

Housing Scrutiny Commission

Void Performance report: April – June 2019
Assistant Mayor for Housing: Cllr Elly Cutkelvin
Lead director: Chris Burgin
Date: 7th. October 2019



City Mayor

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: all
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- Report version number: v.1

1. Summary

Void performance in the first quarter of 2019/20 has been very encouraging after a poor year end in 18/19. Average void times for June stood at 43.1 days for routine, 148.4 for long term and 87.3 for all voids with 86% of properties being let in under 7 days at an average of 4.6 days from ready to let to occupation.

2. Purpose of report

To update members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission on Void performance for the first quarter of 2019/20.

3. Supporting information including options considered:

The table below shows 1st. quarter 19/20 performance against 18/19- year end performance targets.

Measure	Target	Year end 18/19	Quarter 1 19/20
Routine Voids*	45 days average	62.13 days	50.6 days
Long term voids	90 days average	113.6 days	138.4 days
All voids	Maximum 90 days average	85.8 days	86.92
No. Voids Held	Less than 2% (421)	284	248 as at end of June now 230 as at 10.7.19
Total annual rent loss	No greater than £825k	£985k	£265k
Ready to let to Occupation**	10 days	5.9 days	5.4 days

*This figure is the number of days void from the end of one tenancy to the start of the next including weekends.

**This figure is the number of working days between when the property is ready to when the new tenancy starts.

Terms & Definitions:

The actual void time is measured in days from when the property is determined as a 'new void' on the system until a new tenancy commences. Sometimes the 'new void'

date is at the end of a one months' notice period but on other occasions it might be at short notice due to a death or with no notice.

Once we receive the keys to a property we get it cleared of any debris and carry out a survey. Once surveyed we categorise it as either a routine void or long-term void. We do this so that we can give the applicant a better idea when the property will be ready; this is based on the extent of work required.

Routine voids

Are those properties that require a comparatively lower level of work prior to being re let.

Long term voids

Are those properties which require a higher level of repair before it can be re let, the reasons maybe:

- Damp proof work, wood worm treatment.
- Asbestos removal (licenced)
- Structural repairs
- Major adaptations
- Fire damaged properties
- The property is being used as an office, by a resident's group or the police
- Projects (such as the tower blocks)
- New meters and supplies.
- Pest control.
- Rewires, new capital kitchens and bathrooms

All voids

This is the term used when talking and reporting on all voids regardless of if they are routine or long term.

Number of voids held

This is the number of vacant properties we hold at any one time; this should be less than 2% of the total stock and excludes decants

Total annual rent loss

This is the amount of rental income we have lost as a result of a property being empty and is based on a daily rate, the longer the property is empty the greater the amount.

There are two weeks over the Christmas period that are defined as rent free, this means that December is traditional a low month for void income loss. The average weekly rental figure is: £69.97 (range £53.64 - £116.48)

Total annual council tax loss

We become liable for paying council tax on void properties at a daily rate as soon as the property has been empty for 1 calendar month. There are exceptions around this

but this is the case in the majority of cases. We work closely with Council Tax to ensure this information is correct and it is audited quarterly.

Decants.

Are properties that are being used as temporary accommodation for tenants whilst major repairs are being carried out to their home. Decants are technically considered voids as the tenant retains their tenancy on the property that is being repaired to which they will move back to. We currently have 12 properties being used as decants

The void journey

The process is split into 3 distinct areas:

- The inspection
- The works
- The letting

The inspection

When we receive the keys to a property the clock starts ticking and the first thing that has to happen is an inspection needs to be carried out, this is done by the Voids Technician (VT), they are responsible for making sure that we comply with our obligations as a landlord with regard to making the property safe. They also ensure that all works are specified in order to meet our letting standard and any other actions ahead of the repairs being carried out are completed. They could include cleaning the property out, arranging for pest control to carry out a fumigation, carry out an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC), an asbestos survey and possible asbestos removal and meter changes.

The works

The specification is issued to either the operatives or to one of our contractors. The city is split geographically into, East and West and a team of approximately 70 operatives are supervised by a team of 6 supervisors. The operatives carry out the full range of tasks required to ensure the property meets our Lettings Standard, see appendix B.

The letting

At void stage the property is advertised on 'Homechoice', a website that allows prospective tenants to bid for properties. They have the chance to bid on 3 properties per weekly cycle.

Once the advertising cycle is completed the Property Lettings Team then extract the shortlists for the properties advertised from the system and make offers to applicants from the housing register. Once the applicant has accepted the offer and the works are completed on the property, they arrange to meet the prospective tenant at the property to view and sign the tenancy agreement.

A new web link is in the final stages of construction with a range of information for new tenants- which will be promoted through the offer letter and minimise the use of paper handouts.

Impacts and Challenges on void time:

Asbestos removal

We must survey all void properties to locate and assess the condition of any asbestos containing materials. If the condition is poor or it's in a location where we will be carrying out other works, such as a kitchen refurbishment we have to arrange for it to be removed. Asbestos poses no risk to tenants so long as it is not disturbed. Some items can be removed by the void operative, such as floor tiles, but other items such as sprayed ceiling coating, must be removed under fully controlled conditions by a licenced contractor. We have to notify every removal to the HSE, we also have to give them 10 days' notice if the removal is under fully controlled conditions. We have a good knowledge of where the asbestos is in our properties, but we have no idea until we received notice which properties are going to become vacant.

Priority voids

We are under pressure to return void properties back into use as quickly as possible. We have a waiting list in excess of 5000 applicants and so the demand and pressure for properties to be available is constant.

We also must respond to even more urgent requests for homes when people are fleeing domestic violence or harassment or waiting to be discharged from hospital and holding up a bed. We can normally accommodate up to 8 priority requests at any one time, however so far this year the priority void list has been consistently in excess of 25, this has been unsustainable and had a negative impact on the normal throughflow of properties, when all the voids you are working on are a priority then the priority ceases. For example, we may be picking out a recent void which we have had a request to prioritise due to the case type and this will be taken over and above an older void which does not have a priority case attached to it. As a result, we have had to prioritise the priority case.

We currently have 19 priority voids.

Fire doors.

The world of fire safety has been challenging since Grenfell and the Hackett Report. As a result all fire door manufacturers have been asked to test the fire resistance of their doors more robustly. A significant number of doors failed and as a result all manufacturers stopped production for several months until new doors had passed the more rigorous testing.

For several months the manufacture of composite fire doors stopped. Some manufacturers have since started production but there is a backlog and a high demand. Something like normal supply did not happen until April this year so we are now recovering from this, but it caused delays to a number of lets.

Garden Clearance:

This work was previously undertaken by Leicester to Work but they stopped being able

to resource this earlier this year. We are now in the process of upskilling the Driver Labourers to do this, however in the interim this work is being issued to other council departments and contractors to do.

Condition properties are returned

We never know what condition a property is going to be returned in, some are clear and require no rubbish removal and minor repairs, but some are the complete opposite. Recently we are seeing an increase in voids that require lots of work. We do recharge the previous tenants, where possible, but this does add to the time it takes to return that property back into use.

What have we changed to try and addresses these challenges:

City wide approach to void repairs

The city is split into 6 areas, 3 in the East and 3 in the West and they are all resourced to do all repairs in the voids in that area, sometimes helping in other areas if they have capacity. The city-wide approach to void repairs continues and has proved to be successful and has had a positive impact on working relationships and communications both inside and outside of the service area and has improved processes.

Ongoing review of the asbestos removal policy.

In the last 12 months the number of asbestos removals completed in void properties has increased by 300%. This has had a significant impact on void time because this work is carried out by licenced removal contractors and we have to give the Health and Safety Executive 10 days' notice prior to the asbestos being removed. In some cases, we can continue to work in the properties until the removal date but if the asbestos is loose or friable then we have to wait until the asbestos is removed. This is something we have accommodated in the past but there has been a spike in numbers, however more recently we have started to see a reduction. We are also looking to see if we can reduce the number of full removals by repairing rather than full removal.

Completing works on occupation

To try and reduce waiting times for priority voids we try to carry out works on occupation, in agreement with the new tenant, this has been successful where it has been possible, and we are looking to widen this out to other void properties.

Recruitment:

We are currently actively recruiting to fill the remaining vacancies in the voids team, there will always be vacancies due to the general churn of staff. We currently have 5 Multi Trade Electrical vacancies and we are currently issuing work to contractors to help us complete void repairs.

The voids team are an important part of the training programme for all apprentices so

that they are exposed to all trades, for example they can rewire a property or fit a full kitchen, something that would be difficult to do in a tenanted home. Whilst this is very important and the right thing to do it can sometimes slow down the work on the void property. However the apprentices gain valuable experience and this is a benefit when they have successfully completed their apprenticeship and hopefully secured a job with the Voids team.

We have previously delayed recruitment so that we would be able to offer apprentices coming out of their time an opportunity.

We have previously recruited a works Planner dedicated to Voids, this post plans the work of the driver labourers to make sure house clearances and rubbish removal is carried out efficiently. They also arrange for the delivery of materials to ensure operatives are not waiting for the materials they need to bring the property up to the letting standard, this is working well.

Issuing work to contractors:

To help assist the in-house craft teams return void properties more quickly we have recently appointed two contractors to help. This is working well and has contributed to the overall improvement in the figures. We are planning to continue doing this until the long term and all voids figures are on target, we will then review the situation.

4. Details of Scrutiny

Report for HSC

5. Financial, legal and other implications

5.1 Financial implications

None sought – for information only

5.2 Legal implications

None sought – for information only

5.3 Climate Change and Carbon Reduction implications

None sought – for information only

5.4 Equalities Implications

None sought – for information

5.5 Other Implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)