

Housing Scrutiny Commission

Void Performance report: April to December 2020

Assistant Mayor for Housing: Cllr Elly Cutkelvin

Lead director: Chris Burgin

Date: 22nd February 2021

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: all
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- Report version number: V6

1. Summary

Void performance from April to December 2020 has declined, with the 'All Void' average for the period 1st April to 31st December 2020 inclusive at 133.8 days, therefore exceeding the 90-day target. In the month of April, the target was met, but the performance deteriorated from this month onwards in conjunction with COVID and the lockdown of the Country.

Void operational performance has continued to be impacted throughout this year.

Void rental loss in the nine months was £856,771 with a yearend projection of £1,096,624.

The total number of all void properties held as of 4th February 2021 was 499. This is an increase in the usual total which would, under normal circumstances, be around 250.

There have been various challenges over the nine-month period, which we continue to manage, mostly attributable to COVID and the direct and indirect impact it has had on the Void and Property Lettings service.

Additional resources are now being drawn from Repairs & Maintenance and external contractors to work to address the current high number of void properties, but it is expected that it will take over 5 months to redress this.

2. Purpose of report

To update members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission on Void performance for the nine-month period from 1st April to 31st December 2020.

To inform members of the short-term measures underway and long-term aspirations to improve void relet times.

3. Supporting information:

The table on the following page summarise the key performance indicators for the Void service.

Measure / Target	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21				
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Total Lets			170	175	184		529
Routine Voids* (days) – 45-day avg. target	62.1	64.1	99.6	109.5	119.2		109.6
All voids (days) – max 60 days avg. target	85.8	123.3	118.4	140.6	141.3		130.1
Number of voids held	NA	293	301	328	340		340
Total annual rent loss No greater than £800k pa	£985,903	£911,060	£265,704	£282,608	£308,459		£856,771
Ready to let to Occupation** (days) 10-day target	5.9	4.5	21.3	16.3	11.3		16.1

*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.

Definitions

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

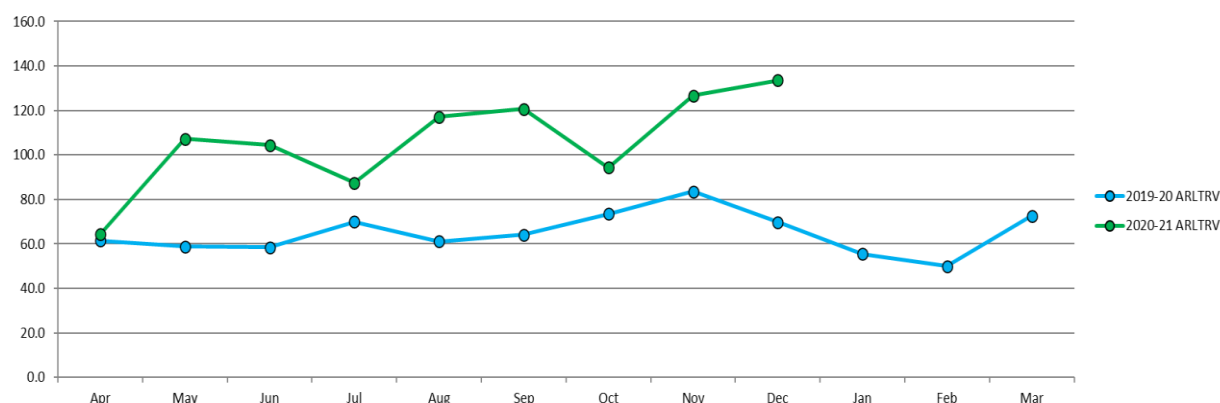
All voids - This is the term used when talking and reporting on all voids regardless of if they are routine or long term.

Number of voids held - This is a snapshot of 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.

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

The chart below sets out the worsening performance compared to 2019-20 performance. It demonstrates the worsening of performance from March 2020 onwards when the first lockdown commenced.



4. Issues affecting void times:

4.1 COVID 19

COVID 19 has had a devastating effect on void times. The course of events is listed below. Some effects were direct and others indirect.

March and April 2020

On 23rd March 2020 the government announced a national lockdown lock down and this immediately effected Voids in the following ways:

- Just prior to this date we had started to develop COVID Business Continuity Plans and COVID Risk Assessments. We anticipated that processes would need to change in response to COVID with Risk Assessments in place.
- Whereas some services in the Council closed, Voids and Property Lettings, due to the fact that we directly address the needs of the homeless in Leicester, were deemed a 'critical service' and we strove to ensure the service continued as best we could under the circumstances.
- The Government instructed as many staff as possible to work from home. As our Housing Allocation and Lettings Officers and Voids Technicians have laptops, they could do so immediately. Admin staff had to continue to work from COVID safe offices.
- However, our craft workforce cannot work from home and following government guidance at that time, we adopted a one void, one operative policy to ensure they remained safe while working on voids. Sharing vehicles was not allowed at that time.
- In addition, Vulnerable and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) staff had to go home as per government advice. Those living with Vulnerable family were also advised to stay at home to protect them. Where they had laptops, they could work from home.
- Therefore, with the craft workforce, approximately 30% had to remain at home to comply with Government Guidelines and Leicester City Council COVID policies, so the amount of work carried out on voids was reduced dramatically because of the

loss of resources.

- This was compounded by staff who were off work with COVID, or self-isolating which further depleted resources.
- Schools closed, causing issues for staff with younger children and we helped them access school places as they had key worker status.
- As moving house was not allowed, we closed the Housing Register and the Choice Based Letting website. We ceased escorted viewings and there were no tenancy signups except in emergency situations., particularly homelessness.
- In those emergency situations, we made disinfected keys available for lone viewings and created a small COVID safe signup area at the Ian Marlow Centre.
- As a result, the signup process was split into two, a verbal and a physical sign up where some tasks were carried out over the phone and the physical signing of documents took place at a new COVID safe sign up area.
- In addition, staff at the Dawn Centre and Border House assisted with physical signups for their clients in a COVID safe way.
- House moves that were able to take place were hampered at times by the inability for applicants to get removal services, also applicants sometimes had to self-isolate. In these instances, the properties were held for the applicant until such time they were able to move.
- A number of applicants also chose not to move home during the pandemic and so properties had to be held and delayed pending an agreed time from the applicant.
- Contractors furloughed a lot of their staff immediately and the work we had allocated to contractors slowed down considerably. We had hoped to pass more work to them, but most had declined to take any additional work as they had to comply with the furlough scheme to access funds to pay their staff.
- The Housing Offices and Libraries where tenancy services are based had closed and so keys could no longer be dropped there when tenancies were terminated. We changed the system to receive keys at the Ian Marlow Centre in a COVID safe way.
- New COVID Risk Assessments were written immediately in order for all aspects of voids work to be carried out safely. These were approved by Corporate Health and Safety as well as the unions.
- Utility companies ceased all but emergency works which made it hard for us to clear utility debts from previous tenants, further hampering voids work.

May and June 2020

During this period there was a partial easing of lockdown

- Voids Driver Labourer staff assisted with COVID related duties such as delivering meals and furniture for Leicester City Council staff working from home. Other Voids and Property Lettings Staff assisted with calling vulnerable residents in support of the C19 Team.
- The Housing Register reopened so that people could apply for housing although the Choice Based Lettings website remained closed. The most urgent cases were referred to us so we could arrange direct lets.
- Risk assessments were reviewed, and measures put in place so that operatives could work in pairs and travel in vehicles together which meant we could recommence larger works, such as kitchens.
- Contractors commenced some work in non-tenanted properties but were still not up to their pre COVID capacity.

- Schools reopened and staff with children who couldn't work from home, were able to return to work.

July and August 2020

At the beginning of July Leicester went into a 'local lockdown' due to the number of COVID cases. It gradually eased over the month of August.

- The choice based Letting website opened partially in July and fully in August.
- Vulnerable and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable staff who could not work at home now returned to work after Individual Risk Assessments had been carried out and appropriate measures put in place where necessary.
- Inspections and works to tenanted properties resumed in a COVID safe way.
- Recovery plans for Voids and Property Lettings were in place and were constantly being updated as government and corporate guidance emerged.
- Childcare provision was inconsistent and as many summer schemes had been cancelled some staff who could not work from home struggled to attend work.
- Signups resumed for Choice Based Letting offers, and the lone viewings and two-part signup process continued.

September and October

At the start of September it felt as if things were returning to normal, cases were low, and restrictions eased, schools reopened after the summer break. However, as September commenced, COVID cases and subsequent deaths started to increase.

- Schools returned although a little late which made it easier for staff with children to work. There was some sporadic staff absence due to their children having been sent home to self-isolate.
- All staff, including the vulnerable people were initially back at work, except for those off sick with COVID or self-isolating. However, shielding for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable was extended and so these staff were required to remain at home.
- The Property Lettings Team have been assisting Housing Management with Mutual Exchange signups in the COVID safe signup area, which will continue.
- Contractor capacity improved to a degree.
- We were able to focus on turning around priority voids for the most urgent of our applicants particularly those in temporary accommodation.

November and December

As November and December progressed, COVID cases increased and hospital admissions were approaching first wave levels. Deaths increased from approximately 200 a day to 400 and we could see that further restrictions might be imposed on or around Christmas.

- Clinically Extremely Vulnerable staff were still required to stay at home but we only have 5 craft staff in this category and so that had a minimal impact.
- Staff attendance continued to be good although many were required to reduce their annual leave allowance to below 30% of their total allocation. This resulted in a huge number of staff requiring to take leave in December which had a significant

impact on our service in December.

- Just before Christmas it was announced that there would be a further period of national lockdown and schools would be closed.
- Works in tenanted properties was again reduced to emergencies only.

January 2021

The period from the first national lockdown in March to present had brought about a depletion in resources, increase in demand and a resultant backlog of void properties.

To address the number of Void properties that had built up and to speed up delivery of properties, the decision was made for Repairs and Maintenance (R&M) as well as other areas of Housing to assist with voids. This was to reduce the backlog and make more voids available to applicants especially those in temporary accommodation.

This assistance commenced on 12th January 2021 and within two weeks R&M have started work on 60 properties and we anticipate that they will return 10 completed voids a week. In addition to help with the repairs work to voids, we have received support from the Admin and Planning Sections as well as additional Voids Technician support to ensure the flow of work is maintained.

The aspiration is to reduce the number of voids held from 500+ to 200+. Note that we will normally always hold approximately 200 voids at any one time due to processes.

If Repairs & Maintenance return 10 backlog voids per week it will take approximately 20 weeks, 5 months to get to pre pandemic VOID levels of in the region of 200-250 voids held.

Impact on Staff

COVID has had not just a massive impact on our service area, but also on our staff. It has been a time of great stress and worry in both their private and working lives. We have had to introduce multiple changes in processes and procedures in response to COVID and they have embraced these changes positively. Staff in all areas of the service have shown a huge commitment to their work and absence other than COVID related issues, has been very low.

Staff wellbeing is paramount and regular welfare checks and other tools are used to ensure morale is maintained in such difficult times.

4.2 Non-Covid Challenges March to December 2020

Utilities

Prior to March last year, we had a utility company called Robin Hood that took over the Gas and Electricity accounts for all void properties. This was reduced to emergencies only from March 2020 due to Covid and Robin Hood ceased operating altogether in August 2020 and went into administration in November 2020 their customer base being bought by British Gas but not the utility contract. This utility partnership made it easy to start work on the property and carry out Gas and Electrical tests. Without a utility partner it means we have to arrange the utility handover and bills for all properties with a multitude of providers who all have different processes instead of

being able to deal with one. It is a complex and time-consuming process which delays many voids.

All voids must have gas and electrical checks before being let and utilities available for the new tenant to take over. Arrangements are being put in place for an alternative utility company to take over this role, subject to Leicester City Council procurement and legal rules.

In the meantime, we have been given additional resource to support Voids in doing this and Finance colleagues have enabled a route to addressing any debts on meters.

Condition properties returned in

This has been an ongoing issue and we know tenants have been reporting fewer responsive repairs to us during COVID than they would do during normal times. The volume of repairs completed between April and December 2020 is 28% lower than the same period twelve months earlier. With fewer repairs being reported to us, this is likely to have an impact on the condition that properties are returned to us when they do become void

Recruitment

We have recently recruited successfully to a number of vacancies with new staff starting during January.

5. Returning to Business as Usual

The main objective over the coming months will be to work towards getting back to Business as Usual (BAU).

Currently it is hard to predict how long the current national lockdown will last, although it would appear to be at least until the 8th March and whether there will any additional measures in place after lockdown ends.

Our aspiration would be to return to normal as soon as possible after lockdown ends and as mentioned, we are focussing on reducing our backlog at this time in preparation for the months to come.

Key actions:

- Between January and July, the Voids and Property Lettings Services continues delivering voids, signing up approximately 90 applicants per month
- Between January and May, if lockdown continues, Repairs and Maintenance will assist Voids and Property Lettings with their backlog and deliver 40 completed voids each month for 5 months totalling 200 voids.
- Contractors utilised to undertake Void work
- Additional temporary staff added to the Voids establishment
- Target of voids held by July to be between 200-250 properties.
- Learn from the COVID crisis and look at possible new ways of working.
- Long term we will look at ways to improve void turnaround times including:
 - Ensuring we maintain a full establishment of staff
 - New 'affinity deal' with a utility provider to make power and gas available

more promptly

- Works on occupation where possible
- Review processes and procedures for void management
- Prioritising 'quick' voids, to turn around those voids with minimal works
- Use of a new more agile contract so capital works are completed more quickly
- Move to mobile working and then use of SOR's for specifying and carrying out works
- Continuing to ensure signups occurs as soon as possible after a property is 'ready to let'.

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?)