

Leicester City Council Scrutiny Review

Council Housing Voids

**A Review Report of the Housing
Scrutiny Commission**

Cllr Paul Newcombe

March 2017

Contents

1.	RECOMMENDATIONS	3
2.	REPORT	4
3.	CONCLUSIONS	12
4.	FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS	13
	APPENDICES	14
	APPENDIX A Membership of the Task Group	14
	APPENDIX B: TASK GROUP MEETING NOTES.....	14
	APPENDIX C: Scope of the review	31

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Assistant Mayor for Housing and the Executive are asked to consider the recommendations set out below.

- 1.1 Where possible, asbestos should be made safe in situ; where a home awaits asbestos removal, project management should address more recently-void homes with fewer problems to get them back into use more quickly.
- 1.2 When a void is made available for rent as much information as possible should be made available to those being offered a tenancy. There should be a more limited number of offers to those seeking a home, and a shorter time limit on deciding whether to accept a housing offer.
- 1.3 Debts for damage and vandalism should be strongly pursued by the department, and that neighbourhood housing officers (NHOs) should routinely inspect homes to ensure structural and other standards are maintained by tenants in the council's homes.
- 1.4 The Task Group commends the work, positive attitude and significant contributions from the apprentices working on voids repairs. It urges the department, and corporately the council, to continue to offer apprenticeships in the department's technical repairs and maintenance teams.
- 1.5 The stores reorganisation programme should not compromise the service provided to tenants by the council. In particular members are concerned that, if parts of the service are outsourced, contractors' systems are aligned with the requirements of tenants and housing, maintenance and repairs staff.
- 1.6 A letting standard shall be agreed for tenants coming into a new council home following full consultation with the tenants and leaseholders forum. Technical and estate management staff will work to that standard – and it will be observed and respected by existing tenants. Tenants will report repairs promptly and provide appropriate access to maintenance and repair staff as required by the tenancy agreement.
- 1.7 The existing decoration allowance scheme for new tenants should be reviewed, with the option of a paint pack scheme which has lower administration costs being considered when the current scheme contract ends. Decoration work should be inspected by estate management officers three months after the tenancy begins. Tenants should be made fully aware of their responsibilities (and rights) through a form of handbook or on tenancy agreements.
- 1.8 At least three sets of keys be available for access to voids to reduce delays caused by different teams or individuals accessing a home then failing to return the existing individual key.

1.9

The allocations scheme should be reviewed with the aim of increasing the speed of delivery of decisions on whether to take an offer for a vacancy. This should include reducing the number of offers available to a potential tenant or considering another system of allocation entirely. There should be an analysis of why offers are rejected – in particular why a major reason for rejection of an offer (35% of rejections) cited the offer being in the wrong area.

1.10

The current policy that tenancies can only start on a Monday should be reviewed. A pilot three month scheme with new tenancies could assess the advantages and problems of changing the policy.

.11

Mobile data recording handsets should be available for voids operatives and repairs teams to improve the accuracy of data capture and reduce the number of data inputs required currently from at least three to just one.

1.12

The council should establish a city-wide energy performance standard in its council stock. This would help the council meet its carbon reduction targets and also mean energy costs would be more affordable for people who are in greatest financial need.

1.13

Short term and medium-term benchmarks for filling voids should be set and a project plan developed to achieve those objectives. The immediate target should be 45 days with a two year target to achieving a 28-day turn-round. Information on the project plan and annual updates on progress on voids reduction should come to the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

1.14

A separate Housing Scrutiny Commission should review the procurement, cost and effectiveness of the Northgate housing department software systems, including the way in which it relates to other relevant council IT systems.

1.15

The Department is requested respond to the recommendations within three months of the report's approval by the Overview Select Committee

1.16

The responses and actions referenced in 1.16 be reported to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission.

2. REPORT

2.1 Background

- 2.1.1 Social rented housing is one of Leicester City Council's most valuable public assets. In financial terms it brought income to the council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of £77.9m in 2016-2017 from around 21,000 homes.
- 2.1.2 Rent income is set to drop in 2017-2018 to around £75m in the face of further stock losses through right to buy and the one per cent reduction in social housing rents imposed by the government.
- 2.1.3 That rent reduction has seriously damaged the department's long-term business plan which looked to provide housing upgrades, estate environmental improvements and new homes for rent. All of those objectives have been hit¹ by the government-imposed rent cap at a time when pressure on housing waiting lists because of homelessness and other housing stress has rarely been greater.
- 2.1.4 Councillors and members of the community have over time expressed concern at how long some council homes had remained empty. Every home that remains unoccupied is not being used to address the housing crisis which exists in Leicester and most major communities in England.
- 2.1.5. Against this background members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission investigated how the council has addressed the problem of empty homes in its housing stock.
- 2.1.6 Compounding the issue that an empty home does not bring in rent government rules require authorities to pay council tax on the vacant property after a time – currently a month. That payment goes from the HRA to the council's general funds.
- 2.1.7 The scrutiny Task Group looked at:
- The numbers of void properties and their nature (flat/house/other special needs housing)
 - Reasons for homes being empty
 - Reasons for delays in bringing them back into use
- 2.1.8 The Task Group broadly divided the issues into administrative and technical matters. It received extensive information and assistance from officers involved in the department's own voids task group. Staff from this group gave extensive support to scrutiny members and members wish to express their gratitude for the high levels of help and co-operation provided from all levels of the department.

¹ [Details are contained in the report to the council on 22nd February 2017](#)

2.1.9 During the review task group members visited a number of empty homes which were undergoing repair as well as one of the towers which was being renovated as part of a £10m upgrading of four tower blocks on the St Peter's Estate.

2.2 Setting the scene

2.2.1 Leicester City Council has a housing stock of more than 21,000 homes; in any one month more than 100 are likely to become vacant for a variety of reasons. Tenants move on, to other homes within the stock or to a non-council home; around a fifth of voids come about through the death of a resident and a little less than ten per cent involve evictions or tenants simply walking away from their home.

2.2.2 According to recent data² a total of 241 homes are vacant across the city, 1.2% of the entire stock. These figures are skewed by the number of void homes in the city centre – more than half of the entire stock vacancies are in this area. Taking out the city centre tower blocks figures the void rate across the rest of the stock is 0.7%.

2.2.3 The high proportion of the voids in the city centre is because of the tower blocks refurbishment programme. A number of flats have been kept unlet so that tenants can be moved into them while their own homes are renovated and upgraded.

2.2.4 Technically these homes are voids. In practice they are mostly occupied. They do, however, have a dramatic effect on the overall statistics for delays in repairing voids. The four longest-“vacant” properties have been “empty” for around 2,700 days. Thirty-six of the longest-running 37 voids are held as “decant” homes.

2.2.5 The Housing Department has set up a voids task group which collects data on vacant homes and is tracking the 200 longest-empty homes in the stock. The most recent report suggests the bottom of this table was taken up by five homes which had been empty for 29 days. Forty-four homes were empty for less than 50 days. In July 2017 the lowest homes in this league had been empty for 20 days. A total of 53 homes had been vacant for less than 50 days.

2.2.6 In financial terms the calendar month point is important. The loss of rent to the Housing Revenue Account is obvious. However, when a council home is empty for a calendar month or more the authority is obliged to start paying the council tax police and fire authority charges on that home. That charge is from the HRA to the council's general revenue fund.

2.2.7 An indicator of the costs involved came from a report to Housing Scrutiny in September 2015 (see link in footnote 3 below). Rent losses are running at around £900k a year and council tax costs at around £150k. In total, void losses in rent and council tax for 2014-2015 were just over £1m.

2.2.8 A profile of the empty properties held by the council shows that of 241 voids 135 are one-bedroom flats, two thirds of them in the central city area. Another

² February 2017

21 are two-bedroom flats. Forty-eight houses, 33 of them three-bedroom, are vacant across the city, just three of them in the city centre.

- 2.2.9 The Housing Scrutiny Commission [received a report](#) on the voids improvement programme in December 2014. The Commission was told then that at the end of the previous year it had been taking 54 days to turn around an empty property; this figure had been reduced to 38 days. The new target would be 25 days. While these times are lower than those being currently achieved, the number of voids has decreased significantly since a peak of 457 in April 2014 and 345 in October 2014.
- 2.2.10 Targets have not been met and a new norm of around 54 days is being looked at as a benchmark for reducing void times. The Task Group looked in detail at the issues underlying why it has been taking so long to bring voids back into use.
- 2.2.11 [A further report to the Housing Scrutiny Commission](#) in September 2015 referenced “steady progress” since the report of December 2014. It set out the costs to the council of voids in four years from 2012-13 to 2014-2015 - £0.6m, £1.0m and £09.m respectively. This figure is likely to be more than £1.1m in 2016-2017.

Voids – the technical issues

- 2.2.12 The department’s Voids Improvement Programme, looking in detail at a small number of voids, analysed the issues involved in bringing them back into physically sound condition and then the processes for getting them re-let.
- 2.2.13 These are broadly in three categories:
- Post-vacancy technical survey
 - Survey results notification to repairs teams
 - Repairs/improvements
- 2.2.14 In some cases homes have been left by previous tenants in considerable disarray. In 2013/14, for example, 396 tenants were charged a total of £402k for some of the work that needed doing in the property after they left.
- 2.2.15 These type of debts are hard to collect, but the allocation policy states that any applicant on the housing register who has a housing related debt will normally only be considered for re-housing under exceptional circumstances.
- 2.2.16 Scrutiny task group members strongly felt debts for damage and vandalism should be strongly pursued by the department, and that neighbourhood housing officers (NHOs) should routinely inspect homes to ensure structural and other standards are maintained by tenants in the council’s homes – including gardens, where it applies.
- 2.2.17 Once a home has been declared void, a technical inspection assesses its physical state. This extends beyond the sometimes cosmetic issues which might come under the issues in the previous paragraph. Around 70% of the stock has asbestos and an early assessment involves whether it is present and if so how it is dealt with.

- 2.2.18 Asbestos may be completely safe for tenants while it remains undisturbed, but if a home requires major renovation – new kitchen or bathroom, for example – the asbestos may pose a serious risk for those doing the site work. In such cases the Health and Safety Executive needs to be notified and a specialist asbestos removal contractor recruited to remove it.
- 2.2.19 Beyond the specific technical issues presented by asbestos different teams have been using different ideas about what needs to be done to bring a void up to standard. No clear definition of this standard has existed and the task group heard that there were instances of “mission creep” by estate management officers who asked for more improvements than might have been necessary (see appendix B3).
- 2.2.20 An over-arching lettings standard has been developed, taking into account a wide range of issues relating to the state of the property – inside and out (see Appendix B3 par 3.3.1). In all around 150 elements ranging from recharges to departing tenants to groundwork are brought into the scope of the lettings standard.
- 2.2.21 However these can be summarised under three broad headings: that all properties, including all associated components to the property and its surrounding area are re-let on the basis of being:-
- Safe
 - Clean
 - In good working order
- 2.2.22 This guidance is directed toward all employees and stakeholders who are required to carry out visits, inspections, removals and repairs to void properties and sets out the standard to which empty homes should be inspected, repaired and offered to new tenants.
- 2.2.23 The aim of the standard is to ensure the Council provides good quality homes for new tenants which are suitable to their needs. It also assists in understanding the cost of works required and the time the repairs might take.
- 2.2.24 The standard suggests not all work must be finished before a new tenant moves in if doing the work would delay the letting and is of a minor nature. The lettings standard suggests new tenants will be advised of and must agree to this arrangement for the work during viewing and/or during sign-up. Otherwise the work must be carried out while the property is still empty.
- 2.2.25 The standard will also provide for an allowance to give to incoming tenants to decorate their new home. The existing allowance arrangement costs £160,000 a year and has to be re-procured in the next year.
- 2.2.26 The department is cautiously rolling out the concept of a lettings standard. But members of the Task Group strongly supported the standard and were keen that it should be promoted more widely.
- 2.2.27 They also felt there should be more monitoring of the condition of homes, inside and out, by estate management staff and where homes are in disrepair tenants be required to do that work themselves.

Site Visits: The Ultimate Void project

- 2.2.28 An important part of the Task Group's work was to make site visits to a number of voids in various states of repair and these were arranged by the housing voids management team, which members appreciated and were grateful for. Detailed notes of the visits can be found in Appendix B4.
- 2.2.29 Property A was re-let within 28 days despite the presence of asbestos, the need for kitchen refurbishment a series of problems – namely a lack of access to keys which delayed the access for the asbestos survey work, a five day delay in starting the kitchen refurbishment and a need to go back to remove some asbestos not spotted in the original survey.³ An offer was accepted on day 10 of the void and the tenant was able to move in once the work was done.
- 2.2.30 Work on Property B featured a number of infuriating problems. It took 35 days to turn round and in that time:
- Kitchen materials were ordered eight days after the property was surveyed and took a further six days to deliver
 - The wrong materials were delivered and it took two days more for the correct materials to be delivered and the kitchen refurbishment to begin.
- 2.2.31 Tenancies start from a Monday; if the work had been finished two days earlier the void time would have been reduced by a week. This particularly exercised members. They felt this policy could cause repair work to be concentrated unnecessarily, also putting pressure on estate management staff to complete formalities for new tenants at the same time of the week.
- 2.2.32 Property C featured a £700 recharge for work required from the previous tenant, and a delay in completing asbestos removal work due to a lack of trained staff.⁴
- 2.2.33 The property was refused twice before an offer was accepted. Both refusals cited the reason that they “did not like the area.” The first refusal was eight days after an offer; the second took 13 days to refuse. The third offer was accepted and the new tenant moved in on the same day.
- 2.2.34 Members were concerned that offers were being rejected on the basis of the location – particularly as this would have been part of the information available when the offer was being made.
- 2.2.35 They were also concerned that it took so long for the department to be told the offer was being rejected. Where lifts are not available this should be made clear. Where possible there should also be escorted visits so that

³ It was suggested a key safe would avoid problems with key access. However the department trialled the use of a key safe and found it made little difference. Staff and contractors STILL forgot to put the key back when they had finished....

⁴ This is less of a problem now the council has extended its list of approved asbestos contractors from two to six.

there is much less chance of “misunderstandings” about a property being offered and its location.⁵

- 2.2.36 Property D was ready after 24 days but took 35 days to let and featured three refusals. One of these appeared to have been a bid made in an error which the applicant was unable to reverse. The other refusals cited a lack of problems with site access. The first offer was rejected after five days. It took 20 days for the next offer to be rejected.
- 2.2.37 *Members would like to put on record that where they met with staff and technicians working on the void properties they were impressed by their enthusiasm and commitment. Women were in the teams and a number of staff were involved in the apprenticeship schemes being run by the City Council.*
- 2.2.38 Members expressed concern at this point that any restructuring of the stores system across the city should not compromise the effective delivery of both a voids repairs system and the wider issue of housing repairs and maintenance.
- 2.2.39 In particular they were concerned that if contracting and supply arrangements were outsourced contractors’ and departmental IT systems were compatible. If necessary this should be written into any procurement specifications.
- 2.2.40 Members of the Task Group visited the Tower refurbishment project in November 2016. Specifically they conducted a tour of Gordon House, which was completely decanted to allow contractors complete access to the building.
- 2.2.41 Members saw homes in three different states of stripping out and being built up again. They were informed that the refurbishment would not provide any upgrade in thermal efficiency of the block, which was part of a four-block development on the St Peters Estate in the early 1970s.
- 2.2.42 They were also told the project management arrangements for the tower had been radically changed after the department’s experience of the refurbishment of the first tower – Framland House.
- 2.2.43 The project involved refurbishing the top eight floors first, moving the tenants back in and then refurbishing the lower floors in the hope that it would make for a speedier refurbishment. This did not happen because the complexities of moving so many tenants in and out of the block had been underestimated and any hoped-for economies of scale were lost.
- 2.2.44 At Gordon House new front doors and communal fire doors had been completed before the main refurbishment and one lift replaced to try and

⁵ Officers are sceptical about the reason given as not liking the area. They suspect applicants of gaming the system and putting in a bid while looking for another property they would prefer to make a bid on.

ensure the block was refurbished as quickly as possible. The site was formally handed over to the main contractor on the 1st August.

- 2.2.45 Members on the visit were pleased with the technical quality of the work under way and the co-operation between council teams and the main contractor. They noted that tenants were pleased with the quality of refurbishment of the other towers where work had been completed⁶.

3. CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 Some issues relating to delays in filling void homes are specific to this issue; but many relate to wider issues of practice and performance across the whole housing stock. These wider issues have an impact on the council's housing repairs service and included:
- Accurate recording of technical data and material requirements
 - Programming of work
 - Availability of appropriately skilled and trained staff
 - Letting procedures
- 3.2 Important health and safety issues involve the presence and removal of asbestos. With 70% of homes potentially containing asbestos this can create significant delays in the turn-round of empty homes. However asbestos can in most cases be safely retained within the council's housing stock.
- 3.3 For some homes which have been renovated delays have sometimes occurred because of how long it has taken to get an offer of housing accepted.
- 3.4 The list of long-term voids is deceptive. Many very-long term "voids" are being used to decant tenants affected by the blocks replacement programme.
- 3.5 Members were dismayed at a system which means tenancies can only start on a Monday. A more flexible system which allows tenants to go into a home once it is ready for occupation should be developed and implemented. Members felt the Monday deadline made it more difficult to programme routine and required work smoothly.

Cllr Paul Newcombe
Chair of the Leicester City Council Housing Scrutiny Commission
3rd March 2017

⁶ The future of Goscote House, a different design, will be subject to a future report to Scrutiny. Options including refurbishment and complete demolition are being assessed by consultants.

4. FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS

1. Financial implications

To come

2. Legal implications

To come

3. Equality Impact Assessment

To come

4. Summary of Appendices

Appendix A – Membership and evidence: Page
Appendix B – Task Group meeting information notes: Page
Appendix C – Scoping document: Page

5. Officer to Contact

Jerry Connolly
Scrutiny Policy Officer
Tel: 0116 454 6343
Jerry.connolly@leicester.gov.uk

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Membership of the Task Group

Cllr Paul Newcombe (chair)
Cllr Dawn Alfonso (Vice chair)
Cllr Teresa Aldred
Cllr Hanif Aqbany
Cllr Annette Byrne
Cllr Diane Cank

Officers providing evidence and support:

Simon Nicholls
Vijay Desor
Jo-Anne Hollings

APPENDIX B: TASK GROUP MEETING NOTES

APPENDIX B1: Notes of meeting on 30th March 2016

Present: Cllr Paul Newcombe; Cllr Dawn Alfonso
Vijay Desor; Simon Nicholls

1. The purpose of the meeting was to activate the task group review into delays in bringing void properties back into use. The void improvement project had been led by Dijay Visor, but after a departmental re-organisation of responsibilities Simon Nicholls was taking over responsibility for this project.
2. It was suggested that areas of interest would include examining the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which were used by the department to assess how well they were performing in this aspect of the department's service.
3. There had been two previous reports to the Commission about the issue following members' continuing concern about the problem of delays in bringing empty properties back into use. The delays cost the council in terms of lost rent and council tax income; importantly it meant that people needing to be housed were not able to access homes.
4. Issues relating to 2014-2015 included problems with the failure of a private contractor. Resources, including those allocated to repairing voids, had to be diverted to cover the work of the contractor, and this was a major cause of further delays in bringing void properties back into use.
5. Officers said that one reason for delays to voids to bring them back into use was the build of the property – some 70% of homes had asbestos and this would need detailed surveying and if necessary, depending on the structural state of the asbestos, it would have to be removed using specialist sub-contractors.
6. Areas of work to be reviewed would include the co-ordination between various teams dealing with:
 - Notification that a home had become void (by whom and to whom)
 - Surveying of the building
 - Post-survey notification to the repairs teams
 - Repairs and/or capital investment
 - Notification that the home was available for letting (by whom and to whom)
 - Letting of the void
7. It was noted that all this was happening at a time when the department was undergoing a major organisational review which would put further stresses on operatives and admin and professional services within the department.
Jerry Connolly: 22nd April 2016

APPENDIX B2: Notes of meeting on 27th April 2016

Present

Cllr Newcombe; Cllr Alfonso; Cllr Byrne; Cllr Aldred; Cllr Aqbany
Simon Nicholls: Head of Service
Jerry Connolly: Scrutiny Policy Officer

1. Apologies

Cllr Cank

2. Introduction to background issues: Simon Nichols

- 3.1. Simon explained that he had inherited the voids improvement project (VIP) in the last few weeks. He was keen to put some oomph into the VIP and said one aspect he wanted to concentrate on was the issue of council tax liability.
- 3.2. “We need to ensure, in challenging times and in the context of the 1% reductions in rent over the next few years that we maximise income. Rental income is also a massive part of what we do so this issue feeds into that”.
- 3.3. The work of the review was divided into two clearly defined sets of issues:
 - a. **Administrative**
 - Pre-notification..how the department knows when buildings become void..
 - Post-notification how the department is told when work has been completed
 - Letting of the voids
 - b. **Technical**
 - Post-vacancy technical survey
 - Survey results notification to repairs teams
 - Repairs/improvements
- 3.4. Keys – their location, use, access and passage on to other parts of the chain of actions – was an issue. Passing on keys in time from one team to another is a big issue. We have to get to the bottom of this issue even if we have universal key while the property is void.
- 2.5. Surveys present a range of issues. One involves changes of legislation about asbestos; many homes (about 70% of the stock) have asbestos. This is normally safe for tenants – the issues relate to exposure of workers to it. We need to notify The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) 14 days before we remove some asbestos and have to use a specialist contractor.
- 2.6. Now we also have to provide an energy performance certificate (EPC). We have had to do this since 2012 and we have not done the whole stock – around 50% have been done and we have an in-house team doing this.

- 2.7. With voids we have no standard for energy performance, but this is also a wider issue in the council's housing stock. A number of programmes have been aimed to improve energy performance, thereby improving financial viability of low-income households.
- 2.8. Where there is friable asbestos in a void we have to use a licensed contractor to remove it. Problems in getting a specialist contractor is not a current issue because we have just put six asbestos removal contractors onto a specialist list – an improvement on previous position where the approved list gradually reduced to two.
- 2.9. Procurement is quite a difficult process. We are trying to employ local companies and workers, but Leicester was not full of asbestos removal contractors. We also need analysts to test the air to make sure it is free of asbestos fibres after the removal contractors have finished their work.
- 2.10. Cllr Aqbany: we've had quite a good service and it might get even better. But there was an issue about the variable quality of void surveys. (This was also referenced by technical staff during the site visits).
- 3.11. Simon agreed there were inconsistencies in quality of surveys across the city. He said the team was recruiting a technical team leader to help improve consistency. There are 5/6 voids technicians across the city. They currently report to housing management team leader. But there will be a change so reports will go to a technical team leader. That is being brought forward and you should start to see more consistency, he said.

A Letting Standard

- 3.12. We will look to define what this will be (rather than a minimum letting standard).

Refusal of lettings offers

- 3.13. Cllr Alfonso raised the issue of the refusal of lettings, which was a significant factor in extending why some homes remained empty although ready for letting. Simon said he had a report on the issue of refusals, but needed to do more work because of data inconsistencies relating to a switch to the new Northgate IT system.
- 3.14. There was a really issue about the way the choice/offer system operated and this might need to be addressed by the Task Group as part of its recommendations.
- 3.15. Cllr Newcombe said that at an earlier point members did stipulate that better information on the location of homes being offered was needed. He commented that it did not sound as if matters have been moved on.

- 3.16. Cllr Byrne commented that housing staff were telling people to bid for houses.
- 3.17. Cllr Aqbany Aqbany said that when he had been a Cabinet lead other members would often pass on complaints about poor quality of homes being offered to tenants. Do you think this has improved. Cllr Aldred pointed out that people in their 80s do not have computer literacy, creating a barrier to HomeChoice.
- 3.18. In relation to **post-survey notification**, Simon said the process of transforming a completed survey into a project specification needed to be smoother. This process also involved new software – Corona.
- 3.19. He also said a grown-up conversation was needed about what work might be done and might have to be done, and when. Some work had to be done before tenant moves in. Electrical safety work for example.
- 3.20. But some might also be done after a new tenant had moved in. There needed to be trust from the tenant that that promised work would be done. Maybe that is something that needs to be part of the conversation.
- 3.21. There might be incentives to make sure the promised work was done. Cllr Aqbany said people are told things are going to be done on trust. Perhaps there should be a statement of what needs to be done and when.

Ultimate Void Journey (UVJ)

- 3.22. Simon described a testbed project starting on 9th May on four voids in Beaumont Leys ward. Under the UVJ we will be monitoring the four properties to physically go through the journey of the void. We will look at the whole process; looking in real life what the real barriers are. All the real world real life problems will be tracked.

3. Site visits

- 4.1 Members and officers found out a lot talking to staff on the site visits to a number of voids. It was noted the homes did not include examples of the few homes which have been left very badly damaged by departing tenants.
- 4.2 Operatives talked about work not being picked up on the specification and talked about the different standards of survey report prepared for them in different parts of the city.
- 4.3 Members thanked Simon for arranging the site visits and meeting site staff to talk about their work.

5. Future actions

- 5.1 HomeChoice – how it works: Suzanne Collins to provide presentation
Ultimate void journey: report back when available

Grouped issues

- Notification that a home is void
- Notification that the home is available
- Letting the void; and
- Surveying voids
- Translation of survey into work specification
- Repairs and/or capital investment

It was agreed at least three meetings would be required, programming in work as available. Jerry would consult members and officer, particularly Simon, and arrange further meetings.

The meeting ended at 19.10.

Jerry Connolly 28th April 2016

APPENDIX B3: Notes of meeting on 7th July 2016

1

Present

Cllr Newcombe; Cllr Alfonso;

Simon Nicholls: Head of Service

Jo-Anne Hollings: Business Change Manager

Jerry Connolly: Scrutiny Policy Officer

2.

Apologies

Cllr Byrne

3.

The lettings standard

3.1

The current position

3.1.1

Simon Nicholls and Jo-Anne Hollings introduced a document summarising work being done by the department's own voids task group to establish an agreed standard of a home when it is being taken over by a new tenant.

3.1.2

There was no clearly established quality benchmarks for new tenants and, critically, for technical and housing staff. For various reasons technical staff have been working to different standards in different parts of the city, partly because technical assessments of work required to be done could vary depending on who was doing the survey.

3.1.3

The picture has been further confused when estate management officers (EMOs) have asked for further work to be done, requiring return visits by technical staff to do further, often minor, work, disrupting and delaying their work schedules.

3.1.4

Calls for further work have also been prompted by demands by the new tenant who may, reasonably or otherwise, expect that certain work should have been done. Pressure might be being put on EMOs, who simply transferred the request to the housing department's technical team.



- 3.1.5 Simon said in evidence: “In the past we had a minimum standard which evolved and which was never adequately communicated... different standards were adopted in different parts of the city.”
- 3.1.6 Because of a lack of clarity about what work, and to what standard, should be done to put a void into good order, standards and methods have developed in a piecemeal and ad hoc basis over time.
- 3.2 A new definition
- 3.2.1 The departmental voids team has adopted the term “lettings standard” to describe in general terms a package of measures which would make up what tenants, repairs and maintenance and technical surveying staff might expect to be done on a void property.
- 3.2.2 The critical difference is that it moves away from the current terminology which describes the work, some of it quite complex and expensive, for letting empty homes as a “minimum” standard.
- 3.2.3 There have been two important objectives in the development of a new letting standard
- Define what should be done under the new lettings standard
 - Ensure the new standard is adopted uniformly across both the department and by tenants
- 3.2.4 There was an online staff consultation on a proposed standard, while new tenants were also asked their views on the proposed standard. Proposals were also taken to the tenants’ and leaseholders’ forum On 26th May 2016 (and were welcomed at that time).

3.3 The lettings standard

- 3.3.1 This was set out in detail in Appendix A of the briefing report to members. The headings for the standard were:
- General principles
 - Recharges (to outgoing tenants)
 - Decoration
 - Electrics
 - Gas plumbing
 - Carpentry
 - Plumbing
 - Labouring
 - Plastering
 - Floor tiling
 - Groundwork
 - Bricklaying; and
 - External work
- 3.3.2 In all more than 150 items, small and large, are included within the above headings. Jo-Anne Collings said that different versions would be available

for different audiences, with a shorter and perhaps simplified version available to new tenants.

- 3.3.3 A launch of the new standard was expected within the next week or so and there would be a detailed three-month consultation before it was formally adopted. It would also be subject to on-going 12 month reviews.

3.4 Further development work

- 3.4.1 One issue has been the variations in surveys across the city and it was clear, not least from site visits by members, that the workers who did the jobs within the void buildings found there were differences across the city which partly related to who had done the survey work.

- 3.4.2 The department has recognised this and has created a post of senior voids technician who will have the job of standardising survey quality across the city and individual stock surveyors. The new post is expected to be filled from September.

3.5 Task group member issues

- 3.5.1 Cllr Newcombe welcomed the move to create a new standard and said it should also be embedded in the tenants' handbook. He also asked if technical staff were moved from area to area to spread good practice where appropriate. Simon said that this was not a policy, but sometimes happened anyway because of pressures on the workforce to get a job completed in a timely way which required them to work in different areas. "We would look to do that but there is a small number of technicians and we get 100 voids a month."

- 3.5.2 Cllr Newcombe asked whether the department had or would consider buddying up technicians to spread good practice. Cllr Alfonso suggested the lettings standard should also include a tenants' responsibilities standard. She said voids work often involved repairs which should have been done through the tenancy.

- 3.5.3 Networking with other authorities. Officers said that they were looking to make comparisons with the Sheffield voids performance, and a benchmarking exercise was being done with other authorities. But members were advised that it was sometimes difficult to make direct comparisons because authority issues were often very different. In Leicester there was now constant pressure on all housing across the city. Some neighbouring authorities still had hard-to-let properties.

- 3.5.4 Members asked what would be required to implement the new standard. Officers said that there should not be any financial impact, but agreed to assess the cost, and therefore the savings by their elimination, of repairs and maintenance staff having to come back to jobs they thought had been completed. This assessment would be provided to the task group.

- 3.5.5 Jo-Anne said she would be monitoring implementation of the standard, including monitoring complaints and the report will be updated on a regular basis. The three month assessment would involve 300 properties, which

should be enough to test the document and provide valuable monitoring and feedback.

- 3.5.6 The department will review the decorating allowance under which around £160k a year is given to new tenants to decorate their homes. Payment was through a B&Q card and the whole scheme would be re-procured and a strategy needed to be in place in April 2017. A number of options would be considered.

4. **Other actions**

- 4.1 An electronic version of the letting strategy would be sent to Jerry and form part of the evidence to this meeting.
- 4.2 Housing Commission members were to be reminded that the task group next met on 14th July at 12pm to consider a report on The Ultimate Void. The meeting closed at 13.35.

Jerry Connolly 8th July 2016

APPENDIX B4: Notes of meeting on 14th July 2016

1. Present

Cllr Newcombe: Cllr Alfonso
Simon Nicholls; Jo-Anne Hollings
Jerry Connolly

2. Apologies

Cllr Byrne

3. Notes from 7th July 2016

- 3.1 The meeting notes from 7th July 2016 were approved.
- 3.2 Issues arising: laminate floors in flats and troublesome trees. These were raised by Cllr Connelly and the topics are covered by the term “exceptional circumstances.” If flooring is in good condition then whether to replace it will be a call for the survey technician.
- 3.3 The tree issue can be controversial with tenant and resident interest groups. One view is that the trees shouldn’t be there in the first place. The reality is that some tenants allow trees to grow piecemeal.
- 3.4 Estate management officers deal with day-to-day issues of tree management. However with staff review this function will become part of EMO function (shrubs, grass grounds maintenance etc).
- 3.5 In the worst cases it could take five days to clear overgrown gardens – an issue which should be dealt with under tenancy management rather than through the voids programme.

4.

The ultimate void

4.1

Simon Nicholls and Jo-Anne Hollings introduced the evidence base relating to how voids were dealt with by the voids management team. They consisted of four case studies – the voids which first became available under the terms of the exercise.

4.2

Wanted to get a full understanding of the issues relating to the physical and organisational barriers to turning a void round. In the case studies presented, the time taken to re-let the voids were 35 days for three homes and 28 days for the fourth.

4.3

This is against an average void time of 64 days across the city, and while the numbers were good the exercise did highlight areas of concern, officers told the task group. For information the sample included two three-bedroom houses and two two-bedroom flats on the first and second floors of housing blocks. A spreadsheet of information about each of the four houses was tabled at the meeting. The spreadsheet forms appendix B of this note. Members were made aware of the property IDs but they will be anonymised for the purposes of the public scrutiny report.

4.4. Property A

4.4.1

A three bedroom house which took 28 days to re-let. This comparatively short period was achieved despite the house needing a re-wire, new kitchen and stripped of asbestos. It also required locks to be changed. The kitchen refurbishment took 16 days and was done by a private contractor. Rewiring took 21 days from key handover to work completion. An offer was accepted on day 10 of the void and the new tenant moved in on day 28.

4.4.2 Issues noted were:

- Lock was changed but the lock was not passed on so an asbestos survey could be undertaken
- The asbestos survey was delayed by the need to remove a carpet which had been considered acceptable by an estate management officer but which on closer inspection needed to be removed
- Five days were lost between passing keys to the kitchen design team and work starting. The reasons for this delay were not clear at this point.
- An element of asbestos was missed in the survey and further work had to be done. Had the survey been completed first time this could have saved a day
- Aluminium doors and windows put in by the tenant had to be replaced

4.4.3

Officer/member observations: The department is looking at how to integrate asbestos survey data in one home to similar homes (for example in a block of flats, or neighbouring houses built at the same time to the same designs)

4.4.4 This cloning process, being done with the use of the Northgate IT system, could save time and money because there is asbestos survey data available on 10k out of 21k homes owned by the council. The council is looking at records of surveying done over the last three years.

4.4.5 Cllr Newcombe raised the possibility of homes have a key safe to reduce the problems relating to handover times from one set of workers or contractors to another. Jo-Anne commented that an issue with this was that staff might forget to return a key when vacating the building.⁷

4.5 Property B:

4.5.1 A three bedroomed house which took 35 days to let. It was surveyed for asbestos but none was found which needed treatment or removal. The kitchen needed to be refurbished, rear garden cleared out and a DPI⁸ switch needed to be installed. The property was accepted by a prospective tenant two weeks before the house was vacated and occupied 35 days later.

4.5.2 Issues noted included:

- The DPI switch had to be ordered from Western Power and took 11 days to deliver.
- Kitchen materials were ordered eight days after the property was surveyed and took a further six days to deliver
- Not only was the kitchen material delivery delayed but wrong materials were delivered
- It took two days for the correct materials to be delivered and the kitchen refurbishment to begin
- The work took 14 days to complete
- Tenancies start from a Monday; if the work had been finished two days earlier the void time would have been reduced by a week.

4.5.3 Members considered that the policy of only starting a tenancy on a Monday needed to be reviewed. Officers were asked to provide an explanation for the current policy and considered that a draft recommendation might be that tenancies should be capable of being started on any weekday.

4.5.4 They felt that in any case this policy could cause work to be concentrated unnecessarily, putting pressure on estate management staff to complete formalities for new tenants at the same time of the week.

4.6 Property C:

4.6.1 A first floor two bedroom flat which took 35 days to re-let. It was surveyed for asbestos and material removed. A new uPVC door was fitted and it was

⁷ There is a possible issue that several trades or contractors might need access during the same period, requiring more than key for the property

re-wired. There was a recharge to the ex-tenant of almost £700 for repairs to the flat arising from the way it had been damaged during the tenancy.

4.6.2 Issues arising during the void period were:

- Asbestos survey technician was given front door key only – needed keys to access other areas
- Asbestos removal was delayed because of a lack of trained staff able to wear the required face mask used in the work. The work was completed 28 days after the survey
- The property was refused twice before an offer was accepted. Both refusals cited the reason that they “did not like the area.” The first refusal was eight days after an offer; the second took 13 days to refuse. The third offer was accepted and the new tenant moved in the same day.

4.6.4 Members were concerned that offers were being rejected on the basis of the location – particularly as this would have been part of the information available when the offer was being made.

4.6.5 They were also concerned that it took so long for the department to be told that the offer was being rejected. A possible recommendation from the task group is that there should be tighter time limits on when an offer can be declined. They felt that some potential tenants might not be able to easily access flats without lifts, and that where lifts are not available this should be made clear. Where possible there should also be escorted visits so that there is much less chance of “misunderstandings” about a property being offered and its location.

4.7 Property D

4.7.1 The 2nd floor two bedroom flat took 35 days to re-let. It was refused three times – once due to what might be called user error when a customer pressed an acceptance button by accident. The system appears not to allow such errors to be corrected at the time. This would be a matter of discussion with HomeChoice witnesses.

4.7.2 The property was re-wired, a door needed to be fitted and tiling put back following the re-wiring. It was ready to let after 24 days. It took a further 11 days for the void to be occupied.

4.7.3 Apart from the finger error bid referred to in 4.7.1 two other offers were refused, both citing problems with stair access. The first was declined after five days; the second took 20 days to be turned down. The property was then offered to Housing First and was occupied within a week.

5 Further issues

5.1 There was some discussion about the balance of responsibilities between the tenant, housing management and void work. In some cases it was

possible that work which should have been considered routine maintenance was being picked up (or consigned to) the voids team.

- 5.2 This may be clarified by the new repairs standard. However, there might also be scope to explore an incentive scheme which would reward tenants who kept their homes in good order. A housing association had developed such a scheme and officers said they would investigate it.
- 5.3 Members were also keen to know the costs associated with voids – both repair costs, loss of rent income and the impact of council tax exemption ending after four weeks. Officers agreed to provide information the costs associated with the ultimate void project.
- 5.4 Members were also keen to see examples of very long-term voids, some of which were empty for 90 days or more. There was also discussion about the need to identify different types of void. Those being decanted for major tower block works should be separated out from voids arising through the normal turnover of tenancies.
- 5.5 Officer said that the ultimate void project had not provided all the information that would be needed. A further study would be done involving a much more serious case.
- 5.6 Members were interested to have information on how well the housing options system was working at the Granby Street customer centre. Officers said they would look to provide information on how the system was working (Caroline Carpendale might be the relevant officer).
6. The meeting closed at 13.35

Jerry Connolly

15th July 2015

APPENDIX B5: Notes of meeting on 21st July 2016

Voids task group meeting notes

- 1. Present**
Cllr Newcombe; Cllr Alfonso
Simon Nicholls; Suzanne Collins; Ketan Shah
Jerry Connolly
- 2. Apologies**
Cllr Byrne; Cllr Aqbany; Cllr Cank
- 3. Notes from 14th July 2016**

These were agreed as a correct record

4.

HomeChoice

4.1

Suzanne introduced her colleague Ketan and said the presentation would be in two parts:

- the HomeChoice web site and the transition from the previous Open Housing lettings application system in January 2016
- A live demonstration of the application system

4.2

The introduction of the Northgate system involved a major reshaping of the HomeChoice web site. One advantage was the splitting out of information for existing tenants and for new applicants.

4.3

This was subject to consultation with the Tenants' Forum, which approved the amendments and made the site easier to use for applicants and those who had to administer the system.

4.4

Objectives were to:

- Provide a clearer customer journey.
- Prevent duplication.
- Provide Future proofing, with a clearer basis on which to update information.
- Promote channel shift.

4.5

Northgate went live for this system in January 2016. It cause some difficulties in that the site architecture appeared to have been developed in the 1990s and was not compatible with more modern systems.

4.6

Changes, and their underlying reasons, were set out as follows.

Previous system

- Disjointed journey with duplication of information on LHC web site and corporate website.
- Information relating to LHC and applying for housing mixed up with existing tenants information.
- Often have to do more than 2 searches to find what you want using LHC URL and LCC URL

New process

- Customer Journey starts with registration and can be followed through logically to the end stage.
- Information about LHC and applying for housing is on its own corporate landing page.
- Link to the cbl site via the corporate apply for housing page for search and bid only.

- Old LHC URL links were redirected to the corporate apply for housing landing page where all information and links are.

4.7 For vulnerable individuals around 60 letters are now being sent out each week highlighting vacant homes; clients would be helped by family members or other advocate support, or come into the office in person.

4.8 Clients still have three bids but the Northgate system does not allow them to prioritise their searches. The system reassesses the total priority list each evening; it allows for the creation of a basket of bids and allows applicants to amend their basket of bids if they have made a bid in error, (an issue raised at a previous task group) or if, for example, a more attractive option becomes available.

4.9 Only relevant properties are made available to clients bidding on the system. The council continues to fund the HomeSwapper social housing exchange system and this service remains free to tenants.

Rejected offers

4.10 Members asked why so many tenants had turned down offers on the basis of the area having previously accepted the offer. They were told that this reason was the most common factor in tenancy offers being neglected.

4.11 It was noted that properties being offered had information, including Google Maps and Streetview, about exactly where they were and the neighbourhood they were in. However location was often a convenient cover for the fact that a home which was more attractive or interesting had been advertised after a bid had been accepted.

Satisfaction surveys

4.12 Councillors asked if there was an end-of-process customer satisfaction survey option on the new site. They were informed no survey was available but that it could be added to the system. As the new process had been online since January it might be appropriate to have such a survey.

4.13 The new system had prompted far fewer telephone queries than when the previous system was put into place, members were told.

4.14 In an ancillary point, Cllr Newcombe asked if there was customer satisfaction data available for clients at the Granby Street Customer Centre.

9 Future schedule

9.1 No further meeting of the task group had yet been scheduled. It was possible that one could be held on Thursday 4th August, depending on whether information was available on:

- Granby Street customer centre satisfaction data

- Longer term voids
- Separation of data on void times to take into account the tower block repairs programme (with its associated long term voids)
- A detailed technical note about the reasons for Monday being the only date at which tenancies began.

Jerry Connolly 21st July 2016

APPENDIX C: Scope of the review

To be completed by the Member proposing the review		
1.	Title of the proposed scrutiny review	Progress and performance relating to void times in city council housing stock
2.	Proposed by	Cllr Paul Newcombe
3.	Rationale	<p>State what prompted the review e.g. media interest /public feedback / new legislation / performance information.</p> <p>Voids and void times are a matter of on-going interest for ward members, members of the scrutiny commission and tenants.</p> <p>There were known difficulties due to the failure of a contractor which required the diversion of departmental resources and caused voids times to increase.</p> <p>A short review would assess the current position, how this relates to previous performance and prospects of further improvements.</p>
4.	Purpose and aims of the review What question(s) do you want to answer and what do you want to achieve? (Outcomes?)	To determine performance levels based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area housing offices • Contractor client (relevant depots) • Relevant KPIs for the service and compared with other authorities • Housing type and locations across the city, including inner and outer estates
5.	Links with corporate aims / priorities How does the review link to corporate aims and priorities?	The built and natural environment Neighbourhoods and communities Providing care and support
6.	Scope Set out what is included in the scope of the review and what is not. For example which services it does and does not cover.	A task group would look at a small number of cases from a range of housing offices across the city For example the task group would look at two examples within each area of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the quickest turn-round of voids • homes empty the longest • repairs completed around the average for the service

Develop a draft Project Plan to incorporate sections seven to twelve of this form

7.	<p>Methodology</p> <p>Describe the methods you will use to undertake the review.</p> <p>How will you undertake the review, what evidence will need to be gathered from members, officers and key stakeholders, including partners and external organisations and experts?</p>	<p>The inquiry will be conducted by a task group and involve at least two meetings. Evidence will be assembled into conclusions and recommendations made to the Housing Scrutiny Commission. Tenant representatives will be invited to take part in the Review</p>
	<p>Witnesses</p> <p>Set out who you want to gather evidence from and how you will plan to do this</p>	<p>Evidence would be taken from officers, local members where appropriate, tenant representatives and other interested individuals or groups.</p> <p>Evidence will be in the form of written reports and oral evidence to the Task Group</p> <p>Site visits would also be organised to look at a range of voids</p>
8.	<p>Timescales</p> <p>How long is the review expected to take to complete?</p>	<p>Four months</p>
	<p>Proposed start date</p>	<p>December 2015</p>
	<p>Proposed completion date</p>	<p>March 2016</p>
9.	<p>Resources / staffing requirements</p> <p>Scrutiny reviews are facilitated by Scrutiny Policy Officers and it is important to estimate the amount of their time, in weeks, that will be required in order to manage the review Project Plan effectively.</p>	<p>Approximately two weeks of Scrutiny Policy Officer time</p>
	<p>Do you anticipate any further resources will be required e.g. site visits or independent technical advice? If so, please provide details.</p>	<p>Site visits within the city may be organised as part of the task group review</p>

10.	<p>Review recommendations and findings</p> <p>To whom will the recommendations be addressed? E.g. Executive / External Partner?</p>	<p>Recommendations will be made to the executive</p>
11.	<p>Likely publicity arising from the review - Is this topic likely to be of high interest to the media? Please explain.</p>	<p>This is unlikely to be a high-profile issue attracting significant media attention. However the media office will be notified routinely when reports are made to the Scrutiny Commission</p>
12.	<p>Publicising the review and its findings and recommendations</p> <p>How will these be published / advertised?</p>	<p>Recommendations and conclusions will be communicated to tenant representative groups and forums;</p> <p>A media report may be produced on the main findings and recommendations</p>
13.	<p>How will this review add value to policy development or service improvement?</p>	<p>By concentrating on an area of performance which has been of interest to members and making constructive recommendations it is hoped to achieve an improvement in the service.</p> <p>It is recognised that external factors (such as the 1% year on year rent reductions demanded by the government) may have a negative impact on the performance of this (and other) housing services.</p>
<p>To be completed by the Divisional Lead Director</p>		
14.	<p>Divisional Comments</p> <p>Scrutiny's role is to influence others to take action and it is important that Scrutiny Commissions seek and understand the views of the Divisional Director.</p>	<p>To come</p>
15.	<p>Are there any potential risks to undertaking this scrutiny review?</p> <p>E.g. are there any similar reviews being undertaken, on-</p>	

	going work or changes in policy which would supersede the need for this review?
16. Are you able to assist with the proposed review? If not please explain why.	
In terms of agreement / supporting documentation / resource availability?	
Name	
Role	
Date	

To be completed by the Scrutiny Support Manager

17. Will the proposed scrutiny review / timescales negatively impact on other work within the Scrutiny Team?	It is expected that this review can be supported fully by the SPO and that it is anticipated to be a fairly quick review. It is also the first review for this commission and is not likely to have any negative impact on any other work of the commission.
Do you have available staffing resources to facilitate this scrutiny review? If not, please provide details.	Yes, the SPO should be able to adequately support this review.
Name	Kalvaran Sandhu
Date	3 rd December 2015