

Housing Scrutiny Voids Task Group recommendations update report.

	Recommendation	Update
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	Asbestos is identified at void inspection stage via information on Northgate plus a visual inspection. If present and testing has not previously been carried out, a test is requested. If no asbestos is present it follows the void journey. If there is asbestos present, dependant on the type, location and extent of works being carried out it may be possible to work around it or it may require removal. Licenced and non-licenced removal is carried out by contractors except for the removal of asbestos containing floor tiles, which are removed by voids operatives using the appropriate method statement. Enabling works to gain access to asbestos are carried out by voids where needed to assist with any contractors work. The process has been amended to ensure that no void moves forward in the void journey until the asbestos has been addressed and the Void Technician is responsible for chasing the removal works to ensure timely return of the void for void works.
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.	<p>1. Property Information</p> <p>All properties are advertised with the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Photograph • Address of Property- street name only • Property Size • Property Type • Whether adapted or not • Weekly rent • Landlord • Area • Sub Area - ie estate • Maximum Occupancy • Heating Type • If it has a garden • Age restrictions (if applicable)

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pet bans (If applicable)• Lift (if applicable)• Void reference number <p>If a property has specific facilities these are detailed in an additional text box ie., type of adaptations.</p> <p>Symbols and Icons are used to aid advert descriptions and are used to detail the property type, bed size, heating type, garden, lift and pets etc.</p> <p>All properties are displayed and can be searched for by bed size or property type and by area.</p> <p>There is a link to google maps.</p> <p>The offer letter advises applicants to visit the area and view the property from the outside.</p> <p>Local information about the areas is handed out at the first visit.</p> <p>The web site and offer letter advise that <i>'there is an expectation that if you are offered a property you will accept the offer. Be sure about the property and the area you choose - detailed information on the property can be found by clicking on the photograph of the properties being advertised, or by clicking on the view details on the right hand side of the screen'</i></p> <p>An area for new tenants information on the LCC Housing pages is currently being considered as a part of the channel shift agenda.</p> <p>2. Number of Offers</p> <p>There is a 3 offer policy. Applicants are reminded at every refusal of the policy and that after their 3rd offer they will be suspended from the</p>
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		<p>housing register for 12 months. If the number of offers requires to be reduced this is a policy decision that would require full consultation and would require HOS involvement as the keeper of the policy. Currently over 70% of properties are accepted on first offer.</p> <p>3. Timescale to accept an offer Timescales for accepting an offer vary depending on whether the property is ready to let or whether the property is still tenanted and in the notice period. 3 postal days are normal see point 1.9 below. Those RTL are treated as a priority and responses are required within 24 hours. The officer is generally making the offer by phone at this point which is followed up by a written offer. In June 2017 the RTL to occupation timescales showed 85% let within 10 days or less and an average RTL to occupation of 6.5 days. This is partly due to the additional resource put in place.</p>
1.3	<p>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</p>	<p>All rechargeable items are identified at void stage and former tenants are invoiced for works required. These debts are pursued by Income Collection. Current tenants are invoiced for recharges whilst in a tenancy and Income collection pursue in same way.</p>
1.4	<p>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.</p>	<p>The apprenticeship scheme is currently being reviewed by HTT to inform and formulate the future requirements of the service.</p>
1.5	<p>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.</p>	<p>Voids have been included in the meetings that have prepared the tender documents for outsourcing the stores. The materials supply requirements of voids have been made clear in terms of availability, specific products and price. We would expect the new managed service to meet those requirements. Waste collection services may or may not be carried out by the new</p>

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		managed service. This is an area for negotiation, however voids has a Driver labourer resource that can fulfil this service.
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	A new letting standard was consulted and agreed on in 2016. This was implemented from May 2017 and staff are working to this standard. A new tenant’s version will be published on the Apply for Housing Web pages for applicants to view shortly. The Conditions of Tenancy state that tenants should report repairs promptly and allow access to operatives and/or contractors to carry out works.
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	The existing decoration allowance scheme is administered through a contract that ends in March 2018. We are currently doing a pilot using paint pack schemes from two companies. The outcome including tenant’s feedback will inform the imminent tendering process for the new contract that will run from April 2018. New tenants are made aware of the CoT at sign up and this is reinforced at the first visit carried out within 6 weeks of the new tenancy commencing. It is at this stage that it can be established if any decorating has been carried out.
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.	This happens already and keys are split where required.
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	The current process is that all offers of void accommodation made have a response deadline of 3 postal days. Applicants are expected to telephone or e-mail the Property Lettings Team within that time. If there is no response from the applicant, an officer will attempt to contact the applicant by phone or e-mail to find out if they are interested in the offer of accommodation. If there is still no response, the offer will be refused on our system and the application is cancelled. Applicants are notified of this process in their offer letter. There have been instances whereby the applicants have not been chased for a response after the 3 postal days. This was due to a lack of resources within the team. This has been addressed.

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		<p>Where a property is ready at the point of offer, offers will be made both verbally and in writing. If applicants fail to attend their viewing appointment, an officer will attempt to contact them by phone. If there is still no response, the offer will be refused on our system and the application cancelled. Applicants are notified of this process in their offer letter.</p> <p>We do analyse why people refuse offers but it is very difficult to improve the refusal rate because applicants are always expecting their next offer to be better than the one before, this is a result of the 3 offer policy.</p>
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.	The introduction on daily tenancies is something that we are working towards but we cannot do a pilot because our systems are not set up to do this. Daily tenancies will impact on many areas such as Housing Benefit, income management and rent accounts. This would be a major change and requires significant system changes.
1.11	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	Mobile working for void operatives is within the Housing System user Group programme of works.
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.	We aim to ensure that all our properties have an EPC rating of C. the HRA Capital Programme is designed to have a positive impact on the energy efficiency of our houses. We will be externally insulating more homes this year, filling difficult to treat lofts and installing 1400 energy efficient boilers.
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	In the 7 months prior to when the new structure came into force on 31 st October 2017, routine voids took an average of 58 days from termination of tenancy to when a new tenancy commences. Since then we have achieved an average of 47.2 days. A number of initiatives have contributed towards this and further work is underway to further improve re-let times.

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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	Not for VPLS.
1.15	The Department is requested respond to the recommendations within three months of the report's approval by the Overview Select Committee.	noted
1.16	The responses and actions referenced in 1.16 be reported to a future meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Commission	noted