

# Housing Scrutiny Commission

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Void Performance report – April - September 18/19

Assistant Mayor for Housing: Cllr Andy Connelly

Lead director: Chris Burgin

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**City Mayor**

## Useful information

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

### 1. Summary

Void performance in the first two quarters of 2018/19 has been disappointing especially since we had achieved significant improvements at year end 17/18 on the preceding financial year. The reasons for the poor performance is because of a combination of several factors all happening at the same time, we are now working through all the issues to ensure we return to a stronger position as soon as possible.

### 2. Purpose of report

To update members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission on Void performance for the first half of 2018/19.

### 3. Supporting information including options considered:

The table below shows 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter performance against 17/18 and performance targets.

Measure	Target	Year end 17/18	Quarter 2 18/19
Routine Voids	45 days average	50.8	57.1
Long term voids	90 days average	96.8	110.4
All voids	Maximum 90 days average	63.1	80
No. Voids Held	Less than 2% (421)	269	288
Total annual rent loss	No greater than £825k	£840k	£265,011.57 (£510k) *
Total annual council tax loss	£202,537	£155,014.00	£34,306.69 (£57,624) *
Ready to let to Occupation	10 days	7.8	5.2

\* 6 month rolling total

## **Why have void time worsened in the last 6 months ?**

### **Vacancies in the Voids Team.**

The Voids team along with day to day repairs held vacancies for several months so that the latest cohort of housing apprentices would be able to apply for a job in the division. This was the right thing to do, the council had invested in their training for up to five years and had a moral obligation to try and help them seek permanent jobs. In effect 3 years' worth of apprentices were coming out of their time altogether because of the different durations of apprenticeships. Between Voids and Repairs 40 vacancies we're being held. In reality this meant that the voids team establishment was lacking 4 teams of operatives for several months which has had a result on the number of voids completed. The recruitment exercise has been completed and whilst we have still got a couple of vacancies (you will always have a churn of staff) the situation is much better now and the number of voids being returned every week now match the number coming in.

### **Asbestos removal**

We must survey all void properties to locate and assess the condition of any asbestos containing materials. If the condition is poor, then we have to arrange for it to be removed. Some items can be removed by the void operative, such as floor tiles, but other items such as sprayed ceiling coating, must be removed under fully controlled conditions by a licenced contractor. We have to notify every removal to the HSE, we also have to give them 10 days' notice if the removal is under fully controlled conditions. We have a good knowledge of where the asbestos is in our properties but we have no idea until we received notice which properties are going to become vacant. This summer the number of asbestos removals required has increased by 300% compared to last years removals.

### **Severe weather**

The impact of the 'beast from the east' is well documented as is the council's swift response in dealing with an unprecedented request for boiler repairs. To respond, all gas trained operatives were allocated work, this included those allocated to voids, the ones that would normally do the 'gas fill and test' that is required when a new tenant signs for the property. All sign ups were suspended, and no gas work was carried out in any void for up to 4 weeks. Even after the all the boilers were repaired, the operatives on loan to gas were still required to carry out boiler services that had been delayed as a result of the reallocation of gas operatives to respond to emergency repairs which was another 4 weeks. There was also a programme of retro fitting 'boiler buddies' to ensure that the next time we encounter severe weather a similar situation wouldn't arise. Whilst the action taken was the right thing to do, this did result in a significant backlog of void properties which we have only recently resolved.

### **Leaks and floods after the severe weather**

After the cold weather came the thaw and a different issue, pipes that had frozen started to burst and, in some cases, ceilings collapsed, and major repairs work was required. To make sure the impact on our tenants was reduced void operatives were re directed to carry out these repairs, priority being given to those who were living in unsatisfactory conditions. This has also had an impact on void time

### **Priority voids**

We are under pressure to return void properties back into use. We are a social housing provider and we have a waiting list in excess of 5000 applicants, the demand and pressure is constant. We also have to respond for even more urgent requests for homes when people are fleeing domestic violence or harassment or waiting to be discharged from hospital and holding up a bed. We can normally accommodate up to 8 priority requests at any one time, however so far this year the priority void list has been consistently 19 properties, this has been unsustainable and had a negative impact on the normal throughflow of properties, when all the voids you are working on are a priority then the priority ceases. For example, we may be picking out a recent void which we have had a request to prioritise due to the case type and this will be taken over and above an older void which does not have a priority case attached to it. As a result, we have had to prioritise the priority case. The number of cases has recently reduced, and we are now at more sustainable levels.

### **Fire doors.**

The world of fire safety has been challenging since Grenfell and the Hackett Report. As result all fire door manufactures have been asked to test the fire resistance of their doors more robustly. A significant number of doors failed and as a result all manufactures stopped production for several weeks/months until new doors had passed the more rigorous testing. We cannot re-let a property without a compliant fire door, any void that needs a new fire door has in effect been parked for several weeks, an example of this is 25 Yew Tree Drive, the void was ready to let on the 28<sup>th</sup>. September but the new door couldn't be ordered until the 5<sup>th</sup>. December 2018 a delay of 11 weeks just to order the door, resulting in £880 additional rent loss until the situation is resolved. In some instances, we have fitted timber fire doors and very recently there is a supplier that has had a fire door pass the new testing regime so we can now order new fire doors but the demand is so high we cannot get doors supplied until April 2019 in many cases.

### **Condition properties are returned**

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



### **What are we doing now to address this:**

#### City wide approach to void repairs

Currently the city is split into 6 areas, 3 in the East and 3 in the West and they are all resourced to do all repair the voids in that area, sometimes helping in other areas if they have capacity. To try and make sure the long-term void properties are returned as quickly as possible work is being allocated on a city-wide basis so that regardless of its location all properties are prioritised equally. This has worked, and all areas are now back to a similar position they we're in at the beginning of the year. As a result we will be reverting back to area based allocation in the next few weeks but this will be reviewed regularly and should a similar situation arise again we will revert back to city wide based working.

#### Advertising properties more appropriately

Properties were being advertised when we received the termination from the existing tenant, before we knew how much work was required to bring them up to the lettings standard. This raised the new tenant's expectations and created pressure in the team that directed resources away from those tenants who were in the greatest need, voids that weren't a priority were being treated as such. Properties are now only advertised once they have been inspected and we have a clearer idea of how long it will take for it to be ready to let. This has reduced the pressure in the team and allows voids to be completed in priority order and manages customer expectations in a more positive way.

#### Reviewing asbestos removals

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

We are starting a pilot in March 2019 to remove all the asbestos from Liangs Easiform bungalows when they become void to assess the impact on time and resources. The best time to remove asbestos is when a property is void because there is no tenant for it to impact on. Removing all the asbestos would also mean we don't have to manage the risk in the future which would benefit the repairs service and totally remove the possibility of any uncontrolled releases and any health and safety involvement, this would also have long term financial benefits. We had 75 of this bungalow type vacant last year.

#### Completing works on occupation

To try and reduce waiting times for priority voids we have started to carry out works on occupation, in agreement with the new tenant, this has been successful where it has

been possible, and we are looking to widen this out to other void properties.

#### Recruitment:

We are currently actively recruiting to fill the remaining vacancies in the voids team, there will always be vacancies due to the number of staff involved but this is now at manageable levels.

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

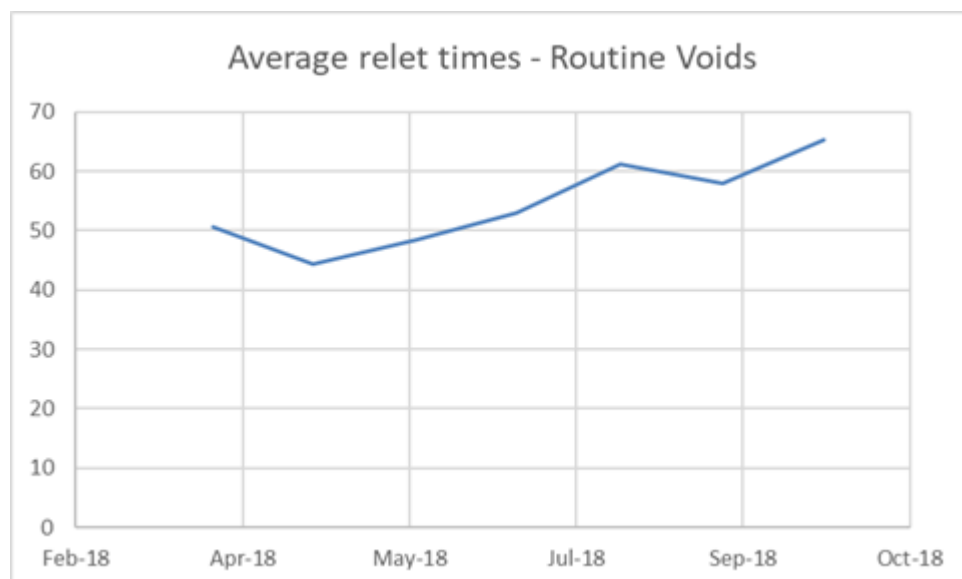
#### Issuing work to contractors

In the past we have only issued capital works to contractors, such as kitchens refurbishments, rewiring and new boilers. To ensure that the voids service is more flexible we will now have the ability to issue all the repairs required in a void property to a contractor, this will help with any peaks and troughs and help us to return empty properties more quickly and in doing so keep the number of voids held to a minimum. It will be sometime before we feel the full positive impact of this decision because the contractors need a mobilisation period to ensure they have sufficient resources to complete the works required.

#### Moving forward:

We have made good progress however it will take time for the figures to reflect the improvements made.

#### Performance graphs:





#### 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?)