

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhoods and Community Scrutiny Panel

DATE: Thursday, 31st October 2019

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WARD(S): All

PART I **FOR COMMENT & CONSIDERATION**

HOUSING REPAIRS AND CUSTOMER CARE

1. **Purpose of Report**

To provide the Neighbourhood and Community Scrutiny Panel with an update on void performance.

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Committee is requested to note the report for information and comment on it.

3. **The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan**

3a. **Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

Housing is one of the key priorities of Slough's Joint Well Being Strategy (SJWS). It contributes to reducing inequalities in health through access to quality housing. There are clear links between housing and the JSNA priorities around improving health conditions so that people can manage their own health and wellbeing and live independently in their communities.

3b. **Five Year Plan Outcomes**

Void management contributes specifically to four outcomes contained in the Council's Five Year Plan (2019-2024), namely:

- Slough children will grow up to be happy, healthy and successful
- Our people will be healthier and manage their own care needs
- Slough will be an attractive place where people choose to live, work and stay
- Our residents will live in good quality homes

3c. The Housing Strategy

Slough's Housing Strategy 2016-2021 sets out the Council's shared vision and priorities to provide sufficient, good quality, affordable housing. The Housing Strategy is currently being reviewed and will be refreshed by January 2020.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

Housing (People) Services (HPS) became responsible for the void budget in relation to the Repairs, Maintenance and Investment Contract (RMI). At the half year, there is a budget overspend reflecting a period when there has been a lot of properties that have become void, but which have been occupied by tenants for over 20 to 30 years. This has resulted in significant expenditure internally and externally, including garden clearances; major re-plastering: asbestos removal and four properties where previous tenants have concreted their gardens, but at different times leaving uneven and dangerous paths, patios, hard landscaping and large asbestos sheds, one in a dangerous condition.

HPS are working with Osborne to find ways to mitigate the risk of an overspend at the end of the financial year.

(b) Risk Management

There are no risk management implications arising from this report.

Type of Risk	Risk	Current Controls	Score	Future Controls
Economic/Financial	Budget overspend	Daily specification of works/Budget monitoring/agreeing variations	15 Critical impact. High probability	Only using Schedule of Rates
Political	Reputational risk to council due to overspend	Budget monitoring & RMI Governance arrangements	12 Critical impact Significant probability	Review both operational and financial performance.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no Human Rights or other Legal implications arising from this report.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

The compilation of this report has not required an Equalities Impact Assessment.

(e) Workforce

There are no workforce implications.

5. Supporting Information

5.1 Voids

Voids and void management are standard housing activities in relation to secure and fixed term tenancies. Voids occur for a variety of reasons, including on death; transfer to another council property due to size of property need; adapted property; moving on to buy a property; move to another part of the country; abandonment of the property; taking advantage of an incentive to downsize; moved into residential care and evictions.

5.1.1 Voids Performance Scrutiny Overview Indicator

SOI 10 - Average re-let time in calendar days (V1 Minor, V2 Standard and V3 Major Work Voids)

This indicator has been reviewed and brought in line with what would be classed as the local authority industry standard for measuring void performance. This standard is based on the old BVPI 212, measuring the average re-let time (calendar days), which excludes any period of time a void property is in actual major works. The void period either side of the major works will be included in the calculation to obtain the average re-let time. The period taken into account for a V3 is the date a tenancy terminates through to the date the tenancy recommences, as shown on the tenancy agreement, less the amount of time the property was subject to major repair. For V1 and V2's, calculation is the same as V3, but no deductions for major repairs.

Void types excluded from the average re-let time calculation include:-

- V4 Capital voids
- Long term management hold void including insurance, major works, pending disposal.
- Operational voids
- Any properties where a formal decision has been made to sell or demolish.

The categories for voids listed in the RMI contract are defined as follows:

Category	Scope of Work	Target Time
Priority 'V1' Minor void works	Lock change clear out, clean, meter readings, services tests (gas, water, electrical), visual asbestos check, decoration of kitchen, bathroom, hall stairs and landing in white emulsion.	Within 5 working days
Priority 'V2' Standard void works	Standard void repairs as described in the Lettable Void Standard	Within 10 working days
Priority 'V3' Major void works	Internal refurbishment of a void property to the Slough Standard.	Within 20 working days

Priority 'V4'	To be instructed from time to time by the Council with works to include structural repairs, damp treatment, roof and window repairs / replacement as necessary.	Works to be completed within agreed deadlines
Capital voids		
Complete internal and external refurbishment	Works to be completed within agreed deadlines subject to the extent of work required	

In addition, there are other categories, which have been developed since the RMI Contract started and account for a small number of voids.

Category	Scope of Work	Target Time
Long Term Management Hold/Insurance/Major Works to be carried out under Programmed works/ pending disposal.	Property held for a specific allocation or due to a refurbishment project, where keeping it void is best solution. Property subject to insurance work resulting from fire or subsidence Property has been left in a state which requires such significant expenditure that it is done as programmed capital works. Strategic decision to dispose.	Actions to be completed within agreed deadlines
Operational void	This could be a new property being prepared for its first let or a property that could be being used outside of tenanted use by the council.	Works to be completed within agreed deadlines
To be demolished	A property that has become void and is being held as such in advance of possible demolition.	

5.1.2 Performance reporting 2019/20

Q1 Average re-let time

Void type	No of Props	Count of void days	Ave void days
V1-Minor voids	1	92	92
V2-Standard Voids	9	821	91
V3-Major Works Void	39	1633 *	42
Q1 Average re-let time	49	2546	52

* Does not include time in major works

Q2 Average re-let time

Void type	No of Props	Count of void days	Ave void days
V1-Minor voids	0	0	0
V2-Standard Voids	4	207	52
V3-Major Works Void	40	1772*	44
Q2 Average re-let time	44	1979	45

* Does not include time in major works

Average re-let time standard void

Time frame	No of Props	Count of void days	Ave void days
Q1	9	821	91
Q2	4	207	52
Year to date	13	1028	79

5.1.3 Volume of Voids

The table below shows the void volume over the past 12 months for secure and fixed term tenancies.

October 2018 – September 2019

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Total
New voids	32	19	24	25	20	16	24	15	26	25	23	34	283
Voids Let	24	29	38	18	13	35	28	11	17	21	21	29	284

5.1.4 Letting of Void Properties

There is a variety of legislation which has to be taken into account when letting properties with a fixed term of less than 7 years. The most recent legislation is the Homes (Fit for Human Habitations) Act 2018 and applies to landlords including councils. This means when a property is let, it needs to take account of this legislation. Tenants can use the Act to legally challenge the council should the property not be fit for human habitation.

The void process involves the council and Osborne, as the council's repairs, maintenance and investment contractor. Osborne's role is to carry out the repair work when the property is void, to bring it up to a condition that is lettable, that allows a new tenant to move in safely.

The circumstances in which a property becomes void are numerous, which involve a variety of processes before keys can be given to Osborne. Examples over and above a standard void, which is where a tenant gives notice, a pre-void inspection is carried out to determine the likely amount of work needed, and explanation is given of the Council's re-charge policy on vacation. At the end of the void period, the tenant returns the keys to the council and the property is in a good state of repair. The keys are given to Osborne who carry out a joint inspection with council Technical Inspectors to determine

the specification. Allocations are advised so that they can identify suitable applicants for the property. The work is carried out, progress being monitored through weekly void meetings and dialogue between Osborne and council's technical team. Once completed, a joint property inspection is carried out and property is signed off as being fit to let. A viewing is held with a suitable applicant, and a signing of the tenancy agreement at the earliest opportunity.

There are numerous vagaries, which have to be managed within the process by council staff; Osborne when carrying out the void work and the unpredictability of applicants.

Examples of these vagaries include uncooperative tenants who will not give access to allow a pre-void inspection; evictions resulting in trashed property; gardens full of rubbish that the tenant has decided not to dispose of; asbestos riddled properties which require a full asbestos removal process; residents passes away with no relatives, so a 28 day Notice to Quit has to be issued to the Public Trustee before action can be taken to the property; property requires replacement kitchens and bathrooms with decisions on incorporating into planned programmes or replacing as part of void works; gardens that need work due to concrete patios and paths presenting health and safety risks; applicants who are very positive about taking a tenancy, and then decide to refuse, resulting in a further allocation to be made; and due to the extensive nature of some work, agreement by the council to additional costs.

5.1.5 Improvement to Void Performance

Over the past 12 months, there has been active working together by council and Osborne officers to make improvements to the voids process; minimise void costs; and minimise costs of bringing voids back into management and available to let. Reasons for this include:

- Being able to let properties more quickly.
- Ensure properties are let to a standard which is fit for human habitation.
- Able to rehouse people in temporary accommodation more quickly, resulting in improved accommodation for them, cost saving to the council, and providing vacant accommodation for new homeless people.
- Minimising rent loss, enabling more income to be spent on tenancy sustainment benefitting new and existing tenants who need additional support in managing their tenancies.
- Minimise council tax payments for these void periods, giving flexibility to spend on non recoverable services for tenants.
- Able to favourably benchmark with other local authorities

To achieve this, the following actions are being taken. These include:

- Improving the IT monitoring processes
- Constant monitoring of voids through weekly joint meetings

- Staff trained to ensure internal processes are timely actioned
- Ensuring keys are passed between the council and Osborne as efficiently as possible.
- Discussions with Environmental Services to assist with clearing gardens.

Redefining of the agreed Lettable Standard in the RMI Contract for Osborne to work to has been reviewed and is in the process of being firmed up on. The Lettable Standard is a document that commits the council to provide a new letting at a standard that a new tenant can move into. It takes into account the cost of bringing a property back into occupation.

This may mean the new tenant has to decorate all or part of the property themselves, but where the council has agreed decoration vouchers to enable them to acquire the materials they require including paint, brushes etc to provide wall colours and papering of their own choice; Gardens will be cleared of detritus, overgrown bushes, grass cut to a level that allows a new tenant to be responsible for the ongoing care and maintenance; and internally and externally, health and safety risks are mitigated.

The property will be let as being fit for human habitation. This may mean the property is decorated wholly, partially or not at all.

Focussing on reducing void times, council and Osborne officers are meeting to jointly explore ways in which the void process can be made more efficient; improving the specification process linked to cost control. Separately, council officers are looking at different applicant viewing arrangements including multiple viewings.

The revised Lettable Standard will be passed via the Residents Board for comment.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

None.

7. **Conclusion**

The report is for information only and therefore, for noting. However, the void's issue is important for many reasons and officers continue to work at getting processes more effective and efficient.

8. **Background Papers**

None.