



Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report

THE 'OUTS AND INS' OF THE VOIDS PROCESS

July 2013

Contents:

Introduction
Who we are 3
What we do
Why we chose to scrutinise the voids process 4

How we did our investigations 4

What we found 5

Our recommendations 6

Conclusion 10

Acknowledgements 10

Appendix A – Scoping paper 11

Appendix B – Review of voids/lettable standard 12

Appendix C – Review of welcome pack 13

Introduction

Who we are:

We are the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, known as 'Spanners', made up of 5 tenants and chaired by Roger Pell.

'Spanners' stands for:

- Scrutinise
- Performance
- Analyse
- Negotiate
- Network
- Evaluate
- Report
- Support

What we do:

We investigate our chosen topics and report recommendations to the Housing Review Board on our findings. Whilst we are independent of the council, we liaise with officers and tenants to gain information. This enables us to give a balanced perspective to support the Housing Service to regulate and improve its performance.

Why we chose to scrutinise the voids process:

We considered a range of topics – including those recommended by staff and the Tenant Representative Group - and eliminated those that were going through a process of internal review. We examined performance information and considered value for

money as well. Residents often see empty properties and wonder why it appears to take a long time to 'let' them. Voids fitted well within these criteria and so was selected as our next scrutiny project.

How we did our investigations

We developed a plan¹ (scoping paper) which outlined the areas to explore and set boundaries around the topic to make sure we stayed focused.

We then agreed which methods we wanted to use to complete our investigations. This included:

- Work shadowing Tenancy Sustainment Officers at various void properties at different stages
- Interviewing tenants, staff and contractors
- Undertaking a staff survey
- Examining the voids standard and voids procedure documents
- Speaking to new tenants
- Examining the new tenants satisfaction survey
- Reviewing the welcome pack and Tenant Handbook
- Examining Housemark benchmarking data and comparing our Voids Standard with Exeter City New Homes Property Standard

During the work shadowing phase we visited a total of 19 properties, at different stages along the process. We had hoped to follow several properties through from start to finish but this did not occur. We feel that there were some properties where timescales moved very quickly and we did not always get notified of the next stage. Also we did not want to hold up the process. However we feel that those properties which we did visit, a mix of sheltered and general needs, houses, flats and bungalows, gave us a good overview as to how the process was working and on which we could make comments.

Copies of all our findings can be found in our evidence box file.

It was decided not to include Devon Home Choice and allocations in this scrutiny investigation.

¹ See Appendix A

This scrutiny investigation took us ten months to complete. All recommendations are based on evidence provided by officers, contractors and tenants. It may be that there is information that we were not made aware of, which may impact on our findings.

What we found

Overall, we found the voids process to be very positive and working reasonably well. EDDC is meeting its target turn around time for voids. The staff involved seem to genuinely care about the process and the tenants. Tenants (and the Panel) have commented on the friendliness of all staff involved. We compare reasonably to others in the sector when it comes to the length of time a property is void.

Whilst we are spending more than others in the sector on void repairs and void management (and we understand this is largely due to the age of the homes and fitting things like new kitchens and bathrooms during the void period) we find that the overall voids/lettable standard is a bit vague and needs clarification to avoid ambiguity. Occasionally this led to tenants being given different messages regarding what would be done to the property from staff².

Currently tenants are given no choice as to the date and time of accompanied viewings³. Whilst we understand the need to let homes as quickly as possible in order to collect the rental income, there needs to be a balance between this and the need for tenants to be able to fit the viewings into their daily lives – this will also give more time for staff to be able to complete paperwork.⁴

Staff need to remember that some tenants will be looking at their potential new home through rose-tinted glasses which means they may not take in or may misunderstand the information given. Staff need to take time with tenants to ensure they give this information at a speed and in a way which works best for the prospective tenant⁵.

Our key recommendations include:

- Void/lettable standard to be clarified and made more specific

² Void process visits

³ Staff interview

⁴ Staff survey

⁵ Tenant interviews and staff survey

- Tenants to be given clear information on the work to be done on their new home and the standard they can expect the property to be in at start of their tenancy in writing
- Tenants to be given choice over dates and times of viewings

Our recommendations

RECOMMENDATION ONE			
Further recommendations	Evidence	Priority 1	Priority 2
1. Void/lettable standard to be clarified and made more specific			
1.1 Revise the current Void/Lettable Standard so that there is no ambiguity as to meaning in line with our detailed review (see Appendix B)	Void/Lettable Standard		
1.2 East Devon staff (and tenants) to carry out a percentage of spot checks at the end of the void period to ensure the standard is being maintained.	Contractor interviews		
1.3 Develop a detailed specification for the standard of cleaning similar to that in the Exeter City Council leaflet to include within the Voids/Lettable Standard.	New Tenants Telephone Survey and tenant interviews		
1.4 Ensure this is given to the cleaners and spot checks need to be carried out to verify the standard is being upheld.	New Tenants Telephone Survey and tenant interviews		
1.5 Develop a detailed specification for the standard of gardens at the end of the void period	Staff Survey		
1.6 Move electric fuseboxes and stop cocks so that they are easily accessible to tenants and are disability-friendly	Contractor interviews Void shadowing Tenant interviews		
1.7 Decorate general needs homes to similar standard as sheltered homes	Staff survey Void shadowing		
1.8 Provide 'buggy stores' and a safe place to recharge electric disability scooters in blocks of	Tenant Interviews		

flats	Contractor Interviews				
1.9 Ensure that parts required are easily accessible and that no delays to work occur as a result of issues with suppliers, for example current kitchen supplier					
RECOMMENDATION TWO					
2.0 Tenants to be given clear information on the work to be done on their new home and the standard they can expect the property to be in at start of their tenancy in writing					
Further details	Evidence	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	
2.1 Provide tenants with a check list of what is going to be done to their new home. This should cover works agreed by the Maintenance Surveyor and any fixtures, fittings and other items that are to be left. This will give new tenants clear information as to what they can expect in their new home.	Voids shadowing and tenant interview				
2.2 Provide tenants with guideline floor plans and measurements in order to give an idea of room size. It should be made clear that these measurements should not be used to order carpet or other floor coverings	Voids shadowing				
2.3 Provide a leaflet similar to the one produced by Exeter City Council. This leaflet should reflect our voids standard	The New Home Property Standard, Exeter City Council				
2.4 Ensure the information given to tenants by all staff is consistent by training staff on the voids standard and other important housing policies such as communal cleaning and grounds maintenance.	Tenant interviews and staff survey				
2.5 Use the recommended checklist and leaflet to explain to tenants what will be done to their new home during the void period. Make sure that time is taken to explain this clearly and ensure	Tenant interviews and staff survey				

tenants have understood.				
2.6 Make sure staff are clear about important housing policies such as communal cleaning and grounds maintenance. Tenants will then know what East Devon will do and what their responsibility is once they have moved into their home, so they do not feel misled.	Tenant interviews and staff survey			
2.7 Use the Tenancy Agreement and Tenant Handbook to explain tenants' rights, entitlements and responsibilities. Make sure that time is taken to explain this clearly and ensure tenants have understood.	Tenant Interviews and staff survey			
2.8 Clarify the garden areas in relation to all properties especially blocks of flats. Ensure tenants are clear when they move in which piece of garden is their responsibility, or whether they are communal gardens.	Staff survey			
2.9 Give tenants a copy of electrical safety certificate. Alert tenants to the fact that the current energy supplier is British Gas but they can change supplier if they wish	Voids shadowing Review of the Tenants' Handbook and Welcome Pack			
RECOMMENDATION THREE				
3.0 Tenants to be given choice over dates and times of viewings				
Further recommendations	Evidence	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
3.1 Provide a choice of times for the accompanied viewings, including weekends and evenings	Voids Shadowing and Staff Survey			
3.2 Ask tenants moving into sheltered accommodation if they wish the Mobile Support Officer to be present at the accompanied viewing	Staff Survey			
3.3 Provide tenants with a named member of staff to contact for information and advice regarding their move	Tenant Interviews			

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

4. General				
Further recommendations	Evidence	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
4.1 Identify criteria where flexibility can be used with regard to rent payment, for example, at the beginning of a tenancy where a tenant might be struggling to pay outgoing rent on a previous property, or at the end of a tenancy, where the tenant has died	Tenant Interviews			
4.2 Review Welcome Pack in line with our detailed review (see Appendix C)	Review of current Welcome Pack			
4.3 Research why 50% of tenants responding to the New Tenants Telephone Survey had issues with their homes within four weeks of moving in	New Tenants telephone Survey			
4.4 Mobile Support Officer to introduce themselves to new sheltered residents during their first week of occupancy to make sure emergency information is given and recorded on the system	Staff Survey			

Conclusion

This was our second scrutiny activity and focussed on a service being provided by the council. There was much more work involved but we are getting more experienced in the scrutiny techniques needed and are growing as a scrutiny group.

We learned a lot about the challenges involved in delivering this housing service and hope that our recommendations help to address some of these.

We are pleased to find there are positive practices to balance our recommendations. We found the voids process to be very positive and working reasonably well, with target times met and staff who genuinely seem to care about the process and tenants.

To recap, our top three recommendations are:

1. Void/lettable standard to be clarified and made more specific
2. Tenants to be given clear information on the work to be done on their new home and the standard they can expect the property to be in at start of their tenancy
3. Tenants to be given choice over dates and times of viewings

We are pleased to recommend this report to the Housing Review Board.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following for their contribution and support during this project:

- Officers of the council who supported us, allowed us to shadow them and patiently searched for information in answer to our questions
- Tenants, Contractors and staff who took part in our surveys and interviews
- Trafford Hall for the free training

A special thank you goes to the Housing Needs Team and Emma Charlton for their patient help in facilitating this project

Appendix A - Scoping paper

Tenant Scrutiny Panel : Review of Voids – procedures and efficiency

BROAD TOPIC AREA	Review of procedures relating to re-lets and voids
SPECIFIC AREAS TO EXPLORE	<p>Void Management</p> <p>Pre let visits</p> <p>Tenant visits (accompanied)</p> <p>Review Tenant welcome pack</p> <p>Length of time empty</p> <p>Tenant feedback – survey</p> <p>Void repairs / maintenance</p>
AREAS NOT COVERED	<p>Devon Home Choice: ease of access / landlord interaction with system</p> <p>Allocations</p> <p>Repairs system</p> <p>Routine maintenance any works not directly concerning re-lets</p> <p>Complaint system</p> <p>Garden maintenance (grass cutting)</p>
DESIRED OUTCOMES	<p>Attend visits and observe procedures</p> <p>Review, observe and recommend</p> <p>New tenant survey, staff interviews and contractors</p> <p>Look for and comment on improvement in current procedures etc</p> <p>Cut out duplication and waste</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attend visits and observe procedures 2. Review system and procedures <p>Look at systems to improve income flow</p> <p>Value for money</p>
WHO SHOULD BE CONSULTED TO OBTAIN EVIDENCE	<p>New tenants – survey, questionnaire</p> <p>Contractor's staff</p> <p>Mystery shoppers</p>

Appendix B – Review of Voids/Letttable Standard

Number in specification	Comment
1. Visual inspection of exterior	Feel repairs should be done to steps and footpaths Need to fit grills over outside drains
2. Security	Don't feel that all windows are checked – eg Property 11 Also Panel feel double glazing units should be replaced if seals have been broken and condensation between panes
3. Electrical specification	Need to add into the specification that extractor fans in bathrooms and kitchens should be checked and where missing fitted in appropriate location. Specification to be updated to the current minimum standards required.
7. Fittings and fixtures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Contractors need to be made aware that specification says 'smooth to touch' in several places – at meeting did not seem to be aware of this and was not always the case for properties visited ii. specification needs to be clearer as to whether the 3m run of worktops is one continuous run or can be broken up iii. Panel found that not all units are left clean (Properties 1 & 11) iv. Specification doesn't say anything about a space for a cooker v. Specification should say that if gas supplied to property then fittings for both gas and electric cookers should be put in kitchen vi. Panel feel that specification should say that new toilet seats should be fitted vii. Specification says toilets and baths free from limescale but panel feel this is not always the case
8. Decorative order	<p>Says 'walls prepare ready for re-decoration' but feel needs more explanation about this – fill holes, smooth etc</p> <p>In light of changes to the way we are 'labelling' properties and recent decommissioning need to look again at which properties will be re-decorated prior to reletting. Perhaps all properties into which an older person or disabled person is moving in should be redecorated?</p>
9. Cleaning	<p>Panel would like to see a separate, detailed specification for the standard of cleaning similar to that in the Exeter City leaflet.</p> <p>This needs to be given to the cleaners and spot checks need to be carried out to check standard being upheld.</p> <p>Panel would like to see nicotine stains all removed (use steam cleaners?)</p>

Appendix C – Review of the Welcome Pack

Original list	Current welcome pack (7/3/13)	Recommendation	Priority
Welcome Letter	Not included	New letter to be drafted and included in pack	1
Information about the local area (including details about doctors, dentists etc)	Not included	Sheet of local information to be put together for each area	2
Info on a leaflet to say where to find this info Services into and within your home	Included	Leaflet on how to switch to another provider to be drafted and included in pack	1
Easy Reference Card for Repairs & Maintenance	Not included – but information in Tenant Handbook	Key phone numbers etc to be collated onto laminated card for easy reference	1
Refuse and recycling leaflet	Not included	Leaflet to be included	3
The Tenants Charter	Replaced by Tenant Handbook	No change required	
How to get involved with the Housing Service	Not included – but information in Tenant Handbook	No change required	
Housing Customer Charter Right to Repair leaflet Right to compensation leaflet Housing Benefit/Council Tax benefit claim form Home Safeguard leaflet Leaflet on dispersed alarm service Booklet on low cost home insurance	This information is now in the Tenant Handbook and/or Annual Report	No change required	
Advice on damp, condensation and mould problems Leaflet	Included	No change required	
Local 'handy pages' directory (if available for area)	Not included	No change required	
Copy of latest Housing Standard or Partnership News newsletter	Housing Matters included	No change required	
Tenant Participation Agreement	Now the Tenant and Council Partnership Agreement - in the Annual Report	No change required	

Original list	Current welcome pack (7/3/13)	Recommendation	Priority
	Flyer about Introductory tenancies	No change required	
	Leaflet on Heating Systems and controls	No change required	
	Annual Report	No change required	
	Home Focus	No change required	