

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 19 March 2024

Report Title

Tenants Scrutiny Panel Review – Voids Lettable Standard

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

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Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected.

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel is a key component of the Council's Tenant Engagement Framework, enabling tenants to scrutinise landlord services and standards with the aim of improving performance, value for money and tenant satisfaction.

The Panel is facilitated by Rotherfed on behalf of the Council and consists of tenant and resident representatives from across the Borough.

The Panel has completed a review of the Council's Voids Lettable Standard. The report details the Panel's findings as attached at Appendix 1.

Following completion of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the report and recommendations were discussed with the Housing Service and other relevant Council services and an action plan was developed in response to each of the recommendations.

This report provides Improving Places Select Commission with a summary of the findings of the review and the Council's response to each of the actions.

Recommendations

1. That Improving Places Select Commission notes the outcome of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the actions proposed to deal with each recommendation and progress made to date.
2. That a further report detailing progress is presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months.

List of Appendices Included

- **Appendix 1** Tenants Scrutiny Panel Review - Investigation into whether the lettable standard used by Rotherham Council during the voids process is suitable and meets tenant expectation.
- **Appendix 2** Tenants Scrutiny Review Action Plan.

Background Papers

None.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None.

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Tenants Scrutiny Panel Review – Voids Lettable Standard

1. Background

1.1 Tenant Scrutiny Panel reviews have provided an ongoing opportunity for tenants to work pro-actively with the Council, to look at various aspects of landlord service delivery, from a customer perspective and to develop recommendations and actions for service improvement.

1.2 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel identified that the voids process was an area where some improvements could be made following discussions with officers and tenants. Further discussion revealed that this was a large topic area, and that the investigation should be split into three separate sections.

1. Lettable standard
2. New tenant support and suitability
3. Downsizing

It was agreed that this investigation would focus on the lettable standard, with further work planned for the other two parts of the voids process in future.

1.3 The lettable standards set out the criteria a property must meet when a new tenant moves in, in relation to safety, repairs, and cleanliness. The standard was last reviewed by officers in 2019 when the new contracts were being procured for the repairs and maintenance service.

1.4 The Scrutiny Panel review consisted of the following:

- Review the lettable standard for Rotherham Council homes.
- Review the communications around the lettable standard both with contract partners and with tenants.
- Review the process and communications around tenants ending their tenancies.
- Consider the views of Rotherham Council tenants and their expectations for the standards in their new homes.
- Benchmark against other housing providers in relation to their lettable standards and communications with tenants
- Review the Social Housing White Paper and the impact that the lettable standard could have on compliance with these requirements.

1.5 During the review, six of the panel members undertook visits to void properties to look at the before and after conditions i.e. prior to works commencing and after completion of voids repairs and cleaning. The visits took place over a period of 14 weeks. Panel members referred to a copy of the lettable standard whilst conducting the visits. In total seventeen visits took place; 12 prior to works commencing and 5 when works to properties were completed and they were ready for re-let. It was planned by the panel that the same addresses would be visited, before and after works, so that a direct comparison could be conducted of the

improvements made. However, this plan could not be followed due to the properties becoming ready for re-let at various times. Instead, a video of the completed works was viewed at a panel meeting.

1.6 Panel members reviewed complaints relating to the voids process, the reasons for the complaints about the voids process and lettable standard were considered from the past two years. The panel noted that relatively few formal complaints had been received by the service during this time (less than one every two months).

1.7 A survey was conducted of new tenants who had moved into their homes, the majority of which with tenancies commencing between October 2022 and April 2023.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The Panel identified the following strengths with the current approach to void properties.

- The panel was happy with the targets and performance by the Council compared to other Local Authorities.
- The panel found it extremely useful to compare the lettable standard with the standard used in other areas and thought that the Council performed well overall.
- The panel was pleased that the letters were quite clear and that they had recently been reviewed.
- Panel members were pleased that the cleaning staff show such flexibility across teams in meeting the two-day target.
- The panel wished to express their thanks to the officers and other Council/contractor staff that are involved in bringing voids up to a lettable standard, having seen the poor condition that some properties are left in by previous tenants when they become void, panel members realised how difficult the task is of making these habitable in a short space of time.

2.2 The Panel developed eleven recommendations and four suggestions to improve the void process as listed below and detailed in the report attached as Appendix 1. The response to each action is summarised below and further detailed in the action plan attached as Appendix 2.

2.3 **Recommendation A- Gas Uncap and test target.**

Reconsider the target of five days to uncap gas supplies, for vulnerable people and those moving in during winter months.

Response- the service is investigating options to reduce the turnaround time including developing efficiencies within processes.

2.4 **Recommendation B- Lettable Standard review**

- Review/update the existing lettable standard to assess against those standards used by other similar housing providers.

- Plan to review again whenever there are changes in legislation or at least every three years.

Response- the service is reviewing areas of the current lettable standard and benchmarking against other housing providers. However, any significant changes would require a change to the repairs and maintenance contracts.

2.5 **Recommendation C- Publicised Lettable Standard**

Provide a public version of the lettable standard, so that new tenants know what to expect when moving in e.g., decoration, cleanliness, heating. Provide this as both printed and online versions. The information should be compact and easy to read for everyone.

Response- the Service is producing a user-friendly version of the lettable standard with a view to making it accessible online and to be provided in their tenancy welcome pack.

2.6 **Recommendation D- Outstanding repairs as tenants move in**

Conduct a review of which repairs can be safely left until after the new tenant has moved in and make this clear to both contractors and new tenants.

Response- The majority of works are undertaken when the property is void. However, some major works which are in serviceable order and can wait i.e. kitchens, bathrooms, windows, doors will be programmed for a future date and the tenant will be made aware so that the letting is not delayed. Information provided at tenancy sign up is also being reviewed.

2.7 **Recommendation E- Plumbing and heating issues**

- Develop a plan to try and overcome the key issues with contracted void works, such as plumbing and heating issues.
- Consider gas being uncapped to test heating systems prior to the new tenant moving in.

Response- the service is investigating the additional cost of carrying out a safety check at the end of the void period. Additional visual checks to the heating system at handover are being implemented as part of the technical officer handover.

2.8 **Recommendation F- Clear properties before cleaning**

Provide clearer guidance to cleaning staff that they should not clean properties where contractors have left rubbish or where aids such as hospital beds remain in the property.

Response- Contractors have been told to issue a reminder to operatives that properties must be cleared. The process has been amended to ensure that there is no overlap between the contractor completing the void works and the cleaning team attending.

2.9 **Recommendation G- Sub-standard repairs**

Ensure that repairs that are sub-standard or missed by contractors are discussed at every contract performance review meeting (as a standard agenda item) and make sure that remedial actions/ improvements are agreed.

Response- The service is increasing handover inspection on void properties carried out by the Technical Officer. Both repairs and handovers have been added to the monthly contract performance meeting agenda to discuss and action. Also, a deep dive into the cause of the increased volume of major voids is ongoing.

2.10 **Recommendation H- Customer feedback**

- Introduce a 'new tenant survey' or provide a feedback system prior to welcome visits taking place.
- Provide a system to collate issues raised at welcome visits to identify trends.

Response- the service will implement a customer satisfaction survey to gather feedback following letting.

2.11 **Recommendation I- Cleaning staff working conditions.**

Consider improving working conditions for cleaning staff, in particular lighting and hot water.

Response- The cleaning teams are provided with head torches and if the property is too dark the clean is not conducted. The service investigated if the cleaning teams would benefit from hot water storage, however the cleaning products used are designed to be used with cold water, also the storage and transport of hot water posed a health and safety concern. The service also investigated the possible use of flood lighting; however, this was deemed not practical due to the limited space in the cleaning vans and points to plug in and charge. Long dusters are being provided to clean behind radiators.

2.12 **Recommendation J- Tenancy termination letters**

Amend the tenancy termination letters as summarised in the report to make them easier to understand and consider whether to also provide these online.

Response- the service is currently reviewing the tenancy termination procedure which will include updating relevant letters in consultation with tenants.

2.13 **Recommendation K- Items left by vacating tenants.**

Provide more clarity and emphasise the agreement when new tenants sign up for items left by vacating tenants such as outbuildings and decking.

Response- The service is developing a document for new tenants to sign to agree and accept responsibility for items, such as decking, left by previous tenants. Such items will be removed by the Council if the new tenant does not agree to them.

2.14 The Panel also made the following further suggestions:

2.15 **Spot-check targets.**

Set some targets for spot checks carried out on both cleaning standards and repairs i.e., how many outstanding /missed /unsatisfactory works are allowed/or provide a grading system. Discuss these targets and findings in the Repairs sub-group.

Response- The service is increasing handover inspection on void properties carried out by the Technical Officer. Both repairs and handovers have been added to the monthly contract performance agenda to discuss, monitor, and action. Quality assurance checks are also carried out by the Facilities services supervisors.

2.16 **ASSA Cliq key monitoring Monitor**

The efficient use of ASSA Cliq keys to make sure that operatives are not re-entering void properties following cleaning and that locks are changed immediately after cleaning is completed.

Response- following the review, an increased stock of ASSA locks has been acquired resulting in a change to the process to enable the locks to remain in place until they are removed by the Housing Options Service prior to the new tenancy, this has improved the efficiency for various teams to access the property. Also, a change in the process ensures that there is not overlap between the contractor and the cleaning teams as identified in recommendation F.

2.17 **On-site viewings**

Reconsider the option of in-person viewings being offered to ensure that people can see conditions and receive an explanation of standards on-site.

Response- This suggestion will be investigated further during the next tenant scrutiny topic; Voids – support to new tenants.

2.18 **Pre-contract meetings**

Provide feedback on the feasibility of conducting pre-contract meetings on site with contractors, like the arrangements for other housing providers, costing out the existing contractor-led approach versus pre-contract arrangements.

Response- Currently, all void properties are visited, and a scope of works is carried out by the Void technical officer before works commence.

2.19 Some service improvements have already been made since the review was completed. However, some are not possible to implement due to budgetary constraints, impact on letting turnaround times, contracts in place etc. The response to each of the recommendations is set out in Appendix 2.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal.

3.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel has developed eleven recommendations and four suggestions. The response to each of the recommendations is detailed above and in the action plan attached as Appendix 2. The plan also provides an update on progress to date.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Review has been discussed at the Housing Involvement Panel.

4.2 The action plan associated with this report (see Appendix 2) will be monitored at monthly Tenant Scrutiny Panel meetings, which are attended by Council officers, Rotherfed and tenant representatives.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision.

5.1 The Council's Housing Service along with the nominated lead officers in the action plan have responsibility for implementing the findings of the review and delivering the associated action plan within the designated timescales.

5.2 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel will receive regular updates on progress against the recommendations and actions.

5.3 A further report will be presented to the Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months' time, detailing progress on delivering the action plan.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 The implication of some recommendations such as enhancing the lettable standard and reducing the turnaround time will increase contractor costs.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 There are no substantive legal issues arising from the content of this report.

7.2 The Scrutiny Review will support the Council in meeting statutory and regulatory requirements arising from the current Regulatory Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and Social Housing Regulator customer standards.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 A compact and easy to read Lettable standard will positively benefit engagement with children, young people, and vulnerable adults.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 Please see attached Equality Analysis.

10.2 We will actively engage under-represented groups and use our customer data to ensure services and communications are accessible and meet the diverse needs of our tenants and neighbourhoods by contributing to the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2022-25 through the following:

- Understanding, listening, and engaging across all communities.
- Delivering fair, inclusive, and accessible services.
- Empowering people to engage and challenge discrimination and to promote good community relations.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 Please see attached Carbon Impact Assessment Report.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1 The Council has contracts in place with Mears and Equans to deliver void works. Changes to the lettable standard will require a variation to the contracts.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 The key risk is the failure to engage with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and inability to deliver against the recommendations in the action plan. This will be addressed through monitoring and reviewing progress detailed within the Action Plan. This will be further mitigated through ongoing monitoring and review by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and Improving Places Select Commission.

Accountable Officer(s)

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