

CABINET

12 NOVEMBER 2021

REFERENCE FROM THE RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A.4 SCRUTINY OF HOUSING VOIDS

(Report prepared by Keith Durran)

BACKGROUND

At its formal meeting held on 15 July 2021 (Minute 15 refers) as well as two informal meetings held on 2 September and 15 September 2021 the Resources and Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee ("the Committee") scrutinised Housing Voids.

The Committee heard that alongside the Allocations Teams usual work they were in the process of a large digitisation of their files from a paper based format to an electronic/digital copy. This process had been hampered by a shortage of staff at present.

The Committee also heard of a property in Alresford that had been handed back to the Allocations Team for letting in June 2020 and how the property had then been offered to a homeless man who had promptly turned it down. The property had then not been offered to another person until May 2021 who had also turned it down. It was then offered to a homeless person in August 2021 who had accepted it.

Members were informed that the reason that the property had not been offered to anyone for 11 months was that it was a specially adapted property with a level access shower, and that it was the Council's practice to hold such adapted properties for people that required that adaption. Tim R. Clarke (Assistant Director, Environmental & Housing) further informed Members that whilst it was ideal for an adapted property to be given to be someone that required that adaption, that should not lead to a property being left empty for any lengthy period of time when someone who didn't need the adaption could have taken the property in the meantime.

It was reported to Members that temporary measures had been introduced in 2021 to control in-year expenditure on improvements to void Council Homes, these had included repairing where possible instead of replacing items as well as issuing out decorating grants so tenants could style their properties personally.

Andy White (Assistant Director, Building & Public Realm) was asked:-

"Can we have the voids detail added to with whether they are currently with building clearing/repairs/upgrades which would include all that is with outside ad hoc contractors, rapid response and any in-house teams? Basically, anything that would fall under Andy's teams. Rapid's contract has timescales for different categories of work and so a reference to the relevant Rapid category would be helpful. Could you also show how long these properties have been with the relevant contractors, especially the ad hoc ones?"

Members heard that this was not possible as the information requested was not collated on a single database and to access and compile such information would take considerable work and Officer time.

It was reported to the Committee that on 6th April 2021 a new recharge policy for council tenants and lease holders had been introduced, that meant the Council could recharge people if they left a Council property and it needed clearing or repairs, or any cost to put the property back into an acceptable state. At the time of the meeting Mr White explained that he was not sure of the number of recharge notices serviced but he knew that they had started but at the present time it had been a very small amount.

It was also reported to the Committee that the Council was currently trialling the upskilling of internal employees to take over the voids repair work from the current external contractors. The trial was to see if the internal team could match the standards of the external contractors in relation to speed and quality of work. Mr White informed Members that due to Market Forces he was unlikely to internally employ in-house qualified trades people as their rates would not match the Council's internal pay scales.

RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

After a detailed discussion the Committee **RECOMMENDED** to Cabinet that:-

- (1) *"the resources available for the Housing Allocations Service of the Council be reviewed in order to ensure that it is able to deliver the rapid response and excellent customer service to those on the Housing Register, and those applying, and thereby contribute further to reducing the average time Council Homes remain untenanted by moving all paper work to a digital format.*
- (2) *following the commission of an informal audit to review to allocation of adapted properties, that changes be made to the process, so that a selection of individuals on the Housing Register are waiting for adapted homes and we should rightly seek to achieve the best match, where possible, this should not be pursued to the extent that individual properties remain untenanted for long periods of time due to infrequent offers to those on the Register and in need of housing.*
- (3) *the temporary measures introduced in 2021 to control expenditure in year on improvements to void Council Homes be continued going forward (as such if the kitchen is functional and efficient to maintain it will not be replaced only for the reason of upgrading it).*
- (4) *the IT solutions for the separate sections of the Council dealing with Housing Allocations and Council Home repairs and maintenance be enhanced so that there is a shared resource that can support the council with a range of data that the current separate systems were unable assist efficiency of the Council as a whole.*
- (5) *a more active and purposeful approach be undertaken than at present in respect of the recharging of former tenants who had left items to be removed or otherwise in a condition requiring remedial/repair works and that these charges be linked from commencement with any debts for unpaid rents by those tenants in order to assist an efficient recovery process.*
- (6) *the current 14 month trail in respect of an in house team to undertake Council House repairs, be actively reviewed to ensure opportunities are taken during that trial, to support skills development and recruitment and retention measures enhancement (including if appropriate market forces enhancements for certain specialist skills and attraction of those with relevant accreditation to work for the Council; maybe part-time).*

- (7) *the Portfolio Holder for Housing be encouraged to establish a Housing Working Party to continue the focus on Housing Voids and the issues considered in the enquiry by this Committee (including those reflected in these recommendations).*
- (8) *an appropriate Key Performance Indicators be developed around timescales for untenanted Council Homes to be offered and re-tenanted, the undertaking of repair/refurbishment of Council Homes and recovery of costs incurred due to the condition of properties once vacated by former tenants etc and shared with Councillors together with periodic detail of achievement against those Indicators.*
- (9) *proposals for a stock condition survey be drawn up and consider the benefits to the Council in identifying issues with the Council's Housing Stock and thereby assist it to improve its plan for expenditure through the Housing Revenue Account in the short, medium and longer term."*

PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENT(S) AND RECOMMENDATION(S) TO CABINET

Portfolio Holder's Comments

"I would like to thank the Committee for their comments. To reply specifically to the points made:

- 1. *Since the last meeting of the Committee the allocations team has been working hard to allocate available properties and I am pleased to be able to advise that at the time of writing there are no general purpose properties available to let that are not allocated or subject to offer to prospective tenants. I would like to particularly mention the Housing Solutions and Allocations Manager, the Senior Housing Solutions and Allocations Officer and the team's apprentice and thank them for the work that has been done to achieve this. Looking into the future the team is presently implementing a new software package which will make the process easier for the team and I hope and expect that this will allow the team to maintain the position that has been achieved.*
- 2. *The team have reviewed processes internally as mentioned and rebalanced the allocations process to give a stronger emphasis on allocating properties at a higher frequency than on perfectly matching any adaptations present to prospective tenants.*
- 3. *The nature of works carried out at properties has been severely cut back for timing and financial reasons. It may be advantageous to review that as the position is regularised into the future, time and financial constraints may allow a winding back of some of the control measures.*
- 4. *The teams are working with a shared spreadsheet at present. They also have separate specialist software for each. I agree that a link between the two packages would be a useful area for future development.*

5. *I agree that once the position on void properties overall is dealt with a greater emphasis on recovery of costs would be appropriate, potentially including external debt recovery services. I think however that it is important to remember that former tenants can sometimes be untraceable or unable to pay any debts. A proportionate response will be required.*
6. *I understand that Mr White's comments at the Committee's meeting were intended to highlight the potential issues with the recruitment of specialist tradespeople such as electricians and gas fitters. The limited duration of the trial period is also a consideration in the attractiveness of the team to potential tradespeople. The team is recruiting at the moment and depending on the outcome measures such as market forces could be applied.*
7. *I have established a pattern of fortnightly meetings with my colleague the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance, Chief Executive, Corporate Director and Assistant Directors to monitor progress.*
8. *The group above has established performance measures. The teams are currently adapting the spreadsheet and records seeking to calculate them efficiently:*

For publication:

- *Quarterly financial void position – income lost and %*
- *Quarterly void average time from date void to date re-let*

For internal monitoring only: the group has requested a small number of indicators focussing on monthly turnover of properties, number of long term voids, turn-around times and costs.

9. *I have asked the teams to investigate the feasibility of a stock condition survey. I am aware of overspends on repairs in the last two years and the need for investment in energy efficiency and other programme items. The potential for expenditure on surveys needs to be considered against the need for direct investment in the stock. A balance has to be struck and I propose to make a decision on a stock survey when the pros and cons are reported."*

Recommendations to Cabinet:

That the recommendations made by the Resources and Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee be noted and that the response(s) of the Portfolio Holder thereto be endorsed.