

VOID MANAGEMENT POLICY

**To:**

Councillor Gerri Bird, Executive Councillor for Housing
Housing Scrutiny Committee 23/01/2023

Report by:

Lynn Bradley, Head of Housing Maintenance & Assets
Tel: 01223 457831 Email: lynn.bradley@cambridge.gov.uk

Wards affected:

ALL

Non-Key Decision

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council receives on average, around 550 general needs and sheltered properties back into stock following termination of a tenancy, and around 180 emergency and temporary accommodation tenancies, per annum.
- 1.2 In recent years, demand for emergency and temporary accommodation has increased, and the condition of general needs stock being returned to the council has decreased, leading to increased turnaround times and void repair budget overspend.
- 1.3 Whilst the council has worked within a void repair specification for each type of void (standard, major works, temporary, emergency), re-let standard (5-point promise), policy and some key processes for a number of years, this is the first Void Management Policy to be formalised by Committee, and confirms the council's commitment to ensuring a consistent approach to managing the turnaround of void repairs.

- 1.4 A review of current council voids repair processes has been undertaken, with a programme of communication with tenants and prospective tenants scheduled from January 2023.

2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended to:

- 2.1 Approve the Council's Void Management Policy and the revised re-let standard, recognising the factors influencing the Policy that has resulted in the prioritised works to be undertaken in the stock whilst vacant.
- 2.2 Agree the revised Cambridge Re-Let Standard and note how the Standard will be communicated to current tenants looking to transfer and those on the Housing Register, via the Council's website and in the Sign-up pack.
- 2.3 Recognise that this Policy will need to be reviewed again within 2 years, as the Government White Paper for Social Housing Regulation was not yet passed as formal legislation at the time of writing this report and we believe this will have implications on this Policy, once in place.

3. Background

- 3.1 In January 2022, the Estates & Facilities service, as part of the Corporate Transformation Programme, committed to:
 - a) reduce the number of voids 'on the books';
 - b) review the level of resource available to manage void properties;
 - c) agree the condition at which a property will be re-let, with a clear understanding at all stages of the re-let process, in order to manage resources, customer expectations and reduce complaints;
 - d) streamline processes to reduce overall void times;
 - e) Work with other departments to help sustain tenants in their homes (where practicable).
- 3.2 The City takes back on average 730 properties each year into the voids and lettings service. These in the main are from notices to quit a tenancy from current tenants, transfers, evictions, surrenders, deaths, abandonments and repossessions. The properties are required to be repaired to a lettable standard as quickly as possible in order to be assigned to a suitable household from the housing register or to a

homeless household in need of temporary or emergency accommodation.

- 3.3 Alongside the day to day works, the Void Team are also asked to prepare properties that have been identified and purchased to be used for specific initiatives (e.g. Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme, Refugee Programme, 'Homes for Ukraine' Programme), as well as a growing number of properties required for decanting tenants from blocks earmarked for re-development. In these circumstances, the required 'let standard' is varied and requires input from various other departments to ensure the properties are ready to be assigned to the customer in question (these properties are therefore not in the scope of this Policy but are in integral part of the Void Management Team workload, so are recognised here).
- 3.4 In recent years, the condition of properties being returned to the Council has greatly reduced, with higher levels of unauthorised alterations, damage to fixtures and fittings, generally in poor condition and rubbish left in gardens and communal areas. This has resulted in the Council struggling to turn properties around to target times due to the level of resource required to prepare the property for re-letting and this has caused an over-spend in the void budget. At the end of 21/22, against a standard (excluding emergency, temporary and major works) void repair target of 20 working days, the service achieved 48.1 days, with an overall re-let time of 86.4 days compared to 16.9 days repair and 37.2 days overall relet time in 2018/19.
- 3.5 The number of properties now being managed in the emergency and temporary service has increased; from 62 temporary units in 2012/13 to 109 in 2021/22. Following the change to the Homeless Duty requirements in 2017, the council is required to house a homeless household for up to 56 days whilst a decision is made on whether the council owes a duty to either permanently house the household or find suitable accommodation elsewhere. There has been a steady increase in homeless households presenting to the council in recent years, through a combination of the cost of living and lack of affordable private accommodation in the City.
- 3.6 To ensure the objectives in the Corporate Transformation Programme are achieved, the service has re-categorised voids into types (temporary/emergency, fast-track, minor works, standard works and business case approvals) and has agreed processes and set targets for each; looked at staffing levels within the void repair team and procured

support from external providers to help to achieve efficiencies, updated rates and prices for undertaking works, costed each type of void, reviewed voids management data and improved collection and presentation of void statistics.

- 3.7 The focus of works in voids will be to ensure compliancy and safety. By rationalising what work should be done whilst the property is vacant and what work should be scheduled as a day-to-day repair or added to a programme of planned works once the property is occupied, will allow the council to better understand the costs associated with re-letting empty properties. The service has identified best practice within high-performing social housing providers to support any changes.
- 3.8 The Voids Team are working with other services across the council; exploring a range of initiatives to provide advice and support to tenants and helping them to manage and stay in their home. These include using video technology to show a walk-about of an empty property pre-works, commissioning videos to show tenants how undertake basic repairs, combat condensation and mold and make best use of the heating system, looking at digital inclusion opportunities in voids and promotion of the services available in Cambridge for accessing furniture, supplies and white goods.
- 3.9 The service is a member of the Benchmarking club, Housemark, and uses the peer group comparison data to inform target setting. Performance against the void repair and re-let targets is monitored at operational meetings and at Housing Management meetings. Performance is shared at regular tenant and leaseholder meetings.

4. Implications

a) Financial Implications

Page: 4

There are no significant financial implications attached to this Policy, other than those outlined in the covering report. The policy, and subsequent revised void standard solidifies the council's position in regard to ensuring an empty property is fit for purpose and ready to move into and aims to reduce both the void repair budget and overall relet time of a standard void.

b) Staffing Implications

The delivery of void repairs will continue to be undertaken by the council's direct labour organisation (DLO), with support from procured contractors where required to achieve efficiencies. The continuing focus on improved communications with tenants and prospective tenants, outlined in this covering report and policy, will be delivered within current staffing levels across housing.

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

The potential impact on protected characteristic groups has been considered as part of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQiA).

d) Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental Implications

It is expected that the Policy will have a 'nil' impact on climate change and environmental implications, however the service is minimising waste wherever feasible by offering viable fixtures and fittings to the incoming tenant.

e) Procurement Implications

None

f) Community Safety Implications

None

5. Consultation and communication considerations

- 5.1 Tenant and Leaseholder representatives were asked to comment on the draft re-let standard. The suggestions have been incorporated into the standard and the Policy where applicable.
- 5.2 A range of channels, including the tenancy sign-up pack, the City's Housing webpages and the Tenant and Leaseholder Portal will be used to communicate with tenants and those on the waiting list about all aspects of the council's void process; to better manage tenant's expectations regarding the repair standard of a council property, as well as what the council's expectations are regarding properties being handed back at the end of a tenancy.
- 5.3 The Voids & Letting Team are committed to working with current and prospective tenants; identifying areas to engage and provide advice,

guidance and support at both the start and end of their tenancy to avoid unnecessary charges being added to their account.

- 5.4 The Voids Team are working closely with other services in housing, including Housing Officers, Tenancy Sustainment, Day-to-Day Repairs Supported Housing and Planned Works to ensure:
 - 5.41 timely information regarding the condition of properties is captured and shared between the services, allowing support teams to liaise with outgoing tenants and offer advice and signposting where suitable;
 - 5.42 where works (either as a day-to-day repair or as part of a planned programme) can be undertaken after a tenant has moved in, the work is promptly booked with the appropriate team, with estimated completion dates given to the tenant.

6. Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

7. Appendices

Appendix A: The Cambridge Re-Let Standard

Appendix B: Temporary and Emergency Housing – Addendum

8. Inspection of papers

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact Catherine Buckle, Business Development Manager (Housing), catherine.buckle@cambridge.gov.uk