

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

| | |
|--|--|
| From: Sue Lister – Corporate Manager – Housing Options Justin Wright Newton – Corporate Manager - BMBS | Report Number: BOS/17/8 |
| To: Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee | Date of meeting: 18 September 2017 |

VOID TIMES IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members of the committee with information about the average time to re-let vacancies within Council housing stock and the action being taken to improve performance.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee has received assurances that appropriate steps are being taken to reduce void times and that the position be reported to Cabinet;
- 2.2 That the approach to reducing void times be endorsed;
- 2.3 That the performance against void targets be monitored and that any underperformance be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 Re-let performance has a direct impact on resources within the HRA. Rent loss and payment of council tax reduces the funds available for other activities. Average rent equates to £80 per week and with approximately 200 vacancies a year, a reduction of 7 days in the void time would achieve a saving of around £16,000 in rent loss and £3,500 in council tax.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications to this report.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 This report is not closely linked with the Council's Corporate / Significant Risks. However, risks are set out below:

| Risk Description | Likelihood | Impact | Mitigation Measures |
|---|--------------|-------------|---|
| Rent loss resulting from long void periods poses a risk to the Council's HRA business plan. | Unlikely (2) | Minimal (1) | Void Improvement Project, efficiency gains from improved utilisation of IT systems. |

6. Consultations

6.1 There have been no consultations specifically associated with this report.

7. Equality Analysis

7.1 There are no equality & diversity implications related directly to this report, however the Housing Options service routinely undertakes equality impact assessments around service delivery.

8. Shared Service / Partnership Implications

8.1 Since April this year an integrated team has been responsible for carrying out repairs in void properties.

9. Links to Joint Strategic Plan

9.1 The services described in this report relate to the following strategic aim: Manage our housing assets effectively.

10. Key Information

Babergh has around 200 void properties each year. During the time they are unoccupied no rent is received and council tax has to be paid.

The work required from the time a tenant gives notice to the start of a new tenancy is carried out by the Housing Options Team and Babergh and Mid Suffolk Building Services (BMBS).

The Housing Options Team visits the outgoing tenant, advertises vacancies on Gateway to Homechoice, carries out viewings for potential new tenants and completes a number of administrative tasks.

BMBS carries out or arranges repairs and safety checks to bring the properties up to the Council's lettable standard.

10.1 Average re-let times

The table below shows the average time to re-let vacancies within Council stock from the end of one tenancy to the start of a new one.

Table 1: Average time to re-let

| Year | All properties | Major works | Minor works | Standard repairs | | |
|-------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|
| | | | | All | General needs | Sheltered |
| 2015/16 | 43 | 148 | 49 | 31 | 25 | 48 |
| 2016/17 | 29 | 140 | 33 | 27 | 26 | 30 |
| 2017/18 quarter 1 | 44 | 63 | 57 | 41 | 41 | 39 |

The table is broken down to show the time to re-let different types of property. A small number of properties each year required extensive repair work which would have required an existing tenant to move out. Minor works include a new kitchen, bathroom, or a new heating system.

The columns for properties which required standard repairs show separate figures for sheltered properties and all other types. Sheltered vacancies are sometimes harder to let. This could be down to a number of reasons, including some funding for care issues at very sheltered schemes, location and demand.

10.2 Comparisons with other landlords

Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS) compiled by central government includes the average time to re-let standard void properties. Amongst Suffolk stock owning authorities the average time in 2015/16 was 39 days with a range from 20 to 67 days. In Norfolk, the average was 33 days with a range from 15 to 51. For Essex authorities the average was 35 which a range from 18 to 60.

In each county the higher performance was in the urban areas, primarily down to geographic spread (less distance to travel to properties and less time collecting materials etc). The average for rural districts, excluding Mid Suffolk and Babergh, was 48 days.

Corporate Manager - BMBS has visited the Flagship Group and at the end of September has a further meeting to discuss performance related issues and average timescales.

10.3 Factors which increase the average re-let time

A number of factors affect the time taken to bring properties up to the lettable standard:-

Prior to work commencing in a void property an asbestos inspection has to take place and any components containing asbestos, such as floor tiles or bath panels removed. This work has to take place once the property is empty as this is an invasive survey and so the outgoing tenants cannot be exposed to asbestos fibres.

Some older long-term tenants have refused improvements such as kitchens or bathrooms which necessitates additional work to reach the lettable standard.

A minority of properties are left in a poor condition by the outgoing tenant and have to be cleared or require flea treatment.

Some properties are hard to let such as sheltered vacancies or bungalows in rural locations.

We have an ageing stock. Over half of our current void properties are over 50 years old.

10.4 BMBS

Prior to this April repairs in Mid Suffolk were carried out in-house and in Babergh by an external contractor. The launch of BMBS brings the two teams together to provide an in-house repairs service for both councils. BMBS is facing some initial challenges which have affected the time taken to complete repairs on void properties.

Two separate IT systems were consolidated onto a single platform (Open Housing) in December last year. However, the two councils still operate differently. With the implementation of the new team, members of staff are having to adapt to new roles and have steep learning curves. The void team leader appointed has been off sick since the end of June, so this has impacted on the consistency of the approach in dealing with voids from BMBS. A project is on-going to reconfigure the system and how it is used to support the business. This includes data cleansing, a review and streamlining of processes and procedures, integration of the BMSDC system with external contractors, staff training and temporary administrative resource to enable changes to be made whilst the day to day work of the service continues.

An additional team leader is being recruited which will double the resource available to focus on repairs in void properties and supervision of the trades team.

With the removal of the void co-ordinators / inspector's roles, the trades team itself is being given more responsibility to diagnose problems and complete the work needed to bring vacant properties up to the lettable standard. This removes the requirement for a surveyor to visit properties and specify the requirements and is intended to shorten the time taken to carry out repair work. A change to ways of working and the culture of the whole team are in progress but will take time to become fully embedded.

BMBS operatives have also been required to assist in the creation of a number of touchdown points across the district with a hub at Great Wenham (requiring some quite significant changes to lay out and function). Those operatives would normally be carrying out works on various properties across the district, so this will also have some impact short term.

10.5 The Void Improvement Project

Within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan is a section on increasing financial capacity and improving efficiency to deliver savings of £300,000 over three years.

Included within the plan is a reduction in the overall average re-let time to 21 days by 2019/20. With an average rent of £80 per week and 200 vacancies a year, a reduction of 7 days in the void time would achieve a saving of around £16,000 in rent loss and £3500 in council tax.

For reasons shown in 10.6 above there has been an increase in the time taken to repair void properties since April. The Void Improvement Project is currently focussing on the new processes and staff roles which flow from the launch of BMBS and the move out of the two offices in Needham and Hadleigh.

Other factors to be addressed include making best use of pre-termination inspections and IT solutions, understanding the reasons some properties are left in poor condition to reduce the number which require substantial repairs and visiting existing tenants who are likely to be offered a transfer to ensure their properties are up to standard. Within the pre-termination period, it is recommended that more information is gathered relating to works that may be required, instructions are given to outgoing tenants to what they will be responsible for, also highlighting condition of decoration and potential for carpets etc to be left to assist new tenants (also supporting the works done by other groups within the local area who support families on lower budgets).

There have been some significant delays caused by the work relating to asbestos surveys being carried out prior to work being able to commence. This process has been looked at and is being monitored to ensure that the impact is as minimal as possible, highlighting where problems have been encountered and learning from these lessons.

Tracking and influencing indicators for this project are set out in Appendix (A).

11. Appendices

| Title | Location |
|---|----------|
| (A) Void Improvement – Tracking and Influencing Indicators and Milestones | Attached |
| (B) Lettable Standard | Attached |

Sue Lister
Corporate Manager – Housing Options

01449 724758
sue.lister@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk

Justin Wright-Newton
Corporate Manager – BMBS

07990 542087
Justin.Wright-Newton@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk