

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

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COMMITTEE	Housing and Environment
DATE	14 January 2014
DIRECTOR	Pete Leonard
TITLE OF REPORT	Voids – Review of Processes
REPORT NUMBER:	H&E/14/001

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides members with information on the revised practices for the management of void properties.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that committee note the contents of the report and the changes to the void processes.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional financial implications arising from the amendments to working practices detailed within the report which will continue to be funded from current budget. A reduction in costs may be achieved.

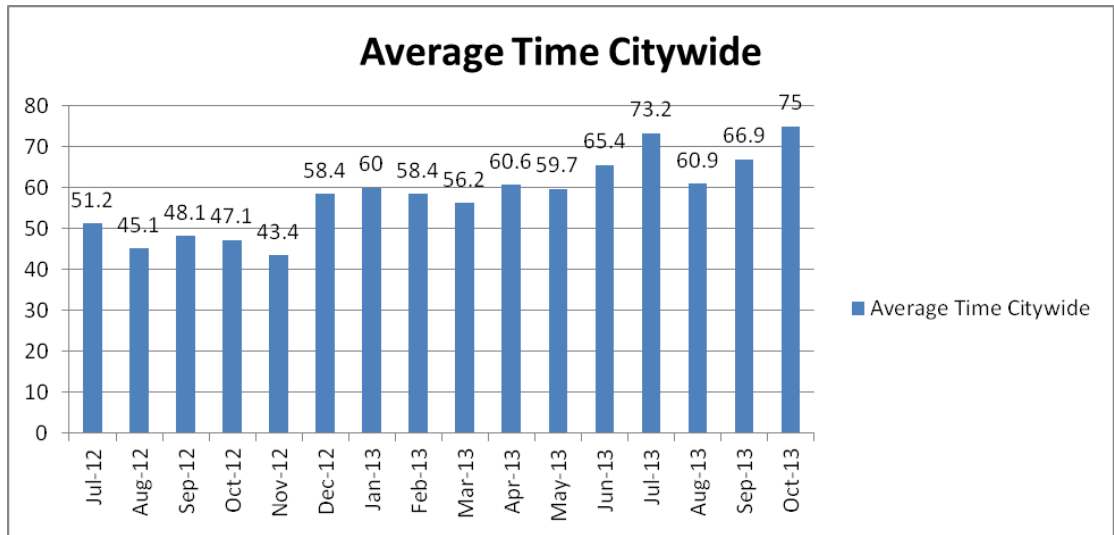
4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no other implications arising from this report.

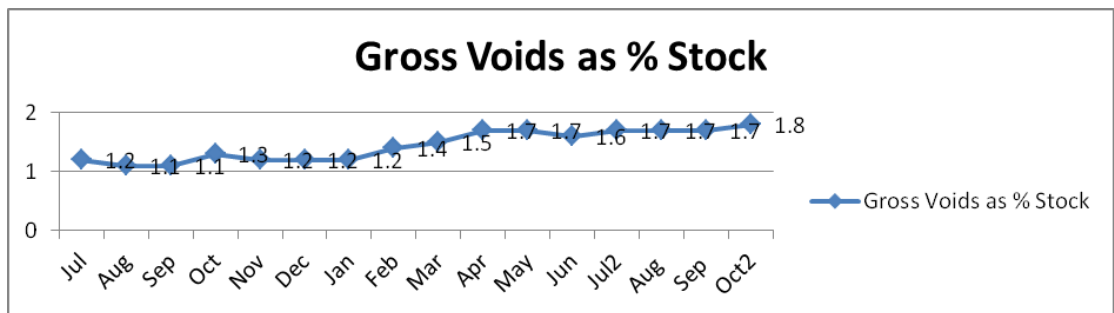
5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

The performance of the service appears to be deteriorating in terms of void turnover periods. Existing processes do not easily identify areas for improvement.

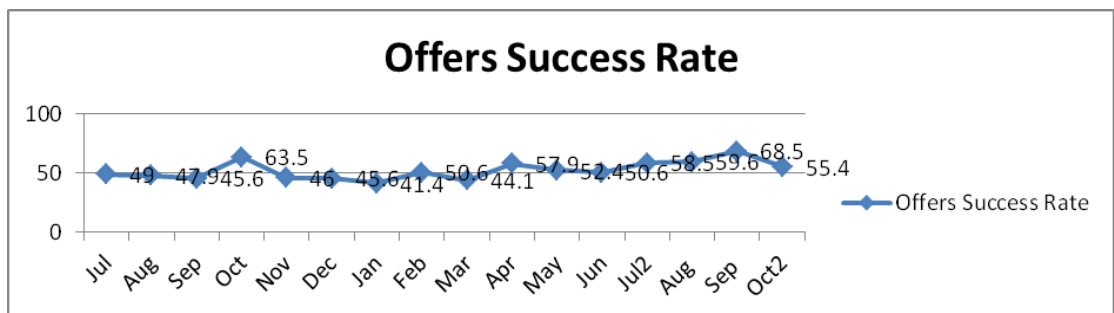
The average void turnover period:



The above chart demonstrates that our average relet period is increasing whereas the level of voids (below) has remained consistent.



The introduction of a one offer policy prior to deferment has seen a continual increase in the acceptance rate of offers with the exception of October 2013.



It would be reasonable to assume that an improved acceptance rate would result in fewer voids and reduced turnover periods. This is not the case and demonstrates the disproportionate impact of a relatively small number of voids has on our recorded performance. Although acceptance rates are improving, they are still below the level expected. One of the reasons for this is that our relet process takes no account of the financial capabilities of prospective tenants to furnish a property.

Project teams consisting of officers from housing management and housing investment have reviewed the void/relet process including:

- Termination policy and procedure
- Recharge policy
- Relet standard
- Information provided to existing and prospective tenants
- Policy on clearing void property of all items
- Existing void paths
- The role of staff
- Support needs and financial inclusion factors for tenants and prospective tenants
- Impact of strategic reviews

Efforts to make best use of the pre-termination period has been unsuccessful to date. Tenants have seen little benefit for them in providing access during the notice period even though it is included in their tenancy agreement. Enforcement would undoubtedly extend beyond the notice period. A revised process would provide for a home visit as a fundamental part of the process to allow appropriate advice and assistance to be provided to the outgoing tenant. This will include agreement on appropriate items which the tenant is prepared to leave in the property for any prospective new tenant. Such items would include:

Carpets

Carpet gripper and underlay

Curtains and/or blinds

Curtain tracks or poles

Laminate flooring

Sheds and Greenhouses

Decking and Patios

Fire Surrounds

Satellite dishes

White goods

Built in appliances

Advice will also be given on items that are unsuitable to be left and details of appropriate charitable organisations provided or advice on appropriate disposal.

Assistance will be offered to relatives who are responsible for ending the tenancy of a person who is deceased. Again, the normal advice to clear the property of all items may be relaxed in a way that will reduce the responsibilities of the relatives and benefit the incoming tenant.

This will ensure that outgoing tenants are fully aware of their responsibilities in terminating their tenancy including any items that would be liable to be recharged to them prior to moving out.

The lettable standard will also be enhanced through minimising unnecessary works which often result in damage to decoration or generate further repairs, such as plaster patching to walls which is

unsightly and leaves prospective new tenants with little alternative than to decorate.

Providing a clean property including communal areas and gardens is essential in maintaining an attractive product and providing new tenants with a reasonable start to their tenancy.

The Aberdeen Housing Service Review Group has endorsed the amended processes as a common sense approach that has substantial benefits for all parties concerned.

Void paths are the recording system to enable the management and tracking of a void property. Previous reviews have recommended a reduction in the number of void paths which was appropriate at those times. The result is that there are now two main paths (Routine and Death). Extracting quality information is difficult and requires significant manual interventions to identify weaknesses in the current processes.

This has resulted in a significant downturn in the average turnover periods which is largely due to the disproportionate impact of a minority of void properties. For example, the Housing for Varying Needs (HFVN) review identified a number of sheltered blocks that were in low or no demand which resulted in a build up of voids. Implementation of the HFVN review re-designated some of these blocks as amenity and resulted in many long term voids now being occupied and the council obtaining rental income. However, these properties also impacted negatively on the turnover performance. There are other pressures facing the housing service that either require or are best to be undertaken during the void period. These would all relate to actions that would take longer than 4 weeks to achieve and in many cases substantially longer, all of which would have a detrimental impact on turnover and void rent loss performance.

The introduction of new and revised void paths will allow more accurate information to be readily obtained to ensure that specific processes are in place to best manage voids. It would be our intention to provide a detailed performance report on voids broken down into each of the paths contributing to the overall position.

The paths are as follows:

HFVN – Sheltered properties involved in the implementation of the review which are being re-designated as mainstream, amenity or very sheltered.

SHQS – All outstanding works required to meet the SHQS requirements.

E&A – Properties that require equipment and adaptations as agreed with the Occupational Therapist.

MAJW – any other major works that are outwith SHQS requirements and do not meet the “off-charge” criteria.

DETH – for all terminations due to the death of the tenant where no successor exists. This path provides for the current policy allowing

family or next of kin a rent free 2-week period to clear and vacate the property.

FAST – a fast track path where access has been obtained during the pre-termination period; the property requires minimal work and the property will be in significant demand.

ROUT – all other void properties.

The Council will benefit through:

- Better information to identify areas of concern and to consider appropriate interventions, resources or other measures to achieve the desired performance outcomes.
- Early commencement of letting process
- Void rent loss would be minimised
- Potentially a reduction in void repair costs.
- Reduction in former tenant arrears
- Enhanced public image.
- Reduction in staff time dealing with enquiries/complaints regarding recharges.
- Improved tenancy sustainment
- Improved recycling

Tenants and Prospective Tenants will benefit through:

- Savings in time and costs for unnecessary removal of items.
- Improved advice on moving home (see Appendix 1)
- A better start for new tenants, particularly those on benefits or low income.

## 6. IMPACT

The community plan sets out our vision for the future of the City – an even better place to live and work, where people can expect high quality services to meet their needs.

This project meets the following objectives:

- Homes challenge – improve the quality of housing and environment for individuals and the community.
- Adopt and implement strategies to support independent living for people with special needs.

It also meets the objectives in the policy document “Aberdeen – the Smarter City”:

- Smarter living – we will enhance the physical and emotional wellbeing of all our citizens by offering support and activities which promote independence, resilience, confidence and self esteem.

Aberdeen City Waste Strategy 2010 – 2015

- Reduce, re-use and recycle – the proposed changes to the clearance of empty property will assist this council to achieve its targets by recycling items to the next tenant.

The contents of this report will treat citizens equally in terms of race, gender, LGBT, older people and people with disabilities.

7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

None

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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