

Void Council Properties

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with context and some detailed insight about the voids management and letting processes, delivered by Berneslai Homes and our partner contractors, which are used to manage Barnsley Council social rented properties.

2.0 Background

2.1 In 2010, the Council met the Decent Homes Standard across all its housing stock. The Decent Homes Standard was a government defined standard based on ensuring a property meets the following criteria:-

- is in a reasonable state of repair
- has reasonably modern facilities and services with individual elements judged on perceived condition and age
- provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

2.2 After the completion of the Decent Homes Standard programme, the Council introduced the Barnsley Homes Standard, an annual programme, which continues to maintain the decency standard in all its properties, including void properties.

2.3 Void properties are an inevitable part of the provision and management of rented accommodation. Properties are classed as void when there is no current tenancy in place and the 'void period' is the time between one tenancy ending and a new tenancy commencing. Whilst a property is void, no rental income is being received and costs like Council Tax can be incurred. There is also considerable pressure on the Council Housing waiting list. All of these factors mean that it is very important that void properties are turned around as quickly as possible and a new tenant receives the home they need.

2.4 The 'Void Standard' (Item 4b - attached) is a document which clearly sets out the minimum lettable standard that all void properties have to meet once work has been fully completed by our construction partners. This standard aims to ensure a consistent approach is applied to all void properties.

2.5 The Void Standard has the core principles of safety, security, cleanliness and repair. It is set very much in the context that the housing stock already meets the Decent Homes Standard and it is not therefore an improvement standard. The void standard is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it is compliant with regulations and any changes required in process or procedures.

2.6 All void properties fall into one of two categories and are classed as either a Routine Void (most voids) or Non-Routine Void (sometimes referred to as Major Works Voids):-

- **Routine Voids** – A works survey is carried out by our construction partners and essential void works are carried out as deemed necessary in accordance with the Void Standard. Once work is completed, usually in less than nine calendar days, our construction partners will hand the keys back to the relevant Housing Management Team for them to continue with the process of identifying a new tenant and letting the property.
- **Non-routine Voids** – Some properties are returned from tenancy in poor condition. These are properties that require significant work to meet the void standard. Often these properties will have had improvement works refused in the past by the tenant or have been subject to robust

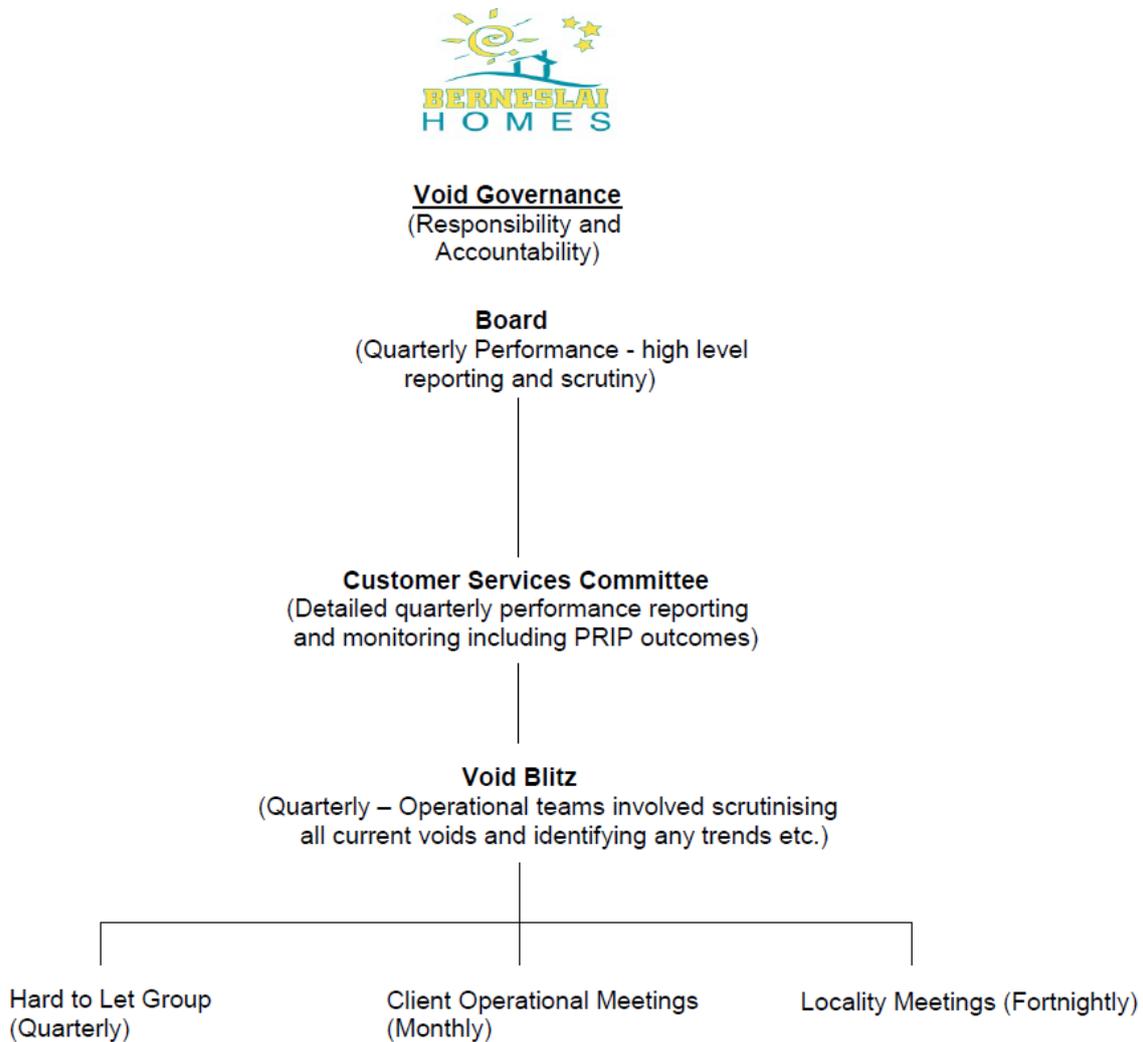
use. Our construction partners have a maximum of ten weeks within which to complete this work, the performance of which is monitored robustly by the Housing Management Team.

- 2.7 At 1 April 2019, there were 113 properties empty, which equates to 0.61% of the total stock (18,427). Of these 77 were classed as routine. At the end of July 2019, 0.56% (102 properties) of stock (18,401 properties) was empty, of which 77 were classed as routine.
- 2.8 Berneslai Homes manages void properties on behalf of the Council. The actual work carried out on void properties is done through the Property Repairs and Improvement Partnership (PRIP) contract. The contract is currently delivered by Berneslai Homes Construction Services in two thirds of the borough and by Kier in one third of the borough - both have defined geographic boundaries.
- 2.9 All completed voids are checked to ensure they meet the void standard and a number of cross cutting teams monitor performance and process. A separate independent review process is also carried out by a panel of tenants. They inspect a random selection of properties prior to letting and against the void standard.
- 2.10 A small number of properties can be more difficult to let than others, usually due to property type (e.g. studio flats). To be classified as 'hard to let' a property has to meet set criteria:-
1. more than three refusals (refusal reasons will be analysed in every case)
 2. not let after multiple viewings
 3. void for six or more weeks
 4. minimal interest shown in advertisement
- If the criteria is met, incentives may be offered in order for the property to be re-let.
- 2.11 In 2018/19, a total of nine properties were re-let using incentives for properties considered 'hard to let', with a total spend of £14,123.75. Incentives used include decoration, white goods and carpets. Total rent loss prior to incentives being ordered was £8,412.19, with the rent loss totalling £1,092.98 after incentives were completed. This relatively small budget has improved performance in this area.
- 2.12 Since January 2011, the Barnsley Homes Standard programme has seen approximately 1,000 properties per annum refurbished to ensure the decency standard is maintained across the social housing stock. This programme has been supported by elemental schemes of work (mainly heating replacements) to address emerging issues in the housing stock. The housing stock is therefore generally in good condition.

3.0 Governance & Monitoring

- 3.1 Void properties are monitored robustly and Berneslai Homes has a strong governance structure in place to do this. Generally, the governance structure comprises of three operational group meetings which are held regularly to discuss void process and procedure. These are:
- **Hard to Let Group Meeting** – chaired by the Housing Management Team, this meeting is held quarterly and teams discuss specific void properties that meet the 'hard to let' criteria, and are proving difficult to let for one reason or another. Any issues will usually be passed on to the Client Operational Group for further resolution if needed
 - **Client Operational Meeting** – chaired by the Asset Management Team, this meeting is held monthly and involves all teams - Asset Management, Housing Management and construction partners. The aim of this group is to discuss the overall voids process in terms of performance management and procedural issues as well as dealing with any concerns about the overall void standard
 - **Locality Meeting** – chaired by the Housing Management Team, this meeting is held fortnightly and deals with the day to day issues arising out of void management. Again any issues will usually be passed on to the Client Operational Group for further resolution if needed.

- 3.2 All groups feed into the 'Void Blitz' meeting which is held on a quarterly basis and has the responsibility for the overall scrutiny of these three groups. Ultimate scrutiny of the whole process is via Berneslai Homes Board, the Berneslai Homes Customer Services Committee and through regular Council / Berneslai Homes liaison and performance meetings.
- 3.3 The diagram below shows the governance structure attached to voids:-



- 3.4 There are different categories of empty properties which allow each service area to take responsibility for the ones that they are accountable for, although ultimately the Berneslai Homes Housing Management Teams are accountable for the entire void process.

4.0 Current Position – Performance

- 4.1 The ethos with void performance is to ensure properties are re-let at the earliest opportunity whilst meeting the agreed void specification. This ensures applicants from the housing waiting list are housed at the earliest opportunity, in line with the Council's Lettings Policy, as well as minimising any lost rental income.

- 4.2 Management information is extracted from the Northgate IT system that measures the entire process, which allows the service to focus in on any part of the process to ensure that performance is maximised. This includes each different part of the process as follows:-

- when a notice is received
- when a pre-void inspection is carried out
- when we advertise properties and allocate properties to individuals
- when properties are offered and when keys are received
- when 'void standard' works orders are raised

- when keys are picked up & returned by partners
- when properties are ready to let
- when accompanied viewings take place
- when they are signed up
- when the new tenancy commences

4.3 The aim is to ensure there is robust and comprehensive management information so that properties go through the process as effectively as possible with properties re-let at the earliest opportunity.

4.4 The two primary indicators relating to void properties are:-

- the average number of calendar days taken to re-let properties (based on the methodology for the previous national best value indicator for voids)
- the percentage of rent lost via the void process

4.5 The table below shows performance against the two key performance indicators from 2001 up to 31 July 2019. Although no specific target is set for the percentage rent loss, it is assumed that performance will be around 1.05%.

Year	Average Void Time – Calendar Days			Percentage Rent Loss	
	BMBC Target	BMBC Actual	HouseMark – Upper Quartile	BMBC Actual	HouseMark – Upper Quartile
2001/2	n/a	62	n/a	n/a	n/a
2005/6	n/a	33	n/a	2.18	2.18
2010/11	n/a	28	n/a	n/a	1.08
2015/16	22.5	19.4	n/a	0.71	n/a
2016/17	22.5	22.59	23.00	0.77	0.75
2017/18	22.5	24.89	24.42	0.75	0.84
2018/19	24	20.28	n/a	0.61	n/a
2019/20 at Qtr 1	23	21.95	n/a	0.61	n/a
2019/20 at 31.7.19	23	22.51	n/a	0.57	n/a

4.6 The latest benchmarking information shows that the average void times for our nearest neighbours are Sheffield – 49 days; Leeds – 35 days; Rotherham – 34 days. Benchmarking is done via HouseMark’s benchmarking service which provides a breakdown of the costs and resources involved in managing the housing management and maintenance functions in the context of performance indicators. The information is designed to enable self-assessment of the organisation’s efficiency and to determine whether the services are of good quality and value for money.

4.7 As well as regular performance monitoring, Berneslai Homes carry out ‘empty property spot checks’ as part of the Service Excellence Assessment Programme (SEAP). This has been a structured and comprehensive method of obtaining and using customer feedback to improve service delivery since 2007. The two main elements of SEAP are reality checking (mystery shopping, spot checks and customer special interest panels) and satisfaction.

4.8 Tenants are trained as Service Excellence Assessors and accompany Berneslai Homes officers on visits to a random sample of properties which are considered as being ready to let. An assessment on the condition of the property is carried out against the Void Standard and a report on their findings is circulated to all officers and partner contractors concerned. Item 4c – Empty Property Spot Checks Report – August 2019 (attached) shows the latest report from Construction Services and Item 4d – Empty Property Spot Checks Report – August 2019 (attached) shows the latest report from Kier.

4.9 Whilst it is felt that performance on voids management on the whole is excellent, this is no reason for Berneslai Homes or the Council to be complacent. Officers continually look for ways in which to improve the timescales for turning void properties around quickly but this has to be balanced by ensuring that any works carried out are appropriate, safe and cost effective.

5.0 Future Plans & Challenges

5.1 The Property Repairs & Improvement Partnership (PRIP) contract is in the process of re-procurement with a new contract being in place by April 2020. It is not envisaged that the outcome of this re-procurement will affect service delivery to customers or the standards set for void property.

5.2 There are no immediate plans to change the voids standard or process significantly but regular review will continue to pick up any changes required by statute, customer feedback or changing circumstances.

5.3 One of the five key themes of the recent social housing consultation is 'empowering residents and strengthening the regulator'. The Government want residents to be able to compare performance more easily. To this end they are proposing that landlords' performance against a number of agreed and meaningful performance indicators is made publically available in a way that enables easy comparison. This is likely to involve a role for the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH). We will keep a watching brief on the impact of any changes via the HouseMark benchmarking club.

5.4 There are currently several pressure points on the council's housing waiting list:-

5.5 *Insufficient two and three bed houses and two bed bungalows to meet demand* - this applies to most locations across the borough. The table below shows the highest demand homes advertised in April/May 2019.

Address	Property type	Bids received
Birdwell	2 bed houses	150 average no. of bids received
Birdwell	3 bed houses	150 average no. of bids received
Kendray	2 bed house	198
Wombwell	2 bed house	119
Honeywell	2 bed house	106
Athersley South	3 bed house	140
Wombwell	2 bed house	123
Goldthorpe	3 bed house	104
Wombwell	3 bed house	115
Worsbrough Common	3 bed house	101
Athersley North	3 bed house	167
Athersley North	2 bed house	140
Dodworth	2 bed house	155
Worsbrough Common	2 bed house	128
Gawber	3 bed house	172
Honeywell	3 bed house	194

5.6 *Shortage of larger homes (four+ bedrooms) for general needs and medical cases* - although not significant in terms of overall numbers, we are seeing an increase in the number of larger families, both with or without medical needs, seeking accommodation. There are currently 275 families on the waiting list needing four bedrooms or more. The council own a stock of 197 homes with four or five bedrooms (193 four bedroom and 4 five bedroom homes). During 2018/19 a total of 10 four bedroom homes were re-let (0 five bed homes). This gives a turnover of 5.1% compared to the overall stock turnover of 7.3%.

- 5.7 *Low stock of four+ bedroom homes* - increasingly, because of this we are encouraging applicants to apply for three bed homes that have a ground floor kitchen, lounge and dining room where one of the rooms can legitimately be utilised as a bedroom.
- 5.8 *People in priority bands (1,2,3) having to wait longer before being rehoused* – this has a knock on effect of applicants ‘priority chasing’ by providing additional information to further their application in an attempt to increase their priority. This affects workloads for the assessment team, increases appeals and leads to an increase in MP enquiries. The table below shows the current average waiting time from entering the priority band to being rehoused compared to the 2016/17 waiting time:-

Priority Band	Current Average Waiting Time (No. of days)	2016/17 Average Waiting Time (No. of Days)
1	121	83
2	195	163
3	220	178
4	407	525

- 5.9 *Mental Health issues being cited as reasons for rehousing* - increasing numbers of cases are being presented where mental health issues are being cited as the reason for rehousing. This can be because of breakdown in relationships, leaving hospital, leaving supported accommodation, poor relationships with neighbours, being targeted for harassment in community etc. Quite often we have difficulties managing the rehousing of these cases with the needs of the individual and the community having to be balanced. Demand in this category is predominantly for two or three bed properties.
- 5.10 *Domestic violence* - as with people presenting mental health issues we are seeing an increasing number of cases presenting domestic violence/domestic abuse issues as the reason for rehousing. This is seen in the increasing number of cases being received via the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) procedures, although we receive many more domestic violence cases than ever get to MARAC. Again demand is predominantly for two or three bed properties.
- 5.11 *Homelessness issues* - an increasing number of cases are being awarded Band 2 priority in particular but also Bands 1 & 3, in accordance with the revised Lettings Policy and the council’s new duties under The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Because of the increasing numbers, and a reduction in the availability of vacancies, quite often Band 2 prevention cases are not being rehoused in the 56 days that the council has to prevent homelessness. These cases then go into Band 3 (Relief) where the chances of rehousing are less. Four properties have been identified to accommodate two families and two single people in order to prevent the use of temporary out of the borough B & B accommodation.
- 5.12 *Lack of suitable accommodation for customers presenting multiple problems* - increasingly we are being asked to, and do, rehouse customers presenting multiple needs/chaotic lifestyles that in an ideal world with more options would be better placed in accommodation with specialist support. The limited number of suitable options means that the council waiting list and general needs housing are the last and only option. This is an issue that is regularly discussed at Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) when chaotic clients with multiple needs and a rehousing need are discussed.
- 5.13 Pressures are quite often placed on staff to accept applicants who clearly need specialist and not general needs accommodation. There is a growing pressure and problem of where to house people who have excluded themselves from existing specialist provision.
- 5.14 BMBC Communities Directorate currently commission specialist provision. Under 25s are provided for by Centrepoint at two separate locations. Over 25s provision is by Humankind, and replaces facilities previously based at Holden House.

- 5.15 Humankind have 10 units with assessment beds, and plan for a further 18 dispersed units with support (two available to date). Referrals to both Centrepont and Humankind are undertaken by BMBC Housing Options team.
- 5.16 *Reducing Stock* – Despite a council house new build programme, and investment in acquisitions and conversions, there is still an ongoing net loss to the council house stock as a result of Right to Buy sales.

6.0 Implications for Local People

- 6.1 Having access to a home that is warm, safe and in good repair, improves wellbeing, health and is often seen as a basic human need. Council housing in Barnsley continues to play an important role in housing provision alongside housing association properties, home ownership and private rented accommodation across the borough. Over the last four decades the number of Council homes has halved, mainly through Right To Buy sales. Demand for Council housing expressed through the Council housing waiting list remains strong. Housing Associations have provided some additional social rented property but private rented accommodation has of late been a significant market provider for those who cannot afford to buy.

7.0 Invited Witnesses

- 7.1 The following witnesses have been invited to today's meeting:-

- David Shepherd, Service Director – Economic Regeneration, Place Directorate, BMBC
- Sarah Cartwright, Group Leader, Housing Growth, Place Directorate, BMBC
- Steve Davis, Director of Assets, Regeneration & Construction, Berneslai Homes
- Tony Griffiths, Housing Management Group Manager (East), Berneslai Homes
- Cllr Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Member, Place (Regeneration & Culture), BMBC

8.0 Possible Areas for Investigation

- 8.1 Members may wish to ask questions around the following areas:-

- What are the repercussions for the service if a home is found not to meet standards during spot checks?
- What are the complexities around converting accommodation for those who require special adaptations within the home and does this limit the number of properties they are able to apply for?
- Who determines which properties are visited and why is only a small sample done?
- Can you give examples of where good practice/performance in one area has been utilised to improve practice/performance in another area of work?
- What is given greatest priority in terms of performance – timescales, maximising income or quality?
- In order to help alleviate tenant poverty and protect the environment, are there any measures that you already take or could take in the future when refurbishing properties, for example recycling carpets?
- In your opinion, does the system do enough to support those at risk of losing their homes and what are the barriers to doing more?
- Which of your key performance indicators relate to quality?

- How do you negotiate/mediate if a tenant is offered a property but does not agree that the standard is acceptable?
- How do you ensure that the incentives for 'hard to let' properties do not encourage tenants to take properties that don't really meet their needs?
- In terms of void and lettings management, what achievement are you most proud of?
- Do you think that the Barnsley Homes Standard is demanding enough and delivers the right standards for social housing in Barnsley given that the Decent Homes Standard it was based on is over 10 years old?
- How do you make tenants aware of the process for reporting safety issues and their right to complain after a property has been occupied?
- What can members do to support the work of Berneslai Homes in relation to void properties and housing management?

9.0 Background Papers and Useful Links

9.1 Background papers and documents included with this report are as follows:-

- Item 4b (attached) - Berneslai Homes Void Standard (January 2019 Revision)
- Item 4c (attached) - Empty Property Spot Checks Report: Construction Services–August 2019
- Item 4d (attached) - Empty Property Spot Checks Report: Kier–August 2019
- GOV.UK – A Decent Home: Definition & Guidance
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-decent-home-definition-and-guidance>
- Berneslai Homes - Barnsley Homes Standard Programme -
<https://www.berneslaihomes.co.uk/repair-your-home/improvement-programmes-and-eligibility/barnsley-homes-standard-programme/>
- BMBC Housing Website:-
<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/services/housing/>
- BMBC Lettings Policy –
<https://www.berneslaihomes.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LETTINGS-POLICY-2018-FINAL-COPY-20181026.pdf>
- National Housing Federation – Homelessness Reduction Act Briefing Summary
<https://www.housing.org.uk/resource-library/browse/homeless-reduction-act-briefing/>
- Centrepoint Barnsley Website:-
<https://centrepoint.org.uk/barnsley/>
- Humankind Website:-
<https://humankindcharity.org.uk/service/thrive-barnsley-complex-needs-service>

10.0 Glossary

BMBC	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
OSC	Overview & Scrutiny Committee
PRIP	Property Repairs Improvement Partnership
RSH	Regulator for Social Housing
SEAP	Service Excellence Assessment Programme

11.0 Officer Contact

Anna Marshall, Scrutiny Officer
23 September 2019