

CITY OF PLYMOUTH

Report: Overview and Scrutiny Panel -
Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration

Subject: Council Housing Voids

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 28th November, 2002

Ref: 5/THRR/SP/CH

Part: I

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to seek the approval of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to submit recommendations to the Executive following meetings of the Scrutiny Panel responsible for reviewing Council Housing Voids.

Corporate Strategy:

The establishment of Overview and Scrutiny Panels forms part of the corporate strategy for implementation of that part of the modernisation agenda relative to new democratic arrangements.

Financial Implications:

The recommendations of the Panel are intended to result in a more efficient voids procedure system, thereby reducing rent loss.

Recommendations:

- (1) To continue to develop a streamlined inspection process by filling vacant posts in the establishment.
- (2) To continue adopting a flexible approach by:
 - (i) reducing the number of refusals;
 - (ii) retaining improvements carried out by tenants, where considered appropriate;

- (iii) making tenants aware of their responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement;
 - (iv) implementing a procedure for the management of the inspection of tenanted properties.
- (3) To continue with the 5, 10 and 15 day targets for routine repairs but that Officers determine an appropriate definition for capital improvements and establish suitable targets and an appropriate monitoring system to ensure that these targets were met.
 - (4) To involve prospective tenants at the work planning stage.
 - (5) To continue the issue of decoration vouchers to prospective tenants.
 - (6) To continue to address the asbestos issue in relation to current and developing legislation.
 - (7) To ensure that tenants are kept fully informed on all matters which impact on their tenancy.
 - (8) Officers prepare proposals with respect to maximising take-up of tenancies within one bedroom properties and bed sits, including exploring the use of those currently on the common register and also those currently under-occupying larger properties.
 - (9) Officers provide the Panel with a monthly update on voids.
 - (10) To submit the findings and recommendations of the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 28th November, 2002, prior to submission to the Executive on 10th December, 2002.
 - (11) Following ratification of this report, progress of implementation against recommendations 1-10 above be reported back by the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration to this Panel by 1st July, 2003.
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Background Papers:

- (1) Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Social Services, Health and Housing dated 18th September, 2001, regarding Council Housing Voids.
 - (2) The Audit Commission's Inspection Report into the City Council's Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service dated August 2002.
 - (3) Report of the Director for Social and Housing Services dated 6th September, 2002, regarding progress in respect of Council Housing Voids.
 - (4) Voids Situation Reports as at 7th October and 23rd October, 2002.
 - (5) A schedule indicating Void Properties by Ward.
 - (6) A briefing note on the Four Streets Project.
 - (7) A draft letter to tenants regarding Asbestos Testing.
 - (8) An analysis of Bed Sits and One Bedroom Flats.
 - (9) Minutes of meetings of the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 14th and 29th October, 2002.
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**REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL –
TRANSPORT, HOUSING AND RELATED REGENERATION**

COUNCIL HOUSING VOIDS

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Commission, at its meeting on 19th September, 2002, agreed to the inclusion of Council Housing Voids in the work programme for the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Scrutiny Panel.
- 1.2 The Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Scrutiny Panel met on 14th and 29th October, 2002, to consider Council Housing Voids and supporting documentation, as well as talk to Officers.

2.0 Panel Structure

Councillors

Councillor Birkenhead, in the Chair.

Councillors Brookshaw, Mrs. Ford, Martin Leaves, Mrs. Nelder and Wheeler.

Also in Attendance

| | | |
|------------|----------------------|---|
| Witnesses: | Councillor D. Viney | Portfolio Holder (for one meeting) |
| | Councillor P. Rowe | |
| | Messrs. C. Shaw and | Plymouth Federation Tenants and Residents |
| | M. Glanville | Association (each for one meeting) |
| | Councillor W. Foster | (for one meeting) |
| | Councillor T. Evans | (for part of one meeting) |
| Officers: | Giles Perritt | Head of Housing and Residential Services |
| | John Doleman | Homelessness & Allocations Manager |
| | Ian Brett | Team Leader – Voids |
| | Margaret Hamlyn | Housing Assistant – Repairs and Voids |
| | Martin Snell | Manufacturing/Acting Building |
| | | Operations Manager |
| | Terry Hannaford | Sector Manager - Repairs and Voids |
| | Carole Hoyle | Democratic Support Officer |

N.B. Councillors Brookshaw and Mrs. Nelder attended for the first meeting only

3.0 Objectives

- 3.1 The Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel consider progress on the implementation of the new procedure for Council Housing Voids and submit its findings and recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 28th November, 2002, prior to submission to the Executive on 10th December, 2002.

4.0 The Detail

- 4.1 As parts of its work programme in 2001/02, the Social Services, Health and Housing Scrutiny Panel met to consider Council Housing Voids.
- 4.2 The Panel's objectives in scrutinising Council Housing Voids were as follows:-
- (a) to achieve greater efficiency by improving the process of dealing with Council Housing Voids;
 - (b) to introduce a system which reduced voids and the length of time a property was vacant to an absolute minimum.
- 4.3 The Panel met on six occasions and formulated a report of recommendations to the Scrutiny Commission on 18th September, 2001.
- 4.4 The Panel recommended that the Lead Portfolio Holder report back progress on the implementation of the new procedure to the Scrutiny Panel within a six-month period from November 2001. However, since the Audit Commission proposed to undertake an inspection of the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service, which included void properties, in May 2002 as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, it was agreed that the progress report should be delayed to allow for inclusion of the findings of that inspection.
- 4.5 This is the background to the report from the Director for Social and Housing Services to the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 6th September, 2002, which concluded that -
- (i) despite performance problems, particularly since April 2002, considerable progress had been made towards implementation of the recommendations of the Social Services, Health and Housing Scrutiny Panel in September 2001;
 - (ii) urgent action was being taken to address the performance problems being experienced, including a temporary increase in resourcing, the use of additional Contractors to undertake work, and the re-focussing of staff priorities in other Housing Teams to ensure that they support the work of the Voids Teams;
 - (iii) Management targets had been agreed for the reduction of vacant properties, to a level whereby, as at March 2003, void levels would constitute 1.7% of the City Council's dwellings. This performance is comparable with the best performing Authorities in the Country.

5.0 Comments

- 5.1 Arising from questions by the Panel, Members heard -
- (i) that the issues relating to resourcing and clarifying process arising from the transition to a centralised allocation team had been addressed and that:-
 - (a) approval had recently been received for an increase in the establishment within Housing and Residential Services and the posts should be filled shortly;

- (b) working procedures were now in place and regular liaison meetings were held between differing levels of staff from the Voids Team and Direct Services Department;
- (ii) that a standard had been set for returning voids and this, together with post checks and accompanied viewings, had led to the number of refusals dropping appreciably;
- (iii) of the success of the Four Streets Project in improving the turnaround of vacant properties in a particular area of the City. Officers advised that it was considered that the number of previous refusals in the area was linked to the issue of desirability and that this had been addressed by an upgrading of the properties, both internally and externally, to make the streets more acceptable to existing and new tenants. The success of the project was partly due to the concentration of housing management resources on the area in question and this could not be extended into other areas without an increase in establishment. However, the following measures were contributing to the successful letting of properties:-
 - (a) an improved specification;
 - (b) matching applicants more carefully to properties;
 - (c) greater enforcement of breaching of tenancy conditions;
- (iv) that it had been determined that, where any improvements carried out by tenants were reusable and in a reasonable condition, they should be left for the next tenant and the Direct Services Department workforce had been made aware that any requests to remove such improvements should be queried;
- (v) that, with regard to the proposed allocation of properties prior to them becoming vacant, although this was a target it had not been possible to progress, mainly due to the efforts being made to ensure a quick turnaround of voids in order that properties were available for let to people in bed and breakfast accommodation;
- (vi) that it was important that tenants were reminded of their responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement and an appropriate leaflet would be circulated to those areas of the City where a particular problem had been identified;
- (vii) that it was accepted that a procedure was required for the management and regular monitoring of properties to ensure early identification of problems;
- (viii) that the 5, 10 and 15 day targets were considered appropriate for routine voids involving basic repairs and maintenance but that, where capital improvements were required, an appropriate definition needed to be determined, suitable targets set and a monitoring system established in order to ensure that these targets were met;
- (ix) that there were benefits to be accrued in the early involvement of prospective tenants at the work planning stage;
- (x) that the take-up of decoration vouchers was approximately 60% although financial constraints meant that tenants were not given a huge choice;

- (xi) that with regard to the issue of asbestos in void properties –
 - (a) since 1st May, 2002, asbestos had been removed from approximately 3% of the total number of empty properties administered;
 - (b) the assessment of properties was carried out in accordance with the Health and Safety Executive's recommendation regarding the safety issues involved in either removing or leaving asbestos in situ;
 - (c) the introduction of new Regulations would assist in identifying the type of properties which contained asbestos;
 - (d) it was hoped that the improved administration of properties containing asbestos would assist in reducing the overall average time for turnaround of void properties;
- (xii) that, with regard to the level of vacant properties, although the current number of void properties was above target, this was partly due to problems with the inputting of data which had now been addressed. Officers were confident that the improvements already implemented, coupled with regular monitoring procedures which had been put in place to identify any problems which arose, would enable the year-end target of 275 to be achieved, which was below the target set by the Audit Commission;
- (xiii) that, with regard to the high number of vacant bed sits and one bedroom properties, the letting of non self-contained properties had become more difficult because of an increased level of expectation in the standard of accommodation being offered but options available included:-
 - (a) the letting of properties to those applicants who would normally be outside the priority need category;
 - (b) the relaxation of the age limit for priority need in order to allow greater access to properties;
 - (c) the introduction of financial incentives such as moving/settling-in expenses;
 - (d) encouraging single people in family accommodation to consider moving into smaller properties.

However, it was important to take account of an applicant's needs and background in order that inappropriate lettings were not made;

- (xiv) that it was important that tenants be kept fully informed on all matters which impact on their tenancy;

- (xv) that, with regard to the recovery of the cost of repairs resulting from damage by tenants, there was a mechanism in place for the recovery of repair costs but this was often a lengthy process. In the case of transfers, a pre-inspection took place and the transfer was not allowed to proceed unless any damage identified was rectified;
- (xvi) that, with regard to whether the City Council had the power to withhold housing from those applicants it considered unsuitable, the Homelessness 2002 granted authority to Local Authorities to exclude groups such as those guilty of anti-social behaviour or those who have any kind of unpaid debts to the Authority.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 The recommendations of the Panel are as follows:-

- (1) To continue to develop a streamlined inspection process by filling vacant posts in the establishment.
- (2) To continue adopting a flexible approach by:
 - (i) reducing the number of refusals;
 - (ii) retaining improvements carried out by tenants, where considered appropriate;
 - (iii) making tenants aware of their responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement;
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