

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL and MIDSUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

From: Improvement and Involvement Officer	Report Number: JHB/17/16
To: Joint Housing Board	Date of meeting: 18 July 2016

TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL – VOIDs REVIEW AND OUTCOMES

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To inform the Board members of the outcomes from the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's review into VOIDs; from a customer's perspective and to hear directly from the Panel Members that took part in the review.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the findings of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel be noted.
The Board is able to resolve this matter

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The reduction in rental income and the introduction of a levy on local authorities which own housing stock, as set out in the Housing and Planning Bill, means that we have ever increasing demands on delivering a value for money service that is fit for our customers and tenants.
- 3.2 The Panel were fully aware of this demand on the service when considering the service delivery and the associated outcomes from this review. In particular, the Panel feel that some of their recommendations could help with cost savings and increase resident satisfaction.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 There are no risks associated with this report.

6. Consultations

- 6.1 The Panel met with a number of officers throughout their review and officers have been consulted on the final report and action plan.

7. Equality Analysis

- 7.1 An Equality Impact Analysis is not required for this report.

8. Shared Service / Partnership Implications

- 8.1 Babergh and Mid Suffolk currently operate the VOID process differently due to the arrangements with an in-house delivery team and an outside contractor. It is hoped that with the review of the DLO currently underway, some of the actions suggested by the Panel can be implemented across both authorities from April 2017.

9. Links to Joint Strategic Plan

- 9.1 The work of the Panel links to make best use of our existing Housing assets and intelligence – based community insight and outcome – focussed performance management.

10. Key Information

- 10.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel formed in January 2016 and currently comprises of three tenants, living within Mid Suffolk. The Panel has been supported through their first review with specialist support from the Housing Quality Network, as agreed by the Board in 2015.
- 10.2 The aims of the Panel are to act as a driver for continuous improvement in performance and excellence through the process of customer-led scrutiny and to ensure that tenants' views, aspirations and priorities are central to the performance framework for housing services at Babergh and Mid Suffolk.
- 10.3 For their first review, the Panel looked at VOIDS (the process of dealing with empty council properties between the previous tenant moving out and a new tenant moving in). The Panel felt that the VOIDS service has wide implications, impacts on all tenants and budgets and is timely to complement the scrutiny by Councillors and work to make improvements. It was also supported by staff. The panel resolved to scrutinise voids performance from the tenant's point of view rather than the process as the Councils had recently commissioned V4 to look into that part.
- 10.4 The Panel's review was carried out between January 2016 and April 2016. The Panel members gave their time freely to attend meetings, review documents, interview staff, survey tenants and carry out research. All of the panel members attended all of the meetings although different members took on different aspects of the research.
- 10.5 Following the conclusion of the review, the Panel has prepared a full report with their findings and recommendations (see Appendix 1).
- 10.6 The full report was presented by a Panel member to officers for their comments before being finalised. Officers have put together their responses to the recommendations in an action plan (see Appendix 2). Progress against these actions will be reported to the Housing Board and Board members will be consulted with to determine how regular this reporting will be required.
- 10.7 It is acknowledged that the Panel is in need of more tenants to make their work truly representative and officers will be using the Panel's report and positive outcomes to recruit more tenants to the panel as they acknowledge that they are not currently representative. Plans include articles within Tenants' News and Views and a dedicated area on the Council's websites.

11. Appendices

Title	Location
A. Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' Tenant Scrutiny Panel Scrutiny Review – VOIDS – The Customer's Perspective (Full Report)	Attached
B. Tenant Scrutiny Panel – VOIDS review - Action Plan	Attached

12. Background Documents

12.1 None.

Authorship:

Victoria Freer
Improvement and Involvement Officer

Tel. 01449 724781

Email: victoria.freer@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' Tenant Scrutiny Panel

Scrutiny Review

Voids – The Customer's Perspective

FINAL REPORT

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1 Introduction

The panel

- 1.1 The Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' Tenant Scrutiny Panel (the panel) aims to act as a critical friend to work in partnership with officers to improve performance. It is currently made up of a group of three tenants. All three panel members were fully involved in this scrutiny. It is hoped that other tenants from both councils will join the panel.
- 1.2 The panel members gave their time freely to attend meetings, review documents, interview staff and carry out research. All of the panel members attended all of the meetings although different members took on different aspects of the research.

What was scrutinised and why

- 1.3 The voids service had been suggested by officers as a first topic for review.
- 1.4 The panel had a full discussion regarding the suitability of the topic and completed a balanced scorecard which helped the panel discuss, independently, if it was a suitable topic for review. In summary the panel felt that the voids service has wide implications, impacts on all tenants and budgets and is timely to complement the scrutiny by councillors and work to make improvements. It was also supported by staff. The panel resolved to scrutinise voids performance from the tenant's point of view.

The timescale and changes taking place during the review

- 1.5 The review was carried out between January 2016 and April 2016.
- 1.6 The scrutiny process took place during a time of rapid change and restricted resources. It is recognised that many changes are in progress and that some of The panel's concerns are being addressed.

How voids in Babergh and Mid Suffolk are managed

- 1.7 The Housing Options Team carries out the administrative work at the end of a tenancy, advertise and allocate vacancies to new tenants and carry out accompanied viewings.
- 1.8 The Asset Management Team inspects properties when they become vacant and specifies and ensures the work is carried out to reach the council's lettable standard.
- 1.9 Babergh uses an external contractor and Mid Suffolk uses a Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) to carry out work on void properties. The councils are aiming to improve average re-let times. Although these are improving, they remain at well above the council's target time of 28 days.

- 1.10 During the time of the scrutiny, work was in progress to improve and integrate the services by the two local authorities. This involved:
- A restructure resulting in staff changes affecting the departments involved in voids
 - Proposals to introduce a new DLO to cover both councils
 - Plans for new information technology to integrate the current systems and provide better communications for staff on site
 - Plans to review the joint lettable standard introduced in 2013 once the new DLO and voids supervisor is in place.

2 Summary

How the scrutiny was carried out

The scope of the review

- 2.1 The review topic was agreed as 'Voids: The Customer's Perspective'. A scoping document was produced, this included:
- The questions the panel intended to answer
 - The methods to be used to gather evidence.

The questions were:

- Does the void standard and process meet customer expectations?
- How far are the policies, processes and decisions made by the councils about voids in the best interest of tenants, including value for money?
- How effective are communications with tenants regarding what to expect about voids?
- How effective is the collection and use of feedback from tenants about voids?
- Are the local authorities meeting the standards of the regulator?

How the evidence was gathered

- 2.2 The aim was to triangulate evidence so that the conclusions were supported from different sources. These included:
- Reviewing reports, policies, performance information and information provided to customers

- Interviews with staff and shadowing staff to visit voids
- Surveys with customers and reviewing complaints.

The main findings

- 2.3 The panel found that there are some very dedicated and experienced staff who will do their very best to support tenants as appropriate and are able to adapt to different circumstances.
- 2.4 The panel members were impressed that staff were open and keen to work with them to make improvements where possible. The panel found the staff were happy to listen, take on board suggestions and make changes. The panel welcome the new structure and plans to create a new DLO and are confident the service will continue to improve.
- 2.5 The panel believes that the importance of involving tenants is recognised and further contributions and involvement by tenants in changes to the voids service will be welcomed.
- 2.6 The following points are shown in relation to the key questions the panel sought to answer.

Does the void standard meet customer expectations?

- 2.7 Expectations will vary and staff are aware that some tenants will be comparing with standards that they may be used to in the private sector.
- 2.8 Although some customers are satisfied, the council's surveys as well as the survey carried out by the panel, show a significant number of tenants are not satisfied with the condition of the properties let to them.
- 2.9 In some cases there is dissatisfaction with items not covered in the void standard such as decorating. In other cases the void standard does not seem to be consistently met, for example cleaning. The panel identified a lack of supervision in some cases, for example regarding cleaning in Mid Suffolk.

How far are the policies, processes and decisions made by the council about voids in the best interest of tenants, including value for money?

- 2.10 There needs to be continued consultation and involvement of tenants regarding the standards the councils should achieve in terms of a balance between time costs and quality.
- 2.11 Targets and benchmarking are not used as effectively as they could be and there did not appear to be a systematic means of comparison with other councils or attempts to find out if good practice from other councils could help improve the service.

- 2.12 Divisions between the two councils with different standards and ways of working are in the process of being addressed. The panel is confident that the measures being put in place will help to improve this.
- 2.13 Although working relationships appeared to be good, there were also differences of understanding and possible duplication between the Asset Management Team and the Housing Options Team. The panel noted that the two teams met regularly regarding voids. However, it was not clear how far voids are prioritised over other repairs in Mid Suffolk as the DLO also carry out responsive repairs. There are now plans to address this with a dedicated voids team.
- 2.14 The panel believes that the officers they shadowed were going beyond their role to help tenants in many cases. However, lack of standardisation and supervision meant discretion is used informally. There did not seem to be guidelines regarding what to take account of, for example on rechargeable works.
- 2.15 This meant that in some cases a blanket approach is taken to remove items. This is not always in the best interest of the outgoing or incoming tenant, or perhaps the councils.
- . For example, is it really necessary and good value for money to remove laminate flooring in case it needs to be taken up at some point?
- 2.16 The checklist and information provided to tenants regarding rechargeable works does not encourage co-operation and does not take a respectful tone.

How effective are communications with tenants about what to expect regarding voids?

- 2.17 The panel found that this was variable according to the officer dealing with it and the stage the property was at in the voids process.
- 2.18 The panel noted some good practice such as information on utilities for tenants and a 'moving advice' leaflet.
- 2.19 There was some evidence that tenants were not clear what the council would be responsible for and for example, were therefore complaining that sheds had not been repaired.
- 2.20 Overall, communication works well but more formality, sharing of good practice and consistent use of information could improve this further.

How effective is the collection and use of feedback from tenants about voids?

- 2.21 The panel found that use of feedback was very limited and opportunities were missed to gather feedback and monitor trends to improve services. For example a survey of new tenants, consistent logging of comments and issues arising from voids and monitoring of expressions of dissatisfaction would all help improve the service and possibly help make savings.
- 2.22 Monitoring of reasons for refusals following a viewing would also be helpful to identify issues and areas for improvement.

Are the local authorities meeting the Standards of the Regulator?

- 2.23 The panel believes there is work to be done in relation to the HCA Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and would like to see work to improve consultation and communications regarding this.
- 2.24 The panel would also want to include attention to 'The Home Standard' in terms of tenant choice and prioritisation of voids in relation to other repairs.

3 The recommendations

Recommendation one

- 3.1 It is understood that the void lettable standard is to be reviewed and it is recommended that this is completed with tenants' involvement, taking into account the HCA standards. It needs to be established and recorded which department is responsible for managing, reviewing and monitoring the standard in the future. There needs to be agreement in terms of the standard being aimed for, where the priorities lie and how the standards compare to other similar councils.

Recommendation two

- 3.2 That staff work with the tenants to produce target and performance information that can be understood and shared with tenants in an annual report and the tenant magazine as required in the HCA Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (HCATIES) Item 2.2.1. This should include comparisons with other similar councils. This should be used routinely by all staff involved in the voids process so they know what they are aiming for and how the councils are performing. It should be clear who this information is reported to, eg, which officers and which council meetings.

Recommendation three

- 3.3 Efforts should also be made to see if improvements to the service could be made by looking at similar organisations' practices. For example to find out how many visits are made to voids and ensure best use is made of them.

Recommendation four

- 3.4 The councils should invest in supporting staff to adapt to the changes and share good practice across the two councils and teams.

Recommendation five

- 3.5 Tenants continue to be involved to help to monitor performance to ensure a smooth transition from the current contractor and DLO to the new DLO from April 2017 to cover both Councils (HCATIES item 1.2c & e). Tenants need to be kept informed of the transition and any changes made. Interim arrangements need to be made regarding supervision and cleaning.

Recommendation six

- 3.6 Guidance factors are produced so that staff feel empowered to make the right decision and proceed confidently in using their discretion. This will also ensure the needs of different tenants are taken into account. For example, elderly or disabled tenants may need properties to be ready before letting.

Recommendation seven

- 3.7 Tenants should be able to view items left by previous tenants and opt to keep and be responsible for items, unless there is a health and safety or clear maintenance issue.
- 3.8 The tenant could be given a period of time (say a month) to decide if they want to keep the items. If they are not wanted they could be removed by the council as a low priority (as opposed to high priority prior to letting) item.
- 3.9 The councils to review rechargeable policies and guidance for tenants, in consultation with tenants if the above is agreed to.
- 3.10 Also guidance for voids officers regarding factors to consider such as the condition of the left items, the outgoing tenants (or tenant relative's) situation, choice and helpfulness for incoming tenants who may be on a limited budget.
- 3.11 This will allow voids officers to use discretion within a framework.

Recommendation eight

- 3.12 The councils give priority to ensuring voids are let in a clean condition. The panel believes this would be cost effective as it would result in fewer refusals and a better relationship with tenants at the outset. The panel believes that tenants are then more likely to respect the property and leave it in a good condition.

Recommendation nine

- 3.13 That the councils introduce a new tenant survey which captures views from ingoing tenants to a new property.
- 3.14 That the councils introduce a call and query log so trends can be spotted.

Recommendation ten

- 3.15 That consideration be given to how the results of this process can be fed into the councils' Joint Scrutiny Committee and how the scrutiny processes can complement each other in the future.

4 How the scrutiny was carried out

The review of documents

- 4.1 A range of relevant documents were reviewed. These are listed in appendix one.
- 4.2 Most of the items were reviewed by the panel at the first stage to help shape the review and decide on questions for the staff interviews. However, some were requested or supplied during the review process but were included in later stages of the review.

The interviews with officers

- 4.3 Interviews were carried out with officers involved in voids. The officers are listed in appendix two.
- 4.4 The panel drew up a list of questions based on the desktop review. Not all questions were appropriate or equally appropriate to all officers. However, they were all given the opportunity to answer all the questions.

Information from tenants

- 4.5 The information from the desktop review was limited as there were only two recorded complaints relating to voids. As we understand it complaints are only logged when they reach formal level. Also there was only one question in the STAR postal survey of tenants carried out in 2014. The panel therefore decided to carry out a telephone survey of tenants moving into properties in the last six months.
- 4.6 A copy of the questionnaire is attached at appendix three. The survey was carried out by a tenant scrutiny panel member during March from a list of tenants provided. Eleven agreed to be interviewed.
- 4.7 Tenants were asked to rate answers on a scale of excellent, good, fair, poor and very bad. In addition to the scoring system comments on each aspect were recorded.

Meetings attended

The councils' Joint Scrutiny Meeting held on 17 February

- 4.8 The panel members attended this meeting and reported on the discussion and outcomes to the group.
- 4.9 Officers provided an overview of void performance and answered questions from members. It is noted that the subject will be returned to in the future.
- 4.10 A member of the panel attended a weekly void meeting with officers.

Visits made by the panel

- 4.11 Panel members shadowed officers which included visiting ready to let properties to see the actual voids. The number of voids available for the panel to visit was limited during the scrutiny as there is obviously a short time that they are available to view. But panel members visited those available (six) which included both councils' properties. The panel is grateful to the staff for organising this.
- 4.12 In some cases panel members were unsure if properties were deemed ready to let or not. Some were properties being moved into, others were at the end of tenancies.

Comparisons with other landlords

- 4.13 The panel reviewed comparisons with other landlords and other void standards taken from HouseMark benchmarking reports.

5 Scrutiny findings

Does the void standard meet customer expectations?

General condition

- 5.1 Officers mentioned during interviews that they are aware that many incoming tenants will be comparing properties to the private sector.
- 5.2 The Panel's telephone survey with tenants asked if the property condition met the tenant's expectations. 6 of the 11 respondents responded yes with three giving an excellent score. Comments included 'Brilliant', 'could see it needed a lot of work-first viewing turned down.'
- 5.3 Questions regarding the standard of the property, satisfaction regarding work being done when they had moved in and the condition of the outside of the property, produced mixed results from 'excellent' to 'very bad.' Comments included, 'Mould on walls', 'Agreed to do cleaning and fill holes in walls', 'Help with boiler needed -

quick response', 'Had been a leak flooded floor, paid for re-plastering to be done myself', 'Nothing needed doing'. Others mentioned problems with heating and outstanding repairs.

- 5.4 The STAR survey results from 2014 included a question for tenants moving in within the previous 12 months 'How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the condition of the property when you moved in?'
- For Babergh, 83% of sheltered tenants and 64% of general needs tenants were satisfied with this
 - For Mid Suffolk, 83% of sheltered tenants and 50% of general needs tenants were satisfied
 - There were a mix of comments including one comment: 'everything is fine.'
- 5.5 The void visits carried out by the panel included a property with lots of items left in the garden.

Decorations

- 5.6 The panel's telephone survey found that 6 out of the 11 rated the decorations as 'poor'. Note that in most cases the councils do not undertake decorating. However, some tenants made some very positive comments such as the decorations being described as 'spotless'.
- 5.7 The STAR survey included a comment from Babergh, 'The decorations were terrible in all the rooms I had to pay to decorate which cost me hundreds and as a pensioner that was difficult.'

Cleaning

- 5.8 The panel was surprised to learn from staff that cleaning is left to the last operator working on the property. There did not always appear to be any checking or supervision of this as there is no supervisor in Mid Suffolk.
- 5.9 From personal experience all three panel members (all from Mid Suffolk) had found the properties needed a great deal of cleaning when they moved in and this was an unwelcome and off-putting start to their tenancy.
- 5.10 The panel's telephone survey found the majority of those questioned reported that the property was clean (8 out of 11) and 6 of the 11 responding said the property met their expectations. Despite these scores for cleanliness there were a number of comments which suggest otherwise. 'mould on all the back walls' 'mould in cupboards' 'floors dirty and food left in fridge' 'old dog hair everywhere' 'disgusting needs a digger to clear rubbish and mud'.
- 5.11 None of the comments were positive on cleaning, the most positive was, 'had been cleaned but dusty'.

- 5.12 The STAR survey included a mix of comments but one property in Mid Suffolk was described as being in 'a very dirty state'. Again mould was mentioned, 'very bad mould and damp.'
- 5.13 The voids visits by the panel included a void property in Mid Suffolk that was 'quite dirty'.
- 5.14 A review of customer complaints only revealed two, both at stage one in relation to voids. One of these was responded to that it was at a lettable standard another related to the condition of the garden and rubbish left outside.
- 5.15 The panel did not feel vouchers or cleaning materials were always appropriate and a dirty property creates a bad impression which could be avoided at relatively little cost. Dirty properties do not reach the lettable standard which states: 'ensure properties are clean.'

How far are the policies, processes and decisions made by the council about voids in the best interest of tenants, including value for money?

Balancing affordability and quality

- 5.16 Officers were asked: '*How do you ensure a balance of affordability and quality?*' The panel recognises that there needs to be an appropriate balance of letting time quality and cost. Discussions with officers suggest further work should be done regarding this balance and how the standard is set and by whom.

Comparisons with other councils

- 5.17 The panel looked at comparisons with other councils supplied on request by officers from the HouseMark benchmarking club. This showed concerns regarding rent loss re let times and in cost per void although the void standard of other councils was not shown.
- 5.18 Officers were asked: '*Do you compare and benchmark with other similar organisations?*' The panel found that, although both councils have joined HouseMark benchmarking clubs, the information does not appear to be used widely and in a systematic way. Some officers had doubts regarding how useful it would be. Comparisons with other authorities depend on the knowledge of particular officers. Officers do not appear to be looking for good practice from elsewhere although some bring experience from previous posts.
- 5.19 Although the panel accepts benchmarking will have its limitations, the panel believes this information should be used to help compare performance and it is wasteful to pay for a service that is not being used. Performance and benchmarking information should also be fed back to tenants according to the HCA consumer standards. The panel would also like to see if good practice could be learned from other councils and landlords.

Performance targets

- 5.20 Officers were asked; *'How are performance targets set? Why are targets not set for some aspects?'* The panel did not find the information provided on target times and times achieved easy to follow. It was not always clear why targets were set for some aspects and not others and how much time was allowed pre- and post-repair.
- 5.21 Officers told the Scrutiny Panel that 28 days from receiving the key to handing the key to the new tenant was an industry standard for an average void but it appears not to be achieved in many cases. Although performance is improving, at the time of reporting to the Joint Scrutiny Committee in February it was at 42 days average for Babergh and 45 days in Mid Suffolk. It was noted by tenant scrutiny panel members attending the council's Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting on 17 February that officers reported that the aim would be to improve on the average re-let time to reach 15 days.
- 5.22 The panel was concerned that the targets may be unhelpful as they required such a big improvement; however, it was accepted that the new structure and plans in place to improve void times may make this more realistic. It was also agreed by the panel that the councils needed to be aware of the average time taken on voids by other councils and be working towards it.

Time taken to relet properties

- 5.23 Officers were asked, *'Let to let to timings, (eg, one letting to the next) – why is the actual time taken much more than the target?'* Some reasons were given for the void times given above, such as skip hire and treatment for pests, these issues would also be experienced in councils meeting the 28 day standard.
- 5.24 There were also differences perceived between the two teams, with the in-house team (Mid Suffolk) seen as being quicker by officers although this is not shown in the figures.
- 5.25 The panel found that it was not clear that voids might be prioritised over routine repairs and that all involved in voids were aware of, and used to working with, targets. For example it was noted the contractors in Babergh were working on an old contract with no penalty clauses for delays. The DLO in Mid Suffolk work to a service level agreement with targets although there is no supervision of the in house team. However, it was noted there are plans to have a dedicated voids team with a voids supervisor that should help to ensure voids were given appropriate priority.
- 5.26 The panel was pleased to see that as much work as possible was done to find a new tenant as soon as notice had been received but that some properties are hard to let and this can cause delays. It was also noted that many incoming tenants are vulnerable and there are complex issues to resolve in partnership with other agencies to ensure the tenant is moving into a home that will be suitable. It was recognised that this time is well spent so that the home is suitable and it does not become empty again too soon.

The cost of voids

- 5.27 Officers were asked: *'Why is the cost of voids (between the two councils) different?'* From information supplied by officers the average cost per void in Babergh in 2014/5 was £4,715 and £3,531 from April to December 2015. For Mid Suffolk the figures are £3,676 (2014/5) and £2,047 (April to December 2015).
- 5.28 The panel recognised that there are historical differences between the councils and the way the repairs are delivered and the amount of work done on them. In view of plans for a unified DLO, new staff structure and the new joint lettable standard to replace the one introduced in 2013, this was not explored further.

Voids process review and design

- 5.29 Officers were asked: *'What has been implemented in the action plan from V4 Consultants' report and what has not been done?'* The panel recognised that much of this was in progress this includes:
- A new organisational structure
 - The introduction of an integrated ICT System for both councils which will also aid communications with officers onsite
 - The creation of one new DLO for both councils
 - Improved supervision in the new staff structure
 - Plans for a new void standard that is enforced to provide more standardisation
 - Plans for supervision staff to be predominantly site-based with IT support.

The move to one DLO

- 5.30 Officers were asked: *'Regarding the choice of contractors vs Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) how were tenants interests considered in the decision-making process?'* The Scrutiny Panel welcomed that tenants had been involved in this decision and were satisfied that the decision had been thought through in terms of the impact on tenants. It was noted that it is proposed that a new DLO will be in place from April 2017. The new management structure is to include more supervision which was an issue of concern identified by the panel. The panel were concerned that interim arrangements should be put in place to address issues that had been identified, such as cleaning and supervision.

Staff involved in each void

- 5.31 Officers were asked: *'When a property becomes empty, or is becoming empty, how many staff visit the property and why?'* It was understood from staff that four visits are carried out to the property in total. This includes pre-termination, void inspection, viewings and post inspection.

- 5.32 Based on the discussion with staff the panel felt this seems to be a high number of visits and although they accept for example pre-termination visits are good practice, there may be duplication between individuals and departments. If four visits are needed it needs to be clear why all four are needed and if this is best use of resources. In contrast to these four visits, supervision was not in place for the DLO in Mid Suffolk. This was supported by the voids visits.

Best use of adapted properties

- 5.33 Officers were asked: *'How do you ensure best use of property adapted for the disabled?'* The panel were satisfied that this was being dealt with efficiently.

Work carried out before and after letting

- 5.34 Officers were asked: *'Is work ever done after the incoming tenant has moved in?'* Staff advised that work is often done when tenants move in and this can be subject to negotiation with tenants especially if they want to move in quickly. However, there is no formality about what is done and how this is varied according to the property and the tenant's circumstances.

Removing alterations, carpets, sheds, etc

- 5.35 Staff were asked: *'Regarding the Void standard-why are some alterations removed? How is it decided?'* The panel accepted that there may be health and safety and ongoing maintenance issues regarding the former tenant's belongings such as carpets, sheds and other fittings. Officers reported that ingoing tenants did not usually want these items and that there was a greater expense to remove them later so they were automatically removed. Incoming tenants are not offered the opportunity to view the property while these items were in situ.

- 5.36 The voids visits included visits in which a panel member noted relatives of deceased tenants were asked to remove good quality carpets.

- 5.37 The panel felt that incoming tenants who might benefit from these items were not given choice and their needs were not always prioritised. Also an unnecessary cost is incurred by the council should the tenants want to keep any items.

The impact of empty properties on a neighbourhood

- 5.38 Officers were asked: *'The impact of empty properties on neighbours and community. Is there an issue?'* It was noted that the councils maintain gardens of long-standing voids. Boarding up is not needed. It was agreed by the panel this did not appear to be a big issue for these councils.

Incentives for tenants to aid the voids process

- 5.39 Officers were asked: *'What incentives for tenants are in place or under consideration, eg, leaving a property clean and clear?'* It was noted that a shorter

termination period is offered in some cases. The panel agreed with staff that properties are often left in a poor state because the outgoing tenant was vulnerable and those likely to benefit would be likely to leave the property in a good state anyway. It was agreed by the panel that a 'clean and clear incentive' would not be of much benefit.

How effective are communications with tenants regarding what to expect about to voids?

5.40 Officers were asked: '*What is the communication flow for tenants?*' The 'moving advice' leaflet for tenants was welcomed. This explained recharge policies, etc. However, this needs to be given to all tenants at the outset to help them to decide whether to make alterations.

It was noted that calls are not logged, for example if the tenant has issues with the property once they have moved in. Some records are kept on the house file but it is not possible to compile a report of queries to identify common themes and issues.

5.41 When a new property is let some officers explain what is expected when the tenant leaves and this is also in the information provided. However, some officers commented that they are inhibited from drawing attention to this as the property may not be let in the condition that is expected on vacating.

This is supported by the voids visits carried out by the panel as well as the survey of tenants by the panel, the Star Survey and complaints received, as outlined above.

5.42 The panel's telephone survey found that 10 of the 11 respondents were clear on repairing responsibilities. Comments included: 'everything explained' and 'everything gone through at sign up.' However, problems with sheds and greenhouses were mentioned, suggesting tenants believed the council are responsible for these.

5.43 10 of the 11 respondents found the Gateway Home Choice system easy to use.

5.44 The voids visits found that the information given did depend on the officer involved and some good practice was noted. Generally, communication appears to be good with tenants knowing what standards to expect regarding their new home.

6 How effective is the collection and use of feedback from tenants about voids?

- 6.1 The panel found that use of feedback was very limited and opportunities were missed to gather feedback and monitor trends to improve services. For example, a survey of new tenants, consistent logging of comments and issues arising from voids and monitoring of expressions of dissatisfaction would all help improve the service and possibly help make savings.
- 6.2 Monitoring of reasons for refusals following a viewing would also be helpful to identify issues and areas for improvement.

Are the local authorities meeting the regulator's standards?

- 6.3 The panel believe there is work to be done to ensure the councils consistently meet the HCA Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and would like to see work to improve consultation and communications regarding this. The panel would also want to include attention to 'The Home Standard' in terms of tenant choice and prioritisation of voids in relation to other repairs.

7 Conclusions and learning points from the scrutiny process

- 7.1 The intention is that the Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' Tenant Scrutiny Panel is made up of a group of tenants from each authority. For this first scrutiny the panel consists of three members, all tenants of Mid Suffolk. It is hoped that other tenants from both councils will join the panel for future topics.
- 7.2 The panel would have liked to have more opportunities to reality check by seeing more ready to let voids, and to extend the survey of tenants. They would also have liked to talk to repairs staff answering the phone and carry out some more shadowing. However with a small group and a first scrutiny it was decided to work with the time and resources available and complete the report in a reasonable time frame.
- 7.3 The panel would also have liked to compare with other councils and may do this in the future.

The panel would be pleased to see an action plan drawn up based on the recommendations that have been made.

- 7.4 This the first scrutiny carried out by the panel and they are very grateful to the officers they interviewed and shadowed. They also thank Victoria Freer, Communities Officer – Tenant Involvement and David Clarke Corporate Manager-Business Improvement (People) for their support and help during the process.

Appendix one: list of documents reviewed by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel

- The Homes and Communities Agency's consumer standards (Home Standard, Tenancy Standard, Neighbourhood and Community Standard and Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard)
- The Decent Homes Standard
- The voids handbook which sets out the policy and procedure and the void standard
- A report by V4 Services from 2014/15 to review and redesign the voids process
- A report to the Councils' Joint Scrutiny Committee held on 17 February 2016 and minutes from that meeting. The papers included performance information on re let times
- A summary of voids costs for 2014/5
- Benchmarking information from HouseMark comparing the councils performance with other similar councils
- A summary of results regarding voids from the most recent tenant's survey
- A summary of complaints re voids
- A summary of the staff structure for those staff involved in voids
- A form used by officers for a pre-termination report
- A schedule of rechargeable items to be signed by officers and outgoing tenants
- Tenant's Information 'moving advice' leaflet
- A summary of reasons for properties being refused
- Void standards from two other councils.

Appendix two: the officers interviewed

- The Corporate Manager for Housing Assessments and Allocations
- A Surveyor in Asset Management
- The Interim Corporate Manager for Responsive Repairs
- An Allocations Officer.

Appendix three: the panel's telephone questionnaire

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils Tenant Scrutiny Panel Voids Questionnaire

Introduction

My name is xxxx From Babergh /Mid Suffolk Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

I need ten minutes of your time to ask you some questions about your experience of the property you have just moved into. The aim is to hear about how empty properties are handed over from the tenant's point of view. We aim to use this to try and improve services.

	Yes	No	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very bad	Comments
What was the property like when you moved in?								
Were you informed what the council would do to the property before you moved in?								
If work was done when you moved in were you satisfied with this arrangement?								
Was the property clean?								
What about the <i>condition</i> of the decorations (not the taste!)								
Did the property condition meet your expectations?								
How would you rate the outside of the property?								
Were you informed before signing a Tenancy Agreement what your repair responsibilities would be and what the council's (landlord) responsibilities would be?								
How easy was the Gateway2Homechoice system to use? If you had no internet access, how was the bidding process for you?								
Were you given reasonable notice of the start date of your tenancy?								
We want to be sure the service is appropriate to all groups. Could you tell me if you are of pensionable age?								
Could you tell me if you have a disability?								
Any other comments (regarding voids)								

Tenant Scrutiny Panel – VOIDS review

Action Plan

No.	Recommendation from panel	Comments from officers
1	It is understood that the void lettable standard is to be reviewed and it is recommended that this is completed with tenants' involvement, taking into account the HCA standards. It needs to be established and recorded which department is responsible for managing, reviewing and monitoring the standard in the future. There needs to be agreement in terms of the standard being aimed for, where the priorities lie and how the standards compare to other similar Councils	This is welcomed and the current work taking place to bring in a new DLO for the two councils will involve tenants. Proposals have been shaped following a tenant session in November and work will take place to build upon that. We recognise that we need to do more to increase awareness of the Lettable standard amongst residents and staff.
2	That staff work with the tenants to produce target and performance information that can be understood and shared with tenants in an annual report and the tenant magazine as required in the HCA Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (HCATIES) Item 2.2.1. This should include comparisons with other similar Councils. This should be used routinely by all staff involved in the voids process so they know what they are aiming for and how the Councils are performing. It should be clear who this information is reported to, eg, which officers and which Council meetings	There are plans in place to look at the performance information collected across Housing and where, when and who this is reported too with plans to improve on the current arrangements. Currently VOID times are monitored regularly and staff receive regular updates to see what performance is like.
3	Efforts should also be made to see if improvements to the service could be made by looking at similar organisations' practices. For example to find out how many visits are made to voids and ensure best use is made of them.	Welcomed and noted for action and we will consider what opportunities there are to reduce the number of visits made to properties during the voids process. We will also review how fellow organisations are managing voids – consider best practice.
4	The Councils should invest in supporting staff to adapt to the changes and share good practice across the two Councils and teams	The review of the DLO will support this. We want to create a culture where staff are encouraged to be involved in the process to share their experiences with one another – to improve communication and learning and development opportunities
5	Tenants continue to be involved to help to monitor performance to ensure a smooth transition from the current contractor and DLO to the new DLO from April 2017 to cover both Councils (HCA item 1.2c &e). Tenants need to be kept informed of the transition and any changes made. Interim arrangements need to be made regarding supervision and cleaning.	Welcomed and noted for action
6	Guidance factors are produced so that staff feel empowered to make the right decision and proceed confidently in using their discretion. This will also ensure the needs of different tenants are taken into account. For example, elderly or disabled tenants may need properties to be ready before letting.	Want to encourage staff to feel empowered to make decisions and welcome the suggestion for something. Will consider introducing guidelines that look at age/disability/background. We will also look at the Recharge Policy to consider guidelines, awareness, decision making, when to apply judgement and also information given to residents
7	Tenants should be able to view items left by previous tenants and opt to keep and be responsible for items, unless there is a health and safety or clear maintenance issue. The tenant could be given a period of time (say a month) to decide if they want to keep the items If they are not wanted they could be removed by the Council as a low priority (as opposed to high priority prior to letting) item. The Councils to review rechargeable policies and guidance for tenants, in consultation with tenants if the above is agreed to. Also guidance for voids officers regarding factors to consider such as the condition of the left items, the outgoing tenants (or tenant relative's) situation, choice and helpfulness for incoming tenants who may be on a limited budget. This will allow voids officers to use discretion within a framework	We will pilot new ways of working which encourage efficiencies and lead to an enhanced level of customer service e.g. Assisted views during notice period of existing tenant, Pretermination and Void inspections being combined to reduce number of visits and save time.
8	The Councils give priority to ensuring voids are let in a clean condition. The Panel believes this would be cost effective as it would result in fewer refusals and a better relationship with tenants at the outset. The Panel believes that tenants are then more likely to respect the property and leave it in a good condition.	Suggest this is picked up as the DLO review moves forward.

No.	Recommendation from panel	Comments from officers
9	That the Councils introduce a new tenant survey which captures views from ingoing tenants to a new property.	Agreed and will continue previous work on introducing a tenant survey. Encourage and support staff to identify trends as a result of formal or informal correspondence – to improve service delivery We will create a report to capture the number of responsive repairs ordered within three weeks of the void process being completed
10	That consideration be given to how the results of this process can be fed into the Councils' Joint Scrutiny Committee and how the scrutiny processes can complement each other in the future.	Officers to explore with Corporate Governance Team