

**Report of:** Head of Oxford City Homes

**To:** Executive Board

**Date:** 21 April 2008 **Item No:**

**Title of Report:** Review of the Voids Pilot

### **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To feedback to the Executive Board following the formation of a working group, comprising of elected Members, tenant representatives and new tenants, to advise on the lettable standard and tenants' choice elements.

**Ward(s) affected:** All.

**Key decision:** Yes

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Patrick Murray.

**Scrutiny Responsibility:** Housing Scrutiny Committee

**Report Approved by:-**

**Portfolio holder:** Councillor Patrick Murray

**Strategic Director:** Tim Sadler

**Legal:** Jeremy King

**Finance:** David Higgins

**Policy Framework:** More housing, better housing for all – Void Works Policy..

**Recommendation(s):** The Executive Board is asked to approve the proposals made by the working group, that:-

1. the lettable standard and tenants' choice elements should be adopted as void policy from the financial year 2008/09.
2. the policy is reviewed with tenants' representatives again if the property refusal rates increase as a result of the voids standard and the approval of any minor changes arising from the review are delegated to the Executive Director – City Services, after consultation with the Portfolio holder and Group Leaders.

## Background –

1. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 2006 Housing Advisory Board advised the Strategic Director, (Housing, Health and Community) that a pilot scheme be run for a 3 month period, during which a random selection, comprising 25% of voids received, would have minimal work carried out.

At the end of this initial pilot, success of the scheme would be measured in terms of;

- Dwellings remaining lettable.
  - Reduced void turnaround.
  - Customer satisfaction levels.
2. Further to this initial pilot, Housing Scrutiny Committee on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2007 recommended Housing Advisory Board to advise the Strategic Director (Housing, Health and Community) that;
    - a. The Voids Pilot scheme be extended for a further 6 months to;
      - i. Include all void properties in that time-frame.
      - ii. Allow for a further review of the scheme after six months.
      - iii. Allow for a further independent Tenants survey to be carried out.
      - iv. Allow for steps to be undertaken to introduce the Tenants Choice features before new Tenants moved into their property, in line with the original pilot proposals.
    - b. A decision on whether to permanently adopt the policy should be taken after 6 months.
    - c. All possible steps should be taken to advise Tenants at Tenancy sign-up on how they could pay their rent.
    - d. Officers worked on proposals for incentivising Tenants to adhere to the terms of their Tenancy Agreement at the end of their Tenancy, to reduce the number of abandoned properties, with a positive (carrot) and negative (stick) approaches being investigated. The results of this work should be reported to Housing Scrutiny Committee once the 6 month pilot is completed.
  3. As a direct result of minimising the work carried out at void stage (i.e. removing the Decent Homes capital works wherever possible) the target spend per individual void was notionally set at £2,000 with an additional £500 allocated for the Tenants Choice elements. The overall void budget for financial year 2007/8 was then set against the criteria detailed in previous paragraphs for the 12 months.
  4. An additional £800,000 was set aside for those voids that contained capital budget elements that were not “fit to let”. In simplistic terms this equates to a capital reduction from the £3,375,000 spent in 2006/7 to £800,000 for the financial year 2007/8.

5. On 8<sup>th</sup> November 2007, Housing Scrutiny Committee recommended that a working Group was formed to review the Voids Policy, including;
  - Lettable Standard
  - Tenants Choice Elements
6. Oxford City Homes formed the Working Group and have had fortnightly meetings to review the Voids Policy. Initially the proposal was to have a group comprising of two tenants from the Repairs Improvement Panel. However, the eight tenants on the panel requested that they all be involved throughout the entire process, it was felt that this would have an overall positive effect. It is also worth noting that two of the tenants have recently been involved in the voids process and their experiences shaped the proposals in this report.
7. In order for the Working Group to understand the complex issues faced when processing a void, we arranged visits to several voids, which were at varying stages of the process (ie. prior to clearance, work being undertaken and ready to let). Following these visits, the Working Group discussed their views (see appendix one for a selection of quotes).
8. The Working Group considered previous guidelines for work carried out in void properties. This included both the original pilot and previous full Decent Homes work. The Group took into account void turnaround times, financial implications, the needs and aspirations of incoming tenants and the fairness issue with regard to existing tenants and their position for Decent Homes work (ie is it an equitable system whereby a new tenant to Oxford City Homes has full Decent Homes work completed whilst an existing tenant is still waiting?)
9. Another consideration was in regard to future Housing Inspections and the criteria of “a challenging void standard”. It was certainly felt by the Working Group that our proposed standard met this criteria in relation to financial and time elements.
10. The following pages document the outcomes from the discussions surrounding Tenants Choice, Voids Working Standards and other issues in regard to effective Void Management.

### **Tenants Choice**

11. Tenants representatives, Councillors and Officers reviewed the Tenants Choice Scheme and concluded that work or items up to a value of £500 was an acceptable figure for this item.
12. The group have also made recommendations that the following items be removed from Tenants Choice;

| Item                   | Reason  |
|------------------------|---|
| Wood effect bath panel | Standard bath panel fitted at void stage where appropriate. |
| Wooden toilet seat     | New toilet seat fitted at void stage (in all cases).        |

13. It was also recommended that the following items be included in the Tenants Choice Scheme, all to be included within the £500 max. allowance .

| Item   | Reason   |
|--|--|
| Rent free week(s)  | Provides new tenants an opportunity to decorate their new home prior to moving in. |
| Clothes horse / dryer  | It was felt that the previous Tenants Choice elements did not cater for flats.     |
| Kitchen swing bin  | To encourage new tenants to maintain their home in a tidy condition.               |
| Child pack comprising of child protection socket covers and cupboard locks                                 | For young families to increase safety awareness in the home.                       |
| Front door accessory pack comprising of doormat, draught excluder, post basket and set of chrome numerals. | To aesthetically improve the entrance to tenants new home.                         |
| Vacuum cleaner – Miele S4281 “voted best buy in Which?”  | To encourage new tenants to maintain their home in a tidy condition.               |

14. It was also felt that a Tenants Choice leaflet be developed (based on recommendations above & previous items still to being offered) to provide better understanding of items prior to a new tenant making their choices.

### **Voids Working Standards**

15. The Working Group considered the current work carried out in voids and compared this with the “Void Property Standards for Council Housing” leaflet (March 2006).
16. From this the group were able to produce recommendations for all elements of work within the void property;

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Clearance of property | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Where necessary all void properties to have clearance of all previous tenant’s belongings (rechargeable to previous</li> </ul> |
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|                                   | tenant).   |
| Gas check                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In all properties we will test all standard gas appliances fitted by Oxford City Homes &amp; repair or replace as required, carry out a gas pipework tightness test to ensure the system is safe.</li> <li>▪ A copy of the gas certificate (CP12) will be made available for the incoming tenant in addition to an “instruct on use” which ensures that the new tenant is familiar with the gas appliances in their new home.</li> </ul>  |
| Electric installation             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All voids will have a Periodic Inspection Report (PIR) carried out by a competent electrical surveyor. Any items deemed to present an immediate danger would be repaired or replaced prior to new tenant moving in.</li> <li>▪ If it were felt that the property required a re-wire within 12 months then the void team would complete.</li> <li>▪ We will ensure that all sockets, switches and light fittings are securely fixed.</li> <li>▪ Any other work highlighted on the PIR will be completed on a programmed basis once the new tenant has moved in.</li> </ul> |
| Lock change                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The front and rear door will have the lock changed (ideally to a 5 lever mortice).</li> <li>▪ Wherever possible a balcony door will also have a lock change carried out.</li> </ul>   |
| Heating system (gas and electric) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If no form of heating is present then Oxford City Homes will install a heating system.</li> <li>▪ If the current heating system is in working order then this will be left insitu for the new tenant.</li> </ul>  |
| Gardens                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rubbish and debris will be cleared and the garden given a rough-cut.</li> <li>▪ Greenhouses, sheds and lean-tos will be removed, except where in a safe condition (in these circumstances the Tenant will be given the option to keep them but will be asked to sign to take on responsibility for maintenance of the structure).</li> <li>▪ Fencing to any boundaries that are the responsibility of Oxford City Homes will be in good order.</li> </ul>   |

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|                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Access paths &amp; steps will be checked for safety.</li> <li>▪ Garden paths are the responsibility of the tenant.</li> </ul>  |
| Bathroom                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We will overhaul taps &amp; ensure waste pipes are not blocked.</li> <li>▪ We will replace plug &amp; chain to bath and basin and check all associated pipework for leaks</li> <li>▪ We will replace the toilet seat, check pipework for leaks and ensure the toilet cistern is flushing properly.</li> <li>▪ We will clean &amp; overhaul any Oxford City Homes fitted ventilation system.</li> <li>▪ We will overhaul an electric shower in accordance with the latest guidelines.</li> <li>▪ Floor coverings to bathrooms will be hygienic, easy to clean, slip &amp; moisture resistant.</li> </ul>  |
| Kitchen                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Kitchen units &amp; worktops will be clean, secure &amp; safe.</li> <li>▪ Provision will be made for washing machine, cooker &amp; fridge freezer where possible.</li> <li>▪ For the sink we will overhaul taps, ensure waste pipes are not blocked &amp; check pipework for leaks.</li> <li>▪ We will ensure that there is a gas and / or electric cooker connection point. If a home does not have a gas supply we will not provide this service prior to new tenant moving in.</li> <li>▪ The cooker space will have a minimum of 3 rows of splash-back tiling.</li> <li>▪ Oxford City Homes will fit connecting taps for washing machines.</li> <li>▪ We will clean &amp; overhaul any Oxford City Homes fitted ventilation system.</li> <li>▪ Floor coverings to kitchen will be hygienic, easy to clean, slip &amp; moisture resistant.</li> </ul> |
| Decoration in the property | <p>Oxford City Homes will not carry out decoration works. It is our policy that new tenants are issued with a Decorating Pack with a choice of colours. The only exceptions are;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tenants who are exempt from repairs obligations.</li> <li>▪ Tenants living in Sheltered</li> </ul>  |

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|                                  | <p>accommodation.</p> <p>In these instances Oxford City Homes will undertake re-decoration if;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Wallpaper is peeling from the walls &amp; re-sticking is impractical.</li> <li>▪ Distemper is present.</li> <li>▪ The room has areas affected by damp / mould.</li> <li>▪ The room has water or nicotine staining.</li> </ul> <p>Oxford City Homes will;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Remove patterned wallpaper.</li> </ul> <p>Oxford City Homes will not;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Remove lining paper or woodchip paper.</li> <li>▪ Over-paint colours that have been done well.</li> </ul> |
| Lofts                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Where loft insulation is lacking or substandard then new insulation will be provided.</li> </ul>  |
| Hard Wired Alarm Services        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Alarm pull cord equipment in sheltered &amp; supported accommodation will be checked to ensure it is working.</li> </ul>  |
| Fireplaces                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All electric fires will be removed.</li> <li>▪ If the fireplace is in good condition then it will be left insitu.</li> </ul>  |
| Non-standard fixtures & fittings | <p>Some tenants carry out DIY improvements to their homes such as;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fitted wardrobes.</li> <li>▪ Electric showers.</li> <li>▪ Built-in cookers.</li> <li>▪ Conservatories.</li> </ul> <p>Our surveyors will assess the maintenance &amp; health and safety issues and, where appropriate the improvement will remain as part of the property. It is important to note that, although Oxford City Homes will “gift” the item to you we will not carry out any repairs or servicing to it. The upkeep and maintenance will be your responsibility.</p>   |
| General                          | <p>In every property we will;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure that the water supply to the property is functioning correctly.</li> <li>▪ Ensure all internal doors are in good working order.</li> <li>▪ Ensure glazing is sound &amp; windows open / close properly.</li> <li>▪ Window locks are checked &amp; we will provide two keys.</li> <li>▪ All floors will be level to receive floor</li> </ul>  |

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|  | <p>coverings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All major plasterwork will be sound; however, some preparation may be required to the walls prior to decoration &amp; this would be your responsibility.</li> <li>▪ Any asbestos-based materials that are identified will be removed &amp; disposed of in accordance with current Health &amp; Safety procedures and the control of Asbestos at Work Act 2002.</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

## **Other Issues Raised and Considered by the Working Group.**

### **Communal Areas.**

17. The Working Group voiced concerns around the condition of the communal areas that were visited as part of the initial overview of voids. From 2008 / 2009 budget there is a sum of £50,000 set aside to assist with addressing this issue. Indeed, this has come about as a direct result of the Working Group recommendations.

### **Condition of Properties Returned to Oxford City Homes.**

18. Another concern raised was in relation to the sub-standard condition that properties are returned to Oxford City Homes. This is currently being addressed through the Tenancy Update Visits carried out by Estate Managers and a feedback system developed for any member of staff who visits a property where they feel the condition is sub-standard.

### **Abandoned Properties**

19. The Working Group discussed a procedure for raising awareness of abandoned properties. In order to address this issue it was felt that a number of approaches should be taken. This includes;

- A more proactive Estate Management function,
- Posters highlighting the problem and who to contact
- Articles in Tenants Newsletter.

### **Financial implications**

20. There are no additional financial implications with regard to the Tenants Choice proposed changes.

21. It is envisaged, from the recommendations made by the Working Group that there will be approximately £150,000 additional money required in order to fulfil the additional Capital elements. This includes rewiring of properties and any making good as a result of the intrusive work. *(If it were felt that the property required a re-wire within 12 months then the void*



*team would complete*). The additional money required can be found from the other capital programme budgets i.e. rewiring.

22. The criterion for decoration, associated works and garden works, was looked at by the Working Group and it was felt that additional works may be required in some circumstances. It is envisaged that there would be an extra £150,000 of Revenue money required to fulfil the proposed recommendations.
23. This extra revenue money (item 22 above) can be found from within existing void maintenance budgets, as the number of void properties has reduced by approximately 50 per annum.

### **Legal implications**

24. There are no specific legal implications to this report as statutory repairing rights remain unaffected.

### **Environmental implications**

25. There are no specific environmental issues to this report.

### **Recommendations**

26. It is proposed that the Working Groups recommendations are adopted from the financial year 2008/2009 and that tenants satisfaction is continually monitored in respect of;
  - Customer satisfaction.
  - Refusal rates.
  - Voids turnaround times and therefore total rent loss period.
27. There will be an annual review of the policy with tenants' representatives and the approval of any minor changes delegated to the Executive Director – City Services following consultation with the Portfolio holder and Group Leaders.

### **Appendices**

28. Appendix 1 - Working Group comments.

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**Background papers:** Committee reports and Void policy leaflets

## **Appendix One –**

### **Working Group Comments**

The following are quotes from the Void Working Group after an organised visit to a number of properties at various stages of the void process;

“When new tenant moves in we didn’t expect any work to be done.”

“The standard of properties from outgoing tenants vary from poor to reasonable.”

“Tight schedule to turn property around to a decent standard and re-let.”

“Majority of properties we saw had a large number of superficial issues.”

“Need human element in regards to reality of the property to re-let.”

“Cannot believe the number of voids that were received in two years.”

“We realise now that it is a mis-conception of properties sitting vacant for long periods of time.”

“People should be recharged for leaving property in sub-standard condition.”

“Its difficult to control the management of tenants expectations.”

“It appears that pre-void management is lacking from the Estate Managers.”

“An eye opener for people all around.”

“Internal and external communication needed for increasing awareness of issues around voids.”

“Some of the areas surrounding properties were in poor condition.” i.e Chillingworth.