

Meeting: Housing Sub Committee
Date: 28 September 2015
Title: Empty Homes – Moving In Standard

Author: Lee Nesbitt
Service: Housing
Directorate: Environment, Housing and Leisure
Wards affected: All

1. Purpose of Report

To inform Members of the Empty Homes Standard and indicate how further scrutiny could contribute to further improvement in this area.

Officers will attend the Committee and take Members through a presentation to provide additional context to this report.

2. Recommendation

To note the information provided and consider the role of scrutiny in this area.

3. Details

3.1 Background

Officer, Members and Tenants have made significant progress over recent years to improve the re-let performance across our empty homes. The following table demonstrates the reduction in the numbers of days taken to re-let our empty homes since 2009, along with the increase in customer satisfaction

Year	Average Days to Relet (Calendar Days)	Customer Satisfaction
2009/10	70.45	6.74
2010/11	47.86	7.65
2011/12	35.71	7.51

2012/13	32.44	7.55
2013/14	31.87	7.55
2014/15	30.41	7.72
2015/16 (To Date)	33.99	8.22

In terms of context approximately 1,200 properties become vacant and are advertised, repaired and re-let each year

In order to deliver the year on year improvements the team have carried out a number of reviews that have helped improve performance.

Further in the report we have provided some detail on the key reviews undertaken and the improvements implemented.

In early 2011 we implemented a business process and re-engineering project across the Empty Homes service to review all steps in the letting and repairs process. External consultants were brought in and we jointly looked at our process in order to improve performance, increase customer satisfaction and reduce the repair costs.

The review identified the following improvements:-

- Review of the repair standard
- Core relocation of the NTC and KNT teams
- A new Pre-termination inspection process
- Improved communication between KNT and NTC
- 100% Post Inspections carried out by KNT
- 20% random selection of post inspections carried out by NTC
- Introduction of a tenant welcome pack

3.2 Service Review

Following Scrutiny by our involved tenants a service review was undertaken by Tenants and Members in 2011 mainly because:

- There was low satisfaction /negative feedback from new tenants about their new homes
- It was a high cost service
- The relet times were still bottom quartile of comparable housing organisations

The challenge set by the group was to review the current empty home standard and the repairs phase of the Empty Homes Process and make recommendations for:

- A revised Empty Homes standard
- The best balance between cost, time and quality
- How the Empty Homes standard should be implemented and inspected before and after the repair works
- Recharges which are fair and practical
- Information given to new and transferring tenants about:
 - The Empty Homes standard
 - Planned repairs and investment work

3.2 What the group did

The Tenants and Members undertook a through review of the service that:

- Heard presentations from service Managers and interviewed key staff from both NTC and Kier Team.
- Looked at all of documentation and performance information related to the Empty Homes process and benchmarked this with others
- Look at complaints and researched how other providers delivered the service.
- Visited empty properties at different stages of the empty homes process
- Consulted with tenants who had moved into their new home to obtain feedback

3.3 What they found

The group identified 10 main areas of concern with 42 recommendations for improvement which included :-

- Improving Value for Money
- Create a new Empty Homes Standard
- Improve the level of cleanliness
- Ensure the wheelie bins are cleared
- Ensure the property is fully cleared of furniture including the loft and gardens
- A clear understanding for new tenants of any follow on repairs required
- Clear guidance on previous tenants fixtures and fittings
- Implement Incentives for tenants to leave their home in a good condition and allow access for pre-termination inspections
- Review the decorating voucher scheme
- Improve the recharge process
- Prevent tenants transferring who do not look after their home.

In addition to the above the group believed that NTC could carry out tenancy reviews to identify properties that are subject to long- term deterioration. This would help prevent properties becoming empty in a very poor condition and needing substantial repairs before the property could be relet.

40 of the 42 recommendations were approved by the previous Head of Housing and the team successfully implemented the changes

3.4 Annual Reviews

Following the large review we committed to undertake annual reviews with tenants to ensure the services continued to improve:

- In 2013 the group carried out a series of pre and post inspections along with a review of the new processes, including the new Moving In Standard.

The group confirmed that the Moving In Standard was fit for purpose and they felt that Kier were meeting the standard. Several minor changes to the standard were recommended, which were agreed to be implemented. The tenants group requested that Ward Members be included in the next review.

- In 2014 a further review of the Moving In Standard was carried out by both tenants and Ward Members who carried out a series of Pre and Post Inspections of empty properties.

The group again confirmed that the Moving In Standard was fit for purpose and they felt that Kier were still meeting this standard. Several minor changes to the standard were recommended, which were agreed to be implemented.

3.5 Challenges along the way

Since 2009 North Tyneside Council has had to change its processes and procedures in order to adhere to both changes in Government legislation and Political change.

These challenges have had a direct impact on the time taken to relet a property and have included:-

- Sept 2009 – Introduction of the new Joint Venture Company
- Jan 2010 – Introduction of choice based lettings
- May 2012 – Introduction of sub regional choice based lettings
- April 2013 – Introduction of the Welfare Reform Act (Bedroom Tax)
- April 2015 – Introduction of the new Sustainable Tenancy Project

3.6 2015 Annual review

Although during 2014/15 the average time to relet a property continued to reduce to 30.41 calendar days, concerns were raised by the group that customer satisfaction was not improving as expected. This was despite the group feeling the Moving In Standard was good and that Kier were continuing to meet it.

The group agreed rather than carry out a further series of pre-and post Inspections of empty properties they would take time to analyse the Customer Satisfaction survey result to determine the root causes of the low satisfaction.

In March 2015 the group interrogated the data which suggested that in the majority of cases the levels of low satisfaction were linked to other areas of Council services, rather than with the quality of the property at the point of allocation.

The group agreed that in a majority of cases better communication was important in improving customer satisfaction with tenants.

A series of minor changes in the way the Council communicates with tenants were implemented which included:-

- Tenants being contacted more regularly through the lettings process.
- Providing new tenants with more notice on when a property is ready to view.
- A direct telephone number for the Kier void team to report repairs within the first 4 weeks of the tenancy.
- More accurate information at the viewing with regards to follow on repairs.
- Combining the delivery of the paint pack with the gas safety inspection. In the majority of cases prior to the commencement of tenancy.

These changes have successfully resulted in an increase in customer satisfaction.

3.7 Next steps

The annual reviews are continuing and we are working with the officers, Members and Tenants to improve the levels of customer satisfaction within the empty homes process.

The team will be undertaking an exercise of contacting new tenants who didn't return a customer satisfaction survey form to enquire about their experience and how they found

the service. It is envisaged using this information to help develop a series of further improvements.

The team are also working closely with the new Sustainable Tenancy team to help to implement their new processes and procedures.

The group would welcome involvement from the Housing Sub Committee to work alongside the current working group reviewing the current customer satisfaction results, reviewing the current Moving In Standard and helping to create an improvement plan to improve performance, increase customer satisfaction and reduce cost.

4. Background Information

The following documents have been used in the compilation of this report:

- **Moving In Standard**
- **Moving Out Standard**
- **Minutes of review meetings**
- **Customer Satisfaction survey data**
- **Tenant scrutiny review report – March 2012**