

	Cabinet Member Decision Report
	Report from the Corporate Director of Resident Services
	Lead Cabinet Member Housing, Homelessness & Renters Security
Voids and Repairs Standards Consultation	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non-Key Decision
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Ryan Collymore, Head of Property Services Ryan.Collymore@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The social housing white paper has proposed to raise the standards for social housing to meet the aspirations of residents. One of the key areas in the Charter for Social Housing was “To have your voice heard by your landlord”. Therefore, this report sets out our Voids Lettable Standard and Repairs and Maintenance Policy that we wish to consult on with our residents.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Lead Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renter’s Security’s grants permission for tenant consultation on the Voids and Repair’s standards.

3.0 Detail

Cabinet Member Foreward

- 3.1 This report outlines the need to review the current voids and repairs standards officers are working to. The focus is to review these standards together with the people they impact or are likely to impact most. Officers are focussing on getting residents back to the centre of our organisation giving them an important voice in shaping the way we deliver our services.

Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

- 3.2 The Borough Plan includes two priorities specific to Housing, these are;
- Strategic Priority 1 – Prosperity and Stability in Brent
 - Strategic Priority 2 – A Cleaner, Greener Future
- 3.3 These two priorities re-affirm the Council's ambition to continue building new Council homes with a target of 1,700 by 2028 and improving the quality of housing across the private sector and in our own housing stock. Housing is also a key stakeholder in the delivery of Green Neighbourhoods both through the engagement with Registered Providers and investment in Council owned homes, specifically retrofitting poorly performing housing. It is acknowledged that whilst Housing is not specified in the remaining priorities set out in the borough plan, a safe, suitable, and secure place to call home is a foundation for Thriving Communities, The Best Start in Life, and a Healthier Brent.
- 3.4 Other strategies that are relevant to Housing include;
- Black Community Action Plan
 - Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy
 - Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy
 - Equality Strategy
 - Health and Well-being Strategy
 - Procurement Strategy
 - Local Plan
 - Inclusive Growth Strategy
- 3.5 Future Strategies due for delivery this financial year that will also provide context are the Private Housing Strategy, Tenant and Leasehold Engagement Strategy and overarching Housing Strategy.

4.0 Background

- 4.1 It is important for all social housing landlords to have agreed standards and policies and procedures. These are crucial in the management and delivery of any landlord's services. It is also essential for residents to know what standards we should be providing, in order to make an informed judgement on how we are performing as a landlord.
- 4.2 In 2017, Brent Council brought its Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) back in house. BHP had been managing the majority of housing functions for 15 years. Over that time there has been an accumulation of policies and procedures around the management of these housing functions. When BHP was brought back in house none of their policies and procedures for voids and repairs were inherited. Since 2017 these policies have not been the main driver for housing teams. The driver has been turning around the poor performance of the ALMO and providing the best service for our customers. It is also important to note that BHP had signed a long-term contract with Wates to deliver repairs and maintenance. Therefore,

the Council was not in a position to make significant changes about how the contract was delivered, including setting new standards. Now that the contract is coming to an end and the Council will be providing R&M possibly under a new model, this is the right time to consult with residents and agree what the standards should be, before the new regime starts.

- 4.3 We are now in a position where we can focus on our offer to residents, which will include setting standards for both staff and contractors in consultation with our residents. Providing more transparency with our services to allow for us to not only be held to account for poor performance but also for good performance to be recognised with meaningful customer centric Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).
- 4.4 Over the last three years Brent Housing Management (BHM) have struggled to meet their KPI targets for the re-servicing of void properties.
- 4.5 The management of keys following the termination of a tenancy has also been one of the main reasons for delays. Up until now, there has not been a consistent approach to key management, which has resulted in keys being left in various locations and getting lost. We now have a process in place where the outgoing tenant is instructed to give keys to the Duty Housing Officer (DHO) and the DHO then hands the keys directly to the Duty Lettings Coordinator (DLC). Alongside this process all actions are updated on CRM so there is a clear audit trail.
- 4.6 There have also been some problems with CRM which has exacerbated the delays. Changes to property attributes such as bed spaces has been an issue where notifications are not getting pushed through for authorisation. This causes a delay as without the correct bed spaces it is difficult to advertise the property on Locata or nominate for a client to view.
- 4.7 The cost of re-servicing voids is high when compared to other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). The high costs are due to three main factors, the specification, the condition of the property and lack of management grip with staff and contractors. It is common for the void specification to include full decorations and a new kitchen and bathroom and these items drive up the cost. The condition properties have been left in also has a big impact on costs. Rubbish left in properties and gardens, damage to internal walls and doors are also things that are commonplace when inspecting voids. This should now start to reduce as pre-termination visits are undertaken for all appropriate terminations. Contractors have previously been allowed to specify the works in a void property without the surveyor in attendance and then in some instances surveyors were agreeing works without visiting the property. Surveyors have now been instructed to carry out joint inspections with the contractors and prioritise cleaning and repairing kitchens and bathrooms rather than renewing. There is also now a cost authorisation regime in place where a surveyor can only sign off a void up to £4k. All voids above that cost need to be signed off by a team leader or service manager, depending on cost level.

5.0 Voids Standard

- 5.1 It is important to note that void properties are the first impression we give our residents of the service we provide and will continue to provide throughout their tenancy. Therefore, it is essential that these properties are re-serviced to a good standard.
- 5.2 The voids standard is a document that outlines how BHM prepares our empty homes for incoming residents. The purpose of the document is to give clear guidance to staff, contractors and residents about the standards expected. Our contractors and staff have been working without a clear standard since BHP was brought back in house. As a result, we have identified differences with costs and work specifications with both contractors and surveyors. This has resulted in a number of high cost voids particularly in 2021/22 where the voids budget was overspent.
- 5.3 Void properties are currently split into two categories, minor and major. A void is considered major if we are replacing major components, e.g. both the kitchen and bathroom. If we are not replacing major components then the void will be considered to be minor. The key to key targets for both categories are different, with the target for minor voids being 35 calendar days and the target for major voids 72 calendar days.

6.0 Voids budget

- 6.1 BHM re-service approximately 300-350 minor and major voids per year. In 2021/22, 66% of voids were major. This can be traced back to a lack of previous investment in the housing stock but also a high standard of specification of works to re-service voids.
- 6.2 The budget was increased in 22/23, which allowed BHM to come in budget. The budget allocation for 2023/24 is £3m in total for major and minor void repairs. This works out on average £9,231 per property for an assumed 325 voids for the year.

7.0 Voids performance

- 7.1 The voids process has three stages;
- 7.1.1 Stage 1: Tenancy end date through to keys collected by the Voids and Lettings team.
 - 7.1.2 Stage 2: Keys collected by the Voids and Lettings team through to the handover date where void works are completed.
 - 7.1.3 Stage 3: Handover date through to the tenancy start date, which includes the property being advertised, nominated to and the tenancy signed and set up on the system.

7.2 BHM is not performing as we should in all three stages, very rarely hitting the individual stage targets. However, it is important to note that we hardly receive any complaints regarding the quality of our void properties. Therefore, we believe we are providing homes that people feel comfortable enough to live in with their families.

8.0 Void Lettable Standard

8.1 The draft lettable standard informs residents, staff and contractors of the things we should do in every void property whether major or minor. The lettable standard covers all health and safety aspects of a void and ensures that Brent Council adheres to its landlord obligations when providing a new home. The Lettable Standard ensures that BHM provides a safe good quality home for new tenants ensuring that the Council meets its landlord obligations. Under this standard, kitchens and bathrooms will be replaced if they are beyond economical repair and/or have under five year's serviceable life. Walls and ceilings are left ready for decoration, floor coverings are provided to kitchens and bathrooms.

8.2 In addition to the works the Council is obligated to undertake, there are other works that can be done in a void such as decorating, providing carpets and replacing kitchen and bathrooms. All of these additions add time and cost to re-servicing a void but are also of great importance to residents when viewing a property and can be the difference between accepting and declining an offer of a new home. Where we have properties that are "harder to let" we often include one or more additions to ensure the property is accepted by prospective tenants.

8.3 Whilst currently there is not a consistent approach to void specification some of the changes for what we do now and what we will do under the new lettable standard are outlined in the table below:

Current Standard	New Standard
Full decoration	Ceiling and walls left ready for decoration
Adhoc Kitchen and bathroom renewals	Renew kitchens and bathroom if they are due to be replaced within 5 years
Tiles around bath up to ceiling height	300mm of tiles around bath

9.0 Repairs and Maintenance

9.1 Repairs and Maintenance is an essential function provided by the Council for our residents. How well our service performs in repairs and maintenance has a significant impact on how residents view housing services as a whole. In fact, following the 2018 STAR, satisfaction with our responsive repairs service was one of the biggest drivers of overall satisfaction with Brent Council as a landlord.

9.2 The Repairs and Maintenance Policy outlines the services BHM should provide for our residents to ensure that their homes are safe and well maintained. It also highlights resident responsibilities under the terms of their tenancy

agreements. Including providing access undertake repairs and safety inspections for Gas, Fire and Electrical safety checks.

- 9.3 The Policy links to various other policies and procedures covering maintenance to our properties and provides guidance to officers on the service standards we aim to provide for our residents. Currently officers struggle to be clear with residents about services we will and won't provide. The Policy will empower officers to confidently make decisions and be able to signpost residents to documentation that support those decision. Without a Policy there are delays in making decisions and that indecision usually generates complaints.

10.0 Consultation

- 10.1 Under the Section 3 of Local Government Act 1999, the authority must consult with representatives of persons who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority. It is proposed that we consult with various stakeholders, which will include residents, tenants and resident associations and members. There will be three main methods of consultation:

- Online survey
- Focus group
- Consultation portal

- 10.2 BHM will also utilise key buildings such as libraries and main foyer in civic centre to publicize details of the proposal and obtain feedback. The above methods will be used to discuss the standards and the wider impacts for all stakeholders. Following the consultation we will bring a paper to Cabinet, for agreement, following which agreed adjustments will be made to both standards in conjunction with stakeholders.

11.0 Financial Considerations

- 11.1 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget allocation in 2023/24 is £3m for void related repairs. This works out on average £9,231 per property for an assumed 325 voids for the year.
- 11.2 Void turnaround will be impacted by the time it takes to complete repairs plus internal BHM process. Void durations will result in reduced rental income being generated in order to pay for investment in council homes. For example, if all voids turnaround was 72 days for 325 voids, rent loss for the year is estimated at £0.45m based on average rent charges in 2023/24 of £133.42 per week. Budgeted rent loss set for the year is aligned with the above example. Void turnaround that exceeds performance target will increase the estimated rent loss for the year, leading to budget pressures.
- 11.3 Increases in number of major voids or additional enhancements to void works specification could result in budget pressures, therefore void standards will require alignment with affordability.

11.4 Uncertainties in the economic environment and cost inflationary uplifts in the construction industry could potentially impact future repairs budgets, this will be managed as part of the budget setting and monitoring process.

12.0 Legal Considerations

12.1 The council has an obligation to keep its housing stock in repair and in good condition in order to be able to meet its statutory obligation to those persons to whom it owes a duty to provide housing accommodation (Part 2 of the Housing Act 1985; section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 and Part V11 Housing Act 1996).

12.2 The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), under its Home Standard, expects providers of social housing to comply with all applicable statutory requirements to ensure the health and safety of tenants.

12.3 Current statutory requirements include:

- Sections 8-10 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 (“LTA 1985”) introduced by the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 designed to ensure that all rented accommodation is fit for human habitation and to strengthen tenants’ means of redress against landlords who do not fulfil their legal obligations to keep their properties safe.
- Section 11 LTA 1985 which places a legal obligation on landlord to ensure that the structure and exterior of residential properties are kept in repair; and that the installations for the supply of water, gas, electricity, sanitation, space heating and heating water are kept in repair and proper working order.
- The Housing Health and Safety Rating System assessment system, introduced via Part 1, Chapter 1 of the Housing Act 2004, used to ensure that properties are free from hazards
- Section 4 of the Defective Premises Act 1972, which places a duty on the landlord to take reasonable care to ensure that all people who could reasonably be affected by “relevant defects” in the state of the property are reasonably safe from personal injury or damage to their property resulting from the defects.

12.4 The policy should be compliant with the mandatory Decent Homes Standard and the consumer Home Standard set out by the Regulator of Social Housing. This legislation and standards cover what social landlords should be achieving in all their properties in respect of decency, modernisation, repair and safety.

12.5 The Social Housing (Regulation) Bill 2022-2023 is currently going through Parliament, this will impact the regulatory framework for social housing and introduces a new proactive, consumer regulation regime focussed on meeting the needs of tenants. One aim of the legislation and regime is to ensure that providers of social housing, such as the Council, keep its properties and estates safe and clean.

- 12.6 These new standards are there to ensure people feel safe and secure in their homes, can get problems fixed before they spiral out of control, and see exactly how good their landlord is performing giving tenants a stronger voice.
- 12.7 As part of the new consumer regulation regime, from April 2023, the RSH is introducing a series of 22 mandatory Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) creating a new system for assessing how well social housing landlords in England are doing at providing good quality homes and services. These measure include those applicable directly to building safety as well as those based on tenant perception surveys setting out tenants views on the council's performance which will include transferring or new tenants coming into a previously void property.

13.0 Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

- 13.1 Pursuant to s149 Equality Act 2010 (the "Public Sector Equality Duty"), the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
 - (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it,
- 13.2 The Public Sector Equality Duty covers the following nine protected characteristics: age, disability, marriage and civil partnership, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 13.3 Having due regard involves the need to enquire into whether and how a proposed decision disproportionately affects people with a protected characteristic and the need to consider taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it. This includes removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- 13.4 There is no prescribed manner in which the council must exercise its public sector equality duty but having an adequate evidence base for its decision is necessary.
- 13.5 During consultation BHM will ensure that no group are disadvantaged by ensuring the methods applied are accessible to all, including where English is not the first language and/or where residents are blind or partially sighted.

14.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

- 14.1 As part of the tender process we will explore the idea of requesting all contractor vehicles are electric or hybrid to reduce emissions whilst they travel around the borough. Handyperson's vehicles will all be electric.

14.2 The above will help the Council's environmental objectives and climate emergency strategy.

15.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

15.1 None

16.0 Communication Considerations

16.1 As highlighted in the report there is likely to be changes in the way services are provided for residents, therefore a detailed consultation plan will be developed to gather the views of existing tenants (more than a year), tenants waiting to be housed and new tenants in the first year of their tenancy.

Report sign off:

PETER GADSDON
Corporate Director, Resident Services