

Voids Management Update

Committee name	Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee
Officer reporting	Rod Smith – Residents Services
Papers with report	Appendix 1 – Void to let case study examples
Ward	All

HEADLINES

The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an understanding of the empty property [known as ‘void property’] management process, the contributions made by various service teams, the interfaces in the ‘end to end process’ and performance associated with this core landlord function.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

- 1. Notes the content of this report including the work which has been undertaken and the work which is ongoing to make best use of the Council’s available housing stock and to mitigate the extent of rent loss.**

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Void Property Management as a landlord function

Empty property management is a core landlord function sitting alongside other key landlord functions such as undertaking repairs and collecting the rent due. The end to end void management process is not vested in one single service team but spans across several teams involving ‘hand-offs’ at key stages of the process. An effective end to end process with robust management oversight is fundamental in ensuring that the Council reduces the total number of void properties at any one time and the total period individual properties are void. A void property represents a loss of income to the Council, measured by weekly rent loss. At the same time a household is denied access to a unit of social housing. This household could be in severely overcrowded and or sub-standard accommodation or could be a homeless household occupying a high cost unit of temporary accommodation.

Overview and definition of a void

A void property exists only where the tenancy and rent account has been formally closed. A property could exist where there is no lawful tenant in occupation but there is a live account in place regarding ‘use and occupation charges’ due from the occupier. A tenant may have passed away or abandoned a property but until such time as the tenancy is lawfully ended [normally via issue of a Notice to Quit] the rent account cannot be closed. The property, although unoccupied, will only be void once due process has been followed and the tenancy and rent account closed. There are several service teams involved in the end to end void property management process. Some of the teams have a dominant role to play such as the Void Repairs Team whilst others have a more minor but nonetheless important part to play such as the Housing Revenues &

Charges Team. A summary of the teams and their involvement in the process is set out in Table 1 below:

Table 1 – Service Teams involved in the Void Management process

Service area	Summary Responsibilities
Lettings Team	<p>Is responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ending the previous tenancy. • Advertising the property and shortlisting potential tenants. • Arranging viewings. • Signing-up new tenants and ensuring they have received all the required statutory paperwork.
Void Repairs Team	<p>Ensures the following is undertaken before any void property is re-let:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It shall be in a clean and safe condition • It will comply with government standards • It will be presented in a good condition. • All statutory safety checks are confirmed and recorded on council systems
Counter Fraud Team	<p>Is responsible for gathering information and carrying out visits as part of the verification check. They provide a level of quality assurance prior to the prospective tenant securing a social housing property.</p>
Tenancy Management Team	<p>Is responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formally ending all tenancies where there is no tenant in occupation and passing vacant possession to the Lettings Team. • Following up all cases where a forthcoming void notification [either following a death or planned move] does not result in the keys coming forward. • Providing a viewings service to prospective tenants.
Contact Centre	<p>The first point of contact for tenants, relatives / next of kin regarding any empty property or a property which is due to become empty.</p>
Resettlement Team	<p>Is responsible for all properties used as temporary accommodation including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ending the previous tenancy • Signing-up new tenants and ensuring they have received all the required statutory paperwork.
Housing Revenues & Charges Team	<p>Are responsible for setting up a new rent account [for a new letting] or terminating an existing rent account [after the ending of a tenancy] following formal notification that the Lettings Team have created or terminated a tenancy.</p>

Business Performance Team	Provide routine and bespoke activity and performance information to Landlord Board, managers and the Voids Management Group to support effective performance management of key stages of the end to end voids process.
Voids Management Group	A cross service group of managers who meet on a fortnightly basis to review performance information and address barriers to service delivery and performance. The group's terms of reference are to: <i>'Take collective ownership for the end to end void property process, to drive improvements in performance, embed good practice and make the best use of the Council's limited supply of social housing'</i>

Summary of key processes and interfaces

Tenancy termination

The Council are notified in a variety of different ways that a property may become empty or is empty. It is the role of the notified officer to ensure this information is shared with all relevant teams so forward planning can be carried out prior to the property being returned by the current tenant or next of kin. This includes planning a pre-vacation inspection and advertising the property to create a shortlist of potential tenants.

When the property has become vacant and the keys have been returned the Lettings Team ensure systems are updated to bring the tenancy and the rent account to an end and trigger the Void Repairs Team to start required works so that the property meets the Council's 'minimum lettable standard'.

Void property inspection and repairs

The overriding objective is that the property should be safe in terms of the health and safety of the future occupants. All repairs relating to health and safety are carried out prior to occupation. In accordance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating Systems (HHSRS) contained within the Housing Act 2004, the property should be free from:

"Any deficiency that might give rise to a hazard which interferes with or puts at risk the health or safety or even the lives of the occupants."

Void property inspections should specifically address the following hazards (as categorised within HHSRS) before the property is let:

- Physiological (damp and mould growth, excess cold/heat)
- Pollutants (asbestos, carbon monoxide)
- Psychological (security, lighting)
- Hygiene (pests, food safety, sanitation, water supply, drainage)
- Protection against accidents (falls, electrical hazards, fire)

The Void Property Clerk of Works will complete a Health and Safety Checklist for each void as well as taking and recording photographic evidence of the void during the void inspection and ensure that all Class 1 Hazards are addressed before occupation.

Electrical, gas and water/waste services are tested, and gas safety certificates and NICEIC electrical inspection certificates will be provided.

- All systems for heating and hot water will receive standard checks for safety and effectiveness and
- Essential repairs to services are completed prior to letting
- All flues are checked
- All landlords' gas appliances will receive an annual gas safety inspection (once connection arranged by the tenant).

All void properties will also have an asbestos survey carried out in line with the Asbestos Management Plan (AMP). Where either Amosite or Crocidolite is identified or any damaged asbestos of any kind, removal will be arranged as required by the AMP.

Completion of the void property inspection will lead to the following actions being undertaken:

- The Void Property Inspection Sheet will be updated and passed to the Voids Coordinator for loading onto Oneserve.
- The Health and Safety Check will be undertaken
- All repairs required prior to occupation will be raised (and marked as rechargeable to the former tenant where appropriate)
- All remedial work carried out should be documented (including before and after photos) and retained for future reference.
- All post-let work should be recorded on the habitable certificate and orders raised (on assess). Voids Coordinator/Repairs Planners will make appointments with the tenant on sign up.

All void work will be completed in line with the approved Schedule of Rates.

At the void property inspection major works voids (classified in line with the Homes and Communities Agency definition) will be identified and marked on Oneserve. Where the Void Clerk of Works suspects structural repairs are required a Structural Engineer will be consulted.

Strategic Voids (e.g. isolated properties, properties with potential for extension or those where significant investment is required) will be identified in line with the Asset Management Strategy and passed to the Investment Team for further appraisal. The void property path on Northgate will be updated accordingly.

The Voids Team are currently being impacted by the proportion of new voids coming through which fall outside of the definition of a 'standard' or routine void due to the extent of work required before reletting. Approximately 50% of the Council's managed stock requires either a new kitchen, bathroom or other type of capital work. During 2019/20 the Void Repairs Team completed 265 standard voids compared with 288 major works voids. In the period April 2020 to mid-December 2020 the team has completed 343 voids. Of these 197 were standard void refurbishments compared with 146 major refurbishment voids. The quality of void properties coming forward and into the voids process directly impacts on the length of time a void property remains with the Void Repairs Team before it can be passed back to the Lettings Team for re-let. The average standard refurbishment cost for a void is £2,126.27 whereas the average Non decent voids refurbishment cost £5,257.28 per property.

Advertising and short-listing

The Council participates in a choice-based lettings scheme called Locata. Properties are

advertised on Locata for a week to allow all suitable applicants to express an interest or “bid” for a property. Once the bidding has closed a shortlist will be created prioritising applicants first by banding and then length of time in that band.

Once the shortlist is created Lettings Officers will request verification checks for the applicants at the top of the shortlist. The verification process is undertaken by the Counter Fraud team in line with the Social Housing Allocation Policy and represents a final check to ensure that, if successful, the applicant is still eligible for the property in question.

Within the Social Housing Allocations Policy there is scope for properties to be let outside of choice-based lettings in certain prescribed circumstances. This includes existing social housing tenants that are fleeing domestic abuse or homeless households who have been in temporary accommodation for longer than the average period. By directly allocating a property to a household we can provide a fast response to a specific housing need. By directly allocating to tenants fleeing domestic abuse we can move vulnerable households into safe and secure accommodation and minimise risk. By directly allocating to homeless households we can fulfil our housing duty to the applicant by making one offer of suitable accommodation and can discharge the ongoing duty if the household does not accept the accommodation.

In order to determine which properties are to be matched with direct allocations the Lettings Team ringfence properties where specific actions are undertaken to make them available for re-let. This includes property recovered due to fraud activity and those that are released due to under occupiers downsizing.

As part of the Council’s response to Covid-19, and in line with Government issued guidance, the Lettings Team stopped advertising and letting properties through choice-based lettings between March 2020 and August 2020. Direct allocations were used to ensure only essential moves continued throughout this period and to ensure void properties continued to be let.

Verification and lettings

The verification checks are in place to ensure all the information taken at the start of the application remains the same and the applicant meets the criteria for an offer of social housing. These checks are carried out by the Counter Fraud Team who review documents, carry out rent, Council Tax and ASB checks. A proportion also involve visiting properties to confirm residency and living arrangements. Once these checks are completed and outcomes notified an assessment is carried out to determine if the client still meets the requirements for the specific property. This includes property which is purpose built or adapted for people with disabilities.

Viewings

Accompanied viewings are held with prospective tenants once the property is returned to the Lettings team. Viewings are held with up to three prospective tenants and are accompanied by a Viewings Officer who can answer any questions the prospective tenant may have and record their decision, including any refusal reasons or feedback.

Multiple viewings are undertaken to reduce the turnaround time for properties. Some residents who are invited to viewings do not attend and some will refuse the property despite bidding for it. By inviting multiple applicants to view properties within allotted timeslots the Council can minimise void turnaround times and make more efficient use of Viewing Officer time.

The viewing outcomes are passed back to the Lettings team. This will work with the applicant at

the top of the short-list who accepted the property and progress the case to tenancy sign-up. If no applicant accepts the property it will be necessary to bring forward further applicants from the short-list or re-advertise if the short-list has been exhausted. This process can be repeated on several occasions until the property is let. Transparency is provided through Locata in that unsuccessful bidders can see specific details regarding the successful applicant. This includes their banding and priority award date.

The reasons for refusals are recorded on Locata and any appropriate sanctions are applied. This could include discharge of duty for unreasonable refusals for homeless applicants who have been issued a final offer letter or suspension on Locata for those that have refused three reasonable offers within a six-month timeframe.

The Voids Management Group

The Voids Management Group was established in April 2019 with the specific aim of bringing together key managers involved in the end to end voids process, improving the quality and range of management information to support scrutiny of the process and to increase overall performance. At the time the Group was established there were 220 void properties in management and teams were generally progressing the voids process via several sequential steps as reflected in Appendix 3 rather than undertaking key stages of the process in parallel.

One of the early objectives of the Group was to move towards 'parallel working' and bring forward a weekly data set which improved 'ownership' and 'accountability' for all void properties. The weekly data set places all void properties into one of three distinct groups:

- **Voids with Lettings** – these are properties which are 'ready to let' but a tenancy agreement has yet to be signed
- **Voids with Void Repairs** – these are properties which are not yet ready to let in that they require the completion of works to bring them up to the Council's 'minimum lettable standard'
- **Voids which are unavailable to let** – these include a range of properties which fall outside the definition of routine voids re-servicing and include major works voids e.g. due to fire damage or underpinning where the property is not habitable in its current condition and properties which the Council has elected not to progress with the re-let process. This could include; properties which are undergoing feasibility surveys in relation to possible conversion, change of use or extension, properties which are being considered for disposal or redevelopment and properties undergoing invasive investigation in relation to fire safety. The common theme across this group is the long- term nature of the void and that, in the interim, it is not possible or appropriate for the property to be let.

In addition to this basic division of voids the weekly data set includes:

- The full void pathway for every void let which includes the date each stage of the void is reached
- Details of all Extra Care voids which are allocated by Adult Social Care once the property is 'ready to let'
- Details of all 'forthcoming voids' i.e. properties where the Council has been given notice that the property will be coming available at a future date
- A breakdown of voids with the Lettings Team by property type
- Weekly rent loss for each group of voids
- Details of properties which are 'not available to let' and have no current expected return

date

This basic approach to grouping voids along with other aspects of the data set enabled managers to;

- Identify 'clusters' of properties which may require alternative approaches to secure re-letting
- Establish which part of the process was adding time to the overall end to end process and why
- Focus on the interfaces and interrelationships between voids moving from one group to another and where delays were occurring
- Develop target timeframes for individual stages of the void process as well as the overall targets
- Develop a performance dashboard and
- Determine 'at a glance' where resources may need to be allocated

Changes delivered since 2019

Quality assurance frameworks have been developed and put in place to pick up any anomalies at the earliest point in the process and to break the cycle of any repeat performance issues.

A tracking system has been developed and implemented between the Void Repairs Team and the Lettings Team. This system, for every void which is with Repairs, notifies the Lettings Team of the expected return date and any changes to the expected return date. Through close monitoring the Lettings Team use the date to forward plan key parts of their process including the verification of applicants and setting up viewings. It also enables Lettings Officers to chase any outstanding information or verifications to ensure all checks are completed by the time the works are completed and the property is ready to let.

A new service level agreement has been developed and agreed between Counter Fraud and Housing Services to create flexibility with verification turnaround times. In summary terms the performance expectation moved away from a blanket target time to a more targeted approach depending on what stage of the process the void is at. There is no gain in receiving verifications for applicants on a property which will not be ready to let for two weeks but real gains can be made on receiving verifications back when a property will be ready to let and a viewing has been set up with two days' notice.

Using feedback from the Viewings Officers and the dedicated Downsizing Officer within the Lettings Team, an enhanced void standard was developed and used to address high refusal rates on properties which were identified as 'harder to let'. These were principally age restricted bungalows for older people. This targeted approach produced positive outcomes and the increased void property spend was offset by reduced rent loss.

A pilot initiative has been undertaken using one of the two void repair contractors in relation to viewings whilst void repair works are in progress. This pilot has demonstrated a real improvement in void turnaround times once the property is ready to let and work is ongoing in terms of identifying properties which are suitable to view using this approach.

The Void Repairs Service undertook a retendering process in relation to its void repairs contract in the lead up to the expiry of the existing term contractor on 2nd April 2020. The tender took into consideration all aspects of a modern Void Repair Service and was geared toward a one stop shop for works of a varied nature and value, reducing the need to employ multiple contractors to

complete a single void. The tender recommended the use of two contractors to undertake void property repairs divided into North and South areas. This ensured that void properties are returned as quickly and effectively as possible and ensures that cover could be provided by one contractor if the other one failed or was unable to cope with the volume of new voids coming through. Evidence to date has demonstrated the real value of having two contractors working in parallel but able to provide mutual support.

Current service improvement objectives

Based upon progress to date it is planned to accelerate and roll out the approach to viewings whilst works are in progress to help reduce overall void to let times. The pilot approach has been restricted to family sized accommodation.

The verifications process is under review to establish if the time between verification visits can be increased whilst still maintaining the same level of assurance. This would ensure a larger pool of applicants who were verified at any one time. In addition, a targeted approach to verifications is actively being considered by way of a rolling program of visits to applicants in priority bands. This would mean that applicants would always have up to date visits and that only desktop checks would need to be completed at offer stage. This would support reduced void turnaround times and would positively impact where there is a need to progress to a second viewing.

Work is ongoing with colleagues in Adult Social Care to streamline processes associated with the reletting of Extra Care Voids and to align working practices to those followed across Housing Services. This includes reviewing what additional support can be put in place to assist residents looking to move into Extra Care.

New joint operational practice notes are being drafted to share with teams working across the void management process to ensure consistency and clarity of approach as well as embedding good practice more widely. This practice note will embed timescales and KPI's for each part of the process on a formal basis.

It is recognised that gains can be made from accelerating the number of 'pre-vacation inspections' undertaken and undertaking works prior to the property being void. Progressing this workstream has presented challenges since the onset of the pandemic but nonetheless remains a service development objective.

In line with government proposals to introduce a new 'Decent Homes Standard' it is also appropriate for the Council to review its approach to planned works programmes to maximise the potential to bring properties up to standard and in turn reduce the number of major works voids. Evidence also suggests that effective engagement with tenants during the lifetime of the tenancy to address property neglect, misuse and hoarding can have the potential to reduce the extent of works of repair and clearance at the end of a tenancy which in turn can positively impact upon relet times. A pilot approach is currently underway using a schedule of 130 properties where there has been no tenancy change for at least 10 years and a limited repair history.

Implications on related Council policies

A role of the Policy Overview Committees is to make recommendations on service changes and improvements to the Cabinet who are responsible for the Council's policy and direction.

How this report benefits Hillingdon residents

None at this stage, pending any findings by the Committee and any recommendations forwarded to Cabinet.

Financial Implications

None at this stage.

Legal Implications

None at this stage.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

Appendix 1 – Void to let case study examples

The Coppice - Property was affected by fire damaged and remained empty since 27th January 2020. A decision was made that the project should be carried out by Void Repairs. The property was inspected 5th June 2020 and works commenced on 17th June 2020. The project was completed on 22nd October 2020 and returned to lettings within 20 weeks from receiving the keys. Comparative projects have usually taken a minimum of 6 months to complete, this process saved both time and reduced overall rent loss to the Council.

Before





After





Bungalow – Hayes – An incident occurred on 6th November 2020 where the property was struck by a vehicle during the night breaking through the brickwork of the bedroom of the property. As the elderly resident was not able to stay at the property the property was issued to Void Repairs. The property was inspected on 9th November 2020 and works commenced on 17th November 2020. Void Repairs assisted the elderly resident with moving their belongings to temporary accommodation by utilising term contractors. Refurbishment works internally have been completed with replacement doors and windows to the front of the property scheduled to be installed in early January 2021.

Before



After



Fairlie House - Property was passed to Void Repairs on 19th August 2020, the inspector identified that the deceased resident was hoarding various items and the flat required extensive refurbishment including a new kitchen and bathroom to bring it to a lettable standard. Works commenced on 8th September 2020 following a large clearance of items. Works were completed on 5th October 2020.

Before



After

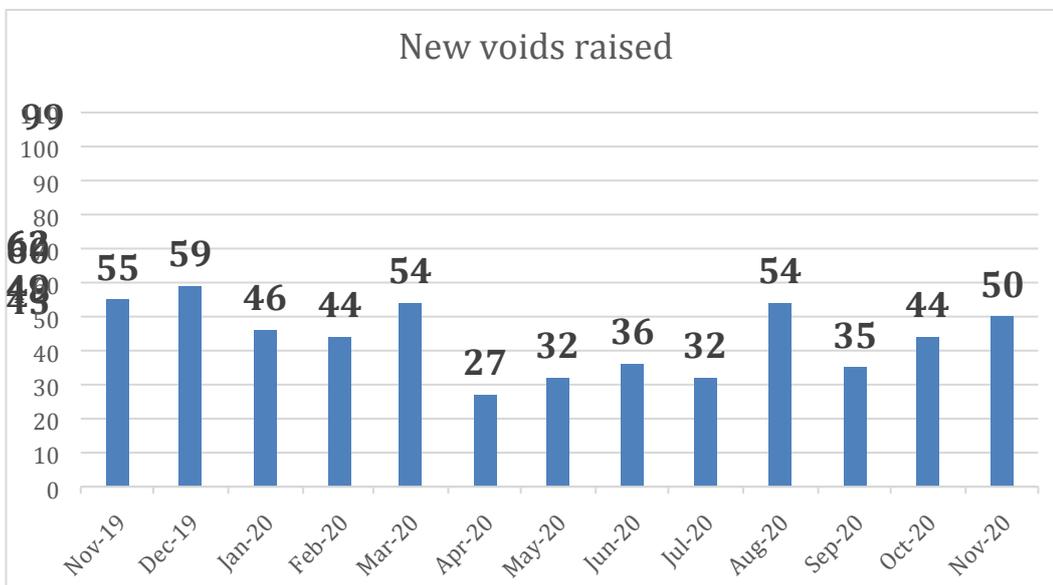


Ash Grove – This property was returned to the Council on 23rd November 2020 whilst it was still within the notice period which did not end until 30th November 2020. Works were able to be undertaken prior to the end of the tenancy and this had an impact on the overall turnaround time of the property with the works being completed on 9 December 2020 and the tenant signing that week for the property. In all this property was vacant for only 14 days.

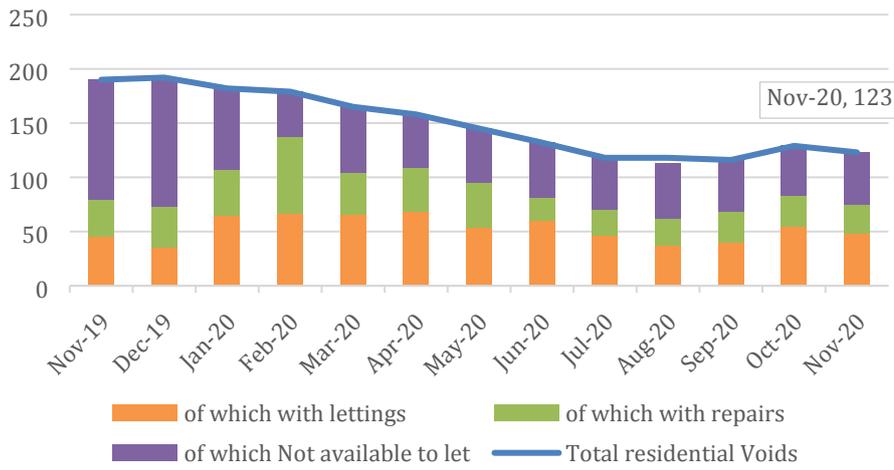
Campbell Close – This property was part of our pilot for viewings whilst works are in progress. The property became vacant on 26th October 2020. The prospective tenant viewed and accepted the property on 4 November 2020 and all verification checks were completed prior to the works being completed on 9 November 2020. This allowed for the resident to sign the tenancy agreement the day after the works were completed. This property was vacant for just 21 days.

Churchfield Close – This property was a bungalow that was identified as a possible candidate for the minimum lettable standard plus. The incoming tenant was an existing social housing tenant who was over the age of 55 and was suffering with medical conditions that meant he was struggling to maintain a larger property and garden along with the caring responsibilities for his wife. By providing additional works such as decoration in the property the couple were able to downsize from their two-bedroom property into a one bedroom.

Appendix 2 – Voids Performance information – November 2019 to November 2020



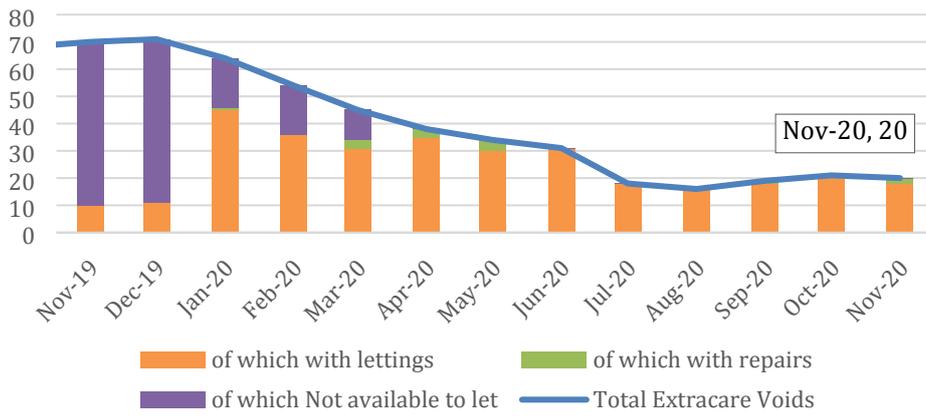
All Residential Voids



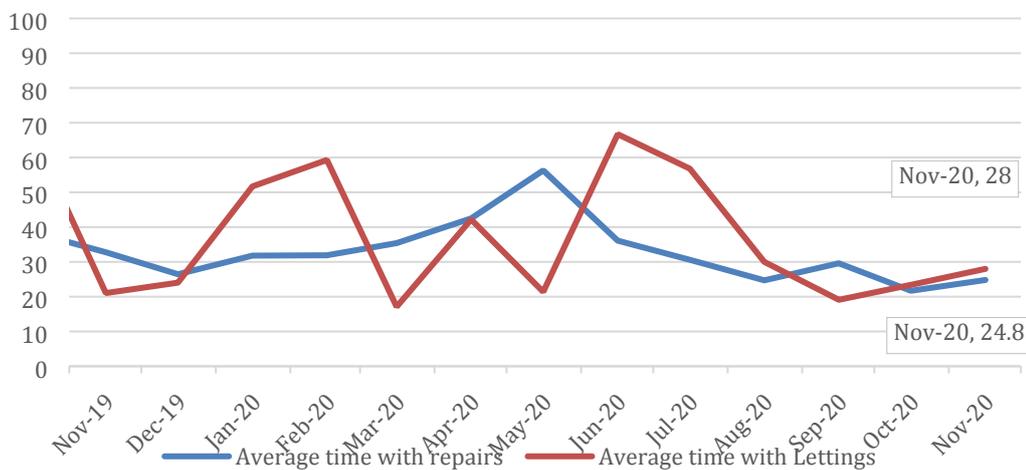
Sheltered Voids



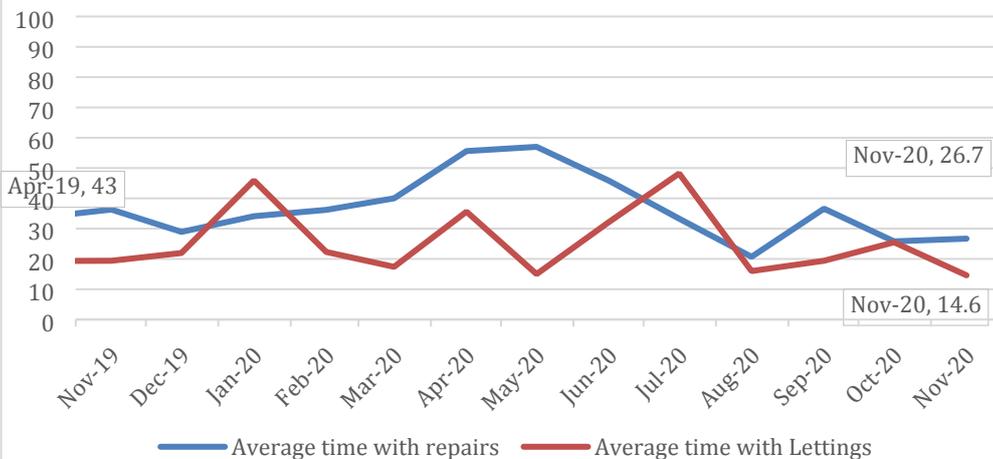
Extracare Voids



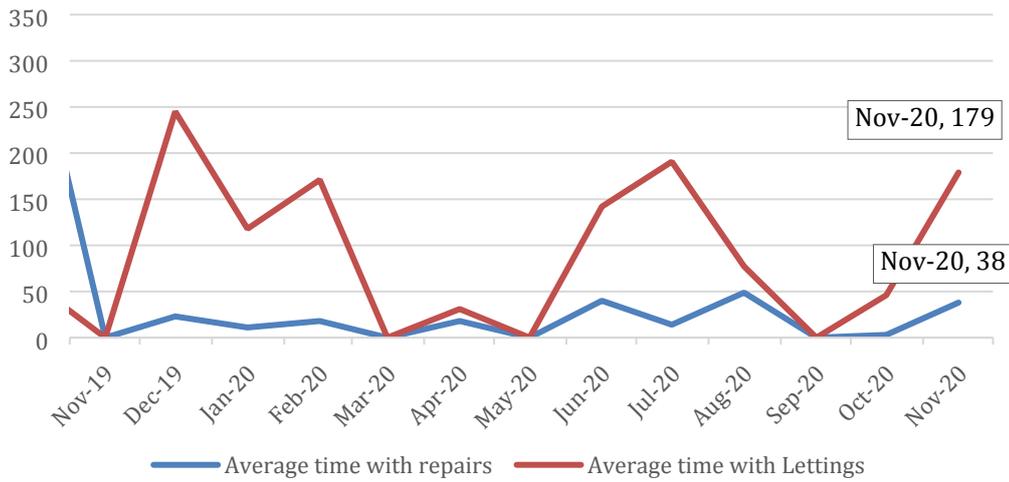
Void to Let Pathway All Properties



General Needs Pathway



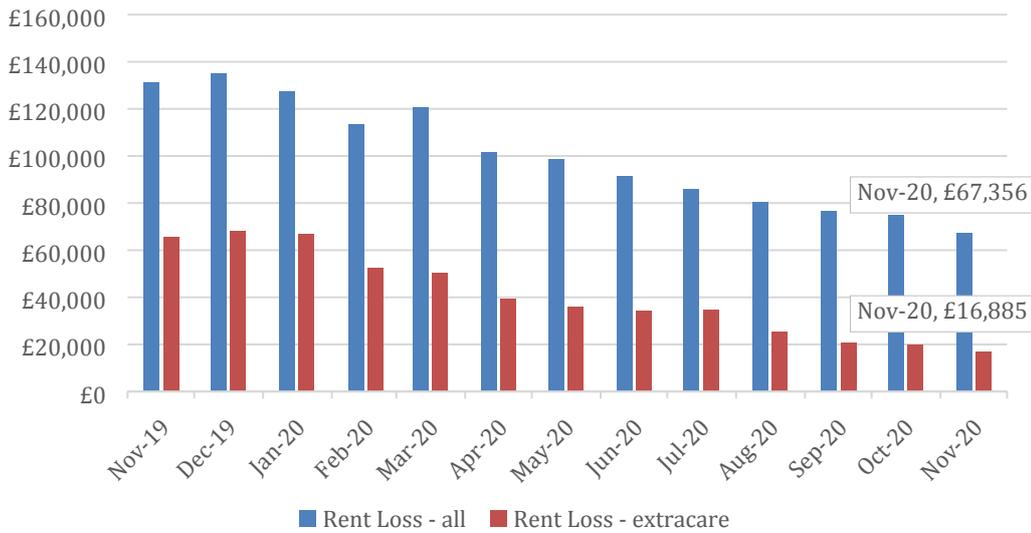
Extra Care Pathway



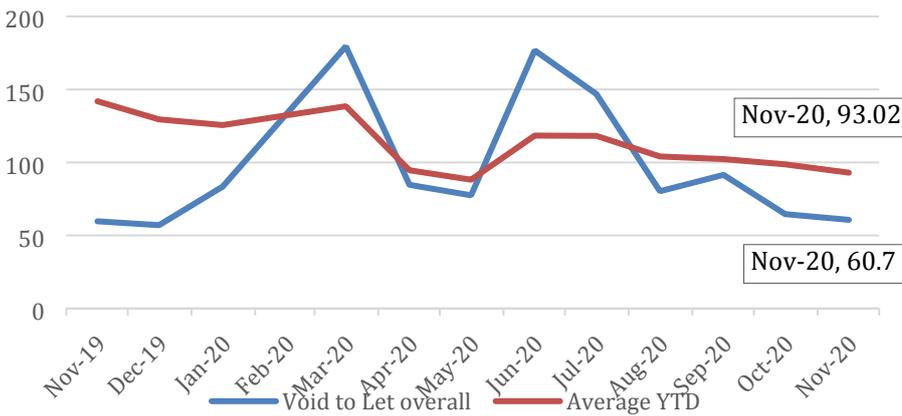
Let at first viewing



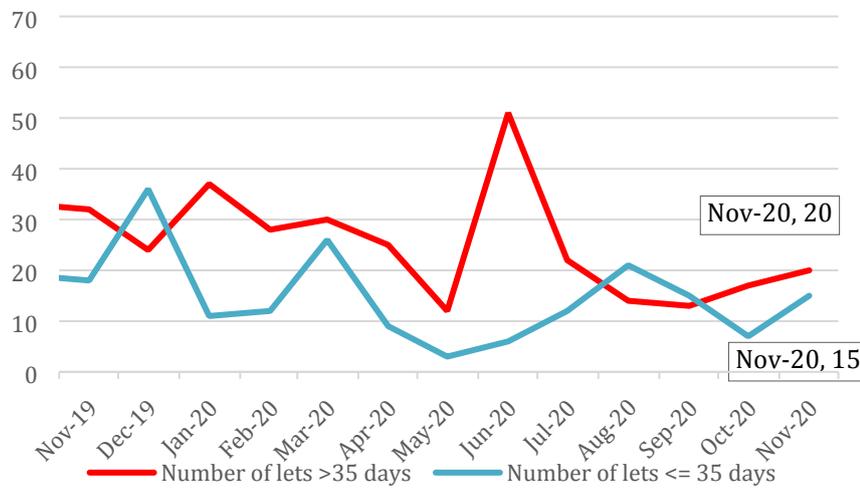
Void rent loss - Monthly - in year



Overall Void to Let timeline



Lets against 35 day target



	Tenant	Repairs	Lettings															
Appendix 3 – Sequential and parallel voids processing																		
Time Frame Void to Let																		
Void Path	Wk -4	Wk -3	Wk -2	Wk -1	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 10	Wk 11	Wk 12	Wk 13	Wk 14+
Notice																		
Repairs - Void Inspection				1.50%	98.50%													
Repairs - Work Ordered					65%	22%	8%	2%	1%	2%								
Repairs - Work Completed					3%	23%	38%	15%	10%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	
Allocations - Nomination																		
Allocations - Viewing					3%	2%	11%	16%	10%	9%	11%	5%	5%	5%	2%	2%	2%	17%
Allocations - Verification					5%	7%	9%	12%	12%	9%	6%	6%	5%	4%	2%	2%	2%	19%
Allocations - Signup					3%	6%	10%	12%	12%	10%	6%	7%	4%	4%	3%	2%	1%	21%
Allocations - Tenancy Start					13%	3%	2%	2%	6%	7%	11%	8%	7%	6%	4%	3%	4%	25%
2018_19 Performance = Week 14																		

Time Frame Void to Let									
Void Path	Wk -4	Wk -3	Wk -2	Wk -1	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5
Notice									
Repairs - Void Inspection									
Repairs - Work Ordered									
Repairs - Work Completed									
Allocations - Nomination									
Allocations - Viewing									
Allocations - Verification									
Allocations - Signup									
Allocations - Tenancy Start									