



Report to Acis Board
By
Tenant Led Scrutiny Panel

Service Area - Empty Homes

November 2014 – May 2015
Board Presentation - July 2015

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1.1 Introduction

1.2 At the time of writing the TLSP members are, Nigel Freeman (Chair), Nigel Hornsey (*Vice Chair*), Olive Ellis and Doreen Overbury with Judy Dagnall returning to the panel in coming months.

2 Selection of topic

2.1 As the principle of Resident Led Scrutiny is to use an evidence-led approach, the panel looked at a range of Scrutiny Triggers to guide the selection of a service area that would benefit from scrutiny. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were studied along with Tenant Satisfaction data, Tenant Complaints and benchmarking information.

2.2 The indicators in 2.1 led the Panel to the 'Empty Homes' service area:

- KPI 20 – Percentage of stock vacant
- KPI 21 – Average time taken to relet a property (calendar days) – exclude properties with major repairs
- KPI 22 – Rent losses from homes (general needs) as a % of rent
- KPI 23 – Average void repair cost per let property

2.3 Two of the three Performance Indicators were in the red (PI20 & 22), quartile 3 positions.

The remaining two Performance Indicators were amber (PI21 & PI23), quartile position 2. Whilst being in amber Q2, PI 23 has also been declining in a 2 month trend as the target for a void repair is £1658 per property and a year to date figure of £2144 (cumulative), £14 per unit out of tolerance and £486 outside of target.

2.4 New to the trigger data set was the addition of the 'Customer Service Questionnaire (CSQ) Post Let Data' covering the 2014 calendar year (Appendix A).

Questions relate to the perception of properties (cleanliness and decoration), viewing, allocations & lettings process and finally the customer experience. Whilst responses to the generic questions raised were good, the additional commentary provided by customers in the free text box was poor.

2.5 The comments from the CSQ and the Performance Indicators detailed was considered to be linked to each other which provided the foundation to select 'Empty Homes' as the service area to be scrutinized.

3 Scope

3.1 Additional data was requested via the Information Protocol system for the 2014 calendar year. This was to include:

- Current void data (snapshot of existing position)
- Management voids
- Property turnover
- Refusals – by area, reason and address

- Tenancy turnover by patch
- Voids scheduling template

3.2 TLSP felt that this scrutiny review could take into account any properties from across the regions (general needs and sheltered accommodation).

It was noted that when it came to reality checking empty properties, this would be a 'live' exercise looking at and inspecting existing empty properties and talking to prospective customers of Acis Group.

With this in mind it was envisaged that those properties most likely to be scrutinized would be Gainsborough and Sheffield with some opportunity to visit outlying villages.

4 Methodology

4.1 The methodology for the scrutiny was set out in a project plan that guided panel activities and enabled the panel to monitor their progress. A copy of the project plan is included as Appendix B.

5 Initial Fact Finding

5.1 Wayne Fox (Voids team) and Lee Toulson (Neighbourhoods) were invited to attend a meeting with the panel to give an overview of the service and answer any questions (Appendix C). Alison Reynolds, Marketing Manager also attended to explain how properties are advertised and what media methods are used.

This opportunity enabled the panel to understand the complex and inconsistent nature of empty properties. They were able to answer questions regarding the void process from the point of termination and able to explain with 'Process Plans' how an Acis internal working group were already thinking about how the voids process could be better run within the organisation.

The panel were keen to know:

- Who signs off voids as 'Ready to let'?
- What, as a percentage of the Voids workforce are multi-skilled?
- How many properties are empty for longer than one month?
- Has bedroom tax had an impact on voids?

Wayne advised that only a small amount of properties were signed off as ready to let through a quality inspection process. The remaining were trusted to have met the lettable standard, which was a concern that the panel explored further in the review.

Whilst a percentage of the voids workforce being multi skilled was not provided through interviewing staff, it was confirmed that the workforce each have a specialist trade with additional skills in other trades being worked up. This was with the exception of electricians and gas plumbers. The panel were satisfied with this response.

Information was distributed from the Acis performance information dated 9 December 2014 on the number of properties empty. This was able to detail the duration of each

empty properties, and of that list 11 of the 63 were void for over five weeks or more.

There was little information provided to suggest that the number of voids were impacted by bedroom tax. Acis are trying to address this issue by changing three bed properties into two bed properties where possible. The panel decided that they would keep an eye on the impact looking forward.

The meeting with staff proved to be a useful exercise and helped the panel determine what evidence they would need to gather during the scrutiny review.

6 Desk Top Review & Findings

6.1 The first stage was to carry out the Desk Top Review (DTR). The purpose of the DTR is to establish what the expected standards for the service area under review are by;

- Comparing the written material (policy, published information etc) with the expected standards (National Consumer Standards, Customer Service Promises, Decent Homes and Lettable Standard) and;
- Comparing performance with similar Registered Providers (RPs).

As part of the Acis Empty Properties Lettable Standard Policy July 2013, point 5.0 Lettable Standards, it quotes "Each property will be fit to live in in accordance with the government's Decent Homes Standard". The panel considered that the Lettable Standard should be used as the benchmarking for measuring reality checking as this is over and above the Government Decent Home Standard.

6.2 To progress the Desk Top Review, the panel requested a range of information as evidence for the scrutiny, in line with the access to information protocol.

The evidence requested included:

- Void / Pre-termination inspection sheet template
- Lettable Standard and accompanying policy
- Decent Homes Standard
- Benchmarking information with similar Registered Providers

6.3 Tenancy and Home Standard quotes:

Registered providers shall:

- Ensure that tenants' homes meet the standard set out in section five of the Government's Decent Homes Guidance¹⁴ and continue to maintain their homes to at least this standard
- Meet the standards of design and quality that applied when the home was built, and were required as a condition of publicly funded financial assistance¹⁵, if these standards are higher than the Decent Homes Standard
- In agreeing a local offer, ensure that it is set at a level not less than these standards and have regard to section six of the Government's Decent Homes Guidance

Repairs and Maintenance Standard quotes:

Registered providers:

- Shall ensure a prudent, planned approach to repairs and maintenance of homes and communal areas. This should demonstrate an appropriate balance of planned and responsive repairs, and value for money. The approach should include: responsive and cyclical repairs, planned and capital work, work on empty properties, and adaptations.

Tenancy Standard quotes:

Registered providers shall:

- Minimize the time that properties are empty between each letting. When doing this, they shall take into account the circumstances of the tenants who have been offered the properties

Customer Service Promises

The promise relevant to this project is:

- We will carry out a follow up visit within the first six weeks of moving into your new home to make sure you are settling in.

6.4 Findings from Desk Top Review

Reasons for refusing a property

This was investigated over a 12 month period January 2014 – December 2014 to see if there was a clear trend or reason that needed unpicking. The reasons for refusal information was sorted and considered by looking at:

- the area
- the reason
- the address

Sheffield

153 Refusals received in 12 months in Sheffield. 32 of those were located on Lower Manor and the remaining 121 coming from Woodthorpe.

Of the 153 refusals, the following information has been extracted relating to the reasons why people are choosing not to move into the property they have been offered after electing to bid on it themselves.

- Circumstances changed – 8
- Condition of property – 10
- Dislike area – fear of ASB – 9
- Dislike area – fear of crime – 4
- Dislike look of area – 29
- Does not wish to move – 14
- Found alternative property – 9
- Garden size too large / small (combined) – 2
- Limited parking – 2
- Limited public transport – 1
- No response – 30
- Potential conflict – 4

- Property too small – 13
- Too far from family – 3
- Too hilly – 1
- Too many steps into dwelling – 3
- Wrong area for school – 7
- Wrong type of dwelling – 4

Whilst it would be useful to set the number of refusals in a wider context ie against the number of offers made or the number of properties actually let, the panel is unable to do so because the IT systems used by Local Authorities does not retain information beyond one bid cycle.

This above is represented as a pie chart in Appendix D.

Most interesting is the 'Fear of crime, fear of ASB and dislike look of area' accounting for 27% of the total reasons given. The panel has acknowledged this and investigated further through the reality checking.

'Circumstances changed' combined with 'does not wish to move' and 'alternative property found' amounts to 20%.

20% of the refusals were attributed to the customer not responding to Acis when they have been successful with a property.

Gainsborough / Rural

Of the 255 refusals, the following information has been extracted relating to the reasons why people are choosing not to move into the property they have been offered after electing to bid on it themselves.

- Affordability – 12
- Denied making a bid – 1
- Did not know precise location of property – 24
- Does not like outlook – 5
- Refused without viewing – 6
- Found alternative accommodation – 24
- Area not suitable – 25
- Arrears too high – 5
- Changed area of choice – 11
- Changed circumstances – 10
- Don't want to move – 13
- Estate officer decision – 27
- Garden too big / small / unkept – 4
- Neighbours giving poor impression of the area / offering drugs / fighting – 3
- No bath only shower – 4
- No shower only bath – 2
- Poor decoration – 2

- Property not suitable – 22
- Property not suitable for adaptation – 2
- Only has electric (no gas) – 3
- Too small – 22
- Too far from family – 1
- Too ill to move – 4
- No carpets or floor coverings – 1
- Not close enough to local facilities – 1
- No contact made – 21

This above is represented as a pie chart found at Appendix E.

The largest percentage at 22% for reasons refusing properties were attributed to a 'change of circumstances', 'not wishing to move' and 'having found alternative accommodation'.

At 10%, the 'estate officer decision' was the second highest reason why people were refusing properties. This was highlighted as an area the panel would want to ask a little more about. This has been challenged with the Neighbourhoods Manager but the evidence from the interview demonstrates that this is the case. It was confirmed that in some cases staff are able to control who is allocated properties to reflect on local neighbourhood intelligence and to ensure that the tenancy is sustainable as in the case of sensitive lets.

9% claimed that they 'did not know the precise location' and again the panel felt that this would need investigating when talking to the marketing team about how much information is provided at the point of advertising properties.

6.5 **Marketing**

TLSP felt that the information provided by the Marketing Manager detailing how properties were advertised should provide any prospective customer with enough information to make an informed decision about properties they would like to bid on.

However, from the numbers detailed in Appendix D and E it would appear as though some customers are either not provided with enough information to make an informed choice, or they simply are making bids without making their own enquiries. This may impact on the amount of days the property remains void (KPI21) may increase the rent losses from homes (KPI 22).

The TLSP agreed to compare the desk top review findings during the reality checking process.

The panel also looked at the information sent out to prospective tenants when offered a property. The panel considered this to be sufficient and relevant.

6.6 **Performance Management** **Customer Service Promises**

A year end Customer Service Promises report evidenced that 100% of visits were not being carried out (Appendix F).

From the information provided, it was clear that for those properties in Sheffield 100% of 6 week visits were being met. However, Gainsborough and Rural achieved anywhere between 83 – 100% over a 12 month period.

The panel acknowledges that the number of six week checks needing to be carried out in Gainsborough and Rural patches is far greater than in Sheffield. This will therefore have a significantly higher impact on the staff resources needed to be able to meet the 100% promise rate.

6.7 **Housemark**

Housemark benchmarking data within the appropriate benchmarking group of 29 other Registered Providers for PI21 and PI22 was evaluated (Appendix G).

It was found that of those organisations, Acis Group reports 27.7 days to re-let a property (calendar days) which is comparative result for Havebury Housing Partnership. The following organisations are outperforming Acis Group and in the upper quartile position:

- Freebridge Community Housing – 13 – 15.66
- Severnside Housing – 18.32 – 20.98
- Stafford and Rural Homes – 20.98 – 23.64
- Boston Mayflower, Monmouthshire Housing Association – 23 – 64 – 26.30

Housemark reports that rent loss due to empty properties (voids) as % rent due, categorises Acis in an Upper Median quartile position, with five other providers outperforming and in the Upper quartile position.

Those organisations are:

- B3 Living
- Severnside Housing
- Stafford and Rural Homes
- Watford Community Housing Trust
- Wellingborough Homes – all of which report 0.81 – 1.01

TLSP are content that Acis are performing well compared to their peer group with no actions or recommendations arising.

6.8 **National Standards**

After reviewing the Home Standards, reviewing the Customer Service Promises and following interviews with staff, TLSP felt that Acis had processes in place to minimise the time lost on empty properties.

An extract from the Home Standard states “Registered Providers shall minimise the time that properties are empty between each letting. When doing this they shall take into account the circumstances of the tenants who have been offered the properties”. The panel are satisfied that Acis’s void process ensures that this is the void inspector visits properties before they keys are handed in by outgoing tenants.

Furthermore the panel felt encouraged that the team were looking internally at how it could further improve its own process and what resources would be needed.

7 Reality Checking & Findings

7.1 TLSP agreed a number of methods to carry out the reality checking over a 4-6 week period. It was agreed that they would work closely with members of the housing and voids team and be invited to work, observe and shadow different officers in order to get a deep appreciation for the tasks that they need to undertake to ensure the properties are ready to let as quickly as possible.

20 properties were identified in 'real time' that TLSP were able to a) shadow the void inspector b) inspect ready to let properties or c) observe viewings with new customers.

In addition, the marketing data relating to each of these properties were also checked for consistency and to check that relevant information was contained in the adverts.

7.2 Marketing

Scope - Review how much information is provided for void properties to enable customers to make informed choices.

Findings - It was clear that the website improvement work that had been explained at staff interview stage had been implemented. There were clear links to local resources such as schools, doctor's surgery and shops etc.

Adverts for those properties available to rent can be found in a number of ways to include Acis reception, Homefinder, Choice Based Lettings, Estate agents and Local Council offices.

7.3 Reviewing the Lettable Standard

Scope - Visit a property once void repairs are complete and the property is available for letting. The panel compared the standard to the Acis Lettable Standard (Appendix H).

4 opportunities were offered and accepted to observe Paul Waite, Empty Property Repairs Officer, to see how he inspects and draws up the repair schedule in accordance with the Lettable Standard.

Findings - A robust process is in place whereby the void inspector draws up job requirements and records his findings on a void schedule which has corresponding cost codes for back office ease. Adequate and fair diary time was accommodated from the officer at each property.

Findings – 12 ready to let properties were offered to the panel to inspect. In order to ensure all panel members worked in a similar way, templates for recording information were developed. Panel members were equipped with the void schedule and lettable standard and these were used as our benchmark to ensure the standards were being met.

Of the 12, 7 were not considered to have met the lettable standard. In most cases it

was felt that this was not met due to:

- Poor Plastering
- Nails and staples protruding
- Unsafe flooring
- Cobwebs and poor cleaning
- Outside / communal areas

A full list of our findings can be found at Appendix I with templates used to record data following this data sheet.

7.4 **Attend a Viewing**

With permission from the applicant, panel members attended when the applicant viewed the property. The panel considered if the style of the viewing and information provided was sufficient and/or appropriate.

Findings - 7 viewings were observed out of the 20 properties identified. TLSP felt that the staff did an excellent job and were able to provide plenty of good quality information about the property and the local area.

Area Service Managers were able to tailor the viewing to suit the individuals needs and able to quickly assess if the property was not meeting the customers need. Debbie Clubley was an exemplar member of staff when working with a customer with specific access requirements.

It was evident from some of the properties that staff would have greater difficulties in 'selling' a property of a lesser quality. However they did this professionally and to the best of their ability.

7.5 **Survey New Tenants**

With permission from the new tenants, panel members will carry out a telephone survey of tenants who have taken a tenancy in the last 3 months to obtain their views on the process. The panel ascertained how the process felt from the point of view of a tenant recently taking up an offer.

Findings - Of the 8 customers that accepted the offer of an Acis property, 7 gave their consent for TLSP to contact them to receive some feedback on their experiences with only 4 successful contacts made.

From the feedback received the customer experience all seemed positive with 'good' and 'very good' recorded. Specific positive feedback was received regarding Debbie Clubley's approach.

Full findings can be seen in Appendix J.

7.6 **Survey Applicants Who Have Recently Refused an offer**

With permission from applicants who refused an offer, the panel were able to ascertain how the process felt from the point of view of an applicant and why they did not accept the offer.

Findings - Of the 3 customers that refused the offer of an Acis property after viewing, all 3 gave their consent for TLSP to contact them to receive some feedback on their experiences with only 1 successful contact made.

Whilst these findings have been included as Appendix K, the panel felt this was not a

viable survey response in order to generate any realistic findings.

7.7 **External appearance and surrounding area**

Following on from the fact that 27% of refusals are attributed to the fear of crime, fear of ASB and dislike look of the area, the panel suggests that Acis consider this fact and explore innovative solutions such as temporary alarm systems in properties rather than boarding up windows that creates negative impressions of neighbourhoods.

The panel also found on visiting properties there was an issue with litter, general rubbish and dog foul as per the image below. The panel recommends that Acis takes responsibility for this issue and clears all external and communal areas prior to viewings or as part of the void inspection process.



8	Judgements, Evidence, Impact & Recommendations		
Our Judgement	Evidence to support our judgement	Impact on service or customers	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Of the 12 properties inspected, 7 showed that Acis are not meeting their own Lettable Standard 	<p>“Ensure the inside of your home is cleaned to a good standard Make good any major defects to plasterwork, walls and ceilings Check the cleanliness of the kitchen and sanitary fittings”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Pictures connected to properties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plastering - Nails and staples - Unsafe flooring - Cobwebs and poor cleaning - Outside / communal areas ➤ Void work schedules not adhered to, identified by staff through staff shadowing ➤ Area Service Manager’s own observations ➤ Staff interviews – not aware of failings ➤ Quality checks not made, only 6/20 ➤ Pictures connected to the property / specific line in the standard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Customer satisfaction ➤ Image of Acis Group – not ‘excellence’ ➤ Not Value for Money ➤ Properties are deteriorating ➤ Repeat jobs cost more money ➤ Not delivering on promises 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Re-write Lettable Standard to make it specific and non speculative See Appendix L for Panel suggestions 2. Provide clear links to the lettable standard on the Acis Website 3. Present ‘Summary of Lettable Standard’ on website in a friendly and engaging manner 4. Involve Tenant void inspectors in quality assurance checks by providing a checklist to new tenants as part of the sign-up procedure to include the completed cleaning checklist and specification of void works 5. Improve the number of quality checks completed, suggesting at the least, 1 in 2 properties 6. Quality inspect post tenancy repairs 7. Include on Lettable Standard - ‘At the point of Sign-up, you will be provided with a list of any outstanding jobs for your

			<p>records' (Appendix L).</p> <p>8. Include on Lettable Standard – 'Tell Us about your experience and how you can feedback if you are dissatisfied' (Appendix L)</p> <p>9. Deliver staff training and awareness sessions of the Lettable Standard</p> <p>10. Present this report, evidence and findings to the trades team involved in voids process</p>
<p>➤ The 'Fear of crime, fear of ASB and dislike look of area' impacts significantly on refusal reasons, accounting for 27% of the total reasons given.</p>	<p>1. Reasons for refusal</p> <p>➤ The panel also found on visiting properties there was an issue with litter, general rubbish and dog foul</p>	<p>➤ Increase in void turnaround</p> <p>➤ Acis own image and reputation</p>	<p>11. Explore innovative solutions such as temporary alarm systems in properties rather than boarding up windows that creates negative impressions of neighbourhoods.</p> <p>12. Ensure all external and communal areas are cleared and tidied prior to viewings and pick up by making it part of the void inspection process</p>
<p>➤ Acis are not providing enough information to ensure customers can make an informed decision prior to bidding on properties.</p>	<p>➤ Reasons for refusals include properties to small/large, garden size too small/large, limited parking</p>	<p>➤ Time wasted on unsuitable bids being made on properties</p> <p>➤ Staff resource time being wasted administering unsuitable bids</p> <p>➤ Increase in void turnaround time</p>	<p>13. Include floor plans, information on car parking arrangements, pictures of the gardens and details of council tax bands.</p>

9 Areas of positive practice

The panel were happy that Acis were meeting the Homes and Communities Tenancy Standard 1.5.

Acis have been proactive in tackling the impact of the bedroom tax by changing number of rooms in dwellings where possible.

Acis have improved the marketing of properties. There are clear links to maps and local resources and the information given out was good. Area Service Managers do a good job of selling the properties to prospective customers.

The panel were encouraged that the Voids team were looking internally at how it could further improve its own process and what resources would be needed.

Current 2014-15 Quarter 3 data set for Housemark demonstrates that Acis are performing well compared to their peer group of 29 other Registered Providers. PI22 – Rent losses from empty homes has certainly improved from a start position of red/lower quartile up to the current Upper Median quartile position.

The Area Service Managers tailored the viewings to suit individual needs and able to quickly assess if the property was not meeting the customers needs.

Staff members Debbie Clubley and Paul Waite, showed excellent knowledge and understanding and carried out their role extremely well, as did the Area Service Managers.

10 **Learning Points**

The panel have reflected on the methodology undertaken to carry out the scrutiny and felt that there were a number of learning points to take forward to future scrutiny reviews.

Panel members will be preparing the compilation of the next report as a continual panel activity after each monthly meeting.

11 **Acknowledgements**

We thank Acis for their full support and backing when carrying out this scrutiny review.

12 **Appendices**

Appendix A	Customer Service Questionnaire
Appendix B	Project Plan
Appendix C	Staff interview questions
Appendix D	Sheffield refusals
Appendix E	Gainsborough & Rural refusals
Appendix F	Customer Service Promises (3 only)
Appendix G	Housemark data
Appendix H	Lettable Standard – Current
Appendix I	Reality checking property details
Appendix J	Questionnaire – new tenants
Appendix K	Questionnaire – refusal tenants
Appendix L	Lettable Standard
Appendix M	Full suite of photographs of good and bad practice