

Report to: Housing Review Board



Date of Meeting 16th March 2023

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Void performance

Report summary:

To provide an update on the performance of the key to key voids process and details of the plans for improved performance recognising that current performance remains of concern.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That members:

- (i) note the content of the report including contributing factors towards performance levels and details of the plans for improved performance
- (ii) give consideration towards the recommendation for an additional staff resource required to implement the suggested improvements, namely an additional Housing Allocations Officer and
- (iii) approve the recommendation for approval to changes to the Voids Lettable Standard

Reason for recommendation:

To keep the Housing Review Board updated as to progress in respect of void performance and recognising that the current performance requires improvement.

Officer: Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager amitchell@eastdevon.gov.uk

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; .

Links to background information .

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
 - A greener East Devon
 - A resilient economy
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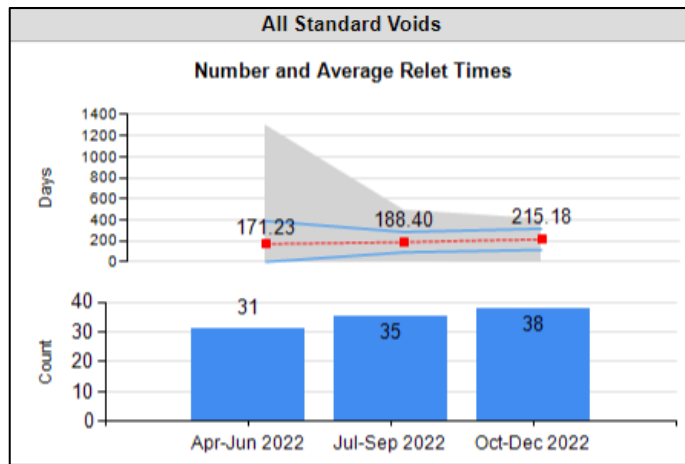
Report in full

1. Background

- 1.1 This report provides an update on void performance providing information for the overall process, referred to as the 'key to key' time, covering the period from when a property becomes void until a new tenant moves in
- 1.2 This report has been produced alongside an independent review into the voids process conducted by the Consultants Echelon which addresses findings through recommendations for improvements in the overall process. The review covers the full void period from termination of a tenancy to the commencement of a new tenancy, including the reporting mechanism used to produce voids statistics. Throughout the review Echelon have been in talks with various teams within the Housing service working towards making improvements to our processes and systems
- 1.3 Data used for this report is captured within the Housing service key performance indicator dashboard. The current void reports are being revised as part of the review, and updated with the aim of ensuring departmental accountability for voids performance
- 1.4 It is acknowledged that performance levels are not where we need them to be and this report will set out the contributing factors for this alongside proposals for changes that will lead to improvements within the overall void process
- 1.5 This report also recommends changes to the Void Lettable Standard to ensure it is modernised, Fit for Purpose, and aligns to EDDC's Poverty Agenda

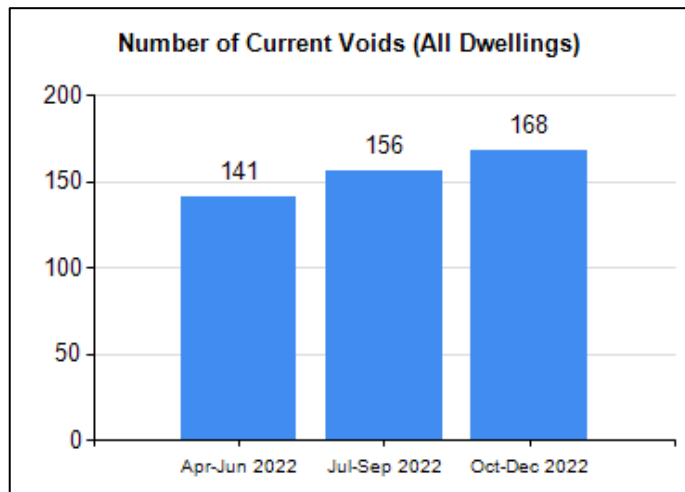
2. Key to Key times

- 2.1 The overall void time (including weekends) for the nine month period from April 2022 to the end of December 2022 representing the first three quarters of the year is as follows for all dwellings, standard and non-standard. Non-standard voids include major works, long term voids, unlettable properties, temporary accommodation and HMO rooms



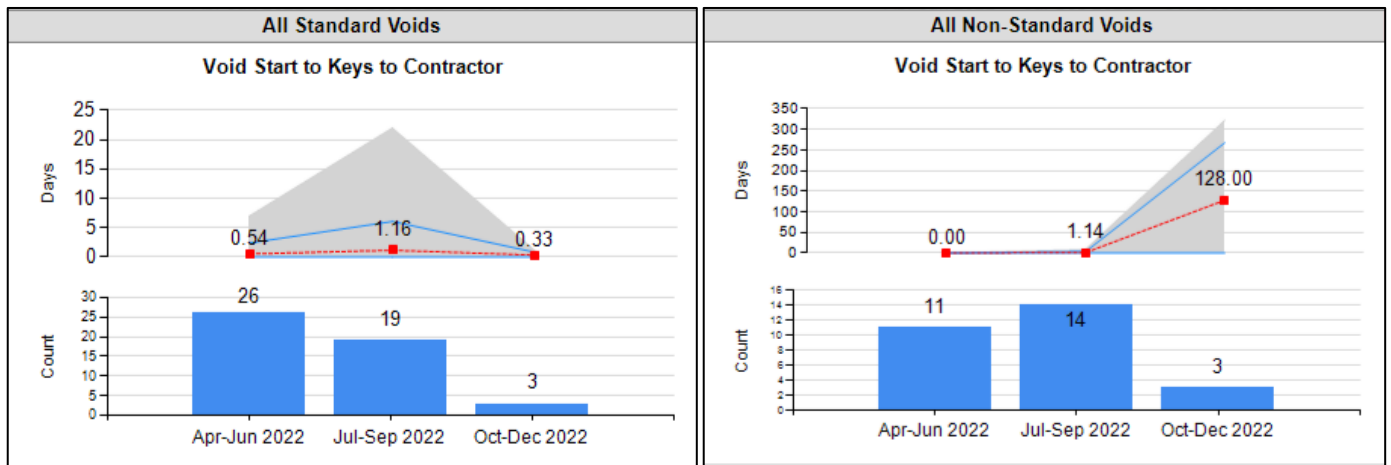
2.2 150 properties have been completed this financial year within the given timescale, with an average void time for those completed of 205.66 days (including weekends)

2.3 As a snapshot, as of 31 December there were a total of 168 voids, 102 of which are classed as 'standard' and 52 of which are classed as 'non-standard' alongside 14 new properties

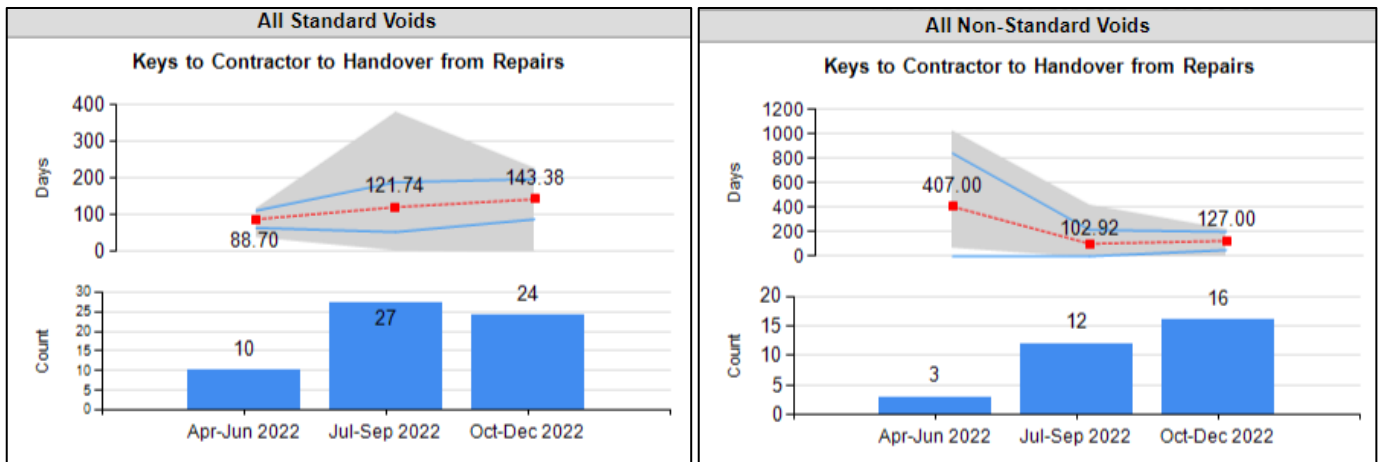


2.4 In addition to the figures shown above, reports are also provided below to show the performance of voids throughout the various stages of the overall process. These reports have been produced to allow us to analyse and highlight where improvements can be achieved

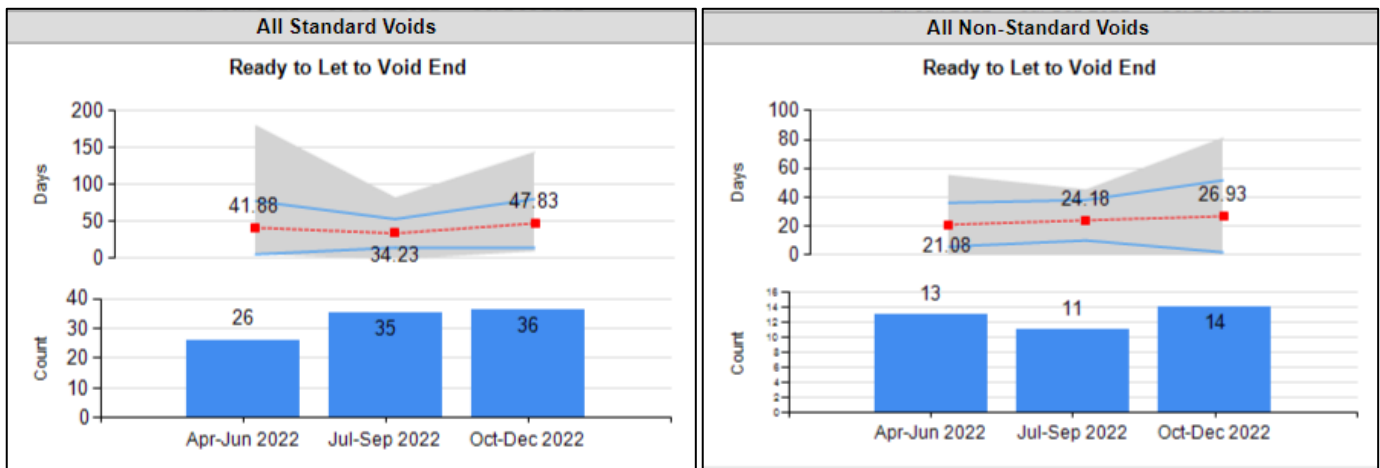
2.5 Stage 1 – Start of void date to keys to Contractor date



Stage 2 – Keys from Contractor date to handover from the Property & Assets team to the Housing Allocations team



Stage 3 – Ready to let date to void end date



3. Contributing factors

- 3.1 A number of contributing factors towards performance levels have been identified in the delivery of the overall void process
 - 3.1.1 The presiding issue has been a lack of resources with which to carry out the overall voids process, in particular staff shortages. We continue to struggle with the recruitment of Surveyors to support the effective management of the void works. This is not a problem unique to EDDC, but an issue which providers nationwide and particularly in the South West are struggling with. Recruitment remains an ongoing process and challenge
 - 3.1.2 There have been acknowledged operational and logistic challenges including the effect of the Covid pandemic upon delivery of the void process. Following the general lifting of Covid restrictions void turnover has increased resulting in more void orders being issued to the Contractor. This in turn has presented challenges for their delivery resulting in a backlog, which is now proving challenging to clear
 - 3.1.3 The continuing impact of Brexit specifically around the sourcing and delivery times for certain materials and components and compounded by the impact of the current economic climate, has led to significant increased material and labour costs in the construction industry
 - 3.1.4 Issues in clearing debt on meters has created delays in the process. However, this has subsequently been addressed by the engagement of an organisation called Tenant Saves money (TSM) who, in simple terms, clear any debt and ensure there is sufficient credit on meters in order to deliver the void work and also for the incoming tenant
 - 3.1.5 There have been a high number of voids that require a large amount of work to address their poor condition when properties are returned to us. Costs continue to be higher than expected and above the PPV (price per void) cost, this is generally due to the condition of

the properties when they are vacated. Typical areas that contribute towards the high costs include

- Requirement for an environmental/deep clean before work can commence
- Remedial work required to repair damage caused by previous tenants
- Removal and disposal of rubbish (both internally and externally) left by previous tenants
- Garden clearances/tidies
- Under investment in planned works due to other priorities ie compliance related work (fire safety) and retrofit work

3.1.6 More significant upgrades of properties have been required which have extended void times. More of this work has needed to be done by way of planned works as opposed to at the re-let stage

3.1.7 It is noted that, whilst we strive to achieve the most efficient timescales possible, measurement of performance needs to be balanced with the Council's objective and responsibility to match the right person to the right property. Therefore, in some cases where properties are considered as 'sensitive lets' or a panel meeting is required in which to agree on the suitability of a match delays may occur. This measure is taken with tenancy sustainability in mind

3.1.8 Additional factors creating additional time at the end of the process, from when the property is signed off as ready to let until the next tenancy commences, include notice periods for the new tenants from their former addresses, affordability issues and also instances where there is no furniture or carpets

4. Improvements and next stages

4.1 With recognition that the void performance is not currently at the levels we expect, independent consultants, Echelon, have been commissioned to carry out a review of the overall process. A number of key recommendations to improve the process have been identified

4.1.1 Our IT systems will be adapted to ensure they reflect the current and new process at every stage. This will ensure we can track a void at any given time

4.1.2 A fully auditable improved key performance indicator (KPI) suite is to be built which will capture statutory returns as well as individual departmental reporting needs

4.1.3 Pre-termination visits are to be re-introduced and are to be more rigid to ensure tenants understand how they should leave their property. This will reduce costs and shorten time-scales for void works for instance in cases where the property has been left in a poor state when handed back by the previous tenant. An extended void period will be created for properties that require substantial works to bring the property up to the required standards, or have major issues such as subsidence

4.1.4 The Housing Allocations team will not allow internal moves until the property is considered to be in a good condition at the termination stage

4.1.5 Joint pre-work inspections are to be re-introduced between EDDC and the contractors. This will give clarity on the scope of works and reduce costs. This will also take away the need to challenge each other on the works scoped and will reduce time wastage

4.1.6 Joint handovers are to be introduced between the Contractor, the Property & Assets team and the Housing Allocations team. This will ensure that all parties are happy with the condition of the void property before it is signed off as ready to let

4.1.7 Planned works programmes are to be reviewed to ensure we can defer planned works in a void property to the planned programme. This will reduce the turn-around time of a void property and bring costs down

4.1.8 The void specification has been modernised and minor amendments made to ensure we look at standardisation of products and meet the requirement of changes in statutory legislation and regulations. This will support the Property & Assets team and in the long term reduce repair costs.

4.1.9 The rigid handovers supported by the system gives confidence to each team that they can go ahead with their responsibilities without delay. For example, when the Property & Assets team take the property from the Housing Allocations team they can be confident that the property is empty, the keys are there and the property is cleared. This will reduce wasted visits by the contractor

5. Recommendation for additional staff resources

5.1 The review exercise conducted by independent consultants, Echelon, has identified areas where additional staff resources are required for two specific parts of the process:

- Pre-termination visits are to be re-introduced and are to be more rigid to ensure residents understand how they should leave the property – this reduces costs and shortens time-scales for void works
- Joint handovers of properties between the Contractors, the Property & Assets team and the Housing Allocations team are to be introduced – this ensures everyone is happy with the condition of the void before it leaves the Property & Assets team

5.2 These measures have been suggested in order to tackle identified issues within the voids process, namely:

- Residents not being managed during and after termination of tenancy, properties not being cleared resulting in time and money wastage, and the reported poor condition of several returned properties leading to increased void times and additional expense
- No smooth handover between departments resulting in time wastage

These measures will tie in with the amendments made to the tenancy policy and the improvements this will bring

5.3 There is no scope within the Housing Allocations team to manage the issues highlighted in 5.1 at the present time with the resources currently available amongst the number of competing priorities. Therefore, it is recommended that an additional Housing Allocations Officer post is required within the Housing Allocations team in order for the team to be set up to take on these additional responsibilities. Based on our records, there would be an expectation of 582 additional visits made up as follows:

- Pre-Termination visits 311(based on tenancy terminations 2021-22)
- Joint Handover visits 271(based on properties allocated 2021-22)

5.4 It is anticipated that each visit will take approximately 2 hours, factoring in travel to and from properties, the time spent with tenants and contractors and the completion of paperwork on site. The number of visits anticipated each week will be 11 which equates to 22 hours per week of Officer's time. In addition to these visits the Officer will also have to do return visits should tenants not keep to pre-arranged appointments, or if a property fails the joint handover inspection. The Officer will also be required to update our systems and colleagues when returning to the office.

- 5.5 It is expected that the Housing Allocations Officers within the team, including the Senior Officer post, will be interchangeable and flexible in order to cover all aspects of the responsibilities of the Housing Allocations team. Main responsibilities include:
- Assisting with the voids process through responsibilities such as dealing with tenancy terminations and pre-termination visits, property viewings and tenancy sign ups
 - Establishing new tenancies including showing prospective tenants their new properties, carrying out a comprehensive sign up procedure which includes talking to tenants about their responsibilities and those of EDDC, including anti-social behaviour, rent, maintaining the property, and repairs procedures
 - Advertising properties on Devon Home Choice making sure all relevant information is available including any adaptations, ensuring that the right person is allocated the right property
 - The allocation of EDDC properties via the Devon Home Choice scheme through shortlisting and making offers
 - Assisting in the management of the Housing Register, including the processing of applications, making decisions on medical and welfare priorities, and the appropriate banding of the application. Inputting and amending information accurately and interrogate and extract data when required.
- 5.6 This position will play an essential role within the overall void process contributing to an efficient cross-team operation aiming to achieve an effective voids process that will result in reduced void times, increased performance and turnaround, and reduced levels of income lost through the voids process for empty properties.
- 5.7 The additional cost to the budget of this additional staff member would be £36,882 based on a salary at the bottom of scale 3 (£28,371) plus on-costs of 30%. It is expected that the financial rewards of an improved void process would be significant ie financial savings through an increased number of our properties becoming available to let
- 5.8 In addition, there is a recommendation within the Echelon report that EDDC appoint an overall responsible person to manage 'complete voids process' (reference to 4.1.10). There is no such post currently within the Housing service, and therefore work will need to be carried out to analyse the potential need for an additional post or whether this can be incorporated within the current resources available

6. Recommendation for approval to changes to the Voids Lettable Standard

- 6.1 As a brief outline the current Lettable Standard has been in place for some time now and as part of the overall void process we have taken the opportunity to review the Lettable Standard. Dialogue has taken place with various departments throughout the Council and also at a recent Resident Involvement Management Group session.
- 6.2 In line with the current works being undertaken and generally outlined in Section 4 above, we have made some changes to the EDDC Lettable Standard to ensure it is modernised and remains fit for purpose. Key changes are around ensuring we pick up the current issues the industry is facing around damp and mould and ensuring we work alongside EDDC's poverty agenda. There are also a number of smaller changes recommended to make low cost improvements, or legislative improvements to the standard we deliver for incoming residents.
- 6.3 To align to EDDC's poverty agenda we are proposing that through a dedicated Hardship Fund we look at providing vouchers towards decorations and carpets for those incoming residents in real hardship to enable them to bring their property up to a decent habitable standard. This proposal was presented to a recent Resident Involvement Management

Group meeting at Trumps Court and residents were generally in agreement of the proposed changes to the Lettable Standard.

If the proposed new Lettable Standard is approved we then to set out internally how this is managed and the criteria for an application to the fund.

6.4 The proposed changes to the current Lettable Standard are presented as Appendix A

Financial implications:

The financial implications are discussed above and the figures for lost rent due to voids are disclosed within the finance report.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications.