

Agenda item 5

Report to: East Durham Homes Board

Date: 29 November 2012

Title of report: Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel
Inspection of Voids

Reported by: Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel

Report for: Decision/Information

1. Purpose of report and link to strategic objectives

The purpose of this report is to outline findings from the recent inspection of voids and highlight any recommendations.

The report links to 5 of the strategic objectives:

- Providing quality homes
- Regenerating estates and communities
- Involving customers to improve services
- Delivering excellent services to all
- Employer of choice and financially stable

2. Recommendations

- As a result of the CIIP inspection 5 recommendations have been made. These are outlined in an action plan in appendix A for the Board's consideration.
- Directors are asked to note the update on previous inspections set out in appendix B.

3. Executive summary

This is the fourth inspection carried out by the Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel. Before carrying out the onsite inspection, the CIIP completed a desktop review including performance indicators, the guide to ending a tenancy, performance dashboards for Choice Based Lettings and Tenancy Management, and the guide to the handy man service. The inspection also involved job shadowing, telephone

interviews, a customer focus group, and interviews with members of staff at East Durham Homes, Kier, Wates, Keepmoat and Morrison. The inspection takes into account targets and voids turnaround times, Decent Homes work, and includes all of EDH's contractors.

4. Risk Implications

There is a current and continuous risk concerning voids i.e. the longer a property is void the more the rent loss to the business.

With the introduction of under-occupancy charges as part of welfare reform, the CIIP anticipates a future risk in terms of an increase in the number of void properties. If a tenant is unable to cover the cost of the additional bedroom(s) he/she may move on resulting in more void properties or abandon the property if the tenant gets into significant debt.

5. Consultation

As part of the inspection, the CIIP has consulted the following people:

- Tenancy Management Officer
- Choice Based Lettings Officer
- Technical Inspectors
- Tenancy Services Manager
- Repairs & Maintenance (Client) Manager
- Project Managers for EDH, Kier, Morrison, Keepmoat and Wates
- Customer Focus group
- Telephone interviews

On completion of the inspection, the CIIP consulted with the Tenancy Services Manager and Repairs & Maintenance (Client) Manager to review the recommendations.

6. Background

The CIIP chose to inspect the voids service after reviewing the performance indicators. In particular, the average number of days for a void property to be let was 23.24 days which was above target (22) for 2011/2012. In addition, the percentage of dwellings that are vacant but unavailable to let had increased.

7. Review findings

The CIIP found that members of EDH staff (from ground level to management) are very passionate about their work and dedicated to turn a property around as quickly as possible. They work as a team and meet once a week to keep each other informed. There is a clear

awareness within the team of the importance of meeting targets and good leadership skills displayed by management. Members of staff are very well informed, pass on all relevant information to prospective tenants at viewings, and are conscious of health and safety, especially where viewings are concerned. The CIIP was impressed with the small touches included in the service such as providing energy saving light bulbs in properties and the welcome pack.

The CIIP recognises the high standard of work carried out by the partners and the good quality fixtures used as there are very few complaints. Partners state that they look for the earliest opportunity to start Decent Homes work and keep EDH informed. Officers at EDH expressed concern about the time taken for decent homes voids. Standard operating procedures are carried out by all partners, though some providers have structural work to complete as well as Decent Homes which takes longer. Viewing while the property is receiving works is possible. However, there is a health and safety issue when major work is being carried out; work would have to be halted and the site made safe therefore applicants are encouraged to wait until the work is complete.

A number of issues were highlighted during the inspection that can lengthen the turnaround time for void properties. Firstly, asbestos checks rely on a safety certificate and if no certificate is available a check must be arranged which can take 3 or 5 days depending on the type of check required for the proposed work. If notifiable asbestos is discovered the work must be halted for 14 days and specialist removal arranged. Secondly, no electrical work can be undertaken until the isolator switch is installed, which is the responsibility of NEDL. Thirdly, flea infestation can hinder work on the property and some properties have to be treated numerous times. The CIIP was also concerned that keys are kept in a draw inside the property. If a break-in occurred thieves would have keys to every door in the house. This was explained at the interview stage that if an intruder had access to the kitchen drawers then they were obviously already inside the property. The rest of the keys left in the drawer enable e.g. the Estate Management Team to gain access through to the front garden for void maintenance.

Currently 10% of G & H rated voids are post inspected. However, when job shadowing, the CIIP found that some 'G' rated houses were not clean enough. The CIIP noted that the way turnaround times are measured is not always consistent. For example, the PI for voids is 21 calendar days, whereas the Decent Homes' target is 30 working days which could be confusing for customers. It was also noted during job shadowing, that bin rubbish was left outside the front door of a void property. The CIIP was concerned that EDH has to pay for it to be removed which adds to the turnaround time and cost, however this appears to have been a one off incident.

Feedback from telephone interviews was very positive. In particular, customers were impressed by the viewing process and 84% of those asked were happy with the state of the property when they received the keys. Notably, most customers referred to decoration when asked about cleanliness. Surveys are very important for tenant feedback. However, the CIIP noted that the survey wording does not distinguish between cleanliness and decoration, and the service is being marked down as a result. In addition, a number of customers were dissatisfied that some jobs had been carried out after they moved in rather than when the property was empty.

The CIIP is concerned that the most frequent cause of refusal for a property is due to location. It would appear customers do not look into the area before bidding, which could be down to customers bidding for a number of properties at once to increase their chance of securing a property. The CIIP recommends that customers are encouraged via the Durham Key Options site to consider where the property is before bidding.

8. Impact for customers (including access and customer care)

Customers will be better informed and more selective in bidding for properties if they are first encouraged to look into the area where the property is located. Customers should also have a better understanding of what to expect from their new property in terms of cleanliness and decoration. They all get a lettable standard for reference at sign up stage. This should result in a more accurate reflection of the service when customers complete surveys concerning the void process.

Further impact for customers would result in less time waiting for properties should further monitoring of Decent Homes voids be implemented.

9. Impact on equality and diversity

The current voids procedure has a direct impact upon disabled customers and the families of disabled dependents. To ensure the best use of current stock voids which have aids and adaptations are inspected to ascertain whether it is appropriate to maintain these pieces of equipment. In some instances facilities such as showers can be upgraded to a flat floor wet area. Our occupational therapy services can make recommendations to disabled people on the housing register or give priority disabled people requiring specialist stock.

10. Impact on value for money

By encouraging customers to have a knowledge of the area they are bidding for, they are less likely to refuse a property, which in turn

should save staff time in carrying out viewings. Fitting of dummy alarms may act as a suitable deterrent and cost less than fitting a real alarm.

11. Legal impact

There are no legal implications in this report.

12. Financial impact

The loss of rental income incurred from potential tenants turning down a property because of location should reduce if customers are clearly made aware that they must look into the area where the property is situated.

The estimated cost per property to install a dummy alarms would be £56.26 per property. The CIIP would like this option to be considered, but recognises the financial implications of this recommendation.

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