



**Report to Safer and Stronger
Communities Scrutiny & Policy
Development Committee
6th April 2017**

Report of: Challenge for Change Tenant Scrutiny Group

Subject: Challenge for Change: *Vacants Property Service*
Progress Update

Author of Report: Jason Siddall and Lindsey Hill - Repairs & Maintenance Team
Rosie Sheldon – Rehousing Team

Summary:

The customer scrutiny panel known as Challenge for Change (C4C) was set up in 2011 to perform an independent review of services delivered by the Council Housing Service. They presented their review of Vacants to scrutiny in July 2015. This report provides a progress update on the recommendations made by the panel.

Type of item: The report author should tick the appropriate box

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	
Statutory consultation	
Performance / budget monitoring report	
Cabinet request for scrutiny	
Full Council request for scrutiny	
Community Assembly request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	
Other	X

The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:

Note the contents of this progress update on the recommendations made by the panel.

Background Papers:

Challenge for Change: Scrutiny Report Vacants Report
Challenge for Change: Outcomes and Recommendations Vacants

Category of Report: OPEN

**Challenge for Change – Vacant Property Services Report
Progress Update February 2017**

An update on the progress of the recommendations made by C4C has been requested and these are presented below:

	Recommendation	Update
1.	Look into the costs of cutting grass/clean net curtains/washing windows/painting neutral colours and then target Hard to Let – areas or properties.	<p>Cost of grass cutting We now have 5 dedicated gardeners working on vacant gardens. The gardens that have this work are identified by their state and prioritised.</p> <p>Clean Net Curtains We have a contract with Orbis who provide net curtains, when requested, in vacant properties; the net curtains used are left in the property for the incoming tenant. We have reminded Orbis to ensure that the net curtains used fully fit the windows to prevent people looking into the property. If the previous tenant has left net curtains that are in a clean state and fit for purpose they are left in the property.</p> <p>Painting neutral colours We now have 5 dedicated painters working on vacant properties. The properties to be painted are identified by the state of decoration or for particularly hard to let properties. We also have the facility to paint properties after they have been let for vulnerable new tenants. Neighbourhood Teams can also request a B&Q voucher or an increase to the amount awarded at the accompanied view if they feel it is needed due to the decoration or need of the new tenant. We also have a Handyperson Service that is available free of charge for elderly or vulnerable tenants to use for decoration, painting and odd jobs around their home.</p>
2.	Review the lettable standard in consultation with service users	The minimum lettable standard (MLS) is primarily budget driven, adheres to health & safety and has to be sustainable. Some minor changes were made to the minimum lettable standard in 2014/15. We are now carrying out a full review of the minimum lettable standard, looking at the approach and considering tailoring the standard, for example, to property type, area of city and the condition of stock.

3.	Introduce a more thorough inspection process both pre and post repair	<p>All properties having repair work over £3k has a joint pre inspection by us and Kier, to jointly identify and agree the repair work to be carried out. The repairs and maintenance team now post inspect 100% of properties returned by Kier following repair work before the property is made fit to let. The inspections ensure that the property meets the standard, identifies any quality issues and these are recorded as major or minor defects returning to Kier to rectify and ensure there are no issues with the property that would prevent it being let. The post inspections have reduced the number of quality issues, identified trends or clarification points with the standard, reduced the number of after tenancy repairs and reduced the number of enquiries/complaints of new tenants. We have also developed a joint 'property check off' sheet with Kier to ensure they check properties before handing them back to us. 'Repairs after tenancy' jobs moved over into the vacants side of Repairs and Maintenance Team, this has helped reduce the number of repairs and has saved money. Quality assurance is scrutinised at the Action Planning Group meeting held each month, with both officers and customers attending.</p>
	Agree a minimum garden as part of a lettable standard	<p><i>See recommendation 1, on grass cutting/gardens point.</i></p>
5.	Learn more from what the best landlords do	<p>We have previously attended Efficiency North and Housemark benchmarking groups with other organisations. More recently we have attended the Housemark Voids Improvement Club, Service Manager's from Repairs and Maintenance and Rehousing regularly attend groups on vacant property and rehousing issues. This also involves networking with other social housing providers to understand comparators within this area of work and understand which good practices could work within SCC stock. However, the challenges experienced by different landlords and housing providers vary significantly and from area to area. This means that even though we can use these networking opportunities to our advantage, it is not always possible to implement the same systems and procedures as others.</p> <p>We have taken the opportunity of a recent restructure to review our performance monitoring framework and have changed this to ensure that it is more meaningful and can be analysed to identified where we have particular difficulties, so as to target resources appropriately and improve relet times.</p>

6.	<p>In Touch and The Bridge could be utilised to advertise hard to let vacants and promote areas and better use could be made of Area Housing Offices to advertise properties locally</p>	<p>The lead in times for these publications may mean that this is not the best way of increasing the advertisement opportunities of difficult to let properties- they may well have been let by the time they are advertised! We are considering a range of actions to target specific properties which are difficult to let including changed advice on housing options for customers who need to be rehoused quickly. However, one of the fundamental issues is that difficult to let properties are often age designated we will continue to consider alternatives and ensure the sustainability of groups of properties or recommend change where this is appropriate. We also use first come first served to advert properties that are difficult to let. We can also write articles to promote areas, featuring a new tenant's positive story about an area, as we have done previously.</p>
7. Page 28	<p>Adverts need more tailoring rather than stock advert – with more detailed and better information on local facilities. More use of positive / happy images</p>	<p>We now have a new website for advertising our properties and have changed the way we advertise them. The adverts now include live internet links to local services/information regarding the area, such as, doctors, schools, police, NHS, etc.</p>
8.	<p>Promote good things about an area to counter negative publicity, promote activities within the area that are appropriate for the age profile – lunch club, toddler groups. Use all Council services in a multiagency approach</p>	<p>See recommendation 6. Neighbourhood Teams provide information to customers in a variety of formats. This information needs reviewing on a regular basis.</p>

9.	Explore idea of using “estate champions” and TARA produced information leaflets. Encourage better press and PR to promote areas	As Housing plus is embedded into the way we deliver the service, Patch Officers will become “champions” on their patch/estates. We are not quite there yet, but Neighbourhood Teams are progressing this and clearly there is a link to point 8 above.
10.	Use both external and internal photos and video tours / You Tube to show prospective tenants an idea of the style of the property	See recommendation 7, the new website enables to advertise properties by uploading multiple photographs. This is difficult as the advert cycle runs alongside the repairs work which means that at the time the photo is taken is before the repair work, making them look less appealing. We are currently looking at uploading more photos for properties where they have to be readvertised or are particularly hard to let.
Page 29 11.	Use clearer names to describe the area where properties are and more localised advertising	We actually advertise the street name and estate on property adverts we don't put the actual number of the property as there are often tenant still in residence at the point of advertising. However we feel that there is sufficient information for customers to understand the location of the property we are advertising.
12.	Provide more information on the property and garden e.g. room sizes / steps	See also recommendation 10. We currently advertise using an external photo and mention the type of parking outside the property, garden space and note in the advert if the room sizes in the property are particularly small.
13.	The website could be more attractive with better use of photos	We have recently updated our website which is now a more user friendly and offers a fresher and clearer service. Many of our properties are advertised by Housing associations and while we do not control the content they place in their adverts we are also taking steps to encourage them to include photos in every advert.

14.	Ask for refusal reasons a week after refusal as some customers may have provided an “on the spot” answer that is not genuine. Make better use/ analysis of refusal data	We now analyse the refusal reasons given when a customer declines a property, this has helped us to understand any issues with the property or improvements that could help to make the property more appealing.
15.	Talk to multiple bidders about their needs to help them bid more appropriately and make it clearer that you don't have to bid for 3 properties per week	The current policy allows applicants to place up to 3 bids each week. However in April 2016, the Council's Allocations Policy was implemented which introduced sanctions for applicants who bid and refused an offer of accommodation. These sanctions can lead to reduced preference on or exclusion from the housing register for those who refuse reasonable offers.
16.	Manage tenancies in a way that limits damage caused in properties including the use of annual tenancy visits	This is something again that Neighbourhoods Teams are working on. Annual visits are taking place but too early to measure any impact on vacant's at the moment.
17.	Ensure that information about flexibility and discretion about bedroom sizes is made available to applicants	A copy of the Council's allocation Policy is available to download from the Sheffield Property Shop website. The details of when discretion may be considered is contained in the Allocations Policy. Officers are also alert to when it may be appropriate to consider discretion. All applicants are advised of which size properties they are eligible for when they join the housing register and there are further details on the website. .
18.	Retain furnished accommodation as an option	We are continuing to deliver furnished accommodation to vulnerable people who meet the criteria. We hold a stock of furnished properties and will furnish properties on demand if necessary. The impact of Welfare Reform changes is likely to impact on our customers so we are ensuring that it is affordable for customers and taking this into consideration in managing the stock of furnished vacants. We are building links with the Neighbourhood Teams and Housing Plus model to achieve this.

19.	Look at how private landlords are letting properties in Hard to Let areas and think and act more like a letting agent	<p><i>See recommendation 5.</i></p> <p>We network with other social housing providers to understand comparators within this area of work. Public sector housing has different challenges and more restraints than successful private landlords. We also work alongside our private rented team who work with private landlords on the City as they are able to access stock in different, often high demand, areas.</p>
20.	Training of frontline staff could be enhanced to give them more property knowledge and FAQs should be produced for Them	<p>We have recently undertaken a full training programme for all front line and neighbourhood staff to ensure that they fully able to respond to queries and offer advice on housing options. Our website also contains frequently asked questions (FAQ's) to help both customers and support staff and we are further exploring how we can use the news facility and improve information on our website.</p>

This page is intentionally left blank