Report to Customers and Communities Committee

6 November 2014

Title:	Response to TALISMAN Review of the Void Service
Report of:	Director of Customers and Communities

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the committee with a formal response to the recommendations made in the TALISMAN review of the void service.

Background

2. At its meeting on 11 September 2014, the committee received a report from TALISMAN (Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management Panel) on their review of how voids are managed.

3. The review highlighted 7 areas of good practice and made 23 recommendations which TALISMAN felt could result in cost savings and an improved service.

4. The scope of the recommendations covers a wider range of issues than those managed by the TGHC void team, and extends to areas of tenancy management that can have an impact on vacant property management.

5. In September the committee discussed that whilst some of the recommendations could quickly be implemented, others would have budgetary implications or may require significant changes to working practices across a number of services.

Response to recommendations

6. Officers met with representatives of TALISMAN on 21 October to discuss the recommendations. The Appendix to this report contains the formal response, and is set out in terms of those that have already been implemented, those that are planned, those that would require wider changes to enable implementation, and finally those that are not to be implemented (with details of the alternative action).

7. The wider implications of our approach to tenancy management are already in discussion as part of our objective setting and planning for the next business plan. This work is focused on the strategic objective of sustaining tenancies and will be informed by the recommendations identified by TALISMAN.

8. At the meeting on 21 October, the representatives from TALISMAN said that they were satisfied with the draft response and our approach to the recommendations.

Link to Values

9. This report relates to the company values of: -
    - Being a listening and learning organisation
    - Being honest, accountable and transparent
    - Being customer focused, innovative and professional

Impact on tenants

10. TALISMAN stated in their original report that their focus was to drive forward service improvements that would improve the lives of customers.

Risk Management Implications

11. This report relates to operational risks in:
    - Voids (not achieving lettable standard)
    - Lettings (properties becoming difficult to let)
    - Repairs (overspending repairs budget)

Financial Implications

12. There are no direct financial implications in the recommendations implemented to date. However, there may be financial implications associated with other recommendations such as decoration vouchers, painting of vacant properties, recovery of rechargeable repairs and the wider aspects of tenancy management. These will be considered as the proposals develop, and in the context of available budgets.

Equality and Diversity Implications

13. There are no direct implications arising from this report.

Value for Money Implications

14. Value for money will be a key focus in the implementation of recommendations.

Health Implications

15. There are no direct implications arising from this report.

Environmental Implications

16. There are no direct environmental implications as a result of this review.

Consultation carried out

17. TALISMAN carried out the review over a period of 8 months and consulted with officers from TGHC and Mears as well as visiting vacant properties and scrutinising customer satisfaction surveys. The formal response to recommendations was discussed with TALISMAN on 21 October.

Recommendation

18. The committee are asked for their views on the response to the TALISMAN review of the void service

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Service Feedback to committee on TALISMAN recommendations

Service Area	Void Service
Date of response to committee	6th November 2014

Recommendation	How is this to be implemented? (or if it can't be explain the reasons for this including any further discussions with TALISMAN)	Lead service	Target date for completion	Where will progress be reported? (e.g. committee, relevant SIG etc)
Recommendation already implemented				
Position statements should be written for every service area as soon as possible at the start of the financial year.	The "Void" service area is part of the overall Repair Management Service and a position statement for this is produced at the start of each year as part of the preparation for the annual report. For this review, a statement focusing just on voids was also requested and was provided (For any service, if TALISMAN requires a bespoke statement then this will be produced by the Service Manager at the commencement of any future review.)	Phil Hogg/Russell Urwin	Complete	Used to formulate the Annual Report. Annual report sent to all tenants.
The term voids be replaced, suggest 'Empty or vacated property'. This may clarify the term for tenants.	Communications team have used the term empty property or vacant property on Housing Company website and will consider for future publications.	Mark Charlton / Ian Clarkin	Complete	Visible on the website and available to all tenants

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Recommendation	How is this to be implemented? (or if it can't be explain the reasons for this including any further discussions with TALISMAN)	Lead service	Target date for completion	Where will progress be reported? (e.g. committee, relevant SIG etc)
First visit to all vacated properties by both TGHC and Mears representatives and a relet category agreed.	Joint inspections have been in place since 19 May 2014. We will continue to monitor the number of category variations after initial inspection to see if this change has been successful. Findings to date show an improvement in the accuracy of the first variation.	Mark Charlton	Complete	Performance monitored by Company/Council Core Group and reported to Committee
Aim to visit all outgoing tenants' homes before the end of their tenancy to encourage them to leave the property in a reasonable condition in accordance with the tenancy agreement, to leave it in a good decorative order, clean and safe conditions.	We currently aim to complete visits to all tenants before tenancies end. Visits are completed on 100% of transfers, however, abandoned properties, evictions and deaths are not visited prior to tenancy end.	Jackie Armstrong	Complete	Ending your tenancy leaflet and termination procedure
Collect and collate failure information over areas of dispute e.g washing machine plumbing holes. Look at reasons for failing lettable standard as this leads to delay and loss of income –identify if there could be a case for more flexibility such as doing some remedial work after tenant has moved in.	Lettable Standard "fails" have been added to the set weekly agenda for the operational meeting between TGHC and Mears. Fails will therefore be discussed on a weekly basis with trend information collated on a monthly basis. Mears have implemented a new procedure in which all fails are to be discussed between area Supervisor and Mears Responsive Maintenance and Void Manager.	Mark Charlton	Complete	Operational / Partnership meetings Performance monitored by Company/Council Core Group and reported to Committee

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	A review of tenant satisfaction is completed on a quarterly basis. Satisfaction remains above 95%, we continue to monitor dissatisfaction.

Joint handovers have been introduced during October. We will continue to further monitor fails and ensure learning.

A review of the current performance indicators will be reviewed by March 2015 in line with any future contract extensions or tender exercises. | | | |
| TGHC and Mears void officers to have regular joint meetings. A list of priority jobs to be shared weekly between TGHC and Mears. | Systems are in place to monitor properties undergoing work with Mears. A report is shared between the partnership on a weekly basis.

Properties are discussed on a weekly basis with attendance required according to discussions. | Mark Charlton | Complete | Company/Council Core Group in contract review |
| The Panel had noted that as a result of Welfare Reform, some property types were not being advertised due to their current difficulty to let, for example 2-bed flats.

Produce regular updates around properties which are taking longer to | All available properties are being actively advertised, but we limit the number of adverts of the same type in each block in any week

Where there are high levels of empty properties in one location, we may defer the relet process until other | Jackie Armstrong | Completed and ongoing | Company/Council and reported to Customers and Communities Committee |

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let and what the company is doing to tackle this issue.	similar properties have been let. A warning marker is built into Northgate showing properties defined as difficult to let. This is monitored and reported to Gateshead Council. Lettings team are working with a sub-regional group on approaches to tackle low demand and the impacts of welfare reform. Internally we are piloting new techniques to encourage lettings to inform future approaches to marketing. For example, open house viewings, additional décor or carpets.			
Collection of keys to be centralised and limited to two collections per day. Suggest that this should be linked to delivery of internal post.	Upon ending of a tenancy a customer has the right to hand keys in at all offices across the Borough. Using the internal post would cause delays in the void process. Discussions have led to process changes which have been implemented. Mears aim to collect keys in a structured way to ensure efficient use of resources. We continue to monitor any delays and will amend processes accordingly in the future.	Mark Charlton	Complete	Operational / Partnership meetings

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For future implementation				
Redecoration voucher scheme to be reviewed and alternatives considered to see if it could offer better value for money for the company and tenants. Currently relies of the tenants' DIY skills being adequate.	Agree we should review the décor voucher scheme. We have a number of procurement exercises that will be commenced in this financial year including Décor vouchers, security and Energy Performance Certificates.	Simon Chrisp	April 2015	Home SIG, Resources and Customers and Communities Committee on policy changes
Suggest that would be more cost effective if Mears could apply one coat of emulsion in one colour to all walls and one coat of undercoat and gloss to all woodwork. This would ensure a good visual effect. Consider that Mears should decorate all sheltered, elderly and vulnerable tenants properties and consider redecorating all relet, not least to set the standard showing how properties should be left by tenants.	Cost analysis exercise to be completed to assess the value of the vouchers per empty property (given out to customers) against the cost of actual redecoration in properties. Costing information and analysis will be required before any changes could be made to the current process. An evaluation of the results will be required in line with current available budgets.	Mark Charlton / Shaun Rowell	January 2015	Home SIG
To review the Lettable Standard leaflet every two years.	Agreed that the leaflet should be reviewed on a more regular basis. Lettable Standard review to be added to the Home SIG agendas.	Mark Charlton	April 2015	Home SIG, Customers and Communities Committee on policy changes

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A request for further information regarding one of the empty properties visited identified that the local housing offices do not keep copies of references given to other housing providers when a former tenant moves out of the borough. The former tenant had been recharged for poor quality DIY work carried out to the property, however it was not possible to check whether the housing provider had requested this information as part of the reference. All requests for references from other housing providers be recorded by a Senior Lettings Officer and details be held on file.	A copy of all future references will be stored electronically in Northgate against the individual.	Craig Gandy	December 2014	N/A
It needed to be made clear to tenants the standard of property expected when tenant leaves the property. Produce a property standard leaflet for new and transferring residents. To be drawn up, monitored and reviewed with residents. To be issued to a tenant when they put in their four weeks' notice.	Review the "ending your tenancy" booklet in line with the rechargeable repairs review with consultation from customers. Clarity to be given with regards to the expectation on customers in terms of final property condition.	Jonathan Graham	April 2015	Home SIG consultation and feedback

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Future Consideration				
The Company currently doesn't always post inspect work where a tenant has had permission for improvements or alterations. Ensure that inspections are carried out to make sure work has been done correctly to avoid remedial works when the property becomes empty.	We currently inspect all high risk permission requests. Items such as gas, electric or structural changes would be inspected. Lower level permissions are inspected on a risk based approach, for example permission for fences or built in wardrobes. A review group would be set up to consider the policy and procedures behind permissions and alterations.	Andrew Mason / Ian Burton	TBC	Home SIG, Customers and Communities Committee on policy changes
All residents to receive an annual visit to check on the state and upkeep of the property. This is a fundamental requirement of asset management, both TGHC and Mears officers agreed with this approach. Identify and prioritise visits to at risk tenants, e.g young and first time tenants, single parents and residents from out of the area without references.	A range of tenancy visits are currently carried out in properties to enable us to identify any property or tenancy issues. External learning is underway to inform how others manage such aspects. Findings will form the basis of a review to develop a risk based tenancy visit programme. Potential to explore opportunities around working with external partners.	Julie McCartney	TBC	SIG consultation and Committee
Rechargeable work agreed and invoiced before tenant vacates the property and photographic evidence to be taken.	Rechargeable repairs are currently applied via repairs in line with the repair policy. We will undertake discussions with Home SIG and present options to	Jonathan Graham	TBC	Home SIG for consultation Report to

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	Gateshead Council for review. We are introducing mobile technology to Void Officers which will allow a potentially simplified process to be adopted. For example, photographic evidence collection and sharing.			Committee
Not to be implemented				
Review the definition for Void relet times and consider some exclusions from this calculation e.g renewal of kitchens where parts take 10 days or more to come into stock, or properties with damp issues requiring remedial works. There is a case for looking at problems caused by dampness and old heating systems on a larger scale as this comes up frequently as the cause of most work required bringing property up to lettable standard.	Exclusion from the Repair Partner working period is not viable as it would fail to show the true reflection of performance. The Key Performance Indicator showing time taken from void to let includes properties where exclusion (exclusion based on benchmarking guideline definition) has been made. Performance is calculated on the average time taken to complete all raised jobs. Fails against target information is used to ensure learning. Clarity around procedures and categories has explained the increase in timescales for dampness during winter months to allow sufficient drying out time.	Mark Charlton		Performance monitored by Company/Council Core Group and reported to Committee

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	Trend information around stock availability and delays is tabled at the Partnership Value Engineering Group with efficiencies and VFM savings being identified. Stock condition surveys are to be commissioned by TGHC to provide accurate information on stock. Issues identified may inform future investment.			
Local performance targets for time taken to make property ready to let and to let property once it is handed over.	(Partially already implemented) We have a suite of Key Performance Indicators (PIs) with targets that are agreed with Gateshead Council and that can be benchmarked with other organisations. The key PI for letting properties is "Average number of calendar days taken to let a property" (ie from when one tenancy ends, until the next one begins) We break this down into smaller elements and measure performance against each element (so we are always aware of the average time to make ready to let, and then to let).			Performance monitored by Company/Council Core Group and reported to Committee

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	There are targets for the time to prepare the property to the lettable standard for each category of work, but we do not have local targets for the time taken to then let, as this is subject to patterns of demand for properties. We do however set targets for each small step in the process in order to avoid delays(eg time to inspect property once keys available; time taken to shortlist bidders after advert closes).			