

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 8 January 2014

CONTACT OFFICER: Neil Aves – Assistant Director, Housing and Environment
(For all enquiries) (01753) 875263

WARD(S): All

PORTFOLIO: Councillor James Swindlehurst – Neighbourhoods and Regeneration

PART I **FOR CONSIDERATION & COMMENT**

THE VOIDS PROCESS AND THE RE-ALLOCATION OF EMPTY COUNCIL HOMES

1 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide members with an overview of current service performance achieved by the Council in relation to the repair, clearance and reallocation of council houses.

2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

That the Panel discuss the information provided and in particular the current status of the service together with the expectation of improvements within future years.

3 The Sustainable Community Strategy, the JSNA and the Corporate Plan

3a. Sustainable Community Strategy Priorities

The quality of and access to housing is a key priority for the council. Slough's Wellbeing Strategy names housing as one of five priorities with the vision that:

“By 2028 Slough will possess a strong, attractive and balanced housing market which recognises the importance of housing in supporting economic growth.”

Good quality, readily available housing is central to the health and wellbeing of the population; it gives the ability to access work and for older residents suitably located and adapted dwellings provide a safe environment for retained independence.

3b. Sustainable Community Strategy: Cross-Cutting themes

Residents who are adequately housed, and feel safe are able to take pride in their community and work to improve the image of the town as well as improving their own quality of life and life chances.

3c. **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)**

Housing is a contributory factor to the wellbeing of Slough residents, and the provision of any form of housing to those in need supports the priorities in the JSNA and it contributes to reducing inequalities in health by avoiding the occupation of poor quality sub-standard housing.

3d **Corporate Plan 2013/14**

The project contributes to the priorities in the Corporate Plan by improving the customer experience by ensuring that the available services and facilities are responsive to the demands of local residents.

4 **Other Implications**

(a) Financial

There are no additional financial implications relating to this report.

(b) Risk Management

This report records the historic transition from Sheltered Housing through to Supported Housing and beyond and as such is purely retrospective and without associated risk.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no human rights implications for this report.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

As a reference report this does not make any recommendations as to future operation of the service or of policy change. Should changes be proposed in future an EIA will be completed at that stage.

5 **Supporting Information**

- 5.1 When a Council tenancy is ended and a property becomes vacant, the Allocations and Voids team within Housing Services visit the property to ensure the attribute details of the property are correct, for example has the property been adapted, are there any additional out buildings, has a large bedroom been subdivided into two.
- 5.2 The property is then passed to Interserve the Council's measured term, responsive repairs contractor who also has responsibility for void refurbishment. The specification and extent of this work can of course vary from property to property and if the home has not had the benefit of Decent Homes work the opportunity is taken to complete this while it is empty.
- 5.3 Once Interserve have completed the necessary works, the property is passed back to the Allocations and Voids team so that they can allocate the property to a household from the Council's housing register. However, although a simple process in theory there are numerous complications.

- 5.4 The voids process is measured by Housemark (formerly BVPI 212) and defined as 'the time in calendar days from the date when the tenancy is terminated up to and including the date the new tenancy agreement starts'. This definition is a standard industry definition.
- 5.5 The performance for Slough for April 2012 to April 2013 was 33.60 days and for the previous year April 2011 to April 2012 was 29.64 days. Both figures are considered lowest quartile performance when compared to other similar sized organisations while top quartile performance is around 12.90 days.
- 5.6 In breaking down the data, there are clear performance issues with the repairs performance of the Council contractor Interserve. On average a void took 28.87 days to complete in the last financial year representing bottom quartile performance. Whereas the average time taken to actually re-allocate a home by the Allocations and Voids team is 4.73 days, which is upper quartile performance.
- 5.7 In mitigation, many of the voids presented to Interserve do require a full decent homes upgrade of affordable warmth, new kitchens or bathrooms rather than 'a lick of paint' and while some authorities may exclude performance on such voids from their reported figures, classifying them as long-term voids, Slough prefers to report performance in its purest form so that we can fully appreciate the cost and resource implications of managing the stock.
- 5.8 There are a number of reasons for this poor performance.
- The initial contract signed with Interserve dates back to February 2002 and therefore understandably has to be put in the context of its operational era. However the initial void performance as stated in the contract for Interserve was 15 days, reducing down to 10 after 3 years. A contract variation was signed on 25 April 2006 which essentially gave full control of voids performance back to Interserve and no longer were they obliged to keep to the original performance in the Contract.
 - Clearly contract monitoring has not been fully robust as to hold the contractor to meeting the requirements of performance.
 - The voids and repairs function are the responsibility of Property Services and since 2011 no longer a Housing Service function which is contrary to best practice among stock owning authorities with top quartile performance. While this separation alone should not result in bottom quartile performance, communication across different office buildings and teams with different priorities does add an additional factor into an already difficult relationship with Interserve.
 - The regular fortnightly voids liaison meetings with Interserve are managed by the Allocations and Voids Team, who do not manage the contract and these meetings have not been attended by representatives of Property Services. This creates another disjoin in performance.
 - Interserve regularly state that sub-contractors are not available or are performing poorly, that they have high levels of sickness, that there are a shortage of specific or key trades and so on.

- In tandem with the poor performance, the quality of many 'completed' voids is poor with contractual obligations only set at a barely lettable standard. Even allowing for this a significant number of properties are rejected by the Voids and Allocations team as not being acceptable and are returned for further work. Despite this check, customers often complain or even refuse properties despite being in housing need.

6 **Looking to the future**

- 6.1 This report has focussed on the negative aspects of the voids management process however it would be unfair not to reflect on the massive improvements which have been made over the life of the Interserve contract. Just prior to the launch of People 1st in 2005, voids performance was around 85 days and for one particular month peaked at over 100 days, representing significant loss of rental income and delays in re-housing needy households from inappropriate temporary accommodation. The current performance, while not acceptable is still significantly better than in the past.
- 6.2 The council is approaching the end of the contract with Interserve and will soon have the opportunity to reconsider how the voids process is operated and managed, clearly a more responsive, efficient service is a must, but similarly the actual standard of voids and quality of workmanship needs to be enhanced as well.
- 6.3 In preparation, the Customer Senate are already reviewing current voids and they have previously completed a review of the responsive repairs service as reported to the panel earlier this year. With the adoption of the new allocations policy, the future focus of allocating the available homes will be to existing tenants, as a reward for good behaviour, to those who have shown the ability to look after their existing homes and to maintain their tenancies without impacting upon their neighbours or the service. Clearly this initiative will fall flat if the reward for maintaining an existing home is the offer of one in a decrepit state.

7 **Conclusions**

- 7.1 Slough will continue to perform at bottom quartile performance on voids, with poor quality voids with the present contract and structural arrangements. In a relatively short time frame the contractual shortcomings can be resolved through re-procurement and with proposals already being implemented by the Strategic Director of Regeneration, Housing & Resources in restructuring Property Services, Housing Service will be increasingly responsible for the customer relationship for both the voids and the 20,000+ response repairs carried out each year. This will lead to an operation which will see voids of an agreed standard being returned to the occupied housing stock in an agreed timescale thereby increasing the rent roll to maintain and enhance services further.

8 **Background Papers**

None.