

## INTERIM UPDATE REPORT - RECOMMENDATION OF THE HOUSING VOIDS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	Providing high quality council homes and landlord services
<b>Relevant Ward Member(s):</b>	N/A
<b>Date of consultation with Ward Member(s):</b>	N/A
<b>Exempt Information:</b>	No

### 1 Summary

- 1.1 In 2019, the Scrutiny Committee undertook a comprehensive piece of task and finish work in relation to the Housing Service's void management function. The recommendations from Scrutiny Committee were accepted by Cabinet on 22 January 2020 ([link to report](#)):
- 1.2 This report seeks to provide Scrutiny Committee with an update in relation to those actions, especially in the context of the impact of the Covid-19, and give additional context following the restructure of the Council's front-facing services in April 2020 and subsequent operational changes that are related to void management and performance.

### 2 Recommendation(s)

**That Committee:**

**Notes the content of the report**

4. **Provides comment on progress in relation to previous recommendations and current Covid-19 impact**

### 3 Current Context and Performance

- 3.1 In common with all landlords, the Covid-19 crisis has impacted the Council's landlord function. The following key points are most significant from the point-of-view of the void function:
- a) Suspension of the Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme with effect from March – a limited number of re-lets have been done throughout the lockdown period, primarily of

temporary accommodation. Given the extension of the Council's responsibilities to homeless households (in effect, meaning the Council has a duty to anyone without settled accommodation, regardless of their priority-need status) and the knock-on increase in nightly paid accommodation, the operational approach has focussed on direct lets to reduce the need for nightly paid. From August 2020, a proportion of properties are being advertised for bidding with others held back for direct let.

- b) Reduction in tenancies being terminated – the cessation of moves generally has reduced the number of tenants giving notice.
- c) Contractor impact – the lockdown impacted initially as safe systems of work needed to be introduced. There was also a significant issue with materials supply as builders merchants closed and/or priority was given to emergency works in tenanted properties.
- d) Internal Council impact – again, lockdown necessitated the introduction of new ways of working as Officers worked from home. The lockdown in March also impeded the process review that was underway with the support of the external change consultant.
- e) Recovery Planning - the work now going on in terms of planning for Recovery will continue to impact, although this comes with an opportunity to embed some principles, including reducing the reliance on nightly paid temporary accommodation

### 3.2 **Restructure and New Ways of Working**

Following the Corporate restructure and appointment of a new Director of Housing and Communities from April 2020 (also of course in the midst of the Council's response to Covid-19), there have been a number of operational changes, reflecting the importance of void management as a cross-cutting landlord function.

Critically, recruitment to the Housing Asset Management function has continued and that team now has three Voids/Repairs Officers in post. This has considerably improved the capacity for void inspection and contractor management. In addition, some interim changes are being undertaken to increase the capacity of the Tenancy Management function (recruitment of a temporary Senior Housing Officer and a Housing Assistant).

Since June a weekly Void Working Group, chaired by the Director of Housing and Communities and with representatives from Housing Options, Housing Management, and Housing Asset Management, has been created to:

- a. Drive change to the void function with all teams involved in changes to the void process, giving ownership and buy-in;
- b. Give control and oversight to how we manage temporary accommodation within our own stock;
- c. Inform the build of the void process workflow on Northgate;
- d. Improve reporting and "real time" information flow;
- e. Improve quality of the lettings process – "right first time";
- f. Ensure we change the tenancy termination processes to be smooth and clean;
- g. Identify and manage contractor issues

Given the above, the team has developed the following mission statement:

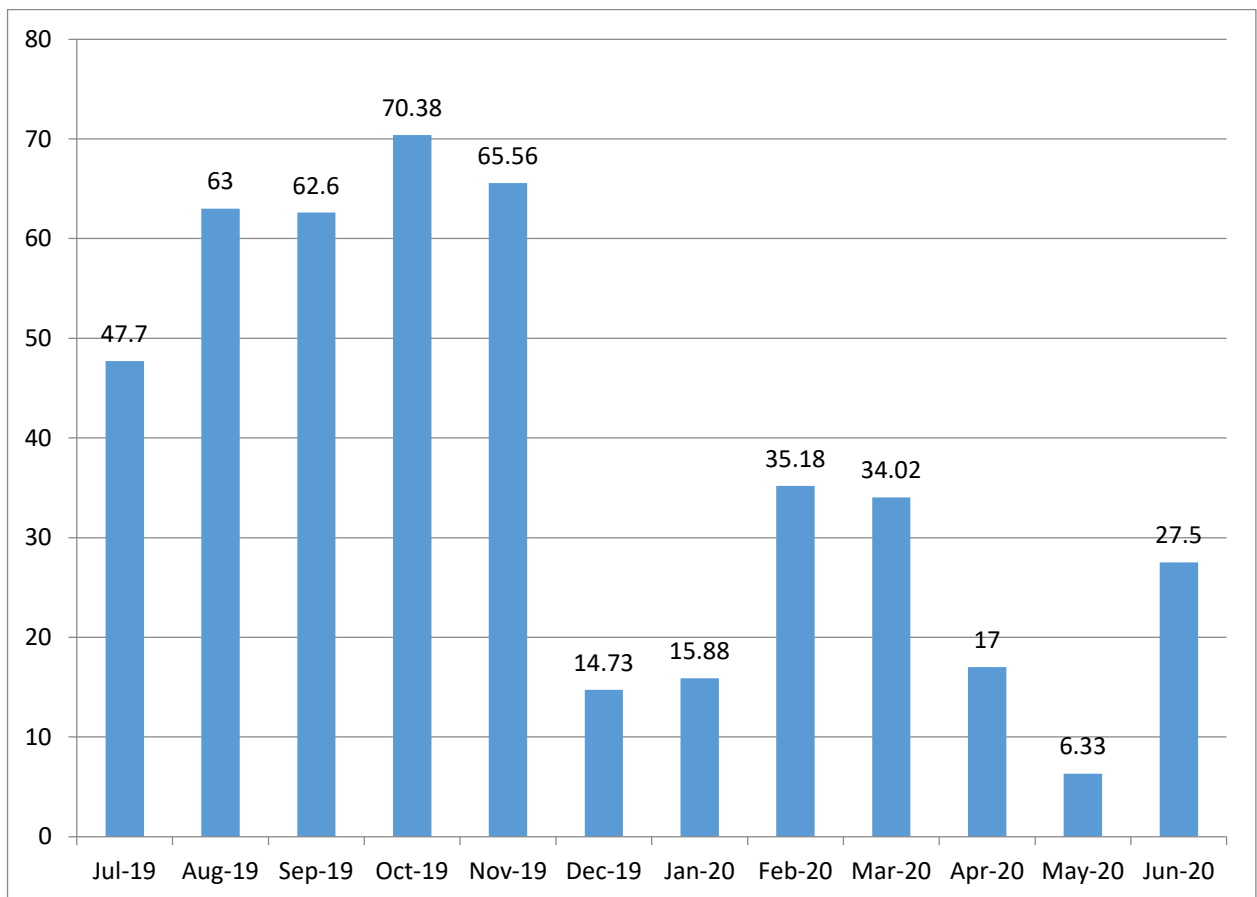
*Working as one team to minimise loss to the Council through the efficient letting of homes at the right time to the required standard:*

- *Working as one team – taking collective responsibility and being accountable for our own actions; sharing information and using common data sources*
- *Minimise loss – this includes rent loss; Council Tax charges; avoiding expensive B&B; avoiding refusals; and avoiding tenancies starting with a poor experience that leads to failure*
- *Efficient letting – taking into account: void turnaround times; void expenditure; balancing major works against doing the minimum required; avoiding refusals*
- *Right time – working to consistent timescales and delivering to the targets given*
- *Required standard - meeting or exceeding the basic re-let standard, including cleanliness, and meeting all landlord statutory requirements (including: gas; electric; water safety; and EPC).*

These operational meetings give opportunity for discussion of existing custom and practice and are used to capture issues for discussion with the Tenant Forum Executive Committee thereby supporting the development of a Void Policy.

### 3.3 Current performance

The table below shows the average turnaround time, month-by-month, over the previous twelve months:



The Void Working Group will over the next few weeks focus in on the development of a better suite of operational indicators to understand void flow. In addition, the review of corporate performance indicators necessitated by the new corporate plan will allow a fresh approach in this area.

## 4 Void Task and Finish Group recommendations

4.1 For ease, these are tabulated below with comment provided:

<p>1) A review of the voids module within the Northgate Housing Management System is undertaken and recommendations proposed to Senior Leadership Team as to how an improved system can be implemented along with revenue expenditure required.</p>	<p>Northgate development is key, including data quality, reporting, and a voids workflow. This is being managed operationally through the Void Working Group and strategically through the Customer and Digital Improvement Board</p>
<p>2) To consult tenants in relation to the implementation of a Golden Goodbye scheme that incentivises tenants to return their home in a good standard that in turn reduces void time and void costs to Melton Borough Council.</p>	<p>There is some debate in the sector at present about the efficacy of these schemes – Irwell Valley Housing introduced the first some years ago and it was reportedly a great success, with others following. There would be a real challenge managing a scheme due to the lack of a clear re-let standard and the poor Decent Homes performance, and this would distort an understanding of its efficacy. It is respectfully suggested this is trialled late in 2021/22.</p>
<p>3) Subject to the outcomes of this consultation, to introduce the Golden Goodbye Scheme on a temporary basis for one year after which time continuation of the scheme to depend on the evaluation of outcomes and success factors.</p>	<p>As above</p>
<p>4) The development of a framework that includes TFEC in the monthly monitoring of voids and includes a written protocol from both parties so as to clarify expectations.</p>	<p>TFEC's role and capacity is hampered due to lockdown and lack of active members at present. They will be heavily involved in Policy development in the next few months as noted above.</p>
<p>5) To reduce, with the aim of eliminating, use of private Bed and Breakfasts by introducing alternatives with options developed by officers for consideration by Cabinet by the end of July 2020.</p>	<p>Absolutely critical. Since March, the Council increased temporary accommodation in its own stock and the Covid-19 Recovery actions will allow this to expand.</p>
<p>6) To review contract arrangements with contractors to ensure sufficient quality and control and explore the potential to move to a single trusted contractor to manage all aspects of voids work.</p>	<p>Through the Void Working Group, there is active management of the Axis contract taking place, and quality and performance issues are to be escalated at a senior level.</p>
<p>7) A review of the Allocations Policy by July 2020.</p>	<p>This was a very challenging timescale – to review an Allocations Policy typically takes 12 months due to the extensive consultation periods and level of research required. Given the scope of the actions post-Covid-19, it is suggested a reasonable approach is to make an assessment of what needs urgent change and obtain sign-off for this, subject to a full review in 2021/22.</p>
<p>8) The development and implementation of a new Voids Policy by July 2020.</p>	<p>There are significant gaps in the Council's landlord policy framework in a number of high-risk areas. A Voids Policy (including re-let standard) will be brought forward by the end of the financial year.</p>

9) The implementation of new Tenant visits on occupation and again after 6 weeks.	Covid 19 has and continues to restrict home visits, this will be picked up and restored through the re-start plans, dependent on lockdown continuing to ease.
10) To provide an interim report to Scrutiny Committee in July 2020 detailing progress against recommendations and a full report in January 2021 to evidence the impact of improvements.	A further report will be provided to Scrutiny in January 2021.

## 5 Financial Implications

*HRA monitoring processes identifies variations from planned void expenditure and rent loss – this is reported through corporate budget monitoring*

**Financial Implications reviewed by:** Director for Corporate Services

## 6 Legal and Governance Implications

6.1 The report is for information purposes only. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

**Legal Implications reviewed by:** N/A

<b>Report Author and Chief Officer:</b>	<b>Andrew Cotton</b>
<b>Report Author Contact Details:</b>	01664 502502 <a href="mailto:acotton@melton.gov.uk">acotton@melton.gov.uk</a>