



Voids Investigation

May 2019

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Appendices A - F

These appendices are available upon request from Kelly Shirley, Policy, Service Development and Partnerships Officer, RBK Council.

INTRODUCTION

The Kingston Residents Scrutiny Panel, KRiSP is an autonomous Panel of council tenants and leaseholders set up by the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Council in conjunction with the Kingston Federation of Residents. The role of KRiSP is to investigate and review the Council's housing services and to propose improvements that will be of benefit to all residents. KRiSP is central to the Council's 'Resident Involvement Framework' and has a commitment to co-regulation. It was formed in October 2013 and is currently composed of 8 tenants and leaseholders.

The role of KRiSP is to carry out service investigations and report on them to the Council. This is KRiSP's ninth investigation and the area of voids was chosen.

The KRiSP Investigation Panel comprised Raewyn Hammond, David Miller, Geof Yates, David West, Jackie Paddon, Mohammed Ali, Gill Willson and Sian Smith.

The Panel was supported by Kelly Shirley from the Council along with mentoring support from Phil Morgan. The KRiSP Investigation Panel would like to thank all the members of staff and residents who gave up their time freely to support this investigation.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Firstly it must be acknowledged that this has been the most difficult investigation that KRiSP has attempted to date. While understanding that Housing Staff are under intense pressure to perform their daily tasks due to cuts within staffing and budgets it has become apparent that some, although by no means all, have found it difficult to provide us with the access and assistance required to enable us to conduct a meaningful appraisal. Of particular concern to KRiSP has been our inability to gain access to any Property Inspections and a suggestion that unlike previous investigations where staff volunteered items that related to the subject being covered we have only been given documents which we have specifically requested.

KRiSP were extremely pleased to see that work was already underway on a proposed Policy Document and we appreciate it being delayed to await the delivery of this report. This approach compares most favourably with that of some other councils that we looked at who did not appear to have any formalised documentation relating to Voids.

Overall there is some way to go in ensuring that there is a clear customer focus in the voids process. We found a rigidity on letters, notice period and handing in of keys which were unhelpful and have proposed that these be reviewed. There was an instance of a tenant waiting 70 days for their property to become available. There were two examples of new tenants living in properties which they reported as being in a poor state. Given the recent Dispatches programme on Channel 4 this represents a reputational risk to the Council.

Whilst welcoming the introduction of recharges we felt that there should be an appeals process in place, and that progress on both income and the proportion of properties being returned in a satisfactory state should be monitored.

There is clearly a growing issue for Sheltered Housing where there are shared facilities which no longer meet the expectations of prospective sheltered tenants. This needs reviewing with the possible introduction of an Options Appraisal.

Finally there is an opportunity to introduce an inspection at the point of notification. This would allow early assessment of the condition of the state of the property for reletting and early notification of recharges that may be due.

METHODOLOGY

The Panel agreed the following three objectives:

1. To consider timescales involved in voids
2. To consider costs involved in voids
3. To review the customer experience in the voids process

This review covers both General needs and Sheltered Accommodation

The Panel carried out the following tasks:

Desk Top Review which considered the following documents

- Draft Voids Policy
- Draft Voids Process
- Annual Void Report 2017/18
- Internal Void Performance Reports April to September 2018
- Housemark report (on comparisons with other landlords)
- Introductory Tenancy Agreement and Secure Tenancy Agreement
- Letters to residents
 - Tenancy Termination due to death
 - Tenancy Termination for other reasons
 - Access required for inspection
 - Rechargeable items
- Core Lettings Log
- Housing Allocations Scheme 2017
- The AICC Guide to Understanding Fair Wear and Tear
- Gov. UK Tenancy Agreement – A Guide for Landlords
- Landlord Law Blog
- Regulated Tenancies (published by the Government)
- Copy of a Private Landlords Void Management Visit Report
- Copy of a Private Landlord Check Out Report

Staff Interviews:

- Stewart Toop – Lead contact, giving KRiSP members a presentation on Voids and exchange of emails re PIN numbers.
- Andrew Donaldson - Group Manager, Housing Repairs and Maintenance
- Anthonia Shodiya - RSO (Resident Services Officer)
- Dominic Di Chiara – Repairs and Maintenance, Maintenance Surveyor
- Jacquie Goddard – Allocations Team Leader

- Kate Bowers - RSO
- Lorraine Shaile - Lead Officer, Sheltered Housing

Information from other Councils

- LB Croydon Voids Internal Audit Report
- Extract from Hounslow Housing Strategy
- LB Sutton Allocations Policy
- Interview with LB Croydon

Resident engagement:

- Survey with a limited number of respondents (some of which were also covered below)
- Resident feedback and copies of emails
- Case Study
- Phone call with one new tenant and one family member of a new tenancy



RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is the complete list of recommendations which have been made following the Panel's investigation. The reasons for these recommendations and findings behind these are detailed in the *Findings* section of this report.

1. That the agreed recommendations from this report form part of the revised policy and process. This should include a tenant-friendly version of the process and coverage of probate and intestacy. Co-production - The revised policy and process could be co-produced with tenants and staff. (Ref policy findings 1 - 3).
2. That RB Kingston consider expanding their regular meeting of all staff involved in voids to consider performance, feedback, recharges performance and improvement issues, including those raised during the 6 week tenancy check. Co-production - Use tenant feedback to identify areas for improvement. (Ref performance findings 4-7, 10 and 11).
3. That RB Kingston consider an inspection at the time of notification. This could use a standard form to support staff in identifying issues. (Ref process findings 8-12).
4. That RB Kingston consider providing a document that clearly sets out example recharges and consider a dispute resolution route. Co-production - Route could be co produced with residents. (Ref process finding 11).

5. That RB Kingston consider early release for tenants from the 4 week notice period subject to the property being assessed as satisfactory in the inspection at time of notification and a new tenant being available. (Ref process finding 13).
 6. That RB Kingston consider flexible return date and location for key return for example the option of returning keys to Guildhall 2. (Ref process finding 13).
 7. That RB Kingston consider the use of keysafes for holding keys for use by contractors on void properties. (Ref process finding 15).
 8. That RB Kingston review the current letters to ensure they are sympathetic as well as functional. Co-production - Letters could be co produced with residents. (Ref process finding 17).
 9. That RB Kingston conducts an Option Appraisal for all schemes with shared facilities to consider options (including conversion, redevelopment and do nothing). Co-production - Option Appraisal should be co produced with residents (Ref sheltered housing findings 18-20)
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FINDINGS

Policy

1. There are comprehensive policy and processes in place. They are currently in draft form awaiting this report. KRISP welcome the approach that has been taken.
2. Currently there is no coverage of either probate or intestacy, both of which could result in significant delays and possible distress to relatives.
3. Even during the investigation leading to the report KRISP members had differing levels of understanding of the voids process. This was shared by residents.

Performance (General Needs)

4. Process and KPIs are monitored in real time by line managers and Performance Monitoring Officer. Other Councils also have weekly voids meetings to review progress with a wider remit.
5. It was unclear who has overall responsibility for a particular void property. KRISP notes that there used to be a dedicated voids team, and that there is some staff support for a dedicated team.

6. General Needs voids performance improved in 2017/18 and is meeting target of 23 days turnaround in some months, but not all. The target of 23 days is consistent with other Councils of a similar size. Major Works voids performance for 2017 is variable with results above target of 62 days in May (73 days), July (104 days) and September (100 days).
7. There was a staff proposal for a three-day turnaround for voids.

Process

8. There are currently two PINs issued for some voids. This allows the Council to progress advertising voids whilst tenants are going through their notice period and line up new tenants at the end of the notice period.
9. An inspection should take place at the end of the notice period to allow an assessment to be made on the level of recharges.
10. However for some new tenants there have been issues both with the time taken to complete major works on a property, which has been let to them before the extent of the works has been inspected and ascertained. One resident waited 70 days for their new home. Two others reported a series of profound issues including mould, dangerous patio and footpath, blocked drain, rusted radiators, broken shower seat and loose tiles in bathroom. It was unclear if these had been identified through the 6-week tenancy check, or if that check had taken place.
11. The Council has recently introduced a Recharges Policy. It was said only 10% of properties are returned in a satisfactory condition and the budget now assumes that £108K will be raised through recharges. KRISP have seen no monitoring reports for the effectiveness of the new Policy either in terms of income or improved condition of returned properties. It is also unclear whether there is a route for resolving disputes on recharges.
12. There are examples of private sector void management visits and check out reports.
13. Currently there is a four-week notice period for tenants terminating their tenancy. There are examples from other Councils and the private rented sector of mutual agreement to an earlier termination. However this would be dependent on the property being in a satisfactory state on notification.
14. Tenants terminating their tenancy have to return their keys to the Tadlow office, which is less accessible than Guildhall 2.
15. LB Croydon's approach starts with handing in keys, with locks changed within 24 hours and keys left in a key safe which contractors can use.
16. There was a proposal from staff for virtual tours of voids. This would require either agreement from residents during the proposed inspection at time of notification or when the property was void.

17. The current letters are functional but somewhat curt.

Sheltered Housing

18. The average number of days for Sheltered Housing voids turnaround was poor during 2017/18. Performance was 62 days in May, 49 days in June, 44 days in July, 37 days in August, 35 days in September and 231 days in October.

19. The longest void time to date is 239 days. One flat in Sobraon House was advertised 24 times before the first eligible nomination was received. Another flat at Dowler Court was advertised 26 times. There are sustained issues at schemes such as Charles Sumner House with one delay of 231 days.

20. Feedback from staff is consistent that shared facilities are no longer what most prospective sheltered tenants want and that alternative uses should be considered. Some schemes appear to be allowing non-sheltered residents into flats.

21. There was also feedback about the Housing Options process being on-line and this being a barrier to some potential sheltered residents.

22. Staff also fed back about the costs involved (currently not specified) in conversion and reconversion of sheltered housing bathrooms. One option suggested by a member of staff would be that a wet room is installed as standard with an optional easily removable bath. This could significantly reduce costs whilst supporting choice around whether to have a bath without major works.

Contractor

23. There was good feedback about the relationship with Axis, echoed by the interview with LB Croydon.

LEARNING

KRISP, when reflecting on the investigation, felt there was a lack of co-operation from some areas of the housing department. Previously, on the Storage report, KRISP had raised the issue around the reluctance of some staff to be interviewed.

The Council have committed to providing logistical support for KRISP in the Terms of Reference.

RB Kingston has an excellent record in supporting KRISP. We would like to see that support continue in line with current and future regulatory expectations.

KRISP also notes the difficulties in obtaining survey responses. Only five responses were received. KRISP understands that the total cohort for the survey was only 75. However it is unclear how many surveys were distributed.

KRISP were unable to view recently vacated and to let properties. That hindered the investigation and subsequent report.

KRISP will seek a meeting with the Director of Housing to resolve these concerns. The Council will want to note that the Social Housing Green Paper, issued following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, identified the prospect of there being a “greater ability for the Regulator to scrutinise the performance and arrangements for local authority landlords” like RB Kingston.

CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion relating to Kingston Residents Scrutiny Panel’s investigation into how Kingston Housing manages its Void stock is that this report is possibly the weakest one that KRISP has so far delivered to the Council. There should be no confusion regarding the Recommendations that have arisen from this investigation, they are all relevant and as usual fact based, the problem is the limited access and information provided that has restricted the scope of our report.

Among the issues that we have experienced are a lack of access to any Voids Inspections, despite declaring our willingness to attend at very short notice if informed; Having to rely upon Council Officers to distribute our survey, so as to protect confidentiality, only to discover that some surveys were not sent out until after our initial Report Writing Meeting; The discovery, half way through the process, that officers are using two separate Property Inspection Numbers.

After the investigation was concluded we became aware of an example set of charges used internally by Officers working out the re-charges for a current void. KRiSP members felt that if this document was brought up to date and used on a regular basis it could prove to be a useful tool for Officers involved in the Void process.

With one noticeable exception we were unable to inspect any other housing authorities Voids Process which would lead us to conclude that Kingston maybe leading the field in their approach to this subject although the lack of empathy in attitudes and correspondence may be offsetting this.

In conclusion, the Voids Process appears very much a “work in progress” and if it could be streamlined and simplified to reduce the number of Void days the benefits to RBK should be financially measurable and tenants would benefit as well.

