



**Briefing 15/26 May 2015**

# Long term void properties

To: contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## Key issues

Impact of long term properties on overall turnaround times for all void properties  
No agreed definition of 'long term void' or 'hard to let' properties  
Separating out long term voids is not a helpful approach

## 1. Introduction

APSE carried out a survey about long term void properties and hard to let properties in March 2015 in response to a member query. The intention was to gain some views about how these two categories of properties are defined and managed. 35 responses were received and the main messages which emerged are noted below. This was followed up by a discussion at the Housing, Building Maintenance and Construction Advisory Group in March 2015.

## 2. Long term voids

'Are you aware of any national definition of 'long term void'?

21 (or 62%) replied that they were unaware of any official national definition. Of the 12 that responded that they did know of a national definition, only 4 pointed to a source. These were from the DCLG Local Authority Housing Statistics (DCLG LAHS) return, the old Best Value Performance Indicator guidance, an Audit Scotland report and a definition from an organisation which collects performance information.

There was wide variation in the responses received pointing to an internal definition. Some are based on the time the property is vacant from 3 to 12 weeks. This will depend on local circumstances such as historic investment in the stock, numbers on the waiting list, conditions of the property, general levels of demand, levels of private rented accommodation and other factors.

Other definitions for long term void were based on the amount of work needed to be done with an expectation that the property will be unavailable for a certain amount of time. For example one noted that if a unit requires one major element of work to be completed or renewed such as a rewire or kitchen, then it should be considered long term void.

Another council considered a property should be categorised as long term void if it is unlikely to be re-let within a year. Others based their definitions on the DCLG LAHS definition such as when the property is squatted, awaiting demolition, due to be handed over to the Police or to be used for asylum seekers. Another responded that a long term void is one which is 'anything not being turned around in the usual manner'.

Two authorities responded that they did not separate out long term voids from normal voids.

Clearly there is no universally accepted definition of what a long term void is even though it is very commonly used term and these properties are often blamed for causing bias in performance figures for void property turnaround times.

### **3. Hard to Let**

'Are you aware of any national definition of 'hard to let'?

There was also a wide variety in responses to a question about awareness of a national definition of hard to let. One response noted that a property which is hard to let is going to be a long term void too, once the current tenant leaves. This may be a view understood by some but only one response linked hard to let and long term void properties.

A number of factors were noted as being responsible for properties being hard to let and these included the following:-

- Property type – bedsits and 1 bedroom properties.
- Bedsits with no parking nearby
- The location
- If a unit has been refused 4 times or more
- A poor neighbourhood or anti-social behaviour
- The design of the property

Other responses noted that they had no hard to let properties nor hard to let areas, clearly a factor of local circumstances.

Numerous factors determine what is hard to let from physical attributes of the property to the activities within the neighbourhood. Others responded in terms of hard to let areas rather than individual properties reflecting the neighbourhood and possibly reputation as a significant factor rather than the property itself. This will again depend upon the local context.

There will be different interpretations within the same organisation where there is no clear definition. One of the responses to the question about a definition for hard to let was 'anything not being turned around in the usual manner'.

### **4. Data**

4 out of 35 of those who responded to the survey noted that they couldn't collect data on long term void properties. This may not be a problem for those organisations who do not separate out long term voids however it is expected that any organisation with a housing stock should be able to identify those properties that have been void for a specific period of time or have had a specific set of works carried out. Accurate and timely data is a fundamental element of managing any service and the inability to access the type of data being discussed in this briefing may be indicative of the organisation's ability as a whole to manage data.

### **5. APSE comment**

The management of void properties is a fundamental element in the provision of a housing service. Making properties available for people who need them, keeping as many properties in the active housing stock as possible, maximising rental income and minimising the number of void properties and the amount of time each of them are void are all objectives to be met.

There is a commonly held view that properties which are vacant for a long term should be identified separately. Some think that they should be managed as a distinct group of properties due to the fact that they are not the same as 'normal' voids which can be let quickly. In terms of performance figures long term voids

have an effect on the overall voids figures by making them look poorer than they would otherwise be, i.e. the average property takes longer to turn around when long term voids are included with normal void properties.

Data from Performance Networks, APSE's performance management and benchmarking model, notes a figure of 46 days as the average time to turn around a void property. The average amount of that length of time when the contractor is completing work in the property is 18 days. Some might argue that including long term voids in these figures increases the number of days that a 'normal' void would take and so does not reflect the management of regular (i.e. the majority of) void properties.

A definition of long term void is needed if a distinction is to be made between normal and long term void properties yet the message coming from this survey is that no universally recognised definition exists. The DCLG LAHS guidance is used by a small number of respondents in our survey. The DCLG Local Authority Housing Statistics guidance (2012/13. Guidance notes for completion) states that "Vacant dwellings are also split into rows by how long the dwelling has been vacant. Row 'a' is for 0-6 weeks, row 'b' for between 6 weeks and 6 months and row 'c' covers those that have been long-term vacant (over 6 months)." This qualifies as guidance only and is not in line with some of the internal definitions used by those responding. Indeed 6 months is far longer than some of those internal definitions. Furthermore it is a definition based on time rather than on the amount of work to be done in a property which is how some define long term void.

The point is that there is no accepted definition – indeed there are a wide variety of definitions in use and so no effective way of identifying what a long term void is, other than internal definitions used within local authorities.

There are different levels of demand for housing across the UK and so what qualifies as long term in one place will be different from elsewhere. From a performance management point of view this makes data benchmarking difficult.

What has emerged from the survey and which was highlighted at the Advisory Group discussion was the issue of considering long term void properties as distinct from normal voids. A small number of respondents noted that they did not think long term voids (or any other category) should be treated differently from all other voids. All should be treated in exactly the same way.

Through the discussion it emerged that some properties can be sidelined or ignored for a period of time because they have been given the title of 'long term void'. They become a long term void simply because they have been termed as such. By treating all voids in the same way the focus stays on all of them rather than having resources focussed on a subset of all voids.

The turnaround time achieved by one of the organisations that takes this approach has reduced over time partially because none of the properties are forgotten as a result of being in a category that can be overlooked.

There is a recognition that if there is a single property which is void for a very long time, it will have an impact on the turnaround figures for the average property. However a void property is a void property and there is a need to ensure that the service is run to meet appropriate targets (maximising rental income and available properties to meet demand) rather than to make performance indicators look good.

Working with long term void and hard to let properties can be difficult but it appears that acting as though a subset of these properties is in some way different does not help to get them back into the active housing stock any quicker and may be having a detrimental impact on the turnaround time for all properties.

**Phil Brennan**  
**Principal Advisor**