



## REVIEW OF VOIDS

<b>Objective:</b>	To look at ways of improving void procedures for Rosebery to provide value for money and tenant service.
<b>Indicators</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) To improve standards in dealing with voids.</li> <li>(ii) To provide value of money.</li> <li>(iii) To improve turn around times</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendations To Rosebery Executive team.</b>	See attached appendix for snapshot of recommendations. More detailed analysis is contained within the report
<b>Context</b>	<p>This is the fourth report conducted by the Residents Panel.</p> <p><u>Choosing a topic</u></p> <p>When deciding what the next topic for review was, some members of the panel were keen to look further into how voids were handled by Rosebery. When the topic of voids was mentioned this was keenly backed by Rosebery as they were undertaking a review of their own policies/procedures on voids such as the Lettable Void Standard Specification and believed the next review would help establish more structured procedures.</p> <p><u>Survey Information</u></p> <p>From the rated by residents service, we noted that the satisfaction levels had been at 100% for the time taken between viewing a property and moving into the home. This declined in December 2012 by 20% and rose 10% in January 2013. The panel were interested as to why there was such a large drop.</p> <p>Even the information received when moving into a new home was at 100% dropping dramatically by 20% in May 2012 and December 2012.</p> <p>There are very low satisfaction levels in the condition of properties when tenants move in. For example satisfaction was only at 50% in April 2012. This then rose sharply to then fall again. Why is the satisfaction rising and dropping so quickly. What changes have or haven't been made. Repairs being made have also fallen dramatically. Are Rosebery trying to move tenants into properties too quickly so that they are not losing rent and then Morrison's are not quick enough in fixing the repair? These are all questions that need to be answered before satisfaction can be improved.</p>

	<p>Interestingly the panel was of the understanding that settling in visits would be undertaken after a specified time. It appears this is not being done due to the satisfaction level being at 8.33% in January 2013 and the panel not being provided with evidence to suggest this is being carried out. Is this because the neighbourhood officers do not have the capacity in the busy work schedule to be able to undertake these settling in visits.</p> <p>Capturing this information is usually limited as there are not many properties that become available on an annual basis. However because of the recent new builds such as Parkside and Noble Park more information should have been captured but the information would not be an accurate reflection.</p>
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<b>Methods &amp; Documents</b>	<p>In this review a variety of methods were used to test the objective. The following methods were used to ensure all areas were covered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Desk top review to familiarise with Rosebery’s policies, procedures and standards. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Key Performance Indicators/Reports</li> <li>○ Pre Void Inspection Form</li> <li>○ Lettable Void Standard Specification Form</li> <li>○ Void –v- Repair Information</li> <li>○ Voluntas statistics (Rated by Residents)</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ After the desk top review had been carried out, the desk top highlighted key areas for further exploration and questioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Interviews with Neighbourhood Officer</li> <li>○ Interview with Neighbourhood Officer Manager</li> <li>○ Interviews with Operations Manager</li> <li>○ Interview with Performance Manager (Morrisons)</li> <li>○ Interviews with Contract Manager (Rosebery)</li> <li>○ Site Inspections</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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<b>Findings</b>	<p>This section includes the findings the panel found whilst carrying out their investigations.</p> <p>The recommendations from these findings can then be found in the next section. (Appendix 1 also details a snapshot of recommendations).</p> <p><u>Key Performance Indicators Reports</u></p> <p>Looking at the current KPI figures for 2012/13 shows a total void loss of £56,255. Dividing this amount by the 97 void properties in the year and dividing by an average rent shows the time to turn around a property is 4.3 weeks. .</p> <p>It is noted in the KPI report that Morrison have agreed a new contractual KPI with the intention of improving void turn around times. Any improvements this makes should be visible in the 2013/14 KPI figures.</p>
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The KPI report shows that 4 properties had a nil void loss which has positively impacted turn around times. Rosebery should put measures in place to increase this number as it has a huge impact on turn around times.

The panel was given an opportunity to look at a transfer from Devon & Cornwall Housing to Rosebery. The tenant was advised in correspondence sent to them on notification of them terminating their tenancy that they would show around new tenants during the notice period. This could in the panel's view decrease turnaround times if Rosebery adopted this procedure. The panel checked the tenancy agreement and it was stated that Rosebery are able to do this.

The panel recognise that performance has improved over the past 12 months, however it is expected that Rosebery will be able to achieve top quartile results in the coming years

#### Pre Void Inspection Form

A pre void inspection is a relatively new procedure that has recently been readopted by Rosebery. The panel is aware from personal experience that this was undertaken before a transfer/exit took place and the tenant was responsible for putting right any remedial works before the transfer/exit was authorised. The panel is not aware of when this stopped happening. However, this has now recommenced and is being undertaken by all the Neighbourhood Officers. The form is completed with the tenant and the information is then passed to Morrison.

The panel feel that this is a positive step and will help tenants to identify what their responsibilities are during their notice period. However, it is important for the tenant to agree to any work that needs to take place and they should sign to confirm their acceptance of this. The pre void inspection form should therefore be signed by the tenant at the time of the inspection with a copy left for them/or sent to them with a leaving letter.

A leaving letter should then be sent attaching the form and explaining what will happen if the work is not completed, such as the transfer/move being stopped until the work is sorted. The leaving letter can also advise the tenant that Rosebery (if the property is in good condition) may contact them to arrange a convenient date and time to show around a new tenant. The letter can also include other useful information such making sure they contact their gas/electric supplier etc. to give meter readings.

The neighbourhood officer should also agree to return to the property before the end of the notice period to check that all work has been completed. This can be confirmed in the leaving letter.

The panel understand that there may be some exceptions to the above where there are vulnerability issues or a business need for the transfer to go ahead.

Morrison often attend these void inspections and the panel would recommend that this happens in all cases so that both Rosebery and

Morrison are aware of the condition of the property and the agreement that has been made with the resident.

#### Lettable standard

Once the property is void the Lettable Void Standard Form is then completed. This is currently being reviewed by Rosebery and has not yet been approved. This is being looked into so as to ensure there is consistency from all members of staff involved in the void process

The panel highlighted a number of potential changes that could be made to the current lettable standard. These changes were noted as a result of their visit to a selection of void properties, as well as through their discussions with various members of staff.

It is recommended that a sub group/focus group is formed which includes panel members who will work with Rosebery to contribute to and agree the lettable standard.

#### Void –v Repair Information

The panel reviewed a report which showed the average number of repairs reported within the first month of a tenancy. The report showed that there were 41 voids in the last 12 months with an average of 1.14 repairs reported per property, within the first month of the tenancy.

The highest number of repairs has been in the Watersedge area with one bedroom properties needing the most attention. This could be attributed to the fact that most one bedroom properties are home vulnerable and OAPS and Watersedge has the largest number of one bedroom properties. The panel suggest that Rosebery could carry out some analysis to assess what group of people are most likely to report repairs and target education/training to them to help reduce this where possible.

The report listed out what each of the post repair works were. Plumbing was the most common type of repair compared to repairs on ceilings/flooring and windows which were lower. There were a total of 14 plumbing repairs reported at a total cost of £4,412.60. This could be because plumbing is more susceptible to faults than structural repairs.

More recently asbestos is now becoming an issue in void properties. The void that was inspected in Melton Place by the panel has been delayed due to asbestos and the cost of dealing with asbestos increases.

#### Interviews with Neighbourhood Officer/Manager

The neighbourhood officer is the first person to be told that a void has become available either by tenants giving up their tenancies, evictions, abandonments, death or transfer.

They have recently reintroduced regular pre void inspections to ensure a property is given back in a decent condition. On the date of

exit the neighbourhood officer then attends the property again to ensure all rubbish has been removed and collect all keys, including gas and electric keys. However this is not a requirement of the neighbourhood officer's role and obviously a pre void inspection cannot be undertaken if the property has been left due to abandonment, eviction or death.

Interestingly, they felt that 85% of voids are below the minimum lettable standard at the time they are returned by the outgoing tenant. This is quite high considering there is on average only 60 to 70 voids per annum, which means that nearly 60 out of 70 homes are below minimum standards when the outgoing tenant leaves.

The panel feel that more regular inspections should be carried out to check the condition of properties. This will help to highlight any potential issues earlier, preventing more serious void work needing to take place when the tenant eventually moves out.

Problem properties could be identified through Rosebery's contractors such as T Brown. When a representative goes to a property to do the annual gas safety check they are in the best position to ascertain whether a property is being kept in good order. If it is clear a property is in bad condition, the representative should then report this to the Neighbourhood Officer who will need to give notice to the tenant under the terms of the tenancy agreement to arrange an inspection. The neighbourhood Officer can then work with the tenant to help them put the property back to a good standard. The panel have recently been introduced to the new Tenancy Sustainment Officers who can also work with the tenant to correct this.

The panel is aware that a tenant has a right to peaceful enjoyment of a property so inspections should only be done on properties that Rosebery have been advised are of poor standard.

A Neighbourhood Officer can also get a good indication as to whether a property is being looked after (as a tenant is supposed to do under their tenancy agreement) through Walkabout Talk Abouts. Again this is opportunity for the Neighbourhood Officer/Tenancy Sustainment Officer to contact and work with the tenant to ensure a property is kept to a reasonable standard.

White goods are sometimes left in properties which can cause extra work as they cannot be left in a void. Currently, if the goods are still in very good condition, the Neighbourhood Officer may see if another tenant wants them or they 'gift' the goods to the tenant coming into the property. The panel feel this is an area that could be explored and there are a number of potential solutions. For example, a garage could be made available to store white goods straight away, so that they do not delay the void time; Rosebery could donate the goods to initiatives such as the Vine Project who sell discounted goods or other furniture stores; Rosebery could explore the possibility of devoting a section on the website where tenants could contact them to express an interest in any goods that become available.

It is also important with a new tenant moving into the property that interaction starts from an early stage. They should be consulted if a

new kitchen is required, or if there is a fireplace in the property do they want it removed. Early interaction increases tenant satisfaction.

It also transpired through the interviews that there are standard changes made to a property such as new locks. There has been much debate about whether all voids should have the door locks changed and even for example new toilet seats. If money was no object then you might decide to do everything but we are in an economic downturn so value for money is very important but also you have to get the right balance. The general feeling amongst the panel was that locks should be changed on a case by case basis. Where there has been a history of ASB, eviction or other concerns at the property then locks should be changed as standard. Where there are no concerns locks should be left as they are. This also applied to the standard replacement of toilet seats. The panel felt that they should only be replaced when in bad condition.

Recently weekly meetings have been introduced between Rosebery and Morrison's so any issues of concern can be discussed at that time and not left. The panel note that these regular monthly meetings between Rosebery and contractors are of great benefit. This is a valuable opportunity for both parties to consider a residents perspective as there is a resident representative present at all meetings.

Tenant recharge is a difficult area to enforce. There has been much mixed feelings about this and no real solution has transpired. The general consensus was that there should be tenant recharge policy in place. Of course if a tenant downsizes and they get the money for the downsizing Rosebery can decrease the amount of money given if the property is damaged. For example recently tenants who were in a four bedroom property downsized to a two bedroom. Due to the extensive damage they only received circa £60 of the £1,500 they were entitled to receive. However the damage to the property was circa £14,000. In this particular case the tenants had medical issues which meant they found it difficult to maintain the condition of the property. This reinforces the need for Rosebery to be more aware of the condition of properties.

The average time and cost to repair a property has increased,

#### Interviews with Performance, Contracts and Operations Manager

The performance manager is retained to do all void and cyclical works. Within the last year, voids were not running well and only recently weekly meetings have been implemented. However there has been a number of high value voids some of which have been largely due to asbestos.

Some examples of high cost voids were 15 Tonstall Road needed clearance work (£4.5k, excavation, environmental clean, ceiling replacement, new kitchen, fencing and stripped wallpaper. 23 Rowden Road needed an environmental clean, clearance, mass works throughout and new kitchen & bathroom. Both of these examples had void costs of approximately £24,000 each.

It was noticed however that Rosebery were not always consistent in their lettable standards. There are three different work streams, temporary, general and sheltered. Sheltered always needs to be in good condition. 8 out of 10 general need properties are not decorated. Judgement needs to be made for this.

It was suggested by the panel that it may be of assistance if the Performance Manager attends the pre void inspection but he believed that was not workable as he needs to see a cleared property but did believe the information obtained from the pre void inspection was of value. The panel feel that it would be of great value for the Performance manager to attend all pre-void inspections despite the fact that the property is not cleared as this will still give an insight into the work that is required.

The Contracts Manager works for Morrison and alongside the performance manager. His/her aim is to drive down cost and raise the standards as well as doing the standard specification standards such as health and safety. Morrison's originally maintained the gas checks in a void property but this is now being undertaken by T Brown.

His role is always to be mindful of turnaround times and costs without cutting standards.

All believe there should be a tenant recharge for damaged property but there are more problems with implementing the same. He is pleased to see pre void inspections now taking place as this allows the tenant to repair the property and then getting the balance right.

The cost for putting right a property has increased because of inflation and RPI (retail prices index). This was agreed as part of the contract with Morrison and is a fairly standard feature of contracts including cleaning and grounds maintenance.

The panel recognise that the current performance manager is very dedicated and committed to maintaining a high standard of void performance. Where as this consistency has lacked in the past due to staff turn around for this position.

As far as the Operations Manager is concerned he has little input in the void process save keeping track on performance (cost and time). It is of concern that cost have increased. The average void cost was £1,500 which has now increased to £3,000. Three properties in the last 12 months were over £10,000. In February the average cost to a void was £5,500. If there is on average 60 properties that would equate to £330,000 per annum. On average they have 7 to 8 days to turn a void round. This would increase obviously if there is significant damage to the property which affects the performance results. On looking at the figures in the KPI average turn around for a property is 4.3 weeks not 7 to 8 days.

Site Inspections

### Ebbisham Road Property

When viewing the property the panel felt that the property was generally in reasonable condition. Work was mostly cosmetic and the overall void time was 17 days. This would have been even quicker had there not been an issue with the flooring in one room.

### Melton Place Property.

The panel felt that the Melton Place property was below standard and this was made worse by the decoration of the property and the general condition that it had been left in. It was noted that this property should have been highlighted as in poor condition at a much earlier stage. The panel understands that this was a difficult case as the property was often empty and it was discovered that the tenants were sub-letting. There was also arrears which was as a result of a clawback in housing benefit. However the condition of the property should have been identified sooner may be when a gas check was done or even on a Walkabout Talk About.

Rosebery should do more to highlight properties that fall below a reasonable standard at the earliest possible opportunity and take action.

The void turn around time for this property was considerably increased because of asbestos and at the time of writing this report we understand that the property remains void because of this.

When carrying out these void inspections the panel observed that the condition of one of the properties was very poor and felt that more work should be done to inspect properties in general so that Rosebery are able to identify where properties are not being kept in a reasonable condition. As mentioned above, staff should be encouraged to highlight where properties are not in a good condition at the earliest opportunity so that action can be taken. Neighbourhood Officers should be out on patch more regularly and ensure that regular inspections are taking place. Their presence should be felt more by residents. Regular inspections of individual properties will highlight issues more quickly and will have a positive impact on reducing void turn around times.

The panel have noted that moving in packs have now been introduced which include local information for the new tenant as well as useful items such as cleaning products, tea & coffee etc. The panel felt that this was positive step and would be well received by residents.

The panel also felt that leaving letters should be introduced. If Rosebery would like to see a copy of Devon & Cornwall's leaving letter this will be supplied to you.

### Dex Vouchers

The resident panel feel that Rosebery's offering of dex vouchers to new residents when they move into a property is a very positive initiative.

Below is the current specification that is used to determine the level of Dex vouchers that are issued:

Location	Grant
Lounge	£50
Dining Room	£45
Kitchen	£45
Hall	£35
Hall Stairs & Landing	£50
Bedroom 1	£50
Other bedrooms	£45
Bathroom	£35

The Neighbourhood team can offer up to these amounts for each room. Depending on the properties condition, Dex vouchers may be issued for just one room, a selection of rooms or all rooms. The total amount awarded therefore depends on the property condition and also how many rooms it has.

It was also suggested that after an inspection of a bad property that Dex vouchers be offered where a tenant is struggling financially (on a low income) to help with decorating costs. There was very mixed feelings from the panel about this as tenants who are working also might not be in a position to avoid decorating materials. This may be an option for Rosebery but this would need to be looked into further as tenants should just expect this.

Another option is that Rosebery work with the local colleges to see if their painting and decorating students would like to undertake work experience helping decorating tenants' homes (who struggle with decorating) for a nominal fee.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the panel have made recommendations to the Executive team at Rosebery to improve:

KPI & Void data

Rosebery should encourage more viewings to take place with new tenants during a tenants notice period to help reduce turn around times.

Settling in visits need to be agreed and booked in for all new residents.

Pre Void Inspection Form

The pre-void inspection form should be signed by the resident at the time of the inspection and a copy given to them or sent in a leaving letter. This form sets out the work that they are then expected to do prior to them moving out. This should also be recorded.

A leaving letter should be introduced which includes a copy of the pre-void inspection form and explains what will happen if the work is not completed. This could also include useful information for the tenant.

A further visit should be agreed where the neighbourhood officer returns, during the notice period, to check the work is complete. This should also be confirmed in the leaving letter.

Where work has not been completed this should prevent a move from going ahead. There may be exceptions to this if there a vulnerability issue or a business need for the move to go ahead.

Morrison should be encouraged to attend all pre void inspections.

Copies of the Pre void inspection sheet needs to be sent to Contacts Manager and Performance manager.

#### Lettable Void Standard Specification Form

Locks should be changed on a case by case basis. Replaced where there is a need for this (for example eviction, anti social behaviour etc.)

Toilet seats should also only be replaced if they are in a bad condition.

A focus group / sub group including panel members to be formed to work with Rosebery to agree the lettable standard.

#### Void –v Repair Information

The panel suggest that Rosebery carry out some analysis to assess what group of people are most likely to report repairs and see if education/training can be targeted to them to help reduce this where possible.

#### Interviews with Neighbourhood Officer/Manager

The panel felt that properties should be inspected more regularly to help prevent serious damage from going un-noticed.

Staff and contractors should be encouraged to highlight where they notice potential issues with a property which should prompt an inspection (with notice given to the tenant).

Walk About Talk About should be an ideal opportunity to highlight where a property looks in poor condition from the outside.

A leaving letter should be sent to all tenants vacating a property.

#### Interviews with Performance, Contracts and Operations Manager

The performance manager should attend all pre-void meetings.

#### Site Inspections

Where white goods are left at a property Rosebery explore different options for how they could be used and how to prevent them from delaying void turn around times.

	<p><u>Dex Vouchers</u></p> <p>Offering discretionary dex vouchers for low income families to help with the decorating if required. This needs to be investigated further as an option.</p> <p>Rosebery should explore whether local colleges could help with decorating properties to gain work experience.</p>
<p><b>Conclusion</b></p>	<p>In conclusion, Rosebery is actively trying to improve their procedures/processes with regard to voids. They are working hard to ensure that void turnarounds are reduced and reduce the cost involved in repairing properties.</p> <p>Rosebery needs to be more proactive in ensuring properties do not fall into a bad state. They need to be helping tenants look after their homes. It is positive to see that Rosebery have employed Tenancy Sustainment Officers who hopefully will relieve some of the burden of the Neighbourhood Officers.</p> <p>Rosebery also needs to ensure they do work during a tenants notice period (where possible) to ensure properties are in a reasonable condition before they actually becomes void. This would then reduce the work that needs to take place once the property is void which has a really positive effect on turnaround times.</p> <p>However tenants do need to be responsible for their homes and ensuring that properties are kept to a decent standard. Rosebery need to be tougher in their stance when dealing with tenants who abuse this to send a clear message that they wont abide their stock being abused by tenants but are there to support tenants who are struggling.</p>

## **APPENDIX 1**

Based on the findings, the panel have made recommendations to the Executive team at Rosebery to improve:

### KPI & Void data

- New tenants should be able to view properties during a tenants notice period to help reduce turn around times.
- Settling in visits need to be agreed and booked in for all new residents.

### Pre Void Inspection Form

- The pre-void inspection form should be signed by the resident at the time of the inspection and a copy given to them.
- This form should also outline what will happen if the agreement is broken or work not complete.
- A further visit should be agreed where the neighbourhood officer returns, during the notice period, to check the work is complete.
- A leaving letter should be issued which includes a copy of the agreement with the tenant. This should reconfirm what will happen if the work is not complete, when a further visit will take place and also include useful information for the tenant.
- Where work has not been completed this should prevent a move from going ahead. There may be exceptions to this if there a vulnerability issue or a business need for the move to go ahead.
- Morrison should be encouraged to attend all pre void inspections.
- Copies of the Pre void inspection sheet needs to be sent to Contacts Manager and Performance manager.

### Lettable Void Standard Specification Form

- Locks should be changed on a case by case basis. Replaced where there is a need for this (for example eviction, anti social behaviour etc)
- Toilet seats should also only be replaced if they are in a bad condition.
- A focus group / sub group including panel members to be formed to work with Rosebery to agree the lettable standard.

### Void –v Repair Information

- The panel suggest that Rosebery carry out some analysis to assess what group of people are most likely to report repairs and see if education/training can be targeted to them to help reduce this where possible.

### Interviews with Neighbourhood Officer/Manager

- The panel felt that properties should be inspected more regularly to help prevent serious damage from going un-noticed.
- Staff and contractors should be encouraged to highlight where they notice potential issues with a property which should prompt an inspection (with notice given to the tenant).
- Walk About Talk About should be an ideal opportunity to highlight where a property looks in poor condition from the outside.
- A leaving letter should be issued to all tenants vacating a property.

### Interviews with Performance, Contracts and Operations Manager

- The performance manager should attend all pre-void meetings.

### Site Inspections

- Where white goods are left at a property Rosebery explore different options for how they could be used and how to prevent them from delaying void turnaround times such as using a garage to store white goods and offering them to tenants via the Rosebery website.

### Dex Vouchers

- Offering discretionary dex vouchers for low income families to help with the decorating if required. This needs to be investigated further as an option.
- Rosebery should explore whether local colleges could help with decorating properties to gain work experience.