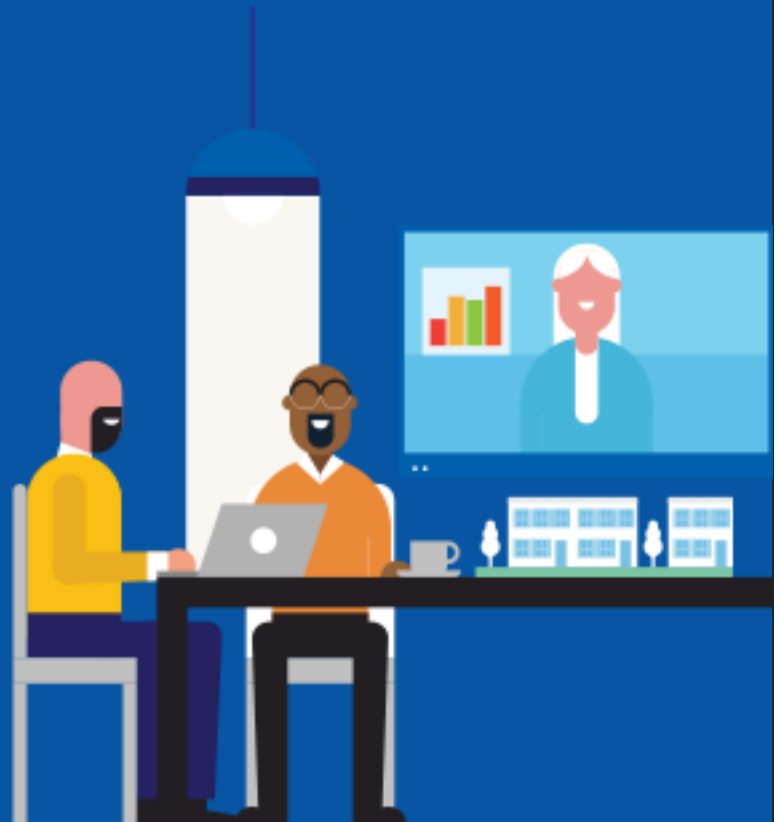


CAMPBELL
TICKELL

Improving the Management of Empty Properties Final Report

June 2022





**An Ghníomhaireacht
Tithíochta**
The Housing Agency

The Housing Agency's purpose is to provide expertise and solutions to help deliver sustainable communities throughout Ireland. A strategic objective is to support stakeholders with evidence-informed insights and data to develop a sustainable Irish housing system. In this vein, the Research Support Programme funds research projects which respond to key topical issues in housing and have the potential to impact on housing policy and practice

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Housing Agency.

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Executive Summary

This research seeks to: Understand the factors contributing to current empty property turnaround times in Ireland; consider UK performance and the factors contributing to that performance and make recommendations capable of enabling improvements in performance.

The research took a mixed methods approach with qualitative emphasis involving a survey of Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities followed up with semi-structured interviews to triangulate survey findings and deepen understanding. A literature review contributed to understanding UK performance and good practice and supported the development of a good practice guide.

UK performance in making an empty property ready for the next occupants and then letting the property demonstrates that significantly shorter empty property durations are possible than those typically being achieved in Ireland. For example, average empty property durations for an Irish local authority are 28 weeks and an English local authority 4 weeks; For an Irish AHB 11 weeks and an English Registered Provider 3 weeks. This research project; explores the factors which are contributing to Ireland's slower turnaround times; explores good practice from Ireland and the UK and makes recommendations for change.

Factors contributing to longer empty property durations include:

- National policy matters: E.g., some current Local Authority empty property funding structures such as the Voids Programme can have the unintended consequence of incentivising high value empty property works.
- Strategic issues: E.g., the low incidence of strategic approaches to asset management, resulting in major works being done to empty properties as a matter of course.
- Inter-team issues: The empty property process has multiple hand-offs between teams. There is limited evidence of joint-working across team boundaries.
- Operational issues: E.g., the availability of contractors to start and deliver empty property works quickly.

This project has also found some examples of good practice, and that there is an interest in improving performance.

To support good practice, the report identifies that the key factors in securing improvements to empty property performance in the UK were:

- Strong consistent focus on the issue by politicians and senior managers.
- A detailed end-to-end empty property process.
- Frequent, meticulous performance management.

Recommendations are made spanning national policy, strategic matters, operational matters, performance management, housing management, empty property works, allocations, lettings and new properties.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following to this study:

- The Housing Agency who funded and supported the work
- The staff in LAs and AHBs who completed the surveys
- The staff in LAs and AHBs who took part in the semi-structured interviews

About the authors

Jon Slade (Director CT) has worked in social housing for over 35 years. The first half of that time working for a range of English local authorities and housing associations on housing management and asset management issues. Latterly, Jon has worked as an interim manager and consultant, for the last 8 years for Campbell Tickell, one of the leading consultancies working across the UK and Ireland. Jon's work focuses on operational issues such as empty property management.

Sarah Alden (Associate Consultant CT) is an experienced researcher specialising in the housing sector. She has worked as an independent research consultant since 2019, following two years as Research Associate at the University of Sheffield and a period working as Research Assistant at the University of Leeds. Prior to this she worked as a Specialist Housing Options Adviser for a number of local authorities and Specialist Legal Service Commission Caseworker (Housing and Welfare Benefits). Sarah has a PhD, Social Policy. Her subject being: 'Provision of statutory housing services to people affected by homelessness' (mixed methodology with national survey), University of Sheffield (awarded 2015); Master of Research in Social Policy, University of York (awarded 2010); and BA (Hons) Sociology & Social Policy, University of Birmingham, 2:1 (awarded 1998).

Kathleen McKillion has 30 years of housing experience including working at senior levels delivering service and compliance improvements, transformational change, mergers and acquisitions for a variety of housing organisations in Ireland and the UK including 10 years as Director of Operations for the Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH). Here she had lead responsibility for over 200 housing associations managing 33,000 tenancies across Ireland. She led a number of housing management initiatives, including tenant dispute resolution services and tenant engagement, allocations, lettings and void management.

Cath Davies is a highly experienced manager with 30 years' experience in the social housing sector; the last 10 of which have been as an independent consultant. She has been living and working in Ireland since September 2017. During this time, she has carried out service reviews for a number of Irish housing organisations. Over a 10-year career as a consultant, Cath has carried out dozens of service reviews of social housing services including rent income, empty properties, allocations and lettings and anti-social behaviour.

Alara Gokceoglu (Researcher CT) is a research specialist who joined CT having achieved a degree in psychology and a master's degree in organisational management. Alara has contributed primary and secondary research using a range of methods including surveys and literature scans to a wide range of CT projects.

Abbreviations

AHB	Approved Housing Body
CBL	Choice Based Letting
CT	Campbell Tickell
DLO	Direct Labour Organisation
EP	Empty Property
GWSF	Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (UK)
HAPM	Housing Association Performance Management framework
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
LA	Local Authority
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (UK)
NOAC	National Oversight and Audit Commission (RoI)

Terminology

Throughout the report we have used the following:

Term used	Meaning
Allocations	Refers to the work carried out by the LA Allocations Team to produce a successful nomination
Allocations period	The length of time from the date when a nomination request is received to the date when a successful nomination is in place.
Empty property	A property which is empty either because the previous tenant has left or because it is a new property awaiting first letting. Also known as: Void property Void
Empty property works	The works needed to get an empty property ready for the new tenant Also known as: Void works

Term used	Meaning
Landlord	The organisation which owns the property. Used in the report to convey that the same situation applies to both AHBs and LAs.
Lettings	The work carried out by the landlord to turn a nomination received from the LA into a signed up new tenant
Pre-termination period	The period just before the end of the previous tenancy, after a notice is received from the (soon to be former) tenant or when it is known that the property is abandoned.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the study

Ireland's social housing is a key social asset built up over time to provide homes for those who need them. Making the most efficient use of this housing directly helps to meet housing needs more effectively. Moreover, Ireland's housing crisis has driven an urgent need for more social homes. The acute demand for social housing in Ireland today means that the sector must let its homes quickly and efficiently.

Irish housing policy has increasingly emphasised the efficient use of social housing stock across the LA and AHB sectors in recent years, with significant investment refurbishing voids. Housing for All, the new housing plan for Ireland, recognises the goal of minimising vacancy and re-let times in social housing and supports "a transition from a response-based approach to a strategic and informed planned maintenance approach based on stock condition surveys."¹

This research aims to investigate the factors which impact on the social housing sector's ability to manage properties efficiently during a time of high demand for social housing. The intended output is to highlight practical and innovative solutions which can improve approaches to managing empty properties, thus making them available for tenants as soon as possible.

Campbell Tickell were awarded funding for this research under The Housing Agency's Research Support Programme 2020.

1.2 Scope

The report is concerned with the management of empty properties by Local Authorities (LAs) and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). In terms of property numbers, the LA sector has approximately 143k properties under management² while the AHB sector has approximately 37k properties under management.³

1.3 Report Structure

The report is broken down into the following sections:

- Section 2 describes the methodology used to meet the report objectives and outlines how the main conclusions were reached.
- Section 3 sets out the findings of the Literature Review: locating Irish empty property performance in relation to UK empty property performance and identifying key factors in empty property performance from within the literature.
- Section 4 sets out the Survey findings.
- Section 5 sets out the findings from the Semi-structured Interviews.

¹ 'Housing for All: a new Housing Plan for Ireland,' September 2021, p. 114.

² NOAC LA Performance Indicator Report 2020

³ [Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority \(AHBRA\) Presentation](#)

- Section 6 sets out the Good Practice Guide.
- Section 7 sets out the Conclusions and Recommendations.

Within the report recommendations are shown within the section in which they arise. This helps to set each recommendation within the context that necessitates it. Recommendations are then gathered together in the Conclusions and Recommendations section.

2. Methodology

2.1 An introduction to the empty property journey

The methodology adopted for this piece of research is built upon an understanding that the journey of a home from its previous tenant to a new tenant is complex and comprises:

- Notice from the tenant or notification of a potential abandoned property
- Keys received
- Nomination requested from LA
- Works specified, ordered, delivered, signed off
- Nomination received from the LA
- Sign up arranged
- Sign up carried out
- New tenant moves in

There are typically four teams involved and numerous hand-offs between those teams. A fully detailed empty property process will have many activities. Whilst each activity is relatively straightforward, the length of the overall process and the number of hand-offs between teams adds complexity.

Taking full account of the empty property journey, in relation to the research question, leads to the methodology described below.

2.2 Mixed methods approach with qualitative emphasis

Addressing the research question requires consideration of a range of issues:

- The perspectives of the AHBs and LAs managing and allocating properties
- Irish empty property performance compared to UK empty property performance
- Empty property good practice
- Synthesis of the issues above to produce recommendations for changes to current practice

Meeting the above requirements involves the deployment of a range of methods, outlined below. The focus on improvement necessitates an understanding of barriers to improvement, together with an understanding of the triggers and causes of better performance. Meeting these requirements requires qualitative consideration in addition to data-driven insight.

2.3 Primary Research

In order to understand the perspectives of those organisations involved in managing and allocating social housing, a survey was developed, distributed and analysed. In order to reflect the number of hand-offs between teams. The survey was designed as follows:

- A section to be completed by the landlord focused on technical issues
- A section to be completed by the landlord focused on lettings issues
- A section to be completed by the LA focused on allocation issues

This approach broke down the overall information requirement with the intention that an operational manager would only have to answer questions pertinent to their responsibilities.

Each survey comprised a range of question types:

- Base data about the completing organisation
- Performance data
- Insight on methods
- Free text insight on relevant issues

The survey was issued to every LA and every Tier 2 and Tier 3⁴ AHB. Numbers issued and returned are shown in the table below:

	Issued		Received					
	LA	AHB	Total	Total %age	LA	LA %age	AHB	AHB %age
Section 1 Technical	31	81	34	30%	18	58%	16	20%
Section 2 Allocations	31	81	12	39%	12	39%	N/A	N/A
Section 3 Lettings	31	81	25	22%	12	39%	13	16%

Table 1: Survey numbers issued and received

The survey was initially published with a three-week deadline and then extended by a further two weeks in order to maximise the numbers returned.

2.4 Analysis

The research team reviewed and analysed all data collected by the surveys. A thematic analysis approach was applied to the analysis of the data, and to identifying the priority conclusions and recommendations that are found in this report. Care was taken to ensure that the themes emerging in this report gave an accurate reflection of the data gathered and to ensure the relevance of the themes to the overall research purpose.

The profile of respondents across the three administered surveys can be found in [Appendix 1](#). The returns are sufficient in number to achieve headline statistical relevance.

⁴ Tier 2 = **50-300 units** or development plans that keep the total under 300 units, or the use of loan finance for development

Tier 3 = **>300 units** or sizeable development plans, including the use of loan finance for development. Source: [Housing Agency](#)

2.5 Semi-structured interviews

Given the importance of qualitative input to the research findings use was made of semi-structured interviews. Interviewers were experienced practitioners, and the interviews were split: 8 with LAs and 8 with AHBs. The interviews were targeted at middle managers (e.g. Head of Lettings, Head of Property etc.) because this is the level which typically has a strong grasp of strategic and operational challenges.

The interviews consisted of questions designed to open up key subjects such as the challenges arising in empty property management. The interviewers then enabled the conversations to range freely across the matters within scope with notes kept to support the identification of key themes across multiple interviews.

2.6 Literature Review

A literature/policy review was undertaken in order to inform two aspects of the report:

- Benchmarking empty property performance by AHBs (taking in to account the differing levels of performance for specialist and general needs providers) and local authorities in Ireland against UK comparators
- Identifying key factors for empty properties e.g. delays in nominations, maintenance delays, property being left in poor condition, contractor delays or delays in estate management checks

There is an ample quantity of statistical data available on UK empty property performance. Although there are lots of void policies available online there is a limited quantity of generic literature available on good practice. This is because empty property performance is not a developing area of housing practice priority across the UK housing sector. It is a topic where the big gains were made some time ago and it is now seen, for the most part, as a business-as-usual activity.

2.7 Good practice guide

The limited extent of good practice literature did not hinder the development of the good practice guide included within this report because the steps which, taken together, represent good practice are present in policies and processes available online and are well known across the UK sector. Campbell Tickell have delivered many service reviews of empty property management. The good practice guide brings together the findings in the (limited) good practice literature, the policies and processes that are available online and the authors' deep and broad practitioner experience of the issues.

2.8 Report writing

The report draws together the elements of the research. In assembling the elements the authors have cross-checked to ensure coherence between the sections and the relevance of recommendations to views expressed by survey respondents and interviewees and to the research objectives.

2.9 Strengths & Limitations of Methodology

There were a number of clear methodological strengths and limitations to this study.

The qualitative element of the approach

The most important strength of the report is the qualitative element. Whilst the performance data (whether from the survey results or from the literature scan) play an important part the data only tells of outputs and outcomes. The greater value in this report comes from gaining a qualitative understanding of why performance is as it is (good and poor performance alike). This was achieved in part by the semi-structured interviews and in part by ensuring that the project team contained experienced practitioners who understand the dynamics and practicalities that lie behind excellent performance and weak performance.

Insufficient responses to support cross-tabulation

When planning the primary research analysis the project team intended to apply cross tabulation in order to explore whether particular subsets of respondents produced differing results. However, the overall number of respondents was insufficient to support statistically significant cross tabulation findings. Nevertheless, this outcome has had a very limited impact on the report because data, interview findings and practitioner experience all point towards a conclusion that most important issues influencing empty property performance are universal.

Limited good practice literature

Although some good practice guides exist, including the Housing Agency's own⁵, there is not a huge quantity of good practice literature available. A large number of policy and procedure documents are available. The relatively small amount of available literature has not impacted the report. The literature that is available generally proposes the same good practice. In turn this is validated by the void policies available online. That same good practice is validated by the experience of the practitioners contributing to this report.

⁵ <https://www.housingagency.ie/publications/effective-void-management-ireland-good-practice-guide>

3. The Domestic and UK Context

3.1 Overview

The challenges of managing social housing in Ireland appear superficially similar to the challenges faced by Registered Providers (RP: the UK equivalent of AHBs) and United Kingdom (UK) LAs. I.e.: in the UK and in Ireland LAs and not for profit organisations (Registered Providers and Housing Associations in the UK, AHBs in Ireland) provide properties for rent at sub-market rent levels.

The chart below shows the average empty property duration in England, Scotland and Ireland in 2018/19:

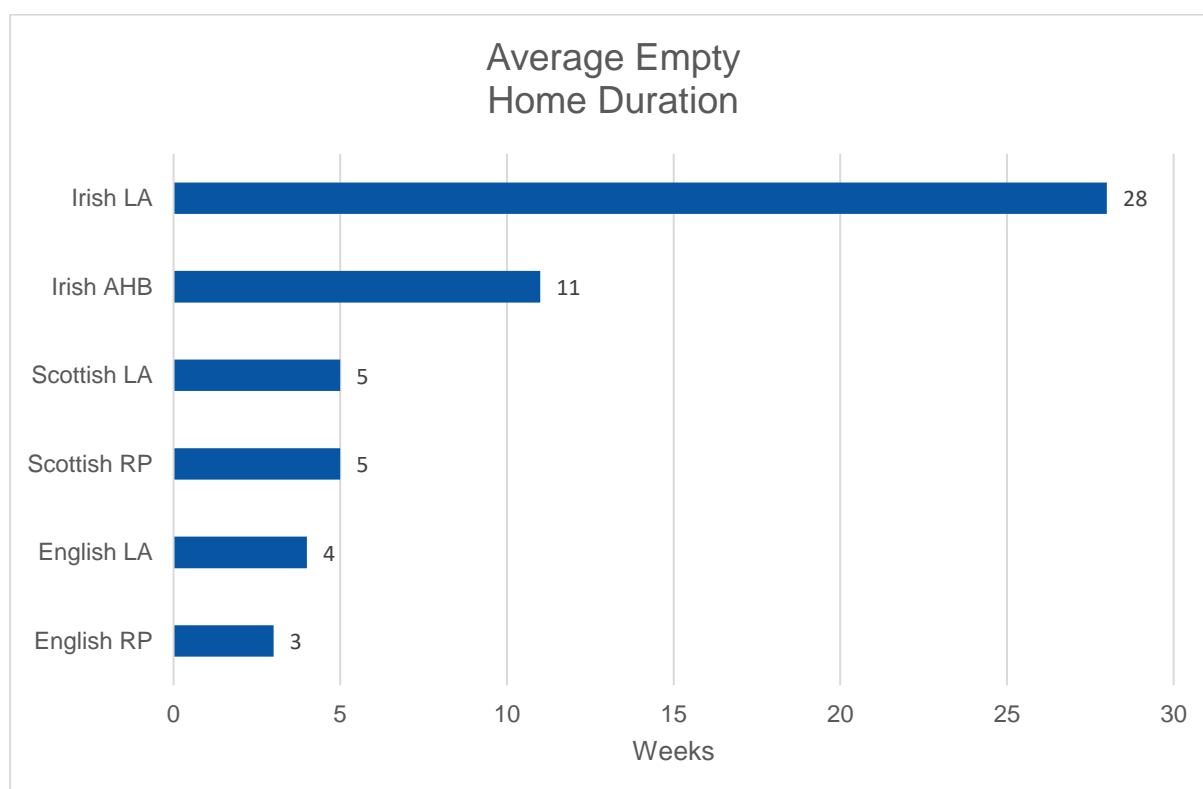


Fig 1: Average Empty property Durations

	Source
English RP	Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) Statistical Release Social Housing Lettings: April 2018 to March 2019
English LA	MHCLG Statistical Release Social Housing Lettings: April 2018 to March 2020
Scottish RP	Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (GWSF) Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance 2018/1

Scottish LA	GWSF Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance 2018/1
Irish AHB	Housing Association Performance Management framework (HAPM) 2019
Irish LA	National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) 2019

The data shows that on average:

- An English LA re-lets an empty property seven times quicker than an Irish LA (4 weeks compared to 28 weeks)
- An English RP re-lets an empty property almost four times quicker than an Irish AHB (3 weeks compared to 11 weeks)

The work undertaken in preparing this report seeks:

- To understand what factors can account for the difference in performance levels, and
- To make observations and recommendations on how Irish empty property management can be improved.

3.2 Key Concepts in English empty property management

Throughout the report we divide our observations between Strategic and Operational issues. It is important to note that effective empty property management relies on these two aspects being in complete alignment. Drawing on the literature review and our extensive experience as practitioners, in England we see:

3.3 Strategic issues

- Universal recognition of the public money argument (explained at 3.5 below)
- Universal recognition of the public good argument (explained at 3.5 below)
- Straightforward approach to funding empty property works in both RP and LA sectors: funded from operating income (rents)
- Universally recognised definitions of terminology which eradicate arguments about performance measures and thereby support focus on influencing the key measures: empty property duration, empty property quality, empty property cost
- Strong, consistent push from politicians and senior leaders/managers that empty property durations must be minimised
- Universal recognition of the relevance and importance of strategic asset management leading to high levels of adoption of Stock Condition Surveys and planned programmes of major works, thus eliminating the need to use empty properties as opportunities to carry out major works

- Contracting arrangements which mean that contractors are available to start and complete empty property works quickly.

3.4 Operational Issues

- Strong, consistent, enduring pressure from senior leadership to minimise empty property durations
- Senior management pressure triggering strong focus in operational teams
- Use of Empty Property lettable standards to define and control work done on empty properties
- Staffing levels geared to hitting required performance levels
- Major works rarely done during empty property works
- Detailed void processes with timings for all key stages
- A range of methods from MS Excel spreadsheets and MS Word checklists through to computerised workflows
- Close, detailed monitoring

3.5 The Public Money Argument and The Public Good Argument

*The Public Money argument*⁶ appears frequently in good practice and policy documents in the UK. Examples are listed in the footnote. The Public Money argument says that an empty property represents lost rental income. Minimising the time period a home is empty represents good financial management.

Each week of rent loss means that operating income is reduced. To give a generic example:

Notional council stock	10,000 units
Notional annual empty property turnover	4%
Voids per year	400
Average rent per week	€51 ⁷
Rental income lost due to average void period of 28 weeks compared to English average of 4 weeks ((€51 x 24) x 800)	€490,000

Thus, a council with a stock of 10k properties and property turnover rate of 4% could increase their operating budget by almost half a million Euro if they improved empty property

⁶ Specific mention made of the relationship between void durations and operating income in good practice guides, in policy documents such as Horizon's Void Policy 2019 and in Value for Money statements such as the Wythenshawe Community Housing Group Value for Money Self Assessment 2016.

⁷ Average council rent in 2015 cited in The Community Foundation for Ireland report 'The Future of Council Housing' (2018) divided by 52

turnaround times to the English LA average. This would represent an increase in rental income of 6%.

*The Public Good argument*⁸ is that social housing is a scarce resource. People at the top of a waiting list are living in less than satisfactory conditions. When an empty property takes longer to get ready, the new tenant faces a longer period living in unsatisfactory conditions.

These two ideas enjoy universal support in the UK. They are ideas that are strongly held at every level so that:

- There is pressure from local politicians that operational practice should focus on minimising the period that a home is empty.
- This political pressure is reflected in the approach taken by senior management.
- Senior management focus on minimising the empty property duration, meaning that operational teams focus strongly on this aspect.

3.6 Relating the English and Irish contexts

The operational challenge facing an AHB or Irish LA in relation to empty properties is the same as that facing an English RP or LA: To bring an empty property back into use in the shortest possible time.

UK performance levels demonstrate that it is possible to bring properties back in to use far quicker than is currently the case in Ireland.

The approach taken to this research is to:

- Identify the differences between the context and methods in Ireland and the UK
- Consider which elements of empty property practice in the UK could contribute to reducing empty property durations in Ireland
- Reflect the learning in recommendations

⁸ "...so landlords can ensure that prospective tenants do not have to wait longer than necessary..."
CIH publication 'How to effectively manage void properties'

4. Research Findings

This section is arranged thematically and has the following structure:

4.1 Tenancy Termination

4.2 Empty property works planning

4.3 Carrying out Empty Property works: cross-departmental working in a LA or AHB

4.4 Carrying out Empty Property Works: Empty Property contracting and work schedules

4.5 Allocations

4.6 Lettings and sign up

4.7 Performance management

4.8 Empty Property Works

4.1 Tenancy Termination

Introduction

The issues which typically arise during the tenancy termination phase of the empty property journey are (irrespective of whether empty property management is strong or weak):

- The quality of the advice and support provided to tenants so that they understand their responsibilities in terms of property condition, notice periods, and returning the keys
- Whether the tenant gives the required notice period
- What the landlord does if the tenant does not give the required notice period
- What the landlord does when they become aware of the impending departure of the tenant (e.g. a pre-termination visit)
- What the landlord does if the property is left in poor condition
- Whether and how the landlord prepares for receipt of the keys (e.g. by telling the technical team about the upcoming empty property)
- Speed of administration on receipt of keys.

Operational Issues

Delays at the termination stage

One of the main assessed barriers on the housing management side related to delays around dealing with the end of a tenancy and provision of keys (reported as a barrier by 21 organisations, with 16 assessing it as being one of the most common). Interviewees explained that they often do not get notice and/or the tenant is transferred to another AHB or LA home, so the AHB landlord decides not to enforce a 4-week notice period.

A further potential issue is that tenants are not necessarily incentivised to adhere to the 4-week notice period as LAs/AHBs generally do not have a policy of recharging outgoing tenants for notice periods and/or works that are the tenant's responsibility.

Some respondents stated that tenant-based actions were needed, such as:

- Increased onus on tenants to maintain properties throughout the tenancy, stricter tenancy enforcement
- Giving less time for a tenant to vacate and ensuring they take belongings - so works can commence in a timelier manner
- One LA reported making efficient use of the pre-tenancy termination period through learning from a high performing LA.

Learning

- Interviewees highlighted that there is no meaningful measurement or incentive for tenants to return keys, give safe vacant possession, or maintain properties to a good standard throughout the tenancy. This was particularly the case for transfers (which, anecdotally, constitute a high proportion of all lettings in LAs)
- The landlord's reputation has an important part to play. For example, if the landlord is known to actively pursue recovery of repairs for which the tenant must pay (known as rechargeable repairs) this will have the effect of reducing the incidence of rechargeable repairs.
- It is important to enable and support tenants to understand their responsibilities when ending their tenancy. An example is L&Q's web content covering ending a tenancy⁹.

Recommendations

- A. Make it easy for tenants to understand their responsibilities at the end of their tenancy in terms of property condition, notice periods, rent and returning the keys. Make clear when tenants could incur additional costs and how those costs will be calculated.
- B. If rechargeable repairs are raised, it is important to have in place a process to recover the recharges from the outgoing tenant.
- C. Put in place procedures to support a smooth tenancy termination process (full notice, clear possessions on time, return keys, provide info to support utility checks). Ensure the procedures describe how typical problems will be addressed.

4.2 Empty property works planning

Our research findings identified that empty property work planning is inconsistent, and that in many cases a lack of strategic oversight results in inefficiencies and delays in operational performance.

Strategic Issues

At a strategic level, most AHBs/LAs reported not following a strategic asset management approach. (I.e.: A Stock Condition Survey providing data to support the development of programmes of major works.).

⁹ <https://www.lqgroup.org.uk/your-home/tenants/moving-home/ending-your-tenancy/social-rented-tenancies>

The lack of a strategic asset management approach (i.e. programmes of work based on a stock condition survey) results in landlords delivering major improvement works to empty properties as the empty property offers an opportunity to do so without disrupting a tenant. However, delivering major works in empty properties is generally more expensive (one off costs versus programmed costs PLUS additional rent loss) and considerably lengthens the empty property duration.

Related to this, a significant minority of respondents reported that they did not have a published lettable standard, with survey responses putting this at just over a third (35.3%, Figure 2). When this is broken down by AHBs and LAs, only half of LA survey respondents (n = 18) reported having a lettable standard (compared to 68.7% of AHBs, n - 16).

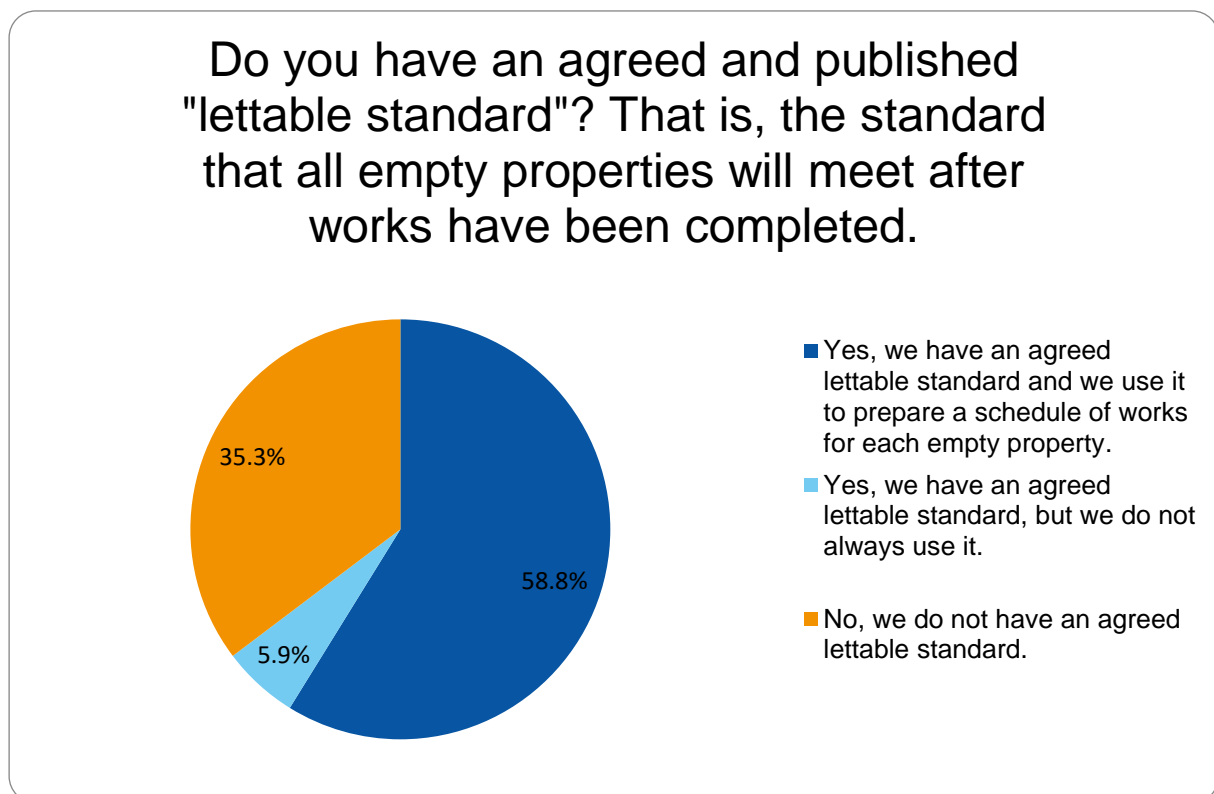


Fig 2: Lettable standards

A *lettable standard* is a document which describes the condition to which every empty property will be brought. When the empty property is first inspected the quantity of works required are those needed to bring the property to the lettable standard, and no more. Lettable standards are a really useful tool in achieving consistency, in controlling cost and in ensuring that works undertaken are only those that the landlord has decided are strategically necessary. On one hand the lettable standard ensures that *all works needed* to meet the standard are undertaken. On the other hand the lettable standard ensures that *no additional works* are ordered beyond those needed to meet the standard. The lettable standard therefore promotes consistency and controls costs.

Operational Issues

The research showed that providers do not tend to prioritise a quick turnaround when assessing potential EH works. For example, 45% carry out the **maximum** works possible on an empty property due to easier access (a further quarter reported that this was dependent on budget, figure 3). Only 30% of survey respondents (n= 20) reported that they do the minimum works possible to get a property ready to let. The clear implication here is that the duration of empty property work has a low priority compared to other issues.

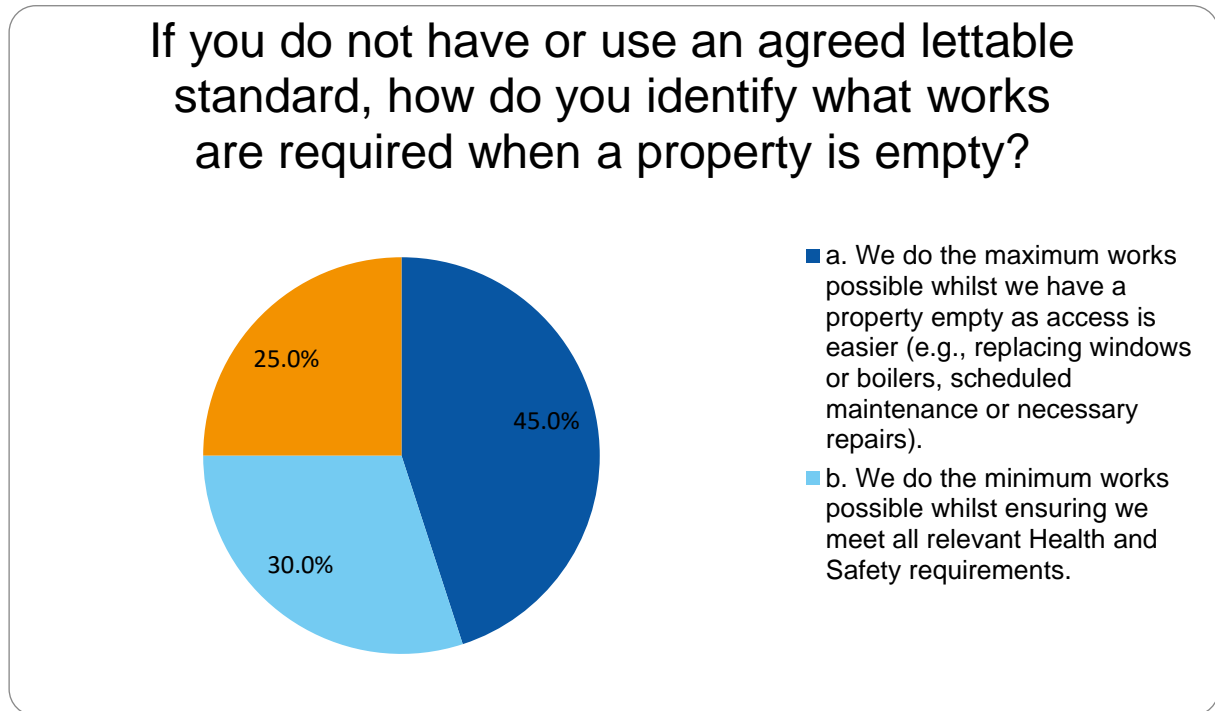


Fig 3: Works required

Of those who reported carrying out the maximum works possible, most acknowledged that they would either “sometimes”, or “often” carry out planned works earlier than scheduled to take advantage of a property being empty (84.7%, based on 9 responses).

At various points in the survey respondents could provide free text comments. On this point the free text responses offered debate on the merits of completing repairs when a property is empty versus when a tenant is ‘in situ’. In support of the latter, a few agreed that as many works as possible should be carried out when the tenant is in situ, so as to yield rent.

Regarding carrying out major works on an empty property, some open responses expressed a preference for bringing this forward where possible, with reasons provided for doing so including:

- Being more cost effective
- Being more convenient, efficient, and less disruptive (for both contractors and potential tenants)
- Ensuring works are carried out to a high standard, when empty, maximises the chance of a successful nomination, and a tenant remaining in the property for longer

Only one respondent referred to the need to get empty properties into circulation quickly as it is the right thing to do, considering wider factors around housing shortages.

Learning

Strategic

- The absence of strategic asset management methods causes major works to be delivered to empty properties rather than tenanted properties.
- The almost total absence of the public money argument and the public good argument permits longer empty property periods.
- A lettable standard can ensure provision of a consistent standard of property at the time of letting. There was an assessed lack of consensus around how to achieve a 'lettable standard' to ensure value for money.

Operational

- As explained above, there is evidence that operational teams do not prioritise minimising void durations, for example by doing major works to empty properties.

Recommendations

- D. At national and political levels, raise the profile of Strategic Asset Management approaches as tools to best manage social housing stock.** An example might include a stock condition survey supporting planned programmes of improvement works rather than ad-hoc work on properties once they become empty. We understand the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) is tendering for an ICT system to roll out Stock Condition Surveys (SCS) to facilitate this.
- E. At national and political levels, promote the public money and public good arguments as reasons to make minimising void periods a strategic level priority.** Seek and promote broad consensus around these issues so that operational teams know that minimising empty property durations is the top priority.
- F. Promote the adoption of a lettable standard by each relevant landlord and monitor adoption through regulatory engagement.**

4.3 Carrying out Empty Property works: cross-departmental working in a LA or AHB

Introduction

The empty property process requires multiple hand-offs between teams. Typically:

From	Reason	To
Development team	New property ready for first letting	Lettings
Development team	New property ready for first letting	Technical Team
Team receiving notice from tenant (e.g. Housing Management)	Notice received	Lettings
Lettings	Request nomination	Allocations (LA)
Team receiving keys (e.g. Housing Management)	Keys received	Technical Team (void works)
Technical Team	Void works complete	Lettings
Allocations	Sending nomination	Lettings
Lettings	Sign up required	Housing management

Table 2: Empty works hand-offs

For an empty property period to be as short as possible each team needs to have in place an efficient and effective process AND the hand-offs between teams need to be timely. So, there is a need for an excellent empty property process AND sound and timely administration.

Strategic Issues

Respondents identified internal and cross departmental communication as a chief facilitator to ensuring a smooth empty property process and reducing the risk of blockages at points across the system.

Conversely, delays due to waiting for tasks to be completed by a different department or external contractor was one of the main assessed factors that contributed to longer empty property durations.

In the UK, the key to initiating the journey towards shorter empty property durations lay in a broad consensus around the unacceptability of long empty property durations. Adverse local media coverage, for example, helped to provide the drive by politicians to achieve better performance. This pressure, in turn, made operational teams ask the required questions, including about ensuring that hand-offs happened in a timely way and that teams were held to account by senior management about their performance within the overall empty property process. So, political interest and pressure caused senior management to focus on the issue.

This focus caused operational teams to pursue quicker turnarounds. The pressure did not ease until significant and enduring performance gains occurred.

LA allocation teams report struggling with empty property works taking too long, whereas AHBs reported a disincentive to get properties ready due to the time it takes to achieve a successful offer through the nomination process. This highlights one of the complexities of empty property management: The number of different teams in the mix results in teams often looking to apportion responsibility for delays to other teams.

Operational issues

A few providers referenced practical measures they have taken to ensure the empty property process is smoother, such as operating a 'robust key management system' and a 'void lock' which is put on all empty property by the officer responsible for managing works to the empty property at the start of the works process, enabling ease of access across staff, contractors, services and providers. Yet overall, respondents indicated that separate teams were not always effectively communicating with each other, with reference to technical, allocations, administration, and estate management teams. The main issues referenced were a lack of transparency (e.g. how AHBs manage received nominations internally) and inadequate data sharing.

Some specific examples were provided where siloed approaches had led to increased empty property duration such as where a LA Development team would sign off on an acquisition based on need and the Allocations team would then find it difficult to nominate due to location or type of property.

A few suggestions were provided to support quicker EH turnaround through reorganising staff teams, such as:

- A dedicated empty property team, viewing that delays were happening due to staff juggling different areas of responsibility.
- Putting strategic measures in place to support a closer working partnership between various teams, such as between technical and allocations team, technical and admin teams.
- Setting up teams combined of technical and estate management working together with regular updates.

We observe that slow performance by one team in the process is permissive of slow performance by other teams. For example, if it takes, on average, 6 weeks to obtain a nomination then there is no reason for the technical team to try and achieve empty property works durations quicker than 6 weeks.

Learning

- Overall, the empty property process across EH management, allocation and lettings lacked fluidity - delays in one area could trigger (or be permissive of) further delays.
- Poor working between teams also reportedly led to duplication of effort, e.g.: AHB asking applicants for information the applicant has already provided to the LA Allocations Team.

- While approaches which focus on linkages between teams can undoubtedly support a smoother EH process, it will likely be insufficient without setting up a system through which each stage of the empty property process is assigned a time period, and closely monitored at each stage, as will be considered later.

Recommendations

- G. A detailed end-to-end empty property process is needed with specific timescales allocated to relevant steps.** Timescales should be identified for ALL relevant steps. E.g. that a property will be inspected within 24 hours of receipt of keys. Setting these timescales will drive out issues which impact hitting the target such as the level of resources allocated to empty property management. Good practice has demonstrated that a range of different team structures can deliver good empty property performance. What matters is a clear process and close monitoring.
- H. Regular, close monitoring of empty property performance is needed.** This will typically be a weekly meeting to discuss performance per property, to identify where performance is outside target timescales and, crucially, that causes of poor performance are identified and addressed.

4.4 Carrying out Empty Property Works: Empty Property contracting and work schedules

Introduction

This section is concerned with:

- Inspecting properties
- Defining the work that needs doing, to make the property ready for re-let
- Appointing a contractor
- The contractor doing the work
- The work being checked and signed off

This is a key stage in the lifespan of an empty property.

Delivery of the works

Respondents identified the importance of having a reliable and good contractor in place with a property project manager to oversee works. Based on survey data, external providers are nearly always used to complete repairs and maintenance on empty properties, normally through an internal/external provider split (with external only at 38.2% (n =13) and mixed provision at 58.8% (n = 20) respectively, Figure 4).

Who carries out repairs and maintenance when one of your properties becomes empty:

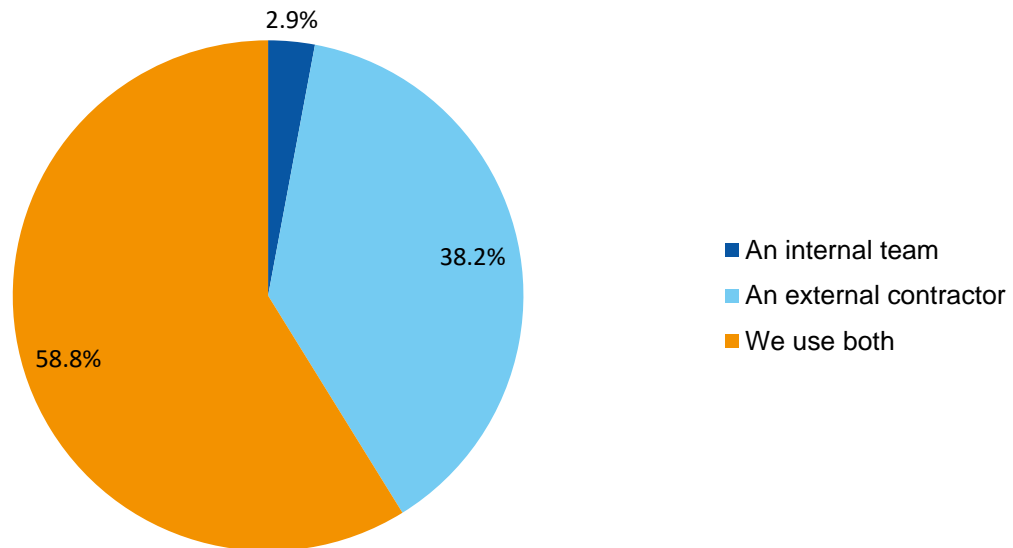


Fig 4: Who delivers repairs works?

Respondents across AHBs and LAs reported contractor related challenges. LA survey respondents based in EH teams referred to delays waiting for a property to be available to work on, with 16.7% assessing delays around inspection and ordering the required empty property works as their top assessed barrier (Appendix 2 provides tables of all assessed barriers reported by survey respondents). Interviewees referred to challenges around the scheduling of empty property works, where non-technical staff (housing officers) are used to produce a schedule of works, sometimes resulting in required work only being identified once the contractors are on site, thus extending the estimated completion date. A few referred to delays occurring due to the lack of contractors to carry out work. For example:

“We have a limited pool of contractors who are very busy and therefore work can take longer. They are not only carrying out work to vacant houses but also reactive maintenance, extensions to houses and disabled persons adaptation” (LA)

Allocation teams referred to contractor issues contributing to delays in getting empty properties ready for re-let, with LA survey respondents reporting that contracted works were taking longer than the original target dates set (with 22.2% viewing this as their main barrier). The greater quantity of empty property work, the more likely there will be delays.

There was consensus that commissioning models can have a significant impact on EH duration, in both directions. A few interviewees explained that contractor framework agreements can introduce delays of around 4 to 8 weeks to get somebody on site once the procurement process is completed, while yet another provided examples where a framework

agreement had reduced EH duration (see fourth bullet in examples of good practice, directly below).

Examples of good practice from survey respondents

Some providers have taken action to speed up the process through enabling greater efficiency, and these are provided in Table 3, below.

Strategic

- Running yearly planned replacement programmes to complete whole schemes together rather than single void properties in isolation (also assessed as more cost effective).
- One LA has developed a “proactive maintenance schedule” which has enabled them to avoid large scale works once a property becomes vacant and improve the way it procures contractors through developing a cascade framework panel, in which there are both time and programme limitations built into the contract. These actions have reduced the time taken to appoint a contractor and their acceptance, which has led to reduced Empty property duration and costs.
- An AHB recently appointed a single contractor to complete maintenance including voids, which has negated the procurement period of voids. Prior to this the AHB was using a panel of contractors for void works which included in-house staff preparing tender documents/ issuing tenders to contractors/tender return period & review of tenders and award.
- Contractor Framework- using framework rates with metrics on performance/Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) not only on price, but to improve on the time to get empty property works completed.
- Having a framework for standard works, rather than repeatedly re-writing specifications
- Use of just one contractor so there is no need to go back to tender for each piece of work. (One AHB estimated that they had saved 4 or 5 weeks per empty property doing this.) Also, developing a relationship with a contractor means that the contractor, over time, gets to understand the standards required by the AHB and so there are fewer snagging issues.

Operational

- Notification of sub-contractors and scheduling works to commence on surrender of a tenancy.
- A dedicated Voids Team to carry out empty property works only, from previously having other responsibilities including dealing daily with reactive maintenance

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Monitoring/Reporting improvements with regular updates via shared reports giving an Estimated Time for empty works to be completed to facilitate early identification of new tenants.▪ Notifying sub-contractors in advance of works being required and scheduling works to commence on surrender of a tenancy. |
|--|

Table 3: Empty property works good practice from respondents

We offer good practice guidance in section 6 below.

Learning

- Staff resource levels need to be sufficient to support timely inspection, specification, monitoring and sign-off of void works.
- Complexity of void works increases cost and time. Delivering void works quickly will be straightforward if the void works themselves are straightforward. So, implementing a strategic asset management approach which identifies and implements programmes of improvement activity can reduce empty property durations by eliminating the need to deliver major works to empty properties.
- Whilst a variety of contract arrangements are possible the key issue is that there need to be resources available to undertake work at short notice. This will likely mean one of:
 - A specific section on void works within an overall repairs contract with incentives and penalties aligned to short delivery timescales.
 - A standalone contract for voids works geared around delivery to short timescales
 - A framework of contractors set up so that empty property works can be called off quickly and with the contractors tied in to delivering to short timescales with incentives and penalties.
- While there are good practice examples happening across LAs/AHBs, the findings identified that a number of providers operate within a more 'reactive' and unplanned maintenance approach, with complications due to contractors working across different areas (i.e., not just managing EHs).
- The landlord needs to have contractual arrangements in place that enable empty property works to commence within 24 hours of the property inspection. In the UK, contractors are often present at the initial void property inspection (or may conduct this alone having taken on the void risk in their contract). When these types of arrangements are not in place it inevitably leads to delays. These delays are then sometimes compounded by some LAs/AHBs who do not have monitoring procedures or set targets in place (see Section 4.7).

Recommendations

- I. Ensure a contract approach is in place which specifically addresses the availability of contractor resources to deliver empty property works to short timescales.**

4.5 Allocations

Introduction

This section covers:

- The landlord requesting a nomination
- The LA Allocations team identify a prospective tenant
- The LA Allocations team sending the nomination to the landlord

Strategic Issues

There is a shared recognition that Choice Based Lettings schemes work to the benefit of applicants and landlords when compared to traditional waiting lists.

Landlords are unhappy with the time it takes to achieve a successful nomination. But AHB landlords are reluctant to push LAs to improve their performance in this area because the AHB landlord fears that doing so will damage the relationship with the LA leading to adverse impacts on development opportunities.

Operational issues

Most interviewees and survey respondents reported challenges related to the allocation process itself. Landlord Lettings staff frequently referred to inefficiencies due to delays in the nomination process, with those who provided figures estimating delays of between 8 and 12 weeks, with the former figure calculated as accounting for 62% of the average 13-week re-let time for one AHB. Another AHB referred to delays being present despite asking for nominations around 6 weeks prior to new properties coming into management. A few referred to the further knock-on effect of these delays which caused yet further delays (e.g., increased risk of vandalism, an unreported leak).

Although Garda vetting checks were mentioned anecdotally (before the survey) as a cause of delays, this was not borne out by the survey findings where only a small number of respondents identified them as an issue.

From the LA (Allocations) perspective, some survey respondents acknowledged existing inefficiencies, attributing these to operating a manual Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system, the requirement to fill in too much paperwork, and lack of control over Garda checks. Nearly half (46.2%) highlighted delays on the AHB side due to them turning down nominations, or not responding in a timely manner when a nomination is provided.

Existing legislation permits an applicant one refusal in a 12-month period without penalty. A second refusal in a 12-month period then triggers a 12-month suspension from the list.

thejournal.ie reports¹⁰ useful aggregate data from 28 of 31 councils: 5,459 refusals nationally in the 3 years starting 2016, of which 357 (circa 7%) resulted in a 12-month suspension. Every refusal causes a longer empty property duration. Traditional waiting lists generate more refusals than CBL. The prevailing point being: refusals lengthen empty property durations, so changes to allocation methods which reduce refusals will shorten empty property durations.

Another identified issue is that in many areas only one offer is made at a time, with one person given time to consider and decide; if the chosen nominee does not respond or refuses then a delay ensues.

Ideas and examples of good practice from respondents

Respondents provided some strategic and practical suggestions that could speed up the nominations process, on both the LA and AHB side, which are provided in Table 4.

Operational

- Request nomination as soon as it is known that the property will be vacated
- Fill out nomination application forms over the phone, rather than sending it in the post
- Providing up to 3 nominations at a time (particularly for hard-to-let areas or where a previous refusal)
- Offering direct nominations rather than selective interview nominations
- Take a pro-active approach to allocation for hard-to-let properties (e.g., promotion, incentives) ("Effective Void Management in Ireland: A Good Practice Guide"¹¹)

Table 4: Expediate nominations/sign-up

Choice based lettings

A few respondents reported that CBL had improved the allocation process through reducing refusals and enabling improved performance on hard-to-let properties:

"In June 2020 we commenced using CBL. As a result of this the Allocation Process is now very efficient... the refusal rate for properties has dropped considerably."

Many respondents suggested the effectiveness of CBL in speeding up lettings was dependent on individual LAs, because some CBL schemes operate more efficiently and effectively than others. For example, some advertise properties before a new scheme is

¹⁰ <https://www.thejournal.ie/housing-application-refusals-4587311-Apr2019/>

¹¹ <http://www.housingagency.ie/publications/effective-void-management-ireland-good-practice-guide>

complete whereas others will only do so once units come into management. An LA interviewee explained that the reason for this from their perspective was to avoid being inundated with calls from the applicant if there was a delay in completion. This was also picked up by a survey respondent, who explained that CBL can cause delays at the LA end if the property is popular, as it can attract hundreds of expressions of interest.

Some respondents felt that CBL would work most effectively if a more targeted approach was adopted, such as:

- Carrying out pre-approval checks (including Garda checks) of applicants at the top of the list so that the checks do not add to the time needed to make a successful allocation.
- Use CBL for hard-to-let properties only (though this would likely require a common definition of what is meant by “hard-to-let” which may not be practical).

Learning

- CBL has the potential to improve the speed of allocations and reduce the rate of refusals.
- CBL schemes need careful configuration geared towards producing a successful nomination in a short period of time. An example of a tactic that may be appropriate is multiple offers with the highest ranked nominee who accepts the property being successful (could be across all properties, or only on hard-to-let properties)
- As one of the main assessed reasons for property refusals relates to location related factors, it is likely that if the potential tenant can choose where they wish to live through a CBL scheme, we could expect this to reduce.
- There is a need to consider where CBL may lead to delays and potential ways to mitigate this: For example, a manual CBL system will cause delays when a new scheme triggers lots of enquiries. But an online system will not cause delays in this circumstance.
- At present CBL is not being operated consistently across LAs, meaning it will be difficult to robustly measure its impact on reducing empty property duration.
- In the UK the issue of slow allocations was largely resolved by applying a rule that allowed a landlord to make a direct allocation if the LA did not provide a nomination within a specified time period.

Recommendations

- J. Set up service level agreements between LA Allocation teams and AHBs/LA Lettings Teams to regulate the nominations process.** This should include: setting out the allocations process, target timescales and reasons for refusal. Actions to support performance management are covered in the following section.
- K. Consider enabling landlords to let properties directly if the LA fails to produce a nomination within an agreed timescale.**
- L. Roll out CBL in all LA areas.**

- M. Promote CBL good practice**, i.e. how to achieve quick and successful turnaround of requests for a nomination using tactics such as pre-qualifying applicants, improved property details etc.

4.6 Lettings and signing for a new tenancy

Introduction

This section is concerned with activity by the landlord on receipt of a nomination from the LA Allocations team. The work involved is:



It is important to note that although the LA Allocations team are responsible for the people-related aspects of the nomination process, the landlord remains responsible for the property-related aspects such as the quality of the property details.

Strategic Issues

It is easy to regard allocations only on a property-by-property basis. However, it is important to also consider matters in aggregate. For example, what aggregate learning can be taken from reasons for refusal? If it is clear from refusal rates that a particular area or block is proving difficult to let, then consideration can be given to making special arrangements such as making multiple offers, bringing empty properties to a higher standard, or offering higher value decorating vouchers¹². An example of managing low demand properties can be found in Argyll Community Housing Association's Low Demand Strategy.¹³

Operational Issues

Based on survey respondents (n= 16) the main assessed reasons for refusal of a tenancy were based on less controllable factors, such as area related factors or some feature of the property (e.g., too small). It is also worth reiterating the point made in the previous section that potential tenants are not incentivised to accept an offer by potential penalties for refusal.

Good practice from respondents

Respondents provided a range of suggestions to make properties more attractive to potential tenants and thus speed up the re-let process, which are provided in Table 5.

¹² [Scottish Allocations good practice guide](#) (see section on 'Letting low demand properties')

¹³ [Argyll Low Demand Strategy](#)

Lettings and sign up
Provision of incentives, such as decoration vouchers or gift household items to incoming tenants
Carrying out an interview at the same time as a property viewing
Enforceable deadline for property acceptance
Carrying out virtual viewings or online video presentations (e.g., for potential tenants who live far away)
Set up "DocuSign"
"Fast track" new tenancy agreements
Pre-allocate properties and have viewings lined up as soon as properties are ready for let
Doing a pre-tenancy sign-up, explaining the Tenancy Agreement (TA), providing a Tenants Handbook and advising applicants when the property is expected to be available

Table 5: Speed up Lettings and sign-up

It is imperative that operational level initiatives are supported at the senior management/strategic level. However, this research uncovered limited evidence that this was happening. One LA, for example, had developed a Tripartite Agreement between the AHB, LA and HSE setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of each of the parties to it, which had facilitated fast tracking of applicants. This is a good example of a Service Level Agreement (that could just as readily be between two parties such as an AHB and a LA Allocations team) which can help to improve performance by setting and monitoring relevant performance measures.

Learning

- It is important that there can be a constructive dialogue between landlords and LA Allocation teams about how the LA Allocations team can help landlords to minimise empty property durations.
- A few LAs/AHBs referred to practical measures they had taken to help speed up property acceptance which should be relatively easy to implement. However, we found no concrete information on what impact this has on re-letting times, which if available, might encourage other providers to take a closer look.

Recommendations

- N. Create an online Allocations good practice resource containing examples of changes to process, rules, working practice etc. which have resulted in improvements to allocation turnaround times.**

4.7 Performance management

Introduction

This section refers to all activity to measure performance, monitor performance and to act on the learning from that monitoring.

Effective empty property performance management depends on:

- Strong, unwavering senior management focus on achieving performance objectives
- Detailed processes
- Timescales identified for all key steps
- Close, frequent monitoring of performance
- Pro-active management of under performance
- A learning culture

Even if the range of recommendations provided in this report are put into practice, this will be less effective in the absence of effective performance management processes to underpin what 'success' should look like.

Strategic Issues

In the section below on operational issues we report only limited enactment of pro-active performance management. Experience in the UK is that frequent rigorous performance management is a key factor in driving down empty property durations. This is because pro-active performance management will drive to the surface all the problems with important operational issues.

The key factor in implementing effective performance management is the strength of the mandate from senior management. Experience shows that there will need to be a (possibly prolonged) period where senior managers keep involved in the management of empty property performance. Close involvement by senior managers is needed until performance is headed in the right direction.

In conducting this research, it became apparent that there is not a universally understood set of terms or data definitions in use relating to empty property management. This was apparent because of the nature of questions raised during the survey and interview phases. This lack of a common set of terms and definitions gets in the way of performance comparison and improvement.

Operational Issues

Monitoring Empty Property duration

All survey respondents reported that they assessed the EH process in some way (such as during meetings). However, less than 2 in 5 report effective technology links at a cross departmental level (see Figure 5). Moreover, a significant minority (32.4%) did not have a

target number of days for empty property works to be completed (see Figure 6). This issue is starker for LAs, where more than 2 in 5 (44.5%) of survey respondents (n =16) do not set a target, compared to slightly less than 1 in 5 (18.8%) (n = 16) of AHBs.

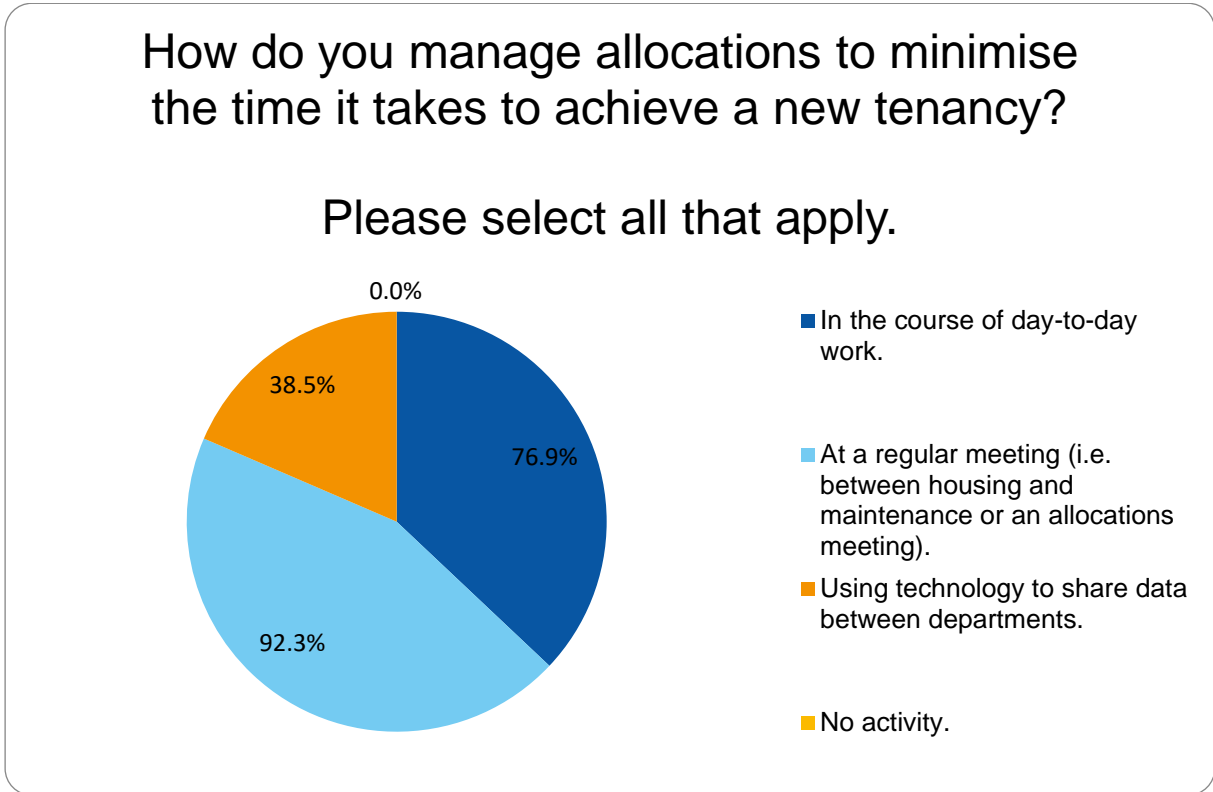


Figure 5: Minimising the duration of allocations

Do you have a target number of days for the empty properties works to be completed? (i.e., the period starting from the tenancy end date to the date on which the property is ready to let.)

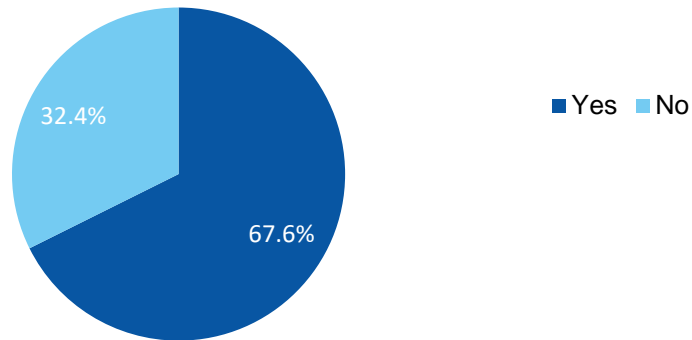


Fig 6: Target days for works

Of those who did set targets, these were set at such a varying level (21 to 125 days) that meaningful comparison is difficult. LAs tend to set targets at a higher number of days than AHBs. For example, the lowest target number of days reported by a LA was 60 days, where all bar one AHB reported a target as being under 60 days.

Furthermore, based on survey responses, although all LA allocation teams report taking actions to minimise EH periods, less than a third (30.8%, n = 13, Figure 8) have a set target to measure the length of time it takes to produce a nomination for an EH.

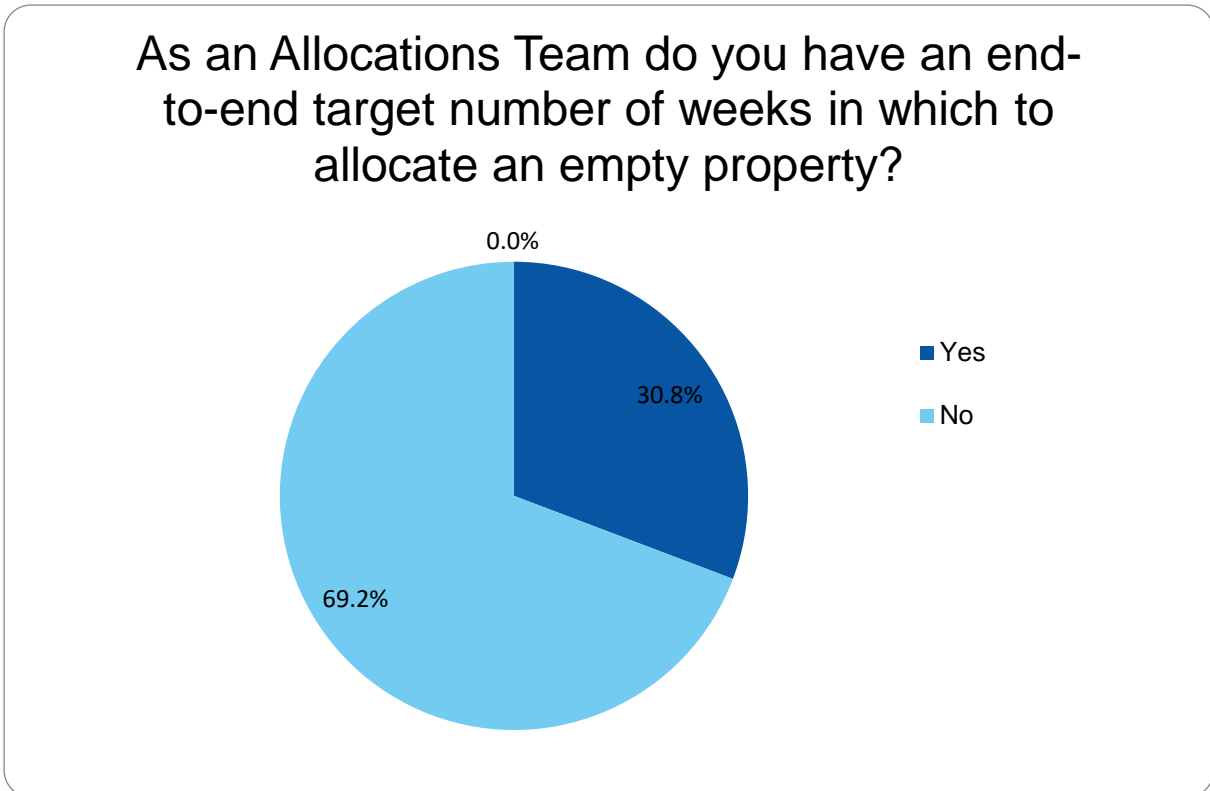


Fig 8: End to end allocation target

Monitoring of refusals is another measure that could usefully inform work to speed up lettings. However, monitoring of refusals is not carried out by around a third of LAs/AHB, according to survey data (in this case, LAs were more likely to monitor this (at 69.2%, n = 9), compared to half of AHBs, n = 7).

LA Allocations teams were asked to provide any key performance indicators they used for allocations. Of the 7 responses received, 4 referenced time related measures (length of time on housing list, average re-let time), and the remaining 3 referenced existing organisation led measures (NOAC figures or the LAs' own allocation schemes).

When assessing end-to-end performance, over half (53.8%) of survey respondents reported that they do not have a target (Figure 9); the figure for LAs was even lower, at under a quarter (23%, n = 13) (compared to 64.3% of AHBs, n = 14). Though the overall number of survey respondents who reported an end-to-end target was only 12, it is worth noting that there was a large, assessed variation between AHBs and LAs (based on 11 responses the average for LAs is 34.4 weeks, compared to 12.68 weeks for AHBs).

Do you have an end-to-end target number of days or weeks in which to let an empty property from the termination of one tenancy to the start date of another tenancy?

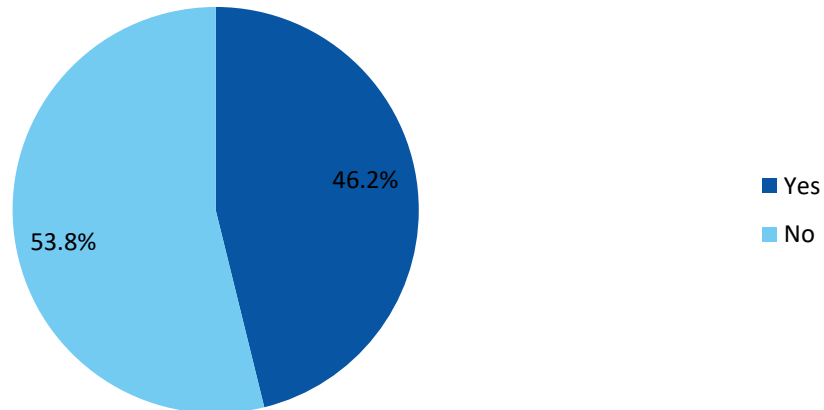


Fig 9: End-to-end target

Learning

- The lack of a universally accepted set of terms and data definitions makes progress more difficult.
- In the UK, comparison across services is viewed as a strong driver to ongoing improvement. Some survey respondents expressed an appetite to benchmark and measure performance, both cross departmentally (e.g., between different LA/AHB teams through the void, allocations and lettings process) and at the sector level. Yet the evidence shows that performance management is inconsistent, with LAs less likely to implement performance measures across all points of the EH journey. For example, where a LA/AHB may monitor empty property duration, they may not monitor allocations or reasons for refusals. This overall absence of performance management will inevitably lead to poor performance not being recognised or addressed.
- Targets are used sporadically and where they have been set, the variation across the sector is high. This makes comparisons less meaningful, unless information about how a specific baseline has been calculated is shared across the sector (i.e., based on previous years, like for like, area-based factors etc.).

Recommendations

- O. **Develop a standardised national set of terminology, data definitions and performance measures which will have two benefits: supporting discussions and enabling benchmarking.**

4.8 Empty Property Works

Introduction

This section is concerned with two issues:

- How empty property work is funded
- How empty property work is resourced (i.e., staffing levels, contractor availability etc.)

Strategic Issues

The current funding regime for LA empty properties perversely incentivises landlords towards longer void periods and larger schedules of work. NOAC noted in 2017:

“It is hard not to conclude that the existing funding schemes, such as the Voids Programme... and the regeneration/remedial works scheme, can end up having a perverse impact on available supply.”¹⁴

The perverse incentive arises because funding is up to a maximum amount (encouraging maximum rather than minimum spending) and because speed is not incentivised.

A number of respondents put forward concerns about the funding of empty property works.

A range of factors import cost into empty property budgets: absence of strategic asset management, lack of empty property-specific contracting arrangements, and the absence of lettable standards.

Operational Issues

Respondents gave particular reference to:

- Under-resourcing of staff leading to staff-time related delays to carrying out inspections, maintenance etc.
- Lack of timely funding to commence refurbishment, tackle voids, carry out required work on older properties that need modernising.
- LAs report a higher median cost than AHBs, and of 13 who provided a response 12 (92.3%) reported this at over 11.5 thousand euros (median cost of empty property works to a property), compared to only 1 of the 10 responding AHBs.

¹⁴ https://noac.ie/noac_publications/noac-local-authority-housing-management-and-maintenance-review/

- Tellingly, there is no mention made of the rent loss implications of longer empty property durations.
- Survey respondents provided some suggestions, both small and more fundamental around what was needed to help support EH management, for example:
 - Funding to be available to LAs to maximise works including energy efficiency which will help towards climate action plans.
 - Some type of small grant for void property repairs below €3000
 - A few felt age should be factored in when considering time/cost of a void period. An LA picked up this point to say Department funding is not sufficient to cover cost and that they often need to get internal approval to cover the balance before proceeding.

Learning

- It is crucial that the funding mechanism for empty property works either incentivises or is neutral in relation to minimising the empty property duration.
- The cost of empty property work can be reduced by using a lettable standard,

Recommendations

- P. Reform LA empty property funding to incentivise minimising void duration and cost.**

5. Semi Structured Interviews

5.1 Introduction

In order to clarify, triangulate and better understand the position outlined by the survey results we conducted semi-structured interviews with managers in AHBs (8 interviews) and LAs (8 interviews).

A summary of the feedback from interviewees can be found at Appendix 3.

Where the interviews lead to recommendations not previously recorded, they are set out within this section. The absence of recommendations in any specific sub-section of Appendix 3 simply means that recommendations already put forward in the foregoing Research Findings section cover off any issues raised.

5.2 Key issues from the semi structured interviews

The interviews very much corroborated the survey findings. It was clear that there is a recognition of the importance of turning around empty property quickly but also, in many places, a feeling of insurmountable problems. By insurmountable we mean problems which cannot be solved by the people facing them. For example, if you are the surveyor responsible for specifying and managing empty property works you may have little or no influence on how repairs contractors are appointed. So, no matter how enthusiastic or committed you are your hands are tied if inadequate contractual arrangements lengthen empty property works durations.

There were lots of examples of good practice and these demonstrate that progress is possible. The good practice brought forward by interviewees is strongly aligned with the good practice set out in section 6 below. For that reason, this section does not cite individual examples here. Empty property management is a complex subject. The large scale and overall complexity can make the subject feel overwhelming. However, as is demonstrated by interviewees, progress can be made by focusing in and making improvements to individual tasks within the overall process.

The problems and challenges raised by interviewees corroborate the survey findings. One issue which cropped up repeatedly was that of silo working, by which we mean that a team focuses on its own activities and struggles to acknowledge the wider context and the importance of interactions and hand-offs between teams. This manifested as one team laying the responsibility for long empty property periods with another team. So, the technical team claim that the cause of delays is the allocations team who, in turn, say that responsibility lies with the housing management team etc. What is needed is joint working to create a shared focus on shortening empty property durations.

Discussions with interviewees confirm our experience: that the case for shortening empty property durations and controlling empty property costs is well understood. When the range of teams involved in empty property management come together, that is when a sense of common purpose can be developed and material improvements made.

An interesting point made during the interviews was that if a landlord delivers its major works principally in empty property, this incentivises residents to seek a transfer as a way to

achieve living in an improved property. This motivation to apply for a transfer disappears if major works are delivered in tenanted properties.

Specialist providers working in the field of mental health report added complexity and delay arising from the fact that three agencies (AHB, LA Allocations Team, Health Service Executive) are in the mix. This added complexity and delay impacts upon a group of people whose need may be more urgent, who may find it harder to cope with their part in the allocations process and who may be less able to cope with the pressures imposed by the delay and complexity.

5.3 Recommendations arising from the semi-structured interviews

The majority of the issues arising in the semi-structured interviews have already been addressed in the recommendations in the Research Findings section. The following new recommendations arise:

- Q.** Good quality contract management has an important part to play in effective empty property management.
- R.** Using a schedule of rates can reduce time in getting work started on an empty property.
- S.** Ensure all staff specifying empty property works are technically competent.
- T.** Streamline Medical Assessments for applicants. Applicants may currently require two Medical Assessments (one by the LA the other by the Health Service Executive (HSE)). LAs could rely upon the HSE assessment.
- U.** Steps to improve consistency across allocations in different LA areas would help to streamline and shorten the allocation process.
- V.** Improvements are needed to the way that the work of the Health Service Executive relates to the allocations process.
- W.** Implement allocation activity (e.g. advertising properties on CBL whilst empty property works are ongoing)
- X.** Make good use of ICT systems to facilitate and underpin service delivery
- Y.** Promote the importance of service delivery within development teams to manage the risk of poor service due to new developments being remote from other properties in management by the landlord.

6. Good Practice Guide

6.1 Introduction

There is no getting away from the fact that empty property management is a task with lots of moving parts. There are lots of teams involved and therefore lots of hand-offs between teams. Think of it as a 100-piece jigsaw. Individual pieces range in scale from how LA empty property works are funded by national government all the way through to how an existing individual tenant knows how to terminate their tenancy.

The scale and complexity of the overall task can feel overwhelming. The key to making progress is to focus on individual pieces of the jigsaw. Many small improvements will add up to big overall improvements.

The literature review yielded only a small number of good practice guidance documents. In our view this is because of the relatively low profile of empty property management across the UK in recent years. The profile of the issue has been relatively low because UK performance has been relatively good (see section 3). In formulating this good practice guide we have taken cognisance of the good practice documents found during the literature review such as the Housing Agency's 2015 guide (produced with the Chartered Institute of Housing)¹⁵ and CIH's UK briefing from 2015¹⁶. The content of the documents is of good quality and still relevant. However, the pre-existing documents focus on the operational aspects of empty property management. Below we take a wider view, considering matters of national policy and practice as well strategic issues and operational issues. The guidance below combines the findings from the literature review, the survey findings and Campbell Tickell's experience as practitioners: We have been working on issues pertinent to empty property management for over 20 years. Over that time we have seen empty property performance in England radically improve. We know it is possible.

6.2 Consensus – Will – Focus

Good practice advice tends to focus on practical issues and there are plenty of those addressed below. But we note that the levels of consensus, will and focus that were present when performance in England improved are not currently visible in Ireland.

In England consensus formed around public money and public good arguments (See section 3.5). There was a period when there was a lot of media coverage about public money being wasted and applicants having to live longer in poor conditions due to long empty property durations. The strong **consensus** produced a strong **will** amongst politicians and senior managers which resulted in strong **focus** on reducing void durations.

Change did not come quickly. **Senior managers needed to get involved** and stay involved in order to make change happen, not least because some of the change needed their involvement.

The sections below discuss the various issues that need to be in place to achieve short empty property durations.

¹⁵ <https://www.housingagency.ie/publications/effective-void-management-ireland-good-practice-guide>

¹⁶ <https://www.cih.org/publications/how-to-effectively-manage-void-properties>

6.3 Strategic Issues

- The **funding** of empty property works needs to be straightforward, transparent and must not incentivise the wrong behaviours. In the UK, empty property works are always funded from operating budgets (i.e. rental income).
- A **Strategic Asset Management Approach** i.e.: a Stock Condition Survey which enables the programming of improvement works. This eliminates the need to do major works to empty properties.
- A **contracting approach** which means that resources are available to work on empty properties with minimal lead times. This can be achieved in a range of ways (specific sub-set within an overall contract, standalone contract, framework). The key is that the contractor can start at 24 hours' notice and complete works quickly. Rates for this work need to reflect the speed required. A variety of pricing mechanisms can support this aspect (e.g.: Schedule of Rates, Price per property).
- A robust **performance management culture**. Excellent empty property management fits very well with a robust performance management approach. In England, the pattern was of high levels of senior management involvement until it was clear that cultural change had been achieved. The relevant Director (of Housing or Operations or Asset Management) may well need to attend the weekly empty property meetings until it is clear that performance and culture are moving in the right direction.
- **Choice Based Lettings** can be an efficient and effective tool to speed up empty property turnaround. There are things that can be done within a CBL scheme to hit maximum speed such as pre-qualifying applicants as they approach the top of the list and offering low demand properties to multiple applicants with the top ranked applicant who accepts the property being allocated to it.
- It is crucial that there are **nationally recognised definitions** of terminology, data definitions and performance measures. This eliminates ambiguity about whether two figures are comparable and enables direct comparisons of performance. Empty property management is one of the most straightforward subjects to measure.

6.4 Administering empty property works

- IT systems can help to manage empty property, for example using workflow software. However, they are not crucial. What matters is **having a detailed process and then managing against that process**. It is possible to produce great outcomes using no more than Excel, email and a phone.
- An example of a property checklist can be seen in [Appendix 4](#).

6.5 Staffing structures

- Because the empty property process involves so many different teams **there is no single staffing structure that is guaranteed to yield the best result**. A dedicated empty property team can really help but there needs to be enough empty properties to make such an arrangement worthwhile.

- If empty property durations are not closely managed, then **empty property responsibilities may not be given sufficient priority**. This is where ongoing **senior management focus is crucial**. When senior managers are on the case, then officers involved in the empty property process will make empty property work a priority.

6.6 An end-to-end empty property process

- **The end-to-end empty property process is the single most important factor in driving down empty property durations**. The process can be divided into a number of sub-processes:
 - Tenancy termination
 - Empty property works
 - Lettings + Allocations
- **Timescales for each key stage are crucial**. There will be lots of these. For example, how quickly will...
 - customer service tell housing management that notice has been received (same working day or within 24 hours is good practice)
 - customer service tell technical services that keys have been received (same working day or within 24 hours is good practice)
 - technical services inspect on receipt of keys (within 24 hours is good practice)
 - technical services issue the works order after their inspection (within 24 hours is good practice)
- **Performance Measurement**: It is crucial that record keeping systems (which could be software based or on paper) ask for the required performance data. If the target is to inspect a property within 24 hours of receipt of the keys, then the time/date of receipt of the keys and the time/date of the inspection both need to be captured to enable monitoring of performance.
- **Service Level Agreements** are an excellent way to provide structure and focus to inter-team relationships.

6.7 Performance Management

- The second most important factor in reducing empty property durations is **regular, meticulous performance management**.
- High performing empty property teams will have **monitoring meetings weekly**. With every property monitored at every meeting.
- **Notes of the meetings** are needed to enable the identification of trends, e.g. why is it that electrical inspections always delay progress etc.

6.8 Tenancy Termination

- **Provide clear advice to tenants**, accessible in a range of ways (e.g. tenant's handbook, online) so that they understand their responsibilities in terms of property condition, notice periods and returning the keys.
- **Have a written process** describing how tenancy termination is handled and make sure that process deals with the most frequent issues such as failure to give the full notice period and repairs which are rechargeable to departing tenants.
- Ensure that the termination process **triggers other relevant empty property processes** i.e. by alerting Lettings and the Technical team to the upcoming empty property.
- Ensure that the termination process **administers keys received immediately** with prescribed timescales.

6.9 Empty property works

- Ensure the Empty Property Works process has **unambiguous, short timescales for the property to be inspected** on receipt of keys.
- Have in place **a system of key management** that supports short empty property durations. This might be suited keys, key safes, digital locks. Locks changed within 24 hours.
- Have a **Lettable Standard** which describes the standard an empty property will be brought to.
- Use an **empty property checklist** (based on the lettable standard) to ensure that all relevant items are covered and that all irrelevant items (i.e. work beyond the scope of the lettable standard) are not included. (See [Appendix 4](#)).
- Ensure the Empty property Works process has **unambiguous, short timescales for the issuing of works orders** following the inspection.
- Consider further ways in which to reduce empty property works durations such as **the contractor attending the initial inspection to scope the works required or the contractor scoping the works on their own**.
- Ensure that there is **regular, close monitoring of works progress**. Minimum is weekly progress update from contractor.
- Ensure the Empty property Works process describes **when contact to other teams is triggered** (informing of expected completion date etc.)
- Have in place a range of **appropriate performance measures of speed, quality and cost** and monitor against them closely.
- Have in place an agreed set of enhancements above the lettable standard which can be applied to **hard-to-let** properties together with a **definition of when a property is hard-to-let**.

6.10 Allocations

- Put in place a **Service Level Agreement (SLA)** with the LA setting out the timescales for key steps in the allocation process. The SLA should make clear the responsibilities and timescales of all parties to the agreement.
- Seek to build **an effective working relationship with the LA**. A relationship which recognises that minimising empty property duration is the objective of both teams.
- **Explore whether performance penalties are possible**: In England we see Registered Providers allowed to allocate to empty properties themselves if the LA does not allocate within agreed timescales.
- **Streamline applicant administration so that it does not slow down allocations**. For example, it may well be possible to carry out certain pre-qualification checks as each applicant nears the top of the list.

6.11 Lettings

- Consider what **work can be done with an applicant before their property is ready** in order to minimise re-let timescales when the property is ready.
- On new schemes consider **briefing groups of new residents together**.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

UK performance on empty property demonstrates that significantly shorter empty property durations are possible. This research project explores the factors which are contributing to Ireland's slower turnaround times.

Factors include:

- National policy matters: E.g., current LA empty property funding incentivises high value empty property works.
- Strategic issues: E.g., the low incidence of strategic approaches to asset management, resulting in major works being done to empty properties as a matter of course.
- Inter-team issues: The empty property process has multiple hand-offs between teams. There is limited evidence of joint-working across team boundaries.
- Operational issues: E.g., the availability of contractors to start and deliver empty property works quickly.

This project has also found some examples of good practice, and that there is an interest in improving performance.

In proposing good practice, the report identifies that the key factors in securing improvements to empty property performance in the UK were:

- Strong consistent focus on the issue by politicians and senior managers.
- A detailed end-to-end empty property process
- Frequent, meticulous performance management

Recommendations have been brought forward throughout the report in order that they can be read within the context that necessitates them. Below are all the recommendations, grouped by theme.

7.1 Table of Recommendations – grouped by theme

<i>National policy</i>	
D.	At national and political levels raise the profile of Strategic Asset Management approaches as tools to best manage social housing stock.
E.	At national and political levels promote the public money and public good arguments as reasons to make minimising void periods a strategic level priority.
F.	Promote the adoption of a lettable standard by each relevant landlord and monitor adoption through regulatory engagement.
L.	Roll out CBL in all LA areas.
M.	Promote CBL good practice.

N.	Create an online Allocations good practice resource containing examples of changes to process, rules, working practice etc. which have resulted in improvements to allocation turnaround times.
O.	Develop a standardised national set of terminology, data definitions and performance measures which will have two benefits: supporting discussions and enabling benchmarking.
P.	Reform LA empty property funding to incentivise minimising void duration and cost.
U.	Steps to improve consistency across allocations in different LA areas would help to streamline and shorten the allocation process.
V.	Improvements are needed to the way that the work of the Health Service Executive relates to the allocations process.
W.	Implement allocation activity (e.g. advertising properties on CBL) whilst empty property works are ongoing)
Strategic	
I.	Ensure a contract approach is in place which specifically addresses the availability of contractor resources to deliver empty property works to short timescales.
Operational – across all involved teams	
G.	A detailed end-to-end empty property process is needed with specific timescales allocated to relevant steps.
X.	Make good use of ICT systems to facilitate and underpin service delivery.
Performance Management	
H.	Regular, close monitoring of empty property performance is needed.
Housing management	
A.	Make it easy for tenants to understand their responsibilities at the end of their tenancy in terms of property condition, notice periods, rent and returning the keys. Make clear when tenants could incur additional costs and how those costs will be calculated
B.	If you raise rechargeable repairs, it is important to have in place a process to recover the recharges from the outgoing tenant.
C.	Put in place procedures to support a smooth tenancy termination process Ensure the procedures describe how typical problems will be addressed.
Empty Property Works	
Q.	Good quality contract management has an important part to play in effective empty property management.

R.	Using a schedule of rates can reduce time in getting work started on an empty property.
S.	Ensure all staff specifying empty property works are technically competent.
<i>Allocations</i>	
J.	Set up service level agreements between LA Allocation teams and AHBs/LA Lettings Teams to regulate the nominations process.
K.	Consider enabling landlords to let properties directly if the LA fails to produce a nomination within an agreed timescale.
T.	Streamline Medical Assessments for applicants. Applicants may currently require two Medical Assessments (one by the LA the other by the Health Service Executive (HSE). LAs could rely upon the HSE assessment.
<i>Lettings</i>	
P.	Carry out pre-tenancy work to advise new tenants of landlord and tenant responsibilities
<i>New Properties</i>	
Y.	Promote the importance of day-today service delivery within development teams to manage the risk of poor service due to new developments being remote from other properties in management by the landlord.

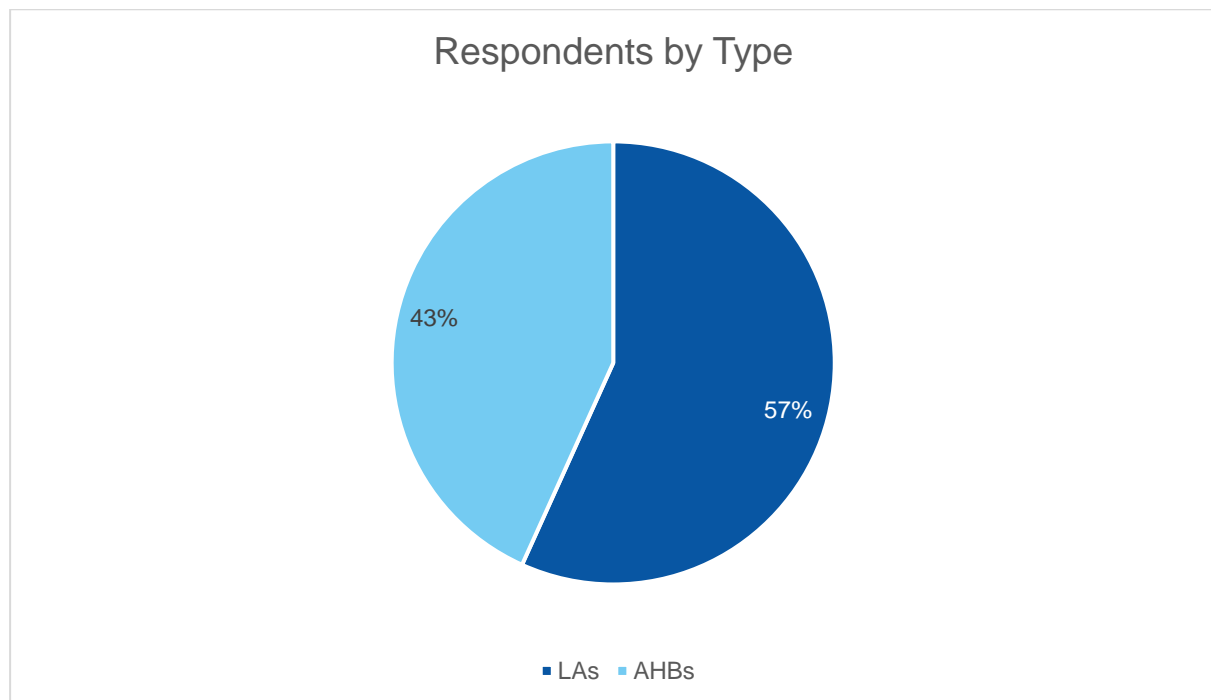
Appendix 1: Profile of Participants

Survey analysis profile of respondents

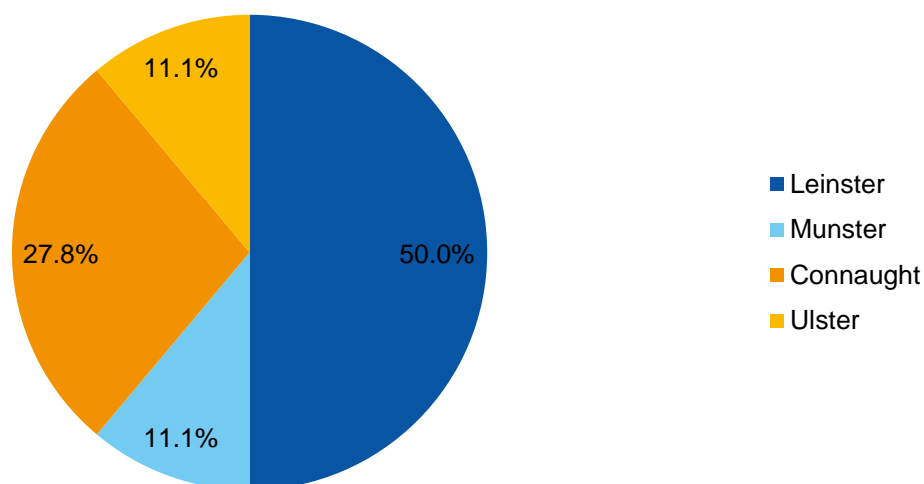
Total 112 organisations initially contacted via email to complete the online survey.

	Issued		Received					
	LA	AHB	Total	Total %age	LA	LA %age	AHB	AHB %age
Section 1 Technical	31	81	34	30%	18	58%	16	20%
Section 2 Allocations	31	81	12	39%	12	39%	N/A	N/A
Section 3 Lettings	31	81	25	22%	12	39%	13	16%

Survey 1

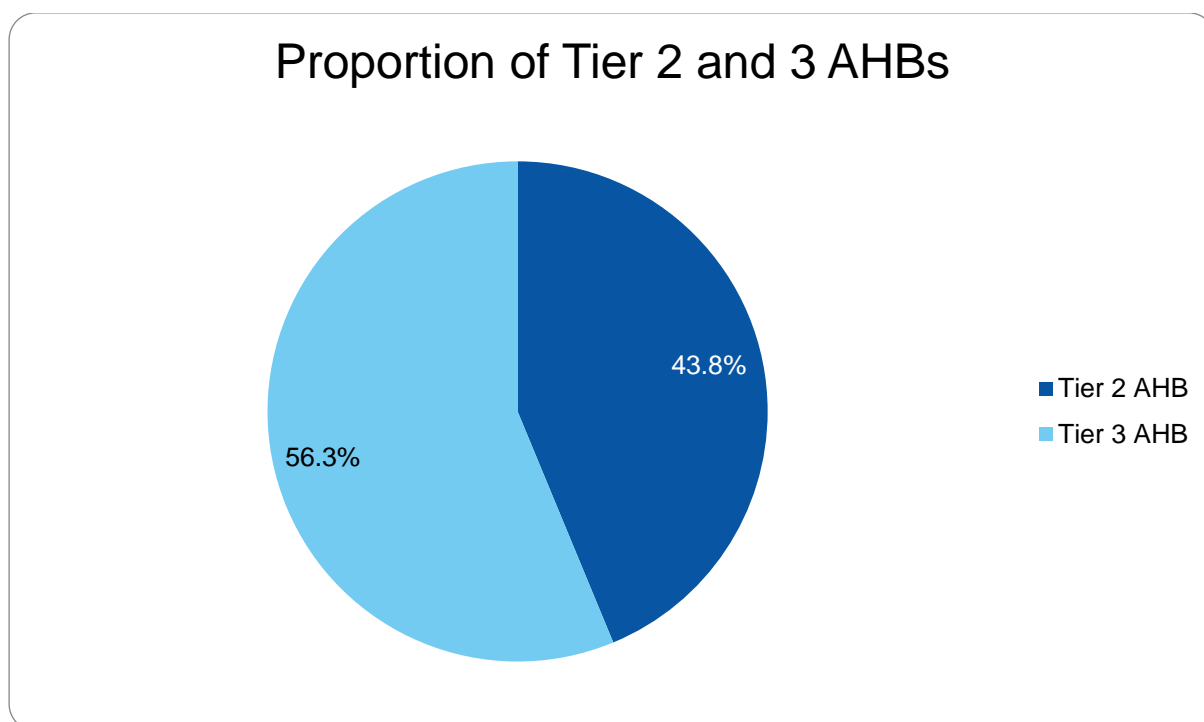


Breakdown of Local Authorities situated in:



AHBs that completed the survey managed properties in:		Response Percent	Response Total
1	ALL LA areas	25.0%	4
2	Carlow County	18.8%	3
3	Cavan County	12.5%	2
4	Clare County	6.3%	1
5	Cork City	12.5%	2
6	Cork County	18.8%	3
7	Donegal County	6.3%	1
8	Dublin City	50.0%	8
9	Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	43.8%	7
10	Fingal County	37.5%	6
11	Galway City	12.5%	2
12	Galway County	6.3%	1
13	Kerry County	12.5%	2
14	Kildare County	25.0%	4
15	Kilkenny County	12.5%	2
16	Laois County	18.8%	3
17	Leitrim County	0.0%	0

18	Limerick City & County	25.0%	4
19	Longford County	6.3%	1
20	Louth County	12.5%	2
21	Mayo County	12.5%	2
22	Meath County	18.8%	3
23	Monaghan County	6.3%	1
24	Offaly County	6.3%	1
25	Roscommon County	12.5%	2
26	Sligo County	6.3%	1
27	South Dublin County	37.5%	6
28	Tipperary County	18.8%	3
29	Waterford City & County	12.5%	2
30	Westmeath County	6.3%	1
31	Wexford County	12.5%	2
32	Wicklow County	18.8%	3
answered			16



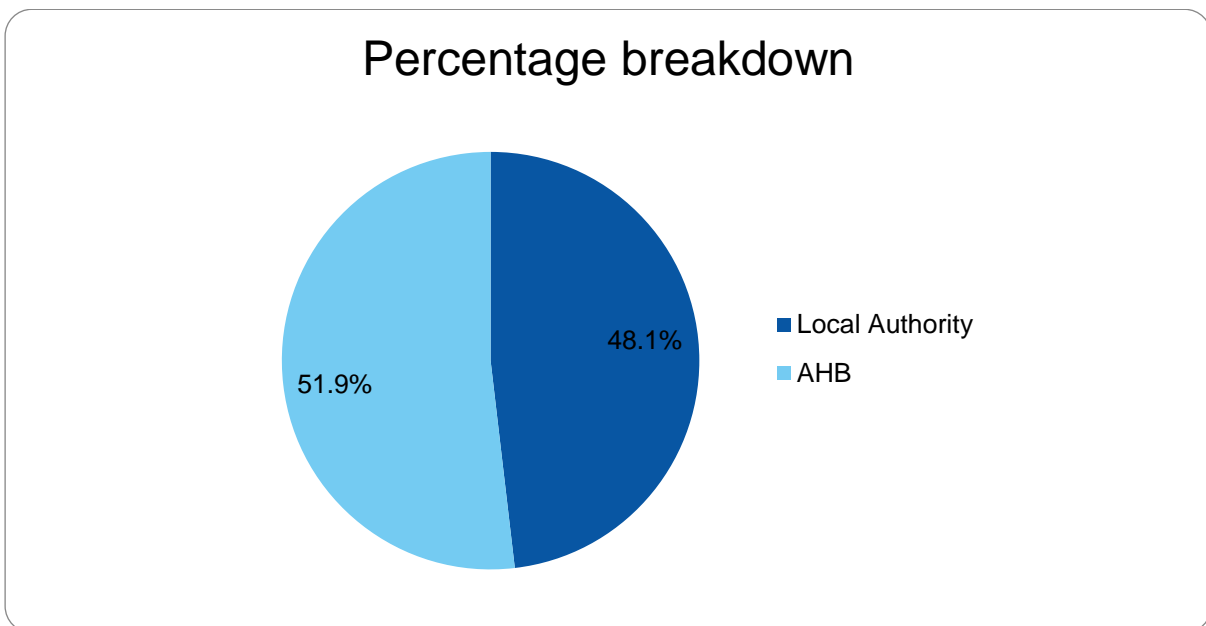
How many properties do you manage? Ranged between 0 – 3,004 leased properties and 8-25,000 owned properties.

Number of leased properties								
	0	1-10	20-30	50-100	100-200	200-300	500-1,000	1,000+
No. of responses	1	5	2	2	3	6	2	4

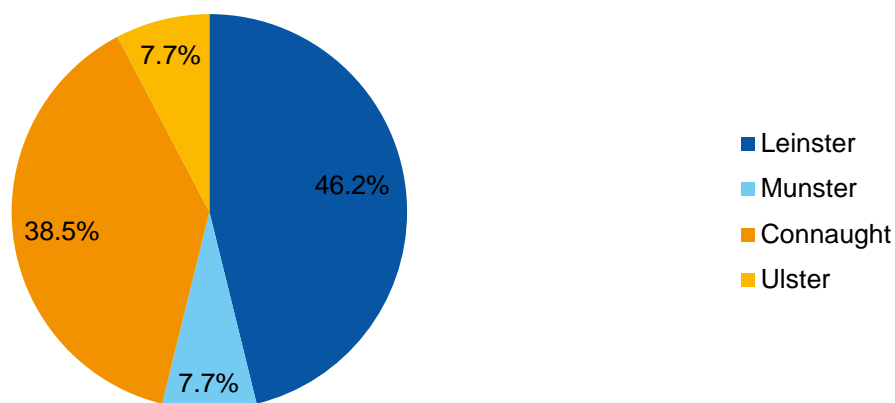
Number of owned properties									
	1-10	10-20	50-100	100-200	300-500	500-1,000	1,000-3,000	3,000-7,000	25,000
No. of responses	1	1	2	2	4	2	11		1

No. of responses								
	0-10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	50-60%	70-80%	90-100%	Not applicable
No. of Urban properties (%)	1	0	0	1	4	5	19	1
No. of Rural properties (%)	12	2	2	4	1	1	1	0

Survey 3



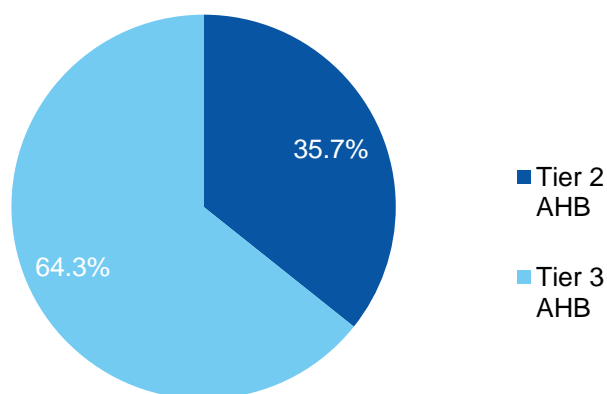
Breakdown of Local Authorities situated in:



AHBs that completed the survey managed properties in:		Response Percent	Response Total
1	ALL	28.6%	4
2	Carlow County	21.4%	3
3	Cavan County	14.3%	2
4	Clare County	7.1%	1
5	Cork City	14.3%	2
6	Cork County	21.4%	3
7	Donegal County	7.1%	1
8	Dublin City	50.0%	7
9	Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	35.7%	5
10	Fingal County	35.7%	5
11	Galway City	14.3%	2
12	Galway County	7.1%	1
13	Kerry County	14.3%	2
14	Kildare County	21.4%	3
15	Kilkenny County	14.3%	2

16	Laois County	21.4%	3
17	Leitrim County	0.0%	0
18	Limerick City & County	21.4%	3
19	Longford County	7.1%	1
20	Louth County	7.1%	1
21	Mayo County	14.3%	2
22	Meath County	21.4%	3
23	Monaghan County	7.1%	1
24	Offaly County	7.1%	1
25	Roscommon County	14.3%	2
26	Sligo County	7.1%	1
27	South Dublin County	35.7%	5
28	Tipperary County	21.4%	3
29	Waterford City & County	14.3%	2
30	Westmeath County	7.1%	1
31	Wexford County	14.3%	2
32	Wicklow County	21.4%	3
answered			14
skipped			13

Proportion of Tier 2 and 3 AHBs



Appendix 2: Survey: Tables of Reported Barriers

EH survey respondents

Most common barriers to letting empty properties more quickly (empty property teams)

Answer Choice		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Response Total
Ranking									
a	There is nothing we could do to get our empty properties ready to let more quickly.	1							1
b	Delays in dealing with the end of a tenancy and provision of keys.	3	4	8	5	1	0	1	22
c	Delays in inspecting and ordering the required empty property works.	3	4	6	5	1	1	0	20
d	Target time periods for completion of empty property works are longer than they need to be.	0	2	5	1	0	2	3	13
e	Empty property works taking longer than the original target date.	6	7	7	2	1	1	1	25
f	Delays in signing off empty properties works as complete.	1	1	2	5	3	4	2	18
g	No reason to get the property ready quickly because of the time it takes to achieve a successful offer on a property.	5	1	3	2	2	3	2	18
answered							30		
skipped							4		

Top reported barrier (i.e. scored a '1') broken down by LA/AHB provider

	LA	AHB
b. Delays in dealing with the end of a tenancy and provision of keys.	5.6%	12.5%
c. Delays in inspecting and ordering the required empty property works.	16.7%	0
d. Target time periods for completion of empty property works are longer than they need to be.	0	0
e. Empty property works taking longer than the original target date.	22.2%	12.5%
f. Delays in signing off empty properties works as complete.	5.6%	0
g. No reason to get the property ready quickly because of the time it takes to achieve a successful offer on a property.	5.6%	25%

LA Allocations team

In your view, what are the most common barriers to letting empty properties more quickly?

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Response Total
Ranking									
a	Time taken to carry out the works needed to get a property ready to let.	7	0	0	1	0	1	1	10
b	We get insufficient notice that an empty property is due to be ready to let.	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	3
c	Something about the property makes it difficult to achieve a letting.	1	1	5	2	1	0	0	10
d	Something about the area makes it difficult to achieve a letting.	3	6	1	0	0	1	0	11
e	Low demand for a property makes it difficult to achieve a letting.	2	3	2	3	0	0	0	10
f	We do not have enough staff to deal with the number of empty properties that we need to allocate.	1	1	3	0	2	0	0	7
g	Our internal processes could be more efficient.	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	3

AHB/LA Allocation teams

What are the most common barriers to letting empty properties more quickly?

Answer Choice		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Response Total
Ranking									
a	There is nothing we could do to get our empty properties ready to let more quickly.	2							10
b	Delays in dealing with the end of a tenancy and provision of keys.	5	6	5	1	2	1	1	21
c	Delays in inspecting and ordering the required empty property works.	1	3	1	4	2	1	0	12
d	Target time periods for completion of empty	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	7

	property works are longer than they need to be.								
e	Empty property works taking longer than the original target date.	8	5	1	1	1	1	1	18
f	Delays in signing off empty properties works as complete.	0	2	2	2	0	2	1	9
g	No reason to get the property ready quickly because of the time it takes to achieve a successful offer on a property.	5	1	0	0	1	0	2	9

Top reported allocations barrier (i.e. scored a '1') by LA/AHB provider

	LA	AHB
b. Delays in dealing with the end of a tenancy and provision of keys.	15.4%	21.4%
c. Delays in inspecting and ordering the required empty property works.	7.7%	0
d. Target time periods for completion of empty property works are longer than they need to be.	7.7%	0
e. Empty property works taking longer than the original target date.	46.2%	14.3%

Appendix 3: Summary of Semi-Structured Interviews

Tenancy Termination (and Housing management)

What has worked well

- AHB The work of **Tenancy Sustainment Officers** (TSOs)- they go above and beyond, verging on providing support to tenants which helps the housing team
- AHB The **Social Reform Fund** set up: The Service Reform Fund (SRF) has been created by the Department of Health; the Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government; the Health Service Executive Ireland (HSE); Local Authorities; and the Atlantic Philanthropies, in collaboration with Genio, to implement service reform in Ireland in mental health, disability and homelessness
- LA Using the pre-tenancy termination period. Clare Co. Co. had visited Monaghan (best performing LA in the country, in terms of speed of letting) - they found that they made better use of the pre-tenancy termination period to get information to the empty properties team to prepare them.

What works less well/key issues causing delays in overall process

- AHB **Covid** impact
- AHB & LA **Notice of tenancy termination:** often don't get notice and/or the tenant is transferring to another AHB or LA home so the AHB landlord feels they cannot enforce a four-week notice period.

Empty Property Works

What has worked well

- AHB Keeping properties up to a good standard- adhere to the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage Minimum **Standards** in Rented Accommodation. However, have a higher standard in special needs housing where the HSE is involved, including for Health & Safety (H&S).
- AHB Followed **Stock Condition Survey** results and requirements re component replacements and have completed all so only have **minimum works** to do at re-lets.

- AHB Front loading major component work on all new **Acquisitions**- kitchens, boilers and claim **funding** for this through the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) scheme. For Mortgage to Rent (MtR) properties, the AHB borrows money from the Housing Finance Agency (HFA). This practice pushes out **replacement** for 10/15 years. *“Give someone a good product and they will treat it well”*.
- AHB **Funding:** Taking advantage of SEI Upgrades to get stock condition up to date.
- AHB **Contractor arrangements:** Establishing clear expectations with the contractors. Use of just one contractor so there is no need to go back to tender for each piece of work. (North and East estimates they have saved 4 or 5 weeks per empty property doing this.) Also, developing a relationship with a contractor means that the contractor, over time, gets to understand the standards required by the AHB and so there are fewer snagging issues.
- AHB Introducing schedule of rates.
- AHB & LA Use of internal Direct Labour Organisation (DLO). (The organisation knows that their internal DLO turns around empty property quickly. They don't always use the DLO if there is no need to get the home ready quickly owing to delays in allocations.)
- LA Move to a **dedicated Voids Team** to carry out empty property works only, from previously having other responsibilities including dealing daily with reactive maintenance.
- LA **Contractor Framework-** using framework rates with metrics on **performance/KPIs** not only on price to improve on the time to get empty property works completed. And having a framework for standard works, rather than repeatedly re-writing specifications.
- LA Good communication- regular meetings between Housing/Allocations and Maintenance/Technical Teams to address issues arising with Voids and question delays.
- LA Monitoring/Reporting improvements with regular updates via shared reports giving an Estimated Time for empty works to be completed to facilitate early identification of new tenants.
- LA Carrying out routine inspections: The organisation carries out one or 2 routine inspections per property per year to pick up any repair issues/rechargeable repair issues. This should reduce the work needed if the property becomes empty.

What works less well/key issues causing delays in overall process

- AHB Costs for planned maintenance works and major component replacement is typically five times higher in Group homes*, heightening the need for 100% occupancy.
- AHB Life skills of tenants is a significant factor in terms of property condition with tenants generally spending more time at home with resultant higher costs required for painting and deep cleans required regularly for smoke damage with intensive management for hoarding.
- AHB Scheduling of empty property works: where non-technical staff (housing officers) are used to produce a schedule of works, sometimes result in a work being identified once the contractors on site. This extends the estimated completion date.
- LA Financial/resource related barriers: Funding and under resourcing of Housing Maintenance & Allocations Departments with staff multi-tasking.
- LA The number of people involved in the overall process without clarity and understanding of respective roles and lengthy timelines for 'hand-offs'.
- LA Availability and lack of contractors and rising costs and availability of materials.
- LA Utilities and especially where new property Acquisitions require a new ESB (electric) connection.
- LA Poor condition of properties requiring substantial works to bring them to a standard.
- LA Major works required, for example new Acquisitions requiring a new kitchen, heating system and rewiring. This is also the case where there have been long term tenants and LAs in the main only carry out major works to empty property only, this up until now incentivised via the Voids Programme.
- LA Contractor framework agreements: reported by all local authorities Cath interviewed: delays incurred by using a framework agreement, it can take up to 1-3 months to get a contractor on site.
- LA Budget approvals: The LA's average empty property works cost €25,000 (each home). They have to get approval for anything over €11,000. This can take weeks to get.
- LA Unrealistic responsive repairs budget that affects what needs to be spent when the property becomes empty: The LA's budget for responsive repairs is €420; they know from AHBs that an AHB budget would be in the region of €1300 per year.
- LA Shifting completion dates: reported by multiple local authorities. I couldn't get to the bottom of this, but everyone told me that completion dates often slipped. Not clear whether this is owing to poor scheduling of the works or contractor delays.

- LA Historically no concept in Ireland of asset management/stock condition surveys/planned maintenance. Also, of not doing rechargeable repairs.
- LA LA tenants have become incentivised to apply for a Transfer, in order to get major works carried out where these works are only carried out in empty properties.

* A Group Home typically has 5 residents and a 'caretaker' all under the one roof, with individual bedrooms and shared common space, funded from the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS)

Recommendations

- Q. Good quality contract management has an important part to play in effective empty property management.**
- R. Using a schedule of rates can reduce time in getting work started on an empty property.**
- S. Ensure all staff specifying empty property works are technically competent.**

Allocations

What has worked well

- AHB Good working relationships between the AHB and LA. Developed a Tripartite Agreement between the AHB, LA and HSE setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of each of the parties to it. Facilitates fast tracking of applicants.
- LA Move to a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system, other than for adapted and older persons properties where tenants are bidding because they want the property. CBL tends to be used by LAs for Hard-to-let properties.

What works less well/key issues causing delays in overall process

- AHB **Disability Strategy Group-** in the region the Group has only had a few meetings in the last five 5 years.
- AHB **Nominations-** both LA and Mental Health (MH) Teams need to link in with LA to give an appropriate nomination to AHBs for applicants who have MH and are linked into their Services. Need a referral from MH team as well as getting applicants on to the Housing list. *"We are dependent on the HSE and the LA to identify potential tenants and process applications respectively."* *"The biggest obstacle we find is the duration of time that it takes the LA to process a nomination, this can be extremely slow. This can sometimes be added to by a delay in potential tenants being identified by the Mental Health team."* LAs are treating special needs as general needs applicants with the time taken to

process applicants on the LA Housing List too long. Special needs applicants are not getting priority for purpose built special needs housing. Only receiving one nomination results in delays. AHBs take nominations in good faith from LA and are not given the applicants case history e.g. AHB has a current situation with a family who already had four transfers for Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and they had not been given this information to more sensitively manage the allocation- location and type of property offered- *“Tenants trust us and are asking how this person moved into this estate”*. One AHB reported that they are able to reject a nomination on the grounds that they consider it is not suitable for the property available. They make a link between this kind of letting and the tenant wanting to move on quickly, which results in another empty property.

- AHB **LA (LA):** Due to **changing personnel, staff** interpret things in their own way and are unfamiliar with the nature of AHBs **providing specialist housing** for people with enduring mental health.
- LA **Health Service Executive (HSE)** Suitability and compatibility of tenants in Group Homes and having adequate support and supervision is an issue. *“We’re an open door, waiting for the person to come with adequate supports.”* Delays with **Care Provider** in getting suitable and **compatible tenants** to live alongside other residents in **Group Homes/shared housing** is very time consuming. *“Getting a **Care Package** for tenants requiring high level support is extremely challenging”*.
- LA Duplication - applicants currently get two **Medical Assessments** carried out by both LAs and the Health Service Executive (HSE).
- LA **Garda Vetting-** causes delays.
- LA **Liaison with LA:** AHBs seem to have no teeth when chasing LAs on delays in nominations. Seems to apply even at the chief executive/director of housing level. *“You can’t bite the hand that feeds you”* and *“you have to bend over backwards to curry favour with directors of housing [at local authorities]”* and *“we can’t rock the boat for development approval.”*

Recommendations / Learning

- T. Streamline Medical Assessments for applicants. Applicants currently get two Medical Assessments carried out by both LAs and the Health Service Executive (HSE). LAs could rely upon the HSE assessment.**
- U. Steps to improve consistency across allocations in different LA areas would help to streamline and shorten the allocations process.**
- V. Improvements are needed to the way that the work of the Health Service Executive relates to the allocations process.**

Lettings

What has worked well

- AHB Reviewing internal lettings processes. A large AHB has started ringing nominations to fill out the application form over the phone, rather than sending it in the post.
- LA Pre-allocating properties and having viewings lined up as soon as properties are Ready for Let.
- LA Doing a pre-tenancy sign-up, explaining the Tenancy Agreement (TA), providing a Tenants Handbook and advising applicants when the property is expected to be available.

What works less well/key issues causing delays in overall process

- LA The number of people involved in the overall process without clarity and understanding of respective roles and timelines for 'hand-offs'

Recommendations

- W.** Implement allocation activity (e.g. advertising properties on CBL) whilst empty property works are ongoing)

Miscellaneous

- AHB Inadequate **ICT systems**
- AHB AHBs taking on new homes in parts of the country where they have not previously worked. Delays have occurred because they do not have links with contractors to carry out the work. (This may tap into the desire for the AHB sector to expand and/or the need to work closely with the Housing Agency: they may have taken homes that, in retrospect they would not have taken simply because they wanted to increase the numbers of homes they managed.)
- AHB Lack of clarity in the definition of an empty property. E.g. One AHB talked about problems with abandonments, but these should not be classed as an empty property until they have repossessed the property, so abandonments should be being talked about in a conversation about the management of empty property.
- AHB Financial implications/resourcing- the HSE has inadequate budgets to support people in the community and the AHB is required to bid for support staff posts every year to the HSE. Lack of support can increase tenancy turnover/no. of empty properties.

- LA Rural properties: without appropriate infrastructure, including transport and for people requiring local services that are generally not available. And rural properties, outside of main towns requiring individual sewage connections where they are not connected to the mains, which also requires significant additional funding
- LA Forming working relationships with new work colleagues who have not met personally due to Covid
- LA Unhealthy relationship between local authorities and AHBs, as AHBs don't feel in a position of power to challenge delays in nominations, as they are reliant on the relationship with LAs for future development opportunities.
- LA LAs are not carrying out effective performance management so poor performance is not recognised or addressed
- LA All attention seems to be on the supply of new homes. Nobody seems to notice or care that the process of letting a new home is so inefficient.

Recommendations

- X. Make good use of ICT systems to facilitate and underpin service delivery**
- Y. Promote the importance of service delivery within development teams to manage the risk of poor service due to new developments being remote from other properties in management by the landlord.**

Appendix 4: Property Checklist

An example checklist is below. It translates a lettable standard into something that can be used:

- Onsite to record works necessary
- To track progress

Property Address		Asbestos register checked?	Y	N
Property Size		Improvement programme checked?	Y	N
Person responsible for this void		Any rechargeable repairs?	Y	N
Recharge raised?	Y / N	Recharge Amount	€	
Date Keys received		Date Works orders issued		
Date of inspection		Target works completion date		
Actual completion date		Post Inspection date		
Notes				
Variations (Order nr, date of variation, cost, reason)				

Group	Item	Standard	Work Required	Order Number	Order Date	Order Value	Target completion date	Actual Completion date
	Lock change	Ordered on receipt of keys						
	Electric Check	Ordered on receipt of keys						
	Gas check	Ordered on receipt of keys						
Throughout								
	Pest and vermin	Any signs of infestation dealt with						
Kitchen								
	The sink-top and work surfaces	In a clean and hygienic condition All plugs present						
	Units	Appropriate in number to the size of the property Secure and doors and drawers operate satisfactorily						
	Tiles/Splashbacks	Tiled areas will be sealed and free from cracked/broken tiles						
	Cooker space	A safe and compliant cooker space with a suitable gas and electric point if both are available						
	Sockets	Minimum 2 x double						
	Fridge, washing machine	Spaces clear and clean. Connections sound and functioning						
Bathroom and toilet								
	All elements	Operational and free from leaks Overflows functioning and not running All plugs present						
	Tiles	Tiled areas will be sealed and free from cracked/broken tiles						
	Toilet(s)	Work properly, be securely fixed and have a new toilet seat fitted						
	Assisted ventilation	Sufficient and working						
Flooring and Stairs								
	Floors throughout	Appropriate to the room, in clean and undamaged condition Any flooring carrying over from previous tenancy (e.g. carpets, laminate) noted and administered						
	Timber floors	Secure and in an acceptable condition. Solid floors will have no major ongoing defects. Stairs will have safe and secure handrails and balustrades						
	Solid floors	No major ongoing defects						
	Stairs	Safe and secure underfoot, handrails and balustrades						
Ceilings and Walls								
	Visible Plasterwork	Ready for decoration Polystyrene tiles removed						
	Walls and ceilings	Free from damp and mould						
	Graffiti	Removed or decorated over (inside or out)						
Gas, Electric & Water								
	Water	Supply working Stopcock working						
	Smoke alarm	Present and working						
	Carbon monoxide alarm	Present and working						

Group	Item	Standard	Work Required	Order Number	Order Date	Order Value	Target completion date	Actual Completion date
Doors, Woodwork, Windows & Glazing								
	Fire doors	Present where required, to the appropriate standard, fully functional and undamaged						
	All internal and external doors	Operate correctly. Fit for purpose						
	All external locks	Changed						
	All windows and glazing	Operate as intended Open and close as intended Frames and glazing undamaged Vents clean and operational Locks wor, keys present						
	Window restrictors	Present where required. To the appropriate standard. Fully functyional						
Cleaning								
	Cleanliness	Clean and free from rubbish (including loft)						
	Surfaces and cupboards	Cleaned						
	Kitchen, bathroom, toilet floors	Mopped						
	Sink, wash hand basin, bath/shower, toilet	Sanitised						
Externally								
	Access paths	Safe and hazard free						
	Boundaries	Clearly defined						
	Lanlords fencing	Safe and secure						
	Roofs, walls, gutters, downpipes	Safe, secure, in good order						
	Garden	Clear of rubbish, safe						
	Landlord sheds, bin sheds etc.	Safe						
	Tenant sheds, greenhouses, garden structures	If safe and in good order, offer to gift to ingoing tenant. If declined, remove						

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