

Please note that this report will be approved by Scrutiny Management Board on 18th February 2015.

BOLSOVER DISTRICT COUNCIL

IMPROVEMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Spotlight Review of hard to let properties

February 2015

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Foreword of Councillor Hilary Gilmour Chair of the Improvement Scrutiny Committee

On behalf of the Improvement Committee it is a pleasure to present this spotlight review on 'Hard of Let Properties'.

The review was particularly concerned with long term void properties within the sheltered housing accommodation and the loss of revenue for Bolsover District Council.

The members gathered evidence from both the areas we visited. Members found misleading advertising especially in respect of a bedsit, Flats that were very unattractive and off putting especially one that had been empty for five years. There was a perception that some sheltered housing is like a care/nursing home rather than independent living within the accommodation.

The recommendations made in this spotlight review are to address the issues to make an investment to attract potential tenants to enable this authority to obtain revenue.

I wish to thank the Housing Needs Manager, Housing Needs Officers for their time to provide information for this review, Scheme Managers at Valley View/Victoria House for affording us time, providing information and the courtesy of visiting the sites.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Scrutiny Officer and Governance Officer for their hard work and commitment to this intense spotlight review.

A sincere thank you to the Members of the Improvement Scrutiny Committee for their dedication to committing to extra meetings to meet the deadline of the review and finally to thank our Bolsover District Council Tenant Panel Member for her attendance and contribution.

1. Introduction

The review was identified following a concern raised by an elected Member regarding the loss of revenue to Bolsover District Council as a result of long term void properties.

When considering what constitutes as 'hard to let' the Committee agreed that the hard to let properties were the Category 2 sheltered accommodation and New Bolsover. As New Bolsover was being dealt with separately and issues being addressed elsewhere, it was agreed not to cover New Bolsover within the remit of this review.

Sheltered housing accommodation is unfurnished properties specially designed or adapted for older people (currently 60+) to maintain independent living. Bolsover District Council has a number of schemes across the District with 44% of the Council's housing stock being sheltered accommodation. The Category 2 service is subject to a contract with Derbyshire County Council, which requires all tenants to have a Needs Assessment and a Support Plan.

Sheltered housing offers the following;

- A Scheme Manager living on site – *all 7 schemes have an onsite Scheme Manager. Support Officers provide out of hours response and cover for annual leave, etc.*
- Laundry
- Communal lounge and kitchen
- Guest bedroom
- District heating system
- Concessionary TV licence
- Organised activities and events
- Linked to Careline providing 24 hour response

The Scheme Manager lives on site and is normally available Monday-Friday 9.00am – 5.00pm. Support Officers are available in an emergency when the Scheme Manager is not on duty.

The Scheme Manager will produce and review a support plan based on the tenant's individual needs and will provide advice and support to tenants and develop and facilitate social activities in the scheme. They do not provide personal care such as bathing, getting dressed or preparing and cooking individual meals but depending on their support plan will liaise with relevant agencies. ¹

Information taken from BDC Council Housing pages of website

To support the Committee in its review, an invitation was sent to the Bolsover District Council Tenant Scrutiny Panel for a Member to be involved as a stakeholder in the review.

2. Recommendations

2.1 ***That Bedsits be renamed Studio Flats and this term be used in all advertising of the properties.***

Initially, Members of the Committee were concerned that the assumption with a bedsit was that the bathroom would be communal and not located within the property and there would only be a small kitchenette. When asking the question to the Housing Needs Manager and Housing Needs Officer, it was confirmed that all bedsits within the sheltered accommodation had a sizable living/sleeping area with a separate bathroom and kitchen.

This was confirmed during the site visit to Valley View where Members were shown both empty and occupied bedsits.

It was unanimously agreed that the term 'bedsit' was off putting and could be misleading but this was a standard term that all Local Authorities used. It was stated that Studio Flat would be a more appropriate description.

Members were advised that Bedsits were unpopular. At a sheltered scheme in Shirebrook, capital receipts were used to knock through two bedsits to create a flat and since that work took place, there has been more demand for those properties. It was confirmed that the layout of the accommodation at Valley View meant that similar works couldn't be undertaken. There are no bedsits at Victoria House.

A1 Housing have also changed the name to Studio Flats (please see Appendix C)

2.2 ***That a programme of improvements to void properties be developed which includes basic decoration to ensure that the properties are ready to move into.***

A number of properties were viewed at the site visits. Although all the empty properties viewed had a certificate confirming that the property met the voids standard, Members felt that potential applicants would be put off these properties for the following reasons;

- Walls – wallpaper stripped on some walls but not others, some walls skimmed and not others and chunks of plaster missing from around the windows.

- Floor – carpet gripper rods left behind and uneven floors where some vinyl tiles have been removed.
- Ceiling – Some ceilings had been skimmed and left bare (not painted)
- Bathrooms – it is understood that bathrooms are part of a scheduled programme of works and all sheltered accommodation is due to have accessible showers in due course.

(Observations from all properties)

We need to ask ourselves as an Authority – do we expect potential tenants to move into this type of accommodation in its current state? Some tenants may not have family to assist with decorating and elderly or vulnerable tenants may not be physically able to do this kind of work themselves or have the means to pay someone else to do it for them.

The Authority is losing income in the form of rent for the empty properties across the sheltered housing at an approximate figure of £2045* per week (not including heating charges and council tax). *see figures provided in key findings.

Some of these properties are long term voids. A one bedroomed flat at Victoria House was viewed which had been empty for five years. (£19,680.00 lost income in rent and £4,030.20 in lost council tax, *based on 14/15 Council Tax rate- Elmton with Creswell, band A with the 25% reduction for single occupancy*).

In order to make these properties attractive to future tenants, an immediate investment from the Housing Revenue Account is required to bring these properties to an agreed acceptable level of décor. With the amount of revenue currently being lost in rent, it is considered that the investment is acceptable in order to increase the income to the Housing Revenue Account through rents once these properties are occupied.

Please refer to Appendix C for examples of how A1 Housing has undertaken works to improve properties.

2.3 *That an advertising/marketing campaign be undertaken to promote the sheltered accommodation with a number of void properties (predominantly Valley View, Bolsover and Victoria House, Creswell).*

The Committee asked questions to the Housing Officers and Scheme Managers about how the properties could be promoted and a list of suggestions is as follows;

- A leaflet with photographs (designed similar to particulars that estates produce when selling or letting houses) which can be placed in local GP

surgeries, Libraries and Community Centres, etc to show the accommodation and facilities on offer.

- Open days promoted with local communities to entice people to come and view the accommodation on offer.
- A 'show home' at each property (it is suggested that at Valley View this would be a bedsit or studio flat) to give prospective tenants an idea of the layout size of the properties and facilities on offer.
- That the Housing Department develop links with the Neighborhood Outreach Team so that the Sheltered Accommodation can be promoted through leaflets and word of mouth to appropriate audiences as part of their work.

It was suggested by the Scheme Manager at Valley View that promotion of sheltered accommodation could be done by having a field worker to attend local groups, events, luncheon clubs, etc. This field worker would be able to speak to people about the type of accommodation and facilities on offer in order to encourage interest in the sheltered schemes.

Members considered that this may be a role that could be carried out by the Neighbourhood Outreach Team who already provide luncheon clubs in various locations across the District attends groups and clubs and meet on a one to one basis with residents of Bolsover District rather than going to the expense of employing another member of staff.

Comments were sought from the Environmental Health Manager who advised that the team would be more than happy to distribute leaflets to appropriate customers or partner organisations but this would be limited due to the target audience at most of the meetings/events provided by Neighbourhood Outreach Team.

2.4 *That the flat at Valley View currently used as an office for the Support Officers be returned for use as residential accommodation.*

To the rear of the property is an annexe which was previously the laundry and is now underused. It was suggested that Support Officers could use this building as an office and return the flat that they are currently taking up.

The Housing Needs Manager advised that the existing secure office arrangements allow the Support Officers to have a secure office to discuss, review, maintain and store Support Plans and Needs Assessments. This is a requirement of the contract with Derbyshire County Council. These arrangements have also been approved by the Council's Data Protection Officer.

Alternatively the annexe could be used as a community space to allow residents from the nearby houses and bungalows to have some time away

from home and socialise, which may eventually lead to them moving into the accommodation, freeing up Council housing elsewhere in the District.

The Housing Needs Manager has advised that the use of the annexe was considered, however, the personal data could not be kept secure as the annex was used by Derbyshire County Council staff and members of the public.

Future use of the annexe is currently being jointly discussed and does include use by groups as an extension of the Day Centre and other older people who wish to access services.

The Committee did not accept that the use of the flat as an office was the most cost effective use of resources and were still of the opinion that the flat should be vacated with immediate effect. The Warden's office could be used as a secure location for the confidential data.

2.5 *That a package of support be considered to offer to interested tenants as an incentive to move into Sheltered Accommodation.*

Suggestions that came out of the review from Members and staff were;

- Assistance with moving
- Relocation allowances
- Local Lettings Policy

There is potential to free up Council properties that may be in demand and move people into the sheltered accommodation.

Looking at the revenue lost in rent for the void sheltered properties Members felt that by offering some incentives for moving into sheltered accommodation it may reduce further loss in rental income in the future and considering that the majority of applicants are over 60, it may be the prospect of the work and effort involved in moving that may be off putting.

Local Lettings Policies have been used to address voids and hard to lets in specific areas in the past and it is considered that having a policy to cover sheltered accommodation would assist in widening the eligibility for the properties.

2.6 *That the costs of changing the Abrisas system to allow the wording of the Choice Based Letting adverts to be amended together with any impacts on A1 Housing and Rykneld Homes be investigated with a view to improving the adverts on the Choice Based Lettings System for Sheltered Accommodation.*

Members were advised that the Abris system used to provide the Choice Based Letting system was linked to A1 Housing (Bassetlaw District Council and Rykneild Homes (North East Derbyshire District Council) and therefore any changes to the system for Bolsover District Council would impact on the system used by the other Local Authorities.

The system is strict on the text entered when property details are being inputted and when this text is transferred into the listing or advert, it leads to confusing text.

The Housing Needs Manager advised that people over 50 can have a property if there is a need, however the advert clearly states; 'minimum applicant age: 60'.

There is a concern that the Choice Based Lettings system is not transparent and that some people who may have been interested in a property, will not have applied due to the minimum age requirement that is advertised and may not be known to the Housing Department for them to pick up the enquiry elsewhere.

An example of an advert is attached as **Appendix B**.

3. Scope of the review

The aims and objectives of the review were to identify the issues around the hard to let properties, considering the following key points;

- why the properties are hard to let
- historical demand for the properties

Members carried out the review with the following key issues in mind,

- Loss of revenue
- Marketing/advertising of properties through the Choice Based Lettings System
- Potential implications of the review of Adult Services being carried out by Derbyshire County Council.

The Committee comprised the following Members,

Councillor Hilary Gilmour (Chair)	Councillor Jim Smith (Vice Chair)
Councillor Pauline Bowmer	Councillor Ray Brooks
Councillor Jim Clifton	Councillor Paul Cooper
Councillor Malcolm Crane	Councillor Ray Heffer
Councillor Duncan McGregor	Councillor Rita Turner

Support to the Committee was provided by the Scrutiny Officer and the Governance Officer.

4. Method of review

The Committee met on 4 occasions to consider the scope of the review, key issues they wanted to discuss and the people they wished to interview.

The Committee sought evidence by way of questioning the Assistant Director of Community Safety and Housing, Housing Needs Manager, Allocations Officers and Scheme Managers and carried out site visits to properties to view empty and occupied bedsits and one-bedroomed flats.

Attached at **Appendix A** is a list of stakeholders involved in the review.

Attached at **Appendix C** are the comments from the Benchmarking exercise.

Equality and Diversity

Within the process of the review, the committee has taken into account the impact of equalities.

5. Evidence

The following evidence was considered as part of the review:

- Written evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Housing
- Verbal evidence from the Assistant Director of Community Safety and Housing, Housing Needs Manager, Housing Allocations Officer and the Scheme Managers from Valley View and Victoria House.
- Site visits to Valley View and Victoria House.

6. Key findings

'Hard to let' is a description, not a classification. It is difficult to define what is a hard to let property as there is not a set length of time that an empty property is advertised before it becomes 'hard to let'. A property could be hard to let because of the low demand of an area and not because of the property itself.

There are two main reasons why the Authority has a number of empty sheltered housing properties, they are;

- a. Bedsits are unpopular
- b. Schemes are away from the amenities which people require

Generally there is less demand for sheltered accommodation but it was reported that historically, some of the schemes have had a waiting list.

The introduction of Choice Based Lettings has had no effect on the demand for sheltered accommodation.

Sheltered housing has been promoted through adverts in the Council's newsletter, through Derbyshire County Council communications and through local press. It has been suggested by the Housing Officers that the Scheme Managers develop a leaflet for properties (similar to Estate agents particulars when selling or letting a property). Allocations Officers are pro-active in looking at the applications in each patch to see if anyone is suitable for sheltered accommodation.

It was suggested that Scheme Managers could go out to local bungalows and talk to people who may be looking to move to sheltered accommodation in the future or hold open day events to get people to come and see the properties. *"There are people out there who are hard to reach and we need to do more to speak to these people"*.

When asking what qualifies as a sheltered applicant, Members were advised that it was a self selection process and people chose to tick the box on the application form although some applicants may be encouraged to apply as a sheltered applicant.

The Choice Based Lettings advert which is raised from the text inputted into the Abris system states, 'sheltered applicants only: yes' on listings for sheltered accommodation. When questioned, Housing Officers advised that they had looked at whether the computer system could be overridden so that all applicants over 60 were included. The system does not currently allow this. The Housing Allocations Officers did advise that they continually check the housing waiting list to see if any suitable applicants can be identified.

It was also considered that the wording within the Choice Based Lettings advert was misleading when it referred to elderly. Any applicant over the age of 60 can apply for a property within a sheltered scheme and someone aged 60 may not describe themselves as elderly.

There is a further issue in that any applicant over 50 can be allocated a sheltered accommodation property if there is a need. Therefore, the advert is misleading.

Members were invited to go and look at layouts of typical bedsits and one bed roomed flats and visited properties at Valley View, Bolsover and Victoria House, Creswell.

Members observed that the communal areas at Victoria House required immediate attention. The approach was untidy with leaves and litter to the entrance and front garden. The interior looks very unattractive with tired décor and paint peeling off radiators throughout the property. The garden to the rear of the property also requires attention. Tenants have made complaints to the warden on numerous occasions about the security fence and the warden stated that the view of the fence from properties looking out onto the rear of the property has put potential tenants off. It is suggested that simply painting the fence or planting some shrubs could improve the view. The whole appearance of this property is unattractive.

The Committee asked how much income was lost per week as a result of empty properties (specifically relating to sheltered accommodation) and a snapshot based on the number of empty properties at the time of questioning was provided as follows;

- Rent: approximately £2045
- Heating charge: approximately £314
- Council Tax £330.88 (based on 22 void properties)

Figures provided on 11/12/2014 by the Assistant Director of Community Safety and Head of Housing

NB: It must be remembered that when using these figures to calculate an annual loss of rent, the figure would be calculated over 48 weeks (that the Authority charges rent) and not 52. Council Tax is charged for 10 months of the year.

The report following Derbyshire County Council's review of Adult Services is due in February 2015.

7. Conclusions

It is disappointing that the Committee is presenting evidence to show lost income of approximately £127,790.72 per year when the Council finds itself identifying ways to make savings whilst still trying to protect services and jobs.

It appears that the issue of sheltered accommodation has not been addressed and it has simply been accepted that as demand for this type of property is currently low, that nothing should be done to address this issue which has resulted in some sheltered accommodation being void for five years.

Although the figures presented may only be a small percentage of the income of the Housing Revenue Account, it is the opinion of the Committee that it is now time that the issues raised in this report should be seriously considered and where possible, action taken to address these problems.

With an aging population, it is important that we have suitable accommodation available to cater for all the needs of our tenants and residents.

APPENDIX A

Stakeholders

Councillor Karl Reid	Cabinet Member – Housing Management
Peter Campbell	Joint Assistant Director – Community safety and Head of Housing
Diane Bonsor	Housing Needs Manager
Samantha Bentley	Environmental Health Officer
Rob Farnsworth	Housing Allocations Officer
Angela Smith	Housing Allocations Officer
Helen McGregor	Scheme Manager – Valley View
Julie Kinnell	Scheme Manager – Victoria House
Doreen Potts	Bolsover District Council Tenant Panel Member

A1 Housing (Bassetlaw District Council)

Chesterfield Borough Council

Rykneld Homes (North East Derbyshire District Council)

APPENDIX B

VICTORIA HOUSE, CRESWELL, S80 4AU

Rent:£82.00

Other

charges:£27.13

Total Cost: £109.13

Bedrooms: 1

Sheltered Housing, Communal garden, District heating, Check bathroom on viewing, Sheltered Applicants Only: Yes , Minimum Applicant Age: 60, Elderly couple joint application, Elderly single application no others, Elderly application partner under age, Elderly two applicants, Elderly application with partner, Min bed 1 Max Bed 2, This is

Ref no: 73023

Example of Choice Based Lettings Advert

APPENDIX C

Whilst drafting the recommendations, Members decided to carry out some benchmarking with our neighbours to compare the standard of decor/cleanliness that other authorities let their sheltered accommodation.

Three Authorities were contacted within the tight timescale and comments are detailed below;

A1 Housing (Bassetlaw District Council)

A1 Housing has 5 different sheltered schemes which are bedsits to 2 bedroom flats. Sheltered Accommodation is now referred to in all publicity as Independent Living and bedsits have been renamed Studio Flats.

When they become empty, all properties are re-painted and carpeted with neutral colours. Redecorating is either undertaken by the caretaker or Probation Services have been used in the past when there have been a number of properties to décor at the same time.

Empty properties are promoted through coffee mornings which are open to the public to come and view the accommodation on offer.

Some advertising is aimed at the children of those people who may be eligible for independent living who may come to view the property first and will then reassure their parent and bring them along to view.

Only one void property (as of 10/02/2015)

Chesterfield Borough Council

Before letting a sheltered accommodation property will ensure that the décor is suitable for someone to live with and that the property is clean.

Don't need to do much advertising, most empty properties are filled through word of mouth.

Rykneld Homes (North East Derbyshire District Council)

Would decorate a property if it wasn't suitable to move into.

Don't have the same problems as the only sheltered scheme at clay Cross is close to local amenities and properties are in demand.

Only one void property (as on 10/02/15)