

Shetland Islands Council submission on the housing emergency

Numbers of void properties fluctuate as they progress through our void processes, and in overall terms with a total stock of around 1700 properties, we are dealing in relatively small numbers. In terms of our normal void processing and monitoring our teams meet weekly to share updated information and track progress to meet letting standards across all void and terminating properties. From this meeting the teams can identify priority properties for action by size, location and accessibility features and can prioritise internal and external resources to progress from the point that termination information is available. We have had quite a number of properties where there has been delays in returning properties for re-let while waiting on utility companies to update meter issues. This is frustratingly outwith our control and is exacerbated in Shetland as there is no local presence from utility suppliers and we often have to wait for significant periods of time for a contracted engineer to be sent to the islands.

We do currently have a few designated policy void properties which are held for major works to be carried out. Some of these have works on site, others are awaiting technical or procurement process to complete before works can commence. We have a real issue with availability and capacity of contractors across all trades and are working with the local construction industry on how we can improve this. We will also have designated decant properties for properties where major works are imminent and this is particularly challenging in the more remote rural and island areas. We have also had a noticeably higher number of properties coming back in poor condition, often requiring major work and thus taking longer to achieve the re-let standard. We are pro-actively using our inspections, both pre-termination and full void inspections, to update components and attributes information to aid quicker allocations.

The value of our all team approach is borne out by the overall improvement in our void turnaround times, down from 88 days in 2022/23 to 74 days in 2023/24. Note that is an overall number of days and includes low demand properties. Alongside this we achieved our allocation quotas in 2023/24. Void management is part of 'business as usual' and recent circumstances have brought additional challenges to every part of the delivery of housing services. As a housing service we are doing everything that we possibly can to turn properties around for re-let, extremely conscious of the intensity of demand for housing, but voids are only part of the solution to homelessness or emergency situations not the solution.

In terms of open market acquisitions, we already have a delegated open market purchase policy with approval for up to 4 open market purchases in a year. We work closely with the regional More Homes Scotland team in building this into the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) as part of our housing supply strategy. This policy is based on a strategic assessment of the *maximum* acquisitions that the overall housing market could sustain. The Council has to be very careful not to destabilise the market by intervening in the availability of properties at the market entry level. Our situation is very different as we have no developers or speculative builders and our housing market is self-contained in a restricted geographic boundary, it is much more sensitive to economic changes. There is often additional cost and time in re-letting acquisitions to ensure that they meet standards and that

any non-standard features are removed. This is reliant on having contractor availability and capacity and being able to prioritise that over the other demands that landlords have. Again, in isolation, acquisitions are not a solution to the housing emergency and should be impact-assessed to ensure that the interventions do not have unintended adverse impacts in the individual communities or housing market areas.

I hope this provides the information you were seeking but please let me know if you need anything further.

Yours sincerely
Executive Manager – Housing
Shetland Islands Council