

Ongo Homes Resident Scrutiny Panel

Investigation into

The lettable standard for Empty Homes

31st May 2019

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1.0. Introduction

- a. This report is the outcome of a detailed RSP (Resident Scrutiny Panel) investigation into how Ongo Homes achieve the appropriate Lettable Standard for their empty homes
- b. The RSP started their investigation on the 15th January 2019
- c. Throughout the duration of the investigation, the RSP endeavoured to uphold the key principles relating to its scrutiny work, namely that the group would:
 - i. Work on behalf of Ongo Homes tenants ensuring that Ongo provides services to the highest standard
 - ii. Provide an independent check and critical challenge to drive up and influence improvements to standards, processes and performance
 - iii. Ensure that Ongo embeds the National regulatory framework on the delivery of both organisational and local offers by monitoring and challenging these standards
 - iv. Form an effective but independent part of the Governance structure within Ongo, together with Community Voice, Ongo Homes Board and the Executive Management Team
 - v. Ensure that Ongo is a well-managed, viable organisation which places tenants at the heart of its business delivering through tenant led scrutiny

The RSPs decision to investigate the Lettable Standard for Empty Homes was taken from a choice of topics and themes provided for consideration by Ongo staff and Community Voice (CV). The investigation was to ensure Value for Money (VFM) and customer satisfaction for tenants.

The following people were involved in carrying out this investigation

Scrutiny Panel Members

Avril Bairstow (Chairperson)
Col Cranidge
Jill Milner

Supported By

Karen Cowen
Wendy Wolfe

2.0 Scope of the investigation

The following were included in the investigation:

- The present Ongo Homes LS (Lettable Standard)
- The actual condition of properties when ready to let to new tenants as per Tenant Inspection reports
- What information customers get in relation to the LS before they get their keys.
- Details of the customers satisfaction surveys undertaken with tenants on the standard of their home.
- An understanding of the process taken to identify and carry any required works.
- Details of whether or not tenants are happy to wait for some works to be completed after they move in, rather than delaying the time before they get their keys.
- Compliments and complaints received around the standard of a home at time of letting to the new tenant.
- The Tenant Inspector process for checking the LS and is this fit for purpose.
- The wider implications to the LS that need consideration e.g., financial, tenancy sustainability.
- Research on the LS standard that other HA's (Housing Associations) and private landlords work to.
- The resources that are currently available to deliver the Ongo Homes LS and are these adequate and being used to best effect.
- Whether or not the LS has an impact on the ability to let.
- How does the Lettable Standard differ from the Transfer standard and is any difference justifiable.

3.0 Background

Over a period of time groups like Tenant Inspectors have voiced very valid opinions as to the actual quality of the empty homes once they are ready to re-let. Complaints have also been received from new tenants on the condition of these empty properties and the cost and effort required to put them right.

In some cases it was considered that remedial work, such as re-plastering or decorating, should have been carried out prior to the property being advertised, rather than receiving the complaint from the new tenant once they have moved in and discovering that they either couldn't afford or even cope with the decorating challenge they face. This also applies to gardens.

The decision to carry out refurbishment works once the new tenant has moved in was also not popular as tenants felt they could not really settle into their new home until the works were completed plus in some cases they had to move out again.

The RSP decided to look into this area to see if any improvements could be made.

4.0 Methodology

The RSP used the following fact finding methods in order to identify Ongo's approach to the Lettable Standard for Empty Homes, the implications, the variety of responses received and the outcome of the different approaches taken:

4.1.1 Desktop consideration of:

- Ongo Homes - Void Inspection record for property type SP3B, House
- Ongo Homes - Flow chart, General Major Works and Major Works, Investment
- Ongo Homes - Flow chart, Empty Homes Planner Process, Maintenance
- Ongo Homes – Tenants Notice to Quit process
- Ongo Homes – Pre Termination Visit form
- Ongo Homes – Lettable Standard (as per Tenants Handbook)
- Ongo Homes – Maintenance Policy (Dec 2018 version)
- Ongo Homes - Satisfaction Survey figures
- Ongo Homes - Cost per void property figures
- Ongo Homes - Tenant Inspectors reports
- Lettable Standard – Ongo Homes (given in tenants pack)
- Lettable Standard – Ongo Homes Website version
- Lettable Standard – Port of Leith HA
- Lettable Standard – Hastoe Group
- Lettable Standard – Cardiff HA
- Lettable Standard – Muir Group
- Lettable Standard – Genesis Housing
- Lettable Standard – North Lanarkshire Council
- Lettable Standard – Dorset Property
- Lettable Standard – Morgan Sindall Property Services
- Lettable Standard - visual photos of private rented within the North Lincolnshire area
- Lettable Standard Scrutiny Report - Northwards Housing/North Manchester Council Homes

The RSP team have prepared a list of 'Best Practice' suggestions which have been taken from some of the documents listed above (see **Appendix 1**)

4.1.2 Background presentations were given from the following Ongo staff and volunteers

Neil Keay – Head Of Maintenance (Strategic)
Martin Anderson – Operations Manager, Voids (Implementation)
Jane Crooks – Lettings Manager
Col Cranidge – Tenant Inspector
Jill Milner – Tenant Inspector

- 4.1.3 Various meetings were held by the RSP, minutes taken and distributed. Information and documents shared on Yammer and by email. A final meeting was held to discuss and agree the conclusions and formulate the recommendations.

5.0 Findings

- 5.1 Throughout the investigation, the RSP identified that a considerable amount of help and assistance was given both in advance, during and after to tenants seeking to leave or move into an Ongo property.

- 5.1.1 The process starts when a tenant provides notice to terminate. Details are then placed on the QL system which sends notifications to the relevant teams. Lettings will notify tenants about what work needs doing before they leave a property and they will be informed about the recharging policy and how it could affect them moving to another Ongo property. Some tenants will pay this, however, this often depends if they want to move into another Ongo property.

Lettings staff carry out property inspections before a tenant leaves to identify if there are any works that need to be done by the tenant. Checks are made to see if the tenant can move to another Ongo property. Pre-leaving inspection forms are completed provided access to the property can be gained (see **Appendix 2**). A move to mobile working in the future and will mean staff will have the use of l pads connected to QL.

Gardens are inspected at the same time as a full property inspection and any jobs will be raised using a pre generated form.

Keys are returned from termination a minimum of 28 days once written notice is given. The void period is 28 days from keys being handed into Ongo.

- 5.1.2 When Empty Homes receive the keys for a property, inspections are carried out to identify any works that may be required. Information from the pre leaving inspection will be passed onto empty homes and this includes information about items which could be left in the property, e.g. carpets. Clearance work in a property / garden will be carried out and the team aim to do this with in the first 5 days. Lettings can then arrange viewings and there may still be works which need doing while these take place.
- 5.1.3 A system in the maintenance team known as project planner is used to include all empty properties detailing what stages these are at. Arrangements are made for the gas to be capped off and legionella checks carried out. Meter readings and any repairs which are required are also noted during the inspection. If major works like a replacement kitchen or bathroom is required this would be done

within 3 months of a tenant moving in (where possible). If the property can't be let due to very poor condition then these works would be carried out sooner.

- 5.1.4 The LS is used as a framework for what inspectors are looking for and what needs to be achieved. When the repair works have been completed this generates a job for the property to be cleaned. During the cleaning work the cleaners will also complete a post inspection check, e.g. any works identified have been completed. The cleaners use a written checklist and are provided with training on the Lettable standard.

Some properties require specialist cleans and can involve environmental issues. Additional resources required to ensure properties can be ready to let within timescale. Currently there is a total of 40% of properties which are meeting the target for the whole process.

The Empty Homes team are struggling to reach timescales, in some cases the delay in the process has been due to waiting for asbestos removal.

Information about the LS is available in the tenant handbook.

Properties need to be clean, safe and secure before they are let and this includes if they need any further works to be carried out.

The following is checked in all voids and is covered by the current £2000 cost per void target:

- Walls/ ceilings will be free from loose plaster and major cracks
- Woodwork will be free from damage and decay
- All statutory safety checks will be completed e.g. gas and electric
- Essential repairs will be complete (e.g. Repair/ replace doors, kitchen units etc)
- Paths to entrances will be in a safe state of repair
- Glass to doors and windows will be in a safe condition
- Property and gardens will be free of rubbish (including roof space)
- All polystyrene ceiling tiles will be removed and ceilings plastered if required
- Gardens will be left in a manageable condition, and will be free from rubbish
- Lofts will be checked and cleared
- There will be a 600mm (minimum) space for a cooker, washing machine and fridge
- External doors will lock securely
- 2 x fobs provided for door entry systems where applicable
- Kitchens and bathrooms will have washable floor coverings
- Bins will be empty

- 5.1.5 There is a high percentage of ageing stock which is becoming a problem as many are in need of improvements.
- 5.1.7 A recent Voluntas survey carried out received a response of 95.5% satisfaction of properties let (**See appendix 3**) yet comments made suggest there is definitely room for improvement.
- 5.1.8 No details regarding asbestos are contained within the lettable standard. Tenants using the MyHome app can look to see if there is any asbestos in their home and its location.
- 5.1.9 The Tenant Inspectors also highlight issues when they carry out their task, examples can be found in **Appendix 4**.

6.0 Conclusions

RSP is confident that they have met the brief/scope for this investigation.

Although Ongo has a LS in place the wording is lacking in detail which results in interpretational differences across the service areas and inspection results. For example 'Essential repairs will be completed' and 'Gardens will be left in a manageable condition'. In both cases the degree to which these have been dealt with could be seen as either good or bad by both inspectors and tenants.

The LS is included in the sign up pack for a property but not advertised on the Ongo website. Although the overall results of the Voluntas Survey for January/February was a very positive 100%, the additional comments made by these tenants clearly shows that there is room for improvement (see **Appendix 5**).

RSP looked at the standard of properties to rent in the private sector. In almost every case the rent was marginally higher but the standard of these properties was also higher especially decoration wise. Most had good carpets fitted to all bedrooms and the lounge, with modern washable floor covering in bathrooms, toilets and kitchens. It is accepted that private rentable properties are only suited to those with the ability to pay a month's rent and a bond in advance; however, as the difference between the rents is getting less this could have an effect on Ongo if the standard is not raised.

At present there is no lettable standard in place for mutual exchange/transfer properties.

RSP studied a number of lettable standards belonging to other Housing Associations and was able to highlight areas within them which Ongo does not currently include in its own standard. This raises the issue that the lettable standard at Ongo is much lower than expected in the sector. Perhaps this should be increased to realise a better product.

Poor Service	√
Fair Service	
Good Service	

7.	Recommendations	Anticipated outcome / comments	Priority
1	<p>A new LS that is crystal clear and which gives guidance on the minimum standard to be achieved. This LS also needs to be available on the Ongo website giving tenants the transparency needed to ensure long term lettings and 100% confidence in Ongo. The LS needs to have sufficient detail in regard to decoration and repair for example:</p> <p>Generally - walls/ceilings to be made good ready for tenant to decorate (torn & damaged wall & ceiling coverings to be removed, fill all cracks over 1mm wide, fill holes made by tenant fixtures, e.g. hooks & nails, issue voucher if needed.</p> <p>Radiators which are in poor condition with flaking paint and rust to be replaced.</p> <p>Special circumstances – if elderly/disabled/vulnerable then may be entitled to have part or all of home decorated (retirement & supported living & general needs)</p>	<p>This would ensure homes ready to let are to a pre-determined acceptable standard. This needs to include mutual exchange/transfers</p>	High
2	<p>The use of photo's to show acceptable and unacceptable standards.</p>	<p>This will assist both the Empty Homes team and Tenant Inspectors in their duties</p>	High

3	Roof spaces to be cleared, checked for asbestos and any breaches in fire walls and re-insulated to an acceptable standard to ensure heating is not wasted	Lofts are currently checked for tenant's belongings and asbestos. Increasing the parameters to include breaches in fire walls and better insulation will give added benefits in the long term.	Medium
4	Provide CO2 detectors in all empty homes if not already installed and hard wire smoke detectors whenever possible	This will give extra confidence to tenants and eliminate the difficulty some tenants face in changing batteries.	High
5	If a void property only has a bath installed then fit a shower as per the usual Ongo expected standard	This will assist in water saving and heating costs for the tenant and will also bring the property up to the expected Ongo standard	Low
6	Check gutters/gulley's – fix to clear / repair where needed (if not already on an annual maintenance programme)	Again this will save money in the long term by preventing damp issues and flooding	Medium
7	Garden clearance better defined and undertaken right at the end of any works on the property. This should ensure rubbish accumulated during the works is dealt with. Where Japanese Knot weed has taken over treatment to begin immediately to prevent spread to other properties and loss of potential new tenancy.	This should prevent tenants incurring costs to tackle difficult issues themselves and also assist the less able and elderly.	Medium
8	More thought and consideration given to undertaking refurbishment works a short time after the new tenant has moved in. Asking tenants to move out shortly after moving in can be very disruptive to some especially those with disabilities, health or age issues.	Voluntas survey comments show this is not always popular or convenient to the tenant. In some cases if the regeneration work has not been thoroughly discussed prior to letting and the tenant very quickly decorates the property this could lead to the tenant refusing to have the work done at all. This, of course, would result in the property missing out until the next time it is let which is not only a cost issue but could affect its re-letting.	Medium

9	Re-visit the questions asked on the Voluntas survey to ensure these questions are fit for purpose and provide the data needed in relation to the true satisfaction at the time of letting.	More probing, open ended questions should provide more constructive feedback that can be utilized to improve performance.	Medium
10	Ask the tenant to initial and agree the standard of their property on sign-up.	This is widely used by private landlords and estate agents. Along with photo's it gives Ongo and the tenant proof of the condition of the property at the time of letting.	Low