

Soha Housing Tenant Scrutiny Group Review: Soha's Voids Service

Introduction

This review focused on whether Soha's standards and approach are achieving the right balance, looking at three key areas.

- 1 People or Properties? - How does Soha approach its voids service?
- 2 Does Soha have a reactive or proactive approach to the voids standard?
- 3 How good are Soha's standards?

Headline Findings.

1. Lettings and voids. The scrutiny group recommends that Soha reviews its KPIs for voids to see if it can achieve a better balance between cost and void turn-around times and the needs of the tenants.
2. The scrutiny group recommends Soha reviews its voids standard particularly the cleaning standard, and seeks a better understanding of the needs and preference of tenants. This way the void standard could reflect a better balance between the priorities of people and properties.
3. The scrutiny group recommends that Soha reviews the structure of voids management in terms of both staffing and budget.
4. The scrutiny group would like Soha to look at how the minimum voids standard is communicated to
 - Staff
 - Tenants
 - Contractors
 - Sub-contractors

This should cover :

- heating systems
- cleaning, decorating and checking that the standard has been reached by contractors.
- explaining what additional resources may be available to new tenants
- liaising with incoming tenant at appropriate times over –for example - what could be left in the property (carpets, furniture) ensuring information is communicated in plain English

Details of Report

1. The Scrutiny Group finds that although Soha is monitoring KPIs at board level, these are not focused on the people moving into the properties, therefore, it may not be looking closely enough at customer satisfaction. Initial satisfaction can be high, as tenants are often very pleased to have a new home. However, improving (and ensuring Soha reaches) the void standard could avoid complaints at a later date. This might also result in a more positive long term relationship between Soha and tenants. If work needs to be done anyway, better to do it at the outset, rather than following complaints. The group feels that this is shutting the door after the horse has bolted.
2. The scrutiny group felt that Soha should now review its void standard particularly the cleaning standard as it is two years since the last review. Looking back it has been updated every two years. The group feels that void and cleaning standards should be updated using more than fifteen tenants' involvement, maybe using a new focus group.
3. The group understands that Soha monitors voids through customer satisfaction and this is usually measured in six weeks of the tenant moving in. It was found (through a survey of people who had been in their homes for around a year) that some tenants were glad to have somewhere to live and if it was reasonable clean they would not have complained as they felt their assured tenancy was at risk. The group thought that the customer journey mapping and comparing standards against four other three star housing providers carried out was good practice. Most of the complaints received about moving in were about the cleaning standard. The Group notes that Soha has already made some changes to how this is carried out, monitored and managed. However, a review, perhaps involving a number of tenants with recent experience (but who have now completed their starter tenancy) would be a good idea.
4. The group was told the higher the standard Soha set the more it was likely to pay. This is understood, but checking that the standard has been met by the contractors is a value for money exercise and should not involve additional cost. The Group felt that the policy on giving out decorating vouchers should be reviewed, as if the property is up to standard, there is an argument that it doesn't need decorating. The Group questioned if the vouchers are about having a quick turnaround time, rather than tenant satisfaction.

RI involvement at the outset might improve the long-term relationship with tenants, and encourage their involvement, making this cost effective.

Tenants should be clear that justified requests and complaints about their property will not jeopardise their tenancy in the first year.

5. The Group felt that Soha could explore imaginative ideas for improving the voids standard further in a cost effective way, for example exploring the idea of asking local colleges if some of their building students would like to get experience through doing small jobs, or perhaps taking on apprentices. The Group also felt there was an opportunity for Resident Involvement to get an independent group of tenants to help with voids, being involved in an inspection process for the cleaning, for example.
6. The group also found the minimum void standard was not being effectively communicated. It was found that some cleaning was better in some residence properties than others and it was either the cleaning or the inspection afterwards that was not to standard
7. Tenants were not always getting basic information on their heating and how it works, meter reading and what Soha can offer the new tenant. It was also felt that not all new tenants come from a ready-made home. Some are from living-in jobs where they lose their house and some are from other breakdowns. The group felt that instead of gift cards for decorating some tenants may need such things as curtains, towels, crockery, cutlery or even a voucher towards a cooker. The Group understands that Soho does have a furniture store for tenants but not all tenants are aware of it. They questioned how Soha defines 'vulnerable' and which tenants have access to the furniture store. The Group suggested that Soha could consider offering other gift cards and ask the tenants in advance which would be best.
8. The group also found the minimum void standard was not being communicated or was being lost in the system between staff to tenants Soha to contractors to Sub contractors. It was found that some cleaning was better in some residence properties than others and it was either the cleaning or the inspection afterwards that was not to standard. The conclusion of this being that two people have two different standards. It was felt that resident involvement could have some input at the beginning middle and end of a void helping with communication to all parties.

Methodology

This review was carried out using the following information and activities:

- Independent briefing by HQN

- Review of information including:
 - Moving in survey
 - Board KPIs
 - Tenant Inspectors' Open Door Inspection of voids
- Interviews with:
 - Maureen Adams, Director of Customer Services & Operations
 - Lee Hayward, Asst Director of Customer Services
 - Richard West, Technical Officer
 - Emma Lemounes, Service Manager, Lettings
 - A number of tenants who had newly moved in
- Survey of 100 tenants who had moved in around a year ago (come to the end of their starter tenancies)