

Resident Scrutiny Panel

Review 10

**TO REVIEW THE PILOT BOURNVILLE
EMPTY PROPERTY STANDARD (BEPS)
TO ENSURE THAT IT IS DELIVERED
CONSISTENTLY AND IS VALUE FOR MONEY**

FEBRUARY 2019

MEMBERS

Member	Role
Christopher Caten	
Paul Chilton	
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Tom Jackson	
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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report by BVT Scrutiny Panel, based on a review undertaken from September 2018 to February 2019, looks at the pilot Bournville Empty Property Standard (BEPS) **APPENDIX A** and assesses what is the minimum, consistent empty property standard that tenants can expect when moving into their new home.
- 1.2 The report makes recommendations for consideration by BVT Trustees and management.
- 1.3 The implementation of any agreed recommendations will be monitored through the Executive Team and Scrutiny Panel.
- 1.4 Scrutiny Panel thanks all staff who helped with this review.

2. SELECTING THE REVIEW

- 2.1 After completing the shops review in June 2018, the Panel wanted to select a tenant-focused review to ensure good rotation between services. Empty properties are also central to the core business.
- 2.2 Minimum empty property standards and their cost have been on the Scrutiny Panel list since the HouseMark report (2015/16) and subsequent Ark report (April 2017).
- 2.3 BVT is working to address all areas highlighted by the Ark report – including empty property works. A new minimum empty property standard is being developed, and the high cost of empty properties compared with those of other housing associations is being addressed.
- 2.4 Having chosen to review empty properties, the Panel agreed to begin by reviewing the pilot of BVT's new minimum Bournville Empty Property Standard (BEPS) – a timely introduction to the much broader topic of Empty Property Management.

3. SCOPING THE REVIEW

- 3.1 Arthur Tsang, Kerri Lewis and Ryan Spencer were invited to a Scrutiny Panel meeting in September 2018 to provide an overview and 'journey of an empty property'. This showed that, over time, costs have risen and the standard has become very subjective and open to interpretation, which meant that there is an inconsistency in delivery. Tenants either do not know what to expect or have an unrealistic view of what to expect.
- 3.2 The whole broad topic of empty property management was shared in some detail at the meeting in September and the issues of cost management, inconsistency and expectations from both staff and tenants were discussed.
- 3.3 Staff suggested that the new minimum empty property standard is at a pilot stage and welcomed a review from the Panel that looked at this standard and assessed if it was fit for purpose, from both a 'value for money' perspective for the business, and a 'quality' and 'fairness' perspective for the new tenant.
- 3.4 It was agreed at a meeting in November that, while the Asset Team is undergoing a change improvement programme of all their services, Scrutiny Panel's review would concentrate on the standard for an empty property for general needs tenants. Title of the review to be: **To review the pilot Bournville Empty Property Standard (BEPS) to ensure that it is delivered consistently and is value for money.**

4. WHAT THE PANEL DID

- 4.1 Members received a copy of the new pilot Bournville Empty Property Standard which was discussed in their meetings.
- 4.2 Members used the following evidence sources:
- a. A Decent Home: Definition and guidance for implementation – June 2006 Update https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7812/138355.pdf (HM Gov. Department for Communities and Local Government)
 - b. BVT staff were interviewed. (See 3.1 – BVT staff support)
 - c. Desktop research – comparison with other housing associations:
 - i. Devon and Cornwall Housing which is totally different from BVT **APPENDIX B**
 - ii. Midland Heart which is huge and in Birmingham **APPENDIX C**
 - iii. The Wrekin Housing Trust which is most like BVT **APPENDIX D**
 - d. Members looked at the New Tenant Satisfaction Surveys for 2017 and 2018 to assess the comments received from tenants after moving into their new property. **APPENDICES E and F**
 - e. Tenants' feedback from a focus meeting about empty properties and repairs held at Selly Manor in October 2018 was also shared and discussed. **APPENDIX G**
 - f. Process maps about the current delivery of empty properties were discussed, and although these certainly impact on value for money, it was agreed these were outside the scope of this review.

5. WHAT THE PANEL FOUND

5.1 New Pilot Bournville Empty Property Standard

- a. Overall, the new standard is thorough but it needs to be laid out more clearly to allow less room for staff or tenants to misunderstand or misinterpret.
- b. It would be helpful if there was some rationale behind some of the decisions – is this a national standard? Or is it BVT's internal health and safety rationale? Or is some of it a BVT extra?
- c. Tenant contributions need to be clearer, e.g. are carpets included or not?

5.2 Desk Top Research

Members found much similarity with the empty property standards from three other housing associations, although they were set out differently:

- a. Devon and Cornwall – set out room by room.
- b. The Wrekin Housing Trust – tenant-led inspection with a tick list.
- c. Midland Heart – safe and clean and functional.

5.3. New Tenant Satisfaction Surveys – 2017 and 2018

The overall quantitative level of new tenant satisfaction was very high (more than 90%) in each year. However, individual comments ranged widely and highlighted issues around inconsistency. These were:

Main observations

The surveys received from new tenants for both years revealed a broad range of comments which highlighted issues around inconsistency. There are comments like:

“Very clean and tidy. Newly painted. Very good.”

“Wasn't expecting the house to be painted and flooring put down? Was very impressed.”

And then

“Previous tenant left a terrible mess. We had to spend money to put it right.”

“Lots of work needed doing (painting, wallpaper) at the time. It's done now.”

5.4. Feedback from Focus Meeting in Selly Manor

The Panel found that tenants were extremely keen for BVT to “stop wasting money” and to think about the key issues when turning around an empty property ready for a new tenant. Some common comments were:

“Why do BVT remove stuff from a new home that is still in good condition? Can't you ask the new tenant if they want it?”

“Why make the tenant who is leaving rip out their carpets?”

“New kitchens and bathrooms are NOT needed if the existing is in good condition.”

“We are angry at the inconsistency of voids – many stories about people receiving different levels of service.”

There was very mixed feedback about the level of decoration that should be expected on an empty property. This is quite an emotive area. In this context, the Panel considered the use of decoration vouchers as practised by several housing associations.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The Panel recognises the value and quality of the current ‘new’ standard that is in place. All the key components that make a home ready to move in – making it safe, secure and clean – are covered. Having researched other empty property standards from similar housing organisations, the similarities are clear. However, the Panel has a number of recommendations that might help BVT to be more consistent in the delivery of the standard and to communicate what to expect more clearly to tenants and staff.

6.2 Scrutiny Panel makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: THEMED APPROACH

That the standard is written with a themed approach. This would make it simpler to follow, more consistent and allow for some catch-all instructions. We recognise that there will need to be some room-specific listings where there are important health and safety issues (e.g. bathroom and kitchen).

We suggest the standard be laid out in themes such as:

- a. Security**
- b. Safety**
- c. Cleanliness**
- d. Fixtures and fittings**

Then within each theme there could be a section that is mandatory (legal etc), a section that is ‘What BVT will do’, and a more discretionary section that needs a conversation with the tenant.

The recommendations that follow are suggestions for these themes.

1a SECURITY THEME

This would include information about:

- i. Locks – please include something that clearly states that all locks on external doors will be changed for the start of a new tenancy
- ii. Windows and doors will be secure with serviceable glazing intact
- iii. Consider anti-snap locks where appropriate
- iv. Information about boundary fences as in the current pilot standard
- v. External lighting – see P.9 in the current pilot standard and change the wording to state “will be removed and made safe”

1b SAFETY THEME

This would include information about:

- i. Electrical – from the current pilot standard
- ii. Gas – from the current pilot standard
- iii. Asbestos – from the current pilot standard
- iv. Sharps and needles – from the current pilot standard
- v. Paving, paths, steps, patios will be structurally sound, safe and free from (legally measureable) trip hazards
- vi. External hand rails will be safe and secure

1c CLEANLINESS THEME

This is a particularly subjective area and it can be difficult to maintain consistency. The Panel recommends that:

EITHER

- i. BVT use a catch-all standard of ‘professionally cleaned’, and note that in BVT’s explanatory notes there is a reference to “ensure that the property is cleaned in compliance with the full professional clean specification”. Scrutiny Panel has not had sight of this specification, but suggests that a summary version of this specification be included, or added as an appendix to the standard.

OR

- ii. BVT follow the example of The Wrekin Housing Trust’s standard which provides a breakdown of each room and a level of detail that includes cleaning behind radiators, removing lime scale etc. The Panel suggests BVT use a subsidiary checklist for cleanliness. This will assist a more consistent delivery.

1d FIXTURES AND FITTINGS THEME

This would include information about the functionality of the whole property, which is particularly the landlord’s responsibility including, for example:

- i. Electricity supply – as in the current pilot standard
- ii. Boiler – as in the current pilot standard, but we recommend that instructions are provided to incoming tenants and/or on a weblink, and a demonstration to tenants

Recommendation 2: GARDENS

- a. Panel members would NOT propose to alter or add to the statement in the current pilot standard. They support the simpler, light touch approach being taken, provided that health and safety are covered.
- b. However, as a positive gesture, in the Cadbury tradition and on the basis that, over time, tenants will wish to make a garden of their own, the Panel recommends that

BVT investigate the feasibility of either replanting a fruit tree where one no longer exists, or donating a bag of bulbs if this is financially viable.

Recommendation 3: SUSTAINABILITY (FOR CONSIDERATION, NOT FOR EMPTY PROPERTY STANDARD)

The Panel discussed including sustainability issues in the pilot empty property standard:

- a. Loft insulation.
- b. Blocking of chimneys (reversibly) where not use for fires or heating units.
- c. Seeking external or additional funding to upgrade some of the older properties and make them more sustainable and environmentally friendly, e.g. install double glazing, solar panels etc. and consult with the owners of the Eco-house.

However, the Panel felt that these sustainable works would fit better within a planned maintenance programme, and NOT the minimum empty property standard. The Panel suggests that these ideas should be included as part of a wider sustainability strategy, and the Strategic Review.

N.B.: A recent report (21st February 2019) by the Committee for Climate Change (CCC) has stated that “from 2025 at the latest, no new homes should be connected to the gas grid – with super-efficient houses and flats heated using low-carbon energy instead”. Gas boilers and hobs will be a thing of the past. <https://bit.ly/2T7ZBzd>

“The way new homes are built and existing properties are “retrofitted” with energy efficiency measures often falls short of stated design standards, deceiving householders and inflicting costs on the future” the committee said.

Also, incidentally, “Closing the “performance gap” between design standards and what is achieved could save those in new homes between £70 and £260 a year on their energy bills”, the report said.

- d. Subject to costs it may be that, should this become law (or not?) and, at a suitable time, incorporating such changes into the voids work would save undertaking a major refit in the future.

Recommendation 4: COMMUNICATING THE NEW STANDARD

The Panel understands that operatives work to a checklist for the empty property standard (which is good) and that prospective new tenants are shown round the property on the Monday before work begins. There is discussion with BVT staff about what work will be carried out and what fixtures and fittings will remain (for the tenant’s responsibility). This is good.

- a. Brochure – for absolute clarity and consistency it is recommended that at the first inspection of the property, new tenants are given a brochure called ‘What to Expect in Your New Home’ which would be a tenant-friendly version of the empty property standard, and a checklist to record concerns or defects. The brochure would set

out what to expect in a property and what condition to expect it in as a new tenant. This would be in addition to any Welcome Pack that might already exist.

- b. Quality Checklist – at the four-weekly visit by their housing officer, tenants would be encouraged to highlight any concerns or defects with the property that have come to light since they moved in. This would serve to remedy any immediate problems, and act as a quality control for the BVT Empty Property Team.

Recommendation 5: UNNECESSARY WORK

The Panel acknowledges the comments in the tenant feedback that items in good condition should not be removed from the home unless necessary for safety reasons and recommends that:

- a. If something is safe, good and working, BVT should allow a new tenant to make the choice whether to keep it and add it as a 'tenant's responsibility'.

Recommendation 6: DECORATION VOUCHERS

Having considered the use of decoration vouchers by other housing associations:

- a. The Panel recommends the use of decoration vouchers on a consistent and fair basis as part of the future empty property standard.
- b. There must be very clear guidelines for staff to follow and tenants' expectations to be managed appropriately. (See **RECOMMENDATION 4**)

Recommendation 7: VULNERABLE TENANTS

In addition, the Panel thought that issues of health and safety are relevant equally to all tenants. Choice, where given, can become an entitlement and inconsistency of approach can creep in. What matters is the quality of communication, both verbal and written:

- a. Care should be taken to ensure maximum clarity with an option for further information and explanation if required, especially to more vulnerable tenants.
- b. Where there are 'community funds' to assist the most vulnerable tenants, these should be utilised fairly.

However, these conversations and decisions may happen outside the delivery of a 'minimum' empty property standard.

Recommendation 8: SATISFACTION

Following the introduction of a new Empty Property Standard, BVT may experience an initial dip in satisfaction levels as some tenants' expectations may be affected by previous experiences.

- a. The Panel recommends that management consider introducing an acceptable revised benchmark for the satisfaction score on the empty property standard that the organisation is prepared to accept.