

Ariane Burgess  
Convener, Local Government  
Housing & Planning Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

5<sup>th</sup> August 2024

Dear Convener

### **Housing Emergency**

Following correspondence dated 28<sup>th</sup> June 2024, please find below information as requested.

#### **Voids and Unlettable Properties**

As at 10/07/2024, Aberdeenshire Council had 421 vacant HRA properties. Aberdeenshire Council has the highest turnover rate amongst local authority landlords, which is a significant driver of the relatively high number of voids. Of these, around 100 voids are in sheltered housing units – sheltered housing has a higher turnover rate than other stock, and generally has a lower level of demand, meaning that these properties are much more difficult to let than other types. 52 void sheltered properties are currently flagged as low demand, with another 16 unlettable due to being planned for disposal. Given that these properties are generally unsuitable for mainstream applicants, they are unlikely to contribute to meeting our wider housing need. Another 14 are currently being held for decant during major works.

In our mainstream stock, 27 properties were being held for use as temporary accommodation – as we do not use bed and breakfast or hotel accommodation, we require a pool of available properties to house homeless applicants at short notice.

104 properties were vacant and unlettable as they were undergoing deep retrofit works to meet energy efficiency and environmental targets, including Internal Wall Insulation, new heating systems, PV panels, re-wiring and new doors and windows. The nature of this work is very invasive, meaning that properties are uninhabitable for an extended period and the works can only be conducted while the property is void. We have a dedicated team working on these properties, but the nature of the works means they will inevitably take time to turn around. We have a large number of properties requiring these upgrades (around 1500), so will likely have around 100 properties affected by this work at any one time for the foreseeable future. In addition to these, we have another 10 properties currently unlettable due to major works being carried out.

These retrofit properties are also most likely to be affected by delays in fitting meters, often extending the period before they can be relet. While we have no control over the process, we have a dedicated resource working with the supplier, and have recently seen some early signs that the situation may be improving. In total, 21 properties cannot currently be let solely due to meter issues, although these are not considered unlettable by the Regulator definition.

Our remaining voids are generally routine voids going through our normal lettings process, and are in the process of being allocated.

In terms of bringing voids back into use, we are currently investigating alternative uses for our vacant sheltered housing properties as part of a wider review of sheltered housing provision. However, the location and type of these properties means that finding an alternative use is challenging. The largest group of unlettable properties represents our on-going work to bring our houses up to ESSH standards and prepare for Net Zero requirements. Since the level of work required is not achievable in an occupied property, there is no realistic way of housing applicants in them until work has been completed (and the meter has been replaced, where this is a factor).

## **Acquisitions**

Aberdeenshire Council undertakes a pre-screening process prior to progressing with any purchases from the open market.

Initial work is undertaken to assess whether:

- the purchase of the property would meet the strategic needs of the housing service;
- the property is located in an area where other council properties are present for management purposes;
- in the case of flats, purchase should ensure council takes full ownership of the building. Where a minority ownership would be created by the purchase, these will not be taken to the next stage;
- the property construction will be considered to ensure standards can be met without the need for expensive retrofit and that energy efficiency standards can be undertaken.
- The cost of the property allows for agreed Net Present Values to remain within approved levels.
- Any particular needs properties are assessed against the needs of those where the service have identified a need for a specific property type.

Following the prescreening process, colleagues in other functions of the housing service will be consulted to ensure that they support the purchase of the property, particularly in terms of housing need and the ability to let the property and also ensure works can be carried out to bring the property to the required standards and energy efficiency.

A report will be presented, in the first instance to the Housing Management Team for agreement to pursue with the purchase. The Head of Service will then discuss with elected members as set out in the scheme of governance to ensure that they also support the purchase. Should all parties above agree, the purchase will be progressed with agreed offer amount.

In general, the acquisitions process focusses on the housing need and demand in the area and whether any potential purchase can positively assist in meeting these needs.

Further information can be provided if required.

Your sincerely

Ally Macleod  
Head of Housing & Building Standards  
Aberdeenshire Council