

## **Housing Emergency submission from North Lanarkshire Council, 19 July 2024**

I refer to your letter of 28<sup>th</sup> June requesting information relating to voids and unlettable properties as well as any strategies in place to acquire or buy back properties.

The current North Lanarkshire Council (NLC) position on void levels is positive, with the lowest level of voids for the past four years, equating to 2.3% of total council stock, as at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. This is well below the local authority average of 3.6%.

NLC has a long-term demolition/re-provisioning programme that aims to replace all multi storey towers and some low-rise low demand flatted blocks with modern, sustainable homes over a twenty/twenty-five-year period. The void figure of 2.3% includes properties from the re-provisioning programme and accounts for a significant 44.4% (369) of all NLC voids. This, alongside a reducing level of properties becoming available for let, is creating additional pressure that requires careful consideration to balancing allocations to meet the range of needs and pressures for social rented homes in North Lanarkshire.

When re-provisioning properties are stripped out, the NLC void rate is 0.9% (323 of 36,575). This is well below the local authority average of 3.25%. Of the 323 vacant properties, 284 are normal lettable stock and 39 are deemed to be low demand. We regularly monitor data to identify low demand properties which would then be considered for our re-provisioning strategy or other appropriate responses. This includes housing management initiatives, regeneration strategies, and allocation initiatives, amongst other wider strategic and management responses.

The most pressing challenge in relation to reducing voids is electricity meter/utility issues which on average is taking around 8 to 10 weeks to resolve in NL and has a significant impact on voids/re-letting time, with many other aspects, such as repairs work, gas safety checks affected (dependent on electricity to the property to enable work to progress). In order to address this we signed up to [help-the-move](#) in June 2023 which supports social housing providers to improve their void management and reduce turnaround times with IT and software solutions. This tool enables direct electronic communications to energy suppliers to resolve meter debts, begin the process of arranging safety checks with an engineer and assists in making the process more efficient. Using this tool has had a positive impact on our void timescales, although delays remain an issue, and we will continue to monitor and review our practice and processes as we progress.

Despite the timescales for utility issues our performance remains strong with percentage rent loss recorded at 0.71% and the average time taken to let a property is 32 days. This is achieved by regularly monitoring voids and having systems and processes in place to rapidly identify delays and solutions to reduce void timescales. We also match applicants to empty homes early in the process with an aim to swiftly turnaround properties and minimise any potential delays and ensure households are settled into their new home as quickly as possible.

In order to increase affordable homes, NLC established an Empty Homes Purchase Scheme in 2013 targeting long term empty properties, particularly those that were falling into disrepair or blighting local communities. The scheme was successful and as a result was extended in 2018 to enable the acquisition of properties for sale in the open market. The purchase of

these properties has been predominately former public sector stock and enables an increase in affordable council homes to meet housing need and in some instances, has facilitated progress of common works and investment in mixed tenure blocks of flats. The scheme was further expanded in 2022 to include private rented sector properties with sitting tenants where landlords were facing financial difficulties, and the tenant was at risk of homelessness.

As at May 2024, 759 properties have been acquired through these schemes, with 33 purchased from private landlords, preventing eviction and homelessness for these households. A target has been set to acquire approximately 100 properties in 2024/25 and will take a strategic approach to meeting the needs of households on our waiting lists. This will include, but not limited to, those families who require a larger family home, tenants affected by the re-provisioning programme and properties within the PRS where potential homelessness may be a risk.

We employ a dedicated Empty Homes Officer whose role is to interact with owners and private landlords to tackle empty homes in our communities by offering advice and assistance to help bring the properties back into use. This work helps to address long term voids and empty homes, improves community safety, contributes to regeneration as well as increasing the supply of housing in the area to assist in tackling the housing emergency.

Acquiring properties through these schemes has been very successful and has brought significant levels of homes back into use as social housing for those on low incomes. It ensures affordability, long-term sustainability and prevents homelessness for PRS tenants. Moreover, it improves housing conditions by enabling repairs and investment, reduces the level of empty and derelict homes, and prevents properties from becoming a blight within local communities.

Yours sincerely

**Stephen Llewellyn**  
**Chief Officer (Housing)**