

# Void health check

Andrew Mapstone is a consultant for Void-Doctor.org. He can be contacted on 01372 451028 or [andrew@mapstone.org.uk](mailto:andrew@mapstone.org.uk)



Most landlords are sick of their void security and especially its symptoms of reduced housing demand and neighbourhood blight. But few officers have the in-depth experience necessary to review different void security product specifications or evaluate contractor bids. Best value and partnering procurement demands that landlords take a robust diagnostic of their void security on a regular basis. More critically, voids - and the re-let process in general - is a good litmus test for the quality of housing management in a neighbourhood.

A key issue in void security best practice is understanding that something is wrong in the first place. A range of quantitative and qualitative measures can be used by the alert landlord to 'take the temperature' of the current void security provision.

On the quantitative side, spiralling void security costs, as physically secured voids 'breed' more voids, is a good start. It's a well known fact that the visual blight of void security deters potential tenants empowered by housing choice. In-house measurement of refusals, exit surveys and ASB broaden the picture about customers' views of the landlord's housing 'product' and the neighbourhood they are 'selling'. Best value performance indicators (BVPI) 68 (void re-let times) and 69 (void rent loss) are also a useful assessment.

A key measurement omitted by most landlords is evaluating the cost of repairs attributed to vandalism within voids. Most responsive repair order processing systems can measure this but, as with all data collection, it's 'garbage-in, garbage-out'. Without this data how can any void security expenditure be justified? As a result, this statistic should be a key BVPI and a measure of success of the whole process.

On the qualitative side, tenant feedback and a simple walk around the neighbourhood will pick up the rusting, graffiti-ed screens that symbolise hard-to-let properties. Other factors such as insurance

company risk classification of the neighbourhood and the delaying effect of void security upon the landlords responsive repairs contractor should also be considered.

Evaluating the cost of voids and, within this, the cost of void security is a balance of both qualitative and quantitative measurement. Take the cost of void security measures plus the lost rental income, delays in repairs, longer re-let times, impact upon housing demand and it becomes easy to understand that voids drive a very significant cost to the landlord. And a cost that's worth addressing.

But what can they do about it? The second stage, after realising there is a problem, is identifying a strategy to solve it. And the first thing to look at is often the void security contractor. Look at how the service was originally procured. Almost every contract will give the landlord an option to trial new products and new services to test the market. It is also important to consider spending to save in the long-run. Contract managers can smooth the relationship between housing clients and the contractor ensuring keys are available and peaks of demand handled realistically. This can minimise the contractors costs and these savings should be passed back to the landlord.

Consider other options like passing void security responsibility to the responsive repairs contractor - it's not passing the buck but a streamlining of the service to speed re-letting. How about forming an intermediate labour market (ILM) service provider to deliver these services ensuring that void security costs are re-invested in the community? Or joining up with other landlords (both public and private) in a neighbourhood to enjoy economies of scale from contractors?

External consultants like void-doctor.org can guide landlords through these complex processes and offer the advantage of 'poacher turned game-keeper' inside knowledge when developing successful void security strategies. ■