Preface

The purpose and scope of this report is to ascertain whether BTS are keeping to the standards outlined in the updated version of the Voids Lettable Standard (VLS).

The Tenant Scrutiny Team for this scrutiny exercise comprise of the following members:

- Victoria Kona (Chair)
- Andrew Kluszczyński
- James Greening
- Alex Zihute
- Esther Dawuda
- Mark Weedon

Tenant Scrutiny Team (TeST) planned, carried out and reported on the VLS (Voids Lettable Standard) between September 2013 and January 2014.

We would like to thank Richard Beattie for his support and the training opportunities he provided for the team. We are hugely grateful to all staff that cooperated in all the reality checks, the presentations and the questions and answer sessions. Lastly we would like to acknowledge and thank all the tenants who graciously opened up to us and spoke so candidly about their situation with us.
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Appendix H – Voids Process (Swim Lanes)
Appendix I – Voids Lettable Standard
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1. Introduction

1.1. What is a void?

A void is defined as, ‘a property that has been vacated by the previous tenant and is waiting to be re-let’. This could be due to eviction, death of the tenant, transfer, notice given by the Council, abandonment, decant, or the tenant moving on (e.g. into a private sector housing, care or other housing).

1.2. Why the study was commissioned

This study was conducted due to the Voids Lettable Standard (VLS) being updated in September 2013 and BTS wanting an independent review to check that the standard is being adhered to completely.

1.3. Scope of the study

After an exercise to determine the scope of this study, we were able to identify our aims, which are as follows:

- To test the **content** of the VLS in order to provide recommendations on the updated version. Does the VLS have everything in it that it needs to and is it easy to understand?

- To test the **communication** of the VLS and to provide recommendations for how it is communicated to Officers and tenants. Do Officers and tenants have easy access to the standard?

- To test the **application** of the VLS and to provide recommendations for BTS practice. Is the VLS being adhered to fully by Officers?

During the scrutiny exercise we also observed the way that the voids process is managed and have made some recommendations based on our findings.
2. Methodology

2.1 Desktop Review
In order to conduct this study, we conducted a desk top review which allowed us to review a variety of documentation which included:

- Voids Lettable Standards for empty properties 2013
- Void inspector checklist
- Voids Process (Swim Lanes)
- Example surveyor reports (post and pre works)
- Void turnaround times (2011 – 2013)
- BTS historic average void cost per property
- Annual Report to Tenants (ART) document
- Comparison VLS (Aragon, Central Beds and Stevenage Homes)
- LBC Voids Standard Operating Procedures
- VLS Factsheet
- Reasons for refusal

2.2 Initial Meeting with BTS Management
We also conducted a question and answer session where Mario De Cesare (BTS Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) Manager) and Mark Willis (Allocations Manager) presented the updated version of the VLS. This was followed by questions by TeST members in order to ascertain key lines of enquiry (see Appendix A).
2.3 Site visits
We performed site visits at the following properties with Carlo Romano and Derek Hobbs between the dates of 21st Oct and 22nd Nov.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>High Rise property</th>
<th>Low rise property</th>
<th>House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>146 Kingsland Court</td>
<td>39 Nursery Cottages</td>
<td>40 Ambleside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>111 Mossdale Court</td>
<td>94 and 108 Colwell Court</td>
<td>53 Priestleys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>97 Five Springs</td>
<td>(sheltered)</td>
<td>14 Burnham Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Villa Court</td>
<td>46 Williton Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47 Des Fuller House</td>
<td>12 Tythe Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(sheltered)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16 St Dominic’s Square</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>56 Pottery Close</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These visits, coupled with the inspectors checklists, allowed TeST to perform visual checks of the VLS and its application.

2.4 Accompanied Viewings
We managed to do accompanied viewings with Innes Griggs in four of the above properties which comprised of 2 houses and 1 low rise and 1 high rise property. This helped us get a clearer picture of how the Tenancy Management Team (now Housing Services Team) work, enabling us to have seen the void process from when the Council received the keys to when the prospective tenants accepted the property. We also were given a sample pack of the types of documentation that a potential tenant may receive. We managed to see 2 management voids (unauthorised alterations to the property by the previous tenant that were not to standard
and did not meet health and safety regulations). We observed the transformation of one of the properties from a neglected and unfit property to a property that met the standard.

As we were doing our post-void checks we had an opportunity to speak to some prospective tenants who were kind enough to highlight their expectations of the property.

2.5 Interviews with the Voids Team

We conducted staff interviews in order to follow up on our findings after the site visit of void properties. This session helped us to clarify areas of ambiguity in order to be able to make clear recommendations (see Appendix B).
3. Findings

3.1 Content findings

A. Although we found that the content of the VLS itself was of a great and high standard, we however, were disappointed to find that BTS management were unable to provide us with benchmarking information showing how they compare to other authorities and how they could use such comparative information to improve their own turnaround time and practice.

B. We discovered that the VLS updated document made no mention of communal keys being made available for sheds and laundry rooms. Even during our site visits and within the inspectors check list, we noted that there was no mention of this. It was established by TeST members that these keys are mainly available to those living in low rise flats where communal laundry rooms and individual outside sheds are commonly included with the tenancy. Not only does this omission mean that a large number if tenants miss out on having sheds or access to laundry rooms, but, it also causes a detrimental cost increase for the council as these sheds get missed by the voids team and are being cleared separately, whenever its vacancy comes to light.

C. The Voids Process (swim lanes) (see appendix E) used within the VLS documents we found to be highly effective in its illustration and in its implementation. It highlighted the importance of each element of the voids process running smoothly and to schedule and from our findings encourage BTS to continue with its implementation.

3.2 Communication findings

D. We noted that unapproved modifications, such as building a conservatory or a front patio, were common, with most of the properties that we viewed having such modifications and thus causing the cost and time spent in bringing the property back to standard to increase. During visits, we asked the inspectors what the official reprimand was for those who modify their properties without seeking council permission, and the resounded response time and time again was that not much could be done therefore not much was being done. For example we found that in one property, the damage caused from factors such as unsatisfactory modifications would cost the BTS team near £50,000, far more than the average £1300 given to each property.

E. During one of our visits to a viewing with a prospective tenant, we were glad to see that the officer had verbally communicated specific modifications to the viewer that would not
be acceptable and that would trigger a red light on the property. Modifications such as replacing fire doors and tampering with the stair railings.

F. From the ART (Annual Report to Tenants) document 2013, we found that the “cost of rent lost due to empty properties” was not provided for the year 2012/2013.

G. There is a lack of communication of the VLS to prospective tenants online or at the accompanied viewing.

H. With regards to the way in which the entire department communicated about voids, we found that, to a certain degree, there was a lack of cross departmental communication. When we sought to get information to aid us with our investigations, we were not given the answers or responses we needed due to roles and responsibilities related to voids not being clearly understood by Officers.

I. We identified a problem when a prospective tenant needed a bathroom and the property was changed to a wet room as BTS thought they were responding to her housing needs. We also identified three similar instances in the reasons for refusal (Appendix I) document where the person needed a wet room.

3.3 Application Findings

J. We found that during our visits and discussions with various staff members, that there was a real issue surrounding the huge drop in the number of surveyors and other staff members needed to keep on top of tenants and the properties. One inspector mentioned that some years back there were far more inspectors with each inspector having a smaller patch of properties. This then meant that more frequent visits could be made and a closer eye was being kept on the standard of properties. However, the reduction in staff levels has meant that less time is made making visits thus enabling tenants to do what they like to properties without being noticed until they move out by which time it is too late.

K. From the documentation, we found that the BTS average void turnaround was 17 days. This is a great achievement by BTS who have still managed to achieve such low numbers despite external factors like including management voids into their figures. (Management voids are property voids that require major works like gutting, which could take several months).

L. While going round the properties, the surveyor informed us that certain modifications, (even if they were done without approval, so long as they met the standard and were manageable) could be kept and not ripped out as was the case some years back. This
not only greatly affects the turnaround days in a positive way but it also sees the council save a lot of money.

M. We also discovered that LBC provide tenants with decorating vouchers by discretion, depending on the amount of work a property is deemed to require upon moving in. This voucher is included in the welcome pack and is to be used to buy decorating materials to bring the property up to that individuals taste. This procedure again helps to reduce the void turnaround days because tenants are given the opportunity to go in and start decorating 2/3 days before the start of the tenancy this in turn helps the number of days it takes to turn the property around as the extra decorating days will not be needed.

N. We discovered that more could be done to recover costs from damaged properties, for example for BTS to establish a penalty system for those tenants that leave the property in a dire state or conversely to reward those that leave their property in a good state when their tenancy ends. The extent of this problem was more evident when we went on our visits and were told by the inspectors of multiple instances where the cost to remove the previous tenants property and rubbish was more than it would cost to decorate.

O. BTS have gone a long way in ensuring that the gas and electricity are dealt with in an efficient manner ensuring that the tenant can then begin their tenancy without delay in gas or electricity. This is clearly outlined in the VLS and was evident to see during our visits that this standard was being applied to each property to the highest level. In addition, BTS have shown great customer focus by acquiring a contract with Scottish power which means that tenants can now move into their property fully connected without any time lapse.
4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions and recommendations for VLS Content

A. Conclusion - Void performance information that compares the performance of BTS with other housing providers is not available. This means that it is not possible for tenants to see how BTS are performing against an average or against the best performing housing providers.

Recommendation - The lack of benchmarking information supplied by BTS management leads us to recommend that BTS provide detailed comparisons on how they will improve and adapt voids best practice.

B. Conclusion - The VLS covers all the areas that it needs to but it doesn’t include information about communal keys for sheds and laundry rooms that are mentioned in the tenancy. This omission means that a large number if tenants miss out on having sheds or access to laundry rooms, but, it also causes a detrimental cost increase for the council as these sheds get missed by the voids team and are being cleared separately, whenever its vacancy comes to light.

Recommendation - The information regarding keys to communal laundry rooms and outside sheds should be included in the updated VLS and for TAB to explore and follow up.

C. Conclusion - The Voids Process (Swim Lanes) is very useful because it makes the void process easy to understand.

Recommendation – The swim lanes used to show the voids process was so effective so continue to use them.

4.2 Conclusions and recommendations for VLS Communication

D. Conclusion – The rate at which these unapproved modifications are happening clearly indicates that tenants are aware that there is no real consequence for making these modifications therefore do not hesitate to modify their properties.
**Recommendation** – We highly recommend that LBC provide more information to the SAPs on auditing of properties to show how unauthorised alterations to properties are being dealt with.

E. **Conclusion** - It was great to see Officers verbally communicate unapproved modifications at the accompanied viewing as they are such a big problem as mentioned already. Therefore although it is mentioned in the welcome pack it is very effective to mention it verbally as it emphasises the point.

**Recommendation** – BTS to train the boiler inspection/repair staff to look for unauthorised modifications. Housing Services to provide information on tenancy audits relating to unapproved modifications to the Tenancy and Asset Management SAP and in the Annual Report to Tenants.

F. **Conclusion** – “Cost of rent lost due to empty properties” comparisons and recommendations can not be made because this indicator is not in the ART.

**Recommendation** – Put “Cost of rent lost due to empty properties” in the ART.

G. **Conclusion** – The VLS is not available to tenants as a whole.

**Recommendation** – Although we found that the standards were very clear and to a high standard, we recommend that the contents of the standard should include visual interpretations (through the use of pictures) of what the tenant should expect when they move in.

H. **Conclusion** – With the reconstruction of teams etc. at LBC Housing roles and responsibilities need to be clearly identified.

**Recommendation** – Roles and responsibilities should be clearly identified within the organisational structure to improve cross communication between departments.

I. **Conclusion** – There was a communication problem with regards to the prospective tenants needs for wet rooms.

**Recommendation** – To improve communication between allocations department and the BTS department.
4.3 Conclusions and recommendations for VLS Application

J. **Conclusion** – The drop in the numbers of inspectors was possibly one of the main reasons for the high degree of properties being left in such a bad state of repair.

**Recommendation** – The new teams out in the field can now help by picking up on unauthorised work and make more home visits to check that no unauthorised alterations are happening especially with known offenders.

K. **Conclusion** – BTS is achieving 17 days turnaround time on average and is looking to improve upon this.

**Recommendation** – The challenge is now to improve the 17 days turnaround time without compromising on good quality of work.

L. **Conclusion** – We feel the inspectors are doing a good job by looking at alteration etc. and keeping them if they are manageable saving turnaround time and costs.

**Recommendation** – Continue using the above approach.

M. **Conclusion** – Giving decoration vouchers is good scheme to keep as it saves on turnaround time.

**Recommendation** – We believe that giving decoration vouchers is good scheme as it saves time, costs and caters for the specific colour schemes of prospective tenants. We feel this is a good scheme and could this be rolled out to even more prospective new tenants.

N. **Conclusion** – Penalising tenants who damage property and rewarding tenants who leave their homes in an excellent condition still needs a lot of attention to reduce the time and cost of damaged voids.

**Recommendation** – We believe that with the new Generic Housing Officers in the field by monitoring homes regularly will identify a problem household and a faster remedial
action (penalties and rewards) can be taken which in the long term cut down on the amount of properties being left in a bad state.

O. Conclusion – BTS have established a good link with the gas and electricity companies to improve tenant welfare when moving into their new property.

Recommendation – None

4.4 Conclusion and Recommendation Summary

In conclusion it is evident that the VLS is a mighty complex procedure which leaves BTS with the even more difficult task of trying to implement a high standard of repairs without compromising on quality all within the least number of days as possible.

Overall, we found that the content within the updated version of the VLS is very clear and very well detailed with one exception, that being the omission of details regarding communal areas and outside shed keys.

Secondly, we found that the way in which the content of the VLS is communicated to current and potential tenants could be improved in order to assist further in reducing the void turnaround figures.

Thirdly, we discovered that the application of the VLS has greatly improved from the previous years, for example with regards to modification now being allowed if deemed to be of a good standard and easily maintainable.
## 5. Response to recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
<th>Target Date</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. BTS provide detailed comparisons with other housing providers.</td>
<td>Benchmark with other Local Authorities and Social Landlords</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>30&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; June 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Include information about communal keys in the VLS.</td>
<td>Updated version of VLS to be agreed and signed off.</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare/Mo Harkin</td>
<td>31&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; March 2014</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenancy audits to clarify who should and who has shed keys.</td>
<td>To be confirmed</td>
<td>To be confirmed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Continue to use the Voids Process.</td>
<td>No additional action needed.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Provide information about unauthorised works by tenants.</td>
<td>Void checklist to include a record of modifications and rechargeable works that is available to the Housing Services Team.</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>31&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; March 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Boiler inspectors to report unauthorised works by tenants.</td>
<td>Boiler inspectors to report unauthorised works by tenants.</td>
<td>Lance Evans</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Put ‘Cost of rent lost due to empty properties’ in the Annual Report to Tenants</td>
<td>Report information to the Resident involvement Project Officer to add to the Annual Report to Tenants.</td>
<td>Mark Willis</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Sept 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Lead Officer</td>
<td>Target Date</td>
<td>Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. Produce an easy to understand version of the VLS for prospective and new tenants.</td>
<td>Review all BTS communication and marketing materials.</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>31st March 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produce a photo library of void properties.</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>30th April 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Put easy version online.</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>30th April 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Provide a clear organisational structure showing roles and responsibilities to tenant panels.</td>
<td>Provide a clear organisational structure showing roles and responsibilities to tenant panels.</td>
<td>Mo Harkin</td>
<td>31st March 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Improve communication between allocations department and BTS related to voids to reduce refusals.</td>
<td>No action needed. House specifications were made clear to tenants before their accompanied viewing in examples given of tenants refusing properties due to there being no wet room.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Generic Housing Officers and Boiler Inspectors check for unauthorised work on routine visits</td>
<td>No additional action needed. GHOs are already tasked with this. See recommendation E relating to Boiler Inspectors.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Lead Officer</td>
<td>Target Date</td>
<td>Status</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Improve on the 17 days voids turn around</td>
<td>New target of 15 days. Calendar Days</td>
<td>Mario De Cesare</td>
<td>In progress as of 1st March 2014</td>
<td>Already BTS new target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Continue to keep unauthorised works by tenants that are manageable.</td>
<td>No additional action needed.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Continue to provide decoration vouchers to tenants.</td>
<td>No additional action needed.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Generic Housing Officers continue with Tenancy Audits.</td>
<td>No additional action needed.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O. None in relation to gas and electric arrangements.</td>
<td>No additional action needed.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>