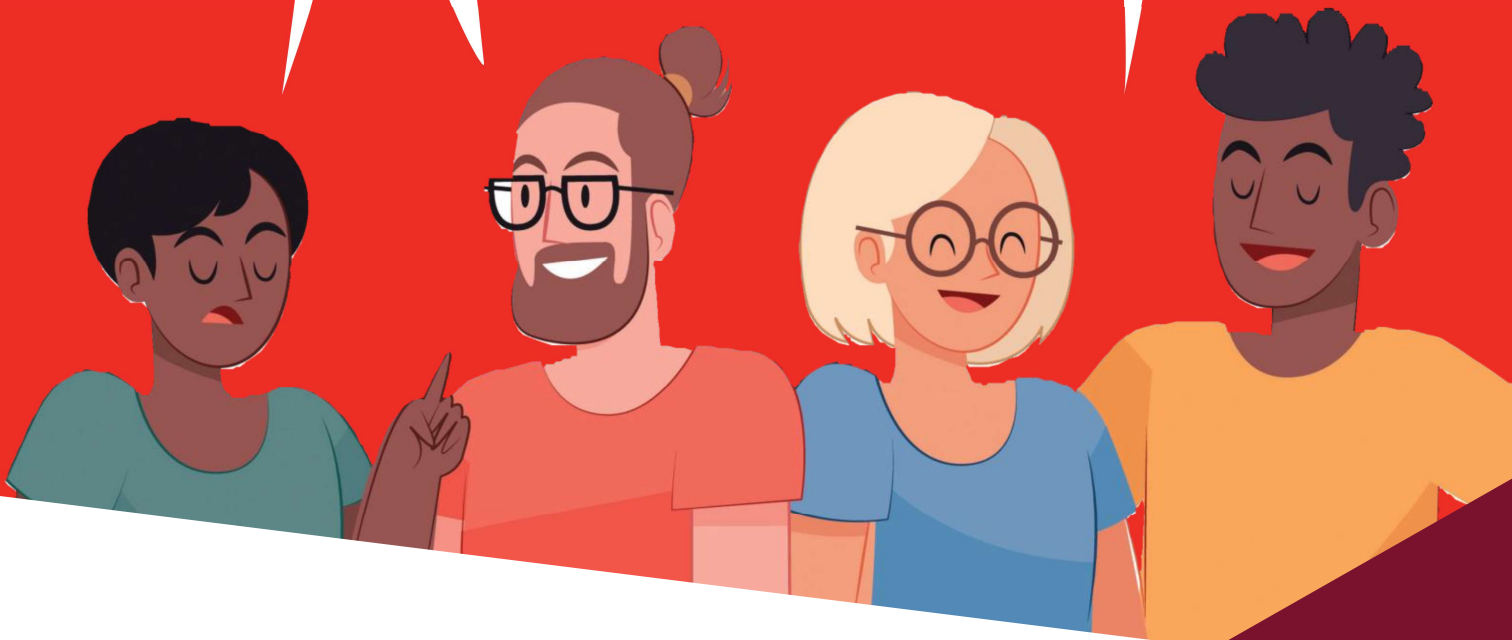


Tenant Challenge Panel (TCP) Voids (Empty homes) scrutiny review final report and recommendations



Tenant Challenge Panel Members (2025/26)

Marion Gerrard (Chair), Rita Stanley (Vice Chair), Karen Francis, Phil Simpson, Glyn Cooke, Sue Christopher, Tracy Mace, Dave Hardy, Tyrone Reid

Staff Support: Chris, Zo, James (Housing Strategy & Engagement Team)



CHESTERFIELD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

1. Who Are the Tenant Challenge Panel?

The Tenant Challenge Panel (TCP) is a group of Chesterfield Borough Council tenants who meet on a monthly basis to scrutinise areas of the housing service. The Panel selects a service area to examine in depth, working alongside the Housing Strategy and Engagement team to invite managers, review data, and develop recommendations for improvement.

A tenant scrutiny review typically runs for approximately six months, culminating in the production of a final report and action plan. The TCP's work helps to hold Chesterfield Borough Council's housing service to account and drives continuous improvement for all tenants.

The TCP would like to thank all members who participated in this review, as well as Jayne Bellamy (Voids Manager) and the wider Housing Services team for their openness and engagement throughout the process.

2. Introduction

For the 2025/26 review cycle, the Tenant Challenge Panel chose to scrutinise Chesterfield Borough Council's voids service – the process by which empty (void) properties are prepared and returned to the lettable standard for new tenants.

The voids service is a critical part of Chesterfield Borough Council's housing offer. How quickly and to what standard empty properties are returned to use directly affects rent income, the experience of new tenants, and the pressure on CBC's housing waiting list. At the time of this review, Chesterfield Borough Council held approximately 350 void properties, with some properties taking significantly longer than the target turnaround time to be relet.

This report summarises the work undertaken by the TCP between September 2025 and March 2026, including property visits, meetings with the Voids Manager, a tenant consultation survey, analysis of complaints and performance data, and a review of the Lettable Standard. It concludes with a set of recommendations for Chesterfield Borough Council's Housing Services team to consider.

3. Methodology

The TCP used a range of methods to gather evidence and build its understanding of the voids service:

- Presentations from and discussions with Jayne Bellamy (Voids Manager) and relevant housing staff
- Physical visits to void properties at different stages of the voids process
- Review and analysis of performance data, benchmarking data (via HouseMark), and voids loss figures

- Review of complaints received relating to the voids service (October 2024 – March 2025)
- A tenant consultation survey sent to 501 tenants who had recently moved into a property (April–October 2025)
- Comparative review of the Chesterfield Borough Council Lettable Standard alongside examples from other councils (including Bolsover District Council and Stevenage Borough Council)
- Review of case studies illustrating the range of conditions in which properties are returned to Chesterfield Borough Council

4. Review summary – session by session

September 2025 – Scoping and introduction

The review commenced with an overview of the voids process, covering the steps taken by Chesterfield Borough Council when a property becomes vacant. The TCP explored the overlap between the voids team and the allocations service, and discussed the introduction of a new IT system, Total Mobile, which is planned to replace the current paper-based inspection process. The Panel agreed to invite the Voids Manager to attend a future meeting to answer questions in detail.

October 2025 – Property visits

Panel members visited four void properties to observe the voids process in practice:

- 57 Lansdowne Road – A three-bedroom house in a relatively poor condition, with evidence of damp and mould in a bedroom and a water leak in the bathroom. The property had a strong smell of cat urine. Garden issues were noted.
- 57 Windermere Road – A four-bedroom house described as requiring a full recondition. The kitchen had already been stripped out. The garden was in a very poor state, with steps needing repair before they could be safely used. Panel members observed this property would take months to complete.
- 38 Bacons Lane – A two-bedroom house nearing completion. Outstanding items included garden clearance, cleaning, and some minor works. The property was broadly in an acceptable condition.
- 87 Belmont Drive – A two-bedroom house ready to let, with only recommissioning and a final clean outstanding. Bathroom flooring was noted as not being of the best quality.

The visits gave Panel members valuable first-hand experience of the range of conditions encountered by the voids team and highlighted the significant variation in the amount of work required between properties.

November 2025 – Voids Manager Q&A & Performance Overview

Jayne Bellamy, Voids Manager, attended the November meeting to answer questions raised by the Panel following the property visits. Key points from this session included:

- The voids team comprises 24 staff in total, including multi-skilled trades staff. The team is understaffed and a reshaping exercise is underway with the hope of expanding the team.
- In addition to core staff, approximately 5.5 FTE agency staff were in place, due to finish at the end of 2025.
- CLC were engaged as a contractor with a contract value of £1.5 million. They were described as an excellent contractor.
- Total Mobile (a new IT system) is being introduced across the voids and repairs service, which will enable inspections to be completed digitally and will allow photographs to be taken and attached to records.
- There is only one painter in the voids team, with a view to contracting painting out for better value.
- There is no dedicated plasterer within the team; small plastering works are completed by multi-skilled staff, with the plastering team called in for larger jobs.
- Chesterfield Borough Council intends to reduce the amount of decorating carried out as void works to focus on faster turnaround, which may result in an initial increase in complaints.

December 2025 – Complaints review and lettable standard

The Panel reviewed void-related complaints received between October 2024 and November 2025. Key complaint themes included:

- Gardens not dealt with at completion of tenancy (COT)
- Poor condition of properties on move-in
- Substandard decorating – including painting over wallpaper rather than stripping, and painting over damp
- Outstanding repairs that had not been completed before tenancy commencement
- Delays in responding to and resolving repairs following move-in

The Panel also began developing a tenant consultation survey to gather the views of tenants who had recently moved into a Chesterfield Borough Council property, focusing on their experience of the lettable standard and the condition of their new home.

January 2026 – Performance data, benchmarking and further visits

The Panel reviewed detailed performance data and HouseMark benchmarking information. Key findings included:

- As of December 2025, Chesterfield Borough Council held approximately 350 void properties – a significant reduction from earlier in the year.
- Average re-let time: 224.94 days, compared to a sector median of 58.00 days – placing Chesterfield Borough Council in the bottom quartile nationally.
- Average days to turn a property around: 192.28 days, compared to 30.40 for other landlords submitting data to HouseMark.
- Void works cost per unit: £286.45, only slightly above the median of £272.40, suggesting costs are broadly in line with peers.
- Void rent loss: significantly higher than comparable landlords, reflecting the extended turnaround times.
- Tenancy turnover is higher than comparable landlords, partly attributed to Chesterfield Borough Council's high proportion of flats (approximately 35% of stock).

The Panel also visited two further void properties – Albert Street North (a new void) and Wordsworth Court – and revisited Lansdowne Road to observe progress since the October visit. These visits helped members understand the full journey of a void property from receipt to relet.

February 2026 – Tenant consultation results and lettable standard review

The tenant consultation survey was sent to 501 tenants who had moved into a Chesterfield Borough Council property between April and October 2025. 42 responses were received. Key findings included:

- The vast majority of tenants (32 out of 40) confirmed the Lettable Standard document was explained to them at sign-up.
- 28 out of 37 respondents felt their property met the Lettable Standard upon closer inspection, though 6 felt it did not.
- 34 out of 40 respondents found their property was clean on moving in – however, 6 did not, with comments referencing disgracefully filthy bathrooms and floors, carpet pieces and staples left behind, and missed hidden surfaces.
- 11 out of 37 respondents reported rubbish or items had not been removed from gardens, outhouses or outbuildings.
- 16 out of 38 respondents were not given window lock keys for all windows – a recurring issue raised across multiple survey responses.
- Only 7 out of 19 respondents confirmed that repairs noted on the Lettable Standard paperwork were completed within the 20-working-day timeframe.

The Panel also compared the Chesterfield Borough Council Lettable Standard with the versions used by Bolsover District Council and Stevenage Borough Council, identifying several areas where the Chesterfield Borough Council document could be strengthened or clarified.

March 2026 – Final Q&A with voids manager & recommendations

Jayne Bellamy attended the March 2026 meeting to respond to the full list of questions raised by the Panel during the review. Key points included:

- Tenant inspectors: Previously used but discontinued. Jayne acknowledged this could be revisited and agreed it should be a recommendation in the final report.
- The voids team works to the Lettable Standard document (not a separate specification). Total Mobile will allow inspections to be completed digitally with photographs.
- Decorating vouchers: Allocated based on a room-by-room assessment, with approximately £30–£40 per room as a contribution toward materials.
- Properties in poor condition are decorated rather than vouchers being issued.
- Cleaners do not currently have a copy of the Lettable Standard. CLC (the contractor) was managed by the assets team, who held the standard.
- Grass cutting is managed by Environmental Services with a target of within 2 weeks of tenancy start date, though the backlog means this is not always achieved.
- The Lettable Standard was introduced in 2006 and has been reviewed periodically, but no fixed review cycle is in place.
- As of February 2026, there were 353 void properties: approximately 45% under three months old, and 22% between three and six months old.
- The pre-termination inspection pilot (where housing officers inspect properties before tenants leave) is managing approximately half of all voids and has identified repairs in advance, helping to reduce delays.

5. Property condition – case studies

As part of the review, the TCP was provided with photographic case studies showing properties returned to Chesterfield Borough Council in very poor condition. These illustrate the significant challenge faced by the voids team when properties are left in a state of disrepair and neglect. In some cases, completing works on a single property in this condition takes as long as completing five or six routine void properties.

Gypsy Lane

This property was returned in a severely deteriorated state, with holes punched through internal doors, heavily soiled floors throughout, an unusable kitchen and bathroom, and significant damage to walls. Work required included a full clean, a new kitchen, a new bathroom, replacement of all damaged doors, wall repairs, and full decoration. The property serves as a stark example of how tenant damage can dramatically increase void turnaround times and costs.

Harehill Road

This property was returned with multiple holes in internal doors, significant wall damage requiring patching, heavily soiled floors and debris left behind. Completed works included replacement of all damaged doors, a new fire suite, and full decoration throughout.

Carsington Close

This property was returned with a heavily overgrown and cluttered garden – including a dilapidated greenhouse, a shed full of rubbish, and extensive debris throughout the outside space. Internal spaces required decoration. The garden required full clearance before any other work could be undertaken.

The cost of poor condition properties

One property returned in severely poor condition can require several weeks of work – equivalent to the time needed to complete five or six routine void properties. This directly contributes to extended re-let times and increased rent loss for the Council.

6. Performance summary

The Panel reviewed performance data throughout the review period. The following table summarises the key benchmarking metrics as reviewed in January 2026:

Measure	CBC	Sector median
Average re-let time (days)	224.94	58.00
Average void turnaround time (days)	192.28	30.40
Void works cost per unit (£)	£286.45	£272.40
Void properties (December 2025)	353	-

Chesterfield Borough Council's re-let times and void turnaround times are significantly above the sector median, placing Chesterfield Borough Council in the bottom quartile nationally. However, void works costs are broadly in line with peers, indicating that the extended timescales are driven by property condition and capacity challenges rather than inefficiency in the works themselves. The significant reduction in void numbers from earlier in the year (when numbers were considerably higher) demonstrates that progress has been made.

7. Tenant consultation – key findings

The TCP designed and distributed a tenant consultation survey in January 2026, targeting 501 tenants who had recently moved into a Chesterfield Borough Council property. 42 responses were received (an 8.4% response rate). The survey focused on tenants' experiences of the Lettable Standard, the condition and cleanliness of their new home, and their experience of any outstanding repairs.

What Went Well

- The majority of tenants (80%) confirmed the Lettable Standard was explained to them at sign-up
- Most tenants (76%) felt their property met the Lettable Standard on closer inspection
- The majority of tenants (85%) found their property to be clean on move-in
- Most tenants (70%) confirmed all rubbish had been removed from gardens and outbuildings
- The vast majority (89%) were provided with two sets of door keys
- Several tenants provided very positive comments, praising the quality and cleanliness of their new home

Areas for improvement

- 16 out of 38 respondents (42%) did not receive window lock keys for all windows
- 17 out of 37 respondents (46%) reported issues with the condition of their property not noted on the Lettable Standard at sign-up
- Only 7 out of 19 respondents (37%) confirmed repairs noted on the Lettable Standard were completed within the 20-working-day timeframe
- 11 out of 37 respondents (30%) reported rubbish or items had not been fully removed from outside areas
- Several tenants reported having to deep clean properties themselves despite a clean having been carried out
- A recurring theme in comments was that issues were only discovered after tenants had moved in and spent time in the property

8. Lettable standard – review findings

The TCP reviewed Chesterfield Borough Council's current Lettable Standard document in detail, comparing it with versions used by Bolsover District Council and Stevenage Borough Council. The Panel identified a number of areas where the Chesterfield Borough Council document could be strengthened, clarified, or made more accessible.

The Panel's view is that the areas covered by the current Lettable Standard are broadly appropriate, but that improvements are needed in the process by which it is applied, as well as the document itself. Key concerns raised included:

- The Lettable Standard checklist is currently completed by staff, with tenants signing off the document rather than being actively involved in checking each item
- There is no separate tenant-facing version or accessible format of the document
- Cleaners do not currently receive a copy of the Lettable Standard to guide their work
- The document does not include a fixed review date and has historically been updated on an ad hoc basis
- There is no specific reference to child window locks or locks appropriate for tenants with specific needs
- The number of window keys provided is not recorded on the document
- There is no reference to checking architraves, woodworm in floors or stairs, or colour coding of taps
- The programmed works schedule (e.g. planned kitchen or window replacements) is not referenced in relation to newly let properties

9. Recommendations

The Tenant Challenge Panel has identified the following recommendations for consideration by Chesterfield Borough Council's Housing Services team. These have been developed through evidence gathered across the full review period and reflect the views of both Panel members and tenants who responded to the consultation.

Lettable Standard Document

R1

A separate tenant-facing column or tick-box section should be added to the Lettable Standard, enabling tenants to actively verify and sign off each item themselves when viewing or signing up for a property, rather than simply signing a completed document.

R2

An accessible version of the Lettable Standard should be developed, using plain language, larger text, and visual aids (such as photos showing acceptable and unacceptable standards). This should be made available in alternative formats on request.

R3

The Lettable Standard should be updated to include: the number of window lock keys provided to the tenant; a check for child window locks where families are moving in; a check of architraves; a check for woodworm in floors and stairs; colour coding and correct fitting of taps in kitchens and bathrooms; a check of the flow of all drains; and plumbing for bleeding radiators.

R4

The Lettable Standard should include a fixed review date, with a commitment to formally review the document at least every two years, involving tenants in the process.

R5

All cleaning contractors and staff completing void works should be provided with a copy of the Lettable Standard and required to work to it..

R6

Accountability for delivery should sit with a named individual for each void property, whether works are completed in-house or by a contractor.

Process improvements

R7

The Lettable Standard sign-up process should be reviewed to allow more time for tenants to view and understand the document, rather than it being completed at speed on sign-up day. The process should be carried out with tenants, not just signed off by them.

R8

Tenant Inspectors should be reintroduced in some form, enabling tenants to play an active role in checking that void properties meet the required standard before they are relet. Chesterfield Borough Council's tenant engagement team should support with the design and implementation of any revised scheme.

R9

Where a programmed works item (such as a kitchen, bathroom, or window replacement) is due on a newly let property, the expected year of replacement should be clearly communicated to the incoming tenant at sign-up.

R10

Painters and decorators working on void properties, whether in-house or contracted, should give more care and attention to the quality of decorating. The Council should consider whether a minimum decorating standard (separate from the Lettable Standard) is appropriate, including full preparation of surfaces before painting.

Property condition and recharging

R11

Chesterfield Borough Council should ensure that the recharge policy, once approved, is applied consistently to properties returned in very poor condition. Tenants should be made aware of the recharge policy at the start of their tenancy so expectations are clear from the outset.

R12

The external security of all property types, including flats and bungalows, should be considered as part of the voids process. The Lettable Standard should be reviewed to ensure it adequately reflects the security requirements of flats, not just houses.

R13

Window lock keys should be provided for all windows at the point of handover, and this should be confirmed and recorded on the Lettable Standard. Where keys are not available at the time of letting, this should be noted and a date for provision agreed.

Performance and capacity

R14

Chesterfield Borough Council should consider tendering for a new contractor to support the voids team following the conclusion of the CLC contract, to ensure the service has sufficient capacity to reduce re-let times and address the backlog of void properties.

R15

The pre-termination inspection pilot should be fully rolled out across all void properties to enable repairs to be identified and booked in advance, thereby reducing the time properties spend empty once the tenancy has ended.

R16

Chesterfield Borough Council should ensure tenants are aware that gas fitting services are available (for a charge) when setting up their new home, and that up-to-date information about this is reflected on the Chesterfield Borough Council website.

10. Final word

The Tenant Challenge Panel would like to thank Jayne Bellamy (Voids Manager) and all Chesterfield Borough Council housing staff who engaged openly and constructively with this review. The Panel recognises that the voids team is working hard in challenging circumstances, including staffing pressures, the conclusion of a major contractor arrangement, and the significant variation in condition of properties returned to Chesterfield Borough Council by outgoing tenants.

The Panel acknowledges the significant reduction in void numbers achieved over the course of this review year, and welcomes the planned introduction of Total Mobile, which should improve the quality of record-keeping, transparency, and accountability across the voids process.

The recommendations in this report are intended to be constructive and achievable. The Panel looks forward to reviewing progress against these recommendations in a future session, and hopes that this report will support CBC in delivering a voids service that all Chesterfield tenants can be confident in.

Next Steps

Chesterfield Borough Council's Housing Services team is asked to review each recommendation and provide a formal response, including an agreed timescale and named owner for each action, within three months of the publication of this report. Progress should be reported back to the Tenant Challenge Panel at a future meeting.

11. Additional thanks

The tenant engagement team would like to especially thank Tyrone for his time in writing up and producing the final report on behalf of the group.