

Housing Scrutiny Report

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1. Synopsis

1.1. This report is intended to provide Housing Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the Homes and Neighbourhoods service, current performance, statistics and the future plans for the service.

1.2. What are Voids

1.3. A 'Void' can be defined as a property, which does not have a legitimate tenant. There are many reasons why voids occur. Sometimes a property may be awaiting a new tenant; or a previous tenant may have given notice and vacated the property. A property may become empty following the death of a tenant, the abandonment of a property or a tenant transferring to or buying another property.

1.4. Changes in property tenancy statuses or the fact that a property is empty for different reasons does not mean the property is classified as Void. The following examples would **not** go through the Void process:

- 1.4.1.1. **Successions** - a legal term used when a person takes over a tenancy when the tenant dies. Successions do not fall within a void status category and are not progressed through the voids process.
- 1.4.1.2. **Mutual Exchanges** - a way for social housing residents to find a move by swapping homes with another social housing resident. Mutual exchanges do not fall within a void status category and are not progressed through the voids process.
- 1.4.1.3. **Unlived In Properties** – properties which may have been vacated / left unoccupied by the tenant without advising Islington Council. Unlived In Properties do not fall within a void status category and are not progressed through the voids process.

2. Void Process – Notification

- 2.1. How does the Housing Needs service deal with LBI voids when information about a void is received?
- 2.2. Information about the voids is received weekly, typically on a Monday.
- 2.3. This information is provided by the Property Services team and will comprise information about:
 - the property to be let
 - features of the property (i.e.- floor level, accessibility etc)
 - location of the property
- 2.4. Upon receipt of the details of the property to be let, the Allocations manager determines properties to be advertised in the council's Choice Based Lettings website and these properties re advertised between Thursday to Sunday midnight.
- 2.5. The decision on properties to advertise accounts for properties that need to be let as a direct offer via a supported choice scheme.
- 2.6. All advertised properties are listed on Home Connections bidding website, which is accessible to all residents who have been awarded a minimum of 120 points to bid for properties.
- 2.7. Residents with 120 points and above are encouraged to bid for up to three properties a week.
- 2.8. How does the Housing Needs service carry out the shortlisting process?

- 2.9. Islington operates a choice-based lettings scheme where residents with 120 or more points are invited to bid for properties advertised weekly on the Islington bidding website.
- 2.10. At the end of the bidding process, Allocation officers will collate all bids from the Home Connections website and shortlist the top eight bidders with the highest number of points* (*unless other priorities exist e.g. Wheelchair accessible home, ground floor, new build or over 50 block).
- 2.11. The Allocations officers will check the residents application meets the priority order and that they have an assessed need for the property being shortlisted.
- 2.12. Following the completion of the bidding process, the top eight residents with the highest number of points are informed of this via an update page on their profile (on the Home Connections site), text message and email and invited to a viewing of the property they had bid for.
- 2.13. The viewing is coordinated by officers in the Housing Management team and those in attendance at the viewing would be asked for their decision as to whether they wish to accept the property they have viewed.
- 2.14. If all or some of the residents in attendance accept the property viewed, the applicant with the highest points award will be offered the property.
- 2.15. How does the Housing Needs service reach decisions on who receives a direct offer or supported choice offer?
- 2.16. There may be circumstances where for urgent operational or financial reasons there is a need to make an offer of housing outside the Choice Based Lettings and, in exceptional circumstances, outside of the priority points and date order criteria set out in the council's Housing Allocation Scheme.
- 2.17. In effect, this means, not all properties that become available will be advertised and offered through the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) process and not all properties will be allocated by priority points and date order. More information about the types of residents who may be made a supported choice offer can be found on pages 36-37 of the council's Housing Allocation Scheme.
- 2.18. In certain circumstances the council may make a direct offer of suitable accommodation outside of the CBL scheme in circumstances where in its discretion it considers it is necessary or appropriate to house a registered applicant otherwise than through the choice- based lettings process. More information about the types of residents who may be made a direct offer can be found on page 38 of the council's Housing Allocation Scheme.

- 2.19. In practice, the service maintains separate lists of residents who are to be made either a direct offer or a supported choice offer. This list is managed by date order.
- 2.20. Therefore, in reaching a decision on who is to be made an offer, the Housing Needs service:
- will consider our Public Sector Equality Duty;
 - will check the property type required by the resident;
 - the length of time that the resident has been on the respective lists.
- 2.21. Timescales the Housing Needs service works toward to when it comes to the lettings process from the moment information is received about a void property.
- 2.22. The average turnaround time is 4-6 weeks. However, this is dependent on:
- the condition of the void property
 - whether it may be ready for a viewing
 - other issues that may arise in the void period.
- 2.23. Who does the Housing Needs service work in partnership with through the voids and lettings process?
- 2.24. The teams that work in close partnership with to ensure a seamless process toward a successful let include (though not exclusively):
- Housing Registration team
 - Mobility team
 - Property services
 - Tenancy (Housing Management)
 - Children services
 - Occupational Therapist
 - Medical advisors
 - Homeless support team
 - Registered social housing landlords
 - support workers/advocates, adult social care team
- 2.25. Data on the number of LBI voids in the last 12 months
- 2.26. 745 council owned properties that were void have been let in the last 12 months.

2.27. The attached PDF document titled '**Voids process map**' highlights the end-to-end process from the point information is received about a void to the point an offer is made to a resident who has successfully viewed and accepted a property.

3. Void Process – Allocation and Lettings

- 3.1. The Duty team is part of the Housing Operations Tenancy Service. It comprises 1 x Team Manager, 1 x Principal Officer and 8 x Tenancy Officers. In addition to its main functions in relation to the voids and lettings process, the team also services emergency drop-ins and responds to housing emergencies affecting several dwellings, such as loss of services, lift outage, fire and flood.
- 3.2. The team works closely with colleagues in Voids, Allocations and Tenancy management in order to turn round and relet properties as quickly as possible. Once let, the team remain a point of contact for the new tenant during the first 8 weeks of the tenancy where they will resolve issues, assist, refer or signpost as appropriate. New tenants will receive a phone call before the end of the 8 week period which establishes any outstanding issues or concerns with settling in. For vulnerable tenants, the phone call is replaced by a home visit from the Duty team.
- 3.3. **The Duty team must carry out initial inspections of newly void properties within 48 hours of keys being received.** This is the start of the void process when the clock starts ticking. This visit is to confirm vacant possession, record details of the property features and assess any storage or clearance of rubbish required. Following the inspection, systems are updated and the property handed off to the voids team to commence reservicing works.
- 3.4. Duty team are next notified when the property is safe to conduct a viewing of prospective new tenants and are provided with details of the client or bidders shortlisted to attend the viewing.
- 3.5. **The Duty team must arrange the viewing within 5 days of the property being declared ready to view, or the date of receiving details of the shortlisted applicants, whichever is later.** The Duty officer attends the viewing giving information about the property, such as its heating system and works that are still in progress, services to the locality and local area, and answers questions from the applicants. Immediately after the viewing, the Duty officer emails the Allocations team to advise which of the applicants have accepted the property.
- 3.6. The Duty team are next notified by Allocations which applicant was successful and who has accepted the property.
- 3.7. **The Duty team must arrange sign up with the new tenant within 48 hours of the property being confirmed as ready to let, or within 48 hours of being notified who has been successful, whichever is later.**
- 3.8. The sign-up process takes about one hour covering important information about commissioning utilities, rent payment and welfare benefits, fire safety checks, the tenancy conditions and key contacts. The tenant is provided with a sign-up pack

containing this and other useful information before they leave with the keys to their new home.

3.9. The step-by-step functions are shown in the process maps.

3.10. In bold above are performance indicators.

4. Void Refurbishment

4.1. Housing Property Services provides void refurbishment services for all Housing managed properties in the Borough. The Voids Team consists of 5 Void Project Managers (VPM) and 1 Void Manager (VM) overseeing all voids from Routine through to Major works and Temporary Accommodation voids.

4.2. The Voids Team refurbishes on average 900 Void properties per financial year. This figure may fluctuate from year to year, with additional New Build Projects and Buyback programmes generating additional void properties requiring void works.

4.3. What is the process for refurbishing Voids

4.4. Depending on the circumstances of the property being made void, Targeted Tenancy Team will carry out tenancy termination procedures, which in some circumstances will include for a tenancy termination notice period to be served. This should allow for the departing tenant to vacate the property, leaving it empty of all lumber and ready for keys to be handed back to the Targeted Tenancy Team.

4.5. On vacating of the property and keys being handed over, the property will be checked to ensure lumber is removed and the property is in order. Any lumber remaining will be recorded and options to recharge the departed tenant will be applied where applicable.

4.6. The Voids Team will then be provided with the keys to the property and any associated communal FOB keys. The Voids Team at this stage take responsibility for the property. A lock change is carried out for security purposes and a VPM allocated to the property. The VPM will then inspect the property with the intention of completing a specification of works. If significant amounts of lumber remain in the property, it may require a lumber clearance to be instructed initially to allow for a full technical inspection to take place. Once the inspection is completed, the VPM will complete a specification of works to refurbish the property. This specification needs to comply with the Council's technical void standard.

4.7. Depending on the profile of the works specification, the void works will be allocated an appropriate Void works job priority. The Void works job priorities are allocated as follows:

- **V10** – Standard Void 10-day target. Allocated for basic void refurbishment works

- **V15** - Standard Plus Kitchen or Bathroom Void 15-day target. Works that may require replacement of bathroom or kitchen
- **V15** - Standard Plus Asbestos (notifiable) Void 15-day target. Works that require asbestos survey and removal of asbestos materials as part of works.
- **V30** – Major Works Void 30-day target. Works that require kitchen & bathroom renewal and/or major refurbishment works.
- **V60** – Major Works Void 60-day target. Works that require kitchen & bathroom renewal and additional major refurbishment works i.e. extensive plasterwork throughout the property.

4.8. The Void works will be allocated by job order to a nominated voids contractor. The Voids Team currently have contracted 2 Voids contractors, providing Voids refurbishment services to the Council. The 2 Void contractors working in partnership with the Council are as follows:

- PiLon Limited
- Richwell Construction Ltd

4.9. Additional support to refurbish void properties is provided by the in-house voids team based at Brewery Road, on 'V10' voids where minimal works are required. The Council's surveying and insurance teams also assist with major works voids with structural or complex damp issues.

4.10. There are additional housing needs projects and buyback properties some of which require re-design or that have more complex repairs, these properties also require decorations, carpets, white goods and furniture.

4.11. These include:

- General Needs Temporary Accommodation 193 in scheme expected occupation up to 2 years
- Rough Sleeper project – GLA – Buyback properties
- Afghan Refugee project – GLA – Buyback properties
- 2-5 Bedroom Temporary accommodation – GLA buyback properties

4.12. Other schemes including previous buyback properties, House Project for care leavers, Housing First, additional voids for children services.

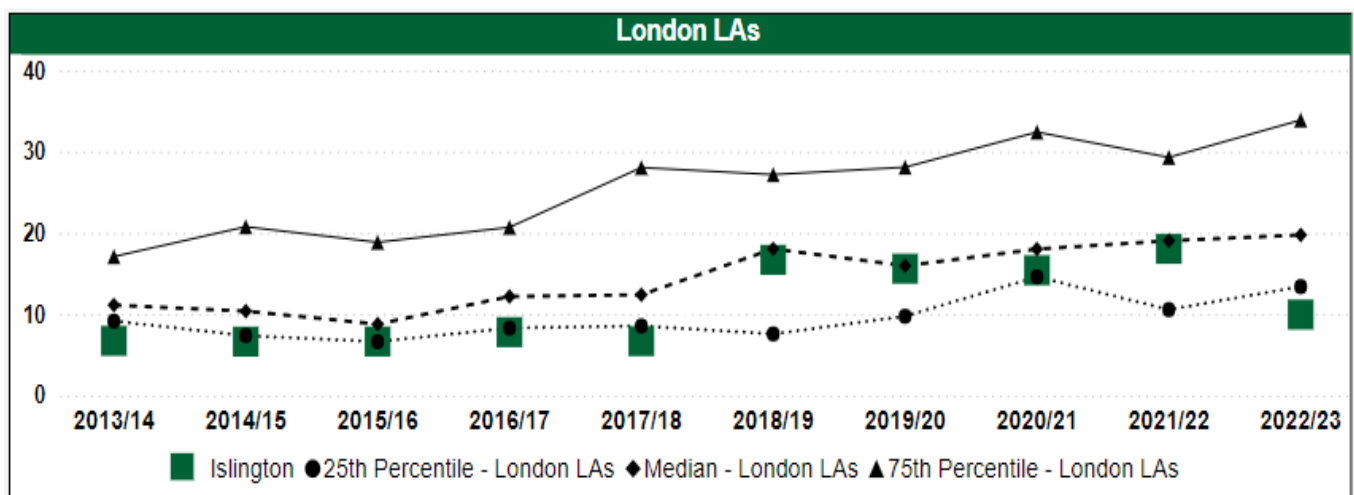
4.13. During the Voids refurbishment period, the property is made available for advert and available for viewing once the property is deemed safe to view by the VPM.

- 4.14. Once works have been completed, the VPM will carry out a handover inspection with the contractor, this may identify snagging issues which the contractor may need to correct before the VPM can formally complete a Certificate of Practical Completion (COPC).
- 4.15. Gas and Electrical safety certification is provided as part of the COPC process.
- 4.16. Once satisfied that the property is ready for occupation, the VPM places the property in Ready for Occupation (OCCP) status and forwards relevant documentation with sets of keys to the Targeted Tenancy team, who will then progress tenancy sign up procedures or Temporary Accommodation Voids allocation procedures.
- 4.17. Void Budget
- 4.18. The current Voids budget allocated for 2024-25 is **£5,765,400**.
- 4.19. Current Void expenditure forecasts indicate Void expenditure will remain within void budget allocation target for 2024-25. Temporary Accommodation Void refurbishment expenditure is separately funded as part of programme funds expenditure.
- 4.20. Performance
- 4.21. Empty Properties
- 4.22. The below tables 1-3 detail Islington Council's performance over a 10-year period for empty properties per 1000 properties of housing stock.
- 4.23. Islington Council seeks to perform within the upper quartile (25th Percentile) in comparison to other London Authorities (LA).
- 4.24. The Tables and chart below indicate that Islington are currently achieving upper quartile performance against this London LA comparative performance table.
- 4.25. Table 1 – Empty Properties per 1000 Housing Stock – 2013 to 2024

EMPTY PROPERTIES PER 1000 HOUSING STOCK				
RepYear	Islington	25th Percentile - London LAs	Median - London LAs	75th Percentile - London LAs
2013/14	7	9	11	17
2014/15	7	7	10	21
2015/16	7	7	9	19
2016/17	8	8	12	21

2017/18	7	9	12	28
2018/19	17	8	18	27
2019/20	16	10	16	28
2020/21	15	15	18	32
2021/22	18	11	19	29
2022/23	10	13	20	34
2023/24	10	N/A	N/A	N/A

4.26. Table 2 – Empty properties per 1000 Housing Stock – Line chart



4.27. Table 3 – Empty properties per 1000 Housing Stock 2013 - 2023

4.28. Average Void Re-Let Time

4.29. The below tables 4-6 detail Islington Council's performance over a 10-year period for Average re-let times for voids.

4.30. Islington Council seeks to perform within the upper quartile (25th Percentile) in

- comparison to other London Authorities (LA).

4.31. The Tables and chart below indicate that Islington are currently achieving upper

- quartile performance against this London LA comparative performance table. 2023-24

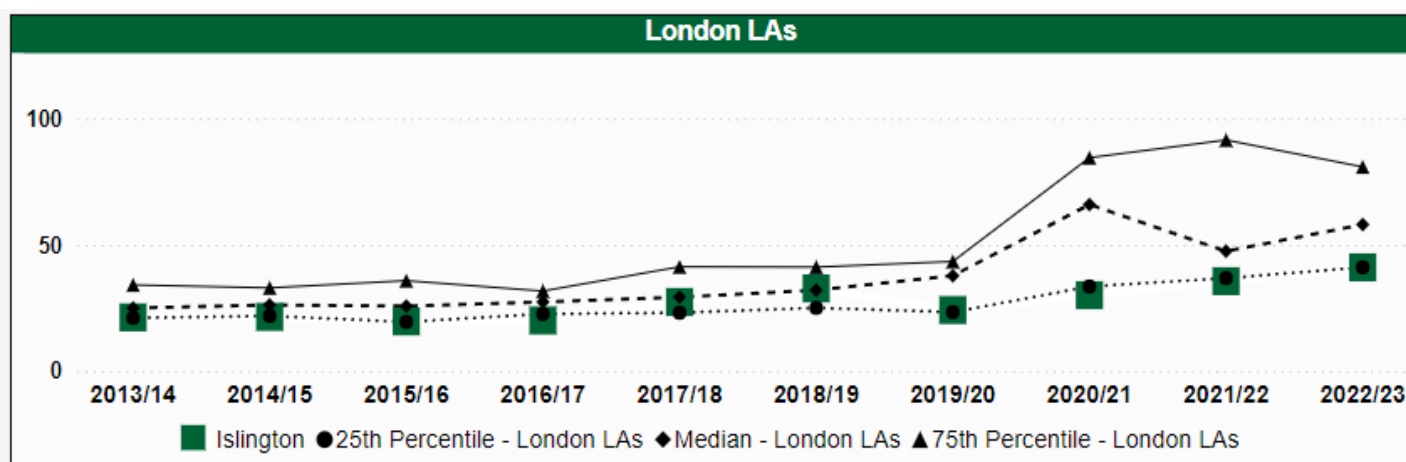
- indicated significant improvement with improved contractor resourcing and 'In-House' resources and improving focus on ready for occupation (OCCP) to sign up of the tenancy (LET) with monitoring / performance tools supporting this.

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Islington	7	7	7	8	7	17	16	15	18	10
75th Percentile - London LAs	17	21	19	21	28	27	28	32	29	34
Median - London LAs	11	10	9	12	12	18	16	18	19	20
25th Percentile - London LAs	9	7	7	8	9	8	10	15	11	13

4.32. Table 4 Average Void Re-Let Time – 2013 to 2024

AVERAGE VOID PROPERTY RE-LET TIME				
RepYear	Islington	75th Percentile - London LAs	Median - London LAs	25th Percentile - London LAs
2013/14	21	34	25	21
2014/15	22	33	26	22
2015/16	20	36	26	20
2016/17	20	32	27	23
2017/18	27	41	29	23
2018/19	33	41	32	25
2019/20	24	43	38	23
2020/21	30	85	66	34
2021/22	36	92	48	37
2022/23	41	81	58	41
2023/24	25	N/A	N/A	N/A

4.33. Table 5



4.34. Table 6

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Islington	21	22	20	20	27	33	24	30	36	41
75th Percentile - London LAs	34	33	36	32	41	41	43	85	92	81
Median - London LAs	25	26	26	27	29	32	38	66	48	58
25th Percentile - London LAs	21	22	20	23	23	25	23	34	37	41

4.35. Future challenges & Potential Areas of Improvement

4.36. **'Buybacks'** Increasing void workload and void 'turnaround time' pressures due to Greater London Authority (GLA) & the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) funded programmes for buying back properties for use in meeting the demands of Temporary Accommodation and affordable housing.

4.37. The current programmes will bring **310 new 'buyback' properties** into Council stock and each property requires refurbishment including, in many cases, major works to ensure the properties are meeting the necessary Void standards. The Council are expecting a **further 120 (1 bed) property** purchases to be agreed and funded over the next 2 financial years, so longer term support for these programmes is needed within the Voids team.

4.38. These demands on the Voids Team are currently being met by increasing overtime for the VPMs and pulling in additional resources from other property services teams. Additional contractor resources are also being sought to meet this demand.

4.39. The Voids Team are seeking to provide a sustainable longer-term resource to manage the increased number of voids - 1 additional resource is therefore being sought:

- 1 VPM to deal with the additional 'buyback' projects – initially for a 2 year fixed term period to assist with pre-checks of buyback properties, produce specification and to be the main point of contact, with additional support from void team cover arrangements during annual leave and to manage these properties with support from other VPMs

- 4.40. **'New Builds'** Increasing void workload and 'turnaround time' pressures. As 'New builds' come online, this inevitably means additional void properties requiring refurbishment, as local residents move from existing Council properties into the 'New Build' schemes.
- 4.41. **'Building regulations'** – increasing requirements of building safety legislation inevitably requires increasing focus on ensuring voids meet these standards, this means additional specification requirements and added pressures to void turnaround times, as additional work requires additional time and void costs factored in.
- 4.42. **'Tenancy Notice Periods'** – opportunities for use of tenancy notice periods where tenants have returned keys early. This can help provide a very short void turnaround period, which helps the overall void turnaround average for the Council and increases rental income.
- 4.43. **'Lumber Clearance'** – increasing levels of lumber clearance demands delays the Voids Team in progressing void refurbishment works. A renewed focus is needed on lumber removal at the tenancy termination stage, including property checks before return of keys and enforcing 'recharge' to tenants who do not clear their lumber as required. This requires additional resource and time allocated within the Targeted Tenancy section and within any future structure and associated processes.
- 4.44. **'Gas safety and operational checks'** – Voids Team are seeking to improve the process of ensuring that heating systems are operating correctly before handover for tenancy sign-up. This will require, where possible, gas heating systems to be fired up and all associated heating systems in the property checked. Currently, issues with heating systems are only picked up when the gas system is re-commissioned when the tenant is moving into the property. Reviewing option of a dedicated 'in-house' gas resource to support this process.
- 4.45. **Damp & Mould** improvement works remain a high priority for voids following the Housing Ombudsman's spotlight on damp & mould report and recent media cases, this also may mean additional specification of works which adds to the

pressures on void turnaround. Improving damp & mould data profiles for properties to inform targeted additional void damp prevention specifications helping to address historic property damp & mould concerns are being reviewed.

4.46. **OCCP to LET** – Improving focus on reducing the time between when the void property is ‘Ready for Occupation’ (OCCP) to tenancy sign-up (LET). This requires viewings of properties to be held at the earliest stage the property is safe to view and ensuring resources for ‘sign up’s’ are available.

4.46.1.1.1. ‘Live’ tracking reports from the ‘Northgate’ Housing system to be reviewed daily and progressed proactively. Improved strategic and collaborative working within the Council from all teams supporting this process is essential.

5. Successions

5.1. Succession work undertaken by the Housing Investigations Team

5.2. Day-to- day succession work

5.3. The Housing Investigations Team (HIT) have carried out check to identify fraud and error on all succession applications for LBI tenancies.

5.4. The succession applications are subject to a two-stage process. At the first stage the application and any supporting documents are robustly reviewed/triaged for possible inconsistencies and the identification of potential fraud. Those that are identified as a risk are sent to the second stage and opened for further investigation. In the cases where no risks are identified, the report is sent back to the tenancy team to allow them to process the application as normal.

5.5. All succession applications are reviewed/triaged within the 10-working day target.

5.6. Since 1st April 2024, HIT have reviewed 118 succession applications and opened 37 for further investigation. From these 37, HIT have recovered one home and a further 6 cases are with our Legal team for possession action. 5 cases have been closed with no further action and the remaining 25 cases remain under investigation. Including the cases with Legal, this would equate to a 6% fraud rate. This is subject to change as the year progresses.

5.7. Table 7

	2022/23	2023/24	April 2024 – August 2024
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No: of succession applications reviewed	269	270	118
No: of cases opened for investigation	61	59	37
No: of properties recovered	13	11	7 (6 are with legal)
Fraud rate (%)	4.8%	4.07%	6%

5.8. Policy changes to succession rights in the Housing Allocations Policy

5.9. As part of the consultation for the newly implemented Housing Allocations Policy, HIT recommended tightening up requirements for both types of discretionary ‘successions’.

5.10. The changes proposed were:-

- The wording of the policy be amended to limit applications for both (1) and (2) to family members defined by Housing Act 1985 s.113 – i.e. those who could succeed on a statutory basis
- New requirement for applicants for both (1) and (2) to have to have lived at the property for at least five years with the tenant or the life of the tenancy if shorter
- New prohibition on applicants for (1) and (2) from owning other residential property

These changes were accepted by Councillors and have been in place since 1st April 2024.

5.11. Proactive assurance work

5.12. In October 2023, HIT became aware of 158 succession applications that had not been reviewed by HIT. HIT carried out reviews on all cases. Initial results found:

Result	Number of cases
No further action	103
Cases already under HIT investigation	5

Cases referred to other departments for action	14
Cases to be opened for further investigation	36

- 5.13. From the 36 cases opened for further investigation – 4 properties have so far been returned, 5 are currently with the Legal team, 6 cases remain under investigation, 1 case is being dealt with via our ASB team and the remainder have been resulted as no further action.
- 5.14. Ongoing Fraudulent succession case studies
- 5.15. The team have identified a case where the applicant was also an Islington employee. The employee has been dismissed as a result and the legal possession action is ongoing.
- 5.16. The team identified a case where the succession applicant has been subletting the property via Airbnb while living abroad. The team are in the process of seeking a criminal prosecution, possession of the property and recovery of unlawful profits.
- 5.17. Another applicant who openly admits that they do not meet the eligibility criteria (only stayed at the property at weekends), is refusing to return the property to LBI and forcing us to take legal action to gain possession.