

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> July 2024

Dear Ms Burgess,

**Re: Housing Emergency**

I refer to your letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> June to Brian Roberts, Interim Chief Executive. Stirling Council's void performance has been improving in recent years, the average time taken to let a void property was 76.88 days in 2022/23 and 74.08 days in 2023/24. This is a similar level to the Scottish average for Councils.

It is important to note that Stirling Council introduced a new Housing Allocation Policy in 2020 and one of the new features of the new Policy was that it increased the proportion of lets to transfer applicants, thereby increasing the overall number of lets by creating a vacancy chain. We currently let 25% of our properties to transfer applicants and this, combined with increasing the supply of affordable housing through new development and acquisitions, has helped us to increase the overall number of lets we make. For example, Stirling Council let 325 properties in 2019/20 compared to 414 properties in 2023/24. The increased turnover has a number of benefits, including increasing the number of lets we are making to homeless households, but it also increases the workload of void properties that the service manages each year and, as a consequence, will lead to higher void relet times. There are further factors which have contributed to higher relet times in recent years, these include:

- difficulty in recruiting some skilled trades.
- delays in letting a property due to length of time taken to deal with utility suppliers in relation to meter issues.
- a significant number of properties returned are in poor condition and require significant works to meet the required standard for relet.

In an effort to improve our void performance we have recruited an additional void supervisor and 7 trade operatives and we use an external contractor to work on voids in order to reduce the time taken to relet properties. These changes have helped to reduce our overall number of voids, for example in January 2023 we had 97 void properties, as of today we have 59 void properties. 59 properties is just under 1% of

our housing stock, which is a relatively low proportion of our housing stock which is empty. Ideally we would recruit further trade operatives to further reduce our time taken to relet properties but the additional labour costs would be challenging particularly given that we have had to make efficiency savings to minimise rent increases in recent years.

We also have a stock of homes and communal buildings which we use for temporary accommodation. We currently have 29 temporary accommodation units which are void and we prioritise these due to the need to minimise using bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless households. Our average void time for temporary accommodation properties is 10 days.

In terms of our strategy for undertaking 2<sup>nd</sup> hand acquisitions, in recent years Stirling Council has purchased between 30 – 40 properties per annum and received Scottish Government grant funding for these. These are a good way of providing additional affordable housing particularly in rural areas where there might not be any sites for building new affordable homes.

However, most of the properties we purchase, which are usually former local authority stock purchased via the right to buy, require significant upgrade works to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. Often works will include the installation of solar panels, replacement kitchen, windows and bathroom - this can result in the property being empty for a significant amount of time before all the works can be completed. This puts an additional workload on the team who also carry out void works so this can contribute to worsened void performance overall. We currently have 41 acquisition properties which are empty and are being worked on. In addition, “ring-fencing” funding for acquisitions can be quite restrictive and it should be noted that the Affordable Housing Supply Programme should be something that is jointly agreed by the Scottish Government and the local authority. For example, there are several new build sites in Stirling which are ready to commence construction works but these cannot progress due to a lack of available grant funding, so if there was to be additional funding available for affordable housing Officers would have a preference for new build sites being developed rather than receipt of additional monies for acquisitions.

I trust this above information is helpful to the work of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Clark

Head of Housing