

Agenda Item	7
Report No	CC/15/25

The Highland Council

Committee: Caithness

Date: 28 April 2025

Report Title: Void-Plus Policy – Update on Progress

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides information on progress against the Void-Plus Policy which was implemented on a trial basis in Caithness as part of the Council's Delivery Plan 2024-2027.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Note** the information provided on progress of the Void-Plus Policy in Caithness; and
- ii. **Note** that a review will be taken of the Void-Plus approach following the first year of operation to determine the success of the approach. This will assist in determining whether the Void-Plus Policy should be continued beyond the trial period.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - The report provides detail as to the financial costs of the Void-Plus policy and the potential to reduce void rental loss as a result of the policy.
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising from this report.
- 3.3 **Risk** - Risk is managed through regular review and reporting to allow corrective action to be taken if necessary.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Implementation of Void-Plus Policy

- 5.1 The Void-Plus Policy is designed to help create sustainable tenancies in parts of Caithness where there has been difficulty in re-letting void Council housing. It involves an enhanced decorative standard at the void stage to encourage applicants to bid for these houses as part of the Caithness Choice-Based Letting process.
- 5.2 As per the update provided in the corporate performance management system (PRMS), the current RAG status of this project is green.

Project: Housing Void-Plus Policy

R ●
A ●
G ●
C ●

Reason for Project RAG Rating and Corrective Action:

18 void properties are in the process of being brought up to Void-Plus standard up to the end of March 2025. Recruitment of an additional painter resource is ongoing with candidates to be shortlisted and interviewed. In the meantime, work is ongoing with current resources.

- 5.3 Key Milestones & Measures of Success
- 5.4 The key milestones for this project as established in PRMS are as follows:

MILESTONES		CURRENT STATUS
<i>Starts April 24; Completes July 24</i>	Void-Plus Policy: New policy approved	M4 24/25 Completed
<i>Starts Apr24 / Completes Aug24</i>	Void-Plus Policy: New policy deployed; targets for specific properties	M5 24/25 Completed
<i>Starts Jan25 / Completes May25</i>	Void-Plus Policy: Report on progress	M12 24/25 On Target
<i>Starts Jun25 / Completes Jan26</i>	Void-Plus Policy: Project Closure Phase	

5.5 The measures of success include:-

- increased levels of tenant satisfaction;
- increased levels of tenancy sustainment; and
- reduced refusal rates

These figures will be available for future reporting when it will be possible to clearly identify what impact Void-Plus has made on these indicators.

In July 2024, the Housing Management Team approved the identification of properties where additional incentives for re-letting may be required. This consists of streets which have experienced a low demand from applicants or where applicants with housing need have refused an offer of housing in order to await a future offer elsewhere.

- 5.6 The Policy commenced in October 2024, following the recruitment of a painter vacancy in the local Building Maintenance Team. Following a review of Building Maintenance capacity – including existing commitments to deliver repairs in Council houses in Caithness – an additional painter post was approved in December 2024. Unfortunately, the recruitment process was unsuccessful in its first attempt to fill this post, but an additional painter was appointed in March and will start on 7 April 2025. This will enable the local team to have capacity to effectively double the number of Void-Plus houses from April 2025.
- 5.7 To date, 18 houses are in the process of being brought up to Void-Plus standard. This reflects the relative low numbers of “new” void houses. Also impacting on the numbers is the separate agreement with SSEN to lease 18 houses which would otherwise have had Void-Plus works delivered. These houses will be leased to SSEN from Summer 2025, and all will comply with the Void-Plus standard.
- 5.8 The allocation details of the houses which have had Void-Plus works in the period to 31 March 2025 are provided below. The first 4 properties were re-advertised following the offer of Void-Plus works. The initial results seem to indicate that Void-Plus works attract applicants in greater housing need (i.e. higher housing points) and minimise the impact of offers being refused with no refusals for properties in the scheme. and/or bids from applicants in limited housing need (i.e. with 0-40 housing points).

- 5.9 Members are reminded that due to area-specific low demand issues, a choice-based letting scheme currently applies in Caithness. In Caithness, housing applicants can register an interest (also known as a 'bid') in a property and will be considered for allocation to that property.

	Points of highest bidder before Void+	Points of highest bidder after Void+	Number of refusals
Property 1	0 points	92 points	0
Property 2	20 points	40 points	0
Property 3	20 points	70 points	0
Property 4	40 points	80 points	0
Property 5	Not applicable	Designated as temporary furnished accommodation	0
Property 6	Not applicable	90 points	0
Property 7	Not applicable	70 points	0
Property 8	Not applicable	80 points	0
Property 9	Not applicable	90 points	0
Property 10	Not applicable	60 points	Not yet signed
Property 11	Not applicable	120 points	Not yet signed
Property 12	Not applicable	90 points	Not yet signed
Property 13	Not applicable	Not allocated yet	Not yet signed
Property 14	Not applicable	90 points	Not yet signed
Property 15	Not applicable	60 points	Not yet signed
Property 16	40 points	Not allocated yet	Not yet signed
Property 17	Not applicable	Not allocated yet	Not yet signed
Property 18	Not applicable	80 points	Not yet signed

- 5.10 The local Housing team has spoken with 9 of the new tenants as part of the standard settling-in process. All 9 have advised that they are satisfied with the quality of their new homes.
- 5.11 **Appendix 1** provides photos of one of the above properties. Some of these properties have also benefited from capital works. Additional investment in the property photographed included a new kitchen and bathroom.
- 5.12 While the Void-Plus Policy is focused primarily on decorative works, it should be noted that 2 of the 18 properties have also benefited from the supply of white goods and carpeting. In order to increase levels of tenancy sustainment all new tenants are offered support to apply for new carpets and white goods, some tenants showed a preference to install their own carpets and white goods.
- 5.13 Measures of Success set up in PRMS are as follows but it is too early to strategically assess performance against the policy measures of success, namely increased levels of tenant satisfaction; increased levels of tenancy sustainment; and a reduction in refusal levels. To date, no Void-Plus property has been refused, and tenants are satisfied with the standard of their property. These measures will be fully assessed and reported on once the pilot period ends.

5.14 Financial Summary

There is no specific budget allocated to this project and there are no associated financial indicators in terms of savings, income generation or investment. Monitoring of the Caithness Area maintenance budget will continue on an ongoing basis to assess the costs incurred through delivery of the Void-Plus Policy. Early indications are that the policy will incur an additional cost of approximately £2,000 per property but it is anticipated that this may be reduced through sole reliance on in-house trades. As time progresses analysis will be undertaken to better understand the financial savings through reduced void rental loss.

5.15 Forward Plan

The Caithness Team intend to double the number of Void-Plus properties to a minimum of 4 per month following the recruitment of the additional painter resource. There is also a recruitment process underway to employ an apprentice painter by May 2025.

A review will be undertaken of the Void-Plus approach following the first year of operation to determine the success of the approach. This will assist in determining whether the Void-Plus Policy should be continued beyond the trial period. An update report on progress of the scheme will be submitted to this Committee in Autumn.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 2 April 2025

Author: Emma Taggart, Principal Housing Officer
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Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – before and after photos relating to a property which had the Void-Plus standard applied.

BEFORE



AFTER



BEFORE



AFTER

