

Report for: Housing, Planning and Development Scrutiny Panel

Title: Voids Performance and Information Report

Report

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Housing Services and Building Safety

Ward(s) affected: All

1. Describe the issue under consideration

The Housing Scrutiny Committee requested an update on key aspects of voids performance. This report sets this information out, provides context on the service's past and recent performance, and gives an update on the work in progress to improve voids performance under the Housing Improvement Plan.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Council's housing stock consists of approximately 15,000 tenanted properties, and the current number of voids is 345 (not ready for let) as at 30 September 2023. The backlog of voids increased significantly during Covid with the repairs service limited as to the range of work it could carry out in Council properties because of pandemic restrictions and associated difficulties including staff shielding and obtaining building supplies.

2.2 The number of current voids (excluding ready for lets) has seen a positive downward trend since the Housing Improvement Plan was agreed at Cabinet in April 23 (from 425 at the end of May 23 to 345 on 30th September 2023). This figure takes account of the influx of new void properties coming into the service (see **Appendix 2** for the current monthly voids graph).

2.3 Prior to 2021/22 the number of voids averaged around 150 per annum as at year end (see **Appendix 1** for the ten-year snapshot profile of voids at year end). Linked to this, between 2013/14 and 2017/18 void turnover ('churn') – the total number of voids as a percentage of the total stock - averaged 0.66% for general needs housing although it should be noted this is also a snapshot position as at the end of the financial year and does not represent all the void properties that occurred throughout the year. Churn in the housing stock is caused by a number of factors – tenants moving out of the sector into to home ownership or residential care for example; being rehoused by the Council; or by dying; and a certain level of churn is necessary to meet housing demand. However, too much churn has negative impacts for the Housing Revenue Account business plan in terms of lost rental income, thereby reducing the amount of money available to invest in council homes and services.

- 2.4 While we have seen encouraging signs of an improving trend in recent months, we acknowledge that we are still some way short of where we want to be. The measures set out in the Housing Services Improvement Plan agreed by Cabinet in April 2023, together with other actions set out in **Sections 3 and 4** of this report to improve voids performance, are expected to reduce void numbers back to pre-pandemic levels and to normal levels of void turnover.
- 2.5 The Housing Services Improvement Plan identified voids management transformation as a key area of focus. The plan states that *‘The Council should continue to review its end-to-end processes to ensure the length of time between a property being vacated and a new tenancy starting is minimised. Clearly the longer a property is void the less the income received by the Council and the more negative the impact on those in desperate housing need.’* This report provides an update on progress against the key actions in the Improvement Plan, together with associated actions to improve voids turnaround, reduce void rent loss, and speed up lettings to provide much needed homes for those in housing need as quickly as possible.
- 2.6 Our transformation of the voids service is part of our wider vision to be an excellent landlord, providing excellent services, ensuring our housing stock is fit for purpose and meeting housing needs.

3. Details

Current position

- 3.1 The Housing Improvement Plan was agreed by Cabinet on 18 April 2023. This identified voids transformation as a key area of focus for the improvement plan. A ‘root and branch’ review of the voids process has been undertaken and a summary of progress against the voids actions in the plan is included in **Section 4** of this report.
- 3.2 While overall relet times are still high due to the backlog of voids that arose as linked to the impacts of Covid and the increased supply of new build lettings in recent years, the number of current voids are on a downward trend. The number of lettings increasing should result in a continuing reduction in the backlog over coming months and an associated improvement in overall relet times.
- 3.3 The number of lets since April 23 dipped in May and June due to two members of the new tenant liaison team going on sickness leave but staff resources were reallocated, and additional training addressed this.

This helped improve performance and there were 28 lets in September taking the year to date (YTD) since the start of April to Sept 23 to 134.

- 3.4 The percentage of void rental loss also trended downwards in this period, from 3.23% in April 23 to 3.02% in September 23.
- 3.5 While significant further work needs to be carried out to clear the backlog, the statistics above indicate that the actions set out in the Housing Improvement Plan are having a positive impact on service performance.
- 3.6 This improvement comes despite the voids service having a number of significant issues and challenges to overcome. The original voids service has an ageing workforce with 70% of operatives being aged 50 and over, with work underway to develop succession planning around this, including increasing the level of apprentices in the workforce, and profiling trades where resources are particularly needed to improve voids performance. There are also some performance and cultural issues within the service and work is underway to address this by introducing better performance management through regular team meetings, 1-2-1s, and performance appraisals.

Systems issues

- 3.7 The systems the voids service uses have also required significant improvement. The service uses the Total Mobile (Service Connect) system to manage day-to-day voids repairs and reporting is managed through Crystal reporting and a new dashboard set up in Total Mobile (Connect) through the work set out in the Housing Improvement Plan. The 'housing' part of the voids process is within the Council's Northgate Housing Management Database / NEC and there is an interface between the two systems.
- 3.8 There is also work underway to use the reporting dashboards more effectively, with work planned to establish Power BI dashboard reporting and to develop the Total Mobile system by introducing an Insight module which would improve oversight of both individual voids operative and voids team productivity. A key issue for the service is poor data quality, and work is underway to cleanse the data, complete vacant fields, and introduce more accurate reporting.
- 3.9 The voids services' processes were last fully mapped in 2016. A summary of the voids process is included at **Appendix 3**. Work is underway to update the detailed process maps and linked to this, an updated version of the Lettable Standard has been produced. A shorter version of the lettable standard for residents is being produced and the service's operations manual also needs to be updated.

Increased voids resources

- 3.10 The voids team has been reconfigured to meet demands, provide an enhanced service, and to address the backlog. This includes the creation of a dedicated backlog team of 6 officers and a dedicated Team Leader with contractor support for specialist works.
- 3.11 Additionally, procurement of new dedicated voids contractors is underway to increase resources to process and turnaround voids more quickly. The procurement process started mid-June and the purpose is to provide back-up to support contractors for the DLO to tackle the voids backlog. The contracts will run for one year and will be divided into two geographical areas, East and West with designated postcodes based on property numbers.
- 3.11 The intention is for contractors to complete 10 voids per week and 16-20 in-house.

Strengthening voids management

- 3.12 A major data cleansing exercise has taken place to establish the current status of each void. Existing system dashboards are being utilised and updated to trigger required actions and next steps enabling better planning and forecasting. Void properties have been divided into backlog and new void patches with dedicated teams responsible for those and with a specific dashboard for each area. Weekly meetings with parties involved in the end-to-end process discuss any issues or quick wins. This is ongoing exercise and in conjunction with other relevant services including members of the Allocations service.
- 3.13 All team members have been trained on processes for different tenures and the importance of accurate record keeping ensuring data is being recorded and utilised from the same data sources. Process maps have updated and improvements incorporated. Regular training and 1-2-1s set out for teams are as detailed below. Roles and responsibilities for existing staff and new staff have been clearly defined, communicated and reinforced. Targets are set and results reviewed.

Current voids position

- 3.14 As at the end of September 2023, there were a total of 458 voids. Of these, 113 are Ready For Let (with the Lettings Team or Housing Management; not requiring any repairs works) meaning that only 345 are true current voids. However, the Scrutiny Panel also requested the following specific items

relating to voids performance and the current voids set, and this is included from 3.15 to 3.24 below.

3.15 Current Voids by bed size:

Bed size	Total
Bedsit/Studio	6
1 Bed	150
2 Beds	103
3 Beds	77
4 Beds	8
5 Beds	1
Total Voids	345

The above table excludes the 113 Ready For Let (RFL) voids, which are found in bullet point 3.16

3.16 Breakdown by ward:

Void by Ward	Total
Alexandra	1
Bounds Green	15
Bruce Grove	12
Crouch End	6
Fortis Green	16
Harringay	1
Highgate	6
Hornsey	16
Muswell Hill	4
Noel Park	40
Northumberland	59
Out of Borough	14
Seven Sisters	27
St. Ann's	14
Stroud Green	9
Tottenham Green	38
Tottenham Hale	23
West Green	15
White Hart Lane	17
Woodside	12
Total Voids	345

RFL by Ward	Total
Alexandra	1
Bounds Green	5
Bruce Grove	4
Crouch End	5
Fortis Green	5
Harringay	0
Highgate	6
Hornsey	14
Muswell Hill	2
Noel Park	3
Northumberland	22
Out of Borough	1
Seven Sisters	6
St. Ann's	1
Stroud Green	0
Tottenham Green	11
Tottenham Hale	5
West Green	3
White Hart Lane	9
Woodside	10
Total RFL	113

3.17 Status of current void properties (i.e., with the Lettings Team or requires significant repairs & maintenance work)

As per bullet point 3.16, there are 113 of voids ready to let and there are 345 voids that still require repairs and maintenance works to make them Ready For Let by bringing them up to the lettable standard.

3.18 Number of pre-voids (where we know a property is becoming vacant and we can plan works)

As at the end of September 2023 there were no known future voids (0 – Zero). This relates to properties where tenants provide their 4-week notice period to us confirming they are ending their tenancy.

3.19 Void Loss (income being lost due to delays in turning these around)

Below is a month-on-month illustration of the percentage of rent lost through General Needs & Sheltered Housing properties being void (empty):

Voids	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
% of rent loss from voids (General Need & Sheltered Housing only)	3.23%	3.33%	3.39%	3.41%	2.99%	3.02%

The September outturn of (3.02%) represents a void loss of £1,613,226 versus £53,506,561 of the rent roll due for the period. For 2023/24 there is a budgeted void loss adjustment figure of 2% or £1.86m. While it is likely that this figure will be exceeded for the current year, the measures set out in the Housing Improvement Plan are intended to reduce void levels back to the levels of voids experienced pre- pandemic. As previously indicated, prior to 2021/22 the graph at **Appendix 1** demonstrates that voids averaged around 150 per annum. It is anticipated that void levels will return to these levels by 2024/25 when the voids loss adjustment figure in the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy is 1%. It is anticipated that as a result of the delivery of the improvement measures set out in this report this figure will be achieved.

3.20 Void works completed each month (properties that have been handed from repairs to lettings)

Below is a breakdown of the voids that have been made Ready For Let by bed size:

Bed size	Total
Bed sit/Studio	1
1 Bed	73
2 Beds	24
3 Beds	11
4 Beds	4

Total Voids RFL	113
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3.21 Number of voids let each month.

Below is a month-on-month illustration of the total number of General Needs, Sheltered Housing, Hostels and Private Sector Leased properties that have been let year to date September 2023.

A total of 134 voids have been relet during the period:

Voids	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	YTD
Total Number of Lets (GN, SH, HOS & PSLs)	27	18	9	29	23	28	134

3.22 Breakdown of the nature of works required.

Breaking down the current works required for existing voids is a challenging task as new voids are coming in and voids are being made ready for let in a continuous cycle. A general breakdown of information is set out here.

Standard void works include lock change, clearance, inspections and surveying work required, front end compliance to include gas, electrical test, an asbestos survey and EPC at a later stage. Works are carried out to the lettable standard across multiple trade areas to include but not limited to carpentry, plumbing, plastering, tiling, decorating and electrical works to ensure compliance with necessary documentation to handover to sign up team.

External contractors are currently used for: asbestos surveys and removals; heating works; large clearances, pest control and guano treatments, large garden cutbacks, environmental cleans, final cleans and EPC surveys. Properties are referred back to tenancy services if unauthorised occupants are present.

Properties are classified as minor void works (financial judgement under £10k), or major void works (currently financial judgement over £10,000). Properties are passed to other teams where required - structures, asset management, major works teams or contractors for specialist works.

3.23 Breakdown of the length of time voids left unoccupied.

As at end of August 2023 the position was:

- 107.5 days YTD on voids after 1st April.

3.24 An assessment of the reasons behind why there might be delays in turning void properties around and what measures have been taken to resolve them.

A variety of factors have caused delays to turnaround times. This has included: the size of the backlog that built up during the pandemic and the number of new voids coming in; the accuracy of voids data recorded in the database; the need for having clear accessible void processes in place and adequately trained staff; lack of resources to carry out the works; staff absences and/ or changes of roles; delays in supplies and materials; and lack of utilities required for works.

Some of the measures that have been and are being put in by the Voids Service include the following:

- Process mapping sessions for 'as is' and 'to be' processes.
- Training sessions for staff on existing systems.
- Recording notes and relevant data accurately to improve accessibility and communication and provide an audit trail.
- Renewed team structure (see Appendix 5 - new voids service structure)
- 'How To' manuals and knowledge sharing to avoid delays when staff are absent.
- Contractor support for backlog and specialist works.
- Dedicated backlog team in place.
- Recruitment as detailed below.
- Service Level Agreements (SLAs) being reviewed together with process to ensure delays or quality issues are flagged.
- Forecasting to ensure planning and resources are put into place for increase workloads.

The table at **Item 4** below provides specific progress updates against the actions set out in the Housing Improvement Plan.

Reporting suspected abandoned / void properties

3.25 Residents and Members can report suspected abandoned / void properties to their housing officer or via the customer contact centre.

Contribution to the Corporate Delivery Plan 2022-2024

3.26 The Corporate Delivery Plan 2022-2024 sets out the high-level outcome of '*an improvement in the quality of housing and resident services in the social rented sector*'. An intermediate outcome supporting this is '*Our council homes will be of a higher quality*' and one of the metrics / measurables linked

to this is '*voids performance*'. The voids performance as at September 2023 is included in **Appendix 2** to this report.

4.0 Voids updates from the Housing Improvement Plan:

Key Actions	Target date	October 2023 progress comments on delivery of action	RAG Status against original target date
Recruit a team of four additional voids staff as a task and finish group to deal with historic voids	Apr-23	A backlog team is in place as of 03.08.23 to deal with pre 01.04.23 voids. Staff and operatives have been allocated to this team with contractor support post Sept 2023.	Completed
Develop a void performance dashboard which has better reporting and analysis on key arrears of delays in the voids process and by department and trade. e.g., void start date to supervisor receiving keys, lock change to clearance, first trade allocation to trade, works completed to sign up, post inspection, ready for advertisement to first shortlist to undertake targeted performance management in these areas.	Sep-23	Training from Total Mobile was delivered on 13/09. The dashboards are in place and being used. A meeting to discuss next steps took place on 12/10.	Dashboard established and further work in progress to develop it.
Procure additional supply-chain to compliment internal resources to clear the backlog and enable peaks in demand to be smoothed.	May-23	Contractor x 2 East & West tender evaluation complete. Void property list for handover to contactors being prepared in readiness for contractor start date.	
Introduce satisfaction surveys measuring overall satisfaction of the property.	Aug-23	'To be' sign up process mapped and sent out for comments on 06/10. Satisfaction Surveys included in process.	
The recommendation is for two additional teams (10 operatives) for a 6- month basis to clear the backlog and prepare for peaks in demand.	Jun-23	7 operative posts filled. 3 remaining posts being recruited to for end October 2023 start. Additional recruitment has already resulted in the number of backlog voids completed increasing.	
Review lettable standard and introduce an optional Decoration Package	Jun-23	Lettable standard updated so original action completed. Initial draft of tenants' version completed. Further amendments underway and to be sent to lead in October	Original action completed

Key Actions	Target date	October 2023 progress comments on delivery of action	RAG Status against original target date
Review lettings and tenancy sign up process	Nov-23	'To be' sign up process mapped and sent out for comments on 06/10.	
In house DLO operative productivity and performance to be managed and monitored more effectively.	Dec-23	Management training sessions and 1-2-1 sessions planned for Autumn 2023. Support provided by HR consultants.	
Contractor penalties to be introduced for late return of void against target (equivalent to rental loss) to incentivise good performance and quick turnaround times.	Mar-24	New Commercial Manager started on 11/09. He will be managing the commercial team and supporting HRS with procurement, to help drive up productivity, efficiency and achievement of a culture of excellence within operations across HRS.	
Joint post inspections arranged as soon as the works are completed, or nearing completion, to allow snagging to happen while operative is still on site	Jun-23	Team Leaders and additional resource attending inspections and void properties.	
Look at utilising Total Mobile to track and monitor voids to completion. Create reports that provide data on the efficiency of operatives involved in individual voids to assess productivity and identify areas for improvement or training.	Oct-23	Training with Total Mobile took place on 13/09. A meeting to discuss next steps took place on 12/10.	

5. Carbon and Climate Change

In connection with efficient billing of utilities work being undertaken to minimise costs to both residents and the Housing Service, the Tenant Saves Money voids energy service is in place as our agent. In the process of a new utility supplier taking over energy supply in void properties, smart meters are being added and helping to ensure energy will be used more efficiently as properties are re-let.

6. Statutory Officers comments

Finance.

This report is for information purposes only.

Procurement

This report is for information purposes only.

Legal

This report is for information purposes only.

Equality

The Council has a Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act (2010) to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share those protected characteristics and people who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share those characteristics and people who do not.

The three parts of the duty apply to the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy/maternity, race, religion/faith, sex and sexual orientation. Marriage and civil partnership status applies to the first part of the duty.

Although it is not enforced in legislation as a protected characteristic, Haringey Council treats socioeconomic status as a local protected characteristic.

The speedy reletting of council properties will benefit Haringey residents in housing need by making much needed affordable homes available as quickly as possible, and minimising time spent in temporary accommodation by homeless households. This will also benefit those with protected characteristics such as people with disabilities; those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds; and others in socio-economically disadvantaged groups

such as single parent households who are more likely to be disadvantaged in the housing market.


7. Use of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Voids numbers over the last 10 years (snapshot figure as at year end).

Appendix 2 – Current voids graph.

Appendix 3 - Summary of voids process.

Appendix 1 – Voids numbers over the last 10 years (snapshot figure as at Year End)



Voids numbers over the last 10 Years (2013-2023)
Excludes RTB, Disposals and TA Acquisitions

TENURE TYPE	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Hostel	22	16	7	8	1	7	8	46	67	57
General Needs	104	74	79	70	85	82	62	80	235	272
PSL	57	28	28	46	32	27	18	29	55	39
Sheltered Housing	5	8	18	17	13	25	14	28	49	74
Community Benefits Society	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	74	73
Travellers Site	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
ALL VOIDS	188	126	132	141	131	141	102	183	481	515

Note: Snapshot figures as at Year End 31st March.

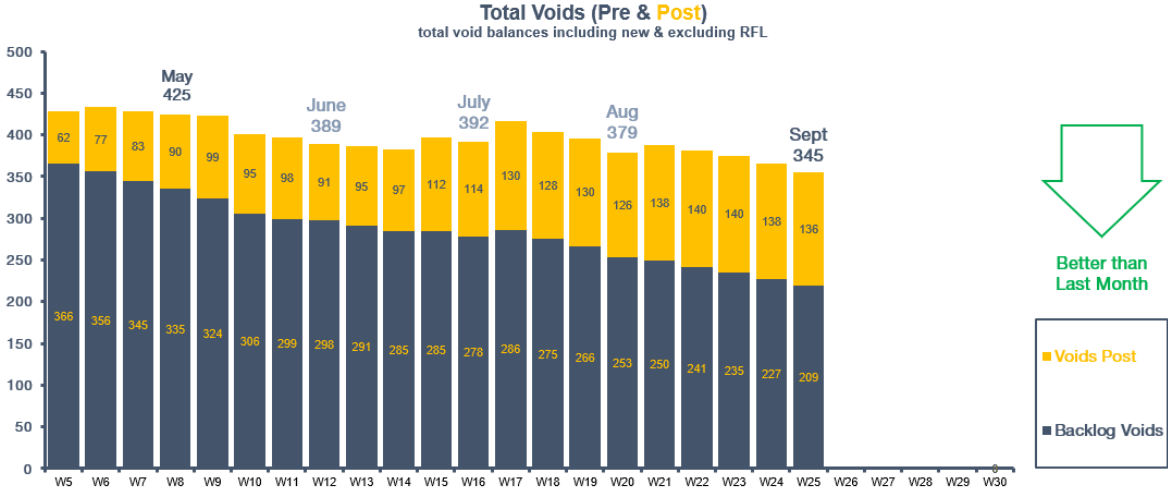
Appendix 2 – Current voids graph – (345 at end of September 2023).



Transformation & Improvement Team
Culture, Strategy and Engagement

Current Voids

Lower is Better Performance



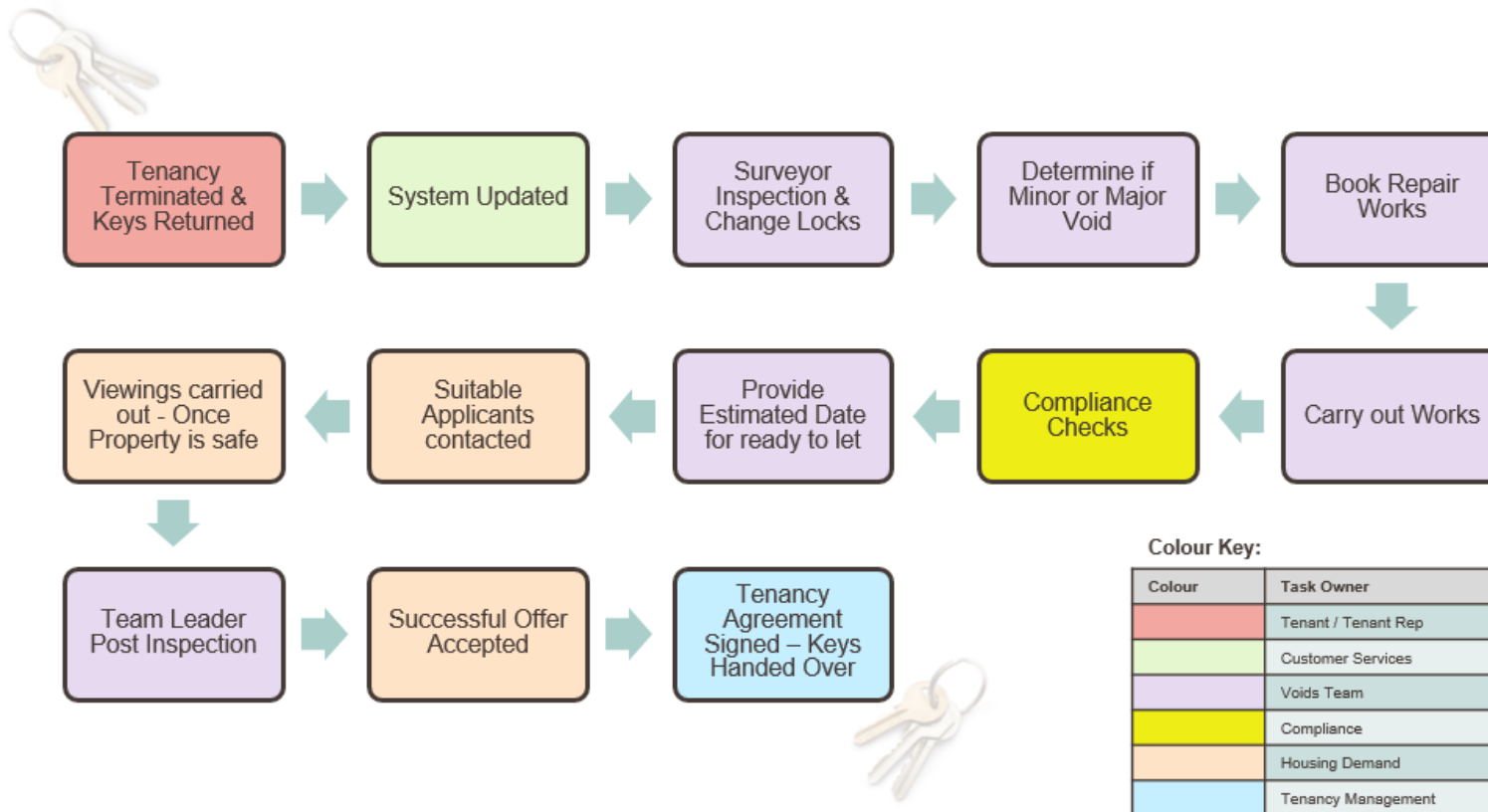
Better than Last Month

■ Voids Post
■ Backlog Voids

Target	Sept	YTD	2022/23
No Target	345	345	NEW

Monthly Metrics:	
Total No. Voids:	345

Appendix 3: The Voids Process



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