

## Void Management Guide

### Guidance Statement

The purpose of this guide is to set out the way in which Stevenage Borough Council's Housing Services will control and manage empty (void) properties within its stock.

As the Housing Services Revenue Account's (HRA's) primary source of income is derived from rents, the Void Management Guide must ensure that procedures are in place that reduce the length of time that a property is empty, therefore minimising the amount of rental income lost.

This guide will ensure a forward looking and strategic approach to void management that will: -

- Minimise rent loss through reducing the length of the void period and void repair costs;
- Set out Stevenage Borough Council's Void and Lettable Standard ensuring that all staff, contractors and tenants are aware of exactly what condition the council expects of its empty properties;
- Set in place systems for monitoring the standards of void properties and customer satisfaction with their new home.

The guide, together with Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Management and Repair policies will guide staff in ensuring that tenants maintain the property to the required standard, are aware of their repair responsibilities and end of tenancy obligations.

It should be used in conjunction with the SBC's allocations policy to ensure that the stock is well used in a way that meets local demand in a fair and equitable way.

It should also be used in conjunction with the most recent process work flows and service standards (see appendix 4)

Stevenage Borough Council will review this guide regularly to ensure that its contents reflect current legislation and the latest examples of best practice in the field.

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## 1 Ending tenancies – the start of the void process

Full details of the termination of a tenancy process can be found in Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Management Policies and Procedures.

All tenants are required to give written notice that they intend to terminate their tenancy. The **standard notice period is four full weeks (28 days)** commencing from the Monday after the termination notice is received. The last day of the tenancy will always be a Sunday. Keys must be returned to Stevenage Borough Council by 10.00 am on the Monday after the tenancy end date.

Failure to do so will incur a charge of one full week's rent. Where the keys are not returned, the cost of changing locks will be recharged to the outgoing tenant.

In the case of an internal transfer, the notice period will be agreed with the tenant.

Void and Letting property procedures will be implemented immediately on receipt of the keys to enable the property to be re-let as soon as possible.

In exceptional circumstances, Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Services may accept a shorter notice period. In such cases the notice period will be agreed with the Empty Homes Manager. This will be considered on a case by case basis.

Stevenage Borough Council tenants are obligated to leave the property, garage and garden areas in a clean and tidy condition as laid out in the tenancy agreement. When a valid notice is received, all outgoing tenants will be reminded of their rights and responsibilities in relation to ending the tenancy. Stevenage Borough Council's will then arrange an inspection of the property by a Project Officer before the tenant moves out: [Link to template appointment letters](#) . This will enable the Empty Homes Team to:-

- agree any improvements which are eligible for compensation;
- identify any rechargeable repairs;
- identify and notify the Building and Maintenance Operation (BMO) and any maintenance contractors of expected volumes of work to assist with forecasting and capacity planning;
- Order works so that component improvements (re-wiring, kitchen etc.) can commence on the void date
- Where intrusive works are expected or where no valid asbestos report is available, book an asbestos survey before the tenant moves out so that any asbestos removal works can commence on the void date
- Undertake an electrical inspection
- Identify any factors which will be considered as part of offering the property for re-let, such as special adaptations.

The outgoing tenant will be responsible for the full costs for clearing out the Property in line with the tenancy agreements terms and conditions and any other rechargeable repairs as laid out in the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

Any rechargeable repairs will be identified by the Project Officer during the pre-void inspection and the tenant made aware of their responsibilities regarding these. The outgoing tenant will be asked to sign the list of rechargeable (pre-void inspection sheet) repairs and this will be used as a checklist to ensure that their responsibilities have been met. [Pre-void inspection form](#)

The tenant will also be informed by their Income Advisor about the status of their rent account and any sundry accounts and encouraged to make payments to clear any outstanding debt before the end of the tenancy. If the tenant is in arrears but is unable to clear them in full before the end of the tenancy, they will be asked to make an affordable payment agreement with Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Services to clear the debt over a period of time. Failure to do so will mean that the tenant will be pursued for any monies owing as laid out in Stevenage Borough Council's Housing Income and Former Tenant Debt arrears procedure.

The Tenancy Advisor will make attempts to obtain a forwarding address from the outgoing tenant.

Where Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Services suspects a property to be abandoned the statutory procedures will be followed as detailed in the tenancy management procedures.

During the void period, the property will be offered to a potential new tenant with minimal delay in accordance with Stevenage Borough Council Allocations policy. The Lettings team will be notified as soon as it is safe to conduct a viewing, so that a sign-up can take place immediately after the property is available for letting.

Stevenage Borough Council's Tenancy Services policies relating to the ending of a tenancy due to abandonment, squatters or death and those relating to storage of personal property are contained on the P/drive under Stevenage Homes 'Tenancy Management'. [Link to SBC's Tenancy Services Policies](#)

## **2 Right to Improve**

Secure Tenants have the right to improve their home and to claim compensation from the council for the cost of the improvement when they leave their home. The Compensation Policy covers this matter in detail and a summary are provided here:-

- only some improvements qualify for compensation and they must have been completed after 1st April 1994;
- the tenant must claim the compensation within 14 days of giving up their tenancy;
- the council taking into account the cost of the improvements works out the amount of compensation due based on the value it has added to the property and the remaining life of the improvement.

Providing that any improvements found in void properties were properly inspected and approved at the time of their installation, or in retrospect and

they pass any current health and safety inspections required, they can remain in the property.

### **3 Repairs to Void Properties**

Stevenage Borough Council aims to identify and complete all necessary repairs to enable a property to be re-let as soon as possible. All repairs will be completed to the Stevenage Borough void standard (appendix 2), whilst ensuring void costs are kept to a minimum. All properties will be issued with electrical and gas safety certificates in compliance with legal requirements.

### **4 Inspection of the property**

The Project Officer will attempt to identify as many repairs as possible during the pre-void inspection. Where there are severe concerns over repairs the Project Officer will request an inspection by the relevant officer from the BMO repairs team. Any repairs identified will be marked on the void inspection sheet (Appendix 3), one copy of which will be passed to the Empty Homes Co-ordinator for the necessary vacant property repairs order to be raised. The tenant will be asked to sign a list of rechargeable repairs they are responsible for so that they are aware of any repairs that are their responsibility. A further inspection will take place by the Project Officer once the tenant has vacated the property. If the outgoing tenant disputes the rechargeable repairs that have been applied to the property then this should be put in writing to the Service Manager for Tenancy Services explaining why the recharge should not apply. The Project Officer will prepare a detailed breakdown of the charges together with photographic evidence. The Tenancy Manager will make a decision on whether the charges should apply. The decision will be communicated in writing where practical to do so.

This will enable the Tenancy Advisor to check whether the former tenant has:-

- complied with their end of tenancy obligations;

It will also enable the Project Officer to:-

- Identify any repairs that may have been missed or hidden by furniture etc. during the pre-void inspection;
- Left the property in a clean and tidy state;
- Check that all keys are present and that the property can be made secure. If any keys are missing the Tenancy Advisor will immediately order replacements, including security door fobs in the case of flatted properties;
- Note and order all repairs necessary to bring the property up to Stevenage Borough Council's Void Standard;
- Ensure that final meter readings are taken;
- Note any adaptations to the property, such as a flush-floor shower, wheelchair height kitchen cupboards and handrails etc. This information will be made available to the Lettings team, so that they are able to offer the property to a prospective tenant that may

require such adaptations.

Timelines and duties are outline in the following documents:

[Link to work flows](#) See Voids & Allocations and Lettings workflows

[Link to process timelines](#) See timelines and functions for type of void notification

## 5 Repairs Ordering

To speed re-let times, repairs will be classified into two categories:-

- Essential repairs that must be completed while the property is empty (including safety checks); and/or
- Non-essential or minor repairs that could be completed once the new tenant has moved into the property or prior to the outgoing tenant moving out. Any further damage to the property would be recharged back to the outgoing tenant.

The Project Officer will agree the priority of the works identified with the voids Charge-hand.

If a void property falls into an area where Decent Homes or planned works is being undertaken, such as boiler or window replacements, the void property will be moved to the top of the list for these works to be completed.

Major and Health and Safety works that would cause a high level of disruption to tenants or put their safety at risk, such as removal of asbestos, damp and rot treatments will be completed prior to the start of the new tenancy. Every attempt will be made to complete all repairs prior to the new tenant taking up their tenancy, however in some circumstances minor, non-essential repairs will be undertaken once the tenancy has commenced. These repairs and the timescales for their completion will be agreed with the new tenant and detailed in the tenant's sign-off sheet. [Tenant sign-off form](#)

Works will be charged to either the voids budget, decent homes budget or the recharge budget.

All works undertaken in the property will be completed to the Stevenage Borough Void Standard (Appendix 2) and to the Decent Homes Standard as laid out by the Government.

## 6 Works to void properties

Works raised on void properties will be carried out in accordance with the Stevenage Borough void standard. Costs for each job raised will comply with the schedule of rates (cost per job). [Link to Schedule of Rates](#)

The Project Officer will ensure that void properties are checked against the planned works programme to make the most cost effective use of resources. Void properties in an area undergoing a planned works programme will be given priority.

The voids Charge-hand will need to complete all works specified on the void sheet before the property will be accepted as ready to let and signed off. There may be occasions when not all works will be completed prior to the new tenant taking up residency of the property. In these cases a timescale for the works to be completed and the tenant notified.

All void properties must have had a gas and electrical check and have the necessary certificates in place before they can be deemed as ready to let. Copies of these are given to the new tenant as part of the sign up process.

## **7 Additional works to hard to let properties**

An individual property will be defined as hard to let when it has been offered and refused 2 times or when it has been advertised 2 times and no expressions of interest have been made.

Analysis will be undertaken in cases where a property meets this definition to identify the contributory factors and to assess reasons for refusal by applicants. A series of measures will be agreed and implemented for individual properties in this category which may include:-

- additional internal works above and beyond the minimum Lettable Standard to enhance the property;
- internal decoration as opposed to vouchers being offered;
- improved security;
- fencing and landscape improvement;
- incentives to incoming tenants such as assistance with removal costs, white goods and/or carpets
- more extensive marketing.

## **8 Lettable (Void) Standard**

Tenancy Services aims to create high quality, sustainable tenancies and achieve a high level of customer satisfaction. All properties let will consistently meet the Governments' Decent Homes standard and our own minimum Lettable Standard. The Lettable Void Standards are contained in Appendix 2 to this document.

The council's minimum Lettable Standard is developed in consultation with customers and is communicated to prospective tenants at viewing. [Link to Lettable Standard](#) A copy is available prior to viewing if requested. Tenants are requested to sign off the property as per the advertised standard at sign-up. [Link to Tenant Sign-off Sheet](#)

Where the decorative condition is poor, Stevenage Borough Council's Empty Homes Team will consider the provision of decoration vouchers to the new tenant. The value of the voucher offered will reflect the extent of the decoration required to bring the property to a decent standard throughout up to a maximum limit.

Stevenage Borough Council's Empty Homes Team may also undertake internal decoration in sheltered Tenancy blocks. We may also undertake decoration where an incoming tenant is vulnerable or elderly and the current standard is poor.

## **9 Creating New Tenancies**

All prospective tenants are provided with information about the property attributes, and local neighbourhood facilities prior to viewing, as part of the Choice Based Lettings system.

When a prospective tenant has indicated their acceptance of a vacant property, the tenancy will commence as soon as possible after all essential repairs are completed. All tenancies start on a Monday. Any tenancy signed up on a Tuesday or later will commence from the following Monday immediately after the sign up date unless there are extenuating circumstances. These are to be agreed with the Empty Homes Manager

All new tenants are given opportunity to feed back their satisfaction with the void management process and standard of the property when let. New tenants will be visited within the first 4 weeks of their tenancy commencing.

In summary the purpose of this visit will be:-

- to welcome the tenant and give an opportunity for them to ask any questions, raise any concerns, follow up on any outstanding issues etc;
- to establish if they need any extra help setting up their home and Identify any support needs the tenant may have;
- to offer any advice about benefit that the tenant may be entitled to;
- to discuss rent payment options or delays with outstanding HB or supporting people grant claims;
- to reinforce the terms of the tenancy agreement and the tenants' rights and responsibilities.
- Report any non-void work repairs to the Repairs Team

The sign up process and settling in visit has a significant impact on the sustainability of tenancies. Tenancy Advisors will ensure a range of supportive procedures and services are in place to ensure effective delivery.

A further visit 8 months into the tenancy will be carried out by the Tenancy Officer to check on the condition of the property and to carryout ID checks.

## **10 Equality and Diversity**

Tenancy Services is committed to providing a fair and equitable service to its

tenants and leaseholders. Through the management of our empty properties the council aims to treat all customers fairly, and with respect and professionalism regardless of their gender, race, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation and marital status.

To help demonstrate our approach to managing empty properties is fully in keeping with the council's equality and diversity aims and objectives, the council collects equalities information on satisfaction with the void management process, the re-let standard, and the quality of advice provided to prospective and existing tenants, to feed into monitoring and review processes. The council will carry out disability and racial equality impact assessments on all new and reviewed policies.

## **Monitoring and Customer Involvement**

Satisfaction with the services provided will be monitored through settling in Visits, surveys and repairs satisfaction cards. Feedback received from these will be used to inform amendments to the policy and thus improve the services provided.

We will monitor this policy by:-

- void turnaround time against the annual performance target;
- the number of new tenants visited within 4 weeks of moving in;
- the value of decorating vouchers issued;
- no of refusals and reasons for refusal;
- no of properties let to homeless households;
- void rent loss;
- number of properties vacant as a percentage of the stock;
- percentage of voids let to internal transfers;
- percentage of voids let to under occupation scheme transfers.

This list is not exhaustive and will be amended in line with changing business needs.

## **Appendix 1**

### **PRE-TENANCY TERMINATION/ TRANSFER APPLICATION VISIT**

The aims of the visit are to:

1. Advise on the obligation to pay rent until the tenancy ends, to highlight any arrears/credit on the rent account/sub accounts and take appropriate action.
2. Ensure that the outgoing tenant is aware of the repairing obligations of the Tenancy Agreement.
3. Carry out an internal and external property inspection, identify and agree remedial work by the tenant before the tenancy ends to prevent a recharge at the void stage.
4. Identify and agree any rechargeable repairs and explain the procedure for invoicing and payment.
5. Identify whether the tenant has made any improvements that would qualify under the tenants' right to compensation.
6. Remind the tenant of the action required on vacating a property, including rubbish clearance and clearance of the loft, all of which is rechargeable, return of keys (including window and shed keys), notifying statutory authorities (e.g. Tenancy Benefit, DHSS) fuel suppliers, doctors, and redirection on post etc., taking meter readings.
7. Agreeing any items to be left in situ – e.g. clean good quality carpets.
8. Identify and record any special features of the property, which may affect allocation – e.g. disabled adaptations, access to property and pass any information to Lettings Team team.
9. If the tenant needs to carry out work prior to the end of the tenancy in order to Transfer and agree a completion date
10. Advise the tenant that it is their responsibility to contact the Empty Homes Co-ordinator when the obligations have been fulfilled in order to arrange a follow-up visit.

The Letting Advisors should be advised to place any transfer application on hold. Once the required works have been completed and signed off by the Project Officer, the Lettings Advisors are to be advised in order to reactivate the transfer application.

Repairs to look for – missing or damaged internal doors, holes in walls, non-standard light fittings, electrical fittings, poor decoration etc.

## **Appendix 2**

[Link to Void Standard](#)

## **Appendix 3**

[Link to Void Inspection Form](#)

Appendix 4

[Link to work flows](#)

[Link to process timelines](#)

[Link to all Empty Homes Documents](#)