
VOID POLICY FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' agreement to adopt a Void Policy for Social Housing.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In order to make the best use of Social Housing, it is imperative that a strong, formal policy and procedure for dealing with void properties exists. The aim of the policy is to reduce both the time that a property is empty and monitor the expenditure.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 Good practice from the Chartered Institute of Housing recommends that housing sections have a policy for monitoring the void process, including a local Best Value Performance Indicator target.
- 3.2 A Service Level Agreement is in place between the Property Maintenance & Highways Manager and Head of Revenue & Housing Management, in order to meet the local Best Value Performance Indicator target and the draft policy on void management.
- 3.3 Attached is a draft Void Policy in Social Housing. The procedure notes for staff are included for Members information.
- 3.4 Following the adoption the policy will be publicised through the tenants newsletter, 'Your Home'.

4 RISK MANAGEMENT

4.1 Operational Risk

The Void Policy for Social Housing will ensure that all Housing team members act to a consistent, well understood procedure.

4.2 Regulatory Risk

As the BV Performance Indicator is now only a local indicator, the performance of void management is only used for internal monitoring procedures and for reporting to Members on a quarterly basis. However, this remains a good management tool and an indication of the proper use of Council assets.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 No additional resources will be required to implement this policy. Additional forms, amendments to letters and staff training will be carried out in-house.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

To adopt the Void Policy for Social Housing.

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue & Housing Management

Background Papers:

Chartered Institute of Housing Best Practice Procedure Manual

For further information please contact Tricia Colwell on:-

Tel:- 01702 318030

E-Mail:- tricia.colwell@rochford.gov.uk



**Rochford District
Council**

VOID POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

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VOID POLICY AND GUIDELINES

1. Policy Statement

The Council recognises that an efficient and effective void policy is essential both in terms of maximising the potential rent income and in making the best use of its limited resources. It aims for efficient and customer orientated procedures and seeks to continually improve the service consistent with the Council's first Corporate Objective:

“To provide quality cost effective services”.

Aims and Objectives

1. To maximise the use of the Councils' housing stock by minimising
 - the number of empty properties
 - the number of refusals
 - the time that properties stand empty
 - the rent loss
 - repair expenditure
2. To continually improve upon key Performance Indicators and aim to be in the top quartile of Local authorities.
3. To ensure that all empty properties are offered for letting at an appropriate high standard in line with the Re-let Standards Policy.
4. To comply with all statutory legislation regarding the termination of tenancies.
5. To comply with the contractual agreement between the Council and its tenants in the tenancy agreement, that sets out the Council and tenant's rights and responsibilities.

Service Improvement and Development Objectives

- Reduce average void turnaround to less than 25 days 2003/4, 23 days for 2004/5 and 21 days for 2005/6.
- Reduce average void expenditure to less than £2000 per property.
- Ensure that the percentage of rent lost through voids is not more than 1.5%.
- Ensure the effective pre-allocation of voids
- Ensure that contractors meet the deadlines for the completion of works.
- Ensure that abandoned and squatted properties are identified and dealt with promptly.

PROCEDURE

2. SETTING THE VOID DATE

The void date takes effect from the nearest Monday following the termination of the tenancy and the receipt of the keys. Keys must be handed in to the office before 12.00 noon on a Monday or the void date will be delayed until the following Monday.

If no notice has been received but the keys are just returned, the void date takes effect from the next Monday, but a calculation will be made to include the four weeks notice period and the rent due will be charged to the former tenant. Void dates should not be backdated.

When no notice has been received, keys are not returned and rent is no longer being paid, the property should be treated as abandoned. The void date is then fixed by when the Council has recovered legal possession.

Administration

Once a property has been voided all office records should be amended i.e. Include on Variation sheet

To make property void on computer:

- Go into 'Rent Accounting'
- Go into 'Void and Tenancy Details'
- Go into 'Make Property Void'
- Enter void address and complete page with details

Enter property on blackboard with '(m)' - with maintenance.

Key Chasing/Lock Changes

Where notice has been given but keys are not returned by Wednesday of the expected void week, the Housing Officer should visit the property to ascertain whether it is empty or not. If tenants have vacated, then an immediate rechargeable lock change should be carried out and an additional weeks rent charged for the property.

Arrears on the Account

The Housing Management Officer is responsible for the recovery of Former Tenant Arrears. The policy and procedures for dealing with Former Tenants are specified in the Rent Management Policy and Procedure guidelines.

3. Dealing with Termination Notices

Notification of a prospective void may come from a variety of sources:

- Telephone call
- Letter
- Advice from another agency e.g. Social Services
- Next of kin
- Keys returned to office

Whenever possible notice of termination should be in writing. Receipts of notice (however obtained) should be acknowledged using the Termination of Tenancy letter. In the case of the death of a tenant, a separate letter should be sent to the next of kin, giving advice on the ending of a tenancy and rent account position.

The tenancy agreement requires that 4 weeks notice is to be given, in practice however a shorter period can be accepted if one of the following circumstances apply:

- Transfer to a Housing Association (if arranged by the Council)
- Death – allow a reasonable time to clear the property (NB Housing Benefit is only paid for the week in which the death occurs, if additional time is needed to clear property then Mesne Profits is chargeable, equivalent to the full gross weekly rent.)
- Cash Incentive Moves
- DIYSO
- Internal Transfers

If there are any doubts as to what notice period to accept, refer to the Assistant Housing Manager for advice.

Dear

I understand that you will be shortly giving up the tenancy of your present home. Could you please complete the form below with the information requested and return this form in the envelope provided. Thank you.

TERMINATION OF TENANCY FORM

Date you intend to leave the property.....

Date when your tenancy is to be terminated (this will be the following Monday after you leave your home)
.....

Reason for Leaving.....

Forwarding
address.....
.....

Please give details of any outstanding repairs you are aware of
.....

To allow us to re-let the property as soon as possible it would be helpful if you would allow prospective new tenants to view your home before you leave.

If we need to make such arrangements would you be agreeable to allowing this to happen? YES / NO (Please circle)

Your property will require an inspection prior to your termination, please provide a day time contact number in order that we can make a mutually agreeable appointment.

Day Contact number.....

Signed..... WHERE A JOINT TENANCY IS HELD

..... BOTH TENANTS NEED TO SIGN

Date.....

4. Monitoring Voids and Key Security

To ensure efficient management of voids the progress of each stage needs to be tracked. Any delays occurring can then be identified and appropriate action taken. A complete record of all voids together with details of their current status should be maintained.

Any prospective void should be recorded and monitored to ensure that the keys are returned by the due date. Any changes to the expected return date must be noted.

Key Security

The correct handling of keys should ensure that they do not become lost and their location can always be identified.

- All keys should have a receipt issued for them
- All keys to be clearly labelled
- Garage keys to be given to Housing Management Officer
- Details of all keys to be written in key book
- All keys to be stored in secure cabinet
- Any subsequent issue of keys to Housing Officer, Maintenance etc to be signed for
- Keys for viewing – if keys are not returned to the office by 4pm then ring to chase. If no response order a rechargeable lock change.

Monitoring Progress of repair work

The status and expected date for return of keys should be monitored by at least a weekly discussion with Maintenance to track its progress and minimise turn around times. Maintenance is responsible for raising orders for any works required. Each stage of the process should be monitored on a void control sheet.

VOID CONTROL SHEET

Property Address.....	
Name of Former Tenant.....	
Forwarding Address.....	
Void Date..... Week Number.....	
Keys Returned Date	Void Category: Immediate relet Standard works Major works
Number and type	Target return date
Lock change ordered YES/NO	Gas/Electric safety check ordered?
Termination sheet issued Date	Clearance ordered Date
Pre-Inspection Date	All works complete/ keys returned by contractor Date
Post inspection Date	Re-call of contractor YES/NO New Target Date for completion Date
Property Ready to Let Date	Property Let to New Tenancy Date

5. INSPECTIONS

Standards to be achieved

All properties must reach the following minimum standard:

- Cleared of furniture, carpets and rubbish (including gardens & sheds)
- Cleaned and swept throughout, including sanitary fittings
- Electric and gas checks completed
- Floor finishes to be free from trip hazards
- All heating provisions to be in working order
- Urgent repairs, that may be dangerous if left, are to be carried out (minor and non-urgent work to be done after tenant moves in and full list of proposed works to be provided to incoming tenant).

Maintenance Procedure

Surveyor to carry out inspection of property within 24 hours of receiving keys. Where sufficient notice given pre-inspect property while tenant still in occupation. Advise Lettings within 24 hours of inspection whether:

- (a) Property is ready for immediate re-let and any repairs can be carried out after tenant moves in
- (b) Property needs repairs which cannot be carried out with a tenant in situ and estimated completion date of works
- (c) Property needs major repairs, will be long term void and estimated completion date.

If property requires extensive works and will be long term void or insurance work prepare specification to enable estimates.

- List re-chargeable items
- Note any aids and adaptations and advise the Allocations Officer
- Arrange clearance and cleaning of property.
- Raise works orders to contractor. Advise contractor to collect keys and set target return completion dates.
- Notify lettings of target return date immediately following inspection
- Monitor progress to completion
- Notify lettings weekly of progress of all voids and amendments to expected completion date.

(a) Transfer Inspections

Upon receipt of a request from lettings, the Housing Management Officer to arrange an inspection with the tenant to take place within 5 working days. It must be stressed to the tenant that this is merely a routine inspection and an offer of alternative accommodation is not imminent. If required an annual inspection of transfer applicants will be carried out.

A transfer will only be approved on the understanding that no expense falls on the Council, from such costs as redecoration, repairs or the

removal of rubbish. The offer of accommodation before all the tenancy obligations have been met, will be at the discretion of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management. The property must be left clean and decorated to an acceptable standard. Gardens must be left tidy and without rubbish. Following the transfer empty properties are inspected and outgoing tenants will be required to pay for any repairs, cleaning or removal of effects.

(b) Mutual exchange inspections

Prior to approval being given for a mutual exchange an inspection of both properties must be carried out (If both Rochford's properties). Housing Officer to arrange appointment to carry out inspection within 10 working days of application for Mutual Exchange. A fee of £135 is payable to cover the cost of the gas and electricity checks which must be paid before an exchange can be agreed.

Maintenance to carry out gas and electric checks and advise when completed. NB Non-standard items can be left in the property provided that the in-coming tenant agrees to accept them and signs a disclaimer to that effect.

(c) Cash Incentive Schemes Inspections

The condition of the property being vacated should be such that it can be re-let immediately. Prior to approval being given for the application an inspection of the property must be carried out.

- Within 24 hrs of notification from the Housing Client and Strategy Officer of a cash incentive scheme application, the Letting Officer to arrange a pre-inspection from a Maintenance surveyor
- Notify tenant of date/time
- Inspection to be carried out as per standard void
- Surveyor to record any works to be carried out by the tenant before completion can proceed. Copy to Housing Client and Strategy Officer.
- Housing Client and Strategy Officer to advise tenant of next stage within 10 working days, namely
 - a) application proceeding with no works or retention required or
 - b) unable to proceed until works are completed by tenant or
 - c) If tenant asks for cost of works to be deducted from cash incentive scheme, Maintenance surveyor to price/ get quotes and tenant to be advised of retention by Housing Client and Strategy Officer.
- Housing Client and Strategy Officer to advise Lettings when / if re-inspection required. Allocation Officer to contact tenant and Surveyor
- Maintenance Surveyor to advise if all works completed satisfactorily. Advise Housing Client and Strategy Officer.
- Register as void when keys received.

(d) Rechargeable Works

If following an inspection of a void property it is obvious that the damage done is not down to fair wear and tear then the former tenant should be re-charged for the damage.

Surveyor should:

- List and describe extent of works and damage by item
- Take photographic record of extent of damage by item
- Advise Housing Manager of extent of damage and costs involved
- Raise a re-chargeable order.

Housing Management to be advised of approximate cost so they can advise former tenant of their liability; give an estimate of cost and advise they will be invoiced for the final amount in due course.

(e) Decorating Allowances

All voids will be inspected by the Surveyor, and a record kept of the state of the property. OAP voids will be redecorated to an acceptable standard. In very poor properties the Housing Manager or Assistant can authorise re-decoration of a non-OAP property. The Housing Manager can also award an exceptional decorating allowance of £40 per room up to £200 if the property has been refused twice because of the poor state or other exceptional circumstances.

6. Garages

Termination of garage tenancy

One weeks notice required in writing to terminate a garage letting. The void date must be a Monday. Keys handed in after 12.00 noon on a Monday will delay the void date to the following Monday.

Arrears to be chased by the Housing Management Officer with a Notice To Quit served after two warning letters. If still no response after serving Notice To Quit advise tenant that they will be charged for the lock change as well as any outstanding rent.

Key Security

- Issue a receipt for all keys returned
- All keys to be clearly labelled with address, number and type
- All keys to be stored in a secure cabinet
- Any subsequent issue of keys to be recorded in key book

Storage of Goods and possessions left in garages

- A full inventory of any items left in abandoned garages must be taken
- Attempts should be made to contact former tenant
- Items to be stored in another garage. Where the former tenant can be contacted notice of one month is required for collection, otherwise 6 months is required unless the property is perishable or valueless when it can be disposed of immediately.

Repairs to Garages

Repairs to be carried out within 30 working days.

Allocating Garages

When a garage is ready to let it should be let to the next person on the waiting list. Council tenants receive priority over non-Council tenants. Any Council tenant should have a clear rent account before offer. Where there is a waiting list for that area garages must be re-let in 15 working days. The waiting list for garages needs to be periodically reviewed.

7. Allocation Process

In order to achieve the maximum prospects of an early acceptance and subsequent re-letting, lettings will pre-allocate whenever possible.

Lettings may choose the most appropriate method. Either:

- For a prospective tenant to view a property whilst the existing tenant is still in occupation
- An external viewing of the property
- An accompanied viewing of the property.

It is good practice to pre-allocate and get a tenancy agreement signed as early as possible, as it provides the incoming tenant with the status of a Protected Intended Occupier, allowing immediate possession if the property becomes squatted. However care must be taken because:

- a signed tenancy agreement cannot later be withdrawn.
- A Protected Intended Occupier would not be created just by allocating a property which will not be ready for months.

Prospective tenants will be selected in accordance with the Council's Letting Policy for Social Housing within 5 working days of notification of becoming void. Wherever possible a 50/50 split between transfers and applicants will be maintained. Allocations will be countersigned by the Housing Manager. If a property is refused the next applicant will be selected within 24 hours.

Viewing whilst tenant still in occupation

The termination form asks if vacating tenants would be willing to allow perspective tenants to view their home. Where this has been agreed Lettings will arrange for a convenient time and date for the viewing to take place within 5 working days.

External Viewing

External viewing is usually made when the property is still undergoing repair work and is therefore not available for internal viewing.

Accompanied Viewing

Wherever possible and particularly when a property has been repeatedly refused or a decorating allowance awarded then an accompanied viewing should be arranged with the Housing Officer. Target time to carry out an accompanied viewing 3 working days.

Pre-allocations

Lettings will pre-allocate the property within 5 working days of notification that a property will soon become available using either external viewing or viewing whilst tenant still in occupation methods. If the property becomes ready to let within those 5 days then an allocation will be made within 48 hours.

Letter for external viewing

Dear

This Council would like to make you the offer of
which is a

This is a provisional offer only and as such the Council reserves the
right to withdraw it at any time prior to the commencement of the
tenancy.

The keys are not yet ready for you to view the interior of the property,
but you may view the property from the outside and inform us if you
wish to be considered for this offer.

The Letting section will contact you later when the property is ready to
be viewed internally and you can pick the keys up then. You must
notify them the same day of your intention whether to accept or refuse
the offer.

Please bear in mind that it is this Councils policy that only two suitable
offers will be made, and this counts as one of them.

Yours sincerely

8. ABANDONED PROPERTIES

Abandoned properties must be dealt with swiftly in order to establish the facts and wherever possible re-let them as soon as possible.

Enquiries must be made as to:

- Can the tenant be contacted?
- Is the rent still being paid?
- Have the keys been returned?
- Is the mail accumulating or being collected?
- Are there external meters- if so take readings to see if being used.
- When did neighbours last see tenant?
- Have tenants' children changed school?
- Is tenant still claiming Housing Benefit?
- Is tenant in hospital/ prison?
- Is there any furniture in the property?

Every attempt should be made to trace the former tenant. If there is indisputable evidence that the tenant has gone and does not intend to return:

- The tenant loses security of tenure
- RDC does not need to go to Court to repossess the property
- To protect our position a Notice to Quit should be served
- The property can be repossessed when the NTQ expires provided that no-one is living there.

(b) PREVENTATIVE STEPS AGAINST VANDALISM AND SQUATTERS

The Housing Management Officers and Estate Caretaker will notify the Housing Manager immediately of any abandoned or squatted properties as noticed on Estate inspections.

Good practice recommends

- Net curtains/blinds to be left at windows of all empty properties to create the impression of occupation
- Visible security signs such as padlocks or screens to be used only where the likelihood of vandalism or squatters is high.
- Locks changed to reduce the risk of keys being handed on.
- The pre-signing of tenancy agreements prior to the effective tenancy date, giving prospective tenants the status of Protected Intended Occupier.
- Encouraging local residents and tenants groups to report any signs of damage, illegal entry or unauthorised occupation.