

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

HOUSING COMMITTEE 22 MARCH 2006

VOID MANAGEMENT POLICY

Report by Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1** The purpose of the report is to recommend to members the proposed Void Management Policy in respect of the management of the Council's housing stock.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1** Void Management and re-let performance are identified by Audit Scotland and Communities Scotland as key areas in the assessment of landlord service delivery.
- 2.2** The Housing Service has submitted reports over a number of years identifying significant mis-match in supply and demand within pockets of East Ayrshire and in a number of cases this has resulted in demolition programmes which, in turn, provide opportunities for subsequent area regeneration.

3. PROPOSED VOID MANAGEMENT POLICY

- 3.1** The main aims and objectives of the Void Management Policy which is appended are: -
- To ensure that vacant properties are processed timeously to avoid unnecessary void rent loss
 - To establish standards which are customer focused
 - To ensure consistency of approach across all Area Housing Teams
 - To address low demand issues and devise appropriate strategies on a community basis
- 3.2** The Void Management Policy codifies existing procedures and practices designed to meet the above objectives and defines the standards which customers can expect.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** There are no financial implications in the adoption of this policy. The management of void properties is budgeted for in the Housing Revenue Account estimates.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There is no statutory requirement to prepare a Void Management Policy. The preparation of a Void Management Policy will, however, meet the expectations of Communities Scotland as regulatory authority in terms of section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 The Allocations Policy Working Group of the Tenants Participation Steering Group have been consulted on the proposed Void Management Policy and fully support the document. The policy and related procedures will enable the Housing Service to better deliver the objectives as set out in the East Ayrshire Community Plan and the Local Housing Strategy.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 It is recommended that Committee: -

- (i) recommend to Council approval of the appended Void Management Policy; and
- (ii) otherwise, note the terms of this report.

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Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

CMCA/LA

1 March 2006

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil

Members wishing further information should contact Gerry Darroch, Housing Services Manager on 01563 554873.

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Void Management Policy

Aims and Objectives	3
Termination of Tenancies	3
Pre-Termination Inspections and Chargeable Repairs.....	4
Void Security	4
Void Inspections	5
Void Gardens	5
New Tenant Starter Pack	5
Preferred Energy Supplier.....	6
Lettable Standards.....	6
Gas Commissions.....	6
Plumbing System Drain Downs.....	6
Allocation of Void Properties	7
New Tenant Repairs.....	7
Compensation for Improvements.....	7
Decoration Allowance	7
Difficult to Let and Low Demand Properties	8
Responsibility and Monitoring	8
Appendix 1	9
The Lettable Standard.....	9

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of the Void Management Policy is to set out the Council's aims and objectives on the management of void properties and to define the standards to be applied in the management of void properties.

The council will aim to: -

- Ensure the property is safe and secure during the unlet period
- Let properties quickly and minimise void rent loss
- Return properties to a lettable standard at the earliest opportunity
- Monitor Void Management performance
- Address the issue of low demand and where necessary devise community based strategies to tackle this.

A property will be deemed void in the following circumstances: -

- When a tenant has formally terminated the tenancy by way of written notice,
- Upon the death of a tenant and where there is no successor in accordance with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001
- By abandonment of a tenancy, when the appropriate procedures have been followed and a formal legal notice has been served in accordance with the requirements of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001,
- When an eviction has been carried out following appropriate court action

Termination of Tenancies

When a tenant or tenant representative indicates that they wish to terminate a tenancy they will be provided with the appropriate form **Termination of Tenancy** and the **Moving Experience** leaflet which sets out the responsibilities of both the Council and the tenant.

For standard terminations the notice period shall be 28 days. Where the termination is as a result of the tenant's death and where there is no successor to

the tenancy or by eviction, the date of termination will be the date when the keys were made available to the council.

Each Termination Notice shall be acknowledged within 5 working days. Tenants will be advised of their termination date and the day that the keys should be made available to the council.

Where possible a Pre-Termination Inspection will be arranged to inform the tenant of any Compensation for Improvement they may be eligible to apply for, and also to assess what work, if any, the existing tenant will be required to carry out in order to avoid re-chargeable repairs.

When keys are made available to the council a receipt detailing the date and time will be provided to the person handing the keys in.

The Council will notify Rent Accounting when a tenancy has been terminated who, in turn, will notify the Council Tax and Housing Benefit sections of the Finance Service.

Pre-Termination Inspections and Chargeable Repairs

When a termination notice is received, an appointment will be made with the outgoing tenant to discuss the standard expected when the house has been emptied. This will include arrangements for replacement of unauthorised fitments, where these do not meet current safety or quality standards, and the reinstatement of any fitments which have been removed or damaged along with the removal of any rubbish and other items from the house. This will be fully documented and the tenant advised in writing.

If the outgoing tenant fails to carry out the required work, the Council will make good any necessary works and the costs will be re-charged to the former tenant when the works have been completed.

If no Termination Notice is received or the outgoing tenant fails to provide access, the property will be inspected when the keys are available and any necessary repairs attributable to negligence or unauthorised removal/replacement will be recharged in the same manner.

Void Security

The first principle in respect of void security will be the safety of the property and that of any adjoining residents. The security provision will be determined locally

and will be considerate of local factors including any previous attempts to break into vacant houses. Screen security is generally unattractive and where possible, conventional measures will be utilised to ensure safety, i.e. secure windows with curtains, and secure doors with robust locks. Where additional security is required, alarms will be used with prompt response times agreed with the contractor. If these measures are deemed inadequate, screen security and steel doors will be used. If plywood shuttering is used on an emergency basis, this will be replaced as soon as possible and within one week.

Void Inspections

When a property has become void the allocations staff will begin the void management process in accordance with established procedures.

All void properties will be let in accordance with the Council's Repair Charter details of which are contained within the Tenants Information Pack and comply with the Lettable Standards (Appendix 1). Although not normal practice it may be necessary to carry out further improvements including decoration to some properties that are deemed as difficult to let in order to make the property more attractive and prevent further void rent loss.

Void Gardens

Void gardens will be inspected for any environmental hazards at the time when the house is inspected. If the house is unlet for a period of more than 4 weeks, during the growing season of April to September, instructions will be issued to the contractor to have the grass and hedges cut. If the garden ground is unkempt at the time of inspection this will be rectified at the earliest opportunity. Long term voids will have the grass cut every 4 weeks during the growing season. Gardens will be de-littered prior to having the grass cut.

New Tenant Starter Pack

All re-lettable void properties will be equipped with a New Tenant Starter Pack. The starter pack is provided to assist tenants when moving into their new home and consists mainly of cleaning equipment and materials.

Preferred Energy Supplier

Since the de-regulation of utility suppliers, social rented landlords have experienced significant problems in identifying power suppliers and ensuring continuity of supplies. We have entered into an agreement with a power supplier to take over all electrical and gas supplies at the point of termination of tenancy. This allows us to have the power arrangements in place when we allocate the property to the new tenant.

The tenant is free to change supplier as they see fit after taking up the tenancy.

Lettable Standards

All properties will be let in accordance with the Lettable Standards which define the minimum level of repairs which should be carried out prior to the property being viewed and the standard of repair which should be reached prior to the property being occupied. Lettable Standards include thorough cleaning and valeting of all properties, safety checks for gas and electric supplies and lock changes for the future security of the new tenant/s. The Lettable Standards will be reviewed, as appropriate, to ensure that they are responsive to changing levels of expectation. Arrangements are in place to monitor the feedback from new tenants on the service the council provides in relation to the letting of void properties.

Gas Commissions

In order to ensure the safety of the property during the void period, gas supplies are capped when safety checks are carried out. When the new tenant moves in we will arrange for a gas engineer to call to remove the cap and carry out a full service of the system and check any other gas fitments.

Plumbing System Drain Downs

On an annual basis from 1st November until 31st March, properties will be drained down when they become vacant. This should prevent burst pipes during extended periods of cold weather. The water supply will be reinstated on the day the new tenant takes up occupation.

Allocation of Void Properties

Where possible staff will endeavour to pre-allocate properties prior to the keys being handed in from the outgoing tenant. There will be instances when this is not possible and in these circumstances staff will begin the selection process at the earliest opportunity and within 2 working days of the keys being made available to the Housing Service.

New Tenant Repairs

Properties will not be viewed by prospective tenants until they are in a fit state for viewing, the safety checks have been carried out and the property has been cleared out and cleaned. The property will not be let until it meets the requirements of the Lettable Standard. There may, however, be some non-essential repairs completed after the tenant has taken up occupancy. Any new tenant repairs will be agreed and jointly signed off during the accompanied viewing by the Housing Officer and the new tenant with a detailed written copy provided by the Housing Officer to the new tenant at the inspection. These repairs will be carried out within 10 days and, if possible, by appointment.

Compensation for Improvements

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 provides that Scottish Secure tenants and Short Scottish Secure Tenants may be eligible to receive compensation for certain improvements they have carried out to their home. Compensation rates are established on the basis of eligible cost and notional lifespan for individual components, where permission for the improvement has been given, the standard of workmanship approved and receipts made available. Details are available on the "Right to Compensation for Improvements Housing (Scotland) Act 2001" leaflet published by the Scottish Executive.

Decoration Allowance

Decoration allowances will be provided for all new tenancies, based on house size. In certain circumstances the level of payment may be increased to promote lettable in no demand properties. The current rates for decoration allowances are as follows: -

Bedsit	£30.00
1 Bedroom	£40.00
2 Bedroom	£50.00
3 bedroom	£60.00
4 Bedroom	£70.00

Difficult to Let and Low Demand Properties

While every effort will be made to re-let properties at the earliest opportunity, there will be occasions where a particular property, house type, street or area has little or no demand. Where it is established that there is little prospect of this situation improving in the foreseeable future, the Service will consider alternatives to allowing the property/properties to remain unlet indefinitely. Marketing strategies, incentive schemes, alternative uses, selective demolition and scope for wider area regeneration should all be considered and the necessary level of local consultation carried out if appropriate and feasible.

Responsibility and Monitoring

Void Management performance will feature in the monthly Senior Management Performance Management Meetings at which Area Managers will be in attendance. Significant deviation from profiled performance will be explored in depth at these meetings.

Day to day responsibility for void management will lie with the Assistant Area Manager who will ensure that processes are adhered to and timescales met. Regular liaison meetings with Building and Works Service will be held on an area basis to discuss performance and address any emerging issues which could affect service delivery.

Allocations Officers will be responsible for the implementation of procedures and processes in relation to void management and will record key movements on the integrated housing management system.

Void management performance is reported to Audit Scotland as a statutory performance indicator. We will provide benchmarking information, on a quarterly basis to the Scottish Housing Best Value Network and compare our performance with other authorities. Where appropriate, we will process benchmark in order to improve our performance and enhance service delivery to our customers. We will report our performance on void management to the Housing Committee on a half yearly basis.

Appendix 1

The Lettable Standard

CATEGORY	REPAIR					PRE LET	POST LET	COMMENTS
Safety Checks	Electrical check, including smoke alarms					√		
	Gas safety check							Day of let
	Asbestos checks					√		Cross check with asbestos register. Follow Asbestos Guidelines. Further guidance is available from the Asbestos Co-ordinator.
Kitchens	Minimum standards						√	Minimum units to be provided where possible Leave enough room for standard size fridge, cooker and washing machine Existing kitchen units should be retained and repaired where possible Replacement items should match existing where possible
		2 Apartment	3 Apartment	4 Apartment	5 Apartment			
	Sink unit	1	1	1	1			
	Floor units	1	2	2	3			
	Floor units 500	0	0	1	0			
	Wall units	1	2	2	3			
	Wall units 500	0	0	1	0			
	Resecure loose kitchen units Make good any sticking or damaged kitchen unit drawers/doors						√	

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	Replace broken or missing hinges catches or handles			
	Resecure loose worktops/replace damaged worktops		√	
	Plumbing for automatic washing machine		√	
	Install double socket above worktop, where possible		√	
	Repair any leaks to the supply and waste pipes which are evident at the time of inspection	√		
	Replace missing or broken plug and chains to sink	√		
	Renew washers to dripping taps and refix loose taps		√	
	Ensure cooker control unit fitted and connector unit are fitted	√		
Bathrooms	Replace any sanitary ware which is broken	√		Replacement items to match existing where possible

CATEGORY	REPAIR	PRE LET	POST LET	COMMENTS
Bathrooms (continued)	Replace any sanitary ware which is cracked		√	Replacement items to match existing where possible
	Replace any sanitary ware which is heavily stained		√	Replacement items to match existing where possible
	Renew toilet seat with seat and lid	√		
	Repair any leaks to the supply and waste pipes which are evident at the time of inspection	√		
	Replace missing or broken plug and chains to sink	√		
	Renew washers to dripping taps and refix loose taps		√	
	Remove all showers unless fitted by the Council	√		
Builderwork	Remove cast iron/ceramic-tiled fireplaces in bedrooms kitchens. Cap chimney head build up and form 9x6" opening and fit vent if required e.g. on outside wall. Make good associated plaster and joiner work		√	
	Check for rising damp and woodworm and arrange remedial work where necessary	√		
Windows	Replace broken or cracked panes of glass internally	√		
	Replace broken or cracked panes of glass externally	√		
	All windows must be secure	√		
	Ensure that there is a minimum of 1key for key operated window	√	√	Pre if windows are locked
	Check all locking mechanisms and safety mechanisms for proper functioning	√		
	Check all windows for opening and closing and adjust as required		√	If house has metal shutters – visit to be made on day of shutter removal to ensure windows are safe.

	Replace defective or missing <input type="checkbox"/> sash cords and cord grips <input type="checkbox"/> sash fasteners and lifts <input type="checkbox"/> casement handles and stays		√	
	Check trickle vents for operation and repair / replace where necessary		√	
Doors	Supply and fit new locks	√		
	Check all doors for opening and closing and adjust where necessary		√	
	Replace missing doors	√	√	Pre – kitchen, l/room and bathroom
	Repair / replace damaged doors		√	
	Replace all glass pass doors which do not meet safety standards with internal panelled doors	√		
	Replace damaged standards and facings		√	
	Replace missing door handles/repair damaged door handles		√	
Gas fires	Remove all fires not installed by the Council Make good associated plaster and joiner work	√	√	Removal of fire – pre let Plasterwork/joinerwork – post let
CATEGORY	REPAIR	PRE LET	POST LET	COMMENTS
Solid fuel central heating	Check that the solid fuel heating system is safe and serviceable	√		
Solid fuel fires	Check operation and repair defective parts. Ensure flues are clear	√		
Electrical central heating/Electric fires	Remove electric fires fitted by the tenant	√		
Hand rails/grabrails	Resecure internal handrails	√	√	To be done pre where health and safety issue
Flooring	Replace or repair all defective timber flooring	√	√	To be done pre where health and safety issue

	Renail loose timber flooring to joists	√	√	To be done pre where health and safety issue
	Replace defective or missing skirting to match existing		√	
	Renail loose skirting		√	
	Discretion to be used whether floor coverings uplifted To be removed if requested by new tenant	√	√	
Plasterwork	Obvious repairs must be carried out minimising disturbance to decoration where possible		√	Hairline or minor cracks will be left for the tenant to fill during decoration
Cleanliness	All debris furnishings etc must be cleared from the empty house including cupboards	√		A high standard of cleaning is required in order to improve the chance of a successful letting
	Valet and leave Starter Pack. Kitchen units, cupboards, work surfaces and sanitary ware must all be clean	√		
	Garden rubbish and external stores must be cleared	√		
Decoration	If wallpaper is badly torn, hanging or stained walls should be stripped ready for decoration	√	√	Pre if it would deter potential applicant i.e. graffiti Decoration is not undertaken by the council and is considered to be the incoming tenants responsibility
	Polystyrene tiles must be removed from all ceilings	√	√	To be done pre where health and safety issue i.e. kitchen
External repairs		√	√	To be done pre where health and safety issue , otherwise to be completed under planned work
	All sheds/garages must be removed if in dangerous condition	√		If not dangerous to be removed on request post let

REMEMBER TO DRAIN DOWN PROPERTIES OVER THE WINTER PERIOD