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**Void Management Policy**

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| **1.** | **Definitions** |
| 1.1 | "Void Management" is the term used to describe how the Council deals with vacant properties to ensure that they are re-let quickly, rent loss is minimised and the most effective use made of the housing stock in order to meet housing need. |
| **2.** | **General Aims** |
| 2.1 | In order to meet the overall goal of delivering the best possible service to Highland Council tenants, the Council must have a clear stated policy on the management of voids. |
| 2.2 | It is also a requirement of Best Value that the Council has systems and processes to meet strategic objectives, and that those systems are open and transparent. These systems will help to achieve the improvement targets identified within the Service Plan. |
| 2.3 | The policy also contributes to the overall framework of housing policies and helps create opportunities for service improvements. |
| **3.** | **Provision of information to tenants/former tenants** |
| 3.1 | The Council recognises the importance of tenants and prospective tenants being kept informed during the void management process. This will be carried out verbally and in writing. |
| 3.2 | All correspondence will be in ‘Plain English’ and it will be clear in all cases who is the officer to contact in case of queries etc. |
| **4.** | **Training** |
| 4.1 | There will be a variety of Council staff involved in the void management process, and a range of different skills are demanded. |
| 4.2 | The Council will ensure that:   * All staff are trained to carry out the roles expected of them; * Opportunities to create efficiencies through staff acquiring new skills are explored, e.g. technical training; * All staff involved in the void management process are familiar with the housing computer system. |
| **5.** | **Scope of the Policy** |
| 5.1 | The management of voids is a complex process which links together a number of related actions. These include:   * Tenancy Termination; * Property Inspections, i.e. pre-termination, post-termination and post-work to assess the property against the Empty Homes Standard; * Raising works orders; * Identifying rechargeable repairs; * Identifying any other outgoing tenant responsibilities; * Assessing decoration allowances; * Key control; * Offering tenancies & arranging viewing; * Creating tenancies, handing over keys, signing lease etc. |
| **6.** | **Terminating tenancies** |
| 6.1 | Most tenancies will terminate by a tenant giving notice, which must be a minimum of 28 days. Rent liability will be for the full 28 days except where it is possible to relet the property within that time, in which case the outgoing tenant will only be liable for rent up to the next tenancy starting. When a tenant is transferred they will be advised to hand in the keys of their property by 12 noon on the day after their new tenancy commences*.* If the keys are kept longer than this a further weeks rent will be charged. |
| 6.2 | Notice must be in writing. The Council will provide tenants with a proforma for this purpose. This will request details of:   * Date of actual leaving; * Reason for giving notice; * Forwarding address; * Access times for pre-termination inspection; * Daytime telephone no.; * Signatures of both parties ; |
| 6.3 | Notices will be acknowledged within 3 working days. Acknowledgements will contain:   * Confirmation of termination date; * A reminder that the Rent Account must be cleared up to termination date; * Reminder to notify utilities (meter readings); * Confirm date/arrangements for inspection; * Claim form for any improvements qualifying under compensation regulations if required; * Where to deliver keys.   In addition the acknowledgement will give clear guidance on the Empty Home Standard which explains what out-going tenants have to do to ensure the property is returned to us in an acceptable condition. The council’s Empty Home Standard (EHS) is detailed in the Repairs Policy at Section 6.3 - see [Repairs Policy](http://www.highland.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/63B5CA5B-8BAB-4B94-A0E4-136AEFD662F6/0/repairspolicymarch2005.pdf) |
| 6.4 | Acknowledgements will emphasise the need to carry out pre-termination inspections, particularly where the tenant intends to leave well before expiry of notice. The possibility for liability for repairs if the property does not meet the Empty Homes Standard on the return of keys will be emphasised. |
| 6.5 | Where a tenancy is terminating because of death and there is no-one  to succeed to the tenancy:   * details will be requested from the person notifying the Council of the death; * the rent liability will cease on the date of death; * It must be made clear to the person contacting the Council that rent arrears will only be recovered against the estate. |
| 6.6 | Where it appears that a property has been abandoned by the tenant, the statutory procedure under Sections 49 and 50 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 will be followed. Reasonable enquiries will be made to establish the whereabouts of the tenant(s) and/or that the property is unoccupied and the tenant(s) no longer intends to occupy it. This may include contacting:   * Any known relatives; * immediate neighbours; * Other agencies, e.g. Police, Social Work, Council Tax; * Utilities, - Electric, Water, Gas. |
| 6.7 | Where a property is clearly abandoned, e.g. if obviously vacant and/or keys have been handed in, it will be secured as appropriate as soon as possible. Such properties will not be left insecure overnight. In between the months of October and April the Council will enter the property in order to drain the water down. Access will also be gained at all times of the year where this is necessary to prevent possible damage to the property or danger to others. |
| **7.** | **Inspections** |
| 7.1 | Except for abandoned properties, and tenancies terminating on death, all properties becoming vacant will, wherever possible, be inspected prior to, and following, the end of the tenancy. |
| 7.2 | A "pre termination" inspection will be carried out wherever possible within two weeks of the tenant’s notice being received*.* The main purpose of this inspection is to explain the Empty Homes Standard and:   * identify any aspects of disrepair which are the tenants responsibility and which would prevent the property meeting the Empty Homes Standard; * to agree what will be removed from/what will remain in the property; * to check any alterations carried out by the outgoing tenant; |
| 7.3 | A standard report form will be completed at the pre termination inspection, signed by both the Housing Officer and the tenant, and a copy given to the tenant. The outgoing tenant will then have the opportunity to remedy any defect for which they are responsible prior to the end of the tenancy. If any such defects are not completed prior to the end of tenancy or if work done is not of a satisfactory standard a recharge may then be raised for the cost of the works. |
| 7.4 | A "post termination" inspection will be carried out, wherever possible within two days of keys being received*.* However, in situations where it is neither practical nor efficient to meet this target, e.g. if the vacancy is some distance from the Area office, up to five working days will be allowed. The purpose of this inspection is to assess if the property meets the Empty Homes Standard and to identify works which may need to be carried out to get the property to meet the standard. A standard report form will be completed. |
| 7.5 | The council’s Empty Home Standard is detailed in the Repairs Policy at Section 6.3 - see [Repairs Policy](http://www.highland.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/63B5CA5B-8BAB-4B94-A0E4-136AEFD662F6/0/repairspolicymarch2005.pdf) |
| 7.6 | Within 10 working days of the post termination inspection the former tenant will be informed if there are outstanding items which are the former tenants responsibility. |
| 7.7 | If an offer of tenancy has not been made at the time of the post termination inspection, when an offer is made it must include any relevant information from the inspection, including whether or not any repairs are to be carried out and the amount of any decoration allowance. If an offer of tenancy has been made prior to the post inspection, the prospective tenant must be advised of any redecoration allowance due or substantial repairs to be carried out once the post termination inspection has been completed. |
| **8.** | **Ordering repairs** |
| 8.1 | Repairs will be ordered within two working days of the post termination inspection, as outlined in the repairs policy. The priority of orders will be at the discretion of officers, having regard to the overall targets for void management and the nature of the repair. As noted in the repairs policy relet repairs will be carried out on a five or ten day timescale, or, exceptionally, where extensive repairs are required on a 20 day timescale. The timescale for repairs will therefore give an indication of the date when the property should be ready for occupation. Appropriate liaison with the contractor will be undertaken to ensure that these timescales are adhered to and the property keys returned without delay. Where only non essential repairs are required a longer timescale may be used as the house is still fit for reoccupation. If however where there are essential and non essential repairs for the same trade it will be more effective to use a five or ten working day target. |
| 8.2 | When essential repairs have been completed, the property should be inspected again, as outlined in the Repairs Policy and if it meets the Empty Homes Standard the "fit for occupation" date will be confirmed. |
| **9.** | **Offering tenancies** |
| 9.1 | Prospective tenants will be selected in accordance with the Highland Housing Register Allocations policy. This can be found at <http://www.highland.gov.uk/livinghere/housing/findinghousing/allocationofcouncilhouses/> |
| 9.2 | All offers will be made in writing, though initially prospective tenants may be notified verbally. Every offer of tenancy will contain at least the following information:   * Size/type of property * Rent * Proposed date of entry where this is possible * Key collection arrangements and/or viewing arrangements * Council tax band * Arrangements for accepting, signing lease etc. * Named contact for queries |
| 9.3 | Where possible tenants should be advised either verbally or in writing of the principal repairs to be carried out on the property and of any programmed capital work due such as kitchen replacement programmes. |
| 9.4 | Offers of tenancies to transfer applicants will normally only be made provided the tenant has no housing related debt and the condition of their house and garden meet the Empty Homes Standard. House inspections will normally be made by the Housing Officer within a target time of 3 working days, or 5 working days where this is appropriate in more rural areas. |
| 9.5 | Applicants are required to respond to an offer within 2 working days of receiving the letter, and to accept/refuse the offer within 3 days of the keys being available for viewing. If the applicants does not respond within this timescale a letter will be sent to the applicant advising them that this offer is being withdrawn and that the property will be re offered to another applicant. |
| 9.6 | All properties subject to an offer should be viewed by the prospective tenant(s), wherever possible prior to acceptance |
| 9.7 | An accompanied viewing should be arranged, and particularly in the following circumstances:   * Prospective tenant is elderly/severely disabled or vulnerable in some other way e.g. through mental health. * There are concerns about the security of the property * Sheltered Housing vacancies * At the discretion of the Area Office – e.g. properties in hard to let areas |
| **10.** | **Creating tenancies** |
| 10.1 | When a prospective tenant has indicated their acceptance of a vacant property, the date of entry to the house must be agreed. This shall be as soon as possible after all essential repairs have been completed, but no tenancy will be entered into until all “essential repairs” are completed. Except in the case of a Highland Council tenant transferring to another council property, all new tenants must meet personally with a council officer and a full pre tenancy interview will be carried out. |
| 10.2 | A shortened version of this interview will be carried out for all tenants transferring within the Highland Council Area. Transferring tenants should also be advised that they will be required to hand in their keys by 12 noon on the day after their new tenancy has started to avoid an additional week’s rent being charged. This will apply both to transfers within and between areas of the Highland Council |
| 10.3 | In addition to the pre tenancy interview outlined above it will be made clear to all new sheltered tenants what the warden service consists of, the name of the warden etc. |
| 10.4 | When the lease is signed the keys may be handed over to the new tenant. |
| 10.5 | If an offer is refused the applicant will be asked to complete the refusal slip giving details of the reason for refusal. Where these reasons relate to the condition of the house or concerns about neighbours etc. the issue will be referred to the appropriate Housing Officer for comment/action. |
| **11.** | **Performance Monitoring** |
| 11.1 | Regular monitoring of the void management process will be undertaken, using the following performance measures:   * the number of properties relet in less than 2 weeks, in 2 – 4 weeks and over 4 weeks, and the percentage in each band as percentage of all relets in the year (Statutory and Key Performance Indicator). * Void rent loss as a percentage of the gross rent debit (Statutory Performance Indicator); * Average void period; * the number of houses refused 2 or more times by reason; * the number of refusals as a percentage of all offers; * the number of houses where the void period is ten weeks or more. |
| 11.2 | The performance indicators outlined above will be reported regularly to the appropriate committees of the Highland Council. |
| **12.** | **Local Lettings Initiatives** |
| 12.1 | Where a local lettings initiative is in operation the above policy may be varied as agreed by the appropriate Committee. |