



Void Management Policy 2020

Housing Revenue Account Services

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1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Set out the principles and service standards of the void management service.
- Help to meet local housing need by maximising availability of social housing.
- Deliver continuous improvement through efficient management of voids.

2. Scope

The Void Management Policy sets out the council's commitment to how it will effectively manage its empty homes within its stock in order to achieve value for money.

Void Management includes the following activities:

- Tenancy termination.
- Inspections.
- Viewings and offers.
- Work to void properties.
- Creating tenancies.
- Management of long term voids.
- Management of low demand properties.

3. Key Principles and Service Standards

This policy aims to ensure that a property is properly managed when it becomes vacant, is brought up to the council's "lettable" standard before a new tenant moves in, and that the rent loss is minimised within the whole process. This policy will, at all times, be aligned to the city's Allocations Policy to ensure the most effective use of the housing stock in order to help meet housing need in Stoke-on-Trent.

The policy will ensure that a forward thinking and strategic approach is adopted to void management by:

- Ensuring that outgoing tenants are aware of their responsibilities prior to leaving the property in order to keep repair costs to a minimum.
- Ensuring that tenants who are found to have wilfully damaged property are recharged for repairs.
- Reducing rent loss by minimising the length of time during which properties are being repaired.
- Ensuring properties are available as quickly as possible for people in housing need.
- Undertaking works to voids which are appropriate to the customer needs.

4. Background

The City Council owns and manages around 18,200 properties across the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Each year there are approximately 1,500 properties that are let. The council is responsible for ensuring void properties are brought up to a standard and let as efficiently as possible.

All repairs and maintenance and health and safety work carried out to council properties, including void properties, are undertaken by Unitas Stoke-on-Trent Ltd, a council owned repairs and maintenance company established in February 2018.

The Council and Unitas developed a lettable standard to improve the quality of stock that is offered to future tenants, see Appendix 2 for details.

5. Legal and Best Practice Framework

This Void Management Policy and the way in which services are delivered comply with the requirements of the following standards and legislation:

- Localism Act 2011.
- The Housing Act 1985.
- Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982.
- Housing Act 1996 (Part 6).
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 (GSIUR) as amended 2018. Approved Code of Practice and guidance.
- British Standard 7671 As Amended (Electrical Installations)
- Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR.
- Equalities Act 2010.

This policy is also compliant with the Homes England and Regulator of Social Housing Framework – The Tenancy and Home Standard by specifically addressing the following requirements:

- Minimising the time that a property is empty between lettings – taking account of the circumstances of the new tenant.
- Meeting all applicable statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of new occupants.
- Demonstrating an appropriate balance of planned and responsive repairs, and value for money. The approach should include: responsive and cyclical repairs, planned and capital work, work on empty properties, and adaptations.
- Ensuring that tenants' homes meet the standard set out in the Government's Decent Homes Guidance and continue to maintain their homes to at least this standard

This policy has links with the Council's Tenancy Strategy, Repairs and Maintenance Policy, Allocations and Lettings Policy. It should also be considered in conjunction with the Council's other wider policies and policy framework.

6. Equalities Statement

The council recognises that it provides housing for communities which include wide social diversity and is committed to providing equal access to services.

This policy aims to treat all customers fairly, with respect and professionalism. In line with the duty placed on the local authority under the Equalities Act 2010 specific consideration of the impact of this policy has been given to people with protected characteristics, including gender, race, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation and marital status. The approach adopted within this policy focuses on understanding individual circumstances in order to provide appropriate advice and support; this includes understanding the needs of tenants who have protected characteristics. Consideration will therefore be given to language barriers, accessibility and cultural issues which may affect a tenant's ability to manage their tenancy or seek advice on problems, and resolutions which take account of the individual's beliefs and abilities.

The council will enable all our tenants to have clear information and equal access to available services and information in a range of appropriate languages and formats will be provided when requested. This policy has been designed to be fully inclusive regardless of the ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious belief, or disability of service users or residents. The Equality Impact Assessment will be reviewed as part of reviewing the policy document in order to inform any changes that may be required.

From time to time the council may ask tenants to provide details of their gender, age, religion, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation in line with the protected characteristics identified within the Equalities Act 2010 to help the council to deliver more effective, appropriate and inclusive policies and practices. All data collected is kept securely, used only for monitoring purposes and is de-personalised at the point of analysis to protect individual's privacy.

The completed Equality Impact Assessment is available on request.

7. Policy Detail

7.1 Tenancy Termination

The requirement set out in the Tenancy Agreement is for 4 weeks written notice to terminate a tenancy. Full details about ending a tenancy can be found in the Tenancy Agreement. Tenants who are transferring to another social tenancy (either City Council or another Registered Provider) may be permitted to give a reduced

notice period. All decisions in this respect will be agreed with the City Council in advance.

Where the outgoing tenant has given notice and fails to leave the property after the end of the notice period legal action may be taken to remove them from the property.

The City Council will, wherever possible, inspect properties becoming vacant, both prior to and following the termination of a tenancy.

7.1.1 Pre-Termination Visits

Once written notice has been received, a pre-termination visit will be undertaken. This visit will determine the condition of the property and highlight any repairs that the tenant will be required to undertake before leaving the property.

At this stage if the tenant has undertaken their own improvements, where permission has not been authorised, the inspecting officer will look for damage to the property. If the outgoing tenant is advised that they need to remove the improvement works they are liable for all costs associated with returning the property to the original state.

If the tenant is transferring to another council property a pre-transfer visit will be carried out. If the works are not completed during this visit the City Council may withdraw alternative offers of accommodation or they may be charged for the works to be undertaken on their behalf.

Where improvement work has been carried out to the property the outgoing tenant may request compensation to cover part of the costs. Full details may be found in the Compensation Policy.

7.1.2 Post-Termination Inspection

A post-termination inspection will be undertaken on all void properties as soon as possible after the tenant leaves.

The purpose of this inspection will be to:

- Ensure the property is empty, and to remove any items that pose a risk to the health and safety of prospective tenant(s) or contractors.
- Determine whether prospective tenants can be allowed to view the property.
- Ensure the property is secure and change the front and back door locks.
- Identify any outstanding disrepair which may be the responsibility of the previous tenant.
- Arrange for electrical appliances and installations to be checked.
- Identify if the property requires a pre-clean or other works before the prospective tenants can view.
- Identify any major repairs.
- Identify works needed to comply with health and safety requirements.

- Identify necessary repairs which are required to enable a property to be re-let as soon as possible.

7.1.3 Terminations Following the Death of the Tenant

The City Council will offer the next of kin for deceased tenants two rent free weeks in order to enable them to clear the property. The rent free weeks run immediately after the date that the death was registered. If the property is not cleared during this time any additional weeks rent will be charged to the estate.

In the instances where the tenancy has been ended due to the death of the sole tenant the executor of the estate is responsible for the removal of all goods from the property.

If there is no executor the council will end the tenancy by service of a Notice to Quit on the Public Trustee. On expiry of this notice any goods remaining in the property that are not required will be disposed of.

The property will still be subject to a pre and post termination visit. The estate may be charged for any repairs and clearance required to the property caused by neglect or wilful damage.

7.1.4 Evictions and Abandonments

The outgoing tenant is responsible for removing all personal possessions from the property, but there could be instances where the tenant fails to give notice (either as a result of eviction or abandonment) and belongings are left in the property. The council does not take responsibility for any items left on its land.

The council will serve a Section 41 notice advising there are personal belongings in the property and upon expiry of the notice any belongings in the property will be treated as abandoned.

For details relating to the storage and removal of personal belongings which have been left in a property due to an eviction or abandonment, are contained in the Tenancy and Estate Management Policy and the Section 41 procedure.

The City Council reserves the right to recharge the outgoing tenant for costs incurred as a result of storing or disposing of goods charged at the weekly rent for the property.

7.1.5 Recharges

The City Council may recharge any outgoing tenant for the costs of making good or renewing any damage caused to the property (outside of normal wear and tear), undertaking repairs to poorly fitted tenant improvement works and for clearing any rubbish and/or belongings that have been left at the property. Recharges may also be applied for the cost of cleaning and/or de-infesting the property. Photographic evidence will be obtained before the void works are carried out to formally record and prove the need for the recharge.

The City Council will make every reasonable effort to contact the previous tenant to inform them of any outstanding items for which they will be recharged and the means of payment. All recharges will be noted on the debtors system and may affect any future application for re-housing if they are not cleared.

Further information on charges and recovery of rechargeable repairs are contained in the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

7.2 Letting a Void Property

The City Council aims to ensure that allocations are made giving full consideration of the customer needs, the property and any issues in the local area.

In some instances, for example where the property is in poor condition, the City Council may undertake repairs to the property prior to a prospective tenant being identified.

7.2.1 Selection of New Tenant(s)

To ensure that void rent loss is kept to a minimum, the process of selecting a new tenant for a property will begin as soon as possible after notice is received from the outgoing tenant or the City Council is made aware that the property will be available for re-letting. Prospective tenants will be selected in accordance with the council's Allocations Policy. If possible a viewing for a prospective tenant will be undertaken prior to the outgoing tenant leaving the property in order to minimise any delay in allocating the property.

7.2.2 Viewings and Offers

Once a suitable applicant has been identified they will be invited to attend a viewing at the property. The viewing is intended to ensure that the property is suitable for the applicant and identify any specific work the applicant requires to enable them to move into the property. Requests for additional works will be considered in line with the city's Repairs and Maintenance Policy.

Where the prospective tenant accepts the property, they may be given the choice to keep some items that have been left in the property by the former tenant. This may include fittings such as curtains and carpets. If the outgoing tenant has left gas or electric appliances in the property the City Council cannot take responsibility for maintaining these and they will therefore be removed.

If the outgoing tenant has made significant changes to the property which cannot be practically or economically maintained (for example loft conversions, garages and workshops) they will be removed and the property returned to the original state.

Internal decorating may be undertaken by the City Council in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances may include a tenant moving into the property that is elderly or vulnerable and/ or the property being in a particularly poor state of decoration.

Once the works have been agreed and the prospective tenant has accepted the property a completion date for the property to be returned will be agreed. In setting the completion date due regard will be taken of the amount of work required and any customer requirements. Prospective tenants will be advised of the date and informed in advance if this date is unlikely to be achieved, for example if additional works are identified during the course of completing the repairs.

7.2.3 Creating New Tenancies

As soon as all essential repairs are completed satisfactorily, the prospective tenant will be invited to sign the Tenancy Agreement, as in the above section.

The terms of the tenancy agreement will be explained to ensure that the tenant(s) is fully aware of the terms and conditions and the consequences if these conditions are breached.

The new tenant will also be provided with appropriate advice about:

- Paying their rent.
- Applying for benefits, if required.
- Setting up utilities.
- Reporting any repairs.
- Fire safety
- Solar panels (where applicable).

If the property has solar panels fitted as part of the Community Energy Scheme Stoke Ltd, the prospective tenant will be obliged to sign a Tenancy Variation Agreement and join the Community Energy Scheme Stoke Ltd. The Tenancy Variation Agreement identifies the additional equipment on the property and allows the provider of the scheme the right to access the loft from time to time to carry out repairs or maintenance.

At this stage the tenant will also be provided with the most recent copy of the Energy Performance Certificate for the property.

7.3 Works to Void Properties

All properties will meet the lettable standard, as shown in Appendix 2, in relation to health and safety prior to letting, including gas safety checks as required. Prior to any works being undertaken the City Council will ensure that there is an up to date asbestos survey for the property.

The focus of works on voids will be to undertake works which are necessary to enable the customer to live in the property. This will ensure that the property meets the Decent Homes Standard and any specific needs for the customers.

Tenants / prospective tenants will not be given access to the property for any reason once Unitas has begun works, due to health and safety reasons.

In some instances works to the property may be undertaken after the tenant has signed up, specifically where, the works can be completed without significant disruption for the tenant, the works will not pose a significant health and safety risk to the tenant or member of their household and the tenant agrees to the works being undertaken on tenancy. External works to the property will, in the main, be undertaken after the new tenancy has started.

The City Council may also delay the completion of some works if the property is known to be included on a planned programme in the near future. In these cases the works will be highlighted as required and undertaken as part of the planned programme and completed once the property is occupied and the planned programme of works has commenced.

Where a property requires an element of decoration, Unitas will deliver a painting pack directly to the incoming tenant which enables the work to be completed by the tenant without a financial cost for materials to the tenant.

7.3.1 Utilities and Services

When a property has become void the City Council will cap both the electric and gas supplies in order to reduce any health and safety risks. Wherever possible the supplies will also be transferred to a preferred supplier in order to reduce any delays in managing the void process.

The electric supply will be uncapped as part of the final works to the property before the sign up is arranged. Incoming tenants will therefore have a working supply at the point of sign up – subject to appropriate levels of payment on the meter.

The gas supply will not be uncapped until the tenant confirms that they have moved into the property, this is to ensure that any risks of gas build up are minimised. Tenants will be advised on the process for arranging the gas uncapping when they attend the sign up. The City Council aims to ensure that the gas is uncapped as soon as possible following the request of the customer. When the gas is uncapped the tenant will also be provided with the annual Gas Safety Certificate.

During the health and safety checks the electric and gas meters at the property will be checked. Any evidence of tampering will be recorded. Tampering with meters is a criminal offence and the City Council will provide tenancy details to utilities companies and the Police if there is evidence that a meter has been damaged.

7.3.2 Major Voids

If a void property requires major works, and therefore a high level of investment, in order to be brought up to an appropriate standard an options appraisal may be undertaken in order to assess whether the works should be completed, or if the property should be taken out of use. Consideration will be given to:

- Level of rent loss if the property is not tenanted and the impact on the Housing Revenue Account.

- The level of demand for the property type and area.
- The overall cost of the works required.

If the assessment finds that the works are financially viable they will be completed. For properties where the assessment finds that it is not financial viable to undertake the works and there is little demand for the property type and/or area the property may be disposed of – either through sale or demolition.

7.3.3 Low Demand Properties

The priority for the City Council is to ensure that all homes are let as soon as possible to tenants who are able to sustain the tenancy. While the Allocations Policy prioritises housing applicants who are in housing need, some housing stock in the city is more difficult to let due to low levels of demand for the property type or area. A property will be considered to be low demand if there are not suitable applicants on the Housing Register for the property.

Additional action(s) may be taken when a low demand property is identified in order to attract a suitable tenant. A combination of the following may be agreed and implemented:

- Additional internal works beyond the needs of the customer.
- Internal decoration.
- Improved security.
- Fencing and landscaping improvements.
- Support for tenants moving in.

7.3.4 Adapted Properties

Properties which are adapted when they become void will be considered in line with the Council's Major Adaptations Policy with the priority being on ensuring best use of the adaptations. In some instances, where a property has major adaptations, the City Council may choose to leave the property void for a longer period until a suitable tenant, who requires the adaptations, can be identified. Decisions to remove major adaptations from properties will be made by a service manager based on all available information on the demand for the property.

8. Financial Implications

Any repair work carried out in the property whilst vacated will be charged to the void budget. The management and monitoring of this budget will be controlled by Unitas and Finance Services.

9. Consultation and Communications

During the development of the policy consultation took place with a range of stakeholders including:

- Portfolio Holders.

- Council Officers within the Housing Solutions Team
- Council Officers within Housing Management Team.
- Unitas Officers, including the Head of Service for Repairs and Maintenance.

The policy has undergone public consultation via Stoke-on Trent City Council website for a period of two weeks and has been considered by the tenant board in July 2020.

The updated policy will be made available online via the council's website (insert a link) and distributed to all decision makers with the council (housing management team and Unitas). Council tenants signed up to the e-gov alert bulletins will be notified of its publication.

10. Links to Other Policies

This policy, together with the Tenancy and Estate Management Policy, Repairs and Maintenance Policy and Rechargeable Repairs Policy will guide staff in ensuring that tenants are aware of their repair responsibilities and tenancy obligations.

This policy should be considered in conjunction with the Allocations Policy to ensure that the stock is well used in a way that meets local demand in a fair and equitable way. As the main provider of affordable homes the City Council is committed to reducing homelessness and meeting housing need through maximising the use and occupation of our homes and the effective turnaround of void properties.

This policy should also be read in conjunction with the following:

- Gas Safety and Servicing Policy.
- Asbestos Management Plan.
- Major Adaptations Policy.
- Rent Setting and Collection Policy.
- Tenant and Leaseholder Compensation Policy.

11. Measuring Quality and Performance

The Council is committed to ensuring that the Void Management Services are delivered to a high standard and provide high levels of customer satisfaction. In order to help it do this, it will monitor and manage performance through a range of methods.

Monitoring and measuring performance levels of all repairs across the housing stock are monitored on a regular basis. The performance and delivery of the service is monitored and reported to the Council and Unitas's Board.

The Council will measure and evaluate performance against a range of appropriate and relevant performance indicators and will benchmark itself against other social housing providers.

The Council may audit the quality of repair works and investigate complaints in relation to the standard of works.

The Council also collects and analyses tenants' views on the repairs service provided. This is collected by staff acting independently of the delivery of the repairs service.

The Council will use performance information to help shape service improvements.

12. Delivering Value for Money

The City Council is committed to ensuring its Void Management Services offer excellent value for money and will therefore ensure that a range of mechanisms are in place to demonstrate value.

The mechanisms used will include:

- Benchmarking against peers.
- Market testing against other providers.
- Reviewing internal cost and performance data.
- Internal business reviews.

Performance in relation to the Void Management Service will be monitored through the Performance Framework. Key measures in relation to Void Management are:

- Number of void properties.
- Average re-let time for a standard void.
- Average re-let time for a non-standard void.
- Amount of void loss.

13. Key Contacts

For comments in relation to this policy and its development please contact the Enabling and Projects Team:

- Telephone: 01782 238562 (office hours only)
- Email: housing.strategy@stoke.gov.uk
- Post: Enabling and Projects Team, Floor 2, Civic Centre, Glebe Street, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 1HH

For further information on how to influence policy development, please contact the Communities Team:

- Telephone: 01782 238515 (office hours only)
- Email: tenantinvolvementteam@stoke.gov.uk
- Post: Communities Team, Floor 1, Civic Centre, Glebe Street, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 1HH

To report a repair, please contact:

- For urgent repairs please telephone: 01782 234100
- For routine repairs please report online: www.Unitas.co.uk
- In person: at your nearest Customer Service Centre

Appendix 1 - Glossary / Definitions

Throughout this policy document, it is inevitable that words or phrases are used that are readily understood by some reader, but which are new to other readers and their meaning is not immediately apparent. The meanings of some words/phrases used in this document are given below:

Decent Homes Standard - a standard set nationally which states that a Decent Home is one which meets all statutory requirements in relation to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, is in a reasonable state of repair, has reasonably modern facilities and provides reasonable thermal comfort.

Major Adaptations - refer to changes to the property or equipment provided in order to assist a disabled person to live more independently.

Decent Homes Standard - a standard set nationally which states that a Decent Home is one which meets all statutory requirements in relation to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, is in a reasonable state of repair, has reasonably modern facilities and provides reasonable thermal comfort.

Equality Statement – Sets out the council’s commitment to ensure everyone is treated the equally.

Fair Wear and Tear – the law defines fair wear and tear as “reasonable use if the premises by the tenant and the ordinary operation of natural forces.” ‘Natural forces’ relates to time and normal daily activities.

Major Void – a major void is one which requires over £10,000 worth of work to be put right.

Planned works – refers to the replacement of elements within the property once they have reached the end of its useful life. This work can be programmed based on information on component life-cycles and installation dates.

Post-termination – refers to the period immediately after the tenant has left the property.

Pre-termination – refers to the period after the tenants has given notice to leave but has not yet left the property.

Recharges – is the cost of repairing or putting right damage or neglect to properties. The costs are charged to the tenant and reclaimed.

Sign-up – is where the new tenant/s are asked to sign the tenancy agreement and given the keys to the property.

Statutory Standards – are standards laid down by the law which must be adhered to.

Tenant Improvements – is the term used for works carried out on the property by the tenant (usually with permission from the City Council).

Unitas Stoke-on-Trent Ltd – the name of the council owned company established to deliver repairs and maintenance services to council owned properties.

Value for Money – is the overall value based on cost, efficiency and effectiveness.

Void / Void property – is the term used to describe a property that has no legal tenant and is generally empty.

Void management – is the process of bringing an untenanted property up to standard to enable a new tenant to move in.

Appendix 2 – Lettable Standard

Kitchen

- The sink-top and work surfaces will be in a clean and hygienic condition.
- All units will be secure and doors and drawers will operate satisfactorily.
- The water supply will be working.
- The number of storage cupboards will depend on the size of kitchen. The storage space will consist of wall and floor units.
- Tiled areas will be sealed and free from cracked/broken tiles
- There will be a safe and compliant cooker space with a suitable gas and electric point if both are available. It is your responsibility to arrange the connection of your cooker by a suitably qualified person.
- There will be a minimum of two double electrical sockets.
- We will provide space for a fridge and, washing machine with plumbing, taps and waste, the connection of your washing machine is your responsibility.
- The kitchen floor will have a washable clean floor covering free from broken and damaged tiles.

Decoration

- The redecoration of the property is your responsibility, including filling small holes and cracks.

Doors, internal woodwork, windows and glazing

- All fire doors will be checked to meet agreed standards.
- All internal and external doors will operate correctly and be fit for purpose.
- The locks to all external doors will be changed.
- All glazing will be intact when you move in and all windows that are designed to open will be in working order.

Ceilings and walls

- Visible plasterwork will be of a decoratable standard.
- We will remove any polystyrene tiles throughout the property.
- All walls and ceilings will be free from damp or mould.
- Graffiti will be removed or decorated over internally and externally.

Floors and stairs

- With your agreement the previous tenants' carpets, lino, ceramic tiles, laminated or wooden floor coverings that are in reasonably good condition will be left in the property. The ongoing maintenance and replacement of these items would become your responsibility.
- Floors will be even and free from tripping hazards.

- The flooring in the kitchen and bathroom will have a clean and washable covering, broken and damaged tiles will be replaced.
- Timber floors will be secure and in an acceptable condition.
- Solid floors will have no major ongoing defects.
- Stairs will have safe and secure handrails and balustrades.

Bathroom and toilet

- All existing bathroom elements will be operational and free from leaks.
- All glazed tiled areas will be correctly sealed and free from cracked or broken tiles.
- All toilets will work properly, be securely fixed and have a new toilet seat fitted. Further replacement toilet seats, as needed throughout your tenancy, will be your responsibility.

Heating and mains services

- If the property has a gas supply, we will have the gas supply and any appliances tested in line with current gas safety regulations to make sure they are safe and in working order.
- We will give you a copy of the landlord's gas safety certificate and let you know where the emergency control valve is when you sign the tenancy agreement.
- The mains water supply will be left working, the main stop tap (also called a stopcock) will be checked and left operational. We will let you know where it is on the sign up visit.
- We will have the electrical supply checked in line with the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contractors (NICEIC) inspection procedure.
- Appropriate smoke alarms will be installed at the property.

Outside

- Recognised access paths will be left safe and hazard free.
- External health and safety hazards will be removed.
- Boundaries will be clearly defined.
- Existing fencing installed by the City Council will be repaired/replaced.
- Roofs, walls, gutters and downpipes will be safe and in working condition.
- We will remove rubbish from the front and back gardens, bin stores and any sheds.
- We will remove sheds, greenhouses and other similar garden structures unless they are in good condition. In the event that any of these items are left, the ongoing maintenance and replacement of these items would become your responsibility.

- We will cut back any overgrown hedges, lawns and trees to an acceptable height. The ongoing maintenance and replacement of these items would become your responsibility.

Cleaning

- The property will be clean and free from rubbish including the loft space.
- Surfaces and cupboards will be cleaned.
- Kitchen and bathroom floors will be mopped.
- The sink, wash hand basin, bath/shower and toilet will be sanitised.