EMPTY HOMES POLICY

Date: 14.11.2025
Review: 18.05.2028

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EMPTY HOMES POLICY

Contents

1.0 Statement

2.0 Aims & Objectives

3.0 End of tenancy

4.0 Formal Termination

5.0 Death of Tenant

6.0 Internal Transfers

7.0 Abandonment

8.0 Eviction

9.0 Pre-Void Inspections

10.0 Compliance

11.0 Works to Void Properties

12.0 Voids & Lettings Standard

13.0 Value for Money

EMPTY HOMES POLICY

1.0 Statement

1.1 Void properties are an inevitable part of the provision and management of rented accommodation, as tenancies will end for one reason or another.

1.2 A property is classed as void when there is no current tenancy. The void period is the time between one tenancy ending and a new tenancy commencing. Whilst a property is void, no rental income is being received for it.

1.3 Loss of rental income can have an impact on the level and quality of service delivery which Radcliffe Housing Society (RHS) can achieve. It is essential, therefore, that an effective and efficient system is in place to manage void properties and limit as far as possible the length of time they remain void, thus minimising the amount of rental income lost through voids.

1.4 Effective void management is also essential to assist us to meet applicants' housing needs, in line with the objectives of the Housing Options Policy, in as efficient a manner as possible.

1.5 This Policy sets out our approach to void management.

2.0 Aims & Objectives

The main objective of this Policy is to operate an effective void management process which will:

- Minimise void periods
- Achieve the minimal void rental loss possible
- Assist in meeting housing need as quickly as possible.

2.2 It is also an objective of this Policy to minimise void repair costs, rechargeable repair costs, and former tenant arrears, through clear and effective communication with tenants and a process of early inspection.

3.0 End of Tenancy

A void can happen for a number of reasons:

- Formal termination – where a tenant gives formal written notice
- Death of a tenant – where a tenant dies and there is no successor to the tenancy
- Transfer – where a tenant moves to another RHS owned property
- Abandonment – where a tenant has abandoned a property without notice
- Eviction – where we have completed court action and obtained authority to evict a tenant.

4.0 Formal Termination

4.1 A tenant is required to give a calendar month's written notice of their intention to leave the property. We will then inform the tenant/s of the end of tenancy date and remind them of their end of tenancy responsibilities, including:

- The property to be left in a clean and tidy condition
- The property to be cleared of all effects
- Any fixtures or fittings installed without permission to be removed, and any damage caused put right

- All keys to be returned by 12pm on the termination date or before
- Rent is due up to and including end of tenancy date, regardless of whether the tenant moves out prior to this date.

4.2 If a termination notice is received by one tenant, with (or without) the knowledge or consent of the other, this notice will still end the tenancy. Accepting a notice from a single joint tenant on behalf of all would not automatically prevent RHS from re-granting a tenancy to the remaining (previously joint) tenant. This would be subject to our Housing Options Policy and must be approved by our Operations Director.

5.0 Death of Tenant

5.1 When a tenant dies and there is no one who qualifies to succeed to the tenancy, then the tenancy will be terminated, once we have satisfied probate conditions. We will advise the tenant's next of kin, or representative dealing with their affairs, of the end of tenancy responsibilities and procedures.

5.2 The condition in which the property is handed back to us, are the same requirements as those already highlighted, in the case of a formal termination.

5.3 We cannot re-let the property until the keys are returned. Therefore, we will recover costs for loss of rental income and an occupancy charge will be made. This charge will be recovered from the former tenant's estate, where funds are available, and will be equivalent to the full rental charge due.

5.4 We recognise that this is a difficult and sensitive time for tenants' families and some flexibility may be required. Extra time may be granted for the property to be cleared and keys returned.

5.5 Where the next of kin or representative request additional time to clear the property, the circumstances will be given full consideration. However, additional time will normally only be granted where they provide confirmation that the tenant's estate can cover the additional occupancy charge which, again, will be the equivalent of the full rental charge due for the agreed period.

5.6 We acknowledge there will be occasions where there are no funds in a former tenant's estate, and therefore the rental loss incurred at this end of tenancy period may not be recovered.

6.0 Internal Transfers

The end of tenancy responsibilities for a tenant transferring to another of our properties, are the same as those in the case of a formal termination. A tenancy start date will have been given for the new property.

7.0 Abandonment

7.1 Abandonments arise where there has been some trigger to consider whether the tenant has left the property without intention to return. No explicit surrender of the property and termination of the tenancy will have been made.

7.2 We will do everything that can be reasonably expected to establish whether a property has been abandoned or not. In doing so, we will consider:

- Whether possessions have been left in the property
- Whether post has been collected or built up
- What the neighbours say
- Whether food or rubbish has been left in the property
- Securing information from Government agencies including MARAC, social services, Housing Benefit or Universal Credit

7.3 This investigation will be evidenced through photographs and an inventory taken. All attempts to contact the tenant(s) will also be evidenced to demonstrate reasonableness.

7.4 Legal action will be taken to recover the property, once reasonableness has been evidenced.

8.0 Eviction

8.1 We use legal actions to evict tenants where there has been breach of tenancy and it is deemed necessary to recover the property. The type and use of legal action will vary depending on the type of breach of tenancy and the tenancy conditions.

8.2 The end of tenancy responsibilities for a tenant being evicted are the same as those in the case of a formal termination. All responsibilities relating to the current property must be carried out by the eviction date.

9.0 Pre-Void Inspections

A pre-void inspection will be carried out at a date and time agreed with the vacating tenant or representatives, at the time of termination. Carrying out pre-void inspections are considered beneficial for the following reasons:

- It can help minimise void periods and void loss
- The condition of the property can be agreed with the tenant, helping to avoid any disputes after they have moved out
- Any issues regarding the condition of the property can be discussed directly with the tenant, and they have the opportunity to resolve them prior to termination. This helps to minimise repair costs and avoid rechargeable repairs
- Where a tenant has died, we will aim to carry out an inspection prior to the property being cleared and keys returned. It is preferable for the next of kin or representative to be present during an inspection. Permission to carry out the inspection will be sought from the next of kin.

9.1 Inspections will be carried out by the Asset Manager with the current tenant present. During an inspection it will be determined whether there are any repairs required due to accidental or wilful damage, neglect or vandalism, by a tenant or tenant's visitor.

9.2 If there is evidence of the above, we will consider recharges against the vacating resident

10.0 Compliance

10.1 We carry out gas servicing inspections annually, but an additional inspection will be done at the time the property becomes void.

10.2 We carry out NICEIC Electrical Safety checks at least once every five years on all our stock. An additional inspection will be done at the time the property becomes void.

10.3 We will carry out an assessment of the property to determine the energy efficiency of the property. The validity of these energy performance certificates lasts for 10 years but can be carried out during a void period in line with our sustainability objectives. The property will not be relet if the rating is less than 'E or less' and further works will be undertaken to improve the energy efficiency rating, before it is let.

11.0 Works to Void Properties

11.1 Void properties will be inspected within one working day the property becomes void. The Asset Manager will carry out the following process on voids:

- Check the stock condition survey and any planned works programme to make the most cost-effective use of resources
- Complete a Void Property Inspection Form (Appendix 1) and arrange for any necessary repairs to be ordered in line with this void standard. Some non-urgent / minor repairs may be completed after the new tenant has moved in.
- The incoming tenant will be advised of the outstanding work and access arrangements will be made
- The Asset Manager will provide information on whether asbestos has been identified in the property.

11.2 A post void inspection will be made following the void works to ensure that the property meets the required voids and lettings standard. Photographic evidence will be taken at the property.

12.0 Voids & Lettings Standard

12.1 We will ensure that at the point of occupancy, the property will be:

- A safe and secure home
- Structurally sound, and where possible energy efficient
- Weather tight, damp free and adequately ventilated
- Ready for all operating connections to the mains utilities
- Fitted with a Decent Homes Standard kitchen and bathroom
- Fully compliant with all utilities checks and certified

Element	Standard to be achieved
Services	• All electrical and gas services to the property should be checked for faults and general integrity. All services to comply with legislative standards. • All taps and overflows will be securely fixed, free from blockages and in full working order.

Appliances	• Such as electric showers or white goods in market rented properties, will be tested to ensure that they are safe to use and compliant with current legislation. • Instruction leaflets will be provided where items are provided by RHS. • All smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors will be in full working order. These will be tested by engineers at the gas and electrical testing stage.
Cleanliness	All properties will be offered in a clean standard when void work has been completed. The basic standard for voids will be: • All items of rubbish to be removed from the property, including loft areas, and where applicable recharged to the former tenant • All work surfaces will be disinfected with particular attention to kitchen and bathrooms including mould removal with anti-fungal solution as appropriate • Baths, basins and toilets should be cleaned and free from staining • All kitchen units and shelving should be washed • Tiling in kitchens and bathrooms should be cleaned if stained • Light switches and light fittings should be free from dirt • All floors should be swept and cleaned if heavily stained • Any white goods in market rented properties should be cleaned • Remove any nails, picture hooks blue tack etc, from walls • Remove items of belongings left by former tenant and recharge the cost to former tenant
Security	• External doors should be undamaged, be secure and have a clean and damage free appearance • 2 new sets of keys must be provided, for both back door and front doors • At least 2 fob keys should be provided to all new lettings • Window lock keys should be provided for all ground floor windows • All window handles, catches and restrictors will be operational • All opening windows will open freely • Any security lights will be in working order
Glazing/Windows	• All broken and cracked panes of glass will be replaced • Any units that show signs of failure will be considered for replacement • All glazing indoors at low level must be laminated to the required safety standard or alternatively replaced with timber panels • All ground floor windows should be lockable
Roofs, drains and gutters	• Roof should be in a good state of repair with securely fixed tiles (this does not include garages or sheds) • Fascia boards and soffits should be in good condition • Flashings should be secure and in a good condition • Gutters and downspouts should be free from blockages and leaks • Manhole covers should be in good condition and secure

	• All roof spaces will be checked and cleared of former tenant belonging if appropriate • Roof spaces will have a minimum of 300mm insulation installed • Tanks and pipes in loft spaces should be lagged
Walls / floors and doors	• Where plasterwork is in a poor condition walls will be recommended for skimming • All architraves and skirting boards will be securely fixed to the wall and free from nails and screws • Holes and plaster works will be filled in with suitable filler and sanded down, minor small holes and decorative cracks will not • All previously fitted carpets/laminates will be assessed for the benefit of the next tenant and will be signed for by the incoming tenant. Any carpets/laminate in a poor or dirty condition will be removed. In flats laminate flooring should be removed where there has been an issue with noise • Floors will be even and free from trip hazards • Repair/replace rotten or damaged floorboards • Flooring in kitchen and bathrooms if required will be fitted with nonslip vinyl flooring • If replacement floor tiling is needed, the asbestos survey is to be checked and then repair or replace to the nearest likeness to be achieved • Internal doors with minor damage will be repairs and decorated where appropriate. Ironmongery to doors will be secure and in working condition • All walls should be visually checked for signs of dampness and mould and where appropriate a DPC survey ordered
Heating	• All properties should have full operational heating within Decent Homes Standards • Tenants should be advised on allocation that if they install an any independent heating, it will be at their expense and responsibility for repair and maintenance • Boiler instructions should be provided to the new tenant • Gas installation will be completed by a qualified engineer and a copy of the gas record (CP12) given to the new tenant. They will be advised of our annual gas servicing procedure. • Carbon Monoxide detectors will be provided and tested
Kitchens	• All kitchens should be in a reasonable state of repair and comply with the Decent Homes Standard • Kitchens should have adequate number of units to meet the size of the property and in good working order. • Cupboard doors and units should be secure, have secure shelving, bases and drawers • Work surfaces should be free from chips, burns, deep scratches and be finished with edging strips. A decision on whether to replace and recharge will be made at the discretion of the Asset Manager • Cooker points will be capped off and will be checked at the electrical and gas checks • Electric fans should be checked if working correctly

	• Cracked, damaged or missing tiling will be replaced with standard white fitting • Sealant between tiles and work surface will be renewed if damaged • Sink and associated plumbing will be checked for leaks • Plumbing for washing machines will be provided • Location of stopcock noted and tested to be in good working order, and to advise new tenant of location
Bathrooms	• All bathrooms should be in a reasonable state of repair and comply with the Decent Homes Standard • The bath will be free from chips and/or cracks and be in a clean condition. Taps should be secure and working properly and be supplied with a plug and chain • Bath panel should be securely fitted and in a good condition • Tiling to the bath area should be adequately sealed. The tiling must be secure, clean and free from cracks • WC should be securely fitted to the floor and be free from cracks or chips. The toilet should be working correctly clean and be free from blockages • Showers should be electrically tested, checked that they are working correctly and that there is adequate tiling for the shower • Shower curtain should be provided where a screen is absent • Where grab rails are in situ these should be securely fastened
Electrical	• All sockets, lighting and their fittings should be in good condition • Appropriate electrical certificates will be updated when tested • For flats, with door entry systems, the system will be tested and be fully operational.
Fire Protection	• Smoke detectors should be provided on each storey of the home • All electrical sockets should be earthed in accordance with current requirements • Flats with supplied fire blankets and extinguishers should have a current service notice on them
Garden Areas / Outside stores	• All garden areas should be free from rubbish • Ponds should be filled in and made safe • Uneven pathways, steps or loose paving will be relevelled and securely fastened • Make safe any steps that would cause a trip hazard • Unsafe structures including greenhouses, sheds and garages to be demolished. Structures will be checked against our Asbestos survey for safe removal • Any structures that will remain will be gifted and signed by the incoming tenant.
Fencing, gates and boundaries	• Priority for replacement will depend on location of property near a health & safety issue (eg family housing facing a main road) • Fencing repair and replacements identified at the void stage should be placed on the fencing replacement programme

Telephone / Satellite dishes / cables	• Satellite dishes and TV aerials that are unsafe will be removed, otherwise these will remain • Provision of a TV aerial is a tenant responsibility where there is no provision of a communal area that is covered with a service charge and maintained by us.

13.0 Value for Money

The Policy has been written to ensure that our void repairs service meets our objectives, to deliver value for money and to continually develop the service to provide the most efficient and effective methods that will achieve this.

13.1 By creating a void and lettings standard, we will achieve a quality product without expending additional resources. It aims to drive a smarter use of existing resources and a proactive management of the finances available. The standard will be reviewed annually to ensure that it delivers the drive in quality without increasing costs.