

# Sunderland City Council

## Void Management Policy

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## 1.

### 1. Purpose

Sunderland City Council are committed to maximising rental income and making the best use of available stock, through the efficient and effective control of empty properties (Voids). This policy is to ensure that Sunderland City Council has effective procedures in place to manage its empty stock quickly and efficiently.

As the Housing Service is funded from the income generated by the rental of its stock, the Void Management Policy focuses on the requirement to reduce the length of time a property is empty.

This policy will ensure a forward looking and strategic approach to void management that will help to:

- Minimise rent loss through reducing the length of the void period and repair costs.
- Ensure that all staff, contractors and tenants are aware of exactly what condition Sunderland City Council expects of its empty properties.
- Put in place systems for monitoring the standards of void properties and customer satisfaction.

This policy, together with Sunderland City Council's Tenancy Management and Repair and Maintenance Policies will guide staff in ensuring that tenants are aware of their repair responsibilities and end of tenancy obligations.

This Policy should be used in conjunction with our Lettings Policy, to ensure that our stock is well used in a way that meets local demand in a fair and equitable way.

Good void management is based on Sunderland City Council managing the process effectively and working closely with the outgoing tenant and as necessary, with other agencies or partners. It involves dealing with three key areas:

- Tenancy termination
- Identification and completion of any work to the property
- Allocation of the property

To achieve this objective the policy also aims to ensure that:

- Meets all of its legal, contractual, and regulatory obligations.
- All properties adhere to the 'Lettable Standard'.
- Sunderland City Council's financial stability and viability is protected.
- Properties are let as quickly as possible.
- Helps address the housing need in its area.
- Properties are desirable and in demand.
- Void costs are minimised whilst not compromising standards.
- Low demand and hard to let properties are quickly identified and remedial strategies implemented.
- Sunderland City Council continues to meet the demands and expectations of potential tenants with regards to standard of accommodation offered.

## **2. Scope**

The Void Management Policy applies to all property within the Council's Housing Stock.

This policy applies to all tenure and occupancy types and Sunderland City Council's staff involved in void management duties including contractors and sub-contractors used on the Council's behalf.

## **3. Legal and Best Practice Framework**

This Void Management Policy and the way in which its 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 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, a property is empty between lettings – taking into account the new tenant's circumstances.
- Meeting all statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of new occupants.
- Demonstrating appropriate balance of planned and responsive repairs, and value for money. This should include, responsive, planned, cyclical work and adaptations on voids.
- Ensuring that tenants homes meet the standards set out in the Government's Decent Homes Standard and Sunderland City Council's Lettable Standard.

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

- Tenancy Management Policy
- Rechargeable Repairs Policy
- Sunderland Allocations Scheme Policy
- Lettings Policy
- Repairs and Maintenance Policy
- Aids and Adaptations Policy
- Tenancy Agreement(s)
- Asset Management Strategy
- Lettable Standard

#### **4. Equality impact considerations**

Sunderland City Council are committed to providing a fair and equitable service to its tenants and service users. Through the management of our empty properties, we aim to treat all tenants fairly, with dignity, respectfully and with professionalism regardless of race, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and marital status.

Sunderland City Council will make reasonable adjustments and tailor their service to meet a tenant's needs.

### **5. Policy Detail**

#### **5.1 Tenancy Termination**

All tenants are required to give at least four week's written notice to terminate their tenancy. Tenancies will always end on a Sunday. Full weekly rent must be paid until the end of the notice period as well as any rent arrears.

Where a tenant is deceased Sunderland City Council will charge the full weekly rent until the tenancy is formally ended. The executor, administrator or family members are not personally responsible for paying the rent of the deceased tenant. This must be paid as well as any arrears from the deceased tenants estate.

The Housing Management Officer will carry out a **Pre-Void Inspection** as soon as possible within the four week notice period. This will be a joint inspection between the Housing Management Officer and a Property Services Officer.

The main purpose of this visit is to:

- Explain to the outgoing tenant that access is required for a pre void inspection of the property, repair or replace any damaged fixtures or fittings and return all keys for the property.
- Advise they must clean and clear the property, garden/yard and any outbuildings. If any items are left upon the tenancy termination date the tenant may be charged for the removal and storage of those items.
- Explain that all debts owing to Sunderland City Council such as rent arrears or court costs must be cleared in full before the end of the tenancy.
- Ensure they take utility meter readings, and no debt is left on the meters.
- Identify any re-chargeable repairs (for which the outgoing tenant is to be recharged for)
- Confirm the forwarding address and contact details.
- Ensure they have redirected their post.

Any adaptations to the property, such as a level access shower, wheelchair height kitchen cupboards and handrails etc. will be noted at this time. This information will be shared with the Council's Allocations team so that they are able to offer the property to an appropriate prospective tenant.

## **5.2 Terminations following the death of a tenant**

It is the responsibility of the next of kin or the executor of the estate to remove all goods and clean and clear the property.

If there is no executor, Sunderland City 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 estate may be charged for any repairs and clearance required to the property caused by neglect or wilful damage.

## **5.3 Evictions and Abandonments**

The outgoing tenant is responsible for removing all personal possessions from the property, but there may be instances where the tenant fails to give notice (either as a result of an eviction or abandonment) and belongings are left in the property.

Sunderland City Council will serve a 'Tort Notice' advising there are personal belongings in the property and upon expiry of the Notice all belongings in the property will be treated as abandoned. Sunderland City Council reserves the right to recharge the outgoing tenant for costs incurred as a result of storing or disposing of goods.

#### **5.4 Rechargeable Repairs**

Sunderland 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 treating any infestations in the property. Photographic evidence will be obtained before the void works are carried out to formally record and prove the need for the recharge.

#### **5.5 Letting a Void Property**

Sunderland 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, Sunderland City Council may undertake repairs to the property prior to a prospective tenant being identified.

#### **5.6 New Tenant(s) Selection**

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 Sunderland City Council is made aware that the property will be available for re-letting. Prospective tenants will be selected in accordance with the Lettings Policy. If possible, a viewing for a prospective tenant will be undertaken prior to the outgoing tenant leaving the property to minimise any delay in allocating the property.

#### **5.7 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. 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 Sunderland 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. etc.) they will be removed, and the property returned to its original condition.

## **5.8 New tenancies**

As soon as all essential repairs are completed satisfactorily, the prospective tenant will be invited to sign the Tenancy Agreement 'The Sign Up'. 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)

## **6. Void Inspection**

As soon as the property becomes void it will be inspected within 2 working days. A full void inspection will include all aspects of the building/s, garden/s, yards and outbuildings.

The gas supply will be disconnected within 48 hours using a sealing 'disc'. Upon the re-let of the property, Property Services will carry out a Gas Safety Check and full service.

Photographs will be taken of any items left in situ or damage to the property.

The Housing Management Officer will check if there is an up-to-date Stock Condition Survey (carried out within the last 5 years). If a new Stock Condition Survey is required this should take place at the Void Inspection.

The Void Inspection and Stock Condition Survey form should be saved on the system.

## **7. Repairs to Void Properties**

Sunderland City Council aims to identify and complete all necessary repairs to ensure the property is relet as quickly as possible.

All works undertaken will be completed to the Lettable Standard. **(Appendix A).**

In exceptional circumstances, minor or non-essential repairs may be undertaken once the tenancy has commenced. These repairs and timescales for their completion will be agreed with the new tenant and charged to the voids budget.

If a repair is identified within the first 28 days of the new tenancy that should have been completed upon the void these repairs will also be charged to the void budget.

All properties will be issued with an electrical, asbestos and gas safety certificate in compliance with legal requirements. An Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) will also be issued and if there is not an up-to-date EPC available, Sunderland City Council will commission a new one. Copies of these will be issued to the new tenant as part of the 'sign up' process.

Sunderland City Council will ensure that properties are checked against any planned works programmes to make the most cost-effective use of resources. If a property falls into a geographical area where planned works is being undertaken, then the void property will be given priority for works to be completed as soon as possible.

Major and Health and Safety works that would cause a high level of disruption to tenants or put their safety at risk, such as necessary removal of asbestos, damp and rot treatments will be completed prior to the start of the new tenancy.

If a property requires major works and a high level of investment, 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
- 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 financially 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.

Secure tenants have the right to improve their home after seeking written permission from the Sunderland City Council. Providing that any improvements found in void properties were properly inspected and approved at the time of their installation, or in retrospect and they pass any current health and safety inspections required and are fire risk compliant, they will remain in the property as a gifted item to the new tenant.

Sunderland City Council will undertake basic redecoration where required before being relet. General needs properties should be left in a suitable condition so that routine internal decoration can take place. As an example, walls, ceiling and woodwork filled and made good but may not be painted. If a property is left with bold or hard to cover colours or there is significant smoke staining consideration should be given to paint those areas before re-letting the property.

Once work to a void property has been completed the property will be post inspected to ensure the work meets the Lettable Standard.

## **8. Adapted Properties**

When adapted properties become void will be considered in line with the Council's Aids and Adaptations Policy with the priority being, ensuring best use of the adaptations. In some instances, where a property has major adaptations, Sunderland 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 the Housing Operations Manager/s based on all available information on the demand for the property

## **9. Tenant Involvement**

Satisfaction with the void repairs service will be monitored through 'New Tenancy Visit' and repairs satisfaction surveys. Feedback from these surveys will be used to inform amendments to the policy and improve ongoing service and performance.

## **10. Monitoring, Review and Evaluation**

To measure the success of this policy the Housing Services Monitoring Group will monitor performance.

Void Management performance monitoring will focus on 4 key aspects – time taken to relet properties, the average cost of bringing voids to a 'lettable standard', the average time to complete void repairs and tenancy sustainment.

Quarterly performance reports from staff will enable the Housing Services Monitoring Group to monitor Sunderland City Council's performance against agreed targets. These reports will be used to inform and set future target setting and enable any changes to working practices.

The Housing Operations Manager/s will monitor the 'lettable standard' and void turnaround time. Void performance will also be discussed regularly at void meetings which are attended by staff, Property Services and contractors carrying out the void works. Void performance will also be monitored on a monthly and quarterly basis via Housing Operations KPIs.

## **11. Roles, Responsibility and Evaluation**

The Senior Manager of Strategic Asset Management retains the overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy.

The Housing Operations Manager is responsible for the operational delivery of this policy, and the associated procedures.

This policy will be reviewed every three years, or earlier in line with legal, regulatory, or good practice requirements.

## **Appendix A**

# **Lettable Standard**

The Lettable Standard is the specification that all our properties will meet when they are let to new tenants.

This standard is set to ensure that the property is safe, secure, clean and in a good state of repair.

## **Your home will:**

- Have fittings for a washing machine.
- Have a gas and an electrical safety check. These are statutory checks carried out to ensure your safety. Certificates will be provided for your information.
- Have been assessed regards its condition and details of any asbestos materials in the property recorded.

## **In your home:**

- The property will be inspected for any repair work that is needed and all major works completed.
- The property will be free of dampness.
- Ensure stop taps are in working order and we will tell you where to find them as well as your gas and electric meters.
- Minor repairs which do not impact upon this standard will be carried out once the tenancy has been granted.
- The property will be clean, all floors swept/mopped, kitchen cupboards will be emptied and clean and your bathroom and toilet fittings will be clean.
- A visual assessment for woodworm and major wet/dry rot will have been carried out, along with any remedial work.
- All walls and ceilings will be clean and free from graffiti with no major cracks. You will be responsible for decorating the inside of your home which may include filling small holes and cracks.
- The garden will be free from rubbish, rubble, debris, or hazards. Garden sheds and other structures will be removed unless you want to keep them and be responsible for them.
- You will be provided with a minimum of two keys per external door.
- Windows which are designed to open and close will be in working order.
- Your kitchen will have facilities to prepare and store food.
- There will be an electric cooker point or a gas cooker point where gas is fitted. Please remember: The installation of a gas or electric cooker is your responsibility. The installation of cookers must be undertaken by suitable qualified persons. Gas cookers must be fitted by a Gas Safe registered engineer.
- Plug sockets will be in working order.
- Radiators will be clean and in working order.
- Smoke alarms will be provided in your home.
- Carbon monoxide alarms where be provided where required.
- We will check the depth of the loft insulation and top this up if needed after you have moved in.
- Ensure that all floors and fixed floor coverings are secure and free from slip and trip hazards.
- Issue you with an Energy Performance Certificate

- Some works external works may be completed after your tenancy begins but we will make you aware what is outstanding and when the work will be completed.

## **Items left by the previous tenant**

Items inside or outside the property that are non-standard such as sheds, fitted wardrobes etc. which were installed by the previous tenant will be removed. However, if you wish to keep them, we will leave them in situ, but it will be your responsibility to maintain them.

These items will not form part of the premises let to you under your tenancy.

The items that are left in the property, which the new tenant (s) accept responsibility for are:

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Landlord: \_\_\_\_\_

Tenant (s) Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Tenant (s) Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by name : \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by signature: \_\_\_\_\_

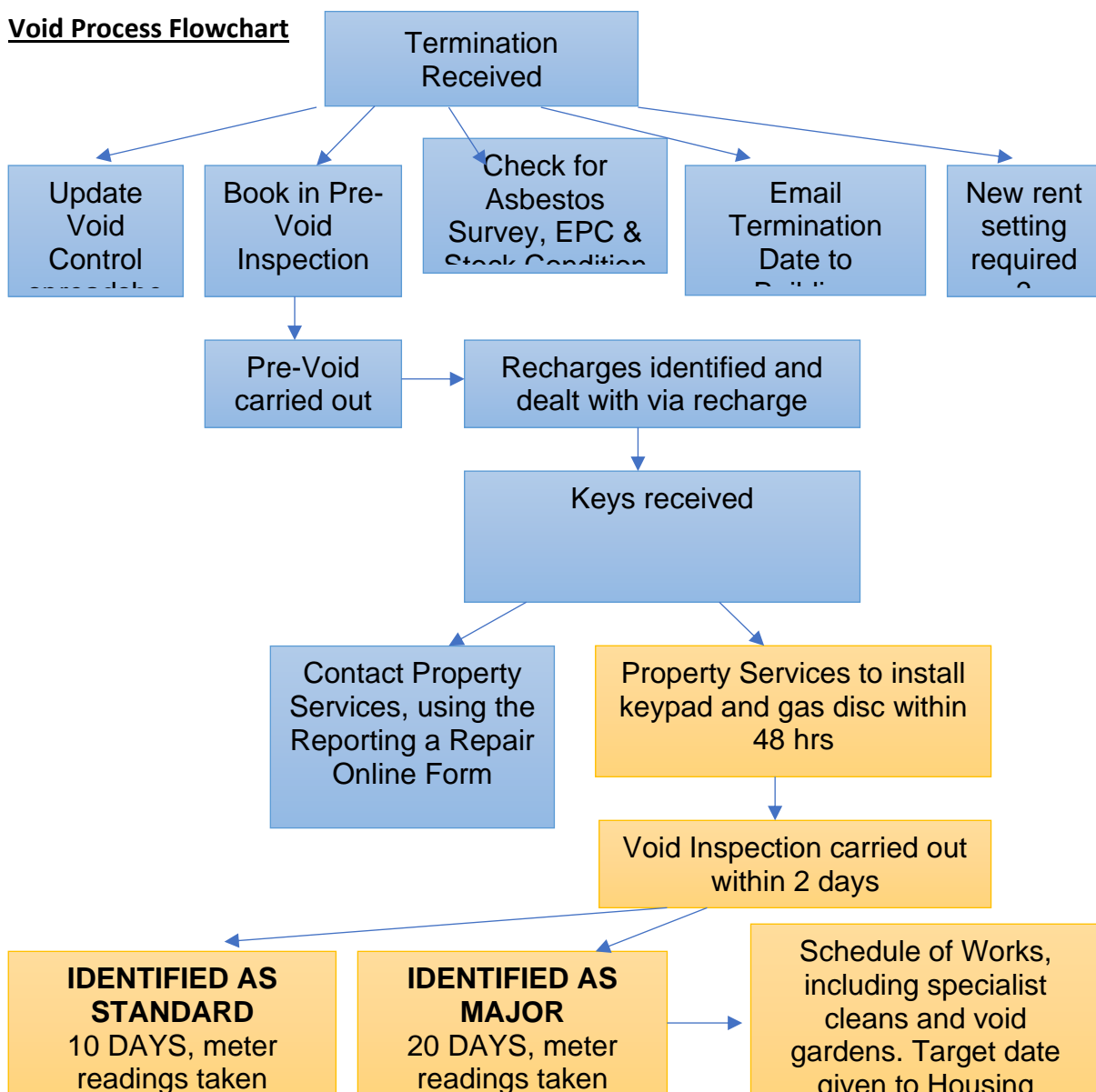
Witness job title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please remember should you rent one of our homes you must obtain permission from Sunderland City Council to carry out any improvements or alterations to your home. When you leave your home, it should be returned in this same standard.

## Appendix B

### Void Process Flowchart



Email Housing  
Operations to advise  
of keys return date

Housing Ops update  
keys returned on Void  
Control Spreadsheet