

Tenants First Housing Co-operative

Void Policy

Date Approved: 22 April 2009

Next Review Date: April 2012

Table of Contents

1. Policy Aims	2
2. Objectives	2
3. Void Properties and Associated Issues.....	3
3.1 Definition of a Void.....	3
3.2 Void Period	3
3.3 Prospective Members.....	3
3.4 Minimum Letting Standards.....	4
3.5 Decoration Allowance	4
3.6 The Right to Compensation for Improvements	4
3.7 Inspections.....	5
3.8 Security against Vandalism.....	5
3.9 Void Properties being Held for Another Purpose.....	5
3.10 Difficult to Let/Low Demand Properties.....	6
3.11 Winter Voids.....	6
3.12 Sheltered and Supported Housing Voids	6
4. Training	7
5. Equal Opportunities	7
6. Monitoring and Reporting.....	8
7. Review	8
8. The Legal Framework	9
9.0 References	9
10.0 Related Policies/Documents	9
Appendix One	10

[Return to Main Policy Index](#)

1. Policy Aims

Tenants First Housing Co-operative (hereafter referred to as the Co-operative) is a fully mutual Co-operative that owns rented properties in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Angus and Glasgow. Approximately 10% of the Co-operative's properties are ready to re-let annually using the terms of the Void Policy and associated procedures.

The Co-operative recognises the following as the key aims of its Void Policy:-

- To ensure that individuals are allocated a property that meets the Co-operative's defined re-letting and new build standards
- To minimise the void days and rent loss on empty properties
- To minimise the cost of void repairs
- To ensure effective, efficient and accountable management of properties.
- To ensure that outgoing members are fully aware of their responsibilities prior to a termination date in order to keep repair costs to a minimum and limit rechargeable fees
- To ensure that voids are let as quickly as possible to assist in meeting housing need and support the local authorities in the abolition of homelessness
- To enable effective monitoring of void management and service delivery to highlight both successes and weaknesses, making the maximum use of information technology
- To comply with legal duties, regulatory requirements and good practice standards
- To have a procedure that adheres to all the above that is clear, easy to follow and accessible for both staff and members

2. Objectives

The approval of this policy supports the following objectives contained in the Co-operative's Internal Management Plan:-

- 1h) "To ensure sustainability in provision, management and maintenance of housing stock
- 1i) "To provide and maintain properties to meet identified need"

3. Void Properties and Associated Issues

3.1 Definition of a Void

The Co-operative adopts the definition of a void property as “any property that has no member for a period of time”.

The Co-operative identifies that there are different ways in which a property can become void and defines them below.

- Formal termination – where the member gives 28 days written notice as per the terms of the Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement and Short Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement of their intention to leave the property
- Death of member – where the Co-operative is notified of the death of a member and there is no successor
- Abandonment – where the Co-operative issues a legal notice to a member who has vacated the property without notice
- Eviction – where the Co-operative completes court action to evict a member
- Transfers – where the member is re-housed in another Co-operative property
- Development voids – where a new property is handed over to the Co-operative as complete and is untenanted
- Decants – where a member has to be moved, usually temporarily, from their property for purposes of refurbishment or as a result of the property becoming inhabitable e.g. fire, flood

Mutual Exchanges do not allow for a property to be empty. The Mutual Exchanges process is documented in the Mutual Exchange procedure.

3.2 Void Period

The void period is the time – measured in calendar days – between the date of termination of a previous tenancy or repossession and the start date of a new tenancy. An empty property is not a void where the member is still legally ‘in occupation’, for example where someone is in hospital for a long period.

3.3 Prospective Members

To enable a prospective member to make an informed decision about the property on offer, the Co-operative will provide good quality information on

factors such as: the property offered; viewing arrangements; rent levels; welfare benefits; amenities; shopping facilities; transport and schools.

3.4 Minimum Letting Standards

The Co-operative has defined a condition standard to which a property will be brought up to before letting it to a new member. This is to ensure a high quality standard of housing, effective maintenance of its housing stock and transparency of service to its current and prospective members. Appendix 1 contains the minimum standards specification.

The list of Minimum Letting Standards will be handed out to prospective members so that they are fully informed about what they can expect regarding the condition of the property they will be moving in to.

3.5 Decoration Allowance

In circumstances where the decorative condition of an empty property is considered to be particularly poor by staff the Co-operative will offer a 'decorating grant' to incoming members, on the following basis:-

- Living area £40
- Bedroom £30
- Other rooms £20
- Up to a maximum of £120

Such grant will require authorisation but will not be paid to the new member until their membership of the Co-operative has been approved and the tenancy agreement has been signed. Fifty percent of the grant will be paid at the start of the tenancy. The remaining on confirmation that significant work has been carried out following inspection by a member of staff.

3.6 The Right to Compensation for Improvements

The Co-operative recognises that some outgoing members may have the right to receive compensation for certain improvement works that have been carried out during their tenancy with the Co-operative's consent e.g. replacement kitchen. Compensation is paid on a sliding scale and any compensation that is paid will depend on how long the member has enjoyed the benefits of the improvement works. As a rule, the longer the member has enjoyed the improvement the less compensation they may be awarded. After the improvement has been in place for five years no compensation will be paid.

3.7 Inspections

The Co-operative recognises that inspections are a vital element of good void management practice. The following inspections will be carried out throughout the void process:-

- Pre-termination inspection when the termination is initially received – this allows staff to check whether the member is willing to allow prospective members to view the property prior to their departure, and enable arrangements to be made which can considerably reduce the void re-letting period. It also allows staff to advise the outgoing member if they should complete repairs or lift carpets, etc so that they will not be recharged for such works.
- End of Termination inspection where necessary just prior to the end of the tenancy as this enables staff:-
 - to ensure the property has been left in a satisfactory condition prior to the tenants' departure.
 - members and staff to sign a declaration at the end of the inspection as to the condition of the property, and agree work for the member to carry out
 - to advise members of likely rechargeable costs if the property has not been left in a good condition.
 - the opportunity to advise the outgoing tenant to take the same end of tenancy meter readings.
 - to ensure the outgoing member is protected where they have left the property in good condition but damage occurs during the void period or when the new member is moving in
- Void inspection when the property has been vacated

3.8 Security against Vandalism

Although the Co-operative has very low incidents of vandalism to empty properties it will at the earliest opportunity, where a void property is vulnerable, or suspected to be vulnerable, to vandalism; squatting or theft of components, make immediate arrangements to secure any such property. These preventative measures may include changing locks and installing boarding over windows and doors. All security measures will comply with building insurance requirements.

3.9 Void Properties being Held for Another Purpose

Occasionally the Co-operative holds a property long-term without re-letting it through its Allocation Policy. The following is an example of some reasons why the Co-operative may not let an empty property through the usual methods:-

- It is to be sold
- It is required as a decant property (*this means a property is used to temporarily transfer a member into when their own home requires major repairs and is uninhabitable e.g. due to fire damage*)

- It is being upgraded through a regeneration programme (*this means a property may be rebuilt using local or central government funding to improve its condition*)

In these circumstances the property's void loss figure is recorded separately from the standard void loss performance figures when being reported on.

3.10 Difficult to Let/Low Demand Properties

The Scottish Housing Regulator's official classification of low demand is where a property has been void for seventeen weeks or longer. Difficult to let properties are classified as properties that are often refused but are re-let within seventeen weeks.

The Co-operative recognises the need to have strategies to assist in minimising difficult to let properties or improving take up of properties in low demand areas. Such strategies will consider and include, but are not limited to:-

- making physical, social conditions and environmental improvements in areas of difficult to let housing
- converting and improving unpopular properties to a higher standard
- allocating difficult to let properties to non-priority applicants where applicants with more housing priority are not forthcoming

3.11 Winter Voids

The need to take action to protect void properties in the winter varies between property types, ages and different geographic locations. At the void inspection decisions will be made as to whether the property will require frost precautions to be taken due to its location or type. Frost and/or flood precautions include:

- conducting regular inspections
- draining down of any water supply pipes and water heating systems
- keeping on timed low level heating a couple of times a day
- putting anti-freeze in WC pan to prevent cracking of the toilet base

The Co-operative will also advise members how to protect their properties in the winter which will be detailed in the Scottish and Short Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement, at the 'signing up' stage, the Members Handbook, newsletters and the website.

3.12 Sheltered and Supported Housing Voids

Void periods in specialist housing, such as sheltered, can sometimes be longer than normal because either the Co-operative may not be in direct control of the assessment process or it can take longer to identify a suitable applicant. Sometimes both of these factors are in play. Efficient and effective procedures, working relationships and liaison arrangements with relevant partners and agencies will be carried out wherever possible to minimise the effect on voids.

3.13 Communication

The co-ordinating of voids involves input from more than one section and external organisations. It is essential that staff and contractors keep each other informed of progress throughout the void period. Procedures, with timescales and areas of responsibility are also in place to ensure that the aims of the Policy are achieved.

3.14 Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement

The terms of the Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement and the Short Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement that are specific to the implementation of the Void Policy are found in section 6 entitled "Ending the Tenancy". The Co-operative will ensure that these terms are explained to new members, are outlined in the member's handbook and when a member expresses their wish to move on or transfer they will be given clear guidelines on their termination responsibilities.

3.15 Member Involvement and Review of Service

In reviewing void management, feedback will be obtained from members and used to improve service delivery by:

- Getting feedback on new members' satisfaction with the property and the void service through the Property Management "Post Letting Visit" and Housing Management "Settling-in Visit" questionnaires
- Monitoring comments and complaints from members

4. Training

The Co-operative through its Internal Management Plan is committed to training and developing staff, Committee/Board members and repair contractors so that they have a good knowledge of the procedures and systems in place for void management that meets the expectations of members, members of the public, colleagues and external organisations.

5. Equal Opportunities

The Co-operative will ensure that in implementing this Policy it will not unfairly discriminate against any individual, household or group on the grounds of gender, gender identity, marital status, on race grounds, or on the grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin, other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions such as religious beliefs or political opinions.

6. Monitoring and Reporting

The Housing Management Sub Committee and the Property Management and Development Sub Committee have delegated responsibility from the Committee of Management to monitor the Co-operative's void performance.

It will be the responsibility of the Housing Manager to provide quarterly reports to the Housing Management Sub Committee on the following:-

- Total number of void days in the current year
- Average void days in the current year
- Total void rent loss in the current year
- Average void rent loss in the current year
- Void rent loss as a percentage of the annual rent receivable in the current year

It will be the responsibility of the Property Manager to provide quarterly reports to the Property Management and Development Sub Committee on the following:

- The average time it takes to make a property ready for let
- The spend per void property
- The average void spend

Performance will also be reported on via the Co-operative's Annual Report, the Your Voice newsletter and on the website.

Performance will be measured against defined targets. Targets will be set annually by:-

- reviewing the performance of the previous year
- benchmarking the performance of other Registered Social Landlords
- taking into account any developments that might impact on staff workload and any external factors, for example a lower demand for particular properties

7. Review

This policy will be approved by the Committee of Management and is reviewed in consultation with members and staff. It will be reviewed every three years unless amendment is prompted by a change in legislation, operational requirements or customer feedback.

8. The Legal Framework

In approving and implementing the Void Policy the Co-operative aims to comply with the following legislation:-

- Housing (Scotland) Act 2001
- Schedule 7 Part1 of Housing (Scotland) Act 2001
- Data Protection Act 1998
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Race Relations Act 1976
- Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000
- Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Matrimonial Homes (Family Protection) (Scotland) Act 1981
- The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1994
- Construction, Design and Management (CDM) Regulations 1994
- Scottish Secure Tenants (Compensation for Improvements) Regulations 2002

9.0 References

- Void Procedures
- Communities Scotland Performance Standard AS1.5 and Self Assessment for Performance Standards
- Scottish Federation of Housing Associations: Raising Standards in Housing Chapter 19 - Void Management

10.0 Related Policies/Documents

- Allocations Policy
- Estate Management Policy – Physical Environment
- Antisocial Behaviour and Harassment Policy
- Property Management Policy
- Abandonment Policy
- Development Policy
- Scottish Secure Tenancy and Short Scottish Secure Tenancy
- Internal Management Plan

Appendix One

GUIDE TO PRE-TERM INSPECTION SHEET

RE-LETTABLE STANDARDS FOR TENANTS FIRST HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE

Objective

The following is Tenants First Housing Co-operative's re-lettable standards for vacant/void dwellings

External Repairs

- The dwelling to be wind and watertight
- The dwelling to be free from structural defect.
- The dwelling to be secure.
- Access to the dwelling to be safe.
- Doors and windows to be free to open and secure.
- Minimum of two keys to be provided for each external door lock.
- Drying green poles or rotary dryers to be in usable order where possible.
- Dangerous outbuildings to be removed.
- Safe accesses paths including no loose slabs or steps.
- Guttering and downpipes in serviceable order.
- Garden ground to be tidy and refuse to be removed.

Internal Repairs

- Gas (where appropriate) and electric safety checks to be carried out.
- The principle means of space and water heating to be visually checked and complete.
- An adequate hot and cold water supply to be provided.
- The dwelling to be free from rising or penetrating damp.
- An efficient system for the removal of foul waste to be provided.
- Dwelling to be visually free from pests or vermin.
- All surfaces to be stable and free from collapse and reasonably even.
- Internal doors to be in place and able to be opened and closed freely with properly functioning handles.
- An electric or gas cooker point to be available and in serviceable condition.
- Adequate kitchen and food storage to be provided including the installation of a kitchen sink base unit, and storage unit with adequate clean and impervious worktop space.
- Kitchen cupboard doors and drawers to be in place and properly functioning.

- A suitable toilet fixed bath or shower and wash hand basin provided free from cracks and in good working order.
- If coloured bathroom suites have been installed and a partial replacement is necessary a reasonable attempt at matching should be made or if not possible replacement white fittings to be used.
- Smoke alarms in full working order to be provided.
- Damaged asbestos to be removed.
- All glazing to be intact.
- The property will be in a hygienic condition.
- Ensure all refuse and furniture is cleared from the property and loft space except where an arrangement has been made between the outgoing tenant and new tenant.
- Plumbing to connect a hot and cold supply washing machine to be provided.

Decoration

- Where a dwelling is in a poor state of decoration then a decision is required to instruct the contractor to carry out appropriate redecoration work at the same time as other repairs are done.
- Only in cases where the dwelling is in a very poor state of decoration and/or where it is likely to be difficult to let should an instruction be issued to the maintenance contractor to redecorate.