



Wear Valley

District Council

Void Property Procedure

JULY 2005

1 Introduction

1.1 The aim of the void procedure is:

- To achieve performance that meets the void target;
- To ensure expenditure on voids is within target; and
- To raise customer satisfaction with the final product.

2 Main features

2.1 Voids will be classified as casual voids or complex voids (see definition below).

2.1.1 *Complex Void*

These are defined as voids which cannot be let immediately or after minor repair because they require structural alterations, damp or timber treatment, asbestos removal, major repairs, major re-plastering, rewiring etc., and those which are designated for an incentive move or disabled adaptations.

Complex voids will be given targets for time and cost, but **will be excluded** from the normal void relet target.

Neighbourhood Managers, in the role of monitoring officer, will sign a form to state that they agree that a void is a complex void. This is a requirement to satisfy Departmental Management Team and District Audit.

2.1.2 *Casual Void*

These will include all other voids and will form the majority of the voids we deal with.

Casual voids will have a thirteen-calendar day target with work being done within this period to bring the property to our agreed lettable standard. Other repairs will be carried out when the new customer moves in.

2.2 *The Lettable Standard*

Before letting a property Housing Officers will make sure:

- the gas and electricity supplies have been checked and any faults repaired (A full gas service will be carried out during the first week of occupation. *Also if the electric power was not on during the void period a live test needs to be carried out at the earliest opportunity once the customer has the electricity reinstated*);
- solid fuel appliances and flues have been checked and any faults repaired;
- sanitary ware is checked and cleaned;
- adequate kitchen storage and cooking facilities are available and that these are clean and tidy;
- all floors, stairs, banisters and handrails have been checked and any faults repaired;
- all windows and external doors are safe and secure and that any faulty locks or

- latches are repaired; and
 - all rubbish from inside and outside is removed and that all floors and woodwork are washed.
- 2.3 Housing Officers shall undertake pre-termination inspections and agree outstanding repairs, including any rechargeable items, with the customer.
- 2.4 The Council will pursue the cost of all rechargeable repairs *in line with the Rechargeable Repairs Policy and Procedure.*
- 2.5 Housing Officers will be set individual targets for their area and given the appropriate information, support and training to enable them to achieve them.
- 2.6 *Housing Officers will complete weekly monitoring reports for consideration by their Neighbourhood Manager.*
- 2.7 The Head of Neighbourhood Operations shall produce monthly statistics for consideration by the Director and departmental management team.
- 2.8 *Responsibilities*

Re-letting void properties quickly is a key objective of the Housing Services Department. A number of officers of the department are involved in the void management procedure. Their responsibilities are set out below:

Housing Officers are responsible for advising outgoing customers of their obligations and responsibilities and for making offers of accommodation to prospective customers.

Customer Service Assistants are responsible for maintaining the Housing Register, advising the Housing Officers who is next on turn for a particular property and for the monitoring of keys. They are also responsible for the front-end transaction of keys and for ensuring they know their whereabouts at all times.

Void Maintenance Managers are responsible for the inspection of properties once they become void, ordering the work, supervising the workforce and for ensuring the quality of work meets the lettable standard. Void Maintenance Managers deal directly with sub contractors, liaise with Housing Officers and meet prospective customers.

Call Centre Staff are responsible for the coding and inputting of void property repairs and logging of keys.

Neighbourhood Managers are responsible for ensuring that voids are relet as quickly as possible.

Principal Property Service Manager is responsible for expenditure on repairing void properties and meeting budgeted expectations.

Principal Neighbourhood Manager is responsible for ensuring the smooth operation of the void procedure through regular meetings with the Neighbourhood Managers and Principal Property Service Manager.

Councilors are responsible for raising legitimate concerns about the condition of void properties on behalf of their constituents.

3 Dealing with Casual Voids

3.1 Pre Termination

- 3.1.1 Although customers are required to give the Council four weeks' written notice of their intention to terminate their tenancy, reduced notice is acceptable if the circumstances justify.
- 3.1.2 Where the property is abandoned (please refer to the Council's procedure for dealing with abandoned properties) or where the keys are handed back without four weeks' notice, the Customer Service Assistants shall assume that four weeks notice has been given from the date we are notified.
- 3.1.3 Where the customer (or his / her next of kin or estate in the case of a deceased customer) serves a valid Notice of Termination giving the appropriate notice period *the Customer Service Assistant will:*
- (a) acknowledge receipt by first class post on the same day;
 - (b) prepare the pre-termination paperwork for the Housing Officer.
- 3.1.4 The Housing Officer will carry out a pre termination inspection within five working days (or at a time convenient for the customer) to identify any outstanding repairs. The officer will advise the customer of any repairs he or she must carry out before leaving the property and explain the rechargeable repairs policy. Where possible a signature acknowledging the rechargeable repair should be obtained from the outgoing customer. Note: The Council **will not** recharge the next of kin or estate of a deceased customer.
- 3.1.5 The visit will also be an opportunity to discuss other issues such as the need for a forwarding address and telephone number, return of keys, leaving the property and garden clean and tidy, compensation for customer's improvements, rent arrears, housing benefit and termination of gas, electricity etc. It is important that the Housing Officer clarifies the need for the outgoing customer to remove all personal belongings from the property before handing it over to the Council.
- 3.1.6 The Housing Officer will obtain the customer's signature on the Pre Termination Inspection Checklist. If the outgoing customer is not present at the pre termination inspection the Housing Officer must advise them in writing of the intention to raise rechargeable repairs within two working days.
- 3.1.7 Where rechargeable repairs have been identified the Housing Officer will record this information on the recharge sheet. *The Void Maintenance Manager will use this information during his or her inspection of the void to verify whether the customer has carried out any of the work.*

3.2 Control of Keys

- 3.2.1 All keys are to be returned to the Council on the Monday that the tenancy ends.

In extreme circumstances, and at the discretion of the *House Officer*, where customers are unable to bring the keys to the local office, arrangements can be made for them to be collected.

- 3.2.2 If the keys are not returned by 3.30pm on the Monday, the Customer Service Assistant will arrange for the termination period to be extended by one week and will advise the Housing Officer of the non return of keys. The Housing Officer will investigate and make a decision on whether or not to change the locks to the property. If a decision to change the locks is made, the outgoing customer will be charged for the forced entry in addition to the extra week's rent.

Note: The customer(s) will have been advised of this during the pre-termination stage.

- 3.2.3 *Customer Service Assistants shall record the return of the keys on the computerised key logging system.*

- 3.3.4 *Customer Service Assistants shall be responsible for monitoring the keys throughout the void and lettings process.*

3.3 Inspecting the Void

- 3.3.1 *The Void Maintenance Manager will inspect the void within three working days of the keys being returned to the office.*

- 3.3.2 Where a forced entry is required **two Housing Officers** will attend while the Property Maintenance gains access, and will inspect the property immediately in accordance with the Council's Abandoned Property Procedure.

- 3.3.3 *The Void Maintenance Manager will identify repairs under two categories: those that need to be done before the customer moves in (these will be given a thirteen calendar day target starting from the day after the jobs are logged) and those that can be left until after the customer has moved in. A copy of the repair schedule will be given to the new customer at the sign up interview.*

- 3.3.4 Any rechargeable repairs not previously identified shall be notified to the outgoing customer in writing.

- 3.3.5 Repairs to be carried out when the customer has moved in will be done on days convenient to the customer who will be given the choice of appointments. The Housing Officer will arrange these appointments with Property Maintenance at the sign up interview.

- 3.3.6 Although a gas safety check will be carried out while the property is void, a full service of the gas appliance will be carried by appointment during the first week of occupation. This service will take place even if the last annual service had been carried out within the last 12 months.
Also an electrical check is carried out once the property is void which must be completed prior to the property being relet. Once the property is relet and power is restored a live electrical check is executed at the earliest convenience. All electrical documentation is then filed on the house file with the gas safety

documents. If a property becomes void again a visual inspection is then required reducing void period.

- 3.3.7 Where rechargeable repairs were identified during the pre termination inspection, the Void Maintenance Manager will check that the customer has carried these out. Where the repairs are still outstanding, this will be identified on the computer in the usual way and the customer pursued for the cost of the repair in accordance with the Council's Rechargeable Repairs Procedure.

3.4 Monitoring the Void

- 3.4.1 Housing Officers will inspect the premises at the beginning of the second week of the two-week repair period to monitor progress. Any potential slippage must be reported at this point and Property Maintenance is required to inform the Neighbourhood Manager in writing that same day.

- 3.4.2 *If slippage occurs beyond the two week repair period and the reasons cannot be justified the Neighbourhood Manager contacts the Principal Property Service Manager who will investigate and take counter action immediately.*

- 3.4.3 *Once the repairs are complete The Void Property Manager will inspect the premises prior to returning the keys to Neighbourhood Operations to ensure that the premises are ready to let and reach the lettable standard.*

- 3.4.4 *The Housing Officer and Customer Service Assistance will complete a void activity report recording all void activity on the weekly Void Report. The report is to be completed by Friday morning of each week for consideration by the Neighbourhood Manager.*

- 3.4.5 Where performance is identified as being below the expected standard the issues will be raised during the following week's meetings between Housing Officer and Void Maintenance Manager.

- 3.4.6 Monthly reports will be presented to Departmental Management Team, with housing Committee appraised each quarter.

- 3.4.7 If, at any stage throughout the monitoring process, an officer considers that a casual void has become a complex void, authorisation must be sought immediately to alter the status.

3.5 Viewing of Empty Properties

- 3.5.1 *In order to reduce re-let times a viewing will take place (if appropriate) with the Housing Officer, Void Manager and prospective customer before repairs are carried out.*

- 3.5.2 *This will enable us to offer a service tailored to the customer's needs. The Officers and customer can negotiate on which repairs will be carried out and which ones can be left.*

- 3.5.3 *It is anticipated savings will be made by not carrying out unnecessary repairs and*

also achieve:

a) Increase in customer satisfaction with the letting process(BV74a, Visions)

b) Improved performance in void re-let times (BV212)

4 Dealing with Complex Voids

4.1 A complex void can be identified in five ways:

- (a) As part of a wider demolition program;
- (b) Following a complaint from a customer (for example of dampness or floor heave);
- (c) Where the property becomes void following an emergency such as flood or fire etc;
- (d) Where a long term void is identified for possible demolition, remodeling or alternate use; or
- (e) During a routine inspection of a casual void.

4.2 The procedure to be adopted for a complex void identified as part of a wider demolition is contained within the Council's Demolition Procedure

4.3 Where a complex void is identified either by (b), (c) or (d) the Housing Officer will carry out a pre termination inspection as set out in 3.1.4 to 3.1.6 above.

4.3.2 Following the Void Inspection work will be passed to The Principal Property Service Manager and a target set between 20 and 30 working days depending on the nature of the repair.

4.4 Monitoring a complex void will follow the same process as set out for a casual void above (see 3.4), taking account for the extended target times.

5 Preparing an Offer

5.1 For full details on preparing an offer please refer to Council's Lettings Policy.

5.2 In relation to the void process, the Customer Service Assistant will check the Council's waiting list for potential applicants immediately upon receiving a valid Notice of Termination from the outgoing customer or next of kin / estate.

5.3 Where a property is thought to have been abandoned the Customer Service Assistant will check the Council's waiting list for potential applicants immediately upon receiving notification of this.

5.4 The Customer Service Assistant will contact the applicant who is next in turn to ascertain whether they are still interested in remaining on the list for accommodation within the area and to check that their details are correct.

5.5 Where the property has been abandoned, or the outgoing customer is no longer in occupation, the Housing Officer will arrange a pre-allocation inspection as soon as the property is considered safe.

- 5.6 A viewing of the property with the successful applicant will be arranged as soon as the Void Maintenance Manager returns the keys following the maintenance work and the home reaches the Council's Lettable Standard. Where appropriate a viewing of the property can also be arranged with the existing customer currently in occupation.

6 Rechargeable Repairs

- 6.1 This section sets out the criteria and guidelines for pursuing a recharge on a void property. The information on raising an invoice should also be followed when pursuing recharge repairs during a tenancy.

- 6.1.1 The tenancy agreement gives us the option to charge a customer for 'willful and negligent' damage to the property. The types of repairs that the customer will be responsible for includes damage through waste, removal of customer fixtures and fittings if they are not made good and the unauthorised removal of customer improvements.

- 6.2 We will not operate a blanket or rigid policy on recharging customers each case will need clear reasons for pursuing. The circumstances where a recharge may not be considered include where:

- a. The repairs are a result of 'fair wear and tear' rather than deliberate willful damage;
- b. There is insufficient evidence to prove that the customer caused the damage;
- c. The customer is incapable of carrying out the repair due to age, ill health, disability etc;
- d. The recharge would result in extreme financial hardship for the customer; and
- e. The customer has made every effort to maintain the property and there only a few minor items outstanding. Officers should take into account any past history of the customer neglecting the property.

Note: If there is any doubt about whether or how much to recharge The Void Maintenance Manager should discuss the case with their Principle Property Service Manager.

- 6.3 One of the aims of the pre termination inspection is to minimise the need for recharging by encouraging outgoing customers to make good any outstanding repairs. However, where rechargeable repairs are required the Housing Officer must agree this with the outgoing customer and explain the procedure for invoicing and payment.

- 6.4 The customer should be given the option to carry out the repair(s) before any recharge is considered. If the customer agrees to carry out the repair, the standard of repair and timescales for completion should be specified. The Housing Officer should obtain the outgoing customer's signature to this effect on the pre termination inspection form.

- 6.5 All items for repair or recharge should be recorded on the recharge sheet (see Guidance Notes). During the void inspection The Void Maintenance Manager will use this record to check that recharges still need to be pursued. This will include

work not carried out or completed to a satisfactory standard.

- 6.6 The Call Centre will raise the rechargeable work as part of the void job ticket and pass the information to the Housing Officer so that a recharge invoice can be raised.

7 Decoration Vouchers

- 7.1 *Decorating vouchers are purchased from retailers and issued directly to customers when the Housing Officer feels that a property's decoration is below standard.*
- 7.2 *The use of Decoration Vouchers is considered by The Chartered Institute of Housing to be good practice and was recommended by the Housing Inspectors.*