

<p>Epping Forest District Council</p> <p>HOUSING DIRECTORATE SERVICE STRATEGY</p> <p>EMPTY COUNCIL PROPERTIES</p>
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1. Introduction

1.1. This Housing Directorate Strategy relates to the Council’s approach to ensure that the amount of time Council dwellings are empty between tenancies is kept to a minimum. This will result in properties being made available to housing applicants as soon as possible, thereby maximising the Council’s rental and Council Tax income, and minimising void times. It will also reduce the possibility of squatting and vandalism and the associated expenditure on empty Council dwellings.

1.2 It should be noted that this Strategy only relates to empty Council properties. The Council has produced a separate Empty Property Strategy that deals with the Council’s strategic approach to minimising the number of empty properties in the private sector.

2. Background to the Service

2.1 In May 2011, the Council appointed it new Repairs Management Contractor “Mears” to oversee a range of improvements to the Housing Repairs Service. One of their “key deliverables” and one of the categories for them to achieve an incentive payment is to meet with tough targets on empty property turnaround times. This requires the Service to complete works to all void properties, including major works, within 10 working days.

2.2 The following table sets out the number of properties let to either homeseekers or tenants transferring by the Council in the last four years:

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
EFDC	502	400	390	376
Housing Association	88	61	116	108
Total	590	461	506	484

2.3 Generally, ensuring vacant Council dwellings are in a habitable standard for letting and are then allocated as soon as possible is the responsibility of both the Housing Repairs Service and the Housing Options Sections of the Housing Directorate.

2.4 The Director of Housing chairs quarterly Customer Improvement Meetings with the appropriate Assistant Director of Housing and Managers to monitor performance on a number of areas, including the management of empty Council properties, and to discuss policy and initiatives in order to maximise performance.

2.5 Comprehensive systems are in place and are detailed later in the Strategy. The efficiency of these systems are confirmed by the Housing Directorate being accredited with both the international quality standard of ISO 9001:2008 and the Customer Service Excellence Award for all of its services including empty property management.

2.6 This Empty Council Properties Strategy has been formulated in consultation with representatives of the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. The Strategy was considered and endorsed by the Council's Housing Scrutiny Panel on 13 March 2012 and was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder in April 2012.

3. Coverage

3.1 This Strategy sets out the Council's:

- Aims and objectives for managing empty Council properties;
- The statutory requirements;
- Consultation and involvement;
- General Principles;
- The Council's Empty Property Standard;
- Performance Output Specifications;
- Action Plan;
- Future Developments;
- Resourcing the Strategy;
- Key Targets and Performance Monitoring;
- Resourcing the Strategy; and
- Reviewing the Strategy

4. Relationship to other documents

4.1 Empty Council property management forms part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy and the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

4.2 The Council has adopted its Housing Charter, which sets out, in simple, clear and precise terms the Council's general approach to all its housing services. In addition, there are a number of agreed service standards which are publicised setting out our aims in all aspects of our dealings with customers.

4.3 The Council's Housing Allocations Scheme sets out the priorities and eligibility criteria for the allocation of accommodation which is reviewed and agreed by the Cabinet on a regular basis. The Scheme is available upon request free of charge. A summary of the scheme is available in a leaflet entitled "Moving Home with the Council".

4.4 The Council has a Property Standard which sets out the condition of a property when it is first allocated to an applicant and has been agreed by the Tenants and Leaseholders Association and the Repairs Focus Group.

4.5. The Council follows the guide set out in the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice in Rented Housing.

4.6. The Housing Directorate produces its Housing Allocations Scheme and a summary leaflet, which sets out the Council's policies on these matters.

4.7 An application pack for the Housing Register is provided including: a summary of the Housing Allocations Scheme, entitled "Moving Home with the Council" which includes advice on mutual exchanges, the formal application including guidance notes, and an information booklet.

4.8 The Strategy should be considered in conjunction with the Housing Directorate Service Strategy on Allocations Homelessness and Housing Advice.

4.9 Information about Housing Services is available on the Council's website at, www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing

5. Aims and Objectives

5.1 The aim of the Council's Strategy on Empty Council Properties is:

“To ensure empty Council properties are in a suitable condition for letting and are allocated to applicants as soon as possible in accordance with the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme minimising any loss of rental income and maximising the Council's performance on void turnaround times.”

5.2 This aim will be met by:

- a) Ensuring that the Housing Directorate meets all of its empty property targets;
- b) Continually monitoring all stages of the Council's performance on empty properties;
- c) Continually reviewing and updating the Council's procedures;
- d) Considering any initiatives to reduce the numbers of difficult-to-let properties, such as the conversion of bedsit dwellings to one bed flats; and
- e) Compliance with the Council's Empty Property Standard

6. Statutory Requirements

6.1 The relevant statutory requirements for the management of empty properties are as follows:

- a) Landlord and Tenant Act
 - Fitness for human habitation (Section 10)
- b) Gas Safety (Installation & Use) Regulations 1996
- c) Housing Act 1996 (as amended)
 - Allocation of Housing Accommodation (Part VI)
 - Homelessness (Part VII)
- d) Race Relations Act 1976
 - Code of Practice in Rented Housing

7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement

7.1 In 2010, the Council set up a Repairs and Maintenance Customer Focus Group which is an officer and tenant group. The Group have been consulted on the new Void Standard, the new Homes Information Pack provided to new tenants when they take up their tenancies. In addition, one representative of the group will be shadowing a Housing Officer (Voids) on a small number of empty properties throughout the void management process and will be given the opportunity to comment.

7.2 This Empty Properties Strategy has been formulated in consultation with representatives of the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

7.3 The Council operates a choice based lettings scheme which provides information to all homeseekers on available properties. Homeseekers can then express an interest in properties.

8. General Principles

8.1 Section 5 of this Strategy sets out the aims and objectives on the management of empty Council properties. This Section details the general approach taken and procedures, which are in place.

8.2 The voids and lettings process starts with existing tenants giving 4 weeks notice of vacation. The notice is acted upon immediately by the Housing Options Section, with the tenancy termination being accepted and recorded.

8.3 This enables Housing Options staff to advertise the property under the choice based lettings scheme selecting the applicant with the highest priority under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme within each short-list for each property.

8.4 At the expiry of the notice, Housing Options staff receive the keys from the outgoing tenant and pass them to Housing Repairs Service who arrange, in all vacant Council properties, for the following essential works:

- Replacement door locks
- Gas safety check
- Electrical safety check
- Rubbish removal
- General clean of kitchen cupboards, worktops and bathroom sanitary ware

8.5 Whilst this is taking place, the Housing Options Section contacts the selected housing applicant to advise them of the vacancy and arrange for them to view the property.

9. Empty Property Standard

9.1 Appropriate works to every empty property will be undertaken to ensure that it meets with the Council's agreed Void Standard, prior to the new tenant taking up occupation which is as follows:

Cleaning and property clearance

- All cobwebs will be removed and the property swept out.
- Kitchen units, all worktop surfaces and sinks will be thoroughly cleaned and all cleaning residue to be rinsed away.
- All bathroom fittings, such as toilet, sink and bath will be cleaned.
- Toilets will be thoroughly cleaned.
- Internal windows and frames will be cleaned and washed down.
- All storage cupboards will be swept and mopped.
- All stairways and steps will be swept

Decoration

- The acceptable standard for decoration is that the walls and ceilings shall be in a good state of repair, to allow the incoming tenant to decorate.
- Minor indentations and cracks will be considered acceptable.
- Minor damage and chipped paintwork is considered as acceptable.

- An appropriate decorations allowance will be awarded (based upon the decorative state of the property and the size of the rooms that need decorating) in the form of a Homebase voucher. This approach assists in keeping void times to a minimum. If the property is designated for occupation for a person over 60 years of age, where a decoration allowance has been provided, the new tenant can request that instead of receiving the allowance, the Council decorates two rooms of their choice.

Electrical safety

- There will be a minimum of 1 light fitting in each room and all staircases will have lighting.
- Light bulbs are the responsibility of the incoming tenant; however the Council will provide bulbs for the hallway and landing.
- All switches, sockets and fuse boxes will be free from cracking and will be properly secured.
- On occupation the new tenant will be provided with an electrical safety test certificate to confirm that the electric installation is safe to use.

Gas Safety

- There will be no gas leaks at the property
- Any old gas fires will be removed if the property has full gas central heating (without a back boiler), the tiled fire place surround will be removed and any opening will be blocked up, re-plastered and a vent provided.
- The gas cooker point will be capped off for safety.
- Upon occupation the new tenant will be provided with a Landlords Gas Safety Certificate, where a gas supply exists. The tenant will need to contact the Council's gas contractor for the area in which they live to re-commission the heating system.

General

- All handrails and balustrades where fitted will be safe and secure.
- All floor surfaces will be safe and secure
- The property will be free from dampness and any mould growth from condensation will be fungicidally washed to reduce risk of re-occurrence.
- The loft (where there is one) will be clear and empty.

- We will provide new tenants with a copy of the Energy Performance Certificate, which gives an indication on the energy consumption for the property.

Kitchen

- All work surfaces will be secure and free from cracks or burns and safe for the preparation of food.
- The kitchen will be clean with all units washed down and disinfected
- Kitchen units will be sound and serviceable with all drawers and doors operating without binding or catching. Damaged or missing drawers will be replaced.
- Non-standard units in good condition will be left in place and where partial replacements are required; these will be completed using the Council's standard white melamine range or doors and drawers.
- All plinths to be fitted where required.
- Where there is a live electric and or gas supply, the hot water supplies will be checked and left working, However, where there is no active electric or gas supply, the hot water will be checked when the property is let.
- There will be a space for a cooker and a cooker connection point supplied (gas and electric if gas is available to the property).
- There will be two double electrical sockets (where space permits)
- If space allows, we will provide space for a fridge and a washing machine.
- Where possible, a cold water washing machine isolation connection, waste and fused spur will be provided.
- Water isolation valves will be clearly labeled.
- There will be a sink base unit and 1000mm floor unit & 1000mm wall unit (or equivalent) in studio/one bed units
- There will be a sink base unit and 2000 mm floor unit & 2000mm wall unit in 2, 3 or 4 bed units, where space allows.

Bathroom

- Sanitary ware will be cleaned and be free from chips, cracks and leaks.
- The WC will be fitted with a toilet seat.
- All sanitary ware will have working taps, plugs and chains.
- There will be at least one row of wall tiles as a splash back around wash hand basins and baths.
- Where there is a shower the walls will be tiled in that immediate area only.

Windows and Doors

- All broken, cracked or “misted” glass will be replaced.
- All rooms will be fitted with a door where all latches, locks, hinges and handles will operate correctly and safely.
- Before the new tenant takes up occupation, the main front entrance door lock will be changed. Any additional lock changes will be the responsibility of the incoming tenant.
- Any windows with locks or restriction devices will be checked and be fully operational prior to the new tenant moving in.
- A key for the meter cupboard will be provided where required.

External areas

- The roof will be water tight
- All down pipes will be safely secured and free from leaks
- Any permanent outbuildings will be cleared prior to occupation and any broken or damaged glazing removed. Any replacement glass in sheds or greenhouses will be the responsibility of the tenant to repair.
- The access path leading to the front door of the property will be safe and not restricted. Any additional paved or concrete areas will be the responsibility of the new tenant to maintain and repair.
- The garden will be cleared of any rubbish, and any large trees checked to ensure safety, but is otherwise will be the responsibility of the incoming tenant

10. Performance Output Specifications

10.1 In order to minimise the time it takes to undertake repairs to empty properties, in December 2011, the Council has entered into an agreement with a Repairs Contractor to undertake the works under a Performance Output Specification. Under this arrangement, the Contractor will, in accordance with the Council’s Void Standard, undertake an inspection of the property, carry out the works and returning the keys to the Council within a maximum period (which will apply for major works as well) of 10 days. The Council will undertake the post inspection to confirm the value and quality of the works. This is expected to substantially reduce the period of time it takes to complete works to empty properties as well as reduce the administrative burden.

11. Completion of Works

11.1 In order to reduce the period that properties remain empty as much work as possible will be undertaken whilst the tenant is in occupation. Any works that need to be undertaken due to the negligence of the outgoing tenant will be recharged.

11.2 On completion of repairs that need to be undertaken prior to occupation, the Housing Options Team issues a formal offer of tenancy and makes arrangements for the prospective tenant to attend the Civic Offices and sign them up to the tenancy.

11.3 Generally, for properties becoming ready for letting on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, the tenancy start date will be the following Monday. For properties becoming ready for letting on Thursdays or Fridays the tenancy start date will be the second Monday following.

11.4 One type of property that is consistently difficult-to-let is bedsit accommodation in sheltered housing schemes. This is because older applicants are looking to move from larger, self-contained, accommodation and, understandably, are not prepared to move to significantly smaller accommodation. As a result, the Council has undertaken a number of major improvement/conversion schemes at sheltered housing schemes to convert bedsits into self-contained flats. The last two such schemes have been facilitated through a stock transfer of the building and tenants to a housing association, following financial appraisals that established that such an approach would be more cost effective to the Council than undertaking the conversion itself. In addition, when the opportunity arises, the Council has converted three adjacent vacant bedsits in sheltered housing schemes into two self contained flats.

12. Action Plan

12.1 The following actions will be undertaken in the future by the Housing Directorate in order to improve performance in the management of empty Council properties:

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Consider the introduction of property enhancements and incentives for difficult-to-let properties	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources
Arrange for a tenant representative from the Repairs and Maintenance Customer Focus Group to shadow Housing Officers throughout the void process	Voids Working Party	April 2012	Within existing resources
Monitor the success of the Performance Output arrangements in respect of voids work	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources
Consider the use of multiple accompanied viewings for difficult-to-let properties	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources
Advertise difficult-to-let studios in private sector advertisements section of local press	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources
Explore the benefits of moving to a weekly choice based lettings property list	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Cabinet to consider the appointment of an Under-Occupation Officer under the list of housing improvements and service enhancements	Voids Working Party	December 2012	Within existing resources

13. Future Developments

13.1 The following “SWOT” analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the areas covered by this Service Strategy:

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Knowledgeable and committed staff Policy and Procedures manual Integrated housing system Compliance with the ISO 9001:2008 Accreditation Customer Service Excellence Award Good relationships with tenants Good tenant consultation framework Repair and Maintenance Focus Group Officer Voids Working Party Comprehensive performance monitoring Customer Improvement meetings Void Standard</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>All new council tenancies start on Monday, which creates peaks and troughs in workload</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Success of Performance Output specifications</p> <p>Additional supply chain contractors engaged in the re-servicing work to void properties</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Economic climate The Council’s staff recruitment restrictions</p> <p>Keys need to be passed to HRS on a daily basis to reduce risk of 8 keys in one day, which impacts on HRS delivery of 10 working day target (see Weaknesses above)</p>

14. Resourcing the Strategy

14.1 All staff are included in the Performance Development Review process, whereby they have an annual interview to assess their own performance including a six-monthly update on progress. All new staff receives induction training and has access to a mentor. Recent training received by staff, which relates to this Strategy, is as follows:

- Training as part of the two-monthly Section Meetings
- IT Training
- Staff briefings on various matters
- Data Protection training
- Recruitment and Selection training for Managers
- Performance Development Review training for Managers
- Managing Sickness Absence training for Managers
- Health and Safety training

14.2 The projection for the number of staff required to deliver the strategy over this year and the following 3 years is detailed in the following table:

Staff Resource Projections				
Posts	2011/2012	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Total FTE	4.125	4.025	3.025	3.025

14.3 It is anticipated that the level of resources required to manage the voids process on a day-to-day basis will reduce over the next 2-years for two reasons. Firstly, the storekeeper role will be undertaken by a new materials supplier following an EU compliant tender in 2012/13. Secondly, the amount of generic Repairs Officers' time will reduce as the procedure is streamlined (as set out in Section 10 above).

14.4 The following table sets out the estimated proportion of void management, and other officer's time, spent on empty properties, but excluding the in-house tradesmen or Contractors who may undertake the works:

Staff Resources Breakdown	
Posts	FTE
Director of Housing	0.025
Assistant Director of Housing (Property)	0.05
Housing Repairs Manager	0.1
Area Repairs Manager (North)	0.2
Area Repairs Manager (South)	0.2
Assistant Area Repairs Manager (North)	0.25
Assistant Area Repairs Manager (South)	0.25
Generic Repairs Officers	2
Customer Repairs Assistant	0.2
Store Keeper	0.1
Housing Options staff	0.75
Total	4.125

15 Key Targets & Performance Monitoring

15.1 The performance for 2010/2011 together with the proposed key targets for the following three years is detailed in the table below:

Key Targets & Performance				
Performance Indicator	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
	(Actual)	(Actual)	(Target)	(Target)
Average time to re-let vacant properties (excluding difficult-to-let, from tenancy termination to tenancy commencement)	33 (calendar days)	31 (calendar days)	30 (calendar days)	25 (calendar days)
% rent loss from empty properties (<u>including difficult-to-lets</u>)	0.85%	1.03%	1.0%	0.9%
Average time for Housing Repairs Service to complete repairs	12.45 (calendar days)	18.7 (calendar days)	15 (calendar days)	10 (calendar days)
Average re-let time after becoming available to let (excluding difficult-to-let)	20 (calendar days)	12 (calendar days)	15 (calendar days)	15 (calendar days)
% <u>of all</u> properties vacant as a % of total housing stock	1.62%	1%	1%	0.95%

16. Reviewing the Strategy

16.1 The Strategy for empty Council properties will be reviewed by the Housing Scrutiny Panel and agreed by the Housing Portfolio Holder in consultation with the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation in April 2015.