

**HOUSING SERVICE
STRATEGY ON
VACANT COUNCIL DWELLINGS**

1. Introduction

1.1. This strategy sets out how Housing Services will keep the amount of time Council dwellings are empty between tenancies to a minimum and assists the Council in discharging its duty to people who are homeless or otherwise in housing need and helps to ensure that loss of rent and Council Tax due to vacancies is kept as low as possible. It also reduces 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.

1.3 This Housing Service Strategy was originally adopted in July 2003. This updated version was formally approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder on XXXXXX, following consultation with the Council's Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation.

2. Background to the Service

2.1 In 2005/6, the Council relet 574 dwellings, compared to 513 in the previous year.

2.2 Generally, the responsibility for ensuring vacant Council dwellings are in suitable condition for reletting and are relet as speedily as possible, in accordance with legislation and Council policy, rests with the Housing Repairs and Housing Needs Sections of Housing Services. Their performance is closely monitored on a quarterly basis to ensure that targets are met and losses to the Council resulting from vacancies in its housing stock are kept to a minimum.

2.3 Housing Services has been accredited with the ISO 9001:2000 quality management system by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance since 2002 which, following its renewal in 2005, is now effective until 2007. Housing Services also achieved the Government's Charter Mark award for excellence in the public sector in January 2005, and has held the Investors in People Award since 2001.

3. Coverage

3.1 This strategy sets out the approach that will be taken by the Council, in particular by the Housing Needs Section and Housing Repairs Section within Housing Services, to deal with empty Council properties. In particular, it covers:

- The standard to be adopted for letting vacant Council properties;
- The main procedures to be followed whilst properties are vacant; and
- The targets applicable to the re-letting of Council properties;

4. Relationship to other documents

4.1 This strategy operates within the main *Council Plan* and accords with the Council's *Best Value Performance Plan*, which sets out annually the authority's intentions for the delivery and development of its services, giving information on past performance and how the Council plans to improve services on a continuing basis. One of the key themes of both the *Council Plan* and the Local Strategic Partnership's *Community Strategy* is 'Homes and Neighbourhoods'.

4.2 This Strategy forms part of the Council's overall *Housing Strategy* and the *Housing Revenue Account Business Plan*.

4.3 The Council has adopted a *Housing Charter*, which sets out in simple, clear and precise terms its general approach to all its housing services.

4.4 This Strategy inter-relates with the Council's *Homelessness Strategy*, *Housing Service Strategy on Allocations* and *Housing Allocations Scheme*.

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

4.6 The Council follows advice from central government, including the Department of Communities and Local Government's *Homelessness Code of Guidance* and *Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Authorities*.

4.7 A copy of the Council's *Housing Allocations Scheme* is available, on request, free of charge. A summary of this scheme is given in booklet form; *Moving home with the Council* and free leaflets are also available, entitled *Redecoration Voucher Scheme* and *Repairs and improvements to your home*.

4.8 Information available about Housing Services is available on the council's website, www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing

5. Aims and Objectives

5.1 The aim of the Council's Strategy on Vacant Council Dwellings is:

"To ensure vacant Council dwellings are in a suitable condition for re-letting and are re-let as soon as possible in accordance with legislation and Council policy, keeping expenditure low and revenue loss to a minimum."

5.2 This aim will be met by the achievement of the following objectives;

- a) Ensuring that Housing Services meets all its targets for empty Council properties;
- b) Continually monitoring all aspects 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 in whole schemes, or for specific properties, including the involvement of other partners if this facilitates a more viable outcome; and
- e) Maximising the use of accompanied viewings, to increase the engagement of prospective tenants within the process and associated tenant satisfaction and to minimise expenditure on repairs to empty properties.

6. Statutory Requirements

6.1 A variety of Government legislation and regulations have an indirect bearing upon the time properties remain empty. Relevant requirements are contained within;

<i>Landlord and Tenant Act 1985</i>	Fitness for human habitation (section 10)
<i>Gas Act 1974</i>	Gas Safety (Installation & Use) Regs 1996
<i>Housing Act 1996 (as amended)</i>	Allocation of Housing Accommodation (Part VI) and Homelessness (Part VII)
<i>Local Government Finance Act 1990</i>	Dwellings exempt from Council Tax

Local Government Act 1999

Council's responsibilities in respect of Best Value.

Race Relations Act 1976

Code of Practice in Rented Housing

7. Client Consultation and Information

7.1 When this strategy was first drafted in 2003, specific targeted consultation was undertaken with those waiting for, and recently offered, Council accommodation, since they are most directly affected by the Council's performance on dealing with vacant Council properties. Their comments were considered as part of a major Voids and Lettings Study that led to, amongst other things, a more streamlined lettings process and the introduction of an accompanied viewing process and an empty property standard.

7.2 As part of the accompanied viewing process, housing applicants offered a vacant Council property are consulted on both the level of proposed repairs to be undertaken and which repairs should be undertaken after the tenant has moved in. In a number of cases, repairs that the Council would ordinarily undertake are declined by tenants, because of their intention to undertake their own improvements.

7.3 When housing applicants first register for housing, they are consulted on which areas within the District they would wish to receive offers of accommodation. As part of the Council's Housing Service Strategy on Allocations, the Council has agreed to the introduction of a "choice based lettings" scheme, in partnership with four neighbouring local authorities working as a Consortium. The Consortium successfully obtained £96,000 funding from the DCLG to implement a joint choice based lettings scheme. The target date for implementation of the choice based lettings scheme is June 2007. Once introduced, it will have an effect on both the way Council properties are let and the turnaround time for letting empty properties. Tenants and housing applicants will be consulted on the proposed operation of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme in Autumn 2007.

7.4 The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation was consulted on this revised Housing Service Strategy before adoption.

8. General Principles

8.1 Housing Services will continue to focus on reducing the time taken to re-let empty properties. There has been all round improvement as a direct result of introducing the integrated Open Housing Management System (OHMS) and a robust performance management regime within Housing Services. This enables the gathering and interpretation of a greater range and amount of information, allowing increased flexibility and speed in decision making and policy direction. This means that senior housing management and housing managers have detailed information to hand and targets can be more accurately monitored.

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

8.3 This enables Housing Needs Officers to select a new tenant for the property from the Housing Register, in accordance with the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme. The new tenant is not generally notified of the availability of the property at this point. This is done when the keys are returned by the outgoing tenant; experience has shown that this avoids upset if the outgoing tenant has a change of mind.

8.4 At the expiry of the notice, Housing Needs staff receive the keys from the outgoing tenant (chasing them up, if necessary), log their receipt on OHMS and pass them to Housing

Repairs staff who arrange, in all cases, for standard essential checks and works to be carried out on the property by the Building Maintenance Section. These works are as follows:

- 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, a Housing Needs Officer will contact the selected housing applicant to advise them of the vacancy and ask them to contact the Housing Repairs Section so that they can view the property, by appointment, accompanied by the officer responsible for overseeing the repairs process.

8.6 A complete survey of the property is undertaken, including loft spaces and any external stores. Housing Repairs Officers (HROs) also consider the possibility of asbestos being present and note the degree by which it could be disturbed whilst repairs are completed. They then follow the accepted procedure for dealing with any such issues. This survey identifies all minor repairs and also major works for which the Council is responsible.

8.7 In order to reduce the period that properties remain empty while undergoing repair, HROs ensure that empty properties meet a basic standard and only arrange the completion of essential work whilst the property is empty; repairs of a minor nature are arranged after the new tenant has taken up occupation.

8.8 The work undertaken whilst properties are vacant includes the following:

- Any major works of a nature that would make it impossible to occupy all or part of the property.
- Any works requiring the lifting of more than 2 square metres of flooring boarding for more than one day.
- The replacement of broken (unserviceable, not cracked) sanitary fittings.
- The provision of a kitchen sink if missing or unserviceable.
- The emulsions of a maximum of two rooms where the property is designed for an older person (i.e. sheltered accommodation or 1 bed flats) and has had no redecoration completed during the previous five years, or in other properties where the redecoration allowance would exceed a specified sum. In the latter case the hallway (if present) is decorated and either the kitchen or bathroom, whichever is in the worse condition.
- Clearing of any rubbish within the property and its curtilage and clean throughout.
- Any additional works agreed if the dwelling has proved difficult to let.

8.9 In addition to the above, the following works are undertaken (if required) after the tenant has taken up occupation, to provide a lettable standard:

- All kitchens will be provided with a sink and the equivalent of 4 single cupboards (either floors or wall). Built in larder cupboards are disregarded. The kitchen layout is to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard
- All habitable rooms will have a means of heating. A radiator or an open fire meets this requirement.
- Any open fires and/or their surrounds are left within the property.

- “Butler” sinks are left within the property.
- Any fittings installed by the previous tenant are left, unless unserviceable or dangerous.

8.10 Any works that need to be undertaken due to the negligence of the outgoing tenant are recharged. This includes the following works:

- Replacement of front or back door lock, or security key fob, due to no keys or key fobs being returned*
- Clearance of rubbish;*
- Supplying and fitting of (due to them being missing or damaged):
 - light rose, flex and bulb holder
 - socket outlets
 - light switch
 - panel door

(* Tenants over 65 years of age are not recharged for these works)

8.11 Accompanied viewing was introduced in 2003 to allow prospective tenants to visit the dwelling at the same time as the officer completing the empty property inspection. This allows prospective tenants the opportunity to have an input into the extent of repairs undertaken. It also reduces the empty property turnaround period, since many applicants are happy for some works to be left to themselves. For example, it may be their intention to replace the kitchen - so there is little point in the Council replacing one kitchen cupboard.

8.12 If, at the accompanied viewing of the property, the selected applicant is not interested in taking the tenancy, the HRO immediately telephones the Housing Needs Section, to minimise delay in finding a replacement tenant. Even so, there is generally insufficient time to arrange a further viewing before the authorised repairs are completed and, in such instances, arrangements are made for the prospective tenant to view the property at the same time as they are made a formal offer of the tenancy.

8.13 Internal decoration is a tenant's responsibility, but the Council gives Homebase redecorating vouchers to incoming tenants, as a contribution towards the cost of buying paint or wallpaper and decorating essentials, such as brushes. This approach is taken, as an alternative to the Council undertaking the redecoration for incoming tenants, in order to reduce the turnaround time. The value of the vouchers to be issued is calculated by the HRO, by reference to the decorative condition of the property and a Redecoration Allowance Room Schedule. The Room Schedule is reviewed by the Housing Portfolio annually. The vouchers are not issued directly by the HRO but by Finance Services' cashiers, after the tenant has signed up for the tenancy and on production by them of a pro-forma completed and authorised by the HRO.

8.14 In order to further reduce delay, since 2004, no post-repair inspections are completed by Housing Services. However, the Building Maintenance Section undertakes its own inspections, in accordance with its own Performance Management Policy; the incoming tenants also advise the Council of any defects found when they move into the property.

8.15 Once essential repairs that need to be undertaken prior to occupation have been completed, Housing Needs staff issue a formal offer of tenancy and make arrangements for the prospective tenant to attend the Civic Offices and sign them up to the tenancy. If a housing applicant has difficulty getting to the Civic Offices because of a disability, alternative arrangements are made through one of the Area Housing Managers.

8.16 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.

8.17 One type of property that is consistently difficult to let is bedsits in sheltered housing schemes, especially with shared bathrooms. This is because older applicants are looking to move from larger, self-contained, accommodation and, understandably, are not prepared to move to significantly smaller, inferior, 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.

8.18 The Council will continue to identify potential conversion schemes for its sheltered housing, and appraise whether it would be more cost effective for the Council to undertake the improvements, or for a housing association through a stock transfer.

9. Action Plan

9.1 The following specific actions are planned by the Council relating to empty Council properties:

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Introduce generic working by the current housing repairs officers and voids officers	Housing Repairs Manager	By 31.12.06	Within existing
Consider the introduction of property enhancements and incentives for difficult-to-let properties	Asst Head of Housing Services (Property & Resources)	By 31.3.07	Within existing
Consider the use of multiple viewings for difficult-to-let properties	Asst Head of Housing Services (Property & Resources)	By 31.3.07	Within existing
Identify and implement any required changes to the accompanied viewing process as a result of introducing choice based lettings	Asst Head of Housing Services (Operations)	By 30.6.07	Within existing
Review the effect on empty property turnaround times of introducing choice based lettings	Asst Head of Housing Services (Operations)	Between 1.6.07 and 31.12.07	Within existing
Complete the feasibility of re-modelling the difficult-to-let sheltered housing scheme at Marden Close, Chigwell Row for general needs housing	Head of Housing Services	By 31.03.07	Within the Capital Feasibilities Budget. Any re-modelling will require budget provision (unquantified at present)

10. Resourcing the Strategy

10.1 Separate budget heads exist for capital and revenue repairs completed to empty properties and for the redecoration vouchers that are given to new tenants who undertake the decoration of property. The sums allowed for 2006/07 are as follows:

Revenue repairs	£644,000
Capital repairs	£259,000
Redecoration allowances	£100,000

10.2 Housing Services' staff resources are shown below;

	Staff Resource Projection			
	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10
Av. no. staff to provide service (FTE p/a)	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9

Total Staff Resource Breakdown – 2006/7	
Posts	FTE
Housing Repairs Manager	0.1
Housing Needs Manager	0.1
Asst Housing Needs Manager (Allocations)	0.6
Asst Housing Repairs Manager	0.1
Housing Officer (Voids)	2.0
Total	2.9

11. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

The table below provides details of past performance and current targets:

Performance and Targets				
Performance Indicator	Actuals		Performance	
	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
Average time to re-let vacant properties (from tenancy termination to tenancy commencement)	55 (calendar) days	46 (calendar) days	42 (calendar) days	42 (calendar) days
% rent loss from empty properties	1.1 %	0.8 %	< 2%	< 2%
Average time for Works Unit to complete repairs	13 (calendar) days	12.5 (calendar) days	14 (calendar) days	14 (calendar) days
Average re-let time after becoming available to let	26 (working) days	15 (working) days	15 (working) days	15 (working) days
% properties vacant as a % of total housing stock	1.2 %	0.8 %	< 1 %	< 1 %

12. Reviewing the Strategy

12.1. This Strategy will be reviewed, in consultation with the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation by October 2009.

