

# EMPTY HOMES MANAGEMENT THE ROLE OF THE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, REPAIRS AND HOUSING MANAGEMENT TEAMS' POLICY

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Empty Property Management Policy sets out Stockport Homes' Ltd (SHL) approach to managing empty (void) residential properties.

1.2 Empty residential properties, including houses and flats, can have a detrimental effect on neighbourhoods, ultimately contributing to some neighbourhoods becoming undesirable and/or unsustainable.

1.3 Having properties standing empty has a negative impact on the financial position of the organisation and prevents or delays customers from being housed in to suitable accommodation.

1.4 The purpose of this policy is to facilitate an efficient and effective 'turnaround' of empty properties. This process starts as soon as any intention of a tenancy ending is given by a tenant or triggered in some other way and is completed when the property is relet after all identified required repairs have been completed. Some repairs may be completed after the property has been relet and these are 'post relet repairs' and new tenants will be informed as to any required post relet repairs.

1.5 By minimising periods when properties are empty, maximising opportunities for direct lets (when there is no void period between one tenancy ending and the next one starting) and utilising any notice periods effectively, void periods and rent loss will be minimised, and customers' needs can be met more efficiently.

## 2 STRATEGIC LINKS

2.1 This policy links to:

- Stockport Homes' mission and aims of 'Transforming Lives' through 'Developing our thriving, safe and sustainable neighbourhoods, maximising our contribution to meeting housing need'.
- Stockport Council's Allocations Policy
- Stockport Homes Lettable and Return Standard Guide
- Stockport Homes' Tenancy Policy
- Stockport Homes' Responsive Repairs Policy
- Stockport Homes' Rechargeable Repairs Policy
- Stockport Homes' Tenancy Changes Policy
- Stockport Homes' Delivery Plan 2021-2026
- Stockport Homes' Accessible Information Policy
- Stockport Homes' Accompanied Viewings Procedure
- Stockport Homes' Value for Money Strategy 2021-2024.

### 3 EFFECTIVE TENANCY TERMINATION MANAGEMENT

3.1 The tenancy termination process will begin as soon as a notification is received, that indicates a property may become empty. The process does not need to wait for a completed tenancy termination form to be received by SHL. The notification could be received in many ways including, but not limited to: -

- Tenant contacting SHL directly
- Next of kin contacting regarding a deceased tenant
- Neighbourhood Housing Officer (NHO) or Independent Living Officer (ILO) notifying that a tenant has abandoned the property
- Customer Finance Officer notifying that an eviction is due to take place

3.2 The Customer Services Officer (CSO) is responsible for administering the 'journey' of any void property and records will be kept electronically giving ease of access for all staff involved in the void process.

3.3 The notice period for terminating a tenancy is four weeks (28 calendar days). This date is calculated from the Monday immediately following the date the notice is received in writing, unless the notice is received before 10am and in those instances, that Monday will be used as the start date.

3.4 The exception to the notice period is when SHL tenants are transferring to another SHL managed property or upon death of the tenant. Upon death, the tenancy will terminate from the Sunday after all keys being received by SHL. A termination form and death certificate must also be received.

3.5 Rent will remain payable until the tenancy terminates and in cases where keys are surrendered by someone other than the tenant or the tenant's representative (parent, next of kin or known professional support worker), the property will be treated as abandoned and the NHO / ILO must take the appropriate action. Guidance can be found in the Abandonment Policy.

3.6 Upon death of the sole tenant, if there is no known next of kin or relative, the tenancy will need to be legally terminated through an appropriate method. In these cases, the NHO / ILO will manage the process to bring the tenancy to an end and will liaise with the Property Management team regarding the property.

3.7 All tenants who are permitted to transfer to another SHL managed property will have a transfer inspection completed prior to being permitted a move. The inspection will normally take place prior to allowing the tenant to place bids on any properties and the tenant will only be permitted to transfer if the current property is in a good state of repair and cleanliness, reducing the need for any costly or lengthy void works. Exceptions to this will be managed by the NHO, Antisocial Behaviour Officer (ASB) and approved by the Head of Housing Management, Head of Property Management and Head of Homelessness and Rehousing. This will be to support cases that require an urgent move linked to ASB or child / adult social care needs.

3.8 Upon receiving notification that a property is likely to become empty, the CSO will place the property in the next available Homechoice advert, unless there is a clear reason why this should not happen, for example, recently deceased tenant and next of kin not yet informed. All properties must be advertised at the earliest possible opportunity.

3.9 As soon as keys are received for a terminating property, the CSO will process these immediately by notifying the Three Sixty voids team that keys are available. If the property requires any security, this will be assessed by the relevant NHO using a risk-based approach, including the decision as to what type of security to use. Alarms and / or full screening may be used and the security will be removed at the point of the new tenancy commencing.

## 4 ROLE AND OF THE REPAIR TEAM

4.1 On receipt of keys for a new void property, the Three Sixty team will organise the following: -

- An asbestos survey (if one is not available on the portal)
- An electrical inspection
- Gas decommissions.

4.2 Three Sixty will visit all void properties within 24 hours of receipt of the keys from the previous tenant and will also complete the following processes: -

- Install a suited lock cylinder allowing ease of access for key stakeholders
- Take meter readings and details
- Request any required property clearance and / or bio clean
- Provide an initial property condition report
- Make any referral for post letting capital works
- Request a Technical Surveyor inspects the property is there are significant high cost repairs or structural defects and authorise any work that exceeds the agreed approval limit of Three Sixty
- Request the operative or sub-contractor completes a schedule of works
- Raise work orders on the repairs system
- Completion of works
- Completion of a water risk assessment
- Provide a new set of keys and handover certificate
- Update the Void monitoring system on Northgate
- Manage all documents and photographs associated with void properties linked to repair activities.

4.3 Some void properties will be allocated to alternative contractors for completion, for example if they require large scale works. In such instances, these may be passed to B4Box who are the social value partner for Three Sixty Living, who utilise larger voids to provide training opportunities.

4.4 When void properties are allocated to a partner contractor, they will complete the schedule of works required and submit this to Three Sixty for approval. They will then carry out all works including legionella assessment.

4.5 All contractors working on void properties must adhere to relevant guidance and rules set by Three Sixty as part of the contract for working on empty properties. This will be monitored by Three Sixty.

4.6 Finally, when all repairs are completed, a post inspection will be carried out after which, if all repairs are completed, the property will be returned to SHL in a clean and lettable condition with a handover certificate which confirms the property meets the Lettable standard.

## **5 ACHIEVING EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE**

5.1 Monitoring void properties throughout the life of the void ensures that maximum performance is achieved, and void periods and void rent loss are minimised.

5.2 Daily monitoring reports track each void property, including properties where there has been notification received that a void property is likely. All staff involved in void property management, including CSOs, Void Officers and Three Sixty, will track performance of the void for each stage of the process. Monitoring includes but is not limited to: -

- Calendar days void
- Keys received from outgoing tenant to handover for repairs
- Keys received from Repairs as 'ready to let' to tenancy sign up date
- Calendar days for asbestos checks.

5.3 Direct lets arise when a tenancy terminates and a new tenancy starts the following day resulting in a zero day void. Maximising opportunities for direct lets is achieved through prioritising any voids for repairs and sign ups when a direct let is identified as being achievable.

5.4 Some properties will require post relet works after a new tenancy has started. These will be identified to the new tenant at the point of the new tenancy sign-up taking place. These could include some minor void repairs but also some planned capital improvement type works. Completing these works after the tenancy has started will minimise any impact on void performance and void rent loss, whilst also giving the tenant the opportunity to move quickly into their new home and in many cases, enabling them to be part of any choice offered within the capital improvement programme.

## **6 RECHARGEABLE REPAIRS**

6.1 SHL tenants have the responsibility to repair any damage caused by themselves or visitors to their homes under the terms of the tenancy agreement. For repairs in void properties which have been attributed to the

previous tenant, these will be recharged. Examples are property clearances, rubbish removal or for any repairs arising from abuse or neglect. Full details can be found in the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

## **7 OFFERING AND ALLOCATING PROPERTIES**

7.1 All properties will be shortlisted the following day after the Homechoice advert they are featured in closes. Adverts currently open weekly from Thursdays at 5pm and close on Tuesdays at 5pm.

7.2 The CSO will shortlist the property using Northgate and will offer the property to the applicant at the top of the shortlist. All offers are provisional until the point of a tenancy sign up taking place. Applicants will be contacted on the same day as the shortlist being run. All applicants will be contacted by telephone, unless there is no telephone number available.

7.3 Applicants will always be encouraged to respond to an offer immediately and where this is not possible, for example if the offer has been made via email or letter, the applicants will be given 48 hours from receiving the offer to make a decision.

7.4 For any applicant living in SHL temporary accommodation, the scheme manager will be informed of the offer and a member of the team at the scheme will visit the applicant to advise of the offer and to get a response.

7.5 In exceptional circumstances, for example for properties that customers do not bid for, but are 'withheld' for them to meet a specific urgency, such as a property with full adaptations or an offer to a family who are experiencing serious ASB, the option to extend the response time is the responsibility of the Head of Property Management or the Customer Services Manager. For further information on withheld offers, please refer to the Allocations Policy.

7.6 As soon as properties are free from any health and safety repairs or checks, the VO will complete an accompanied viewing with the applicant. A risk assessment is completed at the viewing by the VO to ensure all known information about the applicant is still correct. The majority of viewings will take place whilst properties are still undergoing repairs and applicants will be advised of any outstanding repairs. Completing viewings before the property is ready to let is a key factor in achieving good performance and prompt turnaround times.

7.7 The CSO and / or VO will book applicants who have accepted the property after a viewing in for a tenancy sign-up. These will be planned using the expected completion date of any void repairs and the communication between the teams involved in void management is essential in keeping applicants updated should the sign-up date need to be amended and brought forward or delayed.

## **8 ADAPTED PROPERTIES AND MANUAL OFFERS**

8.1 For any fully adapted properties, these will not be advertised through Homechoice, but will be allocated by the Adapted Property Panel. SHLs Occupational Therapist will advise the CSO of who to offer these properties to and will accompany the applicant on the accompanied viewing.

8.2 For properties with one or minor adaptations, these will be advertised and allocated through Homechoice.

8.3 Some properties will not be advertised through Homechoice and will not be allocated through Choice Based Lettings but via a manual offer direct to an applicant. This will be to meet an urgent need, for example a child or adult social care issue and will have the support of Head of Property Management, Head of ASB, Head of Housing Need and Head of Housing Management. Cases may also be heard and agreed at Special Housing Panel. Please see the Allocations Policy for further information regarding the withheld process and Special Housing Panel.

## **9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA)**

9.1 Where some differential negative impact has been identified, mitigating actions have been put in to place. This includes ensuring that any vulnerable customers have adequate time to view a property and to sign-up for a property. Viewings can be completed in person or virtually if required.

9.2 Properties that are allocated to customers in sheltered housing schemes or fully adapted properties will be subject to decoration when void if required and other customers can be offered decorating vouchers giving them choice in how to decorate their new home.

9.3 Staff involved in void management will ensure that any correspondence with customers is in the format most suitable to them.

## **10 OWNERSHIP, MONITORING & REVIEW**

10.1 The Policy is owned by the Operations Directorate and will be monitored by the Operations Management Team.

10.2 The Policy will be reviewed in line with the Operations Management Policy and Procedure Review Schedule.