

Managing Voids: Letting Homes



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Original authoring:	Bob Blackaby
Update and additional authoring:	Joanne Kent-Smith and John Marron – Policy and Practice Officers (CIH)
Editor:	Debbie Larner – Head of Practice (CIH)
Design and Production:	Renaissance Creative Design & Print Ltd
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Managing voids: letting homes

Managing voids is a core function for all housing organisations i.e. housing associations, local authorities and Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and this **practice brief** examines the life cycle of a void property and the relationship with a potential tenant. Containing a range of comprehensive checklists and practice examples, it emphasises that void properties are potential homes and the relationship between customer and provider should be the golden thread running through any successful void process.

All housing organisations will generally experience a residual level of voids (empty properties/homes), which arise for a variety of reasons on a day to day basis. However, excessive void numbers or properties standing empty for long periods can have far-reaching implications on both organisations and the communities they serve, including:

- **rental loss:** limiting organisation's abilities to meet repair obligations and responsibilities
- **financial commitments:** organisations currently face enormous pressure to meet their loan obligations due to volatility within financial markets
- **credibility:** prolonged void periods or high concentrations of voids can damage an organisation's reputation and standing within the community
- **neighbourhoods:** if left unchecked, voids can negatively affect the appearance of a street, compromise the security of neighbouring properties, lead to vandalism and ultimately the decline of an area.

Improving void management and performance involves a combination of efforts to:

- **reduce the number of properties** that are void
- **reduce the time** that properties stand empty
- **improve the standard** of processes, such as measuring the quality of repairs or the matching of people and properties
- **monitor performance** and use of the information to improve performance.

These key areas of organisational performance are clearly related and this **practice brief** considers how processes can be streamlined to improve void management and improve efficiency, both in terms of the quality of the property and the turnaround time. It offers practice guidance on:

- improving processes
- co-ordinated working
- efficient procurement
- adaptation of management principles
- setting challenging targets and standards
- minimising void periods.

In addition, it highlights the importance of maintaining a customer focus throughout the process to achieve a sustainable letting at the end.



The wider context

Delivering effective and efficient void services is central to the business of well-performing housing organisations, whilst supporting wider government objectives to:

- create sustainable homes and communities that meet tenants' needs and expectations
- bring existing stock up to a decent homes standards and meet the lifetime homes standards
- maximise the use and occupation of existing housing stock
- increase choice to tenants about where they live.

Void management has close links to other aspects of policy and performance, including:

- asset management: maintaining the stock in good condition and with a level of amenities, serves to reduce turnover caused by dissatisfaction with the quality of the housing and ensures that the housing. It also ensures that the housing is likely to be attractive to home seekers when it becomes vacant
- tenancy sustainment: activities which help tenants, particularly those who are vulnerable, to cope with the practicalities of holding a tenancy will help to reduce turnover and therefore void levels
- procurement: good quality specifications and partnerships with suppliers, particularly repair contractors, will help ensure that void properties are repaired on time, efficiently and effectively and that work is to a high standard.



Customer driven culture

In recent years an increasing performance culture, greater emphasis on delivering customer focused outcomes, improved partnering arrangements and the introduction of choice based lettings have all underpinned substantial change to the way housing organisations manage their void and lettings processes. However further improvement are still important. The new housing regulator, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), is clear that it expects landlords to improve the existing levels of choice and the service offer to residents through the provision of services which are customer driven and tailored to reflect the needs and aspirations of current and future residents. Consultation on the TSAs proposed new regulatory framework and national standards is currently ongoing.

Efficiency gains and void management service improvements have been achieved through:

- Enhanced opportunities for resident involvement and responsiveness to customer feedback, and the development of customer insight
- Increasing levels of partnership arrangements for void repairs and services
- Efficient procurement
- Adaptation of management principles traditionally associated with the private sector construction/manufacturing industries to improve organisational performance, which consider processes from the experience of the customer.

Furthermore developing customer insight can make a real difference to the experiences of residents through the provision of customer driven services, which are both tailored and cost effective. Developed customer insight can help organisations improve efficiency by only prioritising and delivering services that are appropriate, and important to customers, thus influencing satisfaction levels.



Further information

**Good Practice Briefing:
Customer insight CIH (2008)**

www.cih.org/publications/pub657.htm

Improving void processes

The management of voids is a complex process, with some factors, such as the rate of tenancy termination, being outside the direct control of housing organisations. A range of functions is involved, including maintenance, lettings and housing management, so effective co-ordination and communication is essential.

Processes should be regularly reviewed and consideration given to the following:

- examine the entire process critically looking at:
 - content and sequencing of work and communication flows
 - allocation of clear responsibilities and targets
 - standards and target timescales for the key processes
 - effective monitoring and progress chasing mechanisms
- have clear procedures on how the various processes and linkages should be handled, while allowing flexibility for individual teams to innovate in the interests of service improvement and efficiency
- introduce specific initiatives to:
 - improve particular parts of the process, such as incentives to tenants to give notice of leaving, or measures to facilitate access by repairs contractors to void properties.



The following questions provide a useful starting point to critically examine void processes:

- are we clear about the outcomes we want to achieve?
- do we know what customers think of our existing performance?
- do we understand the expectations and aspirations of our customers? Do we meet these expectations?
- do we understand the void process, and what is involved at each stage?
- is the sequence of the processes right?
- could more processes be carried out simultaneously?
- are there delays between one process finishing and another starting?
- is there an identified person responsible for each process?
- are the right people communicating with each other effectively?
- are there appropriate quality controls in place in relation to:
 - void repairs
 - suitable matching of applicants to properties
 - flow and appropriateness of information, both within the organisation, between partners, and prospective tenant.
- do we have the right performance information to tell whether the process is working correctly?
- if things are going wrong, how easy is it to tell where the problem lies?
- could performance be improved through improved training or IT?





Practice checklist: void management processes

Void management processes should be:

- ✓ reviewed regularly
- ✓ customer focused:
 - involve residents in the development of services
 - enhance opportunities to capture customer feedback
 - be responsive to changes in customer expectations, and local circumstances
 - maintain and improve levels of customer satisfaction
- ✓ financially viable:
 - minimise rental loss and void costs
 - ensure the quick and efficient turn around of void repairs
 - deliver the best quality standard possible
 - make best use of existing stock, and resources
- ✓ responsive to communities and neighbourhoods:
 - reduce the risk of vandalism of squatters, and minimise any negative impact on the wider locality
 - create sustainable tenancies, and communities
- ✓ efficient and effective in terms of internal mechanisms:
 - be aligned to clear working procedures, which show responsibility for each stage in the process
 - have defined standards and targets for key processes, which are communicated to all relevant staff and partners
 - have effective quality control mechanisms, ensuring that all work is carried out to a high standard, in the first instance
 - have in place effective performance monitoring and progress chasing arrangements
 - facilitate open communication and flow of information between different departments, contractors.

Involving tenants

There are a number of stages in the voids process where the views of customers, both in terms of home seekers and tenants are particularly valuable. Their input can help the development of an effective voids process. The main opportunities for gathering customer feedback are:

- asking tenants who give notice on their properties for reasons why they are leaving
- consulting home seekers and tenants in the development and monitoring of the re-let standard
- analysing feedback from home seekers about offers they refuse
- obtaining feedback from new tenants about their experience of the lettings process
- utilising feedback from existing tenants about what they like about the area/ property type (to use in future property marketing).

Co-ordinating the service

In most situations, responsibility for some aspects of the void processes will fall outside the core housing management team. This could involve input from estate and scheme based staff, repairs and cleaning contractors, or occupational therapists. Whatever arrangement exists, effective internal communication and co-ordination are vital.



Practice example

In response to disappointing void turnaround performance Severnside Housing Association established a dedicated void team to examine and improve void processes and procedures, and to build closer links between the property services and allocations and lettings teams.

As a consequence the following improvements were achieved:

- improved communications information sharing
- average void duration was significantly reduced
- improvements in customer focus and quality of information to prospective tenants
- increased use of notice period to achieve void inspection and work.



Management principles

Systems thinking and lean management principles are approaches that have traditionally been used within the manufacturing and construction industries. However they are increasingly being adopted by the housing organisations to drive improvements in performance.

Systems thinking

Systems thinking is an approach to problem solving that considers each individual stage of a process in conjunction with the overall system or entire process. In other words it looks at the process from 'end to end'.

A system thinking approach seeks to understand why and where delays and problems occur in the context of:

- how it fits into the whole process
- how the linkages and interactions between elements contribute to the entirety of the system or process

For the voids process this would encompass the whole process from receipt of notice, through the pre-inspection, completion of work stages and post-inspection. A systems thinking approach requires effective communication between all departments, partners and contractors in order to avoid the silo effect, and promote input and suggestions from all staff.



Practice example

In 2007 Milton Keynes Council adopted systems thinking to improve the whole housing service including dealing with empty homes.

Key stages

- **agree a clear purpose:** the housing service exists to put the 'right person, in right home and sustain their tenancy'. Any work which does not do this is 'waste' and is removed
- **work on the whole housing system:** voids work flow was improved, so too were rental income, allocations, repairs and maintenance.
- **new techniques and better data:** work flows are mapped, control charts used and new measures developed. BVPI average re-let times were ignored and focus on true 'end to end time' as effects incoming tenant.



Key successes:

- **integrated contractor working:** a number of subcontractors were co-located in new facilities and work closely together to prepare a home as soon as possible for the new tenant
- **other changes which improved void turn around time:** asbestos encapsulation, using key safes, contractors at weekly empty homes meetings, better methods for giving notice, viewing and sign-up all helped
- **rewrite the allocations rule book:** a new allocations scheme assesses people in housing need on the day and then provides real choice across tenure. There is no waiting list, no bidding, low homelessness, and options advice for all
- **flexible lettable standard:** all voids are made 'safe, sanitary and secure'. The prospective tenant agrees what and when other work might be needed, including decoration
- **financial savings:** reduced void times has increased rental income over £150,000 in 2007/08
- **void duration:** the average end to end time properties remain empty has reduced by half. BVPI have fallen from 55 days in 2006/7 to 22.5 days in 2008/9.

Lean management

Lean management processes are particularly concerned with continuous improvement and adding value to the customer through:

- managing maintenance processes at minimum cost
- maximising the value to customer.

In order to generate the maximum possible amount of value, a lean management process reviews the design of systems and processes to minimise the waste of materials, time and effort. It:

- defines who the customers are
- defines the desired outputs and value in customer terms
- reviews current processes
- identifies and eliminates waste.



Practice example

In February 2006 Stafford and Rural Homes were faced with the following challenges:

- bottom quartile voids performance
- high rental loss and void costs
- variances in delivery and standards of customer facing services

A cross functional lean team was established to drive improvement. Existing processes were mapped, identifying key activities and root causes of waste. Issues identified included;

- up to 210 separate stages in the process
- many delays as a result of time spent checking and updating
- lack of trust and empowerment
- processes not completed simultaneously
- silo working
- 17 people involved in the process, resulting in a 90 day turnaround.

As a result of applying lean management principles the void process was redesigned and waste eliminated.

Key successes:

- standard void turnaround target of five days, within top quartile performance
- a reduction in property refusals
- increased commitment and ownership by staff
- stages in the process reduced from 210 to 49
- £500k void cost savings
- £234k savings against rent loss.



Reducing void durations

One of the key ways to improve performance is to reduce the amount of time that a property remains empty. Therefore processes need to be co-ordinated, efficient and effective.

Key principles for reducing void durations are:

- make use of the notice period (where given)
- reduce 'dead time' – the time when nothing is happening – to a minimum
- carry out activities at the same time rather than sequentially
- delay non-essential activities until the property has been re-let.

Managing the notice period

The notice period provides a valuable period during which the void process can commence, and tenancy conditions can be enforced.

Managing the relationship with the outgoing tenant during the notice period will impact upon the final condition of the property, and subsequent re-let times. Managed effectively the notice period provides opportunity for the identification, preparation and completion of repairs, and allows time to find a replacement tenant.

Situations may also arise where a housing organisation may also choose to exercise flexibility around the 28 day notice period. Typically:

- following the death of the tenant
- admittance into residential care
- transfer to another housing organisation
- internal transfer
- where a tenant wishes to agree an immediate surrender of their tenancy.

In responding to requests to surrender a tenancy, the cost of waiving the notice period (rental loss) should be balanced against the potential risk of abandonment, vandalism and non recoverable late tenant rent arrears if surrender is not agreed.



Setting 'vacating' standards

Encouraging outgoing tenants to leave their homes in a clean and decent state of repair when they end their tenancies can have a significant impact on the void duration. Properties left in a good condition will enable the housing organisation to re-let the property quickly and with minimum repair costs.

Many organisations operate reward or financial incentives schemes to encourage tenants to give effective notice and leave the property in a good condition. Typically schemes encourage tenants to:

- provide 28 days notice to terminate
- leave the property clean, clear of all rubbish and in a satisfactory condition
- return all keys
- maintain a clear rent account
- provide access during the void period for repairs and viewings.



Practice example

Tristar Homes offer a £75 golden goodbye to tenants who are vacating one of their homes, to encourage outgoing tenants to leave the property in a satisfactory standard. Access is required during the notice period for repairs and viewings, minimising both void costs and duration. To qualify for the payment the tenant has to:

- allow access to carry out an inspection of the property
- allow access for repairs
- allow an incoming tenant to view the property
- leave the property clean
- leave the property and garden clear of contents
- give four weeks' notice
- return all keys to the local housing office.

Tristar Homes work in partnership with SitexOrbis to protect homes.



Minimising refusals

Matching the most appropriate prospective tenant to a void property either through an allocations process or a bidding system is essential as inappropriate and untimely offers can result in needless property refusals and unnecessarily prolonged void durations.

In order to ensure that a housing organisation makes effective use of the housing stock the following areas are key to ensure a well managed lettings/bidding process:

- **accuracy:** regularly review and update prospective tenants' details, including:
 - household circumstances
 - housing need and requirements
 - contact details, and
 - investigate all failures to respond to offers
- **act upon information:** ensure that property attributes are correctly recorded and advertised
- **take action:** where the reason for refusal relates to the condition of the property, or the re-let standard has not been met, take action to address any shortfalls quickly.

Managing expectations

To help manage expectations and lower the numbers of refusals, a summary of the re-let standard or procedure should be provided to all prospective tenants at the offer stage. This provides an early opportunity to liaise directly with the prospective tenant about their expectations and anticipate any issues that may be encountered. Early communication also increases resident involvement and choice for example around kitchen or bathroom finishes, or retention of non- standard fittings or improvements.

Where a prospective tenant agrees that minor works can be completed after the new tenancy has commenced, it is important to ensure that the new tenant is fully informed of target completion dates for each repair, and convenient appointment times agreed with the tenant.

Reducing dead time

'Dead time' refers to the time wasted between one process stopping and the next one starting, or where time is wasted through stages of the void process being carried out sequentially rather than simultaneously.

The following table suggests activities that can be undertaken at different stages of the void process to help reduce the amount of dead time, and ultimately reduce overall void durations.

During notice period	While void
Inform outgoing tenant of responsibilities and vacating standard	Gas, electricity safety check
Arrange for offers to be generated for prospective tenants / advertising for Choice Based Letting (CBL)	Completion of repairs, where access during notice period was not available Liaise with prospective tenant about repairs/ decoration (many new tenants prefer to move in quickly, and are prepared to have non-essential works carried out after move in)
Accompanied viewings	Complete change of lock
Check for any programmed improvements or planned maintenance to be pulled forward into void works	Completion of annual gas servicing/safety check
Complete property inspection	Complete repairs simultaneously, minimise 'dead time' between sequential activities
Order essential and non-essential repairs and materials	Install property security where relevant
Use property inspection details to update asset management records	Arrange further viewing with prospective tenant, if required
Keep prospective tenant fully informed of target tenancy start date	Arrange for any goods left in the property to be stored or disposed of as appropriate
Completion of essential health and safety repairs	Decorate as necessary
Liaise with prospective tenant about non essential work and removal of non standard fittings and improvements	Maintain security and condition of dwelling and gardens until new let secured



Practice example

Muirhouse Housing Association works hard to ensure that nearly all voids are accepted at the first offer and average void turnaround time is two days. Success can be attributed to a number of factors including:

- one person is responsible for overseeing the whole process; from notice period through to the new letting. There is no split between housing management and maintenance
- close working arrangements exist with locally based community contractors who complete void repairs and specialist services such as cleaning and decoration
- refusals are minimised through proactively contacting applicants as they approach the top of the waiting list to ensure contact details and preferences are up to date
- maximising the notice period to complete inspection and repairs
- a flexible approach to decoration dependent upon the incoming tenants' needs.



Re-let standards

The re-let standard determines the standard the property will meet when it is re-let, and describes the quality standard for repairs and decoration. The re-let standard can be divided into two parts:

- standards that must be met before the new tenant moves in. These must include all statutory, health, safety and security requirements
- standards that must be met within a defined period after the new tenancy starts.



Practice checklist: re-let standards

- ✓ develop in consultation with existing and prospective tenants
- ✓ have a degree of flexibility to respond to the needs of different incoming groups
- ✓ communicate to both staff and customers
- ✓ ensure standards are clear, easily understood and readily accessible
- ✓ focus standards on outputs/outcomes rather than processes
- ✓ ensure standards meet all statutory obligations including all repairing obligations and safety responsibilities
- ✓ include a feedback mechanism which enables you to identify where tenants consider that the property has not met the re-let standard or where the property has been refused because of the standard of the property.



Practice example

Bolton at Home has 25 customer inspectors who are trained to carry out random inspections of voids. In 2004 they introduced a 'lettable void standard' to be consistently met by all properties, used photographs to agree what was acceptable, and developed an employee manual. Bolton at Home has introduced the following improvements as a result of working with customer inspectors:

- all old locks are recycled following lock changes
- electricity supply is established to all properties
- all soiled floorboards are replaced in addition to damaged boards
- security screens have been reduced with window netting and alarms
- all potential customers can view photographs and copies of the lettable standard via the internet.



Cleaning and decoration

Undertaking decorations can be costly, both in terms of extending the void duration and increasing void costs. However, poor decoration and cleanliness will limit any chance of successfully letting a property and can impact negatively on refusal rates and customer satisfaction. Housing organisations have a range of options when considering decorating void properties including:

- giving vouchers to be exchanged for decorative materials
- paying cash to the tenant
- carrying out the work directly
- providing materials.

When considering each option, housing organisations will need to consider the how accessible it is to the prospective tenant, whether it is cost effective and if it will aid letting a void property.



Practice example

In 2007 Newark and Sherwood Homes undertook a comprehensive consultation with tenants to understand levels of satisfaction with the quality of their homes at the point of let.

A key outcome was dissatisfaction with the standard of decoration in kitchens and bathrooms. In response a pilot scheme was introduced to decorate kitchens and bathrooms in all void properties where the property decoration is not considered to be at a high standard.

Local contractors complete the work and decorating costs have been offset against the decorating and cleaning allowances that would have previously been made to the incoming tenant.



Void inspections

There are generally two opportunities to carry out an inspection to a property

- pre-void
- on termination

The inspection stages are the key links and check points in the void management process. They also offer a key opportunity for customer involvement as housing organisations are increasingly using tenant inspectors to compliment the inspection process.

In addition to the pre-void and termination inspections, post-void inspections should also be carried out to determine that the repairs identified have been completed and to the agreed standard and to sign off the property as ready-to-let. Inspecting all post-void properties can have resource and capacity implications. Organisations should take a statistical and risk-based approach to post-void inspections.



Pre-void inspections

An inspection at this stage gives an opportunity to –

find out:

- why the tenant is moving – this can provide customer information that can be used to inform service delivery and future supply and demand planning factors and can feed into strategies e.g. asset management, community cohesion
- the tenant's new address (this should have been supplied at the point of notice)
- whether the landlord has an accurate record of property attributes, including any adaptations
- whether any items that have been installed by the tenant need to be removed or retained as a provision for the next tenant e.g. sheds, conservatories, showers – an assessment needs to be made on the condition and quality and then balanced with the cost of future repairs to the landlord and its likely responsibility for this repair.

remind tenants of:

- arrangements for handing in of the keys
- the need to remove all furniture and personal effects (apart from curtains/blinds)
- the need to pay off any rent arrears and to pay the rent until the end of the tenancy
- the need to turn off fuel and water supplies when leaving and, where cold weather is anticipated, to drain tanks
- any 'good condition' incentive scheme that may exist.

assess:

- the repairs needed to the property according to the re-let standard
- the amount of redecoration work required and, where different methods exist, the method to be adopted
- whether there is any work that needs doing for which the tenant will be charged – there are obvious benefits in carrying out the inspections as early as possible in the notice period to give the tenant maximum opportunity to put these items right
- whether any compensation is payable under the right to improve (England and Wales) or the right to compensation for improvements (Scotland)
- whether specific security measures need to be taken when the property becomes void.

To take photographs for marketing the property (usually as part of a choice based lettings scheme)

arrange dates/times for:

- viewings by prospective tenants
- any further inspections that may be needed
- pre-void repairs to be carried out.

Inspection on termination

An inspection at this stage gives an opportunity to:

- check that the condition of the home has not altered since the earlier inspection
- identify the measures that are required to make the property safe
- check whether re-chargeable repairs, brought to the tenant's attention have been carried out and are to an acceptable standard
- identify the repairs necessary to ensure a successful letting in line with any agreed criteria.

✓ **Practice checklist: inspection on termination**

- ✓ be prompt – within 24 hours of receipt of keys should be the target wherever possible
- ✓ complete by trained staff
- ✓ assess the property against a clear re-let standard
- ✓ use a standard checklist for identifying defects
- ✓ collect data electronically allowing inspections and orders to be raised without return to offices or uploading onto systems without duplication
- ✓ cross reference to major investment programmes – voids can either be put into major works programmes avoiding future disruption to the tenant, or works replacements could be held pending future programmes – the decision making process must be transparent
- ✓ undertake a stock condition survey to supplement and update the stock condition database – this will enable a more accurate programme and investment planning in the future
- ✓ identify the need for any specialist clearance of bulky items, dangerous items such as sharps and needles and any pest infestations
- ✓ identify any security arrangements that may be needed which should be linked to risk
- ✓ identify the safety checks/repairs required to the property for heating, electrics, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, warden call alarm systems and any other services
- ✓ be flexible in the process where an incoming tenant has been identified and specific needs have been highlighted



Practice example

Cube Housing Association has put in place a partnership agreement which includes a joint inspection with a named liaison officer from the contractor, who accompanies the dedicated voids officer to complete the property inspection. Both agree what work will be required to bring the property up to the lettable standard and the timeframe for the work to be completed. The process has resulted in:

- stronger worker relationships
- more accurate work orders, and a reduction in variation requests by the contractor
- a reduction in the void period
- improved quality of information to the incoming tenant, allowing them to plan the move to their new home in a more structured and positive way.



Carrying out repairs

In-house staff or appointed contractors should be set strict quality and time targets for carrying out void works as both factors are directly related to successfully letting a void property. Many housing organisations publish in their service standards the turnaround time for a void property as it is acknowledged that delays in repairs or repairs carried out to a poor standard have a financial cost to the business in terms of loss of income and a social/emotional cost to the prospective tenant who may have an urgent need for alternative accommodation.

Further information

**Improving repairs and maintenance:
A Good Practice Guide CIH (2008)**

www.cih.org/publications/pub653.htm



Practice checklist: effective void repairs

- ✓ wherever possible repairs should be completed outside the void period
- ✓ the security and safety of the property should be maintained at all times
- ✓ efficient methods should be applied to the procurement of services and goods
- ✓ make best use of IT and administrative systems to aid the streamlining of order processing
- ✓ processes should be streamlined to avoid multiple visits
- ✓ work should be co-ordinated to run simultaneously rather than sequentially
- ✓ maximise the use of multi skilled or 'pairing' arrangements
- ✓ time targets should be exacting but realistic
- ✓ works and contractors should be efficiently co-ordinated, with clearly defined responsibilities
- ✓ introduce effective key management processes, such as the installation of universal locks or key boxes to reduce delays
- ✓ establish effective arrangements with specialist contractors for non repair work e.g. rubbish removal, needle stick clearance, asbestos.





Practice example

Following a successful pilot during 2007 Guinness Northern Counties Housing Association have revised working arrangements for the management of voids.

A review of void management revealed duplication around inspection and order processing, and time delays around different contractors gaining access to the property. As a result the following changes were introduced;

- the main contractor now collects void keys taking responsibility for managing the whole process there after
- the contractor undertakes the void inspection and completes work as necessary to meet the agreed void re-let charter
- if additional contractors are required, the main contractor arranges this and manages access to the property
- upon completion of all work a single invoice is provided to cover the whole of the work.

Key outcomes included:

- reduced duplication of pre- and post-inspections
- communications between both parties improving substantially
- reduced void turnaround times
- efficiency gains were forecast at 630 people hours per annum. This allowed staff to undertake more customer-focused work as a consequence adding more value to the service
- 50% reductions in the numbers of orders raised and invoices processed
- changes proved popular with both staff and contractors.



Environmental issues

The void period provides an ideal opportunity to consider environmental issues and how to make properties more energy efficient. This is all the more important with the introduction of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) in the rented sector. Apart from basic measures such as cavity wall/loft insulation and boiler replacement, this might also be the right time to carry out more ambitious measures including floor insulation and whole heating system replacement as this work is best undertaken in an unoccupied property. Housing organisations might also want to consider undertaking more detailed 'energy surveys' at this point with the view to establish an environmental stock performance baseline to inform future improvement as part of cyclical maintenance schedules.

Further information

Housing, the environment and our changing climate CIH (2008)

www.cih.org/publications/pub127.htm

As a minimum, inspectors should check for the following:

- Loft/cavity wall insulation and 'topping-up' where necessary
- Draught proofing, including floor insulation
- Hot water tank insulation
- Energy efficient light bulbs
- Heating controls
- Composting bins
- Water butts.

It is important that void inspection staff has the knowledge to carry out basic energy assessment work. In order to carry out energy efficiency work within the void turnaround period it is important that funding mechanisms are in place or have at least been explored. The Carbon Emission Reduction Target (CERT), which puts an obligation on suppliers of gas and electricity to secure energy savings from their domestic customer base, is one of the main sources of funding.

Adapted from Fit For The Future: The Green Homes Retrofit Manual (Housing Corporation)

The Energy Saving Trust's Energy Efficiency, the guide includes information the various funding sources

<http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk>

For support in accessing CERT money see the Carbon Reduction One Stop Shop (CROSS) Funding Partnership

<http://www.funding.org.uk/>



Energy Performance Certificates

Every new letting in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland requires an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC). An EPC remains valid for ten years and can be re-used as often as required during this period. However, where a landlord has improved the energy efficiency of the dwelling, they will most likely commission a new certificate, to supersede an existing one.

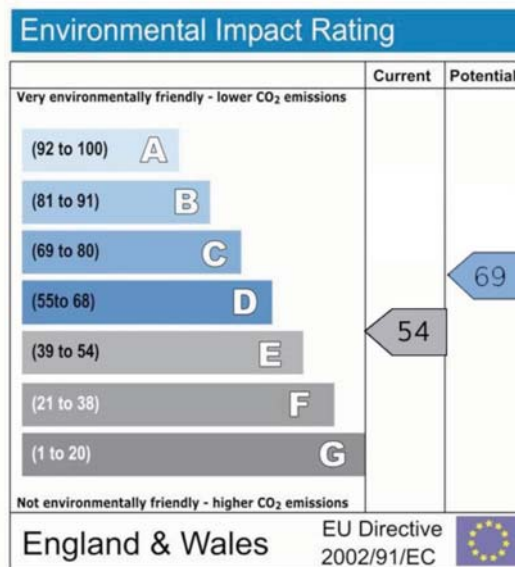
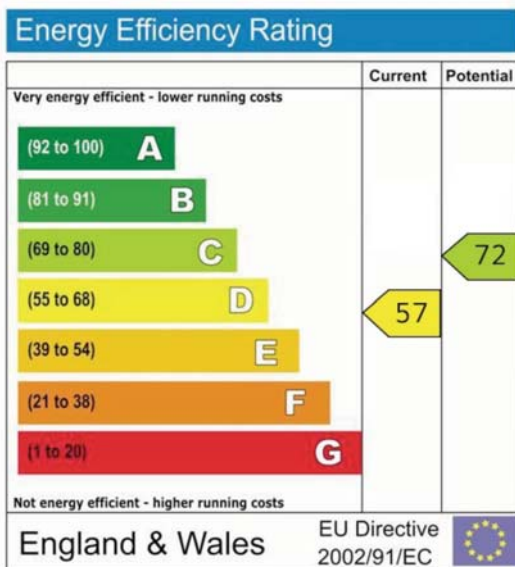
The certificate uses the familiar white goods' A-G band labelling system to display energy and environmental impact rating of the property and lists cost-effective energy efficiency improvement measures.

As EPCs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can only be produced by an accredited Domestic Energy Assessor (DEA), larger housing organisations may consider training their own in-house staff to achieve accreditation in order to carry out assessments. While there is no specified qualification for energy assessors in Scotland, the Scottish Government has entered into a protocol with organisations whose members have an understanding of the building and energy sectors and only they may produce EPCs.

General background information on EPCs for England and Wales is available from:

www.homeinformationpacks.gov.uk

For Scotland and Northern Ireland specific information see **www.sbsa.gov.uk** and **www.dfpni.gov.uk** respectively.



Efficient use of IT

A wide range of IT solutions exist in the market place to improve operational productivity, performance and customer focus. While dynamic appointment and workforce scheduling, flexible mobile working, and mobile communication are increasingly common in the management of responsive and planned repairs, successful elements of these processes can be adapted to fit the voids process.

By using handheld PCs inspectors can work offline to capture information and then transfer the data to the office without having to physically return there. Void inspectors can also access information such as repairs codes, property attributes, tenancy agreements and electronic diaries via PCs, contributing to a streamlined process and working towards reducing void turnaround time.

Void security

Properties left standing empty for prolonged periods are particularly at risk of vandalism, theft, damage and in some situations squatters. Conversely, the use of security measures can have a detrimental visual impact on a neighbourhood and influence the perceptions of a prospective tenant regarding the area where a property is situated. When considering using security measures organisations should take risk based approach.



Practice checklist: void security

- ✓ outgoing tenant should be required to return all external door and window keys to the property
- ✓ landlord to check property is secure once vacant possession obtained
- ✓ prompt removal of fixtures and fittings equipment prone to theft
- ✓ all doors locks should be changed to reduce the risk of squatting or theft (locks can be recycled)
- ✓ estate based officers should completed routine external inspections of voids to ensure they are secure, and remove obvious signs of non-occupation
- ✓ local residents should be encouraged to report vandalism or damage
- ✓ gardens should be maintained to reduce the visual impact of voids on the neighbourhood.

Options for additional security include the use of:

- curtains and blinds
- lighting timers
- alarms -linked to a control centre
- smart water (DNA spray)
- security fittings – such as window screens and security doors
- security patrols.

Managing performance

Housing organisations should develop systems that enable them to measure their void management performance. They need to set targets and monitor performance against the targets. They also need to be able to see what is happening with voids at different stages in the process to anticipate whether there are problems that need to be tackled.



Practice checklist: managing performance

- ✓ establish rigorous and challenging targets for quality, timescales and cost
- ✓ use a range of national and local performance indicators
- ✓ understand the effectiveness of each stage in the void processes
- ✓ identify, anticipate and tackle blockages at different stages of the void and lettings process
- ✓ compare performance with other organisations
- ✓ adjust information to take account of differences in type of stock and location
- ✓ provide reports to tenants, prospective tenants and stakeholders
- ✓ evidence how the evaluation of performance information and customer feedback has been used to improve void management policies, procedures and/or working practices
- ✓ identify at the earliest opportunity where:
 - Concentrations or high frequencies of voids are emerging
 - Indications of extended void durations, and/or
 - Increases in refusal numbers.

Websites

Audit Commission

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing/pages/default.aspx

Regulation and good practice information

Chartered Institute of Housing

www.cih.org

The professional body for people involved in housing and communities

Communities and Local Government

www.communities.gov.uk

Government department responsible for housing, communities, planning and regeneration

Department for Social Development

www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/hsdiv-housing.htm

Government department responsible for housing policy and regulation of social housing in Northern Ireland

DirectGov

www.direct.gov.uk/en/index.htm

The government's public service website including information on property safety

Empty Homes Agency

www.emptyhomes.com/

An independent campaigning charity highlighting the waste of empty homes, useful information on EDMOs

Equality and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Commission working to eliminate discrimination and reduce inequality

Government Equalities Office

www.equalities.gov.uk

Responsible for equalities legislation and policy in the UK

Homes and Communities Agency

www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/

National housing and regeneration delivery agency for England

I&DeA

www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagel=1

The improvement and development agency for local government

Improvement Network

www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk/imp/core/page.do?pagelid=1

A network that is helping to lay the foundations for successful partnership working

Renewal.net

www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=1338

Government backed website looking at what works in neighbourhood renewal

Scottish Government: Housing

www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing

Devolved government for Scotland, responsible for housing policy and tackling related issues such as homelessness and fuel poverty

Scottish Housing Regulator

www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk

Regulator of registered social landlords and local authority housing and homelessness services in Scotland

Tenant Participation Advisory Service

www.tpas.org.uk/

Promoting tenant involvement and empowerment



Tenant Services Authority

www.tenantservicesauthority.org

The new regulator for the affordable housing sector

Wales Audit Office

www.wao.gov.uk

Regulation of all areas of devolved government in Wales, including housing

Welsh Assembly Government: Housing and Community

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity>

Devolved government in Wales dealing with housing and community regeneration

The Chartered Institute of Housing



The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the professional body for people involved in housing and communities.

We are a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. We have a diverse and growing membership of over 22,000 people – both in the public and private sectors – living and working in over 20 countries on five continents across the world.

We exist to maximise the contribution that housing professionals make to the wellbeing of communities. Our vision is to be the first point of contact for – and the credible voice of – anyone involved or interested in housing.



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