



EFFECTIVE VOID MANAGEMENT IN IRELAND

Edited by Prof John McPeake



Acknowledgements

This practice guide was produced by the Chartered Institute of Housing in Ireland, in association with the Housing Agency. We would like to thank Professor John McPeake for editing the guide.

The guide has also benefited greatly by contributions from the following people and organisations

Mick Concannon and Marion Smith, Clúid Housing

Ben Dunne and Alison O'Gorman, Túath Housing

Liam Burke, Martina O'Connor and Aoife Sheridan, Fingal County Council

Peter Minnock, Kildare County Council

Seamus Kavanagh, Kilkenny County Council

Hugh Hogan, South Dublin County Council

Sheena McCallion, Apex Housing

Colette Moore, Clanmil Housing

Policy and practice team, Chartered Institute of Housing

We would like to thank everyone who assisted in the production of this guide.

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Foreword



I'm passionate about what we do in housing to improve people's lives, strengthen communities, help vulnerable people and contribute to improving the economic and social health of our society.

When it comes to delivering results, we have little chance of getting things right unless we get things right on the front line. Making sure homes are not lying empty is one area that has vast social and financial repercussions if not done effectively, affecting the lives of people waiting for social housing and the bottom line of housing providers.

I'm pleased to present this practice guide on how to manage voids, together with our partners the Housing Agency. We want to make sure that housing professionals across Ireland have all the support, advice and tools they need to deliver for people on the ground.

All social landlords can expect to have vacant properties at one time or another. But if you build up an understanding of the reasons behind the vacancies you can put efficient procedures in place to bring empty homes back into use more quickly, and develop solutions to address long-term voids.

As housing professionals, you have an unparalleled understanding of the practices that work on the front line. CIH's job is to make sure your expertise is gathered and shared so practitioners across Ireland can learn from each other. So I'd like to thank the local authorities and approved housing bodies who helped to inform this guide – your input is invaluable.

CIH is currently expanding its support for housing professionals in Ireland – this guide is part of a package of resources, qualifications, training and events to help you do the best job you can. If you'd like to find out more, visit our website (cih.org/republicofireland), and if there's a topic you'd like us to focus on, we'd love to hear from you (ireland@cih.org).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terrie Alafat".

Terrie Alafat

Chief executive

Chartered Institute of Housing



I welcome the publication of this practice guide on the management of empty social housing.

The Housing Agency works with others in the delivery of housing and housing services. One of our priorities is to assist local authorities and approved housing bodies in the development of skills in key areas of housing management.

It is crucial that the available social housing stock is used as efficiently as possible to meet the ongoing requirement for good quality, secure and affordable housing. There continues to be significant demand for social housing support across the country. Every property that can be brought back into use as quickly as possible is one more step in addressing this need.

Reducing voids and re-let times is important for so many reasons: it means a social housing tenancy is offered quickly to people in need; it brings in revenue in rent; and it reduces the cost of boarding-up properties and expenditure on alternative accommodating in the private rented sector. The shorter a house is vacant, generally speaking, the less it costs to bring to habitable standard. Also vacant properties can detract significantly from a neighbourhood.

This guide is timely and, in bringing together shared experience of what works well, I hope that it will help to reinforce the message that real progress can be achieved if we plan and work together with a common goal.

The practice guide will be available to download from the Housing Agency website (www.housing.ie). CIH will be providing a training course on void management to accompany the publication.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Tricia O'Keefe, professional development coordinator at CIH for her work on this guide, and also the local authorities and approved housing bodies who shared their practice with her.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John C' Connor".

John O'Connor

Chief executive
Housing Agency

Introduction

Managing voids is a core function for local authorities (LAs) and approved housing bodies (AHBs).

LAs and AHBs can expect to see a proportion of their homes becoming vacant. That is usually a positive thing as it enables them to meet the needs of those waiting for a home. However, the current critical shortage of housing stock available to meet growing demand makes the efficient turnaround of voids a priority. It is vital that housing organisations minimise the number of empty properties and the length of time that they are empty.

This practice guide aims to help housing organisations let homes as quickly as possible and in the best possible condition, to tenants who will most benefit from them. It provides a brief overview of good practice in key areas of voids management, illustrated with examples from Ireland and the UK. It will be useful as a starting point for those working in the housing sector considering a comprehensive review of their voids management processes, and also for those seeking to address particular issues.

Why is it important to have an effective approach to managing voids?

Delivering effective and efficient void services is one of the most important areas of good housing management and should be at the core of a strongly performing housing business for the following reasons:

- 1. Making effective use of social assets:** empty properties are a wasted resource, and adversely affect homelessness and waiting lists. Housing organisations should ensure prospective tenants do not have to wait longer than necessary to move into a well-maintained home.
- 2. Maximising rent and revenue:** high levels of voids and long-term voids result in lost rental revenue, limiting a housing organisation's abilities to meet repair and other service obligations; and affecting financial viability in the longer term.
- 3. Effective asset management:** maintaining empty homes in good condition is vital to maintaining the value of a housing organisation's assets. Where properties are empty for lengthy periods of time, this can result in:
 - increasing repairs and maintenance costs as the physical fabric of the property declines

- security costs, utility reconnection costs and time delays
- costs of dealing with dilapidation and vandalism
- customer dissatisfaction and higher turnover and void levels
- increased risk of squatting

- 4. Sustainable neighbourhoods:** long-term voids can negatively affect the appearance of an area, how people feel about it as a place to live, and undermine future lettings and community regeneration.

Categorising voids

The current critical shortage of housing stock underlines the importance of registering and tracking all available properties, as a limited resource that meets a fundamental social need. It is important that all empty properties – not just those that are long-term vacants or difficult to let – are categorised as voids and are included in management and review processes. Therefore a void is best defined as any property that doesn't have a tenant living in it for a period of time.

LAs and AHBs should:

- categorise all empty properties as voids
- consider an enhanced policy approach for difficult to let properties
- ensure that all tenants understand the notice period and process at the start of their tenancy
- have processes in place to capture 'no notice' voids, such as those that might arise from the Rental Accommodation Scheme – for example using rent arrears information to identify and manage such 'no notice' voids
- regularly review the status of property taken out of stock for demolition or redevelopment
- ensure asset registers are complete and up to date
- regularly review and check asset registers to identify voids that may not trigger appraisal mechanisms, such as properties built under the Rural Cottage Scheme

Improving void management processes

The twin goals should be to have the lowest possible number of void properties and to relet empty homes as quickly as possible. There are three over-arching principles that will help LAs and AHBs achieve these goals:

- have effective void management processes in place
- integrate void management with housing management
- involve customers and support choice

An effective procedure for managing voids must balance these factors and achieve a high level of customer satisfaction.

Having effective void management processes in place

There are three main performance dimensions to the delivery of an effective voids management process – time, quality and cost.



To be effective, clear void management processes need to be in place that balance these performance constraints, and cover all the required actions from tenancy termination to subsequent relet. There are nine points to consider.

1. Get your targets, time-frames and supporting policies and procedures right

Targets for void repairs should be based on achieving overall continuous improvement in the quality and timeliness of delivering a ready-to-let property. While all vacant dwellings should be classified as voids, depending on the scale, it may be necessary to have enhanced policies and procedures for long-term voids and difficult to let properties (see below). Many social landlords have separate targets for different categories of voids, but this must not detract from the policy intent of minimising the total number of voids and minimising relet times.

It is important to be clear about what work must be done during the vacancy period (e.g. urgent work), and what can be done after re-occupation.

Define void management outcomes with clear standards and targets which are communicated to all relevant staff and partners. Identify specific stages and efficiently sequence void management processes to a defined time-scale. This can include:

- a. **Developing a clear and realistic relet standard.** It is vitally important that the relet standard is easily understood, capable of consistent application, and is properly communicated and explained to staff, contractors and prospective tenants. The relet standard should be output-based (e.g. it should state that kitchen units will be clean, rather than kitchen units will be cleaned).

The relet standard should be supported by appropriate policies and procedures for:

- redecoration - what role, if any, will the landlord have and is there a case for redecoration vouchers?
- recharging for tenant-related damage and repairs
- arrangements for dealing with water, gas, electricity, oil and solid fuel services and installations in empty properties, such as servicing, meter readings, and disconnections and reconnections in empty properties
- security arrangements for void dwellings, including during the period of work, to reduce vandalism and the risk of squatting
- tenant incentives e.g. to give the required notice, leave the property clear and clean, hand back all keys, etc

Housing organisations need to strike a balance between tenant aspirations, the timeframe for the works, and the cost. Relet standards are dependent on a range of variables but there are some basic principles which can be applied. Relet standards should:

- have monitoring systems in place which ensure that the standard is effectively implemented, such as post-inspections using a checklist

- have mechanisms that trigger remedial action to address any problems identified by the post-inspection
- include some form of confirmation from new tenants, such as signing off the property, to state that the property has met the relet standard
- have mechanisms in place to identify where new tenants consider that the property has not met the relet standard or where the property has been refused because a prospective tenant was not happy with the standard of the property being offered. Seek to understand why this has happened and adjust your processes as necessary. The intent should be that all properties offered for relet will meet the stated standard. Extra work takes time and costs money; it should be avoided as far as possible.

Consideration needs to be given to external space, for example communal areas and gardens. Points to consider include:

- Overgrown gardens of difficult-to-let and long-term voids may be generally contributing to the unpopularity of the area. Organisations should consider keeping grass cut and gardens tidy during void period.
- The relet standard for gardens should be at least equivalent to what is expected under normal tenancy conditions.
- The garden should be included in the empty property inspection to ensure that it is safe, any potential health and safety hazards removed and rubbish is cleared.

b. Identify voids swiftly, and respond quickly.

Tenants are usually required to provide four weeks' notice of tenancy termination. Having notice of a termination allows the landlord to begin the processes required to relet the property and minimise the vacancy period. Ideally, within 24 hours of receiving notice LAs and AHBs should

conduct a pre-inspection of the dwelling while the current tenant is still in occupation. This could include:

- identifying the repairs that are required, preferably categorised into urgent and non-urgent, with non-urgent work potentially carried out after reletting
- paying particular attention to health and safety related matters such as heating and electrical equipment, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, and any items that may have a "long lead" time in terms of repair
- ensuring the tenant is aware of any repairs that are their responsibility to complete prior to leaving
- identifying any damage caused by the outgoing tenant, explaining this to the tenant, and flagging for the vacancy inspection
- confirming the status of the utility accounts, to minimise potential issues at relet
- reminding the tenant of their obligation to "clear and clean" the property prior to leaving
- discussing the status of the rent account, and any arrears
- gaining insight into why the tenant is leaving, and obtaining a forwarding address

c. Have clear processes for dealing with

abandoned properties. Although most tenants provide some notice, LAs and AHBs often have to deal with properties that have been abandoned. There are particular challenges dealing with abandoned properties:

- Confirming that the property is actually abandoned should be a priority. There are some steps that may help such as talking to neighbours or family members, where known, and checking if the rent is still being paid.

Having effective void management processes in place

- While a property may appear abandoned, as the tenancy has not been terminated, the tenant has a legal right to return and take up residence.
- If the landlord is satisfied that the property has been abandoned, the tenancy will need to be legally terminated before it can be relet. This is a legal process and must be carefully followed.
- There may or may not be former tenant possessions in the property, and the landlord will have a duty of care in respect of these items.
- Where a former tenant has died, a sensitive approach will be required to bring the tenancy to a legal end; remember that rent is due until a tenancy is legally terminated, so prompt action will help avoid an increase in rent arrears.
- The best advice with abandoned properties is to tread carefully but don't ignore the problem and the potential that such properties offer.

d. Use a standardised vacancy inspection process, which will:

- confirm the condition of the property as left by the former tenant, building on information obtained during the pre termination inspection, initiating recharges as required
- identify and order the remedial repairs required to meet the relet standard
- apply standardised response targets based on a categorisation of the relets – for example:
 - relet voids – 48 hours for completion where property is in good condition and only basic safety check and cleaning required
 - minor repair voids – five working days where property requires above with only minor additional repairs
 - major repair voids – 12 working days where

major component replacement and/or extensive re-decoration is required

- long-term voids – see below
- capture the information required to update the landlord's stock condition or asset management system to allow for more accurate planning of future planned maintenance

Halton Housing Trust reviewed its void processes and relet standard, and succeeded in reducing:

- turnaround times from 42 days to just 19
- average void cost from £1550 to £1050
- average rent loss from £492.50 to £202.14

At the same time it increased customer satisfaction levels

<http://bit.ly/1hghNN>

Clannmil Housing is a Belfast-based housing association with almost 400 relets annually. The association has recently become concerned with the number of tenants who were terminating their tenancies with no or inadequate notice. This was reducing the time available to the association to organise the works necessary to relet the property, which was having an impact on overall relet times. In an effort to address this issue the association has developed a incentive scheme to encourage tenants who are terminating their tenancies to provide full notice, clear their possessions, return all keys and leave any pre-pay gas and electricity cards to facilitate the statutory checks. This new scheme is about to enter pilot testing and, if successful, will be rolled out across the association's housing stock.

2. Inform and involve the right people.

Produce effective and comprehensive performance information and ensure this is shared between relevant partners. Involve the right people including maintenance and development teams, housing managers, lettings staff and contractors. Many LAs and AHBs own and manage housing that has been designed for people with support requirements, such as the frail elderly, and people with physical or mental disabilities. When voids arise in these types of properties early involvement of the appropriate partners is particularly important, especially where care or specialised support services may be required. Increasingly, landlords with such properties, including mainstream sheltered housing, are finding that vacancies are difficult to let, making engagement with the right people all the more important (see below on joint working).

3. Establish clear responsibilities.

Allocate clear responsibilities for each stage of the void management process; but have a group or lead individual who has responsibility to make decisions promptly on the overall process. Depending on the scale, LAs and AHBs may consider creating a specialist void team.

4. Programming work to minimise delays.

An important aspect of repairs is the ability to programme works promptly so there are no unnecessary delays. Housing organisations should consider:

- using specialist void repair teams/contractors – this allows resources to be targeted and planned in a more effective way, minimising the risk of operatives being diverted to undertake responsive repairs, therefore delaying the completion of voids
- having a schedule of rates specifically for the repair of empty properties between lettings
- having separate contracts for repairing empty properties and monitor these separately from other jobs

- providing a system of performance-related penalties and incentives that benefit the contractor and housing organisation linked to target times and savings in rent loss
- ensuring that contractor choice is based on price and quality – for larger organisations consider breaking up void repair packages so that the risk of poor performance is minimised
- ensuring links with major improvement programmes that can incorporate voids repairs
- putting planned contracts in place that enable major replacement to be carried out to the same standard and cost as programmed works – this involves specifying in advance the volumes of replacement items needed for void works, either as separate or additional to planned contracts

5. Tendering and framework agreements.

Where an LA or AHB works with a range of different contractors or sub-contractors, the process of tendering and commissioning repairs can take time. Delays can be minimised by:

- where tendering is necessary, communicating effectively with all departments to prioritise void contracts and reduce delays
- using builders from a panel with established suitability criteria
- avoiding ‘batching’ repairs (where repair works are grouped in multiple units), and dealing with each void as single units
- using framework agreements

Framework agreements are time and/or cost-limited contracts with a single contractor (single operator framework) or with three or more contractors (multi-operator framework). Framework agreements, once established, simplify procurement for void and repair works as they arise. Housing organisations might consider using a single operator framework agreement for response repairs using a schedule of rates and

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multi-operator framework agreements for more extensive void works which would be tendered to the framework contractors.

Template for public procurement framework agreement:

<http://bit.ly/1X49VSC>

Kildare County Council has introduced framework agreements for small works and response maintenance. This replaces procurement panels as part of a campaign to improve its void management processes, while remaining procurement compliant.

<http://bit.ly/1Unfgjl>

6. **Introduce service level agreements.** These should have strict contractual time and quality targets for void works, and impose penalties on contractors who fail to meet them or 'pain and gain' clauses for achievement/non-achievement within partnering arrangements.

7. **Working around tenants.** The increasing practice of pre-allocating properties where notice has been received raises the issue of how housing organisations work around incoming tenants. In some cases, where properties are allocated prior to the previous tenant moving out, new tenants are keen to take up occupancy of the empty property as soon as possible. This has advantages not only for the incoming tenant but also for the housing organisation as it:

- allows 'back-to-back' lettings to take place (subject to safety checks)
- allows rent on the property to be collected much more quickly
- negates the need for security measures

However, it raises the issue of how much work can and should be deferred until the new tenant has moved in. Works should only be deferred until after the tenant moves if they are non-essential.

8. **Allocations.** The allocations process should be triggered as soon as a housing organisation is aware of the upcoming void. Accurate and up-to-date information about applicants and their household, needs and preferences is crucial to managing allocations effectively. Letting policy should seek both to meet housing need, and contribute towards broader goals such as achieving balanced communities and tackling anti-social behaviour.

- In non-choice based letting systems, housing organisations should have processes in place to periodically update and review applicants' information, which will help to reduce the number of refusals. It is sometimes the case that multiple offers are required to achieve a letting; this may reflect low demand – but it may also reflect unrealistic expectations on the part of applicants, or a system that encourages prospective tenants to be "choosy." A policy of a maximum number of reasonable offers might help to address this situation.
- Nomination agreements between LAs and AHBs should be clear and include the allocations policy for selecting, prioritising and refusing nominations, and timescales for each stage of the process. Monitoring arrangements should cover outcomes as well as numbers of nominations so that any problems are quickly highlighted and can be dealt with.
- Choice based letting (CBL) systems can provide an alternative approach to traditional allocation processes. Benefits include greater customer choice, increased engagement and interaction between customers and housing providers, and better acceptance rates. CBL systems also offer the potential for significant efficiencies – saving time

and money. In particular housing organisations can make substantial savings in registering applicants and manually updating and shortlisting. However CBL cannot rectify the acute shortage of social rented housing. CBL allocation processes should be transparent so that they can educate and inform customer choice, and manage expectations. As CBL encourages and rewards pro-active engagement, the system should incorporate measures to facilitate access by groups with specific disadvantages such as learning difficulties, poor literacy, poor ITC skills and limited opportunities to access the internet.

Regardless of the allocation method, the most important point to remember is that stock turnover will be lower, and thus voids will be lower, when we put the right people in the right properties from the outset.

9. **Monitoring and review.** Have effective monitoring and chasing systems in place at each stage. Regularly review the system in place. Benchmark performance against high-performing housing organisations. A percentage of completed voids should be post-inspected for audit purposes to ensure the right standard is being achieved and all agreed works are being done.

Practice examples

Many housing organisations are finding that end-to-end void process mapping has enabled them to identify where improvements can be made. Duplication and reworking can be eliminated and streamlining achieved.

Cluid Housing Association has adopted a “systems thinking” approach to void management. This approach seeks to improve the whole process by looking across all activities and how they link together, from the time a tenant leaves to when another moves in rather than looking in isolation at parts of the process. For example, analysing how long it takes contractors to do any work and how long it takes to

deal with keys and arrange access. To do this it:

- agreed a clear purpose:
 - to provide tenants with a comfortable home, treat them fairly, and give choices where possible
 - to respond quickly and correctly when issues were identified
- developed an integrated approach: void workflows were improved, in conjunction with improvements to rental income collection, letting processes and repairs and maintenance to create an integrated housing system
- improved information and mapping: all workflows were mapped and co-ordinated. The review process included joint working between internal and external partners, including housing officers as the frontline staff
- eliminated steps in the process that did not add value, and combined steps, such as doing income assessments and signing tenancy agreement at time of viewing:
 - pre-review: voids process included 120 steps, 52 different ‘hands’, seven visits, nine signatures, six letters, 14 emails and a 20 per cent refusal rate
 - post-review: reduced to 29 steps, 16 ‘hands’, six visits, three signatures, one letter, two emails, and a seven per cent refusal rate
- put in place monitoring so it could make continual improvements: since the introduction of the new system void times have dropped by 33 per cent while the cost of works have reduced by 11 per cent and total void costs by 32 per cent.

For further information contact Mick Concannon:
mconcannon@cluid.ie, www.cluid.ie

Having effective void management processes in place

Milton Keynes Council in England also improved its void management by implementing a systems thinking review they called 'working smarter'. Its successes was based on:

- understanding the purpose of the service by engaging stakeholders and not making assumptions
- identifying and driving out wasteful working practices that did not support the purpose
- designing a workflow process that ensured every action added value to the process and not waste
- visibility – IT systems were integrated and displayed on LCD screens in real time to give complete visibility of information on work demand and available resources.

Successes have included:

- reducing the average end-to-end repairs to 3.1 days
- no access reduced by 70 per cent
- improved rental income.

Find out more: bit.ly/1KxFcZ8

Apex Housing in Derry recently completed a review of its policy, procedures and systems for managing voids. A number of additional measures were introduced including:

1. new joint working arrangements between the housing management and property services teams
2. changes to the maintenance contract to complete just urgent and health and safety works prior to reletting, with other non-urgent repairs being carried out when the new tenant is in situ
3. updating IT systems and the introduction of new void coding to facilitate more effective monitoring and reporting

4. conducting joint housing management and property services inspections during the notice period enabling early identification of works
5. introduction of more robust key management arrangements
6. advertising long term voids on its website
7. conducting viewings and pre-allocating the property while the current tenant is still in occupation
8. taking a pro-active approach to minimise void periods.

During 2014/15 Apex's average relet time was 1.6 weeks, basic termination of tenancy costs were £195, and costs arising from additional works at termination averaged £723 . Apex anticipates an improvement in performance in 2015/16 as a result of the additional measures introduced.

Integrating void management with housing management

Managing voids involves a complex set of stages, from ending a tenancy through to bringing a property up to reletting standard and letting. It requires the interaction of a range of housing management and maintenance functions, linking allocations and lettings, estate management, and repairs and maintenance.

Housing organisations should ensure that they do not have conflicting objectives for these services, and that action to deal with empty properties is co-ordinated so all parts of the housing service are working to common business and service goals. This requires effective communication and coordination between different housing functions.

It also means that performance on empty property should be assessed in relation to performance in other areas. This is particularly important when comparing the performance of different housing organisations; for example, a housing organisation with a low void rate may have achieved this at the expense of customer choice through operating a one-offer-only policy.

Key integrated measures might include:

1. **Joint working:** to ensure effective links, improved communication and co-operative working between housing management, maintenance and repair services. Many housing organisations have established joint forums, often involving customers. Such systems are effective because they can oversee the voids process holistically and ensure that blockages in systems are addressed. They also allow for wider issues to be considered to ensure that empty homes are minimised and relet as quickly as possible. Some housing organisations have created dedicated void teams with a mix of disciplines – surveyors, allocations, clerks of works etc – to provide a seamless service.

Fingal County Council reduced its voids from 139 in 2014 to just 30 in 2015 by reviewing its voids management processes using “Lean Six Sigma” tools and techniques. Lean Six Sigma is a management methodology that relies on systematic team working and collaboration to eliminate waste and improve performance. This approach helped to improve communication, cut out work that doesn’t add value and reduce delays.

Communication problems were eliminated by prioritising voids at formal monthly meetings, using ‘pivot points’ – personnel whose key knowledge could identify delays and drive the improvement process – and introducing new IT software to support lean planning analytics and communication tools. Stakeholders now use a master relet calendar to monitor and track the progress of all void units. The IT reporting and analysis system collates data from four separate software systems and streamlines processes, identifying duplication and gaps in information being shared. The system allows for real time reporting, the information being shared through dashboard updates to all stakeholder departments – lettings, estate management, architects and repairs/maintenance teams. This facilitates continual improvement as part of the process.

Other improvements included:

- limiting the period for the tenant to remove possessions and arranging a prompt clear-out, allowing more expedient inspections
- classifying voids in terms of level of works required has allowed for prioritisation of units that require minimal works, allowing for quick turnaround of these units
- reducing inspection times
- using framework agreements to streamline the procurement process and minimise procurement delays

Integrating void management with housing management

- removing 'batching' from voids procurement process to improve unit flow
 - using service level agreements with repairs contractors to specified contract periods on units
 - improving key management by using secure lockers/designated staff and moving key management function to local offices
2. Have systems for producing the **Building Energy Rating Certificate** and consider which, if any, of the works identified should be included as part of the relet repairs, which should be completed after a new tenant moves in, and which might be better included in a future planned maintenance scheme.
3. **Management of keys:** effective control of key movement can minimise access delays for contractors, housing managers, utility companies, accompanied viewings and/or occupational health staff. Duplication of keys, use of suited/universal locks or secure key boxes with master locks or coded keypads can reduce time spent locating and accessing keys. Obviously if all the keys are not recovered from the former tenant, the landlord should replace the locks and issue new keys.
4. **Combining different stages:** some stages of the void management process can be combined or overlapped. For example, arrange a pre-inspection of a property where a tenant has given notice before the property is empty; or allocate homes to new tenants before repair works are completed to speed up the relet process. Be discerning about which repairs are necessary for a relet and which are not. This can reduce costs and turnaround time.
5. **Identify underlying trends in voids:** for example if a lot of homes are becoming vacant on a particular street, is there an underlying reason for this? Effective void management not only relies on well-managed and efficient procedures, but also

requires an in-depth understanding of the types of and level of demand, by area and by property type. At its simplest level this could be a recognition that there is no longer a demand in an area for studios or an increased demand for one-bedroom flats. Further work is always needed to confirm whether this is a short or long-term trend, and this will then determine the response. A short-term response may include introducing some form of incentive such as additional void repair and redecoration works to make the properties more attractive. Longer term strategic planning may lead to considering options including sale, knocking adjoining properties together to create larger units, reconfiguring larger properties to create smaller homes (typically one and two bedrooms) or complete redevelopment.

6. **Asset management:** LAs and AHBs can use the void process to support a broader approach to asset management, for example:
- developing better intelligence about the property and the estate where it is located by completing stock condition surveys (see above)
 - implementing cyclical planned maintenance and improvement programmes
 - keeping the void management process focused on financial viability
 - supporting the best use of existing housing stock and resources
 - developing strategies for the disposal, demolition, redevelopment, remodelling or re-designation of housing which has been empty for some time and which is clearly unpopular
 - considering selling properties which are long-term voids

Where housing organisations have effective asset management in place this will in turn reduce turnaround times and long-term voids.

Involving customers and supporting choice

Work with your customers to identify ways to reduce the level of voids, void turnaround times and refusals. Share performance information with them including the steps taken to let empty properties and reasons for refusal.

1. Use customer insight data to inform void management processes. Find out about prospective tenants' housing needs and aspirations.
2. Find out why existing tenants want to leave or have abandoned their properties.
3. Give feedback. Customers should also receive information about what action is being taken to let empty properties and reasons that properties have been refused.
4. Consult customers about their communities. Analyse feedback from prospective tenants who refuse an offer; and consult existing tenants about what they like or dislike about an area.
5. Consult customers about the void management process. Seek customers' views of the void repairs service including new or prospective tenants, people who are living next door to empty properties; and people on estates who are worried about the risk of vandalism or concerned about the impact of void properties on their neighbourhood.
6. Consult home seekers and tenants on service standards. These should be set with customers to ensure that they meet their needs, for example, involving customers in establishing the relet standard, agreeing a decoration allowance policy, agreeing the number of choices that should be given to incoming tenants, security and managing complaints.
7. Use tenant inspectors. Use tenants as inspectors and train them to post-inspect or spot-check ready-to-let properties.
8. Support choice. Identify ways in which prospective and existing customers can be encouraged to

make more empowered choices about where they live as this will support greater personal investment in homes and communities.

Intelligently use the information gained through these steps. Knowing about the issues is necessary, but not sufficient in itself. You have to use the feedback, and demonstrate that you have listened and learned from the experiences of your customers. You need act on the information; make changes to your work practices, ensure your "product" is fit for purpose, update your standards, and strive to address any blockages or impediments identified.

Practice examples:

Ensuring that tenants are well informed and encouraging tenant participation is fundamental to good housing management. Failure to engage tenants can lead to difficulties with estate and letting management, problems with anti-social behaviour and higher levels of voids.

The Housing Unit: Managing in partnership: enabling tenant participation in housing estate management, 2001

<http://bit.ly/1VrzfQG>

Helena Homes customer inspections:

<http://bit.ly/1VpBKmP>

Central Bedfordshire Council in England has reviewed its minimum voids standard to take into account vulnerability and the tenant's ability to decorate their property. It uses decoration vouchers to support new tenants, instead of redecorating properties. This gives tenants more choice and speeds up the turn-around time by reducing the amount of work to be done when a tenant leaves. This should enable the tenant to enjoy better living conditions and reduce high void refurbishment costs at the end of the tenancy.

<http://bit.ly/1hghNND>

Long-term voids

Tackling long-term voids is a big issue particularly where they are concentrated in the same area, blighting communities. However, the causes of long-term voids must be clearly understood so that appropriate decisions can be taken. There needs to be an effective options appraisal system and clear trigger mechanisms, which could include:

- the number of offers required to let the dwelling
- the number of weeks vacant
- the cost of repairs to achieve the relet standard
- the turnover rate

There can be a number of different reasons why long-term voids occur, including:

1. Getting empty properties ready to let: pre-letting repair work can take a lot of time depending on the state of disrepair in which a property has been left; or whether unauthorised alterations have taken place.
2. Decanted homes: properties where the tenant has been moved out to leave it empty pending improvement, redevelopment or demolition.
3. The availability of viable alternatives: in some areas there are high levels of alternative accommodation in the private rented sector subsidised under the Rental Accommodation Scheme, which may make some social lets less popular.
4. Low demand: this can be for a number of reasons including over supply, changes in local housing needs (e.g. reduced need for sheltered housing), unpopular building form (e.g. deck access flats), and anti-social behaviour or crime in the estate or location.

There is no one cause of long-term voids, nor is there a single, simple solution. Knowing the reasons why some homes are unpopular will enable housing organisations to develop appropriate solutions in partnership with tenants and communities. To be effective, clear management arrangements need to be in place to

ensure that decisions are taken promptly, for example:

- Develop strategies for dealing with difficult to let homes that address the specific reasons why they are difficult to let.
- Develop a maintenance and modernisation programme that is aimed at reducing the incidence of long term voids, for instance by offering support arrangements for tenants while major works are carried out and avoiding decants.
- Make use of short-life long-term voids that are in good condition, for example for temporary accommodation for homeless people rather than bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Develop tailored marketing strategies.
- Develop strategies for the sale, disposal, demolition, redevelopment, remodelling or re-designation of housing which has been empty for some time and which is clearly unpopular.
- Decorate and furnish a property to use as a show home and hold open days.
- Ensure that where demolition is decided upon there are clear management arrangements for achieving demolition promptly.
- Ensure that a cost benefit analysis is carried out to assess investment costs versus the cost of not investing, for example rent loss, cost of alternative accommodation, increased homelessness, longer waiting lists etc.
- Research and identify underlying trends in empty homes. Are a lot of homes becoming vacant on a particular street? Is there a reason for this, such as anti-social behaviour or hate crime?

Further reading

Practice examples

South Dublin County Council introduced a choice-based letting scheme to tackle properties in hard to let areas. The system is completely online, and the website is designed to be mobile-friendly and easy to use. Prospective tenants receive a pin number and can register their interest for any advertised properties.

<http://bit.ly/1NIheML>

See also Centre for Housing Research 2006, Good practice in housing management: guidelines for local authorities. Regenerating estates, rebuilding vibrant communities

<http://bit.ly/1VryjvU>

Kilkenny County Council undertook work to improve the physical environment of one of its 'hard to let' estates as part of a general regeneration scheme, and with the participation of current tenants. It repainted exteriors and fixed broken paving, kerbstone, guttering etc. Six residential units were demolished to create an open space. In addition a playing field and family resource centre were developed with the support of funding from the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) programme, and community involvement. As a result the estate is now a popular area for prospective tenants.

Clanmil Housing in Belfast now advertises all of its difficult to let properties on its own website and on two commercial letting sites (www.propertypal.com and www.propertynews.com).

Wakefield and District Housing (WDH) has launched an 'immediate available homes' campaign – all properties which have proven difficult to let through the choice-based letting scheme are advertised on the 'immediately available homes' list and can usually be let within two to three days.

CIH has a number of publications that are relevant to voids management and are free to members:

<http://www.cih.org/freepublications>

Comprehensive guidance and practice notes for chartered members and subscribers in our practice online section:

<http://www.cih.org/practiceonline>

There are also CIH books available for purchase:

http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Improving_Repairs_and_Maintenance_Services

http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Successful_Neighbourhoods



CIH in Ireland
c/o The Housing Agency
53 Mount Street Upper
Dublin 2, Ireland

01 656 4160 | cih.org/republicofireland