

Cheltenham Borough Council Empty Homes (Voids) Policy

Version control

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Responsible officer

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Consultees

Internal

- Tenancy Management
- Empty Homes Teams
- Responsive Repairs
- Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services

External

- Tenants via the Tenant Panel

Distribution

Website

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1. Purpose of the policy

- 1.1 This policy sets out Cheltenham Borough Council's approach to managing empty homes (void properties).
- 1.2 The purpose of the policy is to:
- a) Set out the principles and service standards of void management to ensure efficient turnaround and minimise rental loss;
 - b) help to meet housing need by maximizing the availability of our housing stock; and
 - c) make best use of housing stock with special characteristics and assist downsizers

2. Scope of the policy

- 2.1 This policy applies to all council-owned housing stock managed directly by Cheltenham Borough Council and includes:
- a) tenancy termination
 - b) Inspections
 - c) Viewings and offers
 - d) Work to void properties
 - e) Creating tenancies
 - f) Management of long-term voids

3. Objectives of the policy

- 3.1 The objectives of this policy are:
- Minimise the time properties remain void.
 - Ensure properties meet the "Fit to Rent" standards before re-letting.
 - Reduce financial loss from empty properties.
 - Improve customer satisfaction and housing availability.
 - Support strategic housing goals including homelessness prevention and affordable housing delivery.

4. Definitions

Void Property: A dwelling that is unoccupied and not generating rental income.

Major Void: A property that requires significant repairs or refurbishment prior to re-letting. This typically includes at least one major component replacement—such as a new kitchen, bathroom, or extensive plastering works. In most cases, these works can be capitalised within the financial budgets.

Minor Void: A property that requires only minimal repairs or preparation before being ready to re-let. These works are generally low-cost and do not involve major component replacement.

5. Void Categories

- Routine Voids: Arising from natural tenancy turnover.
- Decant Voids: Required for regeneration, redevelopment or disrepair.
- Hard-to-Let Voids: Properties with low demand due to location, size, or condition.
- Temporary Furnished Accommodation voids - properties set aside for temporarily housing homeless households.

6. Void Management Process

6.1 Tenancy Termination

- 6.1.1 Full details about ending a tenancy can be found in the Tenancy Agreement, including the requirement for a tenant to provide 4 weeks written notice. Tenants who are transferring to another social tenancy (either council or another Registered Provider) may be permitted to give a reduced notice period. All decisions in this respect will need to be agreed with the council in advance.
- 6.1.2 Where the outgoing tenant has given notice and fails to leave the property after the end of the notice period legal action may be taken to remove them from the property.
- 6.1.3 The council will, wherever possible, inspect properties becoming vacant, both prior to and following the termination of a tenancy.

6.2 Pre-Termination Visits

- 6.2.1 The purpose of pre-termination inspections is to ensure that the outgoing tenant clearly understands which repairs are their responsibility. During the inspection, they will be advised of the approximate cost of CBC carrying out these repairs, which will be recharged to them if they choose not to complete the work themselves.
- 6.2.2 In addition, the inspection allows CBC to identify any garden, shed or parking space that is being used by the tenant and any work that may need to be scheduled in advance of the keys being returned. This enables early engagement with our contractors, helping to minimise both the cost and duration of the void period for CBC.
- 6.2.3 Once written notice ending the tenancy has been received, a pre-termination visit will be undertaken as soon as practicable. This visit will determine the condition of the property and highlight any repairs that the tenant will be required to undertake before leaving the property and where applicable, explain that the council reserves the right to recharge the outgoing tenant for any damages to the property caused by the willful neglect or arising out of unauthorised alterations to the property.

- 6.2.4 At this stage if the tenant has undertaken their own improvements, where permission has not been authorised, or where permission required reinstatement, the inspecting officer will look for damage to the property. If the outgoing tenant is advised that they need to remove the improvement works, they are liable for all costs associated with returning the property to the original state.
- 6.2.5 If the tenant is on the housing register and is transferring to another council property a pretransfer visit will be carried out. If the works are not completed during this visit the council may withdraw alternative offers of accommodation or they may be charged for the works to be undertaken on their behalf.

6.3 Post-Termination Inspection

- 6.3.1 A post-termination inspection will be undertaken on all void properties within 2 working days of the property becoming void.
- 6.3.2 The purpose of this inspection will be to:
- a) Ensure the property is empty, and to remove any items that pose a risk to the health and safety of prospective tenant(s) or contractors.
 - b) Determine whether prospective tenants can be allowed to view the property.
 - c) Ensure the property is secure and change the front and back door locks.
 - d) Identify any outstanding disrepair which may be the responsibility of the previous tenant.
 - e) Arrange for electrical appliances and installations to be checked.
 - f) Identify if the property requires a pre-clean or other works before the prospective tenants can view.
 - g) Identify works and repairs to comply with the council's Lettable Standard.
 - h) Apply a risk-based approach to determining the appropriate level of security (if required).

6.4 Termination following the death of the tenant

- 6.4.1 Where the tenant dies, the tenancy still needs to be terminated by the giving of 4 weeks written notice. The council may, however, agree to accept a shorter notice period.
- 6.4.2 In the instances where the tenancy has been ended due to the death of the sole tenant the person who has been properly authorised to deal with the late tenant's estate is responsible for the removal of all goods from the property. Where there is no person properly authorised to deal with the deceased tenant's estate, then the council will commence the formal legal process to end the tenancy by the service of a Notice to Quit on the Public Trustee. Once this Notice has expired, any goods

remaining in the property will be disposed of following the procedure set out in Section 41 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 which is discussed below in this policy.

- 6.4.3 The property will still be subject to a pre and post termination visit. If damage to the property has occurred owing to the wilful neglect of the deceased tenant or the carrying out of unauthorised alterations by the deceased tenant, then the council may consider pursuing the estate for the costs of making good any damages caused by the deceased tenant during the tenancy.

6.5 Evictions and Abandonments

- 6.5.1 The outgoing tenant is responsible for removing all personal possessions from the property by the end of the written notice period. However, there may be some instances where the tenant fails to give notice (either because of eviction or abandonment) and belongings are left in the property or where notice has been given but belongings are still left within the property. Once the notice period has expired and the tenant has left the property, the council accepts no responsibility for any items left within the property or the land forming part of the tenancy. In such circumstances the council reserves the right to issue a formal Notice in accordance with section 41 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 advising there are personal belongings within the property and that upon expiry of the notice any belongings remaining will become the property of the council and will be dealt with in accordance with section 41.

6.6 Recharges

- 6.6.1 The council will recharge the tenant the cost of repairing any damage or unauthorised alteration to the property.
- 6.6.2 If the outgoing tenant does not comply with their tenancy obligations to vacate the property and leave it in a satisfactory condition with vacant possession and/or if the outgoing tenant fails to return all keys and fobs the council will charge the outgoing tenant for the cost of deep cleaning the property, and/or any costs in removing left items at the property and/or the cost of any replacement keys.
- 6.6.3 At the end of the tenancy, the council reserves the right to recover from the outgoing tenant any compensatory damages that have occurred during the period of the tenancy because of the tenant being in breach of the tenancy agreement.
- 6.6.4 The council will make every reasonable effort to contact the outgoing tenant to inform them of any outstanding items for which they may be liable to offer the tenant the opportunity to settle the matter and thereby avoiding the need for formal legal proceedings via the civil courts. The amount claimed by way of compensatory damages will be raised by way of a recharge notification to the outgoing tenant. Any recharge notifications will be noted on the debtors' system and may affect any future application for re-housing if they are not cleared.

6.6.5 Further information on recharges can be found in our rechargeable repairs policy.

6.7 Letting a void property

6.7.1 The council aims to ensure that allocations are made giving full consideration of the customer needs, the property and any issues in the local area.

6.7.2 To ensure that void rent loss is kept to a minimum, the process of selecting a new tenant for a property will begin when the council is made aware that the property will be available for re-letting. Prospective tenants will be selected in accordance with the council's relevant policies and advertised via Homeseecker Plus.

6.8 Viewings and Offers

6.8.1 Once a suitable applicant has been identified they may be invited to attend a viewing at the property. In exceptional circumstances where adaptations are needed, a viewing for a prospective tenant will be undertaken prior to the outgoing tenant leaving the property to minimise any delay in allocating the property.

6.8.2 Lettings Officers will inform the applicants when the void property can be viewed. This may be before, after or during void works depending on health and safety considerations. Where disabled adaptations are required, the applicants and an OT will visit the property before repair works commence and if the property is suitable, the Disabled Adaptations Procedure will be followed.

6.9 Creating new tenancies

6.9.1 As soon as all essential repairs are completed satisfactorily, the prospective tenant will be invited to sign the Tenancy Agreement. The terms of the Tenancy Agreement will be explained to ensure that the tenant(s) is fully aware of the landlord and tenant responsibilities, and the consequences if conditions are breached.

6.9.2 The new tenant will also be provided with appropriate advice about:

- a) Paying their rent.
- b) Applying for benefits, if required.
- c) Setting up utilities.
- d) Reporting any repairs.
- e) Health and Safety including fire and safety.

6.9.3 Tenants will be given the opportunity to provide feedback relating to the void management and allocations process by completing a Tenant Satisfaction Survey.

6.9.4 Feedback and satisfaction will be monitored and reported in accordance with the council's performance management framework.

6.10 Works to void properties

- 6.10.1 All properties will meet the lettable standard, as shown in Appendix 1. Prior to any works being undertaken the council will ensure that there is an up-to-date asbestos survey for the property.
- 6.10.2 Tenants/prospective tenants will not be given access to the property for any reason once void work has begun, due to health and safety reasons unless it is authorised by the contractor, voids supervisor or Operations Manager for Responsive Repairs.
- 6.10.3 In some instances, works to the property may be undertaken after the tenant has signed up, specifically where the works can be completed without significant disruption for the tenant, the works will not pose a significant health and safety risk to the tenant or member of their household and the tenant agrees to the works being undertaken on tenancy. External works on the property will, in the main, be undertaken after the new tenancy has started.
- 6.10.4 The council may also delay the completion of some works if the property is known to be included on a planned programme in the next 6 months.
- 6.10.5 Internal decorating may be undertaken by the council in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances may include a tenant moving into the property that is elderly or vulnerable and/or the property being in a particularly poor state of decoration. The council may offer decorating vouchers to assist with the cost of redecoration.
- 6.10.6 Some adaptations may be completed before the tenancy commences, but these will be dependent on the individual needs, must be specified in an Occupational Therapist report and be in accordance with the Disabled Facilities Grant procedures.

6.11 Utilities and services

- 6.11.1 All properties will be inspected and be issued with both electrical and gas safety certification ensuring that the property is compliant with the current gas and electrical regulations. All properties will have a valid Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) in place prior to the letting with a minimum rating of between A to E to mirror the council's commitment to sustainability and compliance with minimum energy efficiency standards (MEES).
- 6.11.2 When a property has become void the council will cap the gas supply to reduce any health and safety risks. Wherever possible the supplies will also be transferred to a preferred supplier to reduce any delays in managing the void process.
- 6.11.3 During the health and safety checks the electric and gas meters at the property will be checked. Any evidence of tampering will be recorded. Tampering with meters is a criminal offence and the council will provide tenancy details to utilities companies and the Police if there is evidence that a meter has been damaged.

6.11.4 The gas supply will not be uncapped until the tenant confirms that they have moved into the property, to ensure that any risks of gas build up are minimised. The council aims to ensure that the gas is uncapped as soon as possible following the request of the customer. When the gas is uncapped the tenant will also be provided with the annual Gas Safety Certificate.

6.11.4 The council will ensure the water supply/system within each property is maintained in accordance with the Water Safety Policy.

6.11.5 Smoke and Carbon Monoxide alarms will be fully tested and installed where required in line with the council's Fire Safety Policy.

6.12 Major voids

6.12.1 Where a void property requires major works, and therefore a high level of investment is needed to bring it up to an appropriate standard, then an options appraisal may be undertaken to assess whether the works should be completed, or if the property should be taken out of use. Consideration will be given to:

- a) Level of rent loss if the property is not tenanted and the impact on the Housing Revenue Account
- b) The level of demand for the property type and area
- c) The overall cost of the works required.

6.12.2 If the assessment finds that the works are financially viable, they will be completed. For properties where the assessment finds that it is not financially viable to undertake the works and there is little demand for the property type and/or area the property may be disposed of – either through sale or demolition

6.13 Temporary Furnished Accommodation (TFA)

6.13.1 These properties are held for the temporary housing of homeless households. They contain flooring, curtains, and appliances and usually a full complement of beds, sofas, tables and chairs to make them suitable for homeless households. The Void Repairs Inspector will take note of the inventory before clearing the property so that items belonging to CBC are not disposed of, unless they are damaged. All damaged and missing items are notified to the Empty Homes Team Assistant so that recharges for the prior tenants can be arranged. The Empty Homes Team will arrange for the delivery of replacement items once the repair work is complete. The Housing Options Team will be advised of the availability of TFA properties as and when necessary.

6.14 Hard to Let Properties

6.14.1 The priority for the council is to ensure that all homes are let as soon as possible to tenants who can sustain the tenancy. A property will be hard to let if it requires 3 offers or more to let it.

6.14.2 Additional action(s) may be taken when a hard to let property is identified to attract a suitable tenant. A combination of the following may be agreed and implemented:

- a) Additional internal works beyond the needs of the customer, including accessibility aids or adaptations
- b) Internal decoration
- c) Carpeting
- d) Support for tenants moving in

6.15 Adapted Properties

6.15.1 Properties which are adapted when they become void will be let to a suitable tenant, who requires the adaptations. Decisions to remove major adaptations from properties will be made by a service manager based on all available information on the demand for the property, subject to approval from the Director.

7. Performance Monitoring

- 7.1 The council is committed to ensuring that its repairs and maintenance services are delivered to a high standard and provide high levels of customer satisfaction. To help it do this, it will monitor and manage performance through a range of methods.
- 7.2 The council will measure and evaluate performance against a range of appropriate and relevant performance indicators and will benchmark itself against other social housing providers. All completed void properties will be cleaned and post inspected to ensure quality of repair works and investigate complaints in relation to the standard of work and will actively collect and analyse tenants' views on the repairs service provided, with feedback collected by staff acting independently of the delivery of the service.
- 7.3 Performance in relation to the void management service will be monitored through the Performance Framework. Key measures in relation to void management are:
 - a) Number of void properties – maximum of 5% of total stock
 - b) Average re-let time for a minor void - 15 days for works, 25 days key to key
 - c) Average re-let time for a major void - 8 weeks for works, 10 weeks key to key
 - d) Amount of void loss – 1% or below
 - e) Average void costs.
- 7.4 Performance information and benchmarking data will be reported to the Cabinet Housing Committee and to our tenants.

8. Governance and Review

- 8.1 The policy will be reviewed periodically to ensure it is consistent with changes in legislation and regulation. As standard, the policy will be reviewed at three yearly intervals.

9. Equality and Accessibility

- 9.1 The council recognises that it provides housing for communities which include wide social diversity and is committed to providing equal access to services.
- 9.2 This policy aims to treat all customers fairly, with respect and professionalism. In line with the duty placed on the local authority under the Equalities Act 2010 specific consideration of the impact of this policy has been given to people with protected characteristics, including gender, race, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation and marital status. The approach adopted within this policy focuses on understanding individual circumstances in order to provide appropriate advice and support; this includes understanding the needs of tenants who have protected characteristics.
- 9.3 Consideration will therefore be given to language barriers, accessibility and cultural issues which may affect a tenant's ability to manage their tenancy or seek advice on problems, and resolutions which take account of the individual's beliefs and abilities.
- 9.4 The council will enable all tenants to have clear information and equal access to available services and information in a range of appropriate languages and formats will be provided when requested. This policy has been designed to be fully inclusive regardless of the ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious belief, or disability of service users or residents.

Appendix 1: Lettable Standard

We want your new home to be of a good standard. Our service aim is to provide a property which is safe, secure, habitable and clean in a timely and cost-effective manner. This standard outlines what you can expect from your new home.

Security

We will make sure:

- Your doors open, close and lock freely with all handles fitted with new 5 lever locks (front and back doors).
- You have 2 keys for the front door and 2 keys for the back door to the property.
- That all window fittings are in good working order and keys will be provided for window locks where fitted.

- You are given 2 entry fob keys to be issued where there is a communal entrance door.

Health and Safety

We will make sure:

- There are working smoke alarms on each floor, either battery operated or hard wired into the property.
- That Gas and electricity installations have been tested and certified as safe.
- If gas is present in the property, a carbon monoxide detector will also be installed.
- That the water supply is working correctly.
- That the property is free of rubbish, this includes the attic and any outbuildings.
- The floors are in a safe and level condition ready for you to cover.
- All stair treads, newel posts, handrails and bannisters are secure and free from defects.
- That all windows and doors meet current regulations.

Kitchen and bathroom

We will make sure:

- There is a fully working supply of hot and cold water to the kitchen and bathroom
- The kitchen and bathroom floors are fitted with a cleanable vinyl tile or vinyl sheet floor covering. This will be free from stains, sealed with no rips or tears.
- Splashbacks or tiles to worktops are in place and fully sealed.
- That is either a gas or electric cooker point. (In properties where there is no gas supply an electric cooker point will be provided).
- Toilets are fully working, clean and free from staining with a new toilet seat fitted.
- That there is a cold-water feed and waste pipe for connection of a washing machine, space allowing.
- A minimum of a functional bath and /or shower, wash hand basin and toilet in the bathroom.
- That all cupboards are secure, clean and fit for purpose along with worktops sink and draining board.
- That space allowing, minimum kitchen unit provision will be as follows:-

One bedroom properties and bedsits: One sink base unit, one double wall unit and one double base unit.

Two bedroom properties: One sink base unit, one double wall unit, one double base unit, one additional double base or double wall unit.

Three/ Four bedroom properties: One sink base unit, two double base units, two double wall units

General

We will make sure that:

- All internal and external doors are in good working order.
- The inside of your home is cleaned to the following standard:
 - Hard floor coverings to be swept and mopped;
 - Light fittings and switches to be wiped clean;
 - Kitchen units and sanitary fittings to be clean;
 - Door frames and skirting to be clean.
- There is a minimum of one means of fixed space heating in the form of an electric or gas heater or a radiator in the living room.
- That plasterwork is in good condition, noting that you may need to carry out some minor preparatory work to hairline cracks and nail holes before you decorate. Where a room is wallpapered and the wallpaper is intact the wallpaper will not be stripped for inspection purposes. Where wallpaper in a room is damaged all walls in that room will be stripped and any plasterwork repairs made good.
- Any non-standard items (such as a timber shed or fitted wardrobe) installed by the previous occupant to be left in the property where they are found to be functional and safe. We will ask you to sign a disclaimer stating that you understand you are responsible for the repair and replacement of any such items.

Garden and communal areas

We will make sure that:

- Your garden, if there is one is safe and clear of rubbish, with no obvious trip hazards.
- That fencing that consists of post and wire will be provided on all property boundaries unless the boundary borders a public footpath, public highway or garage site. Please refer to our fencing policy if you are unsure.
- That any brick external stores are in a wind and watertight condition.

Decoration Vouchers

You are responsible for the internal decoration of your new home

We may be able to help you with some of the cost if decorating is required. Your Letting Officer will advise you of any help we can give you by issuing decorating vouchers which you can use to buy your own materials.

Minor repairs after moving in

To avoid causing you unnecessary delays in moving into your new home, we may need to carry out some minor repairs, such as replacement glazing after you have moved in.

We will agree any work with you and confirm approximate timescales for completing this work.

