

APPENDIX 1

Void Policy – Housing

Thurrock Council

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DRAFT

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Aims

Thurrock Council is committed to providing high quality homes for our tenants. The purpose of the Void Policy is to make void properties available for letting as quickly as possible, minimising rent loss and maximising the housing available, whilst enabling our tenants to know what they can expect from their home: that it will be clean, safe, secure, and comply with any legal requirements.

This Policy ensures consistency of the standard of properties that we let to our tenants, working alongside the Housing Strategy and Asset Management Strategy and in doing so, it supports the Council's Corporate Plan.

The Policy will enable the Council to ensure its housing voids process, functions effectively by ensuring that all properties are available to our tenants at an acceptable standard, in line with the voids fit to let standard, by meeting the Council's legal obligations and the terms of the Tenancy Agreement.

This policy will:

- confirm how the council's void policy will work to reduce homelessness
- confirm the minimum standards our tenants can expect when they move into a property, ensuring consistency throughout the standard of every property we let.
- explain how the Council will maintain its housing stock and preserve its value.
- ensure that the Council let its properties quickly and efficiently to ensure we meet housing demand and that we don't lose valuable rent.
- set out appropriate standards to measure performance delivery and ensures that no unnecessary expenditure is incurred in meeting these standards.
- to ensure tenants are aware of their end of tenancy obligations

This Policy applies to all properties held by the Council within its Housing Revenue Account and is triggered by a tenancy ending.

This document applies to all tenure and occupancy types and Council staff involved in void management functions including contractors and sub-contractors used on the Council's behalf.

Corporate Context

Thurrock Council's vision and corporate priorities, adopted in January 2018, underpin this Housing Resident Engagement Strategy. The Council's vision is for Thurrock to be **an ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.**

Sitting alongside the vision are the three corporate priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.

People – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay.

This means:

- high quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
- build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
- communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together

The Housing Void Policy outlines the approach which is taken towards void properties and rehousing tenants in suitable timescales. The policy identifies the support and communication which tenants will need and can expect throughout the void process.

Place – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future.

This means:

- roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
- clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
- fewer public buildings with better services

When repairs and investment are identified as being necessary to improve or maintain a specific property, the council will work in line with the Fit to Let standard ensuring that a property is in good repair for its residents.

Prosperity – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations.

This means:

- attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
- vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
- commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

This policy supports the corporate aims by ensuring the council's properties provide well-maintained quality homes suitable for residents needs and in which they are proud to live.

Delivering high-quality housing across all tenures is central to ensuring positive health and wellbeing outcomes for residents. The council will ensure that services represent value for money, going over and above statutory duties, with high levels of customer satisfaction.

Legislation, Regulation and Best Practice Framework

Thurrock Council carries out repairs in line with legal and statutory obligations, to safeguard the health, safety and security of tenants, other occupants or visitors and to safeguard the building and environment.

This Policy will ensure compliance with current legislation, promote good practice and has regard to:

- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, 2005
- The Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Equality Act 2010
- Construction Design and Management Regulations (CDM 2015)
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998
- The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
- The Housing Act 2004
- Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018
- Regulator for Social Housing: Homes Standard
- The Water Supply regulation 2018
- The Energy Efficiency (private rented property) (England and Wales) regulation 2015
- Control of Asbestos regulation 2012

Local Context

On 20th March 2019, a new law came into force which required rented houses and flats to be 'fit for human habitation', meaning that they are safe, healthy, and free from things that could cause serious harm.

This required all councils to ensure that void standard must oblige the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act to prevent avoidable legal action.¹

The management of void properties and re-letting of housing stock is a core function of the Council and must have an effective and efficient void process in place.

There are several reasons that lead to the initiation of the void process, these are outlined below:

- Termination - The tenant supplies formal written notice
- Death of tenant - The tenant dies and there is no successor to the tenancy
- Transfer - The tenant moves to another property owned by Thurrock Council
- Abandonment - The tenant has vacated the property without prior notice
- Eviction - The Council has completed court action and obtained authority to evict the tenant/s
- Decants - The tenant is being rehoused following plans to demolish housing stock for regeneration purposes

The council want its residents to take pride in their homes and enjoy being part of a thriving community, where residents enjoy living and working.

The council will ensure an effective Voids process that maintains our properties are in good standard whilst achieving a high level of resident satisfaction.

The council have a fit to let standard of which all homes should be brought up to, before being re-let. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation.

Thurrock Voids Team will carry out any essential routine repairs and Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the Void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time. It is a "repair and safety check" process only.

The pre-void inspection form completed during the notice period will provide further detail and specific instructions for each property.

Properties will be re-let in accordance with our allocations policy. The use of choice-based lettings and advertising properties will also help to minimise void periods.

This Void Policy is intended to be consistent with and complement other policies and procedures in particular the Asset Management Strategy, Housing Strategy, Gas Safety Policy², Allocations Policy and **Tenancy Management Policy**.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homes-fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018/guide-for-landlords-homes-fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018>

² <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A5664152/document/versions/latest>

The Void Policy must also operate in conjunction with Procurement Policy, Corporate Complaints Policy, Adaptations and Equality and Diversity.

Both mutual exchanges and direct lets for housing management reasons are outside the scope of the policy, although appropriate landlord compliance checks are carried out in relation to these functions.

Glossary of Terms

Void: A property for which there is a current rent account, but for which no current tenancy exists. A void period is the period which commences the first day there is no rent debit and ends on the day a new debit is raised.

Choice-based letting: A way of allocating council housing which requires people on the housing register to select and bid for available properties, rather than waiting for the council to offer them a home.

Decant: a temporary/Permanent move to another property while improvements or major repairs are carried out to the normal home.

Housing Allocation Scheme: explains the options available for those looking for a home in the Borough and in particular sets out which groups of people are priorities for Council assistance.

Tenancy Management Policy: All local authorities will be required to publish and maintain a tenancy management policy. This will set out objectives that should be taken into account by individual social landlords when considering granting or reissuing a tenancy.

Purpose

This document outlines Thurrock Councils Voids policy for the management of our empty homes (voids) and supports both the Council's Housing Strategy and Asset Management Strategy, focussing on making the best use of existing stock, and our mission of 'High Quality Services for People, Homes and Communities. This document also considers our statutory and regulatory responsibilities.

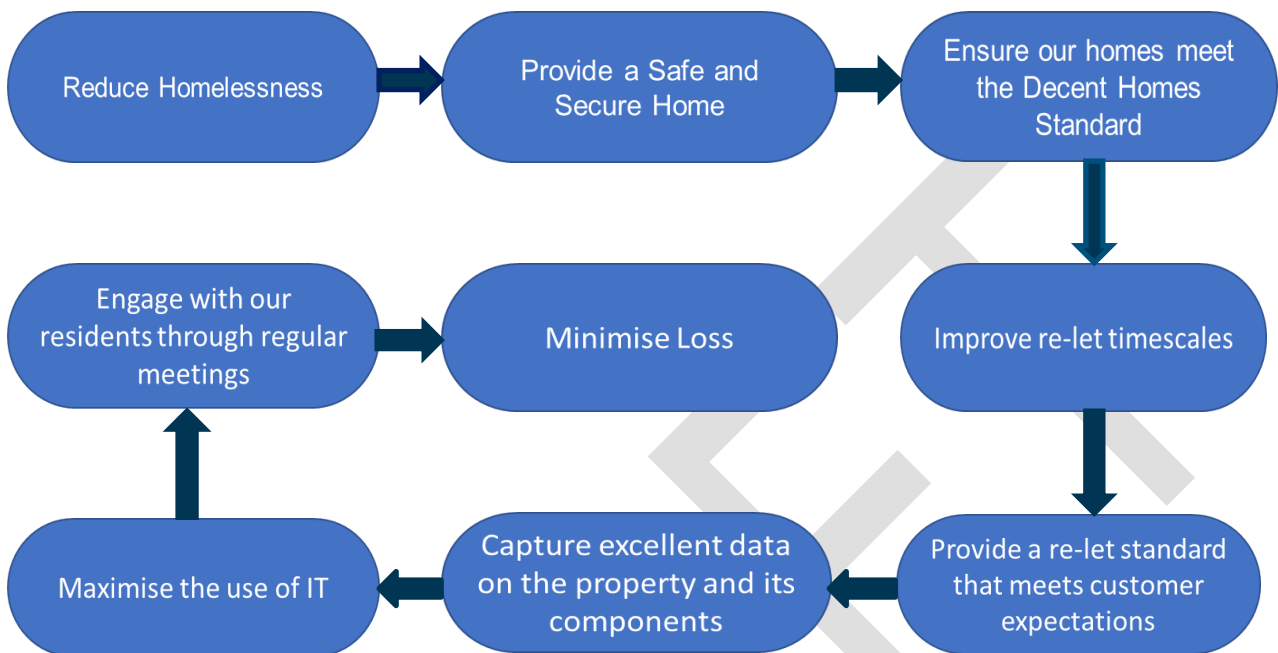
To meet the purposes of the policy, the Council agrees to minimise loss to the Council through the efficient letting of homes at the right time to the required standard by ensuring the following:

- a. Reduce Homelessness - you may be homeless if you're sleeping rough, don't have rights to stay where you are or you live in unsuitable housing
- b. Minimise loss – this includes rent loss; Council Tax charges; avoiding expensive nightly paid accommodation due to lack of temporary accommodation; avoiding refusals; and avoiding tenancies starting with a poor experience that leads to failure
- c. Efficient letting – taking into account: void turnaround times; void expenditure; balancing major works against doing the minimum required; avoiding refusals
- d. Right time – working to consistent timescales and delivering to the targets given
- e. Required standard – meeting the Councils Fit to Let Standard³, including cleanliness, and meeting all landlord statutory requirements

³ <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A7245379/document/versions/latest>

Priorities

This policy will ensure that a number of key priorities are undertaken during the void process. These include:



Void Standards

i. General Voids

This is the minimum standard to which all homes should be brought up to before being re-let. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the councils Fit to Let Standard.

The council will carry out any essential routine repairs and Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting. The primary objective of the Void process is to return the property for re-let in the shortest possible time. It is a “repair and safety check” process only.

The pre-void inspection form completed during the notice period provides full detail and specific instructions for each property.

The Council continues to invest in our properties so that standards are maintained. We will do this:

- through annual improvement and maintenance programmes
- by having a minimum standard for the properties once they become void

When elements of a property have been considered to have been deliberately damaged by the tenant, or unauthorised alterations have been made, the Tenancy Management Officer will advise

the outgoing tenant at the termination stage of the recharge for works. Refer to end of tenancy link for recharge information.⁴

A recharge will be raised to the outgoing tenant for removal of goods and clearance of gardens to recoup expenditure.

This Policy confirms the following approach in line with the Council's Fit to Let standards:

- Carry out a gas safety check where gas is installed and leave a copy of the certificate at the property.
- Carry out a safety check of the electrical installation.
- Undertake a water hygiene test
- Ensure that an Asbestos Management Certificate is in place for Void properties
- Provide an Energy Performance Certificate (where appropriate)
- Undertake all health and safety repairs
- Complete a site clearance
- Clean the property.
- Re-decorate if deemed required
- Carry out all of the required repairs in line with the Fit to Let standard
- Carry out necessary works to minimise the risk of damp and mould and maintain energy efficiency

Where non-standard tenant improvements are in place and meet statutory and regulatory requirements, the re-let will be done with the following confirmed to the new tenant in writing:

- The improvement is gifted to the incoming tenant
- The Council does not accept any responsibility for the maintenance of the improvement
- If the improvement is not maintained to a reasonable standard by tenant and/or it reaches the end of its lifespan, the Council will remove it and undertake remedial works to restore the property to the Council's standard, and that this will be at no cost to the incoming tenant
- If the white goods are in good condition, undertake a PAT test and gift to new tenants.
- If the incoming tenant refuses the improvement, it will be removed, and remedial works will be carried out.

Void properties identifying a history of damp and mould issues, will have a specialist damp and mould survey undertaken. Any required repairs carried out to rectify, this could include damp treatment, building works or improvements made to the thermal efficiency of the property.

Where there is no gas mains supply, the Council will undertake an options appraisal considering:

- New efficient storage heaters; or
- Alternative methods including ground and air source heat pumps.

This will be a best value approach based on but not limited to cost, ease of installation, the thermal characteristics of the property, and likely heating costs for future tenants.

⁴ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/end-of-tenancy/step-by-step-guide>

Existing disabled adaptations will be left in place, subject to testing to establish they remain safe and appropriate for the property type. The property will be matched to an applicant with an appropriate long-term housing need.

Medical aids or equipment e.g., walking frames, shower chairs etc. left in properties without a clear indication of ownership (provider labels etc.) will be deemed to be tenant belongings that have been abandoned and will be disposed of in line with the Council's property clearance approach.

The Council will restrict access to lofts in properties, going through the void process, where loft access is deemed unsafe.

The Council will continue to aim to minimise the time a property is unoccupied by carrying out inspections in the tenant's notice period wherever possible.

During void works, applicants who have been offered the property will only be able to undertake a viewing by prior appointment, accompanied by a Tenancy Management Officer, and subject to appropriate risk assessment.

To assist with re-let times the Council may:

- Complete non health & safety repairs repair's once the new tenant has moved in. If this is the case, tenants will be informed of the timescale for their completion.
- Leave work to the garden if this means the property can be let to a new tenant faster. The gardening work will be completed once the property is occupied.

Sheltered Housing

Void sheltered housing properties will undergo all repair works identified during void specifications in line with the general fit to let standard. Additional work to these properties may be undertaken when identified, with the property being fully redecorated in order to ensure our elderly and vulnerable residents have a smooth transition into their new property.

ii. Capital Works Programme

The Council aim is to provide high quality accommodation that demonstrates the benefits of our repairs and capital investment programmes and positively influences the health and wellbeing of our tenants and residents. These works are undertaken where there are significant refurbishment upgrades required in properties.

All void properties refurbished through the capital works programme will align with the agreed fit to let standard, but could also include the following where applicable:

- Structural Works
- Transforming Homes refurbishment
- Fire Damage
- Flood Damage
- Vandalism

iii. Temporary Accommodation

The Council will undertake the fit to let standard to which all temporary accommodation properties should be brought up to before being re-let in line with the Councils temporary accommodation fit to let standard. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the TA FTL Standard document.⁵

Any essential routine repairs and/or Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting will be carried out as per the TA FTL Standard.

iv. Phi Properties

In order to utilise retained RTB receipts, the council entered into a partnership arrangement through a third-party company. The third party would purchase the properties on the Councils behalf and lease them back under certain conditions.

The scheme is known as Phi Leasing. These properties are acquired on a long-term leasing agreement for which the Council has full repairs obligation under the term of the agreement.

The key benefits of the scheme are:

- Ability to provide immediate affordable housing supply
- No capital requirements from local authorities
- The Council retain full control over use, rent and management of the property
- The scheme will be applied to single properties or larger developments
- No procurement issues for the Council
- No transactional abort costs

In line with the agreement, the Council will undertake the minimum standard to which all Phi properties should be brought up to before being let in line with the Councils Phi fit to let standard. It is the standard which makes a property safe and secure for occupation. Technical specifications are included in the Phi FTL Standard document. Any essential routine repairs and/or Health & Safety checks that require completing prior to re-letting will be carried out as per the Phi FTL Standard.

Performance

Satisfaction surveys undertaken on behalf of the Housing service are conducted following HouseMark STAR methodology where possible, which is the leading satisfaction framework for the UK Housing sector.

The data used to measure satisfaction is collected on the council's behalf over the telephone with residents by a third-party independent research contractor that specialises in conducting satisfaction surveys for the Housing sector.

⁵ <https://edrms.thurrock.gov.uk/id:A4433563/document/versions/latest>

The overall aim is to be within the national top quartile for void performance. Performance will be monitored regularly to help drive up management standards, reduce homelessness, improving efficiency and satisfaction levels and ensure value for money by reducing costs.

The Council acknowledges its stock requires considerable capital investment to improve it to the Decent Homes Standard and has committed ensuring the integrity of the asset is maintained and that the council fulfils its duty to provide residents with affordable warmth in homes with future-proofed facilities there is an ongoing need for capital investment.

The Housing Capital Programme, known as the Transforming Homes Programme, invests in the long-term integrity of the council's assets and brings significant improvements to the health and wellbeing of residents and reducing fuel poverty through improved energy efficiency.

The council are committed to delivering a capital investment programme that achieves at least 85% resident satisfaction.

However, this does mean properties needing re-let works are often identified as requiring capital works. To reflect this, void performance will be managed operationally by reporting monthly using the following categories:

Corporate Performance

Targets are agreed annually with the Assistant Director of Housing and the Housing Intelligence and Performance Manager. We will report on our key performance areas to our Management Team and our Tenants ensuring open transparency.

KPI's will include satisfaction with the standard of property when re-let, average days to re-let, % re-let within target time, number of refusals and reasons, tenancy sustainability, termination reasons, and income lost due to voids.

The void teams re-let target for standard voids is currently set at 28 calendar days and is reviewed annually in line with government guidelines and legislation.

The void teams re-let target for capital voids is currently set at 60 calendar days and is reviewed annually in line with government guidelines and legislation.

Engagement with Residents

The Housing sector continues to see significant changes to the regulatory framework that sets the standard for resident and building safety.

This led to the fundamental changes introduced through the White Paper and the A Charter for Social Housing Residents, these documents aim to place residents back at the heart of building safety and delivers changes to ensure that every social housing resident is safe in their home.

Following the introduction of the white Paper, the council has worked with its residents to develop a Housing Resident Engagement Strategy 2022 – 2027 which will set out the council's plans over three years, focusing on the council's customers and committing to developing greater

opportunities for tenant and feedback, ensuring the strategy is in line with government legislation around buildings and fire safety.

Engaging residents in the requirements of their Tenancy Conditions is also an important priority to ensure resources address lifecycle replacement appropriately and are not diverted to tackle avoidable property damage or rectify unauthorised alterations.

The Council will capture new tenant feedback and use this to inform process and policy improvements in relation to the re-let standard, allocations process, and tenancy sign-up.

The methods of engagement are continually evolving and adapting to the needs of local communities. Current examples of engagement in asset management are:

- a panel of trained residents who assist in the procurement of all asset management works and services contracts
- residents are engaged in the monitoring of major contracts
- a team of residents actively assist and contribute to the 'fit to let' standard of properties through attendance at regular void inspections
- members of the tenants excellent panel attend new voids, handovers and tenancy sign ups
- resident engagement sessions are held ahead of any major improvement projects
- colour and finish choices for major products such as kitchens, worktops, flooring or wall finishes are chosen by the tenant's excellence panel

Monitoring, Measuring and Review

This policy will be reviewed every three years in line with changes in working practices or changes in legislation.

The activities covered under the Void Policy will be subject to performance monitoring with service reviews carried out periodically to ensure that the policy is effective, to ensure the Adults, Housing and Health Directorate provide services which meet residents' needs on a continuing basis.

If any significant issues of concern arise, these will be addressed by the Voids Manager in the first instance, who will report such matters to Asset Manager and the Housing Management Team.

Periodic audits of policy compliance may be conducted by managers and by the Internal Auditor with results being reported as appropriate.

Key areas for audit and review will include:

- Risk management
- Provision of training and / or information to staff
- Compliance with policy and procedure
- Effectiveness of communications about maintenance with contractors and tenants
- Progress towards strategic targets
- Compliance with regulations e.g., Gas, Health & Safety
- Budgetary and expenditure control

- Contract administration and contractor performance
- Customer satisfaction with Property Maintenance

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