

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

HOUSING COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 28 MARCH 2023

Report Title	Empty Council Homes Policy			
Purpose of Report	Following a recommendation from Audit Risk Assurance this report presents an Empty Council Homes Policy for approval. The policy will provide the strategic framework for our operational void procedures.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to: a) Approve the Empty Council Homes Policy b) Note that the Policy will take effect from 01 April 2023			
Consultation and Feedback	The Tenant Scrutiny Panel independently investigate Stroud's Housing Services and make recommendations for improvement. A tenant focus group was formed to review the Council's void management with the scope to understand the effectiveness of the Council's current void process and to ensure tenants are engaged in helping to shape and improve this aspect of housing services. The new Empty Council Homes Policy has been shared with the Council's tenancy representatives for involvement and feedback.			
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Options	The policy is presented following a recommendation from Audit Risk Assurance. The Committee could determine not to adopt the policy, but this would be against the advice of our auditors. Therefore, no other options have been considered.			
Background Papers	None			
Appendices	Appendix 1: Voids Policy			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	No	No	No	No

1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

- 1.1 A Council property becomes vacant (void) when a tenancy ends, for example when a tenant terminates their tenancy. The period between a property becoming vacant and subsequently relet is known as the void period.
- 1.2 In all Council homes that become void, the Council will undertake a series of checks to establish the property condition and whether there is any remedial work required to ensure the property meets the Council's lettings standard before another tenant can move in. This process is known as void management and is the method of bringing an untenanted property up to standard.
- 1.3 In January 2022, Audit Risk Assurance published its final review into an audit of voids management in the Council's housing stock. The report identified that while Property

Care, the team that are responsible for ensuring Council homes meet regulatory standards, has a voids procedure, there was no voids policy. One of the 20 recommendations in the Audit Report was that a Voids Policy should be produced.

- 1.4 Later in 2022, with the support of the Tenant Advisory Participation Service, the new Tenant Scrutiny Panel was formed. The panel chose to scrutinise void performance and their report, which included 16 recommendations, was published in November 2022. One of the recommendations arising from this panel is the establishment of a Voids Management Policy
- 1.5 The new Empty Council Homes Policy covers the recommendations from the two reports, and our procedures will be updated accordingly.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1 The Empty Council Homes Policy will apply to all Council Homes and the objectives of this policy are:

- To minimise the loss of rental income as a result of properties being empty
- To ensure the Council makes the most effective use of its housing stock to let to the best matched applicants
- To reduce pressure on temporary accommodation for homeless households
- To clearly define the responsibilities of tenants and the Council in relation to void management
- To ensure tenants and prospective tenants understand the basis of our decisions in managing vacant properties and organising for these to be relet quickly and appropriately
- To ensure that properties are brought up to a consistent and acceptable standard when let

- 2.2 The policy includes a three stage voids management process:

Pre-void – this is the stage where we know a property is due to become vacant but hasn't yet, for example, where a tenant has given or been given a valid notice. During this stage property care will arrange to inspect the property in order to assess and plan any known required works either during the pre-void stage or once the property becomes void,

Void – this is the period where the works are scheduled and the completion of any necessary repairs to get the property to our lettings standard and ready for relet.

Ready to let – in order to reduce void times and ensure homes are available to let to those in housing need, Property Care will ensure all health and safety requirements are met prior to letting. There may however be some minor works that can be undertaken once a tenant has moved into the property.

- 2.3 When a property is void, the required void work is generally classed as major or minor. Major voids are defined as those where structural works are required, or significant works which are difficult to do when the property is occupied. Minor works include statutory safety checks and bringing the home up to the Council's Lettable Standard. Unless the new tenant is vulnerable, the Council do not do decoration work, but if appropriate we offer vouchers so that the new tenant can decorate their home to their taste.
- 2.4 The Housing industries performance on voids was badly affected by the pandemic. It was further affected by national shortages of skilled workers and both the availability and costs of building materials.
- 2.5 The Council recognise the importance of void management and as a result undertook a review into our procedures. to speed up processes where possible. For example, the re-

introduction of pre-termination inspections has made a positive difference. These inspections allow a draft schedule to be prepared prior to the tenant leaving and has enabled us to make it very clear to tenants when works are their responsibility to complete before they move, otherwise they will be recharged.

- 2.6 Over the last quarter the number of homes which at any one time are empty and undergoing works has been stable at around 35. To maximise availability of homes for those in need, work has been prioritised to those empty properties that can be returned to occupancy quickly (known as 'minor voids'). This is most effective at reduce the time when rent is not collected. This was considered by the voids working group which recognised and understood this approach.
- 2.7 The impact of this is that properties requiring major and structural works can sometimes take significantly longer to be completed. The overall effect is that the mean average time for all empty properties to be returned to occupancy is extended. Stroud District Councils performance on voids over the last quarter:

Number of days to return a void back into use:	
Target:	42
Actual for minor works:	37
Actual for all work:	121

- 2.8 The new Empty Council Homes Policy sets the framework for continuing to improve performance in managing void properties efficiently and effectively.

3. IMPLICATIONS

3.1 Financial Implications

There are no implications arising directly from this report. Any expenditure arising will be met through established budgets.

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3.2 Legal Implications

An Empty Council Homes or Void Policy is instrumental from a government perspective. Establishing KPI's provides transparent accountability for Housing Revenue Expenses.

Whilst there are no significant legal implications arising from this report, the advice of One Legal should be sought when for example, dealing with evictions and abandonments.

Email: legalservices@onelegal.org.uk

3.3 Equality Implications

There are not any specific changes to service delivery proposed within this decision.

3.4 Environmental Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.