

HALTON HOUSING TRUST

EMPTY PROPERTY MANAGEMENT POLICY

Date due for Review :

Introduction

Halton Housing Trust (the Trust) will provide an efficient and effective housing management service with regard to empty properties, by ensuring :-

- the maximised use of available stock through the control of empty properties;
- that void periods are kept to a minimum;
- the maximisation of rental income due;
- liaison with other appropriate agencies concerning the needs of tenants both as individuals and communities.

The Trust will ensure that the implementation of this policy will comply with the Housing Corporation's Regulatory Code and Guidance.

The Trust will measure its performance against standards set in conjunction with its Board of Management and Halton Housing Community Voice.

Policy Statement

The Trust will look to continue to meet housing needs and to maximise rental income by giving high priority to turning round empty properties by repairing and letting them within strict target timescales.

The Trust will use comprehensive procedures to ensure that its standards are not only met but exceeded wherever possible.

Target times for the re-let of void properties will be set in conjunction with the Trust's Board and Halton Housing Community Voice.

The policy is designed to give flexibility to allow a range of options for the management of empty properties. It recognises that not all properties are high in demand and ensures that it maximises the efficient and effective use of stock.

In implementing this policy, staff will have regard to the Trust's Customer Care and Equality and Diversity Policies.

The Trust will continue to monitor market indicators to be able to react efficiently to any changes in the supply/demand relationship. The Trust will co-operate with Halton Borough Council and other housing associations to effectively monitor this.

The Trust will look to involve its tenants in the management of empty properties by encouraging them to report abandoned properties, squatting, and vandalism and theft from empty properties.

The Trust's procedures will cover the following areas:

Voids

- Pre-inspection of properties where proper notice is received.
- Responsive repairs using contractors where necessary to bring properties to a lettable standard before relet and within agreed timescales.
- Management of keys and control of empty properties.
- Quick response to knowledge that a property is or will become vacant in the future.
- Identification and prompt action against non-occupation or squatting.
- Utilisation of notice periods to reduce turnaround time.
- Research and implementation of effective security measures for empty properties.

Repairs

- Recharging of repairs to outgoing tenants for damage or neglect.
- Target times for repairs to void properties set in conjunction with the Board and Halton Housing Community Voice.
- Minor repairs to be undertaken when new tenants are in occupation.

Lettings

- Pre-allocation of properties during the notice period and before the property becomes vacant.
- Prompt processing of nominations.
- Accompanied viewings on all offers.
- Effective and efficient sign up procedure.
- Use of decoration allowances.

General

- Clear responsibilities for all staff involved in lettings and void management.
- Active marketing of difficult to let properties.
- Regular review of policy regarding difficult to let properties.
- Accurate systems to ensure performance data can be easily produced.
- Monitoring of the Meeting Housing Need and Access to Housing Policy and Procedures.

- Monitoring of market supply/demand.

Implementation

The Trust will have detailed procedures to cover all ways in which a property may become empty with the aim of as quick a turnaround time as possible.

Relinquishment (Giving Up) of a Tenancy

The Trust will normally require 4 weeks notice in writing from tenants wishing to give up their tenancy. The only exceptions when such notice would be waived are:-

- 1) for transfer cases;
- 2) on the death of the tenant;
- 3) where the tenant has gone into long term nursing care;
- 4) at the discretion of the Deputy Chief Executive in other exceptional circumstances on the grounds of customer care and fairness.

The Trust will confirm the termination date in writing and advise the outgoing tenant of their responsibilities to leave the property in a condition suitable for re-letting.

Where no notice is received, the Trust will charge rent for the full, four week period and make every effort to recover rent due and damages, where required. A similar procedure will then be carried out as for an abandoned property.

Where four weeks notice is received:-

- As soon as possible after notice is received an inspection will be carried out to assess work required and to arrange a date to handover keys.
- All outgoing tenants will be asked to complete a questionnaire regarding service delivery and reasons why they are leaving. They will also be asked to leave a forwarding address.
- Properties will be pre-allocated as soon as possible after notice is received.
- On receipt of the keys a full inspection will be carried out and repairs identified. A decision about the need for a decoration allowance will also be made.
- The Trust will accept no responsibility for anything left in the property at the end of the tenancy. It will assume that any items left in the property are no longer required by the outgoing tenant. Arrangements will be made for them to be removed, and a reasonable charge for the cost of removal and disposal may be made to the outgoing tenant.

Abandonment

In order to try to prevent properties being abandoned or in dealing with abandonment when it does occur, the Trust will ensure that :-

- staff are vigilant in identifying vacant and suspected abandoned properties;
- the Trust will seek closer links with other agencies who can assist in the identification of abandoned dwellings. These agencies will include the Police, Fire Brigade and Post Delivery Service (Royal Mail) etc.;
- staff will be trained in dealing with suspected abandoned properties;
- all vulnerable properties will be secured;
- an inspection is carried out on the same day as the identification of an abandoned property to assess what work may be required and subsequently any work will be arranged within the timescales set in conjunction with the Trust's Board and Halton Housing Community Voice for the re-let of void properties;
- the Trust will serve a notice as a means of recovering abandoned properties;
- the Trust will aim to recover any outstanding rent and any costs incurred for clearing and/or repairing any damage to the property.

Unlawful Occupation

The Trust will be vigilant in identifying properties which may be unlawfully occupied. The Trust's procedures will cover investigation, confirmation, possession, repairs and relet within agreed timescales. Prompt legal action will be taken to evict squatters and unauthorised occupants.

Death of a Tenant

In the event of the death of a tenant, the Trust will act in a sensitive and supportive manner with the relatives of the deceased tenant. Any requests for succession will be dealt with as effectively and efficiently as possible in accordance with the Trust's Succession, Assignment and Mutual Exchange Policy.

Once the Trust has been notified that a tenant has died by the family administering the estate, the relatives will be allowed a maximum of 28 days to clear the property, of which the first 14 days will be rent free. The next of kin should serve Notice to Quit on the Trust on behalf of the deceased tenant's estate. Rent will cease to be payable once this notice has expired and/or the keys have been handed in, whichever is the sooner. Where no next of kin is available, housing staff will arrange for the property to be cleared and will try to recover any rent due and any other costs incurred from the estate.

Eviction

Action for re-letting the property will begin as soon as practically possible after the eviction has been arranged.

'Difficult to Let' properties

The Trust considers 'difficult to let' properties as those offered and refused three times or more for no good reason or those properties in areas where there is no one waiting for them.

A range of measures can be considered to cope with this, including :-

- Difficult to let properties will be identified and reasons for refusal etc. clarified.
- Difficult to let properties will be actively marketed with the aim to raise interest.
- Decorating of some or all of the property as part of the relet work.
- The eligibility criteria for letting properties in difficult to let areas may be relaxed.
- The Trust will work closely with the Police and residents to tackle crime and vandalism in areas of low demand.
- The Trust may offer incentives to tenants to move in e.g. enhanced decoration allowances.
- Further cleaning, improvements or repairs will be carried out to difficult to let properties as required to facilitate a letting. For example, this may include the clearing and tidying up of gardens left overgrown for the new tenant.
- The need to dispose of properties will be regularly reviewed. Where there are concentrated areas of low demand demolition and rationalisation may be considered as an option for dealing with void management. This would normally be a last resort.
- A Supply and Demand Strategy will be devised and regularly updated and will include:
 1. Monitoring of demand for housing and void levels in the districts
 2. Regular consultation with tenants and residents where estates are experiencing constant low demand to seek their views on the future of the properties.
 3. Where a Tenants and Residents Association exists they will be used for consultation. Other methods will include:
 - Writing to tenants asking for their comments
 - Calling public meetings
 - Visiting tenants and residents
 - Analysing feedback from tenants and residents

Any consultation carried out under points 2.and 3. above will be done in compliance with the Trust's Tenant and Resident Involvement Policy.

Decoration Allowances

The decorative condition of any property to be relet will be assessed. This will be in accordance with agreed guidelines that cover the amount to be offered for each room to the incoming tenant. The overall assessment will be reflected in the total amount of any allowance given. The incoming tenant can then put the allowance towards the cost of buying materials to redecorate the property. The Trust reserves the right to make such allowances available either by cheque or by vouchers that can be redeemed at local stores.

The award of decoration allowances will be as follows :-

- The full amount of any assessment for a decoration allowance will be paid to:-
 1. new tenants of the Trust ;
 2. existing tenants who were OAPs and transferring to another Trust property ;
 3. other existing tenants transferring to another Trust property, where the decorative condition of the property they were leaving did not attract a decoration allowance.
- An ' Offset Rule' will be applied to all cases where existing tenants who are not OAPs are transferring to another Trust property. The Offset Rule states that where an existing tenant (who was not an OAP) was transferring, the decorative condition of the property they were leaving would be assessed and would be taken into account before the award of any decoration allowance for the property they were moving into.

The Trust will provide appropriate advice and assistance for elderly tenants regarding redecorating the inside of their homes. This will be via the Trust's Assisted Decoration Scheme. Details of the scheme are available in the Services to the Elderly and Disabled and Those with Special Needs Policy and Tenants Handbook.

Lettings

Where notice is received properties will be pre-allocated. Where no notice is received the property will be relet as soon as confirmation that the tenancy has ended is received.

Performance Information

The Trust's Board and Halton Housing Community Voice will receive quarterly reports on:

- Numbers on the Waiting List
- Number of lettings during the period for waiting list, transfer, HOMES and nomination cases
- Number of Operational and Policy voids

- Operational voids are properties which will be re-let again after necessary repairs are complete and a suitable applicant has been identified.
- Policy voids are properties which will not be re-let for a period or may not be relet at all. Reasons could include properties being used for decanting or properties awaiting demolition etc.
- Average re-let times
- Any other information as requested by the Board

Consultation

The Trust will consult with its tenants and Halton Housing Community Voice on any proposed changes to this policy in accordance with the Trust's Tenant and Resident Involvement Policy.

Standards of Delivery

The Trust will meet standards set in conjunction with its Board and Halton Housing Community Voice through the implementation of the policy.

Equal Opportunities

Employees will receive training to ensure equal opportunity is considered at all stages of the void procedure in accordance with the Trust's Equality and Diversity in Service Delivery Policy.

Responsibility

It will be the responsibility of Deputy Chief Executive to ensure that this policy is applied effectively and that staff are trained appropriately in the procedures associated with empty property management.

Review

The Trust will review the policy annually to ensure that objectives and targets are being achieved in accordance with required standards, quality, effectiveness and value for money. The Trust will ensure that any review reflects good practice and complies with relevant legislation.

Associated Documents

Empty Property Management Procedures
Repairs, Maintenance and Improvement Policy
Meeting Housing Need and Access to Housing Policy
Equality and Diversity in Service Delivery Policy

Services for Elderly and Disabled Residents and Those with Special Needs
Policy
Succession, Assignment & Mutual Exchange Policy
Tenant and Resident Involvement Policy
Customer Care Policy
Tenants Handbook