



## Empty Homes Policy

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<b>Approved by:</b>	GLT
<b>Drafted by:</b>	Jimmy Singh & Alison Holt
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## **1.0 Statement and Background**

- 1.1** Wythenshawe Community Housing Group (WCHG) will maximise the use of its stock available, through the control of its empty properties to minimise void rent loss. WCHG will give high priority to turnaround of its empty assets as quickly and effectively, by repairing and letting them within agreed timescales. WCHG will provide a cost-effective repairs service with the provision of high-quality provision of homes which are sustainable.
- 1.2** WCHG will ensure that which are let meet the acceptable standards as contained within Empty Homes standard which is contained within Appendix A of the policy. Prospective tenants will be kept updated as work progresses throughout the void management process.
- 1.3** As part of WCHG's Corporate Plan 2020, it will look to implement its theme on 'Great Places' which is to invest and to improve the safety and amenity of homes, with a longer-term focus on improving estate quality and the overall performance of its assets during the 'empty homes' process with the delivery of its low carbon and sustainability strategies.

## **2.0 Scope**

- 2.1** This policy applies to all empty properties managed by WCHG.

## **3.0 Definition**

- 3.1** The term void management is used to describe the various processes which are involved in dealing with a property. This begins at the point of which it is known that the property will become empty, through to the re-let of the property to a new tenant.

An empty property can have one of a number of origins:

- The previous tenant has given notice and left, or been transferred to another WCHG property;
- The previous tenant has left without handing in the keys (abandoned) or without given notice;
- The property has been repossessed as a result of an eviction warrant;
- The property has been badly damaged by fire or requires major/structural repair and the tenant has had to move out so the repairs can be carried out (management void); and
- It is a new or refurbished property, which has yet to have a tenant allocated to it and has become one of the Group's assets.

## **4.0 Empty Homes Classification**

**4.1** Following the initial inspection, empty homes to be re-let will be classified as either:

- Standard Voids – those voids requiring basic repairs and maintenance to reach re-lettable standards (Graded Void Cost Band A and B); and
- Major Voids – those voids requiring major repairs and maintenance to reach re-lettable standard (Graded Void Cost Band C and D) and or a decency element

These categories will be utilised to examine, monitor, set targets and report performance indicators such as cost and time take. We will also profile reasons for tenancy termination, monitor condition/damage and recharge outgoing tenants in accordance with the Group's Recharge Policy.

On occasions, WCHG will have some empty properties that will be vacant but not available for letting. These will include the following:

- Long term voids, where a decision on future investment or demolition has been made.
- Major improvements and Programmed of works.
- All units awaiting sale or disposal.
- Property ready to let but held to support a specific project or to provide temporary accommodation such as for decant purposes.

## **5.0 Policy**

**5.1** All tenants are required to give four weeks written notice to vacate their property. This is the standard notice period. In exceptional circumstances, WCHG may accept a shorter notice period contained within the tenancy agreement for example, where an internal transfer has been agreed. When a valid notice has been received, all outgoing tenants will be advised of their rights and responsibilities in relation to ending the tenancy.

**5.2** Once notice has been received, TM team will arrange and complete an inspection of the property prior to the tenancy ending to:

- Assess the condition of the home and any tenancy breaches,
- Discuss the reward scheme and any qualifying criteria,
- Identify any rechargeable repairs and discuss options,
- Identify and notify maintenance contractors of expected volume of work to assist with forecasting and capacity planning; and
- Identify any factors that should be considered as part of offering the property for re-let, for example, adaptations for disabilities.

- 5.3** All tenants are required to leave the property clear of all belongings and leave the property tidy and clean, this includes the external areas including gardens and common areas. WCHG expect repairs which are the responsibility of the tenant to have been carried out and keys returned on or before the notice expiry date. The outgoing tenant will become responsible for the full cost of any subsequent clearing and cleaning under the terms of the Rechargeable Repairs and Recoverable Costs Policy.
- 5.4** Where a tenant hands back the keys earlier than the given expiry of the notice, WCHG will accept this as a surrender of tenancy by mutual agreement. If the keys are received by noon on Monday (with the exception of bank holidays), the tenancy should be terminated from the proceeding Sunday. If the keys are returned after noon on Monday, the tenancy should be terminated from the following Sunday. Where the keys are not returned, the cost of gaining access to change the lock will be recharged to the outgoing tenant. Where WCHG suspects a property has been abandoned, the abandoned tenancy procedure will be followed.
- 5.5** Once the void management process has been initiated, WCHG will ensure that all empty properties have minimal and non-intrusive security on its properties, using a risk management approach to determine the appropriate level of security. Where there is a high risk of squatting, break-in or vandalism, appropriate security measures will be ordered to protect the property. Where possible, the use of steel shuttering will be kept to a minimum.
- 5.6** WCHG will aim to accommodate the incoming tenants' preferences at the accompanied viewing, which could include:
- Determining repairs to be completed whilst the property is empty and work that could be completed once the new tenancy has started;
  - The urgency of need for rehousing and any vulnerability/disability of the incoming tenant; and
  - Making efficient use of any existing disabled adaptations. The Adapted Homes team will carry out an accompanied viewing with the Tenancy Management Coordinator once they have been identified as suitable applicant.
- 5.7** WCHG may use the period the property is empty to bring forward any work that may cause major disruption to the incoming tenant or may be difficult to undertake once the property is occupied, such as major or programmed improvement works.
- 5.8** WCHG recognises that an ageing population demands adaptations to existing homes and in order to make the most efficient use of existing facilities. WCHG will not routinely remove adaptations from empty properties. Where possible, WCHG will aim to re-let adapted properties to applicants with disabilities and/or recycle any adaptations that are removed from a property. The decision to remove any adaptations can only be made once every option has been

explored to find a suitable applicant and the Adapted Homes team has been fully consulted in accordance with the Equipment and Adaptations Policy and service level agreement (SLA).

- 5.9** WCHG aims to create high quality, sustainable tenancies and achieve a high level of customer satisfaction. All properties let will consistently meet the Government's Decent Homes standard and WCHG's own Empty Property standard contained within Appendix A.
- 5.10** Where the decorative condition is poor, WCHG may provide a paint pack voucher to the incoming tenant. The value of the voucher offered will reflect the extent of the decoration required to bring the property to a reasonable standard throughout. WCHG may undertake internal decoration where an incoming tenant is vulnerable or elderly and this has been identified at the time the property was offered and provisionally accepted.
- 5.11** Where properties have been identified as difficult to let, WCHG may offer incentives such as carpets, decoration of some rooms or other market incentives as deemed appropriate in order to encourage acceptance of properties.
- 5.12** When advertising a property, WCHG provides all prospective tenants with information about the property attributes and local neighbourhood facilities. When a prospective tenant has indicated their acceptance of a vacant property, the tenancy will commence as soon as possible after all essential works have been completed. The tenancy will commence on the day the new tenant receives the keys for the property unless it has been an internal transfer in which case the tenancy will start on a Monday.
- 5.13** The money health check, sign up process and post let visits have significant impact on the sustainability of the tenancy. WCHG offers a tenancy support service to ensure vulnerable tenants receive the assistance they need to help them move into their new home.
- 5.14** All new tenants will be given the opportunity to provide feedback relating to the void management and allocations process at the time the property is let by completing a New Tenancy Survey. Feedback and satisfaction will be monitored and reported in accordance with the Group's performance management framework.
- 5.15** WCHG will aim to undertake a stock condition survey of 50% of the properties when they become empty in order to check the major components within the asset and to check against the data held with Pro-master.



**5.16** All properties will have a valid Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) in place at the point of let with a minimum rating band of between A to E and this will be enhanced further if deemed required to reflect WCHG's commitment to improvements undertaken since or as part of the void process by the implementation of its carbon reduction and sustainability strategies.

**5.17** Whilst the property is void, WCHG will arrange an Asbestos Management Survey to be undertaken if one has not been completed in the last 12 months or when if necessary based on the anticipated scope of works. The survey will identify if any asbestos containing materials (ACMs) are present in its current condition and will make recommendations on whether to remove the ACM or to manage it in situ in accordance with Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012. The information on retained ACMs will be shared with the new incoming tenants at the outset of the tenancy.

## **6.0 Performance Management**

**6.1** WCHG will actively manage and monitor the performance and service delivery of void properties. WCHG recognises the financial impact of property turnover and the costs associated with re-let times and re-let standards. Monthly performance management data will be collated and reported to examine the correct balance of demand, property standards, satisfaction and overall costs to determine decisions.

**6.2** WCHG will undertake an annual zero budgeting process to determine the void budget and this will be based upon agreed parameters on anticipated future turnover. A number of mechanisms and reports will be collated including the following:

- Monthly Management Finance Reporting Pack;
- Corporate Performance Pack;
- Tenant Committee;
- Benchmarking Groups; and
- Post Inspection data on completion of works.

**6.3** Service Inspectors will aim to complete 40% of either physical inspections or properties at handover stage or telephone surveys within 28 days of the start date of the tenancy.

## **7.0 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **7.1 The Board and Chief Executive**

**7.1.1** Ultimately the Board holds overall responsibility for the safety of all of the organisation's customers, employees and appointed contractors living or working in properties owned or managed by WCHG.

**7.1.2** The Chief Executive is responsible to the Board for ensuring that WCHG operates safely and complies with all statutory, legislative and regulatory requirements.

**7.1.3** As part of the responsibilities detailed in the document, the Chief Executive and Directors will ensure compliance by:

- Reviewing and agreeing the Policy and Procedures to be implemented by WCHG;
- Ensuring the staffing structure is adequately resourced with competent persons nominated to oversee and manage all aspects of the Empty Homes process; and
- Ensuring sufficient financial and staffing resources are available to enable the void processes and procedures to be implemented and maintained.

## **7.2 The Director of Assets**

**7.2.1** The Director of Assets, along with others identified in this Policy, are designated as 'Responsible Deputies' and ensure the delivery of this policy.

## **7.3 The Senior Contract Manager**

**7.3.1** Under the current organisational structure, the Senior Contract Manager has management responsibility for the Wythenshawe Works Voids team. The Voids team are responsible for the day to day management of the void operation as such the Senior Contract Manager is designated as the 'Responsible Officer' under this policy.

**7.3.2** The Competent Person(s) does not need to be a direct employee of WCHG. However, the senior manager must ensure the competency of any external persons, contractors or consultants appointed.

**7.3.3** Any specialist contractor or consultant must be accredited and must provide evidence of competency levels of any employee they allocate to work on WCHG's assets.

**7.3.4** The Senior Contract Manager is responsible for ensuring all Contractors are adequately trained/competent in relation to the work asked of them to ensure the working methods adopted by them do not compromise safety and the subsequent reputation of WCHG and to ensure they maintain knowledge and skills.

## **7.4 Contract Manager**

**7.4.1** The Contract Manager is responsible for monitoring the performance of their subordinates and Contractors against this Policy and standard contractor terms and conditions of engagement.

**7.4.2** The Contract Manager is responsible for ensuring all WCHG technicians receive adequate information, instruction and training in relation to the specific trade and to ensure they maintain knowledge and skills.

## **7.5 Health and Safety**

**7.5.1** The Health and Safety Manager is responsible for the management of the training of technicians working on voids and associated training records are maintained.

## **7.6 Employees**

**7.6.1** All employees have a responsibility for their own health and safety and that of others, including members of the public, residents, visitors and Contractors in the event of a fire.

**7.6.2** All employees have a responsibility to inform WCHG of any work situations which may pose a danger of fires.

**7.6.3** All employees have responsibility to report hazards that may present a serious risk of fire or compromise the integrity of an area of compartmentation.

**7.6.4** All employees must complete mandatory health and safety training.

## **7.7 Housing Managers**

**7.7.1** Housing Managers are responsible for the management of tenancies including and the Allocation Processes of Empty Homes.

**7.7.2** Housing Managers are responsible for ensuring appropriate housing advice is provided and that all relevant checks are undertaken including assessments in ability, needs and vulnerability of new customers and residents prior to letting.

## **7.8 Development Managers**

**7.8.1** Development Managers will ensure all new build schemes and acquired stock fully comply with regulatory and legislative requirements prior to formal handover or occupancy. This will include the provision of all appropriate documentation/certification at the point of handover to TM.



## **8.0 Statutory and Legislative Framework**

Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 & 1987  
Housing Act 1985, 1988, 1996, 1998 & 2004  
Localism Bill 2011  
The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England from April 2012  
Defective Premises Act 1972  
Occupiers Liability Act 1957  
Construction Act 1996  
Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015  
Right to Repair Regulations 1994  
Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998  
Housing Health and Safety Rating System  
Health and Safety at Work Act 1974  
Disability Discrimination Act 1995  
Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012  
Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) 1999  
Environmental Protection Act 1990  
CRE Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing  
Homes Fitness for Human Habitation Act 2018

## **9.0 Associated Policies and Procedures**

Allocations Policy  
Asbestos Policy  
Responsive Repairs Procedure  
Gas Maintenance and Safety Management Policy  
Electrical Safety Management Policy  
Equipment and Adaptations Policy  
Legionella Management Policy  
Rechargeable Repairs and Recoverable Costs Policy  
Customer Complaints, Comment & Compliments Policy  
Health and Safety Policy and working documents  
Environmental Sustainability Strategy  
Value for Money Strategy  
Discretionary Compensation, Colleague Guidance Note  
Equality and Diversity Policy  
Asset Management Strategy  
Asset Management Plan  
Low Carbon and Sustainability Strategies  
Garden Boundary and Fencing Policy

## **10.0 Equality and Diversity**

WCHG has a responsibility to serve the needs and promote the interests of its entire staff and all its tenants/service users. WCHG will provide equal service in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. WCHG works towards developing services, facilities and working practices which are equally accessible to and appropriate for all its customers, irrespective of their gender, age, race, sexual orientation, sex, gender re-assignment, disability, religion, marital status/civil partnerships or income.

WCHG will make consideration for all identified vulnerable groups when conducting this service.

At the discretion of WCHG, consideration will be given to all vulnerable groups, tailoring our service and customer needs. This will be dealt with case by case on an individual need.

We will provide information in languages other than English, in Braille, Large Print, Compact Disc and Audiotape. Our reception and interview rooms are fitted with a hearing loop system.

## **Appendix A – Empty Property Standard**

WCHG will endeavour to provide a high quality letting standard and will undertake the repairs before a new tenant moves in. However, if it is identified that large component renewals are required for (e.g. kitchen and bathroom replacements), WCHG may choose to undertake renewals once the home is occupied enabling tenant choice in design, colour etc.

### General Standards

- All areas of the home, including the loft space will be clear from rubbish and contaminated bins emptied. The property will be left clean, fresh and tidy with air fresheners.
- Internal and external surfaces will be free from any graffiti.
- All properties will have a valid Energy Performance Certificate.
- Both gas and electrical services including fixed appliances, such as smoke detectors, burglar alarms and CO detectors will be fully commissioned and tested prior to the commencement of the new tenancy and the relevant documentation will be included in the handover pack.
- WCHG will aim to ensure gas and electrical supplies are on at the time of handover and that the relevant utility company's details will be provided allowing for meters to be topped up by the incoming customer where possible.
- WCHG have in place controls which are in place to ensure the water supply/system within each void property is addressed prior to handover and recording mechanisms are in place.
- An Asbestos Management Survey will be undertaken on all voids where the Group does not hold any up to date information and a summary of the information provided at the time of let.
- Locks to all external doors will be changed with a minimum of 2 keys provided to the incoming customer.
- All glazing systems will be intact.
- Provision will be made for an electric cooker (only) and one space provided for a washing machine and a fridge.
- Upgrade all lighting to low energy lighting LEL throughout the property.

- Remove all forms of secondary heating.
- Loft insulation will be upgraded to 300mm thickness if currently below 200mm.

### Internal Works

- Loose, damp or defective plaster to walls and ceilings will be removed and made good, suitable for decoration.
- All polystyrene ceiling tiles and decorative poly coving will be removed and made good, suitable for decoration.
- Floors, stairs and handrails will be checked for stability and safety and will be free from defects.
- Windows will be inspected to ensure ease of opening and closing. Any broken or failed double glazed units will be renewed.
- Internal doors will be properly fitted with fully working handles and catches. Internal glazed doors will be removed if not to current standard. Associated woodwork, door casings, architrave and skirting will be in reasonable condition.
- Non-standard items/improvements from the previous tenancy will be removed and replaced with a WCHG's standard if they no longer meet current standard.
- Water outlets will be working correctly and free from leaks or blockages to any pipes. Toilets will be in working order, cleaned and the toilet seat will be renewed.
- Bathroom suites will be serviceable and clean with a new WC seat and shower curtain fitted. Any defective/cracked wall tiles and mastic sealant will be renewed.
- Kitchens will be serviceable and consist of a minimum of eight-unit doors and four meters of worktops (where possible).
- Decoration will be in reasonable condition and paper adhered to surfaces.

## External Works

- The property will be secure, wind and watertight.
- External boundary including hedges, fences, walls, gates and sheds will be in a reasonable safe condition in accordance with the Garden Boundary and Fencing Policy.
- Footpaths to and from the property and flag perimeter will be in good condition, free from trips and other hazards.
- Gardens will be cleared, safe and tidy at the tenancy start (subject to inclement weather conditions). All ponds will be removed and backfilled and left levelled.
- Drainage systems, gutters, rain water pipes and waste pipes will be flowing, functional and free from obstruction.