



NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET REPORT

Report Title	VOIDS LETTABLE STANDARD
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AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC

Cabinet Meeting Date:	9 June 2010
Key Decision:	YES
Listed on Forward Plan:	YES
Within Policy:	YES
Policy Document:	YES
Directorate:	HOUSING
Accountable Cabinet Member:	Cllr Sally Beardsworth
Ward(s)	ALL

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To consider the changes necessary to the existing lettable standard (attached at Appendix A) and to approve the revised draft in Appendix B.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members approve the draft lettable standard in appendix B.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 The lettable standard specifies the work that will be carried out to void properties to make them ready for the new tenant. The existing lettable

standard is attached in Appendix A.

- 3.1.2 The existing lettable standard was produced in 2007 and needs to be reviewed to ensure it reflects tenants' views and that all necessary work is covered. It was produced for tradesmen working in voids rather than as a guide for tenants.

3.2 Issues

- 3.2.1 There were 1,141 void properties during 2009/10. The total spent on voids amounted to £3,535,227. The average cost per void amounted to £3,098, made up of an average revenue spend per property of £1,611 and £1,488 capital.
- 3.2.2 The current lettable standard pre-dates the Decent Homes contracts; did not provide sufficient guidance – for example whether single glazed UPVC windows should be upgraded, and gave no choice to residents over decorating. Nor did it give guidance on whether improvements carried out by tenants and carpets and flooring should be left for the new tenant, provided they were in good condition. These issues were raised by the Tenant Auditors during their recent inspection. Although the existing lettable standard states that any new kitchen will be fitted after tenants have moved in, in most cases, due to hygiene or the very poor condition of the kitchen, this has been done during the void period and clarification is required.
- 3.2.3 Once approved, the new lettable standard will be produced in a leaflet form with pictures, on a room-by-room basis, as requested by the Tenant Auditors. It will be given to all prospective tenants when they view the property so that they know what to expect in their new home.

3.3 Choices (Options)

- 3.3.1 There is an option to bring all voids up to the Decent Homes standard. Whilst this would ensure a very good standard for the new tenant, it also needs to be considered that existing tenants living next door may be some time away from having decent homes work in their properties; that to increase void expenditure to cover decent homes costs would take money from the existing decent homes programme, and could cost more because of the dispersed, pepper-potted nature of the location of voids. It is, therefore, recommended that this approach should not be adopted. However, where kitchens and bathrooms are either unhygienic or beyond repair, then they will be replaced. Heating will be in good working order, but partial or warm air heating will not be upgraded. If there is no central heating at all in the property, a new system will be fitted. Single UPVC windows will remain and will not be replaced with double glazed units. All such outstanding work will be noted and included in planning improvement and Decent Homes programmes for the future.
- 3.3.2 The tenant auditors requested that any improvements carried out by tenants should remain where possible. Improvements will be removed only if they are in poor condition or do not meet regulations. The same principle will apply to any adaptations carried out for disabled tenants.

- 3.3.3** Some work could be carried out after the tenant has moved in. This shortens the void period and does allow the tenant's own circumstances to be taken into account – for example, if a new kitchen is to be fitted it can be designed around the new tenant's appliances. Tenants were asked for their views on this. Seventy nine per cent said they would be happy for some work to be carried out after they had moved in: 7% said they would not support this. Details are shown in the table below.

Type of work	Tenants happy for this to be done after they have moved in	Tenants not happy for this to be done after they have moved in
Cutting down overgrown garden	76%	8%
Minor repairs (e.g. broken wall tiles, fencing, repairs to kitchen units, window catches unless unsafe, doors (unless fire doors)	77%	15%
If a new kitchen to be fitted	42%	47%

- 3.3.4** The lettable standard in appendix B reflects the results of this consultation. Minor repairs and work to clear overgrown gardens will be carried out after tenants have moved in. Where kitchens are being replaced, it is recommended that this work be done during the void period where the existing units are unhygienic.

4. Implications (including financial implications)

4.1 Policy

- 4.1.1 Cabinet has recently approved a new tenancy agreement specifying that tenants must leave their properties in a good condition when they move out and has also approved a recharge policy outlining the circumstances in which tenants will be charged for the damage they cause, the aims of which include reducing the costs of repairing void properties.

4.2 Resources and Risk

- 4.2.1 The voids budget remains under pressure due to the fact that a significant number of properties do not yet conform to the Decent Homes standard.

4.3 Legal

- 4.3.1 The Council is required to carry out gas and electrical safety checks. These are done in every void and certificates given to the new tenant to confirm this.

4.4 Equality

- 4.4.1 An Equalities Impact screening assessment was carried out. New tenants with disability needs are assessed by Housing Solutions and adaptations provided where necessary. Decorating is not normally carried out but can be

done where the disability need supports this. This is being addressed by a Vulnerable Tenants Strategy that is in preparation.

4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

- 4.5.1 All tenants were sent a copy of a draft of the revised lettable standard together with a questionnaire for comments on the proposals. There have been over 2,000 replies. Details of tenants preferences are shown in paragraph 3.3.2
- 4.5.2 Officers have also worked closely with the Tenant Auditors to draw up the revised standard.
- 4.5.3 Consultation also showed support for a change in the approach to decorating. At present, the Council delivers a decoration pack to new tenants for them to use. Sixty per cent of tenants stated they would like to see a choice of vouchers (this would probably be an electronic pre paid card) or the decoration pack. Eighteen per cent stated that the existing decoration pack system should be kept, but 81% did not express a view on this. It is recommended that tenants be given the option to choose which they would prefer. The current cost of a decoration pack for a one-bedroom property is £110, rising by approximately £30 per additional room, awarded where decoration is necessary.
- 4.5.4 Consultation also showed that tenants would like to see a welcome pack left in the property, with bin liners being the most popular item, closely followed by cleaning materials. Only ten per cent of tenants felt this would not be useful. This will be accommodated within existing resources.

4.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes

- 4.6.1 The recommendations support the Corporate Plan priorities of
- * Improved homes, health and wellbeing, and
 - * An efficient, well-managed organisation that puts our customers at the heart of what we do.

4.7 Other Implications

- 4.7.1 None

5. Background Papers

- 5.1 None

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APPENDIX A: EXISTING LETTABLE STANDARD

1.0 General

1.1 Evidence of damp, wet rot, dry rot, rising damp, penetrative damp, vermin and infestation will require further investigation and treatment.

2.0 Floors and Stairs

2.1 Repair or renew broken/cracked stair treads or risers

2.2 Repair or renew broken and/or missing handrails and/or balustrade

2.3 Repair or renew damaged/uneven floorboards/floor panels

2.4 Remove nails from floors/stairs

2.5 Repair broken/uneven floor screed or asphalt

2.6 Patch only loose, cracked and missing floor tiles (nearest colour match only – do not expect exact match). Paint splashed or scratched/scored tiles are not to be replaced.

3.0 Windows and Doors

3.1 Renew front and rear door locks unless already changed through eviction/repossession process. Ensure that xxx copies of keys are made, labelled and kept secure.

3.2 Ensure that windows are secure – repair or renew defective window furniture.

3.3 Check glass for cracks and breakages and replace if security/safety risk.

3.4 Ensure that external doors are secure and lockable.

3.5 Replace any missing/badly damaged bathroom and/or w/c doors. All other internal doors will be replaced when new tenant is in-situ.

3.6 All fire doors must operate effectively and correctly.

3.7 Fire door closers must be in situ and in working condition

4.0 Heating System

4.1 All appliances for heating will be in good working order.

4.2 There will be a basic heating source i.e. gas fire in main living room until a heating replacement programme is implemented.

4.3 The installation of central heating, where none currently exists, will be carried out before the tenant moves in (Ref. Tenant Handbook page 37)

5.0 **Gas and Electric Safety Checks**

5.1 Carry out a full safety check and test of the electric system, replacing any unsafe sockets, switches or lamp holders.

5.2 Replace missing smoke alarms

5.3 Test smoke alarms for correct operation, replacing battery if necessary.

5.4 Carry out safety check of gas supply and appliances that are the responsibility of the Council.

6.0 **Kitchen**

6.1 Units to be functional and in a hygienic condition.

6.2 Worktops to be in a hygienic condition.

6.3 Ensure that there is provision for gas and electric cooking appliances (if the property has both facilities)

6.4 Where kitchen units are coming to the end of their serviceable life a full kitchen replacement will be installed ***after the tenant has moved in***. (Ref. Tenant Handbook page 37)

7.0 **Bathroom**

7.1 W/C's to be fully operational and free from cracks.

7.2 Bath to be free from chipped surfaces and sharp edges

7.3 Sanitary ware to be cleaned and toilet seat replaced if necessary

8.0 **Walls and Ceilings**

8.1 Ceilings to be in a sound condition with polystyrene tiles to be removed and ceiling to be skimmed if necessary.

8.2 Walls should be free from large-scale damaged/loose plasterwork.

8.3 Stud partition walls should be secure and free from large-scale damaged plasterboard.

9.0 **Decoration**

9.1 No decoration shall be carried out unless the existing standard of decoration is very poor and has been authorised by the Team Leader/Supervisor (Ref. Tenant Handbook page 37)

9.2 Emulsion walls containing offensive, or racist, graffiti/drawings, will be over painted with emulsion, papered walls will be stripped.

9.3 In all other instances, a decoration pack will be issued.

External (Note: Not usually part of voids work)

- The roof will be watertight and safe – check for sagging/tile slippage.
- The guttering and down pipe will be secure and clear from blockages and leaks.
- All steps, paths and any handrails leading up to a property will be safe.

Cleaning and Clearing

- All of the previous tenant's belongings and rubbish and bulk refuse will be cleared from inside and/or outside of the property.
- The property will be left clean and tidy.
- The loft space and garden will be cleared of rubbish and bulk refuse.
- The garden will be cleared of any rubbish and if overgrown will be chopped back but nothing more. (Ref. Tenant Handbook page 38)

APPENDIX B: REVISED LETTABLE STANDARD

WORK TO BE DONE BEFORE TENANT MOVES IN

- ☒ The property will look in good order and be clean, tidy and secure.
 - It will be free from damp, mould or infestation.
 - Broken/cracked stair treads or risers will be repaired
 - Broken and/or missing handrails and/or balustrades will be repaired or replaced
 - Damaged/uneven floorboards/floor panels will be repaired or renewed
 - Nails will be removed from floors/stairs
 - Broken/uneven floor screed or asphalt will be remedied
- ☒ Kitchen units will be clean and in good condition. Where the kitchen is unhygienic or beyond repair, a new kitchen will be fitted. There will be two rows of tiling above the sink, worktops and behind the cooker space.
- ☒ Bathroom fittings will be clean and in good condition with no chips or cracks. Tiles and grout will be clean and sound. There will be a minimum of two rows of tiling behind the wash hand basin and bath. Any shower area, including showers over baths will have tiled walls. Plugs and chains will be in place. New toilet seats will have been fitted.
- ☒ New locks will be fitted to front and back doors.
- ☒ Existing windows will be secure and in good working order. Any broken glass will be replaced on the day the new tenant moves in. Defective catches or hinges that are a safety issue will be repaired or replaced as necessary.
- ☒ Good decorating will be left in place. Wall plaster will be sound. Offensive graffiti/drawings will be painted over, and heavy nicotine stains covered. In other cases, where decorating is required, tenants will be offered a choice of a decoration pack or vouchers/electronic pre-paid cards for use in a retail outlet.
- ☒ Roofs will be checked to ensure they are watertight and safe. Guttering and down pipes will be similarly checked and secured. Any steps, paths or handrails leading to the property will be checked to ensure they are safe and repaired as necessary.
- ☒ If the property has been adapted for a disabled person, for example, by removing the bath and fitting a walk in shower, this will remain. Every effort will be made to offer the property to someone who needs these adaptations, but if there is no one on the housing register, who needs them, they will remain. The shower will not be removed and the bath refitted. Stair lifts will be removed if not required by the new tenant.
- ☒ Gas and electrical safety checks will be carried out in all void properties. The new tenant will be provided with certificates to confirm this.
- ☒ Carpets and laminate flooring will be removed unless in good condition unless they need to be removed for access to sub floors or electrical wiring. Damaged floor tiles will be replaced and floors cleaned. Any polystyrene ceiling tiles will be

removed.

- ☑ All heating appliances will be serviced and in good working order. In the case of a property, which is heated by only a coal fire, or has no central heating, a new system will be fitted.
- ☑ Any rubbish and items left behind by the previous tenant will be removed, including anything left in gardens, sheds/bin stores or loft spaces.
- ☑ Improvements made by the previous tenant that are safe, meet regulations and are in good condition will be kept and maintained. Any that do not meet these requirements will be removed.
- ☑ Fire doors will be checked and repaired where necessary, ensuring there are no breaches, that door closers are fitted and working and that intumescent strips are fitted as appropriate. Smoke alarms will be tested. Missing smoke alarms will be replaced.

WORK TO BE DONE AFTER THE TENANT HAS MOVED IN

Some repairs will be done after the tenant has moved in. If this is the case, this will be discussed with the tenant when they view the property and at sign up they will be advised of completion dates. Examples of work that can be done after a tenant has moved in include:

- cutting back an overgrown garden and any necessary tree pruning
- minor repairs such as replacing broken wall tiles, repairs to kitchen units, window catches unless unsafe, fitting new or repairing internal doors, unless they are fire doors
- replacement of damaged fencing where security is not an issue