

Empty Homes Policy

Lead Director: Assistant Director Housing and Communities

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Committee Review: Customer Committee

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1. Introduction and Aim

- 1.1 This Policy outlines Cobalt Housing's approach to managing empty homes efficiently and in line with regulatory standards. It aims to minimise rental income loss, reduce neighbourhood disruption, and ensure homes are relet quickly and to a high standard.
- 1.2 Cobalt is committed to ensuring the management of our empty homes is delivered in line with our statutory and regulatory requirements. Cobalt acknowledges that the efficient and effective management of our empty homes is a high priority for our tenants and residents.

2. Policy Statement

- 2.1 The Empty Homes Policy applies to all of Cobalt's residential housing stock upon termination of a tenancy and where a property is empty. The intention of the Policy is to minimise the financial loss of rental income, making best use of our assets and to increase customer satisfaction with their home and neighbourhood.

3. Policy Principles

- 3.1 The Tenancy Standard and Safety and Quality Standard of the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England (April 2012) requires registered providers to:
- 3.2 Tenancy Standard:
 - let homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way demonstrating how lettings:
 - make best use of available housing
 - contribute to local authorities strategic housing function and sustainable communities
 - minimise the time that properties are empty between each letting.
- 3.3 Safety and Quality Standard:
 - ensure that tenants' homes meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (June 2006)
 - provide a cost-effective repairs and maintenance service to homes and communal areas and has the objective of completing repairs and improvements right first time.
 - meet all applicable statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of the occupants in their homes.
- 3.4 In order to achieve the above, detailed below are the key policy principles for managing empty homes.

Best Use of Stock

- 3.5 As part of our approach to the management of empty homes, Cobalt will ensure that high-cost empty homes are reviewed as part of our active asset management and value for money approach. This will allow us to determine the most appropriate action to ensure that our assets are viable and fit for the future.

Allocations

- 3.6 Cobalt are a scheme partner of the Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings scheme known as Property Pool Plus (PPP). PPP is a common allocations scheme which seeks to ensure that social housing is allocated fairly and objectively to those most in need. Cobalt has a nominations agreement with the Local Authority where a minimum of 50% of our empty homes will be allocated through the scheme. This target is managed and monitored by the Neighbourhood Team to ensure we are compliant.

- 3.7 This is supported by Cobalt's Access to Housing Policy which is approved by the Local Authority and sets out Cobalt's responsibilities and approach to the allocation of available properties we own and manage in order to sustain tenancies and our neighbourhoods.
- 3.8 Sometimes Cobalt will have Local Lettings Plans for defined areas, these will be approved by the local authority and Board / SMT. These LLP's help Cobalt deliver its allocations flexibly in response to local issues, to encourage demand and deliver sustainable communities.
- 3.9 Consideration must be given to those applicants who are not immediately able to take up their new tenancy due to a disability. Cobalt aims to provide a service to its customers where individual needs are considered, and reasonable adjustments applied.

Housing Needs Panel

- 3.10 Cobalt also has an internal register for its transferring tenants. The register is based on housing need only and is categorised into three bands which are:
- **Band A** – tenants who require an urgent move due to either targeted harassment including domestic abuse and those who require an urgent move due to the condition of their home.
 - **Band B** – rightsizing, for tenants who require a move to either a smaller or larger property to suit their family's needs, creating a more sustainable tenancy, and minimise costs to the tenant.
 - **Band C** – medical register, this band is for tenants who require level access accommodation or adaptations. Using this facility allows us to move tenants into more suitable accommodation and makes best use of our homes. It also reduces the number of adaptations needed to be removed from homes when they become empty.

Rechargeable Repairs

- 3.11 Cobalt must ensure that its resources for repairs and maintenance are maximised and may therefore charge former tenants for the completion of repairs that are considered to be the tenants' responsibility. In addition, tenants may be charged for repairs to the property which have been caused by either unauthorised alterations, wilful or accidental damage. Cobalt will use the appropriate National Housing Federations (NHF) 'Schedule of Rates' for the charge of rechargeable repairs.

Repairs to Empty Homes

- 3.12 Empty homes will be inspected before and after repairs, and repaired in accordance with Cobalt's Lettable Standard, to ensure that properties offered for letting are of a consistent standard. Cobalt is committed to ensuring all homes meet our Lettable Standard before re-letting. This ensures properties are ready for occupation, meet the decent homes standard including eliminating health and safety risks, are clean and meet the needs of incoming tenants.
- 3.13 Cobalt will also monitor the number of follow up repairs raised for newly tenanted homes within a specific timescale which is outlined in the Lettable Standard to ensure all repairs completed when the property was empty were completed adequately. This includes all building safety compliance requirements and certification as required by governing legislation.

Relet times

- 3.14 To minimise the period of time a home is empty, Cobalt will undertake repairs in accordance with Empty Homes Priorities. A comprehensive list of priority timescales is outlined within the Lettable Standard.
- 3.15 Overall relet times can be broken down into four periods:
- **time in management 1** – dates keys returned from departing tenant to keys to property services team
 - **time with property** – keys with surveyor to keys with contractors
 - **time with contractors** – whole period in repairs and unavailable for letting
 - **time in management 2** – ready for letting to new tenancy commenced
- 3.16 Cobalt has introduced three void types defined as:

Void category	Time in maintenance	Average relet time
Quick Void (QV)	Up to 5 days	14 days
Standard Void (SV)	Up to 20 days	28 days
Long Term Void (LVT)	Up to 60 days	90 days

- 3.17 Currently targets are set as:
- **Core relet time 25 days** - the whole time in maintenance is removed from the relet period where major or significant works are carried out in the property, this is industry standard. For all Long Term Voids the core relet time will be the time in management 2 figure only due to the nature of the works carried out at the property.
 - **Average relet days 35 days** - this covers the whole of the time the property is unavailable for letting and not attracting rent. This period is often described as 'key-to-key'.

Customer Satisfaction and Feedback

- 3.18 Cobalt monitor satisfaction levels of new tenants in relation to the standard of service they received during the empty homes process including their satisfaction with the home, neighbourhood and the customer care they received from Cobalt as a landlord.
- 3.19 Any dissatisfaction will be followed up and investigated by the appropriate manager to identify the root cause of the complaint and to implement preventative measures where necessary.

4. Risk Management

- 4.1 The key risk associated with non-delivery of this Policy is:

Risk Register Ref:	Risk Description:
FV10 – Poor management of empty homes and tenancy turnover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor management of empty homes results in poor relet times, void costs and rent losses which increase beyond the levels assumed in the approved business plan. • Non-compliant homes (safety)
Risk Consequences:	Management and Mitigation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breach of landlord regulatory standards • Financial loss including Void Rent loss. • Poor VFM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal review of processes and procedures • KPI performance targets • Performance management reporting tools

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputational damage – Peers and stakeholders • Customer complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial performance monitoring • Contractor performance monitoring • Tenant satisfaction feedback • Continuous improvement and benchmarking
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Key Risk Indicators and Control Limits

4.2 Detailed below are the key performance measures in respect of the management of Empty Homes. Further information regarding the definition of the KPI's can be made available upon request:

- Total Qualifying relets
- Actual Relet Time
- CORE Relet Time
- Time in Management (1 and 2)
- Time in Maintenance
- Void Turnaround Time
- Void rent loss
- New Tenant satisfaction with the Home
- New Tenant satisfaction with the Neighbourhood
- New Tenant satisfaction with the Allocations Service
- Overall satisfaction with customer care

5. Regulatory and Legislative Compliance

- Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
- Housing Act 2004
- HCA – The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England from April 2012
- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- Housing Health and Safety Rating System 2006
- The Construction, Design and Management Regulations 2015
- Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 2016
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulation 2018
- Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012

6. Links to Other Key Documents

- Cobalt's Responsive Repairs Policy
- Cobalt's Access to Housing Policy
- Lettable Standard

7. Governance of this Policy

Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)	An EQIA has been completed, it has been noted that further EQIA reviews and consultation will be undertaken in relation to the associated policies and standards such as the recharge policy and lettable standard to provide assurance of a fair and transparent approach.
Financial and Links to VfM	Business plan provision is made available for the management of Empty Homes to ensure all necessary repairs are undertaken in a timely manner.
Privacy and Data Protection	All contractors involved in the management of Empty Homes have confirmed they are GDPR compliant to account for the transfer of information being submitted via electronic job tickets to facilitate repairs to empty homes.
Health and Safety	Failure to implement this Policy carries significant risk in terms of health and safety for its tenants, staff and contractors and embedding the policy will ensure Cobalt assets are safe and fit for habitation.
Development and Consultation	<p>The policy is required to ensure Cobalt meets the Home and Tenant Standard of the regulatory framework for social housing and provides a cost-effective service for maintaining empty homes.</p> <p>Key managers from Neighbourhoods and Property Department have been consulted throughout the Policy review and their feedback has been incorporated within the document. The Tenant Consultative Panel have reviewed the policy prior to its approval and recommendations have been adopted in the final version.</p>

8. Definitions

- Active Asset Management - A process to base future investment decisions relating to the performance of Cobalt's assets.
- CORE - Continuous Recording is a national information source that records a wide range of data on both the household and property each time a letting or sale is made by Private Registered Providers, Local Authorities, and social housing tenants.
- GDPR - General Data Protection Regulations – a comprehensive legal framework to protect the personal data of individuals.
- Lettable Standard - A definition of the standard of works and timescales in which work will be undertaken within an empty home
- Local Lettings Plan - To manage risk in the allocation of properties, particularly around the sustainability of communities.

