



Soha Tenants' Forum

**Soha Housing
Tenant Inspectors
Voids Inspection Report
May 2007**

The Team consisted of:

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We would all like to express our thanks to all the members of staff, who helped in the construction of this report. In all cases, they gave of their time and interest far over the call of duty. We should especially like to emphasise that this whole operation would not have been possible without the constant help and support of Catherine Little

Jargon buster

KLOE – Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) are detailed questions that the Audit Commission use when inspecting a housing association.

KPIs – Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are pieces of information collected to show a housing association's performance in a particular area.

Void – an empty property.

CoRE – Continuous Recording -

IBS – International Business Systems. A database which is used by many housing associations.

1. VOIDS REPORT

It was decided by the Tenant Inspectors that for our second exercise as an inspection, we should consider the situation of Soha's procedures with regard to Voids, and as such, we decided upon a review of the processes which are currently being followed when a property becomes void, and to examine the programme and to suggest any improvements where we found that there were shortfalls in the operation of the procedures.

Our first requirement was to outline what it was that we needed to examine. We came to the following outline programme.

1. To determine the programme which at present Soha use to record all matters relating to a particular property when it is notified as becoming available.
2. To abstract from the existing records the changes of tenancies that have taken place over the last six months.
3. To ascertain the period when a tenancy was vacated and when it was reoccupied.
4. To determine whether the cost of any of remedial works that may have had to be undertaken was through fair wear and tear, or whether the outgoing tenant was responsible for any unauthorised work or wilful damage done to the property.
5. Where there are examples of wilful damage, what steps will be taken to recover these costs from the outgoing tenant.
6. Does the incoming prospective Tenant have the opportunity to fully inspect and comment on the state of the property before agreeing to take up the Tenancy?
7. What is the level of supervision of the works to be carried out on a property during the void period?
8. Is there any method of estimating what is the likely cost of repairs to a property?
9. Is there any delay in re-letting the property caused by allocation meetings?
10. Does the work carried out during the void period result in an increase in the rent for the property, or are they automatically re-let at the "Target Rent" for that particular type of property?

11. We decided to investigate specifically the problems relating to sheltered accommodation and details are included in Appendix F.

2. HISTORY

It would appear that when Soha took over the housing stock from SODC ten years ago, very little was known about the condition of the properties. SODC was itself placed in a similar position in 1974 when it inherited the housing stock from eight constituent authorities. During the time that the properties were in its care SODC did not have a complete and detailed record of all its properties. They were therefore in the same position as Soha is today. During the last ten years such information has been collected piecemeal.

Most of the information currently held on the condition of the properties has been collected by the Repairs Section and more recently by the Planned Maintenance Section. The former section is also responsible for voids and is endeavouring to complete data appertaining to the properties as they become vacant.

Information on properties is not consistently stored within the existing IBS system, especially in respect to Disability Aids and Adaptations.

Due to inefficiencies within the IBS system, the Allocations team does not always have to hand such information as heating type, and whether the property is adapted or not. If this information could be linked in to nomination requests, then better matching of nominees and their expectations could be achieved much earlier in the process, thus reducing the number of refusals both by the nominee and Soha. The present system means that some properties are let to people who do not require adaptations, which is an inefficient use of stock.

Conclusions

Better use needs to be made of Stock Condition Survey, and access to full details of each property to be available, perhaps on a 'Read Only' basis to all relevant members of staff.

There needs to be a better recycling of adaptations, which will hopefully reduce the number of new ones being undertaken on an annual basis.

VOIDS STANDARDS

There appears to be a degree of confusion over what is expected both by Soha and new Tenants regarding the levels of both repairs and cleanliness and these can be very subjective. The current voids standard (appendix A of Empty Properties Policy Soha/PO25. See appendix A) is under review. It is not currently made readily available to prospective tenants.

It is the aim of Soha to achieve a 3 star service in this respect and to achieve this it must:

- Have a customer focused service that is responsive and effective in its delivery.
- Have an excellent customer satisfaction rating of more than 95% in its service.
- A top quartile performance in respect of void re-let times.
- Be able to show that there is good Value for money in the servicing and refurbishing of properties.
- Have clear information on true costs of voids, e.g., staff time, etc. This information should be used to set targets for the reduction of costs

VOIDS PROBLEMS

Soha has at present an “Empty Properties (Voids or Change of Tenancy) Policy” a copy of which is attached as Appendix A.

The present procedure is complicated and has some draw backs, they are:

- The problem in ascertaining the time to be taken to complete the works due to be done, largely due to the lack of pre-knowledge of the property.
- The condition of the void at the time that the property becomes available for re-let.
- Until the property becomes available there is little information about the void. There is at present no means of knowing what services are installed and what condition they are in.
- There are no arrangements with energy suppliers to provide the new Tenant with the requisite services.
- There is no formal void progress meeting with either the Contractors or Housing staff.
- There is no Minimum Voids standard which prospective Tenants can see and relate to.

An endeavour should be made to ensure that the prospective Tenant is given an opportunity to view the property at an early stage. This could result in a saving of both time and labour by giving them an incentive to carry out voluntary work where some of the work required to be done is of a personal preference e.g. colour scheme of wall paper or paint. It might therefore, be helpful if both the incoming and outgoing tenants could meet to negotiate on items which might be left in situ and those which belong to the outgoing Tenant.

Notice periods

Not all Tenants give the required 4 weeks notice. This may be for a variety of reasons, and it is accepted that this will always be the case. Soha receives Notice to Quit properties in a number of ways, for instance, letter, phone, Scheme Manager, word of mouth etc. There is at present no consistency in how the notice is received and how it is dealt with, and at present, the level of information collected from and guidance given to Tenants or their relatives regarding their liabilities and responsibilities varies greatly.

It would be preferable for a standard procedure to be formulated which could then be used as a basis which could be easily referred to by all relevant members of staff. This could work as a "Check List" of operations to be completed during the whole period of the change of Tenancies.

The following points have been raised which need to be addressed:

- A minimum voids standard has not been set with Tenant involvement
- This standard is not communicated to incoming Tenants.
- The existing standard appears to be basic and is very subjective.
- The average cost of void repairs at £1,900.00 (including VAT) is high.
- There is no agreed timescale for the completion of repairs in the re-let process.
- Turn around times for repairs are not effectively monitored.
- There is at present, no incentive scheme during the notice to enable speedy re-lets.
- Cleaning of the properties prior to re-let has only recently been undertaken by a dedicated operative.
- There is at present, no arrangements with energy suppliers to provide the incoming Tenant with the necessary services.
- There does not appear to be a clear post inspection process.
- Satisfaction survey responses are not effectively monitored with a view to improving the service overall.

- There are no formal void progress meetings with contractors or housing department staff.
- There is a lack of information for incoming Tenants regarding the area that they are moving into.
- Serious consideration should be given to the widening of Soha's database to cover the condition of all its properties by a regular cycle of periodic inspections both internally and externally.
- The voids review which has been undertaken recommends that:
 - Consideration is given to provide handheld computers for technical staff so surveys could be placed directly onto IBS; and
 - An average void cost is agreed with contractors.

It is noted that both these recommendations are well worth pursuing.

Conclusions

- 1 There needs to be greater co-ordination and communication between all departments.
- 2 A large percentage of new tenants seem to be satisfied with the state of the property on offer (see appendix G)
- 3 However, there is a perception amongst prospective tenants that if a complaint were to be made, the offer might be withdrawn
- 4 If a copy of the proposed voids standard were available, this could be avoided.

Recommendations

1. Voids standard review to include tenants on the working party
2. A simplified minimum voids standard needs to be made available to the prospective tenants (in Plain English). This to be made available when first offered the property
3. More efficient use of IBS system to enable staff in relevant departments to interrogate the stock condition survey
4. Serious consideration should be given to the widening of Soha's database to cover the condition of all its properties by a regular cycle of periodic inspections both internally and externally
5. Consideration should be given to provide handheld computers for technical staff so surveys could be placed directly onto IBS.
6. An average void cost is agreed with contractors.

Appendices

- A – Soha PO25 Empty Properties policy
- B – December 2006 voids performance
- C – KLOE voids repairs
- D – Voids procedures
- E – Voids standard
- F – Report on voids in sheltered schemes
- G – Reasons for refusal
- H – Assessment of voids timescales

Soha Housing Ltd

EMPTY PROPERTIES (VOIDS OR CHANGE OF TENANCY) POLICY

1 **Objective**

To manage void turnaround in an efficient and effective manner whilst meeting customers expectations and needs.

2 **Policy Statement**

2.1 Soha aims to keep the time taken to relet properties to a minimum whilst maintaining its lettable standard. This minimises rent loss and helps meet housing need by reletting properties as quickly as possible.

2.2 Target –Soha aims to achieve a void turnaround time for routine relets so as to be a top quartile performer.

3 **Implementation**

Soha produces a weekly management report on voids. This is reviewed by the Maintenance Manager and by SMT on a regular (quarterly) basis.

- Type
- Address
- Voids date, and length of time void
- Relet date
- Cost of works incurred and category of void – i.e. “major” or “minor”
- Total time void
- Relettable void period (source – Core)

A summary report on voids is contained in the monthly and quarterly management report.

4 **Priorities and Constraints**

Management of voids is complex. Different factors influence the lettable of a property. Whilst Soha has a minimum void standard for relets, it will consider individual cases outside this standard where appropriate and will have regard to customer satisfaction levels.

5 **Responsibility**

Pre termination inspections are carried out by the Technical Officer , and when completed are presented to the Housing Officer prior to any inspection they may wish to make. The Maintenance Manager is responsible for ensuring that this happens.

Voids are inspected by Technical Officers who report to the Maintenance Manager. The Maintenance Manager is responsible for ensuring that voids are:

- a. Inspected
- b. Correctly classified (see paragraph 3 above)
- c. Repaired by contractors in accordance with the Association's financial regulations, ensuring value for money, and are carried out in a timely fashion depending upon the scope of works
- d. Keeping the voids monitoring report accurate.

The letting of voids is the responsibility of the Allocations Team. The "awaiting development" voids are the responsibility of the Development Team.

6 **Consultation**

Most aspects of void management do not require tenant consultation. Soha aims to involve tenants in reviewing lettable standards.

7 **Appeals**

Any tenant who feels aggrieved by the nature of a void offered to them, may appeal by using the Association's Complaints Procedure.

8 **Date of Board Approval**

This policy was approved by the Board on the 27 January 2004

9 **Date of Next Scheduled Review**

This policy will be reviewed no later than December 2008.

Appendix B

March 2007 voids performance

Voids

	Met ?	This Mth	Last Mth	31 Mar 06	Target
No of Standard Void Properties		42	37	23	
Turnaround Time (weeks)		3.8 weeks	3.9 weeks	2.6 weeks	
No of Voids with Major Works		25	26	21	
Turnaround Time (weeks)		3.5 weeks	3.6 weeks	0.8 weeks	
Total No of Void Properties		67	63	44	
Turnaround Time (weeks)	No	3.8 weeks	3.9 weeks	2.1 weeks	2.8 weeks
No of Out of Service Properties		0	1	41	
Total No of Empty Properties		67	64	85	
Percentage of total stock	Yes	1.39%	1.34%	1.80%	3.00%
Total Void Properties Cumulative YTD		371	346	408	
Unsold Shared Ownership Properties		60	22		
Unsold Shared Equity Properties		2	3		

Appendix C – KLOE – Void Repairs

KEY LINE OF ENQUIRY (KLOE)	AN ORGANISATION DELIVERING AN EXCELLENT SERVICE	AN ORGANISATION DELIVERING A FAIR SERVICE
<p>Void repairs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How quickly, and to what standard, does the organisation complete repairs to its empty properties? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a challenging re-let standard, to which service users have contributed, and which is available to tenants and prospective tenants before they view the property. • Carries out repairs and safety checks to empty properties quickly and efficiently, to its own re-let standard. As a result, there is a high level of service user satisfaction with the standard at which homes are re-let. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have a lettable standard, but it is not systematically used to ensure new service users move into homes of a consistently good standard. • Provides inconsistent advice to advise prospective tenants of the re-let standard before they view the property. • May carry out safety checks, but service users do not automatically receive copies of safety certificates.