



Setting the standards for empty homes

May 2024

Report written by Debbie Larner based on workshop material gathered through Echelon Improvement Partnerships' Empty Homes Programme for AMIP members.



Contents

• Welcome and introduction to programme.....	04
• Session 1: Making a house a home.....	06
• Session 2: The resident's voice.....	10
• Session 3: Setting the standards.....	14
• Session 4: Joining up the dots.....	16
• Session 5: Safe and decent homes.....	19
• Session 6: Future proofing empty homes.....	22
• Conclusion.....	24

The importance of an effective voids process and policy

An effective voids process and policy can maximise rent and revenue, reduce ongoing repairs and maintenance costs, offer fit-for-purpose properties for prospective tenants and contribute to local communities but the process around the re-letting of empty homes can be challenging for social housing providers.

In September 2023, Echelon Improvement Partnerships launched a six-month Empty Homes Programme focused on best practice approaches and methodology in the effective management of the void process, to find collective solutions to some of these challenges.

Over 270 people from across the sector – clients, contractors, suppliers, consultants and sector bodies – attended the sessions, and contributed their experiences and knowledge.

I'm delighted to be able bring you this report detailing each of the programme's six sessions and the outcomes.

I hope that you find it a useful tool when planning your empty homes strategies.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who contributed to the programme, whether that was as a speaker or through attending the sessions. This report would not be possible without you, and special thanks to Debbie for her stewardship of the group.

**Mathew Baxter, CEO,
Echelon Group**



Introduction to the Empty Homes Programme

Managing the empty homes process is a core function for all housing organisations - empty properties are potential homes and the relationship between customer and provider should be the golden thread running through any successful void process. All housing organisations will generally experience a residual level of empty properties, which arise for a variety of reasons. However, excessive void numbers or properties standing empty for long periods can have far-reaching implications on both organisations and the communities they serve.

We ran an online six-month programme for AMIP members, to explore some of the challenges and solutions with a range of experts, contractors, and landlords. The sessions considered the following key issues:

- What could/should we provide for incoming tenants?
- How do we maintain a customer focus throughout the process to achieve a sustainable letting?
- How can we use letting standards more effectively and flexibly?
- How can processes be streamlined to improve empty property management and efficiency, in terms of the quality of the property?
- How do we break down the departmental silos to make sure we are all working to a common set of objectives?

Debbie Larner
Chair of the Empty
Homes Programme



Debbie Larner bio

Debbie has worked in the social housing sector for over 30 years within both local authorities and housing associations before moving on to join the professional body – Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) – where she was Head of Practice, with a key focus on translating government policy into practice. In that role she developed expertise in housing and asset management.

She has also authored a range of practice-focused publications, including void management, resident engagement, tenancy management and building safety.

Debbie is recognised as a leader in developing and embedding professional standards and developed the CIH professional standards for housing.



Session 1: Making a house a home

Making a house a home focused on the psychological impact that a home can have.

Historically, we have removed flooring and furnishing as standard practice in the social housing sector. Why do we do this? We wanted to prompt an honest and open discussion about what we could/should provide for new residents, the implications and benefits of doing so and to dispel some long-standing myths.

Dr Hannah Absalom, Associate Funding Director at TAROE Trust, started the session and discussed why the home is one of the fundamental areas where social value is produced and asked why all too often organisations don't see this. She explored how rethinking the empty homes process can be of significant value to tenants with home-related trauma, including those experiencing domestic abuse and homelessness. The need for more choice and personalisation in the process was a key focus of her presentation. She highlighted how when we see the empty homes process as "home creation", rather than filling a void, we shift our perspective to what matters to the tenant. For this reason, it's important to offer choice over decoration, furniture, white goods etc. This also helps engender trust, which, in turn, helps tenants to develop a relationship both with the home and their landlord.

Claire Donovan, Head of Policy, Research & Campaigns at End Furniture Poverty (EFP), discussed the physical and psychological impact of furniture poverty and how the sector can offer more support to those in need. In its recent report looking into the extent of furniture poverty in the UK, it found that six million people, 9% of the UK population are living in furniture poverty. Furthermore, 55% of those living in furniture poverty have a disability and 26% of social housing tenants are living in furniture poverty. Over one million adults are living in what we're calling 'deep furniture poverty' where they are missing three or more essential furniture items. And one of the report's starkest findings revealed that at least 740,000 children in the UK do not have their own bed to sleep in.

Discussion points:

- Are we in danger of labelling all residents as "vulnerable" and in need of support? – we need to be cautious of acting in a paternalistic manner and seeing ourselves as "saviours".
- Over and above providing material goods, is there more we can do to support that feeling of home and a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood or community?
- While many providers do support furniture recycling schemes, should we be forming partnerships to supply new furniture (e.g., with IKEA)?
- Getting goods from A to B is sometimes a bigger issue than accessing them in the first place. What role can contractors play, linked to their corporate social value responsibilities, to support the moving of furniture and white goods into people's homes?

We have a relationship with home that shapes who we are and how we connect with the wider world. A home shapes our identity and how we relate to others. A safe and stable home is of immense social value:

NHS: The cost of poor housing is estimated to be £1.4bn a year (BRE Report 2021).

Domestic abuse: It has been known for decades that housing is a foundation in aiding survivors/victims of domestic abuse to exit safely. Allocations can save lives and reduce trauma.

Homelessness: In 2012 the social cost of homelessness in England was £1bn (Crisis 'cost of homelessness' report). That will only have increased since then.

To furnish or not to furnish?

It is standard practice in the social housing sector for properties to be allocated unfurnished, which means no furniture, no appliances and usually no floor or window coverings either. For many tenants, this is what they want, they have already acquired furniture and furnishings, but for some, particularly those fleeing domestic violence, coming from homelessness, or even moving from the private rental sector where the property may have been furnished, they can have nothing which can create huge challenges for a new tenancy. EFP believes that at least 10% of tenancies should be furnished – so what are the available options?

Capital route

Where the landlord purchases furniture and recoups capital over three to five years, ideally through the service charge which includes an element for repairs and replacement, and admin costs. Once capital cost is recouped, the landlord can continue to claim service charge at the same level.

Rental route

Where the landlord rents the furniture from a third party and the service charge includes an element for landlord admin costs.

Furniture poverty: the inability to afford or access basic furniture, appliances and furnishings that provide a household with a socially acceptable standard of living.

Furniture insecurity: a household has the items they need for now, but if something essential breaks or needs replacing, they will not have the savings to do so.

Furniture destitution: a long-term chronic situation where a household has none or very few essential furniture items.

The essential furniture items:

- Bed, bedding and mattress
- Table and chairs
- Sofa and/or easy chairs
- Wardrobe/drawers
- Floor coverings
- Window coverings
- Washing machine
- Refrigerator and freezer
- Cooker/oven
- TV

The benefits are clear – not only does it support better living conditions for residents, it helps tenancy sustainment, which provides sustained rental income and reduced void costs. And, linking in with the first session, there are major benefits for the tenant. They are moving into a home, not an empty box. They have all the furniture items that they need with the peace of mind of knowing that if it breaks or needs replacing, it's covered. They have somewhere comfortable to sleep, somewhere safe to store their food and to cook it, somewhere to sit and relax, and can invite family and friends into their home. Tenants in furnished properties are more likely to engage with support services, and tenants on low incomes won't build up unmanageable debt by trying to furnish it themselves.



Session 1: Making a house a home continued...

Options:

- Furnished Tenancy – made at outset of tenancy – furnishing the property, not the tenant.
- Furniture Rental Agreement – more flexible – furnishes the tenant not the property, and can be offered to existing tenants on a 'needs' basis.

However, not all tenants will need furnished tenancies – just some support to access affordable furniture. This could include partnering with a furniture reuse and/or furniture gifting schemes. But it is important to be realistic about the quality and quantity of furniture available through reuse, and the challenges around safety, PAT testing, fire labels, and the costs of logistics and cleaning – as such it's not a free option.

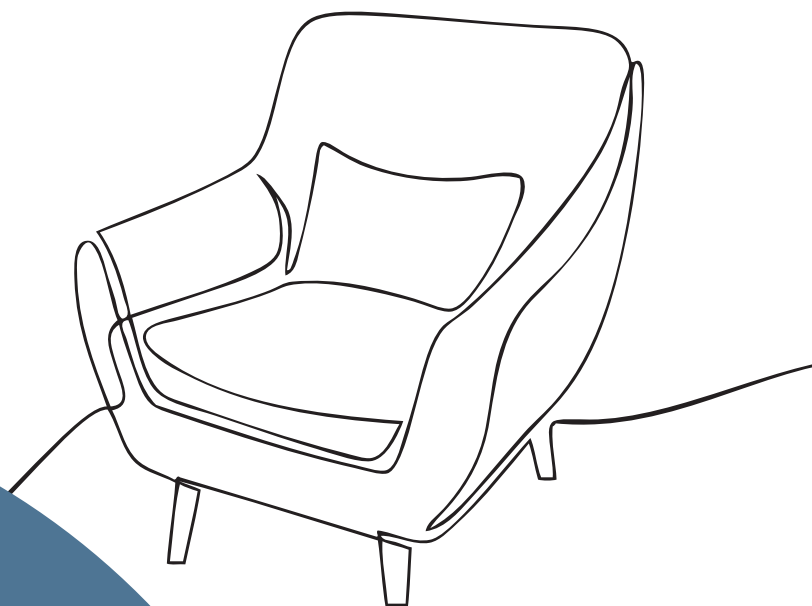
Housing organisations should think about blended solutions – furnished tenancies for those tenants who are on benefits and likely to remain on benefits, and then reuse and gifting schemes for those who need one or two items.

End Furniture Poverty has produced a Blueprint for Furniture Provision in Social Housing, which helps all social landlords to seriously consider furniture provision in their homes.

Discussion points:

- By not offering furnished tenancies, are we inadvertently pushing people into the much less secure private rented sector?
- Should there be a national register of furniture schemes or regional reuse hubs across the UK and what role should social landlords play?
- Can we collaborate with large suppliers and charities to reduce furniture poverty?
- How can we tailor what is required to the needs of the incoming tenant? How do we know what is needed in advance of the offer being made and/or the sign-up being done?

Recent data suggests that only 3% of homes let in the social housing sector are furnished compared to 31% in the private rented sector.



David Ripley, Executive Director of Customer Service at Thirteen Group, closed the session with an analysis of how the organisation has transformed its empty homes process. The starting point for rethinking its approach to voids was being open and honest, embracing the challenges that the customers face, and looking at what solutions they could offer.

“At Thirteen we genuinely believe that our job as a social housing provider is to give everyone the best opportunity to be the best that they can be. We can do this by putting carpets in and giving them a good home”.

David Ripley, Executive Director of Customer Service at Thirteen Group

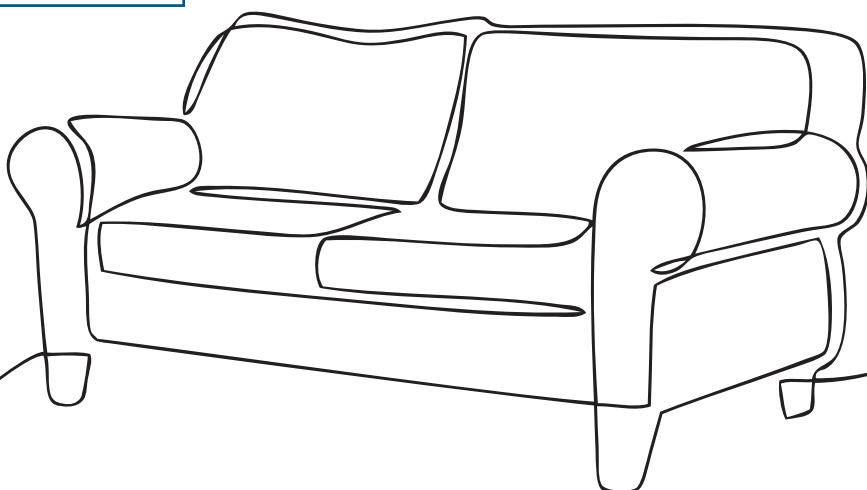
Part of this was to dispel the myths – the view that we had to take everything out to manage risk and meet health and safety requirements – what if someone tripped over a carpet that we left in? But, in reality it recognised that it was an entirely disproportionate approach and rather than not doing something because it was a risk, it’s about how the risk is managed.

Research by The Leeds Sustainability Institute states that carpets can reduce air leakage by up to a third in some homes, making homes without carpet, lino, or laminate more expensive and difficult to heat.

In 2017, Thirteen Group started to pilot an enhanced home standard – putting in carpets and carrying out full decorations. It used disclaimer agreements where the resident takes liability for any issues with the flooring to manage the risk. It capitalises the costs against the asset which has enabled it to use money set aside from its Decent Homes budget. As a result of this new approach, Thirteen Group has seen overall business improvements including improved tenancy sustainability, reduced eviction rates, lowering of void costs, improved turnaround times and better satisfaction with homes let.

Discussion points:

- How do we move away from measuring success in terms of void turnaround times and rent loss figures to more qualitative measures looking at the experience from the resident’s point of view?
- How do we persuade our finance colleagues that it makes good business sense to provide carpeting and decorations in new homes? What is the business case?



Session 2: The resident's voice

The resident's voice focused on how we could and should proactively involve and engage residents (and potential residents) to improve our empty homes performance and standards.

Fiona Brown and Pam Hankinson of Stop Social Housing Stigma opened the session. They set out the overall aim of their campaign which is to highlight, from a resident's perspective, the negative impact of social housing stigma and to challenge and take positive action to eradicate stigma in social housing. One of the consequences of stereotyping and stigmatising residents is that we don't always listen to them and/or ask for their views and feedback, so we don't get their valuable input into how we design and deliver our services. This is important across all areas of service delivery including empty property management. So, what should landlords be doing?

- Communicate with tenants and listen to them.
- Lose the 'them and us' mentality.
- Beware of unconscious bias.
- Be careful about attitudes towards tenants and avoid thinking you know best.
- Think carefully about the language – it matters!
- Liaise with tenants about decisions, you'll be surprised at the ideas they have!
- Have tenants on the Board, they will bring their life experience into the boardroom.

It's not okay: a guide to tackling stigma in social housing, was published in partnership with Stop Social Housing Stigma and CIH.

Some real examples of the stereotypes people who live in social housing face:

"It is often assumed that we are all on benefits, so we should be grateful to be given a 'rent-free' home".

"Because we don't pay for the rent, we will be satisfied with sub-standard repairs, or contractors not looking after our homes".

"It is assumed we don't work. So, they can turn up at any time for appointments".

"It is assumed we don't look after our homes because we don't own them, but we are proud of our homes and look after them".

"Sometimes we are treated as though we need to have things done for us and to us instead of consulting with us to discuss what we need".

Discussion points:

- It isn't just the media and politicians who stereotype and stigmatise social housing. As a sector, we need to take responsibility for our own attitudes and behaviours.
- Does the word "social" add to the stigma – do we need to think about a new term for homes managed by housing associations, local authorities and ALMOs?
- Do we also need to change our language and housing jargon – move away from the term "void" and "asset" as they mean nothing to residents and diminish the concept of "home"?
- How can we counter the negative images of social housing – how do we focus on the positive stories and outcomes?
- How do we get better at capturing data on our residents so we can tailor our services to address tenants' needs and expectations?

During the second segment, Michael Hill, National Consultancy Manager at Tpas England, discussed the numerous benefits of involving residents. Michael challenged us to change the rhetoric from participation/engagement/involvement to 'resident influence' which is a much more proactive word that focuses on impact and outcomes rather than process.

It also mirrors the language the Regulator of Social Housing is now using in its new consumer standard – transparency, influence and accountability. Registered providers must now offer tenants “a wide range of meaningful opportunities” to get involved with matters relating to their housing and the standard requires registered providers to consider tenants’ views when making decisions relating to their housing management.

At the end of the day, it is about encouraging more trust and collaboration between tenants and landlords by creating more opportunities for tenants to influence. It's essential that organisations understand the value they get from listening to residents. You get the benefit of their lived experience, unbiased suggestions, and ultimately free consultancy if used effectively! Every opportunity provided for residents to influence, offers more meaningful outcomes for housing providers.

“Don't see resident involvement as a hierarchy – provide a whole range of opportunities for residents to engage, but you will only benefit if you value what is said and provide a way to blend that insight into your systems and processes.”

Michael Hill, National Consultancy Manager at Tpas England



Discussion points:

- You cannot underestimate the importance of telling customers what changes you have made as a result of their feedback and that they have made a difference – do we do this enough?
- How do you make sure that residents take on board the financial implications of any decisions they make? It's about presenting the big picture transparently and setting out the choices in an honest and open way.
- How do we ensure we have knowledge about the incoming tenant so we can tailor our approach to what they need?

Session 2: The resident's voice continued...

For the final segment, Charley Oulton, Head of Engagement and Experience at Orbit Group, explained why it set up its empty homes customer inspection service. The aims were to:

- Identify areas of inconsistency in delivering against our relet standard – region, tenure and partner performance.
- Improve its relet standard.
- Increase customer satisfaction and improve first impressions of Orbit.

When they first set up the process, residents were trained on the relet standard, how to inspect an empty home and what to look out for in terms of quality. Initially this was done physically, with residents actually going into the empty properties. As a result of Covid, they adapted the process so residents were able to view empty homes remotely and use these virtual inspections to perform quality checks against re-let standards. This approach made sure that customers could still engage with them and influence their services.

What are we trying to achieve by involving residents?

Service Improvement: Make things better, improve value for money, to be efficient & effective.

Accountability & Transparency: Demonstrate what the landlord is doing, how it holds itself up to challenge and scrutiny, building trust.

Social Impact: Making a positive difference to the lives of people or place.

Charley explained how the feedback collated has helped Orbit Group to identify notable themes and trends and improve processes to deal with any remedial actions required. As a result of resident feedback, it has stopped a blanket approach where carpets and flooring are removed as a matter of course. It now also provides grants for residents to support them to furnish their tenancy. Orbit also reviewed the quality of the cleaning, garden maintenance and decorations in its empty properties.

"I look forward to the virtual viewings covering all the items on the checklist. I enjoy seeing properties I would never view in real life; I hope others will enjoy this opportunity as we can now do it from the comfort of our own homes."

Orbit resident



Orbit Group resident John Bennett discussed how meetings held between tenants and the Orbit team each quarter allow them to explore possible changes to re-let standards with the tenant's voice at the heart of the conversation. The changes that Orbit made, including long-term changes to its lettable standards and running pilot schemes on furnishing provision, have helped it to proactively engage tenants and deliver meaningful outcomes.

Discussion points:

- We also need to think about the attitudes and behaviours of our contractors who are in and out of residents' homes much more than we are. Also how do they get the most from their interactions with residents?
- Are we still "ticking boxes" when it comes to resident involvement? Do we really understand what they want and need? We need to review our values to really reflect a serious intention to put residents at the heart of what we do.
- We must be really honest about what residents can influence and what they can't – don't raise expectations that residents can influence a decision if you have already made it or have to do something for legal or regulatory reasons.

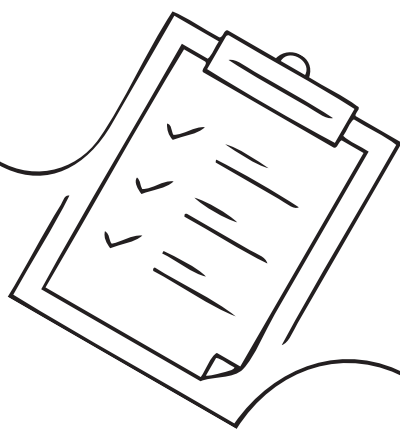


Session 3: Setting the standards

In setting the standards, the current approach to lettable/void standards was explored in detail.

To start the session, Mark Dale, Responsive Repairs and Voids Lead at Exeter City Council set the scene for the morning. He talked delegates through how Exeter had fundamentally changed its approach to void standards and the impact that this new approach had on both residents and the organisation. Mark outlined how the council implemented a successfully performing 28-point plan to manage void properties, with a 29-day average on standard voids.

When voids numbers almost trebled, combined with a materials shortage and contractor and internal capacity issues, the council had to evolve its standard to accommodate the changing landscape. Mark spoke about managing that process and outlined the importance of communication in managing expectations and ensuring that a consistent standard is delivered.



Common themes in lettable standards

Structural Integrity:

- Assessment of the overall structural condition of the property.
- Identification and correction of any structural issues, such as cracks or subsidence.

Health and safety:

- Presence and functionality of smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors (where required).
- Ensuring safe electrical installations & appliances.
- Fire safety measures, including fire doors.
- Asbestos.
- Legionella control.

Sanitary conditions:

- Adequate and functional bathroom facilities.
- Proper waste disposal systems.

Heating and insulation:

- Functionality of heating systems.
- Adequate insulation to maintain a comfortable living environment.
- Efficient and safe ventilation.

Windows and doors:

- Window furniture.
- Cracked, blown, and damaged glazing.
- Clean, secure and watertight.
- Locks and lock changes.

General condition:

- Overall cleanliness and maintenance of the property.
- Clearance of personal items and rubbish.
- Decorations.

Security:

- Adequate locks on doors and windows.
- Measures to enhance the overall security of the property.

Woodwork/carpentry:

- Complete and secure skirting and architraves.
- Dry rot and timber decay.

Flooring:

- Safe and good condition.

We also shared the results of a recent benchmarking analysis conducted by Echelon's commercial team on 10 lettable standards, which identified common themes including structural integrity, windows and doors, flooring and heating, and insulation.

Attendees were then split into smaller groups in breakout rooms to discuss the purpose of lettable standards and what would happen if we got rid of them. There was a general consensus that it was important to have a minimum standard for a variety of important reasons, including:

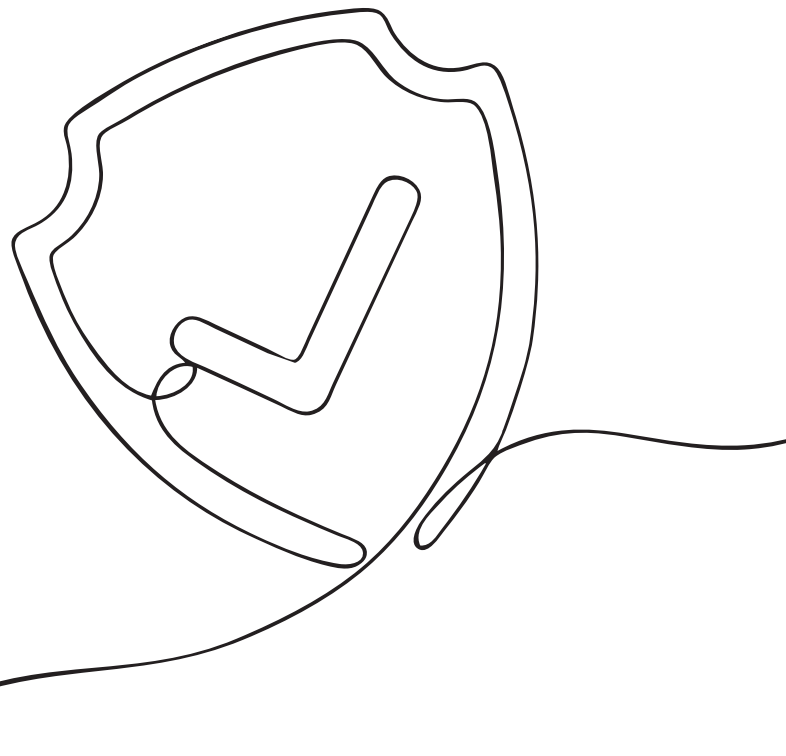
- Ensuring that we bring all empty homes to the same safe, secure and habitable standards.
- Providing budget consistency for landlords, enabling long-term financial planning.
- Offering certainty and consistency for residents.

Overall, it was agreed that housing providers have a social purpose to provide good quality, safe homes and other benefits include tenant wellbeing and satisfaction and reducing tenant/void turnover, as well as setting health and safety and quality standards. Also, well-maintained properties are less likely to require extensive repairs, reducing the overall cost of property management for housing providers, leading to longer-term savings.

In summary, attendees believe that the lettable standard is a useful and necessary tool, but it should be used flexibly to make decisions based on individual needs, local circumstances, and demand, rather than as an absolute.

Things to think about...

- How often do you review your void standard? Good practice dictates every two years as a minimum.
- Is your standard developed/reviewed with input from tenants/prospective tenants?
- How do your standards link back to your asset management strategy/business plan objectives?
- Whether standards can be flexed to be tailored to a particular area, archetype or similar localised approach.
- Can your standards be varied to adapt to specific circumstances – demand, tenant requirements, post-letting?
- Are prospective tenants aware of the standard before viewing?
- Do incoming tenants get the opportunity to “sign-off” against the standard?



Session 4: Joining up the dots

Joining up the dots explored how we can align all areas across an organisation to optimise the void period and meet the expectations set out in the new regulatory framework for social housing, introduced in April 2024.

Debbie Larner set the scene with an overview of the regulatory framework for social housing focusing specifically on the new Safety and Quality standard, which replaced the Home standard in April 2024. The standard is made up of five requirements:

- Quality of homes
- Decent Homes
- Health and safety
- Repairs, maintenance, and planned improvements
- Adaptations

It is important that landlords have an accurate, up-to-date and evidenced understanding of the condition of their homes – specifically in relation to stock quality and safety. The void period is a good opportunity to assess and update stock condition.

New regulatory expectations for registered providers:

- Landlords must maintain tenants' homes so that they are **safe and of a decent standard**. Where things go wrong, **complaints are handled effectively**, and things are put right.
- The relationship between tenants and landlords must be underpinned by **shared expectations of fairness and respect**, and a shared understanding of their respective rights and responsibilities.
- Landlords must demonstrate that they understand the **diverse needs of the communities** that they serve, and their services should reflect that.
- Tenants understand, use and have **confidence in the recourse** that they have to get problems resolved.
- Stakeholders have confidence that landlords' commitment to their tenants is underpinned by **effective consumer regulation**, whether that landlord is a housing association, council or for-profit provider.



Henrik von Bahr of Plentific discussed some of the current pressures on landlords, and the common challenges seen in voids management. These include the management of manual processes, a lack of visibility and traceability, inefficient voids and repair work, and no insight for improvement.

Henrik explained how Plentific's Void Manager module offers an efficient way to automate the voids process and assess analytics on individual voids projects. Plentific has worked with social housing providers across the sector to identify and implement solutions that aim to:

- Digitalise and streamline void processes.
- Track work progress with connected data.
- Manage the supply chain in a standardised way.
- Provide advanced analytics which can support overall business and financial performance.

Natalie Dwight, Maintenance Manager at L&Q, explained how the housing association started working with Plentific to manage its voids process. At that time L&Q had teams split up into different neighbourhoods. Each team tracked voids separately, worked to different objectives and targets and manual spreadsheets were being used which were inconsistent among teams and often not up to date.

Applying the new standards to empty homes management:

- Use the void period to update your stock condition data.
- Think about how to effectively use the void period to carry out planned improvements (if appropriate).
- With the emphasis on outcomes for tenants, think about what repairs could/should be done once the tenant has moved in.
- Measure resident satisfaction with the quality of the new home you provide and act where residents identify failings in the service.
- Involve your residents in the design delivery and scrutiny of your void services.
- Learn from the complaints that residents make about the experience of moving into their new home. Remember that complaints can identify systemic problems in service delivery that you need to address.

Using the Plentific platform, L&Q was able to eliminate silo working and multiple trackers, and demonstrate accountability, transparency and visibility, leading to a significant improvement in its void turnaround time. The platform also allows collaboration and communication between teams, enabling a robust, real-time understanding of progress. It acts as a checklist as activities are assigned and everyone involved, including contractors, has a clear oversight of the whole end-to-end process.



Session 4: Joining up the dots continued...

The session sparked much interest in the group and led to further conversations around data management and how it will play a key role in the future of voids management.

Current property management challenges for social landlords

Market conditions:

- Increasing interest rates.
- Regulatory pressures.
- Changing legislation.

Supply chain issues:

- Limited supply chains.
- Increasing costs.
- Lack of skilled labour.

Digitalisation

- Multiple systems.
- Inconsistent internal processes.
- Change management.

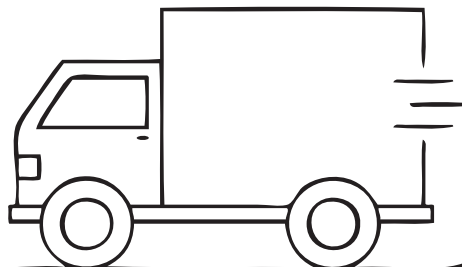
Data

- Fragmented data.
- Lack of real-time insights.
- Need for data-driven actions.

Discussion points:

- Are we measuring the right things on void performance? Do we need to take a step back and think about the longer-term condition of the home and the sustainability of the tenancy?
- How do we get all the different departments involved and identify common objectives – including lettings, housing management, voids and asset teams?
- How do we ensure that we have a “golden thread” of information about the condition of our stock?
- How do we ensure the integrity and quality of the data we hold?
- Are we moving to a more personalised approach where we have a tailored approach to what we provide for new tenants? And if this is the case, how do we cost it?

Rita Lad, Sales Director at Travis Perkins Managed Services (TPMS), explained how the company can streamline the voids management process and assist surveyors. TPMS provides surveyors with a pre-populated list, they input the materials they need, and TPMS delivers them on the first day of the void. This can help contractors and landlords minimise lost earnings and work in a more time-efficient way to manage their voids.



Session 5: Safe and decent homes

Safe and decent homes focused on how to make the most effective use of the void period.

Before we moved into the substantive content of the session, Sarah Davis, Senior Policy and Practice Officer at the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), set out the key proposals in the Government's consultation on reforms to social housing allocations. The consultation was seeking views on the following issues:

- The introduction of a United Kingdom (UK) connection test, to ensure that those with the closest connection to the UK are eligible for a social home.
- Mandating the following tests: local connection test, income test, false statement test, and tests for anti-social behaviour and terrorism offences.
- The introduction of a new ground for eviction for those who are convicted of terrorism offences, and implementation of a 'three strikes and you're out' policy for anti-social behaviour.

It was an important issue to discuss as changes to how social housing is allocated could have an impact on who is eligible for housing which could have a knock-on effect on how quickly housing providers can let empty homes.

Our next speaker was Darren Ypey, Co-founder and Director of TSM Void Energy Service, who outlined some of the challenges faced by landlords when dealing with energy suppliers. He talked through potential solutions to speed up the process, saving time and money.

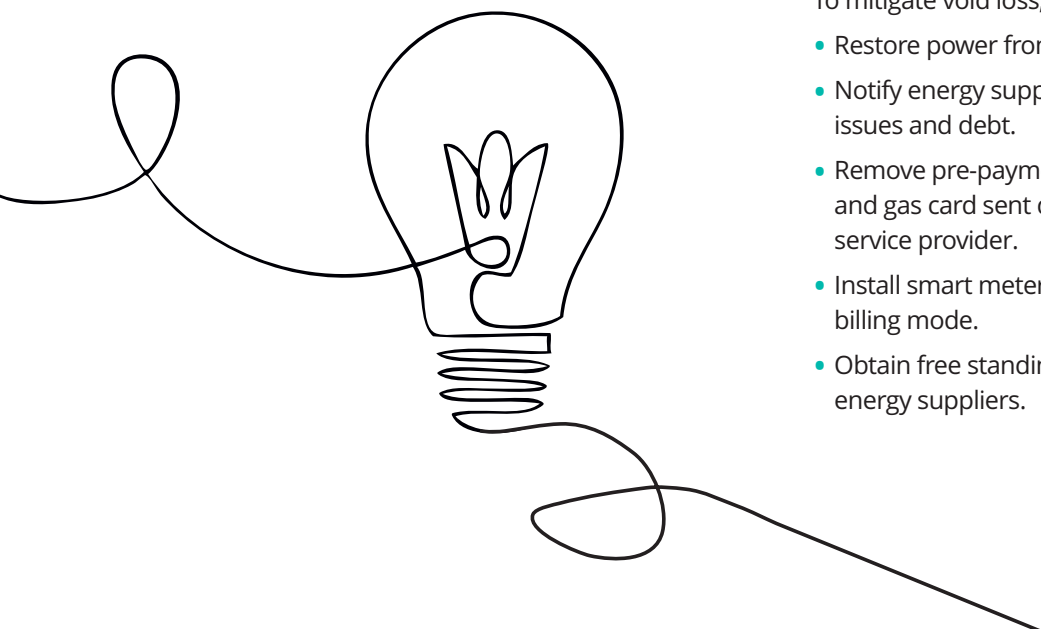
Services provided by energy service providers can include:

- Reset and Remote Token Issues (RTIs) for pre-payment debts with ALL UK energy suppliers, delivered to an address of your choice.
- Meter replacements with all UK energy suppliers.
- Smart meter installation in void properties.
- Online portals for informing suppliers of tenant changes.
- Monthly consolidated energy bills.
- Installation of 2-pole & 4-pole isolation switches.

He explained that social landlords "lose" £101m per year dealing with energy-related issues for empty properties, which cause delays in them being relet due to the time it can take to restore power, remove debt from pre-payment meters, deal with energy billing issues etc. Fundamentally, providers need to restore the energy on the first day of the void to enable the works to be started without any delay.

To mitigate void loss, it is important to:

- Restore power from faulty meters on the same day.
- Notify energy suppliers to remove energy billing issues and debt.
- Remove pre-payment debts with a new electric key and gas card sent directly from the void energy service provider.
- Install smart meters in void properties to credit billing mode.
- Obtain free standing charge and working credit from energy suppliers.



Session 5: Safe and decent homes continued...

Tony Cubitt, National Sales Director, Vericon Systems, talked about how remote monitoring and IoT sensor tech provides information that can ultimately be used to protect assets, determine risk levels and maintain compliance, as well as supporting landlords to provide better overall services and support to residents.

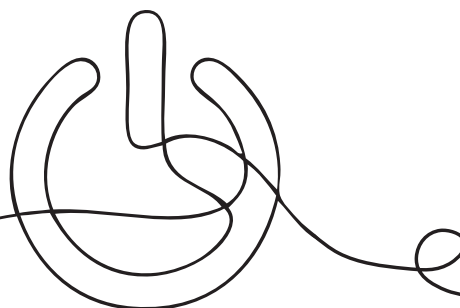
While the concept of understanding how a building is performing remotely is not new, it isn't adopted as frequently as it is across the commercial sector where it is more commonplace. If providers have stock over large geographical areas, it is the most realistic way to manage performance in both an efficient and effective way.

Tony highlighted the benefits of installing technology when a property is empty, including no access issues and less disruption for residents, incoming residents being more likely to be receptive to pre-installed tech, nipping future problems in the bud and a baseline, which can be used for future analytics and comparisons.

To gain real value from IoT and use it to drive change that will impact businesses, there needs to be an adoption policy. This is why using the void period as part of the planned technology adoption programme makes sense. The voids process is already a capital expenditure built into the housing programme where works are carried out without affecting residents and it's spread over a number of years. Eventually a turning point will be reached where the value outweighs the adoption rate.

Remote technology can be used to address issues around:

- Fuel poverty: using remote boiler control sensors and temperature monitors.
- Damp and mould: environmental condition monitors and humidity monitors.



The meeting ended with a breakout session on the best use of voids led by Richard Mardle, Client Relationship Director at Wates Group.

Attendees discussed how additional works such as EPC certification, full property inspections, stock condition surveys, decarb works and the installation of technology can be carried out when a property is empty.

They outlined potential barriers such as budget, lack of oversight, the varying commercial natures of contracts, Service Level Agreements and turnaround timescales to relet a property, and key safes and accessibility.

Finally, they discussed how those barriers can be overcome to provide a better value and more customer-centric service to residents. Solutions put forward included removing silo working, regular meetings attended by all departments, utilising consistent components that meet all necessary legislative requirements for all replacements, aligning with asset management and planned programmes, and ensuring that properties meet the Decent Homes Standard.

Discussion points:



What can realistically be done when a home is empty?

- EPC certification.
- Full inspection of a property/stock condition surveys.
- Consider decorating vouchers and floor coverings.
- Install sensors and remote monitoring as standard.
- Decarbonisation works.
- Consider whether garden requires maintenance.

What are the barriers to this happening?

- Lack of resources.
- Lack of budget.
- Lack of oversight.
- Varying commercial natures of contract – PPV/ SORs/Open Book etc.
- SLAs and turnaround timescales to relet a property.
- Key safes and accessibility.

How can we break down those barriers to ultimately provide a better value and more customer-centric service to our residents?

- Offer regular meetings for all departments to attend.
- Utilise consistent components for all replacements and ensure that all components meet the legislative requirements.
- Remove silo working.
- Ensure there is alignment with asset management and planned programmes.
- Ensure properties meet Decent Homes Standard.

Session 6: Future proofing empty homes

The last session in our Empty Homes Programme focused on future proofing homes during the void period – specifically how we approach aids and adaptations.

Our first speaker, Sheila Mackintosh, Housing Consultant, focused on how registered providers can adopt a best practice approach to aids and adaptations in empty homes.

Concentration of disabled people in social housing

- 25% of all disabled people in the UK live in social housing (34% of all wheelchair users).
- Over half of households have someone with a disability.
- 20% of new lettings are to households with specific disability-related housing needs.

There are a number of constraints – recognising that while an efficient turnaround is important, we need more adapted and accessible homes. Therefore, we need to accept that some delays are necessary. There are sources of funding available – these do vary between housing associations and local authorities and there are differences between how funds are administered across local authority areas.

Sources of funding for aids and adaptations

Using the voids process:

- Pre-void inspection – note any aids and adaptations already in place.
- Identify suitable resident - who will benefit from the adaptations?
- If no one identified – decide whether to remove or leave in situ (this will depend on appropriateness, quality, condition etc).
- Not already adapted – consider whether this will be a good property to adapt.

- Repairs to existing aids and adaptation – where appropriate.
- Information - make sure correct information about adaptations is on the asset management database once void work is completed.

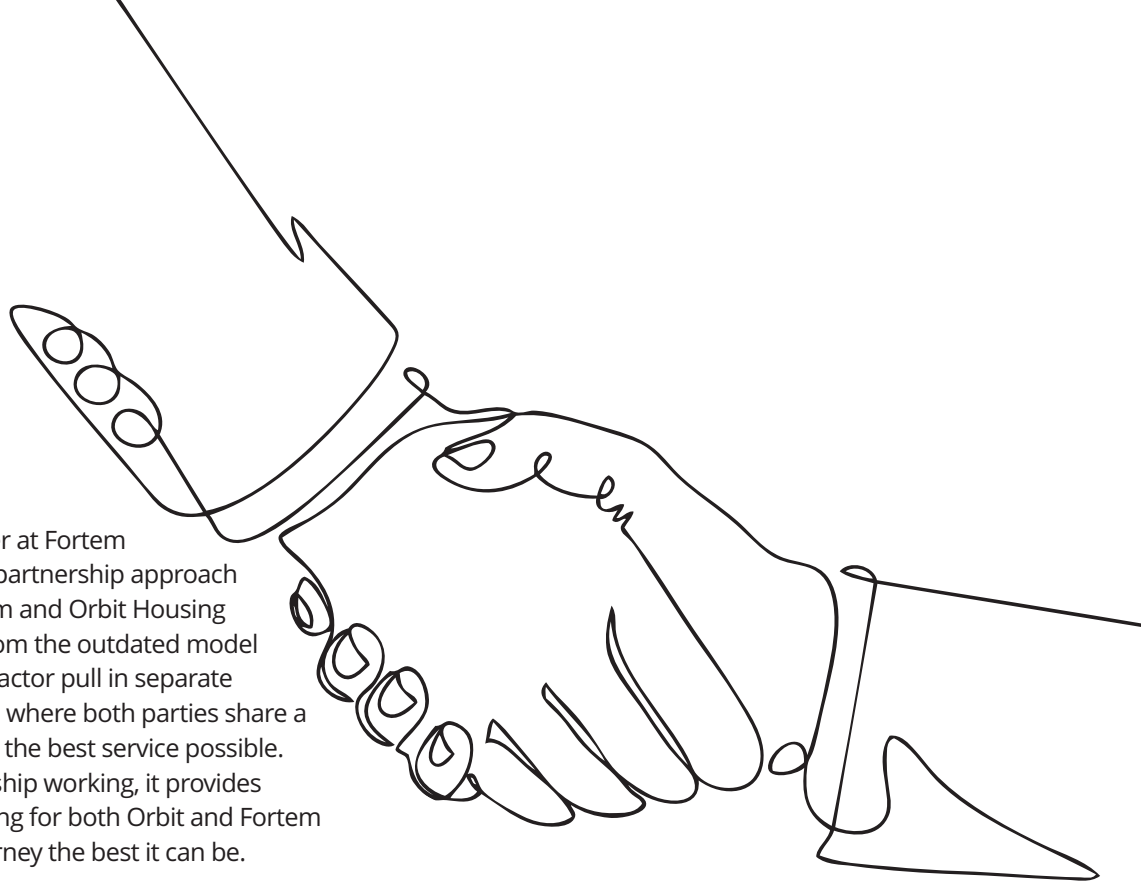
As a sector, we need to get better at the design of aids and adaptations to create the important sense of home, to remove stigma, and to address targeted anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Finally, Sheila highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach:

- Strategy for properly funding adaptations.
- Work with local authority re external funding, policy and practice.
- A strategy to improve design.
- Talk to suppliers re better products and prices.
- Accessible housing register/service to match tenants to properties.
- Properly updated property register.
- Outcomes measurement, standards and benchmarking.
- Involve disabled residents.

Trends in aids and adaptations

- Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) allocation has more than doubled since 2015 to £623m in 2023/24.
- 37% of DFGs (2021/22) go to housing association tenants on average.
- There has been a decline in the number of adapted homes in the housing association sector from 21% to 18%.
- The percentage of housing association tenants with a long-standing condition that lack the adaptations they need has risen from 50% to 56% in the last five years.



Tom Knight, Voids Manager at Fortem Solutions, focused on the partnership approach developed between Fortem and Orbit Housing Group. It has moved on from the outdated model where the client and contractor pull in separate directions to a partnership where both parties share a common goal of providing the best service possible. With this ethos of partnership working, it provides efficiencies and streamlining for both Orbit and Fortem to make the customer journey the best it can be.

Key principles include:

- Understanding mutual expectations and needs of each partner to provide the best service for prospective tenants.
- Consultation between client and contractor around changes to void standards and commercial models to lead to better delivery and home standards for tenants.
- Willingness to pilot new technologies solutions to outdated practices.

Finally, the delegates were invited to create their own best practice voids process. The group were asked to think about:

- When does the empty homes period start?
- What determines a 'successful' void period? And for who?
- What does a holistic approach to the process look like for all the stakeholders?
- How do we remain customer centric?
- How do we minimise silo working?
- How do we measure tenancy sustainment, independence and customer happiness?
- How can we make the process quick, smooth and transactional, but still make sure that our service is bespoke and personal?

Discussion points:

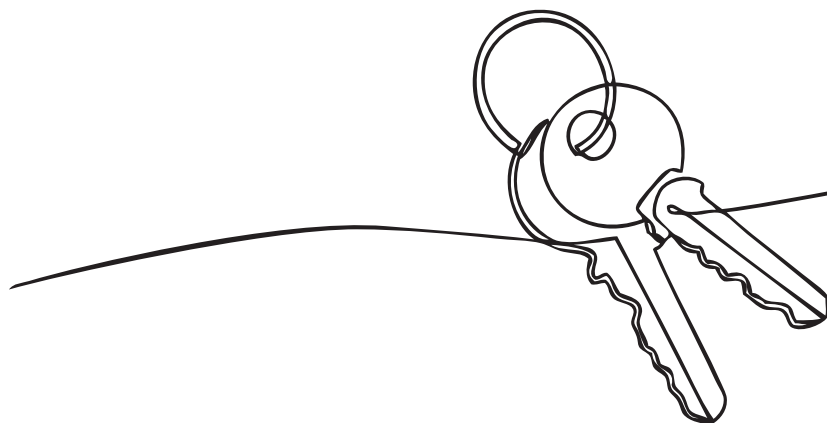
- Voids should commence from the date at which the previous tenant gives notice.
- At the point of a void, best practice would be to align and communicate to the various departments and inform them of the void.
- Cost of temporary accommodation is becoming an increasing area of concern with upcoming voids.
- An effective partnership is essential to the void turnaround and standard.
- All notices and allocations should be communicated and appropriately managed.
- Ensure that any void works address the root cause of problems, rather than symptoms.
- Incorporate a servicing programme which aligns with the asset management database.
- Consider tracking tenancy sustainment following on from void properties being tenanted.

Conclusion

Over the course of the last six months, we have considered the empty homes process in detail.

There were some common themes which came up regularly:

- Using the pre-termination time effectively both to co-ordinate the approach, lining up a prospective tenant, assessing works required etc.
- Understanding the needs and circumstances of the incoming tenants so the empty home can be adapted to meet needs and/or expectations – e.g. flooring, aids and adaptations.
- Ensuring that you hold good, robust data on your stock – especially in light of the new regulatory requirements.
- Having a comprehensive suite of performance measures (KPIs) which are collectively agreed and communicated across the organisation.
- Sourcing new technological solutions to support working, planning and tracking so that each stage of the process can be monitored and managed effectively.
- The importance of a regular (weekly) coordination and liaison meeting involving all the departments in the empty homes process.
- Making sure that the lettable standard is regularly reviewed (where possible involving tenants/prospective tenants).



We have a relationship with home that shapes who we are and how we connect with the wider world. A home shapes our identity and how we relate to others. A safe and stable home is of immense social value.



More about AMIP



The Empty Homes Programme was delivered by EIP through its unique best practice and networking club AMIP.

AMIP brings together people from across the housing sector to share their expertise, with client and supplier membership options, and members include housing providers, contractors, suppliers and wider stakeholders such as CIH and Tpas.

It aims to drive innovation by focusing on key topics and to continue to create improvements for all members by sharing operational and strategic best practice and high-quality collateral.

The quarterly AMIP meetings feature high-profile speakers, covering topical issues such as equality, diversity and inclusion, succession planning, decarbonisation, fuel poverty, procurement, mental health and wellbeing, social value, customer engagement and alternative delivery models.

AMIP members also have access to a regularly updated calendar of groups/programmes focused on topical issues such as wellbeing and competency and conduct, as well as a range of training options and webinars.

Not a member yet?

Email amip@echelonip.co.uk or visit the EIP website www.echelonip.co.uk for more information.

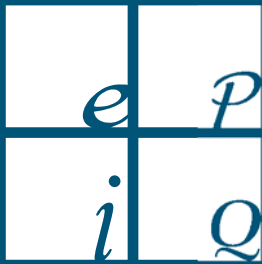


Echelon Group

Echelon Group

Echelon Improvement Partnerships is part of the Echelon Group, which also comprises Echelon Consultancy, Pretium Frameworks, Quantum Training and E2EX.





Echelon Group

Find out more about our services via our websites and social media channels:

 echelonconsultancy.co.uk

 [@echelonltd](https://twitter.com/echelonltd)

 [Echelon Consultancy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/echelon-consultancy)

 pretium.co.uk

 [@pretium_1](https://twitter.com/pretium_1)

 [Pretium Frameworks Ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/pretium-frameworks-ltd)


 echelonip.co.uk

 [@EchelonIP](https://twitter.com/EchelonIP)

 [Echelon Improvement Partnerships](https://www.linkedin.com/company/echelon-improvement-partnerships)

 quantumtraining.co.uk

 [@Quantumltd](https://twitter.com/Quantumltd)

 [Quantum Training Ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/quantum-training-ltd)