



BEST VALUE FUNDAMENTAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

FOR

EMPTY PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

INDEX

PART ONE

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

1. An introduction to the Review and service
2. Scope of the Review
3. Function Aims and Objectives
4. Statutory Aspects
5. Discretionary Aspects
6. Who Provides the Service?
7. How is the Service Currently Provided?
8. How does the Service contribute to the Council's Corporate Objectives?
9. How does the Service contribute to Sustainable Development?
10. Preliminary and Key issues
11. Recent Audit Reports and Recommendations
12. Project Leader and Review Team Members
13. A Corporate Approach
14. Sheffield Hallam Demand Study

SECTION 2 BASELINE STATEMENT

1. History of the Service and Service Standards
2. Financial Information
3. Human Resource Information
4. Internal Key Issues
5. Operational Information
6. Customer Base and User Profiles
7. Customer Perception and Satisfaction
8. Complaints Received and Causes of Complaints
9. Existing Performance Information
10. Cost/quality Comparison
11. External trend data

12. National and Local Indicators
13. Quality Systems/Initiatives
14. Benchmarking groups
15. Working with Allocations, Housing Management and Counter Staff
16. Competitor Information or Information about companies providing a similar service; private, public or voluntary sector

SECTION 3 CONSULT

1. History
2. Prospective Tenants
3. Refusal of Tenancy
4. New Tenants
5. Existing Tenants
6. Staff, Contractor and Council Member Consultation
7. Contractor
8. Survey Results
9. Developing Consultation in the future
10. Summary

SECTION 4 COMPARE

1. Performance Monitoring
2. Policies and Procedures
3. Beacon Council
4. National Housing Providers
5. Local Housing Providers
6. Termination of Tenancy
7. Repairs
8. Security

Empty Properties due for demolition. Long-term Empty Properties

Short-term Empty Properties

9. Policy
10. Staff Training

SECTION 5 CHALLENGE

1. Internal Empty Property Review Team
2. Renewal of Baths
3. Plasterwork
4. Electrical Test and Check
5. Gas Checks and Landlord's Certificates
6. Renew Kitchen Units
7. Decoration
8. Cleaning
9. Standard of Inspection
10. Work on Occupation
11. Security

12. Relationship between Client and Contractor
13. A Long-term Perspective
14. External Challenge
15. Internal Audit Review
16. Riverside Group

-

-

SECTION 6 COMPETE

1. Introduction
2. Competition Exercises and Market Testing
3. The Riverside Group
4. Assessing Competitiveness Stage by Stage

-

-

SECTION 7 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

-

SECTION 8 ACTION PLAN

APPENDICES

1. Empty Property Procedure
2. Minimum standards of Empty Properties

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

-

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 An Introduction to the Review and the Service

The review was initially entitled "A Best Value Review of Void Procedure".

A "void" is the housing term applied to an empty council house. In the pursuit of accessibility and the use of plain English we have tried to amend all our documentation which previously referred to "voids" or "void management" to "empty properties" and "empty property management".

The review is based on the function of the Repairs and Improvements team's role in managing empty properties. The relationship between them and other sections of the department such as Allocations and Housing Management is also considered where the teams have to work together on the process.

How to implement Best Value has been the topic of many debates since its implementation. We have tried to base the review on guidance issued corporately that has given consistency to the review in both structure and mechanisms for reporting and monitoring.

In simple terms we have interpreted Best Value as the use of consultation and comparison to challenge the competitiveness of the function. Even more simply, the review's aim is to improve the service. Our focus is on outcomes and not processes.

The proposed Large-scale Voluntary Stock Transfer to the Riverside Group by December 2002 has an obvious impact on what can be achieved within the Best Value regime. The aspect of empty property management reviewed here is only a small part of the Housing Department's service. The decision to transfer the stock was based on elements of competitiveness that the review explores. It is not however realistic to imagine that the review will have an impact on the process of stock transfer. It should however provide a useful insight into the empty property management aspect of the current service, effecting improvements prior to transfer and contributing to the restructure of the Housing Department and procedure should the transfer go ahead.

1.2 Scope of the Review

For the purposes of this review the empty property management period has been defined as the period between the tenant submitting notification of termination of their tenancy (or handing in keys without notice or abandoning the property) to the date the repairs surveyor assesses the property as being ready to let.

Originally how the property was then allocated to a tenant was to be considered separately in year 2002/03 of the Best Value review process. The issues raised during this review will be the starting point for the best value Allocation review. Similarly, the planned and responsive repair services were to be considered in 2001/02 and 2002/03 respectively. It was recognised that this was not ideal, This was not ideal, however at that time the corporate organisation of best value reviews was the subject of a service-value driven process which brought with it a number of inherent problems, particularly on linked or cross-cutting subjects

With hindsight it is abundantly clear that the empty property review needed to be more closely tied with the allocations and lettings review. However the decision at the time was to separate the two, largely it has to be said because of a management assessment that the latter review should be

deferred until the outcome of the "DTLR's Quality & Choice" housing green paper proposals were clearer.

However, the Authority's approach to Best Value itself has since been reviewed and the proposed schedule changed from one that is service based to one that is thematic.

The following procedures are considered as part of the review:

- The liaison between the Management Section and the Repairs Team when notice is given of termination of a tenancy.
- The action taken prior to termination of tenancy (currently, a pre-termination inspection).
- The action taken when the termination of tenancy procedure has not been followed i.e. abandonment and absence of 28-day notice.
- The liaison between the Management Section and the Repairs Team when a tenancy is terminated and keys are returned.
- The process by which necessary work on an empty property is determined.
- The process by which necessary work on an empty property is procured.
- The management and monitoring of empty properties, which are undergoing work with the contractor.
- The hand-over and inspection of empty properties on completion of work by the contractor.
- The process by which the empty property is passed for allocation.
- Liaison between the Repairs Team and the Allocations Team during the period when the property is not available to let.
- The security and management of empty properties both undergoing work with a view to letting and those on the Raffles estate which will be demolished.
- The approach to be taken with empty properties on low demand estates.

1.3 Function Aims and Objectives

The key aims of the empty property procedure are:

- To effectively prioritise all properties that become empty by categorising them into immediate relet, medium term relet and difficult to let.
- To ensure that empty properties are turned around for reletting within the prioritising procedure as soon as possible.
- To achieve value for money in both the quantity and quality of work carried out and through the efficiency of the procedure itself.
- To ensure that expenditure on empty property management is effectively controlled and monitored.
- To ensure that empty properties are made available for let at a high standard to satisfy prospective tenants.
- To ensure that empty properties are not detrimental to the quality of life on estates.

1.4 Statutory Aspects

The council has a statutory requirement to ensure that its properties are made available to let at an acceptable standard. This is the Fitness Standard referred to in the 1985 Housing Act and amendments. The council have also taken into account of the DTLR's "Decent Home Standard" introduced in July 2001 and with which all our stock is to due o comply by 2010.

1.5 Discretionary Aspects

The service is discretionary in the respect that it is a management function that could be externalised.

1.6 Who Provides the Service?

The Housing Department currently provides the service through the Repairs and Improvement Section of the Department. The works contracts are currently held by Carlisle Works (Carlisle City Council's contractor), excepting the gas repairs and maintenance contract which is held by NorthWest Heating.

During the period of the review the options available regarding changing the provider of the service have altered. The City Council has chosen Riverside Group as a preferred partner in the pursuit of Large-scale Voluntary Stock Transfer. If the transfer goes ahead, the management of the empty property process will cease to be carried out by the Council and instead be carried out by Riverside or its subsidiary. If the transfer does not go ahead, the resulting continued depletion of the Housing Revenue Account would almost certainly require a major change in how the departmental service is provided at a fundamental level. The transfer, or a decision not to transfer, is likely to happen before the end of 2002. The intervening period is not long enough to contract the service to another provider, even if this was an appropriate recommendation. Riverside have given a commitment to the Housing staff and the Works Department that all jobs are secure and any existing measured term contracts will continue until March 2004.

1.7 How is the Service Currently Provided?

When a tenant gives 28 days notice of termination a repair surveyor inspects the property within 14 days (pre-termination inspection). During this visit the surveyor establishes basic information regarding how much work will need to be done to the property while it is empty and also any repair work which the tenant is responsible for. The gas and electricity suppliers are also noted on this visit. Following this initial visit the surveyor will liaise with the allocation officer and the property's lettable criteria will be established. If it is an immediate or medium term relet a further visit and more detailed inspection is carried out within 3 days of the actual termination (empty property inspection). If the property is determined as difficult to let no action is taken at this stage. Written instruction of the work required is passed to the contractor within 2 days of this visit. The length of time the property is with the contractor is based on the cost of this work. Checks on wiring and gas supplies are carried out if necessary. All properties are inspected on return from the contractors for quality and value for money. If this is found to be in order, they are passed to the Allocations Section as ready to let.

In the case of an abandonment of the property detailed checks are carried out to ensure that the former tenant does not intend to return. Once Housing Officers have investigated the situation and are satisfied there is no intention to return a Notice to Quit is served on the property and the property is repossessed on expiry of the Notice. The Repairs Section begins the empty property process as they would do from the termination date on a regular empty property.

In the event of the tenant handing in the house keys without offering any notice period (surrender of tenancy) then usually four weeks notice is still taken. This will be dependent on the circumstances and if no indication of a forwarding address is given, a Notice to Quit may be served. On expiry of either Notice the Repairs Section begins the empty property process as they would do from the termination date on a regular empty property.

1.8 How does the Service contribute to the Council's Corporate Objectives?

The principal corporate objective to which this service contributes is to "satisfy housing need". The service provides a dual role in facilitating this. By providing the service efficiently it allows costs through rental loss to be kept to a minimum meaning more money can be invested in stock and services. Secondly by providing quality repairs and improvements to the Council's housing stock it maintains the availability of stock for relet where appropriate.

The service also contributes to the following corporate key aims:

- "Protect and improve our environment" by ensuring stocks' energy efficiency measures are improved

- "Reduce crime and disorder" by improving security of the properties and ensuring they are well secured when empty
- "Improve social well-being" by making the properties more attractive places to live
- "Spend the community's money wisely" by ensuring funds are spent efficiently.

1.9 How does the Service Contribute to Sustainable Development?

Improvements to the stock during the empty property period can ensure that people are satisfied in their new homes helping communities to stabilise.

Physical improvements to the empty properties' energy efficiency rating can help to protect the environment.

1.10 Preliminary and Key Issues

Benchmarking indicates that we are under-performing on empty property management. We are currently part of the Historic Cities and Northern Consortium benchmarking groups in addition to National rankings. The indicators that are used to benchmark generally reflect both the empty property period while works are undertaken and the period of allocation. Because demand is low in pockets of the Carlisle area, allocation can often take a substantial period of time. It is hoped that research will provide a more accurate picture of how the review period contributes to the Authority's performance.

Empty Property Procedure in the Department was already documented which provided a starting point for procedural review and comparisons (the updated version of the procedure is provided as Appendix).

Little or no consultation had previously been done with tenants specifically on this aspect of the service.

Although staff working on the management of empty properties are experienced, their views on the service had not been sought. Staff training needs are addressed through systematic personal reviews. There were doubts about how effectively this process addressed empty property management policy and procedural implementation.

The Sheffield Hallam Demand Study concluded that demand in the area is principally area based. Other aspects which contribute to demand such as whether properties physically meet prospective tenants' expectations and what impact the way we manage long term empty properties has on neighbourhoods' desirability are addressed but will be explored in more detail by this review.

1.11 Recent Audit Reports and Recommendations

Internal Audit conducted a "Value for Money and Performance Review Study: Inspection of Housing Repairs" which was presented to Housing and Care Services Committee on the 7th of October 1999 (HC 119/99).

In summary, recommendations were made in the areas of:

- The effects of recentralisation of staff.
- The way work is ordered.
- Avoiding duplication.

With particular reference to empty property procedure recommendations were made on:

- Establishing clear guidelines as to officer roles and responsibilities in the process.
- Clarifying the priority system mechanism the surveyor utilised when deciding the turn-around time required for a property according to its potential letting time and the funding available.

These recommendations have been effected.

1.12 Project Leader and Review Team Members

Project Leaders:

John Hughes, Manager: Repairs and Improvements

Sean P. Parnaby Assistant Manager Repairs and Improvement

Core Review Team Members:

Brian Durham, Manager: Finance and Support Services

David Gillon, Senior Housing Repairs Surveyor

Marion Gordon, Development Officer

External Challenger

Scott Harrington, Hyde Harrington

1.13 A Corporate Approach

The Review has been based on corporate guidance within the City Council's Best Value Fundamental Performance Review Handbook and the Best Value Performance Plan 2000/01. The reporting structures through which the review has been monitored are detailed therein. Although not attached as an appendix a copy of the handbook is available for reference purposes.

1.14 Sheffield Hallam Demand Study

Sheffield Hallam University completed a demand study in the summer of 2000. This study encompassed both the public and private rented sector and other tenures across the whole of the housing stock in Carlisle. Although not attached as an appendix a copy of the full Report is available for reference purposes.

SECTION 2 BASELINE STATEMENT

This section provides a positional statement of the service at the beginning of the review. The sections 3 and 4 (Compare and Consult) will establish further information about the service that is needed in order to challenge the competitiveness of the service.

2.1 History of the Service and Service Standards

At the time of the Local Government Review in 1974, Carlisle City Council had a housing stock in excess of 14,000 properties. Through Right to Buy Legislation and some small-scale demolition on the Raffles Estate the remaining stock at the end of March 2001 was 8,003.

Demand for Council housing has dropped dramatically over the last decade and the Sheffield Hallam Demand Study was commissioned to provide a background against how falling demand could be tackled.

10 years ago, nearly all of the estates had lengthy waiting lists and the Department operated with a rationing mentality. Demand problems were only apparent in the Raffles estate and large amounts of Estate Action, followed by Single Regeneration Budget funding was being invested in capital improvements there.

Today presents a very different picture. Nearly all areas experience some letting difficulties with certain property types and there is an increasing number of long-term empty properties.

These factors have necessitated changes in both how we approach the allocation of our properties and also how we manage the empty properties on our estates.

Work to empty properties has always been contained within a comprehensive Measured Term Contract incorporating responsive repairs and planned maintenance including the annual painting programme. There are currently three contracts covering the housing stock which are let on a three year rolling programme with a built-in two year extension. The City's contractor, Carlisle Works, operate all three contracts.

NorthWest Heating currently holds the contract for the repair and maintenance of gas appliances.

The procedure for dealing with empty properties has remained largely unchanged over the years with Housing Repairs Surveyors vetting the property, completing a list of repairs to be carried out and instructing Carlisle Works to carry out the works.

Until recently there were no set timescales to complete the work, although Carlisle Works were expected to treat all empty properties as a priority, regardless of the extent of the repairs to be carried out either by volume or cost or the demand for the property.

This has been addressed through the contracts and procedures with a range of initiatives introduced to improve the overall performance in turning over empty properties including agreed time-scales by value of work content which have been determined in conjunction with Carlisle Works.

In addition, to address the specific needs of the empty property procedure, a sub-group was set up in July 2000 to investigate in detail all aspects of the service. This group initially comprised of officers from Housing, Carlisle Works, Allocations, the Department of Environment and Development, and Internal Audit and met on a monthly basis until June 2001. The remit of the group when formed was to consider the transfer of the Empty Property Repairs Surveyors to the Contractor, Carlisle Works, to eliminate duplication, reduce costs and speed up the empty property procedure.

The possibility of staff reorganisation was considered, though not recommended. The group introduced a letting standard and improvements to the way the process is managed internally including integration of computer systems, clearer lines of communication throughout the process and allocation of responsibilities for the various stages of the procedure. The outcomes of this group are discussed in more length within the challenge section.

Although not attached as an appendix, minutes are available on request.

As part of the continuous improvement to the empty property service, a second group comprising Housing staff and Works staff was formed in July 2001 to advance the progress made by the initial group with the specific task of dealing with operational issues and the standards of empty properties. The monthly meetings will continue to make continuous improvements to the service delivery and issues raised during these meetings are dealt with in more detail in the Challenge Section.

The service operated centrally until 1991 when it was extensively decentralised to area housing offices. Repairs surveyors were patch-based during this period and generic on responsive,

planned and empty property repairs. Managers of the services were also generic, dealing with housing management and repairs issues, though specialist management at a Principal Officer level was maintained. The service was recentralised (as part of a departmental review necessitated by falling balances) in 1999. The repairs and improvement section became specialist, as did its responsive and empty property functions. The planned work is still shared according to its nature, though it is predominantly managed by the empty property staff.

2.2 Financial Information

Expenditure on Repairs and Improvement functions accounts for the most substantial spend in the department.

The original department Best Value Plan, broken down by service against allocations, estimates expenditure on the empty property function at 12 % of the total budget making it the third largest service in terms for expenditure.

2.3 Human Resource Information

The Housing Repairs and Improvements Section operates from a central base to deliver the service.

The Manager of Repairs and Improvements is responsible for the section, including responsive, planned and empty property repairs, supported by an Assistant Manager. There is a dedicated team of Repairs Surveyors headed by a Senior Surveyor dealing with all empty properties within the housing stock. The Empty Property Repairs Surveyor Team is also supported by a team of 6 No. Repairs Assistants who, as part of their overall duties, undertake the administrative tasks associated with the procedure.

- Manager: Repairs and Improvements 1No.
- Assistant Manager: Repairs and Improvements 1No.
- Senior Surveyor 1 No.
- Empty Property Repairs Surveyors 5 No.

(There are 4 No. Full Time Equivalent

And 2 No. 0.5 Full Time Equivalent)

A timesheet exercise was carried out in 1999 when the repairs service was decentralised. Excluding Administration and Support Services, this resulted in an estimation of a total of only 1.6% of departmental (i.e. including housing management, allocation, counter staff etc.) officer time being dedicated to the repair of empty properties. An estimate of 25.42% was made for responsive repairs, 3.2% on the painting programme, 4.36% on planned work, 2.66% on improvements and 0.7% on other related work. Both the number of empty properties and the security problems posed by the empty properties have increased since then.

A corporate structure is in place for personal development and training needs assessment. Bi-annual Personal Development Interviews and Team Improvement Reviews are carried out. Staff discuss their training needs in the Personal Development Interviews with their line managers.

2.4 Internal Key Issues

There is no policy regarding how we manage empty properties though the procedures are well documented and have already been referred to.

Political direction has not been sought or proffered with direct regard to the balance between improving the quality of the properties we let against reducing costs.

Should it go ahead, stock transfer will have a substantial impact on the empty property process in terms of how much can be spent on improving properties, as they become empty.

The management of long term empty properties needs to be considered as part of our strategic approach to tackling low demand and demolition programmes.

2.5 Operational Information

The repair team is based in a portacabin behind the Civic Centre.

Access to the service is provided by the following means:

- By a freephone service during office hours
- By telephone out of hours via an emergency number
- Face to face with generic Civic Centre Housing Counter staff based in the Civic centre during office hours (disabled access)
- By post to the Civic Centre
- By e-mail to a generic enquiry box
- Repair surveyors are all accessible by mobile telephones and staff use voice-mail.

The Orchard computer system is used to manage the empty property process and is accessible by the Works Department and Allocations Section as well as repairs staff.

2.6 Customer Base and User Profiles

The Health Action Zone and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000) have carried out profiling on a ward basis.

The wards containing low demand estates generally have higher rankings in both indices, though because of the different indicators used, positions are not consistent.

The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions profile ranks 6 Carlisle wards in the Cumbrian top 40:

- Upperby 13
- Botcherby 20
- Morton 26
- Currock 36
- Harraby 39
- Belle Vue (inc. Raffles) 40

All of these estates show signs of low demand for certain house-types. The Morton estate's ranking reflects the high proportion of elderly people living on the estate – there is an over-supply of elderly persons accommodation on the estate, but it remains popular as a preferred area.

The Health Action Zone profile, which only covers North Cumbria, ranks 5 Carlisle wards in the top 20:

Botcherby

Upperby

Belle Vue

Morton

Arthuret

2.7 Customer Perception and Satisfaction

No customer consultation had been done prior to the review on either the perception of or satisfaction with the service directly.

A waiting/transfer list survey was carried out in January 1999. It was largely geared towards informing the allocation procedure but some of the feedback reflected on the empty property period.

The survey asked people who had been offered properties if they were not happy with choices offered to say why not. From a base of 37 people, the following comments were made:

The state of the flat we were offered was appalling / Area and condition of flat on offer / Smelling and dirty, rooms too small / Accommodation appeared damp, graffiti on outside walls, unkempt appearance

Some general information is available regarding how satisfied tenants are with their quality of life, the quality of the departmental service and satisfaction with the standard of repairs.

The Sheffield Hallam Demand Study indicated that many tenants (94%) are happy with the places they live.

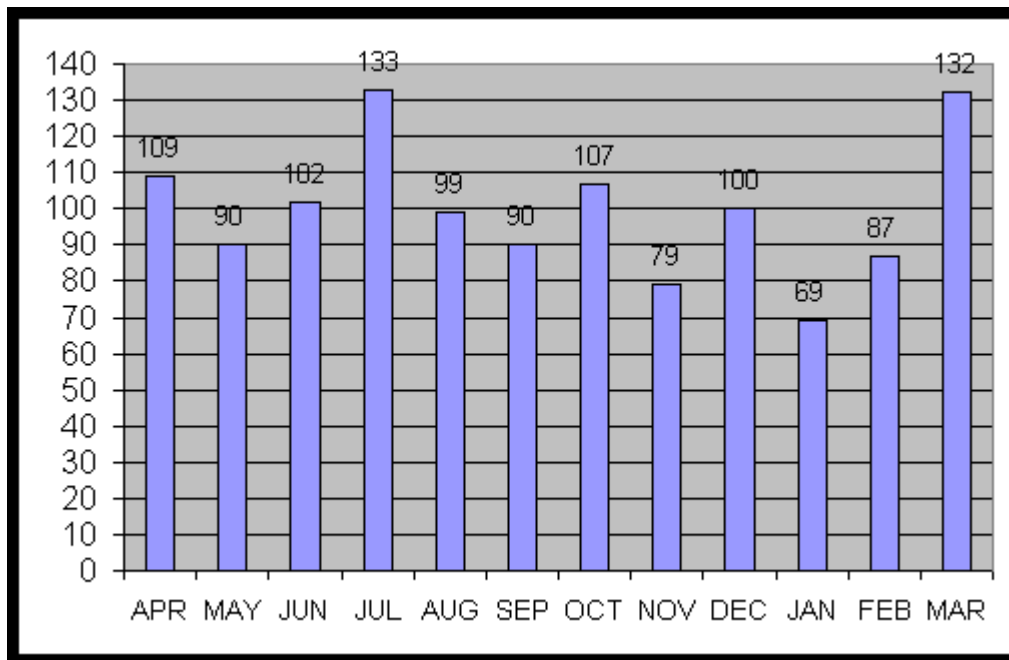
2.8 Complaints Received and Causes of Complaints

No corporate complaints have been received regarding the empty property service over the last 2 years.

Complaints are received at local levels that are normally investigated by the Repairs Surveyor. No records are kept of these complaints.

2.9 Existing Performance Information

In the year to 31 March 2001 the Repairs and Improvements Section turned over 1,197 empty properties. Table 1 shows the number of empty properties on a month by month basis.

**TABLE 1**

Currently timescales within the overall empty property procedure are not monitored other than the performance of the Contractor, Carlisle Works on their ability to return empty properties ready-to-let within the agreed timescales.

2.10 Cost/quality comparison

No cost or quality comparison has previously been made. The Housemark scheme may provide a better indication of this, but we will first need to have our own benchmarking data validated before being allowed, to participate in the system.

2.11 External trend data

The problems affecting estates that are brought about by low demand and marginalisation are occurring nationally. Estates are rarely seen as the preferred choice of individuals – most people who have alternatives take them.

Government restrictions on council borrowing mean that nationally the council stock is ageing and stock condition is deteriorating.

2.12 National and local indicators

No national or local performance indicators are produced relating to this period.

The national performance indicator BVPI 68 relates to the empty property period and the letting period:

BV 68	Average relet times for dwellings let in the previous financial year (days).
-------	--

It is the only national housing indicator that is subject to a top quartile requirement (25 days).

Our performance on this indicator is poor.

Our local indicator LP 68 differentiates between the letting times for properties requiring major and minor repairs:

--	--

LP 68	<p>The average time taken to relet properties for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Minor Repairs b. Major Repairs
-------	---

2.13 Quality systems/initiatives

Carlisle City Council was awarded "Investors in People" status in 2000.

2.14 Benchmarking groups

The authority is a member of several benchmarking groups.

Information is currently being collated for the Chartered Institute of Housing's Benchmarking Internet site, "Housemark". This benchmarking facility is likely to be at the forefront of developments in the field and should allow us to access considerable information.

The Northern Consortium of Housing Authorities issued a benchmarking report, of which Carlisle was part, in November 2000. This year only National Indicators were used, though the scheme will be developed to include local ones.

The Historic Cities group is based on like authorities developed through CIPFA statistics. The membership of the group is fairly relaxed and the level of input from member authorities varies. Because of the small sample, some figures vary widely.

The Housing Department also benchmarks informally against the other Cumbrian Authorities, except where stock transfer makes it inappropriate.

2.15 Working with Allocations, Housing Management and Counter Staff

As outlined under the heading "How the service is provided" in the introduction, other sections of the department are involved in throughout the process of turning over an empty property.

Housing Management or counter staff will usually take or serve Notice on a property. Allocations staff assess its lettable in the first instance and will offer it to prospective tenants. Housing Management staff may be made aware of problems on signing tenants up and counter staff may have to deal with queries throughout the process.

Many of these functions were already documented within the empty property procedure at the beginning of the review (not all) but what was not clear was how smoothly communications ran in practice, nor how aware staff were of the actual procedure.

2.16 Competitor information, or information about companies providing a similar service; private, public or voluntary sector

At the beginning of the review no assessment had been made of the services provided by similar organisations, public or private and this was clearly an area which had to be tackled when applying the comparative aspect of the review.

SECTION 3 CONSULT

3.1 History

Historically there has been no intensive consultation of tenants, partners or staff regarding the management of empty properties by the Housing Department.

It would appear that Carlisle City Council has not been alone in this failing. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Housing Research Summary Number 147 on Tenant Participation states:

"Overall there is less tenant involvement in activities such as voids management, arrears management and allocations and lettings..."

At a neighbourhood level performance and targets are reported to Tenants and Residents Associations on a monthly basis along with other information with regards to planned and responsive repairs. Tenant and Residents groups are encouraged to give feedback or request further information. However there has been no pro-active consultation on empty properties. Similarly, while changes in procedure have resulted from suggestions made by staff and partners, their input has not been actively sought.

The consultation phase of this Best Value Review therefore provided an excellent opportunity to develop our performance. The key aims of this phase of the review were to:

- Establish what tenants, staff, contractors and Council Members think of the service
- Generate ideas from tenants and staff of ways to improve the service
- Ensure that mechanisms for ongoing, meaningful consultation are put in place

Because there are many aspects to the review and many stakeholders, the potential for consultation was wide. This has been recognised and efforts have been made to ensure that the consultation undertaken is relevant, focussed and conducive to producing easy and honest responses.

In all cases, tenants were offered entry into a prize draw for gift vouchers and, where appropriate, a pre-paid envelope was provided to encourage participants to return the questionnaire.

It is recognised that the emphasis on postal surveys is not ideal because it restricts accessibility and does not lend itself readily to asking questions in depth. However individual consultation was carried out with some of the residents who live on the Botcherby estate and with potential tenants who refused one of our properties. The emphasis on quantitative information and simple questions was deliberate. We need to understand the basics and act upon the information we receive before we attempt anything more ambitious.

Introducing variety and improving accessibility in consultation methods will be a key task of the Day of Debate proposed in "Developing Consultation in the Future". This should also contribute to the qualitative information already sought.

Consultations with the tenants, staff, Council Members, contractors was completed with a comprehensive questionnaire targeted at particular groups who both use and deliver the service.

3.2 Prospective Tenants

The opinions of tenants who are interested in renting our properties are particularly important in the climate of low demand that we are experiencing in the area.

The Sheffield Hallam Demand Study indicates that the general perception is that the quality of our housing is good, but lack of demand is a result of social factors.

"Only when [Council] accommodation was considered a problem did housing quality assume parity with the neighbourhood as an influence on residents' housing choices."

One owner-occupier says,

"Fifty years ago people rented real hovels. The houses today are really good... So the actual housing stock – there is nothing wrong with Raffles – it's purely a social problem. I mean you can put a new kitchen in or a new bathroom but what's the point, because the people won't change."

During the summer of 2001 a systematic random sample of people on the waiting and transfer lists was conducted. 185 completed questionnaires were received. This gives an overall response rate of 37% and 95% confidence level.

On 6/4/01 1277 applicants were registered on the waiting list and 635 on the transfer list. A questionnaire was sent to 500 people and 185 questionnaires were returned. A summary of the survey is available on request.

The results give a better understanding of what a prospective tenant views as being important when considering a property.

- Security of the property
- Condition of the property
- Cleanliness
- Condition of the garden
- Decoration of property
- Time taken when property is empty to repair and relet

Whilst other issues were raised, these relate to Housing Management and allocations issues that need to be addressed within the internal allocation review.

Over a third of the sample preferred the idea of moving into the property as soon as possible and having any small repairs done after they have moved in.

3.3 Refusal of Tenancy

Allocation Officers already complete a form detailing prospective tenants' reasons for refusing properties entitled "Refusal of Offer of Tenancy"

This form included the options of "Poor decorative state" and "Disrepair". The form is filed with the applicant's details as part of their personal record and is not input on a database to establish proportionate reasons why applicants turn down properties.

Allocation staff found that the return rate for the original forms was low.

To try to combat this Allocation staff were asked to complete forms where possible with the tenants and where not, stress the importance of their return for a trial period of 6 weeks during the Summer of 2001.

Approximately 35 properties were refused after viewing every month during 2000/01.

Despite efforts of staff, only 12 responses were received during the trial period. This obviously does not provide an adequate sample of tenants views. Further work is needed within this area, which will be addressed within the internal review of allocations.

3.4 New Tenants

Because a tenant has accepted a property we must not automatically assume that they are satisfied with the state of repair. From April to August 2001, 257 properties have been let to new tenants. All new tenants received a questionnaire and 44% gave a response a confidence level of 95%.

The tenants were satisfied with

- Security of the property
- Condition of the property
- Windows
- Heating

And less satisfied with

- Cleanliness
- Condition of the garden
- Decoration of the property
- Standard of the kitchen

Comments were made with regards to

- Job to be done by target date
- Explanation of the heating systems
- Dirty property
- Redecoration vouchers
- Fencing
- More kitchen units
- No pipe work to fit washing machine.
- Outstanding repairs.

Comments were also made that relate specifically to the allocation process that will be investigated during the internal allocations review.

3.5 Existing Tenants

The Sheffield Hallam Demand Study indicated that many tenants (94%) are happy with the places they live. A comment, described by the Study as typical, was:

"I like being a tenant. It's nice around here. My house has been modernised and the area is really nice now."

However, empty properties, particularly in number and over a long period, are known to have a detrimental impact on a neighbourhood.

Excepting the Raffles estate, where demolition is in progress, the highest empty property levels in the city are on the Botcherby estate. The empty property rate was approximately 10% in April 2001.

During the summer of 2001 every tenant on the estate was sent an empty property questionnaire. 434 questionnaires were sent out in total. 177 questionnaires were returned. To improve the return rate, 150 of the questionnaires were hand delivered and tenants were given the chance to complete the form with an Officer if they were in the property at the time of

Delivery An overall response rate of 27% and a confidence level of 95%

80% of the sample say empty properties are a problem in their area. 81% think that empty properties are filled slowly as opposed to 9 % who think they are filled quickly.

As a direct result of having empty properties in their area 75% think vandalism is a problem. 66% think children/young people hanging around are a problem. 75% think litter and rubbish dumping is a problem and around 80% think overgrown gardens are a problem.

Just over 75% of the sample think having empty properties in the area attracts drug users/pushers and around 80% think they increase crime in general.

86 % thinks having empty properties in the area spoils the "neighbourly" feel of the estate.

90% felt that properties should be boarded or screened to prevent vandalism.

Other negative comments were made regarding

- Gardens
- Boarding properties instead of security screens.
- Dumping of rubbish
- Attracting children and youths

Comments were also made that relate specifically to the allocation process that will be investigated during the internal review of allocations.

3.6 Staff, Contractor and Council Member Consultation

The review team took the decision to carry out joint consultation with each individual surveyor to observe and assess the quantity and quality of work and the standard of the empty property on completion of the work.

From this process the following issues were raised

- Each individual surveyor inspects the empty property working to his own standard.
- No common standard for inspection is used by any of the surveyors, leading to different standards of property across the housing stock.

No consideration is given to the demand for the property and how the work is allocated to the contractor. Most of the surveyors leave very little work to be completed when the new tenant takes up residence (relet work).

To address these issues a Working Party was put together with the overall aim of "setting the standards for empty property inspection which includes the type of work, when the work should be completed and the timescales to achieve completion".

The Working Party consists of all the surveyors who work on empty properties, the Assistant Manager (Chair), Administration Assistant, Works Manager (contractor) and Supervisor (contractor).

During the discussions, the following issues were raised and are worth investigating further in the Challenge chapter

- Renewal of baths
- Plasterwork
- Electrical test and check
- Gas checks and Landlord's Certificates
- Renewal of kitchen units
- Decoration
- Cleaning
- Garden maintenance

During the consultation process it became apparent that the Client / Contractor relationship needed to be examined further and this is explored within the Challenge process.

3.7 Contractor

The contractor has been included, not only in the questionnaire, but also consulted with regards to the minimum standards, procedures, and time scales in dealing with empty properties. During the consultation process the contractor has identified areas of poor performance, poor specification and assisted in rectifying these areas. Regular meetings are now taking place on a monthly basis with the concentration not on the contractor /client relationship, but how as a team we can sell the properties to prospective new tenants.

3.8 Survey Results

21 Councillors and 75 staff from Housing and Carlisle Works responded to the questionnaire expressing their views an overall response rate of 61 % a confidence level of 95%.

67% know how empty property management contributes to the overall aim and objectives of the housing service.

40 % think the way we deal with empty properties is not consistent and only 48% know how performance is monitored.

20% think the procedure is effective in reducing turnaround times and 79% stated they had received no training in empty property management.

Other issues raised from the questionnaire were;

- Training
- Length of time property is empty
- Greater liaison between departments
- Improved working relations with the Works department

These issues are examined further in the Challenge section.

3.9 Developing Consultation in the future

Carlisle District already has a number of well-established and informed Tenants and Residents Associations and a Tenants Federation.

The Federation is likely to be a key component in how consultation is effected in the future, though other methods may also be adopted when a different tenant base is required.

Following on from the consultation with the residents it has been agreed to organise a "Day of Debate "with representatives of the tenants Federation, tenants Groups, Members of staff the Works Department and Council Members to discuss various issues with empty properties.

With the assistance of an external facilitator attendees will consider:

- Ongoing ways for staff and tenants to express their views
- (Regular consultation mechanisms/Potential one off exercises)
- Long-term reporting and performance indicators
- Letting standards
- Empty property procedure
- Prioritising empty property management

The day should:

- Establish the base level of knowledge among participants
- Generate some useful qualitative information
- Raise delegates awareness of the other participants views and priorities

- Explore the Empty property procedure and minimum standards
- Hear brief presentations by a representative of each group of participants (e.g. a staff member, a Council Member, a member of the Works Department, a tenant) regarding their own perspectives on the services

3.10 Summary

The Consultation phase is a key element in the review process.

It is recognised that the Housing Department has neglected the empty property process in previous consultation and that the extensive surveying that has been undertaken as part of the review will only go some way to rectifying this.

The results of the consultation are examined further in the Challenge process and feed back will be given to all the groups that have taken time to assist this process.

Further consultation mechanisms that will enable comparisons to be made with current satisfaction levels and provide tenants, councillors and staff alike with useful and accessible information about the way that we provide the service will be initiated through the "Day of Debate".

Section 4 COMPARE

Several approaches have been taken to enable the comparison of Carlisle City Council's empty property management with that of other providers.

Examples of Best Practice relating to many aspects of empty property management have been sought from the Chartered Institute of Housing's Housemark system as well as from Local Authorities and Housing Associations recognised as better performers in the field.

We have used a similar structure to the one adopted by the Housemark system to make comparisons:

- Performance monitoring
- Policies and procedures
- Security and vandalism
- Service standards and re-let inspections
- Staff training

4.1 Performance Monitoring

Problems with making effective comparisons are well documented. At worst organisations can interpret indicators differently, collating different statistics to compare. Even when interpretations are the same, different collation methods, wording, timing or sampling can cast doubt on the validity of comparisons.

The review split between the empty property management process repairs function and allocations function has meant that existing National Performance Indicator, which includes the allocation period, is ineffective for our purposes. It is the only National Indicator in Housing Services to be subject to a top quartile target, which is indicative of its importance. It should be noted however that Carlisle's performance on this National Indicator is very poor. The bearing that demand has on this and the Performance Indicator itself is discussed in the baseline statement.

The condition of the stock also has a bearing on how quickly we can turn properties around. The condition of our own stock is comparatively poor to many areas.

Stage by stage targets have been set in the Empty Property Procedure during its revision by an internal sub-group of the review team and a database set up to monitor these.

Our target times compare favourably with Best Practice examples on pre and post inspections.

Using an effective IT system from which performance information can be drawn in a clear fashion is a recurring theme in good practice material. Ensuring that the system (Orchard) was set up and accessible to both client and contractor, and used, was another task undertaken by the internal working party.

As part of the consultation phase of the process officers have discussed with the Tenants Federation within the area a review of the empty property performance information they receive including its frequency, content and format this process will be continuing.

It is hoped that the Housemark system will improve the effectiveness of our benchmarking when adopted.

Other Housing Providers gave responses to the questionnaire sent to their organisations. The results have been summarised and can be supplied if requested.

Generally other housing providers deal with empty properties employing similar numbers of staff. All used technically qualified staff at some stage during the process. The majority of the service providers used their own DSO to carry out the work.

The major difference was the amount of investment made during the period when the property was empty. The cost varied from £465 to £3,000 the average of the housing providers surveyed was £1,327. Carlisle Council spend £1,400. The most noticeable difference is, that housing providers with high demand were able to spend less on the properties compared to those housing providers in low demand areas. The two highest spending housing providers were our direct competitors within the area.

Internal transfers were discussed with other housing providers and Carlisle City Council seems to transfer more tenants between properties than other housing providers. 30% of all new lets are internal transfers at a cost on the Empty property budget of £300,000. More investigation is needed to ensure that transfers are being processed in line with the procedure. The issue of internal transfers will be reviewed during the Allocations review.

4.2 Policies and Procedures

As part of the compare process we were able to access many other examples of procedural good practice from other Councils and Registered Social Landlords from both the Housemark system and from writing to better performing providers. The Council compared favourably with other providers both in terms for the detail of the revised Empty Property Procedure, Minimum Standards and of agreed target times.

Comparisons were drawn from 3 distinct housing providers groups, a Beacon Council, other local authorities and housing associations both local and regional.

4.3 Beacon Council

Care was taken when comparing Carlisle City Council to the Beacon authority, York City Council, whilst similarities exist in both, procedure and standards consideration was given to the high demand of York City Council properties compared to the low demand of Carlisle City Councils properties. It was further noted that large-scale modernisation programmes have been made with the York City Council housing stock, compared with the low investment into Carlisle City Council housing stock. Similar conclusions were reached using Ipswich City Council identified from a

Good Practice Guide.

York and Ipswich supplied comprehensive information on their procedures and minimum standards.

4.4 National Housing Providers

In comparison to other national housing providers, Carlisle City Council did not have a minimum standard for the empty properties, the minimum standards supplied by other housing providers shaped our own minimum standards following the guidelines of Good Practice and recommendations from the Chartered Institute of Housing.

4.5 Local Housing Providers

Having already identified the area as low demand for social housing comparisons were done with other housing providers within the geographical area. From this process we were able to gain an understanding of how our competitors sell the product to prospective tenants. This is in contrast to Carlisle City Council where the emphasis was on maximising the repairs within the property whilst the property was empty.

When revising the procedure and standards detailed in Appendices 1&2 the Housemark Good Practice Guide was taken into consideration, which makes the following suggestions for reducing re-let times for empty properties:

4.6 Termination of Tenancy

- Carry out initial property inspection and tenancy termination visit before the tenant leaves
- Agree with tenant or executor the condition the property is to be left in, rechargeable repairs, rubbish clearance, date and time for hand-over of keys etc.

4.7 Repairs

- Initial property inspection before tenant leaves
- Non-essential repairs by appointment after tenancy starts
- Fast-response empty property repair and clean-up teams
- Penalty clauses in repair contracts for failure to meet targets
- Decoration allowances/materials for new tenants

4.8 Security

- Effective security measures to protect empty properties

When comparing Carlisle City Council with other Housing providers it is clear that to minimise the cost of security to empty property a coherent strategy is required. To draw comparison with other housing providers effectively, security of empty properties can be divided into three distinct groups.

1. Empty properties due for demolition.
2. Long-term empty properties.
3. Short-term empty properties.

4.8.1 Empty properties due for demolition

The empty properties due for demolition relate mainly to the Raffles area. Various methods have been used to secure the properties over the past few years, the main method being security

shutters supplied by the Works Department and an external contractor. The costs for these shutters are £15 per week. Some of the properties on Raffles have security shutters, which were fitted 4 to 5 years ago at an annual cost of £780.

Alternative methods have been used from ground floor blocking up to timber boarding. Both methods have problems and at times are not cost effective due to the block work being carried out using slither blocks which are easy to break through and the timber boarding needs the constant replacement of damaged sheets.

The issue is being further compounded because there is no clear strategy for the Raffles Estate on whom properties are to be demolished and consultation is ongoing with the Riverside Group on their plans for the estate. The indecision has a clear impact on the cost for security to the empty properties.

When drawing comparisons with other housing providers who have the same problem it was clear that speed, from the decision to demolish the properties to when this action can be taken, is the key to a successful strategy. Other housing providers within the region have tackled the problem swiftly without properties being boarded for 4 years or more.

If properties are going to be secured for a long period of time then consideration should be given to blocking up the properties identified for demolition. The cost for the work is £300 which when compared to the shutter cost of £15 per week means a break even point of 20 weeks. By clearly identifying those properties which are due for demolition, but will remain empty for longer than 20 weeks, we should be able to create long term savings in security costs. (See Action Plan)

4.8.2 Long-term Empty Properties

Empty properties within the remaining stock that are identified as long-term (category C) are secured with either security shutters, timber boarding or left with no security measures.

The security shutters cost £15 week and the timber boards cost £250 approx. Consultation with the tenants has stated that the methods presently adopted lead to youths being attracted to the area creating vandalism and a knock on effect that the security shutters and timber boarding blight the area.

Good Practice guides and other housing providers use alternative methods when dealing with long-term empty properties

Consideration should be given to properties being secured using "Portable Alarms" and response teams to attend to activations. Net curtains would be used on all the windows. Using portable alarms would result in the area not being blighted with screens or boards. The cost quoted is £26 with a minimum of 60 properties per week. Minimum weekly cost of £1,560 (See Action Plan).

4.8.3 Short-term Empty Properties

Empty properties are only secured at the request of Housing Management staff. The properties are secured using security shutters and timber boarding.

This can lead to inappropriate security methods being used. Examples can be seen on Botcherby Estate where different methods have been used and rural areas where the risk of damage to the property is minimal.

Other Housing providers only secure properties in problem areas and the Good Practice Guide suggest this should be done in consultation with local residents groups.

Consideration is being given to clearly defining the type and area that security shutters and timber boarding should be used and developing a clear strategy of security for the empty properties that

is based on risk and not individual needs. Control should be with the R&I section that is responsible for the budget control and not on an ad-hoc basis.

Generally the strategy and procedure for dealing with the security of empty properties should reflect the Housemark Good Practice Guide

The Guide makes the following suggestions on effective security measures for empty properties:

- security mark or remove fixtures and fittings at risk of being stolen, such as hot water cylinders, boilers and radiators
- put up net curtains at windows
- in high risk areas, protect doors and windows with defensive barriers, such as boarding, cages, grilles, screens
- use portable intruder alarms backed up with staff to respond when the alarm is triggered
- arrange for security monitoring patrols by designated security staff, estate wardens, caretakers, etc.
- Provide telephone hotlines for residents to report break-ins, vandalism etc.

Orbis and SPS Doorguard were both approached regarding the provision of comprehensive security packages for empty properties. Although the services provided appeared excellent, the costs were prohibitive.

There is no warden service provided, but resources are being sought through Safer Communities Funding and will be considered within the corporate regeneration context.

A specific vandalism hotline is not provided, but tenants are able to call the Careline service 24 hours a day who will arrange a response.

4.9 Policy

All the other Housing providers had a clear policy statement relating to the overall aim of the organisation and in some cases clear targets set within the policy.

There is currently no policy statement reflecting our approach to managing empty properties and this will be addressed within the Action Plan.

4.10 Staff Training

Staff training was identified during the consultation process as a main area of concern. No formal training has been carried out in recent years with any staff working on the empty properties.

During the Best Value review regular meetings have taken place with the R&I staff. This has been extended to include the Contractor's representatives and the next meeting will include representatives from Housing Management and Allocations. From these meetings a comprehensive training programme will be established to include all areas of the Council.

To build a better understanding of the client /contractor relationship Carlisle Works have given time to their supervisors to work with the surveyors in completing some of the initial empty property inspections. From this process both parties will be able to improve the working relationship and have a better understanding of the problems.

Other housing providers have training programmes and refresher courses for staff dealing with empty properties. In certain cases these training courses have included representatives of tenant groups and councillors. Following the day of debate consideration will be given to introducing a wider training programme.

Section 5 CHALLENGE

The City Council's Internal Audit has agreed to provide a Challenge perspective on the review at this stage.

Criticism was made of Kirklees Council by the Housing Inspectorate for using their Internal Audit Department to provide an external challenge to the service. An external challenger with no links to the City Council has therefore also been approached.

As previously discussed, the future of the entire departmental service has, in a manner of speaking, already been challenged through an external review and the recommendation made to transfer the stock to a Registered Social Landlord.

An internal review team was also set up to improve and challenge the service.

5.1 Internal Empty Property Review Team

The initial team was formed in August 2000 to examine the internal procedures and relationship with the Works Department. The review team members included Housing, Works Department, Property Services, Audit and Union staff. As the meetings continued, representatives from IT Services and the Allocations team were invited as appropriate.

Initially the primary function of the team was to consider the pilot transfer of the Repairs Surveyors Empty Property Team to the Works Department. It was suggested that this proposal would have reduced staff costs to the Housing Department and duplication in the empty property process. However, an earlier pilot in 1999 had been unsuccessful resulting in extended empty property periods and tenant dissatisfaction. The Housing Department felt they had lost control of the function and that the service had deteriorated; though the Works Department found that from their perspective the process ran more smoothly, particularly with regards to the more direct communication channels it created.

The staff restructure pilot did not go ahead due to staff and tenant concerns about the reoccurrence of the difficulties previously experienced. However the group continued to meet to discuss improvements to the empty property procedure, the empty property monitoring process, composite coding, IT systems and communication channels.

The group had their final meeting in May 2001. The internal review team meetings were fully

minuted. The minutes are not appended, but are available on request.

To continue the process of development, the second group was formed to address operational issues holding the first meeting in July 2001. Representative from Repairs and Improvements and the Works department met to challenge areas of concern raised during the consultation process.

The issues that are discussed in further detail are:

- Renewal of baths
- Plasterwork
- Electrical test and check
- Gas checks and Landlord's Certificates
- Renewal of kitchen units
- Decoration
- Cleaning

- Garden maintenance
- Standard of inspection
- Work on occupation
- Security

5.2 Renewal of Baths

The current practice by the surveyors on inspecting a defective bath is to issue an order for a respray. Very few baths are renewed. The reason given by the surveyors for this practice relates to the cost incurred within the Measured Term Contract.

The cost of renewing a bath within the Measured Term Contract varies from £385 to £610. The overall objective should be to improve the service to our tenants by renewing a bath when it is required and not re-spraying the bath. It was agreed to address the inconsistencies with the SOR price and include renewing the bath where appropriate in the minimum standards.

5.3 Plasterwork

During joint visits with the surveyors the plasterwork was inspected. The common practice of renewing ceilings with plasterboard, bonding coat and a skimming coat was investigated.

It was agreed that the bonding coat was both expensive and time-consuming and whilst a better finish could be achieved using a bonding coat, a time/and cost saving of £13 per square metre could be achieved. This was introduced with immediate benefit.

The Working Party also suggested changing the specification for wall coat plastering from bonding and skim coats to one coat plasterwork.

The overall aim was to save the time spent waiting for the bonding coat to dry.

The way forward is detailed in the Action Plan.

The work of applying a bonding liquid to the walls before plastering was also examined. In accordance with BS 5492 and the BRE building guide it was agreed that the bonding liquid was not required and therefore this practice ceased with immediate effect.

5.4 Electrical Test and Check

Concern was expressed at the beginning of the review with regard to the number of electrical rewires being undertaken in empty properties.

Investigation was carried out to discover why such a large number of properties needed a rewire. The current procedure allows the surveyor to instruct the Works Contractor to complete a 16th Edition Electrical Test and Check.

Some surveyors order a 16th Edition Test to every empty property from the Works Contractor. Other surveyors do not order any 16th Edition Tests.

The 16th edition test is completed by the Works Contractor or sub-contracted to local Electrical Contractors.

During the challenge process it was discovered that the Works Contractor did not check the test issued to the local Electrical Contractors for accuracy. This can result in the sub-contractor being able to recommend a rewire to the empty property. Basically the sub-contractor would have the opportunity to generate his own workload. This practice has now ceased and the Works Contractor has put in place checks to ensure all recommendations are agreed with the authorising officer.

During consultative meetings with the Works Contractor it was agreed to raise the repair limit from £500 to £1000 before recommending a rewire. This is still considerably cheaper than the cost of £3500 for a rewire. It was further agreed, to give clear guidance to the surveyors when completing a survey, and this has been written into the standards document.

The overall effect has seen a reduction by 50% for the request to rewire.

A review period of six months has been recommended for electrical tests and checks, as detailed in the Action Plan.

5.5 Gas Checks and Landlord's Certificates

During the period when a property is empty gas checks are only carried out if the previous tenant has damaged a gas appliance or gas pipework.

The present procedure states that no property will be let without a current Landlord's Gas Certificate. This is in accordance with the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulation 1998 which states:-

" In order to comply with the regulation Landlords need to ensure that installation pipework, appliances and where applicable their flues, are checked for safety at intervals of not more than 12 months". And "any new tenant must be given a current copy of the Landlords certificate"

A problem is created for the surveyor in complying with the regulation when the current Landlords Certificate is out of date. The current practice is to wait at the property for the Gas and Electricity Boards to attend to switch on the power which can take up to four hours. This is further complicated when the property is shuttered and the surveyor then has to organise the removal of shutters, replacement of glass, sashes and doors to allow the test to proceed correctly.

The lost time during this period can be 5 – 20 days per empty property.

It was felt that, whilst compliance with the gas regulation was paramount, a better procedure must be introduced to save time and money.

Two different procedures were considered.

- When the four-week notice is received, check for a current Landlord's Certificate. If there is no current certificate issue instructions for the Contractor to carry out a test in the following four weeks.

- If no current Landlord's Certificate is present when the new tenant moves in, instruct the Contractor to attend and commission the gas appliances, carrying out Landlord's Certification and instructing tenant on the use of appliances.

House Mark gave the second procedure as "Best Practice" and is stated by other housing providers as their preferred choice.

This has been written into the revised procedure.

5.6 Renew Kitchen Units

Kitchen units are renewed on an ad hoc basis, with the surveyors renewing "like for like". It was agreed that, within the standards, a minimum kitchen should be installed, which would include new floor coverings and decoration.

The improvements made within the kitchen will make the property more lettable and address criticism from tenants over the poor standard of kitchens.

5.7 Decoration

No decoration is carried out on any empty property. Whilst it is agreed that certain properties would benefit from some decoration, the costs were prohibitive.

The Measured Term Contract with the Works Department generates the high costs. The Works Department does not have enough painters to carry out work of this nature and therefore there would be a need to sub-contract the work to local decorators.

Consideration will be given to the surveyors issuing work, to redecorate empty properties, to local decorating contractors at the market cost.

The decoration is written into the minimum standards, though at present we are unable to introduce the standard due to the cost of this particular work.

Consideration is given to piloting decoration within one area. Details are given within the Action Plan.

The use of decoration vouchers as a tool to letting properties will be examined during the Allocation review.

5.8 Cleaning

The cleaning of the properties was a major issue raised during the tenant consultation. It was agreed in principle that the properties need to be cleaned before a prospective tenant views the property. The properties are not cleaned on a regular basis due to the cost and the specification used.

To resolve the problem of cost and specification discussions will take place with the Works cleaning staff to improve the service. Details are given in the Action Plan.

5.9 Standard of Inspection

During the one to one consultations with the surveying staff, concern was expressed that no clear guidelines had been given to the surveying staff with regards to minimum standards. It was also of concern that the surveyors were spending 50% of their time on clerical work that included, dividing the work into trades for the Works department, costing recharge work, dealing with the re let work and various summary reports.

Following consultation with all areas concerned including the contractor, it was agreed to introduce more clerical support for the surveyors and redesign the Empty Property sheets, introduce a revised procedure, and introduce minimum standards. The result has been an increase in the number of inspections the surveyor can achieve in one day.

It was further agreed to have regular meetings to monitor the situation and to achieve continuous improvements through challenging the process.

5.10 Work on Occupation

During the consultation process the issue regarding work to be done on occupation was investigated. The tenants did express an opinion that they are willing to have minor work completed when they occupy their home. Work has been detailed to be done on occupation within the standard. The change for the surveyors is to focus on getting the property into a lettable standard and not to complete every required repair in the property. Since the introduction, a reduction of work whilst the property is empty has been noted.

5.11 Security

During the review it was agreed to change all locks on empty properties and upgrading the lock to five-lever mortice locks. The decision to change and upgrade the locks is in keeping with the Crime and Disorder Act 1988, Section 17,

"Without prejudice to any other obligation imposed on it, it shall be the duty of each authority to which this section applies to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder in the area"

One of the main concerns for the new tenant was the lack of security keys for the windows this has been addressed within the minimum standards and every property that is ready to be re let will have a minimum of two keys for the windows. The windows locks are also checked for damage and replaced as necessary.

5.12 Relationship between Client and Contractor

The relationship between the Housing Surveyors and the Works Contractors has been built up over many years, with the majority of surveyors being ex-Works personnel.

For the most part the working relationship is good with both parties working to achieve similar goals of customer satisfaction.

Where the relationship is strained relates to the use of the Measured Term Contract and the Schedule of Rates. Due to the size and complexity of the codes disagreements arise and can distract both parties from the common goal of service delivery.

This is further compounded by the reluctance of surveyors to issue work that they believe is priced above market rates ie baths, decoration, garden cleaning etc, and the targets for the Works contractor being based on financial gain rather than service delivery.

While mentioning concerns over the present system of work, it is not within the brief of this report to address this issue, but only to note that a Working Party exists to address these issues. At present, the working party is reviewing alternative Schedules that may improve service delivery by resolving the major problems with the current Schedules of Rates and working practises.

5.13 A Long-term Perspective

The long-term perspective for challenging the provision of service will require flexibility because of

changing circumstances. During the period leading up to the stock transfer regular meetings will take place to discuss how we can further develop the empty property procedures within limited resources.

It is expected that demand for social housing will continue to fall in coming years. How effectively changing the way we provide the housing service will tackle falling demand remains to be seen. Certainly the empty property service's contribution to maintaining or improving demand would revolve around ensuring that the properties are let at a high standard as efficiently as possible.

Because of the need for major capital investment in stock, the traditional Local Authority approach to housing will become rarer as increasingly Councils have to change the way the service is delivered in order to secure funding.

Registered Social Landlords are also likely to have to reappraise the way they provide services due to changes in organisation structures, growth in the sector due to transfers of stock, rent restructuring and changes in accountability requirements.

5.14 External Challenge

The traditional nature of the way the council operates makes an external challenger's role very important.

Scott Harrington of Hyde Harrington, (Surveyors), has been approached to offer an external challenge to the way that the service is provided. The decision was taken to approach a challenger from the private sector because of the fundamentally different view they would be able to provide on the service.

He will try to ensure:

- That the underlying rationale for the provision of the service has been explored
- That the challenge process has addressed all possible ideas for future service delivery
- That improved performance is the criterion against which all alternative options are set
- That the rationale for selecting options for research is sound

Mr Harrington will provide an informed external challenge to the service for several reasons:

- He is a senior partner with a background in surveying and property management
- He knows the local area with respect to demand and the market
- He is entirely independent of Carlisle City Council
- He works in the private sector

Mr Harrington has been given extensive information to evaluate the service including statistical information on our performance on empty properties and unlimited access to the Housing and Works Department personal.

We have also requested that Mr Harrington compare our service to other housing providers and supplied him unlimited access to our links and relevant databases.

5.15 Internal Audit Review

Internal Audit has agreed to assess the review at this stage and make recommendations. This will provide a useful insight into both the review process and the service, both of which they are familiar with.

If they consider it appropriate they will also assess the ongoing improvement process.

5.16 Riverside Group

The decision to pursue transfer was taken following an independent report by HACAS Chapman Hendy in November 2000. This report challenged the departmental service provision. Options of utilising the Private Finance Initiative, creating an Arm's Length Company, Stock Transfer and stock retention were all considered. A key component of the report was the need for investment in the stock which could not be met if the Council remained as provider.

Section 6 COMPETE

6.1 Introduction

When assessing the competitiveness of the empty property service we hope to achieve:

- Clear identification of improvements necessary to achieve competitiveness
- Various options to improve service delivery

6.2 Competition Exercises and Market Testing

Both the Repairs and Improvements team and Carlisle Works Department have been subjected to contractual competition. The former was subjected to Compulsory Competitive Tendering in 1995; the latter is still operating under periodic contractual terms. It is recognised however that competitiveness is different from having to go through a competition exercise.

Market testing the whole of the Repairs and Improvements' empty property function was considered to be an inappropriate method by which to pursue competitiveness for a number of reasons:

- Commitment has been given to the Housing staff and the Works Department that there would be no staff reductions and the Measured Term Contract would continue for 2 years beyond transfer.
- The stock transfer itself, should it go ahead, would necessitate both the revision of how the function is operated and the relationship with Carlisle Works Department
- The service would also have to have been considered within the context of responsive and planned repairs. These were not under review and not enough resources available to review them in conjunction with the empty property service.

6.3 The Riverside Group

As part of the stock transfer process, a panel of tenants, officers and Councillors assessed Riverside Group's competitiveness as a provider.

They were assessed with 5 other existing RSLs plus an "in-house" option against a comprehensive set of pre-determined selection criteria which included measurement of their actual and perceived performance on empty property management.

6.4 Assessing Competitiveness Stage by Stage

Whilst taking on board the commitment given by Riverside it was decided to market test certain areas of the service and evaluate the cost of the work.

The Works Department belongs to a benchmark club ACSCO benchmarking. 129 direct service organisations belong to the club submitting data on the organisational cost and cost comparisons.

In comparison the Works Department are 10% more expensive than the average within the group. With reference to the plumbing elements that state of the twelve items compared the Works Department have the highest charge for three items of all the D.S.O.'s

Care needs to be taken when analysing the data particularly with reference to the quality of the materials used and working methods adopted by the Works Department which may be of a higher standard than the collective group.

Overall it can be stated that the Works Department on the Schedule of Rates are slightly above the average when compared to other D.S.O.s

Certain elements of the work are priced on local rates that have been negotiated several years ago and have not been compared to the local market recently. These elements have now been market tested and show that the work is priced above the market rate and the quality of the service could be improved by externally tendering the work.

Examples of this work are garden maintenance, cleaning, decorating etc.

Discussions are taking place with the Works Department to agree a way forward.

During the consultation process it was stated that renewing a bath was very expensive. On examining the working practice it was discovered that the provisional sum was not being applied correctly and the result of renewing a bath was invoiced from £378 to £610. This has now been corrected through discussions with the Works Department.

It is worth noting that whilst reviewing the prices it is not about driving down costs but reviewing the service and ensuring value for money, which also means ensuring, we are paying the correct price for the service.

Multi-skilling of the operatives was discussed with the Works Department who do have some operatives who are prepared to carry out small elements of other trade work, but this is not across all depots and trades. In comparison to other DSO's, the Works should consider more training to encourage multi-skilling to become the norm rather than the exception. This will improve the service delivery by making it more cost effective and efficient.

Section 7 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Best Value review has been completed during a period of large change for Carlisle City Council. With the proposed stock transfer to the Riverside Group in 2002 time is limited to introduce any major changes to the structure procurement of contracts and working practices.

The review did examine the structure and process of managing the empty properties with a view to transferring staff to the Works Department but agreed that this proposal was not the way forward.

The largest change that has been made is with the culture of the organisation. The properties are now prepared to a minimum standard with the concentration on "selling" the property to a new customer rather than taking the opportunity to carry out as many repairs as possible whilst the property is empty.

At the same time the review has examined in detail some of the working practices and recommended changes that have seen a reduction in time and in some areas a reduction in the cost of the work. It is worth noting that the reductions in cost have come about by examining the service delivery and not due to a need to reduce the cost of the work.

During the review better working relationships have started to be developed between the contractor and the client, that are more open and honest although some of the major problems relate to the SOR which is being dealt with under a different review. Common goals need to be set for all parties dealing with Empty Properties or as one tenant stated:-

" the only problem with the Empty Properties are the staff"

Common goals will assist in achieving the expectations of our tenants.

Overall the review has forced individuals and departments to examine closely how they deal with Empty Properties and challenge some of the working methods that when introduced did improve the problems with Empty Properties, but over the years has become dated and an hindrance to the smooth running of the procedure. To ensure the changes made during this review do not become dated review dates have been set to examine the progress and review our methods of work compared to other housing providers.

The starting point for the internal review of allocations will be the issues raised during the tenant consultation and various issues raised during this review. During the internal review of allocations there will be issues that will have an impact on this review, but these can and will be addressed during the meetings aimed at continuous development of the empty property policy and procedures.

Section 8 ACTION PLAN

The initial action plan is based on what we have already learned about the service and propose to improve it.

It sets out to provide:

- Key tasks to be undertaken in order to deliver the service improvements
- The expected improvement including measurable performance indicators and targets for improvements where applicable
- Time scale for implementation of the improvements

- Named officers responsible for each task
- Named officers who are responsible for ensuring the task is resourced and target date achieved.

In addition, because some consultation and comparison work is ongoing, within the action plan tasks have been allocated to indicate when and how the information will be appraised and fed into the ongoing review process including its impact on options and delivery.

The Departmental Management Team will monitor and review the progress of the action plan and continuous improvement timetable, reporting to other Working Groups and Committees as appropriate.

The review of the empty property service will be an ongoing process. Reappraisal of the service through feedback and ongoing development is scheduled in the action plan until August 2002. This will obviously be subject to how the proposed Stock Transfer progresses. This review report will be a living document, updated and used as the vehicle to feed ongoing service information and proposals to the Departmental Management Team, Best Value Working Group, Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the Executive where necessary.

The naming of the officer responsible for the resources to complete the task is in keeping with Carlisle Council "Investors in People" status. By ensuring the person who is given the task to complete is also given the adequate support, time and resources.

ACTION PLAN

Task	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Responsible Officer
Pilot the decoration of the kitchen and bathroom as per Minimum Standards	Improve the lettable of the property	S.P.Parnaby	J
Create and adopt a policy for the management of empty properties.	Improved sense of political direction.	John Hughes	J
Re-negotiate the cleaning of the properties Both price and timescales with the Works Department.	Improve the quality of the Empty Property	S.P.Parnaby	John
Pilot the idea of "one coat plastering"	Increase the turnaround times during the plastering process	G.Warwick	J.
Day of Debate	To have an open day to discuss with residents the new standards and problems with Empty Property	John Hughes	J
Develop strategy for security to Empty Properties	Clear direction in dealing with the problems of long-term Empty Properties	A.Slater	T

Task	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Respo Re
Identify the properties for demolition and secure in an alternative method.	Improved security and cost savings to the housing stock	L.Brewis	T
Pilot the use of nets and mobile alarms in empty properties.	Improved security/reduced costs/environmental improvement.	S.P.Parnaby	Job
Make introductory and refresher EPP training available to all staff.	Improved knowledge for staff and direct influence for them to improve policy. Better service for tenants.	S.P.Parnaby	Job
Introduce a monitoring system for complaints received.	Establishes reasons for complaints/patterns.	John Hughes	,
Adopt Housemark benchmarking system.	Improved benchmarking facility and opportunity to make assessment thereof.	L.Brewis	T
Develop local indicators and benchmarking groups to reflect more empty property information.	Improved benchmarking and assessment potential.	To be agreed	To
Task	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Respo Re
Complete the External challenge	Give an external overview on the success f the changes	S.Harrington	S.I
Discuss with Riverside the future of the service and how to develop the changes that have been introduced	Give clear direction on the Empty property problem	S.P.Parnaby	Job
Improve tenant involvement with the Empty Property standards	Develop tenant participation within the Empty property standards	Tenant Participation Officers	,
Develop tenant information based on performance indicators	Improved accessibility of performance for tenants.	S.P.Parnaby	Job

Appendix 1

-

-

-

-

-

-

-



—

—

—

Empty Property - Procedure

-

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Revised 30/08/01 S.P.Parnaby

Revised 14/11/00

-

EMPTY PROPERTY PROCEDURE

Stage 1 – Tenancy Termination

1. On receipt of a notice of termination of a tenancy the Estate Assistant must, within 24 hours, raise a pre-termination inspection in Orchard and forward a copy of EP1 (appendix 1) by E-mail to the R & I section at the same time.

Note: EP1 does refer to both transfer and termination

2. Where a pre-transfer inspection is required for a tenant transferring to another property the inspection will be raised on Orchard by the Accommodation Assistant who will forward a copy of form EP1 to the R&I Section at the same time.
3. The Surveyors must undertake all pre-termination inspections within 3 days of the termination being raised on Orchard by the Estates Assistant.
4. The R&I Section will complete the Transfer/Notice Inspection sheet EP2 one copy to

be given to the tenant at the time of the visit (Tenants Signature required) and one copy to the Housing Department (Accommodation Assistant) within one working day of this visit. It is the responsibility of the R&I Section to assess the repairs required and record the work that the outgoing tenant needs to rectify, and to arrange to revisit after the work is completed and before the tenancy ends. If a transfer involves extensive repair work, the repairs surveyor will liaise with the Accommodations Assistant to determine whether it will proceed.

5. The R&I Section must return the Tenancy/Property Report Form (EP1) to the Allocations. The Allocations Section must determine the property's lettable category, i.e. A, B or C.
6. If on this inspection the R&I Section consider that the property needs a wiring check, a job will be raised and cost's to the void expenditure code within 3 working days.
7. The R&I Section will enter the empty property record on the Excel spreadsheet for key tracking purposes.

N.B. Excel to be continuously updated throughout the empty property period.

Stage 2 – When the tenancy has ended

2.1 When the keys have been handed in, the Estate Assistant will terminate the tenancy and pass the keys to the Allocation Section on the day of receipt. The Accommodation Assistant will write the grading on the key fob. The R&I Section will collect the keys on a daily basis and carry out an inspection within 2 working days of collection.

2. When the keys have not been returned by Monday (4pm)
 1. Estate Assistant to chase the up the keys for vacated address and advise tenant of additional rent payable (in writing). If no response to the request for the keys the Estate Assistant to advise R&I section to change the locks and recharge the tenant.
 2. The Estate Assistant will inform the Senior Surveyor and the Accommodation Assistant, within 1 working day, by E-mail of any extension to the tenancy.

2.2.3 R&I Section to input changing of locks on void code and any recharges, to activate the Rechargeable Repairs invoicing procedure, within 3 working days.

2.2.4 Following change of locks the R&I Section will carry out an inspection within 2 working days

2.2.5 On a normal termination of tenancy if the tenant leaves any belongings in the property the Repairs Surveyor is to organise their removal and disposal and recharge accordingly.

2.3 On the same day as the Empty Property inspection the R&I Section will arrange for repairs for A & B graded properties. The keys and vet sheets for properties graded C will be returned to the Allocation Section until a prospective tenant has been identified, whereupon the keys and vet sheets will be forwarded to the R&I Section.

Stage 3 – Abandonment

1. The Estate Assistant will carry out the Department's Abandonment Procedure. When the tenancy is terminated the Estate Assistant will inform the R&I Section who, within 1 working day, raise the order to gain entry and change the locks and activate the Rechargeable Repairs invoicing procedure.
2. When the keys for the new locks are available the R&I Section will contact the patch Estate Assistant, within 2 working days, to arrange a joint visit.
3. The Estate Assistant is responsible for carrying out an inventory of items left in the property and taking photographs. The same procedure will apply to evictions.

4. The R&I Section is responsible for carrying out initial assessment of repairs needed. If there are a lot of items like furniture and carpets this will necessarily be limited to what might, for example, be visible at a pre-termination or transfer inspection. The R & I Section should complete the Tenancy/Property Report Form EP1 during the visit and return this to the Allocation Section as described in paragraph 1.5.
5. The R&I Section is also responsible for raising a rechargeable repair in Orchard, within 3 working days, in order to activate the Rechargeable Repairs procedure.

Stage 4 – Standard of Empty Property

- 4.1. The Surveyors will inspect the empty property within 2 days of receiving the keys.
 - 4.2. The inspection will ensure the property comes up to the minimum standard as detailed within the minimum standard document.
3. On completion of the VET sheet the Surveyor will estimate the total cost of the work dividing it into three areas, work while property empty, rechargeable work and relet work.
4. The completed VET sheet will be passed to the Administration Staff to enter the Works Orders and raise the rechargeable work following the recharge procedure.
5. Two copies of the VET sheet will be passed to the Works Department.
6. On completion of the work to the empty property, a joint inspection by the Surveyor and Works Supervisor will be carried out to confirm standard of work, cost and to identify additional work that may be required.
7. The Surveyor will transfer all of the Relet Work from the VET sheet to the Ready To Let form EP3. (Appendix 3) or attach a copy of the Works order to the EP3 form.

Stage 5 – Checking Off After Completion of Empty Property

1. When a property is ready to let the R&I Section will return the keys to the Allocation Section with the Ready to Let Notification Form EP3
2. Included with the Ready to Let documentation must be the current Landlord's Gas Safety Certificate CP12.
3. If there is no CP12 Certificate inform Allocations when letting the property that the tenant must ring NWH and organise the commissioning of the heating system and gas appliances.
4. All accommodation for the elderly and vulnerable must have the gas appliances commissioned, as detailed in 5.3

NB – During the commissioning process the engineer will instruct the tenant in the use of the appliances within their home.

5. Once the tenancy commencement date has been agreed, the Allocations Section will notify R&I who will raise the relet work, with a target of completion within fourteen days (10 working days) of the tenancy commencing.
6. Four weeks after the tenancy commences the surveyor will contact the tenant to ensure all outstanding work has been completed.

APPENDIX 1

EP 1

TENANCY/PROPERTY REPORT			
PRE-TRANSFER & PRE-TERMINATION		GRADE	
Requested by:		Date:	
Pre-selected for (Transfer only)			
Name(s) of Tenant			
Address of Tenancy			
Access Details			
Tenancy Details (Transfers only – to be completed by Estates Assistant)			
Has the tenancy been conducted in a satisfactory manner?			Yes/No
If No please give details (including any neighbour related issues)			
Any estate issues or problems with neighbouring houses which may affect the future letting of this property? Yes/No			
If Yes please give details			
To be completed by the Void Surveyor			
Property Type		Pre War / Post War	
Heating Type		No of Radiators / Heaters	
Kitchen – Modernised/Unmodernised		Kitchen Condition – Good/Fair/Poor	
Bathroom – Modernised/Unmodernised		Bathroom Condition – Good/Fair/Poor	
Bathroom Location – Ground/Upper		WC Location – Ground/Upper/Both	
Double Glazed – Yes/No		Shared Access – Yes/No	
Gas Meter – Yes/No	Type of Meter	Supplier	
Adaptations (Please specify)			

Cleanliness – Good/Fair/Poor	Decorative standard – Good/Fair/Poor
Transfers Only - Assessed Redecoration Allowance	£
Max Redecoration Allowance for Property Type	£
Tenants own Alterations/Improvements (Please specify)	
Acceptable Yes/No	
Reinstatement of fixtures/fittings required (Give details)	
Are there any outstanding repairs for which the tenant is responsible? Yes/No	
If Yes please give details	
Signed	Housing Repairs Surveyor
Date	
Allocations Grading on Demand/Lettability	
A. High Demand	(i.e. pre-selected or let within two weeks of RTL date)
• Mid Demand	(i.e. lettable within three/four weeks of RTL date)
• Low Demand	(i.e. lettable with difficulty)
Accommodation Assistant's comments on Demand/Lettability	
Signed	Accommodation Assistant
Date	

APPENDIX 2

EP 2

TRANSFER/NOTICE INSPECTION

NAME _____ **Telephone No:**

ADDRESS _____

DATE _____

I understand that on vacating the property I must:

1. Remove

- a. all loose floor coverings, i.e. vinyl and carpeting.
- b. Items of furniture and household rubbish.

1. Leave

- a. the dustbin within the premises.
- b. bayonet fittings for the gas cooker
- c. all door keys (2 or more for each lock).
- d. the garden and house in a clean and tidy condition.

- 1. Notify electric and gas suppliers that I am moving, and ask for a final reading and empty meters.

2. I am also responsible for the following work, which I must carry out before I leave:

Declaration

I understand that

- a. If I fail to carry out the work, I will be recharged for the work by Carlisle City Council

Or

- b. If I am transferring to another tenancy and fail to carry out the work, to the satisfaction of the Council, that the new tenancy may be suspended or refused.

Signed _____ **(Tenant)**

On behalf of the Council _____ **Date** _____

APPENDIX 3

EP 3

Ready to Let Notification

Address

Property Type Pre War/Post War

Type of Heating No of Radiators

Double Glazing Yes/No **Location of Stop Tap**

Kitchen Modernised/Unmodernised **Kitchen Condition** Good/Fair/Poor

Bathroom Modernised/Unmodernised **Bathroom Condition** Good/Fair/Poor

Bathroom Location Ground/Upper/Both **WC Location** Ground/Upper/Both

Bathing Facilities Bath/Shower/Level Access Shower

Gas Cooker Point Poker/Bayonet **Electric Cooker Box** Yes/No

Meter Readings Gas Electric

Decoration Good/Fair/Poor **Garden Condition** Good/Fair/Poor

Level Access Yes/No **Driveway** Yes/No

Screens/Boards to be removed Yes/No *(Please note that 3 working days notice are required from the tenant for screens/boards to be removed and reglazing to be carried out)*

Screens – Works Dept Screens/Sitex Screens **Redecoration Allowance** £

Improvements carried out during void period requiring rent increase

Full window replacement ☐ Bathroom Refurb ☐ Kitchen Refurb ☐

Installation of Central Heating ☐ Full Improvement ☐

Repairs to be carried out on occupation (please specify)

Comments

Housing Repairs Surveyor Date



—
—
—

Minimum Standard of Empty Properties

-
-
-

Issued 30 /08/01 S.P.Parnaby

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

AIMS

The empty property standard checklist aims to assist surveyors to achieve a consistent level of work across all empty properties and to give guidance to tenants and non-technical staff as to the condition of the property when offered to a new tenant.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the empty property standard is to achieve a product of a reasonable standard that is lettable and suitable for our new tenants. The work is to be completed within a reasonable time-scale both while the property is empty and when the property has been relet.

Main Features

1. Clear standards are given to allow the surveyors and contractors to be more consistent in their approach to the work in the empty properties.
2. Empty properties are categorised as Standard, Minor or Major Works stating clearly the completion dates for each property.
3. Completion dates are based on work content and not value of work.
4. Concentration on service delivery by issuing work to enhance the property and to make the house more lettable.
5. To issue more work when property is relet and to complete the work within two weeks of tenant moving into their home.

MINIMUM STANDARD OF EMPTY PROPERTY.

Item	Standard	Empty	Relet
Bathrooms			
Toilet	<p>Renew WC seat, except if the toilet seat is in good condition or is part of a matching suite/set.</p> <p>Renew cisterns only in ceramic, not plastic. Bakelite/high level cistern – ensure in full working order and overhaul if necessary.</p>	<p>*</p> <p>*</p>	
WHB	<p>Renew all metal WHB.</p> <p>Check WHB for cracks or damage and renew as necessary.</p> <p>Ensure one course of tiles to splashback.</p> <p>Check taps. Renew only as a pair.</p> <p>Check waste pipe for leaks and damage.</p> <p>Renew plug as necessary (NB if plug is present do not renew chain).</p>	<p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p>	*
Bath	<p>Check bath for damage. If bath badly stained, chipped below waterline or enamel peeling, renew bath.</p> <p>Bath to be re-sprayed only in exceptional cases.</p> <p>Ensure two courses of tiles to splashback.</p> <p>Check condition of bath panel, renew as necessary.</p>	<p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p>	<p>*</p> <p>*</p>

	Renew plug as necessary (NB if plug is present do not renew chain). Check taps. Renew only as a pair.	*	*
Showers	Check plumbing work to shower unit. Check to ensure isolation switch or pullcord is installed and in working condition. Check the main fuseboard for isolation switch for shower. If any of the above checks are missing have shower checked by electrician or removed.	*	
Door	Ensure bathroom and toilets can be locked. Renew or fit 3" barrel bolt.		*
Plasterwork			
Ceilings	Repair only large cracks or damage by previous tenant. Only consider renewing ceilings if in a dangerous condition.	*	*
Walls	Plaster patch only areas of damage or loose plasterwork. Only consider re-plastering full walls if badly damaged or wall plaster missing.	*	
Small holes	Do not fill any picture holes, plug holes etc		
Electrical Work			
Consumer	All rewirable fuse boards are to be issued to the contractor as a rewire, without the need for a 16 th edition test. All pushbutton fuse boards to be issued to the contractor for a 16 th edition test. Circuit breaker fuse boards are to be left unless the previous tenant has changed any of the wiring.	*	*
Fittings	Only on circuit breaker fuse boards, check all fittings for damage and raise orders for the contractor to renew as necessary.	*	
Item	Standard	Empty	Relet
Front & Rear Door Locks			
	All locks to be changed. Five-lever mortice locks with handles (key both sides) to be fitted to front and back doors. Mortice and Yale locks to be recycled.	*	*

	Yale lock to be left in position, at surveyor's discretion, but barrel to be changed. The contractor is to reuse all 5 lever locks including having new keys cut.		
Window Locks			
	Check windows for keys. A minimum of two keys to be supplied to new tenant.	*	
Kitchens			
Sink Unit	One 1000 sink unit. Insert sink tops to be used if space is short.	*	
Base Unit	One 1000 base unit with work surface.	*	
Wall Unit	One 1000 unit	*	
	<i>Combination of above.</i>		
Cooker Space	Cooker space with gas and electricity supply, unless preference expressed by incoming tenant.	*	
Washing Machine Space	Washing machine space with hot and cold feed, waste, electricity supply with fused spur.	*	
Fridge Space	Fridge space with electricity supply.	*	
Tiles	Two rows of tiles with rounded edges to be fitted above units.	*	
	<i>The minimum kitchen to be fitted if complete replacement required, like-for-like if kitchen had previously been improved. Tenant's own kitchen units in poor condition to be removed and replaced with standard kitchen.</i>		
Floor Coverings			
Floor Coverings	Carpets/vinyl to be left if in good condition.		
Floor tiles	Repair where required (small area). Remove full floors and screed (large areas).	*	*
Kitchens	Renew with vinyl sheet flooring sealed at edges.	*	
Bathrooms	Solid floor – as kitchen. Wooden floor – do not sheet vinyl.	*	
Fans			

	<p>Kitchen and bathroom fans are installed when property is rewired.</p> <p>Kitchen and bathroom fans to be installed at surveyor's discretion.</p> <p>Whole house ventilation systems can be installed in properties with poor ventilation</p>	*	<p>*</p> <p>*</p>
--	---	---	-------------------

Item	Standard	Empty	Relet
Decoration			
	<i>Redecoration allowances given if property rewired while void.</i>		
Ceilings	Polystyrene tiles to be removed.	*	
Sinks, baths and worktops	To be resealed if necessary at discretion of surveyor.	*	
Kitchens and bathrooms	To be decorated if in poor condition. Wallpaper to be stripped, walls and ceilings to be emulsioned and woodwork undercoated and glossed.	*	
Rest of House	To be stripped if in poor condition and plasterwork rectified if necessary after wallpaper taken off. Ceilings to be artexed if necessary. Wallpaper to be stripped before a rewire.	*	
Cleaning			
	A domestic clean, full house or half house to be carried out at surveyor's discretion.	*	
Smoke Detectors			
	Mains-operated smoke detectors to be installed outside kitchen door and on first floor landing.	*	
Gardens			
	<p>Grade C voids are passed to Parks and Countryside and grass will be cut on a regular basis.</p> <p>Grade A and B voids – grass and hedge cutting to be ordered with Parks and Countryside for when tenant moves in. Work to be completed within 14 days of tenancy commencing.</p>	*	

			*
--	--	--	---

Time-scales & Further information

1. The object of setting targets for empty properties is to allow Allocations to complete all the necessary paperwork and have a tenant allocated to the property, so that upon completion of the work a tenant can move into their home immediately.
2. Time-scales for empty properties will be based on work content and not on cost of work.
3. The three categories of empty property will be

Routine 1 week

Minor Works 3 weeks

Major Works 6 weeks

4 The work content will be

Routine – Safety work and small repairs.

Minor Works – Renew kitchen, doors, internal plasterwork, full decoration, full central heating.

Major Works – Structural work. Extensive work as agreed with Surveyor.

1. Empty properties taking over 6 weeks must have a written progress report from the contractor to the surveyor.
2. A Senior Surveyor in the Repairs and Improvements Section will carry out a 20% quality inspection of the empty property procedure. The inspection may be carried out before or after completion of void repairs.
3. If the Accommodation Assistant wishes to undertake an accompanied viewing when the property is with Carlisle Works, the Accommodation Assistant will liase directly with the R&I Section to arrange access.
4. When the Accommodation Assistant carries out an accompanied viewing with the prospective tenant and finds faults or vandal damage, they must liase with the R&I Section in order to remedy the defects.