

Managing lettings and empty homes – Covid19 (January 2021)



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

Following announcement of a new national lockdown measures to ensure that nobody leaves their home for anything other than essential food or medicine, one form of exercise a day, and/or to travel to work if absolutely necessary, the guidance on home moves has been updated.

Safety at this time should be of paramount importance and organisations are urged to prioritise on a case-by-case basis, considering which lettings and voids the should be processing in the current climate and, if so, ensuring that robust health and safety measures are in place. It is important to fully document and communicate any new policies and procedures to all staff managing lettings and empty homes in a timely and consistent manner.

Home moves are classed as an essential reason to leave your current home. Those who identify as clinically extremely vulnerable are also able to move home. However, they should consider their personal situation and the circumstances of their move and may wish to seek medical advice before deciding whether to commit to or go ahead with a move.

The current restrictions are in place in Northern Ireland until 6 February and will be reviewed on 21 January. As it stands, house moves are exempt and are considered a valid reason to be outside of the home.

You may leave the home to facilitate a house move, and to do associated activities for that purpose, including viewing properties and making arrangements for [removals](#).

In Scotland, it is [recommended that all social landlords consider their policy](#) on new tenancy sign-ups during this time and make a clear a sensible decision about the circumstances in which they will grant new tenancies. It is recommended to conduct virtual viewings, but where there is no alternative, landlord staff and agents can accompany landlords and prospective tenants on physical viewings but should seek to minimise contact with prospective tenants and home occupiers at all times and follow government guidelines on physical distancing and the use of face coverings.

Please see [here](#) for the most updated advice on home moves from the Scottish Government.

If you are going to repair and let vacant homes at this time, you will need to consider which should take priority. For example, to ease the pressure on the NHS, some landlords are housing people who are no longer deemed a clinical priority in hospital but who are still recovering from Covid-19 and need a self-contained home for isolation purposes. NHS guidance is available [here](#).

Another example of priority would be housing rough sleepers and homeless people who are otherwise in shared accommodation, or re-housing victims of domestic abuse.

Guidance for:

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland

COVID-19
GOOD PRACTICE

#CV19HOUSING

Where people decide to move and the housing association / landlord is helping to assist, they should pay particular attention to maintaining hygiene and social distancing measures to protect themselves and reduce the risk presented by the coronavirus. Only take part in property viewings if they are not showing symptoms of coronavirus. It is also worth considering whether the viewing of a property can be done virtually, it is recommended that this is done every time unless there are exceptional circumstances.

How you could...

1. Conduct a property inspection for a vacating customer

Around 2-3 weeks prior to tenancy termination, call the vacating resident to complete the pre-termination form.

Ask the vacating resident to send you photos of the property for your records via email, text, or any other communication platform that supports this. Photos would include:

- A picture of each room of the property
- Alterations that have been done by the customer
- Pictures of any outstanding repairs/concerns in the property
- Pictures of external areas

Attach these pictures to the termination form so that you can gain an idea of the property condition/requirements for void works

As this might differ from your usual approach, make sure that the voids team are aware of when the keys are due to be received so that they can schedule their visits and works.

Organisations are deep-cleaning vacant properties before re-letting, paying particular attention to frequently touched areas and surfaced such as bathrooms, grab-rails in corridors and stairwells, door handles and light switches.

Some organisations are holding voids for a period of time before working on them, where

a customer had reported symptoms. If there is an instance whereby death occurs in the home as a result of Covid-19, you should wait a week before allowing anybody to enter the property. If an area has been heavily contaminated, such as with visible bodily fluids from a person with Covid-19, consider using protection for the eyes, mouth and nose, as well as wearing gloves and an apron. It is advised that you wear personal protective equipment (PPE) where possible and once cleaning has finished these should be double-bagged, then stored securely for 72 hours before being thrown away in the regular rubbish.

2. Collect the returned keys

Using key safes offers a good, contact-free way of handling keys during the vacancy process. A key safe is a strong mechanical, usually metal, box in which you can securely store keys. It can be installed into brick or concrete on the outside of a property, or it can be detached and left somewhere safe. The keys are accessed by a combination code. The combination code will only be known to you and anyone with access to the property.

- When considering the use of a key safe: the staff member handling the vacancy can inform the vacating tenant that they will be provided with a key safe which they should leave the keys in at the agreed time on their termination date.
- You will need to agree a specific time and outline instructions with the tenant, perhaps via phone call, email or text, as to when the key safe will be left for them, to avoid contact.

3. Conduct a safe viewing

- Arrange a suitable time for the viewing of the property, so that the prospective tenant can access it and look around while the staff member stays at a safe distance outside.

- Where possible, provide hand sanitiser, bacterial wipes and gloves for the prospective tenant. You could leave these in a box outside of the property. You will also need to leave a bag that can be tied to dispose of the wipes and gloves.
- It is important to consider pre-screening to ensure that there is no risk posed by the customer attending the viewing; check that they are not showing any Covid-19 symptoms and/or make sure that they are not vulnerable in any way. The customer should be requested to attend the viewing on their own, however if they have specific support needs they may be required to be accompanied by another member of their household/carer.
- Organisations tell us that they have increased the level of cleaning of vacant homes generally. The staff member conducting the viewing may want to arrive at the property 20 to 30 minutes before the customer to carry out further cleaning such as disinfecting of key touch points such as light switches, the wiping of door handles and sanitising surfaces.

Alternatively, a viewing may be conducted remotely if necessary (for example, where a tenant is currently self-isolating or is too concerned about being in contact with another person). You could do this by taking pictures of the property and sending to the customer via email or text. Another way could be to virtually 'walk around' the home while using a video call option. Establish their preferred method of communication.

- Following the virtual viewing of photographs, the staff member should make contact via telephone to obtain feedback and proceed with the application should the customer wish to move into the home. If you are virtually showing the prospective tenant around the home via a video call, you could obtain feedback via this method at the end of the tour and then proceed with the application that way.
- This telephone call should cover all requirements set out in your organisations' letting policy, a tenancy start date should

be agreed and you may want to follow the practice below in conducting a no-contact sign up.

4. Conduct a no-contact sign-up

- It is advised that you allow extra time for the appointment. Give the customer a call to arrange a suitable time.
- Inform the customer that you will not be at the property at the same time together. If necessary, explain that this is to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission and that this is a measure your organisation must take to keep everybody safe.
- Ask the customer to make sure that they have a fully charged mobile phone with them with the volume turned up so that you can contact them when they are at the property
- Explain to the customer that you will be attending first to leave paper for signature and keys inside, and that they should remain clear of the property until you call them. Once you have left, call the customer and let them know that it is safe to enter.
- The customer should sign the papers and leave them in the property. Ask that once they leave, they call you to let you know, so that you can return to retrieve the papers.
- Call the customer back to inform them that you have left. They can then re-enter the property to begin their tenancy. You may want to advise the customer that any non-urgent repairs will not be going ahead at this time but, should they notice anything needing repaired, they should report it as normal so that is in on your records to pick up when service resumes. For further information on repairs and maintenance services during Covid-19 please see [here](#).
- Make a follow up call a week later, shorter than your usual tenancy follow up call, to ensure that everything is ok.