

Social Housing Re-let Process Review

Background

South Dublin County Council manages approximately 10,000 rented homes, of which approximately 1% of which are vacant at any one time. It is a key objective for our Housing Department to refurbishment and re-let vacant social housing units with minimal delay and in line with best asset management practice. This involves a preventative maintenance approach to housing stock management, an emphasis on providing safe, clean and secure homes while utilising funding mechanisms to ensure prompt turnaround times and consistent standards. This report provides the committee with an update on progress made to achieve a more efficient re-let process, outlining revisions to the process following review and refinement of previous practices.

There is an ongoing focus across our Housing Department on the importance of minimising re-let times and ensuring that any vacant homes in our housing stock are returned to occupation as soon as possible. Specific challenges in relation to hard-to-let areas as well as various construction industry challenges have impacted on our re-let times in recent years. However, in 2022 up to the end of October, we have achieved a 16% improvement in our turnaround times and a 27% increase in the number of vacant properties returned to occupancy and we are committed to further improving turnaround times and efficiencies associated with the re-let process.

Re-let Process

In addition to using our recently introduced integrated housing system to record new home completions and acquisitions as well as tenancy surrenders and provides triggers to our allocation and maintenance teams to commence allocations and refurbishment tasks within the re-let process, staff from allocations and maintenance teams coordinate works timelines and prospective tenancy sign-ups on vacant properties and engage regularly to communicate progress and challenges in the process.

Properties are advertised on our online Choice Based Letting portal significantly in advance of the projected date for completion of works to allow suitable tenants to be identified and to provide sufficient time to complete all required pre-tenancy checks to facilitate tenancy sign-ups and commencement in conjunction with the scheduled completion of all re-let works. In addition, allocations staff communicate regularly with prospective tenants to ensure that they are prepared and ready to move in as and when properties are available.

Under our re-let works process that is managed through the integrated housing system, properties becoming vacant are referred to a specific section within our housing maintenance team to manage the works required to return the property to occupancy. An initial property inspection is targeted to be undertaken within one week of the tenancy of the property being surrendered or terminated. This initial inspection also involves an assessment of whether the property requires security shuttering to prevent unauthorised access and/or malicious damage if there are local estate management issues. The security shuttering is a protective measure and does not prevent works proceeding to bring the property back into use within the earliest possible time. Works are scheduled and undertaken with staff and contractors provided with access to the property as required. Upon completion of the inspection works are then

assigned to direct labour and/or contractors as required with a supervising Foreman of Works assigned to oversee progress and report on projected timelines for completion to link in with our housing allocations processes.

We use both in-house direct labour staff and external contractors for re-let works depending on the nature and complexity of the works required. Minor works such as replacing internal doors, small electrical/mechanical upgrades, plumbing, decoration and cleaning are undertaken by direct labour staff to expedite the works while where major works are required, such as windows/doors/kitchens/bathroom/heating system replacement or electrical re-wiring, these are assigned to contractors on our re-let framework who then undertake all required works to the particular property.

Many of the properties surrendered to the Council in recent years have required significant works to due to length of tenancy and/or tenants' particular circumstances. We had taken the approach of using the vacancy period to undertake significant works associated with a planned maintenance programme but acknowledge that this has contributed to increased re-let turnaround times. Given the expanding energy efficiency retrofit programme funded by the department and our own planned maintenance programme as well as the challenges of increasing social housing need, we have reviewed our re-let standards with the objective of undertaking only the works required to provide a clean, safe and secure property to incoming tenants in appropriate condition to meet their needs and to comply with minimum rental standards when they move in. The tenant will be notified at this stage of any planned maintenance works or future upgrades required along with the likely timeframe for completion of these works.

Review of Processes

Relevant housing staff and management have, for a number of months, been engaged in a working examination and review of re-let processes including:

- Profile of currently vacant properties and progress through re-let process
- Tracking and reporting through the re-let/voids module of the integrated housing system
- Planned allocations and any allocations issues arising including identification of "hard-to-let" properties
- External contractor performance and procurement
- Timeframes and budget management

This has provided a forum for staff leading the various sections involved in the re-let process to identify and address any issues within the process as well as facilitating improved collaboration and refinement of processes.

Revised Approach

The ongoing examination of all areas of re-lets has led to a fully reviewed and streamlined process of re-let management from key-to-key that will ensure an appropriate standard of works while minimising turnaround times. As detailed in Appendix 1, we have revised our re-let standard works to provide certainty to tenants that we will provide a clean, safe and secure property to incoming tenants in appropriate condition to meet their needs and complaint with minimum rental standards when they move in. The streamlining of processes includes a commitment to notifying tenants of proposed or required planned maintenance and/or energy efficiency works or future upgrades along with the likely timeframe for these works.

The updated indicative works scheduler for our streamlined re-let process shown below in fig. 1 below provides for a target average turnaround time of 16-20 weeks for re-let works and allocation (compared to a current average timeframe of just over 28 weeks). This timeframe and schedule have been interrogated and agreed by our maintenance team as realistically achievable and presents a clear template for future performance measurement.

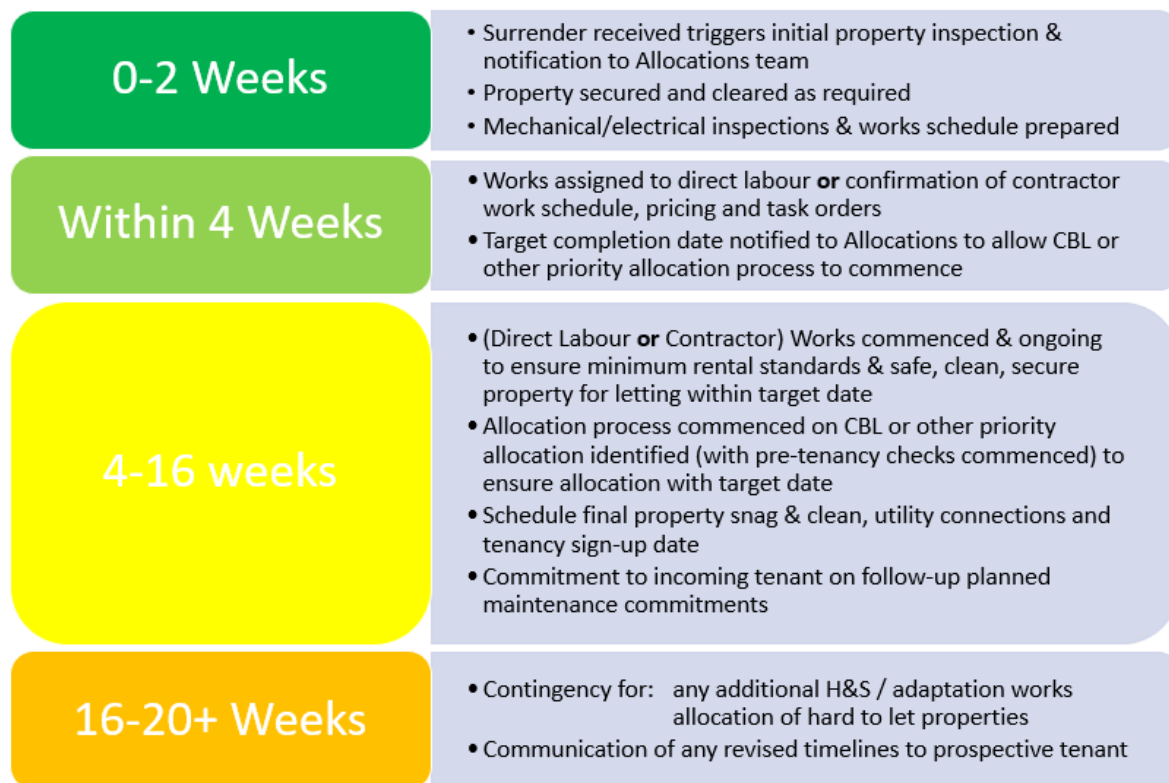


Fig. 1 Re-let process scheduler and target timeframes

Enhanced void management through our new integrated housing system

The recently introduced integrated housing system is continuing to improve our workflows and process management by providing real-time reporting, enhancing the synergy between our allocations/maintenance teams and external contractors including developing triggers for specific work processes. The system is being further developed to map and report progress against target timeframes, providing dashboard data for key personnel to manage these processes more effectively.

In addition, the system’s enhanced CBL functionality supports more informed expressions of interest by applicants, based on the use of the system to provide full property details including location, typology and specific features etc.

New procurement to increase external contractor resources

We have issued a tender for a new framework of external contractors for relet works. This tender provides for an increased number of lots (from 2 to 5) comprising smaller geographical areas that will reduce our dependency on a limited number of contractors with the aim of increasing the responsiveness of contractors and harnessing the capabilities of smaller, local contractors. The updated procurement also provides the opportunity to fully embed our contractors’ re-let works within the integrated housing system to enhance contract management, reporting and payment processes.

Approach to “hard-to-let” properties

Challenges in relation to allocating properties in specific estates with socio-demographic and estate management challenges continues to impact on re-let turnaround times. Properties are classified as “hard-to-let” where no expressions of interest are received following advertisement on CBL or where three formal tenancy offers made following expressions of interest through CBL are refused. In addition to analysis of the reasons and contributory factors for refusals in specific cases, we are exploring potential additional measures including

allocations on estate management grounds, works above the minimum standards outlined above including security and environmental works, and potential tenancy supports to assist with allocation of such properties.

Conclusion

The Council is committed to refining and improving our performance in this area given its importance, particularly in the current circumstances, with our objective now to significantly improve relet periods by:

- Reducing turnaround times to a minimum so new tenants can access properties quicker
- Maximising rental incomes by reducing void periods
- Ensuring relet works are of good quality whilst driving down costs
- Embracing digital innovation through our Integrated Housing System
- Improving contract management
- Ensuring more sustainable communities as long-term voids can often have a negative impact of the appearance of an estate
- Working with our tenants to make sure that they are satisfied with the condition of the property let and that their new home is safe, clean and secure.

Appendix 1- Relet Property Works Standards

What you can expect in your new home:

We want to make sure we deliver a clean, safe, and secure property to incoming tenants, that meets their basic needs and that is in a reasonable condition when they move in. All our properties will meet our property standard within our targets for turnaround times and cost.

1. Clean out of Dwelling and Disposal of Waste

- Removal of belongings and waste from previous tenant
- Remove any fitted carpets and floor coverings, except any non-slip flooring to kitchen and bathroom which is in good condition.
- Ensure that flooring is level and safe allowing you to fit the floor covering of your choice.
- Clear the garden of any rubbish, loose paving, poor condition sheds.
- Check the property for asbestos and where it is identified it will either be removed or left in a safe condition.

2. Electrical Inspection

- Carry out an electrical inspection, provide an electrical safety certificate and complete any necessary repairs to make sure electrical fixtures and fittings are safe.
- Ensure the property has a working mains smoke and carbon monoxide detector system as well as heat detector.
- Install 24-hour trickle fans or a Positive Input Ventilation (PIV) unit depending on property requirements and upgrade if required.
- Provide a minimum of x1 double USB socket in bedrooms, living room and kitchen in addition to standard sockets.

3. Mechanical/Plumbing Inspection

- Undertake a gas safety check, provide safety certificate and carry out any necessary repairs.
- Arrange for a turn on and test of the gas once the tenant is in situ.
- Make sure the heating system is working properly.
- Provide a valid energy performance certificate.
- Provide advice and/or guidance on operation of heating system.
- The Council will ensure an exhaustive inspection whenever damp or mould is present and will undertake whatever works are needed, e.g., upgrading fans and ventilation
- Flush all systems and ensure there is hot and cold running water, and all taps are working properly.

4. Internal Joinery

- Make sure all doors are in good working order and that any glass panels in doors and side panels meets current safety standards
- Check that staircases, banisters and balustrades are secure and safe
- Make sure there are curtain battens fitted above all windows.
- Secure and/or repair any loose or broken floorboards.

5. Repair/Replacement of Kitchen (incl. extractor fan, sink, taps, floor coverings etc)

- Make sure the kitchen is adequate and has:
 - A kitchen sink unit with cupboard underneath
 - An electric cooker point
 - An electric point for a fridge freezer
 - At least two usable cupboards
 - Adequate work surface

- Space and plumbing for a washing machine (unless communal facilities are provided)
- A minimum of three rows of splashback above the cooker

Kitchen units, including all work surfaces, cupboards and drawers will be cleaned and sanitised internally and externally.

6. Repair/Replacement of Bathroom Furniture and Floor Coverings

- Make sure all toilets, showers, baths, sinks and taps are working properly.
- A minimum of three rows of splashback around the sink and full height tiling in shower
- Ensure all sealant around baths, basins and sinks is in good condition.
- Remove any existing shower curtain where present and/or replace with new.
- Replace all toilet seats.
- Install non-slip flooring to bathroom if not present
- Aids and adaptations will be left in situ unless instructed to remove. All aids and adaptations will be checked, and repairs undertaken as necessary to ensure they are safe to use.
- All sinks, basins, taps, tiled areas, and showers will be cleaned and sanitised.
- All toilets and pipe work will be cleaned.
- Bathroom and WC floors will be disinfected.

7. Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarms

- Adequate numbers of smoke alarms will be fitted, and Carbon Monoxide Detectors where required.
- Where these are provided, they will be checked and serviced. Plumbing We will:
- Check all accessible pipe work and tanks for leaks and blockages and carry out any repairs as necessary.
- Install a Surestop valve to the mains water supply.

8. Clean Down of Walls, making good and internal painting/decorating as required

- All properties will be free from damp.
- Check the plasterwork on exposed walls and ceilings is in good condition and repair/replaster where condition is poor.
- Strip wallpaper where damaged or where it is suspected that walls underneath may be damaged.
- Remove all polystyrene ceiling tiles and skim coat plaster repair over area of removal if required.
- Mist coat emulsion paint to walls where wallpaper has been removed or to all newly plastered surfaces.
- Ensure that where signs of damp are identified we will treat it.
- Ensure all surfaces, including woodwork are free of flaking paint and ready for decorating.
- Remove any graffiti
- All floors and stairs will be swept and wet mopped where possible.
- All doors (internal and external), doorframes, windows, window frames, windowsills, skirting boards, radiators, and pipe works will be washed down and wiped cleaned.
- Cobwebs will be removed from all areas.
- If the property shows signs of vermin or insect infestation, then fumigation or other appropriate treatment will take place. Prior to this becoming the tenant's responsibility from commencement of tenancy.

9. Repair of External Windows & Doors (Restrictors, Locks, Hinges, Glass, Seals, Warping etc.)

- Make sure all windows and locks are in good working order and reseal any gaps around the windows.
- Replace any blown or cracked double glazed units.
- Renew locks to all lockable doors, including any outbuildings.
- Check any other security measures like window locks are working properly and provide keys.
- Provide any communal entrance fobs or keys that are required.

10. Repair/Replacement of Rainwater Goods - Gutters, Fascia, Soffit

- Ensure the property is wind and weather-proof
- Clear the loft of any rubbish and ensure the fire break is intact.
- The loft hatch is to be fitted with a suitable Fire Brigade lock so that it is kept out of use.
- Check rain-water goods are in good condition and clear any blockages or make repairs if necessary.
- Remove any outbuildings or structures which are not safe.
- Ensure any outbuildings are in good condition and watertight.
- Provide an outside light at front of property.

11. Miscellaneous External Works (Garden areas, flushing of foul & storm connections, power washing inside curtilages, painting etc)

- Ensure grass and hedges are cut where necessary
- Fill or remove any garden ponds
- Ensure fencing that borders a public space is in good condition and that all other boundaries will be marked by at least post and wire.
- Ensure that paths leading to main doors are free from trip hazards.

12. Other Necessary Works not specified Above (e.g., preliminaries, surveys, certifications, vents, Insulation, BER, contract cleaning etc)

- Completed Building Energy Rating for the property

General maintenance and future upgrades

- Inform you of any works due to be carried out at your property within the following 12 months.
- Check the property for asbestos and where it is identified it will either be removed or left in a safe condition.
- Not all repairs will be carried out before re-letting. Some repairs may be completed once the incoming tenant has moved in. These will be repairs that wouldn't prevent the tenant from living in the property.
- The new tenant will be advised of any outstanding work during viewing and/or during sign-up. New tenants will be asked to sign an acceptance form that confirms the property is of an acceptable standard, with any repairs due after re-let clearly noted.