

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL
PORTFOLIO HOLDER DELEGATED DECISION

by

COUNTY COUNCILLOR IAIN MCINTOSH

**PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING, PLANNING AND ECONOMIC
REGENERATION**

February 2022

REPORT AUTHOR: Interim Service Manager – Tenancy Services

REPORT TITLE: A New ‘Quality of Accommodation Standard’ for Council homes

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

1.1 This report requests approval to introduce a new Quality of Accommodation Standard (QoAs) to apply to homes let by the Council.

2. Background

2.1 The Council lets circa 500 homes a year, the vast majority of these being properties that have previously been tenanted. The current Empty Homes Standard¹ provides limited detailed information about the standard incoming tenants can expect their new home to meet. This has resulted in tenants regularly querying what they should and should not expect to find in their new homes when they move in. The lack of detailed information has also led to different interpretations of the standard by both officers and void works contractors, including Heart of Wales Property Services (HoWPS) creating an inconsistent approach to works specified for void properties to make them fit to let.

2.2 The STAR Survey² in 2019 and the 2020 ‘Moving on Up’ workshops with Housing Services colleagues and the Tenant Scrutiny Panel identified that the standard of properties when let needs to better reflect the needs and aspirations of incoming tenants. There needs to be a particular emphasis on properties being clean, fresh and able to be moved into as soon as possible after the new tenancy agreement has been signed.

¹ The current empty homes standard relates to properties that are re-let through the Council's void process and does not include newly built homes, being let for the first time.

² STAR is the Survey of Tenants and Residents, used by many social landlords in Wales to gain customer feedback on services. From 2021-2022, the STAR survey is a mandatory requirement of the Welsh Government for all social landlords.

- 2.3 A key intended impact of the revised QoAS is to create a ‘wow factor’ for new tenants, so that their first impression of a home rented from the Council is positive. This will make settling in easier and establish a good relationship between tenants and the Council from the start of the tenancy. This will be achieved through a mix of decorating, cleaning and a focus on the quality of bathrooms and kitchens, as these factors are of most importance to incoming tenants. This will be underpinned by an ongoing commitment to ensure that new tenants are actively supported to minimise, wherever possible, the costs of setting up a home.
- 2.4 One of the biggest costs of setting up a new home is that of floor coverings, such as carpets. The current empty homes standard does not include any reference to the provision of flooring or carpets with current practice being to remove existing floor coverings from the property during the voids process. As part of making it easier and more affordable for new tenants to settle in quickly to their homes, the revised QoAS includes the option for ‘gifting’ existing carpet on the understanding that the new tenant wishes to accept both the carpet and all ongoing maintenance liabilities of such.
- 2.5 The QoAS will provide a robust and detailed standard for officers to work from, and give tenants a standard they can expect from the Council with an anticipated subsequent increase in tenant satisfaction³ and tenancy sustainability. The QoAS establishes a sound foundation from which tenants are more aware of the expectations of how they take care of their home, and encouraging properties to be returned to the Council at the end of tenancy in a clean, undamaged state that reduces the costs and time required to let the property to another household. It will also support a more accurate record of property maintenance for the lifetime of the tenancy.

3. Advice

- 3.1 The proposed QoAS is attached to this report as Appendix One. The core elements are summarised below:
- ✓ Professional and thorough clean of the entire property.
 - ✓ Wherever possible, the ‘gifting’ of existing carpet on the understanding that the new tenant wishes to accept it and any ongoing maintenance liability. To facilitate this any carpet to be ‘gifted’ will be thoroughly cleaned. It will also be checked by a member of the Council’s Asset Management Team to make sure it is securely fitted and complies with all current health and safety requirements for residential carpets.
 - ✓ Decoration of all rooms that are not at good standard, normally through the provision of decoration vouchers and packs. In certain circumstances – for example where the redecoration needed to make the home liveable is beyond the capabilities or capacity of the incoming tenant, the décor is unhygienic or work has been undertaken that has

³ In 2019, the Council took part in the STAR survey of tenants. The survey showed: 65% overall satisfaction; 77% satisfied with quality of the home; 71% felt rent provides value for money; 54% satisfied with repairs and maintenance.

damaged existing decoration - the Council will undertake pre-let decoration.

- ✓ Clear indication and timescale of any Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) or improvement works that may be planned for the property.
- ✓ Essential repairs completed during void period and notification of any repairs that can be safely and with minimal disruption undertaken after the property is let, with target times for completion - this will help speed up the time a property can be let, helping tenants move more quickly into their new home.
- ✓ Garden tidy up and cut-back.

3.2 The QoAS will be an integral part of the eight-week 'Settling-in Visit' for new tenants, allowing the visiting officer and the tenant to make sure that the rights and responsibilities and commitments of both tenant and the Council are being fulfilled.

3.3 The introduction of the new QoAS will align with two new initiatives being driven forward by the Council to improve services for its tenants.

3.4 'First Touch' Mobile Working

3.4.1 'First Touch' will allow Housing Services colleagues to work as easily in the field, on estates and in properties as if they were in their office or working from their home-hub. 'First Touch' has been developed and piloted for housing management and maintenance officers over the past year, and as Covid-19 restrictions ease, will be rolled-out during 2021-22. Colleagues will be able to access all management systems for housing no matter where they are in Powys, subject to mobile phone reception. This will speed up the response to tenants' enquiries and mean that officers will be able to spend more time working on site and within local communities. First Touch will allow for rapid ordering of all works necessary to be brought up to the QoAS to allow the property to be re-let quickly and efficiently.

3.4.2 The First Touch system will also allow officers to capture photographic evidence of the condition of the property at the start of the tenancy and the condition when the tenant leaves. This will support a robust approach to the recovery of rechargeable repairs costs and help tenants to be better informed about their rights and responsibilities about the care and maintenance of their home.

3.5 'Keeping in Touch'

3.5.1 Part of the 'Love Where You Live' community sustainability strategy, 'Keeping in Touch' is a new way of developing positive relationships between tenants and the Council. Every tenant will be visited by their area housing officer at least once every three years.

3.5.2 During the visit, housing officers and tenants will be able to discuss:

- ✓ Any current or possible housing needs or aspirations by both the tenant and members of their household, for example grown up children living with their parents or guardians but who want to have their own home.
- ✓ Their experiences of services provided by the Council, including for example repairs and maintenance and estate maintenance.
- ✓ An update on future investment plans, for example the WHQS programme or new development plans for the community.
- ✓ Outstanding repairs and repairs that need to be done, both by the Council and those that are the tenant's responsibility.
- ✓ The condition of the property and garden, making sure that both the Council and tenants are fulfilling their duties and responsibilities to each other, with reference to the QoAS assessment undertaken at the time the property was let.
- ✓ Money management and rent payments, including for example making the most of social security support and accessing employment and training opportunities.

3.6 Each property over time will gain a QoAS record, which will be contributing to the knowledge the Council has about the condition of its housing assets, and the way its properties are being used and enjoyed.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 The costs associated with delivering the QoAS for the re-letting of homes will not result in additional expenditure per void property than that currently provided for in the Thirty-year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The new QoAS will mean that the nature of the works required will change towards those that have a more immediate impact on the quality of life experienced by the incoming tenant.
- 4.2 The revised specification represents a change of emphasis rather than a significant change for the standard of void works. Void works are currently undertaken by Heart of Wales Property Services (HoWPS), as provided for in the Housing Maintenance Specification, which includes: "work to empty properties to enable them to be re-let in accordance with the Authority's [Powys County Council] (set out in Annex Six of this Specification) which may be varied from time to time". HoWPS will be notified of the change through the Change Control procedure, subject to the new standard being approved.
- 4.3 Provision has been made in the current HRA Business Plan for additional decorating expenditure, to be undertaken at the discretion of the Council's officers.
- 4.4 Over time, efficiencies will be gained by cutting down the cost of floor covering removal and disposal and supporting a more robust approach to recharging those few tenants who do cause damage to their home.

4.2 The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and that provision has been made within the HRA business Plan to accommodate any additional costs that may arise for the recommendation.

5. Legal implications

5.1 The QoAS helps make sure that the Council's homes are safe and in good condition at the time of letting, reducing the risk of claims against the Council for any breaches of health and safety requirements.

5.2 In researching the experience of other social landlords about the 'gifting' of carpets to incoming tenants, some expressed concerns regarding the legal status of gifting, which may mean that the Council remains liable for any resultant compensation claims or in extreme circumstances, repairs and replacement of the floor covering.

5.3 To mitigate any such future liability on the Council through such 'gifting', an appropriate disclaimer has been prepared. A copy of the disclaimer is attached to this report as Appendix Two. An incoming tenant will be expected to sign the disclaimer, transferring to them full responsibility for any floor covering in the property, at the time of letting and during the tenancy. In addition, to add legal weight to the arrangement, details of the 'gifting' will be included in the tenancy agreement between the tenant and the Council.

5.4 The Principal Solicitor- Housing has commented as follows: The disclaimer the tenant's sign will provide the Council with some protection regarding any claims from the tenant, but claims will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis and it is possible, although not likely, that there could be a successful claim. It is not possible to provide a 100% guarantee that the Council will be protected from claims.

5.5 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) has commented as follows: "I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report".

6. Data Protection

6.1 The Professional Lead – Data Protection has commented as follows: No changes in the way that we manage personal data will result through the implementation of the QoAS.

7. Comment from local member(s)

7.1 The letting of Council-owned homes take place across Powys which means that the QoAS applies to all constituencies.

8. Integrated Impact Assessment

8.1 An Impact Assessment is attached to this report as Appendix Three.

9. **Recommendation**

- 9.1 It is recommended that approval be given to the introduction of a new Quality of Accommodation Standard to be applied to the letting of Council-owned homes as set out in Appendix One to the report.

Contact Officer: Richard Batt (Interim Services Manager – Tenancy Services)

Tel: 07954 028 705

Email: Richard.Batt@Powys.gov.uk

Head of Service: Nina Davies (Head of Housing and Community Development)

Corporate Director: Nigel Brinn (Economy and Environment)