

GOOD PRACTICE IN HOUSING MANAGEMENT

GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

**MANAGING VOIDS:
CO-ORDINATING THE MONITORING, REPAIR
AND ALLOCATION OF VACANT DWELLINGS**

Produced in conjunction with



The Department of the Environment and Local Government
and

The City and County Managers Association

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FOREWORD

Over the past two decades the task of managing local authority housing has become more challenging from a range of perspectives. Although living standards in Ireland have generally improved over this period, the level of dependence on social welfare benefits among residents of public housing has remained stubbornly high and significant problems of criminal and anti-social behaviour have developed on some estates. Residents of local authority estates have also begun to demand a greater say in the management of the areas in which they live and like most modern consumers have developed higher expectations about the standards of service which they should receive from their local authority. At the same time, management practices within the public sector have changed dramatically, and Department of the Environment and Local Government statements of policy on housing have repeatedly exhorted local authorities to reform their traditional practices so that they can meet the new challenges of public housing management and keep in step with this wider reform process.

The establishment of the Housing Management Group in 1996 and the publication of its two reports in 1996 and 1998 marked a watershed in the development of local authority housing management practice in Ireland. These reports sketch out the broad framework that this reform process should follow. In the *First Report*, the Housing Management Group makes a series of recommendations in relation to housing management systems, tenancy matters, repairs and maintenance, lettings, rents and tenant involvement – all of which are intended to help local authorities achieve good practice in housing management. On the basis of the recommendations of its *Second Report*, the Housing Unit was established in order to continue and develop the work commenced by the Housing Management Group in identifying good practice in housing management.

The development of good practice guidelines on a range of aspects of housing management is a central step in this process. These guidelines build on the reform framework which is outlined in the Housing Management Group reports, by providing more in-depth guidance on the steps that local authorities should implement in order

to achieve good practice in the various aspects of their housing management function. Furthermore, the guidelines also suggest a wide range of actions which, depending on their individual circumstances and resources, local authorities may strive to implement in order to achieve best practice in housing management.

These guidelines are intended to be a practical working tool for local authority housing managers and, with this in mind, the guidelines have been laid out in a user-friendly style, drawing on practical examples of reforms that have been put in place in different authorities around the country, and they provide checklists of the different stages that should be followed in implementing good practice. In the development of these guidelines, every effort has also been made to strike a balance between being overly general and overly prescriptive. Each local authority must decide on its own approach, having regard to the size and type of housing stock, the level of housing policy development, and the changing nature of the local housing environment. Some aspects of the guidelines will only apply to the larger housing authorities, with complex staffing structures; other parts are more relevant to rural authorities with a more dispersed stock of dwellings. However, it is hoped that all public housing practitioners will find in them some relevant suggestions which they can utilise in their own local authority.

These guidelines draw on an extensive process of consultation with local authority housing practitioners across the country. This consultation was carried out by the Housing Unit staff and through the medium of the five Regional Housing Practitioner Networks which were established in 1998 in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas on good practice among local authority housing staff. The compilation of the good practice manuals was directed by a sub-committee of the Housing Unit Consultative Committee, which is made up of representatives of the key stakeholders in social housing in Ireland. The details of the process of compiling these guidelines are included in the acknowledgements to this document.

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SECTION ONE

The dramatic growth in demand for local authority housing since the mid-1990s, coupled with the shortage of accommodation available to meet this demand, has propelled the issue of vacant dwellings to the top of the housing management agenda. However, even apart from periods of accommodation shortage, void management, i.e. the efficient administration of tenancy changes in social housing, is a key housing management task. Vacant dwellings generate no rental income for local authorities and therefore reduce the amount of money available to spend on housing management and maintenance generally. More importantly, dwellings left vacant for long periods can generate additional costs, as they may be targets for vandalism or squatting and, as a result, large numbers of voids in an estate can destabilise the community. However, as the title of these guidelines suggests, void management is a challenging task, since the effective management of this aspect of the housing service involves a range of functions, including monitoring, repair and allocation of vacant dwellings. Furthermore, in some cases, high levels of voids are caused by complex factors which may be outside the direct control of local authorities, e.g. low demand for accommodation in particular estates or districts.

Section One of these Good Practice Guidelines highlights the reasons why void management is such an important housing management task; it outlines the challenges that local authority housing practitioners must overcome, and the issues and policies that they should consider if they are to improve the effectiveness of this aspect of the housing management service. On the basis of this discussion, objectives are identified and priorities for action are outlined, in order to achieve good practice in void management.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID MANAGEMENT

Effective management of voids is a key aspect of achieving good practice in housing management. From the perspective of the efficient use of the local authority housing stock, minimising voids ensures that this valuable public asset is used to its full potential. Void management is also central to customer care. Minimising voids helps to ensure that applicants for housing are accommodated as quickly as possible and that existing tenants are not forced to live beside vacant dwellings which may be subject to vandalism. Furthermore, large numbers of vacant properties in estates create an air of dereliction, which can contribute to their further physical and social decline. Good estate management practice requires that such long-term voids should be minimised.

As already mentioned, void management is also significant from the financial perspective. Loss of rent, extra security costs and higher repair costs associated with dwellings that are left vacant for a long period can impose a significant financial burden on local authorities.

Because effective void management is dependent on the co-ordination of several functions, numbers of vacant properties are often a meaningful indicator of the effectiveness of the wider housing management service provided by local authorities. Void levels can reflect, for example, ineffective management of the repairs service which results in delays in bringing properties up to lettable standard; or poor allocation procedures, which generate high numbers of refusals of offers of accommodation; or lack of investment in estates which leads to these estates becoming even more unpopular with prospective tenants.

Unlike some of the other aspects of housing management which are addressed in these guidelines, the housing legislation does not impose any specific responsibilities on local authorities in relation to void management. However, high levels of voids can reduce the ability of local authorities to fulfil their statutory obligation to provide accommodation for those who are unable to provide it from their own means, and may also force them to make use of expensive and often inappropriate temporary accommodation for homeless families and individuals. The 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act requires local authorities to develop a statement of policy on housing management and the associated Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoELG) *Memorandum on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management* specifies that procedures for effective void management should be considered in detail in the sections of these statements which address the letting of dwellings.

1.2 **ACHIEVING GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID MANAGEMENT: ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

Achieving good practice in void management is a challenging task and many issues and policies need to be considered in the development of a programme to improve practice in this area. Some of these issues and policies are relevant only to the task of void management; others apply to the wider local authority housing service and indeed to the entire public service.

In common with all public service management reform programmes, plans to improve void management practice should take account of the following issues:

- ◆ The Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) identifies the issues of maximising the contribution of public bodies to social and economic development, providing an excellent service to the public and ensuring the efficient use of resources, as the key aims of public sector reform in this country. Furthermore, under the terms of the SMI a range of priority actions to achieve these aims are identified. These include: delivering quality services to customers and clients; reducing 'red tape'; delegating authority and accountability; improving financial management and ensuring value for money; enhancing the use of new technology and improving co-ordination between public agencies.
- ◆ The SMI also identifies the establishment of systems of performance monitoring as the key to achieving good practice in public sector management and, since May 2000, the Department of the Environment and Local Government has required local authorities to monitor their performance in a range of services. Therefore, the identification of a set of performance indicators which will measure the quality of the service and to inform strategic management decisions should be a central element of any proposed strategy to achieve good practice in void management. These indicators should reflect DoELG standards on performance monitoring, be related to the specific local needs and requirements of each local authority, include provision for assessing customer satisfaction and addressing customer complaints and be regularly reviewed, updated and monitored to meet changing conditions and circumstances.
- ◆ Management information systems should be established in order to collate all of the information necessary for performance measurement. This management

information should relate directly to the chosen performance indicators; be easily collected, readily collated, clearly presented, and regularly reviewed. It should also aid problem solving and decision-making and assist in policy formation. Void management information systems should, ideally, be linked to the information systems relating to the other main elements of the housing service, e.g. tenancy updates, rents, lettings, finance, maintenance, and budget control.

Under the terms of the national agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF), local authorities are required to produce Customer Action Plans by March 2001. These plans, which are published as part of each authority's corporate plan should have a strong strategic focus, clearly set out that each local authority wants to achieve with regard to improving customer service and how they plan to achieve it.

A range of recent developments which have impacted on the entire local authority housing service also have implications for the reform of void management. These include the following:

- ◆ The programme for the reform of the management of the local government system, particularly the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), to develop policy on each of the main functional areas within all local authorities. In most cases this process has included the establishment of a Strategic Policy Committee which focuses on the housing area and is serviced by a Director of Housing.
- ◆ Initiatives to localise housing management structures and to include tenants in management decisions. The widespread development of such reforms has seen the transformation of traditional housing management practices in many local authorities. Tenant participation projects, estate agreements and housing fora are some examples of developments of this type which demand a new range of expertise from housing practitioners and make them directly accountable to the customer.
- ◆ The recent expansion of the remit of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) to include local authorities. This has obvious implications for public housing management since tenants of local authority estates are more likely to be living in poverty. Under the terms of the NAPS, public agencies are required to 'poverty

proof their services, i.e. to ensure they do not create or perpetuate inequality and that they contribute to achieving a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities.

- ◆ The provisions of the Equal Status Act, 2000. This Act outlaws discrimination in a range of areas including employment and the provision of goods and services and other opportunities to which the public generally have access. Discrimination is described in the Act as the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person is, has been or would be treated. Nine distinct grounds for discrimination are identified in the Act. These are gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religious belief, and membership of the Traveller Community.
- ◆ The identification of the need for closer co-ordination between the different housing management services. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group identifies the dispersal of the functions that go to make up the housing management service across different sections within local authorities as one of the main factors which impede good practice in public housing management. As a result of this method of organisation, the delivery of services on estates is often characterised by lack of co-ordination, conflicting priorities and unsatisfactory standards. Good practice in void management requires that this service should come under a single management structure and should be effectively co-ordinated with the other aspects of housing management in order to ensure that a comprehensive service is delivered to tenants.

Finally, in developing programmes of good practice in void management, local authority housing practitioners should also take account of the following issues, which are particularly relevant to this housing management task:

- ◆ The first step in achieving good practice in the management of voids service is the establishment of an effective system for identifying vacant dwellings. This should be based on the compilation of a comprehensive data base of all dwellings owned by the local authority, combined with the development of effective procedures to ensure that tenants provide the authority with sufficient notice of their intention to quit dwellings and for identifying and dealing with abandoned and illegally occupied properties.

- ◆ Local authority housing practitioners should develop a clear policy on the inspection of vacant properties. The aim of this policy should be to ensure that all vacant properties are speedily inspected by the authority. They should also devise a clear statement of the criteria by which the fitness of a property for letting can be measured in order to ensure that all information necessary for its repair can be systematically recorded.
- ◆ In addition local authorities should set up an efficient system for scheduling and monitoring progress in relation to the inspection, repair, viewing and re-letting of vacant dwellings. This task will be made substantially more efficient and effective through the use of information and communications technology (ICT).
- ◆ Local authorities should critically review the operation of their repair and maintenance service in order to ensure that all repairs necessary to bring the property up to lettable standard are carried out as soon as possible after the authority becomes aware that the dwelling has been or is about to be vacated.
- ◆ Local authorities should put in place efficient and prompt procedures for the allocation of accommodation which ensure that allocations staff are informed as quickly as possible that properties are available for letting, offers of accommodation are sent out speedily, and refusals of offers of accommodation by housing applicants are minimised.
- ◆ Like many other aspects of housing management the efficiency of the void management service can be substantially improved if it is managed on a local basis. The Department of the Environment and Local Government *Memorandum on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management* recommends that 'Where a local office has been or is being established as part of an estate management system, it should have responsibility to the greatest extent possible for matters relating to the taking by a new tenant of a dwelling in the estate or area concerned'.
- ◆ The effective co-ordination of the different housing management functions which are necessary for efficient void management is a particularly challenging task. The co-ordination of these services requires a wide variety of skills including the people management skills necessary for the speedy allocation of dwellings to applicants and the property management skills necessary for

effective repair service management. Furthermore, achieving good practice in each of these individual aspects of the void management service may contradict the wider aim of minimising voids. Widespread refurbishment of dwellings, for example, may result in a high void rate and in cases where the housing stock is of poor quality, voids can be used as an opportunity to upgrade, and having no voids at all may not constitute the best use of the housing stock.

- ◆ In order to overcome this potential problem local authorities should review their Statement of Policy on Housing Management to ensure that it does not set conflicting objectives for the repair and allocation services; that action to deal with voids is co-ordinated with the actions of these services, with all sections working to common goals, and that the authority's performance in void management is assessed with regard to its performance in other relevant areas.
- ◆ In many local authorities the incidence of voids is significantly higher in difficult-to-let estates, which are in low demand among housing applicants, in which offers of accommodation are regularly refused, and which have a high rate of turnover of existing tenants. Similarly, levels of voids are often higher in dwellings such as flats and apartments, which are in low demand among prospective tenants. Local authorities should ensure that their voids management information system can identify any clusters of voids in dwellings of this type and if difficult-to-let properties are identified as making a significant contribution to voids, that strategies are developed to establish the reasons for such voids and to take prompt remedial action to deal with the underlying causes of their unpopularity.
- ◆ Like all other aspects of public housing management, effective management of staff resources is the key to improving practice in void management. Staff involved in allocations of property have built up considerable knowledge of the reasons why particular estates or properties are unpopular among applicants for housing and their expertise in this regard should be utilised to inform policy development. Furthermore, local authorities should put in place adequate procedures to facilitate the professional development of all voids service staff, and most especially to ensure that the managers of this service have the skills necessary to co-ordinate all of the different tasks involved in void management.

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID MANAGEMENT

The primary purpose of these guidelines is to help local authorities to minimise the number of vacant properties in their stock of dwellings and the time for which they remain vacant, in order to maximise rent receipts, reduce the incidence of vandalism and squatting in vacant dwellings, and reduce the need for avoidable refurbishment.

These guidelines are also intended to help local authorities to develop strategies for void management which will achieve the following objectives:

- ◆ Achieve high standards of customer care and ensure accountability to the customer in the management of the service
- ◆ Achieve value for money for all expenditure on the service
- ◆ Develop a strategic void management policy which co-ordinates the different housing management tasks involved in the management of vacant dwellings and establishes the management structure necessary to implement this policy
- ◆ Identify performance indicators that will help to assess the quality of void management on an ongoing basis, with reference to performance in all other relevant elements of the housing service
- ◆ Establish management information systems in order to collate the information necessary for performance measurement
- ◆ Facilitate and encourage tenant participation in void management
- ◆ Ensure that procedures for void management do not create or perpetuate disadvantage or inequality among local authority tenants or applicants for housing
- ◆ Identify and tackle voids concentrated in difficult-to-let estates and properties
- ◆ Maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of void management staff, protect their health and safety, provide appropriate opportunities for staff training and development, and facilitate and encourage staff participation in decision-making regarding the management of the service
- ◆ Co-ordinate void management with the other elements of the public housing service, in order to provide a comprehensive service to tenants.

1.4 ACHIEVING GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID MANAGEMENT

This manual is not intended to be an all-embracing guide to void management. Each local authority must decide on the details of its own approach, having regard to the size and type of housing stock, the level of housing policy development and the changing nature of the local housing environment. However, several key elements of the void management service can be singled out as particular priorities for reform in the majority of local authorities, and it is these priorities for action which are the focus of the guidelines.

These guidelines on good practice in void management are set out in four sections:

- ◆ Section Two focuses on the strategic management and monitoring of voids. It examines how voids can be quickly identified and sets out the steps for developing a strategic policy on the management of the voids service.
- ◆ Section Three examines the role of the housing inspection, repair and allocations services in minimising voids and addresses the issue of securing vacant dwellings.
- ◆ Section Four sets out a range of recommendations for identifying and tackling voids in difficult-to-let estates and properties.
- ◆ Section Five includes a range of recommendations relating to quality customer service in void management and to the effective development of the staff of the service.

In the case of each of these priority areas, the guidelines suggest a range of reforms that each local authority should implement in order to achieve good practice in void management. These 'Good Practice Recommendations' identify a base-line level of service that all local authorities should aim to achieve in order to provide a satisfactory service to the customer. Furthermore, the guidelines also include a number of 'Best Practice Suggestions' – intended to provide ideas on reforms that local authority housing practitioners may wish to implement in order to achieve excellence in void management.

SECTION TWO

The introduction to these guidelines highlighted the fact that effective management of vacant dwellings involves the co-ordination of a wide range of housing management functions including monitoring, repair and allocation of vacant dwellings. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group identifies the co-ordination of the different elements of the housing service as a particular weakness in local authority housing management, and in the case of void management this weakness is often compounded by the fact that the different elements of this service may be working to achieve conflicting aims. In addition, effective void management is difficult to achieve because local authorities may not be aware that dwellings have become vacant until some time after the tenant has left.

In order to overcome these problems, local authorities need to adopt a more strategic approach to void management, which will increase the equity, effectiveness and value for money of this service, by ensuring that systems are put in place to identify vacant dwellings and monitor progress in relation to their re-letting and that the different housing management tasks involved in void management are effectively co-ordinated. This approach should be based on the development of a strategic policy on void monitoring and management, the instigation of a range of reforms to aid the efficient implementation of this policy, and the establishment of systems to assess the performance of the service on an ongoing basis.

2.1 **DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC POLICY ON VOID MONITORING AND MANAGEMENT**

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING OF VOIDS

The 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act requires local authorities to develop statements of policy on housing management and the accompanying DoELG *Memorandum on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management* specifies that procedures for effective void management should be considered in detail in the sections of these statements which address the allocation of dwellings.

There is evidence, however, that many of the housing policy statements produced by local authorities do not meet the aims and objectives demanded of them by this memorandum. Many statements provide an inadequate basis for the strategic management of the housing service – they are mainly concerned with describing the service, the aims which they set out for improving the service are largely aspirational, they do not specify how these aims will be achieved, or how the authority's performance in meeting these aims will be measured, and they exhibit a lack of appreciation of the need for high standards of customer care.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 1:

Developing Statements of Policy on Void Monitoring and Management

- ◆ Local authorities should revise their statements of policy on housing management with a view to

developing statements that will provide a framework for strategic monitoring and management of voids.

- ◆ These statements should address the following issues:
 - The strategic objectives of the void management service
 - The specific aims of the different housing management functions involved in void management
 - The management structure of the voids service
 - Procedures for the identification and monitoring of voids
 - Procedures for identifying, tackling and reducing the incidence of abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings
 - Procedures and policy on the inspection of vacant dwellings
 - Procedures for securing vacant dwellings
 - Procedures for repair of voids
 - Procedures for the re-letting of voids
 - Procedures for addressing the causes of difficult-to-let estates or dwellings
 - Procedures for assessing customer satisfaction with the service
 - Procedures for addressing customer complaints
 - Procedures for monitoring the performance of the service.

- ◆ The details of the statement of policy on void management should be determined by each local authority on the basis of a consideration of the strategic needs of the organisation and of consultation with elected members, tenants and staff. However, in order to aid the development of their policy, housing practitioners may wish to consult the checklist of suggested items for inclusion in this statement, which is provided on the following page.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 2:

Communicating Void Monitoring and Management Policy to Tenants and Staff

- ◆ Each local authority should ensure that its policy on void management is effectively communicated to tenants and staff, using the procedures that are set out in Section Five of these guidelines.

**STATEMENTS OF POLICY
ON VOID MONITORING
AND MANAGEMENT –**

CHECKLIST OF CONTENTS

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT

- ◆ The strategic objectives of the voids service ✓
- ◆ Specific aims of the following housing management tasks, both as services in their own right and in relation to achieving good practice in void management:
 - monitoring of voids ✓
 - inspection of voids ✓
 - securing vacant dwellings ✓
 - repair of vacant dwellings ✓
 - allocation of vacant dwellings ✓
- ◆ The management structure of the voids service ✓

VOID IDENTIFICATION AND MONITORING

- ◆ Procedures for logging details of vacant dwellings and monitoring progress in relation to their repair and re-letting ✓
- ◆ Statement of the type and detail of management information that can be generated by the void logging and monitoring system ✓
- ◆ Procedures for ensuring that tenants provide adequate notice of their intention to vacate their dwelling ✓
- ◆ Policy on tenant transfers and exchanges ✓
- ◆ Procedures for identifying abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings ✓

VOID INSPECTION, REPAIR, RE-LETTING AND SECURITY

- ◆ Procedures and policy on the inspection of vacant dwellings, including a statement of the criteria by which the fitness of a property for letting can be measured ✓
- ◆ Procedures for repair of voids and details of the re-lets maintenance plan ✓
- ◆ Procedures for the speedy re-letting of voids ✓
- ◆ Procedures for securing both long and short-term voids ✓

MINIMISING AND TACKLING LONG-TERM VOIDS

- ◆ Policy and procedures on dealing with illegal occupiers of local authority dwellings ✓
- ◆ Procedures for minimising the incidence of abandoned dwellings ✓
- ◆ Procedures for identifying and addressing the causes of difficult-to-let estates or dwellings ✓
- ◆ Procedures for minimising refusals of offers of accommodation ✓

CUSTOMER CARE AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING

- ◆ Procedures for assessing customer satisfaction with all elements of the void management service ✓
- ◆ Procedures for making a complaint about the void management service ✓
- ◆ Procedures for addressing customer complaints, including target response times and policy on the provision of compensation ✓
- ◆ Procedures for assessing the performance of the void management service ✓

2.2 GOOD PRACTICE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE VOID SERVICE

The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group identifies the dispersal of the functions that make up the housing management service across different sections within local authorities as one of the main factors which impede good practice in public housing management and contribute to lack of co-ordination of the different elements of the service, conflicting priorities and, ultimately, unsatisfactory standards of service to the customer. Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier in these guidelines, the effective co-ordination of the different housing management tasks associated with void management is both particularly important and challenging.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 3:

Voids Service Management Structure

- ◆ Local authorities should ensure that all of the housing management functions necessary for effective void management operate under a unified management structure, with a single line of command over all aspects of the service.
- ◆ In order to achieve this, the void monitoring, inspection, security, repair and re-letting services should be based in the housing department and, as far as practicable, all staff of these services should be accountable to the head of the housing department.
- ◆ In those authorities in which the location of all elements of the void management service in the housing department is impractical, housing practitioners should ensure that service agreements are put in place between the housing department and the sections of the authority in which voids service staff are based. These agreements should clearly specify the service to be provided in terms of anticipated volume and standard of service.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 1:

Voids Service Management Structure

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in void management, local authorities with a large housing stock and/or a particularly large number of void dwellings may also wish to consider designating an official with specific responsibility for co-ordinating the different housing management tasks necessary for void management and for designing and implementing the strategic management measures aimed at addressing the causes of difficult-to-let estates and properties.

2.3 GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID IDENTIFICATION

The efficiency of void management service is often undermined because local authorities do not become aware of the fact that a dwelling is vacant until some time after the tenant has left. Improving procedures for the identification of vacant dwellings is a vital prerequisite for achieving good practice in void management. In order to achieve this, local authorities should ensure that they have a comprehensive database of all dwellings in their housing stock, along with reliable procedures to ensure that tenants provide the authority with adequate notice of their intention to vacate the dwelling and systems to identify abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 4:

Property Database

- ◆ The first step in the development of improved procedures for void identification is the collation of a database of the most up-to-date information available on all sections of the housing stock.
- ◆ Housing practitioners should note that good practice guidelines previously issued by the Housing Unit on the *Repair and Maintenance of Dwellings* also recommend the collation of a property database as a key step in the development of a preventive maintenance programme. Good Practice Recommendations No. 17, 18 and 19 in those guidelines set out the various steps necessary for the production of a detailed database of this type.
- ◆ For the purposes of void management, the collation of such a detailed property database is not strictly necessary. However, as a minimum, local authorities should put together a short overview of each property in their stock of dwellings. This property overview should consist of tables listing all estates in alphabetical order and setting out the following basic information on each estate:
 - number of dwellings
 - date of construction
 - type of dwellings: low rise, medium rise or multi-storey
 - built form: traditional construction or system built
 - tenure mix: percentage of rented and tenant-purchased dwellings.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 5:

Letting Agreement Minimum Notice Requirements

- ◆ Housing practitioners should ensure that letting agreements require tenants to provide the local authority with at least one month's notice in writing, of their intention to terminate their tenancy and vacate their dwelling.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 6:

Communicating Minimum Notice Requirements to Tenants

- ◆ The requirement to provide the local authority with written notice of intent to terminate a tenancy and vacate a dwelling should be clearly explained by an official of the authority to all new tenants on the letting of a dwelling. The need for tenants to inform the authority if their dwelling will be vacant for a long period due to hospitalisation, for instance, should also be stressed. This will ensure that the dwelling is not incorrectly classified as abandoned and will allow the local authority to instigate appropriate security measures.
- ◆ Those authorities which provide pre-tenancy training or information sessions for new tenants should ensure that minimum written notice requirements are also clearly explained at these sessions and are set out in tenants' handbooks if available.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 2:
Information for Tenants
Vacating a Dwelling

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in void management, housing practitioners may wish to consider producing a leaflet explaining the procedure for terminating a tenancy and setting out the responsibilities of tenants who are about to vacate a dwelling. This leaflet could address issues such as: the tenant's responsibility to leave the dwelling in a reasonable condition, the procedure for handing in the keys to the local authority and for dealing with other utilities such as electricity, telephone, etc.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 7:

Tenancy Termination Procedures

- ◆ Local authorities should supply all tenants who are terminating a tenancy with a form seeking information on the following issues:
 - The date of termination of the tenancy
 - The expected date of vacation of the dwelling
 - Reasons for leaving
 - Details of any outstanding repairs known to the tenant
 - Details of when any outstanding rent will be paid
 - Indication of whether the tenant is prepared to allow repairs to be carried out and/or prospective tenants to be shown around the dwelling before it is vacated
 - Daytime contact details for the tenant
 - Forwarding address.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 8:

Identifying Abandoned or Illegally Occupied Dwellings

- ◆ As well as encouraging tenants to inform the local authority of their intention to vacate a dwelling, good practice in void management also requires that procedures are put in place to identify dwellings that have been abandoned by tenants or are illegally occupied.
- ◆ In order to achieve this, individual tenants and members of tenants and residents associations should be actively encouraged to contact the local authority if they believe that a dwelling has been abandoned or is illegally occupied and to report incidences of vandalism or theft from vacant properties to the local authority or the Gardaí. Notices in the authority's offices or in tenants' handbooks should provide details of the appropriate section or official to contact with information of this type.
- ◆ A local estate management system is the most effective system of identifying abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings. Guidelines on the establishment of estate management projects and their role in void identification are set out in Section Four of these guidelines.

2.4 GOOD PRACTICE IN VOID MONITORING

The establishment of an efficient system for logging details of vacant dwellings and for monitoring progress in relation to their re-letting is vital for achieving good practice in void management. In addition, the void monitoring systems should be able to provide the management information necessary for ongoing monitoring of the performance of the service and contribute to customer care by providing tenants and applicants for housing with information about the number of vacant dwellings in the authority's stock.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 9:

Void Logging and Monitoring Systems

- ◆ Local authorities should establish a computerised system for logging details of all vacant dwellings and monitoring progress in relation to their repair and re-letting.
- ◆ This system should include full details of all dwellings in their housing stock, as recorded in the property database discussed in Good Practice Recommendation No. 4, above. In addition, the void logging and monitoring system should also record details of properties owned by the authority but not yet in management, e.g. dwellings currently being constructed or acquired.
- ◆ The void logging and monitoring system should be capable of identifying the location of the keys of the property at all times and of distinguishing between properties that are:
 - available for letting
 - to be let after minor repairs
 - awaiting major remedial works
 - undergoing major remedial works
 - being deliberately held vacant for future use, for instance as a community facility or as accommodation for tenants decanted from their homes
 - awaiting demolition
 - squatted or illegally occupied
 - awaiting a decision on future use.

- ◆ In the case of properties that are to be let after minor repairs, the void logging and monitoring system should be capable of recording details of the repairs that are necessary to bring the property up to lettable standard, of specifying whether the repairs are the responsibility of the tenant or the authority, and of tracking progress in relation to the completion of the repairs.

- ◆ Finally, the void monitoring and logging system should be capable of recording management information necessary for performance monitoring and of interfacing with information and communications technology systems for the management of related housing management functions such as allocation and maintenance of dwellings.

2.5 DEALING WITH ABANDONED AND ILLEGALLY OCCUPIED DWELLINGS

Good practice in void monitoring and management also requires that local authorities should have set procedures for dealing with abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings, in order to ensure they are made available for letting to a legitimate applicant as quickly as possible.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 10:

Procedures for Dealing with Abandoned Dwellings

- ◆ Local authorities should draw up a clear policy on dealing with abandoned dwellings which aims to ensure that voids of this type are repossessed and re-let as quickly as possible. This policy should include clear guidelines for staff on:
 - checking whether the property is unoccupied
 - checking how long the property has been unoccupied
 - ascertaining the tenant's whereabouts
 - deciding whether the tenancy has been terminated
 - storing or disposing of possessions left by the tenant
 - the proper administration of repossession procedures.
- ◆ Procedures for the repossession of abandoned dwellings are set out in the Housing Act, 1966 and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1992 and are identical to the procedures for repossession of dwellings on grounds on non-payment of rent. These procedures are discussed in detail in good practice guidelines previously issued by the Housing Unit on *Rent Assessment, Collection, Accounting and Arrears Control*.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 11:

Policy and Procedures on Illegal Occupation of Dwellings

- ◆ Local authorities should ensure that their Statement of Policy on Housing Management includes a clear statement that illegal occupation of dwellings will not be tolerated under any circumstances, that immediate action will be taken to evict any persons found to be illegally occupying dwellings, and that such persons will not be eligible to apply for housing by the authority in the future.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 12:

Procedures for the Eviction of Illegal Occupants

- ◆ Local authorities should also draw up procedures for the eviction of illegal occupiers under the terms of Section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1997 and should provide guidelines for staff on the operation of these procedures.

- ◆ This Act makes specific provision for dealing with cases where a local authority dwelling or any part of it is occupied, continuously or intermittently, by a person other than the tenant, or by a person who has failed to vacate the dwelling on the termination of a tenancy and that person is committing anti-social behaviour. In such situations the local authority notify the Gardaí that the occupant of the dwelling is an illegal occupier and has been, engaged in anti-social behaviour, and that in the interests of good estate management it is necessary that this person is required to vacate the dwelling. On the basis of such a notification the Gardaí are empowered to direct the occupant to leave the dwelling immediately in a peaceable and orderly manner.

2.6 VOID MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

In common with all other aspects of the local authority housing service the establishment of a system of performance indicators is a vital step in improving void management practice. The Department of the Environment and Local Government *Circular LG 9/00: Service Indicators in Local Authorities* requires local authorities to publish the results of specified measures of their overall performance in void management, each year in their annual reports. However, in order to achieve best practice in housing management, housing practitioners may also wish to utilise more detailed measures of specific aspects of their void management performance which reflect local circumstances and requirements. The recommendations and suggestions outlined below are intended to aid development of performance monitoring policies.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 13:

Void Management Performance Indicators

- ◆ In order to measure their overall performance in void management, local authorities should collate information on the percentage of dwellings that are vacant and are (a) available for letting and awaiting minor repairs or (b) are vacant for other reasons.
- ◆ Information on these issues should be measured on a monthly basis, and the average monthly measurement should be calculated and published at the end of the year in the authority's annual report.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 3:

Void Management Performance Indicators

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in void management, local authorities should consider developing a comprehensive system of performance indicators. These performance indicators could include the following:
 - percentage of new tenants who have participated in pre-tenancy information courses on the voids service
 - percentage of tenants terminating their tenancies who provided the authority with the minimum amount of notice in writing
 - results of monitoring tenants' reasons for leaving their local authority dwelling as indicated in their tenancy termination form
 - number of working days per year on which the void logging and monitoring system failed to operate
 - number of cases in which legal action for the repossession of abandoned dwellings was initiated and percentage of such cases which were successful
 - number of cases in which legal action for the eviction of illegal occupants of dwellings was initiated and percentage of such cases which were successful.

SECTION THREE

Section Two of these guidelines examined the strategic management of the voids service and set out a series of recommendations intended to ensure that the incidence of vacant dwellings is accurately logged and monitored by local authorities and that different housing management functions necessary for management of these voids are effectively co-ordinated.

This section moves on from these general management considerations and focuses instead on each of the specific housing management functions necessary for void management. It examines the inspection, repair, allocation and security of vacant dwellings and highlights a range of strategies that can be employed by local authority housing practitioners to ensure that these functions are carried out more quickly, effectively and economically, and are managed in a strategic fashion which will contribute to achieving the aims of the void management service.

3.1 INSPECTING VACANT DWELLINGS

INSPECTION, REPAIR, ALLOCATION AND SECURITY OF VOIDS

Good practice in housing management requires that all void dwellings are inspected before re-letting in order that information about any repairs necessary to bring the dwelling up to lettable standard can be systematically recorded and appropriate action instigated. Furthermore, the efficient inspection of dwellings can greatly improve the effectiveness of the entire void management service. The speedy inspection of dwellings ensures that they can be repaired and re-let more quickly and the accurate specification of necessary repair works is vital in order to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 14:

Policy on Minimum Standards of Dwellings

- ◆ The first step in achieving good practice in the inspection of dwellings is the preparation of a policy on minimum standards of dwellings, which can be used as a basis for the development of a statement of the criteria by which the fitness of a property for letting can be measured.
- ◆ Among the issues which housing practitioners should take into account in the development of such a policy are the following:
 - the legal requirements regarding the minimum standards to which local authority accommodation should be maintained, as prescribed by regulations made under the 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act

- other legal obligations of landlords under the health and safety legislation in relation to issues such as fire safety, the servicing of gas boilers and the absence of vermin, etc
- the obligations of tenants in relation to the maintenance of the dwelling as set out in Section 83(1)(m) of the 1980 Housing Regulations
- the authority's own views and standards on issues not covered by government regulation, e.g. the state of decoration and cleanliness of the dwelling.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 15:

Void Dwelling Inspection Forms

- ◆ On the basis of their policy on minimum standards of dwellings, local authorities should develop a void inspection form which would allow inspection staff to systematically record all relevant information concerning the condition of void dwellings, to specify the works required to bring the dwelling up to lettable standard and to differentiate between repairs which are the responsibility of the authority and of the tenant.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 16:

Void Dwelling Inspections

- ◆ Arrangements for the inspection of void dwellings should be initiated immediately after the authority receives notice of the tenant's intention to vacate the dwelling, and as far as practicable inspections should be carried out before the tenant moves out in order to give the inspector an opportunity to advise tenants of any repairs for which they are responsible. However, in cases where the initial inspection indicates the need for major structural repair or renovation, the dwelling should be re-inspected after it has been vacated and all furniture has been removed, in order to accurately assess necessary repairs.

- ◆ Wherever practicable inspections should be carried out by designated inspection staff who are properly trained to carry out this work. Recommendations regarding the training of void inspectors are set out in Section Five of these guidelines.
- ◆ Inspection staff should be assigned responsibility for taking meter readings and for testing and disconnecting supplies of water, gas, oil and electricity services in abandoned dwellings and they should be provided with guidelines on the procedures for doing this.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 17:

Disseminating Void Dwelling Inspection Information

- ◆ Local authorities should establish systems to ensure that information gleaned from void dwelling inspections is recorded by the void logging and monitoring system and is passed on to the repair and allocations sections as quickly as possible. In those authorities which employ designated void services managers this function should be included within the remit of these officials. In other authorities void inspectors should take responsibility for the logging of repairs, while the head of the Housing Department should ensure that the relevant sections act on this information as quickly as possible.

3.2 REPAIRING VOID DWELLINGS

Ensuring that necessary repairs to void dwellings are carried out as quickly as possible, so that they can be swiftly re-let, is a key element of achieving good practice in void management. However, in addition, it is also important that the repair of void dwellings is managed strategically in order to ensure that tenants are encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities in relation to bringing dwellings up to lettable standard and that vacancies are used as an opportunity to upgrade dwellings where appropriate.

In order to achieve this, local authorities should develop a re-lets maintenance plan and put in place a formal procedure to ensure that this plan is complied with at all times. Housing practitioners should note that the good practice guidelines previously issued by the Housing Unit on the *Repair and Maintenance of Dwellings* also recommend the development of a re-lets maintenance plan as a key element of achieving good practice in the management of the preventive maintenance programme and Section Three of those guidelines sets out detailed recommendations on the management of this and other commonly recurring repair jobs.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No 18:

Developing a Re-Lets Maintenance Plan

- ◆ In order to achieve good practice in the management of repairs to void dwellings, local authorities should develop a re-lets maintenance plan.
- ◆ This plan should be based on an analysis of the numbers of re-lets as a percentage of total stock over the preceding three to five years and on projections of re-let numbers over the next two years which are calculated on the basis of this analysis.
- ◆ The details of the re-lets maintenance plan should be determined by each local authority. However, in order to guide the process of developing this plan, a checklist of suggested items for inclusion is included on the following page.

**Re-Lets
Maintenance Plans –
Checklist of Contents**

Policy on the Re-Letting of Dwellings

- ◆ Policy and procedures for dealing with the projected number of re-lets including a classification of re-lets by scope of work and related turn-around times ✓
- ◆ Guidelines on the essential pre-let repairs which must be carried out before re-letting of all dwellings and on the non-essential repairs that can be carried out within a specified timeframe after the dwelling has been re-let ✓
- ◆ Policy on the up-grading of dwellings at the time of re-letting ✓
- ◆ Clear policy and procedures on handling abandoned property and abandoned furniture in vacant dwellings ✓
- ◆ Clear policy and procedures on securing vacant dwellings and on the patrolling of vacant properties ✓

Staffing and Resourcing of the Re-Lets Maintenance Service

- ◆ Resource provision covering requirement of Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) staff and/or contractors dedicated to achieving the policy and turn-around objectives of the plan ✓
- ◆ A fixed-term contract (with one or more contractors) with schedules of rates for the main re-let repair items ✓
- ◆ Target times for completion of different repair times by contractors and penalties for failure to meet targets ✓
- ◆ When DLO staff are involved, negotiate maximum flexibility in working arrangements to secure earliest void turn-around and provide necessary training on same ✓

Re-Lets Compliance Procedure

- ◆ Details of re-lets compliance procedure ✓

Tenant Participation in the Re-letting of Dwellings

- ◆ Policy on tenant's obligation to carry out appropriate repair and re-decoration of the dwelling prior to transfer to alternative accommodation ✓
- ◆ Liaison procedures with adjoining residents on nature, scope and timing of re-let repairs ✓
- ◆ Advance letting procedures for early involvement of incoming tenant including maximum choice in finishes, fittings and colour ✓

Re-Let Management Performance Monitoring

- ◆ Procedures for performance monitoring ✓

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO 19:

Re-Lets Repair Compliance Procedure

- ◆ In order to ensure that the provisions of the re-lets maintenance plan are adhered to, local authorities should put in place a formal re-lets compliance procedure, under the terms of which the head of the maintenance and repair section receives competent technical clarification on the following:
 - The dwelling is suitable and safe for re-letting, and meets the local authority's re-letting standards.
 - A list and timeframe for completion of any outstanding non-essential repairs has been provided.
 - Electrical systems have been checked and all necessary repairs and up-grading completed.
 - Sanitary services have been checked and are in full working order.
 - Central heating has been checked and is in full working order and the boiler has been fully serviced.
 - The chimney(s) have been swept and smoke-tested.
 - Time targets for the completion of the work have been met or otherwise.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 4:
Special Re-let Repair Teams
or Contractors

- ◆ Local authorities with a large housing stock and/or with a large number of vacant dwellings may wish to consider using specialist repair teams from within their own Direct Labour Organisation or repair contractors to carry out re-let repairs.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO 20:

Non-Essential Repairs to Void Dwellings

- ◆ In order to ensure that dwellings become available for re-letting as quickly as possible, housing practitioners should make provision for carrying out non-essential repairs after the new tenant has moved into the dwelling. However, in such cases tenants should be provided with an indicative timeframe for the completion of these repairs.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No 21:

Ensuring that Tenants Fulfil their Repair Responsibilities Prior to Vacating a Dwelling

- ◆ In order to minimise the works which need to be carried out to dwellings on re-letting, local authorities should ensure that any agreement on tenant transfers to alternative accommodation are conditional on dwellings being left in a satisfactory, safe and good decorative condition with no outstanding tenant-responsible repairs and that all rent has been paid.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 5:

Redecoration of Vacant Dwellings

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in void management, local authorities should consider redecorating vacant dwellings only in cases where the dwelling is in very poor decorative condition, if the incoming tenant is elderly or disabled, or if the property is difficult-to-let and having the dwelling in good decorative order is considered vital for attracting new tenants.
- ◆ In other cases the local authority could facilitate the involvement of incoming tenants in redecorating through the provision of inducements such as free materials, vouchers, or rent-free periods to allow the tenant to fund re-decoration. This method also has the advantage of allowing tenants a full choice of colour schemes etc.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 6:

Refurbishment of Vacant Dwellings

- ◆ Local authorities may wish to explore the possibility of up-grading dwellings at the time of re-letting in order to ensure that all dwellings are brought to a common quality and safety standard. Among the works which could be carried out at the stage of re-letting are the following:
 - electrical upgrade to meter, cooker protection and immersion installation
 - re-wiring and additional socket provision
 - insulation upgrade and draught-proofing works
 - installation of central heating system
 - installation of double-glazed windows as appropriate
 - installation of smoke alarms, door security and monitored phone systems for elderly or disabled tenants.

3.3 RE-LETTING VOID DWELLINGS

Effective and speedy procedures for letting accommodation can help to ensure that dwellings are vacant for the minimum period possible. This section examines a range of reforms which can be instigated in order to speed up the letting of dwellings. These include: making tenancy offers before the dwelling is available for letting and minimising the number of refusals of accommodation, by ensuring that all of the information held about housing applicants is correct and up-to-date and limiting the numbers of offers of accommodation to each housing applicant. In addition operating a 'customer friendly' allocations policy can also help to minimise refusals of accommodation and Section Five of these Guidelines sets out a range of recommendations for achieving this.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No 22:

Monitoring of Waiting Lists for Accommodation

- ◆ The personal circumstances and addresses of housing applicants can frequently change, and obsolete information held by local authorities can mean that tenancy offers may be inappropriate or issued to the wrong address and the property may have to be re-offered as a result. In order to avoid this, local authorities should actively review their waiting lists in order to ensure that the information held on applicants is correct.
- ◆ This is usually done by writing en masse to applicants to ask them to confirm that they are still in need of housing and that the details held on their application file are still accurate. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group recommends that such periodic reviews of waiting lists should be carried out at least every 12 months. In order to make this task more manageable housing practitioners may wish to restrict the review to applicants who have a realistic chance of being offered accommodation in the next year or so.
- ◆ Alternatively local authorities may wish to continuously renew their waiting lists by contacting each applicant on the anniversary of the date on which his/her application for accommodation was received.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No 23:

Restriction of Tenancy Offers

- ◆ In order to reduce rates of refusal of offers of accommodation, local authorities should restrict the number of times an applicant can refuse an offer without penalty and should devise a range of equitable penalties to address persistent refusals of reasonable offers of accommodation.
- ◆ Local authorities which operate a policy of restriction of tenancy offers should ensure that they have clear rules on circumstances where refusals are acceptable, and would not therefore count against an offer limit.
- ◆ Furthermore, there is a danger that a restrictive lettings policy may result in an increased demand for transfers post-allocation of accommodation. In order to avoid this, local authorities should ensure that restrictive letting systems are operated in tandem with the customer friendly lettings policies which are set out in Section Five.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No 24:

Pre-allocation of Accommodation

- ◆ In order to speed up the process of re-letting void dwellings, local authorities should avoid adopting a wholly sequential approach to their repair and allocation and should endeavour to match a vacant property with a housing applicant before it is ready for occupation. If a dwelling does not need significant repair this could happen before the original tenant has vacated the dwelling. Alternatively, in cases where more extensive refurbishment is needed it could be allocated before the repair works are complete.

- ◆ When housing practitioners plan to allocate a dwelling before the tenant has vacated it, they should ensure that they secure written permission stating that the departing tenant is willing to allow prospective tenants to be shown around the dwelling before it is vacated. In cases where housing practitioners plan to allocate a dwelling before it has been repaired they should ensure that the performance of sections of DLOs or contractors responsible for repairs is closely monitored and repairs are finished on time.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 7:
Issuing Offers
of Accommodation

- ◆ In order to speed up the process of communicating offers of accommodation to prospective tenants, housing practitioners may wish to consider trying to initially contact prospective tenants by telephone or delivering offers of accommodation by hand. This approach can also help local authorities to discover quickly whether the tenant has had a significant change of circumstances such as a change of address and can help to guard against fraud.
- ◆ In addition the offer of accommodation should require applicants to inform the authority of whether they are accepting the offer within a specified period. Failure to do so should be deemed as a refusal. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group suggests that two to three working days is an appropriate response time.

3.4 SECURING VOIDS

Repairing dwellings quickly and pre-allocating tenancies should help to reduce periods for which dwellings are vacant and consequently lower the incidence of vandalism and squatting in voids. However, in addition, it is also necessary to have procedures for securing vacant properties. Good security is especially important in difficult-to-let estates, in which properties may remain vacant for a particularly long period and the incidence of anti-social behaviour may be higher than the norm. However, in some cases the methods used to secure voids can be counter-productive because they can draw attention to the fact that the dwelling is vacant. This section highlights a range of methods that can be used to secure vacant dwellings, both in estates where there is high risk of vandalism and in cases where the risk is negligible. Housing practitioners should ensure that the method of security chosen is appropriate to the particular circumstances.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 25:

Patrolling Vacant Dwellings:

- ◆ Local authorities should make provision for patrolling vacant dwelling to check for signs of vandalism and squatting. Depending on the individual circumstances this could be done by estate-based staff or by a private security firm.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 8: Securing Low Risk Voids

- ◆ In cases where voids are judged to be at low risk of vandalism or squatting, for instance because they will be vacant for a short period of time or are located in an area with no anti-social behaviour, local authorities may wish to consider utilising unobtrusive methods of securing the property which aim to give the impression that it is occupied. Suitable methods include: putting up curtains in a dwelling or fitting timer switches on lights to turn them on and off at certain times of the day.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 26:

Securing High Risk Voids

- ◆ In the case of voids that are at high risk of vandalism by virtue of their location in an area prone to anti-social behaviour or because they will be vacant for a long time, more robust methods of security are appropriate. Traditionally this has involved the boarding up of windows and doors on vacant dwellings or the fitting of security grilles. These methods have the advantage of being relatively effective in terms of impeding access to the dwelling. However, they are also problematic because they draw attention to the fact that the dwelling is vacant.

- ◆ Instead of using boarding or grilles to secure voids that are at high risk of vandalism or squatting, local authorities should consider using less obvious methods of securing dwellings where appropriate. Potential alternatives include: installing burglar alarms in dwellings located in areas prone to break-ins and removing saleable fixtures and fittings such as water tanks, central heating boilers and bathroom suites from dwellings of this type.

3.5 VOID MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

In common with all other aspects of the local authority housing service the establishment of a system of performance indicators is a vital step in improving void management practice. The Department of the Environment and Local Government *Circular LG 9/00: Service Indicators in Local Authorities* requires local authorities to publish the results of specified measures of their overall performance in void management, each year in their annual reports. However, in order to achieve best practice in housing management, housing practitioners may also wish to utilise more detailed measures of specific aspects of their void management performance which reflect local circumstances and requirements. The recommendations and suggestions outlined below are intended to aid development of performance monitoring policies.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION NO. 27:

Void Management Performance Monitoring

- ◆ In order to achieve good practice in the inspection, repair and allocation of vacant dwellings, local authorities should monitor the average time taken to re-let dwellings available for letting or awaiting minor repairs, on an annual basis.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 9:

Void Management Performance Monitoring

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in the inspection, repair and allocation of vacant dwellings, local authorities should consider developing a comprehensive system of performance indicators, which could include the following:
 - the period between the tenancy termination and the initial inspection
 - adherence to specified target times for the inspection of vacant dwellings
 - the period between the ordering and completion of the repair works
 - the period between the completion of works and re-letting
 - the average cost of void repairs
 - the average cost of securing void dwellings
 - rent loss as a result of voids expressed as a percentage of the total rent due for the year.

SECTION FOUR

Although the reform of procedures for the identification, inspection, repair and re-letting of vacant dwellings can be effective in reducing the incidence of voids, it is unlikely that they will be completely eliminated using strategies of this type. This is because in many local authorities the incidence of voids is significantly higher in difficult-to-let estates, which are in low demand among housing applicants, in which offers of accommodation are regularly refused and which have a high rate of turnover of existing tenants. Similarly some property types, such as flats or small houses, may experience a high rate of turnover of tenants, as they will need to move out if their families grow.

The Department of the Environment and Local Government *Memorandum on the Preparation of A Statement of Policy on Housing Management* points out that: 'Continuous monitoring of the level of vacant dwellings is necessary in order to identify properties which are difficult-to-let in a particular estate or area, to establish the reasons, and to take prompt remedial action to deal with the underlying causes'. This section examines how monitoring and research of this type can be carried out in practice and how void reduction programmes to address the issues raised in these exercises can be developed. Depending on the problems identified in individual estates, a void reduction strategy could involve one or several interventions related to the allocation of tenancies, the repair and refurbishment of dwellings, estate management or estate regeneration.

4.1 MONITORING THE INCIDENCE OF DIFFICULT-TO-LET ESTATES AND DWELLINGS

ADDRESSING DIFFICULT-TO-LET ESTATES AND DWELLINGS

Identifying the factors that make an estate difficult-to-let is a challenging task, for a number of reasons. In the majority of cases the unpopularity of an estate is due not to a single problem but to the interaction of a range of factors which can be difficult to identify and disentangle from one another. Similarly, although the unpopularity of estates may lead to housing management problems for local authorities, in many cases the causes of these problems are related not to the housing service but to wider social and economic issues.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 28:

Monitoring the Incidence of Difficult-to-let Estates

- ◆ The first step in the development of a strategy to reduce voids in difficult-to-let estates is the establishment of a system to identify dwellings of this type. In order to achieve this, housing practitioners should continuously monitor the location and level of vacant dwellings in order to identify clusters of voids which may indicate that an estate or property type is difficult-to-let.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 29:

Identifying the Reasons for Difficult-to-let Estates

- ◆ Once an estate has been identified as difficult-to-let the next step is to discover the reasons for its

unpopularity. In order to do this, local authorities should use one or more of the following methods:

- Examining the 'reasons for leaving' section of the tenancy termination forms supplied by tenants who voluntarily surrender tenancies on the estate
- Asking applicants for housing who refuse accommodation on an estate to identify their reasons for doing so
- Instigating procedures to consult with individual tenants and members of tenants' and residents' associations regarding the reasons for the unpopularity of the estate and the needs of the area. This could be done for example by means of a questionnaire survey or consultation meetings with local authority staff
- Commissioning an appropriate institution to carry out in-depth research into the reasons for the unpopularity of the estate.

4.2 **REDUCING VOIDS THROUGH RE-LETTING**

Section three of these guidelines examined the role of the allocations service in ensuring that vacant dwellings are re-tenanted as quickly as possible. However, in difficult-to-let estates, the normal procedures for speedy allocation of accommodation may not be effective as offers may be refused or the waiting list for entry to the estate may be very small. In such cases local authorities should examine the possibility of instigating other reforms to the allocations service in order to speed up the re-letting of voids.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 30:

Maintaining a Register of Applicants Willing to Accept Offers of Accommodation in Difficult-to-let Estates

- ◆ In order to speed up the process of allocating tenancies in difficult-to-let estates and reduce the incidence of refusals of offers of accommodation, local authorities should maintain a separate register of qualified applicants who are willing to live in these areas. Applicants on this list should be given priority in the allocation of tenancies in these estates.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 10: Accompanied Viewings

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in the letting of accommodation in difficult-to-let estates, local authorities may wish to consider designating an official to accompany housing applicants viewing dwellings which they have been offered. This will ensure that the applicant locates the property and it provides an opportunity for the official to allay any concerns the applicant may have about the neighbourhood.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 11: Relaxing Occupancy Standards in Difficult-to-let Estates

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in the letting of accommodation on difficult-to-let estates, local authorities may wish to consider relaxing occupancy standards by offering applicants a larger dwelling than they would normally be entitled to. This will provide an incentive for applicants to accept offers of accommodation in difficult-to-let estates and reduce the likelihood that tenants will have to move out if their families increase in size.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 31:

Encouraging the Development of Balanced Communities in Difficult-to-let Estates

- ◆ In order to address the underlying causes of difficult-to-let estates, local authorities should make strategic use of the allocations system to encourage the development of more balanced communities in these estates. In order to improve the reputation of these areas, for example, local authorities should avoid allocating accommodation to potentially disruptive applicants and should endeavour to use re-letting of dwellings to encourage a wider social mix of tenants in the estate.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 32:

Restrictive Transfer Policies

- ◆ Vacant dwellings in difficult-to-let estates are caused not only by refusals of offers of accommodation, but also by high levels of transfers of existing tenants to alternative accommodation. Local authorities which find that this is a problem should consider placing restrictions on transfers by, for instance, requiring tenants to have been resident in the dwelling for a minimum period of time before becoming eligible for transfer.
- ◆ As in the case of restriction of tenancy offers, local authorities which operate a restrictive transfer policy should ensure that they have clear rules on circumstances where exceptions will be made.

4.3 REDUCING VOIDS THROUGH REFURBISHMENT AND REPAIR OF DWELLINGS

Traditionally refurbishment of dwellings and of the general environment of estates has been the most commonly used response by local authorities to the problems of difficult-to-let estates. In fact there is evidence that refurbishment has been used too readily. The DoELG *Memorandum on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management* argues that ‘... there is an undue reliance by many authorities on funding under the Department’s Remedial Works Scheme as a solution to problems which could have been averted or lessened if management of the dwellings and the estate had been effectively tackled at an earlier stage’. When used appropriately, however, refurbishment and repair can play a key role in making estates more popular among existing and prospective tenants. Although, on their own, interventions of this type will rarely be adequate to address the underlying problems of these areas and they should be used in tandem with some of the other reforms examined in this section.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 12:

Higher Standards of Decoration of Difficult-to-let Properties

- ◆ Local authorities which experience difficulties letting certain types of properties or dwellings located in certain estates should consider decorating these properties to a higher standard than the norm in order to encourage applicants for housing to accept tenancies in these dwellings.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 33:

Converting Unpopular Properties to More Desirable Accommodation

- ◆ Local authorities which have difficulties letting particular types of accommodation, or have an especially high rate of turnover of tenancies in certain types of dwellings, should consider converting such properties into more desirable accommodation, by, for example, converting ground floor flats into maisonettes with own door entrances.

- ◆ Alternatively, high levels of turnover of tenants in estates which consist of a single dwelling type can be addressed by building extra units in order to provide alternative types of accommodation, e.g. by building in-fill standard housing in flats complexes, or by diversifying the tenure of the estate by building affordable housing or transferring ownership to a voluntary housing association or co-operative

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 34:

Change of Use of Unpopular Properties

- ◆ Local authorities which have difficulty letting particular properties should consider converting them to an appropriate alternative use such as a local estate office, community facility or crèche.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 35:

Refurbishment of Estates

- ◆ In some cases, large-scale refurbishment of dwellings and of the general environment is necessary in order to address the causes of its unpopularity and consequent high void rate. However, refurbishment should only be chosen in cases where housing practitioners are certain that: the poor quality of the built environment is the primary reason for the unpopularity of the estate, other options for addressing the incidence of voids have been considered or tried and found to be inappropriate, and the balance of economic advantage lies with the refurbishment option.
- ◆ In addition, local authorities should carry out detailed monitoring of each phase of a refurbishment project together with a comprehensive evaluation of the project on completion. Furthermore, they should ensure that tenants and residents of the target estates are consulted in-depth about the refurbishment works and that the standard of housing management and maintenance is improved.

4.4 ESTATE MANAGEMENT

In recent years many local authorities have established local estate management projects on difficult-to-let and problem estates, and some have decentralised their entire housing management service through the establishment of estate and district management offices. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group points out: 'There is strong evidence that systems which place emphasis on the management of individual estates help to secure a better and more efficient housing service which, in turn, can give rise to a qualitative improvement in the lives of residents'. In addition the establishment of estate management projects on difficult-to-let estates can make a significant contribution to reducing voids, both in the short term by helping to identify abandoned and illegally occupied properties, and in the longer term, by addressing the causes of voids through making the estate more popular.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 36:

Estate-focused Management

- ◆ Local authorities should establish estate-focused management systems in estates with high levels of voids. The establishment of such a system would involve the following steps:
 - Designate individual officers to specific estates or groups of estates
 - These 'estate officers' would perform generalist duties such as responding to tenants' queries on all housing management matters and facilitate and promote the formation of estate committees which would include tenants' representatives.
 - Estate officers should have the appropriate level of authority to make certain decisions locally. Their duties may involve working outside of normal hours and this should be reflected in the terms and conditions of their employment.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 37:

Estate-based Management

- ◆ In larger estates or groups of adjacent estates which have high levels of voids, or where voids are concentrated in estates that are remote from headquarters, local authorities should consider establishing an estate-based management system which would involve having a local housing management presence 'on the ground' by way of a local office or sub-office. Such a presence could initially be on a part-time basis to gauge the demand for such a service.
- ◆ The local office should be the base for all staff working on the estate or the area to which it relates and should have responsibility for the widest possible range of landlord and related services in regard to the estate.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 38:

Role of Estate-based Staff in Void Identification

- ◆ In those estates in which local estate management structures have been established, estate-based staff should be assigned responsibility for actively monitoring and recording the incidence of void dwellings and instigating appropriate action, and for encouraging local tenants' and residents' associations to play a role in identifying abandoned and illegally occupied dwellings.

4.5 ESTATE REGENERATION

In estates where the high level of voids is caused by the interaction of a range of factors, or where the local problems are regarded as particularly complex and intractable, local authorities should consider extending estate management projects to establish a multi-faceted programme to regenerate the estate, involving a concentration of resources from a range of statutory and community agencies. The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group recommends that this can be achieved by the development of an estate-based strategy and it sets out a range of recommendations regarding the design and implementation of a programme of this type, while its *Second Report* includes a range of suggestions regarding the actions that might be carried out under the auspices of an estate-based strategy.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 14: Estate-based Strategies

- ◆ The first step in the development of an estate-based strategy is assigning a member of staff as liaison officer to work with the tenants of the target estate and to encourage the formation of a tenant/community association if one does not already exist as set out in Good Practice Recommendations numbers 36 and 37 above
- ◆ After this the local authority should start an Estate Management Task Force comprising representatives of the local authority and tenants, together with all agencies which are involved in providing services in the estate. This could include: representatives of the relevant Partnership Company, the Gardaí, FÁS, Health Board, Department of Social Welfare (in relation to the Community Development Programme), Combat Poverty Agency and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) together with Community Groups.
- ◆ The group should have responsibility for developing a strategy for improving conditions in the estate/area. This task would normally include the following:
 - Determine the social, recreational, environmental, employment and community needs of estate area through widespread consultation with tenants and residents and surveys of their views
 - Analyse research findings and prepare an estate-based strategy that would provide a holistic response to the needs identified.
 - Identify the resources, plans and programmes which each statutory agency can deliver in response to the identified needs;
 - Implement a strategy plan
 - Seek feedback from tenants and residents and evaluate responses.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 14:

Actions Appropriate for
Inclusion in an Estate-based
Strategy

- ◆ An estate-based strategy will include actions which can be undertaken quickly and others which will be longer term projects. The strategy might include the following actions:
 - Working with the Gardaí to set up a neighbourhood watch or community alert scheme
 - Providing a flat or house which can be used for a variety of community activities
 - Ensuring that at least one shop is open, re-opened, or refurbished
 - Involving local second level schools in joint projects linked to improving the estate and to future work opportunities and working with primary schools to develop an awareness among pupils about the estate
 - Providing greater recreational facilities for teenagers and children where vandalism is caused mainly by them
 - Identifying the potential for adult education in the area and arranging for the VEC and adult literacy groups to meet this need
 - Maximising the resources of Partnership Companies to provide estate management training in co-operation with relevant training bodies
 - Organising community clean-up days and providing practical assistance such as equipment and skips
 - Involving Partnership Companies and Fás in the setting-up of co-operatives of local people to undertake minor works to the estate on a contract basis
 - Employment of a community development worker under the Community Development Programme.

4.6 VOID MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE MONITORING

In common with all other aspects of the local authority housing service the establishment of a system of performance indicators is a vital step in improving void management practice. The Department of the Environment and Local Government *Circular LG 9/00: Service Indicators in Local Authorities* requires local authorities to publish the results of specified measures of their overall performance in void management, each year in their annual reports. However, in order to achieve best practice in housing management, housing practitioners may also wish to utilise more detailed measures of specific aspects of their void management performance which reflect local circumstances and requirements. The recommendations and suggestions outlined below are intended to aid development of performance monitoring policies.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 15:

Void Management
Performance Monitoring

- ◆ In order to achieve best practice in reducing voids in difficult-to-let estates and properties, local authorities should monitor the percentage of their vacant dwellings which could be considered to be long-term voids (because they have been vacant for six months or more) under the following headings:
 - available for letting
 - awaiting minor reports
 - to be let after major repairs, conversion, or improvement
 - awaiting demolition
 - other.

- ◆ They should also review the results of monitoring of clusters of voids in difficult-to-let estates or properties and evaluate the effectiveness of reforms introduced to address clusters of voids on this basis.

SECTION FIVE

Both tenants and local authorities have a range of rights and responsibilities in relation to void management service. Tenants have the right to expect a high-quality void management service, to make a complaint if that service is unsatisfactory, and to be consulted about decisions concerning the management of the service. They also have a responsibility to provide the authority with adequate notice of their intention to quit the dwelling and to leave it in reasonable order, and to inform the authority if they suspect that any dwellings in their estate are abandoned or illegally occupied. Local authorities have a responsibility to provide an efficient service to tenants. This section of the guidelines examines the strategies which can be put in place in order to ensure that both parties fulfil their rights and responsibilities.

The staff of the void management service are among the main determinants of the quality of the service that is delivered to tenants by local authorities, and this section also considers how the management of staff resources can be improved. In order to achieve good practice in the management of the voids service, local authorities need to adopt a strategic approach to personnel management and development. This approach should be based on the development of a policy which ensures that the service is managed in an integrated fashion and that suitable staff are recruited to the service, provided with the training necessary to carry out their job and encouraged and facilitated to play a role in decision-making regarding the management of the service.

QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE AND PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

5.1 DEVELOPING A CUSTOMER CARE CODE

The first step in improving the standard of customer service in the void management service is the development of a customer action plan. This code should clearly set out the standard of service that tenants can expect to receive from the local authority and establish mechanisms for them to make a complaint if the service is unsatisfactory. In addition, local authorities should establish mechanisms for surveying individual tenants and members of tenants' associations on the quality of the voids service and regarding major management reforms and should endeavour to operate a customer friendly approach to the allocation of dwellings which provides housing applicants with maximum possible choice.

Good Practice Recommendation No. 39:

Developing a Customer Action Plan for Void Management

- ◆ Local authorities should develop a customer care code for their void management service.
- ◆ The starting point for the development of this code is the establishment of

procedures for surveying the satisfaction of tenants regarding all aspects of the void management service. This should include surveying new tenants on their satisfaction with procedures for the repair and allocation of void dwellings.

- ◆ Both the Housing Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) and the local authority partnership committee should also play a central role in the formulation of the customer action plan
- ◆ The plan should set out the responsibilities of both the local authority and tenants in relation to the void management service.
- ◆ The plan should clearly set out the standard a service which tenants can expect from the local authority and how adherence to these standards will be measured
- ◆ Local authorities should present the customer action plan in simple format, publish it in an attractive manner, and make it available to all tenants.
- ◆ The details of the Customer Action Plan should be determined by each local authority on the basis of consultation with both tenants and staff. However, a checklist of the contents of a customer care code is also provided below.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 40:

Tenant Satisfaction Surveys

- ◆ Local authorities should establish mechanisms for surveying individual tenants and members of tenants' associations on an ongoing basis regarding their satisfaction with all aspects of the void management service and information on the voids service that is provided to them by the local authority.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 41:

Customer Friendly Lettings Policy

- ◆ Local authorities which operate a policy of restricting offers of accommodation to housing applicants and restricting tenant transfers should ensure that they also operate a customer friendly lettings policy which allows applicants to nominate the areas in which they would prefer to live.

5.2 PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group raises some concerns about personnel management within local authorities and includes a number of suggestions for improving practice in this area. The report identifies the establishment of effective arrangements for the training and development of local authority staff as a vital prerequisite to achieving good practice in housing management, and it suggests that such training should address both housing management policy and the skills necessary to provide a better service, including the development and improvement of the interpersonal skills necessary for good customer care. As was mentioned in the Introduction to these guidelines, the report also identifies the dispersal of the different functions that go to make up public housing service across different sections within local authorities as one of the main factors impeding good practice in public housing management particularly in relation to void management.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 42:

Developing an Integrated Void Management Service

- ◆ The head of the housing department should be charged with the development of an integrated approach to the delivery of the voids management service and the need to co-ordinate void inspection, repair, security and allocation should be recognised as a key housing management responsibility.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 43:

Personnel Management and Development Policy

- ◆ In order to achieve good practice in the voids service, local authorities should develop and implement a policy on the management and development of the staff of this service.
- ◆ As a minimum, this policy statement should contain the following information:
 - the skills and competencies that are expected from the different staff of the service
 - details of training plans in order to update and develop the skills of all grades of staff

- details of the authority's arrangements for staff participation in policy development
 - the authority's disciplinary policy
 - any staff welfare or support services that it may provide.
-
- ◆ In the interests of ensuring that a comprehensive housing management service is provided for tenants, the personnel management and development policy should seek to promote an integrated multi-disciplinary approach to the delivery of all aspects of the voids service and encourage and facilitate interaction between staff working in the different sections of the authority's housing service.

 - ◆ The details of the personnel management and development policy should be determined by each local authority on the basis of consultation with staff and a consideration of the strategic requirements of its void management service. However, in order to aid the development of their policy, local authorities may wish to consult the checklist of items for inclusion in this statement that is provided on the following page.

CUSTOMER ACTION PLAN –**CHECKLIST OF CONTENTS****BEHAVIOUR OF VOID MANAGEMENT STAFF**

- ◆ Introduce and identify oneself to the tenant's satisfaction ✓
- ◆ Treat tenants with respect and courtesy at all times ✓
- ◆ Respect the confidentiality of any information provided by the tenant to the authority ✓
- ◆ Do not ask tenants to discuss personal, family or financial information in an inappropriate environment such as a public office or at the door of their home ✓

RIGHTS OF TENANTS

- ◆ To have a reasonable choice of accommodation ✓
- ◆ To have the privacy of their home respected at all times ✓
- ◆ To have void dwellings in their estate re-let as quickly as possible ✓

RESPONSIBILITIES OF TENANTS

- ◆ To provide the local authority with adequate notice of their intention to quit the dwelling ✓
- ◆ To leave their dwelling in reasonable order ✓
- ◆ To inform the authority of any dwellings which they believe are abandoned or squatted ✓

TENANT SATISFACTION WITH THE VOID MANAGEMENT SERVICE

- ◆ A formal complaints procedure should be available for tenants who are dissatisfied with any aspect of the void management service ✓
- ◆ All complaints should be investigated promptly and details of expected response times to complaints should be included in the customer care code ✓
- ◆ Local authorities should establish a prompt method of compensating tenants for any damage caused in the course of repairing properties ✓
- ◆ Local authorities should establish procedures for accessing feedback from individual tenants and members of tenants' associations on the performance of all aspects of the void management service ✓

**PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT AND
DEVELOPMENT POLICY –****CHECKLIST OF CONTENTS****STAFF SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES**

- ◆ Details of the skills and competencies that are expected from the main grades of staff who are employed by the voids service ✓

STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN

- ◆ Procedures for surveying staff regarding their training needs ✓
- ◆ Information programmes on developments in void management policy and information and communications technology ✓
- ◆ Skills up-dating programmes ✓
- ◆ Inter-disciplinary workshops and seminars, including joint training with staff of other sections of the housing service ✓

STAFF MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION

- ◆ Details of the procedures for the management and supervision of staff, including the 'line of command' in the voids section ✓
- ◆ Details of the authority's procedures for dealing with staff grievances and complaints ✓
- ◆ Disciplinary procedures covering the following areas:
 - absenteeism ✓
 - poor performance ✓
 - breaches of the customer care code ✓
 - breaches of health and safety policy ✓

STAFF INFORMATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- ◆ Procedures for consulting staff on the development and reform of void management policy and procedures ✓

STAFF WELFARE

- ◆ Staff welfare policy and services ✓
- ◆ Details of the authority's health and safety policy ✓

5.3 **INFORMATION FOR VOIDS SERVICE STAFF**

Section Two of these guidelines discussed the need to provide information to tenants on the operation of the voids service in order to ensure that they fulfil their obligations in relation to, for instance, vacating dwellings. If reform of void management is to be effectively implemented it is also vital that procedures are put in place to clearly communicate the details of the authority's policy to staff who deliver the service on a day-to-day basis.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 44:

Resource Packs for Voids Service Staff

- ◆ Local authorities should provide resource packs for all staff of the voids service.
- ◆ The exact content of these resource packs is a matter for individual authorities. However, as a minimum, they should contain the following information:
 - the authority's statement of policy on void management
 - the content of any voids service guides which the authority issues to tenants
 - the authority's customer care code
 - the authority's personnel management and development policy
 - details of procedures for monitoring the performance of all aspects of the voids service.

5.4 STAFF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The *First Report* of the Housing Management Group identifies the provision of training for staff as a vital prerequisite to achieving good practice in public housing management.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 45:

Staff Training and Programmes

- ◆ In order to achieve good practice in the management of the voids service, local authorities should develop and implement a training programme for the staff of the service. Although the details of this programme will depend on local circumstances, as a minimum it should address the following issues:
 - all aspects of the authority's void management policy
 - good practice in the repair of voids
 - good practice in securing voids
 - procedures for identifying and reposessing abandoned dwellings
 - procedures for evicting illegal occupiers
 - good practice in the re-letting of voids
 - customer care
 - interpersonal skills
 - health and safety procedures including personal health issues such as stress management skills
 - skills up-dating and enhancement courses.
- ◆ This programme should also provide for training for any specialist void management staff employed by the authority such as void inspection staff and voids service managers.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 16: Interdisciplinary and Interdepartmental Staff Training

- ◆ In order to facilitate the development of an integrated team approach to void management, local authorities should ensure that training courses include the full range of disciplines and grades of staff which work in the voids service.
- ◆ In order to encourage interaction between the voids service staff and the staff of the other aspects of the housing service, local authorities should consider including staff from a range of sections within the same training programme, where relevant. Suitable topics for training of this type would include:
 - freedom of information
 - equal opportunities
 - housing policy
 - stress management.

5.5 STAFF PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE VOIDS SERVICE

No one has a more intimate knowledge of the operation, and especially of the inefficiencies, of the voids service than the staff who provide the service. Achieving good practice in the management of the voids service requires that staff are consulted about any proposed reforms to the service and are afforded an opportunity to influence these reforms and play a role in the development of the authority.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION No. 46:

Developing Partnership Arrangements with Staff

- ◆ Local authorities should develop an active internal partnership with staff which ensures that staff of all grades are afforded a full opportunity to influence policy formation and operational strategy and are consulted regarding all changes in policy or operational matters.
- ◆ Consultation with staff can make a particular contribution to policy development in the following areas: the development of policy on void management; addressing voids in difficult-to-let estates; the formulation of customer care codes; the development of training programmes; the identification of performance indicators.
- ◆ Staff should be kept informed about the results of performance monitoring and be given an opportunity to play a role in planning to address any inefficiencies identified by performance monitoring.
- ◆ Procedures to survey staff satisfaction on a regular basis should also be established.

5.6 CUSTOMER CARE AND PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

In order to achieve best practice in void management, local authorities may wish to implement a programme to measure the performance of their personnel management and development programme for this service.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 17: Customer Care Performance Indicators

- ◆ In order to achieve high standards of customer care in the voids service local authorities should establish procedures to survey individual tenants and members of tenants' and residents' associations on their satisfaction with all aspects of the service and monitor the results of these surveys on an ongoing basis.

Best Practice Suggestion No. 18: Personnel Management and Development Performance Indicators

- ◆ Indicators of the authority's performance in the area of personnel management and development could include the following issues:
 - Percentage of voids service staff involved in health and safety, skills upgrading and personal development training
 - Percentage of staff involved in integrated training
 - Number and percentage of hours lost among housing staff and maintenance workforce by work depot, section, or location and by
 - (a) Casual sick leave
 - (b) Certified sick leave
 - (c) Industrial injury
 - (d) Special leave
 - Number of staff satisfaction surveys carried out on policy, operation, service delivery
 - Number and percentage of staff expressing
 - (a) satisfaction with service
 - (b) need to change aspects of service
 - (c) need to overhaul entire service.

This section summarises the main provisions of the legislation on void management and of other legislation, which is relevant to good practice in the management of this service. It also lists some further readings and contact details of organisations which can provide useful advice to local authorities on the management of their voids service.

6.1 VOID MANAGEMENT LEGISLATION AND GUIDELINES

LEGISLATION, PUBLICATIONS, USEFUL ADDRESSES

The main provisions in relation to the maintenance of local authority dwellings are contained in the Housing Act, 1966, as amended.

HOUSING ACT, 1966

- ◆ *Section 58 (1)* – vests responsibility for the management and maintenance of local authority dwellings in local authorities subject to regulations made by the Minister for the Environment and Local Government.
- ◆ *Section 62* – sets out the procedures for the repossession of abandoned local authority dwellings. These procedures, which are identical to those used for repossession of dwellings on grounds of non-payment of rent, involve the serving of a written Notice to Quit the dwelling not less than four weeks after it is due to take effect.

HOUSING REGULATIONS, 1980

- ◆ *Section 83(1)(m)* – requires local authority tenants to keep their dwellings in a fit and proper state, renders them responsible for all internal decoration, breakage of glass in the windows, damage to the fixtures and fittings of the dwelling and proper maintenance of the garden and prohibits them causing any damage to the dwelling, allowing refuse to accumulate, and carrying out any additions or alterations without the permission of the local authority. It also requires them to make good any damage to the dwelling without delay or to reimburse the local authority for the costs of doing this.

HOUSING ACT, 1988

The 1988 Housing Act sets out the principal provisions relating to the allocation of local authority dwellings and sets out the responsibilities of local authorities in relation to providing accommodation for homeless people.

- ◆ *Section 9* – requires local authorities to carry out periodic assessments of the numbers of people within their operation areas who are in need of housing and are unable to provide it from their own resources. These assessments should be carried out every three years as a minimum.
- ◆ *Section 11* – requires local authorities to let their dwellings in accordance with a scheme of letting priorities, which they have developed on the basis of this assessment of housing need and a consideration of relevant legislative requirements. The adoption of such a scheme is a reserved function of the elected members of the local authority subject to the approval of the Minister for the Environment and Local Government.
- ◆ *Section 29* – deems it an offence for any person to deliberately supply false information to local authorities for the purposes of their assessment of housing need or in reaching decisions regarding the allocations of local authority accommodation.

HOUSING (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS ACT), 1992

The 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act also contains a number of provisions which are relevant to the management of the void management service. These include:

- ◆ *Section 9(1)* – requires local authorities to develop a statement of policy on housing management and the Department of the Environment and Local Government's (1992) *Memorandum on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management* specifies that the section of this statement which addresses the letting of local authority accommodation should include detailed consideration of the authority's procedures for monitoring the incidence of vacant dwellings; reporting on the reasons for vacancies and measures to ensure that dwellings becoming available for letting are let to tenants within the shortest possible timeframe.
- ◆ *Section 9(2)* – allows local authorities to delegate some of their housing management, maintenance and control functions to a designated body.

- ◆ *Section 9(3)* – specifies the matters which should be contained in a delegation order.
- ◆ *Section 16* – specifies that the minimum period of a notice to quit a local authority dwelling should be less than four weeks.

HOUSING (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) ACT, 1997

- ◆ *Section 20* – makes specific provision for dealing with cases where a local authority dwelling or any part of it is occupied, continuously or intermittently, by a person other than the tenant, or a person who has failed to vacate the dwelling on the termination of a tenancy and that person is committing antisocial behaviour. In situations such as these the local authority may send notification to the Gardai stating that the dwelling is illegally occupied *and* the occupant is, or has been engaged in anti-social behaviour and in the interests of good estate management should be required to vacate the dwelling. Persons who refuse to comply with such directions from a garda are deemed to have committed an offence under the terms of the Act and on conviction are liable to a fine of up to £1,500 or to a prison sentence of up to 12 months, or both.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT CIRCULARS AND MEMORANDA.

Circular LG 9/00 – instructs local authorities to establish procedures to monitor their performance in a range of service areas including vacant dwellings. Under the terms of this circular and the associated DoELG policy statement – *Service Indicators in Local Authorities* – local authorities are required to collect information on: the percentage of their dwellings that are vacant and are (a) available for letting or (b) vacant for other reasons, together with information on the average time taken to re-let dwellings available for letting or awaiting minor repairs. The Circular suggests that these performance indicators should be measured on a monthly basis with the average monthly measurement shown at year-end.

Circular LG 13/00 – includes guidelines on the preparation of a customer service action plan and *Circular LG 14/00* sets out the principles of Quality Customer Service which should inform the development of the action plans.

6.2 VOID MANAGEMENT PUBLICATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

Department of the Environment and Local Government (2000),
Modernising Government: The Challenge for Local Government,
Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government

Department of the Environment (1999),
Guidelines: Remedial Works Scheme for Local Authority Housing,
Dublin, Department of the Environment

Department of the Environment and Local Government (2000),
Service Indicators in Local Authorities,
Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government

Housing Management Group (1996),
First Report,
Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government

Housing Management Group (1998),
Second Report,
Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government

HOUSING UNIT PUBLICATIONS

Brennan, B. (2000),
*Good Practice in Housing Management: Guidelines for Local Authorities –
Repair and Maintenance of Dwellings*,
Dublin, Housing Unit

Clarke, J. and Norris M. (2001),
*Good Practice in Housing Management: Guidelines for Local Authorities – Rent Assessment,
Collection, Accounting and Arrears Control*,
Dublin, Housing Unit

6.4 USEFUL ADDRESSES

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Custom House, Dublin 1
Tel: 01-8882000
Fax: 01-8882888
Website: www.environ.ie