

Empty homes standard review 2021: Summary

Introduction

In September 2021 the Scrutiny Group volunteered to carry out a review of Cottsway’s Empty Homes Standard in response to relatively low levels of customer satisfaction from customers who had taken part in the lettings satisfaction survey.

What we did

We reviewed empty homes standards from eleven organisations of a similar size to Cottsway with the aim of seeing how Cottsway’s standard compares. We looked at each organisation’s published standard and compared relevant sections against each other, including the level of information provided for each section, eg. cleaning, removal of rubbish, repairs etc. Each member also focused on one area – gifted items, safety and security, and energy efficiency. In addition, one member of the group also visited an empty property, which helped to put Cottsway’s Empty Homes Standard into context.

Our review focussed on:

- How Cottsway’s standard compares to others
- The level of detail provided
- Safety and security
- Energy efficiency
- Gifted items
- Cleaning.

Visiting an empty property

One member of the Scrutiny Group visited a currently empty property accompanied by the Communities Manager. This was an older, recently vacated 3-bedroom family home left in relatively poor condition. We then returned to view the property when the work was completed, and it was ready to let. These visits helped provide some context to the review.

Benchmarking of anonymised Acuity satisfaction data

Acuity carry out Cottsway’s telephone surveys and were able to provide us with the following anonymised benchmarking information from their clients:

	Base sizes		Condition of your home at the time of letting		Helpfulness of staff dealing with your new tenancy		Easy to deal with		Overall lettings process	
	2020/21	2021/22	2020/21	2021/22	2020/21	2021/22	2020/21	2021/22	2020/21	2021/22
Landlord 1	279	99	94%	93%	96%	93%			97%	97%
Landlord 2		318		81%						93%
Landlord 3		45		84%		91%		84%		89%
Landlord 4	97	83	70%	68%	96%	95%			89%	89%
Landlord 5		32		84%		97%				88%
Cottsway Lettings	115	59	81%	80%	92%	85%	91%	88%	88%	83%
Landlord 6		6		80%						83%
Landlord 7		41		71%		90%				76%
Landlord 8	61						92%		87%	

Here Cottsway rank joint 5th place out of seven landlords for satisfaction with the condition of the home at time of letting in 2021/22. Cottsway also rank joint 6th of seven landlords for satisfaction with the overall lettings process in 2021/22.

What we found

- Other housing associations have more detail in their Empty Homes Standards though the standards are broadly similar.
- More emphasis is needed on safety and security and energy efficiency –there is little mention of this in Cottsway’s Empty Homes Standard. Other housing associations place more emphasis on it.
- There are also more flexible and generous decorating voucher schemes depending on the size and condition of the property.
- Our visit to a recently vacated property highlighted the challenges the Empty homes Team face and the need to communicate clearly with customers about what they can and cannot expect from their new home.

Cleaning

Though not included in the review we are aware that comments collected in the lettings satisfaction survey show dissatisfaction with the cleaning of empty properties. In response, Cottsway are aiming to improve the standard of cleaning by trialling the use of a specialist cleaning contractor.

Conclusion

Customer expectations (as evidenced through survey comments) sometimes exceed the current Empty Homes Standard and Cottsway’s offer.

To better manage this more, information should be included in the ‘Moving into an empty home’ information given to new customers including information on what Cottsway do and don’t provide in a previously occupied home. This will better reflect what Cottsway actually do - for example, new customers are provided with a copy of an Energy Performance Certificate and smoke detectors are provided and tested, but this is not mentioned in the current document.

Making clear what Cottsway don’t provide is also valuable, for example carpets, flooring (though kitchens and bathrooms do have floor coverings) and full decoration are not provided, but this is not clear in the current standard shared with new customers.

A greater emphasis on safety and security, and energy efficiency would also be useful and would fit well with the Charter for Social Housing Residents (white paper) and the green agenda.

Better communication with customers will help ensure that their expectations are realistic and reflect the agreed standard. Providing more detail in the Empty Homes Standard and making customers more aware of what the standard does and does not include when they bid for and accept a property will have little impact on budgets or officer time but does have the potential to improve customer satisfaction with the lettings process.

Recommendations

- To improve the level of information given in Cottsway’s published Empty Homes Standard, including more information on safety and security, and energy efficiency. The revised standard can be found online at: www.cottsway.co.uk/emptyhomes
- To review the criteria for decorating packs.

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