

Scrutiny Panel Review

• Voids

Contents

1.	Executive summary	2
2.	Introduction	3
3.	Review aims	4
4.	Methodology	5-6
5.	Review findings and recommendations	7-11
6.	Summary and next steps	12
	<u>Appendix A</u> : Inside Housing report	16
	<u>Appendix B</u> : BBC report	17

September 2024

Executive summary

West Kent's Scrutiny Panel ('we') have conducted a review into the efficiency of how homes are re-let after becoming void.

Over the past two years, we've been kept informed during our quarterly meetings about West Kent's void loss and re-let times.

We were initially interested in this area when the target re-let time was repeatedly missed in 2022. We knew the importance of having homes available as soon as possible for residents that needed them.

The review involved analysing data from a variety of sources, including West Kents' Tenant Satisfaction and Rant and Rave findings. Also, the amount lost by West Kent during the void period was a concern, as we would prefer to see money saved and spent on other areas. We appreciated that there would always be a loss, but did not expect it to be as high as reported.

After a challenging start to the first half of 2023, the void loss and re-let times started to improve. Although the void loss target was met last year, it was still £685,000, and the re-let time for the year-to-date was not within target. We wanted to review the processes around this area and became focused on helping West Kent to improve the re-let time and reduce the voids loss from 2024.

From our previous '*Repairs*' review, we also wanted to use our knowledge to improve other areas associated with voids, such as the void standard. The majority of scores received through 'Rant and Rave' in 2023, from residents commenting on the condition of the home they moved into, were below the target West Kent had set at 4.4 out of 5. We wanted to see if we could improve the standard of the re-let homes to improve resident satisfaction.

Introduction

We were formed in 2020 and the Panel currently consists of six residents. We meet quarterly to understand and analyse performance and satisfaction information and recommend ways in which West Kent can improve services for residents. We also meet monthly to discuss our chosen review topics and regularly hold discussions within the group about the ongoing review.

The last review conducted by us was focused on anti-social behaviour (ASB) and the communication provided during the ASB case process.

This review on voids was completed by six panel members, with one person nominated as the review lead.

Definition of Terms

A **void** refers to all properties for which there is a current rent account, but for which no current tenancy exists, thereby incurring rent and service charge losses. A void can include a new build home, being let for the first time, but for the purpose of this review we are only focused on properties West Kent are re-letting.

The **void period** starts on the Monday after the keys are handed back to West Kent and ends on the official tenancy start date for the new resident.

The **void loss** calculation does not include:

New builds;

Mutual exchanges;

Successions; or

Major works to re-lets (i.e. bathroom / kitchen replacements)

Asbestos works required.

Minor Void means any empty home where the works required are standard, and involve general repairs, but no major component replacement (e.g. a Kitchen or Bathroom).

Major Void or **V3** means any empty home where at least one major component needs replacing (for example a kitchen or bathroom) or where a property must not be let, as it is unavailable due to health and safety concerns (such as needing to replace floorboards throughout).

Review aims

When considering this review, we agreed on the following questions to answer:

How can the process be streamlined to ensure the optimum response to a new void and the minimal loss of revenue, whilst providing welcoming homes for new residents to take pride in?

Would it be beneficial to have the Allocations officer being involved from the start of the process to consider the incoming tenant and what their needs will be to allow them to arrange gifting of items?

What should be the position for gifting of items left by outgoing tenants such as white goods and carpeting (understanding that testing/ cleaning may be required prior to the new tenant taking possession – and understanding that the items are gifted and not the responsibility of WKHA)?

Provision of safe, warm, welcoming homes for our residents.

Methodology

This review started on 12 February 2024. It has been conducted over a period of six months, with some changes to the Panel during this period due to health and personal issues. Data from a variety of sources has been obtained and analysed by us. Details of the sources are as follows:

Staff presentations and information

We have met with:

The Head of Voids and Lettings.

An empty homes surveyor.

The Contract Manager for Voids and Repairs.

A manager from Brenwards.

The Tenancy Sustainment Manager

The West Kent Fuel Efficiency Officer

Data and information

The panel also received:

Void Management Policy (Draft)

Summary of responsibilities

Void Dashboard

Figures provided to Communities and Housing Board Members for end of 2023.

Void Specification January 2024

Description of minimum standard for all Void properties.

Materials and Components Schedule

Details of the finish to be expected.

Home Standards for General Needs, Emerald, Extra Care and Temporary / Supported properties

Explanation of responsibilities for West Kent and Resident

Bathroom and Kitchen Specifications

Details of the requirements

Template Version of Pre and Post Void Inspection Forms

Pre-void form is completed before keys are handed back by outgoing resident

Post-void is completed at the end of Brenwards works

Rant and Rave Data

Comments from residents when they have scored 1, 2 or 3 in transactional feedback for re-let homes, and repairs within 6 months of moving into a property.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures Feedback

Comments from residents that relate to a selection of key words.

Complaint Case Summaries

Seven cases that have been dealt with by the Customer Resolution Team related to re-lets.

Voids Data combined from Allocations and Brenwards

Information has been provided to show the last six months of void properties.

Location of void properties.

Void Type (V1,2,3 or Minor / Major)

Timescales for works

Timescales to Tenancy Start Date.

Void Loss

Out-of-target Supporting Documentation

Brenwards comments for the property

Pre-void inspection

Schedule of repairs

Post-void inspection

West Kent Communities Documentation

Criteria and guidance for Furniture Packs

Criteria and guidance for Hardship Fund

Copy of Financial Inclusion Affordability Check Form

Alternative Housing Providers Policies

- 1. Moat**
- 2. North Devon Homes**
- 3. Rosebery Housing Association**

We have also received information quarterly on West Kent's performance relating to voids, so this has informed their review.

Desktop research

We also completed our own research:

Inside Housing article from 23 January 2024 (appendix A)

Additional housing association policies and data

BBC report: [Anger over carpet being ripped out of social housing - BBC News](#) dated 16th May 2023 (appendix B)

Review findings and recommendations

The Panel have raised six recommendations from the questions raised in the initial scoping meeting, using our understanding of the information and data received relating to voids.

Recommendations

How can the process be streamlined to ensure the optimum response to a new void and the minimal loss of revenue, whilst providing welcoming homes for new residents to take pride in?

1. Introduce an 18-month visual inspection of the condition of properties.

We were shown several examples of void properties that had been in very poor condition. The initial question asked to West Kent staff was '*how do properties get into such poor condition?*'. There are approximately 10% of properties in the six months of data given to the Panel, which were recorded as V3 works, which is the highest level of repair and could allow for an indefinite period for repair. Properties shown had signs of both significant hoarding and neglect.

We expect that many of the properties would be visited by an operative or Neighbourhood Housing Officer within an 18-month period. Although there is a 5 year stock survey, any other visits by operatives / NHO's should also record property condition and relevant observations such as the general condition of the property, any significant concerns including hoarding and neglect of the property. The information gained from these visits can then be entered into the later recommended information report (5.2) for individual properties. The aim would be to use existing visits, such as gas safety checks and general repairs/ home visits, rather than introducing a new appointment.

We received information when we commenced the review:

Stock condition surveys have commenced however we are collecting a reduced amount of data on key components only and HHSRS risk. No photos are being stored on CX, but we will ensure data is manually transferred to CX until the mobile solution is up and running. We are behind on the programme by 144 properties due to the delay in commencing surveys in CX, but these will be arranged for the 1st Quarter of 2024/2025. We have made progress on reducing stock condition surveys older than 5 years from 52 surveys to 37, all of these are going through the no access process. We are working to reduce the number of properties where residents are refusing works and are making good progress in reducing these numbers by actively engaging with our residents.

A collaborative approach using standardised home visit reports should be used by all staff to make sure they record the condition of the property on CX when they have been in a property, would provide several benefits:

Residents that are vulnerable, such as those that hoard items or cannot maintain their homes, can be identified and supported sooner.

Identification of any other safeguarding issues

Significant repairs, such as damp and mould, can be identified and actioned earlier.

If the property then becomes void, it should be in a better condition, to reduce the extent of any void works and lower the re-let time. The information recorded from the 18-month visits may also assist in the planning of works needed when the keys are returned.

Measure: This will be introduced to all properties, except for shared ownership, leasehold homes and KEHFA schemes. Two years after the introduction of this recommendation, it should be possible to review the quality of the information being recorded from these visits and whether a visit every 18-months has been achievable. These will also link to and inform the stock condition of properties. It should be a “live” document/ spreadsheet, that incorporates all information about the individual property.

The measure of how many people have been referred to Communities, Tenancy Sustainment and / or the Damp, Mould and Condensation team, through these visits, would provide some indication of impact.

As the condition of the properties are monitored, the amount of void repairs should start to reduce; this would be a long-term process. It would be helpful if this process could eliminate homes that exceed the £20,000 threshold of repair works, which is when a void is assessed to see if it would be more economical to sell. Also, a reasonable reduction to the percentage of homes recorded as V3 / major void works, could be set as a target by the Property Team, to measure the success of this recommendation.

2. The data captured during the void process should be reviewed to ensure consistency across teams and the information reported on CX should be revisited to make sure it is being implemented efficiently.

Data provided during the review showed some inconsistencies, as information was combined into one spreadsheet from two separate sources; the Allocations team had a spreadsheet, and the Property team / Brenwards had a spreadsheet. There appeared to be some typographical errors from manual input, especially related to dates, which meant there was a conflict between some of the information recorded. Key dates, such as void start dates and void target dates, should be recorded in one location.

Although the Panel understand that there are different functions being completed by each team, it would be beneficial to have both teams working from a single data source; this might be through CX. However, any manual data entry should be verified through functions such as '*checksum*' to assist in improving the integrity of the data.

There should be an information section (either within CX or an accessible joined database) relating to each property – that can be accessed in order to populate information such as property condition, that is provided by any employee or contractor visiting the property. This could be pulled through from simple reports/ job details completed.

Standardising property visit forms will allow this to be completed.

The information section can also pull through all information relating to the property, from the size of the property to repairs carried out. This could also list the programmed works such as kitchen/ bathroom/ boiler/ window replacement dates etc.

Using this information may also help identify ongoing issues with properties as all repairs and reports will be easily viewed.

The Panel identified that as the functions of the Allocations team and Property team (including operatives) interact during the process, it makes sense to have a live document that records everything related to a single property in real-time. Key information for an asset (such as number of bedrooms) can be pre-populated from CX in pre-void inspection forms, to avoid manual input, all repairs can be listed for the void period, with each repair being updated when completed, so all teams involved know when they can act.

Measure: Once this recommendation has been actioned, the Panel expect improved planning accuracy for the void process and an improvement in efficiency of the works. The Panel would hope to see the reduction in the re-let target date and overall void loss. These figures can continue to be monitored for 12 to 18 months, but any change to the recording of information may need to be implemented for long-term benefit.

3. To create welcoming homes for new residents to take pride in, carpet should be installed in all rooms of a void as a standard for social rent homes and considered for others.

To introduce this change, a pilot scheme should be considered for the installation of carpet in the hallway, bedrooms and living rooms of voids in the next financial year (2025/26) for a period of 18 months. If a carpet in a property is left by the outgoing tenant, and is in good

condition, this should be offered as a gifted item (thus removing the need for new carpet to be fitted). This will ensure that carpets will not be replaced unnecessarily.

Any carpet put into a void will be a gifted item and West Kent will not be responsible for any damage.

Any need for carpet will be discussed with the incoming tenant at the earliest opportunity, as they may not be required. The carpets that could be offered will have a limited range of colours.

This will keep costs to a minimum for the duration of the trial.

The panel are aware that in May 2022 the void standard was reviewed and the Communities and Housing committee asked for carpets to be considered. Data was reviewed regarding need and demand for floor coverings in order to determine whether the standard needed to be reviewed. This then went to Board for discussion later in 2022 and more work was undertaken to understand which tenants needed an enhanced void standard and, given the significant cost implications, options for funding. In October 2022 it was agreed that the community fund would be used to cover approximately 10% of general needs voids with carpets. In 2023 we supported 34 households with flooring which does equate to slightly more than the assumed 10%. This approach was agreed as funding carpets at all voids has significant impacts on budgets and was not always required.

They raised the question as to why Emerald schemes were given carpet as standard for a void – but this was not the practice for other properties. (The panel visited a completed void in Whiteoak Court, and these were supplied by Brenwards at £18 per square meter). It is felt that by employing local businesses to complete this work – costs could be considerably reduced and also offer support for local businesses. This should go out to tender to identify the best suppliers. They will also need to be onboarded to work closely with Brenwards to avoid delays in the overall void process.

The panel felt that most social rent housing residents would benefit from the offer of carpeting, as they are from the poorest backgrounds generally living on benefits. It is also recognised that those on affordable rents could also benefit from this offer depending on financial means testing and disposable income. The need to carpet a property would be financially very difficult for most incoming residents. It is also recognised that some incoming tenants would prefer to provide their own flooring.

In order to reduce the need for carpeting, further consideration should be given to leaving existing flooring in place – and cleaning it as part of the void process. Flooring will need to be in good condition and gifted to the incoming tenant. This will help reduce costs.

To mitigate the cost of providing flooring – it may be possible to offset the costs with a small rental increase. Whilst this will be difficult to do, understanding that residents may move before the carpet costs are met, this will ensure that the household has a safe, warm, welcoming environment with the benefits of:

- People taking better care of their homes as this will encourage pride in the new home

- A warmer home, with the energy saving benefits of adequate flooring
- A reduction of anti-social related cases through noise reduction
- A reduction of damp and mould in the home
- Improved rant and rave feedback from new tenants.

The panel recommended that means testing should be extended to consider the financial affordability for each incoming household. There are grants offered by local authorities – which can be utilised, but this is not an offer for all, which means that many are disadvantaged. The grant availability will offset some of the potential costs to West Kent.

The panel understand that provision of carpets could be costly – but feel that in the current economic climate, this would be very beneficial to families in need for all of the reasons highlighted.

A recent article in *Inside Housing* on fuel poverty, identified that there are 1.2 million people living without flooring in the UK, with two thirds of those people in social housing. Last year (Q1-Q5), over £21,000 of support was provided to some of our vulnerable residents through the hardship fund for flooring. This support is subject to a financial assessment. (App A)

Other research also indicated that two housing associations indicated that there was a significant impact on voids – as people are less likely to want to leave if they have the carpets etc that they need. This proposal could be set as a trial first, consideration could also be given to recharging the cost of installation. (App B)

Measure: To monitor the success of this pilot, consideration can be given to a set of questions to ask our new residents at the start and end of the financial year. For instance, the 'Rant and Rave' question, '*Thinking about your recent move, how satisfied are you with the overall condition of your home?*' can be asked of the piloted residents and their scores can be directly compared to the previous year. After 12 months, West Kent can check if the carpets remained in the property. The residents can be asked about any benefits they identified from having carpets. The level of hardship requests for carpets should also be reduced if re-let homes do not need them. This will allow the hardship fund and the scheme offered by KCC to be used with families that are struggling with their living conditions in existing homes.

4. To create welcoming homes for new residents to take pride in, the walls should be whitewashed.

The panel visited two void properties in White Oak, Swanley. One was a ready to let unit and the other recently void. The ready to let unit had been whitewashed and re-carpeted to a good standard and presented a welcoming new home. The other had old carpet that was to be removed and was in average decorative state which was going to be brought up to the same standard as the ready to let unit.

The panel have suggested that all homes being relet should have a whitewash finish to all rooms.

The whitewash would allow clearer conversations to be had with the resident upon responsibility for redecoration of a property. Any damage will only be the whitewash of the walls / ceiling, not trying to colour match or compensate for wallpaper damaged.

Whitewash is recommended – rather than a choice of colour, as this will bring down the painting times (avoiding the need for cutting in of walls to ceilings) – and avoid any issues with colour choice etc.

Measure:

This should reduce the need for decorating vouchers being provided.

Our more vulnerable incoming tenants will not need to find decorators as the property will be in a good liveable condition (along the standards of the over 55 scheme voids).

When these works are carried out, this may assist with identifying more serious underlying issues such as hidden damp and mould, and structural issues.

Use of mould resistant paint will also contribute to helping prevent damp and mould in the future.

The allocations officer can also work with the incoming tenant – as some may wish to complete their own redecoration in time.

5. A Voids Co-ordinator should be appointed to oversee the entire voids process from hand back to re-let.

There are several people that are involved in managing the voids process, but there does not appear to be an overarching person co-ordinating the process. In view of the level of financial importance associated with voids, especially the repair costs and the loss of rent, it would be justified to have somebody at West Kent managing the voids. It is felt that this role would be vital to keep a close eye on the format and relevance of the input of data as soon as the system allows. This will also help to oversee and monitor/ manage costs relating to the redecoration of void properties and the provision of flooring.

Although Brenwards have a co-ordinator for repairs, they do not have control of other operatives, such as inHomes, and although the surveyor at West Kent is involved across the repairs process, the allocation element to the re-let is outside of their control. There should be someone that takes accountability for ensuring each void is finished to the highest standard in the quickest timeframe, with someone ready to move in as soon as the home is ready. If someone from the Allocations team is needed earlier in the process, the co-ordinator would be able to make those arrangements and therefore, it would not be necessary to have the Allocations officer being involved from the start.

There are some areas of the void process, such as Asbestos works, which seems to be separated from the process but is an important part. A co-ordinator would be focused on bringing teams together, rather than looking to separate functions. They could use a Gantt chart to monitor the timings of each stage, knowing exactly what stage each void is and it would help to identify trends in performance.

Measure: This recommendation, with the right person coordinating the voids, should see a direct improvement in all areas of performance.

6. The work of the Abacus Furniture Project should be better advertised.

An outgoing resident should be informed about the Abacus Furniture Project at the very start of their notice period. Also, if someone indicates to their NHO, the Allocations team or the Property team about a potential gifted item during the notice period, they should be directed to Abacus. Improved advertisement of the service should also be considered generally, as well as to those moving into new homes in need of support.

This may also benefit current residents – as there is only minimal information on the WKHA website.

The Panel wanted to make sure incoming tenants all over the county have easy access to white goods or furniture. If an outgoing resident does not want an item, consideration was given to whether West Kent would organise the gifting of the item to the next resident. However, this raised several issues and would limit the donation of the item to just the incoming tenant.

It was decided that as Abacus already run a successful project and all of their soft furnishings comply with current fire regulations, as well as electrical goods being safety tested, they should be promoted. They can also ensure any donated item is available to any resident.

The Panel also felt this recommendation would help to lower fly-tipping, which is a concern across many West Kent neighbourhoods.

Measure: We could ask Abacus to check any donations they received or items sold from the void properties in 2025/26. If the advertisement has been successful, we would expect to see people using the service and this recommendation can also be measured by the number of overall donations made in comparison to the previous year.

Better advertising of Abacus should see a greater use of the service by our residents in general.

Summary and next steps

The key messages in this report are about improving the standards of the homes that we provide incoming residents. Looking at carpeting and redecoration helps to avoid the stigma for entering social housing, and providing a safe, clean environment for individuals and families.

The Panel have been very impressed with the improvements made with the voids process since 2022 – and have given their findings and recommendations to further improve our services.

The Panel have identified the need for joined up thinking and planning within the void process, suggesting greater data collection about properties and residents. This will not only help smooth the process in the future, but will also give great emphasis on those that are vulnerable and need additional support.

The cost-of-living crisis has had a huge impact on social housing residents, and these recommendations seek to help those with the greatest needs.

By making use of the opportunities to inspect our properties at the earliest opportunity of a notice period, and through regular property condition reports, WK can identify areas of works needed and upcoming to lower the void turnaround times and save losses in the future.

There is a table of recommendations related to the review and responses from relevant heads of service across West Kent.

A progress report on the recommendation implementation will be provided to the panel and communities and housing committee in six months *****

A resident copy of this report will be published on the West Kent Website.

The numbers behind fuel poverty in the UK

Switchee's new model shows the number of social households underheating their homes across the UK in real time, during 2022 and 2023. *Inside Housing* looks into the figures

As the cost of living crisis in the UK stretches into a third winter, fuel poverty remains a concern for millions of people living in the social rented sector, as well as their landlords. The latest increase in the energy price cap, which came into force at the start of the year and will see average household bills increase by £94 annually, is set to make the situation worse for those on the brink of falling into fuel poverty.

There are a number of different definitions of fuel poverty, which can make it difficult to get an accurate gauge on the true extent of the problem across the country. A household is sometimes defined as being fuel poor if it spends at least 10% of its income on energy to heat the home to a reasonable standard. According to this metric, the government estimates that up to 8.8 million households in England could be classed as having been in fuel poverty in 2023.

Up-to-date data

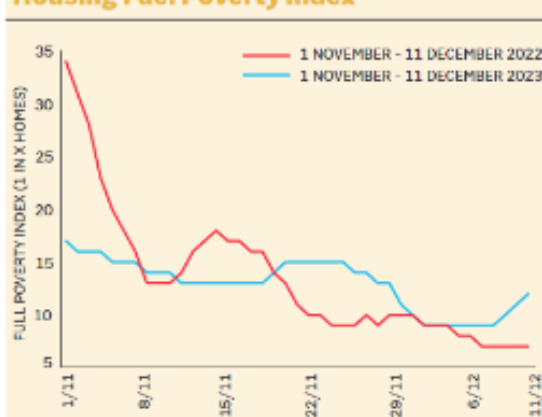
However, this way of defining fuel poverty can provide data which is months out of date. Switchee, which provides smart thermostats and live data analytics tools to help social landlords bring down heating bills for tenants, has developed a Housing Fuel Poverty Index to track fuel poverty in real time. The index shows the proportion of social rented homes in the UK that failed to reach a temperature of 18°C in any of the previous seven days. Using this definition, last winter, one in eight social homes were in fuel poverty on an average day. This equates to 640,000 homes and 1.7 million people. Switchee estimates that this could have resulted in more than 16,000 additional hospital admissions.

In the first of a series of quarterly reports, *Inside Housing* has worked with data from the Switchee index to give a picture of fuel poverty across the country and to drill down into the regions where it is hitting hardest.

Overall, this autumn and the start of winter are better than last year. Across the UK between 1 September and 11 December 2023 (the last date for which data is available), an average of 4.08% of social homes were in fuel poverty (around one in 25). This compares with an average of 4.94% for the same period last year.

Ben Morris, data lead at Switchee, says: "This winter

Housing Fuel Poverty Index



Source: Switchee

has been mild, and with fuel poverty levels still 26% above winter 2021-22, this suggests a new normal in the level of fuel poverty prevalence in UK social housing."

In England, the North East experienced the worst fuel poverty this autumn and winter. Since September, an average of 6.11% of homes were in fuel poverty, compared to 6.56% in 2022. Since the start of December, that figure rises to 15.14%, although that is significantly down on last winter when 21.4% of households were in fuel poverty. To compare, in Greater London, the figures are 2.56% since September and 7.37% in the first 11 days of December.

Welsh social households are more likely to be in fuel poverty. From 1-11 December, 17.42% failed to achieve 18°C the previous week, with that figure at 6.29% since the start of September. In Scotland, 4.06% of social homes were in fuel poverty on any given day between the start of September and 11 December, while in December the average was 8.87%.

Mr Morris says: "We haven't yet seen the full impact of the January energy price cap rise, and with energy debt now at record levels, significant concern still exists for the remainder of this winter." ●

640k

Social homes in fuel poverty on an average day last winter

1.7m

Social housing residents in fuel poverty on an average day last winter

4.08%

Average homes in fuel poverty in UK between 1 September and 11 December 2023

17.42%

Welsh households in fuel poverty from 1-11 December 2023

Appendix B

Anger over carpet being ripped out of social housing - BBC News

Anger over carpet being ripped out of social housing

Published

16 May 2023

Share



Image caption,

Lena still has no carpet in her house after moving in months ago

By Nicky Hudson & Colletta Smith

BBC Cost of Living producer and correspondent

Anti-poverty campaigners are calling for housing associations to stop tearing up carpets between tenants and leaving many with bare floors.

Most social landlords rip up flooring when a tenant moves out due to hygiene - but it's not always replaced quickly.

Some 1.2 million people in the UK have no carpet or flooring in their bedrooms and living areas, a survey suggests.

Lena and her son moved into a flat in Oldham months ago but the floors are still bare.

"It makes it really hard to keep either of the bedrooms warm," she said.

What are your rights when you're renting?

By law UK landlords only have to put flooring in kitchens and bathrooms. Campaign group End Furniture Poverty is calling for this law to extend to the rest of the house.

It is urging housing associations to inspect and reuse what is already there where possible.

The vast majority of people living without flooring in all rooms - 760,000 - were in social housing, according to the survey of 5,500 people carried out by The National Centre for Social Research.

It also found 4.8 million adults in the UK were living without at least one item of essential furniture, like floors, beds, fridges, curtains or blinds.



Image caption,

Lena's bedroom and stairs have no carpet and old grippers stick out around the edge

When Lena moved into her first floor flat she did not have a bed so spent the first few nights sleeping on top of a duvet on the concrete floor in her bedroom.

Research by The Leeds Sustainability Institute states that carpets can reduce air leakage by up to a third in some homes, making homes without carpet, lino, or laminate more expensive and difficult to heat.

Lena said it was unlikely that she would be able to afford to carpet the house herself before winter.

"You've got to get the carpet, get it fitted and then delivery, so how do you do that on a low income? I'm trying my best, but I can only do what I can," she said.

Kelly Webb, director of customer services at Lena's landlord, First Choice Homes Oldham said its approach was leave any good quality floor coverings in place.

"We also offer help to customers who are struggling to afford flooring and furnishings so they can settle into their home comfortably," she said.

Kate Henderson, chief executive of the National Housing Federations said: "In social housing, carpets have historically been removed as standard practice for practical reasons, to ensure hygiene between lets and to prevent any possible contamination."

But End Furniture Poverty called this a "terrible policy" and urged housing associations to inspect, clean and leave flooring in place if possible.

Claire Donovan, head of policy at the campaign group, said: "That's low-cost, it's quick, it's easy and could help over three quarters of a million people who are living without flooring in social housing."



Image caption,

Lena's bedroom floor still has no carpet months after she moved in

Each country in the UK has responsibility for its own social housing under devolved powers from the government.

The Welsh government is due to publish standards for social housing which require that all habitable rooms, including staircases and landings have suitable coverings. It told the BBC it expected this to become law in the Autumn.

End Furniture Poverty is calling on the governments in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland to do the same.

The Department for Housing in England said: "Landlords must ensure homes are of a decent standard and investigate and respond to complaints quickly. If residents are unhappy, they can contact the Housing Ombudsman."

The Scottish government said: "Provision of floor coverings is the responsibility and personal choice of social housing tenants" and that the Scottish Housing Charter states homes must be in a good state of repair.

And in Northern Ireland the Department for Communities said there were "no plans to legislate on flooring" but that there is a support fund for those in crisis which could apply to flooring.



Image caption,

David Ripley said Thirteen Group Housing Association in Middlesbrough guarantees flooring for every tenant

A handful of social housing providers are already tackling the issue. In Middlesbrough, Thirteen Group Housing Association guarantees flooring for every tenant.

Its executive director of customer services David Ripley said: "We looked at our process and thought actually there's a different way to manage this risk.

"The use of disclaimers came in to enable us to leave existing carpets and flooring within properties."

He said the price of new carpets in some properties had not cost the business any extra as tenants had stayed in properties longer, looked after them better and been less likely to fall into rent arrears.

"That saves Thirteen Group £1.5m each year... which we reinvest back by putting the flooring in the properties when we let them," he added.

Some charities are also working to help put an end to families living without flooring.

The church-based donation site ACTS 435 has managed to get hundreds of individuals funding for flooring in bedrooms and living rooms.

Greenstream Flooring in Porth, South Wales gives away re-used carpet tiles to people in need who have been referred. And No Floor No More, based in St Albans, gathers up old carpets and laminate flooring to re-distribute to social housing tenants in need.