

Salix Homes 
Customer Voice

Scrutiny Report

Salix Homes' approach to managing empty properties

September 2022

1. Scope

Subject	Salix Homes' approach to managing empty properties (voids).
Commissioned by	Salix Homes Customer Committee (SHCC)
Panel	To be sourced from Salix Homes Scrutiny Pool (between 3 and 6 members)
Aims / objectives/ outcomes	The purpose of this review is to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and review Salix Homes approach to the terminations process • Understand and review the reasons Salix Homes' customers are terminating their tenancies
Areas out of scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private Sector Leasing (PSL) • Non-traditional housing stock • Fixed term tenancies • Management moves
Key service area involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer Service & Assets Directorate
Links to corporate plan	<p>Scrutiny supports the Corporate Plan: Our Homes: Sustainable, high quality, and safe. Ensure we provide high quality homes for our customers on target, and that are decent.</p> <p>Our Homes: Salix Homes aims to ensure the best use of its housing stock, to meet the housing needs of the local communities in Central Salford.</p>
Indicators of success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage attendance; scrutiny panel – [Target: 100%] • Number of recommendations made – [Target: 6] • Percentage of high to low level suggestions – [Target: 50%/50%] • Number of recommendations implemented – [Target: 80%] • Satisfaction of the process from Scrutiny Panel: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On a scale of 1-5 how much do you think that Salix Homes has listened to your views? 2. On a scale of 1-5 how much do you think that Salix Homes has acted on your views? 3. On a scale of 1-5 rating, would you recommend being involved with Salix Homes to your neighbours?
Timescale	See workplan
Resource commitments	Proposed cost: £1,250, excluding staff time.
Report Author	Susan Wilkinson, Customer Engagement Manager

2. Methodology

The panel approached the gathering of evidence to inform their review and final analysis in several ways.

2.1 Review of relevant documentation in relation to Salix Homes terminations process, customer to landlord, and landlord to customer relationship **(Appendix 1)**

- Salix Homes Empty Properties Management Policy
- Salix Homes Empty Properties Procedure
- Link sent for Salix Homes Customer Charter 'Our Promise'
- Link sent for Salix Homes Corporate Plan
- Pre-termination Inspection Form
- Past 6 months post void work information
- External Void Repair Guarantee
- Salix Homes Exit Survey
- Just Reward Application
- Salix Homes Customer Feedback and Complaints Policy and Procedure
- Complaints over last 12 months
- Data on terminations since April 2021
- 12 months' rent arrears for deceased customers

2.2 Analysis of current performance data **(Appendix 2)**

- Key Performance Indicators –
 - % Of general needs properties currently tenanted
 - % Of sheltered properties currently tenanted
 - Average managed re-let time (48 voids at 03/10/22)
 - Average cost of a void property
 - Average cost of a void property (Including capital costs)
 - Average void rent loss

2.3 Satisfaction

- Voids and Allocations Satisfaction

2.4 Complaints

- Complaints Performance

2.5 Reviewed the relevant sections of Salix Homes website –

2.6 Focus Group with the following Officers: **(Appendix 3)**

- Ben Cruickshanks, Voids, and Allocations Manager
- Reece Olive, Voids Inspector

2.7 Interview with following Officers: **(Appendix 4)**

- Hayley Reed, Customer Service Delivery Manager

3. Introduction

- 3.1 Following Build Back Better (BBB) in May 2021, Salix Homes restructured their Customer Service and Assets Directorate into more specialised teams. This included the creation of 3 new Officer roles, which specifically focus upon the advertising and allocation of empty properties and the supplement of the existing 17 members of the Voids and Allocations Team, consists of Managers, Trade Operatives and Surveyors.
- 3.2 In September 2022, Salix Homes Customer Committee commissioned a piece of scrutiny on Salix Homes' Approach to managing empty properties. A group of five scrutineers were selected from Salix Homes' wider scrutiny pool.
- 3.3 The purpose of this review is to:
 - Understand and review Salix Homes' approach to the terminations process
 - Understand and review the reasons Salix Homes' customers are terminating their tenancies

4. Findings - Understand and review Salix Homes' approach to the terminations process.

4.1 Overview

The scrutiny panel identified that the efficient handling of empty properties is one of the most important areas of housing management. Thus, ensuring the letting of their properties in a suitable timeframe, to maximise income, and minimise time / expense taken to complete repairs to vacant properties.

- 4.1.2 Salix Homes communicates their Terminations Process to customers via 2 mechanisms. This includes their Tenancy Agreement when customers first sign-up with Salix Homes and via their website.
- 4.1.3 A customer must provide a full 4 weeks' notice of termination – the countdown to which only begins from the following Monday, unless the customer is deceased, moving to permanent residential care, transferring, or exchanging properties. Should a customer fail to provide the full 4 weeks' notice, their tenancy will not terminate until the stated period has elapsed and rent will be liable for anytime outside the relevant 4 weeks (from the 1st Monday).
- 4.1.4 As soon as a customer notifies Salix Homes they are ending their tenancy, the Managing Officer or Call Centre Operative notifies the Voids Team within one working day to allow for early advertisement and allocation of the property, completion of any required void repair work and any viewings to occur.

4.2 Empty Properties Management Policy

- 4.2.1 Salix Homes' Policy and Procedure for managing empty properties can be sent to customers at their request. The policy and procedure was previously accessible via the website, though not on the new website. Make the process more efficient by identifying empty properties promptly, and minimising time taken to complete repairs to vacant homes, and thus reduce potential rent losses.
- 4.2.2 Both the policy and procedure now require updating as the Pre-Termination Inspection no longer occurs prior to customers vacating, due to a lack of resources.
- 4.2.3 The Just Rewards Scheme is another service that is not being promoted / utilised for customers to its full potential. This is possibly as there is no pre-termination inspection completed, which is part of the required process.
- 4.2.4 By not completing the pre-termination inspection Salix Homes are not able to identify properties that are direct lets, or conversely, identify properties that require major works; therefore, they cannot plan resources adequately.
- 4.2.5 Pre-termination inspections would assist Salix Homes to quicker identify the amount of repair work required, to plan resources and identify rechargeable repairs, which can then be explained to the vacating customer, at the earliest opportunity.

4.3 Empty Properties Procedure

- 4.3.1 Customers are advised in the procedure how they can provide notification to end their tenancy, which include:
 - Customer informs of intention by visiting Salix Homes offices

- Customer informs of intention in writing
- Next of kin of deceased customer does one of the above
- Office made aware of possible abandonment / illegal occupancy
- Office made aware of customer being transferred to other property or Landlord
- Other sources, e.g., local knowledge, Police, Social Services, Housing Benefits

4.3.2 The scrutiny group felt it is currently too complex to end a tenancy and the system is not supporting customers to do what Salix Homes are asking them to do. Tenants could previously attend Diamond House and complete a Termination Notice at any point during the week and receive a copy of this paperwork. However, the reception / office is no longer open unless a prior appointment has been arranged, which makes this process far less easily accessible than previously.

4.3.3 The group suggested opening the reception on Mondays so vacating customers can return their keys to Diamond House before 12pm and new customers can collect their keys for their new home in the afternoon. However, opening only on Monday would not resolve this issue as Salix Homes complete new lets on any day of the week.

4.3.4 A further issue raised is keys being posted through the letterbox at Diamond House, which was questioned as a security risk. The letterbox is checked twice daily on Mondays for any key returns and then daily throughout the week to ensure no keys are left overnight.

4.3.5 Salix Homes should consider reopening Diamond House reception on a full-time basis as opening part-time could confuse and inconvenience customers. If people are advised reception was opening part-time, they may assume the same opening hours anyway prior to the pandemic and attend when the office was closed, leading to complaints and frustration.

4.3.6 Some customers may have limited language, reading or skills and no digital access, and may therefore be unable to send an email or even compose a termination letter, so the current process becomes even more onerous. This might explain the current lack of notification and random keys received / handed in unexpectedly and without the required notice. Therefore, easy access to a pre-arranged Pre-Termination Inspection, and or the ability to visit Diamond House is vital.

4.4 Pre-Termination Inspection

4.4.1 These inspections are a great way to help effectively manage voids by providing a good idea of what work needs to be done in the property, and what would be the responsibility of the tenant or the organisations. Although this inspection doesn't identify absolutely everything that needs to be done, Salix Homes will be in a better place to start as soon as that customer vacates the property. or perhaps even before - should the tenant be so amenable.

4.4.2 Pre-termination inspections could utilise software from the start by feeding the information from the inspections into Salix Homes' repairs and maintenance module to inform Salix of the materials and labour required, so the organisation would know exactly what was needed, and then potentially allowing adequate lead times for any ordering / planning purposes.

4.5 Voids Team

4.5.1 There are obvious advantages of avoiding unnecessarily long voids or protracted refurbishments; and this can be achieved by Salix Homes ensuring the relevant people are available, and at the right time, to ensure properties are fit and ready quickly, for a new resident. Therefore, the benefit of having multi-trade teams - ready to go into action on the earliest possible scheduled / required day, is clear.

- 4.5.2 Additionally, having an in-house team is easier for clearer planning, and in terms of Covid-19, can benefit from following one policy as opposed to several contractors operating under different policies, such as different requirements for social distancing etc.
- 4.5.3 The scrutineers identified that having the Voids Inspector in situ is a great asset for planning the level of repairs required for relets, however, this role is not as effective without the Neighbourhood Officer accompanying the Surveyor to complete the pre-inspection before the customer vacates.
- 4.5.4 The overriding priority is to ensure that Salix Homes manages its properties efficiently and effectively and minimises the period when properties are empty.
- 4.5.5 To mitigate the risks of rental loss, Value for Money (VfM) and leaving properties empty for significant periods of time, Salix Homes, undertake the following:
- weekly meetings are held with all Salix colleagues involved in the void process to assess the progress on all vacant properties under repair, which will highlight any overdue issues
 - review management reports to highlight overdue repairs daily
 - performance is assessed daily by the Voids Supervisor and Voids and Allocations Manager

4.6 Exit Survey

- 4.6.1 When Salix Homes receives a notification of ending a tenancy the Officer previously completed an Exit Survey with the customer to obtain the following information:
- Their reason for leaving
 - A current telephone number
 - Their forwarding address, or contact address of NOK if tenant is deceased
 - The intended date of vacation
 - An appointment to complete a Pre-termination property inspection
 - An agreement to pay any outstanding rent
- 4.6.2 During the Managers Focus Group, it was discussed and identified that Salix Homes' intention is to reinstate the Exit Survey. The process is being reviewed to see if Officers can complete this by phone, or if the survey can be sent to customers by email.
- 4.6.3 Salix Homes must further inform the outgoing tenant of their responsibilities in relation to the following:
- Taking meter readings and notifying utility companies of their change of address
 - The condition the property must be left in
 - Outstanding Rechargeable Repairs and/or rent due
 - Leaving the property safe, secure, and where and when the keys are to be handed in
 - Energy supplies for Gas and Electric will be transferred to British Gas during the termination period, which will transfer on the 28th day (last day of the tenancy)
- 4.6.4 Although the Call Centre Operatives do advise customers of their responsibilities, the call is lengthy and might be too much information for customers to process. However, this could be the only conversation customers will have with Salix Homes as a Neighbourhood Officer no longer

completes the Exit Survey, Pre-termination Inspection, and any conversations to discuss key returns.

- 4.6.5 All customers must be provided with a written acknowledgement of the Notice of Termination, which includes a disposal of effects authority, which is the top white copy of the termination form. As the reception is no longer open to customers this increases the possibility of this paperwork being delayed or even lost, either when being sent to customers or when being returned to Salix Homes. Completing the paperwork in person would reduce this risk significantly.
- 4.6.6 Since the pandemic the office has remained closed, and the Exit Survey is no longer completed with customers so important information is being lost, although Salix Homes do realise this is important information and they do intend to reinstate this survey. Salix Homes may also explore Officers conducting a telephone survey with the tenant, or for the system to send out an email version to complete and return.
- 4.6.7 When the Exit Survey is reinstated, Salix Homes can once again benefit from the vital information harvested, especially with regards to the reason why tenant is vacating. Potentially this could be utilised to ascertain if there was anything further the organisation might do to maintain that customer (whether at their current, or an alternative address, if necessary), and which could ultimately save valuable time and resources for Salix Homes as well as avoid major upheaval for the tenant.
- 4.6.8 One reason on the Exit Survey is the customer can no longer afford to live in their property, which may be an issue for lots of households during the recent cost-of-living crisis. If Salix Homes can identify these customers, they can then provide support, for example by applying for Discretionary Housing Payments or checking they are claiming all appropriate benefits.
- 4.6.9 The Exit Survey will assist Salix Homes to identify trends within their neighbourhoods to analyse which areas are mostly affected by customers vacating. This analysis could better direct resources in making neighbourhoods more desirable and tackling issues, such as Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB).

4.7 Just Rewards

- 4.7.1 When giving notification to end their tenancy to Salix Homes, customers should be notified of this scheme, which allows them to apply for a payment of £100 if they meet the following criteria:
- Give Salix Homes four weeks' notice and allow access for a pre-termination inspection
 - Leave their home in excellent condition
 - Make sure that their rent is paid up in full
- 4.7.2 Since BBB, Salix Homes don't complete a pre-termination inspection as they no longer have Neighbourhood Officers to arrange and complete this visit with the Voids Inspector. Previously, this inspection identified any repairs required, any recharges to the customer, and allowed estimation of the potential time involved to have the property ready for re-letting, as well as establishing whether the customer might be eligible for the Just Reward scheme. Therefore, the potential benefits, to all, of formulating and implementing an adjusted / revised process of the now redundant method is clear.
- 4.7.3 It appears that Salix Homes no longer promote the Just Rewards scheme since customers are unable to fulfil the necessary criteria, although this may be through no fault of themselves. No

customers applied for the Just Reward scheme in the last 12 months, which indicates that this is not being raised when they provide a Notice of Termination.

- 4.7.4 From 2018 – 2020, only 28 Just Reward payments were processed for customers, which totalled £2,795 as one payment for some reason was only for £95. This equates to only 14 annual payments and less than 4 Just Rewards per quarter, which is an extremely low amount.
- 4.7.5 What is unclear is whether there is an adequate system in place to provide customers with their reward, especially as we no longer complete their Pre- termination Inspection. Surely, if their properties are vacated and left in excellent condition, and their rent is paid in full, the payment should still be honoured.
- 4.7.6 The group suggested that the Just Reward ‘Application and Eligibility Criteria’ should be re-designed for the following reasons:
- The pre-termination inspection is no longer completed
 - Customers should not be expected to allow prospective tenants to visit their homes
 - Item 6, ‘repaired to an agreed standard’ is not clear as standards vary for everyone
 - ‘Property should be clean’ was not specific enough for the scrutineers. Again, clean is a relative concept for many people
 - Requires more space to complete personal details – reduce / remove graphics

4.8 Internal Reporting / Recording Systems

4.8.1 Salix Homes use 3 IT software systems to record and monitor the management of voids, which are Contact Relationship Management (CRM), Northgate and Accuserv.

4.8.2 Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

4.8.3 When a termination notice is received by the Call Centre, a CRM notice is generated to the Voids team advising on the termination date, and keys expected date. Another notice is generated to send to the Income Officer advising of the termination date so rent can be calculated and collected for that period, along with any arrears.

4.8.4 Northgate

4.8.5 When the Voids Team receive the CRM notice, they enter the details of the termination onto the Northgate Housing Management System to generate the keys expected date, which then starts the voids process. Although the procedure states the Voids Team will be responsible for monitoring each stage of the empty property management process, this is not currently the case.

4.8.6 Part of the empty property management process includes ensuring keys are returned before 12pm on Mondays, which often requires calls to customers prior to them leaving to chase keys. Voids do pursue keys, although this is only completed after the termination end date has elapsed, which can prolong the process. Previously, Neighbourhood Officers managed this by chasing the keys before the due end date.

4.9 Void Turnaround Time

- 4.9.1 The group identified that Salix Homes can improve void turnaround time by giving new tenants decoration vouchers instead of providing a painter to paint the walls.
- 4.9.2 Not only is this value for money (VfM) by reducing the labour required, but it can also increase customer satisfaction and engagement as customers can now decorate their new home to their liking.
- 4.9.3 Furthermore, Salix are prioritising any minor voids to be turned around quickly to reduce the overall cumulative figure. Major works may have to be scheduled on a more dynamic, and individually tailored basis subject to the lead times / availability of any specialist goods and trades so required.

4.10 Staff / Training

- 4.10.1 Since the pandemic, the responsibility for processing terminations mainly now falls on the Call Centre Operatives. There is no hard and fast script for the call centre when speaking to customers wishing to end their tenancy, it is dependent on the caller as to when, and which soft skills to use.
- 4.10.2 As there is a lot of information to process when completing a termination, the group advised there should be further information sent to the customer detailing a list of actions they must complete. The Voids and Allocations Manager is currently in the process of completing letters, which will be brought to the Scrutiny Panel and the Customer Committee for feedback and approval once completed. These have not yet been received / reviewed.
- 4.10.3 Managers were open to discussing issues with workloads and frustrations around some internal communications and working models. The limitations of resources were much evident when discussing several processes with the managers.
- 4.10.4 One area was the lack of Officers to call customers vacating to check progress with keys being returned etc. The group, and Salix Homes felt this was an area where gaps had been identified.
- 4.10.5 Discussions occurred around random keys often being returned to Diamond House without receiving any termination notification, which leads to delays, waste of resources, loss of rental income, disruption and properties being empty for longer than necessary.
- 4.10.6 Officers and Managers both felt that at times they did not have the adequate resources to deal with terminations efficiently / effectively.

4.11 Performance

- 4.11.1 Within the Policy and Procedure there are a set of 6 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which are reported to Salix Homes Customer Committee and Board.

Indicator	Freq	20-21 Figures	19-20 Housemark Top Quartile	21-22 Target	21-22 Figures	Short Term Trend	Status
% General needs properties currently tenanted	M	99.65%	n/a	99.50%	99.71%	▬	✓
% Of sheltered properties currently tenanted	M	96.88%	n/a	98.30%	99.65%	↓	✓
Average managed re-let time (48 voids at 03/10/22)	M	20.12 days	26 days	20 days	35.31 days	↓	✗
Average cost of a void property	M	£3,486	n/a	£3,537	£3,201	▬	✓
Average cost of a void property (Including capital costs)	M	£4,125	n/a	£4,115	£3,516	↑	✓
Average void rent loss	M	0.50%	0.59%	0.60%	0.74%	▬	✗

Figure 1 Voids Performance

4.11.2 Key Performance Indicators

4.11.3 The average managed re-let time, at 35.3 days in October 2022 remained below the corporate target of 20 days. This is due to the volume of terminations received from customers, and the level of work required in those properties.

4.11.4 Salix Homes endeavour to meet their target of 20 days, although, they have recognised that using internal operatives for standard works saves around £1296 less, than if work was contracted out; however, Salix do continue to use subcontractors for specialist works only.

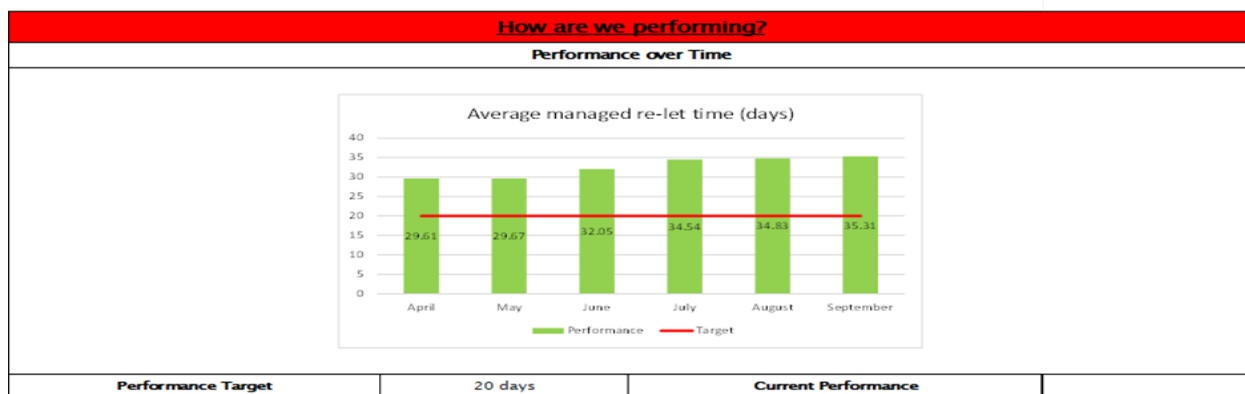


Figure 2 Voids re-let times

4.11.5 Whilst this does have an impact on void loss due to the length of time the property is void, overall, it delivers a saving for Salix Homes of over £800 per void, compared to subcontracting the work out (August performance figures). Salix Homes will continue to monitor this to ensure savings are achieved.

4.11.6 Although it may not be possible to reduce the number of terminations received, completing a Pre-termination Inspection may have allowed Salix Homes to effectively plan their resources and order the materials required to speed up the process more effectively.

4.12 Customer feedback

4.12.1 From May 2021 to August 2022 there has been 15 formal complaints, which includes both Voids and Allocations. From the 15 complaints, 40% were for voids and all were stage one with no Member of Parliament (MP) enquiries. Of the six formal complaints three were upheld, 1 was partially upheld and 2 were not upheld. The common theme being around incomplete internal repairs. It is imperative to listen to all our users, and also to correct and learn from past mistakes.

4.12.2 Since December 2022, Salix Homes began re-sending customer satisfaction surveys, however this is only for new tenancies. The Exit Survey is not being completed yet, although this is being reintroduced in the coming months. The survey may require some changes to comply with the new regulatory customer service standards.

4.13 Strengths

- Where possible all letting standard repair work is completed before a property is let, giving the tenant access to a much-deserved home whilst minimising disruption
- Although 4 weeks' notice is required, Salix would consider extending this period if necessary, or even allow the customer to rescind their notice, which would not be possible with a private tenancy
- Letters are being created to send to customers when they terminate their tenancy providing all the information as to what they must do prior to vacating

4.14 Areas of improvement

- All NOK details should be confirmed annually, which would save time and effort in the case of a deceased customer
- All surveys should have either a tick box or a drop-down menu to involve as little writing as possible as some customers may find completing them difficult / onerous.
- Customers should not be allowed to move onto the next question on Notice of Termination forms until they have completed the previous answer
- Ensure we have the contact details of all landlords in Private Sector Lease (PSL) properties in case of emergencies
- For on-line forms make all questions mandatory so they can't progress without completing
- Information should be checked and recorded on Salix Homes' system for all people residing in the properties. This will allow Salix to tailor services accordingly and provide a more targeted approach, especially regarding customer safety

4.15 Recommendations

- Re-introduce the Pre-termination Inspection with the Housing Officer

- When customers give their expression to terminate their tenancy, the system should populate automatically with their personal information onto the termination form
- Provide deceased customers NOK with 2 weeks grace period to allow them to clear the property, which may provide encouragement to clear it sooner. This would not even equate to 50% of the rent lost last year in written off rent arrears, therefore this could be worthwhile
- Policy and procedure need re-writing as they are outdated since Covid-19
- Open Salix reception again full time for customers
- When customers complete an expression to end their tenancy, allow customers who have digital access to complete a Zoom call to assess their furniture for the recycling centre. This would save resources
- Provide the customer with a checklist of tasks they must do before moving out, such as complete gas/electric readings, change address, inform Council etc. Officers should take a signature from the customer that they have received this checklist, and this should also be recorded in CRM
- Make the system automatically alert us when customers contact us if their NOK details are blank. There should also be annual checks for all customers, even if they put have no NOK, which will prevent wasting time and effort trying to trace someone
- Allow customers to complete their termination on the MySalix portal

5. Findings – Understand and Review the reasons Salix Homes customers are terminating their tenancies

5.1 Overview

5.1.2 Customers terminate their tenancy for several different reasons. The group identified the importance for Salix Homes to understand why. This allows them to assess any improvements they can implement to retain customers, which will save time, money, and effort in the long-term. Reasons for leaving the property can be for the following reasons:

- Deceased
- Relinquished
- Rehoused
- Evicted - ASB
- Evicted - rent arrears
- Management Move / Downsize
- Abandoned
- Care Home

5.2 Deceased Customers

5.2.1 From October 2021 to October 2022, 103 customers passed away, and their tenancies ended. What was immediately visible to the scrutineers was the process for a deceased person, which the group felt was inconsiderate. Salix Homes do not provide the NOK with any period of grace for clearing the property, whilst perhaps having to make funeral arrangements at the same time.

5.2.2 Although Salix Homes say they sympathise with the NOK and don't call them until the second week after the death, they then follow on the conversation to advise rent will accrue for every week the keys are not returned, which will be charged to the customer's estate. The scrutiny group felt this was insensitive and it makes Salix Homes appear too money orientated.

5.2.3 These 103 terminations generated £56,136.79 in arrears, which equates to an average of £545 per customer. If Salix Homes provided 2 weeks grace to each deceased tenancy it would not equate to even 50% of this rent loss, and it may encourage their NOK to clear the property sooner.

5.3 Relinquished

5.3.1 From April 2022 to October 2022, 56 customers relinquished their tenancies, however we do not have further information why they vacated. Once the Exit Survey is re-introduced Salix Homes can analyse the data to assess if they are moving within, or outside of Salford, and whether they are moving to private or other social housing, or moving in with friends, family or a partner, and any other reasons.

5.3.2 Officers may recognise if a call is not quite right, that perhaps a customer is under the influence when / if stating that they wish to give notice. In such circumstances, Officers will check if they have a Support Worker or call the customer back the following day to check this information. Officers may send a note to Tenancy Sustainment with details of a support worker for them to review the case.

5.3.3 If customers advise they have support needs, such as drug and alcohol this is recorded in CRM under their details, and if an Officer feels this is evident in the phone call, they will review this,

which is a safety check. A customer could be having an episode so this can prevent them making a mistake so there is a logic, and great benefit in this.

5.4 Rehoused customers

5.4.1 Since April 2022, Salix Homes have rehoused 8 customers. To qualify, a property must be unsuitable for the person / family living there. They have placed a bid on Salford House Exchange (SHE) and through allocated points, they came top of the bid. Often, households with disabilities will bid for a ground floor property, or a property with a wet room etc.

5.5 Evicted customers due to ASB

5.5.1 Only 1 customer was evicted due to ASB from April 2022 to October 2022. Eviction is a last resort for Salix Homes; therefore, the seriousness of this case must have been significant to lead to eviction.

5.6 Evicted customers due to rent arrears

5.6.1 Five customers have been evicted for rent arrears during the same period. There is no set amount for rent arrears. The criteria states the customer must engage with Salix Homes and enter into a payment agreement for any outstanding balances. Only if the customer refuses to engage, do Salix Homes apply to court for the eviction.

5.7 Management move / Downsize

5.7.1 Nine customers received management moves or downsized. Salix Homes will only move customers who are experiencing financial hardship. For example, a customer not using a third bedroom could be paying bedroom tax, which they cannot afford. If no financial hardship exists they must bid on (SHE). Management moves can be completed for Safeguarding purposes or Domestic Abuse.

5.8 Abandoned

5.8.1 Seven customers abandoned their properties from April 2022 to October 2022, which were completed by an Officer through serving a Notice to Quit. Customers have 28 days to respond to Salix Homes, thereafter, we will break into the property and change the locks.

Customers who usually abandon their homes are potentially people with chaotic lifestyles, who may be vulnerable and unable to manage their tenancy. These properties are very often left in extremely poor condition and often require major voids work completing, such as fitting a new kitchen and bathroom and can take substantially longer to complete.

5.9 Care Home

5.9.1 When customers move into a care home they do so initially for 6 weeks as a trial period. It is usually during this period that the NOK or the Social Worker provide Salix with a Confirmation Letter of Termination, and their tenancy ends immediately. Sixteen customers have been moved permanently into a care home as they can no longer manage their tenancy.

5.10 Tenancy Agreement

5.10.1 The scrutiny panel found the information on terminating your tenancy is currently displayed in the Assured Tenancy Agreement (Starter Tenancy Agreement); however, when Salix Homes are signing up a new customer, they would not discuss how to end the tenancy. Officers discuss more immediately important information such as Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), tenants' responsibilities, breaches of tenancy, managing rent etc.

5.11 Website

- 5.11.1 Salix Homes website was quite outdated at the start of the project and difficult to manoeuvre, although the website has recently been updated.
- 5.11.2 The new website states, 'All tenancies start and end on a Monday so your notice period must also end on a Monday', although this is incorrect as tenancies can start on any day of the week. It also states customers must 'return keys to the Salix Homes Office by 12pm', however, it does not advise that they must post them in the letterbox as the office is closed.
- 5.11.3 The Scrutineers liked the fact the information about ending the tenancy can be accessed from the main menu without having to log into the system as a customer; therefore, an executor or administrator can begin to deal with it without the need to access my portal. Furthermore, people without the Salix account can get information on the process for tenancy terminations.
- 5.11.4 Upon death of a tenant, the website says that NOK must clear all belongings from the property, or they will be charged for the disposal. It fails to mention the furniture recycling scheme that customers can donate furniture that is in good condition, complete with fire retardant labels.
- 5.11.5 In relation to accessibility, the scrutineers advised that they found it easy to find support to translate information should English not be your first language. In the top corner of the website page there is an option to click on accessibility, which opens the Recite Me Toolbar with several options, including a User Guide for the toolbar that translates to 131 different languages, which is excellent.
- 5.11.6 The option to change the colour theme for customers who are colourblind is useful, along with the option to increase the font size for customers with sight problems, or the use of the magnifying glass. Furthermore, there is an option to adjust the reading speed to accommodate individual learning styles, which is another benefit.
- 5.11.7 The option to download an audio file for customers who are illiterate or customers who are blind is great; however, it is not clear how a blind person would access this option.

5.12 MySalix

- 5.12.1 This is available 365 days a year and can be accessed via desktop, mobile, or tablet; however, the group found this doesn't allow customers to end their tenancy via this method. Surely this would be beneficial completing this on the portal, and Salix Homes would also know who is officially ending their tenancy, and not leave it open to someone else doing so by way of malicious act.
- 5.12.2 Completing a Notice of Termination on the portal is possibly the safest way, it further encourages digital access, would free up resources in the Call Centre and there is an audit trail linked to CRM.
- 5.12.3 The scrutineers felt it would be helpful to further include this option on the MySalix portal as this was the first place they looked for this information.

5.13 Strengths

- The new website has some excellent applications to support those most vulnerable, such as people with learning difficulties, or hearing and visual impairments
- Recite me toolbar with excellent translation options on the website into 131 different languages
- Accommodates individualities by allowing customers to change the colour, font, image and reading style of the website content
- Soft skills of the Call Centre Officers are excellent. They can recognise trigger points of misunderstanding /language difficulties to ensure customers grasp exactly what is being said.

5.14 Areas for Improvement

- Introduce more Face-to-Face Surgeries, which would allow customers a further easy way to discuss their tenancy
- Change the information on the website stating all tenancies start on a Monday, as this is incorrect
- Start the process earlier to call customers and ask if there are any property issues before they vacate, issues before they vacate, such as ASB, change of health, repairs etc
- Show pictures of what is not acceptable to customers, so it is clear what we ask for















5.15 Recommendations

- Introduce a grace period for deceased customers to provide NOK with time to clear the property, within reason
- Open the reception at Diamond House fulltime to make the service more accessible for customers
- Allow customers to provide a Notice of Termination on their MySalix portal
- Add Just Rewards to the portal with a small bullet list of criteria and then provide 'click to expand' for a detailed explanation
- Promote the furniture recycling scheme, particularly regarding deceased tenancies on the new website
- Re-introduce the Exit Survey
- Complete a video for customers advising what they must do when terminating a tenancy, similarly, complete another video for new tenancies
- When completing a lock change, if the property is left clear, tidy, and reasonably clean, customers should still be sent their Just Rewards application, even if they failed to apply before vacating

6.0 Next Steps

- 6.1 The recommendations from this report will be sent to the Senior Management Team meeting for a response. Although not all the recommendations will be adaptable, they were included in the report as this is what the scrutineers suggested and although discussions had occurred, they requested the recommendations be included.

Appendix 1: All requested Empty Properties documentation sent to the scrutiny panel for reading

<p>Empty properties policy</p>  <p>Empty Properties Management Policy F</p>	<p>Empty Properties Procedure</p>  <p>Empty Properties Procedure - Final.docx</p>	<p>Exit Survey</p>  <p>Exit Survey.pdf</p>
<p>External Void Repair Guarantee</p>  <p>External void repair guarantee.pdf</p>	<p>Just Reward Application</p>  <p>Just Reward Voucher A5 2012.pdf</p>	<p>Arrears on deceased tenancies</p>  <p>FW_ Arrears on deceased tenancies.m</p>
<p>KPI Information</p>  <p>FW_ KPI nfo.msg</p>	<p>Just Rewards paid 2018 - 2020</p>  <p>Just Rewards 2018-2020 sent to scr</p>	<p>6 months Post Void Work</p>  <p>post void work 6months.pdf</p>
<p>Pre-termination Inspection Form</p>  <p>Pre Termination Inspection Form.docx</p>	<p>Termination reasons</p>  <p>RE_ Scrutiny Information - termina</p>	<p>All Voids & Allocations Complaints – 12 months</p>  <p>Complaints.zip</p>
<p>Void Gardening Referral form</p>  <p>Void gardening team referral form.pdf</p>	<p>Answers to questions around Council Tax</p>  <p>RE_ Scrutiny Information-answers</p>	

Salix Homes Corporate Plan - <http://publications.salixhomes.co.uk/our-plan/welcome/>

Salix Homes Customer Charter <https://www.salixhomes.co.uk/news/our-promise-you>

Appendix 2 – Performance Measures

- % Of general needs properties currently tenanted
- % Of sheltered properties currently tenanted
- Average managed re-let time (48 voids at 03/10/22)
- Average cost of a void property
- Average cost of a void property (Including capital costs)
- Average void rent loss

Appendix 3 - Interviews with the following Officers

Focus Group Questions for the Voids and Allocations Manager and the Voids Supervisor

1. Has Salix ever done follow up calls following customers leaving?
2. Older people won't have access to the internet. Could an officer go and see them at home?.
3. Do you ask for a forwarding address from customers?
4. If a customer has recorded on the Salix Homes' system they have no NOK and this is checked annually, would Salix still have to serve a Notice to Quit (NTQ) and apply to the Public Trustee to terminate?
5. Could a termination notice be done maliciously?
6. Salix Homes are ruthless by not providing any grace period to clear the property. They are seen as callous as they call NOK to ask for rent payments.
7. Can we provide NOK with a grace period to clear the property following a death? Their NOK could be on the other side of the country or working etc.
8. RSAP – what does this mean?
9. Procedure says Salix input customer information into Core, what is this?
10. Why do we do this?
11. Does posting keys in the letterbox pose security risks?
12. No Just Rewards have been issued in the last 12 months. Is this due to the property condition or has Salix Homes not promoted this?
13. Do you persuade the tenant to stay if they are leaving to go to another property?
14. Could the householder be offered an incentive if we can enter and do the void work before they move out?
15. Do you have a checklist when doing the inspection?
16. Could Salix arrange a courtesy payment for customers to get access to their property in their 4-weeks' notice period to do the repairs before they move out?
17. How tidy does the property have to be?
18. The group advised there are a lot of new appliances, especially washing machines coming now with aqua stop device. They make fitting bigger on washers to prevent leaks and sometimes these do not fit through the cupboard spaces, so must check this. They are also shortening pipes to cut costs. Sockets are behind the appliances on 35ml boxes and when appliance in position, it doesn't sit back properly. Fit on voids scheme and on investment schemes.
19. Is there a follow up call around 72 hours after to ask if there are any issues after they move into the property?
20. Do you find people are not understanding what their responsibility is?
21. If Reece does all inspections, who does this in Reece's absence?

Appendix 4:

Focus Group Questions for the Customer Service Delivery Manager

1. Are officers dealing with customers terminating tenancies advising them of the Just Reward, is it a prompt, are they expected to do it?
2. There is lots of information to process when terminating, how can we expect customers to take all this information on board immediately?
3. Do the Customer Service Officers have a script to refer to?
4. Stamps have increased in cost so is this something that prevents customers returning their paperwork
5. This is a complex and lengthy process that is failing in many areas. How do you propose to address this?
6. What is in place for customers who cannot read?
7. Is there any plans to open the reception for customers?
8. Could Salix Homes have an interactive screen at DH for customers to use?
9. What is the purpose of DH if it is closed?
10. What happened to the staff on reception at DH?
11. Do you ask customers the reasons they are terminating to try and prevent them leaving?
12. Would Salix be able to afford the just rewards if everyone leaving qualified in a year?
13. How would the Just Reward affect PSL Leaseholder tenants?