

## Members' Library Service Request Form

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Document Title	Voids Management Policy Review 2019 - Consultation Exercise

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**REPORT TO:** Members' Library Service

**MEETING DATE:**

**BY:** Depute Chief Executive (Partnerships and  
Community Services)

**SUBJECT:** Voids Management Policy Review 2019  
– Consultation Exercise

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## **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To outline the findings of the consultation exercise on the proposals for changes to the council's Voids Management Policy.
- 1.2 To outline the key aspects of the consultation process.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the findings of the consultation exercise.
- 2.2 Members are asked to note the scope and methodology of the consultation exercise.

## **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 introduced the requirement to consult with all tenants and tenant's organisations when reviewing policies relating to housing management, repairs or maintenance, where the proposal if implemented, is likely to affect tenants.
- 3.2 The legislation does not specify the extent or type of consultation to be used, however, it is good practice to use a variety of consultation methods. Social landlords also need to ensure that they take into account the needs of specific groups, such as those with a disability and older people when reviewing any policies and procedures.
- 3.3 The Consultation Report can be found at Appendix 1. This report contains the methodology used and approach taken during the consultation

process. As required the report will be placed in the Consultation Hub on the council's website [www.eastlothian.gov.uk](http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk).

### **Consultation Outcomes**

- 3.4 The majority of responses/feedback were received via the use of the Voids Review Survey which was sent out to all tenants in East Lothian. Over 8500 surveys were sent out and 1026 replies were received, a response rate of approximately 12%.
- 3.5 Other consultation methods included a dedicated e-mail address and Freephone number. A public meeting was held jointly with East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel in May 2019 to discuss the proposals. There was also an article in the council's tenant newsletter 'Homefront'.
- 3.6 Analysis of all the responses/feedback gathered through the various consultation methods noted that there was a wide support for all four proposals for change to the Voids management Policy. This analysis forms part of the Voids Management Policy Consultation report as attached.

## **4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1.1 This consultation exercise ensures that the Council meets its obligations to tenants under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

## **5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 5.1 The subject of this report has been through the Integrated Impact Assessment process and no negative impacts have been identified.

## **6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 Financial – none.
- 6.2 Personnel – none.
- 6.3 Other – none.

## **7 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 7.1 Report to Cabinet – Voids Management Policy Review – November 2019

Appendix 1: Voids Management Policy – Consultation Report – August 2019

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<b>DATE</b>	November 2019

Voids Management Policy - Consultation Report

August 2019

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## Introduction

East Lothian Council has a range of policies that set out our overall approach to providing services for our tenants and residents. These policies include the relevant performance standards that help to improve the quality and value of those services as part of the Scottish Social Housing Charter.

The Voids Management Policy explains our responsibilities and procedures for dealing with council housing stock from the 28 day termination notice period through to a new tenant moving into their new tenancy. The current voids policy was introduced in 2006 with only a small number of changes made after a review in 2009.

The Voids Management Policy has been under review from March 2018. Staff from various East Lothian Council teams such as Community Housing and Homelessness, Property Maintenance and the Central Heating Team have worked in partnership with East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel to review and update the policy and propose changes to improve the voids process.

## Legal Background

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 introduced the requirement to consult with all tenants and tenant's organisations when reviewing policies relating to housing management, repairs or maintenance, where the proposal if implemented, is likely to affect the tenant. Due to a number of proposed changes to the voids policy, all council tenants were asked for their feedback.

## Consultation Survey

All council tenants (over 8500) were sent consultation documents from 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019. The consultation itself was in the form of a covering letter which explained the reason for the review and the voids policy consultation survey. The letter also explained the ways that tenants could have their say and contained an e-mail address and a Freephone number for tenants to gain further information. A web address was also added to the letter which gave tenants the choice to participate online or by using the return envelope for the paper survey. The survey was also added to the council's Consultation Hub at [www.eastlothian.gov.uk](http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk).

The consultation survey asked for comments/feedback on the four proposed changes:-

- 1) Decoration Pack Scheme
- 2) Preferred Supplier Option

- 3) Post Void Repairs
- 4) Void Clean Standard

The survey also included a fifth question asking if there were any further comments on the draft Voids Policy.

The consultation period began on the 30<sup>th</sup> May and lasted until 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019.

A Consultation Register was set up by the Service Development Team to deal with enquiries from tenants who required advice and further information. All those who had contacted by either e-mail or telephone were given advice on the reasons for the consultation and assistance with completing the survey.

### Public Event - East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel

ELTRP and the council hosted a joint event to review and launch the consultation and gather feedback. This event took place on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019 at the Hope Church in Musselburgh. The event was publicized in each of the area housing offices and invites were sent to all Tenants and Residents Groups in East Lothian. The meeting was attended by 28 people. Community Housing Staff gave a presentation on the review and explained the proposed policy and procedural changes. This was followed by a question and answer session. Attendees were asked their opinion of the four questions being asked in the consultation document and as a group were overwhelmingly in favour of all four proposals put forward.

### Homefront - newsletter

The Summer 2019 edition of the Homefront newsletter which goes out to all tenants and stakeholders included an article on the voids policy review and encouraged tenants to participate and have their say on the proposed changes and explained the reasons for the review.



## Consultation Methods

Audience	Method	Aim
Tenants	Letters directly to all tenants (8500+)  Homefront article advising of survey	To provide information regarding the consultation process and advise of the proposed changes and invite comment/feedback
East Lothian Tenants & Residents Panel	Consultation event held jointly with East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel	
General Public	Consultation Hub	To enable online survey responses & statistical analysis
	Freephone Number	For tenants to leave feedback or request call back. Area housing offices were involved in responding to general enquiries
	Dedicated e-mail address	For further information and feedback. Area housing offices were involved in responding to general enquiries
	Survey Monkey	To enable online survey responses & statistical analysis

## Consultation Survey Analysis

By the end of the consultation period 990 completed surveys from tenants were returned via Royal Mail and 36 were completed online. The surveys were entered into a web based analytical tool for further statistical analysis.

The following graphs and tables document each survey question and details the responses which were made to each individual question and the number of responses made.

### **Q1. Decoration Pack Scheme**

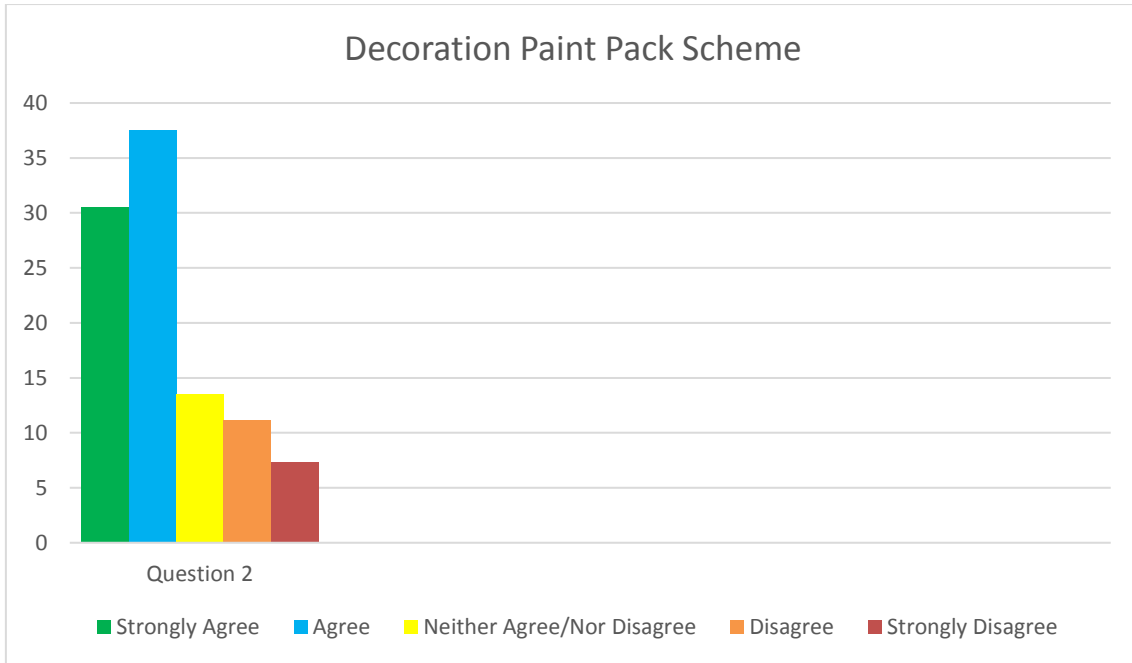
Currently, the council gives a cash payment to incoming tenants who are offered properties which are assessed as being in poor decorative order.

The council also takes into account any debts owed to the council. This could be for previous Council Tax arrears, rent arrears, rechargeable repairs etc. This means that the tenant may either receive a reduced amount after any arrears are deducted, or receive no allowance and may therefore not have any means to decorate their property.

Decoration allowance spend for new tenants in 2017/18 was around £142,000. By looking at less costly alternatives to the cash payment system we could ensure that any savings made could be better spent in improving services or further investment in the council.

For these reasons we are proposing to change to a Decoration Pack Scheme for new tenants. Tenants would be given a paint pack according to the size of their property. The paint pack would include all the decorating supplies needed e.g. paint brushes, rollers, filler etc. which would be delivered to their property. Tenants would also be able to choose paint from a colour chart from a dedicated range.

Do you agree that we should move to the Decoration pack Scheme from a cash payment scheme?



**Answer Choices**

**Responses**

Strongly Agree	30.47%	309
Agree	37.57%	381
Neither Agree/nor Disagree	13.51%	137
Disagree	11.14%	113
Strongly Disagree	7.30%	74

**Answered 1014**  
**Skipped Question 12**

**Q2. Preferred Supplier**

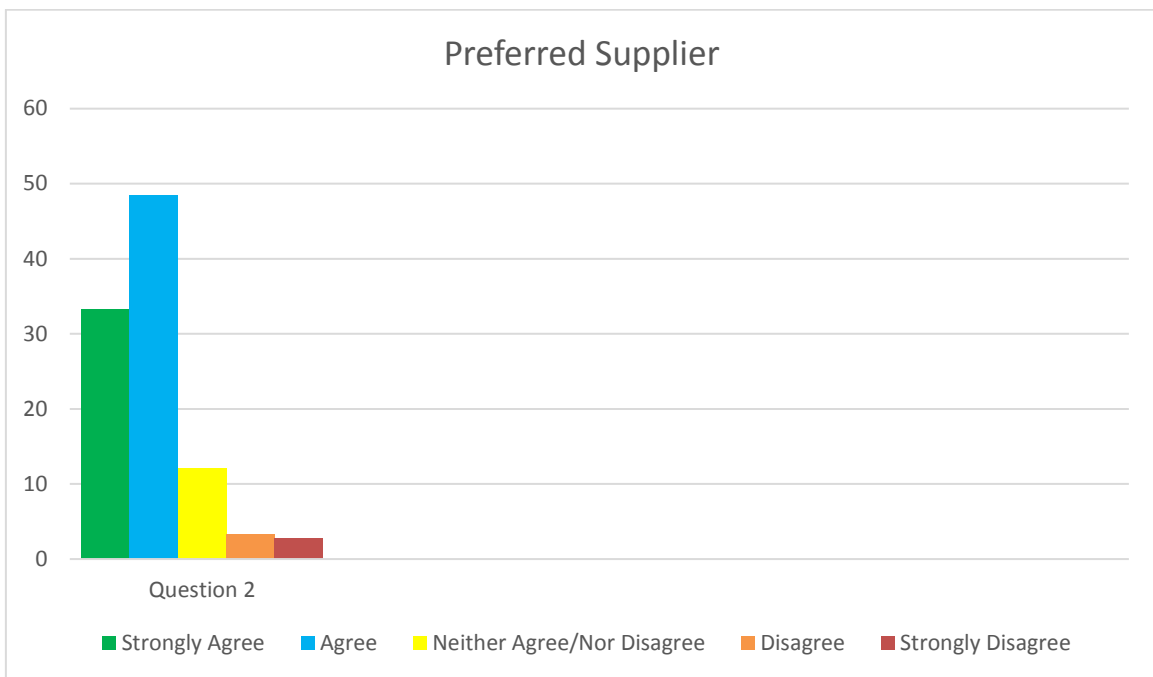
Currently when a property comes back into the council's housing stock there can often be debt on meters from previous tenants. The debt can be costly in terms of administration for the council and confusing and time consuming for any incoming tenants when they move into the property.

Safety checks of gas and electricity cannot be completed until the debt is cleared. This can lead to delays for the new tenant receiving their keys and being able to move in and can also lead to rent loss for the council. It can also mean that families who have been homeless and living in temporary accommodation are taking longer to move into their new tenancy.

We propose to move to one 'preferred supplier' option for all Void properties. The preferred supplier would ensure that all meters are cleared of debt for the new tenants and that they receive either new cards/keys or a smart meter is installed. This means that the supply of energy can be maintained and all safety checks can be carried out prior to the tenant moving in.

We will ensure that our 'preferred supplier' will offer competitive rates to its customers. If a new tenant wishes they can choose their own supplier after moving into the property.

Do you agree that the council should use the 'preferred supplier' option for void properties?



**Answer Choices**

**Responses**

Strongly Agree	33.30%	331
Agree	48.49%	482
Neither Agree/nor Disagree	12.07%	120
Disagree	3.32%	33
Strongly Disagree	2.82%	28
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>994</b>
	<b>Skipped Question</b>	<b>32</b>

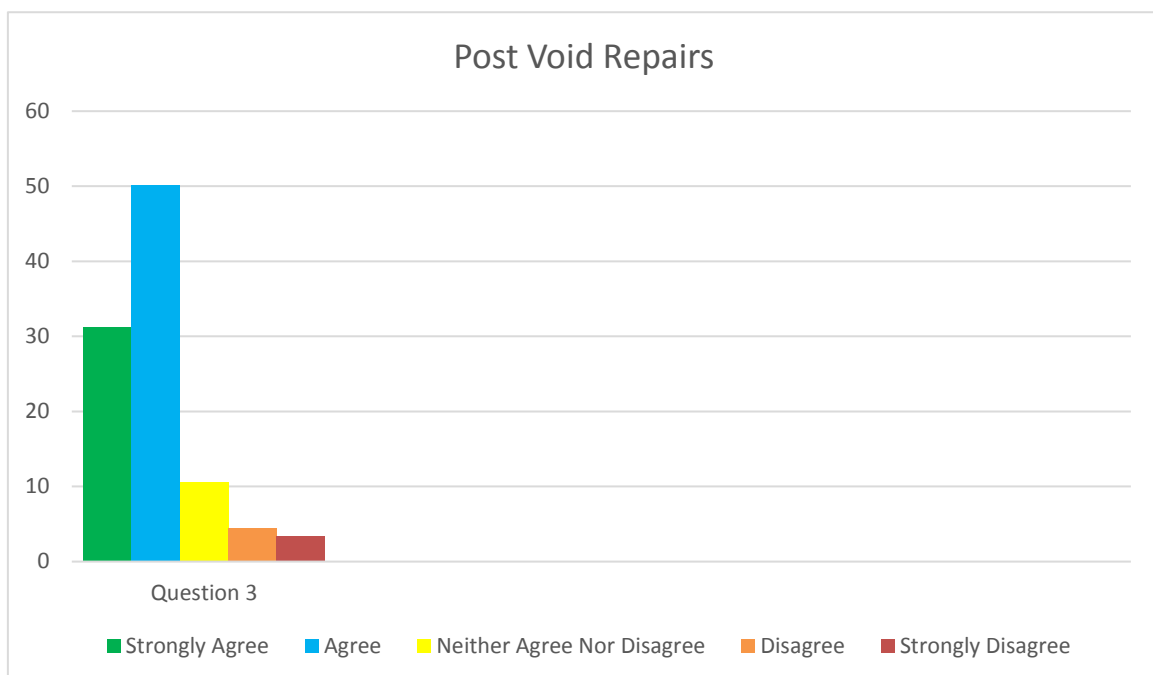
### Q3. Post Void Repairs

To reduce the time to re-let a property the council is now carrying out all non-essential repairs after a tenant receives the keys and their tenancy starts. Only the necessary safety checks and essential repairs are being completed while the property is empty. If a property requires any upgrades to kitchens, bathroom or central heating the tenant would be given a specified date or due date for the work to be carried out after they move in. If there are outstanding repairs, tenants can arrange a suitable date to have these completed.

Carrying out planned works in the post-void period would allow tenants assessed as requiring a kitchen replacement to participate in the planning and choosing their kitchen layout and style around the appliances they have or wish to purchase, rather than a standard like-for-like kitchen installed prior to their moving in.

Post void repair works means that prospective tenants can move in as soon as possible, reducing rent loss to the council. It also ensures that at a time when the council is facing the pressure of meeting the demands of the Homelessness Legislation, we are able to allow families to move into their new tenancy sooner and free up any Temporary Accommodation for other Homeless households.

Do you agree that the council should continue with post void repairs to speed up the moving in process?



<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
Strongly Agree	31.30%	318
Agree	50.20%	510
Neither Agree/nor Disagree	10.63%	108
Disagree	4.43%	45
Strongly Disagree	3.44%	35
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1016</b>
	<b>Skipped Question</b>	<b>10</b>

#### Q4. Void Clean Standard

The Council has recently changed from a system where there were a number of different classes of clean for voids depending on the condition of the property.

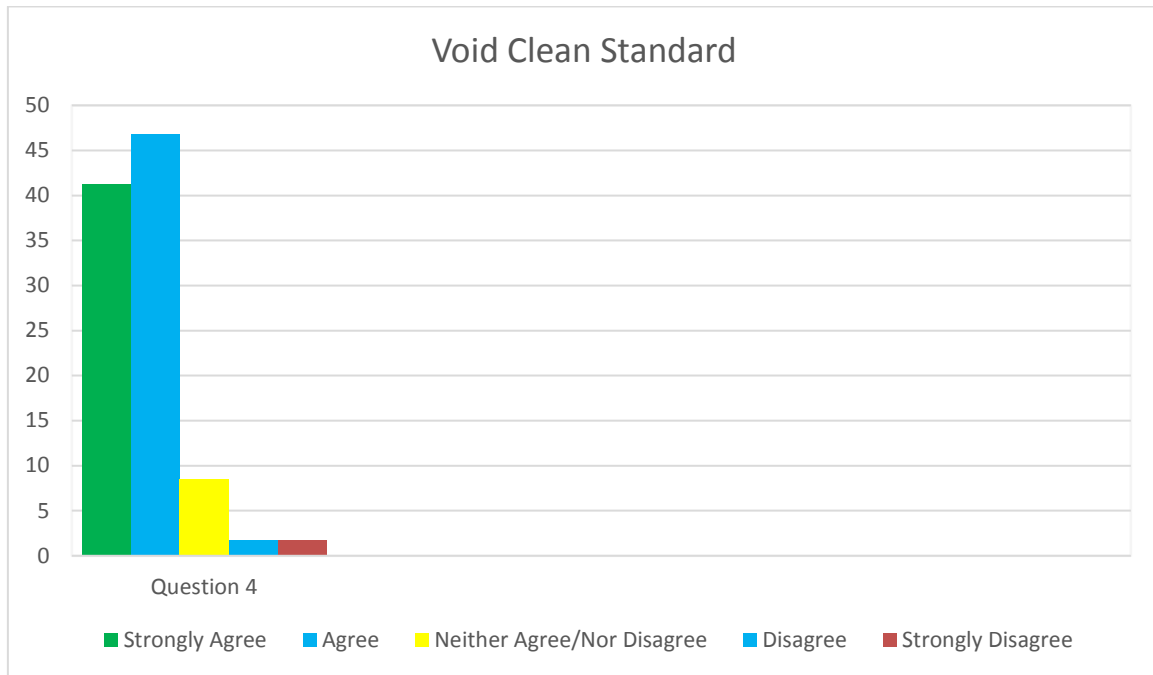
To ensure that all new tenants find the highest standard of cleanliness for every void the council has adopted a new 'Void Clean Standard'. All of the properties being let will be cleaned against an itemised checklist before they are allocated to a new tenant.

The void clean standard includes:

- Bag and remove waste from site
- Sweep/Hoover and wash hard flooring in all rooms/internal hallways with a deodorising disinfectant.
- Ensure all storage cupboards are emptied and cleaned
- Carpeted flooring - Hoover/full shampoo where specified
- Wash all internal and external windows, doors & surrounds
- Kitchen - wash all units internally and externally, worktops, walls, oven and appliances internally and externally, sink and surround ensuring a streak free result. Clean all radiators, switches and sockets
- Bathroom/toilet - wash and sanitize suite, wash all ceramic tiles, walls and all units. Sanitised strip applied to the toilet
- Bedrooms - sweep/hoover flooring, wash all window surrounds, skirting boards and doors, wash all furniture (exclusive of bedding & curtains) Clean all radiators, switches and sockets
- Living Room - sweep/hoover flooring, wash all fixed furniture, wash skirting boards, door and standards and remove excessive marks, blue tack, pins, etc. from walls where viable. Clean all radiators, switches and sockets
- Removal of all cobwebs, dust from radiators and pipe work within the area.

- Clean scuffs and dirt from paintwork where possible.
- Leave 2 air fresheners.
- Final check ensuring all tasks complete and surfaces streak free

Do you agree that the council should continue to use the new void clean standard for all of its void properties?



### Answer Choices

### Responses

Strongly Agree	41.25%	408
Agree	46.81%	463
Neither Agree/nor Disagree	8.49%	84
Disagree	1.72%	17
Strongly Disagree	1.72%	17
<b>Answered</b>		<b>989</b>
<b>Skipped Question</b>		<b>37</b>

### [Analysis of comments](#)

As well as being asked their view on each question, participants were asked to make additional comments/suggestions using the comment box provided underneath each of the questions.

The comments for each of the survey questions have been collated into main themes and trends in each question as follows:

## Q1.Decoration Pack Scheme

There were 253 comments/suggestions made by participants on the proposed Decoration Pack scheme. The comments could be divided into 10 main themes:

Provision for elderly and disabled	60
Council should decorate all properties	27
Choice between cash scheme and pack	18
Existing cash scheme should continue	36
Have no allowance or paint pack	7
Concern over quality of paint pack	8
Positive comments on the proposed change	38
Concern over tenants not using money for intended purpose	43
Concern over condition of walls in voids	8
Unclear/personal	8

- 60 respondents were concerned how the proposed changes would affect those who are disabled or elderly and unable to decorate themselves - There is currently an Additional Works Scheme where decoration is completed by the council on a case-by-case basis for those unable to decorate the property themselves. The scheme will be reviewed as part of the Voids Policy Review.
- 27 respondents felt that the council should decorate properties prior to the tenant moving in - This had been considered by the review group, however this would result in lengthy delays in void turnaround and high costs.
- 18 of the respondents felt that the council are taking away the tenant's choice and felt that there should be a choice between the existing scheme and the proposed paint pack scheme - Dual system would over-complicate and be very difficult to manage.
- 36 respondents commented that the cash scheme should continue to be used.
- 7 respondents felt that there should be no scheme and tenants should have to make their own arrangements - The Review Team felt that the council should provide an alternative to the cash scheme which would allow tenant's to settle in their home and improve their property.
- 8 respondents were concerned that the decoration pack would be poor quality and not fit for purpose - If approved, paint packs would be chosen through procurement and would only use approved suppliers with quality products.
- 38 respondents gave positive comments on the scheme
- 43 respondents stated that they did not believe the existing cash payments were used appropriately and the current scheme was being abused.
- 8 respondents stated that there can often be issues with the condition of walls in council properties - If there are large areas where walls



need to rectified this would be picked up at the void survey, smaller areas can be filled by tenant prior to decoration.

- 8 responses were unclear or highlighted their own situation with no clear opinion stated.

## Q2. Preferred Supplier Option

There were 136 comments/suggestions made by participants on the proposed preferred supplier question. The comments could be divided into 7 main categories:

Positive/approval of change	56
Negative comments/ no change should be made	12
Install smart meters/change meter types	10
Cost/Supplier/Customer service to be considered	18
Previous tenant should pay debt	11
Not understanding question	18
Personal comments on situation	11

- 56 respondents gave positive comments or approval to the proposed changes.
- 12 respondents stated that the existing system should remain.
- 10 respondents stated that smart meters should be installed in all void properties - this is not the council's remit and often an agreement between tenant and supplier themselves.
- 18 respondents stated that they would approve of the changes but suppliers would have to have the best energy prices/customer service - Any suppliers would be appointed through procurement system with criteria of things such as competitive prices and social tariffs.
- 11 respondents stated that the council should make the previous tenant pay their debts prior to moving out - Tenants are made aware that this is their responsibility to clear all debts prior to moving, however the debt is between the current tenant and the supplier and the council would only be aware after they have moved out.
- 18 respondents did not understand the question and thought the council would move their existing supply to a preferred supplier.
- 11 respondents gave unclear answers and or personal comments relating to their own supplier

## Q3. Post Void Repairs

There were 182 comments/suggestions made by participants on the proposed Post Void Repairs. The comments could be divided into 6 main categories:

Positive Comments	52
Agreed but tighter timescales for work	20
Negative against proposal in general	21

Work should be carried out prior to moving in	44
Not suitable for people with disabilities/elderly	7
Unclear/Personal situation	38

- 52 respondents gave positive comments on the proposed change to post void repairs
- 20 respondents stated that they were in favour of the changes but felt that there should be tighter timescales for the planned work - It is proposed that tenants will be advised of dates for all planned work at the sign up interview with the CHO. Other repairs will be subject to standard repair times and organised at a convenient time by the tenant.
- 21 respondents were negative against the proposals and stated that the work should be carried out prior to moving in.
- 7 respondents stated that post void work was not suitable for people with disabilities/elderly - Any work needing carried out in these circumstances could be carried out during void period. This would be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- 38 responses were unclear or highlighted their own situation/issue with repairs service.

#### Q4. Void Clean Standard

There were 176 comments/suggestions made by participants on the proposed Void Clean Standard. The comments could be divided into 6 main categories:

Positive and agreed with proposal	82
Positive but should be checked prior to being let	9
Should be done by vacating tenants	25
Gardens should be added to the list	3
No clean of void	21
Unclear/Personal situation	36

- 82 respondents agreed and gave a positive comment on the void clean standard.
- 9 participants were positive on the condition that the property should be checked against the standard prior to the property being let.
- 25 respondents commented that the clean should be done by the vacating tenant and that there should be more of an emphasis on this - One of the proposals of the review group is the new 'moving out' leaflet which details the responsibilities of the outgoing tenant. Outgoing tenant's responsibilities will also be included in the new Tenant Handbook which is currently being designed by SDT and ELTRP.
- 3 of these responses were concerned that gardens weren't mentioned on the list - Gardens are given a cut/tidy up for incoming tenant. This has been included in Draft Void Management Policy.

- 21 respondents said that there should be no clean and stated that the incoming tenant should be responsible for this – The review group agreed that the void clean standard was a way of ensuring a standard for all void properties across the district and would help with customer satisfaction.
- There were 36 comments which were received where it was unclear what position the participants were making in their comments or were complaining about their own circumstances on moving into their tenancy.

Q5. There were 118 additional comments made by respondents when asked if they had any further comments on the draft Voids Policy. The responses were wide ranging however could be divided into 7 main themes.

Previous tenants should be leaving properties in better condition	16
Inspections being carried out prior to being let	3
Gardens should be cut/tidy when let	3
Long voids in their area	5
Houses being let asap	5
Elderly and disabled taken into account when reviewing policies	3
Unclear/Personal situation/no comments	83

## Consultation Findings

After analysis of the consultation survey returns, it was noted that there was a majority support from respondents for all four proposals for change.

There were also a number of comments made which will be taken forward by the Voids Review sub-group and will inform the procedural changes as part of the review.

## Consultation Register

As part of the consultation process, it is important that all comments, views, concerns voiced by stakeholders are recorded in the Consultation Register and where appropriate, responded to by staff. Themes, trends etc., identified in the responses will be considered by the Voids Policy Review Group and inform the final voids policy development. The consultation will form part of the Council's Consultation Hub.

