

Safe working in void properties during the COVID-19 outbreak Sources of guidance and frequently asked questions

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Introduction

This advice has been developed in discussion with the housing sector and is based on Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland guidance (see below). The following information supports the practical implementation of this guidance providing operational advice for use in developing safe working procedures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission when returning both furnished and unfurnished voids to a lettable standard.

It is intended to support the process of bringing voids back into use but also as public information to assist those working in or moving into recently vacated residential property. Housing Associations and local authorities may want to consider providing specific advice for tenants. If there are any questions as to the interpretation of this advice you should refer, in the first instance to the published guidance.

Guidance

Guidance is updated regularly so please check the website below to ensure you are using the latest versions.

<https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-topics/covid-19/>

The most relevant guidance documents for the housing sector are:

Social or Community Care and Residential Settings:

<https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-information-and-guidance-for-social-or-community-care-and-residential-settings/>

and

Non Healthcare Settings:

<https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-guidance-for-non-healthcare-settings/>

The following guidance may also prove useful:

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for social landlords:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guidance-for-social-landlords/>

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on allocations for the housing sector:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-allocations-advice-and-information-for-the-housing-sector/>

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on moving home:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-moving-home/>

If you need further general information about Covid-19 please visit www.nhsinform.scot. If you need further information on infection control or COVID-19 please contact the Health Protection team at the NHS Board for your local area. Their contact details can be found in the appendix of all Public Health Scotland guidance.

Frequently Asked Questions

1Q. How long should an empty property be left before cleaning and repair work can start?

A. A void can be cleaned immediately. Once a void has been ventilated through opening windows, and cleaned thoroughly with detergent and disinfectant the property can be put back in to use immediately.

Cleaning should include any potentially contaminated high contact areas such as door or window handles, sink areas, appliances and food preparation and storage areas, telephones/intercoms and grab-rails. Once this process has been completed, the property can be put back into use.

Any public areas where a symptomatic individual has only passed through (spent minimal time in), e.g. corridors, and which are not visibly contaminated with any body fluids, do not need to be further decontaminated beyond routine cleaning processes.

Environmental cleaning and disinfection should be undertaken using disposable cloths and mop heads using standard household detergent and disinfectant that are active against viruses and bacteria. Follow manufacturer's instructions for dilution, application and contact times for all detergents and disinfectants. All cloths and mop heads used must be disposed of and should be put into waste bags as outlined below. The person responsible for undertaking the cleaning with detergent and disinfectant should be familiar with these processes and procedures.

2Q. Is this the same for furnished and unfurnished properties?

A. Yes, the same approach should be used for both types of properties. once a void property, including its furniture, has been well ventilated and cleaned thoroughly with detergent and disinfectant, it can be put back in to use immediately. See q9 below for where soft furnishings cannot be cleaned and disinfected.

3Q. Should a property be cleaned before repair work starts?

A. Yes, thorough cleaning will effectively reduce the risk of infection to those entering the property.

4Q. Are ordinary commercial cleaning products sufficient to remove coronavirus?

A. Yes, coronaviruses are readily neutralised by standard household detergent and disinfectant that are active against viruses and bacteria. Follow manufacturer's instructions for dilution, application and contact times for all detergents and disinfectants.

5Q. Is "misting" or the spraying with disinfectant in a void property an effective way to reduce infection risks?

A. The World Health Organisation has issues specific guidance saying "misting" or "fogging" with disinfectant spray is not recommended for use against COVID-19. This is because spraying with disinfectants may not be effective in removing the infection and the spraying may miss reaching surfaces shielded by objects.

6Q. Are there any particular sorts of surfaces that will need special attention?

A. How long the virus survives on surfaces depends on a number of factors, for example the surface the virus is on; whether that surface is exposed to sunlight; environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity; and the level and effectiveness of any cleaning that is done.

Whilst the type of surface can be an issue the level of contact is also very important. In the light of this particular attention should be paid to cleaning all areas and surfaces that are likely to be touched or used frequently as identified above.

7Q. Should the inside of windows be included in the cleaning process?

A. Windows, window handles and cills should be cleaned thoroughly paying particular attention to any frequently touched areas.

8Q. What about any waste left in the property?

A. Where waste is from a room where it's confirmed or suspected the occupant has had COVID-19, ensure all waste items that have been in contact with the individual (e.g. used tissues and disposable cleaning cloths) are disposed of securely within disposable bags. When full, the plastic bag should then be placed in a second bin bag and tied. Store these bags somewhere safe for 72 hours before putting them out for collection. Other general waste

can be disposed of as normal. If it's been confirmed or suspected the occupant has not had COVID-19, there is no need to bag the individual's waste and store this separately-dispose of it as normal.

9Q. If the property is furnished will soft furnishings need any particular treatment?

A. Where it is possible to clean and disinfect furniture cleaning can begin immediately. Once a void including its furniture has been cleaned thoroughly with detergent and disinfectant the property can be put back in to use immediately.

Furniture, carpets and other soft furnishings, should be cleaned with detergent and disinfectant. If items cannot be cleaned using detergents or laundered, for example, upholstered furniture, steam cleaning should be used. If there is evidence of blood or body fluid that has been spilt and cannot be removed with steam cleaning then the item should be disposed of safely.

As with other surfaces, under most circumstances even without cleaning or disinfectant, the amount of any infectious virus on the surface of soft furnishings is likely to have decreased significantly by 72 hours. When cleaning soft furniture ensure the property is ventilated by opening windows and that hand hygiene is carried out.

10Q. In a furnished property how should kitchen utensils, crockery and cutlery be cleaned?

A. All cups, drinking glasses, crockery and eating and serving utensils should be washed in a dish washer or warm water and general purpose detergent and dried before being put away in a drawer or cupboard, prior to them being used by the new tenant.

11Q. In the case of bedding and beds will a standard commercial laundry service be sufficient?

A. Yes. Mattresses should be cleaned with detergent and disinfectant. If items cannot be cleaned using detergents or laundered, for example, upholstered furniture and mattresses, steam cleaning should be used. If there is evidence of blood or body fluid that has been spilt and cannot be removed with steam cleaning then the mattress should be disposed of safely.

Wash items in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Use the warmest water setting and dry items completely. Dirty laundry that has been in contact with an unwell person should be laundered separately where possible. Do not shake dirty laundry, as this minimises the possibility of dispersing virus through the air.

Clean and disinfect anything used for transporting laundry with your usual products, in line with the cleaning guidance above.

After handling dirty laundry ensure hand hygiene is carried out.

12Q. What, if any PPE should cleaning staff be using, is this different in furnished and unfurnished properties?

A. It does not matter whether the property is furnished or not, the need to wear PPE depends on the risk posed by the previous occupant.

When cleaning surfaces there is no need to wear PPE over and above the clothing which would normally be used. There is no need to provide different PPE than the PPE normally provided before the pandemic started. Instead, practising good hand hygiene and social distancing is key to minimising the risk of infection.

Additional PPE should be used when a need has been identified and justified by a risk assessment.

If a risk assessment of the setting indicates that a higher level of contamination may be present (for example, the previous resident had COVID-19 or a death has taken place at the property) or there is visible contamination with body fluids, then the need for additional PPE could be considered.

The minimum PPE to be worn for cleaning an area after a person with symptoms of COVID-19, or confirmed COVID-19, has left the setting, is disposable gloves and an apron. Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds after all PPE has been removed. If a risk assessment of the property indicates that a higher level of virus may be present then additional PPE to protect the cleaner's eyes, mouth and nose may be necessary.

Where PPE is deemed necessary, an adequate supply and quality must be maintained which is provided free of charge to workers and which must fit properly. Staff should also be trained in its use.

13Q. Once cleaning is completed does the property have to be left for a period before repair work can start?

A. No, once the property has been cleaned and disinfected as advised here repair work can begin immediately.

Everyone working in an empty property should maintain social distancing and good hand hygiene at all times but following the guidance and this advice should ensure that the work environment is as safe as possible.

14Q. What PPE should repairs operatives use when working in a void property?

A. Once a property has been cleaned and ventilated appropriately the risk of viral transmission to those working in it will be significantly reduced and should not require additional PPE. But the risk of co-workers infecting each other will be the same as in any other work environment so it will be important as a precaution to wear face coverings, ensure good hand hygiene, physical distancing and good ventilation by keeping windows and doors to small rooms and cupboards open.

15Q. Once repair work is completed should the property be left for a further period before the new occupant moves in?

A. No, the property will be ready to reuse after the initial clean and the short-term presence of repair workers does not affect this.

Further advice

This advice has been prepared jointly by ALACHO and Public Health Scotland. The opening section provides details of where you can find official guidance relating to public health and COVID 19 and where to go for technical advice on issues relating to public health during the current emergency.

The Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers may be able to assist with practical advice; they can be contacted at tony.cain@alacho.org.