

Communal Area Management Procedure for Brentwood Borough Council

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Good housekeeping is fundamental to reducing risk in communal areas. Controlling the presence of combustible materials and ignition sources not only results in a dramatic reduction in the potential for accidental fires to start and develop in the common parts of blocks, it significantly reduces the scope for deliberate fires. It also ensures escape routes are free of obstructions that might hinder the evacuation of people from the building and access for fire-fighters.
- 1.2. There is a tendency for some residents to treat the communal areas of sheltered schemes and general needs blocks as an extension of their own home. As a consequence, it is not unknown to find personal belongings being stored in corridors and on stairway landings, along with furniture and electrical appliances. There are also occasions where residents are using the corridors as gardens and installing garden furniture and plants.
- 1.3. Other residents see the common parts as communal amenity areas, where they can store bicycles, children's toys, or dry clothes in areas other than drying rooms.
- 1.4. There cannot be any leniency with this procedure as Essex County Fire and Rescue Service will take action against Brentwood Council if they are found not to be managing the communal areas of housing blocks, in the worst-case with fines and imprisonment.

2. Definition of a communal area

- 2.1. A communal area is an area that more than one resident is entitled to use. These areas are owned by Brentwood Council who manage these to ensure that the Health and Safety of all residents.
- 2.2. If a ground floor property has a direct personal access door to the external of the sheltered scheme that only they use, or if the front door leads directly to outside, this is not deemed as a communal access point and so is not included in the restrictions.
- 2.3. If a property has a shared stairwell or corridor leading to its front door, even if the corridor only leads to that property, this area is classed as a communal area under government guidance. Brentwood Councils procedure is that this must be kept clear of all items. This is even if the access is only to two residents' flats. It is a shared escape route in the event of a fire but also access for the Fire and Rescue Service.
- 2.4. This procedure is about communal corridors, cupboards with electrical and gas equipment in that are located off communal corridors, and cupboards that have not been allocated as resident cupboards.

2.5. This does not apply within sheltered housing to break-out areas in corridors, entrance foyers, kitchens, offices, halls, or cupboards that are allocated for club use. These areas must be kept tidy and clear from other items as identified later in this document.

3. Definition of a sterile environment

3.1. A sterile environment is one in which residents are not permitted to use the common parts as a garden, or to store or dispose of their belongings, or store rubbish in. No exceptions would apply. It would ensure that the common parts are effectively “sterile” i.e. free of combustible material, ignition sources and obstructions. The common parts are for access and egress only.

3.2. The benefits of this approach are:

- It is the simplest procedure to adopt.
- It removes not only the risk from accidental fires, involving items in the common parts, but also denies fuel for the fire setter.
- There is no ambiguity regarding what is allowed and therefore residents know exactly where they stand.
- It is easier for estate officers to manage when carrying out inspections.
- Enforcing authorities usually favour this approach.
- It enables quick and easy access for the Fire and Rescue Service.
- It is simpler to audit by those carrying out fire risk assessments.
- It arguably reduces the liability on landlords.

3.3. There are, however, disadvantages including:

- By not taking into account the specific circumstances, this procedure might not be risk proportionate.
- It unduly penalises those who could manage their common parts effectively.
- It reduces the opportunity for residents to personalise and improve their living environment.

4. Management of Sheltered Housing communal areas

4.1. The sheltered housing communal areas will be inspected by the Sheltered Officers supported by the Housing Officers. This is then backed up by Brentwood Council Housing Services.

4.2. The communal areas of Sheltered Housing schemes must have furniture that complies to BS7176:2007 “Specification for resistance to ignition of upholstered furniture for non-domestic seating” and is compliant to the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire Safety) Regulations 1988. Therefore no items can be gifted or donated without the Sheltered Officers permission.

- 4.3. Any potential ignition sources such as excessive papers must be reduced in these areas, to prevent accidental fires. Any electrical items kept in these areas must be tested in compliance with the Councils portable appliance testing schedule, to reduce the potential of fire starting. The Housing Service will be responsible for managing these hazards.
- 4.4. Combustible material in all communal areas must not be allowed and all residents reminded it is not permitted. Never allow items to be left awaiting disposal, not even in chute rooms – even short-term presence poses a risk
- 4.5. Mobility scooters should not be stored or charged in any communal corridor areas and all residents must follow the motorised scooter procedure for Sheltered Housing schemes (currently being reviewed).
- 4.6. Single stairway buildings and dead-end areas must not have any items narrowing escape routes.
- 4.7. Motorcycles, mowers and other gardening equipment containing petrol and other fuels including gas BBQ's must be stored in areas separated from the rest of the scheme. These areas will be on a premise by premise case and the list of appropriate locations will be held in a separate document.
- 4.8. Residents are not allowed to store hazardous chemicals, gas containers or flammable liquids in storage cabinets or dedicated storerooms and cupboards. This includes gas BBQ's.
- 4.9. Sheltered Housing schemes must be inspected weekly by the scheme managers to ensure that no articles have been placed in areas where they are not permitted and that residents have not increased items in communal areas beyond those recommended.
- 4.10. Permissible items for **corridors** are limited to:
- Pictures provided and put up by Housing Services;
 - Notice boards managed by Housing Services;

Non-permissible items in **corridors** include everything listed below and in section 6.3. This list is not exhaustive.

- 4.11. These items include:

- Thick Coconut style doormats, including pieces of carpet, large mats etc. These are also a tripping hazard
- Net curtains in front of windows and doors
- Any items on windowsills including plants
- Umbrella stands
- Electrical items including battery powered fairy lights
- Plants, pots, and garden furniture
- Milk bottles and milk bottle holders for collection.

- Slim, non-slip rubber backed doormats
- Door wreathes are only permitted during the festive season

4.12. Permissible items for **communal halls only** can be found below; again this list is not exhaustive:

- Festive electrical lights as long as these are regularly electrically tested by the Council as part of the appliance testing, and up for a short-term period only
- Festive decorations that are only up for a short-term period. These must be discussed with the relevant Sheltered Officer prior to putting up.
- Plants and plant pots

4.13. A list of general non-permissible items for all **communal areas** can be found below; again this list is not exhaustive:

- Lawn mowers,
- Gas BBQ's
- Cars, Motorbikes or mopeds
- Garden furniture

4.14. All electrical cupboards, meter cupboards and gas cupboards that are in a communal area are to be Sterile Environments. This means that these cupboards must contain no items due to the potential risk of fire.

5. Management of General Needs communal areas

5.1. The general needs block communal areas will be inspected by the Estate Officers supported by the Housing Officers. This is then backed up by Brentwood Council Housing Services.

5.2. No areas are to have anything stored, no matter how temporarily, in them. This includes waste bags, shoe racks, ornaments, chairs, or plant pots. Any one of these items could cause an issue in helping a fire spread, or for the Fire and Rescue Service in tackling a fire.

5.3. Residents must be made aware that storing items in communal areas is a fire hazard and a potential breach of their tenancy agreement.

5.4. Any electrical services, including lighting, will be tested and maintained by Housing Services.

5.5. Mobility scooters should not be stored or charged in any communal areas and all residents must follow the motorised scooter procedure (currently being reviewed).

5.6. All electrical cupboards, meter cupboards and gas cupboards that are in communal areas are to be Sterile Environments. This means that these cupboards must contain no items due to the potential risk of fire.

5.7. No gates are to be erected in any walkways. This includes end of walkway areas, open air access paths at the rear of properties, or gates over resident dwelling doors. Where there is a path at the front or rear of properties, one gate can be installed at either end of the walkway.

6. Procedures to follow if items are discovered in communal areas.

6.1. This procedure will be introduced from 07th January 2019. Residents will be informed that all items must be removed from this date. We will endeavour to assist people in removing items from communal areas and educate them as to the reasons we have to do this.

6.2. Certain vulnerable residents will require more assistance to move items from their areas at first

6.3. There are certain items that must be removed from any communal area as soon as they are noticed. Objects in this category are, but not limited to:

- Motorcycles
- Scooters
- Gas BBQ's
- Petrol lawnmowers
- Anything with an engine that uses petrol or diesel
- Cans of fuel etc.

6.4. After the commencement of the procedure, a series of steps will be taken by continual perpetrators. These steps are shown in the flowchart in appendix 1.

6.5. There are a series of letters which will be sent to residents depending on the severity and number of occurrences of items being left in the general needs communal areas.

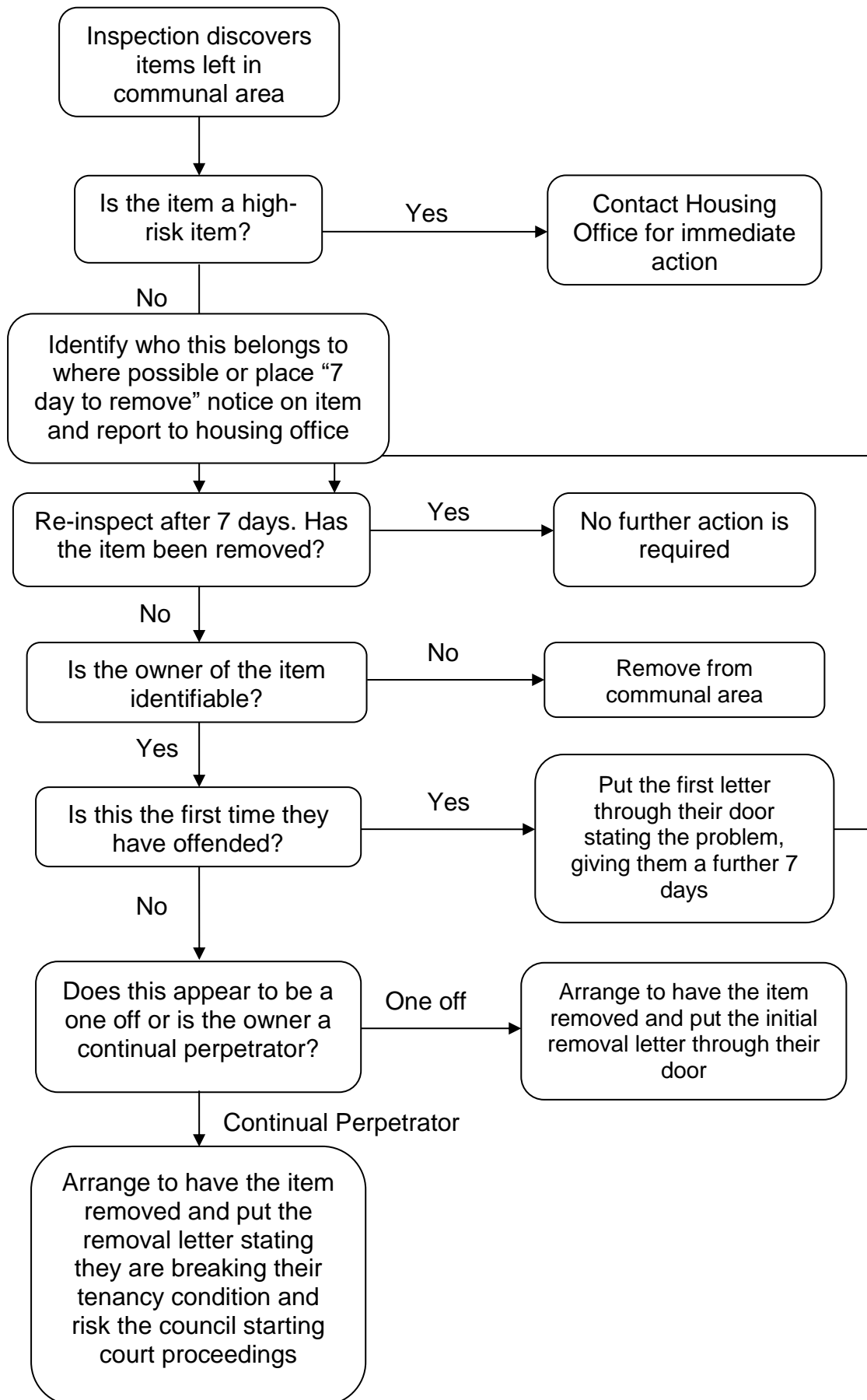
7. Other personnel attending communal areas

7.1. All persons employed by or working on behalf of Brentwood Council have a duty to ensure this procedure is being observed.

7.2. If any persons notice any items in communal areas, they must report this to the Estate Management Team by the close of the working day.

7.3. The exception is if the item is classed as a high-risk item, as defined in 6.3 above, the person noting it must immediately inform the Estate Management Team, so action can be taken immediately.

Appendix 1 – Flowchart of procedures for items found in communal areas



Estate Management Team / Sheltered Team Procedures for Identified Problem Areas

1. Problem Reported

On receipt of a written or verbal request being received, this should be recorded on to the Council Record Management System and allocated to the relevant Estate Officer, ensuring all the resident's contact details are registered. If the resident is a Leaseholder, then the Home Ownership Team should be notified.

The Estate Officer will be responsible for carrying out all investigations and will liaise and keep the Home Improvement Team informed of progress.

Remember at all times that if items are dumped in a communal area then there is a serious fire risk. You should ensure the procedure is followed in a timely manner.

2. Response

Depending on the items stored the Estate Officer will respond by either of the following:

- **Combustible Items** – To check all council IT systems for contact details for the resident, if available the resident should be contacted straight away and asked to remove the items immediately. If the resident is not able to be contacted arrangements should be made without delay to authorise the removal of the item by raising an action for the Caretaking Team and telephoning them to ensure the items are removed the same day. The Estate Officer should then place a letter through the door advising of the action taken.

If the item is a small object such as a gas cylinder, then the Estate Officer will seek advice on the removal and costs from the Environmental Health Department or the Street Care Department.

If the item is a car or motorbike the Estate Officer will seek costings from the Enforcement Officers based at Brentwood and then consult with the Principal Estate Officer for codes etc.

- **Non-Combustible items** - The Estate Officer / Sheltered Officer will carry out a home visit the same day to assess the extent of the problem and whether or not an immediate hazard is in place. If there is an immediate hazard, then the above action will be taken. If however there is not an immediate risk, then the Estate Officer / Sheltered Officer will place a seven-day notice sticker on the item requesting the item is removed. The Estate Officer / Sheltered Officer will carry out a further check after seven days and if the item has not been removed will post Letter 1 through the resident's door, asking they remove the item within seven days. A further visit will be carried out by the Estate Officer / Sheltered Officer and if the item is not removed then they will make

arrangements via the Caretaking team to remove the items. Letter 2 will then be sent to the resident.

3. Persistent Offenders

If the offender is persistent then action may be taken against their tenancy or if a leaseholder, then against the individuals lease agreement. If the resident is a leaseholder, you will need to liaise with the Homeownership Team.

If the offender is a tenant, then an investigation into the circumstances should be carried out. If the tenant is vulnerable, then a range of support can be offered and liaison with the relevant support agencies should be investigated. In exceptional circumstances the Estate Officer / Sheltered Officer will arrange removal of the item/s with the help of the Caretaking Team.

If the tenant does not have extenuating circumstances and the problem continues then the Estate management team will service a Notice of Seeking Possession. If the problem is still not resolved, then advice from the Principal Estate Officer should be sought and possible legal action considered.