

Briefing Note: Residential Possession Proceedings

Introduction

Landlords frequently wish to recover possession of a let residential property if (a) the tenant is in arrears of rent (b) the tenant has breached other terms of the tenancy agreement, eg caused it to fall into disrepair or unlawfully sublet it or (c) the landlord simply wants to sell the property. Frustratingly for landlords, the law in this area favours the tenant. It is not possible to simply gain possession by re-entering your property and changing the locks. If you did, the tenant would have a strong claim against you for breach of the terms of the tenancy; namely, "the covenant (agreement) for quiet enjoyment", and/or unlawful eviction and harassment. This could lead to a damages claim or possibly a criminal conviction.

There are potentially three steps to be taken to recover possession:

1. Serving notice on the tenant that possession is required ("the notice of possession");
2. Issuing a claim for possession in the county court; and
3. Recovering possession after judgment.

Should the tenant fail to leave the property after the expiry of a notice of possession, the proper procedure must be followed and you must obtain a possession order from the court before trying to take back possession. Even when the notice seeking possession has expired, you do not have the right to evict the tenants without a court order. After the court has made the possession order, a bailiff's services may be required to recover possession after judgment.

This briefing note should not be relied upon as legal advice and you should contact us for advice on your specific circumstances.

Briefing Note
January 2012

For detailed advice on all residential possession proceedings please contact:

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Notice of possession

Assured Shorthold Tenancies

All assured tenancies entered into on or after 28 February 1997 are (except for a few limited exceptions) automatically assured shorthold tenancies ('AST's). It is therefore likely that your tenancy agreement with a residential tenant is an AST. Broadly speaking, there are two types of notice which may be used to recover possession of a property let on an AST: a "section 21 notice" no fault and "section 8 notice" fault notice.

Section 8 – "fault notice"

A section 8 notice is generally used where the tenant is in breach of terms of the tenancy, most commonly unpaid rent. The section 8 notice informs the tenant that the landlord intends to bring proceedings for possession of the property on the grounds specified in the notice. The notice states the earliest date that proceedings will begin. Generally, the most common grounds relied upon are that the tenant has accumulated substantial rent arrears at the time of deemed receipt of the notice and at the date of the hearing; the tenant has persistently delayed in paying the rent due; and any obligation of the tenancy (other than non-payment of rent) has been broken. After expiry of the notice, you may issue court proceedings for recovery of possession from the court.

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Section 21 – “no fault notice”

The tenant does not need to be in breach of the terms of the tenancy for service of this notice. After the expiry of the notice, you can issue court proceedings for an order to recover possession from the court. There are two types of notice depending on whether you are terminating a fixed term tenancy or a tenancy that has continued after expiry of the fixed term.

With either notice, the tenant has to be given at least 2 months’ notice of possession. One of the types of notices must specify an actual date and that date has to be the last day of the period of a tenancy. This can be complicated to calculate.

Legal advice should be sought on the appropriate notice and the calculation of the last day of the period of the tenancy.

You must check that you have properly protected any tenancy deposit (if required) and provided the tenant with the requisite information about the deposit before dispatching a s21 notice.

Comparison between the two types of notice

The advantages of a s8 notice are:

- a) The most common grounds, non-payment of rent and breach of another term of the tenancy, mean you only have to wait 14 days after the deemed date of receipt by the tenant of the notice of possession. There are no complex calculations as to “the last day of the period of the tenancy”.
- b) Service of the notice on a “fault” basis can bring to the tenant’s attention breaches of the tenancy. The requirement for the tenant to leave the property at short notice may focus his or her mind more quickly on finding alternative accommodation than with a s21 notice.
- c) You are not precluded from recovering possession on this type of notice even if the tenancy deposit requirements have not been complied with.

The disadvantages of serving a s8 notice are that:

- a) You have to prove that the grounds for possession set out in the notice are made out. Certain grounds are mandatory, such as where the tenant has at least 8 weeks’ rent unpaid, if the rent is paid weekly or fortnightly; or, if rent is payable monthly, at least two months’ rent is unpaid at the time of serving the notice. Other grounds are discretionary, such as where the tenant has breached an obligation of the tenancy. If the mandatory grounds are made out, the court should order that the tenant must deliver up possession on a specific date. If only discretionary grounds are made out, then the court must decide on a balance of probabilities whether possession should be delivered up.
- b) If the tenant pays part of the arrears (even just before the possession hearing), then the landlord may have to rely upon discretionary grounds such as persistent delay in paying rent and/or some rent being lawfully due from the tenant. Obtaining the possession order is not as certain as under the s21 notice, provided the notice has been properly served.
- c) You have to use the standard procedure at court to recover possession, which may mean an 8-week delay, at least, in recovering possession. One or more court hearings will be necessary.

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The benefits of using the section 21 notice are that:

- a) You do not need to prove that the tenant was in breach of the terms of the tenancy;
- b) If the s21 notice has been validly served possession must be given up (subject to some discretion for the court to postpone the date for possession in cases of exceptional hardship); and
- c) If you do not seek rental arrears then you may use the accelerated possession procedure at court. This may mean that you obtain a possession order and therefore evict the tenant more quickly.

The disadvantages are:

- a) That for one type of s21 notice, the date of expiry must be carefully calculated and the notice correctly drafted. Otherwise the notice is potentially invalid and the court will not order possession.
- b) The tenant has to be given at least 2 months' notice of possession and the date specified has to be the last day of the period of a tenancy in some cases. Depending on the date when it falls, the landlord may have to wait nearly 3 months before issuing possession proceedings.
- c) If you have not properly protected the tenancy deposit in a government scheme (as required) and provided the tenant with the requisite information, this can prevent you from recovering possession until those requirements are met.

Determining which notice to serve can be complicated and depends on tactical considerations in each case.

Bringing the notice to the tenant's attention

The tenancy agreement may contain provisions as to how the notice should be sent or otherwise brought to the tenant's attention. Equally, the law provides certain provisions. Again, legal advice should be sought.

Some tenants will vacate the property after being served with the notice. If they do not, after expiry of the relevant notice, you can issue a claim for possession, normally in the county court, relying on either the section 8 or section 21 notice.

Claim for possession

Standard procedure

Certain information and documents must be provided to the court in the claim form and particulars of claim, the documents required to issue court proceedings. Once the claim has been issued by the court, it will be sent back indicating a date for the possession hearing. The hearing date will be between 28 and 56 days from the date of issue of the claim form. The defendant has 14 days from the date of deemed receipt of the claim form to put in a defence at court.

At the hearing

The first hearing is typically 5 to 10 minutes long. If the defendant has not filed a defence, or has put in a defence which does not show a genuine dispute on substantial grounds, the judge will normally determine possession there and then. If the defendant's defence is of substance, the judge will normally adjourn the case with directions as to disclosure and witness statements and order a longer hearing at a later date. After disclosure and witness evidence, the judge will determine whether possession should be delivered at the longer hearing.

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If possession is ordered at the first hearing, the date for possession is typically 14 days after the date of the hearing, except in cases of exceptional hardship.

Rental arrears

The landlord may ask the court to make an order that the tenant pays the unpaid rent within a certain period, normally 14 days. If a tenancy deposit is held, the landlord should ask the court to make an order that the deposit may be repaid to him out of that scheme.

Accelerated procedure

This provides for a faster process, without necessarily having a hearing, for a possession order to be made, if the tenant does not file a defence. This may not be used if the landlord has relied upon the s8 notice or wishes to make any other claims than possession, eg for unpaid rent or dilapidations.

Recovering your costs

Many landlords have terms in their tenancy agreements allowing them to recover costs of recovering possession of the property from their tenants. However, the court rules in possession claims provide for fixed costs, typically in the sum of £200 to £300. The court will not normally award a landlord his actual legal fees, but the fixed fees, unless the proceedings become more complex than the norm. An example of more complex proceedings would be when the court requires further hearings to the first hearing. Unless you have legal expenses insurance which would cover your legal fees, or the tenant pays your fees as part of settlement, you are likely to have to finance the possession proceedings yourself with little prospect of recovery of those costs from the tenant.

Recovering possession after judgment

If the tenant stays in the property beyond the date for possession specified in the court order, the landlord must apply for a warrant for possession. The warrant for possession allows a bailiff to re-enter the property and evict anyone found at the property. The warrant will specify a date and time for the warrant to be "executed", i.e. the property given back to the landlord. The landlord will need to arrange for a locksmith to meet with the bailiff at the property to change the locks at that appointment.

Unless the tenants leave the property in the meantime, clear their belongings and hand over all keys to the property the landlord, it is only after the bailiff has recovered possession of the property, that the landlord may re-let the property or otherwise go back into possession. It is important to note that physical recovery of the property by bailiffs is not always quick – it depends on the workload of the bailiffs for the court concerned. In some cases it can take weeks and even months.

If you would like to know more about this topic or our other legal services, please contact:

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