

Empty Homes & Decoration Policy

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Policy Owner	Housing Services
Author	Regional Manager (East)
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Comments	none
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Empty Homes & Decoration Policy and Procedure

1. Policy Statement

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to set out what actions are required of Blackwood when dealing with empty properties to ensure that Blackwood achieves the following outcomes for every empty property:
- complying with regulatory and legislative requirements
 - meeting housing need
 - ensuring properties are ready to be let in as short a period as possible
 - ensuring value for money in empty home repairs and reaching our Lettable Standard
 - minimising rent loss and recharge loss and
 - maximising customer satisfaction in relation to the standard of their new home.
- 1.2 Empty properties generate no rental income and can destabilise communities, so all employees should work cohesively to facilitate smooth and speedy empty home management to minimise the period between tenancies, or between the handover and letting of properties in a new development.
- 1.3 Properties should be prepared to enable customers, as far as possible, to make their own choices about their homes and to live as independently as their personal circumstances may permit. Blackwood is committed to enabling people to live life to the full by the provision of seamless person-centred housing and support services, and this should underpin our empty home management processes.
- 1.4 Blackwood has approximately 120 empty properties per year, and generally we perform well in terms of time to re-let, as there is good demand for most properties. Customer satisfaction rates are consistently good; we strive to continuously improve our performance to ensure that our customers who move into a new home find it to be in a good state of repair, decoration and cleanliness, all delivered in a way that generates value for money.
- 1.5 This policy should be read in conjunction with the following key documents:
- Safety Management System
 - Asset Management Strategy
 - Allocations Policy and
 - Estate Management Policy
- 1.6 Properties withdrawn from management due to remodelling, major repairs or demolition are not covered by this policy. Such properties will be withdrawn from management only following appropriate approval.

1.7 Empty home management should be in accordance with the Blackwood values and should focus on delivering fairness and consistency in the standard of service delivered to all customers, coupled with value for money. All properties shall meet the Blackwood Standard as defined in the Asset Management Strategy.

2. Legislation

2.1 Blackwood must adhere to the legislation which relates to Empty Home Management, including:

- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014
- The Data Protection Act 1998 (from May 2018 this will be replaced by General Data Protection Regulations)
- The Equality Act 2010
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998
- The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012
- Building (Scotland) Regulations 2016
- The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and all subsequent amendments and regulations created by the Act
- The current edition of the IEE wiring regulations (17th Edition)
- All current and relevant British Standards and approved codes of practice
- Construction Design and Management Regulations 2015
- Bribery Act 2010
- The Building (Energy Performance of Buildings) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2016

2.2 Additionally Blackwood will work to attain all the Outcomes in the Scottish Social Housing Charter. For the purposes of this Policy, the key outcomes are Outcome 4 and Outcome 13:

2.3 Outcome 4

Social landlords manage their businesses so that tenants' homes, as a minimum, meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) when they are allocated; are always clean, tidy and in a good state of repair; and also meet the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (ESSH) by December 2020.

2.4 Outcome 13

Social landlords manage all aspects of their businesses so that tenants, owners and other customers receive services that provide continually improving value for the rent and other charges they pay.

3. Key Operational Framework

3.1 Minimising the occurrence of empty homes through maximising tenancy sustainment

3.1.1 Empty homes can arise for many reasons – formal termination; abandonment; eviction and death. Wherever possible, effective housing management must contribute positively and proactively to minimising the number of empty homes which occur. This will be through supporting customers to sustain their tenancy through the provision of appropriate support – this may include financial inclusion advice (for example relating to benefits, debt or budgeting), the installation of adaptations or the provision of housing support.

3.1.2 Effective implementation of such support may enable customers to remain in their own homes or prevent them losing their homes. In addition, however, Blackwood should monitor and report on empty properties to identify and address issues which may be causing empty homes and/or affecting periods between tenancies. This will include monitoring reasons for termination and reasons for refusal of offers.

4. Monitoring, Measurement and Reporting

4.1 Performance in relation to this policy will be monitored and managed (as a minimum) as follows, with targets set annually:

- Tenancies sustained for more than 12 months
- Number of empty homes
- Percentage of rental income lost through empty homes
- Time for new lets
- Time to relets
- Time taken to repair empty homes
- Complaints relating to new lets and relets

4.2 Blackwood will aim for continuous improvement in empty home management and will benchmark performance against other housing providers.

5. Review

5.1 This policy will be reviewed every 3 years or earlier as required.

Empty Homes & Decoration Procedure

1. Standards

1.1 Standard at Termination

The customer's responsibilities regarding the condition the property is to be left in, will be made clear throughout a tenancy (during Annual Visits and at other times) and will be reconfirmed to the customer during the notice of termination period. The property should meet the Lettable Standard (see Appendix 1) except for fair wear and tear. Where this is not the case, Blackwood will recharge outgoing customers for any repairs required to the property which are due to their damage, disrepair or neglect. Where an outgoing customer leaves a property in such an excellent state of repair that only statutory checks and security works are required, the outgoing customer will be rewarded with a £50 High Street voucher, provided the outgoing customer has no outstanding debt or liability to Blackwood.

1.2 Standard at Re-let

1.2.1 The property will meet the Lettable Standard (see Appendix 1), either at the date of allocation of the property or within two weeks thereafter (if the customer agrees to move in and have minor repairs completed after their move-in date). Incoming customers will be given a copy of the Lettable Standard and will be able to check that the property meets this standard at their Date of Entry (or within two weeks as detailed above).

1.2.2 This will not apply where the property is scheduled to receive Planned Maintenance works, when the new customer will be advised of the likely date for the works and advised to delay redecorating until then. The related elements of the Lettable Standard will then be achieved on completion of the Planned Maintenance works.

1.2.3 Wherever possible, the scheduled Planned Maintenance works should be undertaken during the period the house is empty, but this period should not be excessively extended to allow these works to be completed. The allocation of a property will only be excessively delayed to allow Planned Maintenance works to progress in exceptional circumstances – for example to prevent the costs and upheaval associated with decant. Excessive delay is likely to mean where the sign-up is postponed for more than 7 days beyond its first possible date. Where customers wish to delay moving in to allow works to be completed, this should be accommodated, but customers must understand their liability to pay rent during the time the property is unoccupied.

1.2.4 Where a customer requires adaptations to secure their independent living, these will be completed as soon as possible, in accordance with the Blackwood Adaptations Policy and Procedures.

2 Approach to minimising the time that homes are empty

2.1 In addition to acting to minimise empty homes occurring, the following approach will be taken to minimise the time that they are empty:

- Whenever notice to terminate is given, an appropriate Blackwood employee will visit the property and advise and agree with the outgoing customer
 - Any outstanding arrears and how these will be paid

- Forwarding address(es)
 - Any repairs, cleaning or re-decoration which are the outgoing customer's responsibility and should be completed prior to leaving the tenancy, or the likely recharge should the work not be completed by the outgoing customer
 - Utilities suppliers and the need to leave credit on prepayment meters. Outgoing customers should be advised that they will be recharged and pursued for any debt left on any prepayment meter
 - Any improvements or alterations that could result in compensation to the outgoing customer or which require to be removed and the property reinstated to its original condition
 - The option of allowing viewings for prospective customers prior to the termination date. Outgoing customers should be encouraged to do this and to agree personal sales / donations with incoming customers should they wish to leave items in the property. Such agreements should be recorded in writing and contractors made aware. Blackwood will not be involved in any personal transactions between outgoing / incoming customers
 - Process for returning keys (including fitting a key safe where appropriate) and the requirement to return all keys by 12 noon on the termination date
 - Confirmation of the end date of the tenancy.
- Where a tenancy has ended because the customer has died, appropriate actions will be taken in accordance with the Allocation Policy and Procedures.
 - Where keys are returned to Blackwood prior to the termination date, staff will contact the outgoing customer and will formally agree through signed termination documentation that Blackwood can proceed with re-let action (including clearing the property) as if the termination date had been reached. Such action is to minimise the outgoing customer's liability for rental payments and to minimise rental loss. Properties will not be cleared until termination paperwork is completed in full.
 - Where keys are not returned to Blackwood at the termination date, every effort will be made to contact the outgoing customer. If this is not possible, a Housing Team Leader will authorise entry to the property no earlier than 48 hours after the termination date. The costs associated with this will be recharged to the outgoing customer. Where the property has been abandoned, the contents of the house will be stored for six months where the value of the goods is greater than the cost of storage.
 - All empty properties where notice of termination has been given will be pre-allocated when possible, and the wishes of the prospective customer will be taken into account wherever possible.
 - Blackwood staff will work together to ensure there is comprehensive and holistic communication where the property may be linked to a support or care package.
 - Following the termination / key return date, inspections (including meter readings) will be carried out promptly. Employees will be alert to any potential Health and Safety risks in empty or abandoned properties and will mitigate any risk. Employees will act immediately to ensure properties are secure when empty, and will adhere to conditions stated by Blackwood's insurers. For long-term empty houses, this includes turning off all mains services (unless required to maintain systems e.g. fire alarm), and draining the water systems (except during months 1 October to 1 April each year, when the central heating system can be set to maintain a minimum temperature of 5°C).

- Works will be instructed as soon as possible, and undertaken by contractors within contractual time limits.
- Where contractors are required to clear abandoned goods, they will do so in accordance with legislation, and the associated costs will be recharged to the outgoing customer (unless otherwise agreed in writing by a Blackwood employee).
- Where properties are empty for a longer period, there will be regular inspection of the properties.
- To minimise the risk of legionella, empty properties will be drained down or flushed through in accordance with the Blackwood Safety Management System as relates to legionella (CP20). This states that:
 - Where we have short term empty homes (less than 21 days) we will flush through the system on a weekly basis and once again no sooner than 72 hrs before reoccupation.
 - Where we have empty homes expected to last more than 21 days we will drain down the hot and cold water systems within 72 hours of the property becoming empty. We will refill and flush through the hot and cold water systems no sooner than 72 hrs before reoccupation.
 - Part of the empty home checks will be to ensure that the water tank is of an approved type, is clean, has a lid and is adequately supported.
- Repair work which requires to be done whilst the property is vacant will be instructed and completed within the timescales set in Blackwood's Performance Management Framework and in the contract(s) with the repairs contractor(s). Adherence to this will be closely monitored. Blackwood will work with contractors to maximise the sustainability and minimise any adverse environmental impact of works. The property will not be held empty awaiting minor, non-intrusive repairs which can be done once the new tenancy has started. A copy of outstanding work will be issued to the customer at sign up and will be fully completed within two weeks of the customer moving in (unless, as detailed above, the works form part of an upcoming Planned Maintenance programme when they will progress in line with the Programme, or are Adaptations works).
- A Blackwood employee will accompany a prospective customer viewing the property and, providing the property is in a reasonable condition, this will be during the period the property is undergoing repair work or statutory checks. This will be at the discretion of the Housing Team, who will ensure that there are no Health and Safety risks.
- Where an applicant decides to accept an offer of tenancy, the Housing Officer will ensure that the tenancy commences as soon as possible in accordance with the allocation policy and procedures.

The date of entry will be after the property is confirmed and logged in UH as "ready to let" by a Blackwood employee.

3 Promoting our properties and developments

- Empty homes should be appealing to prospective customers, both inside and out.
- Empty homes will be allocated in accordance with the Allocations Policy. Employees will analyse, monitor and manage all reasons for refusal and will take remedial action as appropriate.
- Where there is no or low demand for a property from applicants on the Waiting List or from nominating organisations, the property will be advertised on the Blackwood website and consideration may be given to:
 - advertising on lettings and other websites
 - promotion in the local community
 - contacting applicants for neighbouring developments
 - implementing difficult-to-let strategies
 - using flyers at appropriate local locations
 - holding an open viewing of the property
 - creating a "show flat" or "show room"
 - installing white goods / furnishings / floor coverings / furniture
 - improving the standard of decoration
 - upgrading the external environment
 - other incentives.

4. Decoration Allowances

- 4.1 In empty homes, decoration and plasterwork will be clean and intact.
- 4.2 Where this is not the case, a Decoration Allowance of vouchers to the value of £75 per room will be made after the tenancy is signed to contribute towards the cost of re-decoration. The value of this will be offset against any debt owed to Blackwood. The Allowance will be paid in the form of B & Q (or comparable) vouchers. B & Q supplies can be ordered online for delivery to the customer's home. Blackwood staff will facilitate this where necessary. Alternatively, a £75 contribution can be made towards meeting a decorator's invoice. Information on any local projects relating to decorating will be given to the new customer, where possible. At the settling in visit, checks will be made to ensure that the re-decoration is being undertaken.
- 4.3 In exceptional circumstances Blackwood may carry out the redecoration of a property at their discretion or at the request of an incoming customer. This will include rooms in properties that are badly smoke damaged or in need of sealing. In other circumstances, the approval of a senior manager will be required.
- 4.4 This level of Decoration Allowance contribution will also be made where there is damage to decoration following maintenance, including Planned Maintenance, works.
- 4.5 Where maintenance works result in damage to floor coverings, the £75 contribution will be made towards the cost of repair of existing flooring, or the supply of replacement flooring. The value of this will be offset against any debt owed to Blackwood.

4.6 The maximum contribution that will be made for any room is £75. The maximum contribution that will be made for any property is the number of rooms in the property multiplied by £75.

5. Satisfaction monitoring and management and customer engagement

5.1 Blackwood employees will monitor and manage all new customers' satisfaction with their new home and will take remedial action as appropriate to address dissatisfaction. Any dissatisfaction with repairs will be addressed with the relevant contractor.

5.2 Feedback on empty home standards and processes will be welcomed from customers and will be considered in relation to how Blackwood staff work in relation to empty home management.

Appendix 1

Lettable Standard (as included in the sign-up pack)

Statutory checks	Gas – valid certificates are in place. Electricity – a full electrical safety test has been undertaken. All Health and Safety hazards have been addressed
Energy efficiency	An Energy Performance Certificate is provided
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All locks to the front main door and rear door (where applicable) have been changed. • The communal entrance door to gain access to the property is in full working order and all appropriate fobs and keys have been provided. • All keys for the property have been supplied, including the main close. • External doors and frames are in full working order
Gas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any bayonet cooker fittings have been fully removed and the supply pipe capped off. • Where there is a prepayment meter for the gas supply, the account has been left in credit and the gas card (if necessary and possible) has been provided.
Electricity	Where there is a prepayment meter for the electricity supply, the account will be left in credit and the electricity card (if necessary and possible) will be provided.
Electrical fittings and lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All light fittings are in full safe working order. Non standard fittings left by a previous tenant will become the liability of the incoming tenant, or will be removed. • All battery operated smoke alarms or Carbon Monoxide detectors (CO Detectors) are in working order. • All light bulbs in enclosed fittings are working
Cleanliness	<p>The whole property will be thoroughly cleared and cleaned to a very high standard of cleanliness throughout, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property thoroughly swept throughout, and floors and flooring mopped • Bathroom wall tiles cleaned and any paint removed • All bathroom fittings washed down, unstained and fit for use • Kitchen wall tiles cleaned and any paint removed • Kitchen sinks, hobs, ovens and work surfaces cleaned and grease free • All cupboards cleared and the insides wiped clean Cupboard doors and tops are clean • Windows cleaned – internally and externally • Interior painted woodwork (doors, doorframes, windowsills, skirting boards etc) cleaned • Fixtures (eg switches, sockets, taps, handles, pipework and

	radiators) will be cleaned thoroughly.
Decoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decoration and plasterwork is clean and intact. • If not, a Decoration Allowance has been awarded.
Adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations will not be removed where it is possible for them to remain in the property. • Adaptations are in full working order and incoming tenant has advised in their usage.
Internal door and frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal doors and frames are in working order. • Door closers are fully functioning, where fitted.
Windows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Windows and restrictors are in working order.
Kitchen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The kitchen is in a clean and serviceable condition. There is a reasonable amount of hygienic and easily cleaned worktop dependant on kitchen layout and size and a fitted sink top. (All appliances are 600mm.) • There is a minimum of 6 sockets in addition to the cooker outlet point. (The units match as far as possible.)
Cooking provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a minimum provision of a 30amp electric cooker point as standard in all properties. • Where a hob and / or oven is supplied by Blackwood, this is in full working order and thoroughly cleaned.
Plumbing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All plumbing and central heating is in good working order. • Advice has been given on how to work the heating system. • Plumbing for washing machines etc will be the responsibility of the incoming tenant.
Bathroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bathroom fittings are clean and in operational order. • An electric shower fitted by Blackwood has been visually inspected for condition and tested for electrical safety. • Showers fitted by a previous tenant will become the liability of the incoming tenant, or will be removed
Digital Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any access has been advised
Flooring	<p>All floors will be of a level and sound construction</p> <p>Any laminate flooring has been removed where it is likely to be a source of nuisance to neighbours. Permission should be gained before fitting new laminate flooring.</p> <p>Where existing floor coverings are of a very high standard of quality and cleanliness, these will be left in the property and will become the responsibility of the incoming tenant.</p>
Garden, external and communal spaces	<p>The garden is tidy, litter free and not overgrown.</p> <p>Communal spaces are tidy and clean.</p>

	The property is in a good state of external repair, including access paths and guttering.
Information	<p>The incoming tenant will be provided with information relating to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact details for Blackwood and the relevant local authority • Rent and service charge liabilities (including detailed breakdown of service charges) • How to pay, including how to access Financial Inclusion Services • Rights and responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement • Security measures relating to the property • Utilities • Adaptations • Water supply and stop cock location • Heating and hot water system(s) • Car parking, bins and other estate management issues • Ambassadors in the development