

Empty Homes Policy

2023 – 2026

Document control

Policy approval	Executive Director – Property, January 2023
Replacing/Updating	Empty Homes Policy 2020-2023
New review date	January 2026
Responsible Executive Director	Executive Director – Property
Author	Head Of Performance
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Version	1.3

Version	Date of review	Details of review
1	January 2020	Policy reflects the approach approved by EDT following the Empty Homes Project
1.1	April 2021	New policy format
1.2	January 2023	Updated Policy – Review and alignment to changes in Empty Homes standard
1.3	November 2024	Empty Homes Standard 2023-2026 added as an appendix to policy (previously a separate document)

1. Introduction

We are committed to effectively managing the refurbishment and allocation of our homes that become empty in a safe, timely and cost-effective way. This policy aligns to the Asset Strategy objectives, in particular to become the home provider of choice.

2. Scope

The implementation and scope of the policy applies and is applicable to:

Livv Housing Group	X
Livv Homes	
Livv Maintenance	X
First Ark Social Investment (Operating as Livv Investment)	
All entities	

3. Compliance

The policy is in place in order to support:

Regulatory Compliance, in particular the Decent Homes Standard	X
Legislative Compliance, in particular Section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985	X
Best Practice	

The Decent Homes Standard applied to a property requires us to ensure that:

- a) It meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing
- b) It is in a reasonable state of repair
- c) It has reasonably modern facilities and services
- d) It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

Under Section 11 of the Landlord and Tenants Act 1985, our repairs obligations are as follows:

- (a) To keep in repair the structure and exterior of the dwelling-house (including drains, gutters and external pipes),
- (b) To keep in repair and proper working order the installations in the dwelling-house for the supply of water, gas and electricity and for sanitation (including basins, sinks, baths and sanitary conveniences, but not other fixtures, fittings and appliances for making use of the supply of water, gas or electricity), and
- (c) To keep in repair and proper working order the installations in the dwelling-house for space heating and heating water.

4. Policy Statement

We will employ the following actions in relation to key stages of the empty homes process:

Pre-tenancy termination inspections: Will be arranged with customers when notice is given for a tenancy transfer or termination, so that the property condition can be assessed, and customer advised of their responsibilities before termination.

Rechargeable Repairs: If items of disrepair that a customer is responsible for are identified during a pre-tenancy termination inspection, the customer will have the opportunity to address them prior to leaving the property. If items are left for us to rectify, the customer will be recharged for those items. In the event of a customer seeking a transfer to another of our properties, we will reserve the right to refuse the transfer if significant items of disrepair are not addressed.

Asbestos Surveys: For properties built prior to 2000, the Asbestos Register will be checked for a valid asbestos survey. Where a survey is not available then a survey will be undertaken to provide a detailed report of any asbestos content within a property prior to any refurbishment works commencing.

Security: A review of security at a property will be undertaken when it becomes empty. Any properties at an increased risk of being targeted by vandalism or theft will have appropriate security measures put in place to protect the asset.

Initial Property Assessment: Full detailed surveys will be undertaken by us to identify any defects or hazards to be addressed to enable the property to be refurbished to our Empty Homes Standard.

When a property becomes empty, prior to refurbishment works, a damp & mould asset survey will be carried out. This will be to ensure that risks of future damp and mould reports are mitigated before a new customer moves into the property. The survey template can be found in the document store on the intranet.

The Performance Manager – Empty Homes will ensure all records of surveys are retained along with empty homes works records and actions identified from the survey are undertaken within the scope of empty homes work and are completed prior to re-letting.

Property Appraisals: Prior to authorising refurbishment works, properties will be evaluated in relation to asset performance including financial, social impact, demand and strategic development objectives.

Properties determined to not be a viable investment based on the appraisal will be considered for alternative options such as disposal, re-configuration or

inclusion on a planned programme. Any request for a property to take an alternative route will be submitted to Investment Appraisal Panel for approval.

Property Adaptations: We will do everything possible to retain adaptations within properties and market in a way that targets prospective customers who may benefit from specific adaptations (e.g. level access showers, stair lifts, through-floor lifts etc).

Cleanliness: All properties will be cleared and free from rubbish and debris and will also undergo a full valet clean before re-occupation. All internal cleansable surfaces will be free from mould, dirt and grease and all sanitary ware will be chemically cleaned or renewed as determined.

Planned Programmes: Properties that require component replacement (such as kitchens and bathrooms) may be deferred to a planned programme and replaced within the first 3 months of a new tenancy, unless they are in such a state of disrepair that they need to be replaced before occupation.

Property Refurbishments: All contractors will provide an anticipated completion date and undertake the refurbishment of properties in line with the survey provided to them by our Empty Homes Surveyors. Where variations to the original survey are identified, a tiered approach to authorisation will be employed to create sufficient controls over expenditure.

The authorisation threshold levels for variations is as follows and refers to the total cost of variations required:

- Up to £500– Property Manager
- £500 - £700 – Empty Homes Surveyor
- Over £700 – Asset Performance Manager

Ongoing analysis of variations will be undertaken to identify trends and the common variations to assist in improving the accuracy of initial property surveys.

Utility supplies: We aim to ensure that gas and electricity supplies are available at the start of tenancy. We will aim to rectify any issues relating to supply to properties, meters or historic utility debt prior to a new customer moving in. If issues cannot be rectified within a reasonable timescale, we may instead support the customer with rectifying issues once they have moved in and are the registered bill payer.

Post Refurbishment Surveys: Once the property has been refurbished, a joint inspection will be undertaken by our Empty Homes Surveyor and Property Manager to confirm whether the property can be made available for let. If any additional works are identified at this stage, then they will be agreed along with the timeframes for completion.

There may be works identified that can be completed when the customer has moved into the property and those works will be agreed with the incoming customer before the tenancy commences.

Property Allocations: Properties will be allocated in accordance with our Lettings Policy. Applicants will be allowed to view properties during the refurbishment process and again when works are complete.

In line with changes to section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, when the applicant signs the tenancy for their new home, they will be provided with a Welcome Handbook which will include a copy of the Energy Performance Certificate, the latest Landlord Gas Safety Register Certificate Electrical Safety Certificate and the asbestos report summary.

Should applicant(s) reject a property offer, the reasons for this will be collated to provide an insight into any trends that may warrant further action.

Hard to let properties: Properties may be hard to let for a variety of reasons including property types/internal layout, geographic areas or social factors. A range of options will be considered to assist in the timely letting of such properties including:

- Identifying and addressing any barriers to allocation resulting from social and/or environmental factors
- Enhancement of our Empty Homes Standard
- Increasing the marketing routes utilised
- The use of local lettings plans with a view to improving the desirability of properties in addition to driving tenancy sustainability

In some instances, the decision may be taken to facilitate a property disposal if there are any concerns relating to the viability of a property. Any requests to dispose of properties will be assessed at 'Option Appraisal' and submitted to Investment Appraisal Panel for approval.

Health and Safety: All visits, inspections and customer contact will be carried out in accordance with health and safety guidelines and good practice. There are standard risk assessments in place for all of these activities, as well as dynamic risk assessments that can be completed on a case by case basis, to ensure the safety of staff, contractors and customers

Data Protection: The termination of existing tenancies and allocation of new tenancies will be carried out in accordance with our Data Protection Policy and the General Data Protection Regulation UK 2021.

5. Policy Outcomes

Through the implementation of the policy, we expect that we will be able to:

- Provide homes that are aligned to our Empty Homes Standard
- Control costs of refurbishment, rechargeable repair and component replacement through accurate pre-work surveys and effective contract management
- Ensure homes are let in a fair and equitable way
- Minimise the length of time homes are empty and subsequently reduce rent loss levels
- Keep housing related debt to a minimum through effective communication and engagement with customers throughout their tenancy and prior to its termination
- Promote a positive collaborative culture to ensure empty homes and lettings performance is an integral element of managing business operations

6. Monitoring and Review

Performance is reported to the Group Board, Executive Leadership Team and relevant committees.

The mechanisms for monitoring performance are:

- Power BI
- Twice Weekly operational Empty Homes Huddles
- New tenancy visits taking place post sign up
- Rant and Rave surveys with customers regarding property and lettings service satisfaction levels
- Survey Monkey to capture property condition feedback
- Monthly Pentana reporting
- Monthly Temperature Checks

In line with the Group's Policy Framework, this policy is scheduled to be reviewed every 3 years. Unless due to a change in Government legislation or regulatory requirements, then the review period will be brought forward in order to ensure compliance.

7. Roles and Responsibilities

The Policy Framework documents the approval routes for all Policies & Strategies, however under this policy the following teams/employees have the following responsibilities.

Executive Director Property	Responsible for final approval of the policy under the Policy Framework
Director of Assets	Operational implementation of policy
Director of Operations	Operational oversight of works delivery
Head of Performance	Operational oversight of service delivery
Senior Surveyor – Empty Homes	Ensuring properties are let at the required standard

8. Equality & Diversity

In order to comply with the Equality Act 2010, an equality analysis (EA) was completed as part of the policy review. Upon completing the EA it was found that the implementation of the policy would support and encourage the aims of the public sector duty. The equality analysis was completed and approved October 2018.

Empty Homes Standard

2023 – 2026

Introduction

The aim of this Empty Home Standard is to define what Livv will provide for all new customers ensuring we:

- Comply with the National Regulator of Social Housing's Home Standard 2015 – statutory compliant
- Comply with Decent Homes Standard 2006 – asset make up and replacement
- Comply with the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 – repairing obligations of landlords
- Comply with The Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (Amendment) Regulations 2022
- Complete all appropriate safety checks relevant to the property (i.e. LGSR, EICR, water flushing etc)

Livv aspire to be the home provider of choice and have focused this standard on presenting the best product possible. To meet our aspirations, we will:

- Assess each home on an individual basis and improve their appeal and encourage ownership
- Focus on cleanliness
- Focus on presentation of key circulation and family areas
- Remove 'garish' decoration
- Introduce modern style kitchens & bathrooms

Livv will provide a property that is fit for occupation and will ensure we maintain our homes in line with our regulatory requirements providing safe and secure homes.

This document details the standard at which Livv let new properties and is aligned to the asset strategy aims to become the 'Home provider of Choice for our chosen product offer':

1. Fire Detection
2. Carbon Monoxide Detection
3. Certification
4. Cleanliness
5. Decoration
6. Security
7. External Areas
8. Property Adaptations
9. Planned Programmes

10. Flooring
11. Staircase
12. Kitchen
13. Bathroom
14. Heating
15. Roofs, Gutters and Drainage
16. Walls and Ceilings
17. Asbestos Sampling and removal

1. **Fire Detection**

All properties will have an interlinked mains powered smoke and heat detection system installed to an LD2 standard.

2. **Carbon Monoxide**

All gas appliances supplied by Livv will undergo testing and commissioning and a carbon monoxide detection alarm will be installed in any room used as living accommodation which contains a fixed combustion appliance (excluding gas cookers).

3. **Certification**

Landlord Electrical Certification, Landlord Gas Safety Record, Energy Performance Certificate and Asbestos Report will be provided on tenancy sign up.

4. **Cleanliness**

All properties will undergo a valet clean prior to reoccupation that will ensure:

- Walls and ceilings are free of dirt and cobwebs
- All woodwork, radiators and window sills are cleaned
- Kitchen units, worktops, shelves and draws to be free from dirt and grease
- Wall tiles to be cleaned and free from mould
- All sanitary ware to be cleaned and sanitised
- Toilet seats and shower heads to be sanitised or renewed
- Finished floor coverings will be cleaned
- All windows will be clean on the inside

Additional items may be requested at the discretion of the Empty Homes Surveyor at the time of survey:

- Cleaning of any doors windows or external glazing
- Cleaning of cooker hoods and extraction fans, ensuring they are free from dirt and grease
- Litter picking of gardens and brushing of paved areas
- Cleaning of white goods

5. **Decoration**

Customers can expect to move into a property where all living areas are decorated in neutral colours and to a serviceable standard. This means that the hall, stairs and landing, kitchen and living room should meet this standard and if not will be decorated. All other areas of the home will be assessed on quality.

In properties that have offensive graffiti or heavy nicotine staining, decoration to the affected areas will be undertaken.

Lining paper may be specified in certain areas to help extend the lifespan of plasterwork.

When new decoration is required, the colours applied consist of magnolia walls, white ceilings and white woodwork as standard.

6. **Security**

All locks to external doors will be changed and properties will be let with a set of keys for all doors, lockers and outbuildings where applicable and at least one key for lockable windows.

All doors and windows will be operational, free from defects and watertight.

All windows above the first floor will have an operational child restrictor in place.

All windows to bathrooms and WC's will have privacy glass fitted.

A minimum of 1 key or fob will be provided for all communal doors.

7. **External Areas**

External gardens will be left in a manageable condition and free from trip hazards and litter.

Excessive growth will be cut back to manageable levels for the incoming customers to maintain unless a communal garden is present. All visible debris will be removed and bins left empty.

Boundary walls, gates and fencing will be free from significant defects. Any urgent repairs will be undertaken during empty homes refurbishment and any non-urgent repairs and/or painting will be deferred to a planned programme

8. **Property Adaptations**

If a property has previously undergone any adaptations, then these will be retained so future customers can benefit from the feature e.g. level access showers.

In some circumstances, consideration for the removal of an adaptation may need to be given if a match for the property cannot be sought after extensive marketing.

Any request for the removal of an adaptation can only be approved by the Performance Manager.

9. Planned Programmes

Any component replacement or other improvements that are identified but not required at tenancy start will be referred to a planned programme.

Kitchen and bathrooms will be deferred to a planned programme and will be targeted to be replaced within the first 3 months of tenancy. The incoming customer will be offered a choice of kitchen colour from an approved range.

10. Flooring

All floors will be free from structural defects, trip hazards and be securely fixed.

All finished flooring will be flat, defect free with no trip hazards and left in a ready cleansable state.

11. Staircase

Staircases will be free from defects and have appropriate balustrades and handrails in place where applicable prior to re-occupation.

12. Kitchen

The number of kitchen units installed is determined by the space available and as such a minimum of three units will be installed including the sink top and at least one work surface.

A cooker space with a minimum of one supply (gas or electric) will be provided. We will endeavour to provide spaces for white goods where possible to standard sizes although, if opening sizes vary, slimline goods may be required.

Kitchens will be left cleansable and serviceable and only kitchens beyond economic repair will be replaced during empty homes refurbishment. Refer to section 9. Planned Programme.

Kitchens in flats will have an anti-vibration mat installed in the washing machine space to help reduce sound transmittance produced by the customer's washing machine.

13. Bathroom

Bathrooms and toilets will have a WC, a bath and/or shower and a wash hand basin.

Bathrooms will have a thermostatic mixer shower fitted above a bath in all our homes.

A minimum of one row of tiles will be fixed above any baths and basins with a mould free silicone sealant.

Bathrooms without adequate ventilation, normally in the way of an opening window or internal bathroom, will have mechanical extraction installed.

Shower curtains, shower heads and hoses will be sanitised or replaced as appropriate.

14. Heating

Each habitable room will have a radiator or heater as a minimum and will normally have localised thermostatic controls to allow room temperatures to be regulated.

At the start of tenancy, new customers will be shown where all controls are and how to operate their heating system.

15. Roofs, Gutters and Drainage

All roof coverings will be free from any major defect and watertight.

All rainwater goods will be securely fixed in place, clear of debris/vegetation and operating effectively.

All soil stacks will be free from defects/blockages.

All drains on the premises will be running freely and any suspected blockages/collapses will be investigated and rectified prior to occupation.

16. Walls and ceilings

All fixings and fixtures deemed unsafe are to be removed.

All nails, screws and Polystyrene tiles will be removed from walls and ceilings.

All surfaces to be left free from mould.

All visible plasterwork will be left in a state that can receive decoration. Any defective plasterwork identified after occupation should be notified via the Responsive Repair Process.

17. Asbestos sampling and removal

There will be a full refurbishment asbestos survey available for all properties built prior to 2000 ahead of works to identify the known locations of asbestos.

The sample locations are taken out of eyeline where possible and sample locations are made good, ready to receive decoration.

Asbestos containing material will be removed or left in situ in line with the asbestos survey recommendations or instruction from an Empty Homes Surveyor if works identified during survey are likely to disturb the material.

This document should act as a guide to the homes we provide to new customers and remove subjectivity from specifying works required to empty homes. The Empty Homes Surveyor will utilise their discretion to endeavour to follow this standard.