

# **Images reveal shocking state of reclaimed West Lothian council homes**

**Images revealing the shocking state of reclaimed West Lothian council homes have been revealed amid concerns about delays bringing them back into use.**

These are the shocking scenes West Lothian housing officers have found when they have taken back the keys to council homes.

The pictures, taken by West Lothian housing officers, show living rooms knee deep in rubbish, a bathtub with weeds growing in it and a kitchens destroyed by ex-tenants that have vacated their home.

Officials say more than half council homes are now left in this condition for Building Services staff to make good before they can be let to the many desperate families on the council's waiting list.



Local councillors branded the photographs eye-opening, while Conservative councillor Alison Adamson said they were astounding.

“What we are looking at is criminal damage,” she said. “This is someone who has deliberately gone about wrecking a house for someone else who desperately needs it. This didn’t just happen overnight.”

Councillors have complained for years about the length of the

void times – the gap between one tenant moving out and a new one moving in – and the pictures were included in a report to explain what was causing the delay.

The average number of days a void property takes to re-let peaked in March 2024 at 119 days as the service worked through the backlog of voids from the severe weather event of later 2022 & early 2023.

Building Services has spent £3.7m on returning mainstream properties to rent and £650,000 getting temporary tenancies back.

All of the homes pictured are termed Category C – 50% of void homes are in this condition and need major refurbishment. The average cost to return these homes to a standard for relet is £10,000 per house.

Next are category B which account for 44% of void houses. These require a spend of £3,500 to bring them up to standard.

Only 6% of homes returned to council are Category A-requiring the minimal work – and a spend of £1,000- before they can be relet.

Performance is now showing an improved trend – October was up due to a number of longer-term voids being let – and it is expect this to continue throughout the remainder of this year with the number of days taken to return a property to let around 60.

Grant Taylor, Building Services Manager told a recent meeting of West Lothian Council's Housing Services PDSP that at the end of November Building Services had completed refurbishment 1,143 mainstream and temporary tenancy homes in the 24/25 financial year- an average of 33 a week.

Of those 990 have now been let. Building Services received 936 new voids during the same period to 30 November.

Bathgate saw the highest number of voids returned to let with 179 followed by Whitburn (168) Armadale (142) and the Breich Valley (137).

Mr Taylor told the meeting: "It's averaging just over £10,000 for the council to return and repair a category C property. That £10,000 per house also puts pressure on the housing revenue account.

"You can see the amount of additional work and in some instances these properties go out to an external company to come in and do the basic cleaning and removal. This is one of the major reasons that we have not been getting properties returned within the previous timescales."

"We are working hard to try to overcome these issues."

Labour's Tony Boyle asked if it was down to mental health or anti-social behaviour issues.

Alison Smith, Housing Management & Community Safety Manager said that Housing Officers could face difficulties getting access to homes and that some tenants did face mental health or addiction issues. Some tenants just destroyed property. She said it could happen within weeks that tenants let properties go into disrepair.

Chairing the panel Councillor George Paul paid tribute to the work of front-line staff for their work.

And Councillor Adamson said: "I can only sympathise with the staff who have to deal with this on a day-to-day basis. It shows the sort of pressures that everyone is under in the whole housing situation. It must be extremely depressing. I can only say thank you for the work that you do. I really hope we can make some inroads into this."

A new team has been formed in the housing department which aims to speed up the void process.

Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter