



**Policy Title:** Management of Empty Houses Policy & Procedures

**Policy Manual Section:** Housing & Technical Services

**Date Approved by Management Committee:** 26 June 2014

**Next Review Date:** June 2017

This document will be made available in different languages and formats on request, including Braille and audio formats.

ENGLISH This information is available on request in other languages, in large print, in Braille and on audio format. If you or anyone you know would like this information in one of these formats please contact Cadder HA on **0141 945 3282**

POLISH Niniejsze informacje dostępne są na żądanie w innych wersjach językowych, dużym drukiem, językiem Braille'a oraz w formacie audio. Aby otrzymać powyższe informacje w jednym z wymienionych formatów, proszę skontaktować się z Zespołem ds. Cadder HA pod numerem telefonu **0141 945 3282**

FRENCH Ces informations sont disponibles sur demande dans d'autres langues, en gros caractères, en braille et en format audio. Si vous souhaitez obtenir ces informations dans l'un de ces formats, veuillez contacter Cadder HA au **0141 945 3282**.

ARABIC به أحرف به ط باعة أخرى، به لغات ال طالب تحت متوفرة المعلومات هذه في ترغبت أدت إذا . صوتي شريط على و بريل به طريقة، أبيرة أن الرجاء الصديغ، هذه من بأي المعلومات هذه على الحصول ل لإسكان آلا سدكو جمعية سياسة به فريق ت اتصل Cadder HA **0141 945 3282** الرقم على

SOMALI Warbixintaan waxaa, haddii la dalbado lagu heli karaa luuqaddo kale, daabacaad weyn, Farta ay dadka indhaha la' akhriyaan (Braille) iyo qaab cajaladdo maqal ah. Haddii aad doonayso inaad warbixintan ku hesho mid ka mid ah qaababkaas, fadlan kala xidhiidh Kooxda Xeerarka ee Cadder HA telefoonka **0141 945 3282**

این مطالب را می توانید به زبان های دیگر، به شکل چاپ به با حروف درشت یا israF حروف بریل (برای نابینایان) و بر روی نوار صوتی درخواست نمایید. در صورتی آه مایل به دریافت این مطالب به یکی از شکل های فوق هستید لطفاً با دفت Cadder HA تماس **0141 945 3282** تلفن شماره. آندید حاصل

RUSSIAN Данная информация может быть предоставлена по требованию на других языках, крупным шрифтом, шрифтом Брайля и в аудиозаписи. Если вы хотите получить данную информацию в одном из этих форматов, обратитесь в Cadder HA по телефону **0141 945 3282**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Cadder Housing Association is a registered social landlord, set up in 1994 to improve the living conditions for residents in the Cadder estate in the north of Glasgow. It operates on a “not-for-profit” basis, and is run by an elected Management Committee consisting mainly of local residents who employ a staff team to manage the Association on a day-to-day basis.
- 1.2 This document outlines Cadder Housing Association’s policy and procedures in relation to the management of empty properties.
- 1.3 The Scottish Secure Tenancy (SST) can only be terminated in six ways these are: -
- Where the landlord has been successful under the grounds of repossession for example, arrears, anti-social etc.
  - Where the property has been abandoned and appropriate notices have been served.
  - On the death of the tenant
  - Conversion to Short SST
  - By written agreement between the landlord and tenant
  - By four weeks notice given by the tenant
- 1.4 An empty house can be defined as a property of the Association that has a current rent account but for a period of time no tenant exists for any period within the financial year. There are many reasons for properties becoming empty, some of the reasons are as listed: -
- Formal termination
  - Death of tenant
  - Abandonment
  - Eviction
  - Transfers
- 1.5 The Association will seek to minimise the time that a property is void, recognising that an empty property represents:
- Lost rental income to the Association
  - An opportunity to alleviate an applicant’s housing need
  - A negative image for the area – in particular for immediate neighbours
  - A possible target for vandalism resulting in increased costs and safety concerns from the neighbours
  - The danger for a deterioration in its condition thus resulting in increased repair costs.

1.6 This document will outline the policy and procedural objectives to ensure that an efficient and effective management of empty properties, these will be listed within the following areas: -

- General Aims and Objectives
- Tenant and Landlord Responsibilities
- Inspections
- Allocations Processes
- Repairs Processes
- Performance Targets / Monitoring
- Customer Satisfaction
- Audit & Review

1.7 Although this document will outline the allocation and repair processes that directly affect the empty homes policy, it should also be read in conjunction with Cadder Housing Association's Repairs & Maintenance Policy and Allocations Policy.

1.8 To facilitate these procedures there are flowcharts that outline the process for different empty homes scenarios, these are as listed with their appendix number: -

Appendix 1 - Empty Properties where four weeks notice has been received

Appendix 2 - Lists the letters / pro-formas that will assist in ensuring greater efficiency in the management of the empty homes processes, good communication throughout the organisation and between staff and tenants or service users.

## 1.9 **Formulation of Policy**

1.9.1 This policy takes account of good practice documents such as the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations' model void policy / procedures and their previous Raising Standards document, as well as seeking to comply with the requirements of the areas outlined at 1.12.

## 1.10 **Equal Opportunities**

1.10.1 The Association will regularly test this policy and associated procedures for equal opportunity implications and take any appropriate action. To ensure equal access to the information contained in this policy for all, we are happy to provide copies in Braille, in large print, translated into other languages or on tape to you or anybody that you know.

## 1.11 **Consultation**

1.11.1 Consultation with the community and resident participation has always been one of the key aspects of the way in which the Association operates. We therefore welcome the statutory provisions in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 which require

all social landlords to take tenants' views into account when formulating key service delivery policies.

1.11.2 At the present time, there are two strands to policy consultation within Cadder:

- firstly, we believe it is important to inform all tenants when a policy review is due, together with some information on what changes are likely to be proposed by the Association
- the next stage is to invite feedback from tenants on (i) how well they feel the proposals address the needs of the community and (ii) whether there are any particular amendments they would like to see.

1.11.3 The Association's Resident Participation Strategy was approved by Committee in May 2014 and sets out a framework on how we intend to consult with tenants and service users. It clearly states that the Association will only consult on any changes to the policy and where these changes significantly affect tenants and service users.

## 1.12 Legislation & Regulation

1.12.1 The Policy meets with legislative and good practice requirements, this includes the following:

**Scottish Secure Tenancy** – The Association can exercise direct control over its tenants via the terms of the Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement. The purpose of this is to protect the interest of its tenants, the wider community and the Association.

**Housing (Scotland Act) 2001** - The Void Property Management Policy adheres to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, in particular guidance in relation to the termination of a tenancy (notified or abandoned), compensation for improvements and access rights for inspection.

**Housing (Scotland) Act 2010** - The introduction of the Scottish Social Housing Charter through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 requires Cadder Housing Association to report to the Scottish Regulator annually on the achievement of the Charter Outcomes. This includes performance in the management of empty homes.

**Gas Safety (Installations and Use) Regulations 1998** – the Association will ensure that it allocates void properties that have benefited from an annual inspection of gas appliances.

**The Energy Performance of Buildings (Scotland) Regulations 2008** – the Association will ensure that it allocates void properties that have a valid Energy Performance Certificate in place.

**The Construction, Design and Management Regulations 2007** – The Association ensures that it meets Health and Safety requirements in the management of voids, particularly relating to repairs by Association or contracted staff.

**Data Protection Act 1998** - Within the terms of the Data Protection Act the Association will ensure that information provided by an applicant and/or tenant, or sought by the Association is relevant only to the management of void properties and that all such information received is treated in the strictest confidence.

Under the provisions of the Data Protection Act, individuals have the right to see and receive a copy of any personal information (for which a small fee may be charged) that is held about them by the Association and to have any inaccuracies corrected.

1.13.1 The Void Property Management Policy complies with the guidelines set by the Scottish Government in the Social Housing Charter. In terms of the management of voids, the Charter states that every social landlord must:

**Housing quality and maintenance -  
Outcome 4: Quality of housing:**

Social landlords manage their businesses so that:

- tenants' homes, as a minimum, meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by April 2015 and continue to meet it thereafter, and when they are allocated, are always clean, tidy and in a good state of repair.

**Getting good value from rent and service charges -  
Outcome 13: Value for Money from rents and service charges:**

*“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.

## **2.0 GENERAL AIMS & OBJECTIVES**

2.1 The Association has identified the following general aims and objectives in relation to the management of empty properties:-

- To minimise the loss of rental income by re-letting properties as soon as the notification of an end of tenancy is received.
- To maximise the opportunity to meet housing needs by allocating properties efficiently.
- To minimise the repair expenditure whilst not deterring acceptances.
- To maximise the empty house period to undertake planned improvements.
- To minimise the number of offers made before a property is let.
- To provide committee with the necessary information that assists them to effectively monitor void performance.
- To ensure that staff have individual targets in the management of void properties.
- To continually improve the service through recording staff and tenant's views.
- To ensure accommodation offered is to the standard specified by the Association on its Maintenance Policy and complies with all Health & Safety requirements.
- To make best use of the Association's available housing stock to help meet housing need and aspiration

## **3.0 TENANT / LANDLORD RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **3.1 Termination Notice Period**

3.1.1 The Association should maximise this period of notice of termination period (28 days) to inspect the property and begin the lettings process. This will ensure that the objectives of the empty house policy can be achieved as outlined in section 2.1 of this document.

3.1.2 Cadder Housing Association will require all tenants to provide four weeks written notice of their intention to leave their property. Outgoing tenants will be advised that keys should be returned to our office by 12 noon on the termination date. Where the termination date falls on a Saturday or Sunday or on any other date that the office is closed, the tenant will be advised that the keys must be returned by 10.00am on the first working day after the termination date at the latest. In cases where the property has become empty due to the death of a tenant, the tenancy will terminate on the date of death. In the event that the tenant's family or relatives require a period beyond a timescale which is deemed to be reasonable to remove furniture and personal belongings, then they will be required to pay the rent charge for this period, for example in excess of 7 calendar days. The Association will require tenants to complete an end of tenancy form that seeks information on the following: -

- Date of termination
- Intended date of leaving the property
- Reason for leaving
- Outstanding repairs
- Willingness to allow prospective tenants to view the property within the four weeks notice period.
- Forwarding address
- An agreed appointment for an end of tenancy inspection by the Housing Services Officer & Technical Services Officer
- Signature by the tenant, as well as any partner or spouse to acknowledge that they are agreeable to the termination of the tenancy in accordance with the Matrimonial Homes (Scotland) Act 1981.

3.1.3 If there is a delay in returning the keys the tenant will be charged additional rent on a daily basis up to and including the date they are returned.

3.1.4 If the tenant returns their keys before the end of the 28-day termination notice period, they will still be charged rent for the full 28 days. In the event that a property is re-let within the 28 day termination period, the rent account of the outgoing tenant will be adjusted accordingly.

3.1.5 The Housing Services Officer will inform the tenant of their responsibilities within their four weeks notice period as outlined in section 4.2 & 4.3 of this document.

3.1.6 A date for the end of tenancy inspection should be agreed with the tenant on completing the notice of tenancy termination form. The date should preferably be within 2 days of notice of tenancy termination being taken.

3.2 In the event that the property has likely been abandoned or the keys are received without notice, the Housing Services Officer will carry out an inspection of the property and assess whether to initiate abandonment proceedings. The Association has clear procedures for dealing with properties that are believed to be abandoned, these procedures cover:

- The checking of apparently unoccupied property
- Means for attempting to discover a tenant's whereabouts
- Serving official abandonment notices
- Storing and disposal of items left in abandoned properties
- Dealing with services such as gas/electricity.



### **3.3 Right to Compensation**

- 3.3.1 The Association has a policy of reimbursing tenants for certain improvements they have carried out to their home, with permission. The Association will also consider any compensation application where the tenant received permission from Scottish Homes prior to the LSVT.
- 3.4 The Association will maximise entitlement to Council Tax discount and exemption, for all void properties. Appendix 3 outlines the guidelines on Council Tax exemption / discount uptake.
- 3.5 The Association operates an incentive scheme to encourage tenants who are terminating their tenancy to comply with their conditions of let where they will: -
- Give 4 weeks notice to terminate their tenancy;
  - Allow access for prospective tenants to view the property during the notice period;
  - Clear all items of all furniture, fittings and carpets by the date of leaving;
  - Ensure the property is vacated in a reasonable condition with no rechargeable repairs;
  - Hand the keys into the office by the date of leaving.

Where tenants comply with their condition of let and achieve the above tasks they will be awarded a payment of £50 (fifty pounds). This scheme will be administered by the Housing Services Officer in close liaison with the Technical Services Officer who will verify compliance with property issues.

### **4.0 Inspections**

- 4.1 The importance of inspections cannot be understated as it allows the Association to assess the condition of the property, also the tenant can be advised of their responsibilities. Where the property is in reasonable condition this will allow the offer process to begin and for prospective tenants to view the property. Therefore, the new tenant can take up occupancy of their new home shortly after the outgoing tenant has vacated the property and repair works have been completed.
- 4.2 At the end of tenancy inspection the Housing Services and Technical Services Officers will advise the tenant of their responsibilities prior to the tenancy termination date, these are:
- To leave the house in a clean and tidy condition
  - To remove all belongings
  - To make sure that any dependants, lodgers leave with you.
  - To allow access to the property, at reasonable times for the Association to show round prospective tenants

- To make good any (rechargeable) repairs or reinstate any alterations carried out without permission.
- 4.3 The Housing Services Officer should issue a letter to the tenant within 2 working days of the end of tenancy inspection to reinforce their responsibilities as outlined in section 4.2, which will include details of the rent due.
- 4.4 The Technical Services Officer should arrange a follow-up inspection time to ensure the tenant has carried out any repairs or reinstated any alterations that have been identified as potential re-chargeables. At this inspection the tenant will be advised of the indicative rechargeable amount (based on Schedule of Rates) if the works have not been completed or works are not to the Association's standard.
- 4.5 Where the property has been repossessed through abandonment procedures or a breach of the Cadder Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement, or keys have been received from the outgoing tenant, the Housing Services & Technical Services Officers should carry out an inspection of the empty property within one working day. Staff should refer to the abandonment procedures where a property is believed to be abandoned.
- 4.6 The inspection of the repossessed or vacated property by the Technical Services Officer and Housing Services Officer will allow them to:

Task	Responsibility
Ensure the property is empty	Housing Services Officer
Assess repairs (re-chargeables)	Technical Services Officer
Assess if the property is available for viewing	Housing Services Officer
Take final meter readings	Technical Services Officer
Ensure the gas and electrical supply is active.	Technical Services Officer
Arrange mandatory checks, for example gas/electric	Technical Services Officer
Take an inventory of belongings*	Housing Services Officer

\* *Where the property has been abandoned staff should consider guidance on the storage of goods before disposing of furniture etc.*

An account for all re-chargeable repairs will be raised where the tenant has caused repair work wilfully, negligently or accidentally. This account should be raised within 5 working days following completion of all repair works. Where required, The Housing Services Officer / Technical Services Officer will take photographs of the condition of the property and furniture and fittings to evidence any rechargeable repairs or the condition of the property. These will be stored in the former tenant file.

4.7 The Housing Services Officer should arrange to visit the new tenant within six weeks of their date of entry to:

- ensure the tenant is settling into their new home.
- ensure the tenant is using the property as their home and they have appropriate furnishings.
- reinforce their conditions of tenancy.
- confirm the tenant's rent status, for example, housing benefit being paid / applied for etc.
- allow the tenant the opportunity to discuss any concerns or highlight any repair issues.

A new tenant pro-forma should be completed and signed off by the Housing Services Officer and tenant.

## **5.0 Allocations Processes**

5.1 Cadder Housing Association will ensure that empty properties are re-let as efficiently as possible.

5.2 The allocation process will begin following the end of tenancy inspection (depending on condition or work content to the property), this to allow the new tenancy to commence as soon as possible after the property has been returned to a lettable condition. Where the property is in poor condition or requires major repair work it may be appropriate not to begin the lettings process until the property has been vacated and the Technical Services Section have issued repair works orders. In the majority of situations, staff should select an applicant for the property, but not carry out the accompanied viewing until repair works are nearing completion.

5.3 In the event that no major repair work is identified the lettings process can begin within one working day of the end of tenancy inspection.

Applicants should be offered accommodation;

- Same day for waiting list;
- Within one working day for transfer applicants, this will allow the Housing Officer to inspect their home.
- Offers to applicants referred to the Association by organisations such as Glasgow City Council Homeless Casework Team, other Housing Associations or support providers should be relayed via a phone call and followed up with a formal offer letter being forwarded to the referring organisation. They will be expected to make the offer to the applicant within the 2 day timescale.

Staff should in the first instance telephone applicants who have secured an offer of housing as an efficient way to gauge their interest in the property. If interested an

accompanied viewing should be made with the successful applicant to allow them to view the property. All offers should be made in writing to the applicant.

(There is no need to issue an offer letter to applicants who have been contacted by phone and they have confirmed that they are not interested in the property. The Housing Services Assistant should update their application for housing with the reason for refusal and issue a letter on the agreed changes to their housing application within 2 days.)

There should be an efficient turn around of the offer / refusal process to ensure that the objectives of the policy and procedures as outlined in section 2.1 of this document are achieved;

- Applicants are given two days to respond to an offer
- Refusals are processed same day
- Selections are made within one working day of refusal
- Applicants interested in properties should be available to view the property within 2 working days.

5.4 The lettings process will be assisted through a review of the waiting list whereby applicants will be asked to confirm their interest in remaining on the housing list and asked to confirm their preference of streets within the Cadder area on the anniversary of their application each year. At each allocations interview, applicants will be made aware of their prospects of securing their preferred house type and area within Cadder. In addition, they will be advised to consider amending their application to reflect house types and areas which may result in them securing an earlier offer of housing. The staff should update an applicant's application for housing to reflect reasons for refusal of offers. Staff, when selecting a property should make contact with the applicant to establish whether they are interested in the property before issuing the formal offer letter therefore reducing the offer process timescale.

5.5 The Housing Services Officer should carryout accompanied viewings with prospective tenants within 2 working days from their expression of interest in the property, subject to the property being in a condition that does not compromise health and Safety, which will be informed by the Technical Services Officer. This accompanied viewing will give the applicant the opportunity to ask questions about the property and the area, for example rent, services, schools etc. The tenant should be provided with a list of repairs that are to be carried out to their new home and copies of the energy performance, gas and electricity safety certificates preferably at the accompanied viewing, if available, otherwise at least before the tenant signs their tenancy agreement.

5.6 The Association will identify any difficult to let properties. In doing so, it will consider properties with high number of refusals / limited demand and ascertain the reasons for this and identify actions to be taken to address matters. Measures

to be considered may include marketing, management of anti-social behaviour, estate management works, decoration and any other issues relevant to the property or its location. Any properties identified as difficult to let will inform the Association's Asset Management Strategy.

- 5.7 The Association will work in partnership with other agencies and accept referrals for accommodation for example G.C.C. Homeless Casework Team, Positive Action in Housing and other support providers etc.

## **6.0 Repairs Processes**

- 6.1 The end of tenancy / empty house inspection will identify repair work that is required. This should start within one working day of the property being vacated. Staff should consider firstly, carrying out minor repairs within the outgoing tenant's notice period, with their agreement, or secondly, carrying out these repairs whilst the new tenant is in residence. Where possible, the outgoing tenant should be advised of any rechargeable repairs in writing by the Technical Services Department and be given the opportunity of carrying out required works prior to the keys being returned. Where rechargeable repairs are identified upon keys being returned to the Association, the Technical Services Officer will raise a rechargeable works order. The Technical Services Department will thereafter pursue recovery of repair costs. Photographs of identified rechargeable repairs will be taken prior to works commencing. These will be saved to the former tenant file.
- 6.2 The repairs required to the empty properties will be assessed against a specification of works (Appendix 4)
- 6.3 Cadder Housing Association does not anticipate the vandalism of void properties being a problem but Housing Services Officers should assess the vulnerability of each void property and arrange for appropriate security via the Technical Services Section, as necessary. In the event of properties being vandalised this should be reported to the Police and a crime number received, which should be passed onto the Technical Services Section to facilitate any insurance claim in relation to said works.
- 6.4 The repairs required to the empty property will be categorised into the appropriate categories of work: -

- Minor

To be completed within 3 working Days from issue of the works order.

Minor works shall include items such as gas and electrical safety checks, the removal of small amounts of furniture, and lock changes with a minimum amount of repairs. The estimated cost will be no greater than £500

- Routine (General works)

To be completed within the agreed timescale based on the value of the work and will be within the range of 5 working days.

It is anticipated that most of the works will fall into this category and will involve multi trade work. The estimated cost will be between £500 and £1,500.

- Major (Extensive repair work)

This will involve repair work carried out by a number of trades and will require a programme to complete the works within 15 working days. The programme will be monitored closely to avoid potential slippage. The estimated cost will be greater than £1,500.

6.5 The Association (Technical Services Section) will carry out 100% post inspections on all repair work to void properties and submit a completion certificate with keys to the Housing Management section upon all identified works being completed to a satisfactory standard.

6.6 The Association will seek to identify planned maintenance improvements that will enhance the attractiveness and demand for the area and its properties.

## **7.0 Performance Targets / Monitoring / Audit**

7.1 The performance of the Association's void properties will be reported quarterly to the Audit & Performance Sub Committee. The Housing Services Manager and Technical Services Manager will discuss all aspects of the void management service at their respective team meetings.

7.2 The Association has performance targets to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of its void property management, these targets include:

- the number of voids
- the percentage of lost rents against actual income
- Average days that properties are empty
- letting performance by category:
  - Less that 2 weeks
  - 2 – 4 weeks
  - 4 weeks plus
- Minor           3 working days           Maximum £500.
- Routine        5 working days           Maximum £1500.
- Major          15 working days          Minimum £1500
- Empty House Repairs Budget
- Post inspection targets of 100% for all properties.

- 7.3 The Association also tracks the progress of empty houses through the Void Module of the SDM Housing Management Software / Record sheet that allows individual procedural targets to be closely monitored for example:-
- Number of days between end of tenancy inspection and offer process
  - Time between offers
  - Time with maintenance for repair works
- 7.4 The Association have disaggregated the overall performance targets to each Housing Services Officer's area in order that they have ownership for their responsibilities in the management of empty houses.
- 7.5 The Association will regularly benchmark the empty house targets and performance with peer and neighbouring associations. The main source of information for benchmarking will be Annual Return on the Scottish Housing Charter. The Association will also benchmark its performance through the Scottish Housing Best Value Network.
- 7.6 The Association will publish its performance in void management against key performance indicators through its Annual Charter Report / Newsletters.
- 7.7 In our drive for continuous improvement the Association will carry out an audit of the empty house procedure and process at least every year. We will select properties for audit based on the following criteria: -
- Repair cost
  - Lost rent
  - Random selection

We will report the findings of the audit to the: -

- Staff
- Contractors
- Audit & Performance Sub-Committee of the Management Committee

## **8.0 Customer / Service Satisfaction**

- 8.1 The Association is committed to a high level of customer satisfaction in the delivery of this Policy, seeking continuous improvement.
- 8.2 The Association will include aspects of the void process within its main customer satisfaction survey and ensure that the feedback is taken into account in the review of the policy. We will conduct a questionnaire survey on satisfaction in all areas of

the empty house process as part of the half yearly audit. We will have a targeted approach where new tenants will be identified for the satisfaction survey.

- 8.3 Housing Management staff will aim to visit all new tenants within a six week period of the tenancy commencing. The main purpose of these visits is to ensure that the tenant has moved in to the property and to ascertain if there are any issues. New tenants will also be asked to answer a number of questions relating to the allocations and void processes (Appendix 5). These responses will help inform policy, procedure and customer service delivery.
- 8.4 The Association's aim is to ensure that the customer receives a quality service and where this is not the case the customer has the opportunity to complain about any aspect of the void process. The customer will be provided with the Association's complaints procedure where they are dissatisfied with the service.
- 8.5.1 The Association is committed to confidentiality where information is given from customers in relation to this policy and this information will not be discussed with a third party without their permission. The Association will comply with the requirements of the Access to Personal Files Act 1987 and the Data Protection Act 1998 in this regard.

## 9.0 **Review**

- 9.1 This Policy will be reviewed in line with the Association's Risk Management Policy.
- 9.2 This policy will be reviewed in June 2017, or earlier to take account of:
- Legislative, regulatory and good practice requirements
  - Association performance
  - the view of tenants and staff