



A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes

Bringing empty homes back into use can play a key part of local strategies to meet housing need. Not only are empty homes a wasted resource, they are often the subject of complaints and frustration for communities, as well as being a catalyst for crime and degradation.

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About the Local Government Association

The Local Government Association are the national membership body for councils, who work on behalf of councils across England to support, promote and improve practices across local government. Our membership comprises of 315 of the 317 councils in England, and includes district, county, metropolitan and unitary authorities, along with London boroughs and the City of London Corporation. Our core members are English councils in full membership and Welsh councils in corporate membership through the Welsh LGA. Our associate members include fire and rescue authorities, police and crime commissioners (PCCs), national parks authorities and town and parish councils through their membership body, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC).

A politically led, cross party organisation, we provide the bridge between central and local government and aim to influence the political agenda on issues that matter in order to help councils deliver the best services to their local communities. We work across the breadth of local government, drawing in every tier of interest to promote and defend the reputation of the sector, focusing our efforts where real impact can be achieved.

The LGA also provides a range of practical support on a free of charge and or subsidised basis, to enable councils to exploit the opportunities that this approach to improvement provides. This includes support of a corporate nature such as leadership programmes, peer challenge, LG Inform and programmes tailored to specific service areas. Our range of improvement programmes are sector-led and peer-based, using expertise drawn from the local government sector to drive sustainable growth, deliver better public services and empower communities.

We provide tools and resources that enable councils to respond to present and emerging challenges and ensure that they have in place the building blocks of what makes a good organisation – a clear vision and set of priorities, strong political and managerial leadership, clear and effective leadership, robust financial planning and the capacity to improve. Our sector-led approach is underpinned by the core principles that local government is responsible for its own performance, is accountable locally and not nationally, and that there is a collective responsibility within the sector. As the voice of local government, we are committed to supporting local government continuously to improve.

About the Empty Homes Network

Established in 2001, the Empty Homes Network is the prominent voice, support and resource community for empty homes officers and practitioners across the country. With over 700 members and subscribers, the Network's aim is to support councils and their employees in bringing empty homes back into use, through the sharing of best practice methods, hands-on experiences, and tools to develop effectiveness and efficiency.

Formed as a non-profit organisation, the Empty Homes Network lobby and campaign for service improvement, increased resources, and enhanced tools, and assist those with the least capacity and experience to gain confidence whilst at the same time ensuring that those who are more experienced have a platform to share, develop and innovate. We support policymakers in developing approaches and frameworks by offering practical and knowledgeable insight at an operational level, all with the aim of adequately equipping councils with the tools required to negotiate, support and enforce where needed.

In addition to our online platform, The Empty Homes Network host an annual national conference bringing together practitioners, experts, and policymakers such as MPs and Councillors, to enable them to share first-hand their experiences, case studies and practical knowledge. This event has grown year on year since its inception, highlighting the importance and willingness of councils to continue to allocate and dedicate resources to the issue, albeit one that is not currently a statutory function.

In recent years, the Empty Homes Network has expanded its development opportunities for councils through their training and consultancy services. Aimed at empty homes officers and practitioners of all experience levels, our courses offer an introduction into the subject of empty homes from a practitioner's point of view and provides a foundation level approach for delegates to use in their day-to-day roles. We also source courses in specialist areas for the benefit of our members, in topics such as probate legalities and hoarding. Our consultancy services are specifically tailored to meet an authority's specific needs. These include a full empty homes service review, enabling the council a fresh perspective and opportunity to assess where best practice or policy improvements can be made; a challenging case appraisal, offering a practical action plan of next steps in dealing with difficult empty homes cases; and empty homes strategy writing and refreshing, for those authorities who are looking to take their first, or next step in developing their policy and procedures. The Empty Homes Network have also worked with authorities to produce investment proposals for new initiatives such as grants, loan and leasing schemes.

Executive summary

Against a backdrop of significant pressure to meet increasing housing demand, councils are increasingly exploring other opportunities to meet shortfalls in supply. Bringing empty homes back into use can play a key part of local strategies to meet housing need. Not only are empty homes a wasted resource, they are often the subject of complaints and frustration for communities, as well as being a catalyst for crime and degradation.

Facing their own challenges locally, councils across England are deemed to be best placed to tackle the issue of empty homes through encouraging and supporting their owners to bring them back into use, and to enforce against owner and property where their condition or effect is to the detriment of a neighbour or community. However, whilst some councils have dedicated teams, officers or departments to carry out this service, dealing with an empty home is not a statutory function that councils are duty bound to provide.

With limited council resources meaning focus is rightly given to corporate priorities, this research has identified that councils largely take a reactive approach to dealing with empty homes, tackling issues and complaints as they are received and when resources allow. Whilst some councils who operate a wholly proactive approach by targeting challenging cases as well as affording time to cleanse data and reduce numbers, many councils, due to their capacity and resources, do not have the opportunity to do both. A shift in mindset, through increasing the ability for councils to be more proactive in their approach, will widely see the numbers of empty homes reduced.

In assessing council taxbase statistics for the past five years, it is evident that the numbers across all types and definitions of empty homes have risen steadily since the COVID-19 pandemic and have largely exceeded the figures seen in 2018. Despite the introduction of an [empty homes premium \(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951402/Empty_home_premium_guidance.pdf\)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951402/Empty_home_premium_guidance.pdf), aimed at disincentivising owners of empty homes, along with efforts of councils, numbers continue to rise not only across England, but in Scotland and Wales also. More than 1 million properties across England in 2022 are unoccupied (4.01 per cent of all dwellings). Although a rise of only 0.08 per cent in 5 years since 2018, this increase represents nearly 60,000 homes. Through surveys and discussions with councils across the country, the accuracy of the national data was compared to statistics held in-house by empty homes officers or their counterparts. Nearly a quarter of practitioners surveyed did not know if their local figures were accurate, whilst only 7 per cent believed them to be always accurate when compared to council taxbase submissions.

Although understanding that council pressures mean that non-statutory functions are afforded less of a priority, this report recommends that councils should consider employing a dedicated empty homes resource as a minimum or explore the opportunities that dual roles with other relevant functions could provide. There are a number of case studies exploring different approaches that councils take to addressing empty homes throughout this report. Councils are encouraged to build and develop their service in order to move progressively over time, to a wholly proactive approach to empty homes work.

Taking into account both the varying levels of resource and variation in levels of empty homes activity within councils, the recommendations laid out are intended to provoke thought and action, and to support councils to think differently about the issue of empty homes. The report suggests councils could consider broadening their definition and remit of empty homes work to include homes left empty for less than six months, to reduce the flow of properties reaching the six-month mark, as well as exploring the opportunities offered by second and unoccupied exempt homes. It also suggests empowering officers through tools readily available to councils, such as allowing access to read-only council tax data and delegating enforcement powers directly to empty homes officers, as over a third of those surveyed did not have the authority to do so.

In support of all councils, several best practice tools are proposed with the intention of improving data recording and accuracy. This includes:

- the implementation of an empty homes database
- a guide for the progression of cases in order to provide structure to the process through to occupation
- an information source checklist to enable officers to identify knowledge gaps throughout their investigation procedures.

Of the empty homes practitioners surveyed during this research, 23 per cent of officers were not aware of whether their empty homes statistics reported through the council taxbase were accurate. The best practice tools and approaches aim to go some way into fixing this.

The report recommendations also highlight the suggestion that councils can empower and equip their officers with tools and solutions already available and within their powers. Accessing read-only council tax information, the supply of regular reports and data from revenue and benefits teams, as well as ensuring that empty homes premium and discounts are set at a level to discourage owners to leave their properties empty, rather than reward councils when homes stay empty for longer. With the backing of government with legislative changes, councils could be afforded the opportunity and flexibility to ringfence funding obtained through premium levies to further their empty homes work, and build sustainable, practical and operational solutions.

It is hoped that this report will not only bring exposure and attention to the issue of empty homes, but in exploring the numbers, resources and best practice elements, councils with existing empty homes officers will be encouraged to continue and develop their work further. It is hoped that it will also initiate and assist councils who currently do not have a dedicated empty homes officer to begin exploring the issue, and will be adequately equipped to pursue bringing empty homes back into use.

Introduction

Why empty homes matter

At a time of critical housing need, both government and councils consider the supply of safe, affordable and sustainable housing as a top priority. The ability to build houses at a rate that meets demand, coupled with the reduction in the availability of homes through the popularity of short-term lets and second home ownership, means that all opportunities to increase supply need to be explored.

One area of increasing interest are the opportunities for bringing empty homes back into use. Empty properties come in all shapes, sizes and locations, with varying levels of deterioration and effect on their neighbours and surrounding communities. Equally, such properties present a significant opportunity to increase available housing stock.

Statistics (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-taxbase-2022-in-england>)

released by government in October 2022, show over one million homes were classed as unoccupied in England, with over 300,000 of those being reported as long-term empty having been vacant for six months or longer. This represents just over 1 per cent of the country's total housing stock being defined as long term empty. To illustrate, this is equivalent to the number of residential properties in the Manchester. Whilst many of these are yet to have reached a stage of deterioration that prompts concern or encourages decline, every empty home removes a property from the housing market, and with it the chance for those on housing registers to be housed, first time buyers to purchase, or those looking to progress on the property ladder. However, owning an empty home is not illegal.

Affecting towns and cities across the UK, empty homes come in all forms, shapes and sizes. The variation in their condition and circumstance, also requires a variation in approach is needed to return them to occupation, with no one-size-fits-all solution. Whilst councils are ideally placed to encourage and enforce action in dealing with empty properties, such work is not a statutory function and therefore councils must determine whether resources are best used in dealing with them or to allocate resources to alternative corporate priorities.

Often a time and resource heavy process, working with empty home owners and unpicking often challenging circumstances requires a practical and empathetic approach. However, low levels of interest by empty home owners in previous government initiatives, administrative difficulties and the

reduction of the empty homes element of the New Homes Bonus calculation, has meant councils are now faced with a reduced incentive to carry out empty homes work, but also face a reduction in terms of their tools and offers of support to owners. This means that councils are left to devise their own strategies, loans, grant schemes and action plans, and allocate resources as they see fit locally.

Aims and objectives

This report aims to inform, educate and support all councils irrespective of their current levels of resource and activity on empty homes. By exploring several elements of empty homes work, the report seeks to gain an appreciation of how councils are currently tackling the issue and in doing so, inform a number of recommendations for authorities to consider, adapt, and implement. With an emphasis on current operational activities of councils rather than investigating the appetite and support from government, this report explores the following four key areas of empty homes work:

- **Statistics:** through assessing the past five years of council taxbase data, determine the accuracy of published empty homes figures. Do recent trends match with the experiences locally?
- **Resources:** to understand existing levels and involvement from councils on empty homes work and determine whether this leads to a reactive or proactive approach in reducing the number of empty homes. Subsequently, can existing service models show how other councils across the country could operate successfully?
- **Best Practice:** to develop and propose a number of best practice tools, and set a common standard to support councils to enhance their existing empty homes services, or from which the inception of one can be based.
- **Enforcement:** to gain an appreciation of the levels of appetite and use of enforcement powers by councils, and whether these are currently being used to their fullest potential.

The investigation is designed and developed with a varied audience in mind, including government, council members and officers, but also to act as a reference point for the public and those with an interest in the field. Critically, the proposals and recommendations put forward should be adaptable and achievable by all councils. Giving consideration to council differences, these recommendations aim to benefit all areas of the country and support the attempts to bring all types of empty homes back into use.

Approach and methodology

As outlined across the four areas of investigation, the approach taken to the research ensured that tangible, practical outcomes and experience-based recommendations were proposed for the development of empty homes activity in councils. To achieve this, the study sought to obtain information and input across four methods:

- a quantitative statistics-based data review
- qualitative research involving empty homes officers across the country
- qualitative research of councils, their staffing resource and appetite to carry out empty homes work
- stakeholder feedback on the implementation of best practice models.

Initially, a quantitative desk-based review of empty homes statistics was carried out using existing and readily available data obtained through historical council taxbase submissions. This data is considered to be the most accurate data available, and although further and more in-depth data may have been obtainable through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, it was considered that Council Taxbase data would be sufficient enough to show the scale of the issue currently. These statistics included numbers of long-term empty homes and those empty for less than six months, empty homes charged the council tax premium, second homes, and those labelled as unoccupied exemptions for council tax purposes.

Secondly, to understand the resources aspect of the paper a qualitative survey was carried out involving councils known to have limited resources currently undertaking empty homes work. These councils were identified based on their membership of the Empty Homes Network, information found on their respective websites, or through prior knowledge of their empty homes service having previously been scaled back. This survey, along with subsequent interviews with a number of respondents, explored current capacity, resourcing, and wider authority appetite to conduct empty homes work as well as understanding future plans and scope for carrying out such work.

Following this, a further survey was carried out with empty homes practitioners across the country in order to investigate a number of aspects of their roles, knowledge and experience. Practitioner's approach to statistics, the perceived accuracy of this data, and the use of available enforcement powers were all explored to give a current view of officers and their work. To ensure the relevance and ability of councils to adopt the best practice elements of the report, the recommendations were put to a number of experienced and knowledgeable empty homes officers, who currently make up the Executive Board of The Empty Homes Network. Consisting of officers from councils across the country, their years of experience in the field ensured that the resulting recommendations had been thoroughly tested, amended and considered, prior to being finalised and included within this report.

Statistics

By definition, an empty home is one that has no permanent occupier or can be defined as a property where the main resident lives elsewhere. However, for the purposes of data collection and operationally, councils are often bound by the terms and definitions used for council tax purposes. With discounts, exemptions and premiums involved, the data collected both locally and nationally is a representation of the status of a property as determined by the owner and their circumstances. Because of this, data sets and information surrounding empty homes are categorised similarly, but often treated differently by councils.

As a standard practice, empty homes that have remained unoccupied for over six months from the moment of being informed by the owner are labelled as long-term empty. Given their category, these are the most likely to warrant concern and/or investigation by the council. However, properties empty for six months or less, second homes and unoccupied exemptions, all fall into the wider definition of having no permanent occupier. Council tax accounts can also show that a property is occupied by the owner, where in fact it is known locally that the property is empty. Similarly, accounts could show a property to be empty where the owners have moved into the property since reporting the vacancy to the authority. Therefore, the general reporting and assessment of empty homes statistics should be carried out with the understanding that whilst the data may not be wholly accurate, the absence of further and more detailed information leaves no alternative option.

Providing a snapshot of all council tax data, councils are required to complete their annual council taxbase submission to government by providing information on all dwellings, bands, exemptions, and discounts. Of the empty homes officers and practitioners surveyed, only seven per cent of respondents found the council taxbase submission to be always accurate for their council, with a

combined 51 per cent of respondents stating that they sometimes or often found the data to be accurate. 23 per cent of the practitioners surveyed did not know if their council figures were accurate or not.

When considering all types and definitions of unoccupied properties, council taxbase statistics show that figures over the past five years peaked in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, with small decreases in 2021 across all areas with the exception of those being charged the empty homes premium. Figures in all categories then reported rises through to 2022, leading to the statistics across all unoccupied properties reaching over one million, (4.01 per cent of all dwellings across the England). Whilst most categories have reported peaks and troughs in the movement of their statistics, properties being charged some form of empty homes premium have continued to rise since 2018 meaning many of those reported empty have remained so for longer, when considering some within that bracket will have since become occupied.

Table 1: 2018 to 2022 statistics relating to homes empty for less than 6 months, long term empty homes, properties charged the empty homes premium, second homes, and those with unoccupied exemptions. Table also shows the difference between figures from 2018 to 2022, along with the number of each category shown as a percentage against total housing stock in England.

	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018 – 2022 difference
Less than 6 months empty	222,101	221,426	200,866	245,302	244,965	- 22,864
Long term empty	256,827	246,644	278,470	237,594	227,953	+ 28,874
Empty homes premium	72,341	71,630	69,201	62,938	62,419	+ 9,922
Second homes	256,913	253,357	262,953	252,629	251,654	+ 5,259
Unoccupied exemptions	203,746	190,993	192,155	171,006	167,042	+ 36,704
Total	1,011,928	984,050	1,003,645	969,469	954,033	+ 57,895
Percent (%) of total dwellings (England)	4.01	3.94	4.05	3.95	3.93	+ 0.08

Homes empty for less than six months

Often overlooked for engagement and action by councils, properties left empty for less than six months can offer a detailed insight into both the numbers of total empty homes in their respective areas, but also allow for monitoring of those that are yet to reach the threshold of being empty for over six months. By expanding the understanding of all empty homes across the spectrum, the inclusion of properties empty for less than six months for consideration can allow properties to be tracked and monitored should they move closer to the six-month mark. This also allows for several additional benefits. Large clusters of new build properties, or those outlined for regeneration can be identified and intervention and engagement with owners can be started earlier in order to slow down the flow of properties on to the long-term list.

Changes to council tax legislation, the removal of the Class A exemption (where a property is undergoing major repairs), and the introduction of the empty homes premium, have all had an effect on the way in which owners report and record the occupancy status of their property. The charges,

discounts, premiums and exemptions are also council specific, and are set locally by each council. Where owners have registered a property as empty but the full council tax charge is payable from day one, early intervention can enable occupied properties to be removed at the earliest opportunity. Also, a property empty for less than six months can still be the catalyst for complaints and warrant further action if the issue is such that it requires immediate attention, such as a public safety risk or where a property is open to unauthorised access.

Nationally, whilst the number of properties empty for less than six months has dropped by just under 10 per cent from 2018 to 2022, the numbers have shown an increase in the past three years since 2020, following the same pattern as those across all categories nationally. These figures, reported through the council taxbase in November 2022 show that 0.88 per cent of all dwellings across the country have been empty for between zero and six months. Regionally, councils have also seen this pattern followed, with large drops in the numbers from 2018 to 2020 but steady increases since through to 2022. Whilst a number of regions across the country have seen a reduction between 2018 and 2022, the East of England, the East Midlands, London and the South East have all seen their numbers increase.

Table 2: Table showing the number of homes empty for less than six months from 2018 to 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

National (England)	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
Less than 6 months empty homes	222,101	221,426	200,866	245,302	244,965	- 22,864
Per cent (%) of total dwellings	0.88%	0.89%	0.81%	1.00%	1.01%	- 0.13%

Table 3: regional statistics of homes empty for less than six months between 2018 and 2022, along with the number shown as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

Regional	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
East of England	23,873 (0.85%)	23,042 (0.83%)	20,880 (0.76%)	25,244 (0.91%)	23,222 (0.93%)	+ 651 (-0.08%)
East Midlands	20,680 (0.95%)	21,016 (0.98%)	16,623 (0.83%)	21,266 (1.07%)	19,443 (1.10%)	+ 1,237 (-0.15%)
London	31,154 (0.83%)	32,755 (0.88%)	28,385 (0.77%)	29,687 (0.81%)	25,688 (0.71%)	+ 5,466 (+0.12%)
North East	12,233 (0.96%)	12,071 (0.96%)	10,725 (0.91%)	14,798 (1.26%)	17,121 (1.39%)	- 4,888 (-0.43%)
North West	27,969 (0.82%)	27,349 (0.81%)	27,321 (0.82%)	33,277 (1.01%)	34,642 (1.05%)	- 6,673 (-0.23%)
South East	33,541 (0.82%)	33,449 (0.83%)	30,665 (0.77%)	37,365 (0.96%)	28,085 (0.93%)	+ 5,456 (-0.11%)
South West	22,495 (0.85%)	21,283 (0.81%)	20,426 (0.77%)	24,601 (1.02%)	24,759 (1.12%)	- 2,264 (-0.27%)

West Midlands	21,226 (0.82%)	22,665 (0.88%)	20,591 (0.81%)	24,528 (0.99%)	23,824 (0.96%)	- 2,598 (-0.14%)
Yorkshire	28,930 (1.16%)	27,796 (1.12%)	24,361 (0.99%)	31,092 (1.27%)	32,427 (1.34%)	- 3,497 (-0.18%)

Long term empty homes

Determined by council tax legislation as those vacant for six months or longer, long term empty homes form a key area and definition on which many councils base their empty homes work. Seen as a key marker for the length of time a property has remained empty, this definition was largely borne from the previously available discounts offered to owners, prior to the reforms in 2013. Many authorities, where properties were recorded as being empty by their owners, would offer discounted periods of up to one year but largely capped at six months. With many councils now having removed or reduced initial discounted periods, councils still use the term as a marker for council tax records and accounts.

The most commonly reported of all of the categories, the number of long term empty homes has risen from 2018 through to a peak in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although having reduced in 2021, the discounting of the statistics in the peak of 2020 will have shown a continued rise from 2018 through to 2022. Despite continued council efforts to reduce the numbers on a large scale, the rise in numbers represents a trend that would give concern given the country's housing shortage. Couple this with the rise in properties being charged the empty homes premium, the figures suggest not only more properties are becoming empty, but also those that are empty are remaining so for longer periods.

With it the previous six month exemption suggesting that most property, irrespective of condition, could be brought back into use prior to becoming eligible for the full charge, long term empty homes represent cases where an owner experiences underlying issues preventing a property from being brought back into use. Representing just over one per cent of the country's housing stock, and a quarter of all of those described and classed as unoccupied, the number of long-term empty homes has increased nationally by nearly 10 per cent over the past five years.

Regionally, this follows suit, with all but two areas of the country experiencing an increase in number and a fall in their percentage of dwellings being classed as long term empty. Whilst a many regions have experienced an increase in number but a fall in percentage, this is most likely due to the amount of available dwellings increasing, such as through the building of new homes, or the regeneration of areas where large numbers of properties have been demolished and replaced with a greater number of new homes.

Table 4: number of long term empty homes from 2018 to 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

National (England)	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
Long term empty homes	256,827	246,644	278,470	237,594	227,953	+ 28,874
Per cent (%) of total dwellings	1.02	0.99	1.12	0.97	0.94	+ 0.08

Table 5: regional statistics of long term empty homes between 2018 and 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

Regional	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
East of England	24,615 (0.88%)	23,145 (0.84%)	27,176 (1.00%)	21,857 (0.79%)	19,748 (0.79%)	+ 4,867 (+0.09%)
East Midlands	22,621 (1.04%)	21,206 (0.98%)	25,003 (1.25%)	20,494 (1.03%)	18,730 (1.06%)	+ 3,891 (-0.02%)
London	35,751 (0.95%)	33,566 (0.90%)	31,529 (0.85%)	26,968 (0.73%)	23,705 (0.65%)	+ 12,046 (+0.30%)
North East	18,104 (1.43%)	17,830 (1.42%)	20,381 (1.73%)	17,628 (1.41%)	17,378 (1.41%)	+ 726 (-0.02%)
North West	42,677 (1.26%)	43,036 (1.28%)	46,289 (1.40%)	41,180 (1.25%)	42,692 (1.30%)	- 15 (-0.04%)
South East	33,481 (0.82%)	33,000 (0.82%)	37,757 (0.95%)	32,607 (0.83%)	28,085 (0.76%)	+ 5,396 (-0.06%)
South West	22,602 (0.85%)	20,998 (0.80%)	26,598 (1.00%)	21,331 (0.88%)	17,651 (0.80%)	+ 4,951 (-0.05%)
West Midlands	29,357 (1.14%)	26,576 (1.04%)	29,699 (1.16%)	23,313 (0.94%)	23,315 (0.94%)	+ 6,042 (+0.20%)
Yorkshire	27,619 (1.10%)	27,287 (1.10%)	32,702 (1.33%)	29,339 (1.20%)	28,348 (1.17%)	- 729 (-0.076%)

Empty homes premium

The only category of empty home to have seen a continual rise since 2018, are those being charged the empty homes premium which have seen numbers increase to 72,341 reported in 2022, compared with 71,630 in 2021.

Introduced in 2013, the **empty homes premium** (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951402/Empty_home_premium_guidance.pdf) allows councils the discretion to charge between 50 per cent to 300 per cent of the council tax liability, for properties known to have been recorded as empty for a period of over two years or more. Implemented on a sliding scale, the premium can be implemented as soon as a property has been registered as empty for over two years, and often initiates a 100 per cent levy. This increases at five years to 200 per cent, and at 10 years at 300 per cent, but these levels and percentage charges are at the discretion and approval of the billing authority. Recent proposals in the Government's Levelling Up Bill set out plans to alter this and would allow councils to implement the levy earlier after an initial period of 12 months.

Nationally, the number of properties being charged the empty homes premium has risen year on year, with **figures** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-taxbase-2022-in-england>) showing over a 10 per cent increase across the country since 2018. Whilst only a small percentage of the country's total housing stock, the continual rise suggests that properties are remaining empty for longer, and that despite significant financial charges being placed against a property by the authority, this continues to provide a minimal deterrent to those that can afford to pay any additional levy sums imposed.

The survey conducted with empty homes practitioners as part of this paper, suggest that changes to the levels and timing of introduction of the premium proposed by the Levelling Up Bill will have some effect on the numbers of empty homes, but that it will not be significant enough to deter the majority of empty home owners. Regionally, all areas of the country have experienced a rise in the number of properties charged the premium since 2018, with London and the North East experiencing the higher percentage of total dwellings charged the premium and London Boroughs also seeing the actual number rising the highest across the five year period. The North East remains the highest in the country, when considering the highest percentage of total dwellings charged the premium.

Table 4: number of long term empty homes from 2018 to 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

National (England)	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
Empty homes premium	72,341	71,630	69,201	62,938	62,419	+ 9,922
Per cent (%) of total dwellings	0.29	0.29	0.28	0.26	0.26	+ 0.03

Second homes



As a rule, we do not deal with second homes and empties - we deal with the associated issues (overgrown gardens etc) but not using empty homes legislation. We receive more complaints about second homes than we do true empties. – Practitioner Survey Respondent.

Often used as a legitimate explanation as to why a home is left empty, second homes are a further category of unused property that can require attention and investigation by councils. As with other categories, second homes are a term used for the allocation of a property for council tax purposes, where previously owners could class their property as such in order to qualify for the relevant discount. A discount largely removed by councils, a second home owner pays the full liable charge from day one. Similar to the Empty Homes Premium, the Government's Levelling Up Bill proposes a second home premium of 100 per cent of the liability annually, as is already in place across Wales. Whilst 66 per cent of authorities think this will have some effect on second home ownership, councils will be able to implement the charge as of April 2024 if approval is given in time do so by the House of Lords.

The number of second homes nationally has remained relatively stagnant in recent years and having followed the same pattern as long term empty homes, peaked in 2020. This reduced in 2021 but appears to be rising again in line with the trends of other categories.

Regionally, with the exception of the North East, all areas of England have seen a rise in second homes across a five-year period, and as a national percentage, the number of second homes is equal to that of long term empty homes at 1.02 per cent of total housing stock. With this considered, councils could consider whether more focus and attention is given to second homes as an opportunity to increase available housing stock quickly and effectively.

Table 8: Table showing the number of second homes from 2018 to 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

National (England)	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
Second homes	256,913	253,357	262,953	252,629	251,654	+ 5,259
Per cent (%) of total dwellings	1.02	1.01	1.06	1.03	1.04	- 0.02

Table 9: Table showing regional statistics of second homes between 2018 and 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

Regional	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
East of England	30,606 (1.73%)	29,909 (1.67%)	30,085 (1.76%)	33,117 (1.70%)	26,704 (1.71%)	+ 3,902 (+0.02%)
East Midlands	14,080 (1.99%)	12,006 (1.96%)	11,209 (2.08%t)	11,566 (2.10%t)	9,869 (2.16%)	+ 4,211 (-1.61%)
London	46,036 (1.78%)	48,164 (1.78%)	52,916 (1.62%)	43,124 (1.54%)	45,980 (1.36%)	+ 56 (+0.42%)
North East	10,502 (2.39%)	10,540 (2.37%)	10,736 (2.64%)	10,947 (2.76%)	11,416 (2.80%)	- 914 (-0.41%)
North West	29,376 (2.08%)	27,742 (2.09%)	29,620 (2.22%)	28,570 (2.27%)	27,257 (2.35%)	+ 2,119 (-0.17%)
South East	41,850 (1.64%)	41,500 (1.65%)	43,114 (1.72%)	40,996 (1.79%)	41,561 (1.69%)	+ 289 (-0.05%)
South West	50,989 (1.70%)	50,256 (1.61%)	50,796 (1.78%)	50,362 (1.90%)	42,654 (1.92%)	+ 8,335 (-0.22%)
West Midlands	12,888 (1.96%)	12,925 (1.92%)	12,751 (1.97%)	12,109 (1.92%)	11,992 (1.89%)	+ 896 (+0.07%)
Yorkshire	20,586 (2.26%)	20,315 (2.22%)	20,922 (2.32%)	20,629 (2.47%)	19,122 (2.50%)	+ 1,464 (- 0.24%)

Unoccupied exemptions

Similarly, to second homes and those empty for less than six months, unoccupied and exempt properties are often overlooked by councils when it comes to defining those requiring action to bring them back into use. Exempt from council tax charges due to a prescribed reason, such properties become and remain empty for completely valid explanations but can be categorised differently in order to remove the liability for a council tax charge. Including properties where the owner has gone into care, those who have moved to receive care, along with those going through probate and where the property has been repossessed, such properties can often remain in their exempt banding in perpetuity. This then removes the disincentive of paying a council tax charge, and therefore reducing the financial liability of a property on an owner.

Nationally, exempt properties account for over 200,000 examples of dwellings unoccupied legitimately for council tax purposes, a fifth of all those reported as vacant. These figures have increased significantly in recent years, with an approximate a 20 per cent uplift on those reported in 2018, and a difference of over 36,000 properties being vacant and eligible for an exemption. Whilst following the trend pattern of the other categories in peaking during 2020, these figures did not show a similar drop in 2021. This is most likely due to there being no incentive for an owner to report a change of circumstances to the authority where a complete exemption is in place. In most cases, an unoccupied exemption will be in place indefinitely, until the authority are informed of a change in circumstances or ownership.

Regionally, the statistics follow the upward trend since 2018, with no regional areas reporting a decline in the number across the five year period. Whilst the North East and North West have shown smaller increases in the percentage of housing stock classed as an unoccupied exemption, all other regions have reported larger and more significant increases, especially when considering the number of properties eligible for such exemptions. Over 8,000 properties in the South East, and 6,500 in the South West respectively report the largest increases. Despite their legitimacy and often the difficult and complex reasoning behind why such properties have become and remained empty, the sheer number of exempt properties would represent a significant additional supply should action be taken to bring them back into use. This would be nearly comparable to that of long term empty homes, which are understandably often the primary focus of a council's attention.

Table 10: Table showing the number of unoccupied exempt properties from 2018 to 2022, along with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

National Figures	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
Unoccupied exemptions	203,746	190,993	192,155	171,006	167,042	+ 36,704
Per cent (%) of total dwellings	0.81	0.76	0.78	0.70	0.69	+ 0.12

Table 11: Table showing regional statistics of unoccupied exempt between 2018 and 2022, with the number as a percentage against total housing stock across England.

Regional	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018-2022 difference
East of England	22,706 (0.81%)	21,164 (0.76%)	21,714 (0.80%)	18,690 (0.68%)	17,037 (0.68%)	+ 5,669 (+0.13%)
East Midlands	16,837 (0.77%)	15,654 (0.73%)	15,053 (0.75%)	13,281 (0.67%)	11,739 (0.66%)	+ 5,098 (+0.11%)
London	22,783 (0.60%)	21,569 (0.58%)	20,552 (0.56%)	18,624 (0.51%)	17,798 (0.49%)	+ 4,985 (+0.11%)
North East	11,577 (0.91%)	11,299 (0.90%)	10,761 (0.91%)	9,727 (0.83%)	10,347 (0.84%)	+ 1,230 (+0.07%)
North West	31,890 (0.94%)	30,819 (0.92%)	31,186 (0.94%)	28,255 (0.86%)	28,289 (0.86%)	+ 3,601 (+0.08%)

South East	34,003 (0.83%)	30,947 (0.77%)	30,854 (0.78%)	27,874 (0.71%)	25,383 (0.69%)	+ 8,620 (+0.14%)
South West	22,362 (0.84%)	20,334 (0.78%)	21,378 (0.81%)	17,961 (0.74%)	15,791 (0.71%)	+ 6,571 (+0.13%)
West Midlands	22,570 (0.87%)	20,926 (0.82%)	20,882 (0.82%)	17,811 (0.72%)	18,036 (0.72%)	+ 4,534 (+0.15%)
Yorkshire	19,018 (0.76%)	18,281 (0.74%)	18,531 (0.75%)	16,155 (0.66%)	15,255 (0.63%)	+ 3,763 (+0.13%)

Statistical and support – Scotland

By comparison in Scotland, empty homes figures over the past five years have followed an almost identical trend to those in England, with numbers peaking during 2020. However, the number of long term empty homes has shown a decline in the following two years since, although still representing an increase from the number recorded in 2018. Whilst the information on properties empty for less than six months is not readily available, if it were to follow the same proportion trends as those in England and Wales, it would likely mean a total percentage of unoccupied properties of over six per cent of the country's total housing stock, approximately two per cent higher than that of England.

With 32 councils across the country, Scotland have taken an active approach to tackling the issue of empty homes whilst also not being a statutory function laid out by Scottish Parliament. 25 of the councils have empty homes officers in place, bringing back approximately **1200 properties** ([https://www.gov.scot/publications/bringing-empty-homes-back-use-audit-privately-owned-empty-homes-scotland/#:~:text=Between%202010%20and%20March%202023,Empty%20Homes%20Partnership%20\(%20SEHP%20\).](https://www.gov.scot/publications/bringing-empty-homes-back-use-audit-privately-owned-empty-homes-scotland/#:~:text=Between%202010%20and%20March%202023,Empty%20Homes%20Partnership%20(%20SEHP%20).)) into use annually. Additionally, councils and their empty homes officers are supported by the **Scottish Empty Homes Partnership** (<https://emptyhomespartnership.scot/>), funded and administered by **Shelter Scotland** (https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/empty_homes). The only funded partnership of its kind across all four home nations, the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership provide support to empty homes officers, as well as signposting empty home owners through support and assistance. However, their constitution and model can often lead to limitations in lobbying government and support of initiatives, being a privately funded organisation with their own corporate aims and agendas.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership also lobby for further schemes and initiatives that support owners alike. Similarly to England, a national loan fund has in the past proved restrictive due to administrative difficulties, with large amounts of funding returned unspent. However, options to reintroduce such a loan fund are being explored as part of the Housing 2040 strategy. It has also been found that local schemes, administered within the council and with empty home owner's needs in mind are more successful than national, government led schemes, where knowledge of the local housing market, housing need, as well as owners are key to their success. Councils have also been creative in their approach to funding, previously using the town centre living fund and rural housing grants to support empty homes work.

In Scotland, legislation is more limited in comparison to England and Wales, and the ability to serve notices on the owner more restrictive. Legislation is weighted more in favour of owners, and therefore more difficult for empty homes officers to utilise in order to seek a resolution to issues. However, the Scottish Government are exploring the possibility of implementing **Compulsory Sale Orders** (<https://archive2021.parliament.scot/newsandmediacentre/113524.aspx>), and **Compulsory Rental Orders** (<https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sqf11sfj/7hRxSE6zy6UCYHbTF0o>)

[mcD/14c8efeabf7f9ee5c2b6b31be36efaec/compulsory_leasing.pdf](#)), taking the best and most practical parts of the same legislation from England and adapting them to suit. Currently, Scottish Councils have no powers to carry out Enforced Sale procedures in order to recoup any accrued debts on a property, and whilst Empty Dwelling Management Orders have in the past been considered, their application and effectiveness in England has discouraged this option from being considered further north of the border.

Table 12: Table showing the statistics relating to long term empty homes, properties charged the empty homes premium, second homes, and those with unoccupied exemptions across Scotland between 2018 and 2022. Table also shows the difference between figures from 2018 to 2022, along with the number of each category shown as a percentage against total housing stock in Scotland.

	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018 – 2022 difference
Long term empty	42,865	43,766	47,333	40,963	39,110	+ 3,755
Empty homes premium	27,692	27,854	30,551	27,146	24,471	+ 3,221
Second homes	24,287	23,890	24,466	24,314	24,907	- 620
Unoccupied exemptions	47,156	45,801	44,143	44,583	45,485	+ 1,671
Total	142,000	141,311	146,493	137,006	133,973	+ 8,027
Per cent (%) of total dwellings (Scotland)	5.54	5.56	5.81	5.47	5.39	+0.15

Statistical and support- Wales

Across Wales, the empty homes figures have followed similar trends to that of England and Scotland, although reductions in numbers from 2020 to 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic have not been as steep. The numbers of those charged some form of Empty Homes Premium have continued to rise to their highest level, whereas the number of second homes has also shown a continued increase. Whilst unoccupied exemptions continue to drop, the number of long term empty homes has increased to the same level as in 2018, with the number of total empty homes now exceeding six per cent of Wales' total housing stock.

The approach to empty homes across Wales has been increasingly proactive in recent years. Led by the operational feedback from councils, the Welsh Government operate an open and accessible approach to engaging with authorities on policy and legislative changes. Offering a direct line of communication, the Government openly take on ideas and initiatives from councils which in turn are then rolled out across the country. The priorities and targets are council-led, with a roaming resource available across the country for councils to use when proactively aiming to tackle the more challenging and difficult empty homes cases.

Whilst local councils in Wales charge similar amounts for the Empty Homes Premium that they do in England, the Second Homes Premium is already a factor in the work to bring empty homes back into use. This is taken a step further in Wales, where a number of the councils chose to ring-fence such income for empty homes work, as well as additional schemes to support housing in their areas. Grant funding for first time buyers, support schemes and refurbishment grants for owners, are underwritten by government in order to reduce and alleviate the financial risk such schemes would

place on individual authorities. Offering loans of up to £35,000 per property, a national loan fund has also been successful in bringing exposure to empty homes work, and the challenges faced in coastal areas presented by second home ownership.

Legislatively, there are several small differences to the enforcement procedures available to empty homes officers than there are across England. New guidance on the Compulsory Purchase Order process is set to be announced, whilst the Empty Dwelling Management threshold for vacancy is set at 6 months rather than the two-year mark in England. Coupled with this, the legislation allows for an application to be made without the requirement of providing the owner with three months notice of an application being made.

Significantly, councils in Wales can benefit from a national enforcement fund where councils can apply for funding specifically to carrying out enforcement work, but with little or no financial risk to the council. This initiative further supports empty homes work and encourages councils to proceed with enforcement where previously they may have been apprehensive to do so.

Table 13: Table showing the statistics relating to long term empty homes, properties charged the empty homes premium, second homes, and those with unoccupied exemptions across Wales between 2018 and 2022. Table also shows the difference between figures from 2018 to 2022, along with the number of each category shown as a percentage against total housing stock in Wales.

	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2018 – 2022 difference
Long term empty	25,701	24,671	25,581	24,830	25,725	- 24
Empty homes premium	7,360	6,690	4,601	2,684	1,749	+ 5,611
Second homes	24,873	24,423	24,197	23,426	22,868	+ 2,005
Unoccupied exemptions	29,907	32,887	33,535	32,333	32,166	- 2,259
Total	87,841	88,671	87,914	83,273	82,508	+ 5,333
Per cent (%) of total dwellings (Scotland)	6.00	6.10	6.07	5.78	5.76	+0.24

Empty homes statistics summary

With statistics across England, Scotland and Wales generally showing rises across all areas and categories of empty homes, the figures represent an ever increasing issue that could provide partial solutions to the housing need across the country. Over 1.25 million properties are currently registered as having no permanent occupier and with a variety of reasons behind their vacancy, councils are tasked with attempting to find, build and develop the solutions required to bring as many back into use as possible. Whilst some may be legitimately empty for valid reason, the system of reporting and recording for council tax purposes allows councils to categorise based on terms that are largely out of date. The introduction of the second home premium and the reduction of the timeframe prior to a long term empty home being charged the premium, will only allow further flexibility of the rules, with owners seeking to alter their status to avoid additional charges.

Although often focusing on the number of long term empties as well as those charged the empty homes premium, the wider picture with the inclusion of homes empty for less than 6 months, second homes and unoccupied exemptions illustrates that the issue could be considered as more widespread than initially thought. In England, there are more reported cases of second homes than there are long term empty homes, and nearly as many of each of both unoccupied exemptions and less than six months empties as there are those that are classed as long term. Long term empty homes, the main area of focus for councils, make up only a quarter of those registered as being vacant and unoccupied.

With this in mind, it is critical for councils to consider the other categories of empty homes, both in terms of their procedures in dealing with complaints about them, but also how they are defined in terms of the types of property councils are willing to take action against. As previously referred to, the categories and descriptions of a property are bound by the terms used for council tax purposes, and therefore councils should consider determining their own criteria for allocating and prioritising complaints, and the properties subjected to them. Where council resources are limited, stretched, or focused on more pressing issues, expanding the description of an empty home to include the additional areas could lead to a corporate rethink of resources and allocated workload. Whether classed as a second home or falling into an unoccupied exempt category, any empty home is an unused, wasted resource, at time of chronic housing need.

In order to significantly reduce the numbers of empty homes, a holistic and achievable solution may be required. This may require, amongst other elements, a reclassification of council tax information, and perhaps the introduction of a charter in which owners, beneficiaries and those liable for council tax have to regularly inform revenue and benefits department of the property's use annually. The system in its current form, relies on the accuracy and information supplied by the owner, but also in them being forthcoming with updates when circumstances change.

Councils who are active in their empty homes work will undoubtedly be working to reduce the numbers and resolve complaints where possible and should be commended for their efforts to do so.

Resources



As an authority with limited resources, what we do, we do well. If we were to invest in capacity, we have the knowledge and experience within the council to offer a much better service. - Practitioner Survey Respondent

As with many public services in today's economic climate, resources and finances in councils are stretched. Councils are rightly focused on delivery of statutory services and aim to make best use of the tools and resources available to them. Therefore, empty homes work, a non-statutory function for councils, is often considered a luxury. In recent years, councils have been incentivised to carry out empty homes work through the new homes bonus which rewards overall increases in housing stock levels. Whilst the empty homes element has reduced significantly over time, the introduction of the empty homes premium has potentially enabled councils to be rewarded financially where properties have remained empty for longer.

Of the 130 councils surveyed where empty homes work is known to be limited, 79 per cent of respondents stated that they do not have a dedicated officer whose role it is to tackle empty homes. Along with this, 53 per cent of respondents said that this is due to resources being limited and workloads being prioritised in other areas. However, of the same survey sample, 78 per cent deemed empty homes to be an ongoing issue. These survey results are likely to be shared across many councils across the country, in that empty homes are considered an ongoing issue, but limited resource and the lack of statutory obligation mean that focus and appetite to carry out empty homes work is reduced.

Of the survey respondents, 85 per cent of councils who do not currently have a dedicated empty homes officer would be considering employing one if corporate, political, and financial opportunities allowed, and of the same sample set, 100 per cent would consider increasing their staffing resource to support local or national empty homes programmes if financial support was provided by government to do so. In support of this, the empty homes practitioners surveyed stated that 45 per cent would use any ring-fenced funding for the provision of additional staff, rather than increasing their ability to carry out enforcement work (30 per cent) or increase their funding for loan and grant programmes (22 per cent).

Of those responding to the resources survey, it was evident that the significant majority of councils who do not have a dedicated resource are smaller borough and district councils, whereas the larger unitary authorities were more likely to have an officer in post. This could be due to several factors. In smaller council areas, often in more rural settings than those of larger cities, empty homes may not play a wider part in meeting the housing need, and the complaints against such properties likely to be fewer, with less dense housing stock and therefore less effect on neighbours and communities. This could also be affected by political make up and an authority's financial capabilities, however, irrespective of political standing, geographical location and available resources, most if not all councils will take on complaints regarding vacant property and investigate an issue to seek a resolution. Where the process stalls, is the progression of proactive steps taken to encourage the owner to bring a property back into use once an issue is resolved. This aspect is often the most resource intensive, time consuming, and difficult to achieve.

With time, finances and resources limited, councils have to be efficient and prioritise their work effectively to achieve successful outcomes. Irrespective of these factors, councils can be described as either taking a proactive or reactive approach to empty homes work. A proactive approach, is considered best practice where councils actively pick up and investigate complaints, pursue all reported empty homes cases, and engage with all empty home owners at every opportunity. They also actively carry out cyclical or annual data cleansing to ensure accuracy of their data. The reactive approach, is predominantly complaint led and a process that tends to deal with the most challenging of cases, responds to issues directly affecting neighbours or communities, but isn't able to allocate the time or resource to actively cleanse data. Of the responses received in the practitioner survey, 24 per cent of respondents describe their empty homes work as proactive, with 33 per cent being reactive. The remaining 44 per cent suggested their approach was somewhere in the middle, leading to a conclusion that with additional resource, tools and capacity, many councils would be enabled to shift from a reactive based approach to one that is proactive.

Given the differences amongst councils in terms of their capacity, resources and geography, the approaches to empty homes work could be simplified using the following activity table. This charts where little or no empty homes work is carried out, through to proactive, where a comprehensive approach is taken to reducing the numbers and actively working to encourage empty home owners to bring them back into use. This involves the active pursuit of priority properties, regular engagement with owners through letters written, data cleansing of all empty properties through targeted mailshots and questionnaires.

By setting out the following, councils may want to consider their current approach and understand the level of input required to move to a more progressive and positive strategy in tackling empty homes. Councils may want to consider which activity category they fall into, and adopt the recommendations and case studies outlined in this report to progress their current activity onto the next level.

The following activity table outlines the levels at which councils take a proactive approach, and within which, the varying levels of procedural input and involvement with empty home owners is explained.

Empty homes resources: activity levels stages

Table 14: Table showing the input and outcomes of varying levels of empty homes activity within local authorities

Stage	Description
Proactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • council have a dedicated officer or team • regularly and proactively engage with empty home owners • carry out regular, cyclical data cleansing • stand-alone empty homes strategy in place • high levels of corporate support • enforcement work is encouraged, often led by a dedicated officer whose focus is to build casework through to formal action • statistics actively monitored using a stand-alone database • policies and procedures in place to provide a definitive cycle of case progression.
Reactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • council has a dedicated resource • actively investigate complaints regarding empty homes • corporate support to carry out empty homes work • enforcement action taken on a regular basis • statistics are monitored • council has an empty homes strategy outlining plans to tackle the issue • some engagement is contacting owners of properties not subject to complaints • minimal data cleansing.
Active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty homes work carried out as part of an officer's role • complaints are investigated with specific issues dealt with • work to encourage empty home owners beyond enforcement notices is limited • enforcement work is limited or complaint-led • no wider engagement carried out with owners to ascertain status or plans of a property • statistics may be considered • empty homes likely not deemed significant enough to warrant allocating of dedicated resource.
Inactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty homes may not be seen as an ongoing issue • limited resources are allocated to dealing with complaints • empty homes statistics are not tracked, monitored, or reported on • very limited corporate support to carry out empty homes work • no enforcement work carried out in respect of empty homes • no empty homes strategy in place, nor included in a wider housing strategy.

Case studies and resourcing models

The following case studies outline examples of the varying levels of resources applied to empty homes work across the country, and provide suggestions as to how these could be replicated by other councils to support their move up the activity level table.

✓ No Use Empty: Kent

Established in 2005, the No Use Empty: Kent initiative was developed as a pilot programme between Kent County Council and four district councils through a Public Sector Agreement 2 arrangement. Following a successful research programme into empty homes across the County and the investment of over £5 million to establish the wider partnership, the initiative was initially set a target of returning 380 properties to use within a three-year period. After achieving a return of 487 properties and receiving a further £2 million in reward grant to provide a recyclable loan fund, the programme expanded in 2009 to include a further 8 district authorities who at the time had no dedicated empty homes officer.

Currently funded until at least 2028, the No Use Empty: Kent partnership has seen investment rise to over £100 over the 18 years of its operation, with referrals into the scheme mainly coming from empty homes officers positioned within the council areas. Currently working on between 60-70 projects and loan applications per year, up from approximately 30-35 3 years ago, the programme has gone from strength to strength, and illustrates how a combined set of goals can bring about wider, lasting change across a number of partner authorities.

Building on the experiences, No Use Empty: Kent work with a budget of approximately £16m for refurbishment projects alone and have recently expanded into new build development with an available budget of £24 million. The partnership offers advice and assistance alongside the district authority empty homes officers, with no boundary restrictions governing what can be done in one area and not another. Over the course of the scheme, loan defaults have totalled £143,000, with 70 per cent of loans now placed as a first charge on the property to secure the financial outlay and mitigate the risk to the authority.

Operating with three team members and supporting the work of twelve empty homes officers across the County the partnership has become a cost neutral operation, with the wider benefits in community and town regeneration receiving significant praise from senior officers and councillors across the area. The uplift in property values, the increase in jobs and economic benefit, as well as the reputation for the programme in delivery solutions tailored to empty home owners, has seen the No Use Empty: Kent programme receive national recognition and exposure. This has been followed by a number of councils looking to replicate their work, their model and offer, as well as expanding the programme to areas sharing a border with Kent. For example, Southend On Sea City Council are currently exploring the replication of the No Use Empty residential scheme having worked with the Kent team since 2022 to deliver a programme whereby commercial property owners have been supported and encouraged to bring their properties back into use for commercial and or mixed-use accommodation.

This programme, administered by Kent County Council, has also allowed for the development of further opportunity within the regeneration sector. By showcasing their previous successes, the council have been able to access finance from the growing places fund as well as empty homes specific funding previously made available by government.

✓ Houses for Homes: Babergh & Mid Suffolk Councils

Taking a different yet innovative approach, Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils decided to create a joint empty homes service to be delivered across both authorities in order to justify the expense of creating an additional resource, often seen in other areas and departments of the council where there is a geographical skillset shortage.

Having had no empty homes service prior to the collaboration starting, both authorities were similar in terms of having no empty homes strategy, policies or toolkit in place. However, the desire and appetite to tackle the issue by both authorities led them to initiating the cross-boundary service. Upon the development and launch of both strategy and toolkit, an additional empty homes officer post was created and filled, resulting in one full time and one fixed term role positions.

On building the service, it was clear to the officers in post that the past experiences of the empty home owners in their area of the council had not been favourable, and that developing encouraging and proactive conversations was becoming increasingly difficult due to the perceived reputation of the council. Whilst standard letters to owners were working to an extent, it was felt that certain aspects of the discussions were being hindered due to previous experiences of the owners. The perception, often felt by many empty home owners that authorities govern with an iron fist was certainly held in this area, and therefore progressive negotiation often proved difficult.

Recognising this, the empty homes officers have developed a brand for their empty homes service, Houses for Homes, in order to rejuvenate the empty homes offer across the area and build a reputation on fostering positive, creative and progressive relationships with those who own empty property. Launched at local shows, fairs and large events, Houses for Homes fill the void between council and private sector organisation, by building trust and offering a service to all types of empty homes and their owners.

The affect in doing so has been significant. Under the previous service, the council would expect to receive direct approaches from empty homes owners approximately five times per year. Under the Houses for Homes initiative, the team now receive around five self-referrals per week from empty home owners, separate to that of complaints received, and gathered through media coverage, discussions at local events or by word of mouth. The scheme allows for proactive intervention work, and crucially, delivers positive reputational benefits by meeting the needs of the local demographic directly.

In what was previously considered a challenging task, the levels of direct engagement with owners have made significant contributions to the success of Houses for Homes, and through creative and innovative thinking, the joint authority programme have been able to invest small amounts to deliver significant change in what will prove to be a lasting and successful initiative.

▼ Durham County Council

The seventh largest council in England by area, Durham County Council tackle the issue of empty homes with the aid of a team of five housing project officers, assisted by four housing projects support officers. With cases split across four operating areas, each of the project officers manage their own caseload and at the same time mentoring the housing support offices to allow them to gain experience of the officer role.

In Durham's case, both Housing Project Officers and Housing Project Support Officers carry out the initial engagement with owners through targeted proactive visits followed by the support officers sending letters and questionnaires to the owners. Cases are then progressed by the

project offices who actively work to encourage owners to bring properties back into use, signposting to several departments if required for the most appropriate action to be taken. Offering this holistic approach, officers at Durham are complimented by support from EHCP, ASB teams and area wardens, who follow up and respond to complaints, all with the aim of providing safer communities.

Durham County Council are also successful in meeting their annual returned to use targets which currently stands at 200 properties. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic meant achieving this target was more difficult, the numbers returned to use by the team are made further impressive as their officers are not delegated authoritative powers, and therefore are not able to issue notices without approval from those in other departments at the authority. Durham follow a very proactive approach, conducting annual visits to approximately 1400 properties as part of their data cleansing process, and work closely with the County Durham Lettings Agency to ensure properties can be brought back into use in the social housing sector where possible.

▼ Dorset Council

Similarly, the fifth largest council in the country by area, Dorset Council follow a district-based approach. They have a Housing Standards Team of 10.5 full time equivalent Environmental Health Practitioners with one dedicated Empty Homes Enforcement Officer who provides additional, specialist support. All officers have their own empty property caseload to manage. A structured case management process ensures that complaints and priority properties are dealt with and progressed in a formal, timely and progressive manner. Being complaint and intelligence driven, the council ensure that the team have the resourcing capacity to also carry out proactive work on empty homes. Along with their standard empty home's procedures,

Dorset Council have also recognised the issue presented by unoccupied second homes. Importantly, both Dorset Council and Durham County Council take the view that through their empty homes procedure all properties are treated the same irrespective of council tax status, class or discount or premium level, meaning that while council tax records could show a property to be occupied or exempt, their process means that it will be investigated and dealt with as an empty home should information and evidence prove this to be the case. Dorset's empty homes work is successfully supported by a voluntary purchase and compulsory purchase fund, along with the financial resources to carry out other enforcement work and in default notices and works where required.

▼ Arun District Council

Arun District Council, currently operate with a team of two officers using a model which is wholly proactive. The process starts with a Technical Administration Officer, whose role involves providing an initial triage assessment, along with conducting large scale mailshots, and initiating engagement with the owner to understand their circumstances as to how the authority could assist. The case is then referred on to the empty homes officer for progression with the owner, along with offers of support and assistance through their grants and loans programmes. Dependant on the levels of progress, cases are then actively progressed onto enforcement and the development of the case through to enforced sale. Where a complaint has identified a pressing and immediate issue, cases are referred directly to the empty homes officer for consideration, and then added to the ongoing caseload as a priority irrespective of the property's

council tax status. Working with a recyclable budget of nearly £300k, the team at Arun District Council have full corporate backing, with another aspect of their work focusing 'Class F' exempt properties, which are those with an outstanding probate application ongoing.

▼ Bristol City Council

Almost identical in structure, Bristol City Council operate with a team of one team leader, one full time officer, and one part time officer. Working under the Private Housing Service and sitting parallel with the wider team of Housing Options, Homes & Landlord Services, the team at Bristol place their emphasis on detail, due process and operating with confidence. With a similar process to that detailed at Arun, a case worker carries out the administrative tasks of sending standard letters offering our loans and incentives using council tax data to attempt to make first contact to the owner before progressing through the empty property procedure. Where a nuisance is reported, the case is then passed directly onto an Environmental Health Housing Officer for action which may result in notices being served and possibly works in default. The team leader then progresses with the stricter enforcement measures for complex cases, as well as bringing together partners from debt recovery, housing options, the authority's refugee schemes and council tax to ensure all stakeholders who can offer assistance are involved through to occupation.

▼ Central Bedfordshire Council

Like Arun and Bristol, the model and procedures followed at Central Bedfordshire Council are logical and progressive. However, the empty homes work at Central Bedfordshire Council is largely based on the accuracy and management of data, and the use of this data to tailor the approach and support delivered by the authority. Working with a prioritised caseload of no more than 50 properties, the team send each empty home owner a minimum of one letter monthly to their priority cases. All other owners across their database receive one letter quarterly, allowing for a natural and continued data cleansing and ensuring their annual Council Taxbase returns are as accurate as possible.

This has been an incredibly successful model of operation, with 95 per cent of their successes in bringing empty homes back into use coming from the persistence in engaging with owners. For the team at Central Bedfordshire, their personal and empathetic approach leads to an increase in properties returned and minimises the requirement for stricter enforcement action. However, their team structure allows time to concentrate enforcement efforts on the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders, leading the way nationally in the use of the power, with 12 per cent of all EDMO cases having been a result of Central Bedfordshire's work. This is only possible due to having two full time officers, one of which is focussed on the enforcement whilst the other manages a comprehensive dataset.

▼ North Norfolk District Council

One council taking an innovative approach to resourcing empty homes work, is North Norfolk District Council. Starting as a task to understand and increase the revenue generated by business rates, the council identified the need for further assessment and understanding of a particular area of the organisation. Having been successful in their approach, the role has expanded to follow a similar investigative process targeting empty homes, and combining this will ensure the correct income is accrued through council tax accounts.

In an area where second homes and single person occupancies are prevalent, the council have adopted a private sector mindset in the understanding of their processes and procedures, along with operational changes and development, leading to greater levels of success. The development of a combined role across two aspects of related work has not only allowed the council to increase capacity, but also ensured outputs are delivered in a way in which is logical and beneficial to multiple areas.

Whilst still in the early stages of the role, much of the work has centred around data collection, investigation and processing but allows for targeted and specific work to engage with owners being carried out. This ensures time and capacity are focused in areas resulting in most benefit, whilst changes to the mindset and way of working require influence, North Norfolk District Council have adopted a resourcing strategy that could be replicated in smaller district and borough councils across the country.

▼ Rushcliffe Borough Council

Rushcliffe Borough Council began undertaking empty homes work after identifying the need for a dedicated resource due to an increase in frequency and complexed nature of complaints received. After the introduction of their empty homes strategy in 2019, the council employed a part time (0.60 FTE) dedicated officer to undertake the handling of complaints and provide focused efforts on bringing empty homes back into use.

Having had no dedicated officer prior to 2019, the authority developed their service from a standing start from which procedures, policies and a comprehensive database of all empty homes across the Borough are logged, tracked and monitored. With only a 0.6 equivalent of a full-time post, the council's process and scoring of empty properties allows for the prioritisation of their workload, but resulting in efforts being focused on the most difficult, challenging and high profile cases. Currently adopting a reactive approach, Rushcliffe Borough Council works to deal with complaints irrespective of the council tax status and category, but following a thorough investigative process to ensure the property is vacant.

Understanding the wider benefits and positive impact of carrying out empty homes work, Rushcliffe Borough Council have been successful in reaching their target of bringing back into use 10 challenging cases annually since 2019, carried out in the absence loan or grant assistance to owners, and having successfully used the enforced sale process to recoup expenditure.

▼ The Empty Homes Doctor: Leeds

As well as dedicating resources internally for empty homes work, councils can look to external organisations to provide or support existing functions. Partnering with housing associations, charitable or community interest groups, as well as established socially minded businesses, councils can potentially expand their resource in a cost effective and efficient way.

In partnership with Leeds City Council, the **Empty Homes Doctor** (<https://www.emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk/>), a not for profit business, works with empty home owners to bring their properties back into use, much like that of an empty homes service offered by a council. Despite having no delegated authority to carry out enforcement work or serve notices, the Empty Homes Doctor provide a person centered and hand-holding approach to their work in bringing empty homes back into use across the city.

Having been in operation for over ten years and partly funded by Leeds City Council, the Empty Homes Doctor undertake work on a mix of cases with varying complexities and are best placed to understand the key drivers and hurdles being experienced locally by owners. Often succeeding where the authority may have previously struggled, the organisation are less restricted by the red tape often faced by council officers, allowing them to provide alternative and innovative solutions through tailored action plans and ad hoc solutions based on the needs of the owner at that time. With a direct line of communication through the council to accept referrals, properties requiring immediate action or enforcement are taken on by the council, although complimented by the additional services that the Empty Homes Doctor has to offer.

Returning over 100 properties to use every year, the Empty Homes Doctor also signpost to other council departments, administer additional services not offered by the council, or refer onwards to enable the owner to receive the support or assistance they require. This model, and the collaboration of two organisations with a common goal, ensures that empty homes of all types, sizes and categories can be supported, with the council primarily focusing efforts on the cases where enforcement is required, whilst the Empty Homes Doctor offer a more personal and solutions-based approach in working with owners across the city.

Other councils have also been creative in enlisting support of community groups and charitable organisations, resulting in notable success. North East Lincolnshire and their partnership with **East Marsh United Ltd** (<https://eastmarshunited.org/>), a community group in Grimsby who focus on developing and transforming their local area for the better; **Giroscope** (<https://giroscope.org.uk/>) in Hull, who have been buying, renovating and reusing empty homes across Hull for use in the social housing sector since the mid-1980s; **Habitat for Humanity Great Britain** (<https://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk/>), whose work has recently focused on commercial to residential conversions, to increase the availability of social housing; and **Lendology CiC** (<https://www.lendology.org.uk/>), whose work across the south of England has enabled numbers of empty homes to be brought back into use through their loan and financing models.

Best Practice

With many aspects of empty homes work, as with the levels of resources councils apply to the field, the operation and outputs vary from council to council. Some councils see the issue as key to their housing strategy and therefore apply resources accordingly, whereas others see it as less of a priority and apportion staff levels accordingly. However, even where councils are carrying out minimal empty homes work, officers can benefit from the implementation of best practice standards to assist. Whilst other areas and professions within councils are often equipped with industry-wide operational standards such as those within planning or environmental health, empty homes officers are more likely to have to find successful routes based on their own knowledge, experience and training, therefore this report suggests a number of approaches that could assist and support their empty homes functions.

Whilst this report has already proposed that councils, where possible, should consider progressing through the activity table levels to reaching a wholly proactive level of approach, it is thought that the following additional tools will enable councils to go even further

In order to assist councils and empty homes practitioners achieve this, this report proposes the introduction or development of a number of best practice methods for reporting, monitoring and progressing cases, through the standalone empty homes database, the cyclical data cleanse of empty homes information, an overarching case progression flowchart, and through the supply of an investigation information sources checklist.

These resources are intended for councils of all levels of involvement in empty homes work, and whilst they may involve a certain level of officer time in the earlier stages of development, they are intended to be implemented at no financial cost to the council and result in a methodical approach providing longer term benefits for the assessment and proactive engagement of empty homes and their owners.

Whilst councils who have officers whose work involves the return to use of empty homes, it is also important to ensure that they are given the appropriate tools, information and training in order to give them the best chances of success. As found in the empty homes practitioner survey, 30 per cent of officers stated that they did not have access to the council tax system or its information. This limits the ability of empty homes officers to fulfil their role efficiently, and although the legislation surrounding access to such information is open to interpretation, the number of authorities who do allow such access should act as an indication that successful outcomes can be achieved by entrusting and enabling officers with all information available to the authority.

Along with this, 80 per cent of respondents in the practitioner survey are supplied with regular reports on empty homes data from council tax, which whilst encouraging, would mean a significant number of councils across the country are not afforded access to key data that could potentially see their empty homes figures reduced. Both this, and the ability for officers to access council tax data on a read only basis, feature in the recommendations of this report as implementing such changes can be achieved by amending policy or practice locally by councils, and not through the requirement of a change of law by government.

The empty homes database

Of the practitioners surveyed, 51 per cent stated they do not use an active, standalone database within which their empty homes data is stored or monitored. This may not be directly linked to the determination of the council tax-base submissions being accurate as mentioned previously, although the development and implementation of such database could enable practitioners the ability to accurately report statistics in the future.

The theory behind the implementation of a standalone database works on four key principles:

- the storage of relevant and accurate information
- the tracking and monitoring of statistics
- efficient categorisation of data to carry out targeted mail merges for engagement and data cleansing
- effective prioritisation of workload.

From a practitioner's perspective, a database works on the premise that all information concerning any type, class or category of empty home is recorded. Separate from a council's content management system, such as Uniform, Civica or Tascomi, the database provides an ongoing working document from which cases can be monitored, categorised or recorded as brought back into use with or without intervention. Using a simple Excel spreadsheet, all empty homes are recorded across each of the wider definitions.

A standalone database also has several ongoing benefits:

- statistics are easily accessible and broken down for the purposes of reporting to senior management or corporate documents,
- trends and patterns can be quickly identified

- by categorising the data on properties, workload priorities can be quickly determined.

However, the largest benefit is through the layout and structure of the database. By separating the database into categories, large scale data cleansing through mail merging can allow for correspondence to be targeted and tailored to the target audience.

Crucially, the database is centred around four primary categories or 'tabs' of empty homes:

- priority cases
- probate cases (those with probate granted and their subsequent council tax exemption elapsed)
- properties owned by housing associations and or companies
- private individuals.

Based on a council's prioritisation of how they would focus efforts on their empty homes work, the priority cases could comprise of cases where complaints are registered, the longest-term empties, the properties in the worst condition, or those with active casefiles open. However, the structure of the database allows for properties across all categories to be moved into the priority tab at any time. Those that are showing as being priorities, are then mirrored in the council's CMS system where case files, documents and interactions are recorded on an ongoing basis. This is limited to priority properties only, as opening such files on a CMS system would prove too large a task to carry out, and the natural return to use of some empty homes would often mean a case file being closed with no input being required.

Additional to the above four tabs or categories, the database includes separate tabs for recorded empty homes across the wider definition, these being less than six month empty homes, second homes, and unoccupied exemptions. Whilst these tabs are not expected to warrant the same engagement and investigation levels as the previous four, the inclusion of them can allow for all empty homes statistics to be monitored. Where one of these categories presents what an authority would consider a priority case, the information held can easily be transferred into the priority tab. It also allows for full data sets in a set standard format to be used in a large-scale data cleanse or mail merge. Holding such data also presents further benefits for the local council and the empty homes officer, for the purposes of conducting further proactive work.

Information held on properties empty for less than six months, can provide an insight into the number of properties passing the 6 month threshold in the following month's or future data cleanses. This can prompt a proactive mailshot to such owners to outline the council's activity on empty homes, begin offering their services and support, but also pick up properties where owners have since moved into a property but where the council tax account is still shows it being empty. Theoretically, this should ensure that only the genuinely empty homes are eventually input into the database. This tab however, does not go through the same cyclical data cleanse carried out for the standard categories and tabs.

With regards to second homes, the introduction of a second homes premium would outline the numbers of such properties in a council's operating area, but also enable an officer to carry out proactive steps as mentioned above in outlining the premium and how the authority can support them in selling or renting the property, prior to the second home premium being applied. These properties, as with all other cases, can be transferred into the priority case tab should a complaint or situation arise where the property warrants more intensive and focused action.

Finally, the unoccupied exemptions containing all further properties known to be empty, albeit for a valid reason, can be shown within a further tab and actively pursued based on their known circumstances for exemption. As with all other categories in the database, the additional breakdown of categories within this tab will be based on their exemption class, with targeted and tailored letters sent to each class exemption based on their reason for being empty. For example, properties with an exemption due to the owner being deceased, would be written to or contacted slightly differently to properties that have been repossessed by a bank or financial institution.

To complete the database, two further monitoring tabs are included to allow officers to move and record properties brought back into use both with intervention, and without. By simply cutting the information from any of the primary database categories and inserting here, these monitoring tabs will allow easy referencing to officers enabling them to track numbers of properties brought back into use through their activity.

Within each of the tabs, the columns will represent the different aspects of the case being investigated. Here, it is suggested that the probate, housing association or company and private individual tabs hold standard information already supplied by Council Tax. This includes empty address, postcode, empty date, and any forwarding address details for the owner or liable persons. However, the priority tab showing the cases where action is more intensive, further columns will include more detailed information about the property, the person and their circumstances. This can include dates of letters sent, next actions, other known addresses, council tax or council debts as well as notes, comments, and links to planning applications and estate agent pages where a property is for sale. Not intended to be a comprehensive or extensive notes page or case progression tool, the depth and quality of the information will allow an officer the ability to have all relevant and detailed information in front of them if and when the time arises that engagement with an owner begins.

Whilst information gathered to this extent is not necessarily required in the other primary or additional tabs, a case can be transferred to the priority category and information subsequently obtained to be include in the relevant columns as information and evidence is gathered.

Empty homes database example

The database example shown here, shows the information and data columns across the top of each of the spreadsheet tabs, with the standard information columns present in all categories and tabs. The additional columns, showing more detailed information on cases, are present in the priority properties tab only. The primary tabs are located along the bottom, followed by the additional and monitoring tabs.

Data cleanse flowchart

To complement and work in conjunction with the empty homes database, the following data cleanse flowchart highlights the process officers may go through to conduct a monthly, annual, or regular database refresh. By following a logical process, empty homes officers can take their existing database with information across all definitions and categories of empty homes, remove or relocated information such as those that have become occupied with or without intervention, and input new data supplied largely by council tax, to include properties that have recently been recorded as empty.

In theory, the priority category of the existing database will not change, unless individual cases have been brought back into use and are now known to be occupied. This tab, with the inclusion of any new priority cases added as they are referred to the authority, will stay the same within the new database. This is also the case for the final two tabs, which are those recording the properties

Reference	Empty Date	Empty Address	Scoring	Case Officer	Circumstance	Progress	Next Action
1965346EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	110	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged, potential prosecution, WID	Notices, WID, debt recovery	Works in default, debt recovery, prosecution, CPO
2201196EMPREQ	Monday, 26 May 2020	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	95	Adam Cliff	Outgoing Deceased, owner missing	Notices, WID, debt recovery	Enforced Sale
2204046EMPREQ	Sunday, 23 September 2018	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	80	Adam Cliff	Elderly owner not engaging. Subject of Class enforcement action	To be determined	Write to owner to offer help and support in selling property
2204043EMPREQ	Friday, 26 April 2019	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	80	Adam Cliff	Elderly owner not engaging. Subject of Class enforcement action	To be determined	Write to owner to offer help and support in selling property
1762736EMPREQ	Saturday, 1 January 2020	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
1802346EMPREQ	Friday, 1 April 2011	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	Refurbishment Stalled	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
1802102EMPREQ	Friday, 1 February 2019	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	Refurbishment Stalled	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
1764276EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	Long term empty, left by parents, never moved back in	Owner not engaging	EDMAO
1762036EMPREQ	Sunday, 10 May 2015	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	To be determined	Enforcement Appraisal
1762036EMPREQ	Thursday, 26 February 2016	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	Limited engagement with owner, was parents house	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
1967006EMPREQ	Tuesday, 26 February 2002	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Owner in IOW as carer, to be contacted again	Owner not engaging	Notices and WID, potential enforced sale / CPO
1762087EMPREQ	Sunday, 7 August 2011	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	left by family 2008, not touched since, no probate	Awaiting progress on Probate	Further Investigation
1807036EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	left by family, never moved in	Owner not engaging	Works in default, debt recovery
1807036EMPREQ	Sunday, 8 May 2011	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	60	Adam Cliff	left by family 2008, not touched since, no probate	Awaiting progress on Probate	WID
1807036EMPREQ	9th May 2019	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Estate beneficiary in Prison, possibly temporarily occupied	Awaiting progress on Probate	Continue to monitor, enforcement & occupancy checks
1807036EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Bought in 2003, never moved in	Owner starting to engage	Monitor - potentially living there part time since Spring 2022
1762036EMPREQ	Wednesday, 25 November 2015	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	60	Adam Cliff	Probate not applied for, likely sole beneficiary	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
2104036EMPREQ	Wednesday, 10 April 2019	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	60	Adam Cliff	Probate not applied for, believed to be dispute between brother & sister beneficiaries	Owner trying to sell	Continue to monitor condition of properties
2202011EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	60	Adam Cliff	Property undergoing major works to rebuild, but appear to have stalled	To be determined	Further attempts made to contact owners and ascertain next steps of progress
1762036EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	60	Adam Cliff	handled down through family, never moved in	Notices, WID, debt recovery	Continue to monitor condition of property
2204036EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Further investigation required. Police involved concerning the owner/occupier	To be determined	Ascertain property history and background
1903046EMPREQ	Tuesday, 6 June 2017	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Limited engagement with owner, was parents house	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMAO
2006066EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Property owner lives next door, used as an extension of property	To be determined	Continue to monitor condition of properties
2102036EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	No engagement from the owner, believed to be living with girlfriend	To be determined	Owner not engaging
2204086EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Not known	Monitor Progress	Work with Owner
2204086EMPREQ	08.08.21	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Owner deceased	Contact NOK	Work with NOK
1762736EMPREQ	Thursday, 12 March 2009	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	40	Adam Cliff	Property to be demolished	To be determined	Awaiting planning app
2204026EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	40	Adam Cliff	Awaiting response from occupier, possible concern for welfare	To be determined	Monitor Progress
2204026EMPREQ	5.1.19	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	40	Adam Cliff	Owner deceased	Work with NOK	Contact owner to ascertain plans for return to the property
2101306EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Property owned by Nottingham Forest, part of the redevelopment area of the stadium	To be determined	None at this time. Continue to monitor
2102076EMPREQ	Sunday, 26 November 2017	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Owner moved into care home in London	Owner's son engaging	Support owner and son in relocating belongings, and having property sold
2102026EMPREQ	Tuesday, 5 January 2021	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Private property	Engaging with owner's daughter	Notices to be served, pending intentions and plans for the property
2003036EMPREQ	Sunday, 23 February 2020	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Beneficiary not pushing probate, owner engaging	Owner slow at engaging	Owner to be offered Eon scheme
2002026EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Owner moved away after daughters death, supporting with options	To be determined	Contact owner to offer further support and find resolution
2202086EMPREQ	No empty role	XX XXXXXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Planning application submitted to demolish and build new dwelling on site	To be determined	Further attempts made to contact owners and ascertain next steps of progress

brought back into use with or without intervention. By creating continual list of properties brought back into use, these statistics can be tracked month by month, year to year, to give a picture of the number of properties now occupied for the purposes of reporting successes of the service.

The additional tabs, showing second homes, less than six months empty and unoccupied exemptions, can be removed entirely, and replaced in the new database with the new information supplied by council tax. This process involves the sorting of all information, broken down by exemptions, discounts and reductions, with class categories referred to making this process easier to follow. As properties within these categories can feature as cases on the priority list, duplicates held within these tabs should be removed for statistics to be maintained and reported accurately.

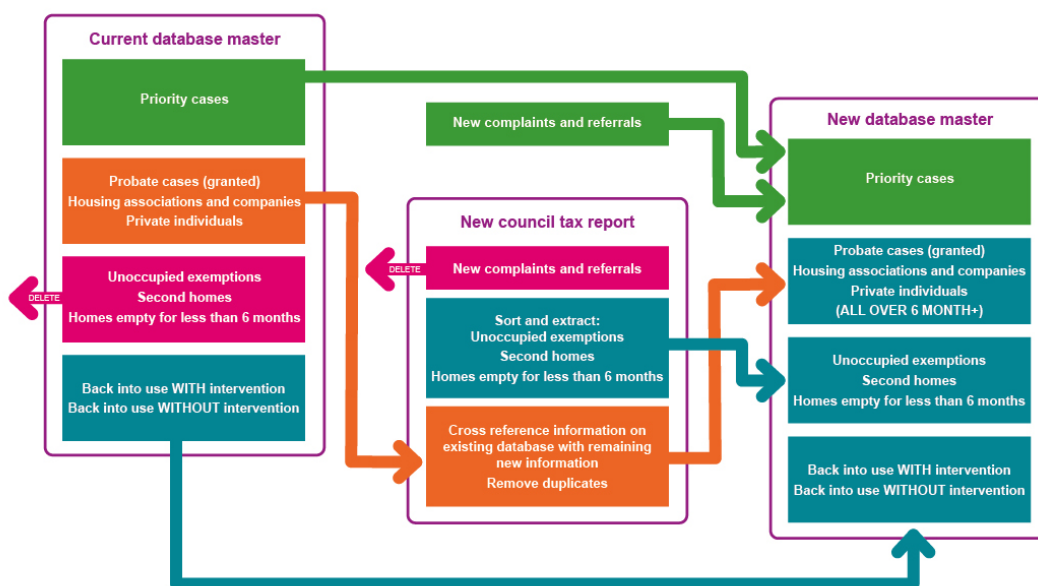
The remaining tabs, displayed as categories of probate, housing associations or companies and private individuals, will then form the majority of the information where cleansing is required. This is where a councils standard six month plus properties will be held, and can range in date from six months empty through to the longest-term empty property the council have on their records. These lists are then cross referenced with the data provided on the new council tax report, resulting in properties from the existing database requiring removal, and addresses within the new report categorised by their type, usually derived from their owner's name, and added to the appropriate category within the new database. As with the process carried out for second homes, less than six months empty and unoccupied exemptions, it is crucial that duplicates found in the priority case tab are removed, in order to prevent cases being counted twice within any statistical reporting.

If carried out on a regularly basis, it is likely that councils will see smaller changes to the removal and addition numbers within their database due to the ongoing exercise of following process to cleanse the data. However, the longer the period between carrying out a fresh of the empty homes database, the more likely it is that officers will find their statistics fluctuate with higher numbers.

The following process map outlines the concept of the cyclical data cleanse suggested to support the development and subsequent maintenance of a standalone empty homes database. This should enable an empty homes officer to ensure that the data held within the database is kept up to date and as accurate as possible. With priority cases and the monitoring tabs of cases brought back into use with and without intervention kept as continual elements of the database, the additional tabs are

replaced with the new information supplied by the council tax report, and sorted into their respective categories and tabs of the database. Unwanted information is completely removed from the database, leaving the existing information from the primary tabs (other than that of the priority tab), to be cross referenced with the equivalent new information received. This results in a refreshed and updated database, broken down into relevant categories, with information on those brought back into use transferred to the two monitoring tabs for future reference. This process is intended to provide a thorough and logical outline of how councils can take an existing extensive dataset across several areas and definitions, and update this with new information to ensure that the database is accurate, relevant to an officer's workload, and updated for reporting or assessing statistics.

Image showing the cycle in which an existing empty homes database can be cleansed, through the removal of unwanted and duplicate data, to the inclusion of new data in order to ensure the information held is as up to date and accurate as possible.



Detailed alt-text: The cycle in which an existing empty homes database can be cleansed, to provide an up to date and accurate picture of the total empty homes known to a local authority. The existing priority cases, along with the addition of new priorities and complaints, are transferred directly into the new master database, as are the monitoring tabs of those brought back into use with, and without intervention. The cases of unoccupied exemptions, second homes, and properties empty for less than six months, are removed, and replaced in the database with the new information supplied by Council Tax. The remaining three tabs, Probate, Housing Association or Company owned properties, and those owned by Private Individuals, are then cross referenced with the new data, duplicates removed leading to newly empty properties being identified, and a remaining number requiring removal due to becoming occupied. This information, once cleansed and formatted to match the previous, becomes the new master database.

Case progression flowchart

For councils who undertake any levels of involvement with empty homes, as in many other aspects of their work, the journey in which they take on a case, a complaint or a piece of work relies on well informed and structured processes. These may differ from council to council, and change from case to case, however the overarching process and steps taken to investigate and pursue the return to use of an empty home are largely the same. The routes to success may change significantly along the way due to an owner's circumstances, a response to a letter or because of the urgent

requirement for enforcement action. However if councils are able to implement the foundations of a process at the early stages of developing their empty homes service, this can prove successful in both tackling the most challenging of cases, whilst ensuring that the procedure allows them to ensure numbers are kept to a minimum.

The following case progression flowchart sets out the main three stages in the journey of an empty home and is intended to act as a guide from which councils can build their own procedural guidance to suit their needs and policies locally. Given the different types, variations and nuances involved with empty homes cases, this flowchart is not designed to guide an authority through a probate case for example, but aims to give logical steps and initiate the thought processes involved in pushing cases through to a successful resolution. Dependant on a council's capacity and resources, the following procedure may only be followed in instances that are deemed as a priority, but the process can also be loosely followed in order to carry out regular or annual data cleanses of the empty homes database.

Identify and Engage

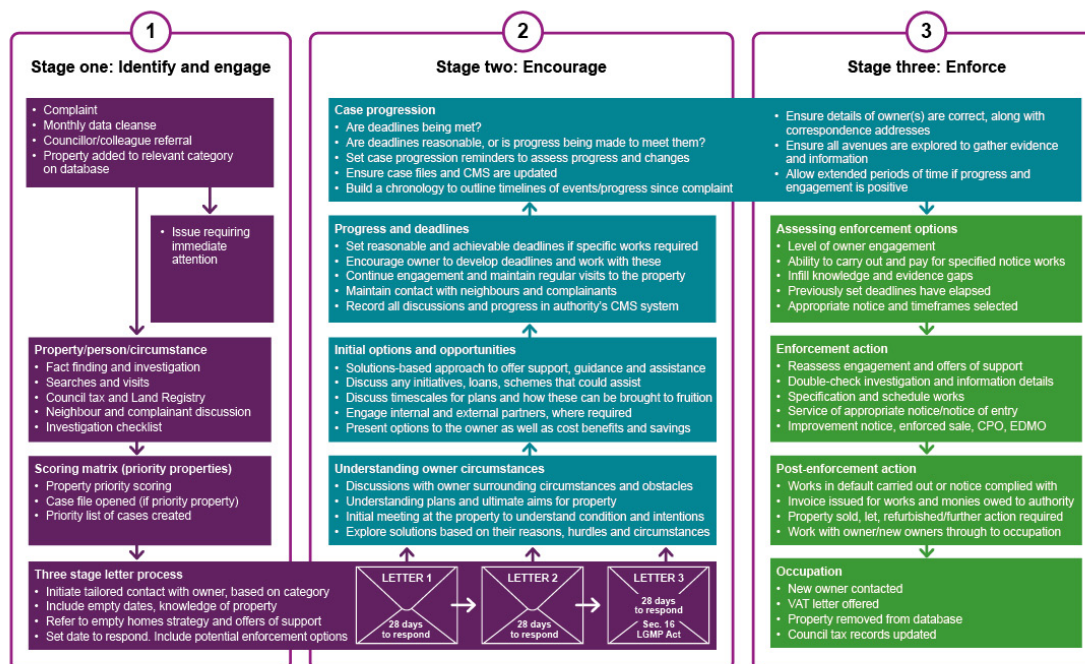
Starting the process through the receipt of a complaint, notification, general knowledge of a property or through an addition to the database from a council tax report, the initial stage outlines the identification and engagement process. Equipped with the knowledge provided by the complainant, or having been supplied with an address list, the investigative procedure starts with an officer attempting to ascertain as much information as possible about the property, the person (the owner), and the circumstance (the reason why the property became and remains empty). Through assessing all available resources, and by investigating lines of enquiry that these may provide, an officer can begin to quickly build a picture, which in turn will enable their support and assistance to be developed and tailored to suit the owner's needs in the future. Councils then often apply a scoring matrix to determine the severity and subsequent priority within the overall caseload.

Councils who are generally proactive in their empty homes work, then tend to follow a three-stage letter process in order to begin initial engagement with an empty home owner. Starting by offering their support, assistance tools and outlining the reasons why the authority want to assist in bringing their property back into use, the three letters in this process incrementally build in terms of their level of severity, and possible enforcement action dependent on the level of response received to each letter. These can also be bespoke in their content to target a specific ownership or council tax exemption group, and importantly form a solid foundation from which the council can base their future enforcement action having made reasonable and regular efforts to make contact with the owners and offer support. Often, where councils are not in receipt of a response to the first two letters sent to an owner, the third letter of this process may include the serving of a Section 16 notice under the Local Government and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1976, requiring an owner by law to provide information on those who have an active and beneficial interest in a property.

Encourage

Moving through to the encourage stage, this section of the process is the most likely to present challenges and changes based on a property and owner's circumstances. Heavily weighted towards understanding the owner's intentions and plans, this part of the process enables a council an opportunity to present a range of solutions that have been developed as part of their empty homes strategy. Financial incentives or loans, grants, leasing arrangements or the purchase and acquisition to name a few, the suite of options developed by an authority are likely to be based and built on the previous experiences in having dealt with empty home owners locally.

Image showing the three stages of an empty homes case, progressing from identifying and engaging with an empty home owner, through encouragement and on to enforcement, resulting in the property becoming occupied



Detailed alt-text: low chart showing the outline of the three stages of an empty homes case, from the initial identification of an empty homes and engagement with an empty home owner, through encouragement and on to enforcement, resulting in the property becoming occupied. Beginning with identify & engage, the process is initiated through a complaint, referral or notification of a property being empty. The investigation process then enables the officer to equip themselves with as much information about the property, its owner and their circumstances as possible, prior to beginning the engagement stage, usually through the three-stage letter process. Dependant on the owner's response, the Encourage stage aims to assess the options available to the owner, through understanding the owner's circumstances, and working toward their ultimate aim for the property by setting realistic and achievable deadlines. Should these not be met, officers move on the enforcement stage, where consideration is given to the council's available powers, either to deal with a specific issue, or to have the property forcibly sold, managed, and purchased by the local authority.

Large parts of this stage will likely involve regular and maintained contact with the owners and complainants, with the direction and onward progress of the case determined largely determined by the owner's intentions and plans. For example, a council might want to consider the following:

- Is work continuing to progress as stated?
- Do they have self-imposed deadlines that are being met?
- Could they be doing more given their circumstances and personal resources?
- Are they being flexible with their proposals and timeframes?

Whilst much of this stage is open ended and flexible dependent on the condition, severity and action of the property and owner, the pursuit and actions requested of the owner have to be reasonable at all times and not what could be seen as beyond the boundaries of an owner's capabilities. If at this stage it is felt that the case is likely to progress to the enforcement stage, whether the course of

action has yet been determined or not, officers should consider developing a chronological outline of their involvement in the case to date and look to build an evidence-based case file case file that combines all prior involvement with the property, owner and complainants. Prior to moving on to the final stage, officers should ensure key pieces of information and evidence are accurate and up to date, such as land registry documents.

Enforce

Finally, the enforce stage should be reached where all other opportunities and efforts to prompt action have failed to materialise, and where no alternative can be found that would result in the property being brought back into use. Enforcement, be it improvement notices or the stricter tools, must be seen as a last resort and all previous work and engagement with the owner should act as evidence to show that this has been satisfied. A councils may want to consider the following:

- Have any knowledge gaps been filled?
- Have the deadlines for action been met?
- Have any deadlines for completed works been adhered to
- Could an additional letter or conversation ensure that the case to pursue an enforced sale or compulsory purchase order is as strong as it can possibly be?

Whilst it is of course pertinent to assess the actions or inaction of an empty home owner, it is also important that empty homes officers display an element of self-assessment throughout, whilst being fair and having the understanding that their work thus far could potentially be open to challenge should it reach the stage of a judicial process.

Importantly, each of the three main stages of the process can be bypassed at any time and enforcement action pursued if there are issues that require immediate attention. In some cases, the process may be followed in reverse, in the sense that a notice is served requiring immediate action, subsequently followed by the engagement with an owner to ascertain their future plans for a property. This is understandable and completely logical, however it should be noted and considered by authorities that the stricter enforcement tools of Compulsory Purchase Order, Enforced Sale and Empty Dwelling Management Order, will require a degree of evidence that every reasonable attempt has been made by the authority to support and encourage the owner to allow them to bring the property back into use.

Investigation Information Sources

From the outset of an investigation, an empty homes officer is likely to conduct a thorough fact-finding exercise to ascertain as much information about a property, owner, and their circumstances as possible prior to initiating engagement at any level. This allows an officer to build a comprehensive picture to begin shaping their support for an owner but can also act as a checklist when considering further enforcement action.

Whilst such action would require a certain degree of information gathering, the below list is intended to encourage officers to explore further sources of information and consider where knowledge gaps may be present within their processes to provide a more wholly accurate and comprehensive case file. By no means an exhaustive list, the below examples are predominantly accessible internally for councils, with some publicly available online (mostly free of charge):

- council tax account, current status
- council tax account notes

- historical council tax accounts for the property
- council tax account for the forwarding address (if owner lives in the same council boundary)
- council tax bills, payments and correspondence
- revenue and benefits department, notes and historical involvement
- planning portal (current and historical applications)
- planning portal, for address specifics, location and boundary lines
- Rightmove (current area sales, historical sales)
- Zoopla (current rental and sale estimates, historical sale particulars)
- LinkedIn, Facebook & Social Media profiles
- Land Registry
- Planning Department (Previous involvement with owner or property)
- Environmental Health Department (Previous involvement with owner or property)
- Environmental Protection (Previous involvement with owner or property)
- Internal Council Systems (Uniform, M3, Academy, Civica) for prior involvement with owner or property
- officer/shared internal files held outside of CRM systems
- historical emails/letters received from owners and complainants
- Electoral Register
- companies house records
- listed status, at risk register, and council's list of buildings of historical interest
- Google
- Google Earth
- Bing Maps
- tracing agent searches
- The Probate Search Service (.gov.uk)
- 192.com
- utility meter readings
- mortgage company / bank contact
- discussions with the complainant(s)
- discussions with the neighbours
- regular, often unannounced visits to the property
- photographs
- photographic diary detailing changes to condition
- the find a prisoner service (.gov.uk)
- adult social care, and the deferred payments team
- council waste and refuse teams, for patterns and use of waste service
- next of kin, family members and friends of the owners.

Enforcement

In many empty homes cases, the nature of the complaint received and the natural deterioration over time of a property can lead to councils considering their enforcement options, whether this be to resolve an immediate issue affecting the neighbour or community, or to result in the property being removed from the ownership of its current owner. The process of an investigation from the outset, is likely to involve visiting the property, accessing the internal parts where possible, and assessing the overall condition with a view to possible routes of enforcement in the future if required. In order to thoroughly ensure legislative compliance through the service of notice and further action, officers have to be certain that their investigative work is accurate, up to date and that their next steps are reasonable and with justification for the chosen course of action.

Councils have at their disposal a number of powers and tools to enforce where the effects on the property's neighbours are minimised, and that communities are not adversely affected due to the neglect or inaction of an empty home owner. Legislation such as the Building Act 1984, Housing Act 1985 & 2004, the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and the Town & Country Planning Act 1990, all provide legal powers that enable councils to act in certain circumstances, and which are often used in situations that suit an empty homes case.

However, the powers bestowed on councils are largely overseen and delegated to competent officers within housing, environmental health or planning departments, and to those whose roles, through their training and education, will at some point require some form of legal process in order for them to take such action. As an empty homes officer this is not the case, with the majority of the role centered around encouragement, support and guidance through to the empty home owner taking positive action of their own accord.

This difference in knowledge, experience, and training, is evidently felt by empty homes practitioners and shown in the results of the survey carried out. Of those who responded, 41 per cent of empty homes practitioners cited a lack of confidence and experience as one of the key factors limiting them in carrying out more enforcement work. Similarly, 49 per cent of those surveyed cited a lack of legal assistance and support hindering their ability for them to conduct further enforcement work. This will inevitably stall progress on difficult cases, leading to properties remaining empty for longer periods of time. In referencing earlier points made in this report, the corporate appetite to carry out enforcement work is also affected by the available resources to councils. 53 per cent of survey respondents stated that their ability to carry out enforcement work was limited by the lack of financial resources to conduct works in default in lieu of the non-compliance of a notice.

This would lead councils and their officers to a position where the threat of enforcement action throughout the negotiation process may not be acted upon. Being able to carry out works on the successful service of a notice can often lead to properties being brought back into use voluntarily by their owners, therefore, councils are encouraged to outline their enforcement policy in relation to empty homes at the earliest opportunity to support and direct the work of the empty homes officer, either through negotiation only, or negotiation with enforcement where required. The increasing of resources to do so, will also lead to the opportunities to bring more empty homes back into use being increased.

There are however councils across the country that use the stricter enforcement powers on a regular basis through targeted and evidence based action and are able to do so due to their procedural structure being well equipped and resourced. Derby City Council for example, have a successful Compulsory Purchase programme, whereas Central Bedfordshire are regularly successful in their pursuit of Empty Dwelling Management Orders. Through their structure, attention to details and due diligence processes, they can use these powers effectively and to their wider advantage when following through on their threat of pursuing such action in future cases.

Of the suite of legislative options available to empty homes officers, it is clear that the tools and the ability to use such tools are often restricted to other officers or departments within the authority. Highlighted in the practitioner survey, 35 per cent of respondents have the appropriate delegated powers or authority to serve improvement notices through existing legislative powers. Whilst this may be due to constitutional limitations, this creates an administrative barrier in to seek approval to serve a notice. This can often take time and create an additional burden, whereas the ability to engage and support empty homes work can be improved by entrusting officers with such legislative powers.

Currently, the only enforcement power designed specifically with empty or unoccupied properties in mind is the Empty Dwelling Management Order. With this legislation prescribing that a property has to have been empty for over two years, councils and officers have to look to other options to take swifter action and build necessary pressure on owners where problems arise for their neighbours and communities. Therefore, officers should be empowered to use the tools available to pursue successful interventions. With this however, comes the requirement for additional support internally in order for officers to build confidence in their abilities over time. This process could be supported by other experienced officers, legal professionals.

Whilst there are no foreseeable upcoming changes to national policy or legislation when it comes to empty homes work specifically, it could be suggested that government consider bringing the Empty Dwelling Management Order prescribed criteria in line with that of Wales, so that the three month notice requirement to inform the owners of an authority's intention to pursue this course of action is removed, and to also reduce the current timeframe of two years empty for a property to qualify for this action. This could possibly be something that is initiated when a property becomes liable for the empty homes premium, or government could look to extend exemptions to the premium charges that would involve an empty homes officer playing a pivotal part in having a premium removed, should certain conditions or criteria be met.

However, in the absence of any anticipated wider changes to existing policy or legislation on a national scale, it is crucial that authorities and their officers, make best use of the current powers and options available to them.

Recommendations

The recommendations put forward by this report are done so with all councils in mind, and with the intention that they are to be cost effective and designed to improve efficiency and outcomes in bringing empty homes back into use. However, it is also important that the recommendations are not case based and are considered irrespective of a council's current levels of empty homes resource. It is also intended that where councils do not currently have a dedicated empty homes function, that these recommendations could be implemented at a later date or developed in conjunction with existing staff to initiate their work to bring empty homes back into use.

- Councils should consider developing their understanding, approach and prioritisation of the wider definitions surrounding empty homes, free from the boundaries that council tax definitions currently provide. Resourcing, capacity and even elements of factors such as finance and geography, can determine whether a class or category of empty home are an important priority to the authority. Second homes for example, may be a crucial area of focus for a council. Also, this can assist in narrowing a practitioner's focus to a particular set of properties. In following a proactive approach, councils will attempt to deal with the most challenging and difficult of cases, whilst at the same time aiming to reduce the overall numbers of empty homes. However, resources and capacity will determine the ability of individual councils to do this, and therefore focus and

- attention should be apportioned appropriately and outlined in the council's empty homes or housing strategy document.
- Despite not being a statutory function, councils should consider the opportunity to employ a dedicated resource where possible or seek creative solutions in the design of a role which links to a relevant yet complimentary function. To assist in their progression through the stages to becoming increasingly active in empty homes work through to a fully proactive service, councils should look to models and structures adopted by others and, to councils where numbers of empty homes across all categories are similar. Whilst enforcement measures will undoubtedly add to the available options for an authority when encouraging empty home owners to return their properties to use, the vast majority of empty homes brought back into use will be down to the intervention, engagement and encouragement initiated by an empty homes, or relevant officer. By increasing an officer's capacity, or that of the team by increasing headcount, greater exposure of the issue locally will also allow for sustained and targeted work, often required to see some of the most challenging cases successfully resolved.
 - Where empty homes work is carried out by officers of any role level, authorities are encouraged to ensure they are supported with the tools and resources already at the council's disposal. Through providing read-only access to council tax information, officers can quickly develop an understanding of a property, owner and their circumstances to ensure engagement and encouragement is started at the most appropriate opportunity. Coupled with this, supplying officers with the enforcement tools required by providing the correct delegated powers to serve improvement notices should be considered. Whilst both of these may require senior approval, constitutional changes, or further training and support for officers, it is suggested that these are relatively small and cost-effective steps councils could take to improve outcomes delivered by the existing resources in place.
 - To develop towards a more proactive approach, and to reduce the flow of empty homes reaching the standard threshold of six months empty, councils should consider engaging with owners of properties empty for three to six months. Whilst the pursuit of owners whose properties fall into this category is not suggested to the same scale of that where properties have been empty for longer than six months, councils should be encouraged to consider assessing these cases on a regular basis, and ascertain whether their capacity would allow a cyclical mailshot every three months. It is thought that this would highlight the options available to an owner and the services provided by the council at an earlier stage, but also prompt owners where they have since occupied a property to update the status of their accounts. This recommendation is not suggested to create additional work for officers, however, those who already follow a wholly proactive service model could consider adding this to their current process. Similar to the process of contacting owners who are close to meeting the empty homes premium threshold, this small, additional step can be implemented by following the process of establishing an empty homes database and can prove beneficial to councils looking to reduce the numbers of properties reaching the long-term empty home definition.
 - Councils could consider broadening the scope of empty homes work to include homes empty for less than 6 months, second homes, and those eligible for a council tax unoccupied exemption. Whilst many authorities currently investigate

such cases, often doing so as a priority, the statistics and definitions surrounding them could be included in the wider monitoring and description of unoccupied homes. If not only to identify trends, it can also provide further weight to the proposal that additional resources are needed. With councils predominantly giving focus and attention on those empty for over six months, broadening the scope can offer a holistic picture of the issue locally, but also provide an accurate definition from which councils can measure their work, trends and successes against other authorities of a similar size and location.

- In respect of their empty homes work, councils are encouraged to move upwards on the activity scale to reach a wholly proactive service where possible and where resources allow. This may mean dedicating an officer's time to focus on empty homes work for those who currently do not have a dedicated empty homes officer or could possibly mean increasing staffing resources to allow current officers to shift from a reactive to a proactive approach. Whilst it is understood that finances, corporate priorities, and often political direction mean empty homes work is of less a priority than other areas, councils should recognise that the challenges in both reducing the numbers of empty homes in their areas, along with dealing with the most difficult cases can only be achieved by proactively assessing and engaging with property owners across the spectrum. Reaching a wholly proactive approach will enable the most challenging cases to be tackled, whilst also giving attention to reducing numbers on a wider scale. If attention is prioritised towards reducing numbers, the process and requirements of an officer to do so will inevitably take away time from progressively pursuing properties that are the most challenging, and most likely the longest empty. In order to find a balance between the two, empty homes work requires a proactive mindset, structured processes, and corporate backing to allow officers the tools and support to pursue all forms of empty homes, irrespective of council tax status or definition. This scale, outlined in the resources section of the paper, can also be used as a self-assessment tool for authorities to identify areas in which they can develop their service and further their proactive engagement with empty home owners.
- To assist in enabling councils with their ability to move towards a wholly proactive approach, councils are encouraged to implement and develop the tools contained within this report to suit their capacity and resources. By creating a fully informed and structured empty homes database, councils will be able to fully assess, report and manage statistics, create accurate engagement processes based on the categorised reasons behind empty homes, and subsequently report on and prioritise their workload to suit capacity. A logical and thorough data cleanse process can ensure occupied properties and newly unoccupied properties are removed and added to the database respectively, as well as providing the foundation for annual cleansing of data for the purposes of reporting to the council tax base for new homes bonus submissions or for alternative incentives set by government in the future. Based on the council's own definitions and priorities, a tailored case progression flowchart can be developed to focus on the overarching process of working through a case, however this could be adapted to allow focus on data cleansing should the council's focus be on reducing numbers rather than dealing with difficult and challenging cases. Finally, councils and their officers should look to build on the information sources checklist to identify knowledge gaps when progressing

cases through to enforcement. Enabling officers to self-assess their process in preparation for serving notices or attending a tribunal or court hearing, such list should act as a prompt to ensure that their process, as well as the information obtained thus far, is as thorough and detailed as it possibly can be. These tools will require the input and approval for the supply of information from the council tax department on a regular basis.

- Councils should consider implementing the proposed council tax changes as set out in the Levelling Up Bill, currently progressing through parliament. This involves the introduction of a second homes premium at 12 months, and the reduction from 24 months to 12 months for eligibility for the empty homes premium. However, government could support this further by setting out a clear direction and strategy on empty homes. The reduction of the empty homes element of the new homes bonus, coupled with the introduction of the empty homes premium, has potentially resulted in unintentionally rewarding councils financially the longer properties are left empty. This could be address by stipulating that the empty homes premium can only be applied where councils are active in their empty homes work, demonstrated through their active empty homes strategy and dedicated officer(s), or, by initiating a ringfence of funding so that any revenue generated can be allocated for empty homes work, additional resourcing and for authorities to develop local financing and support initiatives.

It is accepted that some of the recommendations proposed will already be in place and adopted as part of the empty homes services provided by councils across the country, and whilst some of them will be easier to implement than others, they are proposed in order to assist with the empty homes work carried out by councils across the board. It is also accepted that all councils are different in their structure and make up. The ability and focus to carry out empty homes work will vary from council to council and in doing so these recommendations are proposed to encourage councils to reach a general standard and level for which empty homes officers can operate and/or strive towards in order to achieve success.

Appendices

▼ Empty homes letter 1 template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address Line 1>

<Forwarding Address Line 2>

<Forwarding Address Line 3>

<Forwarding Postcode>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

Our records show that the property at the above address has been unoccupied since <XX/XX/XXXX> and that you are the owner, or that you act on behalf of the owner.

In line with Government guidance, XXXXXXXX Council has developed an Empty Homes Strategy working to bring privately owned empty property back into use as homes in the Borough. We maintain a record of identified empty properties, and your property is currently on this database. Our aim is to work **with** owners of empty properties to help bring them back into use, and we offer a range of advice and assistance to achieve this.

There are many reasons why it is in the owner's interest to bring an empty property back into use:

- to reduce your costs (council tax, insurance and maintenance bills)
- to generate a regular rental income or a capital sum if you want to sell
- to provide a valuable resource helping the current housing shortage in the city
- to provide a home for somebody and their family
- to reduce deterioration of the property and avoid problems for the community.

Can we help?

Whatever the reason your property has become empty, get in touch with us as there may be ways we can work together. You can telephone or e-mail us. Enclosed is an information fact sheet which outlines the council's empty homes strategy, and some of the options available in dealing with empty homes.

If your property is no longer empty or you already have plans for bringing your property back into use, please let us know so we can update our records, and see if we can still help in any way.

Whatever the reason your property has become empty, we are writing to let you know that we want to help and look forward to hearing from you so that we can work together.

XXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use, so if we haven't heard from you by <XX/XX/XXXX> we will contact you again.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer

XXXXXXXXXX Council

∨ Empty homes letter 2 template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address Line 1>

<Forwarding Address Line 2>

<Forwarding Address Line 3>

<Forwarding Postcode>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

We wrote to you on XX/XX/XXXX but we do not appear to have received a reply.

This property has now been registered on the council's Empty Property Database for some time and is one of several that our Council Tax Department has told us are currently registered as having been **unoccupied since XX/XX/XXXX**. It is therefore important that you let us know as soon as possible how you intend to bring this property back into use.

If you are not sure how to do this, we would welcome the chance to help. A copy of the fact sheet sent previously is enclosed and we can provide further information as required.

We would remind you that there are many reasons why bringing an empty property back into use is extremely beneficial:

- to reduce your costs (council tax, insurance and maintenance bills)
- to generate a regular rental income or a capital sum if you want to sell
- to provide a valuable resource helping the current housing shortage in the city
- to provide a home for somebody and their family
- to reduce deterioration of the property and avoid problems for the community.

Please contact us

If your property is no longer empty or you already have plans in place to return your property to use, please let us know and we will update our records. Under current legislation there are no Council Tax discounts for unoccupied properties so Council Tax systems will not automatically update when a property becomes reoccupied. **A property will remain registered as empty unless the owner has advised the Council Tax Department otherwise.** Please note: It is a requirement under Council Tax regulations that owners provide information on who occupies a property.

XXXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use, so if we haven't heard from you by **XX/XX/XXXX** we will contact you a final time before considering any further options or action.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer

XXXXXXXXXX Council

∨ Empty homes letter 3 template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address Line 1>

<Forwarding Address Line 2>

<Forwarding Address Line 3>

<Forwarding Postcode>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

We wrote to you on <XX/XX/XXXX> and <XX/XX/XXXX>, but we still have not received a reply.

This property is now causing the council concern as it has been registered on our Empty Property Database for a considerable period of time and is one that our Council Tax Department has confirmed has been registered as **unoccupied since <XX/XX/XXXX>**.

(Please note: A property will remain registered as empty unless the owner has advised the Council Tax Department otherwise.)

We are continuing to contact you in line with Government guidance which requires local authorities to develop and implement strategies to work with owners of empty property to help them bring them back into use as homes.

Please let us know how you intend to bring this property back into use.

Important - please do not ignore this letter

We make it our priority to work *with* owners of empty properties providing advice, help and funding where appropriate (see enclosed fact sheet). However, if the council is unable to engage with owners, despite repeated attempts to do so, we will consider further action to ensure the re-use and reoccupation of the property. **This may include making recommendations for a range of enforcement action under current legislation, including an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO), whereby control of the property is given to the local authority, an enforced sale, or the serving of a compulsory purchase order (CPO).**

XXXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use so, if we haven't heard from you by <XX/XX/XXXX>, this property will automatically be assessed for priority and any further action will be decided based on that assessment.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer

XXXXXXXXXX Council

✓ Example scoring matrix

Empty Homes Scoring and Rating System

Each empty home identified will be assessed using a scoring sheet which considers various criteria. The result of this assessment is that the property will be placed in a category which determines the priority level it is given, and the subsequent course of action taken.

Properties will be reassessed when necessary/new information is obtained to ensure they remain situated in the correct categories and the correct level of priority is given.

The categories will be classified as follows:

Red – (scores 50 or over)

Cases which fall into this category will be prioritised. All avenues will be explored with the owner to return their property to use in a way that suits their own needs, the needs of the community and the Council. Where assistance is refused and the owner is unwilling to cooperate, all enforcement options will be considered to establish the most appropriate course of action.

Amber - (scores 25 - 49)

Cases which fall into this category will be considered a lower priority than those in the Red category. Resources will still be invested in these cases and officers will work with owners in an attempt to prevent empty homes from deteriorating and being reassessed to a higher category.

Where necessary, enforcement options will be employed if considered the most appropriate course of action. Cases in this category will be monitored on a more frequent basis than those properties which fall within the Green category and will be reassessed where necessary.

Green - (scores less than 25)

Cases which fall into this category will be given a lower priority for action, but owners will be contacted and offered any assistance they may need to return their property back into use. These properties will be monitored for any change and reassessed where necessary.

References and further resources

- The Local Government Association: www.local.gov.uk (<https://www.local.gov.uk>)
- The Empty Homes Network: www.ehnetwork.org.uk (<http://www.ehnetwork.org.uk>)

Statistics

- Council Taxbase Statistics (England): www.gov.uk/government/collections/council-taxbase-statistics (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/council-taxbase-statistics>)
- Council Taxbase Statistics (Scotland): www.gov.scot/publications/housing-statistics-empty-properties-and-second-homes/ (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-statistics-empty-properties-and-second-homes/>)
- Council Taxbase Statistics (Wales): www.statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/LocalGovernment/Finance/CouncilTax/Dwellings (<http://www.statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/LocalGovernment/Finance/CouncilTax/Dwellings>)

Case Studies & Examples

- No Use Empty: Kent: www.no-use-empty.org.uk (<http://www.no-use-empty.org.uk>)
- Houses for Homes: www.babergh.gov.uk/housing/emptyhomes (<http://www.babergh.gov.uk/housing/emptyhomes>)
- Durham County Council: www.durham.gov.uk/emptyhomes (<http://www.durham.gov.uk/emptyhomes>)
- Dorset Council: www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/-/empty-homes (<http://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/-/empty-homes>)
- Arun District Council: www.arun.gov.uk/empty-homes-guidance (<http://www.arun.gov.uk/empty-homes-guidance>)
- Bristol City Council: www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/housing/housing-empty-properties (<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/housing/housing-empty-properties>)
- Central Bedfordshire Council: www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/74/housing/347/empty_properties (http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/74/housing/347/empty_properties)

- [p://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/74/housing/347/empty_properties](http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/74/housing/347/empty_properties))
- North Norfolk District Council: www.north-norfolk.gov.uk/tasks/housing-strategy-community-support/view-empty-home-advice (<http://www.north-norfolk.gov.uk/tasks/housing-strategy-community-support/view-empty-home-advice>)
 - Rushcliffe Borough Council: www.rushcliffe.gov.uk/environmental-health/housing/empty-homes (<http://www.rushcliffe.gov.uk/environmental-health/housing/empty-homes>)
 - The Empty Homes Doctor: www.emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk (<http://www.emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk>)
 - East Marsh United: www.eastmarshunited.org (<http://www.eastmarshunited.org>)
 - Giroscope: www.giroscope.org.uk (<http://www.giroscope.org.uk>)
 - Habitat for Humanity Great Britain: www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk (<http://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk>)
 - Lendology CiC: www.lendology.org.uk (<http://www.lendology.org.uk>)
 - Levelling Up White Paper: www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>)
 - Council Tax information sharing: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/26/section/85 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/26/section/85>)