



Cheshire West & Chester Council

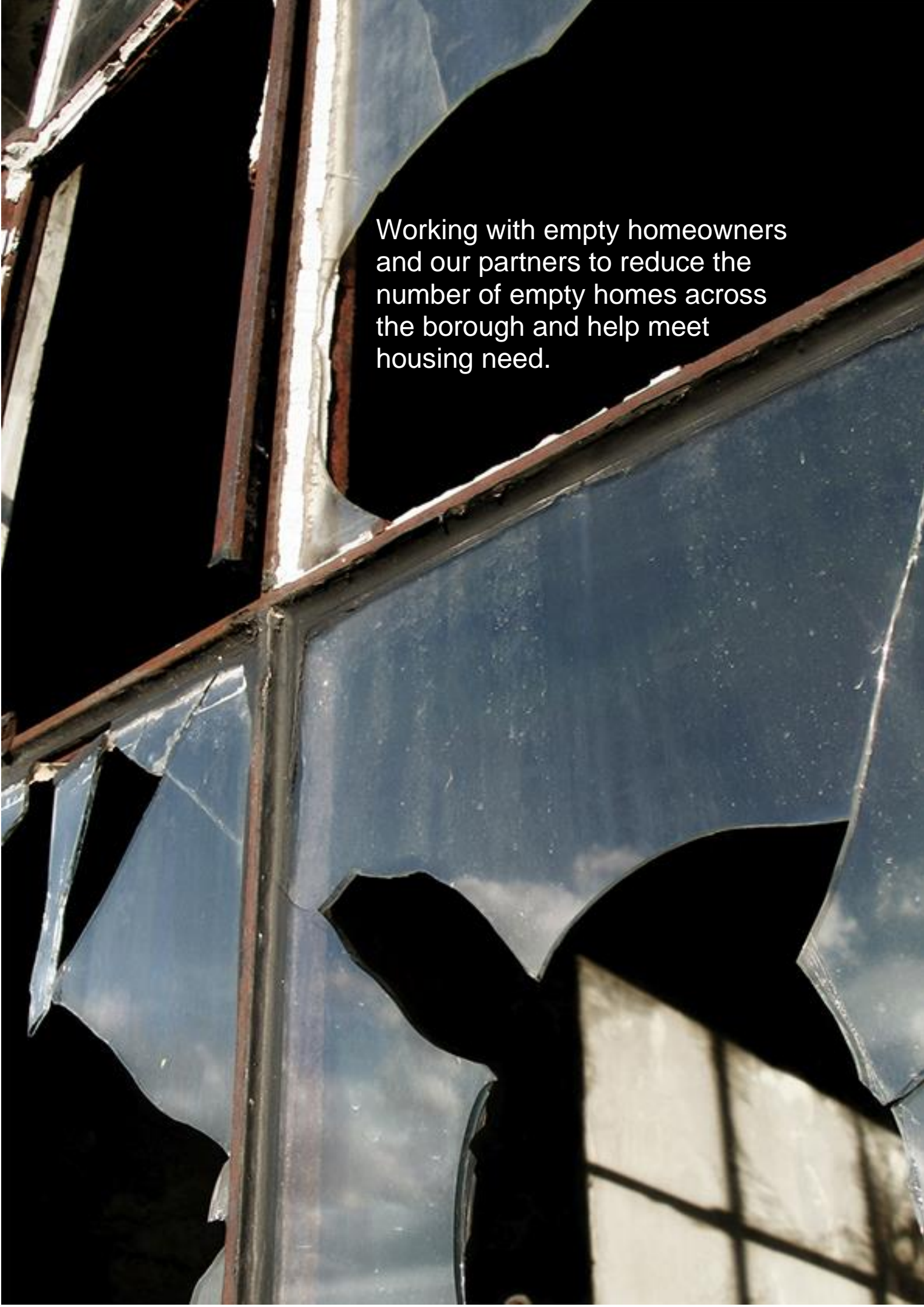
# Empty Homes Strategy 2022 - 2027



Building futures, opening doors



Cheshire West  
and Chester



Working with empty homeowners  
and our partners to reduce the  
number of empty homes across  
the borough and help meet  
housing need.

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## Foreword

With around 6,500 people on the housing register and limited social housing available, there continues to be a significant demand for housing across the borough. This new Empty Homes Strategy aims to build on the progress we have made, and we will continue to work with empty homeowners to increase the supply of housing.

This strategy sets out the approach we will take to provide a clear direction for addressing empty homes which blight our communities and adversely affect our neighbourhoods.

This strategy, alongside our Housing Strategy, demonstrates our continued commitment to providing sustainable and thriving communities across Cheshire West and Chester.

Since the last strategy was published in 2016, 965 empty homes have been brought back into use with each one helping to provide much needed housing for our residents.

This new strategy will continue to build on the progress we have made as well as detailing our continued aims and objectives. Moreover, this strategy also provides the framework that we will use to bring the borough's empty homes back into use. To achieve this, we will continue to work in partnership with empty homeowners and our partners to help bring a further 1000 empty homes back into use over the lifetime of this strategy.

Over the next five years we will concentrate our efforts on addressing the number of neglected empty homes across the borough that often blight our communities to create safe, clean and attractive neighbourhoods for our residents.

I hope that every empty homeowner will work with us and do their part in making use of their untapped resource by bringing their empty home back in to use.

**Councillor Matt Bryan**

Cabinet Member for Housing, Planning and Climate Emergency

## 1. Executive Summary

Every empty home across the borough is a wasted resource particularly when there is a significant need and a lack of supply of affordable housing.

We understand that homes may become empty for short periods of time whilst they are renovated or improved prior to letting or sale. This is a natural feature of the property market, and these homes do not generally represent a problem. However, homes that have been empty for more than six months (long-term empty homes) are not only a waste of valuable resources, they can also be a source of serious anti-social behaviour. For this reason, they are the primary focus of this strategy.

Since we published our last Empty Homes Strategy in 2016, we have returned 965 long-term empty homes back into use. Despite this good work, there are still 4,302 empty homes across the borough of which 1,406 are long-term empty. Furthermore, 753 empty properties are council tax exempt properties and 431 homes being subject to an empty homes premium charge (March 2021).

To help bring empty homes back into use, we have devised a financial assistance programme that provides loans and grants as well as advice and support. However, there are times when it is necessary to use enforcement measures.

The aim of this Strategy is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes. Our target over the next five years is to build on the progress we have made and bring a further 1000 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures and the significant progress we have made in reducing the number of long-term empty homes across the borough. However, we feel that this target is achievable due to our proven track record in bringing empty homes back into use.

To help focus our resources we will continue to apply our four strategic priorities as follows:

- **To raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available to empty homeowners**
- **Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need**
- **Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect**
- **Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders**

A detailed action plan lists the actions required to achieve the above priorities. The action plan identifies new actions to be delivered in the first two years of this strategy. After which, a further action plan will be developed to ensure the target is achieved over the remaining lifetime of this strategy. The action plan details the timescales for delivery, and the lead responsibility.

Our empty homes work will only be successful if we continue to work in partnership with empty homeowners and key stakeholders. We believe that partnership working is key to bringing a further 1000 empty homes back into use and providing much needed housing for our residents.

## 2. Introduction

As of March 2021, Cheshire West and Chester had a total of 4,302 empty homes across the borough of which 2,159 have been empty for over six months. We also have around 6,500 applicants registered on our housing register. To help meet the ever-increasing demand for housing, we must make better use of our existing stock.

Each of the borough's empty homes is a wasted resource as it:

- Has a negative effect on our communities, becoming a potential focal point for illegal activities and anti-social behaviour
- Increases renovation costs as a result of deteriorating condition
- Becomes a strain and expense on agencies such as the Police, and the Fire and Rescue Service
- May also become a risk to the public through unsafe structures, harbouring litter and vermin and finally
- Affects neighbouring house prices

Returning empty homes back into use makes good economic sense as it is both cheaper and faster than building new homes. At the same time, it is friendlier to our environment as it makes use of an untapped existing resource.

This strategy will provide the focus needed to bring privately-owned empty homes back into use. From this, more homes will come onto the market, benefiting the community by increasing the available stock of decent homes and providing opportunities for more affordable housing. It will also help decrease anti-social behaviour, reduce the risk to public health from unsafe structures, potentially provide an income via letting for the homeowner and finally, help maintain and improve the local housing market.

The approach we will take will continue to combine enforcement activity with new and innovative initiatives, including specialist guidance, loan support and grant assistance.

Most importantly, this strategy will continue to place a strong emphasis on partnership working, which will include working with empty homeowners, housing providers such as registered providers who provide social housing and private landlords who provide private rented housing.

### 3. Setting the scene

#### 3.1 What is an empty home?

Within the context of this strategy, we have determined that there are two main types of empty home.

**Short-term empty homes** are those homes that have been unoccupied for up to six months. They are often in the process of being sold or between lettings, are being renovated and improved prior to occupation or awaiting probate following the death of the occupier. Short-term empty homes are a natural part of the housing market. We know that, within our borough, a large proportion of empty homes fall into this category and do not normally require any intervention.

**Long-term empty homes** are those homes that have been empty for six months or more.

We will continue to concentrate our resources on bringing long-term empty homes back into use, particularly those homes that have been empty for two years or more, as these homes often cause our residents the most problems.

#### 3.2 Why do homes become empty?

There are many reasons why a home may become empty, the main reasons are as follows:

- Low demand
- Inheritance
- Awaiting demolition
- Lack of finance to carry out repairs
- Owner moved into care
- Investment opportunities
- Lack of interest
- Awaiting planning consent
- Prohibition orders
- Repossessions and finally
- Family disputes such as divorce settlements

#### 3.3 Our exclusions and exemptions

There are occasions when a property may have become empty but may qualify for a Council Tax exemption. Examples include:

- Due to bereavement, will be classed as exempt from the date of the person's death to six months after probate has been granted



- By a person who has gone into a residential care home on a permanent basis. This will not apply to properties that subsequently have been rented out for any period after a tenant has been in occupation
- Someone who has left to either receive care or to provide care to another person due to illness, disability or old age in their home, which is not classed as a nursing home
- By a person who is in prison

Please be advised that the above list is not exhaustive and may be subject to change, further details can be found at [www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk)

The Government requires all local authorities to provide quarterly returns in relation to the number of empty homes, including those empty homes brought back into use. The quarterly return does not include those empty homes that are subject to a Council Tax exemption. However, this strategy allows for such properties to be given consideration, particularly where they are causing problems to neighbouring properties.

### **3.4 What are the advantages of bringing empty homes back into use?**

Bringing empty homes back into use can bring many advantages such as:

- Provides an increase in the number of good quality and affordable housing across all tenures
- Improves the existing built environment
- Reduces levels of anti-social behaviour
- Reduces crime and the fear of crime
- Reduced risk to the emergency services
- Supports area regeneration schemes
- Supports corporate economic growth and development priorities, objectives and strategies
- Provides income generation opportunities through the New Homes Bonus
- Recovers debt owed to the Council
- Reduces workload for other Council departments such as Environmental Health
- Encourages partnership working that facilitates investment from external organisations.

Addressing empty homes helps us to meet housing need as residents can gain access to accommodation that was previously unavailable.

Bringing empty homes back into use also minimises the adverse effects on our communities, as long-term empty homes can often become susceptible to incidents of crime and anti-social behaviour.

### **3.5 How we identify empty homes**

We have a range of ways that allow us to identify firstly, if a home is empty and secondly, the owner of an empty home.

### **3.5.1 Through Council Tax data**

Council tax data is the main source of information in identifying both the location and owner of an empty home. Section 85 of the Local Government Act 2003 allows the address of the empty home, the liable party's name, their address, and contact details to be used for the identification of empty homeowners.

### **3.5.2 Through tracing agents**

We can enlist the help of tracing agents who specialise in locating absentee owners through professional genealogical and legal research services.

### **3.5.3 Through partners**

We often rely on information provided to us by:

- Residents
- Parish and town councillors
- Landlords
- Police
- Fire and Rescue Service

These strong partnerships have allowed us to accurately identify empty homes.

## **3.6 Prioritising which empty homes to bring back into use**

To ensure that we allocate our resources appropriately, a "priority scoring" system is used. This consists of carrying out a risk assessment on each empty home that is reported to us. The process uses a set of factors that takes into consideration the risk of leaving the home empty. A summary of the factors we use are as follows:

- Environmental factors, such as boarded up windows, accumulated rubbish/fly tipping and overgrown gardens
- Social factors, which examine if the property is a source of crime, vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour
- Health and safety factors, such as disrepair or in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties, cause hazards to the public and pest activity and finally
- Length of time empty factor; this naturally forms part of our risk assessment process

Each of the above factors carries a number of points which are then added together, and a final score is awarded. We will then prioritise those empty homes that present the most risk to our neighbourhoods and add these to our caseload.

### 3.7 How we bring empty homes back into use

There are three main categories in which we can bring empty homes back into use which are as follows: enablement, inducement and enforcement. They are designed for use in that order.

#### 3.7.1 Enablement

Initially, we will send letters to the owner of an empty home asking why the property is empty and what the owners' intentions are. The letter explains the options available to bring the empty home back into use.

These include:

- Providing technical advice in relation to any work required to bring the empty home up to standard
- Help to become a good landlord by becoming a member of the Cheshire Landlord Accreditation Scheme, which provides practical support and advice
- Facilitate a partnership arrangement between the empty homeowner and management organisation, for example, a lettings agency or registered provider
- Assist with ownership disputes and complications, to enable a sale or tenancy

#### 3.7.2 Inducement

Where necessary and subject to qualifying criteria, the following can be offered to owners of empty homes where they have indicated that they would like to bring their home back into use but require assistance to do so.

- **Empty home grant** - available to owners to help them towards carrying out any required improvement works to an empty home.
- **Empty home loan** - we can provide a shared equity loan if the empty homeowner intends to let their property after completion of any required works.
- **Conversion grant** - this grant is for the conversion of long-term empty homes or obsolete commercial premises to provide new units of private rented residential accommodation.
- **Decent home loan** - this loan enables the empty homeowner to carry out necessary renovations using funds released from any available equity in their capital asset. The empty homeowner must occupy the home on completion of works.

Further information about grants and loans including qualifying criteria is detailed in our Home Assistance Policy, which can be viewed on the Council website.

In addition to the financial assistance measures mentioned above, we also operate the following:

- **Landlord accreditation scheme** - This scheme aims to recognise those landlords who provide a high standard of housing management. Where an empty home has been brought back into use via the use of a grant or loan and the owner has agreed to let the property, the landlord will be required to be accredited.
- **Empty homes matchmaker service** – This service “matches” and brings together those empty homeowners who wish to sell their empty home with an accredited private landlord, registered letting agent, registered provider or property developer who wishes to purchase an empty home and bring it back into use.

### 3.7.3 Enforcement

Where owners refuse to co-operate with us and the empty home is a high priority, then we will take appropriate enforcement action.

- **Enforced sale** - We can enforce the sale of an empty home if the owner has a financial debt owed to us and it is registered against the property. The debt can be for one or more reasons, but to enforce a sale the debt needs to be for a “reasonable” sum of money. If the debt is unpaid, we can issue a notice to the owner to enforce the sale of the property to reclaim the debt and costs.
- **Compulsory purchase order** - Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order to acquire underused or ineffectively used homes for residential purposes if there is a general housing need in the area. Section 226 (1)(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order if we believe that the acquisition will facilitate the carrying out of redevelopment, development or improvement of the land or building. The compulsory purchase order process can be legally complicated, expensive and time consuming. The process also leaves the Council owning the empty home and having direct responsibility for it.

Further details around enforcement can be found in our Enforcement Policy which is available upon request.

A flow chart depicting our Empty Homes Procedure Following an Initial Referral is available in section 8.1.

### 3.8 National measures that impact on our empty homes work

This strategy makes use of national measures that have been put in place to assist local authorities in dealing with empty homes, some of which have been detailed below.

### 3.8.1 Council Tax changes

Since April 2013, the government has devolved powers to vary the amount of Council Tax paid on empty homes to the local level. The aim of this policy was to further incentivise empty homeowners to bring their empty homes back into use by removing reductions or exemptions that were previously in place.

Local authorities are now able to decide whether to apply a discount for properties empty for up to six months and for those properties empty and in need of considerable renovation. There is also the provision to charge a long-term empty premium which allows local authorities to set Council Tax at a higher rate on properties that have been empty and unfurnished for two years or longer.

The table below outlines the Council's policy for empty homes council tax premiums.

	<b>Homes empty for up to 2 years</b>	<b>Homes empty for between 2 and 5 years</b>	<b>Homes empty for over 5 years</b>	<b>Homes empty for over 10 years</b>
<b>Council Tax Rate</b>	Full council tax payable	Additional 100%	Additional 200%	Additional 300%

When a home first becomes empty and unfurnished there is no council tax discount. Once the property has been empty for two years, the empty homes premium is applied as above until the property becomes occupied.

Other changes brought in following these reforms include the charge for second homes being set at 100% in line with empty homes. When a property is uninhabitable and requires major structural repair a 25% discount is given for a maximum of 12 months.

### 3.9 Local measures that impact on our empty homes work

In addition to the national measures the following local measures also impact on our empty homes work.

#### 3.9.1 Housing Strategy - strategic housing priorities beyond 2020

The current Housing Strategy for the borough was published in late 2014 and focuses on the following three priorities:

- Priority 1: Increasing and enabling delivery: more homes, stable growth
- Priority 2: Improving access to housing
- Priority 3: Improving housing quality, sustainability and design

This Empty Homes Strategy will play its part in increasing and enabling the delivery of more homes that provide stable growth.

### 3.9.2 The Council Plan

Play your part to Thrive is the Council Plan for Cheshire West and Chester.

The Plan outlines the overall strategic direction for the Council for 2020 - 2024, and its principal aim is to build greener, fairer and stronger communities by working together. The plan sets out the six key priorities for the Council over the next four years, including why these issues are local priorities, the actions that will be taken, key partners for delivering success, and the outcomes that will be monitored.

These priorities are:

- To tackle the climate emergency
- Grow our local economy and deliver good jobs with fair wages for our residents
- Support children and young people to make the best start in life and achieve their full potential
- Enable more adults to live longer, healthier and happier lives
- Make our neighbourhoods even better places to call home
- An efficient and empowering Council

The values of the organisation have been included in this strategy to enable the delivery of the plan. The themes below have been shaped by staff and will guide the approach to supporting staff on issues of recruitment, training and appraisal: **Teamwork, Honesty, Respect, Innovation, Value for Money, Empowerment.**

### 3.9.3 Private rented sector

The role which the private rented sector plays in helping to meet housing need is becoming increasingly important. As a result, our relationship with private sector landlords continues to be developed to include specialist advice and support, as well as a range of incentives that help landlords to engage with us, our overall aim is to ensure that private sector tenancies are sustained over the long-term.

In terms of empty homes, private landlords can play a part in helping to meet housing need by purchasing empty homes via our Empty Homes Matching Service and subsequently bring the empty home back into use via the rental market. For many of our residents the private rented sector is their only housing option and therefore it is vital that we continue to assist the private rented sector to offer accommodation that is both innovative and addresses housing need.

## 4. Our current performance

### 4.1 Our current performance

As of March 2021, there are 1,406 long-term empty homes across the borough, 431 have been empty for two years or more and are subject to an empty homes premium charge. The empty homes premium charge allows us to set the council tax at a rate of 200% for those homes that have stood empty for two years or more.



**Chart 1** - The chart below shows the progress we have made over the last five years in reducing the number of long-term empty homes across Cheshire West and Chester. The chart shows those empty homes that have a Council Tax exemption and those that do not (non-exempt).

**Total number of long-term empty homes from 2016 – 2021**

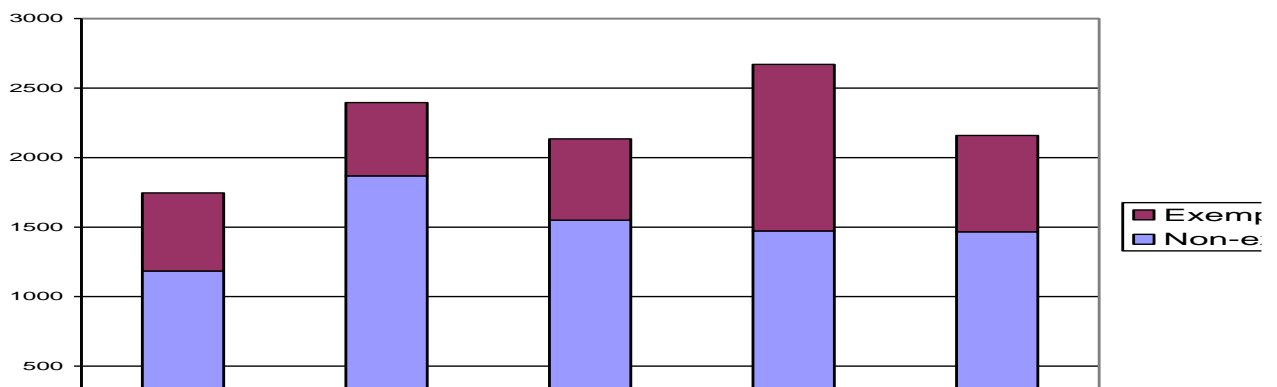


Table depicting progress made over the last five years.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Non-exempt</b>	1,184	1,868	1,550	1473	1406
<b>Exempt</b>	562	527	584	1197	753
<b>Total</b>	1,746	2,395	2,134	2670	2159

The reasons behind the number of long-term empty homes are due to circumstances out of the Council's control, such as trends within the housing market and owners' individual circumstances. The role of the Council is to target the most problematic empty homes, and without the work carried out to address empty homes, there would be more than 900 additional long-term empties.

**Chart 2** – The chart below shows the length of time homes have been empty for, as of March 2021. As previously stated, the total number of long-term empty homes in March 2021 was 2,159. It is worth noting that the number of empty homes varies from month to month however, on average there is a churn of around 300 empty homes a month.

**Length of time home has been empty as of March 2021**

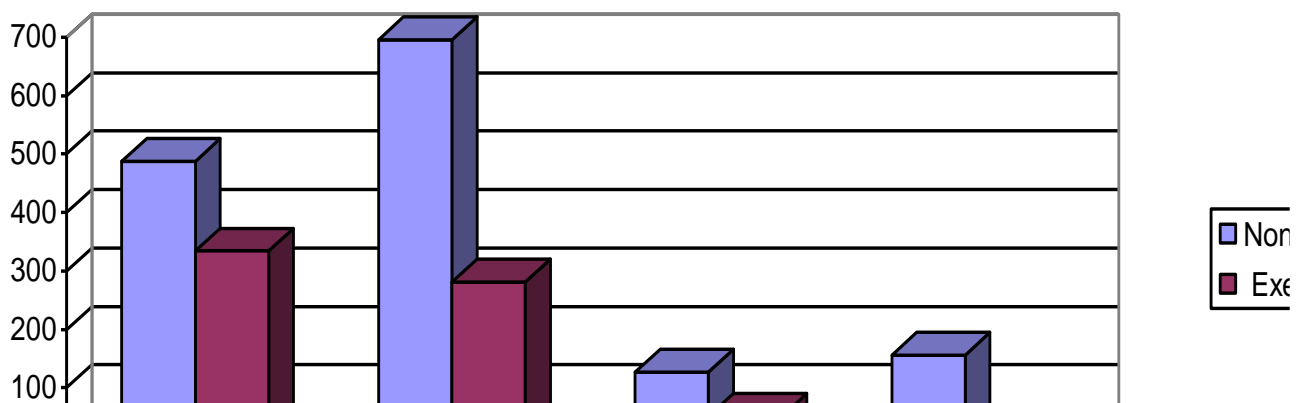


Table depicting the length of time homes have been empty as of March 2021.

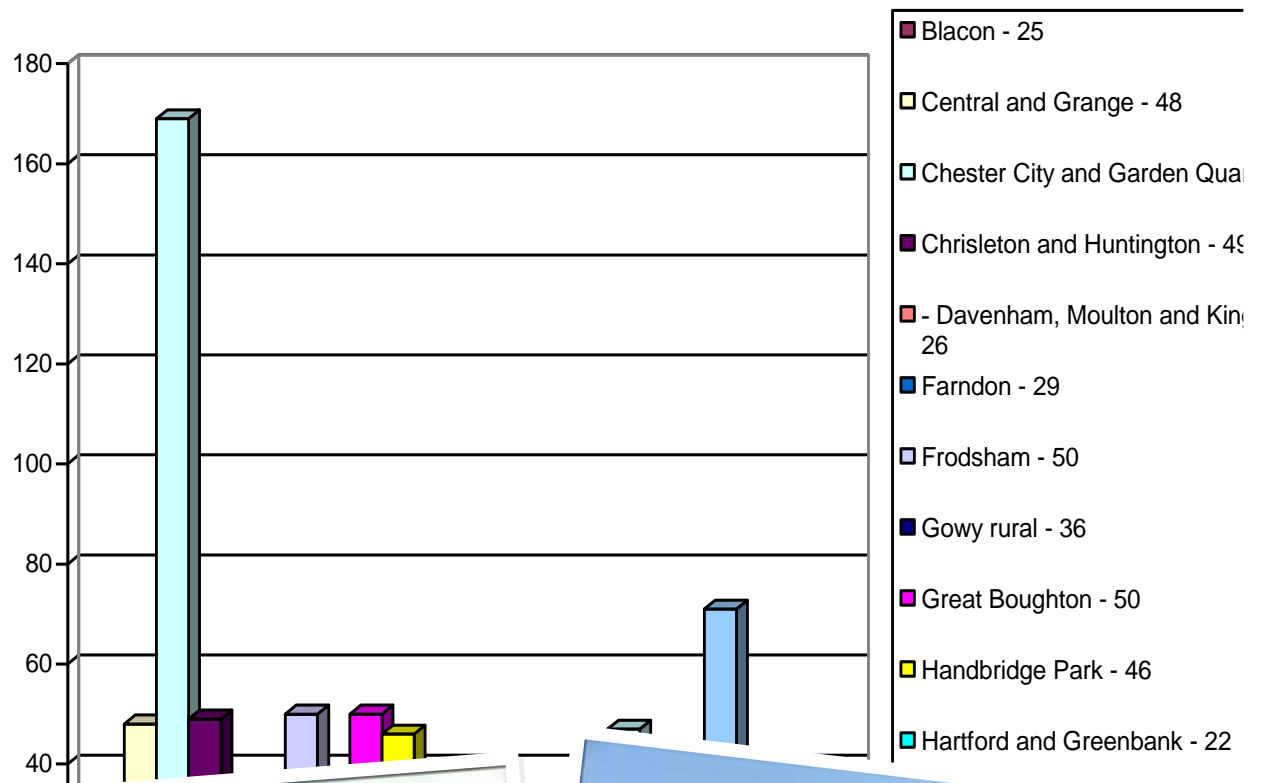
	6 month - 1 year	1 year - 3 year	3 year - 5 year	5 year plus
<b>Non-exempt</b>	487	696	127	156
<b>Exempt</b>	334	281	51	27
<b>Total</b>	821	977	178	183

There are long-term empty homes in every ward, but the number varies considerably. The charts below show the number of long-term empty homes by ward as of March 2021.

**Chart 3** – The chart overleaf shows the number of long-term empty homes within each ward (A - O) as of March 2021. Chester City and Garden Quarter ward stands out as having the most long-term empty homes with 169, followed by Hoole and Newton with 71.

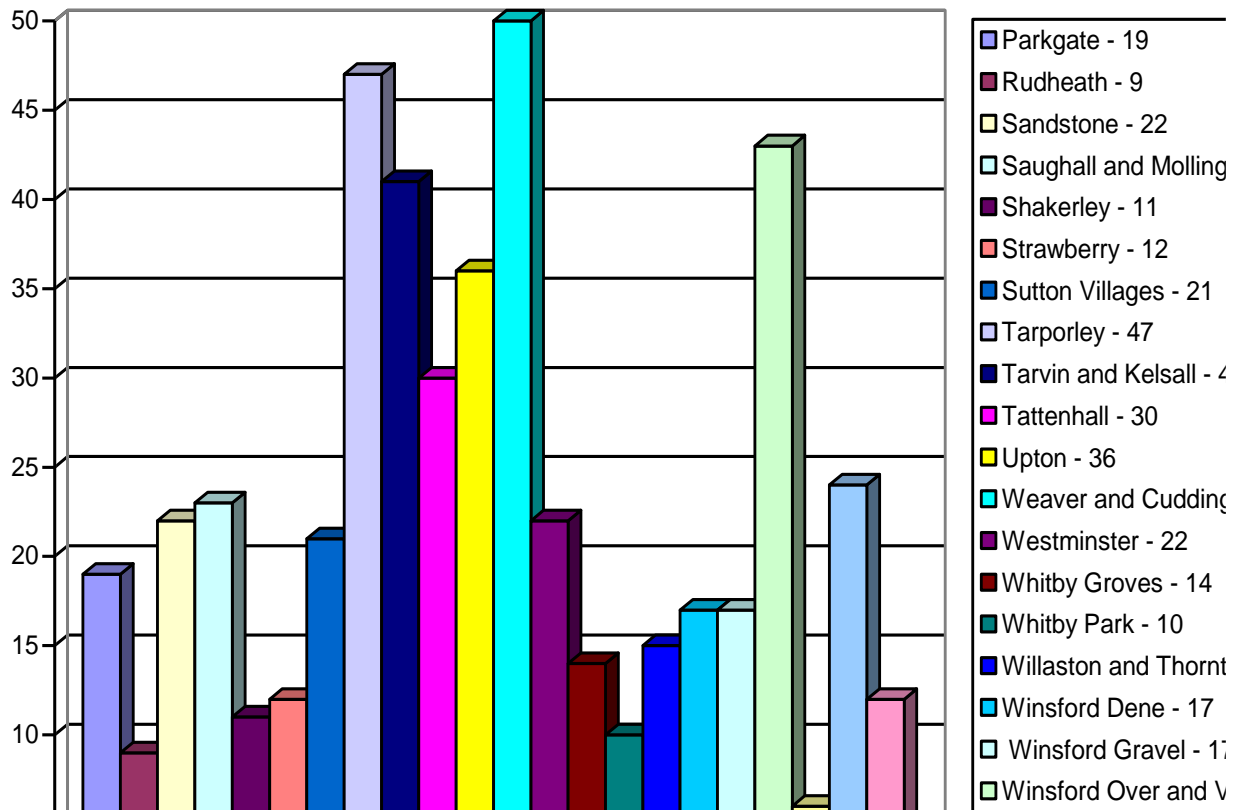


**Number of long-term empty homes within each ward (A – O) as of March 2021.**



**Chart 4** – The chart below shows the number of long-term empty homes within each ward (P - Z) as of March 2021. The numbers in these wards are similar to the majority of wards in Chart 3.

**Number of long-term empty homes within each ward (P – Z) as of March 2021.**



**Total number of long-term empty homes within each council tax band as of March 2021.**

Table below depicts the number of empty homes within each Council Tax band. 72% of properties are within bands A to C.

	<b>Band A</b>	<b>Band B</b>	<b>Band C</b>	<b>Band D</b>	<b>Band E</b>	<b>Band F</b>	<b>Band G</b>	<b>Band H</b>
<b>Total</b>	430	346	235	160	108	54	65	8

## Types of incentives used during financial year 2020 – 2021.

The table below shows the type of incentives used during financial year 2020 - 2021 and the number of times they were accessed.

Type of incentive	2020/21
Agreed sale	1
Correspondence and negotiation	201
Empty home grant/loan	1
Conversion grant	0
Leasing scheme	0
Matching/buy and sell service	1
Enforcement notice	0
Threat of compulsory purchase	0
Compulsory Purchase Order	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>

### 4.1.1 Comparing our recent performance within the region

In August 2021, our total long-term empty homes figure was 1,552 (0.96% of the total housing stock). When compared within the region, our closest neighbouring authorities are Cheshire East Council and Wirral Borough Council whose long-term empty homes figures for the same period were 2,002 (1.1%) and 2,231 (1.49%) respectively. When compared with the Liverpool City Region, Liverpool City Council's long-term empty homes figure was 4,631 (2%), whilst Sefton Council's was 2,155 (1.69%). It is worth noting that each neighbouring authority will have their own localised housing issues, and such issues can have a considerable impact on the number of empty homes within their area.

## 4.2 What do our stakeholders think?

Consultation has been central to the development of this strategy and sought the views of staff, empty homeowners, partners and residents. A formal consultation process for the proposed strategy will be carried out over a period of 12 weeks to seek the views of residents and other stakeholders regarding our proposed approach to dealing with long-term empty homes. The key findings of the formal consultation are detailed below.

### 4.2.1 Consultation findings

The key messages to emerge from the consultation were that the following are all well supported:

- The aim to bring empty homes back into use
- The objectives and intended outcomes of the proposed strategy
- The criteria proposed to prioritise which empty homes to target
- The proposed approach and incentives to help bring empty homes back into use
- The proposed use of enforcement when necessary to bring empty homes back into use.

## **5. Aims, priorities and outcomes**

### **5.1 Our aim**

Our aim is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes.

### **5.2 Our principal target**

Our principal target over the next five years is to bring a further 1000 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures and the significant progress we have made in reducing the number of long-term empty home across the borough over the last five years; however, we feel that this target is achievable due to our proven track record in bringing empty homes back into use.

#### **5.2.1 How will we achieve our principal target?**

We will achieve our target by building on the good work that is already established across the borough. We will continue to do the things that work and deliver results including the use of advice, financial assistance and enforcement action. Alongside this, we will implement an action plan that will deliver new initiatives and service improvements.

### **5.3 Our strategic priorities**

To help us to achieve both our aim and principal target, we will continue to adopt the four strategic priorities outlined in our previous strategy as follows:

- Raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available
- Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need
- Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect
- Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders

Each strategic priority is discussed in more detail below highlighting the main actions required to deliver them.

#### **5.3.1 Raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available**

We need to raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource, and we must continue to showcase the financial assistance as well as the advice and support measures that are available to empty homeowners to help them bring their empty home back into use.

To help achieve this priority we will:

- Draw up a communication plan that sets out how we will publicise that the borough's empty homes are a wasted resource.
- We will continue to publicise the range of advice and support available to empty homeowners.
- Ensure that reporting an empty home continues to be seen as a civic duty amongst all our residents and key partners.
- Identify new ways that our residents and partners can report an empty home and make sure that there are options available that take into consideration new technologies.

Intended outcomes:

- Better awareness within our communities of our empty homes campaign and the range of help available to empty homeowners.
- More efficient ways for the public to report an empty home.
- Increased contribution and response to the regional debate on empty homes.
- Increase in partnership working with empty homeowners.
- More accurate and up to date information.
- Greater acceptance from empty homeowners to work with staff to bring their home back into use.

### **5.3.2 Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need**

There are significant levels of housing need across the borough, it is therefore essential that we continue to increase the supply and choice of decent housing for people in need.

To help achieve this priority we will:

- Concentrate our resources in areas where there is a need for more housing by working collaboratively with private landlords and registered providers
- Ensure that our staff work closely with empty homeowners and help them bring their empty home back into use by providing advice and support and, where appropriate, financial assistance
- Ensure that where empty homes that are brought back into use via landlords, that those landlords are accredited and provide a good housing management service

Intended outcomes:

- Reduction in the number of long-term empty homes.
- Maximisation of existing stock and other buildings.

- Rejuvenated and more settled neighbourhoods.
- Reductions in the use of temporary accommodation and levels of homelessness by increasing access to private rented sector housing.

### **5.3.3 Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect**

Our work must also continue to improve our neighbourhoods by addressing those empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect. Our involvement needs to result in a tangible difference to those communities that are affected by empty homes.

To help achieve this priority we will:

- Maintain our links with external partners such as the Police to help identify and address those empty homes that have become the focus of crime and anti-social behaviour
- Keep under review our “priority scoring assessment” to ensure that resources are concentrated on those empty homes that have become the focus of crime and anti-social behaviour
- Carry out a programme of priority scoring assessments so that we can address those empty homes that are having the biggest impact on our neighbourhoods
- Be proactive in our efforts to bring empty homes back into use through the active use of enforcement measures that are backed up by current legislation, as detailed in section 8.2 of this strategy

Intended outcomes:

- Reduction in the levels of litter, vermin and fly tipping associated with empty homes.
- Reduced carbon emissions by renovating existing homes.
- More attractive and sustainable neighbourhoods.
- Reduction in the levels of vandalism, arson, drug use and other anti-social behaviour focused around empty homes.
- Reduction of risk to and resources expended by emergency services.

### **5.3.4 Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders**

It is vital that our work is strategically linked to our corporate objectives as well as the priorities that are identified in our Housing Strategy.

To help achieve this priority we will:

- Promote economic growth through the links with Planning and Economic Development
- Work closely with Council Tax and use the data to focus our empty homes work in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes
- Work with stakeholders such as Parish and Town Councils to identify and address long-term empty homes that are having a negative impact on their surroundings

Intended outcomes:

- An increase in the levels of partnership working amongst owners.
- More effective partnership working between stakeholders.

## **6. Ensuring we deliver**

### **6.1 Measuring our success**

Six performance indicators have been developed, as follows:

1. The number of empty homes in the borough broken down as: six months, twelve months, up to two years and more than two years.
2. The number of empty homes brought back into use, broken down as: six months, twelve months, up to two years and more than two years.
3. How were these empty homes brought back into use, broken down by: Conversion grant, Empty home grant/loan, Enforcement action, initiated compulsory purchase order, West Cheshire Homes – Choice Based Lettings and housing advice service and finally Correspondence and negotiation.
4. Total number of empty homes with a high priority score (above 80).
5. Total number of empty homes with a high priority score brought back into use.
6. A breakdown of the outcome of our involvement, the number of empty homes that have been put up for sale, undergone renovation/visual improvement measures and/or changed ownership.

The above performance indicators are designed to provide both a narrative and baseline for our empty homes field work.

Empty homes which have been brought back into use as a result of our involvement will count towards the achievement of our principal target. Our involvement will be demonstrated through:

- Providing advice and guidance
- Creating links with landlords, agents and tenants
- Providing financial assistance
- Taking enforcement action

Any involvement to bring an empty home back into use will only be attributed to the Council if we have had two points of contact with the empty homeowner.

#### **6.1.1 Preventative measures**

We will also take a proactive approach and carry out preventative measures where we can. We will do this by working with homeowners with a view to preventing their property from becoming a long-term empty home by putting them in touch with landlords who wish to purchase homes via our matching service and buy and sell service.

#### **6.1.2 Achieving interim target measures**

Despite the best intentions of officers, bringing empty homes back into use can be a long process. However, there are sometimes short-term measures that can be taken to improve the situation, for example, an empty home with overgrown gardens that



are causing a considerable eye sore could, as an interim measure, have the gardens tidied up.

## **6.2 Service development through quality assurance**

The development of the Empty Homes Service will continue to be based on quality assurance data. This data comprises of a survey that will be sent to those empty homeowners who have accessed a financial assistance measure, once their property has been brought back into use. The survey asks the empty homeowner to provide their views on the quality of service provided, as well as the effectiveness of the specific measures that were deployed to bring their empty home back into use.

The quality assurance data will help identify good practice, as well as any barriers that officers face.

## **6.3 Roles and responsibilities**

The key stakeholders are:

- Residents affected by empty homes in their area, or who own an empty home and would like assistance in bringing it back into use
- Elected members who have a role in ensuring the public is aware of and understand this strategy and how it affects their community. They also provide an important line of referral for our residents
- All our staff have a responsibility to drive the strategy and ensure that the principles behind it and its strategic importance are reflected in wider local authority issues

### **6.3.1 Strategic responsibility**

Our Housing Strategy and Policy team will be responsible for providing the strategic overview in terms of ensuring that the aims of this strategy are compliant with the overall aims and objectives set out in the borough's Housing Strategy. The team will take the lead on setting the delivery framework, as well as developing and reviewing the action plan in partnership with Regulatory Services.

### **6.3.2 Operational responsibility**

The operational delivery of our Empty Homes Service sits within Regulatory Services. Although a generic team, one officer specialises in this area of work and will continue to focus on ensuring empty homes are brought back into use.

### **6.3.3 Other organisations involved**

Local businesses such as letting and estate agents, property developers and construction firms can have an interest in the implementation of some measures for addressing empty homes.

Other organisations such as registered providers also have an involvement in reoccupation opportunities. Regulatory Services will continue to work closely with external stakeholders such as the Fire and Rescue Service as well as the Police.

## 7. Summary

This strategy identifies the importance of bringing empty homes back into use for the benefit of the community. The principal target of bringing 1000 empty homes back into use over the lifetime of this strategy we believe will help to deliver much needed housing for our residents.

We have made good progress since the last Empty Homes Strategy back in 2016 however, we know there is more we need to do. We will therefore continue to do all we can to encourage empty homeowners to bring their empty home back into use, to include enforcement measures where necessary. Ultimately our goal is to increase the supply of housing, whilst positively impacting on the quality of life of our residents.

Our action plan will help to address the problems caused by long-term empty homes. We will continue to concentrate our resources in bringing long-term empty homes back into use. We will concentrate on those homes that have been empty for two years or more, as it is these empty homes that can often cause our residents the most problems.

### 7.1 Contact details

Any queries regarding this strategy should be directed to:

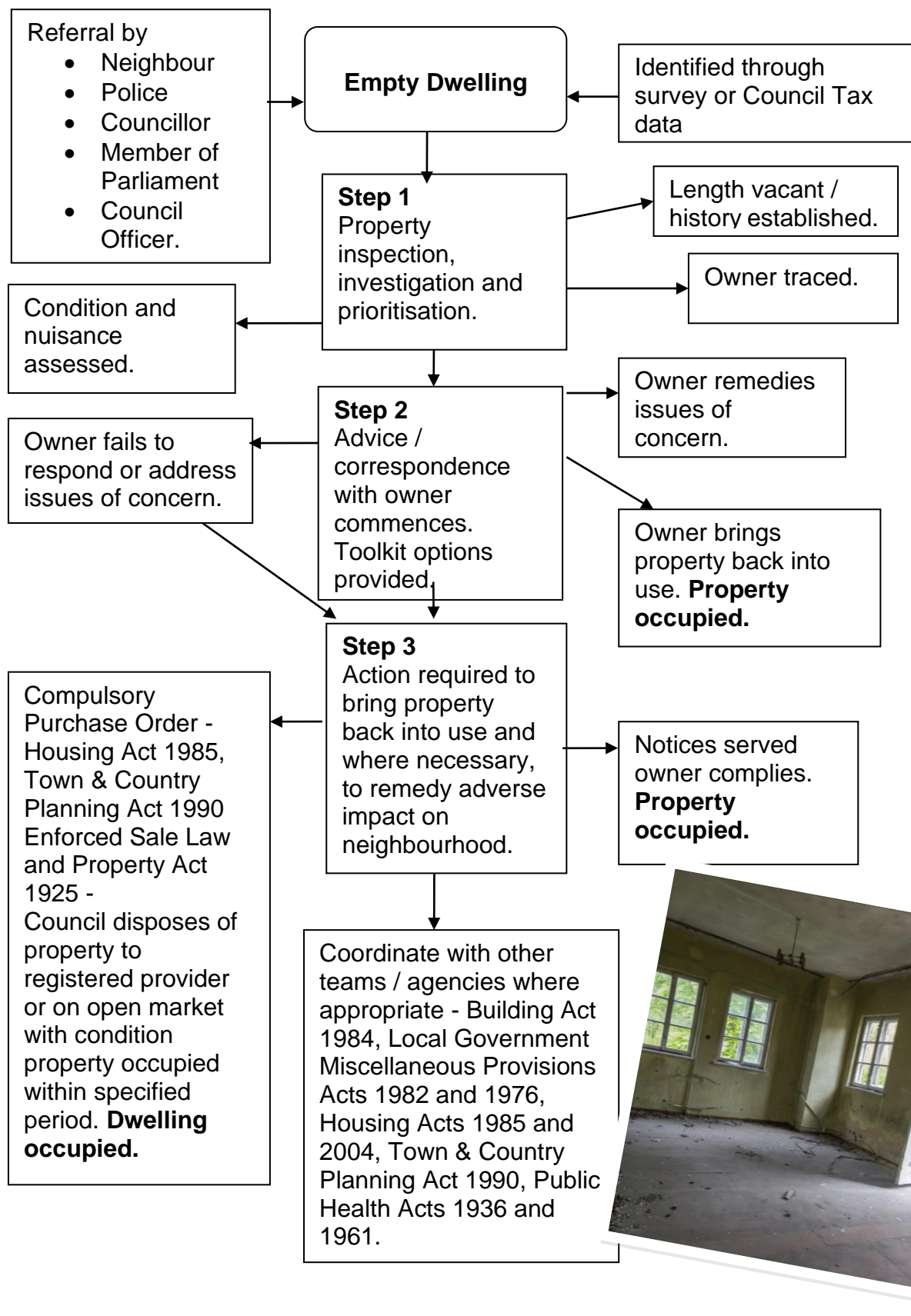
Housing Strategy and Policy Team

Telephone: 0151 356 6410

Email: [housingstrategy@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](mailto:housingstrategy@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk)

## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Empty homes procedure following initial referral



## 8.2 Legislation in relation to empty homes

	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>What the legislation allows</b>
Empty homes that have been vacant for 6 months or more where negotiation has failed to return the empty home back into use.	Housing Act 2004 – section 134.	To grant the local authority the necessary powers to take over the management of an empty home initially under an interim empty dwelling management order.
Powers of entry.	Housing Act 2004 – section 239.	Local authority staff are able to use their power of entry to enter unoccupied premises or land to carry out inspections in relation to statutory capacities.
Demolition orders.	Housing Act 1985 – section 265.	Issuing a demolition order on an empty home where a category 1 hazard exists.
Information sharing between local authority departments.	Local Government Act 2003 – section 85.	Allows the Council Tax department to share the addresses of empty properties with Regulatory Services staff, including owners name and address details.
	Housing Act 1985 – section 237.	Use of information collected for other purposes in relation to sections 1 - 4 of the Housing Act.
Compulsory Purchase Orders.	Housing Act 1985 - section 17.	The local authority is able to purchase an empty home if there are no identifiable owners or no efforts have been made to return the home to use.
	Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – section 226.	
Changes to Council Tax charges on empty homes.	Local Government Finance Act 2003.	Local Authorities have been given discretionary powers to raise the amount of Council Tax charged on empty homes.

	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>What the legislation allows</b>
Requiring information from anyone who has a legal interest in an empty home.	Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1976 – section 16.	Allows local authorities the right to require information e.g. ownership details from a person with an interest in an empty home.
	Housing Act 2004 – section 235.	Power to require to view documents from anyone with a legal interest in a property, for example a mortgage provider.
Enforced Sales provisions.	Law of Property Act 1925 – section 103.	A local authority can force the sale of a property to retrieve a debt owed.
Unsightly land and property affecting the amenity of an area.	Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – section 215 – 219.	Requires the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of an empty home.
	Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003.	Requires the owner to remove graffiti and clear rubbish.
	Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005.	Requires the owner to take steps to address an empty home which is adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.
	Building Act 1984 – section 79.	Requires the owner to renovate/demolish a property that is adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.
	Building Act 1984 – section 59.	Requires the owner to make satisfactory provision for the drainage of a property.
Anti-Social Behaviour.	Anti-Social Behaviour and Crime and Policing Act 2014.	Allows the local authority to serve community protection notices where a person (aged 16 and over), business or organisation is committing anti-social behaviour.

## 8.4 Reference materials

National Housing Strategy - Laying the Foundations – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
National Planning Policy Framework – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Empty Homes Programme – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Affordable Homes Programme – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Empty Homes Toolkit – Empty Homes Agency  
Empty Homes Annual Reports – Empty Homes Agency  
Tackling Empty Homes – Empty Homes Network



