



Cheshire West & Chester Council

Empty Homes Strategy

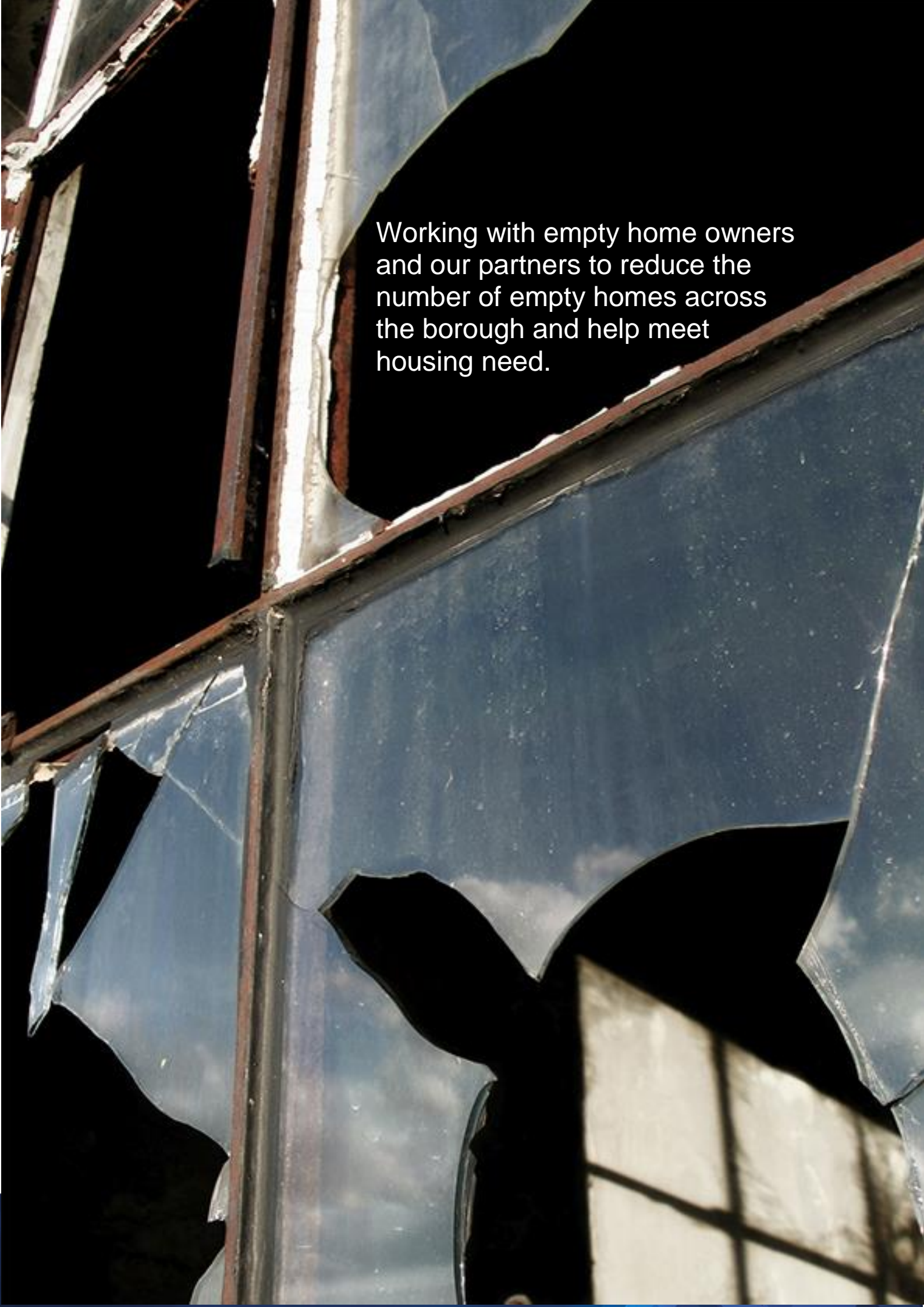
2016 - 2021



Building futures, opening doors



Cheshire West
and Chester



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

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I have pleasure in introducing Cheshire West and Chester Council's new Empty Homes Strategy.

This strategy sets out the Council's continued commitment as well as the approach we will take in providing a clear direction for addressing empty homes, which blight our communities and adversely affect our neighbourhoods.

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

Since the last strategy was published back in 2010, 658 empty homes have been brought back into use which has helped to reinvigorate those communities.

This new strategy will build on the progress made as well as define the new key aims and objectives, and provide the framework that will continue to enable the borough's empty homes to be brought back into use. To achieve this, we will continue to work in partnership with empty home owners and our partners to help bring a further 900 empty homes back into use over the life time of this strategy.

We are fully committed to reducing the number of neglected empty homes that can blight communities across the borough to create safe, clean and attractive neighbourhoods for our residents.

I hope that you share our vision in making use of an untapped resource by addressing privately owned empty homes.



Councillor Angela Claydon
Cabinet Member for Housing



1. Executive Summary

We recognise that empty homes are a wasted resource particularly when there is a need for more housing across the borough.

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 but 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 back in 2010 we have returned 658 long term empty homes back into use. Despite all this good work, we cannot rest on our laurels as there are currently 2,211 long term empty homes (including 510 homes that have a Council Tax exemption) across the borough.

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 particularly in cases where owners are unwilling to engage with us. In such cases, we will be unrelenting in our approach with a view to meeting the housing needs of our residents.

The aim of this Strategy is to unlock the housing potential of long term empty homes. Our principal target over the next five years is to bring a further 900 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures however, we feel that this target is achievable due to our proven track record in bringing empty homes back into use and our planned service improvements.



To help focus our resources we have identified 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 home owners**
- **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.

An Empty Homes Steering Group will be established to oversee the delivery of the strategy and action plan. The action plan and the achievement of our principal target will be reviewed annually.

Our empty homes work will only be successful if we continue to work in partnership with empty home owners and our key stakeholders. We believe that partnership working is key to achieving our ambitious target of bringing a further 900 empty homes back into use and providing much needed housing for our residents.



2. Introduction

As at January 2016, Cheshire West and Chester had a total of 4,347 empty homes across the borough. We also have over 3,200 applicants registered on our housing waiting list. In order 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 Fire and Rescue Service
- May also become a risk to the public through unsafe structures, harbouring litter and vermin
- 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 give focus and drive 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 to decrease anti-social behaviour, reduce the risk to public health from unsafe structures, potentially provide an income via letting for the home owner and finally, help to 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 has a strong emphasis on partnership working, which will include working with owners of empty homes as well as 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, half 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 in 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 remedial works
- Owner in institutional care
- Investment opportunities
- Lack of interest
- Awaiting planning consent
- Prohibition orders
- Repossessions
- Family disputes such as divorce settlements.

3.3 Our exclusions and exemptions

There are occasions when a property may have become empty but may fall under a Council Tax exemption. The exemption in most cases will only last for a fixed period of time, after which a charge will be due and payable by the owner. There a number of exemptions relating to a property that is left unoccupied:

- 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
- Where the owner is a student.

The Government requires all councils 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:

- An increase in the number of good quality and affordable housing across all tenures
- Improvement to the existing built environment
- Reduced levels of anti-social behaviour
- Reduction in 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
- Reduction in workload for other Council departments such as Environmental Health
- Partnership working that facilitates investment from external organisations.

Addressing empty homes not only meets housing need as residents can gain access to accommodation that was previously unavailable, but also provides opportunities to maximise our income through New Homes Bonus payments that are paid to us by central Government for each property brought back into use.

In addition to the above, 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 go about identifying 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 home owners.

3.5.2 Through tracing agents

We have the ability to 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, we have devised a form of "priority scoring". Our priority scoring 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 listed below:

- Environmental factors, such as boarded up windows, accumulated rubbish/fly tipping and overgrown gardens
- Social factors, which examines 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, hazards to the public and pest activity
- Length of time empty factor; this naturally forms part of our risk assessment process.

Each of the above 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 case load.

3.7 How we bring empty homes back into use

There are a number of ways in which we can bring empty homes back into use, consisting of three main categories as follows: enablement, inducement and enforcement and 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 in order 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 home owner and management organisation; for example a lettings agency or registered provider
- Assist with ownership disputes and complications in order 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 grants** - these are available to owners to help them towards carrying out any required improvement works to an empty home
- **Empty home loans** - we are able to provide a shared equity loan if the empty home owner intends to let their property after completion of any required works
- **Conversion grants** - 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 home owner to carry out necessary renovations using funds released from any available equity in their capital asset. The empty home owner 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 is available upon request.

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 Matching Service** - This allows the empty home owner to sell their home to an accredited landlord or a managing agent who is either a member of the Association of Residential Lettings Agents (ARLA) or is a member of the National Approved Letting Scheme (NALS), who will then let the property and help bring the empty home 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 are able to 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 in order to enforce a sale the debt needs to be for a “reasonable” sum of money. If the debt is unpaid, we are able to issue a notice to the owner to enforce the sale of the property in order 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 under used 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 Regulatory Services Enforcement Policy which is available upon request.

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

4. So how are we doing?

4.1 Our current performance

As at January 2016, there are currently 2,211 long term empty homes across the borough of which, 510 of these are in receipt of a Council Tax exemption. Furthermore, of the total 2,211, 467 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 150% for those homes that have stood empty for two years or more.

4.1.1 Comparing our 2014 - 2015 performance within the region

In terms of financial year 2014 – 2015, our total long term empty homes figure including both exempt and non-exempt homes was 2,179 (1.45% 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 1,684 (1.01%) and 1,826 (1.25%) respectively. When compared with the Liverpool City Region, Liverpool City Council's long term empty homes figure was 4,584 (2.11%), whilst Sefton Council's was 3,155 (2.52%). It is worth noting that each neighbouring authority will have their own housing issues, such issues can have a considerable impact on the number of empty homes within their area.

4.1.2 Comparing our 2014 - 2015 performance with best practice authorities

In terms of the national picture, Derby City Council is seen as a good practice authority and has won many awards for the way they have set about addressing empty homes. Derby City Council's long term empty home figure for 2014 - 2015 is 1,600.

Pages 14 through to 18 contain a series of charts that illustrates our performance in more detail. The charts also help to identify where the empty homes are located, the number of empty homes per Council Tax band, as well as what has been the most effective way of bringing empty homes back into use.



Chart 1 - The chart below shows the progress we have made over the last five years in reducing the number of 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). The large spike in the exempt figures for 2012 and 2013 is a result of changes in Council Tax legislation which saw the introduction of the Empty Homes Premium Charge.

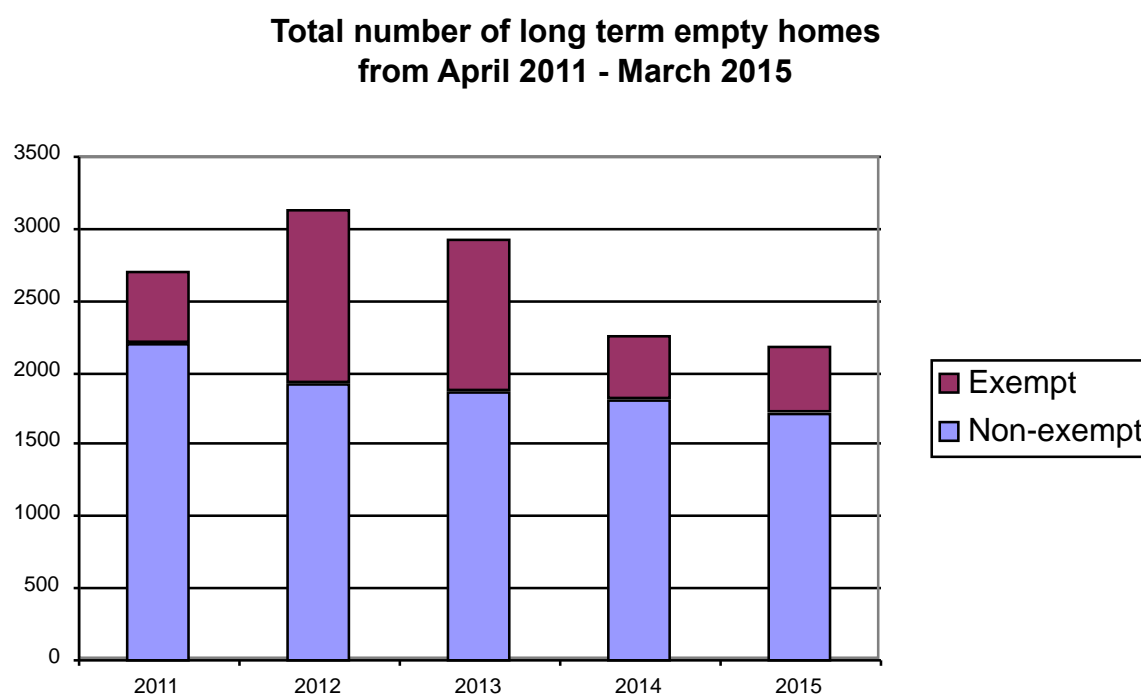


Table depicting progress made over the last five years.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Non-exempt	2,196	1,917	1,864	1,800	1,710
Exempt	495	1,219	1,057	446	469
Total	2,691	3,136	2,921	2,246	2,179

Chart 2 – The chart below shows the length of time homes have been empty for, as at January 2016. As previously stated, the total number of exempt and non-exempt long term empty homes in January 2016 was 2,211. 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.

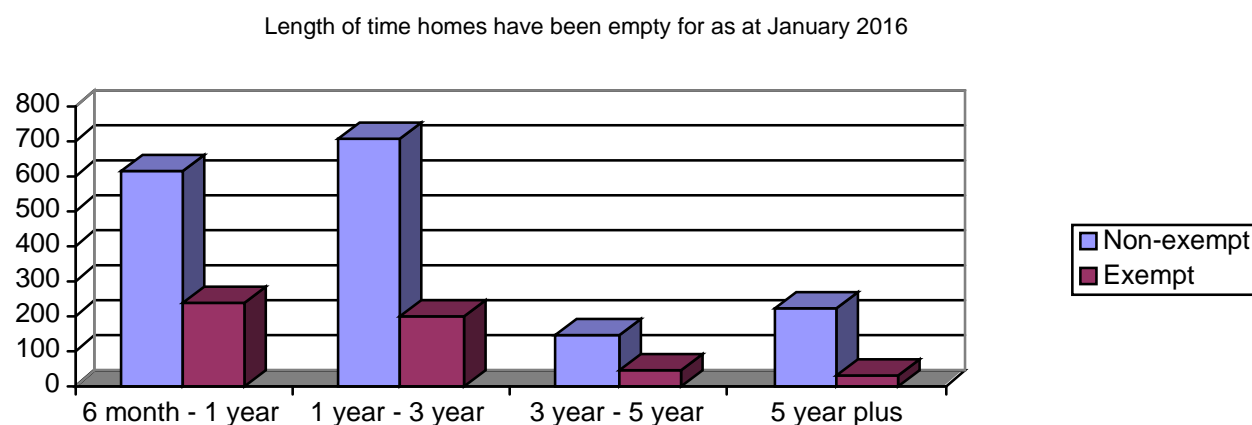


Table depicting the length of time homes have been empty as at January 2016.

	6 month - 1 year	1 year - 3 year	3 year - 5 year	5 year plus
Non-exempt	618	711	146	226
Exempt	237	199	43	31
Total	855	910	189	257

There are long term empty homes in every ward but the number varies considerably. The charts on page 16 show both the number of long term exempt and non-exempt empty homes by ward as at January 2016.



Chart 3 – The chart below shows the number of long term empty homes within each ward (A - L) as at January 2016.

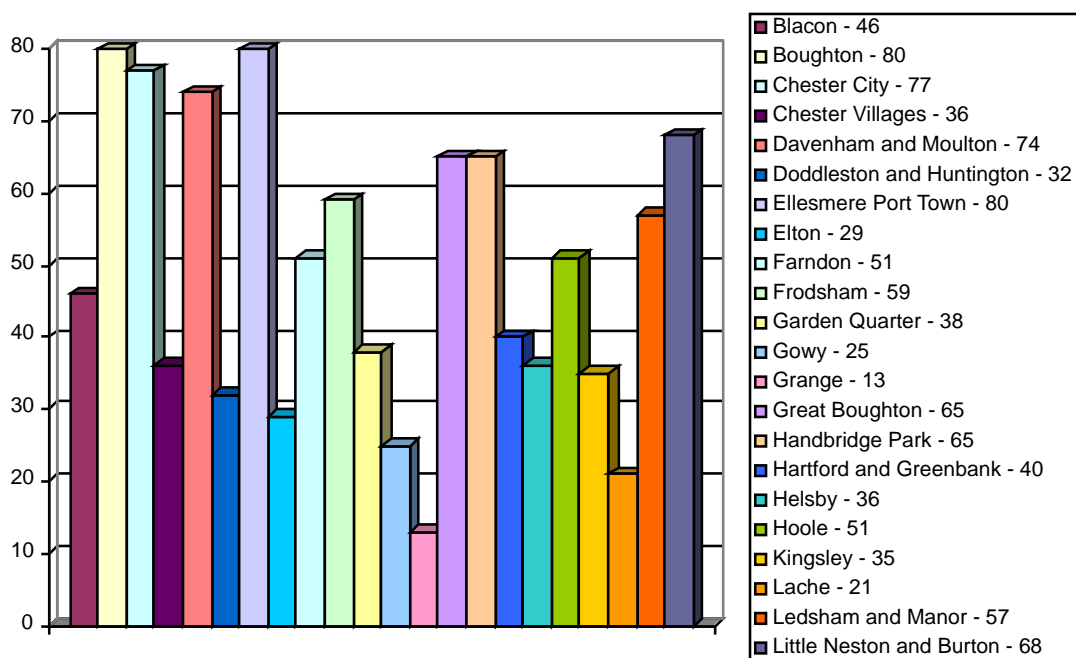


Chart 4 – The chart below shows the number of long term empty homes within each ward (M - Z) as at January 2016.

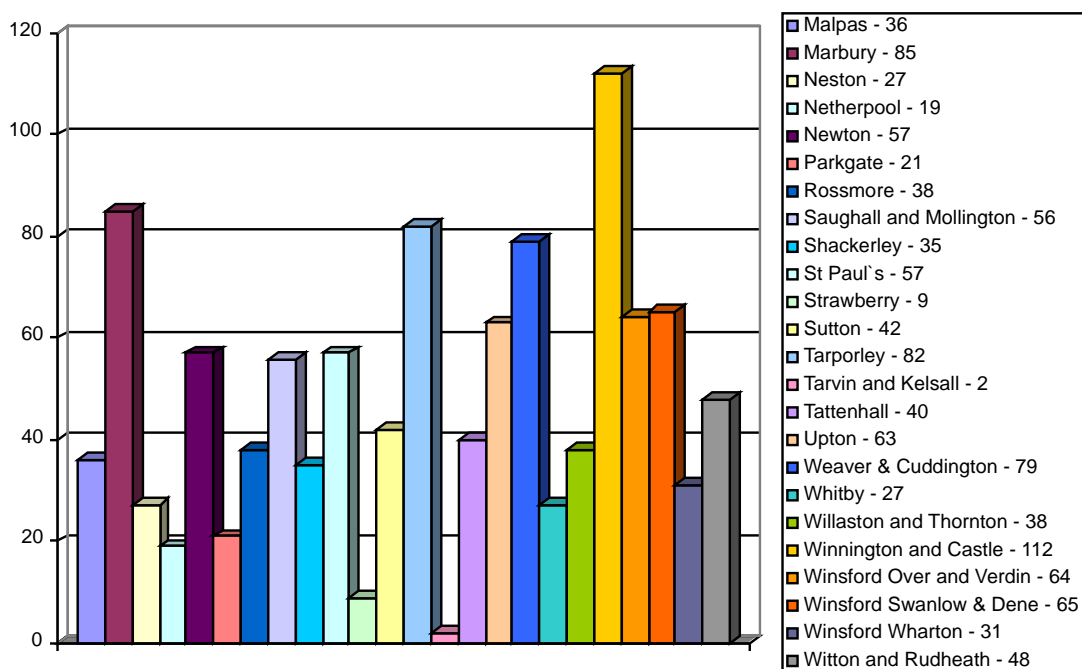


Chart 5 – The chart below shows the total number of long term empty homes within each Council Tax band as at January 2016.

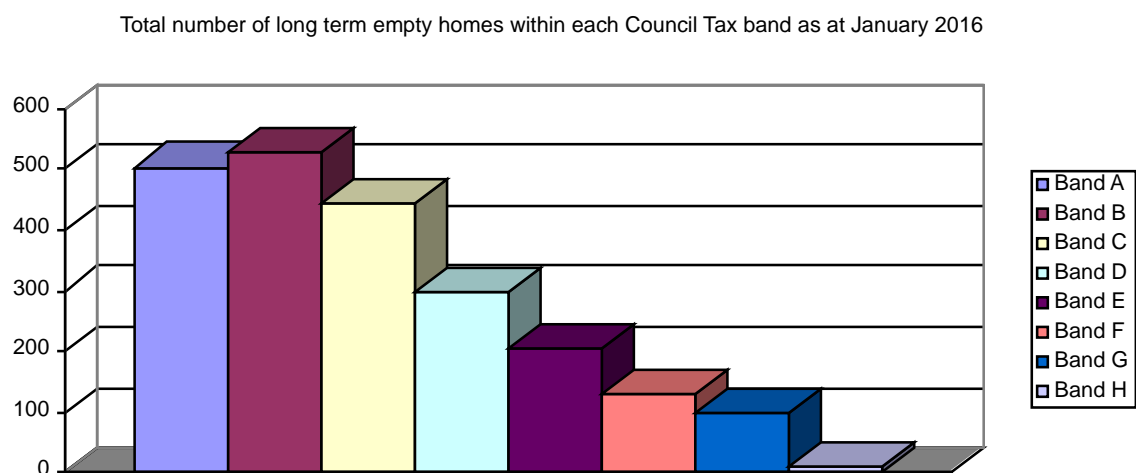


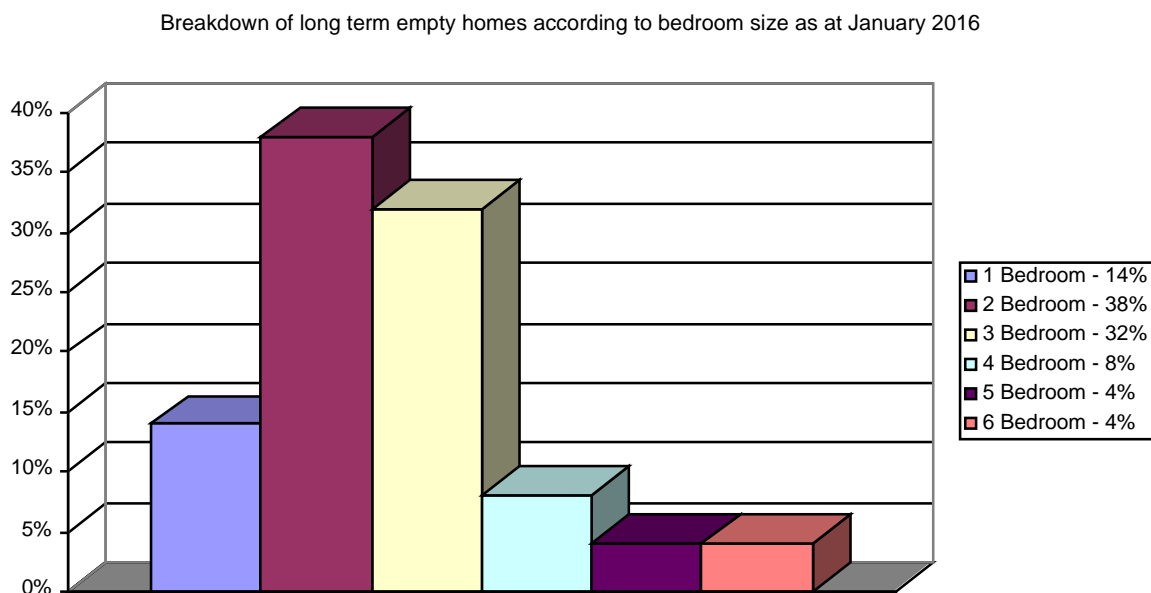
Table below depicts the number of empty homes within each Council Tax band.

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H
Total	503	527	442	296	203	131	98	11

The majority of empty homes have two or three bedrooms with only 16% of empty properties having more than 3 bedrooms and 14% of empty homes having only one bedroom.

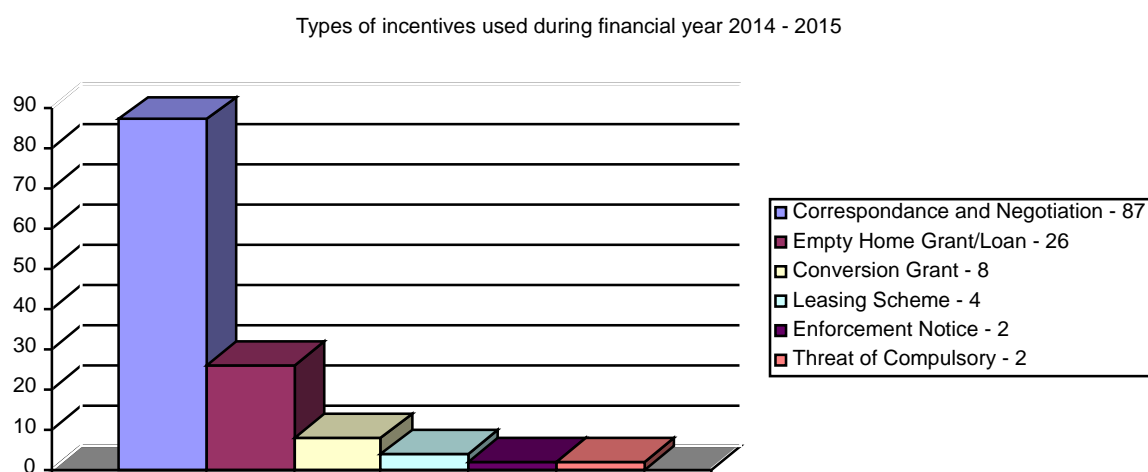


Chart 6 - The chart below shows the breakdown of long term empty homes according to bedroom size as at January 2016.



To help us address empty homes, we have developed a range of measures ranging from providing advice and support through to financial assistance and enforcement. The measures are designed to incentivise empty home owners and persuade them to bring their empty home back into use without the need for us to resort to enforcement. The most popular and cost effective measure is the advice, support (correspondence) and negotiation work that is delivered by our staff to empty home owners.

Chart 7 - The chart below shows the type of incentives used during financial year 2014 - 2015 and the number of times they were accessed.



4.2 What do our stakeholders think?

Consultation has been central to the development of this strategy and sought the views of staff, empty home owners, partners and residents. A formal consultation process for the draft strategy was carried out over a period of 12 weeks from 14 September to 4 December 2015.

4.2.1 Feedback from empty home owners

We also consulted with a number of empty home owners and asked them to comment on the service they received. We asked what they thought about the measures (whether financial or enforcement) that were used by staff in helping to bring their empty home back into use. Feedback was as follows:

- The officer was excellent, professional and very helpful, at the end she came to inspect the property
- Your member of staff was always very professional and their knowledge of empty homes was excellent
- Very helpful service to try and get empty homes back into use
- What would be more helpful is to get the money earlier and you need to cut red tape and duplication
- If the Council has deemed a property not to be of a good standard then they should offer more financial help
- The pressure you receive to get your property back in use outweighs the grants you actually get. The equity scheme which is based on valuations cannot be accessed if your house decreases in value
- I don't agree with you taking my home. We should not have to pay full Council Tax if we are working to bring the empty home back in to use
- Your website needs more work. You ask a question it takes you to a section but the information you want is either missing from the section or out of date. The planning portal is also hard to use and does not provide timely information. Your processes take too long and in the meantime we have to pay the Empty Homes Premium Charge
- Charging full Council Tax to those who are self-employed and have the intention to sort their property out is not helpful and totally unfair.

4.2.2 Feedback from the formal 12 week consultation

A formal consultation was completed on the draft strategy which resulted in 51 respondents completing either an online or paper based survey. This took place over a 12 week period from 14 September through to and including 4 December 2015, the questions and feedback results were as follows:

1. **How important or unimportant do you think it is to bring empty homes back into use?** All respondents felt that it was either important or very important to bring empty homes back into use.
2. **To help deal with empty homes effectively, we have used the term "short term" for homes that are unoccupied for up to six months and "long term" for homes that have been unoccupied for six months and more, do you agree with these terms?** The majority of respondents agreed with the definitions of short term and long term, although a small number disagreed or said they didn't know. Those who disagreed commented that there may be valid reasons why a house is empty for longer than six months. These included delays caused by probate or a delayed decision about whether a resident's trial period in a care home will be permanent.
3. **The Empty Homes Strategy has identified a number of strategic priorities and resulting outcomes, do you agree with both the strategic priorities and resulting outcomes?** All respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the strategic priorities and resulting outcomes listed within the strategy. One respondent mentioned that there was a need to raise awareness of the financial assistance as well as the advice and support available to empty home owners.
4. **Do you agree with our proposals to concentrate resources in addressing empty homes?** All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with our proposals to concentrate resources in addressing empty homes. In terms of which areas should be given priority, respondents agreed that problem empty homes, homes in disrepair and long term empty homes should be prioritised.
5. **Do you agree with the incentives that the Council has to assist empty home owners?** The majority of respondents agreed with the range of financial incentives however, some felt that loans should be used instead of grants. At the same time, it was felt that assistance should be concentrated in areas where there is a housing need, particularly given there is limited grants and loans available. One respondent commented on the need to convert empty shops into affordable accommodation, whilst another mentioned that the Council shouldn't give any financial assistance to empty home owners and instead should purchase the empty home and then use it to provide housing for vulnerable people.

- 6. Which of the measures currently being used would you consider to be most helpful to encourage an empty home owner to bring their home back into use?** When asked to choose which form of financial assistance measure would be the most helpful, most respondents considered providing an Empty Home Grant to an empty home owner would be the best way to encourage owners to bring their empty home back into use. This was closely followed by an Empty Home Loan and a Conversion Grant.
- 7. To help review performance we have proposed setting up an Empty Homes Steering Group, do you agree with this approach?** Most respondents agreed with the proposal to set up an Empty Homes Steering Group. Those that didn't agree commented that if there was a cost associated with the running of the group, then the group should not be set up. Another respondent felt that a group wasn't needed; instead it just needed officers to keep up the pressure on empty home owners.

Further feedback from the formal consultation is available in section 8.4 Consultation Findings.

4.2.3 Feedback from staff

A consultation session was held in August 2015. Staff were asked to provide their views on the current service and what the authority should aim to deliver in the future; comments included:

- It's important to bring empty homes back into use as they are a wasted resource and can help meet housing need
- Currently we provide a good service which is evidenced through performance indicators but improvements could be made with additional resources and a review of the current measures
- Any future target should be ambitious but realistic
- The current range of measures needs to be reviewed to ensure that they are still relevant, at the same time any new measures that are available to help address empty homes should also be considered
- The current offer for empty home owners needs promoting, including clear and easy to find information on the website
- A steering group is needed to ensure the strategy is delivered.

4.3 S.W.O.T. Analysis

Having consulted in the development of this strategy, we have used the findings to identify our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as follows:

Strengths:

- Professional committed staff
- Joined up approach
- Bespoke cost effective Financial Assistance Programme
- Good performance when compared with other north west regional authorities
- Clear focus
- Strong political backing
- Corporate priority

Weaknesses:

- Limited staff resource
- Limitations in accessing intelligent data in a time efficient manner
- Not very effective in showcasing achievements
- Need continued commitment from all internal departments

Opportunities:

- New initiatives e.g. Buy and Sell Service
- Opportunities for registered providers to get involved in purchasing or leasing former empty homes for rent
- Private landlords and letting agents are keen to get involved
- Good response to Empty Homes Strategy consultation

Threats:

- Potential uncertainty around funding due to ongoing local government financial constraints
- Conflicting demands being placed on operational staff.

5. So what's next?

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 900 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures; however, we feel that this target is achievable due to our proven track record in bringing empty homes back into use and our planned service improvements.

5.2.1 How will we achieve our principal target?

Based on consultation and a review of our current performance, we have identified four strategic priority areas of work and a number of actions to deliver our overall aim and target of bringing 180 empty homes back into use each year.

We will achieve this 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. We believe this will enable us to not only deliver our principal target but it will also help us to provide an effective efficient service to our residents, empty home owners and our stakeholders.

5.3 Our strategic priorities

To help us to achieve our aim of unlocking the housing potential of long term empty homes across the borough, we have identified four strategic priorities as follows:

- To 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. A detailed action plan can be found in section 8.2. 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.

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 better showcase the financial assistance as well as the advice and support measures that are available to empty home owners 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 also better publicise the range of advice and support to empty home owners
- Ensure that reporting an empty home becomes a civic duty amongst all our residents and key partners
- Improve the way that our residents and partners can report an empty home and make sure that there are a number of options available that take into consideration new technologies.

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 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 home owners 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.

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 look 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:

- Forge 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
- 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 unrelenting 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 8.3 of this strategy.

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 2014 - 2020. To help achieve this priority we will:

- Ensure effective links with the Housing Delivery Plan and review how bringing empty homes back into use will increase the numbers of affordable housing across the borough
- Promote economic growth through the development of closer links with Planning and Economic Development for example, work closely with Locality Teams and convert empty shops into housing
- Work closely with Council Tax and use their data more intelligently that will help us to focus our empty homes work in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes
- Work closely with Parish and Town Councils via the use of a protocol which forms part of our empty homes Communication Plan.

The achievement of the above strategic priorities and subsequent key actions will help us to deliver specific outcomes which are detailed overleaf.

5.4 Outcomes of this strategy

The strategic priorities and subsequent key actions detailed on pages 24 and 25 will deliver or contribute to the following outcomes:

Strategic priorities	Outcome
To raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available to empty home owners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better awareness within our communities of our empty homes campaign and the range of help available to empty home owners. • 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 home owners. • More accurate and up to date information. • Greater acceptance from empty home owners to work with staff to bring their home back into use.
Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in the levels of partnership working amongst owners. • More effective partnership working between stakeholders.

5.5 Financial resources

As a council, we continue to place a high level of strategic importance in addressing long term empty homes and this is reflected in the capital resources that we have allocated for this area.

The proposed allocated funding for the next four years is illustrated below:

Budget	Current Financial year 2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Empty Homes Grant/Loan	50,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000
Conversion Grant	130,000	100,000	100,000	100,000	100,000
Compulsory Purchase Order	280,000	632,750	787,475	826,727	844,054
Capitalised salaries	31,243	42,000	42,000	42,000	42,000
Total	491,243	814,750	969,475	1,008,727	1,026,054

In terms of the allocated budget for compulsory purchase orders, this fund is self financing as previous properties that have been compulsory purchased will be sold on the open market and the monies used to fund future compulsory purchase order work.

5.6 Links to other strategies

This strategy has links to a number of national and local strategies and will impact on the same.

5.6.1 National strategic links

There are a number of nationally produced strategic publications which focus our attention on empty homes, such as the 2003 publication “Empty property; unlocking the potential”, which encouraged local authorities to develop positive policies to bring empty homes back into use.

Moreover in 2011, the Conservative led coalition government produced the national housing strategy publication “Laying the Foundations” which stated that: “We are fully committed to bringing empty homes back into use, as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing and reducing the negative impact that neglected empty homes can have on communities”.

In 2012, the National Planning Policy Framework was published which highlighted the expectation that local authorities will address the empty homes issue locally: “Local planning authorities should identify and bring back into residential use empty housing and buildings in line with local housing and empty homes strategies and where appropriate, acquire properties under compulsory purchase powers”.

The coalition government also launched two empty homes related policies, namely the New Homes Bonus and the Empty Homes Programme.

5.6.2 New Homes Bonus

The New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils for increasing the number of homes and their use. The New Homes Bonus is paid each year for six years. It is based on the amount of extra Council Tax revenue raised for new build homes, conversions and long term empty homes brought back into use. Those empty homes that were brought back into use during the financial year 2014 - 2015 will net this authority £680,000 (over six years) in New Homes Bonus grant. At the time of writing, the Government is currently consulting on the future direction of New Homes Bonus with a view that the amount paid to local authorities will reduce from the current six years to a proposed four years maximum.

5.6.3 Empty Homes Programme

The Homes and Communities Agency allocated £100 million through two rounds of the Empty Homes Programme in 2012. The funding was designed to bring empty properties back into use as affordable housing.

The programme often saw many of the successful bidders receiving large amounts of funding and, as a consequence, many were unable to deliver on such a large-scale basis. This resulted in forfeiture of funding and the delivery of many schemes remains well below target. Going forward, bringing empty properties back into use as affordable homes is now funded through the Affordable Homes Programme.

5.6.4 Affordable Homes Programme 2015 - 2018

The main objectives of the Affordable Homes Programme are to increase the supply of new affordable housing and to build homes that address demographic challenges including the needs of smaller households.

The Homes and Communities Agency launched their 2015 - 2018 prospectus inviting registered providers, councils and developers to bid for a share of up to £1.7bn of grant funding for delivery of new affordable housing outside London.

5.6.5 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 home owners in bringing 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 an Empty Homes Premium which allows local authorities to set Council Tax at a rate of 150% for those properties that have stood empty for two years or longer.

Following the above, empty home owners in Cheshire West and Chester are now only given a one month exemption before a 75% Council Tax charge is applied.

Once the property has been empty for two years, the Empty Homes Premium is applied at 150% Council Tax charge until the property becomes occupied.

Other changes brought in following these reforms include the charge for second homes increasing from 75% to 90% and the uninhabitable charge increasing from a full exemption for 12 months to a 75% charge for twelve months (in both cases the charge reverts to 100% after twelve months).

5.6.6 Local strategic links

In addition to the above national strategic links, there are a number of local strategic links that have an impact on this strategy as follows:

5.6.7 Housing Strategy 2014 - 2020

The Housing Strategy provides a clear statement of the Council's vision and aims for housing in the borough for the next five years. It sets out the key drivers and issues affecting the borough and what the Council intends to do to help overcome these challenges and create the right conditions to support growth, meet local housing need and promote a more resilient, diverse and balanced local housing market.

As the strategic housing authority for Cheshire West and Chester, we have a duty to ensure that the housing needs of all the borough's residents are met, regardless of tenure. This means that we must not only ensure that those in greatest housing need are able to access a suitable and sustainable home, but also that the range of housing available in the borough provides sufficient choice for residents.

One of the Housing Strategy's priorities is "Increasing and enabling delivery: more homes, stable growth" which specifically prioritises the need to reduce the number of empty properties in the borough and subsequently increase the number of available dwellings, including affordable homes; this includes the use of both incentives to encourage owners to work with the Council to bring empty homes back into use, but also robust enforcement action where necessary.

5.6.8 Helping the borough to THRIVE

Helping the borough to Thrive is the new Council Plan for Cheshire West and Chester. This Plan has been developed through extensive consultation with local residents, engaging over 1,800 people with their views on the priorities for the Council. The Plan has also been shaped through the known needs of the borough, and our known local evidence. This Plan has been developed alongside our budget plan for the next four years, and includes some of the necessary actions that need to address our financial context.

The Plan sets the overall strategic direction for the Council for 2016 - 2020, and its principal aim is to help the borough including residents, communities and the local economy - to thrive by 2020. This plan contains further information on the ten priority outcomes that the Council is working towards 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 ten outcomes include:

Thriving Residents:

- All of our families, children and young people are supported to get the best start in life.
- Vulnerable adults and children feel safe and are protected.
- Older people and vulnerable adults are supported to lead fulfilled and independent lives.

Thriving Communities:

- Cleanest, safest and most sustainable neighbourhoods in the country.
- Good quality and affordable housing that meets the needs of our diverse communities.
- Vibrant and healthy communities with inclusive leisure, heritage and culture opportunities.
- Our resources are well managed and reflect the priorities of our residents

Thriving Economy:

- People are well educated, skilled and earn a decent living.
- A great place to do business in the United Kingdom.
- A well connected and accessible borough.

The new 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: **T**eam **W**ork, **H**onesty, **R**espect, **I**nnovation, **V**alue for Money, **E**mpowerment.

5.6.9 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.

6. Ensuring we deliver

6.1 Measuring our success

Our success will be monitored against the achievement of the action plan detailed in section 8.2. The action plan sets out the tasks to be achieved over the next two years. The action plan and the achievement of our principal target will be reviewed annually. To help ensure this target is achieved, we have developed six performance indicators 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.

We will adopt the national agreement that any involvement to bring an empty home back into use will only be attributed to us if we have had three points of contact with the empty home owner.

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 home owners 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 Empty Homes Matching Service.

6.1.2 Achieving interim target measures

It is worth noting that despite the best intentions of officers, bringing empty homes back into use can be a long drawn out process. However, there are things that can be done in the short term 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.

This process can require considerable resource in terms of officer time so a new performance measure has been introduced to the list of performance indicators for this area of work.

6.2 Reviewing the strategy

An Empty Homes Steering Group will be established to oversee the delivery of the strategy and action plan. The group will meet quarterly and will consist of representatives from both Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services.

The group's remit will be to:

- Review performance against performance indicators and the action plan
- Provide a scrutiny role
- Publicise our achievements
- Review the measures operational staff use in bringing empty homes back into use
- Review customer feedback
- Provide further strategic direction when required
- Ensure that the resources available to help address empty homes are appropriate
- Review the action plan on an annual basis
- Work together to find solutions to identified barriers.

6.3 Service development through quality assurance

The development of the Empty Homes Service will be based on quality assurance data. This data will include a survey that will be sent to those empty home owners who have accessed a financial assistance measure, once their property has been brought back into use. The survey will ask the empty home owner 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. We will also use visual data in the form of before and after photos.

The quality assurance data will be presented to the Empty Homes Steering Group on a quarterly basis. The data is designed to help inform the group of both good practice, as well as any barriers that officers face.

6.4 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 an important role in ensuring the public are 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.

6.4.1 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 2014 - 2020. 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.

6.4.2 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.

6.4.3 Other organisations involved

Local businesses such as letting and estate agents, property developers and construction firms can have an interest in the implementation of the 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.

6.5 Partnership working

The success of this strategy is fully dependant on partnership working with both internal and external stakeholders. Below is a list of the main stakeholders involved:

6.5.1 Internal partnerships

- Housing Strategy
- West Cheshire Homes (formerly Housing Solutions)
- Council Tax
- Regulatory Services
- Anti-Social Behaviour Team
- Legal department
- Housing Benefits
- Conservation team
- Locality team

6.5.2 External partnerships

- Local residents
- Local strategic partnerships
- Registered providers and other public landlords
- Private sector landlords
- Local property developers
- Fire and rescue service
- Police
- Parish and town councils.

By taking both a holistic and strategic approach and working in partnership with our stakeholders, we are able to share knowledge and resources to achieve the best results. Our multi agency working will help to ensure that bringing empty homes back into use is efficient, remains cost effective and that the skills and resources available are utilised both efficiently and effectively.



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 900 empty homes back into use over the lifetime of this strategy we believe will help us to deliver much needed housing for our residents.

We have made good progress since the last Empty Homes Strategy back in 2010 however, we know there is more we need to do. We will therefore continue to do all we can to encourage empty home owners 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.

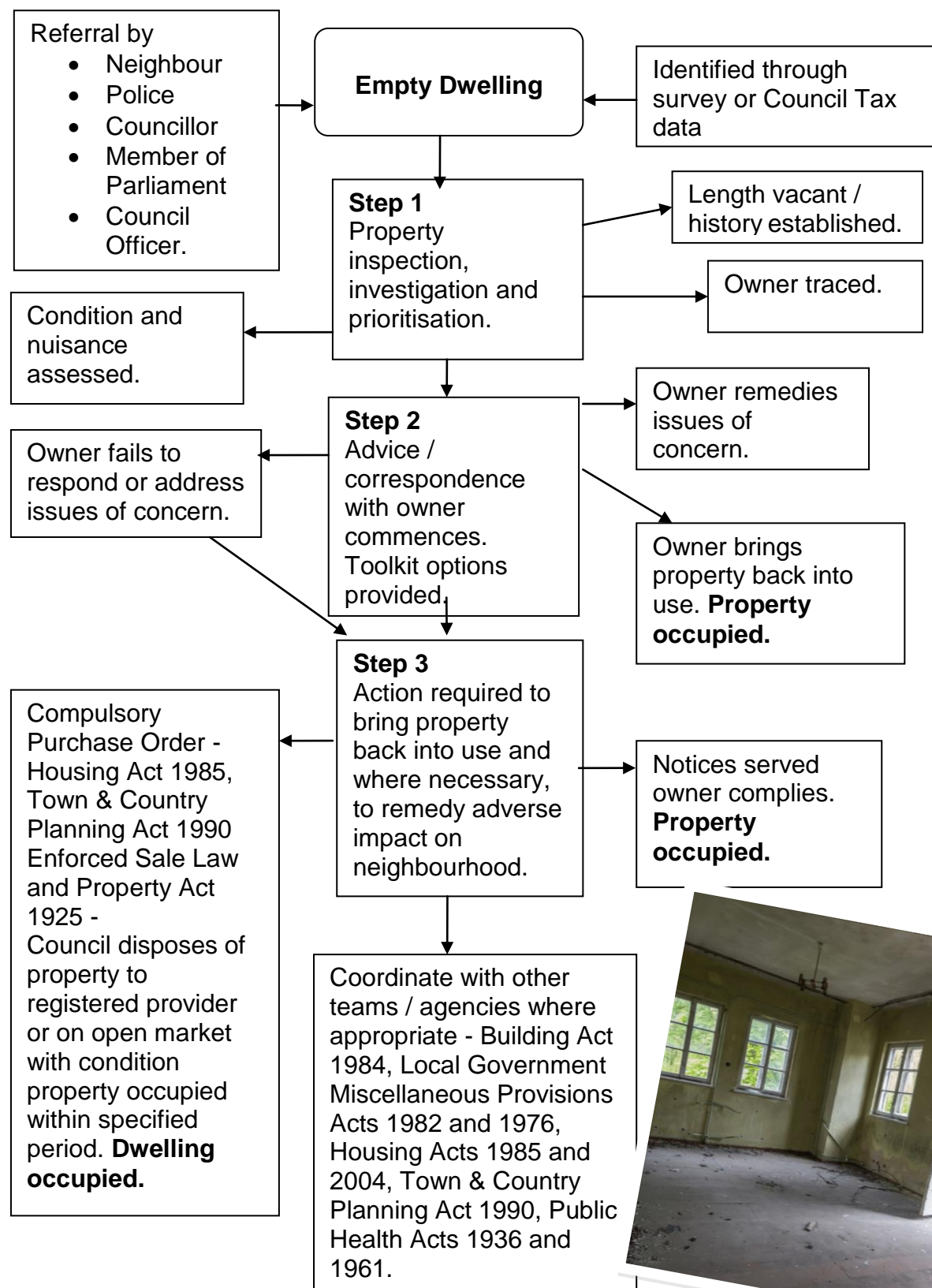
Our action plan will help to address the problems caused by long term empty homes. We will continue to concentrate our resources on bringing long term empty homes back into use. In particular, we will concentrate on those homes that have been empty for two years or more, as it is these long term empty 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,
4 Civic Way, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire CH65 0BE
Telephone: 0151 356 6410
Email: housingstrategy@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

8. Appendix

8.1 Empty homes procedure following initial referral



8.2 Action plan

This action plan sets out what we will do over the next two years to help address empty homes.

Strategic priority	What we will do	Target date	Lead
To raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contribute and respond to any national debates on empty homes policy and procedures. 	As required	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a communication plan to raise awareness of the issue of empty homes and the support and assistance available to bring them back into use 	April 2016	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review our empty home reporting tools. 	May 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the empty home website offer, making sure it is relevant for both empty home owners as well as residents wishing to report or seek advice about empty homes. 	September 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver a series of empty home roadshows in those areas where there are large numbers of empty homes. 	April 2017	Regulatory Services
Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a package of incentives and support to encourage empty home owners to consider becoming a private landlord. 	April 2016	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify new external investment partners who can purchase empty homes from an owner. 	September 2016	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with accredited landlords and establish a list of landlords that are able to bring empty homes back into use via better promotion of the “matching service”. 	December 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review all financial assistance measures, repackage and market revised offer. 	January 2017	Housing Strategy

8.2 Action plan continued

Strategic priority	What we will do	Target date	Lead
Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the options to retain ownership and management of compulsory purchase order properties to meet housing need. 	March 2017	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with registered providers to identify suitable empty homes for renovation and/or conversion for affordable rent. 	May 2017	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyse housing need data and prioritise work in areas and property types for which there is most housing need. 	July 2017	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review how we measure abandonment and our exemptions to include second home classifications. 	December 2017	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the scoring assessment of empty homes to prioritise work including prioritising areas with greatest housing need 	May 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out a programme of priority assessments so that we can tackle those empty homes that are having the biggest impact on our neighbourhoods. 	August 2016	Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate the feasibility of adopting an empty dwelling management order process. 	January 2017	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up an Empty Homes Steering Group, to include terms of reference. 	April 2016	Housing Strategy and Housing Strategy

8.2 Action plan continued

Strategic priority	What we will do	Target date	Lead
Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with Council Tax to increase effectiveness and encourage collaborative working in relation to information sharing and customer contact. 	April 2016	Housing Strategy, Regulatory Services and Council Tax
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the IT platform can record and report all performance indicators and encourage transfer of data from Council Tax records. 	April 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree performance indicators including interim targets and monitor/publish progress being made against the same. 	April 2016	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Service
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure effective links with the housing delivery plan and review how bringing empty homes back into use can contribute towards increased units of affordable housing. 	August 2016	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure effective links with economic growth. 	November 2016	Housing Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with Planning Department to increase effectiveness and encourage collaborative working in relation to enforcement action. 	February 2017	Regulatory Services and Planning Department
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop closer links with key external partners such as Parish and Town Councils, neighbouring local authorities, Police etc. 	June 2017	Housing Strategy and Regulatory Services
Provide a strategic fit with other corporate objectives and develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders continued.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put in place agreements with registered providers that help to ensure better synergy in using the social housing sector to bring empty homes back into use. 	February 2017	Housing Strategy

8.3 Legislation in relation to empty homes

	Legislation	What the legislation allows
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.

8.3 Legislation in relation to empty homes continued

	Legislation	What the legislation allows
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 Consultation findings

The following are general comments and suggestions to improve the strategy that respondents provided in relation to the formal consultation.

- This is a welcome and relevant draft strategy that has considered the subject in some detail. The target of 900 homes brought back into use over a 5 year period is certainly challenging given the developing financial environment for the Council - and with that operating context in mind the right balance needs to be struck between tackling the most problematical properties to bring them back into use (which can often take a protracted period of time if 'sticks' such as CPO are pursued) and ensuring the target is achievable. The priority scoring matrix therefore needs to be quite flexible in nature to allow progress to be made towards achieving the target
- Work with other Council Teams such as the Older Person Gateway Team, GP's, and other agencies to identify homes at risk of becoming an empty home in order to prevent homes becoming long term empty
- Engage with outside organisations that are in a position to purchase empty homes and undertake renovations with some contribution from the council and sell them on as affordable homes for local people
- Conversion of empty shops that may never reopen in high streets into low cost housing
- Not impressed by your current performance. Takes too long to make something happen. Fits with Neston Neighbourhood Plan which keeps development within existing urban footprint to protect green belt and identifies a need for affordable and small homes in the Parish. Will it be applied to commercial properties e.g. empty shops like the Shand in Neston - a long running eyesore? Ideal if an empty shop could be converted into residential accommodation
- The Cheshire West and Chester Council website need to be addressed urgently as it is not user friendly or fit for purpose
- The objectives should always be 100% occupation
- Local residents should be eligible to join the empty homes steering group - I'd certainly like to be a part of such a steering group
- If there are areas in which homes are so run down that grants, loans or anything else won't fix them up, they should be knocked down and replaced either commercially or with new affordable housing.
- The monies from the New Homes Bonus should be used to fund the financial assistance measures which would result in more Conversion Grants, Empty Homes Grant/Loans etc

- There are many under occupied properties - e.g. spaces above shops - which should be brought into use. There are also older people living in large family houses which could be converted to provide self-contained accommodation for someone to live in and be a support/help. Look at former office buildings which are empty for a fixed time, these could be converted to accommodation.
- Can the strategy be extended to outside the borough?
- I think the strategy must be operated with great care as there are many circumstances why a property may be empty and the Council should only become involved as a last resort
- If someone has an empty property and chooses not to work with the authority to return it back into use, then clearly they have too much spare money and an enforceable financial penalty will be the most effect method of getting them to address their empty property. The Council has limited funds and I do not believe that public money should be given as a grant to anyone who owns more than one property
- Moving some of the allocated stock for over 55s or over 30s into access for everyone as keeping a reserve for when it's needed in 10 years helps nobody now
- I would recommend that you contact local firms of Estate Agents, Chartered Surveyors, Solicitors and Accountants, together with their professional bodies, to make them aware of the potential assistance available
- It is a good policy and should be implemented

8.5 Reference materials

National Housing Strategy - Laying the Foundations – Department of Communities and Local Government

National Planning Policy Framework – Department of Communities and Local Government

New Homes Bonus – Department of Communities and Local Government

Empty Homes Programme – Department of Communities and Local Government

Affordable Homes Programme – Department of Communities and Local Government

Empty Homes Toolkit – Empty Homes Agency

Empty Homes Annual Reports – Empty Homes Agency

Tackling Empty Homes – Empty Homes Network



Accessing Cheshire West and Chester Council information and services

Council information is also available in audio, Braille, large print or other formats. If you would like a copy in a different format, in another language or require a BSL interpreter, please email us at:
equalities@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

Telephone: 0300 123 8 123

Textphone: 18001 01606 867 670

Email: equalities@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

Web: www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk