



Lancaster City Council - Regeneration and Planning Service

Empty Homes Strategy 2017-2022



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Policy Statement

The Empty Homes Strategy 2017 – 2022 is intended to continue and build upon the positive work already developed to reduce the number of long term empty homes across the district. The implementation of this Strategy will ensure that the council continues to hold up-to-date intelligence about empty homes through collaborative working and data sharing across council services and by using a range of methods, tools and incentives to bring empty homes back into use. Continuous monitoring of empty properties and analysis of prevalence of empty homes as a result of changes in the housing markets will allow the council to formulate effective approaches and direct resources as required to target those areas.

To pro-actively reduce the number of long term empty homes in the district, the strategy sets out a series of measures to raise awareness of the impact of empty homes and offer a range of incentives and support to the owners of empty homes.

The Strategy seeks to build upon the existing partnership with Methodist Action North West which is supported with dedicated council funding to provide the financial and technical support sometimes required to bring empty homes back into use, and to provide other elements of practical support to home owners wherever possible.

The Strategy also provides the framework for taking appropriate enforcement action against the owners of empty homes. This requires the continued support and input of other council services in order to be effective and to deal with long term empty properties in a timely and most efficient way. This, in turn, will benefit those communities and neighbouring properties and act as a deterrent to other empty homes owners.

Most importantly, the Strategy seeks to maintain and maximise the existing housing stock in Lancaster district, by bringing as many empty homes back into use as existing council resources allow. This comes about at a time when there is a real shortage of housing in Lancaster district and the role that Empty Homes Strategy can play in meeting the district's housing need, and one which has received overwhelming support from Lancaster district's residents.

Through efficient and effective partnership working, the City Council will seek to reduce the number of empty homes in Lancaster District and bring as many properties as possible into beneficial use. This will be achieved by:

- **Maintaining an accurate and up-to-date record of empty properties shared as appropriate with key partners;**
- **Proactively targeting empty properties that have a significant negative impact on the surrounding neighbourhood and those which have been empty for more than two years;**
- **Working with owners of empty properties to raise awareness of the options available to them;**
- **Providing financial support towards the cost of necessary repair and restoration work;**
- **Where necessary, utilising statutory powers to require work to be carried out; and**
- **Monitoring the use of discretionary provisions (e.g. differential council tax charging) as a means of discouraging properties from remaining empty.**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of the Council's Empty Homes Strategy is to reduce the number of long term empty homes within Lancaster district and maximise opportunities to bring empty properties back into use through a range of approaches, measures, interventions and use of statutory powers.
- 1.2 Empty homes often have a very negative impact on the local area, as they are prone to deteriorate over time without regular upkeep, and can be subject to antisocial behaviour or vandalism. Empty homes are also a wasted resource that could be used to meet the increasing housing need across the Lancaster District. According to Council Tax records, there were 1920 long term empty homes in Lancaster District on the 1 January 2017.
- 1.3 Since the appointment of an Empty Homes Officer in July 2013 and the adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy, over 250 homes have been brought back into use with Council involvement. Accurate records are now kept of all empty properties and their status, and there is open dialogue with most empty home owners and a point of contact for any concerned neighbours.
- 1.4 This strategy has been produced to build on the success of the previous Empty Homes Strategy and provide a framework within which empty homes will be brought back into use. This will help maintain sustainable neighbourhoods which will contribute towards regeneration and investment, reduce social problems and meet the housing needs of the district.

The main objectives of the strategy are to:

- Raise awareness of empty homes and the issues they cause;
- Maintain accurate records and information about empty homes in the district;
- Explore and pursue funding opportunities available to tackle empty homes;
- Continue to take a proactive approach to engage with empty home owners and target problematic empty homes that generate complaints; and
- Implement all measures available to the Council in order to bring empty homes back into use.

What is an Empty Home?

- 1.5 At any given time, there will always be a number of empty homes due to people buying and selling houses, relocating, estates being resolved etc. In most cases, this will be a short term situation. The houses that are being targeted in this strategy are those that have been left empty for an excessive period of time and have become 'long term empty homes', which is defined by the Government as being empty for six months or more.
- 1.6 There are a number of reasons as to why homes become empty for an extended period, such as:
- Taking an excessive period of time to sell on the open market;
 - Renovations taking longer than planned;
 - Irresponsible or unexperienced landlord;
 - Property left in probate;
 - Health issues of owner;
 - Family disputes or relationship breakdown;
 - Abandonment, repossession or bankruptcy; and
 - Property being kept as financial investment or for sentimental reasons.
- 1.7 There are many financial, social and environmental benefits to bringing long term empty properties back into use, for the owners, the neighbours and the wider community. It is estimated that leaving a property empty is, on average, costing the owner over £7000 per year in lost rental income, council tax and insurance, and this does not take into account depreciation or any repairs required due to vandalism.
- 1.8 As well as being a financial burden to the owner and removing much needed housing from the market, there are other reasons that bringing long term empty properties back into use has a positive effect, such as:
- Improving the visual amenity of the local area, and so increasing local property values;
 - Investment in regeneration areas can encourage stable communities and inspire further investment in the housing stock;
 - Removes the burden of responsibility placed on neighbouring residents and the negative effects empty properties can have on adjoining dwellings such as excessive cold and damp;
 - Supporting local businesses and services by maximising the population, and so boosting the economy; and
 - Reducing the need for emergency and enforcement action by the emergency services and local authority, which is a savings to the tax payer.

2. The National Context

- 2.1 According to Government figures, there are over 610,000 empty homes across England, with over 200,000 of these being long term empty properties that have been empty in excess of six months. On average, approximately 2% of the housing stock is empty at any one time. A certain level of empty properties is necessary to ensure the normal functioning of the housing market and modernisation of existing housing stock.
- 2.2 The profile of empty homes has been rising up the political agenda for the past few years. In 2011, the then coalition Government published 'Laying the Foundations' – A Housing Strategy for England, which demonstrated a clear commitment to tackling empty homes by making £100m available in Capital funding to develop projects that improve long term empty properties and see that they are effectively used to provide affordable housing to people with housing need. In addition, other financial and policy drivers were brought in to encourage Council's to invest in empty homes, primarily through the Homes and Communities Agency's Affordable Homes Programme 2011-2015. This was the basis upon which the council successfully bid for Cluster of Empty Homes Funding to bring forward a regeneration scheme at Chatsworth Gardens in Morecambe's West End, and in addition, the council supported the sub-regional bid made by Methodist Action North West to secure funding under the Empty Homes Funding (Community Groups).
- 2.3 However, since 2015, there have been no further Affordable Homes Programme funding that is specifically targeted towards bringing empty homes funding back into use.

New Homes Bonus

- 2.4 The New Homes Bonus allocates funding to Local Authorities for a six year period as a reward for increasing housing supply including the return to use of empty properties. The future of the New Homes Bonus is currently unclear, and the Department of Communities and Local Government are currently reviewing this and undertaking further consultation.

Council Tax Changes

- 2.5 From April 2013, councils have the discretion to decide on discounts available to owners of empty properties in order to act as an incentive to bring them back into use, as well as the option to place a premium on the Council Tax of properties that have been empty in excess of two years.
- 2.6 Lancaster City Council has taken advantage of this, and reduced the length of time that discounts are available to empty home owners, and the owners of properties that have been left empty in excess of two years are now charged 150%. The aim of this is to try to discourage home owners from leaving properties empty for an excessive period of time.

- 2.7 Over three years on from these changes it is considered that they have been effective in acting as a deterrent to homes being left empty for an excessive period of time, as the number of properties that have been empty in excess of two years has stopped increasing and have levelled at around 250.
- 2.8 However, a negative outcome of this change has been the trend for the owners of long term empty properties to put a small amount of furniture within the property and classify it as a second home. This removes the premium charge and makes identifying empty properties more difficult. There has also been a backlash from home owners that are renovating properties with whatever spare money and time that they have, with the aim to bringing a modernised property back into use. As the owner is being financially penalised once the property becomes empty for more than two years, which only extends the length of time it takes them to complete the works.
- 2.9 The Council will continue to monitor and review the impact of discretionary measures such as differential council tax charging during the life of this strategy.

3. The Local Context

3.1 The District of Lancaster has a total housing stock of approximately 63,000 dwellings, with a population of over 140,000 residents.

3.2 Council Tax records are used to determine the level of empty homes and as of 1 January 2017 there were 1,920 long term empty properties. This includes:

- Long term empty premium properties - 257 properties that have been empty in excess of two years, which is the main focus of the Empty Homes Officers work;
- Long term empty properties, which has been empty for between 6-24 months – 660 properties - owners will only be contacted if the property is causing concern, or to be made aware of Council initiatives;
- Empty uninhabitable major works – 74 properties that are undergoing extensive structural works;
- Exempt properties – 298 properties where the owners are deceased or in a care home, or the property is prohibited. Due to partnership working with Council Tax and Housing Standard, those that are causing concern are now being targeted in order to see that they be brought back into use; and
- Second homes – 631 properties – which are classified as empty with Council Tax as they are not permanent residence. Some of them will be genuine holiday and second homes, but due to some empty home owners trying to avoid premium charges placed on empty properties, it is believed that at least 20% of properties classified as second homes are actually long term empty properties.

3.3 This does not, however, include any properties that have been removed from the Council Tax listings by the Valuation Office for whatever reason, and are either due to be returned following extensive renovations or have been abandoned in a poor condition with no incentive to be brought back into use. It also does not include properties that are not accurately classified within the Council Tax records, such as properties that have been vacated but the owner has failed to notify the Council. If Council Tax is still paid there would be no reason for the property to be flagged up as empty unless it is brought to the attention of the Council by a concerned neighbour.

3.4 It is therefore evident that pinning down an accurate number of genuine long term empty properties in the district is not straightforward, but a rough estimate puts the figure close to 1,800. This is also a fluid number that is changing on a daily basis, as houses become occupied and further houses are vacated.

Lancaster City Council's Corporate Plan / Medium Term Financial Strategy

Corporate Plan / Medium Term Financial Strategy

3.5 Lancaster City Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2020 identifies four main priorities for Lancaster district which are:

- Economic growth
- Health and Wellbeing
- Clean, Green and Safe Places
- Community Leadership

3.6 The Health and Wellbeing priority is around improving the quality of housing and availability of housing across the district, which includes housing renewal, housing regeneration and improvements to the existing housing stock. Bringing empty homes back into use contributes to this priority. The Clean, Green and Safe Places priority is concerned with ensuring our district is a safe place to live and the wider context is about reducing the potential for anti-social behaviour and acts of vandalism and crime that are often associated with empty homes and the impact upon the wider community.

3.7 The Medium Term Financial Strategy must both support and inform the Council's vision for the district and the strategic direction as set out in the Corporate Plan. This is so that available resources are matched against agreed priorities and any other supporting needs. It also highlights any imbalance – this being the need to make savings and manage expectations.

3.8 The Council expects that this imbalance and the need to make savings will continue to grow significantly over the medium term and will need to be considered by the Council as part of its annual budget process.

Draft Local Plan and Strategic Market Assessment

3.9 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires all local authorities to understand their district's housing requirements, and to ensure that they take account of, and plan to meet that need, and this is a very important pre-cursor in getting Local Plans adopted.

3.10 Lancaster City Council is preparing the draft Local Plan which will be seeking to deliver an annual housing requirement of 675 dwellings per year. The methodology for assessing the district's housing need through housing related studies already takes account of empty properties in the district and even if every empty property came back into use there would still be a significant shortfall. Notwithstanding this, the Local Plan will not focus solely on new supply of housing, as the existing housing stock in Lancaster district is just as important, and the emphasis of new supply is very much focused on what new housing is required across the district to meet the specific needs of that community and new housing should therefore complement the existing housing supply to meet future needs.

Housing Strategy and Action Plan 2012-2017

- 3.11 The Housing Strategy and Action Plan was approved in 2013 after the Council undertook a district wide Housing Needs Survey in 2011. The three themes contained within the Housing Strategy are:
- Quantity – achieving sustainable growth in the Lancaster District
 - Quality – Regeneration priorities and improving the existing housing stock
 - People – meeting the housing needs of all parts of the community
- 3.12 Improving the existing housing stock remains a very clear priority in Lancaster district, but very challenging at a time when much of the external funding opportunities have ceased. However, bringing back empty properties into use is an agreed Cabinet priority, and a specific action within the Housing Strategy was to prepare and implement an Empty Homes Strategy for Lancaster district. As a new Housing Strategy for Lancaster district will shortly be prepared, the role of the existing housing stock in Lancaster district is a continuing theme/priority and work on empty homes is integral to this.

Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy

- 3.13 Lancaster district has a very large private rented sector due in part to the presence of two major universities in the City and the corresponding need for large amounts of student housing. In recent years, as well as increased provision on campus at Lancaster University, there has been an increased level of private sector student housing new build provision in the city centre. The council fully expects that this will ultimately bring about changes to the housing markets in south Lancaster as demand for different types of student housing will shift and should help to improve access to market housing in the traditional residential areas in south Lancaster. Notwithstanding this, a key focus of the Empty Homes Strategy will be to measure those impacts and changes, and where required, the Empty Homes Officer will support landlords to pro-actively manage their properties. Lancaster University now run their own accreditation scheme for off-campus student accommodation, with the support of the Housing Standards Team who previously administered the scheme and helped shape the new service.
- 3.14 Lancaster City Council's Housing Standards Team carries out a wide range of duties to ensure that private sector rented accommodation is free from category one hazards and that minimum standards are achieved. Where possible, the Council will seek to achieve full voluntary compliance with legislative requirements and license provisions, but will not hesitate in using its enforcement powers where necessary and now has increased legislative powers to tackle Rogue Landlords as part of the Housing and Planning Act 2016.
- 3.15 The Housing Standards Team also promote and encourage good quality accommodation by administration of the Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing and the Council's Accredited Property Scheme and work very closely with the Home Improvement Agency and Housing Options Team providing a seamless service where possible. Technical Officers routinely inspect properties prior to a bond being issued or where properties are being referred into the Council's Social Lettings Agency, complaints

around anti-social behaviour as well as disrepair and illegal eviction and in order to build upon their success. A more recent initiative is to implement selective licensing in Morecambe's West End, where the highest concentration of private sector rented accommodation exists, and work is currently ongoing to bring this forward.

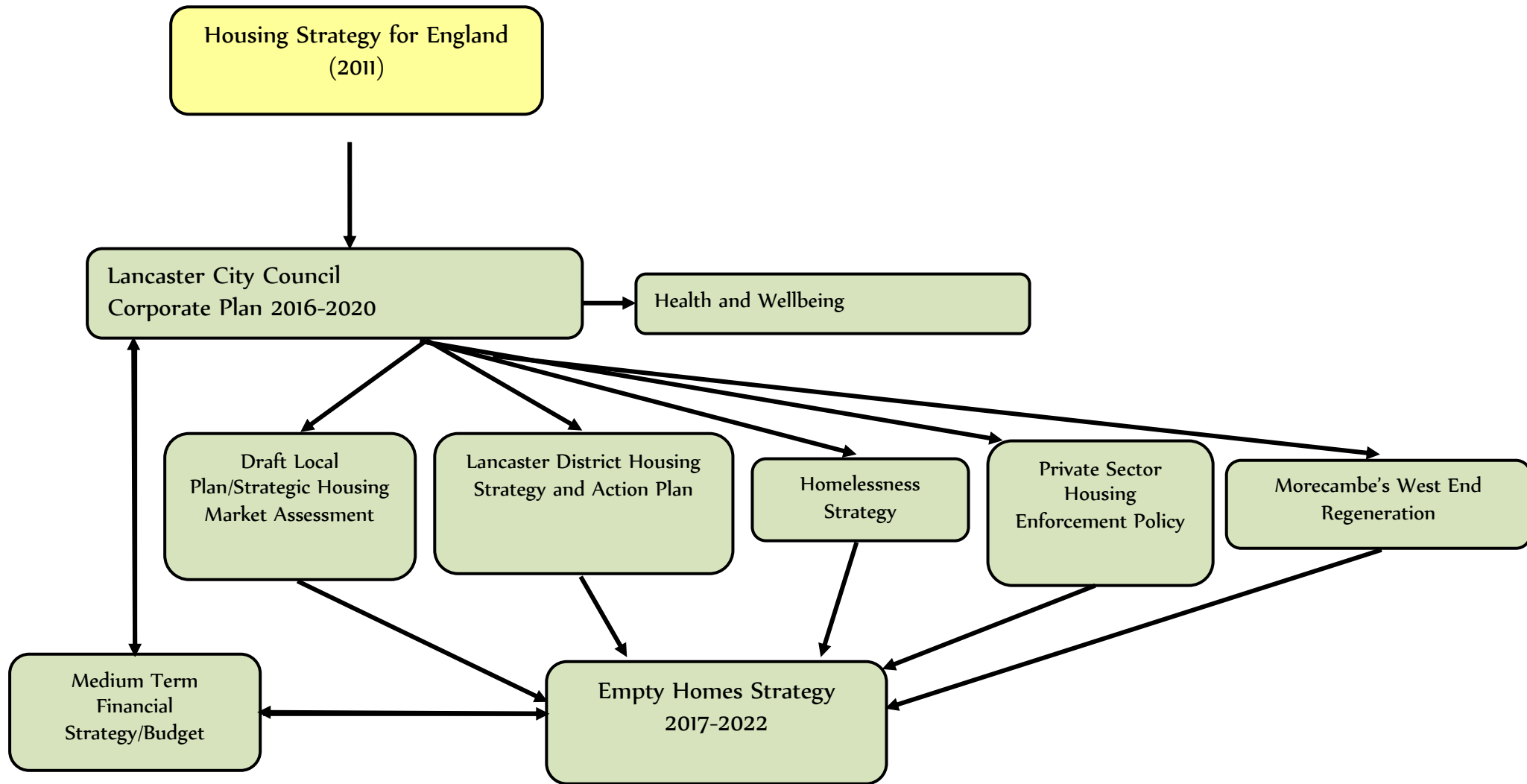
3.16 In summary, the Housing Standards Team significantly contributes towards the improvement and investment in the private rented sector and work towards increasing the number of private sector properties that meet the decent homes standard, as well as making use of any suitable initiatives to improve the thermal efficiency of existing housing stock and reduce fuel poverty by making the appropriate referrals to other agencies or through direct interventions through the Home Improvement Agency.

3.17 There are direct links between the Housing Standards Team and the Empty Homes Officer. The Housing Standards Team will often take an initial complaint about an empty property and then work to resolve short term issues affecting neighbouring properties through negotiation and enforcement.

Homelessness Strategy

3.18 Lancaster City Council will be undertaking a refresh of its Homelessness Strategy in the light of a number of changes in government policy which includes a series of welfare reforms and the emerging Homelessness Reduction Bill and subsequent legislation. One of the identified priorities in the last Homelessness Strategy was to increase the supply of affordable housing and good quality rented accommodation available in Lancaster district. Much work has been done to increase the provision of rented accommodation in the district, which has included the implementation of the Council's Choice Based Lettings Scheme and a review of the allocation policy, closer working between the Council's Housing Options Team, Housing Standards Team and Home Improvement Agency, who are all based in one office at Morecambe Town Hall. There is strengthened partnership working with key partners such as Registered Providers, third sector organisations and private landlords, and the established partnership with Methodist Action North West who operate a Social Lettings Scheme in Lancaster district and which has been rolled out to incorporate empty properties. Properties brought into the social lettings agency are let through referrals from the council's Housing Options Team which directly assists in meeting a local housing need and the proactive prevention of homelessness.

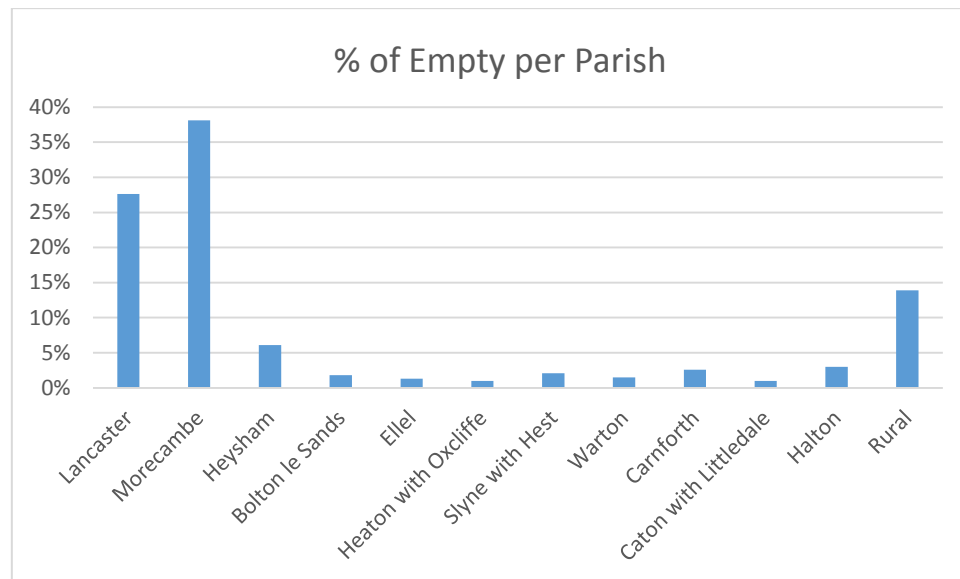
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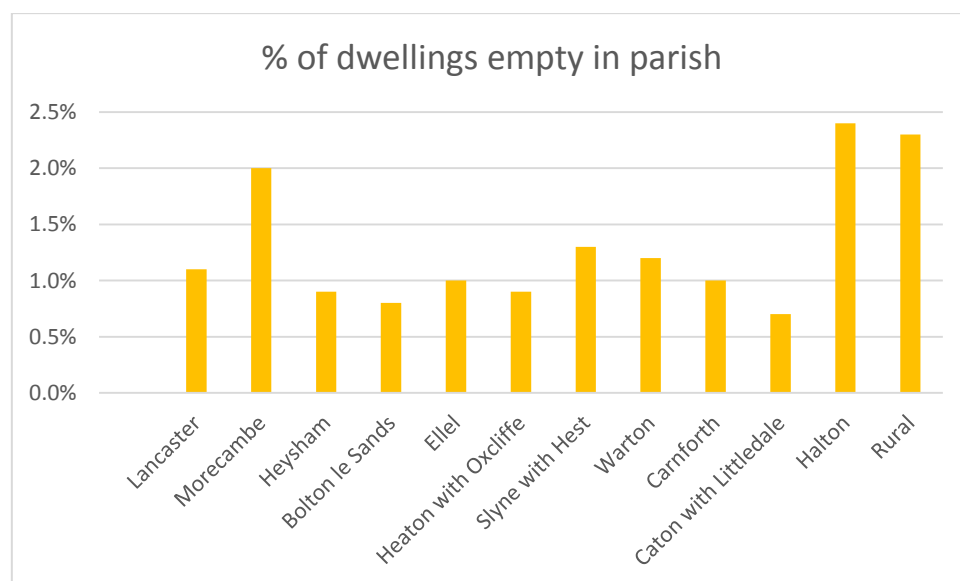
4. The Local Impact

Empty Properties per Parish

4.1 Work has been done to establish the levels of empty properties across the various parts of Lancaster District (labelled as “parishes” for the purposes of this document). This is to show where the problem areas are and where more focus might be needed. The results have been displayed in two formats: the percentage of all empty properties across the Lancaster District per parish and the percentage of the dwellings within the parish that are empty.



4.2 This shows, as expected, that the highest levels of empty properties are in the two main urban areas, Lancaster and Morecambe, with Morecambe having almost 40% of the total empty properties in the District. It also shows that there is a high percentage of empty properties in the remaining 29 rural parishes, with almost 14% being in these areas.



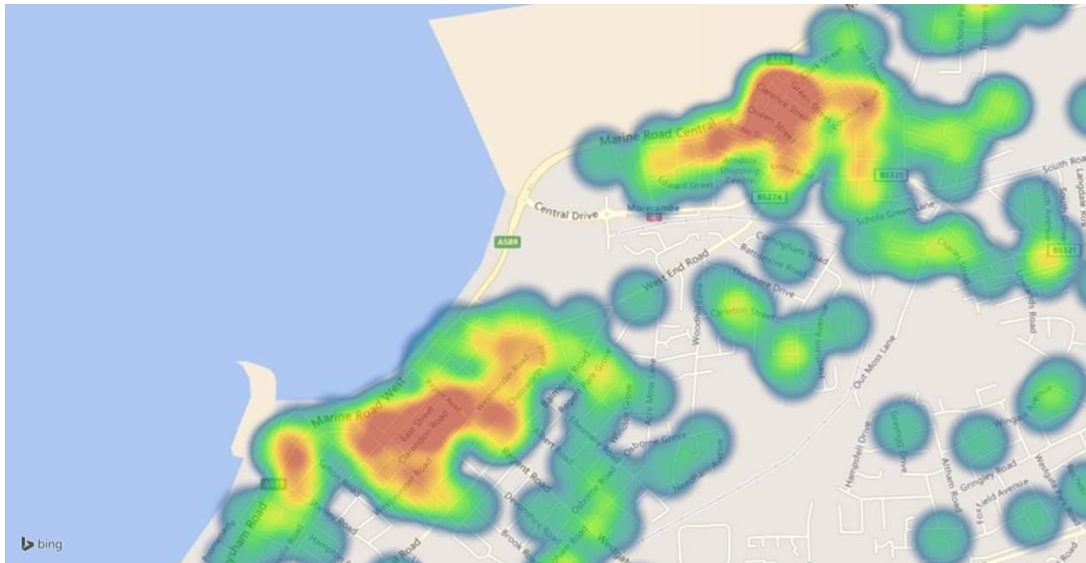
4.3 This shows individual parishes with high levels of empty properties within them. On average, approximately 1% of each parish's total dwellings are empty, however there are some parishes with a much higher level which requires further investigation. Again, Morecambe stands out with 2% of the total housing stock being empty. This is unsurprising due to the nature of the housing stock having a high level of flats and the number of poor quality / derelict buildings.

4.4 More surprisingly are the rural villages that have shown high levels of empty homes, such as Halton (2.4%), Middleton (6%), Borwick (5.2%) and Wennington (5.8%). It has been found that the high levels of empty homes in both Halton and Middleton are due to ongoing developments; Halton being the unsold properties within the Halton Mills development, and Middleton being the stalled development of the former Pontin's Holiday Camp site. Whereas, in villages such as Borwick and Wennington, these results have shown what a large impact any empty properties can have in a small rural environment.

Mapping

4.5 Following on from obtaining this data, it has been possible to map some of this information to show 'hot spots' in the district. As Morecambe has been shown to have the highest level of empty properties, the initial mapping has been done of LA3 and LA4 postcodes. The results are shown below.





- 4.6 This quite clearly shows that the most concentrated areas of empty homes are within the Town Centre and the West End of Morecambe. This assists when trying to take a targeted approach to tackling the negative impact of empty homes. It has also been used by the Council's Health and Housing Service to form an evidence base to define a suitable area when applying for Selective Licensing, as empty homes in these areas is an indication that more needs to be done by landlords to improve housing standards.

Cluster of Empty Homes Funding – Chatsworth Gardens (Morecambe's West End)

- 4.7 For the past decade the West End of Morecambe has been a major regeneration priority for the Council, founded upon the West End Masterplan's principle focus to remove Housing in Multiple Occupation and smaller poor quality flat units by converting them back to larger family housing. As part of this Masterplan, the Council acquired a number of properties in Chatsworth Gardens to create an exemplar scheme, which due to funding constraints sat empty for a number of years, only adding to the high level of vacancy in the area.
- 4.8 In 2013, the Council was successful in bidding for £1.9m in capital funding from the Cluster of Empty Home Programme which targeted areas with high levels of empty properties in order to bring them back into use through refurbishment rather than demolition.
- 4.9 The first phase of this project involved the renovation of 27 terraced empty properties which were a mix of single houses, self-contained flats, bedsits and former guest houses which due to their multi-occupancy nature comprised 62-104 units (depending on whether they are defined by planning, housing or council tax). The Council's development partner, PlaceFirst, has been successful in converting these into 51 houses and apartments for private rent, which, predominantly, have now all been occupied at market rent. The remaining units are the least desirable, upper floor flats that the developer is unwilling to accept a lower rent for in order to make the project sustainable in the longer term. Pictured below are some before and after photos of PlaceFirst.

Photograph of Westminster Road before and after refurbishment



- 4.10 The second phase is due on site in 2017 and aims bring the remaining 21 empty terraced properties back into use as high quality market rent houses and apartments. There will be a reduction from the number of existing units from a range of 69-95 units (similar to the first phase this is not an exact number depending on the definition used) down to 45 units. The 45 units comprise 1 five bedroom, 13 four bedroom, 10 three bedroom and 21 two bedroom units.
- 4.11 In addition to Chatsworth Gardens the project has tackled other empty properties within the Masterplan area on Clarendon Road and Bold Street. The Council considers this project to have been a success, which has brought new life to a once dilapidated area of Morecambe. The Empty Homes Officer has noticed an increase in interest from developers in other empty properties in the vicinity to Chatsworth Gardens, hoping to benefit from knock on effect the scheme will have on property prices. The renovation project has not only attracted external investment from property developers, but has encouraged local residents and communities to take pride in their homes and improve the visual appearance of the neighborhood.

Methodist Action North West

- 4.12 In 2012, a new partnership was formed between Lancaster City Council and Methodist Action North West (a Preston Based charity) to deliver a new Social Lettings Agency in the Lancaster District. Methodist Action lease private sector housing in the local area from owners that would like to rent their properties but do not want the responsibility of management. The properties are then made available to people that present to the Council with housing need, are rented at the local housing allowance rate, and are fully managed to ensure all housing standards are met. The owner will receive a guaranteed rental income for the term of the lease and the property will be returned to them in the same condition that it was taken on to give them full peace of mind. The scheme has been successful in increasing the number of good quality private rented properties and has increased the portfolio of housing offers to people who are in housing need who present to the council.
- 4.13 As the Social Lettings agreement was being established between Methodist Action and Lancaster City Council, the Government made available £30m in funding to community

groups to bring empty properties back into use. A sub-regional bid between Lancaster City Council, Preston City Council, South Ribble Borough Council and Methodist Action was successful in winning £1.25m in funding to be used across all three districts to bring empty properties back into use. The scheme runs alongside the Social Letting scheme, with a loan being offered to the owners of long term empty properties in order for renovations to be carried out for the property to be brought back into use. The loan is then repaid to Methodist Action via the rental income in the first few years. More recently, Lancaster City Council has provided a further £200k of its own budget to further the investment in bringing long term empty properties back into use.

- 4.14 This £200k budget has been available since April 2015 in order to offer grants to the owners of long term empty properties of up to £12,000, with a projected 16 properties being renovated and occupied in a two year period. This unfortunately has not been achieved for a number of reasons. Firstly, a new partnership and terms of reference had to be agreed between the relevant parties at the start of the project. Further problems arose due to a major development of 6 flats falling through, as well as the reluctance of some landlords and property owners to rent their property through Methodist Action at a reduced rental income resulting in lower take up than expected. There have also been a number of limitations placed on how the finance can be used, due to the type and size of properties required for the social letting scheme limiting the offer of finance to one and two bedroom properties (the most acute need is for one bedroom units), as well as the management limitations of Methodist Action not taking on individual units in buildings with mixed ownership unless they have full control of the management arrangements.
- 4.15 Furthermore, given the need for one bedroom units, there has also been the strategic decision not to concentrate the funding in the West End of Morecambe due to potential conflict with the West End Masterplan and the over-supply of single persons accommodation that already exists. Since the approval of the funding 33 properties have been surveyed as part of the scheme, with 9 properties proceeding, and, as of January 2017, only three of these currently being occupied.
- 4.16 In the 4 years that Methodist Action and Lancaster City Council have been working together to bring long term empty properties back into use, through both the sub-regional funding and direct funding from Lancaster City Council, 16 properties have been completed creating 19 new units of accommodation. All properties have, therefore, benefitted from this financial assistance, have been fully renovated and are now occupied by local people that approached the Council in housing need. The properties that have been brought back into use through the scheme have been done very successfully, and have been properties that were unlikely to have come back into use without assistance. The offer of financial assistance has also been a positive way of making contact with empty home owners, as, even if they are not interested in taking advantage of the scheme, they are made aware of the Empty Home Officers role within the Council, are offered other assistance available and means that there is an open dialogue to provide updates with the progress with the property in the future.
- 4.17 Methodist Action have confirmed that they are keen to continue the successful partnership with Lancaster City Council in order to provide good quality social housing for the local residents and see that long term empty properties are brought back into use. They are

always proactively looking for any available funding that can be used to further invest in the project, and have already invested their own funding into three of the schemes as a top up loan to the owner to ensure the projects go ahead. This is something that they are willing to consider for any projects in the future on a case by case basis.

Proactive Section 215 Work

- 4.18 The Council is actively targeting the areas of the district that are considered to be of significant importance with regard to their visual impact on the local community and visitors. This includes Lancaster City Centre, Morecambe Town Centre and main thoroughfares in and out, and through the district. Residential and commercial properties, as well as public buildings and open areas of land in these areas are considered to have a significant impact on the public perception of an area. The Council is working to encourage all owners in these areas to take pride in their asset and invest in the visual appearance to improve the perception of Lancaster and Morecambe to increase investment and tourism. Building on the success of this work, it is likely that this project will be extended to other areas, such as targeting smaller town or village centres and individual properties that are considered to be falling into disrepair.
- 4.19 This proactive work can be linked with the Section 215 works of the Empty Homes Officer as empty homes in prominent locations can have a large impact on the surrounding area, even lowering the value of neighbouring properties. These properties are therefore often proactively targeted for Section 215 Notices as a means to lessen their negative impact. Also, due to the properties being vacant, there is little excuse for the works not being undertaken, such as a struggling business or family home on low income.
- 4.20 If the owner is unable to pay for the works to improve the visual appearance of the property they are actively encouraged to sell the building in order for someone else to complete the works. Should the owner of the building not carry out the works outlined in the notice, the Council then has the option to either prosecute for non-compliance or carry out the works on their behalf and place a charge on the property, which can lead to an enforced sale. Details of enforcement powers available to the Empty Homes Officer are discussed further in Section 5.18.

5. Achievements met by the Empty Homes Strategy 2013-2015 and Objectives going Forward

5.1 The Council's last Empty Homes Strategy was written in 2013 to coincide with the appointment of the first Empty Homes Officer tasked with specifically targeting empty homes and using the powers available to reduce their impact and reduce the overall number of empty homes across the district. A number of objectives were put forward and these can now be assessed in terms of achievement, expanded on for the future and further objectives added.

To Raise Awareness of Empty Homes Issues

5.2 Benefits of raising awareness using information and publicity:

- Members of the community affected by empty properties are more informed and have a contact within the Council to raise any concerns
- The public are made aware of enforcement actions available to the Local Authority that can be used when dealing with problematic empty properties
- Owners of empty properties are educated in the problems associated with leaving a house empty and the missed opportunities associated with them
- Owners become more aware of the assistance available through promotion of the Council's role

5.3 Achievements made towards raising awareness of empty homes issues:

- **Letters to empty homes owners** – Contact has been made with all empty home owners whose property has been empty in excess of 2 years, making them aware of the Council Tax premium, highlighting any specific issues regarding their property, and emphasising their potential lost revenue and risks involved in leaving a property empty. Letter drops have also been carried out to all relevant empty home owners to make them aware of the financial assistance available to bring their property back into use.
- **Media coverage** – There have been a number of articles in local newspapers highlighting the issues surrounding empty homes across the district and advertising the financial assistance available. There was also a full page article in the Council brochure that is mailed out to all properties in the district with their yearly Council Tax bill. These have had a varying range of response, mostly positive, with people being pleased that the role is within the Council
- **Visiting neighbouring properties** – The people that are most affected by empty properties are those that live directly adjacent to them. Either through physical problems caused, such as excessive cold or damp, or the worry and stress of potential antisocial or criminal activity taking place at the property. By visiting the neighbouring properties and making them aware that the property is being monitored, and the owner encouraged to take action, it can remove some of the burden and give them a point of contact within the Council should they need to report anything.

5.4 Objectives going forward:

- Continue to ensure all empty home owners whose property has been empty in excess of 2 years are contacted, and expand this contact to properties that have been empty for more than 21 months to give them advance warning of the premium charge.

- Ensure that there is at least one press release within the media on a yearly basis to keep the issue of empty properties relevant in people's minds and provide contact details for people that are affected by them
- Carry on visiting neighbouring properties of long term empty homes to provide them with a point of contact within the Council
- Continue to raise awareness of the issues surrounding empty properties, and strive to find additional methods of connecting with local residents such as community meetings or leaflet drops in areas with high levels of empty properties.

To Maintain Accurate Records and Information about Empty Homes in the District

5.5 The majority of the statistics relating to empty homes in the district are obtained from the Council Tax register. This shows details regarding the status of the property, how long it has been empty and provides contact details for the owner of the property. An up to date spreadsheet of all empty homes is provided by Council Tax on a quarterly basis in order to keep up to date with any changes.

5.6 Since July 2015, the Empty Homes Officer has been working much more closely with the Council Tax service which allows for a much more targeted approach when contacting empty home owners. This has led to more joint working when it comes to enforcement as if a property owner is in Council Tax debt and the property requires direct action from the lack of compliance with enforcement measures, this can lead to the enforced sale of the property.

5.7 Other ways of information gathering are via complaints from the general public, internal referrals from other services within the authority and other statutory bodies, such as the Fire Service and Police. On receipt of this information, background checks are carried out, as well as a site visit depending on the source, if the complaint is found to be valid, a hard file and an electronic file is created. All copies of letters, photographs and other documents are input into these files, as well as a log being kept of telephone calls, emails and site visit notes.

5.8 By keeping records and information on empty properties in the area, it allows the Council to monitor the progress being made towards bringing an empty property back into use. It also assists in deciding what future action needs to be taken.

5.9 Objectives going forward:

- Continue to maintain records and information about empty homes to ensure the information is accurate and up to date.
- Continue to develop the close working relationship with the Council Tax service to maintain and gather relevant information on empty homes, and target problem properties
- Encourage additional information to be provided by third parties
- Pursue the mapping of empty properties across the district to better assist with focusing attention towards areas of high vacancy, and as an aid to communicate information

To Explore and Pursue Funding Opportunities to Tackle Empty Homes

- 5.10 The Council is always open to funding opportunities to help assist in bringing empty homes back into use, however, unfortunately there is currently no known funding opportunities available that can be used to tackle empty homes.
- 5.11 As previously stated, Lancaster City Council are working closely with Methodist Action who are proactively pursuing any funding available for works towards empty properties which may be available to third parties rather than local authorities. Methodist Action are actively working with national lobbying groups such as the Empty Homes Network, HACT, Agents for Change and Locality to argue for more empty homes funding from the Government, including providing case studies to be used to support further lobbying. Also, through their established networks, they are requesting financial support through charitable donations and formal investment as well as providing an element of match funding for properties referred into the Empty Homes Scheme on a case by case basis.
- 5.12 This partnership working can give us access to funding that otherwise would not have been able to be accessed by the Council, and can assist to work towards our joint goal of providing good quality housing and reducing the numbers of empty properties.
- 5.13 Objectives going forward:
- Continue build on the relationship between Lancaster City Council and Methodist Action in order to maximise the funding opportunities available.
 - Keep up to date with all Government legislation and be prepared to bid for any suitable funding.

Continue to Take a Proactive Approach to Engage with Empty Home Owners and Target Problematic Empty Homes that Generate Complaints

- 5.14 As previously stated, contact has already been made with all empty home owners whose property has been empty in excess of 2 years, as well as letter drops going out to all suitable properties owners to make them aware of the funding available. The Council needs to be proactive in tackling empty properties, to make owners aware of the negative impact their property is having and highlight the various options available to bring them back into use.
- 5.15 Due to the increase in planning applications for purpose built student accommodation across the Lancaster area, there could in the future be a surplus of individual student dwellings which could well fall empty. The Council is therefore establishing the link between student homes and empty properties, and will look to contact student housing landlords to encourage them to use their properties to meet alternative housing demands in Lancaster.
- 5.16 The Council is also actively encouraging members of the public to report any empty homes in the local area that have either been left empty for an excessive period of time or are causing any kind of concern. Even if the property is already known, it provides another contact to obtain any information about the background of the property and gives the resident the peace of mind that the owner of the property is being pursued.

5.17 Objectives going forward:

- Continue to engage with empty home owners and local residents to best assist with encouraging action to be taken to bring long term empty properties back into use.
- Actively target student housing landlords of properties that have been empty in excess of 6 months to encourage them to take action with their properties

To Implement All Measures Available to the Council in Order to Bring Empty Homes Back into Use

5.18 There are a number of measures available to the Council to encourage empty home owners to take action with their property with the aim to see that they are brought back into use. These measures range from liaising with them and offering advice and reassurance, to enforcement action that can lead to the enforced sale of their property. These measures are outlined below:

- Advice and Guidance – making empty home owners aware of their various options, to sell or rent their properties and the financial and maintenance benefits that this has in comparison with leaving the house empty. Other motivations are also offered, such as reduced VAT rates on renovations to long term empty properties and guidance on planning where appropriate.
- Financial and Other Assistance – The partnership with Methodist Action has provided the Empty Homes Officer with an additional tool to offer empty home owners without the necessary financial resources to bring properties back into use where this is the primary reason for the property remaining empty. The loan given to carry out renovations works to the long term empty properties give owners an additional option that they would otherwise not have had. The Empty Homes Officer has also developed relationships with a number of properties developers, and can provide their details if a home owner is interested in selling quickly and without estate agents fees.
- Threat of Enforcement – If there is no success with an owner towards bringing an empty property back into use, the threat of enforcement action is used to focus their mind as to the alternative if they do not take positive action independently.
- Enforcement – There are a number of statutory notices under a range of legislation that are available to the Council to use against problematic empty properties. The main notice used is under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which targets properties that are considered to be detrimental to the amenity of the surrounding area, and a notice can be served requesting that various works be completed to rectify this. Team work with other departments also means that vermin problems, unsecured properties, fire risks and failure to pay Council Tax can also be enforced against.
- Works in Default or Prosecution – This is a measure that can be used as a last resort, and so will only impact on very few empty home owners across the district. The direct non-compliance with an enforcement notice is a criminal offence and so can lead to prosecution, or in some cases the Council deem it more effective to carry out the required works themselves and charge the owner. This would then see that the negative impact felt by the property would be remedied, and the owner billed accordingly.
- Enforced Sale – If the Council hold a charge against a property for works in default, and the owner is either untraceable, unwilling or unable to pay, there is the option to enforce

the sale of the property in order to recover their costs by placing it up for auction. To date, this power has not yet been achieved by the Council, although we did get close before the owner paid their outstanding balance at the last opportunity. This is a tool that should be explored further and utilised in the appropriate circumstances, however the Council needs to identify the appropriate resources within the legal department to make this a practicable option.

5.19 Objectives going forward:

- Continue to work through all the measures available, to an increasing degree of severity, in order to achieve the desired outcome.
- Where appropriate, increase the use of Section 215 Notices to lessen the negative impact of long term empty properties with the view to seeing them brought back into use.
- Pursue the use of enforced sales on the most severe cases, in which all other options have failed, as a final means to see the property brought back into use. This can also then be advertised as a deterrent to other empty homes owners to leaving their properties to deteriorate.

6. Case Studies

Pond Terrace, Carnforth

- 6.1 This property had been empty for three years when the Empty Homes Officer contacted the owner via a general mail drop, making empty home owners aware of the funding available to carry out works to long term empty properties. The owner had purchased the property as an investment, and was carrying out renovation works as and when she could afford to and had the time.
- 6.2 The owner saw the benefit of taking the interest free finance available and so agreed to the survey of the property and to get quotations for the works. The cost of the works exceeded the loan available, therefore Methodist Action were able to provide a small top up loan and the owner contributed the rest.
- 6.3 The works took two months to complete by a local building firm. They were completed to the Council's specifications to a high standard, and met all of the housing standards criteria for decent rented housing. The property has since been rented out by Methodist Action to a local person that presented to the Council with housing need.



Hawksworth Grove, Heysham

6.4 This property had been empty for approximately 7 years when it was brought to the attention of the Empty Homes Officer by a concerned neighbour. The property was never listed as empty with Council Tax, as it was inherited by the owner when his uncle died and he listed it as his main residence but never moved in.

6.5 The property had deteriorated to a poor condition, with very overgrown gardens and fly tipping, which can attract vermin, and the neighbours reported the internal issues the property was causing via the adjoining wall.

6.6 After tracking down the owner with the assistance of Council Tax, the Empty Homes Officer was able to provide him with a number of options as to what he could do with his property. In the end, it was decided he would sell to a property developer, who fully renovated the property within 3 months, and it has now been sold and is occupied.



EMPTY HOMES ACTION PLAN 2017 – 2022

Action – Raise Awareness	Outcomes	Lead	Timescale for completion	Resource Implications
Regularly review council tax data and make contact with empty homes owners at the earliest possible stage	Reduction in the time homes are empty	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Use a wide range of publicity at regular intervals and encourage reporting of empty homes	Raises public awareness	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Provide early intervention through a wide range of advice and support to bring empty homes back into use as quickly as possible	Reduction in the time homes are empty	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Regularly liaise with neighbours of empty properties	Providing support to local residents	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Action – Maintain accurate records				
Obtain information from council tax on a quarterly basis to monitor the total number of empty properties on a district wide basis	More effective monitoring	Empty Homes Officer	Quarterly	Within existing resources
Maintain internal records of empty properties being targeted and log all actions taken	More effective monitoring	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Provide statistical information to check progress on reducing the number of empty homes and consider the impact of the current council tax charging policy	More effective monitoring	Empty Homes Officer	Quarterly	Within existing resources

Action –Seek funding				
Investigate any funding opportunities to draw down funding for empty homes	Increase resources to reduce empty homes	Empty Homes Officer/Housing Strategy Officer	As and when required	Within existing resources
Work in partnership and support Methodist Action North West by identifying suitable empty properties that can be brought back into use	Will reduce empty homes and monies are recycled	Empty Homes Officer/Housing Strategy Officer	Ongoing and at quarterly reviews	Within existing resources
Maintain links with other district councils, regional and national bodies to identify potential funding opportunities and recognised good practice around empty homes	Better chance of securing funding	Empty Homes Officer/Housing Strategy Officer	As and when required	Within existing resources
Action – Proactive approach				
Monitor the numbers of empty student housing becoming vacant and make contact with long term empty student housing landlords	Bring housing in desirable areas back into housing stock	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Encourage members of the public to report empty homes	More effective monitoring and support for residents	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources

Action – Enforcement				
Maintain contact with empty homes owners at regular intervals and monitor the situation	Better recording and audit trail	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Where appropriate, serve notices upon empty homes owners and take appropriate legal action	Will reduce number of empty homes	Empty Homes Officer/Legal Services	As and when required	Within existing resources
If necessary, prosecute empty homes owners and undertake works in default	Will reduce number of empty homes	Empty Homes Officer/Legal Services	As and when required	Within existing resources
Pursue an enforced sale as a last resort	Will reduce number of empty homes	Empty Homes Officer/Legal Services	As and when required	Identify appropriate resources within Legal Services
Review the level of legal support to support empty homes enforcement and options to increase resources	Will reduce number of empty homes	Legal Services Manager	As and when required	Identify appropriate resources within Legal Services