

CABINET

Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030

14 January 2024

Report of Chief Officer Sustainable Growth

PURPOSE OF REPORT			
To approve the submission of the Empty Homes Strategy for its consideration, approval, and adoption into the council's Policy Framework.			
Key Decision	X	Non-Key Decision	Referral from Cabinet Member
Date of notice of forthcoming key decision	2 November 2024		
This report is Public			

RECOMMENDATIONS OF Councillor Caroline Jackson

- (1) The Empty Homes Strategy 2025 - 2030 is adopted into the council's corporate Policy Framework.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030 aims to address the issue of long-term empty homes across Lancaster District, supporting the council's priority for Healthy and Happy Communities. The document identifies key goals, objectives, and strategies to reduce empty homes, and contributing to the local housing market and improving community well-being.
- 1.2 The final version of the empty Homes Strategy is attached in **Appendix 1**.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Nationally, the prevalence of empty homes has been a growing concern due to its impact on housing availability and community vitality. The government estimates over 255,000 long-term empty properties exist in the UK, creating a housing challenge amidst growing demand. Legislative measures, like differential council tax premiums and the New Homes Bonus scheme, have been introduced to incentivize the reoccupation of empty homes.
- 2.2 Locally, Lancaster District mirrors this issue, with a slightly higher rate of empty homes than the national average. The city council recognises long-term empty homes as a wasted resource amid a housing crisis and shortage of available homes in the district. As of January 2024, approximately 840 homes were classified as long-term empty (vacant for over six months), affecting housing availability and community aesthetics. The strategy,

therefore, sets an ambitious target to bring back 60 long-term empty homes annually into use through interventions by the Empty Homes Officer and other council services.

- 2.3 Empty homes are linked to various negative effects on communities, including deteriorating environment, increased risk of vandalism, and associated impact on well-being and property values. The strategy outlines an approach to combat these issues, taking proactive steps with homeowners, employing enforcement actions when necessary, and exploring financial and collaborative solutions to support this work.
- 2.4 Housing availability remains a challenge in Lancaster, and local policies, such as council tax premiums for empty properties exceeding one year, aim to discourage prolonged vacancies. The council has adjusted council tax charges to further encourage occupancy, introducing higher charges the longer properties remain empty, with up to a 400% premium for properties vacant over 10 years.

3.0 Proposal Details

- 3.1 The strategy aligns with Lancaster City Council's broader housing and community plans, such as the Homes Strategy 2020-2025 and the Homelessness Strategy 2023-2028. The council's housing renewal efforts focus on key areas like Morecambe's West End, which suffers from high vacancy rates, substandard housing, and economic challenges. Targeted intervention in such areas is expected to improve community well-being, reduce criminal activity, and boost local pride.
- 3.2 The strategy is organised around five core objectives:
 - *Accurate Record Maintenance and Data Sharing:* Emphasising the need for up-to-date data on empty homes to target resources efficiently. Collaboration with other council services, data collection through council tax records, and regular updates on empty home statuses are central to this objective. Tracking housing trends allows the council to respond effectively to market shifts and changes in property status.
 - *Proactive Targeting of Problematic Properties:* The strategy focus is on homes that have been empty for over two years or those causing significant neighbourhood amenity impact. Properties of concern include those in poor condition or those contributing to local blight, which may lead to intervention or statutory enforcement to require owners to repair and improve. Mapping and analysing these properties enables the council pinpoint high-priority areas and plan its interventions.
 - *Raising Awareness and Engaging Homeowners:* Outreach is a vital component, involving education for homeowners on the implications of leaving properties empty and the benefits of reoccupying them. The council plans to engage local media, issue annual public updates, and communicate with neighbours affected by empty properties to mitigate any negative effects on the community. Homeowners are encouraged to take responsibility through information on council tax premiums, available support, and options for reoccupation or sale.
 - *Applying Statutory Enforcement Measures:* Where voluntary efforts fail, the council can use statutory measures to ensure properties are

improved or brought back into use. Enforcement tools include the Town and Country Planning Act for property maintenance, the Building Act to ensure safety, and the Housing Act for habitability. Serious cases may lead to enforced sales if homeowners remain unresponsive, with costs recouped by legal charges on the property or recovering expenses through other means.

- *Exploring Funding and Partnerships:* Given the limited funding landscape for specifically targeting empty homes, the council will seek alternative financial support through partnerships and government programs when available. Collaboration with other stakeholders, such as housing charities or social lettings agencies, is encouraged to maximize resource use and gain external support for funding applications.

- 3.3 To ensure its ongoing effectiveness, the Strategy includes regular reviews of council tax data, enforcement activities, and community feedback. The council will adjust its approach based on emerging challenges, such as changes in market conditions or legislation, and will scale its enforcement actions to meet community needs.
- 3.4 The Empty Homes Officer post is a fully funded, permanent role within the Regeneration Team and Sustainable Growth Service. The Empty Homes Officer will continue to implement actions under the range of available statutory instruments against the most problematic empty properties (refer to **Legal Implications**). The main notice used is under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which targets properties considered to be detrimental to the amenity of the surrounding area.
- 3.5 Works in Default or Prosecution can be used as a last resort. In the most problematic cases and where it is deemed more effective for the council to carry out the required works, funds used are recovered through a charge on the property. Currently, £26.5k of the Works in Default budget has been spent with £17.5k remaining. Due to the varying nature and timing of cases this could either be sufficient to sustain empty homes work for several years or spent entirely on one major works in default project. Additional resources may therefore be required in future to replenish these funds (refer to Financial Implications).
- 3.6 The Strategy underscores the importance of partnerships, especially where external funding is needed. Previous partnerships, such as the collaboration with Methodist Action North-West, allowed the council to offer financial assistance to property owners, bringing several homes back into use. Although this partnership ended due to the charity's liquidation, similar future collaborations are encouraged.
- 3.7 Additionally, the council's Housing Standards Team and Empty Homes Officer collaborate closely on issues related to housing condition standards, anti-social behaviour, and property management. The proposed Social Lettings Agency could offer a new avenue for supporting empty homeowners and providing affordable rental options.
- 3.8 The Strategy includes case studies that highlight the impact of the council's past interventions. Examples show how properties that had been empty for years, often due to owner inaction or financial issues, were brought back into use through council support or enforcement. Notably, enforced sales have successfully addressed problematic cases, such as the Hampton Road property in Morecambe, where vandalism and neglect persisted until the Empty Homes Officer's intervention.

4.0 Details of Consultation

4.1 The Strategy has been developed in partnership with the council's Housing Task Force.

5.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

4.1 A summary of the options and analysis is presented below:

	Option 1: The final version of the Empty Homes Strategy is approved for adoption into the council's Policy Framework.	Option 2: The final version of the Empty Homes Strategy is not adopted as corporate council policy.
Advantages	<p>Enables the council to progress its empty homes work to an agreed framework, objectives, and action plan.</p> <p>While having some flexibility the Strategy defines the council's objectives and approach and the future targeting of empty homes priorities.</p>	No advantages identified unless Members require substantive amendments to the document or seek further consultation on the final document.
Disadvantages	A delay in the adoption of the Strategy may create further uncertainty around the council's intentions for this area of policy and work.	Ongoing work of the Empty Homes Officer takes place outside of an agreed priority framework and Action Plan.
Risks/ Mitigation	<p>Risks are around reputational risk to the council of approving an approach which does not meet the objectives and/or does not find favour with the wider community.</p> <p>However, it is considered that the Strategy reflects the stakeholder and community aspirations (as expressed through consultation) and the council's overarching and current corporate policy framework.</p>	Work proceeds ad hoc and outside of an agreed policy framework.

6.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

The preferred option is **Option 1**.

7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 The Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030 is a comprehensive plan to address long-term vacancies in Lancaster District's housing stock. It combines proactive and reactive measures, aiming to balance supportive interventions with necessary enforcement actions.
- 7.2 By bringing empty homes back into use, the council aims to reduce housing shortages, improve neighbourhood conditions, and contribute to Lancaster's broader goals of community sustainability and well-being. Regular monitoring, effective partnerships, and targeted resource use are essential to achieving the strategy's objectives and making a positive impact on Lancaster's housing landscape.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

Access to Quality Housing plays a fundamental role in health and well-being by ensuring that communities have access to homes for people of all incomes which are comfortable, warm and allows them to maintain their independence. The collective actions of the council in making an active contribution to the provision of new homes, achieving its housing regeneration ambitions, and making the best use of Lancaster district's existing housing stock, including empty homes will positively contribute to meeting its corporate objectives.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, HR, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

There are no Health & Safety, Equality and Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, HR implications arising from the adoption of this document as corporate policy. In terms of the impact on potential actions and outcomes officers are confident that issues have been intensively explored and tested during the preparation of the document itself, adhering to the principles of the council's corporate policy framework.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The strategy employs a combination of direct interventions, incentives, and statutory enforcement. The Empty Homes Officer, along with council departments, uses legislative tools such as

- **Town and Country Planning Act (1990):** Section 215 allows the council to mandate maintenance on properties detracting from community appearance, with fines and property charges for non-compliance.
- **Building Act (1984):** Ensures buildings are safe for occupancy or allows the council to take action to secure unsafe properties.
- **Housing Act (2004):** Empowers the council with entry rights for inspections, enforcement for property improvement, and potential Empty Dwelling

Management Orders for reoccupation.

- **Enforced Sales and Compulsory Purchase Orders:** Used in severe cases where no other resolution is feasible, allowing the council to sell a property to recover costs or acquire it to repurpose for housing.

The decision on the strategy's adoption/approval into corporate policy can be taken by Cabinet.

There are no further legal implications in adopting the document as corporate policy.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate Financial Implications arising from the adoption of the Empty Home strategy as corporate policy.

The Empty Homes Strategy is intended to provide policy guidance and a foundation on which the council can make a case for intervention, using existing budgets and staffing resources to deliver proposals which meet its objectives. Depending on the identified issue the council will act in various ways. It may act as a direct delivery body where appropriate, or as an enabling partner.

However, it should be highlighted that should additional, unfunded, resources be required in the future as noted in the body of the report, this would be subject to further Cabinet approval.

The Empty Homes Officer has access to the Regeneration Works in Default Budget for emergency works for securing properties and works in default when legal notices have not been complied with. Over the last 6 financial years £26.5k has been spent of the budget. £11k was spend in 23/24 and so far, £67.27 has been spent in 24/25, which shows the varied demands on the budget each year. The current budget allocation stands at £17.5k, which could either be sufficient to sustain empty homes work for several years or spent on one major works in default project. Current constraints on the budget will play a significant role in decision making.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources: The main staffing resource on the council side to support progression of the Strategy is the Empty Homes Officer supported by Legal Services. In appropriate circumstances and cases requests for legal advice/assistance may be made to an external specialist solicitor.

Information Services: No direct Information Service implications based on the council approving corporate policy.

Property: No implications based on the council approving corporate policy,

Open Spaces: No Open Space implications based on the council approving.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

Adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy provides the foundation for the application of council funds and staff resources to priority issues. However, as noted above additional council resources may be required in the future to replenish the Works in Default budget. Should additional resources be required application will need to in accordance with the council's Budget and Policy Framework and be balanced against other council priorities and investment outcomes.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has nothing to add to the legal comments above.

Once adopted the Empty Homes Strategy will form part of the council's Corporate Policy Framework.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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