



Lancaster City Council - Sustainable Growth Service

Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030



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Executive Summary

The Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030 (“the Strategy”) is intended to deliver against one of Lancaster City Council’s key priorities – Healthy and Happy Communities - by reducing the number of long-term empty homes across the district. As of 1 January 2024, there were 840 long term empty properties (empty in excess of 6 months, as outlined in para. 1.6) in the Lancaster District, approximately 1% of the housing supply.

Progressing the 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. Continuous monitoring of empty properties and analysis of the prevalence of empty homes due to changes in the housing market will allow effective targeting of staff and financial resources. The council will also use a range of methods, tools, and incentives to bring identified empty homes back into habitable use.

The Strategy sets out a series of pro-active measures to raise awareness of the negative impact of empty homes on communities and offer a range of incentives and support to empty homeowners to bring their property back into the housing market. The Strategy also provides the framework for taking statutory enforcement action against the owners of those empty homes considered to be harming community amenity by their appearance and neglect. This requires the continued support and input of other council services to be effective and to deal with long term empty properties in both a timely and efficient way. This, in turn, will benefit neighbouring homes and act as a deterrent to leaving residential property empty and in a state of disrepair. The Strategy also considers the role of discretionary tax measures within the city council’s competency, such as differential council tax charging, to discourage residential property from becoming or remaining empty.

The aim of the Strategy is to maximise the use of the existing housing stock in the Lancaster district, by bringing 60 long term empty properties back into use, following intervention from the Empty Homes Officer, each year. At a time when the city council has recognised a local housing crisis and an acute shortage of housing, the Empty Homes Strategy can play a significant role in meeting the district’s housing need.

Core Aims and Objectives

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

- Maintaining an accurate and up-to-date record of empty properties and sharing appropriate information with key partners.
- Proactively targeting empty properties that have a significant negative impact on the surrounding community, and those which have been empty for more than two years.
- Working with owners to raise awareness of the options available to bring their property back onto the residential market.
- Where necessary, using statutory powers to require property improvement works.
- Monitoring and reviewing the use of discretionary council tax framework and provisions to discourage properties from becoming or remaining empty.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of the 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 officer-led interventions supported by statutory powers.
- 1.2 Empty homes are a wasted resource that could be used to meet the increasing housing need across the area. They often have a negative impact on the community, as they are prone to deteriorate over time without regular upkeep and can be subject to antisocial behaviour or vandalism. According to Council Tax records, as of the 1 January 2024, there were over 3100 empty and underutilised dwellings across the Lancaster district, 840 of which are considered long term empty properties.
- 1.3 Since the appointment of an Empty Homes Officer in July 2013 and the adoption of the first Empty Homes Strategy in 2013, over 590 long term empty homes have been brought back into use with council officer involvement. Accurate records are now kept of empty properties and their status, and there is open dialogue with most long-term empty homeowners and a point of contact for concerned neighbours and other community stakeholders.
- 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 help meet the housing needs of the district.

The main objectives of the strategy are to:

- Ensure the direction of work and application of staff and other resources continues to reflect the city council's priorities.
- Raise awareness of empty homes and the negative issues they cause for communities.
- Maintain accurate records and information about empty homes in the district.
- Explore and pursue the funding opportunities available to tackle empty homes.
- Continue to take a proactive approach to engage with empty homeowners and target problematic empty homes that generate complaints.
- Implement all measures available to the council to bring empty homes back into use.

What is an Empty Home?

1.5 There will always be a number of empty homes in any area's housing stock. There are several reasons why homes become empty for an extended period, including (but not limited to):

- Property taking an excessive period 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.
- Property being kept as financial investment or for sentimental reasons.

1.6 In most cases, the empty property 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 and have become "long term empty homes." This is defined by the Government as any residential property that has remained empty for six months or more. However, the council's focus is on properties that have been empty for two years or longer, as it is felt that at this point a reasonable period of time has been given to allow the turnover of the property and contact should be made with the owner to determine whether intervention is required.

1.7 In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns had a knock-on impact on all areas of life, including increasing the number of empty homes. House sales, renovations, and legal work came to an effective standstill, meaning there was a backlog of work once lockdowns were lifted, which in turn increased house prices, construction, and material costs. Many properties were left empty for longer than owners anticipated, with the pandemic being a common reason given for the delay. It is expected that the impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt in the market for many years to come.

1.8 There are many financial, social, and environmental benefits to bringing long term empty properties back into use. For the owners, it is estimated that leaving a property empty costs, on average, over £7000 per year in lost rental income, council tax and insurance¹. This does not account for depreciation or the cost of maintenance and repairs.

1.9 Homes lying empty impacts negatively on turnover in the housing market which contributes to housing shortages. In recent years, the development industry has struggled to deliver sufficient homes to meet demand within a challenging national and local planning policy framework and economic climate. Bringing empty homes back into the market can help ease pressure in new housing supply.

¹ No Use Empty - <https://www.no-use-empty.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/owning-an-empty-property/>

1.10 There are wider positive community benefits of bringing long term empty properties back into use, such as:

- Improving the visual amenity of the local area.
- Encouraging community pride and further investment in the housing stock.
- Removing the burden and negative effects empty properties can have on adjoining dwellings such as excessive cold and damp.
- Supporting local businesses and services by increasing the local population, boosting the local economy.
- Reducing the need for emergency and other enforcement action by local emergency services, city council and other public agencies.

2. The National Context

- 2.1 A certain level of empty properties is necessary to ensure the normal functioning of the housing market and modernisation of existing housing stock. It is expected that approximately 2% of the housing stock is empty at any one time. However, the number and proportion of empty properties continues to rise. According to Government figures, as of October 2022 there were over 255,000 long term empty properties in the UK as defined by the Government - an increase of over 20,000 since the previous year.
- 2.2 The profile of empty homes has been rising up the political agenda for the last 15 years, particularly as pressures have built up on the housing supply side and widely recognised failures to meet housing demand. In 2011, the then Coalition Government published “Laying the Foundations – A Housing Strategy for England”. This outlined a commitment to tackling empty homes by making £100 million available in capital funding to develop projects to improve long term empty properties to provide affordable housing to people in housing need.
- 2.3 In addition, other financial and policy instruments were brought in to encourage local authorities to tackle the empty homes issue - primarily through the Homes and Communities Agency’s Affordable Homes Programme 2011-2015. Lancaster City Council successfully bid for Cluster of Empty Homes Funding under this policy to help enable the award-winning Chatsworth Gardens housing regeneration initiative in Morecambe’s West End. In addition, the council supported a bid made by Methodist Action North West to secure funding under the Empty Homes Funding (Community Groups) to deliver a Social Lettings Agency, as outlined in paragraph 4.33.
- 2.4 However, since 2015, there have been no further Affordable Homes Programme funding specifically targeted at bringing empty homes back into use.

Legislation

- 2.5 Legislation in relation to empty properties falls under several different Acts of Parliament. In pursuing action against individual properties and individuals care must be taken to apply the most appropriate tool depending on the situation. The legislation currently used by the Empty Homes Officer includes:
- Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – Section 215 – enables the Local Authority to serve notice on any property that is deemed to be negatively impacting on the amenity of the surrounding area, requiring works of improvement to be carried out. Failure to do so can lead to prosecution and a fine. In addition, the Local Authority may carry out the works in default and recoup the cost. A charge may be placed on the property by way of security.
 - Law of Property Act 1925 – Section 103 – gives the Local Authority the rights of a mortgage lender following the failure to repay an outstanding debt, which can lead to the enforced sale of a property.
 - Building Act 1984 – Section 76 to 83 – ensures that buildings are safe or give the Local Authority the power to take action to make them safe.
 - Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 - Section 29 – gives the Local Authority the power to carry out works in relation to a building that is

temporarily unoccupied and either insecure, or likely to become a danger to public health.

- The Housing Act 2004 – various sections – contains several tools – such as the right: of entry, to conduct inspections, and to take enforcement action – designed to ensure properties are safe and suitable to be lived in.

2.6 The Empty Homes Officer has limited delegated power to apply this legislation and is reliant on working closely with other relevant services within the city council to take action when and where required.

2.7 Other legislation available in relation to empty homes matters not currently used includes:

- Housing Act 1985 – Section 17 – allows the Local Authority to compulsory purchase (CPO) houses to improve the quality of the housing stock. There are so few properties in the Lancaster district that would meet the criteria needed to implement a CPO that it has not been considered necessary to pursue action under this provision.
- Housing Act 2004 – Part 4, Chapter 2 – makes provision for a Local Authority to take over the management of an empty property by way of an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO). Due to the up-front cost required, the management of the property and the safety concerns for the tenant, the used of EDMOs have not been considered a suitable provision to date.

New Homes Bonus

2.8 In 2011 the Government initiated the New Homes Bonus (NHB) scheme - a grant paid to Local Authorities based on the annual increase in housing supply, including the return to use of empty properties. The intention of the grant was to incentivise local authorities to increase housing supply, although the scheme has been criticised for potential lack of additionality and “deadweight” effects², meaning it is believed it had little impact on the outcome. The future of the NHB scheme beyond 2024 is unclear, although provisional allocations for 2024/25 have been published.

2.9 The NHB previously included a legacy payment (each annual in-year reward was paid for six financial years as well as the new reward for that year), however legacy payments have stopped, and the payment is now only one year. Lancaster’s NHB payment has therefore reduced from £546,837 (2022/23 allocation) to £188,043 (2023/24 allocation). However, bringing empty property back into use still has a direct positive impact on the council’s budget and in supporting its wider community services provision.

² New Homes Bonus (England), 2017

Council Tax Changes

- 2.10 From April 2013, local authorities were given the discretion to decide on removing or reducing any discounts available to owners of empty properties to act as an incentive to bring empty homes back into use. There was also an option introduced to place a premium on the Council Tax of properties that have been empty more than two years.
- 2.11 Lancaster City Council decided to reduce the length of time that discounts are available to empty homeowners to just one month. Owners of properties that have been left empty for more than two years were charged 200% of the equivalent ordinary council tax charge for a similar property, increasing to 300% after more than 5 years and 400% after more than 10 years. However, from April 2024, the length of time a property is empty before the premium is applied was reduced to just one year. The aim is to discourage homeowners from leaving properties empty for an excessive period of time. Exceptions to the premium charge are available due to unforeseen circumstances or once the owner is actively marketing the property for rent or sale.
- 2.12 It is considered that these changes have been effective in acting as a deterrent to homes being left empty for an excessive period, as the number of properties that have been empty more than two years has stopped increasing and has stabilised at around 250 units.
- 2.13 However, there has been a trend for owners to engage in avoidance measures by leaving furniture within the property and classifying the property as a second home. Owners taking advantage of this loophole removes the premium charge and makes identifying empty properties more difficult. From April 2025, councils will have the discretion to place a 100% premium charge on all second homes. This measure is not specifically designed to target empty properties, but it will have the added benefit of closing this loophole and encouraging owners to bring their property back into use.
- 2.14 There has been some criticism of the Council Tax Premium from homeowners in relation to the financial impact when they are engaging positively on the property and that increased holding costs extend the length of time it takes them to complete the works. Owners are directed to the exceptions criteria to see if the Premium can be removed for a period of time to assist with any financial hardship, however it is considered that the increased Council Tax works as an incentive to complete the works as quickly as possible.
- 2.15 The city council will continue to monitor and review the impact of its application of the available discretionary measures during the life of this strategy to encourage properties to be brought into use and as new opportunities or statutory tools and legislation allows.

3. The Local Context

3.1 According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2021 the District of Lancaster had a total housing stock of approximately 66,000 dwellings, with a population of around 144,000 residents, both of which are thought to be increasing. Council Tax records are used to determine the number of empty homes and as of 1 January 2024 there were 840 long term empty properties (6 months or longer), making up 1.3% of the housing stock. This comprises:

- 257 long term empty premium properties that have been empty for more than two years, which is the main focus of the Empty Homes Officer’s work.
- 513 long term empty properties, which have been empty for between 6 and 24 months, where owners will only be contacted if the property is causing community concern, or to be made aware of city council initiatives or incentives.
- 70 properties that are undergoing extensive structural works and defined as uninhabitable due to construction activity.

3.2 The table below shows a comparison of Lancaster with other Local Authorities within the Lancashire district, with the most recent figures available.

Table 1: Long Term Empty Properties, 2023

	Long Term Empty Properties (>6 months)	Total Dwelling Stock	Percentage Dwellings Long Term Empty
Blackburn with Darwen	1012	63,050	1.6%
Blackpool	1382	72,270	1.9%
Burnley	678	42,720	1.6%
Chorley	411	52,680	0.8%
Fylde	495	41,030	1.2%
Hyndburn	454	37,710	1.2%
Lancaster	828	66,370	1.2%
Pendle	632	41,230	1.5%
Preston	1190	67,550	1.8%
Ribble Valley	316	29,010	1.1%
Rosendale	506	32,540	1.6%
South Ribble	370	51,440	0.7%
West Lancashire	562	51,870	1.1%
Wyre	60	54,820	0.1%
Lancashire	8,896	704,290	1.3%
England	261,474	25,353,530	1.0%

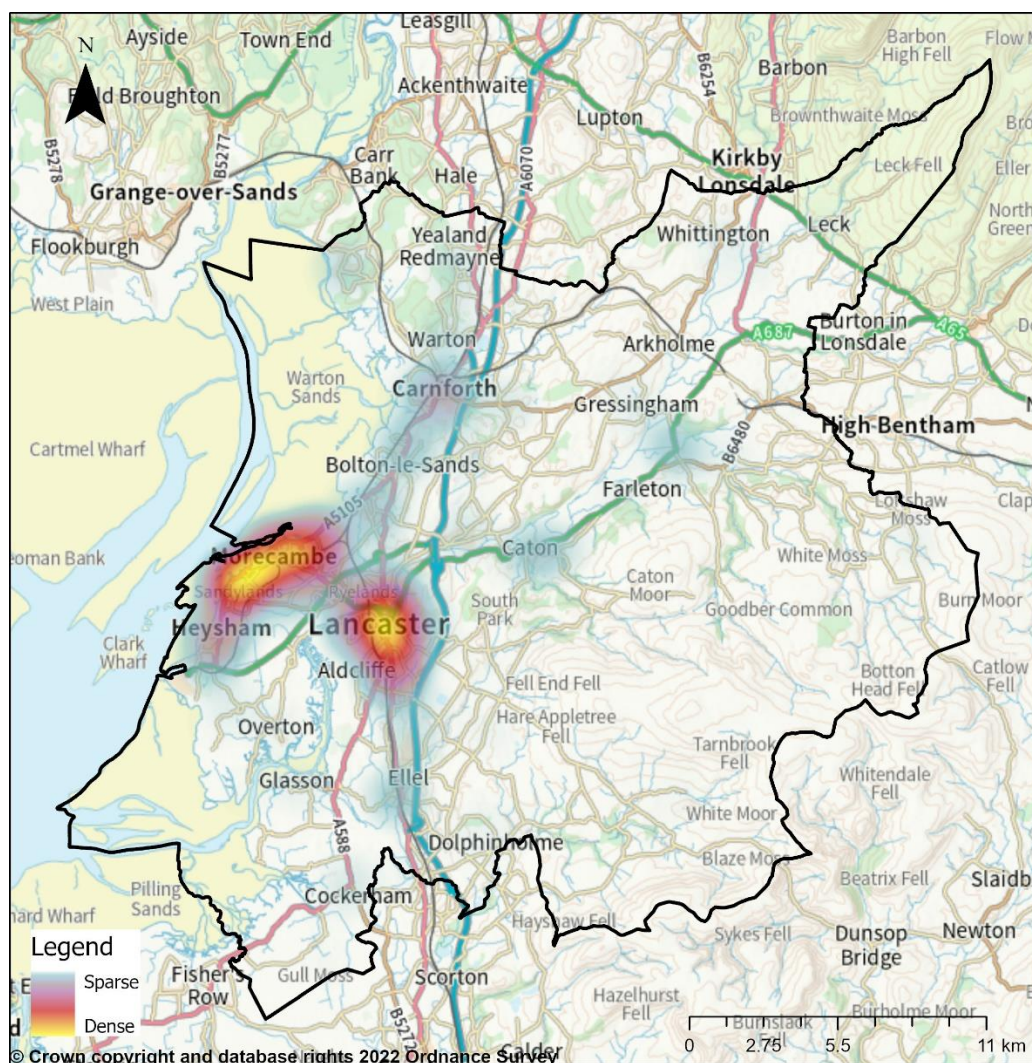
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

3.3 At a national level, approximately 1% of all dwellings are considered to be long term empty, whilst Lancashire has a slightly higher rate of 1.3%. Lancaster, having a rate of 1.2% of its dwelling stock empty in 2023, is above the national average, but below the Lancashire average.

- 3.4 There are additional properties which are empty, but which do not fall within the Government definition of long-term empty homes. These include:
- Exempt properties – 513 properties where the owners is deceased or in a care home, or the property is prohibited from occupation due to its poor condition. Due to partnership working with Council Tax and Housing Standards, those properties that are causing concern or have been empty more than two years are now being targeted in order to see if they can be brought back into use.
 - Second homes – 625 properties – which are classified by Council Tax as empty as they are not a current permanent residence. The majority are genuine holiday and second homes. However, due to owners' action to avoid incurring premium council tax charges placed on empty properties, it is estimated by council officers that at least 20% of properties classified as second homes are, in reality, long term empty.
- 3.5 These figures do not include any properties that have been removed from the Council Tax listings by the Valuation Office, which are either due to be returned to the list following extensive renovations, or abandoned in such poor condition that there is no reasonable prospect of being brought back into viable use. It also does not include properties that are not currently accurately classified within the Council Tax records, such as properties that have been vacated but where 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.
- 3.6 Obtaining an accurate number of genuine long term empty properties in the district at any particular time is therefore not a straightforward exercise. However, review of the available information along with the application of local knowledge can give a reasonable estimate that the figure is around 1500 empty units. However, it must be recognised that the situation is in constant flux and changing daily, as houses become occupied and further houses are vacated under the natural market churn.

The Local Impact

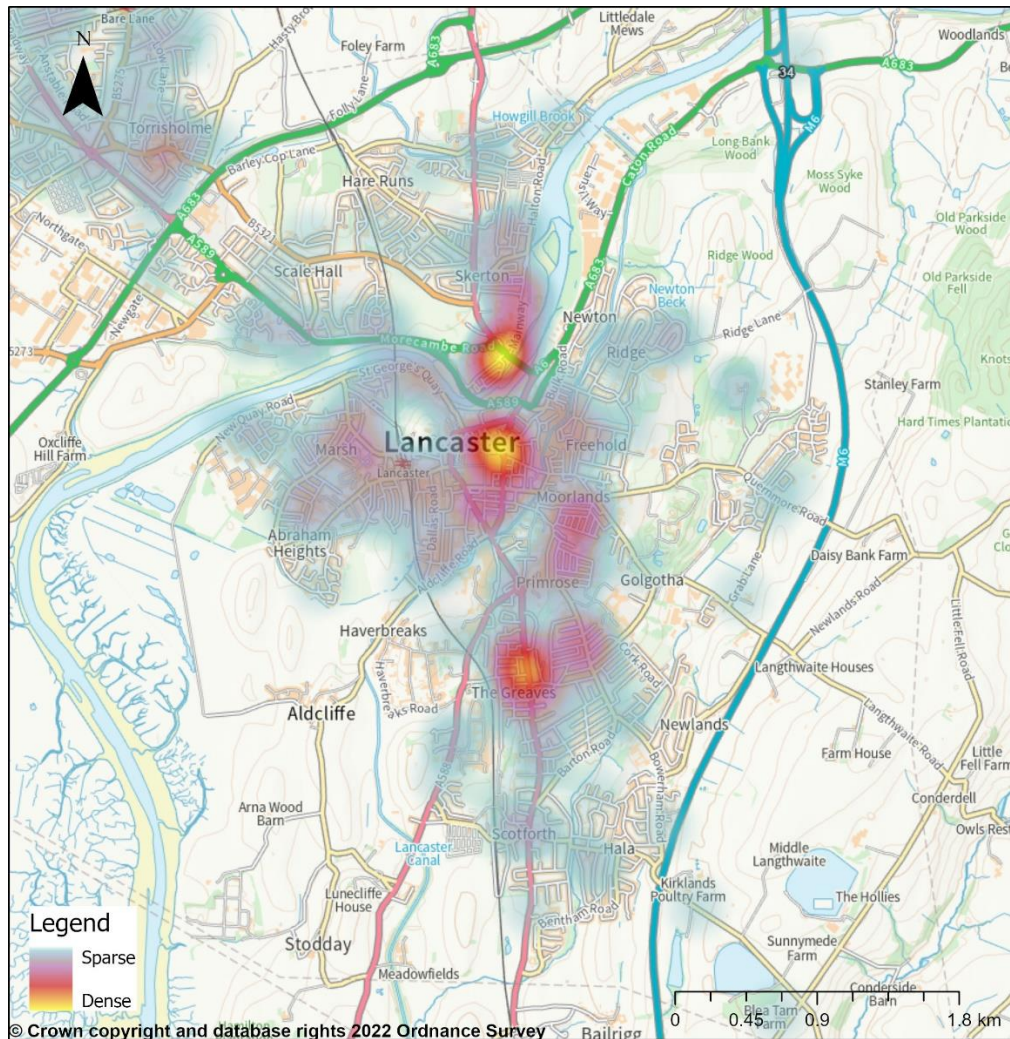
3.7 Mapping has been used to show the location of long-term empty properties across the district. The maps below show the “hot spots” located within the urban areas and Lancaster and Morecambe town centres, with smaller concentrations along major routes in and out of the district. This is unsurprising as it would be anticipated more empty properties would be found in the more densely built-up areas.



3.8 Looking closely at Lancaster reveals an even distribution of empty properties across the city centre, with concentrated pockets of empty homes located in the following areas:

- South Skerton – there are approximately 30 flats within the Mainway estate which are currently empty due to the need for refurbishment. These units are owned by Lancaster City Council and have so far been empty for less than one year. The Mainway estate is the subject of significant housing renewal and investment programme, led by the council’s Housing Team.
- City Centre – approximately 15 flats are in the process of being refurbished within the same building close to the city centre. They have been empty for three years and are close to completion.

- Greaves – this is a popular student area, and it is therefore likely that the high proportion of empty properties in this area is in relation to turnover of tenants and refurbishments.



3.9 Detail for Morecambe shows there is an even distribution of empty properties across the urban areas, with three main pockets of concentration in Bare, Poulton and the West End. Across all of Morecambe there will be multiple reasons for the high empty property concentrations although the following factors are considered most relevant to this area:

- Prevalence of low-quality flats, especially along the sea front and in the West End where there tends to be a higher turnover of occupants in flats as compared with houses, meaning there is more opportunity for them to be left empty.
- Higher numbers of low income and potentially transient residents. Social and economic conditions lend themselves to a high proportion of empty homes, such as modest rents, absent/poor performing landlords, and poor-quality housing stock.

4. Local Policy and Actions

The Council Plan / Medium Term Financial Strategy

4.1 Lancaster City Council's Council Plan 2024 – 2027, identifies four main priorities for Lancaster district:

- A Sustainable District
- An Inclusive and Prosperous Local Economy
- Happy and Healthy Communities
- A Co-operative, Kind and Responsible Council

4.2 The Healthy and Happy Communities priority seeks to increase wellbeing and reduce and tackle the causes of inequality, empowering and supporting healthy ways of living. 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 this priority.

4.3 The council's 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 Council Plan and the council-wide Policy Framework. This is required so that the council's resources are matched against its agreed priorities and other supporting needs while set against opportunities to make efficiencies, savings and manage expectations in a challenging financial environment.

4.4 The council faces a significant financial challenge. Central government have withdrawn in the region of 40% of the council's funding over the last decade with the burden passed on to the local council taxpayers and businesses in the district. The council has experienced a significant reduction in real terms spending power. Alongside the national context of spiking inflation, high energy costs and increases to the National Living Wage, local authorities are under financial strain like never before. Demand for services continues to rise, including the statutory services that our communities rely on.

4.5 The council has embarked on a programme called Outcomes-Based Resourcing (OBR) that will see it examine every area of its budget and match resources more closely with its priorities. The OBR programme includes looking at ways the council can do things differently and more efficiently, and the Empty Homes Strategy must also respond to this wider agenda.

4.6 It must be recognised that due to budget reductions significant capacity to support the Empty Homes Officer has been lost. The equivalent of one full time technical officer, helping to serve legal notices and undertake building/construction specification has been lost. This has reduced the capacity available to effectively use all avenues available to tackle empty homes. The service is still adjusting to these changes and seeing how it can "achieve more with less."

Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2020-25

- 4.7 The council's Homes Strategy was refreshed and adopted in February 2021. The Strategy sets out the strategic direction for housing activity in Lancaster district taking account of the identified housing needs and supply alongside the quality of new and existing housing stock and establishing a strategic framework which sets out the council's own housing priorities. As part of the full review of the council's Local Plan, the council will be refreshing its housing evidence and will be preparing an up-to-date Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to understand the housing needs in Lancaster district. Data on empty homes will form part of this assessment in relation to existing housing supply.
- 4.8 Government funding, initially under the Green Homes Grant (Local Authority Delivery programmes), which is a government scheme supporting energy efficiency upgrades of low-energy efficiency, low-income households across England, has allowed some of the worst performing properties with the lowest Environmental Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings in Lancaster district to receive green energy measures to qualifying households. Funding is expected to continue under Government grant for retrofit measures of off-gas properties or homes without central heating and will primarily be targeted at properties with EPCs D, E, F and G.
- 4.9 Improving the existing housing stock remains a priority in Lancaster district but is challenging at a time when much of the external funding opportunities have ceased and there are council budget pressures. However, bringing back empty properties into use is an agreed council priority, and a specific action within the previous Housing Strategy (2012-2017) was to prepare and implement an Empty Homes Strategy. The current Homes Strategy acknowledges the role the existing housing stock in Lancaster district makes to supply and meeting needs, is a continuing theme/priority, and work on mitigating the impact of empty homes is integral to helping meet local housing needs.

Private Sector Housing and Enforcement

- 4.10 Lancaster district has a large private rented sector, with issues and significant differences in the rental market between the districts two major conurbations of Lancaster and Morecambe arising from historic social and economic factors.
- 4.11 In recent years, due in part to the presence of two universities, Lancaster city has seen increased volume of student housing, and particularly the increase in purpose-built provision in Lancaster city centre to shift some of the demand for student housing (in the form of small HMO's) away from the residential areas in south Lancaster. An Article 4 Direction was implemented to control the number of new proposals for HMO's in south Lancaster, which now require planning permission. One consideration, when assessing applications for permission, is the number of existing HMO's in the surrounding area. 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.
- 4.12 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.

- 4.13 Morecambe has seen long term decline in demand for traditional seaside holidays, leading to the erosion of the resort's economy which it has struggled to overcome. The decline in tourism left a significant stock of low quality, shared, rented accommodation which attracted a transient population experiencing widespread social and economic deprivation. This was a particular issue for the West End of Morecambe.
- 4.14 Lack of investment by private landlords led to a degraded housing environment, poor conditions for local residents which had a 'knock-on' effect on the remaining holiday establishments, many of whom found themselves operating next door to poor quality hostels. High and persistent levels of unemployment, high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, crime, and vandalism exacerbated these issues.
- 4.15 While successive and ongoing targeted housing initiatives have brought about dramatic improvements, the age, condition and management of housing stock in the West End is still a focus and priority to ensure that private sector rented accommodation is free from category one hazards and that minimum standards are achieved.
- 4.16 Where possible, the council will seek to achieve full voluntary compliance with legislative requirements and licence 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.
- 4.17 The Housing Standards Team also promote and encourage good quality accommodation by administering Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing and the Council's Accredited Property Scheme and work very closely with the Home Improvement Agency and Housing Options. Technical Officers routinely inspect properties prior to a bond being issued and deal with complaints around anti-social behaviour, disrepair, and illegal eviction.
- 4.18 A more recent initiative has been to consider the appropriateness of selective licensing in Morecambe's West End, where the highest concentration of private sector rented accommodation exists. For the second time, in 2023, the council undertook a consultation on whether a defined area of the West End of Morecambe should be subject to selective licensing. A report was brought to Cabinet on the 16th April 2024 when it was decided not to proceed with selective licensing, and that the council would instead develop an action plan which would concentrate on a more intelligence led, targeted enforcement approach, would explore a Good Landlords Charter and that a full housing stock condition survey would be commissioned.
- 4.19 Recent funding made available to the Housing Standards Team means they are currently in the early stages of setting up a social lettings agency and have brought in a specialised Housing Solicitor into the Council's Legal Team. Once a social lettings agency has been established it could have the potential to provide another option for empty homeowners looking to bring their property into use. The potential for a grant or loan being made available for any required works to the property will be investigated once the social lettings agency has been established. Also, an in-house Housing Solicitor would provide massive potential to expand on the use of enforcement powers and the potential use of enforced sales to see properties brought back into the housing market.

4.20 The Housing Standards Team significantly contributes towards the improvement and investment in the private rented sector, and works towards increasing the number of private sector properties that meet the decent homes standard. They also make 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.

4.21 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

4.22 At its Cabinet meeting on 24th October 2023, the refreshed Homelessness Strategy 2023-2028 was adopted. This had been prepared during a period of national economic uncertainty, taking account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, cost of living crisis and the tightening housing market in Lancaster district which has impacted on homelessness, as well as global factors such as the invasion of Ukraine and withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan resulting in the UK taking more refugees. Despite these challenges, the city council seeks to build on what is working well in our area engaging positively with our local partners and other councils.

4.23 Prevention of homelessness remains a key priority as well as tackling repeat homelessness. The Homelessness Strategy sets out the progress made in the last three years as well as the council's ambitions over the next five years which can be broadly described as:

Priority Area 1 – Prevention of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Priority Area 2 – Intervention to relieve homelessness and rough sleeping.

Priority Area 3 – Recovery from homelessness and rough sleeping.

Priority Area 4 – Underlying improvements to reduce homelessness in Lancaster and improve services locally.

4.24 Action and intervention on empty homes increases the supply of housing locally and links directly to improving the choice and supply of housing in the district. The council continues to explore alternative options to bring empty homes back into use in the form of rented accommodation and make those homes available for people in need of housing, including those threatened with homelessness.

Housing Regeneration

4.25 Historically the council's major private housing activities and actions have focussed on Morecambe's West End following its designation as a Housing Renewal Area in 1993, leading to a 10-year programme of action to improve housing conditions and the local environment, through to initiation of the West End Masterplan and its significant public investment in capital housing improvements.

4.26 In general action concentrated on the conversion and refurbishment of many of the largest and worst multi-occupied properties. Block repair and improvement, and environmental improvements, have been ongoing with objectives to:

- Increase the attractiveness of the West End as an area to live for existing residents and to attract new people to move into the area as long-term residents, having a knock-on impact to improve the overall image of the resort.
- Increase the proportion of owner occupiers and alleviate some of the major issues with the private rented housing stock, such as empty and derelict units, poor management, and upkeep of properties.
- Diversify the types of housing available.
- Increase the amount of useable quality open space.
- Improve the quality of the built environment.
- Assure the sustainability of local shops through consolidation and establishing a niche market identity.

4.27 In 2013, the Council was successful in bidding for £1.9 million from the Clusters 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. This funding helped bridge the final financial funding gap, alongside other significant public investment, to enable developer PlaceFirst to renovate 48 terraced empty properties into use as a mix of single house and self-contained flats, and made available for private market rent.



Photograph of Westminster Road before and after refurbishment

4.28 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 the 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 neighbourhood.

4.29 The progression of Empty Homes Strategy work built on the experience of the team involved in progressing significant housing improvements in the West End of Morecambe. As

the resources available for major housing improvement became harder to find officers focussed on the district-wide but town centre focused programme of working, with owners of third-party residential and business properties to facilitate remedy of the external appearance where deficient, and to bring previously empty property including homes into use.

- 4.30 This work had significant crossover with Empty Homes Officer activity involving officers having recourse to action under the planning acts (Section 215) and as a last resort to forcing improvements by undertaking works in default while assuring costs recovery over the long term.
- 4.31 The Empty Homes Officer continues to undertake targeted action in the West End of Morecambe although the capacity of the regeneration team has been reduced in recent times through budget cuts.
- 4.32 The work of the Regeneration Service is currently predominantly focussed on the delivery of new homes under area regeneration strategies ongoing or emerging for the Canal Quarter in Lancaster and central area regeneration in Morecambe.

Methodist Action North West

- 4.33 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. A successful bid for Government funding allowed a loan to be offered to the owners of long-term empty properties for renovations to be carried out and for the properties to be brought back into use and managed by Methodist Action, with the loan being repaid through the rental income. As the scheme was so successful, Lancaster City Council invested £200k of its own money to further extend the scheme once the Government funding ended.
- 4.34 The partnership between Lancaster City Council and Methodist Action was successful in bringing 22 properties back into use, which are properties that would otherwise have potentially remained empty for a substantial length of time. Unfortunately, in the summer of 2019 Methodist Action went into liquidation, meaning that this partnership ended. All properties that had been brought back into use through the scheme were handed back to the owners and the offer of financial assistance to empty homeowners was suspended.
- 4.35 It is considered that this was an effective partnership that delivered on its aims, and it is unfortunate that it was cut short. The council can take what it has learned from this experience and hopefully move forward with a new partner to offer a new empty homes scheme if a new Registered Provider can be found.

5. Empty Homes Strategy Action Review and Future Objectives

5.1 This is the council's third Empty Homes Strategy since the appointment of the Empty Homes Officer in 2013 who was tasked with:

- Specifically targeting empty homes.
- Using the available statutory powers to reduce their impact.
- Assisting in seeing as many empty homes brought back into use as possible.

The broad strategic objectives and achievements of the previous strategies can be used as a benchmark to assess effectiveness of the work undertaken and to ensure the direction of future work meets the current policy priorities and objectives of the council.

Objective 1: 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 city council with whom 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 this presents.
- Owners become more aware of the assistance available through promotion of the council's role.

5.3 Raising awareness of empty homes issues has taken the form of the following actions:

- Letters to empty homes owners – Contact is made with all empty homeowners whose property has been empty more than 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.
- Media coverage – There have been regular articles in local newspapers highlighting the issues surrounding empty homes across the district, including The Lancaster Guardian and The Visitor. A section was included on the Council's social media pages highlighting the work of the Empty Homes Officer and the benefits it creates. These have had a varying range of responses, mostly positive, with people being pleased that the council is performing this role.
- Visiting neighbouring properties – The people that are most affected by empty properties are those who live directly adjacent to them; either through the 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. Visiting the neighbouring properties and making them aware that the property is being monitored, and the owner encouraged to act, can remove stress and anxiety giving a point of contact within the council should they need to report anything.

5.4 Pointers to Future Actions:

- Continue to ensure all empty homeowners whose property has been empty for more than 2 years are contacted.
- Expand contact to properties that have been empty for more than 18 months to give owners 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 who 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 find additional methods of connecting with local residents such as community meetings or leaflet drops in areas with high levels of empty properties.

Objective 2: To Maintain Accurate Records and Information on Empty Homes

- 5.5 Most 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 the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service for Lancaster & Preston City Councils on a quarterly basis to keep up to date with any changes. This is then used to create an active case log for the Empty Homes Officer. Other ways of information gathering are via complaints from the public, internal referrals from other services within the authority and other statutory bodies, such as the Fire Service and Police.
- 5.6 On receipt of information pertaining to an empty home, background checks are carried out, as well as a site visit to the property to assess its condition. An electronic file is then created to contain a copy of all letters and photos, and any other documents relevant to the property. The active case log is then used to store relevant information to each property and is used to keep track of required actions going forward.
- 5.7 All of the Empty Homes Officers active cases are now mapped using Geographic Information System (GIS) software. This was an objective previously set out in the strategy with the aim to better focus attention towards areas of high vacancy and to aid with communicating information. The use of GIS has also helped to make site visits more efficient, reducing duplication of visits to an area, which is a better use of officer time and better for the environment.
- 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, store important contact information for the owner which can be easily accessed in an emergency and allow easy recall of properties if a new complaint is made. It also assists in deciding what future action needs to be taken.

5.9 Pointers to Future Actions:

- Continue to maintain records and information on empty homes to ensure the information is accurate and up to date.
- Continue to develop the close working relationship with the shared Revenues & Benefits service to maintain and gather relevant information on empty homes, and target problem properties.
- Encourage additional information to be provided by other council departments and third parties, including the public, statutory partners, and community stakeholders.

Objective 3: To Explore and Pursue Funding Opportunities to Tackle Empty Homes

5.10 The council is open to funding opportunities to help assist in bringing empty homes back into use. However, since 2015 there has been no specific funding programmes targeted at empty homes. While Homes England's Affordable Homes Programme 2021-26 is the main route to funding new affordable homes, this grant stream lends itself more to new build schemes rather than purchase and repair schemes where the costs can often be more challenging.

5.11 The council's staff resource base has also been denuded in recent years. Even if funding opportunities do become available there would need to be significant consideration of the ability and capacity of the council to bid for, administer, and implement actions under external funds depending on the nature of any opportunity. Partnership with other public facing stakeholders interested in the empty homes agenda would be required.

5.12 Pointers to Future Actions:

- Keep up to date with all Government legislation and funding opportunities.
- Should opportunities arise, review capacity and ability of the council to bid for, administer, and implement actions under external funding opportunities in association with public facing stakeholders as appropriate.

Objective 4: Continue to Take a Proactive Approach to Engage with Empty Homeowners and Target Problematic Empty Homes that Generate Complaints

5.13 As previously noted, contact has already been made with all empty homeowners whose property has been empty more than 2 years. 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.

5.14 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 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.

5.15 Pointers to Future Actions

- Continue to engage with empty homeowners 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 more than 6 months to encourage them to take action with their properties.

Objective 5: To Implement All Measures Available to the Council in Order to Bring Empty Homes Back into Use

5.16 There are several measures available to the Council to encourage empty homeowners 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 homeowners 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 incentives are also offered, such as reduced VAT rates on renovations to long term empty properties and guidance on planning where appropriate.
- External Assistance – The Empty Homes Officer is often contacted by property developers looking for empty homes to renovate. A database has therefore been established of interested parties should a homeowner show an interest in selling a property in need of modernisation. This can save the owner time and money, and see the property brought back into use.
- 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 several 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. Teamwork with other departments also means that vermin problems, fly tipping, 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 homeowners 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 deems 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 only been used once by the council on a property in extremely poor condition which had been disclaimed and had no chance of being brought back into use by other means. 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.

5.17 Due to limited staffing and funding resources, it is necessary to target staff time towards the worst cases that need urgent attention, as well as limit the use of Section 215 Notices to cases where a successful enforced sale is predicted. This is due to the loss of assistance with the service of notices, and to ensure all available funds are used to obtain the best outcome.

5.18 Pointers to Future Actions

- Continue to work through all the measures available, to an increasing degree of severity, in order to achieve the desired outcome.
- Aim to see that approximately 60 properties are brought back into use following intervention from the Empty Homes Officer each year.
- 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 in the most severe cases, where all other measures have failed, as a final means to see the property brought back into use. The possible consequences of leaving a property to deteriorate can also be advertised as a deterrent to other owners of empty homes.
- Review resources and ensure targeting at priority properties in terms of severity of impact on community amenity.

6. Conclusion and Statement on Continuing Objectives and Action Plan

- 6.1 Empty homes are a necessary consequence of housing turn over – a house must become empty in order for new owners to move in. In most cases, this will only be a few days, however, this period can become extended for several reasons, such as, when renovation works are required, or the property is part of the estate of a deceased owner. The length of time that a property is empty, and the condition that it is left in whilst empty, can start to have a negative impact on the surrounding neighbours and the wider community if left unchecked. The role of the Empty Homes Officer is to monitor empty properties to mitigate the potential negative impacts that empty properties can have and facilitate suitable enforcement action when required.
- 6.2 There is a recognised housing shortage across the Lancaster District, therefore all empty properties brought back into use will help to ease this pressure and provide much needed housing. Central Government incentives, as well as discretionary powers Local Authorities can impose, aim to work as a deterrent to leaving properties empty for an excessive period.
- 6.3 The Empty Homes Strategy aims to set out a plan of action to raise awareness of empty homes and their impact on the wider community, effectively record and monitor all empty properties, take a proactive approach to working with empty home owners, seek any funding available to be used on empty homes schemes, and use available legislation to mitigate the negative effects of empty homes.

1. Case Studies

Beaufort Road, Morecambe

- 1.1 This property had been empty for 7 years and the owner seemed unwilling to engage with the Council with regards to assistance that we might be able to provide. The Empty Homes Officer was approached by a local property developer who was interested in the potential purchase of the property and so their contact details were passed to the owner of the property.
- 1.2 Within 4 months the sale had been completed and a full renovation of the property commenced. The new owner was able to complete the works and have the property on the open market for sale within 6 months.



Combermere Road, Heysham

1.3 This property was left empty in 2012 due to the owner being out of their depth with the level of renovations required to bring it back up to a habitable standard. After contact from the Empty Homes Officer, in 2018 the owner was willing to sell the property to a local property developer who purchased the house specifically to bring it back into use using the Methodist Action Scheme with the Council.

1.4 Council funding was made available to the new owner due to the length of time the property had been left empty. The works were carried out to the Council's specifications and met all the housing standards criteria for decent rented housing. The property was subsequently rented out to a local person who presented to the Council with housing need and was managed by Methodist Action until such time that they went into liquidation, at which time it was handed back to the owner who took over the management of the property.



1.5 This property was owned by a development company in the South of England who had invested in Morecambe with little understanding of the property values. It sat empty for over 10 years before the threat of enforcement action finally encouraged the owner to sell the property, at which time the full renovation works were carried out and the property brought back into use.



East Lodge, Aldcliffe Road, Lancaster

1.6 This listed building was purchased as a retirement project, where the owner quickly realised, they were out of their depth with the amount of works required. Rather than sell the property, it was left empty for close to 20 years, was subject to multiple break-ins and acts of vandalism and fell into a state of disrepair.

1.7 Following years of false promises and little action, the council took the decision to serve a Section 215 Notice on the owner, requiring extensive works of improvement to the property, with the threat of an enforced sale if they were not carried out. This gave the owner the motivation needed to finally agree to sell the property to a local property developer.

1.8 The works were completed within 6 months of the sale and the property has now been returned to its former glory.



1.9 This property was purchased by a company in 2012 as an investment fraud. Six investors were tricked into handing over their own money towards the renovation costs, well in excess of the value of the property, with the promise of returns once the works had been completed. No works were ever carried out and the company went into liquidation and disclaimed the property in 2014.

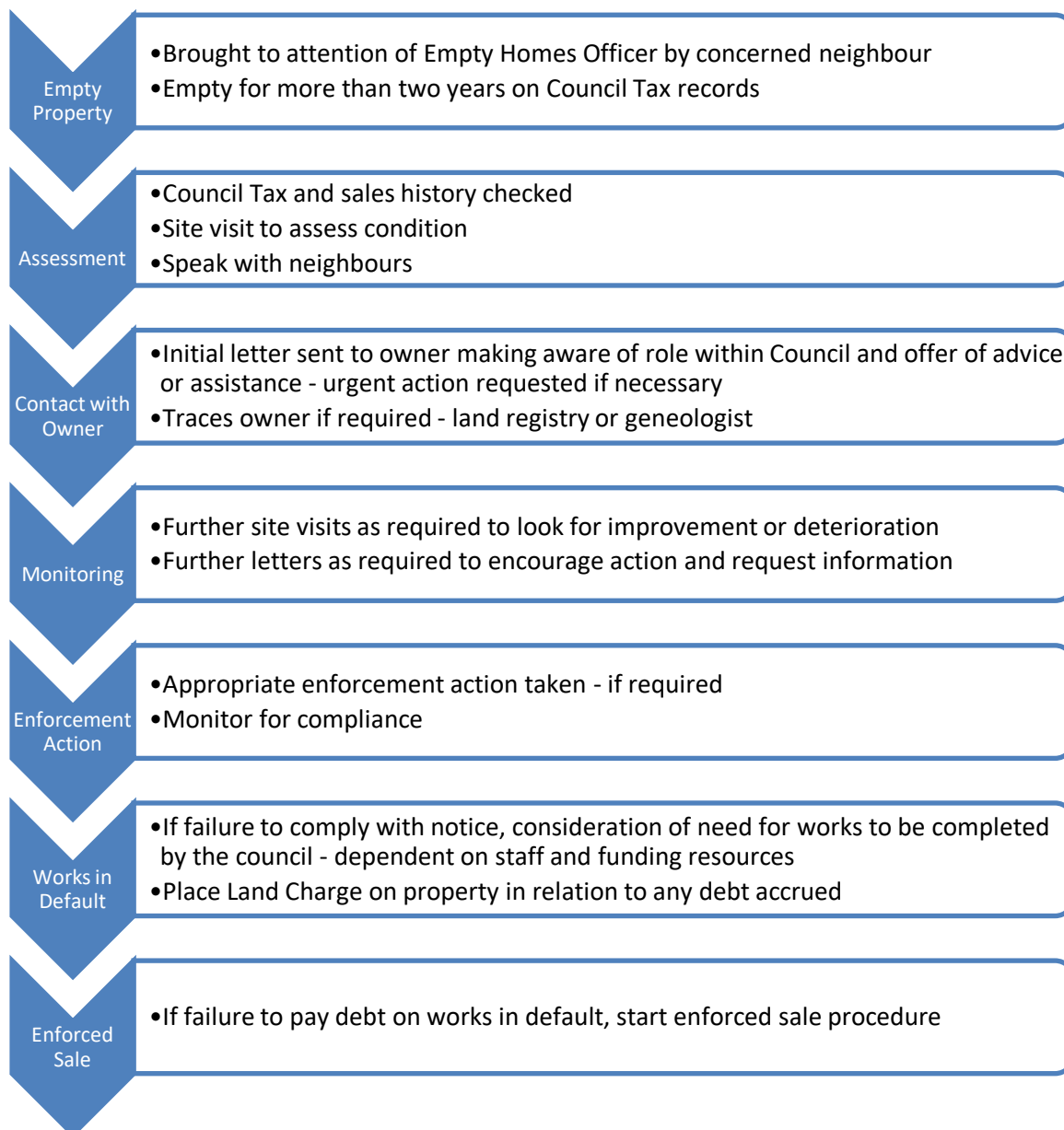
1.10 A fire in the property in 2015 and regular vandalism meant that the property quickly fell into a state of disrepair. The Council were called regularly by concerned neighbours and carried out various works to attempt to minimise the negative impact of the property.

1.11 Due to the debt building up against the property and the knowledge that there was no owner to take responsibility for the property, the enforced sales procedure was followed. In 2019 the property was sold to a local property developer via auction, and following extensive renovations the property was brought back into use in 2021.

1.12 Without this intervention by the council, it is likely that the property would not have been brought back into use, and would have continued to be a target for vandalism and a constant source of worry for the neighbours.



2. Empty Homes Work Progression



3. EMPTY HOMES ACTION PLAN 2025-2030

Action – Raise Awareness	Outcomes	Lead	Timescale for completion	Measure	Resource Implications
Regularly review council tax data and contact empty homes owners at the earliest possible stage	Reduction in the time homes are empty	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Carried out weekly	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	Aim to publicly report on empty homes twice per year	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	Carried out weekly	Within existing resources
Regularly liaise with neighbours of empty properties	Providing support to local residents	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Carried out weekly	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	Obtained quarterly	Within existing resources
Maintain internal records of empty properties being targeted and log all actions taken	More effective monitoring	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing	Carried out daily	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	60 empty properties brought back into use with Council intervention per year	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	Currently no available funding	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	Current links with Empty Homes Network and Empty Homes North LA Group	Within existing resources
Action – Enforcement					
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	0 notices were served in 2024 – negotiations have been successful	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	Works in default were carried out to 1 property in 2024	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	1 enforced sale has been carried out by Lancaster City Council in the previous 10 years	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	Housing Solicitor in role in 2024 providing additional support	Identify appropriate resources within Legal Services