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WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**LONG TERM EMPTY PROPERTY  
STRATEGY  
2024 - 2029**

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 This strategy describes the council's intentions to reduce the number of empty homes in the district and bring them back into use.
- 1.2 Returning empty homes back into use not only helps to meet housing needs but can also reduce problems associated with vacant properties. Empty homes can adversely affect the lives of people in the vicinity, can be a magnet for anti-social behaviour and an unnecessary drain on public services.
- 1.3 The council is committed to taking action to reduce the number of empty homes in the area by taking a proactive approach in supporting owners to help return their empty properties back into use or to redevelop them. A coordinated and sustainable approach can deliver an increase in housing supply, improve housing standards, and reduce the number of empty homes.

## **2. The National Context**

- 2.1 The Government classes properties that have been empty for longer than 6 months as long-term empty. It is recommended that local authorities have an empty homes strategy for their area, with the aspiration to reduce the number of long-term empty homes.
- 2.2 Government policy to incentivise the reoccupation of long-term empty homes allows local authorities to vary the amount of council tax payable on some empty homes, with the option of imposing an 'empty homes premium.'
- 2.3 Despite this, long term empties are now at their highest level. The most recent Government statistics (November 2023) report 261,189 long term empty homes in England, representing a rise of 12,556 compared to 2022, up by 5% annually and 16% since before the pandemic in 2019.

## **3. The Local Context**

- 3.1 The adopted West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2031 describes housing provision as critically important and sets out ambition to provide 15,950 homes throughout the plan period. The plan describes the importance of protecting the existing stock in meeting the housing needs of our residents.
- 3.2 Any empty property can be a problem, and therefore all owners of long-term empty properties will be contacted to encourage the return to use. Many long-term empty homes will be returned to use without continued council intervention. Therefore the focus of more significant work will generally be on those properties that have been empty for more than two years or have received specific complaints. These longer-term empty homes cause most concern as they are more likely to remain empty for longer without intervention and are also more likely to be an increasing source of blight and complaint.
- 3.3 The Council Tax database is used to determine the number of empty homes in West Oxfordshire. At the end of March 2024 there was registered 1128 long-term empty properties which represents 2% of all domestic properties in the district, of which 125 were

classed as being empty in excess of 2 years. 64% of these were within the towns of Chipping Norton and Witney; with 9.8% of those properties awaiting demolition.

#### **4. Why Homes are Empty**

4.1 For the purposes of this strategy the term 'empty property' is taken to be a dwelling which is unoccupied and without furniture.

4.2 There are two main types of empty residential properties:

- 1) Transactional empty properties; and,
- 2) Long-term empty properties

4.3 Homes that have been recorded as empty for more than 6 months are classified as long-term empty by the Council. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) classes problematic empty properties as those that are inactive in the housing market and have been empty for more than 6 months. Transactional empty properties are generally up to 6 months, usually due to a change in tenant or ownership and are part of the normal cycle of people moving to a new house; although they may be empty for longer should they be subject to major renovations works.

4.4 A property does not have to be used all the time to be classed as occupied. For example, if it is:

- A second home or holiday home
- A property which is part of a wider regeneration programme and could be in the process of being developed or marked for demolition
- A property which has pending planning permission, could be waiting refurbishments, or could be waiting for new occupant to move in
- A property where the owner is living elsewhere to provide or receive personal care.

4.5 There are many reasons for properties being left empty. Some are easily categorised, and other circumstances are more complex with owners having their own individual reasons for keeping their property empty. Some of the most common barriers that exist for owners of long-term empty properties are preventing them from returning their property back into use include:

- Issues with inheritance and/or delays with probate
- Lack of finance to carry out necessary repairs and/or refurbishment
- Perceived problems associated with letting of properties
- Owner unwilling to bring the property back into use
- Sentimental attachment to the property
- Lack of decision as to whether to sell or rent the property
- The owners are not local and are uncontactable, therefore effectively abandoning the property

- Part of a larger portfolio of properties, where one empty property does not affect their overall income.

## **5. Challenges Presented by Empty Homes.**

- 5.1 Dealing with an empty home is not always straightforward. A property may be used as a second home, and so not occupied on a permanent basis, but is in use. It may be that non-residential space such as that often found above shops is being used for storage or other business-related matters and although not immediately obvious it is in use.
- 5.2 There may be properties awaiting planning permissions and work is unable to commence whilst this is being sought. A number of these may include specialist permissions if they are a Listed Building or located in a Conservation Area.
- 5.3 Ownership Issues: A property may be owned by a number of different people or companies. The property may be subject to legal proceedings such as probate, divorce settlements, proceeds of crime restrictions or other legal restrictions.
- 5.4 Land Registry Issues: Although it is now compulsory in England to register any property which changes ownership or has a mortgage taken out against it for the first time, properties which have not changed ownership since before this requirement may not be registered with the Land Registry and information regarding the property will not be available from this source.
- 5.5 Absentee Owner: It may not be immediately evident who the owner of a property is or where they are, as they may have moved away with little information available to trace them.
- 5.6 Intentionally Vacant: Some properties are deliberately kept empty by the owner for specific reasons such as for their children when they leave home or elderly relatives who are in care. Some are kept empty until the owner feels the housing market is suitable to sell the property at the price they want. Others feel unwilling to sell due to emotional/past family connections with the property. Some owners are reluctant to engage with the Council and believe that as the property is privately owned the Council does not have the right to require action to return it to use. They may be unaware, or have no concern for, the effect the property has on the local area and surrounding properties. These are properties which are likely to be left empty for many years and fall into disrepair.

## **6. Why Empty Homes Matter**

- 6.1 The ambition of the adopted West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2031 to provide 15,950 homes over the plan period is challenging. High numbers of un-occupied homes are damaging when offset against this number. The plan also has a target of achieving 274 homes for the affordable sector annually. In addition to increasing the availability of housing in the district, tackling long term empty homes could also provide benefits for housing affordability.

- 6.1 Empty properties are a wasted resource, both for the community and the owner. The Council receives complaints about empty properties, including those that have been neglected or fallen into disrepair, from local people who rightly object to unsightly discussed properties. For properties in this state, there are implications for the Council's Environmental Protection and Planning Enforcement Teams that have to use staff time and other resources to intervene to deal with pests, dilapidation, overgrown gardens, damage to neighbouring properties and other such issues.
- 6.2 For owners leaving a property empty can become costly and be a source of unnecessary anxiety.
- 6.3 There is an increased risk of vandalism and crime, and the property can be difficult to insure, which could result in high repair costs or even mean a complete loss of asset.
- 6.4 Even the general deterioration of an unlive property will result in costs, including those due to works necessary to maintain it even in its vacant state, as well as to enable the property to be brought back up to suitable living standards.
- 6.5 For the local community empty homes can have a direct impact on adjoining properties through issues such as damp and structural problems. Alongside this, unsightly empty homes can have a detrimental effect on the neighbourhood, affecting neighbouring house prices and pose an attraction for local crime, including vandalism, breaking into the property for various reasons, and can contribute to a lack of pride in the area.

## **7 Opportunities from Empty Homes**

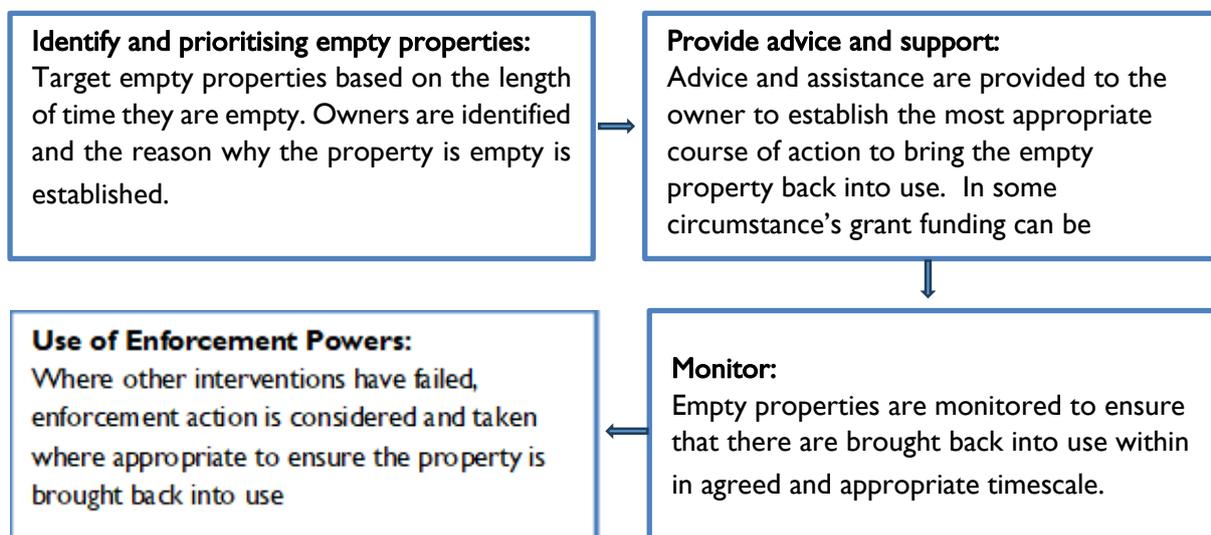
- 7.1 By renting or selling the property to allow occupation not only are the above issues resolved, but whilst not necessarily problem-free, there is the added advantage of gaining regular rental income or the capital from the sale of the property, and a beneficial impact on local housing needs.
- 7.2 Returning empty homes into occupation can help eliminate many of these issues and ensure that house prices in the immediate vicinity are protected from preventable reductions. Improving an area can also encourage investment in the local economy and a return of any lost pride in the community created by empty homes.
- 7.3 Empty homes returned to residential use increase the availability of homes. Instead of being a source of concern these homes can be transformed from a wasted resource into a home for an individual or family in housing need. There are approximately 2215 households on the waiting list for social housing. The utilisation of empty homes could prevent some of these people from facing issues such as homelessness or overcrowding or provide a first home for a local person and/or family.

## 8. Our Approach to Empty Homes

8.1 The council will work to prevent properties becoming empty over the long term by responding to enquiries about such properties from the public, undertaking media campaigns in the local press and other social media platforms as well as promotions of its work on the council website.

8.2 Where properties do become empty, the council will try and locate owners and starting with an informal approach will work with them cooperatively in an attempt to bring properties back into use. Generally this will take the form of offering advice and guidance. Where this is not successful, the council will move onto enforcement against the owner to require the property be brought back into use.

The Council's approach to tackling empty properties is summarised as follows:



8.3 The council follows an investigation process in order to trace owners of empty properties with a view to encouraging them to bring properties back into use. However, in some circumstances it is not always possible to identify or make contact with owners, or owners are reluctant or unable to bring properties back into use.

8.4 Under these circumstances, or if there is an imminent risk to health and safety, the council will consider a number of enforcement options. The options available include, but are not limited to: -

- **Enforced Sale** – Allows the council to force the sale of a property to recover debts owed to the council that are registered as a charge on the property.
- **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)** – Enables the council to secure occupation and responsible management of some privately owned houses and flats that have been empty for two or more years.

- **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO)** – Enables the council to purchase and sell an empty property for the purpose of providing housing accommodation or facilities connected to housing accommodation.

8.5 A summary of the various enforcement powers that are available to the council in respect of property aesthetics. Maintenance and addressing long-term empty concerns are described in Annex A.

## 9. Aims, Objectives and Approach to Tackling Empty Homes

9.1 The over-riding aim of this strategy is to bring empty homes back into use and tackle the issues posed by those that are long term vacant, are problematic or could help to meet some of the local housing need.

9.2 The starting point for any intervention will be to work with the property owner where possible. Each empty home is different and there are many reasons why they become empty. However, despite these, it is also important to recognise that an empty home is a potential blight on the community and wasted resource.

9.3 In order to achieve the aims this strategy focusses on five objectives:

- 1) To gather relevant, accurate and current information about empty homes in the district.
- 2) To provide advice, assistance and guidance to landlords and property owner
- 3) To raise awareness of empty homes in the district and promote the strategy.
- 4) To introduce a Council Tax Premium on second homes and apply a premium to long term empty properties after one year.
- 5) To reduce the number of empty homes and return empty homes back into use, through all available and appropriate means.

9.4 Table I below shows the key actions that will be taken to implement the objectives of this strategy.

<b>Objective 1: To gather relevant, accurate and current information about empty homes</b>		
<b>Actions</b>	<b>Timescales</b>	<b>Responsible officer/team</b>
Maintain an empty property database containing information provided by council tax, environmental protection, and development management	Continuous	Revenues Team

Continue to carry out reviews of empty properties using council tax data and information from questionnaires sent to all owners of known empty properties about the occupancy status of the properties.	Annually	Revenues Team
Map location of reported empty homes	TBC	Revenues Team/GIS Team
Carry out risk assessments on known empty properties and identify for proactive enforcement	On a case-by case basis	Revenues Team/Environmental Protection Team/Legal Team
<b>Objective 2: Provide advice, assistance and guidance to landlords and property owner</b>		
<b>Actions</b>	<b>Timescales</b>	<b>Responsible officer/team</b>
Produce an updated empty property guide/information leaflet for owners of empty homes	January 2025 and reviewed annually	Revenues Officer/Revenues Manager and Communications Team
Ensure early engagement with owners of empty homes and that engagement is continuous	Case-by-case	Revenues Officers
<b>Objective 3: To raise awareness of empty homes in the district and promote the strategy</b>		
<b>Actions</b>	<b>Timescales</b>	<b>Responsible officer/team</b>

Review and update information on the council's website and provide relevant updates via the council's media channels.	As required	Revenues Manager/Communications Team
Run at least one awareness raising campaign to coincide, where possible, with the National Empty Homes week	Annually	Revenues Manager
<b>Objective 4: To introduce a Council Tax Premium on second homes and apply a premium to long term empty properties after one year.</b>		
To seek approval from the Council to apply premiums on second homes from 1 April 2025	January 2025	Business Manager/Revenues Team
To seek approval from the Council to apply premiums on long term empty properties after one year of being empty	January 2025	Business Manager/Revenues Team
<b>Objective 5: To reduce the number of empty homes and return empty homes back into use, through all available and appropriate means</b>		
<b>Actions</b>	<b>Timescales</b>	<b>Responsible officer/team</b>
Seek to identify funding to offer financial assistance	Continuous	Revenues Manager
Actively look for any Government initiatives that assist with finances for bringing properties back to use	Continuous	Revenues Manager
Work in partnership with internal departments to ensure delivery of aims	Continuous	Revenues Team, Environmental Health,

		Development Management, Legal, CFU, Building Control
Continue to review the use of enforcement options for empty homes on a case-by-case basis	As required	Revenues Team, Environmental Health, Development Management, Legal, CFU, Building Control

## 10. Performance Monitoring and Review

10.1. The purpose of this strategy is to explain the current situation with regard to empty homes both on a national and local basis and to set out the Council's future plans. It is essential that the effectiveness of actions delivered by the implementation of the strategy is closely monitored and reviewed. In order to develop a good system of performance management it is proposed to undertake the following actions: -

- Monitor the number of empty homes brought back into use
- Develop up to date knowledge of best practice through research and liaison
- Monitor and review delivery of actions within the Implementation Plan

## Annex A – Enforcement Powers

Problem/Concern	Legislation	Statutory Powers
Dangerous or dilapidated buildings or structures	Building Act 1984 (s77 & s78)	To require the owner to make the property safe (section 77) or enable the Local Authority to take emergency action to make the building safe (Section 78)
	Building Act 1984 (s79)	To require the owner to repair ruinous or dilapidated buildings seriously detrimental to an area
	Housing Act 2004 (part 1)	Under the Housing health and Safety Rating system local authorities can evaluate the potential risks to health and safety arising from deficiencies within properties and take appropriate enforcement action
Unsecured properties (where it poses the risk that it may be entered or suffer vandalism, arson or similar)	Building Act 1984, s78 Local government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, s29	To allow Local Authority to fence off the property. To require the owner to take steps to secure a property or allow the Local Authority to board it up in an emergency.
Blocked or defective drainage or private sewers	Local Government (Miscellaneous provisions) Act 1976 (s35)	To require the owner to address obstructed private sewers.
	Building Act 1984 (s59)	To require the owner to address blocked or defective drainage.
	Public health Act 1961 (s17)	To require the owner to address defective drainage or private sewers.
Vermin (where it is either present or there is a risk of attracting vermin that may detrimentally affect people's health)	Public Health Act 1961 (s34)	To require the owner to remove waste so that vermin is not attracted to the site, destroy any infestation and remove any accumulations prejudicial to health.
	Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 (s4)	
	Public Health Act 1936 (s83)	

	Environmental Protection Act 1990 (s80)	
	Building Act 1984 (s76)	
Unightly land and property affecting the amenity of an area	Public Health Act 1961 (s34)	To require the owner to remove waste from the property (see above)
	Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (s215)	To require the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of a property
	Building Act 1984 (s79)	To require the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of a property
Recovery of debts against a property	Law of Property Act 1925 (s101 & s103)	To apply for an order of sale of the property to recover council tax debts or debts secured as a legal charge after work in default carried out
Properties empty for over 2 years and causing nuisance in the community	Housing Act 2004 (s133 – 183)	To apply for an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) to enable the local authority to take over the management of eligible empty properties, to bring them back into use
Long-term empty properties where no traceable owners, or where all efforts to return the property to use have been exhausted	Housing Act 1985 (s17)	To seek to acquire a property under a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)
Anti-Social Behaviour	Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.  Community Protection Notices	To prevent an owner's persistent, continuing or unreasonable behaviour, having a negative impact on the local community's quality of life.