

CABINET



URN: 24-010

Report Title : Empty Homes Strategy

Report to: Executive Leadership Team – 14 February 2024
Cabinet

Date of meeting : 4 March 2024

Responsible Cabinet Member: Cllr Emma Flaxman-Taylor

Responsible Officer : Melanie Holland, Head of Strategic Housing
Sue Bolan, Enabling and Strategy Manager

Is this a Key decision?: No

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / INTRODUCTION FROM CABINET MEMBER

The Empty Homes Strategy provides a policy framework, setting out the Council's current and new priority actions for bringing empty homes back into use; highlighting support and guidance for owners of empty homes; summarising legislation relating to empty homes and how the Council ensures that it follows best practice; and provides a comprehensive Action Plan.

The Empty Homes Policy was last updated in 2018. This updated version being an Empty Homes Strategy, provides an overview of the numbers of empty homes in the borough of Great Yarmouth, why homes can become empty and how, especially long-term. Empty homes are a wasted resource, so it is important that they are brought back into use.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Cabinet:

- (a) Approves the Empty Homes Strategy contained at Appendix I.
- (b) Delegates authority to the Executive Director – People and Head of Strategic Housing to undertake any minor and/or consequential amendments to the Empty Homes Strategy for the purpose of ensuring it is up to date, clarifying its content or interpretation, correcting any errors or omissions, updating it in accordance with changes in legislation, and/or caselaw, or with changes in the management structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Empty Homes Strategy seeks to highlight the reason why homes in private ownership are empty, the advice and assistance the Council can offer, and the initiatives it is exploring to assist owners of empty homes. The Strategy also sets out the range of enforcement activity the Council currently uses and the associated policy approach. This strategy is only to address privately owned properties, the Void Management Policy and Void Standard addresses properties owned by the Council.
- 1.2. The Council Tax base return in October 2023 saw a decrease in long term empty homes from 613 to 600.
- 1.3. Empty homes are found across the borough (fig. 1 below), with the largest number being found in the main town of Great Yarmouth. The regeneration of the town will assist in the reduction of empty properties, through the increase in property values and therefore the willingness to invest to create that financial return.
- 1.4. The options available to support empty homeowners in the Empty Homes Strategy support regeneration and economic growth in the town of Great Yarmouth and across the Borough.

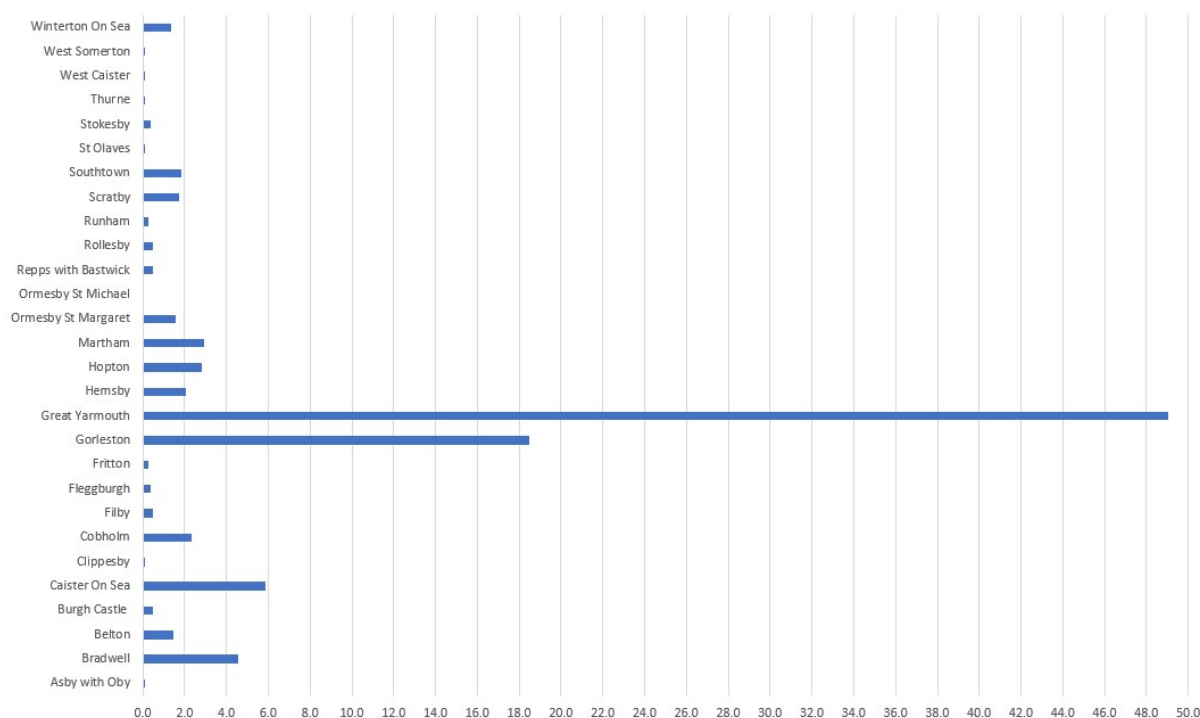


Fig.1 – Number of empty properties boroughwide, show by the % found in each town / village (Source; GYBC Council Tax)

2. DELIVERY OF EMPTY HOMES POLICY 2018

- 2.1. Since the launch of the existing Empty Homes Policy in 2018 the Council has undertaken a number of actions to seek to bring empty homes back into use:

Purchase and Repair Scheme

- 2.2. The Council itself has purchased 9 empty homes which have been brought back into use as social housing and is currently considering a further 4 empty homes. Further to this, owners have been introduced to other charities and to Norfolk County Council (NCC) for their supported housing provision, along with the investors registered with the Council. Challenges faced include, the level of works required making Council acquisition unviable, but in these instances either direction to other purchasing organisation / investor or advice to sell on the open market has led to the property being brought back into use.

Invest & Lease Option

- 2.3. An Invest and Lease Scheme provides another option to offer empty homeowners, under this scheme the Council would take a 7-year lease with an owner, renovating the property and letting it for the period of the lease. The renovation costs are recovered through the rental income generated by the property when let.

To date, modelling of the Invest and Lease Scheme has shown that it is financial unviable, however, the approval to create the Council's own social lettings company, now provides a new opportunity to for a viable solution and therefore needs to be reconsidered. The introduction of Empty Dwelling Management Orders could follow, should a scheme be developed successfully.

Loan Option

- 2.4. The loan option was launched in 2019 and initially targeted those who had expressed finance as a barrier to bringing their empty home back into use. The option continued to be offered until December 2021 when it was put on hold, reflecting on the lack of applications and interest in the scheme.

Feedback from those sent the application information for the option was negative, the majority referred to the £300 upfront payment and the associated requirements of the scheme. In addition, it was found that mortgage companies would not accept the equity charge against the property.

This option is included in the updated Strategy with the intention to revisit the process and the vehicle under which financial support is given, whether this remains a loan or can become a grant with nomination rights to the Council, as this is recognised as a successful approach to address empties while providing temporary accommodation or discharging a homelessness duty. Again, this would be dependent on the creation of the social lettings scheme, but could be an income stream, if lettings continue with a management charge following the grant / loan term.

Other initiatives

- 2.5 Although not included in the 2018 policy a list of investors has been created. This was in response to the introduction of GDPR and no longer being able to send out list of empty homes. These investor details are sent to empty homeowners and, where agreed, displayed on the Council's website. There are currently 11 investors on the register, this register is open to anyone and is advertised on the Empty Homes pages of the website.
- 2.6 The Council's multi-agency Operational Property Enforcement Group continues to address empty properties in the borough, where several departments need to be involved. The work of this group will be reported separately to cabinet on a 6-month basis.

3. PROPOSED EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

- 3.1. This new Strategy reflects on the positive results achieved and the challenges faced during the term of the previous policy and identifies five strategic aims, which set out key priorities:

Increase the supply of decent housing for all tenures

Including targeted delivery of the specific size and type of property needed, introducing an invest and lease scheme and focussing on flats above shops to complement the town centre regeneration.

Raise awareness

Including the introduction of an annual empty homes event, to bring together the council departments and external agencies which can help empty homeowners.

Support & guidance

Including further advice to empty homeowners in regard to applying for probate, particularly where executors are not carrying out their duties.

Enforcement

Ensuring the Council is making use of all the powers available to it, to address empty homes. Including the introduction of Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

Working together

Establish further working relationships with new organisations to maximise funding opportunities to address empty homes.

- 3.2. An Action Plan and process flow diagram are included in this Strategy to ensure resources are concentrated on those empty properties which are a priority.
- 3.3. Case studies are also included to help the reader understand the variety of work involved when addressing empty homes.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. A capital budget of £325,000 is in place to support empty homes activity, to decrease this borrowing over time, the Empty Homes Strategy includes an action to consider introducing the recycling of capital receipts received, following enforcement, to be used for empty homes work.
- 4.2. The decrease in empty homes last year, contributed to the increased New Homes Bonus received by the Council reinforcing the importance of addressing empty homes.

5. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. Delivery of the Strategy is identified under the Action Plan.
- 5.2. Timescales for delivery will be at risk should the current level of resource be decreased.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. There is not a statutory duty to have an Empty Homes Strategy, but it is considered good practice.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1. Although it is not a statutory duty to have an Empty Homes Strategy, it is considered good practice to have one in place. The attached Strategy is proposed to replace the existing policy.
- 7.2. The review of options included in the 2018 policy is proposed as part of this Strategy, with the intention of ensuring these options are financially viable in the current economic climate, while making them attractive to empty homeowners. Revised proposals in relation to loans and leasing products will be presented to Cabinet in due course.
- 7.3. The Strategy also proposes to offer an annual empty homes event to bring together internal departments and external organisations to address empty homes, with the aim of increasing awareness and the enforcement options available to the Council.
- 7.4. The proposed Action Plan demonstrates the timeline for implementation of the Strategy elements.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Empty Homes Policy 2018

Consultations	Comment
Monitoring Officer Consultation:	Via ELT
Section 151 Officer Consultation:	Via ELT
Existing Council Policies:	Empty Homes Policy 2018
Equality Issues/EQIA assessment:	<p>Social housing supplied through the reuse of empty homes provides an affordable and secure form of tenure, which seeks to ensure residents do not fall into the poverty trap and have improved health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Working with empty homeowners and particularly enforcement action considers protected characteristics and provides EQIA as and when required, updating and maintaining the assessment throughout the involvement with the individual.</p>



Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028

Author	Sue Bolan Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Strategic Housing
Date	27th July 2023
Next review due	August 2028
Document Status	Draft V2.0

Contents

1	Introduction	8
2	National Picture	8
3	Local Picture	9
4	Impact of Empty Homes	10
5	Strategic Aims & Priorities	11
5.1	Increase the supply of decent housing for all tenures	12
5.2	Raise Awareness	12
5.3	Support & Guidance	13
5.4	Enforcement	13
5.5	Working Together	14
6	Support Available	15
7	Legislation Informing and Supporting the Strategy	15
8	Support & Guidance for Officers	16
9	Monitoring and Review	17
	Appendix One - Example Priority Matrix	18
	Appendix Two - Great Yarmouth BC - Empty Homes Action Plan	19
	Appendix Three - Example Cases	24
	Appendix Four - Empty Homes Process Flow Diagram	25

1 Introduction

Empty homes are a wasted resource and can lead to anti-social behaviour and blight neighbourhoods. Great Yarmouth Borough Council is committed to bringing empty homes back into use, in particular those properties which have been empty for long periods of time. Since the publication of the Empty Homes Policy in 2018, 2,170 properties have been brought back into use. This new Strategy aims to build on the progress the Council has made and describes the Council's intentions and approach to increase the number of long-term empty homes being brought back into use. The Borough currently contains approximately 600 empty homes which have been empty for over six months, this equates to 1.2% of housing stock.

The Strategy summarises the national picture in relation to recent legislation to prevent owners leaving empty homes empty for long periods of time; discusses the local picture in the Borough, including how the Council resources the empty homes function; explains why homes can become empty; sets out the Council's current and new priority actions for bringing empty homes back into use; highlights support and guidance for owners of empty homes; summarises legislation relating to empty homes and how the Council ensures that it follows best practice; and finally provides a comprehensive action plan.

2 National Picture

The latest Government data (October 2023) shows 269,009 properties in England have been standing empty for more than six months. This is an increase on 2022 and still does not show a return to pre-pandemic figures.

The empty homes premium has been introduced to help increase the number of homes brought back into use. The Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023 gives Local Authorities the option to create second home premium meaning a second home in Great Yarmouth will be charged 200% council tax.

This Act also gives Local Authorities the ability to charge the empty homes premium from 12 months instead of the current 24 months. This will see empty homeowners being charged 200% council tax from the one-year anniversary of the property being empty, potentially rising to 400% after 10 years.

One of the loopholes for empty homeowners is the short-term letting market (Airbnb for example) which stated that a property had to be 'available' to let for 140 days however as of April 2023, the government introduced more stringent rules to close this loophole, meaning that owners have to evidence that their property was available to let for 140 days and actually let for a minimum of 70 days, before they can be considered for business rates relief.

To try and assist in addressing this issue further the government has consulted on a planning change which will see the introduction of a new class of property (C5 (short term or holiday lets), changes to this new class will be through permitted development unless an Article 4 direction is in place, which will see the requirement to seek planning permission for this change.

In addition, the Action on Empty Homes group is calling for a new Nationally funded Empty Homes programme (as already provided by the Welsh and Scottish governments) with funding devolved to local councils to introduce or enhance measures to deal with empty home problems.

3 Local Picture

Historically long-term empty home numbers in the Great Yarmouth Borough Council area have been stable at around 600. The pandemic in 2020 saw empty home figures spike nationally by approximately 20%, which is taking time to recover from. As shown by Figure one below, the Borough is returning to pre-pandemic numbers, as this year (2023/24) has seen a slight decrease (600 empty homes) from last year (613 empty homes). However, this still equates to 1.2% of dwelling stock, which as shown in Figure two are slightly above the national and regional averages. Hence why it is so important to have an Empty Homes Strategy.

Figure one

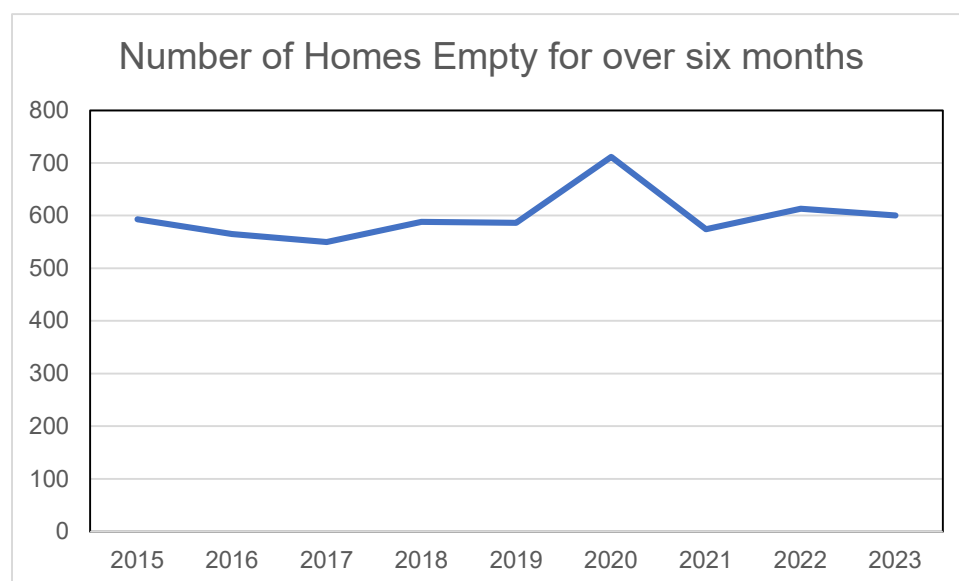


Figure two

Empty Homes as a % of all properties registered for Council Tax purposes – October 2023	
Location	% Empties
Great Yarmouth Borough Council	1.2%
Norfolk	1.1%
England	1.1%

The introduction of the council tax premiums (levy, levy 5 & levy 10) has resulted in some owners deciding to bring their empty properties back into use and, where the property is not creating a problem to the neighbours and surrounding area, has provided additional income to the Council. Where a debt is being accrued the Council Tax department has a debt recovery team, that uses its enforcement powers to ensure the debt does not remain outstanding for a protracted period of time.

Properties brought back into use can help to increase the New Homes Bonus received by the Council and, where the property is brought back as affordable housing, this not only meets the highest need in the Borough but also provides a premium to the New Homes Bonus.

The Council recognises the need to bring empty homes back into use and has 1.5 FTE officers dedicated to empty homes work; the full-time post being the *Property Enabling Officer* within Environmental Services whose role is to support the work of the Council's Operational Property Enforcement Group

(OPEG). The half post being the *Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager* within Strategic Housing whose main priority is residential empty properties within the borough.

It should be noted that these posts work closely with all other services across the Borough Council providing support to bring empty homes back into use.

Great Yarmouth Borough Council's OPEG is made-up of officers from the relevant services:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| - Environmental Health | - Property & Assets |
| - Housing | - Conservation |
| - Council Tax | - Community Hub |
| - Planning | - NP Law |
| - Building Control | |

OPEG, chaired by the Head of Environmental Services tackles problem properties in the Borough, commercial and residential, which require a joint approach.

There is also a Task & Finish Group created for Great Yarmouth, which is attended by the Norfolk Constabulary (Great Yarmouth Police), Norfolk Fire & Rescue Service, Homelessness Team, and the Ambulance Service. Working as part of a multi-agency approach information is shared and strategic approaches considered for high profile and resource intensive properties in the borough.

It can take a significant amount of time to resolve a problem property, to obtain contact with the owner, establish their intentions and to limit the risk to the Council, some instances are not quick wins, they take time, different approaches and joint working with both council services and external agencies, to ensure the right outcome is achieved for all involved.

To ensure the most cost-effective approach to tackling empty homes, with the limited resource for empty homes work, the Council focuses on those properties which provide an environmental, and social benefit to the local community, a financial benefit to public services and enhances the reputation of the Council to resolve the issue of long-term empty homes. As shown in Appendix 1, the Council applies an assessment criterion to ensure that all empty homes are identified and scored according to impact with priority given to those properties identified as causing a higher impact.

4 Impact of Empty Homes

Empty homes across the borough are a wasted resource particularly when there is a significant need and a lack of supply of affordable housing. That said, homes which become empty while they are renovated or improved prior to letting or sale form part of the housing market's turnover and do not generally cause a problem. Such properties are however monitored to ensure work progresses expeditiously.

Homes that have been empty for more than six months (long-term empty homes) are the properties where the Council focusses its efforts. These homes are a wasted resource and can cause issues for the owner and the neighbourhood.

Empty homes:

- can have a negative effect on an area, becoming a focal point for illegal activities and anti-social behaviour;
- cause strain and financial pressures to the Council other agencies such as the Police, and the Fire and Rescue Service;
- may also become a risk to the public through unsafe structures, e.g., harbouring litter and vermin; and
- may affect the ability of surrounding neighbours to sell their properties due to the appearance and concern of an empty home.

Empty homes are also an expense to the owner, due to council tax premiums applied, insurance and of course any issues which arise. In contrast to this, an income could be achieved through letting the home. Some of the known reasons why people leave their homes empty include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| • Inheritance | • Lack of interest |
| • Awaiting demolition | • Awaiting planning consent |
| • Lack of finance to carry out repairs | • Prohibition orders |
| • Owner moved into care | • Repossessions and finally |
| • Investment opportunities | • Family disputes such as divorce settlements |

In some cases, the owner simply doesn't know how to or can't face, dealing with the empty property as demonstrated in the examples at Appendix 3.

5 Strategic Aims & Priorities

This Empty Homes Strategy supports the Council's Corporate Plan 2020-2025 and the Council's Strategic Priority:

To bring empty properties back into use and in the town centre bring the first and second floors of appropriate properties back into residential use, creating quality homes.

The Strategy provides direction and sets out the resource allocation to support the bringing of empty homes back into use to help meet the housing needs of the borough.

To support this, the aims of this Strategy are:

- To increase the supply of decent housing for all tenures.
- To raise awareness of the need to report empty homes to the Council.
- To support and guide the resolution of empty homes.
- To support enforcement measures where needed.
- To work together with multi-agency partners to bring back into use empty homes.

Each of these is explored below, demonstrating our current approach and how this can be improved with further targeted actions identified in the Action Plan in Appendix 2.

5.1 Increase the supply of decent housing for all tenures

Current priority actions

- The purchase of empty homes is currently an option and is offered as opportunities arise or various funding schemes are available.
- Working with the Housing Options team, specific type and sizes of properties required to meet our affordable housing needs have been identified and a targeted approach to acquire these is underway.
- The Investors Register enables the introduction of investors to empty homeowners to assist in bringing their property back into use.
- Where the Council is aware of other organisations (including its wholly owned subsidiary – Equinox Homes) and charities looking for accommodation to meet specific needs. Empty homes which fit their needs can also be identified and introductions made.

New priority actions

- Review the loan option available to owners of empty homes, seeking to make it more accessible for owners seeking to bring their properties up to a lettable or saleable standard for the private market, including considering how in certain circumstances, the loan becomes a grant for the property. This may also support the Council to discharge its homelessness duties.
- Introduction of an invest and lease option, allowing the provision of social or private rented accommodation, this would encourage empty homeowners, who do not want to / are not ready to sell their properties, to bring their properties into a useable condition and provide additional accommodation to meet housing need.
- Review the empty flats above shops and create a project to bring these properties back into use, making use of external grant funding alongside Council borrowing, which would see town centre homes provided for students and others, complementing the provision of The Place (the new library, university and learning centre) and the regeneration of the town centre.

5.2 Raise Awareness

Current priority actions

- Empty properties are identified primarily through monthly empty property reports provided by Council Tax.
- Empty properties can be reported through the GYBC website alongside calling customer services or any of department directly.

New priority actions

- Further raising awareness of these routes to our customers and neighbours of empty properties, to help reporting and understanding of the process for addressing empty homes.
- Raise awareness of the wasted resource to empty homeowners and the costs and risks of having an empty home
- Raise awareness of the assistance available to empty homeowners will help to complete the circle of complaints and resolving empty homes.
- Proactively demonstrate the housing need of the borough to partner organisations encouraging them to bring their properties back into use in a timely manner.

- Carry out an annual Empty Homes Event, bringing together Council Tax, Planning, Environmental Health, Fire, Police, Estate Agents, Auction House & Investors.

5.3 Support & Guidance

When working with empty homeowners the Council takes a positive and individual approach. Homes can sometimes be left empty for very personal and emotional reasons. Because of this, each empty homeowner is dealt with individually and not assumed to keep their property empty for no reason. The Council should be seen as a positive support not just as enforcement.

It should not be underestimated the affect an empty property can have on the neighbours and area surrounding. The Council helps where appropriate ensuring taxpayers' money is protected by securing a charge, but where the Council cannot help, advises the matter is a civil issue and where to start.

The debt recovery team ensures a debt recovery plan is in place to protect taxpayers' money including the use of enforced sale.

Priority actions

- Learn and implement best practice of other authorities on properties which are in probate. (Explore the use of Article 50 – Administration of Justice Act and using citations under rules 46 & 47 of Non-Contentious Probate Rules 1987). To unblock homes where probate is yet to be granted.
- Clarify areas which are not Council responsibility and provide appropriate response (without risking providing legal advice), to protect the limited resource in place.
- Adhere to the process diagram at Appendix Four to streamline the approach to empty residential properties to ensure best use of the resource available.
- Work with probate researchers, making use of their resources to find beneficiaries of properties where no known owner can be found, saving on Council resources without additional cost.

5.4 Enforcement

Current priority actions

- The Council prefers to work with owners to bring an empty property back into use and will ensure it meets its Public Sector Equality Duty when required to act against empty homeowners.
- Where enforcement action is required the Council has, and makes use of, several powers at its disposal further detailed in section 5.
- Any costs recoverable are registered as a charge against the property to ensure that taxpayers money is protected through debt recovery process.

New priority actions

- Review the powers the Council currently uses.
- Identify powers which are available but not currently used and ensure that all officers are fully trained in how those powers should be used.
- Continue to ensure all charges are properly secured against the property to ensure repayment.
- Consider ensuring capital receipts received for properties, following enforcement action, are recycled for bringing empty homes back into use, subject to the appropriate retention period.

- Introduce an Invest and Lease scheme, allowing the Council to then consider Empty Dwelling Management Orders within its suite of powers to address empty homes.

The introduction of the second homes premium may see some owners disposing of their properties or renting their properties. However, further work could be carried out to identify whether a second home is being used, by requesting evidence of utility bills.

This would mean more properties are moved across to empty status, which initially would see empty numbers increase, but would open options to bring the properties back into use. Currently some enforcement options are limited where the property is classed as a second home.

This could also see an increased income to the Council where the property can be proved to be empty for more than 2 years. However, this is a risk, as there would be an increase in empty homes without the appropriate resource in place to follow the whole process through.

5.5 Working Together

Current priority actions

- Various partnerships have been established and opportunities continue to be identified, including building relationships with smaller investors who are interested in empty properties in the Borough.
- The Operational Property Enforcement Group (OPEG) brings together expertise from all relevant services in the Council to ensure properties with various issues can be dealt with.
- The relationship with the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust has seen listed properties brought back into use through partnership working.
- Work with Norfolk County Council has and continues to see the purchase and use of empty single dwellings for those needing supported living options.
- The Community Land Trusts in the borough can consider empty properties alongside market acquisitions and new build.
- Homes England will provide funding through their Affordable Housing Programme to assist with the costs to bring specific properties back into use and empty homes continue to be considered, as further funding opportunities become available.
- The Council's wholly owned company, Equinox, will consider empty properties amongst the other options being considered.
- The Council also work with various charities and organisations, seeking accommodation to meet specific needs.

New priority actions

- Continue to identify further opportunities to work with organisations and identify further external funding opportunities to maximise income.
- Investigate the support available from Homes England to regenerate the town centre, particularly the use of flats above shops.

6 Support Available

The Council offers support to empty homeowners and affected neighbours through various options as summarised below:

Advice - Both empty homeowners and affected neighbours are supported. Some empty homeowners have inherited a property and need advice, handholding through the process of taking ownership and next steps with the property whether that be through probate or addressing the issue of an underperforming executor. Neighbours can be advised on their rights, for example where overgrown foliage is encroaching on their land.

Purchase and Repair - The Council can purchase empty properties and bring them back into use as council homes. Any acquisition is subject to a business case which considers viability and housing need and is subject to available grant funding.

Empty Home Loans - Loans of up to £25,000 are available to empty property owners where there is a minimum of 35% free equity in the home. The loan term is 5 years, repayable either through the rental stream or through sale after renovation.

Investors Register - The Council holds a list of investors who would like to acquire empty properties and bring them back into use. Details of investors are included with each letter sent to empty homeowners and, where permission has been granted, details are displayed on the empty home's pages of the Council's website.

Charities and other organisations - Through the enabling and housing delivery roles the Council has developed relationships with several charities and organisations looking for properties, either single dwelling, HMO's, flats and commercial with residential above. The Council works as a conduit to provide introductions to these organisations providing another route to bringing the property back into use.

The support offered will be enhanced by providing a Lease and Repair option for empty homeowners, which will see the Council taking a 7-year lease with an owner, repairing the property and leasing it to social housing applicants and those in need of temporary accommodation. Once in place this option will also enable the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders enhancing the Council's enforcement options.

The loan option will also be reviewed to make it a more attractive option for homeowners and include the option to make the loan a grant where the Council have nomination rights for a period of time.

7 Legislation Informing and Supporting the Strategy

The Council has several enforcement powers which can be used to bring properties back into use where an owner fails to work with us. Further legislation is available, and these should be identified and used to ensure the Council is make best use of every option available to it.

Town & Country Planning Act 1990 – S215

This power can be used to remedy the issue of a property's condition being detrimental to the street scene. Non-compliance with the notice can result in a fine. Works can be carried out in default and a charge put on the property, level of works and potential for recovery is always assessed before action.

Building Act 1984 – S79, S78 & S77

Each of these sections consider dangerous, through to ruinous and dilapidated, buildings giving the Council the power to repair, secure or demolish buildings which are considered a danger to the public or impact on the amenity of the local area. Costs are recoverable through a charge against the property.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1983 – S29

Enables the Council to secure the property and to stop the property becoming a danger to public health. These can be used as emergency powers to secure a property and therefore are not recoverable, however, should notice be given the charges for this can be secured against a property and lead to further enforcement action.

Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949

Requires the owner to rid the property of rats or mice. If not adhered to, the Council can carry out works in default and apply a charge on the property.

Town & Country Planning Act 1990 – S226 & Housing Act 1985 – S17

These powers are used when compulsorily acquiring a property. Both enable the acquisition of land or property for the provision of housing.

Law of Property Act 1975 – S103

This legislation enables the enforced sale of a property, following non-payment of an outstanding charge.

Local Government Act 2003

Changes to this Act gave Councils the ability to add Council Tax premiums to empty and second home properties, encouraging owners to bring their property back into use.

8 Support & Guidance for Officers

Whereas support and guidance for homeowners and affected neighbours is important, so too is the need to ensure Council Officers are supported and properly trained. Working with empty homeowners, as with other front-line services, can be challenging. Proper training should be provided to ensure Officers are safe in their roles and have the correct support in place when needed.

Equally training is important, legislation changes, and officers need to ensure they are fully up to date. The Council is a member of the Empty Homes Network which provides support, training and guidance to Empty Home Officers across the Country. The website provides the opportunity for Empty Home officers to ask questions to help resolve issues. The Organisation also holds an annual conference for empty home officers from across the Country to share ideas and celebrate successes.

The Council is also a member of the Herts, Beds & Bucks Empty Homes Forum, this group meets quarterly and although started only as local group it has expanded to cover a larger area. This group allows empty homeowners to discuss their cases confidentially to draw on the experiences of others, the group also provides practical training sessions to ensure officers are prepared for various situations.

Internally the Operational Property Enforcement Group brings together expertise from the departments of the Council to find a practical way forward with properties having multiple intervention needs.

9 Monitoring and Review

The Empty Homes Strategy will be subject to bi-annual monitoring, with a full review of the document and a new Empty Homes Strategy in 2028.

The Council's Housing Service Plan Key Performance Indicators require:

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| 1. PR04 - Number of long-term empty properties (6 months +) | Less than 600 |
| 2. PR04 - Number of long-term empty properties (over 2 year) | Less than 160 |
| 3. Number of properties brought back into use to be reported annually. | |

Example Priority Matrix

This matrix can be used to prioritise properties under the OPEG group or general empty homes, to ensure resources are concentrated in the right areas. Scoring may change to reflect changes in housing need and strategic approach.

Property Address:	
Visibility 2 – Hidden 4 – Visible 6 – Highly Visible 10 – Strategic / Policy Area	
Duration Empty 2 – 6 months + 4 – 24 months + 6 – 5 years + 10 – 10 years +	
Security 2 – Secure & Maintained 4 – Secure & Not Maintained 6 – Not Secure 10 – Serious / Repetitive Anti-Social Behaviour	
Condition 2 – Good Condition 4 – Minor disrepair 6 – Major disrepair 10 – Dilapidation / Vandalism	
Property Total	
Need 2 – Low 4 – Medium 6 – High 10 – Specialist (Disabled / Larger Home)	
Number of beds 2 – 2-bed 4 – 3-bed 6 – 1-bed 10 – 4-bed	
Market Value 2 – £350K + 4 – Under £150K 6 – £150K - £250K 10 – £250K - £349K	
Refurbishment Costs 2 – Up to £15K 4 – £16K – £30K 6 – £30K - £49K 10 – £50K +	
Viability Total	
Total Score	

Great Yarmouth BC - Empty Homes Action Plan

Corporate Priority: *To bring empty properties back into use and in the town centre bring the first and second floors of appropriate properties back into residential use, creating quality homes.*

Action	What will we do?	Who is responsible?	Timescale	Resources	How success will be monitored
Aim: 1. Increase the supply of decent housing for all tenures					
1.1 Review the loan option.	Review how this is offered in other Councils to consider how this can be made more accessible to all.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Head of Strategic Housing	Summer 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager	Properties brought back into use through this option. Additional homes available to the private market.
1.2 Introduce a Lease & Repair Option	Create a viable lease and repair scheme. Consider Empty Dwelling Management Orders.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Head of Strategic Housing	Proposal to ELT & Cabinet June 2024 Launch scheme in September 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Legal	Launch and take up of lease and repair option. Additional homes available to the private & social market. Empty Dwelling Management Orders included within enforcement options.
1.3 Review empty flats above shops in the Town Centre.	Create a project to bring these properties back into use. Making use of external grant funding from Homes England or other sources alongside Council borrowing.	Initial scoping work; Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Project delivery; Project Team Head of Strategic Housing	Initial scoping work; Summer 2024 Proposal to ELT & Cabinet; Autumn 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Council Tax / Business Rates Colleagues.	Town centre homes provided for students (and others), complementing the provision of The Place – the library, university and learning centre.

			Launch dependent on creation of project team.	Homes England or alternative grant funding	
Aim: 2. Raise Awareness					
2.1 Awareness campaign for; - Options available to empty homeowner - Responsibilities of the Council, where it can and can't help. - Reporting routes for neighbours and others affected by empty homes.	Create an options leaflet to be included in Council Tax bills and for mail drop.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Head of Strategic Housing	January 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer Print Room Communications Team	Increased take up of the options available with and through the Council. Additional homes available to the private market.
	Social media updates to be carried out quarterly demonstrating options, reporting routes and any specific (for example need for LAHF properties).		January 2024 – then ongoing quarterly	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Communications Team	
	Empty Homes Event		Initially Autumn 2024 Annually subject to review	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer Communications Team	

				Environmental Health / Council Tax / Planning	
2.2 Proactively demonstrate the housing need of the borough to partner organisations	Create a monthly newsletter, capturing empty data, housing need data and the supporting options available from the Council.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Housing Options Service Manager Head of Strategic Housing	May 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Housing Options Team Member	Partner organisations bringing empty properties back into use promptly. Increased take up of purchase (or lease & repair option if approved) available from the Council.
Aim 3. Support & Guidance					
3.1 Learn and implement best practice of other authorities on properties which are in probate.	Contact other Local Authorities to understand their approach. Explore the use of Article 50 – Administration of Justice Act and using citations under rules 46 & 47 of Non-Contentious Probate Rules 1987).	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Council Tax Colleagues	Initial Scoping; Spring 2024 Implementation would be subject to additional resource.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Council Tax Colleagues	Long term properties trapped in probate are granted to enable onward sale or rental.
3.2 Protect the empty homes resource to ensure it is used in the most cost-effective way.	Clearly identify areas which are civil matters and not Council responsibility. Create appropriate response to help the enquirer but end our involvement.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer Head of Strategic Housing	January 2024	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer	Resource not wasted on repeat / vexatious enquiries.
	Adhere to the process diagram at Appendix Four to streamline the approach to empty residential properties to ensure best use of the resource available.	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer Head of Strategic Housing	Ongoing	Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager Property Enabling Officer	Resource is concentrated on those properties providing environmental, social and financial benefit to the council.

Aim: 4. Enforcement					
4.1 Ensure the Council is making best use of all the enforcement powers available.	<p>Review the enforcement powers the Council currently uses.</p> <p>Identify other powers we could be using.</p> <p>Ensure officers are fully trained in how those powers are enacted.</p>	Heads of Service	Ongoing – Continuous Personal Development	<p>Housing Enabling & Strategy Manager</p> <p>Property Enabling Officer</p> <p>Heads of Service</p> <p>NP Law</p> <p>External training courses</p>	<p>All enforcement options open to Local Authorities can be considered.</p> <p>Officers confident in enacting.</p>
4.2 Maximise income	<p>Ensure all charges are properly secured against the property to ensure repayment.</p> <p>Including subsequent notice where property has previously been secured under emergency powers.</p> <p>Follow debt recovery process.</p>	<p>All Enforcing Officers</p> <p>Recovery Team</p>	Ongoing	<p>All Enforcing Officers</p> <p>Local Land Charges</p> <p>Recovery Team</p> <p>NP Law – when enforcing against debt.</p>	<p>All works costs are secured and a debt recovery process in place.</p> <p>Income to the Council maximised.</p> <p>Enforced sale / CPO processed used to ensure property is brought back into use.</p>
Aim: 5. Working Together					
5.1 Identify further opportunities to work with organisations	Through meetings and existing relationships identify further opportunities to use empty homes.	<p>Housing Strategy & Delivery Team</p> <p>Head of Strategic Housing</p>	Ongoing	<p>Housing Strategy & Delivery Team</p> <p>Head of Strategic Housing</p>	<p>Further options available to empty homeowners.</p> <p>More properties brought back into use meeting specific needs of the borough.</p>
5.2 Identify further external	Through meetings and existing relationships identify further				

funding opportunities to maximise income.	opportunities for funding to address empty homes.			All officers who have links!	
---	---	--	--	------------------------------	--

Example Cases

Example Case 1

An empty property in the town was causing concern for the neighbours. On visiting the property, it was a blight on the street scene which was a major route through the town. The property had been broken into and used for squatting and other illegal purposes, the property was in a very poor state of repair internally and externally. Communication with the owner had failed. Using the Council's power to CPO, the property was compulsorily acquired. The outstanding debt on the property cleared. The property was renovated into two flats using grant from Homes England and Council borrowing and is used by the Council to provide housing to those in need. The neighbours feel safer with the property being back in use and managed and the property is no longer causing a blight on the street scene.

Example Case 2

An empty property was causing issues for the neighbours and concerns for the welfare of the individual residing at the property. The property was being used for hoarding and there was concern for the occupier's welfare. During this time, it was established that the individual had protected characteristics and therefore members of the Hub and social services were included in activities. Ensuring coherence to the Public Sector Equality Duty a prohibition notice was served as several category 1 hazards had been identified. Environmental Health then, over a period of time, negotiated and, under notice, cleared the property. Adhering to the continually updated Equality Assessment, time was provided to clear the debt owed on the property, but this failed. Using the Council's power to enforce sale of the property it was sold at auction and is being renovated to live in. The debt on the property cleared and the remaining funds paid.

Example Case 3

An empty property was reported by neighbours, attracting anti-social behaviour and the deterioration causing damage to the neighbouring property. On investigation of ownership, it was established that property was inherited. The beneficiary wanted nothing to do with the property for personal reasons. There were outstanding debts associated with the property and it was causing them significant distress.

Officers dealing with empty properties need to be able to help in all situations and know the correct approach, heavy handed is not always helpful, as in this example. Speaking with the beneficiary, it was explained how the enforcement process can help. Enforcement action took place, the beneficiary is rid of a property causing distress and registered debts can be cleared, when claimed, as part of the process.

Empty Homes Process Flow Diagram

This diagram demonstrates how a property will be considered.

