

Tackling Long-Term Empty Homes

Council notes:

- Long-Term Empty Homes, as defined by the government in the Local Government Finance Act 1992¹ (as amended), are a national problem that need a local solution.
- The number of long-term empty homes (empty for 6+ months) in the district: 528 (Sept 2022), 546 (Sept 2023), 531 (Sept 2024), 473 (Sept 2025)—a recent improvement, but still a significant wasted housing resource.
- The council's most recent Empty Homes Strategy was adopted in 2006 and despite being linked on the council's website is believed to be no longer live.
- The council's Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy dates from 2022 and is based on other policies which expired in 2017 and 2021.
- The fiscal levers available to councils to deal with the problem of long-term empty homes include, but are not limited to, compulsory purchase orders, Long-Term Empty Property premiums and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

Council believes:

- That bringing empty homes back into use can play a key part in local strategies to meet housing need. Not only are empty homes a wasted resource, but they are often the subject of complaints and frustration for communities, as well as being a catalyst for crime and degradation².
- That effective action on bringing empty homes back into use is among the fastest and best-value ways to increase supply, cut blight, and improve access to housing in East Cambridgeshire.
- A modernised strategy should combine support incentives with proportionate and compassionate enforcement, learning from councils that have delivered results.

Council resolves to:

1. Direct Officers to develop a new Empty Homes Strategy by July 2026, replacing the 2006 and 2022 documents, with clear targets, resourcing, and an annual public report and present this to Operational Services committee for review and onward recommendation to full Council. This strategy to include:
 - a) ambitious and realistic district targets to reduce long-term empty homes and return them to use
 - b) the list of the full range of fiscal levers, including council tax premium rates, published local exemptions and deferrals for active renovation.

2. As part of a new Empty Homes Strategy, develop a business case and options for the resources required to implement the strategy, including investigation into:
 - a) a revolving Empty Homes Loan Fund³ to finance works to bring empty homes back to habitable standard.
 - b) an expanded enforcement capacity (including training and legal support) to deploy Empty Dwelling Management Orders and targeted Compulsory Purchase Orders for persistently problematic properties⁴.
 - c) an Empty Homes Partnership with local housing associations, community-led housing groups and social enterprises to support owners to bring properties up to standard and explore external funds to underwrite conversions.
 - d) the associated cost and Return on Investment justification of an Empty Homes Officer function along with a review of case management systems.
 - e) the resourcing, associated costs and justification of a public “Report an Empty” portal and matchmaker service for buyers and renovators, and publish a quarterly dashboard, in line with LGA best practice.
3. Following the adoption of a new Empty Homes Strategy, run an annual communications campaign during Empty Homes Week to showcase success stories and promote offers and enforcement.

Proposer: Cllr Mark Inskip

Seconder: Cllr Keith Horgan

Notes:

1. Long-term empty homes are defined as dwellings that have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for a period of one year or more. This definition is used for the purpose of council tax, where councils can charge a premium on such properties to encourage their reoccupation.
2. As advised by the November 2023 publication of the Local Government Association entitled, “A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes” found here: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/practical-approach-councils-dealing-empty-homes>
3. An example of an Empty Homes Loan Fund, learning from Councils that signpost to partners that specialise in this is Lendology.com (see <https://www.lendology.org.uk/loans/empty-property-loans/?nocache=1751535828>)
4. Currently, as Anglia Revenues Partnership are employed to manage the collection of our Council Tax, as well as provide the data on empty homes, it will be advisable to consult with them as to how this strategy interfaces with their responsibilities. It may also be possible they could assist with enforcement actions as they currently operate a service to recover unpaid Council Tax above certain thresholds.