

**TITLE: Long Term Empty Homes Strategy**

Committee: Operational Services

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**Issue**

1. In late 2025, a motion was agreed at Full Council, to move forward with a new strategy to address Long Term Empty Properties (LTEs) in the district. The draft strategy is appended to the report and set out in broad terms below.

**Recommendations**

2. To approve the Long Term Empty Homes Strategy, which covers work in this area over the next two years, and for officers to provide a progress update for the Committee in 6-9 months.

**Background/Options**

3. The issues surrounding empty homes are well known. Essentially, they are an unused resource at a time of housing shortage. There are many other secondary issues often associated with LTEs; including Council Tax avoidance and nuisance and blight to local neighbourhoods. These issues often run across different services and a coordinated approach is therefore required to effectively deal with them.
4. The Council has appointed Adam Cliff from the Empty Homes Network to develop the strategy, which sets out what is generally accepted as the best way to address the issue of empty properties, with particular focus on LTEs. In addition, he will undertake work to a review and progress our existing LTE cases.

Adam produced the LGA good practice guidance on dealing with these issues, having wide experience in this area of work.

5. The strategy recommends a progressive and sequential approach which is flexible according to the issues affecting each property. These might include the owner's willingness to move forward, money owed to public bodies, the physical state of the property and the impact the property is having on other properties and the local community.

Importantly the strategy seeks to engage with owners of LTEs wherever possible but also recognises the need for formal action with uncooperative owners and or where there are urgent circumstances relating to the property.

6. The key objectives of the strategy are shown in the table below:

<b>Objective 1 - To build and maintain an accurate empty homes database</b>		
<b>Ref</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Success Criteria and Outcomes</b>
<b>OB1</b>	Undertake monthly data matching and cleansing using Council Tax and internal systems to ensure all records reflect current property status and ownership	Database reviewed monthly, with discrepancies identified and resolved, achieving and maintaining data accuracy
<b>OB2</b>	Record and track all complaints, referrals and inspection outcomes within a centralised system to support consistent case management	100% of cases logged within 5 working days, with clear audit trails and regular updates recorded
<b>OB3</b>	Strengthen data sharing arrangements with internal teams and relevant external partners to improve intelligence and case identification	Formal data-sharing protocols in place, reviewed annually, with evidence of regular information exchange
<b>Objective 2 - To identify and prioritise empty homes for progressive action</b>		
<b>OB4</b>	Apply a structured, risk-based scoring matrix to all priority empty homes cases to ensure a consistent and transparent process	100% of active priority cases scored, with priority levels clearly recorded and regularly reviewed
<b>OB5</b>	Undertake quarterly reviews of high-risk categories, including long-term empty homes, high Council Tax arrears, and frequently complained-about properties	Updated priority lists produced quarterly, with changes in risk status clearly documented
<b>OB6</b>	Maintain and actively manage a targeted list of high-priority properties requiring intervention	All priority cases show evidence of ongoing action, engagement or escalation where appropriate
<b>Objective 3 - Provide advice, assistance and guidance to empty home owners</b>		

<b>OB7</b>	Develop, publish and regularly update guidance materials to inform owners of their responsibilities, options and available support	Guidance is accessible online, reviewed annually, and reflects current legislation and local policy
<b>OB8</b>	Proactively engage with owners through written correspondence, telephone contact and site visits to encourage action	Initial contact made within 10 working days of case allocation, with follow-up activity recorded
<b>OB9</b>	Signpost owners to relevant financial assistance, legal advice, and property improvement services where appropriate	Evidence of advice and support options provided in at least 90% of applicable cases
<b>Objective 4 – To reduce numbers, and return problematic empty homes back into use</b>		
<b>OB10</b>	Work collaboratively with owners to secure voluntary solutions, including sale, letting, or refurbishment of empty properties	Demonstrable year-on-year reduction in long-term empty homes across the district
<b>OB11</b>	Escalate cases to formal enforcement action where voluntary engagement fails, in line with Council policy and legislation	Enforcement action initiated in qualifying high-risk cases, with clear progression recorded
<b>OB12</b>	Collaborate with internal departments and external partners to address complex or high-impact empty homes	Reduction in complaints and environmental issues linked to targeted properties
<b>Objective 5 - To maximise income opportunities, including council tax and enforcement debt recovery</b>		
<b>OB13</b>	Ensure empty homes and second homes premiums are applied consistently and accurately to all eligible properties	100% of qualifying properties correctly identified and charged, with minimal error rates
<b>OB14</b>	Identify and reinstate properties previously exempt or removed from the Council Tax list once they become liable	Year-on-year increase in properties returned to the tax base, supported by audit records
<b>OB15</b>	Actively pursue council tax and enforcement debt linked to empty homes through coordinated recovery processes	Measurable reduction in arrears levels and improved recovery rates year-on-year

7. The original motion contained some specific expectations to come out of the strategy which will be covered as follows:

a) *ambitious and realistic district targets to reduce long-term empty homes and return them to use*

Whilst such targets can only be set after the proposed database is completed and cases investigated, experience from other councils suggests that a reduction in current LTEs of around 20% should be achievable. Progress will be reported to members once work has commenced.

b) *the list of the full range of fiscal levers, including council tax premium rates, published local exemptions and deferrals for active renovation.*

These are referred to within the strategy as options for use as cases require.

In addition, the motion required consideration of the following:

c) *a revolving Empty Homes Loan Fund to finance works to bring empty homes back to habitable standard.*

This can be considered once an accurate picture of LTEs in the district is obtained and will be reported to members at that time.

d) *an expanded enforcement capacity (including training and legal support) to deploy Empty Dwelling Management Orders and targeted Compulsory Purchase Orders for persistently problematic properties.*

There will be a need for such support, but most likely, for other processes, such as Enforced Sale.

e) *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.*

This can be considered once an accurate picture of LTEs in the district is obtained and will be reported to members at that time

f) *the associated cost and Return on Investment justification of an Empty Homes Officer function along with a review of case management systems.*

Officers have agreed a two year arrangement and related budget to procure expertise in this area of work.

g) *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.*

Initially, it is intended to promote the reporting arrangement, before considering other services

h) *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.*

This will be undertaken for the next Empty Homes Week in early 2027 but officers anticipate wider promotion of this initiative before that time.

8. The strategy also contains an initial plan for undertaking this work, based on the objectives above, as follows:

	<b>Workstream</b>	<b>Objectives Achieved</b>
<b>Phase 1 – Establishing the baseline</b>		
<b>June – Sept 2026</b>	Develop and populate a comprehensive empty homes database using Council Tax data, historic records, and referrals, ensuring all known cases are captured	<b>Objectives 1 and 2</b>
	Categorise and risk-rate all priority properties using the agreed scoring matrix to identify high, medium, and low priority cases	
	Undertake site visits to all high-priority properties to verify status, gather intelligence, and record condition and occupancy evidence	
<b>Phase 2 – Case Building</b>		
<b>Sept – Dec 2026</b>	Identify properties with significant Council Tax arrears and begin detailed casework in collaboration with ARP Revenues and Recovery teams and external legal support.	<b>Objectives 1, 2 and 5</b>
	Review properties currently subject to exemptions or discounts to confirm eligibility and identify opportunities for reinstatement	
	Initiate early actions to maximise revenue, including correcting liability, applying premiums, and preparing cases for recovery	
<b>Phase 3 – Owner engagement and support</b>		
<b>Dec – May 2027</b>	Implement a structured three-stage letter process to engage all owners of empty homes, encouraging dialogue and action	<b>Objectives 3, 4, 5</b>
	Develop and promote a clear package of advice, guidance, and support options, including financial assistance and partnership opportunities	
	Establish links with internal departments and external partners (e.g. housing, enforcement, agents) to support owners in bringing properties back into use	

<b>Phase 4 – Intervention and escalation</b>		
<b>May – Dec 2027</b>	Review progress across all cases, updating risk ratings and prioritisation based on engagement and outcomes achieved	<b>Objectives 1, 2 and 4</b>
	Progress high-priority and non-compliant cases toward appropriate enforcement action, in line with policy and legislation	
	Continue proactive engagement with newly identified empty homes while maintaining database accuracy and regular updates	
<b>Phase 5 – Enforcement and delivery</b>		
<b>Dec 2027 – June 2028</b>	Finalise and implement enforcement action plans for the most challenging and long-term empty homes	<b>Objectives 2, 4 and 5</b>
	Progress formal enforcement measures where necessary, including legal and financial remedies to secure reoccupation	
	Monitor outcomes, including reductions in empty homes and recovery of debt, and embed learning into ongoing service delivery	

9. Officers are of the view that this programme of work will take the council forward in this work area and with modest resource, ensure that the Council has an accurate database of LTEs and has commenced work in bring back as many as possible into use.

### **Additional Implications Assessment**

10. In the table below, please put Yes or No in each box:

<b>Financial Implications</b> Yes	<b>Legal Implications</b> No	<b>Human Resources (HR) Implications</b> Yes
<b>Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)</b> No	<b>Carbon Impact Assessment (CIA)</b> No	<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)</b> No

#### **Financial implications**

CMT approval given for provision of consultancy services, by the Empty Homes Network, funded from reserves.

## **HR Implications**

HMRC assessment of off payroll working completed successfully.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1 Motion to Council November 2025**

#### **Tackling Long-Term Empty Homes**

##### **Council notes:**

- Long-Term Empty Homes, as defined by the government in the Local Government Finance Act 1992<sup>1</sup> (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 degradation<sup>2</sup>.
- 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 Fund 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 properties.
  - 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.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Long Term Empty Homes Strategy**

### **Background documents**

none



# East Cambridgeshire District Council

**East Cambridgeshire District Council**

**Empty Homes Strategy**

**2026 - 2028**

**(Draft v.1 | May 2026)**

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## 1. Introduction

This is East Cambridgeshire District Council's first Empty Homes Strategy since 2006, covering the period through to April 2028.

This strategy aims to give an understanding of the issues vacant houses can cause, how they impact residents and communities, and how the Council intends to approach these issues, in order to bring more empty homes back into use. This is especially important for those which have been empty for over six months and are considered long term empty properties (LTEs).

The strategy looks at why homes become empty, what advice and assistance is available to empty home owners, and how the Council intends to effect change and prompt action.

Empty homes can be detrimental to the lives of local residents and communities for a number of reasons. A single empty home can blight a street or community, reduce surrounding property values and be a catalyst for nuisance to local residents. Empty homes can also attract vandalism, fly-tipping and other criminal activity, ranging from the minor to the extremely serious. They also represent a risk for the emergency services and put added pressure on council departments such as Housing and Environmental Health.

Homes can become and remain empty for a number of reasons. Whether financial pressures, legal or administrative delays or pending refurbishments, empty homes and their owners often face challenging and difficult circumstances that can prevent properties from being fully utilised. Supporting owners in overcoming such hurdles where it is their intention to do so, and tackling those empty homes where there are no reasonable prospects of positive action from their owners, will positively impact our residents, both by increasing the housing supply but also the wider community for whom empty homes often cause the most problems.

Across East Cambridgeshire, the Council Taxbase records show there were 1,354 empty homes in November 2025, of which 470 were LTEs. Equating to 3.25% of the district's housing stock, this represents a significant waste of a limited resource, at a time when housing supply is not meeting increased demand.

Of this, Council Tax records show 223 properties are currently liable for the Empty Homes Premium, meaning they have remained empty for a period of 12 months or more. However, statistical information is limited, and it is recognised that there are a number of empty homes where full Council Tax is being paid and the property is not registered as empty.

Similarly, records show that East Cambridgeshire currently has 294 second homes, and 303 unoccupied exempt properties, reported as such by their owners in order to obtain discounted Council Tax charges, or exemptions for legitimate reasons.

The benefits of implementing an Empty Homes Strategy are wide ranging, and can be categorised as social, regenerative, financial and strategic.

In supporting these key areas through bringing empty homes back into use, this strategy aims to:

- assist in meeting housing need
- improve housing conditions
- assist with a reduction in crime and the fear of crime
- address properties causing localised blight
- increase Council Tax collection rates and empty home premiums
- maximise income and revenue opportunities, and recover debts

The case for dealing with empty homes is a compelling one, not only from a neighbourhood improvement and housing perspective, but also as a financial incentive both for the owners of empty homes, and for the authority.

This strategy covers the Council's intentions in supporting and assisting owners of empty homes, along with the available tools and enforcement options at the authority's disposal, should support and negotiation prove insufficient. In tackling the most challenging of cases, it is the Council's aim to reduce the numbers of empty homes across the district, regenerate unused and vacant properties, and reinvigorate communities for the benefit of our residents.

## **2. Background to Empty Homes**

### **2.1 What is an empty home?**

A dwelling is considered to be a long-term empty home if it has been unoccupied for 6 months or longer. Privately owned, long-term empty homes are the focus of this strategy, but concerns will be highlighted to public bodies and housing associations (registered providers) where an empty home they own requires attention.

Empty homes can be found in all areas, wards and locations across the district, and are not necessarily semi-derelict, boarded up or causing a problem. There are also large numbers of homes which naturally become empty for periods of time, perhaps due to transactional processes, being between tenants, or when an owner passes away, and the probate process delays a transaction. When a dwelling remains empty for a significant period of time, is attracting unwanted attention or is the subject of a complaint to the authority, it would be considered a high priority case in line with the rating system attached as Appendix B, and held within the Council's empty homes database as a priority property.

Whilst these properties are often recorded as empty through their Council Tax accounts, it is also often the case that second homes, those that qualify for an unoccupied exemption, or even where a property is reported as occupied, can be referred to the authority as empty and unoccupied. All referrals, complaints and notifications will be recorded and investigated as empty homes, until such time that our enquiries find that the property is in fact occupied or otherwise sufficiently used.

## **2.2 Why do properties become and remain empty?**

There are a number of reasons why properties could become and remain empty. These include:

- The property is difficult to sell or let due to its physical state and condition
- It is currently being renovated, or the owners has plans to refurbish or develop the property
- The owner does not have the capacity/finances/time/skills to manage or maintain the property
- The property has been, or is in the process of being repossessed
- Where the previous owner has passed away, leading to an often time-consuming administrative procedure around probate
- The owner is being cared for elsewhere, is in hospital or has been moved into a home/care
- The property has been abandoned by the owner and/or the owner is untraceable
- When a property is left empty due to speculative investment, through acquiring a property
- Where probate has been granted and the beneficiary is yet to decide on future plans
- Where the property is adjoined to or forms part of a business, and the owner does not wish to let or sell
- Accidental landlords, where partners co-habit leaving a second property empty

It is important that the Council understands why individual properties become and/or remain empty, along with the owner's circumstances and intentions in order to tailor and deliver our support and assistance appropriately.

## **2.3 Challenges presented by empty homes**

Dealing with an empty home is not always straightforward. Each property, its owner, their circumstances and intentions are all unique. For example:

- A property may be used as a second home, and so not occupied on a permanent basis but is still in use.
- It may be that non-residential space often found above shops is being used for storage or other business related matters, and although not immediately obvious, it is in use.

- There may be properties awaiting planning permission and work is unable to commence whilst this is being sought. This may include specialist permissions if they are a Listed Building or located in a Conservation Area.
- 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, repossession or proceeds of crime restrictions.
- 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 that time may not be registered with the Land Registry and information regarding the property will not be available from this source.
- 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.
- 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.
- The emotional attachment associated with a property, formerly a family home or owned by parents, can often lead to the reluctance or reticence to take action, or deal with a property immediately.

Some owners are often simply reluctant to engage with the Council, and believe that as the property is privately owned the Council do not have the right to require action to return it to use. They may be unaware, or have no concern for the affect the property has on the local area and surrounding properties. These are properties which are likely to be left empty for many years, fall into disrepair, and be the subject of future complaints and action.

Subsequently, it is considered that the Local Authority is best placed to tackle the issues that empty homes present. With a range of professional experience across departments, legislative powers and tools at their disposal, the Council is able to provide a vehicle for a solutions-based approach that benefits all parties involved.

## **2.4 Why empty homes matter, and the need for a strategy**

The key issue is that empty homes represent a wasted resource, especially in the current climate where housing needs are critical.

In addition, Councils often receive complaints relating to empty homes from local residents, who rightly object to unsightly disused properties. There are resulting implications for the Council's Environmental Health and Housing teams who have to use staff time and resources to investigate a wide range of issues.

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 properties can be detrimental to neighbouring house prices and can result in a lack of pride and investment in the area. The possibility of empty homes attracting unwanted attention can also cause added anxiety and ongoing concern for local residents. Empty Homes undermine a community's confidence in the area, resulting in problems for neighbouring properties again leading to involvement from the Local Authority.

For empty homes owners, leaving a property standing empty can become costly and be a source of unnecessary headache. By remaining empty and increasing in deterioration, the additional risk of vandalism and crime can lead to a property being difficult to insure, which could ultimately result in high repair costs or even mean a complete loss of asset.

Even the general deterioration of an unlive in property will result in costs. Deterioration by lack of maintenance, insurance, council tax and premiums, utility standing charges and mortgage payments, all increase the financial liability of leaving a property empty, and one which can often become insurmountable for the owners. By renting or selling the property, not only are the above issues resolved, but there is the added advantage of gaining regular rental income or the capital generated from the sale of a property.

There is also the environmental and sustainable impact of leaving homes empty. It is estimated that it would take the equivalent of 75 acres of land to build 900 homes. This could be greenfield sites of open land that local people value, whereas it would be more efficient and sustainable to make best use of existing dwelling stock available.

Empty homes returned to use as domestic dwellings increase the availability of homes, including potentially affordable 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 many individuals and families in housing need, and the utilisation of empty homes could prevent some of these people from facing issues such as homelessness and overcrowding, or provide a first home for a local person.

Returning empty homes to use can help eliminate these issues and ensure that house prices 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 a single empty home.

This strategy sets out how East Cambridgeshire District Council intends to work with empty homeowners to bring their home back into habitable use, and continue to reduce empty homes as a wasted resource across the district.

### 3. The National Context

Since 2010 the Government has placed considerable emphasis on the importance of returning empty homes to use. Statistics published in November 2025 in the Council Taxbase for England, put the number of empty homes at 542,276. Of these, 309,856 were classed as LTEs.

Representing 2.1% of the country's total housing stock, the total number of empty homes has consistently risen in recent years, similarly to that of LTEs, showing that 1.20% of the country's housing stock has been empty for six months or more.

Having introduced the Empty Homes Premium in 2013, granting local authorities the power to implement additional levies for properties that remain empty for longer periods, the number of properties liable for such premiums have still increased year on year, resulting in 152,932 properties being reported as being liable for the premium in November 2025. Announced in 2022, and aiming to disincentivise empty homes owners further, the Government's Levelling Up Bill proposed reforms to the Council Tax discount and premium levels, enabling councils to charge the empty homes premium at 12 months, down from the initial 24.

Coupled with this, in 2011 the Government introduced the New Homes Bonus, allowing councils to benefit financially by increasing their net dwellings through building new homes, and bringing back into use those which had remained empty. Under the scheme, the Government match-funded Council Tax receipts for each additional property added to their net dwelling stock for a seven year period, and therefore incentivised local authorities to both build housing and bring those empty back into occupation. However, this incentive has now been withdrawn.

In 2023, The Local Government Association (LGA) in conjunction with The Empty Homes Network, produced a guidance and best practice report entitled "Empty Homes - a practical approach for Councils on dealing with empty homes". Amongst practical and operational guidance for councils, the report recommended that in order to increase engagement and success in bringing empty homes back into use, local authorities should consider:

- developing their understanding and wider prioritisation of the definitions of empty homes, and broadening the scope of empty homes work to include properties classed as second homes and those with an unoccupied council tax exemption
- employing a dedicated resource where possible, in order to progress from a reactive approach to tackling empty homes, through to a proactive approach
- ensure officers and practitioners are equipped and supported with the relevant tools and resources, often already at the council's disposal, such as delegated powers and authority to take enforcement action
- taking a proactive approach to engaging with empty home owners at an earlier stage, where properties are known to have been empty for two or three months, rather than initiating contact after six months

- moving towards wholly proactive approach to empty homes work, where local authorities have often operated a reactive service due to resource, staffing or financial constraints.

In publishing this report, the recommendations offered routes of progression and complimented those published in the Empty Homes, House of Commons Briefing Paper No.3012, released in June 2018, which suggested:

- Local authorities should have an empty homes strategy for their area, with the aspiration to reduce the number of long-term empty homes.
- Local authorities and social housing providers should seek funding and allocate resources to buy and refurbish empty properties for people in housing need.
- Local authorities should take a casework-based approach with owners of long-term empty properties to encourage, advise and support them to bring homes back into housing use. Employing dedicated empty homes staff can ensure that the council is able to act on information about homes, and build up expertise in working with owners, including taking enforcement action where necessary.

1.

2.

2.1

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Whilst there is currently no government-led national strategy to deal with empty homes, the legislation and ability for councils to implement a number of measures places the emphasis on Local Authorities to propose and deliver solutions locally that suit them and their residents.

## 4.0 The Local Context and Corporate Objectives

### 4.1 Empty homes statistics across East Cambridgeshire

Currently, the Council Taxbase, released annually in November, is the only available method to determine the number of empty homes across both East Cambridgeshire, and nationally. However, it is accepted that this method does not provide a full and accurate account of the number of empty homes across the district.

To overcome this, a detailed and comprehensive database will be developed in order for the authority to track and monitor data across all empty homes categories and definitions. Whilst this will allow for accurate and up to date statistical reporting, it will also provide the foundation from which cases can be prioritised, properties can be assessed and scored, and reports can be compiled based on wards, length of time empty, and ownership status.

### 4.2 Total Dwellings

In terms of total housing stock across England, the number of dwellings has increased by 3.32%. In East Cambridgeshire however, the number of dwellings has risen from 38,962 in 2021 to 41,665 in 2025, an increase of 7.68%, outpacing the national average.

Total Dwellings					
Local Authority	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
England	25,817,220	25,675,421	25,462,055	25,225,481	24,987,468
East Cambridgeshire	41,665	41,131	40,495	39,673	38,962
Fenland	48,372	47,856	47,291	46,837	46,457
Uttlesford	40,948	40,449	39,278	39,206	38,839

At the local level, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, and Uttlesford all display similar upward trends, though on a much smaller scale. Fenland maintains the largest stock throughout, growing from 46,457 to 48,372, while East Cambridgeshire and Uttlesford follow comparable trajectories, reaching 41,665 and 40,948 respectively by 2025.

In percentage terms, local growth broadly mirrors national patterns, with modest but consistent year-on-year increases. However, Uttlesford shows slightly more variability between years. Overall, the three authorities track closely with national expansion trends, suggesting stable and sustained housing development across both local and wider contexts.

### 4.3 Total Empty Homes

The 2025 data for East Cambridgeshire shows that the overall number of empty homes in the district has fallen over the past year, following a period of fluctuation. In 2025, a total of 1,354 properties were recorded as empty, compared with 1,549 in 2024, representing a reduction of 195 properties (around 13%). Over the five-year period since 2021, however, total empty homes have increased by 99, reflecting a longer-term pattern increase alongside year-to-year variation.

Empty homes in East Cambridgeshire accounted for 3.25% of the total housing stock in 2025, down from 3.77% in 2024 and broadly in line with levels seen earlier in the period. While this proportion remains slightly lower than the national average, it still represents a significant number of homes lying unused in a district experiencing ongoing housing and affordability challenges.

The breakdown between short-term and long-term empty homes provides important insight into the nature of vacancy locally. In 2025, 470 homes were empty for more than six months, down from 539 in 2024, but still higher than the 411 recorded in 2021. This indicates that long-term empty homes remain a persistent feature of the local housing landscape. Short-term empties stood at 287 properties in 2025, also showing a reduction on the previous year.

Empty Homes Statistics					
	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
<b>Total Dwellings</b>	<b>41,665</b>	<b>41,131</b>	<b>40,495</b>	<b>39,673</b>	<b>38,962</b>
<b>Empty Homes</b>	<b>757</b>	<b>888</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>713</b>
<b>Second Homes</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Unoccupied Exemptions</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>325</b>
<b>Total Empty Homes</b>	<b>1,354</b>	<b>1,549</b>	<b>1,447</b>	<b>1,403</b>	<b>1,255</b>
<b>% of total housing Stock</b>	<b>3.25%</b>	<b>3.77%</b>	<b>3.57%</b>	<b>3.54%</b>	<b>3.22%</b>
Empty Homes Breakdown					
<b>&lt;6 Months Empty</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>&gt;6 Months Empty</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>481</b>	<b>411</b>
<b>Empty Homes Premium</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>170</b>

#### **4.4 Locating empty homes and the empty homes database**

In order to compile the Council's comprehensive database of empty homes information, the Council should look to a variety of sources to ensure their data and information held is as accurate as possible.

Primarily, the Council uses existing information held on empty homes in the form of Council Tax data. The Council will also use other means to identify potential empty homes, including information from the electoral register and Land Registry. Residents, neighbours, Council departments, Councillors and partner organisations will be encouraged to report empty homes to the council, especially when there are issues or complaints.

The Council will ensure that an empty homes database is developed, maintained and regularly updated with any relevant and new information received being passed to relevant teams to ensure transparency and accuracy throughout the Council.

Council Tax data also needs to be shared with relevant teams who have an interest in empty properties. Specific permissions were introduced in the Local Government Act 2003 to enable Council Tax data to be used for the sole purpose of bringing empty properties back into use, as well as the general powers already available to share data for investigations relating to criminal matters and so on.

It is important that homeowners keep their Council Tax records up to date, as a home may be recorded as empty following refurbishments, sales or probate, when it is in fact occupied and wider discussions will be held with the Council's Council Tax collection service to encourage this.

#### **4.5 Priority properties**

Consisting of the most prominent empty homes, those empty for the longest periods and those where the authority have received complaints or referrals, East Cambridgeshire will develop an active list of higher priority cases within its operational database. In prioritising the caseload, this will allow staff involved to focus their efforts and capacity on those that require the most attention or have highest concern.

These properties may initially be recorded within the general database under an alternative category. However, a referral, complaint, a significant deterioration in condition or an urgent health and safety concern would warrant the property being escalated to a priority level case potentially in parallel with the individual issue being dealt with on its own merits.

This list can also include occasions where a property is referred to the authority, but records show that this may not be the case, such as where an owner has failed to register a property as empty, or where a property has been removed its Council Tax banding.

The Council's list of higher priority cases, can potentially be in any category of ownership but are likely to include properties that fall under any of the following:

- currently being charged some level of empty homes premium
- at various stages of the probate process
- classed as Second Homes for Council Tax purposes
- falling under a Council Tax unoccupied exemption
- that are fully exempt from Council Tax, having been delisted

#### **4.6 Probate cases**

Properties recorded on the authority's database as probate cases, are those which have been through the probate process and their period for a Class F exemption has elapsed. These properties are now in the ownership or responsibility of their beneficiaries or estate executors, and are no longer under the restrictions that the probate process may impose.

#### **4.7 Housing associations and companies**

Not restricted to including properties that are owned by individuals, the Council's empty homes database will also contain details and information of properties owned by housing associations and companies.

These properties are categorised separately as such, as any engagement with either a housing association or company is likely to be with a secretary or senior figure within the organisation, and therefore any correspondence is adapted to suit.

#### **4.8 Private individuals**

The largest category on the database will likely be that where properties are owned by private individuals. The most likely source of quick-wins or where houses are naturally brought back into use, this category can also include instances where the owner is charged any level of empty homes premium, although the longer-term empty and more challenging cases, will likely be held on the priority case list.

#### **4.9 Second homes**

Although not often included within national total or long-term empty homes figures, referrals and complaints are often made to the council concerning properties classed as second homes. within the wider database, and any future referrals received where a property is classed as such, can be subsequently moved to be considered a priority case where applicable. For this reason, the number of second homes will be tracked and monitored

The second homes data shows a contrasting picture to empty homes, with national and local trends diverging in recent years and clear variation between the similar authorities.

Second Homes					
	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
<b>England</b>	<b>268,153</b>	<b>279,870</b>	<b>263,318</b>	<b>256,913</b>	<b>253,357</b>
<b>East Cambridgeshire</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>Fenland</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>Uttlesford</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>179</b>

Over the five-year period, second home numbers show a more variable pattern compared to overall dwelling growth, both nationally and locally. Across England, totals rise overall from 253,357 in 2021 to 268,153 in 2025, but with a notable peak in 2024 (279,870) followed by a decline.

Locally, trends are less consistent and diverge more clearly from the national picture. East Cambridgeshire peaks in 2023 (293) before declining sharply to 217 by 2025, suggesting a contraction in second home ownership. Fenland shows fluctuations, increasing overall from 182 to 219 but with a spike in 2024 (262) and a subsequent drop. Uttlesford, by contrast, records a gradual upward trend overall, ending higher in 2025 (236) despite a dip in 2024.

Whilst the Council recognises there are genuine and legitimate reasons for properties to be used as a second home, there are instances where a second home reported as empty, becomes the source for complaints and concern. Where this is the case, the Council will refer to both Empty Homes Strategy and other enforcement policies, to engage and encourage homeowners if we receive complaints.

Owners who cannot demonstrate the use of the property as a second home will be investigated in line with the Empty Homes Strategy. The below examples of evidence could be used to support the use of the property as a second home if requested by the authority:

- **Gas usage.** Copies of actual (not estimated) gas bills for the last 12 months showing the property in use for a minimum six months of the calendar year. Use may constitute 26 weekends throughout the year or midweek usage equivalent to six months usage.
- **Electric usage.** Copies of actual (not estimated) electric bills for the last 12 months showing the property in use for a minimum six months of the calendar year. Use may constitute 26 weekends through the year OR midweek usage equivalent to 6 months usage.
- **Water usage.** Copies of water meter reading bills (not set tariff) for the last 12 months showing the property in use for a minimum six months of the calendar year. Use may constitute 26 weekends through the year OR midweek usage equivalent to six months usage.

- **Booking Confirmations.** Copies of booking confirmations for use of property as a holiday home, or equivalent information.
- **Officer inspection.** A council officer inspection to help evidence the property's internal condition and suggest use as a second home.

#### 4.10 Unoccupied exemptions

Similarly to second homes, properties falling under an unoccupied exemption category are often not included within wider empty homes statistics, but their condition and vacancy may warrant complaints and further investigation. Therefore, these properties are to be monitored within the wider database and include instances of properties that are currently going through probate, where the owner is in prison or property has been repossessed, and in other cases such as where an owner has moved to provide or receive care. (Appendix F)

Currently, statistics show there are 303 properties across the district that qualify for an unoccupied exemption, broken down into the relevant categories shown in the table below:

Unoccupied Exemptions						
Class	Definition	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
B	Owned by a charity	59	96	81	85	87
D	Owner in prison	2	0	3	2	3
E	Owner receiving care	58	70	89	65	50
F	Owner is deceased	172	198	187	161	171
G	Occupation Prohibited	1	1	1	3	3
H	Left by a minister of religion	0	0	1	0	0
I	Owner moved to receive care	6	11	6	9	10
J	Owner moved to provide care	0	1	1	1	0
K	Last occupied by a student	0	1	0	0	0
L	Property repossessed	5	4	3	1	1
Q	Property owner bankrupt	0	0	0	0	0

<b>Total</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>325</b>
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Over the five-year period, unoccupied exemptions in East Cambridgeshire show a fluctuating but overall slightly declining trend. Total exemptions rise from 325 in 2021 to a peak of 382 in 2024, before falling notably to 303 in 2025, indicating a recent reduction after several years of relative stability.

Across categories, properties classified under “owner is deceased” (Class F) consistently account for the largest share, though numbers vary, peaking at 198 in 2024 before dropping to 172 in 2025. “Owned by a charity” (Class B) also shows variability, declining overall from 87 in 2021 to 59 in 2025 despite a temporary increase in 2024. Meanwhile, “owner receiving care” (Class E) rises to a high in 2023 before easing back.

Other categories remain minimal and relatively stable, contributing little to overall change. Overall, the data suggests that shifts in a few key categories drive most variation in total exemptions over time.

#### **4.11 Properties empty under six months**

Whilst it is considered best practice to monitor figures and consider properties as long-term empty after a six-month period, it is also important to track the number of properties empty for six months or less. Currently standing at 287 cases, this information will be held within the database, in order to monitor properties reaching the six month stage, and to proactively prepare for those when they get to this period, thus enabling an early intervention.

#### **4.12 Properties returned to use – With Intervention**

Also held within the empty homes database, are statistics and information on properties that have been brought back to use with some form of involvement from the authority. Whilst this is not a requirement imposed on the authority by central government, these statistics can be used to track and monitor performance internally, as well as to set annual targets for numbers of properties brought back into use.

#### **4.13 Properties returned to use – Without Intervention**

Where properties are naturally brought back into use, or have become occupied after a period of vacancy without council intervention, these properties are logged within the database in order to ascertain trends or patterns, having previously been logged within the database as active cases.

#### **4.14 Meeting corporate objectives**

Whilst returning empty homes to use will not solve a wider housing supply issue in isolation, they can often be a quick and cost-effective way of increasing the supply of good quality, safe and affordable housing. Reducing the requirement to build on greenbelt land, regenerating brownfield sites and reinvigorating communities, bringing

empty homes back into use can play a significant part in meeting the Council's wider corporate objectives, and benefitting the residents across East Cambridgeshire.

This strategy, its aims and objectives, links with a variety of council documents, strategies and plans as outlined below.

- [East Cambridgeshire District Council Housing Strategy](#)
- [East Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2027](#)
- [Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2025-2030](#)
- [Private Sector Housing Policy \(2022\)](#)
- Various Enforcement Policies across the Council

## **5.0 Strategic Aims and Objectives**

### **5.1 Aims and objectives of the empty homes strategy**

Irrespective of why a property has become and remained empty, and despite the owner's current circumstances, it is always the Council's primary intention to work *with* an empty home owner where possible, in order to support, and where required, facilitate action to reach the owner's ultimate intentions.

However, it is critical to remember that each property, owner, personal circumstances and reason for why the property became and has remained empty are all different, and therefore each property and owner have to be treated individually and based on the information that is available.

Whilst some reasons and circumstances can be more sensitive or challenging than others, it is important for the authority to be committed to the principles and aims of the Empty Homes Strategy, and recognise that an empty property can result in problematic situations for their neighbours and communities.

Owners must be made aware that whilst the council would prefer to work with them in bringing their plans to fruition, inaction is not an option. By owning an empty property, they have a responsibility for it and must act accordingly.

The Action Plan for progressing towards the overall aims is included at Appendix A, and acts as a prompt and a process guide to further develop the tools available, enhance the support and guidance East Cambridgeshire offers as an authority, and make further progress in bringing empty homes back into use across the district. The Action Plan identifies five key objectives for the Empty Homes Strategy, as follows:

#### **5.2 Objective 1 | To build and maintain an accurate empty homes database**

The continued development and maintenance of the empty homes database will play a pivotal role in the Council's efforts to tackle empty homes, and enable further steps to be taken to reduce numbers across the District. Holding key information and data, this database allows targeted action, allowing the relevant officer to conduct regular, often monthly data cleanse exercises, to ensure the information is accurate and up to date.

It should be noted that experience elsewhere has shown that an initial, in-depth review of this current information is likely to quickly reduce numbers of LTEs. Assuming this is the case for East Cambs., attention would then turn to the more complex cases.

Complaints and referrals received regarding empty homes will be logged accordingly to ensure that they are investigated and prioritised effectively, and 'risk rated' in conjunction with the scoring matrix found in Appendix C. Although the matrix score will be the principal guide to the order in which properties are dealt with, there may be exceptions based on local circumstances, severity and nature of a complaint, or immediate issues requiring urgent attention.

The largest source of information is received through a regular review of all council tax information. Strong and productive relationships and opportunities for data sharing will be developed with Council Tax colleagues at ARP, to ensure that up to date account information is obtainable, enabling an effective and efficient tool for both departments, and especially in terms of having accurate empty homes data included.

### **5.3 Objective 2 | To identify and prioritise empty homes for progressive action**

A structured and intelligence-led approach will be taken to identify and prioritise empty homes across the district, ensuring that time resources are directed where they will have the greatest impact. Using the empty homes database as a central tool, properties will be assessed and categorised based on a range of risk factors, enabling a clear and consistent framework for intervention.

Particular focus will be given to long-term empty properties, especially those vacant for extended periods, where the likelihood of natural reoccupation (ie without council intervention) is low. In addition, properties with significant Council Tax arrears will be prioritised, recognising the dual benefit of bringing homes back into use, while supporting income recovery.

The Council will also prioritise the most challenging and problematic cases, including those subject to frequent complaints, reports of anti-social behaviour, or where properties are known to be causing nuisance or blight to the local area. Intelligence gathered from residents, elected members, and partner agencies will play a key role in identifying such properties and ensuring they are addressed appropriately. It is also important that we remain able to deal quickly with issues, regardless of them being empty homes or not.

While the scoring matrix outlined in Appendix C will guide prioritisation, a flexible approach will be maintained to respond to urgent or high-impact cases. This objective will ensure that enforcement and support activity is targeted effectively, driving measurable reductions in empty homes and improving neighbourhoods across East Cambridgeshire.

### **5.4 Objective 3 | Provide advice, assistance and guidance to empty home owners**

As exposure of the empty homes issue continues to develop, so do the opportunities and methods to bring them back into use. As there are currently no national initiatives or schemes designed to support empty home owners, local authorities are afforded the opportunity to design and deliver initiatives that would help support the need of local people with local solutions.

Whilst East Cambridgeshire doesn't currently operate a financial mechanism of loans, grants or direct funding to support the return to use of empty property, such schemes will be explored and considered should the finances be made available, either locally or nationally, during the period of this strategy.

Other non-financial avenues of support will also be explored, considered and procured, but it is often the case that such innovation is dependent on the individual

needs and circumstances of the owner and therefore it is often found that these need to be procured or acquired as and when the need is identified.

Often acting as the first point of service, the Empty Homes page of the Council's website will be refreshed, updated and enhanced in order to provide an overview of the authority's activities, including the options, advice and support we are able to offer as an authority for those who own empty homes. Currently, the empty homes web page include offers of support, policy and protocol documents, as well as a tool for the public to report empty homes anonymously to the local authority.

#### **5.5 Objective 4 | To reduce numbers, and return problematic empty homes back in to use**

The process to bring empty homes back into use, and seeing the numbers of cases reduce, starts with the investigation and prioritisation of referrals, accurately recorded within the authority's database. All complaints and referrals from residents are treated as a priority, and then scored accordingly, using the rating matrix. In order to build trust in, and a positive reputation for the service, such complaints will be followed through, and complainants informed of the process as a whole as well as the priority status of their complaint subject.

After the initial information gathering exercise, regular and persistent engagement with empty home owners using existing resources and letters will allow every opportunity for empty home owners to respond and engage with the Council. Subsequently, council processes and procedures will enable such engagement to be recorded and monitored, with further action and or interventions planned where necessary.

As every empty home case is different in terms of its history and owner circumstances, the opportunity to further the tools and support offering the council have will be constantly reviewed, and where gaps in such support are identified, solutions will be sought in order to see these filled.

It is also the aim of the strategy to inform other wider council strategies and policies, and to encourage further support of the council's efforts to bring empty homes back into use where applicable.

The database will be used to regularly appraise the available enforcement options for all empty homes and pursue the relevant action when suitable for those deemed to be a priority, and more urgently where immediate attention and action is required as a result of a referral or complaint.

Where previously agreed actions have stalled, or when a lack of engagement with the authority leads to the decision to pursue action further, prior efforts to appraise suitable enforcement action will ensure a swift and reasonable process through to the service of notices.

Although used as a last resort, enforcement action should be a consideration throughout the investigation and support stages, in order to display that every effort and opportunity has been given to the owners prior to such action being taken. It is suggested that, whilst many more will be resolved quickly by other means 10

prioritised empty homes will be brought back into use annually throughout the period of this enforcement led strategy.

## **5.6 Objective 5 | To maximise income opportunities including Council Tax and enforcement debt recovery**

Through empty homes work, and the developing working relationship with council tax colleagues, this strategy aims to identify and maximise debt recovery, both through council tax charges and arrears, and through land charges registered as a result of works in default being taken as part of the enforcement work which is likely..

Where enforcement action will be considered and carried out on a case-by-case basis, we will pursue all cases in conjunction with colleagues (both internally and also ARP), and where appropriate, drive forward action to consider Enforced Sales where necessary.

To this end , existing empty homes with large amounts of council tax arrears should be identified and added to the list of priority properties with immediate effect.

In addition, and as part of developing and maintaining an accurate database, we will expand work with ARP to ensure all cases of empty homes are up to date, and that the CTB1 submission is produced to reflect internal knowledge and datasets. This would ensure that any potential income opportunities provided by central government incentives are maximised.

Finally, to identify, track and pursue cases of empty homes where they have previously been removed from the council tax listing, resulting in no charges being applicable for the subject property. Having such cases brought back to use at the earliest opportunity, will therefore increase number of available and chargeable dwellings, as well as the potential revenue and for the authority.

## **5.7 Achieving our objectives**

The Council believes that a corporate approach and commitment to dealing with LTEs will ensure all services within the council are working together to achieve the best for the district and its residents. The Council seeks to commit appropriate resources to work with owners of LTEs to bring properties back into use.

Through maintaining an accurate and up to date database of empty homes, their owners and relevant information, the council believes that this will work to provide a solid foundation of support, advice and guidance, serving to reduce the wider numbers of empty homes, and dealing with the more challenging cases.

The council aims to encourage empty homeowners to engage with the local authority, carrying out inspections, offering support and signposting to relevant internal or external partners, in order to provide the best route to occupation.

Where informal action has been unsuccessful then a range of enforcement action may be taken to facilitate re-occupation of the properties.

Where owners do not engage, or where the property has been identified as 'high risk' using the empty property risk assessment, the strategy will be adopted and the most appropriate enforcement action considered to bring the property back into use.

The council also seeks to raise awareness of successful action on empty homes across the district to encourage others to realise the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use, and support the longevity of the service.

## 6.0 Our Approach to Tackling Empty Homes

To meet our objectives in bringing empty homes back into use, it is recognised that there is a need to work both on a proactive and reactive basis. and that a coordinated approach across all relevant services is paramount in the success in bringing empty homes back into use. The council recognises that there is no single solution which will resolve problems associated with empty properties and will therefore use its powers and duties to engage; encourage and enforce against empty home owners on an individual and case by case basis.

### 6.1 Investigate, Engage, Encourage, Enforce

The process to be adopted, and that is considered to be best practice amongst empty homes practitioners, can be simplified into four stages; **Investigate, Engage, Encourage** and **Enforce**.

The process of bringing an empty home back into use begins with the **Investigation** stage. By exploring the details surrounding property ownership, recent occupancy history, property values and possible reasons behind the vacancy, officers are able to begin building a wider picture of the current circumstances in order to best decide on the possible future support and assistance required by the owner. This also enables initial contact with owners to be tailored based on evidence.

Secondly, the **Engage** stage uses template or bespoke letters to contact owners which have been developed to inform owners of the benefits of bringing their properties back into use, why the council is involved, and the potential options that they have moving forward.

These communications will escalate in seriousness from the first informal advice letter to a final warning actively presenting the possibility of enforcement action being undertaken to ensure the property is returned to use. These template letters are quick to print and send, allowing officers to deal with a potentially large volume of empty home owners, particularly useful as part of a data cleanse procedure.

In many cases these letters are successful, prompting a response from the property owner that leads onto the third stage in the process. If correspondence is unsuccessful, then visits will be carried out in an attempt to engage with property owners and provide bespoke support. Due to its nature, this work is detailed and can be time consuming, but its success often reduces the need for further enforcement action. If this approach fails to produce the desired outcome, it provides the groundwork and justification for legal action.

Having achieved initial contact with an owner, the next step is to understand their personal and property's circumstances and **encourage** them to share their future plans for the empty home. This then allows officers to intervene, if necessary, with suitable assistance and support tools at their disposal. This may be in the form of simply arranging for a property valuation, or enlisting a contractor to supply a schedule of works for refurbishment. However, this all depends on the circumstances and future plans of the owner.

Finally, where engagement is lacking, or previously agreed steps and actions have not been forthcoming, the officers will progress to the **enforce** stage. Opportunities will be explored to pursue formal action to remove problematic or dangerous features of a property or look to more stricter enforcement powers to have the property removed from the possession of its current owner.

Whilst such actions are always considered a last resort, they are considered throughout the process to build a thorough and comprehensive case file should the actions of the authority come under judicial scrutiny. In addition, some cases will require the council to act immediately, for instance, in respect of dangerous buildings, or statutory nuisance.

## **6.2 Advise, Support and Assist**

In the first instance, it is always the council's aim to provide help and advice to the owners of empty homes. Advice may be given with refurbishment, sales, legal processes and other aspects of lettings, finding tenants, health and safety and energy efficiency. Where required, this may include support from internal or external partners, in order to ensure that the owner has all of the available options and information available to them prior to pursuing with a decision on their plans.

## **6.3 Council tax premiums on empty and second homes**

East Cambridgeshire's current approach to empty and second homes premiums reflects a strengthened, policy-led response to housing need, aligned with recent legislative changes.

From April 2025, the Council applied a tiered long-term empty homes premium, beginning after just one year of vacancy rather than the previous two-year threshold. Charges escalate significantly over time, with a 100% premium (200% Council Tax) for properties empty 1–5 years, rising to 300% (400% Council Tax) for those vacant over 10 years. This accelerated framework is designed to incentivise earlier reoccupation and reduce the number of long-term empty homes.

In parallel, the Council has approved the introduction of a 100% Second Homes premium from April 2026, meaning owners of furnished but unoccupied properties will also pay double Council Tax. This aims to address the use of dwellings that do not contribute to permanent housing supply, while allowing for specific statutory exemptions such as job-related accommodation or properties actively marketed for sale or let.

## **6.4 Council Tax and Enforcement Debt Recovery**

The Council will adopt a proactive and coordinated approach to council tax and enforcement debt recovery (including where necessary, from works in default) in relation to empty homes, recognising the important role this plays in both revenue collection and bringing properties back into use. Where empty properties accrue council tax arrears, these cases will be closely aligned with empty homes activity to ensure a joined-up and effective response.

Properties with significant arrears will be prioritised for intervention, as non-payment can often indicate wider issues such as long-term vacancy, neglect, or disengaged ownership. Close working arrangements between officers, council tax and recovery teams will ensure that up-to-date account information is shared, enabling timely and informed decision-making.

A range of recovery tools will be utilised in accordance with council policy and legislation, including reminder notices, summons, liability orders, and enforcement action through agents where appropriate. In more complex or high-risk cases, particularly those involving long-term empty homes, the Council will consider the use of additional enforcement mechanisms, such as charging orders or insolvency proceedings where these are proportionate and necessary.

This coordinated approach will ensure that debt recovery not only supports the council's financial position but also acts as a lever to encourage property owners to take action. By linking debt recovery activity with empty homes interventions, the council aims to increase engagement, promote reoccupation, and reduce the number of problematic empty properties across the district.

## **6.5 Value Added Tax (VAT)**

The council is able to supply a 'reduced VAT' letter to empty home owners who are refurbishing their properties. Qualifying properties are those that have been empty for over two years, and enables an owner to reduce their VAT liability on certain aspects of a refurbishment from 20% to 5%, and for properties empty over 10 years, from 20% to 0% rated respectively.

The local authority is also able to assist in this by proving a property has been empty for a certain length of time, usually by exploring council tax records, or by using their prior knowledge or involvement with a property or owner. Further information on this can be found on the HMRC Buildings and Construction VAT (Notice 708), Section 8. ([Buildings and construction \(VAT Notice 708\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/buildings-and-construction-vat-notice-708))

## **6.6 Maximise income opportunities**

The Council recognises that bringing empty homes back into use not only delivers housing benefits but also creates opportunities for income and revenue generation. Three key income streams have been identified which support both the sustainability of the service and wider corporate priorities.

Firstly, empty homes and second homes premiums provide a significant and growing source of revenue. These premiums are applied through the Council Tax system, increasing the financial liability on properties that are either long-term empty or not used as a sole or main residence. As well as generating income, these charges act as a behavioural incentive, encouraging owners to return properties to occupation. The

recent strengthening of premium thresholds is expected to further enhance both income levels and effectiveness.

Secondly, the reinstatement of properties previously removed from council tax banding, such as those classed as exempt or delisted, offers an additional revenue stream. By identifying when properties become habitable or no longer meet exemption criteria, the authority can ensure they are correctly banded and liable for Council Tax. This process improves data accuracy while increasing the overall tax base.

Finally, council tax and enforcement debt recovery represents a further income opportunity. Actively pursuing outstanding debts linked to empty homes ensures that owed revenue is recovered, while also prompting engagement from owners. Together, these three approaches form a complementary framework, supporting both financial resilience and the strategic aim of reducing empty homes across the district.

## **6.7 Enforcement**

A voluntary way forward to renovation and re-occupation is the preferred option, and officers will endeavour to encourage and persuade such progress. However, where owners cannot be traced, where informal approaches fail, or a there is a detrimental effect on the community, the Council should proceed with legal action. Due regard will be given to the Council's wider enforcement policies before any action is taken.

The Council does have a substantial range of powers at its disposal and also duties required by legislation, and will consider using these where necessary. These include:

- Securing empty property – Notice to secure a property that is open to access. Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 s29
- Improving housing conditions – Improvement notices, Prohibition Order or a Hazard Awareness Notice to remove hazards. (Housing Act 2004)
- Eradication of vermin – Notice to clear any land of vermin and remove waste, deposits or accumulations likely to attract vermin. The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 allows the Council to require and undertake works on behalf of an owner or occupier to prevent damage to buildings being caused by rats and mice (can include works to property or gardens)
- Abatement of a nuisance – Notice to reduce or remove a statutory nuisance such as an accumulation or deposit that is prejudicial to health or a nuisance under Environmental Protection Act s79/s80.
- The Public Health Act 1936 allows the Local Authority to require and undertake works on behalf of an owner or occupier to improve filthy and verminous properties
- Safety of empty homes – Notice to make a property safe or allow emergency action to be taken to make it safe. Building Act 1984 section 77 & 78 / Housing Act 2004.

- Notice to make satisfactory provision for drainage where it is not currently in place, including sewers, drains and rainwater pipes in disrepair or missing altogether. Building Act 1985.
- Unsightly condition of empty home and adjoining land – notice to address unsightly land or external appearance of a property under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 s215.
- Community Protection Warning and Notice. where the property is causing persistent detriment to the local area.
- Council Tax debts to the property. Where council tax debts are excessive, ARP will secure the debts which allows the start of the formal proceedings of applying for a liability order/charging order and enforced sale.

## **6.8 Enforcement Policies**

All enforcement activity for empty properties will have regard to the relevant legislation, as well as the Council's various enforcement policies as appropriate, most likely within the following departments:

- Environmental Health
- Planning
- Building Control
- Council Tax (through ARP)

## **6.9 Enforced Sale**

The Law of Property Act 1925 allows local authorities to recover charges and debts through the sale of the property. This option can only be utilised where there is a debt to the local authority that can be registered as a statutory charge on the property.

## **6.10 Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)**

Available under section 133 of the Housing Act 2004, an EDMO can be made where an owner leaves a property empty and has no intention of securing its voluntary reoccupation. The Council and a partner agency undertake the management of a property for a period of up to seven years, with the EDMO reviewed after that time.

EDMO's are open to appeal at any stage and are seen as administratively burdensome. The end result is the possible return of the property into the same ownership as that which left it vacant and neglected in the first instance.

## **6.11 Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)**

Nationally, Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO's) on empty homes have increasingly been successful, with the outcomes having proven popular with the general public. In addition to enhancing housing availability, the anti-social and criminal activities with which empty buildings can so often attract are also addressed as a consequence of such enforcement.

CPO's can be made under S17 of the Housing Act 1985 or under S226 (as amended by Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990, for the provision of housing accommodation or to make a quantitative or qualitative improvement to existing housing.

### **6.12 Additional Statutory Powers**

Where an empty home is causing a specific problem to a neighbourhood or is dangerous or ruinous for example, a range of enforcement powers are available. The timing and extent of the action taken will be dependent upon the individual circumstances encountered at the property. A detailed list of these measures is listed in Appendix D.

### **6.13 Unclaimed CPO / Enforced Sale Money**

In the event that a property has been sold using the enforced sale process the following items can be deducted from the sale proceeds:

- any works in default costs
- the legal costs in undertaking the enforced sale procedure
- conveyancing costs in connection with the sale
- auctioneer's or other marketing costs
- other officer time in relation to the enforced sale process
- any other debts owed to the council

The balance would then be paid to the former owner of the property subject to any other charges or mortgages on the property or paid into Court.

Where the Compulsory Purchase Order process is used, the former owners will be entitled to compensation once the council becomes the owner of the property. If a claim is not settled, or a reference made to the Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber) within six years, the claim for compensation will be statute barred.

### **6.14 Promoting the empty homes strategy**

The empty homes strategy will be publicised locally and on the Council's website to raise awareness.

The residents, councillors, partner agencies and other council services are encouraged to report empty homes in their community.

An email address will be provided on the council's empty homes webpage in order for the aforementioned to make contact, and report an empty home.

The council will encourage property owners to make their unused home occupied through writing to them about the strategy and enforcement policy.

## **7.0 Appendices**

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**Appendix A – 24-Month Empty Homes Action Plan**

**Appendix B – Strategy Delivery Phases and timescales**

**Appendix C – Empty Homes Priority Scoring System**

**Appendix D – Statutory Enforcement Powers**

**Appendix E – Empty Homes & Second Homes Premiums**

**Appendix F – Council Tax Exemptions**

**Appendix G – Empty Homes Procedure / Flowchart**

## Appendix A: 24-Month Empty Homes Action Plan

<b>Objective 1 - To build and maintain an accurate empty homes database</b>		
<b>Reference</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Success Criteria &amp; Outcomes</b>
<b>OB1</b>	Undertake monthly data matching and cleansing using Council Tax and internal systems to ensure all records reflect current property status and ownership	Database reviewed monthly, with discrepancies identified and resolved, achieving and maintaining data accuracy
<b>OB2</b>	Record and track all complaints, referrals and inspection outcomes within a centralised system to support consistent case management	100% of cases logged within 5 working days, with clear audit trails and regular updates recorded
<b>OB3</b>	Strengthen data sharing arrangements with internal teams and relevant external partners to improve intelligence and case identification	Formal data-sharing protocols in place, reviewed annually, with evidence of regular information exchange
<b>Objective 2 - To identify and prioritise empty homes for progressive action</b>		
<b>OB4</b>	Apply a structured, risk-based scoring matrix to all priority empty homes cases to ensure a consistent and transparent process	100% of active priority cases scored, with priority levels clearly recorded and regularly reviewed
<b>OB5</b>	Undertake quarterly reviews of high-risk categories, including long-term empty homes, high Council Tax arrears, and frequently complained-about properties	Updated priority lists produced quarterly, with changes in risk status clearly documented
<b>OB6</b>	Maintain and actively manage a targeted list of high-priority properties requiring intervention	All priority cases show evidence of ongoing action, engagement or escalation where appropriate

<b>Objective 3 - Provide advice, assistance and guidance to empty home owners</b>		
<b>OB7</b>	Develop, publish and regularly update guidance materials to inform owners of their responsibilities, options and available support	Guidance is accessible online, reviewed annually, and reflects current legislation and local policy
<b>OB8</b>	Proactively engage with owners through written correspondence, telephone contact and site visits to encourage action	Initial contact made within 10 working days of case allocation, with follow-up activity recorded
<b>OB9</b>	Signpost owners to relevant financial assistance, legal advice, and property improvement services where appropriate	Evidence of advice and support options provided in at least 90% of applicable cases
<b>Objective 4 – To reduce numbers, and return problematic empty homes back into use</b>		
<b>OB10</b>	Work collaboratively with owners to secure voluntary solutions, including sale, letting, or refurbishment of empty properties	Demonstrable year-on-year reduction in long-term empty homes across the district
<b>OB11</b>	Escalate cases to formal enforcement action where voluntary engagement fails, in line with Council policy and legislation	Enforcement action initiated in qualifying high-risk cases, with clear progression recorded
<b>OB12</b>	Collaborate with internal departments and external partners to address complex or high-impact empty homes	Reduction in complaints and environmental issues linked to targeted properties
<b>Objective 5 - To maximise income opportunities, including council tax and enforcement debt recovery</b>		
<b>OB13</b>	Ensure empty homes and second homes premiums are applied consistently and accurately to all eligible properties	100% of qualifying properties correctly identified and charged, with minimal error rates

<b>OB14</b>	Identify and reinstate properties previously exempt or removed from the Council Tax list once they become liable	Year-on-year increase in properties returned to the tax base, supported by audit records
<b>OB15</b>	Actively pursue council tax and enforcement debt linked to empty homes through coordinated recovery processes	Measurable reduction in arrears levels and improved recovery rates year-on-year

## Appendix B – 24-Month Action Plan Delivery, Phased Breakdown

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Workstream	Objectives Achieved	
<b>Phase 1 – Establishing the baseline</b>		
<b>June 2026 – September 2026</b>	Develop and populate a comprehensive empty homes database using Council Tax data, historic records, and referrals, ensuring all known cases are captured	<b>Objectives 1 and 2</b>
	Categorise and risk-rate all priority properties using the agreed scoring matrix to identify high, medium, and low priority cases	
	Undertake site visits to all high-priority properties to verify status, gather intelligence, and record condition and occupancy evidence	
<b>Phase 2 – Case Building</b>		
<b>September 2026 – December 2026</b>	Identify properties with significant Council Tax arrears and begin detailed casework in collaboration with ARP Revenues and Recovery teams	<b>Objectives 1, 2 and 5</b>
	Review properties currently subject to exemptions or discounts to confirm eligibility and identify opportunities for reinstatement	
	Initiate early actions to maximise revenue, including correcting liability, applying premiums, and preparing cases for recovery	
<b>Phase 3 – Owner engagement and support</b>		

<b>December 2026 – May 2027</b>	Implement a structured three-stage letter process to engage all owners of empty homes, encouraging dialogue and action	<b>Objectives 3, 4, 5</b>
	Develop and promote a clear package of advice, guidance, and support options, including financial assistance and partnership opportunities	
	Establish links with internal departments and external partners (e.g. housing, enforcement, agents) to support owners in bringing properties back into use	
<b>Phase 4 – Intervention and escalation</b>		
<b>May 2027 – December 2027</b>	Review progress across all cases, updating risk ratings and prioritisation based on engagement and outcomes achieved	<b>Objectives 1, 2 and 4</b>
	Progress high-priority and non-compliant cases toward appropriate enforcement action, in line with policy and legislation	
	Continue proactive engagement with newly identified empty homes while maintaining database accuracy and regular updates	
<b>Phase 5 – Enforcement and delivery</b>		
<b>December 2027 – June 2028</b>	Finalise and implement enforcement action plans for the most challenging and long-term empty homes	<b>Objectives 2, 4 and 5</b>
	Progress formal enforcement measures where necessary, including legal and financial remedies to secure reoccupation	
	Monitor outcomes, including reductions in empty homes and recovery of debt, and embed learning into ongoing service delivery	



## **Appendix C: Empty Homes Scoring and Rating Matrix**

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Each empty home identified as a high priority case, will be assessed using a scoring sheet which considers various criteria. The result of this assessment will determine the level of action, attention given, and possible future enforcement action taken.

Properties will be reassessed when necessary, or new information is obtained to ensure they remain situated in the correct categories. The categories will be classified as follows:

### **RED – (scores 50 or over)**

Cases which fall into this category will be prioritised. All avenues will be explored with the owner to return their property to use in a way that suits their own needs, the needs of the community and the Council. Where assistance is refused and the owner is unwilling to cooperate, all enforcement options will be considered to establish the most appropriate course of action.

### **AMBER - (scores 25 - 49)**

Cases which fall into this category will be considered a lower priority than those in the Red category. Resources will still be invested in these cases and officers will work with owners in an attempt to prevent empty homes from deteriorating and being reassessed to a higher category. Where necessary, enforcement options will be employed if considered the most appropriate course of action. Cases in this category will be monitored on a more frequent basis than those properties which fall within the Green category and will be reassessed where necessary.

### **GREEN - (scores less than 25)**

Cases which fall into this category will be given a lower priority for action, but owners will be contacted and offered any assistance they may need to return their property back into use. These properties will be monitored for any change and reassessed where necessary.



# East Cambridgeshire District Council

## Empty Homes Assessment Scoring Matrix

Criteria	Classification	Score
<b>Length of Time Empty</b>	< 1 year	0
	1-2 years	5
	2-5 years	10
	5-10 years	15
	> 10 years	20
<b>Location</b>	Extremely isolated with no access	0
	Isolated property with access	5
	Rural residential area	10
	Urban residential neighbourhood	15
	Prominent position	20
<b>Special Interest</b>	Listed Building	10
	Located in a Conservation Area	5
<b>General Condition</b>	Well maintained	0
	Acceptable for surrounding area	5
	Noticeably empty/unattractive	10
	Extremely unsightly/detrimental to the area	20
<b>Unwanted attention</b>	Attracting criminal activity such as graffiti, fly tipping, vandalism, anti-social behaviour	20
<b>Monies Owed to East Cambridgeshire District Council</b>	No outstanding monies owed	0
	< £500	5
	£500 - £2000	10
	£2000 - £5000	15
	> £5000	20
<b>Owner Interaction</b>	High level of cooperation	0
		5

	Average level of contact & efforts made	10
	Minimal contact & little efforts made	20
	No contact/untraceable/no efforts made	
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>Red / Amber / Green</b>	

## **Appendix D: Statutory Enforcement Options**

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**Town & Country Planning Act 1990, Section 215:** Where the condition of an empty home is detrimental to the amenity of the area.

**Building Act 1984, Sections 77-79:** Where an empty home is in such a condition to be dangerous or is seriously detrimental to the amenity or of the neighbourhood.

**Building Act 1984, Section 59:** Where the condition of the drainage to a building is prejudicial to health or a nuisance.

**Environmental Protection Act 1990, Section 80:** Where a statutory nuisance exists, is likely to occur or recur at the property.

**Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, Section 4:** Applied where the condition of the property is such that it is providing or likely to provide harbourage to rodents.

**Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29:** Allows the Council to act if a property is open to unauthorised access and is a risk to public health.

**Housing and Planning Act 2016, Part 7:** Allows authorisation to be given for officers to enter land (and property on that land) in connection with a proposal to acquire a compulsory interest in that land (and property on that land).

**Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, Section 16; and Town & Country Planning Act 1990, section 330** – A notice may be served to establish information regarding property ownership or interests in land.

**Housing Act 1985 Section 17 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981:** Forms the basis for the compulsory purchase of land/buildings for the provision of housing accommodation.

**Housing Act 2004 Part 4:** Grants powers to take over the management of a property using Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO).

**Law of Property Act 1925, Part III:** The basis for enforced sale where certain debts are owed to the Local Authority.

**The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, Part 4:** Allows for enforcement of matters considered to be detrimental to the quality of life to those in the locality.

**Public Health Act 1961 Section 34:** Deals with the removal of waste from property or land.

**Public Health Act 1936 Section 83:** Deals with the cleansing of filthy or verminous premises.

**Housing Act 2004 Part 1:** Housing conditions, improvements and enforcement.

## Appendix E: Current Levels of Empty and Second Home Premiums

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### Empty Homes Premium

- **Implementation timeline:**  
Approved February 2024, effective 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024, revised thresholds from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025
- **Trigger for premium:**  
Applies when a property is empty and substantially unfurnished for 12 months
- **Premium levels (from April 2025):**
  - 1–5 years empty: +100% (200% Council Tax total)
  - 5–10 years empty: +200% (300% total)
  - 10+ years empty: +300% (400% total)
- **Key national exemptions:**
  - Armed forces accommodation (Class E)
  - Annexes (Class F)
  - Actively marketed for sale/let (12 months)
  - Probate cases (12 months)
  - Major repairs/structural works (12 months)
- **Local discretionary exceptions:**
  - Sale/marketing extended up to 24 months
  - New owners (sale or inheritance): up to 12–24 months relief
- **Additional notes:**
  - Uninhabitable discounts cannot overlap once premium applies

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### Second Homes Premium

- **Implementation timeline:**  
Approved February 2025, came into force 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026
- **Definition of second home:**  
Furnished property with no sole or main resident
- **Premium level:**  
100% premium (200% Council Tax payable) after 1 year
- **Key national exemption classes:**
  - Armed forces accommodation (Class E)
  - Annexes (Class F)
  - Properties actively marketed for let (12 months)
  - Probate-related properties (12 months)
  - Job-related dwellings
  - Caravan pitches/boat moorings

Seasonal/holiday-use restricted properties

- **Local discretionary provisions:**  
Properties marketed for sale: exemption extended up to 24 months  
Discretion available in cases of hardship or vulnerability
- **Additional notes:**  
Formal notice included in Council Tax setting process  
Aligns second homes treatment with empty homes premium approach

## **Appendix F: Council Tax | Unoccupied Exemptions**

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<b>Class B</b>	Property left empty and owned by a charity
<b>Class D</b>	Empty and liable person in prison or detained
<b>Class E</b>	Empty, where the owner is receiving care in a home or hospital
<b>Class F</b>	Empty, where the owner is deceased
<b>Class G</b>	Occupation of the property is prohibited by law
<b>Class H</b>	Property left empty by a minister of religion
<b>Class I</b>	Property owner has moved to receive personal care
<b>Class J</b>	Property owner has moved to provide personal care
<b>Class K</b>	Property empty, last occupied by a student
<b>Class L</b>	Properties that have been repossessed
<b>Class Q</b>	Property owned by someone who has become bankrupt
<b>Class R</b>	Vacant caravan pitch or boat mooring
<b>Class T</b>	Unoccupied Annexes

