

People and Health Overview Committee

15 September 2025

Empty Homes Strategy

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Cabinet Member:

Cllr G Taylor, Health and Housing

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director:

J Price, Executive Director of People - Adults

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Statutory Authority: Housing Act 2004

Report status: Public

1. Executive summary

1.1 Long term empty homes are a wasted housing resource that blight our communities. Removing barriers to get empty homes back into beneficial use as quickly as possible helps meet our high demand for housing, reduces pressure on new build development, improves our communities and provides a future income and asset for the owner.

1.2 The Empty Homes Strategy outlines how Dorset Council will work towards getting as many empty homes back into use as possible. The strategy outlines our progress to date, the local and national context, the targets we have set ourselves and how we will make progress, using our influence and where appropriate the available enforcement powers.

1.3 The strategy is informed by the Councils [Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council](#) and its delivery plan [Home in on Housing - Dorset Council](#) including helping to meet corporate objectives.

2. Recommendation

2.1 That the People and Health Overview Committee recommend to Cabinet that it approves the adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy.

3. Reason for the recommendation

3.1 To enable officers to work towards implementing the content of the Empty Homes Strategy, bringing long term empty homes back into beneficial use to meet the corporate aims of the Council and the aims of its [Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council](#).

3. The report

3.1 Dorset Council already has a good track record in its work to bring long term empty homes back into beneficial use. Our service is already highlighted in [national good practice guidance](#) and has been recognised for [national innovation awards](#). However, we feel that we can do more. The Empty Homes Strategy outlines our future aspirations which include:

- Work to incentivise and promote empty properties being brought back into use to help meet housing demand and grow our communities.
- Use all available options to bring long term empty homes back into use including advice, assistance, support and where appropriate, proportionate enforcement action.
- Develop a more proactive service, which will identify and tackle the 'hidden' long term empty homes
- Improve our outcomes, bringing more long-term empty homes back into beneficial use

3.2 The strategy sets clear targets, reporting requirements, oversight and an action plan which focusses on work to:

- Develop improved data management and intelligence about long term empty homes, enabling our work to be better targeted
- Target 'hidden' empty homes and get ahead of the problem, without the need for a case to be reported to us
- Further develop our proportionate enforcement options to tackle the worst cases
- Continue to raise the profile of long-term empty homes, how we can help and assist residents to report cases affecting their community

- Work with stakeholders to maximise our outcomes including colleagues in housing supply, Council Tax and our Town and Parish Councils
- Help those bringing empty homes back into use, to do it in a way that helps to meet our net zero targets.

3.3 Operationally the strategy also provides officers with a clear mandate to act, using all necessary powers in a fair and proportionate manner.

3.4 In working towards the objectives of the strategy, most actions are informal and involve providing advice, assistance and support to property owners to encourage them to take the necessary steps to get the property occupied. The reasons for properties being left long term empty are linked to a wide range of issues. In most cases, officers work constructively with property owners to overcome these obstacles. Sometimes outcomes can be achieved quickly, however on other occasions the barriers are so complex that positive progress can take years. In an even smaller number of cases, it might be necessary to take formal legal action to take over the management or ownership of an abandoned home. In these cases, our responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty and the balance of the Human Rights of the owner and community, need to be carefully assessed.

3.5 While the strategy provides a direction and framework for our future action, specific legal or enforcement action is taken with regard to the [Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for Determining Financial Penalties - October 2023 - Dorset Council](#)

3.6 If a long-term empty property is acquired either voluntarily or via CPO powers, then the strategy promotes a close working relationship with colleagues in the Councils Assets and Property Team. This is in line with the processes set out in the Council's Strategic Asset Management Plan, including options appraisal, input and advice from Assets & Property colleagues and the relevant asset management officer advisory group.

4. **Alternative options considered**

4.1 There is no legal requirement for Councils to have an Empty Homes Strategy. Therefore, it is possible for this operational work to progress without such a strategy in place. This option has been discounted. The strategy provides clear direction and structure to this work over the short to medium term. It will enable officers to work towards meeting the objectives articulated in the strategy and as detailed above, a strategy of this type provides officers with a clear mandate to act, which is important when decisions can be subject to legal challenge.

5. Legal considerations

- 5.1 Action on long term empty homes falls into two distinct categories. Firstly, legal action to lessen the impact such properties may have on the local community from blight including pests, rubbish, unauthorised access, vandalism, squatting and overgrown gardens. We will always try to work with property owners to secure any necessary interim improvements of this type. However, where this proves unsuccessful and a residual risk exists, then the strategy promotes the use of a range of enforcement powers to bring about positive improvements. This action only manages the state and impact of the property in the short term.
- 5.2 Secondly, there is a further framework of powers which enable the Council to work towards the longer-term steps to bring the property back into beneficial use, either by purchase, taking over its management or enforced sale. This includes the Town and County Planning Act 1990 and other legal powers (Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers), the Housing Act 2004 (Empty Dwelling Management Order) and the Law of Property Act 1925 (Enforced Sale). We will always work with property owners to secure the beneficial use of the property, however where this proves unsuccessful and the property is considered a priority for further action, then the strategy promotes the use of these powers. The fact that the Council has the resources to even consider taking over the ownership or management of a property, is often sufficient for an owner to act much earlier in the process. Such action would be taken in consultation with the Council's legal services team.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 In support of this strategy, Dorset Council is currently allocating capital of £600,000 per year (25/26 to 27/28), reducing to £500,000 per year (28/29 to 29/30), for the purchase of long-term empty properties. This property acquisition may be by voluntary purchase or by Compulsory Purchase. It should be emphasised that acquisition of long-term empty properties by voluntary or compulsory purchase is an absolute last resort and if a property owner is willing to sell an empty home, in the first instance they will be encouraged to do so on the open market or via auction.
- 6.2 Since 2021 the Council has had need to acquire 3 long term empty properties voluntarily and 1 via a CPO. Case studies illustrating this type of work are detailed in the strategy.
- 6.3 In fulfilling the objectives of this strategy, there is close working relationships with other teams, including the Revenues and Benefits Service. Council Tax data is a key source of intelligence in identifying long term empty homes and tracing owners. The Housing Act 2004 provides specific legal powers for this

council tax data to be used in this way, effectively overriding the normal prohibitions on data sharing personal information. Empty homes work also helps to keep the council tax base 'up to date', helping to maximise council tax collection. The strategy seeks to quantify this benefit derived from empty homes intervention for its inclusion in regular and annual updates

7. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 7.1 Long term empty properties can have a significant impact on our local communities. By working to bring them back into beneficial use, it promotes the longer-term sustainable use of residential accommodation in our towns and villages, protecting our built environment.
- 7.2 Dorset Council has put climate and nature as a core priority in the Council Plan. This strategy will positively impact upon the achievement of these goals by promoting the longer-term sustainable use of existing built assets, mitigating the need for additional development (thereby alleviating the attendant emission and natural environmental impacts associated with new development); and setting as a strategic aim, the achievement of energy efficiency and climate resilience for homes we bring back into use wherever possible, through a commitment within the action plan to promote sustainable renovation practices through the production of guidance for those undertaking renovation works (and with recognition of the challenges to such in the case of heritage or listed assets).

8. Well-being and health implications

- 8.1 Long term empty properties can have a significant impact on our local communities. At an individual level, living near an empty property with the potential for vandalism, squatting or fly tipping has a significant detrimental effect on the local community, raising anxiety about the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour. Knowing that the Council will act in individual cases, provides residents with considerable reassurance that their concerns are being taken seriously and that where possible, short- and long-term improvements can be made.
- 8.2 At an individual level, dealing with a long-term empty property can be an extremely stressful situation for the property owner. The strategy recognises that in some cases our involvement and assistance given to the owner can be extremely positive, helping them to resolve property issues, dispose of assets, settle debts and generally move to a more stable position. We do not provide any legal or financial advice and owners are always advised to seek their own competent advice when making decisions.

9 Risk implications

- 9.1 Having considered the risks associated with this decision and strategy; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

10. Equalities

- 10.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed, and the assessment and action plan are attached at Appendix 2.
- 10.2 It is common for owners of long-term empty properties to also have protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. The EqIA identifies that for the protected characteristics of age, disability, people with caring responsibilities, socio-economic deprivation and armed forces communities, there is a need for some service amendments to ensure that the necessary reasonable adjustments to service delivery are identified and implemented.

11. Appendices

- 11.1 Appendix 1 - Draft Empty Homes Strategy
Appendix 2 - Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

12. Background papers

- 12.1 [Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for Determining Financial Penalties - October 2023 - Dorset Council](#)
[Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy 2024 - Dorset Council](#)
[A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes | Local Government Association](#)
[Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council](#)
[Home in on Housing - Dorset Council.](#)

13. Report sign-off

- 13.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)