

People and Health Overview Committee
15 September 2025
Questions from Councillors

Question 1 - Submitted by Cllr Robin Legg

Newell House, Sherborne has been unoccupied for more than two decades. It is becoming increasingly derelict and a location for antisocial behaviour. Only last week the police wrote to Dorset of their concerns and warned that the Fire and Rescue Service regard the listed building as at high risk of arson attack. How will the proposed empty homes strategy be used to bring Newell House into residential occupation?

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

It would not be appropriate to discuss details of a specific case in a public forum. It is a matter of public knowledge that Newell House is a former school building which has been unoccupied for some considerable time. The strategy being brought before members is focussed on domestic accommodation only and specifically excludes action in relation to non-domestic buildings and dwellings. Whereas Councils have specific powers to deal with long term empty residential dwellings, corresponding specific legal provisions are not available for non-domestic buildings, who's reuse is generally subject to market forces. Despite this, the Council is aware of this building and action has been taken by Building Control, Conservation and the Housing Standards Team to liaise with the owner, secure the site, and protect against unauthorised entry. Dealing with buildings/land of this type, on this scale, sits outside of this strategy, and requires specific corporate funding and a multi-disciplinary team to assess and mitigate financial and other risks, to assess any viable way forward.

Question 2 - Submitted by Cllr Robin Legg

Recently the BBC conducted a survey of local authorities to establish the number of long term empty homes in each and whether the problem was getting worse. The article inferred that many authorities were more interested in the increased council tax revenue generated by empty properties than solving the empty homes crisis. Dorset's response to the BBC's Freedom of Information enquiry showed a significant deterioration between 2019 and 2025. The number of homes empty for at least twelve months rose from 6,404 to 7,716 in that five year period. An increase of 20.5%. Long term empty commercial properties saw an even steeper increase of 55.0% How can members be confident therefore that the empty homes strategy proposed by officers will bring improvement?

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

The Council's Empty Homes Strategy is a positive local response to what is a national issue. As with a lot of statistics, such data needs to be treated with caution. The above figures, likely obtained directly from the Council Tax baseline data, define empty properties as those unoccupied for 12 months or more (paying the long-term council tax empty home premium). 12 months is a short period empty, and based on our experience this data will include a considerable amount of 'churn', with properties empty pending renovation, sale, planning permission etc. This strategy focusses on properties which have been empty for at least 2 years, as these are more likely to represent genuine long empty properties.

The overall numbers of empty properties are largely caused by factors outside of the council's control. In part the strategy focuses on those very complex empty properties which will not return to use without some form of Council intervention – these are the 'real' empty homes. The strategy sets performance and reporting criteria based on current resources; this will enable members to monitor progress. The strategy will also maintain better data on trends, enabling us to assess our effectiveness and direct resources.

As stated previously, this strategy focuses on empty residential dwellings, and commercial buildings are outside of its scope.