

Empty Homes Strategy

‘Bringing unoccupied homes back into use’



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Dorset Council - Empty Homes Strategy

‘Bringing unoccupied homes back into use’

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1.0 Introduction

Long term empty properties are a wasted housing resource.

Empty properties can make an area feel run down and undermine community spirit. They can also become the focus for anti-social behaviour (ASB), fly tipping, vermin, and other criminal behaviour.

National and local housing shortages have created challenges for our residents. As house prices rise, some of our working-age residents are struggling to afford to live here. Our most vulnerable residents also find it difficult to find suitable homes.

Bringing an empty property back into beneficial use can not only resolve these environmental and social problems but also provides a new home. 'Bit by bit', this helps meet our high demand for housing, reduces pressure on new build development and provides a future income and asset for the owner.

Reducing the number of empty homes just makes sense.

It is a strategic priority of the [Dorset Council Plan 2024 to 2029](#) to provide affordable and high-quality housing. We recognise the importance of increasing the availability of affordable homes to meet the needs of local people, improving the existing housing stock, and ensuring sustainable development. It improves residents' health, the economy and our local environment.

The vision of the [Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council](#) is to ensure our residents have access to affordable, suitable, secure homes where they can live well as part of sustainable and thriving communities.

Action on empty homes forms a key theme of that strategy and our housing delivery plan.

We already have a good track record. Since 2019 we have

- responded to 836 requests to deal with long term empty homes.
- developed a wide range of assistance to help owners get their empty homes back into use.
- brought 52 long term empty homes back into use because of our direct action
- we have developed the processes to purchase long term empty homes, both voluntarily and by Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)
- we have voluntarily purchased 3 long term empty homes, bringing them back into use for temporary accommodation, supported housing or for immediate sale back onto the open market
- we have completed our first CPO
- our service is already recognised nationally as delivering 'best practice'

The Council will use its influence and where appropriate legal powers to continue to encourage the owners of empty, unoccupied properties to bring them back into beneficial use.

Homes become empty for many reasons. We have an important role to influence and provide solutions, tailored to the individual circumstances of each case. We will do this by continuing to provide a range of advice, incentives and signposting to other services. In appropriate circumstances, we will also use the full range of enforcement powers available to us.

We have already achieved a lot, we think we can do more. The strategy will outline our ambitions to

- better understand our empty home challenge, so that we can more effectively target our resources
- develop a more proactive service, which will identify and tackle the 'hidden' long term empty homes
- further develop our suite of enforcement sanctions to include Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) and Enforced Sales
- work with all stakeholders, so that they share our ambition, especially when dealing with the most challenging cases
- identify where specific empty homes can directly contribute to meeting our affordable housing need through assisting property owners directly into schemes such as Key4Me and property leasing.

2.0 Strategic Aims

The Council will:

- 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

2.1 Data and Insight

The Council will:

- Maintain a detailed database to monitor and target empty properties for action. This will include data provided by the public, other agencies including our town and parish councils and internal stakeholders including Revenues and Benefits.
- Ensure our information is regularly updated with the status of each property, enabling timely updates on progress, outcomes and trends.

2.2 Engagement, Support and Enforcement

The Council will:

- Contact property owners to understand why homes are empty and offer support to bring them back into beneficial use.
- Develop projects to create a more proactive service, which will identify and tackle more 'hidden' long term empty homes.
- Provide financial incentives to enable properties to be improved, renovated and ready for occupation.
- Provide professional, independent and unbiased advice on potential routes to bring properties back into beneficial use.
- Continue to work in partnership with other housing services, providers and partners to explore how we may contribute to a wide range of housing and other council corporate priorities. For example, using empty homes to provide temporary accommodation, homes for care leavers, providing a home for those with a disability or accommodating people on the Council's housing register.
- Where appropriate, we will use a range of proportionate enforcement powers to reduce the short-term impact of abandoned homes and work towards bringing those houses back into beneficial use (See **Appendix 3**)
- Work in an intelligence led way, acting on reports, referrals and requests from all stakeholders. Case investigation, progression including regulatory action will be based on a range of priority criteria. For example, the effect that the property has on the local community, its location, type and size, condition, repair costs, demand for housing in that area, relevant human rights issues and equality considerations.

2.3 Public Awareness

The Council will:

- Work to raise public awareness (such as the [National Empty Homes Week](#) and other initiatives) to highlight the issue of empty homes, encourage reporting and the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use.
- Encourage the public to report empty homes by providing a range of simple reporting mechanisms [Information for those affected by empty homes - Dorset Council](#)
- Work in partnership with a range of local stakeholders to promote reporting of empty homes, bringing houses back into use and reducing their impact on communities including working closely with our town and parish councils.

2.4 Monitoring and Review

The Council will:

- Annually review this strategy, and identify new opportunities, amending the strategy as needed.
- Set clear performance indicators to measure success, identify risks and monitor our activity (see **Appendix 1**)
- Annually review an action plan for our future work, ensuring that we continue to maximise the resources at our disposal, exploit all the opportunities available to us and drive outcome and success in our work (see **Appendix 3**)

2.5 Sustainable Solutions

The Council will:

- aim to achieve a high level of energy efficiency and climate resilience for homes we bring back into use, recognising that net zero will not always be possible in every case.
- Integrate this strategy with the broader [Housing Strategy 2024-2030](#) to ensure long-term sustainability and alignment to wider Council priorities.

3.0 Strategy Scope

3.1 What is a long-term empty property?

In explaining and shaping the work of this strategy, it is useful to understand what a *long-term empty home* is. Conversely it is useful to understand what buildings will normally fall outside of this strategy.

Different statutory provisions use different criteria for what constitutes a *long-term empty home*. This can range from 6 months to 2 years empty.

It is our experience that those properties which have been unoccupied for shorter periods of time, for example up to 2 years empty, are more likely to be subject to a variety of ‘churn’ and ongoing or delayed efforts to bring them back into beneficial use. Also, they are less likely to have deteriorated and be causing significant distress or nuisance to communities.

Properties which have been empty and unoccupied for 2 years or more are at risk of remaining empty for long periods of time. This increases the likelihood they will impact our communities with disrepair, overgrown gardens, rubbish, vermin and ASB.

Therefore, while the council has the power to deal with some empty homes from 6 months empty, to prioritise work under this strategy and to enable accurate and meaningful reporting, properties which have been empty for 2 years or more will be considered *long term empty* under this strategy.

Definition: for the purposes of this strategy, a long-term empty home is a residential premises which has not been occupied for 2 years or more.

A ‘residential premises’ is any dwelling, house or flat which is rated for Council Tax purposes. The residential element of mixed-use buildings are within the scope of this strategy i.e. a long-term empty flat over a shop.

This definition focuses on the use and occupation of the building. It is applied irrespective of the property’s current Council Tax status or other factors including whether the property is furnished.

Therefore, this definition incorporates a wide range of unoccupied residential premises which includes what might be termed ‘hidden’ empty homes, such as

- unoccupied buildings categorised as *second homes* for Council Tax purposes,
- ‘*sham*’ *second homes*,
- residential premises delisted from the Council Tax register,
- homes where the former occupant has died, and
- houses empty as the occupant has moved into long term care.

Definition: for the purposes of this strategy, a long-term empty home can include a ‘*sham*’ *second home*. This is a residential premises which the owner states is a *second home* for council tax purposes, but it is not occupied for any period.

3.2 What isn't a long-term empty home?

The following is a list of residential and other buildings which will normally fall outside of the scope of this strategy:

Properties used and occupied for short periods as commercial holiday lets including Airbnb.

Definition: for the purposes of this strategy, a holiday let is any dwelling normally occupied for short periods of time on a commercial basis.

For the purposes of Council Tax, a holiday let is valued for Business Rates if:

- in the last 12 months the property has been available to let commercially for short periods of at least 140 nights; and
- the property will be available to let commercially for short periods of at least 140 nights in the next 12 months; and
- in the last 12 months the property has actually been let commercially as self-catering accommodation for short periods of 70 nights or more

Genuine second homes, used by their owners and others from time to time.

Definition: for the purposes of this strategy, a *second home* is any furnished dwelling which is not a person's main residence but is occupied from 'time to time'. There is no minimum period that a second home must be occupied. However, under the terms of this strategy, to be a *genuine* second home, it must be occupied for at least some periods of time.

For Council Tax purposes, a property is a *second home* when it is substantially furnished, and nobody uses it as their only or main home. The Council Tax definition focusses on the furnishing of the property, not its use or occupation. Under the Council Tax provisions, there is no minimum period that a second home must be occupied.

Note - There is a distinction to be made between what could be termed a *genuine second home*, used periodically by its owners, which falls outside of this strategy and an empty, unused 'second home', which is *never* occupied and is 'in scope' for the purposes of this strategy.

Empty buildings used for non-domestic purposes, in other words commercial property such as long-term empty offices and shops.

Homes which have been unoccupied for less than 2 years. In some circumstances the Council has the legal power to deal with properties which have been empty and unoccupied for at least 6 months. While the Council may want to use its discretion to act upon empty homes which have been unoccupied for between 6 months and 2 years, this strategy will focus action and reporting on homes which have been empty and unoccupied for at least 2 years.

Homes unoccupied following the death of the occupant and a clear and active plan to obtain probate or letters of administration are in place.

Homes unoccupied due to the occupant receiving or providing care elsewhere and the occupant is likely to return to live at the property in the near future.

3.3 Why are homes left long-term empty?

Homes are left long-term empty for wide variety of reasons. Understanding the background for a dwellings lack of use, enables officers to better target their response. However, in a significant minority of cases, despite reasonable investigation, the full reasons for a properties empty status can still be unclear or difficult to understand. In some cases, it may include one or several of the below factors.

- **Financial** - Many homes are left vacant due to financial constraints, whether it's a lack of funds for repairs or renovations, or owners choosing to leave properties empty as part of an investment strategy (e.g., "buy-to-leave"). Listed Buildings are at high risk of abandonment, due to the high repair costs and perceived planning constraints.
- **Inheritance and Probate**- The death of a property owner can lead to delays in transferring ownership due to probate processes and the need to determine beneficiaries. Sometimes next of kin are not clearly identifiable. We also recognise that some beneficiaries find it very difficult to progress with the estate of the deceased. This can be due to family disagreements and emotional connections to the property and its possessions.
- **Care** - Properties can become empty when owners move into hospital, nursing homes, or other care facilities. Some owners lack the capacity to make decisions about how their home and other assets are dealt with.
- **Abandoned Second Homes and Sham Second Homes**- Second homes, particularly in some of our areas with high tourist demand, can become abandoned by the owner. This can happen as owners needs change. These second homes are never used and there is no intention to do so. *Sham second homes* are sometimes created by owners to circumvent the Council Tax premiums.
- **Investment Strategies** - Some individuals may purchase properties with no intention of living in them or renting them, but instead, hold them for future sale with the hope of profit.
- **Delays in Planning and Development**. Renovation projects, property conversions and even new-build homes can be left empty for various reasons, including delays due to planning permissions, construction issues and/or finances.
- **Lack of Urgency or Knowledge** Some owners may procrastinate on renovating or upgrading a property, while others may lack the knowledge or expertise to effectively manage the process.
- **Lack of Vision** - Owners might not fully recognise the potential of their property, whether it's to provide housing or generate capital or a regular income.

3.4 Counting long term empty homes

Accurately counting the number of long-term empty homes, both nationally and locally is complex. Council Tax data of long-term empty homes is only one source of information. As empty and unoccupied homes can extend across more than one Council Tax category, the true number of long-term empty homes is the sum of a combination of several different data sources (Figure 1).

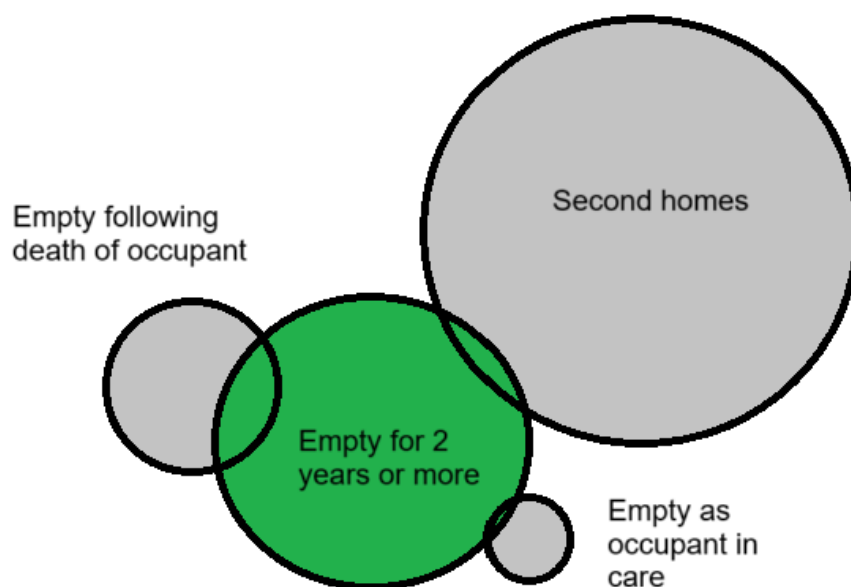


Figure 1: The number of long-term empty homes is the sum of several different data sources. This includes 'hidden' empty homes

4.0 The National Context

4.1 Background

The national Council Taxbase reports annually on empty and unoccupied homes. In 2024 it identified just over 502,000 properties reported as empty. This constitutes a year-on-year increase from 479,000 in 2020.

In 2024, of those empty properties, 119,606 were being charged a Council Tax Premium indicating that they have been long term empty for at least 12 months. This figure has been rising consistently across the country since 2020, indicating that empty homes is a growing national issue.

4.2 Guidance and good practice

There is currently no national strategy to tackle the issue of long-term empty homes.

The Local Government Association (LGA) recognised in recent guidance [‘A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes’](#) that “Against a backdrop of significant pressure to meet increasing housing demand, councils are increasingly exploring other opportunities to meet shortfalls in supply.” They also report that with resources being tight, many Councils have historically only chosen to act on long term empty homes in a reactive

way. In publishing this guidance, the LGA sought to change this stance to encourage more proactive empty homes work and the use of a wider range of options available to Council's, both in terms of assistance, advice and enforcement powers.

“Councils across England are deemed to be best placed to tackle the issue of empty homes through encouraging and supporting their owners to bring them back into use, and to enforce against owner and property where their condition or effect is to the detriment of a neighbour or community. However, dealing with an empty home is not a statutory function that councils are duty bound to provide.”²

In 2023 Crisis, the national charity for people experiencing homelessness, called for a [concerted effort to repurpose long-term empty properties](#) through a number of measures, including a partnership approach to developing a National Empty Homes Initiative.

4.3 Long Term Empty Homes and Council Tax Premium

The council tax system in England allows councils to charge higher rates for properties that have been empty for certain periods of time. This is often referred to as the Empty Home Premium. The aim of this premium charge is to encourage owners to bring their empty properties back into use.

Over recent years the ability of councils to charge this premium has been enhanced and is based on the period the property has been unoccupied. Currently in Dorset the 100% premium charge (or double Council Tax) is payable from one year empty and unoccupied. Properties empty and unoccupied for 5 or more years are liable for a 200% premium charge (or triple Council Tax). Properties empty and unoccupied for 10 years or more are liable to a 300% premium charge (or quadruple Council Tax).

4.4 New Homes Bonus

The New Homes Bonus (NHB) was introduced by Government in 2011, with the aim of encouraging local authorities to grant planning permissions for the building of new houses in return for additional revenue.

The New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils to reflect and incentivise housing growth in their areas. It is based on the amount of extra Council Tax revenue raised for new-build homes, conversions and long-term empty homes brought back into use. There is also an extra payment for providing affordable homes.

2025/26 could be the last year of New Homes Bonus, however a final decision on this is yet to be announced by government.

5.0 The Local Context

5.1 Background

In July 2024 there were 1463 properties on the Council Tax register which were classified as empty for 6 months or more. Of these 816 properties had been unoccupied for 12 months or more and were therefore liable to pay the Empty Home Premium. The breakdown of Council Tax empty home classification and the number of years empty is detailed below.

This data only provides an indication of the number of empty and unoccupied homes. It is likely to underestimate the true number of empty homes in our communities, as it does not

include other possible categories such as abandoned second homes and properties where the liable person has died and no steps are being taken to obtain probate.

Period empty and unoccupied	Number of properties	Council Tax Premium
6 months up to 1 year	647	Standard rate
1 to up to 2 years	203	100% premium (double CT)
2 to up to 5 years	125	100% premium (double CT)
5 to up to 10 years	33	200% (triple CT)
10+ years	12	300% (quadruple CT)
Total	1020	

Table 1 Empty Property in Dorset Council Tax Base (August 2024) by payment of Council Tax Premium only.

New empty homes cases for investigation are generally identified from two main sources. Firstly, reports from the public and other stakeholders and secondly, we are developing our proactive work undertaken using data sources such as council tax and other available lists.

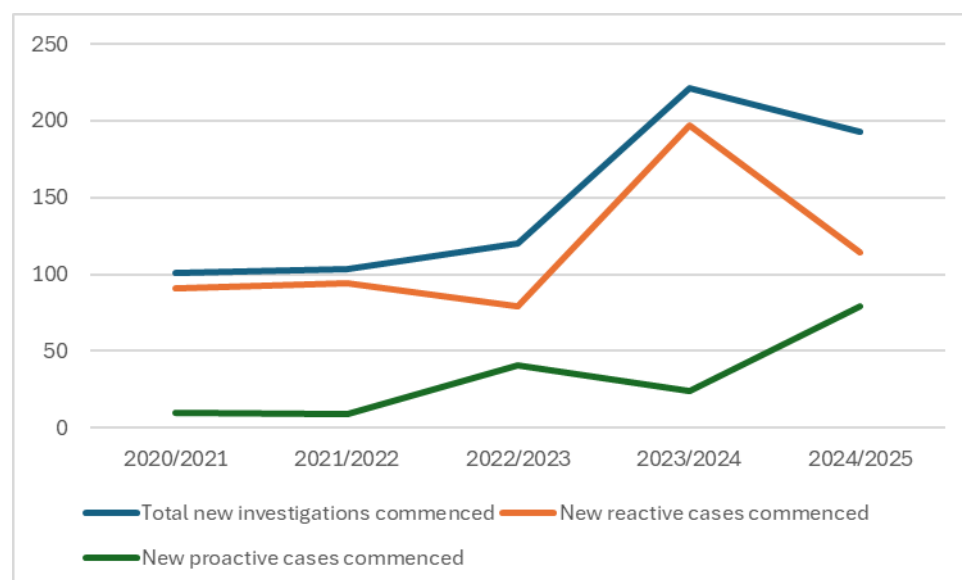


Figure 2: The total number of new investigations commenced each year, including new reactive and proactive cases.

5.2 Outcomes and performance

In the last 4 years, 53 long term empty homes have been brought back into beneficial use as a direct result of action instigated by Dorset Council. (Figure 3)

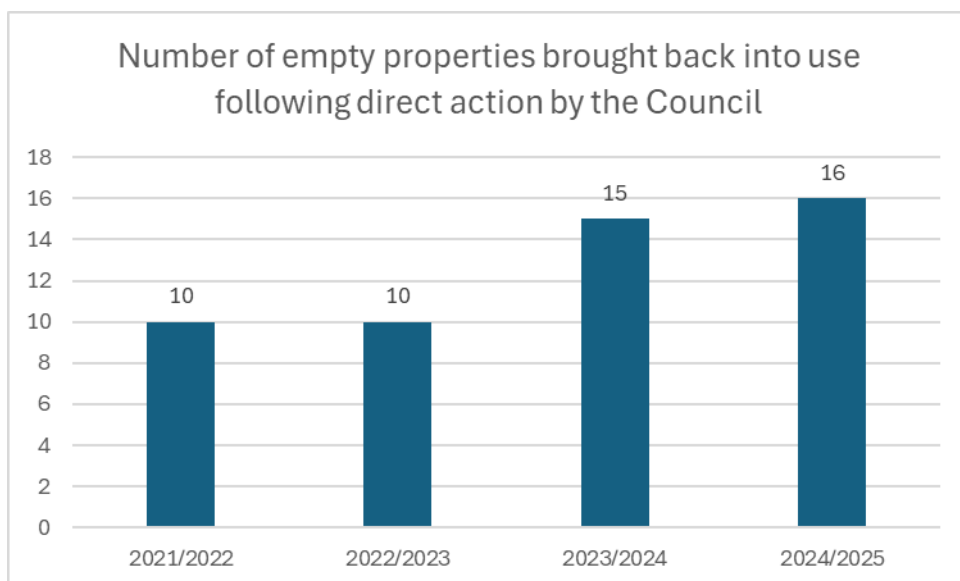


Figure 3: the number of empty properties bought back into use. (2024/25 data does not include Q4).

Our ambition is to increase our output of empty homes brought back into use by our direct action.

6.0 Our Approach - Support, Assistance and Enforcement

In working towards bringing long term empty homes back into use, no single process of support, assistance and enforcement is consistently and reliably effective in every case.

Each empty property and each empty property owner are different. Each set of circumstances which led to a property being long term empty varies from case to case. This then requires a bespoke use of the below tools, at the right time, in the right way, to unlock a case and encourage the owner to act positively.

At one extreme, a small amount of timely advice and assistance from us can achieve results over a short timescale of months. More complex cases can require extensive work, building constructive, positive relationships with the owner, which can sometimes require formal enforcement action, if that is deemed appropriate and proportionate. Such action, used in a small minority of the most complex cases, can take years to progress to a positive outcome.

Appendix 4 outlines an example of our approach, using support, assistance and enforcement as a flow diagram.

6.1 Support and assistance

In the early stages of engagement, Dorset Council will use a wide variety of action to help owners bring their long-term empty homes back into beneficial use. This offer of support is provided to most if not all live cases. What is suitable will vary from 'case to case' and can include:

- Assistance in accessing [VAT reductions](#) for renovation work to properties that have been empty for 2 years or more.
- Access to the councils direct [leasing scheme](#) and [Key4Me](#) landlord incentive scheme when a property owner provides affordable rented accommodation to the Council

- Access to a range of repayment loans from our ethical, not for profit lender, [Lendology](#)
- Advice on a range of issues including planning requirements, listed building, building regulation and other regulatory requirements which need to be addressed to bring properties back into use
- Advice on the benefits of ongoing property use and letting, versus the cost of leaving a house empty
- Help and encouragement in applying for probate or letters of administration.
- Advice about reducing the impact that an empty property has on a local area, while steps are taken to bring it back into use.
- Assessing all options to bring the property back into use including voluntary purchase where budgets permit

In most cases, this type of supportive approach will be sufficient to ensure action to bring the property back into beneficial use (see figure 4 below)

6.2 Enforcement

Where support, advice and assistance provided to an owner has failed to lead to positive action or the property owner cannot be identified, we will consider whether the empty property and the circumstances associated with it, warrants formal action.

These formal powers are likely to be necessary in a smaller number of case (see figure 4 below). This action can take various forms, and it mainly includes action to:

- Reduce or manage the impact that the empty property is having on the local community.
- Longer term steps to bring the property back into beneficial use using a change in ownership or management.

A list of possible enforcement interventions are set out in **Appendix 4** of this strategy which should be read in conjunction with the [Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for Determining Financial Penalties - October 2023 - Dorset Council](#)

6.3 Case Prioritisation

It will not always be possible or appropriate to take enforcement action. Such action will be prioritised on a minority of cases. In deciding its priorities and the most appropriate course of action, the Council will amongst other matters have regard to a wide range of relevant factors including:

- The response of the property owner.
- The length of time the property has been empty.
- The impact of the empty property on the neighbourhood and the level of justified complaint.
- Housing need in the area for the accommodation.
- The size, condition and location of the property, including its heritage status
- The likely cost of bringing the empty property back into use.
- Any debts or other charges secured on the property.
- The views of the owner and their intended use for the property including any timescale.
- The views of neighbours and other residents.
- The availability of funding to progress.

- The human rights considerations of taking enforcement action, both for the property owner and affected residents.
- Considering if the property owner has any protected characteristics under equality legislation and what reasonable adjustments to service delivery might be considered appropriate.

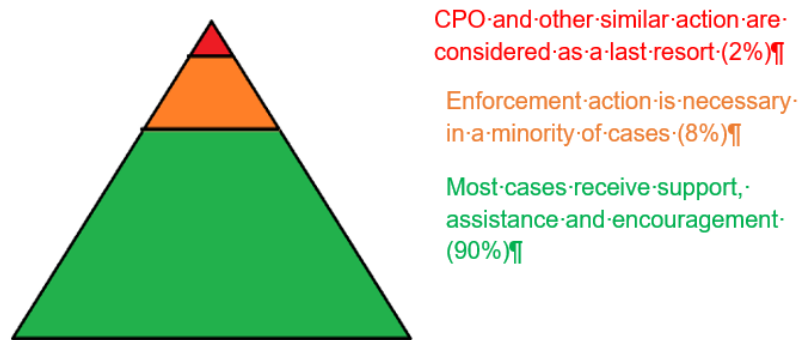


Figure 4: a diagram to illustrate the proportion of cases which can be resolved with informal advice and assistance, versus the proportion requiring formal legal action.

6.4 Resources

To meet the aims of this strategy, facilitate enforcement action and where necessary, to acquire long term empty property (both voluntarily or through compulsory purchase), sufficient financial resources need to be available.

6.4.1 Capital

From 2020 to 2028, to meet the aims of this strategy the Council has committed up to £3.7M of capital funding targeted for voluntarily or compulsory purchase of long-term empty properties.

While this capital funding may on average enable in the region of 10 long term empty properties to be acquired, the mere presence of the Councils ability to take this type of action has a significant impact. It acts as motivation for property owners to engage with us and creates a tangible deterrent. Overall, this significantly reduces the likelihood of having to take actions of last resort, such as a CPO. Therefore, the impact of this funding is felt far beyond the small number of empty properties which we finally purchase.

6.4.2 Revenue

Enforcement and other action may also result in 'one off' revenue costs. This includes carrying out 'works in default' of an enforcement notice. This occurs for example, where the we are dealing with an absent owner, and it is appropriate and necessary for the Council to carry out works itself, which it has required the owner to perform.

This is often necessary to protect residents and our communities from more immediate risks and the high impact empty homes can sometimes have. This revenue expenditure is currently funded from existing approved budgets.

6.5 Financial assistance and Loans

The Council offers repayment loans of up to £25,000 per unit of accommodation to bring empty properties back into use, from its 'not for profit', ethical lender; [Lendology](#). Further details of the financial assistance available, eligibility and conditions can be found in the [Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy 2024 - Dorset Council](#).

To meet our corporate objectives, the availability of financial assistance for long term empty homes is based on there being a wider public benefit to returning the property to beneficial use including at least one of the following:

- bringing an empty property back into use which has been unoccupied for at least 6 months and there is no realistic proposition of it coming back into beneficial use in the near future.
- helping the Council to meet housing need by setting rent at or below Local Housing Allowance rates and remain available for an agreed period likely to be equal to the period of the loan.
- providing nomination rights to the Council for an agreed period normally 5 years. This can be achieved via direct nomination or via the Councils Leasing Scheme

Where there is identified housing need for a specific type of accommodation, in a geographical area, the Council may approve a discretionary grant to support a loan, subject to individual approval by the Corporate Director for Housing and Community Safety. This would normally be in conjunction with an agreed offer of nomination rights or lease from the property owner, for the use of the property by the Council for affordable rent over an extended period, likely to be more than the 5-year nomination period outlined above.

6.6 Finders and Genealogy Service

The Council has procured the services of a 'Finder and Genealogy' provider. This contract enables the Council to use the skills and knowledge of professional researchers to trace the owners of abandoned homes and assist in finding the next of kin to unclaimed estates, that include long term empty homes.

The aim of this service is to increase the speed and accuracy of tracing owners and next of kin, providing new lines of enquiry and increasing the likelihood of long-standing complex cases being progressed to a successful conclusion.

6.7 Working with Stakeholders

6.7.1 Revenues and Benefits

The Council incentivises the owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use. It has adopted national enabling powers to charge a Council Tax Premium on homes empty and unfurnished for more than 12 months.

To ensure Council Tax records are maintained and 'up to date', the Revenue and Benefits Team normally carry out an Empty Property Review. This data is shared and informs the work of this strategy.

Establishing the use and occupation of a property for the purposes of this strategy can sometimes be challenging. This is especially the case where properties change between Council Tax classifications such as 'empty home', 'second home' and occupied. This strategy promotes timely data sharing and liaison with the Councils Revenues and Benefits Service, ensuring records are kept 'up to date' about properties of interest and enabling more seamless service delivery between teams.

6.7.2 Planning, Conservation, Environmental Protection and Building Control

Long term empty properties can pose a wide variety of environmental and wider social issues to communities. Acting on the impact of empty homes and bringing them back into use often requires a 'joined up' approach including a range of council services.

This strategy recognises the need for and encourages this type of approach, to enable issues to be addressed and properties brought back into use in the timeliest way.

Where long term empty properties are also Listed Buildings, we will work closely with the Councils Conservation Team to ensure that a successful outcome is achieved, which retains and conserves the historic interest of the building.

6.7.3 Strategic Asset Management

Where the Council is proposing to acquire a long-term empty property, either via voluntary or compulsory purchase, then prior to completion and as early as possible in the acquisition process, the case will be subject to asset review. This will be in line with the process 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.

This process will ensure that any acquisition and subsequent decisions about the disposal or repurposing of the former long term empty property are consistent with the councils Strategic Asset Management Plan and Council Plan.

7.0 Measuring Impact

A range of performance indicators are detailed in **Appendix 1**. Performance indicators aim to be simple, measurable and allow oversight of the progress of this strategy.

The performance indicators have been set with reference to the current and projected capacity of the service. Should this change, it would be necessary to review the strategy, its associated Action Plan and Performance Indicators.

8.0 Equality

In setting out this strategy, offering services and taking enforcement action, we are committed to ensuring that no one associated with the action we take or don't take is discriminated against because of any protected characteristic including age, disability, race, sex, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief or sexual orientation.

Actions to bring empty properties back into use will be administered in accordance with the Council's [Equality scheme](#). In acting, including enforcement action against property owners with protected characteristics, we are committed to making any necessary reasonable adjustments to our services, this may include, but is not limited to:

- Asking empty homeowners at an early stage if they have any difficulties in engaging with our service and how we can adjust our provision accordingly.
- Encouraging property owners to seek help from family, friends or an advocate. This also includes professional, independent advice such as a solicitor.
- In appropriate circumstances and normally with the agreement of the property owner, speaking to the next of kin and other family members about the situation.
- Offering a wide range of help and assistance as detailed above, at all stages, to positively assist in resolving the issues arising.
- Offering property owners the chance to be independently represented at any meetings.
- Where appropriate postponing action to allow recipients of our service more time to consider their position.
- Providing communication in a format and type which is suitable to the recipient.
- Liaising with other services to ensure as far as is possible we understand the wider situation that may affect the property owner, including but not limited to Council Tax,

Adult Social Care, Housing, Dorset Council Deferred Payments Team and Community Mental Health Services

- Being mindful that the owners of empty properties maybe vulnerable to exploitation from others.

A summary of the strategies Equality Impact Assessment is detailed at Appendix 8.

9.0 Human Rights

The Council is obliged to act in a way which is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. The Convention Rights relevant to this strategy include:

Article 1 (of the First Protocol) - This protects the right of everyone to the peaceful enjoyment of possessions. No one can be deprived of possessions except in the public interest and subject to the relevant national and international laws.

Article 8 (of the Convention) - This protects private and family life, home, and correspondence. No public authority can interfere with these interests except if it is in accordance with the law and is necessary in the interests of national security, public safety, or the economic wellbeing of the country.

Article 14 (of the Convention) - This protects the right to enjoy rights and freedoms in the Convention free from discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, or national or social origin.

Prior to taking any action and in particular legal action, the Council will carefully consider if there is a compelling case in the public interest which justifies interfering with the human rights of any person associated with the ownership of a long-term empty property.

In each case it will be necessary to demonstrate that the benefits of our action and the benefits of bringing an empty house back into use outweigh the loss that will be suffered by the empty homeowner. Only when these assessments show a presumption in favour of acting will the use of our powers be proportionate and considered to be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Appendix 1 Proposed Key Performance Indicators and Reports

	Proposed Key Performance Indicators
Number of long-term empty properties brought back into use as a direct result of Council action.	Increase the number of empty properties brought back into beneficial use 25/26 15 properties 26/27 and onwards 20 properties per year <u>Notes</u> Initial increasing target linked to new officer capacity from 24/25. ‘Council action’ means any step or process taken which can be evidenced as bringing about a positive change that caused the property to be brought back into beneficial use. Coincidental results and outcomes including properties that were coming back into use anyway are not counted in this metric. Current average performance since 2021 is 13 properties per year. Bringing empty homes back into use can take a prolonged period, leading to some variation in outcomes in each year.
Monthly recording and monitoring of the number of properties liable to pay the Long Term Empty Homes Premium and Class F exemption (death of the liable person) which have been empty for 2 years or more.	Monthly report (for internal strategy management purposes) <u>Notes</u> Although the number of long-term empty homes is subject to external market forces, which are outside of the control of the Council, reporting on the number of properties liable to pay the empty home premium or possessing the Class F exemption (for 2 years or more), provides a clear trend of changing numbers over time and can enable resources to be directed effectively.
Quarterly report of the number of ongoing / open investigations of empty properties by Housing Standards.	Quarterly report (for internal strategy management purposes) <u>Notes</u> This metric measures the ongoing level of cases under investigation at any one time by Housing Standards. It is a useful measure of the demand, response and activity levels of the service.
Annual activity report including the above and detailing formal and informal action relating to long term empty property and associated capital and revenue expenditure	Annual activity report to Portfolio Holder Health and Housing and the ‘Home in on Housing’ Board <u>Notes</u> Enforcement action includes any legal notice issued with the aim of managing the impact of an empty home or served with the intention of bringing it back into use. This includes Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO), enforced sale and Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO). Informal action includes positive steps other than enforcement action which have resulted in the property being brought back into use including the provision of loan assistance and voluntary purchase. Multiple actions may occur on the same property

The performance indicators have been set with reference to the current and projected capacity of the service. Should this change, it would be necessary to review the strategy, its associated Action Plan and Performance Indicators.

Appendix 2 Case Studies

Voluntary purchase and renovation for Dorset Council temporary accommodation



West View, Blandford Forum had been empty and abandoned for many years. Ground floor windows and doors were boarded up and the front courtyard overgrown.

The buildings' journey from eyesore to home took just under three years for the Empty Homes Team to complete. In that time the owners were traced, the purchase negotiated, funding acquired for the renovation, the necessary works specified, a contractor appointed, and the work completed.

The building now provides a safe, warm home for 6 local people in urgent housing need. 'On site' support from Dorset Council staff, provided from a private ground floor office enables occupants to be supported onto the next stage of their journey to a more permanent home.

Temporary accommodation of this kind was in short supply in this part of the county, and West View provided a real boost to Dorset Councils local housing offer.

West View represented a win, win, win for Dorset Council and residents. A long-term empty home was renovated and restored to use. Much needed temporary accommodation was delivered. There is also a long-term saving on temporary bed and breakfast costs.

Financial Assistance working with Lendology

This listed building in West Street, Blandford Forum, had been empty for decades and the owners were paying the Empty Homes Premium.

The owners had plans for the renovation and reuse of the building but were unable to fully fund the project. The Council worked with its ethical lender; Lendology, to develop a package of loan and other funding to make sure that the renovation could complete.

As part of the funding agreement, the owners provided the council with tenant nomination rights, so that the newly converted home would be used for affordable temporary accommodation. To make the letting and management of the property as seamless as possible, the owners joined the councils direct leasing scheme for the entire nomination period.

This case study shows how Dorset Council can use financial assistance to not only rescue a listed building but bring it back into use for much needed affordable housing.



Compulsory Purchase Order



This semi-detached house in Bridport had been empty for over 10 years. The Council spent time trying to contact and negotiate with the owner over its renovation and reuse. During this time, the property caused ongoing complaint about the fact it was empty and the garden overgrown.

As a last resort, after all other options had been exhausted, the Council commenced a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) to take ownership of the house, so that it could be brought back into beneficial use. Following the prescribed legal process, while the Council continued to try to negotiate with the owner, the ownership of the house finally vested with Dorset Council in early 2025.

Properties subject to CPO may sometimes be sold back onto the open market as quickly as possible, but as in this case, the aim is that it is repurposed for affordable housing.

Appendix 3 Action Plan

	Aim	Action	Expected outcomes	Completion
1	Data Review of existing empty homes data including all reactive and proactive data sources, storage and management	• Develop a system for prioritising cases for action based on the themes of this strategy • Review the use of the current Housing Standards database for recording empty property information • Identify any new data sources • Create and manage a data management system enabling the management of KPI's and reports outlined in this strategy • Quantify the increased Council Tax liability achieved from the work of this strategy	• Improved data about long-term empty homes • Greater understanding of the issues and associated trends • Ability to provide timely activity and management reports • Better targeting of resources • Understand the wider benefits of the strategy including increasing Council Tax revenue.	31 December 2025 and ongoing
2	Targeting 'hidden empty homes'	• Develop the proactive work of the service including: ◦ Council Tax Class F exempt dwellings – long term empty following the death of the occupant and empty 2 years or more ◦ Empty properties owned by rural estates	• Target work on hidden' empty homes • Increase in Council Tax liability and revenue as Class F exemptions are not liable for CT	Report in first annual review
3	Enforcement	• Develop our understanding and use of the full range of legal processes to bring empty homes back into use using enforcement powers including: ◦ Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) ◦ Enforced Sales • Identify target properties where such enforcement action is appropriate and implement action where legal basis and resources permit.	• Develop our formal response to complex long term empty properties to include all possible legal powers including EDMO and Enforced Sales • Ability to take formal action against a wider range of high profile, problematic empty homes	Report in first annual review
4	Engagement	• Review and maintain the website content for empty homes ensuring that the information	• Encourages and helps the owners of empty property by providing a high-	31 December 2025 and ongoing

	Provide and maintain good quality communication about the challenge of long-term empty homes in Dorset.	- provided is up to date, appropriate and accurate. • Participation in the annual Empty Homes Week including social media, press releases and other initiatives. • Review all correspondence to ensure that communication is accessible, clear, includes all necessary detail, creating new necessary standard communications where appropriate.	- quality information to help them bring properties back into use. • Ensures that stakeholders can easily report incidents of empty homes • Enables customers to self-serve without increasing unnecessary demands on back office and operational staff • Remove barriers to residents accessing this service • Ensure that empty homeowners can fully engage in the service	February 2026 and annually 31 December 2025 and ongoing
5	Monitoring and Review Carryout an annual review of the strategy looking at the progress against the key performance indicators.	• Review the strategy, aims, KPI and reporting mechanisms to check progress. • Investigate the feasibility of benchmarking opportunities with other local authorities of a similar size and stock profile etc providing a comparable empty home service	• Ensures that the strategy is a live process, kept up to date, able to track progress, assess risks and opportunities. • Monitor performance, outcomes and develop best practice opportunities.	Annually 31 March 2026
6	Resources Maintain suitable and sufficient capital and revenue funding to support the aims of this strategy and investigate options to grow the service	• Revenue Investigate the feasibility of a specific revenue budget for essential enforcement expenditure including works in default • Capital • Keep under review and up to date reporting of capital spend on managing the impact of and acquiring long term empty properties. • Investigate potential internal and external funding sources with a view to maintaining and expanding the outputs and outcomes of this strategy	• Ongoing use of proportionate and necessary enforcement work and expenditure to support the aims of this strategy. • Determine how capital, revenue and staff funding impacts on outcomes and outputs, including where appropriate devising business cases to maintain or expand the work of this strategy.	Ongoing – report at annual review

7	Partnerships To work with internal stakeholders including Council Tax to review where the provision of services can complement the aim of bringing empty homes back into use	• Quarterly liaison with Council Tax and Revenues Team • Annual workshop with Council Tax and Revenues Team to enable greater mutual understanding, joint working and staff efficiency. • Investigate the feasibility and implement a suitable multi-disciplinary virtual team or venue to tackle the issue of long-term empty homes in Dorset including representation from Council Tax, Conservation, Planning, Building Control and other relevant stake holders • Investigate and report on the feasibility of improving uptake of the private sector leasing scheme and Key4Me for the owners of empty homes • Contact and work with town and parish councils to make them aware of this strategy and how they may assist in its implementation, development and reporting.	• Share information, data and continue to build mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities and where possible reduce any duplication • Ensure a corporate approach to dealing with long term empty homes so that different services are aligned to this aim • Increase the uptake of leasing and renting schemes, including targeting more recent empty homes in high demand geographical areas, helping to reduce reliance on temporary accommodation. • Share information, data and continue to build mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities	Ongoing Quarterly November 2025 Report at annual review Report on pilot at annual review
8	Net Zero Promote energy efficient and climate resilient renovation practices to contribute to our net zero targets and reduce the environmental impact of bringing existing empty homes back into use.	Create guidance for those renovating empty homes which provides 'up to date', good quality information about works which contribute to creating more energy efficient and climate resilient homes, access to support and funding.	Contribute and work towards net zero targets and climate resilience goals	1 April 2026
9	Public Sector Equality Duty	Refer to EqIA Action Plan	Case officers are aware of the detail of the EQIA and its action plan. Identification of protected	Within 6 months of the

	Implement the findings and action plan of the strategies Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA).		characteristics and application of reasonable adjustments is embedded into the relevant documentation, processes and decision making	adoption of this strategy
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The performance indicators have been set with reference to the current and projected capacity of the service. Should this change, it would be necessary to review the strategy, its associated Action Plan and Performance Indicators.

Appendix 4 Enforcement powers

The general principles of how and when enforcement powers will be used is set out in the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for determining Financial Penalties. Enforcement options include:

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's).

The Council may apply to the First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) to impose an [EDMO](#) on a house which has been empty for at least six months. If granted the order gives the Council the power to manage the house, but not take the full ownership. Final EDMO's last for a maximum period of seven years, after which another order maybe applied for, or some alternative action taken.

During the lifetime of the EDMO, the Council is required to rent the property for residential purposes and may recover any costs incurred in improving and managing it through the rental income obtained. If there is any surplus income, then it must be passed on to the freehold owner.

The Council may work in partnership with a Registered Provider of Housing or other agencies to manage a property which has been subject to an EDMO.

Enforced Sale

The 'enforced sale' of a house is an option available to local authorities where a property has certain unpaid legal or financial charges secured on it. This typically includes costs associated with works carried out 'in default' of a notice. In these cases, the local authority exercises the power of sale conferred by the charge, to recover the money it is owed.

The most common statutory provisions enabling works in default with an associated property charge are detailed below:

- Section 4 Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949
Requiring land to be kept free of rats and mice
- Section 79 Building Act 1984
Requiring works to remedy ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites
- Section 80 Environmental Protection Act 1990
Requiring abatement of statutory nuisance
- Section 215 Town and Country Planning Act 1990
Requiring steps to be taken for the purpose of remedying the adverse effect on amenity caused by detrimental condition of land and buildings
- Sections 11 and 12 Housing Act 2006
Requiring the taking of action to deal with category 1 or 2 hazards in residential premises
- Council Tax Debts - requires an application to court and an order for sale

The Council can seek an order from HM Land Registry (Law of Property Act 1925) to force and complete the sale of the house on the open market or via auction to recoup its costs. The freehold owner is then entitled to the balance of the sale price.

As neglected long term empty properties can typically require the above formal action, combined with the fact that absent owners often fail to comply with works notices and pay the associated 'works in default' costs, then this process can be relevant to empty homes.

Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)

Various legal provisions provide local authorities with the power to apply to the Secretary of State to acquire land, houses or other properties by compulsion ([CPO](#)). CPO action can be considered in a range of circumstances including action on an empty home to ensure the provision of housing accommodation. CPO can also be used to enable an empty property to be renovated, improved, and brought back into beneficial use, which will remedy its adverse environmental, economic, and social impact on the surrounding area.

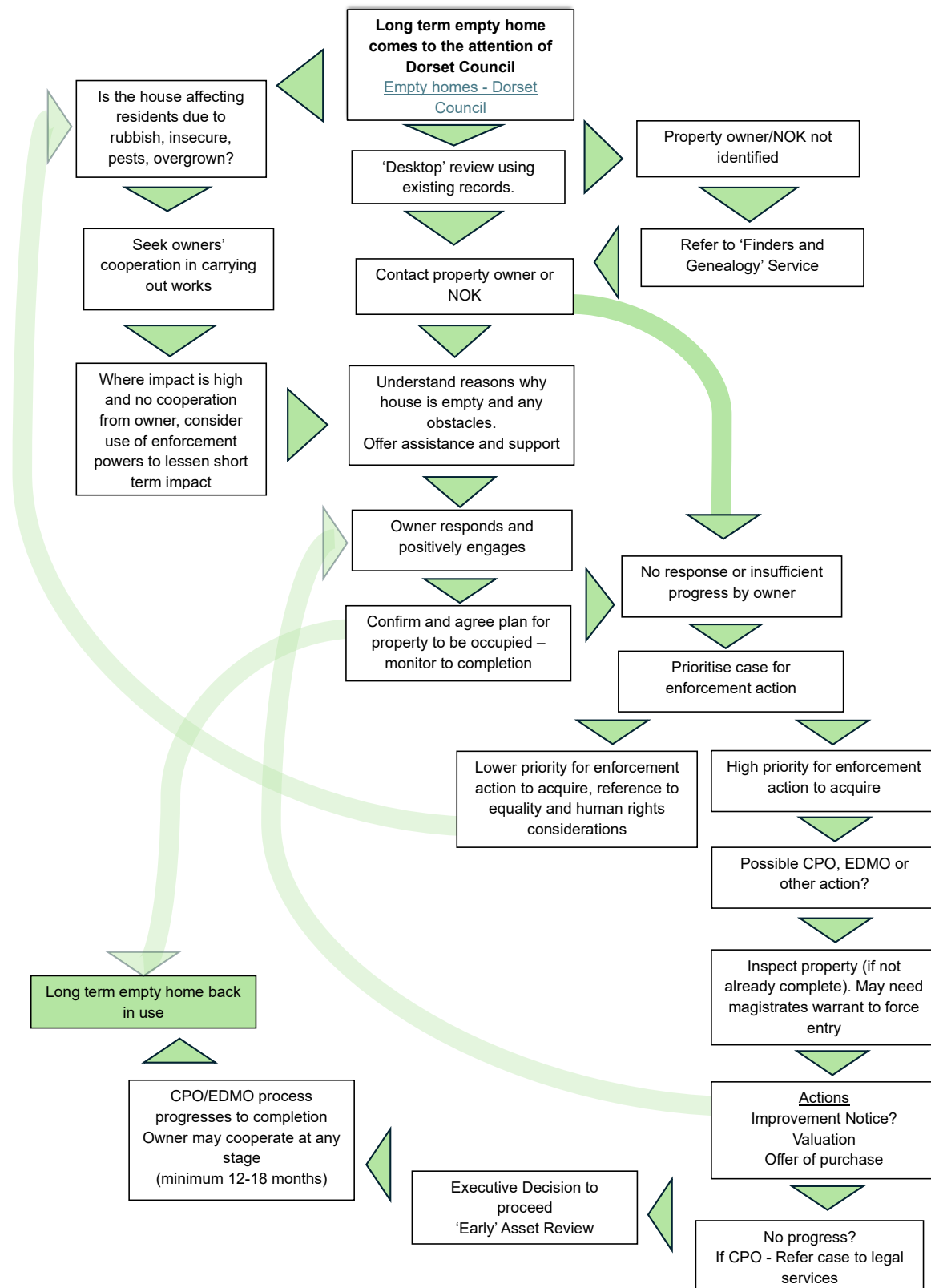
There are significant human rights and equality implications associated with the compulsory purchase of empty homes. Therefore, a CPO should only be considered where there is a compelling case in the public interest.

Other Enforcement Action

Other legislation can also be considered when dealing with issues arising from empty properties, including:

- [Local Government \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act 1982 s29](#) - enables the Council to secure a property that is open to access
- [Buildings Act 1984 s77 and 78](#) - enables the Council to require an owner to make a property safe or allow emergency action to be taken to make it safe
- [Town and Country Planning Act 1990 s215](#) - enables the Council to take action to address a dis-amenity to the local community and unsightly external appearance
- [Housing Act 1985 s265](#) - enables the Council to demolish a property that cannot be satisfactorily repaired (i.e. derelict properties)
- [Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 Section 4](#) - Requiring land to be kept free of rats and mice
- [Environmental Protection Act 1990 Section 80](#) - Requiring abatement of statutory nuisance
- [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#) – Community Protection Notice – action where a property is having a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality, and is unreasonable, and the behaviour is of a persistent or continuing nature.

Appendix 5 – Our Approach - Support, Assistance and Enforcement (Flow Chart)



Appendix 6 - Glossary of Terms

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Action or inaction by a person(s) which causes, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to others.

Long term empty home

For the purposes of this strategy, a long-term empty home is a residential premises which has not been occupied for 2 years or more

Empty Homes Premium

This is an additional council tax charge on the owners of long-term empty properties that have been unoccupied and unfurnished for 1 year or more. The premium increases over time and is a 100% premium (double council tax) if the property has been empty for 1 to 5 years, 200% premium (triple council tax) from 5 to 10 years unoccupied and 300% premium (quadruple council tax) for 10 years or more unoccupied.

Holiday let

For the purposes of this strategy, a holiday let is any dwelling normally occupied for short periods of time on a commercial basis.

For the purposes of Council Tax, a holiday let is valued for Business Rates if:

- in the last 12 months the property has been available to let commercially for short periods of at least 140 nights; and
- the property will be available to let commercially for short periods of at least 140 nights in the next 12 months; and
- in the last 12 months the property has actually been let commercially as self-catering accommodation for short periods of 70 nights or more

‘Letters of administration’

If a person dies without a will, the next of kin can apply for the legal right to manage the estate. In these cases, the eligible application receives ‘letters of administration’ to prove they have a legal right to manage and disperse the estate of the deceased.

Probate

Probate is the process of obtaining the legal right to deal with someone’s property, money and possessions (their ‘estate’) when they die.

Second home

For the purposes of this strategy, a ‘second home’ is any furnished dwelling which is occupied from ‘time to time’, but nobody uses it as their only or main home.

There is no minimum period that a second home must be occupied. However, to be a second home and not an empty home, it must be at least occupied for some of the time.

For Council Tax purposes, a property is a ‘second home’ when it is substantially furnished but nobody uses the property as their only or main home.

Note - There is a distinction to be made between what could be termed a genuine ‘second home’, used periodically by its owners, which falls outside of this strategy and abandoned ‘second homes’, which are never occupied and are ‘in scope’ for the purposes of this strategy.

‘Sham second home’

For the purposes of this strategy, a long-term empty home can include a 'sham second home'. This is a dwelling, which the owner states is a 'second home' for council tax purposes, but it is not occupied for any period of time.

Appendix 7 - References and further information

1. [Local authority Council Taxbase in England: 2024 \(revised\) - GOV.UK](#)
2. [LGA: A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes](#)
3. [DEFRA: Second and Empty Homes: Statistical Digest of Rural England](#)
4. [Dorset Council Plan 2024 to 2029](#)
5. [Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council](#)
6. [Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and Statement of Principles for Determining Financial Penalties - October 2023 - Dorset Council](#)
7. [Action on Empty Homes](#)
8. [Empty Homes Network](#)