

Consultation Document

What is this consultation about?

We would like to hear your views on the proposed Empty Homes Strategy, which sets out our plans for bringing empty homes back into use. We welcome feedback from all residents, empty homeowners, staff and partners. This feedback is really important for us to understand how to best address the issue of long-term empty homes and shape our new Empty Homes Strategy.

The aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes. Our target over the next five years is to bring 1000 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures and the significant progress we have already made in reducing the number of long-term empty homes across the borough. However, we feel that this target is achievable, having returned 965 long-term empty homes into use since we published our last strategy in 2016. We have worked with key stakeholders to develop the proposed strategy and now is the time to have your say and help shape the final Empty Homes Strategy.

What is an empty home?

Short-term empty homes are those homes that have been unoccupied for up to six months. They are often in the process of being sold or between lettings, are being renovated prior to occupation or awaiting probate following the death of the occupier. Short-term empty homes are a natural part of the housing market. We know that within west Cheshire, half of empty homes fall into this category and do not normally cause any issue or require any intervention.

Long-term empty homes are those homes that have been empty for six months or more, for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Low demand
- Inheritance of
- Awaiting demolition
- Lack of finance to carry out repairs
- Owner moved into care
- Investment opportunities
- Lack of interest
- Awaiting planning consent
- Prohibition orders
- Repossessions and finally
- Family disputes such as divorce settlements

Why is it important to address empty homes?

Empty homes are a wasted resource, particularly when there is a significant need for affordable housing. In Cheshire West and Chester, we have almost 6,500 applicants on our housing register. To help meet the ever-increasing demand for housing, we must make better use of our existing stock. Returning empty homes back into use makes good economic sense as it is both cheaper and faster than building new homes. At the same time, it is friendlier to our environment as it makes use of an untapped existing resource.

What are the disadvantages of homes remaining empty?

- Has a negative effect on our communities, becoming a potential focal point for illegal activities and anti-social behaviour
- Increases future renovation costs as a result of deteriorating condition
- Becomes a strain and expense on agencies such as the Police, and the Fire and Rescue Service
- May also become a risk to the public through unsafe structures, harbouring litter and vermin and finally
- Affects neighbouring house prices

What are the advantages of bringing empty homes back into use?

- Provides an increase in the number of good quality and affordable housing across all tenures
- Improves the existing built environment
- Reduces levels of anti-social behaviour
- Reduces crime and the fear of crime
- Reduced risk to the emergency services
- Supports area regeneration schemes
- Supports corporate economic growth and development priorities, objectives and strategies
- Provides income generation opportunities through the New Homes Bonus
- Recovers debt owed to the Council
- Reduces workload for other Council departments such as Environmental Health and finally
- Encourages partnership working that facilitates investment from external organisations

What are our aims?

Since we published our last Empty Homes Strategy in 2016, we have returned 965 long-term empty homes back into use. Despite this achievement, there are currently around 4,800 empty homes across the borough, of which about 1,500 are long-term empty. Our aim is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes and bring 1000 properties back into use through the lifetime of this strategy.

How will we do this?

- By raising awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available
- Increasing the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need
- Improving our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect, and finally
- Developing effective partnerships with key stakeholders

How will we prioritise which empty homes to bring back into use?

To ensure that we allocate our resources appropriately, we will conduct a risk assessment and priority scoring methodology. The process uses a set of factors that takes into consideration the risk of leaving the home empty. A summary of the factors we will use are as follows:

- Environmental factors, such as boarded up windows, accumulated rubbish/fly tipping and overgrown gardens
- Social factors, which examines if the property is a source of crime, vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour
- Health and safety factors, such as disrepair or in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties, cause hazards to the public and pest activity and finally
- Length of time empty factor; this naturally forms part of our risk assessment process

We will prioritise those properties with the highest risk score following the assessment.

What approach do we intend to take to bring long-term empty homes back into use?

We will continue to combine enforcement activity with new and innovative initiatives, including specialist guidance, loan support and grant assistance.

The Empty Homes Strategy will continue to place a strong emphasis on partnership working, which will include working with empty homeowners and housing providers

such as registered providers, who provide social housing and private landlords who provide private rented housing.

How will we bring empty homes back into use?

Enablement

We will make contact with every empty property owner, asking why the property is empty, what their intentions are, and explaining the options available to them to encourage them to bring the property back into use.

Inducement

Where necessary, and subject to qualifying criteria, the Council offers a range of financial assistance to help bring empty homes back into use:

- **Empty home grants** - These are available to owners to help them towards carrying out any required improvement works to an empty home.
- **Empty home loan** - We can provide a shared equity loan if the empty homeowner intends to let their property after completion of any required works.
- **Conversion grant** - This grant is for the conversion of long-term empty homes or obsolete commercial premises to provide new units of private rented residential accommodation.
- **Decent home loan** - This loan enables the empty homeowner to carry out necessary renovations using funds released from any available equity in their capital asset. The empty homeowner must occupy the home on completion of works.

In addition, the Council also offers the following schemes:

- **Landlord accreditation scheme** - This scheme aims to recognise those landlords who provide a high standard of housing management. Where an empty home has been brought back into use via the use of a grant or loan and the owner has agreed to let the property, the landlord will be required to be accredited.
- **Empty homes matching service** - This service allows the empty homeowner to sell their home to an accredited landlord or a managing agent who is either a member of the Association of Residential Lettings Agents (ARLA) or is a member of the National Approved Letting Scheme (NALS), who will then let the property and help bring the empty home back into use.
- **Empty homes buy and sell service** – This service brings together those empty homeowners who wish to sell their empty home with property developers or private individuals who wish to buy the home to refurbish and sell the property on the open market or live in the property themselves.

Enforcement

Where owners refuse to co-operate with us and the empty home is a high priority, then we will take appropriate enforcement action.

- **Enforced sale** - We can enforce the sale of an empty home if the owner has a financial debt owed to us and it is registered against the property.
- **Compulsory purchase order** - Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order to acquire underused or ineffectively used homes for residential purposes if there is a general housing need in the area. Section 226 (1)(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order if we believe that the acquisition will facilitate the carrying out of redevelopment, development or improvement of the land or building.

Further details around enforcement can be found in our Enforcement Policy which is available upon request, using the contact details below.

How can I get involved and have my say?

The Council is committed to enabling residents and stakeholders to be involved in this consultation. Please have your voice heard by completing our survey. Analysis of the results will enable us to shape the Empty Homes Strategy to best reflect the needs of the Borough and fulfil its aims.

The consultation will be running over a 12 week period from Monday 29th November 2021 until Sunday 27th February 2022.

Please visit

<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/EmptyHomesStrategyConsultation2021/> to have your say.

Other ways to take part

For any enquiries relating to this strategy please:

- Email: housingstrategy@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk
- Telephone: **0300 123 8 123** quoting 'Empty Homes Strategy'
- Write to: Housing Strategy, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Council Offices, 4 Civic Way, Ellesmere Port, CH65 0BE

What happens next?

We will be consulting on these options until 27th February 2022. The results will be made available on the Council's website from April 2022 and will inform a report to Cabinet in Spring 2022.