Empty Property Strategy 2015 - 2019

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Introduction

The Council's first Empty Property strategy was adopted in 2008. The Strategy’s aims and objectives link into the Council’s strategic aims and are an essential element of the Housing Strategy and the Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy.

The Council has moved away from a reactive approach to private sector empty properties by developing a number of initiatives to help solve the problems empty houses bring to an area. Information and assistance is made available at an early stage, so helping prevent long term empty properties falling into decline and dereliction.

The Council's Empty Property Officers proactively engage with property owners in order to develop effective partnerships aimed at achieving clear targets and performance levels.

This proactive approach has aided the improved supply of homes across the borough, and will continue to help to reduce homelessness, increase the choice of accommodation available, and work towards the decent homes standards and conditions that all residents should enjoy.

Tackling empty properties will also reduce instances of nuisance and vandalism and support the Council’s strategic aims and objectives in improving the local environment and neighbourhood.
Delivering the Strategy through Key Objectives

This strategy sets out the ways in which Gravesham Borough Council aims to bring empty properties back into use so that owners and residents are fully aware of the Council's aims and objectives in order that successes can be monitored against targets.

Gravesham Council aims to bring up to 175 empty properties back into use over the next 5 years.

In order to achieve its aim, this strategy focuses on 4 key objectives:-

1. Continued development of a proactive approach towards the early identification and prevention of empty properties;

2. Target and prevent short-term empty properties becoming long-term empty;

3. Bring long-term problematic empty properties back into use via negotiation and enforcement action;

4. Work with partners to raise awareness of issues surrounding empty properties and to explore innovative methods of bringing empty properties back into use
Why have an Empty Property Strategy?

The Council is committed to tackling the blight of empty properties adopting a proactive approach to assist owners in returning their property to use. Empty properties are not only a wasted asset, but can attract nuisance behaviour and unwanted attention. A coordinated and sustainable approach can deliver an increase in housing supply, improve standards and reduce the number of empty homes.

Who Benefits from bringing empty properties back into use?

**Homeowner**
- Increased Income: Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) est. up to £8,000 per annum lost by leaving a property empty
- Increased capital value
- Reduction in costs of insurance, repairs & maintenance
- Reduced risk of squatters and vandalism
- Access to Council’s support system in managing property

**Community**
- Reduction in negative impact on neighbourhood house prices
- Prevents anti-social behaviour including vandalism, arson, burglary, fly-tipping and drug misuse
- Regeneration of an area

**Council**
- Increased housing supply
- Reduced costs in dealing with complaints about empty homes
- Increased income from Council Tax
- Reduced homelessness
- Reduced need for “green field” development
Why do properties become and remain empty?

Properties remain empty for a variety of different reasons that can include issues with a property’s structure, financial affairs, legal matters or a general lack of understanding, but with the right support and information owners can be encouraged and supported to return their property to use.
The National Picture

Empty properties are not only found in large towns and cities. They are a characteristic feature in many areas of the country. Across England, in 2011-12, there were 710,140 empty properties of which 98,343 were in the South East (Empty Homes Agency).

The vast majority of empty properties are privately owned with more than half of these remaining empty for longer than six months and a significant proportion are abandoned for years. Empty homes can quickly fall into disrepair and the longer they remain empty the more likely it is that they will become derelict and prohibitively expensive to bring back into use.

Long-term problematic empty homes are a major cause for concern. They represent waste, financial expense and missed opportunities. They can blight communities, attract vandals and squatters and tie up the resources of local authorities and the emergency services. Bringing more long-term empty homes back into use is a sustainable way to meet housing demand and helps to reduce the need to build new houses.

However, the acknowledged housing shortage has brought the plight of empty properties into the public eye and bringing them back into use has become a priority. With the introduction of incentives and significant input from local authorities empty properties are being returned to use through various methods.

The scale of the problem nationally has provoked a national policy response, coordinated by the Empty Homes Agency - an independent campaigning organisation – and subject to the scrutiny of the Government’s Select Committee for Empty Homes. The main recommendations of the Select Committee report were:

- Radical intervention in inner urban areas of market failure to make them attractive to a mix of existing and potential residents
- Greater emphasis on the monitoring of market stability to restore confidence to neighbourhoods at risk and prevent them from declining into housing market failure
- Stricter implementation of the Planning Guidance PPG3 with regard to the re-use of brownfield sites and a more radical curb on greenfield development

Existing Powers

The Government, working with the Empty Homes Agency encourages local authorities not only to deal with their own empty properties but also to adopt measures to bring privately owned empty homes back into use as part of their strategic housing approach. Local authorities are increasingly engaging with owners to find solutions. This can take the form of offering incentives such as renovation grants or loans or advice on selling, leasing and tax issues. This approach is dependent on good will and co-operation from owners and where this is achieved can be highly effective. Local authorities may also resort to enforcement action where it has not proved possible to achieve re-occupation of empty homes through voluntary
means. For many years, local authorities have been able to call upon statutory last resort powers to require the sale or renovation of empty homes. The most commonly known powers are compulsory purchase and enforced sale.

In 2006 the Government introduced an alternative last resort power - Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), which initially allowed local authorities with housing responsibilities to take over the management of some residential properties that have been empty for more than 6 months. The ‘empty’ time period was extended by the government to two years from November 2012 and the local authority must now give the owner at least three months notice of their intention to seek an order. The property must also now be attracting anti-social, nuisance behaviour.
The Local Picture

Gravesham Council’s proactive approach in recent years has proved to be very effective in reducing the overall number of empty properties and long term empties.

Empty Homes in Kent - October 2011 - 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority/Borough</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Empty Homes</th>
<th>%Empty Homes in Kent</th>
<th>Empty For over 6 months (and unfurnished)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashford</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,221</td>
<td>5.23%</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,163</td>
<td>4.98%</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,955</td>
<td>8.37%</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2,091</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,678</td>
<td>8.38%</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartford</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,086</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,033</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>250</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>4.06%</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dover</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,087</td>
<td>8.95%</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,873</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>725</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,490</td>
<td>7.44%</td>
<td>631</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gravesham</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>3.82%</td>
<td>282</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>212</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>3.40%</td>
<td>184</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maidstone</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,583</td>
<td>6.78%</td>
<td>530</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1,401</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>422</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,239</td>
<td>6.19%</td>
<td>446</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medway UA</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,710</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3,478</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>1,417</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3,375</td>
<td>16.86%</td>
<td>996</td>
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<td>Sevenoaks</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,409</td>
<td>6.03%</td>
<td>483</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,304</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>444</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,258</td>
<td>6.28%</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepway</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,003</td>
<td>8.58%</td>
<td>767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2,004</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>766</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,939</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
<td>798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swale</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,784</td>
<td>7.64%</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,845</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,633</td>
<td>8.15%</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanet</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,377</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>1,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>(3,065)</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>1,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2452</td>
<td>12.25%</td>
<td>953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonbridge &amp; Malling</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,016</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,030</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,258</td>
<td>6.28%</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunbridge Wells</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,208</td>
<td>5.18%</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,340</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent Total</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>23,331</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>8,512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>22,489</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7,844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>20,015</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>6,870</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bringing empty properties back into use

The contribution of empty properties to the Council’s housing objectives is highlighted in the Council’s Corporate Business Plan (CBP) 2011-2015 within Area of Focus 8 and is also a Measure of Accountability (CBP18).

Empty Property Corporate Working Group

The Council’s Empty Property Corporate Working Group provides a co-ordinated response to problematic, long term empty properties in its delivery of the Empty Property Strategy. The group has been in operation since 1997 and now operates as a corporate working group reporting directly to the Council’s Management Team. It currently includes representatives from Housing Strategy and Development, Planning and Regeneration, Private Housing, Housing Finance, Legal and Council Tax. In addition, the Council has its own Projects Surveyor dedicated to dealing with empty properties.

This approach ensures that action is focused both corporately and across other agencies to ensure that resources are more effectively targeted and actions are not duplicated.

Awareness Raising

• All property owners have a responsibility to ensure that their property does not affect that of their neighbours or the wider community. The Council will continue to seek to raise awareness of the reasons why owners should not leave their properties empty. For example:
  • Letting out an empty property can provide a valuable income, or selling it can mean a large windfall;
  • Assured shorthold tenancies mean that vacant possession of the property is guaranteed if it is no longer wanted to be rented out;
  • Agreements can be obtained to lease the property with a local housing association (Registered Social Landlord);
  • Many house-hunters are looking for properties to renovate themselves so properties need not be in an excellent condition to interest them;
  • Empty properties deteriorate rapidly and they cost more to insure and provide no income;
  • Using empty properties provide important social and community benefits (eg utilisation of a valuable asset when many people desperately need good homes, tackling anti-social behaviour like graffiti and fly-tipping, contributing to the regeneration of an area, etc)

Changes in Council Tax Classification

From 1 April 2013 changes in Council Tax Empty Property Classifications required changes to the way in which empty property data was collated in order to facilitate the maximisation of empty properties brought back into use under the New Homes Bonus* criteria. This required a co-ordinated approach in identifying empty properties that could have become long-term empty
(i.e. empty for more than 6 months) prior to the Council Tax Banding Report which is run on 30 September each year. These figures are used to calculate the amount of New Homes Bonus awarded to the local authority for that year and is paid annually by central government for the next six years.

Owners in this category were sent a series of letters aimed at establishing contact and ensuring that they were making sufficient efforts to bring about the reoccupation as quickly as possible. Owners were offered advice and assistance where necessary and re-occupation was rigorously monitored in order to ensure that the Council Tax data was as accurate as possible by the time the report was run. This operation will continue on an annual basis as long as the New Homes Bonus continues to be allocated in this way.

*New Homes Bonus - the Department for Communities and Local Government set aside almost £1billion over the Comprehensive Spending Review Period (2011 -2015) for the New Homes Bonus. New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils for increasing the number of homes and their use. It is paid each year for 6 years and 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.

Identifying empty properties

The Council introduced a bespoke Empty Property Database which went live in August 2011 and is constantly updated via the Council Tax database. Any properties reported by Council Members, officers or residents are added to the database when they are confirmed as empty. Progress on bringing the properties back into use is monitored through the Empty Property Corporate Working Group’s monthly meetings. Details of relevant properties reported to the Kent No Use Empty Property Initiative will also be forwarded to the Council and added to the database.

Ownership

If the empty property is Council owned then the appropriate officers are informed immediately. If it is privately owned then a number of checks are completed against existing council records including Council Tax Database, Anite Data Recording System, Planning Uniform System. The owner’s details and any previous history relating to the property are established, including the use of land searches, Experian searches, company/electoral roll searches and tracing agents.

Visit

Empty properties are visited and an assessment made of their overall condition and then prioritised for further action depending on their physical condition and security. The owner is encouraged to repair and bring the property back into use, a record of the works that could be included in any enforcement action is prepared. Photographic evidence is also taken of the property’s condition.
Environmental Health Officers will ensure that the property presents no significant hazards to visitors to the property, including members of the public passing by on the highway. Should a significant hazard exist, a Notice can be served under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Building Act 1984 or the Housing Acts 1985 and 2004.

Advice and assistance

Owners of empty properties are contacted to clarify their intentions. If an owner does not wish to retain the property, advice and assistance can be provided, and the situation will continue to be monitored until the property is sold. If an owner wishes to retain the property, options will be discussed and advice and assistance offered wherever practicable. This includes literature and information packs, details of lettings and estate agents, and advice on the various financial packages available on the market, such as equity release schemes and low interest secured loan packages. The Council will continue to work with the owner and monitor progress until the property is brought back into use.

On a case by case basis, the Empty Property Corporate Working Group will consider providing an interest free loan to owners to enable them to refurbish and then let or sell the property. Loans are facilitated through the Kent No Use Empty initiative and would be repayable after a term of 3 years for a rental property and 2 years if the owners wish to sell the property or upon the sale of the property or a breach of loan conditions.

Enforcement action

When owners will not work with the Council within reasonable timescales, and if their empty properties are causing a nuisance to the public by their appearance and condition, the Council has a range of enforcement options available (eg dangerous structures under the Building Act 1984, dilapidated housing under the Housing Acts 1985 and 2004, unsightly appearance under S.215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, etc). These options will only be taken as a last resort and only in the public interest.

If a property is causing a nuisance to neighbours and the owner refuses to co-operate to remedy the situation, the Council will consider the following options:

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

The Council will use, as appropriate, CPO powers under Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 and Section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 where all reasonable attempts have been made with the owner to bring the empty property back into use and the continuation of the situation will have a detrimental effect on the neighbouring and surrounding environment. The use of a CPO is a lengthy, time-consuming process and will be used only when other approaches have not been successful. However, the threat of a CPO acts as an effective tool to encourage owners of empty properties to take action.
Serving CPOs on empty properties may be justified where there appears to be no other chance of a suitable property being used as a home. They enable the Council to acquire the property to redevelop in partnership with a Registered Social Landlord. This could be the refurbishment of the existing property or the demolition and rebuilding of a scheme for use as social housing.

Enforced Sales

The Council can force the sale of an empty property under Section 103 (i) of the Law of Property Act 1925 in order to recover the costs incurred by the Council for carrying out works in default. Sale can also be forced where the empty property has an outstanding Council Tax debt. Such charges can be registered against the property and unless the owner repays the outstanding sum, the Council can force its sale to recover its costs.

Enforced sales may be justified for properties that are a nuisance to the public and where the Council has had to use its resources (eg removing rubbish, securing the property, etc). The Council will seek to ensure that the enforced sale of any property leads to its re-occupation or redevelopment.

Unsecured Properties

These are empty properties that are not secure so that they can be broken into, vandalised, set on fire, etc. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29 allows the Council to:

- make the property secure or board it up in an emergency, or
- allow the property to be fenced off

Unsightly land or external appearance

Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows the Council to serve notice on the owner of land whose condition is adversely affecting the amenity of the area. Timely use of this action may prevent properties from falling into serious disrepair.

If the owner fails to comply with the notice, the Council is entitled to carry out the works and reclaim the costs, which are able to be registered as a local land charge. The Council can also prosecute the owner for non-compliance and if convicted, the owner can be fined and have a criminal offence registered against them. If following conviction, the owner continues to fail to comply with the notice, the Council can prosecute the owner again and the fines can be substantially higher. The Council will publicise the results of all legal actions undertaken in order to act as a deterrent to others.
Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

EDMOs, introduced in England from April 2006, allowed councils with housing responsibilities to take over the management of some residential properties that have been empty for more than six months. The property does not have to be run down or uninhabitable. However since November 2012 the empty period was increased to 2 years and the council must now give the owner 3 months notice that they intend to apply for an order.

An EDMO cannot be made on a property where one or more of the following statements are true:

- It is not a dwelling (eg it is a building or part of a building used for non-residential purposes)
- It is not wholly unoccupied (eg only part of the house or flat is unoccupied or there are spare rooms not in use)
- It has been lived in at any time within the previous six months
- The two year exception period applies to all empty dwellings regardless of the reason they are unoccupied. However, even after two years, many unoccupied dwellings will continue to be excepted as long as one or more of the following statements are true:
  - The property is normally the only or main residence
  - The property is occupied occasionally as a second home or a holiday home
  - The property is genuinely on the market for sale or to be let
  - The property is expected to be inherited but the grant of representation (probate) following the death of the previous owner has not yet been obtained. In this case, the property will continue to be accepted for six months after the grant of representation has been obtained
  - It is an agricultural holding within the meaning of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986, or a farm business tenancy within the meaning of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995
  - It is usually occupied by an employee of the relevant proprietor in connection with the performance of his duties under the terms of his contract of employment
  - It is available for occupation by a minister of religion as a residence from which to perform the duties of his office
  - It is subject to a court order freezing the property of the relevant proprietor
  - It is prevented from being occupied as a result of a criminal investigation or criminal proceedings
  - It is mortgaged, where the mortgagee, in right of the mortgage has entered into in and is in possession of the dwelling

Where a property has been empty for at least two years and it is unlikely to become occupied in the near future, the Council will consider the use of an EDMO. The Council will arrange the management of the property, the undertaking of works and the letting of the property. The subsequent rental income will then be used to pay for the works and any residual income will be paid to the owner.

In September 2013 Gravesham Council was granted an Interim Empty Dwelling Management Order on a property that had been empty for over 8 years and will resort to using this legislation where owners fail to take reasonable steps to bring about the re-occupation of their property.
Working with Partners

The Council supports the Kent County Council funded No Use Empty (NUE) Scheme in maximising the return of empty properties back into use within Gravesham. The initiative provides:

- Access to an empty property loan scheme to encourage owners to renovate their properties and make them available either for sale or let;
- Enforcement support and training to provide in-depth support on empty property projects and training for staff involved in enforcement work;
- A capital fund scheme to fund the acquisition of empty properties for development and leasing via an affordable partner;
- Communications and publicity to highlight the detrimental effects on local communities arising from empty properties and the potential benefits of bringing them back into use;
- The “No Use Empty” website to ensure effective communication for the initiative and to promote best practice, case studies, etc.

A representative of the Council’s Housing Strategy and Development Team attends meetings of the Kent Empty Property Officer Group through which information and best practice are shared and new initiatives developed. In addition, consultation and discussions take place with private landlords and agents through landlords’ forums.

Housing Associations

The Council works with Housing Associations in partnership to address the needs of residents across the Borough. The redevelopment and refurbishment of empty properties will be considered and assistance provided as required to meet these needs. Owners of empty properties can be directed to housing associations to enable possible partnerships.

Private Sector Landlords’ Forum

The Private Sector Landlords’ Forum is a group that meets twice-yearly to exchange information and advice on matters relating to private sector accommodation. The forum has been running in Gravesham for several years and, more recently, has been extended to cover the Dartford area as well. All private sector landlords and letting agents are invited to attend the meetings. Two newsletters a year are proposed for those unable to attend the meetings.

The Council has introduced a Voluntary Accreditation Scheme to recognise the many local landlords who are committed to providing good quality, properly managed accommodation to let. They receive a Certificate of Accreditation from the Council, free advertising on the Council’s website, advice on regulations covering rented property and grant aid for work on improving the means of escape from fire in HMOs, basic amenities and energy efficiency works (funding permitting). Explorations are underway for joining a proposed Kent-wide scheme.
Target area based activity

The Council will target its empty property resources to complement priority initiative areas to create maximum impact. Bringing an empty home up to current standards and returning it to use is a considerably more cost effective way of providing affordable housing than building a new property.

In July 2014 the Council launched a landlord accreditation scheme. The scheme, The Gravesham Rental Standard, is a voluntary scheme to promote high standards of accommodation and management in the private sector. It is also a set of standards relating to the management and physical condition of rented accommodation. The aims of the Gravesham Rental Standard are to:-

- Establish standards for private rented accommodation
- Promote awareness of such standards with both tenants and landlords
- Allow tenants to choose an accredited landlord

Funding

The council’s empty property initiatives will be financed by a variety of sources including the Council’s budgets, the Kent Empty Property Initiative and where appropriate and available, bids for resources from the Government.
Measuring performance

A co-ordinated response to problematic, long-term empty properties is provided by the Council’s Empty Property Corporate Working Group. The group has been in operation since 1997 and currently includes representatives from Housing Strategy and Development, Planning and Regeneration, Private Housing, and Council Tax.

An up to date empty property database is maintained and progress on bringing properties back into use is monitored by the Empty Property Corporate Working Group. Empty properties are visited and their overall condition assessed. Owners are contacted to clarify their intentions and advice and assistance provided. On a case by case basis, an interest free loan will be considered to enable owners to refurbish and then let the property.

This approach ensures that action is focused both corporately and across other agencies to ensure that resources are effectively targeted and actions are not duplicated.

The Council’s Corporate Plan 2011-2015 ‘Connecting with the Community’ is based upon 18 Areas of Focus identified by the local community. Area of Focus 8 is ‘Working with Private Housing Providers in the Delivery of Quality Housing’ and includes objective CBP18 which records the number of non-local authority empty homes brought back into occupation. Performance will be monitored, reviewed and evaluated by the Council’s Empty Property Corporate Working Group and reported to Elected Members on a quarterly basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Actual Outturn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>39 dwellings</td>
<td>17 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>39 dwellings</td>
<td>80 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>39 dwellings</td>
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<td>2008/09</td>
<td>39 dwellings</td>
<td>76 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>39 dwellings</td>
<td>55 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>28 dwellings</td>
<td>26 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>28 dwellings</td>
<td>50 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>28 dwellings</td>
<td>54 dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>35 dwellings</td>
<td>58 dwellings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The actions that count towards CBP18 include the following:
- Grants, loans or other financial assistance facilitated by the Council
- Leasing arrangements
- Advice given to the owner which is followed and results in the empty property being returned to use, for example, provision or advice on:-
  - The Council’s empty property strategy;
  - Options on sale and lettings issues;
  - Grants, loans or other financial assistance
  - Landlords’ Forum or accreditation scheme;
Repairs, including details on building contractors meeting minimum standards;
- Referral to housing association or other intermediary with relevant expertise;
- Enforcement action, including repair notices, CPO, works in default, enforced sale; and
- Enquiries made to establish ownership or property and follow-up action

Where an empty property is converted into several flats or units, the number of flats that are subsequently re-occupied during the year may count towards the indicator. Where a non-residential empty property is converted into a dwelling, that dwelling (or the number of flats or units within it) that is subsequently re-occupied during the year may count towards the indicator.

How we do it

Initial complaint report

Occupied

No further action

Check occupancy via council tax database

Empty

Confirm ownership and contact details

Contact owner via let/email/tel

Reply

Advice/encouragement/options

Owner cooperative

Renovation/sale/letting

Loan

Property occupied

No reply

Follow up contact/visit/further checks

Owner uncooperative

Enforcement action S.215, Edmo, cpo

Owner traced

Owner traced
Action Plan

The Council is committed to reducing empty properties across the borough and has at its disposal a number of statutory powers to take action as necessary. Intervention will be targeted to raise awareness, identify empty properties, provide advice and assistance and, as a last resort, undertake enforcement action. A collaborative approach will be adopted in partnership with all agencies to tackle the issues around empty properties.

The Council has defined four key strategic aims for dealing with empty properties:

Strategic Aim 1: Maintain a proactive approach towards the early identification and prevention of empty properties

Strategic Aim 2: Bring long-term empty properties back into use

Strategic Aim 3: Work with partners to raise awareness of the issues around empty properties

Strategic Aim 4: Use a range of tools to bring about the reoccupation of long-term empty properties

SMART targets to deliver the aims of the Council’s Empty Property Strategy are summarised in the Action Plan shown in Appendix 2 under each of the three strategic aims:

In turn, the Empty Property Strategy directly contributes to the Council’s strategic goals and housing priorities as defined by the Corporate Plan 2011-2015:

Area of Focus 8 – Working with private housing providers in the delivery of quality housing

Area of Focus 9 – Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable people within Gravesham

Area of Focus 14 - Sustainable environment and safeguarding our cultural heritage –

The Strategy also supports the:

- Housing Strategy by providing quality and choice in the housing market by reducing empty properties, creating safe and sustainable neighbourhoods, meeting the needs of vulnerable people and ensuring homes meet the Decent Homes Standard
- Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy by exploring alternative methods of bringing empty private rented properties back into use and evaluating legislative changes relating to empty property that will impact on private landlords, such as licensing
- Homelessness Strategy by helping to ensure that sufficient accommodation is available to meet the needs of homeless people, maximising the use of the existing housing stock and by providing support services for people at risk of becoming homeless
- Community Safety Strategy by reducing the number of empty properties, the opportunity
for crime including attacks, drug use and other anti-social behaviour, such as vandalism, fly-tipping and graffiti will be reduced
• Equality, diversity and community cohesion by promoting engagement, diversity, social inclusion and health and well-being

In adopting this Strategy, the Council will improve the supply of homes across the Borough and reduce the number of empty properties. This will increase the choice of housing available and help to reduce homelessness. In turn, this will lead to improved environmental conditions and a reduction in nuisance to neighbouring properties and communities whilst making an economic benefit to the local economy.
Appendix 1. - Case Study

The property first came to the attention of Gravesham Borough Council in 2002 and due to the complex nature of the case it was eventually referred to the Council’s Empty Property Working Group in October 2007. An investigation was undertaken to identify and contact the owners and other responsible parties and this revealed there were two registered owners but one had died several years previously and his estate had not been transferred to his beneficiaries. The case was further complicated by a family feud over the ownership.

In order to bring about a resolution to the matter the Empty Property Officer negotiated with both parties without a great deal of success until enforcement action i.e. the service of a S.215 Notice under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 was taken by the Council. This brought about a change of ownership and eventual sale of the property to a developer. Pressure was maintained via the threat of enforcement action and planning permission was granted for its conversion and was eventually re-occupied in the latter part of 2011.
## Appendix 2.

### Empty Homes Assessment Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property Description</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Vacant</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 2 years</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 3 years</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 5 years</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 15 years</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Condition (tick all that apply)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden overgrown</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling into disrepair</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an eyesore to the neighbourhood</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causing damage to adjoining property</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracting vandalism/anti social behaviour</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other (tick all that apply)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No attempts to sell/re-let or refurbish after 2 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more empty homes in close proximity e.g. same or adjoining roads</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property in high profile area e.g. town/village centre, conservation area etc</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council receiving complaints about the property</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous action/charges by the council</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Low scoring properties – up to 35 points

These are likely to be properties that are taking longer than expected to be reoccupied due to inheritance issues or delays in renovation. They are generally in reasonable external condition, secure and unlikely to be causing a nuisance. EPO’s will make initial approach to the owner and maintain regular monitoring.

### Medium scoring properties – 40 – 55 points

These properties may have been empty longer or beginning to show signs of neglect and causing neighbours concern. EPO’s will contact owner and enter negotiations to halt further deterioration and work towards reoccupation. If the owner does not co-operate enforcement action may be considered following inspection visit.
High scoring properties – 60 points or over

These properties will have been empty for many years, causing nuisance, detrimental to the area or giving serious cause for concern. They are at greater risk of attracting vandalism, arson, fly tipping and may have been subject to previous enforcement action. EPO’s will contact the owner and the property will be inspected, using Powers of Entry if necessary. Further enforcement action will be considered e.g. S.215, CPO etc.

Urgent properties

These will be properties that are unsecure, unsafe or dangerous. They will be secured or made safe as soon as possible and then scored and dealt with in order of priority.

Prioritising Action

Properties with the highest scores or in urgent need of attention will be prioritised for action. Prioritised properties will be brought to the attention of other services where applicable and may be referred to the Empty Property Working Group for co-ordinated action.