

GRAVESHAM EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

2023-2028

1. Introduction

Gravesham Borough Council's Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028 sets out how the council is committed to bringing long-term empty homes back into use. It will seek to reduce the number of empty homes within the borough, whilst promoting options available to bring empty homes back into use as residential dwellings.

With around 1,060 households on the council's housing register and limited social housing available, there continues to be a significant demand for housing within the borough and across Kent. Many people cannot access good quality housing, yet many homes stand vacant. Every empty home within the borough is an identified wasted resource.

In adopting this strategy, the council will improve the supply of homes across the borough and reduce the number of empty properties. This will potentially increase the choice of housing available and could assist in providing additional housing options to households in the borough looking

to secure a new home. 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.

The success of this strategy will make a contribution to the continued prosperity of the borough and an increase in the supply of homes for the many households in urgent need. This strategy sets out the range of initiatives the council has adopted to tackle the problem of empty homes.

2. Purpose statement

This strategy sets out the council's approach to tackle empty homes within the borough. It is a corporate priority and sits within our Corporate plan commitment to enforce a high quality of private housing. The corporate plan outlines that the council wants to enforce a high quality of private housing and work with landlords to tackle property standards, empty homes and homes in multiple occupation.

3. Strategy aims

The council is committed to reducing empty homes 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 homes, 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 empty homes.

The council has defined three key strategic aims for dealing with empty homes:

Aim 1: Maintain a proactive approach towards the identification and prevention of empty homes

Aim 2: Bring properties that have been vacant for six months or more back into use and use a range of tools to bring about reoccupation.

Aim 3: Work with our partners to raise awareness of the issues around empty homes.

4. Why homes are left empty

Many homes are left empty in the short-term during the process of sale or refurbishment. This strategy focuses on those which have been left empty for over six months or are causing problems to the community in which they are situated.

There are many genuine reasons why a property can remain unoccupied for a short period of time; however, homes that have been empty for more than six months are of concern, and these are known as long-term empty homes.

A property, residential or commercial, is classed as empty if it is not anyone's main home residence, and is substantially unfurnished. A long-term empty property is where it is inactive in the market and has been recorded as empty for more than six months. If a property is empty for less than six months it may be due to a delayed sale or letting. These are classed as transactional empty properties. Although transactional empty properties are less of a priority for the council, they can still cause concern.

In some cases, a property may appear empty, but it is not classed as empty. Properties do not have to be used all the time to be classed as occupied. This applies to properties that might be awaiting refurbishment or are second homes and holiday homes.

Considering the number of long-term empty homes within Gravesham, the council is committed to taking action whenever possible to bring them back into use. Council intervention helps increase overall housing supply and reduces the negative environmental and economic effects that empty properties have on neighbourhoods.

Since the last Empty Homes Strategy was published in 2016, 105 empty Gravesham homes have been brought back into use.

There are around 182 long-term empty home in the borough. Furthermore, around 364 empty homes are council tax exempt properties and 53 homes subject to an empty homes council tax premium. (October 2022)

Properties are usually vacant for the following reasons:

- The property is being re-possessioned.
- The owner is being cared for elsewhere or is in hospital.
- The owner has died and the property is undergoing probate.
- The property is being renovated.
- The property is being marketed for sale or rent.
- The owner does not have the time/skills/finance or the inclination to manage the property.

Properties that remain empty for a long time can have significant and adverse consequences for local communities. They can:

- Cause damage to neighbouring properties.
- Become an eyesore and blight the local area.
- Attract anti-social behaviour, vandalism, and arson.
- Encourage fly-tipping, accumulations of waste and pests.

- Be open to adverse possession or squatting.
- Represent a wasted resource of capital or rental income and a home for a family in need.

5. The National Position

Empty and derelict properties are an issue across the country, alongside a shortage in both market and affordable housing.

Table 1 shows statistics published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which put the number of empty homes in England in October 2021 at 653,025. This represents a 1.9% decrease on the previous year's total. Of the 653,025 empty homes, 36%, 237,340 were classed as long-term empty properties.

Table 1: Number of short- and long-term empty properties within England as of 4th October 2022.

Year	Short Term Empty Properties	Long Term Empty Properties
2011	719,352	277,529
2012	704,357	254,059
2013	635,127	216,050
2014	610,123	205,821
2015	600,179	203,596
2016	589,760	200,145
2017	605,891	205,293
2018	634,453	216,186
2019	648,114	225,845
2020	665,628	268,385
2021	653,025	237,340

Source: LT615 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants>

6. The County Position

Kent and Medway had an empty homes strategy that ran from October 2016-2021.

Below indicates all long-term vacant dwellings by local authority area each year.

Local Authority	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Ashford	240	283	322	426	543	681
Canterbury	599	443	511	581	769	813
Dartford	188	220	253	274	283	252
Dover	624	523	471	460	725	601
Folkestone & Hythe	547	470	468	489	619	656
Gravesham	204	255	250	204	326	270
Maidstone	306	342	485	433	537	500
Medway	817	986	1114	1398	1573	1303
Sevenoaks	379	315	367	431	435	294
Swale	291	348	356	388	541	469
Thanet	899	771	781	976	1129	877

Tonbridge and Malling	346	360	359	331	370	356
Tunbridge Wells	376	448	405	377	494	435

Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants

7. Gravesham's position

The council continues to be proactive in attempting to reduce the number of long-term empty homes in the borough. The council works in partnership with Kent County Council's No Use Empty initiative, bringing empty properties back into use and improving the physical urban environment.

7.1 Long-term empty homes in Gravesham since 2004

The reasons for fluctuations in the number of empty homes in any district are complex and are linked to housing demand in the locality and wider national influences. This could include the position of the general economy and availability of finance. However, the number of long-term homes in England has fallen over the last decade.

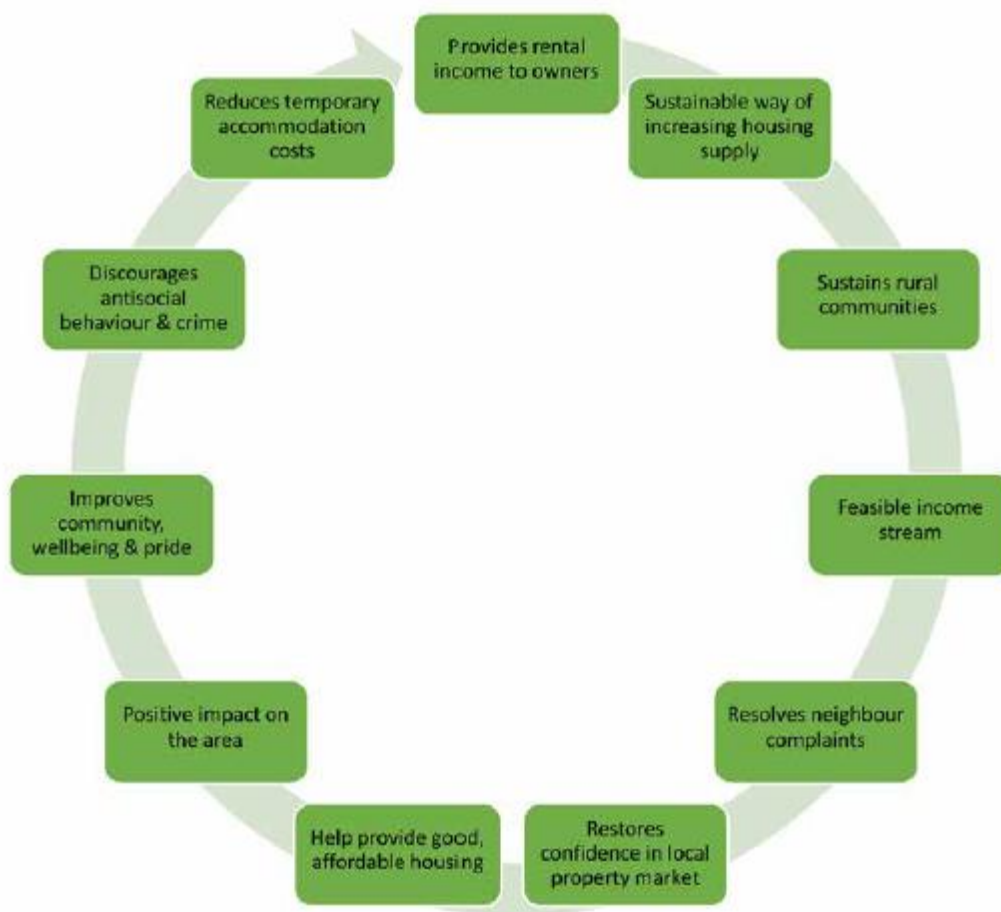
7.2 Empty homes in Gravesham by area

Using Council Tax records a more in-depth local snapshot can be provided, in addition to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's live data.

Number of Empty Properties by Area	Exemptions	Empty Total
Cobham	1	4
Gravesend Central	14	38
Gravesend East	22	59
Gravesend North	22	44
Gravesend South	10	21
Gravesend West	14	28
Higham	6	9
Luddesdown	1	3
Meopham	16	26
Northfleet Istead	6	7
Northfleet North	9	24
Northfleet South	10	23
Shorne	5	7
Vigo	0	1

Source: Gravesham Borough Council, Council Tax Figures based on individual liabilities and properties that have been empty over 6 months as of October 2022

8. Benefits of bringing empty homes back into use



9. Our strategic priorities

This strategy sets out the routes by 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 agreed targets. In order to achieve our aims, our strategy focuses on four key priorities:

9.1 Priority 1 – Identification

Understanding where long-term empty properties are located and who owns them by working with internal and external agencies and teams.

- To maintain, relevant, accurate and current information relating to empty homes within the borough.
- Provide information on how to identify a potential empty property and the means of notifying the Empty Homes Officer.
- Use Council Tax data and other data sources to assist in identifying long-term empty homes.

9.2 Priority 2 – Support and advice

Developing a package of support and advice for empty property owners, promoting the service and encouraging owners of empty properties to bring them back into use without enforcement action.

- Provide access to the Kent County Council No Use Empty initiative, to enable owners of empty homes to bring properties back into use, to a satisfactory standard for habitation.
- Identify external agencies and companies that could assist an owner with the letting, sale or renovating of an empty property. Maintain a list of potentials.
- Identify potential properties to provide accommodation for people on the housing register or for use as temporary accommodation.
- To bring empty homes back into use through encouragement, advice and assistance.

9.3 Priority 3 - Partnership working

Explore all avenues open to the council, working in partnership with other agencies, to secure funding to bring empty properties back into use.

- Work with registered providers to identify opportunities to bring long-term empty properties back into use as affordable housing.
- Work with Homes England to identify funding to bring empty properties back into use.
- Work with colleagues across the council to identify empty properties and agree the most appropriate action to bring them back into use.
- Work with other local authorities and agencies like No Use Empty, to identify areas of joint working and potential sources of funding for bringing empty properties back into use.

9.4 Priority 4 – Enforcement

Where necessary, use enforcement powers and compulsory purchase orders to tackle properties, where supporting empty homeowners has failed to result in properties being brought back into use.

- Make use of enforcement powers and legislation to bring long-term empty properties back into use, where negotiations fail.
- Use Compulsory Purchase Orders where other forms of enforcement have been unsuccessful in returning properties back into use.

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.

10. How we bring empty homes back into use

The council receives referrals (including complaints) about empty homes from various sources, such as local residents, other council departments, external agencies, councillors and the MP. The team also generates referrals when it becomes aware of a long-term empty home through other means. Every referral is recorded by the council.

Upon receipt of an empty property referral, an officer will make preliminary enquiries. Existing council records will be reviewed and an initial visit will usually take place within 28 days. A visit may not be necessary if a previous complaint is already being investigated. If,

following inspection, a property is confirmed to be vacant, it is entered onto the council's proprietary empty property database.

The council will normally attempt to engage with the owner of an empty property on an informal basis. Usually, this will involve sending a letter with an offer of help and advice. If a response is made, the council will attempt to help in whatever way it can. If no response is made, a further attempt to contact the owner will be made. Again, this will usually be by way of an informal letter.

In some cases, the owner may not be easily located and the Empty Property Team will use a range of investigative tools to identify legal ownership and responsibility.

11. Enforcement

The council achieves most success on an informal basis. Encouragement, help and advice is often all that is needed to ensure an owner takes action. A gentle reminder as to the council's available enforcement options may also prompt a response from those who are more reluctant to engage.

Where an owner undertakes to either sell or renovate the property, the council will continue to visit and monitor the situation to make sure the promised actions are taken in a timely manner.

While the council will always endeavour to bring an empty property back into use by informal means, this is not always possible. Enforcement action may be an option. However, this is not always possible, as it is not unlawful to own an empty property. Appendix 1 details the enforcement procedure and Appendix 2 outlines the enforcement options.

12. Funding – No Use Empty

Gravesham Borough Council is a part of Kent County Council's No Use Empty scheme. The primary aim of the No Use Empty scheme is to improve the physical urban environment in Kent by bringing empty properties back into use as quality housing accommodation and to raise awareness of the issues surrounding empty properties, highlighting the problems they cause to local communities. The scheme has operated throughout Kent for over a decade providing over £40 million in loans to bringing back into use over 7,000 units.

Loans are available to owners of empty properties where they do not have the necessary funding or access to it to bring the property back into use. These loans can cover various types of work, such as:

- Disrepair or structural issues.
- Damp and mould growth.
- Electrical rewiring.
- Thermal upgrading such as windows.
- Boiler work and insulation.
- Improvements to kitchens or bathrooms.

Currently, No Use Empty offers loans up to £25,000 towards 100% of the total cost of the eligible works. The following conditions are attached to the loan:

- The property must have been empty for at least six months.
- The property does not meet the decent homes standard.

- Upon completion of the works the property will be rented out at an affordable rent and the council will have nomination rights to the property, until the loan has been fully repaid.
- The property must conform to all planning and building control regulations
- All works must be carried out and completed by registered builders.
- Any loan given will be secured against the property and a charge on the property will be put in place.
- All loans are awarded on a discretionary basis and are subject to availability and policy review.

12.1 Reduced auction sales rate

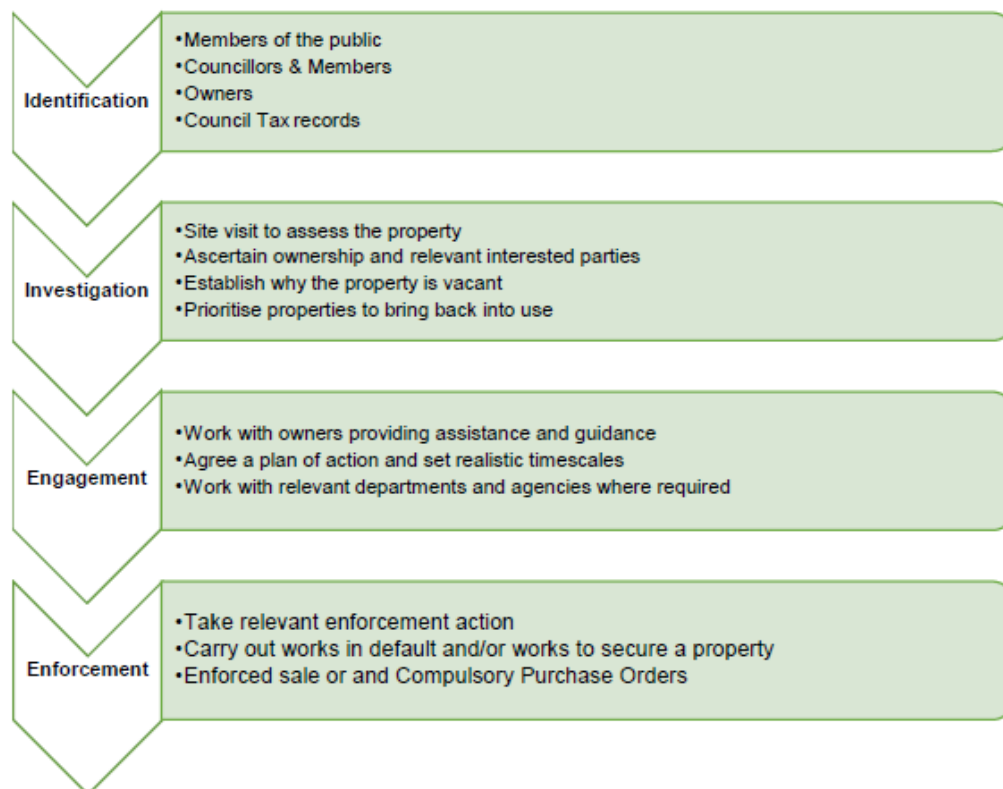
As part of the No Use Empty Scheme Clive Emson's auction house offers a reduced fee for selling vacant properties at auction. For more information or to apply for the reduce rate please visit

www.cliveemson.co.uk

12.2 Empty Property Corporate Working Group

The council's Corporate Empty Property Working Group is at the heart of this approach providing a collaborative response to problematic, long-term empty properties in its delivery of the Empty Property Strategy. The group includes representatives from Housing Strategy and Development, Planning, Private Housing, Housing Finance, Legal and Council Tax.

Appendix 1 – Enforcement Procedure



Appendix 2 - Enforcement options

The council will always attempt to work with the property and or landowner, but where this has not been possible or successful, it will consider the appropriate use of enforcement actions to bring an empty property back into use. The council has a variety of powers available to it under various legislation to assist in this function.

- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) – Allows the council to obtain land or property without the consent of the owner.
- Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – Section 226 – Allows the council the compulsory acquisition of land for development and other planning purposes.
- Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – Section 215 – Allows the council to issue a notice to the owner of land or a property where it adversely affects the amenity of the area. The notice will specify what works the owner is required to address. If the owner fails to comply with the notice the council may prosecute the owner of the property for non-compliance with the notice and undertake the works in default and make a charge against the property.
- Housing Act 2004 – Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) – Empty dwelling management orders allow Local Authorities to take control of and manage a private residential property that has been empty for a long period where the owner has failed to bring it back into use.
- Law of Property Act 1925 – Enforced Sale – Allows the council the right to force the sale of an empty property to recover any costs incurred in dealing with the associated property.
- Building Act 1984 – Section 77 and 78 – Allows the council to issue a notice to the owner of a property when it represents a danger to the public, also allows the Local Authority to carry out works in default if required.
- The Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions act 1982 – Section 29 – Allows the council to prevent unauthorised entry to a property or prevent a building from becoming a danger to public health.
- Housing Act 1985 – Section 265 - If a property is dilapidated and it is not financially economical to bring it back into use, a demolition order can be served by the council.

Appendix 3 – Action Plan

Priority 1 – Identification

Understanding where long term empty homes are located, who owns them and working with internal and external agencies and teams.

Priority	Actions	Timescale	Comments/Status
1.1	To maintain, relevant, accurate and current information relating to empty homes within the borough.	Ongoing	Implementation of new database April 2023
1.2	Provide information on how to identify a potential empty home and the means of notifying the Private Sector	Ongoing	

	Housing Team		
1.3	Use Council tax data and other data sources to assist in identifying long term empty properties.	Ongoing	
1.4	Raise public awareness and develop relationships with internal teams, including Ward and Parish Councillors		

Priority 2 - Support and Advice

Developing a package of support and advice for empty property owners, promoting the service and encouraging owners of empty properties to bring them back into use without enforcement action.

Priority	Actions	Timescale	Comments/Status
2.1	Provide access to the Kent County Council No Use Empty initiative, to enable empty homeowners to bring properties back into use, to a satisfactory standard for habitation	As long as funding is available	Implementation of new database April 2023
2.2	Identify external agencies and companies that could assist an owner with the letting, sale or renovating of an empty home. Maintain a list of potentials.	2023-2028	
2.3	Identify potential empty homes to provide accommodation for people on the housing register or for use as temporary accommodation.	Ongoing	
2.4	To bring empty homes and dwellings back into use	Ongoing	

	through encouragement, advice and assistance.		
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Priority 3 - Partnership Working

Explore all avenues open to the Local Authority, working in partnership with other agencies, to secure funding opportunities to bring empty properties back into use.

Priority	Actions	Timescale	Comments/Status
3.1	Work with registered providers to identify opportunities to bring long term empty homes back into use as affordable housing.	Ongoing	
3.2	Work with Homes England to identify funding streams available to bring empty properties back into use.	Ongoing	
3.3	Work with colleagues across the Council to identify empty homes and agree the most appropriate action to bring them back into use.	Ongoing	
3.4	Work with other Local Authorities and agencies like No Use Empty, to identify areas of joint working and potential sources of funding for bringing empty properties back into use.	Ongoing	

Priority 4 - Enforcement

Where necessary, use enforcement powers and compulsory purchase orders to tackle properties, where supporting empty homeowners has failed to result in properties being brought back into use.

Priority	Actions	Timescale	Comments/Status
4.1	Make use of enforcement powers and legislation to bring long term	Ongoing	

	empty homes back into use, where negotiations fail.		
4.2	Use compulsory purchase orders where other forms of enforcement have been unsuccessful in returning properties back into use.	Ongoing	