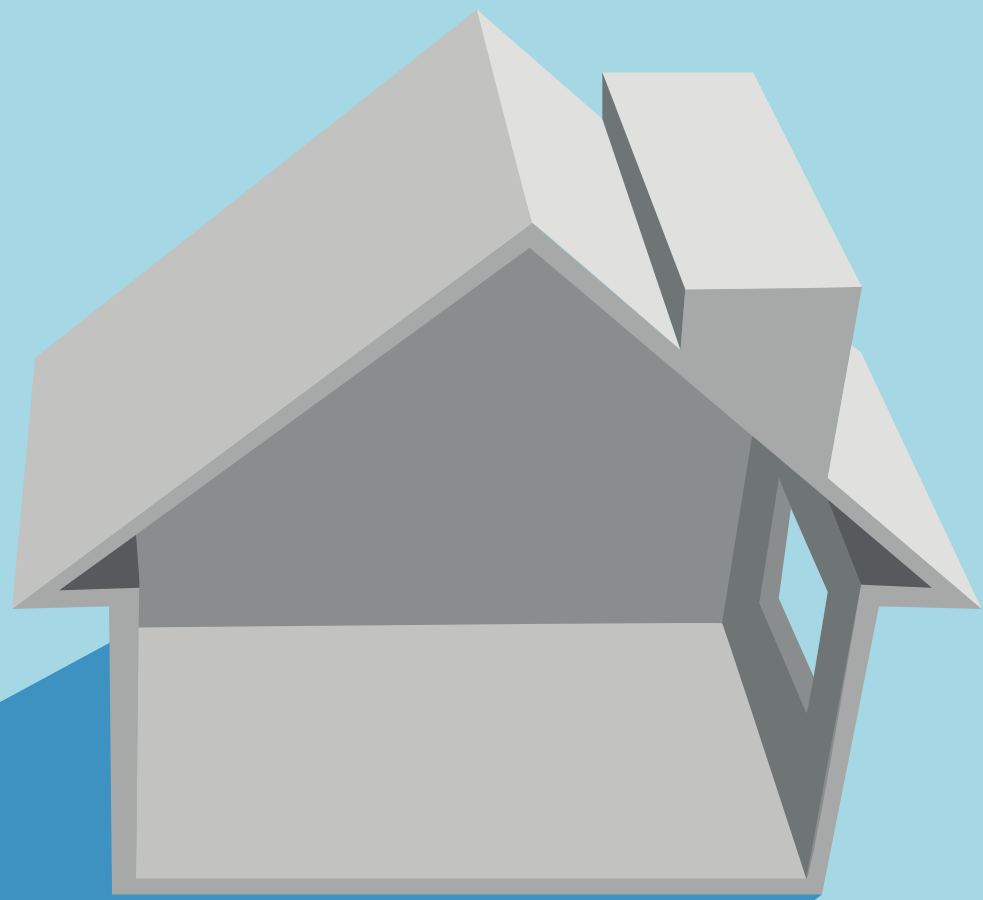


# Empty homes Strategy



[wigan.gov.uk/emptyhomes](http://wigan.gov.uk/emptyhomes)

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## Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan for Wigan 2021-2024

### 1. Introduction & Overview

Wigan Council has a long and proud history of providing good quality housing and support to our residents. Through the work of “The Deal” we have sought to empower our communities to enable them to do what they do best and utilise local skills and a passion for making Wigan a great place to live. Key to this has been identifying new ways to deliver public services that put the aspirations of our residents at the heart of how we design our services.

Our strategy for empty homes is no different, it seeks to build upon the positive work already developed to reduce the number of long-term empty homes across the borough, and bring these back into use.

We know that having empty homes in our Borough is a waste of a resource which, in a time of unprecedented demand for housing, could be better utilised by providing a home for someone to live in. Furthermore, an empty home can deteriorate over time and without intervention can cause wider negative impacts on an area.

We also know that the process of bringing an empty home back into use has the potential to unlock wider community wealth benefits for local residents, such as:

- Encouraging local developers, where possible, to bring homes back into use as affordable homes to help address local need and demand for housing.
- Using the refurbishment of empty homes as a catalyst to unlock more opportunities for work placements and local skills development, by working with contractors to encourage maximum use of the local supply chain, and with local businesses to enhance local employment opportunities.
- Supporting the development of local skills and promoting work placements, with longer-term support for qualifications and employment, through working with local educational organisations and community and voluntary groups.
- Setting a standard for energy efficiency and growing the expertise among Wigan business in the low carbon house building and retrofit sector.
- Developing the local housing market by diversifying and scaling up alternative models for home ownership in the borough.

#### 1.1 What is an Empty Home?

At any given time, there will always be several empty homes around the borough due to the natural flows and externalities of the housing market. This includes activity such as the buying and selling of homes, people and households relocating, the process of resolving estates through probate, and such others. In most cases, these vacancies will be a short-term situation.

The houses that are being targeted in this strategy are those that have been left empty for an excessive period and have become 'long-term empty homes', which is defined by the Government as being empty for six months or more. For the purposes of this strategy, we adopt the same definition of an empty home being a residential dwelling which has remained unoccupied for at least six months or longer.

There are a number of reasons as to why homes become empty for an extended period, such as:

- Taking an excessive period to sell on the open market.
- Renovations taking longer than planned.
- Irresponsible or inexperienced proprietor.
- Property left in probate.
- Health issues of owner.
- Family disputes or relationship breakdown.
- Abandonment, repossession or bankruptcy; and
- Property being kept as financial investment or for sentimental reasons.

The view of the Council is that if a property is empty, then it is a potential home for someone. We will always look at any opportunity to bring empty homes back into occupation.

## 1.2 Why have an Empty Homes Strategy?

The Strategy provides the framework for taking a different approach to bringing empty homes back into use.

The 2019 Wigan Housing Needs Assessment identified unprecedented levels of housing demand and need throughout the borough. To help meet this need and demand, the assessment identified, amongst other things, the importance of maximising the best use of the borough's existing housing stock. A significant part of this includes bringing empty homes back into use. In doing so, Wigan Council can increase the overall supply of housing, whilst also reducing the demand for new land for housing and hence the associated environmental impacts.

Empty properties are a waste of valuable housing resource and, if left for lengthy periods of time, can have a negative effect on neighbourhoods and the environment. This can take the form of disrepair, fly tipping, pests and being a focus for antisocial behaviour or criminal activities. This in turn can affect property values and a community's sense of wellbeing, and furthermore discourage private investment in the area: nobody wants to live next door to a poorly maintained empty property.

The implementation of this Strategy will ensure that the Council continues to hold up-to-date intelligence about empty homes through collaborative working and data sharing across Council services, and by using a range of methods, tools and incentives to bring empty homes back into use. Continuous monitoring of empty properties and ongoing analyses of the prevalence of empty homes, because of changes in the housing markets, will allow the Council to formulate effective approaches and direct resources as required to target those areas.

Most importantly, the strategy seeks to maintain and maximise the existing housing stock in Wigan borough, by bringing as many empty homes back into use as existing Council resources allow.

## 1.3 Main objectives of the strategy:

Our Strategy will be achieved by the following:

- ❖ Maintaining an accurate and up-to-date record of empty properties, shared as appropriate with key partners and other Council services.
- ❖ Proactively targeting empty properties that have a significant, negative impact on the surrounding neighbourhood, and those which have been empty for more than two years.
- ❖ Working with owners of empty properties to raise awareness of the options available to them.
- ❖ Providing advice as to financial support that might be available towards the cost of purchasing or necessary repair and restoration work where possible.
- ❖ Developing a schedule of properties for purchase and refurbishment.
- ❖ Exploring options for bringing properties back that are affordable for local people.
- ❖ Facilitation of placements for skill development, work experience and employment.
- ❖ Maximising opportunities to make homes greener and more energy efficient.
- ❖ Creation of partnerships with local businesses and social enterprises to support refurbishment programmes.
- ❖ Where necessary, utilising statutory powers to require work to be carried out.
- ❖ Monitoring the use of discretionary provisions (e.g., differential Council Tax charging) as a means of discouraging properties from remaining empty.

## 1.4 Benefits of the strategy:

There are many financial, social, and environmental benefits to bringing long-term empty properties back into use, for the owners, the neighbours and the wider community. It is estimated that leaving a property empty is, on average, costing the owner over £7,000 per year in lost rental income and increased Council Tax and insurance premiums, and this does not consider depreciation, or any repairs required due to potential vandalism.

As well as being a financial burden to the owner and removing much needed housing from the market, there are other reasons that bringing long-term empty properties back into use has a positive effect, such as:

- Improving the visual amenity of the local area, and so increasing local property values.
- Investment in regeneration areas, encouraging stable communities and inspiring further investment in the housing stock.
- Removing the burden of responsibility placed on neighbouring residents and the negative effects empty properties can have on adjoining dwellings, such as excessive cold and damp.
- Supporting local businesses and services by maximising the population, and so boosting the economy; and
- Reducing the need for emergency and enforcement action by the emergency services and local authority, which is a saving to the taxpayer.

## 2. National and Local Context

### 2.1 The National Context

According to Government figures, there are over 610,000 empty homes across England, with over 200,000 of these being long-term empty properties that have been empty for more than six months. On average, approximately 2% of the housing stock is empty at any one time, though a certain level of empty properties is necessary to ensure the normal functioning of the housing market and the modernisation of existing housing stock.

The profile of empty homes has been rising up the political agenda for the past few years. In 2011, the then coalition Government published 'Laying the Foundations' – A Housing Strategy for England, which demonstrated a clear commitment to tackling empty homes by making £100m available in capital funding to develop projects that improve long-term empty properties and see that they are effectively used to provide affordable housing to people with housing need. In addition, other financial and policy drivers were brought in to encourage local authorities to invest in empty homes, primarily through the Homes and Communities Agency's Affordable Homes Programme 2011 - 2015.

Since 2015, there has been no further Affordable Homes Programme funding that is specifically targeted towards bringing empty homes back into use.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) which are a legal device which enable local authorities to put an unoccupied property back into use as housing. The Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 allows local authorities to increase the percentage by which a billing authority in England may increase the Council Tax payable in respect of a long-term empty dwelling. Fixing our Broken Housing Market (Housing White Paper, February 2017) sets out the government's plans to boost the supply of new homes in England. It includes a commitment from the government to:

- Plan for the right homes in the right places
- Build homes faster
- Diversify the housing market
- Help people now

Within the 2017 White Paper there is also a commitment to improve neighbourhoods by continuing to crack down on long-term empty homes and support areas most affected by second homes. The Government pledges to continue to support local authorities to encourage efficient use of its existing stock, making best use of homes that are long-term empty.

#### 2.1.1 Council Tax Changes

From April 2013, local authorities have had the discretion to decide on the level of discounts available to owners of empty properties to act as an incentive to bring them back into use, as well as the option to place a premium on the Council Tax of properties that have been empty more than two years.

Wigan has taken advantage of this and reduced the length of time that discounts are available to empty homeowners, and the owners of properties that have been left empty more than two years are now charged at 150%. The aim of this is to try to discourage homeowners from leaving properties empty for an excessive period of time.

Over three years on from these changes, it is considered that they have been effective in acting as a deterrent to homes being left empty for an excessive period, as the number of properties that have been empty over two years has stopped increasing and has levelled at around 250.

The following Council Tax charges may be applied to empty properties in Wigan:

- 150% charge for properties that have been empty for 2 years but less than 5 years.
- Up to 200% for properties that have been empty for between 5 and 10 years.
- The Council is reviewing premiums for properties that have been empty for 10 years or more.

From 1st April 2021 new owners of a property currently being charged a premium who are carrying out work to bring it back into use will be exempt from the premium for up to 12 months from the date the work commences. In addition, a 100% discount may be awarded for a maximum period of one month from the date a property first becomes unoccupied and unfurnished. The Council aims to use any additional revenue to fund schemes which will help owners carry out work to bring properties back into use. The Council will continue to monitor and review the impact of discretionary measures such as differential Council Tax charging during the life of this strategy.

## **2.1.2 New Homes Bonus**

The New Homes Bonus allocates funding to local authorities for a 6-year period (reducing to 4 years), as a reward for increasing housing supply including the return to use of empty properties. The future of the New Homes Bonus scheme beyond 2021 is currently unclear.

On average, an empty home costs

**£7,018**

a year (not taking vandalism into account).

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On average, an empty home costs

**£10,000**

to renovate.





## 2.2 The Local Context

Wigan has a total housing stock of approximately 146,345 dwellings and 143,429 households across Wigan Borough, with a population of over 326,300 residents.

The 2019 Housing Needs Assessment anticipated that 1,126 new dwellings need to be made available each year to 2037 to meet forecasted demand. Council Tax records are used to determine the level of empty homes. There are currently circa 4,000 empty properties. Approximately 50% of these are classified as long-term empty properties that have been empty in excess of two years; these are to be the main focus of our Housing Enforcement Officers' work.

This does not, however, include any properties that have been removed from the Council Tax listings by the Valuation Office for whatever reason, and are either due to be returned following extensive renovations or have been abandoned in a poor condition with no incentive to be brought back into use. It also does not include properties that are not accurately classified within the Council Tax records, such as properties that have been vacated but the owner has failed to notify the Council. If Council Tax is still being paid, there would be no reason for the property to be flagged up as empty unless it is brought to the attention of the Council by a concerned neighbour.

It is therefore evident that pinning down an accurate number of genuine, long-term empty properties in the borough is not straightforward, but a best estimate puts the figure close to 4,000. This is also a fluid number that is changing daily, as houses become occupied and further houses are vacated.

Producing this Empty Property Strategy is a key action within the Council's overall Housing Strategy, along with a commitment to tackle long-term empty properties with a new approach.

### 2.2.1 Draft Local Plan and Strategic Market Assessment

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires all local authorities to understand their borough's housing requirements, and to ensure that they take account of, and plan to meet, that need. This is a very important pre-cursor in getting Local Plans adopted.

Wigan Council is preparing the draft Local Plan which will be seeking to deliver an annual housing requirement of circa. 700 dwellings per year. The methodology for assessing the borough's housing need through housing-related studies already takes account of empty properties in the borough. Even if every empty property came back into use, there would still be a significant shortfall. Notwithstanding this, the Local Plan will not focus solely on new supply of housing, as the existing housing stock in Wigan borough is just as important, and the emphasis of new supply is very much focused on what new housing is required across the borough to meet the specific needs of communities, and new housing should therefore complement the existing housing supply to help meet future needs.

## **2.2.2 Housing Strategy and Action Plan**

The Housing Strategy for Wigan borough was approved in December 2020 after the Council undertook a borough-wide Housing Needs Assessment in 2019/20.

The 2019/20 Housing Needs Assessment identified the necessity to take a proactive approach in bringing empty homes back into use as part of the Council's wider plan to increasing overall housing supply.

Improving the existing housing stock remains a very clear priority in Wigan borough, but also very challenging at a time when much of the external funding opportunities have ceased. However, bringing back empty properties into use is a priority, and a specific action within the Housing Strategy to implement an Empty Homes Strategy for the Wigan borough.

## **2.2.3 Private Sector Housing Standards Enforcement Policy**

Wigan borough has a very large private rented sector market, approximately 15,500 properties are privately rented. The Council pro-actively work with private landlords and owners to maintain their properties to a good standard and free from hazards.

The Council will always try to support landlords to resolve any issues in relation to housing standards informally and seek to achieve full voluntary compliance with legislative requirements and license provisions. However, where landlords/owners do not engage or co-operate, we will fully utilise our enforcement powers where necessary, including legislative powers to tackle Rogue Landlords gained through the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

## **2.2.4 Homelessness Strategy**

Wigan Council has been undertaking a refresh of its Homelessness Strategy in the light of several changes in government policy, which include a series of welfare reforms and the emerging Homelessness Reduction Bill and subsequent legislation. One of the identified priorities in the last Homelessness Strategy was to increase the supply of affordable housing and good quality rented accommodation available in Wigan borough. The work to bring empty homes back in use further supports our responsibilities under the Homeless Strategy.

## 3. Strategic Priorities

Tackling long-term empty properties in Wigan will contribute to a number of Council's commitments in The Deal 2030:

- The **Home for all** priority is around improving the quality of housing and availability of affordable housing across the borough, which includes housing renewal, housing regeneration and improvements to the existing housing stock. Bringing empty homes back into use contributes to this priority.
- The **An environment to be proud of** priority is concerned with ensuring our communities are safe and free of anti-social behaviour. Empty homes attract nuisances of their own from damage, fly tipping, waste, and attract vermin, to name a few. Reducing empty homes reduces these problems and makes communities nicer places to live.
- The **Communities that care for each other** priority is to help people feel part of the community and to ensure that nobody feels isolated where they live. We will work with owners of empty properties and signpost them to local voluntary groups, local charities, and local initiatives, that collectively will bring about change to these empty properties. It's not just about how we will help the owners of these properties but also about creating opportunities for communities to help each other. We also want to use this opportunity to create homes for people who are currently facing difficult personal circumstances.
- The **Economic Growth that benefits everyone** priority will underpin every aspect of our empty homes work. We will seek to encourage owners to use of the local supply chain and local businesses and groups. As part of our refurbishment model we hope to create volunteering opportunities which will lead to employment opportunities. By creating homes, we can allow individuals to flourish and, in some cases, offer this accommodation to individuals that otherwise may have been homeless. Every aspect of our model contains an element of Community Wealth Building, and we are proud of this approach.

## 4. Putting our strategy into action

Wigan Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use as quickly as possible. The Council needs to work with owners of empty homes and our wider partners to take all available opportunities to help tackle long-term empty properties in the borough.

The Council has a key role in influencing and intervening in the housing market to bring about positive change for our communities; we not only have an interest in housing stock from the perspective of meeting our demand for affordable housing, but also in ensuring our communities are places people are proud to live in.

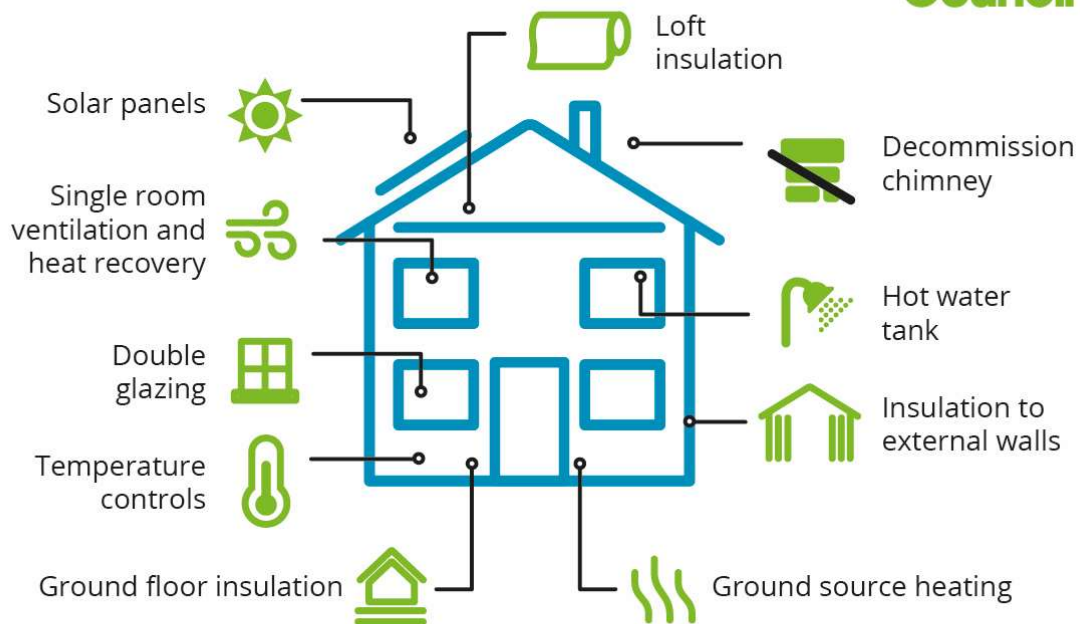
Every story behind why a property became empty is different, so our approach to bringing empty homes back into use needs to be multifaceted to cater to a range of circumstances.

## 4.1 Our principles for delivery:

We aim to tackle the problem of empty homes, and deliver our overall strategic aims, by adhering to the following principles:

- Work with owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use.
- Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing long-term empty homes that have become the focus of anti-social behaviour and neglect.
- Educate, providing advice and information to help raise awareness around long-term empty properties.
- Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders to address long-term empty properties.
- Identify and encourage opportunities for skill development, work placements and employment.
- Maximise opportunities to make homes greener and more energy efficient.
- Increase the number of homes coming back into use as affordable homes.

## Whole House Retrofit



## 5. Our Action Plan:

Each Strategic Priority has several key actions which the Council and partners will need to deliver, details of which are contained within the following sections of the Strategy:

### 5.1 Communities that care for each other:

***Work with owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use as affordable homes.***

Empty homes can make a valuable contribution to meeting housing need when the local authority, Registered Provider or community minded developer are able to buy or lease the empty properties from the owner and refurbish them. These can then be rented at an affordable rent level, or sold as an affordable ownership property, to those who are priced out of the housing market in Wigan borough. Whilst this isn't viable in every case, it's an outcome we are keen to encourage through our approach.

Early engagement with owners to fully understand their situation is key to bringing forward the right solution.

Our approach is underpinned by Community Wealth Building principles, and we will seek to identify opportunities to support local businesses and communities in our solutions for bringing properties back in to use, as well as seek to offer a range of placement for work experience, skill development and employment a part of refurbishment works undertaken on empty properties.

#### **ACTIONS:**

- Identify areas of highest housing need from the live Council Housing Register and the anticipated demand from the housing needs assessment. Use this information to help prioritise the areas we be required to work in.
- Using various methods of engagement with owners and communication with residents, we aim to highlight the problem of empty homes and proactively work with our communities to bring them back into use. We will lead by example and will educate, engage and where needed, we will enforce.
- Work with owners of long-term empty homes to bring them back into use as a range of affordable housing types.

### 5.2 An environment to be proud of: long-term

***Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing long-term empty homes that have become the focus of anti-social behaviour and neglect.***

It is important that Council resources are also focused on those areas where properties have been empty for the longest time and which are having the biggest impact to the people who live in the local area. As well as affecting the overall environment through their appearance, empty properties can become the target of anti-social and criminal behaviour.

To ensure that resources are allocated appropriately, the Council proposes to assess the impact an empty home has on the local environment using an empty home assessment form (EHA). The EHA contains a risk assessment on each empty home that is reported to the Council.

A summary of the factors to be used are listed below:

- **Environmental Factors** - such as boarded up windows, accumulated rubbish/fly tipping and overgrown gardens.
- **Social Factors** – such as is the property a source of crime, vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour.
- **Health or Safety Factors** - such as disrepair or if the property is in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties, hazards to the public and pest activity.
- **Period Vacant Factor** – how long has the property been empty.

Those empty properties with the highest score will be prioritised for investigation and action.

## ACTIONS:

- Assessments to be used to assess the priority for bringing empty properties back into use and draw up a marking scheme for priority scoring.
- Identify priority properties to be targeted for action because of using priority scoring matrix.
- The assessment will also be used to identify those empty properties that can be brought back into use quickly and with limited investment.
- Make better use of the powers and legislation to bring long-term empty properties back into use.

## Keeping your empty house secure

### Keep it occupied

The best way to keep any property secure is to keep it occupied.



Reduces Deterioration of property

Reduces costs - can charge rent

Reduces risk of property fraud

Reduces risk of thieves

Increases the security of the property

Reduces risk of major incidents

## 5.3 A home for all:

### *Provide advice and information to help raise awareness around empty properties.*

Owners of empty properties are often not aware of the support available to them to help them bring their empty property back into use. Initial advice will be provided on the Council's website and owners can make further contact with the Council. The advice may be to sell, or to improve and let, their properties. This is done through provision of information on the cost and consequences of keeping a property empty.

To engage with property owners, the Council identifies empty properties from Council Tax data where the property has been registered as empty and from complaints received from members of the public. An online reporting form is available on the Council's webpage to encourage the public to report an empty property in their neighbourhood.

When an empty property has been identified the Council writes to the owner, and where a reply is received, an officer will visit the owner to discuss their plans for the property. The Council will provide advice and assistance on how the property may be brought back into use. Where there are statutory nuisances associated with an empty property or the property is open to unauthorised access, the Council will also consider using its legislative powers to rectify problems.

The Council can provide details of local letting agents, the Ethical Lettings Agency, and liaise with developers registered on the Developer Hub to identify any potential opportunities for partnerships.

Where financial incentives or funding are available, officers will signpost the owner to this funding, where applicable, and will continue to support the owner until the property has been brought back in to use.

### **ACTIONS**

- Continue to engage with owners of empty properties to ensure they are fully aware of their options.
- Promote the online reporting form on the Council's webpage more effectively through social media, to encourage the public to report an empty property in their neighbourhood.
- Promote the work with owners and local developers. Continue to develop new relationships with developers and always support the owner to get the best price for their property if they decide to sell.

## 5.4 Economic growth that benefits everyone

### *Develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders.*

The partnership approach to addressing empty homes with the voluntary and community sector has already proved key in our work so far and this will increase as partners attract significant investment into addressing empty homes.

The Council has already invested in the empty homes work and remains committed to provide further capacity to tackle them.

By continuing our proactive and strategic approach to empty homes, we anticipate a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation and an increase in the properties available via our Ethical Lettings Agency.

The Council needs to work with partners, and developers, to increase the number of empty properties brought back into use. We hope to achieve success not just by bringing a home back into use but by also using the opportunity for a wealth of other economic benefits.

To help engage further with long-term empty property owners, there should be a more concerted effort across a range of Council teams such as Revenues and Benefits, Council Tax, Planning Enforcement, Housing Standards, Environmental Health and Building Control, to maximise and share information. A joint approach can help in encouraging homeowners to take a pro-active approach towards selling or improving their empty home for let or for sale. Across the wider teams we will work together to achieve a greater success.

The Council will also work to identify empty properties above commercial premises where there may be potential for residential properties. This is a new approach which may provide suitable and needed accommodation and generate income that was not previously considered.

All our work on empty homes will include opportunities for local college students, volunteers, people within supported employment and local groups who wish gain experience. This will be a catalyst to help people from the area into further employment.

## **ACTIONS:**

- Work with property developers and Registered Providers to identify opportunities to jointly bring empty homes back into use.
- Work to identify and utilise funding to bring empty homes 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 to identify suitable empty properties above commercial premises which could be brought back into use as residential properties.
- Explore opportunities to use the renovation of empty homes to train and educate individuals regarding the construction trade.

## **6. Review of the Strategy**

The Strategy will be reviewed annually to ensure that all new changes in legislation, and other policies and strategies developed by the Council, are reflected. The Action Plan will be live and provide detailed actions and targets to ensure that we achieve the priorities identified and will in turn inform the annual review of the Strategy.