



The Empty Homes Network

3-Point Plan | 2025 - 2030



About The Empty Homes Network

Established in 2001, the Empty Homes Network is the prominent voice, support and resource community for empty homes officers and practitioners across the country. With over 900 members and subscribers, the Network's aim is to support councils in bringing empty homes back into use, through the sharing of best practice methods, hands-on experience, and tools to develop effectiveness and efficiency.

Formed as a non-profit organisation, the Empty Homes Network lobby and campaign for service improvement and assist those with the least capacity and experience to gain confidence, whilst at the same time ensuring that those who are more experienced have a platform to share, develop and innovate. We support policymakers in formulating approaches and frameworks by offering insight at an operational level, all with the aim of adequately equipping councils with the tools required to negotiate, support and enforce where needed.

In addition to our online platform, The Empty Homes Network host an annual national conference bringing together practitioners, experts, and policymakers to share first-hand their experiences and relevant case studies. Our conference has grown year on year, highlighting the importance and willingness of councils to allocate and dedicate resources to the issue, albeit one that is not a statutory function.

In recent years, the Empty Homes Network have expanded their development opportunities for councils through their training and consultancy services. Aimed at empty homes officers and practitioners of all experience levels, their courses offer an introduction into the subject of empty homes from a practitioner's point of view and provides a foundation level approach for delegates to use in their roles. We also source courses in specialist areas for the benefit of our members, in topics such as probate legalities and hoarding.

Our consultancy services are specifically tailored to meet an authority's specific needs. These include a full empty homes service review, enabling the council a fresh perspective and opportunity to assess where best practice or policy improvements can be made; a challenging case appraisal, offering a practical action plan of next steps in dealing with difficult empty homes cases; and empty homes strategy writing and refreshing, for those authorities who are looking to take their first, or next step in developing their policy and procedures. The Empty Homes Network have also worked with authorities to produce investment proposals for new initiatives such as grants, loan and leasing schemes.



Introduction

The Empty Homes Network is committed to ensuring that empty homes are recognised as a vital resource in tackling the UK's housing challenges. Over the next five years, we aim to elevate empty homes work on the national agenda, advocating for policy changes and increased investment in local authority services.

This three-point plan sets out our key priorities and strategic direction, informed by the experiences and insights of empty homes officers and local authorities across the country. It provides clear, evidence-based recommendations designed to:

1. Strengthen national and local action on empty homes through a legal duty and an integrated policy approach.
2. Improve the effectiveness of Council Tax measures to ensure they actively support empty homes work.
3. Enhance enforcement powers to give local authorities the tools they need to bring more empty properties back into use.

By presenting a unified vision and clear policy recommendations, this plan seeks to drive meaningful change by empowering local authorities, influencing central government, and ensuring that the potential in empty homes are fully recognised as a valuable part of the UK's housing supply.

The recommendations are categorised based on their feasibility and timeline for implementation:

- **Immediately Achievable** - Steps that can be implemented now.
- **Medium Term** - Changes that require further development or legislative adjustments.
- **Longer Term** - Ambitious reforms that set a future direction for empty homes policy.

This strategy provides a strong, consistent message that highlights the urgency of the issue and the practical solutions needed to address it. With the right policies and investment, we can bring more empty homes back into use, creating stronger, more sustainable communities across the country.



1

National Strategy, Local Action

To implement a duty on local housing authorities to investigate and act on bringing long-term empty homes back into use



1.1 Without a duty to investigate and act, the work of returning long-term empty homes to beneficial use by local housing authorities varies considerably. Affordable and sustainable housing provision is a shared value and aim of most, if not all local housing authorities. We believe a new duty to investigate and act on long-term empty homes will help all local housing authorities to drive a consistent national response, adding priority and ensuring local resources are available for this critical work. We believe that not only a duty to investigate, but a duty to act on long term empty homes, informed by new approved guidance, will ensure that all local housing authorities are fully equipped and ready to act, now and into the future. ●

1.2 Action needs to be embedded in strategy. We believe that a new National Empty Homes Strategy would provide a vision for action and growth, and drive national progress. This duty would ensure local housing authorities develop a dedicated strategic approach to responding to the challenge of long-term empty homes. Approved guidance would help local housing authorities to ensure strategies are fit for purpose, appropriate to their unique circumstances, and fully integrated with their wider housing strategies and corporate aims.

Included within this recommendation, central government and local authorities should be under a duty to have a dedicated empty property strategy or policy, complementing their wider housing strategy, linking with their corporate strategies and responsibilities, the environment, and meeting local and national housing need. Empty homes should also be included as a component for action as part of an authority's local plan. ●

1.3 Knowing the full scale of the challenge and measuring success is an important part of the strategic journey. We believe that local housing authorities should provide regular returns to government about their activity and action to bring long term empty homes back into beneficial use. Clear criteria, definitions and reporting tools would enable consistent and accurate data to be compiled, enabling trends and progress to be clearly identified, understood and mapped.

In support of empty homes work, central government are recommended to develop an empty homes specific reporting mechanism, that places a duty on authorities to report on the numbers of empty homes actively brought back into use with intervention. This can serve to highlight local authorities who are successful and proactive in their efforts, which in turn would encourage others of a similar size, geography or political make-up to follow suit. This can also highlight successes in parallel to the release of the Council Taxbase Statistics. ●

1.4 The implementation of a National Empty Homes Programme, delivery and that seen in Wales and led by central government, a national programme of exposure, attention and solutions that would lead to large scale numbers of empty homes being brought back into use. Funded through the revenue generated by the empty and second homes premium receipts, this could include, but is not limited to:

1.4.1 National Loan Fund | Enabling local authorities, empty authorities and and community groups the opportunity to access loan funding for the purchase, acquisition or refurbishment of empty homes. A low interest fund, this would be repaid and recycled over the course of its delivery and return perpetual value for money throughout its lifecycle. 🟡

1.4.2 National Acquisition Fund | A national fund enabling local authorities access to finance for the purchase of empty homes, in order to increase their available housing, temporary accommodation, or care stock. 🟢

1.4.3 National Enforcement Fund | Allowing local authorities the opportunity to mitigate their financial risk in carrying out works in default, a national enforcement fund would remove restrictive barriers experienced by local authorities and enable charges to be placed on properties to ensure that funding is secured. 🟢

1.4.4 National Enforcement Support Resource | The development and implementation of a national enforcement resource would equip local authorities with the tools and resources required to carry out enforcement work, where this is often delayed by limited knowledge or experience. Mirroring the availability of such resource in Wales, local authorities would be able to seek guidance, assistance and support on challenging and protracted empty homes cases, and through mentoring, be taken through enforcement processes relevant to their current caseload. 🟢

1.4.5 National Incentive Programme | Empty home owners often don't see their property as a problem, either morally, or as a detriment to their surrounding community. A national incentive programme, such as the boiler or diesel car scrappage scheme, would bring owners forward and likely encourage the acceleration of their plans for bringing the property back into use. Incentives could include a payment where a property is sold to a local authority, reduced capital gains tax upon the sale where a property has been empty for over 12 months, or legal costs paid as a grant for properties sold where empty over a certain length of time. 🟡





2

Making Council Tax work to support Empty Homes Services

Enabling and incentivising Local Authorities to increase and develop their empty homes resource, through the use of the Empty Homes Premium, the Second Homes Premium, and proposing changes to the current Council Tax regime.

The following recommendations, it is envisaged, could all be implemented at pace and make a significant difference to the ability of local authorities to carry out empty homes work, but also generate much needed revenue. Whilst it is understood and appreciated that some circumstances mean indefinite periods of exemption would apply, these recommendations take those into consideration, and doesn't seek to penalise people in situations out of their control.

2.1 The Council Tax Empty Homes Premium is a welcome and essential tool in bringing properties into beneficial use. We believe that the adoption of these discretionary premiums by local housing authorities should be closely linked to their activity on empty homes. We believe that only a local housing authority with a fit for purpose Empty Homes Strategy should be able to adopt the premium charges. This will add strength, credibility and rationale to this additional tax. The diminished returns provided within the New Homes Bonus for empty homes work, has led to a situation where councils are now rewarded financially through properties remaining empty for longer by way of receipts from the Empty Homes Premium. Inadvertently, this means that authorities are often discouraged from pursuing empty homes cases due to the levels of premium being received.

With this, it is recommended that local authorities should be restricted in their ability to charge the Empty Homes Premium where empty homes are not currently pursued beyond a complaint resolution. By implementing the Empty Homes Premium, a local authority is suggesting that a property liable for such additional charge is an issue, and therefore, we believe, should subsequently be providing solutions and support in order to alleviate the owner of such charge. ●

2.2 A replacement of the incentive provided by the New Homes Bonus is proposed to reward councils financially for carrying out empty homes work, in relation to properties brought back into use which have involved council intervention. Based on a predetermined criteria of what intervention involves, empty homes teams can be rewarded by way of allocated funds generated through the Empty or Second Homes Premium, to support their work through increased resources and capacity, or to begin other initiatives such as loans, grants, or acquisitions. Building on the point outlined in point 1.3, a national reporting mechanism would be a further catalyst for such incentive, and in turn encourage councils to begin or increase their focus on empty homes work. ●





2.3 Similarly to a scheme implemented by the Welsh Government, Council Tax Premium receipts could be used and ringfenced for use to support local people onto the housing ladder. Either first-time buyers, or those moving into previously empty homes, such initiatives prove successful particularly in areas where there is a high percentage of second homes, and or holiday let accommodation. ●

2.4 The removal of indefinite exemption and discount periods | Currently, the discounts and exemption regime within Council Tax legislation means that in certain circumstances, properties can remain stagnant and within an exemption class in perpetuity. This leads to a position where the incentive to be proactive in bringing a property back into use by the owner is largely removed. By imposing a maximum period, or a periodical application for a local authority to approve, this will remove the ability for properties to sit in an exemption for perpetuity, even where an owners circumstances change but where the authority are not made aware. ●

2.5 The implementation of a probate application time limitation | Current legislation means that properties subject to probate can sit in an exemption in perpetuity, where for example there is a single beneficiary, or where circumstances mean that their liability for an asset would result in changes to their income, benefits or tax liabilities. This not only results in properties remaining empty for longer, but also reduces the ability for councils to generate income from such properties. By imposing a probate application time limit, such applications would have to be submitted within a specified time period, with properties subject to council tax liability from such time that the time limit expires, therefore removing the ability for a property to sit in a Class F exemption indefinitely. ●

2.6 Allow local authorities and empty homes officers the ability to have properties re-banded/relisted with the Valuation Office Agency | With owners becoming more aware of the charges imposed on empty homes and subsequent premiums, an increasing number of properties are being taken out of banding and therefore removing the disincentive of council tax and the ability of the authority to charge a premium. It is recommended that Councils, and in particular empty homes officers, should be able to present an evidence based case for the relisting/re-banding of properties, where owners have failed to take action or carry out their plans. By enabling officers to apply for a relisting, the council will be allowed to reinstate council tax liability, and implement a financial charge that could prompt affirmative action. ●

2.7 To allow an empty homes officer greater autonomy in supplying information, based on evidence, for council tax accounts to be changed, challenged or updated | Currently, many local authorities see the role of an empty homes officer and their revenue and benefits teams as separate. In contrast, some see them as an integral part of maintaining accurate and relevant information in order to ensure that any charges, discounts or exemptions are accurately accounted for on accounts. By supporting empty homes work, local councils can implement a joint working arrangement for the supply and sharing of data, so that empty homes are pursued, but also so that accounts are kept accurate and up to date.

An empty homes officer, through engagement with owners, neighbours and complainants, is often best placed to report on council tax accounts that are incorrect. Councils should therefore be enabled to allow empty homes officers the power to implement, add, or remove discounts or premiums based on their evidence and experience of an empty home and its owner. ●

2.8 To legislate and allow for read-only access to Council Tax accounts, for relevant officers | Also, whilst current legislation permits limited access to council tax information relating to empty homes, this could be taken a step further, resulting in significant changes in the ability of officers to carry out their roles. By permitting officers within the authority to have read-only access to council tax information, they can respond quickly to complaints, investigate cases of empty homes effectively and efficiently, and ensure a comprehensive database of information is built in order to track, manage and maintain accurate records. ●

2.9 To improve debt recovery rates, and to enable local authorities to secure their funding expended, we would welcome changes to the land registry processing system to make first registrations by a local authority a priority, and fast-tracked. ●

2.10 To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the empty homes officer role, we would welcome and encourage legislation to enable local authorities a direct line of correspondence to organisations and institutions who have a direct interest in the property, such as banks, financial institutions and utility companies. The sharing of data for the purposes of securing the value of the asset, as well as intervention to ensure any issues or defects are addressed without the requirement of notices. ●





3

Redefining Powers, Unleashing Potential

The development of empty homes specific enforcement tools



Whilst enforcement is always considered as a last resort, current legislation, on the whole, was never designed for the specific use of targeting empty homes, with the exception of the Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO).

Also, all current enforcement tools available to local authorities fail to result in the occupation of a property without further work, investment or resources being expended. With many councils apprehensive to carry out enforcement work at such cost, they are left with little option than to focus efforts on where most value for money and benefit to the local community would be gained. Even where the financial outlay is of lesser concern, the enforcement tools available to local authorities would unlikely lead to large-scale numbers of empty homes being brought back into use, and therefore the tools and powers at their disposal, need to be tailored and targeted at the most problematic, challenging, and least engaged cases and owners.

3.1 The recommendation to alter current EDMO legislation | The Empty Homes Network currently view the EDMO as largely fit for purpose, with the recommendation that small changes to the legislation would enable a smoother and less restrictive ability to make an application. In line with the Welsh Government, it is recommended that an EDMO can be applied for after a property has been empty for over six months. A small change to the legislation would also impose a primary charge on the property, taking precedent over a mortgage which would in-turn ensure that the funds owed to the council are repaid upon the sale of the property first. Also, removing the best value element for the end use of the property, would open up the potential of being able to use more properties subject to an EDMO, for use within the social housing sector. However, supporting such change would require a degree of higher investment and contingency from the local authority, to cover management costs and void periods. ●

3.2 To compliment the above recommendation, a revised EDMO is proposed in conjunction with the proposal outlined in 1.4.3, allowing local authorities to access a funding stream to conduct enforcement work. The single largest preventative barrier for EDMOs, is the fiscal ability for local authorities to carry out refurbishment work, and subsequently manage a property after a successful application. Removing this hurdle for local authorities, will enable an increased number of EDMOs to be considered at an earlier stage, rather than simply reducing the timeframe for which one can be carried out. ●

3.3 The development of an enforced sale-style option, without the requirement to apply charges to a property prior to making an application | Bridging the gap between the morality of leaving a property empty, and it is posing no issue to the neighbours or local community, the Network proposes a form of Compulsory Sale or Empty Dwelling Sale Order, whereby a local authority can apply to a Court or Tribunal to forcibly sell a property. Similar to an EDMO, foundational work will have been carried out and every opportunity given to the owner to voluntarily take action.

However, where there is little or no engagement, and a property has been evidenced to have been empty for a number of years, a council are currently limited in their options of enforcement. Where an EDMO would result in some form of financial outlay from the authority, such power would alleviate this by simply transferring the ownership through an auction, and so that best value can be achieved.

Evidence would have to include efforts to engage with the owners, examples of attempts to trace and ensure ownership details are correct, and that all avenues have been expended in offering the owner the appropriate solutions to their circumstances. ●

3.4 A form of notice that certifies a property as being empty, removing the challenge from an owner to classify the property differently for council tax purposes | To build on the potential effect that the recommendations in 2.7 propose, an evidence based notice to classify a property as empty, rather than being occupied or classed as a second home, when served, would allow the opportunity for local authorities to correctly class a property and therefore apply a full charge or an empty homes premium where applicable.

Based on the professional expertise of the officer dealing with the complaint/property, a notice could be issued to the owner in advance of any changes being made, in order to offer them the opportunity to challenge the decision of the officer. Upon expiry of the notice, a property is then reclassified for council tax and the appropriate charges applied. ●





The Empty Homes Network
PO Box 1547
Peterborough
PE1 9AB

www.ehnetwork.org.uk

admin@ehnetwork.org.uk