



Borough of Telford and Wrekin

Cabinet

16 February 2023

Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2021 - 2026 Update

Cabinet Member:	Cllr Richard Overton - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member: Housing, Enforcement and Transport	
Lead Director:	Katherine Kynaston - Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	
Service Area:	Housing, Employment & Infrastructure	
Report Author:	Ravi Phull - Housing Strategy & Regeneration Service Delivery Manager	
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Wards Affected:	All Wards	
Key Decision:	Not Key Decision	
Forward Plan:	Not Applicable	
Report considered by:	Senior Management Team – 17 January 2023 Business Briefing – 26 January 2023 Cabinet – 16 February 2023	

1.0 Recommendations for noting:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 1.1 Notes the actions undertaken in respect of the Long-Term Empty Property Strategy; and
- 1.2 Endorses the use of compulsory purchase powers and enforced sale powers to deliver the aims of the strategy and delegates authority to the Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure and the Director: Policy & Governance, in consultation with the Cabinet Member: Housing, Enforcement & Transport, to approve any policy or procedure relating to enforced sale and to take all necessary steps to secure the making, confirmation and implementation of any CPO powers in furtherance of the Long-Term Empty Property Strategy

2.0 Purpose of Report

2.1 To provide an update on the work the Council is doing to bring long term empty residential properties back into use.

3.0 Background

3.1 In 2021 Telford and Wrekin Council adopted its Long-Term Empty Property Strategy 2021-2026.

3.2 The Plan supports the priorities set out in the Council's overarching Housing Strategy, specifically:

- Making the BEST use of our existing homes;
- Supporting communities by addressing the blight that empty properties can create; and
- providing homes to support those in housing need including our most vulnerable.

3.3 The Strategy recognises the negative environmental impacts that empty properties bring, such as the increased risk of fly tipping and anti-social behaviour but also that every unoccupied property is a wasted housing opportunity for our residents in need of affordable accommodation.

3.4 Properties which have been empty for less than 6 months are typically part of a natural churn in the residential market linked with changes in ownership, tenancy, refurbishment and probate so the Strategy focusses principally on properties that have been vacant for more than 6 months.

3.5 The Strategy sets a target to bring a minimum of 375 long term empty properties back into residential use over the lifetime of the Strategy with a focus on those longest empty. This includes a number that have been empty for up to 20 years which require extensive engagement with owners, often hard to reach, and using a number of approaches to break the impasse these properties are in.

3.6 The strategy sets out a clear approach to how we will engage with owners of long-term empty properties in our Borough. Ensuring we always provide support, advice and guidance where appropriate, we also set a robust enforcement regime where informal action does not succeed.

3.7 Partnership working is a key focus of the strategy to ensure that not only are properties brought back into use, but also that the best outcomes are achieved for the owners of the empty properties, the neighbourhoods affected by them and to maximise opportunities for people to access affordable homes.

3.8 Key objectives set in the Strategy are:

- To bring long term empty residential properties back into use

- To contribute to a reduction in crime and fear of crime in our neighbourhoods
- To increase affordability and choice of housing for residents
- To support our High Streets and Borough Towns by addressing empty residential properties above shops
- To address the negative impact of empty properties on communities, improving visual amenity and reducing antisocial behaviour
- To provide economic benefits through local employment
- To maximise financial benefits through New Homes Bonus and Council Tax recovery

4.0 Summary of main proposals

The following sections provide an update on delivery against the strategy:

To bring Long Term Empty residential properties back into use

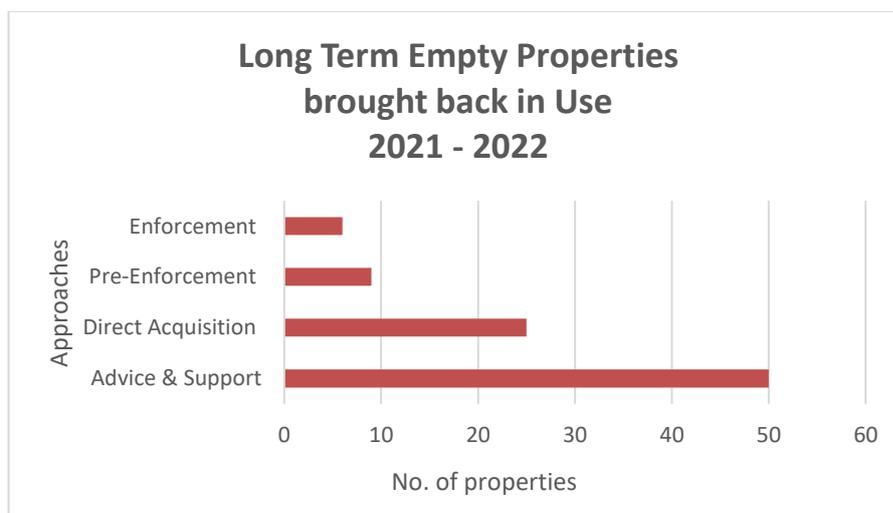
4.1 **Since the base date of the Strategy we have brought 117 Long Term Empty properties back into use** against our target of 375 by 2026:

4.2 Of the 117 properties brought back into use:

- **2 properties** had been empty for longer than **20 years**,
- **4 properties** had been empty longer than **10 years**,
- **3 properties** longer than 5 years and
- **33 properties** had been empty longer than 2 years.

We have used the full range of powers available to us to work with owners of these very long term empties to bring them back into occupation.

The following graph shows the different **approaches** used to achieve this target:



The following case studies illustrate the range of issues addressed and the length of time it can take to influence a positive outcome.

Case Study 1 – Property Empty for 18+ Years

Before



This property had been empty for 18+ years since the previous owner died. We were receiving complaints from neighbours about the condition of the property attracting vermin and concerns about potential antisocial behaviour. This was also having a negative impact on the value and saleability of neighbouring properties.

Our empty property officer engaged with the current owner through pre-enforcement methods, which triggered improvement works to commence on site. We continued to inspect the property over a period of a year to monitor progress. As a result, the property was made habitable enough for the owner's family to move into it and they continue to make improvements.

During Renovation



Now – Occupied



Case Studies 2 & 3 – Two properties empty for 10+ years



Before



Water ingress and other serious disrepair



An internal inspection showed the poor condition of the properties with failed ceilings damp and rotten windows



Complete refurbishment was required for both with an estimated timescales of 9mths + to complete



Two semi detached properties which had been empty for more than 10 years. The condition of the properties was affecting the amenity of the area. Water ingress had severely affected the internal aspect of the properties.

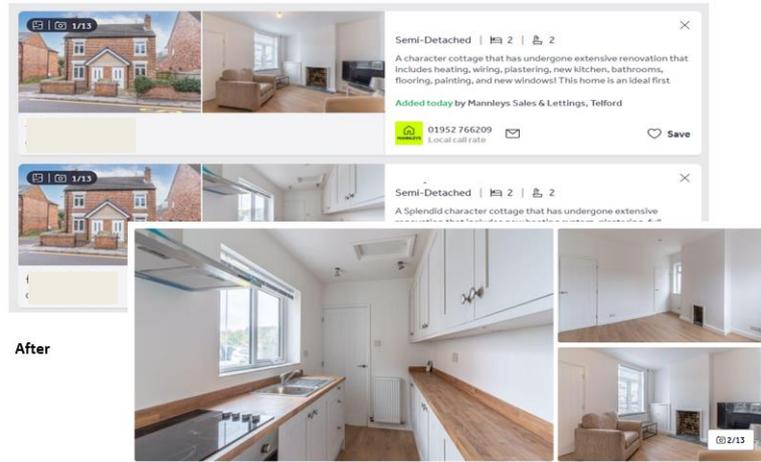
Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2021 - 2026 Update



Our officer conducted inspections to assess conditions within the properties.

The officer worked on this case for 2+ years to engage with owners, monitor progress and support them into bringing the properties back into reoccupation.

Both properties are now occupied.



Case Study 4 – Problematic for 20 years



Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2021 - 2026 Update

This property had been cause for concern for over 20 years, a number of council officers had been involved with the property owner. Enforcement action including the service of a prohibition order meant that the owner had to be re-housed due to the extremely dangerous condition of the property.

Our empty property officer supported the owner by arranging additional help and support for him through the Council. We also helped him to sell the property by arranging auctioneers and solicitors. We facilitated engagement between the owner and the auctioneers and solicitors and other internal council departments, to ensure he got the best outcome whilst working to bring the property back into use.

Our officer also ensured the neighbours were constantly communicated with regarding any progress.



Photos show internal damage by past fire from top of staircase, damage to roof and existing property.



The property is currently being renovated by the new owner. A single storey rear extension has been built and previous dangerous extensions have been removed. The property has been stripped back to brick and is in the process of being repaired throughout. All new windows and doors, new services such as water, gas and electricity also being installed within the property. We will continue to monitor this case until it is occupied once again.

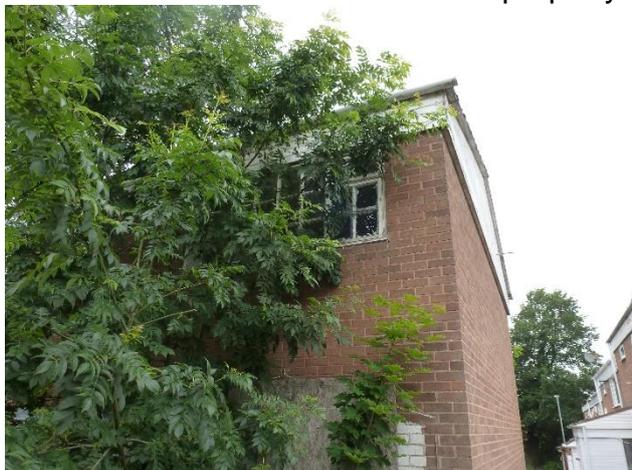


5.0 To contribute to a reduction in crime and fear of crime in our neighbourhoods & to address the negative impact of empty properties on communities, improving visual amenity and reducing antisocial behaviour

5.1 40 of the 117 properties brought back into use to date were within our Safer, Stronger Communities Programme areas. Empty properties in these areas where levels of crime and anti-social behaviour are already high can act as hotspots for criminal activity as well as being visually detrimental.

Case Study 5

A long term empty property in negative equity situation. Owner living abroad. Rubbish accumulation due to property being empty.





Following extensive engagement with the owner who was abroad resulted in the officer discovering someone had illegally assumed ownership of this property. We helped the owner to regain control over the property and supported them into selling the property to ensure the best outcome for them along with facilitating re-occupation of the property.

The owner welcomed our support and went on to sell the property.



The new owner completely renovated the property, and it is now let out and occupied.

This has also improved the amenity of the area.

6.0 To increase affordability and choice of housing for residents

6.1 Of the **117** brought back into use **112** were in Council Tax bands A-C.

7.0 Direct Acquisition

7.1 Of the 117 properties brought back into use, 28 were acquired by Telford and Wrekin Council. These properties have been refurbished with a number being let to key groups including providing move on accommodation for those previously homeless through the Rough Sleepers and Next Steps Accommodation

Programmes (RSAP & NSAP) and to deliver our Supported & Specialist Housing Strategy.

- 7.2 In addition a further 13 long term empty properties were acquired by Telford and Wrekin Homes, a sub brand of NuPlace focussed on acquiring and refurbishing existing homes. Of these approximately 50% are let at open market rents with the balance being let at local housing allowance rents and being used as move on accommodation. Examples of this is shown below:

Case Study 7 – Telford and Wrekin Homes Property



A 3 bed semidetached property. The property was purchased for c. £144,000 and was in a considerable state of disrepair with works required throughout including a new kitchen and bathroom, new heating system, new joinery and redecoration as well as some extensive external works to the rear garden. These works have transformed the property into a high quality family home. The property is now rented out by Telford & Wrekin Homes at £800pcm.

Case Study 8 – Further examples of work undertaken by Telford and Wrekin homes at various addresses.



8.0 To support our High Streets and Borough Towns by addressing empty residential properties above shops

Case Study 7 - Two flats above shops, empty over 2 years



The empty property officer provided ongoing support to the owner to sell these two flats and bring them back into occupation.

9.0 To provide economic benefits through local employment

9.1 As an example of how by bringing properties back into use local employment opportunities are created one of the case studies involved four individual Telford developers working in partnership to buy, renovate and sell two empty properties. They engaged local tradesmen to refurbish the properties and bring them up to standard.

10.0 To maximise financial benefits through New Homes Bonus and Council Tax recovery

10.1 The reduction in the number of empty properties will have a positive impact on the New Homes Bonus received by the Authority.

10.2 We are currently applying a 100% Council Tax premium on 116 properties that have been empty for between 2 and 5 years, 200% premium on 30 properties that have been empty between 5 and 10 years and 300% on 14 properties that have been empty longer than 10 years.

11.0 Partnership Working

11.1 As the case studies illustrate successful outcomes often come following long term engagement and support being provided to owners. In addition we work in partnership across services and with external organisations to maximise impact and support wider outcomes.

11.2 Officers work closely with the **Private Sector Housing team** to assess physical conditions in empty properties to determine if hazards exist and take action under the Housing Act 2004 if necessary.

11.3 We regularly work with **the Police and Fire Service**, taking referrals and working closely where conditions pose a safety risk, or there are signs of criminality or unauthorised occupation.

11.4 We also work with the **Planning** and **Public Protection** teams where we find accumulations and fly tipping or insecure and overgrown gardens.

11.5 We work closely with **Council Tax** investigation officers to ensure any false claims of second home status are swiftly investigated and the correct council tax is levied.

11.6 We continue to build strong relationships with our **Registered Social Landlords** to avoid long term voids. Where appropriate we are acquiring properties directly ensuring that these provide quality rented accommodation and/or meet specialist housing needs.

11.7 As a member of the **West Midlands Empty Property Officers Group** and **The Empty Homes Network** we ensure we keep abreast of any developments in legislation as well as continually developing our approach through peer to peer learning.

12.0 Next Steps

- 12.1 We currently have a caseload of **128** active, problematic, empty properties. These include 4 properties which have been empty for over 20 years, 17 for over 10 years, 27 for over 5 years and 37 for over 2 years.
- 12.2 Alongside continuing to target properties longest empty we respond daily to 'report an empty' alerts, calls from the public, partners and councillors, providing advice and support. We will continue to proactively target empties in our **safer stronger areas** moving straight to enforcement action where properties are showing signs of escalating into a neighbourhood nuisance.
- 12.3 We are working with legal services to streamline our **enforced sale** and **compulsory purchase** order processes, allowing us to move more swiftly to use these powers on the more difficult, longstanding cases. We have already seen the threat of such action leading to positive activity in a number of cases.
- 12.4 Regular communications using case studies highlight the benefits of the work and encourage reporting of empties but also the support and advice available to owners and the opportunities to work with us to find a resolution. This information is also available through our website.
- 12.5 In early 2023 we will be launching a **loan scheme** in partnership with **Just Credit Union** to provide low-cost loans to qualifying owners of long term empty properties of up to **£8,000** to help towards refurbishment.
- 12.6 As part of proposals set out in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy it is proposed to apply a 100% council tax premium to second homes from 1 April 2024 and that the premium on long-term empty homes of 100% should be applied after 12 months rather than 24 months from 1 April 2024 provided that the necessary legislation is in place by that date. These proposals are subject to public consultation as part of the MTFs.

13.0 Alternative Options

- 13.1 The alternative would be to do nothing, which would mean hundreds of properties being left empty at a time of rising housing need and having a detrimental impact on our neighbourhoods and communities. Officers regularly consider whether there are alternative methods of achieving positive results and any change in strategy would be brought back to Cabinet for consideration.

14.0 Key Risks

- 14.1 The current cost of living crisis and increasing cost of labour and materials may hinder owners of empty homes in need of major refurbishment. Support for businesses in the Cost of Living Strategy and the offer of loans through Just Credit Union will help towards mitigating this risk.

15.0 Council Priorities

15.1 The strategy detailed in this report supports the following Council priorities:

- Every child, young person, and adult lives well in their community
- All neighbourhoods are a great place to live
- A community-focussed, innovative council providing efficient, effective and quality services.

16.0 Financial Implications

16.1 The Medium Term Financial Strategy includes capital funding of £1.1m towards the aims of the Long Term Empty Property Strategy. Finance will support the strategy on an ongoing basis.

17.0 Legal and HR Implications

17.1 Whilst there is no specific statutory duty requiring the Council to have an Empty Homes Strategy, having adopted the Strategy in November 2021, it is prescient for Cabinet to be updated of progress. The strategy itself sets out the Council's main statutory enforcement options and sets out various items of relevant legislation. In cases where enforcement action is required or any legal process, including compulsory purchase needs to be pursued, legal advice will be provided on an ongoing basis.

17.2 In relation to the making of a Compulsory Purchase Order, the Council has wide legal powers to do so. Legal advice will be provided on a case by case basis to ensure that the Council acts lawfully.

18.0 Ward Implications

18.1 The work of this strategy affects all wards across the Borough.

19.0 Health, Social and Economic Implications

19.1 Empty properties are not only associated with criminal and antisocial behaviour but affect the general morale and wellbeing of neighbourhoods and can be a contributory factor to levels of deprivation where properties create long term blight. The work of this Strategy ensures we are proactively working on bringing properties back into use for our residents whilst ensuring that residents know of the work we are doing and know where to report problematic properties.

19.2 The properties we have acquired through Telford and Wrekin Homes are providing accommodation for some of our most vulnerable clients including those recovering from homelessness and rough sleeping.

20.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

20.1 The work of this strategy aims to provide the best outcomes for all residents, from the owners of the properties, the neighbourhoods and the people accessing properties to live in including some of our most vulnerable residents.

21.0 Climate Change and Environmental Implications

21.1 This strategy ensures long standing, derelict properties are brought up to the correct energy performance standards through refurbishment whether by the owner, through Telford and Wrekin Homes acquisition or ensuring landlords achieve the correct EPC rating prior to letting. Addressing long term empties within our communities is improving the environment of our neighbourhoods' benefitting residents through reducing incidences of fly tipping and improving attractiveness of properties and streets.

22.0 Background Papers

1 The Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2021-2026

23.0 Appendices

None

24.0 Report Sign Off

Signed off by	Date sent	Date signed off	Initials
Legal	19/01/2023	19/01/2023	RP
Finance	10/01/2023	10/01/2023	DR