



Borough of Telford and Wrekin

Cabinet

Monday 6 January 2025

Long-Term Empty Property Strategy Update

Cabinet Member:	Cllr Richard Overton - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member: Highways, Housing & Enforcement	
Lead Director:	Katherine Kynaston - Director: Housing, Commercial & Customer Services	
Service Area:	Housing, Commercial & Customer Services	
Report Author:	Ravi Phull - Housing Strategy & Regeneration Service Delivery Manager	
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Wards Affected:	All Wards	
Key Decision:	Not Applicable	
Forward Plan:	Not Applicable	
Report considered by:	Senior Management Team – 3 December 2024 Business Briefing – 12 December 2024	

1.0 Recommendations for decision/noting:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 1.1 Notes the actions undertaken in respect to the delivery of the Long-Term Empty Property Strategy.
- 1.2 Re-affirms the Strategy and the approach being taken to address long term empty properties across the Borough.

2.0 Purpose of Report

- 2.1 To provide an update on the impact of the Council's Empty Property Strategy which has seen 312 long term and problematic empties brought back into occupation since the base date, benefitting communities across the Borough.

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.
- 3.6 The Strategy sets out a clear approach to how we will engage with owners ensuring we always provide support, advice and guidance wherever appropriate but also take robust enforcement action where informal action does not succeed.
- 3.7 Partnership working is a key focus 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 The key objectives of 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 each of the strategy objectives:

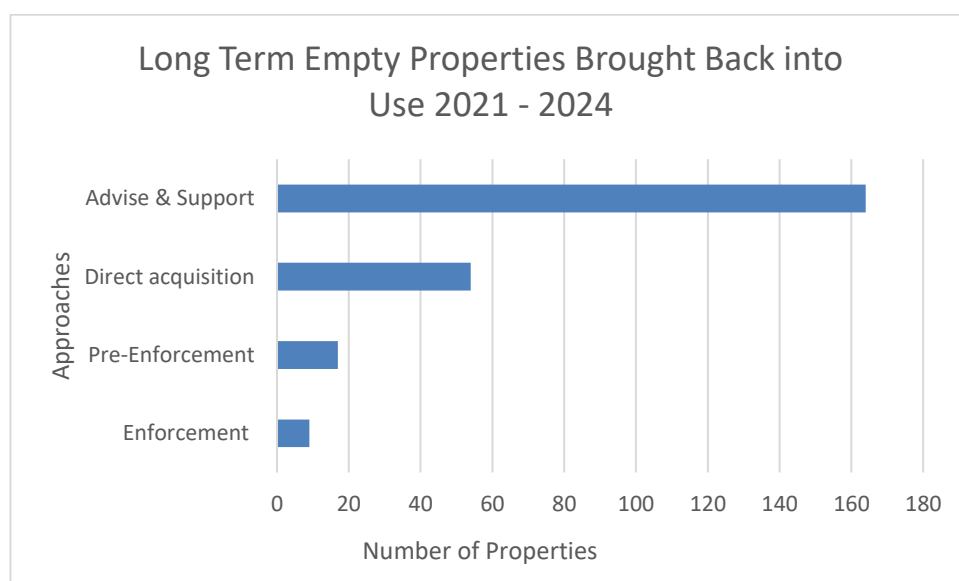
Objective 1 - To bring Long Term Empty residential properties back into use

- 4.1 From June 2021, the base date of the Strategy, we have brought 312 Long Term Empty properties back into use against our target of 375 by June 2026.
- 4.2 This is another 195 long term empty properties since our last update report in 2023. This reflects the proactive approach taken locally recognised as best practice in the last LGA Report (2023). It is also contributing to our having a significantly lower empty property figure (1 in 97 properties) than the national average for all LAs (1 in 48) as measured by Action on Empties, a nationally recognised charity and lobbyist for tackling empty homes, ranking us 44 from 296 Authorities.
- 4.3 We are currently tracking ahead of the target, and we remain ambitious to bring as many properties back into use as possible exceeding our target where possible, to benefit local residents

Of the 312 properties brought back into use:

- 3 properties had been empty for longer than 20 years,
- 12 properties had been empty longer than 10 years,
- 20 properties longer than 5 years and
- 60 properties had been empty longer than 2 years

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

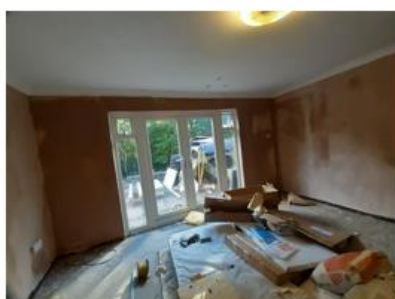
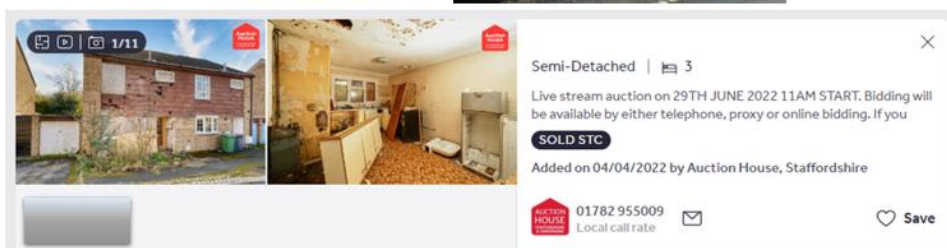


Long Term Empty Property Strategy Update

- 4.4 We understand that there are costs involved in the refurbishment and sale of long-term empty properties. As part of our offer we have worked with our local credit union who provide a low-cost Better Homes for All loan to help owners of empty properties bring them back into use.
- 4.5 We have been engaging with beneficiaries of properties with Class F (owner deceased) exemption. This class has no expiry date and properties in this category can remain empty for very long periods of time, which may lead them to attract anti-social behaviour. Recognising this can also be a difficult time the team have actively worked to support people to apply for probate which to date has resulted in 28 properties being brought back into use or now in probate.
- 4.6 Another area of focus is long term empty properties on premium council tax rates, where payments are not being made and large council tax debt is accruing. This is highlighted in the case study below:

Case Study

Before



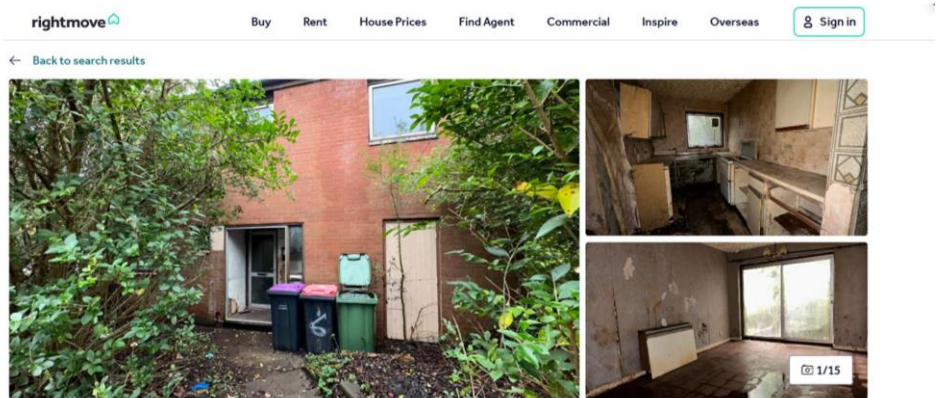
Long Term Empty Property Strategy Update

This was a long term problematic empty property with significant accrued debts. Work ultimately led to an application for an order of sale which was approved giving the Council possession of the property and enabling it to be sold. This repaid the debts of £17,000 and more importantly, to the community, has facilitated the property being fully renovated by the new owner as a family home.

5.0 Objective 2 – To contribute to a reduction in crime and fear of crime in our neighbourhoods & to address the impact of empty properties on communities

5.1 To date 155 of the 312 properties brought back into use have been 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

Long term empty over 8 years. In disrepair and attracting anti-social behaviour as it was open to access.



Property had accrued c. £8,000 in unpaid council tax debt.

Empty Property Officer worked with a number of internal and external partners. In order to prevent enforcement action, the mortgage company repossessed the property. It was sold at auction.

hotspots for criminal activity as well as being visually detrimental.

Case Study



This property which had been empty for 8 years and in severe disrepair and a target for ASB has now been completely renovated and is now occupied. This has

benefitted neighbours and surrounding community removing a hotspot for criminal activity.

6.0 Objective 3 – To increase affordability and choice of housing for residents

- 6.1 Of the 312 brought back into use 222 were in Council Tax bands A-C. They were typically 3 bed family homes.

Case Study

Following Telford & Wrekin Homes purchasing an empty property this was let to a family with 3 children who were in temporary accommodation due to homelessness. The family are now living close to the children's schools and family support network which was key as the tenant doesn't drive. Since moving in the tenant has also been able to complete their qualifications and has a stable income and is very settled in their home.

7.0 Direct Acquisition

- 7.1 The Council has acquired 81 properties which have been refurbished and 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 provide supported and specialist accommodation supporting vulnerable adults and children. These properties are having a huge impact on the lives of our most vulnerable.

Case Study

Young man, who following family breakdown ended up rough sleeping. A chaotic life including abuse and drug use left him with a history of eviction, deemed too high risk for many housing providers and ultimately hospitalisation. In 2023 he moved into a Council NSAP property and started to engage with services including the Autism Hub and Job Box and reconnecting with his family. He has now moved on to successfully sustain his own tenancy living independently.

- 7.2 In addition by the end of March 2025 Telford & Wrekin Homes, which is part of Nuplace, the Council's wholly owned housing company, will have acquired 36 empty properties as part of the Telford & Wrekin Homes Programme, which have been refurbished, breathing new life into outdated housing stock.

Case Study

Fleeing from domestic abuse the family approached the Housing Solutions Team desperate for a property in Donnington near to the children's school. They were nominated for a Telford & Wrekin Homes property that had been acquired as an empty. They have been living in the property now for 18 months and are safe and settled.

8.0 Objective 4 – To support our High Streets and Borough Towns by addressing empty residential properties above shops

8.1 Once again the focus is on problem properties. Currently we are working on a parade of shops with a number of flats above in Donnington. Three of these have been empty for over 5 years and have been accruing unpaid council tax. Following legal action against the freeholder, the freehold was sold at auction. The new freeholder is carrying out renovation works and 2 flats are already occupied.

9.0 Objective 5 – To provide economic benefits through local employment

9.1 Where possible, the council utilise local skills and employment to bring empty properties back into use.

9.2 We have recently awarded a tender to a local contractor for the refurbishment of a long term empty bungalow acquired by the council. This will be used to house key groups in the borough.

10.0 Objective 6 – To maximise financial benefits through New Homes Bonus and Council Tax recovery

10.1 There is a financial benefit of bringing empty properties into use. Currently TWC receive approximately £1,500 per property completed or brought back into use, through New Homes Bonus. This is reinvested into frontline services. The scheme will continue in 25/26 with future years to be confirmed as part of the Local Government Finance Settlement.

10.2 In April 2024, following national legislation the Council extended the 100% premium levy onto properties which had been empty for longer than 12 months. As a result by June 2024 316 properties that had been empty for between 1 and 5 years were subject to the 100% premium. In addition, 37 properties that have been empty between 5 and 10 years were attracting the 200% premium and 300% council tax was being charged on 12 properties empty longer than 10 years. Ensuring the application of the premium provides revenue but also an incentive for owners to address long term empties. Officers prioritise contact with owners of properties in the higher levy bands to offer support, advice and explore routes to bring the properties back however these are typically some of the most problematic with owners hardest to engage.

11.0 Partnership Working

11.1 As the case studies illustrate successful outcomes often come following a lengthy period of 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.

Long Term Empty Property Strategy Update

- 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 of rubbish, 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 The Empty Property Officer and Assistant currently have a caseload of 148 active, problematic, empty properties. These include 10 properties which have been empty for over 20 years, 14 for over 10 years and 39 for over 5 years.
- 12.2 Alongside this we continue to respond daily to 'report an empty' alerts, calls from the public, partners and councillors, providing advice and support. We also 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, where advice and support is not sufficient and in relation to the most problematic and longstanding cases.
- 12.4 To enable owners to access support directly and maximise the reach of our work, we are developing a guide to all the support, advice and contacts to supplement the information on the Council's website and promote to partners and communities.
- 12.5 We are also working on a communications plan to show the positive outcomes of our work, to incentivise owners of empty properties to bring them back into use and to encourage residents to refer problematic properties to us.

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 significant housing need and continuing to have a detrimental impact on our neighbourhoods and communities.

14.0 Key Risks

14.1 The continued cost of living crisis and cost of labour and materials may hinder owners of empty homes in need of major refurbishment. Initiatives such as the Better Homes for All loan 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 approved Capital Programme contains allocations of £1.1m to support the Capital proposals within this report, to include the acquisition and repurposing of long-term empty properties.

17.0 Legal and HR Implications

17.1 Whilst there is no specific statutory duty requiring the Council to have an Empty Property Strategy, having adopted the strategy in 2021, it is prescient for Cabinet to be updated on progress. The strategy itself sets out the Council's main statutory enforcement options and relevant legislation.

17.2 In relation to Compulsory Purchase Orders, the Council has wide legal powers. Legal advice will be provided in relation to enforcement, compulsory purchase and any other legal matter, as needed, to ensure the Council acts lawfully.

17.3 The proposals contained in this report can be delivered using existing resources.

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 can not only be associated with criminal and antisocial behaviour but can affect the general morale and wellbeing of neighbourhoods and can be a contributory factor to levels of deprivation where properties create long term blight. We are proactive in addressing empties and seek to ensure that residents know of the work we are doing and how to report problematic properties. A number of the properties addressed particularly through acquisition for Telford & Wrekin Homes have provided specialist accommodation improving health and social care outcomes for individuals. Wherever possible we use local contractors supporting local jobs to work on properties we acquire.

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 making these properties their new home 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 Energy Performance Certificate (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 Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2021-2026
- 2 Long Term Empty Property Strategy Update 2023

23.0 Appendices

None

24.0 Report Sign Off

Signed off by	Date sent	Date signed off	Initials
Director	26/11/24	28/11/24	KK
Finance	13/11/24	13/11/24	DMR
Legal	26/11/24	26/11/24	SH