

EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

2025

Foreword

In 2015, Harborough District recognised the potential problems caused by long-term empty properties and thus produced an Empty Property Strategy. Since then, our intervention has resulted in some empty properties being brought back into use that might otherwise have still been standing vacant.

Harborough District Council recognise that there are many reasons why properties become empty and that bringing them back into use can be complicated.

Harborough District Council want to work with owners to support them to bring their properties back into use wherever possible. Formal action will be reserved for the most difficult cases, where the local community is impacted by the properties remaining empty.

This is our first strategy review and action plan update and includes new initiatives designed to reduce even further the number of empty properties in the district. We intend to continue to take action both informally and if necessary, formally to continue our record of success in dealing with empty properties in the district.

Introduction

The Government has clearly stated that it is essential that better use is made of existing housing stock to assist in the supply of housing. One way of achieving this is to take action in respect of private sector houses, left vacant by their owners for more than six months.

In November 2023 the Local Government Association published national statistics relating to empty homes from 2018 to 2022 in their document "[A Practical Approach for Councils on Dealing with Empty Properties](#)" Nationally the number of long term empty homes which have been empty for six months or more has increased from 227,953 in 2018 to 256,872 in 2022 – an increase of over 12%.

In Harborough District in April 2022 there were 528 properties empty for more than 6 months, of which 121 properties were empty for more than 2 years. In October 2024 there were 286 properties empty for more than 6 months of which 123 were empty for more than 2 years. The Council's adopted Local Plan 2011 to 2031 set a target of developing 532 new homes per year, with 40% affordable housing, which indicates the level of housing need in the district. The current emerging Local Plan will set new targets for affordable housing within the district.

There is no recognised definition of an empty property and it is not always as straightforward to identify an empty property as it may seem. Generally, and for the purpose of this strategy, an empty property is a domestic property which is void of people and furniture/possessions for at least 6 months.

There are many reasons why a property becomes empty and is not brought back into use. Here are some examples:

- Owner is in residential care and would wish to return (but often is unable to do so)
- Reluctance to let or sell the property
- Unclear ownership or probate issues
- Being marketed for sale or rent at unrealistic asking price
- Property needs repair, improvement, refurbishment or complete redevelopment
- Property has been abandoned

In addition, there are many reasons why they remain empty, including:

- Lack of knowledge/skills to refurbish or manage an empty property
- Lethargy or indifference – maximisation of wealth from assets is not a priority for an individual or company
- Business disputes
- Inheritance disputes

- DIY owner – a property is acquired as a renovation project, but expense or unforeseen problems escalate
- Owner inertia – owners who do not wish to sell or rent due to previous bad experiences or sentimental reasons, often there are mental health issues and vulnerability that contribute to the problem
- Property owner has died and there are no traceable descendants
- Land-banking – owners waiting for values to increase and not wanting to offer the property for rent in the meantime
- Obstruction – owners who simply refuse to bring the property back in to use

There is a significant need and demand for housing in the Harborough district and empty properties which could otherwise be made available for sale or rent are a wasted resource. In many cases, the longer a property is left empty the more money it will cost to bring it back into use as the condition of the property deteriorates. This makes it increasingly difficult for some owners to be able to afford to bring a property back into use and so the property remains empty and continues to deteriorate.

Apart from the estimated cost to an owner, empty properties have a detrimental effect upon a neighbourhood and often detract from both the appearance and value of adjacent properties. It has been estimated that the presence of a boarded-up property can reduce the valuation of an adjacent property by as much as 10%. There have been examples in other parts of the country where the presence of empty properties has undermined confidence in the area. This in turn has resulted in the creation of areas where nobody wants to live.

Empty Properties are often used for a range of anti-social behaviour and can be the source of a substantial number of complaints from members of the public. Properties are often vandalised and used for the dumping of refuse and there have been numerous examples of properties being fire-damaged, which can present grave risks to the occupiers of adjoining properties. Experience has also shown that empty properties can be used for prostitution and drug abuse. In addition to the environmental problems, properties left vacant deny affordable houses to those in housing need.

It is the Council's experience that the longer a property is left vacant, its condition will worsen and as a result the more problems it will cause. This can then impact on the eventual cost of returning the property back into use. As such it is important that empty properties are identified as early as possible to enable contact to be made with an owner and hopefully a quick return of the property into occupation.

Harborough District Council's Approach

Harborough District Council's Empty Property Strategy was adopted in 2015. A targeted approach has been employed to bring properties back into use, applying a range of potential solutions appropriate to the property and situation. This will ensure

that action is taken based on consistent and transparent policy criteria and will combine an approach based on incentives and enforcement.

The Council wishes to prevent properties being left vacant in the long-term and will take preventative action wherever necessary to intervene. Understanding the reasons why a property has been empty for more than 6 months is the key issue in tackling empty properties. Reasons for vacancy may vary according to owner and property circumstances and the local authority has a key enabling role to try to bring the property back into use with the owner's cooperation. Appendix 1 highlights the intervention path that the Council will follow, when dealing with an empty property.

Strategic objectives

Our strategic objectives can be summarised as follows:

- to identify and monitor both derelict and long-term empty properties
- to rate the risk that empty properties pose and target those with the greatest risk
- to raise awareness of empty property issues
- to encourage an owner to take action to secure the re-occupation of a property
- to initiate formal action to bring a property back into use

Identification and monitoring of long-term empty properties

A list of properties that are long term empty has been collated and is maintained and updated regularly. This list identifies the addresses of the properties concerned together with basic information concerning current action being taken. The list will be periodically updated and will contain both newly identified properties and those where action has been successful in bringing a property back into occupation.

Council tax records, His Majesty's Land Registry and the Electoral Register will all be used to secure information regarding the ownership of a property.

In addition, we will react to the complaints we receive from members of the public, we will also look to access any other information available to us, either internal or external to Harborough District to identify private sector empty properties.

Rating the Risk of Empty Properties

Most empty properties in the District are returned into occupation without any interventions by the council. In order to target the most problematic properties a system of prioritisation has been adopted to ensure that the most serious cases receive the most urgent attention.

The following table of criteria will be used to determine the properties to be prioritised for action. Individual cases will be reassessed in the case of changing circumstances.

Table 1: Assessment Framework for Prioritising Empty Properties

Issue	0 points	1 point	2 points	5 points
Length of time property has been left empty		Over 6 months	6months to 12 months	Over 12 months and +1 point for every year after
Area of high housing demand	No demand	Low	Moderate	High demand
Number of complaints received about the property	No complaints	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 +
Listed building Status	Not listed	Grade II	Grade II*	Grade I
Level of impact on the surrounding neighbourhood	No Impact	Low	Moderate	High impact
Property state of repair	No disrepair	Low	Moderate (e.g. Cat 2 hazard)	High (e.g. Cat 1 hazard) +10 points for multiple Cat 1 hazards
Attracting secondary problems i.e. fly tipping/anti-social behaviour	No associated problems	Low	Moderate	High

The ongoing assessment of properties on the list will enable the Council to target the most problematic properties first, considering where there is the greatest housing need, and to develop a delivery plan for individual properties including timeframes for bringing the property back into use.

Information affecting the prioritisation of empty property action will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that intervention remains responsive to changing needs in line with the Action Plan set out in Appendix 3 of the strategy.

Raising awareness of empty property issues

We would make every attempt to seek to use the media in advertising the action we are taking in the hope that this firstly reassures the public affected by such properties

and secondly, encourages empty property owners to work with us in bringing properties back into use.

In addition, we will engage with national campaigns as appropriate to raise awareness of the issue of empty properties. Our website will include the various ways that the council can support owners to bring homes back into use. The Council signposts owners of empty properties to various schemes that enable them to become accredited private landlords.

Re-occupation – informal action

Harborough District Council wants to work with owners to bring their properties back into use. Once an empty property has been identified, steps will be taken to establish ownership of the property and the current whereabouts of the owner. All reasonable attempts will be made to trace the whereabouts of an owner to commence discussions, but it should be made clear that failure to do so does not preclude the District Council from taking any action that may be legally necessary to deal with both short and long-term issues pertaining to the property.

Since 2013, councils in England have had the power to charge additional council tax on long-term empty homes. In accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 2012, the Council has exercised its discretion regarding Council Tax discounts. In 2019 an empty property premium of 50% was introduced for properties empty for more than 2 years.

In Act also so phased in over the two years further increases for properties empty for longer than five years (200%) and ten years (300%). Recent changes to the legislation strengthened the powers to council so that they can charge the premium on homes that have been empty for 1 or more years (rather than the previous 2 years).

In addition, the legislation allows for the introduction of premiums on second homes. A second home is defined as a dwelling that is substantially furnished and has no resident (i.e., it is not someone's sole or main residence). Second homes can contribute to a shortage of available housing for local residents. When properties are often taken off the market for long-term rentals, exacerbating the housing crisis.

Once an owner has been identified we will enter into dialogue with them to determine what his/her proposals are for the future of the property, together with an associated time scale. Providing that the owner has plans in place to bring the property back into occupation, no further action will need to be taken by the Council, other than monitoring the property to ensure that progress is being made. Action that could be taken by the owner to secure the re-occupation of the property could include any of the following:

- ◆ Re-occupation by the owner
- ◆ Property let to tenants

- ◆ Property placed on the open market for sale
- ◆ Leasing arrangements
- ◆ Discretionary grants available to owners to assist in bringing empty properties back into use.

The Council's Environment Team has responsibility for providing advice for owners and residents. There is advice available on the Council's Web Site including how to report an empty property and information for homeowners and landlords on bringing empty properties back into use.

In some cases, subject to available resources, the Council may be able to support owners to bring empty properties back into use through the provision of an Empty Properties Grant. The grant will provide a contribution towards some of the costs required to bring the property back into a state of good repair. The grant will be discretionary and will be subject to an inspection of the property to identify the works which must be carried out before the property can be reoccupied. The grant is also reclaimed by the council once a property is sold.

The Council considers opportunities to put owners in touch with private or third sector organisations that can support the owner in renovating a building to either rent or sell.

There may be instances where a person is interested in purchasing one of the properties that we are dealing with. We will not break data protection legislation but acknowledge that freedom of information would entitle an applicant to a list of these properties. Whilst we may not be able to disclose the identity of an owner, we will where we feel an interest is genuine, advise the owner of that interest in the hope that he/she will approach the prospective purchaser directly. In other situations, we will gladly act as an intermediary in an attempt to put relevant parties in touch with each other.

Re-occupation – formal action

The Council want to enable owners to bring their empty properties back into use themselves and will work with them to try to achieve this. However, this is not always possible, and the Council can, if necessary, use a range of legislative tools to ensure that empty properties do not become a nuisance, Appendix 2 details the legislation available.

If an empty property becomes a nuisance to neighbours/the local community and informal avenues have been exhausted, then the council will consider using legislation to enforce action and this could include:

a) Nuisance and unsecured properties

Where properties have been vandalised, are open and allowing unauthorised access or being used to dump rubbish, an owner will be required to undertake works to abate

any nuisance being caused. Owners will usually be given the opportunity to do the necessary work themselves, but if they fail to do so, then the Council may undertake the work in default and an appropriate charge will be made on the property. There is also the option of prosecution dependent upon the seriousness of the offence(s).

b) Adversely affecting the amenity of a neighbourhood

The condition and appearance of an empty property can have a blighting affect and can also often be described as 'adversely affecting the amenity of a neighbourhood'. This could include for example the level of disrepair, dumped rubbish, the general appearance of the property or the overgrown state of a garden. In such situations, owners will be required to carry out appropriate work to improve the appearance of the property pending its re-occupation. Failure to fulfil this legal obligation could result in the Council undertaking the necessary work in default, placing a charge on the property and/or undertaking a prosecution.

c) Community Protection Notice

Under the Crime and Policing Act 2014 an individual can be served with a notice to bring a property up to a certain standard, where it is creating a nuisance to neighbours/the local community. In this case the action is against the person and not the property. Formal action follows and incremental approach and an individual would be first warned that they would be served with a Community Protection Notice (CPN).

d) Enforced sale

Enforced sale is a procedure that can be used by the Council which not only assists in bringing empty properties back into use but also ensures that debts owed to the Council are recouped.

Mention has already been made that the Council can undertake work in default on behalf of an owner to ensure that problems with an empty property are resolved. The owner does, however, still have a liability and will be expected to pay for the cost of these works together with any other costs incurred by the Council. In certain circumstances where debts go unpaid the Law of Property Act 1925 can be used to 'force' the sale of the property to recover these debts. The subsequent sale not only ensures that the Council recovers the money owed to it but will also result in new owners undertaking the renovation and reoccupation of the property.

d) Compulsory purchase orders

The use of compulsory purchase powers is viewed by the Government as a 'last resort' for Councils to use in situations where they have failed to secure the co-operation of an owner in bringing an empty property back into use. The Council views compulsory purchase as a valuable tool in dealing with empty properties and will use these powers in situations where the co-operation of the owner is not forthcoming.

The timescale for possible compulsory purchase action will be greatly determined by the response of an owner. The council will offer every opportunity for an owner to submit proposals for the reoccupation of a property together with agreed timescales. It will only be in instances where no such proposals are forthcoming or not honoured when compulsory purchase action will be commenced.

Prior to commencing compulsory purchase procedures, owners will be advised of the council's intention to consider such action in a final attempt to encourage activity on their part.

Compulsory purchase orders, once made by the council, need to be confirmed by the relevant Government office. Prior to a decision being made, a local public inquiry may be necessary in situations where owners object to the making of an order.

In the event of a compulsory purchase order being confirmed we will seek to dispose of the property to somebody who is prepared to enter into an agreement with the council to renovate and reoccupy within a specified period of time. The council may apply covenants to any sale that takes place to control the future occupation of the property.

e) Empty dwelling management orders

As part of its ongoing commitment into ensuring that empty properties are brought back into use, the government introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) in the Housing Act 2004.

An EDMO can be applied to a dwelling that has been empty for at least six months. In appropriate cases an EDMO might be considered as an alternative to using compulsory purchase powers. It must be stressed that EDMOs will not be appropriate in all cases, but they do enable the Council to in effect take over the management and control of a dwelling. Unlike compulsory purchase orders, an owner still retains ownership of the property. The Council would, however, spend money on the renovation, repair and management of the property and these costs would be recoverable.

Monitoring and Review

This strategy is operational from 2025 to 2030 and builds on the Strategy from 2015.

It will be reviewed periodically and updated as necessary to ensure it remains responsive to local and national issues, changes in legislation/guidance and operational requirements.

Any case requiring intervention in the form of Compulsory Purchase, Enforced Sale or Empty Dwelling Management Order, will be subject to the appropriate authorisation of the Council.

Achievements to date

Action on empty homes since the introduction of the strategy has been delivered in several areas that had been identified in the previous Action Plan, specifically:

- Revoking the discount offered to empty property owners and introducing a 50% empty homes premium. This has led to conversations with owners of long-term empty properties, which has helped signpost them to support.
- There are regular inspections of long-term empty properties on the list to evaluate risk. These are done on an area-by-area basis and are used to update the council tax records. Properties that remain empty are then targeted for intervention. The number of interventions is reported monthly.
- There is ongoing engagement with some of the properties that have been identified as problematic. This follows the process identified for dealing with empty properties (see Appendix 1).
- There is information on empty properties on the council website. This often leads to complaints about properties that are empty.
- Some of the online complaints have related to empty properties that are exempt from the list, for example because probate is still in process. Others have led to the identification of some properties that are incorrectly reported to council tax.
- There is ongoing engagement with partners, including social housing providers to find opportunities for intervention. Further engagement with private and third sector organisations has taken place to try to find possible services that homeowners could access. This work is ongoing.

Action Plan

The revised Action Plan is included as Appendix 3. This includes some actions that continue from the original Action Plan for 2015- 2020 but introduces some new actions.

A joined up approach across the council is effective way to work to ensure that the most appropriate course of action is taken in relation to the more problematic long-term empty cases. The approach includes officers from housing, planning, council tax and environmental health, with support from legal services.

Further work on building partnerships with private and third sector organisations to support homeowners to return their properties to use, has also been identified as a priority. This will allow the council to offer homeowners a wider range of support.

Further work on communications and promoting the return of empty homes to use is also a priority.

Performance and targets

Our performance and targets are intended to reflect the 'direct action' taken by the District Council in securing the re-occupation of an empty property. The number of interventions, including inspections, formal letters, meetings and other contact, will be recorded monthly. The number of empty properties will be reported annually.

Table 2 below provides information in terms of the number of empty private sector properties in the Harborough District over recent years.

Statistical data regarding the number of empty properties is taken from the District Council's Housing Investment Programme submission document.

Table 2: Empty properties in the Harborough District

	2015/ 16	2016/ 17	2017/ 18	2018/ 19	2019/ 20	2020/ 21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23	2023/ 24
Total number of empty properties	672	670	657	662	721	805	703	703	742
Number of empty properties for more than 6 months (October 2020)	347	355	331	322	379	528	377	383	396
Number of properties classed as empty and being charged the empty homes premium	0	0	0	103	113	121	127	150	138

Equality Assessment

The equality assessment recognised that bringing empty properties back into use would have a positive impact on the local community by reducing the issue of blight and the risk of anti-social behaviour in the area.

The strategy recognises that enforcement action will only be considered as a last resort and in the event of such action due consideration will be given to human rights and equality legislation throughout the process.

Contact Information

Should you have any comments about this strategy or require any further information on empty property issues, please contact the Environment Team at:

Harborough District Council

The Symington Building

Adam & Eve Street

Market Harborough

Leicestershire

LE16 7AG

Email: environmentteam@harborough.gov.uk

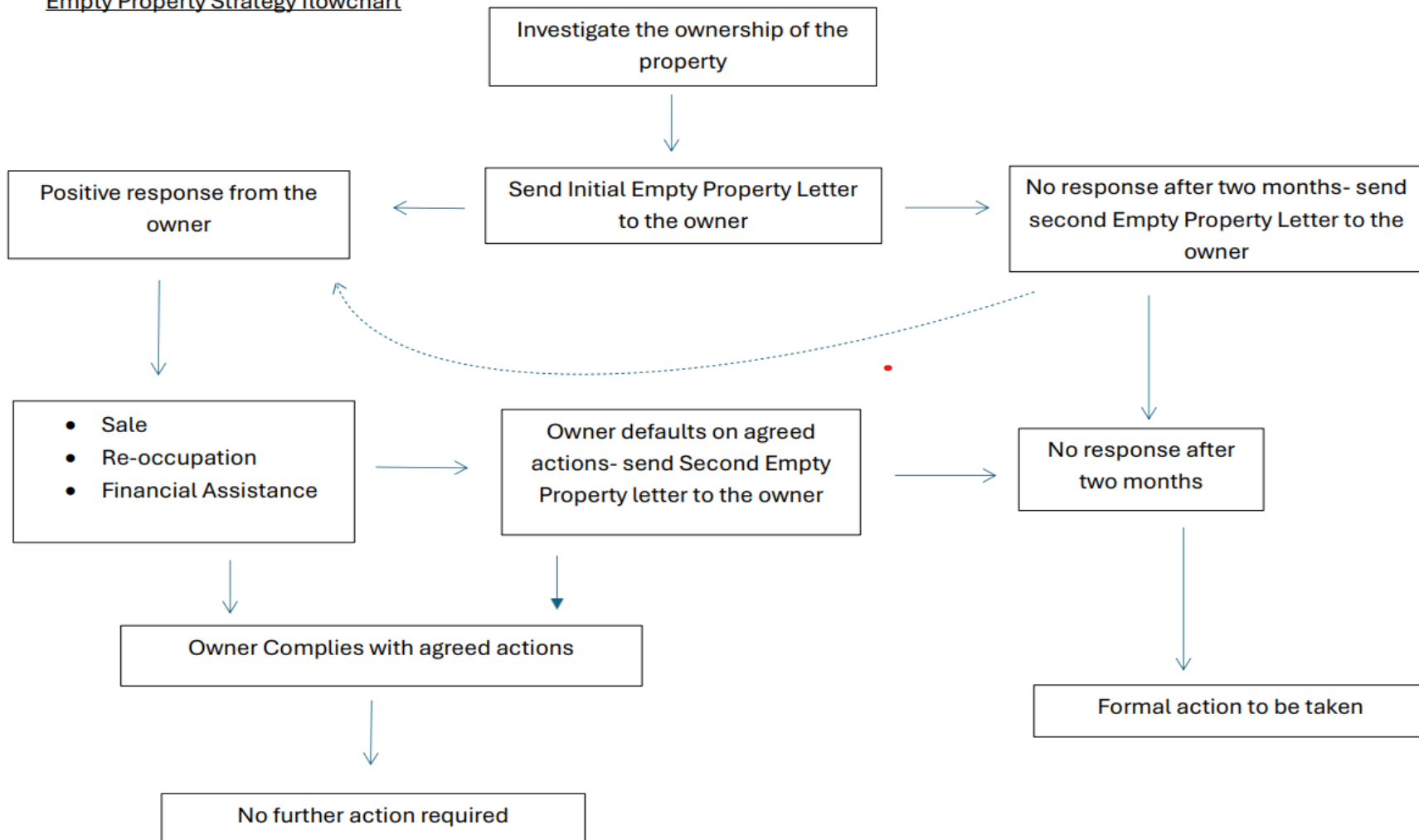
Empty properties can also be reported via the Council website at www.harborough.gov.uk

Appendices

1. Intervention Process Map
2. Enforcement powers available to the council
3. Action Plan

Appendix 1: Intervention Process Map

Empty Property Strategy flowchart



Appendix 2: Enforcement Powers Available to the Council to Tackle Long-Term Empty Properties

Problem	Legislation	Power Granted
Dangerous or dilapidated buildings or structures	Building Act 1984 Sections 77 and 78	To require the owner to make the property safe (Section 77) or enable the Local Authority to take emergency action to make the building safe (Section 78).
	Housing Act 2004 Part 1	Under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System local authorities can evaluate the potential risks to health and safety arising from deficiencies within properties and take appropriate enforcement action.
	Environmental Protection Act 1990 Section 80	To determine whether any premises is in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance.
Unsecured properties (where it poses a risk that it may be entered or suffer vandalism, arson or similar)	Building Act 1984 Section 78	To allow the Local Authority to secure the property.
	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 Section 29	To require the owner to take steps to secure a property or allow to board it up in an Emergency.
Blocked or defective drains or private sewers.	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 Section 35	To require the owner to address obstructed private drains.
	Building Act 1984 Section 59	To require the owner to address blocked or defective drainage.
	Public Health Act 1961 Section 17	To require the owner to address blocked or defective drainage.
Vermin (where it is either	Public Health Act 1961 Section 34	To require an owner to remove waste so that

present or there is a risk of attracting vermin) that may detrimentally affect people's health.		vermin is not attracted to the site.
	Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 Section 4	
	Public Health Act 1936 Section 83	
	Environmental Protection Act 1990 Section 80	
	Building Act 1984 Section 79	
Unsightly land and property affecting the amenity of an area.	Public Health Act 1961 Section 34	To require the owner to remove waste from the property (see above).
	Building Act 1984 Section 79	To require the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of a property.
	Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Section 215	To require the owner to take steps to address a property adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.
	Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014	To require the owner to take steps to address a property adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.

Appendix 3: Action Plan 2025 to 2030

Actions	Justifications	Milestones	Responsible Officer/Team	Funding/Resources	Timescales	Expected outcomes
Regular sharing of information on empty properties between Revenues and Benefits and Enforcement Officers	Informed use of strategic information in support of further service development	Annual Audit of Council Tax Information to meet deadline for Government returns Sharing of empty property information	Council Tax Team Leader Partnership Manager (Revenues and Benefits)	Operational budget	Annual Monthly	Reduce discrepancies in Council Tax data. Sharing information to shape the prioritisation of interventions
Maximise the application of Council Tax Premiums on empty properties	The increased cost to owners of long-term empty properties and second homes should encourage them to bring them back into use without enforcement intervention	Consultation on the proposed changes Align the approach of Council Tax Premiums across the Revs and Bens Partnership Review and evaluate the impact of the	Partnership Manager (Revenues and Benefits)	Operational budget	Introduced XX	Voluntary Reduction in the number long term empty properties and second homes

		introduction, quarterly.				
Remain responsive to issues affecting owners/landlords that impact on vacancy rates.	Support for landlords and the local economy leading to increased sustainability of occupation	Development and promotion of information for landlords / owners via South Leicestershire Landlord Forum Empty Property Grant linked temporary accommodation Aquisition	Environment Team Leader Housing Team	Operational budget	On going	Increased number of accredited landlords To allow every opportunity for empty home owners to engage with the authority informally
Promote the strategy to highlight the issues presented by empty homes, and promote the successes and benefits of bringing empty homes back into use	Reduction in number of empty properties through education and service awareness.	Update website content and other information available Participate in Empty Homes Week	Environment Team Leader	Operational Budget	On going	Increased awareness of the impact of empty properties Streamlined process for reporting problematic empty properties

Develop links with third sector organisations and private companies that can support empty property owners to bring them back into use	Support homeowners to access a range of possible services that could help them to find a way to move the empty property to market	Establishment of links with companies and third sector renewal organisations	Environment team Leader	Operational Budget External funding	On going	Re-occupation of properties through owners' own actions
To risk assess the list of properties for enforcement action based on prioritisation criteria.	To ensure that the most problematic issues are addressed first To provide a transparent criteria for the prioritisation of empty property action	Maintenance of project plan for top priority properties including timeframes for interventions including cross team action to coordinate the approach	Environment Team Leader	Operational budget	Annual review, with monthly updates	Properties for enforcement action identified and reviewed until resolved To pursue enforcement action and to progress with the appropriate tools where there is no reasonable prospect of the property being brought back into use