

# **EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY FOR PENDLE**

**2021 - 2024**

## Introduction

This is Pendle Council's Empty Homes Strategy for 2021 - 2024. It will support the delivery of some of the key priorities in Pendle Council's Housing Strategy 2018 - 2023 and be complementary to other strategies and policies such as Pendle Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 2024 and Pendle Environmental Health Enforcement Policy. Its purpose is to show what we, the Council, will do about empty homes in Pendle. It lists the key actions we'll be undertaking, with partners, in order to deliver this strategy.

## Why tackle empty homes?

A dwelling is considered to be a long term empty home if it has been unoccupied for 6 months or longer. Whilst large numbers of homes in the borough naturally become empty for periods of time, eg due to the buying and selling process, some empty homes attract unwanted attention and create problems for the neighbourhood. These homes are considered a priority for intervention by the Council.

The benefits of a strategy to deal with empty homes can be identified as social, regenerative, financial and strategic. A strategy can:

- assist in meeting housing need and reducing homelessness;
- improve housing conditions, neighbourhoods and create better environments for local communities;
- assist with reducing crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- Improve the health and wellbeing of communities and individuals;
- contribute to a balanced housing market and community sustainability as well as the regeneration of an area;
- Increase New Homes Bonus (which can be reinvested into the local area);

Returning empty homes to use can be the quickest and most cost effective way to increase the supply of housing. While it will not solve the housing problem, it can nevertheless play an important part in maximising existing housing stock for the benefit of the people of Pendle.

Homes are left empty for a variety of reasons and plans to bring properties back into use need to be tailored to each circumstance. This Strategy recognises there is no one simple solution to the problem of empty homes and outlines a range of options to bring properties back into use.

## Our Aim and Objectives

### Aim

The overarching aim of the Strategy is to develop and implement a range of measures that will directly, or indirectly, help return long-term empty homes back into use.

### Strategic Objectives

- Objective 1 - To continue to raise awareness of empty homes in the borough
- Objective 2 - To continue to maintain a database of empty homes and improve the accuracy of the data
- Objective 3 - To assist and encourage empty homes owners to bring their property back into use
- Objective 4 - To improve the condition of empty homes and target the most problematic with enforcement action

## Statistics

As per Table 1 below, nationally there has been reductions in empty properties between 2011 and 2016, followed by a rise up to 2020, almost to 2011 levels. However, in Pendle, there has generally been significant reductions in empty property within the borough throughout the last 10 years, although there was a slight rise in 2020.

**Table 1 – Vacant dwellings by Year**

		Date to which figures relate									
Measure	Area	03-Oct 2011	01-Oct 2012	07-Oct 2013	06-Oct 2014	05-Oct 2015	03-Oct 2016	02-Oct 2017	01-Oct 2018	07-Oct 2019	05-Oct 2020
All vacant dwellings	England	719,352	704,357	635,127	610,123	600,179	589,766	605,891	634,453	648,114	665,628
	Pendle	2,746	2,554	2,529	2,190	2,045	1,897	1,859	1,817	1,620	1,534
All long-term vacant dwellings – 6 months or more	England	277,529	254,059	216,050	205,821	203,596	200,145	205,293	216,186	225,845	268,385
	Pendle	1,770	1,575	1,206	1,022	1,031	900	944	862	708	765

\*Source – Council Tax Base – Statistical Release - Table 615 Vacant dwellings by Local Authority District, England, from 2004 – Gov.uk – Live Tables on Dwelling Stock (including vacants) – latest update 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021

A number of factors may have contributed towards this reduction in Pendle, both in terms of national factors, and not least, the approaches taken by the Council itself to help bring empty properties back into use. That said, any empty property is considered to be a wasted resource and may contribute towards problematic issues. Of the 765 properties considered long-term empty in October 2020, there were 182 empty for over 5 years and 84 empty for over 10 years. It is generally these longer term empty homes which cause most concern as they are more likely to remain empty for longer without intervention, and are also more likely to be an increasing source of blight and complaint. It is however recognised that this information is limited and there may be a number of empty homes where full Council Tax is being paid and the property has not been registered as being empty.

**Table 2 – Internal Performance Indicator out-turns by year - Performance Indicators**

<b>Internal Performance Indicator</b>	<b>Year</b>					
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
HS5 - Number of private sector dwellings (empty properties) that are returned into occupation	921	1104	1028	794	542	462
HS8 - Number of long-term empty properties brought back into occupation through compulsory purchase	N/a	N/a	N/a	2	0	0

**HS5** Whilst there has been considerable success in returning properties back into occupation over the past 6 years these numbers do not reflect the overall annual reduction in empty properties as there is now a significant churn of empty properties

**HS8** This is a new performance indicator that was introduced in 2018/19 and unfortunately this work has been severely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic.

## National Context

Since 2010, Government has placed considerable emphasis on the importance of returning empty homes to use. Actions have included:-

- In 2011, the Government confirmed that councils could attract additional funding under the **New Homes Bonus (NHB)** scheme for bringing empty homes back into use. Under the scheme, the Government matched the Council Tax raised for each property brought back into use for a period of six years. The number of years over which payments are made was reduced from six to five in 2017/18 and further reduced to four years from 2018/19
- Since April 2013, powers previously held by central government to vary the amount of council tax paid on some empty

homes has been devolved to local level. The aim of this policy is to further incentivise the reoccupation of long term empty homes by increasing council tax payable or by removing reductions or exemptions that were previously in place. Local authorities are now able to decide whether to apply a discount for properties empty for up to six months and those properties empty and in need of considerable renovation. There is also the option of imposing an 'empty homes premium' whereby council tax levels for most properties empty for two years or longer are set at 200%.

**National Planning Policy Framework - Feb 2019 MHCLG - page 118, - Planning policies and decisions should**

d) promote and support the development of under-utilised land and buildings, especially if this would help to meet identified needs for housing where land supply is constrained and available sites could be used more effectively (for example converting space above shops, and building on or above service yards, car parks, lock-ups and railway infrastructure) <sup>45</sup>;

*<sup>45</sup> As part of this approach, plans and decisions should support efforts to identify and bring back into residential use empty homes and other buildings, supported by the use of compulsory purchase powers where appropriate*

In 2018 'Empty Homes' a national campaigning charity published a report entitled '**Empty Homes in England**'. It made several recommendations that have also been published in the House of Commons Briefing Paper No. 3012 June 2018, Empty Housing\*:

- Local authorities should have an empty homes strategy for their area, with the aspiration to reduce the number of long-term empty homes.
- Local authorities and social housing providers should seek funding and allocate resources to buy and refurbish empty properties for people in housing need.
- Local authorities should take a casework approach with owners of long- term empty properties to encourage, advise and support them to bring homes back into housing use. Employing dedicated empty homes staff can ensure that the council is able to act on information about homes, and build up expertise in working with owners, including taking enforcement action where necessary.
- Local authorities with concentrations of long-term empty homes should look at how they can support community-based neighbourhood regeneration approaches.
- Local authorities, particularly in high value areas, should conduct studies to understand the extent and impact of 'buy-to-leave' empty or hardly ever used. Where it is an issue, they should review the measures they could adopt to incentivise people to sell or rent those properties, or not to buy properties in the first place with the intention of leaving them empty or hardly ever used.

## Local Context

This latest Strategy has been developed to deliver elements of **Pendle Council's Housing Strategy 2018 – 2023** which in turn helps deliver the over-arching **Pendle Council Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023**. The Empty Homes Strategy was last updated in 2019 and a number of actions contained within it were taken forward. Its objectives continue to remain relevant to this new Strategy. The strategy is complimentary to other strategies and policies which include:-

***Pendle Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 2024*** - Every local authority must produce a homelessness strategy and the Council have adopted this strategy to take into account the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Bringing empty homes back into use increases the supply of housing in the Borough and helps to avert homelessness.

***Pendle Environmental Health Enforcement Policy*** – which details the Council's approach towards enforcement in relation to environmental health issues, including empty properties.

## Funding / Delivery Challenges

The Council receives no direct funding from government for empty properties work. Although there is funding for the Empty Property Loans Scheme, there is no dedicated officer to deliver upon empty properties work. Thus, the only staffing resource derives from officers within the wider Residential Team dealing with this work alongside their wider work. Consequently, there is a need to continue to maximise the use of resources such as the Council's website to help respond to enquiries. This lack of staffing resource unfortunately means however that the strategy needs to be limited somewhat in its ambitions.

## Key Actions

This Strategy brings together all the current strategies that Pendle Council are working to and is intended to provide increased focus on realising the vision and strategic objectives set for 2021 – 2024.

The Action Plan (Page 6) sets out the key actions for the Council to deliver with its partners. Detailed actions to deliver these priorities will be incorporated into relevant Service Plans. Cumulatively these actions will work towards delivering the overall objectives and aim. The strategy Action Plan will be updated on an annual basis

## Empty Homes Strategy 2021 - 2024: Action Plan

### **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1:** To continue to raise awareness of empty homes in the Borough

#### **Key Actions**

- Review all literature / advice being given out and update information where required.
- Support and publicise national awareness campaigns such as Empty Homes week of Action
- Where appropriate, publicise ongoing success of bringing empty properties back into use

### **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:** To continue to maintain a database of empty homes and improve the accuracy of the data

#### **Key Actions**

- Review specific policies for when responding to reports of empty properties
- Continue to collect and record relevant, accurate and current information of empty homes in the Borough;
- Continue to investigate empty properties with mortgages to encourage action from lenders.

### **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3:** To assist and encourage empty homes owners to bring their property back into use

#### **Key Actions**

- Review the effectiveness of the advice, assistance and guidance being given to landlords and property owners
- Continue administration of the Empty Property Loan Scheme.
- Develop a scheme to enable us to offer financial assistance to bring vacant space above shops and offices into residential use.
- To seek opportunities to secure additional funding to support work to tackle empty homes in the borough.

## **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4:** To improve the condition of empty homes and target the most problematic with enforcement action

### **Key Actions**

- Continue to use empty homes loan funding to facilitate the Compulsory Purchase (CPO) of properties that have been empty for over 2 years where the owner is not willing to bring the property back into use.
- Subject to the outcome of a public enquiry, develop a scheme to enable the clearance of the dilapidated properties in Elizabeth Street Nelson.
- Work with registered providers and wider partners to seek opportunities to bring empty homes back into use
- Review the effectiveness of enforcement action where such action is required to be taken

## **References**

**“Empty Homes in England 2018”, Action on Empty Homes. 2019.**

<https://www.actiononemptyhomes.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=68fa9a2d-83f5-4ca4-936b-a8d8248484c0>

**National Planning Policy Framework 2019, MHCLG.**

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