

Empty Homes Strategy 2026–2030

North Northamptonshire Council

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1.0 Introduction / foreword

1.1 Empty homes are a wasted resource in the face of rising housing needs. They have negative impacts and can attract anti-social behaviour, degrade neighbourhoods, cause unauthorised occupation by squatters and in extreme cases arson. Such properties can be the cause of damage to adjoining properties and cause complaints to local authorities. The owners of these empty properties often live elsewhere, which means they do not suffer the direct negative impacts.

1.2 Clear benefits for local authorities and the local community accrue from the re-use of empty properties. They include the provision of improved quality and choice of housing accommodation for the residents of North Northamptonshire, increased Council Tax revenue and reduced expenditure by eliminating the need to board them up to keep them secure. Each empty property brought back into use will not only save hours of officer time by the Council, but also, potentially, Police and Fire Service Officers' time and enable scarce resources to be targeted into other areas.

1.3 This Strategy outlines North Northamptonshire Council's approach to identifying, managing, and bringing long-term empty homes back into use.

Nationally there are about 700,000 empty properties in the private sector which represents about 1.6% of the total private sector stock. At any one time in North Northamptonshire there are c.400 long-term empty properties, which have been empty for longer than two years. Some of these are eventually re-occupied again if they are caught up in probate or have difficulties selling. However, there are still a number of properties that lie empty for considerable periods of time and over many years.

2.0 Strategic Objectives

2.1 Aligned with the Council's wider housing priorities, the Empty Homes Strategy aims to:

- Reduce the number of long-term empty homes across North Northamptonshire.
- Improve housing standards and reduce blight caused by vacant properties.
- Increase affordable housing supply through reuse and regeneration.
- Support community regeneration and reduce anti-social behaviour.
- Maximise income opportunities through council tax premiums and enforcement.

The risks in not doing anything means that most long-term empty properties will likely remain empty, continue to be a blight in the community and remain a wasted resource. The Council will also continue to receive complaints.

3.0 Legislative Framework and Tools

3.1 Officer interventions are needed to address this and there are several options that can be deployed. The most effective option is to seek to persuade the owner of the need to return their property back into use and will be the option initially pursued by three staged escalation letters, with the first being more informal to the latter being a step closer to formal enforcement sanctions to be considered and deployed. Only when it has become clear that negotiation with the owner has been unsuccessful, and that they do not voluntarily intend to co-operate, will other legally enforceable sanctions be considered.

3.2 Enforcement Powers

Legal sanctions may not necessarily, of themselves, compel the owner to return their property back into use but may, as a consequence of the financial impact of compliance with a particular statute, result in the re-letting of a property in order to recoup their costs. Where the owner fails to comply with conditions imposed by any legal sanction, the cost of any remedial action taken by the Council in default of the owner is normally, but not always, recoverable from them. However, this is not always possible for various reasons, e.g., the owner of the property has changed, the recovery of the debt is now statute barred, or the owner cannot be found.

- Enforced Sales - Enforced sale is a provision that enables the Council to recover outstanding debts, following actions that have created a land charge against a property for the relevant debt. The Enforced Sales procedure may be followed even where the owner cannot be traced and even where the property has changed hands, as long as the relevant debt remains unpaid.
- Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) - This generally guarantees that the property is brought back into use and improved to the Decent Homes Standard. Extremely long-term periods are involved with this option, which, even if not subject to appeal can take between 12-24 months.
- Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) - The Council may apply to the First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) to impose an EDMO on a house that has been empty for more than 6 months, to take control, to secure occupation and ensure proper management of the unoccupied dwelling. The EDMO is made against the person with the most relevant interest in the property, known as the relevant proprietor and allows the Council to take over most of the rights and responsibilities of the relevant proprietor, i.e. the right to possession. The Council does not become the legal owner and, as such, cannot sell or mortgage the property, although an EDMO is a local land charge and the Local Authority may apply to have details entered on HM Land Registry.

3.3 All these options would achieve the desired objective, but each option has potentially negative implications in respect of finance and resources and would only be used as a last resort.

3.4 Council Tax Premiums

From April 2024, Councils can apply a 100% premium on homes empty for 1+ years.

From April 2025, Councils can apply a 100% premium on second homes.

North Northamptonshire Council currently applies:

- 100% premium for homes empty 1-5 years.
- 200% premium for 5-10 years
- 300% premium for 10+ years
- From April 2027, NNC intends to apply a 100% premium on second homes.

3.5 Empty Property Grants

While national funding is limited, local authorities may offer grants or loans to owners to renovate and reuse properties. A revised Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy in 2026 will introduce localised grants with conditions.

4.0 Operational Approach

4.1 Identification and Monitoring

We will aim / seek to use the following:

- Maintain an accurate database of long-term empty homes.
- Use council tax data, housing enforcement records, and service request reports to identify trends and hot spots.
- Prioritise properties based on length of time empty, property condition, and community impact.

4.2 Engagement and Support

We intend to do this by:

- Offer advice and support to empty homeowners to bring homes back into use.
- Promote any leasing schemes, empty property grants, and sale options.
- Explore partnering with housing associations and developers.

4.3 Enforcement and Legal Action

These would be considered and deployed on a case-by-case basis.

- Use statutory powers where engagement with the property owner fails.
- Develop procedures for enforcement decisions and processes.

1. Collaborate with probate specialists to resolve ownership issues.

5.0 Partnership and Collaboration

5.1 North Northamptonshire Council will contact and collaborate with the following organisations when necessary to assist with the implementation of this Strategy.

- **Homes England** - is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. They help form partnerships that bridge the gap between the public and private sector, in order to deliver new homes and regenerate places that meet local needs and aspirations.
- **Registered Providers** - social landlords that might be able to purchase empty units.
- **Voluntary and Community Sector** - to assist with local level problems.
- **Probate and legal experts** - to assist with those properties tied up in probate.
- Align with the Council's wider housing, homelessness, and regeneration strategies.

6.0 Monitoring and Review

6.1 North Northamptonshire Council will seek to review progress and performance biannually (twice yearly) against quarterly targets of total numbers of long-term empties and total numbers brought back into use, to determine a percentage reduction.

6.2 North Northamptonshire Council will consider and deploy enforcement actions when needed.

6.3 North Northamptonshire Council will review the revenue generated from council tax premiums.

7. Conclusion

7.1 This Strategy is a call to action. By using legislative tools, engaging owners, and working collaboratively, North Northamptonshire Council aims to unlock the potential of empty homes to meet housing needs, regenerate communities and improve quality of life.

7.2 Officers will always be mindful of limited resources and financial constraints that may have to be drawn upon in any proactive interventions when determining the best course of action to follow., Where interventions with potentially negative impacts upon the Council's limited resources appear inevitable, any such interventions will only be implemented with Executive approval.