

POSITION PAPER

# Tackling empty properties



This position paper examines the impact of empty residential and commercial properties on communities and the wider property sector. It provides a UK-wide perspective on current approaches, best practice, and Propertymark's recommendations for further reform.

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2026



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# What is an empty property?

An empty property is defined as a residential or commercial building that is unoccupied and not in active use for a sustained period.

This may include properties that are vacant due to personal circumstances, market conditions, legal or ownership issues, or broader economic and social changes. While some properties may be temporarily empty, long-term empty properties are those that remain unused for extended periods and can have a detrimental impact on local communities, housing supply, and economic activity.

## WHY DO PROPERTIES BECOME EMPTY?

Residential properties can become empty for a wide range of personal, economic, and structural reasons. Changes in personal circumstances, such as relationship breakdowns, inheritance, or an owner moving into residential care can result in homes being left unoccupied for long periods, particularly where ownership is not clearly established.

Failed or speculative investments can also lead to vacancies, especially where owners are unwilling or unable to sell or rent a property at a loss. In some cases, properties are difficult to dispose of due to poor condition, low demand, or market conditions, while unresolved ownership or difficulties in tracing owners can prevent action being taken to bring homes back into use.

At a wider level, empty properties can be influenced by local and regional factors. Second homes, for example, have significant seasonal impacts in tourism hot spot areas such as Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire and Anglesey in Wales, Devon, Cornwall and the Lake District in England and major cities across the United Kingdom where properties may remain unoccupied for much of the year.

In areas of low housing demand, clusters of empty dwellings can emerge, creating a negative cycle that discourages investment and reduces opportunities for people to move within the local housing market. This can contribute to higher levels of deprivation and inequality.

In town centres, declining footfall, long commercial leases and changing retail patterns can result in vacant commercial and residential properties, further undermining the vitality of an area.

# The negative impact of empty properties on communities

Combining data sources across the UK, there are over 359,000 long-term empty residential properties that have been vacant for in excess of six months. These figures do not include short-term vacancies, second homes, holiday lets, probate cases or properties under major renovation.

Empty properties, whether residential or commercial, present several significant challenges to both individual owners and the wider community. From economic inefficiency to social decline, the risks associated with long-term vacancy must be recognised and addressed through informed policy and proactive management.

More than

**359,000**

residential properties across the UK have remained empty for over six months

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## A WASTED ASSET

At a time of urgent housing need, each long-term vacant residential property could provide a safe and stable place to live for a vulnerable person or a family facing homelessness.

Leaving homes unused not only drains communities of life and resources but also overlooks a practical solution to easing the housing crisis. Bringing these properties back into use is a vital step toward tackling inequality and supporting those in need of secure accommodation.

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## SECURITY THREATS

Vacant properties are more likely to become magnets for vandalism, squatting, theft, and arson. In some cases, insurers may refuse to cover certain incidents if the property has remained unoccupied for an extended period.

## COST OF MAINTENANCE

One of the most pressing concerns, especially for landlords and their property agents, is the ongoing cost of maintenance and deterioration. Properties that remain unoccupied are often left without regular inspections or upkeep, which accelerates physical degradation.

Issues such as damp, mould, weather damage, and pest infestations can take hold more quickly in an empty building, often resulting in higher repair costs than if the property were actively used and maintained. Even when not in use, the property must still be insured, heated minimally, and protected from environmental damage.

## FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

An additional challenge for landlords and property agents is that vacant properties generate no rental income, yet owners must continue to cover fixed expenses such as mortgage repayments, insurance, council tax, and utilities. This results in a poor return on investment and ties up capital that could be used more effectively elsewhere.

Over time, prolonged vacancy can also diminish a property's market value, particularly if signs of neglect become visible or if the property is in an area with high vacancy rates. Also, there are often legal and regulatory challenges associated with maintaining or repurposing empty properties.

Local authorities may impose fines or higher council tax rates on long-term vacant buildings, and zoning laws can make redevelopment or change of use more difficult. Owners may find themselves caught between regulatory restrictions and a lack of viable tenants or buyers.

The wider impact on the community is that long term empty properties create an eyesore, which can deter investment, decrease neighbouring property values, and impact morale and mental health amongst people living near by.

# Current approaches to tackling empty properties

ENG

## LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION ACT 2023

This is a key piece of UK Government legislation designed to support urban regeneration, planning reform, and local empowerment. One of its specific goals is to help tackle empty properties, particularly in England.

The Act allows local authorities in England to apply a 100% council tax premium (i.e. double the tax) on homes left empty for more than one year. Prior to the Act, premiums could only be applied if a property had been empty for two years, giving owners an incentive to get empty properties back into use more quickly.

Examples of local authorities that have introduced the council tax premium include the City of York, Pendle Borough Council, and Barnsley Council.

The legislation also tackles the proliferation of second homes—additional properties that are not a primary residence. The Act gives local authorities power to apply a 100% premium regardless of how long the home has been empty, provided it is not being used full-time for rent or actively marketed for sale.

As of 2024, in England there are approximately 272,257 homes that have been empty for six months or more — around 1.06% of all dwellings or 1 in 94 homes.



## LOCAL AUTHORITY POWERS

Legislation from the Housing Act 2004 gives local authorities the power to apply for Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), which enable the authority to take over the management, but not ownership, of a property that's been empty for 6 months or more. Local authorities can then renovate the property, bring it back into use, and recover costs through a rental income. However, according to the House of Commons Library, between 2017 and 2020 only twenty decisions were made on EDMO applications from English local authorities.

In the most severe cases, particularly where there's no prospect of reoccupation and the property is blighting the area, a local authority can issue a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) so long as they are able to demonstrate public interest and gain permission from the Secretary of State.

In cases where the empty property is causing a less severe impact, local authorities can use planning and building control regulations. Provisions in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, allow local authorities to issue a Section 215 notice requiring landowners to clean up land or buildings if their condition is adversely affecting the amenity of the area. Section 215 notices apply to both land and buildings, and is often used for neglected empty homes, overgrown gardens, or derelict structures.



## HIGH STREET RENTAL AUCTIONS (HRSA)

When non-domestic stock remains vacant, it can have a devastating impact on high streets and town centres. HRSA's are a relatively new tool introduced by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 to help tackle long-term vacant commercial properties. This includes shops, offices, and other business premises often located in town centres or high streets.

If the scheme is operational in a local authority area, the authority can act if a commercial property has been vacant for one year or more. The process allows local authorities to take control of the property's leasing rights and hold a public auction to rent it out to new tenants with the overall aim of reducing vacancy rates. The successful new tenants then lease the property directly from the council, not the original owner. HRSA's are at the discretion of local authorities and do not require the consent of owners.

Take up of HRSA's has been limited, but the number of local authorities using them is increasing. Notable uptake includes Bassetlaw, the London Borough of Camden, Darlington and Rugby.

WAL

## COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

Since April 2023, local authorities in Wales can charge up to 300% council tax on long-term empty homes (unfurnished and vacant for 12+ months) and second homes. This is significantly higher than the premiums in England under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. However, of the twenty-two local authorities in Wales, only a small number are using the 300% premium and even then, reserve this for significantly long-term empty properties.

For example, Monmouthshire County Borough Council and the City and County of Cardiff will charge 100% premium for properties that have been empty for one year, 200% for two years and 300% for properties that have been empty for three years or more.

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WAL

## NATIONAL EMPTY HOMES GRANT SCHEME

In January 2023, the Welsh Government announced a £50 million fund to support the renovation of long-term empty homes which have been registered empty for one year or more.

Total grant funding available for applicants can be up to £25,000 to get the property back into use and fit for human habitation. However, under the terms of the grant, the applicant must live in the property making private rented sector properties ineligible.

WAL

## PARTNERSHIP WORKING AND LOCAL AUTHORITY POWERS

As is the case in England, local authorities in Wales have specific powers to tackle empty properties including EDMOs for unresponsive owners and CPOs, which can be useful where a property offers serious concerns. Some local authorities, such as Denbighshire County Borough Council, are working in partnership with Registered Social Landlords to convert empty properties into social homes.

In December 2025, the Welsh Government published a new Handbook on Empty Properties in Wales, aimed at providing practical guidance for local authorities, property owners, community organisations, and other stakeholders working to tackle long-term empty homes and commercial buildings.

The handbook highlights how empty properties can blight communities, attract anti-social behaviour, and represent a wasted resource in a time of high housing need. It sets out tools and best practice for identifying, managing, and bringing these properties back into beneficial use to support housing supply and local regeneration.

The handbook launch was accompanied by an extension of the Empty Homes Grant application window and a pilot to remove local authority contribution requirements, reflecting a broader commitment to revitalising empty properties across Wales.



Scotland has introduced the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership which we will highlight further in this position paper as an example of best practice.

Landlords, their property agents, and property owners require high-quality advice and guidance to bring properties back into use. Integral to this is the recruitment and retention of local authority empty homes officers.

In 2025, the Scottish Government introduced a dedicated £2 million loan fund to support local authorities and social landlords in acquiring and refurbishing empty homes for affordable housing. This includes hiring more Empty Homes Officers in local authorities.

Scottish Government legislation also allows local authorities in Scotland to charge up to 100% premium on properties that have been unoccupied for 12 months or more for both long-term empties and second homes. This move is designed to discourage vacancy and encourage reoccupation.



The majority of the relevant legislation in Northern Ireland focuses on the potential environmental and public health impacts of empty residential and commercial property.

While the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 has taken steps to modernise this legislation, much of it dates back to the nineteenth century. The Dilapidation Bill, at Committee Stage at the time of writing, has been introduced to ensure there is greater consistency in the way that local authorities enforce regulations to demolish or improve empty buildings.

There is currently no financial support specifically targeted at supporting owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Local authorities in Northern Ireland also do not have the power to offer premiums on council tax.

## INTERNATIONAL SCHEMES

Japan has set up Akiya Banks or Empty Home Banks, which are databases set up by local governments with lists of empty properties. Buyers can buy through a local authority or agent for a low value but will be required to renovate the property.

The €1 Homes Scheme is run by small Italian municipalities, where abandoned homes are sold for as little as €1 or even given away to encourage people to renovate them and live or invest in rural, depopulated areas. While often run by municipalities, some €1 home programmes partner with local real estate agents to handle legal and legislative requirements.

# The role of local authorities

Local authorities have an important role in dealing with empty homes. They can identify and monitor empty properties, contact owners, and offer advice or support to help bring homes back into use.

This may include providing grants or loans, helping owners rent or sell their property, or working with housing associations and community groups. If owners do not act, local authorities can also use legal powers to deal with long-term empty homes. By doing this, they can improve local areas and increase the number of homes available for people to live in.

However, for local authorities to be effective in this role, they need to take a strategic approach and ensure that resources are in place.

We received Freedom of Information data from 226 local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales which provides an overview of how councils are currently responding to the issue of empty homes and the level of resources in place to address it.

## Less than half of councils have an empty homes strategy in place

38%

of authorities that responded have an empty homes strategy in place. However, some local authorities noted that, where a strategy

does exist, there may be a need to refresh or update it to reflect recent policy developments. A small number of authorities also stated that they were considering developing a new empty homes strategy in 2026.

## Less than half of councils have at least one dedicated officer working on empty homes

41%

of authorities reported having at least one dedicated officer working on empty homes. In some cases, this role sits within wider housing teams,

meaning officers may balance empty homes work alongside other housing responsibilities.

## Only a quarter of councils have a dedicated budget for empty homes work

25%

of authorities stated that they had a dedicated budget for empty homes work. In some cases, these budgets covered salaries only, and where

officers were part of wider housing teams, their salaries were not always specifically allocated to empty homes activity.

# Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP)

The SEHP, launched in 2010, is funded by the Scottish Government and coordinated by Shelter Scotland to help bring privately-owned empty homes back into use. It supports the Scottish Government's commitment to repurposing vacant properties into affordable housing where possible.

**Core aims:**

- Support the Scottish Government to deliver the actions on empty homes set out in the strategy and to promote the role that empty homes play in delivering all parts of the Housing to 2040 Route Map.
- Encourage all Scottish local authorities to adopt a strategic approach to tackling empty homes through mapping, data, and local solutions.
- Encourage every Scottish council to appoint at least one Empty Homes Officer (EHO). This is important because in some cases landlords who inherit or purchase empty homes may lack the time or knowledge to bring them up to human habitation standards. EHOs can streamline the process, reduce stress and delay, and provide practical support.
- Provide training and best-practice support for EHOs. This ensures EHOs can share best practice and promote high standards across Scotland.
- Operating a countrywide Empty Homes Advice Service for property owners. This provides tailored advice via a dedicated telephone service, develops online advice, and uses social media to raise awareness of the help and support offered.

**43,538**

homes brought back into use by the scheme, which had been empty for six months or longer, including 31,596 which were empty for 12+ months.

**FIND OUT MORE**

**[emptyhomespartnership.scot](https://emptyhomespartnership.scot)**  
[info@emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk](mailto:info@emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk)  
0113 881 4810

# Empty Homes Doctor – Leeds City Council

The Empty Homes Doctor is a free, one-to-one advisory service funded by Leeds City Council and delivered by the social enterprise Social Business Brokers CIC. It provides tailored support to owners of empty properties, including private landlords, to help bring them back into use.

The Empty Homes Doctor works in collaboration with local third sector organisations to provide expert support and community led initiatives. Some of the specific support provided to landlords and property agents includes navigating legal and planning issues, finding reliable and trusted tradespeople, demystifying tax implications, and exploring other options such as renting and selling property.

The scheme works in collaboration with Latch (Leeds Action to Create Homes) which is a charitable organisation that buys and renovates empty, derelict properties to create high-quality, supported housing for people who are homeless or in housing need.

Since 2015, the scheme has brought over 3,000 homes back into use across Leeds reducing the vacant-home count from 8,508 to around 5,491. The service has piloted key solutions and tailored advice which has helped more than 500 private homeowners return their properties to use.

**3,017**

homes brought  
back into use across  
Leeds since 2015.

## FIND OUT MORE

[www.emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk](http://www.emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk)

[info@emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk](mailto:info@emptyhomesdoctor.org.uk)

0113 410 9383

# Propertymark's Recommendations

## GOVERNMENT:

Financial sanctions such as council tax premiums are a blunt instrument for tackling empty homes and generally make properties even less likely to be brought back into use. Instead, owners need financial support and practical advice.

Governments and local authorities should work collaboratively with the third sector to establish the underlying reasons that homes become empty. This could be an opportunity to engage local people, utilise data and intelligence, and identify local solutions.

Governments should ringfence funding for local authorities to recruit empty homes officers who provide advice and signpost support to property owners.

Governments across the UK should consider further business rate reform to incentivise bringing commercial properties back into use and making them more sustainable as businesses.

## ENGLAND:

The UK Government should introduce a targeted investment programme focused on areas with high concentrations of long-term empty homes, supporting regeneration and community revitalisation in these locations.

## NORTHERN IRELAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES:

The Northern Ireland Assembly should consider grant funding for tackling empty homes which could be administered by local authorities.

The devolved nations should consider the feasibility of the UK Government's High Street Rental Auctions or adopt a similar scheme for high streets and town centres.

The Welsh Government's National Empty Homes Grant Scheme should be extended to private landlords.

Continued...

## LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

Local authorities should only use EDMOs in extreme cases. However, the legislation should be amended to allow them to be used after a property has been empty for six months, rather than two years, and require the local authority to consult with a qualified property agent to speed up the process of returning stock to the market.

Local authorities should use current powers, including EDMOs and CPOs more effectively.

Local authorities across the UK should have a dedicated officer tackling empty properties in their area, a dedicated strategy on tackling empty properties, and ensure sufficient revenue and capital budgets are in place to tackle the problem.

Local authorities should keep a database of empty properties in their area to support investors and help get more people on the housing ladder.

Local authorities should ensure that planning functions are streamlined and efficient and that they can support planning applicants as quickly and efficiently as possible.

# About Propertymark



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We are member-led with a Board which is made up of practicing agents, and we work closely with our members to set professional standards through regulation, accredited and recognised qualifications, an industry-leading training programme, and mandatory Continuing Professional Development.

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Their qualifications are regulated by the national Qualification Regulators in England (Ofqual), Wales (Qualifications Wales) and, Northern Ireland (CCEA). In addition, their Scotland-specific Qualifications are credited and levelled within the SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework). This is helping to support adherence with the Scottish Letting Agent Register and Letting Agent Code of Practice.

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## CONTACT PROPERTYMARK

For further information and to arrange a meeting, please email [policy@propertymark.co.uk](mailto:policy@propertymark.co.uk)

Propertymark ensures the voices of UK property agents are heard. We work with our members to interpret key policy developments and lobby for changes that represent members' views. We also work with MPs and Parliamentarians across the devolved nations.



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