

Empty Homes Plan 2015 – 2018

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Aims and priorities

Woking Borough Council's Vision: Towards Tomorrow Today sets out three thematic areas that form a statement of intent for shaping the Borough's future. One of these themes; 'Place – An enterprising, vibrant and sustainable place' sets out how the Council will help create a high quality natural environment which has strong identity and is a place where people want to be.

To help contribute to a high-quality built environment, the Council aims to reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough. Empty homes have the potential to impact negatively on both the local neighbourhood but also on the wider housing market and by ensuring that the number of long-term empty homes are minimised the local economy will prosper and flourish.

This Empty Homes Plan forms part of the Council's over-arching Housing Strategy and replaces the previous Empty Homes Strategy which was published in 2007.

This plan sets out in greater detail our priorities and how we intend to accomplish them. It also details to local Councillors, local residents, and our stakeholders how we will work to prevent properties becoming 'long-term' empty and how we will bring back into use homes that have been previously left empty.

This plan also sets out 3 key priorities to support empty homes being brought back into use across the borough:

Priority 1: To minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions

Priority 2: To maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back into use through initiatives and incentives

Priority 3: To use innovative interventions to bring empty homes back

Why bring empty homes back into use?

Homes that lie empty and unoccupied are a wasted resource, and this is especially the case given the current high demand for all forms of housing across the Borough. Long-term empty homes often create eyesores in a local neighbourhood, and detract from it being a place where people want to live.

Empty homes can also place a burden on local neighbourhoods through:

- detracting from the visual amenity of the local area;
- encouraging anti-social behaviour, vandalism, and other criminal activity;
- attracting vermin where gardens become unkempt and overgrown, or are subject to fly-tipping;
- providing harbourage for pigeons where windows and/or the roof structure is insecure;
- creating concerns for immediate neighbours due to lack of general maintenance and disrepair, and;
- being targeted by squatters.

Empty homes can also be attributed to fuelling a 'spiral of decline' in a local area where a sense of neglect discourages inward investment and new households are dissuaded from moving into the neighbourhood, whether they are seeking to rent or own a home. This impacts negatively on the local economy.

Returning empty homes back into use can enhance local neighbourhoods through:

- Maintaining property values;
- Providing increased housing options for local residents, and;
- Improving the sense of pride in a local neighbourhood.

Why do homes become empty?

Homes become empty for a variety of reasons. While many routinely becoming empty as an inevitable consequence of being sold, and are soon re-occupied, other homes remain empty for a wide range of other reasons, including where:

- the owner is unable to organise building works that are required;
- the property is subject to probate;
- the property has been inherited and the beneficiary is struggling to move on;
- the owner has moved into residential care, or other supported housing;
- the property is subject to redevelopment proposals;
- the owner has moved away or abroad;
- the options for bringing the home back into use are not understood by the owner;
- the owner refuses to rent the property, and;
- the owner is waiting for an increase in its capital value.

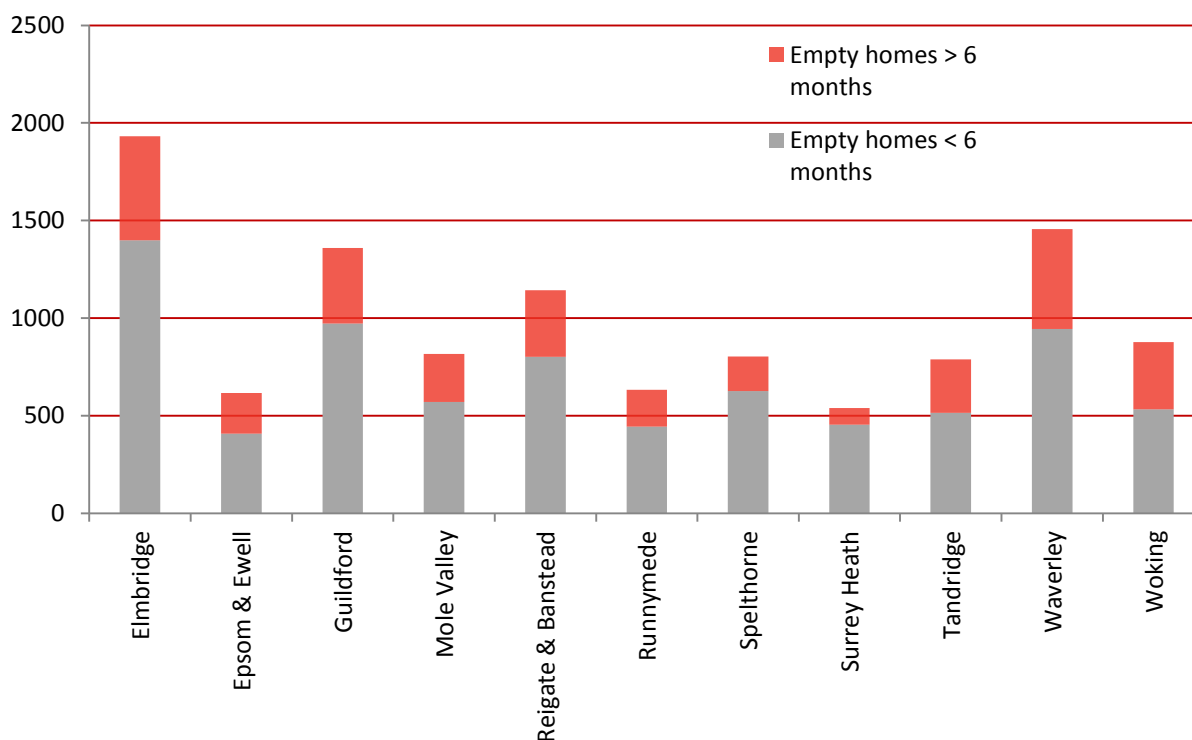
Due to the wide and varied factors that influence homes remaining empty, it is those homes that are empty for longer than 6 months that are considered 'long-term' empty homes that warrant additional support to bring back into use. In these cases the housing market will not, in itself, provide the catalyst necessary to return the property back into use.

The local position

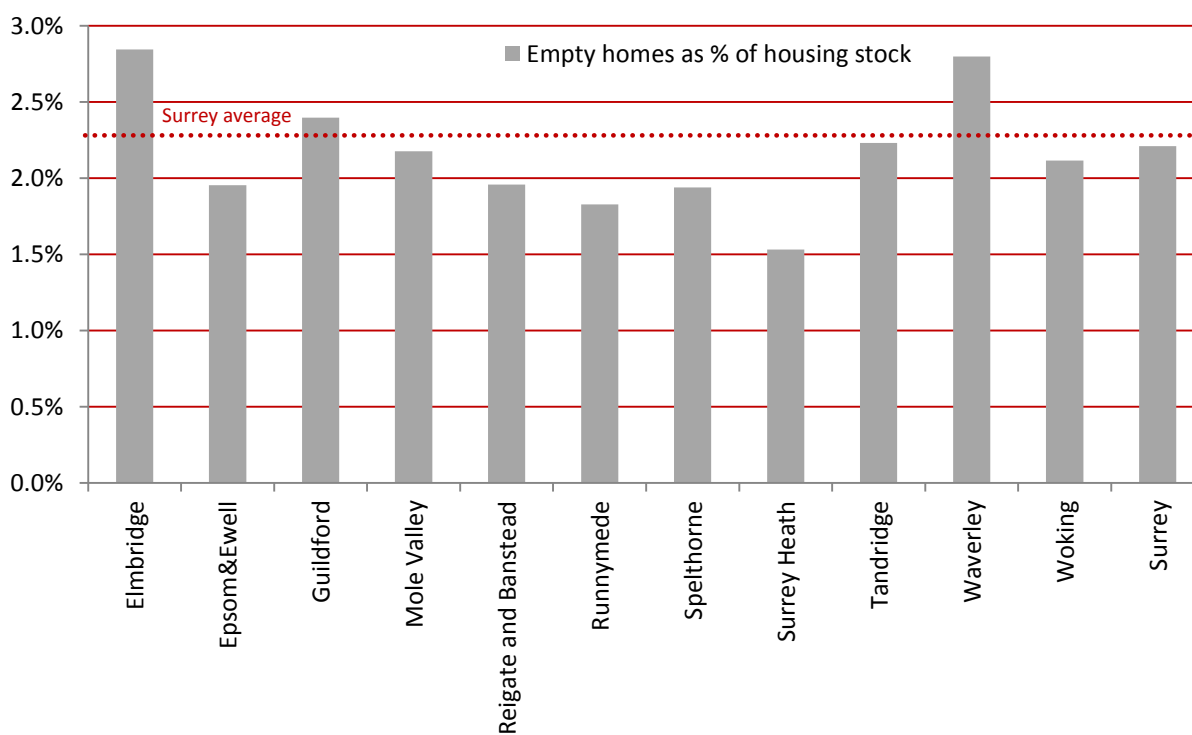
There are some 610,000 empty homes in England, of which around 216,000 have been empty for over 6 months (DCLG, October 2014) with almost 100,000 of the total number of empty homes being found in the South East region. Within Surrey, there are almost 11,000 empty homes, and nearly 3,300 of these have been empty for more than 6 months (see Table 1).

In Woking there are in the region of 880 empty homes in total which equates to 2.11% of the total housing stock within the Borough, of which around 850 are within private ownership (i.e. not owned by housing associations or public bodies). Although the number fluctuates, there are around 340 long-term empty homes that have been empty for over 6 months.

Since October 2006, the number of empty homes in Woking has reduced by 20% from 1,107 to 880 (DCLG) and while the number of long-term empty homes in Woking had also reduced by the same percentage during that period the number has recently returned to a similar level to that found in 2006.

Table 1: Distribution of empty homes within Surrey

Across Surrey as a whole it is estimated that 2.21% of the total housing stock lies empty (see Table 2) with Woking having proportionately fewer empty homes (2.11%) than the Surrey average.

Table 2: Empty homes as a percentage of the housing stock within Surrey

Priority 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions

The Council has a wide range of formal and informal interventions available to help to resolve the many varied problems associated with empty homes, and the careful assessment of the most appropriate course of action for each case is essential to ensure that homes are brought back into use effectively. In some cases returning the property back into use is not appropriate, and demolition may be the best course of action to facilitate the re-development of the site.

Action 1.1: Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment

Given the relatively low numbers of empty homes in Woking, and the distribution of those properties across the whole of the Borough, it is essential that in addition to utilising desk-top records, local residents are able to easily report empty homes in their neighbourhoods, so that action can be instigated to return them back into use. Residents are able to report empty homes online through the Council's website and this web form is currently found within the empty homes web pages. However this reporting form is currently not located within the Council's 'report it' website page, and has not been used by residents to the level anticipated.

Action 1.2: Provide a link to the empty homes reporting form on the Council's 'report it' website page

Providing advice and assistance to empty home owners

In the first instance, working informally with property owners is often the most effective method for bringing empty homes back into use. There are a wide variety of reasons why a home is empty, and dialogue with the owner or person responsible will identify the specific reasons that home is empty and then officers can consider the opportunities available to bring the home back into use.

Action 1.3: Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes

Advice is provided on the steps to becoming a private landlord, and we can provide guidance on any repairs or improvements required to meet the appropriate standards for private renting. Empty property owners are also advised how to join the Council's private sector leasing scheme. Properties in this scheme are managed by the Council, which rents the property at an affordable rent level while guaranteeing the rent level to the owner. This provides a stress-free rental option for inexperienced landlords, or where the owners live outside of the Woking area and this has been a barrier to renting the property previously.

Action 1.4: Review the promotion of the Council's private sector leasing scheme to empty property owners

Where empty properties have not fallen into disrepair and owners wish to retain responsibility for management, the Council offers assistance with accessing our rent deposit bond scheme where a bond from the Council enables tenants to rent accommodation without the need to provide a cash deposit as is normally the case in the private rented sector.

Action 1.5: Review the effectiveness of the bond scheme for empty property owners

Working with partners

The Council is also able to assist with advice regarding planning and building control matters to enable redevelopment or conversion of those homes that require significant works to bring them back into use, including redevelopment opportunities to deliver affordable housing schemes. The Council has established working arrangements with a wide range of partners, including housing associations, and where empty property owners wish to sell their properties the Council can also provide a fast-track purchase option through Thamesway Housing Ltd.

Currently around 5% of all empty homes are known (through Council Tax records) to have become empty as a result of their owners entering residential care. Very often these properties remain empty for long periods of time while the owner remains in residential care before eventually being sold to repay residential care fees. There is an opportunity to develop a lease scheme working in partnership with colleagues in the social care profession to provide a rental income for the owner to offset the potential residential care costs and reduce the impact on residential care costs on the eventual property sale.

Action 1.6: *Investigate the opportunities for providing a lease and rent scheme for homes left empty due to their owners entering residential care*

Priority 2 – Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives

In many cases, properties either become empty or remain empty as a result of the owner's inability to finance repairs or maintenance issues. This can range from relatively small funding gaps through to the need to finance major structural repairs. It is often the case that the failure to resolve a relatively minor problem at an early stage (for example a slipped roof tile) can result in its longer-term impact threatening the continued occupation, especially where the owner is not aware of the disrepair, or does not appreciate the importance of investing in repairs.

In some cases, properties remain empty due to the owner's failure to market the property for sale. This may be due to an unrealistic expectation of the current market value (especially where the property is in poor condition) or concerns regarding the fees and costs associated with selling the property. There are also perceived barriers to selling the property due to either a fundamental mistrust of the property selling process, or a lack of knowledge and skills to be in a position to market the property. In these circumstances the Council has an opportunity to promote the acquisition of empty homes through Thamesway Housing Ltd with a view to renovating and renting at affordable rents to those in housing need.

Action 2.1: Promote the acquisition of empty homes through Thamesway Housing Ltd

The Council currently offers financial assistance to owners to encourage empty homes being brought back into use, however the take up has been relatively poor. Despite this, it is undoubted that financial assistance to empty home owners if utilised has the real potential to facilitate homes being returned to use that would otherwise remain unoccupied, and as a result provide positive neighbourhood improvements as well as increasing the supply of accommodation within Woking.

Given the various financial circumstances associated with empty homes, it is important to consider the use of both grants and loans to maximise the opportunities for both returning homes back to use, whilst recycling capital funding where possible to support future homes being returned to use. Where financial assistance is offered to a property owner it will be conditional on the Council nominating a homeless household to occupy the property. This ensures that the Council's funding returns a home back into use, as well as providing a valuable home to a household in housing need which reduces the burden on the Council's Housing Service.

Action 2.2: Review the financial assistance available to empty home owners in the Council's Housing Assistance Policy

The Council has a long-established rent deposit bond scheme which provides landlords with a guaranteed financial 'bond' in lieu of a cash deposit, which allows households, who are unable to fund a tenancy deposit, the opportunity of renting accommodation in the private rented sector. This scheme is of particular interest to investor landlords who are seeking to bring empty homes back into use.

Action 2.3: Promote the rent deposit bond scheme to empty property owners

The Council has already introduced the Empty Homes Premium within the local Council Tax charging regime which adds a 50% increase on the level of Council Tax charged on properties that have remained empty for over two years. The Council has also reduced the length of time that an empty home can secure a Council Tax discount from six months to one month. These approaches both maximise the level of Council Tax income for those homes that are left empty and helps to encourage owners to return empty homes back into use.

Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use

In the first instance informal action is very often the most effective approach to bringing empty homes back into use. Where informal action is sought, the Council aims to provide transparency regarding the consequences to the property owner in the event that actions are not completed. However, in some cases, informal action is either ineffective or inappropriate, and the Council has wide ranging powers to instigate enforcement action to secure improvements to empty homes.

Enforcement action can range from serving notices requiring repairs to be carried out, (e.g. repairing a gutter that is leaking onto a neighbouring property) through to the Council considering the use of compulsory purchase powers (see Table 3, below). Action can be taken using both housing and planning powers as set out in the Council's Scheme of Delegation.

Action 3.1: Adopt a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy incorporating empty homes interventions

Instigating enforcement action

Where the Council takes enforcement action it will be proportionate to the individual circumstances of the case, and will contribute to the overall aim of either returning the property back into use, or reducing the negative impact that the property poses to the locality. Action will be instigated using a risk assessment methodology that will assess the impact of individual empty homes on neighbouring homes, and the wider neighbourhood.

Action 3.2: Implement a risk-based assessment for empty property interventions

Where an empty home causes a severe negative impact within the neighbourhood, and where informal action is not completed by the property owner, formal enforcement action will be prioritised. This will maximise the effectiveness of the Council's interventions, and reduce the negative impact that the empty home places on its neighbourhood. Enforcement action may not be appropriate where the negative impact of the empty home is not considered to be severe

Action 3.3: Fast-track the commencement of enforcement action following failed informal action

We will also aim to recover all reasonable costs incurred in taking the enforcement action, and this may result in a legal charge being placed on the property to recover costs and interest accrued since the action was taken. In cases where debts have accrued following enforcement action, the Council may seek to enforce the sale of the property to settle those debts.

Action 3.4: Review the Council's policy for implementing enforced sale in respect of empty homes

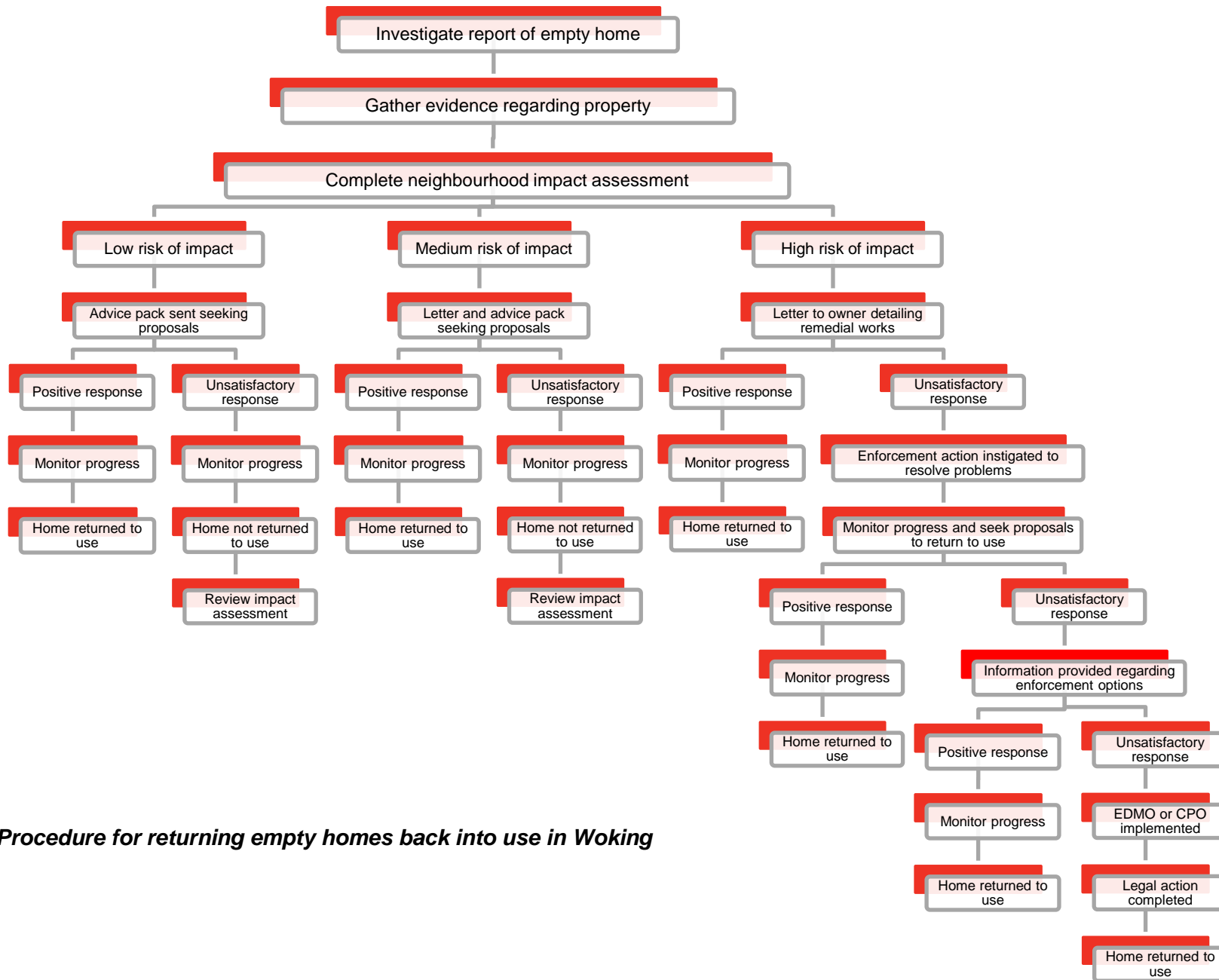


Table 3: Procedure for returning empty homes back into use in Woking

How will we return empty homes back into use?

To deliver the aims and priorities detailed within this plan, we will complete a range of actions during the life of this plan. These actions are detailed on the following pages as an action plan (see Table 4).

Table 4: Empty Homes Plan - action plan

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council’s interventions							
1.1	Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment	HSEO	Reduced number of long-term empty homes	100 homes returned to use or demolished during the life of this plan (April 2015 – Dec 2018)	Staffing resources	Available resources will be monitored and reviewed depending on the level of enforcement action necessary	31/03/18
1.2	Provide a link to the empty homes reporting form on the Council’s ‘report it’ website page	HSEO	Online reporting form readily available for residents to report empty homes	20 reports of empty homes received through the online form each year	The online form is not well used	The online form will be widely promoted	30/09/15
1.3	Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes	HSEO	Owners are better informed on the assistance available to return empty homes back into use	Web pages reviewed at least quarterly and updates implemented	Information is not kept up to date or accurate	The web pages will be reviewed and revised to reflect the latest position	Ongoing

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
1.4	Review the promotion of the Council's private sector leasing scheme to empty property owners	HSEO	Increase the number of homes returned to use through private sector leasing schemes	Additional 5 empty homes returned to use through private sector leasing each year	Disengagement of empty home owners	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/12/15
1.5	Review the effectiveness of the bond scheme for empty property owners	HSEO	Increase the number of homes returned to use through the bond scheme	Additional 5 empty homes returned to use through the bond scheme each year	Disengagement of empty home owners	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/16
1.6	Investigate the opportunities for providing a lease and rent scheme for homes left empty due to their owners entering residential care	HSEO	Increase the number of homes returned to use where the owners have entered residential care	Additional 2 empty homes returned to use through private sector leasing each year	Disengagement of empty home owners and/or families		31/03/17

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 2 – Maximise opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives							
2.1	Promote the acquisition of empty homes through Thamesway Housing Ltd	HSEO	Long term empty homes acquired for affordable rent or re-sale	10 long term empty homes acquired by 31/03/18	Disengagement of empty home owners to acquisition	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/18
2.2	Review the financial assistance available to empty home owners in the Council's Housing Assistance Policy	HSM	Capital funding available for empty homes' initiatives	Additional 2 empty homes returned to use through accessing housing assistance each year	Limitations on capital funding	Housing Assistance Policy will be reviewed periodically	30/12/15
2.3	Promote the rent deposit bond scheme to empty property owners	HSEO	Increase the number of homes returned to use through the bond scheme	Additional 5 empty homes returned to use through the bond scheme each year	Disengagement of empty home owners	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/18

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 3 – Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use							
3.1	Adopt a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy to include empty homes interventions	HSM	Enforcement outcomes and cost recovery maximised	Enforcement Policy adopted and implemented	Enforcement Policy not adopted	Consultation process to influence successful outcome	31/12/15
		HSEO	Debts registered as a charge on the property	N/A	Failure to recover debts	Quarterly monitoring of charges and debt recovery	Ongoing
		HSEO	CPO cases delivered through partnership agreement with Legal Services	Identify key empty homes for potential CPO action	Staffing resources	Available resources will be monitored and reviewed depending on the level of preparatory action necessary	31/12/15
				Legal Services partnership agreement in place	Failure to recover legal costs	Legal costs identified in advance and along with recovery mechanism	31/03/16
					Reputational risk	Performance of the partnership agreement monitored and reviewed annually	Ongoing

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
3.2	Implement a risk based assessment for empty property enforcement interventions	HSEO	Enforcement action is proportionate to each situation	Risk assessment methodology and procedures implemented	Enforcement action instigated contrary to the matrix	Enforcement actions reviewed prior to instigation Enforcement notices subject to review prior to service	31/03/16
3.3	Fast-track the commencement of enforcement action following failed informal action	HSEO	Enforcement action instigated where long-term empty home owners do not respond to informal action	5 successful enforcement interventions each year in respect of long-term empty homes	Staffing resources	Regular performance monitoring to identify where resources need to be redirected	Ongoing
3.4	Review the Council's policy for implementing enforced sale in respect of empty homes	HSEO	Enforced sale procedure robust and fit for purpose	Staff trained in enforced sale procedure	Staffing resources	Regular performance monitoring to identify where resources need to be redirected	30/09/15

Table 4 key: HSM – Housing Standards Manager

HSEO – Housing Strategy and Enabling Officer