

**2017-  
2022**

# Wyre Forest District Council Empty Properties Strategy



**Wyre Forest**  
District Council



2017-2022

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## Introduction

Wyre Forest District is situated within North West Worcestershire. The District is made up of three towns, Kidderminster, Bewdley and Stourport-on-Severn together with a rural hinterland which includes a number of small villages. The residential population is estimated to be in the region of 97,975 (Census 2011) with around 45,008 domestic dwellings.

Currently we have 3190 people on Wyre Forest District Councils housing waiting list and this figure is increasing year on year, the District Council therefore looks at working to ensure empty homes are brought back into use as a matter of priority to help improve housing options within the district. As at January 2017 Wyre Forest District Council has 778 empty properties of which 365 have stood empty for over 6 months some many years. The Council believes at a time of such housing need this is a wasted resource and therefore it is seen as a priority to bring empty homes back into use.

This strategy aims to identify the causes of empty properties, why they remain empty and a clear action plan showing how we intend to do to reduce the number of wasted homes. The overarching aim of this strategy is to help alleviate the housing need within the district, to offer wider housing choice to residents and to reduce the blight that can result where properties are left empty and neglected.

## Why do properties remain empty?

There are many reasons why domestic properties remain empty in Wyre Forest. A property will usually be empty during a change of ownership; there is nothing wrong with this and it is usually an indicator of a healthy housing market. However it may be an indicator of underlying problems when a property is not occupied within a reasonable timescale. The formal measure is a property that has remained unoccupied for longer than 6 months. From the research already carried out amongst the owners of long term empty properties the main reasons stated for leaving a property empty are:

- Owners lacking information about the options available to them
- Owners moving into residential care
- Delays in the administration of the estate where the owner has died
- Perceived problems with renting the property out
- Owners waiting for further price increases in the market before selling
- The costs associated with renovation of older and long term empty properties
- Properties that are awaiting demolition and/or redevelopment

- Emotional attachment or being overwhelmed when considering how to deal with the property

## Why work to bring Empty Properties back into use?

From a housing policy perspective, the overriding reasons in bringing long term empty properties back into use is to increase the numbers of homes available for those in need and minimise the under use of existing housing. At a time of growing housing need this can assist in widening the choice of housing available and may lessen the risk of homelessness.

There are also sustainable neighbourhood reasons as well and these include:

1. **To discourage crime and vandalism**-empty properties are known to attract anti-social behaviour and are a magnet for vandalism and arson.
2. **To discourage fly tipping and other environmental crime on the land of an empty property**- empty properties are often surrounded by rubbish and can pose a risk to public health.
3. **To discourage price devaluation of neighbouring properties**- neighbouring property prices can be affected by as much as 30% (Empty Homes Agency).
4. **Reduce expense to the owner**- It's less expensive to have a property in use than to leave it empty. It is estimated that the average annual costs of keeping a three bedroom house empty can be around £7000 per year in Wyre Forest based upon typical council tax, lost income, standing charges and maintenance costs.

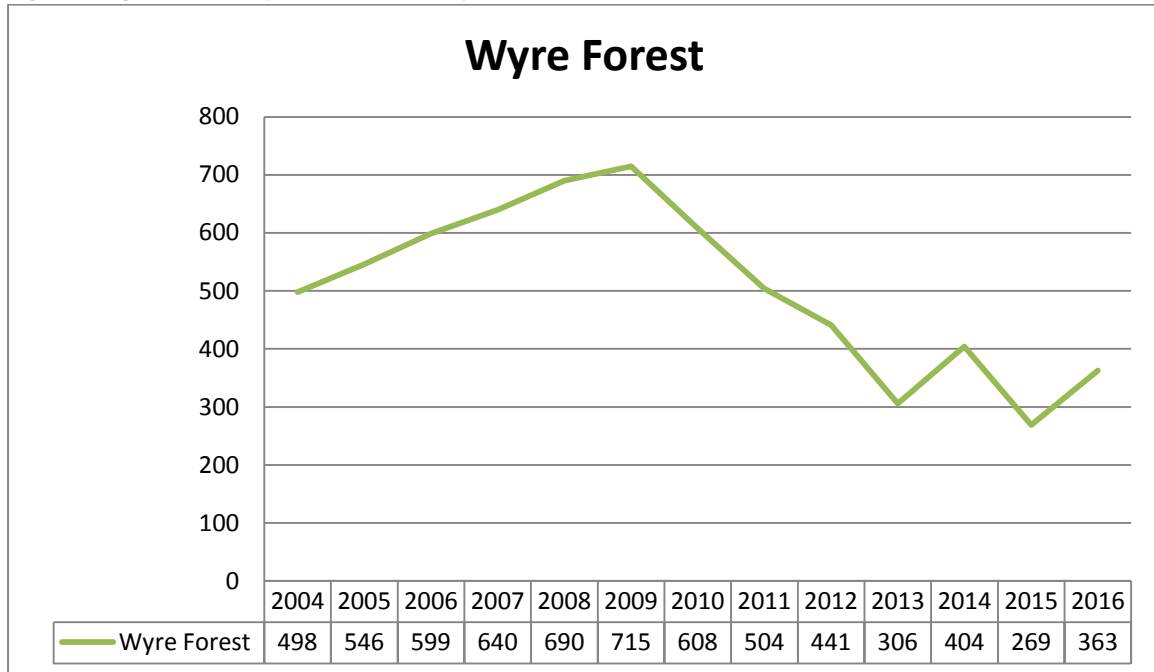
### New Homes Bonus

Launched in April 2011, the New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to the Council for increasing the level of housing. The amount of money is based on the number of new build homes, conversions and long term empty homes brought back into use. The scheme is intended to act as an incentive for local authorities to encourage housing development and to have an effective empty homes strategy. Rewards will only be paid for a net increase in housing, meaning that local authorities could miss out on funding if the numbers of occupied properties do not increase. It is therefore clear that at a time when local government resources are diminishing, the potential financial benefits Wyre Forest can accrue from the New Homes Bonus are significant and could affect the ability of the Council to deliver services.

## Empty Properties in Wyre Forest

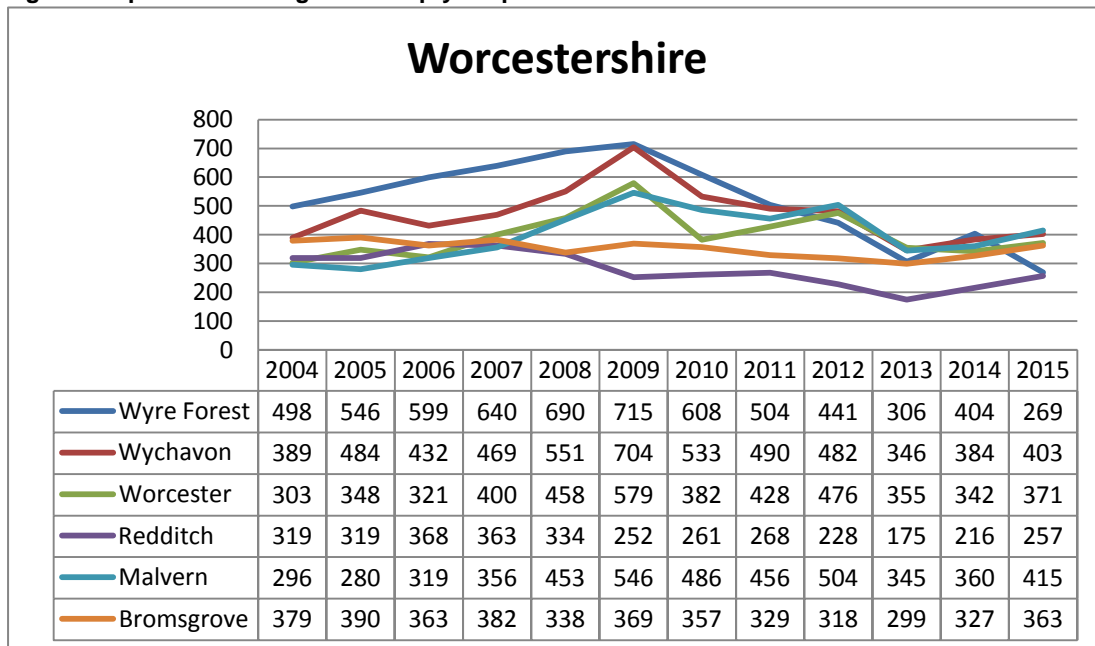
Wyre Forest currently has around 365 long-term empty properties on the Council Tax database. The numbers have decreased steadily over the past few years with a slight increase during 2016. This strategy has been designed therefore to stop the increase happening and reduce the amount of empty homes in the future years.

**Fig 1: Long Term Empty Properties in Wyre Forest as at October 2016**



Information provided from gov.uk

**Fig 2: Comparison of Long Term Empty Properties in Worcestershire as of 2015**



Information provided from gov.uk

Empty properties are an issue that affects all areas of Worcestershire and as at October 2015 Worcestershire had a total of 2078 long term empty properties. Fig 2 shows that as of October 2015 we had the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest amount of empty properties in Worcestershire. We have also showed the largest decline over the past 11 years.

## Achievements to date

This strategy replaces the 2011-2014 Empty Property Strategy. During the period of the 2011-2014 Empty Property Strategy 100 properties were returned to use through the direct intervention of Wyre Forest District Council. From Fig 1 it can be seen that there was a significant decrease in the amount of long term empty properties up until 2016 which saw a increase compared to 2015, this is partly due to new housing coming onto the market which is yet to be occupied and conditions in the market making a slow turn around in properties along with people holding out for a better price.

The table below lists the objectives set out in our previous strategy and includes comments to indicate what we have achieved to date.

Actions	Outcome
To raise awareness of empty properties across the district and to promote the advice and assistance available.	We have updated our website to include an empty properties online form which enables users to report empty properties directly. An updated empty properties leaflet has been developed which is sent out alongside the letters and questionnaires to owners of empty properties this gives an explanation as to why we are interested in reducing the number of empty homes and to offer advice and further guidance.
To reduce the number of homes becoming empty for more than six months by improving the process of identifying the appropriate action needed to address them.	By using our information technology systems we have improved and streamlined our process of identifying what action is needed and logging action taken to create a data trail against each individual property.
To establish and maintain an accurate database of empty properties in the district and gather other relevant up to date information to help establish trends and priorities for action.	A database has been set up and used to track progress on Empty Properties over 6 months this information is shared with the Council Tax department to avoid duplication of work.
To work closely with partners to gain the necessary co-operation and commitment to tackle the issues associated with empty properties and to identify solutions	We have an annual review process with Council Tax to coordinate activities of different parts of the Council on empty properties. We attend regular update meetings with the West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group to discuss what the other councils in the area are doing. We have worked with all the councils in the county to tackle empty homes through actions in the Worcestershire Housing Strategy 2011 – 2016.



## Key Aims and Objectives

Wyre Forests' aim is to bring its empty residential properties back into use. This may help to alleviate growing housing need and offer more choice in the market, it will also help us to maintain our neighbourhoods and prevent the blight that is a factor of empty homes.

To achieve this aim, it is important to set some clear objectives. These objectives are:

1. To raise awareness of private sector empty properties across the district and gain co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issues from both within the Council and externally from all involved partners.
2. To bring empty properties back into use and to increase housing supply.
3. To promote the range of advice and assistance available to owners of empty private sector properties.
4. To minimise the number of properties becoming empty long-term through the use of early intervention initiatives.
5. To obtain clear and accurate information relating to empty private sector homes and monitor trends in order to establish priorities for interventions.
6. To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation of cases to enable the most appropriate course of action to be taken by the Council.

To reduce the number of empty residential dwellings across the district we will:

1. Monitor the number of empty properties monthly, paying particular attention to new additions so that we can target our resources accordingly.
2. Ensure that we contact all owners of empty property to advise them of options and initiatives aimed at bringing the properties back into use.
3. Pro-actively use the full range of tools available to the Council which are aimed at bringing long-term empty properties back into use, including Compulsory Purchase Orders, Enforced Sale Procedures and Empty Dwelling Management Orders.
4. Target all properties which are having an adverse effect on the sustainability of neighbourhoods.
5. Further develop existing initiatives and options available to owners of empty properties to make it easier for them to bring their properties back into use, such as the Rent Bond Scheme.

## **Delivering our objectives and the resources available**

### **Prioritisation of dealing with empty properties**

The Council will prioritise the work it undertakes on empty homes based on consideration of the following factors:

1. Health and safety risk to the public
2. Impact on the environment
3. Impact on neighbouring property owners and area
4. Opportunity to bring properties back into use that would meet local housing need
5. Clear evidence
6. Length of time left empty without action by the owner
7. The likelihood of the owner undertaking works without Council action

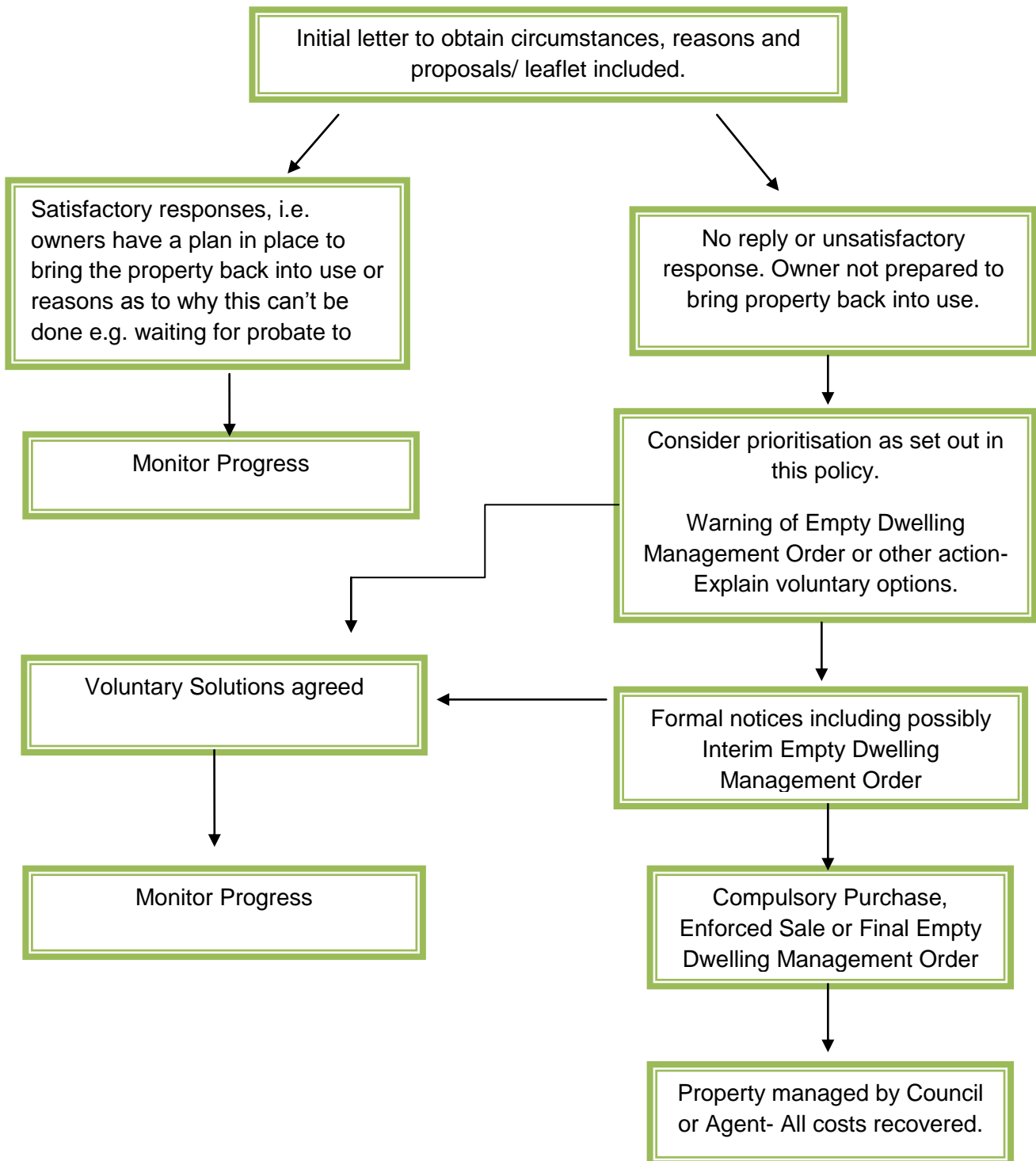
When targeting a particular property we have developed an Empty Homes Scoring System (appendix one) this takes the above factors into account and assess each individual property on its own merit it also helps us decide if the proposed outcome outweighs the resources that we will need to put into it.

The majority of empty properties are not problematic and remain empty without being a cause of major concern to the general public. However, in terms of the need for housing in the district it is also unacceptable for new build and existing properties to remain empty over an extended period. It is the Council's view that valuable housing resources should be used for housing wherever practical and the Council is prepared to take action to bring these properties back into use when owners are unwilling to achieve a voluntary solution.

The Council considers that in the majority of cases, bringing empty properties back into use will provide much needed specific types of property and bridge a gap between supply and demand generally thereby enabling others right to a home.

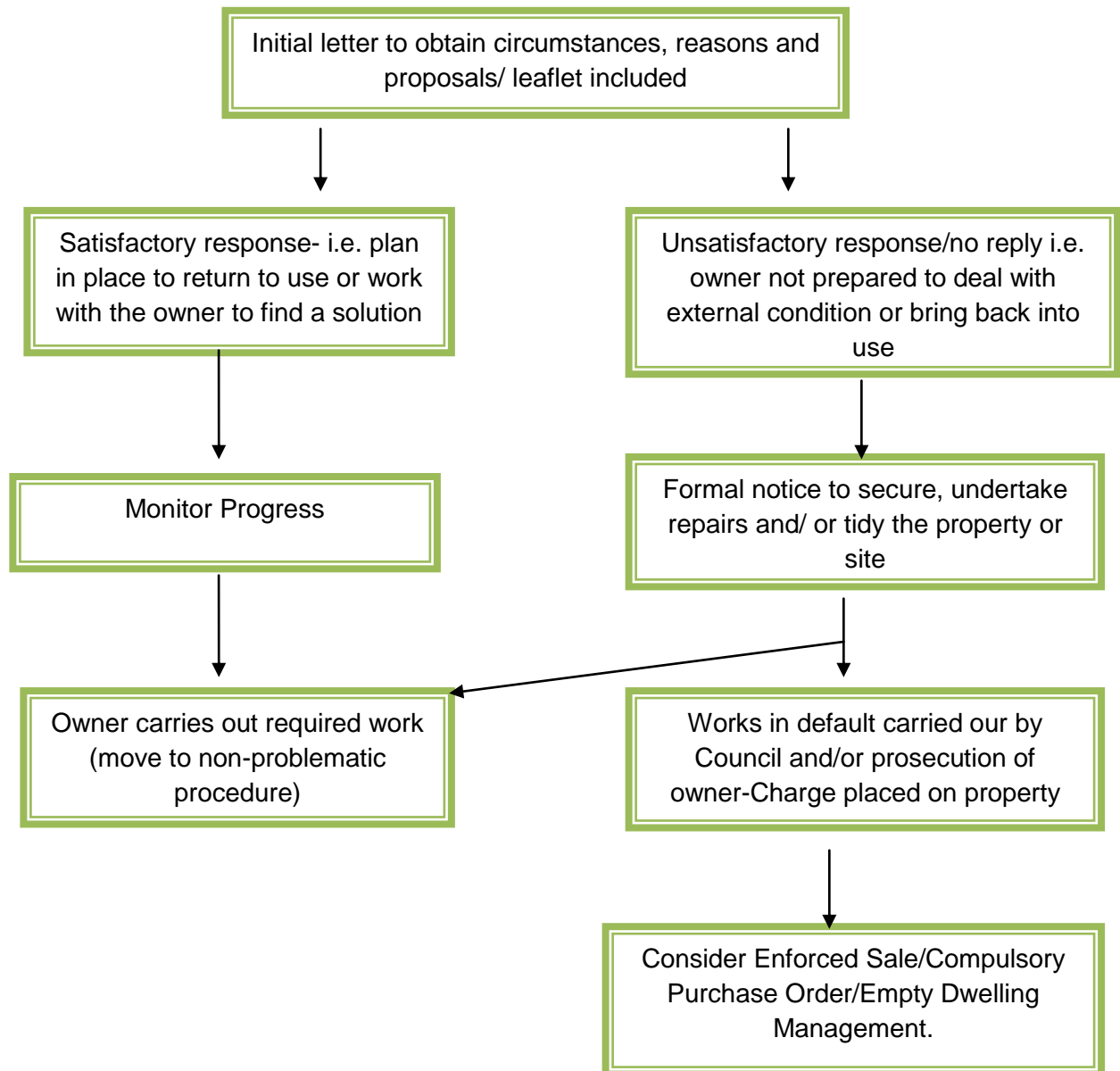


The proposed procedure for dealing with non-problematic properties is set out as follows:



Wyre Forest District Council recognise the detrimental impact empty properties can have on communities, both in terms of blight and the waste housing resource at a time of growing need.

**The proposed procedure for dealing with problematic properties is set out as follows:**



## **Enforcement Options**

The Council will use the full range of powers available to tackle empty residential dwellings including enforcement measures where negotiation fails, including the use of Improvement Notices, Compulsory Purchase Orders, Enforced Sale Procedures and Empty Dwelling Management Orders,. Each empty property will be considered on its own merits and the Council will take what it considers to be best course of action to achieve the most positive outcome for the neighbourhood. Enforcement action is covered by the Housing Enforcement Policy.

Details of the enforcement powers that we will use are as follows:

### **Housing Act 2004 Improvement Notices**

Improvement notices under this act require the property owner(s) to bring the property up to a habitable standard within a given period of time. These will be used for properties where owners are not making reasonable progress themselves to bring the property up to habitable standard. This action would normally be a pre-cursor to use of EDMO and ESP powers.

### **Enforced Sale Procedure (ESP)**

The Enforced Sale Procedure uses powers under Section 103 of the Law of Property Act 1925 and offers an option to recoup debts above £1000.00 and bring empty properties back into use through forcing a change in ownership. This is less complicated than Compulsory Purchase and can be used in conjunction with carrying out Works in Default where notices have been served on owners requiring works to be done to resolve any visual detriment being caused by the empty property. If these notices are not complied with, the Council has the right to carry out the works and seek to recover the debt. A charge is placed against the property and the Council then forces the sale of the property to recover the outstanding debt for the works unless the property owner has paid that debt.

### **Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)**

The Housing Act 1985, Section 17 allows the Local Authority to acquire underused or ineffectively used property for residential purposes if there is a general housing need in the area. In addition Section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1980 (as amended by Section 99 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) allows Local Authorities to acquire land or buildings if acquisition will allow improvements or redevelopment to take place. CPO is intended to prompt the owner to enter into constructive dialogue with the Local Authority and to avoid the need to resort to such measures.

### **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)**

Empty Dwelling Management Orders were introduced in July 2006 under the provisions of the Housing Act 2004. The intention of an EDMO is to bridge the gap between voluntary measures and existing enforcement procedures. It will provide an effective back up to such arrangements where owners have turn down offers of assistance and do not have plans of their own to bring the property back into use. The threat of an EDMO is intended to put pressure on the owner to enter into constructive dialogue with the Local Authority with the

object of agreeing the best course of action to secure occupation, thereby avoiding the need for an order to be made.

**Use of other Enforcement powers:** - The use of other powers will be considered where appropriate and best course of action taken to resolve empty property issues; the aim being the achievement of the Council's wider strategic objectives around sustainable communities' local environmental improvements and regeneration of Wyre Forest. Examples include Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 which will be considered where the condition of an empty property is considered to be adversely affecting the amenity of an area, or the use of Section 79 of the Building Act 1984 which addresses defective premises and ruinous and dilapidated buildings. Other powers available include the requirement to secure a property against intruders using the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 Section 29 and the power to require works to clear rubbish and treat for vermin using the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 section 4.

### **Prosecution**

Where a person fails to comply with a notice requiring works and/or fails to provide information required in response to a requisition for information, the Council will give serious consideration to prosecution for these offences, following the Housing Enforcement Policy.

## Wyre Forests' Empty Property Action Plan

### Strategic Aim 1: To maintain accurate information about the numbers of long term empty homes

Ref	Objectives	Why	Target/Date	Resources	Accountable Officer
1	Maintain, and where possible improve the accuracy of data held by the council regarding the number of empty homes	To ensure that the action is targeted at those homes which are causing the most detrimental impact on their neighbourhood and which will positively impact on the new homes bonus	To reduce the number of long term empty properties to a minimum.	Housing Services Officer/ Council Tax Officers	Housing Services Officer

**Actions towards this objective include:**

An annual audit of empty homes
Develop good working relationships with owners of empty homes- to encourage them to be brought back into use
Effective partnership working with colleagues in resources column.

Ref	Objectives	Why	Target/Date	Resources	Accountable Officer
2	To encourage owners of empty properties to advise the council when the property is occupied	To ensure that action is targeted at those homes that are still currently empty to maximise use of resources	Ongoing	Housing Services Officer/ Council Tax Officers	Housing Services Officer

**Actions towards this objective include:**

Distribution of the empty homes leaflet with council tax bills with an empty classification on the property.
To carry out annual audits of all empty homes
To develop the Councils website enabling residents to advise the Housing Team when an empty property becomes occupied.

## Strategic Aim 2: To encourage owners of privately owned empty homes to bring them back into residential use

Ref	Objective	Why	Target/Date	Resources	Accountable Officer
1	To encourage owners to bring empty homes back into use through a range of information and advice	Empty homes are a waste of resources and by targeting empty homes the council may improve it's income stream	To bring back into use 20 homes per year.	Housing Services Officer/Private Sector Housing Team	Housing Services Officer

### Actions towards this objective will include:

Provide access to free advice and information for owners
To provide the Empty Homes leaflet with letters sent out
Work with landlords and letting agents

Ref	Objective	Why	Target/Date	Resources	Accountable Officer
2	Where owners are looking at bringing properties back into use through renting then encourage the owners to rent them through our rent bond scheme.	To increase the number of affordable empty homes in the district	To bring back into use 5 homes per year via the rent bond scheme	Housing Services Officer/ Private Sector Liaison Officer	Housing Services Officer

### Actions towards this objective will include:

To work closely with the Private Sector Liaison Officer
To work with the Community Led Housing Coordinator to develop community schemes within empty homes

Ref	Objective	Why	Target/Date	Resources	Accountable Officer
3	Develop specific enforcement measures for bringing properties into use where owners are unwilling to do so	To reduce the amount of detrimental properties in the district and increase the new homes bonus	To ensure that adequate procedures are in place to carry enforcement action if required	Housing Services Officer/ Private Sector Housing Team and Legal	Principal Environmental Health Officer (Housing & Water Management)

### Actions towards this objective will include:

To work closely with the Council Legal team to develop a procedure to ensure a streamline process between the departments and the property owner.
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### Strategic Aim 3: To minimise the number of empty properties becoming long-term through early interventions

1	Mail outs to all empty property owners (over 6 months)	To capture the empty home owners before the properties become long term empty and risk becoming a detrimental impact on the area	Ongoing/ To reduce the amount of long term empty properties	Housing Services Officer	Housing Services Officer

**Actions towards this objective will include:**

To work closely with the Council Tax Department to ensure that monthly lists are raised and sent over to the Housing Strategy Officer to action.
Act upon the information received from property owners and provide advice and assistance if required.

2	Follow up mail outs to owners of all empty properties over 6 months who have previously advised that they are renovating their properties etc.	To monitor and check on progress of properties which are classed as long term empty to encourage owners to put them back into occupation	To reduce the amount of empty homes and increase the new homes bonus.	Housing Services Officer	Housing Services Officer

**Actions towards this objective will include:**

Maintain the IT systems and send out regular correspondence to ensure information is current and accurate
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### Strategic Aim 4: To minimise the amount of properties in high priority need areas becoming long term empty

1	Map Long Term empty properties onto GGP mapping system to look at hotspot areas.	To enable us to direct our resources effectively to the targeted areas.	To bring back homes in the priority affordable areas back into use	Housing Services Officer	Housing Services Officer

**Actions towards this objective will include:**

Work closely with the Data Protection Management Officer to create an empty homes overlay on the GGP system within the Council.
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## **Empty Homes Scoring System.**

<b>Property Description</b>	<b>Points</b>
Time Vacant	
Over 6 Months to 2 Years	10
2 Years Plus	20
Condition (tick all that apply)	
Garden Overgrown	10
Falling into disrepair	15
Becoming an eyesore to the neighbourhood	15
Causing Damage to adjoining property	15
Attracting vandalism/anti social behaviour	15
Other (tick all that apply)	
No attempts to sell/re-let or refurbish after 2 years	5
Council receiving complaints about the property	10
Previous action/charges by the Council	15
Property in a priority area for affordable rent	20

### **Low scoring properties- up to 35 points**

These are likely to be properties that are taking longer than expected to be reoccupied due to inheritance issues or delays in renovation. They are generally in reasonable condition, secure and unlikely to be causing a nuisance. The Council will make initial approach to the owner and maintain regular monitoring

### **Medium scoring properties- 40-55 points**

These properties may have been empty longer or beginning to show signs of neglect and causing neighbours concern. The Council will contact the owner and enter negotiations to halt further deterioration and work towards reoccupation. If the owner does not cooperate enforcement action may be considered following inspection.

### **High scoring properties- 60 points or over**

These properties will have been empty for several years, causing nuisance, detrimental to the area or giving serious cause for concern. They are at greater risk of attracting vandalism, arson, fly tipping and may have been subject to previous enforcement action. They are likely to also be in an area of priority need. The Council will contact the owner and the property will be inspected using Powers of Entry if necessary. Further enforcement action will be considered.