

Empty homes

Officer toolkit

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Against a backdrop of significant pressure to meet increasing housing demand, councils are increasingly exploring other opportunities to meet shortfalls in supply. Bringing empty homes back into use can play a key part of local strategies to meet housing need.

This toolkit provides officers with a variety of tools which can support councils to progress to a proactive service. This includes:

- a descriptive guide to the different stages of empty homes activity
- empty homes premiums
- the implementation of an empty homes database
- data cleansing flow chart
- case prioritisation using the database
- case progression flow chart
- a bank of information sources for use in investigation procedures
- draft letters.

How does your council deal with empty homes?

Use this table to identify what stage your council's service is at. This can help to understand how to improve and progress your service.

Stage	Description
Proactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • council have a dedicated officer or team • regularly and proactively engage with empty home owners • carry out regular, cyclical data cleansing • stand-alone empty homes strategy in place • high levels of corporate support • enforcement work is encouraged, often led by a dedicated officer whose focus is to build casework through to formal action • statistics actively monitored using a stand-alone database • policies and procedures in place to provide a definitive cycle of case progression.
Reactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • council has a dedicated resource • actively investigate complaints regarding empty homes • corporate support to carry out empty homes work • enforcement action taken on a regular basis • statistics are monitored • council has an empty homes strategy outlining plans to tackle the issue • some engagement, contacting owners of properties not subject to complaints • minimal data cleansing.
Active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty homes work carried out as part of an officer's role • complaints are investigated with specific issues dealt with • work to encourage empty homeowners beyond enforcement notices is limited • enforcement work is limited or complaint-led • no wider engagement carried out with owners to ascertain status or plans of a property • statistics may be considered • empty homes likely not deemed significant enough to warrant allocating of dedicated resource.

Stage	Description
Inactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty homes may not be seen as an ongoing issue • limited resources are allocated to dealing with complaints • empty homes statistics are not tracked, monitored, or reported on • very limited corporate support to carry out empty homes work • no enforcement work carried out in respect of empty homes • no empty homes strategy in place, nor included in a wider housing strategy.

Empty homes premium

Introduced in 2013, the empty homes premium allows councils the discretion to charge between 50 per cent to 300 per cent of the council tax liability, for properties recorded as empty for a period of over two years or more. Implemented on a sliding scale, the premium can be implemented as soon as a property has been registered as empty for over two years, and often initiates a 100 per cent levy. This increases at 5 years to 200 per cent, and at 10 years at 300 per cent, but these levels and percentage charges are at the discretion and approval of the billing authority.

Council tax data is often used as a basis for creating an empty homes database and to identify empty homes cases.

Empty homes database

An empty homes database should record all empty homes in your local authority. These are often held separately from council's content management system and can be made using an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet forms a working document from which cases can be monitored, categorised, or recorded as brought back into use with or without intervention.

Each row should be a separate property. A separate column should be used for each different piece of information, for example:

- property address
- owner contact name
- the date when the property became empty
- how best to contact the owner
- officer assigned to the property
- scoring for prioritisation (see the below sub-section)
- the circumstances for the property being empty
- a log of progress with the case
- the next action to be taken.

Using tabs can help to structure the data base. These tabs can be centred around different categories of empty homes:

- priority cases
- probate cases (those with probate granted and their subsequent council tax exemption elapsed)
- properties owned by housing associations and or companies
- private Individuals.

What is deemed to be a priority case will differ between councils, but will usually be comprised of cases where complaints are registered, are the longest-term empties, are the properties in the worst condition, or are those with active casefiles open. The scoring tool below can be used to determine this. The structure of the database allows for properties across all categories to be moved into the priority tab at any time. A council's efforts will typically be focused on these cases.

Properties in the priority case tab can be mirrored in the council's CMS system where case files, documents and interactions can be recorded on an ongoing basis. Limit this to priority cases, as opening such files on a CMS system would be a large task, and the natural return to use of some empty homes would often mean a case file is closed with no input being required.

Additional tabs can be added to record and monitor empty homes in the wider definition, such as:

- less than six-month empty homes
- second homes
- unoccupied exemptions.
- homes brought into use with intervention
- homes brought into use without intervention.

Whilst these tabs are not expected to warrant the same engagement and investigation levels as the others, their inclusion can allow for all empty homes statistics to be monitored.

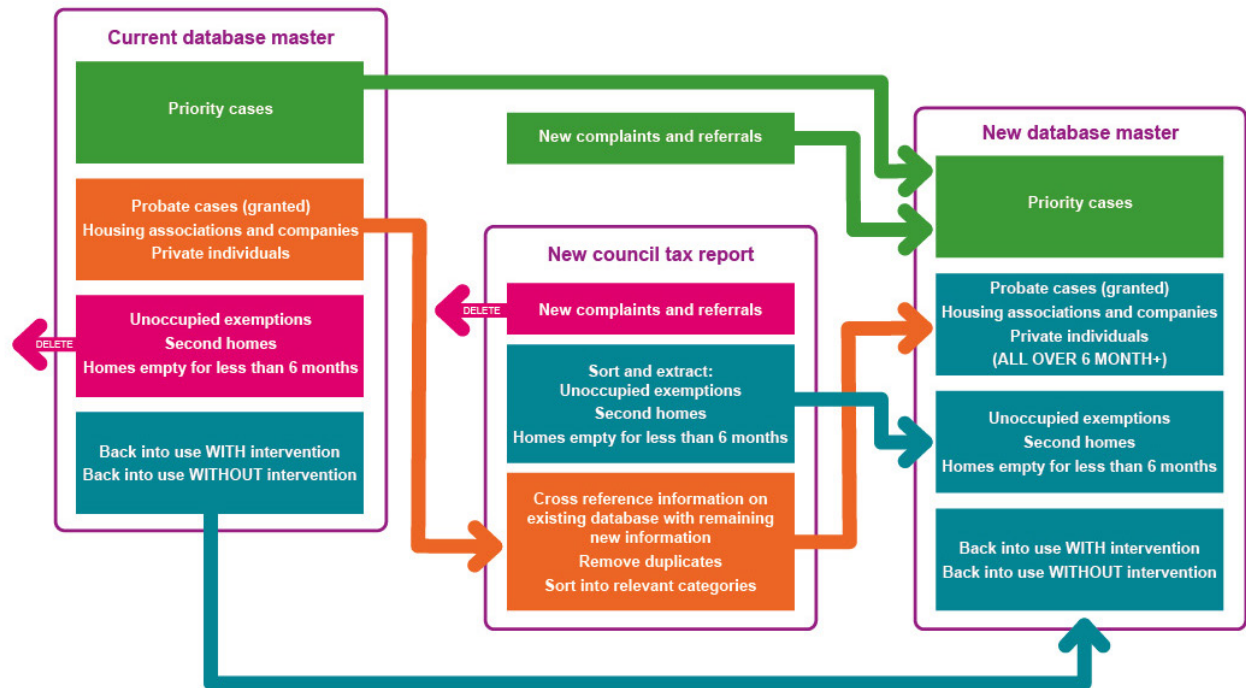
Data Cleanse Flowchart

The data cleanse flowchart outlines the steps officers can follow to refresh a database on a monthly, annual, or regular basis. This helps empty homes officers keep the database accurate and up to date.

Officers can remove outdated entries, relocate information as needed, and add newly identified empty properties. The flowchart ensures the database is refreshed and organised into relevant categories. Properties that have been brought back into use are transferred to monitoring tabs for future reference.

This process provides a clear and logical method for councils to update extensive datasets with new information, ensuring the database remains accurate, relevant to officers' work, and ready for reporting or statistical analysis.

This process is intended to provide a thorough and logical outline of how councils can take an existing extensive dataset across several areas and definitions, and update this with new information to ensure that the database is accurate, relevant to an officer's workload, and updated for reporting or assessing statistics.



For a larger resolution image you can zoom in on please [visit our website](#).

Empty homes scoring system

Each empty home identified can be assessed using a scoring sheet which considers various criteria. The result of this assessment is that the property will be placed in a category which determines the priority level it is given, and the subsequent course of action taken. A note of the score should be entered into the database.

Criteria	Classification	Score
Time Empty	Less than 1 year	0
	1-2 years	5
	2-5 years	10
	5-10 years	15
	Over 10 years	20
Location	Extremely isolated with no access	0
	Isolated property with access	5
	Rural residential area	10
	Urban residential neighbourhood	15
	Prominent position	20
Special Interest	Listed Building	10
	Located in a Conservation Area	5
General Condition	Well-maintained	0
	Acceptable for surrounding area	5
	Noticeably empty/unattractive	10
	Extremely unsightly/detrimental to the area	20
Unwanted attention	Attracting criminal activity such as graffiti, fly tipping, vandalism, anti-social behaviour	20
Debts Owed to the council	No outstanding monies owed	0
	< £500	5
	£500 - £2000	10
	£2000 - £5000	15
	>£5000	20
Owner Interaction	High level of cooperation	0
	Average level of contact & efforts made	5
	Minimal contact & little efforts made	10
	No contact/untraceable/no efforts made	20
Total Score	Red / Amber / Green	

RED – (scores 50 or over)

Cases which fall into this category will be prioritised. All avenues will be explored with the owner to return their property to use in a way that suits their own needs, the needs of the community and the Council. Where assistance is refused and the owner is unwilling to cooperate, all enforcement options will be considered to establish the most appropriate course of action.

AMBER - (scores 25 - 49)

Cases which fall into this category will be considered a lower priority than those in the Red category. Resources will still be invested in these cases and officers will work with owners to prevent empty homes from deteriorating and being reassessed to a higher category. Where necessary, enforcement options will be employed if considered the most appropriate course of action. Cases in this category will be monitored on a more frequent basis than those properties which fall within the Green category and will be reassessed where necessary.

GREEN - (scores less than 25)

Cases which fall into this category will be given a lower priority for action, but owners will be contacted and offered any assistance they may need to return their property back into use. These properties will be monitored for any change and reassessed where necessary.

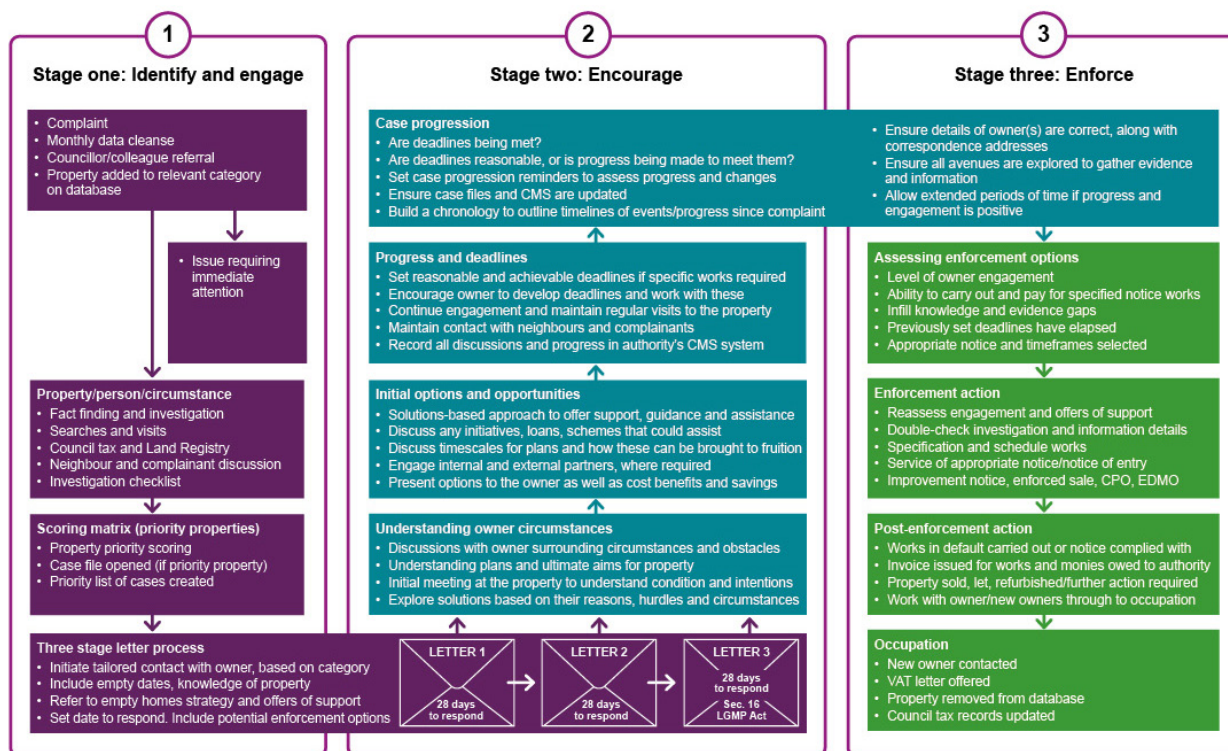
Reference	Empty Date	Empty Address	Scoring	Case Officer	Circumstance	Progress	Next Action
1900344EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	110	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged, potential prosecution, W/D	Notices, W/D, debt recovery	Works in default, debt recovery, prosecution, CPO
2201196EMPREQ	Monday, 25 May 2020	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	95	Adam Cliff	Occupier Deceased, owner missing	Notices, W/D, debt recovery	Enforced Sale
2204249EMPREQ	Sunday, 23 September 2018	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	80	Adam Cliff	Elderly owner not engaging, Subject of C14 enforcement action	To be determined	Write to owner to offer help and support in selling property
2204243EMPREQ	Friday, 26 April 2019	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	80	Adam Cliff	Elderly owner not engaging, Subject of C14 enforcement action	To be determined	Write to owner to offer help and support in selling property
1702703EMPREQ	Saturday, 1 January 2000	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
1800348EMPREQ	Friday, 1 April 2011	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	Refurbishment Stalled	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
1805182EMPREQ	Friday, 1 February 2019	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	75	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	Refurbishment Stalled	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
1704278EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	Long term empty, left by parents, never moved back in	Owner not engaging	EDMO
1702698EMPREQ	Sunday, 10 May 2016	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	At enforcement stage, owner disengaged	To be determined	Enforcement Appraisal
1702681EMPREQ	Thursday, 25 February 2016	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	70	Adam Cliff	Limited engagement with owner, was parents house	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
1907080EMPREQ	Tuesday, 28 February 2002	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Owner in KIW as carer, not contacted again	Owner not engaging	Notices and W/D, potential enforced sale / CPO
1702671EMPREQ	Sunday, 7 August 2011	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Left by family, never moved in, no probate	Awaiting progress on Probate	Further inspection
1807038EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Left by family, never moved in	Owner not engaging	Works in default, debt recovery
1807038EMPREQ	Sunday, 8 May 2011	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	65	Adam Cliff	Left by family 2008, not touched since, no probate	Awaiting progress on Probate	W/D
1807038EMPREQ	9th May 2019	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	55	Adam Cliff	Estate beneficiary in Prison, possibly temporarily occupied	Awaiting progress on Probate	Continue to monitor, enforcement & occupancy checks
1807038EMPREQ	Sunday, 1 April 2018	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	55	Adam Cliff	Bought in 2003, never moved in	Owner starting to engage	Monitor - potentially living there part-time since Spring 2022
1702699EMPREQ	Wednesday, 25 November 2015	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	50	Adam Cliff	Probate not applied for, likely sole beneficiary	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
2104066EMPREQ	Wednesday, 10 April 2019	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	50	Adam Cliff	Property not selling at Auction, believed to be dispute between brother & sister beneficiaries	Owner trying to sell	Continue to monitor condition of properties
2200211EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	50	Adam Cliff	Property undergoing major works to rebuild, but appear to have stalled	To be determined	Further attempts made to contact owners and ascertain next steps of progress
1702702EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	50	Adam Cliff	Handed down through family, never moved in	Notices, W/D, debt recovery	Continue to monitor condition of property
2204043EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Further investigation required. Police involved concerning the owner/occupier	To be determined	Ascertain property history and background
1900345EMPREQ	Tuesday, 6 June 2017	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Limited engagement with owner, was parents house	To be determined	Owner to be offered Eon Scheme & EDMO
2005067EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Property owner lives next door, used as an extension of property	To be determined	Continue to monitor condition of properties
2102714EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	No engagement from the owner, believed to be living with girlfriend	To be determined	Owner not engaging
2204036EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Not known	Contact Owner	Work with Owner
2204036EMPREQ	08.09.21	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Owner deceased	Contact NOK	Work with NOK
1702714EMPREQ	Thursday, 12 March 2009	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Property to be demolished	To be determined	Awaiting planning app
2102133EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Awaiting response from occupier, possible concern for welfare	Monitor Progress	Contact owner to ascertain plans for return to the property
2204028EMPREQ	5.7.19	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	45	Adam Cliff	Owner deceased	Work with NOK	Work with NOK
2102708EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Property owned by Nottingham Forest, part of the redevelopment area of the stadium	To be determined	None at this time. Continue to monitor
2102707EMPREQ	Sunday, 26 November 2017	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Owner moved into care home in London	Owner's son engaging	Support owner and son in relocating belongings, and having property sold
2102680EMPREQ	Tuesday, 5 January 2021	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Probate property	Engaging with owner's daughter	Notices to be served, pending intentions and plans for the property
2002875EMPREQ	Sunday, 23 February 2020	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Beneficiary not paying probate, owner engaging	Owner slow at engaging	Owner to be offered EON scheme
2002875EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Owner moved away after daughter's death, supporting with options	To be determined	Contact owner to offer further support and final resolution
2202882EMPREQ	No empty note	XX.XXXXXXXXXX	To Score	Adam Cliff	Planning application submitted to demolish and build new dwelling on site	To be determined	Further attempts made to contact owners and ascertain next steps of progress

For a larger resolution image you can zoom in on please visit our website.

Case Progression Flowchart

Having a clear process for progressing cases at the early stages of developing their empty homes service can assist with tackling challenging cases and managing the number of cases which progress at each stage.

The case progression flowchart sets out the main three stages in the journey of an empty home and can be adapted for councils to build their own procedural guidance to suit their needs and policies locally.



For a larger resolution image you can zoom in on please [visit our website](#).

Investigation information sources

From the outset of an investigation, an empty homes officer is likely to conduct a thorough fact-finding exercise to ascertain as much information about a property, owner, and their circumstances as possible prior to initiating engagement at any level.

The below list is intended to encourage officers to explore further sources of information and consider where knowledge gaps may be present within their processes to provide a more wholly accurate and comprehensive case file. By no means an exhaustive list, the below examples are predominantly accessible internally for councils, with some publicly available online (mostly free of charge)

- council tax account, current status
- council tax account notes
- historical council tax accounts for the property
- council tax account for the forwarding address (if owner lives in the same council boundary)

- council tax bills, payments and correspondence
- revenue and benefits department, notes and historical involvement
- planning portal (current and historical applications)
- planning portal, for address specifics, location and boundary lines
- Rightmove (current area sales, historical sales)
- Zoopla (current rental and sale estimates, historical sale particulars)
- LinkedIn, Facebook & Social Media profiles
- Land Registry
- planning department (previous involvement with owner or property)
- Environmental Health Department (previous involvement with owner or property)
- Environmental Protection (Previous involvement with owner or property)
- internal council systems (Uniform, M3, Academy, Civica) for prior involvement with owner or property
- officer/shared internal files held outside of CRM systems
- historical emails/letters received from owners and complainants
- Electoral Register
- companies house records
- listed status, at risk register, and council's list of buildings of historical interest
- genealogists
- social media
- Google
- Google Earth
- Bing Maps
- tracing agent searches
- The Probate Search Service (.gov.uk)
- 192.com
- utility meter readings
- mortgage company/bank contact
- discussions with the complainant(s)
- discussions with the neighbours
- regular, often unannounced visits to the property
- photographs
- photographic diary detailing changes to condition
- the find a prisoner service (.gov.uk)
- Adult social care, and the deferred payments team
- council waste and refuse teams, for patterns and use of waste service
- next of kin, family members and friends of the owners.

Empty homes letter to owner templates

Here you can find some letter templates to initiate and progress contact with an empty property owner. These will need adapting to your council's policies, strategies and governance structures.

Empty Homes Letter 1 Template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

Our records show that the property at the above address has been unoccupied since <XX/XX/XXXX> and that you are the owner, or that you act on behalf of the owner.

In line with Government guidance, XXXXXXXX Council has developed an Empty Homes Strategy working to bring privately owned empty property back into use as homes in the Borough. We maintain a record of identified empty properties, and your property is currently on this database. Our aim is to work with owners of empty properties to help bring them back into use, and we offer a range of advice and assistance to achieve this.

There are many reasons why it is in the owner's interest to bring an empty property back into use:

- To reduce your costs (council tax, insurance and maintenance bills)
- To generate a regular rental income or a capital sum if you want to sell
- To provide a valuable resource helping the current housing shortage in the city
- To provide a home for somebody and their family
- To reduce deterioration of the property and avoid problems for the community

CAN WE HELP?

Whatever the reason your property has become empty, get in touch with us as there may be ways we can work together. You can telephone or e-mail us. Enclosed is an information fact sheet which outlines the council's empty homes strategy, and some of the options available in dealing with empty homes.

If your property is no longer empty or you already have plans for bringing your property back into use, please let us know so we can update our records, and see if we can still help in any way.

Whatever the reason your property has become empty, we are writing to let you know that we want to help and look forward to hearing from you so that we can work together.

XXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use, so if we haven't heard from you by <XX/XX/XXXX> we will contact you again.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer, XXXXXXXXX Council

Empty Homes Letter 2 Template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

We wrote to you on XX/XX/XXXX but we do not appear to have received a reply.

This property has now been registered on the council's Empty Property Database for some time and is one of several that our Council Tax Department has told us are currently registered as having been unoccupied since XX/XX/XXXX. It is therefore important that you let us know as soon as possible how you intend to bring this property back into use.

If you are not sure how to do this, we would welcome the chance to help. A copy of the fact sheet sent previously is enclosed and we can provide further information as required.

We would remind you that there are many reasons why bringing an empty property back into use is extremely beneficial:

- To reduce your costs (council tax, insurance and maintenance bills)
- To generate a regular rental income or a capital sum if you want to sell.
- To provide a valuable resource helping the current housing shortage in the city
- To provide a home for somebody.
- To reduce deterioration of the property and avoid problems for the community

PLEASE CONTACT US

If your property is no longer empty or you already have plans in place to return your property to use, please let us know and we will update our records. Under current legislation there are no Council Tax discounts for unoccupied properties so Council Tax systems will not automatically update when a property becomes reoccupied. A property will remain registered as empty unless the owner has advised the Council Tax Department otherwise. Please note: It is a requirement under Council Tax regulations that owners provide information on who occupies a property.

XXXXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use, so if we haven't heard from you by XX/XX/XXXX we will contact you a final time before considering any further options or action.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer, XXXXXXXXXXXX Council

Empty Homes Letter 3 Template

<Case Reference>

<Date>

<Owner Name>

<Forwarding Address>

Dear <XXXX>,

Re: Property at <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>, <XXXX>.

We wrote to you on <XX/XX/XXXX> and <XX/XX/XXXX>, but we still have not received a reply.

This property is now causing the council concern as it has been registered on our Empty Property Database for a considerable period of time and is one that our Council Tax Department has confirmed has been registered as unoccupied since <XX/XX/XXXX>.

(Please note: A property will remain registered as empty unless the owner has advised the Council Tax Department otherwise.)

We are continuing to contact you in line with Government guidance which requires local authorities to develop and implement strategies to work with owners of empty property to help them bring them back into use as homes.

Please let us know how you intend to bring this property back into use.

IMPORTANT – PLEASE DO NOT IGNORE THIS LETTER

We make it our priority to work with owners of empty properties providing advice, help and funding where appropriate (see enclosed fact sheet). However, if the council is unable to engage with owners, despite repeated attempts to do so, we will consider further action to ensure the re-use and reoccupation of the property. This may include making recommendations for a range of enforcement action under current legislation, including an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO), whereby control of the property is given to the local authority, an enforced sale, or the serving of a compulsory purchase order (CPO).

XXXXXXXXX Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use so, if we haven't heard from you by <XX/XX/XXXX>, this property will automatically be assessed for priority and any further action will be decided based on that assessment.

Yours Sincerely,

<XXXX XXXX>

Empty Homes Officer, XXXXXXXXXXXX Council



Local Government Association

18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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REF 5.192