EMPTY HOMES POLICY

2017-2021

Empty Homes Policy

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RUSHMOOR
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Contents

Introduction

This policy sets out how Rushmoor Borough Council will work to bring empty homes back into use, and supports our strategic objective to maximise capacity within existing housing stock as set out in Rushmoor's Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2017-2021.

Empty homes are a blight on local communities and a wasted resource we cannot afford when there is such high demand for housing in Rushmoor. An empty property could be a home for a family needing somewhere to live. We work with owners to encourage, enable and assist them bring their empty properties back into use.

The benefits to bringing these homes back into use for the council, the local community and individuals are many including:

Meeting the housing needs of our residents	**Preventing empty homes becoming a target for antisocial behaviour**	**The local community benefit from the improved environment, maintaining safe attractive neighbourhoods and preventing depreciation of property value**
The owner benefits from support and advice on options for the reuse of the empty home, turning cost into financial benefits	**Generates New Homes Bonus income**	**Reduce costs of providing temporary accomodation in bed and breakfast for homeless households in need**

The council will use the following twin-track approach to bringing empty homes back into use.

Provide general advice, assistance and incentives to all owners to help them bring empty homes back into use; and

Prioritise all empty home for the appropriate action

We will respond to complaints about empty homes as detailed on page six.

We have a good track record for tackling empty homes. Since 2011, we have brought 94 empty properties back into use, including 42 street properties, conversion of a disused Sergeants' Mess to provide 45 units of much-needed temporary accommodation and seven units of empty sheltered accommodation now being used as supported accommodation.

Prioritising resources

The Government has produced guidance and legislation under the Housing Act 2004 to support local authorities to tackle the problem of long-term empty homes. Nationally, long-term empty homes are defined as properties that have been empty for more than six months.

Experience in Rushmoor shows that most properties that are empty for less than two years are re-occupied with minimal intervention from the council. As such, and to allow for alignment with our council tax scheme, this policy will focus on properties that have been empty for two years or more. The council tax scheme applies a premium of 150% to properties that we know to have been empty for two years or more.

As of June 2017, there were around 113 properties, which had been empty for six months up to two years and 38 properties had been unoccupied for more than two years. These figures do not include properties on regeneration schemes known to be vacant and waiting to be demolished.

To ensure that resources are used appropriately and effectively all actionable empty homes will be prioritised using a points-based system.

Appendix 1; Empty property prioritisation scheme provides further details on the scoring system and uses the following criteria to prioritise empty homes.

Length of time empty

The longer a property is empty, the higher the priority.

Property condition

The poorer the condition, the higher the priority.

Impact of property on neighbours and local community

The bigger the impact on neighbours and the community and number of complaints the higher the priority.

Once prioritised, the council will concentrate case action on the highest priority cases.

Action on empty homes

The council can take enforcement action to bring a property back into use where the property has been empty for more than two years and it is having an adverse impact on the surrounding area.

Where property has been empty for less than two years and is in poor condition, it will only be classed as 'actionable empty' in exceptional circumstances.

The council will use a risk-based approach to identify the highest priority cases and take enforcement action where appropriate, to tackle the worst cases.

There is a range of options available to the council to bring a property back into use. These fall into three broad categories.

| Informal advice, assistance and incentives | Low-level enforcement action | High-level enforcement action |
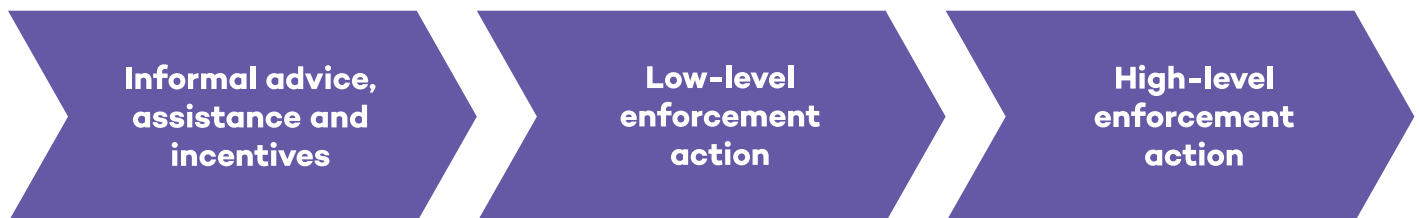
General advice for all owners

We will provide information and advice to all empty property owners to help them bring their property back into use. Information on how to report an empty property is available on our website at **www.rushmoor.gov.uk**

Informal advice, assistance and incentives

The council's main approach to tackling the issue of long-term empty homes is to work with the owners to encourage them to bring their homes back into use voluntarily.

We will work with owners of actionable empty homes advising them of the options available and providing information on a range of issues including:

- Information about renovating /or converting the property for occupation and signposting the owner to resources to support them
- Selling on the open market including at auction or to a Registered Provider of social housing (RP)
- Financial incentives, subject to budget available, including grants and loans
- Advice about letting the property including information about the council's rent deposit scheme and private tenancy officer to help find a suitable tenant
- Possible enforcement action that could be taken – environmental health, planning and building control issues
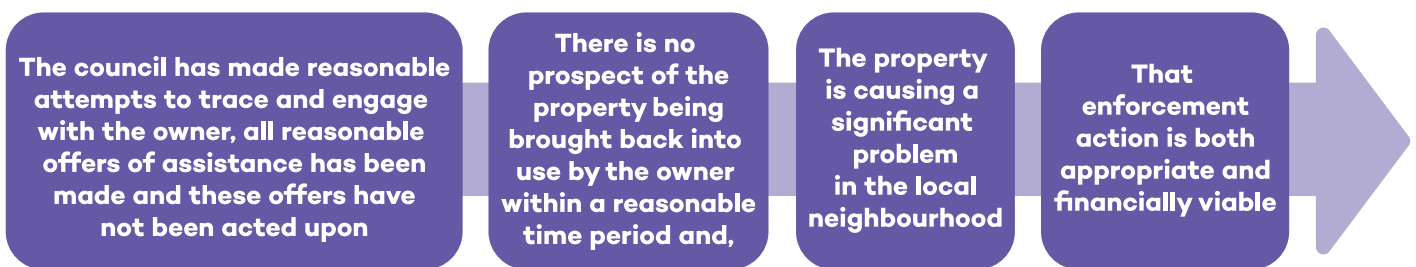
Low-level enforcement action

Where actionable properties are in a condition which will cause problems for neighbours, for example overgrown gardens or disrepair, in the first instance we will try to engage with the owner to encourage them to carry out the necessary works. Where this fails, we may take low-level enforcement action and serve notice to carry out the required remedial works.
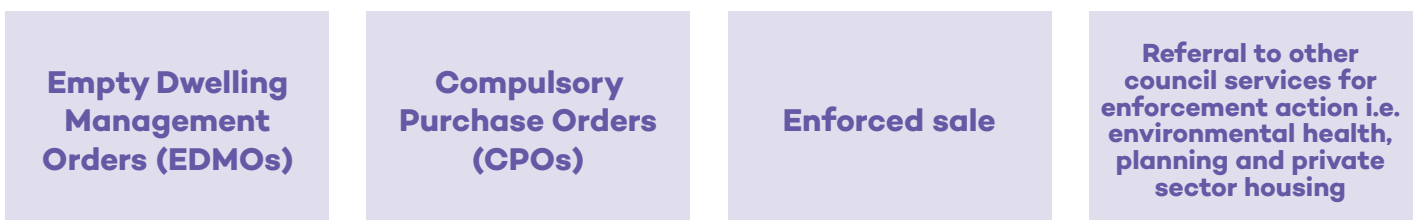
Where appropriate, cases will be referred to other council departments such as environmental health, planning services and the private sector housing team.

High-level enforcement action

For priority properties, we will engage with the owner and work with them to bring the property back into use. Our Empty Homes Corporate Group meets every three months to monitor progress to bring properties back into use. High-level enforcement action will only be considered as a last resort when all of the following criteria have been met.

The council has made reasonable attempts to trace and engage with the owner, all reasonable offers of assistance has been made and these offers have not been acted upon	There is no prospect of the property being brought back into use by the owner within a reasonable time period and,	The property is causing a significant problem in the local neighbourhood	That enforcement action is both appropriate and financially viable

The council has a range of enforcement powers to tackle the problem of long-term empty properties. High-level enforcement action to bring the property back into use may include:

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)	Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)	Enforced sale	Referral to other council services for enforcement action i.e. environmental health, planning and private sector housing

When the appropriate high-level action has been determined, we will seek Cabinet approval to begin enforcement.

In limited circumstances, owners are exempt from some enforcement action that would lead to the council removing management or ownership of the property from the owner. These circumstances are:

• Where the owner has moved to receive care
• Where the council is satisfied that the property is being used as a second home
• For six months after a probate decision has been made

Empty property enquiries and dealing with complaints

How we respond to reports received about an empty property:

• Investigate the complaint, including a visit to the property to establish if the council needs to take further action

• Prioritise the property using the points system

• Write to the owner to inform them that we are aware that the property is empty and enquire about their future intentions for the property. Offer general advice including signposting to resources to support the owner

• Advise of any action required for any necessary works and ensure it is carried out

• Refer the complaint and seek support from other council departments for action where appropriate

•

Inform the complainant whether the property is classified as empty or not and update them on the action taken

Complaints, reviews and appeals

Rushmoor Borough Council is committed to providing good quality service. If you are not happy with the service you have received or decision made under this policy, we need to know so that we can have the opportunity to put it right and learn from the experience.

In the first instance, please speak to the Strategy and Enabling Team Manager (job share) who will try to resolve the concern. They can be contacted by calling **01252 398 687** or **01252 398 630**, or by email at **zoe.paine@rushmoor.gov.uk** or **sally.ravenhill@rushmoor.gov.uk**

Alternatively or if you are not satisfied with the response, the council's complaints policy can be viewed on our website at **www.rushmoor.gov.uk**

Appendix 1

Empty property prioritisation scheme

Address:	
Description of property:	

Time empty	Score	Tick
Two years and over	10	
Five years and over	20	
Ten years +	30	

Property condition	Score	Tick
Visibily neglected - overgrown garden, poor external appearance, exterior not maintained	10	
Poor condition- significant disrepair affecting adjoining neighbours or visitors to the property	20	
Very poor condition - structural damage resulting from neglect. Requires major works internally or externally to structure and amenities to bring into use.	30	

Impact of neighbours and local community	Score	Tick
Attracting antisocial behaviour - evidence or risk of fire, vandalism, risk of entry	5	
Visual impact - visible from main road, garden overgrown	5	
Rubbish or fly-tipping	5	
Vermin - complaints received or presence of vermin	5	
Semi-detached, terrace or flat	5	
Number of complaints	5	
Number of people complaining - more than one person	5	
History of local authority action	5	

Total		

Empty Property Priority		Priority score	
80-100	50-80	20-50	<20
High	**High Medium**	**Low Medium**	**Low**

A property that has been empty for less than two years, but is in poor condition and complaints have been received will only be classed as 'actionable empty' in exceptional circumstances and as agreed by the council's Empty Homes Corporate Group.