



**Woking Borough Council**

**Empty Homes Plan**

**2022 – 2027**

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## Introduction

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.

The 2021 revision of the National Planning Policy Framework maintains the expectation that Local Authorities should implement plans and decisions to support efforts to identify, and bring back into residential use, empty homes and other buildings. This should be supported by the use of compulsory purchase powers where appropriate.

The Council's Housing Strategy 2021-26 highlights that empty homes are recognised as a wasted resource, particularly in areas such as Woking where there is such a high demand for all types of housing. Houses that are left unoccupied can quickly fall into disrepair and impact local neighbourhoods. Bringing empty properties back into use can benefit individual owners, potential occupiers, businesses and the wider community.

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.

The Council has identified three strategic priorities to reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough, which are as follows:

1. Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions
2. Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives
3. Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use

## Empty Homes in Woking

Woking Borough Council wants to increase the number of empty homes that are brought back into use as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing, and to reduce blight on neighbourhoods. 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.

In extreme circumstances 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 become 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, 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 may not, in itself, provide the catalyst necessary to return the property back into use.

## **The local position**

Nationally long term empty homes have risen steadily since 2016 and are now 19% higher than in 2016.<sup>1</sup> There are 653,025 empty homes in England, of which 237,340 have been empty for over 6 months (DLUHC, October 2021) with 31,070 of the total number of empty homes being found in the South East region. Within Surrey, there are 12,485 empty homes, and 4,339 of these have been empty for more than 6 months.

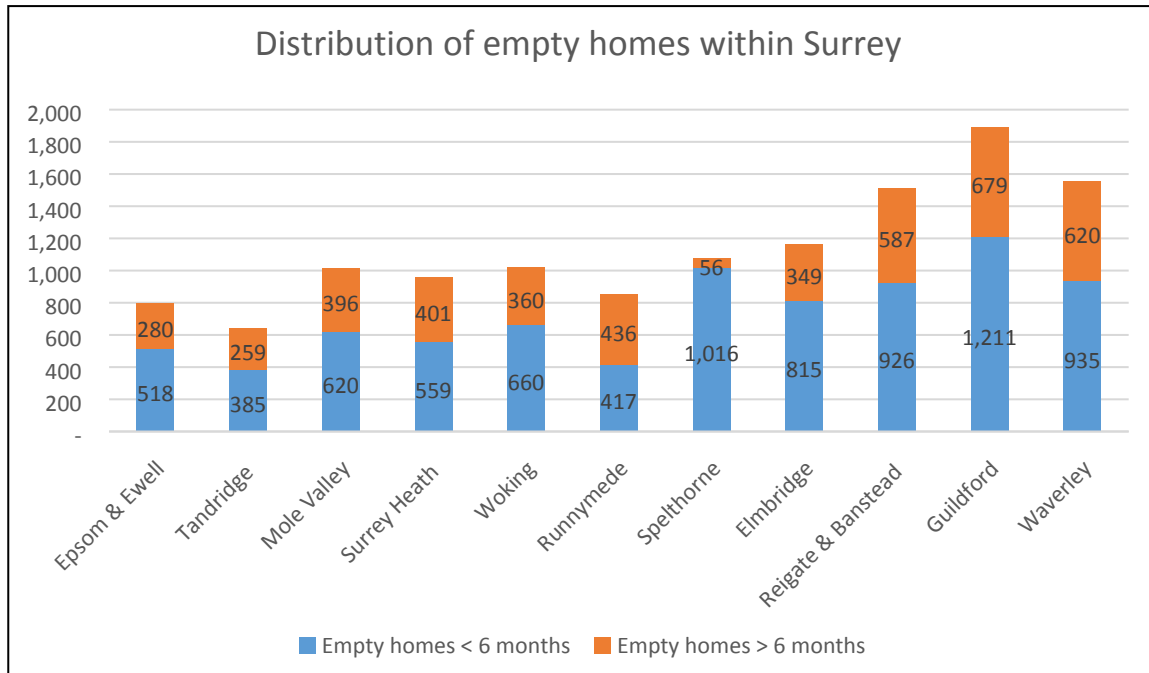
In Woking there were 42,554 chargeable Council tax properties as of October 2021 and of which 729 are long term empty homes<sup>2</sup> which includes properties that are exempt from paying Council Tax e.g. the owner has passed away, it is a second home or not habitable. In October 2021 there were 360 long term empty homes in Woking which equates to 0.8% of the total housing stock within the Borough. This is a 22% reduction from 460 in 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Empty Homes Agency February 2022

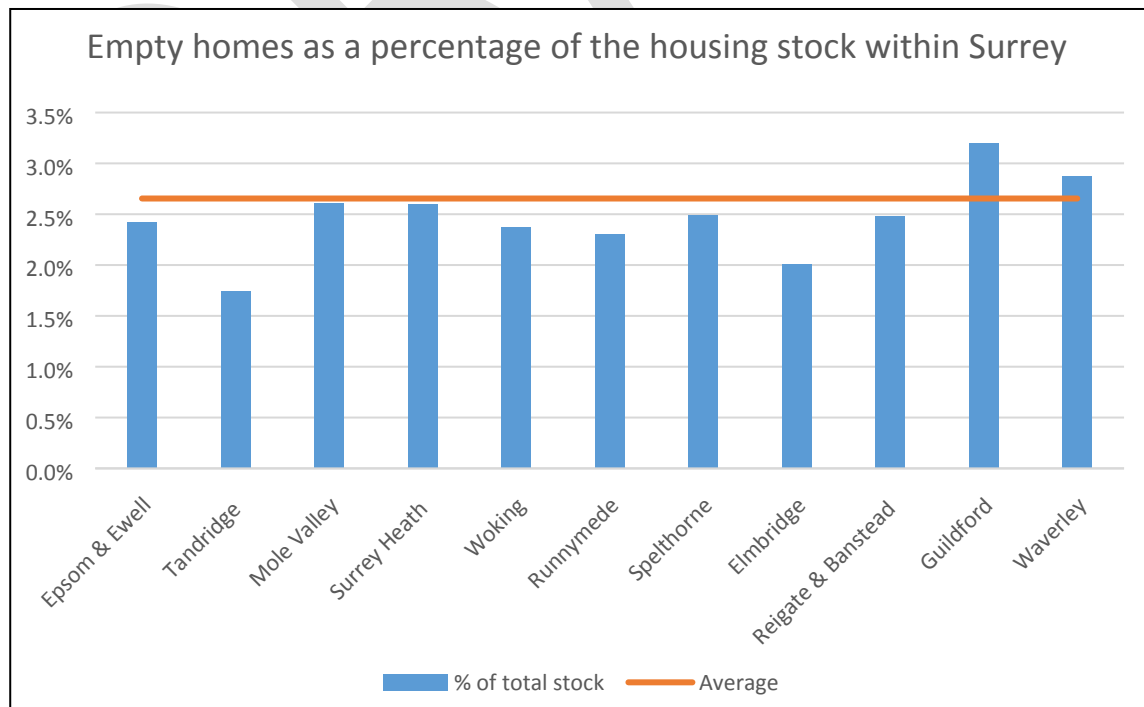
<sup>2</sup> [Council Taxbase 2021 in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-taxbase-2021-in-england)

Table 1: Distribution of all empty homes within Surrey<sup>3</sup>



Across Surrey as a whole it is estimated that 2.5% of the total housing stock lies empty (see Table 2) with Woking having slightly fewer empty homes (2.4%) than the Surrey average.

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



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants>

## **Strategic Priorities**

### **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 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 rare 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.

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.

#### **Providing advice and assistance to empty homeowners**

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.

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 Let's Rent Complete service. Properties in this scheme can be 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.

Where empty properties have not fallen into disrepair and owners wish to retain responsibility for management, the Council offers assistance with accessing our Let's Rent Connect service where a bond and rent in advance 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.

#### **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. where the property complies with the company's funding structure.

The Empty Homes Agency toolkit [Community Action on Empty Homes Toolkit](#) promotes best practice as working with local community groups to assist with improving gardens or empty homes to bring them back in to use. This is something the Council wants to investigate.

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.

Since the 2012 and 2015 Empty Homes Programmes, there has been no central government funding aimed at tackling empty homes and current regional programmes are aimed at new build affordable housing or helping first time buyers purchase property. The Private Sector Housing team will, however, apply for any relevant empty homes funding should it be made available. This may include partnership working with other registered housing providers.

**Over the next 5 years, the Council aims to:**

- Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment
- Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes
- Review the promotion of the Council's Let's Rent service to empty property owners
- 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**

### **Professional Renovation Advice**

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. We have a professional renovation advice service where our surveyors can provide free, professional advice on renovating a property, including a list of works required and an estimate of costs. They can also offer advice or assistance with the planning process.

### **Assistance with selling an empty home**

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 bringing them back into use. We also hold a list of people who are interested in buying empty properties which can save money on estate agent or auction fees.

### **Let's Rent – private renting**

The Council has a long-established 'Let's Rent' service which is free and provides landlords and owners of empty properties with a regular rental income and professional lettings service, whilst also assisting Woking residents threatened with homelessness. The Let's Rent service has an experienced and friendly team that supports landlords throughout the process and provides professional up to date advice on minimum property standards and landlord responsibilities.

**Let's Rent Connect-** Through this service, we introduce landlords to prospective tenants, arrange the tenancy agreement, property inventory and pay a cash incentive, rent in advance and provide a high value bond in lieu of a deposit to cover rent arrears and damages. In addition free regular property inspections and professional advice is provided throughout the tenancy to ensure the property is compliant and the tenancy runs smoothly. No fees or commission are payable for this service and the landlord is under no obligation to accept anyone nominated by us.

**Let's Rent Complete-** Through this scheme, the landlord can lease their property to us for a minimum of two years, guaranteeing a rental income that is paid annually and in

advance, even if the property is vacant. We will professionally manage the property and handle all responsibilities involved with the letting from tenant liaison to call outs and most repairs.

More information can be found at [www.woking.gov.uk/letsrent](http://www.woking.gov.uk/letsrent)

## **Financial Assistance**

The Council currently offers financial assistance to owners to encourage empty homes to be brought back into use, however the take up has been relatively low. Despite this, it is undoubted that financial assistance to empty homeowners 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 discretionary 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 household threatened with homelessness 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.

## **Loans and grants**

Financial assistance, including discretionary grants and low-cost loans, is available from us and our partner, Parity Trust. Financial assistance is assessed on a case-by-case basis and a personalised package can be tailored to your needs. To discuss what assistance may be available for your circumstances please contact the Private Sector Housing Team [emptyhomes@woking.gov.uk](mailto:emptyhomes@woking.gov.uk) . Further Empty Homes Grant \* information can be found in Annexe 2.

## **General assistance**

Other ways that the Council can assist empty home owners to bring their property back in to use can include the following:

- Inspect and identify work required to bring a property up to a lettable/sellable standard
- Project manage the work and sign off (3% admin fee of cost of works) to include Schedule of Works and organising three quotes
- Supply and fit a free keysafe for ease of access with contractors and the Council
- Refer to Parity Trust for access to loan costs loans

- Put empty home owners in touch with interest buyers including Thamesway Housing Limited
- Free one off garden clearance (to be considered on a case by case basis) using Woking Borough Council staff volunteer days
- Provide confirmation that a property has been empty home for more than two years to reduce VAT to 5% on refurbishment work
- Refer to support agencies and have regard to Safeguarding at all times.

### **Empty Homes Council Tax Premium**

The Council has already introduced the Empty Homes Premium within the local Council Tax charging regime. A property that has been empty and substantially unfurnished for 24 months or more will be subject to an empty home premium of 100% of the standard occupied charge. This will double the amount of Council Tax that has to be paid. After five years the empty home premium will double again, meaning that you will be required to pay an additional 200% on top of you bill. If the property has been empty for more than 10 years the empty home premium will triple, meaning that the owner will be required to pay an additional 300%. 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.

### **Over the next 5 years, the Council aims to:**

- Promote the acquisition of empty homes through Thamesway Housing Ltd
- Promote the Let's Rent scheme to empty property owners
- Research community-led housing solutions to returning empty homes back into use

\*The annual Empty Grant is subject to review each year and can be withdrawn by the Council at any time. The Empty Homes Grant available for 2022/23 is £20,000.

### **Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back in to use**

#### **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, including:

- Compulsory purchase - this is where we apply to the Secretary of State to buy a property from an owner, even if they don't give their consent.
- Enforced sale - this allows the sale of an empty property to be forced to recover debts that are owed to us.
- Empty Dwelling Management Order - this is a legal measure that allows us to take over an empty property on a temporary basis to have it renovated and reoccupied. Once costs are recovered this can generate an income for the owner.
- Enforcement Notices such as Prevention of the Damage by Pests Act 1949 and Section 29 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982

#### **Instigating enforcement action**

Where an empty home causes a severe negative impact within the neighbourhood, and where the property owner has not responded to informal action, the property will be referred to the Empty Homes Working Group to decide what and if enforcement action is appropriate. This group consists of representatives from different Council departments such as Legal, Environmental Health, Planning Enforcement, Housing and Council Tax ensuring a mix of expertise. 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.

Properties will be prioritised for action using a risk assessment methodology that will assess the impact of each empty home on neighbours, and the wider neighbourhood as well as debts to the Council and any vulnerabilities of the owner. We will also aim to recover all reasonable costs incurred in taking the enforcement action, and this may result in a legal charging order 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. The Council's Recovery Policy outlines the statutory recovery process and the options available to the Council when considering enforcement action.

**Over the next 5 years, the Council aims to:**

- Review scope of empty homes interventions in the Housing Standards enforcement policy.
- Refer high risk properties to the Empty Homes Working Group to agree an enforcement plan.
- Consider commencing enforcement action following failed informal action.

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## ANNEXE 1 – Empty Homes Action Plan

Strategy Priority 1 - Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions					
No.	Commitment	Actions/Milestones	Lead Officer	Risks	Status
1.1	Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use	200 homes returned to use during the life of this plan (2022-2027)	Private Sector Housing Manager	Staffing resources	
1.2	Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes	Web pages reviewed at least bi-annually, and updates implemented.  Work with colleagues in Marcomms to raise awareness of the work being done to bring empty homes back into use to Woking residents	Private Sector Housing Liaison Team Leader	Information is not kept up to date or accurate  Other priorities prevent awareness campaigns	
1.3	Review the promotion and effectiveness of the Council's Let's Rent scheme to empty property owners	Additional 5 empty homes returned to use through the Let's Rent scheme over the lifetime of this plan.	Private Sector Housing Liaison Team Leader	Disengagement of empty homeowners	
1.4	Investigate the opportunities for providing a lease and rent scheme for homes left empty due to their owners entering residential Care	Additional 5 empty homes returned to use through private sector leasing over the lifetimes of this plan.	Private Sector Housing Manager	Disengagement of empty homeowners and/or families  Potential to upset family members if not treated sensitively	

<b>1.5</b>	Maintain a database of empty properties and keep in regular contact with owners	Bi-monthly Empty Homes Questionnaire to be sent to new Long Term Empty property owners and followed up.	Private Sector Housing Liaison Team Leader	Staffing resources  Empty-Home owners reservations about Council enquiries.	
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**Strategy Priority 2 - Maximise opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Actions/Milestones</b>	<b>Lead Officer</b>	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Status</b>
<b>2.1</b>	Promote the acquisition of empty homes through Thamesway Housing Ltd	10 long term empty homes acquired over the lifetime of this plan	Private Sector Housing Manager  and  Private Sector Housing Liaison Team Leader	Disengagement of empty homeowners to acquisition  Limitations acquisitions for funding	
<b>2.2</b>	Review the financial assistance available to empty homeowners	5 long term empty properties brought back in to use using financial assistance from the Council over the lifetime of this plan	Private Sector Housing Manager	Limitations on capital funding  Disengagement of empty homeowners to acquisition	
<b>2.3</b>	Work informally with empty	Research community-led housing	Private Sector		

	homeowners before considering enforcement options where appropriate.	solutions to returning empty homes back into use.	Housing Manager		
<b>2.4</b>	Refer to Woking Borough Council's Hoarders Group and other Adult Care Services to ensure safeguarding	Bring 1 property back in to use following referral to the Hoarders Group.	Private Sector Housing Liaison Team Leader	Non engagement of the empty home owner	

<b>Strategy Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use</b>					
<b>No.</b>	<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Actions/Milestones</b>	<b>Lead Officer</b>	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Status</b>
<b>3.1</b>	Review enforcement options available and update procedures and policies as required.	Identify key empty homes for potential CPO action  Empty Homes Working group to inform enforcement options for high-risk empty properties referred to the group	Private Sector Housing Manager	Failure to recover debts  Failure to recover legal costs Staffing resources Reputational risk	
<b>3.2</b>	Review the risk-based assessment for empty property enforcement interventions	Risk assessment methodology and procedures implemented.	Private Sector Housing Manager	Failure to enforce after property identified as high risk	
<b>3.3</b>	Ensure the Council's enforced sales procedures	Staff trained in empty homes enforcement options and to attend safeguarding	Private Sector	Staffing resources	



	do not contradict the Charging Policy	training.	Housing Manager		
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## Annexe 2 – Empty Homes Grant criteria

	<b>Empty Homes Grant (discretionary)</b>
Purpose	The Empty Homes Grant (EHG) is discretionary. It provides owners with a means to bring a long term empty property back in to beneficial use which they may not have been able to achieve on their own. It also enables the Council to work directly with owners to provide a home to Woking residents in housing need.
Eligibility	<p>Applicant qualifying criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicant must be the empty home owner or person able to legally act on their behalf;</li> <li>• Applicant must be at least 18 years old;</li> <li>• Freeholder or leaseholder with at least 10 years lease remaining;</li> <li>• Property has been empty for at least 12 months and in the applicants ownership for at least 3 months.</li> </ul> <p>Property qualifying criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Property does not meet the Decent Homes Standard;</li> <li>• Property has at least one category one hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Ratings System (HHSRS);</li> <li>• Property is classed as a Long Term Empty or Long Term Empty Premium property identified through Council Tax records and has been empty at least 12 months;</li> <li>• Property will meet the minimum Let's Rent letting standard <a href="http://www.woking.gov.uk/letsrent">www.woking.gov.uk/letsrent</a> and the owner agrees to improve the property if the EHG does not cover the costs</li> </ul>
Eligible works	<p>Where an EHG is used the property will be brought up to the Decent Homes Standard and will be free of category one hazard under the HHSRS.</p> <p>A Council Surveyor will provide the applicant with a Schedule of Works (SOW) for the EHG and a report for any additional work required to meet the Let's Rent letting standard in advance of a grant being approved.</p> <p>The Council can organise quotes and project manage work required for the EHG.</p>

	<p>The Council can organise quotes and project manage work required above the EHG for a 3% fee of the value of the works.</p> <p>The Council can supply and fit a free keysafe for ease of access with contractors and the Council and applicant.</p> <p>There may be circumstances where the EHG can be used for legal costs in order to bring a property back in to use, e.g. probate. This will be at the discretion of the Private Sector Housing Manager/Director of Housing.</p>
Financial arrangements	<p>Subject to availability the EHG will be offered to qualifying applicants owning a qualifying property.</p> <p>Three quotes must be provided for the eligible work which must be carried out by one of the three contractors whose quotes the applicant has submitted against the SOW provided and been approved by the Council.</p> <p>The EHG will be paid to the applicant on completion of the agreed work following an inspection by a Council Surveyor to confirm it meets an acceptable standard and subject to the receipt of satisfactory invoices.</p> <p>The work must be completed within 6 months of the EHG approval letter being issued.</p> <p>[If you are a landlord and this grant approval includes work you are required to carry out as a result of a Notice served under the Housing Act-2004, then such works must be completed within the timescale specified in the said notice(s).]</p>
Conditions	<p>Maximum grant per property is £20,000*</p> <p>The amount of grant offered will be assessed on an individual basis.</p> <p>The applicant will be required to complete the EHG application form, provide proof of ownership and freehold/leasehold details.</p> <p>The EHG will be dependent on the inspection carried out by the Council and the applicants commitment to carry out work in excess of the EHG to meet the Let's Rent lettable standard. In such cases the applicant will be required to provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate they have access to additional funds to enable the work to be completed to ensure the property will be brought back in to use.</p> <p>The grant is repayable by placing the empty property on to Let's Rent for 5 years minimum and a local land charge will be placed against the empty property.</p>

	The Council may demand the repayment of the EHG if the recipient disposes (whether by sale, assignment, transfer or otherwise) of the premises in respect of which the grant was given within 10 years of receipt of the EHG.
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\*the total annual Empty Grant is subject to review each year and can be withdrawn. The Empty Homes Grant available for 2022/23 is £20,000.