

# EMPTY HOMES



**WMEPOG**

**WEST MIDLANDS EMPTY PROPERTY OFFICER GROUP**

## WMEPOG – Who are we?

The West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group is the platform for the local authorities within the West Midlands to promote the benefits of reducing the number of empty properties that are having a detrimental effect on their communities, and that are potentially reducing the level of affordable housing in the region. Our objectives are to:

- Raise awareness and provide advice to members of the group, partner organisations and the general public
- Share ideas, knowledge, procedures and protocols within the group
- Support and encourage members to meet their objectives within the group
- Promote the WMEPOG on a national level
- Consult organisations, for example Empty Homes Agency and the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners, designed to promote the issues surrounding empty properties

The Group meets bi-annually to discuss issues surrounding all aspects of empty properties, including changes to legislation and policies. It provides an opportunity for local authorities to come together to celebrate success stories and discuss solutions to some of the more complex cases. The Group also provides on-going support and guidance for members with different levels of experience to enable them to work more confidently and efficiently to achieve their goals.

**For further information about the WMEPOG or for an informal discussion, please contact:**

**Chair: Sheree L. Johansen** [Sheree.Johansen@stratford-dc.gov.uk](mailto:Sheree.Johansen@stratford-dc.gov.uk)

**Vice-Chair: Alison Powers** [Alison.Powers@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk](mailto:Alison.Powers@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk)

## What is an Empty Property?

A property is classed as empty after it has remained unoccupied and unfurnished for six months or longer.

(Empty homes do not include second homes, holiday lets or student accommodation which is only occupied for part of the year.)

Although there are in excess of 200,000 long-term empty properties in the UK, there are many thousands that are in the process of being sold, or renovated for rental purposes or personal occupation. Usually a council won't start investigating the reason a property is empty until it has been unoccupied for at least six months as most properties will become reoccupied during this period without the need of any intervention from the council.

Delays in bringing empty properties back into use may also be due to delays with planning applications and deceased persons properties awaiting a grant of probate.

Some properties are empty for a very genuine reason; for example, the owner is in hospital or caring for an ill or elderly relative elsewhere. In circumstances such as these it is unlikely the council will be able to take action.

## Facts and Figures

The number of long-term empty properties in England has risen for the first time in a decade, increasing by 2.6% from 200,145 in October 2016 to 205,293 in October 2017.

The West Midlands region has approximately 20,000 long term empty properties as at 2nd October 2017, which makes it the fourth highest region in the UK.

These figures may not be a true reflection of the actual numbers of empty properties as they are dependent on the information held by the local authorities and are based on councils' knowing where the empty properties are.

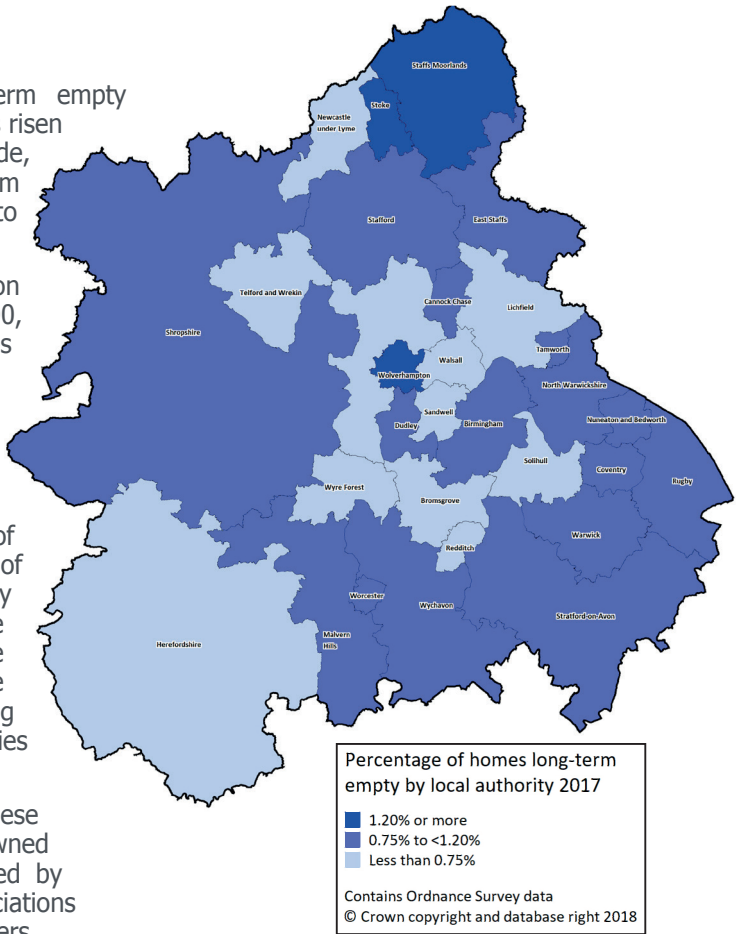
The vast majority of these properties are privately owned with only 1 in 10 owned by councils, housing associations and other housing providers.

Councils can currently charge a premium of up to 50% on Council Tax if a property has been empty for two years or more. In his Autumn Budget speech the Chancellor, Phillip Hammond, said

**“It cannot be right to leave properties empty when so many are desperate for a place to live”.**

He subsequently announced plans to give councils the power to increase the premium to 100% to try to address the problem. For the wealthier owners of empty properties, it is thought that this premium is unlikely to make any difference and will be viewed as more of an annoyance than a deterrent.

It is clear to see that further Government intervention and investment is urgently required, together with additional powers for local authorities to tackle the increasing problem of empty homes.



## Are you the owner of an Empty Property?

If so, your local authority can offer support to help you to try to overcome any barriers that are preventing you from bringing it back into use. It can provide advice and information on a range of options in your district, for example:

- **Selling your property**

You can either sell your property privately, or through an estate agent via advertising or at a property auction.

- **Letting your property**

You can either let your property privately or through an estate agent – if you are considering becoming a landlord you may wish to become a member of a recognised landlord association; further details are available below.

- **Improving your property**

Your local authority may have grants or incentives available; contact them directly for advice and information.

- **Leasing your property**

You may wish to lease the property to a management company who will provide a guaranteed rental income in exchange for a longer-term lease.

If you are considering becoming a landlord and letting your property there are a number of things you need to know and certain safety measures must be in place, you may wish to join a recognised landlord association. There is a Midlands Scheme and two nationally available;

MLAS – Midland Landlord Accreditation Scheme – [mlas.org.uk/](https://mlas.org.uk/)

RLA – Residential Landlord Association – [www.rla.org.uk](https://www.rla.org.uk)

NLA – National Landlord Association – [www.landlords.org.uk](https://www.landlords.org.uk)

Please visit their websites for further details on how to join. Your local authority will also be able to give you advice on letting your property and helping you decide whether you should let the property as a single house or whether to turn the property into shared accommodation or an HMO (House in Multiple Occupation). An HMO may require a licence, you should always seek advice from your local authority as it will have a dedicated officer to advise you of the legal requirements.

Each local authority has its own policy for dealing with empty properties and these will contain initiatives which are available to owners. These may come in the form of financial assistance such as grants or loans, provided to help owners refurbish their properties in order to return them to use.

The council will also be able to give you information and advice on:

- VAT reductions – [www.gov.uk/vat-builders](https://www.gov.uk/vat-builders)
- Council Tax discounts
- Planning and Building Control advice



## Before and After

The property is situated on a large corner plot of a busy street, on the outskirts of the town centre close to several businesses, a mosque and children's play area.

It had sat empty for almost a decade and become the subject of numerous complaints from the public who were concerned about the general condition of the property, its untidy appearance and the negative impact it was having on the area.

It became a prime target for anti-social behaviour including unauthorised access and fly-tipping and had to be boarded up and re-boarded on several occasions.

In 2017 the new owners were granted an empty homes loan from the local council, which enabled them to renovate the property and reside in it themselves on completion of the works. The owners are currently renovating and extending the empty, commercial property next door and have obtained planning permission to build a pharmacy on the ground floor with two residential dwellings above.



## Benefits of bringing your empty property back into use

Empty properties are a wasted resource, can be a source of complaints from neighbours and can cost owners a lot of money to maintain and insure. Bringing your property back into use not only relieves the stress of worrying about maintaining the property in addition to your own home, it also has a number of other benefits:

- Increasing the provision of much-needed homes
- Generating additional income for the owner
- Contributing to the regeneration of an area
- Increasing spending in the local economy
- Potentially increasing the market value of surrounding properties
- Reducing the risk of crime and anti-social behaviour at the property
- Reducing the need to build new homes in the area

## Consequences of leaving your property empty

As you can see there are many benefits of bringing your property back into use, but some owners still choose to do nothing by leaving their properties to fall into disrepair and become a blight on the neighbourhood. While it may seem like the easier option for some to ignore their empty properties, unfortunately there are consequences:

- Increased risk of crime and anti-social behaviour such as vandalism, drugs and squatting
- Increased risk of complaints from neighbours
- De-valuation of property and those within the area
- Increased need to build new properties on green belt land
- Reduced the income into the local economy affecting local businesses

Your local authority may receive complaints about your empty property from members of the public for a number of reasons. They will try to contact owners in order to try to resolve the matter, but if officers get no response from owners or they refuse to carry out the work required, depending on the nature of the complaint, they may need to resort to enforcement action in order to reduce the risk or remove the issue. Although this is not an exhaustive list, some of the enforcement options available to local authorities are:

- **Empty Dwelling Management Order** – a legal device for local authorities to use in order to take over the management of an empty property and return it to use
- **Compulsory Purchase Order** – often used as a last resort where the local authority cannot locate an owner or the owner is totally unresponsive to any attempts to make contact
- **Enforced Sale** – the local authority can enforce the sale of a property in order to recover debt owed to them
- **Community Protection Notice** – can be issued where a property is having a detrimental effect of a persistent or on-going nature on the local community
- **Section 215** – these notices may be served by the local planning authority where it is considered that the condition of a piece of land adversely affects the amenity of the area in question

## Do you live near or know of any empty properties?

If you notice or are affected by an empty property in your district, your local authority would like to hear from you!

Although councils use various methods to identify and maintain an accurate database of empty properties in their districts, the general public are an excellent source of information in helping to identify where other empty properties are, especially the problematic ones.

Spotting an empty property may not always be easy as many of them are well-maintained.

### There is a good chance that the property is empty if:

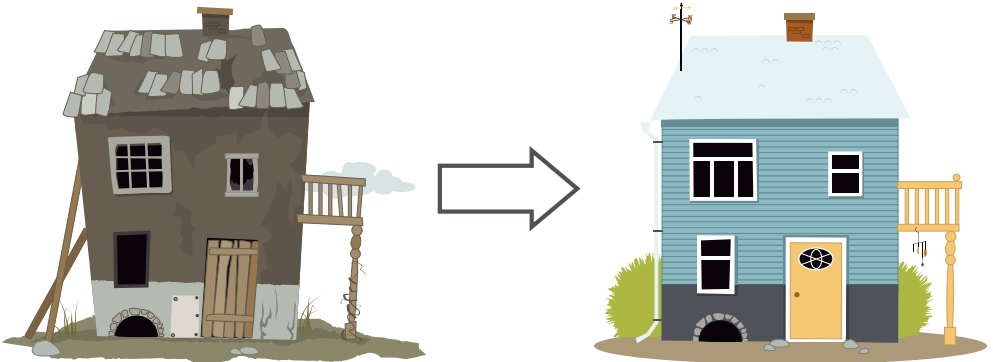
- the property is boarded up or has metal screens over the doors and windows
- no one is ever seen entering or leaving the property
- the front and back gardens are very overgrown
- there is rubbish dumped at the front or back of the property
- there are pests and vermin
- there is evidence of squatting or illegal activities
- the property looks derelict, with broken windows and doors, holes in the roof or a large amount of uncollected post built up

Your council will use a range of methods to encourage or require owners to bring their properties back into use. These will include:

- Advice and information on what options are available
- Financial assistance
- Boarding up
- Tracing owners
- Enforcement

**Unfortunately some cases can be very complex and it is important to understand that they can often take a long time (sometimes years) to resolve, however by reporting it, you have set the wheels in motion.**

In order to bring empty privately owned homes back into use, we need the help of landlords, owners and residents. To report an empty home near you, please contact your local council. Details on back page.



## **For further information contact your local authority**

### **Birmingham City Council**

Tel: 0121 303 1111

### **Bromsgrove District Council**

Tel: 01527 881188

### **Cannock Chase District Council**

Tel: 01543 462621

### **Coventry City Council**

Tel: 0808 583 4333

### **Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council**

Tel: 0300 555 2345

### **East Staffordshire Borough Council**

Tel: 01283 508000

### **Herefordshire County Council**

Tel: 01432 260000

### **Lichfield District Council**

Tel: 01543 308000

### **Malvern Hills District Council**

Tel: 01684 862151

### **Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council**

Tel: 01782 717717

### **North Warwickshire Borough Council**

Tel: 01827 715341

### **Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council**

Tel: 024 7637 6376

### **Redditch Borough Council**

Tel: 01527 64252

### **Rugby Borough Council**

Tel: 01788 533533

### **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

Tel: 0121 569 5232

### **Shropshire County Council**

Tel: 0345 678 9000

### **Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council**

Tel: 0121 704 6000

### **South Staffordshire Council**

Tel: 01902 696000

### **Stafford Borough Council**

Tel: 01785 619000

### **Staffordshire County Council**

Tel: 01283 508000

### **Staffordshire Moorlands District Council**

Tel: 0345 605 3010

### **Stoke-on-Trent City Council**

Tel: 01782 233344

### **Stratford-on-Avon District Council**

Tel: 01789 267575

### **Tamworth Borough Council**

Tel: 01827 709709

### **Telford and Wrekin Borough Council**

Tel: 01952 380000

### **Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council**

Tel: 01922 650000

### **Warwick District Council**

Tel: 01926 450000

### **Warwickshire County Council**

Tel: 01926 410410

### **Wolverhampton City Council**

Tel: 01902 551155

### **Worcester City Council**

Tel: 01902 551155

### **Wychavon District Council**

Tel: 01386 565000

### **Wyre Forest District Council**

Tel: 01562 732928