

Aberdeen City Empty Homes Policy

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1. Purpose Statement

- 1.1 This document sets out Aberdeen City Council's policy on bringing privately owned empty residential properties back into use. Aberdeen City Council is committed to bringing residential empty properties back into use in response to the negative impact unoccupied homes have on our communities. One of the strategic outcomes of the Aberdeen City Local Housing Strategy 2018-2023 is to provide an adequate supply of housing across all tenures and to make sure that homes are the right size, type and location that people want to live in with access to suitable services and facilities. Bringing empty homes back into use represents an important and progressive part of this.
- 1.2 As of January 2021, there are around 2,500 privately owned properties that have been empty for 12 months or more across the city. Aberdeen City Council employs an Empty Homes Officer who works with owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use. This is important because the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership estimates that the cost of a new build property far outweighs the cost of refurbishing an empty home as the infrastructure and local services are already in place when bringing an empty home back into use. Further, there is a multiplier effect on the economy in bringing an empty home back into use by restoring confidence in the local economy and property market.
- 1.3 The aim of this policy is to:
 - Work with owners of empty homes to bring them back into residential use.
 - Work with owners of empty homes to match existing housing supply with housing demand in the city through Matchmake to Rent and Matchmake to Sell schemes.
 - Ensure there is a coordinated approach between council services to tackle empty homes.
 - Continue to raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes in Aberdeen City.

2. Application and Scope Statement

- 2.1 This policy will affect owners of privately owned long-term empty properties across the city with a focus on priority properties. A long-term empty home is defined as being unoccupied for 12 months or more and liable for Council Tax.
- 2.2 Priority properties are those with any of the following:
 - Properties that have generated a complaint and have a negative impact on the neighbourhood.
 - Properties that have been empty for two years or more which are subject to the 100% Council Tax levy and are in Council Tax arrears.

- Properties that have been empty for two years or more and are subject to the 100% Council Tax levy.
 - Properties that are subject to enforcement action from any Council service.
 - Properties that are in the city centre. A key strategic aim is to promote living in the city centre as part of the City Centre Living Strategy.
 - Properties that are in poor condition and affect adjoining properties.
- 2.3 There are no specific exclusions to the policy. The Aberdeen City Empty Homes Policy applies equally to all long-term empty homes.

3. Responsibilities

- 3.1 The Chief Officer Strategic Place Planning is responsible for managing the Empty Homes Service.
- 3.2 Any instances of non-compliance with the policy should be reported to Chief Officer Strategic Place Planning.
- 3.3 Questions on the policy should be communicated to emptyhomes@aberdeencity.gov.uk which will then be directed to the Chief Officer Strategic Place Planning.

4. Supporting Procedures and Documentation

- 4.1 This policy supports the Aberdeen City Local Housing Strategy 2018 – 2023.
- 4.2 The Empty Homes Matchmaker Schemes support this policy. The matchmaker scheme to rent aims to introduce long-term empty homeowners who are looking to rent their empty property to people on Aberdeen City Council's housing waiting lists. The matchmaker scheme to sell aims to introduce long-term empty homeowners who are looking to sell their property with people who are looking to purchase an empty property. The Matchmake to Sell Scheme can be used whether the property requires some form of repair work, or the property is in a condition that is ready to move in.
- 4.3 Details on the matchmaker schemes can be found:
<https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/services/housing/advice-and-information-empty-home-owners/matchmaker-scheme>.

5. Policy Statement/s

5.1 Aberdeen City Council will identify and work with owners of a privately owned empty residential property.

5.2 There are several reasons why the Council might work with owners of empty properties:

- Neighbourhood impact.
- Location and condition of property.
- Length of time empty.
- Potential to meet strategic housing priorities.
- The recovery of public funds.

5.3 There are different methods of assistance available to owners to help them bring their empty property back into use and may include any of the following:

- Options for bespoke practical support, for example, assistance with the legislative requirements in relation to becoming a private landlord.
- Options for financial support, for example, VAT relief letters and information on Aberdeen City Council's Empty Homes Loan Fund detailed in the Aberdeen City Council Empty Homes Loan Fund Policy.
- Options for Empty Homes Service schemes, for example, the "Matchmake to Rent and Sell Schemes."

5.4 The Empty Homes Officer will assist with identifying owners who may be paying the wrong level of Council Tax. Information relating to Council Tax can be found: <https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/services/council-tax>.

5.5 Compulsory Purchase Orders

- Compulsory Purchase Orders are powers for a public body to acquire land or property from a third party compulsorily, usually under planning, highway or housing powers. CPO's can be an effective enforcement tool for unlocking housing supply, regeneration and development where there is a clear community benefit.
- In situations where there has been repeated and unsuccessful attempts of engagement with an owner, and the condition of the property continues to deteriorate to an unacceptable extent and adversely impact the community within that area, exercising Compulsory Purchase Order powers as a last resort will allow the Council to bring an empty property back into productive use.
- Compulsory Purchase Orders will only be used in such cases where the public benefits which will be achieved outweigh the private interests of the owner who has abandoned the property and has shown no indication that (s)he intends to take

responsibility for it. Compulsory Purchase Orders will be used in accordance with procedures.

6. Definitions

- **100% Additional Council Tax Levy:** An additional Council Tax levy charged to properties that have been empty for one year or more without being actively marketed for sale or rent and two years or more if being actively marketed.
- **CPO:** A CPO is an order that gives the authority the legal power to buy a persons' home or land.
- **Discretion:** A decision made by the Council Tax department to place a temporary hold on charging a 100% additional Council Tax charge where the owner of the empty property is actively engaging with the Empty Homes Officer and working to bring the empty property back into use.
- **Empty Home:** A privately owned residential property that has been empty for 6 months or more and liable for Council Tax.
- **Long-term Empty Home:** A privately owned residential property that has been empty for 12 months or more and liable for Council Tax.
- **Owner:** The legal owner, executor or legally appointed representative of the empty property in question.

7. Risk

- 7.1 This policy aims to ensure that empty homes are brought back into use and owners in Aberdeen have access to the Empty Homes Service. This policy seeks to reduce risks and enhance the Council's reputation by working with owners of empty private residential properties to ensure that the homes are brought back into use.
- 7.2 Without this policy owners of empty private residential properties would not receive support to help them to bring the property back into use. Consequently, empty homes may attract anti-social behaviour and/or criminal activity and have a detrimental impact on the surrounding community and impact the Council's reputation. The implementation of this policy will ensure that these risks are monitored and mitigated through the consistent implementation of this policy. Implementation of this policy will be monitored by the Housing Strategy Team with any emerging risks escalated to the Chief Officer Strategic Place Planning for action.
- 7.4 There are no unintended effects, consequences or risks envisaged from the implementation of this policy.

7.5 PREVENT

- The UK Government's PREVENT Strategy requires local authorities to ensure that publicly owned resources do not provide a platform for extremists and are not used to disseminate extremist views. Frontline staff who engage with the public should understand what radicalisation means and why people may be vulnerable to it. The Empty Homes Officer and other relevant staff have been trained on the PREVENT Strategy and will report any concerns regarding suspicious activity for action.

8. Policy Performance

8.1 Housing is an important resource, and the main aim of the empty homes policy is to work with owners of long-term empty private residential properties to increase housing supply. Performance will be measured by:

- (a) the number of empty homes across the city.
- (b) the number of long-term empty homes brought back into use each financial year.

8.2 The report(s) are produced by the Empty Homes Officer and distributed to appropriate officers on a quarterly basis showing current performance and year to date information so that officers can monitor and scrutinise current performance and trends against targets and take appropriate action.

8.3 An annual update on affordable housing is provided to City Growth and Resources Committee each year. The number of empty homes brought back into use will form part of this report.

8.4 An annual update on empty homes will be reported to Operational Delivery Committee which will include recommendations for any relevant amendments or corrections relating to this policy.

9. Design and Delivery

9.1 This policy and its supporting documentation are aligned to supporting the delivery of LOIP outcomes specifically:

- **Stretch Outcome 1** - 10% increase in employment across priority and volume growth sectors by 2026. Carrying out repairs and maintenance to homes contributes to the local economy by keeping people in work.
- **Stretch Outcome 11** - Healthy life expectancy (time lived in good health) is five years longer by 2026. Living in good quality housing contributes to improved health and wellbeing outcomes.
- **Stretch Outcome 14** - Addressing climate change by reducing Aberdeen's carbon emissions by 42.5% by 2026 and adapting to the impacts of our changing climate. It

takes more than 50 tonnes of CO2 to build an average UK house, therefore bringing empty homes back into use also contributes to carbon reduction through making better use of existing housing stock.

- 9.2 The Stretch Outcomes break down our overall vision for the Economy, Younger People, Older People and Place of Aberdeen into manageable thematic programmes of work. The Empty Homes Service contributes to Economy and Place of these thematic programmes.

10. Housekeeping and Maintenance

- 10.1 The policy will be reviewed annually and when there are legislative changes and updates, the policy will be amended.

11. Communication and Distribution

- 11.1 The policy has been drafted with involvement from the Empty Homes Working Group which includes representation from Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and Aberdeen City Council's Environmental Health, Legal & Governance, Private Sector Housing, Housing Access, Energy Team, Finance, Council Tax and Building Standards teams.
- 11.2 The policy will be made available for intended users on the council website and will be cascaded to staff within the appropriate services. If services users request it, we can provide the documents in other formats such as different languages or fonts.

12. Information Management

- 12.1 Information generated by the application of this policy will be managed in accordance with the Council's Corporate Information Policy and Supporting Procedures. The privacy notice can be found:
<https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/your-data-empty-homes-privacy-notice>.