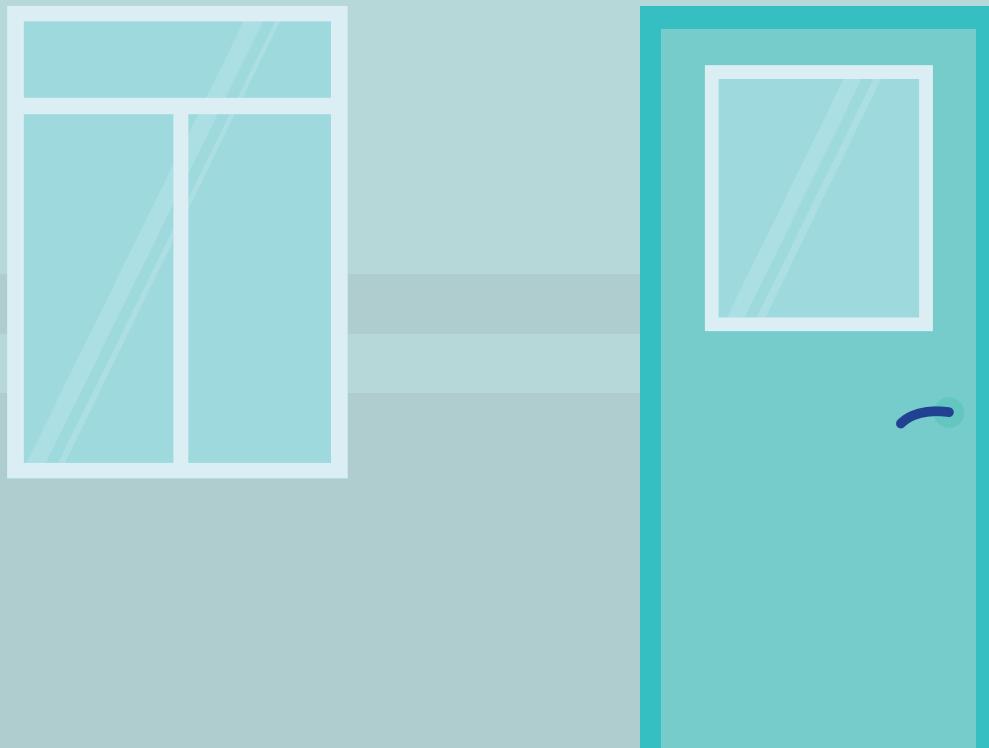


# Empty Homes Strategy

2023-2028



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## Introduction

Arun District Council presents their third Empty Homes Strategy. This will review the positive work that has been achieved since our first and second strategy (2012-2017&2018-2023). It also outlines the work we will continue to do to address the problem with long term empty properties within our district.

This Empty Homes Strategy provides a revised plan for the next five years and what we are consistently doing to tackle the problem with empty homes within the area. The document demonstrates our corporate approach and commitment in dealing with long-term empty homes and ensures we and other departments within the council are working together in bringing these much-needed properties back into use.

As of October 2021 there were 385 properties compared to October 2017 when there were 408 in our district that were unoccupied and unfurnished. This figure does not include second homes, holiday homes, homes where the owner is receiving care elsewhere or homes where the owner has passed away. In line with central government guidelines the intention is for the council to work with **all** empty homeowners to bring their properties back into use. To start with, our focus is on the properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished as these are a wasted resource that could provide much-needed homes for local people.

# Why do we need an Empty Homes Strategy?

The Arun district comprises of three towns, Arundel, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton all of which are popular places to live and work. As of August 2022 our records show there are 77,049 residential properties with a population of 164,800 (2021 census). Empty homes within any area of the country represent a wasted resource especially in the current climate where housing needs are critical and properties are built to be lived in and used as a home for individuals or larger families.

The Housing Options Team has a current register of 1465 families (September 2022) in need of council housing, compared to 1357 families (March 2017). The number of long-term empty homes in the district equates to a third of the number of families on the housing register. Reusing empty properties, flats over shops or derelict units also increases the housing supply and improves neighbourhoods.

If properties are allowed to remain unused and neglected, they can begin to cause issues within the community including:

- attracting anti-social behaviour, vandalism and arson
- fly tipping , accumulations of waste and pests
- adverse possession - when a person who does not have the legal title to land (or property) and occupies the land without the permission of the legal owner
- causing damage to neighbouring properties
- being an eyesore
- a cost to the council in lost council tax revenue
- wasted resource of a capital or rental income

This strategy sets out how Arun District Council will continue to work with empty home owners in order to bring their home back into habitable use and continue to reduce empty homes as a wasted resource on the district.

Before



After works completed by the property owner



## What is an 'empty home'?

In Arun an empty home refers to non-Arun District Council owned residential properties that have remained unoccupied for at least six months. Empty home owners will continue to pay Council Tax at the normal rate, unless a Council Tax exemption applies.

As of April 2022 the council exercised the power afforded to them, under The Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings charged) Act 2018, to introduce a premium on homes left empty as shown in the table below:

<b>Length of time residential property has been 'empty'</b>	<b>Council Tax additional premium</b>
Empty for up to 2 years	0% (you will pay normal council tax charges)
Empty for between 2 and 5 years	100%
Empty for between 5 and 10 years	200%
Empty for over 10 years	300%

Information regarding empty home owners council tax is provided to the dedicated full time Empty Homes Officer by the Revenues Team. Permissions were introduced in the Local Government Act 2003 to enable Council Tax data to be used for the sole purpose of bringing empty properties back into use. **It is important Council Tax records are up to date as a home may be recorded as empty following refurbishments, sales, probate etc. when it is actually occupied.**

Empty homes are not always easy to identify, a rundown property with an overgrown garden may appear empty but is actually someone's home. On the flip side a well-kept, tidy property could have been vacant for several years. The property needs to be unfurnished and not lived in, therefore someone's second/holiday home is not classed as an empty home.

## What are we trying to achieve?

- our aim is trying to reduce the number of homes on the district that are empty for more than six months
- improve the existing built environment by bringing derelict land and buildings that are uninhabitable back to occupied use
- returning unoccupied residential properties to use
- improvement and re-occupation of 'problem' long term empty properties
- by using existing empty homes on the district by bringing them back into habitable use in order to help reduce the need for potential greenfield developments
- contribute towards the district's stock of good quality affordable housing

## How will it be achieved?

- since 2017 Arun District Council has had a full time Empty Homes Officer and a part-time Technical Support Officer was appointed in 2022 both are dedicated to Empty homes work. They liaise with the Revenues Team on a monthly basis to obtain a database of empty homes and their owners
- monthly mailshots to all empty home owners within the district to ensure records are up to date with the most current information
- to encourage empty home owners to engage with the local authority who will provide advice, guidance and financial assistance regarding ways to bring the property back into use
- carrying out inspections to ensure properties are free from category one hazards as assessed under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System
- consistently working with long term empty property owners to encourage their engagement with the council to bring their property back into use
- where informal action has been unsuccessful then a range of enforcement action maybe taken to facilitate re-occupation of the properties

## Why are there empty homes?

There are various reasons why properties become empty. Understanding these reasons allows for a range of different approaches to be adopted to tackle the problem. Some of these reasons or causes include:

- abandonment, sometimes due to age, or ill-health of owners or family disagreements
- property inherited – owner lacks knowledge or inclination to deal with the property
- property unfurnished and involved in a protracted probate case
- owners unaware of options to bring property back into use
- owner may not be in a position to finance refurbishment or repair costs
- speculative purchase by an owner who lacks funds to redevelop and/or skills and knowledge to manage the project
- properties abandoned by the owner-occupiers or repossessed by finance institutions
- empty residential property above shops – unsuitable means of access, security problems for the business property, reluctant freeholders or lease restrictions
- properties bought for the purpose of site assembly and left empty pending refurbishment or redevelopment
- owner just wants to have an empty home

The council will use existing information held on empty homes. The council may use other means to identify potential empty homes via information from the electoral register so these can also be bought back into use under the strategy.

An empty homes database has been maintained by the Empty Homes Officer since 2014 and includes details of properties which have been identified as empty for six months or more as well as the long-term empty properties which are prioritised and targeted by the council to return them to use.

The Empty Homes Officer will ensure that the empty homes database is maintained and updated on a weekly basis with any relevant/new information received being passed to the relevant team to ensure transparency throughout the council.

## How many empty homes are there?

The first table below gives an idea of some of the reasons why homes are empty and the number of these that are recorded within Arun as of August 2022.

A number of the categories are excluded from the empty homes remit as they still remain someone's primary residence i.e. the empty home owner is in hospital, prison or receiving care elsewhere, however if a member of the public is concerned about a property – report it via the [online form here](#) and it can be looked into.

Primary focus for the next five years will be on any home that has been recorded as unoccupied and unfurnished for 12 months or more.

An idea of empty home figures on the district can be seen in the second table below.

<b>Reason for being unoccupied</b>	<b>Number of homes</b>
Second homes or holiday homes (furnished)	1665
Unoccupied and unfurnished for 12-24 months	254
Unoccupied and unfurnished for 2-5 years	87
Unoccupied and unfurnished for 5-10 years	18
Unoccupied and unfurnished for 10+ years	5
Information provided by council tax records 2022	

The table to the right shows the empty homes figures for the financial years of 2017/2018 to 2020/2021.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of empty homes in Arun</b>
2017/2018	398
2018/2019	426
2019/2020	540
2020/2021	385

# Our approach

## Engage

The starting point for us is to 'engage' with the empty home owner and where possible talk to them directly. A meeting is sometimes more helpful to an empty home owner as it's a more personal approach, however this is not always possible. We aim to offer helpful information to homeowners which explains how the owner can bring their property back into use.

Each empty home is different and there are many reasons why they become empty. These reasons can be sensitive and it is important to understand all different circumstances. However, it is also important to be committed to the principles of our strategy and recognise that to the community an empty home is a wasted resource or annoyance.

Owners of empty homes should be aware that while the council would prefer to work with them amicably, and on an informal basis, more formal enforcement action may be taken. Under the Housing Act 2004 the Council is required to keep housing conditions within their area under review and if a Category 1 hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System is identified the Council is under a duty to act. The Council must discharge its statutory duties.

## Encourage

Every empty home that is brought back into use effectively increases the housing supply in the area and provides a home for somebody. The council offers advice on ways to bring empty homes back into use which can be viewed via the Empty Homes page on Arun District Council's website [www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties](http://www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties). Ultimately if homeowners are engaging, provide reasonable timeframes, are transparent and not

avoiding officers or work needed, then bringing the home back into use can be monitored rather than enforced.

When empty home owners are struggling financially to bring their home back into use the council has secured funding for different types of financial assistance. This can be in the form of a non-repayable loan, an interest free loan or a loan to sell, more information on the financial packages Arun District Council offer can be found on the website [www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties](http://www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties)

More information on renting your home can be found through our website  
[www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties](http://www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties)

Rent your property to students, more information on this can be obtained by emailing Chichester University direct at [privatesector@chi.ac.uk](mailto:privatesector@chi.ac.uk)

As part of the conditions of the financial assistance the empty home owner will be required to join the Arun and Chichester Landlord Accreditation Scheme which is run by Chichester University. More information can be found on the website [www.arun.gov.uk/landlord-accreditation-scheme](http://www.arun.gov.uk/landlord-accreditation-scheme)

The YMCA also offer funding to refurbish empty homes in return for a set leasing scheme, with guaranteed rents, Arun District Council may also be able to contribute financially towards this. More information can be obtained on the website [www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties](http://www.arun.gov.uk/empty-properties)

Properties that have been empty for two years or more can benefit from a VAT reduction to 5% and in some cases there is zero VAT charged for carrying out works to bring it back into use. More

## Our approach (continued)

information can be accessed at [Buildings and construction \(VAT Notice 708\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/buildings-and-construction-vat-notice-708)

Empty home owners may also find reliable trades people through

[www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk](http://www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk)

[www.checkatrade.com](http://www.checkatrade.com) or

[www.mybuilder.com](http://www.mybuilder.com)

A letter confirming how long the property has been empty for can also be provided by your Empty Homes Officer by emailing [empty.homes@arun.gov.uk](mailto:empty.homes@arun.gov.uk)

### Enforce

Enforcement action undertaken in relation to empty homes is designed to ensure the reoccupation and/or refurbishment of an empty home. This will include the service of enforcement notices under a range of legislation available to the council to bring the empty home and associated land back into occupied use.

Enforcement action will be taken where a residential home has been empty for more than one year, or earlier if deemed appropriate. Action can also be taken if a home is causing nuisance, is dangerous or seriously dilapidated. It will also be taken when it is considered that the home will not be brought back into use unless enforcement action is used, and on empty homes where the owner hasn't co-operated with us. Local authorities have a number of ways to enforce which can be used when insufficient progress is made by the owner, or the owner does not engage.

Enforcement powers are available to the Empty Homes Officer to address any immediate risks posed by a problem property, to improve an empty home's appearance or to secure an empty home. If the owner does not take the action needed to remedy the problem, then the local authority may carry out work in default. If remedial works in default become necessary, the cost of the works and any other associated costs incurred by the Council will become a debt owed to the Council. If the debt remains unpaid the Council will enter a local land charge on the Council's Local Land Charges Register.

The Council has statutory powers to enforce the sale of a property where debts are owing to the Council, and a local land charge has been entered on the Council's Local Land Charges Register.

### Enforcement Powers

The Council has a number of enforcement powers that it can utilise to deal with empty homes. These include but are not limited to:

1. Improvement Notices (Housing Act 2004)
2. Demolition Orders (Housing Act 1985)
3. Prevention of Damage by Pests Notices (Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949)
4. Compulsory Purchase Orders (Housing Act 1985)
5. Empty Dwelling Management Order (Housing Act 2004)

## Target for Arun

We will continue to focus on all empty homes within the district with our target increasing from 17 in 2014 to 30 in 2018 to 50 from 2022. This reflects the number of empty homes bought back into use each year through direct intervention of the Empty Homes Officer.

Year	Target	Actual
2018/2019	30	82
2019/2020	30	67
2020/2021	30	76
2021/2022	50	141

The table (right) shows the number of Empty Homes which have been brought back into use through direct intervention by Arun District Council in the last 5 years.

## Promoting the strategy

The Empty Homes Strategy will be publicised locally and on the council website to promote awareness.

The general public is encouraged to advise the council of empty homes of which they are aware and property owners are encouraged to make their unused home available.

An e-form was launched on the council website in 2012 which enables members of the public to ['Report an Empty home'](#) to the council.



Arun's empty homes activity will help to focus upon the specialist work to deal with problem cases; particularly where there is no other party with the legal power to deal with a problem empty home or where a homeowner refuses to co-operate.

**Empty homes – a wasted resource.**