

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

26 June 2025

### Part 1 - Public

#### Matters for Information



Cabinet Member	Robin Betts, Cabinet Member for Housing, Environment and Economy
Responsible Officer	Eleanor Hoyle, Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health
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#### Empty Homes

### 1 Summary and Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report updates Members on empty homes work including current figures on empty homes across the borough, trends, comparison with other Kent local authorities, recent activities and the new Empty Homes Officer post.

### 2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area

- 2.1 Improving housing options for local people whilst protecting our outdoor areas of importance.
- 2.1.1 Empty homes can be a wasted resource and bringing them back into use adds to the housing availability within Tonbridge & Malling, potentially providing options for some of the customers we work with in the housing service.

### 3 Introduction and Background

- 3.1 Members have requested an update on our work on empty homes.

#### Current data and empty property premiums

- 3.2 The Council does not have a dedicated empty homes system, so data is simply extracted from the council tax system at a snapshot in time. The council tax system records the number of days the dwellings are empty, and this can range from 1 day to more than 1,000 days.
- 3.3 Properties that are empty do generally have to pay council tax. Housing associations with charitable objectives can be granted a "Class B" exemption for a

maximum of six months provided that the property will be occupied again in accordance with those charitable objectives within that time.

- 3.4 Properties that are empty for longer than 12 months (other than in certain exceptional circumstances) attract a premium charge:
- more than one year (more than two years before 1 April 2024) but less than five years –charged the full council tax plus an extra 100 per cent
  - over five years –charged the full council tax plus an extra 200 per cent
  - over ten years –charged the full council tax plus an extra 300 per cent
- 3.5 At **Annex 1** Members will note a listing which shows the number of properties in each parished or unparished area of the council broken down by duration category. This snapshot was taken on 15 May 2025. The duration categories are:
- a. 0 to 6 months
  - b. 6 to 12 months
  - c. 1 to 2 years
  - d. 2 to 3 years
  - e. Over 3 years
- 3.6 As stated above, any property in duration categories c) through to e) will be paying a premium, unless there are exceptional circumstances.
- 3.7 Properties in duration category a) are generally those properties that are in the process of “changing hands” due to house sales or tenancy changes. Often a property can be empty for a short period whilst ownership or tenancies change over.
- 3.8 Members will note from the Annex that in total, covering all durations, at 15 May 2025 there were 867 empty properties across the borough. 263 (30.3%) of these properties were in duration categories for which premiums are payable.
- 3.9 Similar snapshots were taken on 7 February 2024 and 18 July 2024. On 7 February 2024, there were 950 empty properties across the borough of which 299 (31.5 %) were in duration categories for which premiums are payable. This did include properties at St George’s Court, Wrotham which have since been demolished and removed from the council tax system. On 18 July 2024, there were 870 empty properties across the borough of which 303 (34.8%) were in duration categories for which premiums are payable.

- 3.10 Members will note that there is a positive direction of travel in respect of the total number of empty properties, and the number of long-term empty properties has also reduced.
- 3.11 In terms of the banding of empty properties, the below table shows the distribution of bands for the 867 empty properties as at 15 May 2025. Members will note that over 70% are in Bands A-D.

<b>Council Tax Band</b>	<b>Number empty at 15/5/25</b>	<b>% of total empty</b>
A	61	7.0%
B	112	12.9%
C	282	32.5%
D	160	18.5%
E	119	13.7%
F	70	8.1%
G	57	6.6%
H	6	0.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### Comparison Data

- 3.12 The table below provides data on the number of long-term (over 6 months) vacant dwellings as at October 2024 across Kent and the change from the previous year. This is based on Council Tax information and collated by MHCLG.

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of long-term vacant dwellings as at October 2024</b>	<b>Change from October 2023</b>
Ashford	697	+369*
Canterbury	953	-14
Dartford	253	-14
Dover	762	-44
Folkestone & Hythe	943	+116
Gravesham	285	+61
Maidstone	624	+10

Sevenoaks	363	-8
Swale	501	+17
Thanet	1,185	+42
Tonbridge & Malling	413	-76
Tunbridge Wells	521	+9

\*It is understood that a removal of a discount class accounted for some of this increase in Ashford.

- 3.13 Members will note that Tonbridge & Malling had the fourth lowest number of long-term empty properties in Kent. Tonbridge & Malling also had the largest decrease in number when compared to 2023. It is important to note that the decrease is not just empty homes being brought back into use, it also includes any removal of properties from the Council Tax system e.g. demolition.

#### Clarion Housing Group voids

- 3.14 In May 2025 Clarion Housing Group reported that they had 113 void properties within Tonbridge & Malling. This included 97 general needs properties and 16 within their LiveSmart schemes. This figure has remained consistent at this level now for approximately two years and although it will consist of some different properties at each reporting date the continuing level of voids has been a concern. This issue has been raised at Regional Director level, and they have fed back that there have been considerable new resources put into Clarion void works teams and the Tonbridge & Malling area has specifically been targeted for some of this new resource. There was also a further update in May 2025 of a new “unlocking voids” plan which is due to be rolled out across the Tonbridge & Malling area after success elsewhere. Further details on this plan have been sought. In addition, Clarion are due to provide a breakdown of the length of time the properties have been void to aid further understanding of the issue.

#### Recent work

- 3.15 Officers from the Housing Improvement and the Revenue and Benefits teams have undertaken visits to empty properties that were recorded on the Council Tax system as empty to check status and this has enabled the data held to be updated. As part of this work and where an empty property was identified any opportunity to offer advice and support to owners on bringing the property back into use was taken.
- 3.16 Officers from the Housing Improvement Team have continued to respond to any complaints about issues at empty homes and sought to resolve where feasible and appropriate.

- 3.17 Officers from the Housing Improvement Team have continued to liaise with other Kent local authorities via the empty homes forum and have been progressing a potential grant through the KCC “No Use Empty” scheme.

#### Empty Homes Officer

- 3.18 Members approved a two-year fixed term Empty Homes Officer post in 2024. Unfortunately, several rounds of recruitment have proved unsuccessful. A more recent recruitment process has however led to an internal secondment opportunity being requested. This has been agreed, and the successful candidate should take up the position shortly.
- 3.19 The establishment of a fixed term Empty Homes Officer post will allow a real focus on this work. The post will work within the Housing Improvement Team, reporting to the Housing Improvement Manager and sit alongside the Housing EHO resource who will support with enforcement. The role will work closely with Council Tax colleagues on data and approach to empty homes. A key part of their role will be to liaise with our Registered Provider partners over any empty properties they may have and seek to bring them back into use as quickly as possible. Additional expert support will be available from the “No Use Empty” scheme Officers at KCC and the post will promote the scheme where appropriate.

### **4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 4.1 The Empty Homes Officer post is being funded from the Housing Assistance reserve. A budget of £30,000 to sit alongside this post to fund any work that enables the facilitation of empty homes being brought back into use, for example, legal expertise, mediation, survey work, promotional work has also been agreed.
- 4.2 There may be occasions when bringing an empty property back into use will negatively impact on Council Tax income as there may be a loss in a premium payment.

### **5 Risk Assessment**

- 5.1 None

### **6 Legal Implications**

- 6.1 There is no statutory duty to have an empty homes resource however some of the issues that arise from empty homes fall within our housing related statutory duties e.g. housing conditions, nuisance, pest control.

### **7 Consultation and Communications**

- 7.1 The Empty Homes Officer will work with the media team to promote the work on reducing the number of empty homes including the various campaigns that take place.

## 8 Implementation

- 8.1 Work on tackling empty homes is already undertaken within the Housing Improvement Team and monitoring of empty homes data is undertaken within the Revenue and Benefits team. The new Empty Homes Officer post will add capacity and impetus to this and allow a more focussed approach.
- 8.2 An update report to Members will be provided in early 2026.

## 9 Cross Cutting Issues

### 9.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

- 9.1.1 Climate change advice has not been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

### 9.2 Equalities and Diversity

- 9.2.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

### 9.3 Other If Relevant

- None

Background Papers	None
Annex 1	Empty Homes data as at 15 May 2025