

Cabinet Member

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## **Empty Homes**

### **1 Summary and Purpose of Report**

1.1 This report provides Members with an update on empty homes work, including current figures, trends, recent activities and the work of the Empty Homes Officer post.

### **2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area**

2.1 Improving housing options for local people whilst protecting our outdoor areas of importance.

2.2 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 the Council work with in the housing service.

### **3 Introduction and Background**

3.1 Members have requested an update on the empty homes work since the last [report of 26 June 2025](#). This update report should be read in conjunction with the same.

#### Council tax data and empty property premiums

3.2 Empty properties are generally liable for Council Tax. However, housing associations with charitable objectives may qualify for a "Class B" exemption for up to six months, provided the property will be reoccupied within that period in line with those charitable objectives.

3.3 Properties that remain empty for more than 12 months (except in certain exceptional circumstances) are subject to an additional premium on top of the standard Council Tax charge:

- Over 1 year but less than 5 years (previously over 2 years before 1 April 2024): standard Council Tax plus a 100% premium
- Over 5 years: standard Council Tax plus a 200% premium
- Over 10 years: standard Council Tax plus a 300% premium

3.4 Properties that have been empty for less than six months are typically those undergoing a change in ownership or tenancy. It is common for a property to remain vacant for a short period while sales are completed, or tenancy arrangements are finalised.

3.5 As at 16 December 2025 there were 995 empty properties across the borough. This includes all properties from those empty for one day through to long term empty properties.

3.6 Similar snapshots were taken on 15 May 2025, 7 February 2024 and 18 July 2024 showing 867, 950 and 870 empty properties across the borough respectively.

Clarion Housing Group voids

3.7 At the end of June 2025, Clarion Housing Group reported that they had 121 void properties within Tonbridge & Malling. This included 111 general needs properties and 10 within their LiveSmart schemes.

3.8 At the end of September 2025, Clarion Housing Group reported that they had 117 void properties within Tonbridge & Malling. This included 106 general needs properties and 11 within their LiveSmart schemes.

3.9 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.

3.10 Members will recall this issue was raised at Regional Director level, and Clarion have fed back that there have been considerable new resources put into their void works teams, and the Tonbridge & Malling area has specifically been targeted for some of this new resource.

3.11 The Council continues to monitor this situation and work with Clarion to reduce the level of voids.

### Comparison Data

3.12 The table below sets out the number of long-term vacant dwellings (defined as empty for more than six months) across Kent, comparing figures reported to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in October 2024 and October 2025 as part of the Council Taxbase statistical return.

3.13 These figures highlight significant variation between authorities, with some areas experiencing sharp increases in empty homes while Ashford have achieved notable reductions.

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of long-term vacant dwellings as at October 2024</b>	<b>Number of long-term vacant dwellings as at October 2025</b>	<b>Change from October 2024</b>	<b>Percentage difference between 2024 and 2025</b>
Ashford	697	378	-319	Decrease of 45.77%
Canterbury	953	1,073	120	Increase of 12.59%
Dartford	253	493	240	Increase of 94.86%
Dover	762	838	76	Increase of 9.97%
Folkestone & Hythe	943	1,034	91	Increase of 9.65%
Gravesham	285	362	77	Increase of 27.02%
Maidstone	624	709	85	Increase of 13.62%
Sevenoaks	363	699	336	Increase of 92.56%
Swale	501	579	78	Increase of 15.57%
Thanet	1,185	1,454	269	Increase of 22.70%

Tonbridge & Malling	413	484	71	Increase of 17.19%
Tunbridge Wells	521	626	105	Increase of 20.15%

- 3.14 Ashford (-45.77%), Dartford (+94.86%), and Sevenoaks (+92.56%) recorded percentage changes in long-term empty homes that are substantially different from the rest of Kent. At this stage, The Council has not established the reasons for these differences. Further enquiries have been made with these councils to understand the situation better.
- 3.15 To provide a more representative picture of the overall trend across Kent, these three councils have been excluded from the calculation of the county-wide average. Based on the remaining nine districts, the amended average percentage change is +16.50%, compared to the figure of +24.18% when all councils were included.
- 3.16 This approach ensures that the headline figure reflects the general pattern across most districts, while acknowledging that further work is needed to clarify the position in the three councils identified above. It shows that Tonbridge & Malling is broadly in line with the average increase across Kent.
- 3.17 This pattern reflects the national picture, as confirmed by the latest Council Taxbase statistics published in November 2025, which report that the number of empty homes in England has risen for the fourth consecutive year.
- 3.18 The upward trend underlines the need for a proactive approach to tackling empty homes.

#### Empty Homes Officer

- 3.19 Members approved a two-year fixed term Empty Homes Officer post in 2024 within the Housing Improvement Team, reporting to the Housing Improvement Manager and sitting alongside the Housing EHO resource who will support with enforcement.
- 3.20 The postholder commenced on 23 June 2025 on a two-year internal secondment basis. This role provides dedicated capacity to focus on empty homes work, liaising with Council Tax colleagues and Registered Providers, and promoting the KCC 'No Use Empty' scheme.
- 3.21 The Empty Homes Officer works closely with Council Tax colleagues on data and approach to empty homes.

3.22 The Empty Homes Officer is liaising with the Council's main Registered Provider partners over any empty properties they may have and seek to bring them back into use as quickly as possible.

#### Recent work

3.23 Since the appointment of the Empty Homes Officer on 23 June 2025, initial work focused on reconciling and improving data quality across the Council. System changes were implemented. Information on enforcement actions has been centralised, and correspondence has been reviewed in line with the national empty homes' toolkit. The Council's web pages have been updated to include more robust information about reporting empty homes.

3.24 The Council have engaged expert support from KCC's No Use Empty (NUE) team and Empty Homes Network (EHN) to assist with reviewing our data and approach to tackling empty homes.

3.25 Regular meetings have been re-established to coordinate activities. These meetings include senior representatives from Housing, Council Tax, Environmental Health and Planning teams.

3.26 The Council have engaged the Council's media team, who are working on a campaign to raise awareness.

3.27 The Council have explored authorising Housing Environmental Health Officers to use existing ASB powers to tackle problematic owners. The team has also engaged with other professionals in the field to share best practice, including enforcement around empty homes.

3.28 The Empty Homes Officer is responding to complaints about problematic empty homes and coordinating the Council's efforts to tackle these issues.

3.29 The Empty Homes Officer has continued to liaise with other Kent local authorities via the empty homes forum and has been progressing a potential grant through the KCC "No Use Empty" scheme.

#### Future work

3.30 From 1 April 2026, a new performance target will be introduced (within the Council's Annual Service Delivery Plan) with an annual target for the Council to bring 18 properties within the borough back into use through direct intervention. This target reflects the Council's ongoing commitment to reducing the number of long-term empty homes, improving housing availability, and supporting community regeneration.

3.31 Achieving this goal will involve proactive engagement with property owners, enforcement of relevant legislation where necessary, and the use of available powers and incentives to return vacant properties to occupation.

3.32 Meeting this target will contribute to addressing housing need, increasing the supply of habitable homes, and enhancing the overall vitality of our neighbourhoods.

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

- 4.1 The Empty Homes Officer post is being funded from the Housing Assistance reserve.
- 4.2 A budget of £30,000 sits 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. There has been no spend to date against the £30,000 facilitation budget.
- 4.3 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**

- 7 There is no statutory duty to have an empty homes resource; however, some issues arising from empty homes fall within housing-related statutory duties.

#### **8 Consultation and Communications**

- 8.1 The Empty Homes Officer is working with the Council's media team to promote the work on reducing the number of empty homes including the various campaigns that take place.

#### **9 Implementation**

- 9.1 Work on tackling empty homes is undertaken within the Housing Improvement Team led by the Empty Homes Officer, 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.

#### **10 Cross Cutting Issues**

- 10.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

- 10.1.1 None.

- 10.2 Equalities and Diversity

10.2.1 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.

10.3 Other If Relevant

- None

Background Papers	Overview and Scrutiny Committee report of 26 June 2025, titled Empty Homes
Annexes	