

Maidstone Borough Council

Housing Services

Empty Homes Plan 2013 – 2015

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Contents

Aims and priorities.....	2
Why bring empty homes back into use?.....	3
Why do homes become empty?.....	4
The position in Maidstone.....	4
Priority 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the council’s interventions.....	7
Priority 2 – Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives...10	
Priority 3 – Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.....	13
How will we return empty homes back into use?.....	16
Empty homes action plan.....	16

Aims and priorities

Maidstone Borough Council's Strategic Plan identifies three key priorities – one of these being for Maidstone to be a decent place to live. To support this priority, the council aims to increase the supply of housing through reducing the number of empty homes within the borough. Empty homes have the potential to impact negatively on both the local neighbourhood but also on the wider housing market and by ensuring long-term empty homes are minimised the council will contribute to its priority for Maidstone to have a growing economy.

This Empty Homes Plan forms part of the Council's over-arching Housing Strategy and replaces the previous Empty Homes Strategy which was published in 2007 (and subsequently updated in 2010).

This plan sets out in greater detail our priorities and how we intend to accomplish them. It also details to local Councillors, local residents, and our stakeholders how we will work to prevent properties becoming 'long-term' empty and how we will bring back into use homes that have been previously left empty.

This plan also sets out 3 key priorities to support empty homes being brought back into use across the borough:

Priority 1

- Minimise the number of empty homes through the council's interventions

Priority 2

- Maximise opportunities for returning homes back to use through initiatives and incentives

Priority 3

- Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use

Why bring empty homes back into use?

Homes that lie empty and unoccupied are clearly a wasted resource. This is especially the case given the current high demand for all forms of housing and the impact on households who are unable to locate appropriate housing for their needs. Empty homes also detract from Maidstone being a decent place in which to live.

Empty homes can also place a burden on local neighbourhoods through:

- § detracting from the visual amenity of the local area;
- § encouraging vandalism, anti-social behaviour and other criminal activity;
- § attracting vermin where gardens become unkempt and overgrown, or are subject to fly-tipping;
- § providing harbourage for pigeons where windows and/or the roof structure is insecure;
- § creating concerns for immediate neighbours due to lack of general maintenance and disrepair, and;
- § being targeted by squatters.

Empty homes can also be attributed to fuelling a 'spiral of decline' in a local area where a sense of neglect discourages inward investment and new households are dissuaded from moving into the neighbourhood, whether they are seeking to rent or own a home.

Why do homes become empty?

Homes become empty for a variety of reasons, with many routinely becoming empty as an inevitable consequence of being sold, and are soon re-occupied. Other homes however, become empty for a wide range of other reasons, including:

- § the owner is unable to organise extensive building works that are required;
- § the property is subject to probate;
- § the property has been inherited and the beneficiary is unaware of their options;
- § the owner has moved into a nursing home, residential care, or other supported housing;
- § the property is subject to redevelopment proposals;
- § the owner has moved away or abroad;
- § the options for bringing the home back into use are not understood by the owner;
- § the owner perceives that renting to tenants is not appropriate, and;
- § the owner is waiting for an increase in its capital value.

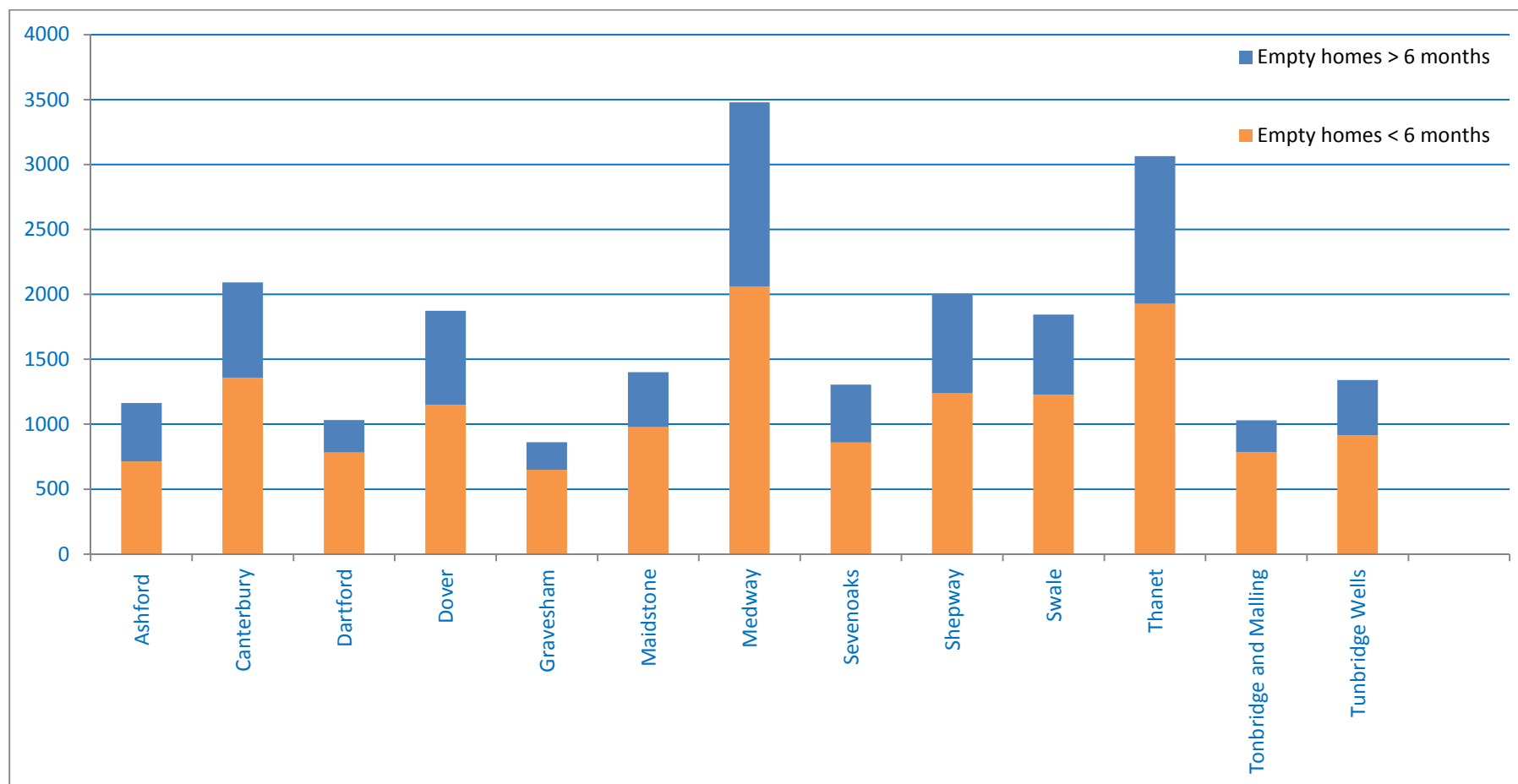
Due to the wide and varied issues that influence empty homes it is considered that those homes that are empty for longer than 6 months are considered 'long-term' empty homes that warrant additional support to bring back into use as these are the properties where the housing market will not, in itself, provide the impetus necessary to resolve the position.

The position in Maidstone

There are some 710,000 empty homes in England, of which around 259,000 have been empty for over 6 months (DCLG, November 2012) with almost 100,000 of the total number of empty homes being found in the South East region. Within Kent, there are around 22,500 empty homes, and almost 8,000 of these have been empty for more than 6 months (see Table 1).

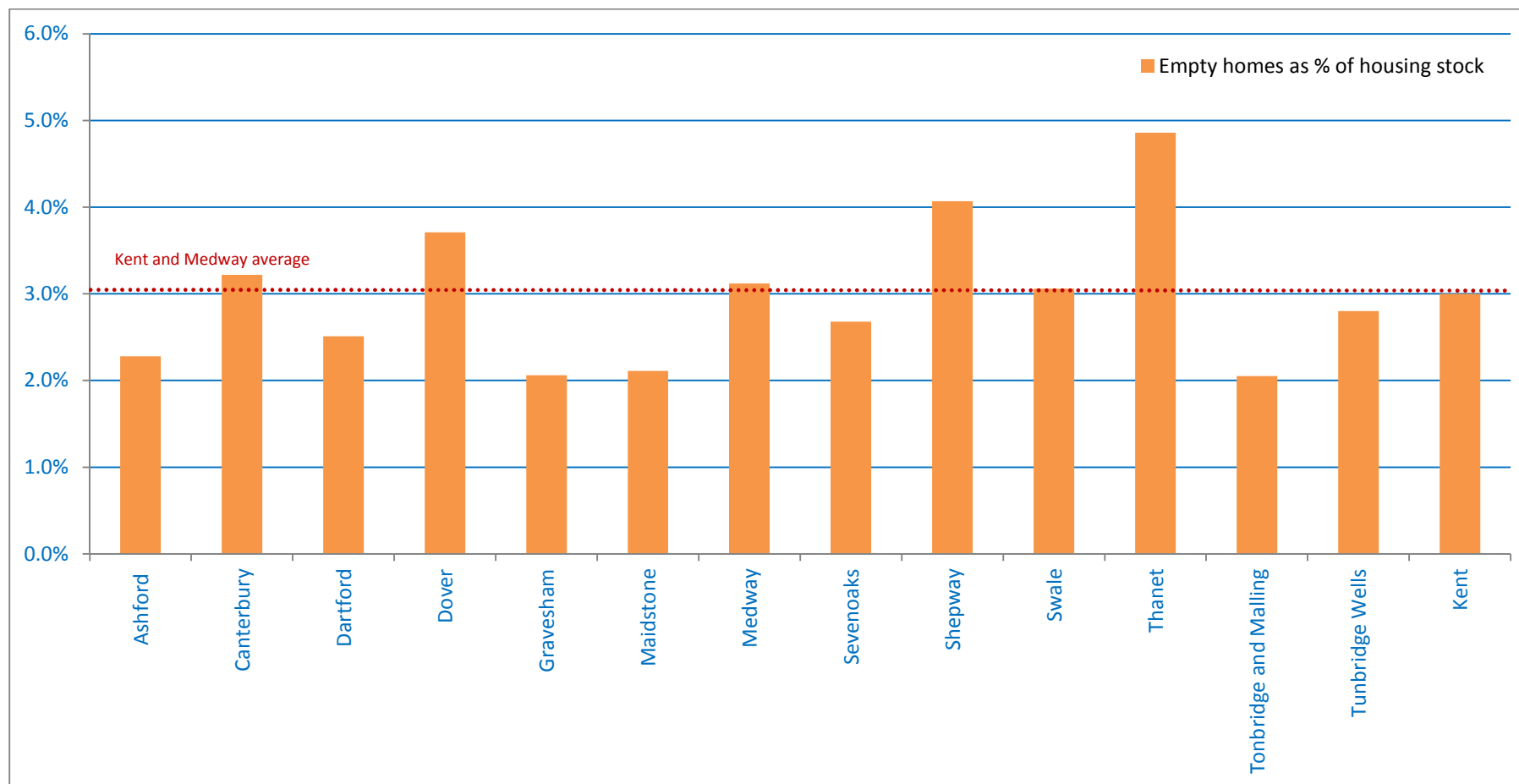
In Maidstone there are in the region of 1,420 empty homes in total which equates to 2.11% of the total housing stock within the borough, of which around 1,350 are within private ownership (i.e. not owned by housing associations or public bodies). Although the number fluctuates, there are around 420 long-term empty homes that have been empty for over 6 months.

Table 1: Distribution of empty homes within Kent and Medway



The statistics for empty homes across Kent and Medway as a whole, show an average of 3.14% of the total housing stock lying empty (see Table 2) across the region. At 2.42%, Maidstone has proportionately fewer empty homes than the Kent average.

Table 2: Empty homes as a percentage of the housing stock within Kent and Medway



Priority 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the council’s interventions

The council has a wide range of formal and informal interventions available to help to resolve the many varied problems associated with empty homes, and the careful assessment of the most appropriate course of action for each case is essential to ensure that homes are brought back into use effectively. In some cases returning the property back into use is not appropriate, and demolition may be the best course of action to facilitate the re-development of the site.

Action 1.1 • Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment

Given the relatively low numbers of empty homes in Maidstone, and the distribution of those properties across the whole of the borough, it is essential that in addition to utilising desk-top records, local residents are able to easily report empty homes in their neighbourhoods, so that action can be instigated to return them back into use.

Action 1.2 • Introduce an online reporting form for residents to report empty homes to council officers

Action 1.3 • Relaunch telephone reporting hotline for empty homes

Providing advice to empty home owners

In the first instance, working informally with property owners is often the most effective method for bringing empty homes back into use. There are a wide variety of reasons why a home is empty, and dialogue with the owner or person responsible will identify the specific reasons that home is empty and then officers can consider the opportunities available to bring the home back into use.

Action 1.4

- Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes

Advice can be provided on the steps to becoming a private landlord, and we can provide guidance on any repairs or improvements required to meet the appropriate standards for private renting, as well as offering assistance with accessing our rent deposit bond scheme where we match prospective private tenants with private rented accommodation.

The council is also able to assist with advice regarding planning and building control matters to enable redevelopment or conversion of those homes that require significant works to bring them back into use.

Working with partners

The council has established working arrangements with a wide range of partners, including housing associations who are able to assist with development opportunities, or offer leasing schemes that can be offered to empty home owners to provide a stress-free rental option for inexperienced owners, or those who live outside of the Maidstone area.

Action 1.5

- Promote private sector leasing opportunities to owners of empty homes

The council also aims to develop innovative approaches to return empty homes back into use as well as responding to the current level of demand for housing across Maidstone. In particular we would like to work with homeless families and other disadvantaged households to work together to return empty homes back into use.

Action 1.6

- Develop an innovative scheme to return empty homes back to use working with homeless households

Priority 2 – Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives

In many cases, homes either become empty or remain empty as a result of the owner's inability to finance repairs or maintenance issues. This can range from relatively small funding gaps through to the need to finance major structural repairs. It is often the case that the failure to resolve a relatively minor problem at an early stage can result in its impact threatening the continued occupation, especially where property owners do not appreciate the importance of investing in repairs.

In some cases, homes remain empty due to the owner's failure to market the property for sale. This is often due to an unrealistic expectation of the current market value (especially where the property is in poor condition) or concerns regarding the fees and costs associated with selling the property.

In some cases though, there are perceived barriers to selling the property due to either a fundamental mistrust of the property selling process, or a lack of knowledge and skills to be in a position to market the property. In these circumstances the council has an opportunity to seek to agree the acquisition of empty homes which would otherwise remain empty with a view to renovating and either disposing on the open market, or renting at affordable rents to those in housing need.

Action 2.1

- Provide an alternative property selling option for empty home owners through the council's Commercialisation Project

The council currently does not offer financial assistance to owners to encourage empty homes being brought back into use. The introduction of financial assistance to empty home owners has the real potential to facilitate homes being returned to use that would otherwise remain unoccupied, and as a result provide positive neighbourhood improvements as well as increasing the supply of accommodation within Maidstone.

Action 2.2

- Dedicate capital funding for empty homes assistance within the council's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy

Given the various financial circumstances associated with empty homes, it is important to consider the use of both grants and loans to maximise the opportunities for both returning homes back to use, whilst recycling capital funding where possible to support future homes being returned to use. Where financial assistance is offered to a property owner it will be conditional on the council nominating a homeless household to occupy the property. This ensures that the council's funding returns a home back into use, as well as providing a valuable home to a household in housing need which reduces the burden on the council's Housing Options service.

The council also intends to continue to work closely with 'No Use Empty' – Kent's empty property initiative and this will enable owners to access interest-free loans for returning empty homes back into use.

Action 2.3

- Endorse partnership agreement for working with 'No Use Empty'

The council has a long-established and successful rent deposit bond scheme which provides landlords with a guaranteed financial 'bond' in lieu of a cash deposit, which allows households, who are unable to fund a tenancy deposit, the opportunity of renting accommodation in the private rented sector. This scheme is of particular interest to investor landlords who are seeking to bring empty homes back into use.

Action 2.4

- Promote the rent deposit bond scheme to empty home owners and landlords

The council has also successfully bid for funding from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to return long-term empty homes back into use. This funding is available to assist owners of empty homes where they agree to enter into a long lease with one of our partner housing associations who will then rent the property to households nominated by the council for the period of the lease.

Action 2.5

- Deliver Homes and Communities Agency funded empty homes scheme (minimum 10 units during the life of this plan)

Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use

In the first instance informal action is very often the most effective approach to bring empty homes back into use. Where informal action is sought, the council aims to provide transparency regarding the consequences to the property owner in the event that actions are not completed. However, in some cases, informal action is either ineffective or inappropriate, and the council has wide ranging powers to instigate enforcement action to secure improvements to empty homes. Action can range from serving notices requiring repairs to be carried out, (e.g. repairing a gutter that is leaking onto a neighbouring property) through to the council considering the use of compulsory purchase powers (see Table 3, below).

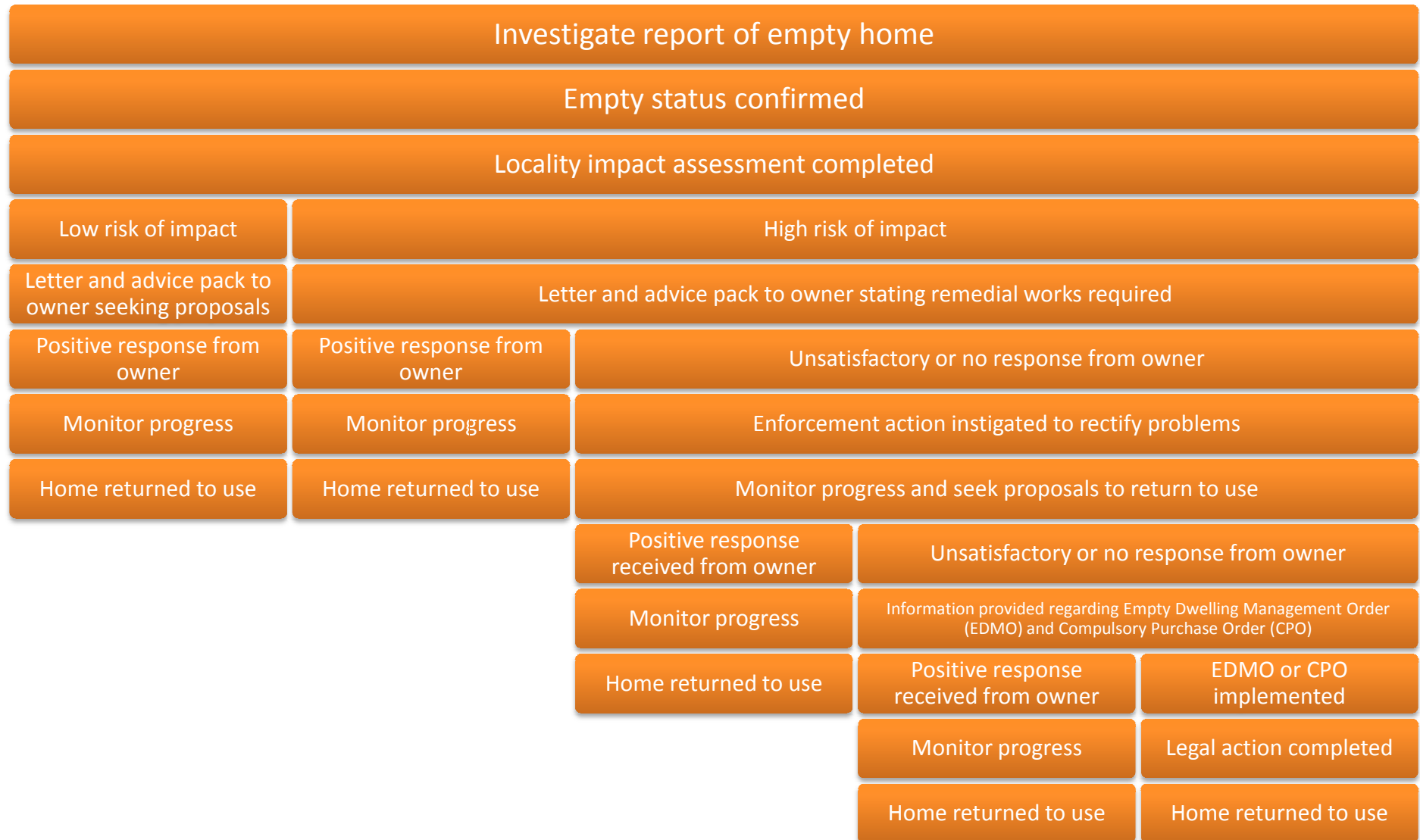
Action 3.1 • Adopt a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy to include empty homes interventions

Instigating enforcement action

Where the council takes enforcement action it will be proportionate to the individual circumstances of the case, and will contribute to the overall aim of either returning the property back into use, or reducing the negative impact that the property poses to the locality. Action will be instigated using a risk assessment methodology that will assess the impact of individual empty homes on neighbouring homes, and the wider neighbourhood.

Action 3.2 • Introduce an evaluation matrix to ensure enforcement interventions are proportionate to the impact of the empty home

Table 3: Procedure for returning empty homes back into use in Maidstone



It is essential that where informal action is not completed by the property owner, that formal enforcement action is instigated to maximise the effectiveness of the council's intervention, and to reduce the negative impact that the empty home places in its neighbourhood.

Action 3.3

- Expedite the commencement of enforcement action following failed informal action

We will also aim to recover all reasonable costs incurred in taking the enforcement action, and this may result in a legal charge being placed on the property to recover costs and interest accrued since the action was taken. In cases where debts have accrued following enforcement action, the council may seek to enforce the sale of the property to settle those debts.

The council will also utilise opportunities within the local Council Tax charging regime to maximise the level of Council Tax payable for those homes that are left empty and this will further ensure that empty homes do not represent a drain on the council's resources.

Action 3.4

- Introduce the Empty Homes Premium within the Council Tax charging policy

How will we return empty homes back into use?

To deliver the aims and priorities detailed within this plan, we will complete a range of actions during the life of this plan. These actions are detailed below as an action plan (see Table 4).

Table 4: Empty homes action plan

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the council’s interventions							
EHP1.1	Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment	PSHTL	Reduced number of long-term empty homes	162 homes returned to use or demolished during the life of this plan (Jan 2013 – Mar 2015)	Disengagement of empty home owners Staffing resources	Full range of incentives and enforcement interventions as set out in this plan Available resources will be monitored and reviewed depending on the level of enforcement action necessary	31/03/15

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
EHP1.2	Introduce an online reporting form for residents to report empty homes to council officers	PSHSSO	Online reporting form available for residents to report empty homes	50 reports of empty homes received through the online form each year	The online form is not well used	The online form will be widely promoted	30/09/13
EHP1.3	Re-launch telephone reporting helpline for empty homes	PSHTL/ PSHSSO	Reporting helpline available for residents to report empty homes to council officers	50 reports of empty homes received through the reporting helpline each year	The reporting helpline is not well used	The helpline number will be widely promoted	31/03/13
EHP1.4	Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes	PSHSSO	Owners are better informed on the assistance available to return empty homes back into use	Web pages reviewed at least quarterly and updates implemented	Information is not kept up to date or accurate	The web pages will be reviewed and revised to reflect the latest position	Ongoing

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
EHP1.5	Promote private sector leasing opportunities to owners of empty homes	PSHTL	Increase the number of homes returned to use through private sector leasing schemes	Additional 15 empty homes returned to use through private sector leasing each year	Disengagement of empty home owners	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/15
EHP1.6	Develop an innovative scheme to return empty homes back to use working with homeless households	HSM	Scheme developed	Scheme adopted	Failure to identify suitable properties for the project Lack of engagement from property owners	Properties will be sourced through the council's Commercialisation Project Increased levels of enforcement action will be implemented	31/06/13
		HSM	Homeless households housed in previously empty homes	3 homeless households provided with accommodation through the scheme during the life of this plan	Lack of engagement	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/15

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 2 – Maximise opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives							
EHP2.1	Provide an alternative property selling option for empty home owners through the council's Commercialisation Project	ADERS	Long term empty homes acquired for affordable rent or re-sale	10 long term empty homes acquired by 31/03/15	Disengagement of empty home owners to acquisition	Enforcement action will be implemented where owners disengage	31/03/15
EHP2.2	Dedicate capital funding for empty homes assistance within the council's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy	HSM	Increased funds that are available for empty homes' initiatives	Recommend £200k capital funding in 2013/14 through redistribution of capital resources	Report recommendations not agreed reducing the number of empty homes returned to use Limitations on capital funding	Increased levels of enforcement action to maintain performance Housing Assistance Policy will be reviewed annually	31/03/13

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
EHP2.3	Endorse partnership agreement for working with 'No Use Empty'	HSM/ PSHTL	Provide access to projects under the 'No Use Empty' scheme	10 successful referrals to 'No Use Empty' each year	Disengagement of empty home owners	Increased levels of enforcement action to maintain performance	31/03/15
EHP2.4	Promote the rent deposit bond scheme to empty home owners and landlords	PSHTL	Investor landlords are better informed about the incentives available to return homes back into use	Landlords attracted to invest in empty homes and bring them back to use	Lack of interest from investor landlords	Bond Scheme to be reviewed annually to maintain interest from empty home owners	Ongoing
EHP2.5	Deliver HCA funded empty homes scheme (minimum 10 units during the life of this plan)	PSHTL/ PSHOs	Long-term empty homes are brought back into use	Minimum 10 units returned back into use	Failure to enter into HCA contract Disengagement of empty home owners Insufficient staffing resources	Negotiations with partners to influence outcome Increased levels of enforcement activity Resources redirected if required	31/03/15

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
PRIORITY 3 – Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use							
EHP3.1	Adopt a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy to include empty homes interventions	HSM/ PSHTL	Enforcement outcomes and cost recovery maximised	Enforcement Policy adopted and implemented	Enforcement Policy not adopted	Consultation process to influence successful outcome	30/09/13
		PSHTL	Debts registered as a charge on the property	N/A	Failure to recover debts	Quarterly monitoring of charges and debt recovery	Ongoing
		PSHTL	CPO cases delivered through external partnership agreement	External legal partnership agreement in place	Failure to recover legal costs Reputational risk	Legal costs identified in advance and along with recovery mechanism Performance of the partnership agreement monitored and reviewed annually	30/09/13

Ref	Action	Officer	Outcome	Performance Measures	Risk Management		Date
					Risk	Mitigation	
EHP3.2	Introduce an evaluation matrix to ensure enforcement interventions are proportionate to the impact of the empty home	PSHTL	Enforcement action is proportionate to each situation	Risk assessment methodology and procedures implemented	Enforcement action instigated contrary to the matrix	Enforcement actions reviewed prior to instigation Enforcement notices subject to review prior to service	31/03/13
EHP3.3	Expedite the commencement of enforcement action following failed informal action	PSHTL	Enforcement action instigated where long-term empty home owners do not respond to informal action	5 successful enforcement interventions each year in respect of long-term empty homes	Staffing resources	Regular performance monitoring to identify where resources need to be redirected	31/03/15
EHP3.4	Introduce the Empty Homes Premium within the Council Tax charging policy	HoRB	Empty Homes Premium agreed and commencement date set	Cabinet report recommendation to introduce the Empty Homes Premium	Report recommendation not agreed	Consultation process to influence successful outcome	31/03/14

Table 4 key: *ADERS – Assistant Director of Environment and Regulatory Services*

HoRB – Head of Revenues and Benefits

HSM – Housing Services Manager

PSHO – Private Sector Housing Officer

PSHSSO – Private Sector Housing System Support Officer

PSHTL – Private Sector Housing Team Leader