

Empty Dwellings Strategy 2021- 2026



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Introduction

Coventry City Council's Empty Dwellings Strategy sets out what the council will do, with partners, to bring homes back into use, to make best use of housing stock in the city and to reduce the negative impact vacant dwellings can have on surrounding homes, neighbourhoods and communities.

By having an Empty Dwellings Strategy and a clear programme of actions and interventions, we can:-

- Improve neighbourhoods and create better environments for local communities;
- Reduce vandalism and anti-social behaviour;
- Improve the health and wellbeing of communities and individuals;
- Help meet housing need by providing additional housing options for the local community;
- Ensure best use of assets;
- Improve housing conditions;
- Increase New Homes Bonus (which can be reinvested into the local area);
- Increase Council Tax income and potentially increase spend on local goods and services from the occupants of formerly vacant dwellings;
- Balance new build with the best use of existing stock; and
- Increase income and capital value to homeowners and reduce the costs of council tax liability.

Dwellings are left empty for a variety of reasons and plans to bring properties back into use need to be tailored to each circumstance. This Strategy recognises there is no one simple solution to the problem of vacant dwellings and outlines a range of options to bring properties back into use.

Strategic Context

There are approximately 24,000,000 dwellings in England. Statistics published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) put the number of vacant dwellings in England in October 2019 at 648,114. This represents a 2.2% increase on the previous year's total.

Of these there are 225,845 properties that were classed as long-term vacant dwellings (unoccupied 6 months+). This was a 4.5% increase on the previous year's total and equates to 35% of vacant dwellings and 0.94% of all properties nationally.

In the West Midlands region, the total number of vacant dwellings in October 2019 was 66,322, which equates to 2.6% of the total housing stock. This was an increase of 2,013 properties from the previous year.

The proportion of long-term vacant dwellings was 0.9% of the total stock or 23,515 properties. This represents 35% of the total number of vacant dwellings in the West Midlands.

Since 2010 the number of vacant dwellings in Coventry was steadily decreasing to levels of around 3,189 properties in 2016.

In 2017 however, the numbers began to increase to the point where in 2019 there were 3,830 vacant dwellings. These levels exceed those seen for a number of years in Coventry.

Further statistical details can be found in Appendix 1 to this Strategy.

Ambitions

The City Council has a duty to assess and plan for housing need and takes the view that every empty home is a wasted opportunity for a Coventry family. The Coventry & Warwickshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) (2013) identified a need for an additional 477 affordable homes to be provided in the city each year. This increased to 600 affordable homes in 2015 when an update of the SHMA was released.

The SHMA acknowledged that each Council should consider drawing together evidence as part of the plan-making process how it can meet the need for affordable housing. In doing so, consideration should be given to increasing the overall housing provision where it would help to meet the identified need for affordable housing. With housing and land in short supply in Coventry vacant dwellings offer an alternative option to support the process of providing much needed affordable housing in the city.

Vacant dwellings are a wasted resource and become a drain on public funds in that they can quickly fall into disrepair and become blights on our neighbourhoods. Often, they can become magnets for fly tipping, anti-social behaviour, vandalism and arson.

The Council's vision is ***to reduce the number of long-term vacant dwellings in Coventry to a practical minimum.***

This will be supported through this Strategy with the aim of focusing on the issue of long-term vacant dwellings. Three objectives have been developed to support this vision:-

Objective 1 – To promote the range of advice, assistance and support available to bring vacant dwellings back into use and develop new solutions such as a Private Sector Leasing scheme;

Objective 2 – To use enforcement action in bringing long term problematic vacant dwellings back into use; and

Objective 3 – To better understand why dwellings are being left empty in the city and where possible prevent dwellings from becoming empty for long periods of time.

Current Position

There are two types of vacant dwellings - those that are empty for short periods of time and longer-term vacant dwellings that can become more problematic.

The short-term vacant properties are re-occupied relatively quickly and are necessary for the housing market to function. These properties rarely require intervention to bring them back into use; they are generally reoccupied within six months.

Longer term vacancies are properties that have remained empty for over six months. These are the ones that usually cause complaints from neighbours and can become detrimental to the neighbourhood; they are the focus of this strategy.

There are significant advantages for everyone in the area by bringing empty homes back into use.

For the owner:-

- Leaving a property empty increases the risk of vandalism and crime which will make the property costly or difficult to insure;
- In the case of arson the full value of the asset could be lost and there may be resultant claims from neighbours for damages;
- The owner will also incur additional costs because they will be expected to maintain the property and remove fly tipping and detritus;
- Generally the Council charges the owner full Council Tax on empty homes. Long term empty homes are liable for a long term empty council tax premium as follows:
 - From 1 April 2019 any property having been empty and unfurnished for more than two years will attract a 100% empty premium.
 - From 1 April 2020 any property having been empty and unfurnished for more than five years will attract a 200% empty premium.
 - From 1 April 2021 any property having been empty and unfurnished for more than ten years will attract a 300% empty premium.
- There is the potential to gain rental income and over a period of time the possibility that the home will increase in value; and
- The owner could choose to sell the home and realise the cash value and invest the money in a different asset.

For local residents:

- Bringing an empty home back into use will significantly reduce the opportunities for vandalism, fly tipping and antisocial behaviour; and
- Unsightly properties can have a negative effect on an area, depress house prices and reduce pride in the area. They can also have a direct impact on adjoining properties through dampness and structural problems.

Moving Forwards 2021-2026

Coventry City Council wants to improve the current position and bring the percentage of long-term vacant dwellings more in line with the national and regional average; recognising it has no control over these wider figures. There will also be a focus on reducing the number of properties that have been empty for long periods of time.

In order to achieve this the Council will work closely with all departments within the Council coordinating activities around vacant dwellings focusing on the following three objectives.

Objective 1 - To bring empty homes back into use using a range of advice, assistance and support.

The Council will provide advice and support to homeowners on a one-to-one basis and work closely with the owner to understand the reasons the property is empty. With the owner's agreement, the Council will determine the best course of action to bring the property back into use. An advice and guidance leaflet will be made available for all empty homeowners in the city to highlight what the Council can offer.

The different types of advice or assistance available could include :-

Advice on selling / renting the empty property

The Council can offer advice on local estate agents, lettings agents or auctioneers who can assist in the sale or letting of the property.

The Council can also inspect the property and assess it according to the Housing Health and Rating System.

The Council will then be able to give the necessary advice as to what the health and safety risks are and how these can be rectified.

Bringing properties up to a lettable standard

The Empty Dwellings Officer, working with the Housing Options Team will explore potential incentives to bring empty properties to a lettable standard in exchange for nomination rights to help households who may be facing homelessness. This could be achieved through the development of the Council's "Let's Rent" scheme which currently exists for private landlords.

Under a Private Sector Leasing Scheme the Council can enter into a lease with a private landlord. The Council will then use the property as an affordable decent home for local households who face homelessness.

A Tenant Finder Scheme is able to assist the owner of an empty property through the lettings process whilst providing good quality homes for local residents who need somewhere to live. The scheme will guide the empty homeowner through the process of letting their property and assist with finding suitable tenants through our Housing Options Team. The Council will work with established local lettings agents and we will inspect the property to ensure that it is at a lettable standard.

Provide assistance with garden or house clearances

Coventry City Council's StreetScene team can offer a garden and house clearing service for empty homeowners.

The service includes:- pest control, garden clearances, house clearances, graffiti removal or removing sharps / needles. The team will go out to the property and give a quote for the works. If the owner wants the work to proceed, it is completed at a time to suit all parties. If the owner is not willing to work with the Council, then the EDO can arrange for the property to be cleared as 'works in default'. Once the work is completed, a charge is placed on the property which will be paid when the property is sold.

Objective 2 - To use enforcement action to bring long term, problematic empty homes back into use

The Council has many Regulatory powers that it can utilise in order to address the impact an empty property has on neighbours and the local area. With the legislation available the Council can serve a notice on the homeowner to ensure that these issues are addressed and in, turn, encourage the owner to bring the property back into use. Where all attempts of intervention have failed or if there is an immediate risk to health or safety, the EDO will consider a number of enforcement options that are available to them as set out in appendix 2.

Objective 3 - To better understand why homes are being left empty in the city and where possible, prevent homes from becoming empty for long periods of time.

As well as bringing empty homes back into use, the Council wants to stop properties becoming long term empty in the first place or reduce the time they are empty. Advice and guidance will be sent out with letters by Council Tax to empty homeowners approaching the six month and two-year empty date. This will open communication with empty homeowners and reduce long term empties in the city.

Action Plan

Action 1 - Secure approval of the revised Empty Dwellings Strategy 2021 – 2026

Action 2 - Appoint a suitably experienced Empty Dwellings Officer.

Action 3 - Review and revise the advice and assistance available to owners of empty dwellings.

Action 4 - Explore opportunities for private sector leasing scheme, Tenant Finder Schemes and social letting.

Action 5 - Explore opportunities for partnership working with local registered providers.

Action 6 - Develop links with internal and external agencies i.e. lettings agents

Action 7 - Development of policies and procedures of enforcement options which include: Compulsory Purchase Orders, Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Enforced Sales.

Delivering the Strategy

In order to deliver the Empty Dwellings Strategy, the Council will need to appoint an EDO to ensure that the three objectives are met, demonstrating the Council's commitment to tackling vacant dwellings.

The Council has opportunities to recycle funding to carry out interventions and enforcement actions highlighted in this strategy, but the EDO can't do this alone; close working relationships between other departments in the Council and stakeholders in the city will be essential for the objectives of this strategy to be achieved.

Data Analysis

The EDO will require monthly data on empty properties within the city. The data will be analysed to understand the flows of empty properties including how many become empty and how many are brought back into use. Continued analysis of this data will look at whether there are trends or issues to explore further. For example, it could highlight if there are certain areas

in the city that are experiencing higher levels of long-term empties than others. The empty homes in Coventry could be mapped and updated biannually to identify clusters of empty properties that could lead to neighbourhood decline and also to identify whether certain owners have multiple empty properties in specific geographical locations. Each empty property will be risk assessed and interventions prioritised accordingly.

Reporting Empty Properties

The EDO will explore the effectiveness of creating an online reporting tool, so members of the public can report a property in real time and not have to phone or email the Council. This will ensure that the Council is made aware of any issues quickly and will have all the relevant information at hand.

When it comes to proceeding with formal action the Council will adopt a staged approach as per its Enforcement Policy and the phases set out below.

Phase 1- Option appraisal

Before any formal action is considered, the Council will seek to work with the owner to identify the range of options available to them to bring the home back into use. Once a property is identified as being empty for six months or more the Council will initially contact the homeowner to:-

1. Gather information on why the home is empty and the owner's plans for the property;
2. Supply an information pack which will:
 - a. Advise on the pitfalls and costs of leaving the home empty.
 - b. Advise on the options available to bring the property back into use.
 - c. This may involve practical guidance on matters such as letting, leasing, property valuation, building regulations and planning, demolition, and debt recovery, drawing as required on the expertise of other departments in the Council and elsewhere.
 - d. The aim will be to help the owner arrive at a solution, which meets their needs and preferences whilst achieving the overall aims and objectives of this policy.
3. It is our aim to agree at this stage, a way forward with the homeowner. This will involve the negotiation of an appropriate timescale for the resolution of their chosen option. We will then revisit the case at the end of the time period;
4. If at the end of this time period, there has been no satisfactory progress we will:
 - a. Contact the homeowner to determine what assistance we can provide to help to bring the home back into use.
 - b. When this has been established, we will negotiate a further timescale for resolution of their chosen option.
5. If there has been no satisfactory progress and the criteria in Appendix 2 have been satisfied, then the case will progress to Phase 2; and
6. In cases where the home is subject to regular environmental crime and the route of anti-social behaviour, the process will skip stage 2 and move straight to phase 3.

Phase 2 - informal warning

Before any formal action is considered, the Council will make clear to the homeowner its intention in bringing the home back into use and the reasons why (see Appendix 2).

1. The Council will agree a further course of action with the homeowner to address any specific issues of concern and ultimately set a date for bringing the home back into use. This will be confirmed in writing; and
2. If at the end of the agreed time period insufficient progress has been made the Council will write to the homeowner:
 - a. pointing out that satisfactory progress has not been made;
 - b. requesting a reason for lack of progress; and
 - c. confirming that formal action will ensue if no reasonable explanation or undertaking is offered and the case will move to Phase 3.

Phase 3 - Formal Action

Where the owner of a property is untraceable or demonstrates an unwillingness to work with the Council and/or satisfactory progress has not been made, the Council will consider taking appropriate enforcement action to:

- mitigate/abate problems emanating from the dwelling; and
- ultimately bring the dwelling back into use. A list of available enforcement powers are contained in Appendix 3.

Where the Council has used compulsory purchase powers, or powers to force the sale of an empty home it will endeavour to ensure that the dwelling is:

1. brought back into use as quickly as possible; and
2. where possible is used to provide affordable housing.

The Council will seek to recover all of its costs where possible in bringing empty properties back into use. The extent of enforcement activity undertaken by the Council will be determined by the resources available to fund both the revenue and capital related elements of the activity. The Council will look at all options available legally and within available resources prior to taking enforcement action to ensure that the Council is not being subjected to unnecessary risk.

Monitoring & Reviewing the Strategy

In order for the Strategy to remain effective and relevant, it is important that it is continually monitored throughout the period of the Strategy.

Monitoring the strategy will be carried out by the following means:-

Monthly data tracking (data received from Council Tax and analysed by the Housing Enforcement Team).

Six monthly reporting to Cabinet Members for Housing and Communities and Policing and Equalities.

The detailed action plan to be monitored by the Property Licensing and Housing Enforcement Team and reviewed annually to ensure it is relevant and up to date.

Appendices

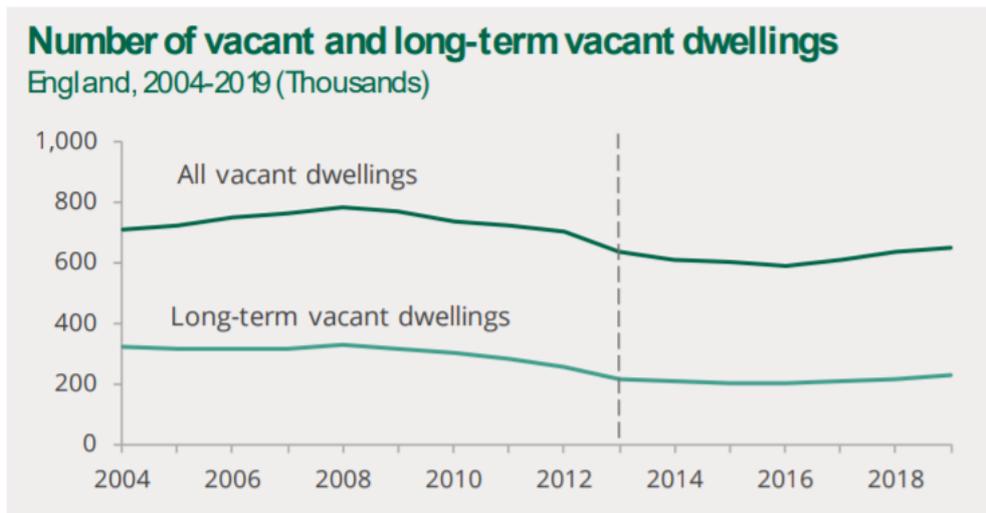
Appendix 1 – Statistical Context

England

The percentage of vacant dwellings has been steadily increasing since 2016 in England and has risen again in 2019 to levels beyond those last seen in 2013. Overall, the number of homes that are long term vacant has also increased since 2016, from 200,145 to 225,845.

Figure 1 shows the number of vacant dwellings and long-term vacant dwellings in England between 2004-2019 and as can be seen both are steadily rising since 2016.

Figure 1- Number of vacant and long-term vacant dwellings 2004 to 2019



West Midlands

In the West Midlands region, the total number of vacant dwellings in October 2019 was 66,322, which equates to 2.6% of the total housing stock. This was an increase of 2,013 properties from the previous year.

The proportion of long-term vacant dwellings was 0.9% of the total stock or 23,515 properties. This represents 35% of the total number of vacant dwellings in the West Midlands.

Figure 2 below shows the comparison of vacant and long-term vacant dwellings by region in 2019.

Figure 2 - Vacant and long-term vacant dwellings by region 2019

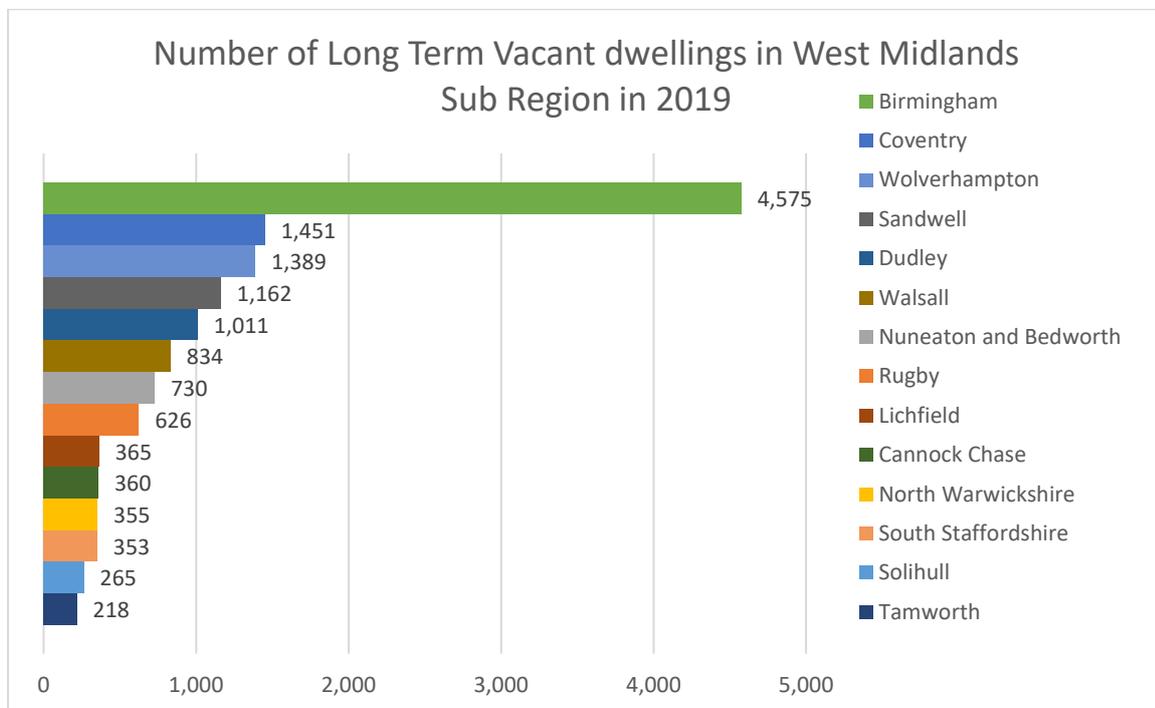
Vacant and long-term vacant dwellings by region England, 2019

	All vacant dwellings		Long-term vacant	
	Number	as % of total stock	Number	as % of total stock
North East	44,566	3.6%	18,154	1.5%
North West	104,738	3.2%	39,195	1.2%
Yorkshire & The Humber	76,191	3.1%	28,884	1.2%
East Midlands	56,909	2.7%	20,324	1.0%
West Midlands	66,322	2.6%	23,515	0.9%
East of England	65,851	2.4%	20,972	0.8%
London	71,666	2.0%	24,677	0.7%
South East	96,128	2.4%	29,562	0.7%
South West	65,743	2.5%	20,562	0.8%
Total	648,114	2.7%	225,845	0.9%

According to most recent figures for the West Midlands for 2019, the highest level of vacant dwellings in the region were found in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton.

Figure 3 below provides the overall figures for the West Midlands in 2019, which places Coventry as the second highest authority in the region.

Figure 3 - Number of Long-Term Vacant dwellings in West Midlands 2019



Coventry

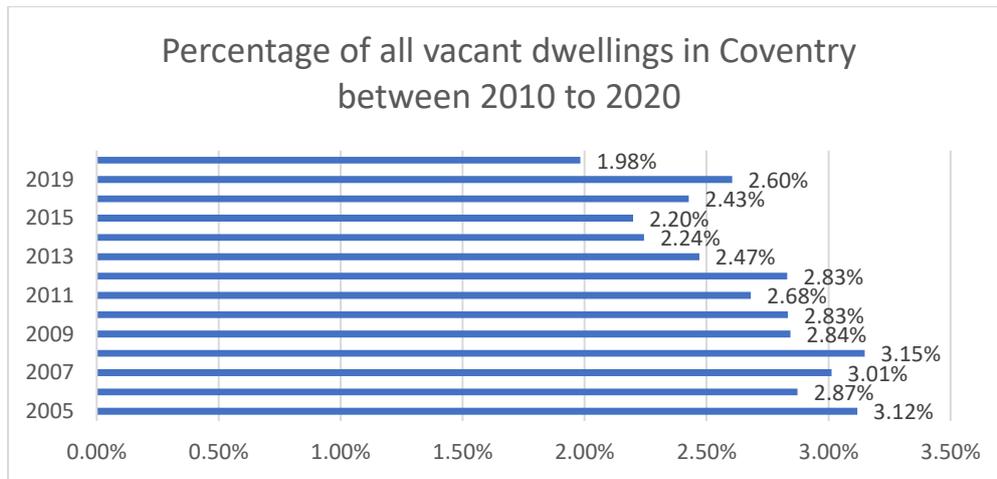
Since 2010 the number of vacant dwellings in Coventry was steadily decreasing to levels of around 3,189 properties in 2016.

In 2017 however, the numbers began to increase to the point where in 2019 there were 3,830 vacant dwellings. These levels exceed those seen for a number of years in Coventry.

As can be seen from Figure 4 below the percentage of vacant dwellings has decreased steadily since 2005, only rising again in 2018/19 and then dropping back off again in 2020 to 2%.

This would suggest that the average number of vacant dwellings is below both the national average and the slightly higher average for the West Midlands. The levels are also significantly better than those for previous years in Coventry.

Figure 4 - Percentage of all vacant dwellings in Coventry between 2010 and 2020

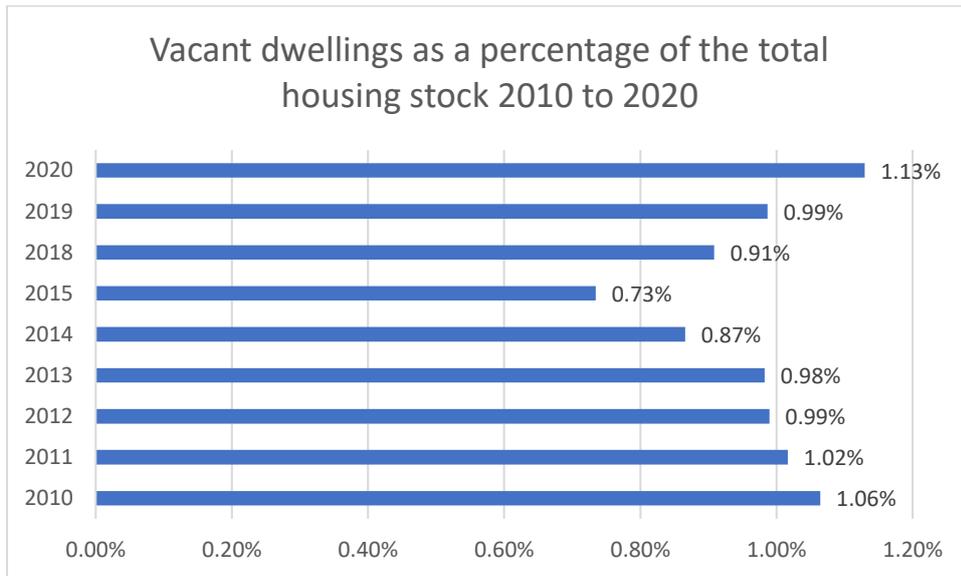


When we consider the figures for long-term vacant dwellings as a percentage of the total housing stock in Coventry and the total number of vacant dwellings we can see however, that the picture is somewhat different.

The average vacant dwellings as a percentage of the total number of dwellings in Coventry at 1.3% is above the national and regional average of 0.9%.

Figure 5 below provides the percentages of all vacant dwelling in Coventry in each year between 2010 and 2020 as a percentage of the total housing stock. This shows that, in the case of long-term vacant dwellings, although there was a decline in percentages between 2010 and 2015 over the last five years there has been a considerable increase to record levels now in 2020.

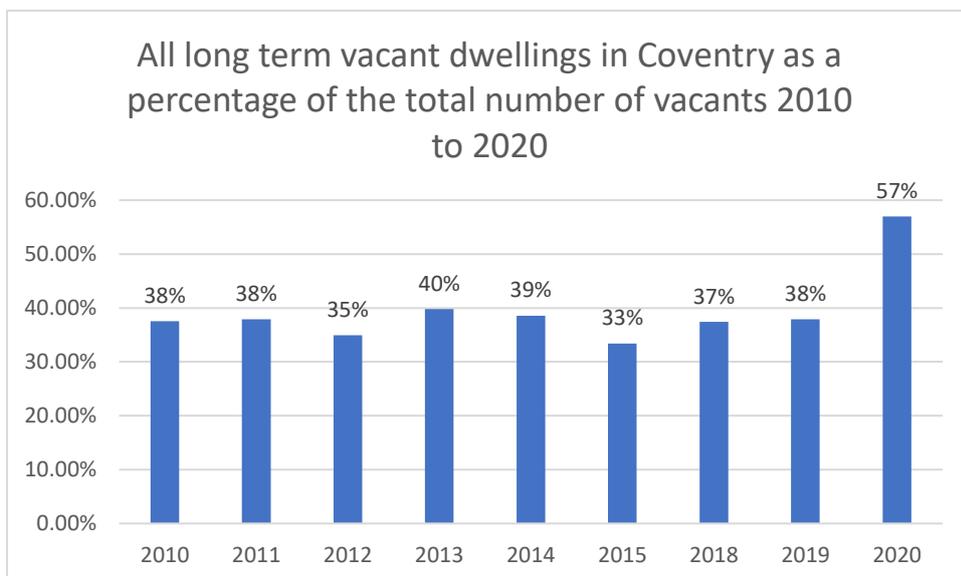
Figure 5 - All vacant dwellings in Coventry as a percentage of the total housing stock 2010 to 2020



Furthermore, when we consider the number of long-term vacant dwellings as a percentage of the total number of vacant dwellings this also increases significantly for 2020.

As can be seen from Figure 6 below the current percentage of long term vacant dwellings as a proportion of the total number of vacant dwellings is now estimated to be 57% - which means that approximately 1,661 or over half of all vacant dwellings have been empty for 6+ months or more.

Figure 6 – All long-term vacant dwellings in Coventry as a percentage of the total number of vacant dwellings 2010 to 2020



Appendix 2 – Empty Dwellings Criteria for Enforcement

Where the Council has been unsuccessful in negotiating with the owner in returning an empty home back into use, it will actively consider using its available powers to force the dwelling back into use where:

1. The dwelling has been empty for more than six months and
 - a. the owner cannot be traced;
 - b. there are more than three incidents in the six-month period of ASB, environmental crime;
 - c. the visual appearance of the dwelling is such that it is having a detrimental effect on the area; or
 - d. the amount of money owed to the Council exceeds £1,000.

2. The dwelling has been empty for two years or more and
 - a. The owner can be traced;
 - b. there are more than three incidents in the six-month period of Anit Social Behaviour, environmental crime;
 - c. the visual appearance of the dwelling is such that it is having a detrimental effect on the area; or
 - d. the amount of money owed to the Council exceeds £1,000.

In the case of money owed to the Council this debt will normally be any outstanding Council Tax; and/or costs incurred by the Council through carrying out works in default (to maintain the home/garden and secure the home from entry) where Legal Notices have been served, but where there has not been compliance.

Where the homeowner has been receiving care in hospital, or a residential home, decisions about the dwelling will be made in accordance with the Charging for Residential Accommodation Guide (CRAG) in support of the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) Regulations 1992 (S.I. 1992/2977).

Appendix 3 – Legislation available for dealing with vacant dwellings

Compulsory Purchase Orders

Making compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) on empty properties may be justified where there appears to be no other chance of a suitable property being used as a home. Before a CPO is confirmed, the Council will have to show that it has taken steps to encourage the owner (if found) to bring the property into acceptable use. The Council will also need to show its reasons for making a CPO and justify interfering with the human rights of the owner or those of anyone else with an interest in the property. This is not a quick process and it can take many months to complete. The owner of a compulsory purchased property may be entitled to compensation for the loss at a level equivalent to the open market value.

Housing Act 1985 Section 17

This Act gives the Council the power to take over land, houses or other properties to increase the number of houses available or improve the quality of the housing stock. The main uses of this power are to get land for housing. This includes bringing empty properties back into use as homes and improving substandard ones. Where the Council get control of a property through this power, it will usually sell it to:

- a private-sector developer

- an owner-occupier or
- a registered social landlord

Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Section 226

The powers in section 226 are intended to help local authorities which have planning powers to take control of the land they need to put in place their community strategies and local development documents. These planning powers are wide enough to allow the Council to take over land for redevelopment. This includes empty properties.

The Housing Act 2004

The Housing Act 2004 gives the Council powers to make sure that properties are safe and suitable to live in. The powers may also apply to empty properties and include:-

- Powers of entry – these allow the Council to enter a property to inspect it if the owner or occupier(s) refuse to let an officer in (the Council has to give at least 24 hours' notice). If an owner and/or occupier stops our officer from getting in, the Council may get a warrant to enter from the courts. This allows the Council to force entry if it must;
- Power to require information – the Council can serve notices asking for certain information, for example, about who owns a property. This allows the Council to act to improve the property using the other powers described;
- Hazard-awareness notices – these will make sure that the owner or the person responsible is aware of a danger and the need to carry out repairs or alterations;
- Power to serve notices – the Council can serve improvement notices when work needs to be done to improve living conditions for occupiers or neighbours. The work specified depends on the conditions found and what the law allows the Council to do;
- Powers to enter a property and carry out work (emergency remedial action) – if an owner does not carry out work to the standard specified by a notice, the Council may do the work and charge the owner for it;
- Power to take over managing properties – there are a number of reasons why the Council may do this, including not being able to issue a licence or if a property has been empty for a long time;
- Power to close a property (prohibition order) – the Council could issue this notice only after it has carried out a detailed assessment to decide the best course of action to deal with a seriously substandard property. The Council might close a property where improvements are too expensive, or the condition of the property is too bad to repair. The notice would mean that nobody could live in the property; and
- Power to order a property to be demolished or an area is cleared – this is done in similar circumstances to closing a property.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) Housing Act 2004

EDMOs allow the Council to take management control of certain empty properties for initially up to 1 year (under an interim EDMO) and then up to 7 years (under a final EDMO). Under an interim EDMO the Council can only grant tenancies with the permission of the owner, but under a final EDMO the owner's consent is not required.

The Council must apply to the First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) for an EDMO. The Property Chamber must be satisfied that there is no reasonable prospect that the property will be reoccupied in the near future without the imposition of the EDMO and that there is an

element of “nuisance” being caused by the property. The Property Chamber will take into account the interests of the community and the effect the order will have on the rights of the relevant proprietor and may have on third parties.

There are, however, certain properties that are exempt from an EDMO. These include:

- Second homes
- Holiday lets
- Flats and houses normally occupied by students
- The owner is in prison
- The owner is receiving or giving care
- The owner is in the armed forces
- The relevant proprietor is temporarily residing elsewhere
- The property is on the market for sale or let

Enforced sales procedures

Where the Council has issued and enforced a charge against a property it will have all the legal rights of a mortgage lender under the Law of Property Act 1925. The Council may have issued the charge against the property because the owner did not:

- Comply with a statutory notice issued; or
- Pay Council Tax or other debts owed to the Council.

Dangerous or dilapidated Buildings or structures

Under Section 77 & 78 of the Building Act 1984, the Council can order an owner to make a property safe or allow the Council to take emergency action to make it safe.

Statutory nuisance (statutory nuisance or premises which can affect health)

Under Section 80 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and Section 76 of the Building Act 1984 the Council can order an owner to make a property safe or allow the Council to take emergency action to make the building safe.

Unsecured properties

These are empty properties that are not secure so they can be broken into, vandalised, set on fire and so on. Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29 provides the Council with the power to order an owner to make a property secure or allow the Council to board it up in an emergency or fence off the property.

Unightly land and property affecting the amenity of the area

The Public Health Act 1961 provides for the Council to order an owner to remove waste from a property or for the Council to do it in default of a notice.

Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 provides that the Council can require the owner to address unightly land or the external appearance of a property and Section 79 of the Building Act 1984 can be used to require the owner to address a property adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.

Blocked or defective drains or private sewers

Powers exist within the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, Building Act 1984 and the Public Health Act 1961 to require the owner to address blocked, defective or obstructed drainage and to carry out any works in default should the owner fail to comply.

Vermin (If present or there is a risk of attracting vermin that may be detrimentally affect people's health)

Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, Building Act 1984, Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 and Public Health Acts of 1936 and 1961 the Council can require the owner to remove waste so that vermin is not attracted to the site and exercise powers to carry out these works in default should the owner fail to comply.