



Exeter
City Council

Empty Homes Strategy

2019 - 2022

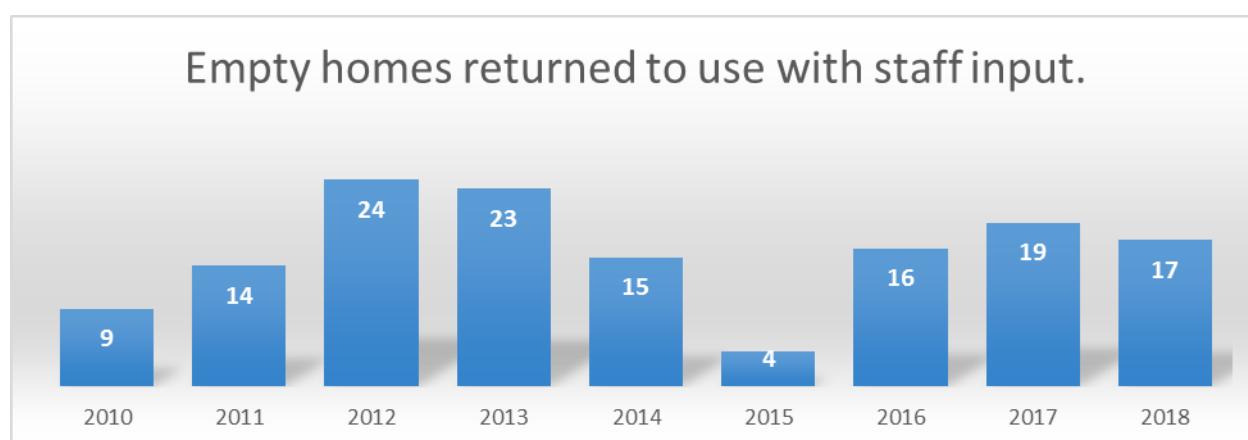


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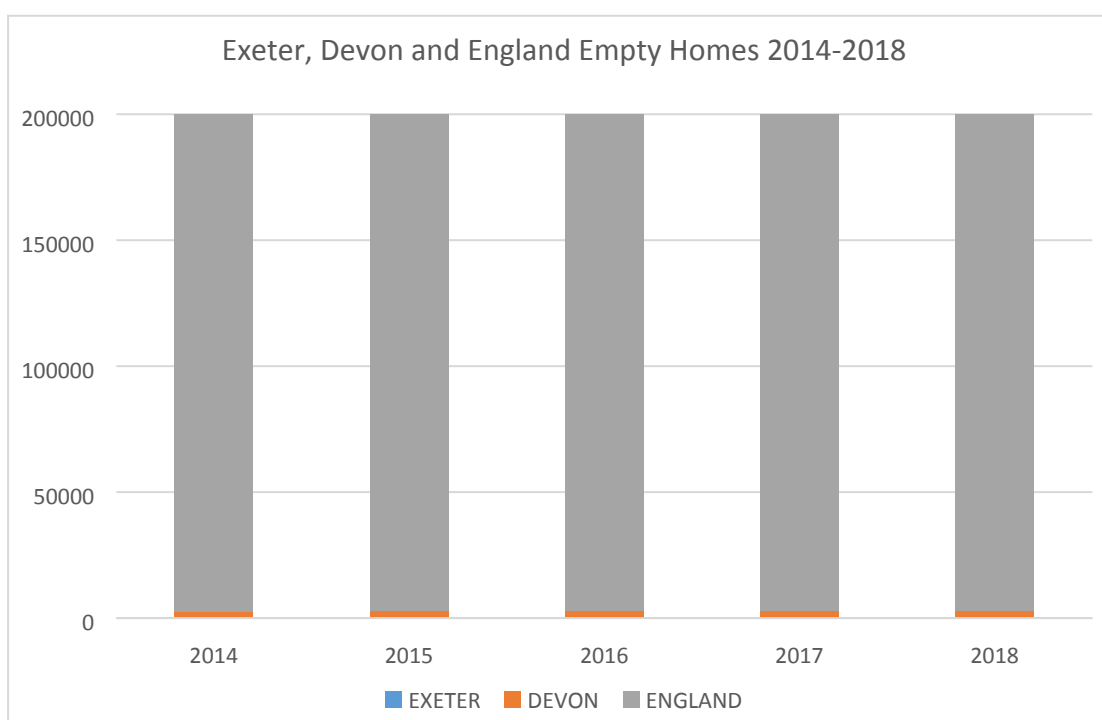
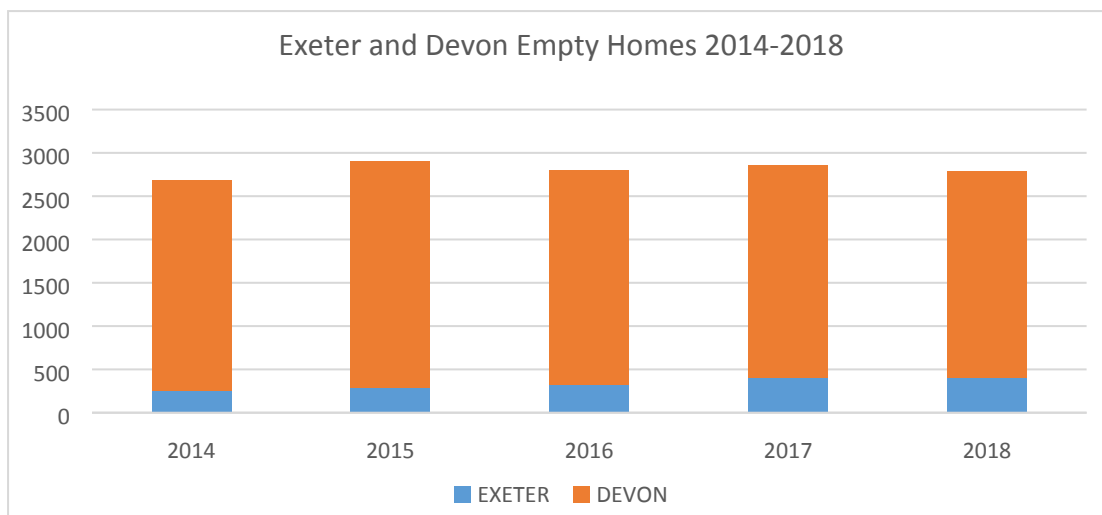
1. Introduction

- 1.1 Nationally a shortage of housing may give rise to increased homelessness and difficulty for some in accessing affordable accommodation. Where property lies empty this can impact the lives of people in the neighbourhood and can be a magnet for anti-social behaviour. Bringing empty homes back into use will help improve the quality of housing and neighbourhoods and help to provide more affordable homes.
- 1.2 This revised Empty Homes Strategy builds on the last strategy (2014-2017) and sets out how the council will continue its work to reduce the number of empty homes in Exeter from 2019 until 2022.
- 1.3 Since commencing this work in 2010 the Council has supported owners to return over 140 empty homes back into use.



- 1.4 This updated strategy takes into account current demographic data, stakeholders' views on our empty property work and recent legislative changes.
- 1.5 Since the last Empty Homes Strategy 2014 – 2017, the number of long term empty homes in Exeter has increased, a trend which has been reflected nationally in the 2017? 2018 figures for England.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
EXETER	258	292	326	403	400
DEVON	2429	2610	2471	2448	2384
ENGLAND	205,821	203,596	200,145	205,293	216,186



Source: council tax base (CTB) Table 615

- 1.6 The annual council tax reporting form (CTB1) completed, in October 2017, calculated the number of long term empty homes in Exeter was 430. When taken as a proportion this represents 0.76% homes in Exeter being classed as long term empty. This is below the average for England which is 0.82%.

2. About Empty Homes

- 2.1 The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) describes problematic empty homes as dwellings that are inactive in the housing market and have been empty for more than 6 months. There are broadly two main types of empty homes: transactional and long-term empty.
- 2.2 Transactional empty homes are generally empty for up to six months, usually due to a change in tenant or ownership and are part of the normal cycle of people moving house. The vast majority of these empty homes do not require any involvement from the council to bring them back into use.
- 2.3 In some instances, a property may be empty or appear empty, but is not classed as empty. A property does not have to be used all the time to be classed as occupied. For example, if it is:
- A second home or a holiday home;
 - A property which is part of a wider regeneration programme and could be in the process of being developed or marked for demolition;
 - A property which has pending planning permission, could be waiting refurbishment or could be waiting for new occupants to move in;
 - A property which appears empty due to an overgrown garden or through lack of maintenance or repair but which is in fact occupied;
 - A property where a for sale/to-let board or where contractors equipment is evident could demonstrate that a property is in the process of being brought back into use;
 - One where the owner is living elsewhere to provide or receive personal care as a result of illness, infirmity or disablement.
- 2.4 Long term empty homes are properties that are empty for more than 6 months. These are identified through Council Tax records. Properties that have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for over two years are classed as long-term empty dwellings and attract a premium increasing the amount of council tax payable on the property.
- 2.5 Homes that have been empty for more than six months usually have an underlying problem and when homes have been empty for more than two years, it is likely that, without intervention, they will stay empty and decline. Long term empty homes can become run down, fall into disrepair, have overgrown gardens and blight the surrounding homes and neighbourhood. They can also become a hub for crime and may attract vandalism, anti-social behaviour, as well as becoming a target for arson. Neighbouring occupants may be particularly dissatisfied and may find their house value has diminished or may be difficult to let or sell.
- 2.6 There are many reasons for homes being left empty, some are easily categorised, and other circumstances are more complex with owners having their own individual reasons for keeping their property empty.
- 2.7 Long-term empty homes can fall into a state of disrepair and become dangerous as well as having a negative environmental and community impact. A coordinated and sustainable approach can deliver an increase in housing supply, improve standards and reduce the number of empty homes. Returning an empty property to use is usually a significantly more cost effective option than redeveloping. This strategy sets out Exeter City Council's commitment to bringing empty homes back in use by adopting a proactive approach to supporting owners to help return their property to use.

- 2.8 There are a number of challenges associated with the task of returning empty homes back into use:
- a) **Ownership disputes** can make it difficult or impossible to establish who the owner is. Court proceedings and divorce settlements can also delay the occupation of a property.
 - b) **Personal owner circumstances** may prevent them from being able to bring a property back into use. For example, they may not have the funds or capacity to renovate or sell a property.
 - c) **Disappearance of owners** can make it time consuming and expensive for the council to trace owners. Even after finding the individual(s) concerned, they may be unwilling to engage with the process.
 - d) **Maintaining property security** to ensure empty homes don't fall victim to acts of vandalism, arson or squatting due to their often vulnerable condition.
 - e) **Intentional empty homes** are kept empty either for no specific reason, or for unreasonable purposes by the owners who simply do not have any intention to occupy the property.
 - f) **Over shop homes** often used for storage and classed as the owner as part of the business but not used as such. Often there is no suitable access for separate living accommodation.
 - g) **Investment portfolios** for individuals or companies seeking to make money on a rising market or as part of a pension.
 - h) **Housing for older people** such as retirement villages and those with age restrictions, due to their nature, have fewer potential buyers and may remain empty for longer depending on market conditions.

3. Policy Context

- 3.1. There is no national empty homes strategy and there has been no specific funding from central government since the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme 2012-2015 at which time the Government said that the £216 million of funding provided was intended to "provide a push in the right direction" and that there were no plans to provide additional funding.
- 3.2 Council Tax Premium – In tackling the issue of empty homes, local authorities have to make best use of the council tax long-term empty premium. Since 2013, local authorities in England have had the power to charge a council tax premium of up to 50% on properties that have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for two years or more. This premium is in addition to the usual council tax charge that applies to the property. The Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 enacted on 1 November 2018 enables the following:
- From April 2019, increasing that premium up to a maximum of 100%.
 - From April 2020, where a property has been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for 5 years or more, increasing the premium further up to a maximum of 200%

- From April 2021, where a property has been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for 10 years or more, applying a premium up to a maximum of 300%
- 3.3 New Homes Bonus - Launched in April 2011, the New Homes Bonus (NHB) was introduced as an incentive for local authorities to encourage housing growth in their area and to reward additional housing supply. It is calculated annually and has become the measure for the national empty homes figures.
- 3.4 From the local policy context empty homes is highlighted in the Exeter City Council Housing Strategy 2016-2020 and links with the Exeter City Council Homelessness Strategy 2016-2021 with the aim of providing a joined up approach to delivering housing for the city.
- 3.5 With the number of people accessing the city there is an ever increasing demand on housing and the pressure to increase supply is considerable. Along with associated factors such as the economy the issues facing the local housing market include:
- A shortfall in homes being built;
 - House prices increasing;
 - Sales decreasing;
 - Affordability of both renting and buying;
 - In excess of 1,800 Exeter households registered with a social housing need on Devon Home Choice;
 - Reductions in Government grant to Housing Associations to bring forward new affordable housing;
 - Large developers are slowing down build programmes to control supply to the market;
 - Diminishing housing development opportunities due to developer preference for student accommodation.
- 3.6 Bringing empty homes back into use will contribute to the council's 2018-2022 Corporate Plan which sets out the key priorities for action which are:
- Promoting health and active lifestyles
 - Tackling congestion and accessibility
 - Building great neighbourhoods

4. Our Approach to Empty Homes

- 4.1 The Council will contribute to the prevention of term by responding to enquiries about empty homes from the public, undertaking social media campaigns, participating in local landlord events and forums, and through promotions on the council website.
- 4.2 The Council will take a pro-active and preventative approach to homes becoming empty over the long term by the early identification of empty homes and taking assertive action to try to locate owners and provide advice and support to owners to assist in getting homes back into use. This will include a range of advice and support including grant funding assistance where appropriate.
- 4.3 Agree actions will be monitored to ensure empty homes are brought back into use within appropriate timescales and where other interventions have failed enforcement action will be taken.

5. Empty Homes Tools

- 5.1 There are a range of tools available to support and encourage home owners to bring properties back into use. These are:

5.2 Value Added Tax (VAT) Arrangement

There is provision through the VAT system for an owner renovating a long term empty home and having the work undertaken by a contractor to pay reduced VAT. The Council can provide a letter to confirm a home has been long term empty.

5.3 Empty home loans

Exeter City Council provides funding for home improvement funds managed through a contract with Wessex Resolutions CIC. This is a consortium of 20 local authorities who pool funding to create a long term fund for home improvement loans with interest and investment profits creating the sustainable funding pipeline.

- 5.4 Empty home loans can be used whether the house is going to be sold or let and the Wessex Resolutions representative will discuss which loan solution is best suited to individual circumstances. Wessex Resolutions are able to provide low-cost loans to cover various types of work, such as:

- Disrepair or structural issues;
- Damp and mould growth;
- Electrical rewiring;
- Thermal upgrading such as windows;
- Boiler work and insulation;
- Improvements to kitchens or bathrooms.

5.5 Matchmaker scheme

The Council can help owners of empty homes to try and find potential buyers. The Empty Property Matchmaker Scheme brings together the owners of empty homes in Exeter and private individuals, investors and developers who want to purchase empty homes in the city.

- 5.6 This scheme helps owners in a number of ways because there are:

- No fees: free service for seller/buyer;
- Bypasses estate agent;
- Reduces cost to sellers as no need to renovate before selling;
- Reduces cost to buyer due to any disrepair;
- Simple process for seller/buyer;
- Choice to pursue offers or not.

- 5.7 To date four matchmaker requests have been made to the scheme.

5.8 Garden clearance scheme

This is a new scheme was introduced in 2018 in response to owners and landlords needing a reliable means of clearing gardens and provides access to chargeable Council services to assist homeowners with clearance plans as part of agreed action plans. Six home owners have accessed this scheme since it started.

5.9 Formal enforcement actions to tackle empty homes

Where informal advice, guidance and support has failed or if there is an imminent risk to public health and/or safety the council will consider enforcement options. The options available include, but are not limited to:

- **Enforced Sale** – Allows the council to force the sale of a property to recover debts owed to the council that are registered as a charge on the property.
- **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)** – Enables the council to secure occupation and responsible management of some privately owned houses and flats that have been empty for two years or more, as well as being actively used for antisocial purposes.
- **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO)** - Enable the council to purchase and sell an empty property for the purpose of providing housing accommodation or facilities connected to housing accommodation

5.10 No formal enforcement action has yet been taken by the Council/

5.11 A summary of the range of enforcement powers that are available to the council are described in **Appendix A**. All enforcement action will be taken in accordance with the council's Enforcement Policy.

6. Delivering the Strategy

6.1 The strategic aim is to bring Exeter's empty homes back into use as lived in homes. There are 3 key objectives:

Objective 1: Bring empty homes back into use to increase the supply of quality, affordable housing in the city by:

- Using negotiation and enforcement action to bring long term empty or homes causing problems back into use;
- Working with Wessex Resolutions CIC to promote home loans to owners of empty homes to help with renovation, selling or letting;
- Develop a suite of innovative approaches to bring homes back into use, both as interim measures and longer term solutions such as a Deposit Guarantee scheme for owners of empty property or schemes where the Council or other registered social landlord manages property letting on behalf of a landlord

Objective 2: To continue to raise awareness and address issues relating to empty homes and to provide advice by:

- Fostering and maintaining relationships with owners of empty homes to inform them of the schemes available to help them bring their homes back into use;
- Improving the information available on the council's website;
- Promoting available services and prevent homes from becoming empty in the first place;
- Maintaining and enhancing effective working relationships with the private sector, registered social landlords and other stakeholders such as the Police and Fire Service.

Objective 3: Improve the quality of neighbourhoods by identifying and tackling the issues associated with empty homes by:

- Adopting both proactive and reactive approaches to identifying, prioritising and monitoring long term empty homes to ensure that no more than 1% of homes is empty and unused for more than six months
- 6.2 Our previous experience in bringing empty homes back into use has taught us that our strategy must contain a combination of incentives and sanctions to be successful. The key mechanisms for achieving our objectives will be to:
- Carry out regular audits to identify and prioritise empty homes, maintain records of empty homes and work to bring homes back into use through co-operation with the owners;
 - Advise and assist property owners who would like to let their property;
 - Ensure enforcement powers are fully utilised where co-operation with owners fails;
 - Redevelop empty homes acquired through enforcement;
 - Work in partnership across the council and external partners to coordinate action to bring empty homes back into use.
- 6.3 The leadership for the delivery of the strategy will be the Private Sector Housing Team integrated within Environmental Health and Licencing in 2018. The more integrated working will support or a wider range prevention and enforcement opportunities.
- 6.4 Key internal partners will include:
- Council Tax to Council Tax Billing and Collection
 - City Development
 - Finance
 - Legal
- 6.5 Key external partners will include:
- The Community Safety Partnership
 - Developers
 - Housing Associations
 - Registered Providers
 - Wessex Resolutions CIC.
- 6.6 Delivery of the strategy will be financed through existing resources. Where appropriate and available, bids for resources from the Government will be made.
- 6.7 The delivery of this strategy will be measured against the aims and objectives set out above and in the accompanying Action Plan throughout the strategy period. Internal monitoring of statistics will be used to measure input in to homes returned to use and the annual Council Tax statistical return will be used to monitor the number of empty homes in Exeter.

7. Action Plan

1. Bring empty homes back into use and increase the supply of quality and affordable housing in the city			
Action	Lead	Timescale	Outcome
Undertake a feasibility study of whether it is possible to develop or procure a Deposit Guarantee Scheme, Council Letting Scheme, Grant Funding Scheme or Lease and Repair Scheme for owners.	Empty Homes Officer. Environmental Health Licensing Manager.	September 2019.	Contribute to target of empty homes brought back into use: 2019 – 25; 2020 – 30; 2021 – 35; 2022 – 40.
Encourage take-up of the Empty Property Matchmaker Scheme.	Empty Homes Team	Ongoing.	Contribute to target of empty homes brought back into use per year.
Implement appropriate joint working practice and protocol with other council departments including: Council Tax to Council Tax Billing and Collection, City Development and Housing Needs.	Empty Homes Team.	December 2019.	Formal procedures in place.
To discuss with Council Tax to Council Tax Billing and Collection further measure that can be taken under The Rating (Property in Common Occupation) a Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 regarding properties that have been empty for over 5 and 10 years.	Environmental Health Licensing Manager	December 2019	Policy adopted.
Renew of Environmental Health Enforcement Policy to ensure tools for delivery with problematic empty homes.	Environmental Health Licensing Manager.	Under review.	Policy adopted.
Adopt an engagement and assistance approach with owners and escalate only if necessary to the use of formal powers.	Empty Homes Team.	Ongoing.	Contribute to the annual targets.
Review the use of planning conditions to avoid creating homes and neighbourhoods which remain vacant through the use of the Exeter City Council Local Plan and the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP).	Empty Homes Team. Senior Environment Technical Officer.	December 2020.	Formal procedures in place.
Review Empty Homes Strategy 2019 - 2022	Empty Homes Officer.	December 2022.	Revised strategy adopted.

2. To continue to raise awareness and address issues relating to empty homes and to provide advice			
Action	Lead	Timescale	Outcome
Develop a communication plan to ensure the Empty Homes Strategy is widely circulated and publicised.	Empty Homes Officer. Private Sector Housing Officer.	30 April 2019.	Increased number of residents and stakeholders aware of the strategy leading to increased uptake of empty homes schemes.
Foster and maintain relationships with owners of empty homes to inform them of the schemes available to help them bring their homes back into use.	Empty Homes Officer. Housing Development Assistant.	Ongoing.	Increased uptake of empty homes schemes.
Participate in landlord forums and landlord accreditation events to promote the various schemes available to bring empty homes back into use.	Empty Homes Officer. Private Sector Housing Officer.	Ongoing.	Increased uptake of empty homes schemes.
Develop, review and regularly maintain empty property pages on the council's website.	Empty Homes Officer.	Ongoing.	Improved traffic/feedback in relation to the content of the website.
Develop and maintain effective working relationships with the private sector, registered providers of housing and other stakeholders such as the Police and Fire Service.	Empty Homes Officer. Private Sector Housing Officer.	Ongoing.	Number of new cases of empty homes referred to the council by other.
Update reports on current empty homes situation and review action plans.	Empty Homes Officer. Principal Environmental Health Officer.	March 2020. March 2021. March 2022.	Report prepared for committee.
Multi agency meeting to discuss and risk assess empty homes.	Empty Homes Officer. Private Sector Housing Officer.	31 March 2019.	Meeting established with Terms of Reference.
Contribute to regional and national committees on empty homes policy and procedures.	Empty Homes Officer. Principal Environmental Health Officer.	As they occur.	Number of meetings attended and consultation responses made.
Promote and encourage the installation of energy efficiency measures in the retrofit of empty homes and advise of funding schemes available.	Empty Homes Officer. Housing Development Assistant.	Ongoing.	Take up of energy efficiency measures.

3. To improve the quality of neighbourhoods			
Action	Lead	Timescale	Outcome Measures
Adopt a proactive and reactive approach to identifying, prioritising and monitoring empty homes and ensure appropriate enforcement action is taken in relation to their condition where legislation permits.	Empty Homes Officer. Principal Environmental Health Officer.	Ongoing.	Formal procedures in place, including a risk assessment and prioritisation methods. Maintain and improve on <1% of housing as empty homes.
Establish procedures and systems to maintain an accurate database of empty homes in the city.	Empty Homes Officer. Housing Development Assistant.	31 October 2019.	Formal procedures in place.
Utilise council tax records and other sources to develop and maintain a database of homes that have remained empty for over 6 months.	Empty Homes Team.	Ongoing.	Formal procedures in place
Explore the use of GIS mapping of empty homes.	Empty Homes Officer. Environmental health Technical Officer.	31 March 2019	Trends in empty homes identified to enable effective targeting of resources.
Ensure 95% of non-secure empty homes to be secured against unauthorised entry within 48 hours of notice expiration.	Empty Homes Team. Environmental health Officer (Public Sector Housing). Principal Environmental Health Officer.	Ongoing.	Empty homes secured reducing risk of squatting, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour.
Seek innovative new ways to provide additional options for owners.	Empty Homes Officer. Principal Environmental Health Officer.	Ongoing.	Production of new options.
Development of individual action plans for all properties over two years empty.	Empty Homes Officer.	As properties become empty in excess of two years.	Plans developed.

Appendix A: Enforcement legislation summary

Problem	Legislation	Power granted
Dangerous or dilapidated buildings or structures	Building Act 1984 ss77 & 78	To require the owner to make the property safe (Section 77) or enable the Local Authority (not London) to take emergency action to make the building safe (Section 78).
	Building Act 1984 s79	To require the owner to repair ruinous or dilapidated buildings seriously detrimental to an area.
	Housing Act 2004 Part I	Under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System local authorities can evaluate the potential risks to health and safety arising from deficiencies within homes and take appropriate enforcement action.
Unsecured homes (where it poses the risk that it may be entered or suffer vandalism, arson or similar).	Building Act 1984, s78 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, s29	To allow the Local Authority to fence off the property. To require the owner to take steps to secure a property or allow the Local Authority to board it up in an emergency.
Blocked or defective drainage or private sewers.	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, s35	To require the owner to address obstructed private sewers.
	Building Act 1984, s59.	To require the owner to address blocked or defective drainage.
	Public Health Act 1961, s17.	To require the owner to address defective drainage or private sewers.

Problem	Legislation	Power granted
Vermin (where it is either present or there is a risk of attracting vermin that may detrimentally affect people's health).	Public Health Act 1961, s34 Prevention of Damage by Pests Act, s4	To require the owner to remove waste so that vermin is not attracted to the site, destroy any infestation and remove any accumulations prejudicial to health.
	Public Health Act 1936, s83.	
	Environmental Protection Act 1990, s80.	
	Building Act 1984, s76.	
Unightly land and property affecting the amenity of an area	Public Health Act 1936, s83	To require the owner to remove waste from the property (see above).
	Town and Country Planning Act 1990, s215.	To require the owner to take steps to address a property adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.
	Building Act 1984, s76.	To require the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of a property.
	Anti-social Behavior, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Community Protection Notices	To prevent an owners persistent, continuing or unreasonable behaviour having a negative impact on the local community's quality of life
Recovery of debts against a property	Law of Property Act 1925, ss101 & 103	To apply for an order of sale of the property to recover council tax debts or debts secured as a legal charge after work in default carried out
Homes empty for over 2 years and causing nuisance in the community	Housing Act 2004 ss133- 183	To apply for an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) to enable the local authority to take over the management of eligible empty homes, to bring them back into use.
Long-term empty homes where no traceable owners, or where all efforts to return the property to use have been exhausted	Housing Act 1985 s17	To seek to acquire a property under a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

	Definition
Affordable Homes Programme	The HCA investment programme aiming to increase the supply of new affordable homes in England. The majority of the new programme will be made available as Affordable Rent with some for affordable home ownership, supported housing and in some circumstances, social rent.
Affordable Housing	Affordable housing includes social rented and intermediate housing, provided to specified eligible households whose needs are not met by the open market.
Affordable Rent	Social housing where rent is charged at up to 80% market rents. The tenancies can either be flexible tenancies or lifetime tenancies. Affordable Rent homes are not subject to the rent restructuring policy that applies to social rented housing.
MHCLG	The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government- is the government department responsible for national housing policy
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency. The national housing and regeneration delivery agency for England
Flexible Tenancy	Fixed term tenancy for a minimum of 2 years with a built in review period
Housing Association	Independent, not-for-profit organisation providing affordable housing
Lifetime Tenancies	Either Secure (council) or Assured tenancies (registered provider).
Market Rent	This refers to private sector rent levels. The rent levels used in this document are sourced from the GLA Rents map and use Valuation Office Agency data. Registered Providers will calculate market rent based on the RICS guidance " <i>Market Rent: a guide for providers of Affordable Rented housing</i> "
Registered Provider	Government funded not-for-profit organisations that provide affordable housing. They include housing associations, trusts and cooperatives.
Social Housing providers	Provider of subsidised social housing below market rent, including the council and other registered providers such as housing associations.
Social Rent	Rents which are kept low through state subsidy, to approximately a third of market levels. The social housing sector is currently governed by a strictly defined system of rent control to ensure that rents are kept affordable.

Appendix C: Useful websites

Age UK:
www.ageuk.org.uk/

Association of Residential Letting Agents (ARLA)
www.arla.co.uk

Citizens Advice Bureau (Exeter):
www.exetercab.org.uk/

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP):
www.dwp.gov.uk

Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service
www.dsfire.gov.uk

Devon County Council:
www.new.devon.gov.uk/

Exeter City Council:
www.Exeter.gov.uk

Empty Homes Network:
www.ehnetwork.org.uk

Empty Homes – national charity:
www.emptyhomes.com

Homes and Communities Agency:
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/homes-and-communities-agency

Joseph Rowntree Foundation:
www.jrf.org.uk

Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government:
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-housing-communities-and-local-government

Rethink Mental Illness:
www.rethink.org/

Shelter:
www.shelter.org.uk

Valuation Office Agency:
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/valuation-office-agency

Wessex Resolutions CIC:
www.wessexresolutions.org.uk/