

REPORT TO CABINET

Open		Would any decisions proposed :			
Any especially affected Wards Options 1 -3 No Option 4 – wards covered by PE31 Postcode	Discretionary /	Be entirely within Cabinet’s powers to decide		YES	
		Need to be recommendations to Council		NO	
	Operational	Is it a Key Decision		NO	
Lead Member: Cllr Rust E-mail: <i>cllr.jo.rust@west-norfolk.gov.uk</i>		Other Cabinet Members consulted: Cllr Beales			
		Other Members consulted:			
Lead Officer: Mark Whitmore E-mail: <i>mark.whitmore@west-norfolk.gov.uk</i>		Other Officers consulted: Kate Blakemore – Chief Executive Michelle Drewery – Deputy Chief Executive Jo Stanton – Revenues & Benefits Manager Jeanette Hollingsworth – Environmental Health Manager Jemma Curtis – Regeneration Programmes Manager Connor Smalls – Regeneration Programmes Officer			
Financial Implications YES	Policy/ Personnel Implications YES	Statutory Implications NO	Equality Impact Assessment YES/If YES: Pre-screening	Risk Management Implications YES	Environmental Considerations NO
If not for publication, the paragraph(s) of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Local Government Act considered to justify that is (are) paragraph(s)					

Date of meeting: 23rd April 2026

TITLE: HIGH STREET RENTAL AUCTIONS

Summary

High street vacancy, both residential and commercial, is harming King’s Lynn’s town centre by weakening economic vitality, encouraging anti-social behaviour and creating a poor impression of the town. Addressing long-term empty properties is therefore central to delivering the King’s Lynn Ten Year Vision for the Pride in Place Programme, which aims to create a more vibrant, safe and inclusive town.

With the appointment of a dedicated Empty Homes Officer through utilising the money we have received through the Second Homes Council Tax, there becomes an opportunity for that officer to implement a High Street Rental Auction Scheme in Kings Lynn, which provides a targeted mechanism to bring vacant commercial units back into use.

The scheme will be applied specifically to the southern section of King’s Lynn High Street, where there is a recognised concentration of empty commercial premises. By enabling rental auctions for eligible properties, the council can

intervene where landlords have failed to re-let units, helping to re-energise the high street and support economic recovery

Recommendation

Cabinet to note the content of this report and agree to implement a High Street Rental Auction Scheme subject to following the national guidance in implementing such a scheme, to initially be applied to the southern section of King's Lynn High Street (appendix 1).

Reason for Decision

The scheme is needed to address the high concentration of long-term vacant commercial units on the southern High Street, which currently undermines the area's economic vitality, appearance and safety.

A High Street Rental Auction Scheme provides a practical tool to bring empty properties back into use and supports the wider aims of revitalising King's Lynn town centre.

1 Background

- 1.1 Long term Empty properties are often a source of frustration within communities as they can fall into disrepair and can attract unwanted criminal and anti- social behaviour. Empty homes are also an unused resource in the housing market.
- 1.2 Properties can fall empty for many reasons and there is no simple regulatory process for returning them to occupation. Working with owners is a time consuming and complex process that requires a dedicated resource to be effective.
- 1.3 The prolonged vacancy of shops and buildings can significantly impact high streets and is a challenge nationally, intensified by economic conditions alongside long term changes in customer shopping habits and the way people now use local high streets. The latest data from Savills in their 'Spotlight: Shopping centre and high street – Q4 2025 report outlines that the high street vacancy rate is at 13.4% (February 2026).

Number of empty properties in Kings Lynn

- 1.4 In December 2025 there were 2179 empty residential properties in West Norfolk. Of these 608 are within the PE30 postcode area.
- 1.5 Table 1 shows the number of properties empty for up to one year (C), one to five years, five to ten years and over ten years in PE30 and for the entire Borough.

Premium	PE30 Postcode Area									BCKLWN
	BAND									ALL BANDS
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	TOTAL	TOTAL
C	264	102	42	19	8	4	1	0	440	1423
LEVY	77	33	11	2	2	4	1	0	130	633
L5	26	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	30	76
L10	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	24
XU	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	14
Total >1yr	108	36	13	3	3	4	1	0	168	747
Total inc <1yr	372	138	55	22	11	8	2	0	608	2170

Table 1: Empty Properties by length empty

- 1.6 Since 2019 councils have been able to charge an additional 100% council tax for properties left empty for over two years. From April 2020 higher amounts were introduced for properties empty for longer periods, and in 2024 properties empty over one year were included. We charge a 100% levy for all properties (subject to exemptions) empty between one and five years and additional levies of 200% for properties empty between five and ten years and 300% for properties empty over 10 years.
- 1.7 The council has been monitoring the impact of the changes in levy amounts on the number of empty properties across the borough. There has been no noticeable change in the number of empty properties with fluctuations of less than +/- 10% since the change in the Levy in April 2024. The number of properties empty over one year as a percentage of the total Council Tax base is 0.91% (Table 2). This is a trend that is reflected in national statistics.

Pride in Place and HSRA (High Street Rental Auctions)

- 1.8 For King's Lynn Town Centre Council data shows that, as of January 2026, there is a vacancy rate of 12.9% of retail units. Council data also shows that whilst the towns occupancy percentage has fallen since January 2024, this is only by approx. 2.8%.

Jan 2024	91%	April 2024	90.8%	Jan 2025	88.7%	June 2025	88.7%	Sept 2025	88.2%
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Table 3: Kings Lynn Town Commercial Occupancy Rates

- 1.9 King's Lynn has been included in the Government's Pride in Place Programme awarding the town £20 million over 10 years. The King's Lynn Neighbourhood Board has prioritised Town Centre Repurposing as an intervention, enabling transformation of underused and neglected buildings, sites and areas.

1.10 This provides the opportunity to undertake a more bespoke solution for the King's Lynn area through utilising the ability for us to undertake High Street Rental Auctions (HSRA) as an additional power to encourage and enforce landlords to let out currently vacant commercial units subject to meeting the required criteria.

2. Introduction

2.1 This report presents to Members the work we are already undertaking to develop an empty homes service through the appointment of an empty homes officer, fully funded through our agreed share of funding from Norfolk County Council through the Second Homes Council Tax which has been applied across the Borough, and the additional opportunity to start using High Street Rental Auctions in relation to Kings Lynn Town Centre.

2.2 The Council is currently in the process of appointing an Empty Homes Officer to lead the development of a new Empty Homes Programme, based on a clear "white and black" checklist of best-practice actions. This role will establish a structured and proactive approach to identifying, prioritising, and tackling empty homes within the borough.

2.3 Key elements of the programme will include:

- **Creating a dedicated empty homes database** capturing all empty properties, including those empty for less than six months. This will enable accurate tracking, data cleansing, prioritisation of cases, and targeted engagement with property owners.
- **Undertaking a data-cleansing exercise**—potentially using a specialist external company—to ensure the council holds accurate, reliable information on empty properties.
- **Implementing a programme of engagement and encouragement**, including options such as loan schemes to help owners bring properties back into use.
- **Using enforcement tools where necessary**, drawing on a range of legislative powers (e.g., Housing Act 2004, Building Act 1984, Planning powers, and Environmental Health legislation) when voluntary engagement is unsuccessful. Where appropriate, this may include works in default, placing charges on properties, and pursuing enforced sale to recover debts.

2.4 The role will ensure that both supportive and regulatory measures are coordinated effectively, recognising that enforcement alone does not significantly reduce empty homes without parallel engagement and incentive-based approaches.

2.5 To complement this, we want to implement our High Street Rental Auction Powers which were introduced as part of the [Levelling Up and Regeneration](#)

[Act 2023](#), and will provide additional leverage to encourage engagement and cooperation with property owners and landlords.

3. High Street Rental Auctions Overview

High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs) are a new power given to local authorities in England that allows them to auction leases for long-term vacant commercial premises in designated high streets or town centres. The powers enable councils to step in where a property has been empty for over a year (or 366 days in two years) and the landlord has not taken reasonable steps to re-let it.

Once designated, councils can run a formal auction process to secure a tenant for a fixed-term lease, typically between one and five years, at market rent. The aim is to tackle persistent vacancy, increase footfall, and support local economic and social regeneration by bringing empty units back into productive use.

- 3.3 The Government's guidance explains that rental auctions are intended to help reverse high vacancy rates, currently around 1 in 7 high street units nationally and to empower local leaders to take proactive steps to revitalise struggling town centres. Councils must follow a tightly defined 22–24 week process, including serving notices, creating an auction pack, and marketing the premises. Landlords still have an opportunity to find a tenant during an initial "grace period," but if no satisfactory tenancy is agreed, the auction proceeds. The approach is designed to re-energise high streets and reduce the negative impacts of empty premises, such as reduced footfall and increased anti-social behaviour.
- 3.4 A HSRA can only be carried out in areas that have been previously designated by the Local Authority and must follow a specific process (appendix 2).
- 3.5 The legislation and process are complex and would involve staff from multiple departments within the Council. There are various legal requirements and specific timescales to follow (see Appendix 2 for a flowchart of the full process). Once an area is designated, starting the HSRA process would follow the below simplified steps;
 - Step 1: Proactively work with landlords who have vacant properties to let them know of the designation, potential application of HSRA and encourage them to let the property.
 - Step 2: Identify & verify the vacant property. The property must satisfy both the vacancy condition (premises have been unoccupied continuously for 12 months, or for at least 366 days (non-continuously) within a 24-month period) and the local benefit condition (the local authority must be satisfied that the occupation of the premises for a suitable high-street use would be beneficial to the local economy, society, or environment).
 - Step 3: A survey may be completed to consider suitability e.g. cost of work to make the rental of the property viable.

- Step 4: The Council serves an initial notice to the landlord requiring the premises to be let.
- Step 5: The Landlord has 8 weeks to enter into a tenancy which the Council considers suitable.
- Step 6: Should no suitable tenancy be put in place, the landlord is served a final notice informing them that the Council will run a High Street Rental Auction for the premises
- Step 7: Landlord has an opportunity to Appeal.
- Step 8: The Council commences a 12-week auction process and completes a tenancy contract.

The High Street Rental Auction process is expected to take 22 to 24 weeks from initiation to completion and a link to the High Street Rental Auctions: Non-statutory guidance can be found in the Background Papers section of this report.

It is important to note that the Government has outlined that the logic of this new national policy is that the auction itself will be used as a last resort when proactive engagement with a landlord has not led to a successful outcome. Based on early experiences gathered by MHCLG from trailblazer authorities who have already designated HSRA High Street Areas, they have not had to implement the full auction process and have seen positive results following designation and proactive engagement with landlords. As such, it has been proven in live situations that having the policy established can help positively encourage landlords to take more proactive and open-minded approach to letting units.

It is also key to understand that the HSRA process will not be applicable to every vacant unit. The policy and process have been created around units which are already up to a lettable standard and can therefore attract a viable tenant ready to enter into a lease and pay rent. The guidance from Government clearly states that very large premises (such as former department stores subject to long term, complex redevelopment) and premises requiring significant investment with serious issues (such as structural or damp issues) are likely to be outside of the scope of HSRA.

4. Implementation of High Street Rental Auctions

- 4.1 Step 1 – Defining the Designated High Streets - If a Local Authority wants to engage and utilise the HSRA process, it must first define the high street or area where HSRA can be used. It is proposed to define this area to the southern part of the High Street in King's Lynn to tackle and focus on the existing concentration of vacancy in this part of the town centre (set out in Appendix 1).

- 4.2 Step 2 – Community Engagement - Once the area is identified, a community engagement period of at least 28 days must take place outlining the proposed 'Designated High Street' where HSRA can be used. If a property is vacant or expected to become vacant soon, landlords will be invited to discuss how the Council can assist in facilitating occupancy, removing the need to initiate the HSRA process.
- 4.3 Step 3 – Vacancy Register - A vacancy register will need to be established and maintained giving details of long-term vacant properties within the designated high street, to allow the Council to identify properties eligible for HSRA's.
- 4.4 Step 4 – HSRA Process – As outlined in this report and the guidance from MHCLG, the HSRA would require following the mandated process and a policy/process would need to be established, including how potential properties would be identified and progress through the auction process.

5. Proposed Application of HSRA in King's Lynn

- 5.1 As of January 2026, the vacancy rate in King's Lynn Town Centre was 12.9%. Whilst this is below the national average, there is a concentration of vacant properties in the southern area of the High Street. Stakeholders, residents and businesses have been raising their concerns about this area due to the notable concentration of vacant units, it is therefore considered that the HSRA powers could have a focused impact on this area of town. This approach would send a clear signal that the Council wants to tackle vacant units in this area of town whilst acknowledging the lower level of vacant properties in the remainder of the town centre.
- 5.2 It is proposed, therefore, that the council will designate the southern part of High Street (Appendix 1) and take a proactive approach with early engagement with landlords. By designating a HSRA area, the Council will be able to use HSRA's as an incentive in discussions to aid and encourage proactive and meaningful conversation to let empty units. This will be in addition to existing powers such as CPO's and Planning Enforcement and will further bolster the Council position to engage in these discussions.
- 5.3 It is important to note the complexities, limitation and newness of the legislation as outlined in this report and manage expectations accordingly. We now have evidence from MHCLG and the trailblazer authorities that designation and proactive engagement works, delivering tangible results. It is therefore recommended that Officers proceed with caution and tactfully approach landlords, first offering that collaborative and proactive engagement whilst outlining powers that are available. This presents an opportunity to establish and improve positive relationships whilst sending out a clear signal as to the Council's vision for the Town Centre. It will be important to review our approach and develop it over time based on any learning as well as further updates from MHCLG and best practice from other authorities who are getting results.

5.4 HSRA can positively grow engagement with landlords and provide an impetus to address persistently vacant premises in addition to existing powers like Planning Enforcement. If the scheme is to operate as intended by Government, then a limited number of premises if any should reach rental auction stage as the landlord should have been positively engaged and proactively brings the premise back into use through collaboration.

6. Options Considered

6.1 To not implement this scheme.

7. Policy Implications

7.1 There will be a requirement to draft a HSRA policy.

7.2 This proposal aligns with the corporate objective to support growth and prosperity.

7.3 Addressing vacant town centre properties and repurposing King's Lynn's town centre is one of the priorities identified in the Pride in Place 10 year vision,

8. Financial Implications

8.1 High Street Rental Auctions - The costs for the process are initially to the Local Authority. However, there is the opportunity to recover these through the auction process and/or through the New Burdens Payments (Deadline for applications: 14 January 2028, or until the burdens are met through a Spending Review bid or a Local Government Finance Settlement. You must apply for payment within the same financial year the HSRA is delivered) up to the value of £5,223 per auction or up to £1,791 if the auction does not meet the marketing stage. There is no limit on the number of auctions an authority can conduct and claim and it will follow the new burdens doctrine. The New Burdens Payment would cover:

- issuing legal notices;
- gaining access to the premises;
- marketing and promoting the auction and premises to be let; and
- administering and managing the auction process.

8.2 One of the main potential barriers to utilise the HSRA powers will be properties that are not in a lettable state. At this time MHCLG have confirmed that there will be no additional fund into 26/27 for such works. However, alternative funding sources to support property renovations and similar work required could be sought through the Pride in Place Programme as well as other funding partners such as Historic England where active discussions are currently on going.

8.3 The post associated with the creation of this service has already been approved for two years and will be funded from the additional Council Tax receipts from the second homes levy.

8.4 The Pride in Place 10 year vision was approved by government on 23rd March 2026, which means funding will be available from April 2026 over the next years to support priorities identified and approved by the King's Lynn Neighbourhood Board. The investment priorities identified in the first 4 year of the programme are subject to a full scheme being developed for approval by the King's Lynn Neighbourhood Board.

9. Personnel Implications

9.1 Recruitment of one FTE Empty Properties Officer post.

9.2 To implement HSRA and an Empty Homes scheme will require coordinated support across the following departments:

- The Councils regulatory departments, including Environmental Health & Planning Enforcement services
- Revenues Team (C Tax and Business Rates)
- Town Centre management – vacancy data and input into the vacancy register (already maintained by the Commercial Services team).
- Regeneration – identifying potential demand, agreeing area to be designated, identify target buildings, community consultation, identifying and engaging landlords, identifying appropriate funding to support targeted interventions
- Property Services – surveying property conditions and works required to achieve minimum lettable standard, marketing and running auctions, tenancy agreements. Property Services would likely need to outsource this work due to the team's limited resources.
- Legal services in respect of enforcing action through the courts, for example pursuing enforced sales, and defending legal challenges.

10. Environmental Considerations

10.1 None

11. Statutory Considerations

11.1 Outside of any statutory duties imposed by the legislation there is no statutory duty for the council to require empty properties to be returned to use.

12. Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) (Pre screening report template attached)

12.1 By confining this work to the Kings Lynn Vision geography it is recognised that empty properties elsewhere will not receive the same level of scrutiny or support to be brought back into use.

13. Risk Management Implications

13.1 Landlords may be struggling to find tenants for currently vacant commercial

properties and if demand is low, the HSRA process might not be able to resolve the issue.

13.2 Quality of premises - Vacant units may be in poor condition which would require potentially significant investment before they are suitable for a tenant, beyond potentially available funding. Under the HSRA process, the landlord retains ownership of the property and is responsible for its condition. If a property is in a poor condition, the landlord would need to carry out repairs before any auction, this could result in legal delays.

13.3 Refurbishment costs - Where the Council will also need to apply for funding, this would add additional resource pressure. Landlords remain central to any repairs.

13.4 Legal Challenge - As a result of the HSRA process, Landlords may launch Legal challenges disputing the council's intervention, vacancy criteria, or statutory compliance etc. Risks include delays, costs, and reputational impact.

14. Declarations of Interest / Dispensations Granted

14.1 None

15. Background Papers

[High Street Rental Auctions: Non-statutory Guidance](#)

visionkingslynn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/KL-Pride-in-Place-Programme-10-Year-Vision.pdf

Appendix 1: Proposed High Street Rental Auctions Red Line Boundary for Southern High Street Only



Appendix 2: HSRA Process Flowchart (as defined by Government guidance)

