

Empty Homes Strategy–Action Plan – By Strategic Objective

Essential Reference Paper B

Objective 1 - Ensure the availability and effective use of information on empty homes within our district				
Through the maintenance of a database of all empty homes using information from Council Tax and other areas of the Council, supported by information from owners and other individuals.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
1.1	Finalise schedule of reports to be run on a regular basis to support empty homes work	Schedule of standard reports run routinely providing fixed snapshots of empty homes situation. (In addition the Empty Homes Officer will retain access to council tax data for further investigation and intermediate updates.)	Empty Homes Officer (Head of Revenue)	Feb 2007
✓	Report available and run on request as required			
1.2	Complete initial input of empty homes data to Environmental Health's M3 database	Tracking of empty homes work will be on the same system as the rest of the service. Environmental Health Officers will be able to access information on empty properties in their parts of the district.	Empty Homes Officer (Environmental Health Business Team)	Mar 2007
✓	Initial input completed and alerts set to notify other officers of empty properties			
1.3	Prepare and implement process for regular updating of empty homes data and feedback to Council Tax officers	Clear understanding of the information needed and the ways it will be provided. Regular contact and information sharing between these two key services re empty homes.	Empty Homes Officer (Head of Revenue)	Mar 2007
✓/✘	Format of report available from Council Tax means that input to Environmental Health System requires significant administrative intervention with retyping of data. Feedback is provided to CT where discrepancies found.			
1.4	Review of Council Tax coding of currently listed empty properties	Ensure that the correct information is available and that occasional use properties and second homes are not included as empty homes.	Head of Revenue (Empty Homes Officer)	Feb 2007
✓/✘	Meetings held properties reviewed and greater understanding of differences in definition gained. It will not be possible to correct all cases due to the different requirements of the two functions.			

✓ Action completed, ✓/✘ Action part completed, ✘ Action not completed

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1.5	Prepare the list of properties that are categorised as requiring continued action. Maintain this list, updating fully on a 1/4ly basis with interim updates removing those properties known to be moved out of this category.	This provides the list of properties for which further action is required to be shared as needed with appropriate partners to the strategy.	Empty Homes Officer	May 2007
*	High turnover of properties and resource constraints has prevented full investigation of all properties to complete prioritisation. Properties highlighted by other departments or via complaints have been targeted for action.			

Objective 1 - Ensure the availability and effective use of information on empty homes within our district

Through the maintenance of a database of all empty homes using information from Council Tax and other areas of the Council, supported by information from owners and other individuals.

Summary - An effective database has not yet been achieved; whilst reports have been extracted from the Council Tax data giving the properties with discounts or exemptions, it proved resource intensive to import this into the Environmental Health system. The high turnover of properties that come back into use having been empty for between six months and two years, together with the time required to input new properties, has meant that the database is not regularly maintained. Analysis of the data for statutory reporting is very time consuming. This is currently being addressed through the population of the recently purchased software.

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Objective 2 – Develop effective partnership working within the Council and with external partners Effectively using Council resources in identification and investigation of empty homes, and in prioritising for action if required. Working with external partners to support empty homes activities.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
2.1	Provide information on Empty Homes activity to all relevant service areas and introduce easier methods for other officers to report possible empty properties (eg through the intranet)	Additional empty homes reporting and further information on potentially problematic empty properties.	Empty Homes Officer	April 2007
✓	Empty property work discussed with key service areas. Officers can access empty homes reporting on website or reported directly via phone or email			
2.2	Formation of an officer group to support the prioritisation of identified empty properties and to help assess the most appropriate action to pursue.	Officers from Council Tax, Development Control, Building Control, Contract Services, Housing Options, Housing Strategy and Community Development effectively involved in Empty Homes activity.	Empty Homes Officer	April 2007
✓	Key officers identified and format agreed, meeting as required for specific properties.			
2.3	Invite external contacts to support the two actions listed above	Improved information availability to support decision making	Empty Homes Officer	Sept 2007
✓/✗	Discussions held with Community Police, and invitation made to town councils to discuss but limited input achieved.			

Objective 2 – Develop effective partnership working within the Council and with external partners Effectively using Council resources in identification and investigation of empty homes, and in prioritising for action if required. Working with external partners to support empty homes activities.	
Summary -	Effective working arrangements have been developed with other Council functions, the primary ones being Council Tax, Development Control, Housing Options and Housing Strategy. Some empty properties have been identified in this way and the empty homes officer is able to assist other areas with their investigations as well as receiving input. Greater involvement with Planning and Housing Policy could help prioritise action on properties in villages and rural areas.

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Objective 3 – Raise the awareness of empty homes in East Herts				
Effectively publicising the problems of empty homes in our district and the services we can offer. Encouraging owners to seek our help to bring their property back into use. Inviting members of the public to report empty homes and specific problems they are causing.				
Action	Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date	
3.1	Develop empty homes web pages including the option to report empty homes on line.	Ready access to information on East Herts empty homes activities. Empty homes reporting from more members of the public.	Empty Homes Officer	Jun 2007
✓	Web page provides information on empty properties, the benefits of bringing them back into use, the support that can be provided and has an online reporting tool.			
3.2	Review initial information sheet sent to owners of empty homes.	Provides newly contacted owners with accurate information outlining the problems of empty homes and the support we can offer to bring them back into use.	Empty Homes Officer	Mar 2007 (then annually)
✓	Information sheet reviewed and updated as necessary			
3.3	Ensure effective publicity is given to empty homes activity and successes through press releases and the use of Link magazine and through continued support for the National Week Of Action On Empty Homes.	More public awareness of our work	Empty Homes Officer (Environmental Health Promotion Officer)	As required (review annually April)
✓	Press releases have been prepared in support of Empty Homes Week and for specific activity and have resulted in some local press coverage. Link items have raised profile leading to increased referrals of properties from members of the public			

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Summary - There has been an increase in awareness with both requests for help from owners and complaints from other members of the public and councillors being received, further publicity following successful enforcement would help to keep the momentum up.				

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Objective 4 - Encourage reuse through information and incentives Encourage the owners of empty homes to see the benefits of returning their property to use. Offer advice, support or incentives to help bring the property into use.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
4.1	Develop information to be sent out by Council Tax when initial claims for discounts on empty properties are made.	Owners are made aware of the support we can offer as early as possible.	Empty Homes Officer (Head of Revenue)	April 2007
*	On discussion with the Principle Officer Revenues this was found to be more complex than expected and it was agreed that initial letters would be sent by the Empty Homes Officer instead.			
4.2	Contact all owners of empty properties when the property has been empty for 6 months and pursue contact for a minimum of 3 attempts.	Owners are made aware of our commitment to bringing empty homes back into use.	Empty Homes Officer	Ongoing
✓/✘	Initial contact was made to all owners but with the difficulty maintaining a full up to date list this has not been followed up rigorously.			
4.3	Monitor the uptake of advice, support and incentives and gather information on its usefulness to empty homes owners.	Information to support any changes required to make our support packages more relevant.	Empty Homes Officer (Head of Revenue)	Ongoing (annual review each May)
✓	Ongoing			

Objective 4 - Encourage reuse through information and incentives Encourage the owners of empty homes to see the benefits of returning their property to use. Offer advice, support or incentives to help bring the property into use.				
Following the initial letters to all empty property owners the lack of a reliable easily updated database has meant that the exercise could not be repeated efficiently and monitoring of properties is excessively time consuming. This is being addressed through the population of the recently purchased software.				

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Objective 5 – Enhance the character of the local community through improvement and reuse of empty homes				
Prioritise for action those empty homes that are problems in their local neighbourhoods and those that could alleviate particular housing need.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
5.1	Review risk assessment worksheet and include appropriate elements in on line empty homes reporting forms. Encourage officers in other services to help collect this information.	Information is available on the condition of the property earlier.	Empty Homes Officer	April 2007
✓	Risk assessment reviewed and collected where visits made			
5.2	Encourage Councillors and members of the public to give specific information to help identify problematic empty homes	Problematic empty homes are identified for early investigation.	Empty Homes Officer	April 2007
✓/✗	Levels of referrals have increased with greater awareness.			
5.3	Develop and introduce housing need scoring for empty properties	Provides the housing need information for prioritisation	Empty Homes Officer (Housing Options Manager/Housing Strategy Manager)	April 2007
✓/✗	A simple approach based on priority for properties in the main towns has been used where necessary and further development has not been necessary as full prioritisation of properties has not been possible. Where necessary specific properties are discussed with the Housing Options team.			
5.4	Prioritise properties as soon as possible (re stage 3 initial prioritisation)	Ensures resources are used most effectively acting on those properties identified for further action	Empty Homes Officer (Empty Homes Officer Group)	June 2007 (then ongoing)
✗	See above for reasons for not pursuing full prioritisation of the empty properties			

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Objective 5 – Enhance the character of the local community through improvement and reuse of empty homes Prioritise for action those empty homes that are problems in their local neighbourhoods and those that could alleviate particular housing need.
Identification and prioritising of properties for action in the manner initially envisaged has not been possible given the high turnover of properties empty between six months and two years and the time required to visit and risk assess each empty property. In some cases the properties that have been brought back into use have met this objective but this has not been through active prioritisation. A revised prioritisation scheme targeting properties subject to complaint, properties that have been left empty for longer time and property in rural areas of specific housing need is outlined in the revised strategy.

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Objective 6 - Take enforcement action where appropriate Where a property is prioritised for action and the owner refuses to bring the property into use, undertake the most appropriate enforcement action for that situation.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
6.1	With the Empty Homes Officer Group develop a process for agreeing appropriate enforcement action	Clear process to be followed consistently. (Development of this process will not prevent ongoing identification of enforcement action)	Empty Homes Officer (Empty Homes Officer Group)	Sept 2007
✓	Individual properties are assessed on a case by case basis with appropriate officers from other service areas as required.			
6.2	Develop procedures to be followed for each enforcement action.	Documented procedures available to allow correct and consistent process to be followed	Empty Homes Officer (Empty Homes Officer Group)	As required (with first use of each action)
✓	Procedure for EDMO action developed, information is available to develop other procedures as required.			

Objective 6 - Take enforcement action where appropriate Where a property is prioritised for action and the owner refuses to bring the property into use, undertake the most appropriate enforcement action for that situation.				
Properties have been identified as appropriate for enforcement actions and action has been taken through Planning Enforcement and Building Control however, full enforcement through the main empty homes options has not been undertaken to date. The possibility of enforcement action has encouraged some owners to bring their property back into use but as more time passes without formal action being taken this effect may reduce. Should Compulsory Purchase be an appropriate action additional resources will be required.				

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Objective 7- Bring back homes in partnership with Registered Social Landlords where a specific housing need is identified. Develop general schemes with partner RSL's which can be offered to the owners of empty homes. Work with RSL's on individual cases where this could provide the most effective use of the property.				
Action		Outcome (Comments)	Responsible Officer (Supported by)	Date
6.1	Finalise arrangements for Herts, Beds & Bucks scheme	Empty Homes Private Sector Leasing and Housing Management scheme available with tenant introductions to be made through our Housing Options Team	Empty Homes Officer (Housing Options Manager)	April 2007
✓	Scheme developed and contract signed. Delays with other authorities have slowed full implementation			
6.2	Finalise PLACE negotiations and launch scheme	Empty homes made available at less than market rent. Introductions to be made through Housing Options Team	Empty Homes Officer (Housing Options Manager)	January 2007
✓	Contracts signed scheme launched and ongoing			
6.3	Review RSL involvement and identify additional opportunities	Ensuring appropriate involvement of RSL's in empty property work	Empty Homes Officer (Housing Strategy Manager, RSL's)	Annually (Sept)
✓	Ongoing discussions with RSLs re the two initiatives shown above, work to allow an amendment of the PLACE Scheme in progress			

Objective 7- Bring back homes in partnership with Registered Social Landlords where a specific housing need is identified. Develop general schemes with partner RSL's which can be offered to the owners of empty homes. Work with RSL's on individual cases where this could provide the most effective use of the property.				
These two major schemes have been developed and implemented but have taken significant amounts of time. The review of the PLACE scheme, if approved by EERA, will bring greater flexibility and fund additional resource to target and progress properties for the scheme.				