

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY – 26 JANUARY 2009

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND HEALTH

8. REVIEW OF EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All

Purpose/Summary of Report

- To report on the review of the current Empty Homes Strategy and associated Action Plan and to propose a revised strategy and associated action plan for the period 2010 to 2015

RECOMMENDATION FOR COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:

(A)	That the committee reviews the proposed Empty Homes Strategy and associated Action Plan providing any comments for submission to the executive

RECOMMENDATION FOR EXECUTIVE:

(A)	That the revised Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan be approved

1. Background

- 1.2 East Herts Empty Homes Strategy was approved in February 2007. The strategy introduced a 5 step approach to tackling empty homes and gave an action plan with a strong focus on the implementation of this approach.
- 1.2 Since the adoption of this Empty Homes Strategy the key targets for the number of empty homes brought back into use in each year have been achieved.
- 1.3 A full review of the action plan has been undertaken, and whilst most actions have been completed, the review has also highlighted areas where the expected outcomes have not been fully achieved. Therefore, drawing on experience gained during the initial period, a review of the overall strategy has been undertaken. (Essential Reference Paper B (Pages 8.8 – 8.16) shows the action plan with comments on progress for each action and a summary of the outcomes by objective). A revised strategy with associated action plan is proposed, Essential Reference Paper C pages 8.17 – 8.48).

2.0 Report

Current Situation and outcomes from the action plan review

- 2.1 East Herts has more than 600 homes that have been left empty for longer than six months and of these over 34 are known to have been empty for more than 10 years (this number is expected to rise when more accurate information is available). Since the Empty Homes Officer was appointed in 2004 approximately 70 properties have been brought back into use through East Herts intervention. However, the overall number of empty properties including the number of very long term empty properties is little changed.
- 2.2 With recent changes in the economy and in particular with the impact this has had on the housing market, further analysis of empty homes data has been undertaken. This has shown that in East Herts there tends to be a high turnover of properties empty for between six months and two years. There remains however a significant number of properties that have been empty for over 5 years with several empty for over 20 years.

- 2.3 The review of the empty homes action plan shows areas of success against the objectives of the strategy including:
- Initial mailings to all empty homes owners providing information and offering support to bring their property back into use
 - the development of good working relationships across the authority to identify and tackle empty homes
 - raising of the awareness of empty property as an issue in the district
 - the development of schemes with partners including other authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL's)
- 2.4 Areas where the outcomes have been less than planned include:
- the ability to maintain an effective register of empty properties and use this to manage workload and track progress towards bringing property back into use
 - a full prioritisation all empty properties within the district, allowing targeting of properties that are problems in their local neighbourhoods, and those that could alleviate particular housing need.

It is expected that the implementation of the recently procured software to support empty homes work will allow a working register of empty homes to be developed and maintained in a more efficient manner. It is proposed that the second point be addressed through a revised process for prioritising properties for investigation and action outlined in 2.9 and 2.10 below.

- 2.5 The successful raising of awareness of empty properties as an issue in the district has had an impact on the empty homes officer's workload. Recently more time has been spent responding to complaints and investigating potentially empty properties at the expense of initiating or following up routine enquiries. In some cases this had led to the identification of problematic empties although in others the properties have proved to be occupied or are claimed to be second homes. Whilst this should lead to improved performance in tackling the problematic empty homes, in the short term it is likely to adversely affect the number of empty homes brought back into use.
- 2.6 In summary, whilst the previous approach aimed to prioritise those properties that detract most from their localities, the practicality of this required visiting all empty properties to assess their condition. Given the high turnover of properties empty for between six months and two years this would have required significantly more resources than those available.

Proposed amendments to the Strategy

- 2.7 The revised strategy seeks to address the need to balance the work done to maximise the number of empty properties brought back into use with that necessary to target empty properties that have been left empty for the longest time, are particularly detrimental to their locality and/or those that could alleviate particular housing need. The aims and objectives have therefore been amended with the aim changing from:

“To maximise the number of empty homes brought back into use.”

To the revised aim:

“To bring empty homes back into use and tackle those that are long term, are problematic or could meet specific housing need.”

To reflect this change, the seven previous objectives (found on page 9 of the current strategy) have been amended slightly and the previous objectives 3 and 4, have been merged. The six objectives in the revised strategy are:

1. Ensure the availability and effective use of information on empty homes within the district.
2. Maintain effective partnership working within the Council and with external partners.
3. Raise the awareness of empty homes in East Herts and encourage action to bring them back into use.
4. Enhance the character of the local community through improvement and reuse of empty homes.
5. Take enforcement action where appropriate and where resources permit.
6. Develop opportunities to bring back homes in partnership with Registered Social Landlords where this supports the overall housing strategy.

- 2.8 In order to achieve the overall aim it is proposed that the focus of empty property work shifts from dealing with properties empty for more than six months to those empty for over two years.
- 2.9 Priority for investigation will be placed on:
- properties attracting complaints
 - properties that have been empty for the longest time
 - properties in locations that are deemed to have a high demand – based on housing needs information and where there are one or more empty homes that may be appropriate in resolving this need.
- 2.10 Following initial investigation and offers of support to help bring the property back into use, priority for further action will be:
- properties particularly detrimental to their locality
 - properties that have been empty for the longest time
 - properties in locations that are deemed to have a high demand – (as identified through discussion with the Housing Strategy & Policy and the Housing Development Officers) where there are one or more empty homes that may be appropriate in resolving this need.
- 2.11 Owners of properties that have been empty for six months will still be sent a letter outlining the value of returning a property into use and the support that East Herts can offer but, unless the owner requests assistance or they fall into one of the categories prioritised for investigation these may be less actively followed up depending on workload.
- 2.12 Recognising the additional workload associated with tackling the more problematic empty homes the target for the number of homes brought back into use in the future has been reduced slightly from 12 to 10 with the expectation that from 2010/11 two of these properties will have been longer term or problematic empty homes.

3.0 Implications/Consultations

3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found in Essential Reference Paper 'A' (Page 8.7).

Background Papers

East Herts Empty Homes Strategy 2007

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ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER 'A'

Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/ Objectives <i>(delete as appropriate):</i>	Pride in East Herts <i>Improve standards of the neighbourhood and environmental management in our towns and villages.</i> Caring about what's built and where <i>Care for and improve our natural and built environment.</i>
Consultation:	
Legal:	No comments made
Financial:	No direct financial implications at this stage. However if this alters this will be covered in future reports
Human Resource:	No direct implications
Risk Management:	