

## **Draft Empty Property Strategy - September 2005**

### **Background**

Government statistics indicate that, as at April 2004, there were 689,675 empty properties in England and the majority of these are in areas of housing need. 3.7% of all private homes are empty. Empty homes are a wasted resource that could be utilised to alleviate homelessness, address housing needs and either remove or reduce the risk of blight to neighbouring properties.

Properties left empty deteriorate in value, still require maintenance and tend to attract problems such as vandalism, rats and mice, squatters, illegal fly-tipping etc. A typical empty property can cost over £5,000 a year to the owner in lost value and maintenance costs.

Empty homes are now considered an important strategic issue nationally and the government has set targets for Councils to address the problem as follows:

- A national target of reducing the percentage to 3%.
- A specific empty homes Best Value Performance Indicator was introduced in April 2000/01 requiring Councils to record the number of vacant private sector properties, that are returned into occupation as a result of actions by the local authority.
- A national target measured by Best Value Performance Indicator 106 that by 2008, 60% of new housing should be built on previously developed/brown-field land or by conversion of existing buildings.
- Planning Policy Guidance 3 requires local authorities to give priority to re-using previously developed land within urban areas, bring empty properties back into use and convert buildings in preference to developing green field sites.

The Housing Strategy 2004 – 2007, objective Four is '*Improving Conditions within Private Sector Housing.*' Part of the action plan set out to achieve this, included the development of a co-ordinated Empty Homes Strategy.

An updated Housing Needs Survey and Stock Condition Survey are to be commissioned next year to ensure that information is kept up to date.

## **The Extent of the Problem in the Wyre Forest District**

Council Tax records currently show the following level of empty homes within the Wyre Forest:

**At the end of May 2005 there were:**

**2050 (4.74%) empty properties of which...**  
**507 (1.17%) were long term empty of 6 months or more (498 in 2003)**  
**and**  
**273 (0.63%) were second homes**

**The remainder were either for sale or short term empty.**

A new stock condition survey will be carried out in 2006. This should provide us with more up to date information on empty properties.

The Right to Buy of Council houses and ex Council houses now in the ownership of WFCH has had a dramatic effect upon the number of affordable homes that are now available to rent. These sales of property outstrip the rate that new affordable housing can be produced with obvious results on the levels of housing need. Whilst it is acknowledged that this has given a home owning opportunity to many people who would have had difficulty in purchasing before Right to Buy, the Council believes that this is now having a negative impact as the net loss of stock to rent, usually of the most desirable family housing, means fewer housing opportunities are available for people on low incomes and in housing need.

During 2004/05, Wyre Forest District Council accepted 240 households as being statutorily homeless. Any work which reduces the number of vacant properties in the district will have an impact on the availability of homes and on housing choices within the district, whether directly or indirectly.

Best Value Performance Indicator 64 requires Local Authorities to report on 'The number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or are demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority'.

**The annual targets for BVPI 64 for the Wyre Forest are: -**

2004/2005 - 7  
2005/2006 - 7  
2006/2007 - 7  
2007/2008 - 7

***There is no case in favour of homes being left vacant.***

### **Strategic Objectives**

To achieve the overall aim of the Empty Property Strategy, four distinct strategic objectives have been identified:

- **To compile an empty property database** - In order to assess and monitor empty property it is essential to compile and regularly maintain a comprehensive database.
- **To identify ways in which empty properties can be brought back into use** - To tackle the problem of empty properties it is essential to have a range of schemes available and to use Local Authority powers such as compulsory purchase orders to deal with properties in disrepair or those which are unfit for habitation. Alternatively owners could be encouraged to bring properties back into use through the provision of grant aid.
- **To raise awareness of empty property issues** -The issue of empty properties needs to be promoted both internally within the Council and externally through use of the media, leaflets and the website.
- **To actively encourage owners of empty properties through a range of incentives to bring their properties back into use** - it is essential that some form of positive incentive be given to the owner of an empty property. This could take the form of grant assistance or acceptance onto a private sector leasing scheme run by the Council or Housing Association. In either case this funding could be coupled to a condition that the property is made available for rent to people in greatest housing need.

### **Additional Opportunities**

The focus needs to be on the long-term empty residential houses which currently total 507 (May 2005).

However, there are other more creative ways to develop the strategy through:

**Flats over shops** - The Wyre Forest District Adopted Local Plan, January 2004, states that '*The conversion of vacant space above existing shops and offices provides an excellent opportunity to provide additional housing in sustainable locations and contribute towards the vitality of the town centres.*'

Empty premises over shops, many of which have the potential for conversion, will need to be identified in the first instance.

It is proposed that officers compile an initial list of potential conversions, and try to establish ownership and contact details. The occupants of the shop below may be able to provide information. It is likely that these units would require substantial financial input to convert them to residential use.

**Vacant office buildings** - The Empty Homes Agency is looking at making use of long-term empty commercial property by converting it to residential use. This is a London based project but aims to establish good practice to share with all authorities and partners. In the Wyre Forest, over the longer term, additional residential units may be brought into use through the use of such redundant buildings.

If necessary, where property is owned by larger agencies e.g. Worcester County Council, Ministry of Defence, British Gas or Health Authorities, the Empty Homes Agency have offered assistance with any negotiations.

### **Achieving strategic objectives**

In order to achieve the objectives of the strategy it is important to develop a corporate joined-up approach within the Council. The Housing Services Section will provide the strategic framework and resources, but to effectively implement the strategy it is essential that other Council Divisions contribute.

- **Development Control Section** - Planning officers are generally the first point of contact made by owners of empty properties for advice on the development options available. In order to advise the enquirer of the options available and any Council initiatives that could assist them, an information pack could be sent out to them by Private Sector Housing.
- **Building Control Section** - are responsible for inspecting empty properties that have been reported as dangerous structures. There is scope for these properties to also be reported to Private Sector Housing for informal or enforcement action.
- **Council Tax Section** - Officers involved in advising owners of empty properties could also invite the owner to contact the Private Sector Housing team. Having established contact, the various options available to bring the property back into use can be considered.

In future, when annual council tax demands are sent out to empty properties, an information pack can be enclosed advising owners of the options available to them and the latest Council initiatives.

- **Private Sector Housing Team** - They are well placed to identify empty private sector homes and those properties likely to become vacant due to disrepair. The team have the technical knowledge to offer advice to accelerate the process by which homes are brought back into use. The team acts to enforce housing conditions and regularly deals with some

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of the problems related to empty properties such as overgrown gardens, rubbish, insecure properties and disrepair.

- **North Worcestershire Care & Repair Agency** – The Agency undertake extensive grant work throughout the district on behalf of the Council and have mechanisms in place to report any empty properties they see or have reported to them.
- **Legal and Democratic Division** - Legal officers already assist in tracing owners of land and properties where there is a dispute or where buildings have fallen into disrepair. These established procedures would continue to be used to enable enforcement or informal action to be taken.
- **Elected Members** - Elected members can play an important role in promoting, encouraging and promoting a successful Empty Property Strategy within their wards, and also in reporting empty properties.
- **Other Officers/Staff** - Other Officers/Staff who carry out work in the District e.g. Refuse and Recycling Operatives can report the existence of longer term empty properties.

### **Tools to achieve the strategic objectives**

In order to achieve the strategic objectives, it will be necessary to:

1. **Compile and maintain an empty property database** - The delivery of this strategy requires an accurate database of empty residential and commercial accommodation (suitable for conversion) to be regularly updated. The database can be developed to incorporate a grading system based on the length of time a property has been empty. This will assist the targeting of inspections and action directed towards the worst properties first and those that offer the greatest potential for bringing back into use to meet local housing need. New powers under the Housing Act 2004 enable the Council to use data from Council tax records to identify empty properties and this will act as the base for data along with already known and investigated properties.
2. **Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer** – this position, based within the Private Sector Housing Team, on a two year contract, will have the specific task of dealing with empty properties. Their role will be to –
  - Continuously develop a basic and up-to date knowledge of relevant issues through on-going research, liaising with other Council Divisions and external partners.

- Initiate and record reports of empty properties from the general public, members, other Council Divisions and partner organisations.
  - Carry out surveys and site visits.
  - Chase progress on individual projects.
  - Advising owners on the options available to them.
  - Develop new initiatives and incentives so a complete range of enabling and enforcing options is available to use in appropriate circumstances.
  - Work with other Council sections and Divisions, to enable a corporate approach to be developed that supports the bringing of empty properties back into use.
3. **Information Packs** - these will be produced to offer general advice and assistance to owners of empty properties. They will be sent out each year with the Council Tax demands and a six monthly follow-up letter sent to those who do not respond.
  4. **Media Advertising** - the Empty Property Strategy will be widely publicised locally to promote awareness. The general public through local media, leaflets and posters will be encouraged to report empty properties and likewise owners must be encouraged to make their unused homes available. A reporting mechanism on the web site will encourage reporting of properties and problems associated with them.
  5. **Partnership Working** - developing links with local estate and letting agents, local landlords, Registered Social Landlords and attendance at the West Midlands Empty Property Officers Forum.
  6. **Grant Assistance** - the Council will consider ways of utilising its discretionary housing grants, powers for provision of loans and other mechanisms to encourage and incentivise landlords and owners to bring their property back into use.
  7. **New Powers and Initiatives** - provision has been made within the Housing Act 2004 for new powers of Empty Dwelling Management Orders. Any costs incurred in bringing the property up to a fit and proper standard can be recovered from the owner by deducting them from rental income. The Council will be developing its approach to utilising these new powers as part of the range of options.
  8. **Council Tax** - a reduction in Council Tax discounts to second home owners. Council tax discount on second homes and long term empty

properties used to be a standard 50% but from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004 the Council was able to set its own level of discount. In order to support the Empty Homes strategy, both categories had the discount reduced to 25%.

## **Conclusion**

Empty properties have gained significant national political attention and are the cause of many problems locally. They also offer great potential for fulfilling local housing needs.

Working corporately on this issue, developing the range of options and actively pursuing individual cases with appropriate means at our disposal will bring results in time and help us meet local needs as well as national targets.

## **Targets**

<i>Action</i>	<i>Target Date</i>	<i>Responsible Officer</i>	<i>Monitoring Arrangements</i>
Compile and maintain an empty property database	Initial Comprehensive review by Spring 2006	Joint responsibility at present – To be Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Review – Spring 2006, Thereafter yearly review of Council tax information
Information packs sent out with Council Tax Demand	Spring 2006	Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Collate responses at 4 months
Develop a comprehensive toolbox of options for varying circumstances including mechanisms / procedures to use the new and existing powers	Summer 2006	Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Annual review of policy and procedures within Private Sector Housing Team
6 Month follow up letter	Autumn 2006	Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Collate responses at 9 months
Promoting the Strategy	Autumn 2005	Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Annual Review
B.V.P.I 64 – The number of private sector dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished during 2005/06 as a result of action by the L.A. <i>Target</i> - 7	March 2006	Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer	Annual Review