

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**CABINET**
25TH SEPTEMBER 2008**Wyre Forest Empty Property Strategy Refresh**

OPEN	
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY THEME:	Stronger Communities
CORPORATE PLAN AIM:	A better quality of life
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Anne Hingley
HEAD OF SERVICE:	Head of Planning, Health & Environment
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APPENDICES	1. Wyre Forest Empty Property Strategy 2008-2011 <i>The appendix to this report has been circulated electronically and a public inspection copy is available on request. (See front cover for details).</i>

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To present Members with a refreshed Wyre Forest Empty Property Strategy 2008-2011 for approval.

2. RECOMMENDATION**RECOMMENDED to Council:**

- 2.1 **that the Wyre Forest Empty Property Strategy 2008-2011 as set out in Appendix 1 of the report to Cabinet be adopted.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 As of July 2008, there are approximately 2000 empty properties in the District, of which 682 are long term empty properties that have been empty for more than 6 months. 469 have been empty for more than 12 months and 105 have been empty for more than 5 years. A number of these may actually be second homes and the properties identified through Council tax records are under review in order to provide a greater understanding.
- 3.2 The Council has recognised and responded to both national and local pressure to consider how best to use empty properties for housing, particularly in areas of higher housing need such as Wyre Forest.

- 3.3 Whilst not a statutory requirement to produce a strategy, the production of an Empty property Strategy separate to the overarching Housing Strategy signals the importance of this issue and the Council first introduced such a strategy back in 2003, responding to the Best Value Performance Indicator 64. Whilst BVPs are no longer in place, the Council continues to set an annual target for empty properties brought back into use or demolished. This target has been raised from 7 to 20, in part due to the resources applied by the Council through the Private Sector Housing Initiatives Officer and now Decent Homes Officer. In 2006/07 21 properties were achieved and in 2007/08 68 properties were achieved, including demolitions.
- 3.4 The Council's Housing Strategy focuses on meeting the local housing needs and improving the quality of stock. The Empty Property Strategy assists with both these aims. The Decent Homes Officer has been employed on a two year temporary contract. One aspect of their role is to assist with bringing empty properties back into use, as well as helping to increase the level of decent homes.
- 3.5 Empty properties, distinct from being a wasted resource that could be providing affordable housing, cause many problems to the communities affected including:
- a. Loss of value of nearby properties
 - b. Difficulty in selling nearby properties
 - c. Visual impact of run down property
 - d. Attraction of vandalism, burglary and anti-social behaviour
 - e. Can be hot spots for rats and mice
 - f. Psychological impact for local community
 - g. Disrepair leading to impacts on neighbouring properties e.g. roof leak leading to damp to adjacent buildings.
 - h. Significant neglected properties becoming imminently dangerous
- 3.6 The Council has a range of potential actions to encourage properties back into use. This can include advice and information, financial assistance, enforcement regarding public health or safety issues and even improvement notices and Empty Dwelling Management Orders through which the Council can take over the management of a property. These options are able to be considered under the Housing Enforcement policy and the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy.

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 The existing Empty Property Strategy (2005-08) is now out of date and requires to be refreshed.
- 4.2 For a number of years, the district experienced a net loss of affordable housing due to the number of right-to-buy sales of Council/Community Housing stock outstripping the provision of new affordable dwellings. However, this trend is now levelling out but historically it has been a contributory factor to a rising local need for affordable housing. Empty properties are therefore a very valuable potential resource to assist meeting local need.

- 4.3 The revised strategy builds from the achievements to date and provides a framework for the use of advice, assistance and enforcement powers to meet the overall aim of bringing empty properties back into use. The properties that have been empty for the longest period of time will be targeted first, along with those properties that are giving specific concerns to the local community.
- 4.4 The work bringing empty properties back into use is based upon a joined up approach, linking together different sections of the Council, working with local residents, property owners and estate agents for the overall benefit of the community.
- 4.5 National best practice developed by the Empty Homes Agency and successful ways of working by other Councils have been considered in refreshing the strategy and developing the Council's approach.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 All costs are contained within existing revenue budgets and any capital expenditure will come from the Council's Single Housing Capital Pot, through the appropriate application of the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Housing Enforcement Policy and the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy both apply to empty properties and there is a clear policy framework for decisions regarding action on individual empty properties.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 There are no risk management implications at this time.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Significant problems have been identified in the local housing market with a need to increase the availability of affordable homes. The Empty Property Strategy will be used to respond to local concerns, improve housing conditions and the local built environment and increase access to decent housing.

9. CONSULTEES

- 9.1 None

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS (to be hyperlinked)

- 10.1 Wyre Forest District Council Empty Property Strategy 2005-2008

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