



District of **easington.**

PRIVATE SECTOR
EMPTY HOMES
STRATEGY STATEMENT

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PRIVATE SECTOR EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY STATEMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The Council has prepared this Private Sector Empty Homes Strategy Statement, to set out an approach to address housing supply and neighbourhood renewal issues associated with the fact that there over 2200 private sector empty dwellings in the District, around 1600 of which have been empty for six months or more. This Strategy Statement sets out how the Council aims to reduce these numbers by working with local residents, owners and other stakeholders & Partners.

This Strategy Statement is a key component of the Council's Housing Strategy and forms part of our wider approach to Private Sector Housing Renewal. It sets out a planned and considered approach to reducing the problems caused by empty homes.

Through the delivery of the action sets out in this Strategy Statement we aim to:

“Enable the return of empty properties into occupation where this contributes to the creation of sustainable communities and provides housing that meets the needs of local people.”

The Strategy Statement identifies three key objectives that are supported by a number of actions, which will help us achieve our overall aim. By focusing our activity, targeting resources effectively and developing appropriate partnerships we aim to make real inroads into reducing the number of long-term empty homes.

2. BACKGROUND:

Why do properties become empty?

There are a number of reasons why privately owned properties in our District have become and remain empty. This includes abandonment and neglect by owners, low desirability of particular types of accommodation and/or particular neighbourhoods, and properties that have been bought by speculative investors without any real motivation to bring them into a residential use.

What problems do empty homes cause?

Empty homes can cause many problems to residents and the Council alike. These include:

- *Social impact*– the presence of long-term empty properties in a neighbourhood can have significant impact on the quality of life of local residents in terms of perception of the area and its attractiveness.
- *Environmental problems* – fly tipping, graffiti, disrepair and dilapidation.
- *Antisocial and criminal activity* – empty properties can often attract problems such as antisocial behaviour, nuisance and disturbance for neighbouring residents and increased incidences of burglary, and in some circumstances arson.
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- *Service Delivery Impacts*– there is often a significant call on the resources of agencies such as the Council, Police and Fire Services through the need for attending reported incidents, undertaking remedial works and gathering evidence and serving of notices in attempts to address matters and secure improvements.

Empty Homes also cause a drain of the resources of their owner. It has been estimated by the National Empty Homes Agency that keeping a property empty typically costs the owner in excess of £8,000 a year including Council tax payments, dilapidation costs, security and rent loss.

What action can be taken to address the issues of empty homes?

Any residential area will have a 'natural turnover' of residents, which results in properties becoming empty from time to time with homes being actively marketed for sale or undergoing renovation. This Strategy Statement focuses on long-term problematic properties; generally categorised as properties which have been empty for longer than six months.

There are many benefits to bringing a property back into use which include making the best use of the District's housing stock, enhancing the local environment, increasing the provision of affordable housing, and increasing financial benefits to owners, local residents and the statutory public agencies. Our processes for dealing with long-term empty homes can be described as three simple steps:

Step1: Engage

When an empty dwelling is identified we decide upon action to be taken based on the length of time the property has been empty, the condition of the building, and the nuisance caused to local residents. Where appropriate we will establish the ownership of the property and make contact with the owner to explain our interest in the property and our policy on dealing with empty properties.

Step 2: Encourage & Enable

We work with the owner/agent, offering advice and information and helping them to identify their intention for the future use of the property. We advise on the options available, e.g. requirements for renovation & occupation, and the pros and cons of selling or letting. The focus here is on supporting and encouraging the owner to bring the property back into use without formal enforcement action from the Council.

Step 3: Enforce

Owners are made aware throughout steps 1 & 2 that if they do not bring the property back into use on a voluntary basis the Council may seek to use a range of enforcement powers to do this where the property or properties are causing a detrimental affect on residents of adjacent properties or the local area, or as part of wider local neighbourhood renewal programme. These powers are contained within the relevant Housing, Planning and Environmental Health legislation. Typically notices are served on owners to board up the dwellings, remove accumulations of noxious rubbish, carry out works which are deemed detrimental to the amenity of the area or remedy a situation with ruinous or dilapidated buildings. There are also longer-term interventions such as Compulsory Purchase and Enforced Sale of a property or Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

In some cases it may not be the best course of action to bring empty properties back into use, for instance it may be more appropriate to demolish an individual property or to look at the longer-term sustainability of the wider street/area in areas of particularly low demand. Each case will be considered on an individual basis and our approach will be guided by the District Council's Housing, Regeneration and Planning strategies.

Any action taken will be in compliance with the national Enforcement Concordat and will be targeted towards those owners who have neglected their properties.

3. THE NATIONAL, REGIONAL and LOCAL CONTEXT:

National Context

Information produced by the Empty Homes Agency from 1st April 2006 suggested that there were a total of 663,328 empty homes in England, of which 593,487 were in the private sector. Around 300,000 of these private sector properties had been empty for more than 6 months. These figures represent an ongoing slow reduction since 2002, thought to be due in part to the general upturn in the national housing market and the ripple effect of an overall shortage of homes in some areas. There has also been some progress in Local Authorities' enforcement of empty homes –related legislation, particularly since the national publication of the *Empty homes: Government response to Select Committee report* in May 2002 in which they recommended that every local authority should adopt an Empty Property Strategy and appoint an Empty Property Officer.

In October 2006 the national Halifax survey of Empty Homes reported a number of important findings including:

- *House prices are lower in areas with highest proportion of empty homes*

The average house price in 20 of the 21 Local Authority areas with the highest proportion of empty homes trades is some 16% below the regional average house price.

- *High Empty Homes areas in areas of deprivation*

19 out of the 21 LAs with the most empty private homes rank amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England, according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

- *12 out of the 21 Local Authority areas with a high level of empty private homes had an unemployment rate above the regional average.*

On average, high empty home areas had a claimant count rate 0.8 percentage points above the regional average.

- *20 out of the 21 Local Authority areas with a high level of empty private homes had average earnings below the regional average and all had earnings below the English average.*

Average weekly earnings in areas with a high amount of private empty homes are, on average, 9% below the regional average and 18% below the English level. This suggests that there is potentially less free income to improve properties in high empty homes areas than in other parts of the country.

Regional Context

Within the North East Region the Empty Homes Agency figures show there in April 2006 there was a total of 42,190 empty homes, of which 33,845 (80%) were in the private sector, compared to the national average of 89%. Out of twenty-three local authorities in the North East Region, the District of Easington is reported to have the third highest number of privately owned long-term empty homes. Within County Durham there were 8,463 empty private sector homes, 37% of which were in Easington

DISTRICT	PRIVATE Empty Homes	Empty longer than Six months
Easington	2798	1665
Chester le Street	247	50
Durham	1043	658
Derwentside	1452	608
Sedgefield	1253	734
Teesdale	153	153
Wear Valley	1517	585
County Durham Total	8463	4453

Figures taken from The Empty Homes Agency 2006

Local Context

The council's Private Sector House Condition Survey (undertaken in 2002) reported 3.3% of the Private Sector housing stock as empty, but the most recent figures from the Empty Homes Agency and Council Tax records suggests that this has increased to around 9% in 2007. Although it is not possible to make a direct comparison due to differences in sampling methods, it is of concern that the proportion of empty dwellings appears to have increased against an overall reduction at the national level over the same time period.

More up to date stock condition and occupancy data is required at the District and local community level a local level to allow a more detailed analysis to help better understand these trends further. It is therefore proposed as part of the Strategy Statement, to commission a Private Sector Stock Condition Survey to compliment the work on establishing a District-wide Empty Homes Database as set out in the action plan in Section 6.

It is however evident from existing records that there are some specific clusters and concentrations of empty properties, most notably in the former Colliery settlements of Easington Colliery, Dawdon and Horden, but equally problem long-term empty properties can, and do, occur in all settlements across the District.

Consultation has taken place with residents and other stakeholders across the District through questionnaires, presentations and workshops to determine what problems empty properties are causing in our local communities.

Members of the public who fed into this consultation process raised concerns including there being too many empty, boarded up properties and that the contribution this made to anti-social behaviour as well as an overall detraction from the appearance and reputation of the area.

Some of the key issues from the consultation that we have sought to address in our action plan include:

1. The Council should target long-term empty houses not houses that are simply slow to sell.
2. Efforts should be concentrated in the areas that have the highest void rates e.g.. the former Colliery Settlements.
3. The Council should develop partnerships with Private Landlords.

4. There should be prompt enforcement action to tackle empty properties and to keep local residents informed of what is being done.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

As stated the overall aim for this Empty Homes Strategy Statement is to:

Enable the return of empty properties into occupation where this contributes to the creation of sustainable communities and provides housing that meets the needs of local people.

By working together with owners, local residents other stakeholders and partners we will work towards reducing the number of empty homes in the District. In order to achieve our aim we've set 3 three key objectives:

- To improve our understanding of the number, location and cause of empty properties in Easington;
- To increase awareness of our approach to dealing with empty homes by working with owners, local residents and other stakeholders; and,
- To minimise the length of time individual properties stand empty

By addressing these objectives and focusing resources effectively we will be contributing to the delivery of the District Housing Strategy and the Council's priorities of:

- Quality Services for all our people.
- Decent Homes for all
- Clean, tidy communities
- Making the District safe
- A sustainable job for everyone.

OBJECTIVE ONE: To improve our understanding of the number, location and cause of empty properties exist in the District.

The first critical step in dealing with long-term empty properties is finding out where they are, who owns them and why they remain unoccupied.

What we have done to date:

- ✓ Work has already begun to identify empty homes in the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder areas of Easington Colliery and Horden.
- ✓ An Empty Property database has been developed and properties are added to it as they become known to us.
- ✓ Ownership information has been gained from the HM Land Registry in addition to that gained from the local community.

What we will do as part of the delivery of this objective:

- ✓ We will build on the existing baseline of long-term empty homes in the Pathfinder area by collecting information from a number of sources
- ✓ We will liaise, at an early stage, with owners of empty properties to discuss the reasons for the properties being empty and their intentions for returning the property into use. We will record this information on the database to enable us to analyse District-wide trends
- ✓ We will monitor the distribution and frequency of empty properties and other trends in the District's housing market to enable us to determine the scale of the problem and help to target resources effectively.

OBJECTIVE TWO: To increase awareness of our approach to dealing with empty homes by working with owners, local residents and other stakeholders.

The resources and powers available to the Council are never going to be sufficient to address all of the District's empty properties. Our resources will be targeted at properties that will have the greatest impact and benefit for the existing local residential community. As such it is vitally important that effective communication processes are in place to raise awareness of the ways and means of dealing with empty properties and encourage owners to take responsibility for the assets that they own in the District.

What we have done to date:

- ✓ We have delivered a series of awareness raising presentations to local resident groups, Area Forums and Parish Councils and the Easington Colliery/Horden and North Peterlee Neighbourhood Management Boards.
- ✓ Articles have appeared in local newspapers and newsletters and a leaflet has been produced and distributed to a number of neighbourhoods that have been identified as having higher than average proportions of empty homes
- ✓ We have developed an 'Investors Pack', which provides owners who are considering selling their properties with the contact details of property investors who are interested in purchasing property in our District.

What we will do as part of the delivery of this objective:

- ✓ Publish the Strategy Statement and other information on the Council's website and the Council's resident's newsletter, Infopoint.
- ✓ Continue to promote our Empty Property service through our attendance at events throughout the District.
- ✓ Continue to develop our information pack for owners of empty properties providing relevant information on the options available to bring their property back into use and contact details of agencies who may be able to help
- ✓ Publish regular updates on number of properties brought into use, complaints received and action taken through a number sources as part of the overall monitoring of the delivery of the Council's Housing Service Plan

OBJECTIVE THREE: To minimise the length of time individual properties stand empty

It is crucial that our limited resources are targeted effectively to tackle the detrimental effect empty homes have on the community. The real ‘proof’ of success will be individual long-term empty properties brought back into use – a tangible benefit to local people and communities.

What we have done to date:

- ✓ We have piloted an Empty Property Officer post in conjunction with the Easington Colliery & Horden Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder. During this relatively short 10-month pilot period 41 long-term empty homes were brought back into use
- ✓ Several Council departments are currently actively involved in dealing with empty homes across the District
- ✓ We have been researching the approaches of other local authorities dealing with concentrations of empty properties so as to widen our range of options for dealing with such properties.

What we will do as part of the delivery of this objective:

- ✓ We will build on the work already carried out by our Housing, Planning and Environmental Services Teams and develop a “virtual enforcement team” lead by a dedicated Empty Property Officer post
- ✓ The team will develop a joint working protocol determining the steps to be taken with each property to minimise the length of time it stands empty. The protocol will consider the most appropriate form of intervention so that this can be quickly and clearly communicated to the owner and local residents

5. PERFORMANCE AND REVIEW:

The actions set out in the Strategy Statement are intended to cover a three-year period from 2007-2010 and will be reviewed on a regular basis in the context of the implementation of the Council’s overall Housing Strategy.

We will continue to monitor the number of empty properties brought back into use through Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 64: *Number of Private Sector dwellings that are returned to occupation or demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority* as well as through the maintenance of our Empty Property Database which will record actions taken and outputs achieved.

All complaints from local residents regarding empty properties will be monitored and recorded on the database as a means of determining the effect on our communities, and residents feedback and comments will be used to help develop the service as part of the delivery of the Council’s Housing Service Plan.

In terms of formal reporting, our activities in this area will be subject to quarterly monitoring by the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and, in the case of BVPI 64, the Council's Executive.

6. SUMMARY ACTION PLAN

Objective 1 – To improve our understanding of the number, location and causes of empty properties exist in the District:

Key Actions	Timescale	Responsible Officer	Resources Required
Establish a baseline of empty homes throughout the District	March 2008	Housing Renewal Manager/Empty Homes Officer	Council Tax records Empty Homes database Empty Homes Officer time
Undertake research in areas of high levels of empty homes	June 2008	Housing Policy & Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Database GIS System Policy & Strategy Team time
Establish ownership details & make contact with owners to establish reasons for vacancy	Ongoing from March 2008	Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes database Land registry Data Council Tax records Information from local residents EHO & Admin Time
Coordinate existing intelligence on empty properties from Housing, Planning & Environmental Health Services	June 2008	Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Database FLARE IT system Officer time from Planning & Environmental Health services

Objective Two – To increase awareness of our approach to dealing with empty homes by working with owners, local residents and other stakeholders.

Key Actions	Timescale	Responsible Officer	Resources Required
Finalise & publish this Empty Homes Strategy Statement	October 2007	Empty Homes Officer	Council Website Communications & Marketing Team Infopoint
Develop an information pack for owners of Empty Properties.	March 2008	Empty Homes Officer	In-house Design Team Empty Homes Database
Promotion of the Service	Ongoing	EHO	Residents Associations Area Forums Neighbourhood Pathfinders Local Members Communications & Marketing Team

Objective Three – To minimise the length of time individual properties stand empty.

Key Actions	Timescale	Responsible Officer	Resources Required
Establish a Virtual Enforcement team	March 2008	Housing Renewals Manager	Empty Homes Officer Environmental Health Officers Planning Officers Community Safety Officers Police Officers Fire & Rescue Service Officers
Develop a joint working protocol for Empty Homes	June 2008	Empty Homes Officer	Virtual Enforcement Team
Develop joint working relationships with Landlords	June 2008	Empty Homes Officer	Private Landlords East Durham Homes Registered Social Landlords