

Item 4

KEY DECISION

REPORT TO CABINET
9TH OCTOBER 2008

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF
NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES AND
DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES

Portfolio Regeneration and Housing Empty Homes Strategy

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Council has identified the need for a more structured and strategic approach to tackling the problem of long term empty private sector housing in the Borough. For the purposes of clarification, “long term” is defined as a property that has been unoccupied for more than six months.
- 1.2 The Government have recognised that reducing the number of empty dwellings has a beneficial effect on communities in terms of reducing crime and disorder, increasing available housing stock, attracting inward investment, assisting regeneration and improving local housing markets. The Housing Act 2004 provided Local Authorities with new powers to deal with neglected or derelict housing including the introduction of “Empty Dwelling Management Orders”.
- 1.3 There are an estimated 132 long term empty private dwellings in the Borough. Some of these homes have remained for sale or to let for a long period of time due to current market conditions however it is estimated that only approximately 13% of the 132 are homes that will require Council intervention to help bring them back into use.
- 1.4 The overall aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is “to work with Owners, Agents and other relevant parties to reduce the numbers of empty private sector housing in Sedgefield Borough thereby contributing to a prosperous and attractive borough with strong and healthy communities”.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Empty Homes Strategy 2008-09 be adopted.
- 2.2 That the Housing Renewal Assistance Policy be reviewed to allow grant assistance to enable owners to bring their property back into use.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The imbalance between supply and demand for available and affordable housing has been acknowledged by the Government following the publication of the Barker Review in 2004. The Government Green paper entitled “Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable” outlines the Government’s commitment to reducing the number of empty homes in order to support communities, reduce crime and increase valuable supply. The Government wants Local Authorities to act strategically to tackle the problem of empty homes through proactive targeting and use of available powers; further enforcement measures are also being explored as part of the new Housing and Planning Delivery Grant. The Government also recommends that all Local Authorities adopt an Empty Homes Strategy to provide a clear framework to tackle empty private sector housing within communities.
- 3.2 The Housing Act 2004 introduced new powers to tackle the issue of long term empty housing in England and Wales. The most significant power granted to Local Authorities are Empty Dwelling Management Orders whereby empty homes are brought back into use often in partnership with the owner. The costs of bringing an empty home back to decent homes standard are paid by the Local Authority and then recovered via future rental income. There are two types of Empty Dwelling Management Orders, interim Orders which last up to 12 months and, if agreement cannot be reached with the owner, final Orders, which can be granted for up to 7 years. Both Orders can only be granted by the Local Residential Property Tribunal.
- 3.3 The Empty Homes Agency Statistics for 2007, recorded a total of 672,924 empty homes across England, which equates to approximately 3.02% of total housing stock . 587,229 of these properties are owned by private landlords and 279,282 have been left vacant for more than six months. The North East of England recorded a total of 43,686 empty homes of which 34,600 were owned by private landlords and 17,960 have been left vacant for more than six months.
- 3.4 There are more than 1,000 empty homes in Sedgefield Borough; 73.5% of these are privately owned. Over 132 of the privately owned empty homes have been vacant for more than 6 months. This figure does not include those properties that are subject to selective demolition in the Master Plan areas, commercial properties, Council properties or Registered Social Landlord properties. Approximately 13% of the 132 properties are uninhabitable and in a state of disrepair which can in turn attract vandalism and crime. Empty homes are socially, environmentally and economically unacceptable.
- 3.5 The Empty Homes Strategy aims to assist delivery of the four key aims of the Borough’s Housing Strategy 2006/2007 – 2008/2009, Sedgefield Borough Council Corporate Plan 2006/7 – 2008/9 and the Local Strategic Partnership Community Strategy 2004 – 2014 which are to promote a Borough where: -
- People can live healthy, active and fulfilling lives as part of vibrant and strong communities
 - High quality businesses can prosper and local people have the confidence and skills to access jobs that they offer
 - The natural and built environment is valued, conserved and enhanced
 - People can access the housing they want in attractive and safe neighbourhoods

- 3.6 The Empty Homes Strategy will assist owners of empty housing to improve and maintain their property or properties up to the decent homes standard. This can be achieved through advice, possible financial assistance and enforcement if necessary. A key outcome of the Empty Homes Strategy is to reduce the number of long term empty housing resulting in increased supply across the Borough. This outcome clearly links in with the Housing Advice and Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2007 – 2010 and in particular the following key action point: -
- To establish good working relationships with private sector landlords by linking into selective licensing and the private sector renewal teams and creating links with private landlords whereby refurbished empty housing will be offered to accepted homeless applicants. These arrangements could be formalised through the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

4. **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 Delivery of the Empty Homes Strategy will be incorporated within the existing staffing structure within the Private Sector Renewals Team. The Senior Private Sector Renewals Officer will take on the role of lead officer and administrative assistance will be supplied by other team members.
- 4.2 The strategy will aim to use the full range of legislative tools available to deal with this issue, however, where no other measures are possible the Council may need to assist owners financially to bring their properties back into use. It is envisaged that this will be provided via a Decent Homes Grant. The sum of £100,000 has already been allocated within the Home Improvement Agency budget for decent homes works relating to replacement properties for those displaced in the Master plan areas and to assist in bringing empty property back into use and will be made available to owners of empty housing who can demonstrate via a test of resources that they are unable to fund partial or full refurbishment.

The Housing Renewal Assistance Policy sets out the qualifying criteria for housing grant assistance and is under review to reflect the necessary amendments required to make financial assistance available in these circumstances.

5. **OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

5.1 Risk Management

A Storm Risk assessment for the scheme has been carried out.

Health & Safety

"No additional implications have been identified".

Equality & Diversity

Full account will be taken of the Council's obligation to promote equality and diversity in the development of this strategy.

Sustainability

An increase in the supply of private sector housing available for occupation will improve the housing choices available to meet current and future demand and will support economic growth by providing modern attractive homes in sustainable neighbourhoods, which will contribute to the delivery of sustainable communities throughout the Borough.

Crime & Disorder

The Council's duty under Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act 1998 has been taken into account when considering the recommendations and should bring about sustainable change through reducing the number of derelict buildings and improving the local environment.

Legal & Constitutional

The Housing Acts 1985 & 2004, the Law of Property Act 1925, the Building Act 1984, the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Local Government Act 2003, The Data Protection Act 1998, the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 have all been taken into account during the completion of this report.

6. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no Overview and Scrutiny implications of this report.

7. LIST OF APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix 1 Empty Homes Strategy 2008 – 2009

7.2 Appendix 2 Storm Risk Assessment and Action Plan

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Wards: All Wards

Background Papers:

- Barker Review of Housing Supply 2004
- Housing Act 2004
- Local Strategic Partnership Community Strategy 2004-2014
- Sedgefield Borough Housing Strategy 2006/7 – 2008/9
- Sedgefield Borough Corporate Plan 2006/7 – 2008/9
- Housing Advice & Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2007 – 2010
- Housing Renewal Assistance Policy 2008-09

Examination by Statutory Officers

	Yes	Not Applicable
1. The report has been examined by the Councils Head of the Paid Service or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The content has been examined by the Councils S.151 Officer or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The content has been examined by the Council's Monitoring Officer or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The report has been approved by Management Team	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>