



**Safest People, Safest Places**

**Combined Fire Authority**

**20 June 2023**

**Empty Buildings**

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## **Report of Director of Emergency Response**

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### **Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on ongoing work in respect of empty buildings in County Durham and Darlington.

### **Background**

2. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) has attended several fires in empty buildings, some of which have resulted in significant incidents, for example, Chilton Lodge, Ridgemount House and Bowburn School.
3. In addition to being an environmental scar, these buildings can pose a significant risk to the community and fire fighters. The risks include:
  - a. Death or injury of firefighters or members of the public. The nature of the buildings means they are often missing floors, have unstable walls and structures, sharps, and entanglement hazards to name but a few;
  - b. Increased cost;
  - c. Reputational damage;
  - d. Legal challenges;
  - e. Societal disaffection;
  - f. Broken window effect leading to increased levels of crime and disorder;
  - g. Urban explorers.

4. To further understand this issue and drive to mitigate this risk, we have collated a list of all known empty properties in our area.

## Data

5. For the year April 2022 – April 2023 there have been 141 recorded fires in ‘empty buildings’ in our area.
6. There are three main sources of data:

- a. **Our Incident Data**

Gathered via the Incident Reporting System (IRS). There are two questions relevant to this area:

- i. Question 3.8 in relation to fire incident types (not False Alarms or Special Services)

*“Was all the property (Buildings and Vehicles) involved in the fire derelict?  
(Yes/No)*

- ii. Question 5.14 in relation to Primary Fires only (not Secondary or Chimney Fires).

*“Is the building normally occupied?”*

*Yes – Occupied.*

*No – Unoccupied Permanently (Vacant)*

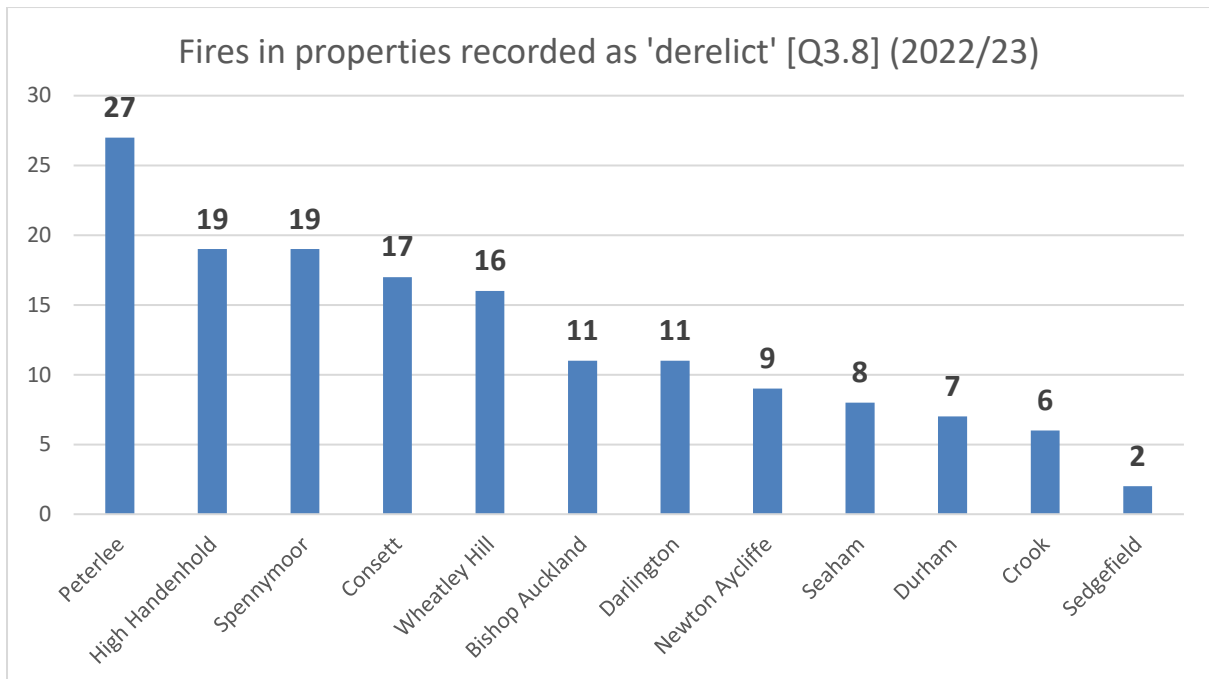
*No – Under Construction.*

*Not Known*

What we don’t currently know is:

- The number of Secondary Fires in and around the buildings.
- Whether we attend other incident types (special services) in or around these buildings.

Another factor is how crews interpret a ‘derelict’ or ‘normally occupied’ building when completing the IRS report.



**b. Local Intelligence Gathered By Crews.**

Crews can submit an empty buildings referral to Durham County Council (DCC) and make an entry in the Service's empty buildings list.

**c. A Shared Empty Building Spreadsheet**

This is an Excel spreadsheet created by CDDFRS which collates a list of all known DCC, Darlington Borough Council (DBC) owned and privately owned empty buildings, that may pose a risk. All crews have access, and it contains a risk assessment (RAG rating) on these properties.

RAG Rating	Likelihood of incident occurring	Action
Green	Unlikely: i.e. well secured or modern property, not accessible to arsonists and therefore at low risk of being targeted	No action required
Amber	Possible: some security but may be ineffective, or property is remote and not likely to attract the attention of vandals and arson attacks	Local awareness amongst crews and monitor activity
Red	Likely: Premises that are unsecure OR with a history of deliberate fire setting and are targets for vandalism and unauthorised access	Complete ORI for premises and select 'Empty Property' in the property type box on the ORI form
Blue	Premises that have been added because they are identified as a risk by the DCC Vacant Properties Group (VPG), but DO NOT appear as a risk for CDDFRS	Crews to review the property

7. There are limitations to collecting detailed data, such as:

a. The definition of an empty building;

- b. Comparison with earlier data which did not focus on recording these incidents in the same way means it is likely we are recording more;
- c. Anecdotal experience is that we are experiencing more incidents, due to:
  - More empty properties;
  - The urban explorer effect on social media;
  - Rise in cannabis farms.

## **Number and Locations**

- 8. CDDFRS currently has identified 176 properties that are or are believed to be 'empty'.
- 9. This list is constantly under review by the crews and there are currently 33 buildings in Darlington and 143 buildings in County Durham.
- 10. In total, 18 buildings are identified as being a high risk, 3 in Darlington and 15 in County Durham. Only 3 of these are owned by a local authority (DCC),<sup>1</sup> the rest being in private ownership.
- 11. Actions for the buildings identified as high risk (Red) include.
  - a. Being placed on the agenda for specific discussion at the relevant group with a view to identifying progress / barriers to rectification and escalation where necessary.
  - b. Familiarisation visits by crews.
  - c. Operational Risk Information (ORI) collated.

## **Progress**

- 12. There is now established joint working with:
  - a. DCC Empty Properties Management Group;
  - b. DCC Empty Building (Non-LA Owned) Management Group.
- 13. A revised DCC risk assessment process now includes our RAG rating in their overall risk assessment process.

## **Successes**

- 14. A significant amount of work has been undertaken to secure the highest risk buildings. Ridgemount House is a great example of multi-agency working which resulted in the building being secured and no recent incidents for CDDFRS.

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<sup>1</sup> Bluebell Meadow Primary School, Bowburn Infant and Nursery School, The Boxing Club, Crook (opposite Lidl)

Although it remains a challenge, legal avenues are being pursued to ensure the owner remedies all issues with the building. Works are currently on going to maintain the security of the building.

15. Bluebell Meadow Primary School has been more robustly secured.

16. DCC have had an audit of their empty building stock conducted by a third party.

### **Further work**

17. Continued improvement of our understanding and joint approach to empty buildings is being driven forward. This includes.

a. CDDFRS

- Closer engagement with DBC, meetings are scheduled to discuss the 'empty buildings' within Darlington and at the Multi Agency Problem Solving Group (MAPS) meetings;
- Continued refinement of the CDDFRS risk assessment;
- Re-linking of CDDFRS and DCC Data Teams in respect of PowerBi.

b. Empty Buildings Group

- Encouraging common use of Ordnance Survey UPRN within local authorities who commonly use their own unique building identifiers that do not correlate to ours to improve building identification;
- Closer scrutiny of existing building stock (inc. domestic property) which, as it falls into disrepair attracts illegal use e.g., cannabis farms.
- Quicker and more robust response by DCC to initial 'open to access' referrals.
- Review of the empty property reporting joint protocol "Tackling Empty Properties (A Practical Guide For Officers) Joint Working.

### **Recommendation**

18. Members are requested to:

a. Note the content of the report.

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