

Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

29 March 2012



Progress Report on the Introduction of Multi-disciplinary Teams for dealing with Empty Homes

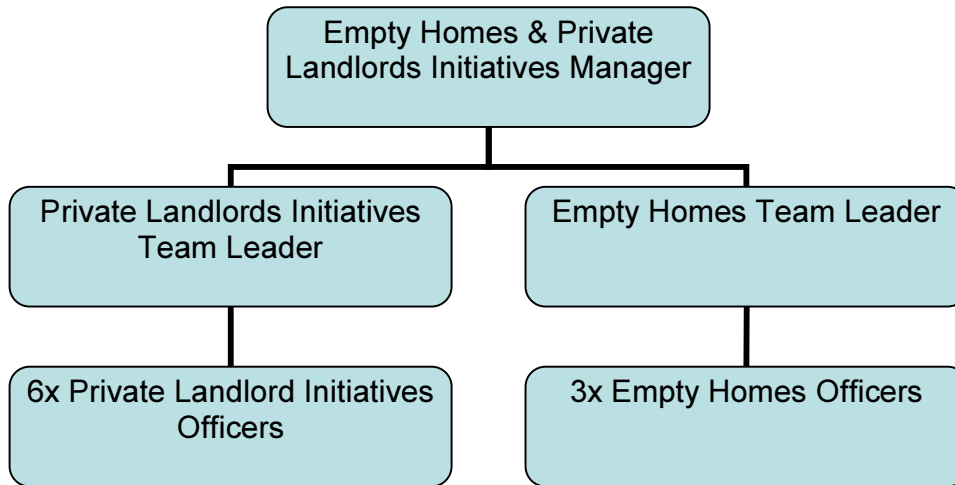
Report of Ian Thompson, Director Regeneration & Economic Development

Purpose of the Report

1. A report of the Assistant Chief Executive in October 2011 to the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee detailing Quarter 1 2011/12 performance identified that eleven empty properties had been brought back into use against a target for the period of twenty. The report identified that the Housing Renewals and Improvement team (the team responsible for bringing empty homes back into use) had implemented a new area based approach of "multi-disciplinary teams" covering both empty properties and private landlords in an endeavour to improve performance. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on progress on the implementation of the teams and to assess whether or not this measure has brought about the anticipated improvement in performance.

Background

2. The structure of the Housing Renewals and Improvement team that was in place when the new unitary authority began operating in April 2009 included a team dedicated to dealing with empty homes and issues of poor property standards and management practices associated with the private rented sector. The service contained a total of twelve Full Time Equivalent Officers, with 4.5 Full Time Equivalent Officers dedicated to bringing empty homes back into use. The service was structured as follows:



In addition to the Empty Homes and Private Landlords Initiatives team there were two other strands to the Housing Renewal and Improvement Service at this time as follows:

- The Decent Homes Team: Dealing with vulnerable households across the County, led by work around home improvements, disabled adaptations and energy efficiency, and
- The Area-based Housing Regeneration Team: Delivering housing regeneration projects in identified housing regeneration areas.

3. In 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12 the target for bringing empty homes back into use has remained the same at 80 properties per year. In 2009/10 the Empty Homes team brought a total of 20 homes back into use, and in 2010/11 48 homes back into use, representing a failure to achieve the stated target in both years. 2009/10 performance represented an average of 4 empty homes per Full Time Equivalent Officer, and in 2010/11 performance rose to an average of 11 properties per Full Time Equivalent Officer.

4. Following the Council's adoption of a Durham Housing Strategy in November 2010 the Housing Renewals and Improvement team carried out a lengthy and inclusive review of the Council's approach to dealing with private sector housing issues that resulted in the adoption of a Private Sector Housing Strategy in 2011. The Strategy commits the Council to performing the following functions in relation to private sector housing:
 - Improving the energy efficiency levels of existing private sector housing
 - Providing advice, grants and loans to enable vulnerable owner occupiers to adapt their homes
 - Providing advice and loans to enable vulnerable owner occupiers to repair their homes
 - Tackling issues of poor management and poor housing conditions in the private rented sector

- Delivering area-based holistic housing regeneration initiatives
 - Delivering new housing, and
 - Bringing empty homes back into use.
5. The chosen strategic option embraces a two tiered approach to dealing with empty homes as follows:
- Concentrated work in identified housing regeneration areas with the worst housing conditions and highest levels of deprivation, and
 - A safety net service to deal with empty homes outside identified regeneration areas that are deemed to be contributing to neighbourhood blight.

The current 2011/12 target is for 67 properties to be brought back into use in the regeneration areas and for 13 safety net properties to be dealt with by the team.

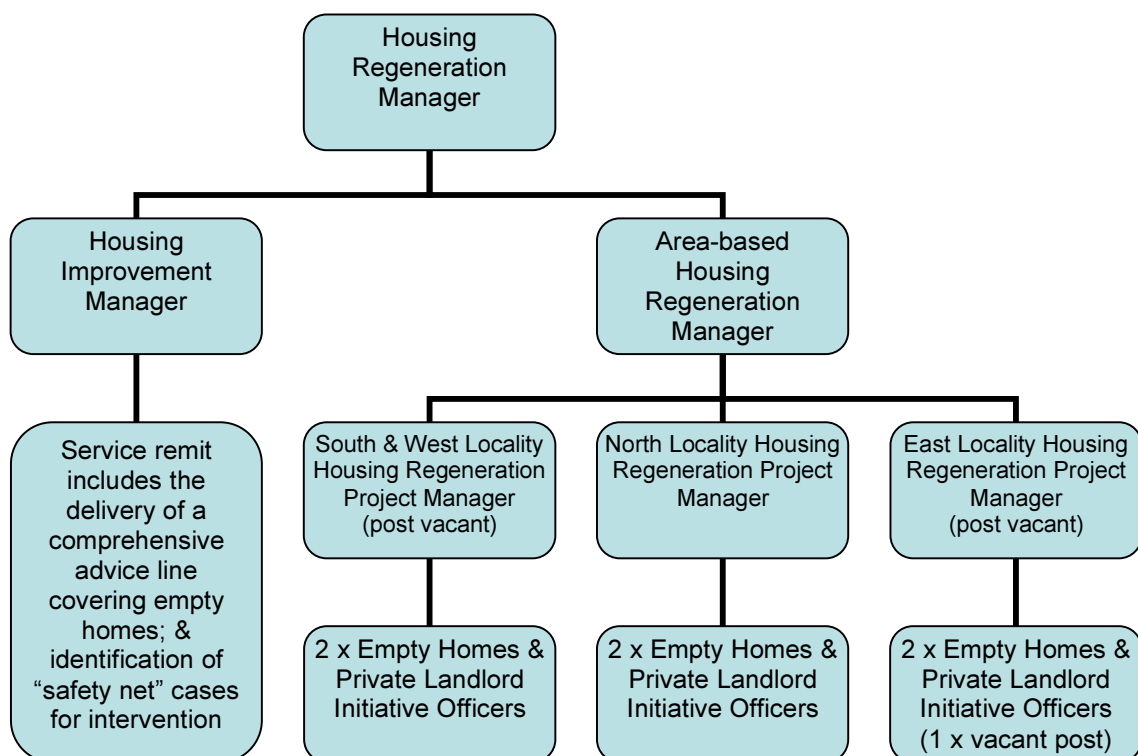
6. Coinciding with the adoption of a clear strategic approach for dealing with empty homes, the Council announced savings required in it's Medium Term Financial Plan and within the RED Service Grouping individual service areas were issued with savings requirements. RED announced a formal restructure which would be consulted upon and implemented by April 2012. The Housing Renewals and Improvement Manager identified the need to put in place interim arrangements ahead of a formal restructure in order to:
- Better align the structure of the service with the chosen strategic option as specified in the Private Sector Housing Strategy
 - Better deliver targets within the Private Sector Housing Strategy Delivery Plan, and
 - Provide effective leadership and line management arrangements following the departure from the authority of the Empty Homes and Private Landlord Initiatives Manager.

Although the interim arrangements were not directly linked to the impending restructure, the arrangements did take account of the future need to make significant cost savings, and were complementary to restructure proposals that staff would be formally consulted upon through the RED restructure process.

7. In June 2011 the Housing Renewals and Improvements Manager carried out consultation with staff and obtained their support to move the Empty Homes and Private Landlord Initiatives Officers into the Area-based Housing Regeneration Teams and combine the roles on an interim basis until such a time that a new structure would be implemented as part of the RED restructure process.

The interim arrangement also involved putting in place new SMART appraisal objectives for all officers involved in these functions by August 2011 and delivering a programme of training by September 2011. These targets have been achieved although they slipped by approximately two months.

8. Subsequently a new service structure was formally agreed as part of the RED restructure process and interviews had been completed and officers were appointed to posts by December 2011, although the new structure will not be fully implemented until 1st April 2012. The new structure is as follows:



9. The new structure containing the so-called “multi-disciplinary teams” has only been in place on an interim and subsequently permanent basis since part of Quarter 2 2011/12 onwards. In Quarter 2 nine and in Quarter 3 seven empty homes were brought back into use. Of the Quarter 3 properties brought back into use 6 were in identified regeneration areas and 1 was a priority case outside the regeneration areas, illustrating that the intended ratio of approximately 6 properties in regeneration areas to 1 safety net case is being achieved.

10. In order to complete a comparison with previous years' performance, based on available performance figures one can assume performance of 32 properties brought back into use for a full year in 2011/12 under the new "multi-disciplinary team" arrangement, (i.e. 16 properties in 2 quarters, double that amount for a full year estimate). A full staffing compliment would amount to 3.8 Full Time Equivalent Officers dealing with empty homes (based on an assumption of 0.2 Full Time Equivalent of the Managers and Project Managers time apportioned to empty homes activity). This equates to performance of an average of 8 properties per Full Time Equivalent Officer. However, three posts on the structure are currently vacant reducing the current Full Time Equivalent to 2.9 equating to performance of 11 properties per Full Time Equivalent Officer. As can be seen when compared to performance in 2009/10 and 2010/11 as outlined in paragraph 3 of this report this demonstrates that performance in terms of average per officer has remained the same as 2010/11 at 11, whilst performance per se has dropped in line with the drop in staffing resources dedicated to empty homes, (32 properties as opposed to the best level of performance of 48 properties in one year).
11. Whilst it is important to measure the number of properties brought back into use as a consequence of direct officer intervention it is of equal, if not higher importance, to consider whether the Council's holistic regeneration approach is increasing confidence in the private sector and if this is having a desired impact on vacancy rates in identified regeneration areas. In this respect it can be seen that vacancy rates in the Craghead group repair intervention area (one of the Council's eight current identified regeneration areas) have reduced from 15% in 2010 to a current rate of 4% which is in line with the average vacancy rate for the county. However for the wider Craghead regeneration area vacancy is currently 5.8%, signifying the need for continued focus on the regeneration area to build on successes to date and to achieve the goal of reducing the vacancy rate to below that of the Durham average of 4.3%. Robust figures are not currently available for the other regeneration areas, but work is currently underway to determine these.
12. The previous management team for empty homes endeavoured to benchmark our performance with that of other authorities, but this work has been assessed and identified as not robust and therefore invalid. In effect the target that has been set for empty homes has no meaningful basis, and further it is not possible to determine whether our performance is comparatively good or bad in relation to other local authorities' performance.

Current Position

13. Work is currently being undertaken to appoint to the three vacant posts within the service. It is hoped that the appointment of high calibre Project Managers in the South and East localities will improve performance. Work is also being undertaken to embed a performance culture within the service which will further increase performance.
14. Given that the new structure is not yet fully implemented and that a performance culture is not yet fully embedded within the service it is too early at this stage to judge whether the introduction of “multi-disciplinary teams” have had a positive impact on the Council’s performance in relation to empty homes.
15. This report is only concerned with impact of the introduction of “multi-disciplinary teams” however, it is important to note that a number of other projects have been, or are in the process of being, developed within the service to improve performance around empty homes, notably:
 - Funding of £656,000 for the period 2012-2015 has been secured from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to bring empty homes back into use, focussing on our priority regeneration areas
 - A further expression of interest has been submitted to HCA for additional funding to work in areas with concentrations of empty homes
 - Progressing with the development of private sector leasing schemes
 - Project assessing the viability of bringing the private rented sector into the Council’s choice based lettings scheme, in part to reduce vacancy rates in low demand areas across the county, is currently being undertaken
 - An annual review of the Council’s Financial Assistance Policy is completed to ensure take up of the Council’s low cost loan scheme by owners of empty homes
 - Application to the Residential Property Tribunal for two Empty Dwelling Management Orders, and
 - Development of a Public Relations Strategy for the Council’s identified regeneration areas to tackle the poor reputation of some of the county’s former coalfield areas.

Recommendations and Reasons

16. That Members continue to monitor the performance of the “multi-disciplinary teams” but allow more time for the new arrangements to fully bed-in before making a final determination as to whether or not they are improving the Council’s performance on empty homes.

17. That Members direct officers within the service to complete a robust benchmarking exercise to determine whether the current targets for empty homes are achievable, and to measure and report performance against that of other high performing authorities.
18. Given that there is an indisputable link between vacancy rates (levels of empty homes) and the sustainability of neighbourhoods that future reports include data on the vacancy rates in each of the Council's priority regeneration areas to determine whether the council's regeneration efforts are having a positive influence on vacancy rates in addition to continuing to measure the positive outcomes from direct intervention the Empty Homes and PLI officers.

Background Papers

None

Appendix 1: Implications

Finance - None

Staffing - None

Risk - None

Equality and Diversity - None

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder - None

Human Rights - None

Consultation - None

Procurement - None

Disability Discrimination Act - None

Legal Implications - None