



# EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

**2008 - 2011**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Empty homes have the potential to cause problems for the surrounding area, such as attracting anti-social behaviour and reducing the value of neighbouring properties. Empty homes are also a wasted resource that could be put to better use providing an additional property to address housing need in an area with very high demand and helping to tackle homelessness. This strategy is essential to addressing these issues and will support the Housing Strategy, the Homelessness Strategy and demonstrate the Council's commitment to working in partnership with private landlords.

Government statistics for the East of England indicate that as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005, there were approximately 56,600 long term empty properties in the region. The data showed that 44% of these vacant properties were within the private sector which equates to just under 25,000 privately owned properties, which had remained empty for 6 months or longer.

The Regional Housing Strategy for the East of England 2005 – 2010, sets out the region's commitment to returning empty homes to use as part of the overall aim of ensuring the everyone can live in a decent home at a price they an afford in locations that are sustainable. The strategy suggests that local housing authorities should:

- Maintain an up to date register of empty homes
- Develop an active approach to bringing empty homes back into use
- Work with housing associations with specialist knowledge
- Develop empty homes charters to raise awareness of the issue
- Be encouraged to work across boundary with neighbouring authorities

Government also highlighted empty homes as a pressing issue for Local Authorities through the introduction of Best Value Performance Indicator 64 and, although this will no longer be a National Indicator, the Council will be retaining it as a local performance indicator. This requires the Council to record the number of vacant private sector dwellings that are returned to occupation or demolished as a result of direct action by the Local Authority.

The Council removed the exemption from Council Tax on long term empty properties in 2004, so property owners are now liable to pay the full Council Tax on these properties, and may also be losing a potential rental income. However,

bringing an empty property back into use and enabling its re-occupation, has a number of advantages for the owner and the community. These include:

For owners:

- Increased property value if sold
- A rental income
- Reduced outgoings, such as Council Tax payments

For the community:

- Provision of additional housing
- Reduction of potential anti-social behaviour
- Enhancement of the character of communities, where even one empty building in poor repair may affect the street scene adversely.

## 2. THE LOCAL PICTURE

The Housing Investment Plan (HIP) return, for 2006/07 showed that as at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2007, there were a total of 30,107 properties in Uttlesford. The figures also indicated that 1003 of those properties were empty at that time. There are a number of different reasons for properties being empty and the breakdown of this figure showed:

- 15 in the public sector
- 988 in the private sector

Of those 988 empty properties in the private sector, 549 (55%) had remained empty for longer than 6 months. Although some of these long-term empty private dwellings may be in need of extensive renovation, or may be on sites awaiting redevelopment, many could be returned to occupation with little or no effort by their owners.

In January 2007, the East of England Empty Homes Task Group produced an Empty Homes Charter which the Council has signed up to. The task group consists of Local Authority representatives, along with Go East, EERA, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the Eastern Region Landlords Association. The Charter sets out actions for every Local Authority, which include:

- Having a corporate commitment to tackling empty homes
- Considering the benefits of a wider sub-regional and/or multi partner approach to tackling empty homes
- Having a clear strategy for tackling empty homes
- Ensuring links to other strategies at regional, sub-regional and local levels

This strategy will set out the various ways in which this council will provide help and support to property owners. Bringing a property back into use encourages economic vitality within the district and has a positive impact on regeneration. It also helps to maintain and protect market house prices by removing empty, decaying properties and replacing these with refurbished homes. The strategy involves working with other appropriate agencies, as well as cross-boundary working with neighbouring Local Authorities. The Council is committed to assisting owners turn empty houses into assets and providing much needed accommodation within the district.

### **3. KEY AIM**

The key aim of this strategy is to find the most appropriate action to address the issues of long-term empty properties within the district.

Within Uttlesford, the demand for affordable and accessible housing far outstrips supply and the Council recognises that empty homes need to be dealt with effectively to help address this demand. The Housing Needs Survey of 2002, which was updated in 2004, estimated that an additional 570 affordable homes per annum were required if all housing needs were to be met within the District. Although the Council is committed to the development of new affordable housing, the amount of properties being provided through this means is not enough to meet the need.

Therefore, the implementation of an Empty Homes Strategy aims to provide a range of approaches to help bring empty homes back into use, and to address the following matters:

- Minimise the development of Greenfield sites
- Improve the existing built environment
- Ensure the housing needs of the district are met
- Provide good quality affordable housing and to ensure economic stability of the communities within the district

## **4. KEY OBJECTIVES**

In order to achieve the overall aim of the Empty Homes Strategy, the Council will be working towards 4 objectives:

**1. Create and maintain a register of empty homes**

In order to retain an up to date list of empty properties in the district, details from Council Tax records will be obtained on a regular basis to help identify long-term empty properties at the earliest opportunity.

**2. Raise awareness of empty homes issues**

By promoting the ways in which the Council is seeking to bring empty properties back into use, the profile of the issue can be raised throughout the District. This will include promotion both internally and externally, through the general public and other parties involved in the property sector.

**3. Develop partnership working**

Joined-up working within the Council will be developed across departments to identify and promote the ways to address the issues. Partnership working will also extend to the region, and sub-region, as well as RSL partners, to seek opportunities for external funding to bring empty homes back into use.

**4. Encourage owners of empty homes to make their properties available for occupation**

The promotion of schemes to encourage owners to put their empty property to better use will be exercised to ensure that properties are made available for occupation, especially to those in the greatest housing need. This will be done though working in partnership with relevant parties who have expertise and experience in renovating empty properties to decent home standard. This will help to address the high levels of housing need within the district.

## **5. ACHIEVING KEY OBJECTIVES**

The strategy should, in the majority of cases, provide adequate means to motivate owners to bring their properties back into use voluntarily, without the need for enforcement action. The way in which the Council intends to achieve its objectives by the following means:

- **Empty Homes Register**

In order to monitor the extent of the private sector empty homes situation, a list will be obtained from the Council Tax section on an annual basis. The information will be used to establish a simple list of long-term empty properties to enable officers to make contact with any new owners of such a property. The list will also be able to incorporate relevant information, such as type of accommodation and state of repair for monitoring purposes.

- **Raising awareness of empty homes issues**

In order to raise the issue of private sector empty homes internally, a corporate and joined-up approach is needed. To effectively implement the strategy, officers from the following services can provide an important contribution;

- **Council Tax**

The Council Tax section is able to provide detailed information of all empty properties to the relevant officer on a regular basis. This will enable a register of long-term empty properties to be kept up to date and the owners to be contacted accordingly.

- **Environmental Health**

Environmental Health Officers are well placed to identify empty private sector homes and those properties which are likely to become vacant because of disrepair. Environmental Health Officers also have an overview of local housing standards and their technical knowledge and input can accelerate the processes by which homes are brought back into use.

- **Housing**

Empty properties will be identified, which can assist in meeting housing needs when returned to occupation which could then reduce pressure on the housing stock within the district. The Empty Homes Strategy links into the Housing Strategy and the Homelessness Strategy, where housing need will be identified. Housing Officers provide information to members of the public and they will be aware of any schemes which may help alleviate the pressures of the housing register.



### **- Legal**

Legal Officers already assist officers to trace the owners of land and properties where there is a dispute or disrepair. These established procedures will continue to be used to enable enforcement or informal action to bring these properties back into use.

### **- Building Control**

Building Control is responsible for inspecting empty properties which have been reported as dangerous structures. There is scope for these properties to also be referred to the service for informal or enforcement action.

### **- Elected Members**

Elected Members can play a major role in promoting, encouraging and sustaining a successful empty homes strategy within their communities.

Raising the issues of empty homes externally to the public is important and can be achieved by the following means:

### **- Parish Councils**

Parish Councils can play an integral part in the process by identifying empty properties that may blight the neighbourhood, through their local knowledge and status within the community.

### **- Landlords' forum**

The Council is keen to build a relationship with private landlords and other private sector agencies by an annual landlords' forum which will include internal and external speakers to present topics such as housing benefits, home energy conservation etc.

### **- Empty Homes Agency's 'National Week of Action'**

The week is promoted by the Empty Homes Agency and is held annually in October. The Council will use this timescale to help promote the issues surrounding empty homes within Uttlesford.

### **- Website**

This strategy will be available on Uttlesford District Council's website.

### **▪ Partnership working**

Along with joint-working internally, the Council also works sub-regionally with other Local Authorities, and is part of a consortium to bring empty homes back into use with the benefit of external funding. The scheme is called PLACE (Private Lease Agreements Converting Empties);

### **- PLACE scheme**

Uttlesford is part of a Consortium of five Local Authorities that successfully bid for capital grant funding from the Regional Housing Board (RHB) for an empty homes renovation and lease project. The other partner Local Authorities are Chelmsford Borough Council, Harlow District Council, Epping Forest District Council, and East Herts District Council. The consortium sought tenders from for two Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners, who are Swan Housing Group and Pathmeads Housing Association.

The capital grant secured is for £3.5million over two years and the project is being run as a pilot. The project is aimed at tackling long-term empty homes that require significant renovation works before being brought back into use. The RHB capital grant is used to fund renovation of the property to the decent homes standard and the property is then signed up to a 3 year lease with the managing RSL with nomination rights to the relevant Local Authority for the duration of the lease. At the end of the 3 year lease, the property will be handed back to the owner. There are no restrictions on the future use of the property, although the option of continuing the lease is available.

The Capital Grant is equally divided between the 5 partner Local Authorities, equating to £700,000 per authority (£350,000 each year). It is anticipated that the project will return approximately 116 long-term empty homes to use across the 5 partner districts. At the end of the 2 year pilot the project will be reviewed and results published, and options for mainstreaming the project considered.

#### **▪ Bringing empty homes back into use**

The PLACE project is integral to this strategy as funding is already available for qualifying properties. However, the Council has established other schemes and ways to assist owners, as well as working towards Government legislation that is in place;

### **- Financial Assistance**

Under the current Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, financial assistance of up to £10,000 (a grant of £3000 and an interest free loan of £7000 repayable on the sale of the property) is available to qualifying landlords to help meet the cost of improving safety, energy efficiency, bringing the property up to the basic fitness standard or to convert large properties into smaller units of accommodation. The property must be available for letting for a period of 10 years.

This service is also looking into providing financial assistance to landlords to renovate and convert empty properties that have been on the market for more than 6 months. It would be recommended that the property would need to be

converted into 1 bedroom flats or bedsits. Such action links into the strategic objectives and aims of the Housing Strategy and the Homelessness Strategy.

Under the current grant policy, persons are eligible to apply for financial assistance to buy an empty property that has been on the market for more than 6 months. The amount of financial assistance is registered as a local land charge and is subject to repayment should the property be sold within a 10-year period or if the mode of occupation changes within this period.

#### **- Private finance**

It is anticipated that some owners may not wish to be tied to the conditions attached to financial assistance obtained through the Council and may wish to finance refurbishments privately. Environmental Health will work with these owners to encourage favourable outcomes.

#### **- Private letting and managing agents**

Some owners will wish to have their properties managed by private letting and managing agents. In order to facilitate this process it is proposed to provide a list of agents within the district. The contacts will prove useful for referral of information; financial assistance referrals and situations where owners wish to dispose of empty properties. The Environmental Health Officers will establish links with these agencies to develop good partnership to meet the needs of both the landlords and the Council.

#### **- The Deposit Guarantee Scheme**

This scheme is managed by King Street Housing Society in partnership with Uttlesford District Council. It is aimed at owners who wish to rent their property to help prevent homelessness and address housing need. The scheme offers rent deposit guarantees to landlords on behalf of prospective tenants who cannot afford the deposit themselves. The deposit guarantee is a guarantee up to an agreed amount against unpaid rent and/or damage or dilapidation which cannot be attributed to fair wear and tear. It is therefore, a guarantee against unpaid rent whether due from the tenant or Housing Benefit Office.

#### **- Compulsory Purchase Orders**

The main basis of the Strategy is to promote participation and cooperation to bring properties back into use. However, the Council may also consider using its legal power to purchase empty properties by using Compulsory Purchase Orders. In taking such action the Council will carry out its enforcement duties in accordance with the enforcement concordat. Formal action would only be taken if other informal routes have been exhausted. In situations where this procedure is implemented, it would prove beneficial if private investors or Housing Association partners could be placed to purchase such properties once acquired by the Council.

### **- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)**

An Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) gives the council the right to possession of the property. Once an EDMO has been made, the Council may do anything the owner would normally be entitled to do with the property, such as entering it to inspect its condition. The Council does not take over ownership of the property but is entitled to possession of it and can prevent the owner from using it or letting someone else use it whilst the order is in force.

There are two types of EDMO. An interim EDMO lasts for an initial period of 12 months, during which time the council must try to work with the owner to agree a way of getting the property back into use. It may ask the owner for permission to let the property to someone. If no agreement can be reached, the council may seek to make a final EDMO, which can last for up to seven years. The owner will have fewer rights to decide how the property is brought back into use under a final EDMO. If the council cannot reach an agreement with the owner and decides not to make a final EDMO, it must hand back possession of the property to the owner.

## 5. ACTION PLAN

| <b>Key Objective 1 – Create and maintain a register of empty homes</b>   |               |           |            |   |                   |
|--|---------------|-----------|------------|---|-------------------|
| How (should include actions and milestones)  | Who           | When      | Resources  | Target/PI   | Progress/Slippage |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a working document of long term empty property details</li> </ul> | Sophie Walker | June 2008 | Staff time | Use information to contact owners and note progress |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obtain information from Council Tax department</li> </ul>                   | Sophie Walker | Annually  | Staff time | Update list of empty properties with information    |                   |

| <b>Key Objective 2 – Raise awareness of empty homes issues</b>                                     |                                  |                     |            |  |                   |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------|--|-------------------|
| How (Should include actions and milestones)  | Who                              | When                | Resources  | Targets/PIs  | Progress/Slippage |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Produce an Empty Homes Strategy</li> </ul>                  | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | March 2008          | Staff time | Community Committee on 13 March for approval               |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend Landlord's Forum to encourage involvement</li> </ul> | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Annually            | Staff time | Advise landlords of progress on empty homes work           |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empty Homes Agency's National Week of Action</li> </ul>     | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Annually in October | Staff time | Raise the profile of empty homes through national campaign |                   |

| <b>Key Objective 3 – Develop partnership working</b>   |                                  |           |                                |   |                   |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|---|-------------------|
| How (Should include actions and milestones)  | Who                              | When      | Resources                      | Targets/PIs   | Progress/Slippage |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet with PLACE project group</li> </ul>                                    | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Monthly   | Staff time<br><br>EERA funding | Attend monthly meetings to discuss potential properties   |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend LCB Empty Homes Forum</li> </ul>                                     | Sophie Walker                    | Quarterly | Staff time                     | Attend quarterly meetings                                 |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet with internal colleagues to discuss progress on empty homes</li> </ul> | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Monthly   | Staff time                     | Meet on a monthly basis to discuss progress with register |                   |

| <b>Key Objective 4 – Encourage owners of empty homes to make their properties available for occupation</b>            |                                  |                          |                                |  |                   |
|---|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| How (Should include actions and milestones)   | Who                              | When                     | Resources                      | Targets/PIs                                | Progress/Slippage |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact owners of empty homes on register</li> </ul>                           | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Ongoing                  | Staff time                     | Write to owners promoting the PLACE scheme |                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with the PLACE project team to bring empty homes back into use</li> </ul> | Sophie Walker/<br>Will Cockerell | Ongoing until April 2010 | Staff time<br><br>EERA funding | 23 properties over a 3 year period         |                   |