

## **DUDLEY MBC EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2006 - 2007**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Empty homes represent waste, financial expense and missed opportunity. They can blight communities, attract vandals and squatters. Bringing empty homes back into use helps to widen housing choice, reduce homelessness, work towards the decent homes standard and improve the environmental and social sustainability of neighbourhoods. It is a win-win situation for the owner, Dudley MBC and the local community.

We are looking to move away from an adhoc, reactive approach to a proactive, co-ordinated and strategic approach towards private sector empty homes.

### **THE NATIONAL PICTURE**

There were 680,412 (3.17%) empty homes across England at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005 – 3.17% of the housing stock. The majority – 86% - were privately owned. A total of 290,862 (42.7%) had been empty for more than six months.

The Communities Plan recognised how making better use of empty properties could contribute to sustainable communities and introduced a number of incentives including:

- a reduction of VAT to encourage renovation of long term empty homes.
- increased funding for the Empty Homes Agency.
- ending Council Tax discount on empty properties.
- enabling local authorities to divulge information on empty properties.

Bringing empty properties back into use also helps to tackle low demand and market failure, anti-social behaviour, the provision of affordable homes and ensuring that all homes meet a decent standard.

Local authorities have a duty under Sec 7 of the Local Government Act 2003 to maintain and enhance the health of the housing market across all housing tenures.

A national performance indicator BVPI 64 has been introduced to record the number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished during the year as a direct result of action by the local authority.

Our empty homes work also contributes to PSA 7 target through helping vulnerable households in the private sector to live in decent homes.

## THE REGIONAL PICTURE

There were 77,544 empty homes in the West Midlands region at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005 (Source: ODPM). 10,593 were owned by social housing providers and 66,810 were privately owned. A total of 35,414 (46%) had been empty for more than six months. In the metropolitan areas the highest % of empty homes can be found in Walsall (4.86%) and Wolverhampton (4.82%)

Local authority	Total empty homes	% empty homes	Local Council	Housing Association	Other public body	Private Landlord / owner	Private homes empty more than 6 mths
Birmingham	17527	4.35%	1550	579	39	15359	9837
Coventry	4971	3.90%	12	1034	7	3918	2678
Dudley	4089	2.60%	504	51	19	3515	1347
Sandwell	4029	3.80%	582	77	0	3370	2558
Solihull	2494	2.77%	N/A	N/A	N/A	2486	1530
Walsall	4732	4.86%	0	1992	0	2740	1036
Wolverhampton	4965	4.82%	975	106	2	3882	1795
	<b>42807</b>		<b>3626</b>	<b>3842</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>35270</b>	<b>20781</b>

West Midlands Regional HIP data 1.4.05 (supplied by the Empty Homes Agency)

## THE LOCAL PICTURE

There were a total of 4089 empty homes in Dudley at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005. 3515 were privately owned and 504 were owned by the local authority. A total of 1347 (33%) empty properties had been empty for more than six months.

Dudley has the lowest % of empty properties at 2.6% and the second lowest number of properties empty for more than 6 months in the West Midlands metropolitan area. (see table above for more information).

The numbers of empty council homes has continued to decrease from over 1000 to 504 on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005.

There has, however, been an increase in the numbers of empty properties and the numbers vacant for more than 6 months. In 2003 there were 2786 empty properties and 1133 properties vacant for more than 6 months. This had increased to 3515 empty properties and 1347 properties vacant for more than 6 months by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005.

A total of 53 private sector vacant dwellings were returned into occupation or demolished during 2005/06 as a direct result of action by the authority. This figure is below the top quartile of all metropolitan authorities of 140.75 and the metropolitan average of 66.5.

## **BACKGROUND**

Dudley MBC published its first empty homes strategy in September 2003.

Objectives included:

- Reducing vacancy rates over the life of the strategy.
- Maximising funding opportunities and effort on homes empty for more than six months.
- Working with the landlords' forum, Dudley housing partnership and residents to raise awareness of empty homes.
- Working within the supporting people and asylum seeker framework to bring empty homes back into use to widen choice for socially excluded groups.
- Working with the landlords' forum and Dudley housing partnership to prevent properties becoming empty.

There has been an increase in the number of private sector vacant dwellings returned into occupation or demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority over the life of the last strategy from 11 in 2002/03 to 53 in 2005/06.

The work is managed through the Private Sector Housing Team who are split into three teams with a co-ordinator. Their role includes working with owners, assessing grants. For example they are currently working with a private owner to bring four flats above the shops in Wrens Nest back into use.

We have worked to raise awareness of empty homes through the development of our housing internet site enabling the community and other stakeholders to be able to find out more about our empty homes work including how to report an empty property and how to bring an empty home back into use.

We have developed our Housing Assistance Scheme (HAS) which provides for major repair and improvement assistance to owners of empty properties in need of:

- Essential repair or improvement to make the property fit for habitation, and
- The provision of means of escape in the case of fire or other fire precautions.

The scheme provides for a fifty percent grant towards the costs of the works up to a maximum of £5000 per property.

The Council reserves the right to nominate tenants when the property is let. The owner is also not allowed to sell or dispose of the property within the five years. The grant is available for properties that have been empty for more than twelve months.

Five grants were paid during the life of the last strategy and three self contained properties were grant aided and will have nominated tenants.

We have boarded up nine properties in an emergency over the past two years. We continue to monitor those nine properties. A key aim is to ensure that if a problem empty home is being used illegally or is a cause of danger then prompt action is taken to board up, make the residence safe and monitor it.

We have also continued to be active members of the West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group where best practice, information sharing and cross authority working is developed.

We are also currently undertaking a process-benchmarking exercise in respect of BVPI 64. This will involve reviewing the processes that top performing local authorities have adopted and comparing and considering changes to our processes.

## **STRATEGIC LINKS**

The borough's Community Strategy – Dudley Borough Challenge - 2005 – 2020 sets out an overall vision of: the promotion of stronger communities throughout the borough.

A strong community has many qualities. It exists where all people are happy and proud to live and where there is decent housing, a clean and safe environment and an area that is attractive, vibrant and harmonious.

The Dudley Borough Challenge also identifies a series of key priorities, which our Empty Homes Strategy will help to impact on:

- Creating a prosperous borough – the return of empty properties into use will help to create wealth for the borough through increases to Council Tax revenues and investment to property. It will also encourage people to stay, return and invest in the borough.
- Promoting a sense of well being and good health for everyone – the return of empty properties into use will help to promote a increased sense of well being through a reduction in vandalism and blight associated with empty properties. Improved housing conditions benefit the health of residents within Dudley.
- Celebrating our heritage and local cultural life – the return of empty properties into use will help to safeguard our heritage and sustain local communities.
- Safeguarding and improving the environment – the return of empty properties into use will help to safeguard and improve the environment surrounding empty properties and the wider environment through reducing the need to build on greenfield sites.
- Promoting individual and community learning – the return of empty properties into use can help to reduce homelessness and provide appropriate environments in which to learn.

- Making Dudley a safe and peaceful place in which to live – the return of empty properties into use will help to make Dudley a safer place through a reduction in anti-social behaviour associated with empty properties.

## **OBJECTIVES**

We recognise that it is necessary for some properties to be vacant for relatively short periods whilst they are being sold or let. These vacancies are essential to ensure the effective functioning of the housing market. This strategy will focus on those empty homes that are not being actively marketed.

This strategy adopts the following definition for an empty home:

- Has been unoccupied for 6 months or more
- Has been unoccupied for less than 6 months but is in serious disrepair or other serious problems are being caused by the property
- Does not have a reasonable prospect of being brought back into use by the owner working alone.

### **Objective 1 - To reduce the number of empty homes across the borough**

The aim of this strategy is to reduce the number of empty homes across the borough - especially those that have been empty for more than six months and to work towards top quartile performance in respect of BVPI 64 by 2008/09.

We will set the following targets - to return into occupation or demolish private sector vacant dwellings as a direct result of action by the authority - for the period 2006/07 – 2008/09.

2006/07	66 properties
2007/08	100 properties
2008/09	140 properties

### **Objective 2 - To obtain clear and accurate information on empty homes in each area and to establish priorities**

We recognise the need to identify as many empty properties as possible to enable us to have a clear picture of empty homes in the borough.

Council Tax data is supplied to us on an annual basis identifying former residences that are empty and those empty for more than six months. If these properties have a commercial link this is also identified (e.g. flats over shops etc.) We will explore with Council Tax the possibility of supplying data on a more regular basis to ensure that the information is kept up to date.

We will also look at working in partnership with others to identify potential empty properties including local authority colleagues, other organisations including the emergency services, Registered Social Landlords and local

people. Our web site will also be available for people to identify empty properties.

We will differentiate the length of time properties have been empty and investigate the reasons.

We will explore the possibility of mapping all empty properties onto the GIS system so that we can map potential hot spots and ensure that we can prioritise resources effectively.

**Objective 3 - To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment, and prioritisation of empty homes and any enforcement action to be taken.**

We will develop processes and service standards to deal with the initial notification of an empty property – establishing ownership, visiting and contacting owners.

We will develop processes to enable us to assess the package of support that may be appropriate. This may be advice, or financial assistance. Our main aim will be to work with owners to help them bring their properties back into use. An understanding of why a property became empty and why it remains empty is important in bringing it back into use. The approach to be taken in bringing empty properties back into use needs to take account of the reasons why the property is empty.

We recognise the importance of bringing all empty properties back into use but have to prioritise our resources effectively. Our performance is assessed against the number of empty properties brought back into use but we also have a responsibility to address properties in serious disrepair. We will develop a process to determine the importance of an empty property and what level of urgency it requires. This prioritisation system will include:

- length of time the property has been empty?
- is there is a history of complaints or notices served?
- is it in a priority neighbourhood area?

This will be informed by our analysis of empty homes in each area.

There will also be cases where urgent action is required because of risk of arson, serious anti-social behaviour, squatting, vandalism for example.

We will develop processes for enforcement action when the owner says they will bring the property back into use but they don't or where we can't contact the owner. These will focus on properties that are causing a nuisance to the public by their appearance and condition. For example symbolic 'entry gateways to Dudley'. The following options will be explored further and would only be taken as a last resort and when in the public interest.

## **Empty Homes Management Orders**

The Housing Act 2004 provides a new discretionary power for local authorities to take over the management of long-term privately owned empty homes. It effectively allows local authorities to 'step into the shoes' of the owner of an unoccupied building and to secure occupation and the proper management of privately owned houses and flats that have been unoccupied for a specified period of time and where certain other conditions are met.

We are developing with other local authorities a regional approach with Mercian Housing Association to use Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

## **Enforced Sales Procedure**

This initiative enables local authorities to recoup debts to the authority and bring empty private sector properties back into use through the sale of that property. The procedure is considered to have a number of social and financial benefits and is considered more expedient than a Compulsory Purchase Order.

## **Compulsory Purchase**

This option enables the local authority to acquire the property from the owner through a legal process. The owner is compensated and the legal costs are met by the Council. The property is sold on to a chosen partner – for example a Registered Social Landlord for re-development. This option can be a lengthy process and can take 24 months plus to complete.

We will develop robust monitoring processes to enable our performance to be accurately monitored.

## **Objective 4 - To raise awareness of empty homes.**

We will produce information and literature and ensure that it is distributed widely including to the owners of empty properties.

We will continue to raise awareness of empty homes through the on-going development of our housing internet site enabling the community and other stakeholders to be able to find out more about how we can assist them and to report empty property.

We will actively publicise our work and in particular any successes so that the profile of empty properties is maintained.

## **Objective 5 - To promote the availability of help / assistance through an Empty Homes Information Pack.**

We will develop an Empty Homes Information Pack which will contain information on:

- The Housing Assistance Scheme – the Council's grant scheme.
- Advice on private letting
- Tenancy Guarantee Scheme

The aim will be to raise awareness amongst owners and other partners of how the Council can assist them in bringing empty properties back into use. It will provide practical help and support to assist owners. It will also outline the enforcement powers of the Council.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

We recognise that we need to work in partnership with a range of stakeholders.

### **Property Owners / Landlords**

Property owners are one of our main stakeholders with whom we need to work alongside to ensure the success of our empty homes strategy. They will range from owners who cannot be identified to others who will need some basic advice to help bring their property back into use.

### **Residents**

It is residents who experience the consequences of empty homes on their community. It is vital that residents can know what to expect from the service and also how they can be involved in future service delivery. The information and marketing of information around empty properties – including successes in dealing with empty properties - will be very important as will feedback and will enhance the Council's credibility as a force for neighbourhood improvement and sustainability in the Borough.

### **Elected Members**

Elected Members are involved in providing community leadership at both a local level – supporting residents who are experiencing the consequences of empty homes – and at a strategic level – in supporting and promoting our empty homes work.

There are a number of directorates who also deal with empty homes and who will be able to assist us:

**Directorate of the Urban Environment** - in investigating complaints, clearing rubbish from a property.



**Directorate of Law and Property** – in taking legal action

**Directorate of Finance (Council Tax)** – in producing reports of empty properties

**Dudley Council Plus** – in answering and responding to queries from the public

**Colleagues in our own directorate** – in re-housing older people and other vulnerable people

A Corporate Empty Homes Working Group has been established and includes representatives from the Directorates of the Urban Environment, and Law and Property. We will look to expand its membership and work with other directorates in developing our policies and processes.

### **West Midlands Empty Homes Officers Forum**

Dudley MBC is a member of the West Midlands Empty Homes Officers Forum who meet regularly to share best practice and knowledge.

### **Registered Social Landlords**

We have continued to work with individual Registered Social Landlords to bring empty homes back into use but the more recent focus of Housing Corporation funding has been towards new housing.

We are developing as members of the West Midlands Empty Homes Officers Forum a regional approach with Mercian Housing Association to use Empty Dwelling Management Orders to secure the occupation and proper management of privately owned houses and flats.

### **REVIEW**

This strategy and progress against targets will be reviewed on an annual basis. It is intended that work completed in this first year will be used to further develop our Empty Homes Strategy.