

**Report to Cabinet – 14<sup>th</sup> June 2006**

**Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services**

**Empty Homes Strategy 2006/07**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To seek Cabinet approval of the Council's Empty Homes Strategy 2006/07. Copies of the proposed Strategy document and associated Action Plan have been placed in the Members' Room and on CMIS.

**Background**

2. 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.
3. There is a significant national policy drive to reduce the number of empty properties and to bring them back into use and a number of incentives have been introduced by central Government.
4. Local authorities' performance is monitored through BVPI 64 which records 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.
5. Dudley has the lowest % of empty properties in the metropolitan West Midlands and one of the lowest numbers of properties vacant for more than six months. There has, however, been an increase in the numbers of empty properties since 2003.
6. The borough has had an empty homes strategy since September 2003 and the number of private sector dwellings returned into occupation or demolished as a direct result of action by us has increased from 11 in 2002/03 to 53 in 2005/06.
7. We have worked to raise awareness of empty homes in Dudley 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.

8. We have also 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
9. The scheme provides for a fifty percent grant towards the cost of the works up to a maximum of £5000 per property. The Council, in return, reserves the right to nominate tenants when the property is let. Five HAS grants were paid during the duration of the last strategy and three self contained properties were grant aided and will have nominated tenants.
10. It is recognised, however, that our previous approach has been somewhat adhoc and reactive and that the new strategy will set the basis for a more pro-active, co-ordinated and strategic approach. The strategy has five objectives:
- To reduce the number of empty homes across the borough.
  - To obtain clear and accurate information on empty homes in each area and to establish priorities.
  - To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation of empty homes and for any enforcement action to be taken.
  - To raise awareness of empty homes.
  - To promote the availability of help / assistance through an Empty Homes Information Pack.
11. The five objectives are supported by an action plan and progress against actions will be reviewed on an annual basis. Examples from the action plan include: an analysis of Council Tax data to identify the number of empty properties, their location, the length of vacancy, and type of owner; developing robust processes, service standards and monitoring processes; promoting the availability of help / assistance.
12. The Strategy also recognises the importance of working in partnership with a range of stakeholders including other directorates who also deal with empty homes and who will be able to assist us in meeting our objectives.

## **Finance**

13. The empty homes strategy will be delivered within existing housing general fund resources.

## **Law**

14. Section 7 of the Local Government Act 2003 gives local authorities clearly defined duties to maintain and enhance the health of the housing market across all housing tenures.

## **Equality Impact**

15. The empty homes strategy will help to raise housing standards in the private sector contributing to equality and diversity objectives.

### **Recommendation**

16. It is proposed that the Cabinet approves the Empty Homes Strategy 2006/07 as summarised in paragraphs 10, 11 & 12 of the report.
17. It is proposed that a copy of the Empty Homes Strategy 2006/07 and Action Plan placed in the Members' Room remain there for future reference.



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### **List of Background Papers**

ODPM Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix