



Empty homes strategy

Dudley Council
2008-2011





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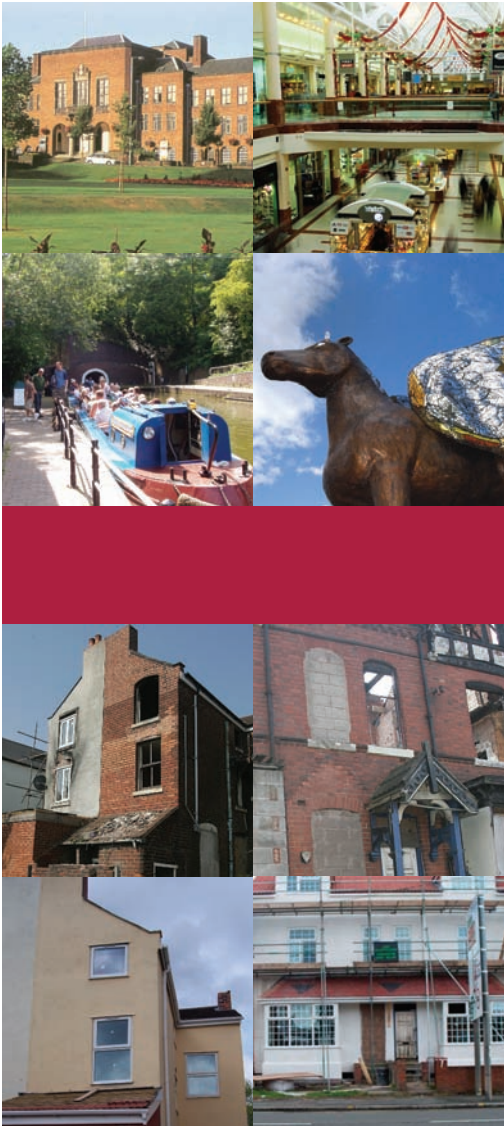
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1. Foreword by Councillor Michael Evans and Linda Sanders, Director

We are delighted to present Dudley Council's Empty Homes Strategy 2008 to 2011. This strategy and action plan updates the 2003 strategy which highlighted the need to tackle the issue of private sector empty homes in the borough and develop co-ordinated, systematic approaches to dealing with this problem.

Empty private sector properties represent a wasted resource to the community especially when the demand for housing in the borough continues to grow. The council is committed to reducing the number of empty properties in the area by working with empty property owners.

This strategy provides information about why privately owned properties are empty, the benefits of bringing properties back into use and, more importantly, details how Dudley Council will develop co-ordinated solutions to tackle the issue. We will also continue to set performance targets in relation to this issue to ensure that we achieve a consistent reduction in the overall number of empty properties during the life of the strategy and sustained improvement in performance against private sector CPA indicators.

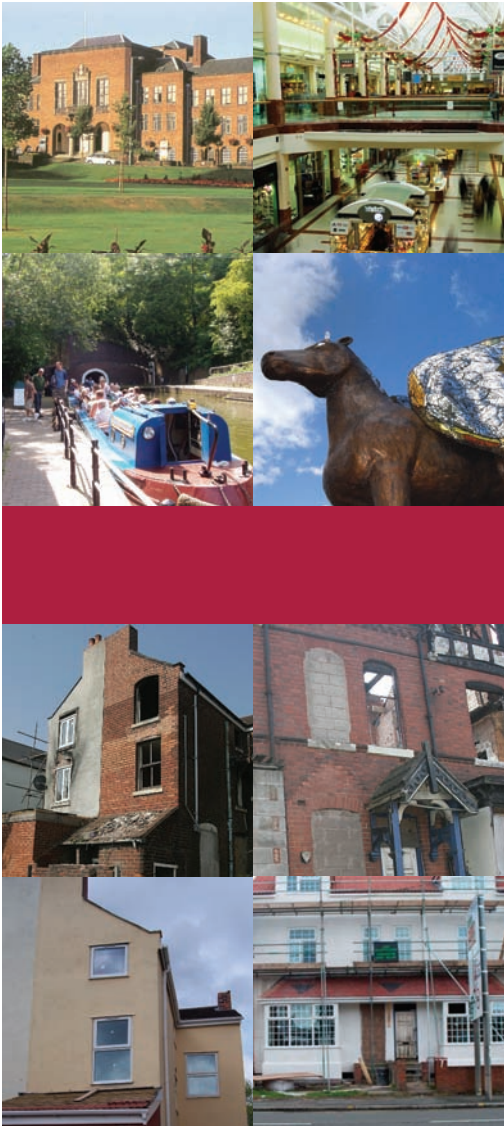
The strategy has been developed through a process of research, wide consultation with stakeholders, partner organisations, members and the wider community. It is also very much a working document. It will be reviewed regularly and updated on an annual basis.



Councillor Michael Evans, cabinet member for housing



Linda Sanders, Director of adult, community & housing services



2. Executive summary

This is Dudley Council's second Empty Homes Strategy and is effective from April 2008. With over 3000 empty properties, of which just under a half have been empty for more than six months in the private sector, the strategy sets out how the council with the support of its partners, will reduce this number by April 2011. The strategy brings together the issues surrounding empty properties and will identify the way forward for Dudley Council to benefit our communities.

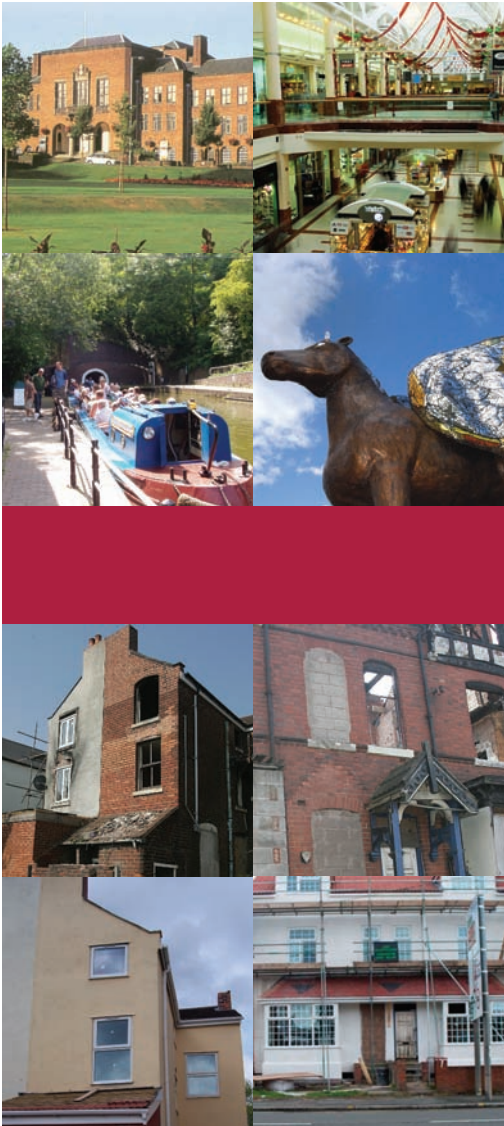
The council's long-term aim is "to help people to lead fulfilled and independent lives in homes of their choice in safe and active communities". The Empty Homes Strategy is a key document which supports this aim and other key plans, policies and strategies, including the council's housing strategy and homelessness strategy. It also supports the Arc of Opportunity, one of six regeneration zones established with Advantage West Midlands with the objective of linking regeneration and opportunity within areas of greatest need and where there may be a significant number of empty properties.

This strategy has been developed to encompass empty private sector residential properties that have been empty for longer than six months.

The overall outcome that the strategy sets out to achieve is:

"Empty properties being managed effectively, helping to create sustainable, safe communities leading to the provision of housing that meets the needs of the residents of Dudley."

The strategy identifies six key objectives that are supported by a number of key actions. They determine the action we will be taking to achieve our overall outcome and outline our future priorities to effectively improve this service. We will make the greatest impact on reducing the number of long-term empty properties by focusing activity, targeting resources effectively and developing appropriate partnerships. The strategy is supported by an action plan, which will be implemented by the Empty Homes Development Officer. The strategy and the action plan will be reviewed on an annual basis to incorporate changes in both local and national policy.



3. Introduction: why we need this strategy

Dudley is a bright, vibrant borough and a popular place to live. There are many developments creating new businesses and new housing. Even with new development, housing need continues to outstrip supply and many local people cannot afford to buy or rent a suitable home. There remains a need for more housing of all kinds.

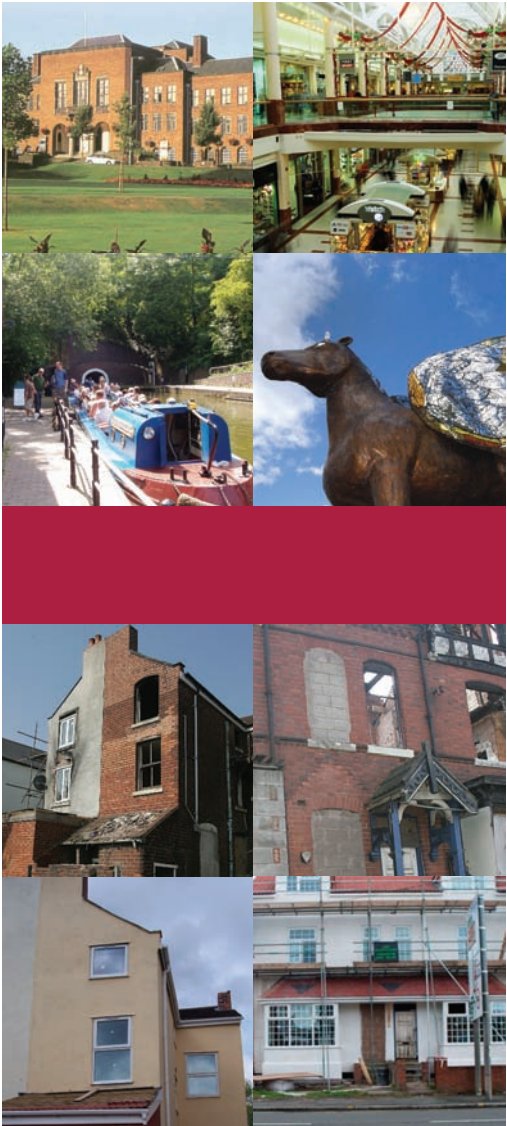
At the same time a significant number of homes in the borough remain empty for longer than 6 months and other, non-residential properties remain unused even though they offer the potential to be turned into homes. These are often rundown as well as empty and contribute to the areas decline.

The majority of empty properties in the borough are privately owned. Many people ask why owners leave their properties empty. Surely they are neglecting their own investment and bringing them back into use would benefit themselves and the local community. Often owners do not know how to get their properties back into use and sometimes they simply don't seem to care.

There is currently an undersupply of housing in Dudley. There is a high demand for property across all housing tenures and price brackets, which has had a significant impact on the housing market resulting in increased house prices. Bringing empty homes back into use helps to widen housing choice, reduce homelessness, work towards the decent homes targets and improve the environmental and social sustainability of neighbourhoods. It is a win-win situation for the owner, Dudley Council and the local community.

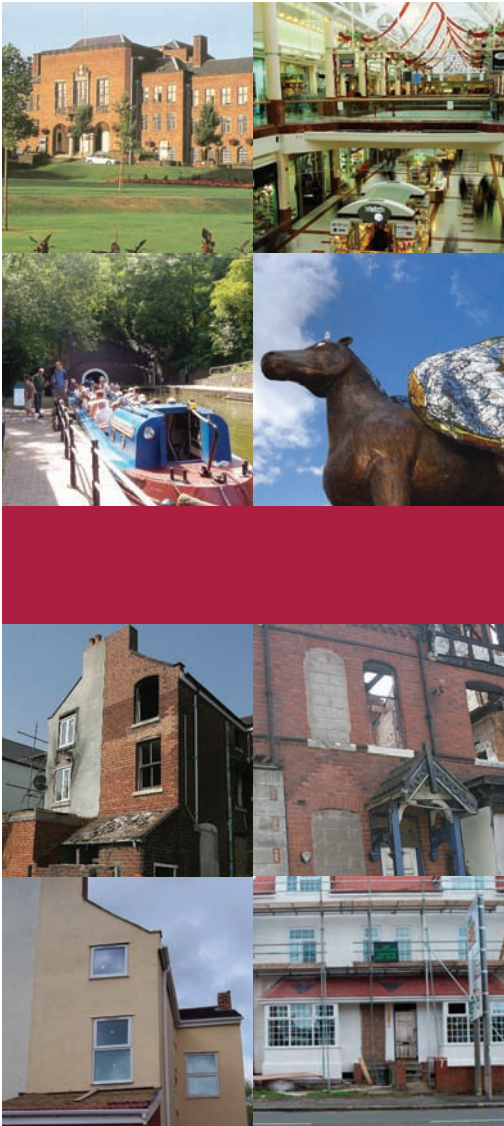
Dudley is looking to move away from an adhoc, reactive approach to a proactive, co-ordinated and strategic approach towards private sector empty homes.

This strategy sets out how we will implement a range of measures that will reduce the overall number of empty properties within the borough and to help bring long-term empty private sector properties back into beneficial use. To assist in achieving this we have identified the following six key objectives:



Key Objectives

1. To raise awareness of empty private sector homes across the borough and gain the co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issue from both within the council and externally from all involved partners.
2. To bring empty properties back into use to increase housing supply and improve neighbourhoods in the Dudley borough.
3. To promote the availability of advice and assistance to owners of empty property and those who are experiencing the problems of living near an empty property.
4. To minimise the number of empty properties becoming long-term empty (over 6 months) by identifying them and working with owners at an early stage.
5. To obtain clear and accurate information on empty private sector homes in each area in order to establish priorities.
6. To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation for the use of the most appropriate tools and action for Dudley Council.



4. The national, regional and local picture

The national picture

Empty homes have become an important national issue over the last few years, with more pressure on local authorities to develop effective strategies for tackling this problem. The government has produced a range of guidance and has introduced legislation designed to help councils set and achieve challenging targets on this issue. There were 672,924 empty homes across England at 1st April 2007 – 3.02% of the national housing stock (Communities and Local Government). The majority – 87% - were privately owned. A total of 279,281 (41%) had been empty for more than six months.

National policy

The Urban Task Force looked at the causes of urban decline and recommended measures to encourage people back into urban areas. Nationally, this was further confirmed as a duty for local government under section 7 of the Local Government Act 2003. Detailed below are some of the recommendations from the various national policy documents concerned with this issue:

- Making empty property strategies a statutory duty for local authorities. Local authorities are currently expected to have an empty property strategy.
- 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 (April 2004).
- Enabling local authorities to divulge information on empty properties.
- Making compulsory purchase orders easier to follow by streamlining the procedures.
- Capital allowance for creating flats over shops for renting was introduced in 2001 budget.

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 Section 7 of the Local Government Act 2003 to maintain and enhance the health of the housing market across all housing tenures.



The regional picture

There were 36,357, empty homes across the West Midlands metropolitan authorities at 1st April 2007 (source: Communities and Local Government). 2,571 were owned by social housing providers and 30,739 were privately owned. A total of 16,143 private sector homes had been empty for longer than six months. Within the metropolitan areas the highest percentage of private sector homes can be found in Wolverhampton (5.0%) and Walsall (4.5%).

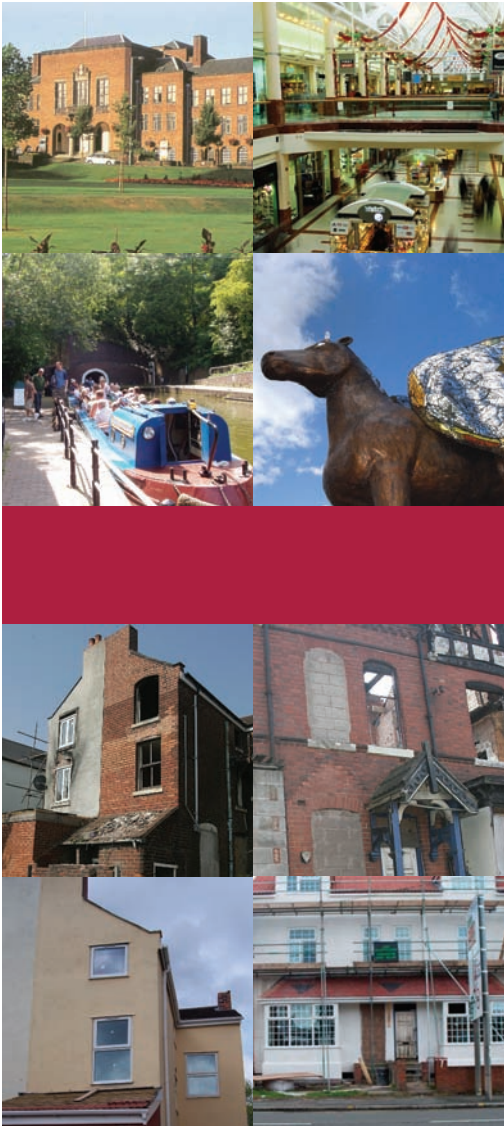
Local authority	Total empty homes	Empty homes as a % of stock *	Local authority owned **	Housing association ***	Other public body	Private Landlord / owner	Private homes empty more than 6 mths
Birmingham	11,079	2.7%	1.7%	0.9%	39	9528	6370
Coventry	4,225	3.3%	9.6%	3.1%	5	3589	2423
Dudley	3,757	2.9%	1.8%	2.3%	39	3190	1624
Sandwell	4,312	3.4%	0.8%	1.9%	0	3972	1584
Solihull	2,872	3.3%	2.3%	0.3%	12	2592	731
Walsall	4,918	4.5%	0%	6%	0	3233	1748
Wolverhampton	5,194	5.0%	1.9%	1.5%	4	4635	1663
Total	36,357	3.3%	1.6%	2.9%	99	30,739	16,143

Source: West Midlands Regional Housing Investment Programme (HIP) data 1.4.07 (supplied by the Communities and Local Government)

* - Percentage calculation of private sector stock (not total number of empty properties)

** - Percentage calculation of local authority stock (not total number of empty properties)

*** - Percentage calculation of Housing Association stock (not total number of empty properties)



Regional policy

The sustainable communities plan launched in 2003 sets out a long-term programme for delivering sustainable communities in urban and rural areas. The plan emphasises the importance of brownfield land and refers to making better use of existing housing stock especially empty properties.

It also introduced a new regional approach to housing policy. Regional housing boards were set up including the West Midlands Regional Housing Board. It has responsibility for the preparation of the regional housing strategy, which was launched in 2005. This strategy is the basis for informing ministers on strategic housing investment policies within the region, with the aim of making housing policy more localised and therefore more relevant and specific to an area's needs.

The regional housing strategy should also contribute to meeting the aims of the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, which is:

- To deliver economic prosperity, safe communities, high quality schools, decent housing, improved physical environment and better health to the poorest parts of the country.
- To narrow the gap between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. This is of particular importance for the West Midlands, which has seven major urban areas including Dudley in receipt of neighbourhood renewal funding and 69 wards (9% of the total) fall within the 10% most deprived wards in the country.
- Housing Strategies at both local and regional levels must also complement the Community Strategies that have been developed by Local Strategic Partnerships.

Dudley council is a member of the West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group which meets regularly to discuss and work together, sharing information and best practice to tackle empty properties across the region.



The local picture

There were a total of 3,757 empty homes in Dudley at 1st April 2007, 3,190 (3%) of the boroughs private sector were owned by the local authority and 438 (1.9%) of the council stock were owned by the local authority. A total of 1,624 (1.6%) empty private sector properties had been vacant for more than six months.

As of 2007, Dudley has the second lowest percentage of empty properties at 2.8% and the second lowest number of properties empty for more than 6 months in the West Midlands metropolitan area (see table on page 8 for more information).

A total of 91 private sector vacant dwellings were returned to occupation or demolished during 2007/8 as a direct result of action by the authority. This figure is in the top quartile of the All England (Source Audit Commission 2007/8).



5. Dudley's Approach to Empty Homes

Dudley now has a dedicated Empty Homes Officer post within the private sector housing division that links into the private sector housing renewal policy. The post works closely with colleagues from other directorates particularly:

- Private sector housing (Environmental Health Officers) – for enforcement issues and administration of the empty homes grant assistance.
- Housing Strategy Development Manager – linking to Housing Association partners and the associated funding that they can attract.
- Council tax – identifying properties and owners details.
- Legal Services Team – initiating legal proceedings.
- Economic regeneration – dangerous structures and linking in with regeneration of particular areas of the Borough.
- Planning and conservation – information sharing and enforcement issues.
- Housing management – properties receiving empty homes grant assistance may be let through this team.



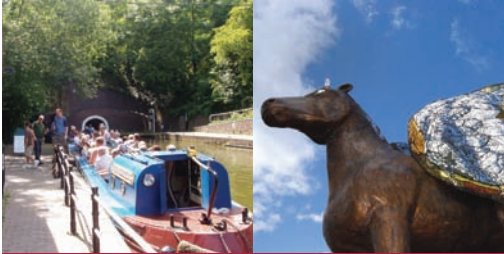
Dealing with empty properties is a complex process and can involve many people and a substantial amount of officer time. New ways of working are always being explored to achieve the council's aims – providing more housing and improving our neighbourhoods. What often surprises people is that there are so many empty homes in the borough.

Private sector housing generally follows up on properties that have been empty for more than six months, recording their details on the Empty Property Database and contacting the owners.

The most recent national figures – taken from the Housing Investment Programme returns collected by Communities and Local Government – show 1624 private sector empty properties (1.6% of the Dudley borough stock) had been vacant for more than six months in Dudley on 1st April 2007 with 438 (1.9%) of public sector properties showing vacant for the same period.

At the same time as homes are standing empty, there is real housing need in Dudley. There are in the region of 5,145 people on the housing waiting list including families accepted as homeless by the council of which there were 256 in 2007. There are also people looking to move 'up' the property ladder, either through renting or buying. The 2005 Housing Needs survey identified an annual shortfall of over 549 units of affordable accommodation in the borough and potentially 14,000 people whose current accommodation does not meet their needs, mainly in the private sector.

Bringing empty homes or abandoned office space back into use increases housing supply and improves neighbourhoods. Research consistently shows that empty and run down properties attract anti-social behaviour and a shabby empty property next door can reduce the value of neighbouring property.



Our Approach to empties follows three simple steps:

- 1. Identify:** Identify empty properties for action and assess their condition. Deal with any immediate issues (boarding up, nuisances, etc) and determine the length of time empty. Establish ownership, make contact and decide further action.
- 2. Encourage:** Work with the owner offering advice and assistance, including funding options, with the intention of bringing the property back into use through voluntary action on the owner's part.
- 3. Enforce:** Where all other negotiation has failed we will seek to take the appropriate enforcement action to ensure the property is in a habitable condition and is brought back into use.

Identify

The first step is identifying where the property is and who owns it. This is not always as easy as it seems: a rundown property may appear empty but is someone's home and is occupied, whereas a tidy house with curtains up may have been empty for years. The most useful way of gathering information about empty properties is through council tax records. Permission to use this information was introduced in the Local Government Act 2003 which allowed local authorities, for the first time, to use council tax information for:

'...identifying vacant dwellings and taking steps to bring vacant dwellings back into use.'

Members of the public frequently report individual properties that they become aware of. They usually provide valuable information and help build up a detailed picture of the situation in the Dudley Borough. In addition to council tax records, we also liaise with environmental health, planning, building control and the structures team within DUE among others, talk to neighbours, carry out land registry searches and check with the probate office.

We have been successful in tracing people as far away as New Zealand and California. Once the owner is identified we will contact them and work with them in bringing the property back into use.



Encourage

Whatever the situation the Empty Homes Development Officer will contact the owner, entering into discussion where possible and outline the options for their empty property by providing information that may assist them in deciding what to do. The options for the owners are to rent the property out, sell the property, or to live in it themselves. How quickly they are able to do any of these will generally depend on the condition of the property. We will advise and pass on relevant information.

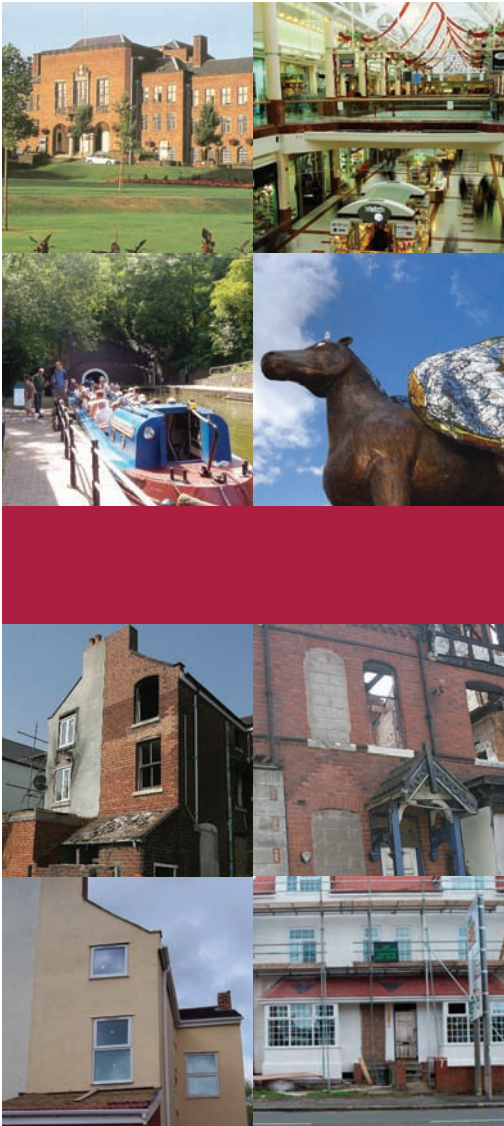
Where empty homes require work to meet the decent homes standard, empty property grants are made available. If owners plan to rent out the property, advice is available on how to become a landlord, including appropriate tenancy agreements, rent setting, repairing obligations or signposting to managing agents. Landlords are encouraged to join our property accreditation scheme.

Enforce

Enforcement action will be considered where the property has been empty for at least one year and where it is considered that the property is unlikely to be brought back into use unless such action is taken. This will be taken forward by the Empty Homes Development Officer with input from other divisions as needed.

Enforcement action through the Empty Homes Strategy is designed to ensure re-occupation and/or refurbishment of an empty property. This could be on top of other action taken for issues like rubbish, vermin, insecure premises, nuisance, or action taken through dangerous structures and other directorates. Enforcement action will be considered against individual properties, group properties (i.e. those with more than one unit of accommodation in them) and vacant land sites.

The Empty Homes Development Officer will follow the private sector housing enforcement policy when deciding the most appropriate form of enforcement action to take.



Enforcement options are:

Empty dwelling management orders

This is a new enforcement tool introduced as part of the Housing Act 2004. It is also the first piece of legislation to specifically target empty homes. It 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. Management costs and any refurbishment costs can be reclaimed from the rental income with any balance going to the owner.

Enforced sales

Carried out under s.103 of the Law and Property Act 1925, this act of parliament enables local authorities to force the sale of a property with a local land charge registered against it. It is a follow-on step from works in default action by the local authority (where the local authority has paid for works to be done in lieu of the owner who is unwilling to act or is untraceable).

If the owner fails to repay the debt, the council may be able to enforce the sale by order of a court. The council does not acquire the property, it is sold to a third party.

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 (CPO)

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 in excess of a year to complete.



Voluntary acquisition

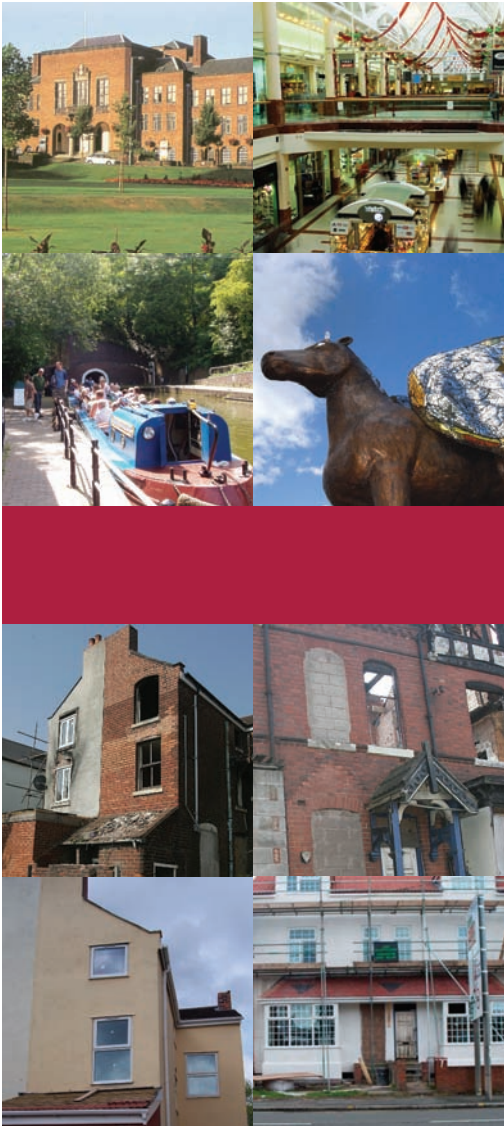
As part of an approach to managing decline, the authority may purchase properties under powers contained in section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by section 99 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) in designated renewal areas and maybe useful pre CPO.

Building Act 1984

Provides powers to tackle 'dangerous and ruinous' structures. Sections: 76-79.

Town and Country and Planning Act 1990

Section 215 notices can be served on owners for land or buildings where they affect the amenity of an area.



6. Dudley's Strategy

Dudley Council published its first Empty Homes Strategy in September 2003. This strategy aims to build on the broad objectives contained therein that assisted the authority in establishing a baseline position on the private sector empty properties across the borough.

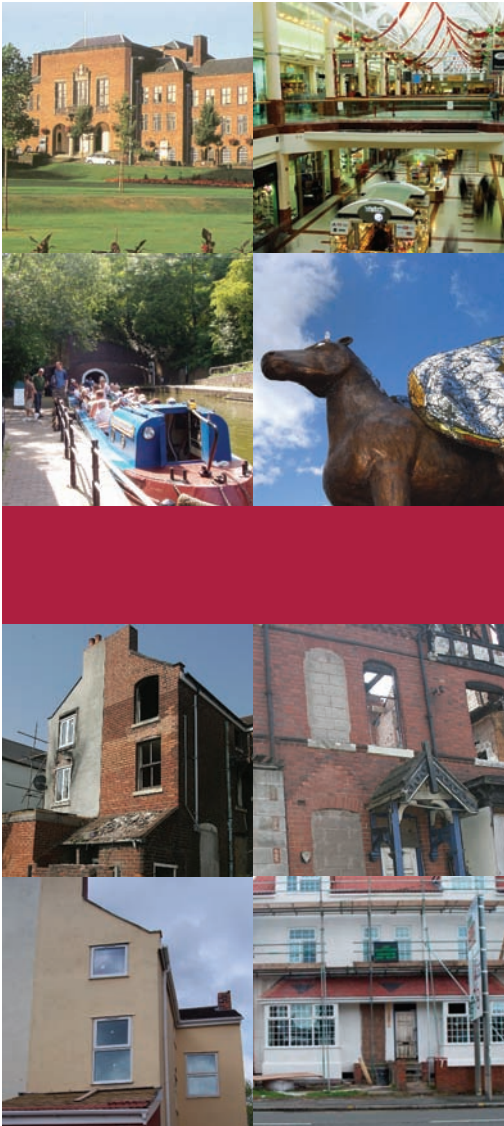
Since 2003 a number of actions have been taken to move the strategy forward including:

- Analysis of empty property data supplied by council tax looking at the geographical distribution and discount reasons.
- Completion of a process benchmarking survey in conjunction with West Midlands Empty Property Forum.
- Developing our relationship with legal services in the use of tools where enforcement action is the only solution.
- Working with the Landlord's Forum and residents to raise awareness of empty homes within the private sector.
- Reducing vacancy rates over the life of the strategy.
- Raising awareness of empty homes through our active role in the development of the void and derelict properties group; and our website, 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.
- Questionnaires were sent out to the owners of all empty properties to investigate the reason why properties have become empty and offering advice to help them to be brought back into use.

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 61 in 2006/7 and 91 in 2007/8.

Dudley has developed a housing assistance scheme (HAS) that offers major repair and improvement assistance to owners of empty properties in need of:

- Essential repair or improvement to meet the decent homes standard, and
- The provision of means of escape in the case of fire or other fire precautions.



The scheme provides a 50% grant towards the costs of the works required, up to a set limit.

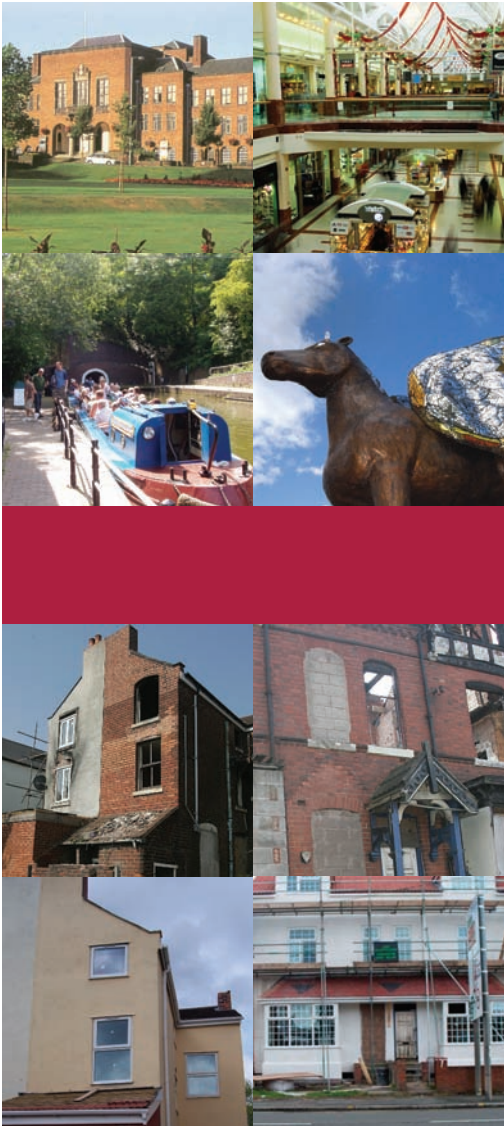
The Council reserves the right to nominate tenants when the property is let. Owners must repay the grant if they sell or dispose of the property within five years of receiving the grant. The grant is available for properties that have been empty for more than twelve months.

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

Nine properties have been boarded up in an emergency over the past two years and they are continually monitored. A key aim is to ensure that if a problem empty home is being used illegally or is a cause of danger, prompt action is taken to board it up, make the residence safe and monitor it.

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

The starting point of our Empty Homes Strategy has always been to work with property owners where possible. Each empty property is different and there are many reasons why they become empty. These reasons can be sensitive and it is important to be understanding of all different situations. However, it is also important to be committed to the principles of our strategy and recognise that empty properties are a blight on a neighbourhood and a wasted resource. Owners should know that while we would prefer to work with them, non-action is not an option. By owning a property they have a responsibility for it and must act accordingly.



7. Delivery of the six key aims and objectives of the strategy

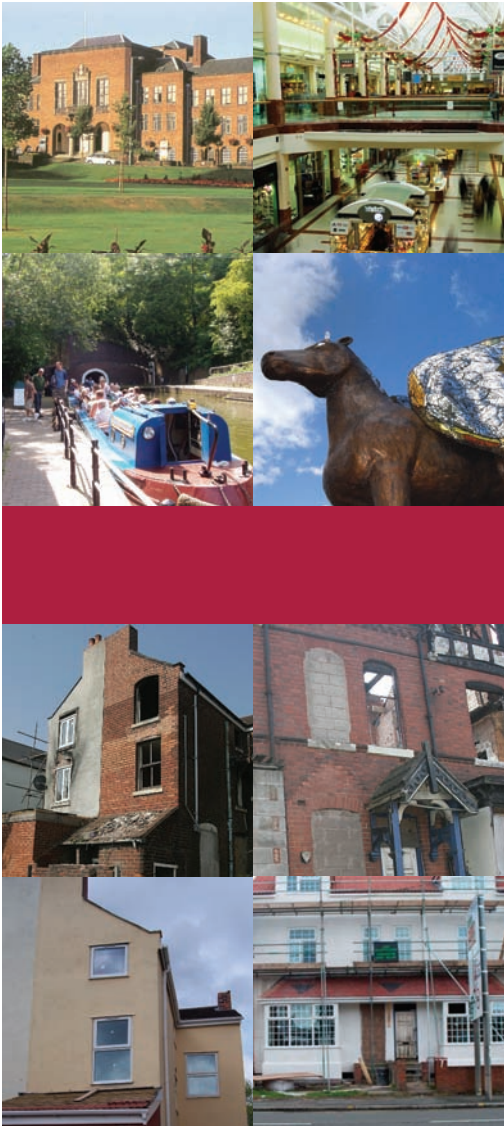
Objective 1: To raise awareness of empty private sector homes across the borough and gain the co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issue from both within the council and externally from all involved partners

To raise the profile of empty property issues it is necessary to adopt a corporate approach. To ensure the effective operation of the strategy and joined up working across the council we intend to set up a Corporate Empty Property Group and to regularly liaise with each service area whose work impacts on the empty property issues.

These include revenues and benefits, environmental services, DUE, law and property, planning, economic regeneration, housing strategy, marketing and communications and links with other local authorities and national bodies.

The Void and Derelict Property Group will be further developed to gain the support of external partners in tackling empty properties whilst also contributing to achieving their targets to reduce the number of arson attacks across the region. This group will also feed into the Corporate Empty Property Group, chaired at a senior level by a member of the Directorate of Adult and Community and Housing Services Departmental Management Team.

The promotion of work on empty homes will continue through provision of information on the council's intranet and website.



Objective 2: To bring empty properties back into use to increase housing supply and improve neighbourhoods

An Empty Homes Development Officer will be appointed to deliver the objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy and implement the strategy action plan.

Detailed analysis will be undertaken of council tax data to identify numbers of empty properties, length of vacancy, type of owner in order that action may be targeted where demand for housing is highest and can be targeted to the most urgent cases.

Enforcement measures for bringing empty properties back will be implemented.

For the period 2008/09 – 2010/11, the following targets have been set to return into occupation or demolish private sector vacant dwellings as a direct result of action by the authority.

2008/09

95 properties

2009/10

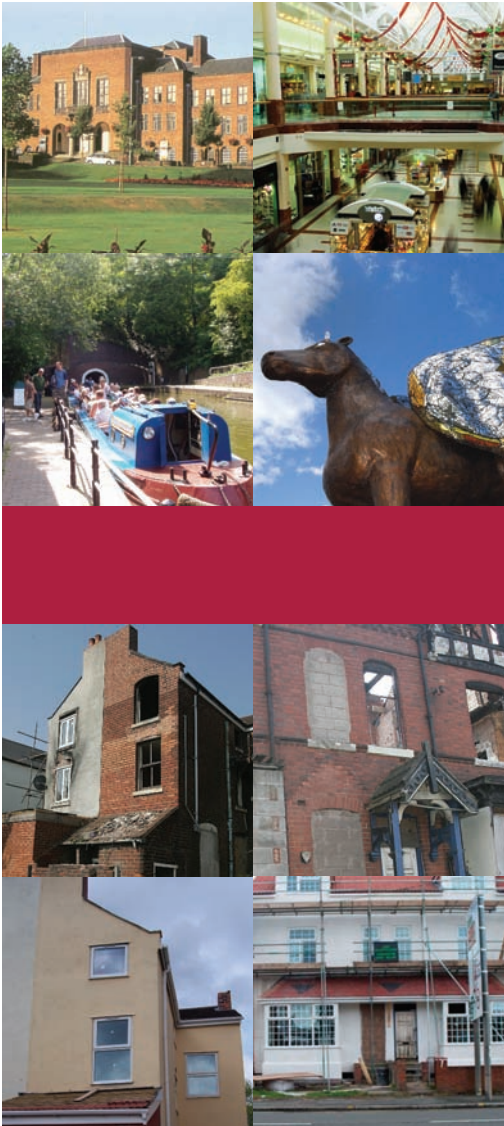
100 properties

2010/11

105 properties

The targets have been set based on All England top quartile achievement of 91 for 2007/08.

Further work will be carried out to identify space above shops and non-residential properties suitable for conversion. In addition, work will be undertaken with partners to identify and bring back into use long term empty properties owned by registered social landlords and the local authority.



Objective 3: To promote the availability of advice / assistance through an empty homes information pack.

An empty homes information pack will be developed that will contain information on:

- The housing assistance scheme – the council’s grant scheme.
- Advice on private letting
- Details of direct let, landlord accreditation or rent guarantee/deposit schemes
- Advice on ways of reporting an empty property and contact details

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.

Information and literature will be produced and widely distributed to all interested parties.

The awareness of empty homes will continue to be raised through the on-going development of the council’s website which enables the community and other stakeholders to be able to find out more about how Dudley Council can assist them and to report empty property.

Empty homes information on the council’s website will be regularly updated to encourage take up of available advice and assistance.

Local estate agents will be targeted to provide as wide a number of outlets for information on assistance available as possible.



Objective 4: To minimise the number of empty properties becoming long-term empty (over 6 months) by identification and working with owners at an early stage

Council tax will be liased to; Further joint working with the revenue division will continue to explore:

- Data can be provided to show changes in vacancy periods, i.e. 6-12 months 12-18 months
- The potential for reviewing policy on council tax discount can be explored.

Any successes will be actively publicised so that the profile of empty properties is maintained.

Objective 5: To obtain clear and accurate information on empty homes in each area and to establish priorities

The need to identify as many empty properties as possible to develop a clear picture of empty homes in the borough has been recognised. Council tax data is analysed on an annual basis to identify all residences that are empty and those empty for more than six months.

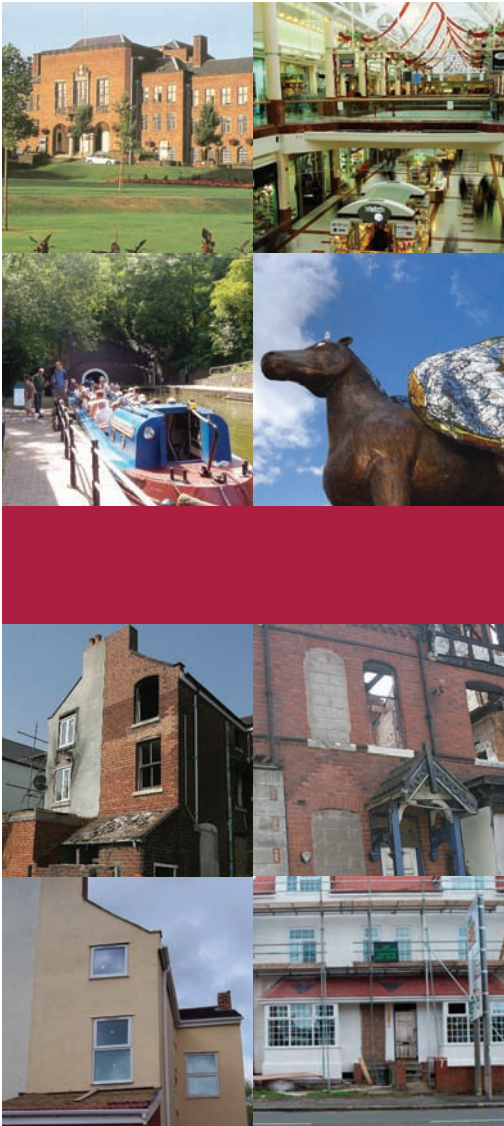
If these properties have a commercial link this is also identified (e.g. flats over shops etc.). The possibility of supplying data on a more regular basis to ensure that the information is kept up to date is being explored with the Revenues Division.

Working in partnership with others to identify potential empty properties will be explored, including local authority colleagues, other organisations (e.g. the emergency services, registered social landlords and the local community at large).

The website will also be available for people to report empty properties.

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

The possibility of mapping all empty properties onto the GIS system will be explored so that potential hot spots can be mapped to help prioritise resources effectively.



Objective 6: To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment, and prioritisation of empty homes and any enforcement action to be taken.

Processes and service standards will be developed to deal with the initial notification of an empty property – establishing ownership, visiting and contacting owners.

Processes to enable the assessment of appropriate packages of support will be developed. This may be advice or financial assistance. The 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 will take account of the reasons. The importance of bringing all empty properties back into use is recognised, however action must be prioritised as resources are limited. While performance is assessed against the number of empty homes brought back into use, there is also a responsibility to address properties in serious disrepair. This will require the development of processes to determine the importance and urgency of action.

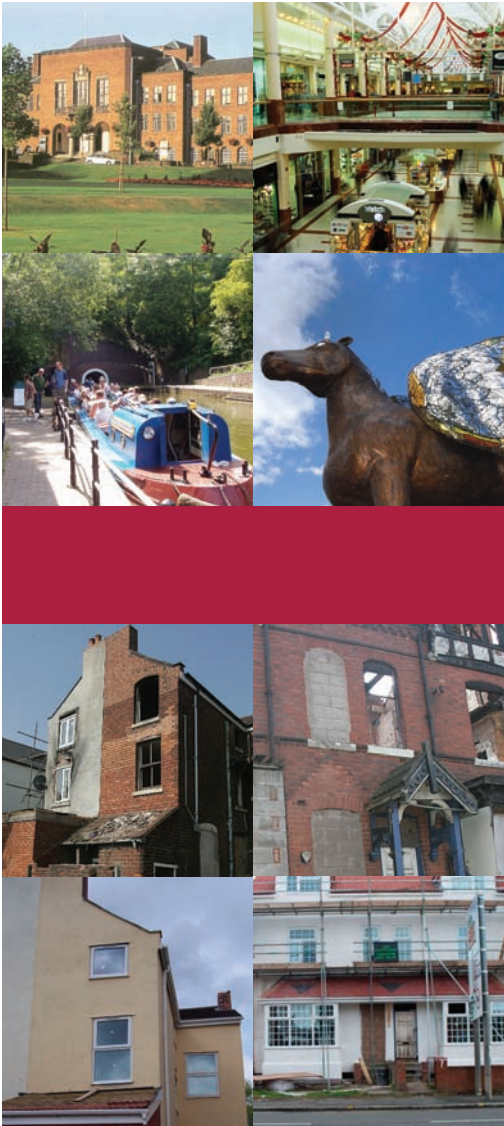
This prioritisation system will include:

- Length of time the property has been empty?
- Is there is a history of complaints or notices served?
- Impact of regeneration of an area.

This will be informed by an 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, and vandalism. Processes for enforcement action will be developed for a wide range of circumstances likely to be encountered. These will focus on properties that are causing a nuisance to the public by their appearance and condition.

A Corporate Empty Property Working Group will be established, chaired by a senior member of the Council's Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services Departmental Management Team and will include representatives from the Directorates of the Urban Environment, Law and Property. and Finance Directorate. Its membership and work with other directorates may be expanded while developing policies and processes.



8. Strategic links: Linking local, regional and national priorities

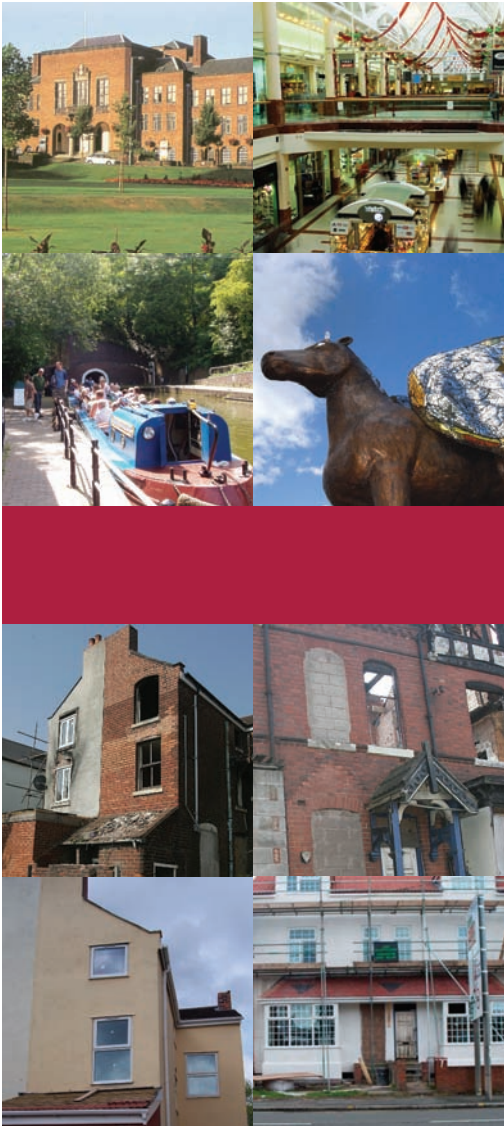
The local authority's strategic housing role is at the heart of achieving the social, economic and environmental objectives that shape a community. It is made up of the strategic decisions and activities associated with effective planning and delivery, in order to meet the housing needs of all residents across all tenures. Strong performance in this role will support effective place shaping and help ensure the delivery of the wider sustainable community.

When looking at the need to increase housing supply as part of our strategic housing role, it is important that we reduce the number of homes that are left empty for long periods of time.

The government expects us to do more to bring long-term empty properties back into use and are exploring a range of measures including the new housing and planning delivery grant to facilitate this. We need to make the best use of what already exists as well as securing new supply.

The following key national, regional and local documents provide important strategic direction to assist us and our partners to focus delivery on priority programmes:

- **The Audit Commission Key Line of Enquiry (KLOE) - 9** identifies bringing empty homes back into use as a clear strategic priority for authorities and that clear effective policies on this issue contributes to reducing the number of wasted homes in areas.
- **The regional housing strategy's priority** - 'To deliver economic prosperity, safe communities, high quality schools, decent housing, improved physical environment and better health to the poorest parts of the country'
- **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 when all members of the community are happy and content and where there is decent housing, and a clean and safe environment which is also vibrant and harmonious.



The Dudley Borough Challenge also identifies a series of key priorities, which this 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 in council tax revenues and investment in 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 an 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.

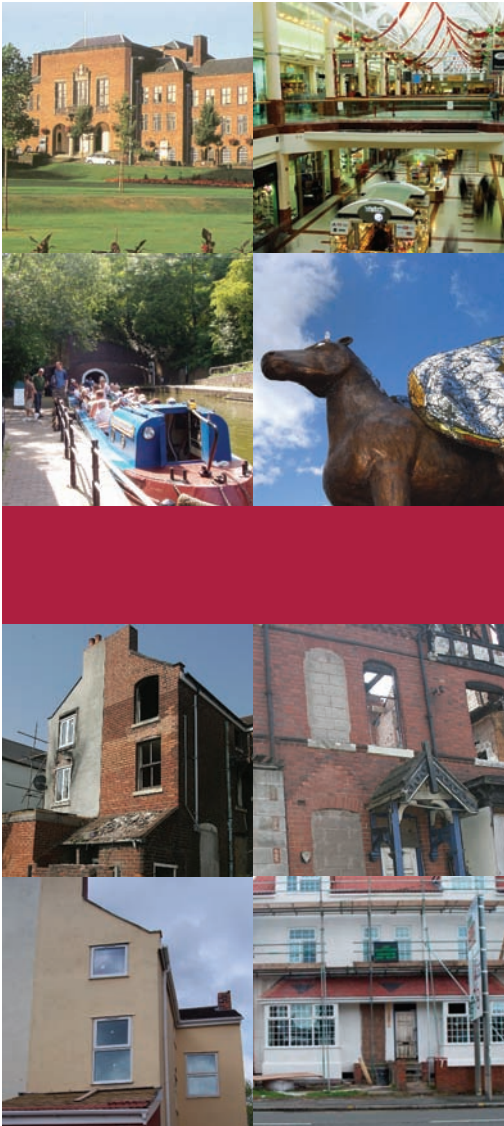
The housing strategy

‘Increasing the number of affordable homes and establishing pathways of choice to promote sustainable communities and balancing the local housing market’.

Community safety and crime reduction strategy

Six key priorities including ‘reduce the incidence of anti social behaviour in the borough and make people feel safe’.

All of the above documents can be accessed via www.dudley.gov.uk/council--democracy/plans-policies--strategies



9. Performance monitoring

Performance targets are set annually and monitored quarterly by the Corporate Performance Monitoring Group. Targets are normally set based on achieving top quartile of performing authorities in this area of work.

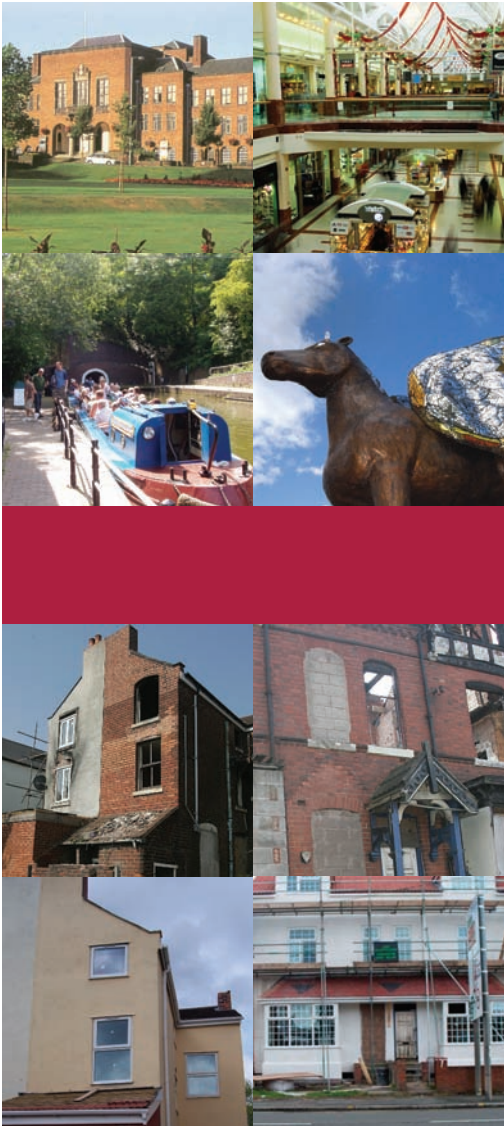
Achievement of outcomes against set targets are audited as a minimum internally but may also be subject to external scrutiny. Until April 2008, the council reported against three national indicators relating to empty homes. These were BVPI64 and CPA housing performance indicators H18 and H23. From April 2008 onwards, BVPI64 has been removed by government but Dudley has retained this as local indicator and will continue to report on the two national indicators H18 and H23.

- BVPI64** Empty Private Sector dwellings returned to use or demolished
- H18** Percentage of total private sector homes vacant for more than six months
- H23** Empty Private Sector dwellings returned to use or demolished as a % of total relevant empties

Dudley Council's performance targets:

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
BVP164	66	85	95	100	105
Outturn	61	91	***	***	***
H18	1.56%	1.43%	***	***	***
H23	1.84%	2.81%	***	***	***

*** Cannot be calculated until year end



10. Partnerships

We believe that, by working in partnership with other organisations, often far more can be achieved together than any of us would be able to deliver working alone. The council recognises that in order to achieve the aims of this strategy greater co-ordination of partners both internally and externally is required.

Strategic Housing Environment Partnership (SHEP)

SHEP has overall responsibility for delivering Dudley Borough's Community Plan and is also responsible for steering the direction of work on environmental sustainable development issues within the borough.

Property owners / landlords

Property owners are one of our main stakeholders with whom we need to work with 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 in their community. It is vital that residents 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.

Dudley Council Plus

In answering and responding to queries from the public.

Dudley Void and Derelict Properties Group

Directorates across the council will continue to work jointly with the West Midlands Arson Task Force and the police with the objective of reducing the number of arson and crime related incidences caused as a result of empty buildings throughout the borough.



Elected members

Elected members are involved in providing community leadership at both a local level (i.e. supporting residents who are experiencing the consequences of empty homes) and at a strategic level (in supporting and promoting our empty homes work).

Council Directorates

There are a number of directorates who will work to tackle the issues of empty homes:

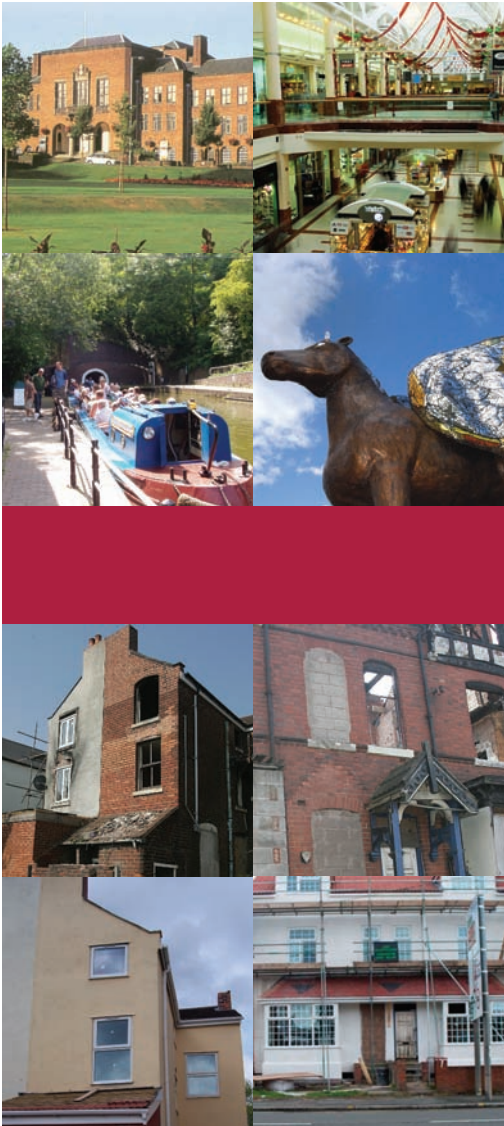
- Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing services - Private Sector Housing team in setting the strategic direction, formulating solutions and directly managing private sector empty properties
- Directorate of the Urban Environment - in investigating complaints, clearing rubbish from a property
- Directorate of Law and Property – in taking legal action
- Directorate of Finance (council tax) – in producing reports of empty properties

West Midlands Empty Homes Officers Forum

Dudley Council is a member of the West Midlands Empty Homes Officers Forum that meets regularly to share best practice and knowledge.

Registered social landlords

Work will continue with individual registered social landlords to bring empty homes back into use. The option of developing a private sector leasing scheme will be explored with registered social landlords.



11. Review and further information

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.

Further information

If you would like to know more about how the council is responding to empty properties, you can contact the Empty Homes Development Officer, Private Sector Housing on **01384 812632**. A range of advice notes and information leaflets are currently available and these can be accessed via the internet links detailed below:

Dudley Council's website:

www.dudley.gov.uk/housing/private-housing/empty-homes

Empty Homes Agency website:

www.emptyhomes.com

National Association of Empty Property Practitioners website:

www.naep.org.uk



12. Appendix 1 - Empty Homes Strategy action plan

Objective 1: To raise awareness of private sector empty homes across the borough and gain the co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issue from both within the council and externally from all involved partners

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	To raise awareness amongst other directorates of empty homes through the development of a Corporate Empty Homes Working Group.	Group set up with agreed terms of reference	March 08	Ongoing	Attendance at meetings Delivery of identified action plan resources	To raise awareness amongst other directorates of empty homes through the development of a Corporate Empty Homes Working Group.	Failure to develop consistent approach across the council and wider partnerships risks criticism from external assessors	Head of Service (PSH)
	To continue the promotion of empty homes work through our housing intranet site and council website	Information on advice and assistance available to respond to empty private sector properties	Jan 08	Ongoing	Effective feedback requested and monitored Number of hits to site pages Number of e-mails received from site	Within Existing Resources	As above	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer
	To further develop the work of the Void and Derelict Property Group to gain support of external partners in tackling empty properties and contributing to their targets	Promote Empty Homes Strategy and work with Arson Task Forces in achieving the objectives of reducing the number of arson attacks within the borough	Oct 08	Ongoing	Terms of Reference in relation to delivery of strategy objectives	Within existing resources	Lack of awareness of empty homes strategy on the part of our partners limits the ability to deliver strategy objectives	
	To produce a report each year in the councils internal staff publications	Increased awareness of the objectives of the empty property strategy across the council	Sept 08	March 2011	Report included within minimum of 1 edition	Marcomms	Cancellation of group may impact the delivery of the strategy objectives	Strategy Manager/Head of Service
	To achieve 3 reports on the delivery of the strategy in local press	Continued awareness of the ongoing work to tackle empties in the private sector	Sept 08	2011		Marcomms/Private Sector existing resources		Strategy Manager /Empty Homes Development Officer/ Marcomms



Objective 2: To bring empty properties back into use and to increase housing supply

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	Establish Empty Homes Development Officer Post	Implementation of strategy/action plan objectives	March 08	May 08	Achieve annually set performance targets 08/09 - 95 09/10 - 100 10/11 - 105	Within existing resources		Strategy Manager/Head of Service
	To implement specific enforcement measures for bringing empty properties back into use where owners are unwilling to do so	Enforcement Procedure operational/monitoring system in place to track cases with legal services	Jun 08	Sep 08	CPO, EDMO, Enforced Sale, Building Act 1984, s.29 LG& Mis Provision Act 1983, EPA 1990		Acting on out of date data wastes resources and can contribute to outside perception of an inefficient directorate	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer
	Analysis of council tax data identifying numbers of empty properties, length of vacancy, type of owner, location.	A clearer picture of empty homes in the borough	April 08	Ongoing	Effective targeting of resources and informing policy development/review in relation to Housing Assistance Scheme	Within existing resources	Failure to accurate report on HSSA returns and flawed target setting	Strategy Manager/Performance Management Officer
	Identify Space above shops and non residential properties suitable for conversion.	Use of Brownfield Sites, Increase in affordable rented accommodation	Jan 09	March 2011	Set target for number to be achieved yearly	DACHS/DUE	Failure to develop this initiative could increase pressure on land planning system	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer
	To identify all long term RSL & publicly owned empty dwellings within the borough to work with partners to bring into use	Utilising existing available accommodation to respond to housing demand	April 08	Ongoing	Analysis of C.Tax Data	Within existing resources		



Objective 3: To promote the availability of advice and assistance available to owners of empty private sector properties

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	To develop an Empty Homes Information Pack to promote the availability of help / assistance.	Raised awareness amongst owners and other partners of how the Council can assist them in bringing empty properties back into use.	Jan 08	March 08	Pack produced and in use	Within existing resources	Lack of awareness of advice and assistance available will prevent the delivery of strategy objectives	
	Target local estate agents to provide as wide a number of outlets for information on support as possible	As above	July 08	Sept 08				
	Produce information and literature on the availability of assistance and ensure it is distributed widely i.e. in C. Tax demands issues		Sept 08	Ongoing	Increased number of enquiries received for HAS packs			

Objective 4: To minimise the number of empty properties becoming long-term through early identification/intervention

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	Explore whether C.Tax data can be provided to show changes in vacancy periods i.e. 6-12 months 12-18mths etc.	Reduction in those empty for longer than 2 years	April 08	Ongoing	Set baseline figure of long-term empties	Within existing resources	Failure to minimise the number of long-term difficult empties may increase the no where legal intervention is required	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer
	Explore the potential for reviewing the policy on council tax discount with Finance	Policy on council tax discount reviewed and incentive to leave empty is removed.	April 08	Ongoing	Response to proposal from Revenues Division	Within existing resources	Less Revenue collected by LA	Strategy Manager (PSH)





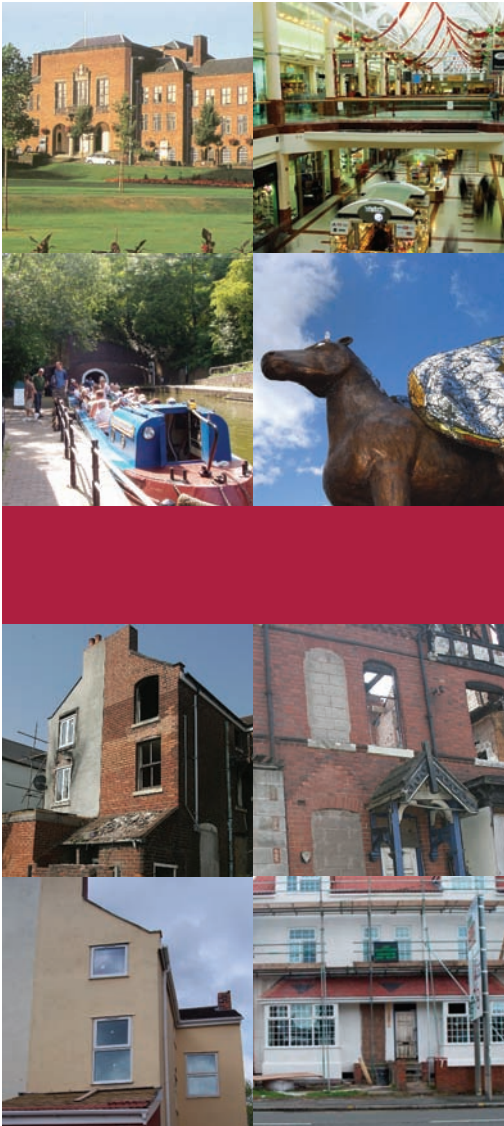
Objective 5: To Obtain clear and accurate information on empty private sector homes in each area in order to establish priorities

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	To establish with Revenues, the supply of Council Tax data on a regular basis.	Records updated more regularly enabling better targeted mail shots to owners	April 08	Ongoing	Empty Homes Information Pack produced	Within existing resources		Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer/Marcomms
	To exploit the use of mapping empty properties onto the GIS system	The ability to map potential hot spots and direct resources effectively	June 08	Jan 09	GIS able to perform mapping function	Within existing resources	Failure to identify hot spots may lead to resources being used ineffectively	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer

Objective 6: To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation for the use of the most appropriate tools and action for Dudley MBC

Ref	Action	Outcome	Timescales		Performance Measure	Resource (include partners)	Business Risk	Accountable Officer
			Start	Finish				
	To develop processes and service standards to manage the identification, assessment and prioritisation of empty homes for enforcement action	To have clear transparent processes to enable empty properties to be effectively managed	April 08	March 09	Process Operational	Within existing resources	Lack of formal processes may result in poor performance and the issue of long-term empties not being addressed	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer
	To develop robust monitoring processes to enable our performance to be accurately monitored across	Robust monitoring processes operational	Aug 08	Jan 09	Process Operational	Within existing resources	Failure to have robust monitoring processes could lead to	Strategy Manager/Empty Homes Development Officer





13. Appendix 2 - Equality impact assessment 2007/08

This report constitutes an initial/partial equalities impact assessment carried out on the Empty Homes Strategy. It contains:

- The reasons for undertaking the assessment
- A description of the aims and objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy
- Explains what the EIA involves
- Outline findings from the initial assessment
- Recommends future actions

Reasons for undertaking the equalities impact assessment

The equalities impact assessment is an important tool in helping us to improve our services. It is a systematic and thorough approach to assessing the effects that the council's policies and functions/services have, or are likely to have, on different groups or communities. This assessment helps us to implement our equality and diversity policy so that we provide services and employment opportunities that are fair and accessible to all members of the community.

The need to carry out EIAs is set out in the following disability, gender and race legislation:

- The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which places a duty on public authorities to promote race equality
- The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 which introduces a duty on public authorities to promote disability equality
- The Equality Act 2006 which includes a duty on public authorities to promote gender equality



Outline finding from the initial assessment

The methodology approach used to identify empty properties is through the analysis of council tax data.

Addresses are sorted into wards and length of time vacant and reason for being empty, giving priority to those long-term empty properties where the council have received complaints from residents or the emergency services.

The initial assessment has shown that the empty property strategy does not discriminate on the grounds of race, gender or disability. There was also no adverse impact on any particular groups and no concerns in terms of meeting the general duty on race equality.

Recommendations

In order to monitor the EIA in future, computerised management system (MVM) will be further developed to ensure all appropriate diversity data is captured and monitoring the outcomes of our enforcement actions and complaints received as a result of any formal action.

The policy is first and foremost aimed at bricks and mortar and is not person specific. The data used to identify empty properties does not show ethnic origin, gender or disability.

