



# **EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY**

Revised April 2006

## **CONTENTS**

### **PAGE NO**

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>1. BACKGROUND</b>  | <b>1.</b>  |
| <b>2. THE LOCAL PICTURE</b>   | <b>2.</b>  |
| <b>3. AIM</b>   | <b>4.</b>  |
| <b>4. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES</b>  | <b>5.</b>  |
| <b>5. ACHIEVING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES</b>  | <b>6.</b>  |
| <b>6. THE LEAD OFFICER ROLE IN THE DELIVERY<br/>OF THE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY</b> | <b>10.</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX A - PERFORMANCE AND ACTION PLAN</b>                                 | <b>11.</b> |

## 1. **BACKGROUND**

Government statistics indicate that, as at April 2002, there were 772,000 empty properties in England and the majority of these are in areas of housing need. 3.7% of all private homes in England are empty. Empty homes are a wasted resource that could be utilised to alleviate homelessness, address housing needs and remove or reduce the risk of blight to adjacent properties within East Cambridgeshire.

Empty homes are now considered to be an important strategic issue nationally, as emphasised by the Urban White Paper, which contains many of the ideas proposed by Planning Policy Guidance note 3 and the findings of the Urban Taskforce in 'Towards an Urban Renaissance'.

The government has set targets for Councils to address the problem of empty properties. These include:

- A national target of reducing the percentage of empty properties to 3%.
- A national target that by 2008, 60% of new housing should be built on brownfield land or by conversion of existing buildings.
- A specific empty homes Best Value Performance Indicator was introduced in April 2000/01 requiring the Council to record the proportion of vacant private sector dwellings, that are returned into occupation during each financial year, as a result of action by the local authority.

The Empty Homes Strategy is an integral part of East Cambridgeshire Council's Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy. It also links to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. The Strategy involves working with other appropriate agencies, demonstrates joined-up thinking and the Council's commitment to set objectives to improve this problem. The Council is committed to assist owners turn empty houses into assets and much needed homes within the district.

## 2. **THE LOCAL PICTURE**

The National Empty Homes Agency Survey indicated that Cambridgeshire had 8,543 empty properties in 2002.

The House Condition Survey carried out by East Cambridgeshire District Council in 2002 indicated that 820 (3%) of dwellings were estimated to be vacant.

**Table - Vacant dwellings by reason for vacancy**

| <b>Vacant Status</b>                         | <b>East Cambridgeshire<br/>2002</b> |             |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Vacant: awaiting sale</b>                 | 50                                  | 6%          |
| <b>Vacant being modernised</b>               | 140                                 | 17%         |
| <b>Newly vacant</b>                          | 240                                 | 29%         |
| <b>Mid-term vacant (1-6 months)</b>          | 220                                 | 28%         |
| <b>Long term vacant (more than 6 months)</b> | 140                                 | 17%         |
| <b>Unlicensed occupation*</b>                | 30                                  | 4%          |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>820</b>                          | <b>100%</b> |

*\*Unlicensed occupation includes groups such as squatters*

Vacant dwellings in the first three categories are of less concern, as they are associated with periodic changes in occupancy, which are part of normal turnover in the housing stock. Of greater importance are dwellings thought to have been vacant for more than 6 months.

The results of the long term vacant (17%) are higher than the national position (15%) from the 1991 English House Condition Survey (EHS), although the sample used within the East Cambridgeshire Survey is so small this cannot be regarded as a significant finding. This also assumes that all empty properties have been identified.

Although there is a small proportion of empty long-term properties (approximately 140 out of 820 in this survey or 17%) some owners do not put these back into use and do not recognise that they are a potential asset. Not only are they losing rental income, but owners usually have to pay partial or full Council Tax. The Government are also investigating initiatives to ensure full Council Tax has to be paid on all empty homes in the future. This would result in these homes becoming an increased liability to the owners.

### **How does reducing numbers of empty properties help owners and the District in general?**

Bringing an empty home back into use offers owners considerable advantages. These include:

- 1) Capital, if the property is sold;
- 2) Income from rent;
- 3) Increased property value and
- 4) Reduced outgoings (i.e. Council Tax).

The various options included in the strategy all offer a number of different ways of providing help and support to property owners.

Bringing back a property 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.

### **Who will lead the strategy?**

The Principal Environmental Services Officer will be the lead officer for the Empty Property Strategy. This officer will play an important role to ensure this issue is fed into the wider housing role of the Council and this Officer will oversee the implementation of the Strategy. Private Sector Housing Officers will be the first point of contact for property owners and will provide advice on the various options available to bring empty properties back into use. Private Sector Housing Officers will also raise public awareness of the problem. They will also provide advice and training on housing legislation and adopted Council standards.

### 3. **AIM**

The aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is to propose and implement action that will effectively address issues relating to long-term empty properties within East Cambridgeshire.

The demand for affordable and accessible housing far outstrips supply and the Council recognises that empty homes across all tenures must be dealt with effectively. The House Condition Survey of 2002 estimated that an additional 529 affordable homes were needed per annum, if all housing needs are to be met within the District for the next 5 years. The Empty Homes Strategy therefore, aims to provide a cross tenure approach to tackling empty homes and addressing housing needs, working in partnership and demonstrating joined-up thinking. This in turn will help to: -

- a) minimise Greenfield development;
- b) improve the existing built environment and reduce the current blight on adjacent properties;
- c) meet housing needs of the district;
- d) provide a strategic fit with other corporate objectives;
- e) provide good quality affordable housing and to ensure economic stability of the communities within the district.

#### **4. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

To achieve the overall aim of the Empty Homes Strategy, four distinct strategic objectives have been identified.

##### **i) To compile an empty homes database**

In order to assess and monitor the extent and nature of the private sector empty homes situation, it will be essential to set up and regularly update a comprehensive designed empty homes database.

##### **ii) To identify ways by which empty homes can be brought back into use**

In order to tackle the problem of empty homes, it will be essential to implement a range of schemes and the use of Environmental Health powers to deal with properties that are considered unfit or in disrepair.

##### **iii) To raise awareness of empty homes issues**

In order to raise the profile of empty homes throughout the District, it will be essential to promote the issue both internally within the Council and externally through the general public and other parties involved in the property sector.

##### **iv) To encourage owners of empty homes, through a range of good incentives to make their properties available to rent**

In order to ensure that properties are made available for renting to people in greatest housing need, it will be essential to promote schemes to encourage owners to rent these properties. This can be done through partnership, working with local Housing Associations, Letting and Managing Agents, who have the relevant expertise and experience in working with private landlords. It is proposed to continue to make some form of financial assistance available for renovation and conversion of empty properties to provide accommodation to those in greatest housing need. This will support the Housing Strategy, The Homelessness Strategy and demonstrate the Council's commitment to working in partnership with private landlords.

## **5. ACHIEVING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

### **A. Raising Awareness of Empty Homes Issues**

#### **Within the Council**

In order to raise the issue of private sector empty homes, a corporate and join-up approach will be adopted. To effectively implement the strategy, an appropriate officer from each relevant service will be identified for liaison purposes. Details will be provided on the intranet and internal newsletter to request information from within the Council's own services regarding empty homes.

#### **Planning**

Local planners can readily identify residential buildings which are empty but which may be blighted by redevelopment or transport proposals. Planners may also have insight into buildings sought by parties and are well placed to provide Environmental Services with relevant information.

#### **Council Tax**

Officers involved in providing Council Tax information to owners of empty homes can invite such owners to approach the Environmental Services Officer to discuss the options available to return properties to occupation.

Information of financial assistance will be sent to owners of empty properties by the most appropriate methods, including with Council tax demands.

The Government has announced their intention to allow Local Authorities to increase second homes Council Tax from 50% to 90%. This represents an additional source of funds that can, if introduced, be used for the development of affordable housing and may make renovation/demolition a more attractive proposal for owners.

#### **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.

#### **Environmental Health**

Environmental Services Officers are well placed to identify empty private sector homes and those properties, which are likely to become vacant because of disrepair. Environmental Services 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.



A further in-house survey will be carried out targeted solely at empty properties within the district to investigate the reasons for being left empty, the average cost of works required to bring them back into habitation and what would encourage owners to bring them back into use. This will enhance the information already available from the Housing Stock Condition survey carried out in May 2002.

### **Housing**

Identification of housing need is an integral part of Housing strategy. 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 East Cambridgeshire. The Empty Home Strategy links into the Housing Strategy and the Homelessness Strategy.

Housing Officers provide information to members of the public and they will be able to assist in advertising and referral of interested parties to Environmental Services Officers.

The void control system in place within Hereward Housing Association with strong links to the Council's housing team will ensure that void levels within their stock are kept to a minimum.

### **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 General Awareness**

It is proposed to launch the Empty Homes Campaign in the mid part of 2004. This will involve a launch event with coverage by local media should resources be available.

Details for the public will be placed on the Council's website and a leaflet produced and sent to every Council taxpayer in the district.

### **Landlords' forum**

In order to encourage good practice, to share information, create partnerships between landlords, the Council and other private sector agencies and promote the strategy further, a regular landlords' forum will be established by mid 2004. Internal and external speakers will be invited to speak on such topics as financial assistance, housing benefits, home energy conservation etc.

## **Empty Homes Database**

To assess and monitor the extent and nature of the private sector empty homes situation, a comprehensive database will be set up. The database will be computer based.

The information will be used to set up records of property owners, addresses etc. The current 'CAPS' system will be used to record any action taken.

Additional information such as type of accommodation, state of repair, approximate cost of repairs, owner's preferred option for re-letting etc. will be added, if required.

The Council Tax Section will provide annual lists of empty properties within the District to Environmental Services.

## **B. How to Bring Empty Properties Back Into Use**

### **Financial Assistance**

Under the current Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, financial assistance of up to £5,000 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 through the Council and may wish to finance refurbishments privately. Environmental Services 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 and place this on the Council's website. The contacts will prove useful for referral of information; financial

assistance referrals and situations where owners wish to dispose of empty properties. The Environmental Services Officer will establish links with these agencies to develop good partnership to meet the needs of both the landlords and the Council.

### **Owners Direct Management**

Owners with previous letting or management experience may wish to manage the property themselves. In order to promote good practice, East Cambridgeshire District Council produces information indicating good standards, which if achieved can enable the landlord to apply for the proposed Private Sector Housing Accreditation scheme.

### **Compulsory Purchase Orders**

The main basis of the Strategy is to promote participation and co-operation 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 formally adopted in March 1998. 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.

**6. THE LEAD OFFICER ROLE IN THE DELIVERY OF THE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY**

The principal role of the Lead Officer is one of co-ordination and enablement and this will be done by:

- a. Continuously developing a basic and up-to-date knowledge of relevant issues, through ongoing research, liaising with nominated officers and external partner organisations.
- b. Initiate and record reports of empty houses from the general public, partners, Council staff and members.
- c. Carry out selected visual surveys, site visits, etc.
- d. Chase progress of individual project and scheme.
- e. Establish preferences and constraints relating to individual properties, and advising owners of the best and most appropriate course of action.
- f. Develop new initiatives and incentives to help owners bring empty homes into use.

## EMPTY HOMES STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE & ACTION PLAN

### Increasing the supply of affordable housing to meet the needs of East Cambridgeshire

|  |  |                         |                         |   |
|--|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Link to other Strategies and Plans and National Housing Policy Objectives</b> | <b><u>Local</u></b><br>Corporate Plan<br>Local Agenda 21<br>Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP)<br>Housing Strategy<br>Homelessness Strategy, The Private Sector<br>Housing Renewal Policy<br><br>Community Safety<br>Community Strategy<br>Urban Capacity Study 2003 |                         |                         | <b><u>National</u></b><br>Towards an Urban Renaissance<br>Decent Homes<br>E-Government<br>Tackling Social Exclusion<br>Sustainable Communities<br>Affordable Warmth |
| <b>Partner Organisations</b>   | Cambs County Council<br>Hereward Housing Association<br>Private Landlords<br>Empty Homes Agency<br>Parish Councils<br><br>LSP  |                         |                         |   |
| <b>Strategic Issue</b>   | <b>Target<br/>04/05</b>  | <b>Target<br/>05/06</b> | <b>Target<br/>06/07</b> | <b>Comments</b>   |
| Develop a draft Empty Homes Strategy   | April 2004   |                         |                         |   |
| Consult with partners on the draft Empty Homes Strategy                          | May 2004   |                         |                         |   |

| Strategic Issue  | Target 04/05                | Target 05/06     | Target 06/07     | Comments   |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------|--|
| Enhance information provided within the House Condition Survey by completing an in-house Empty Homes survey of the District.   | Survey to commence May 2004 |                  |                  | Details from Council Tax and Housing Benefit will be required on empty properties throughout East Cambs. This will provide a basis for a survey by officers, which will provide essential up-to-date information on empty properties. This will enable planned programmes to be developed giving an indication as to the level of resources that will be required to bring empty properties back into use. |
| Implement the Empty Homes Strategy   | July 2004                   |                  |                  | Implementation of the Strategy will start in June 2004 following committee approval.   |
| Write Empty Homes information pack   | June 2004                   |                  |                  | Explanation pack will be developed in June 2004 available to landlords.  |
| Development of a landlords Forum   | April 2004                  |                  |                  | This is a joint initiative with Housing Services, Benefits and Environmental Services and demonstrates a co-ordinated, joined up approach.   |
| Report progress to partners and revise the strategy accordingly, if required.  |                             | Review July 2005 | Review July 2006 | The Strategy is a developing, dynamic document and will be revised, if necessary.  |
| The number of private sector vacant dwellings returned into occupation as a direct result of action by the Council linking with BV 64 and Environmental Services Service Plan. | 5                           | 6                | 7                | An Empty Homes database will assist in the collection of information regarding empty properties but also monitor progress of properties.   |