



Empty Homes Strategy 2009



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1. Introduction

Empty properties are potentially a wasted resource particularly when there is a housing shortage both nationally and in the South Hams. Empty properties can contribute towards the degeneration of an area by having an adverse effect on the amenity and dragging other areas down. The Council's Empty Homes Strategy offers a co-ordinated approach to tackling the problem of empty homes and identifies the most effective solutions to meet local housing need. It will also lead to a range of tangible benefits for the local authority, the empty property owners and the community.

- The people living in South Hams benefit through improving the existing built environment helping maintain safe, attractive neighbourhoods and preventing depreciation of property values.
- The local authority benefits from meeting the housing need of local people, reducing the need to build on Greenfield sites, and preventing empty properties from becoming the focus of anti-social behaviour.
- The empty property owner benefits from the provision of support and advice on options for the re-use of their empty property, possible financial assistance and support to turn their costly empty property into a valuable asset.
- A successful Empty Homes Strategy will also help provide more affordable housing, reducing pressure on existing housing stock.

2. Objectives

- To identify empty residential properties and maximise their reuse.
- To support Council Priority 1 through targeting empty properties which can help meet housing need.
- To improve the existing built environment, promote clean, attractive neighbourhoods and deliver safer, stronger communities.

3. Background

3.1 The National Context

The Empty Homes Agency estimates that there are 663,328 empty homes in the UK (of which 290,224 have been empty for more than 6 months), equivalent to 3.06% of the total number of homes. Published in July 2007, the housing Green Paper, Homes for the Future: More Affordable, More Sustainable, sets out the Government's strategy for meeting a new target of over 240,000 net additional homes a year by 2016 (2 million new homes by 2016). The document makes specific reference to the need to tackle long term empty properties and the consultation paper on the new Housing and Planning Grant may introduce a new requirement for local authorities to have in place an effective empty homes strategy to be eligible for grant.

The Audit Commission Report 'Building better lives – getting the best from strategic housing' (September 2009) states that if only 5% of empty homes could be brought back into use, Councils could cut their annual homelessness costs by £0.5 billion. It also recommends that Council's should identify and work with owners of empty properties, using regulatory sanctions where necessary, to bring more empty homes back into use

Over the last few years, South Hams District Council has enabled a pipeline of affordable housing projects. The forward trajectory plan consists of over 30 affordable housing sites which will enable delivery to increase year on year with record levels of delivery in the next few years.

Councils are also required to deliver sustainable development which considers effective protection of the environment. The Empty Homes Agency has drawn attention to how the re-use of empty homes can contribute to this aim. Research has shown that the creation of new homes will involve 60-70 tonnes of carbon emissions whereas refurbishment of existing properties creates only 7-10 tonnes.

3.2 The Sub Regional Context

Across the South West of England there are over 22,000 properties that have been empty for over 6 months (based on Council Tax figures – Empty Homes Agency 2008). There is a clear indication from central and local Government of a shift towards the development of Regional Housing Strategies and encouragement for local authorities to work together jointly. South Hams District Council works closely with other local authorities across Devon and delivers a shared service with West Devon Borough Council. We are also part of the Plymouth Housing Market Area which includes South Hams District Council, West Devon Borough Council, Plymouth City Council, Dartmoor National Park and Caradon District Council. Together, the Plymouth Housing Market Area commissioned a Housing Market Needs Assessment in 2006 which examined housing needs across these local authorities.

3.3 The Local Context

According to the South Hams District Council Private Sector Housing Survey 2008 (HCS 2008) South Hams has an estimated 600 homes that have been empty for over 6 months. There are high levels of housing need and affordability of housing is a key issue for South Hams.

In the South Hams the average house price in 2008 was £308,343 (source Land Registry) and median average full time gross earnings 2008/2009 £19,846 (source HMRC Survey of Personal income data), the house price affordability ration is 11.83 well above the national average of 7. This problem is exacerbated in our rural areas where young people are regularly unable to access local housing and have to move away from family and friends. Social housing remains in high demand and the supply of affordable housing is a priority for South Hams Council.

3.4 Links with Other Related Strategies, Policies and Plans

3.4.1 Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing (PPS3)

This policy requires local authorities to identify enough land to deliver the homes needed in their areas over the next 15 years. In doing so they are expected to support the national target of at least 60 homes on brownfield sites. Clearly, the re-use of empty homes can help contribute towards this target.

3.4.2 South Hams Local Development Framework

The importance of bringing empty properties back into use is highlighted in the South Hams Local Plan where it is stated that the Council will monitor effectiveness of its Empty Homes Strategy as a means of meeting housing need.

3.4.3 South West Regional Housing Strategy

The importance of making the best use of existing housing stock is also mentioned in the South West Regional Housing Strategy and it recognises that this “will involve reducing the incidence of long term empty properties”.

3.4.4 South Hams District Council - Housing Strategy (2005-10), Homelessness Strategy (2008-13)

The current Housing Strategy 2005 – 2010, sets the overarching strategic vision for housing within the South Hams. Tackling the issue of empty homes is a key element of the current Housing Strategy and will remain a key objective within the next housing strategy which will be developed jointly with West Devon Borough Council. The Homelessness Strategy 2008-13 identifies the use of the Direct Lets Scheme as a key tool in tackling and preventing homelessness.

3.4.5 Private Sector Housing Renewal

The return to use of empty properties will play a significant role in improving conditions in the private sector and will therefore contribute to the objectives identified in the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. By engaging positively with empty property owners the Council can also assist in the improvement of standards in the private rented sector through general advice and information as well as through enforcement where necessary.

3.4.6 Audit Commission Requirements

The Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE's) are looking for councils to proactively target wasted housing resources through positive engagement and enforcement measures. An Empty Homes Strategy, supported by measurable outcomes, will play a key part in demonstrating that the Council has a proactive and strategic approach.

3.5 Empty Homes and the need for Housing in South Hams: Key Facts and Figures

The total number of properties in South Hams is 42,300, and of those, 900 are vacant with 600 vacant for more than 6 months. The Housing Market and Need Assessment (2006) found 41% of concealed households cannot afford private rental and 80% not being able to afford home ownership and only around 36.5% of newly formed households earn over the national average wage. (Concealed households are people who are currently living within a household, wanting to move to their own accommodation and form a separate household). The social stock is now 8.9% below the national average and provides 253 net re-let units each year. In addition to vacancies in existing stock, a further 606 more affordable homes are required annually. This illustrates that some of the potential demand for affordable housing could be met if some of the Council's empty properties were returned to use.

Table 1 - All dwellings by Vacancy Status

Vacancy Status	Dwellings	Percent
Occupied	41,400	97.9%
Unlicensed occupation	0	0.0%
Vacant awaiting new owner	80	0.2%
Vacant awaiting new tenant	110	0.3%
Vacant awaiting demolition	0	0.0%
Vacant being modernised	50	0.1%
New, never occupied	0	0.0%
Utilised non-res purpose	0	0.0%
Other	60	0.1%
Long term vacant*	600	1.4%
Total vacant dwellings	900	2.1%
Total stock	42,300	100.0%

* Includes vacant dwellings to let where they are being modernised prior to letting or have not been let for over 6 months

In South Hams empty private homes as a percentage of the total number of private homes is 2.1% (compared to the national figure of 3.06%). Empty homes are therefore not a problem specific to South Hams compared to some areas of the country. However there are a number of long term problem private empty properties that cause concern for local communities. Many of these are also in areas of high housing need.

4. Targeting the Problem

4.1 Sources of Information

In the South Hams there are three main sources of information for identifying and increasing information available on empty homes in the district.

4.1.1 Council Tax Database

Council Tax records are generally accepted to be a very useful source of information for local authorities to understand their empty homes problem. These records indicate the location of an empty property, the length of time empty and the name and address of the person responsible for paying the council tax (usually the owner). Limited information is also available on the reason for the property being empty. However council Tax records do need to be treated with caution as they are rarely comprehensive, so they often understate the problem of empty homes in local authority areas. For instance some properties which are listed as uninhabitable are then removed from Council Tax lists.

4.1.2 Private Sector Housing Condition Survey 2008

The survey identified an estimate on the number of properties empty for longer than six months and the total number of vacant properties by occupancy status (see Table 1. above) although due to the sample size it does not provide a manageable working list of such properties.

4.1.3 Notification by the Public and other parties

The Council receives complaints and information regarding potentially empty dwellings from varying sources including members of the public, District and Parish Councillors and the Police. This information enables the Council to look at the properties that are potentially causing concern for residents and will be included in the prioritisation detailed in Section 5.4. The Council has a range of powers to deal with empty properties and the effects they may have (see Fig 1, below).

4.2 Where are the Empty Properties?

Using Council Tax records, the properties that have been empty for over 6 months (as at December 2009) can be readily identified by general area. It can be seen that there is a fairly even distribution across the District with clusters in the main Towns.

Table 2 - Empty properties by Area

Main Towns – Long Term Empty Properties	
Dartmouth	61
Ivybridge	25
Kingsbridge	36
Salcombe	40
Totnes	49
Other parishes	363

It is clear that further analysis is required and it is proposed that the individual properties will be mapped on to a Geographical Information System overlay. The overlay would give a better visual representation of the distribution which would be updated on a regular basis. It would also enable the relationship between empty properties and areas of Housing Need to be compared.

4.3 Why are Properties Empty?

A key question for the Council is “Why are private homes being left empty?” Without an answer to this question, we are unlikely to be successful in encouraging owners to bring their properties back into use. Information from council tax records list properties along with a void banding. However, these bands only give a very broad picture and do not indicate the reason behind a property being empty.

Research demonstrates that there are a wide variety of reasons, the most common theme is that the property requires renovation and the owner lacks funds to carry out works, or the owners claimed they were in the process of renovating the property (often slowed down by lack of funds).

Other reasons include people who have inherited property and are undecided on what action to take or don't want the hassle of being a landlord or are concerned about having a bad tenant.

In summary, there are numerous reasons why a property may be empty and a balance of supporting owners both directly through financial incentives, advice and persuasion is necessary to secure change.

The economic climate at the time of drafting the strategy is considered to be potentially of assistance as people look to maximise their income.

5. Developing Solutions

5.1 A Corporate Approach

The identification of a range of reasons why properties are left empty indicates that a range of solutions are needed to address them. To develop and implement effective solutions, the empty homes strategy should link in with wider organisations, it should have a corporate approach, and it also needs to meet the needs of the local community.

Empty Homes is a cross-cutting issue and it is therefore necessary to include a wide range of Council services including Environmental Health, Planning, Affordable Housing , Private Sector Housing, Building Control, Housing Advice, Finance, Council tax, Legal and Property Services amongst others. These departments are not only important for dealing with some of the problems of empty homes, but are also an important source of referral of empty properties to the Empty Homes Officer.

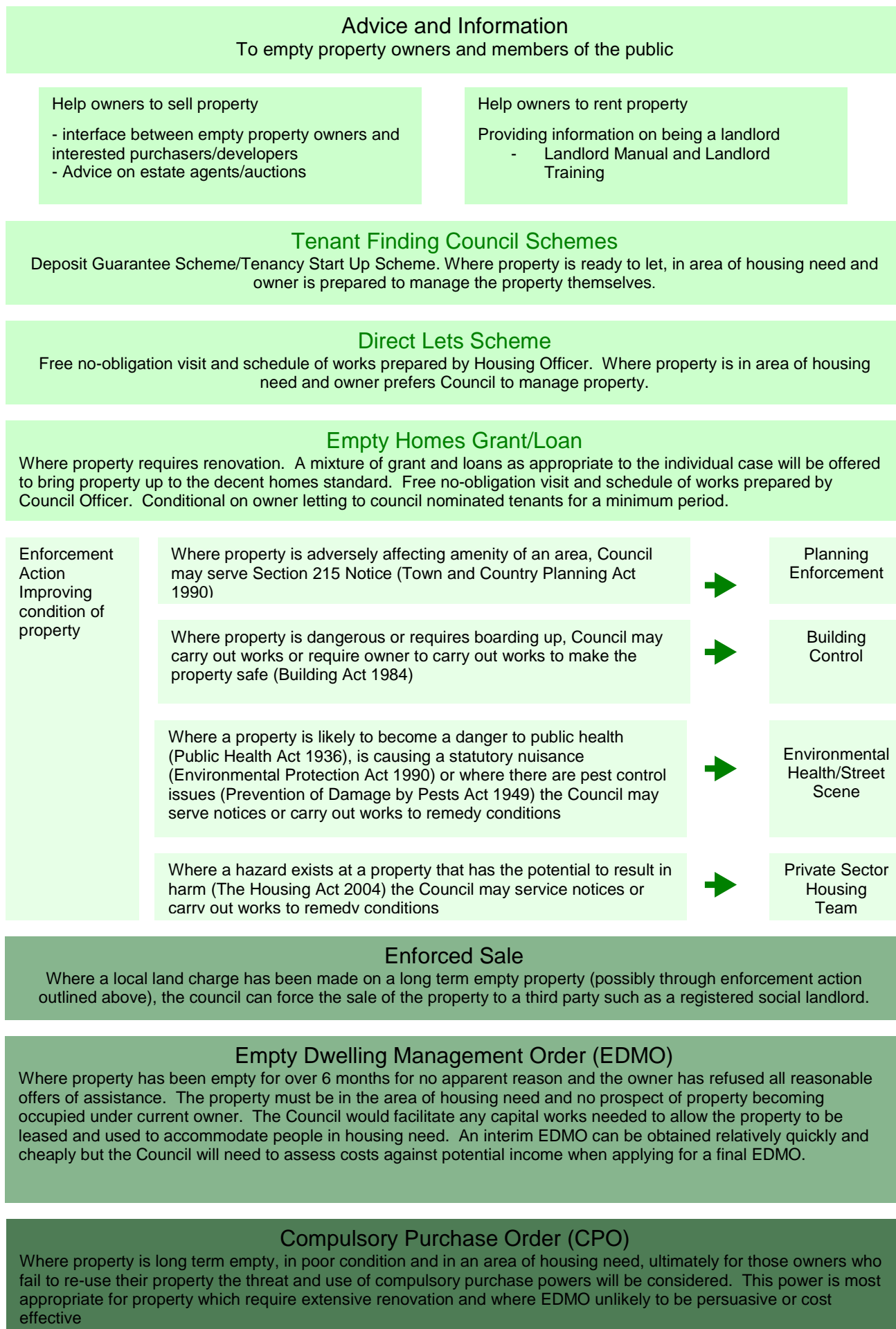
An internal Focus Group has been set up which include representatives from Planning, Building Control, Environmental Health, Private Sector Housing and Legal. The initial meeting held in October 2009 scoped the range of options and legislative powers available to the Council and its partners. The group will serve to improve the effectiveness of enforcement measures by securing good communication and developing procedures across council departments.

Senior management support and commitment from elected members has also been established during the consultation period for the Empty Homes Strategy.

5.2 Encouragement, Persuasion and Enforcement - Options for the Future

It is recognised that properties remain empty for a wide variety of reasons. Similarly owner's circumstances and requirements will vary. Given these factors the Strategy aims to offer owners a wide range of options, progressing from 'lighter' involvement of offering advice and information, then voluntary agreements for bringing property into use through to enforcement action to force the owner to bring the property back into use. These options are demonstrated by the shaded boxes in figure 1 below:

Figure 1 - Options for Returning Empty Properties to Use



5.3 The Process of Engagement with Owners

It is essential that a good working relationship is developed between the Council and property owners to encourage the voluntary re-use of long term empty properties. Only where voluntary approaches have been declined or ignored should the Council consider the use of their statutory enforcement powers. Each empty home and property owner will require an individual solution but there will be specific stages in all cases to ensure all empty homes are investigated thoroughly and dealt with fairly. These stages are set out below:

- Each property owner on the database will initially be written to and provided with information on the full range of voluntary measures available to assist with the reoccupation of the property. They will be requested to complete a brief questionnaire on why the property is empty and when it will be reoccupied; an option to contact the Council and to open dialogue will be offered. It is hoped that this will identify owners actively looking for a way forward and the level of response will influence the following stages.
- After initial screening above, The Empty Homes Officer will assess the priority of all empty properties on the Empty Homes Database according to the Empty Property Prioritisation Sheet. This form takes into account a number of factors relating to the empty property such as housing need, length of time vacant, property condition, social impact, number of complaints received and notices served on the property.
- Those properties with the highest priority will be placed on an Action List and will be subject to further involvement by the Empty Homes Officer.
- The Empty Homes Officer will write to each of the owners of the empty properties and provide information on the full range of voluntary measures available to assist with the reoccupation of the property and outline the Council's enforcement powers and wider duties. A face to face meeting will be offered during which the owner will be asked what they intend to do to bring the property back into use. The Empty Homes Officer will work with the owner to achieve a successful outcome to the owner's chosen option.
- Those owners who refuse to co-operate, either at interview or with the written advice given, will be informed that the Council may consider taking enforcement action to secure the re-use of the property. A further opportunity to co-operate with the Empty Homes Officer will be offered.
- Those empty homes where there is little likelihood of being brought back into occupation, voluntarily, and score highly on the rating system, will be targeted for enforcement action.

6. Funding and Performance Management

6.1 Funding and Resources

The main source of capital funding available for empty property work is through the Private Sector Renewal Policy funded by the Regional Housing Pot. This is based partly on a formulaic allocation and partly on bids. The amount the Council receives varies year on year and the ratio of formula to bid is also subject to change (2009/10 67.5:32.5%). Previous performance on spending and related outcomes based on Regional Housing priorities are also taken into account. For years 1, 2 and 3 of the strategy additional funding has been allocated from the Council's Affordable Housing Capital Programme. At present it is proposed to provide officer time through the Private Sector Housing Team with support from both the Enabling and Advice services. It may be necessary to secure further resources at a future date.

In addition, the financial implications of using Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders will need to be fully understood although it is unlikely that such actions will be pursued within year one. Compulsory Purchase Orders will only be considered where an onward sale to a Registered Social Landlord or other owner can be agreed so would normally have minimal financial implications other than existing staff time.

6.2 Performance Management

6.2.1 Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 64

Until 2008/9 the Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 64 had been used to measure performance on empty homes work. It measured "the number of non local authority owned dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the year as a result of action by the local authority". Government guidance for BVPI 64 allowed local authorities to include all empty properties returned to use regardless of the length of time that they have been left empty. The indicator did not reflect work carried out to bring longer term empty properties back into use.

6.2.2 Local Performance Indicator

The Strategy proposes a new measure of empty homes performance which is meaningful in terms of bringing longer term empty properties back into use and the units of accommodation created:

"the number of private sector units of accommodation created by bringing properties, previously empty for over 6 months, back into use".

This reflects the data required by the Regional Housing Body through the Private Sector Renewal output monitoring and the Housing Standards Statistical Analysis return.

Annual Targets

Year	Local PI (units of accommodation)
2009/10	0
2010/11	4
2011/12	10
2012/13	12
TOTAL	26

7. Strategy Timetable

Action	Target Date	Completed
Initial gathering of raw data via Housing Condition Survey and Council Tax records	October 2009	November 2009
Establish Empty Homes Strategy Project Team (arrange initial scoping meeting and agree membership)	September 2009	September 2009
Draft Strategy – initial consultation	November 2009	December 2009
Adopt Strategy	March 2009	
Establish Empty Homes Database (include 'cleaning up' data)	Ongoing	
Initial Letter to all properties on database	Dec-Jan 2010	
Establish and complete Empty Property Prioritisation Sheet for existing and all newly reported empty properties	May 2010	
Policies and Procedures (Develop empty Dwelling Management Order/ Compulsory Purchase Order policy and procedures)	May – June 2010	
Identify groups of empty properties to be targeted through prioritisation work and contact	August 2010	
Review of Strategy	January 2011	