

Empty Homes Strategy 2012 - 2015

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Summary and Recommendation:

One of the actions in the Copeland Housing Strategy 2011 – 2015 was to ‘Build on findings from the empty homes research to develop an empty homes strategy for Copeland’.

The panel is requested to note progress and members comments are invited.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Task 2.3.2 in the Housing Strategy Delivery Plan is to produce an empty property strategy for the Borough.

2 EMPTY HOMES

- 2.1 Local housing authorities in England and Wales have a statutory duty to monitor housing conditions within their area and to take appropriate measures to deal with unsatisfactory housing.
- 2.2 The attached draft empty property strategy outlines the council’s framework for intervention in dealing with empty homes.

3. CONSULTATION

- 2.1 Officers prefer members of the Strategic Housing Panel to have the opportunity of commenting on the draft empty homes strategy before it is sent for consultation in February 2012. Following consultation it will then be reported with recommendations to the Council meeting cycle in April 2012.

4. FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOURCES OF FINANCE)

4.1 There are no financial and human resource implications arising for the council from this report that cannot be contained within existing Housing Services revenue estimates.

COPELAND BOROUGH COUNCIL EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

1.1 Local housing authorities in England and Wales have a statutory duty to monitor housing conditions within their area and to take appropriate measures to deal with unsatisfactory housing. Accurate and up to date housing market intelligence is key to discharging this duty and to the development of effective housing strategies. Within this context, a thorough understanding of the main characteristics of empty homes is essential because empty homes may:

- ◆ *Provide a productive untapped resource to meet the Borough's housing needs.*
- ◆ *Have an adverse impact on local communities.*
- ◆ *Indicate serious movement in housing trends and resident aspirations.*
- ◆ *Impact the extent of housing market values and demand.*

1.2 Understanding the characteristics of empty homes is essential to develop a strategic approach to invest in an appropriate policy response.

1.3 The benefits of bringing empty homes back into use are:

- ◆ *Potential income from letting or selling*
- ◆ *Increase in housing supply and choice*
- ◆ *Minimising the negative impact imposed on the neighbourhoods*
- ◆ *Encouraging safer and sustainable communities*
- ◆ *Increased Council Tax revenue*

- ◆ *Reduced expenditure on security, dilapidation costs, maintenance and clearing of fly tipping or other criminal activity*

1.4 This Empty Property Strategy sets out an appropriate response to be implemented by the Council to address the issue of empty homes within the Borough. The Strategy establishes a framework for intervention and is designed to fully support the Council's wider corporate objectives. At its core it has been designed to complement the Council's housing strategy¹ to support economic growth within the Borough. It is based on the implementation of a targeted approach towards empty homes and intended to utilise both statutory and discretionary powers to achieve effective solutions.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Copeland Borough Council commissioned a company called Goose Housing Research (GHR) to undertake primary and secondary research into the extent and characteristics of empty homes across the Borough. In 2011 GHR presented the findings²
- 2.2 Bringing empty homes back into use is a Government priority and is an important contributor to meeting the Government's housing and regeneration objective of creating mixed, sustainable and cohesive communities where people want and can afford to live.
- 2.3 In looking at empty homes it is necessary to distinguish between those which are short term 'transitional vacants' and those which are longer term 'problematic vacants'. The former are homes which are currently empty because of changes in occupancy e.g. for sale or letting, or are undergoing modernisation and/or repair. These empty homes are anticipated to be brought back into use and have been empty for less than 6 months. Homes which have been empty for more than 6 months are likely to be associated with other issues preventing immediate occupation e.g. disrepair or dereliction. These are 'problematic vacants' and are likely to be of concern to local housing authorities.

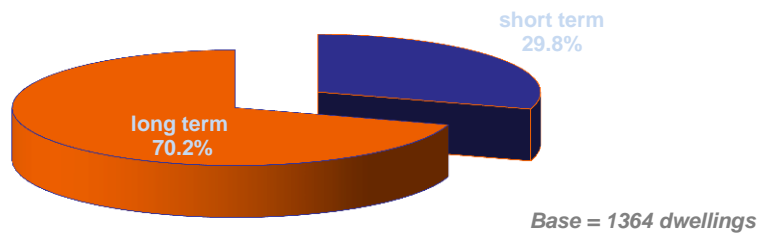
¹ Copeland Housing Strategy 2011 to 2015

² Copeland Borough Council – Vacant Dwellings Survey 2010 – GHR 12/10

NATIONAL & REGIONAL CONTEXT

- 2.4 Nationally, the Empty Homes Agency estimated that in 2009, there were 22,717,526 dwellings in England of which, 651,993 were empty, accounting for 2.9% of all housing stock. 307,001 (47.2%) of these empty dwellings had been vacant for over 6 months, representing a rate of 1.4%.
- 2.5 Regionally, there were 122,632 empty dwellings of which 64,332 (52.5%) had been empty for over 6 months.
- 2.6 Within Copeland, the survey estimated that 1364 dwellings were empty, representing 4.0% of the total housing stock. Of these 958 dwellings or 70.2% had been empty for over 6 months. This represents a rate of 2.8%, twice the national average. This figure excludes holiday lets, residential mobile homes and other temporary non permanent structures e.g. beach huts, whether they are used as permanent residences or not. It is also based on empty homes registered as such on the Council Tax File.

FIGURE 1: SHORT TERM & LONG EMPTY HOMES



2.7 The survey identified that empty homes in Copeland exhibit the following key characteristics:

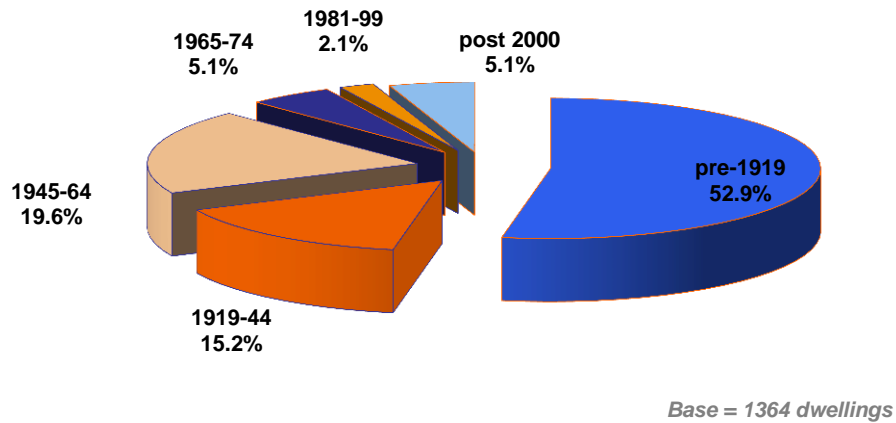
- ◆ *406 homes (29.8%) have been empty under 6 months. 958 (70.2%) have been empty for over 6 months.*
- ◆ *1167 empty homes (85.6%) are houses in type whilst 130 (9.5%) are flats. The remaining 67 empty homes (4.9%) are bungalows.*
- ◆ *872 empty homes (63.9%) are of terraced configuration whilst 382 (28.0%) were semi-detached. 110 empty homes (8.1%) are detached.*
- ◆ *722 empty homes (52.9%) were built before 1919 with a further 208 (15.2%) constructed in the inter war period. 267 empty homes (19.6%) were built in the early post war period with 167 (12.3%) built since 1964.*
- ◆ *1152 (84.5%) empty homes are privately owned. The remaining 212 (15.5%) empty homes are in the social rented sector.*
- ◆ *Vacancy rates vary across the 7 Area Forums³ in Copeland. Frizington, Millom, Cleator Moor and West Lakes exhibit above average rates of vacancy.*
- ◆ *Rates of transitional vacancy (i.e. vacant under 6 months) are above average in Frizington, Millom, Cleator Moor and Whitehaven Remainder areas.*
- ◆ *Rates of very long term problematic vacants (i.e. vacant over 5 years) are above average in the West Lakes, Distington, Frizington and Millom areas.*

³ Area Forums defined in Table 1, page 5

TABLE 1: LENGTH OF VACANCY

FORUM AREA	TOTAL VACANTS		Under 6 months		6 months – 1 year		1 – 2 years		2 – 3 years		3 – 4 years		4 – 5 years		5 + years	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
West Lakes (Bootle, Ennerdale, Gosforth, Millom Without and Seascale wards)	172	12.6	38	22.1	45	26.2	31	18.0	20	11.6	11	6.4	1	0.6	26	15.1
Millom (Haverigg, Holborn Hill and Newtown wards)	212	15.5	67	31.6	48	22.6	35	16.5	19	9.0	22	10.4	5	2.4	16	7.5
Egremont (Egremont North and Egremont South wards)	140	10.3	39	27.9	41	29.3	27	19.3	19	13.6	3	2.1	7	5.0	4	2.9
Distington (Distington ward)	47	3.4	12	25.5	12	25.5	11	23.4	4	8.5	2	4.3	1	2.1	5	10.6
Frizington (Frizington ward)	75	5.5	28	37.3	14	18.7	15	20.0	7	9.3	4	5.3	1	1.3	6	8.0
Cleator Moor (Cleator Moor North and Cleator Moor South wards)	173	12.7	56	32.4	34	19.7	46	26.6	14	8.1	10	5.8	4	2.3	9	5.2
Whitehaven Remainder (Arlecdon, Beckermat, Bransty, Harbour, Hillcrest, Kells, Mirehouse, Moresby, Sandwith and St. Bees wards)	545	40.0	166	30.5	139	25.5	98	18.0	69	12.7	15	2.8	24	4.4	34	6.2
TOTAL	1364	100.0	406	29.89	333	24.4	263	19.3	152	11.1	67	4.9	43	3.2	100	7.3

FIGURE 2: DATE OF CONSTRUCTION – EMPTY HOMES



2.8 The survey identified significant variances in the rate of empty homes across the Borough

2.9 Thus long term problematic empty homes in Copeland are characterised as pre-war, terraced housing located in Whitehaven, Millom and Cleator Moor areas.

2.10 Short term empty homes are numerically concentrated in the Whitehaven area. These are associated with older terraced and semi detached housing and a significant minority are within the Registered Social Landlord sector.

3. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

THE ROLE OF LOCAL COUNCILS

3.1 With encouragement from Government, many local Councils have adopted a strategic approach to dealing with privately owned empty homes.

3.2 The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) provide financial support to 'Empty Homes' an agency that provides good practice advice and guidance to local authorities

and to encourage them to develop empty homes strategies. Such strategies are now a common feature in many authority areas as is the employment of empty homes officers. The role of the empty homes officer has become increasingly recognised in recent years, particularly since the formation of a representative body, the National Association of Empty Homes Practitioners. Empty homes officers perform a range of functions from identifying empty homes to preparing empty homes strategies and brokering with owners reuse of their properties. This function is carried out by officers within the housing renewal team at Copeland.

THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

3.3 The (DCLG) Department of Communities and Local Government's vision is:

'Of prosperous and cohesive communities, offering a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for all...'

3.4 The DCLG are charged with bringing forward sufficient land and housing to meet projected needs. They have introduced a number of policies, initiatives and financial incentives to assist local authorities in their work to bring empty homes back into use.

The following Government documents reflect this vision:

- ◆ **The Housing Act (2004)**
- ◆ **Planning Policy Statement 3 (as amended)**
- ◆ **New Homes Bonus: Final Scheme Design**
- ◆ **The Sustainable Communities Plan – Building for the Future (2003)**
- ◆ **Unlocking the Potential (2003)**

HOMES FOR THE FUTURE: MORE AFFORDABLE, MORE SUSTAINABLE (2007)

- 3.5 This states that Councils, as part of their strategic housing role; need to reduce the number of homes that are left empty for long periods of time. This strategy reiterates the need to make use of empty homes.

REGIONAL AND SUB REGIONAL CONTEXT

- 3.7 The North West Regional Housing Strategy acknowledges that empty homes are a wasted asset and empty homes strategies are an important way of increasing supply of affordable housing. The strategy which suggests activity to optimise the use of existing stock, has a critical role in effectively increasing supply and should therefore be reflected in wider strategies. This includes, work to bring empty homes back into use and addressing under occupation, particularly, in social and older private housing.

- 3.8 One of the objectives of the Regional Housing Strategy is to achieve the right quantity of housing. To achieve this, the strategy states that ...*'This will require new supply in both rural and urban areas to be appropriate to local markets and environments It is also vital that the capacity of the existing stock is fully used, in particular, that empty properties are brought back into use'*.

- 3.9 The strategy also emphasises the need to integrate strategic objectives. It states *'Much of the emphasis on increasing supply nationally has focused on the provision of new homes. In regions such as the North West, this has to be complemented by strategies to bring the many existing properties back into effective use.*

CORPORATE POLICY

- 3.10 In Copeland the Empty Property Strategy has been developed in response to the key issues facing the Council. It has been drawn up at a time of considerable and rapid change both within national and local contexts bringing new strategic considerations for the Council. As part of its response the Council has developed a new Housing Strategy. The Empty Property Strategy has

therefore been influenced by not only this strategy but also has cognisance of regional and sub regional strategic objectives.

- 3.11 Within this strategic context, the Empty Property Strategy is also intended to support the Council in the achievement of its wider corporate objectives. The Council's Corporate Implementation Plan 2011/12 sets out 4 themed goals which are accompanied by a clear set of objectives.

THEME 1 – PEOPLE

'To support the development of strong, healthy and engaged communities'.

THEME 2 – PROSPERITY

'To build a sustainable, modern, low carbon economy that delivers economic security to the whole community'.

THEME 3 – PLACE

'To support Copeland in becoming an attractive, safer and greener place to be'.

THEME 4 – PERFORMANCE

'Delivering excellent and value for money services'.

In addition to this, the Empty Property Strategy also supports the Strategy for Sustainable Communities in Copeland. The strategy concentrates on four key issues that are important to Copeland residents, businesses, agencies and communities. Each key issue is accompanied by a set of priorities.

- PLACE - "together we will sustain and develop Copeland as a quality place for successive generations to live, work and play".
- PEOPLE – "together we will raise people's aspirations for themselves and for Copeland"
- PROSPERITY – "together we will build on Copeland's prosperity"
- PARTNERSHIP – "together we will work in partnership across Copeland"

3.13 Implementation of the Empty Property Strategy will be the responsibility of the Housing Services Team with support as required, from other departments under the general direction of the Council's Corporate Management Team. The overall principle of the Empty Property Strategy is to wherever possible, bring empty homes back into residential use.

4. HOUSING STRATEGY 2011

4.1 The Council has set out its Housing Strategy 2011 to 2015 with its over arching aim to:

'ensure that the housing available in the Borough supports the distinct economic ambitions of our communities as effectively as possible'

4.2 The strategy contains four strategic objectives:

◆ ***Strategic Objective 1***

'facilitating the right housing offer to support economic growth and community sustainability'

◆ ***Strategic Objective 2***

'making best use of the existing stock'

◆ ***Strategic Objective 3***

'enabling people to access the housing and support that they need, when they need it'

Strategic Objective 4

'an integrated delivery approach'

4.3 Each objective identifies a series of key actions intended to ensure successful delivery of the over arching aim. The aim of this Empty Property Strategy is to support the Council's strategic housing objectives and unlock the housing potential of long term empty homes and:

- ◆ **Increase supply of decent private sector accommodation in the Borough.**
- ◆ **Reduce the potential for crime and antisocial behaviour by dealing effectively with long term empty homes.**
- ◆ **Support communities in maintaining decent neighbourhoods.**
- ◆ **Raise awareness of the opportunity of empty homes as a potential housing solution.**
- ◆ **Work in partnership with external agencies and create effective corporate relationships.**

4.4 Delivery of the Strategy will be co-ordinated and monitored by Housing Services and the Strategic Housing Panel via an annual report, to effectively implement the various options available as well as to develop new innovative methods to bring long term homes back into use or take other appropriate action where this is not possible.

5. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

5.1 The Empty Property Strategy embraces the following general principles and protocols:

- ◆ *Recognition that the primary responsibility for maintaining the condition and use of residential property rests squarely with owners.*
- ◆ *The housing market is dynamic and reflects the quality of the local economy. The number of empty homes can change rapidly due to the economic variance. Monitoring the level and characteristics of empty homes is an essential component of housing market intelligence.*
- ◆ *To function at all and to allow residential mobility the housing market needs to include a number of empty homes.*

- ◆ *Any action undertaken by the Council in dealing with empty homes contributes to its wider corporate objectives.*
- ◆ *Recognition that empty homes can represent a wasted resource and can have a negative impact on local communities.*
- ◆ *A preference to return empty homes to residential use unless this cannot be achieved for economic, technical or social reasons.*
- ◆ *That long term empty homes are more likely to exhibit higher multiple symptoms of disrepair, insecurity and vandalism leading to more significant negative impacts on local communities.*
- ◆ *That it is not possible to deal effectively with all empty homes in the Borough simultaneously. Effective policy implementation will be based on a targeted approach on a worst first basis.*
- ◆ *A preference to secure remedial solutions through collaboration and joint working using wherever possible incentives and encouragement.*
- ◆ *Use of enforcement powers be retained and implemented as action of last resort in accordance with the Council's protocols.*
- ◆ *All actions taken to remedy problems of empty homes are appropriate and deliver best value, having regard to the Council's resources and priorities.*
- ◆ *The Council will set annual targets to achieve the Policy Plan; monitor performance against targets and review service delivery accordingly.*

5.2 These principles shape the general direction for the framework for empty home intervention as set out in the following chapter.

6. A FRAMEWORK FOR EMPTY HOMES INTERVENTION

6.1 The Empty Property Strategy embraces two key assumptions:

1) A general preference to return empty homes to residential use, except where this is not possible due to economic technical or social factors, and

2) To give priority to dealing with empty homes on a worst-first basis, particularly regarding homes which have a significant negative impact on the local community.

6.2 Within this context thirteen key actions form a framework for Council intervention in dealing with empty homes:

- i. Identify all empty homes within the Borough and prioritise, considering level of nuisance caused, the condition of the property, length of time empty, if the property can be an 'easy win'.**
- ii. Give priority for intervention to empty homes on a worst-first basis .**
- iii. Publicise the Council's policy on empty homes in the media, on the Council's website and by leaflet distribution to known owners.**
- iv. Set up mechanisms to encourage the public to report empty homes, particularly those which may not be registered as such on the Council Tax File.**
- v. Having identified the empty home, trace the owner and make contact.**
- vi. Encourage the owner to consider costs and benefits and to be aware of other relevant issues, such as nuisance and anti social behaviour.**

- vii. **Develop a positive approach rather than a confrontational approach with the owner, unless other factors make this impossible – for example serious health & safety issues needing immediate attention.**
- viii. **Identify why the home is empty and how to resolve reasons which are maintaining this position.**
- ix. **Identify the owners own aspirations for the home and assist in developing and enabling them if they offer a realistic solution.**
- x. **As a last resort consider and implement the most appropriate enforcement option.**
- xi. **At all times pursue a coordinated and consistent corporate approach to send out a clear and unambiguous message to owners.**
- xii. **Enable the most efficient use of resources available to the Council, utilising best practice advice from other sources including the Empty Homes Agency.**

7. POLICY RESPONSE & ACTION PLAN

- 7.1 The Council’s Housing Strategy 2011 sets out four strategic objectives supported by a range of key issues and justifications to help economic growth across the Borough. The Empty Property Strategy is designed to assist in the achievement of these objectives with actions identified in support of all relevant key issues and justifications as follows:

Housing Strategy Objective One:

‘Facilitating the right housing offer to support economic growth’

Empty Homes Strategy Action Point 1.....

‘Instigate a corporate approach to empty homes, monitor and report the characteristics of the empty home sector, and take appropriate action’.....

1.1 'Facilitate the Right Supply of New Homes'

- ◆ Identify all empty homes in the Borough and prioritise for targeted action with the aim of bringing them back into use.
- ◆ Seek to contact all owners and encourage participation in returning empty homes into use.
- ◆ Explore options for providing assistance to owners through existing mechanisms.
- ◆ Set a target to reduce the rate both of long term and short term empty homes to the national average within 5 years.
- ◆ Establish a dialogue with house builders to monitor delays in new housing sales and lettings.
- ◆ Continue to monitor the RSL sector with regard to vacancy rates and re let times to discuss appropriate options for improvement where required.

1.2 'Improve the Quality of Place'

- ◆ Prioritise identified empty homes which have a significant negative impact within the community for intervention (i.e. worst first).
- ◆ Where long term solutions are not readily available instigate measures to reduce the negative impact of empty homes on local communities.
- ◆ Use available powers to make empty homes safe and secure.
- ◆ Work with partners and other housing providers to ensure that where empty homes result from regeneration proposals, length of vacancy is minimised. Ensure that the potential for community disruption is minimised by timely delivery of regeneration proposals.
- ◆ Establish and publicise mechanisms for reporting of empty homes and respond to complaints quickly.
- ◆ Ensure free access by the public to all relevant data collated on empty homes in the Borough.
- ◆ Establish procedures for corporate monitoring of action taken by all departments in respect of empty homes including notices under the various statutory powers.

- ◆ Where significant numbers of empty homes are evident consider options for an area based approach.

1.3 'Ensure Sufficient Affordable Housing'

- ◆ Explore opportunities to encourage low cost options to return empty homes into use, through advice and assistance to owners.
- ◆ Explore the potential for the Registered Social Landlord/Private Landlord sector to acquire empty homes or to provide a management service to the owner.
- ◆ Consider how best the New Housing Bonus scheme could be applied to empty homes.

1.4 Develop the Role of the Private Rented Sector

- ◆ Expand dialogue with private landlords through existing channels to explore potential for joint working on empty homes.
Consider packages of financial support and incentives to bring empty homes up to a satisfactory standard for re letting
- ◆ Consider options for nomination rights linked to financial incentives.

Housing Strategy Objective Two:

'Making best use of existing stock'

Empty Property Strategy Action Point 2.....

'To unlock the potential of empty homes to contribute to meeting the housing needs of the Borough'.....

2.1 'Focus Attention to the Energy Efficiency of Existing Stock'

- ◆ Working with energy suppliers, providers and owners to prioritise the empty homes sector for energy efficiency improvements linked to guaranteed future occupancy.
- ◆ Promote energy efficiency and sustainability in all supported improvement to achieve the Decent Homes Standard as a minimum.

2.2 'Enable Improvements in Private Sector Stock Conditions'

- ◆ Promote the return to use of empty homes which have achieved minimum standards, for example the Decent Homes Standard.
- ◆ Develop an accreditation scheme with private landlords to set minimum standards of condition and management.
- ◆ Coordinate interdepartmental action targeted at the worst empty homes to secure condition improvements, utilising enforcement powers where appropriate.
- ◆ Work with partners and other housing providers to ensure that empty homes subject to renovation, redesign or demolition are vacant for a minimum period and are maintained in a safe and secure condition.

2.3 'Reduce the Number of Empty Homes in the Borough'

- ◆ Implement the Empty Homes Policy Plan with a view to reducing the rate of empty homes to 2% of the total stock within 5 years.
- ◆ Raise awareness of the problems associated with empty homes and promote options available.
- ◆ Establish an Empty Homes Protocol with the RSL sector (and potentially the Private Rented sector) to set guidelines and targets for re letting and minimising empty homes.

Housing Strategy Objective Three:

'Helping people access the housing they need'

Empty Property Strategy Action Point 3.....

'Helping owners to find new residents for empty homes'.....

3.1 'Ensure the Right Housing Option for Older People'

- ◆ Explore the potential for private funding initiatives to bring empty homes into use with banking and financial institutions, with particular regard to downsizing and meeting the needs of older residents.
- ◆ Promote incentives that link opportunities to return empty homes to use by target client groups, e.g. older persons, first time buyers, low cost home ownership or executive housing.

3.2 'Continue to prevent and deal effectively with homelessness'

- ◆ Actively support public interest in empty homes particularly where this may lead to a positive housing solution.
- ◆ Develop and implement a process to ensure partnership between Housing Services Team and the Private Rented Sector to prevent an increase in empty homes.

3.3 'Respond positively to the opportunity of more flexible affordable homes, tenancies and allocations.'

- Explore the potential for nomination agreements linked to incentives to bring empty homes into use.
- Develop low cost affordable home ownership packages with financial institutions linked to empty homes reduction.