



Copeland Empty Homes Policy

2016 - 2020

COPELAND EMPTY HOMES POLICY

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COPELAND EMPTY HOMES POLICY

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This refreshed and updated policy continues to provide a framework for intervention to address the issue of empty homes within the Borough. The Policy 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.
- 1.2 The overall principle of the Empty Homes Policy is to wherever possible, bring empty homes back into residential use. This sits within the overarching aim of the main Copeland Housing Strategy, which is to ensure that the housing available in the borough supports the distinct economic ambitions of our communities as effectively as possible.
- 1.3 The priorities are:
- 1) To work with owners 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 targeted basis, particularly regarding homes which have a significant negative impact on the local community.
- 1.4 The Empty Homes Policy Action Plan sets out 28 actions under the following key strategic action points:
- **Action Point One:** Instigate a corporate approach to empty homes, monitor and report the characteristics of the empty homes sector, and take appropriate action
 - **Action Point Two:** Unlock the potential of empty homes to contribute to meeting the housing needs of the borough
 - **Action Point Three:** Help owners to find residents for empty homes

The complete Action Plan is included in Appendix 1

2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This Empty Homes Policy establishes a framework for intervention to address the issue of empty homes within the Borough. The Policy is designed to fully support the Council's wider corporate objectives. At its core it has been designed to complement the Council's housing strategy² 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.

2.2 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:

1. **Provide a productive untapped resource to meet the Borough's housing needs.**
2. **Have an adverse impact on local communities.**
3. **Indicate serious movement in housing trends and resident aspirations.**
4. **Impact negatively on housing market values and demand.**

2.3 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 neighbourhoods**
- ◆ **Encouraging safer and sustainable communities**
- ◆ **Increased Council Tax revenue & New Homes Bonus**
- ◆ **Reduced expenditure on security, dilapidation costs, maintenance and clearing of fly tipping or other criminal activity**

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 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 six months. Homes which have been empty for more than six months are more 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.

3.2 Nationally, the Empty Homes Agency estimated that in 2015, there were 23,464,163 dwellings in England of which, 610,123 were empty, accounting for 2.6% of all housing stock. Regionally, there were 40,461 empty dwellings which had been empty for over 6 months.

3.3 Within Copeland, a survey carried out in late 2014 estimated that 1,365 dwellings were empty, of these 607 had been empty for over six months. 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.

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

- ◆ **758 homes have been empty under 6 months. 607 have been empty for over 6 months.**
- ◆ **1,167 empty homes are houses in type whilst 130 are flats. The remaining 68 empty homes are bungalows.**

3.5 Numbers of empty homes will be subject to constant fluctuation and surveys are affected by sample sizing and stratification. Vacant dwellings can be difficult to identify with certainty and the most reliable estimates are obtained from a combination of sources including surveys, Council Tax data, the Census and others.

3.6 Research undertaken in other Districts has indicated that Council Tax records on whether dwellings are vacant or not are often inaccurate. There are many reasons but among them is late (or no) notification of changes of circumstances initiated by owners, former owners or those acting on their behalf.

4.0 POLICY PRINCIPLES

4.1 The Policy embraces the following general principles:

- 1. Recognition that the primary responsibility for maintaining the condition and use of residential property rests squarely with owners.**

2. 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.
3. To function at all and to allow residential mobility the housing market needs to include a number of transitional empty homes.
4. Any action undertaken by the Council in dealing with empty homes contributes to its wider corporate objectives.
5. Recognition that empty homes can represent a wasted resource and can have a negative impact on local communities, particularly where they are left to become unfit for immediate housing use.
6. A preference to return empty homes to residential use unless this cannot be achieved for economic, technical or social reasons.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. A preference to secure remedial solutions through collaboration and joint working using wherever possible incentives and encouragement.
10. Use of enforcement powers be retained and implemented as action of last resort in accordance with the Council's protocols.
11. All actions taken to remedy problems of empty homes are appropriate and deliver best value, having regard to the Council's resources and priorities.

12. The Council will produce an annual delivery plan with targets; monitor performance and review service delivery accordingly.

5.0 POLICY PRIORITIES

5.1 The twelve key priorities for dealing with empty homes in Copeland are:

- 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 targeted approach.**
- iii. **Publicise the Council's policy, activity and outcomes on empty homes in the media, on the Council's website, through partners 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**

Appendix 1: Action Plan

The Council's Housing Strategy 2016-2019 sets out three strategic objectives supported by a range of key issues and justifications to help economic growth across the Borough. The Empty Homes Policy 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 | | |
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| Empty Homes Policy Action Point One: Instigate a corporate approach to empty homes, monitor and report the characteristics of the empty homes sector, and take appropriate action | | |
| 1.1. Facilitate the right supply of new homes | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employ an empty homes officer on a two year fixed term contract or secondment to ensure the actions within this policy are completed. 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. | Ongoing | Copeland Borough Council Housing Services and partners |
| | Ongoing | Copeland Borough Council |
| | By December 2016 | Copeland Housing Strategy Partnership |
| | Target reached by 2020 | Copeland Borough Council and Registered Provider partners |
| | Ongoing | Copeland Borough Council and |

| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a target to reduce the rate both of long term and short term empty homes within 5 years. • Establish a dialogue with house builders to monitor delays in new housing sales and lettings. | | Registered Provider partners |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.2 Improve the quality of place | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise identified empty homes which have a significant negative impact within the community for intervention. • 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. • Establish and publicise mechanisms for reporting of empty homes and respond to complaints quickly. • 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 | <p>Establish and maintain and review priorities</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>January 2016</p> <p>June 2016</p> <p>To be determined</p> | <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> |

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| | | |
| 1.3 Ensure Sufficient Affordable Housing | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore opportunities to encourage low cost options to return empty homes into use, through advice and assistance to owners. Consider how best the New Housing Bonus scheme could be applied to empty homes. | <p>Ongoing</p> <p>As per timetable for reviewing New Homes Bonus protocol</p> | <p>Borough Council with Registered Providers and Landlords Forum</p> <p>Housing Strategy Partnership and communities</p> |
| 1.4 Develop the role of the private rented sector | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand dialogue with private landlords through existing channels to explore potential for joint working on empty homes Consider packages of external 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 | <p>Ongoing</p> <p>December 2016</p> <p>March 2016</p> | <p>Borough Council and Landlords forum</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council and Registered Providers</p> |

| Housing Strategy Objective Two: Making best use of existing stock | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Empty Homes Policy Action Point Two: Contribute to meeting the housing needs of the borough | | |
| 2.1 Focus attention to the energy efficiency of existing stock | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work 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 | <p>Ongoing</p> <p>ongoing</p> | Housing Strategy Partnership and affordable warmth partners |
| 2.2 Enable improvements in private sector stock conditions | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate interdepartmental action targeted at 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. | <p>ongoing</p> <p>ongoing</p> <p>ongoing</p> | <p>Copeland Borough Council and Landlords Forum</p> <p>Copeland Housing Strategy Partnership</p> |

| 2.3 Reduce the number of empty homes in the borough | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the Empty Homes Strategy to reduce the rate of empty homes within 5 years. Raise awareness of the problems associated with empty homes and promote options available. | <p>Target achieved 2020</p> <p>ongoing</p> | <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Housing Strategy Partnership</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council, Registered Providers and Landlords Forum</p> |
| Housing Strategy Objective Three: Helping people access the housing they need | | |
| Empty Homes Policy Action Point Three: Helping owners to find new residents for empty homes | | |
| 3.1 Ensure the right housing options for older people | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the potential for private funding initiatives to bring empty homes into use with banking and financial institutions. 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 | <p>April 2017</p> <p>Ongoing</p> | <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> <p>Copeland Borough Council</p> |

| 3.2 Continue to prevent and deal effectively with homelessness | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 | Ongoing | Copeland Housing Strategy Partnership |
| | Ongoing | Copeland Borough Council and Landlords Forum |
| 3.3 Respond positively to the opportunity of more flexible affordable homes, tenancies and allocations | | |
| Action | Date | Lead Partner |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the potential for nomination agreements linked to incentives to bring empty homes into use. Explore the potential to develop low cost affordable home ownership packages with financial institutions linked to empty homes reduction. | June 2016 | Copeland Borough Council and Registered Providers |
| | June 2017 | Copeland Borough Council |