



## EMPTY PROPERTY DELIVERY PLAN 2011 - 2015

### **Introduction**

The North Somerset Council Empty Property Delivery Plan 2011–2016 has been developed to promote the best use of existing properties in North Somerset. The overall aim of the delivery plan is to reduce the number of empty properties in the district. The plan sets out the key priorities and issues concerning empty properties and the procedures we will use to help bring them back into use.

This plan sits beneath the [Housing Strategy 2010-2015](#), which highlights the issue of empty properties. It is linked to the [Private Sector Housing Strategy](#) and is one of a number of documents that assist in delivering affordable homes in North Somerset.

In developing this plan we have taken into account the limited resources we have available to us. The limitations on our resources mean that we must use them efficiently to ensure that they are used to their greatest effect. So this strategy is about targeting our work to maximise the available opportunities to bring empty properties back into use.

The Delivery Plan will be reviewed annually to ensure it reflects changing national policy.

### **National context**

The reuse of empty properties was highlighted as a priority in the government's New Homes Bonus Consultation paper in November 2010. This paper sets out the Government's plans to increase house building across the country by providing councils with financial incentives for building new homes. In this proposal the Government will pay councils the equivalent of six years of council tax for each new property built and, importantly, for each empty property that is brought back into use. This means that, if these proposals are adopted, by working to bring empty properties back into use, we will be working to bring an additional income stream into the council at a time of otherwise decreasing resources.

However, it is important to note that if there were to be a net increase in the number of empty properties in a year, the number by which they had increased would be deducted from any New Homes Bonus payment. Therefore, it is vital that we work to minimise the chance of this happening.

Through the Homes and Communities Agency, the Government has also allocated £100m of capital funding to bring empty properties back into use. We will be working with our Registered Provider partners to bid for this funding.

## Local context

The North Somerset Housing Strategy 2010-2015 sets out our vision:

“Maintaining and developing successful communities where people want to live, by meeting the housing needs of our residents”

Implementing this Empty Property Delivery Plan will assist in achieving this vision, both by contributing to improvements in neighbourhoods where empty properties may be attracting anti-social behaviour, vermin or vandalism, and also by helping to reduce housing need, by allowing a household to live in a home that would not otherwise have been available.

As at February 2011 there were 1755 empty homes in North Somerset that had been empty for six months or more. These properties can be categorised in the table below:

Table A – Priority of Empty Property Categories

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Properties</b>	<b>Targeted work</b>
Unoccupied and unfurnished for more than six months	287	Yes – <b>priority</b>
Furnished long term empty homes – over six months	345	Yes – <b>priority</b>
Long-term empty homes where occupation is restricted by a planning condition preventing permanent occupancy requiring 28 days vacancy every 12 months i.e. short lets, holiday lets	25	Only if complaints received
Long-term empty second homes which could be furnished but not used as main residence.	423	Only if complaints received
Homes that belong to those who are required to live in alternative accommodation i.e. tied accommodation	15	Only if complaints received
Structural repairs	24	Only if complaints received
Repairs and alterations	3	Only if complaints received
The person liable to pay council tax is unknown but is in the process of being traced through Land Registry searches. This could be where a property has been sold but the owner has not provided details to council tax. Once ownership is traced property may be re-allocated to other category.	114	Only if complaints received
Probate granted	32	Only if complaints received

Awaiting probate	262	Only if complaints received
Owner in hospital or residential care	186	Only if complaints received
Mortgagee – repossessions	30	Only if complaints received
Owner receiving personal care	9	Only if complaints received
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1755</b>	

These long term empty properties are a wasted resource in a district that faces a high level of housing need:

- There are currently 9126 applicants on the HomeChoice register. 7011 live in North Somerset and of these 4716 are in Bands A – C and have one or more housing need.
- Homelessness figures show that during 2009/2010 North Somerset had a duty to house 533 applicants, demonstrating the problems some residents face in accessing housing that is affordable to them.
- The West of England Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2009 (SHMA) highlighted a backlog of households in housing need in North Somerset and identified a continuing requirement for new affordable housing.
- The SHMA identified a need for 904 new affordable homes each year for the period 2009-2021.
- During the period 2007/2010 an average of only 245 new affordable homes was provided in North Somerset each year.

These figures demonstrate the problems some residents face in accessing housing that is affordable to them, and highlights a continuing shortfall of affordable housing. Bringing empty properties back into use will be a useful tool for increasing housing supply. This is particularly important in the current climate, in which the capital funding for building new affordable homes has been significantly reduced. This is why it is important for us to have a co-ordinated plan for our work to bring long-term empty properties back into use.

## **What are we doing now?**

We have been working successfully to bring empty homes back into use since the development of our previous Empty Property Strategy in 2008. Some of this work includes:

### **Help with letting the property**

- We help owners by recommending suitable tenants from the HomeChoice register.
- We advise on tenancy terms and can provide tenancy agreements.
- We complete and fast track housing benefit forms and chase any outstanding claims.
- We help arrange deposit bonds and cash deposits in some cases.
- We can be a point of contact throughout the tenancy.
- We provide information on the Property Accreditation Scheme and available discounts on labour and materials.

### **Help with selling the property**

- We provide advice on how to prepare a property for sale, instructing estate agents, conveyancing and completion of the sale.
- We provide a list of developers who are interested in buying empty properties.

### **Help with refurbishing the property/financial advice**

- We provide advice on funding the cost of renovation, planning the work and finding a building contractor.
- We advise on and may authorise financial assistance in certain cases.

### **Planning services**

- We provide advice on change of use, from commercial to residential or vice versa, and advise when planning permission is required, for example when an owner plans to convert a house into flats.
- We carry out initial inspections/visits.

### **Key achievements to date**

As a result of our work, during 2009-10 a total of 21 long term empty properties were brought back into use. To do this we:

- Created a database to record empty properties, which is updated and reviewed regularly.
- Established strong working links with council tax staff in order to obtain up-to-date lists of properties registered as empty on their databases. This has enabled us to send a letter to each empty property owner with a questionnaire about the property to confirm whether or not it is empty, and if so, why.

- Provided owners with help and advice on selling, renting, renovation and the property accreditation scheme
- Implemented a tenant finding scheme.
- Carried out a marketing campaign using links with local newspapers, radio and news websites, articles in North Somerset Life (the council's magazine) and Neighbourhood Watch magazines.
- Updated the council's website, providing details of the empty homes scheme and allowing people to report empty properties directly.

## **Consultation**

The Council has an Empty Property Steering Group. This is made up of officers from planning, housing, housing conservation, and a chosen registered provider. The group worked together to identify the issues, priorities and actions for consultation in this draft strategy.

The draft Empty Property Delivery Plan was sent out to the following for comment:

Chief Executive, Members of the Council, Town & Parish Councils, Affordable Housing Delivery Group, Strategic Housing & Planning Group, HCA, Avon and Somerset Police, Avon Fire Authority, Landlords, Liberata, teams within the Council and external Partners including Registered Providers.

A summary of the formal responses received and the council's actions are shown in the table on page 12.

## **Issues and Challenges**

To meet our aim of bringing long term empty properties back into use we must first understand the key issues and challenges that face us. We have identified a number of key issues and challenges:

- Better information is needed on the particular problems to help target resources to tackle specific issues.
- There is a concentration of empty flats above shops in Weston-super-Mare.
- The owners of the flats above shops face particular obstacles in renting out their properties, including: access, noise, fire regulations and expense of conversion.
- Staffing levels are limited.
- The council is facing significant cuts to its budget as a result of the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review
- There are limited financial incentives for owners of empty properties.

## **Delivering the strategy**

We know that there is further work required to bring more empty properties back into use. Understanding the issues and challenges set out above has allowed us to identify a number of priority areas of work on which we will focus our actions. The overall aim of this delivery plan is to reduce the number of empty properties in North Somerset, to do this we have identified the following priorities:

- Working with empty property owners
- Making best use of resources

We are aware of the limited resources we have available to bring empty properties back into use. This means that we must focus our work and prioritise the properties that we target. Therefore, we will only target properties that have been empty for more than six months, and only those in the council tax categories shown on page 2 in Table A – Priority of Empty Property Categories.

Throughout our work we offer advice and assistance to encourage owners to bring their empty properties back into use, however where this approach does not work, we may take enforcement action.

## **Actions**

For each of our priorities we have identified a number of actions. These are set out below.

### **Working with empty property owners**

- We will continue to raise the profile of long-term empty homes through publicity campaigns, outlining options to owners to help bring them back into use.
- We will continue to send a letter and questionnaire to owners of long term empty properties outlining all the options available to bring those properties back into use.
- We will continue to work with empty home owners to support and encourage voluntary action.
- We will consider enforcement action where negotiations fail.
- We will improve our understanding of empty properties in North Somerset.
- We will seek to identify empty properties in rural areas, where there can be a particular demand for affordable housing. These may not always be houses, but could be disused farm buildings, for example.

### **Making best use of resources**

- We will adopt a systematic approach to categorising empty homes and direct resources according to agreed priority categories.
- We will explore good practice with other local authorities, joint working and keep up-to- date with best practice.
- We will seek closer working between council officers to make the best use of officers' time and responsibilities.
- We will support Registered Providers bidding for HCA funding to bring empty homes back into use wherever possible.

## Risks

There are risks to meeting the priorities and the following table shows the risks and how we can mitigate them.

Table B – Risks and mitigation

<b>Risks</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Lack of response from owners	Raise the profile of empty properties and incentives through local publicity
Officers' time and resources are restricted	Manage officers' time and resources appropriately by targeting priority categories
Lack of funding – there has been no allocation for the Private Sector Renewal Budget from the Government for 2011/2012 and availability of low-cost home improvement loans is limited	Raise the profile of empty properties and , outline alternative options to owners including possible HCA funding to RPs
Budget restraints mean funds may not be available for enforcement of Compulsory Purchase Orders.	Make selective use of legal remedies and encourage in-house training where possible
The council will lose New Homes Bonus funds if there is an increase in long term empties recorded	Ensure regular lists are received from council tax to keep records updated

## Partnership working

It will be essential for teams within the council to work closely together and in partnership with external agencies to meet the priorities identified. This is particularly true in the current financial climate, in which we must ensure we make the best possible use of our limited resources.

Input will be needed from the following teams within the council:

Table C – Teams and responsibilities

<b>Team</b>	<b>Roles and responsibilities</b>
Housing Strategy and Enabling	The Housing Development Officer has primary responsibility for empty property work and works closely with empty property owners, offering advice and guidance to help bring their properties back into use. Visits, records and monitors progress on reported empty properties
Housing Renewals Team	This team makes referrals to the loan scheme, provides direct assistance, subject to resources. Officers have the power to carry out enforcement work – open to access,

	environmental protection, and health and safety hazards.
Private Rented Housing Team	This team encourages landlords of empty properties to sign up to the Accreditation Scheme so that they can benefit from the incentives offered.
Building Control	This team carries out inspections, enforces the Building Act Powers on problem properties.
Development Management (Applications and Consents Team)	Gives advice on planning permission and change of use i.e. commercial to residential or vice versa.
Legal Services	This team advises on the legal aspects of new schemes and initiatives and takes the lead on enforcement action.
Valuation	This team arranges valuations when required for possible Compulsory Purchase Orders and Empty Dwelling Management Orders etc.
Housing Advice Team	This team operates the deposit guarantee scheme, working with empty property owners who would like to rent out their properties. Finds tenants for landlords wanting to rent out their properties.

External partnership working is equally important to the success of the delivery plan. The following table shows the external partners and their additional input.

Table D – Partners and their input

<b>Partner</b>	<b>Input</b>
Council Tax	Provide details of owners of empty properties and statistical information.
Registered Providers	Continue to explore the opportunities to manage properties on behalf of owners.
West of England Empty Property Group	Quarterly meetings held to discuss good working practices, resources and new initiative.
Empty Homes Network and Empty Homes Agency	Support officers by providing practical advice and training.
Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)	As well as providing funding for new affordable housing the HCA will be allocating funds for re-use of empty property in its' 2011/2015 programme.

### **Planned outcomes**

By completing the actions in this delivery plan we aim to reduce significantly the number of long-term empty properties in North Somerset. This will lead to better use being made of the existing housing stock in the district and contribute to meeting housing need in North Somerset.

## **Links to the Housing Strategy**

The Empty Homes Delivery Plan will contribute to the priorities in the Housing Strategy as follows:

- Delivering homes, developing communities - supporting and encouraging owners to bring their homes back into use.
- Better homes, better places - enable owners to bring their homes up to the Decent Home Standard by using the low interest loan scheme where possible.
- Greater opportunity and greater choice - providing greater choice to homeless people with the tenant finding scheme.

## **Monitoring**

Resources and partnerships are essential to deliver a good service and this will be monitored by:

- Empty property steering group meetings.
- Team updates to ensure the delivery plan is in-line with the team plan.
- Number and level of complaints.
- Quarterly reports on the council website.
- Monthly updates of performance report to Scrutiny Panel.

## Action Plan

Priority	Action	Target date	Lead	Resource	Performance measures
<b>Working with empty property owners</b>	Raise the profile of empty properties through publicity campaigns and send out letters/leaflets to Estate Agents, Solicitors and Care Homes outlining options to owners and targeting key areas and improve our understanding of empty properties including rural areas	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer's time	Number of responses to relevant campaigns
	Consider and pursue enforcement action where negotiations fail	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer/Housing Renewals Team/Planning/Legal Team	Internal officer's time and CPO funding	Number of empty properties where enforcement cases are in progress
	Implement Private Sector Leasing Scheme with Registered Providers to offer flexible options including guaranteed rent for term	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer's time	Number of empty properties involved in the scheme

<b>Making the best use of resources</b>	Adopt a systematic approach to categorising empty properties and direct resources to agreed priorities	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer's time	Number of properties categorised and priority allocated.
	Work with council tax to manage impact of New Homes Bonus	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer's time	Number of properties reduced in priority categories
	Explore good practice with other local authorities and West of England group, internal joint working and keep up to date with best practice	Ongoing	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer/Empty Homes Network/Other Local Authorities and West of England Empty Property Group	Instances of good practice/joint working identified.
	Support Registered Providers bidding for HCA funding to bring empty properties back into use	April/May 2011	Housing Development Officer	Housing Development Officer and Registered Providers time	Number of successful HCA bids for funding

## Summary of responses

Name	Response	Our comments	Changes made
Anonymous	Given a good result to your bidding process to turn empty properties back into use - perhaps you could put further investigation into 114 in row 8 category – Page 1.	Council Tax trace the unknown owners of these properties through land registry searches and carry out any appropriate further investigation and re-allocate to another category if appropriate.	Further information added into Table A.
Anonymous	Needs to be less words. Explanations could be via a link or an appendix.	The draft document is considered to be relatively short and concise compared to similar Local Authority plans. Links to be added.	Links added to text.
Councillor	Will there be reports of progress periodically, if so, where?	Progress to be reported quarterly on the Council website on the Housing – Empty Property page. Monthly updates of performance reports to Scrutiny Panel.	Updated Plan to clarify monitoring.
Landlord	I think the only way you encourage landlords to rent out properties is if you have more certainty about them being paid housing benefit. I have had nothing but problems with a flat that I own with the tenant being on housing benefit to the extent that I would not rent to someone on benefits again.	Comment noted however, Policy on direct payments to landlords is a matter of Government Policy and the criteria is strict. In some circumstances direct payments can be made to landlords. Issues could possibly be raised with central government in an appropriate forum. We are seeking to establish a Private Sector Leasing Scheme through Registered Providers which would enable landlords	None.

		using this scheme to have guaranteed rent payments.	
Yatton Parish Council	<p>It is suggested that Table D could include liaising with care homes to monitor if properties are empty following a residents' admission into long term care (even if the lets were for short term periods).</p> <p>It was considered that the action plan regarding publicity for the plan needs to be continued after June 2011.</p>	<p>Leaflet drop to care homes outlining options for owners.</p> <p>Comment noted and agreed.</p>	<p>Updated Action Plan.</p> <p>Publicity to continue beyond June 2011.</p>
Backwell Parish Council	We think it is quite clear and easy to understand. We think it could prove more difficult with unco-operative property owners who are reluctant to agree and may need further litigation.	Support noted and welcomed.	None.
Wraxall and Failand Parish Council – Chairman's comments	I believed that the language used to describe what was required was not clear to someone who was unfamiliar with this policy. Too often Local Government Plans and policies are couched in language used by professionals in that discipline.	Delivery Plan checked for 'plain English' by Communications Team.	Suggested comments from Communications Team actioned.
Planning Policy Manager, Development and Environment	The report should examine the potential for non-residential or mixed uses. Is it concerned with all empty property ie also empty office etc? This is part of an overall approach to employment-	Comment noted. Review position when final changes to Use Classes Order are confirmed.	None proposed at present but renew at later date.

	led and will also become more relevant in terms of the proposed changes to the Use Classes Order to permit changes from commercial to residential.		
Supporting People Manager, Adult Social Services & Housing	The only comment I have is about improving the ability to convert former shops into homes.	Comment noted. Review position when final changes to Use Classes Order are confirmed.	None proposed at present but review at later date.
Applications and Consents Service Manager, Development and Environment	Table C page 8. Building Control should be split to read Building Control on one row and Development Management (applications and consents team) on another row to show the separate roles of Building Control and Development Management.	Comment noted and agreed	Table C amended.
Abbots Leigh Parish Council	General support for Empty Property Delivery Plan	Support noted.	None.
Landlord	General support for Empty Property Delivery Plan	Support noted.	None.
Landlord	General support for Empty Property Delivery Plan	Support noted.	None.
Landlord	General support for Empty Property Delivery Plan	Support noted.	None.