

### **Case Study – Negotiation with an Owner of a Long-Term, Problematic, Empty Property.**

The newly appointed Empty Homes Officer was made aware of several long term, problematic properties that would form a high priority list consisting of approximately fifteen houses out of the total six-hundred that lay empty.

After visiting a number of properties within a ward of the city at the request of its Councillor, the Empty Homes Officer visited one of the 'priority' properties that had been causing the surrounding neighbours and their community particular problems. Rough sleepers, congregating drinkers and antisocial behaviour all are being attracted to the area due to this empty property.

Empty for a number of years, the property was hidden from the road by a large hedge, hiding the deteriorating condition of the property from direct view, but also providing ideal cover for any potential fly-tippers or rough sleepers.

Within days of visiting the property with the ward Councillor, the Empty Homes Officer received a phone call reporting an incident at the house where a neighbour had seen a number of people coming out of the property's garden early in the morning. All had been drinking and they had provided an unwelcome sight as the neighbour was taking his young son to school. The Empty Homes Officer later visited the complainant, who explained what had happened, and the various other incidents that had occurred over the past five years the property had been empty.

Over the course of the following two weeks, attempts to contact the owner proved unsuccessful, despite the case history showing that the owner had been reasonably co-operative when previously contacted by a Council officer. After reviewing the case history, it was clear that the property had received a number of complaints from neighbouring residents and that the owner had always complied with council requests, but only to the absolute minimum.

A lead on one of the previous case notes provided the Officer with the owner's daughter's name but no address. After a search via council tax records the Officer was able to find an address for her on the same street as the problematic empty home. The Empty Homes Officer visited and the current occupier informed him that the daughter had moved house and gave him her forwarding address.

After finally meeting the property owner's daughter after a couple of unsuccessful visits, the Empty Homes Officer explained the situation with regards to the recent complaints and the strong possibility that enforcement action would soon be taken which may lead to enforcing the sale or compulsorily purchasing the property. Surprisingly, the daughter was fully supportive of this action and past events had led her to agree that drastic action was needed for her father to take note of the severity and number of complaints that the property had attracted.

After meeting with the owner and his daughter the following week, the Empty Homes Officer explained that action was needed, either voluntarily, or through the use of the Council's statutory powers. The owner was apologetic, and by offering advice and support through the process, the realisation that something urgent needed to happen was acknowledged. A process was agreed, whereby the property would be eventually put on the open market, after the property was cleared of wanted belongings from inside the property and the front of the property was tidied to give a favourable first impression to any potential purchasers.

Over the next four months, bi-weekly meetings were held at the property to monitor progress and spontaneous visits were conducted to offer support and advice but also to keep the owner aware that the Empty Homes Officer was there and informally checking up on the progress made. With the owner being a compulsive hoarder the sheer volume of items accrued in the property over a number of decades has proved difficult to sift through, especially considering the age of the owner (early eighties).

As it stands, various valuations have been sought for the property most of which fall below the owners expected sale price. Item removal and clearance of the property is still continuing and it is expected that the property would be on the market within the next few weeks.

Continuous contact and meetings with the owner and his daughter has forced the issue. Whilst there is still some distance to go to having the property renovated and occupied, the process has, so far, been positive. The Council's intervention by the Empty Homes Officer has been a welcome source of support and advice for this elderly owner and his daughter who were unsure how to resolve the problem.