



Peterborough City Council

Empty Homes Strategy

2017 - 2019

11th January 2017

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SECTION 1 FOREWORD



We are facing a local and national housing crisis. The current demand for housing across Peterborough far outstrips supply, and as a result, around 3300 families are on the housing register awaiting suitable accommodation. Along with this, many others live in cramped, overcrowded and otherwise unsuitable properties. At the same time, as at October 2016 there are around 540 properties that have been empty for six months or more.

To be able to meet housing demand, the best possible use of existing stock must be made, along with efforts to free up brownfield sites to build more new homes. Returning long-term empty homes into use will not solve the whole issue, but will certainly have a considerable and credible impact.

In addition, empty homes can have a considerably detrimental effect on the lives of neighbours and local residents as they are often a magnet for crime, anti-social behaviour, and drive down property prices contributing to urban blight and decline. Combined with crime, these properties put added pressure on emergency services as well as the Council's provisions to deal with environmental health and anti-social behaviour teams.

The case for dealing with empty properties is therefore a compelling one, both from a community and a housing perspective. However, in times of unprecedented cuts to local government funding, there are also financial incentives for Local Authorities not only to return existing homes into use, but to ensure that the number of vacant homes does not then increase.

Having included empty properties as part of the Government's New Homes Bonus (NHB) initiative, reducing the number of vacant homes attracts additional income to the Council. Whilst this is a positive step, an increase in numbers attracts a penalty, effectively removing the incentive against the reward earned through new-build property. It is thought that empty homes work in the city has attracted over £3million in NHB rewards since its inception, not taking into account the additional income received through council tax and economic benefits.

Over the period of the previous strategy, Peterborough City Council's Empty Homes Officer has enjoyed unprecedented success in returning properties to occupation, as well as receiving national recognition, of which I am extremely proud.

However, there is more to be done and this hard work and tenacity must continue. This comprehensively updated strategy will ensure that Peterborough remains at the forefront of empty homes work and is able to maximise the economic, community and financial benefits that this brings to the city and its residents.

Councillor Irene Walsh - Cabinet Member Communities and Environment Capital

SECTION 2. NOTES TO THIS REVISION

Peterborough City Council published its first Empty Homes Strategy in 2003 which was subsequently revised and refined in 2009. This accounted for changes implemented in housing policy and law after the enactment of the Housing Act 2004 and the Decent Homes agenda.

The Empty Homes Strategy that followed in 2012 was a comprehensive and robust document that not only built on previous achievements but accounted for the shift in political interest and demand for more to be done on the empty homes issue. This also provided a solid foundation for which the Council would go on to achieve a high level of success in the empty homes field.

Throughout the strategy period 2012-2015 there has been significant changes in the empty homes field of work. The profile of the problems that empty homes bring has been thrust into the national spotlight through coverage on television programmes such as *'The Empty Homes Scandal'* and through campaigns by both the Empty Homes Agency and housing charity Shelter.

What remains however, is the overriding fact that empty homes represent a waste of a valuable resource whilst the need for decent, affordable housing in the city is increasing. This updated Strategy will ensure that Peterborough City Council will not only build on the previous successes and adapt to changes both at a local and national level, but will also ensure that the Council remains committed to being at the forefront of this work. The Council will build on the preventative role and will consider empty property in the wider context of the pressure on housing availability and affordability faced by the city, to develop innovative and proactive engagement with owners.



Fletton High Street - Empty 12 years and brought back to use through Empty Homes Partnership with Cross Keys Homes

SECTION 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2016, Peterborough had approximately 540 properties that have been empty for six months or more.

Whilst the number of empty homes brought back into use has been significant the past four years, the waste of good housing, criminal activity and urban degradation associated with empty homes continues. Coupled with this, around 3,330 people remain on the Council's housing register, clearly demonstrating the need for affordable housing in the city.

Whilst this issue has been increasingly recognised across the country through national media and television programmes such as the 'Great Property Scandal' and 'Britain's Empty Homes', both public and political awareness has therefore raised the expectation that something should be done on this issue and it cannot be ignored.

As well as featuring heavily in the Coalition's Housing Strategy, the introduction of the New Homes Bonus (NHB) scheme that rewards Councils for their work in returning empty homes to use, has added a new dimension to dealing with empty homes and encouraged more local authorities to look closer at the issue.

When dealing with empty homes and their owners, a voluntary way forward and solution is always preferred. Advice, assistance and incentives reduce the demand on council resources as well as the need to pursue enforcement action at a later date. Whilst in the vast majority of cases this is sufficient, there are occasions where owners cannot be traced or are simply unwilling to enter into voluntary dialogue. It is here where enforcement action needs to be considered. Although considered a last resort, Peterborough City Council has nevertheless been successful in their application of enforcement action in recent years with Enforced Sales and in particular with Empty Dwelling Management Orders. Peterborough was the first local authority in the country to secure an Empty Dwelling Management Order through the Residential Property Tribunal, following the enactment of the Housing Act 2004

The Council has also seen success over the past five years in working with local Registered Providers and local investors, seeing a number of long-term empty properties returned to use through negotiation with Registered Providers and subsequently used as affordable housing to meet local need and demand.

Peterborough City Council has been acknowledged both locally and nationally for its proactive and innovative approach to empty homes work, culminating in the Council's Empty Homes Officer being named 'Empty Property Practitioner of the Year' in 2013, by the nationally recognised Empty Homes Network, following on from being Highly Commended in the previous year.

This Strategy provides the framework to ensure that Peterborough City Council continues its reputation as being at the forefront of tackling the issue of empty property, the key aims being:

- To bring empty homes in the private sector back into use, utilising both voluntary means and, when appropriate, statutory enforcement powers which will contribute to an increase in the

affordable housing supply, alleviate the numbers of people in housing need on the housing register, improve neighbourhoods and community confidence and contribute to tackling homelessness in Peterborough

- To introduce Empty Homes Assistance to offer as an incentive to owners of empty property that are of the type that is in high demand across the city. Assistance will contribute to improving the house condition and the property will be placed on a private leasing scheme and will be made available to families in housing need at affordable rent levels
- To work with colleagues leading on the housing joint venture partnership with Cross Keys Homes to thoroughly explore the option of purchasing empty property in suitable locations with property attributes in highest demand in the city. These properties will then be managed by Cross Keys Homes as part of the joint venture.
- To look at the issue of empty property in the whole context of the demand for good quality and affordable housing in the City. Build on the preventative role by proactively developing relationships with owners to prevent properties becoming long term empty and provide a continuous supply of houses that can be utilised by the Housing Needs Service
- to continually improve and refine the evidence base by assembling relevant, accurate and current information to target specific groups depending on why their properties are empty. Tailor different solutions to bring those empty properties back into use or prevent them becoming empty
- To raise awareness of the Empty Homes issue and to promote the service and strategy to owners, neighbours and those affected by empty homes
- To maximise income from the New Homes Bonus that is received from returning empty property back into use

SECTION 4. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

By bringing empty and unused property back into use the following can be achieved:

- Maximising existing housing resource
- Increasing the provision of good quality, affordable housing
- Minimising adverse environmental, social and local impact
- The reduction in the requirement to build on greenfield sites
- Improving the existing built environment
- Improving housing accessibility across all tenures
- Encouraging growth and betterment within communities
- Encouraging inward investment, and promoting sustainable communities
- Supporting regeneration both small and large scale
- Supporting other corporate priorities, objectives and strategies

According to the charity 'Empty Homes', there were 610,123 empty properties in England at the end of 2014. This was the lowest number of recorded empty homes since data collection on the issue began in 2004, where the figure stood at 710,935. Whilst this progress has to be welcomed, it provides an alarming statistic which highlights the scale of the problem nationally.



Central government and local authorities cannot ignore the potential and waste that empty homes present, both as a source of accommodation and as a source of income throughout times of budgetary constraints. This is evident through incentives such as the New Homes Bonus, where authorities are rewarded for an increase in their overall housing stock, and penalised for any decrease.

Fletton Avenue - Empty 10 years and sold privately on behalf of the owner

For communities however, there are other concerns that empty homes present. If allowed to deteriorate, a single property can blight a street and neighbourhood causing nuisance to residents, reducing house prices and contributing to urban decline. As well as encouraging vandalism, fly-tipping and other criminal activity, there may also be an increase in the fear of crime which can have a detrimental effect on the lives of residents in the neighbourhood.

Empty homes impact negatively on our city and our communities and are a wasted valuable resource. They do however, also represent a considerable opportunity.

SECTION 5. THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

In 2015 there were an estimated 600,000 empty homes in England, down from 700,000, in 2012. Houses that have been empty for more than six months are classified as long term empty. There are currently approximately 200,000 long-term empty homes in England.

5.1 New Homes Bonus

Introduced in 2010, the New Homes Bonus rewards local authorities through grant allocations, where they have provided additional accommodation through newly built dwellings. The scheme also recognises empty homes work by including additions to the housing stock through the return to use of empty homes as well as commercial building conversions into residential dwellings.

New Home Bonus not only encourages local authorities to invest in empty homes work, it also serves to justify on-going investment in the area to ensure that the problem of empty property is monitored

and contained. With each addition to the overall housing stock of the city payments are worth in the region of £7,000. Therefore it is in the financial interest of the council to reduce the number of empty homes and to also ensure that this figure remains as low as possible.

The New Homes Bonus was initially a six year scheme and it is hoped that this incentive to local authorities continues so the financial benefits to the Council of bringing empty properties back into the available dwelling stock can also continue.

5.2 Empty Homes Programmes

As part of the government's comprehensive spending review in 2010, a £100 million fund administered by the Homes & Communities Agency was established to assist local authorities and registered providers in bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing. This could be carried out through either a lease and repair or purchase and repair option. A second round of funding was announced in 2012.

The central government funded National Empty Homes Loan Fund was also launched in 2013 which aimed to offer owners of empty homes a loan of up to £15,000 to renovate their property to the Decent Homes Standard in order to rent them out. The scheme was operated by the charity Empty Homes working in partnership with Ecology Building Society and were granted a £3 million budget from the Department for Communities and Local Government on the basis that 324 empty properties would be brought back into use within agreed timescales. Unfortunately this scheme was withdrawn in July 2014 because of the low take up by home owners. Empty Homes commented that the secured loan offered by Ecology Building Society 'was not suitable given the financial circumstances of the property owners'.

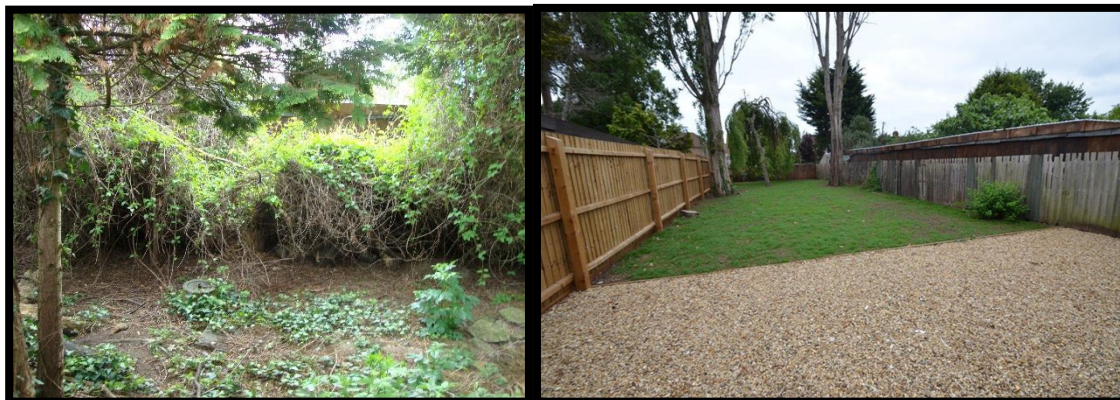
5.3 Council Tax

Since April 2013, powers that were previously held by central government to determine the level of council tax paid on empty properties were devolved to local authority level. The aim of this policy was to incentivise owners into reoccupying their property through either increasing the council tax payable on empty property or by removing the reductions of exemptions previously in place.

Local authorities are now able to determine whether to apply a discount for empty property for up to six months for those properties empty and in need of considerable renovations. There is also the option of imposing an 'empty homes premium', where council tax levels are able to be set at 150% for property that has been empty for two years or longer.

In April 2016 the one month's discount for a home being substantially unfurnished and unoccupied was removed.

The fall in long term empty homes from 299,999 in 2010 to 205,000 in 2014 clearly demonstrates the success of the government’s Empty Homes Programme. The challenge now falls to local councils to introduce and implement their own measures, to ensure the empty homes issue remains topical on the local agenda.



Vere Road - Empty 8 Years and brought back into use through an Empty Dwelling Management Order

SECTION 6. THE LOCAL CONTEXT

6.1 Peterborough is a city with huge ambitions. The vision for the city is:

“A bigger and better Peterborough that grows the right way, and through truly sustainable growth: Improves the quality of life of all its people and communities and ensures that all communities benefit from growth and the opportunities that it brings. Creates a truly sustainable Peterborough, the urban centre of a thriving sub-regional community of villages and market towns. A healthy, safe and exciting place to live, work and visit, famous as the environmental capital of the UK.”

6.2 The Peterborough Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008 - 2021 is the overarching strategy which guides the work of Peterborough City Council and its partners. The strategic priorities are:

- Drive growth, regeneration and economic development
- Improve educational attainment and skills
- Safeguard vulnerable children and adults
- Implement the Environment Capital agenda
- Support Peterborough’s culture and leisure trust – Vivacity
- Keep all our communities safe, cohesive and healthy
- Achieve the best health and wellbeing for the city

6.3 The Empty Homes Strategy links to the following corporate priorities:

- Drive growth, regeneration and economic development - by increasing the available housing stock in the city, creating better places to live and increasing economic prosperity by creating a well-managed private rented housing sector
- Improving educational attainment and skills - by creating safe, warm and good quality housing to help reduce physical and mental illness in order to promote higher levels of achievement, particularly in education and employment
- Safeguard vulnerable children and adults - by increasing the available housing stock for vulnerable families
- Implement the Environmental Capital agenda - by improving the energy efficiency of existing empty housing stock and reducing carbon emissions from domestic dwellings
- Keep all our communities safe, cohesive and healthy - by building and empowering local communities, making Peterborough safer and building pride in Peterborough's neighbourhoods
- Achieve the best health and wellbeing for the city - by providing good quality, secure and affordable housing to all of the residents of the city

6.4 The Empty Homes Strategy will inform and underpin the Peterborough Housing Strategy 2016 - 2021 which is the overarching document enabling the Council to address the housing needs of the City. In particular, the two key Housing Strategy priorities that this Strategy feeds into are:

- Increasing the supply of homes which people can afford and
- Improve housing conditions to support health and wellbeing

6.5 This Strategy links into Peterborough's Child Poverty Strategy 2016 - 2021 particularly Priority 2 - Improving Standards of Living by providing safe, affordable and, good quality housing

6.6 This Strategy links into Peterborough's Homelessness Strategy, particularly

- To increase the housing stock availability through the reuse of empty homes
- To encourage bids from registered charities and providers for funding from central government
- Promote and support the Empty Homes Strategy

6.7 There are many benefits associated with bringing empty property back into use, including:

- Reducing blight on neighbourhoods
- Increasing housing supply and occupancy
- Reduction in crime and fear of crime
- Income generation through New Homes Bonus and Council Tax revenue
- Debt recovery associated with empty homes
- Increased private sector investment in the city
- Less risk and pressure on emergency services
- Reduced pressure on council services

- Inward investment by external partners

At a time of increasing pressure on local government services, the requirement to make more use of available resources is stronger than it has been for years.

In Peterborough alone, there are around 540 properties that have been empty for six months and 130 of these have been empty for more than two years. It is these long term empty homes which cause most concern and are more likely to remain empty further without intervention. These properties are also more likely to be the source of complaints.

At the same time, there are just over 3,300 applicants on the housing register in Peterborough. Whilst returning empty homes to use may not always be the quickest option and solution to the housing problems both nationally and locally, it is often the most cost effective and can play an important part in maximising the use of existing housing stock for the benefit of the residents of Peterborough.

With current housing need in the city requiring all possible routes of finding and securing accommodation, all avenues have to be explored when looking at ways to increase the housing stock. In Peterborough, as it is across the country, demand is far outstripping supply.

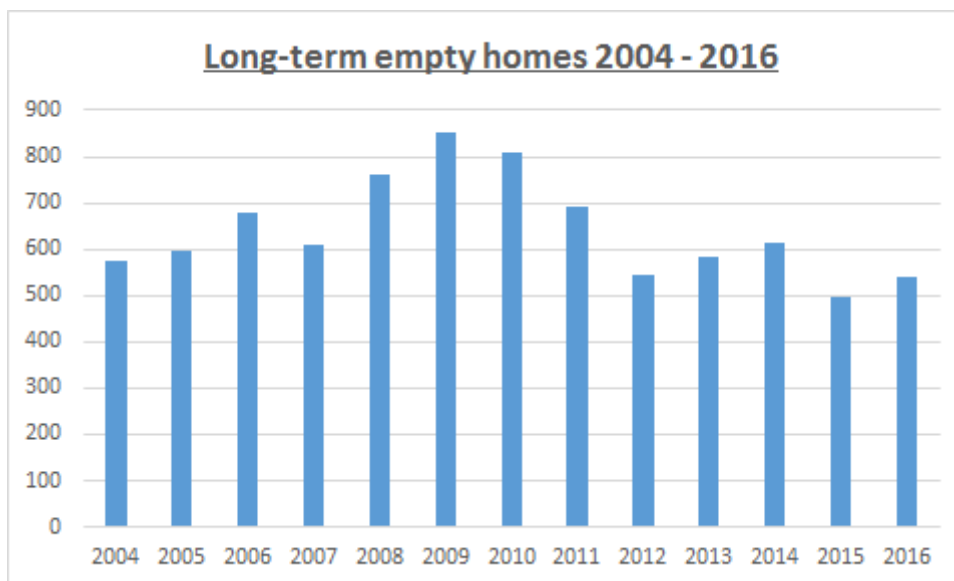


Barnstock, Bretton. - Empty 2 years and brought back into use through Empty Homes Partnership with Cross Keys Homes.

6.3 Statistics and comparison

As seen in the table below, the number of long-term empty homes in Peterborough has shown a significant decline over the past 7 years, falling from over 800 in 2009 to 540 in 2016.

Although only a steady decline, this illustrates the benefits of having a dedicated officer to tackle the issue of empty homes.



6.4 Achievements - 2012 - 2016

Peterborough City Council has enjoyed unprecedented successes within the empty homes field over the past four years. Some of these include:

- Over 820 empty homes brought back into use with Council intervention
- The Empty Homes portion of the New Homes Bonus allocation has reached £3 million
- Peterborough City Council's Empty Homes Officer Highly Commended in 2013 by the Empty Homes Network, the Country's foremost empty homes practitioner group
- Peterborough City Council's Empty Homes Officer named 'National Empty Homes Practitioner of the Year 2014' by the Empty Homes Network
- Successfully bid for £1.2 million HCA 'Empty Homes Funding Round 1' in partnership with Cross Keys Homes in March 2012. The Empty Homes Partnership was successful in returning 7 long term and problematic properties back to use, with a combined empty period of 36 years
- The Council and Cross Keys Homes were Highly Commended in 2013 for their delivery of the Empty Homes Partnership
- Worked in partnership with the charity 'Hope Into Action' to secure HCA funding to bring back into use 4 empty homes in the city, now used to support ex-offenders and drug users during rehabilitation. Two houses were purchased in 2012 and a further 2 houses in 2014
- The Council were successful in securing 6 Empty Dwelling Management Orders applications to the Residential Property Tribunal between July 2014 and August 2016, two of which were revoked as they prompted the owner to take voluntary action.
- Building a successful relationship with investors and buyers of empty homes, resulting in the private sales of a number of short and long term empty houses
- Peterborough City Council's Empty Homes Officer provided case and best practice advice to neighbouring authorities and set up the Eastern Region Forum for empty homes practitioners,

bringing together expertise and advice sharing opportunities for all empty homes work in the region

- Peterborough City Council's Empty Homes Officer accepted onto the Empty Homes Network Executive Committee resulting in Peterborough playing a part in driving and implementing new policy and practice nationally

To date, it is estimated that empty homes work in Peterborough has contributed to the Council receiving in excess of £3million of New Homes Bonus allocation. In the same way as a reduction of empty properties attracts a bonus, an increase in the number attracts a penalty, reducing any New Homes Bonus that may be payable on new build properties

As of April 2013, Peterborough City Council implemented a one month empty Council Tax exemption period, whereby the full council tax charge is payable after this expires. The exemption for property needing considerable refurbishment was removed. The Council also implemented the Empty Homes Premium set at 150% for property registered as empty for two years or more.

The increase in housing supply as well as the community related benefits including the enhancement of local neighbourhoods, the reduction of vandalism and anti-social behaviour and the improvement of housing standards are key to achieving the strategic priorities of the Council to improve the quality of life and the environment of its residents. Opportunities to maximise income and minimise losses must also be fully explored, whilst at the same time providing the very best service possible to the residents of the city. This strategy highlights how resources can be targeted effectively to address the issue of empty homes in the city and continue an approach that brings reward and positive outcomes both financially for the Council, but also for the residents in our communities.



Vere Road - Empty 8 Years and brought back into use through an Empty Dwelling Management Order

SECTION 7 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2017 - 2019 THE KEY PRIORITIES

7.1 Measures For Bringing Empty Properties Back Into Use

To bring empty homes in the private sector back into use, utilising both voluntary means and, when appropriate, statutory enforcement powers which will contribute to an increase in the affordable housing supply, alleviate the numbers of people in housing need on the housing register, improve neighbourhoods and community confidence and contribute to tackling homelessness in Peterborough

A systematic three stage approach adopted by many local authorities has been implemented and used since 2011 in Peterborough. The starting point for this approach will always be to work with the property owner wherever possible as there are many reasons why a property becomes empty. Some of those reasons may be sensitive and it is important to be understanding of the full range of different situations that may occur. However, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that an empty home is a wasted resource and often a blight on any neighbourhood. Owners are made aware that the Council's preference is to negotiate a satisfactory solution but the owners are also made aware of their responsibilities.

The three stage approach is:

Identification

- Identify properties for action based on length of time they have been empty, the level of nuisance being caused, and the condition of the building.
- Establish ownership and make contact to ascertain the reasons for the property being empty and the owner's plans
- Decide on proportionate action

One way of gathering information about empty property is through Council Tax records. Permission to use this information was given in the Local Government Act 2003 which allows Local Authorities to use Council Tax information for "identifying vacant dwellings and taking steps to bring vacant dwellings back into use".

The Empty Homes Officer is also contacted by members of the public, who report empty properties that they are aware of. The Empty Homes pages on the Council website have been developed and have included a facility for members of the public to report an empty home electronically and anonymously. There is also a dedicated email address emptyhomes@peterborough.gov.uk, which goes straight through to the Empty Homes Officer.

In addition to this, the Empty Homes Officer liaises with visiting officers in the Prevention & Enforcement Service, Planning Services and Building Control Services, has conversations with neighbours, accesses Land Registry Online and checks with Probate Offices.

Encouragement

- Work with the owner offering advice and assistance
- The aim is to bring the property back into use through the voluntary action of the owner

In the first instance our aim is to provide advice and assistance to the owner with a view to outlining the options that are available to them. The options are to rent out the property, to sell the property or to live in it themselves. How quickly they are able to do any of these will depend on the condition of the property and the owner's personal and financial circumstances.

A three stage template letter process has been developed which escalate in seriousness. Once this has been instigated, the property is assessed to determine its condition and its effect on the local area and a priority rating for action is determined.

Enforcement

Where the encouragement option has failed and owners are not willing to engage proactively with the Empty Homes Officer, or where it is considered that the property is unlikely to be brought back into use voluntarily, there is little option but to proceed with enforcement action. By closely following the approaches outlined above and recording all actions taken, an extensive evidence base will have been built up which demonstrates that the Council has taken all reasonable steps to bring the property back into use voluntarily. This evidence base will accelerate the enforcement process and increase the chance of success if the owner were to appeal the enforcement action.

Enforcement action could include the use of:

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

EDMO's were first introduced in 2006 and allow local authorities to take management control of an empty property for up to 7 years, carrying out any necessary repairs and arranging for the property to be rented out during this period.

The owner retains ownership and the right to sell the property and receives any surplus income made during this time once management costs and refurbishment costs have been reclaimed from the rental income.

In 2012 the criteria for using an EDMO changed. The minimum time a property has to be empty increased from six months to two years. An EDMO is also now only applicable for properties attracting anti-social behaviour and/or having a significantly adverse effect on the community. This will inevitably restrict its use to a smaller number of properties, but it remains a valuable tool for long-term empty properties having a significant impact on a neighbourhood.

Since 2012, Peterborough City Council has been successful in its targeted use of EDMO's, successfully applying for 6, 2 of which were revoked due to owner co-operation following notification of the Council's intention.

Voluntary Use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders

The same process as the enforced EDMO is followed, but the action is done on a voluntary basis negotiated with the owner.

Enforced Sale

The Law and Property Act 1925 allows local authorities to recover charges through the sale of the property. This option can only be utilised where there is a debt to the local authority registered as a charge on the property and this can be in the form of Council Tax debt or works in default following notices being served to remove accumulations or carry out improvement works etc.

This option is more attractive than compulsory purchase as it does not require the local authority to take ownership of the property and sell it on and therefore requires no capital outlay.

Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)

CPO's can be made under Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 or under Sect 226 (as amended by the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990, for the provision of housing accommodation or to make a quantitative or qualitative improvement to existing housing.

The initiation of a CPO is often enough to encourage owners to bring their properties back into use voluntarily. This process is costly with regard to time and resources and is only considered when all other options are unsuccessful as it removes ownership from the current owner.

Other Statutory Powers

All empty properties undergo an assessment by the Empty Homes Officer and an inspection carried out under the Housing Act 2004 Housing Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS). The Housing Act places a duty on local authorities to take action when the most serious Category 1 hazards are identified. The authority has the option to serve Improvement Notices requiring the owner to carry out the necessary works to remedy defects, which will reduce the hazards to an acceptable level.

If the owner fails to comply with a notice, the authority can arrange for the works to be carried out in default and recover the costs from the owner. Any costs are registered as a local land charge against the property and may count in any subsequent enforced sale action.

A list of all statutory enforcement powers can be found in Appendix A.

7.2 Incentives, Empty Homes Assistance & Private Sector Leasing

To introduce Empty Homes Assistance to offer as an incentive to owners of empty property that are of the type that is in high demand across the city. Assistance will contribute to improving the house condition and the property will be placed on a private leasing scheme and will be made available to families in housing need at affordable rent levels

Empty Homes Assistance & Private Sector Leasing

Given the shortage of available housing and current housing demand, the Council is introducing discretionary Empty Homes Assistance to act as an incentive to owners to put their empty properties forward to be used as accommodation for families in need of housing on the Council's Housing Register. This initiative will contribute to increasing housing supply in the City making more privately owned homes available to the Housing Needs Service which in turn will reduce the use of temporary hostel and expensive bed & breakfast accommodation.

To be considered for Empty Homes Assistance, the property must have been empty for a minimum of 6 months prior to application and be of the size and type of accommodation in need by clients on the Housing Register. The Empty Homes Officer will assess the property and the potential refurbishment costs in order to determine the lease period which will be a minimum of 5 years. The Council will initially offer Empty Homes Assistance in order to carry out the necessary repairs and refurbishment. The Home Improvement Agency will schedule the required works, tender the work using their approved contractors and oversee the work onsite.

The arrangement for the 'private leasing scheme' involves the Council entering into 2 agreements with the property owner:

- 1) a lease agreement
- 2) a loan agreement

The lease agreement provides for the owner to let the property to the Council for a minimum period of 5 years in exchange of the Council agreeing to process the rental payments. The lease agreement also provides for the Council to undertake and pay for the repair works to the property on the owner's behalf.

The Council will recover the costs of the repair works through a fixed sum interest free loan offered to the owner (the Empty Homes Assistance) in exchange for the owner leasing the property to the Council. The maximum amount of Empty Homes Assistance is £20,000 per property. The loan amount will be for a sum equal to the costs of the repair works plus reasonable charges. The loan amount will be repaid by monthly repayments spread over the term of the lease. The loan will be secured by way of a legal charge over the property.

Under both the lease and loan agreements, the Council will have a right to set off its obligation to pay its rent. This means that the Council may recover the costs of the repair works by reducing its monthly rent in equal amount of the monthly loan repayment. If the Council is unable to recover the monthly loan repayments, for example where the lease agreement ends earlier, then the whole unpaid loan balance becomes immediately payable on demand together with any accrued interest from the certified completion date of works until the date of repayment at such reasonable rates as the Council

may determine.

The property owner must enter into a separate management agreement with the preferred management agent who will manage the property throughout the duration of the agreed lease period. The property owner must make the property available for lease to the Council for nomination to applicants in housing need for the duration of the agreed lease period and immediately after any remedial works have been carried out.

The Council will then offer a guaranteed monthly rent (based on the Local Housing Allowance rate) and will nominate a household in housing need into the property. The Council will recoup the repairs and refurbishment costs from the monthly rent, minus any fees for the management of the property during the lease period. Any remaining monies at the end of the lease period will be paid back directly to the owner. At the end of the lease agreement the property is handed back to the owner in good repair in order to sell or continue renting it out.

Empty Homes Assistance & Owners in Residential Care

Empty Homes Assistance and the Private Sector Leasing Scheme will also be available to people living in long term residential care who own a vacant property enabling them to lease their house to the Council to house a family in housing need in return for a guaranteed rent, which could contribute towards their care costs, for a fixed period of time.

Empty Homes Assistance & Private Rented Properties

Empty Homes Assistance and the Private Sector Leasing Scheme may also be offered to properties owned by Private Landlords that are currently empty as the Landlord cannot meet the licensing or housing standard requirements. In order to receive Empty Homes Assistance the owner must not have been the subject of any Housing Act enforcement action or convictions including not meeting the Fit & Proper Person Test

Empty Home Assistance is discretionary and is provided subject to funding availability. Full details of Empty Homes Assistance are contained within the Housing Renewals Policy 2017 - 2019

Other Incentives

Where a property has remained empty for over two years, the owner of the property becomes eligible to receive a reduced rate of VAT on the costs of any refurbishment works. This is achieved by requesting a letter from the Empty Homes Officer who will confirm the last occupancy date of the property. A contractor is then able to apply the reduced VAT rate. Currently the reduced rate of VAT reduces the 20% VAT rule to 5%.

7.3 Proactive & Preventative Work

To work with colleagues leading on the housing joint venture partnership with Cross Keys Homes to thoroughly explore the option of purchasing empty property in suitable locations with property attributes in highest demand in the city. These properties will then be managed by Cross Keys Homes as part of the joint venture.

To look at the issue of empty property in the whole context of the demand for good quality and affordable housing in the City. Build on the preventative role by proactively developing relationships with owners to prevent properties becoming long term empty and provide a continuous supply of houses that can be utilised by the Housing Needs Service

The Empty Homes Officer provides a comprehensive advice and assistance service to the owners of empty property, those who are looking to purchase or develop empty property and those who are experiencing problems arising from living near to empty properties. Information and guidance is given on refurbishment, sales, lettings, energy efficiency or hazards within the property due to defects.

Where owners prove difficult to trace through Council Tax or Land Registry records the Council has long-standing and positive relationships with tracing agents who offer their services free of charge to the Council. If a property is going through the process of probate, it becomes exempt from Council Tax for six months, which is notified to the Empty Homes Officer who works proactively with the beneficiary and their legal representatives in order to prevent a home becoming a long term empty property.

The Council is looking at the issue of empty property in the whole context of the demand for and shortage of good quality and affordable housing in the City and will proactively develop new and enhance existing relationships with owners and property investors to prevent properties becoming long term empty. In addition to the offer of Empty homes Assistance and the private leasing scheme, partnership working with colleagues leading on the Housing Joint Venture with Cross Keys Homes will fully explore the option of purchasing empty property depending on the property location, property attributes and the financial viability of the acquisition.

7.4 Improve & Maintain Accurate Evidence Base & Targeting Specific Groups

To continually improve and refine the evidence base by assembling relevant, accurate and current information to target specific groups depending on why their properties are empty. Tailor different solutions to bring those empty properties back into use or prevent them becoming empty

Empty Homes Database

The Council has a database of empty homes that have been identified through Council Tax or referred to the Empty Homes Officer since 2011. This database is updated monthly from Council Tax with all properties that have remained empty for six months. When a complaint is made about an empty property or an owner notifies the Council that a property is empty or there is an intention it may

become empty details are automatically added to the database irrespective of time left empty which allows proactive engagement to take place.

Council Tax and Partnership Working

The Empty Homes Officer works in partnership with colleagues in Council Tax to ensure the accuracy of the empty homes data is continually being reviewed and evaluated, in order to ensure that the overall picture of empty homes in the city is as current as possible. This ensures that statistics can be provided at short notice and also ensures that the overall available housing stock is correct for the purposes of the New Homes Bonus allocation.

The Empty Homes Officer and Visiting Officers from Council Tax exchange accurate and timely information on the current status of properties to ensure records are kept as accurate as possible both for revenue purposes and empty homes activity. The Empty Homes Officer is continually exploring ways in which relationships with Council Tax can be improved.

Website and Referral Options

The Empty Homes pages on Peterborough City Council's website provide a brief summary of the activities carried out by the Empty Homes Officer as well as what people can do to make a complaint about an empty property or what to do if they own an empty property.

There is also a referral form which residents can anonymously submit reports of empty properties.

Targeting Specific Groups

Analysis is continually carried out on the Empty Homes database to ascertain the length of time the property is empty, ownership details, property attributes, condition, potential refurbishment costs and reasons for the property becoming empty. The aim is to target specific groups of empty property with tailored solutions that meet the owner's' needs and maximise the supply of affordable housing in the city

7.5 Raising Awareness of the Empty Homes Issue

To raise awareness of the Empty Homes issue and to promote the service and strategy to owners, neighbours and those affected by empty homes

In order to ensure the profile of the importance of empty homes activity is maintained the Empty Homes Officer liaises with other departments within the Council, including:

- The Media Team

- The Housing & Strategic Planning Team
- Housing Needs Service
- Shared Transactional Services (Council Tax)
- Financial Services Team
- Prevention & Enforcement Service Officers
- Planning & Building Control Services
- Members Services

The Empty Homes Officer has collaborated in favourable press coverage about empty properties across the City on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, BBC Look East, Heart FM and the Peterborough Telegraph. It is the Council's aim to keep the issue of empty properties and the work of the Empty Homes Officer regularly in the spotlight by regular press releases.



Fletton Avenue - Empty for 2 years and brought back into use through enforced sale and refurbished by the new owner

7.6 Maximising Income and Funding Opportunities

To maximise income from the New Homes Bonus that is received from returning empty property back into use

There are three main streams of income associated with empty homes work - New Homes Bonus, debt recovery and bids into external funding sources.

New Homes Bonus

In order to maximise New Homes Bonus allocation the Empty Homes Officer, working with colleagues in Council Tax ensures the data used to calculate the New Home Bonus award is as accurate as possible. The data is extracted as a snapshot of Council Tax records, usually at the end of October.

Debt recovery

There are several types of debt associated with empty homes, the most common being council tax and works in default costs.

Peterborough City Council seeks to ensure that all debt recovery opportunities are maximised. It is therefore imperative that the close working relationship already in place with Council Tax colleagues is continued and strengthened through the sharing of information and data which could aid the debt recovery process.

External funding

Peterborough City Council are continually looking at ways in which both the Council themselves or external partners can secure funding options to return empty homes to use and would always seek to support applications and partnership working should these be successful.

The Nationwide Foundation is a registered charity whose aim is to create decent, affordable housing for those in need. They help bring empty properties back into use by providing grants and social investments to community-led organisations. The Nationwide Foundation has also funded a project that seeks to promote the creation of affordable housing from long term empty commercial property. A new bidding round will be launched in early 2017 and the Empty Homes Officer will look at the feasibility of submitting a bid.

The Homes & Communities Agency Empty Homes Programme has now ended and funding for tackling empty property moved to the Affordable Homes Programme, although there was not any specific ringfenced funding for empty homes activity. This situation is being monitored should opportunities to bid for funding become available.

There are also a variety of ways in which the re-occupation of empty homes maximises income. Private sector investment in empty homes serves not only to bring investment into the city, but also employs local tradesmen and supports local people. The reduction in blight and decline associated with empty homes also helps towards environmental improvements and maintaining property values. The general improvement in appearance that the renovation of empty property brings contributes not only to regeneration aspirations, but also the appearance and attractiveness of the city.

8. MONITORING & PERFORMANCE

Although there is no national target for bringing empty homes back into use, the Council considers that this area is an important function which aims to increase the supply of decent and safe housing in the city, so retains a local indicator to measure performance. Performance is monitored using the following guides:

- The total number of long-term empty properties as at 1st April
- The total number of long-term empty properties that are returned to use or demolished through Local Authority intervention
- The fiscal proportion of New Homes Bonus allocations earned through the return to use of empty homes
- The number of EDMOs in place, or successfully applied for
- The number of Enforced sales successfully executed
- The number of Housing Act 2004 Improvement notices served

SECTION 9 ACTION PLAN

The strategic objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy have been described in detail throughout this document, but to summarise, there are five key objectives

Objective	Action Number	Target and Outcome	Description	Lead Officer
Bring private sector homes back into use	1	Continue to reduce the number of long term empty homes in the city, and highlight the benefits of returning such property to use	To utilise all information and available tools to return 120 empty property to use, and to champion the benefits of doing so.	Empty Homes Officer
Bring private sector homes back into use	2	Pursue enforcement action against prominent problematic and nuisance properties, where the owner is not responding or uncooperative	Progress specifically identified property through the EDMO/Enforced Sale process	Empty Homes Officer
Bring private sector homes back into use	3	Ensure compliance within the service, and accurate recording of actions in accordance with procedure	Maintain and update records on the relevant systems, and ensure a structured progression through the empty homes process	Empty Homes Officer
Introduce Empty Homes Assistance Loan	4	To build, negotiate and deliver property specific loan packages	Through negotiating with owners, deliver a scheme which provides social housing, as well as an income for the homeowner	Empty Homes Officer
Introduce Empty Homes Assistance Loan	5	To build a successful channel from private sector empty, to public sector occupied	Manage the process from initial contact to the property becoming occupied	Empty Homes Officer
Build on preventing property becoming empty	6	Raise awareness of the service to local people	By providing a first point of call to the homeowner for support and assistance, and to dispel the possible perception of an enforcement approach	Empty Homes Officer
Proactive engagement with owners and investors	7	Prevention of properties becoming long term empty	Proactive intervention to ensure a continuous supply of houses that can be utilised by the Housing Needs Service.	Empty Homes Officer

Explore opportunities through Housing Joint Venture	8	Maximise availability of affordable housing	The partnership with colleagues leading on the Housing Joint Venture with Cross Keys Homes will also be fully explored in order to ascertain how this mechanism can be used to return empty properties to use.	Empty Homes officer
Build on preventing property becoming empty	9	Target specific scenarios or circumstance, and promote how the service helps	Look at the generic reasons for property becoming empty such as probate or accidental landlords, and tailor support to assist those specific groups	Empty Homes Officer
Improve, and refine methods for gaining intelligence	10	Explore the practices of other local authorities, and draw on their experiences to adapt our methods	Ensure that the service is up to date with best practice across the country, and exploring methods used by other authorities that can be adopted locally	Empty Homes Officer
Improve, and refine methods for gaining intelligence	11	Ensure that the database is kept up to date and accurate, both for reporting and for contacting owners	Continue to review and adapt both the information made available by Council Tax, but also the reporting methods used by the public, to ensure all property left empty is investigated	Empty Homes Officer
Raise awareness of the empty homes issue	12	To improve exposure to the public as a service, as well as a service to empty home owners	Reaching the right people with the right service through targeted press releases, bespoke letters and mailshots	Empty Homes Officer
Raise awareness of the empty homes issue	13	To highlight the service as a single point of contact for all empty home enquiries	To regularly review and improve all outlets of communication, such as the Council's website, Social Media and both internal and external press releases	Empty Homes Officer
Maximise income through the New Homes Bonus	14	Ensure all held information is accurate and up to date	Regularly perform updates and checks on the database, to ensure that data is as accurate as possible by the CTB1 completion date	Empty Homes Officer
Maximise income through the New Homes Bonus	15	To enhance communication channels with Revenue and Benefits	By continually reviewing communication channels, processes and information sharing, this will in turn improve accuracy and ultimately performance.	Empty Homes Officer
All	16	Conduct an annual review of strategy targets, progress, action plan and resources.	Review action plan and targets to ensure they remain SMART and challenging. Where possible, access new and additional funding	Housing Programmes Manager

			opportunities to implement new measures.	
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Appendix A - Statutory Enforcement Options

Dangerous or dilapidated buildings or structures	Building Act 1984, Sections 77 and 78	To need the owner to make the property safe (Section 77) or to enable the Local Authority to take emergency action to make the property safe
	Housing Act 1985, Sections 189 and 190	To need the owner to make the property safe. Section 189 applies if the property is unfit for human habitation. Section 190 applies in other cases of serious disrepair.
Unsecured properties (if it poses the risk that it may be entered or suffer vandalism, arson or similar)	Building Act 1984, Section 78	To allow the Local Authority to fence off the property
	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29	To need the owner to take steps to secure the property or to allow the Local Authority to board it up in an emergency
	Environmental Protection Act 1990, Section 80	
Vermin (If it is either present or there is a risk of attracting vermin that may detrimentally affect people's health)	Public Health Act 1961, Section 34	To need the owner to remove waste so that vermin is not attracted to the site
	Prevention of Damage by Pests Act, Section 4	
	Public Health Act 1936, Section 83	
	Environmental Protection Act 1990, Section 80	
	Building Act 1984, Section 76	
Unightly land and property affecting the amenity of the area	Public Health Act 1961, Section 34	To need the owner to remove waste from the property
	Town and County Planning Act 1990, Section 215	To need the owner to address unsightly land or the external appearance of the property
	Building Act 1984,	To need the owner to take steps to

	Section 79	address a property adversely affecting the amenity of an area through its disrepair.
Long-term vacant property that is detrimental to the area	Housing Act 1985 Section 17	To grant the Local Authority the powers of Compulsory purchase
Long-term vacant property that does not meet the current housing standards	Housing Act 2004, Sections 11 & 12	To require the owner to carry out the necessary repairs to bring the property up to the current housing standards.
Properties that have been vacant in excess of 6 months where negotiation has been unsuccessful in returning the property to use.	Housing Act 2004, Part 4, Section 134	To grant the Local Authority the powers to take over the management of a property initially under an interim Empty Dwelling Management order then under a Final Empty Dwelling Management Order.
Properties on which the Local Authority have incurred costs, eg. for securing dwellings, or carrying out essential repairs.	Property Act 1925 Sections 101 & 103	Enables the Local Authority to require the sale of the property in order to recover any outstanding debts owed to the Authority including Council Tax Arrears

Appendix B – Empty Homes Procedure Flowchart

