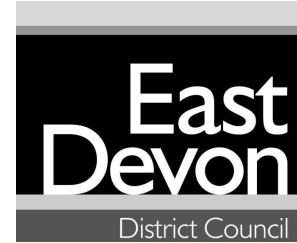


## Agenda Item: 12

**Executive Board**

**15 July 2009**

**MS**



### **East Devon Empty Homes' Strategy 2009-2014**

#### **Summary**

This document sets out East Devon District Council's Empty Homes Strategy for 2009-2014. It details actions which will be undertaken to bring empty properties back into use and maximise the use of under-occupied building to support the Council's objective of providing more affordable housing.

It links closely to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2008 and the Housing Strategy 2008 - 2011. Together these documents set the Council's aims for Empty Homes for a period of five years and identifies delivery tools in an action plan.

This Empty Homes Strategy takes into account new national, regional and local issues now evident in the private sector. A survey of the condition of the private sector housing stock carried out in 2008, has also been used to help set our priorities for private sector housing renewal.

#### **Recommendation**

**The Executive Board approves the Empty Homes' Strategy 2009-2014.**

##### **a) Reasons for Recommendation**

To ensure that we have an up to date Empty Homes' Strategy and to meet our statutory duties.

##### **b) Alternative Options**

The Empty Homes Strategy is not adopted and we do not meet our statutory duties.

##### **c) Risk Considerations**

We do not have an up to date Empty Homes Strategy and do not comply with the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002.

##### **d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations**

###### **Positive Impact Overall**

Affordable homes  
Thriving economy  
Excellent customer service  
Inspirational Council  
Meeting our diversity and equality duties

##### **e) Date for Review of Decision**

April 2011

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## 1. Background

1.1 The most important aspect of empty properties is that they are a wasted resource when so many people desperately need a decent home. Empty properties offer a good opportunity to help ease the pressure on local housing, whether by bringing existing empty homes back into use or by creating new homes through conversion of under-used space. For example, in East Devon in March 2009:

- There were 91 homeless households in temporary accommodation.
- There were 4,381 households on the Council's housing register; 6 with Priority Cards, 648 in Gold band, 2,392 in Silver band and 1,335 in Bronze band.

Yet at the same time there were 551 dwellings in the area registered with Council Tax as a long term (over six months) unfurnished empty property.

1.2 Empty properties are a drain on resources for the owners; ongoing costs include council tax, insurance, repairs, security etc and yet the property produces no income. It has been estimated that keeping a family-sized home empty costs the owner an average of £10,000 per annum (taking into account lost income).

1.3 The fabric of an empty property can deteriorate much more quickly than in an occupied property. Furthermore, neighbouring properties can also be affected e.g. by damp caused by water leaks. In the worst cases the property may become structurally unsound and therefore dangerous to the public.

1.4 If the empty property is of historic interest a part of our heritage is threatened. Poltimore House has become a famous example of an historic property falling into increasing disrepair.

1.5 An empty home may become a target for vandals, arson, fly tipping and can attract vermin, all of which can affect the quality of life for neighbours. It has been estimated by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors that a long-term empty property can reduce the value of neighbouring properties by 18%.

1.6 Empty properties can become a target for squatters. Although the property is being used as housing, it is not a long-term solution and depending on the nature of the squatters, there can be a negative impact on the local community. The house itself may also be damaged.

1.7 Some of the above problems will require the local authority, the Police or the Fire Service to step in and take action. Sometimes this will be at the taxpayers' expense and costs cannot always be recovered from the owner. For example, Councils can deal with the worst empty properties through enforcement action; however these normally cost several thousand pounds each in fees and officer time.

1.8 In some parts of the country (fortunately not in this area of high housing demand) if a cluster of properties become empty in a small area they can quickly begin to establish a spiral of decline, as confidence is lost.

## 2. Significant issues

2.1 The aim of the strategy is to help make better use of all properties, both commercial and residential, in and around the East Devon district that might realistically provide more housing than they do at present.

The strategy sets out the local and national picture in respect of empty homes and also the tools and legal powers available to local authorities and their RSL partners in dealing with empty dwellings. It is also part of a wider suite of strategies for the Exeter and Torbay Housing Market Assessment Area (ETHMA).

Consequently the scope of this Empty Homes Strategy is deliberately wide. It includes:

- Empty properties in the private sector
- Homes that are under-occupied as well as those that are completely vacant
- Second homes and holiday homes as well as mainstream housing
- Redundant commercial space that could be converted to homes e.g. shops, warehouses and industrial sites etc

The strategy also seeks to clearly set out the on-going accomplishments of the Empty Homes Partnership and what is being done to alleviate the problem of empty homes in the East Devon Area. The strategy also seeks to bring those buildings that are historically important for future generations to the attention of the public.

By making the general public aware of empty homes, the problems they cause and by encouraging them to report any potential long-term empties East Devon District Council can help speed up the process of bringing them back into use.

### 3. Outcomes

3.1 The main driver behind this Empty Homes Strategy is to ensure that the Council and the partners of the Empty Homes Service are in a good position to assist in the re-use of empty property across the region and ensure that they are renovated to the Decent Homes Standard and made available to those in most housing need.

- The Private Sector Leasing scheme will be maintained with the necessary number of properties, as required by the Housing Services team, to increase the options available for providing homes for homeless households and others in housing need.
- A LOTS (Living Over The Shops) scheme will be implemented to deliver at least 5 dwellings in the period 2009 to 2011 to utilise empty space and provide additional affordable accommodation.
- The provision of decent, safe, affordable and alternative accommodation will be increased by developing an incentive scheme for private sector landlords to provide Decent Home standard accommodation by establishing links with the Rent Guarantee Scheme and Deposit Bond Scheme.
- Regular analysis of Council Tax data will identify long term empty properties so that ideally contact can be made with owners of these properties. The reasons why properties are empty can be established and assistance offered to bring them back into use.
- A detailed portfolio of empty property enforcement action will be compiled in order to return empty units back into use and to advertise to other empty property owners that the Council is prepared to take statutory action.
- A suitable loan scheme will be developed with Wessex Re-investment Trust to encourage and assist owners of non-decent empty property to bring them back into use.
- A Direct Lets scheme will be established to provide at least 10 properties on an annual basis to encourage and assist owners of empty property to bring them back into use and to a Decent Homes Standard.

#### 4. Consultation

4.1 The Empty Homes Team sent out an email inviting feedback on the strategy that had been placed electronically on the EDDC website. There has been direct consultation with the Wider Strategic Housing Group, the seven partner Housing Associations, 10 other local Housing Associations and the three partner local authorities of Mid Devon District Council, Teignbridge District Council and Exeter City Council.

In the light of the Council's new duty under the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Empty Homes' Strategy will remain on the Council's website and comments from the community invited. This will further inform our assessment in regard to empty property in the East Devon district.

4.2 All comments received have been incorporated where relevant into the Strategy.

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#### **Legal Implications**

There are no legal implications.

#### **Financial Implications**

Financial implications have not been detailed at this stage but it is anticipated that government grants will be received to fund expenditure.

#### **Consultation on Reports to the Executive**

The consultation process is explained in the report.

#### **Background Papers**

- Questionnaire on the consultation draft

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Executive Board  
15 July 2009