

**REDDITCH BOROUGH COUNCIL
EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY
2009 - 2012**

MISSION STATEMENT

“Redditch Borough Council will endeavour to work with owners in a spirit of cooperation and partnership in order to return empty homes back into use and thereby contribute to the well-being of the Borough. However if an agreement cannot be reached within a reasonable timescale, then the Council will look to use a range of legal powers to bring the home back into use.”

Introduction

An acute, nationwide housing shortage is giving rise to increased homelessness and affordability problems. Despite the high level of housing need throughout the region, there are also a significant number of homes lying empty.

Though empty homes are not the whole answer to the current housing crisis, government and local authorities cannot ignore their potential and the need to ensure that owners are both encouraged, and where appropriate, required to unlock the potential of this wasted resource.

This is the first Empty Homes Strategy to be adopted by Redditch Borough Council. The Strategy’s aims and objectives link into three of the Council’s corporate priorities:

- **Enterprising Community** - This is defined as a vibrant and vital Borough where the population is well educated, has high skill levels and is healthy and fit. Housing is excellent and varied and the community is served by a prosperous town centre that has access to first class leisure facilities. The Council’s voice is influential and respected by residents, partners, other governmental agencies and suppliers and the town’s economy provides sufficient high quality jobs for residents, with good levels of pay and reward.
- **Safe** – This means that the Council will work in partnership with other agencies through the Redditch Community Safety Partnership to reduce crime and disorder and will identify key projects to build community confidence and allow residents and visitors to be safe and feel safe.
- **Clean and Green** – The Council will develop attractive open spaces, taking enforcement action against littering, fly tipping and other behaviour detrimental to the environment where appropriate and supporting measures to tackle climate change.

The Strategy is one of a suite of strategies that are being developed to cover a range of housing priorities within the Borough (e.g. Housing Strategy, Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy). The Council is seeking to move away from a reactive approach to private sector empty homes by developing a number of initiatives to solve the problems caused by empty properties (e.g. vandalism, decline of an area, anti-social behaviour), and by making information and assistance available at an earlier stage, preventing long term empty homes falling into decline and dereliction. Developing effective partnerships with property owners and achieving clear targets and performance levels will help achieve these aims.

In turn, this approach will improve the supply of homes across the Borough, help to reduce homelessness, increase the choice of accommodation available, and work towards the decent

homes standards and conditions that all residents should enjoy. Tackling empty homes will also reduce instances of nuisance and vandalism.

There is increasing pressure on housing authorities to develop effective empty homes strategies to make best use of the existing housing stock within their area. This is driven by a growing population and increases in the rate of household formation contributed to by smaller household sizes. There is also a growing pressure on local authority and registered social landlord housing stock, characterised in its most acute form as homelessness. There is an undersupply of housing in Redditch to meet the high demand for properties across all housing tenures and price brackets. This has inevitably resulted in increased house prices. Returning empty homes to use can make a significant contribution to increasing overall housing supply and meeting demand.

Empty homes represent the highest incidence of unfit housing. They can blight a whole neighbourhood and are socially, environmentally and economically unacceptable. They are a wasted housing resource and can attract anti-social behaviour, including vandalism, arson and fly-tipping. Rundown empty properties can adversely affect neighbouring house prices and are a wasted asset for the owner.

Redditch Borough Council has been successful in delivering a reduction in the percentage of Council homes lying empty and in reducing the average number of days each property lies empty between lettings. It is now important that the Council decreases the number of homes in the private sector being left empty for significant periods of time

Strategy aims and objectives

The Strategy aims to reduce the number of empty homes that are having a detrimental impact on the communities in which they are situated, and are potentially reducing the level of affordable housing in the Borough.

The strategy aims to:

- Increase the supply of much needed housing
- Reduce homelessness
- Contribute to the regeneration of the Borough
- Help to create sustainable communities
- Respond positively to public concerns, such as discouraging crime and vandalism
- Reduce the need for "green field" development

The purpose of this Empty Homes Strategy is to encourage the adoption of a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to bringing empty homes in the private sector back into use. The lack of a comprehensive strategy can result in action being somewhat reactive, fragmented, resource-intensive and lacking in long-term strategic direction or corporate drive.

An objective of this Strategy is to work in partnership with private landlords and owners, Registered Social Landlords, local agencies and residents, to identify empty homes and seek funding can be for their improvement and subsequent occupation. More so, properties can be prevented from becoming empty long-term by identifying potential cases and working with their owners.

This Strategy sets out ways in which the Council intends to bring empty homes back into use in Redditch, so that owners and residents are fully aware of the Council's aims and objectives and successes can be monitored against set targets.

The Strategy Action Plan includes a series of 'SMART' supporting actions to ensure delivery of targets, and to ensure that we continuously seek to improve and innovate the way in which we work.

Why do homes become and remain empty?

Properties may become empty for many different reasons. In most cases, this is a short term issue, for example, following a purchase where a property needs to be renovated before it can be occupied, or where it is in probate. Such transactions are a natural function of the housing market. Transactional properties are actively marketed or are being prepared for occupation. More than half the homes that are empty at any given time are transactional.

Nonetheless, a significant proportion of homes that become empty remain so for long periods of time. This is usually because there is a fundamental problem preventing their occupation. Problematic properties are not actively marketed or being prepared for occupation. This may be due to the condition of the property which means occupation is not possible until the problem has been addressed.

Consequently, there are a number of reasons why properties become empty:

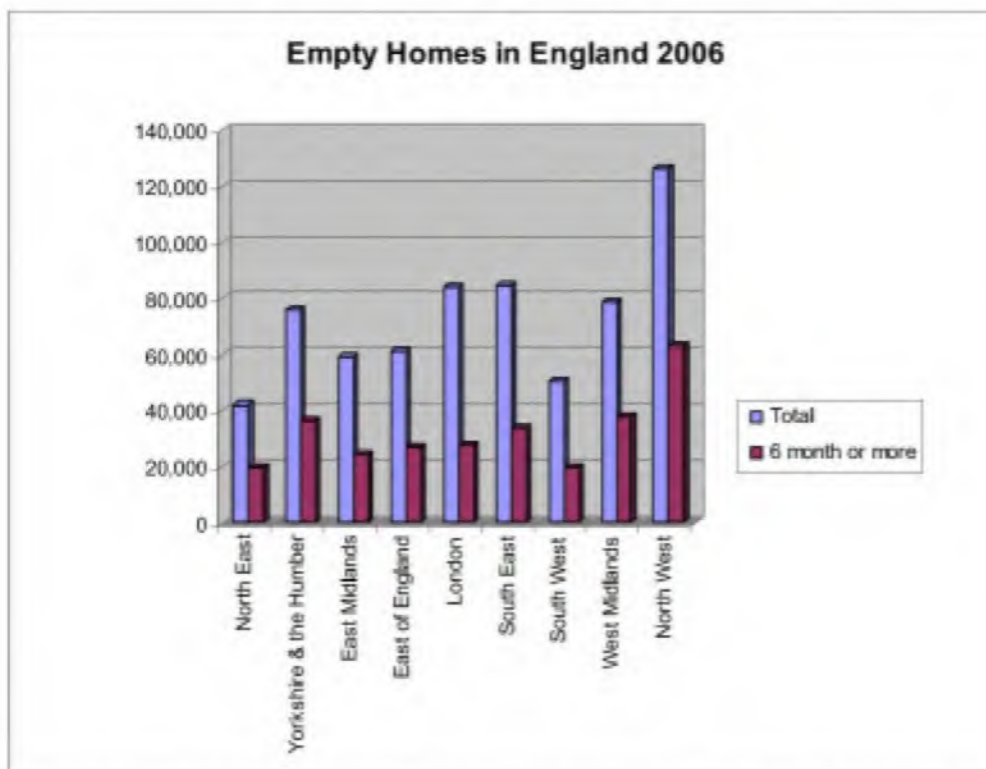
- Transactional empty properties pending a change of owner
- Owners not being aware of the options available to bring properties back into use
- Properties which are left empty by the resident moving into residential care
- Properties where the owner has died and the State is awaiting the appropriate legal action
- Perceived problems with renting the property
- Extensive maintenance problems combined with low value of the property
- Owners awaiting an upturn in the market
- Covenant restricting the type of use of the property
- Increase in the buy to leave¹ market following pension reforms

¹ 'Buy to Leave' is the term used where houses are purchased and left unoccupied either for investment or to be used by future generations.

The National Picture

Empty properties are not only found in large towns and cities. They are a characteristic feature in many areas of the country. Across England, on 1st April 2007, there were 672,924 empty properties of which 72,135 were in the West Midlands (Empty Homes Agency).

The problems posed by empty homes are not exclusive to Redditch - they are a national issue. There are 593,000 empty privately owned residential properties in England, of which 290,000 have been out of use for longer than 6 months (source: Housing and Investment Programme: Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix 2006).



The vast majority of empty homes are privately owned - over half a million. More than half of these (290,224 including 38,056 in the West Midlands) remain empty for longer than six months and a significant proportion are abandoned for years. Empty homes can quickly fall into disrepair and the longer they remain empty the more likely it is that they will become derelict and prohibitively expensive to bring back into use.

Long-term problematic empty homes are a major cause for concern. They represent waste, financial expense and missed opportunities. They can blight communities, attract vandals and squatters and tie up the resources of local authorities and the emergency services. Bringing more long-term empty homes back into use is a sustainable way to meet housing demand and helps to reduce the need to build new houses.

The scale of the problem nationally has provoked a national policy response, co-ordinated by the Empty Homes Agency and, more recently, subject to the scrutiny of the Government's Select Committee for Empty Homes. The main recommendations of the Select Committee report are:

- Radical intervention in inner urban areas of market failure to make them attractive to a mix of existing and potential residents
- Greater emphasis on the monitoring of market stability to restore confidence to neighbourhoods at risk and prevent them from declining into housing market failure
- Stricter implementation of the Planning Guidance PPG3 with regard to the re- use of brownfield sites and a more radical curb on greenfield development

The National Housing Federation has recently published a report stating that many people who are priced out of the housing market are now turning to the social housing sector. As a result housing waiting lists nationally have grown by 57% over the past five years to 1.6million households – or four million people.

National & Regional Plans and Strategies

Housing Green Paper

Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable (2007)

The recent Green Paper sought the views on the Government's proposals to increase the supply of housing and highlights the importance of bringing empty homes back into use. It also introduced the new Housing and Planning Delivery Grant (HPDG) to incentivise and facilitate local authorities to deliver a step change in housing supply. This will be to meet the Government's ambition for an additional 3 million homes by 2020, this includes bringing empty homes into use.

Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing (PPS3) (2006)

National planning advice on housing is set out in PPS3. It encourages local planning authorities to make effective use of the existing housing stock, and states that local authorities "should develop positive policies to identify and bring into residential use empty housing and buildings in line with local housing and empty properties strategies". Obstacles to the development of vacant or derelict sites and buildings should be addressed (for example, by the use of compulsory purchase powers where this would help resolve land ownership or assembly issues.)

Sustainable Communities: Homes for All (2005)

This policy document published by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) focuses on a home for everyone, addressing both provision of temporary accommodation and tenure issues. It sees the role of local authorities as taking a strategic approach in managing housing markets, and intervening to ensure that it operates effectively, making homes decent, increasing house building and dealing with abandoned properties. More specifically the policy encourages local authorities to make better use of long-term empty homes and commits to tackling the issue.

Housing Act 2004

The Housing Act 2004 contains a wide range of measures that will help protect the most vulnerable in society while creating a fairer housing market for all those who own, rent or let residential property. In terms of how this relates to empty properties, Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) have been introduced. This enables local authorities to take legal action against owners of empty properties who refuse to bring their property back into the housing market.

Unlocking the Potential (2003)

In February 2003, ODPM published "Unlocking the Potential". This document sets out the importance the government placed on the re-use of empty homes. It states that the re-use of empty homes can bring both financial and non-financial benefits to the owners, Local Authorities and the general public.

The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 (RRO)

The RRO enables Local Authorities to develop private sector renewal policies that reflect local needs and priorities and respond to challenges in the local housing market.

Audit Commission

The Audit Commission's Private Sector Housing Key Lines Of Enquiry (KLOE) identifies bringing empty homes back into use as part of demonstrating how Council policies are effective in enabling people to remain in their own homes in suitable and sustainable properties.

Empty Homes Agency (EHA)

The Empty Homes Agency is an independent campaigning charity, which exists to highlight the waste of empty homes in England and works with others to devise and promote solutions to bring empty property back into use.

The Agency was set up in 1992 in response to the high number of empty properties and the crisis with homelessness. It worked on bringing individual empty properties back into use and encouraged local authorities to implement empty property strategies.

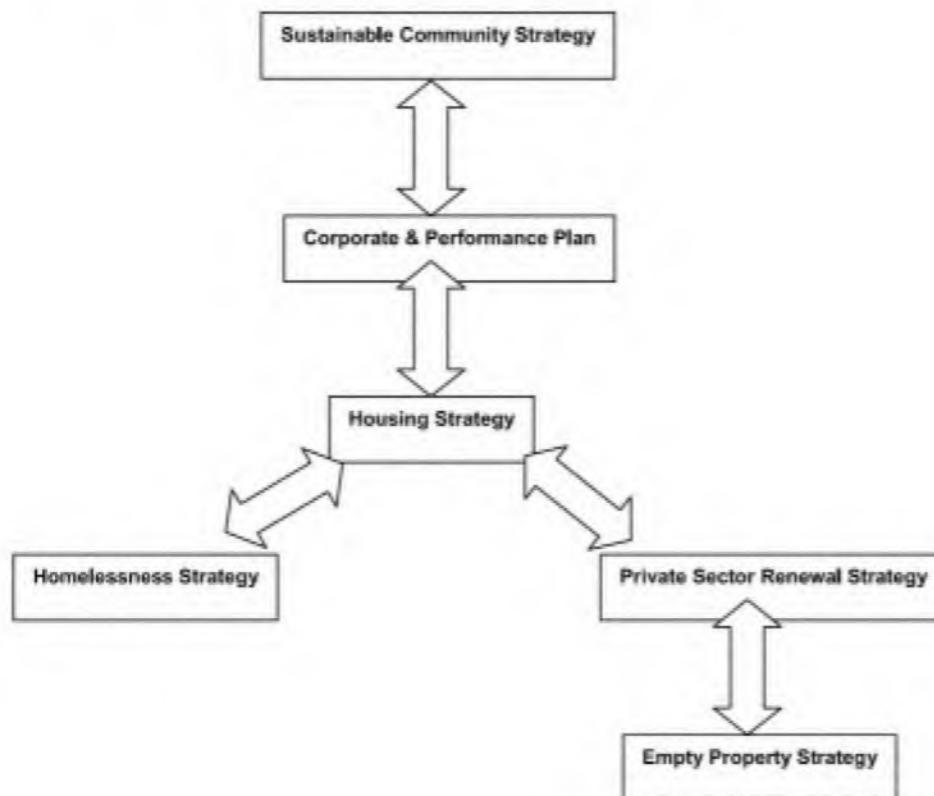
The Agency aims to raise awareness of the potential of empty homes in England to meet housing need and devise and promote, with others, sustainable solutions that will bring empty homes back into use.

The EHA works both nationally and locally. Nationally they campaign and lobby for policy change to encourage owners bring their homes back into use. On a local level they provide support to local authorities that want to bring empty homes back into use aiding the regeneration of communities, by ensuring their economic stability.

Local Plans and Strategies

The Empty Property Strategy sits within a wider framework of strategies and policy documents, which reflect not only the Council's corporate priorities, but also the Government's national and regional agenda (figure 1).

Figure 1: The Empty Property Strategy – Planning Process



Sustainable Community Strategy

The Redditch Partnership has reviewed the Sustainable Community Strategy for Redditch. This identifies long-term shared priorities that the agencies wish to work towards, to improve the wellbeing of local residents. These shared priorities are:

- Communities that are safe and feel safe
- A better environment – for today and tomorrow
- Economic success that is shared by all
- Improving health and wellbeing

- Meeting the needs of children and young people
- Stronger Communities.

Corporate & Performance Plan 2007 - 2010

The Council's Corporate Plan is one of a number of plans and strategies that will contribute towards the delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy. There is also a Local Area Agreement for Worcestershire. This is an agreement with National Government which sets out a series of areas on which the Council and its partners have agreed to focus on over the next three years.

Under the Corporate Plan the Council has identified three key areas where it plans to focus its improvement efforts over the next three years. This Empty Property Strategy is able to link with these three priorities:

Council Priority	Empty Property Link
Enterprising Community	Bringing an empty home up to current standards and returning it to use is a considerably more cost effective way of providing housing than building a new property. Bringing empty homes back into use will increase the supply of much needed housing, reduce homelessness, contribute to the regeneration of an area and help to create sustainable communities.
Safe	Empty homes attract squatters, children and young people who may have no criminal intent but who could cause noise and other problems including anti-social behaviour, underage consumption of alcohol and drug taking.
Clean and Green	Empty homes can be targeted by arsonists, vandals, attract litter and vermin which impact significantly on the community. Hazardous and other special wastes, attracting high disposal charges are often dumped in and around empty homes. Utilising empty homes reduces the need for 'green field' development and cuts carbon emissions by renovating existing, rather than building new homes

Housing Strategy 2005 - 2009

The Redditch Borough Council Housing Strategy covers the period 2005-2009. It will be refreshed this year to cover the period 2009 – 2013 in conjunction with the completion of the South Housing Market Area Housing Strategy. The overall aim of the Housing Strategy is to achieve first class

housing in the Borough of Redditch and to provide more affordable housing and support to meet the needs of our communities now and in the future.

The Housing Strategy priorities include:

- Meeting Affordable Housing Needs
- Tackling Homelessness and Providing Housing Options
- Deliver a sustainable customer focused Council Housing Service
- Improving conditions in the Private Sector

Tackling the issue of empty homes is highlighted within the Housing Strategy.

Private Sector Housing Strategy

This strategy concentrates on the private sector, which is the sector within which most empty homes occur. It outlines the current position regarding empty homes as well as detailing future challenges and priorities for action.

Local Development Framework

The Local Development Framework (LDF) is a collection of documents that deliver the planning strategy for Redditch Borough Council, and will guide all future development including housing. This comprises both the statutory development plan and supplementary planning documents. The Core Strategy will set out the spatial vision and objectives for the Borough, and the mechanisms for delivering that strategy.

A number of documents are prepared to support the Local Development Framework. One of these, which is currently under preparation, is the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment that identifies potential sites for housing. The potential for the reuse of empty homes will be considered as part of that assessment.

Local Picture

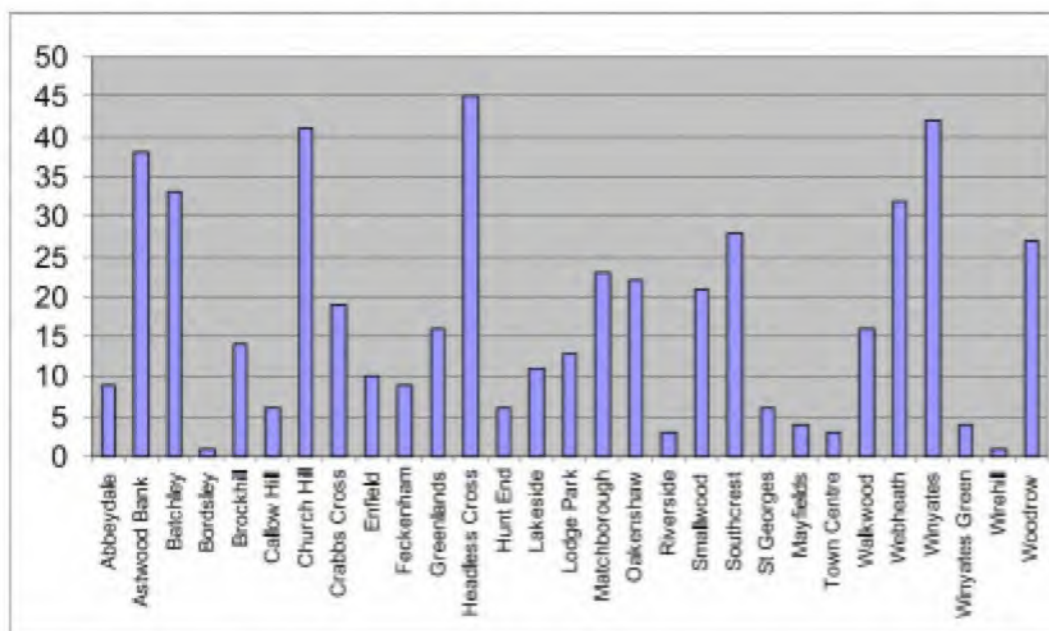
The stock condition survey 2004 revealed that 250 (1%) of the housing stock in Redditch was empty compared to the National Average of 3%. An analysis of the Council Tax data on empty residential properties in October 2008 shows there were 903 empty properties with 386 left empty for six months or longer.

Year *	Number of Empty Homes	Cumulative Total	Empty for 6 months or more
93	2	2	0
96	1	3	0
00	2	5	0
02	1	6	0
03	1	7	0
04	6	13	1
05	10	23	2
06	34	57	8
07	400	457	293
08	503	903	93

* data only available for these years

Historically, due to numbers and limited resources, Redditch Borough Council has not concentrated on bringing empty homes back into use and has only offered advice and guidance. However, there is considerable room for improvement, particularly with regard to properties that have been empty for over 6 months or more and those that are in a dilapidated condition and where advice and persuasion has failed. It has been recognised through the Housing Strategy and Private Sector Housing Strategy that a more robust and structured approach is required.

The empty homes are spread across the Borough, with Headless Cross recording the highest number of properties recorded as empty.



There are some properties that are of greater concern than others due to their dilapidated condition causing health and safety issues. Properties vacant for less than six months are not a high priority due to the fact that, for the housing market to function, there will always be a need for a certain number of properties to be empty so that normal buying and selling can take place.

Council Tax is payable in respect of empty homes, second homes and properties that have been unfurnished for more than six months. However, as these properties are not used as main residences the amount of Council Tax payable is reduced and a 50% discount is applicable.

Section 11A into the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives billing authorities a power to reduce the Council Tax discount on long-term empty dwellings. Redditch Borough Council has continued with a 50% discount on Council Tax for empty properties due to the previously low number of empty homes.

Housing Needs Survey 2005

The Redditch Borough Council Housing Needs Survey 2005 (undertaken by David Couttie Associates (DCA)) showed a total affordable housing need of 955 units within the Borough. The major means of addressing this need are the relets of the existing Council and Housing Association properties, which, average 589 properties per year. After allowing for the existing stock relets, there will still be a total annual affordable housing shortfall of 366 properties representing a total of 3,660 units over the ten years to 2015.

Based on the average new unit supply of around 65 units over the last three years, this level of annual need is over five times the number of units able to be provided from new delivery and conversions resulting in growing levels of unmet need each year. Additionally, 300 existing and 56 concealed households intend to leave the Borough over the next three years because of a lack of affordable rented housing. These are not included in the needs assessment calculation.

Some of the Housing Needs Survey 2005 recommendations were:

- ◆ Provide a mix of house types in market and social sectors, but mainly 2, 3 and 4 bedroom houses in the social sector.
- ◆ The private rented sector is less than half national levels. Promoting the growth of the private rented sector to provide a more balanced housing market

Bringing empty properties back into use - Our Priorities and Actions

In developing this Strategy it is vital to have an understanding of the reasons why properties might be left empty and the value of bringing them back into use. Homes can be empty for a wide variety of reasons. Some reasons are indicative of a healthy market, for example major refurbishments, and others such as slow to let homes, can be indicative of wider market problems. It's generally accepted that the number of long-term empty properties is the best indication of problems in the housing market.

The Council attaches importance to bringing all empty homes back into use. However, it has to make effective use of the available resources, therefore this Strategy will be targeted at those empty for over six months.

Below are our priorities for addressing the issue of empty homes. The contribution of empty homes to the Council's housing objectives is highlighted in the Private Sector Housing Strategy. This has been reinforced by the Council's Housing Strategy 2005-09.

The Council is committed to reducing empty homes across the Borough and has at its disposal a number of statutory powers to take action as necessary. Intervention will be targeted to raise awareness, identify empty properties, provide advice and assistance and, as a last resort, undertake enforcement action. A collaborative approach will be adopted in partnership with all agencies to tackle the issues around empty homes.

The Council has defined three key strategic aims for dealing with empty homes:

- **Strategic Aim 1: *Develop a proactive approach towards the early identification and prevention of empty homes***
- **Strategic Aim 2: *Bring long-term empty homes back into use***
- **Strategic Aim 3: *Work with partners to raise awareness of the issues around empty homes***

SMART targets to deliver the aims of the Council's Empty Property Strategy are summarised in the Action Plan under each of the three strategic aims.

The powers and actions we can take in appropriate circumstances

Awareness raising

All property owners have a responsibility to ensure that their property does not affect that of their neighbours or the wider community. The Council will seek to raise awareness of the reasons why owners should not leave their properties empty. For example:

- Letting out an empty property can provide a valuable income, or selling it can mean a large windfall
- Use of assured shorthold tenancies mean that vacant possession of the property is guaranteed if the owner no longer wants to rent the property out
- Agreements can be obtained to lease the property to a local housing association (Registered Social Landlord)
- Many house-hunters are looking for properties to renovate themselves so properties need not be in an excellent condition to interest potential purchasers
- Empty homes deteriorate rapidly, cost more to insure and provide no income

- Using empty homes provides important social and community benefits (eg utilisation of a valuable asset when many people desperately need good homes, tackling antisocial behaviour like graffiti and fly-tipping, contributing to the regeneration of an area.)

Improving Accuracy of Records - Identifying empty properties

There are a variety of databases holding information on empty homes. It is important that this information is in one central place for all officers to access. New empty homes will be identified at the earliest opportunity and information will be at hand for officers to see if there is previous history, for example whether any enforcement action has been taken.

The Council will maintain an up to date empty homes database. This is based on Council Tax updates which are matched against existing records to identify new empty properties. Any properties reported by Council Members, officers or residents are added to the database when they are confirmed as empty.

Increasing Publicity

Promotional information is a great way to publicise the Council's aims on empty homes. Effective publicity is critical to a successful empty property strategy as it is quicker and more cost effective than long-winded investigation in reaching a large number of property owners. Those that respond are likely to be more receptive to the advice and information given.

Involving Others

Housing Options Team

The Housing Options Team provides advice and assistance to the public and can signpost to various organisations to obtain alternative accommodation including Housing Associations and letting agents. They can also provide assistance to landlords to bring their empty homes back into use by providing a number of incentives including finding suitable tenants, cash deposits and assisting with the Housing Benefit forms. They are also able to provide advice on tenancy deposit schemes, tenancy law and notice periods.

Residents

To enable properties to be brought back into use more effectively and efficiently, information surrounding empty homes needs to be detailed. Residents can play an important role in reporting where empty properties are. Although the Council can identify empty homes through Council Tax databases and other means, these sources are not error free. Reports from the public can help improve knowledge of an empty property situation. A further advantage is that reports from the public tell the Council about the cases that are affecting people the most.

Housing Associations

The Housing Policy Team will continue to build upon the strong relationships with our Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners to explore the opportunity to manage properties on behalf of owners.

Private Landlords

The Housing Policy Team is keen to work with landlords to bring properties back into use. Professional and private landlords are key players in ensuring private sector empty homes are reoccupied. They are also likely to provide a major part of the market in the purchase of empty properties returned to sale, whilst also providing information regarding market conditions. Their active engagement will therefore be encouraged.

Ownership

If the property is privately owned then a number of checks will be completed against existing records. The owner's details and any previous history relating to the property will be established, including the use of land searches and tracing agents.

Visiting

Empty homes will be visited, an assessment made of their overall condition and then prioritised for further action depending on their physical condition and security. The owner will be encouraged to repair and bring the property back into use though a record of the works that could be included in any enforcement action will be prepared. Photographic evidence will be taken of the property's condition.

Environmental Health Officers will ensure that the property presents no significant hazards to visitors to the property, including members of the public passing by on the highway. Should a significant hazard exist, a Notice can be served under the Housing Act 2004.

Advice and assistance

Owners of empty homes will be contacted to clarify their intentions. If an owner does not wish to retain the property, advice and assistance can be provided, and the situation will continue to be monitored until the property is sold.

If an owner wishes to retain the property, options will be discussed and advice and assistance offered wherever practicable. This will include literature and information packs, details of lettings and estate agents, and advice on the various financial packages available on the market, such as equity release schemes and low interest secured loan packages. The Council will continue to work with the owner and monitor progress until the property is brought back into use.

Enforcement action

When owners will not work with the Council within reasonable timescales, and if their empty homes are causing a nuisance to the public by their appearance and condition, the Council has a range of enforcement options available.

If a property is causing a nuisance and the owner refuses to co-operate to remedy the situation, the Council will assess the following options that are available and utilise the most suitable in the

circumstances. These options will only be taken as a last resort and only in the public interest when the property is causing a nuisance:

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

The Council will use compulsory purchase powers under Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985, subject to secretary of state approval, where all reasonable attempts have been made with the owner to bring the empty home back into use and the continuation of the situation will have a detrimental effect on the neighbouring and surrounding environment. The use of compulsory purchase powers is a lengthy, time-consuming process and is only used when other approaches have not been successful. However, the threat of a compulsory purchase acts as an effective tool to encourage owners of empty homes to take action.

Serving CPOs on empty homes may be justified where there appears to be no other chance of a suitable property being used as a home. They enable the Council to acquire the property to redevelop in partnership with a Registered Social Landlord. This could be the refurbishment of the existing property or the demolition and rebuilding of a scheme for use as social housing.

Enforced Sales

The Council can force the sale of an empty home in order to recover the costs incurred by the Council for carrying out works in default. Sale can also be forced where the empty property has an outstanding Council Tax debt. Such debts can be registered as charges against the property and unless the owner repays the outstanding sum, the Council can force its sale to recover its costs.

Enforced sales may be justified for properties that are a nuisance to the public and where the Council has had to use its resources (eg removing rubbish, securing the property, etc). The Council will seek to ensure that the enforced sale of any property leads to its rapid reoccupation or redevelopment.

Unsecured Properties

These are empty properties that are not secure so that they can be broken into, vandalised, set on fire, etc. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 (Section 29) allows the Council to:

- secure properties to prevent unauthorised entry or to take steps to prevent properties becoming a danger to public health

Unightly land or external appearance

Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows the Council to serve notice on the owner of land whose condition is adversely affecting the amenity of the area. Timely use of this action may prevent properties from falling into serious disrepair.

If the owner fails to comply with the notice, the Council is entitled to carry out the works and reclaim the costs, which can then be registered as a local land charge. The Council can also prosecute the owner for non-compliance with the notice and if convicted, the owner can be fined and have a criminal offence registered against them. If, following conviction, the owner continues

to fail to comply with the notice, the Council can prosecute the owner again and the fines can be substantially higher. The Council will publicise the results of all legal actions undertaken in order to act as a deterrent to others.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

EDMOs, introduced in England from April 2006, allow councils with housing responsibilities to take over the management of some residential properties that have been empty for more than six months. The property does not have to be run down or uninhabitable. The fact that it has not been lived in for more than six months could be enough to allow an EDMO to be made. This route could only be suitable for properties needing little or no refurbishment.

An EDMO cannot be made in respect of a property where one or more of the following statements applies:

- It is not a dwelling (e.g. it is a building or part of a building used for non-residential purposes)
- It is not wholly unoccupied (e.g. only part of the house or flat is unoccupied or there are spare rooms not in use)
- It has been lived in at any time within the previous six months

The six month exemption period applies to all empty dwellings regardless of the reason they are unoccupied. However, even after six months, many unoccupied dwellings will continue to be exempted as long as one or more of the following statements are true:

- The property is normally the only or main residence of the owner
- The property is occupied occasionally as a second home or a holiday home
- The property is genuinely on the market for sale or to be let
- The property is expected to be inherited but the grant of representation (probate) following the death of the previous owner has not yet been obtained. In this case, the property will continue to be accepted for six months after the grant of representation has been obtained
- It is an agricultural holding within the meaning of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986, or a farm business tenancy within the meaning of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995
- It is usually occupied by an employee of the relevant proprietor in connection with the performance of his duties under the terms of his contract of employment
- It is available for occupation by a minister of religion as a residence from which to perform the duties of his office
- It is subject to a court order freezing the property of the relevant proprietor
- It is prevented from being occupied as a result of a criminal investigation or criminal proceedings

- It is mortgaged, where the mortgagee, in right of the mortgage has entered into and is in possession of the dwelling

Where a home has been empty for at least six months, according to Council Tax records, and there is no reasonable prospect that the dwelling will become occupied in the near future, the Council will consider the use of an EDMO as a last resort. The purpose is to prevent further deterioration of the property and to secure occupation. The Council will arrange the management of the property, the undertaking of works and the letting of the property. The subsequent rental income will then be used to pay for the management and works and any residual income will be paid to the owner.

Resources

The balance between resources available, priorities of the Council and national and local delivery targets are important in determining what is achievable in terms of reducing the number of empty properties in the Borough.

However the continued improvement delivered by identified actions can only be sustained if long term funding can be identified and secured. The council may incur costs of building or refurbishment works in using its legal powers. Although it may be possible to recover these costs at a later stage, either from the owner or by securing the sale of the property to a third party, they would need to be met in the first instance.



Performance Monitoring

Clear management and co-ordination of resources and partnerships are essential to deliver good services. This will be achieved by regular:

- Team updates to ensure actions are in-line with Service Plan
- Performance indicators
- Housing Investment Programme returns
- Business plans
- Comprehensive Performance Indicators
- Reduced complaints

Given the good condition of housing stock within the Borough it is anticipated that the target in the main will be met through units being renovated rather than being demolished.

Financial Year	Vacant properties returned to use
09/10	20
10/11	30
11/12	40

It is hoped that this Empty Homes Strategy will raise the profile of empty properties within the Borough of Redditch, with increased interest from Councillors, developers and the general public. The actions outline the key objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2012. The target dates for delivery are set out in the action plan below. Delivery of the actions will be formally monitored and reviewed where necessary in-line with Government changes, in the national, regional and local picture.

Empty Homes Strategy 2009 – 2012 Action Plan					
Objective No.	Management Action	Target Date	Completion Date	Lead Section	Comments
Strategic Aim 1: <i>Develop a proactive approach towards the early identification and prevention of empty properties</i>					
1.1	Develop an Empty Homes Website: • Liaise with IT • Launch website	April 09		Housing Strategy Team	Empty Homes Agency has excellent link for reporting empty properties, incorporate a link to this on Private Sector Housing pages.
1.2	Review procedures for identifying owners of empty homes and recording, monitoring and reporting performance	Jul 09		Housing Strategy Team	Monthly reporting from CT

1.3	Review monitoring processes to include reasons why homes become empty: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Devise a questionnaire for completion by owners of all newly occurring empty homes over 6 months about their intentions• Review reasons behind those areas having a high number of empty homes• Review appropriateness of enforcement action against reasons for homes becoming empty	Jul 09		Housing Strategy Team	
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1.4	Develop a means of prioritising empty homes by their physical condition and security together with the follow-up action required	Oct 09		Housing Strategy Team	Will require some joint working with Private Sector Officers from Environmental Health.
1.5	Consider including a paragraph concerning empty homes and the Council's powers in Council Tax letters	Jul 09		Revenues	
1.6	Review Council Tax discounts for empty homes	Jul 09		Revenues	

Strategic Aim 2: <i>Bring long-term empty properties back into use</i>					
2.1	Bring 90 empty homes back into use by 31st March 2011	March 2011		Housing Strategy and Private Sector Environmental Health Officers	The target figure incorporates those homes that require support to bring back into use and those that would have come back into use without assistance.
2.2	Research and develop a corporate policy / procedure for enforcement action for bringing empty homes back into use through a range of powers (eg CPO, enforced sale, s215, EDMO, etc)	October 09		Housing Strategy Team	
2.3	Research model EDMO procedures to enable action to be taken as a last resort should the need arise	July 09		Housing Strategy Team	
2.4	Research and develop information packs for owners of empty homes on empty property management, legislation / tax, available grants and loans, financial packages, incentives, etc	Jul 09		Housing Strategy Team	

2.5	Explore Council Tax concessions on discretionary payments for owners refurbishing an empty homes and bringing back into use	May 09		Revenues	
2.6	Maximise the external funding opportunities for tackling empty homes (Government, Regional Housing Board, etc)	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	
Strategic Aim 3: <i>Work with partners to raise awareness of the issues around empty homes</i>					
3.1	Review, consult, update and publish Empty Homes Strategy	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	
3.2	Investigate the potential for further joint working with other Worcestershire authorities to raise awareness and tackle issues related to empty homes	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	

3.3	Provide advice to landlords and owners through: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Landlords' forum• Landlord newsletters• Press articles• Website	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	
3.4	Promote effective partnerships with landlords and owners to reduce vacancy levels in the private housing stock	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	
3.5	Continue and improve external partnership working to share good practice, resources and gain external resources through joint initiatives	Ongoing		Housing Strategy Team	