

Draft

Empty Homes Strategy 2007 –2009

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Introduction

North Wiltshire is a rural district situated in the South west of England, near the major population centres of Swindon, Bath and Bristol. The District's population is based around the six market towns of Chippenham, Corsham, Calne, Malmesbury, Wootton Bassett and Cricklade.

The continuing economic growth along the M4 corridor, combined with North Wiltshire's attractive rural environment, has meant that the District has become popular with commuters and businesses. Land and property prices have continued to rise steeply, placing affordable housing out of the reach of many local people.

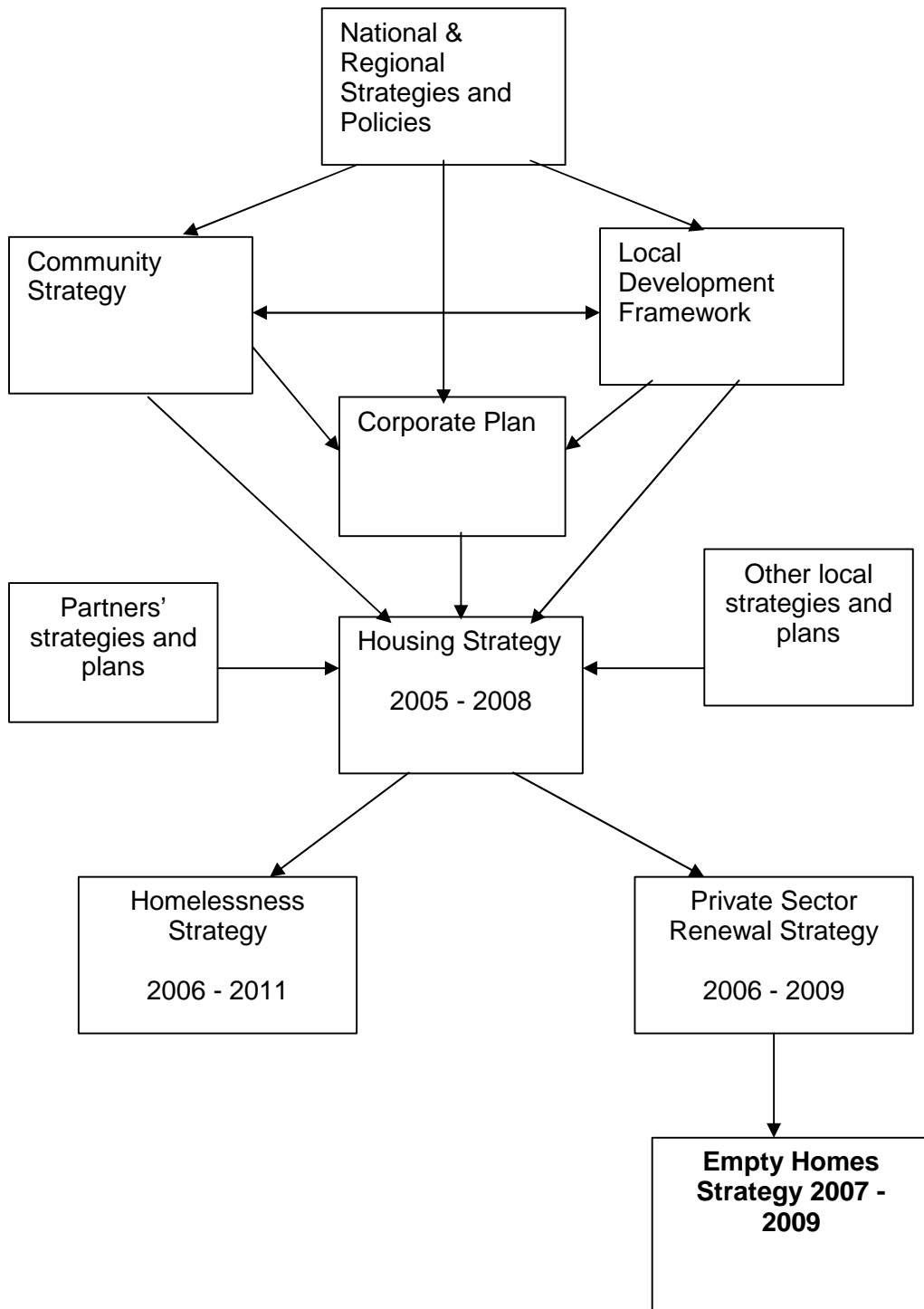
In a District where housing demand exceeds housing supply it is difficult to understand why homes are left empty, disused and deteriorating.

The purpose of the Strategy is to ensure that the number of empty properties in the District is kept to a minimum, and to identify new opportunities to encourage owners to bring them back into use by:

- q **Collating and ensuring that information on empty properties is accurate and up to date:**
- q **Devising new and innovative ways of encouraging owners of empty properties to bring them back into use.**
- q **Raising awareness and seeking help from all parts of the community and external partnerships to tackle the problem.**

Corporate Context

Strategy Map



Corporate Plan

The Corporate Plan forms a key part of the Council's business planning process and is reflected in the four Business Area plans, team plans and individual work plans. This ensures that accountability and responsibility for delivery is identified and reviewed and monitored monthly.

The Corporate Priorities identified for 2006/07 were:

- Buoyant Economy
- Car Parks and Decriminalisation
- Cleaner, Safer and Better Streets
- Customer Focus
- Equality & Diversity
- Healthy Lifestyle
- Housing
- Minimise Waste – Maximise Recycling
- Partnership Working
- Spatial Planning

Community Strategy

Ensuring that there is sufficient housing of all types to meet the needs of the community has been identified as a key issue in North Wiltshire's Community Plan.

The key issues raised in the Community Strategy in terms of Housing and the Built Environment are :

- ◆ Lack of affordable housing
- ◆ Housing developments need to consider that there are sufficient facilities such as schools and healthcare facilities available.
- ◆ Development should be in keeping with an area.
- ◆ Availability of sheltered housing.
- ◆ Lack of available and affordable starter homes to enable young people to stay in the area.

Although bringing empty properties back into use, will help increase the supply of housing in the district, and indirectly reduce the need to build more affordable homes; the issue of empty homes was not raised as a key concern for the community through the Community Strategy.

Housing Strategy

The Council's Housing Strategy 2005-2008 is a three-year plan produced in consultation with partners, stakeholders, Members and the local community with the aim of addressing the current and future housing needs of the people of North Wiltshire.

The focus of the Housing Strategy 2005 –2008 is on:

Affordable Housing

- Affordable housing through planning gain – the use of the planning system is the most effective way to deliver new affordable housing
- Social housing built with grant – the District Council has committed £2 million per year to grant fund housing development. In addition to this the District also attracts Housing Corporation grant funding of approximately £1 million per year.
- Cross subsidising affordable homes with private market housing – profit generated from the sale of private market housing is used to subsidise the provision of social housing.
- Making the best use of land resources – the Housing Team are working with Westlea Housing Association and the Asset Management team to identify sites for affordable housing development.
- Making the best use of existing stock – providing adaptations in existing housing and providing incentives for people to move to smaller properties.

Reducing Homelessness

- Prevention of homelessness
- Eliminate the use of B&B
- Improve services to homeless people – such as Housing Advice service.
- Improve inter agency working – to ensure a consistent service is provided to all people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- Improve monitoring – to enable the team to monitor trends and target resources more effectively.

Improving Private Sector Housing

- Making best use of available resources ;
 - ensuring grant assistance is directed to households most in need.
 - working in partnership with neighbouring authorities to explore equity release and national loan schemes.
- Energy Efficiency - Improve on the work currently carried out by the Council in partnership with Wiltshire Energy Efficiency Advice Centre in promoting energy efficiency through advice and assistance.
- Making the best use of existing stock by bringing empty homes back into use.

- To ensure that the countywide Home Improvement Agency Partnership set up in 2004 continues to provide a consistent service across Wiltshire. The work of the home Improvement agency currently includes home safety and benefit checks, assisting vulnerable clients through the grant process and promoting energy efficiency.

Consultation

As part of the consultation on the Housing Strategy 2005-2008, members of the housing team attended the 5 Area Committees to discuss the Housing Strategy and invite members and any residents present to vote on housing priorities.

In addition to this, members of the public were encouraged to voice their opinion through the Council's website and the Councils newsletter "Improving North Wiltshire".

As a result of this consultation we now have a clear idea of the community's views of housing priorities in North Wiltshire:

Rank	Priority Area
1	Providing new affordable housing
2	Homelessness prevention
3	Empty homes
4	Housing with support
5	Home ownership
6	Disabled facilities grants
7	Energy efficiency
8	Sustainable communities
9	Improving existing housing
10	Establishing housing need
11	Housing advice
12	Choice based lettings

Based on the importance that the public gave to utilising our empty homes, one of the key actions identified in the Housing Strategy was to develop an Empty Homes Strategy.

National, Regional and Local Perspective

National Picture

In February 2003 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published "Unlocking the Potential", a document setting the importance the government placed on the reuse of empty properties. "Each empty property is a wasted resource from the point of view of the owner, a wasted opportunity from the point of view of the developer and a wasted asset from the point of view of Local Authorities charged with bringing forward sufficient land and housing to meet projected housing needs" The document maintains that the reuse of empty properties can bring both financial and non-financial benefits to the owners, Local Authorities and the general public.

In July 2003 the Regulatory Reform Order came into force. This swept away the prescriptive powers of previous legislation and replaced them with a general power to provide 'assistance' in 'any form' and for 'any person' for the following purposes:

- u To acquire living accommodation
- u To adapt or improve living accommodation
- u To repair living accommodation
- u To demolish buildings comprising or including living accommodation and to construct replacement accommodation.

The objective of the legislation was to enable local authorities to develop private sector renewal policies that responded to challenges in the local housing market.

Housing Act 2004

The Housing Act 2004 received Royal Assent on 18th November 2004. This major piece of legislation deals in the main with housing standards and conditions in the private sector. The aim of the Act is to create a fairer housing market for all those who own, rent or let residential property, while protecting the most vulnerable households in the community.

One of the key elements of the Act was the introduction of Empty Management Dwelling Orders, which enable the Local Authority to take over the management of empty properties as determined by Residential Property Tribunals. An interim order can only be used with the consent of the owner, while a final order can be made without the consent of the homeowner.

At 1st April 2005 there were 680,412 empty homes in England, this amounts to approximately 3% of the total housing stock.

The most recent figures on empty homes indicate that although great strides have been made to reduce the numbers at national level from over 753,188 at April 2001 to 680,412 at 1st April 2005, the issue of empty properties remains a significant problem throughout the country.

The Empty Homes Agency's Manifesto 2005 states, "there are still more empty homes than homeless families".

Regional Picture

This table compares the numbers of empty homes to the numbers of homeless families living in temporary accommodation

Empty Homes and Temporary accommodation by region (April 2004)

	No. Empty Homes (Apr 04)	% of Dwelling stock Empty (Apr 04)	No. households in Temporary accommodation (Apr 04)	% of Households in temporary accommodation
North East	39,597	3.5%	2,022	0.2%
North West	127,473	4.2%	5,018	0.2%
Yorkshire & Humber	84,224	3.8%	5,266	0.2%
East Midlands	58,192	3.2%	3,281	0.2%
West Midlands	75,829	3.3%	4,352	0.2%
East of England	59,467	2.5%	8,444	0.4%
London	99,047	3.1%	57,879	1.8%
South East	83,371	2.4%	13,066	0.4%
South West	62,475	2.8%	6,697	0.3%
England	689,675	3.2%	106,025	0.5%

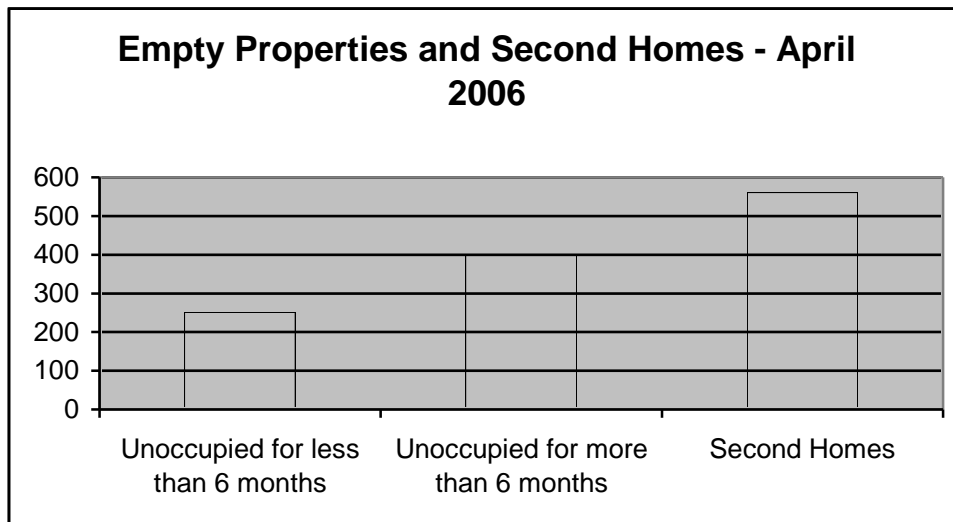
Source: ODPM

Local Situation

One of the basic findings of the stock condition survey 2003/04 was that there were approximately 620 empty properties in the District. This number was split between properties that were unoccupied less than six months and those deemed as long standing empty properties. This was fairly consistent with Council Tax Records for unoccupied properties at the time.

The current figures as of 1st April 2006 are more favourable and show that approximately 483 are long term empty properties and that some if not all could be utilised to meet part of the housing demand in the district. It is clearly more cost effective to renew a structurally sound building than developing a new property altogether.

This represents less than 1% of the total Housing stock of the district, compared with a national figure of 3% and a Regional figure of 2.8%.



There are some properties that are of greater concern than others. For instance properties vacant for less than six months are not of 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 the normal buying and selling can take place.

Bringing Empty Homes Back into use

In developing the Empty Homes Strategy it is vital to have an understanding of:

1. The reasons why properties might be left empty and
2. The value of bringing them back into use.

Reasons Properties are Left Empty

Properties become vacant for a number of reasons and a good understanding of these issues is essential for the Council to pro-actively assist in reducing the number of vacant homes in the district. Some of the main reasons why a property might be left empty are listed below:

- q Owner only wants to sell property and would not consider letting it.
- q Perceived problems with renting a property.
- q Owner cannot afford to repair the property and is unable to meet criteria to avail of grant assistance or commercial loans.
- q Owners unaware of the options available to bring properties back into use.
- q Property difficult to sell because of condition.
- q Owner untraceable or living abroad temporarily
- q Owner waiting for property prices to rise
- q Disputes over legal ownership
- q Property above or linked to a business property and business owner does not want to lease it.
- q Owner dies or moves to residential care

Although the council is aware that all of the above are contributory factors to properties remaining empty it does not have an accurate split of which of the factors are the most prominent.

Therefore, one of the priorities has been to contact the owners of empty properties in the District to establish the reasons that these properties are being left empty. This is an area of work which will enable the limited resources available to be directed in the most appropriate manner.

Value of Bringing Properties Back into Use

There are a number of advantages both to the community and the owners of empty properties of ensuring that properties do not remain vacant for longer than necessary.

Increase the Housing Supply.

North Wiltshire is an area of high housing demand, which cannot be met exclusively by new housing development. Therefore, there will always be a need to make the best use of existing housing.

As of May 2006 there were 1352 households on the Council Housing Needs Register seeking affordable accommodation. On average around 400 social rented properties become available to let each year. Demand is therefore far out stripping supply.

In 2005/06, 581 households presented as homeless to the District Council, of these the Council accepted a duty to house 251 households. As at March 06 55 households were in temporary accommodation waiting for an offer of a permanent home. Given the shortage of social housing in the District, many families are seeking privately rented accommodation.

Financial Savings

There are financial savings to the community, as it is recognised that it is often cheaper to renovate an existing property than build a new one.

Empty properties and empty land also represent a cost to the community in terms of:

- Loss of Council tax revenue
- Having a negative impact on house prices in the area
- Attracting crime and vandalism into the neighbourhood.
- Complaints made to the council
- Enforcement costs
- Repair costs.

The Royal institute of Chartered Surveyors has estimated that the average costs of keeping a property empty are in excess of £6000 per annum, this includes costs to the community and the owner, for example, loss of rent, and loss of council tax revenue.

Environmental Benefits

The environment we live in has a major impact on the quality of our lives. Many of the residents choose to live in North Wiltshire because it is a green and rural environment. It is essential therefore that in order to balance the land supply necessary for housing development and retain a pleasant environment in which to live that maximum use is made of homes that already exist.

In addition to this, empty properties often attract problems such as vandalism, drug abuse, theft and other nuisances that bear a cost to the local community as well as being an eyesore.

Options

The Council has used a range of options to achieve its objective of bringing empty properties back into use. The current mechanisms used by the Council are explained below. They are promoted by the Homelessness, Private Sector and Environmental Health Teams.

Rent Deposit Scheme

North Wiltshire District Council's current scheme was established to help priority homeless households access accommodation in the private rented sector.

The scheme provides tenants with a rent deposit, which is paid directly to the landlord on their behalf. In some cases the Council will also provide funds to the landlord in respect of the first months rent. During the tenancy the tenant is expected to repay the monies to the Council. This allows the Council to recycle the money and for the tenant to build up a rent deposit during their tenancy. There are moves to revise and expand the scheme to aid the homeless team in preventing homelessness in the district.

Private Sector Leasing Scheme (PSL)

The Council, in partnership with Westlea and Sarsen Housing Associations, runs two leasing schemes to provide an alternative to B&B for homeless families. This has the effect of reducing temporary accommodation costs while at the same time providing homeless families with a better quality of accommodation. At present there are approximately 30 properties leased under this scheme.

Housing Renewal Grants.

Over the past five years there has been a noticeable decline in the amount of assistance that the Council has been able to provide in terms of discretionary assistance for Housing Renewal. This has been due to the rise in demand for mandatory disabled adaptations and the pressures that this has put onto our limited financial resources.

In November 2005 the Government for the South West wrote to confirm that the allocation for private sector renewal would be in form of Capital Grant rather than a borrowing credit. This will allow the Council to redress the imbalance in investment in Housing Renewal in North Wilts.

However, the main focus of the Capital Grant is to achieve the Decent Homes Standard. The total budget of £40,000 for 2006/07 for empty homes will only bring a small number of properties back into use.

Compulsory Purchase

The council can in extreme circumstances, use compulsory purchase to bring a property back into use. However, this option has not been used to-date due to the resource implications of legal costs and officer time.

Advice and Assistance

The Private Sector Team offers advice and assistance to landlords with regard to the rental income they could receive, signposting to relevant housing associations or letting agents and to other colleagues or partners to enable them to bring empty properties back into use. They will also provide information on the different schemes mentioned above.

Resources

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

The Housing Renewal Strategy sets out in detail the Council's aims and objectives in terms of private sector renewal, which includes empty homes and details the resources available to achieve these aims.

The table below illustrates the overall budget for housing renewal. This has changed since the Housing Renewal Strategy was approved and takes account of proposed reductions in the capital funding available for housing renewal. The funding available for empty homes is within the budget for discretionary assistance.

Funding for Housing Renewal from 2003/2008

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
	SPEND	SPEND	BUDGET	BUDGET	PLANNED	PLANNED
Disabled Facilities Grant	469,000	536,000	780,000	650,000	600,000	500,000
Other Discretionary Assistance	191,000	126,000	120,000	447,000	400,000	400,000
Total	660,000	662,000	900,000	1097,000	1,000,000	900,000

Although it is anticipated that a similar level of assistance for discretionary grants will be available in 2007/08 and 2008/09, budgets are reviewed on an annual basis and any changes in national or regional funding would need to be considered at this time.

Between 2000 and 2006, there has been an increase in spend on mandatory disabled adaptations with a corresponding decrease in funds available for other housing renewal targets.

In 2005/06, £120,000 was set aside for discretionary assistance for the Council to achieve its targets in the areas of:

Bringing Empty Homes back into use – BVPI 64	£30,000
Bringing Properties back to a habitable standard - BVPI 62	£40,000
Achieving Decent Homes - PSA 7(Public Service Agreement) and Essential Repairs, and meeting the Energy Efficiency Targets (Heca ACT 1995)	£50,000

In April 2006, the Government Office for the South West allocated Capital Grant funding to Local Authorities, the purpose of this being to encourage Local Authorities to focus on improving existing housing, specifically in the area of achieving the decent homes standard. This change is very much

welcomed by the Council although it will also have implications in terms of demands on staff.

The allocation for North Wiltshire is £446,000 for 2006/07 and a small proportion of these funds will be used to bring empty properties back into use.

For further information please see the Housing Renewal Strategy 2006/2009

Staff Resource

The Private Sector Housing Team comprises one Principal Private Sector Housing Officer and 2.5 Private Sector Housing Officers.

Officers are involved in processing Disabled Facilities Grants, processing Housing Renewal Grants, House Condition Inspections, improving Energy Efficiency in the District and providing advice on a range of issues pertaining to Private Sector Housing.

A key part of the team's work involves developing and directing partnerships to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

Performance

The council's performance in terms of Empty Homes is monitored under the national BVPI 64 - "The number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned to use or demolished as a direct result of action by the Local Authority".

Given the condition of housing stock within the district it is anticipated that the target in the main will be met through units being returned to occupation rather than being demolished.

BVPI 64 - Past Performance and Future Targets

Year	Number of empty properties brought back into use
2003/04	14
2004/05	8
2005/06	5
2006/07 - Target	8
2007/08 - Target	10+
2008/09 - Target	10+

Performance against this target has not been consistent due to the resource issues in the Private sector Housing Team and the need to prioritise the mandatory elements of the service. However, the most effective methods of achieving this performance in previous years have been:

Rent Deposit Scheme.
PSL Scheme

This is a property in Malmesbury that was brought back into use with an Empty Properties Grant.

Future Opportunities

In looking to the future it is clear that, although empty homes represent a small proportion of the properties in the district (less than 1%), there will be a positive impact on the community if this matter is tackled.

There are some key areas that need to be focused on if this is to be achieved;

Improving the accuracy of records held about empty homes,

Seeking the opinions of owners of empty properties on what assistance they feel would be useful.

Increasing awareness amongst the community that the Council wishes to offer assistance to owners of empty properties but that it also has powers to carry out enforcement where owners are refusing to engage.

The Options

In terms of the options that are available, the Council intend to expand those that have been effective in the past, while at the same time exploring new ideas.

The ability of the housing team, and in particular, the private sector team to react and achieve its targets in this area is directly related to the overall priorities of the Housing Renewal Strategy and resources available to achieve these.

The Council will look to expand the current options of:

Option One

Rent Deposit Scheme - this scheme is popular with homeless clients and the homeless team are looking to widen the criteria to use as an effective tool in Homeless prevention.

Option Two

Housing Renewal grants- at present the Council will provide up to a maximum of £10,000 to an owner to bring their empty property back into use on the basis they will accept Council nominated tenants at the Council's discretion for a minimum of 5 years following completion of work. This however, only allows a small number of properties to be brought back into use in any given year. It was also set up to help fulfil the demand for temporary accommodation for homeless clients. With the change in government policy of reducing the no of households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010 it means that this option will need to be adapted. A viable possibility might be to provide a maximum of £10,000 and make the property available for a period of five years, for homeless households who would like to access the private rented sector.

In terms of new options the Council will:

Option Three

Investigate the use of the new tools of enforcement, where it is clear that it is a viable option in terms of staff & financial resource available. These tools include the use of Empty Dwellings Management Orders (EDMOs) which give Councils the legal power to take over the management of some properties which have been left empty for over 6 months. Government guidance is still awaited on EDMOs, which will give the Council a clearer picture of the resource implications of this new scheme.

Option Four

Use the website and other forms of publicity to encourage owners to contact the council for assistance in bringing their empty property back into use

Option Five

- Continue to explore with our RSL partners, opportunities to make it easier for owners to let their properties to people in need of housing through developing new schemes where possible and improving links with Housing Benefits

Empty Homes Action Plan

Key Action	Target Date 2006/07	Target Date 2007/08	Target Date 2008/09	Responsible Officer	Responsible Agency	Resources Required	Linked Strategies
Work with Council tax to provide a more accurate picture of the no of empty properties	Jan 2007			Principal Private Sector Housing Officer P Southway	NWDC	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy
To bring back into use 5% of the total number of empty properties by 2010.	8	10+	10+	Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC	Staff time Grant Funding Advice	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy Homelessness Strategy
Expand the Rent Deposit Scheme		April 2007		Principal Homelessness Officers	NWDC	Staff time DCLG Funding	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy Homelessness Strategy
Contact the owners of empty properties and set up a register to record the addresses of empty properties and reasons why they remain empty	April 2007			Principal Private Sector Housing Officer Paul Southway	NWDC		Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy
Produce a leaflet informing members of the public about the costs of leaving properties empty and what options are available to help bring them back into use.	June 2007			Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy
Present a report to Executive to explain the value of reducing the council tax discount on empty properties	Dec 2006			Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy

Introduce mechanism for consulting with owners of empty properties on incentives to bring properties back into use.		April 2007		Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy
Review Empty Homes Strategy on an annual basis		Jan 08	Jan 09	Principal Private Sector Housing Officer Jan Parry	NWDC	Staff time	
Continue and improve partnership working to share good practice, resources and gain external resources through joint initiatives	ongoing	ongoing	ongoing	Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC County wide Empty Properties group	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy
Evaluate feasibility of using Empty Property Management Orders		October 2007		Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC County wide Empty Properties group	Staff time	Housing Renewal Strategy Corporate Plan
Develop a database online to enable agencies and members of the public to identify empty and derelict properties in the District		Dec 2007		Principal Private Sector Housing Officer	NWDC	Staff time	Housing Strategy Housing Renewal Strategy

