

Title:	Empty Homes Policy
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Tom James
Reporting Officer:	Paul Yeomans, Housing Renewal Manager
Key Decision:	No

Purpose

The Empty Homes Policy sets out our objectives for returning long-term empty properties to occupation, and the tools and resources we will use to meet those objectives.

Background

The Corporate Plan identifies 'Meeting Housing Need' as one of its six 'spotlight areas', and includes an objective to make the most of the existing housing stock to meet housing need. The development of the empty homes strategy is identified as a critical task, and there are key performance targets (including a national Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI)) relating to the number of long-term vacant dwellings and the number of these returned to use as a result of the Council's actions.

Properties remain empty for a variety of reasons. Many are vacant awaiting sale. However, houses which remain empty for six months or more are a wasted resource and can cause problems in the neighbourhood. There is a range of measures that councils can use to promote better use of the private sector stock. The policy sets out what we are going to do, as well as why and how we are going to do it.

Main issues

The policy notes that there are in the region of 400 houses which are long-term vacant within the District, and which are likely to require some form of intervention to bring them back into occupation. A number of these are empty purely because it suits the owners to keep them so, in order to capitalise on the increases in house prices; in other cases, owners lack the money or the knowledge to repair or improve the houses they have bought or inherited.

We have identified £100,000 of capital resources to provide small, repayable grants to encourage owners to repair and re-use their empty homes. In addition, we have a range of powers which we can deploy depending on the circumstances. When the Housing Act 2004 is brought into force, it will provide additional tools to encourage re-occupation of unused accommodation. We aim to return 25 properties to use each year, and to halve the number of long-term empty houses by 2015.

Action Plan

Action	Due by
Review information held on Council Tax database	October 2005
Prioritise empty properties for action	November 2005
Draw up 'Vacant Houses List' of top 25 properties to be targeted and eligible for grant assistance	January 2006
Review and revise targets for Corporate/Service Plans	Annually in October/November
Consider reduction of Council Tax discount for long-term vacant houses	January 2006
Engage with private sector developers and housing associations to develop resources available for acquisition and improvement of empty homes.	March 2006
Report and review progress against targets, including BVPI 64	Quarterly and annually
Provide publicity and information via web site, leaflets and media coverage, including information targeted at individual owners	Ongoing from adoption of policy
Ensure new housing regulation policy includes action on empty homes when new legislation comes into effect	March 2006
First annual review of Empty Homes Policy	January to March 2007
Review funding of Empty Homes Officer post	February 2007

Financial considerations

The additional resources required to implement the Empty Homes policy are minimal. As the policy notes, we currently receive £6,000 per annum from our partner Housing Associations towards the employment of an Empty Homes Officer, and we have identified a part-time member of staff to fulfil that role from our current staff. Their duties will be to

- maintain a point of contact to which members of the public can refer complaints or enquiries about vacant houses;
- investigate causes of vacancy, and deal with problems caused by vacancy; and
- encourage owners and advise them regarding bringing empty properties back to use.

A sum of £100,000 has been identified from the proceeds of the sale of Ethandune hostel to fund grants of up to £10,000 (£12,000 for first time buyers) which will help owners carry out capital works to their properties to meet the Decent Homes Standard, ready for re-occupation. Such grants are generally repayable on sale of the property, and any funds repaid will be recycled into further grants. Full details of these grants are provided in the

Housing Renewal Policy. The effectiveness and value for money of these grants will be reviewed as part of the annual review of the housing renewal and empty homes policies.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications

Human Rights

There are no implications for human rights. The policy details powers of enforcement which are available to the Council to promote the objectives. The exercise of those powers might be considered to breach Article 1 of Part II of the Human Rights Act 1998 (Protection of Property). However, the use of such powers conforms to national legislation and guidance, and will conform to the Council's Enforcement policy.

Options

There is no statutory duty for the Council to have an Empty Homes policy. However there is national BVPI which assesses the Council's performance in returning empty homes to use. The adoption of the policy is recognised good practice, confirms the Council's commitment to the aims of its Housing Strategy, and provides a framework within which the Council can meet its aims of maximising the existing housing resources of the District.

Recommendation

Cabinet is recommended to adopt the Empty Homes policy.

Plain English guidance given