EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

2009 - 2014

eastbourne.gov.uk/emptyhomes
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INTRODUCTION

Foreword by Councillor Mrs Margaret Bannister, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Community Services

Welcome to Eastbourne Borough Council’s second Empty Property Strategy which reviews the progress made during the period covered by the original document and provides a revised plan for addressing the problem of long term empty properties. Good quality housing continues to play a crucial role in the development of safe, healthy and thriving communities in Eastbourne and the local authority is uniquely placed to co-ordinate action to tackle the problem of empty homes across all tenures in the town’s housing stock. The Empty Property Strategy demonstrates our corporate commitment to tackling the problem of long term empty homes and ensures that we and our partners adopt a co-ordinated carrot and stick approach to returning them to use. The success of the strategy can make a valuable contribution to both the continued regeneration of our town and an increase in the supply of homes for the many households in urgent housing need.

Why do we need this strategy?

Eastbourne is a popular place to live in, work in or visit but residents and visitors alike might be surprised by the number of long term empty properties within the housing stock. Normal turnover in the housing market results in some homes remaining empty for a period of time, possibly undergoing repair renovation or conversion, or awaiting demolition. However, if properties are allowed to remain empty and neglected, they can cause serious problems and given the normally high demand for housing in Eastbourne, returning them to use would benefit both the owners and the local community. The reasons for returning them to use can be summarised as follows:

- They are a wasted housing resource and deny homes to households in housing need;
- They can become an eyesore and damage the environment, having a negative impact on community safety, the economy and the well-being of local people;
- They can attract fly-tipping, pests, crime and anti-social behaviour;
- They can reduce the value of nearby properties;
- They add to the pressure for new housing provision on Greenfield sites;
- They can be a cost to the Council in lost council tax revenue;
- They are a missed opportunity for owners in terms of their capital value and/or potential rental income;

Eight out of ten empty homes are privately owned and in encouraging local authorities to take the lead in dealing with empty homes across all tenures, the Government expects them to be adopting measures to bring privately owned empty homes back into use as part of their broader strategic housing approach.

For Eastbourne Borough Council the re-occupation of empty homes helps to improve the quality of private housing and adds to the provision of decent homes
across all tenures, thereby playing a significant role in the Council’s strategic approach to tackling homelessness. Tackling empty properties is at the core of the sustainability agenda, promoting the maximum use of available housing, the re-use of previously developed land and the conversion of existing buildings in preference to providing new homes on green-field sites. However, in addition to providing much needed homes, returning empty properties to use has the benefit of improving the appearance of the town, attracting investment and supporting economic regeneration strategies.

The Council’s commitment to taking action was demonstrated by the decision to appoint a full-time Empty Property Officer in 2006, with the intention of reducing the number of properties becoming empty and helping to bring long term empty properties back into use. This updated Empty Property Strategy therefore reflects the need for creative thinking and persistence on the part of the Empty Property Officer, as well as colleagues across the Council, in ensuring that empty properties are identified, monitored and returned to use.

**What is an Empty Property Strategy?**

This Strategy replaces the one that covered the period 2003 – 2008 and will serve as an action plan for the next five years under the umbrella of our Housing Strategy 2008 – 2013. Taking its lead from the Eastbourne Community Strategy it has obvious links with the Homelessness Strategy, the Private Housing Renewal Policy and the Crime and Disorder Strategy. The key objective is to reduce the number of empty properties in the town and this will be achieved by bringing existing long term empty properties back into use and ensuring that those becoming empty are returned to use without undue delay. This strategy will be a “live” working document and serve as a point of reference for all those involved in empty property work in Eastbourne.

Its aims and objectives are also compatible with the countywide Pride of Place - Sustainable Community Strategy’s proposed vision for Eastbourne:

"By 2026 Eastbourne will be a premier seaside destination within an enhanced green setting. To meet everyone’s needs Eastbourne will be a safe, thriving, healthy and vibrant community with appropriate housing, education, and employment choices, responding to the effects of climate change”

and that Eastbourne will be a place:

“*That has a good supply of high quality sustainable housing which offers choice for local people and those wishing to move to the town to work*”

This vision is shared by Eastbourne’s key corporate strategies, including the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy. The LDF Core Strategy will reinforce the objectives for housing, which are to deliver the required number, range and mix of sustainable housing, particularly addressing the need for affordable housing, but designed to respect the character of the neighbourhood area, whilst making the best use of land, especially previously developed land.
What are we trying to achieve?

1) The identification and recording of residential properties that have remained empty for a long period, with the reasons for this and the owner’s contact details;

2) The identification of non-residential empty property and vacant sites that have development potential for residential use;

3) The return to use and/or redevelopment of unused or derelict property and/or land;

4) The return to use of unoccupied residential properties;

5) A reduction in both the overall number of empty properties in Eastbourne and the length of time that properties becoming empty remain unoccupied;

6) The improvement and regeneration of neighbourhoods by targeting long term empty properties and ensuring that they are returned to use;

How will we achieve this?

1) Using Council Tax records as a basis for identifying long term empty properties and improving the accuracy and quality of the data by making contact with individual owners;

2) Raising public awareness of empty properties and the multiple benefits of bringing them back into use;

3) Promoting the Empty Property Officer as a contact point and resource for the owners of empty properties, others in the community with concerns about the impact of empty properties and those seeking to purchase, renovate or redevelop empty properties;

4) Encouraging, advising and working with property owners, private landlords and other stakeholders to ensure that their empty properties are brought back into use with the minimum delay;

5) Promoting a range of grants, loans and other potential assistance for anyone looking at the options for returning an empty property to use;

6) Examining how enforcement action might be used as a last resort, when all other available options have been exhausted;

7) Encouraging a corporate approach to tackling empty properties, with particular linkages to the Council’s Difficult Property Group (DPG) and colleagues in Council Tax, Housing Needs, Housing Development, Private Housing Renewal, Planning and Legal Services;
THE NATIONAL PICTURE

The extent of the problem and the aims of this strategy are best put into context by an examination of the national picture and the Government’s policy on tackling empty homes.

Number of Empty Homes in England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Dwellings</th>
<th>Total Empty</th>
<th>% of Stock</th>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>RSL</th>
<th>Other (Public)</th>
<th>Other (Private)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st April 2007</td>
<td>22,279,300</td>
<td>672,294</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>40,963</td>
<td>38,178</td>
<td>6,554</td>
<td>587,229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st April 2008</td>
<td>22,493,857</td>
<td>697,055</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>36,944</td>
<td>42,039</td>
<td>4,802</td>
<td>613,270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2007 & 2008 HSSA Returns

This information is collected annually from local housing authorities in England as part of the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA). At 1st April 2007 there had been good progress with a 12% reduction in the number of empty homes in England since 1997. The 672,924 empty dwellings represented 3.02% of the total housing stock, which then stood at just over 22 million dwellings. Significantly, 271,252 were identified as private sector empty homes that had remained unoccupied for six months or longer.

By 1st April 2008 the start of the economic downturn and early problems in the housing market saw a marked increase in empty properties, with 697,055 now representing 3.10% of the total housing stock. At 293,728 the number of private sector homes remaining unoccupied for six months or longer showed an increase of 22,476 or 8.3%, compared with the previous year. The limited availability of credit and a failing housing market are likely to lead to further increases in the number of empty properties, reflecting rising numbers of repossessions, some owners and developers being unable to raise funds for renovation works, others choosing not to sell or having difficulty finding a buyer and building projects grinding to a halt.

Properties become vacant for many different reasons. In the majority of cases this is a short term issue, for example, where a property is in probate or in need of renovation before it can be occupied following a change of ownership or, if let, between tenants. Such transactions are a normal function of the housing market in England, with properties being actively marketed or prepared for occupation. The remaining properties stay empty for long periods of time either due to problems that prevent their occupation or the intent of the owner. These problematic homes are the major concern for both the Government and local authorities because they are not being actively marketed or prepared for occupation and are unlikely to be returned to use without some form of intervention.

What has been done about them?

Central Government has long recognised the need to maximise the use of the existing housing stock in order to minimise the number of new homes that needs to
be built each year, particularly in areas of high demand like the South East. Bringing empty homes back into use also contributes to wider Government objectives such as:

- creating sustainable communities;
- tackling low demand and market failure;
- tackling anti-social behaviour;
- providing affordable homes;
- ensuring that homes meet a decent standard;

Successive Governments have therefore been keen to demonstrate their intention of addressing the issue of empty homes and 2003 saw a significant milestone with the publication of ‘Empty Property: Unlocking the Potential”, the first comprehensive guidance on bringing empty property back into use.

The importance given to tackling empty homes is also reflected in the legislative changes, policy documents, and guidance that have flowed from government over many years:

- The Housing Act 1985 – empowers local authorities to acquire land, houses or other properties from private individuals, for quantitative or qualitative housing gain. The power can be used to compulsory purchase empty homes.

- The Urban Task Force, set up in 1998, studied urban decline and in 1999 published ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’, recommending measures to encourage people back into urban areas. These included:
  - A statutory duty for local authorities to have an Empty Property Strategy (authorities are currently expected to have one);
  - The reduction of VAT on conversion and refurbishment of empty property. (In the Budget of 2001 VAT was reduced to 5% for such works to properties empty for over 3 years – recently amended to over 2 years – and to 0% for those empty for over 10 years),
  - Changes in Council Tax rules to allow full Council Tax to be charged on empty properties. (Implemented by Local Government Act 2003, Section 75);
  - Allowing Council Tax information to be shared with other departments for the purpose of identifying, monitoring empty properties and taking steps to return them to use. (Implemented by Local Government Act 2003, Section 85);

- A Best Value Performance Indicator, used to compare the performance of local authorities nationally, was introduced in 2000/01 to report upon the number of non-LA vacant dwellings returned to use or demolished annually as a direct result of action by the local authority.

- In February 2003 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister launched the Communities Plan, ‘Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future’, setting out a long-term programme of action for delivering sustainable communities
in both urban and rural areas. It specifically refers to bringing empty homes back into use.

- The Housing Act 2004 included the introduction of the Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO), enabling local authorities to take over the temporary management of an empty property if an owner is not prepared to return it to use. The local authority can carry out repairs and recover the costs from rental income.

- In January 2005, as part of its Sustainable Communities agenda, the Government published ‘Sustainable Communities: Homes for All’. One of two plans, it encouraged local authorities to make better use of long-term empty properties and re-affirmed the Government’s commitment to tackling the problem.

- In responding to the Barker Review in December 2005, which highlighted the need to increase the supply of housing, the government stated that: "In addition to new build, it essential to make better use of existing housing stock and one way of doing this is to address the issue of the number of private sector empty properties vacant for 6 months or more”.

- The Government Green Paper, ‘Homes for the Future: More Affordable, More Sustainable’, published in July 2007, stated that local authorities, as part of their strategic housing role, should make better use of empty homes when looking to increase housing supply.

- Planning Policy Statement 3 published in November 2006 underpins the Government’s strategic housing policy objective: “to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live in a decent home, which they can afford in a community where they want to live”. It stresses the need for local planning authorities to continue to make effective use of land by re-using land that has previously been developed; the national annual target is that at least 60% of new housing be provided on previously developed land, including land and buildings that are vacant or derelict.

The **Empty Homes Agency** was set up as long ago as 1992 in response to the high number of empty properties and rising levels of homelessness. The Agency, which receives government support, is an independent campaigning charity aiming to raise awareness of the waste of empty homes nationally and working with others to promote solutions to bring them back into use. The Agency has successfully campaigned for:

- Local authorities to adopt Empty Property Strategies and to appoint Empty Property Officers, with more than 200 having done so to date;
- The discretion for local authorities to reduce or remove Council Tax discounts historically given to owners of long term empty homes;
- The scandal of empty homes to be kept in the public eye, organising seminars and conferences, and holding National and London Weeks of Action;
The recognition of the good work of local authorities and housing associations, by holding annual awards for good practice around the country;

Empty Property Officers to be able to join regional forums for the purpose of networking and sharing best practice;

However, the Agency is far from complacent and continues to have an active campaign agenda. It believes that with unprecedented housing need, and unfolding environmental crises, the waste of empty homes cannot be allowed to continue. They are, therefore, continuing to campaign for:

- The Government’s recognition of how the use of empty homes can help to meet housing supply targets;
- Having empty homes returned to use included within housing growth targets, related performance indicators and the Housing and Planning Reward Grant System;
- Local authorities to have a statutory duty to tackle empty homes in their area, with proper financial support being provided by the Government;
- The abolition of all Council Tax discounts being given to owners who keep their property empty, given that around half of local authorities have failed to use their discretionary powers and continue to give discounts;
- The Government to investigate options for the introduction of higher and punitive levels of Council Tax for very long term empty homes;
- The harmonisation of VAT rates to stimulate the renovation of empty homes, particularly as the building of new homes is zero rated;
- Making better use of empty commercial buildings to create more homes;
- Taking action to end the scandal of empty homes in the public sector;
- Encouraging the temporary occupation of vacant homes that are awaiting redevelopment through the use of short life housing initiatives and property guardian schemes;

The Agency is a good source of information about empty homes, including monthly bulletins, statistics, case studies, policy documents, publications and useful contacts.

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP) exists to support people who bring empty properties back into use. Its website is a valuable source of indexed information and also facilitates an electronic forum for its members to exchange views about a wide range of empty property topics.

The Association was particularly influential in producing guidance, acceptable to the relevant Government Office, on the collection of data for Best Value Performance Indicator 64. The indicator, in use until 2007/08, required local authorities to measure their performance with regard to the “number of non-local authority owned vacant dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the financial year as a direct result of action by the local authority.” The guidance had been deemed necessary as a result of variations in the way that local authorities had been interpreting the Audit Commission’s own guidance, particularly with regard to the extent and significance of the actions they had undertaken or initiated.
There had been much debate about the effectiveness of the PI, in terms of both encouraging local authorities to take empty property work seriously and measuring their performance. Following its removal from the list of National Indicators from April 2008, it remains a key concern of NAEPP to ensure that local authorities have effective empty property strategies with targets set in response to local circumstances. Unsurprisingly, they are taking the lead in promoting replacement performance measures and in May 2009 issued a draft consultation of their new proposals entitled “Guidelines for Monitoring Empty Homes Interventions: A Standard Approach for Local Authorities”. They will continue to lobby both national and local government to give their support to the proposed monitoring framework and to adopt it for annual measuring and reporting purposes.

THE REGIONAL PICTURE

Number of Empty Homes

A further analysis of the 2008 statistics referred to on page 6 reveals that, in terms of empty properties as a percentage of total housing, the South East (2.53%) compares favourably with the national average (3.10%). At 2.73%, East Sussex is just above the regional average but compares well nationally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Dwellings</th>
<th>Total Empty</th>
<th>% of Stock</th>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>RSL</th>
<th>Other (public)</th>
<th>Other (private)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Sussex</td>
<td>361,543</td>
<td>9,856</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East Region</td>
<td>3,603,644</td>
<td>91,074</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2,632</td>
<td>4,468</td>
<td>932</td>
<td>83,042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2008 HSSA Returns

South East Regional Housing Strategy

The South East Regional Housing Strategy was first published in 2005 and subsequently reviewed and updated for the period 2008-2011. In the review document, consulted upon in 2007, the Board recognised that with around 30,000 spread across the region long-term empty homes could increase housing supply if brought back into use, with relatively low level financial support being provided through the region’s private housing renewal funding.

With an overall objective of ensuring that everyone in the region has access to a decent home at a price they can afford, the investment priorities for 2008-2011 are to:

- Build more affordable homes;
- Bring decent housing within reach of people on low incomes;
- Improve the quality of new housing and existing stock;

BEST programme

In 2007/08 the five District and Borough Councils in East Sussex, together with Brighton and Hove City Council, made a successful bid to the South East Regional Housing Board for private housing renewal funding. The partnership has been
allocated funding of £18.5 million over the three year period 2008-2011. A proportion of this allocation will support this Council’s empty property work by funding both the Empty Property Officer post and the provision of Empty Property Grant assistance on a limited and discretionary basis. It also supports a partnership arrangement and service level agreement through which the Empty Property Officer is now working one and a half days a week for Wealden District Council.

**Sussex Empty Homes Forum**

The thirteen local authorities across East and West Sussex have been meeting for some years on a quarterly basis to share information and promote best practice in relation to empty property work. Although the authorities may differ widely, they have shared interests and aims when it comes to monitoring empty homes and working with owners to bring them back into use.

Taking a lead from a target in the East Sussex Local Area Agreement (LAA), to develop a County-wide Empty Homes Strategy by the end of 2007, it was decided that existing joint working and partnership arrangements pointed towards the need for a pan-Sussex document. This resulted in the Forum’s recent publication of a *Strategic Framework 2008-2011 for Tackling Empty Homes in Sussex*. It promotes a co-ordinated approach to empty homes work with the objectives of:

- making the best use of resources;
- promoting consistency and partnership working;
- sharing knowledge and best practice to increase performance;

The actions planned include:

- adopting a Sussex-wide performance measure for empty property work;
- holding two Good Practice workshops each year;
- participation in national organisations and campaigns relating to empty property;
- encouraging and developing additional cross-boundary working;

The Strategic Framework is intended to complement the Empty Property Strategy documents that still need to be produced by each local authority to underpin their approach to empty property work at a local level.
THE LOCAL PICTURE

Housing Stock in Eastbourne

There was a population of around 92,242 living in an estimated 44,672 households as at June 2009. The numbers of dwellings, according to tenure, are estimated at:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owner Occupied</td>
<td>30,700</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately Rented</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Association</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>46,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many empty homes are there?

The information collected for the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA), at 1st April 2008, previously analysed at national and regional levels, reveals the following picture for Eastbourne and, for comparison purposes, other authorities in East Sussex, including Brighton and Hove.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Dwellings</th>
<th>Total Empty</th>
<th>% of Stock</th>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>RSL (public)</th>
<th>Other (public)</th>
<th>Other (private)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brighton &amp; Hove UA</strong></td>
<td>123,697</td>
<td>2,531</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastbourne BC</strong></td>
<td>46,705</td>
<td>1,133</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hastings BC</td>
<td>41,712</td>
<td>2,544</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes DC</td>
<td>42,360</td>
<td>1,080</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rother DC</td>
<td>43,630</td>
<td>1,066</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealden DC</td>
<td>63,439</td>
<td>1,502</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>East Sussex</strong></td>
<td>361,543</td>
<td>9,856</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9,237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At 1st April 2008 there were an estimated 1133 empty homes in Eastbourne, representing some 2.43% of the total stock and comparing favourably with East Sussex (2.73%), the South East Region (2.53%) and the national figure of 3.10%.

Of those 1133 empty properties, 88 were owned by the local authority, 67 by housing associations and 978 were privately owned. Of the latter, 354 had remained empty for a period of six months or more and can be described as long term empty.

Council Tax records have long been the best source of this data given that most empty properties are identifiable by an exemption class granted to the owner from the date their property became empty. Unfortunately the records are less reliable in the case of long term empty properties which return to a full charge at the end of their exemption period and are therefore recorded on a separate database by the Empty Property Officer. Although Council Tax records change continuously, and are out of date very quickly, they provide a useful snapshot of the situation on a particular day and the various exemption classes help to explain why properties are empty, as exemplified in the following table:
Empty Properties by Council Tax Exemption Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemption Class (reason for being unoccupied)</th>
<th>Class Code</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; April 2008</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; April 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to six months after completion</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring/undergoing major repair works (12 months max)</td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unoccupied and unfurnished up to six months</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable person in prison or detention</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable person in a rest home, nursing home or hospital</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable person deceased and probate not granted</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable person deceased, for up to six months after probate</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation prohibited by law</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting to be occupied by a minister of religion</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable party receiving care elsewhere</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liable party providing care elsewhere</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normally occupied by student(s)</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgagee in possession</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Council Tax Records

Understandably, when estimating the number of empty properties for reporting purposes some of the above classes can be excluded on the basis that they remain someone’s principal home, for example whilst in prison, hospital or receiving/giving care. Also, for completeness, long term empty properties, that are no longer exempt, have to be added.

As a reflection of the economic downturn and current market conditions the table confirms that numbers are increasing across the board. It is most noticeable in Class C and these are generally habitable and available properties which the owners are having difficulty either selling and/or letting. Unsurprisingly there are early indications that the number of private sector homes remaining empty for over six months has also increased considerably, to around 500 at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009.

The main focus of this strategy is on these long term empties in the private sector but preliminary enquiries reveal that many are either undergoing renovation or already being actively marketed for sale or rent, therefore requiring no intervention or even encouragement from the local authority. It is the remaining problematic and often longer term empties that need to be tackled and a database of properties remaining empty for more than 12 months has to be maintained separately for monitoring purposes.
Is there evidence they need to be returned to use?

The demand for more homes

Eastbourne’s **Housing Strategy 2008 – 2013** confirms that long-term empty properties are a particular concern given the numbers of people becoming homeless or unable to meet their housing needs. Together with the **Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013** and supported by **Housing Facts and Figures June 2009**, it provides evidence of housing needs that cannot be met by the supply of social housing and both strategies emphasise the importance of maximising the use of available housing resources across all tenures. Improving access to privately rented homes is identified as a means of meeting housing needs and preventing homelessness. Returning empty properties to use and adding to the number of decent homes in the private sector would clearly make a positive and valuable contribution.

Improving housing stock condition

Eastbourne Borough Council’s **Private Housing Renewal Policy – ‘Improving Homes, Transforming Lives’** sets the agenda for private housing, and its aims are:

- To provide decent, safe, warm, secure and healthy homes;
- To develop an area based focus where necessary to ensure assistance is aimed at those suffering the worst housing conditions or whose properties are the most unsuitable;
- To provide better quality provision in private rented housing and to support landlords through a range of incentives and undertake appropriate enforcement against bad landlords where necessary;
- To actively target and tackle homelessness and increase the availability of accommodation to meet the needs of homeless households;
- To support initiatives to deal with obsolete / long term empty housing;
- To support the overarching strategic commitment to improve and sustain the wellbeing of Eastbourne residents;

Research over a number of years has helped to inform and provide an evidence base for the policy. This has included base information from the comprehensive **House Condition and Energy Efficiency Survey** undertaken in the summer of 2007. The information builds a picture of significant problems in sections of our privately owned housing stock, and underpins the Council’s plans to help vulnerable residents to repair, improve or adapt their homes and to ensure that more of its private housing stock achieves the Decent Homes Standard in line with government targets. Again, improving and returning empty properties to use would obviously make a valuable contribution.

The benefits of returning empty properties to use are therefore clearly recognised, both in terms of improving the stock and meeting housing need and the documents referred to above are all available for viewing on the Council’s website at: [www.eastbourne.gov.uk/housing](http://www.eastbourne.gov.uk/housing)
What has been achieved to date?

In line with the Empty Property Strategy 2003-2008 and the associated Action Plan the Council has been actively involved in empty property work over a number of years. Achievements to date include:

- The appointment of a full-time Empty Property Officer in 2006;
- Active participation in and attendance at the Sussex Empty Homes Forum;
- Contribution to the production of a Strategic Framework for Tackling Empty Homes in Sussex 2008 – 2011, promoting the best use of resources, effective partnership working and the sharing of knowledge and best practice to increase performance;
- The development and updating of Empty Homes pages on the Council’s website with links to related documents and websites and a facility for reporting an empty property or requesting further advice or assistance;
- The production of an advisory leaflet for empty property owners, exploring the options for returning their properties to use;
- The production of a questionnaire to be sent to owners of properties believed to be long term empty, checking the accuracy of the Council’s records and obtaining more information about the property, the reasons for it being empty and any intentions the owner has for its future use;
- The inclusion of an Empty Property Grant in the Council’s private housing assistance programme, supported by a successful bid to the South East Regional Housing Board for private housing renewal funding;
- During the period of the strategy, 151 non-local authority-owned empty properties were returned to use (or demolished) as a direct result of action by the Council, in line with guidance relating to the relevant Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 64), more than meeting the target of averaging at least 20 each year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>EMPTY PROPERTIES RETURNED TO USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Best Value Performance Indicator 64

- Although the use of BVPI 64 ended at the end of 2007/08 the Council has retained the measure as a local indicator and in 2008/09 the performance level increased to 118 properties returned to use, easily meeting the target that had been increased to 50 each year for the purpose of the BEST programme monitoring process;
- Implemented joint working arrangements through a service level agreement with Wealden District Council that enables them to benefit from the Empty Property Officer’s time and expertise;
How were these outcomes achieved?

Although many of the achievements reflect the work of the Empty Property Officer, the overall success of empty property work is dependent upon effective joint working, both corporately across Council departments and with external partners. This can be best demonstrated by looking at some examples of how properties have been returned to use:

Case Study A: Stansted Road, Eastbourne

Advice and encouragement can sometimes achieve results without further intervention by the Council. These two properties had been empty for many years and were boarded-up when reported to the Empty Property Officer. A letter was immediately sent to the owners, enclosing questionnaires and an advice leaflet which promoted the benefits of returning the empty properties to use. A few weeks later a letter was received confirming the owner’s intention to refurbish the properties and return them to use. The Empty Property Officer followed this up with a telephone call later in the year to check on progress. The properties were returned to use within a year of being reported.

Case Study B: Ceylon Place, Eastbourne

Properties are sometimes empty for longer than would otherwise be necessary simply because there are problems finding a tenant. The Empty Property Officer received a call from a private landlord who was having that problem with a flat that had been empty for over two months. He was referred to the Council’s Housing Needs team who were able to nominate a suitable tenant and help them secure the private rented accommodation by providing financial assistance through the Deposit Bond scheme. The property was quickly returned to use.

Case Study C: Biddenden Close, Eastbourne

The owner of this property was concerned about the perceived pitfalls associated with being a landlord and was happy to lease it to Eastbourne Homes Limited, the partner organisation now operating the Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme on behalf of the Council. The scheme offers guaranteed rental income, relief from day to day management responsibilities, vacant possession at the end of the lease and the return of the property in the same state of reasonable repair and decorative condition. The Council benefited from being able to accommodate a homeless household and the property was quickly returned to use.

Case Study D: Seaside, Eastbourne

Following the launch of the Seaside Road Regeneration Strategy in July 2000, there has been considerable investment in improving residential and commercial buildings and the area remains a priority for the Empty Property Strategy. One of the Council’s preferred Housing Association partners successfully completed a residential development on an unused garage site and was able to convert and
extend an adjacent long term empty property to provide an additional seven affordable housing units.

Case Study E: Brodrick Road, Eastbourne

This family-sized property, owned by East Sussex County Council and previously used to accommodate a school caretaker, had remained empty for some years and fallen into disrepair. Negotiations between the two Councils led to an arrangement whereby it would be leased by Eastbourne Homes Limited at a reduced rent and renovated with an Empty Property Loan from funding allocated to the local authority by the Regional Housing Board for housing renewal purposes. The property has been used to assist a homeless household and a proportion of the rental income is being used to repay the loan.

Case Study F: Seaside Road, Eastbourne

The owner of this business had been under-occupying the large flat on the floors above and having moved out wanted to return it to use as a source of income. Council officers responsible for the regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) provided the advice and assistance that enabled the generously proportioned accommodation to be upgraded to a licensable standard. It was then returned to use and is able to safely accommodate up to eight occupants who share the lounge, kitchen and other facilities.

Case Study G: Winchcombe Road, Eastbourne

This 4-bed end of terrace house had been empty for many years, was in a very poor state of repair and had been boarded-up following the death of the absent owner. The purchaser obtained a planning consent to divide the property vertically into two smaller dwellings and applied successfully for an Empty Property Grant to help meet the conversion and renovation costs. In accordance with the Grant conditions the completed houses are occupied by households nominated by the Council, at an affordable rent, for a period of at least five years.

Work at Winchcombe Road in progress
IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

Reference has already been made to the Council’s key aims and objectives in tackling empty properties and successfully achieving them is dependent upon the effective implementation of this strategy.

Who is responsible?

The Council has a dedicated Empty Property Officer, located in the Private Housing Team in the Environmental Health Department. Although the post holder has a lead and co-ordinating role, empty property issues remain a corporate responsibility requiring close cross-departmental working:

- Private Housing (Environmental Health Officers) – maintaining decent home standards and other enforcement issues;
- Housing Development – for links to Housing Association partners and other funding potential to develop brown field sites or re-use empty properties;
- Housing Needs – developing links with private landlords, assisting owners of empty properties to locate tenants and enabling households in need of housing to access empty homes in the private sector;
- Council Tax – providing base information for the identification and recording of empty properties, understanding the reasons for them being empty and providing contact details for owners;
- Planning/Building Control – providing information about any plans for empty properties and looking at mutually relevant enforcement issues;
- Legal Services – advice and assistance on a range of legal issues and with particular regard to any proposals to pursue enforcement action;
- Eastbourne Homes Limited – administration of the Private Sector Leasing Scheme;

The previous strategy referred to plans for an Empty Property Partnership but this was overtaken by the establishment of the Council’s Difficulty Property Group. The DPG brings together officers from most of the above disciplines to deal with major issues surrounding any properties in the borough that required corporate consideration. The Empty Property Officer is now a member of the Group and has a forum to discuss any particularly problematic empty homes and to decide upon an appropriate, corporate course of action.

What needs to be done?

The Council’s preference is to work with owners to find the best way of returning properties to use. This requires an accurate and regularly updated information base, a sound knowledge of the local housing market, an understanding of the options that are available to owners and an appreciation of the difficult circumstances that some of them might be experiencing. However, where all other efforts have failed and leaving the property empty is not acceptable, the Council will consider taking enforcement action as a last resort. Owners should be encouraged to understand that, normally, doing nothing is not an option.
Identifying and recording empty properties

Appearances can be deceptive! Although a property in poor condition may appear unoccupied it could be someone’s home, whilst a well maintained house could have been unoccupied for a long period. Council Tax records remain the best source of information about empty properties. The exemptions and discounts granted to owners of empty homes act as an initial indicator that the property is empty and the information collected provides useful details of the address, the date it became empty, the reason for it being empty, the name and address of the owner and, eventually, the date that it is returned to use. Importantly the Government gave local authorities specific powers to share and use this information under the Local Government Act 2003.

Simple analysis of this information helps the authority to estimate the number of empty homes at any particular date and maintain a database of long term empty properties, normally those that have come to the end of an exemption period and returned to full charge. The quality of the database can be improved, with additions or deletions, as information becomes available from other sources. For example long term uninhabitable properties may have been removed from the Council Tax list, whilst empty spaces over shops could be taxed under business rates. In other cases the Council Tax records might be simply inaccurate due to misinformation or even fraud. Liaison with Environmental Health, Planning, Building Control, Refuse Collection etc. and reports/complaints from the public can help with this continuous improvement process. The Empty Property Officer will liaise with Council Tax colleagues in respect of relevant updated information. There are facilities for reporting empty properties on the websites of the Council and the Empty Homes Agency. www.eastbourne.gov.uk/housing/housing/empty/contact-us www.reportemptyhomes.com

Publicity and Information

Given the demand for housing across all tenures and the normally active local housing market the number of empty homes is a surprise to many people. It is therefore a possibility that increased public awareness of the extent of the problem and of the many advantages of properties being re-occupied might help to reduce the number of properties either becoming empty or remaining so for longer than necessary.

An advisory leaflet has therefore been produced, promoting the multiple benefits of returning empty properties to use and exploring the options that are available to owners. The Empty Property Officer is promoted as a contact and resource for the owners of empty properties or anyone else with concerns about the impact of one in their locality. The officer is also available to advise anyone with an interest in the purchase, renovation or re-development of empty properties. The leaflet has sections on selling, letting and renovating a property with links to helpful websites and the telephone numbers of useful organisations. Reference is also made to more direct assistance available from the Council in terms of providing Empty Property Grants and/or finding tenants, with contact details for obtaining further information. The leaflet needs to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
The Council’s website has pages that are dedicated to publicising the missed opportunities of properties allowed to remain empty and unused for long periods, promoting the benefits of returning them to use and offering owners advice and assistance. At www.eastbourne.gov.uk/emptyhomes there is access to further pages giving details of:

- Empty Property Strategy - a range of initiatives aimed at bringing empty homes back into use. Whenever possible we will try to work with owners to provide advice, information and guidance;
- Advice for Empty Property Owners - information about options for owners - selling, letting or renovating their property;
- Private Sector Leasing - this can help by relieving inexperienced landlords of the responsibility of letting and managing their property;
- Empty Property Grants - these can provide funds to improve the condition of a property to meet the Decent Homes Standard, making it suitable for letting. The grant is usually conditional upon the council being able to nominate a tenant for an agreed period;
- Enforcement Powers - the council will only use these powers if negotiations with the owner have been fully exhausted.

There are also links to:

- Other related pages on the Council’s website;
- Other websites providing information and advice about empty homes, such as Communities and Local Government and the Empty Homes Agency;
- Documents that can be downloaded, such as the Empty Property Strategy, the advisory leaflet and a publicity poster;
- Empty Homes Contact Form that can be used to report an empty property or to direct an enquiry to the Empty Property Officer. (see page 18 for link)

The contents of the website must be reviewed and updated regularly.

The Council can also contribute to the promotion of public awareness on a wider basis through:

- representation at the Sussex Empty Homes Forum and involvement with Strategic Framework for tackling Empty Homes across the County;
- membership of the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP);
- links with the Empty Homes Agency and its campaign for tackling empty homes;

**Targeted Encouragement and Assistance**

Generally, properties are considered to be long term empty after six months but monitoring experience suggests that many are returned to use shortly after this
threshold has been reached. In these circumstances, and with the exception of properties that have been the subject of a complaint or otherwise require urgent action, the database is used to record and target properties that have been empty for more than twelve months. Owners will be contacted, by phone or more often in writing, to establish whether their property is in fact empty. If it is, they will be asked to confirm the reason(s) and to indicate if, how and when they intend to return the property to use. A short questionnaire and reply paid envelope often help with this process. The advisory leaflet referred to above is normally made available and there is a link to the Council’s website to access advice, publications and other relevant organisations. The obvious options for owners are to live in the property themselves or, more likely, to make it available for sale and/or rent. However, they are invited to contact the Empty Property Officer if further advice or assistance is required. This might include:

- details of financial assistance towards the costs of renovation works, offered by the Council in the form of an **Empty Property Grant**, funded through the Private Housing Renewal Programme;

- help with finding tenants through the **Private Sector Leasing** scheme administered by Eastbourne Home Limited on behalf of the Council or a range of initiatives used by the Housing Needs Team to help homeless households or others in housing need to access private rented accommodation, such as **Rent/Deposit Loans** or simply **Nomination Agreements** with private landlords;

- contact details for local Letting Agents and/or Estate Agents

- details of potential purchasers who have registered an interest in acquiring empty properties in the town;

- information about beneficial VAT rates for developing/renovating long term empty properties;

- information about the Capital Allowance scheme allowing property owners to claim up front tax relief on all capital spent on renovating, converting and/or creating access to vacant or under-used space above shops to provide flats to rent;

Experience suggests that in the majority of cases the response from owners will be reassuring about action being taken to return the property to use or perhaps ongoing monitoring will reveal that the property is once again occupied. In only a small minority of cases will the Council need to pursue the matter further or consider more formal action.

**Renovation, Regeneration and Redevelopment**

Badly neglected empty properties attract anti-social behaviour and can reduce the value of neighbouring properties. Bringing such empty properties back into use and
re-using empty flats over shops or abandoned office space increases housing supply and improves the environment.

Reference has already been made to the Council’s discretionary Empty Property Grants that are provided through the Council’s Private Housing renewal Programme. These can contribute up to 50% of the costs of eligible works for renovating a single dwelling or converting a property into flats, subject to a maximum sum for each dwelling returned to use as determined by the current Private Housing Renewal Policy. The availability of this assistance is constrained by the annual budget and is conditional upon the Council being able to lease the properties returned to use and/or having nomination rights for a specified period, normally five years. (Detailed guidance notes and an application form are available upon request).

Given the shortage of land available for the development of new housing in Eastbourne, there is already an emphasis on using “brown field” sites that have been used for another purpose, such as industrial or commercial buildings/land, existing residential buildings and flats over shops. The Local Authority will continue to prioritise the renovation and regeneration of empty properties and vacant sites through its approved Development Programme in partnership with registered Social Landlords. The Empty Property Officer will monitor the availability of empty property or vacant sites with development potential and liaise closely with colleagues in the Housing Development team.

Flats over shops have long been regarded as a source of additional residential accommodation with many being left unused and sometimes neglected. The reasons for flats remaining empty are complex, with access and security issues being major concerns and the alternative use as storage space being a common factor. Some of these flats have remained unoccupied for many years and the owners have no intention of making them available for residential purposes. Nevertheless the Empty Property officer will continue to monitor the situation. Owners will be contacted and offered advice and encouragement, including details of the Flat Conversion Allowance. This is a tax allowance introduced by the Inland Revenue in 2001 intended to encourage the renovation and letting of empty space above shops. The Empty Property Grant is also an option that could help owners with costs of renovation or providing independent access to a flat.

**Enforcement Action**

When all other options have failed and as a last resort, the local authority will consider the use of enforcement powers to improve the appearance of a problematic empty property and/or return it to use.

**General Enforcement Powers**

These powers, set out in the table below, can be used to address immediate risks posed by a problem property and may help to improve its appearance, pending its return to use. If the required action is not taken by the owner works in default can be carried out with an appropriate charge being imposed on the owner.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous or dilapidated buildings</td>
<td>Building Act 1984, section 77 and 78</td>
<td>Requires the owner to make the property safe and/or enables the Local Authority to take emergency action to make the property safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property in such a state as to be a nuisance (e.g. causing dampness in adjoining property) or prejudicial to health</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Act 1990, section 79</td>
<td>Requires the owner to take steps to abate the nuisance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Act 1984, section 76</td>
<td>Enables the Local Authority to take emergency action to abate the nuisance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsecured property posing a risk of unauthorised entry or likely to suffer vandalism, arson or similar</td>
<td>Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, section 29</td>
<td>Requires the owner to take steps to secure the property or allows the Local Authority to board it up in an emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Act 1984, section 78</td>
<td>Allows the Local Authority to fence off the property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocked or defective drains or private sewers</td>
<td>Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, section 35</td>
<td>Requires the owner to address obstructed private sewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Act 1984, section 59</td>
<td>Requires the owner to address blocked or defective drains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Health Act 1961, section 17</td>
<td>Requires the owner to address defective drains or private sewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermin either present or a risk of attracting vermin that may detrimentally affect peoples health</td>
<td>Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, section 4</td>
<td>Requires the owner to take steps to clear the land of vermin and/or requires the owner to remove waste likely to attract vermin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental Protection Act 1990, section 79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Health Act 1936, section 83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsightly land or property affecting the amenity of the area</td>
<td>Public Health Act 1961, section 34</td>
<td>Requires the owner to remove waste from the property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Town and Country Planning Act 1990, section 215</td>
<td>Requires the owner to address unsightly land or external appearance of the property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Act 1984, section 79</td>
<td>Requires the owner to address the property adversely affecting the amenity of the area through its disrepair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Enforcement Options for Returning Properties to Use

Enforcement action through the Empty Property Strategy, using the following additional powers is intended to secure the refurbishment and re-occupation of a long term problematic empty property. However, this action can be costly and time consuming, particularly if opposed. It will only be considered where a property has been empty for at least a year and the property is otherwise unlikely to be returned to use. Any action will first have to be approved by the Difficult Property Group. The approach will be fair, equitable and incremental with owners being kept fully advised, both before and during the enforcement action, and being given the opportunity and sufficient time to address the problems and/or return the property to use. Throughout the process voluntary action by the owner will be the preferred solution providing significant costs have not been incurred by the Council.

- **Enforced Sale Procedure**

  Carried out under Section 103 of the Law of Property Act 1925, the local authority is able to force the sale of a property with a local land charge on it for money owed, either for works carried out in default by the Council or for unpaid Council Tax. The owner must be given the opportunity to repay the debt prior to sale but otherwise the property is sold to a third party and following the payment of any outstanding charges, including the mortgage, any remaining money is held in an account to be claimed by former owner. The procedure can have the double benefit of the debt being recovered and the property being returned to use.

- **Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)**

  Under the Housing Act 1995 Section 17 the local authority has the power to acquire land and property compulsorily where the owner is unwilling to sell voluntarily. It can be applied to underused or ineffectively used property/land if there is proven housing need and can be pursued where acquisition would allow improvement or redevelopment to take place, contributing to the promotion of economic, social or economic well being. The Orders have to be approved by the Government Office and may be subject to public enquiry, making them potentially time-consuming and costly. It really is a last resort but once approved the Council could arrange the sale of the property, preferably to a housing association to provide affordable housing. Otherwise it could be sold on the open market, subject to covenants ensuring the refurbishment and reoccupation of the property.

- **Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)**

  This relatively new power was introduced in the Housing Act 2004 but came into force in April 2006. It is pursued through a Residential Property Tribunal (RPT) who must be satisfied that there is no reasonable prospect of the dwelling being returned to use in a reasonable timescale without an EDMO. They take into account the interests of the community and the effect that the order will have on the rights of the owner. If approved the authority takes management control, initially for one year under an interim EDMO and then
for seven years under a final EDMO. Under an interim EDMO a tenancy can only be granted with the owners consent but under a final EDMO it is not required. The costs of management and any refurbishment are taken from the rental income with the balance going to the owner. There is, therefore, a risk attached to using an EDMO for a property in need of extensive refurbishment.

Certain dwellings are exempt from an EDMO, including dwellings undergoing repair or awaiting planning permission, those where the owner is temporarily resident elsewhere, holiday homes, and dwellings for sale or where the owner has died. The government is keen to see greater use being made of this power but, even nationally, relatively few have been approved

**Performance Management**

Reference has already been made to the removal of BVPI 64 from the set of National Indicators at the end of 2007/08. Previously it had been used to measure “the number of non-local authority owned dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the year as a result of action by the local authority”. Government guidance allowed the inclusion of all empty properties regardless of the time they had remained empty and there were problems with a consistent interpretation of what qualified as “action by the local authority”. The indicator did not, therefore, satisfactorily reflect the work being carried out by local authorities to return long term empty properties to use.

In the absence of anything else Eastbourne Borough Council, along with many other local authorities, has retained the measure as a local indicator, pending the outcome of work being done to promote replacement performance measures, through NAEPP nationally and the Sussex Empty Homes Forum locally. For the purpose of clarity, and in anticipation of new performance measures being introduced, the records being maintained by this Council will include the length of time that each property remained empty before it was returned to use.

**Monitor and Review**

The strategy is intended to be in place for 5 years (2009 – 2014) but will be reviewed annually and updated if necessary.

The Council will continue to monitor the overall levels of empty homes, the progress of long term empty properties (over 6 months) maintained on its database and any problems associated with individual properties. It will also compare the local picture and its performance with those at a local, regional and national level. Should this monitoring indicate significant variations or problems, such as any further consequences of the current economic downturn, or draw attention to any new legislation affecting the Council’s powers for dealing with empty properties, the impact on this strategy will be reviewed immediately.
Contact Information

Should you have any comments about this strategy or require any further information on empty property issues, please contact the Empty Property Officer at:

Eastbourne Borough Council
1 Grove Road
Eastbourne
East Sussex
BN21 4TW

Telephone: 01323 415303

Email: emptyhomes@eastbourne.gov.uk or through the Council’s website at: www.eastbourne.gov.uk/emptyhomes
**APPENDIX 1: ACTION PLAN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>By whom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use Council Tax records and other sources to develop and maintain a database of properties that have remained empty for over six months.</td>
<td>The identification, recording and monitoring of long term empty residential properties, with reasons and owners’ contact details.</td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor and review the database, contacting owners as necessary, make the required additions or deletions and give feedback to Council Tax colleagues.</td>
<td>Improved accuracy of the database and a more accurate estimate of long term empty property numbers for reporting purposes.</td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce, regularly review and update an Empty Property advice leaflet.</td>
<td>Increased awareness of the problems caused by empty properties, the options for returning them to use and what is being done by the Council, its partners and other organisations. Promotion of the Empty Property Officer as a contact point and resource for the owners of empty properties, people with concerns about the impact of empty properties and those seeking to purchase, renovate or redevelop empty properties.</td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce guidance notes and an application form for empty property grants and publicise their purpose and availability.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximise media coverage and other forms of publicity.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend meetings of the Landlords Forum, run in partnership with Wealden DC and the National Landlords Association.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieved and ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend meetings of the Sussex Empty Homes Forum that provides a coordinated approach to empty property work, promoting shared knowledge, best practice and improved performance.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieved and Ongoing</td>
<td>Empty Property Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop existing joint working arrangements with Wealden DC through Service Level Agreement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Timescale</td>
<td>By whom</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Encourage and co-ordinate a corporate approach to tackling empty properties with particular linkages to Council Tax, Housing Needs, Housing Development, Private Housing Renewal, Planning, Building Control and Legal.**  
Attendance at meetings of the Council’s multi-disciplined Difficult Property Group (DPG) that seeks solutions for problematic property or land within the Borough, including examination of how enforcement might be used as a last resort. | The identification of non-residential empty property and vacant sites that have development potential for residential use.  
The return to use and/or redevelopment of unused or derelict property and land.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Achieved and ongoing          | Empty Property Officer           |
| **Send a letter and questionnaire to the owners of all properties empty for a year or more.**  
Contact owners by telephone, wherever possible, if there has been no response or further information is required.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Returned questionnaires or other responses help to explain if/why properties remain empty, whether and/or how they are likely to be brought back into use within a reasonable timescale and, by elimination, identify the more problematic properties that might require the intervention of the Council.                                                                                   | Achieved and ongoing          | Empty Property Officer           |
| **Target owners of remaining long term empty properties with a second letter offering encouragement, information, advice, and a willingness to work with them to return their properties to use with the minimum delay.**  
Maximise expenditure on Empty Property Grants, subject to the approved annual budget within the Private Housing Renewal programme.  
Promote the Council’s schemes that help private sector landlords locate tenants, such as Private Sector Leasing, Rent/Deposit Loans and simple nomination rights.                                                                                                                                                                                     | A reduction in both the overall number of empty properties in Eastbourne and the length of time the properties becoming empty remain unoccupied.  
The improvement and regeneration of neighbourhoods blighted by problematic long term empty properties.  
The return to occupation or demolition of empty residential dwellings as a result of action taken by the local authority, in line with the Empty Property Strategy’s local performance indicator and any updated annual target.                                                                                     | Ongoing                       | Empty Property Officer/DPG       |
| **Where everything else has failed and there are no acceptable reasons for a property to remain empty a referral to DPG will be made for careful consideration of enforcement action.**                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | The improvement and regeneration of neighbourhoods blighted by problematic long term empty properties.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Ongoing                       | DPG                             |