

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Inform members of the current position in relation to empty properties and anti social behaviour across the City
- 1.2 Inform members of work currently being undertaken to tackle empty properties and anti social behaviour
- 1.3 To advise members of the forthcoming review of anti social behaviour by Community and Safer City Scrutiny Committee which could be used to inform proposals for tackling anti social behaviour at Area Committee level

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Evidence suggests that a clear link between anti social behaviour and a poor housing environment exists across all tenures. Where poor quality housing is evident, a higher than average level of anti social behaviour is likely to be experienced resulting in a poorer quality of life for all local residents. This is often more apparent where a high level of empty homes exist. Often poor quality housing in the private rented sector becomes the housing of last resort for the most vulnerable individuals in society.
- 2.2 Strategically, the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership have identified anti social behaviour, empty homes and poor landlord practices in the private rented sector as key issues requiring further intervention. This is highlighted in a number of local strategies including the Sunderland Strategy, Safer Sunderland Strategy, Empty Property Strategy and the Housing Strategy.
- 2.3 It is recognised that long-term empty homes represent a wasted resource and re-occupation results in the following mutual benefits: making a valuable contribution to meeting the housing needs of local people; generating additional revenue through Council Tax; preventing empty properties becoming the focus of anti social behaviour and enhancing the appearance of the local environment.
- 2.4 As of August 2009, **2314 (2.5% of the total private stock in the Sunderland)** private properties were classed as long term (over six months) empty residential homes. On an area basis the breakdown is as follows;
 - North – 385 (2.1% of the private stock in that area)
 - East – 722 (3.6% of the private stock in that area)
 - West – 403 (2% of the private stock in that area)
 - Coalfield – 513 (3.3% of the private stock in that area)
 - Washington – 291 (1.7% of the private stock in that area)

Given that the national average for long term empty properties in the private sector is **1.3%** it is evident that all areas exceed this.

- 2.5 In 2008/09, **406** empty properties across the City were brought back into use or demolished against a key PI target of 360 (339 were brought back into use and 77 were demolished as part of the Councils Area Renewal Programme). A breakdown of those premises across the area committees is as follows:-

- East Area 80
- North Area 137 (77 demolitions)
- Coalfield Area 55
- West Area 112
- Washington Area 22

2.6 The City wide target for 2009/10 is 375. This is a 'stretching' target given limited resources and the length of time it takes to bring empty properties back into use. To the end of September 2009 there have been 117 properties brought back into use or demolished across the city. The breakdown is as follows:-

- East Area 51
- North Area 17
- Coalfield Area 25
- West Area 14
- Washington Area 10

2.7 In order to tackle problems associated with the private rented sector, the Council's Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Team pro-actively engage with landlords, managing agents and tenants to provide support, advice and guidance on health, safety and housing related matters. In addition, formal action is taken where both landlord and tenant fail to improve conditions.

2.8 With regard to anti social behaviour, the Team also hold the responsibility for investigating and resolving all such incidents in the private sector. The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit investigated approximately **500** cases during 08/09. On an area basis the breakdown is as follows;

- North 55
- East 148
- West 98
- Coalfield 57
- Washington 133

3. CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Interventions currently in place to tackle problems associated with the private rented sector and empty properties include:

Empty Properties

3.2 **Landlord Accreditation Scheme** – Currently there are limited powers to regulate the Private Rented Sector, however, Sunderland, operates a voluntary Accreditation Scheme with the aim of promoting good landlord practices. 228 landlords are currently accredited, 81 of whom have property in the Hendon area. Landlords are vetted prior to being accepted as an accredited landlord. The Scheme operates across the city.

3.3 **Dedicated team to carry out enforcement activity associated with housing standards** – Where officers have been unable to resolve issues informally, formal action can be taken to ensure housing standards are improved. This can range from defective drains to dangerous conditions in the home. The team also inspect the City's 1500 Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) to ensure they provide a safe and healthy home for tenants. Over recent years the government has introduced

mandatory licensing for larger HMOs and Sunderland currently licence 120 such properties. Licensing strengthens the authority's powers in relation to the management of such properties.

- 3.4 **Tenant/landlord vetting** - In addition, the team is responsible for carrying out 'vetting checks' on behalf of landlords who are members of the City Council's Voluntary Accreditation Scheme and on average almost 30 such requests are received each month.
- 3.5 **Dedicated Empty Property Officer** - The Empty Property Officer and a Private Sector Housing Officer work across the whole of the city to bring empty properties in the private sector back into use. This can be through working with owners to renovate and sell or rent out, use of enforcement powers, demolishing the most unfit housing or by working with the Housing Options Team to match homeless people with empty properties. However, the volume of work associated with ensuring empty homes are secured against unauthorised access, free from anti social behaviour, vandalism and illegal dumping mean that proactive preventative work is limited.
- 3.6 Previously a targeted approach was adopted in the Hendon area, when Back on the Map funded a dedicated Empty Property Officer for three years. This project terminated in March 2009 during which time 178 empty homes had been brought back into use. As part of this initiative a 'Smartwater' scheme was successful in protecting properties and their contents from theft.
- 3.7 **Area Renewal** – In certain areas it has been essential to provide additional support in relation to home and environmental improvements. These have been targeted schemes as part of a wider regeneration package. In particular landlords have benefited from participation in Block Improvement Schemes on the condition that the property is brought up to the Accreditation standard. Should participating Landlords allow their properties to remain empty for longer than 3 months they have to pay back their grant allocation in full.
- 3.8 Recently a pilot project was undertaken by the Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Team which saw officers proactively tackling issues of empty homes, anti social behaviour and poor rented housing standards and management in two pilot areas. Initial feedback from residents welcomed this approach but more work to determine the outcomes, impact and hopefully the reduction in the fear of crime expressed by residents initially is required. Officers intend to return to the two pilot areas after 6 months to measure and learn from the exercise.
- 3.9 In addition, the team is currently finalising an application to the Secretary of State to introduce Selective Licensing in the Hendon area. Selective Licensing allows a targeted approach to be taken in a set geographical area that is suffering from low demand and/or anti social behaviour. All private landlords operating in the area are required to pass a 'fit and proper test' and be issued with a licence. Operating without such a licence is a criminal offence. Should Sunderland's application be successful it will be one of only 12 authorities in the country to have introduced Selective Licensing.

Anti Social Behaviour

- 3.10 **Dedicated team to investigate cases of anti social behaviour within the private rented sector** - With regard to anti social behaviour, although the Council's Housing

and Neighbourhood Renewal Team holds the responsibility for investigating and resolving cases across all housing tenures, their main focus relates to the owner occupied and private rented sectors.

- 3.11 There are currently three Officers employed to cover the City. Officers are committed to reducing the level of anti social behaviour within the private sector and regularly work outside of their office hours (9-5) to investigate cases and attend community meetings. Given that approximately 76% or 210,000 of Sunderland's residents live in the private sector and that the majority of anti social behaviour occurs on evenings and weekends, difficulties can arise when trying to resolve cases.

Partnership Working

- 3.12 The Council works with its partners to tackle anti social behaviour through Local Multi Agency Problem Solving groups (LMAPS). Partners, for example Gentoos and the Police also have resources to deal with anti social behaviour and it is necessary to ensure that, along with the Council's own resources, they are used to maximum effect.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 At its meeting on 7 July 2009, Community and Safer City Scrutiny Committee agreed proposals for a review of anti social behaviour actively. The suggested areas to be included within the review are as follows;

- To gain an understanding of approaches of the Council and its partners in tackling anti social behaviour and ensure that a strategic approach is being taken
- To map service provision to identify hotspots or any gaps in provision
- To examine the issue of underage drinking (note – Children's Services Review Committee scrutinised Alcohol and Young People in 2008/09)
- Strengthen the environmental services connection with LMAPS
- To consider the balance between preventative and enforcement action
- Developing activities and interventions for young people and families that helps meet their needs
- Look at perceptions of anti social behaviour (Local Area Agreement)
- Progress of Local Multi Agency Problem Solving Groups

A draft final report will be considered in March 2010.

- 4.2 Area Committees have all identified anti social behaviour as a priority within their areas. This is a problem which occurs in all Area Committee boundaries to varying levels and members have expressed a wish to see a local response to these issues. Whereas anti social behaviour must be addressed at a local level, it is important that any solution is sustainable and maximises all available resources, including those of partners
- 4.3 In view of the work already being undertaken by the Community and Safer City Committee, it would be appropriate to have regard to the findings of this review when formulating proposals for tackling anti social behaviour at Area Committee level. Given the timetable of the review, it is recommended that a further report is submitted to Area Committees in April next year

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Members are recommended to:

Review

Note the initiatives already taking place to tackle Anti Social Behaviour
Note the work to be carried out by the Community and Safer City Scrutiny
Committee review
Agree to receive a further report in April 2010