

Sunderland West Area Committee

6th July 2011

Report of the Executive Director of Health, Housing and Adult Services

Influencing Practice, Policy, Strategy – Empty Property Action Plan 2011-12

1. Why has it come to Committee?

- 1.1. This report offers Members the opportunity for consultation on plans and strategies relevant to the Sunderland West area. It also provides information and updates, which will encourage Members to feed into proposals for service or policy change.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council has always been proactive in working with its partners to bring empty properties back into occupation. To this end the Council has produced its second Empty Property Strategy which serves as a tool to ensure that communities are sustainable at a strategic level. Additionally, at a local level, it ensures early intervention prevents residential empty properties causing problems to neighbourhoods and provides local people with local homes.

3. Empty Property Strategy

- 3.1 There are six overarching strategic priorities for Sunderland identified within the Sunderland Housing Priorities Plan SHPP; two of which are directly related to bringing empty properties back into residential use, which is:
- to improve the existing housing stock by accelerating housing market renewal including block improvement schemes, demolitions, reducing the numbers of empty properties and effective licensing of landlords
 - working with owners to invest in empty properties and bring them back into use and to consider different models of investment in the private rented sector

The success of the Empty Property Strategy can be measured as follows:

Date	Reoccupied	Demolished	Total	Target
2007-2008	240	8	248	200
2008 - 2009	329	77	406	369
2009 - 2010	291	49	340	375
2010 - 2011	321	0	362	355

- 3.2 As part of the Government's Affordable Housing Programme £100m has been set aside for tackling empty properties. We are currently looking at involving Registered Providers across the city, which would include bringing back into use a range of properties.
- 3.3 The Government's New Homes Bonus also proposes that it will match fund the additional council tax raised by councils for bringing long term empty properties back into use. The number of empty properties (according to Government and Council Tax definitions) will be measured in October of each year. Any decreases in empty properties from one year to the next will be rewarded through the New Homes Bonus. The definition also includes empty Social Housing Registered Social Landlord properties in the City.

3.4 It was announced in January 2011, that the Government will use secondary legislation to introduce new constraints relating to Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs). The constraints allow local authorities to utilise EDMOs only if a property has been empty for two years and is attracting vandalism and anti social behaviour. This will be closely monitored as part of this project.

4. Aims and Objectives:

4.1 The Empty Property Service aims to:

‘Provide a proactive and innovative approach to the reduction in the number of empty properties in Sunderland to assist in the creation of sustainable communities in all neighbourhoods’.

This will be achieved by:

1. Developing a comprehensive and locality based empty property service which raises awareness of empty homes issues.
2. Using a preventative and innovative approach to reoccupy empty properties.
3. Ensuring reoccupied properties are sustainable within their neighbourhoods.
4. Responding to the needs and requirements of property owners, partners and neighbourhoods.
5. Involving a range of partners and individuals to encourage action and make best use of limited resources.

4.2 Throughout 2011-2012, the Empty Property service will prioritise the following across Sunderland:

1. Strive to reduce the number of empty properties across Sunderland to the city average of 2.47% as at the end of April 2011.
2. Reoccupy 360 empty properties across Sunderland with internal and external partners, focusing on 200 empty properties within wards where empty properties are higher than the city average as at the end of April 2011 and working within the context of the New Homes Bonus.
3. Reduce homelessness across the City.
4. Promote the Landlord accreditation scheme.
5. Look to target the worst hot spot areas as a first priority, especially in wards where empty properties are higher than the city average as at the end of April 2011.
6. To work closely with Officers in Environmental Services to explore the most effective way of bringing empty commercial premises back into use.
7. To work closely with partners to explore the effect and impact of the New Homes Bonus on empty properties.

4.3 Benefits of introducing the Empty Property Action Plan are:

Customer/Community Benefits	Council Benefit
Empty properties returned into occupation	Increase in income to the Council through payment of full Council Tax Attract payment of New Homes Bonus.
Reduction in empty properties being targeted	Reduction in number of requests for service regarding empty properties.
More homes available for homeless people	Reduction in costs of works in default.
More sustainable communities	Reduction in homelessness.

5. Empty Property Action Plan

- 5.1 The action plan, see Annex 1, will help contribute towards the Council's values: proud, decent and together in the way we treat our customers and work in partnership to achieve the community's needs. It is also part of a series of Directorate projects and has been monitored by the Directorate Change Team. Currently, the project does not include empty commercial properties but the most effective way to bring commercial empty properties back to use will be explored within the Council and with external partners.
- 5.2 Officers will work together with owners of empty properties and external agencies to ensure the property is brought back into occupation or to prevent them from becoming empty in the first place. The solution to empty properties lies often in a partnership approach. Officers will also undertake inspections as necessary to ensure that the property meets the Decent Homes Standard. The primary focus will be prevention and early intervention.
- 5.3 At April 2011 the numbers of empty properties across each of the local areas and across the City as a whole are set out in Annex 2. The statistics and analysis below are based on the figures from April 2011. The proportion of Private Sector Stock empty is as a percentage in each ward area.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Empty properties are a priority in each of the local areas and this is reflected in the local work plans. The attached action plan provides a more local examination of the issues and provides an innovative local action plan aimed at specifically addressing those local issues in relation to bringing empty properties back into use and creating a greater housing resource for the City.
- 6.2 Project work is proving to be successful in various areas and it is hoped that this work will be continued and expanded to other wards, particularly those wards that do not meet the city average as at April 2011. This involves officers tackling empty properties, anti social behaviour, landlord accreditation and issues of disrepair in partnership with Housing Providers the police and other local partners. This is in response to concerns from local residents and ward members.
- 6.3 This action plan will be monitored quarterly and reviewed after one year by the Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Senior Management Team and Area Committee. The information will also be made available to all local partners and the public should they request it.

7. Recommendations

Members are requested to:

- Note the content of the report and draft action plan
- Consider and provide feedback on the locality aims and actions in Sunderland West Action Plan (draft)
- Identify and feedback information regarding empty properties
- Agree to review the action plan after one year

Annex 2: Empty Properties at a ward level, as at 1 April 2011

Background papers

- The Housing Act 2004
- Empty Property Strategy (2007-2011)
- Local Area Plans (LAPS) (2009-2011)
- The following websites were used as reference and for benchmarking:
 - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingsupply/newhomesbonus/newhomesbonusquestions/>
 - <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk>
 - <http://www.camden.gov.uk>
 - <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/>

Contact Officer:

Graeme Wilson, Assistant Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Manager,
Tel 0191 561 2034, email: Graeme.wilson1@sunderland.gov.uk