

Exeter Empty Homes Strategy – Action Plan Update 2015

Objective One: Maintain, and where possible improve, the accuracy of data held by the Council regarding the number of empty homes.

ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES	LEAD OFFICER	TIMESCALE
Encourage owners to inform the Council when the property is occupied.	Through effective marketing and publicity, ensure new occupiers inform the Council as soon as they move in.	High	Housing Development / Council Tax	Senior Housing Development Officer/ Revenues Collection Manager	Ongoing – review annually to ensure
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Empty Homes December 2014: Promotional activities including a full page article in the Express and Echo Mail outs from March to October of 2014 to 511 owners. 368 owners responded. 110 confirmed their properties were occupied. A total of 247 properties were removed from the long term empty lists between March – October 2014. 					
Undertake annual audit of empty homes to ensure that data held is accurate.	To target those homes that will have the greatest impact. To improve the Council's funding through the New Homes Bonus.	High	Housing Development / Council Tax	Senior Housing Development Officer / Revenues Collection Manager	Bi annual checks
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Homes Bonus data cleansing between March - October of 2014. Internal audit Report in September 2014 showed the Council have been proactive in minimising long term empty properties in Exeter 					
Effective partnership working with colleagues across the Council.	To work collaboratively across departments to help bring empty homes back into use.	High	Housing Development Council Tax Private Sector housing Planning Building Control Legal	Senior Housing Development Officer	Ongoing through monthly meetings
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly case meetings held across departments South West Empty Homes Forum in October 2014 Free training in Compulsory Purchase Orders in February 2015. Joint working on cases with all departments 					

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Objective Two: Raise awareness of empty homes issues.
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ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES	LEAD OFFICER	TIMESCALE
Review and update publicity material to highlight the issue of empty homes and options available to homeowners to return the property back into use.	Improve information available on advice and assistance.	High	Housing Development Team	Housing Development Support Assistant	Review bi-annually to ensure information accurate and useful
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature reviewed twice in 2014 to promote the service, response rates increased to 70% Website content being updated in conjunction with Private Sector Housing 					
Maintain attendance at and maintain a presence at meetings of national empty homes bodies.	Contribute and respond to the national debate on empty homes policy and procedures.	Medium	Existing staff	Housing Development Assistant	Bi-annual meetings
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 x staff attended the National Empty Homes Conference in May 2014. Attendance planned for the 2015 event. Officer from Exeter City Council is represented on the Executive Board of the Empty Homes Network as Treasurer. 					
Respond to national consultations.	Contribute and respond to national consultations on empty homes policy and procedures.	Medium	Existing staff with input from other departments	Senior Housing Development Officer	Ongoing as required
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Empty Homes Service were consulted on the National Policy Statement as published by the Empty Homes Network in December 2014. Exeter responded to the National Empty Homes Week 'pledge' run by the Empty Homes Agency in December 2014. 					

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Objective Three: To encourage owners of empty homes to bring them back to use

ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES	LEAD OFFICER	TIMESCALE
Advise and inform owners of all possible options available to bring empty homes back into use, via frequent and regular communications.	Improved advice, assistance and publicity.	High	Housing Development Team	Housing Department Officers/ Assistants	Ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mail outs to over 500 properties annually. • Contact maintained regularly with all owners of properties under investigation. • 18 of the longest term empty homes in Exeter have been returned to use this year. These properties had collectively been empty over 135 years. 					
Investigate other sources of finance to assist owners to bring empty homes back into use.	Join National Empty Homes Loan Fund. Seek other funding streams	Medium	Government funding schemes / HD Team	Senior Housing Development Officer	Ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Empty Homes Loan Fund was closed in July 2014 without any successful cases. • The Empty Homes Service still offer a low-cost loan through Wessex Home Improvement Loans to empty homes owners. 					
Investigate when appropriate all reported empty homes, investigate and prioritise long-term empty properties	Continue to reactively investigate all reports received.	High	Existing staff with input from other teams	Housing Development Officer/ Assistants	Ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All reports to the Empty Homes Service are assessed using prioritisation criteria, and where appropriate picked up as part of ongoing case work. • In September 2014, 11 of the top priority cases identified in 2013 had been re-occupied or resolved. • A rolling list of the 'Top 15' empty homes cases are given the highest priority and highlighted for enforcement action by Officers. 					
Contact lenders to long-term empty properties, informing them of the situation and encouraging them to contact the owner.	To create an additional avenue of pressure on owners of long-term empty properties to return them to use.	Medium	Existing staff	Housing Development Officer	Annually
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land registry searches used on all cases to determine ownership and lenders • Section 16 notices, requesting information on the property, are routinely sent to owners and lenders 					

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Objective Four: Prioritising empty homes for enforcement action

ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES	LEAD OFFICER	TIMESCALE
Risk assess properties on the Empty Homes Database to establish empty homes to prioritise for action.	Implement the empty homes risk based assessment procedure to identify those empty homes which require Council intervention.	High	Housing Development Team	Housing Development Team	Ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritisation criteria accounts for the condition of the property, length of time empty and additional factors such as impact on the surrounding area. • All active cases and all new reports are assessed and resources focused on the properties identified as high priority. 					

Objective Five: Strengthen existing and develop new partnerships to reduce the number of long term empty properties

ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES	LEAD OFFICER	TIMESCALE
Maintain clear strategic leadership.	To help all stakeholders with a role to reduce the number of long-term empty homes.	High	All staff	Senior Housing Development Officer	Ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular updates to Portfolio Holder and Members • Regular newsletters outlining recent successes, news and events • All enquiries to the service welcomed and information shared on the status of empty homes in the City. 					
Strengthen partnership between regional empty homes officers.	For training purposes, information sharing and best practice solutions.	Medium	HD Team	Senior HD Officer	Bi-annual meetings
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership Officer working part-time for East Devon and Exeter • Regional training events such as SWEHF, recent HHSRS training for empty homes staff and online resources such as the Empty Homes Network 					

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Organise the South West Empty Homes Forum (SWEHF)	To bring together representatives from local councils, housing associations and empty homes practitioners in order to workshop solutions to the issue of empty homes.	Medium	Existing staff	Housing Development Officer / Assistant	Event held annually
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 60 people attended South West Empty Homes Forum from 30 local authorities and organisations. The event produced positive feedback and is self-financing. SWEHF 2015 is planned for next year. 					
Regular empty homes meetings between empty homes officers.	To ensure continuity in approach to empty properties, as well as the sharing of advice in difficult cases.	High	All staff	Housing Development Team	Monthly
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case meetings are held every month with attendees from Environmental Health and Council Tax. 					
Improve partnership, working with fire service/ police on long-term empty properties.	Able to deal more effectively with incidents occurring as a result of a long-term empty.	Medium	Existing staff	Housing Development Officer	June 2014 and ongoing
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liaison with police and fire services where appropriate, in regard to empty homes cases. 					
Improve links with landlords, landlord associations, letting / management agencies through information, newsletters and Landlords Forum meetings.	Investigate new ways of improving links with the private rented sector.	Medium	Existing staff and NLA	Housing Development Officer	Three landlord forums a year
UPDATE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Landlords' Forums are held 2-3 times a year are well attended Regular newsletters reporting recent successes and news and events Improvements to the contact of the website is ongoing, including linking up with Private Sector Housing to create Landlord and Tenant guides, Matchmaking scheme run for individuals and small firms interested in buying empty homes is well subscribed to. 					