

**EXETER CITY COUNCIL**  
**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY**  
**2 JUNE 2009**

**EXECUTIVE**  
**16 JUNE 2009**

**EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2009-2014**

**1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 To inform Members of the consultation results for the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014 and recommend that the amended version is approved.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Executive on 24 March 2009 approved the draft Empty Homes Strategy and agreed that it should go out to public consultation, with the results reported back at Scrutiny on 2 June 2009 and then to Executive on the 16 June 2009.
- 2.2 Over 200 copies of the draft strategy were sent to councillors, housing associations, landlord associations, relevant staff and current ExtraLet and Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme landlords asking them to give comments on the strategy and action plan. There were 11 formal responses, with many of the comments being constructive and positive together with favourable remarks on existing schemes. Once the final strategy is approved it will become more generally available to the public through the Council's website and any further comments received can be considered for the next review.

**3. CONSULTATION RESULTS**

- 3.1 The following comments were received:
- The strategy is very strong on the processes, successes and potential of empty homes work.
  - Some pointed out that there were some gaps in the content such as downsizing, the STEPs Project, serving notices and the inclusion of the recently published resident landlord booklet designed to help people take in lodgers.
  - Favourable comments were received from some of the 120 ExtraLet and PSL landlords about the existing schemes.
  - Many thought it is a good idea to be launching the strategy at this time in light of recent national and regional announcements of funding for empty homes.
  - Because of the possibility of a future Audit Commission inspection, the action plan needs to have further revision.
  - One Councillor expressed concerns about the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) in comparison to Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs). Clarification on this issue is set out below and may help to alleviate these concerns:

- EDMOs allow the Local Authority to take over an empty property, bring it back up to the decent homes standard and let it to those in housing need from the housing register. The costs of renovation are recouped through rent, with any excess income going to the property owner. An owner can reclaim their property at any time provided they wish to sell, live in it or rent themselves. Interim EDMOs last for one year, whilst a full EDMO can last for seven years. A comprehensive legal case must be made for each property before its use. The property remains in the possession of the owner throughout and the EDMO can be revoked if the owner agrees to bring it back into use and work with the Council. The use of an EDMO is seen very much as a last resort and in most cases property owners are more than willing to work with the Council to find a viable solution for the property.

- CPOs allow the Local Authority to take possession of a property and sell without the owner's permission. The owner is then compensated appropriately for the loss of the property.

- The lack of knowledge about the service by the general public was a factor which came to light during consultation. This may mean more money is needed to fund campaigns and advertising about the empty homes service.
- Advertising could hopefully facilitate an increase in the number of landlords ready to work with the Council. A budget will be considered by the partnership for the future.
- In light of the Council's new duty under the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 further opportunities for consultation must be given to the public as the new strategy is implemented.

#### **4. PROPOSALS**

4.1 As a result of this consultation the following amendments to the strategy are proposed:

- Sections will be added dealing with downsizing and lodgings.
- More emphasis will be placed on the 'need' for empty homes to be brought back into use. WHY are we doing this and WHO are we doing it for?
- Further consideration of advertising has been given high priority in the revised action plan.
- The explanation of CPOs and EDMOs on pages 27-29 has been reviewed and amended.
- More challenging annual targets to fund the reuse of empty property in partnership with the Homes and Communities Agency have been introduced. Accordingly the target will be increased from 11 to 20 empty properties a year.
- Provision of funds for the STEPS programme to be included in the action plan as a valuable source of funds and property used for affordable housing.
- The document is to be formatted to correspond with Exeter City Council's existing strategies, therefore forming part of a suite of strategies.

- The Empty Homes Partnership Manager will ensure that the strategy and action plan are aligned with the Audit Commission's requirements.
- 4.2 More generally that emphasis be placed on the high support councillors have for the reuse of empty properties and homes within the city.
- 4.3 As a result the strategy has been updated and a copy placed in the Members' room. The revised action plan is appended.
5. **RECOMMENDED** that Scrutiny Committee– Community supports and Executive approves that:
- (1) the actions and revisions to the Empty Homes Strategy as set out in paragraph 4 of this report.
  - (2) the revised action plan contained in Appendix I of this report.
  - (3) Scrutiny Committee Community receives an annual update on progress against the action plan
  - (4) in accordance with the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 the Empty Homes Strategy and action plan be placed on the website and further comments invited from the community.

## HEAD OF HOUSING SERVICES

S:PA/LP/Committee/609SCC6  
20.5.09

## COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

### **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)** **Background papers used in compiling this report:**

Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014