

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY
9 NOVEMBER 2010

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2009-2014

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To update Members on progress in delivering the Empty Homes Strategy.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014 was approved by the Executive in June 2009 following an extensive public and stakeholder consultation.
- 2.2 The Strategy sets out how the Council will seek to maximise housing opportunities across the city by identifying empty properties, working with their owners and bringing them back in to use.

Key areas of the Strategy include:

- Finding viable solutions to bring empty properties back into use
- Using empty commercial space through conversions of offices, warehouses schools, churches etc
- Using enforcement powers where an owner refuses to respond to any requests for help and assistance to bring their property back into use.
- Partnership working to maximise opportunities to tackle empty properties.
- Provide affordable housing for those in housing need through the EXtraLet and Private Sector Leasing Schemes.
- Improving housing standards for those properties joining the Council's housing schemes.

3. PROGRESS AGAINST TARGETS

- 3.1 The Empty Homes Strategy includes a detailed plan setting out the action, target date, priority, and lead officer. A copy of the action plan is attached as Appendix I and summarises the progress made against each action.
- 3.2 Members will see that a number of actions have been successfully completed or are currently being implemented. These include:
- i) Extralet and Private Sector Leased Scheme still popular with landlords and helping the Council to reduce the use of temporary accommodation
 - ii) Former Admiral Inn at Alphington completed and occupied
 - iii) Long-term empty at Oxford Road nearing completion
 - iv) Council's Downsizing Scheme remains popular. New over-55's accommodation generating interest through Devon Home Choice
 - v) 15 long-term empties have been identified and work is on-going to bring them back into use
- 3.3 There are also some actions which we are unable to pursue at this time. The main reasons for this are:

- i) Homes and Community Agency funding for Empty Homes has been delayed pending the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review
- ii) No further renovation grant funding available at this time
- iii) Empty Homes service funding through housing associations currently under negotiation for 2011 onwards
- iv) Funding through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for re-modelling the Council's sheltered housing schemes now exhausted. Awaiting the outcome of the national HRA review.

3.4 As Members can see the ability to pursue a number of key actions will depend on the outcome on the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review and the level of future funding that will be available for bringing empty properties back into use and providing new affordable housing generally. Once the out come of the spending review is known a report will be submitted to Members outlining what can be achieved through this, and other housing strategies, and what schemes/actions will need to be reviewed.

4. RECOMMENDED: That Scrutiny Committee Community

Notes the progress being made towards achieving targets set out in the Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014 Action Plan.

HEAD OF HOUSING SERVICES

S:PALP/Cttee/1110SCC5
22.10.10

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

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

Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2009-2014

					LEAD	PROGRESS
					OFFICER	JULY 2010
ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES			
STRATEGY						
1	Review progress against the Empty Homes Strategy action plan.	Annually	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Review to Scrutiny in November 2010
2	Create a suitable strap line for the Empty Homes Strategy.	Proactive line which encapsulates the aim of the strategy	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE: Agreed: Eliminating Empty Properties in Exeter
3	Empty Homes Action Plan.	Monthly	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Monitored at Strategic Housing Management Group
PROGRAMME						
1	Return properties empty for more than six months to use.	40 per year	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	7 properties back into use. More resources have been put into this area and a comprehensive enforcement procedure manual is due to be completed at the end of September 2010.
2	Negotiate with the Homes and Communities Agency to secure funding for empty homes grants.	100 units before the end of 31 March 2014	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	10 units complete. No more funding available - awaiting outcome of the comprehensive spending review – October 2010
3	Negotiate with internal council departments for renovation grant funding.	Subject to availability	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	No funding available at present

4	Identify long term empty properties (over 2 years) which could be brought back into use using enforcement powers from the Housing Act 2004 (Empty Dwelling Management Orders).	6 per year	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	2 Completed , 1-on site. 15 in pipeline
5	Identify funding in the council's Affordable Housing Capital Programme for use on empty properties and the creation of other housing solutions.	£200,000 to be spent on off-the-shelf purchases by 31 March 2010	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Very little interest from RSL's. Looking to change from social rented to intermediate rent to make a more viable package
		£108,500 to be spent on purchase of move-on properties	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Enabling Officers	COMPLETE
		£18,000 on family housing conversion in Rifford Road	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE
		£249,000 on the rehab of the former Admiral Inn	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE
		£100,000 as a leasing pot to provide further private sector leased homes in Exeter (target = 10 units)	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE - 10 units
		£30,000 for the leasing of an 'eyesore' property in Oxford Street	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	On-site, due for completion November 2010

		£150,000 allocated on Laings rehabilitation	High	Staff time / capital funding	Strategic Housing Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager	3 completed , 3 due to transfer, 1 in pipeline.
6	Identify funding for the EXtraLet scheme.	£80,000 to be spent by September 2009. Consider extra commuted sum money	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Housing Needs Manager	£200,000 allocated from the affordable housing Capital Programme to fund works to privately owned properties to be used by EXtraLet over next 2 years

					LEAD	PROGRESS
					OFFICER	JULY 2010
ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES			
7	Maintain Empty Homes Partnership for the Strategic Housing Market Assessment Region.	Annually	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Looking at building a new Partnership with RSL's. Meetings arranged with registered providers to consult. Completion end March 2011
8	Continue to promote downsizing to free up properties for families in the Exeter area and help prevent under-occupation.	Council target of at least 25 moves per year. Budget of £50,000	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Housing Enabling Officers	Ongoing. 7 Completed so far this year.
		RSL target of at least 20 moves per year. Budget of £50,000 (2008-10)	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Housing Enabling Officers	This scheme is no longer running as there is no funding available. Take up by RSL's was slow

9	Promoting the creation of resident landlords within the city willing to take in lodgers.	20 lodgers in 2009-10	Medium	£5,000 spent on officer time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE - Becoming a Resident Landlord Booklet produced April 2009 (300 produced) / Accompanying leaflet for City services completed. Good demand for booklet. Unable to measure how many new lodgings have been created.
10	Create a register of landlords and potential lodgings as a housing option.	Create list	Medium	Staff time	Housing Needs Manager	Due to the range of outlets for the Lodgers booklet/leaflet this has been difficult to measure. However, the Crashpad and Nightstop scheme (part funded by ECC) help young people into lodgings in the city
11	Promote and monitor the STEPs programme run by Exeter Community Initiative.	Work with STEPs to come up with funds and 2 properties for affordable housing	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Housing Enabling Officers	Project now established. Transferred to Exeter Shilhay for managing and development.
12	Conversion of under-used or hard to let sheltered housing blocks.	10 possible guest room conversions	Medium	Staff time / capital funding	Head of Housing Services / Housing Enabling Manager	Contained in Housing Asset Management Strategy - options being explored. However, funding through HRA may be difficult.
13	Tackle restrictive lettings practices.	Persuade some Housing Associations to change practices which restrict letting of flats to people with children	Medium	Staff time	Housing Needs Manager	COMPLETE - restrictions have been relaxed as far as is practical.

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT, INFORMATION & TRAINING						
1	Prepare and implement a service improvement plan	31 December 2009	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	COMPLETE - New SIP agreed and being monitored
2	Obtain and review council tax lists to identify empty properties.	February / June / October. (Every 4 months)	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	Changes in working practices mean we will be updating monthly - more staff resources being put in to increase activity
3	Conduct street surveys to identify vacant units over shops and empty buildings.	Fore Street, Heavitree / Cowick Street, St Thomas to be thoroughly surveyed by 31 March 2011	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	Survey not completed. However maps have been put in place showing where the reported empty homes are and will be updated monthly as appropriate
4	Ensure the Empty Property database is kept up to date in order to establish the capacity for linking the data to broader regeneration.	Monthly	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	Ongoing
5	Remain abreast of changes in legislation and best practice as discussed by the Government, the Empty Homes Agency and the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners.	Continuous process	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Ongoing. Awaiting new guidelines and finding from Coalition Government

6	Continue to build staff skills and knowledge.	Continuous process	Medium	Staff time	Housing Enabling Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	RIEP funding bid monies are funding an enforcement training package including interpersonal skills required for all aspects of enforcement and building a toolkit for use by officers. Exeter and the partner councils along with Dorset, Devon and some Cornwall officers will benefit. The ten day course over 6 months is due to start in September and conclude in February 2011
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					LEAD	PROGRESS
					OFFICER	AS OF JULY 2010
	ACTION	TARGET	PRIORITY	RESOURCES		
7	Empty Homes Partnership Newsletter	Every 6 months	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Fourth issue completed and on the empty homes website pages
8	Advertising	Consider additional resources to facilitate publicity	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager	Publicity Plan agreed. Limited response on advertising new advertisements due to start in September 2010.
ADMINISTRATION						
1	Aim to reply to all calls / emails relating to empty properties within 2 days.	200 per month. Subject to number of messages	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Negotiator	July 2010 1057 calls received 98.2% answered within 18 seconds.

2	Secure revenue funding for the administration of the Empty Homes Partnership beyond 2011 subject to Local Government reorganisation of Devon.	7 Resident Social Landlords and 2 District Councils plus Exeter City Council by 2011	Low	Staff time / capital funding	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Officer	LGR Abandoned. One RSL has pulled out of the Partnership. Reviewing the funding of the other RSL's. Mid Devon have signed up for a further 3 years. East Devon - beginning negotiations (September) to renew the Service Level Agreement
3	Continue to host the Empty Homes Partnership meetings.	Every 6 months	Medium	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Officer	Last meeting held in June. Next meeting due November 2010
4	Continue to host the South West Empty Homes Forum.	Every 6 months	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Officer	Forum held in June. Next forum - 17 November 2010
CONSULTATION						
1	Empty Homes Strategy 2009-2014 to be placed on the Council's website for public view and comment.	Subject to approval from Committee	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Officer	COMPLETE
2	Review and revise Empty Homes Strategy in light of comments from the public.	Subject to approval from Committee	High	Staff time	Empty Homes Partnership Manager / Empty Homes Partnership Officer	COMPLETE