

MID DEVON EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

2011-2015



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1.0. Foreword

Mid Devon District Council has always taken the issue of empty homes seriously however the region is lucky in that it does not have streets of derelict and boarded-up properties like those found in some parts of the country. Nevertheless, Mid Devon does have a shortage of housing, with large numbers of people currently on the housing register. As such, Mid Devon District Council has to make the best use of all the accommodation available in the area and cannot afford to leave them standing empty unnecessarily.

Mid Devon District Council's empty homes work has been an important feature of the Community Housing Strategy. However, an initiative that involves a number of council departments and outside partners working together deserves special recognition, so Mid Devon District Council has produced this separate Empty Homes Strategy. The aim is for continuous improvement - so if you have any comments please let the Private Sector Housing Team know.

1.1. The Empty Homes Strategy Mission Statement

"To provide more housing and create a better environment by bringing empty homes back into occupation"

2.0. The Scope and Aim of the Strategy

2.1. Introduction

The aim of the strategy is to make better use of all properties, both commercial and residential, in and around the Mid Devon district that might realistically provide more housing than they do presently.

The strategy sets out the local and national picture in respect of empty homes and also the tools and legal powers available to deal with empty dwellings. It is also part of a wider suite of strategies under the Community Housing Strategy.

Consequently the scope of this Empty Homes Strategy is deliberately wide. It includes:

- ◆ Private sector properties as well as those in the public sector;
- ◆ Second homes and holiday homes as well as mainstream housing;
- ◆ Redundant commercial space that could be converted to homes e.g. shops, warehouses and industrial sites etc.

The strategy also seeks to set out what is being done to alleviate the problem of empty homes in the Mid Devon Area. By making the general public aware of empty homes, the problems they cause and encouraging them to report any potential long-term empties Mid Devon District Council can help speed up the process of bringing them back into use.



2.2. A Word from Cllr Ray Stanley (Portfolio Holder for housing)

Welcome to Mid Devon District Council's Empty Homes Strategy which sets out the initiatives the Council plans to implement over the next five years. The council is committed to increasing the supply of decent and affordable housing in the district.

This is why we need to ensure that in Mid Devon we are making the best possible use of existing housing. Empty homes have a huge social impact on local residents - they can affect the appearance of a neighbourhood and people living nearby have to suffer the consequences if an empty home falls derelict or is attacked by vandals. The strategy reflects the authority's comprehensive response to the issue of empty homes in the district.

3.0. What is meant by Empty Homes?

3.1. True Empty Homes

For many people, empty homes conjure up images of boarded-up, semi-derelict properties in run-down neighbourhoods but the real picture is very different. Thousands of properties will become empty at some point during the year as part of the normal operation of the housing market e.g. between lettings or as part of the process of being bought and sold. These properties are known as "**transactional empties**" and make up the majority of properties empty at any one time. It is only when properties stay empty for a significant period of time that they are regarded as "**problematic empties**".

3.2. Second and Holiday Homes

These properties share the common characteristic that they are furnished but are no-one's principal home. For the purposes of this strategy they are distinguished as follows, but note that these are common sense and not legal definitions:

- ◆ Holiday homes are properties run mainly as a business to generate income from lettings. Some holiday homes have restrictions that mean they cannot be occupied for the whole of the year or are classed as business properties and do not appear in council tax statistics.
- ◆ Second homes are furnished properties used mainly by their owners and their families but are not the owners' principal residence.
- ◆ The strategy also recognises dwellings used occasionally by employees. These are homes provided on a temporary basis to employees who normally live elsewhere. Health Trusts for example may have homes available for doctors on call and some rural properties may only be for use by agricultural workers. There are only a handful of such properties in the Mid Devon area.

In most cases these properties will not merit intervention or assistance through the Empty Homes Strategy.

3.3. Wasted Non-residential Space

This covers a wide range of situations. Sometimes an entire building is no longer viable in its previous use. This can apply not only to offices and warehouses but also to schools and churches. In other cases, the lower floors of a building may still be viable e.g. as



shops, but upper floors are empty or under-utilised. Each case must be taken on its merits but encouraging conversions is an important part of the Empty Homes Strategy.

4.0. Why are Homes Empty?

An in-depth study of private sector empty properties was carried out by the Department of Environment in 1996¹ and the 2003 government paper Empty Homes: Temporary Management, Lasting Solutions found that the most common reasons for problematic empties were the previous occupant:

- ◆ Passing away;
- ◆ Moving to a hospital or institution;
- ◆ Being evicted or repossessed;
- ◆ Being unable to rent the property due to maintenance or value issues.

These reasons accounted for 77% of owner-occupied properties and 62% of rented ones.

- ◆ In more than 80% of cases the end of the vacancy involved a change of ownership.
- ◆ In only a small percentage (6%) of cases did the condition of the property cause it to become vacant; but disrepair was a significant cause of properties remaining empty (40% where the property was previously owner-occupied, 30% where it was previously tenanted).
- ◆ Where properties remained vacant even after changing hands, serious disrepair or renovation of the property was the most common reason for this (80-90%).
- ◆ Pre-1919 properties and terraced properties were disproportionately likely to become problematic empties due to the repairs needed on older buildings.

4.1. Where does the Information come from?

The best statistical source available to Mid Devon District Council for information about empty homes is council tax records. The information is reasonably up-to-date and a record exists for most dwellings in the district. There are however exceptions which can cause the information to be incomplete in certain circumstances.

Whilst people liable for council tax are responsible for keeping the council up to date with changes in their circumstances, this does not mean that data is completely reliable. Nor is it always easy to extract the necessary information because council tax systems are designed to help collect council tax, not to record information about empty properties. Furthermore, properties that have been deemed uninhabitable by the Local Authority will be given a 12 month exemption from council tax however derelict properties in the poorest conditions can be removed completely from the Valuation List by the Valuation Office Agency on the local authority's instructions.

4.2. Challenges

Empty properties may not be as simple as they first appear. Properties which may appear empty may in fact be a second home and occupied infrequently, space above shops can be essential storage for a small business without any other resources and there are also instances where properties are empty awaiting planning permission and



renovation. These are frequent occurrences where empty properties are concerned but there are also other issues which arise:

Deliberate misrepresentation - In the past, discounts for empty properties meant that some owners might claim that properties were empty when they were in fact occupied. Now that discounts have been virtually removed for second homes and long-term empties, some owners might claim that only one person occupies the property. This gives them a 25% discount. There is anecdotal evidence that some owners of second homes may be using this tactic e.g. by claiming that the second home is the "principal residence" of a member of the family. However, this is less likely for unfurnished empties because there is still a 100% discount for six months on such properties and the owner would either have to forego this by leaving the property furnished or would have to re-furnish the property after the exemption had expired. There is unfortunately no research to indicate how frequently misrepresentation of this sort occurs.

'An Englishman's home is his castle' - Some landlords and owners can be uncooperative when it comes to their empty properties. They believe that the property belongs to them and the Council does not have the right to force them into action. These are the properties which are most likely to be left empty for several years.

Issues over ownership - In some cases there are complicated patterns of ownership which need to be unravelled. The property may be part owned by a housing association or property developer, or by another member of the family who may have differing plans for the site. Property can also be caught up in court proceedings and especially in probate repossession and divorce settlements.

Land Registry issues - Registration of property with the Land Registry is not yet entirely compulsory. Since 1990 the compulsory zone has been widened and voluntary registration encouraged however there are still properties which remain unregistered because they have not changed ownership since 1990.

The owners have disappeared - In some cases it is not immediately apparent who the owner of a property is. This may be due to owners moving away or a property being left to a relative who is unaware of ownership. In this instance the council has to employ council tax records, land registry data, probate records and often the help of neighbours in order to find the registered owners.

Squatters, drug users and crime - Empty properties are often a target for squatters and crime because they are less secure than an occupied property. Arson can be a problem and it is the council's priority to secure these buildings to prevent further misuse.

Intentional Empties - Properties are sometimes kept empty intentionally by their owners for specific reasons e.g. they may remain empty for a member of the family, often an elderly relative in a care home in case they wish to return home or can no longer afford the fees. In some cases families may buy properties to give to their children after they finish higher education.

An empty property may also come about due to fluctuations in the market, the 'credit crunch' being a fine example. If an owner cannot sell a property at the price they want



they may prefer to leave it vacant and keep it on the market until the right offer comes along. Some properties are also acquired for speculative investment and in this case the owner often does not worry about it being empty. It is then the task of the local authority to work with the owner and attempt to bring them around to the idea of development.

5.0. Why Empty Properties Matter

5.1. Challenges for Owners and the Community

- ◆ Empty properties cost their owners money - in council tax, insurance, repairs, security etc. - yet produce no income. It has been estimated that keeping a family-sized home empty costs the owner an average of £10,000 per annum (taking into account potential income).
- ◆ The fabric of the property can deteriorate. This is likely to happen much more quickly than in an occupied property. Neighbouring properties can also be affected e.g. by damp caused by water leaks. In the worst cases the property may become structurally unsound and therefore dangerous to the public.
- ◆ An empty home may become a target for vandals, arson, fly tipping and can attract vermin. All this affects the quality of life for neighbours. It has also been estimated that a long-term empty property can reduce the value of neighbouring properties by up to 10%.
- ◆ Empty properties can become a target for squatters. Although the property is being used as housing, it is not a long-term solution and depending on the nature of the squatters, there can be a negative impact on the local community. The house itself may also be damaged.
- ◆ Some of the above problems will require the local authority, the Police or the Fire Service to step in and take action. Sometimes this will be at the taxpayers' expense and costs cannot always be recovered from the owner.

5.2. A Wasted Resource - Local Housing Need

But perhaps the most important aspect of empty properties is that they are a **wasted resource** when so many people desperately need a decent home. As at 1 April 2010, in the Mid Devon District:

- 7 homeless households were in temporary accommodation.
- There were **1,500** households on the Council's housing register; 2 in band A (Priority Cards), 59 in band B, 377 in band C, 299 in band D and 763 in band E.

Yet at the same time (1 April 2010) there were **406** dwellings in the area registered with Council Tax as a long term (over six months) unfurnished empty property.

	Council Tax Non-exempt Empties	Length of time empty		
		Up to 6 months	Over 6 months	TOTAL
Long term empty - Class C	Unfurnished empties (no exemption)	20	386	406
2 nd Homes Classes A&B&ZERO	Furnished empties (10% discount) inc standard empties (usually 50% discount)	18	236	254
	TOTAL Non-Exempt	38	622	660



Empty properties offer a good opportunity to help ease the pressure on local housing, whether by bringing existing empty homes back into use or by creating new homes through conversion of under-used space. This is the main driver behind this Empty Homes Strategy.

6.0. Mid Devon District in Perspective

6.1. The Recent Local Picture

So far it has not been possible to conduct an in-depth study of empty properties in Mid Devon. However Mid Devon's council tax data does provide reasonably up-to-date information about empty properties in the area. Records exist for most dwellings in the district and there are exemption and discount codes that give some indication of why the properties are empty. Council tax visiting officers have the job of checking that claims for exemptions are valid.

Class	Council Tax Exempt Empties	Length of time empty		
		Up to 6 months	Over 6 months	TOTAL
	Exempt for limited periods of time			
C	Unfurnished empty dwellings (up to six months)	207	6	213
A	Dwellings needing major repair works or undergoing structural alteration (up to one year)	4	33	37
F	Unoccupied dwellings being part of the estate of a person who has died (up to six months after grant of probate or letters of administration)	48	41	89
	Exempt as long as they remain empty			
K	Dwellings where the owner is a student who last lived in the dwelling as their main home	0	2	2
D	Dwellings left unoccupied by people who are in prison	1	0	1
I & E	Dwellings left unoccupied by people who have moved to receive personal care	14	41	55
J	Dwellings left unoccupied by people who have moved to provide personal care to another person	0	2	2
T	Annexes which cannot be let separately from the main dwelling	3	36	39
Q	Dwellings where the liable person is a trustee in bankruptcy	0	0	0
G	Dwellings where occupation is forbidden by law, or which are kept unoccupied because of impending compulsory purchase	0	7	7
H	Dwellings awaiting occupation by ministers of religion	1	0	1
L	Dwellings taken into possession by a mortgage lender	3	3	6
	TOTAL Exempt	281	171	452

Council tax figures for exempt properties as at 1 April 2010



Thousands of properties become empty on an annual basis as part of the normal operation of the housing market e.g. between lettings in the rented sector or as part of the process of being bought and sold. The Council Tax figures highlight that there is a relatively high number of empty homes (319) registered as being empty for less than 6 months. This may reflect the current state of the housing market in which a high proportion of property owners are currently trying to sell or rent their property while empty. This potentially has a knock on effect on the figures for long term empties (557 excluding second homes) because if a property is on the market or available to let and empty for over 6 months it falls automatically into the long term empty Class C category.

6.2. Exemption Categories

There are several reasons for empty properties to be exempt from council tax and remain empty for a long period of time:

- ◆ According to government legislation, unfurnished empty dwellings are exempt for up to six months. This allows any legal proceedings after the sale of the property or death of the previous occupier to be completed.
- ◆ Any empty dwellings currently undergoing extensive structural repair or alteration are exempt for up to a year to allow works to be completed.
- ◆ Any dwellings owned by a student who last occupied the building as their main home are exempt. Students do not pay council tax whilst they are in full-time education.
- ◆ Any dwellings unoccupied whilst their owners are in prison are exempt.
- ◆ Any dwellings unoccupied by those who are receiving professional care elsewhere are exempt.
- ◆ Any dwellings empty due to their owners providing care for another are exempt.
- ◆ Annexes that cannot be let separately from the main dwelling are exempt.
- ◆ A dwelling where the liable person is a trustee in bankruptcy is exempt.
- ◆ Dwellings that cannot be occupied by law or which are undergoing compulsory purchase are exempt.
- ◆ Dwellings awaiting occupation by a minister of religion are exempt.
- ◆ Dwellings taken into possession by a mortgage lender after repossession are exempt.

6.3. Second Homes

According to recent research ² there are around 245,000 households who own second homes in England. The South West is one of the most popular areas for second home ownership. Only 10% of UK households live in the South West, however it accounts for 24% of all second homes. According to Council Tax figures, as 1 April 2010, over **254** second homes are found in and around Mid Devon District Council alone.

The impact of second homes on local communities is huge. Those on low incomes who may have lived in villages for most of their lives are consistently priced out of the market and move away. This creates increased pressure on larger urban areas.

Villages can be left empty for portions of the year and this leads to the loss of services and local amenities and also the downturn of local businesses.

² Knight Frank Residential Research, CLG



6.4. Mid Devon's Need

According to the 2007 Exeter & Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment, the Mid Devon District will need around 1,200 new houses within the next five years to satisfy local demand and the demand of migration to the city. The population of the region, according to the Office for National Statistics, is predicted to rise to 161,300 by 2029, representing a 25% rise over the 25 year period between 2004 and 2029. The local authority needs to be looking to provide new affordable housing to meet this predicted need for housing in the area.

6.5. Council Tax Empty Property Statistics as at 1 April 2010

Ward	Length of time empty				TOTAL
	Empty less than 6 months	% empty less than 6 months	Empty over 6 months	% empty over 6 months	
Boniface 70	12	31.58%	26	68.42%	38
Bradninch 04	2	18.18%	9	81.82%	11
Cadbury 08	8	19.51%	33	80.49%	41
Canonsleigh 71	16	39.02%	25	60.98%	41
Castle 72	35	36.84%	60	63.16%	95
Clare and Shuttern 73	19	16.10%	99	83.90%	118
Cullompton North 75	14	30.43%	32	69.57%	46
Cullompton Outer 76	1	4.17%	23	95.83%	24
Cullompton South 77	15	41.67%	21	58.33%	36
Halberton 25	10	33.33%	20	66.67%	30
Lawrence 78	16	29.09%	39	70.91%	55
Lower Culm 79	17	36.95%	29	63.05%	46
Lowman 80	23	43.40%	30	56.60%	53
Newbrooke 81	6	35.29%	11	64.71%	17
Sandford and Creedy 82	8	15.38%	44	84.62%	52
Silverton 45	6	27.27%	16	72.73%	22
Taw 83	4	12.12%	29	87.88%	33
Taw Vale 84	5	14.29%	30	85.71%	35
Upper Culm 85	9	13.85%	56	86.15%	65
Upper Yeo 86	8	26.67%	22	73.33%	30
Way 87	5	31.25%	11	68.75%	16
Westexe 88	41	49.40%	42	50.60%	83
Yeo 89	9	21.95%	32	78.05%	41
TOTAL	289	28.11	739	71.89	1028



Please note the discrepancy between the total number of properties split by ward and the total number of exempt & non-exempt properties is due to the fact that we have not been able to identify the ward for some properties on the Council Tax system and also the fact that some exemption codes are not counted.

The evidence available from 2010 suggests that the number of long term empty properties in Mid Devon District Council has increased since 2007. More significant for the purposes of this Strategy are the unfurnished properties that have been empty for longer than 6 months, which has increased from 312 empties to 386. This reflects a relatively low level of problem empty homes in Mid Devon however bringing empty property back into use can only act to ease the housing need of the district. The highest number of long term empty properties can currently be found in the wards of Clare & Shutterton, Castle and Upper Culm, whilst the lowest numbers are situated in the wards of Bradninch, Way and Newbrooke.

7.0. Empty Property Solutions:

What can be Done?

The government's strategy 'Homes for All' highlighted the importance of the private rented sector and required Local Authorities to reduce homelessness by offering a wider range of preventative measures and increase access to settled homes. As a result, Mid Devon District Council is looking into working closely with private sector landlords to improve access to private sector tenancies.

Owners of empty homes need clear information about the options available to them. With longer-term empties, owners need to be approached regularly to encourage them to take action. Wherever appropriate, owners will be pointed towards the necessary professional advice e.g. from accountants, solicitors, building surveyors etc.

The local authority aims, where possible, to bring all empty properties back into use with the cooperation of the owners and will attempt in all cases to make this happen. Landlords may decide to rent or lease the properties or sell to a housing association or private developer.

Mid Devon District Council held its first landlords' forum in January 2010 and another in September 2010. The aim of the of the bi-annual forums is to enhance the working relationship between the Council, and local private sector landlords and managing agents to ensure a supply of high quality private rented accommodation throughout the district.

7.1. Grant Funding

7.1.1. Empty Homes Grant

Council grants can be used to tackle homes that do not meet the Housing Health and Safety Rating System or Decent Homes standards. This can help prevent properties becoming empty in the first place or help bring back into use empty properties that have fallen into disrepair.

Currently the council offers a landlord grant of 50% of the cost of works to bring a property to a decent and lettable standard, up to a maximum of £25,000, for a five year nomination agreement. If a landlord agrees to a nomination agreement of ten years they can access a grant that covers 75% of the cost of works, up to a maximum of £25,000.



The nomination agreement gives the council the opportunity to tenant the property with someone suitable to the size and location of that property. If the council does not have a suitable tenant at the time the property is vacant the owner can tenant the property. If and when the property becomes vacant within the grant nomination period the owner approaches the council again to see if a suitable tenant is available at this time.

7.1.2. Social Housing Grant

This is money given by the Homes and Communities Agency to housing associations to help them deliver affordable housing. The Housing Associations bid for grant funding for conversions or purchases of existing empty properties, with support from local authorities.

7.1.3. Local Authority Capital Grant

This is similar to Social Housing Grant (SHG) but is money from the Council's own capital resources. It can be used alongside SHG on joint-funded schemes but can also be used independently. When used in joint-funded schemes, Homes and Communities Agency rules would apply; but used independently, the Council could set its own criteria e.g. rent levels, nomination arrangements and so on.

7.2. Leasing Property

Private letting is often the best solution where owners do not want to sell a home or live in it themselves. Some owners are reluctant to let their homes out and there is a particular value in explaining what is involved and making sure they are supported. Through the Council's Deposit and Rent Scheme (DARS) scheme the council is able to offer those on a low income Deposit and Rent in advance.

7.3. Government Policy

The government has taken a number of steps in recent years to help address the issue of empty properties.

- ◆ 2001 VAT was reduced to 0% on refurbishment of properties empty longer than 10 years (if sold); to 5% on refurbishment of properties empty longer than 2 years; and to 5% on conversions of properties.
- ◆ 2003 Personal information (such as owner's names and addresses) held for council tax purposes can now be used for empty homes work.
- ◆ 2003 ODPM have published **Empty Homes - Unlocking the Potential: An Implementation Handbook** for local authorities, empty property owners and others
- ◆ 2004 Local Authorities can charge up to 100% of full council tax on furnished second homes and long-term empty homes
- ◆ 2006 Provisions allowing local authorities to take control of empty properties through **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)** were passed in the Housing Act 2004.



7.4. The Legislation

Where an empty property creates problems for the community, enforcement powers can be utilised to bring a property back into use. A wide range of such powers exist under Planning, Housing, Environmental Health and Building Control legislation. In many cases, the local authority can take action in default if the owner refuses to respond and has the right to recover costs from the owners.

7.4.1. Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

Introduced in the Housing Act 2004 the local authority has the power to take over the management of long-term privately owned empty homes and rent them out if owners persistently turn down offers of assistance.

There are two types of EDMOs:

- ♦ An interim EDMO can last for up to one year but the local authority cannot put a tenant in the property during this time unless the owner agrees. The order is revoked if at any time the owner decides to sell, let or reoccupy the property.
- ♦ A final EDMO is considered only if all attempts have failed to get the owner to bring the property back into use. This can last up to seven years and gives the local council full management of the property.

EDMOs do not apply to any property where there are plans to sell, rent or renovate. Properties are also exempt where the ownership is being resolved through probate and are exempt for a further six months after that.

All properties obtained through EDMOs would be used by Mid Devon District Council to help alleviate housing need and go some way towards making sure that there is a home available for everyone living within the region.

7.4.2. Enforced Sale Procedure

Under the Law of Property Act 1925 the local authority can instruct the sale of a privately owned house where there is an outstanding council debt registered against the title of that property.

7.4.3. Section 215 of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990

The council has the power, in certain circumstances, to take steps requiring land and buildings to be cleaned up when its condition adversely affects the amenity of the area.

7.4.4. Compulsory Purchase Orders

Under the Acquisition of Land Act 1981 and Housing Act 1985 the local authority has the power to serve compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) on empty property where there appears to be no other chance of a suitable property being used as a home. Before a CPO is confirmed, it has to be demonstrated that steps to encourage the owner to bring the property back into acceptable use have been exhausted. Even though CPOs can be a lengthy process they have proven to be an effective tool.



7.5. Other Government Incentives

7.5.1. Capital Allowance for Living over the Shop schemes (LOTS)

There is a significant body of commercial space, including space above shops and office accommodation, which is under-utilised. Owners are often unaware of the potential to free up space and the possibility of viable conversion to residential use. The LOTS scheme intends to assist towards the provision of social rented accommodation in the major towns within Mid Devon.

The Finance Act 2000 allows property owners and occupiers to claim up-front tax relief on the whole of their capital spending on the renovation or conversion of underused space above shops and commercial properties in order to provide flats to rent.

For a property to qualify it must have:

- ◆ Been built before 1980.
- ◆ No more than five floors (including loft conversions but excluding any basements).
- ◆ Been originally used for residential property above the ground floor.
- ◆ A ground floor, which was used for commercial purposes when works started (either retail, financial or professional services, food and drink, industrial uses or medical and health.)
- ◆ Been unoccupied above the ground floor or used for storage for at least one year before conversion.

For more information see: www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/camanual/CA43000.htm

7.6. Redfield Sites

There are calls by the Empty Homes Agency to add 'redfield' sites to the list of green and brownfield sites. These are recycled sites where an empty property is brought back into use for the local community.

A recent study by the Empty Homes Agency showed that reusing an existing empty property generated less than 1/5 of the carbon dioxide created in the building of a new house and cost considerably less (the normal costs for the initial infrastructure used to build a new home amounts to between £35,000 - £40,000). The proposal is that instead of knocking down buildings and commercial units on brownfield sites to build new homes, existing buildings can be converted and brought back into use.

8.0. Working Together: The Corporate Approach

To deliver an effective Empty Homes Strategy many different parts of the Council have to work together.

8.1. Building Control

- ◆ Taking enforcement action in respect of empty properties that are dangerous structures



8.2. Council Members

- ♦ Providing strategic leadership
- ♦ Setting the Council's budget and determining the amount of revenue and capital funding available for empty homes work
- ♦ Establishing policy around council tax discounts for second and long-term empty homes, currently charged at 90%

8.3. Council Tax

- ♦ Providing statistical information about empty properties
- ♦ Providing details of owners and their properties when investigating empty properties

8.4. Customer Services

- ♦ Referring empty property owners and complaints to the right service

8.5. Environmental Health and Private Sector Housing

- ♦ Taking enforcement action on problem properties
- ♦ Identifying problem empties and referring them to the Empty Homes Team

8.6. Housing Benefit

- ♦ Ensuring timely processing of housing benefit claims to facilitate private lettings to those on lower incomes
- ♦ Advising on the housing benefit and Local Housing Allowance aspects of new schemes

8.7. Housing Homelessness & Enabling

- ♦ Overseeing the operation of the Private Sector Leasing scheme and Deposit and Rent (in advance) scheme
- ♦ Working with Housing Associations to identify possible empty homes affordable housing schemes
- ♦ Providing capital funding and supporting bids to the Homes and Communities Agency for social housing grants etc

8.8. Legal Services

- ♦ Progressing enforcement actions such as EDMOs, compulsory purchases and enforced sales
- ♦ Advising on the legal aspects of new schemes and initiatives

8.9. Planning

- ♦ Ensuring appropriate planning policies to help bring empty properties back into use. This especially applies on houses split into bed-sits and self-contained flats and also on properties that could become houses in multiple-occupation
- ♦ Advising owners about appropriate and inappropriate development options for their empty properties
- ♦ Taking enforcement action in respect of empty properties that fall within planning powers
- ♦ Identifying planning regulations for all listed empty properties



9.0 Other External Partners

9.1. Devon and Cornwall Training Network

A partnership of local authorities and Registered Social Landlords to anticipate, facilitate and provide quality housing training events in Devon and Cornwall.

www.dctn.org.uk

9.2. Devon Strategic Housing Group

A strategic housing partnership comprising the seven Devon district councils, Dartmoor National Park, Torbay Council, Mid Devon District Council and Plymouth City Councils, Devon County Council and Housing

Associations and the Community Council of Devon working together to improve the delivery of affordable housing in Devon.

www.dshg.org.uk

9.3. Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

Formerly the Housing Corporation, the HCA provide funding to local authorities for affordable housing, bringing land back into productive use and improving quality of life by raising standards for the physical and social environment.

www.homesandcommunities.co.uk

9.4. The Empty Homes Agency

The Empty Homes Agency is an independent national charity set up in 1992 to raise awareness of the potential of empty homes in England to meet housing need and devise and promote, with others, sustainable solutions that will bring empty homes back into use.

www.emptyhomes.com

9.5. The Empty Homes Network

Formerly the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP) formed in May 2001, this is an organisation that brings together professionals and organisations in the empty homes world to network and exchange good practice. There is a national annual conference to bring together officers and share the experiences of empty property practitioners throughout the country.

www.naepp.org.uk

9.6. The South West Empty Homes Forum

Hosted by the Empty Homes Service, this brings together local authority and housing association officers across the South West to encourage the mutual exchange of information. The six-monthly forum allows practitioners to network, share ideas on best practice and develop knowledge.



10.0. How can you help?

10.1. Owners

If you own an empty property, either residential or commercial, there are many different options that could be open to you. Contact the Private Sector Housing Team for further information and assistance on 01884 255255 or email customerfirst@middevon.gov.uk.

10.2 Members of the Public

If you know of an empty property that is causing problems to surrounding dwellings or where the owner seems to need help to bring it back into use, report it to the Private Sector Housing Team on 01884 255255 or email customerfirst@middevon.gov.uk.

10.3 Feedback on this Strategy

Mid Devon District Council aim for constant improvement, so if you have any comments about this strategy please let us know.

11.0. Links and partnerships

11.1. Associated Strategies

11.1.1 Community Housing Strategy for Mid Devon 2005-2011

<http://www.middevon.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=3455&p=0>

11.1.2. Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013

<http://www.middevon.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=9902&p=0>

11.1.3. Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy 2008-2011

<http://www.middevon.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=12903&p=0>

11.1.4. South West Regional Housing Strategy 2005-2016

www.gos.gov.uk/gosw/people/sc/housing/

12.0. Priorities and Policies

- To raise awareness of the issues of empty homes.
- To maximise the re-use of empty homes.
- To improve the existing built environment in line with the Government's Decent Homes Standard.
- To provide good quality affordable housing.
- To support area regeneration programmes.
- To ensure programmes meet a range of housing needs.
- To support the Community Housing Strategy, Corporate Strategy and Local Development Framework.



12.1. Resources

- Partnerships with other Local Authorities.
- Partnerships with Registered Social Landlords.
- Homes and Communities Agency Funding.
- Private Sector Renewal Grant Funding.

12.2. How consultation was carried out

An email was circulated inviting initial feedback on the 2010-2015 Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) strategy. The email went to MDDC's:

- Cllr Ray Stanley - Portfolio holder for Housing;
- Kevin Finan - Director of Community Services & Deputy Chief Executive;
- Cllr Clive Eginton - Chairman of the Decent and Affordable Homes Policy Development Group;
- Jonathan Guscott - Head of Planning & Regeneration;
- Catherine Simmons - Housing Homelessness & Enabling;
- Ken McLaren - Building Control Manager;
- Simon Johnson - Legal Services Manager;
- Liz Reeves - Customer First Manager
- John Chumbley - Revenues Manager;
- Six local Housing Associations - Cornerstone, Devon & Cornwall Housing, Sarsen, Sovereign Housing, Spectrum Housing, Tor Homes;
- Three neighbouring local authorities - East Devon District Council, Teignbridge District Council and Exeter City Council.
- National Landlords Association

The strategy was placed electronically on the MDDC website and the public invited to feedback. In the light of the Council's new duty under the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Empty Homes Strategy will remain on the Council's website and comments from the community invited. Press releases also highlighted the Strategy Consultation and copies of the Strategy and Feedback Forms were made available at all Council Customer Contact points. This will further inform our assessment in regard to empty property in the Mid Devon district.

12.3 Results of the final consultation

The following comments about the strategy were received:

- The strategy was acknowledged as being informative on identifying the problems in Mid Devon and supports the need to provide both proactive and reactive solutions.
- Recent announcements of national and regional funding initiatives (e.g. New Homes Bonus) strengthen the need for the strategy.
- A fair but firm process of enforcement received widespread support.
- Any grant aid should be used to secure more housing for local people in the areas of greatest need.
- New initiatives such as Loans need to be explored to limit the impact of reduced grant funding.
- Raising the profile of Empty Homes may bring a greater demand for proactive measures which will be very much resource dependant.



13.0 Empty Homes Action Plan with Targets 2011 - 2015

PRIORITY	TARGET	COMPLETION	OUTCOME	ACTION	OWNERSHIP
Implement & develop the Empty Homes Strategy in partnership with others to provide a wide range of affordable housing to meet housing need.					
1. Monitor the number of empty properties from available sources of information including the Council Tax Register	Establish monthly reports from Council Tax and procedure for monitoring all discounted and exempt property	Completion by March 2011	To determine the number of Empty properties within the District and which properties to target to meet housing need	Obtain monthly monitoring statistics from Council Tax to gauge the numbers and location of empty property	Private Sector Housing
2. Living Over the Shops Scheme (LOTS)	Implement a LOTS to identify property and assist owners to make use of redundant space	Implement by September 2011	Provision of additional affordable accommodation and reclassification of units that are not suitable for residential	Establish procedures and scheme paperwork. Use council tax records to identify suitable units.	Private Sector Housing
3. Link with the Deposit & Rent (in advance) Scheme (DARS)	Establish monthly reports from Housing Needs and procedure for monitoring how many long term empty properties are bought back into use	March 2011	Provision of decent, safe, affordable, alternative accommodation	Obtain monthly reports on the numbers of DARS properties. Collate with council tax empty property data.	Private Sector Housing & Housing Needs



PRIORITY	TARGET	COMPLETION	OUTCOME	ACTION	OWNERSHIP
4. Review the Empty Homes Strategy	Monitor the effectiveness of the Empty Homes Strategy	Annually	Mid Devon District Council policy for Empty Homes	Annually report on the progress of the Empty Homes Strategy (January 2012 first report).	Private Sector Housing Team, Environmental Health
5. Identify Long Term empty properties and attempt to trace and contact owners	15 long term empty property to be bought back into use	March 2011	Better use of Council Tax data to target long term empty properties in a location and of a size that meets the housing need	Utilise the monthly data received from Council Tax to identify which empty properties can be targeted	Councillors, Council officers and members of the public
6. Enforcement	Put together a detailed portfolio to cover all aspects of empty homes enforcement. To include procedures and standard letters	April 2011	Twofold outcome to get empty properties back into use and to advertise to other owners of such properties that the council is prepared to take statutory action	Make use of enforcement tools (such as EDMO, Enforced Sale Procedure, S215 notices and/or CPO) after all avenues have been exhausted with property owners	Environmental Health Services, Legal Services, Financial Services, Private Sector Housing, Building Control, Planning, Council Tax



PRIORITY	TARGET	COMPLETION	OUTCOME	ACTION	OWNERSHIP
7. Empty property prioritisation	Put together an empty property 'scoring' tool to prioritise the council's action on known empty property	January 2011	Resources can be targeted to the properties that are deemed to be a priority for the local area	Utilise consultation feedback as a tool to shape the scoring tool and how priority is established	Private Sector Housing
8. Wessex Reinvestment Trust Loan Scheme Assistance for owners of empty properties	Provision of loans	Ongoing	To encourage and assist owners of non-decent empty properties to bring them back into use	Work with WRT to set up a suitable loan scheme and advertise widely to ensure targets are reached	Private Sector Housing, Environmental Health, Wessex Reinvestment Trust
9. Advertising the service and available schemes in the local press and the MDDC website	100% positive feedback from customer service surveys	Ongoing	Adverts, press releases and website information	Advertising the service and available schemes in the local press and the EDDC website	Private Sector Housing
10. Advising and assisting owners of empty properties to bring them back into use	Continual	Ongoing	Reduction of empties	Advising and assisting owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Keep suitable records of advice and assistance given	Private Sector Housing



PRIORITY	TARGET	COMPLETION	OUTCOME	ACTION	OWNERS HIP
11. Establish an Empty Property Working Group	To establish a cross-service working group that meet regularly to discuss problematic properties and how they can be moved forward	January 2011	A cross-service working group will work to ensure that the key strategic aims of the empty homes strategy are met	Identify relevant services and request nominated representatives from each service. Draft terms of reference for working group for all services to sign up to.	Private Sector Housing
12. Continuous development and training on empty homes enforcement delivery	To develop the necessary skills and knowledge to pursue enforcement	Ongoing	Staff will be able to deliver the key strategic aims of the strategy	Identify relevant training schemes and networking with all relevant forums	Private Sector Housing

14.0. Empty Homes Partnership Success

14.1. Searle Street Crediton Project.

Before.....



This original 4 bed detached property benefited from the addition of a two-storey extension and conversion into two x 2 bed self-contained flats.

The owner of the property, working in conjunction with Mid Devon District Council, utilised the empty homes grant to completely renovate the premises that had been empty for more than two years

Works were undertaken by local contractors, with the property benefitting from a new roof, rewired electrics, fire protection system, new kitchen and bathroom facilities and a new central heating system. The flats were decorated to a high standard with new flooring throughout and have been occupied since July 2009.

After.....



