

Private Sector Housing

Empty Property Strategy

The aim of the empty property strategy is to maximise the provision of new homes through:

1. Re-use of existing empty dwellings.
2. The re-use, conversion or adaptation of empty living space over shops.
3. The conversion and adaptation of appropriate redundant commercial buildings.

This will be done through:

1. Provision of advice and information to owners of the benefits of bringing back into use their empty homes and buildings, and the help available from the Council.
2. The awarding of grants to pump prime where appropriate.
3. The development of partnerships with both the public and private sector to aid owners with the letting and management of their properties.
4. The use of the full range of housing and environmental health legislation, including compulsory purchase, where owners deliberately leave their properties empty.
5. Publicising the existence of the Empty Property Strategy to as wide an audience as possible.

A Corporate Approach

In order for the Empty Property Strategy (EPS) to be successful a corporate approach is essential. Various departments within the Council can have a positive role within the strategy and are also a source of useful information. Therefore the first step within the strategy' will be to set up an interdepartmental empty property forum. The purpose of this forum is to facilitate the two-way flow of information between the relevant sections and promote "the joined up thinking" approach necessary to secure the aims of the EPS.

Draft copies of this strategy have been sent to the following Sections for consultation and preliminary discussions highlighting areas where joint working will particularly affect the success of the strategy.

Planning

Empty property conversions must comply with planning policies and particular care will be needed where properties are located in a conservation area and/or are listed. The Dover District Local Plan supports the aim of utilising vacant space above shops and this is seen as an area where collaborative working can be very successful eg Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme.

Building Control

When converting a property Building Regulation approval will invariably be required, and it is important that any advice provided through the EPS does not conflict with the Building Regulations. In addition, both Building Control and Environmental Health are

the main recipients of referrals from the public regarding derelict and dangerous properties. The strategy will benefit from the sharing of such information.

Legal Services

It is anticipated that at some stage compulsory purchase (CPO) will be necessary with some vacant dwellings. Once a proposal for C.P.O. action has been agreed by Committee the Legal Section will have the major role in securing the Compulsory Purchase Order.

Finance

Council Tax records can provide a valuable source of information regarding the location of empty dwellings and ownership details, subject to Data Protection.

Housing

From the waiting lists held by housing, information can be gained regarding areas of high housing need and type of accommodation required.

Environmental Health

Environmental Health is the major recipient of referrals from the public etc, regarding vacant properties. It already has a successful grants scheme for vacant dwellings, and a well developed partnership with Sanctuary Housing for the letting and management of properties brought back into use with grant aid. It is also exploring the possibility of developing further initiatives with suitable partners to secure the re-use of dwellings acquired through Compulsory Purchase action. The Environmental Health Section will take the lead role in the Empty Property Forum.

The Empty Property Forum will consist of a named officer from each of the above departments who will act as liaison between each Section and the lead officer in Environmental Health. Initially it is envisaged that the forum will meet quarterly.

The Target

The Dover District Council House Condition Survey 1994 estimated that 6.5% (2468) private sector dwellings were vacant at that time. This compares unfavourably with the results of the latest National House Condition Survey average of 3.9%. Discussions are already taking place with the Council Tax Section to explore whether a more up-to-date figure can be determined from the records held by this Section. The last local Housing Condition Survey was carried out in 2000-2001 and provided valuable information as to the numbers and locations of empty dwellings.

Whilst the aim of the EPS is to maximise the re-use of empty dwellings it would be impossible to tackle all vacant properties at one time, given the large estimated number of such within the district and the limited resources available.

One of the Best Value Performance Indicators which came into place from 2001 requires that the Council set a target number of long term vacant (ie empty for 6 months or more) dwellings to be brought back into use through local authority action. This will

be initially set at 40 dwellings per annum which represents 1.6% of the total estimated number and is felt to be realistic given the restraints of limited resources. However as experience and proficiency develops once the strategy is up and running it is anticipated this figure will be increased. It is considered appropriate to target particular properties and not just "pick off" potentially easy ones. The following three groupings are to be given priority in the scheme:

1. Located in an area of high housing demand and in particular if it is, or could be, a family home.
2. Those situated on a major route within the Dover District area.
3. "Eyesore" properties which are a regular source of complaint.

By focusing on the above three priorities, the strategy will have a qualitative as well as a quantitative approach.

Pro-active v Enforcement

Wherever possible owners will be encouraged by positive means to bring their properties back into use. Two successful elements to this are already in place within the Environmental Health Section namely, a specially designed empty property grant which can be used for pump priming the renovation of empty properties in disrepair, and the partnership with Sanctuary Housing which provides a means for owners to let their properties. The first empty property improved with an empty property grant is already being let through Sanctuary Housing Association, and several more are undergoing renovation. However what is being found is that there is a large time span between owners making an enquiry and a property becoming occupied again. In some cases, proposed schemes do not come to fruition owing to lack of resources on the part of the owners.

For these reasons and to ensure the EPS target is met, a proactive stance will be adopted to encourage owners to come forward.

As stated earlier, the Environmental Health Section will take the lead role for the EPS, but within this Section one officer will be designated to co-ordinate the work involved within the EPS. Leaflets and an information pack promoting the benefits to owners of letting their empty properties, and the ways in which the Council and its partners can help, have been produced and will be distributed as widely as possible. This will include obvious places such as Council Offices, Libraries but also local letting and estate agents and property developers as a preliminary means to developing partnerships with the private sector. As with the drafting of this Strategy, consultations have taken place with other departments to ensure that owners are not given conflicting information.

Briefly, owners are advised on how the empty property grants scheme works, the various means by which a property can be let, which section of the Council can provide the relevant information, but most importantly encourages owners to actually contact the designated officer within the Environmental Health in order to establish a dialogue.

The above is expected to be an effective way in which contact can be made with empty property owners, however it cannot be relied upon solely to achieve the aim of the EPS. Council Tax records can provide information as to the location of the majority of empty dwellings, but tracing owners can be more problematic. Tracing some owners will take quite a bit of detective work and will be time-consuming. This may affect ability to reach the proposed target of 40 properties.

To help with this task it is proposed to establish an empty property hot-line within the Environmental Health Section to allow members of the public to report empty properties. This will further help in the locating of empty properties and it is hoped will be a valuable source of information as to ownership. Once an empty property has been reported it is important that the person contacting the Council is kept up-to-date with the progress being made in order to retain the confidence of the general public in the EPS. All owners traced either through referrals, records etc will be sent the empty property information pack to again encourage a positive dialogue with the owner with the aim of bringing the property back into housing use.

Unfortunately not all owners will respond to positive encouragement and some properties may not even have an identifiable owner. Therefore alternative means of bringing neglected properties back into use will have to be used. The two proposed routes for doing this are:

1. The use of Compulsory Purchase Orders
2. Utilisation of the Law of Property Act 1925.
- 3.

Within the Environmental Health Service, a designated procedure is already in place, to be used when considered appropriate with owners who have deliberately left their properties empty. This is done by sending owners a series of standard letters, which increasingly emphasise to the formal action which will be taken if their property is deliberately left empty. It therefore will not be used where properties are actively being made available for let, or are for sale. Although a firm stance will be taken with unco-operative owners, at all stages the primary emphasis will always be to work positively with owners, and any help sought will not be followed up.

In order for a Compulsory Purchase Order to be confirmed, the Council must be able to demonstrate how the property will be brought back into housing use. There is scope here to develop partnership(s) with private property companies. However, the preferred option will be to sell to a Housing Association.

The alternative means of acquiring neglected empty properties is through the Law of Property Act 1925. This procedure can only be used where a property is registered with the Land Registry, and the Council has a legal charge on the property eg where works have been carried out in default. In addition there is no control over who the property is sold to as the sale is carried out by a Receiver appointed through the Land Registry, though this in turn reduces the input required by the Council. It is therefore not anticipated that this procedure will be regularly used, but there may be instances when it would be appropriate.

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