Empty Homes Action Plan
2017 – 2022
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1. **Background**

1.1 There are an estimated 610,000 empty homes in England, with 210,000 homes left unoccupied longer than six months.

1.2 91% of properties are owned privately, the remaining properties are in the ownership of Social Landlords.

1.3 There are a wide range of reasons, why a property is left empty;

- Owners move out for the area for work
- Properties where owners are holding the property as an asset, speculating that area prices will increase;
- Property has been inherited after the death of a relative and the new owner is unwilling or unsure how to dispose of the property.
- The dwelling may be used for only a few weeks of the year
- Property has been damaged by previous tenants and the landlord is unable to finance repairs to re-let;
- Property is an area where there is low demand and the owner is unable to either sell or rent the property;
- The resident has moved into residential care; and
- Occupation prohibited by the Police as part of an ongoing investigation or the owner is currently in jail.
- Occupation prohibited by another agency, where the property is assessed as too dangerous for occupation.

1.4 Bringing long term empty homes back into use was also highlighted by the Government as a key priority in ‘Laying the Foundations’, a Housing Strategy for England. This strategy led to a number of incentives being put into place to support local authorities and their partners including;

- The payment of New Homes Bonus for long term empty properties brought back into use;
- Changes to Council Tax exemptions for empty homes and the introduction of the Premium Council tax charge for properties left empty over 2 years.
1.5 Councils have a plan for the current and future housing needs of the local population across all tenures. The overall role of Council’s in housing is a strategic role. This is clarified in ‘The Strategic Housing Role for Local Authorities’ sets out the powers and duties in five key areas;

- Assess and plan for the current and future housing needs of the population across all tenures;
- Make the best use of the existing housing stock;
- Plan and facilitate new supply;
- Plan and commission housing support services which link homes nad housing support services and;
- Work in partnership to secure effective housing and neighbourhood management on an ongoing basis.

1.6 The Council recognises its own duty, valuing the important of bringing empty properties back it use.

1.7 Empty Homes is a ‘Key Issue’ in the emerging Housing Strategy for North East Lincolnshire and within the Council’s Outcome Framework;

‘All people in NEL enjoy & benefit from a strong economy’

1.8 In previous years, the Council have financed a number of capital schemes to bring properties back into use. These included: grants to enable owner occupiers to buy empty property and loans to encourage landlords to invest in the area.

1.9 There is no capital funding for similar schemes. This means the Council needs to take a more diverse approach to bringing empty property back into use.

1.10 Currently, the Council’s only tools to bring empty properties back into use are;

- Advice and assistance
- Enforcement

1.11 There are only three methods of enforcement that can bring about a change of ownership, that can ensure the Council forces the property to be re-occupied. These are;
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders
- Compulsory Purchase Orders
- Enforced Sale

Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders require Capital Investment from the Council.

2. Number of Homes Empty in the Borough

2.1 When assessing Empty Homes, Local Authorities use Council Tax Data.

2.2 Once a property becomes empty, the owner has a responsibility to inform the Council, that there has been a change in occupation status.

2.3 There are a number of reasons why Council Tax Data may not show the true picture;
   - Owner records the property as occupied or a second home to avoid paying empty homes premium, and
   - Property has been removed from the Council Tax system due to severe disrepair.

2.4 Removing a property from the valuation list means it will no longer exist for Council Tax purposes. If a property is deleted from the valuation list, the owner is no longer liable for Council Tax. When the property is brought back into use, it will be re-banded and treated as a new dwelling.

2.5 The total number of residential dwellings in North East Lincolnshire is 73896. The total number of vacant dwellings is 3818 of which 1462 have been void for 6 months or longer (Council Tax Records: April 2016)

3. Overview of the wards most affected by Empty Homes.

*Insert table of empties by area/ward*

The above table shows concentrations of empty properties around the West Marsh, Sidney Sussex, and Croft Baker wards. The East Marsh has the higher percentage of Empty Homes.

4. Recommended Action

4.1 Community Interest Company (CIC)

A Community Interest Company, can help to regenerate an area by;
• Help to redress the imbalance between poorly managed private sector rented homes and home ownership, by providing quality homes for sale which low income households can afford.

• Provide good quality rented homes

• Provide an ethical lettings agency, promoting a responsible lettings service

• Provide opportunities for skills training, apprentices and employment

The CIC will carry out refurbishment works in partnership with Grimsby Institute of Further Education. These properties will either be owned by the CIC or managed through empty dwelling management orders. Owners of empty dwellings or privately rented property will be offered the opportunity to let properties through the CIC.

The CIC will only let properties that have a minimum E Energy Rating, with accommodation up to a quality standard.

Other properties will be refurbished and sold on the open market as Low Cost Home Ownership. This will include Rent to Buy or Homesteading.

4.2 Working with Landlords

Whilst there may not be able to offer financial incentives to bring a property back into use, the Council intend to work with landlords to bring properties back into use.

4.3 Consultancy

Through its partner ENGIE, the Council will offer a bespoke Consultancy Service, to work with owners of empty property. The Consultancy will help remove barriers preventing an owner bringing a property back into use. They will provide advice and assistance on current legislative standards, advice on how to finance repairs and find a buyers.

4.4 Engagement

Regular e-newsletters to owners of empty homes, providing helpful advice, assistance and any updates on enforcement action taken by the authority.

Campaigns to reach out to residents, asking them to be our eyes and ears. We want residents to let us know if a property is empty, if it’s causing a nuisance for example; if it’s attracting fly tipping, or if there are regular intruders or criminal activity at the property. This will help us to build up a case to take to the owner of the empty property, so we can start to work with them.

4.5 Ensure the most appropriate enforcement measures are utilised
Where all other avenues have failed, the Council will take a proactive stance on enforcement.

The Council will work with other agencies, to gather and share intelligence, which will improve opportunities to work with landlords to evidence the impact their neglect has on the borough.

This will include;

- Working with the Fire Service, Safer Communities and Police to prevent and tackle Arson and criminal activity, which centers around empty property.
- Ensuring the owner is liable for the Council Tax payment and where the property has been empty for over two years they pay the premium charge.
- Enforce the sale of properties left empty and neglected where owners of empty property have accrued debts to the local authority through;
  - Nonpayment or Council Tax arrears
  - Removal of Fly Tipping Waste
  - Works in default where there property is causing a statutory nuisance to neighbouring properties.
  - Frequently boarding up the property to prevent access by intruders

A more proactive and targeted approach to enforcement needs to be implemented, to deter owners in general from leaving the property vacant.

There will be regular press releases to name and shame owners who have left properties neglected in the borough and subsequently prosecuted.

5. Delivery Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Target Dates</th>
<th>By Whom</th>
<th>Completed by</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>To establish a CIC with key stakeholders</td>
<td>The CIC will need to be setup, funding confirmed and ready to launch</td>
<td>April 2017</td>
<td>All Partners</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Develop and put in place new working practices with Council Tax</td>
<td>Properties left empty for more than 2 years can attract Council Tax of 150%. Improved joined up working will enable the Empty Homes Team to use this as a penalty for leaving a home empty.</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>Council Tax/ENGIE</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Improving information submitted by residents when they report an empty home</td>
<td>Residents can be our eyes and ears. They know more about these properties. We could ask locals to provide additional information about properties e.g. has there been any vandalism, squatters, anti-social behaviour, or has the property deteriorated. They could take pictures with mobile phones and upload them to the Councils website. This would assist us gather data.</td>
<td>April 2017</td>
<td>NELC/ENGIE</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Establish an Empty Homes Consultancy</td>
<td>Offer advice on initiatives to encourage ethical landlords to invest in the area.</td>
<td>April 2017</td>
<td>ENGIE</td>
<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Integral to the CIC, set up a Private Sector Lettings Agency</td>
<td>Managing properties, on behalf of owners of empty homes and properties taken under Management Orders.</td>
<td>April 2018</td>
<td>CIC</td>
<td></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Explore opportunities to fund Area Based Regeneration</td>
<td>In some areas of the borough, empty homes are a symptom and not a cause of the area’s decline. The Empty Property Team will source funding with partners to bring additional funding to help improve the areas, making the empty properties a more attractive lettings and investment opportunity.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Housing Development Board</td>
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### Performance

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<td>Actual</td>
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