Maldon District Council
Empty Homes Strategy
2008 - 2012

Annual Review
October 2009
1. What do we mean by ‘Empty Homes’?

The Council’s Empty Homes Strategy is mainly concerned with homes that are privately owned, have not been in use for some time and could reasonably be brought back into use to help meet local housing need.

In some cases, it may be extended to include other types of buildings that could be easily adapted to provide a home, for example properties that may have been built as houses, converted into offices or shops and no longer in use.

We would not include homes that are owned and managed by housing associations (Registered Social Landlords) as this is covered through the other means such as the Council’s partnering arrangements and their own business plans. We would however include properties that are owned by public bodies such as the Police, the Health Authority and Essex County Council.

For a property to be classified as ‘empty’ it would have to have been unoccupied for at least six months. Although we would be willing to give advice to an owner with a property in these circumstances if it would help them bring it back into use, in practice we would target properties that have been empty for much longer, especially during a time of recession when it may be harder to sell a home on the open market.

In some cases a property may be recorded as being a second home, for example somewhere that is used infrequently by the owner, such as for holidays. Although we would not seek to target owners of second homes we may contact them asking what their plans are if it appears that a property has not been used for some time and it has been brought to our attention.

2. What is the problem?

There is an unprecedented demand for housing throughout the District, especially for affordable housing. The impact of the recession has meant that the supply of new homes is likely to reduce due to financial constraint, despite a growing need. It is therefore necessary to make best use of all possible resources to help balance the supply of housing against local need.

Whether a home is brought back to use through being sold on the open market for use, rented by a private landlord or used to provide affordable housing in the short or longer term, it makes a positive contribution to the District’s ability to house people in the area.
Homes that are left empty for long periods will not grow in value to the same extent as those that are in use and are more likely to need significant investment to keep them in use. They may also attract anti-social behaviour, present risks to passers by and have a negative affect on the appearance and value of surrounding properties. There may be good reasons for an owner not wishing to sell a property at a particular time but if this is likely to be for more than six months, they are losing out on additional income that could be earned by letting the home to another family.

From the Council’s perspective, we can only justify encouraging the development of new homes if we are also doing all that we can to make best use of the existing housing stock.

3. What is the scale of the problem?

“As of July 2008 the number of recorded ‘empty homes’ was 860. Of these, 460 had been empty for six months or more.” - Maldon District Council’s Empty Homes Strategy 2008 – 2012

Since the launch of the current Empty Homes Strategy in September 2008, the Council has been looking at all properties that are recorded as being empty. This has given us a more accurate picture of the current situation. Over time, some properties will become empty and others will return into use but it is helpful to establish as best we can the number of those that continue to remain empty.

- Number of homes listed as empty that have returned to use = 56
- Number of homes empty since 2008 = 176.
- Number of homes that have been empty since before 2008 = 141
- Number of empty homes not suitable for use = 40 (approx)
- Number of homes possibly suited for use = 277 (176 + 141 – 40)

Of the 176 properties that have been empty since the beginning of last year, some if not the majority will hopefully be returned to use through being released for sale on the open market. In some cases, especially during a recession, owners may find it difficult to sell and although these may not be seen as potentially long-term empty homes there is a risk that they could fall into this category without advice and support to the owners on options such as renting.

Of the 141 properties that have been empty for more than twelve months some of these are unsuitable for renovation or future use. We estimate that
this is about 40 properties and will work on establishing this throughout the next year.

This leaves about 100 potential properties that could be brought back into use. This is still a significant number but does include a wide variety of types of buildings in various locations.

Our Empty Homes Strategy introduced a matrix for assessing which of these properties should be prioritised, bearing in mind the limitations on the Council’s resources. This assessment considers the length of time the property has been empty, the likelihood of it meeting local needs (in terms of size and location) and the impact that it is having on the surrounding environment.

Also as part of the Strategy, owners of properties that are targeted are notified of the Council’s concerns about the property remaining empty and offered advice and assistance to help them bring it back into use. During the first year of the Strategy 44 owners have been contacted directly by the Council encouraging them to bring their homes back into use. In 15 cases, subsequent letters have been sent outlining our continued concern.

It is not always easy to track down and make contact with owners of empty homes but we want to make contact with all other owners (currently estimated to be 56) by September 2010.

4. What have we done?

We set out five actions in the Strategy that we thought would help to bring homes back into use.

We said we would:

- Make best use of existing information to identify homes that it believes to be empty.
- Promote through the local media (press, leaflets, website, and Landlords’ Forum) the aims of this strategy
- Undertake a survey of shopping areas across the District to find out the extent to which better use could be made of rooms above shops.
- Contact other public bodies such as Essex County Council, the Police, and others to see what properties they may have that are not being used in the District.
- Consult with local RSLs to explore any opportunities to make better use of their own local housing stock and how they may be able to contribute towards providing options to owners of empty homes.
What we did:

- Put in place more effective working arrangements between Council services, in particular Housing and Council Tax to identify and review properties that were recorded as being empty, inspecting them to see what the current situation is. This has given us a much better idea about the scale of the problem.
- We promoted the aims of the strategy both with partners and also be directly targeting owners of homes that we knew had been empty for more than twelve months, improving our understanding of the needs of owners and the possible range of solutions.
- We carried out a survey of the space above shops in Maldon, Heybridge, Burnham-on-Crouch and Southminster identifying both the opportunity and barriers to making better use of flats above shops.
- We have begun to contact other public organisations to see what properties they may have having failed to identify any through our search of local records.
- We have worked with our partner RSLs (housing associations) to make better use of their housing stock, resulting in five homes being made available as affordable housing which were previously allocated for use as temporary accommodation and often empty.

We have also introduced a private sector leasing scheme (PSL Scheme) with our partner Colne Housing Society. This gives an opportunity for owners of empty homes to lease them to Colne in return for a guaranteed income, during which time Colne will make them available as affordable housing for local people.

In addition to this, recognising that many empty homes need refurbishment before they can be rented, we successfully bid for funding from the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) to enhance the PSL Scheme by offering grants to owners whose homes also need renovation. This is in partnership with Braintree District Council and is known as the “Empty to Decent Homes” scheme as all properties will be brought up to the Decent Homes standard as well as used to provide affordable housing.

5. What have we learnt?

We realise that very often a property is left empty because of the owner’s situation rather than because of problems with the property itself. Consequently we are finding that it is often necessary to understand and work with the owner so that options best meet their own needs rather than take a property led approach to the problem. As this can be quite time-consuming, it reinforces the use of the matrix that we have developed to prioritise which properties (and owners) we should target to bring homes back into use.
We have also found that in some cases, especially where there is a possibility that an empty property may present problems such as nuisance to neighbours, that a more joined-up approach is needed, extending beyond the range of options that the Council’s strategic housing service can provide. We are therefore developing a more joined-up, corporate approach to tackling some homes in the future. This will include sharing information, explaining why some homes are less suited for intervention than others, and considering a range of enforcement action delivered through Planning and Environmental Health as well as Housing.

From our survey of spaces above shops we know that there is only limited potential to make better use from empty space but some businesses may benefit from providing residential accommodation, especially during a time of recession, than storage so we need to promote this to all businesses. We also anticipate that some properties that are currently used for residential accommodation may be in need of renovation if they are to be able to continue to be a source of housing in the future.

Despite extending the range of options for owners of empty homes, we are beginning to recognise that some may nevertheless chose not to take advantage of our help and support. As we establish contact with more owners and build up a picture of the problems that they may face, it may become apparent in the future that enforcement action is required, especially where the problem extends beyond the fact that the home is empty.


- Target at least six empty homes for assistance from the Empty to Decent Homes Scheme

- Ensure that all owners of homes that have been empty for at least twelve months have been contacted and provided with a range of options to help encourage them to bring empty homes back into use.

- Further refine the data base of empty homes so that it accurately shows the number of properties that should be targeted as being suitable to meet housing needs.

- Promote the opportunity for providing rented accommodation above shops to help local businesses through the Council’s Economic Development as well as Housing Services.

- Contact Essex Police, Health Authority, County Council and other public bodies to establish if they have under-used residential accommodation in the District and other empty or underused properties that may be suitable for conversion to meet local housing needs.
• Improve our corporate approach to tackling empty homes by working more closely with Planning and Environmental Health on sharing information about empty homes and developing a range of enforcement options including a step by step corporate approach across these services.

• Continue to work with RSLs to make better use of their empty housing stock by identifying hard to let properties and those that are unoccupied and seeking each landlord to have in place actions to bring these properties back into use.

• Complete outstanding actions from last year’s action plan.
Progress in 2008 / 09

Empty Homes Strategy 2008 – 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish data base and prioritise properties to be investigated</td>
<td>Realistic work-plan of targeted properties / owners</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>October 2008</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult with Essex County Council and other public bodies to identify properties that could be brought back into use as homes in the District</td>
<td>Wider range of potential homes that would not otherwise have been identified</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>Progressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry out survey of local shopping areas to assess potential for making best use of space above shops to provide homes.</td>
<td>Extend options for increasing housing supply in a sustainable way and will contribute to Planning Services assessment of potential housing supply</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>Maldon by December 2008. Heybridge by Feb 2009. Burnham by March 2009 Southminster by April 2009</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce leaflet promoting the Council’s empty homes work and distribute.</td>
<td>Better awareness of strategy and encourage reporting of empty properties</td>
<td>Officer time and printing costs</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>October 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore through RSL Forum possibilities for partner RSLs to</td>
<td>Increase options for owners and provides additional affordable housing</td>
<td>Possible need for grant from Housing Corporation</td>
<td>Strategic Housing Manager</td>
<td>December 2008</td>
<td>Private Sector Leasing Scheme and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Expected Outcome</td>
<td>Responsible Party</td>
<td>Due Date</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acquire empty homes</td>
<td>and/or the Council</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce and make available information pack for owners.</td>
<td>Better understanding of options and responsibilities both as owners and possibly landlords</td>
<td>Officer time and printing costs</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>Completed and ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish Colne PSL scheme within the District.</td>
<td>Gives more options to owners</td>
<td>Possible need for funding to cover void-loss</td>
<td>Strategic Housing Manager</td>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult with Mid Essex Historical Building Trust to find out how they may be able to support owners of older empty homes</td>
<td>Protects local heritage</td>
<td>To be identified</td>
<td>Strategic Housing Manager</td>
<td>December 2008</td>
<td>Limited progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote the aims of the strategy at sub-regional and regional level</td>
<td>Secure additional resources and identify good practice</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Strategic Housing Manager</td>
<td>October 2008 and ongoing</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertake an impact assessment as to the use of EDMOs and CPOs through discussion with other local authorities</td>
<td>Clarify the implications for the Council of using these sanctions.</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Enabling Officer</td>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Developing corporate approach linked to existing partnerships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Report progress of the strategy to Affordable Housing Programme Board</td>
<td>Consistent monitoring and review of the strategy.</td>
<td>Officer time</td>
<td>Strategic Housing Manager</td>
<td>March 2009 and six-monthly thereafter.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
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</tbody>
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and Landlords’ Forum twice yearly