Wolverhampton City Council

OPEN EXECUTIVE
DECISION ITEM (AMBER)

Cabinet

Date 14th JULY 2010

Portfolio(s) COUNCILLOR MRS P BRADLEY/REGENERATION AND ENTERPRISE

Originating Service Group(s) REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT

Contact Officer(s)/ LESLEY WILLIAMS
Telephone Number(s) 0553

Title PRIVATE SECTOR EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY 2010-2015

RECOMMENDATION

That the Private Sector Empty Property Strategy 2010-2015 which outlines the various initiatives the Council uses and intends to use to bring long term empty residential properties back into use as a housing resource for the City be approved.
1. PURPOSE

1.1 The Council’s aim with this strategy is to bring its empty private sector residential properties back into use. This will provide additional housing opportunity and choice to help to alleviate growing housing need, and will also help to maintain and improve our neighbourhoods by removing and preventing the blight effect of many empty homes.

1.2 Tackling empty homes contributes to the sustainability of neighbourhoods and whole communities through:

- Increasing the stock of good quality housing with better energy efficiency standards
- Reducing carbon emissions impact by renovating rather than building new homes
- Reducing the potential for crime, fly tipping and vandalism (and arson in extreme cases)
- Promoting regeneration and re-investment in communities suffering from housing market weakness and blighted by empty homes

1.3 The adoption of the Private Sector Empty Property Strategy 2010-15 therefore supports the wider objectives set within the Housing Strategy (2009) around place shaping and addressing the detrimental impact empty properties can cause in neighbourhoods; and delivering on the wider goals for Wolverhampton around resident outcomes as identified in the Council’s Corporate Plan (2009-2012) and in the Sustainable Communities Strategy (2008-2026).

1.4 The Action Plan (pages 17-22) sets out targets for the delivery of the Strategy, including bringing 200 long term empty properties back into use each year (action Ref 13).

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 In 2004, the Council produced and published its first dedicated Private Sector Empty Property Strategy (2004-2007). Since then, the Council have brought in excess of 900 long term empty properties back into use, whilst in excess of 30 derelict properties have been demolished to be replaced by new, better housing.

2.2 The Council has also developed a number of other initiatives, such as the Rent Deposit and Private Sector Leasing Schemes, which support the wider aims of reducing the number of empty properties and widening the choice of housing available to meet a growing need for good quality affordable housing.

2.3 The Council is continually looking to work proactively with a range of partners and agencies to tackle empty properties and provide solutions to bring them back into use; a successful partnership between the Council and Midland Heart enabled three derelict properties to be renovated to include energy efficiency measures in Coleman Street. All of the strategic objectives around empty properties are aimed at supporting sustainable neighbourhoods, both environmentally and cohesively. Each empty property is considered on its own merits within the framework set out in the strategy, and the best course of action is taken wherever possible to bring about the most satisfactory resolution.

2.4 The draft Private Sector Empty Property Strategy (Appendix A complete with Action Plan) has been developed in consultation with the Empty Property Working Group, which comprises officers from the Private Sector Team, Legal Services, Planning Enforcement, Public Protection and Council Tax.
2.5 Monitoring of the action plan will be carried out by the Empty Property Working Group and regular progress reports will be presented to Wolverhampton Strategic Housing Partnership as part of the wider Housing Strategy Monitoring framework (to be agreed).

3. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

3.1 Since 2004 the Council has resourced a service aimed at bringing empty residential properties back into use, including the provision of dedicated officers who have achieved the significant results to date.

3.2 The principle of establishing a revolving capital fund to drive forward the Private Sector Empty Property Strategy was originally approved by Cabinet in 2006. The revolving fund provides for properties that are consistent with the strategy to be acquired under Compulsory Purchase Orders, allowing for the refurbishment of these properties to a marketable condition in order for them to be remarketed and sold. The resulting capital receipt is then re-invested in new acquisitions. This revolving capital fund of some £0.2M per annum is accommodated within the private sector housing provision of the Housing Capital Programme.

3.3 Enforcement action (such as works in default under Section 215 or refurbishment of properties managed under Empty Dwelling Management Orders) will continue in line with existing policies.

3.4 There are no additional financial implications arising from the adoption of this Strategy.

[SW/29062010/M]

4. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Support from the Legal Services Division will continue to be required to enable the Council to continue to utilise all of the statutory powers available to bring long term empty properties back into use.

5. **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no identified equality implications in adopting this Strategy as it deals with property, however, equality impacts are considered on all new policy initiatives and will continue to be monitored, along with the outcomes, as part of the Strategy.

6. **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 Empty properties can present significant detrimental blight on neighbourhoods. Neglected properties are a magnet for anti-social behaviour, vandalism and in extreme cases arson. The adoption of this Strategy will go a long way towards environmental improvements across Wolverhampton’s neighbourhoods by allowing officers to use all of the remedies available to facilitate the bringing of empty properties back into use.

7. **SCHEDULE OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

7.1 None.
Wolverhampton City Council
Draft Empty Property Strategy 2010-2015

Introduction

Like most parts of England, Wolverhampton has a shortage of affordable homes. We have an identified unmet shortage of 702 affordable homes each year (for the period 2007-2012) according to our Housing Needs Survey 2007. We have a Housing Register exceeding 10,000 applicants for Council rented housing and we have also in the region of 2650 long-term empty properties (taken from the Council Tax data). These are empty privately owned domestic dwellings that have stood empty for in excess of 6 months, however many have stood empty for a number of years. The Council believes at a time of such housing need that this is a wasted resource and as such it must be a priority for the Council and its partners, to work together to bring as many empty homes back into use as possible. The Strategy will both to help meet need and to offer choice, and to reduce the blight that can result where properties are empty and neglected.

In 2004, Wolverhampton produced and published its first dedicated Empty Property Strategy. Since then, we have brought 817 long term empty properties back into use, whilst a further 27 have been demolished to be replaced by new, better housing. We have also, with colleagues in Homeless Services, developed a Rent Deposit scheme and the City Council is working proactively with a range of partners and agencies to prevent homelessness. We are also looking closely at our neighbourhoods with a view to sustainment, both environmentally and cohesively, and work carried out to reduce the number of empty properties and street scene enforcement enhances that work.

We need to move forwards, build on our success, and develop new policies and initiatives following legislation within the Housing Act 2004 and subsequent government guidance. This is a key issue for Wolverhampton, and we will aim to bring even more empty homes back into use over the next five years for the life of this strategy. We believe that the majority of empty homes can be dealt with by working with the owner, but where this is not possible we will look to use the full range of enforcement powers available to the Council in order to resolve problems. A credible threat of action, coupled with good local publicity on successful enforcement cases will encourage most owners to work with the Council.
Why do properties remain empty?

There are many reasons why domestic property remains empty in Wolverhampton. Property will usually be empty during a change of ownership; there is nothing wrong in this and it is usually an indicator of a healthy housing market. However it may be an indicator of underlying problems when property is not occupied within a reasonable timescale after a change of ownership; the formal measure is a property that has remained unoccupied for longer than 6 months. We have carried out research amongst owners of such long-term empty properties and the main reasons stated for leaving a property empty are:

• Owners lacking information about the options available to them
• Owners moving into residential care
• Delays in the administration of the estate where the owner has died
• Perceived problems with renting the property out
• Owners waiting for further increases in the market before selling
• The costs associated with renovation of older & long-term empty properties
• Properties that are awaiting demolition and/or redevelopment

Why work to bring empty properties back in use?

From a housing policy perspective, the overriding reasons in bringing long-term empty property back into use is to increase the numbers of homes available for those in need and minimise the under use of existing housing. At a time of growing housing need this can assist in widening the choice of housing available and may lessen the risk of homelessness.

There are sustainable neighbourhood reasons as well, and these include:

• To discourage crime and vandalism – empty properties are known to attract anti-social behaviour and are a magnet for vandalism and arson
• To discourage fly tipping and other environmental crime on the land of an empty property – empty properties are often surrounded by rubbish and can pose a risk to public health
• To discourage price devaluation of neighbouring properties – neighbouring property prices can be affected by as much as 30% (Empty Homes Agency)
• Expense to the owner – it’s less expensive to have a property in use than to leave it empty. It is estimated that the average annual costs of keeping a three-bedroom house in Wolverhampton empty can be around £10,000 per year (latest figures suggested by the Empty Homes Agency).

Nationally it is estimated that there are 613,270 empty private properties in England (at April 2008; latest figures available), 303,285 of those being empty longer than 6 months; 34,511 long term empty properties in the West Midlands Region (information taken from Communities and Local Government HSSA returns for 2007/08). Whilst the figure for long term empty private property nationally has fallen, it is rising in the West Midlands and Wolverhampton. A reason for this is the impact of the “credit crunch;”
however a falling housing market brings both threats and opportunities for tackling empty homes. Wolverhampton is positioning itself to respond to the threats and make the most of the opportunities presented as set out within this document’s Action Plan.

There have been a number of government initiatives to tackle empty properties in recent years, as the pressures faced by Local Housing Authorities in terms of meeting increasing demand for affordable housing is recognised as a national issue. These include:

**Use of Council Tax Data to identify empty property** - Section 85 of the Local Government Act 2003 added Paragraph 18A to Schedule 2 to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to allow the use of Council Tax data by the Council for the purposes of identifying vacant dwellings or taking steps to bring vacant dwellings back into use. This data is used by the Council’s Empty Property Team to identify empty dwellings and the name and address of the current owner.

**Council Tax Discounts for empty domestic dwellings** - Section 75 of the Local Government Act 2003 inserted Section 11A into the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and gives billing authorities a discretionary power to reduce the Council Tax discount on long term empty dwellings. From 1st April 2008 Wolverhampton City Council removed this discretionary discount, on dwellings which have been unoccupied and unfurnished for longer than six months, to ensure there is no fiscal incentive to keeping a property empty.

**Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)** - Empty Dwelling Management Orders were introduced in July 2006 under the provisions of the Housing Act 2004. The intention of an EDMO is to bridge the gap between voluntary measures and existing enforcement procedures. It will provide an effective back up to such arrangements where owners turn down offers of assistance and do not have plans of their own to bring the property back into use. The threat of an EDMO is intended to put pressure on the owner to enter into constructive dialogue with the local authority with the object of agreeing the best course of action to secure occupation, thereby avoiding the need for an order to be made. Cabinet approval was obtained for the use of EDMOs as a means to bring long term empty property back into use in October 2009.

**Enforced Sale Procedure (ESP)** – The Enforced Sale Procedure uses powers under Section 103 of the Law and Properties Act 1925, and offers an option to recoup debts and bring empty properties back into use through forcing a change in ownership. This is less complicated than Compulsory Purchase and can be used in conjunction with carrying out Works in Default where notices have been served on owners requiring works to be done to resolve any visual detriment being caused by the empty property. If these notices are not complied with, the Council has the right to carry out the works and seek to recover the debt. A charge is placed against the property and the Council then forces the sale of the property to recover the outstanding debt for the works.
Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) - The Housing Act 1985, section 17 allows the Local Authority to acquire underused or ineffectively used property for residential purposes if there is a general housing need in the area. In addition section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by section 99 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) allows Local Authorities to acquire land or buildings if acquisition will allow improvements or redevelopment to take place. CPO can be a lengthy process and the possibility of a CPO is intended to prompt the owner to enter into constructive dialogue with the local authority and to avoid the need to resort to such measures.

Use of other enforcement powers: - the use of other powers will be considered where appropriate, and best course of action taken to resolve empty property issues; the aim being the achievement of the Councils wider strategic objectives around sustainable communities’ local environmental improvements and the regeneration of Wolverhampton. Examples include the use of Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 which will be considered where the condition of an empty property is considered to be adversely affecting the amenity of an area, or the use of Section 79 of the Building Act 1984 which addresses defective premises and ruinous and dilapidated buildings.

Wolverhampton Profile

Wolverhampton is a Millennium City situated within the West Midlands conurbation, and is bordered by Sandwell, Walsall and Dudley, who together are collectively known as the Black Country Boroughs. The resident population for the City of Wolverhampton was estimated to be in the region of 239,300 people (Housing Needs Study 2007), and this is expected to grow by a further 2,600 by the year 2026. There are around 104,000 domestic dwellings in Wolverhampton, with approximately 75,900 in the private sector (owner occupied and privately rented), with the remaining being in the social rented sector (including Council owned stock managed by Wolverhampton Homes and property owned and managed by Housing Associations).

Empty Properties in Wolverhampton

Wolverhampton currently has around 2,650 long-term empty properties on the Council Tax database and the numbers have risen steadily over the past few years but starting to show a slight downward trend for 2009.
Fig 1: Empty Properties in Wolverhampton as at November 2009

![Empty Properties by Year](image)

*Source: Council Tax Data*

**Housing Need in Wolverhampton**

As demand for affordable housing is increasing, so do associated problems such as increased homelessness. As at April 2010 there were nearly 10,006 applicants on the Council’s Housing Register (including those seeking transfers). The average number of bids received for each property available to let in the last 6 months is 60. The HNS 2007 also established that Wolverhampton faces an annual unmet need for new affordable housing of 702 units each year up to 2012; this is at a time when the average house price in the City is £137,234 (September 2007) which is approximately 6.24% times the average annual household income of residents living in Wolverhampton.

Yet this unmet need, for affordable housing, is set against a backdrop of 2650 long-term empty domestic properties, and this figure has been in excess of 2600 for the last 3 years.
Fig 2: Number of Empty Properties in Wolverhampton at November 2009

Source: Wolverhampton City Council Empty Property Team

The number of empty properties and progress in bringing empty property back into use in Wolverhampton is usually measured regionally, and this is how we compare with the neighbouring authorities of Walsall, Sandwell, Dudley and Birmingham:

Fig 3: Sub Regional Empty Property

Source: HSSA data 2008, CLG
Achievements since 2004

Raising Awareness
A key element of our work involves raising awareness and we have received some high profile press releases in the local news since the publication of our previous strategy. However, we recognise the need to build on this success and we propose to advertise in the local press in the coming months, and we need to make better use of the “free” press for articles and information. As well as promoting the success of action taken (for example the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders), there is also a need to promote the links to the rest of our Housing Futures Plan and our Private Sector and Housing Assistance policies, for example, encouraging owners of empty property(s) to consider becoming accredited landlords or making use of the Rent Deposit Scheme.

The Councils first Empty Properties Strategy (2004-2007) has been focused on problematic empty properties and has achieved a reduction in the number of long term empty properties. For example the number of properties empty over 5 years has reduced by 75 over the last 2 years. There has also been a reduction in the number of properties that could be considered detrimental to neighbourhoods. All owners of properties that have been empty between 1993 and 2004 have been written to, and there is a current case load of approximately 190 reported empty properties of which around 70 [red] could be considered problematic and detrimental to the immediate neighbourhood.

Fig 4: Percentage of private residential properties split by detrimental to neighbourhoods and well maintained in Wolverhampton in 2009
The 2004-2007 strategy has been successful in terms of dealing with problematic empty properties, but does not have a positive effect on newly arising empty properties that is exceeding the number being brought back into use. However, we are proactively targeting owners of recent empty properties with mail outs and questionnaires; seeking reasons for the property being empty, asking for contact details for future use, and offering advice and assistance at an early stage in order to prevent properties becoming very long term empty.

Empty Property Commitment

Wolverhampton Council and its partners recognise the detrimental impact empty properties can have on communities, both in terms of blight and the wasted housing resource at a time of growing housing need. This strategy has been developed to reflect best practice, and aims to raise the profile of empty homes and the work of the Council at a corporate level and across all partnerships.

- Wolverhampton will promote its corporate commitment to tackling empty homes at every opportunity.
- Wolverhampton will maintain a dedicated team with direct responsibility for empty residential properties in the private sector.
- Wolverhampton will work at a sub-regional and regional level with other local authorities wherever possible and work in a multi-partner approach to tackle empty residential dwellings.
- Wolverhampton will use all the legislative and enforcement options available whilst at the same time looking to work in conjunction with owners to bring empty residential properties back into use.
- Wolverhampton will ensure that accurate records are kept and will adopt best practice when identifying, recording and monitoring all empty residential properties.
- Wolverhampton will regularly review and refresh its Empty Property Strategy and accompanying Action Plan to take account of new issues and to respond to best practice and guidance.
- Wolverhampton will develop clear frameworks and processes for communicating its work around empty properties with the public, partners and stakeholders.
- Wolverhampton will set annual targets for bringing long term empty properties back into use which will compliment other performance targets such as H18 and H23.
- Wolverhampton will ensure that its Empty Property Strategy links to the Council’s corporate objectives and strategies at a sub regional level.
Wolverhampton’s Key Aims and Objectives

Wolverhampton’s aim is to bring its empty residential properties back into use. This may help to alleviate growing housing need and offer more choice in the market, and it will also help us to maintain our neighbourhoods and prevent the blight that is a factor of empty homes.

To achieve this aim, it is important to set some clear objectives. These objectives are:

1. To raise awareness of private sector empty properties across the City and gain co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issues from both within the Council and externally from all involved partners

2. To bring empty properties back into use and to increase housing supply

3. To promote the range of advice and assistance available to owners of empty private sector properties

4. To minimise the number of empty properties becoming empty long term through the use of early intervention initiatives

5. To obtain clear and accurate information relating to empty private sector homes and monitor trends in order to establish priorities for interventions

6. To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation of cases to enable to most appropriate course of action to be taken by the Council.

To reduce the number of empty residential dwellings across the City we will:

- Monitor the number of empty properties monthly, paying particular attention to new additions so that we can target our resources accordingly
- Ensure that we contact all owners of empty property to advise them of options and initiatives aimed at bringing the properties back into use
- Pro-actively use the full range of tools available to the Council which are aimed at bringing long term empty properties back into use, including Compulsory Purchase Orders, Enforced Sale Procedures and Empty Dwelling Management Orders
- Target all properties which are having an adverse effect on the sustainability of neighbourhoods
- Further develop existing initiatives and options available to owners of empty properties to make it easier for them to bring their properties back into use, such as the Private Sector Leasing and Rent Deposit Schemes

The majority of properties that become empty will usually be brought back into use through normal market forces (sale and re-lets for example), but the
Council needs to have a number of responses to deal with those properties that fall outside of the normal market forces.

**Assistance to find Voluntary Solutions**

There are a wide range of reasons for properties being empty and the Council always prefers to work with owners to find a voluntary solution where possible. Based on working with owners over the last 4 years, the following initiatives have been developed and will be offered (where appropriate) in advance of any enforced solution.

- Responsible owners will have the opportunity to become accredited landlords which will attract a number of benefits, including access to potential tenants on the Council Housing Register and advertising thorough Choice Based Lettings

- If owners wish to let to someone who is homeless, the Council can help find tenants and provide a bond instead of a cash deposit

- The Council, whilst it does not provide any financial incentives with regards to empty properties at present, is currently exploring options around financial assistance in certain circumstances. For example, the Council is exploring the feasibility around providing bridging finance to prepare properties for occupation. If an owner can prove conventional finance sources have been exhausted, the Council may consider financing the refurbishment and recovering the costs through rent and/or placing a charge on the property.

- If owners can not afford legal and marketing costs to sell a property, the Council may, in certain circumstances, consider providing financial assistance to assist with the sale, and the costs will then be recovered from the proceeds of the sale

- The Council has recently appointed two Managing Agents (Wolverhampton Homes and bchs) to operate a Private Sector Leasing Scheme. In partnership with the Council, the Agents are leasing properties for periods of up to five years to provide wider housing choice and much needed accommodation across the City. Owners will be able to use Council accredited agents on a voluntary basis. However, if owners are not willing to voluntarily bring properties back into use, the Council can consider using its statutory powers such as making an Empty Dwelling Management order.
Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 is a power Council’s can use where properties and/or land is considered visually detrimental to the amenity of an area. When dealing with empty residential property, the Council intends to increase the use of this power in both individual cases and in targeted areas.

Previously the Council has concentrated its resources towards dealing with those properties that have a detrimental impact on neighbourhoods by tackling properties that have fallen into disrepair, however housing market intelligence shows increasing numbers of empty newbuild flats and apartments and that initiatives need to be explored to address these properties too, with the aim of widening the housing market choice for local residents of Wolverhampton and to start to address the growing need for affordable housing. We aim to expand our Rent Deposit Scheme to ensure that we increase the choice of housing available for vulnerable families and we will look to engage with and support private landlords through a number of
initiatives such as accreditation schemes, landlord training, information and advocacy services and the Private Sector Leasing Scheme.

We will also use the full range of powers available to the Council to tackle empty residential dwellings including enforcement measures where advocacy fails, including the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders, Compulsory Purchase Orders and Enforced Sale Procedures where these are considered necessary as a last resort response. Each empty property will be considered on its own merits, and the Council will take what it considers to be best course of action to achieve the most positive outcome for the neighbourhood. Other related powers will also be used imaginatively to reduce the adverse impact of long term empty properties where issues such as anti-social behaviour and environmental crime are key issues. As well as addressing the immediate neighbourhood problems this will also give the Council additional leverage in using other powers to bring the properties back into use.

In order to raise public awareness we will develop a high profile publicity campaign. We already send out information leaflets to every property on the Council Tax data base annually, with Council Tax bills, giving free advice and information on dealing with and reporting empty properties. We will develop this further by regularly contacting all owners of certain categories of empty property advising on options available to them. We will also publicise our success and make best use of the local media.

In order to improve the supply of decent and affordable housing in the City to meet our growing housing need we need to improve the supply of decent affordable private rented stock. In order to achieve this we will need to raise the profile of the sector and advertise the benefits to both potential owners and landlords and to potential residents. We will also need to ensure that appropriate tenancy support services are available to residents who may be vulnerable to help them sustain tenancies in the private rented sector. This will mean working in partnership with support services and supported housing organisations to both raise awareness of the benefits and to ensure that property standards are maintained and meet requirements of residents. We will also need to further promote the Rent Deposit and Private Sector Leasing Schemes and other similar initiatives to show where assistance is available to help residents and their support services access the private rented sector.

By providing the correct information about letting property to vulnerable households and the support networks available we aim to increase the choice available to residents of supported accommodation who need to access suitable move-on properties. If these services are in place and well publicised we will also increase the numbers of private sector landlords who will be prepared to let to low income, vulnerable households.
The majority of empty properties are not problematic and remain empty without being a cause of major concern to the general public. However, in terms of the need for housing in Wolverhampton, it is also unacceptable for both new build and existing properties to remain empty over an extended period. It is the Council’s view that valuable housing resources should be used for housing wherever practical and the Council is prepared to take action to bring these properties back into use when owners are unwilling to achieve a voluntary solution. The Housing Act 2004 gave Councils powers to pursue Empty Dwelling Management Orders on properties empty over 6 months. A Residential Property Tribunal has to be satisfied that;

- The property has been empty 6 months
- There is no reasonable prospect of the property becoming occupied without an order
- If the order is made, there is a reasonable prospect of the property becoming occupied
- The property does not fall under a number of prescribed exemptions
- The Council has considered the rights of the proprietor against the interests of the wider community

The Council considers that in the majority of cases, bringing empty properties back into use will provide much needed specific types of property and bridge a gap between supply and demand generally thereby enabling others the right to a home.

The proposed procedure for dealing with non-problematic properties is set out as follows:
Fig 7: Procedure for Non Problematic Properties

**Procedure – Non Problematic Properties**

1. **Initial letter to obtain circumstances, reasons and proposals Advice / information pack included**
   - Satisfactory response – ie plan in place to return to use within 6 months/ on market to sell or rent (Some exemptions apply)
   - No reply or unsatisfactory response. Owner not prepared to bring property back into use

2. **Monitor Progress**
3. **Warning of Empty Dwelling Management Order – Explain voluntary options**
   - Voluntary Solution agreed
   - Monitor Progress
   - Interim Empty Dwelling Management Order

4. **Final Empty Dwelling Management Order**
   - Property managed by Council or Agent – All costs recovered

**Delivering our Objectives**

To ensure objectives are being met we have developed a robust action plan and monitoring system which is set at the end of this document. These targets will be reviewed annually and reported to Wolverhampton Strategic Housing Partnership who oversees the delivery of all housing related strategies and plans.

**Resources**

Since 2004 the Council has resourced a service aimed at bringing empty residential properties back into use, including the provision of dedicated officers who have achieved significant results to date.

These dedicated resources allow a targeted approach in areas where empty properties and sustainability are an issue. In conjunction with officers working
with landlords and other partners, a proactive targeted approach will be used in certain areas of the City that are showing signs of housing market weakness and an over supply of private rented properties. An example of this is where we are looking to implement a Selective Licensing Scheme in the City.

The principle of establishing a revolving fund to drive forward the Private Sector Empty Property Strategy was originally approved by Cabinet in 2006. The revolving fund provides for properties that are consistent with the strategy to be acquired under enforcement powers to be remarketed and sold. Enforcement action (such as works in default under Section 215 or refurbishment of properties managed under EDMO) will become an integral part of the revolving fund to ensure the majority of the cost of empty properties work is recycled.

The Way Forward
Tackling empty homes contributes to the sustainability of neighbourhoods and whole communities through:

- Increasing the stock of good quality housing with better energy efficiency standards
- Cutting carbon emissions by renovating rather than building new homes
- Reducing the potential for crime, fly tipping and vandalism (and arson in extreme cases)
- Promoting regeneration and re-investment in communities suffering from housing market weakness and blighted by empty homes

To ensure that the Council is effective in achieving its strategic objectives and reducing the numbers of long term empty properties it will:

1. Continue to pursue existing and newly arising Compulsory Purchase Orders on selected properties where a voluntary solution can not be reached. We estimate we will be dealing with 5 CPOs per annum.

2. The Council will monitor the effects of removing the Council Tax discount on empty properties.

3. The Council has contacted and offered advice to all owners who have had properties empty since between 1993 and 2006. The Council will review and follow up all owners of properties that have been empty from 1993-2006 and consider action on the cases that remain empty during 2010/11.

4. The Council will contact and offer advice to the owners of properties that have been empty since 2007 to date during 2010/11.
5. The Council will contact the owners of all newly arising empty properties during the life of the strategy (currently between 100 and 300 per month).

6. The Council will consider the use of Section 215 notices on problematic empty properties where a voluntary solution can not be found (66 current cases and any newly arising cases).

7. The Council will consider Enforced Sale, Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders on properties that remain empty following Section 215 action.

8. The Council will consider applying for Empty Dwelling Management Orders on non problematic properties where a voluntary solution can not be found.

The Strategy Action Plan will be monitored quarterly through the Empty Property Working Group and progress reported annually to Wolverhampton Strategic Housing Partnership unless otherwise requested.
Wolverhampton’s Empty Property Action Plan: Key Aims and Objectives

**Objective 1:** To raise awareness of private sector empty properties across the city and gain the co-operation and commitment necessary to tackle the issue from both within the Council and externally from all involved partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REF</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>TIMESCALES</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE MEASURES</th>
<th>RESOURCE (INCLUDE PARTNERS)</th>
<th>BUSINESS RISK</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABLE OFFICER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Continue to raise awareness amongst other directorates of empty homes through the empty property working group.</td>
<td>Groups set up with agreed terms of reference.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Attendance at meetings. Delivery of identified action plan resources.</td>
<td>Relevant Council departments.</td>
<td>Failure to develop consistent approach across the Council and wider partnerships risks wasted effort and duplication.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>To continue the promotion of empty properties work through our housing intranet site and Council website.</td>
<td>Information on advice and assistance available to respond to empty private sector properties.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Effective feedback requested and monitored. Number of hits to site pages. Number of emails received from site.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Service must be promoted to assist officers and citizens.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>To achieve 3 reports on the delivery of the strategy in local press.</td>
<td>Continued awareness of the ongoing work to tackle empties in the private sector.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Marketing, private sector team existing resources.</td>
<td>Service must be promoted to assist owners and citizens.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Investigate private sector funding options.</td>
<td>Feasibility of using private funds for empty progress.</td>
<td>04/10</td>
<td>Complete Feasibility</td>
<td>Within existing reserves.</td>
<td>Assistance route not explored could be missed opportunity.</td>
<td>NSO</td>
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## Objective 2: To bring empty properties back into use and to increase housing supply

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>PERFORMANCE MEASURE</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Further develop specific enforcement measures for bringing empty properties back into use where owners are unwilling to do so.</td>
<td>Enforcement procedure operational/monitoring system in place to track cases.</td>
<td>04/10 - 04/11</td>
<td>CPO, EDMO, Enforced Sale, Building Act 1984, s.29 LG &amp; Mis Provision Act 1983, EPA 1990, s.215</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>inadequate procedures can impact the delivery of the empty property strategy.</td>
<td>PHAO, NSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Further develop council tax data identifying numbers of empty properties, length of vacancy, type of owner, exemption categories, and location.</td>
<td>Develop a clearer picture of empty properties in the City.</td>
<td>04/10 - Ongoing</td>
<td>Effective targeting of resources and informing policy development.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to maintain accurate empty property records could lead to inappropriately targeted actions.</td>
<td>NSO, Council Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>To identify all long term, RSL and publicly owned empty dwellings within the City to work with partners to bring into use.</td>
<td>Utilising existing available accommodation to respond to housing demand.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Analysis of council tax data.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td></td>
<td>PHAO, Head of Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Objective 3: To promote the availability of advice and assistance available to owners of empty private sector properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REF</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>TIMESCALES</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE MEASURE</th>
<th>RESOURCE (INCLUDING PARTNERS)</th>
<th>BUSINESS RISK</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABLE OFFICER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>To develop an empty property information pack to promote the availability of help/assistance.</td>
<td>Raised awareness amongst owners and other partners of how the Council can assist them in bringing empty properties back into use.</td>
<td>04/10</td>
<td>09/10</td>
<td>Pack produced and in use.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Lack of awareness of advice and assistance available will prevent the delivery of strategy objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Produce information and literature on the availability of assistance and ensure it is distributed widely ie. in annual Council Tax issues.</td>
<td>Increased number of enquiries received for information packs.</td>
<td>04/10</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Marketing/ within existing.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>NSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Promote Private Sector Leasing. | Improved number of properties in PSL. | Ongoing | Number signed up to PSL. | BCHS and WH to promote jointly. | Failure to provide leads to ineffective scheme. | NSO |
### Objective 4: To minimise the number of empty properties becoming long-term through early interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REF</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>TIMESCALES</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE MEASURE</th>
<th>RESOURCE (INCLUDE PARTNERS)</th>
<th>BUSINESS RISK</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABLE OFFICER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mail outs to all empty property owners (over 6 months).</td>
<td>Advice and assistance offered to all owners.</td>
<td>In progress</td>
<td>04/11</td>
<td>Weekly mail outs.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to proactively approach owners could lead to a rise in empty properties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Follow up mail outs to owners of all empty properties over 6 months.</td>
<td>Advice and assistance offered to all owners.</td>
<td>In progress</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Weekly mail outs.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to follow up action with owners could lead to a rise in empty properties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mail outs to newly arising empty properties over 6 months.</td>
<td>Advice and assistance offered to all owners.</td>
<td>09/10</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Weekly mail outs.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to proactively approach owners could lead to a rise in empty properties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bring properties back into use via interventions.</td>
<td>200 Properties per annum back in use.</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Number of properties back in use.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>May not be achieved if current establishment of team is reduced</td>
<td>NSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Monitor overall number of empties over 6 months.</td>
<td>Reduction in overall figure.</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Reducing empty properties number.</td>
<td>Within existing resources and monitor.</td>
<td>Other market factors can affect outcome.</td>
<td>NSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Objective 5:** To obtain clear and accurate information on empty private sector homes and monitor to establish priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>To exploit the use of mapping empty properties onto the GIS system.</td>
<td>The ability to map potential hot spots and trends and direct resources effectively to target these areas</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>GIS able to perform mapping function.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to identify hot spots may lead to resources being used ineffectively.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Objective 6:** To enhance the process for managing the identification, assessment and prioritisation for the use of the most appropriate tools and action for Wolverhampton City Council

<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>To develop processes and service standards to manage the identification, assessment and prioritisation of empty properties for enforcement action.</td>
<td>To have clear transparent processes to enable empty properties to be effectively managed.</td>
<td>04/10 Ongoing</td>
<td>Process operational.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Lack of formal processes may result in poor performance and the issue of long term empties not being addressed.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>To develop robust monitoring processes to enable our performance to be accurately monitored across.</td>
<td>Robust monitoring processes operational.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Process operational.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Failure to have robust monitoring processes could lead to poor project management.</td>
<td>PHAO NSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Develop customer satisfaction surveys for neighbours and owners.</td>
<td>Information gathered for service improvement.</td>
<td>04/10 Ongoing</td>
<td>Number of surveys sent and returned.</td>
<td>Within existing resources.</td>
<td>Without feedback improvements to customer service will be difficult.</td>
<td>NSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>