

Private Sector Housing
and
Empty Property
Strategy

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Strategic and Legislative Framework	4
	Links to the existing strategic framework	4
3	KEY STRATEGIC AIMS	6
4	Monitoring and Implementation	7
	Capital Resources.....	7
	Working Group.....	8
	Figure 2 Private Sector and Empty Properties Working Group – Processes and Responsibilities.....	8

1 Introduction

- 1.1. The amount of attention given to maximising the potential of housing within the private sector has gained significant momentum, particularly in light of the housing shortage. Groups like the Empty Homes Agency¹ have worked hard to raise the profile of the issue nationally, with growing success. The Government has been promoting the Decent Homes agenda since 2001 in the public sector, and has given significant powers to local authorities to enable them to act in tackling non-decent homes within the private sector². The recently elected coalition government has also clearly highlighted its intention to address the issue of empty properties in its agenda³. Since often private sector homes become non-decent through being left empty, or are left empty because they are non-decent, at this stage it seems logical to combine empty properties and private sector housing in a single strategy.
- 1.2. The significance of properties sitting empty or in poor condition is reinforced by the growing evidence that the country has a severe shortage of affordable homes (both in relation to social and market housing). Numerous studies of affordability, housing stock and household growth, and local authority waiting lists have revealed that this is an issue in almost all parts of the country. Empty Properties can also be a cause of antisocial behaviour and increased crime (often in the form of arson, vandalism and other destructive acts), and have a detrimental effect on neighbourhoods.
- 1.3. This strategy proposes addressing the issues of empty property and poor quality private sector housing under the key aim of providing for vulnerable households, to ensure the benefits of funding are maximised. It aims to optimise existing resources, whilst allowing scope for new funding to be attracted from external partners.
- 1.4. Implementing the strategy will require effective internal co-operation as well as close partnerships with Registered Social Landlords, private sector households, landlords and potentially other bodies who would benefit from improved stock condition, such as Primary Care Trusts. This will include measures to ensure households living within the private sector are protected, and landlords working to provide decent and safe homes are supported.

¹ www.emptyhomes.com

² See The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002, <http://www.uk-legislation.hmso.gov.uk/si/si2002/20021860.htm>

³ See "The Coalition: our programme for government", available at <http://programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk/>

2 Strategic and Legislative Framework

2.1. It is our statutory duty as a Council to monitor and maintain the condition of the housing stock, with specific regard to empty property, poor quality housing, affordable warmth and home security. This duty is outlined in the Housing Act 2004. The primary means through which Local Authorities can address poor quality stock are through enforcement (Housing Acts 1985 and 2004), and assistance (The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (amended 2009)). Assistance may be in any form (e.g. financial, advice, support).

2.2. A number of measures exist which are designed to support the private sector, including:

- Mandatory licensing of qualifying Houses in Multiple Occupation
- Empowerment to local authorities in using Management Orders where private rented properties are poorly managed
- Tenancy Deposit Protection Schemes
- Introduction of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, enabling local authorities to assess non-decent properties against specific criteria and act where necessary to address any hazards.
- Encouraging voluntary groups such as landlord forums and accreditation schemes.

Links to the existing strategic framework

2.3. The relevant strategic documents both at a district and wider level, and the objectives within them that link to this strategy are referenced in the following section.

2.4. Leicestershire Together Improvement Plan

- Improve home energy efficiency through increasing the average Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of private sector properties (Target timescale, March 2011)
- Make improvements to ensure fewer properties are in poor condition through reducing the number of non decent private sector homes occupied by vulnerable households (Target timescale, March 2011)
- Take steps to ensure more private rented property is brought back into use, through working to reduce the number of empty properties in the private sector (Target timescale, March 2011)

2.5. Joint Strategic Needs Assessment Priorities

- Achieving decent homes in the private sector
- Tackling fuel poverty, anti-social behaviour and drug activity
- Housing adaptations for disabled people
- Making use of empty homes
- Accreditation for landlords and tenants

2.6. Blaby District Council Corporate Plan

- Use information from Private Sector Housing Stock Survey to target support to achieve Decent Homes Standard in vulnerable households

2.7. Blaby District Council Local Housing Strategy

- Offer financial assistance to vulnerable households in non decent homes
- Provide financial incentives to landlords to make their homes energy efficient
- Provide financial support to a Care and Repair Agency who lever in finance to improve housing standards for the elderly and disabled in the district
- Respond to tenants with complaints about housing conditions in the private rented sector through our Housing Enforcement Policy
- Support and work in partnership with East Midlands Decent and Safe Homes (DASH) over encouraging and advertising the East Midlands Landlords Accreditation Scheme (EMLAS) in order to promote a higher standard of rented accommodation
- Implement the mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation
- Make available finance for our deposit bond scheme and develop a rent in advance scheme to enable homelessness prevention allowing persons at risk to take up residency in the private rented sector
- Develop private sector leasing schemes in collaboration with property owners and housing associations
- Target assistance towards vulnerable households

2.8. Blaby District Council Affordable Warmth Strategy

- Review and Monitor the delivery of the Affordable Warmth Action Plan
- Raise Awareness of Affordable Warmth among Key Agencies and the Public
- Improve Health through Affordable Warmth
- Target Households through Improved Networks and Referral Systems
- Improve Access to Financial Assistance

3 KEY STRATEGIC AIMS

3.1. The core aims of this strategy are:

1. Bringing Empty Properties back into use
2. Making homes decent and safe
3. Facilitating new supply of housing for vulnerable people
4. Licensing and monitoring of Houses in Multiple Occupation
5. Providing support and security to tenants and landlords
6. Reducing the negative effects of empty and poor quality properties on the neighbourhood and residents, in relation to anti-social behaviour and other crime

3.2. The overall strategic objective is to improve the supply of decent and affordable homes, and the overall quality of housing in the district.

Key characteristics in Blaby District include:

- A high proportion of owner occupiers
- A high proportion of older households
- A low supply of general needs affordable stock for families
- Relatively high house prices – although the number of sales have dropped, the price of property has remained relatively stable across much of the district, particularly in the more rural settlements.

These characteristics will be considered in the implementation of the strategy.

3.3. Working to achieve the aims outlined will involve:

- Creating partnerships
- Establishing and following clear processes with regard to identifying and tackling problem properties, either where they are empty or in poor condition, and providing households, owners and landlords with the appropriate support to tackle their housing issues.
- Streamlining the process through which empty or non-decent homes can be brought back into use through legal means, where this becomes necessary.
- Ensuring that the criteria according to which people are eligible for grant funding are fair and prioritise those in greatest need.

4 Monitoring and Implementation

4.1. There is a considerable amount of scope available to local authorities and other stakeholders to enable improvements within the private sector. This will necessitate co-operation and cohesion between all of the departments currently involved in tackling issues within the private sector. To achieve these strategic goals to the satisfaction of all parties, a system will need to be established which links:

- Registered Social Landlords
- Private Landlords
- Blaby District Council Housing Strategy Department
- Blaby District Council Environmental Protection Department
- Blaby District Council Housing Options Department
- Blaby District Council Housing Benefits Department
- Blaby District Council Legal Department
- Blaby District Council Resident Support Department
- East Midlands Landlords Accreditation Scheme
- East Midlands Decent and Safe Homes
- Owners of targeted properties
- Vulnerable tenants
- Other potential funding partners, for example the Primary Care Trusts

Capital Resources

4.2. This is a fledgling strategy and as such the exact input of partners and capital resources has not yet been established. Funding sources will change with the evolution of the work carried out, but are likely to be derived from across the following sources:

- Grant subsidy provided through central government / other public funding streams as available.
- Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) investing in the area
- Private Landlords investing in the area
- Leicester and Leicestershire Local Authorities and Leicestershire County Council
- Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Primary Care Trusts
- Local Financial Organisations (e.g. Shepshed Building Society, Market Harborough Building Society, Melton Mowbray Building Society, Earl Shilton Building Society, Loughborough Building Society).
- Larger financial organisations (for example companies interested in being institutional investors in conjunction with RSLs to provide privately rented housing)
- Any other potential investment organisations with an interest in the area (to be examined as opportunities arise)

Working Group

- 4.3. A working group has been set up to review the policy framework in relation to the strategy and monitor its progress, implementation, achievements and actions.

Figure 1 Private Sector and Empty Properties Working Group – Processes and Responsibilities

Process/Action	Responsible Department(s)
Monitoring Empty Properties – Set up and evaluate the process for locating, monitoring and assessing problem properties*	Housing Strategy and Enabling Officer, liaising with Council Tax, Environmental Protection, and Housing Options (Decent Homes Officer)
Agree policies and procedures required to streamline assistance for eligible candidates in relation to poor quality or empty property	Housing Strategy, Environmental Protection, Housing Options
Determine funding options	Housing Strategy, Housing Options, other departments where funding opportunities arise
Review and establish the legal processes involved in implementing the strategy	Housing Strategy, Legal
Formulate and maintain internal and external partnerships in implementing the strategy	Housing Strategy