

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY)
TO THE EXECUTIVE
3RD FEBRUARY 2006

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

1.1 The Executive will be aware that the approved Housing Strategy for 2004/5 - 2007/8 contains an action to develop a specific strategy to address the issue of empty homes in the private sector across the District.

1.2 This report introduces this strategy to the Executive and considers the implications of its implementation.

1.3

The Contact Officer for this report is Paul Staines (Assistant Director Housing and Community Safety) (01235 547621)

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 *That the Executive approve the Empty Homes Strategy attached as appendix 1 to this report.*

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

(a) This report relates to the Council's vision and strands A, B, C, E and G.

(b) This report relates to the Housing Strategy

(c) This report complies with existing Council policies in respect of affordable housing and housing enabling.

4.0 Background and Supporting Information

4.1 It is one of the Council's specific actions detailed in the Housing Strategy to reduce the number of Empty Homes in the District. The Council wishes to work with owners of empty homes in the district to enable them to be brought back into use.

4.2 The reduction in the number of Empty Homes is a specific Best Value Performance Indicator. No 64 and the Council has set a target of 4 for 2005/2006.

4.3 The strategy is based upon recent legislation that enables the authority to use information held by the Council Tax section to identify empty properties and their owners.

4.4 Using this information concerted efforts have been made to reduce the number of Empty Homes. Over 440 visits have been made, details and photographs recorded, and over 85 letters sent to owners. To date 14 properties have come back into occupation following investigation and contact from officers.

4.5 The Housing Act 2004 is to introduce an additional power in 2006, namely Empty Dwelling Management Order, to bridge the gap between voluntary measures and existing enforcement procedures i.e. Compulsory Purchase. The legislation, which is discretionary, is intended to operate alongside measures such as voluntary leasing schemes run by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords. It provides 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. Officers propose to return to the Executive to discuss the possible enactment of these powers when more detail on their operation is available from central government.

- 4.6 The work undertaken to enact the strategy to date has suggested that there is not a serious problem concerning empty properties in the District when compared to many other Councils. This view has been endorsed by the findings of the 2005 House Condition Survey. This will make it difficult to improve on the BVPI as there is a low base line. However, a number of properties have been identified that are long term empty and an options appraisal to the merits of securing their return to use is needed. This could involve the Council's grant policy and nomination rights where appropriate.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 The work associated with reducing Empty Homes is labour intensive with numerous, continual checks having to be made at each stage in the procedure mainly to avoid abortive visits being made. As empty property numbers reduce so this work will yield less results and the Council will need to consider the relative priority of the work.
- 5.2 Where owners are reluctant or resistant in bringing their properties back into use we need to consider what further action could be taken to enforce the policy.
- 5.3 The strategy will require review following the implementation of the relevant parts of the 2004 Housing Act, relevant details of which are still awaited.

Paul Staines
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (Housing and Community Safety)

CORPORATE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

CONTEXT

- 1) The Vale of White Horse is located in the upper Thames Valley with the Council taking its name from the famous monument carved on the crest of White Horse Hill at Uffington, the oldest of all the White Horses in England.
- 2) The Vale is bound to the north and east by the River Thames and to the south by the Berkshire Downs. The District covers some 224 square miles (580 square kilometres) of country that is attractive and mainly rural in character. The Vale lies in south western Oxfordshire and is one of five districts within the County.
- 3) The population of the Vale is estimated as 116,746 which have increased by over 45% during the past 40 years. About half the population lives in the 3 historic market towns of Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon. The remainder is distributed in more than 60 villages and hamlets throughout the Vale.
- 4) The population of the Vale grew rapidly from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s, largely as a result of decisions made by the former Berkshire County Council prior to Local Government Reorganisation in 1974. Since then, the newly formed District Council has directed its planning policies at more sustainable levels of growth and a greater degree of environmental protection.
- 5) The Vale has 47,387 households of which nearly a quarter consists of a single person. The level of owner occupation, at 74.4%, is similar to the average for the South East Region but above the national average of 68.9 %.
- 6) Whilst the rate of population growth may have subsided, there has continued to be a dramatic increase in the number of households. This reflects the national trend towards smaller and more rapidly forming households.
- 7) In common with much of the country the Vale is experiencing an ageing population with 15.5 % over 65 in 2001, compared with 13.8 % in 1991.
- 8) The Vale is an area of high house prices, even by the standards of the South East, which is itself the most expensive region outside London. In Oct – Dec 2004 the average cost of a semi-detached property in the Vale was £217,035 compared with £214,280 in the rest of the South East and that of a flat or maisonette £158,880 compared with £148,953.
- 9) Oxfordshire is an area of relative high prosperity with an index of gross domestic product per head of 110, the third highest in the region, against the UK index of 100. The range in the South East Region is between 68 and 138. However there are pockets of deprivation in the Vale particularly at sub ward level. Rural isolation is an issue in some parts of the District.

EMPLOYMENT

- 1) The District is generally affluent with the economy benefiting from high levels of employment and high incomes largely due to the influence of a knowledge-based sector, which has replaced agriculture as the leading employment provider.
- 2) Unemployment rates in the Vale are low at 0.7 %, as at June 2002. Less than 8 % receive Housing Benefit compared with an all England figure of 17 %. The ratio of income of working households to house prices in the Vale is 3.65, the second lowest in the County.

HOUSING STOCK

- 1) The total number of dwellings in the District in April 2002 was 47,156 most of which is relatively modern. (Nationally more than a quarter of all homes in the UK are at least 80 years old) As at 31st March 2002 the tenure of housing in the District consisted of:-

a) Owner Occupied – 74 %	National average – 70 %
b) Private Rented – 10+ %	National average – 10 %
c) Housing Association – 13 %	National average – 20 %
d) Vacant – 1 %	
e) Other (e.g. Almshouses) – 2 %	

The level of owner occupation is similar to the average for the South East Region but above the national average. The level of outright owner occupation in the District is 3 % above the regional average of 26 % and the level of private rented is slightly above the national average of 10 % but significantly below that of Oxford City at 24 %.

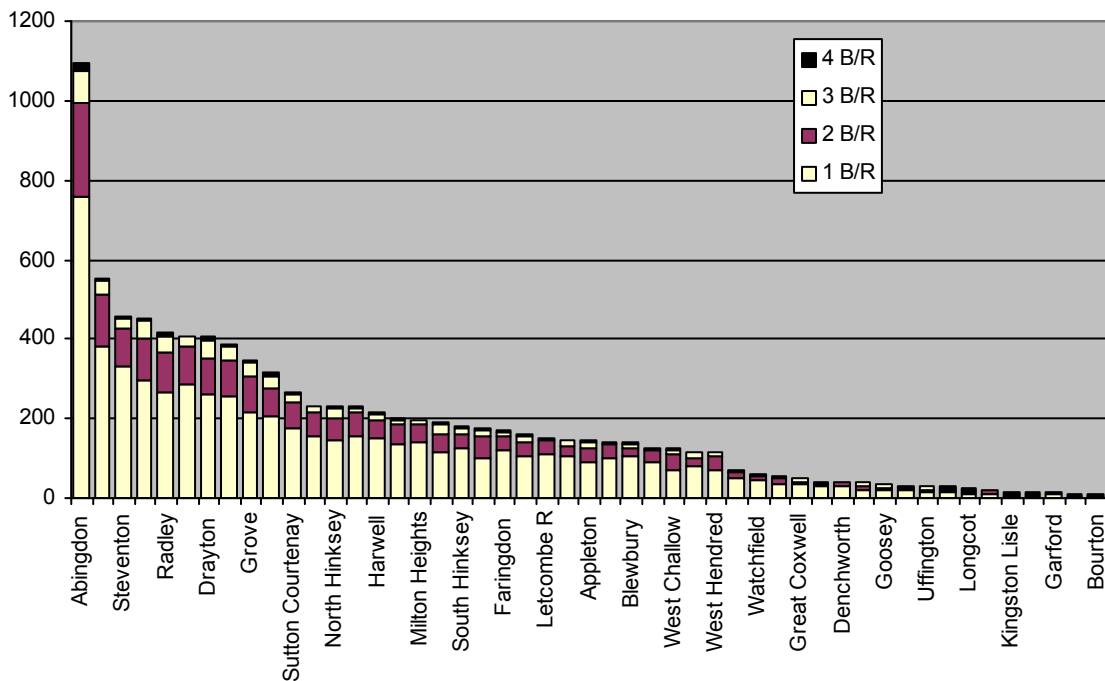
- 2) At the time of the transfer of the Council's housing stock to The Vale Housing Association Ltd. in February 1995 the Council set a target of 550 additional affordable homes within five years mainly using capital generated as a result of the transfer. This target was met within 4 years and to date (04/05) 1400 homes have been provided reflecting an investment of over £35m in social housing grant. Throughout this period land availability has been the limiting factor and the Council has been innovative and determined in reaching its targets against that constraint taking measured investment risks to bring forward sites that would otherwise remain undeveloped, such as the West Central Redevelopment Abingdon, and Limborough Road Wantage. The Council has also worked hard in the development of supported housing and was well prepared for the advent of Supporting People having worked with other Oxfordshire Authorities to start to turn supported housing development towards strategic objectives rather than opportunities on the ground. This has been demonstrated in a beacon status award for the Oxfordshire Supporting People regime.

HOUSING NEED

- 1) There are 2075 applicants registered on the Council's Housing Needs Register, as at April 2005, of whom 1195 are either lacking or sharing facilities or have a very high degree of social / medical housing need. All have applied for accommodation to rent but of the 1195 figure, 227 would be prepared to consider shared ownership as a possible solution to their housing problem.

1 Bedroomed accommodation demand from the Housing Register is: 1,050	
2 Bedroomed	611
3 Bedroomed	269
4 Bedroomed	145

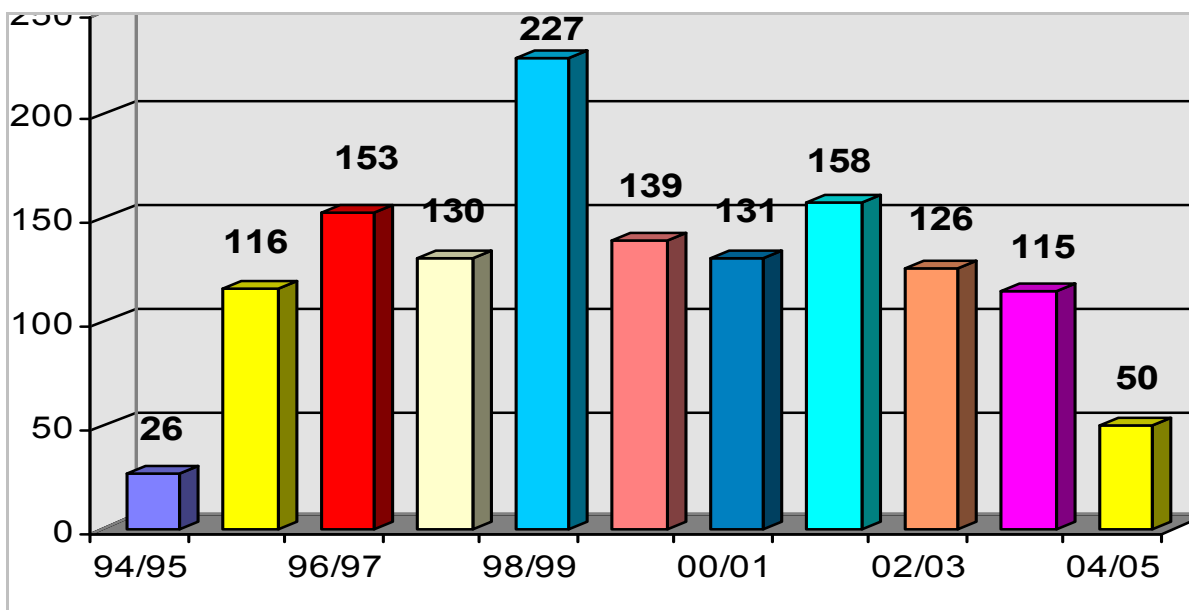
The following chart shows the general extent of housing need for specific areas of the Vale and sizes of dwellings required. (This chart does not show the demand from a specific area and does not take into account applicants who have chosen to be considered for more than one area.)



2) The social housing stock in the District currently totals 6145 and is all owned and managed by Registered Social Landlords. Nominations are made by the Council from its Housing Register in accordance with agreements made with each of the main providers. Vacancies reflect the national average of 2 % – 3% of general needs housing and 6 % of accommodation provided specifically for the elderly.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROVISION

The following table shows the total additional social housing provided by RSLs in the Vale since 1994.



PRIVATE SECTOR

- 1) On the private housing sector the enforcement of housing conditions is focused on the mobile home parks in the district and more recently on houses in multiple occupation. The Vale Energy Team set up in 1996 has had considerable success in reducing home energy consumption in the District and reducing fuel poverty.
- 2) This sector also recognises an opportunity to increase the supply of housing, albeit marginally, through the revitalisation of the Council's Empty Homes Policy. This is particularly relevant at the present time with the demise of Local Authority Social Housing Grant and the total dependence on the Housing Corporation for grant funding to increase the supply of affordable housing.

BACKGROUND

- 1) The Government's statistics show that, as at April 2002, there were 772,000 empty private properties in England. The majority of these properties are in areas of housing need. For example there are 100,000 empty homes but also 50,000 homeless households and a huge problem due to lack of affordable housing. A total of 3.7 % of all private homes are empty.
- 2) The Government has set a target for Councils to reduce the percentage of empty homes to 3 %.
- 3) The Council's policy is to have a strategy to reduce the number of empty homes in the District. (Ref. 96/20 adopted 19/06/96)
- 4) Bringing an empty home back into use offers owners considerable potential advantages :-
 - a) Capital if the property is sold now or in the future.
 - b) Income if the property is let
 - c) Increased property value
 - d) Reduced outgoings e.g. Council Tax
 - e) Increased security and less likely to be vandalised
 - f) Improve/restore older buildings/homes to modern standards.
- 5) Benefits to the community include :-
 - a) Reduces pressure for Greenfield sites.
 - b) Encourages economic vitality. (Local shops)
 - c) Assists with any regeneration initiative.
 - d) Opportunity to making additional stock available for rent or shared ownership with nomination rights to the Council.
 - e) Creates employment opportunities.
 - f) Maximises the use of existing buildings and homes.
 - g) Helps in sustaining rural communities.
 - h) Increased revenue to the Council.



Coxwell Street Faringdon

AIM

The aim of the Vale's Empty Homes Strategy is to propose and implement action that will effectively address issues related to long term empty properties (vacant for more than 12 months) and to bring such accommodation back into use to assist the District in meeting its housing needs.

Not all empty homes will be suitable for the scheme. Many will be empty in the short term whilst in the process of being sold and others will be inappropriate because of type, size, location, state of repair and redevelopment issues.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

- 1) To achieve the overall aim of the Empty Homes Strategy, and to raise awareness of the issue of Empty Homes, the following strategic objectives have been identified.
 - a) Empty homes represent a wasted resource that could be better used to help to alleviate homelessness and address housing need in the Vale. Restoring vacant properties can also help revitalise economic prosperity in particular areas thereby improving working partnerships between the public and private sectors. The demand for affordable and accessible housing far outstrips supply and the Council recognises that empty homes must be dealt with effectively across all tenures.
 - b) Properties that have been vacant for a considerable amount of time and those that are in a poor condition can be a source of on going nuisance attracting crime and anti social behaviour as well as devaluing surrounding properties. Empty homes represent a loss of revenue to the Council and are costly to maintain both to the private and public funds, e.g. as a consequence of rubbish clearance, police action on squatting and vandalism and other nuisances.

- c) In order to assess and monitor the extent and nature of the private sector empty homes situation it will be necessary to set up and regularly update a comprehensive register of such accommodation.
- d) In order to tackle the problem of empty homes it will be essential to involve other departments, agencies and organisations such as Environmental Health regarding unfit properties and dwellings in disrepair. (One in 13 houses in England is officially regarded as unfit for occupation)
- e) In order to raise the profile of empty homes throughout the District, it will be necessary to promote the issue within the Council and externally through the general public and other parties involved in the property sector.
- f) In order to ensure that properties are made available for letting to people in the greatest housing need, it will be essential to promote schemes such as the Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme. This will reassure landlords, that rent will be paid regularly and on time whilst demonstrating the Council's commitment to working in partnership with them. This can be done in association with local Registered Social Landlords who have the relevant expertise and experience in working with property owners.
- g) The Council recognises that private sector leasing schemes frequently result in market or near market rent levels being charged. The Council will try to ensure where nominations are made to temporary accommodation that households who are seeking employment are not deterred from taking up work as a consequence of high rents and the impact of benefit withdrawal.

IDENTIFYING THE EMPTY HOMES

- a) Local planners may be able to identify residential buildings, which may be blighted by redevelopment or transport proposals (e.g. proposed reservoir).
- b) Council Tax information is probably the best and main source of details of empty properties in the Vale, and this will form the basis of the Empty Homes Register.
- c) Legal Officers already help planners and environmental health officers trace ownership of land and buildings for various purposes. I.e. disputes and disrepair. Such established procedures can result in the identification of the owners and lead to homes being brought back into use.
- d) Environmental Health Officers are well placed to identify empty private sector homes and those properties which are likely to become vacant because of disrepair, those subject to a closing order and those dwellings which have been abandoned. Such officers also have an overview of local housing standards and their technical knowledge and input can accelerate the processes by which homes are brought back into use.
- e) Building Control officers are responsible for inspecting empty properties which have been identified as possible dangerous structures. Again there is scope for these to be targeted as part of the Empty Homes Strategy.

RECORDING OF THOSE PROPERTIES IDENTIFIED

- a) An Empty Homes Register will be established on an appropriate computer programme based on information already held by Council Tax, supplemented by the Land Registry records where needed.

- b) The information will be used to set up records of property owners, addresses and vacation dates. The system will then be used to record any action taken and progress made in bringing the property back into use.
- c) Other information, such as location, type of accommodation, state of repair, owner's preferred option for re-occupation, and nominated partners etc. will be added as required.
- d) Local situation: - As at December 2004 the number of unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings in the Vale that were vacant totalled 347.

OPTIONS AVAILABLE

- a) Some owners may not wish to have the responsibility of managing their properties and may prefer to use the services of an estate or managing agent. Such agents will also have the added advantage of providing valuation and surveying expertise.
- b) Owners with previous letting or management experience may wish to manage the properties themselves and there are "Landlord's guides" available to advise potential landlords.
- c) The Council will continue to maximise opportunities in the private rented sector through the Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme to private landlords. This has proved to be successful in both meeting housing need and in encouraging property owners to make their accommodation available for letting.
- d) The main basis of this strategy is to promote participation and co-operation with owners of vacant accommodation but in certain circumstances the Council may consider using its legal powers in respect of Compulsory Purchase Orders. This approach will only be used as a last resort where an owner of an empty property has turned down Council offers of help to bring the property back into occupation. This action would need to be co-ordinated with a Registered Social Landlord who would be willing to purchase the dwelling from the Council and include it in their housing stock. The compulsory purchase of vacant property as empowered in Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985, can apply to dwellings that are derelict or abandoned. CPOs can be used for vacant properties that have not been the subject of any complaint including those dwellings that are:-
 - 1) unoccupied
 - 2) suitable for immediate residential use and occupation (subject to decorative and minor repair)
 - 3) not likely to be used or occupied for residential purposes in the near future unless purchased by the Local Authority.

The use of CPO powers to acquire vacant properties will be the exception rather than the rule and they will be normally targeted at vacant and derelict properties where the owner repeatedly fails to take responsibility for maintaining the dwelling despite requests by the Council to do so.

- e) The Government has announced its intention to introduce a Compulsory Leasing Scheme (Empty Homes Management Orders) to bring empty homes back into use. This power could be used as an alternative to Compulsory Purchase and as with CPOs an RSL may need to be involved to manage the leasing arrangement. (OSLA) The Council may facilitate the capital works needed to allow the property to be leased and use the dwelling, probably in conjunction with a housing association (RSL) to accommodate people in housing need (e.g. homeless or key workers). The rental income would pay for the cost of the improvements to the property. When the full amount had been recovered, the property would revert to the owner in a fit state to continue to allow the dwelling to be rented out.

- f) With the introduction of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme for Housing Association owned vacancies it might be appropriate, in certain circumstances, for privately owned empty homes to be filled using this facility.

ACTION TO BE TAKEN

- a) Establish owner's details through Council Tax information or via a Land Registry search.
- b) Inform the owner of the Council's Empty Homes Strategy and how the Council could assist in bringing the property back into use
- c) Where owner responds positively advise them of relevant scheme and forward details on where appropriate.
- d) Where no response is received a second letter will be sent asking for the owner's plans to bring the property back into use.
- e) Where considered appropriate other options will be investigated including CPO and Voluntary/Compulsory Leasing arrangements. (EHMOs as and when they are included in future housing legislation)
- f) In the event that dwellings owned by a Registered Social Landlord are identified as being vacant for over 6 months and not addressed through ordinary joint partnering arrangements, the Council will determine the reason for the vacancy and try to help to resolve the problem through negotiation. (It is envisaged that such vacancies will be concentrated in sheltered housing stock where the demand for such accommodation can be limited in certain rural areas of the Vale especially at specific times of the year)

In addition:-

- 1) In partnership with RSLs the Council will continue working to promote sustainable communities through its development programme. This will ensure that hard-to-let /void accommodation is kept to a minimum.
- 2) The Council has developed a choice based lettings system in line with proposals contained in the Government's Housing Green Paper. This should help to minimise the numbers of applicants who are rehoused and immediately apply to go on the transfer register of the RSL resulting in increased void times as properties change hands.

MONITORING

It is vital that the success of the strategy in meeting its objectives is monitored on a regular basis and the appropriate action taken to address any identified weaknesses in delivery.

To assist the monitoring process the Council has set the following targets:-

- To consider all the options available for tackling the problem of empty homes and ensure that where vacant properties are identified every effort is made to bring the dwelling back into use to help meet local housing needs.
- To provide a procedural framework for bringing properties back into use including the initial grading and targeting of new and previously identified dwellings where action by the Council is considered necessary.
- To enhance the character of the local community through improvement and rehabilitation of derelict properties leading to improved safety and reduced risks of vandalism.

- To work corporately and in partnership with stakeholders in adopting a pro-active approach to identifying and restoring vacant properties to meet housing need.
- To carry out regular surveys of empty homes in the Vale
- To carry out mail shots to owners of vacant private accommodation
- To support bids made by RSLs to The Housing Corporation which seek to bring empty homes back into use.
- To promote the Strategy through consultation and working in partnership with stakeholders.
 - i) Owners/Landlords
 - ii) Estate Agents
 - iii) Parish Councils
 - iv) Housing Corporation
 - v) Registered Social Landlords
 - vi) General Public
 - vii) District Councillors
 - viii) Other Council departments
- To have an Empty Homes Co-ordinator based at the Council who will deal with enquiries and initiate the most appropriate form of action.

CONCLUSION

The strategy has highlighted the problem of empty homes in the Vale and proposed ways of bringing them back into use to help to address both the shortage of affordable homes and the limited access to accommodation for those who are benefit dependant or on low incomes. The Council will continue to update and review the strategy in line with its overall housing strategic objectives.