



Department for
**Social
Development**

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NORTHERN IRELAND EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

2013 – 2018



MINISTERS FOREWORD

As Minister of the Department for Social Development tackling the issue of empty homes is one of my major priorities. I have pleasure therefore in introducing the Department's Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2013 – 2018, which will be delivered in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.



I am determined to maximise all opportunities to meet housing need, reduce blight and tackle anti-social behaviour. I see the rejuvenation of empty homes as an important means of achieving this. I therefore want to pursue a comprehensive approach to tackling empty homes in order to not only provide much needed housing but also to transform streets and areas right across Northern Ireland.

This Strategy and Action Plan draws on practice elsewhere and I commend it and look forward to reporting on its success and achievements in the near future.

Nelson McCausland

Nelson McCausland MLA
Minister for Social Development

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Empty homes are a wasted resource. Although addressing the empty homes problem cannot solve housing supply issues alone, they can be part of an holistic approach to providing local affordable housing and regenerating communities. Bringing empty homes back into use can reduce property deterioration and associated crime whilst reducing development pressures elsewhere. Additionally, identifying the whereabouts of owners of empty houses should increase rates revenue. It is important that action is taken to address this problem.

The experience to date in other parts of the United Kingdom indicates that an Empty Homes Strategy should include a range of incentives and sanctions. Although legal penalties such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) have been used successfully across the water, it is generally accepted that an incentivised ‘carrot’ approach is likely to have a more effective outcome than a purely ‘stick’ orientated strategy. The Housing Executive and other statutory bodies already have legal powers to vest, demolish or directly repair properties, and the aim of this Strategy is to look at positive and innovative ways in which empty homes in Northern Ireland can be brought back into use, whilst working proactively with existing owners.

This holistic approach to empty homes provides important links to the Housing Executive’s Homelessness Strategy and the Department’s Housing Strategy, which highlight housing demand and the shortfall in provision. This Strategy has been developed based on the findings and the subsequent recommendations from a pilot exercise carried out in Fortwilliam and Upper Newtownards Road and from best practices elsewhere. It sets out a clear direction and actions for tackling empty homes with specific targets which will be tested, developed and reported on each quarter.

It will consider why homes become empty, the profile of empty homes in Northern Ireland, the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use and how and who can assist in this process. It sets out key objectives, and the processes and tools that can be used to meet these objectives within an action plan. Less than 1% of the total social housing stock is void. It is therefore anticipated that efforts will be concentrated on properties which are privately owned.

Resolving the empty homes problem here will require effort and resources. This strategy sets out the planned steps to address the problem that empty homes present in Northern Ireland. Some actions can be taken quickly and others will be implemented in the medium to long term.

The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that the number of empty homes in Northern Ireland is kept to a minimum and to identify new opportunities to encourage owners to bring them back into use.

WHAT IS AN EMPTY HOME AND WHY BRING IT BACK INTO USE?

An empty home is a dwelling or residential property that has been left unoccupied. Homes may become empty for a number of reasons and, in many cases, it is only for a brief period of time. At one end of the spectrum, a home may become empty for a short time while awaiting sale or an owner searches for a tenant, or it may be empty while renovation or repairs are being planned. Alternatively, it may have been abandoned for a number of years, and consequently could now be an eyesore or even a danger to the local community. Examples of properties like this can be seen right across Northern Ireland, and are a consequence of the natural order of the housing market.

This strategy does not propose that action should be taken in every case where a home is empty. For example, where it is being advertised for sale or for let, where the owner has plans for its use, where it is in negative equity, where the owner is now in care, where there are legal issues surrounding probate, estate and legal ownership or where the property is used as a holiday home. The reason a property

becomes empty in the first instance will need to inform the approach taken to bring it back into use.

For the purposes of this strategy an empty home is defined as any residential property not currently occupied that has remained unoccupied for longer than 6 months, and that is not currently being actively marketed by the owner .

There needs to be a level of property vacancy for the housing market to function, and it is accepted that some properties will be uneconomical to return to use in the current climate. However, as pointed out below, making effort to return homes to use will have significant benefits to both individuals and the community at large.

There are a number of reasons for bringing empty homes back into use. For example, it reduces the likelihood of break-ins, cuts down antisocial behaviour (due to fire, vandalism, fly tipping of empty properties), can provide rental income or capital if the property is sold and reduce deterioration and the negative impact of blight. In addition, there is high demand for housing, particularly affordable housing in some parts of Northern Ireland and empty homes could help towards meeting this need by providing housing to rent or buy. As of December 2012 there were over 40,000 people on the Waiting List with approximately half of these applicants in housing stress. Bringing long term empty homes back into use would address some of the unmet need It would also encourage wider community regeneration whilst promoting urban renewal, and long-term sustainable rural communities.

One of the aims of the Regional Development Strategy is to facilitate the supply of additional housing to meet the projected needs of the region over the next 25 years. It recognises the need to guard against pressure building up as a result of housing land shortages; tackling the empty homes issue will help address the pressure.

This strategy seeks to respond to all of the above issues.

SECTION 2

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of the strategy are to:

- ensure that awareness of the issue of empty homes is raised;
- maximise the potential for the reuse of empty homes;
- provide good quality affordable housing;
- improve the existing built environment;
- promote the availability of funding, schemes and other services through targeted information sharing and publicity;
- reduce the pressure on the future development of greenfield sites and protect the environment;
- ensure programmes meet a range of housing needs, whilst providing a choice of accommodation and area; and
- support the Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy and Corporate Strategies.

ACTIONS

In implementing this Strategy, it is anticipated that four key actions will be delivered. These are listed below.

1. To collect relevant, accurate and up-to-date information

The Housing Executive will develop and maintain a database of empty homes in Northern Ireland. The number of empty homes will be collated mainly from Land and Property Service (LPS) but will be further supplemented by:

- Information from previous work carried out by the Housing Executive, including identification of empty properties by NIHE staff working on the ground within existing NIHE estates; consideration of blighted properties as identified under Article 63 of the 1981 Housing Order;
- Working with Building Control/Environmental Health staff in Local Councils who deal with empty properties considered to have a detrimental effect on the wider amenity of an area. Properties that are considered dangerous, or raise health and safety concerns can be targeted with remedial work or in extreme cases demolition.
- Individual reports from elected Members, local Councils and the general public;
- Site surveys, calling cards and community information;
- House Condition and Housing Needs Surveys;
- The Electoral Roll;
- Mail shots/questionnaires;
- Community groups;
- Telephone calls and enquiries via the Housing Executive's website.

2. To raise awareness of empty homes issues

The Housing Executive will use various media sources to promote the problematic issue of empty homes, the type of assistance that can be offered to address them, and the benefits of bringing them back into use. Evidence from the 'No Use Empty Initiative' in Kent, England suggests that the most successful approach to empty homes is via targeted Advice and Guidance, with a success rate of close to 60%; for every one property councils directly helped to return to use, roughly nine are estimated to have been reoccupied without any intervention on the back of advice, information sharing and publicity. In comparison enforcement, or indeed the threat of enforcement, only delivered 14% of the successful delivery of reuse of empty dwellings.

3. To risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.

In order to more effectively manage resources, the Empty Homes Unit within the Housing Executive will prioritise which empty homes are to be targeted and the timescale for doing so. A balanced approach will therefore be adopted where some resources are directed towards those homes which can be brought back into use relatively easily, as opposed to those which require more intensive involvement, such as detailed negotiations and/or enforcement action. In the first instance the Housing Executive will attempt to identify and bring long term empty ex-Housing Executive properties back into use for social renting. It is hoped that the lessons learnt and processes tested during this pilot approach can subsequently be applied across a wider focus of empty properties in Northern Ireland in due course.

Identified empty homes will be risk assessed to determine their priority by external surveys and the property given a score to take account of the condition. Results of the property surveys will be added to the database and mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS) to establish empty home "Hotspots" to assist in targeting action.

4. To implement specific measures to bring empty homes back into use.

To properly carry out actions 1 - 3 it is necessary to put specific measures into operation. These may include:

- Publications and web page created to promote awareness of empty homes;
- An e-form to be set into the web page for people to report empty properties but also for owners of empty properties to request assistance;
- A process to be agreed to enable particular actions to be carried out at staged intervals;
- Ongoing identification of potential funding streams;
- Schemes to assist in the reoccupation process such as loan schemes and private sector leasing and a proactive approach to creating new homes;
- Legislation that can be used for different areas of enforcement on empty properties;
- Creating an action plan that can be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure aims are being met; and
- A pilot scheme that focuses on derelict and empty properties that were previously in Housing Executive ownership, bought under the House Sales scheme, and have since fallen into disrepair. The aim of this pilot will be to work proactively with owners in order to purchase a number of properties with a view to them eventually being refurbished and returned to social housing stock in areas of current housing need.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Collaborative working within and between the Department, the Housing Executive as well as with external organisations and bodies will be a vital component in making the whole process work and becoming successful in achieving the aims of this strategy and the targets set. We will work with the following organisations:

- Land and Property Services - Rates

- DOE Planning
- District Council Building Control / Environmental Health
- District Council Members and Officers
- Housing Associations
- Empty Homes Agencies in other regions of the United Kingdom

OTHER INITIATIVES

The empty homes strategy does not exist in isolation. There are opportunities to enhance outcomes by linking it to other relevant strategies and initiatives and by being proactive and operating the strategy according to what has proved to be best practice elsewhere. These initiatives include:

- Advice and Information;
- Partner Landlord Schemes/Matching (tenant finding schemes);
- Landlord Training;
- Private Rented Sector Access Schemes;
- Registered Housing Association leases and repairs;
- Registered Housing Association buys and rents;
- Helping owners to sell;
- Grants/Loans Schemes;
- Homesteading;
- Sweat equity/improvement tenancy;
- Short life housing ;
- Rating of empty properties;
- Use of Repair Notices;
- Vesting;
- Community Asset Transfer;
- Regeneration.

SECTION 3

ACTION PLAN

The necessary steps to fix the empty homes problem will be taken principally by both the Department and the Housing Executive. Some will be completed quickly whilst others will be delivered in the medium term.

The current legislative framework (1981 Housing Order) allows the Housing Executive to intervene at different levels to bring empty homes back into use, or to assist them to be brought back into use. There are often legislative obstacles to bringing unused homes back into use again and the Department will consider these matters to ensure that the necessary powers exist which will address the wider empty homes agenda.

Work to date has shown that efforts to bring empty homes back into use are hampered by a number of factors not least an absence of staff and financial resources. Other factors include an absence of accurate data about the location and ownership of empty homes and no straightforward legal means of bringing the properties into use, for example to secure the property for rental purposes. These factors must be dealt with if the empty homes problem here is to be effectively addressed.

We will explore the value of enabling social landlords to lease an empty home and then rent it to a tenant. This may require a change to tenancy law. Such arrangements could apply to homes in various states of condition for example for an agreed duration.

Drawing on best practice elsewhere, the empty homes unit will take steps to actively work with housing associations, community groups, voluntary groups and local councils to identify and rectify the problem empty homes present.

The attached Action Plan has been developed and agreed with the Housing Executive to ensure that the Strategy aims and objectives are supported by focussed activity. The Action Plan will be reviewed annually and action taken on a quarterly basis and SMART targets will be set.

ACTION PLAN

ACTION	KEY TASKS	RESPONSIBILITY	TARGET DATE
1. Set up an Empty Homes unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a dedicated unit to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Produce and distribute information leaflets; - mail drop with rates bills 2014/15; - raise awareness; collect accurate data and develop a database of empty homes. • Analyse data from Land & Property Service of vacant domestic properties and identify Councils and Wards where Empty Homes issues are greatest. 	Housing Executive Department	September 2013 August 2013
2. New website for central reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a dedicated webpage for reporting empty properties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make contact with owners and give advice which details various options. 	Housing Executive	September 2013
3. Land & Property Services information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with LPS to make case for sharing information. 	Department	September 2013
4. Information gathering and bring forward legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Councils to identify properties and owners; 	Department and Housing Executive	September 2013

ACTION	KEY TASKS	RESPONSIBILITY	TARGET DATE
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop information sharing arrangements between LPS and DSD. 	Department	September 2013
6. Meet with lenders where repossessed property is empty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop protocols. 	Housing Executive	December 2013
7. Empty Homes Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the number of empty homes by 4% over next 5 years or take action on 120 empty homes each year; Identify list of (at least 10) potential pilot properties (ex NIHE in areas of housing need); Transfers to Housing Associations to refurbish and let; Identify funding streams with key stakeholders; Develop and launch a scheme to deliver affordable homes (£19m, £4.7m of which is allocated to bring empty homes back into use); 	<p>Housing Executive</p> <p>Housing Executive</p> <p>Housing Executive</p> <p>Department and Housing Executive</p> <p>Department</p>	<p></p> <p>December 2013</p> <p>March 2014</p> <p>March 2014</p> <p>March 2014</p>

ACTION	KEY TASKS	RESPONSIBILITY	TARGET DATE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with DSD Urban Regeneration to identify/consider community asset transfers; • Implement initiatives used in other jurisdictions. 	<p>Department</p> <p>Housing Executive</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p>
8. Vesting legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine current use of legislation and identify barriers and bring forward proposals for legislative change; • Explore the need/viability of legislation to provide for Empty Homes Management Orders. 	<p>Department</p> <p>Department</p>	<p>April 2014</p> <p>April 2014</p>
9. Tenancy legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring forward proposals for legislation to enable Housing Association to lease empty properties and then let. 	Department	2015/16