

**Epping Forest District Council**  
**HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY**  
**ON**  
**EMPTY PROPERTIES**

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The objective of this Housing Service Strategy is to seek to minimise the number of dwellings standing empty at any one time, both in the public and private sectors.
- 1.2 This deceptively simple objective not only helps to relieve homelessness, housing need and maximise income, but can also transform the environment of an estate or shopping centre and, by bringing around such improvements, transfer benefits across the fields of health, education, and social services.
- 1.3 It also provides direct benefits to this Council with regard to its own property as it maximises rental income and minimises the costs of managing the properties.
- 1.4 The following Strategy will explain how the Council's Housing Services, working together with the Council's Works Unit, Environmental Services and Planning Services will aim to meet this objective.
- 1.5 This Strategy was formulated in consultation with the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and endorsed by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (1) on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2003.

**2. Background to the Service**

- 2.1 Staff within Housing Needs and the Housing Repairs sections of Housing Services together with the Works Unit are directly involved in activities relating to all empty Council properties.  
  
New procedures were implemented in December 2001 following a comprehensive review of the involvement of all sections dealing with empty properties with the intention of reducing void times.
- 2.2 Housing Needs initially receive the keys and pass them to Housing Repairs. Housing Needs will also attempt to allocate the property either immediately, or even before vacation, allowing the applicants an opportunity to view the dwelling accompanied by a Housing Voids Officer.
- 2.3 Voids Officers inspect the property, prior to showing it to any prospective tenant, and issue repair orders to the Works Unit.
- 2.3 The type and cost of repairs undertaken by the Works Unit are in accordance with a specification and contract let following competition. The current contract expires on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2004.
- 2.4 The Works Unit is monitored by the Housing Repairs Section.

- 2.5 The Housing Client section within Housing Services monitor the overall empty time periods for government returns and also as part of the performance monitoring of the Housing Managers. This work is the responsibility of the Assistant Head of Housing Services ( Strategy ).
- 2.6 The Assistant Head of Environmental Services monitors the numbers of empty private properties using information from Council Tax records. Staff from Environmental Services also respond to contact from the public and provide suggestions and advice to enable people to maximise the use of their property.
- 2.7 Planning Services develop Local Plan policy which meet the guidelines contained within the Government's Policy Planning Guidance ( PPG 3 ). On Housing this presently encourages the use of vacant buildings or sites in town centre areas and also generally precludes the use of residential accommodation for other purposes.
- 2.8 Staff within Planning Services are also striving to identify all vacant/derelict buildings suitable for redevelopment. This information is required by ODPM but is of use to other Service areas of the Council.
- 2.9 At the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2002 there were a 89 empty Council and Registered Social landlord dwellings and 1679 in the private sector.

### **3. Coverage**

- 3.1 Empty council dwellings include all homes which will be offered to those on the Council's Housing Register ( including homeless applicants ) and Transfer Lists. The property may be a flat, maisonette, bungalow or a house, it may be sheltered; with a warden. All are managed by Housing Services staff.
- 3.2 There are also considerable numbers of privately owned dwellings that lie empty at any one time. These include flats above shops and derelict property. Around 1,679 private properties were estimated as being empty at the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2002, which includes 792 empty for more than 6 months.
- 3.3 This Strategy document outlines the approach the Council adopts in trying to continually reduce the time a property remains empty and provides detail of any matters which have a bearing on those aims, objectives, and processes.
- 3.4 All strategies must be based upon the involvement of those affected and information relating to consultation is also included in this paper.
- 3.5 The paper also includes targets that the Council seeks to achieve, how these will be monitored, and how any additional costs will be funded. These are the processes by which the Council seeks to achieve continual improvement, fundamental to the concepts of Best Value.

### **4. Relationship to other documents**

- 4.1 This strategy reflects the basic principle of the Council's Housing Charter, which sets out the Council's general approach for the activity of housing services. Furthermore, this strategy also provides information as required by the Housing Charter.
- 4.2 The Housing Service Strategy expands upon the information contained within the Housing Strategy Statement 2002 – 2005, and particularly strategies 5(d)1, 5(d)3c), 5(d)4b)c), and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, 3.4(b) e), 3.4(e) & (f). Empty property is also an issue which features within the Council's Community

Plan and Best Value Performance Plan. Its importance is echoed within the Housing Services' Performance Monitoring system where clear targets are detailed and reviewed.

- 4.3 This activity (and all others provided by Housing Services) is now supported by the full accreditation of Housing Services to the ISO 9000:2000 Quality Management standard achieved in Spring 2003.
- 4.4 Epping Forest Local Plan, H.10 and H.13 demonstrate the Council's intentions with regard the utilisation of town centre premises and also the limitations the Council impose in order to restrict the loss of residential property. This reflects the approaches encouraged within the Government's Policy Planning Guidance referred to earlier ( para 2.7 ).
- 4.5 The Private Sector Housing Strategy is itself an intrinsic part of the Housing Strategy and is the basis of Environmental Services activities when dealing with empty property in the private sector.
- 4.6 This strategy has been established bearing in mind these issues and also the best practise suggestions of the Chartered Institute of Housing published within its Standards Manual and in its regular journals.
- 4.7 Information available on the Council's website, [www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing](http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing) and the Environmental Services page compliments the detail produced here.

## **5. Aims & Objectives**

- 5.1 The aim of the Council's Housing Service Strategy on Empty Properties is to complement the Housing Strategy 2003 – 2005 and the HRA Business Plan by seeking "To maximise the use of Council dwellings by continually seeking to reduce the period they are unlet to no more than an average of 6 weeks, and to strive to minimise the numbers of unused private dwellings."
- 5.2 This aim will be achieved by attaining the following objectives;
  - a) ensuring that Housing Services meets all targets,
  - b) continually reviewing those targets,
  - c) continually monitoring all aspects of the Council's performance on voids,
  - d) continually reviewing and updating the Council's procedures,
  - e) consulting with those on the Housing Register,
  - f) considering any initiatives to reduce the numbers of difficult to let properties such as the conversion of bedsit dwellings to one bed flats in whole schemes ( e.g. Hyde Mead House ), or for specific properties, including the involvement of other partners if this enables progress.
  - g) extending the practise of accompanied viewing to involve prospective tenants and encourage acceptance of offers,
  - h) monitoring the number of empty properties within the private sector

- i) establishing the production of information aimed at the private sector encouraging full utilisation of property.

## **6. Statutory Requirements**

- 6.1 A variety of Government legislation and regulations have an indirect bearing upon the time properties remain empty. Relevant requirements are contained within;
- a) Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
    - Fitness for human habitation ( section 10 )
  - b) Gas Act 1974
    - Gas Safety ( Installation & Use ) Regs 1996
  - c) Housing Act 1996 (as amended)
    - Allocation of Housing Accommodation. ( Part VI ).
    - Homelessness ( Part VII ).
  - d) Local Government and Housing Act 1989
    - Annual Report to Tenants ( section 167 )
  - e) Local Government Finance Act 1990
    - Dwellings exempt from Council Tax
  - f) Local Government Act 1999
    - Council's responsibilities in respect of Best Value.
  - g) Regulatory Reform Act 2001
    - Encourages new means of the release of finance to encourage occupation of empty private homes.
  - h) Homelessness Act 2002
    - Allocation of Housing
    - Homelessness
  - i) Race Relations Act 1976
  - j) Code of Practise

## **7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement**

- 7.1 The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, is an important district wide consultative body. They are therefore an intrinsic part of this strategy. With the new Tenant Participation Agreement it is anticipated that the Federation's involvement will increase and they will have the skills to provide a greater contribution to future strategic and policy activities. The Federation monitors voids performance on a quarterly basis.
- 7.2 Specific targeted consultation was undertaken with those waiting for, and recently offered, council accommodation as they were most directly affected by void performance. Their comments were considered as part of the Voids and Lettings survey that led to the introduction of an accompanied viewing process, which is effectively ongoing involvement.

- 7.3 Any developments will also be featured within the Council's publication "Housing News" so ensuring that the widest possible audience are aware of any proposals or plans that are agreed.
- 7.4 Officers will also continue to publicise empty property performance in the Council's Annual Report to Tenants ( Local Government & Housing Act 1989).

## **8. General Principles**

- 8.1 The Service Strategies are a part of the Housing Strategy and provide the additional detail of the individual areas of activity.
- 8.2 With regard empty properties Housing Services will continue to develop its activities aimed at speeding their return to use. Housing Service activities have shown an all round enhancement as a direct result of introducing parts of an integrated Housing Management computer system, OHMS. This enables the gathering and interpretation of a greater range and amount of information allowing increased flexibility and speed in decision making and policy direction. This means that senior housing management and housing managers will have more detailed information to hand, that targets can be more accurately monitored and that they can be easily and quickly amended. Figures included in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan demonstrate this improvement, e.g. void rent loss has decreased by 40% over the two years, 2000/2002, and the number of properties empty at year end has more than halved to 82 during the same period.
- 8.3 The views of residents will become more apparent during the duration of this strategy. Ideas will emanate from the Council's newly established Residents Panel and also be produced through the development and enhancement of the Tenant Participation Agreement and the growth of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. The growing participation of residents as a result of increased awareness and knowledge will be of great assistance to the Council in achieving the aim of this strategy.
- 8.4 Officers will ensure that inspections of empty properties are completed promptly, usually as part of an accompanied viewing process (see 8.8).
- 8.5 In order to reduce the period properties remain empty while undergoing repair, officers ensure that our properties meet the basic standard (agreed as part of the Voids and Lettings Review) and will only arrange the completion of essential work; repairs of a minor nature will be arranged after the new tenant has taken occupation.
- 8.6 Redecoration work to be kept to a minimum, allowances to be granted if necessary on all properties including those designated for older people.
- 8.7 The Redecoration Allowance Scheme has also been modified following the Voids and Lettings Review and tenants are now given vouchers to be redeemed in a major DIY retailer. This has led to a saving in officer time and means that the tenants can complete the redecoration with no financial limitations.
- 8.8 In order to further reduce delay no further post repair inspections are now completed, other than spot checks. The Works Unit complete their own check and the occupants of dwellings will advise the Council of any defects found when they move into the property.

- 8.9 In addition staff will continue to review the nature of the actual work completed to ensure that the dwellings are brought to a standard suitable to be occupied but that there is no waste of resources.
- 8.10 It is intended that officers will continue to review the manner in which the process of allocating property is completed. Accompanied viewing has been introduced to allow prospective tenants to visit the dwelling at the same time as the officer completing the void inspection. This allows them the opportunity to have an input in the level of repair completed to the dwelling and it also speeds the allocation procedure. Many people are happy for some works to be left to themselves. For example, it may be their intention to replace the kitchen so there is little point in the Council replacing one kitchen cupboard.
- 8.11 The Council will examine possibilities opened up by the Government's Policy Statement, Quality and Choice: A Way Forward for Housing relating to "choice based lettings". Discussions include the increased use of the advertising of empty properties and allowing people to ask to move to specific properties (so reducing refusals). In addition local connection is no longer a requirement to entitlement to our properties following the Homeless Act 2002 and this may increase the numbers of those willing to consider properties that have proved difficult to let.
- 8.12 The Council is also considering, with tenant consultation, entering into partnership arrangements with other RSLs to enable the conversion of unpopular dwellings into property more in demand (e.g. studios converted into one bed flats).
- 8.13 Environmental Services staff will continue to consider the views and advice of the Empty Homes Agency which provides a wealth of opinion on the matter. Of the 1,679 empty private properties (4% of private sector) 19% were unfit requiring repairs estimated at £1.1.million. None could be classed as derelict but the Council can not neglect this area.
- 8.14 While the Council has decided not to pursue the introduction of compulsory purchase of empty properties staff continue to provide advice to encourage owners to make use of such property. In some cases grant aid is possible although financial constraints limit availability to those in the most need.
- 8.15 Consideration is also being given to private sector leasing/purchase schemes by working with RSL partners. They lease or buy empty property, refurbish as necessary and then return it to the rental market.
- 8.16 It is hoped that these practises will positively contribute to the reduction of empty property. Officers will remain aware of developments and ideas relating to the whole issue and continually update accordingly.

## **9. Best Value Considerations**

The Government's approach to Best Value refers to consideration of four main elements, known as the "Four C's";

- 9.1 Challenge. – Housing Services in general will be thoroughly challenged by a Best Value Service Review of the entire service during 2003. The Review will concentrate on those services which have the greatest impact on customers and those which are in most need of improvement. The Voids process will be reviewed. The service was robustly challenged as part of the Voids and Lettings Study during 1999/2000.
- 9.2 Compare.- The Best Value Review uses information from a number of sources in order to compare the quality of services provided with those of other similar providers.

The Council is a member of Housemark and it is hoped that this will provide readily accessible information in the future as will performance indicators and the findings of the STATUS tenants satisfaction survey. Separate surveys/comparison exercises will also be used. Direct benchmarking was not available at the time of the last review and the benefits of such an opportunity are fully appreciated. Following the change in allocation methods to accompanied viewing, comparisons that were available reflected well.

- 9.3 Consult.- The Council has adopted a strong consultation framework with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation. This will be the main ongoing method of consulting customers about performance and areas for improvement under the Review. Other surveys may also be carried out as with Reviews that have already taken place in Housing Services. The Best Value Review of Housing Services will include a postal survey of tenants recently moving into void properties and two focus groups of tenants to discuss qualitative issues.
- 9.4 Compete.- The benefits of introducing competition in the provision of Housing Services will also be considered under the Best Value Review. Competition is more appropriate for some services than others and this will be examined under the Review.

<b>10. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS</b>
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**Future Developments**

Strengths

- Staff are working in an improving scenario and morale is positive.
- High profile issue under constant monitoring and review.
- Recent comprehensive Voids and Lettings Study

Weaknesses

- limited resources to commit to the private sector
- delays inherent when dealing with major repairs (contract procedures), insurance cases or adaptations (planning procedures)
- staff shortages within Works Unit due to labour shortages in building industry and subsequent competition to secure staff.

Opportunities

- Legislation may allow the freeing of more money for investment within the private sector
- Improvement of OHMS statistical information
- Choice based lettings may reduce refusals and void times
- Best Value Review

Threats

- Choice based lettings could add to void times – our approach must avoid this.
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## 11. Action Plan

11.1 The following specific actions are planned by the Council relating to void properties prior to April 2004;

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Complete the implementation of the present OHMS integrated computer system – new OHMS packages & other IT developments are being produced and these are considered when they become available.	Housing Client Manager	May 2004	Consider impact upon budget.
Improved monitoring information to be produced to meet demands of Tenants & Leaseholders Federation, ISO 9001 and our own requirements.	Principal Hsg Info/Strategy Officer.	June 2003	None
Continue the development of tenant participation through the Federation to increase their involvement	Housing Client Manager	Ongoing	Training Budget
Maintain regular checks on the numbers of empty private property and investigate ways by which they can target owners of such property.	Environmental Services	Ongoing	Staffing & budget
Develop strategies to provide private owners with information to encourage them to identify finance to bring property back into use	Environmental Services	June 04	
Liaise with other service areas to seek their assistance in contacting private owners (Council tax to send information in response to empty property claims)	Environmental Services / Finance		
Work with housing association partners to buy/lease empty private properties and return them to the rented sector.	Head of Housing Services	Sept 2003	Self financing
Investigate the introduction of pocket PCs for Voids officers to increase efficiency	Housing Repairs manager	September 2003	Budget - £15,000

## 12 Resourcing the Strategy

12.1 Separate budget heads exist for repairs completed to empty properties and for the redecoration vouchers that are given to new tenants who undertake the decoration of property. The sums allowed for 2002/2003 are £574,000 and £106,000 respectively.

12.2 Housing Services' Staff resources are shown below;

	Staff Resource Projection			
	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05
Av. no. staff to provide service (FTE p/a)	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4

Total Staff Resource Breakdown – 2003/04	
Posts	FTE
Housing Repairs Manager	0.3
Housing Needs Manager	0.3
Principal Housing Officer ( Allocations )	0.6
Snr. Housing Officer ( Policy )	0.2
Housing Officer ( Voids )	2.0
Environmental Health Officer	0.05
Total	3.45

## 13. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

13.1 The table below reflects improvements in the service which have been achieved since completing the Voids and Lettings review.

Key Targets and Performance					
Performance Indicator	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05
	Actual	Actual	Est	Target	Target
Time to complete void inspection	2 days	2 days	7 days	7 days	7 days
Time to complete repairs	10 days	10 days	7 days	7 days	7 days
Time to make first offer	32 days	10 days	5 * days	5* days	5* days
Overall time to occupy property	13 weeks	10.6 weeks	6 weeks	5 weeks	4 weeks
Average Rent Loss due to voids	1.84	1.41	1.1	1.0	0.8

\*these days are within the 7 days allowed to inspect (& complete an accompanied viewing)

- 13.2 The OHMS integrated computer system allows the processing and questioning of data held by using " Info maker " Reports. This enables more detailed and more frequent reports allowing closer monitoring. This in turn enables a quicker response to any changes that are implemented and will allow fine tuning of any policy or practise introduced.
- 13.3 The following are monitored on a quarterly basis;
- a) Time taken to inspect and issue instructions to repair,
  - b) Time taken to complete the repair,
  - c) Time taken to make the first offer of the dwelling to a new tenant,
  - d) The numbers of offers made,
  - e) The overall time taken to relet property,
  - f) The numbers and reason for refusal
  - g) Average void loss

#### **14. Reviewing the Strategy**

- 14.1 The above performance monitoring will feed into a formal annual review of the strategy which will be reported to the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 14.2 This will be supported by ongoing reviews carried out by officers.
- 14.3 Issues for consideration will also emanate from Tenant Participation Groups and via The Council's Complaints Procedure.
- 14.4 This whole Strategy will also be formally reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, in consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, by April 2005.