

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

EMPTY PROPERTIES

POSITION STATEMENT 2003

Statutory Duties & Guidance

There is no statutory duty to deal with empty properties per se.

BVI 64 – requires the Local Authority to report the number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished during the financial year.

Our return for 2002-2003 is 0.

Epping Forest Housing Strategy 2002-2003

PS(13) – to keep the number of empty non-Council properties to a minimum.

PPG3 – planning objective to bring empty homes back into use and promote the conversion of existing buildings within urban areas in preference to the development of greenfield sites.

HIP Assessment Guidance

Item 6 – Performance Indicator for private sector stock requires effective empty property policies.

How Many Empties in EFDC

Our Council Tax records indicate over 1,900 empty properties (including commercial and public sector) of which 524 have been empty more than 12 months.

What We Have Done So Far

1. We have produced an 'empty properties' leaflet giving advice to owners and local residents. This is sent out with Council Tax demands and issued to the public on request.
2. We have in the past submitted articles in the Forester magazine to raise awareness of empty properties and inviting the public to notify us of empty properties.

We had a positive response initially but we were unable to follow up leads effectively and so the impetus was not sustained.

3. We canvassed local letting agencies for interest in taking on and letting empty properties in the area. We have produced a list of letting agencies together with details of their conditions, services provided and charges. We can then pass this information on to owners of empties, interested in letting.

4. We have produced a standard letter of sorts for dealing with the initial stages of investigations into empty properties.

These need to be modified to be more effective/relevant to the cases we deal with and policies of EFDC.

5. We are persistent in harassing our Council Tax section for some co-operation in disclosing information relating to empty properties.
6. We have e-mailed all EFDC staff requesting they pass to us details of any potential empties they may come across during their day to day duties. There has been little response – but then we do not offer any incentives. If there was a financial incentive for anyone notifying us of such a property which we ultimately brought back into use – we may be inundated with addresses!
7. Head of Housing is exploring the possibility of working with an RSL to introduce a market rental private sector leasing scheme within the district. The owners of empty properties could be targeted to come into the scheme, leasing their home to an RSL and housing a Council applicant at a market rent.

Three RSL's have expressed an interest to date and are in discussions with Head of Housing. We are kept informed of developments.

8. We have relaxed our prior qualifying period in the case of renovation grants for empty properties.
9. We support the Epping Forest Housing Aid Rent Guarantee Scheme and will advise landlords of it to encourage renting.
10. We use our statutory powers to secure vacant properties, eliminate rodent infestations and require repairs where adjacent buildings are affected.
11. We provide general advice to landlords and home owners re: grants available and legislative requirements re. renting a property etc.

What We Could/Should Do

1. Carry out a survey to establish some basic data upon which to develop an empty property strategy (EPS) e.g. how many, location, condition, proportion unfit, numbers above commercial properties, estimated cost to bring back into use etc. etc.
2. Consult/establish links with local owners and their advisers to learn why properties are kept empty in order to provide a solution and effectively market an EPS (e.g. fears of letting).
3. Develop an EPS based on reliable data and sound policies;
 - we need some carrots and sticks to encourage and enforce;
 - some enforcement e.g. CPOs is very technical, time consuming and requires specialist knowledge.
4. We need full Council commitment and Member involvement.

5. Seek participation from other Services – Planning, Housing Benefits, Council Tax, Legal – for effective ‘working together’ approach.
6. Develop relationships with other outside partners/national bodies (e.g. solicitors, chartered surveyors, managing agents).
7. Establish a dedicated Empty Property Officer post to manage the strategy, liaise with internal and external services, to make the strategy user friendly for public and partners and as a demonstration of the Council’s commitment to tackling empty properties.
8. Secure financial resources in order to offer grants / loans etc specifically for empty properties so that there is no impact on our high priority issues such as disabled facility grants etc..
9. Publicise – crucial but only effective once the strategy, procedures and resources are in place.
10. Respond quickly to publicity for maximum effect – some LA’s have a dedicated telephone hotline.

Conclusion

To effectively tackle empty properties we need to COMMIT and dedicate manpower and resources.

There is no quick solution to improve the statistics to bring empty properties back into use.

Sally Devine
Environmental Health Officer