

Empty Properties Policy Statement and Action Plan



Introduction

Empty properties are a blight on the Borough's environment and a significant waste of a scarce resource. The Council cannot deal with the problems empty properties cause acting alone. Neither can we counter the wider economic forces which sometimes cause properties to remain empty.

However, as the body responsible for the stewardship of Rossendale as a place the Council does have a duty to act with our partners to lift the blight which empty properties place on our communities. This policy statement and action plan set out the levers which the Council is going to use across all its services in order to address the problems caused by empty properties.

The Size of the Problem

As at April 2006 there were approximately 1,600 empty properties in Rossendale representing about 5.5% of the housing stock. Roughly half of this number are longer term empty properties which are the ones which are most likely to cause problems. A level of empty properties is inevitable in any housing market; however the number of empty properties in Rossendale is about 640 more than if the vacancy level was at the national average of 3.3%. There are particular concentrations of empty properties in the Worsley and Greensclough wards which account for nearly 1/3 of the total number of vacant properties. These wards have relatively weak housing demand and lower than average household incomes.

There is a significant identified local need for affordable housing in the borough and if the level of vacancy were to be reduced to the North West average of 4.5%, it would perhaps be possible to meet about 82% of the currently identified need for affordable housing. The reality is, of course that read across of this nature is too simplistic. However, it does put the problem and the way in which it impacts on the local housing market into perspective.

Properties become and remain empty for a range of reasons, but at the core of all the case specific reasons lies one overriding factor, that for the property owner it is more economically attractive to leave the property empty, possibly in a deteriorating condition, than to bring it back into use. It is this economic reality that the Council must seek to address through its actions in relation to empty properties.

It also worth noting that out of the 963 terraced houses that are vacant 474 have been vacant for more than 6 months, so just under 50% of all vacant terraced housing is long term vacancy. This heavy weighting of the housing stock towards one type of housing means that in many cases the market is providing the wrong sort of housing to meet demand. This may mean that we need to develop innovative ways to address this type of market failure without resorting to large scale demolition which is unacceptable to the community.

The Objectives of Action

Quite clearly the Council needs to take action against empty properties to improve the quality of life of residents generally. However, this outcome is not sufficiently specific in terms of the issue to be addressed. Therefore the Council has set itself the following objective linked to the aspirations for housing set out in the Community Strategy.

By 2020 working with its partners the Borough Council intends to bring the level of vacancy into line with the North West average.

This implies a reduction in the number of empty properties by 290 compared to the April 2006 baseline.

The Benefits of Action

Taking action to reduce the number of empty properties will generate benefits in a number of areas

- Improvement to the environment arising from properties no longer being rundown and generating anti social behaviour.
- Additional housing supply without either requiring greenfield land or environmentally wasteful new build. In addition a proportion of this additional supply is likely to impact on the affordable housing problem.
- Occupation of vacant properties by people who spend money in local shops and other facilities provides additional income to the local economy
- Improving the functionality of the housing market.

The Levers We Can Use

To address the fundamental economic problems identified above the Council needs to be able to use levers which will affect the behaviour of;

- Individual Property Owners
- Property Developers

As an organisation we have tools available utilising powers in the following areas

- Environmental Health
- Housing
- Local Taxation
- Planning

Given the scale of the problem we face we need to use all these powers in a joined up way in order to achieve our objectives

The key strands of the approach set out in the actions plan attached to this policy statement are;

- Inducement – through equity release loan regimes
- Incentivisation – through the planning and council tax systems
- Enforcement – using statutory powers such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders and S.215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

The Council needs to consider carefully where it should intervene in the market partly because there are finite resources available and partly because the Council should not be acting where the market itself will deliver appropriate outcomes. For these reasons it will be appropriate for the Council to target its efforts on defined areas which

- Represent gateways to the Borough.
- Represent significant concentrations of empty properties.
- Display high levels of Anti-Social Behaviour linked to vacant properties

Monitoring and Review

The action plan attached to this policy will be monitored through the Council's Performance Management Framework which is set out in the Corporate Improvement Plan.

Given the time that it takes to have an impact on major economic forces the effectiveness of the Council's overall policy stance will be reviewed every two years and targets will be revised to reflect progress.

Consultation

Consultation on this policy statement and future revisions will be undertaken in line with the requirements set out in the statement of community involvement which forms part of the local Development Framework.

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Empty Properties Action Plan – Inducement Workstream

Action	Output	Timescale	Responsible Manager
<p>1. Achieve targets for performance indicator BVP 164 through, making available a budget of £144k pa plus fees address empty property issues in addition to providing access to Home Repair Assistance through equity release schemes.</p>	<p>Bring 35 properties back into use in 2006/07 and 40 per year thereafter in line with targets for BVP164</p>	<p>Ongoing programme of work</p>	<p>Private Sector Renewal Manager</p>
<p>2. Develop with RSL partners a project to utilise S106 funds for off site affordable housing to reduce the empty properties problem</p>	<p>Target to bring 5 properties per year into use following agreement of the scheme mechanism during 2007/08</p>	<p>Mechanism agreed first half of 2007/08 first projects implemented during 2008/09</p>	<p>Housing Strategy Officer</p>
<p>3. Develop with RSL partners project to buy empty properties back into use as affordable housing and temporary accommodation</p>	<p>Target to provide up to 5 units by the end of 2008/09</p>	<p>Agree mechanism by end of September 2007 and then implement by the end of 2008/09</p>	<p>Housing Strategy Officer</p>

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Empty Properties Action Plan – Incentivisation Workstream

Action	Output	Timescale	Responsible Manager
<p>1. Remove the incentive to leave properties empty by exercising the local discretion to charge full council tax on empty properties</p>	<p>Unquantifiable but could be measured through an increase in the number of private rented properties available</p>	<p>From April 2007 subject to agreement by full council of the necessary budget resolutions</p>	<p>Head of Financial Services in relation to policy and Service Assurance Manager in relation to implementation</p>
<p>2. Develop a planning policy within the Local Development Framework which promotes reuse of existing housing rather than new development, particularly in areas with high levels of empty properties</p>	<p>Reduction in the number of planning applications for residential development on Greenfield sites</p>	<p>Include in core strategy for adoption late 2007</p>	<p>Senior Planning Officer (Forward Planning)</p>

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 Empty Properties Action Plan – Enforcement Workstream

Action	Output	Timescale	Responsible Manager
1. Implement a program of action utilising powers under s215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Law of Property Act targeting prominent empty properties initially on gateway sites	Action against 90 properties in first phase of this programme	October 2006 and then ongoing	NEAT Manager Environmental Health Manager
2. Prepare and implement a policy statement in relation to Empty Dwelling Management Orders under the Housing Act 2004	Policy statement providing further support to actions	Policy Statement by May 2007	Housing Strategy Officer coordinating the efforts of NEAT Teams and Environmental Health