
Empty Homes Strategy 2017-20

Mendip District Council

March 2017

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Executive Summary

Mendip District Council takes a proactive approach to working with owners of empty homes to help them bring their properties back into use. The aim of this strategy is to outline how Mendip will continue to develop this service over the next three years identifying potential challenges and how we can address them. It also makes reference to the Private Sector Housing Team (PSH Team which carries out work with private sector landlords in the district through Mendip and hold regular landlord's forums.

The Key Priorities of the Empty Homes Strategy

- Reducing the number of empty homes in the District
- Reducing levels of homelessness and the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by providing a suitable and sufficient supply of affordable housing units through the private rented sector
- Enabling additional affordable homes across Mendip.
- Implement the Decent Homes Standard into the design of empty home conversion and renovation projects.
- Promotion of thermal comfort through implementation of the Decent Homes Standard
- Encourage the use of under used potential accommodation above shops.
- Continued partnership working with the private and voluntary sectors to bring empty homes back into use
- Continued development of our work with private sector landlords

Introduction

This is Mendip District Council's sixth revision of its Empty Homes Strategy, the first being produced in 1995. Mendip has always shown a clear commitment to this area of work and for several years has had a dedicated Empty Homes Officer in post. It is felt that the duties of the role can be absorbed by the current Private Sector Housing Team Officers, without losing personnel and will make the strategy and the team more robust, proactive and forward thinking. This will combine knowledge, skills and good relationships with landlords along with empty home owners, giving them the support and knowledge they require. This would also bring Mendip's working arrangement with empty homes more into alignment with local surrounding authorities.

The housing market has and is still going through changes, which is why Mendip needs to continue to support empty home owners and ensure that all properties are being utilised and where possible support the current housing need.

When considering the key priorities of this strategy Mendip District Council's goals together with the aims of other national, regional and local policies that relate to empty homes have been taken into account..

Mendip's vision is to be a place to be proud of where people, communities and businesses are encouraged to achieve their potential and to deliver this vision and provide focus Mendip has established two key priorities:

- To improve the health and wellbeing of the residents and communities of Mendip
- Supporting economic development and growth

When the Coalition Government was formed they set out their aim for empty homes in the Housing Strategy for England (Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England 2014) part of which was to increase the number of empty homes brought back into use as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing, and to reduce blight on neighbourhoods. The Government made a commitment to put in place the right incentives and levers, both practical and financial to support local authorities, housing providers and community and voluntary groups.

From this led the 'income incentives' for local authorities to bring empty homes back into use in the form of the New Homes Bonus and the ability to charge 150% council tax for owning a long term empty home.

There are currently 610,000 empty homes in England with 205,821 long-term vacant dwellings (that is homes unoccupied for over six months); (Homes from Empty Homes 2015). In Somerset there were approximately 2,049 long term empty properties reported in October 2014. At 1.02% of the total homes, this proportion was marginally below the regional and national averages.

The Mendip context

Mendip's natural and man-made environments are a highly diverse and distinctive feature of the district. The Mendip Hills look down over the Somerset Levels and Moors, with the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs fringing the east of the district. Together they have had a direct bearing on the varied pattern of settlement and communication within Mendip and generate a varied sense of place and true local distinctiveness to the district's towns and villages.

Mendip is a mainly rural area with five major market towns namely, Glastonbury, Frome, Shepton Mallet, Street and Wells (England's smallest city). The district is located in the northeast of Somerset and covers an area of about 740 square kilometres.

Around two thirds of the 109,279 residents (source: Census 2011) live in the five main centres, with the rest of the population distributed among more than 100 smaller rural settlements of varying size. The principal towns all perform traditional market town roles offering employment, services, cultural and community facilities as well as high street shopping.

Demand for affordable housing in the area remains consistently high. There are currently just over 1500 applicants on Mendip's Choice Based Lettings Register seeking affordable housing.

Mendip recognises empty homes are a wasted resource

At best empty properties are a waste of valuable resources but often empty properties can have negative effects on neighbourhoods and their environment.

The basis of this strategy is to focus on the very long term empty homes ie those properties which have been left empty for eighteen months or more, because it has been identified there is often a natural return of use within the first 18 months of being empty due to being renovated and or waiting to be sold. However if owners indicate an unwillingness to engage with the Council there is the option to use a more formal approach, and initiate procedures to bring the property back by using the enforcement tools available in Housing legislation.

Problems empty homes can cause:

Empty homes can have a negative effect on a community and this can include:

- Increased dereliction, vandalism, litter and other anti-social behaviour;
- Reduced market values in neighbouring properties, contributing to a spiral of decline;
- Reduced demand for goods and services in the area; and

- Waste of useful and much needed units of accommodation;
- Wasted financial resources for the Council and also for the owners

Some common reasons why properties are empty for a long period of time:

- A landlord previously rented out a property and it now needs a lot of work before it can be let again and the landlord is unable to find the money to get the works done.
- Someone has inherited a property (perhaps jointly with another family member) and is unsure what is best to do: whether to sell, rent, or move into it.
- People have bought properties to do up and for a variety of reasons, including the pressure of other commitments and financial constraints, are taking a long time to complete the works or the works have stalled.
- People are holding a property empty anticipating a rise in its market value before seeking to sell it. Added to which, some people have unrealistic expectations of the price their property could fetch given the local market.

*Taken from Empty Homes National Campaign Charity 2015.

Data

Council Tax records are the main reference point for monitoring and information on condition and ownership. The existing liaison between the PSH Team and the Council Tax Team will continue to keep this information up-to-date and relevant to officers' work in the problem of empty homes. It is essential that the council has a cross-service working group of officers who will be expected to co-ordinate actions and monitor progress of work within the area of empty homes. To further supplement and support this, the PSH Team will continue to use the M3 module to help with the administration and recording of empty homes.

Targeting and reducing the number of empty homes, the Council aims to:-

To reduce the number of very long-term empty homes by encouraging owners to bring them back into use by various methods and to discourage owners from leaving them empty by actions including signposting to partners and the use of financial measures and incentives as appropriate.

Improve the district through more attractive neighbourhoods, increasing the property values and potentially reducing the incidence of anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Our objective is to;-

Provide advice and support to owners wishing to bring empty homes back into use. Increase the opportunities for people in housing need through more affordable housing, greater choice and improved standards.

Help empty home owners benefit through rental income or capital and lessen unnecessary costs and security of the unoccupied property.

Where necessary, use appropriate informal and formal methods to encourage empty homes back into use.

Housing Overview and its relationship to Empty HomesHousing Advice, Homelessness and Housing Need

Housing need in the district is continually changing. There is a necessity to keep our knowledge of the local housing market as up to date as possible. This will allow the Strategy to respond quickly to the changing needs and preferences of the community.

There is a Somerset-wide Homelessness Strategy and in Mendip there is a clear link between the work of the Housing Options team and the work of the Private Sector Housing Team and therefore some of the actions contained within this strategy complement the work in the Homelessness strategy.

A choice based lettings scheme called 'Homefinder Somerset' was introduced improving the way social housing is allocated. Applicants now bid for available properties rather than the properties being allocated by a housing officer.

The availability of good quality and affordable private rented accommodation is fundamental to the success of homelessness prevention whilst offering more choice. We have already introduced a number of schemes which not only assist in bringing empty properties back into use but also provide good quality affordable housing to households on our housing register.

The YMCA run a Rent Deposit scheme that is funded by the Council which continues with an incredible success rate of recycling funds which allows continuing help and support to non priority clients to find and sustain affordable housing.

Decent Homes

Empty home owners who bring their properties back into use through assistance or intervention from the Council will be encouraged to bring their property up to Decent Homes Standard*. An Empty Home Grant or low-cost loan may be available to achieve this. All owners who choose to rent out their properties and have had financial assistance from the Council would be encouraged by officers to join a landlord accreditation scheme.

Thermal Comfort

Empty home owners who receive grant or loan funding will be required to ensure that the thermal comfort of the property meets the current legal requirements and achieves a good level of thermal comfort. This will include such measures as loft and cavity wall insulation and effective, efficient and affordable heating systems.

We will continue to encourage owners to achieve beyond the Decent Homes Standard where practicable through advice and guidance or where appropriate financial assistance is provided or available.

Private Landlords' Forum

The Mendip Landlords' Forum is well established and as part of this strategy we will continue to develop the forum and work in partnership with our landlords to provide training, advice to develop good quality private rented accommodation. Empty Home owners who become landlords will be strongly encouraged to engage with their local Landlords' Forum.

Resourcing the Empty Homes Strategy

The council will seek to provide adequate funding each year to the private sector renewal budget for capital works for disabled facilities grants, decent homes grants and loans. Part of this capital funding will be used to finance empty homes grants, loans and other initiatives.

*To meet the Decent Home Standard, the property must meet the HHSRS (Housing Health and Safety Rating System) minimum safety standards for housing and be in a reasonable state of repair. Taken from Shelter Jan 2016

Advice, Support and Enforcement of the Empty Homes Strategy

It is and has always been the commitment of this council to encourage the supply and improvement of a good quality private sector housing stock through advice, support and guidance of owners and landlords. This commitment will not change and neither will the council's commitment to offering grants and loans to owners to help bring empty homes back into use.

However it is true that in some cases owners and landlords will try to avoid meeting their responsibilities to the community and district at large and the council will need to consider and, in appropriate cases, take more robust including formal action to resolve problems caused by long term empty homes languishing in a state of disrepair and non-use.

To this effect the following options, both informal and formal, will be explored and used in appropriate cases to encourage owners and landlords to getting their empty homes back into use.

Selling the Empty Property on the Open Market

In some cases the best solution is to sell the property on the open market so that the property comes back into use through improvement and refurbishment of the new owner. Clearly if this is the best option, the existing owner will be encouraged, supported and guided to do this and the council will offer advice and guidance on what other help may be available within the council and from external bodies on how this can be done.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

The use of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) may be considered by this Council as a final resort in the most exceptional circumstances to bring long-term empty properties back into use. With CPOs the property is purchased by the council and the owner compensated for the loss rather than taking over merely the management of the property as in EDMOS.

It will always be the council's intention to use all other methods of guidance and support prior to taking this action but in appropriate cases the council will consider the use of a CPO to resolve long term problematic empty homes.

Enforced Sale

Where the owner of an empty home owes money to the council for example council tax and where all other options of recovering the debt have been explored, or where the council has served formal notices relating to the property e.g. Housing Act(s), Environmental Protection Act, Local Government (Misc Provisions) Act(s) and the Town & Country Planning Act(s)*and or other relevant enforcement options, and have carried out works in default of the notice(s) and have expended money in so doing, a charge will be registered on the Local Land Charge Register or if appropriate on the national Land Registry. The Council will take all necessary legal action to recover

these costs through the courts and enforcing the sale of the property, where appropriate. The enforced sale will be seen as a first step in encouraging action to get the empty property back into use by the existing or new owner.

It is the intention of this Council to delegate to and empower the appropriate officers in the relevant services and teams so that enforcement of the law pertaining to land and empty properties is most efficiently and effectively carried out, to improve cross-service working of relevant officers.

Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMOs)

The Housing Act 2004, introduced new powers to Local Authorities to take over the management of empty properties where owners have rejected all reasonable voluntary solutions to bring it back into use. EDMOs give local authorities the power to take over management of a long term empty property for up to seven years to ensure that it becomes and remains occupied. However this enforcement option does require the local authority to provide considerable resources in terms of staff, time and finance to be successful over a prolonged period.

Very long-term empty properties, whose owners are absent or prove uncooperative, will be prioritised for enforcement action accordingly:

- By length of time empty.
- By condition of the property.
- Whether the property is causing a detrimental environmental impact.
- Whether the property already faces enforcement by other council departments.
- Whether the property is affecting the stability of or causing harm to other properties.
- Whether the owner owns multiple properties.
- Whether the owner owes money to the council.

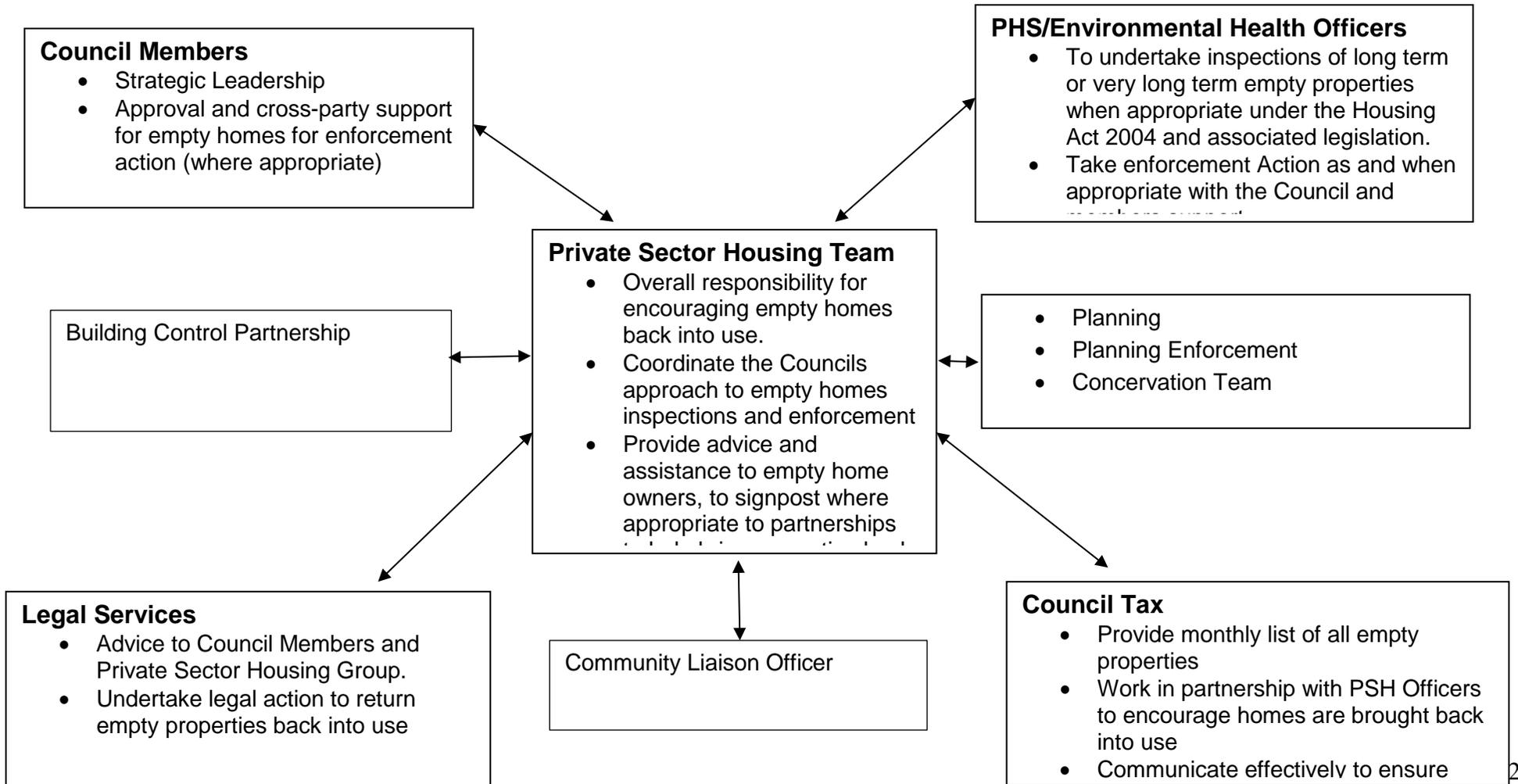
When the council decide to take formal enforcement action the use of a good quality private provider of this service may be used.

Action Plan for April 2017- 2020

Action	Lead	Partners	Linked strategies/policy	Target date	Measurable outputs
Bring 10% of “targetable properties”* back into use on an annual basis. *over 2 years	PSH Officers	Internal and external staff and agencies	PSH Strategy	Annually	10% of properties over 2yrs (which will vary each year)
Ensure that properties brought back into use through grant or loan funding reach the Decent Homes Standard	PSH Team	Internal and external staff and agencies	HECA further Report 2013-2017	Ongoing	All empty homes brought back with input from MDC subject to full inspection and meet D H Standard
Hold two Mendip wide private sector landlord forums/Training.	PSH Team	Mendip YMCA	Homelessness strategy	Bi annually	Landlords Forums/training held
Hold meetings with partners internal and external. Internal group working with internal colleagues and or with external public and private agencies.	PSH Team	Mendip YMCA, Somerset Care and Repair, Keyring Lettings and Council Tax	Empty Homes Strategy Homeless Strategy Private sector housing strategy	Ongoing	Attendance of meetings held and actions/outcomes from them. Number proactive actions/outcomes aims organized.
Improve links with landlords, landlord associations, letting and property management agents and estate agents.	PSH Team		Private Sector Housing Strategy Homelessness Strategy Empty Homes Strategy	Ongoing	Update Web page, send out relevant leaflets regarding grants and loans.

Continued financial support to assist owners bring properties back into use.	PSH Team	Wessex Aster, Home Improvement Agencies	Empty Homes Strategy	Ongoing	Record number many loans and grants applied for and granted
Produce publicity material to highlight the issue of empty homes and the options available to the owners to bring the property back into use.	PSH Officers and Technical Administrator		Empty Homes Strategy	Two per year	Update Website and information regarding grants and loans

Working together in Mendip District Council and Empty Homes



Consultation and Partnership Working

At Mendip we pride ourselves on our wide range of effective partnerships. We have close operational links with the four other Somerset district councils. Mendip has and will continue to develop a private sector Landlord's Forum and training across the district. We will continue to work with the other Somerset Districts to develop a more cohesive approach to tackling housing issues of all sorts across the county.

Mendip's Housing Strategy as well as revisions of the Private Sector Housing Strategy, the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy and the HECA Further Report. All of these strategies will have some links with this Empty Homes Strategy.

Consultations

Centre for Sustainable Energy

Somerset Care and Repair

Aster Group

Other large-scale Registered Providers within Mendip
Mendip Strategic Housing Partnership

Mendip YMCA

The five Somerset Local Authorities

Mendip's Local Parish Councils

Keyring Lettings