

South Cambridgeshire District Council

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

2012-2016



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1. Foreword

Empty homes are a wasted resource in terms of housing available for people to live in and they can also have a negative impact on their surrounding communities, as well as being a financial burden for many owners.

The latest Government figures show there are approximately 740,000 empty homes in England, yet housing waiting lists continue to grow. As outlined in the Housing Strategy for England published in November 2011, tackling empty homes has been identified as a national priority for the Government as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing and reducing the negative impact that neglected empty homes can have on communities.

Within South Cambridgeshire there were 561 empty homes vacant for over 6 months as of 1st April 2011, with over 5,000 people on our housing register looking for affordable accommodation.

That is why we are committed to making the most of existing stock. We want to work **with** rather than against owners, developing services to support them and overcome the hurdles they face. We acknowledge that each empty home has its own story to tell and understand, but whilst there is such a need for affordable housing we cannot sit back and do nothing.

The implementation of this Strategy will ensure that we play our part in bringing empty homes back into use that is both proportional and reasonable for the District.



Councillor Mark Howell
Housing Portfolio Holder

2. What will the Empty Homes Strategy do?

The Empty Homes Strategy is a supporting document to the Council's Housing Strategy and sets out our plans for bringing the District's empty homes back into use over the next 5 years.

The Strategy aims to clearly set out:

- The current situation of empty homes in South Cambridgeshire
- Our work so far to bring empty homes back into use
- Our future priorities for tackling empty homes
- When we do this by and how

Our vision for Housing –

To be the best housing service by providing good quality housing across all tenures that is accessible to all – that enhances residents' quality of life, their health and wellbeing, that supports economic growth and social opportunities, alongside improved energy security and reduced carbon footprints.

By understanding the reasons why properties remain empty within South Cambridgeshire, we will work with owners to **encourage** and **assist** them to bring back empty homes into use to help support the housing needs of the District.

2.1 Why Target Empty Homes?

Tackling South Cambridgeshire's 561 long-term empty homes is very much a positive project for all:

- **For those in housing need** – there is a real shortage of affordable and privately rented homes in the District and by bringing empty homes back into use this can increase the supply of housing available.
- **For those living nearby** – deteriorating empty homes can blight a street and can have a direct effect on property values. In 2003 a study carried out by researchers 'Hometrack' concluded that empty homes cause neighbouring properties to drop in value by on average 20%.
- **For the owner** – it costs money to leave a home empty.
£8,800 per annum in lost rent (2 bedroom average rent)
£1,080 per annum on Council Tax (Band B – payable after 6 months)
That's £9,880 without even considering additional costs through dilapidation, management, security and insurance – it just doesn't make sense to leave it empty.
- **For the Council and emergency services** – reduced demand on services such as dealing with complaints and police/fire service being called out to empty homes. Financial incentive through the New Homes Bonus when properties are brought back into use.

3. Empty Homes in South Cambridgeshire



3.1 What is an Empty Home?

There is no single definition used by the Communities and Local Government (CLG) to describe empty homes. The CLG are concerned to ensure that problematic empty properties, i.e. those that are not subject to a transactional process – are brought back into use. The CLG does not count second homes and other properties that may only be used occasionally (e.g. holiday homes and other seasonal lets) as empty. Properties that are empty for less than six months (and are therefore likely to be transactional) are categorised separately for statistical purposes from longer-term empty homes that are more likely to be problematic.

In April 2011, there were 561 empty homes (empty for 6 months or longer) across South Cambridgeshire. This represents less than 1% of the overall housing stock in the District.

| | 2009/10 | 2010/11 |
|--|---------|---------|
| Number of homes in the District | 60,657 | 61,392 |
| Number of Private Sector homes in the District | 54,664 | 55,478 |
| of which empty for 6+ months | 542 | 441 |
| Number of Public Sector homes in the District | 5,993 | 5,914 |
| of which empty for 6+ months | 60 | 120 |
| Council properties | [32] | [51] |
| Housing Association properties | [17] | [29] |
| Other public sector homes, i.e. MOD, Police, NHS | [11] | [40] |

[Source HSSA return and local data]

The number of public sector homes empty for 6+ months in 2010/11 includes 39 Council homes waiting to be redeveloped that will provide better quality and energy efficient homes for existing tenants, as well as additional affordable homes. Within the Council's own stock, the remaining 12 long-term empty homes will be addressed through the Council's 30-year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The remaining focus of this Strategy relates to private sector housing and actions identified to bring these properties back into use. Other public sector properties identified as empty for 6+ months represent 12% of all empty homes but will be targeted alongside the private sector stock to bring back into use where possible.

Each empty home has a different story to tell and therefore different solutions need to be found to bring them back into use.

There are a wide variety of reasons why a property may be left empty, such as lack of funds, fear of renting, inability to sell, bereavement, care needs, imprisonment, etc. To be truly successful in bringing them back into use we must have a wide range of options available for owners from supportive advice and assistance to proactive enforcement.

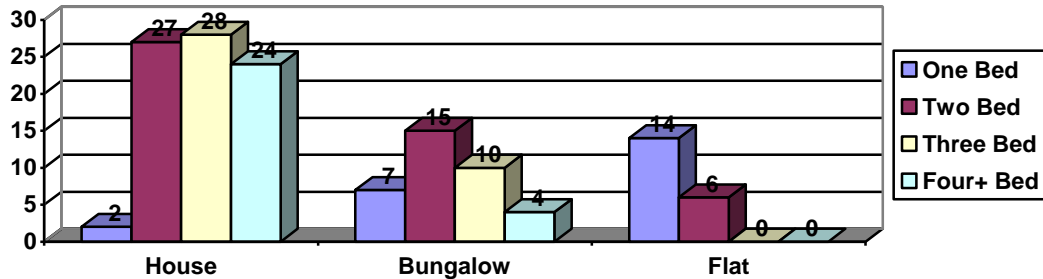
3.2 Empty Homes Study

An empty homes study was completed in May 2011, surveying all owners of homes that had been empty for 6+ months. The aim of the survey was to:

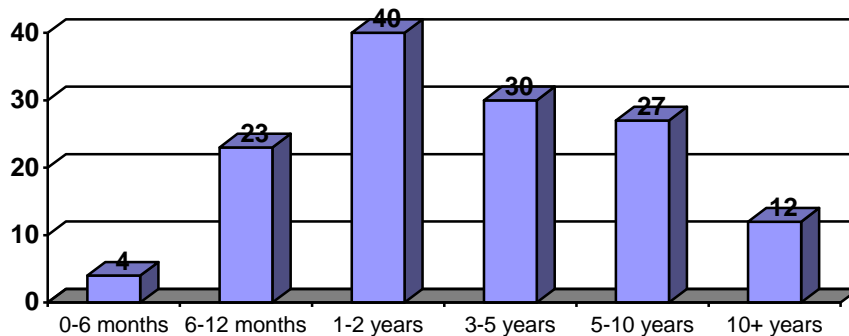
- Gain a better understanding of the reasons for homes being empty
- Identify what help and advice owners would find useful
- Evidence a case for new initiatives and working practices

From the surveys sent out, we received a 39% response rate (178 responses). Key findings within the study are listed below:

Homes empty for 6+ months by Property Type



Length of time property has been empty



The main reasons for properties being empty include:

- Property in the process of being refurbished
- Property up for sale
- Property empty because it had fallen into disrepair
- Planning issues delaying works to property

30% of owners said that the cost of repairs was a factor in the property remaining empty

Condition of properties empty:

- 25% require complete renovation inside but structurally sound
- 23% need updating, ie rewiring, new plumbing, new bathroom, etc.
- 23% are ready to move into

Reasons how/why became responsible for property:

- 26% bought property to live in it themselves
- 20% inherited property
- 11% bought for income from renting
- 11% included with other properties purchased

A full copy of the results of the survey and survey form are available on our website at <http://www.scams.gov.uk/Housing/StrategyAndDevelopment/emptyhomes.htm>

4. What are we doing?



4.1 Council Tax Discount

The Council took the decision in December 2010 to alter the council tax charge levied in respect of properties that are empty for over 6 months from 50% to the full charge of 100%. This decision was not taken lightly, but was justified given the number of people needing a home in South Cambridgeshire. Since its implementation, the number of empty homes recorded by Council Tax has reduced by 10% (59 homes).

The Government are further consulting on plans to allow councils local discretion to introduce a council tax premium on homes in their area that have been empty for more than two years, to provide a stronger incentive to get the homes back into productive use and remove the blight from such properties on local neighbourhoods. We will keep a close eye on these proposals and if approved by central government, will consider the benefits of increasing further the council tax for empty properties within South Cambridgeshire.

4.2 Empty Homes Database

As part of developing the Empty Homes Strategy, a database of long-term empty homes was set up using information provided by Council Tax. This will enable the Council to monitor the number of new long-term empty homes being recorded and the number of homes brought back into use. We will use this information to target newly arising empty homeowners with advice and assistance to ensure homes do not remain empty for any longer than is necessary.

4.3 Working better, together

Officers within Housing Strategy, Council Tax, Planning Enforcement and Environmental Health have teamed up to take forward the issue of Empty Homes. We are working closely together to ensure a more joined up approach, through monitoring empty homes, providing advice and assistance to enforcement action.

We will continue to work with key partners to promote new initiatives and investigate funding options to help bring back empty homes into use.

4.4 Empty Homes Grant Initiative

In partnership with King Street Housing Society, the Council is piloting an Empty Homes Grant Initiative. The purpose of the scheme is to provide financial assistance (through S.106 affordable housing contributions) to help bring back long-term empty properties into use with the aim of providing additional affordable accommodation in order to meet local housing needs. Grants are awarded at the Council's discretion to bring properties up to a decent standard so that they can be let through the Council's Private Sector Leasing Scheme (PSL) at an Affordable Rent. King Street Housing Society will project manage the works required and take on the management responsibility once completed.



Further details of the Grant Initiative scheme can be found on our website at <http://www.scams.gov.uk/Housing/StrategyAndDevelopment/emptyhomes.htm>

4.5 Advice and Assistance

As part of the survey sent to owners of long-term empty homes, 12% of respondents indicated that help/advice in finding a tenant or buyer would be useful. Over the coming year, we will work towards producing an information leaflet that will provide details such as local letting agents, estate agents, tax exemptions/grants, etc. for those owners looking to rent, trying to sell or wanting to renovate their property.

As part of the development of the Home-Link Choice Based Lettings Scheme, a private rented sector module is being progressed to allow individual landlords to advertise their properties for rent through the Home-Link Scheme. Once implemented, this will be an additional resource available to owners of empty properties wishing to rent out their home. Benefits to the scheme include a basic tenant finding service, support with direct payments, credit referencing and a tenancy health check, as well as offering advice and support through the National Landlords' Association. Further details of the scheme can be found on the [Home-Link CBL Scheme](#) website.

Information is also available on the [Homes & Communities Agency](#) website. A toolkit has been developed to provide a detailed overview of empty homes in the country, with numerous links to external websites and publications where further information is available. It has been designed to be useful for a wide range of audiences – from property owners, concerned neighbours, council officers and local councillors.

Further information on empty homes is available from the [Empty Homes Agency](#). This is an independent charity that provides practical help to people and organisations who wish to bring homes back into use.

This Strategy does not aim to duplicate the information available from these organisations but simply to signpost to these sources – see the Contacts section for details.

4.6 Requests for information on Empty Homes

The Council often receives requests for details of empty homes in the District; this is generally from potential purchasers, developers, etc. Unfortunately, under the Data Protection Act we are unable to give out personal details regarding empty properties and ownership. However, upon request we can provide a list of empty properties but it would be up to the individual to find out who the owner is through Land Registry or other sources. We are also working towards developing an *Interested Purchasers Database*, providing an interface between empty property homeowners and interested purchasers and developers. 14 respondents from our empty homes survey indicated that they would wish to participate if such a scheme was implemented.



Other sources of information available include the [Empty Homes Agency](#) reporting website (see para 4.7 below). This enables members of the public to get local reports on properties reported as empty.

There are numerous sources of information about empty properties that are marketed for sale. There are specialist agencies that sell property in need of renovation. A high proportion of the residential properties sold at auction are empty homes. Further information about sources of information and buying empty homes is available on the [Empty Homes Agency](#) website.

The [HCA Empty Homes Toolkit](#) also provides information on finding out who owns empty homes.

4.7 Reporting an Empty Home

Long-term empty homes can be reported direct to the Environmental Health Officer at the Council. Alternatively, properties can be reported on-line through the national website set up by the Empty Homes Agency (<http://reportemptyhomes.com>). This report is directed to the local authority to action and enables progress to be tracked through the website.

4.8 Action taken upon reporting an Empty Home

To date, the Council has not had to take any enforcement action that has resulted in taking over the property or enforcing the sale. Although there are empty homes dispersed across the District we do not suffer the same problems as urban areas that have high levels of empty homes in particular hotspots that can lead to a haven for crime, vandalism, anti-social behaviour and squatting. For South Cambridgeshire it is more the lack of housing available rather than empty homes being problematic and we will always try to work with owners to resolve particular issues rather than resorting to enforcement action.

In the first instance, empty homes should be reported to the Environmental Health Officer who will investigate the property to ensure it is not causing a health or safety risk. In 2010/11 there were 5 cases investigated by Environmental Health that resulted in contact being made with the owner and visits carried out. Two empty homes so far have been brought back into use.

Planning Enforcement Officers may get involved where a particular property is causing an adverse impact on the amenity of the area due to its appearance, such as the condition of the garden or the property being in a state of poor repair. Again in these circumstances, the Council will try and resolve the situation through positive negotiation and assistance. In 2011 Planning Enforcement worked with the Home Improvement Agency to repair and clear a property that had become very overgrown and uninhabitable.



Through negotiation and agreement with the owner the property was brought back to a habitable state and repairs undertaken without the need for legal action.

Vacant historic buildings are particularly vulnerable to decay and the Council try and pursue action to secure the future of historic buildings at risk including promoting their repair and occupation.

In cases where the owners are not willing to engage proactively with officers, there are a number of enforcement options available to councils. These would only ever be considered by South Cambs DC as a last resort where the owner is unwilling to work with the Council and the property is considered dangerous and/or causing a nuisance.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) are a legal power contained within the [Housing Act 2004](#) that enables councils to take over the management of an empty dwelling with the aim of securing its occupancy. An EDMO allows councils to take over the running of the property, carry out repairs and then rent it out. The Government are proposing some changes to EDMOs to protect responsible homeowners and ensure that their use is limited to the very worst long-term empty homes – those that have been empty for a significant period of time and are a nuisance to the community. As this Council would only ever use an EDMO as a last resort it is not anticipated that the proposed changes will affect current practices.

Enforced sale of empty homes

Homes that have become an eyesore, or pose a danger to public can be subject to a range of enforcement measures using legislation. “*Land that adversely affects the amenity of the neighbourhood*” can be served with a Legal Notice under Section 215 of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990; or where “*premises are such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance*”, Notice can be served under the Buildings Act 1984.

In most cases, failure by the owner to comply with a legal notice can lead to councils arranging for the works to be carried out in default and charging the costs to the owner, or registering a charge against the property. If this goes unpaid councils can enforce the sale of the property to recover all costs.

Enforced sale of empty homes due to unpaid council tax

Where there is debt incurred due to an absent owner not paying council tax due on an abandoned property, a similar procedure can be followed to the enforced sale procedure.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

Specific powers set out in [Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985](#) and [Section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#) allow councils to compulsorily purchase individual empty homes to enable them to be used for housing.

5. Our future priorities for tackling empty homes

The Empty Homes Strategy has been developed with three main priorities.

We will....

- Improve our evidence base
- Be pro-active in dealing with properties that are empty long-term
- Improve information and advice

Work on this has already begun. Following the implementation of the Empty Homes Database we have contacted owners of long-term empty homes to establish why properties are empty and what help we could offer to assist them. We have already targeted 17 owners who indicated they may be interested in the empty homes grant initiative by providing further details of the scheme and inviting them to apply for a grant. We have also publicised the scheme through our website, in the South Cambs Magazine and at the Council's Open Day.

We also asked if owners would be willing to work with a housing association if their property had the potential for redevelopment to provide additional affordable housing. 7 respondents indicated that they may be willing to consider this and they have been advised to contact our Housing Development & Enabling Manager to investigate further.

An Empty Homes Action Plan setting out how we aim to achieve the priorities stated above and when we expect to do this by is attached as Appendix A.

6. Consultation and Monitoring Performance

6.1 How we consulted

To kick-start the development of the Empty Homes Strategy, the completion of a survey from owners of long-term empty homes has helped to inform the direction of this Strategy. Following on from this, those that have indicated a wish to be further consulted have been sent a copy of the draft Strategy for comment.

Local Members and parish councils were also invited to comment on the draft Strategy before the Housing Portfolio Holder's final approval.

6.2 How we will monitor performance

We recognise the importance of ensuring that we manage and monitor our performance in relation to our targets. The Empty Homes Action Plan will be monitored quarterly by the Strategic Housing Steering Group as part of the wider performance monitoring of the Housing Strategy and will be published on our website. An annual update will be taken to the Housing Portfolio Holder and achievements publicised through the South Cambs Magazine. The Action Plan is intended to be a live document to ensure it continues to meet our key objectives during the lifespan of the Strategy.

6.3 How we will resource the Empty Homes Strategy

Funding

Empty Homes Grant Initiative

The Empty Homes Grant Initiative has been funded through money received in lieu of affordable housing. This money is ring-fenced for the provision of affordable housing only and an annual budget of £50,000 has been approved for the Empty Homes Grant Initiative.

Homes & Community Agency (HCA) Empty Homes Fund

The Government has announced that £100 million of targeted investment will be made available for empty homes as part of the Affordable Housing Programme 2011-15 (AHP). The £100m funding is available from April 2012 and will be targeted at long-term empty properties which would not come back into use without intervention.

The funding available will be allocated either through the HCA or through an intermediary grants giving organisation via formal bidding rounds. This is so that both Registered Providers of social housing and smaller not-for-profit community and voluntary groups are able to apply for funding.

The Council already has a good track record for providing affordable housing in partnership with Registered Providers and we are keen to support any bids for funding that help to meet the objectives of this Strategy. The Council would welcome the opportunity to work with any Registered Provider to pursue further funding opportunities and new initiatives to bring empty homes back into use.

Community and voluntary organisations will be able to apply for part of the £100m Government funding for pioneering housing schemes that will ensure empty properties that ruin neighbourhoods are lived in once again, and at the same time provide affordable housing. The details of the scheme and the formal bidding guidance will be published by the intermediary grants giving organisation once appointed.

Further funding opportunities will be explored as part of the Strategy's Action Plan implementation.

Staff Resources

The Council does not have a dedicated officer for Empty Homes. This role is split between Environmental Health and Planning Enforcement (where appropriate) who will act upon reports of empty properties and liaise with the owners; and the Strategic Housing Section who will oversee the implementation of this Strategy, develop new initiatives and provide advice and assistance to help owners get their properties back into use.

7. Contacts

If you require any further information about the Empty Homes Strategy or the Empty Homes Grant Initiative, please contact the Housing Strategic Team on 01954 713352 or email julie.fletcher@scambs.gov.uk

If you wish to report an empty home or have concerns regarding a specific property, please contact our Environmental Health Team via our contact centre on 03450 450063 or email chris.evans@scambs.gov.uk.

7.1 Website Information

South Cambridgeshire District Council –
<http://www.scambs.gov.uk/Housing/StrategyAndDevelopment/emptyhomes.htm>

Empty Homes Agency - <http://www.emptyhomes.com>

Report an Empty Home - <http://reportemptyhomes.com>

Homes & Communities Agency; Empty Homes Toolkit -
<http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/empty-homes-toolkit>

Home-Link Choice Based Lettings Scheme: Latest news for Private Landlords –
<http://www.home-link.org.uk/THO/>

APPENDIX A

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

Improve our Evidence Base

| What | How | Expected Outcome | When | Progress |
|--|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Maintain and develop the Empty Homes Database to increase functionality and reporting facilities | Council Tax to provide data annually on all empty properties vacant for over 6 months | Achieve a year on year reduction in the number of empty homes due to implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy and withdrawal of the discretionary Council Tax discount. Numbers currently stand at 561 Our improved evidence base and understanding of empty properties allows us to target resources in the most effective way | Annually from May 2012 | Database established April 2011. Owners surveyed to help develop the Empty Homes Strategy. |

Be pro-active in dealing with properties that are empty long-term

| What | How | Expected Outcome | When | Progress |
|---|---|--|----------------|--|
| Publicise the Empty Homes Grant Scheme | Promote scheme through the South Cambs Magazine and through the website | Raise awareness of the scheme and the Empty Homes Strategy to a wide audience | October 2011 | Completed |
| Pilot the Empty Homes Grant Scheme | Property identified as a pilot to the scheme | Property to be made available through the Private Sector Leasing Scheme. Pilot used to assess the value of the grant scheme. | April 2012 | In progress – King Street Housing Society assessing the works required |
| Monitor the effectiveness of the Empty Homes Grant Scheme | Monitor number of enquiries and take-up of the scheme and assess whether there are any barriers to take-up and how these could be overcome. | Between 3-5 properties to be brought back into use under the Grant Scheme annually. | September 2012 | |
| Signpost to advice and information sources | Mail out to newly arising empty home owners and work with both Environmental Health, Planning Enforcement and Council Tax teams so that information is targeted where appropriate | To ensure home owners of empty properties know how to find information and advice | June 2012 | |

| What | How | Expected Outcome | When | Progress |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Create an interested purchasers database | Follow up those expressing an interest to take part in such a scheme and develop a database that can be accessed by potential purchasers | A means of introducing potential purchasers/ developers to empty home owners looking to sell | June 2012 | |
| Investigate additional internal and external funding sources | Investigate potential funding streams through the New Homes Bonus and HCA funding | Look at alternative grant options and further initiatives to help bring empty homes back into use | February 2013 | |
| Funding opportunities for community groups | Publicise funding opportunities following Government guidance. | Raise awareness and work in partnership with any groups expressing an interest in applying for funding. | Dependant on bidding rounds and allocation criteria | Awaiting further government guidance |
| Improve Information & Advice | | | | |
| What | How | Expected Outcome | When | Progress |
| Develop the Empty Homes pages on the website | Information will be developed during the first year of the implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy | To act as an access point to all information regarding empty homes, including links to external sources | October 2012 | Initial pages published |
| Develop an Empty Homes Information Pack | Produce a range of advisory leaflets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to the Empty Homes Strategy - Seller's Leaflet - Landlord's Leaflet - Repairs & Renovations Leaflet - Empty Homes Grant Leaflet | Engage actively with home owners of empty properties to support them in bringing their homes back into use | September 2012 | |
| Explore opportunities for access to the private rented module of the Home-Link CBL Scheme | Liaise with the Sub Regional Home-Link Manager regarding the development of the private rented module of the Home-Link CBL Scheme and publicise through the Information Pack and website | To provide a further option for home owners who wish to rent out their property through advertising via the CBL Scheme as well as receiving a landlord support package | October 2012 | Private Sector module currently in development |