



Empty Homes Strategy 2011 - 2014

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Foreword – Investing in Stafford Borough

Housing plays a vital role in ensuring those living in the Borough have safe, decent, affordable and sustainable homes. Quality housing and a safe and green environment are at the heart of the economic prosperity of the Borough and a thriving, sustainable community.

The Borough Council has to plan carefully not only to ensure that new housing is developed in line with this vision, but also that maximum use is made of the existing housing stock for the benefit of the local and wider community.

We recognise that home ownership is a major aspiration of many people within the Borough and we fully support the benefits that ownership brings to individuals and the community. However, we also recognise that empty homes are an issue both nationally and locally. At any one time, some 700,000 homes are empty nationwide and this represents over 3% of the housing stock. Whilst not all these homes are a problem and are a natural function of the housing market, in some cases support or intervention is needed to bring them back into use.

We have developed this Empty Homes Strategy understanding that some empty homes can cause significant problems to both neighbours and communities.

We recognise that bringing empty homes back into use:

- May have benefits for the owner and local community,
- May reduce local problems of vandalism and fly tipping and depressed house prices and housing blight,
- May help to restore local economic vitality and
- Increases council tax income, which benefits the wider community.

The Borough Council, through its Strategic Housing Functions, will be promoting the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan to identify empty homes and to bring them back into use, where possible.

We hope that this Strategy and Action Plan will help others to work with us in our community leadership role for the benefit of our residents and form the basis of partnership working to ensure Stafford Borough provides a better place to live, work, play and visit.

Cabinet Member for Community

Head of Environment

Summary

Stafford Borough Council's Empty Homes Strategy aims to take a risk-based approach to tackling empty homes, bringing a positive impact on the community - supporting both strong neighbourhoods and homeownership.

We shall

- implement our Empty Homes Strategy in a responsive and effective way.
- take a risk-based approach in prioritising actions where an individual long-term empty home may pose a risk to neighbourhoods
- hold information on empty homes in order to capture complaints from the public to help identify problematic homes and provide an understanding of the nature and number of complaints received.
- safeguard both homeowners and members of the local community by taking action, where appropriate, to ensure long-term problematic empty homes do not have a detrimental effect on the local community.
- aim to reduce vandalism and fly tipping, anti social behaviour associated with empty homes in the borough.
- offer advice and assistance to anybody who should wish to know more about how we can help bring an empty home back into use.

Chapter 1: Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this strategy is to look in detail at empty homes in Stafford Borough. The Strategy will look at why homes become empty, the profile of empty homes in the Borough, the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use and how the Council can assist in this process, whilst at the same time supporting the benefits that home ownership brings to individuals and the community.

What is an empty home?

- 2 An empty home is a dwelling or residential property that has been left unoccupied. Homes may become empty for a number of reasons and in many cases it is only for a temporary period. For example, a home may become empty for a short period whilst awaiting sale or let, other homes may be empty whilst they are renovated prior to reoccupation. These processes are a natural function of the housing market.
- 3 The Council distinguishes between 'empty homes' and 'long-term empty homes'. Empty homes are any home not currently occupied and these become long-term empty if unoccupied for longer than 6 months. Since no action may be required in the majority of empty homes, different actions and resources are applied to each category, both in terms of preventing a home from becoming long-term empty and in bringing homes back into use.
- 4 The main focus of Stafford Borough Council's Empty Homes Strategy is on the proportion of long-term empty homes that stand empty for six months or more. Usually, homes stand empty because there are fundamental underlying reasons preventing reoccupation. Such homes can become a major cause for concern, for example, where they are not being prepared for occupation and, in a minority of cases, are unlikely to come back into use without Local Authority intervention. For the purposes of this strategy, our definition of a long term empty home is: 'a dwelling that has been vacant for more than 6 months and which requires Local Authority assistance to bring back into use'.
- 5 Long term empty homes are a wasted resource; especially given that Stafford Borough has an identified annual affordable housing need of 293 dwellings (Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007). The number of households on the Housing Register has increased by 56% during 2008/09. In addition, empty homes can contribute to area decline and undermine community cohesion.

Why do homes become empty?

- 6 There are a number of reasons why homes become empty and are not brought back into use, these include:
- Lack of funds for refurbishment,
 - Reluctance to let on the private rented market,
 - Bankruptcy, repossession or abandonment,
 - Occupier being subject to long term care or hospitalisation,
 - Homes let through employment,
 - Probate, estate or legal ownership issues,
 - Lack of awareness of options,
 - Owners unable or not wishing to sell or rent, or
 - Waiting for a property chain to complete.
- 7 Many owners need support, information and encouragement to help them bring their empty home back into use. However, a minority of owners have little or no intention of doing anything with their empty home and appear content for it to remain empty and fall into disrepair, to the detriment of the neighbourhood.
- 8 This Strategy will attempt to look at why homes become empty, the benefits of bringing them back into use, how the Empty Homes Strategy links to other strategic documents, the profile of empty homes in the Borough and what the Council can do to bring empty homes back into use.

What are the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use?

- 9 Taking targeted action to bring empty homes back into use help tackle a number of social, economic and public health issues. Stafford Borough Council can take action or provide advice and assistance to make a positive contribution to the overall health and well being of local residents and the community. This Section will now look at who will benefit by bringing empty homes back into use.
- 10 **The Owner** – by bringing an empty home back into use an owner can benefit in a number of ways. If an empty home is sold the owner will receive capital income. If the property were let on the rented market, the owner would receive a regular monthly income. Leaving a home empty increases the risk of vandalism and crime, making the property costly or difficult to insure and leaving the owner vulnerable to losing their asset completely if it is destroyed by fire. If the empty home is subject to vandalism it will reduce in value affecting the owner's asset, should they wish to sell it.

- 11 **Local Residents** – bringing an empty home back into use will significantly reduce the opportunities for vandalism, fly tipping and anti-social behaviour. Unsightly homes can have a depressive effect on neighbouring house prices and also reduce pride in the community, as well as having a direct impact on adjoining homes through dampness and structural problems.
- 12 **The Local Economy** - bringing an empty home back into use encourages economic vitality, this can increase spending in the local economy and protects house prices within the neighbourhood. Unsightly homes deter investment in an area and can lead to decline or area blight.
- 13 **The Wider Community** - increased council tax income for occupied homes means that more money can be invested in other services within the Borough. Reduced demand on services such as the Fire and Rescue Service, the Police and the Council, means that resources can be used more effectively elsewhere. Bringing empty homes back into use can help reduce the demand for new build dwellings. This in turn, may reduce the pressure to build on green field sites, thus preserving the environment.
- 14 People in housing need benefit from increased availability, greater choice, improved standards of housing and more affordable housing. This will help reduce the time households spend on the Housing Register and lead to a reduced reliance on temporary accommodation.
- 15 It is important for Stafford Borough Council to be proactive when dealing with long-term empty homes. It is important to have an early warning system for potential long-term empty homes since this will enable the Council to target homes and help prevent them from becoming a problem. The longer a home remains empty, the greater the amount of disrepair it is likely to fall into. This will increase the cost associated with bringing it back into use.

Why produce an Empty Homes Strategy?

- 16 By producing an Empty Homes Strategy the Council can show that it has a targeted, effective and coordinated approach to tackling the problem of empty homes and that it has researched and identified the most effective solutions to meet local housing need. The Council will only target homes that pose a risk to the local community; this can be where an empty home is a centre for anti-social behaviour, poses a threat of injury or has a detrimental affect to house prices in the area.
- 17 The production and implementation of an Empty Homes Strategy can provide a range of benefits to the Council, key service providers, empty homeowners and the community:

- The Council benefits from meeting the housing needs of local people, generating additional Council Tax, preventing the empty homes becoming the focus of anti-social behaviour and helping to reduce the need to build on green field sites.
- The owners of empty homes will benefit from Council support and advice on options for the re-use of their empty home and how it could be turned into a valuable asset.
- Residents of the Borough will benefit through improvements to the existing built environment, helping maintain safe attractive neighbourhoods and preventing depreciation of property values.
- Services such as the Police and the Fire and Rescue Service will spend less time in dealing with issues arising from empty homes.
- Regeneration and increased investment in areas will also provide a boost to the morale of communities.
- A successful Empty Homes Strategy will also help provide more affordable housing, reducing the pressure on existing housing stock.

18 Empty homes can therefore become directly detrimental to both public and individual finances and can have a major effect on communities. Bringing empty homes back into use benefits the whole community.

Equalities and Diversity

19 Stafford Borough Council aims to ensure this Strategy has a positive impact on both homeowners and employees. To ensure that this happens an Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out on the Strategy and the implications of its contents. This helps ensure that the Empty Homes Strategy is inclusive and does not have a negative impact on any particular group on the basis of ethnicity, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief.

Chapter 2: Links to other Related Strategies and Plans

- 20 Chapter 1 has defined what an empty home is, and has shown the benefits of bringing long term empty homes back into use. It has also addressed why Stafford Borough Council should produce an Empty Homes Strategy. This chapter will identify how the Empty Homes Strategy links with other Council strategies and plans.

Stafford Borough Corporate Plan 2010 – 2016

- 21 Stafford Borough Council's Corporate Plan sets out the Council's four main priorities for the period 2010 – 2016:
- Priority 1 - Prosperity for all
 - Priority 2 - Cleaner, Greener, Safer Communities
 - Priority 3 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Priority 4 - Leading and Delivering for our Community

- 22 As part of creating Cleaner, Greener, Safer Communities the Corporate Plan 2010 - 2014 states one of the Council's aims is to enhance the built environment by working in partnership to deal effectively with unoccupied dwellings. The Council's Housing Group aims to invest in private sector housing through grants and loan assistance to owners and, this can help to provide an adequate supply of housing which the identified needs.

Stafford Borough's Housing Strategy 2008 - 2013

- 23 The Council's Housing Strategy 2008 – 2013 includes the following strategic priorities:
- To improve the physical condition of the housing stock across all tenures,
 - To prevent homelessness,
 - To increase the number of new affordable houses in the Borough,
 - To promote independent living for disabled people and
 - To work in partnership to deliver services.
- 24 This Empty Home Strategy is intended to expand on the Action Plan developed within the Housing Strategy and provides specific actions, which deliver the Council's Strategic Priorities. It should be noted that an updated Housing Strategy will be published in 2011.

Stafford Borough's Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy 2009 – 2011

- 25 The Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (PSHRP) sets out the Council's approach to private sector renewal and the regeneration of the private sector housing market in the Borough. The Policy details the way in which the Council's resources for Private Sector Housing Renewal will be allocated, and the legal and research framework that supports the priorities in the Policy, including assistance for owners to bring empty homes back into use.
- 26 The aim of the Policy is to work towards achieving the Decent Homes Standard, supporting the Government's objective that everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home. The House Condition and Energy Efficiency Survey 2008 estimates that 20.9% of the Borough's housing stock (that is, 11,400 homes) will fail to meet one or more of the Decent Homes Standard criteria, of which over 1,800 may be occupied by vulnerable households.
- 27 The private rented sector is recognised as an important sector in the housing market in providing homes for those people who cannot or prefer not to buy their home and are not well placed to be eligible for social housing. Historically, the private rented sector has often been the provider of poor quality housing. Both through the PSHRP and other activities the Council is working closely with Private Sector Landlords to support them and encourage (or enforce where necessary) good standards, for example the Landlord Accreditation Scheme, the Deposit Guarantee Scheme and Landlord Forums.
- 28 To support the Council's housing priorities, the PSHRP specifically sets out how the Council can use Empty Property Grants to help bring empty homes back into use. The Council can give a grant of up to £5,000 if the property is subsequently let on an Assured Shorthold Tenancy for a minimum of five years and is registered on any Landlord Accreditation Scheme supported by the Council.
- 29 Empty Property Grants to part-fund improvements have, in the past, proved a good incentive to enable homes to be brought back into use and made available for renting. Grant assistance of £22,000 paid to homeowners in 2007/08 helped in bringing 5 homes back into use, with works being completed to the value of £72,000. In 2008/09, grant assistance of £28,000 helped in bringing a further 6 homes back into use, with works being completed to the value of £114,000. In 2009/10 grant assistance of £26,363 helped bring 10 empty homes back into use. The PSHRP specifically sets out how the Council can use Empty Property Grants for this purpose.

Staffordshire Local Area Agreements 2008 – 2011

- 30 The Staffordshire Local Area Agreement (LAA) aims to improve the quality of life of people in Staffordshire by enhancing local services and economic prosperity. The four main priorities set out by the LAA are:
- A vibrant, prosperous and sustainable economy,
 - A Strong, safe and cohesive community,
 - Improved health and sense of well being and
 - A protected, enhanced and respected environment.
- 31 By bringing empty homes back into use the Empty Homes Strategy will help to create a 'vibrant prosperous and sustainable economy' and help provide a 'strong, safe and cohesive community'.

Chapter 3: Empty Homes Profile

- 32 Chapters 1 and 2 have identified the reasons why Stafford Borough Council should look to bring empty homes back into use, and how this Strategy links to other strategies and plans. This chapter will look at the profile of empty homes both nationally and regionally; also it will also look at empty homes in neighbouring authorities. It will then look in detail at the profile of empty homes within Stafford Borough.

National Picture

- 33 In April 2009 The Empty Homes Agency (www.emptyhomes.com) estimated that there were 651,993 empty homes in England, this represents 3% of the total housing stock. Approximately 307,001 of the empty homes were thought to have been vacant for longer than six months, this represents 1.36 % of the total housing stock.
- 34 The Government is committed to getting empty homes back into use to contribute towards meeting housing needs, both in the social and private sectors. The aim is to ensure that homes do not remain vacant for long periods of time and that they are brought back into use as quickly as possible. A number of measures have been introduced recently to assist local authorities to do this, such as allowing local authority officers who have responsibility for empty homes access to Council Tax data (Sec 85 Local Government Finance Act 2003) and from April 2004 the option for local authorities to choose to discontinue council tax discounts on empty homes. The government has also produced a guidance document "Empty Property: Unlocking the Potential" to help local authorities with this process.
- 35 Published in July 2007, the Housing Green Paper, "Homes for the Future: More Affordable, More Sustainable," sets out the Government's strategy for meeting a new target of over 240,000 net additional homes per year by 2016 (2 million new homes by 2016). The document makes specific reference for the need to tackle long-term empty homes.

The Regional Picture

- 36 The Empty Homes Agency estimates there are 72,000 empty homes in the West Midlands region of which 34,500 have been empty for six months or more. Social housing stock accounts for around 8,500 empty homes within the region, which leaves 63,500 within the private sector. These figures have decreased slightly over recent years. More local authorities are recognising the problems and dedicating resources towards resolving the issues surrounding long-term empty homes.

The Local Picture

- 37 Stafford Borough Council is part of the North Housing Market Area of the West Midlands Region, along with, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and East Staffordshire District Council. Other local authorities that are situated within Staffordshire are Cannock Chase District Council, Lichfield District Council, Tamworth Borough Council, and South Staffordshire District Council.
- 38 The Empty Homes Agency estimates there are 16,709 empty homes in Staffordshire of which 8,562 have been empty for six months or more.

Figure 1: Profile of Empty Homes in Staffordshire

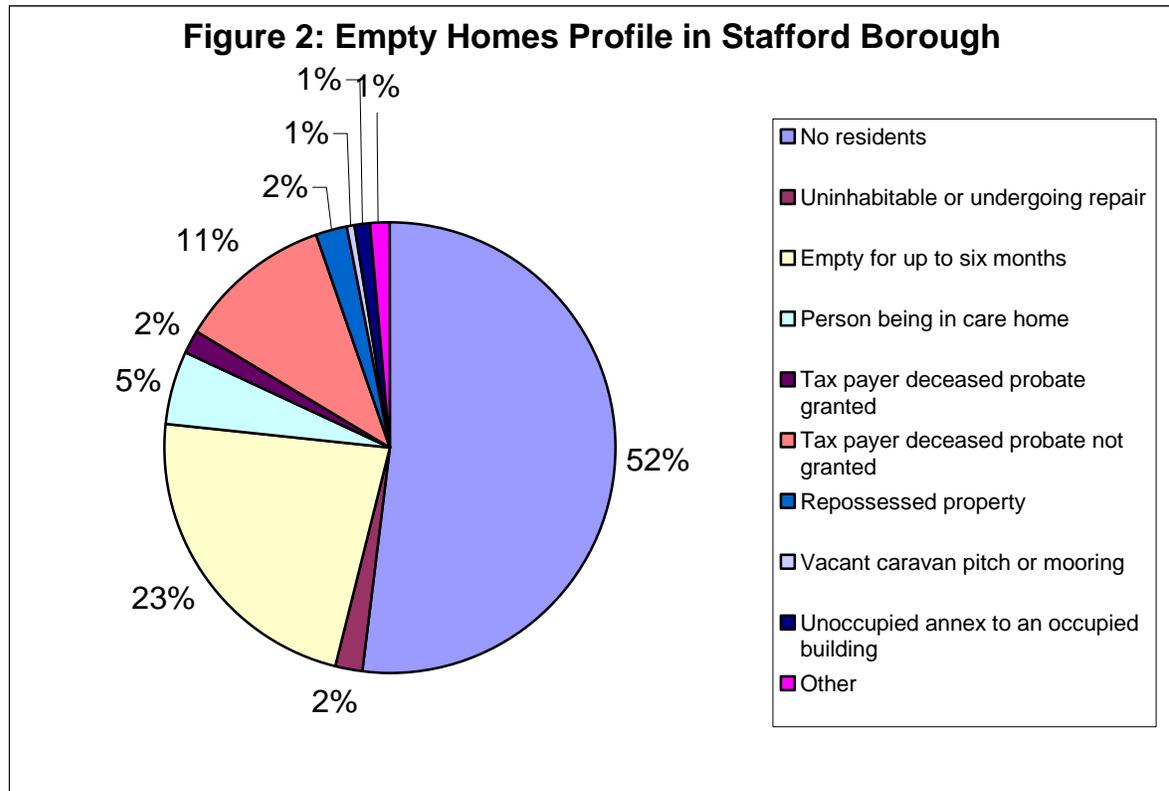
Local Authority	Total Empty Homes	Percentage of Housing Stock Empty	Empty Social Housing Stock	Privately Owned	Private Homes empty for more than 6 months
Cannock Chase	1077	2.46	107	970	504
East Staffordshire	1777	3.78	68	1709	530
Lichfield	1187	2.83	7	1120	525
Newcastle-under-Lyme	1729	3.24	90	1639	766
South Staffs	618	1.38	111	507	290
Stafford	1750	3.13	91	1659	926
Staffordshire Moorlands	1196	2.81	55	1141	843
Stoke-on-Trent	6677	5.96	543	6134	3941
Tamworth	698	2.19	89	609	237
Staffordshire Total	16,709	3.09	1161	15488	8562
West Midlands	72,329	3.09	78,938	613,279	303,285

Source: Empty Homes Agency, Stafford Borough Council

- 39 The table at Figure 1 shows that compared to the other Staffordshire authorities Stafford Borough has a slightly higher than average percentage of empty homes as a proportion of total housing stock. However, the percentage of empty properties as a proportion of total housing stock in Stafford Borough is identical to the national figure.

Empty Homes in Stafford Borough

- 40 As at April 2009 Stafford Borough Council's Council Tax records shows that there are approximately 1,750 empty homes within the Borough. This represents 3.13% of housing stock. This section will now take a closer look at the empty homes within the Borough. Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the reasons why homes are empty and receiving a Council Tax discount.



Source: Stafford Borough Council

- 41 Council Tax records show that of the 1,750 empty homes within the Borough 926 (52%) have no residents and have been empty for six months or longer. 406 (23%) homes have been empty for a period of less than six months. Other significant reasons for homes being empty are where the council tax payer is deceased and the home remains empty whilst probate has not been granted (11%), or where the owner is in a care home (5%).
- 42 As stated in the Introduction to this Strategy, many homes become empty for a short period whilst they are awaiting sale or let and others may remain empty whilst they are renovated or improved prior to occupation. These are natural functions of the housing market and it is likely the home will only be empty for a short period before being returned to use and therefore there is no need for the Council's intervention.

- 43 The main focus of Stafford Borough Council's Empty Homes Strategy is on the smaller, but significant proportion of empty homes that stand empty for over six months and are causing a significant blight on their neighbourhoods. The strategy will now look in more detail at the 926 homes (which represents 52% of the total number of empty homes in the Borough) that have been standing empty for six months or longer.

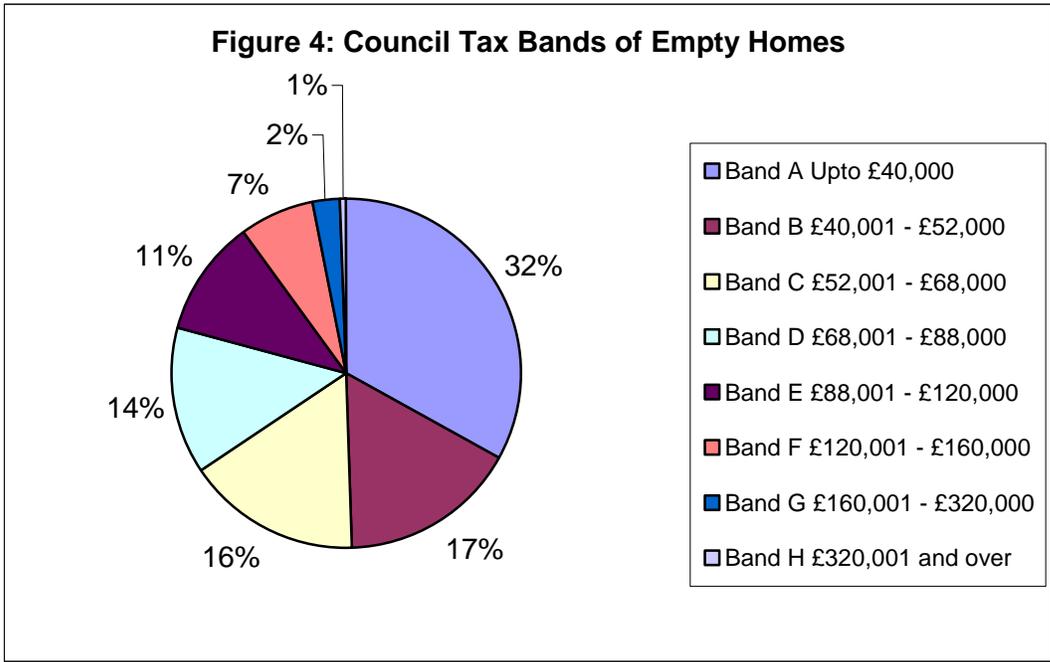
Council Tax Bands of Empty Homes

Figure 3: Council Tax Bands

	Number of Properties in Stafford Borough	Percentage	Number of Empty Homes in Stafford Borough	Percentage
Band A Up to £40,000	11672	21%	305	32%
Band B £40,001 - £52,000	12495	23%	154	17%
Band C £52,001 - £68,000	12298	22%	148	16%
Band D £68,001 - £88,000	8476	15%	127	14%
Band E £88,001 - £120,000	5500	10%	99	11%
Band F £120,001 - £160,000	3063	6%	65	7%
Band G £160,001 - £320,000	1485	3%	23	2%
Band H £320,001 and over	105	0%	5	1%
Total	55094	100%	926	100%

Source: Office of National Statistics, Stafford Borough Council

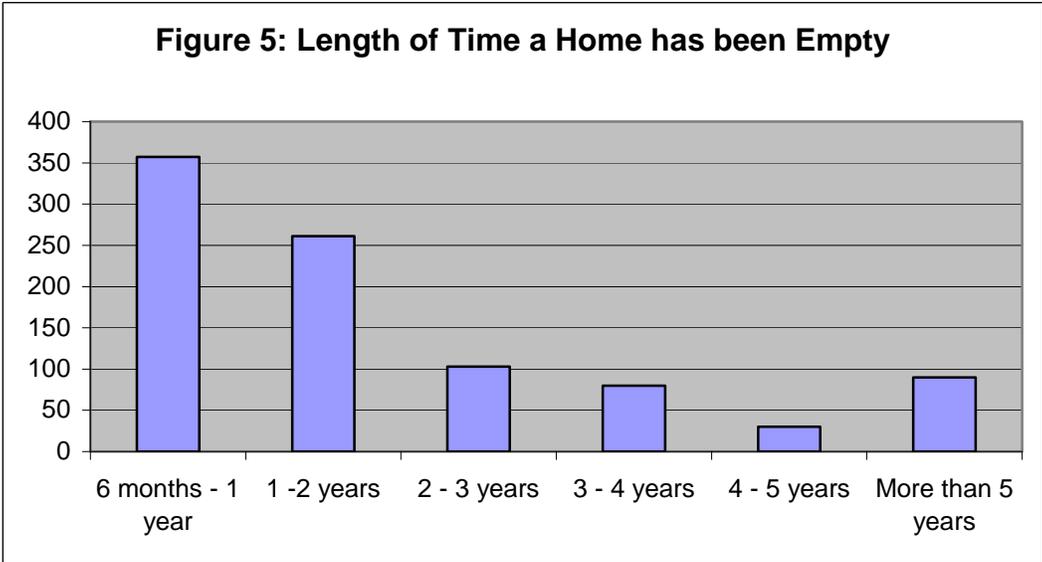
- 44 Figure 3 shows the number of homes in Stafford Borough and which Council Tax band they fall into. It should be noted that the Council Tax Band of a home reflects the value of that home, as it would have been on 1 April 1991.
- 45 Figure 3 shows that the largest proportion of homes within the Borough (23%) fall into Council Tax Band B. However, the largest proportion of empty homes fall into Band A.



Source: Stafford Borough Council

46 Figure 4 shows that the greatest proportion of homes that lie empty are those in the lower Council Tax Bandings. As homes increase in value, the proportion of them that are left empty for six months or more falls. The higher the value of a home, the less likely it is to become empty for a period of six months or more.

Length of Time Homes are Left Empty



Source: Stafford Borough Council

- 47 Figure 5 shows that 39% of homes in Stafford Borough have been empty between 6 months and 1 year; 78% of homes that are empty have been empty for up to three years; 22% of homes have been empty for up to three years and 8% have been empty for more than five years.
- 48 Analysis of Council Tax data shows that 71% of empty homes are situated in Stafford Town, and a further 10 % are situated in Stone; therefore 81 % of empty homes in the Borough are in urban areas. However, there are no particular 'hot spots' of empty homes within the urban areas of the Borough. The remaining 19 % of empty homes are pepper-potted throughout the rural areas of the Borough.

Empty Homes Survey

- 49 In July 2009 Stafford Borough Council Environmental Health Officers conducted a sample survey of 100 homes that were registered on the Council Tax database as empty for 6 months or more as at 1 April 2009. The survey was designed to capture information including the age, type, condition, the general neighbourhood and any evidence of renovation of each empty home. Neighbours were also asked about their views on the empty home.
- 50 From the 100 empty homes surveyed, 25 had been returned to use when the Officer called. This indicates that although the homes had been empty for a period of more than 6 months prior to the visit, they had been returned to use without the need for Council intervention. In most cases the homes had been empty whilst being offered for sale, or empty while renovation work was being carried out prior to being re-occupied, thus indicating a significant 'churn' in the Borough's housing market.
- 51 37% of homes surveyed were semi detached, 30% terraced, 25% detached and 5% were flats. 25% of the empty homes were built before 1900; 21% were built between 1901 and 1945; 15% were built between 1946 and 1960; 39% were built between 1960 and 2009.
- 52 50% of the homes surveyed were judged to be good condition, 32% appeared to be structurally sound; 10% were in need of refurbishment; 6% in need of substantial repair and 2% derelict. 31% of homes had evidence of renovation being undertaken.
- 53 87% of the empty homes surveyed were single dwellings situated next to homes that were occupied, 5% were in isolated areas, 2% were substantially affecting the neighbourhood and 6% were in an area with two or more empty homes. Indications from the survey were, therefore, that empty homes were not causing any significant levels of blight on particular neighbourhoods.

- 54 The survey has shown that 68% of people living by an empty home were not concerned about the home being empty. 21% of people were very concerned and 11% were only slightly concerned. The main concern voiced by those living next to an empty home was that it could be a focal point for anti-social behaviour. Some neighbours were concerned that if the property became unsightly it could affect the local community and have a negative affect on house prices.
- 55 When neighbours were asked what they would like to see happen to the empty home, 52% of people said they would like to see it returned to owner occupation, 34% said they would like it to be left empty and 14% said they would like it to be returned to use as affordable housing. Where people wanted the home to remain empty this was because it was not having a negative affect on them, they were not affected by noise and had more car parking space whilst the home was empty.

Summary of Findings

- 56 The analysis of empty homes in Stafford Borough has found that empty homes are more likely to be smaller properties in the lower Council Tax bands, the majority of long-term empty homes are left empty between six months and two years, and most empty homes are to be found in the urban areas of the Borough. These findings will help develop the aims and objectives of the strategy.
- 57 The surveys carried out showed that neighbours were generally only concerned about an empty home if it was affecting them. Where there were no negative affects there was little concern over the home being empty.
- 58 The survey showed that there is a significant level of 'churn' in the housing market, although some homes were empty for longer than six months, they were only empty whilst they were being sold or having work carried out. Although they fall in to the definition of a long-term empty home, they do not need Council intervention to be brought back into use.
- 59 Within the Borough, there are no concentrations of empty homes or areas of blight such as can be found in major urban areas. Assistance has been provided for long-term empty homes by way of advice and in some cases grant incentives. Other homes have been prevented from remaining empty in the long term by supporting and encouraging the setting up of new tenancies and by providing access to the Council's Deposit Guarantee Scheme.
- 60 Stafford Borough Council's Housing Strategy sets a target of bringing 50 long-term empty homes back into use by 2011. Between 1st April 2008 and 30th March 2009, the Council helped bring 80 privately owned homes back in to use, of which 6 had been long term empty, the remaining

intervention work helped to prevent homes remaining empty in the long term.

Chapter 4: Strategic Aim, Priorities and Objectives

- 61 Chapter 3 provided an analysis of the profile of empty homes within the Borough, this information, and the outcomes of a Multi-Agency Focus Group on Empty Homes, has helped in the development of the aims and priorities of this strategy.

Strategic Aim

- 62 The overarching aim of the Strategy is to propose and implement a range of measures that will, directly or indirectly, help return long-term private sector empty homes back into use where it is identified that assistance or, in a small minority of cases, intervention may be required.

The Council's Five Priorities:

- 63 In order to achieve the strategic aim of the Strategy, we have identified the following five priorities:

Priority 1: To work in partnership with other agencies to reduce the number of long-term empty homes in Stafford Borough by bringing them back into use.

- 64 Reducing the number of long-term empty homes will increase the housing supply in the Borough; it will also increase revenue received by the Council through Council Tax receipts.

Priority 2: To minimise the number of homes becoming long-term empty (six months or more) by taking a proactive approach to identifying them early and working with owners as soon as possible.

- 65 By taking a proactive approach the Council can help prevent homes from becoming long-term empty. The longer a home is left empty the more disrepair it could fall into and the higher the cost of bringing it back into use.

Priority 3: To raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use and provide resources for owners of empty homes.

- 66 Raising public awareness of how the Council and its partners can help bring empty homes back into use and by providing assistance it is hoped owners will be less likely to leave their home empty.

Priority 4: To take enforcement action when appropriate.

- 67 By taking enforcement action, where appropriate, the Council can help return homes back into use, where they have become a problem.

Priority 5: To develop a sustainable level of community cohesion through re-occupation of empty homes

- 68 Community cohesion can be defined as how the community bonds and brings people together in society, particularly in the context of cultural diversity and a sense of belonging. Bringing homes back into use can have a positive effect on the whole community and helps prevent the decline of a community.

Objectives

- 69 In order to implement the priorities of this Strategy, Stafford Borough Council has set the following objectives:
- The Council's Housing Strategy aims to help facilitate 50 long-term empty homes being brought back into use by 2011. The Housing Group Service Plan has an annual target of bringing 80 homes back into use; however, this target includes all empty homes and not just long-term empty homes.
 - Work with Stafford Borough Council's Revenues & Benefits Service to identify when a home has been empty for six months and, if appropriate, make contact with the owner.
 - Set up regular liaison meetings with community groups that are affected by empty homes and organisations that have an interest in empty homes being brought back into use, including the Fire & Rescue Service, the Police and Registered Social Landlords.
 - Provide a single point of contact for advice on empty homes in order to provide details of the resources available.
 - Work with Stafford and Rural Homes to identify empty homes that can be bought on the open market and brought back into use as affordable housing.

Chapter 5: Delivery of Priorities and Objectives

- 70 Chapter 4 looked at the Council's strategic aim, priorities and objectives. We will look at how Stafford Borough Council will deliver these priorities and objectives
- 71 The Housing Group will carry out the work required to achieve the priorities and objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy. The Housing Group sits within the Environmental and Health Service and is made up of the Housing Standards Team, the Housing Strategy Team and the Housing Options Team.

Raising Awareness

- 72 In order to carry out the priorities and objectives of this Strategy it is important to raise awareness of empty homes and the Council's role in bringing them back into use. To ensure the effective operation of the Strategy, and 'joined-up' working across the Council, it is necessary to adopt a corporate approach. The Housing Group intend to liaise regularly with the following services whose work impacts on empty homes issues.

Revenues and Benefits Service

- 73 Information on empty homes from Council Tax records is crucial to maintaining accurate data. The Housing Group will liaise closely with the Council Tax Service to ensure initiatives relating to homes that have been empty for longer than six months are brought to the attention of owners.

Environmental and Health Service

- 74 Environmental Health Officers, in the normal course of their duties, may come across homes that are empty. Officers may be able to advise on the particular circumstances and history of long-standing problem empty homes. They also have established relationships with a number of local private sector housing providers and are fully acquainted with local housing standards. Therefore, they can provide a valuable input into the process of returning empty homes to use.

Registered Social Landlords

- 75 In February 2006 Stafford Borough Council voluntarily transferred its housing stock to Stafford and Rural Homes (SARH). SARH Housing Officers work across the Borough, and can be well placed to pass on and receive information from the community. They are also particularly aware of the status of former social housing stock that has been subject to the

Right To Buy. Through closer communication we will ensure that empty homes can be referred to the Housing Group for any action required.

National Campaigns

- 76 Stafford Borough Council helps raise awareness of the issue of empty homes and the Council's role in bringing them back into use with key partners and stakeholders. This can be achieved by using the local media during national campaigns; for example: during the 'National Empty Homes Week' 24 – 28 November 2009, the public were invited to report problematic empty homes to the Council or direct to the Empty Homes Agency.

Stafford Borough Council's Website

- 77 The Council's website has information relating to empty homes, including how they can be reported and how the Council can help bring them back into use. The website provides easy access to advice and information. It also provides clear information on an alternative route for enquiries and service requests.

Information Pack

- 78 The Housing Group have developed an information pack to assist owners of empty homes and inform them of the help and support that may be available to them. Packs are available from the Housing Group on 01785 619313. housingadvice@staffordbc.gov.uk

Awareness in the wider community

Stafford Borough Councillors

- 79 Councillors can act as an important link with the community and their ability to publicise and shape local issues is invaluable. With their political and civic links, Councillors can promote partnerships within the community, and thus play a major role in facilitating the priorities and objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy.

Estate Agents, Lettings Agents and Private Landlords

- 80 Estate Agents, Lettings Agents and Private Landlords are key partners in ensuring private sector empty homes are reoccupied, both in terms of identifying empty homes and also finding buyers and tenants. These partners can also provide valuable information regarding market conditions.

Private Developers

- 81 By working closely with private developers, particularly those with a large quantity of unsold units, the Council can look to provide incentives for buyers, or encourage the developers to sell to a Registered Social Landlord.

Public Sector Organisations

- 82 The Housing Group will work with other public sector organisations such as Ministry of Defence, the Police and the Fire and Rescue Service to identify empty homes, where there are issues of particular concern to these organisations.

Links with other local authorities and national bodies

- 83 The sharing of information and ideas regarding the problems associated with empty homes is beneficial to the country as a whole and will undoubtedly assist the Government in updating its national strategy. It is essential that the Council keeps itself informed and updated regarding the development of any successful empty homes initiatives that are put into effect by other local authorities and national bodies. To this end the Council's designated Empty Homes Officer will continue their association with forums such as the West Midlands Empty Property Officers' Group, the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP) and the Empty Homes Agency.

Maintain and update data

- 84 Data collection is important if we are to:
- Determine the extent of the existing problem and monitor trends
 - Continue to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound targets for reducing the number of problem empty homes,
 - Measure progress,
 - Gather routine updates from existing Council sources.
- 85 The specific objective is to maintain records of empty homes in the Borough that may require intervention.

Existing Satisfactory Dwelling Programme

- 86 Stafford Borough Council has entered into a partnership with SARH to assist the purchase of empty homes from the open market and convert them into affordable housing. Such homes are called Existing Satisfactory Dwellings (ESD). The Council will continue to support other Registered

Social Landlords in the acquisition of affordable housing from open market sources.

- 87 In order to deliver the objectives of this strategy effectively, The Housing Group will look to set up regular liaison meetings with organisations that come into contact with, or are affected by empty homes. The Action Plan at Annex B on page 33, details how the priorities and objectives of this strategy will be carried out.

Chapter 6: Measures to Bring Empty Homes Back into Use

- 88 The Council has a number of measures it can use to assist in returning empty homes back into use; this includes advice, assistance, incentive schemes and enforcement. Where the Council considers enforcement action to be appropriate the approach will be fair, equitable and incremental. The primary function of central and local government enforcement work is to protect the public, the environment and various other groups such as consumers. There is a need to carry out enforcement functions in a consistent, practical and equitable manner, which, in turn, will help to promote a thriving local and national economy. By complying with our Service Enforcement Policy, Stafford Borough Council commits itself to the policies and procedures set out below.
- 89 Where measures to bring homes back into use are progressive, before moving from one of the following approaches to another, we will ensure that owners are fully advised and given an opportunity and sufficient time to take measures of their own to bring their homes back into use.

Priorities for Action

- 90 Whilst it is important to bring all empty homes back into use, the Council recognises that some homes cause greater concern than others. In order to maximise the effectiveness of limited resources and to protect individual property rights, we must prioritise intervention. The information gathered would allow the Council to take into consideration the location of the home and its effect on the surrounding neighbourhood. Owners of empty homes in good repair, where it is reasonable for the home to be unoccupied, will, in most cases, not be a priority for intervention beyond advice and assistance.

Proactive Advice and Assistance

- 91 Where appropriate, owners of homes that have been left empty for over six months will be contacted by a member of the Housing Group and asked what their future intentions are for the dwelling. General advice will be offered with regard to such matters as repairs, finding prospective tenants and accessing professional advice. This approach is being continually refined and an enhanced advice and assistance service will be made available for all owners. This will comprise an information pack covering such areas as:

- Advice and good practice on the carrying out of repairs,
- Energy efficiency,
- Grant assistance,

- Council contacts, landlords forums,
 - Landlord Accreditation Schemes and
 - Association of letting agents.
- 92 This information pack will be sent to all owners of empty homes contacted, and a record made that this advice has been issued.

Incentives for Bringing Empty Homes Back into Use

- 93 The Council has the following incentives to help bring empty homes back into use:

Deposit Guarantee Scheme

- 94 Homes can remain empty because potential tenants find it difficult to raise the money for a deposit and rent in advance at the same time. The Housing Options Team currently offer assistance to households in gaining access to suitable accommodation by guaranteeing the deposit to the landlord in the form of a bond. If we offer such assistance, we will maintain contact with the tenant to ensure they are paying the rent and abiding by their tenancy conditions.

Discretionary Empty Property Grants

- 95 To encourage the return to use of empty homes, the Council's Housing Renewal Policy provides for Empty Property Grants. The grant aims to provide 50% funding of up to £5,000 dwelling to achieve the Decent Homes Standard. A decent home is a home that meets the statutory minimum standards of warmth, weatherproofing and reasonably modern facilities.
- 96 Grants are repayable to the Council in the event of a transfer of ownership or change of tenure within 5 years. We currently offer financial assistance (subject to the availability of funds) to owners to help bring their houses back into a useable condition, followed by a period of 5 years during which the property must be let on an Assured Shorthold Tenancy. Grant funding for empty homes is at the Council's discretion and subject to available resources.
- 97 Throughout all of the above it is acknowledged that the owners of empty homes have often acquired their property through inheritance or some other unplanned event and so can be unsure about the most suitable course of action to take. The Council can provide advice and assistance to help such owners decide what's best for their particular circumstances.

Capital Investment

- 98 Through Section 106 of The Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Council can receive payments in lieu of affordable housing on some developments within the Borough. Where appropriate, the Council will look to using such payments to support local Registered Social Landlords in purchasing empty homes from the open market and converting them into socially rented accommodation (ESDs).

Enforcement

- 99 This is considered to be the option of “last resort” some empty homes can become a blight or nuisance to a neighbourhood and can pose a danger to the public health. There is a range of statutory powers available to the Council to deal with specific problems associated with an empty home. Issues such as nuisance, vermin infestation, fly tipping and dangerous or insecure buildings can be addressed by statutory action and this permits the Council to serve notice and carry out works in default and/or to prosecute for non-compliance. Such powers include:

Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (S.15)

- 100 A notice can be served on the homeowner where a home is considered to be ‘detrimental to the amenities of the neighbourhood’

Building Act 1984 (S. 76-79)

- 101 Provides powers to tackle ‘dangerous and ruinous’ structures.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982

- 102 Under Section 9, the Council has the power to secure empty homes against access, where there is considered to be a danger to public health.

Environmental Protection Act 1990 (S.79-80)

- 103 These powers are used to remedy conditions that are detrimental to health or circumstances that constitute a statutory nuisance.

Housing Act 2004

- 104 The Council has the power to remedy property conditions that pose a threat to the health and safety of potential occupiers and visitors.
- 105 In most cases, failure by the owner to comply with a notice can lead to the Council arranging for the works to be done in default. If the costs cannot be recovered by billing the owner, a charge is placed on the property. Where large debts occur to the Council and there is no prospect of that debt being recovered, the Council may consider forcing the sale of the home. After visiting an empty home, the Council will liaise with the

relevant services to ensure that they understand the significance of the issue and work with them to improve matters.

Effective Sanctions

- 106 The Council will initially make every effort to work with owners of empty homes identified as requiring intervention to enable them to voluntarily return their property into use. However, as time passes and the home remains empty or deteriorates, the Council will take a phased approach to enforcement action in line with the Service's Enforcement. Our approach will give the empty homeowner every opportunity to bring their home back into use on a voluntary basis but committing to intervene where this proves necessary or appropriate;

Phase 1 - Option appraisal and initial timescale

Action

- 107 Before any formal action is considered and where the empty home is identified as a priority, the Council will seek to work with the homeowner to identify the range of options available to them to bring the dwelling back into use. This may involve practical guidance on matters such as letting, grant assistance, building regulations and planning, etc, drawing, as required, on the expertise of other Council services. The aim will be to help the owner arrive at a solution that meets their needs and preferences, whilst achieving the overall aims and objectives of our Strategy.

Outcome

- 108 The owner will receive an Information Pack and a letter to confirm the agreed options and timescales for returning the home back into use.

Phase 2 - Commencement of formal process

Action

- 109 If the owner can demonstrate a good reason for the delay or failure to implement the agreed option, a revised timescale or option will be negotiated. If the owner otherwise fails to make satisfactory progress, we will issue a further letter.

Outcome

- 110 Revisit phase 1 or a further letter to the owner as follows:
1. A letter to confirm that satisfactory progress has not been made.
 2. A letter requesting a reason for lack of progress.
 3. A letter to confirm that formal action will ensue if no reasonable explanation or undertaking is offered.

Phase 3 - Formal Action

Action

- 111 Where the owner of a home is untraceable or demonstrates an unwillingness to work with the Council or where satisfactory progress has not been made, the Council will consider taking appropriate enforcement action:

Outcome

1. Formal Notice/works in default or,
2. Enforced Sale Procedure or,
3. Empty Dwelling Management Order (EMDO) or,
4. Compulsory Purchase Order. (CPO).

Enforced Sale

- 112 This option may be considered for homes where the Council has had to use its enforcement powers (see above) to abate nuisances or to secure a home. The owner must pay charges that are raised against the property by the Council for carrying out the works in default. Such charges can be made against the home and unless the owner pays, the Council can force its sale to recover its costs. With this process, the Council's charge takes precedent over any outstanding loans or debts secured against the home. The owner will receive whatever money is left when the Council and other debtors have recovered their costs, and the owner will also be responsible for their own legal costs. The Council will seek to ensure that the enforced sale of any home leads to its rapid re-occupation or redevelopment and does not perpetuate the misery of empty homes into the future.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders

- 113 Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EMDO) are a welcome addition to the powers available to the Council to bring empty homes back into use. EDMO's are a means by which the Council can temporarily take over the management of a home to repair and then let the property. EDMO's may be suitable where, despite the Council's best endeavours, owners have failed to bring a home back into use and it is cost effective to do so. Each case will be considered on its own merits.
- 114 We will be seeking Registered Social Landlord partner to manage homes subject to EDMO's.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

- 115 Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) are a means by which the Council can acquire land and buildings for housing purposes. Having gained possession we will seek to dispose of these homes with safeguards to ensure that the homes are made habitable and occupied. CPOs are a

lengthy legal process that is not to be undertaken lightly but CPOs will be used in appropriate cases where, despite the Council's best endeavours, owners have consistently failed to bring homes back into occupation. As with EDMO's, each case will be considered on its own merits.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

- 116 Chapter 3 sets out the profile of Empty Homes within Stafford Borough and, in paragraphs 55 – 59, summarises the conclusions drawn from the data gathered. Chapter 4 sets out the Council’s Aim, Priorities and Objectives, developed from our consultation with key partners and research conclusions. Chapter 5 sets out how the Council will deliver the Priorities and Chapter 6 outlines the measures the Council will use to bring empty homes back into use. Chapter 7 now draws together the main themes from the Strategy and provides the basis for our Action Plan at Annex B below.
- 117 A key theme running through the Strategy is the advantages that bringing empty homes back into use has for individual owners and the community. Awareness raising with the community, homeowners and the Council’s partners is therefore crucial to progressing the overall Aim of the Strategy.
- 118 The development of information for homeowners and partners, through the Council’s web site and information packs and promotional literature, will support the Strategy’s Priorities and Objectives.
- 119 Working in partnership with other agencies is also key, both in terms of implementing and resourcing the Strategy. In addition, partnering is important in terms of delivering the Strategy’s outcomes and supporting the awareness-raising theme. The Landlords’ Forum and the establishment of an Empty Homes Working Group are crucial aspects of partnership working.
- 120 Further to partnership working is the ongoing close working relationship with Stafford and Rural Homes, the main social housing provider within the Borough. Stafford and Rural Homes and other Registered Social Landlords can bring both expertise and resources to delivering the empty homes solutions contained within the Action Plan.
- 121 Information on current empty homes and the Council’s policy infrastructure to support the empty homes work must be up to date and effective. This will ensure that officers are well informed and are proactive and that the Council has a full range of options available to deal appropriately with empty homes.
- 122 The actions developed in response to the pepper-potted distribution and profile of empty homes across the Borough, Priorities and Objectives identified in this Strategy, must be delivered proportionately, recognise the aspirations of owners and be within the resources available to the Council.

Key Contacts

For advice and information on bring empty homes back into use:

Housing Standards Team
Environmental and Health Services
Civic Centre
Riverside
Stafford ST19 5JG
01785 619 000
ehadmin@staffordbc.gov.uk

For information relating to Council Tax:

Revenues and Benefits
Civic Centre
Riverside
Stafford ST19 5JG
01785 619 000

For queries relating to this Strategy:

Stephen Ward
Environmental and Health Services
Civic Centre
Riverside
Stafford ST19 5JG
01785 619 000
ehadmin@staffordbc.gov.uk

The Empty Homes Agency:

Empty Homes Agency
Downstream Building
1 London Bridge
London
SE1 9BG
T: 020 7022 1870
F: 020 7681 3214
E: info@emptyhomes.co.uk

Action Plan

This action plan sets out how Stafford Borough Council will deliver its Empty Homes Strategy. The Action Plan will be refreshed on an annual basis through the use of consultation and an Empty Homes Action Group.

Action	Outcome	Milestone	Resources	Lead Partner	Target Date
Raise awareness of empty homes and the Council's role in bringing them back into use.	Residents of the Borough are aware of the Council's Strategy to deal with empty homes.	Annual press coverage to coincide with 'National Empty Homes Week'.	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	December 2010 Ongoing
Work with Revenues and Benefits Service to develop and maintain a database of empty homes	The Housing Group will contact owners of long-term empty homes to advise of the support available.	Have in place a procedure to contact owner of empty homes that qualify for Council Tax "C Discount" within 28 days of receiving the information from Revenues and Benefits Service.	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	April 2011
Provide an information pack for owners of empty homes	Information pack is sent to owners of empty homes offering advice and assistance.	Feedback on the information pack has been received and reported to the Empty Homes Action Group	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	Review of feedback October 2011

Action	Outcome	Milestone	Resources	Lead Partner	Target Date
Provide an empty homes awareness pack for professionals who may come into contact with empty homes.	Awareness packs are developed and distributed	50 awareness pack distributed to professionals	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	April 2011
Encourage bringing empty homes back into use through the Landlord Forum	Landlords are aware of the support the Council can provide in bringing empty homes back into use	90 empty homes brought back into use per year with Council assistance.	Empty Property Grants Deposit Guarantee Scheme	Stafford Borough Council	September 2010
Record and maintain information on empty homes where intervention is felt appropriate	Records are kept so the Council can track progress empty homes where intervention action was necessary	10 long-term empty homes are returned to use through intervention and support from the Council.	Capital resources as allocated in the annual review of the Private Sector Renewal Policy.	Stafford Borough Council	April 2011
Set up an Empty Homes Action Group	An action group is set up to help bring empty homes back into use	Action group meets on a six monthly basis to review progress of the Action Plan	Existing staff resources Partner organisations	Stafford Borough Council	April 2011

Action	Outcome	Milestone	Resources	Lead Partner	Target Date
Ensure appropriate enforcement policies are in place	A working procedure is in place and enforcement action is able to be audited against the procedure	Procedure is reviewed on a annual basis	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	October 2011
Work with Registered Social Landlords to support the Council's enforcement action	Long-term empty homes that have been a blight on the neighbourhood are returned to use having a positive impact on community cohesion.	1 empty home has been purchased through a Compulsory Purchase Order by the Council and returned to use by July 2010	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	July 2010
Periodically seek public opinion	Refresh of Empty Homes Survey	Survey conducted annually	Existing staff resources	Stafford Borough Council	Annual

This document can be made available on request in large print, audiocassette, Braille or in another language. It may take some days to transcribe it. If you would like a copy in one of these formats then contact Housing Options on 01785 619353.

Alternatively you can e-mail your request to housingadvice@staffordbc.gov.uk.

[Arabic]

ولو كنت بحاجة إلى مزيد من المعلومات بخصوص هذا المنشور فيرجى الاتصال بمجلس بلدة ستافورد [Stafford Borough Council] على الرقم 01785 619 000 .

[Hindi]

यदि आपको इस प्रकाशन के बारे में अधिक जानकारी की आवश्यकता हो तो कृपया स्टैफोर्ड बरो परिषद [Stafford Borough Council] से 01785 619 000 पर संपर्क करें।

[Punjabi]

ਜੇਕਰ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਸ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ਼ਨ ਦੇ ਬਾਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਹੋਰ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਟੈਫੋਰਡ ਬਾਰੋ ਪਰਿਸ਼ਦ [Stafford Borough Council] ਨੂੰ 01785 619 000 ਉੱਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

[Urdu]

اگر آپ کو اس اشاعت کے بارے میں مزید معلومات کی ضرورت ہو تو براہ کرم اسٹیفورڈ بروکونسل [Stafford Borough Council] سے 01785 619 000 پر رابطہ کریں۔

Chinese]

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