

# Empty Property Strategy 2007–2012

2011/12 update

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**Empty Property Strategy 2011/12 update**

# Welcome to the 2011/12 Update for Birmingham's Empty Property Strategy

## Welcome from Councillor Lines, Cabinet Member for Housing

**There are currently around 1.7 million households on housing waiting lists around Britain, but reports suggest that less than 100,000 new homes will be built in the UK in 2011. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of homes lie empty.**

Empty properties are often poorly maintained. They can have a negative impact on their neighbourhood, making

them appear scruffy or neglected and lowering house prices.

In Birmingham we are tackling the problem of empty properties – and at the same time creating housing and improving our city. We encourage responsible ownership through a range of methods; from providing free advice and information to empty property owners, to taking legal action when necessary.

Launched in December 2007, the 2007-2012 strategy and action plan updates the 2003 strategy in order to include new initiatives and challenging performance targets to be achieved by 2012.

- Significant improvements have been made in dealing with empty homes since the publication of Birmingham's first Empty Property Strategy in 2003.



- The strategy has attracted much positive attention to Birmingham's proactive stance in dealing with long-term empty properties and has been identified as a model of good practice by the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services.
- In August 2011, there were less than 9,000 private sector empty properties in the city – a drop of over 5,000 from 2003.

Birmingham has clearly had considerable success tackling empty properties across all tenures, and we aim to continue our good work.

The Strategy Action Plan (see Appendix B) targets affordable property types and the areas of the city with the most overcrowding. The plan also identifies a number of forward looking actions designed to ensure that we continue to seek to be innovative and improve the way we work.

Dealing with empty properties is an essential and cost-effective part of helping Birmingham become a better place to live.

**“The strategy has been identified as a model of good practice by the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services . . .”**

**Councillor John Lines  
Cabinet Member for Housing**



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Lines".





Kentish Road

– before



Kentish Road

– after



The Empty Property Team proactively seeks out properties which Council Tax records indicate have been empty for more than five years

# Empty property strategy update and revised action plan 2011/12

**Following its formal launch in December 2007 the strategy has been reviewed annually to assess and track progress against strategy targets and to consider ways to further improve the service.**

## **1. Local Performance Indicators**

In Birmingham we have developed our own local empty property performance indicators. These are helpful in keeping councillors and the local community informed on progress against local priorities. They are also designed to reflect these local priorities more closely. From the outset the

2007-2012 strategy has included sub-targets for specific property types and locations.

### **Interventions**

Intervention is the term we use to describe any form of work we undertake. Birmingham is currently vice-chair of the Empty Homes Network. The members of this group have agreed to categorise empty homes as needing either 'intensive' or 'low-level' interventions.

- Intensive interventions are those relating to problematic, long-term empty homes that are

unlikely to be returned to use without sustained, proactive intervention and enforcement action.

- Low-level interventions are those where simple advice and guidance proves enough to prompt owners into action.

Appendix A shows how we have performed against our headline targets for 2010/11. We have consistently met and exceeded our targets, which is why we have increased the total target for empty properties to be returned to use through intensive interventions from 1,250 to 1,400.

### **Properties that have stood empty for more than five years**

The longer a property is empty, the more dilapidated and problematic it is likely to become. These are also the properties likely to need sustained intervention in order to be returned to use.

Following the 2007/08 review a new sub-target was introduced for returning long-term empty properties to use. The Empty Property Team proactively investigates all properties which council tax records indicate have been empty for more than five years, regardless of whether they have been reported as problematic. Of the 282 properties requiring intensive intervention to return them to use during 2010/11, 48% (136) had been empty for over 5 years. It is worth noting, however, that this equates to 53% of the annual target of 253 successful interventions.

### **Family sized homes (3+ bedrooms) in council tax bands A to C**

There aren't enough affordable family homes in the city. To contribute towards addressing this shortfall, the Empty Homes Strategy contains a sub-target where 60% of all private sector properties returned to use must have three or more bedrooms and be in council tax bands A to C. In 2010/11, 72% of

properties the team returned to use were of this type.

### **East Birmingham Housing Market Area and the former Urban Living area**

We are aware that in two areas of the city in particular, East Birmingham Housing Market Area and the former Urban Living area, there are relatively high levels of both overcrowding and empty homes. The strategy action plan has been developed to reflect and address this shortfall. In 2010/11, 101 properties were returned to use in these areas as a result of sustained and intensive intervention.

### **Properties returned to use through low-level interventions**

As previously pointed out, many properties returned to use as a consequence of the team's action are not counted as 'full' interventions. Nevertheless, the team dedicates time and resources to achieving these and they undoubtedly have an impact. To reflect this, a local performance indicator of 100 low-level interventions has been set up to 2012. In 2007/2008 we achieved 95 low-level interventions, and in 2010/2011 we achieved 119.

## **2. Review of Policy Tools**

Birmingham City Council has a number of enforcement action options that it can adopt in

cases where persuasion or the use of incentives has proved to be unsuccessful.

### **Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)**

CPOs are a lengthy process that the council does not undertake lightly. They are only used in appropriate cases, where despite the council's best endeavours an owner has repeatedly failed to bring an empty property back into use. In many cases the commencement of CPO action prompts an owner to act, where all previous dialogue has failed. During 2010/11 seven properties were vested by the city using CPO powers. On 1 September 2011 there were 22 further CPO cases being processed by the Private Sector Empty Properties Team.

### **Retention of Larger CPO Properties**

Given current housing market conditions, there is no guarantee that a property will sell quickly when the city has succeeded in buying it through CPO action. The strategy action plan (Appendix B) already targets areas of the city where empty homes and overcrowding are most prevalent. Given the current shortage of large, affordable housing in the city, tenure change to social rent may be the most appropriate action when a larger home has been acquired through CPO.

In 2009/10, three large family homes were compulsorily purchased when the Housing Strategy and Partnerships and Empty Property teams combined Working Neighbourhoods Fund, Section 106 and mainstream budget funding. During 2010/11 these homes were refurbished to a high standard and let to families who had been living in temporary accommodation.

### **Enforced sale**

Enforced sale is a procedure that allows local authorities to recover debt but can also serve as a way of bringing empty properties back into use. In cases where the council has incurred debt on an empty property, enforced sale is a speedier and more cost effective enforcement tool than a CPO. One such nuisance property with unpaid debt was returned to use through enforced sale. As with CPO, it is often the initiation of action against an owner that will finally persuade them to act.

### **Cross Boundary Working**

Birmingham currently chairs the West Midlands Empty Property Officers Group. The city also acts as vice chair to the national Empty Homes Network. Birmingham's 2007-2012 Empty Property Strategy has been identified as a model of good practice by the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory

Services and has led to positive attention from the press and television. Probably as a result of this, Birmingham has been invited to chair Capita's Empty Homes Conference in January 2012.

The team has received visits from a number of authorities wishing to see first hand the way we operate, and officers from the city's Empty Property team have been invited to speak at a number of events in England and Wales.

## **3. New Empty Homes Funding Initiatives**

### **New Homes Bonus**

Launched in April 2011, the New Homes Bonus is a six-year programme offering to match-fund additional council tax revenue raised through the delivery of new homes, coupled with empty properties brought back into use. Affordable homes attract an additional amount. The Department for Communities and Local Government has set aside almost £1 billion over the Comprehensive Spending Review period for the scheme, including nearly £200 million in 2011-12 and £250 million in each of the following three years.

The programme has been welcomed by the independent charity Empty Homes as one which will reward local authorities for long-term empty homes returned to use in the same way as it will reward

them for new homes that are built.

The scheme is intended to act as an incentive for local authorities to have effective empty homes strategies. Rewards will only be paid for a net increase in housing, meaning that local authorities could miss out on rewards for new homes built if vacancy levels are allowed to increase. In practical terms this means that if 1,000 new homes were built during the year, but empty property numbers go up by 800, the local authority will get New Homes Bonus payments for only 200 new homes. This offers the best incentive yet for housing providers to return empty homes to use.

### **£100m Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) Funding**

Tackling empty homes is one of the coalition government's policy priorities. As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, the government announced a £100m fund to bring more empty homes back into use. Empty homes form part of the Homes and Communities Agency's 2011-15 Affordable Homes Programme. The £100m funding is available from April 2012 to bring 3,300 vacant properties back into use. It will be targeted at long-term empty properties which would not come back into use without intervention. The HCA offers providers as much

flexibility as possible to ensure funding goes towards the most effective approaches at a local level. Birmingham has a strong track record in tackling empty homes in an efficient and proactive way. We are currently working on securing HCA funding to enable us to plan future programmes of interventions.

**“The team has received visits from a number of authorities wishing to see first hand the way we operate, and officers from the city’s Empty Properties team have been invited to speak at a number of events in England and Wales.”**



Redhill Road  
– before



Redhill Road  
– after

# Appendix A

Empty Homes Performance Information			
Increasing the supply of affordable housing to meet the needs of Birmingham			
<b>Links to other strategies, plans and national housing policy objectives</b>	<b>Local</b> Council Plan Community Strategy Housing Plan Private Sector Housing Strategy Homelessness Strategy Supporting People HRA Business Plan 3-Star Action Plan	<b>Regional</b> Empty Homes Network West Midlands Empty Property Officers Group	<b>National</b> Decent Homes Tackling Social Exclusion Sustainable Communities Affordable Warmth
<b>Partner organisations</b>	Private Landlords Forum, Empty Homes Agency		

<b>Headline Targets (Private Sector)</b>	<b>Target 2006/7</b>	<b>Actual 2006/7</b>	<b>Target 2007/8</b>	<b>Actual 2007/8</b>	<b>Target 2008/9</b>	<b>Actual 2008/9</b>	<b>Target 2009/10</b>	<b>Target 2009/10</b>	<b>Target 2010/11</b>	<b>Target 2010/11</b>	<b>Target 2011/12</b>
Reduce number of empty homes requiring intensive intervention by 1,400 by 2012	125	156	175	237	200	248	253	261	253	282	253
Return to use properties empty for over five years	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	35%	47%	50%	57%	50%	48%	50%
% family sized empty homes (3+ bedrooms) in council tax bands A–C returned to use	N/A	N/A	60%	62%	60%	64%	60%	64%	60%	72%	60%
Number of empty properties returned to use in former Urban Living area	N/A	N/A	35	49	40	66	50	51	50	50	50
Number of properties returned to use in East Birmingham HMA	N/A	N/A	35	50	40	46	50	51	50	51	50
Number of properties returned to use through lower level of intervention	N/A	N/A	100	95	100	76	100	64	100	119	100



## Birmingham City Council Private Sector Empty Property Team

WARDS COVERED	EMAIL	TELEPHONE NUMBER	MOBILE NUMBER
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Longbridge, Kings Norton, Moseley and Kings Heath, Northfield, Weoley Castle.	<a href="mailto:emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk">emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk</a>	0121 303 4703	07917 172 236
Aston, Bournville, Kingstanding, Ladywood, Lozells and East Handsworth, Nechells, Oscott, Perry Barr, Selly Oak, Soho.	<a href="mailto:emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk">emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk</a>	0121 303 7771	07920 088 539
Bartley Green, Edgbaston, Harborne, Quinton, Springfield.	<a href="mailto:emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk">emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk</a>	0121 303 7063	07920 088 538
Acocks Green, Brandwood, Billesley, Sparkbrook.	<a href="mailto:emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk">emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk</a>	0121 303 7063	07766 924 106
Bordesley Green, Hall Green, Hodge Hill, Shard End, Sheldon, South Yardley, Stechford and Yardley North, Washwood Heath.	<a href="mailto:emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk">emptyproperty@birmingham.gov.uk</a>	0121 675 5497	07920 088 540

[www.birmingham.gov.uk/housing](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/housing)

**If you would like this information in Braille, large print or on audiotape,  
please contact your local neighbourhood office or housing team.**