

North Somerset Council

Empty Property Delivery Plan 2016-2021

Introduction

North Somerset Council's (NSC) corporate plan outlines a vision for the district as:

“A great place to live where people, businesses and communities flourish. Modern, efficient services and a strong voice for North Somerset”

In order to support this vision, the council's Empty Property Delivery Plans' key aims are to:-

- Reduce the number of long term empty homes in the district to help increase housing supply;
- Reduce the negative impact that empty homes can have on the local community and the wider housing market;
- Ensure the Empty Property Delivery Plan, supports the Councils' Housing Strategy 2016-2021 by helping to meet housing need and improve the quality of housing across the district;

This Plan sets out the council's priorities in relation to empty homes, focussing on homes that are substantially unfurnished and have been unoccupied for more than six months (*excluding properties that are empty for a good reason for example because the owner is in or receiving care*). The Plan details the actions we will undertake, within the resources that are available, to prevent these properties remaining empty long term, to bring them back into use and delivers a balance between providing owners with advice, information and the use of enforcement powers.

Context

Since the previous Empty Property Delivery Plan was produced in 2011, there have been a number of changes both nationally and locally:

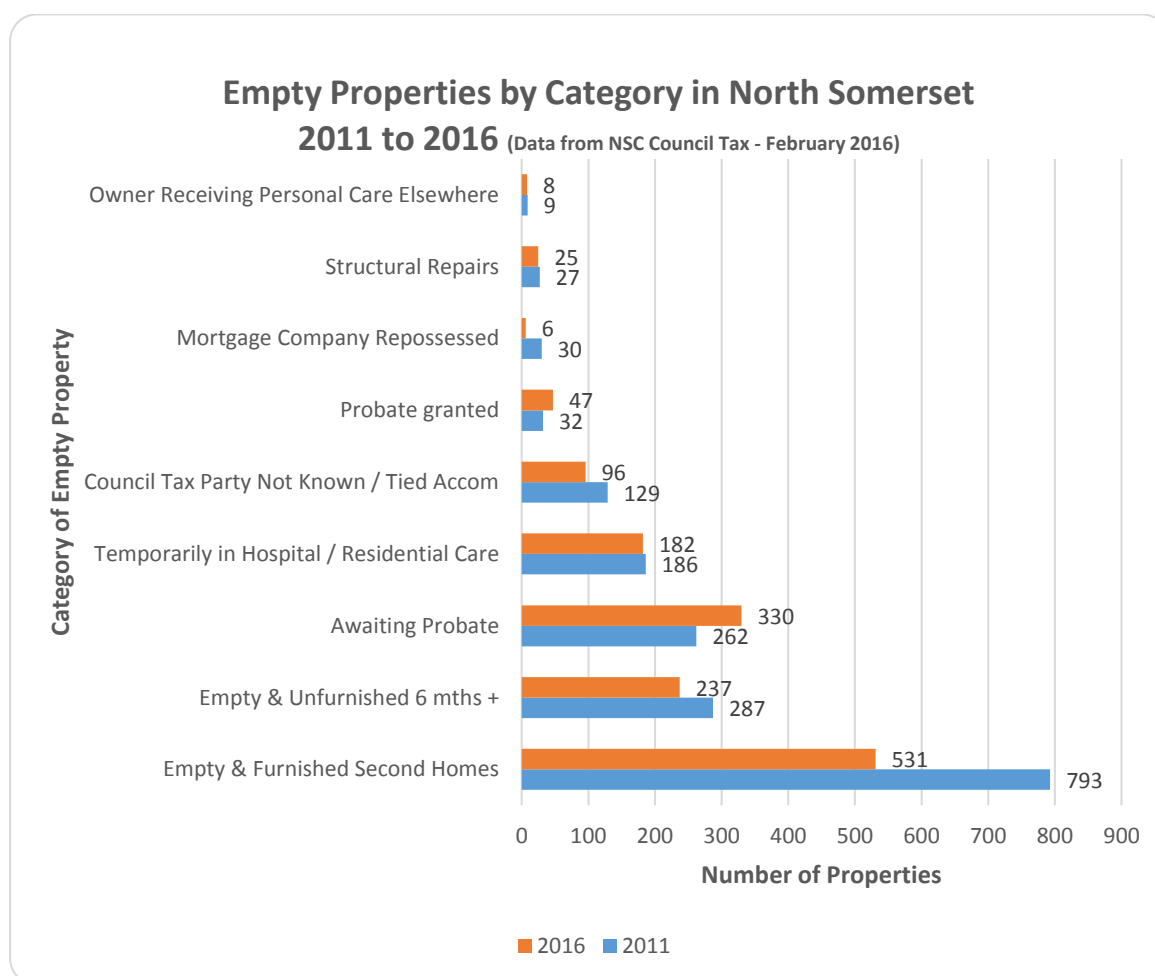
Nationally, the **total number of all empty homes** in England has decreased by 17% to 600,179. Within this figure, the total number of long term empty homes (empty and unfurnished for more than 6 months) has reduced by 26.6% to 203,596 properties. This reduction is attributable to a combination of factors including the improvement in the local housing market since the 2008 property crash; initiatives offered by central government to bring empty homes back into use and actions and interventions by Local Authorities to bring empty properties back into use (ref: Empty Homes in England – Empty Homes Autumn 2015);

Over the same period, the total number of empty homes in **North Somerset** has reduced by 34% to 1,460 and long term empty homes (empty and unfurnished for more than 6 months) have reduced by 59.9% to 223 properties (source DCLG Oct 2015).

Chart 1 below, gives a comparison of empty homes between 2011 and 2016. The categories of empty property shown, reflect the definitions currently used by the Council Tax service but

because their definitions have changed since 2011, some of these have been combined in order to show how numbers have changed during this period.

Chart 1.



In 2011, the **New Homes Bonus (NHB)** saw the Government matching the Council Tax raised for every new home built and empty home brought back into use. The funding, provides a sum for each property based on its' Council Tax charge each year for a period of 6 years. The NHB scheme is currently under review, but early indications are that it may be continued, with grant paid for shorter periods.

The number of households registered on the **Council's HomeChoice Register** is **3,637** at the end of 2015/16. In the last 12 months, 928 households were added to the Homechoice register seeking affordable housing which was more than double the number of letting (444) in the same period. (Housing Strategy 2016-21 NSC)

Council Tax reforms under the Local Government & Finance Act 2012, gave councils the ability to remove the discounts previously granted to owners of empty homes. These discounts included exemption from Council Tax for the first six months a property was empty, followed by a discount of up to 50%. Under the revised regulations, NSC now issue a 100% Council Tax charge for all homes as soon as they become empty. The regulations also allow the charging of an additional 50% premium for properties that have been empty for more than two years. NSC do not currently charge an additional premium as it is considered it would dissuade owners from declaring that their home has become empty.

Actions taken

Throughout the term of the previous plan, we have continued to contact and attempt to engage with, owners of empty homes across the district.

Utilising data gained from Council Tax records, we have recorded details of properties that have been empty and unfurnished for at least six months and contacted owners of these empty properties to offer advice and information about the help available to them from NSC, including:-

- a Private Sector Leasing Scheme managed by a Registered Provider;
- a Registered Provider Lease and Repair scheme;
- the availability of a loan to bring their property back into use;
- Information on VAT reductions for repairs to empty properties;
- the council's Tenant Finding Scheme;
- the availability of energy efficiency advice;
- access to a list of potential purchasers looking for an empty home;
- promotion of the **NoUseEmptyWest** website, jointly run with the other councils in the West of England Partnership;

Outcomes

Over the course of the previous plan and as a result of interventions by NSC, 112 homes have been brought back into use.

This included enabling owners of 19 properties to join a **Private Sector Leasing Scheme** that guaranteed their rents for fixed terms, providing them with a fixed income and a home to applicants on the housing register;

We also issued confirmation letters to owners to enable them to apply for **reduced rate VAT** for the costs of materials used to repair their empty properties;

We have been able to help owners wanting to rent their property, by **finding tenants** from the council's HomeChoice register, offering a rent deposit guarantee, fast tracking Housing Benefit applications and providing ongoing advice and support throughout the tenancy.

Due to the limited resources available, we have **prioritised properties** for further actions where owners have refused to bring their homes back into use, based on a number of factors including:- the length of time the property has been empty, the property condition, the social impact on the community, the number of complaints received, actions and interventions already taken etc. We are in the process of progressing our first Compulsory Purchase Order on an empty property, having received no positive engagement with the owner.

Empty Properties that Cause a Nuisance

Where we receive **complaints** about empty properties that have been causing a nuisance or annoyance to the communities in which they are located, we have investigated the properties, made an assessment of any public health or safety concerns and determined whether any statutory grounds for action exist.

We have subsequently, contacted owners to encourage and enable them to remedy the concerns raised and also to engage with them to promote the options that are available to bring their property back into use.

When owners have not responded or have been unwilling to improve the condition of their property, we have used **enforcement powers** to require them carry out the necessary work. We have, for example, had to issue formal warnings to the owners of 5 properties during the past 12 months in order to access, inspect or require works to be carried out to their properties. Whilst our enforcement action is aimed at requiring an owner carry out repairs or improvements to a property, this can act as a catalyst to bring the property back into use.

Going Forward – Delivery and Updating of the Plan

Strategic Priorities

The Empty Property Action Plan (Appendix A) sets out 4 key priorities to enable the achievement of the delivery plan aims as summarised below.

- **Raise Awareness of Empty Homes**

We will raise the awareness of the wider community of the issues of empty homes and the actions that NSC take to bring homes back into use. By publicising the actions and interventions available to NSC, we will highlight the support available for owners of empty properties to bring them back into use and encourage members of the public to notify NSC when they are aware of an empty home in their community.

- **Make Best use of Resources**

We will continue to make best use of resources available to us by recording and prioritising action on empty properties; continuing to look at ways of improving the efficiency of our processes; exploring opportunities for external funding and seeking partnerships with the public and private sectors to improve the offer available for owners of empty homes.

- **Engagement with current Owners**

We will build on the current positive engagement with owners of empty homes, within the resources available, and work with the owners to overcome the barriers preventing their properties being brought back into use. To improve outcomes we will engage with new owners at a much earlier stage; investigate the use of alternative engagement methods and introduce a bespoke event for owners of empty properties;

- **Enforcement**

We will continue to use our enforcement powers where owners of empty properties cause a nuisance to communities and owners do not respond to requests to carry out remedial works. We will prioritise interventions to bring homes back into use; we will also review our Compulsory Purchase processes in the light of our experience of using these powers and will also develop a procedure to enable the enforced sales of empty properties that have outstanding council debts. We will also review our enforcement policy in relation to the charges owners of empty property have to pay where the council has to take formal action.

Appendix A

Empty Homes Action Plan 2016-2021

Priority	Target	Target Date	Lead	Description of Action
Raising Awareness of Empty Homes	•Raise awareness of empty homes and the actions taken within the district	Dec-2016	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Housing Development Team	Produce publicity material that can be used to promote the work undertaken with owners of empty homes to ensure this informs the wider community, utilising NS Life magazine, Councils social media pages and local press;
	•Ensure that information about the Empty Homes plan and procedures are available on the Council Web pages	Oct-2016	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Housing Development Team	Empty Property Delivery Plan document to be linked to the Councils' Housing web page
	• Utilise the Councils' membership of the <i>West of England Empty Property Group</i>	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Housing Development Team	Promote the groups' <i>No Use Empty West</i> Web site and Factsheets to provide information about Empty Homes work, services carried out and processes involved by NSC and neighbouring authorities;
	• Maintain accurate database of Empty Properties	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Business Support	Utilise data provided by Council Tax and reports from members of the public to record empty properties and the actions and interventions made by all departments;

Make Best Use of Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the database to prioritise and action the top 10 Long Term Empty Properties 	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Business Support	Cases prioritised based on an agreed formula that takes account of the type of property, its' condition, length of time empty, number of complaints received, social impact, statutory notices served, debt history;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that where possible, the council maximise efficiency by identifying tasks relating to Empty Properties that could be undertaken by council officers working in the community; 	Ongoing	Inter Departmental	To assist in inspecting / photographing / evidencing an empty property, providing the use of officer time is cost effective and does not impede upon officers carrying out their normal duties;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to explore opportunities for external funding to help support empty homes projects; 	Ongoing	Housing Development Team	To seek funding from HCA, EDF (Hinkley Point C) to fund schemes that will bring empty homes back into use;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure partnership from a Registered Provider to provide leasing service to owners; 	Oct-16	Housing Development Team	To secure the partnership of a Registered Provider, underpinned by a service level agreement, that will clearly set out the relationship between the RP and NSC and how it will help meet the needs of applicants on the Homechoice register and provide a high standard leasing service to owners;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore opportunities from the private sector to offer short term letting solution to owners; 	Jan-17	Housing Development Team	To seek private sector organisations who offer short term letting solutions and signpost these to owners of empty properties who are reluctant to commit to longer term arrangements (e.g. Property Guardianship)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early intervention with new owners or Empty Properties 	Aug-16	CT Revenues Team / Housing Development Team	Include information on the options and services available to owners of empty homes in initial correspondence sent to them by Council Tax;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to routinely Contact and Survey owners of homes that have been empty for 6 months + 	Ongoing	Business Support / Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team	Write to Owners explaining the Councils' Offer of help, assistance and guidance to enable them to overcome the reasons why their property is empty. This will include advice on:- Improvement Loans; Leasing to a Registered Provider; Planning and Building Control issues; VAT reduction for works to empty homes; the Councils' tenant finding scheme; Energy Efficiency advice; potential purchasers interested in empty properties; See Below
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the uptake of home improvement loans to assist with the repair of empty properties; 	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team	Help owners access home improvement loans to assist with the repair of empty properties;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise and assist owners who have expressed an interest in leasing their properties to a partner Registered Provider 	Oct-2016	Housing Development Team	Refer owners to the Private Sector Lease Scheme;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise owners of properties empty for more than 2 years of possible VAT Reduced rating for works to empty properties; 	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team	Refer owners to current HMRC information about reduced rating for renovation of empty properties and provide owners with verification of the length of time the property has been empty;

Engagement with Owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist owners of long term empty properties with access to free Building Regulation advice 	Ongoing	Building Control Team	Ensure that owners are provided with access to free timely advice from Building Control in connection with the repair, improvement, conversion or redevelopment of empty properties;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist owners of long term empty properties with access to free pre application Planning Advice; 	Ongoing	Development Control Team	Ensure that the owners of long term empties have access to free pre application planning advice where repairs, alterations, conversions redevelopment of an empty property may require planning consent;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist owners of long term empty properties on steps required to become a landlord 	Ongoing	Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team	Provide help and advice to owners with little or no experience of renting properties, on energy efficiency, the relevant local standards and statutory requirements for letting a property within the district;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the take up of the free Tenant Finding Service provided by North Somerset Council; 	Ongoing	Housing Advice Team	Promote and highlight the benefits of the scheme generally and target promotion to owners in high demand areas. Emphasise the support that can be maintained for the occupancy of the tenant - including access to housing support officer and Housing Benefit advice and information;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate the use of alternative methods of engagement with empty home owners; 	Nov-16	<p>Housing Development Team / Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Empty Property Steering Group</p>	<p>Introduction of an Empty Homes 'Owners' Event, to enable owners to access information on services from NSC and partner organisations in a 'one stop shop' - give information on and receive feedback about the services currently on offer and how they may be improved and the support available to help get properties occupied;</p>
Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respond to complaints received regarding the condition of empty homes utilising all available statutory powers; 	Ongoing	Inter Departmental	<p>Where help, support and advice offered to owners of empty properties is refused and further engagement or negotiation has failed and properties remain a nuisance or present a public health issue, ensure that enforcement action is taken to remedy the condition, using the statutory powers available. Review enforcement policy relating to the charges owners of empty properties are required to pay to the council where formal action is required.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a 'Compulsory Purchase Order' procedure for empty homes; 	Nov-16	<p>Housing Adaptations and Improvements Team / Housing Development Team</p>	<p>Utilise learning from the progression of current CPO cases to develop a procedure that will assist the timely progression of future cases;</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an 'Enforced Sales' procedure for empty homes; 	Nov-16	<p>Housing Development Team / Council Tax Recovery Team</p>	<p>Develop a procedure that will ensure empty properties with debts outstanding to the council are flagged and information shared with CT recovery</p>