Hastings Empty Homes Strategy 2009 - 2013

Making empty properties work again for our community
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Introduction

The Government continues to encourage Local Authorities to reduce the number of empty homes. This strategy outlines how we will tackle the issue of empty properties in the borough and builds on the successes of the previous two strategies.

We have a successful track record of a proactive approach towards getting empty homes back into use. Our strategy has been produced to acknowledge the concerns of our community about empty and neglected property, such as distress felt by neighbours because of the fear of crime through vandalism and antisocial behaviour, the devaluing of surrounding homes and the detrimental image they portray of the town.

Importantly this strategy acknowledges that bringing empty homes back into use can assist in meeting housing need for our community. Empty homes are a wasted asset. Hastings has a shortage of affordable homes and making best use of the available housing stock by returning property back into use will make a valuable contribution to meeting the town’s housing needs.

Our Empty Homes Officer will continue to work with a range of partnerships with the common aim of bringing empty homes back into use and increasing the supply of decent, affordable homes. This strategy promotes a coordinated approach, enabling us to offer a range of services and make full use of all the resources that are available for bringing properties back into use.

The strategy is divided into three parts. The first part looks at why we need to bring empty homes back into use, the scale of the problem in the borough and the progress made since we began to bring empty homes back into use in 2000. The second part outlines our strategic priorities and objectives and how we will achieve these, as well as how we will continue to fund the strategy. The third part explains the links to other strategies and groups that can assist in the delivery of this strategy.

There is a detailed action plan separate to this document, which sets how we will achieve our goals.
Part 1 - Why work to get empty properties back into use?

‘There are too many pressures on land, resources, communities and finances to allow a valuable resource such as housing to lie idle and wasted’
The Government’s Community Action on Empty Homes

Empty properties are a disincentive to anyone wishing to stay or move to an area. They are visually unattractive and create an impression of neglect and decline. Reducing the numbers can enhance local pride in an area.

Empty homes need to be brought back into use to:

- Help meet the increase in demand for homes as the number of households increase
- Encourage economic vitality – getting previously empty homes back into use has a positive impact on regeneration by stimulating local trade.
- Aid sustainability and conserve resources by making best use of existing buildings that would otherwise go to waste
- Discourage crime, fear of crime and vandalism associated with derelict properties
- Reduce pressure for development of Greenfield land by making best use of our existing housing stock
- Prevent the loss of the infrastructure that supports the community in areas where large numbers of properties are left empty
- Discourage fly tipping and other forms of anti social behaviour which may attract vermin and disease.
- Discourage local property price devaluation. An empty property in derelict condition can devalue neighbouring properties by as much as 20 %.(Data derived from Local Agents, Insurance Broker, Council Tax, RICS & The Empty Homes Agency – source Hastings Borough Council (Sept 2008))

‘There is nothing more depressing to the eye or likely to provide a dampener to investment and regeneration than the sight of empty property’
Planning Inspectorate, planning policy guidance notes - Housing: Putting Empty Property First
‘It’s less expensive to have a property in use than to leave it empty. For example, these are the typical average annual costs of keeping a two-bedroom flat and two-bedroom house in Hastings empty’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2 bed flat</th>
<th>2 bed House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent loss</td>
<td>£5,400</td>
<td>£8,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excludes cost of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilapidation &amp; Vandalism</td>
<td>£1,000</td>
<td>£1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance &amp; Security</td>
<td>£500</td>
<td>£500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Tax</td>
<td>£973</td>
<td>£1,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance (where obtainable)</td>
<td>£200</td>
<td>£480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>£8,073</td>
<td>£11,778</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The costs of keeping a property empty. Data derived from Local Agents, Insurance Broker, Council Tax, RICS & The Empty Homes Agency – source Hastings Borough Council (Sept 2008, being the most current data available)
Reasons for properties being left empty

There are a variety of often-complex reasons why properties become empty. Understanding these reasons allows for a range of different approaches to be adopted to tackle the problems.

Some of the reasons are:

- The cost of repairs and renovation are a common issue given.
- The owner is trying to sell the property and for various reasons has been unsuccessful.
- The owner has abandoned the property. This is often linked to age or ill health.
- The property has been inherited and the owner lacks knowledge or inclination to deal with the property.
- A speculative purchase by owner who lacks the skills and knowledge to manage the project.
- Properties are bought for the purpose of assembling a site for redevelopment and left empty, whilst this process occurs.
- The resident moving into residential care.
- Delays or disputes in the administration of the estate where the owner has died.
- Owners are waiting for increases in the market price before selling.
- Perceived and often unfounded problems with issues around renting the property.
- The ownership of a property is in dispute or unknown, which can often lead to complex legal problems.

This is not an exhaustive list and it is often the case that there is a combination of complex issues, which initially prevent a property being brought back into use.
Hastings – Current Picture

Hastings has over 41,000 dwellings. The stock condition survey 2007 suggests 60% of housing is in owner occupation, 24% is private rented accommodation and 16% is social housing owned by Registered Providers.

Average house prices have fallen since December 2007 by 5.4% (November 2008) after a long period of sustained house price inflation. Average house prices in Hastings remain below the regional average, but incomes are also well below the regional average. As a consequence, owner occupation is unaffordable for many households on modest incomes and they depend upon access to privately rented accommodation as the only viable alternative to social rented provision.

Approximately 2,000 people are registered on the Council’s common housing register and seek social rented accommodation. The Housing Needs Survey 2005 estimated there is a total need of over 1,049 affordable properties a year with only 43% of this need being currently met. There is an approximate shortage of 596 affordable dwellings per annum in Hastings.

With 80% of those on the common housing register wholly benefit-dependent, the profile of low levels of home ownership and high levels of private rented accommodation (compared to the national average) will be slow to change. With predictions for a continuing national trend in the increase of the number of households we can expect further demands for homes to be supplied from the private rented sector.

The Council have a number of ways to assist people in accessing suitable accommodation. However, bringing empty homes back into use can help meet the need for affordable housing provision, making best use of existing housing stock.

Why do Properties Become Empty in Hastings?

- Most empties are in pre1919 buildings, which have high levels of disrepair.
- A large number of empty properties are leasehold flats and a significant proportion of these are basement flats. Basement properties have high repair costs due mainly to problems with damp penetration.
- There can be disincentives to potential purchasers of leasehold properties in converted blocks that have potential freehold problems, e.g. absent freeholder or poor management.
- There are a lot of long-term empty homes that have been inherited or bought cheaply and owners do not have the means to develop these or they do not want to sell as they wish to realise a future higher value.
- Properties can remain unsold for significant periods. This is due to a combination of factors such as disrepair and low levels of income.
At September 2008, there were 885 properties that fall into the long-term empty category (empty for six months or longer). The majority of these empties are within the pre1919 housing stock, which has been converted into flats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of empty homes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1,355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2008</td>
<td>885</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The number of empty homes in the borough. Data derived from Council Tax records – source Hastings Borough Council (Sept 2008, being the most current data available)
Empty Property Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property Type</th>
<th>Number of Empty Homes</th>
<th>% Of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maisonettes</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basements</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. The number of empty properties by type. Data derived from Council Tax records – source Hastings Borough Council (Sept 2008, being the most current data available)

Second Homes
There were 928 second homes/furnished properties (Sept 2008). It is important to recognise that there is a distinction between long-term empties and second homes. Second homes and holiday lets are a key factor of our economy. Although these properties are not available for housing the people of our community, they make a vital contribution to the town’s economy. Second homes are not counted as empty homes.

Transitional Properties
Although we use the reference of ‘over 6 months’ to count the number of empties in the borough, this number is often affected by what we call ‘transitional empties’. These are properties that are unlikely to be empty for long, such as: properties that are up for sale or awaiting letting; properties affected by probate; properties undergoing extensive refurbishment. These properties increase the number of homes recorded as empty in the borough for a relatively short amount of time and do not need intervention to bring them back into use. They can however give a false impression of the amount of intervention that is required and make the number of empty homes seem high.
Empty over 12 months

It is useful to look at the number of properties that have been empty for over 12 months, which in the majority of cases eliminates transitional empties from the overall figure. This gives a more realistic picture of the number of long-term empties in the borough that can be extremely hard to bring back into use. The borough has high concentrations of empty properties, within the top five wards highlighted as Central St Leonards, Castle, Gensing, Maze Hill and Old Hastings wards. The top five wards also contain the highest concentrations of properties that have been empty for 2 years or more.

Number of empties by ward from 6 months to 10 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>6 months to 12 months</th>
<th>12 months to 2 years</th>
<th>2 to 5 years</th>
<th>5 to 10 years</th>
<th>10 years plus</th>
<th>Total of all empties from 6 months and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashdown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baird</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braybrooke</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central St Leonards</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conquest</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gensing</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollington</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maze Hill</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Hastings</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ore</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Helens</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silverhill</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tressell</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West St Leonards</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wishing tree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. The number of empty properties by ward and length of time vacant. Data derived from Council Tax records – source Hastings Borough Council (Sept 2008, being the most current data available)
The number of empty properties brought back into use

‘In Hastings, we have increased the number of empty properties brought back into use’

The figures for 07/08 include a number of empty homes being demolished, which are included under the best value performance indicator. Now that the indicator is no longer nationally reported on, future targets exclude demolitions. The target for 08/09 was reduced to bring it in line with other strategies and plans with targets concerning bringing empty homes back into use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Total number achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/02</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>404</strong></td>
<td><strong>553</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Number of empty properties brought back into use through direct action, including empty homes financial assistance (BVPI). Data derived from BVPI returns – source Hastings Borough Council.
How we have brought empty homes back into use

At March 2009 a total of 553 long-term empty properties had been brought back into use (since 2001) as a direct result of the council’s intervention in the form of enforcement activity, financial assistance, advice and other involvement.

Advice
We have a variety of information and advice available to owners and prospective purchasers of empty homes. Our Empty Homes Officer offers professional help and advice to owners wishing to bring their property back into use. This includes advice on:

- Financial assistance available to assist in bringing properties back into use.
- Letting the property to private tenants.
- The appointment of an appropriate managing agent.
- The sale of empty properties to Registered Providers.
- Supplying evidence for discounted VAT to the Customs and Excise office.
- Selling an empty property: We keep a list of owners of empty properties who wish to find a buyer and of purchasers looking to acquire a property for a home or development. We are able to put the two groups in contact with each other (see page 32 for contact details).

Financial Assistance
We offer financial assistance packages for private sector landlords to encourage them to bring their empty homes back into use.

Utilising this funding we have been able to help many private sector owners bring properties back into use where there have been high levels of disrepair and fall short of the decent homes standard. Owners do not always feel that it is economical in the short term to bring long-term empty properties into use. As property prices have increased over recent years the purchasers have sometimes found that rental income has not been sufficient to cover both the property purchase price and its initial repair.

Through the application of empty homes financial assistance we have been successful in bringing such properties back into use. Owners in receipt of financial assistance agree to place their properties in the rental market for the first five years, with the Council reserving tenancy referral rights. This provides an initial subsidy for the property owner and provides a home for a household in housing need.
In 2007 the conditions attached to financial assistance policy were changed to benefit more applicants and to maximise the number of empty homes brought back into use. This increased the number of properties brought back into use as decent, affordable homes for people in housing need.

In 2007 we devised and launched a first time buyers' scheme (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/housing_grants/default.aspx), which assists first time buyers in purchasing property, including empty property

**Enforcement Activity**

Though we prefer to work in partnership with owners of empty properties, it sometimes becomes necessary to employ enforcement action to assist in bringing empty homes back into use. The Council has a variety of powers available under various pieces of Legislation to assist in this function. This has proved to be an effective tool and includes action such as Improvement Notices, which require an owner to make repairs and deal with hazards within a property. Action is taken to address poorly maintained facades of properties, requiring owners to clean, maintain and decorate the property and the land it sits on. All enforcement activity is carried out in line with our Enforcement Policy.

**Identifying Empty Properties**

We monitor empty homes in the town through Council Tax data and make contact with the owners. A hotline provides residents with a free contact telephone number (0800 085 8967) for reporting empty homes of particular concern.

The Government’s national Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 64) measured success in bringing properties back into use, which were vacant for 6 months or more. The indicator was useful for consistent and rigorous reporting nationally, particularly in a previously buoyant and rising housing market where property values were relatively high and properties marketed were unlikely to remain unsold for very long. In such circumstances there is considerable incentive for an owner to minimise the time in which a property remains empty.

However, in a slower market, the expectation is that many of these ‘transitional’ empty dwellings remain empty for longer than 6 months, particularly if they require significant levels of renovation before they can be sold or let. This will have an impact on the numbers of properties classed as an empty home.
**Successes to Date:**

Between 2000 and 2008 funding of £1.2 million was invested by the Council in contributing to the return to use of 553 long term empty homes in the borough. This funding has been used to provide financial assistance packages and has also provided for the employment of a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

Through the application of empty homes financial assistance we have been successful in bringing empty homes back into use. This assistance has enabled the Council to facilitate the renovation of 55 long-term empty homes since 2000 and is a cost effective way in which the Council can help someone in housing need to secure a home, through the Council retaining tenancy referral rights.

We aimed to monitor all empty homes in the town and utilise Council Tax data to identify empty properties and contact the owners. By monitoring our initiatives for getting homes back into use we were able to adapt the strategy to meet housing needs. For example, the conditions attached to financial assistance were changed in our financial assistance policy to accommodate more applicants thereby maximising the supply of empty homes for use as affordable homes and we devised and recently launched a first time buyers’ scheme, which assists first time buyers in purchasing property, including empty properties.

Our Empty Homes Officer chaired the Sussex Empty Homes Forum over 2 years inviting the Empty Homes Agency, SEEDA and the Housing Corporation (now the Homes and Community Agency) to attend and recently worked towards the publication of a Sussex-wide strategic framework. On a local level we held quarterly forums for discussing empty homes with various agencies for the purpose of determining the direction the strategy should follow. Other indicators are: joint renovation projects with the council’s conservation service; and with Amicus (a Registered Social Landlord) in locating 20 empty properties to purchase and repair.

Our empty homes strategy has been promoted through our website. Additionally each year the key strategy services, including the free phone hotline, have been advertised in the Summer Guide and the Winter Environmental Guide, which are delivered to every dwelling in Hastings thereby reaching all residents of the borough. Potential purchasers of empty homes and developers were made aware of our financial assistance programmes and services through advertisements placed in the local property auction catalogues. Our Empty Homes Officer has introduced many developers into the town by being a first point of contact.

Our work with owners included: providing advice on letting; registration with Hastings Accredited Landlords Scheme (HALo); getting owners in touch with housing associations who provide leasing schemes; providing VAT advice on development of empty homes; bringing together property developers and owners wishing to sell; promotion of services at the Landlords Forum.

We have worked closely with Registered Providers in targeting Housing Corporation (now the Homes and Community Agency) funding for the purchase of property in areas with low levels of social housing, such as Central St Leonards. This resulted in the renovation of Marlborough House in Warrior Square as well as the purchase of 20 empty residential properties.
**Future Challenges**

To date, the focus of attention has been on bringing high numbers of empties back into use. Inevitably, this has meant a focus on properties that are easier to bring back into use rather than those which take more time and resources to tackle.

Our Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) policy was adopted during the period of last strategy. Further work is now required to establish partnerships, which will assist in the delivery of the policy and enable us to use CPO powers for problematic empty dwellings. We will undertake further work to develop an appropriate model for enacting a CPO. This will include the identification of processes and resources needed to return empty properties back into use where all other means of doing so have been exhausted.

The Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) is a power introduced under the Housing Act 2004, enabling compulsory leasing of empty homes. There are various barriers that have prevented the Council from using this power to tackle empty homes to date. The Council does not have sufficient resources or expertise to take on the management of empty dwellings. We will be working to overcome these barriers so that EDMOs become a further effective tool for tackling empty dwellings.

Our data shows there are significant numbers of long-term empty properties (2 years or more) in the borough. These are usually far more problematic properties with a range of issues preventing their use. Our attention must still be to continue to reduce empties properties overall, but we will have a particular emphasis on bringing those longer-term hard-to-tackle properties back into use. This is a more targeted approach than in our previous strategy that focused solely on properties that were empty for 6 months or more. Our analysis has also shown that there are particularly high concentrations of empty properties in 5 wards within the borough. Our focus will therefore be aimed at these wards, namely, Central St Leonards, Castle, Gensing, Maze Hill and Old Hastings wards.

We believe there is little justification for keeping public sector owned properties vacant for significant periods of time and will work with public sector bodies to bring about their early return to use. We will continue to target empty public sector properties regardless of their location within the borough.
Part 2 - Strategic Priorities

‘By 2013 we want our town’s community spirit, culture, youth population and extraordinary natural environment to be the foundations of a safer, healthier and more prosperous place with lasting opportunities for everybody’

Hasting Community Strategy 2003-2013

1. To prevent homes from becoming long term empty.

2. To bring long term empty homes back into use (empty over 2 years).

3. Increase the amount of decent, affordable housing for those in housing need.
To prevent homes from becoming long term empty.

- **Objective:** Minimise the number of properties becoming long-term empty (2 years or more), continuing to identify them at an early stage and promote interventions to owners or potential purchasers.

To achieve this we will:

**Maintain and regularly update a database of empty properties**
We will maintain, monitor and regularly update our database of empty homes. We will maintain our planned approach to identifying the properties and targeting intervention, regularly reviewing progress against the 20 worst properties in the priority wards (Central St Leonards, Castle, Gensing, Maze Hill and Old Hastings wards).

**Provide a point of contact within the Council for empty properties.**
The Empty Homes Officer will be the single point of contact for all parties who share an interest in realising the potential of empty homes. We will provide a variety of methods of communication to enable people to make contact easily (see page 32 for contact details).

**Give advice on becoming a landlord and assist in letting empty properties**
We will encourage owners of empty properties who are undecided about letting, to make their property available for rent on the open market. We will provide information for existing and potential new landlords on tenancy agreements; health and safety requirements, methods for finding tenants and landlord support groups.

We will signpost landlords of empty properties to the Council’s ‘LetStart’ service, which provides a free letting service and includes a tenant finder service (telephone 01424 451212 and ask for LetStart).

**Continue to promote and reward good landlords through the Accredited Lettings Scheme (HALo)**
The HALo scheme recognises the achievements of responsible landlords by accrediting properties that meet the standards of the HALo Code of Practice. All landlords are given the opportunity to become accredited. Where empty homes financial assistance is applicable, immediate accreditation to HALo is awarded.

**Use our planning powers to assist owners in returning property to use.**
The Empty Homes Strategy aims to ensure that development of empty properties is facilitated in accordance with the Hastings Local Plan 2004 and is carried out in the best interests of the general public and the area. Where planning permission is required and where an application for financial assistance is made, we will proactively work with owners at the initial stages of renovation projects to assist them in developing their planning application.
Identify empty non-residential property and land that could be used for residential purposes. Were it is practical to do so, we will work with and provide advice and guidance to help owners of non-residential property and land in bringing this back into use for residential purposes.

We will promote our Empty Homes Strategy
We will campaign and lobby on issues related to or likely to affect the Empty Homes Strategy at local, regional and national level. We will provide information about the Empty Homes Strategy on the Council’s web site, through local advertising and through public events. We will raise awareness of the issues and options highlighted in the strategy by the development of a publicity campaigns.

To bring long-term empty homes back into use (empty over 2 years).

- **Objective**: To improve neighbourhoods and the existing built environment by targeting and helping to bring long term empty properties back into use
- **Objective**: Focus our activity on wards with the highest concentrations of long-term empty properties.

To achieve this we will:

**Target discretionary financial assistance**
We will make financial assistance of up to £30,000 (£20,000 for flats) available for the renovation of long-term empty buildings throughout the borough. To qualify, a property should be empty for longer than 12 months. Disused commercial buildings with permission for change of use to residential can also be considered.

**Provide Townscape Heritage Initiative Grants (THI)**
These grants are funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Council. Whilst funding remains available we will continue to use the THI grant to assist in the conservation of the exterior of properties in designated conservation areas. A conservation area is one of special architectural and historic interest, where it is desirable to preserve or enhance the character or appearance. In these areas there are special controls over the external appearance of existing properties and new development.

**Work with public bodies**
There are a number of long-term empty dwellings in the ownership of public bodies. We will encourage and work with public sector partners to help return these to use where there is little justification for these properties remaining empty.
Take Enforcement Action
We will continue to work in a positive partnership with owners. However, not all owners respond to positive encouragement. Where negotiation with an owner does not bring the property back into use, enforcement action will be taken as set out in Housing Renewal Enforcement Policy. There are various enforcement options open to the Council:

- General – the powers available under a variety of statutory instruments can be utilised to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Examples are:
  - Housing Act 2004 – If an empty property was found to have Category 1 hazards, we can make the owner carry out repairs, regardless of whether it is occupied. A property is assessed against prescribed hazards, e.g. trips and falls and if the risk associated with that hazard is sufficiently high then this could constitute a Category 1 Hazard.
  - Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – An owner can be made to clean, maintain and decorate the property and the land it sits on. The Council’s ‘Grotbusters’ team will implement planning enforcement action to further encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. This has proved an extremely effective tool, which has seen vast improvements to the appearance of properties across the town.

- Empty Dwelling Management Orders – in certain circumstances, Councils can seek to take over the management of a property, carrying out works (if applicable) and then renting the property out. Management costs and any refurbishment costs can be reclaimed from the rental income, with any remaining balance paid to the owner. Hastings Borough Council no longer has its own housing stock and such action would only be considered where it was considered financially and organisationally viable and where the Council has in place an arrangement with a third party organisation, such as a Registered Provider who can provide the housing management required to ensure that making such an Order is carried out correctly and effectively.

- Enforced Sale – This allows the Council to force the sale of a property with a local land charge on it. It is a step on from Works in Default action by the Council (where the Council has paid for works to be done in lieu of the owner, who is unwilling to act, or is untraceable). However, the owner, if known, has to be given the opportunity to repay the debt prior to sale. The Council does not acquire the property; it is sold to a third party. Any outstanding charges against the property, including any mortgage, are paid following the sale and the money remaining, if any, is put into an account for the owner to claim.

- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) – We have developed our own CPO policy and will consider using CPO powers as a last resort, where an owner’s cooperation has not been forthcoming. CPO allows Councils to acquire property for various reasons. Once approved, we would arrange the sale of the property, preferably to a Registered Social Landlord partner to develop as affordable housing. If this is not financially viable, the property will be sold on the open market subject to covenants ensuring the refurbishment and reoccupation of the property.
Increase the amount of decent, affordable housing for those in housing need

- **Objective:** Improve access to decent, affordable housing for people in housing need and stimulate inward investment to areas of deprivation thereby complementing the regeneration activity for the town.

To achieve this we will:

**Utilise Tenancy Referral Agreements**
As a condition of financial assistance offered to owners of empty homes the Council will retain tenancy referral rights to the property for 5 years. This will allow the Council to refer tenants from the common housing register to these properties, allowing those in housing need to benefit from affordable private rented accommodation.

**Create Decent Homes**
All financial assistance targeted at empty homes will lead to the property meeting the Decent Homes Standard. Where let, the property must be maintained in a decent condition for the benefit of the tenants and the investment of the owner.

Where enforcement action is used to assist in bringing a property into use, the property will be required to meet the basic statutory standard and, where possible, elements of the Decent Homes Standard.

Our Empty Homes Officer offers advice and assistance to owners and purchasers of empty homes in meeting the Decent Homes Standard as part of the refurbishment of an empty home.

**Promote a First Time Buyers scheme**
Our Financial Assistance Policy provides deposits for first time buyers. We will contribute a 10% deposit (maximum £10,000) toward the purchase of a home that needs bringing up to the decent homes standard within the Central St Leonards Housing Renewal Area. If the property is brought up to the Decent Homes Standard within ten years of the purchase, then we will not ask for the deposit to be repaid. This will assist in stimulating inward investment into this area creating more opportunities for people struggling to buy their first home.
Funding the empty homes strategy

Funding is dependent on the levels of allocation received from the Regional Housing Board. The Regional Housing Board is a partnership board chaired by the South East England Partnership Board and among other things makes recommendations to central Government on the allocation of resources for private sector housing renewal. Indicatively, the Council intends to allocate £400,000 from the total private sector renewal allocation it receives over period 2008/09 - 2010/11 to enable the continuation of the delivery of the priorities and objectives of the strategy. This is subject to change depending on the availability of funding and the needs of the town. The strategy will be subject to a refresh in 2010/11 to take account of any revised funding arrangements.

The resources available to us for implementing the strategy will enable us to:

- Employ a full-time, dedicated Empty Homes Officer to put the strategy into action,
- Offer financial assistance packages to help enable long-term, empty properties back into use,
- Promote a range of schemes to make it easier for owners to repair and let their property,
- Publicise the strategy throughout the whole of the borough, thereby encouraging participation in identifying empty properties.
Part 3 - Links to the Wider Issues and other Strategic Goals

Regional Context

Sussex Empty Homes Forum
Empty Homes Officers, across Sussex meet quarterly to share best practice and work together on regional issues.

Sussex empty homes strategy
Throughout Sussex (East and West Sussex), thirteen local authorities have signed up to a countywide empty homes strategy. The common aims are to: improve neighbourhoods; reduce the waste of empty homes; maximise available housing; reduce the need for new-build housing. In sharing our experiences, we aim to look at areas of overlap and differences and to learn from both and to make empty homes work more manageable. Above all, the strategy will enable us to share good practice and improve service. This Strategy has been developed initially to:

- Share best practice and improve the quality of service in dealing with empty homes across Sussex.
- Provide a platform from which innovative solutions to empty homes can be developed. This can take many forms, for example by working together we can look at ways of pooling resources to achieve value for money and eliminate unnecessary duplication. This work can also assist us in establishing targeting methods, such as the recent work in East Sussex, which has produced a statistically robust evaluation of the condition of the stock in the area. This gives us further insights into where we have concentrations of empty homes in the coastal and rural strips.
- Produce a Directory of Good Practice for all Sussex Empty Homes Strategy partners to share.

This partnership can be further built upon to foster improvements in service delivery on empty homes for the future.
Southeast Regional Housing Board (SRHB)
The SRHB is responsible for delivery of the South East Regional Housing Strategy (2008-11). The objectives of the strategy published by the RHB in April 2008 are to:

- Make sure 35% of all new homes are affordable, either for rent or for part-rent/part-buy
- Make sure new affordable homes come in a range of sizes, to suit families as well as couples and singles
- Continued funding for local authority housing stock to meet the decent home standard
- Make sure that new affordable homes meet high standards of building and energy efficiency.

The SRHB will also invest in refurbishing rundown private sector housing, affordable homes in rural areas and accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers

The SRHB is represented by The Government Office of the South East, South East England Development Agency, the South East England Partnership Board, the Homes and Community Agency and cross party representation from elected councillors from across the region.

The National Context
Empty properties in England
The problems posed by the numbers of empty homes are a national issue. In 2007, the total number of empty properties (over six months) across England was 672,924. This figure includes empty homes in the private sector as well as the public sector, i.e. Housing Association properties or properties owned by the Government. In the South East the total number stands at 83,745 (not including London). In 2007 the level of private homes left empty for over six months was 279,281.

The overall level of empty homes fluctuates year on year, with a slow reduction in recent years. However in February 2009 the government released its latest empty homes statistics, revealing that between 2007 and 2008 the number of empty homes in England leapt by 25,000 - the biggest increase in 17 years.
Government action
The government has given local authorities, owners and developers many tools to help bring empty homes back into use. In recent years:

- All local authorities have been encouraged to publish an empty homes strategy
- VAT has been reduced to 5% on properties empty for two years and 0% on properties empty for over ten years.
- Full council tax charging has been introduced on empty property and access to the name and address details of owners of empty homes for the purpose of bringing empty homes back into use.
- Compulsory Purchase Orders streamlining procedures have been introduced (DTLR produced a 5 Part guide to CPO in 2001)

- Communities Plan - Sustainable Communities:
  Building for the Future (2003) - This sets a long-term programme of action for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas. The Plan includes housing and planning reforms and offers a new approach to how we build and what we build. It specifically refers to bringing empty homes back into use.

- Housing Act 2004:
  This introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders, the first power specifically targeting privately owned, empty property. Local authorities are now, in effect, empowered to take over most of the rights and responsibilities of the owner of an empty dwelling, to refurbish and rent the property without becoming the titled owner.

  In 2005 the Government referred directly to the important benefits to housing supply and to environmental concern in the use of existing housing stock.
Other Hastings Strategies and Key Priorities

Community Strategy 2003-2013

‘A town with a decent home for everyone’

The Community Strategy (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/community_strategy/default.aspx) is the Council's ten-year vision for Hastings. The strategy outlines how making our town one with a decent home for everyone can affect and be affected by the six other things we are trying to achieve for Hastings. These are:

A Town that’s Good to Live in - Preventing dereliction and finding uses for empty properties
An Economically Successful Town - People are more likely to find and keep jobs if they have a good, secure home
A Healthier Town - Improving housing conditions creates healthier living environments
A Learning Town - People are more likely to succeed in learning if they have a good, secure home
An Inclusive Town - Maximising the supply of affordable and sustainable rented homes
A Safer Town - Improving home security and providing safe accommodation for vulnerable people

Housing Strategy 2004-2009

‘Improve residents' quality of life and the condition of the town’s housing, with particular emphasis on privately rented homes, empty homes and concentrations of properties that fail to meet the minimum statutory standard’

Our housing vision and priorities for the borough have been developed within the context of Government housing policy - the Housing Green Paper and related policy paper, The Way Forward for Housing. While the strategy (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/housing_strategy/default.aspx) reflects local circumstances, we recognise that wider regional trends and issues affecting other coastal resort towns have an influence on our housing market. The strategy, therefore, takes account of the priorities within the South East Regional Housing Strategy where they are relevant to us. Local issues and needs identified through our research and consultation are put in the context of the regional priorities throughout this document.
The Homelessness Strategy (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/homelessness_strategy/default.aspx) sets out the Councils strategic framework for the continued improvement to the housing and support services delivered by the Council, stakeholders and local agencies in the prevention of homelessness. The strategy sets out how this will be achieved:

- Assisting households in housing need to secure suitable accommodation at a price they can afford
- Providing a range of housing advice and assistance to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping
- Further improving our understanding of the causes and reasons for homelessness in Hastings and enabling us to develop and prioritise new services in response to emerging needs
- Ensuring appropriate housing related support is available for vulnerable households
- Facilitating the improvement and adaptation of existing homes.

**St Leonards Housing Renewal Area**

Central St. Leonards ward was declared a Housing Renewal Area in 2003 (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/central_stleonards_renewal/default.aspx). The Renewal Area will last for ten years. Here, a quarter of all dwellings are classed as failing to meet the fitness standard and one fifth are in serious disrepair. In addition to poor housing conditions, unemployment and benefit dependency is high and almost half the households have an income of under £10,000. Out of the 16 wards in the town, Central St Leonards contains the greatest concentration of long-term empty properties. 31% (June 2007) of long-term empty homes are to be found here. Our aim is to reduce these numbers in line with the general targets for the whole of the town, which is 30% by 2013. Initiatives to bring empty homes back into use will play a key role in achieving the vision for the area.
Urban Renaissance Programme (URP)

Central St Leonards is the focus of significant levels of capital investment programme in the town with funding from the Regional Housing Board, SEEDA, HBC, ESCC, Heritage Lottery Board and other partners. In total this is estimated to be £20m of planned public and private investment for the period 2007/2011. The funding is being used to deliver improvements to homes, restoration of key buildings, shop fronts, parks, gardens, key trading streets and the seafront, collectively referred to as the Central St Leonards Urban Renaissance Programme (URP). This partnership programme reflects priorities’ identified by residents and will ensure that Central St Leonards both benefits from and contributes to the town’s regeneration. It will do this by creating the physical environment in which business and community life can grow and prosper.

Regeneration of Hastings

Hastings is the most deprived town in the South East and the 29th most deprived local authority area in the country, so regeneration is a major priority for all partners working in and for the town and the wider economic area of which Hastings is the core. The Hastings and Bexhill Economic Alliance is developing an Economic Development, Inclusion and Sustainability Strategy (February 2008) which aims:

“To create an inclusive, successful and sustainable economy, which brings a decent standard of living and quality of life to all our residents.” (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/regeneration_strategy/default.aspx)

The three overall aims of this five-year strategy are to be:

- Successful – To increase business activity and create employment, providing a range of local job opportunities and increasing average earnings
- Inclusive – To enable local people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to raise their skills and aspirations and to get jobs offering stable employment and a living wage
- Sustainable – To achieve and maintain environmentally-sustainable prosperity, by maximising environmental benefits and opportunities and minimising negative environmental impacts

The Hastings & Bexhill Task Force, a partnership of local and regional authorities, is working to a ten-year regeneration programme. Its Five Point Plan aims to:

“Create an upward spiral of success and achieve a vibrant self sustaining economy, through”:

1. Urban renaissance: Creating 1 million square feet of education and commercial space and 1,400 new homes through the Millennium Communities programme
2. Business development: focusing on innovation, business support, growth and inward investment
3. Excellence in education: Creation of the University Centre Hastings (UCH) plus increased educational aspirations, participation and attainment
4. Broadband connectivity: Developing awareness, training and investment
5. Transport improvements: Improving transport links within the towns and to the rest of the region

Local Development Framework (LDF) – the spatial plan for the town

The vision, policies and objectives in the LDF (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/ldf/default.aspx) support the re-use of empty homes.

Extract from Vision Statement: Take a Trip To Hastings In 2026 (this describes how Hastings might be in 2026)
'It is not only new homes that are of improved quality: Focused renewal programmes, investment and enforcement actions have vastly improved the quality of the private sector housing stock in Central St Leonards...'
Appendices

Appendix One - Glossary of terms and contacts

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs)
www.audit-commission.gov.uk
A series of targets set by the government, administered by the Audit Commission to measure local authority performance in all areas. Please note that National Indicators have now replaced BVPIs and there is no longer an indicator dedicated to empty homes.

Brownfield Land Assembly Trust (BLAT)
www.seeda.co.uk
Set up by SEEDA, working closely with other partners, to specifically identify and acquire small, derelict sites in urban regeneration areas for recycling into the housing land market. These sites are likely to have specific development cost constraints, which means that they are not deliverable by Housing Associations or developers by conventional methods in the residential market.

Communities Plan
www.communities.gov.uk
Working name for the Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future publication (Feb 2003) ‘The Plan sets out a long-term programme for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas. It aims to tackle housing supply issues in the South East, low demand in other parts of the country, and the quality of our public spaces.’

CLG - Communities and Local Government
www.communities.gov.uk
Created in May 2006 with a powerful remit to promote community cohesion and equality as well as responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government. Supersedes ODPM in these areas.

Empty Homes Agency
www.emptyhomes.com
The Empty Homes Agency is an independent campaigning charity, which exists to highlight the waste of empty property in England and works with others to devise and promote solutions to bring empty property back into use.
Government Office for the South East
(GOSE) [www.GOSE.gov.uk](http://www.GOSE.gov.uk)
Regional operations for ten central Government departments. Structured through multidisciplinary teams that include housing and regeneration.

**Housing Association**
A non-profit making organisation providing affordable housing. If registered with the Homes and Community Agency also known as registered providers (RPs). Hastings works with a number of Housing Associations.

**The Homes and Community Agency**
[www.homesandcommunities.co.uk](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk)
The Homes and Communities Agency provides funding for affordable housing and helps bring land and buildings back into productive use. The agency now has responsibility for the main funding programmes previously within the remit of the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships and is the key government agency responsible for new housing delivery.

**National Association of Empty Property Practitioners**
[www.naepp.org.uk](http://www.naepp.org.uk)
The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners was established in May 2001 to support people involved in delivering empty property strategies. It was launched by empty property practitioners with the support of government ministers, the Homes and Community Agency and the Empty Homes Agency. Its aims include promoting unity and understanding amongst Empty Property Practitioners, promoting the role of Empty Property Practitioners and promoting policies and practices, which offer effective responses to the challenges presented by Empty Property. NAEPP worked with the Audit Commission to set the definition of BVPI 64 [see also BVPI].

**National Land Use Database**
[www.nlud.org.uk](http://www.nlud.org.uk)
‘The objective of the full National Land Use Database is to develop a complete, consistent and detailed geographic record of land use in England, extendable to the other countries of the United Kingdom.’
ODPM – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Government departments now superseded by CLG.

Regional Housing Board / Regional Housing Strategy
www.GOSE.gov.uk
Set up by Ministers to develop regional housing strategies and advise on funding.

South East England Development Agency
(SEEDA)
www.seeda.co.uk
The South East development agency with strategic lead in promoting sustainable economic development in the region. Housing role includes brownfield land development programme and promotion of best practice in built environment skills and sustainable construction.

South East England Partnership Board (formerly South East England Regional Assembly-SEERA)
http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk
Grouping of local authorities with economic and social partners (CBI, TUC, voluntary sector etc.) set up and funded by Government to promote South East England. Also the regional planning body.

Sussex Empty Homes Forum
Forum with representatives from all local authorities in Sussex, specifically to discuss and share good practice on empty homes work.

Sustainable Communities
www.communities.gov.uk
‘Sustainable communities are about things that matter to people: decent homes at prices people can afford, good public transport, schools, hospitals, and shops; people able to have a say on the way their neighbourhood is run; and a clean, safe environment’.
Appendix Two – Further Information

This strategy is available in large print, audio and other languages on request. Call 01424 451772

For more information or advice contact The Councils Empty Homes Officer:

Free phone: 0800 085 8967

E-Mail: emptyhomes@hastings.gov.uk

Web: www.hastings.gov.uk/empty_homes

Location: The Empty Homes Officer, Housing Services, Renaissance House, The Old Christchurch School, London Road, St Leonards on Sea TN37 6AN

LetStart: http://www.hastings.gov.uk/housing_advice/default.aspx#letstart

