

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**HIGHWAYS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES
CABINET MEMBER**

EMPTY HOMES

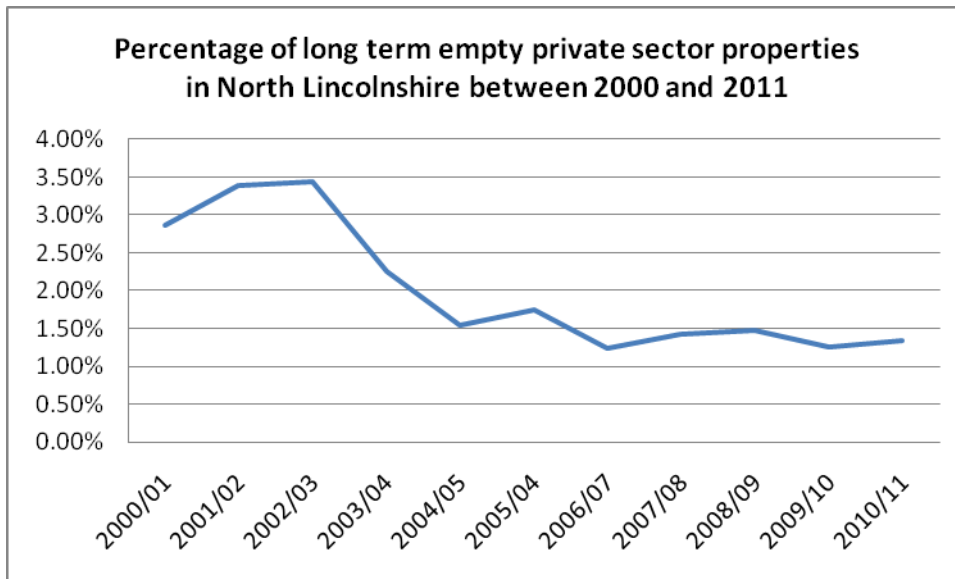
1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Cabinet Member about the current approach to empty homes in North Lincolnshire and the review being taken as part of the development of the Housing Strategy.
- 1.2 The key points in this report are:
 - 1.2.1 A plan for tackling empty homes will be produced as part of the Integrated Housing Strategy due to be approved in December 2012.
 - 1.2.2 The empty homes plan will be based on a robust evidence base and extensive consultation with a range of partners, stakeholders and the local community.
 - 1.2.3 In the meantime the council will seek to commission housing associations and other interested bodies to assist in bringing empty homes back into use.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 In North Lincolnshire in 2010/11 there were 823 homes in the private sector that have been left vacant for more than 6 months. Across England approximately 1.4% of homes have been left empty for 6 months, exactly the same proportion as in North Lincolnshire.
- 2.2 The graph below illustrates how the current rate of empty properties compares with previous years.
- 2.3 In March 2011 the council adopted a toolkit that set out a measured approach to engaging with owners of empty properties to encourage them to bring them back into use.
- 2.4 In August 2011 the council revised the Housing Assistance Policy. The policy includes provision to award empty homes loans of up to £25,000 towards the costs of bringing homes that have been empty for more than

2 years back into use. The loans, which are subject to conditions, are repayable over a maximum of 5 years.



2.5 The review of the council's approach to empty homes will include:

- Analysis of the distribution of empty homes and comparison with areas of housing need
- The potential for joint working with others to assist owners to bring homes back into use
- Analysis of the reasons that dwellings are left empty to see if preventive measures can be put in place
- Review of the measures currently available to the council including the generation and use of external funding and allocation of staff resources

2.6 The government has set out its incentives to local authorities to bring empty homes back into use in a document called Laying the Foundations – a Housing Strategy for England. Amongst the measures that have been put forward are: the payment of New Homes Bonus for long term (i.e. vacant for more than 6 months) empty dwellings returned to use; and proposals to allow local authorities to levy the full rate of council tax on empty dwellings.

2.7 The government has announced an empty homes fund of £100m that housing associations and community groups can bid for. The council will work with suitable partners to work up a North Lincolnshire bid in time for the 23 January deadline as set out in the guidance issued on 24 November. Funding will be allocated from March 2012.

2.8 The government also has published proposals for technical reforms of council tax which, if agreed, would take effect from 2013/14. The changes being contemplated include allowing billing authorities to levy

an 'empty homes premium' on dwellings which have been left empty for two years or more.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 Option 1 – Approve the timescale for the development of an empty homes business plan as part of the Integrated Housing Strategy.
- 3.2 Option 2 – Develop a stand alone empty homes strategy.
- 3.3 Option 3 – Remain with the existing ad hoc approach to empty homes and continue to review and amend these individual measures on an ongoing basis.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 Option 1 is the preferred option as this makes best use of the available staff resources for the development of a robust evidence base and business plan. One single Housing Strategy would enable clearer presentation of priorities and enable informed decision on allocations of resources.
- 4.2 Option 2 is not achievable unless staff are withdrawn from other assignments which would adversely affect performance in key areas.
- 4.3 Option 3 is to continue to work without an overall plan. An ad hoc approach is will not encourage support from other stakeholders and is unlikely to enable the council to make the best use of resources.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

- 5.1 Financial implications – an effective business plan should enable the council to utilise some of the New Homes Bonus payable by the government for each empty property brought back into use. This is worth £5,757 for homes in council tax Band A, up to £8,635 for Band D rated properties.
- 5.2 The need for the match funding from the council to help bring empty homes back into use will be assessed as part of the corporate capital budget setting process.
- 5.3 The costs of bringing individual empty homes back into use vary considerably.
- 5.4 Staff time will be allocated to the empty homes business plan as part of the Integrated Housing Strategy assignment.
- 5.5 There are no IT resource implications arising from these proposals.

6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

6.1 Statutory implications - the legal aspects of returning empty homes were addressed in the report approved in March 2011 on the empty homes toolkit. The council is currently consulting on a housing enforcement policy that aims to ensure a consistent and proportionate approach to legal proceedings.

6.2 Environmental implications – bringing empty homes back into use has positive benefits for the environment and local communities.

6.3 Section 17 crime and disorder implications – empty properties tend to attract various forms of anti social behaviour and reducing the numbers is beneficial to the community.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 There has been no formal consultation regarding this report.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That the Cabinet Member approves the development of an empty homes business plan as part of the Integrated Housing Strategy and receives regular update reports on progress towards the development of the Housing Strategy.

DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD & ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report

Cabinet member reports:
Empty Property Tool Kit 6 March 2011.
North Lincolnshire Housing Strategy 8 August 2011.
Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy 8 August 2011.
Housing Enforcement Policy 11 November 2011.

Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England
HM Government November 2011.