

Shropshire  
Council

# Empty Homes Strategy

2010 – 2013



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## Foreword by Councillor Mal Price - Portfolio Holder for Housing



**Welcome to Shropshire Council's Empty Homes Strategy which has been developed in partnership with a wide range of community stakeholders and partners. It sets out the initiatives that the Council plans to implement over the next 3 years to maximise the re-use of empty homes across Shropshire.**

**The shortage of housing across many parts of the Country means many ordinary people are unable to afford a decent home to rent or buy. The Government is committed to increasing the supply of housing and recognises that at the same time we must ensure that that we make the best possible use of existing housing. We need to address this issue in Shropshire where the supply of affordable housing is a key priority for the Council.**

**Empty homes also have a huge social impact – they can affect the appearance of a neighbourhood and people living nearby may have to suffer the consequences if an empty home falls derelict or is attacked by vandals.**

**Shropshire Council is committed to bringing empty homes back into use and will aim to develop key links with stakeholders and partners to ensure that the Empty Homes Strategy successfully delivers useful housing in our local communities.**

**We hope the community and key stakeholders will actively be involved in the delivery of the Strategy through contacting the Empty Homes Officers with any comments or concerns about empty homes in their local areas.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Price'.

**Councillor Mal Price  
Portfolio Holder for Housing**

## Understanding the Empty Homes Problem in Shropshire

Figure 1 Lower Layer Super Output Area Map clearly illustrates that empty homes can be found throughout Shropshire. Whilst there are concentrations in the larger communities and market town areas, when added together a significant number of empty homes are located in rural areas.

Fig. 1

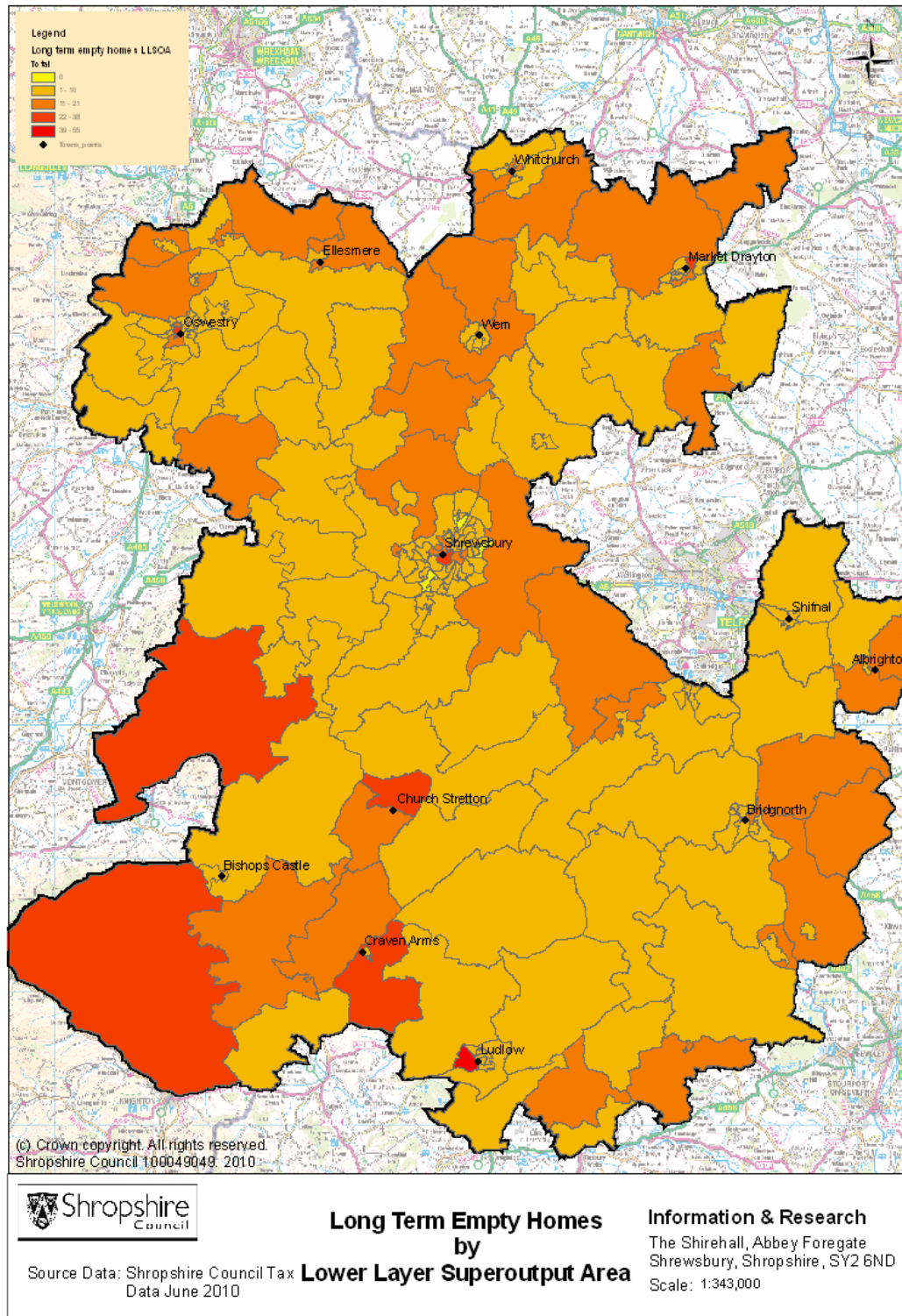
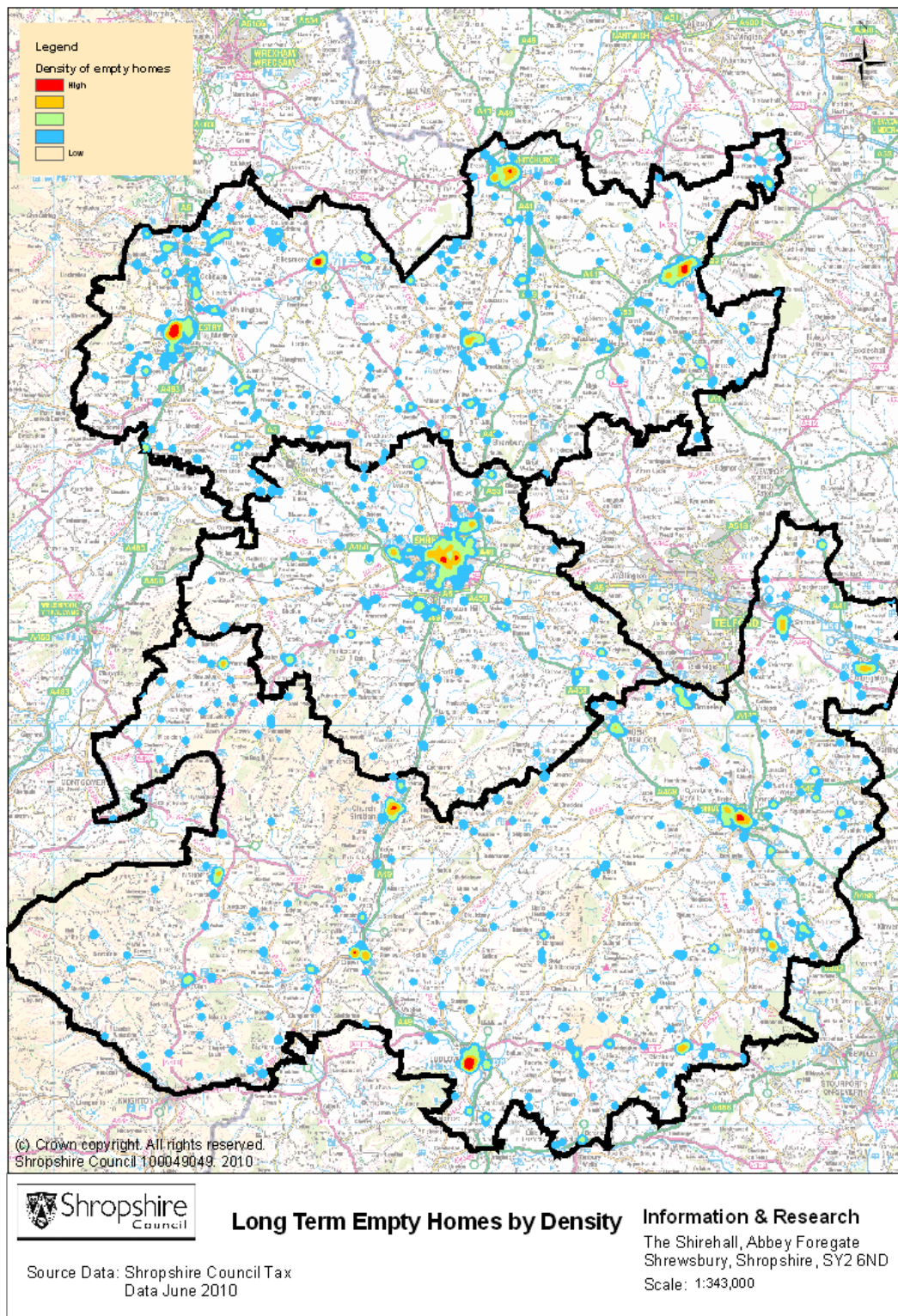


Figure 2 Long Term Empty Homes by Density Map centres on those areas of Shropshire which have the highest concentration of empty homes (Hot Spots). High density areas are predominantly located in the larger community and market town areas.

Fig. 2



## **Executive Summary**

### **1. Introduction**

The Council's Empty Homes Strategy aims to minimise empty homes and identify opportunities for reoccupation. Where appropriate, a locality based approach will be adopted to focus activity on specific areas.

The Council has amended its Council Tax exemption policy. A proportion of the additional resultant income has been directed to the Private Sector Housing Team to create two dedicated Empty Homes Officers and reinforce the provision of Empty Properties to Homes Grants.

To date, a reactive approach has been adopted by the Council in dealing with empty homes using a combination of incentive grants, advice and persuasion.

Nationally and regionally, some 3% of properties are vacant. 42% of these are in the private sector and have been unoccupied for 6 months or more. Locally, in April 2009, 3.3% of properties in Shropshire were vacant of which 44% or 1,933 were in the private sector and had been vacant in excess of 6 months.

### **2. Strategies and Policies**

The new Coalition Government intends introducing a range of measures to tackle empty homes. There is wide recognition that reoccupation of empty homes forms a necessary contribution to meeting overall housing need.

The Empty Homes Strategy contributes to the three Council Community Strategy priorities and has links to the Housing Strategy, Private Sector Housing Policies, Homelessness Strategy and Local Development Framework Implementation Plan.

### **3. Defining an Empty Home**

Empty homes are either vacant as a result of transition between occupancies or are more problematic, typically remaining vacant in excess of 6 months.

### **4. The Impact of Empty Homes and Benefits of Reuse**

Empty homes attract vandalism and anti social behaviour. They may affect adjoining buildings, particularly with dampness. Large numbers of empty homes restricts housing supply.

Returning homes to use can bring a range of benefits:-

- Increasing security and providing additional income or capital to the owner.
- Enhancing available housing stock and the environment while minimising anti social behaviour.
- Providing additional Council Tax income and assisting in regeneration.

## 5. Aim and Objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy

The aim of this strategy is to provide a framework within which empty homes initiatives can be brought back into use. This Strategy will ensure that works carried out to empty homes is in accordance with local planning policy and that it is carried out in the best interests of local residents, thus promoting regeneration, investment and contributing to a reduction in social problems, crime and disorder. This action can make a positive contribution to the overall health and wellbeing of local residents.

Five key objectives have been identified to achieve the aim:-

1. To raise awareness of empty homes issues
2. To collect relevant, accurate and up-to-date information
3. To risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.
4. To implement specific measures to bring empty homes back into use.
5. To focus efforts on those areas of Shropshire with the greatest concentrations of empty homes.

## 6. Achieving the Objectives

Initially, owners of empty homes will be encouraged to return them to use on a voluntary basis. Support, advice and where appropriate financial assistance will be provided. Where there is an unwillingness to utilise a property and no justification for it to remain empty, consideration will be given to the use of enforcement powers available to the Council.

Our objectives will be met through the following measures:-

1. Raising awareness of empty home issues
2. Gathering relevant, accurate and up to date information
3. Risk assessing empty homes to determine their priority for action
4. Focusing efforts on those areas of Shropshire with the greatest concentrations of empty homes

## 7. Key Actions

A choice of action will always be made to suit both the owner and the property. These will involve partners such as communities, owners, Housing Associations and other organisations.

### Achieving Sale of the Property

- Liaison with estate agents and auctioneers may prompt sales.
- Sale to a Housing Association may be achieved through direct negotiation.
- Enforced sale of a property may be an option where there are monies owed to the Council.
- Compulsory purchase may also be an option where the property is problematic. It will always be viewed as a last resort.

## **Improvement**

Funding enquiries may involve mortgage lenders, independent financial advisers and Home Improvement Agencies as well as the Council's own Empty Property to Homes Grant may be available. See Appendix 3.

## **Leasing Arrangements**

Many owners may be willing to lease their properties to a Housing Association or other organisation. Such arrangements may also incorporate improvements or on a short term basis. In addition, the Council may establish a tenant finding scheme to bring private sector lets back into use.

## **Reducing the Environmental Impact of Empty Properties**

The Council may use powers to reduce the impact of empty homes and control nuisances improving security and dealing with dangerous structures.

## **Enforcement Action**

Legal powers may be used for long-term empty homes. These may involve a Statutory Notice requiring work to be carried out or more far-reaching enforcement measures such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders, enforced sale, or compulsory purchase. These measures will only be used as a last resort where it has been impossible to trace the owner or agree a voluntary solution with them. See Appendix 4.

## **8. Targets and Local Performance Indicators**

A local indicator now measures the number of empty homes brought back into use, excluding Rent Deposit Cases or any other activity reported elsewhere.

NI 155 is a national indicator measuring affordable homes delivered. Bringing empty homes back into use to provide affordable housing contributes to this figure where long term affordability is a feature.

Long term empty homes recorded on Council Tax records will reduce due to the change in Council Tax publicity surrounding delivery of this strategy.

## **Performance during 2009/10**

During 2009/10 the Private Sector Housing Team returned 26 empty homes to use. Targets will rise to 101 homes during 2012/13.

## **9. Actions & Priorities**

Our plans and actions to tackle this issue over the next 3 years detail our approach and can be summarised below:-:

1. To raise awareness of empty homes issues
2. To collect relevant, accurate and up-to-date information
3. To risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.
4. To implement Empty Home Action Zones.

## 1. Introduction

This is the first Empty Homes Strategy to be adopted by Shropshire Council. The Strategy sets out how Shropshire Council intends to tackle the issue of empty homes during the next 3 years.

The purpose of the strategy is to ensure that the number of empty homes in Shropshire Council's area is kept to a minimum and to identify new opportunities to encourage owners to bring them back into use.

In an area where housing demand exceeds supply, it is difficult to justify homes being left empty, disused and deteriorating. A key and innovative feature of this Strategy will be to pilot locality focused work establishing Empty Home Action Zones aiming to significantly increase the number of long term empty homes that are brought back into use. Clusters of long term empty homes will be targeted by these zones in consultation with local communities and using a risk based assessment procedure.

The Council's Private Sector Housing Renewal Team is responsible for delivering the Empty Homes Strategy.

### Background and Current Developments

Prior to the establishment of the Shropshire Unitary Authority in April 2009, a limited amount of empty home work was carried out by the five former District and Borough Councils each with a separate strategy and approach. A number of Councils provided financial incentives in the form of grants to assist in the renovation and reoccupation of properties primarily to first time buyers for owner occupation or to landlords for private sector rental. Bridgnorth District Council also operated a successful Living over the Shops Scheme and Oswestry Borough Council targeted flats above shops as part of a broader town centre regeneration scheme.

Since the formation of the new Shropshire Council there has been a continuation of the use of empty homes grants that have helped to return empty and underutilised homes back into use as well as meeting the need for affordable housing, in addition to the continuation of our reactive empty homes service.

It is recognised that specific challenges are presented by the large geographical area which Shropshire covers combined with the dispersed nature of settlements. There is a need to establish a robust Empty Homes Strategy and to identify additional financial resources to support its effective delivery.

The Local Government Act 2003 gave Councils new discretionary powers to reduce or remove the 50% Council Tax discount awarded in respect of long-term empty homes with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004.

In the 2008/09 financial year, immediately prior to the creation of Shropshire Council, there was a disparity between Shropshire's five Borough and District Councils regarding this discretionary power in respect of homes classed as long term empty. Three of the Councils had removed the discount and two had retained the full 50% discount.

With the creation of Shropshire Council in 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009, elected Members took the opportunity to standardise this discretionary power across the new Council's geographical area and subsequently approved retention of the full 50% Council Tax discount awarded in respect of long-term empty homes.

A review of the Council Tax database indicated that the number of homes which had been vacant for more than 6 months had marginally increased between October 2008 and October 2009 (Appendix 1). Furthermore 70%, (1,379) of these long-term empty homes were in property valuation bands A, B and C.

One of Shropshire Council's priorities for improvement is "to provide a range of affordable housing options for Shropshire residents". One way of contributing towards this priority is by increasing the number of properties in the housing market and reducing or removing the discretionary 50% Council Tax discount in respect of long-term empty homes. This may encourage owners to sell or let homes that have been empty for more than six months.

As a result of this, during January 2010 Shropshire Council reviewed its Council Tax discounts for empty homes. It was resolved that a revised discretionary Council Tax discount policy be adopted in respect of long term empty properties for the 2010-11 financial year; i.e. the retention of the full 50% discount for six months and complete removal of the discount thereafter.

Revision of the discretionary Council Tax discount has increased Council Tax income and a proportion of this has been ring fenced for a 3 year period to support the work of Private Sector Housing Team. Funding has been provided for the creation of two dedicated Empty Homes Officers to assist in the implementation of this strategy and to provide additional capital funding for the popular Empty Properties to Homes Grants.

### Achievements so far

During the year since 1 April 2009 the Council's Housing Private Sector Housing Renewal Team has dealt with over 25 empty home enquiries on a reactive basis, using the various options available to assist and encourage owners to bring their long term empty homes back into use.

The Council's main approach is to engage, promote and persuade owners to bring empty homes back into use and only when this fails will enforcement action be considered.

During 2009/10 financial year the Private Sector Housing Assistance Team has been responsible for delivering the following: -

- Completion of 7 legacy Empty Homes Grants approved by the former District and Borough Councils, bringing 7 units of accommodation back into use at a cost of approximately £77,000.
- A further legacy Empty Homes Grant and 20 Empty Properties to Homes Grants are approved awaiting completion which, when completed will bring 21 units of

accommodation back into use. Approximately £296,000 is committed to these projects.

- There are applications awaited in respect of 12 further units of accommodation with an anticipated commitment of approximately £200,000.

Due to the significant timescales involved in the completion of some schemes, particularly those involving multiple units, it is often difficult to predict spend and outcomes in a particular financial year. An aim of this Strategy is to facilitate more focused work and to reduce the timescales involved with bringing empty homes back into use.

### The National Context

The Government's Department for Communities and Local Government <sup>1</sup> has stated that empty homes account for 3 per cent of the housing stock. The overall vacancy rate has reduced by 9 per cent since 1997 from 763,234 to 697,055. Of the 697,055 vacant properties in 2008, 293,728 were identified as private sector vacancies of six months or longer.

Published in July 2007, the Housing Green Paper, Homes for the Future: More Affordable, More Sustainable, sets out the Government's strategy for meeting a new target of over 240,000 net additional homes a year by 2016 (2 million new homes by 2016). The document makes specific reference to the need to tackle long term empty properties and the consultation paper on the new Housing and Planning Delivery Grant may introduce a new requirement for local authorities to have in place an effective empty homes strategy to be eligible for grant. Specific mention is also made of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's) and Local Authorities are being encouraged to use this power.

The new Coalition Government formed in May 2010 has, in its proposal document, "Our Programme for Government" expressed a commitment to explore a range of measures to bring empty homes into use.

Councils are also required to deliver sustainable development which considers effective protection of the environment. The Empty Homes Agency has drawn attention to how the re-use of empty homes can contribute to this aim. Research has shown that the creation of a new home typically creates 60 -70 tonnes of carbon emissions whereas refurbishment of an existing property creates only 7-10 tonnes.

### The Regional and Sub Regional Context

Bringing empty homes back into use is a Government priority and is an important contributor to meeting the Government's housing and regeneration objective of creating mixed, sustainable and cohesive communities where people want to and can afford to live.

The West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy acknowledges that empty homes are a wasted asset and empty homes strategies are an important way of increasing the supply of affordable housing. The regional strategy also acknowledges that the reuse of existing stock reduces the potential for antisocial behaviour and offers wider regeneration benefits.

The Empty Homes Agency recognises that many vacant properties could be utilised to address the unsatisfied demand and estimates that in April 2009 that regionally, there were 69,002 empty homes equating to a vacancy rate of 2.94% of which 33,780 had been empty for in excess of 6 months.<sup>2</sup>

The Regional Housing Group for the West Midlands has developed a Regional Housing Strategy. This sets out the housing needs of the region, identifies priorities for action, and demonstrates how these link with the wider regeneration work and other strategies and plans.

The Regional Housing Strategy 2005 aims to make housing policy more localised and therefore more relevant and specific to an areas needs. The Strategy states *“Existing housing stock is also a key resource in meeting the changing needs of West Midlands communities”* *“There will be no justification for building new homes when acceptable existing stock is unused, in whichever sector or tenure”*. *“Empty homes are wasted assets. The re-use of these through empty homes properties strategies is an important way of increasing the supply of affordable housing”*.<sup>3</sup>

### The Local Context - Key Facts and Figures

In April 2009, there were 131,273 properties in Shropshire and of those, 4362 were vacant, with 1933 vacant for more than 6 months. At the same time there were over 5000 households in need of affordable housing on the Shropshire HomePoint Housing Register and a further 3,500 to 4000 on other Housing Association Registers in the County, which clearly illustrates how the reuse of empty homes will go some way to addressing Housing Need in Shropshire. Table 1 below provides a breakdown on the number of empty homes by area as at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 (HSSA 2009 Revised).

**Table 1: Empty Homes Figures by former District and Borough as at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 (Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix 2009 Revised)**

Former District & Borough Authorities	Total Empty Homes	Percentage of Homes Empty	Private homes empty for more than 6 months.
Bridgnorth	880	3.76%	333
South Shropshire	913	4.51%	504
North Shropshire	940	3.56%	514
Oswestry	533	3.04%	224
Shrewsbury & Atcham	1096	2.51%	358
Combined Fig	4362	3.32%	1933

## 2. Strategies and Policies

### National Strategies and Policies

The new Coalition Government formed in May 2010 has, in its proposal document “Our Programme for Government” expressed a commitment to explore a range of measures to bring empty homes into use.

At the time of writing, further detailed guidance has yet to be issued. The Council welcomes this commitment which builds upon previous national policy documents, each of which identified empty homes as an underutilised element of housing resource and the impact such properties can have on communities, specifically:-

- Homes for the Future: more affordable, more sustainable -2007:
- Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing (PPS3) - Nov 2006
- The Sustainable Communities: Homes for All – 2005
- Communities and Local Government -Empty Homes, Unlocking the Potential, An Implementation Handbook for local authorities, empty property owners and others - 2003.

### Regional Strategies and Policies

#### Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands 2008

The new Government’s document “Our Programme for Government” indicates a planned review of Regional Spatial Strategies. Further detail is awaited. At the present time this strategy builds upon the existing Regional Spatial Strategy as it applies to empty homes:-

Policy CF4: The reuse of land and buildings for housing states “*Local planning authorities should optimise the opportunities for recycling land and buildings for new housing development.*” It states that the Regional Planning Board, through its monitoring role, should ensure that it takes account of the “*action taken by local authorities to reduce vacancy rates (e.g. by using the Empty Homes Strategies) and the governments target to reduce them*”.

Policy RR2, part C (iv) emphasises the need for “*to providing affordable housing to meet local needs, in existing settlements, wherever possible and making full use of the existing housing stock*”.<sup>5</sup>

We will rapidly abolish and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils, including giving councils new powers to stop ‘garden grabbing’.

## **Achieving Strategic Objectives - The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) 2008**

In 2008, a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) was jointly undertaken by Shropshire and Herefordshire Councils. This was a comprehensive assessment of the housing market in relation to affordability and balance.

The SHMA recognised the need to have a targeted programme to reduce empty properties as a contribution to meeting overall housing need.

When the SHMA was produced, the former Shropshire Authorities and Herefordshire Council constituted the West Housing Market Area (WHMA). Since early 2010 the WHMA has been extended to include Telford and Wrekin Council.

### **Local Strategies and Policies**

#### **Shropshire Council's Community Strategy 2010-2020**

The vision for Shropshire, set out in the Sustainable Communities Strategy 2010-2020 is of a 'flourishing Shropshire'. To reflect and deliver the vision, the Sustainable Communities Strategy sets out three priorities:-

##### **1. Enterprise and growth, with strong market towns and rebalanced rural settlements**

The Empty Homes Strategy particularly contributes to this aim through:-

- The creation of affordable housing ensures housing for working people
- Community safety is enhanced with fewer empty homes
- The character of communities is protected and enhanced by empty homes work.

##### **2. Responding to climate change and enhancing our natural and built environment**

The Empty Homes Strategy particularly contributes to this aim through:-

- Properties returned to use contribute to improved visual amenity.
- Reuse of existing empty homes minimises environmental impact.
- Improvement of properties to the Decent Homes standard, helps minimise environmental impact of housing provision.

##### **3. Healthy, safe and confident people and communities**

The Empty Homes Strategy particularly contributes to this aim through:-

- Minimising empty homes promotes vibrant, cohesive communities.
- Returning homes to use allows communities to remain intact by accommodating family members within their local environment.

The Empty Homes Strategy sits within the Corporate Strategy and has links with :-

- Housing Strategy

- Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy
- Housing Assistance Policy
- Homelessness Strategy
- Local Development Framework (LDF) Implementation Plan and the Local Investment Plan

## **Housing Strategy**

Based on the aims of the Community Strategy and Regional Strategies, eight main themes emerge and have been defined for the Housing Strategy. Those aims on which empty homes issues have a direct bearing are as follows:

- Housing provision and affordability – making maximum use of empty properties through an Empty Property Strategy. Exploring every opportunity to provide affordable housing or for the supply of sites for affordable housing, using resources including land owned by the Council or other public agencies.
- ‘Decent homes’ in the private sector - We will develop an ‘Empty Property’ strategy to programme the return of long-term empty homes back into use using a variety of measures available to us, as these are clearly a vital resource in attempting to address housing needs.
- Vulnerable households - We aim to continue to improve services for vulnerable and older people especially practical support in their homes. Further groups have been identified as priority groups through the Homelessness Strategy and Supporting People Strategy and on which we will work with the County Supporting People programme, subject to resources.
- Housing options and allocations – Through the Council’s Empty Property to Homes Grants there is the option for the Council to take up nomination rights where financial assistance is provided at the following increments £15,000 and £20,000 for a period of 5 years.

Returning empty homes back to beneficial use makes a direct contribution to all of these goals because it increases the supply of cross-tenure and affordable housing, whilst also addressing problems of antisocial behaviour and neighbourhood blight.

## **Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy 2009**

Section 12 of the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy describes the action that the Council may take in respect of both Interim and Final Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase.

## **Housing Assistance Policy 2009**

The Regulatory Reform Order 2002 introduced a new wider discretionary power to allow Local Authorities to provide a range of financial and other assistance for repairs, improvements and adaptations. The intention is to allow greater flexibility and discretion in delivering assistance to address local needs.

The Housing Assistance Policy identifies a number of incentives that can be accessed by owners of empty properties to assist them bring their properties up to the Decent Homes Standard in order that they may be made available to rent or occupied by the applicant as a first time owner occupier.

## **Homelessness Strategy 2008**

The 2008 Homelessness Strategy arises out of the comprehensive review of the 2003 – 2008 Shropshire Homelessness Strategy. The document focuses on topics and priorities that have been identified at both a national, regional and local level.

The Shropshire Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2008/2009 sets out a number of key objectives. The following objectives support the Empty Homes Strategy:

- To extend the provision of accommodation options to prevent the need for emergency accommodation Objective (5.9).
- To sustain and reduce further the use of temporary accommodation in Shropshire by 2010 (Objective 5.12)
- Reduce fuel poverty and improve private sector housing conditions in Shropshire (Objective 5.14).

By delivering a number of solutions to bring empty homes back into use, the Empty Homes Strategy will assist in providing a range of affordable housing options and assist in creating a balanced housing market.

## **Local Development Framework (LDF) Implementation Plan and the Local Investment Plan**

As a replacement to the Local Plan, Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and Local Investment Plans (LIPs) are designed to demonstrate that the development strategy proposed for a locality will be supported by the necessary infrastructure.

The LDF Implementation Plan outlines infrastructure requirements which are needed to support the level and location of development for Shropshire, as outlined in the Core Strategy. It covers physical infrastructure (transport, energy, water, waste, minerals and ICT/digital), social infrastructure (education, health and community facilities) and green infrastructure (open spaces, recreation and sporting facilities and green public realm) requirements.

The Local Investment Plan (LIP) will help the Council and its partners to work together to coordinate various funding streams.

The two plans share a set of place based appendices, which identify the local vision for a place and list all the infrastructure and investment requirements for that area. It brings together “top down” schemes, originating from large organisations such as Shropshire Council, and “bottom up” schemes, originating from community aspirations. It will be used to assist in prioritising which are the most important schemes within a particular place, given limited resources, and will help provide a delivery programme which will create and maintain it as a sustainable community.

Together this package of documents is known as the Regeneration Prospectus. As an example the place based appendix for Shrewsbury identifies and divides the infrastructure and investment requirements into the following themes:

- Housing and cohesive, sustainable communities
- Economic investment and opportunity
- Social and community infrastructure
- Environment and climate change
- Transport and accessibility
- Regeneration projects

The Infrastructure and Investment Development Framework for Shrewsbury has set as one of its key priorities to increase the supply of affordable homes by bringing empty buildings back into use during 2009 and 2013.

### 3 Defining an Empty Home

#### What is an Empty Home?

Empty homes occur for a variety of reasons. Some are empty for short periods of time and tend to come back into use relatively quickly; others may be empty for a significant period of time and are not likely to come back into use until the underlying reason for the vacancy is addressed.

It is important to recognise that a certain level of vacancy is necessary for the market to function.

There are two main types of empty homes:

#### 1. Transitional Vacancies

These are homes which are in a transitional process that will remain empty for a short period of time, generally between occupancies, due to market forces, probate or due to a programme of refurbishment. These homes seldom require the intervention of the Council in order to ensure that they are brought back into the housing stock within 6 months of being vacated. There will always be a percentage of homes that fall into this category.

#### 2. Problematic Vacancies

These are homes which are effectively inactive in the housing market and have remained empty for over six months and are classed as problematic vacancies and are targeted for action within this strategy.

#### Why do homes become and remain empty?

In order to develop an action plan to tackle empty homes it is important to understand why they are left unoccupied. The circumstances behind this can often be very complicated requiring a diplomatic and sensitive approach by the Council.

Houses can become long term vacant for a range of reasons, including the following:

- Abandoned/Repossessed
- Transitional vacancies
- Investment Opportunities
- Inheritance
- Family disputes/Divorce settlements
- Probate
- Bankruptcy
- Low demand area
- Owner in hospital or institutional care
- Lack of finances to renovate property
- Lack of information and advice on the various options available to return the home back into use.

It is important that the Council assesses each individual empty home on its merits to ensure that the best course of action is taken to work with the owner to bring the property back into use. This could be by the provision of advice, information, financial incentives or enforcement action. A small percentage of empty homes will remain empty for a longer period of time where an owner may be in hospital or in institutional care.

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## 4 The Impact of Empty Homes and Benefits of Reuse.

### What is the impact of empty homes?

This can be split into two main areas:

#### 1. Community

- An empty home with boarded up windows and doors, overgrown gardens and accumulations of rubbish (fly tipping) can indirectly affect the marketability and value of neighbouring properties. They can become a blight on the village or townscape. The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and a study by Hometrack in 2003 both estimate that empty homes can devalue neighbouring homes by as much as 18%.<sup>7</sup>
- An empty home can become damp which may cause expensive damage to the main fabric of the building. In addition it may also pose a direct risk of damage to adjoining properties through dampness and infestation.
- Empty homes may attract more serious criminal activity, including arson, squatting, vandalism and drug dealing which cause blight on neighbourhoods and tie up the resources of emergency services and the Local Authority.
- The longer a property is left empty and unattended the more difficult it can be to prevent unauthorised entry.

#### 2. Housing Need

- There is considerable high demand for social housing. In April 2009 there were over 5000 people who had formally applied for housing on the Shropshire HomePoint Housing Register and a further 3,500 to 4000 on other Housing Association Registers in the County.
- The private sector has a key role to play in the provision of housing for those in housing need. The large number of empty homes identified within Shropshire if brought back into use will help to meet this need.
- Bringing empty homes back into use will not only regenerate our communities and reduce the opportunity for disturbance and criminal behaviour, but will also provide a sustainable way to meet future housing demand

### What are the benefits of bringing an empty home back into use?

Considering the wide range of costs that may be directly attributed to empty homes, it is clear that any strategy which aims to bring these properties back into use can be expected to yield considerable benefits.

There are many social and economic benefits and opportunities when dealing with long term empty homes and returning them back into occupation. These include:

**Benefits to the Home Owner:**

- A maintained and occupied home will deter against unauthorised access and antisocial behaviour.
- Can turn a costly empty home or its land into an asset and increase its value by clearance and development of the site or renovation of the existing property.
- Provide rental income or capital if the property is sold.
- Reduce deterioration to the fabric of the property.

**Benefits to the Community:**

- Potential to provide affordable housing for local people
- Assist in creating sustainable communities by enhancing the local environment.
- Prevent or reduce antisocial behaviour which can be particularly detrimental to neighbouring properties.

**Benefits to the Local Authority:**

- Increased availability of housing for local people, as well as a continued reduction and prevention of homelessness, therefore minimising the use of temporary accommodation.
- Increased range and availability of rental properties.
- Improved stock condition
- Assistance in reviving rundown areas and improvement of communities, which can consequently be a further catalyst for wider regeneration by building property market confidence.
- Provide a sustainable way to meet future housing demand
- Reduce anti-social behaviour.
- Generate additional Council Tax revenue.
- Promoting well managed and maintained private sector housing will enable a better standard of living and will assist in meeting the Decent Homes Standard across all tenures.

## 5 Aim and Objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy

### Aim

The aim of this strategy is to provide a framework within which an empty home initiative can be developed to bring more homes back into use. This Strategy will ensure that works carried out to empty homes is in accordance with local planning policy and that it is carried out in the best interests of local residents, thus promoting regeneration, investment and contributing to a reduction in social problems, crime and disorder. This action can make a positive contribution to the overall health and wellbeing of local residents.

### Key Objectives

To achieve this aim, we have identified four key objectives:

- 1. To raise awareness of empty homes issues**  
To work with internal departments within the Council, external stakeholders and members of the public to gain an understanding and commitment to tackle the issues associated with empty homes and to promote the benefits of returning empty homes back into use.
- 2. To collect relevant, accurate and up-to-date information**  
Create an empty homes database of all known empty homes using the Council Tax database and a variety of additional qualitative and quantitative data sources.
- 3. To risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.**  
Identified empty homes will be risk assessed to determine their priority and mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS) to establish empty home “Hotspots” to assist in targeting action.
- 4. To focus efforts on those areas of Shropshire with the greatest concentrations of empty homes.**  
A locality based approach will be used known as Empty Home Action Zones to deal with the greatest concentrations of empty homes in Shropshire. The majority of resources and enforcement action will be focused in these areas to provide financial assistance to empty home owners and engage with local residents to bring long term empty homes back into use.

## 6 Achieving the Objectives

It is our intention to encourage the owners of empty homes to bring them back into use voluntarily. Our approach will therefore be focused initially on engaging with the owners offering support, advice and, where appropriate, offering financial assistance in the form of Empty Properties to Homes Grants. However, where an owner is unwilling to bring the home back into use, and it is either causing a specific problem within its neighbourhood, or would meet a particular housing need, we will consider the use of the enforcement powers available to us.

Our objectives will be met through the following measures:

### 1. Raising awareness of empty home issues

The Housing Renewal and Assistance Teams are based in Private Sector Housing within the Community Services Directorate. These new teams were established as part of the new Shropshire Council and provide advice on the particular circumstances and history of long standing empty homes. They establish relationships with local private sector housing providers and are fully acquainted with local housing standards.

In order to raise the profile of empty homes, and ensure the effective operation of the strategy, the Council is itself implementing a “joined up” approach through improved liaison between internal teams. These include:

- **Elected Members**  
Provide strategic leadership, setting the Council’s budget and determining the amount of revenue and capital funding available for the Empty Homes Strategy through establishing policy around Council Tax discounts for second homes and long term empty homes.
- **Communications and Marketing**  
This team is responsible for advice and assistance on all promotional and marketing matters and for producing appropriate advertising materials.
- **Housing Options**  
This team is responsible for nominating tenants for properties which have received the top tier (Maximum) Empty Properties to Homes Grant from the Council. They also work with Housing Associations and private landlords to identify suitable empty homes which can be developed into affordable housing schemes.
- **Public Protection (Environmental Health)**  
This team is responsible for dealing with the Public Health issues relating to empty homes such as vermin, insecurity and accumulations of waste.
- **Council Tax**  
Provide statistical information about empty homes in the area and essential ownership details.

- **Legal Services**  
Play an important role in advising on the legal aspects of new schemes and initiatives, progressing enforcement actions such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders, Compulsory Purchase and Enforced Sales.
- **Planning Services**  
This section is responsible for ensuring that appropriate planning policies are in place to help bring empty homes back into use. They also play a key role in providing advice about appropriate development options for empty homes. This section is also responsible for the enforcement of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 regulations in respect of empty homes and their detriment to the visual amenity of an area, through overgrown gardens and dilapidated exteriors.
- **Building Control**  
Has responsibility for taking enforcement action in respect of empty homes that are deemed to be dangerous structures.
- **Conservation**  
Play an important role in identifying empty historic homes which are at risk. Conservation officers provide owners of empty historic buildings with essential technical advice, information and where appropriate access to financial assistance to assist in the renovation work.
- **Housing Strategy**  
While not a stand alone initiative the Empty Homes Strategy contributes to the broader Housing Strategy and Corporate Strategy of the Council. It is therefore essential that the Private Sector Housing Team maintain close contact with their strategic housing colleagues in developing and promoting this Strategy.

To ensure that empty homes are effectively brought back into use close partnership working between the Private Sector Housing Team and external stakeholders and members of public is also required. These are detailed in Appendix 3.

## **2. Gathering relevant, accurate and up to date information**

An empty homes database will be created of known empty homes within Shropshire. Details on individual empty homes will be collated mainly from the Council Tax database, but will be further supplemented by:

- information from other council departments
- individual reports from Elected Members, Town and Parish Councils and the general public
- individual reports from the Empty Homes Agency website
- Land Registry Searches
- site surveys
- House Condition and Housing Needs Surveys
- the Census
- the Electoral Roll

- mailshots/questionnaires
- focus groups
- telephone calls and enquiries via the Council’s website.

### 3. Risk assessing empty homes to determine their priority for action.

In order to more effectively manage resources , the Council will prioritise which empty homes are to be targeted through the Empty Homes Strategy. A balanced approach will therefore be adopted where some resources are directed towards those homes, which can be brought back into use relatively easily, to those which require more intensive involvement, such as detailed negotiations and/or enforcement action.

Properties on the empty homes database will be risk assessed and mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS) to establish empty home “Hotspots” to assist in targeting action.

The following criteria will be applied when risk assessing all empty homes. One or more of the criteria may trigger action regardless of the risk rating:

GREEN	AMBER	RED	URGENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacant for less than 9 months</li> <li>• In a clean and tidy condition</li> <li>• Secure</li> <li>• Attempts are ongoing to sell or re-let</li> <li>• There are legal issues (probate)</li> <li>• Undergoing refurbishment or building works</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacant in excess of 6 months</li> <li>• Starting to appear neglected</li> <li>• Attracting Rubbish Dumping</li> <li>• Little or no real attempts to sell or re-let</li> <li>• Little or no recent refurbishment or activity</li> <li>• Causing a nuisance for the neighbours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacant in excess of 6 months</li> <li>• Insecure</li> <li>• Falling into serious disrepair</li> <li>• Attracting vandalism and anti-social behaviour</li> <li>• Little or no attempt to sell or re-let</li> <li>• Little or no maintenance on property or surrounding land</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of arson or serious anti - social behaviour (via Arson Task Force/ Police or Fire Services)</li> <li>• Insecure</li> <li>• Squatting</li> <li>• Vandalism</li> <li>• Listed Building or in a Conservation Area</li> </ul>

**Green** - Empty home for less than 9 months but the owner is in the process of renovation or sale, or there are probate or other legal issues. These homes are not causing a nuisance and are secure and in a good state of repair.

**Amber** -Empty home vacant in excess of 6 months that is falling into a state of neglect, attempts to sell or re-let have been unsuccessful, and the owner has

not maintained the appearance. Beginning to cause a nuisance, attract rubbish dumping or anti-social behavior and action is needed to prevent serious disrepair.

**Red** - Empty home vacant in excess of 6 months causing a nuisance to local communities. At risk of vandalism, arson, may already be insecure, attracting rubbish and in a serious state of disrepair and /or dereliction.

**Urgent** - There will be some empty homes that fall within the red category that are in urgent need of attention by the Council, and these will predominately be the ones that are insecure. The Council's Public Protection Team will normally be responsible for securing such properties in the first instance and will recover the costs from the owners where relevant. Subsequently these empty homes will move into one of the other bands for monitoring/action by the Housing Renewal Team.

Empty homes that fall into the Green Category will only require monitoring to ensure that they do not begin to fall into other categories.

The empty homes in the Amber Category will be closely monitored and the Council, with support of the local community will attempt to negotiate with the owners to try to prevent any further deterioration in the condition of that empty home. The use of Planning and Public Protection enforcement powers could be considered at this stage if appropriate.

Any empty homes that fall within the Red or Urgent Categories will receive immediate attention. It is **only** when an empty home reaches Category Red or Urgent that the Council will consider using Compulsory Purchase or Enforced Sale as an option.

Some long-term empty homes will fall into areas of ongoing larger scale locality area schemes, or may be adversely affecting the image of the communities such as those on main routes into the town/village. These empty homes may fall outside the above timescales within the categories and therefore be dealt with differently.

#### **4. Focusing efforts on those areas of Shropshire with the greatest concentrations of empty homes.**

One of the key features of this strategy will be to implement locality focused work to identify empty homes and tackle their associated impact on local communities. This will be achieved through the creation of Empty Home Action Zones (EHAZ's). These zones will define the greatest concentration of long term empty homes within Shropshire and the majority of resources, enforcement action will therefore be directed to these areas. It is anticipated 3 or 4 EHAZ's will be in place at any one time.

This focused approach will involve the use of primarily Council Tax data to identify empty property "Hotspots", targeting geographical areas where there are clusters of long term empty homes. It is anticipated that focusing on specific localities for time-managed periods will maximise the effectiveness of the limited resources currently available. Locality focus will also enable build up of momentum, for example the opportunity to work with groups of owners, financial advisers and lenders, and to agree local protocols for letting. Locality based focus groups will be set up to ensure

that the views and concerns of local residents are addressed where possible and will be incorporated into the area action plan.

The locality based approach will where appropriate also incorporate a programme of works to enhance the local community. A budget will be set aside to undertake minor environmental works (visual amenity/street scene), which will be of benefit to the whole community. This measure will be used when the property is back in use, particularly where empty properties have been a source of considerable nuisance e.g. minor landscaping, external decoration, restoration of fencing, gating of alleyways etc.

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## 7. Key Actions

This Strategy not only encompasses and draws together initiatives already operational but also requires new initiatives to be developed. Once an empty home has been identified, it will be necessary to decide which initiative is best suited to both the owner and the property in order to bring it back into beneficial use and increase the supply of homes for people in housing need.

### Involving Partners

#### **Communities**

Central to the locality based Empty Home Action Zones will be liaison and partnership with local communities, to identify those properties of priority focus for them. Locality based focus groups will, where appropriate, be set up to ensure that the views and concerns of local residents are addressed where possible and will be incorporated into the area action plan.

#### **Owners**

Owners with one or a small number of properties may be partners over a short term period whilst their property is assessed for inclusion and, where appropriate, work is undertaken to bring the property into use.

Companies with a larger portfolio of properties or government sections may become long term partners by leasing properties to the scheme over a period of time.

Liaison with managing agents will also be developed to encourage long term partnerships.

Owners may also contact the Council directly for housing advice. Advertising and publicity would be the most effective way to raise owners' awareness to this initiative and encourage them to contact the Council for further information and assistance.

#### **Housing Associations**

Housing Associations often form the key to bringing empty properties back into use. They are able to introduce finance, design and development capability, together with housing management skills.

Housing Associations, often in partnership with the Council, may pursue schemes such as Flats over Shops or leasing schemes to target empty properties and bring them back into residential use. This may be with the benefit of funding from the Homes and Communities Agency.

#### **Other Organisations**

The range of organisations with an interest in rented housing provision is wide and varied. The public launch of the Empty Homes Strategy will raise awareness of the opportunities, which this scheme offers to a broader range of organisations.

Interest and involvement with bringing empty properties into use can be revitalised and maintained if opportunities are to be maximised and the Strategy sustained in the long term. This will be achieved through publicity aimed at raising awareness and inviting further engagement.

## **Achieving Sale of the Property**

### **Estate Agent action / Auctioneers**

Liaison with estate agents and auctioneers may bring about the sale of a property which has been on the market for more than 6 months. A positive approach to marketing and/or review of the property value may assist in this

### **Housing Association purchase**

This may be achieved through direct negotiation with the property owner in association with grant funding bodies

### **Enforced Sale**

Enforced sale of a property may be an option where there are monies owed to the Council, particularly where property is causing a nuisance or has been subject to enforcement action by the Council.

### **Compulsory purchase**

Compulsory purchase may also be an option where the property is causing a nuisance or has been subject to enforcement action by the Council. It will always be viewed as a last resort.

## **Improvement**

### **Liaison with Mortgage Lenders**

A focus of the Empty Home Action Zones will be to enhance availability of funding required to bring empty homes back into use. This will involve liaison with mortgage lenders and other agencies.

### **Home Improvement Agency**

The services of a Home Improvement Agency such as Anchor Staying Put Shropshire may assist in helping to secure the funding needed to bring a property back into use, by securing private, charitable and/or public funding.

### **Equity Release**

Equity release may be a means by which a property can be brought back into use either for sale or private rental. The property owner should seek independent financial advice.

### **Grant Assistance**

The Council's own Empty Property to Homes Grant is also a route by which funding may be obtained to facilitate improvements. These are detailed in Appendix 3.

## **Leasing Arrangements**

### **Owner improves and leases to a Housing Association**

While not wishing to dispose of the asset, an owner may be willing to renovate a property, possibly with financial help (conditional grant-aid from the Council) then lease it to a Housing Association for affordable letting and management, subject to funding being available.

## **Housing Association/Council lease from owner and improve**

While not wishing to dispose of the asset, an owner may be willing to lease a property to an Housing Association to renovate and use for affordable letting subject to funding being available.

## **Tenant finding schemes**

Working in partnership with private sector landlords, voluntary sector agencies and Housing Associations the Council may establish a tenant finding scheme to bring private sector lets back into use.

## **Short-life housing**

Some vacant property may be suitable to short-lets, as temporary or interim accommodation for a range of user groups. These lets would be at a sub-market level, managed either by the property owner (subject to agreement with the Council) or by an approved Housing Association partner.

## **Reducing the Environmental Impact of Empty Properties**

To implement this strategy, the Council may draw upon the following powers to reduce the environmental impact of empty homes and control or abate nuisances:

- Improved security : Local Government Act 1982
- Powers under Building Act 1984 / Town & Country Planning Act 1990
- Dangerous buildings : Building Act 1984
- Abatement of nuisance : Environmental Protection Act 1990

## **Enforcement Action**

These may be used to tackle problematic long-term empty homes. Empty homes, which have become an eyesore or could pose a danger to the public, may be subject to a range of enforcement measures using a variety of legislation. See Appendix 4 for a detailed list of available legal powers to tackle empty homes.

Failure by the owner to comply with a Statutory Notice requiring work to be carried out may lead to the Council carrying the necessary work in default, with the associated costs being charged to the owner. Where an owner refuses to repay the costs associated with the works in default, a charge is placed against the property on the Local Land Charge Register or by registering it as a caution on the Land Registry Certificate.

More far-reaching enforcement measures may include Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), enforced sale, or compulsory purchase. These measures will only be used as a last resort where it has been impossible to trace the owner or agree a voluntary solution with them, or where a property has simply been abandoned. Only when it is clear that there is no realistic prospect the dwelling will be returned to use willingly by the owner, then we will then consider which of these enforcement options is the most appropriate.

### Enforced Sale Procedure

This legal process may be used where there is a charge in favour of the Council on the property to require its forced sale. This is normally where works in default have been undertaken at a property and the debt has been secured on the premises by making a local land charge or by registering it as a caution on the Land Registry Certificate. If the owner fails to repay the debt this power enables the Local Authority to recover its debt through the enforced sale of the property.

### Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

These enable the Council or its partner to 'step into management control' of the dwelling in order to secure its reoccupation. Empty Dwelling Management Orders are a discretionary power introduced in the Housing Act 2004 that came into force in April 2006. They allow Local Authorities to take management control of certain empty homes for initially up to 1 year (under an interim EDMO) and then for 7 years (under a final EDMO). Under an interim EDMO the authority can only grant tenancies with the permission of the owner but under a final EDMO the owner's consent is not required. We are proposing to work in partnership with a Housing Association to allow us to use these powers in appropriate situations. Once we have determined that an EDMO is the most appropriate course of action for a particular property and the Residential Property Tribunal have authorised an interim EDMO, the partner Housing Association will support us in managing the property. If we then make a final EDMO, the Housing Association will be granted a tenancy on the property and will manage it, sub-letting to tenants either introduced by our Housing Options Team or through their direct marketing organisation.

### Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

These are the ultimate formal solution and are the most costly and time consuming to the Local Authority. In the case of long term empty homes, we will always consider the use of CPO as a last resort if no other option is suitable.

Local Authorities have the power to acquire land and property compulsorily where the owner is not willing to sell by agreement. This applies to underused or ineffectively used property/land for housing purposes if there is housing need in the area. Compulsory purchase can be approved where acquisition will allow improvements or redevelopment to take place, providing that the improvement/redevelopment contributes to the promotion of economic, social or environmental well being. Compulsory purchase is a potentially costly and time-consuming process and will be used as a last resort where attempts at encouragement have failed and where other enforcement actions are not seen to be viable.

## 8. Targets and Local Performance Indicators

National performance indicators for empty homes were abolished in 2008/9. Nevertheless, government advice is to continue to monitor performance under these indicators. Our targets for these indicators therefore remain part of our overall action plan on empty homes as does the development of new ones.

The table below shows a number of performance indicators used by the Council to measure and record the number of empty homes that are brought back into use:-

Indicator	
Private Sector Housing Local Performance Indicator (PSH LPI) - Properties brought back into use.	This local performance indicator records the number of empty homes brought back into use or demolished during the financial year as a direct result of action by the Council.(This PSH LPI excludes Rent Deposit Cases or any other activity reported elsewhere)
NI 155	This national indicator is reported to the Department of Communities and Local Government and relates to the number of affordable homes delivered and is designed to promote an increase in the supply of affordable housing. It measures total supply of intermediate housing and social rent housing. Bringing empty homes back into use to provide affordable housing contributes to this figure where long term affordability is a feature.
Long Term Empty Home data held on Council Tax records	It is expected that there will be a reduction in numbers of long term empty homes as a result of the change in Council Tax exemption and publicity surrounding delivery of this strategy.

### Performance during 2009/10

During the first 12 months of the new Shropshire Council the Private Sector Housing Team returned a total of 26 empty homes into use through a combination of grant assistance, advice and information.

A breakdown of this activity by Quarter is shown in the table below:

**Table showing the number of empty homes returned to use during 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010 (PSH LPI).**

Activity in Quarter				Total
1	2	3	4	
12	5	5	4	26

A total of 20 units were created through the Empty Properties to Homes Grants and a further 6 units were either created or demolished through a combination of advice, information and the threat of enforcement action.

Setting a realistic target on how many empty homes can be brought back into use is a difficult process as there are a number of different Council activities which can contribute to the Council's Private Sector Housing Local Performance Indicator:

- Grant Assistance – Empty Properties to Homes Grants
- Advice and information from the Private Sector Housing Team
- Enforcement
- Demolition
- Purchase or leasing empty homes by Housing Associations

However, local performance targets will be set year on year for the next three years as shown in table 1 below. With the new Council Tax funding for two dedicated fulltime Empty Homes Officer Posts for a three year period and additional capital funding for Empty Properties to Homes Grants we expect outputs to rise.

Table 1 below shows the local performance targets for returning empty homes back into use for the next 3 years (Total number for each financial year):

**Table 1**

2010/11 Target	2011/12 Target	2012/13 Target
51	76	101

This figure can then be broken down further in table 2 below to show the anticipated level of activity **only** in relation to long term empty homes over 6 months that are falling into a state of neglect (Risk Rated – Amber):

**Table 2**

2010/11 Target	2011/12 Target	2012/13 Target
30	40	55

Finally, table 3 below breaks this figure down again to show the anticipated level of activity **only** in relation to problematic long term empty homes over 6 months that are causing a nuisance, in a serious state of disrepair or dereliction and requiring significant resources to deal with (Risk Rated –Red):

**Table 3**

2010/11 Target	2011/12 Target	2012/13 Target
2	5	5

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## **9. Actions & Priorities**

Empty homes are a high priority issue for Shropshire residents. Our plans and actions to tackle this issue over the next 3 years are summarised below under our four key objective areas:

1. To raise awareness of empty homes issues
2. To collect relevant, accurate and up-to-date information
3. To risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.
4. To implement Empty Home Action Zones.

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Empty Homes Strategy Action Plan – The Way Forward 2010 - 2013

Objective	Action Number	Target and outcomes	Action description	Target date for actions	Lead officer	Support required
<b>Raising awareness of empty homes issues</b>	EH1	Raise awareness of the empty homes issue	Produce publicity material to highlight the issues of empty homes and options available to homeowners to return the property back into use.	Oct 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager/ Comms & Marketing Team
	EH2	Improve the way the public can obtain information from the Council on empty homes	Review the means by which we publicise the service. Measures could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text messaging facility</li> <li>• Empty home information added on front page of council website.</li> <li>• Update Empty Homes web pages</li> <li>• Mail shots</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Empty home information included in council newsletters and parish magazines</li> </ul>	Oct 2010	Empty Homes Officers/ Housing Assistance Support Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH3	Contribute and respond to the national debate on empty homes policy and procedures	Commence attendance at and maintain a proactive presence at meetings of National Association of Empty Property Practitioners and Empty Homes Agency.	Oct 2010	Housing Renewal Manager	
	EH4	Contribute and respond to national consultations on empty homes policy and procedures	Respond to national consultations	Ongoing	Housing Renewal Manager	Empty Homes Officers

<b>Gathering relevant, accurate and up to date information.</b>	EH5	Setup an up to date Empty Homes Database	Establish an Empty Homes Database, initially using Council Tax data, which will be updated on a quarterly basis.	Nov 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH6	Explore other methods of collecting up to date empty homes data.	Setup an e-form on the Councils website for reporting empty homes.	Oct 2010	Housing Assistance Support Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH7	Improve links with other council departments particularly Planning, Housing Strategy and Public Protection	Establish cross-departmental meetings and information exchange	Nov 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH8	Improve cross boundary working, training and sharing best practice between West Midlands local authorities	Attend meetings and support training events organised by the West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group	Oct 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH9	Set up a dedicated Empty Homes Hotline to improve information exchange between members of public reporting empty homes to the Council	Investigate the feasibility of setting up a dedicated empty homes telephone hotline.	Dec 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH10	To have properties mapped to assist in directing resources	Map empty homes on the GIS system to identify "clusters" and assist in targeting action.	Jan 2011	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH11	Regular updates on all aspects of the team's ongoing work and new initiatives	Preparation of quarterly empty homes monitoring and performance report	Sept 2010	Housing Renewal Manager	

<b>Risk assess empty homes to determine priority for action</b>	EH12	Implement the empty homes risk based assessment procedure to identify those empty homes, which require Local Authority intervention.	Risk assess properties on the Empty Homes Database to establish empty home hotspots to target action.	Oct 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
<b>Implement Empty Home Action Zones</b>	EH13	Improved advice and assistance	Advise and inform owners of all possible options available to bring empty homes back into use, such as frequent and regular recorded communications, including letters, telephone calls, etc., and offering advice to owners of long-term empty homes.	Ongoing	EHO's/ Empty Homes Officers/ Housing Reg.. Officers	
	EH14	Improve the uptake of Empty Properties to Homes Grants	Promote the "Empty Properties to Homes" grants more widely and consider targeting to Empty Home Action Zones.	Nov 2010	Empty Homes Officers/ EHO/ Senior/ Technical Officers	Housing Assist.. Manager
	EH15	Identify other sources of finance to fund the renovation and repair of empty homes	Investigate other sources of finance to assist owners to bring empty homes back into use, including equity release and loan finance.	Ongoing	Senior Housing Assistance Officers	Housing Assist.. Manager
	EH16	Effective and targeted enforcement action	Using the Private Sector Housing Service Enforcement Policy evaluate all possible enforcement options for returning empty homes back to use.	Ongoing	EHO's/ Empty Home/Reg. Officers	Housing Renewal Manager

Implement Empty Home Action Zones	EH17	Effective and targeted enforcement action	Set up procedures for dealing with empty properties with clear decision rules, procedures and timescales.	Sept 2010	Housing Renewal Manager	
	EH18	Effective and targeted enforcement action	Step up enforcement activity against prominent nuisance properties where owner is untraceable or uncooperative.	Ongoing	EHO's/ Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH19	Improve links and processes with the Planning Service to deal with visual amenity issues associated with problematic empty homes.	Liaise with the Planning Service where appropriate to instigate proceedings under the Town and Country Planning Act (section 215) against "eye-sore" properties to mitigate visual impact and encourage re-use.	Ongoing	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	EH20	Effective and targeted enforcement action	Identify long-term problematic empty properties to be targeted through enforced sale, CPO or EDMO.	Jan 2011	Empty Homes Officers	
	EH21	Continue to reactively investigate all reports received, whilst monitoring and reviewing points at which proactive intervention in long term empty homes should be best implemented within an Empty Home Action Zone	Investigate where appropriate all reported empty homes and proactive investigation of all long-term empty properties. Prioritise action in accordance with established empty homes policy procedures.	Oct 2010	Empty Homes Officers/ EHO's /Housing Reg.. Officers	
	EH22	Develop Private Sector and Voluntary Leasing Scheme	Investigate the establishment of a Private Sector and Voluntary Leasing schemes with Local Housing Associations	Mar 2011	Housing Renewal Manager	
	EH23	Investigate mechanism to advertise private rented properties through Shropshire Home Point	Assist landlords, in letting their properties by investigating the possibility of advertising private rented properties	Feb 2011	Housing Renewal Manager	Housing Options Manager

			through Shropshire HomePoint.			
	Eh24	Investigate new ways of improving links with the Private Rented Sector	Improve links with landlords, landlord associations, letting and property management agencies through improved information, newsletters and the Landlords Forum meetings.	Nov 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Assist.. Support Officers
	Eh25	Continue membership of the Unoccupied Buildings working group facilitated by Shropshire Fire & Rescue Service	Improve links with the Police, Fire Service, Housing Associations, Community Safety Partnership and others to identify long-term empty homes.	Ongoing	Housing Renewal Manager	
	Eh26	Establish a series of pilot Empty Home Action Zones to tackle the impact of long term empty homes on the local community	Establish empty home hotspots using the Empty Homes Database and risk assessment procedure.	Nov 2010	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
Implement Empty Home Action Zones	Eh27	Set up the first phase of Empty Homes Action Zone focus groups	Set up locality based focus groups with members of the local community in Empty Home Action Zones to identify which empty home issues are of highest priority	Feb 2011	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	Eh28	Commence first phase of minor environmental work schemes in Empty Homes Action Zones	Identify where appropriate any areas highlighted by the focus groups/area surveys, which would benefit from minor environmental work to enhance the local community within the Empty Home Action Zone.	Mar 2011	Empty Homes Officers	Housing Renewal Manager
	Eh29	Annual review of strategy, action plan, targets and resources	Review action plan and targets to ensure that they remain SMART and Challenging. Where possible access additional funding to resource new/additional measures	Sept 2011	Housing Renewal Manager	

## Appendix 1

**Number of long term empty homes within each of the former Borough and District Council areas as at October 2008 and October 2009:**

Former Local Authority Area	Long Term Empty as at October 2008	Long Term Empty as at October 2009
Bridgnorth	344	343
North Shropshire	513	500
Oswestry	215	239
Shrewsbury & Atcham	479	494
Totals	1907	1940

## Appendix 2

### External partners and stakeholders involved in returning empty homes back into use:

External partners	Their role
The Empty Homes Agency	<p>The Empty Homes Agency is an independent national charity set up in 1992 to highlight the waste of empty property in England. It lobbies the government and works with others to devise and promote solutions to bring empty properties back into use. Its aim is to <b><i>“raise awareness of the potential of empty homes in England to meet housing need and devise and promote, with others, sustainable solutions that will bring empty homes back into use.”</i></b></p> <p>This national charity receives funding from the government, the National Lottery and other sources to support empty homes initiatives and develop empty homes policy.</p> <p><a href="http://www.emptyhomes.com">www.emptyhomes.com</a></p>
The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP)	<p>Formed in May 2001, this is an organisation that brings together all the professionals and organisations in the empty homes world to exchange good practice.</p> <p><a href="http://www.naepp.org.uk">www.naepp.org.uk</a></p>
Homes and Communities Agency	<p>Part of the former Housing Corporation, provides funding to local authorities via the housing associations for affordable housing, bring land back into productive use and improve quality of life by raising standards for the physical and social environment.</p> <p><a href="http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk">www.homesandcommunities.co.uk</a></p>
Empty Homes Conference	<p>Hosted by Exeter City Council in conjunction with NAEPP, brings together and shares the experiences of empty property practitioners throughout the country</p>
Government Office West Midlands (GOWM)	<p>Works to achieve sustainable growth and to develop safe and prosperous communities that meet the diverse needs of everyone who lives and works here. GOWM puts Government policy into practice at local level, implementing key programmes and initiatives in partnership with regional and local organisations and provides feedback to central Government that helps inform future policy.</p> <p><a href="http://www.gosw.gov.uk">www.gosw.gov.uk</a></p>
South	<p>These organisations have a network of housing officers</p>

Shropshire, Severnside, Meres and Mosses Housing Associations and other housing associations	across Shropshire. Staff are employed in front line locations and are well placed to pass on and receive information from the public. They are also aware of the status of ex-council right to buy stock and have an important role in the dissemination of information and the implementation of remedial actions..
Landlords' Forum and landlord groups in Shropshire and the West Midlands Empty Property Forum	Professional and private landlords are key players in ensuring private sector empties are reoccupied. They are also likely to provide a major part of the market in the purchase of empty properties returned for sale, while also providing information regarding market conditions. Their active engagement will therefore be encouraged.
West Mercia Constabulary, West Midlands Fire Service and the Community Safety Partnership	Will be aware of empty properties which may be attracting anti social behaviour and complaints or a target for arson. Information will assist the Council in prioritising enforcement actions
Local town and parish councils, Local Joint Committees and neighbourhood groups	These organizations are very often aware of or the first to receive complaints or representations from local residents of properties, which are becoming an eyesore or attracting anti-social behaviour.
Other strategic partners	Returning empty properties to use usually involves a number of private sector institutions and professional services at some stage. These may include: banks and building societies; conveyancers; estate agents; property management and letting agencies.

## Appendix 3

### Empty Properties to Homes Grants – Qualifying Criteria:

Incentives are a very important tool in dealing with long term empty properties

Shropshire Council currently offers Empty Properties to Homes Grants to Landlords and prospective first time Owner-Occupiers. Assistance will be considered for a dwelling or potential dwelling which has not been:

- (a) Occupied for a minimum of one year immediately prior to the date of application and falls (or will fall when renovated) within Council Tax bands A-D.

**and**

- (b) Requires repair or improvement to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

Assistance will normally be paid towards the cost of work agreed by the Council or its agents as necessary to achieve the Decent Homes Standard, or create a self contained unit within it, meeting that standard up to a maximum of:-

- a) **£5,000** per original vacant building. Units to be occupied by the applicant in person as first time owner occupier or to be made available for residential letting for the entire 5 year condition period. At the Council's discretion, the grant award may be increased where multiple units are proposed.

**or**

- b) **£15,000**, per original vacant building. Units are to be made available throughout the entire 5 year condition period for residential letting at the Local Housing Allowance level prevailing on 1<sup>st</sup> April in the year of application. At the Council's discretion, the grant award may be increased where multiple units are proposed. Rents may rise annually in line with the prevailing Local Housing Allowance, details of which can be confirmed by the Council.

**or**

- c) **£20,000**, per original vacant building. Units are to be made available throughout the entire 5 year condition period for residential letting at the Local Housing Allowance level prevailing on 1<sup>st</sup> April in the year of application. In addition, the Council will nominate tenants in accordance with its allocations policy. At the Council's discretion, the grant award may be increased where multiple units are proposed.

Rents may rise annually in line with the prevailing Local Housing Allowance, details of which can be confirmed by the Council.

Following completion of work, unless otherwise agreed with the Council, each unit must provide at least one separate bedroom and:-

- A. Meet the current statutory minimum standard for housing i.e. be free of Category 1 Hazards as determined by the Council or its agents under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

**and**

- B. Be in a reasonable state of repair
- C. Provide reasonably modern facilities and services
- D. Provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

If, for whatever reason, it is not possible to fully meet the Decent Homes standard, at the Council's discretion grants may be approved and paid subject to the elimination of Category 1 Hazards assessed under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

Empty Properties to Homes Grants are subject to conditions for repayment in accordance with the Council's Assistance Framework for a period of 5 years and will either become a Local Land Charge or be subject to a similar mechanism. This means that failure to satisfy all conditions will, subject to extenuating circumstances; result in repayment of grant being necessary.

During the grant condition period, applicants must provide the Council, on demand, details of the occupiers of the property and if for any reason the property becomes vacant.

## Appendix 4

### Statutory powers available to the Local Authority to take specific action against empty homes:

Section 17 & 18, Housing Act 1985	Local Authorities have the power to acquire land, houses and property to increase the number of homes available or improve the quality of the housing stock. This can be used to take control of empty dwellings and sell to a private sector developer, owner-occupier or Housing Association.
Section 16, Local Government (miscellaneous provisions) Act 1982	Local Authority can request information relating to an empty property from any one it suspects may have it or have an interest in the land.
Section 29, Local Government (miscellaneous provisions) Act 1982	Allows Local Authorities to carry out work on unoccupied buildings to prevent any unauthorized access or prevent it from becoming a danger to the public.
Section 77, Building Act 1984 Allows the local authority to deal with dangerous buildings.	The Local Authority can apply to the Magistrate's Court to get an order for the owner to renovate or demolish the property. If this fails they can take the work on by default.
Section 78, Building Act 1984	Allows Local Authorities to deal with buildings posing immediate danger. Local authorities can carry out remedial works to remove the danger without obtaining permission from the owner.
Section 79, Building Act 1984	Allows Local Authorities to deal with ruinous and dilapidated buildings and structures and neglected sites in the interest of amenity.
Section 215, Town and Country Planning Act 1990	Allows Local Authorities to deal with unsightly land or the external appearance of the property.

Section 226, Town and Country Planning Act 1990	Allows Local Authorities to take control of land they need to put into place community strategies and local development. This also includes being able to take over land for redevelopment.
Section 330, Town and Country Planning Act 1990	Local Authority can request information about the ownership of an empty property from anyone with interest in the land.
Sections 79-81, Environmental Protection Act 1990	Allows Local Authorities to require abatement of statutory nuisances. This can apply to the accumulation of rubbish and any damp affecting adjoining properties. If the owner does not complete the works, the local authority can undertake them by default.
Section 54, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990	<i>“A Local Authority may execute any works which appear to them to be urgently necessary for the preservation of a listed building in their area.”</i> The Local Authority can be authorised to compulsorily acquire a listed property and any relevant land if they feel it has been deliberately left or has fallen into a bad state of repair.
Enforced Sale Procedures, Law of Property Act 1925	Where a Local Authority has issued a charge against a property they have all the legal right of a mortgage lender and can repossess the vacant dwelling for housing needs
Empty Property Act 2007	Removed the exemption for unoccupied commercial properties. Empty property rates increased from 50-100% of their basic business rate following void periods

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7. Hometrack Website:  
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# SHROPSHIRE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

## Feedback Form

The development of the Empty Homes Strategy is an ongoing process and will be reviewed annually to ensure that it remains relevant and up to date.

It is important that the views of our stakeholders are taken into consideration for future strategies. If you would like to give your views on this strategy, please complete and return this feedback form.

Please tick the boxes below to show how much you agree or disagree with the statements below

1. The Empty Homes Strategy should provide a comprehensive range of options for bringing empty homes back into use

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Do you have any comments?
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2. Developing a community-based approach through the Empty Home Action Zones is a good idea

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Do you have any comments?
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3. The Council should seek to maximise the number of affordable homes achieved through its Empty Homes Strategy

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Do you have any comments?
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4. The performance management approach proposed in the Strategy is about right

Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
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Do you have any comments?

5. Any further comments?

6. Name and contact details

Please return to the Private Sector Housing Team, Shropshire Council, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shropshire, SY2 6ND.

**Contact Details**

Any enquiries regarding this strategy can be directed to:

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