



Shropshire
Council

Empty Homes Strategy
2010 – 2013

SUMMARY DOCUMENT



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Foreword

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.

This is a summary of the Shropshire Empty Homes Strategy.

More detailed information is available in the full version of the document

1. Introduction

This is Shropshire Council's first Empty Homes Strategy. The Strategy sets out how Shropshire Council intends to tackle the issue of empty homes over the next 3 years.

Shropshire has a shortage of affordable housing. Homes being left empty, unused and falling into disrepair at a time of housing shortage are a wasted resource.

The aim is to ensure that the number of empty homes in Shropshire Council's area is kept to a minimum by encouraging owners to bring them back into use.

A key part of this Strategy will be "Empty Home Action Zones". Clusters of long term empty homes will be targeted in these Zones. This will be created in consultation with local communities.

The National Picture

Empty homes account for 3 per cent of the housing stock - 697,055 empty homes in 2008. Of these, 293,728 are private sector properties, empty for six months or longer

The Coalition Government formed in May 2010 has already stated its commitment to exploring a range of measures to bring empty homes into use ("Our Programme for Government" May 2010). The aim is to meet housing need and also to tackle the problems that can be caused in neighbourhoods by empty properties.

Councils are also required to help to protect the environment. The national Empty Homes Agency says the re-use of empty homes can help to do this. Research has shown that building a new home can create 60 -70 tonnes of carbon emissions while refurbishment of an existing property creates only 7-10 tonnes.

Councils have the legal power to issue Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's) and are being encouraged to use this power to bring homes back into use.

2. Aim and Objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy

Aim

The aim of this Strategy is to bring more homes back into use.

Key Objectives

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

- 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 through Empty Home Action Zones**

It is our aim to encourage the owners of empty homes to bring them back into use voluntarily. Our initial approach will therefore be focused on working 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, the Council will consider the use of its legal enforcement powers.

The Local Picture - Key Facts and Figures

In April 2009, there were 131,273 properties in total in Shropshire. Of these, 4,362 were empty, with 1,933 empty for more than 6 months.

At the same time there were over 5,000 households seeking affordable housing on the Shropshire HomePoint Housing Register (waiting list). There were a further 3,500 to 4,000 on other Housing Association Registers in the County. These figures represent only those people seeking housing in the social sector.

This clearly shows how the reuse of empty homes will go some way to mitigate Housing Need in Shropshire.

Table 1 provides a breakdown on the number of empty homes by area as at 1st April 2009

Table 1: Empty Homes Figures by former District and Borough as at 1st 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

3. What is an Empty Home?

Homes are empty for a range of reasons. Some are empty for a time and tend to come back into use quite quickly; others may be empty for longer and may not come back into use until the underlying reason for them being empty is addressed.

There are two main types of empty homes:

1. 'Transitional or Short-term Empty'

These homes are empty for a short period of time. The main reasons are because they are being sold, subject to probate (the previous owner has died) or work of repair or improvement is being carried out on them (or planned).

These homes don't usually need Council involvement to ensure that they are brought back into use within 6 months of being vacated. There will always be a percentage of homes that fall into this category.

2. 'Problem or Longer-term' Empty

These are homes which are not for sale, or are proving difficult to sell, and have remained empty for over six months. These 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. There are often many reasons why properties remain empty and these issues need to be understood and addressed to focus action appropriately.

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

- Transitional short-term vacancies
- Probate
- Family disputes/Divorce settlements
- Bankruptcy
- Owner in hospital or institutional care
- Inheritance
- Investment properties
- Low demand area
- Abandoned/Repossessed
- 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 considers 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

Why Bring Empty Homes Back Into Use?

There are a number of positive reasons for bringing empty homes back into use:

1. Benefits to the Home Owner

- A lived-in home will reduce the likelihood of it being broken into.
- Cut down antisocial behaviour.
- Can turn a costly empty home or its land into an asset and increase its value through development opportunities through site clearance or renovation of the existing property.
- Provide rental income or capital if the property is sold.
- Reduce deterioration

2. Housing Need

- There is high demand for housing, particularly affordable housing, in Shropshire. Empty homes could help to meet this need by providing housing to rent or buy.
- Bringing empty homes back into use can help to regenerate our communities and reduce the opportunity for disturbance and criminal behaviour

3. 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.
- An empty home can become damp which may cause expensive damage to the main fabric of the building and to any neighbouring buildings.

- Empty homes may attract more serious criminal activity, including arson, squatting, vandalism and drug dealing
- The longer a property is left empty and unattended the more difficult it can be to prevent unauthorised entry.

4. How will the Council Prioritise Action?

Empty Homes will be risk assessed and mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS) to establish empty home “Hotspots” to help 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"> • Vacant for less than 9 months • In a clean and tidy condition • Secure • Attempts are ongoing to sell or re-let • There are legal issues (probate) • Undergoing refurbishment or building works 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacant in excess of 6 months • Starting to appear neglected • Attracting Rubbish Dumping • Little or no real attempts to sell or re-let • Little or no recent refurbishment or activity • Causing a nuisance for the neighbours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacant in excess of 6 months • Insecure • Falling into serious disrepair • Attracting vandalism and anti-social behaviour • Little or no attempt to sell or re-let • Little or no maintenance on property or surrounding land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of arson or serious anti - social behaviour (via Arson Task Force/ Police or Fire Services) • Insecure • Squatting • Vandalism • Listed Building or in a Conservation Area.

Empty homes that fall into the Green Category will only require keeping an eye on 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.

Empty Home Action Zones (EHAZ's)

One of the key features of this Strategy will be to identify Empty Home Action Zones, initially funded for 3 years, commencing April 2010. It is anticipated 3 or 4 EHAZ's will be in place at any one time.

Empty Home Action Zones aim to enable the Council to work in partnership to:

- Develop a local approach
- Tackle problem empty homes
- Involve local communities
- Work with property owners
- Work with local housing associations, estate agents, community groups

Empty Home Action Zones (EHAZ) will be in place for a defined period, depending on the local profile. The Council will target resources for the defined period and aims to work in close partnership at a local level to bring empty homes back into use.

A small budget will be set aside to undertake minor environmental works which will be of benefit to the whole community. This measure will be used when the property is back in use, particularly where empty homes have been a source of considerable nuisance e.g. minor landscaping, external decoration, restoration of fencing, gating of alleyways etc.

5. Key Actions

This Strategy encompasses and draws together initiatives already operational and 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.

7.1 Involving Partners

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.

Owners with one or a small number of properties, managing agents or 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. 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 may form the key to bringing empty properties back into use. They are able to introduce finance, design and development abilities together with their housing management skills.

Other Organisations with an interest in rented housing provision is wide and varied may also be partners. (See Appendix 1)

4.2 Achieving Sale of the Property

Estate Agent action / Auctioneers

Liaison with estate agents and auctioneers may achieve 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 the 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.

4.3 Improve and Use

Liaison with Mortgage Lenders

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

Anchor Staying Put Shropshire

The services of a Home Improvement Agency may assist in helping to secure the funding needed to bring a property back into use

Equity Release

Equity release may be a means by which a property can be brought back into use either for sale or private rental.

4.4 Leasing Arrangements

Owner improves and leases to Housing Association

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

Housing Association/Council lease from owner and improve

An owner may be willing to lease a property to an Housing Association to renovate and use for affordable letting

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 by the property owner (subject to agreement with the Council) or by an approved Housing Association partner.

4.5 Reducing the Environmental Impact of Empty Properties

The Council has and may use 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 / T + C Planning Act 1990
- Dangerous buildings : Building Act 1984
- Abatement of nuisance : Environmental Protection Act 1990

4.6 Enforcement Action

This may be resorted to, 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.

Enforced Sale Procedure

This legal process may be used by the Council to force sale of the property. This is normally where works in default have been undertaken at a property and the debt has been secured on the premises. If the owner fails to repay the debt the Local Authority may enforce sale of the property to recover the debt.

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. A Housing Association will be granted a tenancy on the property and will manage it, sub-letting to tenants.

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

The use of CPO may be seen as a last resort if no other option is suitable.

6. Background and Current Developments

Through the Shropshire Council's Community Strategy (2010-2020), Housing Strategy and Private Sector Housing Enforcement Strategy, the Council sets out its vision of a 'flourishing Shropshire'

The Empty Homes Strategy particularly helps to achieve this aim through:

- Increasing the supply of affordable housing

- Community safety can be improved with fewer empty homes
- The character of communities can be protected and improved by empty homes work.

Before Shropshire became one unitary Authority each of the five former District and Borough Councils had a separate strategy and approach. A number of Councils provided grants to assist in bringing homes back into use, mainly for first time buyers or to landlords for private sector rent. Bridgnorth District Council also ran a successful Living over the Shops Scheme and Oswestry Borough Council targeted flats above shops as part of a broader town centre Regeneration Scheme.

Shropshire Council has continued to offer Empty Homes Grants that have helped to return empty homes back into use as well as meeting the need for affordable housing.

Shropshire is a large geographical area and this presents challenges. To better tackle empty homes, the Council has identified additional funding to support Empty Home Action Zones.

During January 2010 Shropshire Council changed the Council Tax Discounts for empty homes. From April 2010, there is a 50% Discount for six months and then the discount is removed. This has increased the Council Tax income from longer term empty homes, some of which is being put towards helping to bring empty homes back into use.

Funding has been provided for 3 years to provide two Empty Homes Officers, to help implement this Strategy, along with additional capital funding for Empty Properties to Homes Grants.

Achievements so far

The Council's main approach is to work with and persuade owners to bring empty homes back into use. Only when this fails will legal enforcement action be considered.

During 1st April 2009 – 31st March 2010, the Council achieved:

Year 2009 - 2010		
Active ongoing work	25	
Homes brought back into use via Grants	7	£77,000
Awaiting Grant Approval	20	£296,000
Grants in the Pipeline	12	£200,00
No Grant	1	

Empty properties can take time to bring back into use, especially where there is more than one unit (home) being created. It is often difficult to predict spend and in a particular financial year. An aim of this Strategy is to carry out more focussed work and to reduce the timescales involved with bringing empty homes back into use.

7. Targets

Performance targets will be set year on year for the next three years as shown in table 1 below. With the Empty Homes Officer Posts and additional capital funding for Empty Properties to Homes Grants in place 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

SUMMARY Empty Homes Strategy Action Plan – The Way Forward 2010

Objective	Target and outcomes	Action description	Target date
Raising awareness of empty homes issues	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. Engage with Town and Parish Councils at Local Joint Committees.	Oct 2010
Gathering relevant, accurate and up to date information	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
Risk assess empty homes to determine priority for action	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
Implement Empty Home Action Zones	Agree local targets to bring empty properties back into use	Identify target areas. Community consultation Liaison with owners and partners	Oct 2010
Deliver target empty homes back into use	Target empty homes back into use	Rolling programme of EHAZs	March 2013

Appendix 1

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 “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.”</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>www.emptyhomes.com</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>www.naepp.org.uk</p>
Homes and Communities Agency	<p>Formerly the 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>www.homesandcommunities.co.uk</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>www.gosw.gov.uk</p>
South	<p>These organisations have a network of housing officers</p>

<p>Shropshire, Severnside, Meres and Mosses Housing Associations and other housing associations</p>	<p>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..</p>
<p>Landlords' Forum and landlord groups in Shropshire and the West Midlands Empty Property Forum</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>West Mercia Constabulary, West Midlands Fire Service and the Community Safety Partnership</p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Local Town and Parish Councils, Local Joint Committees and neighbourhood groups</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Other strategic partners</p>	<p>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.</p>

Appendix 2

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 1st 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 1st 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 meet the Decent Homes Standard i.e.:-

- 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.

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?

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?

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?

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:

Paul Kelly – Housing Renewal Manager Tel: 0345 678 9000
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