

LONDON BOROUGH OF WALTHAM
FOREST
EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY
SUMMARY

2007-2010

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Summary Empty Property Strategy

1. Introduction and background

Despite the overwhelming demand for housing in Waltham Forest and IN London as a whole, Council Tax records show there are currently 2,475 empty private sector dwellings in the borough. 1,611 of these have been empty long-term, i.e., six months or more. This represents around 4% of the total private sector (non-RSL) stock, see figure 1 below.

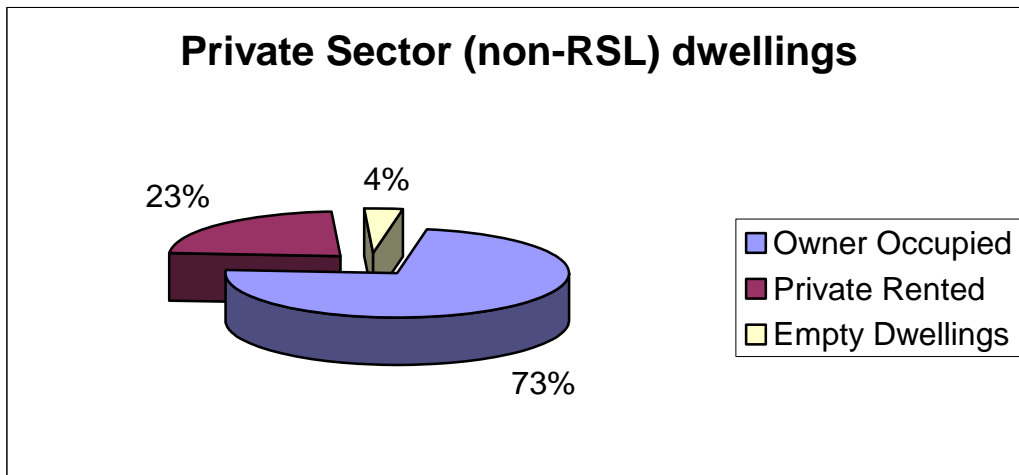


Figure 1: Source-Waltham Forest Private Sector Stock Condition Survey

Bringing empty properties back into residential use could provide much needed homes for those with housing need in the borough. In 2005/6 the total number of households accepted for housing were 1,400, whereas the total number of Council and Housing Association properties available for letting in that period, was 942. There are also additional pressures from existing Council tenants wanting transfers and waiting list applicants.

Reducing the number of empty properties can also result in improved environmental conditions and a reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour often associated with empty derelict properties.

The need to reduce empty homes has received high profile in recent years, through organisations such as the Empty Homes Agency. In response, the Government has introduced a number of measures aimed at encouraging the re-use of empty properties. Local Authorities have been given new enforcement powers under the Housing Act 2004 known as Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs). EDMOs give the Council the power to take over the management of empty private sector dwellings (empty for six months or more) and to do whatever it takes to bring the property back into occupation. The Council can recoup the cost of repairs from rental income. Our approach will be to work closely with empty property owners, but where all attempts to negotiate with the owner has failed, we will use EDMOs.

2. Defining 'Empty Property'

The Empty Property Strategy is concerned with 'problematic vacancies' - these are properties that are inactive in the housing market and empty for six months or more. Also targeted are shops above flats and un-used commercial spaces with potential for creating 'bulk' units.

In 2005/6 we identified an Internet café with redundant space from which 8 units have been created. We have also identified potential for creating 30 flats above a supermarket, over two floors. We successfully pursued the owner, resulting in a joint project between the Council, the owner and a property developer. The £1.25m project will create new homes that will be used to house homeless families and the target for completion is 2007/8.

We will continue to investigate opportunities for converting empty commercial spaces into residential dwellings, in close consultation with Planning, Housing Associations and Property Developers.

3. Identifying empty properties & their owners

We will use the following methods to identify empty properties and establish ownership:

- Make enquiries through neighbours
- Carry out survey's by area, including the super output areas
- Analyse Council Tax data
- Contact agencies such as Land Registry, utility companies (gas, electric etc.) and the electoral register
- Work with other internal departments and services such as Council Tax, Better Neighbourhoods team, Environmental Health, Planning and Street Wardens

4. Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the Empty Property Strategy is to reduce the number of empty properties in the borough and increase the supply of affordable housing. To achieve this aim we have identified five main priorities:

1. Identify long-term empty properties in the borough
2. Provide encouragement and support to empty property owners
3. Develop a more co-ordinated approach to empty property work
4. Use enforcement powers where necessary
5. Promote the benefits of turning empty properties into homes

Our Action Plan for achieving these priorities can be viewed in Appendix 1.

5. Resources

Housing and Neighbourhoods employs two empty property officers with responsibility for all aspects of empty property work. The costs for delivering the programme will be met from sub-regional funding. The total sub-regional allocation for Waltham Forest for 2006/7 is £728,000, which will be used to bring 55 empty and derelict properties back into occupation. Waltham Forest has been assured a further £262,000 for 2007/8. Other funding may become available through RSLs that bid for Temporary Social Housing Grants where empty property work is identified.

6. Why bring empty properties back into use?

- Provides an income for the owner
- Provides a home for a family
- Improves the neighbourhood
- Discourages vandalism and crime
- Attracts investment into the area

7. Options for empty property owners

A range of options is available to owners for bringing their empty properties back into residential use, including:

Retaining the property; and:

- Selling it to a private individual, property developer or Housing Association
- Re-occupying the property
- Letting the property through a letting/ management agent
- Letting the property and managing it

Private Sector Leasing Scheme (PSL)

The council has a Private Sector Leasing team with responsibility for procuring private sector dwellings. Owners can lease their properties to the Council, removing day-to-day management responsibility and risk for the owner. Rent is guaranteed for a specified period of time irrespective of whether the property is let or not.

Rent Deposit Scheme

Under this scheme the Council guarantees owners of empty properties a suitable tenant and rent deposit. Assistance is also provided with setting up an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST).

Housing Association Leasing scheme (HALS)

This scheme provides an opportunity for owners to lease their property to registered social landlords (RSLs) for periods of three to five years, for which the Council gets nomination rights to the properties. Through partnership working with RSLs such as Christian Action, Network, London & Quadrant and East Homes.

Empty Property Grants (Renovation)

This scheme provides owners with financial assistance of up to a maximum £10,000, to turn their empty property into homes. A condition attached to the grant is that the Council will have 5-year nomination rights to the property, at agreed rent. This scheme is linked to our Rent Deposit scheme.

Temporary Social Housing Grant

This programme can assist RSLs and owners to bring empty properties back into use. The RSL acquires the property on a lease from the owner for a minimum period of two years (maximum 30 years), with a Social Housing Grant (SHG) for renovation works. This provides a method of utilising properties that owners do not require for occupation in the short or medium term, but they still wish the property to be returned to them at some point.

Contacting us

To speak to us about an empty property or to obtain further information about how to bring an empty property back into use, you can: -

Telephone the Empty Property Officer on 020 8496 5518

Write to the Private Sector Leasing Team at the address below

Fax us on 020 8496 5579

Email empty.property@hsg.lbwf.gov.uk

Visit the Housing Department (address below)

The Private Sector Leasing Team

Housing and Neighbourhoods Services
Cedar Wood House
2d Fulbourne Road
Walthamstow
London E17 4GG

Appendix 1 - Action Plan

Target	Actions	Benefits/ outcome	Tim scale	Lead C fficer
<i>Priority one – identify long term empty properties in the borough</i>				
Identify 100 properties empty long-term, by March 2007	Set up an empty property hotline and explore possibility of SMS texting to report an empty property	Point of contact for residents Alternative method for residents who do not want to speak to someone	January 2007	GH
	Develop and maintain database of agencies that will assist in tracing owners	Save time	February 2007	GH
	Conduct a survey in smaller 'shop parade' urban areas to identify under-used commercial spaces and shops above flats	Indication of scale of the problem Identification of potential new homes	April 2007	GH
	Using GIS mapping identify areas for targeting under this strategy, and provide incentives to staff to identify long-term empty properties are	Prioritise resources according to area needs Joint outcomes with Better Neighbourhoods team	March 2007	GH
<i>Priority two – provide encouragement and support to empty property owners</i>				
Bring 50 long-term empty properties back into occupation by April 2007	Set up a comprehensive database of empty properties, including redundant/ underused spaces, with adequate monitoring tools	Easy access to information about empty properties	January 2007	GH/PA
	Send letter to empty property owners with Council Tax demand, enquiring about their intentions and providing advice and information	Alert owners properties being monitored May voluntarily bring property back into use	February 2007	GH/PA
	Negotiate between empty property owners and developers and RSLs	Facilitating negotiations between RSLs, property developers and empty property owners	Ongoing	GH/PA

Target	Actions	Benefits/ outcome	Time scale	Lead Officer
<i>Priority Three – develop a more coordinated approach to empty property work</i>				
Improve communications amongst relevant services and partners	Establish systems for sharing information internally including length of time vacant, circumstances, state of repair and any actions being taken out by other services	Prevent duplication of work Direct resources accordingly Pooling of resources	March 2007	GH
	Provide progress reports to Private Housing Steering Group and Sector Strategic Group	Monitor performance Take remedial action early	Quarterly	GH
	Identify opportunities for running joint campaigns with the East sub-region	Holistic approach to shared issues Efficiency and cost savings	Ongoing	GH/JJ
	Identify opportunities for bringing together RSLs, property developers and owners	Enabling re-use of empty properties	Ongoing	GH
	Use Private Housing Forums to share information with external partners and stakeholders on empty property work	Keeping our partners informed	Quarterly	GH/ JJ
<i>Priority four – use enforcement action where necessary</i>				
Develop an enforcement policy/ protocol by April 2007	Assess impact and cost implications of EDMOs for Waltham Forest and develop report for negotiations with RSLs and Ascham homes regarding management of properties under EDMOs	Identify best delivery mechanism for Management of properties acquired through EDMOs	February 2007	GH/ JJ/ RG
	Consult sub-regional partnership regarding issues around EDMOs	Identify how partner boroughs are implementing EDMOs	Ongoing	GH/JJ

	Develop criteria for selection of empty properties to action through EDMO	Clear guidelines for staff dealing with empty properties	April 2007	JJ
Target	Actions	Benefits/ outcome	Tim scale	Lead Officer
<i>Priority five - promote the benefits of turning empty properties into homes</i>				
Deliver two high-profile publicity campaigns by March 2007	Publicise Empty Property Strategy	Raise awareness of our approach for tackling empty properties	October – December 06	JJ
	Send information packs with Council Tax demand to empty property owners, with translation request form	Raise awareness and provide advice Alert owners property being monitored Ensure everyone can access services	January 2007	GH
	Highlight a success stories in the borough using local media	Highlighting benefits of brining empty properties back into use	December 2006	GH
	Use internal publications to show success stories	Raise awareness amongst staff	Ongoing	GH
	Place empty property advert in Waltham Forest Magazine	Raise awareness amongst residents	Twice yearly	GH
	Investigate possibility of bus campaign with sub-regional borough partners, to raise awareness of penalties for not brining empty properties back into use	Efficiency and cost savings Working together to tackle shared problems	February 2007	GH
	Alert staff about issue of empty properties via payslips	Raise awareness amongst staff	February 2007	GH