Introduction

Addressing long term empty homes, those empty for more than six months, is a priority for the Council and partners. These are more than just bricks and mortar, it is a potential home a place for individuals and families to live their lives and bring up their families.

Whilst empty homes are a normal part of any housing market turnover once they become empty for a long period they become a wasted resource, a potential blight on the community and a cost to the Council.

Leeds City Council has a vision to be the “Best City/Best Council” in the UK framed around its ambition to have a “strong economy” and a compassionate city. The Empty Homes Strategy is rooted in both these ambitions and forms part of the Council’s Housing Growth and Jobs for Young People priority.

The Council and its partners have made great progress in tackling empty homes over the last few years

- Since 2005 the level of long term empty homes has reduced from 12000 to 3800 in March 2016. Empty homes now represent 1.32 % of the housing stock.
- Since March 2012 there has been a net reduction of 1999 long term empty homes in the city. As part of the Core Planning Strategy the City will reduce the number of empty homes by 2000 from March 2012 to March 2017.

Training Volunteers

Canopy Housing is a charity that works with Leeds City Council in renovating empty properties through community volunteering schemes. The charity aims to purchase and renovate houses in the Beeston and Harehills areas of Leeds, two urban areas which have high densities of empty properties.

After consulting with the Council and Leeds Empty Homes Doctor about a property in Harehills near Canopy Housing’s community building, the charity was able to purchase this terraced property. At the time of purchase, the four-bedroom property was in need of serious repair, having been empty for well over two years, and its appearance was adversely affecting the local neighbourhood.

Canopy Housing used the property renovation project to bring the house back up to standard, whilst at the same time training volunteers. The property needed much attention, and extensive repairs were carried out, including a new roof, insulation and installation of a new kitchen and bathroom, as well as installing a ventilation system to prevent condensation and mould. After completion, the property became available to a family, who have been living in their new home since 2015.
The partnership approach to addressing empty homes with the voluntary and third sector has increased with partners attracting significant investment into addressing empty homes, offering training opportunities and providing increasing numbers of affordable, supported homes for vulnerable individuals and families. This work has been recognised with partners winning National and International Awards for their work.

Leeds City Council despite the recent reduction in public finance has continued to invest in its empty homes work providing an additional £3.5m since 2012 into services to address empty homes.

Since 2012 the Council and partners have returned 12868 long term empty homes back into occupation as a result of the actions taken by them.

There are numerous reasons for a property to be empty. The strategy will continue the approach that if it is empty then it is a potential home for some one. We will continue to look at opportunities to bring empty homes back into occupation. This will include help and advice, financial support, working with partners and enforcement actions, including compulsory purchase where appropriate.

The work the Council and partners undertake in addressing empty homes is held up as excellent practice within the Country and has been recognised by peers via both National and International Awards, illustrating the excellent work within Leeds.

**Partnership Working**

A member of the public brought this property to the Council’s attention when a complaint about noise from pigeons was received. This property had been left empty for seven years and needed major refurbishment work. The Council arranged for Leeds Empty Homes Doctor to get in touch with the owners and arranged a site visit. The property was in a poor state of repair and through consultation with the owners, it was decided that the property should be sold. Through the work of the Empty Homes Doctor, LATCH, a charity that provides housing for those that are homeless and in housing need, purchased the property. The charity spent several months working on the property, including structural and insulation work, renovating it to a high standard, with financial support from Leeds Community Foundation.

LATCH’s renovation works made use of its own volunteer programme, giving young people with additional support needs who were out of work the opportunity to receive skills training and work experience, and they have since gained employment and further training opportunities. In addition, due to the cross partnership work and innovation demonstrated with this property, Leeds Empty Homes Doctor won the award for the Most Innovative Intervention at the Empty Homes Awards.
What is an empty home?

An empty home is very simply one which is not occupied; this can be for a vast number of reasons. Obviously empty homes form part of any housing market and without them this market could not operate effectively, which would affect the economic well-being of the city.

Empty homes which have been unoccupied for longer than six months have been classified as long term empty homes by Government. It is these empty homes that the Council and partners target to try and bring them back into occupation, removing blight but more importantly providing homes in city.

Over 95% of the empty homes in the city are in private occupation and not within the control of the Council or partners.

Area Approach

This property, in the Cross Green area of Leeds, was built in the 19th Century, and had been empty for at least 15 years. The condition of the property and its effect on the surrounding area had long been the subject of neighbour complaints, attracting the attention of local councillors and Members of Parliament. Therefore, action needed to be taken to bring this home back into use, in order to safeguard those around the property.

As the property had been empty for such a lengthy period of time, the council made the decision to instigate a Compulsory Purchase Action against the owner. Following the acquisition of the property under this procedure, the Council sold it to a local private landlord who already owned other properties in the area and was keen to renovate this property so that it could be reoccupied. In addition to being able to purchase the property, the property was within the target area for a Group Repair scheme in place at the time, and the new landlord was able to benefit from this, receiving assistance towards the renovation of the exterior of the building.
What have we done?

Each year the Council and partners have returned over 3200 long term empty homes back into use and since March 2012 reduced the number of empty homes by 1999. These figures are based on the previous Comprehensive Performance Review methodology adopted by Government in 2005 and are used by the Council to measure empty homes in the city.

Since 2005 there has been a steady reduction in the number of empty homes in the city with an annual net reduction year on year. This has contributed to the housing supply, removed blight from neighbourhoods and reduced the need for newly built homes protecting the green space of the city. It has also helped to increase the asset value for owners and provided an income for owners, and has created opportunities for training and employment, all of which contributes to the economic prosperity of the city and region.

As part of the last strategy, Empty Homes Strategy 2012/5, Filling the Void, the Council and partners developed new ways to bring empty homes back into occupation. These enhanced the previous excellent work in the city. Since 2012 new ways of addressing empty homes have included:

The introduction of financial disincentives via the Council Tax System

Previous owners were exempt from Council Tax for the first 6 months if a property was empty. All owners are now liable for Council Tax from the first day a property becomes empty and 150% Council Tax after 2 years.

Leeds City Council investing over £3m into empty homes work

The investment has allowed for the creation of an equity release loan to support owners to return their homes back into use. This allows an owner to borrow up to £30k over 5 years.

Increased finance has allowed more compulsory purchase to occur so preventing owners from leaving properties empty without the Council having the ability to take ownership.

The targeting of empty homes on a geographical basis via the Leeds Neighbourhood Approach. As part of the approach all empty home owners are invited to work with the Council to return their home back into use. Where they don’t engage then full enforcement action is taken including compulsory purchase to address the empty home.

Oldest Property Benefits

A £30,000 secured empty homes loan was provided in 2015 for a Grade II listed property. The property consisted of an old barn with later additions dating from 1500-1800. The current owner bought the property in 2014 after standing empty for two years. Prior to that it had been used as a commercial premises for a number of years. It was purchased to renovate and bring it back into use as a habitable family home.

The property required a lot of attention when it was purchased, and various specialist craftsmen were used to restore it in a sympathetic way. The timber in the barn had to be treated and damp issues resolved, a new kitchen and bathrooms were installed. The property was rewired, and was redecorated both internally and externally. In addition to this, a new staircase had to be fitted to match the original, and new doors had to be created, which required a skilled joiner.

The loan, along with savings, was used to renovate the property. Within 16 months the property was transformed from a sad neglected building to a lovely family home. A lot of the work was carried out by the present owner and family members and was finished to a high standard.

The maximum loan term is five years. There are no monthly payments to make on the loan. Interest is charged on a compound basis twice annually and is secured as a Legal Charge against the property.
Empty Homes Doctor Service

Supported by the Council the Empty Homes Doctor is an independent social enterprise which helps owners to address their empty homes. The service is free and is able to work with individual owners to find solutions to their problems, offering help and advice, access to builders, solicitors managing agents and auction houses to get owners to help themselves.

Working with partners in the Community Led Housing Sector

By working in partnership with Canopy, GIPSIL and LATCH the city is able to access additional funding for empty homes, increase the number of properties targeted and most importantly help people with employment and a new affordable quality home. Through working together over £5m additional funds have been accessed for empty homes since 2012, over 50 empty homes returned. Most importantly this has provided training and employment opportunities for vulnerable individuals to improve their lives and provided new quality homes for those in need.

Homes and Communities (HCA) Buy Back Programme

As part of the HCA Empty Property Programme Round 2 the Council agreed a programme to buy back empty homes for the first time. This involved a total of £2.2m investment and returned 20 long term empty right to buy homes and transforming 2 community centres which had previously been houses back into homes.

Investing in New Family Home

As a joint scheme with the government, the council is able to purchase long term empty homes for use as social rented accommodation. This scheme recently identified a former council property in the Bramley area of Leeds which had been empty for over four years. The Council approached the owner in 2014. There was no obligation to sell the two bedroom property, but the council arranged a valuation and a survey of the property, completing the purchase later that year.

The council spent well over £6,500 through the scheme to bring the property back up to the Council’s letting standard. A family was able to move in shortly after the renovation work was completed. The family had been given the highest priority on the Leeds Homes register, due to the antisocial behaviour that they were suffering in their previous home.

This scheme has multiple benefits: giving a family who were in desperate housing need a new home, brings back into use a house that had been empty for over four years, and bringing the property back into use also has a positive impact on the local area and community.
What will we do?

Empty homes remain a priority for the Council and the city. They form part of the solution for additional homes required within the city. Returning them back into use contributes to the economic well-being of the city but more importantly provides a home for an individual or a family in need. The Council and partners will continue the excellent work they already undertakes in this area, work which has been recognised nationally and globally as innovative and excellent.

However it is important that as part of the Empty Homes Strategy the Council continues to work with partners and be innovative to continue to achieve the excellent results and reputation it has gained in previous years.

The Core Planning Strategy includes a net reduction of 2000 long term empty homes from 2012 to 2017. It important that post 2017 this reduction is maintained to enhance the supply of homes but also to protect the green fields of Leeds for everyone to enjoy and benefit from.

The 2016/19 Strategy will continue the excellent work already being undertaken and will also look to enhance what we do and look for new opportunities to bring back empty homes in the city. As part of this work the Council and partners are looking at new initiatives.

Socially Enterprising

A property located in the Cross Flatts area, built in the 1930s, had stood empty for at least 20 years. The property had been in a derelict condition, and it was estimated that repairs would cost over £30,000.

The council had been aware of the state of the property for some time, and had investigated numerous complaints about its condition, taking formal action against the owner several times. Many residents had complained about the property over the years, and local councillors and Members of Parliament had become actively involved, requiring action to be taken to bring this property back into use, to safeguard the people living in the vicinity.

The council had continually served the owner with notices to try and address the issues, which included security problems and overgrown vegetation. However, the owner’s non-responsive behaviour often led the council to carry out works in default.

As the property had a significant impact on the lives of residents and had been neglected by the owner, it became clear that the only way to deal with this property was to instigate a Compulsory Purchase Order. In August 2012, the property was vested in the Council and was purchased by the Hunslet Club, a local charity working with young people in South Leeds. The property was purchased to give young people the opportunity to develop practical training and skills during the renovation, as well as providing local people with affordable housing. Leeds Empty Homes Doctor worked with the Club in order to bring it back up to a high standard, and in 2015, a local family moved in.
An enhanced long term empty home buy-back programme

Due to the success of the previous programme the Council has now has a HCA buy-back programme for 2015/8 from increasing the number from 20 to 100 long term empty homes. As well as previous right to buy empty homes the Council will be able to target long term empty homes to support other regeneration activities across the city.

Community Led Housing Partnership

This partnership has continued to grow and deliver empty homes back into use. More importantly by doing so the partnership has changed people’s lives by offering them training opportunities to improve their employability, has helped and supported vulnerable individuals on the edge of society and continues to provide quality homes for people. To enhance the work a number on initiatives are being developed,

1. Provision of long term leases on peppercorn rents to increase asset bases so improving long term sustainability of the organisation and their improving borrowing capacity

2. Use of right buy receipts to financially support work with 30% grants

3. Interest free loans to support the work which can be recycled back into the sector on repayment.

4. To explore the opportunities around social care as a potential way of returning empty homes. The work of the sector is very much people centred and support driven. With ongoing changes in Universal Credit this is a potential growth area for the sector.

Further financial assistance for owners

The implementation of a £5k interest free loan over 2 years via the Leeds City Credit Union to allow owners to undertake small works to properties and get them back into occupation.

The challenge for the city is to ensure that the excellent work already undertaken continues and the level of empty homes remains as low as practically possible. Once the Core Planning Strategy reduction of 2000 empty homes has been achieved it is important that this is not only maintained but further reductions occur. There will be point where the level of empty homes will not reduce further as there will always be a certain number of empty homes required for a healthy housing market. The challenge will be to preserve this level so as not to increase the level of blight, maintain the supply of homes and continue to protect the green fields of the city.

Targets

To return 3200 long term empty homes back into occupation every year

To reduce the number of empty homes by 2000 from April 2012 to April 2017

From April 2017 to maintain the reduction in empty homes at or below this level

Using Community Funding

The Community Grants programme is used to purchase and renovate empty homes to bring them back into use, meeting the needs of the city. Gipsil, a social enterprise based in Gipton, used this programme to purchase a three bedroom semi-detached home. This property had long been neglected, falling into disrepair, and had been the subject of multiple burglaries. Due to the extensive work necessary to bring it back into use as a home, the property did not sell on the open market.

As Gipsil’s housing support programme provides housing to vulnerable young people who are in housing need, they decided to convert the property into two, one bedroom, self-contained flats. This project took 16 weeks to complete after the planning application went through, and the property was let to two Gipsil service users. Gipsil have ensured that these properties are affordable to heat and light, making a successful tenancy more likely. This renovation work not only helps vulnerable people into housing and brings empty homes back into use, but also addresses the issue of a shortage of one bedroom properties across the city.