

Appendix 1

London Borough of Barnet Empty Property Strategy 2013-14

1. Introduction

In Barnet 2.14% of properties are empty with 0.78% (0.7% is average for London) of those being classed as long term empty. Properties may be empty for a short period of time e.g. whilst they are refurbished or between lets. Unfortunately sometimes things go wrong and buildings stay empty for a long time. This may be because planned refurbishment did not take place, or is delayed or abandoned. Also complications sometimes arise over inheritance where occupiers have died.

All too often disrepair can result from homes being left empty and not maintained. With no occupants to notice, small disrepair problems can escalate quickly. Empty homes can attract anti-social behaviour, crime (including squatting), encourage fly tipping, attract vermin and become detrimental to the amenities of the neighbourhood.

Bringing empty properties back into residential use contributes to increasing the overall housing supply (including the supply of affordable homes). This is particularly crucial at the present time. Barnet Council is currently being faced with a steep increase in the number of requests for housing for example in 2012/13 there was a 21.7% increase in new temporary accommodation admissions from 694 in 2011/12 to 845 in 2012/13. With the recent changes in the benefits system this looks likely to continue to rise.

2. Aim of the strategy

The Empty Property Strategy contributes towards the Barnet's Housing Strategy 2010-2025 "Providing Housing Choices that Meet the Needs and Aspirations of Barnet Residents". It is also built upon the principles set out in the Homes and Communities Agency "Empty Homes Tool Kit" and the Mayor of London Draft Revised Housing Strategy (currently in consultation)"

The main aim of this Strategy as set out in the Councils strategy is to reduce the numbers of empty properties in the Borough. In doing so we aim to benefit:

- *the community* by improving the local environment, supporting regeneration and removing crime hot spots caused by some squatted premises
- *owners of empty properties* by improving the condition of the property and turning them from a wasted resource into a productive one
- *the housing market* by increasing housing availability (with a focus on the supply of affordable housing)
- *the environment* by re-using existing dwellings the impact on the environment is lower for a new build.
- *the Council finances* through increased revenue from the New Homes Bonus.

3. Local Strategic Context

The second priority outcome of the Councils Corporate Plan 2013-16 (published April 2013) is *'to maintain the right environment for a strong and diverse local economy'* which confirms the Councils commitment to creating the environment for growth in the local economy. Investment in regeneration and development is an essential driver for this for growth, creating jobs, reinvigorating communities and improving living standards. One of the key targets for this priority outcome is to bring one hundred empty properties back into use.

In September 2012 the Council adopted a 'Local Plan' which replaced the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) (adopted May 2006). Its vision (shared with the Councils Sustainable Community Strategy) is:

'It is 2026. Barnet is known as a successful London suburb. It has successfully ridden difficult times to emerge as resilient as ever. The public service is smaller than before but the organisations within it, through effective partnerships, work together to deliver good services and there is a healthy relationship between them, and residents who do things for themselves and their families.

Established and new residents value living here for the Borough's excellent schools, strong retail offer, clean streets, low levels of crime and fear of crime, easy access to green open spaces and access to good quality healthcare.

Barnet is an economically and socially successful place. With high levels of educational qualifications and access to good transport networks, residents continue to have access locally, in other parts of London and beyond to jobs in a wide variety of different industries.

Barnet's success is founded on its residents, in particular through a strong civic society, including its diverse faith communities, founded on an ethos of self-help for those that can, and support through a wide range of volunteering activities for others. Different communities get on well together with each other"

Bringing empty properties back into use contributes to the following Objectives contained within the Core Strategy of the Local Plan:

- *To manage housing growth to meet housing aspirations*
- *To promote strong and cohesive communities*
- *To protect and enhance the suburbs*

The Council's Housing Strategy 2010-25 also has a commitment to achieving a high quality of desirable and modern homes for everyone in Barnet. Making better use of empty properties also contributes to the following key objectives of the strategy:

Increasing housing supply, including family sized homes, to improve the range of housing choices and opportunities available to residents and

Improving the condition and sustainability of the existing housing stock.

4. Regional Strategic Context

The Mayor of London's spatial development strategy known as the London Plan (2011) directed Boroughs to:

.....promote efficient use of the existing stock by reducing the number of vacant, unfit and unsatisfactory dwellings, including through setting and monitoring targets for bringing properties back into use. In particular, boroughs should prioritise long-term empty homes, derelict empty homes and listed buildings to be brought back into residential use.

The Mayor proposed to work towards reducing long-term vacant properties to one per cent of the overall stock, which (across London) will require bringing at least 3,000 dwellings back into use.

The Revised London Housing Strategy (in draft) confirmed this commitment stating that

long term empty homes are a wasted housing resource. They are also often magnets for crime, vandalism and squatters, and are a blight on neighbourhoods and that:

No more than one per cent of homes in London should stand empty and unused for more than six months. (2.20 p40)

Currently Barnet meets this requirement.

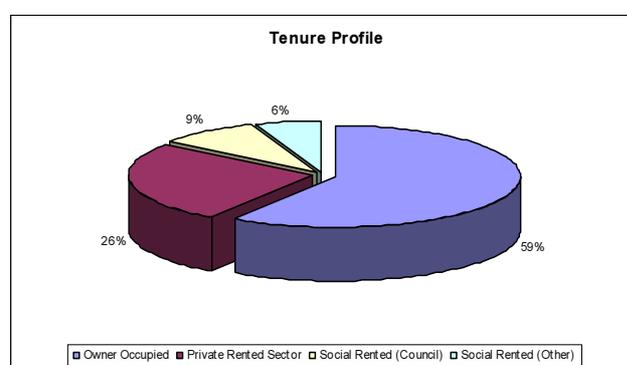
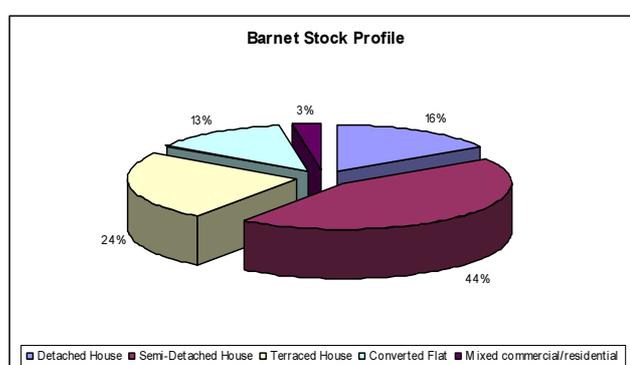
There are currently 82,000 empty homes in London (2.5% of the total housing stock) of which 66,000 are in the private sector (Page 65 of the original Mayors Housing Strategy). Although this is below the national average there is a risk of this figure increasing during the housing market down turn.

35,000 (1.1%) of London's private and public sector homes have been empty for more than 6 months. In the private sector, these are often properties that are caught in protracted legal disputes, abandoned or derelict, or are where the owner does not intend to or has insufficient incentive or resources to bring the empty property back into use. Returning such properties to use is challenging and expensive, often requiring enforcement action and/or significant investment to make them habitable (Page 65 of the original Mayors Housing Strategy).

5. Borough Profile and Housing Need

Covering 86.7 square km, Barnet covers a large geographical area stretching from Chipping Barnet in the North to Cricklewood in the South, and from Edgware in the West to Brunswick Park in the East. Barnet is a very attractive place to live and work, with large amounts of high quality greenbelt land, parks and open spaces, popular and high performing schools and good transport links. There are pockets of deprivation, particularly in the west of the borough which provide the focus for our regeneration plans.

According to the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix 2011-12 HSSA 2011-12) the total number of dwellings in the Borough was 138,453. However, this number is smaller than the actual number of households due to Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), the number of which is estimated to be 4,973 bringing the total up to in excess of 143,426. The stock and tenure profile of the Borough are as follows:



As at the 1st April 2011, an estimated 6,429 dwellings were considered to have a category 1 hazard^[1] present, 6,194 of those dwellings being within private housing (HSSA 2011-12).

There is an ever-increasing pressure to provide affordable housing in the Borough. The growth in the local population, newly-formed households and existing households in need of appropriate accommodation and the high price of properties in the Borough contribute to pressures on the affordable end of the housing market. There are a number of regeneration initiatives in the Borough, which include development of new housing.

As of October 2012 there were 2,329 homeless households placed in temporary accommodation in the Borough, broken down by property size this was as follows:

Property Size	No of households
1-bed	617
2-bed	987

3-bed	596
4-bed	106
5-bed	21
6-bed	2
Total	2329

The number of households recorded for which housing provision needs to be made stands at 16,103 (HSSA 2011-12).

As at the 1st April 2012 there were 3,260 dwelling vacant in the borough the majority of which (2,708) were private sector dwellings vacant in the Borough. A total of 1,676 of those private sector dwellings had been vacant for more than six months (HSSA 2011-12).

Bringing such properties back into use is an important part of the Councils and the Mayor of London's Strategies for meeting housing need, improving quality of life and developing a sustainable community.

6. Previous Performance

Barnet Council has had an intermittent Empty Property Programme over the past three years due to low levels of funding for Empty Property Grants since 31st March 2011.

The Council's performance for the period, 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2013 can be summarised as follows:

Total number of properties brought back into residential Use.	415
Properties renovated and occupied by homeless persons through nomination rights.	11
Properties Demolished following Council involvement	7
Properties Approved by CRC for Compulsory Purchase	24

Due to the reduced size of the programme the majority of the activity has been around the provision of informal advice and dealing reactively with service requests regarding empty properties causing problems.

A significant amount of work has also been undertaken to ensure that the databases held by Council Tax and Environmental Health are fully up to date and accurate. An Empty Property Survey has been completed annually for the past three years of all properties recorded as long term empty on the Council Tax database. As of 1st April 2013, 1,314 long term empty properties were recorded on the Environmental Health Empty Property Database. Of these 60% have been prioritised for action by the Council and 219 are considered a high to medium priority.

7. The Strategy

It is normal for an area to have a number of properties that are empty for short periods of time as a result of housing churn and it can be seen as an indicator of a healthy housing market. These properties will be brought back into use as a natural part of the market and do not require any intervention from the Council.

However some properties will not naturally come back into use and over time can start to cause the problems outlined above. It is these properties that the strategy is targeted at whilst also aiming to provide assistance to owners who are keen to occupy their properties but need some additional guidance and support in doing so.

In order to develop a successful strategy the reasons why the property may have fallen and remained empty must be considered. Within Barnet the reasons include:

- simple abandonment and/or neglect by owners
- the owner being in long term care
- properties bought as a capital investment in a rising market (which is now stagnant)
- or a simple inability to bring the property back into use (financial or through capability).

This strategy is aimed at bringing long-term vacant properties, including vacant sites and redundant commercial premises (that have the potential for either conversion or redevelopment for housing purposes), back into beneficial use.

The strategy has three key priority outcomes:

Priority Outcome 1: Increase the Housing Provision in Barnet with Nomination Rights

This strategy feeds into the following Corporate Strategy Priority Outcomes:

Priority Outcome 1: To maintain a well designed, attractive and accessible place, with sustainable infrastructure across the borough.

Reduce the number of households placed in emergency accommodation to 500.

Priority Outcome 2: To maintain the right environment for a strong and diverse local economy.

Reduce the average length of time spent by households in short-term nightly purchased accommodation to 26 weeks

The Council will work with Barnet Homes and/or an alternative Social Housing provider approved by the Council to develop a seamless service to compliant landlords applying for Empty Property Financial Assistance

How We Will Make This Happen

We will work with Barnet Homes and/or an alternative Social Housing provider approved by the Council to house people in housing need nominated by the Council, to ensure that:

- accepting Empty Property Financial Assistance and letting to Barnet Homes is a commercially viable option for landlords in the current economic climate
- a seamless service for administering Empty Property Financial Assistance and letting the property is provided to landlords.

How We Will Measure Success

- Procedures are in place to enable seamless administration of Empty Property Financial Assistance.
- Empty property grant budget committed in line with the criteria laid down in the Financial Assistance Policy.
- 90% of landlords in receipt of Empty Property Financial Assistance scoring the Council 8 out of 10 or above in a satisfaction survey.
- Work with Barnet Homes to assess the suitability of/and develop where found to be viable a scheme for renovating and letting properties where the prospective landlord does not have immediate access to funds.
- Empty Dwelling Management Procedure in place

Priority Outcome 2: Provision of a Targeted, Legally Compliant Empty Property Team

The Private Sector Housing Team will provide both a reactive and proactive service in relation to empty properties. The reactive service will respond to complaints about problems being caused by empty properties e.g. accumulations, vermin, squatters etc. These cases usually involve enforcement action during the initial stages to deal with the matter that triggered the complaint.

Due to the number of properties on the database the Council are unable to take action against all the properties recorded. These properties will be targeted using the risk assessment method outlined below.

Generally the Council will begin by offering advice, guidance and financial incentives. Where the owners are receptive to this no enforcement action will generally be required. Where this is not successful the Council will move onto

enforcement against the owner to require the property to meet a minimum standard and be brought back into use. At all stages the process will be in line with the current Environmental Health Enforcement Policy and as such will be fair and equitable. The owners of the empty properties will be given reasonable opportunity to bring the property back into use. Using a range of options is much more successful in bringing these properties back into use rather than using a one size fits all approach.

The possible enforcement actions are summarised below:

- **Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)**
Compulsory Purchase Orders allow Local Housing Authorities to apply to the Secretary of State to compulsorily purchase properties.
- **Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)**
Empty Dwelling Management Orders allow councils to secure occupation and proper management of privately owned houses and flats that have been empty for a minimum of 6 months. To start the process the local authority must apply to the Residential Property Tribunal (RPT) for an interim management order.
- **Enforced Sale Procedure**
Enforced sales allow local authorities to force the sale of a property to recover debts. The debts will usually be for work undertaken in default of the owner or for Council Tax debt. Debts may be secured either against a property.

Where possible the Council will also seek to maximise the potential returns in relation to the New Homes Bonus.

How We Will Make This Happen

- Develop procedures to enable seamless delivery of all enforcement options.
- Ensure that all properties at risk of illegal entry are secure to reduce the risk of squatting.
- Work with NSCSO in relation to Council Tax to maximise the opportunities for securing New Homes Bonus in relation to empty properties.

How We Will Measure Success

- A minimum of 100 long term (empty for 6 months or more) empty properties brought back into use
- Officers are 95% compliant on an audit of compliance with the Environmental Health Enforcement Policy.
- All non secure empty properties to be secured against unauthorised entry within 48 hours of notice expiration

- Increase in the amount of New Homes Bonus received linked with bringing empty properties back into residential use.

Priority Outcome 3: Ensuring that the Properties Causing the Most Problems are Targeted.

In order to effectively tackle empty properties an accurate and up to date database is essential.

The Council has taken the opportunity provided by Central Government to design its own Council Tax Support Scheme and has decided to remove the discount previously given to long term empty properties and increase it to 150% for properties which have been empty for at least two years. There will therefore be no incentive for 'self-reporting' and it is therefore vital that an accurate database is kept of empty properties.

The database will not just be a list of addresses of empty properties, but all properties within it will be risk assessed for their potential impact (based upon length of time empty, state of repair, potential negative impact on the surrounding area and any previous enforcement action). The database will also allow the Council to measure the impact of the Empty Property Strategy.

In order for the scheme to be successful the profile of empty properties both internally and externally must be raised. By increasing the profile of empty property work internally it is anticipated that it will increase the number reported to the Private Sector Housing Team.

Raising awareness within the community is also vital and this will be done by using for example Members, London Landlord Accreditation Scheme News Letter, the Police, the Landlords Forum, estate agents and other property professionals.

How We Will Make This Happen

- Up to date Empty Property Database with all properties on the data base inspected and risk assessed
- Work programme designed around targeting the highest risk properties first
- Use a combination of working with other departments/organisations and raising awareness in the community to ensure that properties continue to be identified, added to the database and prioritised.
- Set up an Empty Property Steering Group involving Council departments and commissioned functions to meet quarterly and prioritise problematic properties for enforcement action.

- Website reviewed for accessibility and ease of use and improvements implemented where appropriate.
- Comprehensive advertising undertaken of the Empty Property Service
- Explore opportunities for more extensive customer feedback to improve accessibility and quality of the service.
- Identify any areas of the borough with a particularly high density of empty properties

How We Will Measure Success

- Annual empty property survey to review and refresh the data on the Empty Property Database.
- Empty Property Steering Group set up and used to agree the properties to be targeted with quarterly meetings implemented.
- Increase in the number of hits on the empty property web pages
- Communication strategy developed, implemented and effectiveness measured.
- Use the Council's Graphical Information Systems (GIS) to map the location of long term empty properties in the borough, and identify any hot spots
- Identify and actively target the top three owners of long term empty properties in the borough

7. The Action Plan

No.	Priority Outcome	Measure of Success	12-13 Baseline (where available)	Timescale	Accountable Owner	Data source ¹
1.1	Increase the Housing Provision in Barnet with Nomination Rights	Procedures are in place to enable seamless administration of Empty Property Financial Assistance.	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Formal procedures in place
1.2		Empty property grant budget committed in line with the criteria laid down in the Financial Assistance Policy.	None in 2012/13	End of March 2014	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Idox Acolaid GR
1.3		90% of landlords in receipt of Empty Property Financial Assistance scoring the Council 8 out of 10 or above in a satisfaction survey.	N/A	Annual Target	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Idox Acolaid GR

¹ State where data associated with this indicator is stored

No.	Priority Outcome	Measure of Success	12-13 Baseline (where available)	Timescale	Accountable Owner	Data source ²
1.4		Work with Barnet Homes to assess the suitability of/and develop where found to be viable a scheme for renovating and letting properties where the prospective landlords does not have immediate access to funds.	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Scheme in place where found to be viable.
		Empty Dwelling Management Procedure in place	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Formal procedures in place
2.1	Provision of a Targeted, Legally Compliant Empty Property Team	Procedures in place to enable seamless delivery of all enforcement options.	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Formal procedures in place

² State where data associated with this indicator is stored

No.	Priority Outcome	Measure of Success	12-13 Baseline (where available)	Timescale	Accountable Owner	Data source ³	Data sou
2.3		Officers are 95% compliant on an audit of compliance with the Environmental Health Enforcement Policy.	N/A As New Team	Annual target	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	5% sample of Idox Acolaid NV cases	
2.4		95% of non secure empty properties to be secured against unauthorised entry within 48 hours of notice expiration	N/A As New Target	Annual target	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Idox Acolaid NV	
2.5		Work with Council Tax to maximise the opportunities for increasing the New Homes Bonus received linked with bringing empty properties back into residential use. Current process reviewed and improvements implemented.	N/A	Annual target	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager/Council Tax	Council Tax HCA Statistical return.	
3.1	Ensuring that the Properties Causing the Most Problems are Targeted.	Subject to funding being available an annual empty property survey undertaken to review and refresh the data on the Empty Property Data Base.	Survey completed in September 2013 and revised data passed to Council Tax in October 2013	October 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager/Maxine Kirby Council Tax	Idox Acolaid NV	

³ State where data associated with this indicator is stored

⁴ State where data associated with this indicator is stored

No.	Priority Outcome	Measure of Success	12-13 Baseline (where available)	Timescale	Accountable Owner	Data source ⁵
3.2		Empty Property Steering Group set up with quarterly meetings completed. Agreement reached on properties to be targeted.	N/A	Quarterly meetings undertaken	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	4 sets of minutes
3.3		Increase in customers self serving.	169 26th March 2013- 25 th April 2013	May 2013 Baseline identified July 2013 Site review/modification complete	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Increase in the number of hits on the empty property web pages. Data provided by LBB webmaster
3.4		Communication strategy developed, implemented and effectiveness measured to ensure that residents are aware of the empty property service and property owners are aware of the financial assistance available	N/A	October 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Effectiveness of strategy measured and documented.

⁵ State where data associated with this indicator is stored

No.	Priority Outcome	Measure of Success	12-13 Baseline (where available)	Timescale	Accountable Owner	Data source ⁶
3.5		Map the location of long term empty properties in the borough, identify any hot spots and target them where appropriate.	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager	Idox Acolaid NV
3.6		Identify and actively target the top three owners of long term empty properties in the borough	N/A	July 2013	Belinda Livesey Private Sector Housing Manager/Maxine Kirby Council Tax	Council Tax data base

⁶ State where data associated with this indicator is stored