



Recommended Good Practice Standards for: Local Authority Empty Homes Initiatives

With a Foreword by

**Cllr Mark Lowry
Cabinet Member for Finance
Plymouth City Council**

**Version 2
May 2013**

Foreword by Cllr. Mark Lowry

Plymouth City Council is pleased to support the Empty Homes Network's Recommended Good Practice Standards.

Plymouth recognises the negative impact empty property has on communities and has an excellent track record in reducing this blight. It endorses the importance of having robust activities in place to bring wasted property back to use to help meet its housing need.

The Empty Homes Network (EHN) promotes the sharing of good practices and it is this valuable resource that has contributed to Plymouth's success in reducing the number of its long term empty dwellings over the last decade from 2,538 in 2003 to 767 in 2013.

The introduction of New Homes Bonus (NHB) provides an opportunity for local authorities who reduce the number of long term empty dwellings to maximise their financial reward. Each long term empty dwelling cancels out one new build, making it important for local authorities to adopt the EHN Good Practice Standards and ensure they do not lose out on available NHB.



Cllr Mark Lowry
Cabinet Member for Finance
Plymouth City Council



Introduction

It is widely agreed across the political spectrum that local authorities should try and minimise the number of empty homes in their areas. The reasons are varied and where the emphasis lies may differ from person to person. But most would agree with the following:

- bringing empty homes back into use relieves pressure on green-field sites
- we should try and minimise homelessness by making the best use of the homes we have got
- empty homes can attract anti-social behaviour and vandalism, to the detriment of neighbours
- empty homes can adversely affect the character of an area and reduce property prices
- problems with the fabric of empty homes, for example water penetration or wood-rot, can affect neighbouring homes
- building new homes has a bigger carbon footprint than upgrading and re-using existing ones

Most of these reasons are recognised in government policy. For example:

“Empty homes are a blight on local communities and a waste which we cannot afford. We need to harness this potential to meet pressing housing need.” (New Homes Bonus, Final Scheme Design, point 17).

The **New Homes Bonus**, introduced in April 2011 adds an important new driver for local authorities. Each long-term empty home brought back into use as a result of a local authority intervention earns the council six years’ council tax compared to what would happen if that home had remained empty. For a Band D property, where the national average Band D council tax is £1,456 in 2013-14, that amounts to **£8,763** over the six-year period. If the re-occupied home is an affordable one, there is a further £350 per annum supplement—that’s another **£2,100**.

With such compelling drivers, residents, managers and elected members all want to see an effective empty homes initiative in their area. But dealing with empty homes is not straightforward. There are many different reasons for homes lying empty, requiring a range of different solutions. We are fortunate to be able to draw on years of experience gained by Empty Homes Network members—mostly employed by local authorities around the country—to compile these Good Practice Standards which offer a template for local action. We see these as the *minimums* standards that a local authority should achieve. The good news is that they are not expensive to implement. What is needed above all is **focus** and **continuity**. Too many empty homes initiatives have come and gone in brief bursts of enthusiasm. But there will always be another set of owners leaving their homes empty. Addressing them should become a mainstream activity; the necessary skills and knowledge should be developed and then maintained within a framework built for the long-term.

The Good Practice Standards

Building the right culture

“Culture” is an intangible factor, hard to nail down, but essential to success. Key dimensions include:

- adopting a “can-do” attitude: and being prepared to challenge the “no-can-do” culture
- honesty about the strengths and weaknesses of the local authority
- recognising the value of partnerships; developing and supporting partners
- looking outwards: seeking new opportunities and solutions
- valuing innovation
- recognising the importance of the human factor – “investing in people”
- learning to stand in the shoes of owners and other third parties; understanding their needs and drivers

Making a plan

Effective action requires effective planning. Drawing up the action plan should involve:

- an assessment of the evidence base around empty homes: How many? Where are they? Who owns them?
- an inventory of potential solutions: partners, funding streams and other options
- involvement of the wider community (for example consultation about local priorities, a “Call-to-Action” event)
- an options appraisal process to consider the measures that might be put in place, taking into account Value-For-Money, available resources and the contribution to New Homes Bonus

Evaluating the plan

An effective action plan could be expected to :

- feature clear priorities that make sense and reflect consultation
- recognise the contribution the actions will make to the New Homes Bonus reward
- include SMART targets tailored to deliver those priorities ie targets that are specific, measurable, realistic and resourced and feature a delivery timeline;
- describe the tools to be used in the delivery of the plan (see *Delivery Options* below)
- set out how the plan will be delivered
- identify an accountable co-ordinator (i.e. Empty Homes Officer or similar) dedicated to the task
- spell out the corporate commitment to the plan, involving all relevant departments
- incorporate customer service standards for owners and residents
- recognise that homes will continue to fall empty and specify the long-term framework to address this

Delivery options

Councils should aim to ensure that the following delivery mechanisms exist in their areas:

- well-signposted mechanisms for residents to report empties that are of concern
- well-signposted access to advice and information for empty home owners
- effective enforcement action against nuisance empties, with the option of Compulsory Purchase or Empty Dwelling Management Orders being used to address the most intractable cases
- sign-posting to partners able to offer a wide range of services such as sales, lettings and refurbishment
- regular contact with owners of longer-term empties to encourage them to act and offering appropriate support
- systematic engagement with all long-term (as defined locally) empty homes with evidence of escalation where problems persist
- a voluntary scheme for “reluctant” or “disengaged” owners, able to return a dwelling to beneficial use without owner involvement but with their agreement and subject to costs being covered

Appraising the results

Communities should be able to see evidence that the plan is being implemented through:

- reports of the amount of New Homes Bonus reward earned through council interventions
- reports of progress against targets in the action plan
- benchmarking against comparable authorities
- records of interventions that accord with the action plan
- active promotion of the help available to owners of empty homes (advertising etc)
- records of contacts made with owners
- records of complaints received and/or reports of empty properties; and of adequate responses being given
- customer satisfaction surveys in respect of actions taken by the local authority
- case histories demonstrating that action is being taken with focus and consistency
- reports of performance against service standards

About the Empty Homes Network

We are a national network with approximately 500 individual members, launched in 2001 as the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners with the support of the government. Then-Minister Sally Keeble wrote

“NAEPP[=EHN] will provide a national voice for local authority and RSL staff in their work to bring empty homes back into use. The Government is keen to see its membership grow into a national network of empty property practitioners. So I would urge all local authorities to take out membership of NAEPP[EHN]. This will ensure that all relevant officers in the authority benefit from the good practice and training opportunities developed by, and for, empty property practitioners”.

About 80% of our members are employed by local authorities, but since 2001 we have expanded our membership to include those working in regeneration companies, in self-help and community groups, and in private sector firms involved in helping bring empty homes back into use. .

Our main role is to support all practitioners and organisations involved in addressing the issue of empty homes to help them work as effectively as possible. We do this by facilitating the sharing of information and experience, by organising training events and conferences, by promoting best practice amongst delivery partners and by promoting sound policy at national level. Our website (www.ehnetwork.org.uk) is packed full of useful information and is used extensively by our members.

We organise a biennial Empty Homes Summit to where we welcome representatives from key organisations such as the Homes and Community Agency, The Department of Communities and Local Government, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Local Government Association and self-help-housing.org. And we run an annual National Empty Homes Conference.

Please note that as a membership organisation we are separate from and independent of the charity Empty Homes, whose contribution to the work of bringing empty homes back into use we greatly value.

For further information

Contact:

David Gibbens, Policy Lead
Empty Homes Network
PO Box 703, Exeter, EX1 9PX
Email: david.gibbens@ehnetwork.org.uk
Tel.: 0844 736 5 736
Web: www.ehnetwork.org.uk