
Empty Homes Strategy 2015 to 2020

www.southlakeland.gov.uk



Contents

Executive Summary	3
Section 1: Introduction and purpose of the strategy	5
Section 2: What are we trying to achieve	10
Section 3: Achieving our vision	11
Section 4: Implementing the Strategy	16
Glossary	17
Appendix 1	18

Executive Summary

The council's Five Year Plan 2014 to 2019 recognises the importance to tackle the issue of empty homes in South Lakeland, bringing them back into use to provide homes that meet need, i.e. an affordable or market housing need. This strategy sets out our vision and priorities to deal with empty homes in South Lakeland, together with measures of success.

Our vision is:

'Bringing empty properties back into use as homes to meet housing needs and to help sustain communities making better use of existing housing.'

Our approach is to:

- 1 Make best use of existing housing stock to provide homes to meet affordable and market housing need
- 2 Target resources primarily at areas of highest housing need where the number of empty homes is higher
- 3 Ensure the accurate monitoring and reporting of empty homes

Our Key Measures of success are to:

- 1 To reduce the number of long-term empty homes (those over two years) by 20% by 2025
- 2 Bring a minimum of 70 empty homes back into use (under and over two years) each year through targeted interventions
- 3 Bring at least three empty homes back into use annually using the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme in partnership with South Lakes Housing
- 4 Re-launch the Matchmaker Scheme and match up to two empty homes per annum through the scheme
- 5 Refer up to five properties per annum to the council's Social Lettings Scheme or Affordable Housing Renovation Grants Scheme
- 6 Identify and report second homes that are currently recorded as empty homes as this is classed as an intervention generating New Homes Bonus – at least 10% of interventions to be through this means



- Empty home brought back into use by the council's Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme "The whole family is delighted with our new home...the scheme has helped me to stay in my home town." (tenant)

Section 1: Introduction and purpose of the strategy

1.0 Purpose of the strategy

The Council Plan recognises the importance of bringing empty homes back into use. This first Empty Homes Strategy sets out our vision and key measures for bringing empty homes back into use as homes to meet an affordable or market housing need within the context of the Council Plan and the council's Housing Strategy.

The Council Plan for 2014 to 2019

“The quality and condition of private sector housing will be improved and the number of empty homes reduced.... We will continue to work with owners and housing providers to bring empty homes back into use”.

It has been developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders including empty home owners. A public consultation period took place for the draft Strategy between 1 July 2015 and 14 August 15.

In order to implement this strategy a detailed Action Plan has been developed which will be updated annually.

A flow chart at Appendix 2 sets out the approaches that are currently used for tackling empty homes dependent on the condition of the home and issues arising.

1.1 Empty Homes in South Lakeland

There are approximately 610,000 empty homes in England representing just under 3% of the 23.2 million homes. In South Lakeland the figure is approximately 1,000 at any one time. (This represents 2% of the 52,000 dwellings in the District Valuation List). Long-term empty homes (i.e. homes empty over six months) have an impact on the local community. The effects include unsightliness, community safety issues such as anti-social behaviour and vandalism, pest infestations, devaluing of neighbouring properties, loss to the local economy and ultimately the loss of a home that a resident or family could live in, i.e. to meet housing need. As the empty home is already part of the existing housing stock it does not create a carbon footprint. Brought back into use, an empty home is recycled supporting the council's environment priorities 'protecting and enhancing our environment'.

Key facts

Key Fact 1: As of 31 January 2015 there were 956 empty homes of which 445 had been empty for more than two years and 504 had been empty less than two years.

Key Fact 2: In 2015 there were 93 successful interventions.

Key Fact 3: For each additional empty home brought back into use (minus empty homes added to the Council Tax list), New Homes Bonus based on the average Council Tax Band for the type of property is received by the council from the Government. If the empty property is an affordable home, an additional £350 is paid on top of the Council Tax rate.

Key Fact 4: New Homes Bonus benefits local communities who can bid for funds for locally important projects.

Key Fact 5: The SHMA evidences the need for 687 new affordable homes per year over a five year period.

Properties can lie empty for a number of reasons such as:

- Up for sale – this can be affected by the local economy resulting in properties taking longer to sell though consultation with estate agents indicate that the market has picked up
- Undergoing repair – before they are rented out or sold – issues around having the finance to repair can prevent the home becoming occupied again
- Property repairs taking longer or costing more than budgeted for
- Family issues in the case of inherited properties/probate
- Owners going into care or living elsewhere
- Legal or planning issues
- No access to funds available for properties in disrepair; owner living at a distance
- Emotional ties to the property, for example following the death of a parent
- Property taking a long time to sell or rent due to location or type of property

Table 1 shows the fluctuation in the number of empty homes since 2013 for homes empty up to two years and homes empty under two years.

Table 1

2013

Year	Empty homes	Notes
Total at 25 January	1184	New premium added from 1 April 2013
More than two years	609	n/a
Less than two years	575	Includes 89 empty flats at K-Village

2014

Year	Empty homes	Notes
Total at 31 January	953	n/a
More than two years	449	This reflects successful appeals to the premium
Less than two years	504	Includes 89 empty flats at K-Village

2015

Year	Empty homes	Notes
Total at 31 January	956	n/a
More than two years	445	This includes K-Village empty flats
Less than two years	511	n/a

1.2 National, Regional and Local Context

1.2.1 National

This strategy is aimed at delivering primarily District actions that tackle long-term empty homes. However, in delivering the key measures set out within the strategy, the council will seek to implement and promote any relevant national policies.

1.2.2 Cumbria

Cumbria Housing Strategy set out priorities for Cumbria over the five year period 2011-2015 and was adopted by South Lakeland District Council in 2011. In 2015 the Cumbria Housing Group (made up of the six housing authorities, Cumbria County Council and the Lake District National Park Authority) adopted a Cumbria Housing Statement setting out housing priorities for Cumbria. The council will continue to work on a Cumbria wide basis to deliver key initiatives.

Over the five year period of the Cumbria Housing Strategy the number of long-term empty homes in South Lakeland reduced from 1,184 in 2013 to 993 in 2015.

South Lakeland District Council currently chairs the Cumbria Empty Property Group to share good practice and promote the work of Cumbria to national bodies such as the Empty Homes Network.

1.2.3 South Lakeland Context

South Lakeland covers a 600 square mile area with large parts of the District falling within two national parks, the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Park. The District is predominantly rural and the housing market is dominated by issues of affordability. South Lakeland is a very popular holiday area with some villages dominated by second and holiday homes. The latest update of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) evidences the need for 687 affordable homes per year over a five year period (3,435 in total) so the need to maximise opportunities to increase the supply of available homes, and in particular, affordable homes is pressing. The under supply has had the effect of pushing up house prices from a median house price of £74,000 in 2000 to £210,000 in 2013. Median incomes remain low meaning that in some parts of the District average house prices are up to 12 times average income.

South Lakeland District Council uses the flexibility available in council tax to charge a full 100% Council Tax on empty homes vacant for 6 months to two years and then 150% on homes empty for two years and over. This gives an incentive for owners to bring empty homes back into use.

The council's draft Housing Strategy sets out five housing priorities which are:

- A. Developing new affordable and open market homes to meet need and support economic growth (helping young people to remain in the area; key workers to be accommodated; and adapting to the needs of an ageing population).
- B. Providing supported housing and services to improve the health and wellbeing of older, young and vulnerable people.
- C. Improving housing standards, particularly environmental, to improve the health and well-being of all residents.
- D. Making best use of the existing housing stock to create sustainable communities.
- E. Preventing and reducing homelessness.

1.3 Key Strategic Links

This strategy sits within the wider context of the Council Plan and the council's Housing Strategy and in particular, Priority D: Making best use of the existing housing stock to create sustainable communities.

Section 2: What are we trying to achieve

2.0 Vision

The council's vision for empty homes is:

'Bringing empty properties back into use as homes to meet affordable and market housing needs and to help sustain communities making better use of existing housing.'

In order to achieve our vision we will focus on three key measures:

2.1 Our approach

Our approach for empty homes is to:

- 1 Make best use of existing housing stock to provide homes to meet affordable and market housing need.
- 2 Target resources primarily at areas of highest housing need where the number of empty homes are higher.
- 3 Ensure the accurate monitoring and reporting of empty homes.

Our key measures of success are to:

- 1 To reduce the number of long-term empty homes over 2 years by 20% by 2025.
- 2 Bring a minimum of 70 empty homes back into use each year (under and over 2 years) through targeted interventions.
- 3 Bring at least three empty homes back into use annually using the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme in partnership with South Lakes Housing.
- 4 Re-launch the Matchmaker scheme and match up to two empty homes per annum through the scheme.
- 5 Refer up to five properties per annum to the council's Social Lettings Scheme or Affordable Housing Renovation Grants Scheme.
- 6 Identify and report second homes that are currently recorded as empty homes which is classed as an intervention generating New Homes Bonus – at least 10% of interventions to be through this means.

Section 3: Achieving our vision

3.1 Make the best use of existing housing stock to provide homes to meet affordable and market housing need

The council is keen to continue the work to reduce the number of long-term empty homes, whilst recognising that the number of empty homes can fluctuate. In order to bring long-term empty homes back into use the council uses various interventions such as:

- Contacting owners and providing more information and advice on bringing the empty home back into use. This can include advice on how to help the property sell, or advice on letting or finding a tenant
- Targeting owners whose homes had been empty two or more years to make them aware they could 'save' 15% VAT on their repairs, and then provide 'VAT' letters
- Contacting owners to let them know about potential buyers of their property (Matchmaker Scheme)
- Make owners aware of the Empty Homes Grants Management Scheme (in partnership with South Lakes Housing) to manage repairs/tenancy via choice based lettings for 5 years. (The first successful uptake and tenancy began in December 2014/January 2015)
- Owners who contact us after receiving a letter to advise that the property was not empty/unfurnished, but was either a second home/holiday let or occupied. This information is passed onto council tax and monitored to check that the record has been subsequently corrected. (This creates New Homes bonus per empty home correctly re-classified in council tax records)
- Owners who contacted us to advise that their property was undergoing major renovations were advised that if the repairs were structural, they may be able to claim a one year D100 council tax exemption

Successful interventions (where a previously empty home is brought back into use through the council's actions) result in New Homes Bonus being paid by the Government.

The council's approach to bringing empty homes back into use is a combination of advice and assistance showing owners options available to them. As a last resort enforcement can be used and has been used in one instance where an Empty Dwelling Management Order was secured for a period of seven years. Appendix 1 shows a flow chart of options that are used dependent on the state of the property. The council will continue to consider enforcement in line with the Housing Enforcement Policy, where an owner is not engaging and has failed to take reasonable steps to bring the property back into use. The council will be putting into place proposals for a scheme to purchase empty homes to bring them back into use as homes by either sale or renting out.

Bringing empty homes back into use supports environmental sustainability by reusing an existing building rather than building new.

Key measures

- 1 To reduce the number of long-term empty homes (those over 2 years) by 20% by 2025.
- 2 Bring a minimum of 70 empty homes back into use (under and over 2 years) each year through targeted interventions.
- 3 Bring at least 3 empty homes back into use annually using the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme in partnership with South Lakes Housing.
- 4 Re-launch the Matchmaker scheme and match up to 2 empty homes per annum through the scheme.
- 5 Up to 5 properties per annum to be referred to the council's Social Lettings Scheme or Affordable Housing Renovation Grants Scheme.

Key actions

- 1a Review and promote the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme in partnership with South Lakes Housing.
- 1b Relaunch the Matchmaker scheme.
- 1c Investigate and participate in new Government initiatives or funding opportunities as they arise.
- 1d Develop proposals for a scheme to purchase empty homes so they can be brought back into use as homes.
- 1e Review the use of enforcement options in line with the council's Housing Enforcement Policy, targeting owners that fail to engage or make reasonable efforts home back into use.

3.2 Target resources primarily at areas of highest housing need where the number of empty homes is higher

The council uses the Council Tax list to identify empty homes. This information is used to contact owners so that information can be gathered on the state of the property, why it is currently empty and what is being done about it by the owner. It is proposed to develop a database of this information as this will give more detailed data on empty homes that can ultimately determine the best course of action to be taken.

It is useful to know how long the property has been empty as this will ultimately determine the likely state of the property and works needed to bring the home back into use. This then helps to determine those homes that are most likely to be brought into use as homes and what interventions may work best. A home that has been empty for over two years is likely to require more work than one that has been empty less than a year.

The SHMA clearly shows the level of housing need within each HMA and the areas of greatest housing need, i.e. Kendal and Ulverston are generally consistent with the highest levels of empty homes shown on the table below. The priority rating indicates how resources will be targeted within each HMA. This will assist in meeting the Council Plan's priority to provide homes to meet need. The priority rating will be reviewed in 2017 when the council will publish a new SHMA. It should be noted that despite an area being lower in the ranking, there will still be targeted actions to encourage owners to bring their empty homes back into use.

HMA	Key Service Centres within the HMA	Net Annual Affordable Housing Requirements	Number of empty homes within Key Service Centres	Priority Rating 1 to 6 (1 being highest)
Cartmel Peninsula	Grange over Sands	71	50	5
Central Lakes	Windermere, Ambleside	56	137	3
Dales	Sedbergh	26	39	6
Kendal	Kendal	164	230	1
Kendal Rural	Milnthorpe, Kirkby Lonsdale	186	37	4
Ulverston and Furness	Ulverston	185	101	2

3.3 Targeting Empty Property/Commercial Premises into Residential Dwellings

Funds are currently available to provide grants to private sector landlords to provide affordable rented dwellings. The purpose of this is to encourage town centre development. Grants are provided for conversions of commercial or empty property into residential dwellings. Resources are targeted at the main service centres of Kendal, Ulverston, Ambleside, Grange over Sands, Kirkby Lonsdale, Milnthorpe, Sedbergh and Windermere/Bowness. More information on the scheme is available on the council's website Housing page.

Funds are currently available to provide grants to private sector landlords to provide affordable rented dwellings. The purpose of this is to encourage town centre development. Grants are provided for conversions of commercial or empty property into residential dwellings. Resources are targeted at the main service centres of Kendal, Ulverston, Ambleside, Grange over Sands, Kirkby Lonsdale, Milnthorpe, Sedbergh and Windermere/Bowness. More information on the scheme is available on the council's website Housing page.

Key Actions

- 2a Develop a database with key information on empty homes that is updated on a monthly basis.
- 3e Review the Empty Homes Strategy in 2018 when the new SHMA is published.

3.4 Ensure the accurate monitoring and reporting of empty homes

- 3.4.1 Monitoring: no action can be taken on the use of properties as second homes, de-rated properties, properties where the owner has gone into care and unfinished properties not qualifying as a dwelling. However, it is recognised that it is important to:
- Monitor the number of second homes
 - Identify and report second homes that are currently recorded as empty homes which then generates New Homes Bonus. This normally comes to light after an owner has contacted the Empty Homes Officer
 - Monitor any homes where the owner has gone into care, unfinished properties not qualifying as a dwelling and de-rated properties
- 3.4.2 Reporting: the council has a web-page giving advice on empty homes and a form to report an empty home. The use of media and social media can be used to ensure the public are aware of how to report empty homes. Parish Councils are extremely valuable in identifying empty homes in their local area.

Additionally, it is important to publicise successful interventions such as the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme, and Matchmaker scheme to encourage more take up of these schemes and ultimately in bringing empty homes back into use to meet housing need.

Key measure

- 6 Identify and report second homes that are currently recorded as empty homes as this is classed as an intervention generating New Homes bonus, a least 10% of interventions to be through this means.

Key Actions

- 3a Establish a standard approach to record interventions in partnership with other Cumbrian District Councils
- 3b Use the SLDC website, the media and social media campaigns to report empty homes and publicise successful interventions.
- 3c Work with Revenues and Benefits to ensure that the second home classification is correctly awarded and that the number of second homes continues to be monitored.
- 3d Work with Parish Councils in the identification of empty and second homes.
- 3e Review the Empty Homes Strategy in 2018 when the new SHMA is published.

Section 4: Implementing the Strategy

4.1 Funding

The Empty Homes Network is calling on Government for additional funding towards bringing empty homes back into use as funding has now ceased. The latest funding was targeted at empty homes in urban areas of low demand.

4.1.1 New Homes Bonus

For each empty home brought back into use the Government pays New Homes Bonus based on an average Council Tax Band D property. In South Lakeland the average Band D property is £1,604. In contrast for new properties the Government pays a flat rate of £350 per property. In South Lakeland 60% of New Homes Bonus is invested in housing and neighbourhood planning. In South Lakeland there have been 93 successful interventions in 2015 (1.4.14 – 31.3.15). New Homes Bonus is payable based upon the period 1 October to 30 September. In South Lakeland 40% of New Homes Bonus is allocated to Locally Important Projects and 60% for Housing and Neighbourhood Planning.

4.1.2 Capital Funding

The council has invested money to finance the Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme (EHGMS) to bring a potential three empty homes back into use to be let to households on the Housing Register at an affordable rent. One property has now been let to a family in housing need in Ulverston. The property will be let at an affordable rent for a period of five years before being returned to the owner for them to consider options for the property. Additional resources will be required to implement the scheme to purchase empty properties. A scheme will need to be developed with a view to implementation April 2017.

4.2 Monitoring and Reviewing the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan

The Empty Homes Strategy will be reviewed in 2017 following the publication of the SHMA. The Action Plan will be monitored and reviewed on an annual basis through the Housing Advisory Group.

Glossary

Empty Home: for the purpose of this Strategy an empty home is defined as “properties that are unoccupied. They may be empty as they wait to come onto the market, sit empty despite being available for sale or rent, or be held off the market as an asset”. Empty homes are in the majority of cases in private hands, given that social landlords such as housing associations let homes through Cumbria Choice and there is high demand for the few that become empty in any one year.

Homes which we would not target as ‘empty’ include the following:

- Holiday homes: sometimes these may be visited by their owners only once or twice a year
- Homes where the owner is receiving care elsewhere
- Homes where the owner has recently died

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO): in place for a period of seven years. The property is rented to a household from the Housing Register for this time and the tenancy is managed by South Lakes Housing. Interim EDMOs can be authorised after a successful application to a Residential Property Tribunal. The dwelling must have been unoccupied for at least two years and where there is no reasonable prospect that it will be occupied in the near future. An interim EDMO enables the council to take steps to ensure, with the owner’s consent, that the property becomes occupied. An interim EDMO lasts no longer than 12 months.

HMA (Housing Market Area): there are six identified Housing Market Areas in South Lakeland set out within the council’s Strategic Housing Market Assessment.

Key Service Centre: key settlements/towns where employment, housing, services and other facilities are provided.

New Homes Bonus: payable by the Government on new affordable homes provided and for successful empty home interventions where a property is brought back into use.

Matchmaker Scheme: the council runs a scheme to match potential buyers with empty home owners. The council is regularly approached by people wanting to buy an empty home.

SHMA (Strategic Housing Market Assessment): evidence showing the current housing market and future housing market detailing the need for market and affordable homes and homes that meet the needs of particular groups such as older people, families, young people, Black and Minority Ethnic Groups, disabled people.

Appendix 1

