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**Report of: Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing**

**Scrutiny Board (Neighbourhoods and Housing)**

**Date: 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

**Subject: Empty Property Strategy 2006 - 2010**

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

All

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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**Executive Summary**

Although Leeds is currently enjoying an overall growth in its economy there are still significant areas of deprivation and decline. These areas are identified by indices of multiple deprivation that include measures demonstrating low educational achievement, higher than average unemployment, lower than average life expectancy and, higher levels of crime and anti-social behaviour etc. Drive through the city and you will be able to identify these areas of decline and deprivation by their poor physical environment and the high levels of empty and derelict properties.

Invariably, there will always be a number of vacant dwellings across the city in order to allow the housing system to function effectively and to facilitate both residential mobility and the improvement or redevelopment of the housing stock. However, vacancy turnover rates and the number of long term empty properties are excessively high within certain areas of the city and this is having an adverse effect upon these communities.

Long term empty properties tend to attract all manner of antisocial behaviour such as fly tipping, vandalism, arson, drug taking and other issues that affect the health and well being of the neighbourhood in which they are situated. Furthermore, when there is a proliferation of such properties, they are a graphic indicator of failing communities and therefore tend to deter further inward investment and become counter productive to the efforts to make the area once again a thriving place to live. The market value and desirability of the housing stock is adversely affected and the decreasing population has an impact upon the economy of the local business sector that serves these areas. Moreover, the decline of these communities is exacerbated and accelerated when the commercial and financial sectors feel it is no longer viable for them to continue trading and investing in these areas.

Leeds City Council recognises that the strategy for dealing with empty and derelict properties must be set within a wider regeneration framework. Empty properties are a symptom of decline and deprivation and dealing with them in isolation will not be sufficient to turn around

the fortunes of the areas they affect. In order to create demand for property across all tenure and ownership types and to rebuild sustainable communities within these disaffected areas of the city it will take a concerted effort on the part of Leeds City Council and partners and therefore, at a strategic citywide level, the Empty Property Strategy documentation needs to be linked and considered in conjunction with the following key corporate documents:-

1. Corporate Plan
2. Leeds Housing Strategy
3. Leeds Regeneration Plan and the component District Regeneration Plans
4. City Growth Strategy
5. Regional Housing Strategy
6. Local Area Agreements
7. Leeds Private Rented Sector Strategy
8. The ALMO's and RSL's business plans and Empty Property Strategies
9. Homelessness Strategy

The attached Empty Property Strategy and the appendix Action Plan details Leeds City Council's plans to address the problems of all long term empty homes where ever they are situated, but particular focus will be in respect of those communities with particular concentrations of such properties.

## **1.0 Purpose Of This Report**

- 1.1 To advise Scrutiny Board of the revised Corporate Empty Property Strategy documentation and updated targets that have been set for the strategy for 2006-2010

## **2.0 Background Information**

- 2.1 According to Government figures collated in 2005, 680,412 homes are lying empty across the country, and there are over 100,000 families formally registered as being in temporary accommodation throughout the regions. However, this high figure excludes the number of single homeless people who are without a permanent home as there are no national records kept of the number of single homeless people. Many homeless charities state that they have huge difficulties moving people on from their homeless hostels into decent accommodation. In addition, there are many sections of the communities that find accessing decent accommodation very difficult due to the housing shortages throughout the regions.
- 2.2 At this time of huge housing need within the country, it is particularly unfortunate that there are so many wasted homes lying empty. Any housing market will always have some degree of empty property through transactional vacancies, but what is particularly disturbing is the constantly high number of properties empty for more than six months. Across England there are just under 300,000 properties that have

been empty for more than six months and, across the board, the vast majority (86%) of this empty property is within the private sector.

- 2.3 Looking at this situation within the context of Leeds, the overall void rate throughout the city is 5.45% (as of July 2006). 2.93% of the total housing stock has been empty for more than 6 months of which 2.49% is within the private sector.
- 2.4 Leeds City Council devised its inaugural Empty Property Strategy in 1999 and it was 'piloted' within the Holbeck and Beeston areas. The strategy, by necessity, had to be holistic in its approach in order to address the complex issues and problems that are the root cause of properties becoming empty and remaining under used for long periods.
- 2.5 Since the launch of the strategy, many new initiatives have been added as we have had to take on board the issues that have confronted us in undertaking the re-kindling / regeneration of these micro housing markets / failing communities throughout the various districts of the city.
- 2.6 Subsequent to Leeds devising and implementing its Empty Property Strategy, the Government introduced its mandatory Best Value performance regime (BVPI64) by which all local authorities are compared upon their performance either in returning empty private sector housing back into use or demolish through their direct intervention. The number of empty properties within the authority is also a criterion upon which the council's performance is judged under the Local Public Service floor target PSA7 and the Continual Performance Assessment measures.
- 2.7 The attached Empty Property Strategy document has been revised and the targets updated for the period covering August 2006 to April 2010.

### **3.0 Recommendations**

- 3.1 That Scrutiny Board approves / endorses the attached revised / updated Empty Property Strategy.