



Leeds
CITY COUNCIL



Filling the Void

Leeds Empty Property Strategy 2012-15





Introduction

The reasons for homes being empty are diverse and complex with no single answer to the problem. Empty properties are part of the normal turnover in the housing market. The vast majority return to occupation in a short space of time as part of a natural cycle of reletting or purchase. There are around 800,000 empty properties in England but only 280,000 of them are long term empties. The rest are empty for valid reasons - awaiting new tenants or owners to move in, or for probate to be sorted out. Any properly functioning housing market will always have a proportion of empty properties, otherwise it will stagnate.

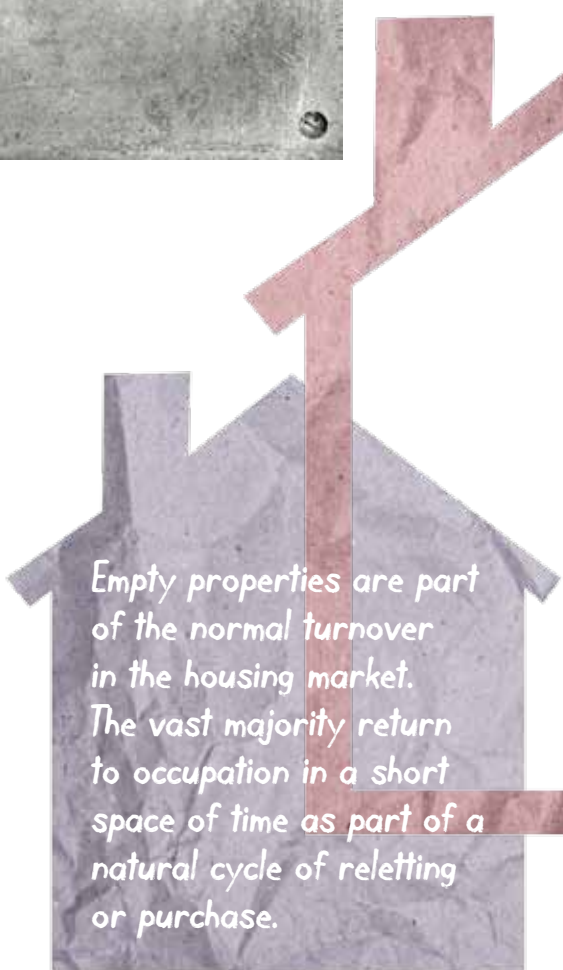
In Leeds empty homes show similar features as the national picture. Most properties are empty due to natural turnover. However a significant number would remain empty without our intervention or that of other agencies and partner organisations. Reducing the number of empty homes in Leeds is a priority for the city. It helps to improve where people live; it helps to prevent neighbourhood blight; and it increases the standing and self confidence of local communities.

Returning empty properties into use is part of the **Vision for Leeds 2011/30**. It is activity that the City Priority Plan has identified; and we have included in our Housing and Regeneration Plan 2011/15. The Housing and Regeneration Board are responsible for delivering the outcomes of this strategy and monitoring its success.

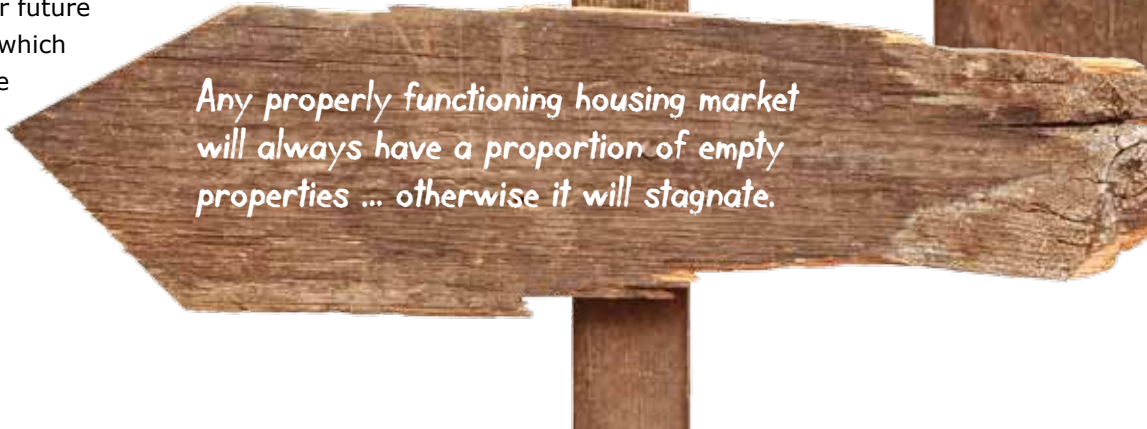
In our strategy:

-  We describe some of the background issues and the effect that empty properties can have on communities and the housing market in Leeds.
-  We examine the benefits of bringing empty properties back into use.
-  We identify which tools we are going to use to achieve our objectives.
-  We describe the funding and resources we can pursue for this purpose.

We have developed an action plan that complements our strategy. It details what we need to do to achieve our targets each year. We aim to bring back into use 3,200 long-term empty homes in the private sector every year until 2016. We have also set ourselves an ambitious target of reducing the net number of long-term empty homes by 300 (5%) by March 2013. We will include targets for future years in our action plan, which we will review and update regularly to ensure we deliver our outcomes.



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Background

Leeds City Council works with partners in the public and private sector to bring empty properties back into use. We successfully co-ordinated a bid for funding from the Homes and Communities Agency. This will fund a programme managed by Connect Housing and delivered by small local organisations that include Latch and Canopy Housing. In 2010/11 46 properties owned by LCC were returned to use through partnership working in a similar way with small organisations.

In the Leeds Housing Strategy we highlighted the issues of housing need and the limited supply of land available for building new homes in Leeds. We have also shown that the traditional 'housing ladder' and housing market no longer function efficiently. In response to this we have made increasing the number of affordable homes in the city one of our priorities.

If homes are empty for longer than is necessary it can contribute to the pressure on households who need somewhere to live. By returning empty properties into use we are adding to the supply of housing. This helps to provide homes for individuals or families.

Empty properties are a wasted resource, both locally and nationally, and have a devastating effect on neighbourhoods and local communities. They can

- become an eyesore to the detriment of the local environment;
- contribute to a cycle of decline in neighbourhoods;

- lead to a loss of pride in local communities;
- have a negative impact on community safety, the economy and the health and well-being of local people;
- become a magnet for fly-tipping, crime and anti-social behaviour;
- create problems for nearby and adjacent properties;
- cause extra costs for property owners;
- cause a drop in the value of property;
- lead to loss of revenue in terms of council tax.

By reducing and preventing empty homes we can help to deal with these issues. It can help to sustain communities, improve neighbourhoods and reduce costs for society.

Nationally the Government sees reducing the number of empty properties as a key priority. In its document "Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England" it dedicated a chapter to addressing the issue. In 2011/12 it made £100m available for programmes taking place between 2012 and 2015. We will be actively pursuing any additional funding which can be used to bring empty properties back into use.






In 2005 we highlighted a number of hotspots. Our work has led to the percentage of long term empty homes in these areas falling below the city average.

Monitoring information on empty properties

We have monitored empty homes in the city since 2005. Our work shows that the number has fallen from approximately 12,000 long term voids in 2005 to 5776 in March 2012.

Our work shows that since we began intervening the total number of empty properties in Leeds has remained constant for a number of years. It has also shown that the number of long term empty homes remains fairly constant as a proportion of the total figure. In March 2012 long term empty properties in the private sector had fallen to 2.14% as a percentage of the total number of homes.

We have monitored empty homes in priority areas across the city. This has meant targeting neighbourhoods and working intensively in them. When we began working in these areas the numbers of empty properties was well above the city average. By 2011 we were able to report that most of these areas fell below the city average void rate. These neighbourhoods are:

-  Beeston Hill;
-  Holbeck;
-  Harehills;
-  Chapeltown;
-  Cross Green and
-  East End Park.

Since 2008 our intervention has led to over 3,000 long term empty private homes in Leeds returning to occupation each year. In 2010/11, by using a variety of interventions we were responsible for 3,243 long term empty homes returning to occupation.

In 2011 the number of long term empty homes as a proportion of the total number of empties in Leeds was 29.5%. This is lower than the national and the regional average - both 38.7%.

In March 2012, the number of long-term voids in Leeds was 5776. This compares to 6,721 in 2010 - a 14% reduction.



Using the law to bring a home back into use

A terraced house in Leeds 9 had been empty since 1996. The owner was living in France. It was a target for repeated break-ins and vandalism. Our Empty Property team contacted the owner about her property. She gave a number of promises that she would deal with the house but failed to keep them.

The team took action to compulsorily purchase the property. Despite the owner lodging an appeal (that she later withdrew) they were able to go ahead with the purchase. Funding for the acquisition was via the West Yorkshire Recycling Empties Partnership.

Once we had bought the house we were able to sell it at auction to a new owner willing to carry out renovations. In March 2012 the work was almost complete in preparation for a new occupant.

Why bring empty properties back into use?

Bringing empty homes back into use can:

- Reduce the wasted resource of empty homes.
- Help to strengthen the housing market in Leeds.
- Reduce the cost of managing the problem for all parties.
- Improve capital asset values for owners.
- Increase rental income for local landlords.
- Improve the environment in which people live by removing visual blight in communities.
- Provide opportunities for involvement and engagement with local landlords. This can lead to improvements in the quality of properties and health and safety standards of homes in the private rented sector.
- Significantly reduce the need for temporary and emergency accommodation; making substantial cost savings for the council.
- Increase the supply of affordable homes and provide a viable affordable housing option
- Reduce the waiting list on the Leeds Housing Register and relieve pressure on the social housing sector.
- Help to change occupancy patterns and make up of the economic diversity in communities.
- Reduce the need for development on brown or green field sites.

Helping the owner

A semi detached house in Leeds 7 had been empty since 2001 and had fallen into a very bad state of disrepair. The owner of the property was attempting to improve it, but progress was very slow.

The Empty Property Team made contact with the owner and started the procedure for a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO). They also took action against the owner for the amount of rubbish in the garden.

This was sufficient to make the owner increase his efforts to get the property back into use. He completed the renovations to the property with help and guidance from the team. The property was reoccupied and the CPO was withdrawn.



In March 2012, the total number of empty homes in the city had fallen to 15441. More than 8000 of these properties are empty for valid reasons - awaiting new tenants or owners to move in, or for probate to be sorted out. The vast majority return to occupation in a short space of time as part of a natural cycle of reletting or purchase.

The average time to relet a property (any size) in Leeds is 84 Days

The average time to let a two bedroomed property in Leeds is 66 days

How are we going to achieve our target of bringing more than 3000 homes back into use?

Since 2005 our work has achieved a steady reduction in the number of long term empty properties from 12,000 to below 6,000. Empty properties are cyclical and whilst the number of long term voids remains fairly constant they are not the same homes. There is a sequence which means that as our intervention means an empty home returns to use others become long term voids and require our input. In each of the last 4 years our work has brought about the return over 3,000 long term empty homes back into use. To do this we have used a number of actions.

We know that we cannot take a 'one size fits all' approach to this issue as no single action will result in every empty property being brought back into occupation. We have developed a "toolkit" approach for dealing with void properties. We use different types of interventions and solutions which we adapt to different circumstances and individual homes.

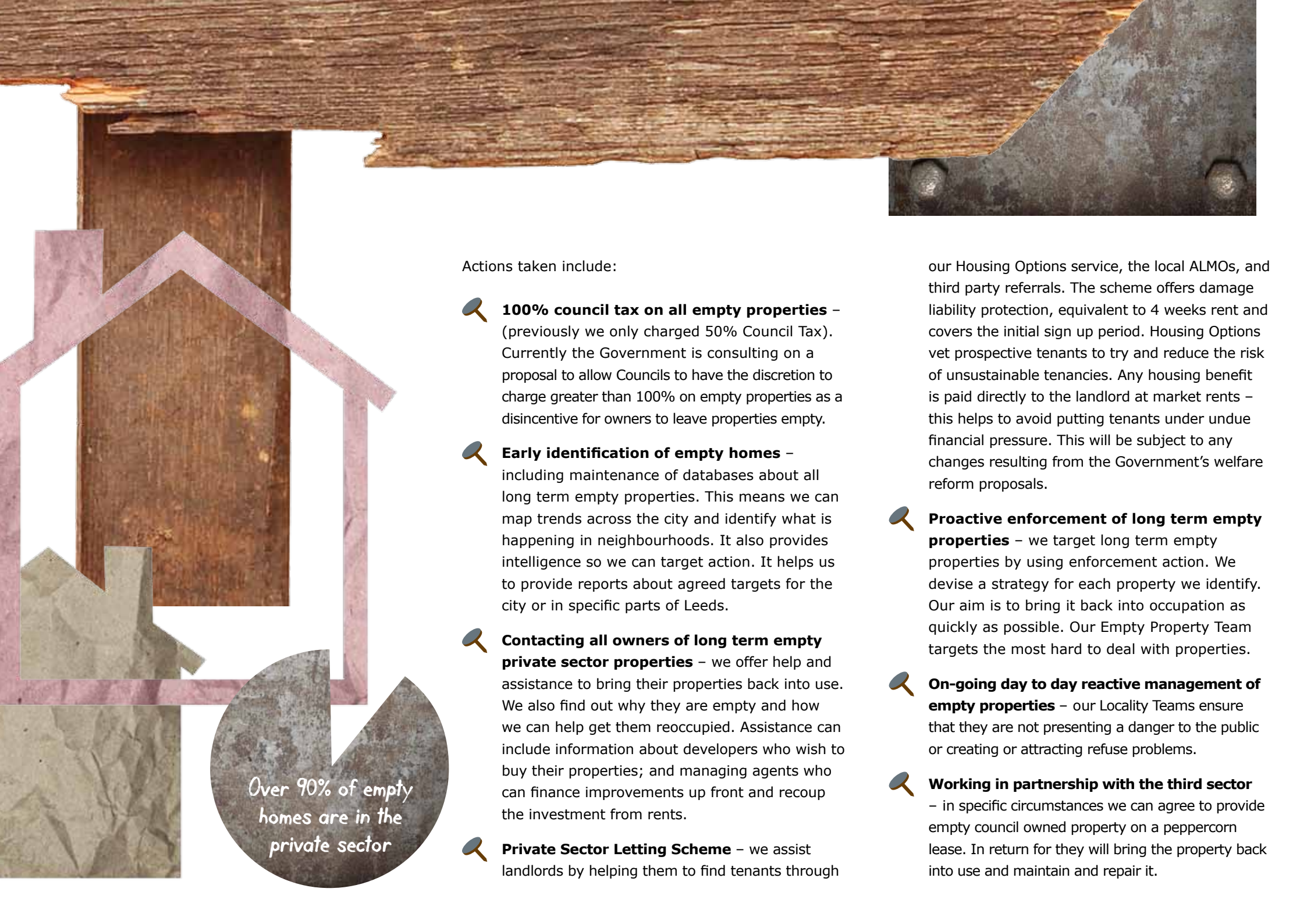
LCC has been responsible for 3,000 long-term empty homes returning into use each year for the past four years.

- This is the highest figure for any Local Authority in England and Wales,*
- It is greater than the combined total for the rest of Yorkshire,*
- It is more than the combined total for the remainder core cities group; made up from Birmingham; Bristol; Liverpool; Manchester Newcastle; Nottingham and Sheffield.*
- It is the highest number of any Metropolitan Council in England.*

The issue of empty homes is not confined to parts to specific parts of the city. The issue can raise its head in more affluent areas. In March 2012 the average time taken to let a property that costs £5000 per month to rent was 266 days.





Photographs courtesy of Canopy








Over 90% of empty homes are in the private sector

Actions taken include:

-  **100% council tax on all empty properties** – (previously we only charged 50% Council Tax). Currently the Government is consulting on a proposal to allow Councils to have the discretion to charge greater than 100% on empty properties as a disincentive for owners to leave properties empty.
-  **Early identification of empty homes** – including maintenance of databases about all long term empty properties. This means we can map trends across the city and identify what is happening in neighbourhoods. It also provides intelligence so we can target action. It helps us to provide reports about agreed targets for the city or in specific parts of Leeds.
-  **Contacting all owners of long term empty private sector properties** – we offer help and assistance to bring their properties back into use. We also find out why they are empty and how we can help get them reoccupied. Assistance can include information about developers who wish to buy their properties; and managing agents who can finance improvements up front and recoup the investment from rents.
-  **Private Sector Letting Scheme** – we assist landlords by helping them to find tenants through


our Housing Options service, the local ALMOs, and third party referrals. The scheme offers damage liability protection, equivalent to 4 weeks rent and covers the initial sign up period. Housing Options vet prospective tenants to try and reduce the risk of unsustainable tenancies. Any housing benefit is paid directly to the landlord at market rents – this helps to avoid putting tenants under undue financial pressure. This will be subject to any changes resulting from the Government's welfare reform proposals.


-  **Proactive enforcement of long term empty properties** – we target long term empty properties by using enforcement action. We devise a strategy for each property we identify. Our aim is to bring it back into occupation as quickly as possible. Our Empty Property Team targets the most hard to deal with properties.
-  **On-going day to day reactive management of empty properties** – our Locality Teams ensure that they are not presenting a danger to the public or creating or attracting refuse problems.
-  **Working in partnership with the third sector** – in specific circumstances we can agree to provide empty council owned property on a peppercorn lease. In return for they will bring the property back into use and maintain and repair it.


Accessing Additional Funding and Resources


To deliver the strategy we need both revenue and capital funding. We take a council wide approach to empty properties and co-ordinate resources from a number of services; including staff.

There are a number of capital funding sources currently available for delivery of the strategy. They include:


 **'Works in default' budgets.** These allow us to take enforcement actions on empty properties and recover costs from the owner.

 **A 'recycling empties' project.** This is a joint project between the 5 West Yorkshire Councils to deal with long term private sector voids. We can share good practice and use joint funding that is available for compulsory purchases.

 **Using commuted sums to provide affordable housing.** Whilst a large proportion of these have gone towards new housing we have also been able to use it in certain cases to deal with empty homes. We have tended to use this when working with organisations in the third sector.

 **The New Homes Bonus.** We have already applied for this type of funding. It becomes payable when more empty properties return to occupation each year than were empty the previous year. In the future it may be possible to access some of this

funding for use on empty homes. We will need to develop business cases to be considered for this.

 **Successful bids for funding.** Recently the Homes and Community Agency announced £100m for empty properties. We have been working in partnership with Connect, LATCH and Canopy who successfully submitted bids and have been promised funds.

Turning empty properties into homes

Engage is a partnership between Connect Housing, and LATCH, Canopy from Leeds and Fresh Horizons in Huddersfield. Engage can provide a one-stop service for property letting, management and maintenance.

Engage offers owners of empty homes the chance to 'turn your empty property headache into a much-needed home.'

The organisations involved with Engage have come together to help tackle empty homes in local communities. At the same time they provide training and employment for local people and provide secure good quality homes for families and individuals in need. In their words.

"Our approach will not suit every owner of an empty property. But if you're struggling with an empty property that is costing you time and money which you can't afford, we may be able to help. At the same time, you may be able to make a real difference to local people in your community."




Engage has secured grant funding through the Homes and Communities Agency and affordable loan finance to support this work, and is working closely with Leeds City Council to identify empty properties and their owners.






CASH STUDY

Moving Forward

We are committed to our objective of bringing 3,200 private sector empty properties back into use in 2012/13. As well as carrying out the actions that we have outlined earlier in this strategy, we will explore the following new initiatives:

-  The potential of empty property loans to help bring properties back into use. These could be made available to owners of empty property if they meet specific eligibility criteria. This type of loan is already available in other areas of the country.
-  Developing local initiatives with partners to deal with empty properties. as part of regeneration schemes.
-  Working closely with the third sector and social enterprises to develop new and innovative solutions.

As with any strategy there will be risks to delivery, which we will need to manage. Potential risks include:

-  The current financial climate facing the council, and the loss of skills and experience.
-  Welfare reforms – as these will affect income levels and the ability of people to pay rent.
-  Reduction in capital funds that will make it more difficult to secure enforcement such as Compulsory Purchase Orders.

It's not just about buildings....

A partnership between Leeds Action to Create Homes (LATCH) and Connect Housing Association brought two long-term empty flats in Chapeltown back into use, creating new homes for homeless people and providing opportunities for long-term unemployed volunteers to gain skills and work experience.

Connect provided the property and a loan for the refurbishment, and LATCH carried out the building work and now manage the property. Ten volunteers completed their placements, gaining practical skills, improved confidence, greater self-belief and more hope for the future.

The new tenants also got involved in the final stages of the refurbishment, planting the garden, painting and tiling and getting the flats ready to move in to. They enjoyed having the opportunity to work on their own flats and meet the volunteers. One said "It really meant a lot to me meeting the volunteers who'd been working hard on my flat. The flat is beautiful and now I've got my own place again I can get on with looking for work."



.... it's about people too

Canopy is a self-help, community housing project in inner city Leeds. They renovate derelict houses to create decent homes for people who are homeless. They have a Volunteer team who create (along with staff) a 'self-help' housing opportunity; where the tenants themselves can help to paint, decorate and furnish their new homes.

Canopy's tenants receive training to carry out practical work such as fitting insulation, plastering, painting, decorating, joinery and plumbing. They invest time and energy to turn an empty house into a good, warm home and make the local area look better.

One of Canopy's successes involved the renovation of a boarded up, derelict house in Harehills. The neighbours had made complaints about anti-social behaviour and substance misuse by a group of young people sheltering each night in the overgrown garden.

One of these young people began volunteering with Canopy. He was 16 years old and had left school without any plan of what to do. He continued to volunteer with Canopy to renovate

the property that he and his friends were claimed to have been making a nuisance outside. He renovated the house with the other volunteers, learnt new skills and gained a place at building college in the process.

And as for the house, it has a very happy tenant living in it. He used to be homeless but through his work with Canopy he has a new home. He was part of the team that renovated it.

