

# Empty Homes Strategy 2009 - 2014



Improving  
and  
Moving  
Forward  
Together

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## 1) Introduction

### What is an Empty Home?

*An empty home is classified as a dwelling, which has been vacant for more than six months.*

### Why do homes become empty?

There are many reasons why homes become and remain empty for long periods, often they are complex and involve financial and legal disputes. Sometimes owners may not have the funds available to bring the properties up to a habitable standard. Some of the reasons encountered in Luton include;

- A property is inherited and the new owner does not know what to do with it
- Part way through renovations the money runs out
- The owner works overseas but still uses the home when returning to England – this includes the armed forces
- The mental health of the owners curtailed their ability to use the property
- The house has become a squat and the owner finds it too difficult and/or expensive to evict the squatter (Squatters do not count in respect of occupation)
- The property is subject to probate, or another legal dispute such as a marriage breakdown

### What can be done to tackle the problem of empty homes?

Luton employs a dedicated Empty Property Officer whose role it is to bring empty properties back into use; there are various statutory powers and financial resources at the officer's disposal.



## 2) Why Have an Empty Homes Strategy?

Luton is a geographically small unitary authority in the East of England region; however many of the Housing problems faced by Luton are the same as those experienced by London Boroughs.

At the end of the financial year 2008/09 Luton had approximately 730 families in Temporary Accommodation, accepted a further 290 as homeless, and had 6369 families on the Housing Needs Register.

Furthermore the 2004 Housing Requirement Study predicted a net annual shortfall of 934 dwellings, with nearly half of this figure being affordable housing.

At the same time local figures identified an average of 793 long term empty homes, more than enough to meet the predicted shortfall if bought back into use.

In this context long term empty homes represent a wasted resource. They are:

- A blight on the community
- They attract vandalism and anti-social behaviour
- They lower the value of surrounding properties
- Through their removal from the general housing stock they increase pressure on overstretched housing resources

The Objectives of this strategy are to:

- Better understand the scale of the empty homes problem in Luton
- Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty homes through early intervention, offering advice and assistance to owners
- Bring empty properties back into use via negotiation with owners and the application of discretionary grant schemes.
- Responsibly employ our enforcement powers to bring long term empty homes into use where negotiation with the owner has failed.

In delivering these objectives we will improve housing supply, reduce housing waiting lists, increase neighbourhood pride and satisfaction while decreasing the number of derelict properties that blight our community. As a result of this strategy, communities in Luton will become stronger, healthier and more vibrant.

### 3) Context

#### **National**

The Government response to the Barker Report “Delivering Stability: Securing Our Future Needs” identifies a commitment to empty homes as a real alternative to developing Greenfield sites and recent changes in legislation have demonstrated a greater determination to tackle the issue of empty homes.

**The Housing Act 1985** empowers local authorities to acquire land, houses or other properties from private individuals, for the provision of housing accommodation. The acquisition must be shown to have a quantitative or qualitative housing gain. This power can be used to compulsorily purchase empty homes.

In addition to Councils’ existing compulsory purchase powers, the **Housing Act 2004** introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

EDMOs allow local housing authorities to take over the management of long term empty homes without acquiring ownership of the property.

#### **Empty Homes Agency**

The Empty Homes Agency (EHA) is an independent campaigning charity, which works with local housing authorities and the Government to highlight the issue of empty homes. It helps develop strategies for returning them to use across England. It was established in 1992 and since that time has been successful in assisting to highlight empty homes as an untapped resource.

According to recent figures published by the EHA there are nearly 700,000 empty homes in England, of these 90% are privately owned and over 300,000 of these have been empty for more than 6 months.

The EHA aims to **raise awareness of the potential of empty homes in England to meet housing need and devise and promote, with others, sustainable solutions that will bring empty homes back into use.**



## Regional

The Regional Housing Strategy 2005-2010 sets out the region's commitment to returning empty homes to use as part of their overall aim of ensuring that everyone can live in a decent home at a price they can afford in locations that are sustainable. The Strategy suggests that local housing authorities should:

- Maintain an up to date register of empty homes
- Develop a proactive approach to bringing empty homes back into use
- Work with housing associations with specialist knowledge in the use of empty homes
- Develop empty homes charters to raise awareness of the issue
- Work across boundaries with neighbouring authorities to tackle the problem

## Beds, Herts & Bucks Forum

The Herts, Beds and Bucks Empty Homes Forum is a body where over 20 (23) different Councils' Empty Homes Officers exchange best practice.

The Forum meets four times a year and invites guest speakers on various topics to do with Empty Homes to address the members. There is also considerable activity between meetings exchanging information and ideas. The Forum also supports new Empty Homes Officers who have yet to be given formal training.

## Local

The local Housing Strategy was developed in 2007 and strives to demonstrate how planned actions will contribute to the aims of the sustainable communities plan.

There are currently 5 local strategic priorities as identified in Luton's overarching Housing Strategy, these are also key to the development of the Empty Homes Strategy:

- *Enabling growth*
- *Increasing delivery of additional affordable housing*
- *Reduce levels of homelessness throughout the town*
- *Tackle poor conditions in private rented stock*
- *Ensuring council owned stock is maintained to a high standard*

The Empty Homes Strategy is an integral part of the Council's Housing Strategy. It will be complimentary to the Council's values and to achieving the wider

corporate objectives, particularly the aims of the Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008-2026.

The Sustainable Communities Strategy has 4 key themes;

- *Stronger and Safer Communities*
- *Health and Wellbeing*
- *Environment and Economic Development*
- *Children and Young People*

Given that the Empty Homes Strategy will bring properties back into the general stock it has the potential to positively impact across the range of priorities.

### **Empty homes can be a magnet for crime and vandalism**

**By bringing them back into use and breaking the cycle of neglect we make our communities stronger and safer.**

### **Dilapidated properties are a health risk**

**By providing assistance to renovate them and put them back into use, we will not only improve neighbourhoods but provide homes for families in need, boosting health & wellbeing across the town**

### **Empty homes are a wasted resource**

**By providing funds to improve them and by encouraging owners to find tenants we will be raising the price of nearby homes and contributing to the economic development of our town as well as reducing the negative environmental impact an empty home can have.**

### **Many households with young children suffer from the most acute housing need**

**By bringing empty homes back into use some of this housing need will be alleviated and we will help to make Luton a stronger, safer and healthier place to live.**

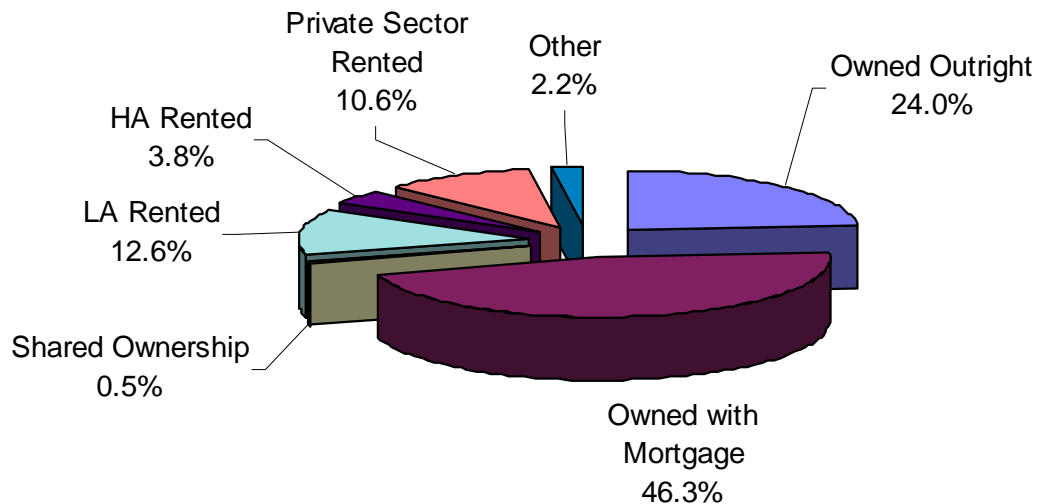


## 4) The Local Picture

The Borough of Luton is a geographically small urban unitary authority; population at the last census was 187,000 although local estimates suggest this may have risen as high as 202,500. Many of the town's characteristics are more like those of a metropolitan or London borough council than other unitary councils. It lies in the East of England region and is also part of the Milton Keynes/South Midlands (MKSM) growth area. It is part of the Bedfordshire sub-region for housing investment, together with the two new unitary authorities of Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough council.

### Stock

*From the 2001 Census, among the occupied dwellings within Luton, 70.3% were either owned outright or with a mortgage. Of the rest, 16.4% were being rented through either Luton Borough Council (12.6%) or a Housing Association (3.8%), 12.8% were being rented privately or with accommodation through a job, and 0.5% were in shared ownership*





## **Housing Need**

Luton is suffering from an acute shortage of housing and in particular affordable rented housing.

The 2004 Housing Requirement Study identified a net shortfall of 934 dwellings per year, of which nearly 50% of the shortfall was affordable housing, including shared ownership.

Furthermore Luton experiences significant pressure on its homelessness and housing needs service, with over 700 families currently occupying temporary accommodation and with approximately 250 families being accepted as homeless each year. The number of households on Luton's Housing needs register have increased dramatically in the last two years and now stands at 6369.

## **Empty homes**

Throughout 2008/09 there were an average of 793 homes that had been empty for over 6 months. This represents approximately 1.04% of the town's total housing stock, the regional average for 2008/09 was 1.2%.

## **CPOs**

LBC successfully carried out its first Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) on a long term empty home recently, completing the process in June 2008. The aim of CPOs is to either renovate the property or develop it so that it may be used as affordable housing in partnership with a Registered Social Landlord. The Executive committee has provided the resources to cover three CPOs this year. If any of the three planned CPOs becomes unnecessary then the funding can be recycled and used for a different property.

## **EDMOs**

The Council plans to secure further funding for the Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) process this year. The aim is to encourage owners of Empty Homes, which require minimal works, to bring them back into use. It is hoped that most owners will cooperate and return their homes to use without the need for an EDMO.

## **Funding**

The use of CPO powers can be expensive and traditionally there is no specific budget for these activities. Recently funding has been provided, sufficient for 3 CPO actions, further funding must be sought on an ad-hoc basis.

## Enforced sale

The Council executive has approved the use of enforced sale, where appropriate, and action will be taken against owners of long term empty properties if this is deemed appropriate.

## Empty Homes Grants

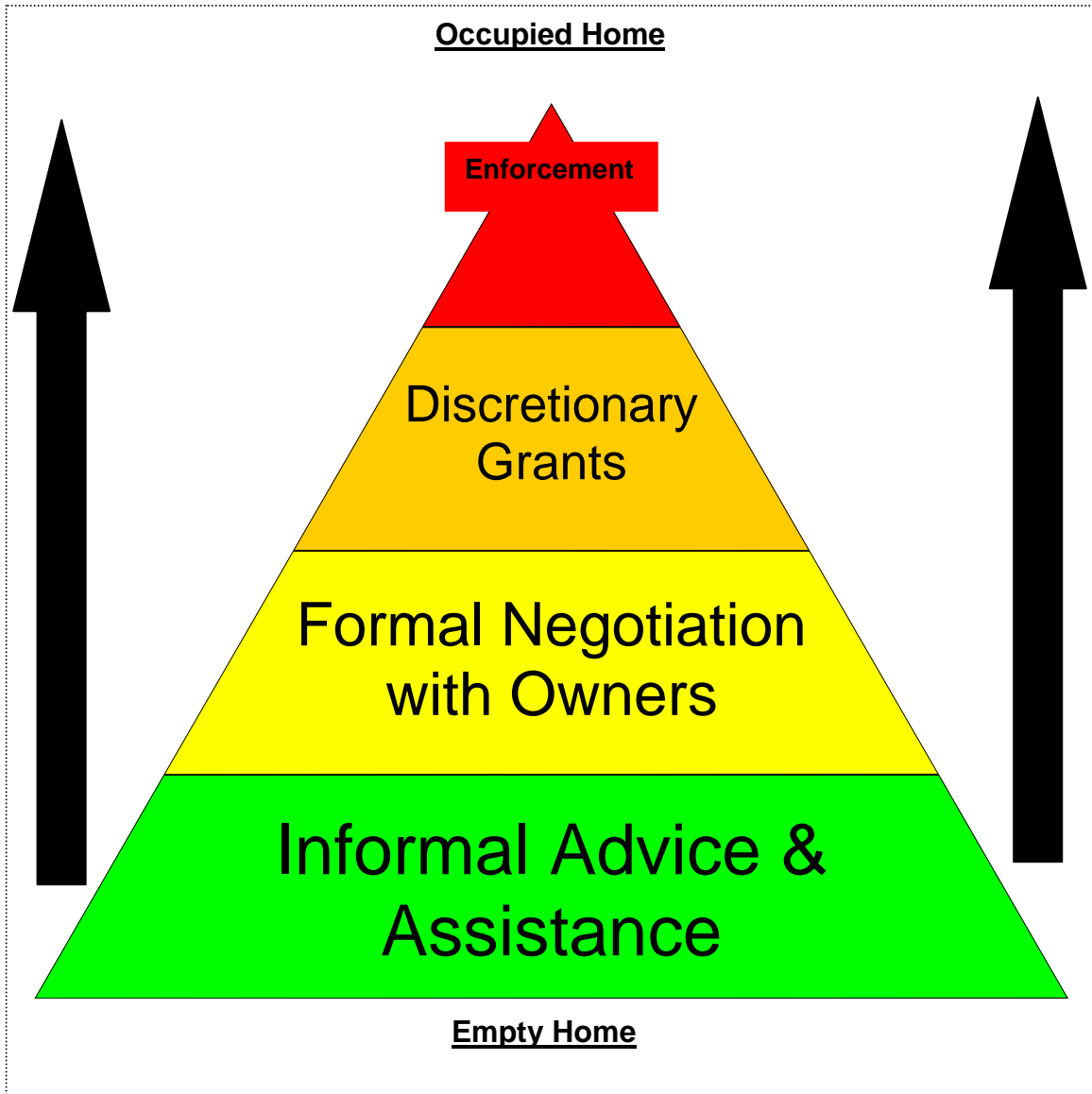
The council has agreed a scheme that offers grants to owners of empty homes which need investment prior to being made available for use. This is conditional and requires a commitment of nomination rights to the Council for a set period. Further details can be obtained from the Empty Property Officer.

## Case study – Long term empty home

<p><i>A large three bedroom home in the Sundon Park area of Luton had been empty for nearly 20 years. Given the size and location of the house, many of the local residents were becoming concerned that the house was empty.</i></p> <p><i>Sadly the owner of the house was unwell and suffered from memory problems. This made it difficult for him to manage a second home and the house was falling into disrepair.</i></p>	<p><i>Some neighbours of the property were so concerned that they contacted the Council's Empty Property Officer and asked for action to be taken to bring the home back into use.</i></p> <p><i>The Empty property Officer met with the owners to offer them advice and assistance on the various avenues available to bring the property back into use.</i></p>	<p><i>Following the meeting the owners decided to sell the house and with the help of the Empty Property Officer the property was sold and is now back in use.</i></p> <p><i>The owners have subsequently written to the Council praising the work of the Empty Property Officer and thanking him for his efforts on their behalf.</i></p>
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## 5) Priorities for Action

### The Action Pyramid



The above diagram shows the potential actions that will be taken in relation to empty homes. It highlights that the majority of work will be informal advice, although the Council will responsibly deploy its enforcement powers if and when necessary. It is not necessarily the case that an empty home will go through all parts of the pyramids. If the owner is adamant that they will not negotiate, it may be the decision of the Empty Property Officer to move straight to enforcement action.

## **Priority 1**

To better understand the scale of the empty homes problem in Luton

Luton is a vibrant, multi-cultural town. However empty properties are a blight on our neighbourhoods and before we can truly tackle this problem we must better understand the scale and nature of it. Therefore we commit to:

- Maintaining an up to date register of empty homes in Luton, based on Council Tax data, information supplied from members of the public and observation by the Empty Property Officer
- Provide and publicise telephone, minicom, email and online methods for members of the public to report empty homes quickly and if necessary anonymously
- Keep members of the public informed of the progress of any empty homes case that they report, once it is proved to be an empty home
- Quickly make contact (if possible) with owners of identified empty homes to ascertain their future plans and whether the home is subject to an exemption
- Hold an annual public awareness event that ties in with national campaigns

## **Priority 2**

Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty homes through early intervention, offering advice and assistance to owners

We understand that homes become empty for many reasons: they may be inherited by a relative who does not have the resources or knowledge to deal with them; they may be subject to probate that continues for years; owner sees it purely as an investment but will not rent it out or the cost of repairs may be prohibitive. Therefore we commit to:

- Providing a one-stop advice and referral service for empty homes via our Empty Property Officer
- Offering owners realistic and professional advice on letting their home, as well as keeping a list of local letting agents that will take on the management of properties.

- Provide practical assistance where possible, to minimise the potential for homes to remain empty in the long term

### **Priority 3**

Bring empty properties back into use via negotiation with owners and the application of discretionary grant schemes

We understand that the cost of renovating long term empty homes is often prohibitive and we are keen to offer financial assistance to owners to help bring these homes back into use. Therefore we will commit to;

- Offering grant information to owners of eligible empty homes
- Offer conditional access to the empty homes grants program
- Processing grant applications in a speedy and professional manner.

### **Priority 4**

Responsibly employ our enforcement powers to bring long term empty homes into use where negotiation with the owner has failed

As the Local Housing Authority we have various enforcement powers at our disposal. However we understand that these must always be deployed responsibly, as an action of last resort where negotiation has failed.

We will:

- Continue the successful use of Compulsory Purchase Orders
- Secure a management partner for the EDMO process
- Begin a pilot EDMO program to evaluate the effectiveness of EDMOs in returning empty homes to use
- Use the enforced sale provision where appropriate
- Create a working group involving planning and building control colleagues to seek innovative ways of using existing powers to tackle empty homes

## 6) Action Plan

Priority 1 – To better understand the Empty Homes problem in Luton						
Action	Officer	Outcome	Milestone	End Date	Sustainable communities Strategy Links	Resourced
Create a database to record empty properties in Luton	EPO	Yearly report to Scrutiny on numbers of empty homes	October 2009	December 2009		Existing
Create and publicise email, online, telephone and in-person methods for members of the public to report empty homes	EPO	Increased knowledge of empty homes in Luton and better resident participation in the process	August 2009	October 2009	<i>'Stronger &amp; Safer Communities</i>	Existing, both EPO and in-house comms

Hold an annual public awareness event	EPO	Increased public awareness of the scale of the empty homes problem		To coincide with the Empty Homes Agency week of action	'	Existing
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Priority 2 – Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty homes through early intervention, offering advice and assistance to owners						
Action	Officer	Outcome	Milestone	End Date	Sustainable communities Strategy Links	Resourced
Produce a series of information leaflets regarding empty	EPO	Reduction in long term empty homes due to better information	August 2009	December 2009	'Stronger & Safer Communities' Environment & Economic Development'	Existing officer time plus in-house comms

homes						
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Priority 3 – Bring empty properties back into use via negotiation with owners and the application of discretionary grant schemes						
Action	Officer	Outcome	Milestone	End Date	Sustainable communities Strategy Links	Resourced
Continue mail-shot to owners of empty homes regarding potential grant assistance.	EPO	Take up of grants means less homes will be empty	First Mailing October 2009	As required	<i>Stronger &amp; Safer Communities' Environment &amp; Economic Development'</i>	Existing
If grant take up is positive then seek extra funding from existing sources	Policy & Strategy Manager	Take up of grants means less homes will be empty and more available for occupation	N/A	N/A		Existing, with extra resources available if bid is successful



Priority 4 – Responsibly employ our enforcement powers to bring long term empty homes into use where negotiation with the owner has failed.						
Action	Officer	Outcome	Milestone	End Date	Sustainable communities Strategy Links	Resourced
Agree a management partner for the EDMO process	EPO	Begin EDMO process to return empty homes to use	September 2009	November 2009	<i>Stronger &amp; Safer Communities' Environment &amp; Economic Development'</i>	Existing, plus potential legal services cost from budget
Once a partner is in place, begin a pilot of 3 EDMO's	EPO	Begin EDMO process to return empty homes to use	December 2009	April 2010	<i>Stronger &amp; Safer Communities' Environment &amp; Economic Development'</i>	Existing, plus potential legal services cost from budget
Produce a report to HDMT on the viability of using enforced	EPO	Return Empty homes to use	August 2009	October 2009	<i>Stronger &amp; Safer Communities' Environment &amp; Economic Development'</i>	Existing

sale procedure						
Create a working group involving Building control and planning colleagues	Policy & Strategy Manager	Return Empty homes to use through planning or building control measures	September 2009	November 2009	<i>Stronger &amp; Safer Communities' Environment &amp; Economic Development'</i>	Existing