

Factsheet 3 Empty Homes

There are often good reasons for why properties are left empty, but some are empty for longer than is justified by the workings of the housing market. A property which has been empty for in excess of 6 months is considered to be a 'long term' empty home.

What happens to empty homes is not simply a matter of concern to those who own them. A property that is left unoccupied and not maintained will over time begin to affect neighbouring properties, whose condition and value might be adversely affected. Empty properties are also at risk from being broken into by vandals and squatters and in extreme cases might become a target of arson. Empty homes can be the cause of complaints to local authorities, for example in relation to environmental health issues.

Bringing empty homes back into use can reduce the need to build more much needed new homes. In an area like North Norfolk, there is high demand for housing across the district but not all areas can have new homes built and bringing empty homes back into use can help meet some of this need. Empty homes account for 3% of the dwellings in North Norfolk. In April 2011, North Norfolk recorded 1,541 empty homes. The vast majority of these were privately owned and 866 of these had been empty for more than 6 months.

Why are these homes empty?

There are many reasons why a property remains empty for a long period - here are some examples:

- the property may be in need of major repairs or refurbishment and the owner may not have the necessary resources to make the property habitable
- there may be problems with accessing the property
- there may be planning restrictions which restrict the occupancy of the property
- the owner may be having difficulty in finding a new tenant or owner
- the owner may have been unable to obtain the mortgagor's or freeholder's consent to let the property
- the owner may be trying to sell the property and may be prepared to leave the property empty whilst they wait for the right price
- the owner may be in residential or nursing care and is unwilling to sell or let the property
- the owner may be unwilling to consider leasing or letting the property
- the owner may be temporarily working abroad and intend to live in the property in the future
- the owner may not be aware of the property's existence, for example where property records are not kept
- there may be a complicated ownership scenario
- the property is in probate

- the owner may not fully appreciate the business case for bringing their empty property back into use
- the property may have been acquired solely for speculative investment purposes and the owner is not concerned that the property is empty
- the property may be owned by a development company who has plans for its future redevelopment
- the property may be joined to a business property and the business owner does not want to let it.

Bringing empty homes back into use

If you have an empty home which you don't really want to sell but are unsure what to do with, maybe we can help. Our aim is to contact all owners of empty homes in the North Norfolk area to discuss their options, offering advice on repairs and letting.

- If the property is ready to let, maybe a short term holiday let may be of interest, although time consuming this would utilise your property. Need assistance on how to start? Contact us and we can guide you.
- Thinking on a longer term maybe a tenant on an Assured Shorthold Tenancy appeals. Advice and assistance can be given by our Housing Options Team or visit our 'Information for private landlords and tenants' web page.
- If your property needs repairs we can offer practical advice to you about bringing it back into use, possibly even through an Empty Homes Grant
- If you do not want to bring the empty property back into use, it is worth remembering we will consider using our enforcement powers to bring the property back into use – but we will not use enforcement powers until all other avenues to bring the property back into use have been exhausted.

We may have to prioritise the action that we take, and we will therefore take enforcement action in cases which will deliver the greatest impact. This is likely to include:-

- those which are dangerous and pose a risk to the public
- those most in need by those unable to access the housing market
- those having the biggest impact on surrounding neighbours

New Homes Bonus

The Government is incentivising Councils to bring empty homes back into use by paying a sum for reductions in the number of empty homes recorded on the annual Council Tax (CTB1) submission through the New Homes Bonus.

Contact: Deborah Skinn or Faith Davies, Housing Services housing@north-norfolk.gov.uk, 01263 516184.