Executive Summary

1. Homes that are left empty are often a blot on the landscape. They are of real concern for both local communities and for Councils. Councils have a duty to consider housing conditions and housing provision within their area and empty properties can impact on problems such as anti social behaviour and the environmental health of the community. The government has recently highlighted the problem of empty homes and is encouraging Councils to use the range of powers at their disposal to bring homes back into use.

2. The purpose of the review was to identify areas where Councils and other partners can work better together to return more homes back to use, to highlight best practice and learn from success and to ensure that all is being done to help plug the gap of available housing.

Empty Homes for the purposes of this review are deemed to be those that have been left unoccupied for a period in excess of 6 months, defined as long-term empty (LTE). (Empty Homes Agency)

3. The review topic was chosen for a number of reasons:

- Empty Homes can be a blight on a neighbourhood, encouraging vandalism and general decay
- There is a shortage of housing in the county which is exacerbated by the current slow down in new builds
- There is an ongoing need to make available affordable housing for key workers and others on low salaries
- There is a continuing need to house residents unexpectedly made homeless
- National Indicators(NI) impacted by Empty Homes
  - NI 155, (Number of Affordable Homes delivered), shows current performance is on target, the economic downturn is having an effect on future projections
  - NI 156 (Number of people living in temporary accommodation) currently on target to be met
• The Local Area Agreement (LAA) Local Indicator, *(Number of clients directly accessing the private rented sector through Local Authority Partnership schemes)*, was below target for the period April to December 08.
• The financial benefits of bringing Empty Homes back into use can far outweigh the cost

4. The review was conducted by a Task and Finish group formed from members of the following Councils:

   • Buckinghamshire County Council
   • Chiltern District Council
   • South Bucks District Council
   • Wycombe District Council

5. Evidence was gathered from:

   • desk top research
   • officers from participating and other Councils
   • a property guardianship scheme
   • national agencies
   • the private sector

6. The Task and Finish group found much good practice and sharing of information already in place within the county and was encouraged to hear of plans for further embedding this. For example, the four District Councils are working in partnership with Housing Associations to develop a sub regional approach to reduce the number of empty properties and support them to build new homes and bring empty property back into use.

7. The review, however, has highlighted some areas for improvement, for example raising the issues associated with empty homes through good publicity. It has also demonstrated that more could be achieved through collaborative working. Shared training opportunities between Councils for officers in housing, planning and environmental health could help to raise awareness of the tools and legislation that is in place to work smarter and ultimately give the residents of Buckinghamshire increased value for money.

8. Finally, Property Guardianship schemes were identified as an innovative way to utilise empty property in the short term and could help to plug the gap for key workers and for other single professionals requiring accommodation. Under these schemes arrangements are made for individuals to occupy empty properties as a form of security.

9. The review has illustrated examples of successes using the statutory powers available and schemes in place to help owners get their properties back into habitable condition. These schemes can involve significant resources and it is acknowledged that this would be a constraint in Buckinghamshire. However, opportunities do exist for raising the issue nationally and for other funding options such as environmental grants to be explored.

10. **Recommendations:**

    Cabinet are invited to agree recommendations vi and vii and to support the remaining recommendations which are directed to the District Councils for agreement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>County Council</th>
<th>District Councils</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i)</td>
<td>Encourage District Councils to identify from within existing resources an officer with specific responsibility for Empty Homes and promote active liaison between Councils</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii)</td>
<td>Share best practice between Councils on bringing empty property back into occupation and encourage Councils to set an annual target for bringing back empty homes into use</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii)</td>
<td>Consider creating a web based resource on Empty Homes linked from the Bucks Strategic Partnership (BSP) website to include information for Councils, partners and the public and links to other useful sites</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv)</td>
<td>Encourage Councils to organise joint training sessions for relevant Officers (e.g. Housing, Environmental Health, Planning and Legal)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v)</td>
<td>Raise awareness of the Empty Homes issue and opportunities amongst members, community liaison officers, other Council employees and the public through press releases, seminars, leafleting and displays</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi)</td>
<td>Council Leaders to raise with Buckinghamshire MPs the benefits of pump priming initiatives to return Empty Homes into use</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii)</td>
<td>Disseminate information about property guardianship schemes to organisations with large numbers of key workers, the third sector and within Councils.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii)</td>
<td>Use the existing network of Housing officers to draw up an action plan with smart targets to address these recommendations and appoint an officer to report back progress in Autumn 2009.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction**

11. The Joint Chairmen’s Network comprises scrutiny chairmen from the County Council and all Districts, other than Aylesbury Vale, who work together to avoid duplication and commission work of shared interest. They selected the topic of Empty Homes for a number of reasons. It is important that all Councils make the best possible use of all their resources and maximising the use of housing stock is of interest to District Councils. Councils need to provide for the predicted growth in housing demand and to continue to provide for individuals and families unexpectedly made homeless. In addition, the county faces challenges in key worker recruitment and the availability of affordable housing remains a barrier.

12. There are tangible benefits to the community, such as maintaining a clean and safe environment, avoiding vandalism and maintaining house value.

13. The reintroduction of empty homes into the housing stock will have an effect on National and Local Indicators.

Empty Homes Review JCN 25 March 2009
• The target for NI 155 (Number of Affordable homes delivered) is on course and will be met for 08/09. However the impact of the economic downturn is affecting the use of land by developers who are waiting for conditions to improve and land prices to rise. This will affect the number of new builds over the following few years.

• The target for NI 156 (Number of people living in temporary accommodation) is also on target to be met. However, the economic downturn may lead to a rise in people unexpectedly made homeless.

• Local Area Agreement (LAA) local indicator (Increasing the number of clients directly accessing the private rented sector through local Authority Partnership Schemes) was below target for the period April to December 2008 and the impact of the economic downturn has been identified as the most probable cause.

14. During March 2009, the Housing Minister backed new guidance from the Empty Homes Agency (EHA), setting out the range of strengthened powers local authorities have to deal with the problem of empty homes. The Empty Homes Agency is an independent campaigning charity which exists to highlight the waste of empty property in England and works to promote solutions to bring them back into use.

Background

15. Local Authorities (LAs) have a duty to consider housing conditions and housing provision within their area. Whilst there is no legal obligation to reduce the number of empty homes, there are a range of powers available to LAs to deal with long term empty properties. Nationally 3% of the total housing stock (approx. 840,000 homes excluding commercial properties) in the country was ‘empty’ in 2007 with about a quarter of those empty for over 6 months.

16. In 2008 approximately 2.4% of the housing stock in Buckinghamshire was empty with 3,510 homes empty in the Housing Association/Local Council sector. Out of 4,616 empty homes in the county, 1106 were privately owned with the remainder owned by the Housing Association/Local Council. In Buckinghamshire Wycombe District Council owns and manages its’ housing stock, whereas Chiltern and South Bucks use Housing Associations.

Reasons for Properties being Empty

17. There are a number of contributory factors which result in long-term empty property. An area may have low demand for housing, an over-supply of certain types of properties or a property may be made empty pending renovation or demolition during area regeneration. The economic activity and transport infrastructure of a location can also be a contributory cause of empty homes. In addition, properties can be bought for example for road widening schemes or leisure centre development but subsequent plans might change, rendering the purchase unnecessary.

18. Factors relating to a specific property that can explain why it is long-term empty include someone speculatively buying a property purely to let the house value increase, an unwillingness to rent out the property or being unable to afford to bring a property back into habitable condition due to financial constraints.

19. The housing market is stagnating as a result of households becoming trapped in negative equity, unable to manage mortgage debt or arrange funding. For some this leads to repossession. There has also been an impact on tenants as ‘Buy to Let’ landlords leave the market or default on their mortgage repayments, rendering some tenants unexpectedly homeless.
20. Social factors include an owner becoming bankrupt or protracted delays following the death of an owner, or emotional attachment as a result of relationship difficulties or breakdown.

Benefits of bringing Empty Homes back into Use

21. The benefits as a result of reoccupation of empty properties include increased revenues from Council tax, the preservation of environmental amenities and reduction of crime and vandalism. Poorly maintained empty properties attract vermin, cause damp and other problems for neighbouring properties and are magnets for vandals, squatters, drug dealers and arsonists. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors estimates that properties adjoining poorly maintained empty properties can be devalued by 18 per cent.

22. There are significant financial benefits to bringing empty homes back into use by persuasion and other routes before resorting to legal action, which is the most expensive option. There is also an opportunity benefit in moving temporary residents out of bed and breakfast accommodation and for housing people unexpectedly made homeless.

23. Empty homes can blight communities and can be a causal factor for anti-social behaviour. Squatters may target empty large detached houses in the semi rural Bucks areas, which can in turn be a contributory factor to environmental degradation for neighbourhoods and communities.

24. The benefits of lower carbon emissions have been explored by the Empty Homes Agency. The agency carried out a study ‘New Tricks with Old Bricks’ that compared the carbon dioxide (CO2) given off in building new homes and contrasted it with emissions in creating additional homes through refurbishing old properties. The results were dramatic; the study suggested that reusing empty homes could make an initial saving of 35 tonnes of carbon dioxide per property, new builds generating 50 tonnes and refurbished 15 tonnes.

25. To make best use of existing housing and ease the pressure for development of new homes a few Councils, for example the London Borough of Bromley, support property guardianship schemes i.e. short temporary occupation periods aimed at the mobile professional tenant

Existing powers available to Councils

26. The main legislation that Councils can use when negotiations with owners are not successful include the following:

- Section 215: Town & Country Planning Act 1990
- Powers under the Building Act 1984 Sections 78, 79
- Demolition order / Emergency Remedial Action to cover any of the 29 hazards falling within the Housing Health & Safety Rating System
- Prevention of Damage by Pest Act 1949
- Local Government (MP) Action 1982 Section 29
- Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)
- Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)

Review process

27. A Task and Finish Group, chaired by South Bucks District Council, carried out the review between October 2008 and March 2009. The participating Councils were:

Buckinghamshire County Council

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1 New Tricks with Old Bricks: How reusing old buildings can cut carbon emissions - 12th February 2008. Empty Homes Agency
Empty Homes Review JCN 25 March 2009
The scoping paper for the review is attached at Appendix 1

The following stages were used to gather information to support the review:

- Desktop Review including gathering information from the Empty Homes Agency
- Officer attendance at Empty Homes Seminar
- Information gathering from:
  - Empty Homes Officer for Chiltern District Council
  - Presentation by the Head of Homes and Housing, Technical Officer Environmental Services and Divisional Environmental Health Officer from Wycombe District Council
  - Corporate Property & Facilities Manager, Buckinghamshire County Council
  - South Bucks District Council officers
- Seminar with CPC Consultant acting for Kent County Council and Ad Hoc, Property Guardian Management
- Survey sent to comparable LAs

Through the review process, members have formulated ideas and recommendations for consideration by the relevant Councils.

Findings of the Review

Resource identification

Members were interested to explore the processes followed by each of the Councils to gain a picture of current arrangements, how these worked in practice and what lessons could be shared. A questionnaire was drawn up based on questions raised by members during task group meetings in order to identify best practice. It was completed by housing officers from the participating Councils plus Reading and Southend Borough Councils. Appendix 2 contains full details.

Members learnt that not all District Councils in Buckinghamshire had an identified Empty Homes officer. Whilst Chiltern District Council employs an Empty Homes Officer who works on a part time basis, in Wycombe, the empty homes function is split between private residential and local authority properties with an officer allocated to each. South Bucks District Council does not have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

The identification of an officer to take on the responsibility of Empty Homes could help improve the system currently followed and speed up the reoccupation process with the consequent benefits.

Recommendation

i. Encourage District Councils to identify from within the existing establishment an officer with specific responsibility for Empty Homes and promote active liaison between Councils

Sharing good practice

Members found that Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe District Councils all had processes in place to identify and report empty homes. However, the resources and mechanism used...
varied considerably between Councils, with some using Council tax records and others relying more heavily on local reporting and officer identification.

35. Chiltern District Council levies a reduced Council Tax charge (50%) to clearly identify empty homes that require action. South Bucks District Council levies a 90% Council Tax charge. Wycombe District Council has retained a 100% charge to encourage owners to gain reoccupation as quickly as possible. The latest Empty Homes statistics suggest that Wycombe have the lowest percentage of long term empty homes. However variances in the criteria used and the way that homes are identified can lead to an inaccurate picture of the local situation as evidenced in the survey results in Appendix 2.

36. In Chiltern District, the officer has developed a systematic process for encouraging owners to gain reoccupation of their properties with a good success rate achieved. The percentage of Empty Homes classified empty (i.e. empty for more than 6 months) is 2.57%\(^2\).

37. In Wycombe District, as in Chiltern, a set process for encouraging owners to get their properties re occupied is followed. The percentage of Empty Homes classified empty is 1.70%\(^3\).

38. In South Bucks District, it is difficult to be clear about whether empty properties are classified as long term empty unless the owner makes contact with the Council for advice. The lack of resources to carry out more frequent checks on empty homes could lead to more properties being empty for longer periods of time. Statistics from the Empty Homes Agency show that South Bucks has the highest percentage of Empty Homes at 2.85%\(^4\).

39. The attached table gives the 2007 and 2008 figures on empty homes supplied to government.

**Bucks Empty Homes Statistics – Source: Empty Homes Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No of homes brought back into use 2007</th>
<th>Private homes empty more than 6 months 2007</th>
<th>Total number of empty homes 2007</th>
<th>Private homes empty more than 6 months 2008</th>
<th>Total number of empty homes 2008</th>
<th>Percentage of housing stock 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVDC</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>1692</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>1707</td>
<td>2.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>2.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBDC</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>2.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WDC</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1167</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>145</strong></td>
<td><strong>1472</strong></td>
<td><strong>4357</strong></td>
<td><strong>1106</strong></td>
<td><strong>4616</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) Statistic taken from Empty Homes Agency returns 2008  
\(^3\) Statistic taken from Empty Homes Agency returns 2008  
\(^4\) Ditto  
Empty Homes Review JCN 25 March 2009
40. Following the identification of long-term empty properties, Councils’ approach to dealing with them also varied. Members recognised the need to focus resource on those properties that have been empty for a substantial period of time and to have a systematic approach to those which will provide most return. This can mean concentrating effort on properties that have been empty for 24 months.

41. Once identified, the processes followed by Chiltern and Wycombe are similar. Initial letters are sent to the owners, followed by a ‘Section 16’ (Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1976 Act) letter if required. Finally, an Empty Dwellings Management Order (EDMO) letter is sent. This allows the Local Authority to take the property into their possession but it is a complex procedure.

42. It was noted that it is usual for owners to have taken action by this stage and that an EDMO is a last resort in the plan for action. The costs involved for Councils in taking enforcement action can also be prohibitively high and persuasion is preferred to enforcement wherever possible. A case study from Mid Sussex District Council illustrates one such scenario for an empty dilapidated bungalow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDMO cost (inclusive) £112,400</td>
<td>Property brought back into use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less 7 years’ rent £75,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortfall £36,800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPO Cost (inclusive) £202,900</td>
<td>Property asset owned by Council at market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>value - £180,000 (Spring 2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43. Officer engagement with owners to encourage bringing the home back into use on a voluntary basis is the most cost efficient method because it is utilises the existing resources Councils have at their disposal, thus avoiding drawing on capital reserves for the upkeep of the property’s amenity.

44. Kent County Council (KCC) received Public Service Agreement (PSA) funding of £5 million to operate a revolving loan scheme typically £25,000 per unit with a financial charge to KCC to cover the property renovation costs. Once the work is completed the unit must be let or sold and cannot be occupied by the loan applicant. The typical cost to KCC per loan is £2,569 (Appendix 3).

45. However, some Councils e.g. Southend Borough Council have taken an environmental line and has secured funding through housing renewal grants to enable enforcement action to be taken for those properties that meet the selection criteria. The case study appears in Appendix 3.

46. The Empty Homes Agency has produced a best practice step-by-step guide to the EDMO process that can be accessed via their website. It provides a comprehensive checklist for bringing long-term empty homes back into use which could be of significant value to those involved in the process.

47. Members were encouraged to hear of two initiatives in Buckinghamshire - the choice based letting scheme and private sector leasing, both of which encourage collaborative working and a more flexible approach to using empty property for social housing.
48. The four District Councils, working in partnership with key Housing Association partners are developing a sub-regional approach to drive down numbers of empty homes and to support Housing Associations to build new homes and bring empty homes back into use.

49. They have secured £100,000 of government funding to launch a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme in 2010 that will change the way people access social housing in the county. It is a scheme whereby vacant Council and Housing Association homes are advertised for rent in a style similar to an estate agent. Although CBL cannot increase the amount of social housing becoming available, customers will have more choice and control over where they live.

50. There are also plans to include shared ownership properties and to offer the service to private landlords in the future.

51. In a further drive to bring private sector property back into use, some authorities are addressing social housing need by using private rental properties either directly or through a Housing Association. With private sector leasing (PSL) the tenant benefits by having a roof over their head, the Council benefits by having fewer empty properties and the owner benefits by having a rental income for a fixed period of time.

52. Under PSL, the Council or housing association:
   - Leases privately owned property for a fixed term
   - Is responsible for all property management issues
   - Makes all contact with the occupants for the duration of the lease
   - Returns the property to the owner with vacant possession at the end of the lease

53. Wycombe District Council has made links with approximately 40 private landlords in anticipation of the future demand for housing from students at the new Bucks University. Both Chiltern and South Bucks District Councils are actively pursuing this option.

54. The Task Group was particularly impressed by the ‘No Use Empty’ initiative in Kent which focuses on bringing back into use long-term empty homes. At a seminar for members and officers from Buckinghamshire and neighbouring Councils, members heard how all the Kent Councils work successfully together through joint action, training, funding and promotion to achieve improved results in returning properties back to use. Details of this initiative can be found in Appendix 3.

55. The initiative was set up in 2005 with a target of 372 houses to be brought back within a 3-year period. As at September 2008, 487 homes have been brought back into occupation with the target of a total of 620 to be reached by April 2009. This initiative has had a catalytic effect encouraging others to bring empty homes back into use. Southend BC is now seeking to implement the Kent model with its sub-regional partners.

ii. Share best practice between Councils on bringing empty property back into occupation.

Web information

56. Chiltern District Council have a dedicated Empty Homes web page on their website space and have produced a community information leaflet in January 2008 to inform people about the mechanisms to return an empty property back into use.

57. Kent has set up a No Use Empty website to provide advice and guidance, a resource that pulls together all relevant information for owners, landlords and any interested parties.

Empty Homes Review JCN 25 March 2009
58. Surrey and Hampshire Councils in partnership are launching an Empty Homes website for their area. The site will provide information for the public and a mechanism for reporting empty properties to the relevant Council. This initiative is being funded by the Regional Housing Board.

iii. Consider creating a web based resource on Empty Homes linked from the Bucks Strategic Partnership (BSP) website to include information for Councils, partners and the public and links to other useful sites.

**Joint Training**

59. It was clear to members that successful reintroduction of empty homes into use does not depend solely on individual officers with the named responsibility. Kent invested in training for a range of front line staff including those from Environmental Health, Housing and Planning to ensure all were fully aware of the range of options available and actions that could be taken. This can help to encourage a shared understanding of the problems of empty properties and reduce the time taken to take enforcement action.

iv. Encourage Councils to organise joint training sessions for relevant officers (e.g. Housing, Environmental Health, Planning and Legal).

**Awareness raising**

60. Members identified a number of examples of good practice in raising awareness of Empty Home issues with stakeholders:

- The Local Empty Homes Forum, a mechanism for sharing good practice between Local Authorities, has been established for Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. The Forum has recently run a road show travelling around the main town centres in the three counties with information on how the local authorities are tackling empty homes and what incentives they are offering to help private owners bring their homes back into use.

- Broadland District Council ran a presentation for staff and the public about the problem of empty homes and what the Council is doing to tackle it and what they can do themselves.

- Kent ensures that success stories about bringing empty homes into use are well publicised.

- Plymouth District Council mounts public displays in key Council buildings, demonstrating how the Council is dealing with their empty properties and events are publicised in the press.

- Stockton on Tees Borough Council worked with Community Development colleagues to encourage members of the public to report long-term empty properties to help bring them back into use. The campaign was promoted through all local community centres and local supermarkets.

v. Raise awareness of the Empty Homes issue and opportunities amongst members, community liaison officers, other Council employees and the public through press releases, seminars, leafleting and displays.

Empty Homes Review JCN 25 March 2009
Funding

61. Members of the group acknowledged that without an external source of funding the Kent model would be difficult to replicate in Buckinghamshire. However other sources of funding are available. For example, Southend Borough Council has successfully used environmental grants to facilitate the reoccupation of empty homes in their area. London Borough of Redbridge brought back into use a Grade 2 listed building with support and funding from genesis housing group and the Abess Adelicia charity.

62. Members recognise that the promotion of information about financial support e.g. Decent Homes Grant is important and should be encouraged.

vi. Council Leaders to raise with Buckinghamshire MPs the benefits of pump priming initiatives to return Empty Homes into use

Property Guardianship Schemes

63. Property Guardianship Schemes are those in which arrangements are made for individuals to occupy empty properties on a short term basis. Properties can be domestic or commercial and property guardians act as a form of security. Both the individual and the property owner pay a fee to the Property Guardianship organisation.

64. At a seminar held in Wycombe for the Task and Finish Group and other interested officers from within Buckinghamshire and beyond, members heard about the Property Guardianship scheme provided by a commercial company, Ad Hoc. Representatives from Ad Hoc, a Dutch based company, explained they operate a scheme of short term lets for single professionals, including key workers, all of whom act as property guardians. Accommodation for key workers is a major issue, particularly in Buckinghamshire with high property prices, and all Councils, including the County Council could benefit from exploring this scheme.

65. The process allows for empty properties to be brought up to habitable standards at minimal costs. Properties highlighted by Ad Hoc included redundant school buildings and commercial properties. Single professionals, in full time employment, are vetted by Ad Hoc and, if suitable, are taken on as property guardians. Ad Hoc charge a management fee to provide a security service for a vacant property. Corporate, commercial and private companies and individuals use their services, including Transport for London, London Boroughs of Bromley and Enfield, Waltham Forest Council, and the Church of England.

66. The advantage for the individual is that they are provided with a place to live in exchange for a small weekly fee of approximately £50 and an undertaking to look after the property, for example keeping it clean and tidy inside and reporting maintenance issues such as leaking pipes, as well as looking after the garden. The fee for the property owner does vary, but ranges between £10 and £50 per week. The amount depends on the size, location and condition of the property and whether it is commercial or domestic. In addition, as this is not a letting arrangement, vacation and repossession of the property can take place with two weeks’ notice.

67. The London Borough of Bromley have successfully engaged Ad Hoc to provide four property guardians on a continuous basis since 2007 for an empty school site where
proposed future development will take place. Appendix 3 includes further details of the guardianship scheme.

**Recommendation**

viii. Disseminate information about property guardianship schemes to organisations with large numbers of key workers, the voluntary and community sector and promote within Councils.

**Limitations of the Review**

68. The review was confined to residential properties and excluded commercial and agricultural property. Within the time constraints of the review, it was not possible to explore options for new public/private partnerships to manage empty homes e.g. shared private sector leasing, self help initiatives or self-help organisation from the Empty Homes Agency. This may be a useful avenue to explore further.

**Conclusion**

69. The review has established the importance of getting empty homes back into use. The Task group worked together to identify areas of best practice both in the County and externally and looked for solutions that could be beneficial in dealing with empty homes in the County.

70. The Task Group was encouraged to hear that the four Buckinghamshire District Councils had secured funding and were working in partnership with Housing Associations to support them to build new homes and to bring empty homes into use.

71. The review identified areas that could be improved including setting a target of the number of empty homes brought back into use within a given period, developing a web site which brings together all relevant information on Empty Homes for Councils, partners and the public and exploring opportunities to improve joint understanding of the issues around empty homes between Council officers through training opportunities.

72. Property Guardianship schemes were identified during the review as being an innovative way to utilise empty property in the short term and could help to plug the gap for key workers and for other single professionals requiring accommodation.

73. The Group was interested to hear of approaches taken by other Councils through the provision of loans to empty property owners and through the use of enforcement action whilst recognising the resource limitations that these approaches would have in Buckinghamshire. However other avenues of grant funding should be explored. The Group also considered that all opportunities should be exploited to raise the issues nationally.
Acknowledgements

The Task and Finish group is grateful for the assistance of the following people who have helped with this review:

Stuart Burrell, Empty Homes / Energy Efficiency Officer, Southend Borough Council
Keith Coldham, Divisional Environmental Health Officer, Wycombe District Council
Doug Edwards, Ad Hoc Property Management Ltd
Jean Fox, Rural Housing Enabler, Bucks Community Action, Chiltern District Council
Martyn Hale, Head of Housing, Wycombe District Council
Carmel Harrison, Project Support Officer, Housing Services, South Bucks District Council
Nick Hilton, Ad Hoc Property Management Ltd
Sean Hughes, Housing Strategy Manager, South Bucks District Council
Andrew Lavender, CPC Consultant for Kent County Council ‘No Use Empty’ Initiative
Graham Morley, Corporate Property and Facilities Manager, Buckinghamshire County Council
Nick Pritchard-Gordon, Housing & Public Health Officer, Reading Borough Council
Harry Quarrell, Technical Officer, Environmental Services, Wycombe District Council
Nienke Steenberger, Director, Ad Hoc Property Management Ltd
Glossary of terms and abbreviations

BSP  Bucks Strategic Partnership  The countywide Local Strategic Partnership for Buckinghamshire, it is a group that provides over-arching direction for the family of Sustainable Community Strategies in the County.

CBL  Choice Based Lettings - A new system for allocating social housing allowing for tenants to apply for widely advertised housing vacancies.

EDMO  Empty Homes Management Order – A power available to LAs which can ultimately lead to taking possession of Empty Homes

EHA  Empty Homes Agency – An independent charity highlights the waste of Empty Property in England

LA  Local Authority. For the purposes of the report this refers to Councils.

LAA  Local Area Agreement . The LAA sets out the priorities for the local areas in Buckinghamshire for three years as agreed between central government and the local authorities. The current LAA runs 2008 – 2011 and is led by Bucks County Council with other key partners from the Bucks Strategic Partnership.

LTE  Long Term Empty – Classification of 6 months as representing long term empty property

NI  National Indicator – A descriptive measure, underpinning the performance framework, part of a set which represents the government’s national priorities for delivery by local government working alone or in partnership.

Housing Associations  - A number of Housing Associations operate in Buckinghamshire. The main ones that work with the District Councils are:

Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust

London & Quadrant Beacon

Paradigm Housing Group

Appendices

Appendix 1: Empty Homes Review Scoping Paper

Appendix 2: Empty Property Survey Results

Appendix 3 Examples of Good Practice

- Case study - Southend Borough Council,
- ‘No Use Empty’ - A Kent initiative,
- Ad Hoc Property Guardianship Scheme

Further information on EDMOs can be found via The Empty Homes Agency

And the Department of Communities and Local Government

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