

# Empty Homes Policy

## Introduction

The Government wants to increase the number of empty homes that are brought back into use as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing, and to reduce blight on neighbourhoods. The Government wants builders, investors and local councils to increase the supply repurposed empty homes.

In Ipswich there are approximately 500 homes that have been empty for six months or more. This is an unacceptable situation especially considering the pressure for affordable homes.

In Ipswich, evidence has shown that one empty house in a neighbourhood can cause significant blight, attracting vandalism, fly-tipping and resulting in adjacent houses becoming difficult or impossible to let out or sell.

Ipswich has a large number of privately rented housing, but there is still a need for affordable housing for those with young families and people wanting to get a foot on the property ladder.

An East of England regional survey carried out in 2005 which included surveying all empty home owners in Ipswich found that 67% of empty properties are houses and 41% of empty properties have a minimum of three bedrooms. 60% do not have a mortgage or loan on the property. 50% of owners do not believe any advice, financial assistance, or other help would encourage them to return their property back into use

By writing, publicising and making full use of an empty home policy, Ipswich Borough Council will work towards preventing a property being left empty and bring an empty property back into use as affordable accommodation.

## AIM

**Reduce the number of long term empty homes in Ipswich by returning homes back into use and discouraging owners from leaving properties empty.**

## Objectives

The objectives of the policy are to:

**Provide advice and assistance, where possible, to those wishing to bring empty homes back into use.**

**Where necessary, use appropriate enforcement action to return the property to use.**

## Background

Ipswich Borough Council has had an empty property strategy since 1994. Since then, much work has been undertaken in bringing homes back into use through advice, the provision of renovation grant assistance and the threat of compulsory purchase. However, the Council's powers have been limited with the only enforcement action open to it being compulsory purchase, which due to its complexity and resource required has only been used as a last resort. The Housing Act 2004 has introduced the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's) these provide an additional enforcement tool to assist with bringing empty homes back into use. In 2012 Ipswich Borough Council implemented its empty homes toolkit; this has helped to increase the number of empty homes being brought back into use.

## Empty homes in Ipswich

Ipswich has approximately 500 homes that have been vacant for more than six months. These homes are left empty for a variety of reasons, but there is a high demand for housing in the borough that makes this figure difficult to understand.

Owning an empty home is not an acceptable choice for an owner as all too often the empty property becomes an eyesore and becomes an attraction for anti-social behaviour. The garden becomes overgrown and the house begins to slip into a state of accelerating disrepair. A slipped slate, or clogged gutter may cause rainwater to penetrate an adjoining property, while doing untold damage to the vacant house. Neighbours will become disgruntled at the increasing eyesore and local children may develop an interest in playing around the garden. Eventually someone may break in causing vandalism and anti-social behaviour, sometimes being occupied by squatters or a venue to sell or use drugs.

An empty, perhaps fire damaged, house may prevent a neighbour from selling or letting out their house. Consequently a second house may become vacant in what ought to be a desirable street.

If the Council does not tackle empty homes an increasing number of houses will fall into a state of dilapidation and anti-social behaviour will increase.

### **Targeting the problem**

One of the aims of this policy is to prevent a property being left empty in the first place.

Some houses will naturally be vacant for a period of time while probate is concluded, or simply because they are for sale. By promoting the empty homes policy and the powers available to it, the Council hopes to discourage owners from leaving a property vacant for longer than is usually necessary.

The Council will target action against all houses that have been vacant for longer than six months. In special circumstances, action may be taken in respect of houses that have been vacant for less than six months, for example where an enforcement notice is outstanding.

The Council will identify an empty property by liaison with the Council Tax service and the maintenance of an empty property database. The database will include all houses that have been empty for six months or longer. The database will be used to electronically map the location of empty houses in order to identify any concentrations.

The public can report homes that are suspected to be empty via the 'Report it Empty' page on the Council's website. Suspected empty properties can also be reported to the Private Sector Housing Team by telephone. Once the report has been made the Council will investigate the ownership of the property and if necessary make contact with the owner. The Private Sector Housing team may also receive reports of empty homes from other departments of the Council such as planning or building control, or outside organisations such as the police or fire service.

### **Annual targets**

The Council's annual target for restoring empty homes back into use is 50. This is 10% of the estimated number of long term empty properties in Ipswich. Based on previous results, it is expected that the majority (80%) of empty homes will be brought back to use as a result of encouragement letters sent to owners. It is expected that 10% will be brought back into use via grants and 10% via enforcement action.

### **Identifying and implementing solutions**

Due to the varying reasons for a house being left vacant there are no "quick fix" solutions to the problem of empty properties. The Council has a range of options available to it for dealing with empty homes and will endeavour to initially advise owners on the ways they can bring a property back into use.

Where an empty property is causing a nuisance or is affecting neighbouring houses the Council will make use of current legal powers to minimise any nuisance whilst it continues to progress bringing the property back into use. This action may include securing the property up or carrying out works in default to rectify disrepair that is affecting neighbouring properties e.g. dangerous structure, broken sewer.

Where a property has been empty for longer than six months the Council will contact the owner to ask what they plan to do with the house and offer advice and assistance to help them return the property back into use. If the owner does not respond or does not appear to be taking steps to bring the house back into use, the Council will consider making use of one of the following options to ultimately bring the property back into use:

### **Empty Dwelling Management Order**

When a property has been unoccupied for at least 12 months and the Council feels that the property is unlikely to be occupied in the near future the Council will consider making an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO).

An EDMO allows the Council to effectively 'step into the shoes' of the owner of an unoccupied dwelling. The Council considers EDMO's to be a significant tool in tackling empty property, in particular, preventing it falling into a state of disrepair and becoming a nuisance to neighbours.

An EDMO will be used when the property is in a habitable condition, or can be made habitable at a reasonable cost, and is likely to become occupied if an EDMO is made.

Private Sector Housing will work in partnership with Ipswich Borough Homes who will take over the management of any properties that are subject to an EDMO. Those on the Council's housing register will be given the first opportunity of occupying the property.

### **Voluntary purchase**

Where contact has been made with an owner of a property that is in a very poor state of repair the Council will consider purchasing the property. A property that has been purchased voluntarily will be sold on to a housing association or developer, with an agreement that the property is brought back into use within an agreed period. The use of voluntary purchase will only be used where all other enforcement action is deemed unsuitable or not cost effective.

### **Enforced sale**

Where the Council is required to spend money in default of an owner after a statutory notice has been served and the owner does not repay the costs the Council will consider forcing a sale of the property to recover its costs.

### **Compulsory purchase**

The Council will consider the compulsory purchase of a property where it is satisfied that the house is in a poor state of repair, is unlikely to be brought back into use by the owner and a clear public benefit would be achieved.

Such a benefit would include provision of affordable housing, improving the appearance of the neighbourhood and reducing anti-social behaviour.

### **Private Sector Housing Grants**

The Council has a private sector housing renewal policy that offers assistance to landlords and first time buyers wishing to bring a property, that has been empty for longer than one year, back into use.

#### ***Grants for Landlords***

The Council will consider applications for Discretionary Landlord's Grants for the renovation of properties or flats above shops that have been empty for at least one year, to bring them back to a condition suitable for occupation.

#### ***Grants for first time buyers***

Applications for discretionary renovation grants will be considered to achieve the renovation of properties empty over one year where the applicant is a first time buyer and their mortgage is over 80% with savings less than £7000. Grant aid will be 80% of the cost of the works up to a maximum of £20000; on completion the property must meet the decent homes standard.

All grants are subject to the Council's application process, terms and conditions and the levels of grant aid available. Only in exceptional circumstances will the Council consider giving financial assistance once enforcement action has commenced against an owner.

### **Empty Homes Toolkit**

In April 2012 Private Sector Housing launched its Empty Homes Toolkit. The toolkit has:

- The most recent council tax list of properties that are registered with the council tax department as being empty,
- A calculator for scoring the level of risk an empty property poses to the community,
- A list of estate agents offering reduced fees for promoting and selling empty homes,
- A list of grants and schemes that are available to help bring empty homes back into use,
- A database of the long term empty properties in Ipswich and a record of the actions that have been taken to bring them back into use,
- A number of letter templates that can be used to generate letters that provide advice and assistance to empty property owners,
- A log of the properties that have been brought back into use.

The Council has found the toolkit effective. The Council will use the toolkit to find empty properties, bring them back into use and to monitor and evaluate progress. The toolkit is designed to include schemes that can resolve every reason for a property being empty. If the property owner wants to sell the property the toolkit has contact details for estate agents who offer reduced fees for the sale of empty homes. If the property owner would like to renovate and rent the property, the toolkit contains contact information to agencies such as Orwell who can help.

### **Approach to enforcement**

In line with the Council's enforcement policy a graduated approach to enforcement will be taken when bringing empty homes back into use. The Council will make contact with the owner if the property has been empty for more than six months. The Council will treat properties that have been empty for more than 12 months as a priority. The Council aim to educate first, encourage second and then if necessary enforcement action will be considered. This maximises the opportunity for the property owner to take action themselves to bring the property back into use, without enforcement action from the Council.