

# Empty Homes: Vacant & Dilapidated Property Initiative

## Empty Homes: the facts

A home that stands empty causes problems. If not secure, it can attract vandals and burglars. It can get overgrown and filled with rubbish, and can soon become an eyesore that is detrimental to the street and the value of surrounding properties. If it gets very run-down it can also become a safety risk and pose a danger to inquisitive and adventurous children. Empty homes bring down an area and threaten the health of the local community.

Government statistics show that at the time of the 2001 Census there were 727,000 (or 3.2% of the total) empty homes in England and Wales. The Government has therefore set targets for councils to address the problem of empty properties. These include:

- a national target of reducing the percentage of empty homes to 3% or below;
- a national target that by 2008, 60% of new housing should be built on brownfield land or by the conversion of existing buildings.

In 2004, Liverpool had 15,964 vacant properties - a percentage of 7.6%, over double the national average. Of these, 13,284 (6.3%) were long-term voids (had been empty for 6 months or more).

## What is the Council doing about it?

Liverpool has a problem, in common with many other northern cities, in that it has a high proportion of pre-1919 terraced homes which do not meet modern requirements or aspirations. The Housing Market Renewal Initiative has been developed to tackle our failing housing market in the north and eastern suburbs of the city - this will involve the clearance of many of these unwanted houses and replacing them with newer and a greater range of property types which people want.

However, HMRI does not cover everywhere in the city, and there are a large proportion of houses in private ownership which are vacant - and not necessarily traditional pre-1919 terraced houses. A specific empty homes Best Value Performance Indicator was introduced in April 2000 requiring the Council to record the proportion of private sector dwellings, vacant at April 1 each year, that are returned into occupation during the financial year as a result of action by the local authority. To tackle this problem, the Council introduced the Vacant & Dilapidated Property Initiative.

## What is the Vacant & Dilapidated Property Initiative?

This initiative was prompted by the desire amongst the community and members for the council to take more effective action against owners of vacant and dilapidated properties. The main complaints being received by the Council relate to:

- accumulations of rubbish
- infestations of vermin, in particular rats
- risk of injury to children and others who enter the building
- ruinous and neglected buildings being an eyesore and having a detrimental effect on the neighbourhood; and
- the property being frequented by drug users (who leave behind discarded hypodermic syringes)

Council members recognised such properties were having both a detrimental effect on the local environment, and were causing blight in certain areas. This in turn was increasing the risk of a downward spiral which, if left unaddressed, undermines the regeneration of Liverpool.

It is acknowledged that the high level of vacant properties, both commercial and residential, is mainly attributable to economic and demographic (population) factors which the Council and others were endeavouring to address through regeneration strategies. The need to develop other alternative measures was apparent, particularly with the difficulties in securing improvements of property using Housing Renewal Areas, Compulsory Purchase Order, House Renovation Grants or through acquisition and improvement by Housing Association.

The approach revolves around using various regulatory powers which it is hoped will force owners to consider the long term future of their property and bring them back into use.

Where owners cannot be traced and the Council incurs expenditure for the removal of rubbish, securing the property or other works, costs can be recovered by forcing the sale of the property through the Law of Property Act 1925.

This procedure has two main benefits in that:

- (a) The Council recovers its costs and;
- (b) A new owner is more likely to bring the property back into use.

Liverpool City Council with its "Vacants Initiative", was one of the first local authorities in the country to recognise this growing problem and to introduce a programme for tackling it. Since the formation of a Vacant Initiative Team within the Environmental Health Service and the launch of the programme in 1993, the initiative

has gathered momentum, resources and expertise. Approximately 10,000 vacant premises have thus far been dealt with under the initiative.

The process from inclusion of a premises in the initiative, to bringing it back into use as a dwelling can be a lengthy one, and in some cases this may take years. It is a process that can unfortunately be complex and require a great deal of resources. However, some cases can be effectively dealt with in a relatively short period of time. In 2004 the vacants team handled over 1200 complaints about vacant property and served over 500 statutory notices to remedy unsatisfactory conditions. In addition a total of 329 properties were brought back in to use and 63 were demolished.

However, there is still a great deal to do and we become aware of further empty premises on a daily basis.

### **What should you do if a vacant property near you is causing concern?**

You can report your concern about vacant property to:-

- **Correspondence Address:** The VACANTS INITIATIVE Community Services Team, Environmental Health & Trading Standards Service, Municipal Buildings Dale street Liverpool L2 2DH
- **Telephone:** 0151 225 4016/ 4017/ 4018
- **Fax:** 0151 225 4024
- **Email:** [environmental.health@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:environmental.health@liverpool.gov.uk)