

Response to Members Questions: Update on Empty Homes

16 September 2021

Cllr Topping

1. How many long term voids do we have empty and how long has the longest void stood empty and why?

11 long term voids the longest being just over 8 years. This longest case is a flat in a development that is being reviewed for redevelopment or sale. All these are vacant due to either major structural works or improvements planned such as conversion of a bedsit to a 1 bed flat or impending disposal. The length of vacancy has been impacted by project delays due to covid.

2. Do we have enough tradespeople and staff for getting voids repaired and back in occupation quickly? If not, what skill gaps do we have?

We have struggled to recruit general builders who can plaster/do brickwork etc. We still have 3 vacancies for these. We also have had vacancies for carpenters that we have now managed to fill after two rounds of trying to recruit. We also have had constraints on the numbers allowed in void properties due to COVID which has restricted numbers inside voids which in turn has prevented works being completed. We are going to review this as with everyone being double jabbed and working socially distancing the risk of losing staff should be reduced if there were a case of COVID

3. How many 5 and 10 year plus empty properties do we have in ES and can we have a 3 year picture to show what has happened over that time?

<u>Empty homes</u>	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	<u>2020/21</u>	Aug-21
Empty between 2 and 5 years	352*	343*	355*	253	247	199
Empty between 5 and 10 years				66	73	60
Empty 10+ years				*	38	46
TOTAL	352	343	355	319	358	305

* Breakdown not available for the years, only recorded after changes to bring in Council tax Premium at different levels for different vacancy lengths.

As can be seen from this table the numbers show a slight downward trend, apart from the pandemic year when so many housing projects halted. The rate at which properties are re-occupied is small and new properties are added each year meaning the problem is still a long way from being solved. The team has knowledge of a large number of properties, particularly those in the old Suffolk Coastal area, that have been empty for more than 5 years and an understanding of what the barriers are to reoccupation.

4. With reference to the “Legal” Section of the report, why has the Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) not been mentioned? Requisitioning of empty properties in wartime. The Housing Act 2004 allows local authorities to take out an EDMO to ensure empty property is used for housing. How many EDMO’s has WDC (formerly) and ES now taken out? If we have not used this option, why not?

The Housing Act does indeed allow for the, making of EDMOs, whereby the Council effectively takes over the property and can act as if they owned it, arranging works and reoccupation. However, the process is complex, requires a social housing partner to manage the property which, with an initial interim phase of only 12 months is difficult to secure as there is no long term certainty. There is also a requirement to work with the owner and the need for sign off by the Residential Property Tribunal. No EDMOs have been made in East Suffolk, the former authorities nor in the rest of Suffolk. Other options have always proved more compelling, however, EDMOs should have appeared in the report as an option.

5. How much funding do we get for bringing a previously uninhabited dwelling back into use as compared to how much NHB we get?

The only funding we get for bringing an empty home back into use is if there is a net increase in new homes. This is not a calculation that is easy to bring down to an individual property level. If Council Tax Premium is being charged on a Long Term Empty Property then once re-occupied the Council tax will return to normal rate, so up to 3 times less income.

6. With reference to the below EADT article on 17th April, how many dwellings in ES have become uninhabitable over the last 5 years and can we have a year on year picture to see how this has come about and compare.

EADT Article:

“East Suffolk has the largest number of empty homes for 2020 with 1,401, and when combined with the number of second homes (4,111) one in every 22 homes is without a permanent resident.

Long term empty and 2nd homes

2019	2020	%change	homes not in use
1126	1401	24	5512

Source Ministry of Housing Community and Local Government.

A spokesperson for **East Suffolk Council** said: "Empty properties can have an impact on local communities, attracting anti-social behaviour and raising concerns about neighbouring property values.

"Our Private Sector Housing Strategy sets out the importance of dealing with empty properties within the district and identifies several initiatives to help bring these properties back into use. This includes the offer of Discretionary Renovation Grants, support from our officers to put owners in touch with estate agents and auction houses, or, in the very worst scenarios, using legal powers to ensure properties are brought back into occupation.

"Whilst the total number of properties empty for more than six months has risen by 24%, this will include a large number of properties which are empty for a justifiable reason, such as renovation or family bereavement. Due to this, the council's Private Sector Housing team more actively focuses on those properties which have been empty for more than two years and are generally more problematic.

"Anyone who is aware of an empty property, particularly one which affects their local neighbourhood, is asked to contact the council's Private Sector Housing team."

The figures in this article include all the houses in "flux", in the housing market and empty whilst they are sold and renovated, and also all second homes. In the year quoted the figures were particularly high due to the impact of the pandemic - 1401. The current comparable figure is 1173, down by 228.

The table included in the response to question 3 above shows the fluctuation in long term empty homes. Not all long-term empty homes are uninhabitable some are just abandoned but, over time, their neglect leads to disrepair.

Clr Gooch

7. Do we use some kind of flow-diagram or chart to triage appropriate actions when properties become known to us?

Unfortunately, for the reasons detailed in the report, there is no active review of properties when we become aware they have been empty for a prolonged period, and therefore no triaging, as we do not have the resource to deal with them proactively. Our actions are likely to be limited to the annual letter detailing the help available, but leaving owners to respond. Our interventions are usually prompted by contact from an owner, or an issue impacting on neighbours that creates another priority. The example cases in Appendix A illustrate this.

8. How is the relationship between ESC and legal companies effected? Do we always use the same lawyers? Is there some kind of permanent contractual rate?

When we need to use legal companies to support compulsory purchase action the services would be procured under normal Council rules.

9. Is the communication to absent householders standardized in the form of a pack of information that gives them options?

We do have standard letters for initial contact but the uniqueness of each property we deal with means that standard approaches have been found to be ineffective. The owners are often wrestling with many other problems and standard packs of information are ignored, which is why resolution so often needs persistent and prolonged input to engage and build up trust, usually on a face-to-face basis. Once a single member of staff becomes the trusted individual, action follows. It is not a rational or logical decision to leave a valuable asset empty and it follows that many of those who own such properties have problems in approaching the solution, in that manner. Hence there is an added layer of complexity that must be dealt with and this requires significant time.

10. Do we use some kind of mediation service when the problem rests with disputes between parties?

This could be suggested but beyond our remit

11. How are budgets allocated for officer training and time? Is this decided on an annual basis?

All staff training is planned and agreed in line with HR policy with budget proposals for each year agreed in advance.

12. What specific actions are we able to take if the owner is residing in a care or nursing home because of diminished capacity and when there might be no power of attorney?

This is not a situation we have come up against. It is likely their home would not be classed as a long-term empty home as it would be furnished.

13. Has good practice in dealing with these cases been sought from other local authorities? Do we know how we compare with other similar profile LAs?

Yes, we are members of the Empty Homes Network where best practise is shared. We are particularly proud of the work we have done to partner with an auction house who provide extra support and discounted fees for empty homeowners who chose to use them, making the actual sale process so much simpler. The Council has officers with experience of successfully delivering empty homes programmes, but they are currently employed on other roles. Those authorities with dedicated empty homes officers achieve more than those without, for the reasons stated in the report.

14. Is any new national legislation on the cards?

No

