

RECYCLING THE CITY

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF EMPTY PROPERTIES

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Introduction

The principle of maximising the use of existing assets reaches to the very heart of the UK government policies for sustainable development. Despite this, however, there are currently over 718,000 empty homes in England alone, of which 310,000 have been empty for more than six months¹. 40,000 of these long-term empty homes are in London, where there are thousands of homeless households and where the need for affordable housing is generating severe economic and social pressures both locally and nationally.

Although the number of empty homes has reduced slightly in the last year, the number of long-term empty homes has continued to increase, despite huge efforts being made to encourage homeowners to bring them back into use. In addition there are thousands of other empty, decaying and redundant properties, both commercial and otherwise that currently blight our urban and rural environments. Estimates as to how many homes these could provide are in the order of 420,000².

The shortage of affordable housing and the impact of empty properties on local communities are two pressing reasons for addressing the issue of how to release the potential of empty properties. By bringing empty properties back into use these neglected assets can be used to improve the quality of life of many thousands of people, offer financial benefits to local authorities, property owners and the general public and make a significant contribution to government policies for a more sustainable future.

... there are currently over 718,000 empty homes in England alone, of which 310,000 have been empty for more than six months ...

The Consultation at St George's House was organised by the Building and Social Housing Foundation to look at how to better use empty properties to provide affordable housing and improve urban environments. Persons of experience and

1. Housing Investment Programme (HIP) Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix 2003 (ODPM, 2003)

2. Dwellings over and in shops in London (Civic Trust/LPAC, 1998), The English House Condition Survey (DETR, 1996) and National Land Use Database 2001.

expertise were brought together from around the world in order to share and develop ideas as to how to meet this challenge. Experience from the United States and Brazil, where similar issues are being addressed, provided a welcome external perspective.

This is the second in a series of three Consultations organised by BSHE, which look at how to better use existing assets to provide affordable homes in vibrant and healthy communities. The first of these consultations looked at the social assets and skills in local communities and how this potential can be realised through an asset-based approach to community development. The third consultation will address issues relating to the better use of land and how mechanisms such as community land trusts can be used to facilitate access to more affordable housing.

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A clear set of recommendations for action have been drawn up as a result of the deliberations of the participants at the Consultation, setting out a range of actions that need to be taken. The recommendations are set out on pages 33 - 38 and outline four broad areas for action: firstly, establishing national and local strategic frameworks; secondly, improving information and raising awareness; thirdly, improving the legal and financial tools currently available and fourthly, suggesting action to engage local communities in the process of bringing empty properties back into use. Contact points for the organisations referred to in the text, and others, can be found on pages 39 - 42.

Recognising the potential of empty properties

What constitutes an empty property?

There is no recognised definition of what constitutes an empty property but the term commonly refers to three major property types: empty houses and flats; disused offices, institutional and commercial properties; and empty space above ground floor shops. The terms 'empty' and 'vacant' are used synonymously throughout this report, as are 'property' and 'building'.

82 per cent of the estimated 718,000 empty homes in England are privately owned and the remainder are publicly owned, primarily by the Ministry of Defence, the NHS, local authorities and Registered Social Landlords¹. Although the overall number of empty homes has decreased in recent years, the number of homes that have been empty for six months or more continues to increase. There are currently 5,000 hectares of empty commercial space² and an unknown quantity of under-utilised commercial space. This is at a time when 95,000 families are living in temporary

accommodation³, the rate of household formation is 162,000 per annum⁴ and only 143,000 new dwelling units were completed in 2003 - 04⁵.

Why are properties empty?

Given that the ownership patterns of the different types of empty property as well as the reasons, motivations and needs of owners differ so starkly, it is not surprising that there are many different, and often complex, reasons for property to stand empty. In the case of empty homes, the operation of the housing market means that homes in the process of being sold or rented are often empty for a short period. Those that have been earmarked as part of a regeneration programme or for demolition will also stand empty, often for years.

... there are many different, and often complex, reasons for property to stand empty ...

1. DTLR, EMP 26, Annex 1, Table 2 (DTLR, 2000)
2. National Land Use Database, 2001
3. ODPM Statistical Release 2004/0055, 15 March 2004
4. ODPM Housing Statistics, Table 401 (average 2001 - 2021 based on 1996 projections)
5. ODPM Statistical Release 2004/0122, 13 May 2004

There are, however, many other reasons for homes to be classified as long-term empty, most commonly:

- Basic economic factors of low demand or because the cost to renovate and bring back into use is not supported by subsequent cash flow.
- Investment holding – owners are waiting for market values to increase and wish to retain the option for sale at the peak of the market.
- Mobility holding – homes are purchased well in advance of moving to enable owners to relocate at short notice.
- Abandonment – generally accepted as extreme in the UK, typically found in areas of low housing demand.
- Dilapidation – renovation work is needed to make the property habitable and the owner cannot afford to, or will not, carry it out.
- Ownership of the property is unresolved or unknown and subject to lengthy legal processes.

- Co-habitation holding – newly formed households often retain their former homes until personal circumstances dictate otherwise.
- Shifting institutional needs mean that public property, such as Ministry of Defence homes, are no longer needed.

In areas of high housing demand empty homes are typically scattered in a pepper-pot fashion, whereas in areas of low housing demand they can be frequently found in larger blocks. When a number of empty homes are clustered together in this way it is all too easy for a culture of under-investment to take root and a spiral of decline to set in, as confidence in the area is lost. It is simplistic to say that high demand is confined to the south of the UK and low demand to the north. Indeed, the two types of demand often exist close together, with rapid change between the two possible.

A survey carried out by the Empty Homes Agency and MORI¹ to ask owners of empty homes why they do not sell or let to gain rental income showed three main responses: firstly, ignorance of the business case for bringing the property back into use and the assistance currently available to do so; secondly, preference for a different form of assistance and thirdly, deliberate intention to keep the property empty.

This latter group is the largest and whilst it includes those holding property speculatively, it is important to recognise that many people prefer to keep their property empty for fear of losing control over it or having the problems of managing difficult tenants.

Empty commercial and institutional property and empty space above shops exist for different reasons, relating primarily to economic and functional issues in addition to some of those factors leading to homes standing empty.

The advantages of bringing empty property back into use

There are many advantages to bringing empty properties back into use and these accrue to owners, local and central government and the community at large:

PROPERTY OWNERS

- Increased income from sale or rent of the home or commercial property that was formerly empty.
- Reduced costs in terms of the property standing empty (insurance, security and maintenance).
- Increase in the capital value of residential property through the use of grant aid.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- Improved quality and choice of housing to help meet strategic housing objectives.
- Increased income from council tax and business rates.
- Cost savings in environmental health departments.
- Preservation of local historic properties.
- Reduced costs of addressing homelessness in their areas.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- Catalyst for wider area regeneration through the creation of property market confidence, breaking a spiral of decline that is easily entered and hard to get out of.
- Increased availability of housing stock in the local area.
- Reduced crime and nuisance in local neighbourhoods.
- No reduction in local property values due to being in the vicinity of derelict or boarded-up property¹.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

- Meeting political commitments to create sustainable communities, use of brownfield sites and the provision of affordable housing.
- Reduced costs for police and fire authorities.
- Reduced costs of tackling homelessness.

Reducing barriers to recycling empty properties

In order to begin to bring empty properties back into use it is important to understand the barriers that currently act as an impediment to doing so.

These barriers can be unintentional as well as intentional. Identifying them is the first step towards their reduction or removal.

BARRIER	DETAIL
Lack of information and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of understanding at the local level as to why properties are empty. • Registers of empty properties, if kept, are rarely up to date or publicly available. • Owners have inaccurate knowledge of short-term tenancies, thus discouraging interim or short-term use of empty property. • Many owners lack the management or other skills needed to maintain their properties properly and in a cost-effective manner. • Many owners do not know that grants are available to help improve empty properties, nor are they aware of the financial case for restoring their property to use. • There are difficulties in tracking ownership of some empty properties.

BARRIER	DETAIL
Legal barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some existing legal tools, such as compulsory purchase orders, are too slow and complex to be easily used. Others are inflexible and weak. • Existing legal powers such as Public Request Ordering Disposal are not widely known or used, nor do they extend to private property. • There is no mandatory obligation on local authorities to have an empty property strategy and this creates a fragmented picture for policy formation purposes. • The provisions of the Data Protection Act prevent local authorities disclosing ownership details to prospective purchasers who contact them.
Financial barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The possibility of speculative gain provides a strong financial incentive for owners to keep their properties empty in areas with rapidly rising prices. • Costs of renovating and bringing the property back into use are high. • There is a lack of dedicated funding for empty property work in local authorities. • There are no tax incentives to bring empty property back into use and disincentives, such as escalating tax penalties, to keep it empty. • VAT at 17.5 per cent on improvement work is a strong disincentive compared to zero-rated new build construction, although a lower rate currently applies for renovation of long-term empty property and conversion of former commercial space to residential use. • There are complicated funding mechanisms for work on empty properties, with funds coming from a range of different sources. • Properties in low demand areas may have low market value or cash flow incapable of supporting the cost of bringing the property back into use.

BARRIER

DETAIL

Isolation and lack of support for local communities and property owners

- Many local authorities are not responsive to local communities who want to take action to deal with empty properties in their local area.
- There is a lack of flexible support packages to meet the different needs of owners.
- Lack of skills, time and financial resources in many local authorities prevent them working with local communities or owners of empty properties.
- There is a shortage of organisations willing to act as intermediaries / managing agents between empty property owners and social housing tenants.

Inertia

- There is a lack of strategic thinking about the re-use of empty property as part of housing strategy.
- Bureaucratic obstacles and red tape discourage community action.
- Delays in bringing regeneration projects to fruition and other planning blights result in properties standing empty for many years.
- There is a lack of leadership by central and local government on empty properties, including little action being taken to bring back into use the 18 per cent of empty properties that are owned by public and social sector landlords.
- There are dispersed departmental responsibilities in local authorities for dealing with empty properties (including environmental health, planning, building control, housing, economic development, council tax and rating and environmental services).

An external perspective

Addressing the issue of empty properties in the United States

The parallels between the British and American experience with respect to most urban redevelopment issues, and empty properties in particular, are both striking and significant. Exact numbers are not known but there are hundreds of thousands of empty properties in the USA. Detroit for example has over 50,000 empty properties and there are 26,000 in Philadelphia¹. There are even many such properties in flourishing cities such as Houston. A large number of these have been abandoned in the sense that the owners have simply walked away, relinquishing any responsibility for them. It is a huge problem and there are a variety of public and private responses at local and national level.

A number of organisations involved with community development, smart growth and planning came together to form the National Vacant Properties Campaign that is now actively mobilising community level private sector action to raise awareness and

understanding whilst drawing on those government resources and schemes that are available. Whilst there are many programmes and activities to combat empty properties, very few American cities actually have an empty property strategy. This compares to two thirds of all English local authorities².

The following distinctions are made between empty properties in the USA:

- Whether or not the properties have a clear re-use potential.
- The scale of abandonment, ranging from isolated properties to huge swaths of open space where abandoned properties have been demolished.
- The type of market conditions – i.e. strong or weak housing markets. These broadly correspond to what are termed high and low housing demand situations in the UK.

Four basic approaches are used in the USA to deal with empty properties, determined by the reason for abandonment. These include the following:

- Motivation – motivating the empty property owners to do right by their properties and communities. In some cases this can be done voluntarily, in others it has to be compulsory.
- Individual investment – using individual investment as an alternative to public sector investment.
- Scattered site re-use and redevelopment – used where the building fabric of a neighbourhood is largely intact.
- Large-scale redevelopment where abandonment is already endemic – creating a market for a neighbourhood by changing the character of the neighbourhood through this process.

There is no single body of legislation to deal with empty properties in the United States and individual states have developed their own legislation. One of the key issues from the standpoint of the local authority

or community is whether or not the legal and economic ability to deal with the empty properties exists. The more progressive statutory position adopted by some states is to determine whether or not an owner has neglected his property and allowed it to become a nuisance to his neighbours or community. Where this is the case it is assumed that the owner has forfeited a significant part of the 'right' to property ownership and the local authority or community has a duty to assert control of the situation. This position departs from the common law principle of evidence of an intent to abandon that still applies in many states.

Legal and financial controls on empty properties vary widely between states but typically are more stringent than in the UK and include the following:

- **Tax foreclosure laws** permit unpaid property taxes to be converted into a lien on the property and this lien can be exercised by the local authority as the basis for foreclosing on the property and taking title to it. It is used in varying degrees in different states and is probably the most widely used tool for gaining control over properties in the USA.

- Compulsory purchase, known as **eminent domain** in the USA, is a quicker and easier tool to use than in the UK, although is now seldom used for community development purposes. There are two main categories – 'spot blight' eminent domain, i.e. the taking of a specific abandoned property on the grounds that it is blighting its surroundings, and 'quick take' eminent domain, i.e. the power to gain control of the property more or less immediately and reuse the property even though a dispute with the owner over the valuation of the property remains unresolved.
- **Empty property receivership**, another extremely valuable tool used in a few American states, enables a local authority to go to court and get permission to act in place of an owner and rehabilitate a property where there is good reason for the property to be rehabilitated rather than risk ultimate demolition by neglect. Once the property has been rehabilitated the owner has the option of buying it back including a fee for the work carried out or the property can be sold under the court's supervision to be re-used in the public interest.

A city-wide approach in New York to bringing empty property back into use

In the 1970s and 1980s the city of New York had thousands of empty properties in every borough, a number of which had been burnt out. Many were taken by the New York City (NYC) government in pursuit of tax arrears and then abandoned or were taken after abandonment. Only the poorest tenants tended to remain in the outer borough neighbourhoods and in neighbourhoods like Harlem and Lower East Side. By the mid 1980s NYC had acquired about 100,000 dwelling units through tax foreclosure proceedings, half of which were empty and the other half occupied. The average amount of city tax arrears for each property was \$36,000, yet NYC spent on average \$2.2 million to acquire, manage, repair and dispose of each vested property, at a total cost approaching \$12 billion, including foregone tax revenues. Each property was held on average for 19 years.

In the mid 1980s New York City's own municipal housing agency, still reeling from the federal cutback on housing expenditure, began its own municipally-financed effort. The city identified housing as having a public purpose and started to float bonds to support the redevelopment of many of its empty properties.

Over a ten-year period it spent \$4.4 billion received from bond funds and rental income. It used a host of different programs designed to address the problems of buildings with different physical and neighbourhood characteristics. The Neighbourhood Enterprise Program and the Tenant Interim Lease Apartment Purchase program are amongst those used to rehabilitate and privatise occupied dwelling units:

- **Neighbourhood Entrepreneurs Program**

This enables small, locally-based private property managers to manage and subsequently own clusters of occupied and empty NYC-owned properties. By focusing on neighbourhood-based entrepreneurs, local real estate capacity is strengthened and quality management and maintenance for the properties is ensured.

- **Tenant Interim Lease Apartment Purchase Program**

This provides assistance and training to organised tenant associations in occupied NYC-owned properties of three or more dwelling units to develop economically self-sufficient, low-income tenant-owned cooperatives. Tenant associations enter into a lease with NYC

to maintain and manage the properties in which they live. The cooperatives only require each household to pay \$250 for their units, but more importantly require an investment of time, commitment, and participation and this has been a very popular and successful programme.

Between 1987 and 2002 about 50,000 vacant dwelling units were rehabilitated in New York City of which 42,000 were city-owned. The main programmes used to address the issue of vacant dwelling units included:

- **Vacant Building RFP Program**

The city issued a series of requests for proposals, each offering a cluster of vacant buildings available for rehabilitation. Proposals were considered on the basis of the project cost and projected rent levels and the capabilities of the developer. The properties were transferred to the winning developer for \$1 each and a mix of public 1% financing and below market loans. The program was targeted at middle- and moderate-income renters and was the workhorse of the rehabilitation effort.

- **LISC/Enterprise Program**

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Enterprise Foundation are two national not-for-profit intermediaries operating throughout the USA. These specialise in raising private sector capital by selling Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and channelling the proceeds to local development groups, who they also provide with technical assistance. This programme was targeted to moderate- and lower-income renting households.

- **Construction Management Program**

This was aimed at rehabilitating large swathes of empty properties in the most abandoned neighbourhoods. Full-service construction management companies were awarded building clusters containing from 800-1,200 empty dwelling units and capital subsidies of over \$100,000 were provided. This was targeted at moderate- and low-income families and homeless people.

- **Special Initiatives Program**

The rehabilitation work in this programme was supervised by city government employees and provided tenanted accommodation for moderate- and low-income households and homeless families.

There were also a variety of smaller-scale niche programmes aimed at empty properties including the HomeWorks-Home Ownership Program, under which small, empty city-owned properties are rehabilitated to create one- to four-family homes for sale, with sub-let options on the larger homes, to individual homebuyers at market prices. The builders generally work with lenders to provide mortgages with low deposits and the lenders take the potential income from the rental apartments into account in qualifying homebuyers for loans, thus making many of the homes affordable to moderate- and middle-income buyers.

The Supportive Housing Loan Programme provides financing to not-for-profit organisations to develop supportive housing for homeless single adults, including people suffering from disabilities such as mental illness and AIDS. Limited funding is available to create housing for families with special needs and young people coming out of foster care. It covers both new build and rehabilitation.

These highly imaginative, but very capital- and management-intensive programmes in New York City have produced the following results:

- There has been a 70 per cent reduction in publicly owned empty dwelling units from 44,000 to an all-time low of 13,278.
- Tax delinquent properties are now conveyed to responsible private owners within two years.
- Real estate tax delinquency has halved in the five years from 1996 to 2001.
- NYC has received \$1.4 billion from tax lien sales (as a result of a policy to avoid taking tax lien properties into NYC ownership).
- There has been significant cost avoidance.
- Housing stock is now in better condition than it has been at any time in the last century.

It is important to note that the initiatives in New York have benefited from an exceptionally strong property market during the last ten years or more and there is continuing high demand for housing space. Current approaches look to utilise very small plots and individual buildings, to allow residential use in manufacturing

zones, to develop at higher density on low density sites and to use land at other public facilities such as hospitals. It is recognised that the market conditions and the availability of financial resources makes bringing empty properties back into use easier in New York than elsewhere.

Recycling empty properties in Brazilian cities

With 82 per cent of the country's population currently living in urban areas, the Brazilian Ministry of Cities was created in January 2003 in response to a long-standing demand from urban social movements, academia, NGOs and professional associations. It seeks to address current issues affecting the cities of Brazil through an integrated approach to urban development. The Ministry is composed of four National Secretariats: Housing, Environmental Sanitation, Urban Programmes and Transportation and Urban Mobility.

Through a participatory planning process in partnership with all spheres of government and civil society, the Ministry of Cities aims to promote the sustainable use and occupation of central urban areas whilst contributing toward the reduction of the Brazilian housing deficit, currently estimated

at 6.5 million dwellings. Among the priorities established by the Ministry in the areas of housing and urban reform are the regularisation of land and housing tenure in urban areas and the restoration and conversion of empty properties in city centres into housing for low-income households.

A range of tools, legislation and financial mechanisms have been developed to provide affordable housing alternatives in city areas that have lost part of their population in the last several years yet remain rich in urban infrastructure:

- The recently approved **Statute of the City** was developed over a number of years through a dynamic process of struggle for urban reform, with organised civil society as its driving force. It secures the principle of the social function of property and of the city and establishes a requirement for community participation in urban management at the local level.

It is considered worldwide as a unique example of progressive urban legislation.

Under this statute emphasis is placed upon the residential use of empty properties allied to the preservation of architectural heritage. A range of tools has been put in place to ensure that urban properties fulfil their social function: empty or under-utilised properties in urban areas are subject to the payment of Urban Building and Land Taxes (IPTU) that are progressive over time. In some cases privately owned empty properties that do not fulfil their social function may be acquired by the government through compulsory purchase.

... the National Conference of Cities enables the active participation of civil society in the formulation of public policy for urban reform ...



Cortiço Senador Pompeu, Rio de Janeiro

Before

After

- Funding mechanisms have been put into place to allow for the reconstruction of dilapidated properties, the rehabilitation of empty properties for multi-family residential use and housing construction on empty or under-utilised lots. One of the principal funding mechanisms allowing for the conversion of empty properties into housing for low-income groups is the **PAR Housing Leasing Programme**, through which funds from the CAIXA Federal Development Bank are used to purchase, restore and adapt empty properties for residential use. These are subsequently leased to low-income households at low monthly rates with the option to buy after 15 years.
- **The National Conference of the Cities**, established by the Brazilian Federal Government, provides a space for discussion at the local, state and

national levels amongst the various stakeholders – including government representatives, urban social movements, labour unions, banks and lending institutions, NGOs, private developers and contractors – and enables the active participation of civil society in the formulation of public policy for urban reform.

- A mapping process is currently being carried out to determine the number and location of empty properties in Brazil's most populous cities.

The programme is currently operating in 20 of the largest Brazilian cities and the Ministry of Cities is looking to increase this to 40 by 2005. Studies are currently underway to facilitate collective management, public/private partnerships and the rehabilitation of federally-owned empty properties for residential use.



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Unlocking the potential of empty properties

Re-use of empty properties as part of a strategic framework

The re-use of empty residential and commercial properties should be recognised as playing an integral part in housing and urban regeneration policies at both national and local levels. All too often in the past its contribution to a comprehensive and sustainable housing policy has not been recognised and valuable assets have been wasted.

NATIONAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The principle of maximising use of existing assets reaches to the very heart of government policies on sustainable development and creating sustainable communities. The UK government recognises the value of the re-use of empty properties in its Sustainable Communities Plan and is currently introducing legislation to provide additional powers to help bring empty properties back into use. The critical importance of political leadership and support at both local and national levels

cannot be emphasised too highly in ensuring that its value to meeting housing need continues to be recognised.

Taxation and regulatory frameworks need to be addressed at national level and will very much determine the tools that are available to local authorities and local communities to deal with empty properties. The issue of resources to carry out the work also needs to be addressed at a national level. No matter how visionary or appropriate the policies, without sufficient resources to carry them out little will actually happen.

Since 18 per cent of all empty homes are currently owned by public and social sector landlords¹, there is scope for government to give a good example to private sector landlords by bringing some of this property back into use, thereby adding to the available housing stock, as well as sending an appropriate message. The value of integrated government policy and action cannot be over-emphasised.

1. DTLR, EMP 26, Annex 1, Table 2 (DTLR, 2000)

REGIONAL AND LOCAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS

With widely varying local conditions, strategies for combating empty properties have to be developed at the regional and local levels. These need to be developed within a strategic framework, the key elements of which include the following:

- Identifying how empty private properties are brought to a local authority's attention.
- Ensuring that it is the rule rather than the exception that a strategy is in place to deal with private sector empty property.
- Deploying sufficient resources to enable the strategy to be implemented.
- Addressing the issue of empty property in public sector ownership.

It is important that empty property strategies are integrated with the long-term housing and broader urban regeneration plans for an area are based on consultation with local communities and other local stakeholders. It is currently not mandatory for local authorities in the UK to have an

empty property strategy, although Best Value Performance Indicator 64 requires local authorities to record annually the number of re-occupied empty dwellings; empties demolished and new dwellings created by converting redundant commercial space. At present one third of all local authorities in England do not have an empty property strategy. Rather than require local authorities to produce a separate empty property strategy this can be included as a section of the annual housing strategy. Careful consideration should be given to improving random individual properties in an area to assess whether there is a clear need for that type of property, the impact the improvement would have and whether such action is part of an overall strategy of local area renewal.

Comprehensive information on empty properties in an area is crucial in developing a local authority's empty property strategy. This could include information on condition, ownership, tax arrears, and criminal activity. Much of this can be gathered from a range of information that local authorities already collect, such as house condition surveys and council tax information, with up-to-date input from the general public and well-publicised telephone hotlines and web-based systems. A good example of a web-

based system in the USA that allows citizens as well as government officials to gain access is Neighbourhood Knowledge Los Angeles¹. A recently launched initiative in London is a website on which empty properties are placed and advertised for sale by six West London boroughs². If successful the intention is to extend this pilot initiative throughout the UK.

The empty property strategy developed by a local authority needs to state how it can work with owners on a voluntary basis to bring empty homes back into use. It also needs to set out the compulsory options that are available if voluntary schemes are not successful. Experience has shown that appealing to the financial rather than altruistic motivation of the property owner is more successful.

Such schemes, whether voluntary or compulsory, will not take place without funding. In addition to the various renovation grants that are currently available, other possible options include:

- Using the additional council tax raised by abolishing the council tax empty property discount to fund empty property work.
- Using funding raised under S.106 planning gain requirements on developers for revitalising empty

homes rather than just for new construction.

- Levering in more capital from the private sector on the basis of the strength of the long-term business case for bringing empty property back into use.

The role of intermediary organisations

Intermediaries play an important part in taking responsibility for the rehabilitation process and the on-going management of empty properties once they have been brought back into use. They are able to bring professional skills and confidence that the empty property owner may not have. This is particularly important in re-using space above shops, where the lack of intermediaries to facilitate the process is one of the key reasons why the capital allowance scheme established to encourage this type of re-use has been extremely under-utilised. Retailers want to concentrate their efforts on their commercial activity rather than get involved in property letting in which they have little experience or expertise. They therefore rely on intermediary organisations to carry out this work. As significant social housing providers in the UK, housing associations are the obvious facilitators and managing agents for this kind of work but have to date been

reluctant to take on the additional workload of restoring and managing private empty property. This work is both labour and capital intensive, generally provides small numbers of additional properties and does not significantly strengthen the asset base of associations.

Some social housing providers such as the Hyde Housing Association and East Thames Housing Group are making a real success of managing schemes where private sector empty properties have been brought back into use. However, such experience is still piecemeal across the UK and more social housing providers need to be encouraged to become involved in this work. One possible means of encouraging this would be to link the development role of social housing providers with that of managing an empty homes scheme for a local authority.

Increasingly the private sector is recognising that, with government grant funding to improve the property and a guaranteed income stream through social housing tenancies, bringing empty properties back into use represents a good business proposition and they are more willing to become involved. Other possible intermediaries are local community groups and Local Strategic Partnerships. One such intermediary is **Common Ground Community** (CGC) that was established in

New York City in 1990 as a non-profit housing and development organisation whose mission is to solve homelessness.

CGC has acted as a highly successful facilitator in bringing together a range of stakeholders and funders to restore empty buildings and provide accommodation for low-income workers and homeless individuals. The first projects that it undertook were large-scale refurbishment and redevelopment of large historic properties to provide permanent or transitional housing for single adults who were homeless or working on low incomes. These early projects included the restoration of the Times Square and Prince George Hotels.

Before CGC acquired the Times Square Hotel it had been used as a mass shelter of last resort by the city. Entire floors had been burnt out and sealed up. Two hundred frail and vulnerable older people, many with mental health problems, were still living there. Through an innovative and imaginative approach, CGC converted it to create 652 permanent bed-sits, half for low-income working people and half for homeless individuals, providing on-site support for those who needed it. The Times Square Business Improvement District that had just been established helped to marshal political will to carry out some positive projects in the neighbourhood. Some prominent and national brand

businesses took commercial space on the ground floor, drawn by the social mission of the organisation. Financing for the work was put together from a range of sources, including the city's Supportive Housing Loan Program and historic rehabilitation tax credits.

CGC's second major restoration project was the Prince George Hotel in Lower Manhattan. After conversion this provided 416 bed-sits, and as in the Times Square Hotel half of these were for homeless individuals and the other half for low-income workers in the city. As with the Times Square building it was in bankruptcy, the neighbours hated it and it had been used as a shelter of last resort for homeless families.

CGC also provides decent cheap accommodation for single homeless adults in the city in clean and pleasant cubicle-type lodging houses at \$7 a night.

In all its work CGC provides support to help residents with the problems they face in their daily lives and to move on eventually to more independent accommodation.

CGC is now looking beyond the large-scale redevelopment approach used previously and is seeking to adopt a neighbourhood-based approach and prevent homelessness occurring by using the existing housing stock in a more targeted and efficient way. It has been found that there is a high correlation between the neighbourhoods that have the highest numbers of homeless families and those with the highest number of empty properties, therefore giving the greatest opportunity for housing people in the very neighbourhoods where they are becoming homeless. CGC is increasingly recognising that the only way to work is to develop a community-based strategy that seeks to intervene with landlords and family members to mediate the tensions or arrears and other situations that are leading



Common Ground Community – The Prince George Before After

people to the brink of homelessness. There is very great value in keeping people in their community, keeping children in the schools that they've been attending and enhancing whatever social capital and relational networks families have in those communities.

Unlocking the potential of empty properties by unlocking the potential of communities

Any property left empty for a long period of time will begin to have an impact on the local area. As its physical condition deteriorates it will begin to affect neighbouring properties both directly, through damp and infestation, and indirectly, through the effects on their value and marketability. Empty property tends to act as a focus for petty crime and nuisance behaviour and boarding up property to prevent this only serves to emphasise and reinforce the decline of an area.

... it is vital to have real engagement from the local community to interact with and inform the higher-level processes and opportunities ...

Where there is a strong housing market empty properties deny housing opportunities to others and add to the upward pressure on house prices.

Involving local communities in decision-making and action relating to empty properties in the neighbourhood presents an opportunity both to deal with the empty properties and to strengthen the local community. Any programme concerned with recycling empty properties should therefore ensure that it effectively engages and uses the people within the community. Providing skills training for local young people, employing local builders and sourcing local materials all help to strengthen local economies and enhance their own potential for the future. Approaches used will need to vary according to the individual economic and social circumstances of the community, but it is vital to have real engagement from the local community to interact with and inform the higher-level processes and opportunities.

Engaging local communities in respect of the empty properties in their neighbourhood has the following advantages:

- It stimulates the interest of the local community and generates a sense of ownership of the process, as well as of the properties themselves.
- It helps to ensure that people have the opportunity to express their own interests and desires with respect to the empty properties in their communities. For example, additional open space or community facilities may well be more appropriate uses for the empty properties than affordable housing, particularly in areas of low housing demand.
- It helps to ensure that low-income populations or homeless individuals are not inadvertently or deliberately excluded from the benefits being created through regeneration.
- It helps to address the fundamental barrier of apathy, of people not believing in the credibility of the system for whatever reason and not really engaging in a process, regardless of how well intentioned it may be.

One of the main barriers faced in local communities is the complexity of the funding process. It is frequently necessary to make applications to a variety of funding sources and it is particularly difficult for inexperienced local communities to do this. Since simplifying national funding mechanisms is a complex process, it may be better to establish a separate simplified funding stream particularly for local communities that are seeking to deal with the empty properties in their neighbourhood.

... involving local communities in decision-making and action relating to empty properties in the neighbourhood presents an opportunity both to deal with the empty properties and to strengthen the local community ...

The following mechanisms, if established, could facilitate greater community involvement in the process of restoring empty properties. This clearly works best within small local areas rather than when properties are scattered over a large area. Boosting the skills and indeed numbers of those dedicated to working with empty properties in local authorities is therefore crucial to this being achieved.

- Appoint trained and salaried community 'ombudsmen' to work at city level and be accountable to the local community rather than the government. These ombudsmen would act as a focal point and gather information, make funding bids and act as an agent of community development.
- Introduce community-planning processes, such as Planning for Real® to allow communities to produce the draft plan for their local community, rather than simply being asked to comment on a plan developed by others. This will need to be developed within specified rules and constraints in order that the final plan has a reasonable chance of implementation.
- Create community awareness through the use of the local media and community exchange systems, access to information on what is happening in the area and education in citizenship.

An example of a community group that has been working in its local area to restore empty property is the **Canopy Housing Project**, which began in the Hyde Park area in Leeds in 1998. This area is only a 20-minute walk from the centre of the flourishing city of Leeds but its housing stock was in a poor state of repair and many of the properties were empty. In all there were 723 Victorian through-terraced and back-to-back properties and 594 of these were classified as unfit for habitation.

Whilst the local community identified housing and youth crime as the major issues it faced, apathy had prevented any change from taking place. Canopy served as a catalyst for practical community activity on housing that was later supplemented by the local authority's larger regeneration initiative. By 2004 most of the properties had been improved and house prices have increased dramatically.

Canopy works with homeless individuals between the ages of 16 – 25 to renovate boarded up, derelict properties. These young people come from a variety of backgrounds, for example those leaving the care system, women fleeing domestic abuse and refugees.

Prospective tenants are involved in both the work and decision-taking for the improvement of the property, the practical work taking between ten to twelve weeks of voluntary involvement. Whilst working on their home the prospective tenant gets to know people from the local area who are also working on the property as volunteers. A social network is established that serves to provide support and prevent isolation for the young tenant.

The project has an open-access resource building within walking distance from its properties (itself a formerly empty property). This serves as a meeting place for tenants and volunteers, as well as providing facilities (kitchen, laundry, computers etc.) The resource building and the sense of ownership over the creation of their home, as well as the social network, help to sustain tenancies. The project tenancies show a high rate of survival. In 2003, for example, 90 per cent of the projects' tenants have moved back into education, accessed training or gained employment.

Canopy has involved the younger and often excluded members of its community in its work on housing. With over 60 young people volunteering on refurbishments a year, the project provided a supportive and

friendly environment where people could feel valued, learn new skills and feel a sense of ownership and pride in what they were doing. The project accessed formal training opportunities for volunteers including the creation of an apprenticeship scheme, provision of a social focus and support in the form of advocacy and advice, help with obtaining benefits and re-engaging with education and employment.

Neighbours are relieved to see that the empty properties are being brought back into use and they also see the younger people within the community doing something constructive and worthwhile. For the first five years of its life Canopy depended on funding raised from private charitable trusts. Now it is self-reliant through rental and support income. The cost of the initial capital works on the properties has been typically funded through social housing grant from a local housing association that retains ownership of the properties but lets them on a 15-year lease to Canopy.

The key to the success of the project is keeping it small and local and, crucially, involving the local community, especially the young people, and building trust where there was none before. Barriers faced by the project have included the complicated

leasing process and the delays arising from the various bureaucratic processes. Rising house prices in the area have also made it more difficult to acquire property.

Canopy has acted as a stimulus to community work within inner city areas of Leeds with volunteers going on to establish two environmental projects that convert outside toilet areas, making them safer and more useful spaces and also establishing a similar housing project in the Beeston area of Leeds. In 2003 the project had the involvement of 120 volunteers from the local areas where it worked. Typically, these included individuals facing exclusion, long-term unemployment, and people with learning and mental health difficulties as well as addiction problems. Students and older members of the community also contributed with practical skills that they wish to share.

An American example of work being carried out by a local community to restore empty properties is that of the **St Joseph Carpenter Society** in East Camden, New Jersey. This is a not-for-profit organisation supported by the Campbell Soup Company – the last remaining major employer with its head office in Camden. The Society works with the local community in the deprived neighbourhoods of East Camden. Over the last 15 years it has acquired and

rehabilitated more than 300 properties scattered throughout a large neighbourhood in one of the most depressed American cities. In doing so it has significantly changed the market conditions in the neighbourhood compared to the rest of the city, as well as providing affordable home ownership to low- and moderate-income households. With the help of local employers it has established an academy to prepare low-income residents for home ownership and is currently developing larger scale redevelopment and regeneration strategies for the neighbourhood in cooperation with all local stakeholders.

Packages of tools and incentives

An easy-to-use package of tools is essential in order for local communities and empty property owners to effectively carry out empty property rehabilitation. These tools need to include financial and technical assistance, a full range of information, and the option of the services of an intermediary organisation to make the process smooth and efficient. The tools will vary according to the different types of empty property and will need to be used appropriately. Some of these tools, such as an appropriate taxation and legislative

framework, can only be established by national government; others can be established locally, in consultation with local communities, property professionals such as estate agents and surveyors, social housing providers, chambers of commerce and town centre managers. This will help to ensure that the tools are relevant to local needs.

Although there are tools currently available to deal with empty properties, they are often not used for the following reasons:

- People frequently don't know that they exist.
- They are too complicated, difficult to use and not assembled into easy to use packages.
- They aren't really appropriate for the groups trying to use them, either in terms of timescales or the complexity of the bureaucracy involved.

Since there are many reasons why a property might be standing empty, a range of different packages needs to be made available and these will vary according to the nature and ownership of the property, its condition and location.

If empty property strategies are to be effective they need skilled empty property practitioners to act as enablers, working with owners locally to bring empty properties back into use. Whilst this is financially viable in the larger metropolitan authorities, it is less so in smaller authorities, where often empty property work has to be carried out as an additional task by already overstretched housing staff. In this instance several neighbouring local authorities could combine their empty property work and employ professional empty property staff to act for all of them.

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners has been established to offer a one-stop shop for local authority empty property officers. It provides quick reference guidance for all members, as well as training, support and networking opportunities for discussion about empty homes issues and ideas.

... an easy-to-use package of tools is essential in order for local communities and empty property owners to effectively carry out empty property rehabilitation ...

Some additional powers will need to be given to local authorities if they are to have sufficient tools to carry out the work needed. Legislation to create Empty Homes Management Orders (EMHOs) in the 2004 Housing Bill is a positive step forward in creating useful tools for local authorities to deal with empty homes where owners are refusing to bring them back into use. These EMHOs give local authorities the power to take over the temporary management of privately owned properties for a period of five years where there is housing need and the owner has turned down reasonable offers of assistance to bring it back into use. If financial resources and professional staff are not made available to support this work, it will only be the largest local authorities that will have sufficient capacity to be able to use the opportunity presented by the legislation.

The following additional powers would also be valuable tools for local authorities seeking to bring empty properties back into use. These need to be established nationally for use at the local level. Wherever compulsory powers are introduced it is important that this is carried out through establishing consensus and balancing the different needs and expectations involved.

- An extension of the schedule of legislation that is currently applied to enforced sale procedures to include all local authority legal charges, including unpaid council tax.
- A liberalisation of the financial limitations on local authorities to permit the financial advantage of equity release from loans given by local authorities to owners of long-term voids via banks and other third parties.
- A stronger legal mechanism to gain speedy control of empty properties that have been abandoned, as opposed to those where there is still an owner who is responsible for the property or can be encouraged to become responsible.
- A fast-track compulsory purchase procedure to be used in very specific cases where empty property is causing danger, blight or nuisance.
- Nationally-funded financial incentives to encourage property owners to bring empty properties back into use.

- Disincentives to prevent speculative property holding in areas where housing markets are strong. The recent measure of charging 90 rather than 50 per cent council tax on empty property is a move in this direction but is unlikely, in isolation, to have any major impact when house prices are increasing at 10-15 per cent per annum or higher.
- An end to the anomalous VAT regime whereby the current preferential tax treatment for new construction is a major distorting factor in the house construction sector.

New construction bears no value added tax, unlike the renovation and improvement of existing properties, which is taxed at 17.5 per cent. Limited exemptions are made for long-term empty property and the conversion of commercial property to residential use. This taxation policy is widely held to act as a perverse incentive to the rehabilitation and improvement of existing properties and contrasts strongly with the USA where the reverse is the case and there is positive discrimination in favour of the rehabilitation of existing properties.

In developing appropriate tools to deal with empty properties, it is helpful to learn from innovative and successful approaches and tools that are being used in other countries to deal with similar problems. An effective programme in the USA ensures that owners of properties at risk of deterioration are given appropriate incentives in order to prevent them becoming abandoned in the future. These incentives are both for the owners of the property and those who might be interested in buying it and include tax incentives - tax credits or tax deductions - as a direct financial benefit for having accomplished the goals.

... since there are many reasons why a property might be standing empty, a range of different packages needs to be made available and these will vary according to the nature and ownership of the property, its condition and location ...

In order to ensure that these incentives do not favour only those earning high incomes, the tax credits or benefits are transferable so that the lower income homeowner, buyer or improver is able to obtain these benefits and then sell them to

someone who can use them directly towards the cost of rehabilitating their home. Successful tools used in other countries include the use of participatory planning and budgeting processes in Brazil to ensure the involvement of local communities in the decision-making process, rental bond schemes in Australia and escalating tax penalties on empty property in some states of the USA. These approaches are worthy of further detailed investigation.

The recent introduction of UK legislation for Business Improvement Districts will have an impact of how empty properties in city centres are dealt with, as will the forthcoming introduction of Property Investment Funds that are currently being developed by the UK Treasury to ensure broader public access to investment in the property market.

... meeting these information needs and raising public awareness through broad public campaigns are crucial elements of any empty property strategy ...

Information and awareness-raising

Lack of information is a major impediment in working to bring empty properties back into use. In different forms this applies to local authorities, to local communities and to owners of empty property. Meeting these information needs and raising public awareness through broad public campaigns are crucial elements of any empty property strategy.

INFORMATION FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

One of the major difficulties faced by local authorities seeking to encourage and facilitate the re-use of empty property is the lack of comprehensive and coordinated information. In order to address this issue local authorities need to maintain an accurate and current register of exactly where the empty properties are in their district, who owns them, how long they have been empty and why they are empty. This is essential information if the authority is to develop an effective strategy to deal with them. Empty property hotlines enable the public to both obtain and give information on properties in their local area that they suspect are standing empty. The use of empty property websites such as that being piloted in West London should be a useful addition to these means of access to empty property¹.

Bringing local planners and housing officers together to share information and good practice is crucial, both within and between cities. This helps to break down isolation and foster joined up action as well as disseminating good practice. It is also important to learn from the successes of other countries in dealing with empty properties. Further research is needed, both locally and nationally, to fully understand the reasons why owners prefer to keep their properties empty. Only when this information is known can appropriate policies and tools be developed to help deal with them.

INFORMATION FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

There is a general lack of public awareness in the UK of the number of properties standing empty, and detailed information on local empty properties is rarely available. Making empty property registers publicly available greatly increases the knowledge and power that the community has to deal with empty property in its locality, although measures may need to be taken to prevent abuse of this information in the form of squatting or mail order and benefit fraud. In so far as it can be reconciled with legal concerns, the greatest possible access to information on empty properties should be provided, so that information systems become a tool not just

for local authorities but also for community empowerment. Such information is published on a frequent basis in some communities in the United States and regular monitoring of this vacancy information helps to provide an early warning system of when an area is beginning to decline, enabling preventative action to be taken.

Community planning and information exchange systems help to give greater knowledge to communities of what is happening locally and encourage greater feedback and participation.

INFORMATION FOR PROPERTY OWNERS

Many owners of empty property are not aware of the support available to bring their property back into use or of the financial benefits of doing so. Nor do many have a clear understanding of the income foregone in not letting the property, as well as the security, insurance and maintenance costs that they incur in keeping it empty.

Many owners also have misconceptions about the difficulties of letting a property, in particular fearing that it might prove impossible to get rid of difficult and troublesome tenants without the expense and worry of legal action. These fears date back to the legal position two decades ago.

Tenancy law has been substantially revised since then with the introduction of short-term leasing arrangements that provide much greater security and flexibility of action for the landlord. The availability of intermediary organisations to take on responsibility for the physical rehabilitation of the property and its ongoing management is critical to encouraging owners to bring their property into use. Guaranteed income with no hassle has proved to be an effective marketing message, far more so than appealing to owners' altruistic instincts to help house the homeless in their local area. If they are to introduce a housing element, most commercial owners will require not only an intermediary organisation to organise the work, but also the security of a commercial lease.

The introduction of Empty Homes Management Orders (EMHO) provides an opportunity for a major public campaign to target the many misconceptions of empty property owners regarding the re-use of their empty property. It can also make them aware of the various voluntary leasing packages currently available as well as the additional EHMO powers that will be available in respect of those owners who continue to refuse to bring their empty properties back into use.

Recommendations for action

The discussions and deliberations of the three-day Consultation were distilled into a series of recommendations for action and these are set out below. The recommendations fall into four broad categories: firstly, establishing a strategic framework for national, regional and local levels within which action to re-use empty properties can be taken; secondly, raising awareness and understanding of how empty properties can be re-used; thirdly, developing practical financial and legal tools necessary to carry out the work needed and finally, establishing routes by which local stakeholders can be involved in the process of re-using empty properties.

Where appropriate, recommendations are directed to those with particular responsibility for implementing the suggested action. In those cases where the recommendation has broader relevance, it is not attributed to any particular organisation.

Establishing national, regional and local strategic frameworks

- Central government (ODPM) should include the re-use of existing empty property as a priority in the national strategies to increase the supply of affordable housing and build sustainable communities.
- Recognise that properties are empty for many different, and often complex, reasons and that a range of strategies needs to be developed by regional housing boards (RHBs) / Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs) at the local authority level to deal with these.
- Require RHBs / ERAs and local authorities to develop an empty property strategy as part of their overall housing and spatial planning strategies.

- Encourage national, regional and local government to have more joined-up thinking in respect of the strategies relating to empty property and to allocate the resources for their implementation.
- Recognise that the private sector, particularly the financial institutions, has an important role to play.
- Base the development of strategy for any local area upon genuine consultation with that community.
- Recognise that the best use for some empty properties may not be affordable housing but the provision of open space or community facilities.
- In areas of low demand ensure that empty property re-use takes place within a broader, integrated and community-based framework for regeneration of neighbourhoods and communities, such as the low demand pathfinder policy.
- Have a holistic approach that sees empty property strategies as an important part of the overall urban regeneration strategy for neighbourhoods, towns and cities.
- Recognise that current and past experience in areas of low demand for housing does not necessarily define future opportunity, although the extent to which the impact of national and global economic forces can be overcome also needs to be understood.
- Public sector landlords should address the fact that 18 per cent of empty property in the UK is in their ownership.

Information and awareness-raising

- Central government (ODPM) should establish a definition of what constitutes an empty property.
- Require local authorities to establish and maintain a register of empty properties so that they have full information on their location, ownership and length of vacancy.
- In so far as it can be reconciled with legal concerns, provide the greatest possible access to empty property information, so that it becomes a tool not just for local authorities but also for community empowerment.

- Local authorities should establish and publicise local empty property hotlines for the public to give or receive information about empty properties.
- Research should be commissioned both locally and nationally as to why properties are kept empty in areas of high demand and used as a basis for developing appropriate tools for dealing with them.
- ODPM should publish regular information both locally and nationally on the number of properties that are empty in the private and public sectors, with clear targets for reduction. Annual reports should be required to detail progress.
- ODPM and/or Housing Corporation are requested to commission research into the roles that intermediary organisations could play in helping to bring empty properties back into use and what assistance would be needed to help them play a greater contribution.
- Use a broad public campaign to target the many misconceptions of empty property owners regarding leasing and renting of property.
- Provide owners of empty properties with easily accessible information on how they can be helped to bring their empty properties back into use.
- Establish community planning and information exchange systems to give greater knowledge to communities of what is happening locally and encourage greater feedback and participation.
- Improve the information available to local authorities and social housing providers concerning housing demand and trends to allow them to make more informed strategic decisions.
- Learn from the successes of other countries in dealing with empty properties, such as transferable tax credits/benefits in the USA, participatory planning processes in Brazil and rental bond schemes in Australia.
- Continue to develop innovative approaches in the UK such as the Housing and Regeneration Tax Credit.
- ODPM should include the empty property situation in the forthcoming Sustainable Communities Summit.

Legal and financial tools

- Recognise that properties are empty for many reasons and that different legal powers, financial packages and tax policies will be needed to deal with them.
- Welcome the inclusion of Empty Homes Management Order powers in the 2004 Housing Bill but recognise that this legislation will not be able to achieve its potential without resources and skills to implement it.
- Require local authorities to act within set timetables to deal with empty properties and to extend the use of Best Value Performance Indicator 64 to include publicly owned stock.
- Encourage greater use of the Public Request Ordering Disposal (PROD) legislation that already exists for empty properties in public ownership and consider extending it to private property as well.
- Increase local authority powers to implement an empty property strategy by giving them the powers to use enforced sale provisions in the case of unpaid local taxation.
- Create a fast-track compulsory purchase process to be used in very specific cases where the empty property is causing danger, blight or nuisance.
- Encourage police forces to make greater use of their powers under the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 to close empty property where appropriate so that it does not attract criminal activity.
- Create stronger legal mechanisms for local authorities to gain control of empty properties, especially where the owners have effectively abandoned them.
- Review ways in which the funding of social housing providers can be amended to facilitate their involvement with empty property work.
- ODPM should permit financial resources raised under the S.106 planning gain requirements on developers to be used for restoring empty properties as well as new construction.

- Suggest that social housing organisations be asked to develop a simplified funding mechanism for empty property work carried out by community organisations, rather than requiring them to comply with the lengthy and complicated procedures of local authorities or social housing providers.
- Create financial incentives for owners to keep property occupied as well as disincentives to keeping it unoccupied. The disincentives can include escalating penalties for continued vacancy, either through council tax or a separate fee structure.
- Create simplified one-stop packages of financial and technical support to encourage owners to bring empty properties back into use.
- Require local authorities to set aside the net income generated from the additional council tax to be paid on long-term empty property into a dedicated empty property fund.
- H.M. Treasury should equalise value added tax treatment on new construction and rehabilitation work to help reduce the disincentive to restore and re-use existing property.

Engaging local communities

- Local authorities should identify intermediary organisations that can act as facilitators or managing agents to help owners and local communities bring empty properties back into use. Existing social housing providers should be encouraged to take on this role.
- Create posts of community facilitators to coordinate local action and tap into the potential of local communities to make empty properties available for local needs.
- Local authorities and intermediary organisations should employ people in the local community wherever possible to carry out work on empty properties.
- Recognise the role that can be played by Town Centre Managers in facilitating the re-use of empty property in city centres.
- Local authorities should encourage local people to become engaged with and excited about the future of their local area through the use of local community planning and other community development processes.

- Local planners and housing officers should meet to share good practice, thereby helping to break down the isolation that local authority officers feel and to foster joined-up thinking. Meeting with colleagues in other local areas will further help to share good practice.
- Recognise that local people are in the best position to know what should be done with the empty properties in their locality, be it the provision of additional green space, community facilities or affordable housing.

Sources of further information

Association of Town Centre Management

1 Queen Anne's Gate
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Web www.emptyhomes.com

Housing Corporation

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National Vacant Properties Campaign

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Web www.vacantproperties.org

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UN-HABITAT

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Email infohabitat@unhabitat.org
Web www.unhabitat.org

Other useful sources**Empty Property: Unlocking the Potential – An Implementation Handbook**

Guidance produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on bringing empty property back into use. Available for download from the ODPM website:
www.odpm.gov.uk

Empty Homes: Temporary Management, Lasting Solutions, May 2003

An ODPM Consultation Paper on the subject of compulsory leasing of empty property. Available for download from the ODPM website:
www.odpm.gov.uk

Creating Opportunity from Abandonment

A summary of the National Vacant Properties Campaign in the USA. Available for download from the campaign website:
www.vacantproperties.org

Empty Homes Agency Monthly Bulletins

Available from the Empty Homes Agency website:
www.emptyhomes.com

National Association of Empty Property Practitioners – A Quick Reference Guide

An NAEPP quick practical guide to the legislations available to deal with empty properties (see address on facing page).

Recognising the Early Signs of Decline – A Toolkit of a Wide Range of Indicators

Shortly to be available from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
www.rics.org

Empro.co.uk

A website listing empty property in six West London boroughs, set up with the support and involvement of the RICS, Empty Homes Agency, Urban Catalyst and ODPM.
www.empro.co.uk

Housing and Regeneration Tax Credit
www.hartcredit.org.uk

Neighbourhood Knowledge Los Angeles (NKLA)

A website dedicated to helping prevent housing and neighbourhood conditions from deteriorating. NKLA provides tools for accessing property and neighbourhood data and works with neighbourhood residents, community organizations, and policymakers to mobilize support for community improvement in the Los Angeles area.

<http://nkla.spsr.ucla.edu>

Community Development partnership network

A membership organisation of local community development intermediaries seeking to build healthy communities by striking an appropriate balance between opportunity and equity.

www.cdpn.org

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