



**EMPTY PROPERTY
STRATEGY**

2003

EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY 2002/2006

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Richmondshire lies in the north east corner of North Yorkshire, to the south of the river Tees. The district covers over 500 square miles, and is mainly rural, embracing some of the County's most attractive scenery, including part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

1.2 There is no question about the scale of the national empty homes problem. There are about 750,000 empty homes in England, the vast majority of which (85%) are in the private sector. Radical intervention is needed in some inner city areas where the housing market has collapsed leaving whole areas of empty property, to make them attractive to a broad mix of existing and potential residents. However, Richmondshire is a predominantly rural district, with Richmond and Catterick Garrison forming the main urban areas. There are no entrenched problems of low demand or streets / areas of difficult to let properties¹. The District has a thriving second and holiday home industry which can make it difficult to quantify the number of properties which are genuinely vacant. Empty homes are often hidden away, known only to neighbours and the surrounding communities.

1.3 Therefore, it is more difficult to quantify the extent of local empty property.

2.0 EMPTY PROPERTY – QUANTIFYING THE PROBLEM

2.1 At the end of November 2002, 824 properties were registered on the Council Tax system as empty homes. Of these, over 590 were classed as empty and unfurnished. Generally, these are properties which are either for sale, or sold, but not occupied. 122 of these were located in Hipswell Parish, where Annington Homes are carrying out a phased programme of refurbishment of surplus MoD properties for resale to the private sector (see paragraph 3.2). However, there may be properties within this figure which are not part of the sales market, but it is not possible to identify these from the information available at the present time. The majority of the remaining houses are classed as being in need of structural repair or major refurbishment, or have been left empty by deceased persons. The latter two categories represent about 1% of the total housing stock.

2.2 Detailed survey work, carried out in early 2002 in a sample of wards, confirmed the scale of the issue in Richmondshire. The wards used for the survey, together with details of the scale of empty property identified, are attached as Appendix 1. The wards surveyed covered about half the District, and were selected to give a good cross section of the different characteristics

¹ Yorkshire and the Humber – Changing Markets and Urban regeneration, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham, published April 2002. Report concluded that none of the North Yorkshire authorities appear to show any serious housing market weakness.

of the area. Members and Town/Parish Councils were consulted on the survey work, as a valuable source of local knowledge.

2.3 The survey revealed that of the 196 properties investigated, 121 were either occupied or in the process of being sold. Those remaining represented less than 1% of the total stock of the area surveyed. The House Condition Survey 2000 estimated that of 971 dwellings identified as being vacant, about 150 were vacant long term.

2.4 Council Tax information, House Condition Survey and the detailed site survey work carried out by the Council all confirm that the number of empty properties in the District is extremely low. Those that exist are scattered through out the area. The only concentration of empty homes exists at Catterick Garrison.

Vacancies in the Public Sector.

2.5 Long term vacancies in public sector housing are associated with sheltered housing complexes in Reeth and Bainbridge. At October 2002, there were 7 vacancies at Quaker Close, Reeth and 5 at Sycamore Close, Bainbridge. This is as a result of the accommodation provided as part of these schemes not being of a standard to meet modern expectations i.e. it is mainly bedsit units with shared facilities.

2.6 There were only 5 vacancies in stock owned by Housing Associations at April 2002, three of which were undergoing refurbishment. None are recognised as long-term vacancies.

Consideration of the empty homes issues by the Council

2.7 In March 2002, Members considered the scale of empty homes within the District following the completion of sample survey work, and concluded that further detailed survey work would not be cost effective. Members agreed that an Empty Property Strategy be based on the existing findings.²

3.0 HOW THE PROBLEM IS BEING ADDRESSED

3.1 Current initiatives within the District to tackle the problem of empty property include:

- A programme at Catterick Garrison to refurbish and bring back into use homes which are surplus to Ministry of Defence requirements.
- Encouraging the re-use of vacant space above shops in Richmond town centre, particularly for residential accommodation
- Modernising our sheltered housing schemes to make them more attractive

Refurbishment of surplus MoD property at Catterick Garrison.

² H86, Housing committee, 12 March 2002.

3.2 Annington Homes was set up in 1996 as a special purpose vehicle to handle a Private Finance bid relating to the ownership/management of the MoD's married persons accommodation. Annington now own these properties and they are leased back to the MoD on the premise that empty or surplus homes are "returned" to Annington Homes as necessary.

3.3 Over the past few years, over 400 properties have been handed back to Annington Homes, as surplus to requirements. There has been a programme of refurbishment and upgrading, to make the accommodation suitable for sale to the private sector. To date, this sales policy has been very successful, with nearly 350 houses being sold. The remaining houses will be refurbished and sold late 2002/early 2003, and 36 flats are currently being improved, and released for a mixture of sale and rent.

3.4 It is anticipated that another 200 2-bedroom houses will be released to Annington Homes in the near future, and refurbished for sale in 2003/2004

3.5 Although the Council has no direct involvement in the refurbishment and sale of these properties, it supports the role Annington Homes is playing in bringing empty property back into use. This course of action is recognised to be the best of the available options.

Living over the Shop in Richmond.

3.6 Over the past two years, the organisation Living Over The Shop (LOTS) has been active in Richmond town centre, identifying properties which have upper floors suitable for conversion into living accommodation. The Council is currently working with this organisation, and with Housing Associations to try and bring this unused space back into productive use.

Key target

- **To bring back into use as living accommodation the upper floors of one property per annum for the period 2002 – 2005.**

3.7 The Council will commit resources through Local Authority Social Housing Grant to assist in the provision of affordable housing through this initiative, working in partnership with LOTS and Housing Associations. Given the long lead-in time which accompanies the implementation of such schemes, (the result of a number of factors including problems associated with identifying owners/leaseholders, and protracted negotiations), the target set appears realistic at this moment in time.³ This will be reviewed in the light of achievements. The number of homes which can be provided varies according to the size and scope within individual properties.

³ Some properties could yield more than one unit of accommodation – up to as many as three flats.

Modernisation of sheltered housing schemes.

3.8 Historically, there has been a high level of voids in Council sheltered units in the deep rural communities. In more sparsely populated areas, it is difficult to predict demand for this type of accommodation. However, it is important to retain provision to provide local facilities for local people. The problem is being addressed through a programme of need analysis and modernisation. Accommodation will be upgraded to provide a smaller number of self-contained flats, to replace the bedsit accommodation with shared facilities which exists at present.

Key target

- **To modernise the elderly sheltered housing scheme at Quaker Close, Reeth by March 2004**
- **To modernise the elderly sheltered housing scheme at Sycamore Close, Bainbridge by March 2006.**

3.9 The Council will commit its own capital resources to improving the quality of these two developments, at an approximate cost of £1.5 million per scheme.

Other actions.

3.10 Other initiatives, which may encourage better use to be made of empty property include:

- Sale of empty surplus assets owned by the Council e.g. homeless unit which has been sold to a private developer, and is being converted into flats
- Regular contact with other public bodies, such as Ministry of Defence, and North Yorkshire County Council, to ensure that empty buildings and homes are kept to a minimum, and new uses are actively sought for those which have been empty for some time
- Where appropriate, bringing empty property to the attention of Registered Social Landlords investing in purchase and refurbishment schemes
- Fiscal measures, such as increasing council tax on empty property⁴.

Private Sector Renewal reforms

3.11 An Order reforming the legislation under which grants are given came into force in 2002⁵. This will have the effect of changing fundamentally the way in which assistance is given for housing adaptations and improvements. A new policy needs to be agreed by Members and in place by July 2003.

⁴ The Government proposes to give Councils in England the choice to apply council tax discounts of between 10% and 50% for second homes, and to end discounts for long term empty property completely. The additional income can be used to tackle housing and other needs of local people. However, as the income raised will go to the precept authority, only a small proportion of the additional finance will be available to the District Council. Therefore, this initiative is unlikely to make a significant difference to the resources available to the Council.

⁵ The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (SI 2002 No. 1860)

3.12 The aim of these reforms is to provide better opportunities for homeowners to repair and maintain their homes using their own resources, while targeting help through grants and other financial assistance, at vulnerable home owners, particularly older and disabled people and families with children. Local authorities can now set their own conditions for assistance, which may take a number of forms, including loans, repayable grants, equity release schemes or the provision of materials and advice.

3.13 Empty homes may be considered as an element of the review of the Council's grants policy, and any resulting decisions fed into this Strategy.

4.0 THE STRATEGY

4.1 Empty property is not a major issue in Richmondshire. Numbers are small, and scattered. The only area of concentration is at Catterick Garrison, where the problem is being successfully addressed through refurbishment and sale to the private sector.

4.2 Therefore, the Council will continue to support the initiative at Catterick Garrison, to address problems of voids in its own sheltered housing stock at Reeth and Bainbridge, and to encourage the re-use of empty space above the shops in Richmond town centre.

4.3 A review of how the Council seeks to influence the quality of private sector stock is currently underway, as part of the Private Sector Renewal Reforms, and any relevant agreed initiatives which emerge from this process will be fed into a review of this Strategy.

4.4 The scale and location of empty property in Richmondshire will be monitored annually, to ensure that low levels of empty property are maintained, and to help to prevent empty property becoming a priority issue for the Council. This will be assisted in future years by new Government legislation which will allow the sharing of limited council tax information between local authority departments for the purposes of identifying empty homes and taking steps to bring them back into use.⁶

5.0 STRATEGY SUMMARY

5.1 Empty property is not a major problem in Richmondshire. To embark on a specific Empty Property Initiative would not be an effective use of Council resources.

5.2 The Council's main actions in dealing with the issue will focus on bringing unused space above shops in Richmond back into use, and in refurbishing sheltered housing complexes in Reeth and Bainbridge.

⁶ News Release 123: 00 November 2002. New powers for councils to improve services by limiting discounts on second homes. ODPM.

5.3 Further consideration of the issue of empty homes will take place as part of the Council's review of its grant policy under the Private Sector Renewal Reforms. Annual monitoring of the position will also be carried out.