Clusters of Empty Homes Policy 2014-15

February 2014
1. **Background**

The Council has set empty homes, and the regeneration of Gainsborough South West Ward, as priorities in its corporate plan. The South West Ward of Gainsborough, and in particular the streets either side of Trinity Street and Ashcroft Road, is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK\(^1\) and has issues of low demand and antisocial behaviour. Over the last 20 years, the level of owner occupation has decreased, and the private rented sector increased to 23.3\(^2\), with resulting social impacts on the demographic profile and community engagement. As of 1 January 2012, there were 175 long term, private sector empty homes in the neighbourhood defined in Section 4 of this policy, representing over 10\% of the total housing stock. The Council was granted funds from the Department of Communities and Local Government under the Clusters of Empty Homes programme.

The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England & Wales) Order 2002 introduced a wide ranging discretionary power to local housing authorities to develop different forms of financial assistance to meet local needs.

2. **Cluster of Empty Homes definition**

The Clusters of Empty Homes programme aims specifically to combat high density of empty homes, and funding was made available to local authorities meeting the following criteria:

- One or more defined geographical Cluster(s)
- At least 100 privately owned long term empty homes within the cluster
- At least 10\% of homes in the cluster empty for at least 6 months.
- Government funding to be match funded 50/50 by the local authority.
- Government funding to be spent on capital works to privately owned, long term empty homes.

3. **Policy Statement**

The Clusters of Empty Homes Policy aims to bring 100 privately owned empty homes in the defined cluster area to Decent Homes standard and back into residential occupation between April 2012 and March 2015. This will be achieved through a variety of interventions including advice and assistance to owners, acquisition and enforcement.

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1 ONS Neighbourhood Statistics
2 West Lindsey Stock Condition Survey 2009. 23.3\% private rented in SWW compared to 10\% across district
Bringing empty homes back into use has a positive effect on local communities, reduces neighbourhood decline, and makes best use of existing housing.

4. Location

West Lindsey District Council has defined the area either side of Trinity Street and Ashcroft Road, Gainsborough, within the area shaded blue

![Map of West Lindsey District Council area](image)

This includes the following streets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ashcroft Road</th>
<th>Drake Street</th>
<th>Pillard House Lane</th>
<th>Tooley Street</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bacon Street</td>
<td>Florence Terrace</td>
<td>Portland Terrace</td>
<td>Trent Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Street</td>
<td>Frampton Terrace</td>
<td>Primrose Street</td>
<td>Trinity Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britannia Terrace</td>
<td>Gordon Street</td>
<td>Queen Street</td>
<td>Trinity Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burton Street</td>
<td>High Street</td>
<td>Ruskin Street</td>
<td>Wall Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland Street</td>
<td>King Street</td>
<td>Sandsfield Lane to 155/180</td>
<td>Waterworks Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Terrace</td>
<td>King Street East</td>
<td>Shakespeare Street</td>
<td>Wellington Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colville Terrace</td>
<td>Lea Rd to 80/171</td>
<td>St Johns Terrace</td>
<td>Wheeldon Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cromwell Street</td>
<td>Lewis Street</td>
<td>Stanley Street</td>
<td>Willoughby Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Street</td>
<td>Linden Terrace</td>
<td>Strafford Street</td>
<td>Wintern Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickenson Terr.</td>
<td>Marlborough St.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The area was chosen based on those streets with an average of 10% empty homes as of 1 January 2012. It is the only neighbourhood in the district meeting the criteria of at least 25 homes and 10% or more empty.
Council members have approved the use of the New Homes Bonus for strategic housing projects.

5. **Options**

The empty homes in the Cluster are individually owned by separate owners with differing circumstances. There are a handful of portfolio landlords owning several rented and empty homes, and a large number of private owners with 1-2 properties who may or may not have intended to let.

While interventions that allow public funds invested in empty homes to be recycled are preferred, it is recognised that the particular market conditions prevailing in this neighbourhood make a small amount of grant aid necessary.

The following options will be made available to assist owners of empty homes to bring their property back to use.

5.1 **Purchase and Repair**

West Lindsey District Council will consider the purchase of an empty home and will then carry out the necessary works to meet Decent Homes Standard, and either let or sell the property as appropriate to ensure its future occupation. The decision to purchase empty homes will be made on a case by case basis and it is not expected that the Council will pay more than the current market value of the empty home.

5.2 **Lease and Repair**

West Lindsey District Council will consider taking the lease of an empty property from the owner and will then carry out works to meet Decent Homes Standard, and let the property to a tenant through a procured local agent. A small, regular lease payment will be made to the owner, with the council retaining the rental income to recoup the cost of the works over a lease term of 5 to 10 years. The lease payment and lease length will be individually negotiated on a case by case basis, and it will not be possible to offer lease and repair on properties needing major renovation or re-construction.

The owner must own the freehold of the empty property, and will need to obtain permission to lease from any other person with an interest in the property, including their mortgagee.

5.3 **Homebuyer’s Assistance**

Homebuyer’s Assistance aims to encourage residents to purchase an empty home, repair or renovate the dwelling to bring it up to a Decent Homes Standard, and remain in residence for 3 years. This can help local people get onto the property ladder as well as potentially
attracting new, economically active households to move into the neighbourhood.

Homebuyer’s Assistance is discretionary financial assistance, and is repayable upon sale, transfer, or the owner ceasing to occupy the dwelling as their only or main residence within three years of the grant being completed. The Council’s assistance is registered as a local land charge.

For full details of the grant terms and conditions please refer to the Housing Assistance Policy.

5.4 Landlord’s Assistance

Landlord’s Assistance aims to help owners of empty homes to repair or renovate the dwelling to bring it up to a Decent Homes Standard. The budget is limited and this intervention will be restricted to a small number of owners who are in negative equity and who cannot gain mortgagee approval to lease to the council.

Landlord’s Assistance is discretionary financial assistance, and is repayable upon sale or transfer of the dwelling within ten years of the grant being completed or in the event that the property becomes long term empty again. The Council’s assistance is registered as a local land charge.

For full details of the grant terms and conditions please refer to the Housing Assistance Policy.

6. Enforcement

Attempts will be made to engage all owners of empty homes in the cluster area. Advice and assistance will be offered to either take up one of the schemes above, or to bring the property back into use themselves, for example by letting or selling on the open market or applying to the National Empty Homes Loan Fund.

In the event that owners refuse to engage in the project and the property remains empty, the council will consider its enforcement powers in line with the council’s Housing Enforcement Policy.

Enforcement options include:

- Enforced sale under the Law of Property Act 1925 where works in default of a statutory notice result in registration of a Local Land Charge
• The making of an Empty Dwelling Management Order under Part 4 of the Housing Act 2004
• The making of a Compulsory Purchase Order under the Housing Act 1985 or other legislation

7. **Links with Other Policies**

This policy has links to:

• The Central Lincolnshire Housing Strategy
• The Housing Assistance Policy (Regulatory Reform Order)
• The Corporate Enforcement Policy
• The Equality Policy
• The Lincolnshire Empty Homes Strategy
• South West Ward Steering Group

8. **Evaluation**

The delivery of the Clusters of Empty Homes Project will be reviewed quarterly until March 2015 by measuring the number of long term empty homes brought to use in the cluster area through West Lindsey District Council involvement.

Evaluation of the wider benefits of the project will be fed into the corporate South West Ward steering group which will measure improvements in housing demand, street scene, reduction in anti-social behaviour and environmental crime among other objectives.

The evaluation of this project will feed into the review of the (Central) Lincolnshire Empty Homes Strategy. The Council will consult with residents, owners, agents and other interested parties affected by our service, so we can draw up clear standards regarding the level of service, performance to be provided and the development of linked policies.