



# **Empty Homes Strategy 2011 – 2014**





## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Foreword .....   | 2  |
| 1. Introduction.....   | 3  |
| 2. Aims and Objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy .....   | 4  |
| 2.1 Delivery of the Aims and Objectives .....  | 4  |
| 2.2 Monitoring Progress .....  | 7  |
| 2.3 Resources .....  | 7  |
| 2.4 Equality and Diversity.....  | 8  |
| 3. Definition of and Reasons for Empty Homes.....  | 9  |
| 4. The Impact of Empty Homes and the Benefits of Re-Use .....  | 10 |
| 5. District Profile .....  | 11 |
| 6. Policy Context .....  | 12 |
| 6.1 National.....  | 12 |
| 6.2 Regional .....   | 13 |
| 6.3 Sub-Regional.....  | 14 |
| 6.4 Local .....  | 14 |
| 6.5 Fit for the Future .....   | 14 |
| 6.6 Core Strategy.....   | 15 |
| 6.7 Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2026.....  | 15 |
| 6.8 Housing Strategy .....   | 15 |
| 6.9 Homelessness Strategy 2010-2015 .....  | 16 |
| 6.10 Financial Assistance Policy .....   | 16 |
| 7. The Local Picture - Empty Property Data Analysis .....  | 17 |
| 7.1 Number of Empty Properties .....   | 17 |
| 7.2 Distribution of Empty Properties .....   | 18 |
| 7.3 Period Empty.....  | 23 |
| 8. Action Plan Programme .....   | 25 |
| Appendix 1: Action Plan Programme.....   | 26 |
| Appendix 2: Statutory Notice Actions where Debt from Works In Default can be<br>Registered in Part 2 of the Local Land Charge Register ..... | 31 |
| Appendix 3: Scoring Matrix .....   | 33 |
| Appendix 4: Equality Impact Assessment.....  | 35 |

## **Foreword**

I am pleased to introduce Warwick District Council's Empty Property Strategy. I am sure that it will drive forward the Council's commitment to engage with owners to deal proactively with empty properties, which are acknowledged as a wasted housing resource.

Warwick District may not be perceived as an area containing large numbers of empty property, but data so far collected indicates that there are many dwellings standing empty for long periods. The reasons for this are many and varied, but in an age where housing need, and homelessness continues to grow, it is simply not acceptable for the owners of these properties to have no realistic plan to return them to use.

This strategy sets out a clear strategic framework which will enable the Council to begin to tackle empty properties and empty property owners head on.

The strategy provides information on our priorities and actions to help tackle the issue of empty properties. The actions within this strategy should bring real benefits to communities within the district.

The strategy will build on the foundation of partnership working, sustainable communities and engagement with our customers. By tackling empty properties, we will be helping to increase affordable housing provision, reduce vandalism and crime, improve the physical environment, help restore local economic vitality and increase income which benefits the wider community.

Norman Vincett  
Housing and Property Services Portfolio Holder

## **1. Introduction**

Warwick District is acknowledged as a great place to live work and visit, but many people may be unaware that it contains a substantial number of empty properties. In fact, from Council Tax data, over 640 dwellings were recorded as long term empty private properties as of May 2011, representing over 1% of the private housing stock.

Within the district housing need continues to increase and outstrips supply. The situation is further exacerbated by a significant number of households unable to afford to buy a home, whilst others struggle to access a home to rent. Tackling the problem of empty homes can therefore make an important contribution to improving neighbourhoods as well as meeting housing need.

The Private Sector Housing Team whose remit includes monitoring and improvement of housing conditions in the private sector have been unable, until now, to dedicate resources to tackle the owners of these properties, and so work has largely been reactive, and based around encouraging owners to bring properties back into use, without recourse to enforcement measures.

Government funding has recently enabled the Council to appoint a dedicated Empty Homes Officer, for a one year period, in which to make an impact on long term empty properties, particularly those in poor condition which have an adverse effect on the neighbourhood.

This strategy sets out how Warwick District Council intends to tackle the issue of empty homes over the period 2011-2014. The purpose of the strategy is to reduce the number of empty homes in the District by working with owners of properties and partner organisations.

## 2. Aims and Objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy

The aim of this strategy is to provide a framework within which to reduce the number of residential empty homes in the District and thereby increase the available provision of housing in the District to help meet housing need.

Five key objectives have been identified in order to achieve this:

1. Better understand the numbers of empty homes in the District and the reasons why owners have left them empty
2. Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty (6 months or more) by taking a proactive approach through early intervention and offering advice and assistance to owners.
3. Risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action
4. Using the Council's enforcement powers where negotiation with the owner has failed, to bring long term empty homes back
5. Raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use.

### 2.1 Delivery of the Aims and Objectives

|  |
|--|
| <b>Objective 1: Better understand the numbers of empty homes in the District and the reasons why owners have left them empty.</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The need to identify as many empty homes as possible and understand the reasons why they become empty is essential in developing a clear picture of empty homes in the District.</li><li>• The Empty Homes Officer will continue to work closely with the Council's Benefits and Revenues Team in order to improve the council's intelligence on empty homes.</li><li>• We will work in partnership with internal and external agencies, as well local communities to help identify potential empty homes.</li><li>• The Council's website will be available for members of the community to report empty properties.</li><li>• The mapping of all empty homes using GIS (Geographic Information System) will continue so that potential hot spots can be mapped to help prioritise resources effectively.</li></ul> |
| <b>Objective 2: Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty (6 months or more) by taking a proactive approach through early intervention and offering advice and assistance to owners.</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By taking a proactive approach the Council can help prevent homes from becoming long term empty. Some owners choose to leave their property</li></ul>  |

empty when bringing it back into use would be of a financial benefit to them. Often owners may not be aware of how much they are losing out financially or how to bring their properties back into use.

- The aim will be to raise awareness amongst owners and other partners of how the council can assist them in bringing empty homes back into use. An empty homes information pack will be developed that will contain information on:
  - Financial effect of leaving a property empty
  - Advice on private letting
  - Advice on carrying out repairs
  - Energy efficiency advice
  - Advice on ways of reporting an empty property
  - Details of the Accreditation and Rent Bond Guarantee Scheme
  - The Council's Financial Assistance Policy
  - Council contacts
  - Outline Enforcement Powers of the council
- Empty Homes information on the Council's website will be regularly updated to encourage take up of available advice and assistance.
- Grants and loans to be made available to bring properties up to Decent Homes standard in return for nomination rights for persons on the housing waiting list

**Objective 3: Risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action**

- In order to effectively manage resources, the Council will prioritise which empty homes are to be targeted through the use of a scoring matrix (appendix 3). The scoring matrix is designed to give each property a numerical value, depending on a number of factors which influence its priority for being dealt with, hence a property which has been empty for a long period, is detrimental to the amenity of an area and has been the subject of anti social behaviour will rank above a property which has only been empty for a short period and is in reasonable condition.
- A balanced approach will be adopted where some resources will be directed at those homes which can be brought back into use relatively easily, to those which require more intensive involvement, such as detailed negotiations and/or enforcement action.
- Properties will continue to be mapped using the Geographical Information System (GIS) to establish any potential hot spots which will assist in targeting action.

**Objective 4: Using the Council's enforcement powers where negotiation with the owner has failed, to bring long term empty homes back into use**

Enforcement action is designed to ensure the re-occupation of an empty property and is considered to be the option of last resort.

Such action will only be instigated when all other attempts at bringing the property back into use have failed and where it is considered that the property is unlikely to be brought back into use unless such action is taken.

Enforcement options are:

- Enforced Sale procedure – this option may be considered for homes where the council has had to use its enforcement powers to abate nuisance or to secure a home. The property is sold to a third party and any outstanding charges against the property, including any mortgage, works carried out in default by the Council and council tax are paid following the sale. Any remaining money is put into an account for the owner to claim.
- Empty Dwelling Management Order – are a means by which the council takes over the management of a property, carrying out works where applicable and then renting the property out.
- Compulsory Purchase Order – this allows the council to acquire property and remove it from the ownership of the current owner. Once an order has been granted, the property can either be developed as affordable housing or sold on the open market.

**Objective 5: Raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use.**

- In order to raise the profile of empty homes in the District, and ensure effective operation of the strategy it is necessary to adopt a corporate approach. In order to achieve this corporate empty homes group has been established. This ensures regular liaison with each service area whose work impacts on empty homes issues. These services include Revenues and Benefits, Housing Advice, Planning, Building Control, Communications and Marketing.
- Links with other local authorities have also been established through the West Midlands Empty Property Officer Group and with National Bodies such as the Homes and Communities Agency and Empty Homes Agency.
- We will develop and strengthen our partnerships with the local community, residential providers of social housing and private developers.
- The promotion of work on empty homes will continue through provision of information on the council's website.



## **2.2 Monitoring Progress**

To ensure that the action plan progresses satisfactorily, it is essential that there is regular and frequent monitoring.

The action plan contains a range of measures which will enable the Housing Strategy Team to monitor outcomes on a regular basis.

Based on the level of resources available to the Council, the aim is to bring at least 75 empty properties back into use within 12 months. Of these, 50 will be 'priority' cases, scored according to the matrix in Appendix 3. For subsequent years, targets will be set according to resources that are made available.

Performance on the implementation of the strategy will be measured by the number of private vacant dwellings returned to occupation for a 12 month period commencing from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2011, as a direct result of action by the Council and or a partner agency.

The definition of "direct result of action" will follow the code of guidance issued by the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners. This encompasses both direct and indirect actions where it is reasonable to conclude that this resulted in a property being returned to use which would have remained empty or speeded up the process of bringing the property back into use.

Monitoring will take the form of monthly and quarterly reports. Monthly one to one meetings will be held between the Empty Homes Officer and the Divisional Environmental Health Officer to ensure any problems are resolved.

The Team Operational Plan will monitor the performance of the key empty property indicators including:

- Number of empty properties back into use
- Number of empty properties for sale/rent
- Number of empty properties renovated/tidied up/boarded up
- Number and type of statutory action taken
- Number of Grant enquiries/applications/approvals/completions
- Number of Rent Bond enquiries/applications
- Number of Accreditation Scheme enquiries/applications/certificates
- Numbers of Mail Shot Letters issued
- Number of Mail shot Questionnaires received
- Number of Owners who respond to mail shots
- Number of Owners who complete request for information (RFI) notices
- Analysis of all of the above

## **2.3 Resources**

To successfully deliver the Empty Homes Strategy the Council will utilise all available resources across departments and work in partnership with its external partners.

The key resource required to effectively deliver the strategy is the post of Empty Homes Officer. This is currently funded directly by a Government grant until

October 2011. It is proposed to continue with the post through New Homes Bonus funding. To date, much of the ground work has been prepared for ongoing work, and the Empty Homes Officer has had direct involvement in bringing 21 properties back to use.

The success of the strategy will be measured through the monitoring process and if appropriate a request for additional resources will be made. If dedicated resources cannot continue beyond 12 months, then the Strategy would need to be reviewed in light of the available resources. In the meantime opportunities for additional funding through external sources will continue to be explored.

Other resources required include continued cooperation and close working with internal departments, such as Benefits and Revenues, Planning, and Building Control, and Legal; and continued funding through the Council's Financial Assistance Policy to assist owners bringing their empty properties back in to use.

## **2.4 Equality and Diversity**

Most of the actions contained within the Strategy are positive in that the Council will be providing, information, advice and assistance to homeowners to aid them in bringing their properties back into use. Enforcement action is not expected to be used frequently and it is considered that this will not adversely impact on any particular group. To ensure that the Strategy is inclusive an Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out (Appendix 4).

### **3. Definition of and Reasons for Empty Homes**

An empty home is a dwelling or residential property that has been left unoccupied. Homes may become empty for a variety of reasons. Some are empty for short periods of time and come back into use relatively quickly, for example, a home may become empty for a short period whilst awaiting sale or let, other homes may be empty whilst they are renovated prior to reoccupation. These processes are a natural function of the housing market; whilst others may be empty for a significant period of time and are not likely to come back into use until the underlying reason for it being empty is addressed.

The Council distinguishes between 'empty homes' and 'long-term empty homes'. Empty homes are any homes not currently occupied and these become long-term empty if they remain unoccupied for longer than 6 months.

The main focus of Warwick Districts Empty Homes Strategy is on private residential dwellings which have been un-occupied for a period of at least 6 months or more. Dwelling can include any form of residential property intended for habitation. This will include accommodation over commercial property, provided it is banded as a dwelling for Council Tax purposes.

We are less concerned with properties empty for less than 6 months because many of these will return to occupation without intervention, and are simply going through transition between ownership and re-occupation.

It is not a priority to deal with properties which do not contain residential accommodation; we will, however, encourage re-use where planning permission is in place to create residential accommodation.

There are many reasons why homes become and remain empty for long periods, often they are complex and involve financial and legal disputes. Some of the reasons include:

- Lack of finance to fund repairs
- Refurbishment progresses slowly
- Lack of understanding in regard to selling or renting privately
- Selling at an unrealistic price
- Waiting for housing market to pick up
- Plans to repair, rent or sell which do not materialise
- Planning restrictions
- Issues surrounding probate, estate and legal ownership
- Poor housing market or perception of poor housing market
- An expectation that capital value will increase with time
- Reluctance to sell or let out
- Owner works overseas but still uses the home when returning to England

## **4. The Impact of Empty Homes and the Benefits of Re-Use**

Empty properties can cause a variety of problems, which tend to increase in severity the longer they remain empty. What starts off as minor disrepair and an eyesore can quickly deteriorate into serious disrepair, and an attraction for crime. In summary, problems include the following:

- A wasted housing resource
- An eyesore and detrimental to amenity of a neighbourhood
- Potential for fly tipping and rodent activity
- A reduction in house prices locally
- Added pressure to develop green field sites to meet the housing need
- Lost revenue to the Council
- An attraction for vandals and graffiti
- An attraction for rough sleepers, arsonists and drug users
- Owners lose out on rental income or capital value
- Difficulty in obtaining buildings insurance
- Statutory nuisance to neighbours
- Enhanced maintenance costs due to neglect

The benefits of re-occupation are many, and can be broken down as follows:

- For the community:
  - Reduction in vandalism and crime
  - Assist in creating sustainable communities by enhancing the local environment
  - Increase in value of properties
  - Increased choice of housing for rent and purchase
- For the Council:
  - Meeting our corporate objectives of making the district a great place to live, work and visit
  - Increased availability of housing for local people both rented and for sale,
  - Continued reduction and prevention of homelessness through increased housing supply
  - Improved stock condition which assists in meeting Decent Homes Standard across all tenures
  - Reduced drain on resources to deal with anti social behaviour, fly tipping, nuisance and rodents
  - Regeneration of streets and neighbourhoods
  - Potential financial gain in terms of New Homes Bonus
- For the owner:
  - A rental income or realisation of capital through sale
  - Burden of Council Tax liability passes to tenant or new owner
  - Reduce the potential of the property falling into serious disrepair
  - Removes difficulties in obtaining insurance cover
  - A maintained and occupied home will deter against unauthorised access and anti social behaviour

## **5. District Profile**

Warwick District Council is within the West Midlands region and is one of the five District Councils that form Warwickshire. It is the largest District in the County, with a population of 135,700, residing in 59,356 households. The District has seen the largest percentage increase in its population over the past 5 years, 7,000 people representing a 5.4% increase.

The District contains the four main towns of Warwick, Leamington Spa, Kenilworth and Whitnash and a number of smaller, more rural settlements. However, this population growth masks some variations across the District. In terms of the main settlements, (the towns of Kenilworth, Leamington Spa, Warwick and Whitnash) Whitnash has seen a 15.2% increase in population since 2002 whereas Kenilworth has only seen a 2.6% increase.

There are 59,356 households in the District of which:

- 73.2% are owner occupiers
- 10.5% are privately renting
- 14.2% are occupying affordable housing with the largest landlord being Warwick District Council
- 2.1% are occupying other forms of housing

In terms of population projections, Warwick's population is projected to increase by 31.6% from 2006 to 2031. This is the highest projected increase of all the Districts and Boroughs with the 65+ age group projected to increase by the largest percentage over the next 25 years.

Over 90% of the population in the District are classed as White British, White Irish or Other White. Compared to the other Districts and Boroughs, Warwick has the highest proportion of those who are of Asian or Asian British ethnic origin, 5.4% compared to the County average of 3.8%. Leamington Spa in particular has comparatively high number of Asian or Asian British residents, and more recently, growing Portuguese and Polish communities.

Warwick District clearly has an affordability issue. The Housing Needs Assessment 2006 identified that the price of an entry level property in the District is £179,856 which would require a single person household to earn £51,387 per annum assuming that they could borrow 3.5 times their income. A two person household wishing to purchase an entry level property would need a combined income of £62,019 per annum assuming they could borrow 2.9 times their income. 52.5% of single earner households earn less than £15,000 pa. 49.4% of two earner households earn less than £30,600 pa. Bringing back empty property into use, especially in Council Tax Bands A, B and C, can only have a positive impact in terms of increasing the supply of accommodation which is affordable to local people.

## 6. Policy Context

### 6.1 National

There are estimated to be over 300,000 long term empty properties in the UK. Whilst approximately 50% of these are empty for transactional reasons, the rest remain empty without a clear plan to return them to use, and a significant number have been effectively abandoned.(Homes and Communities Agency, 2010).

Table 1: National data on Empty Homes (Source: Empty Homes Agency) \*long term is defined as being more than 6 months.

| Year | Total empty (privately owned) | % of Private stock | Long term* private empties | % of private stock |
|------|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| 2009 | 651,993                       | (2.87%)            | 307,001                    | 1.32%              |
| 2008 | 697,055                       | (3.10%)            | 303,285                    | 1.31%              |
| 2007 | 672,924                       | (3.02%)            | 279,281                    | 1.20%              |

Empty Property as an issue has gained steady momentum and awareness over recent years. The Empty Homes Agency, formed in 1992, has played a key role in raising the national profile. They are an independent charity who campaign for empty homes to be brought back into use for the benefit of those in housing need. The agency provides practical help and training to people and organisations to facilitate empty home re-use.

The Barker Review of Housing Supply (2004) highlighted the need for an increased housing supply. The Government, at that time recognised that apart from new building programmes, regeneration of the country's existing housing stock would be necessary to address the ever increasing demand for affordable housing. Today, that need is greater than ever, and it is a travesty that there are still so many empty properties in our cities, towns and rural areas.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's), which for the first time gave powers to local authorities to take over empty properties without owning them, carry out repairs and let them out, recovering their costs directly from rental returns. To date, EDMO's have not enjoyed great success, perhaps mainly because of the complexity of the process and lack of resources to implement the powers. The Government have recently stated that they support the use of EDMO's for properties which have been empty for at least 2 years and exhibit conditions which affect the amenity of a neighbourhood.

The Government Green Paper, Homes for the Future: more affordable, more sustainable (2007) suggested that we need to make better use of existing dwellings and land, and local authorities needed to take a strategic and proactive role in reducing the number of empty properties.

The coalition government has continued to support Local Authorities to tackle empty homes with a commitment to provide £100 million towards empty homes and also with the introduction of the new homes bonus. The New Homes Bonus

is intended to reward Local Authorities for increasing housing supply, of which empty homes returned to use will contribute. There is wide recognition that reoccupation of empty homes forms a necessary contribution to meeting overall housing need.

## 6.2 Regional

The West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy 2005 acknowledges that empty homes are a wasted resource, and encourages their re-use across the region to increase housing supply.

The Empty Homes Agency estimates there are 72,000 empty homes in the West Midlands region of which 34,500 have been empty for 6 months or more. It is estimated that 63,500 of these are within the private sector. More local authorities are recognising the problems associated with long term empty homes and in particular that they represent a considerable waste of existing resource. As such more resources are being dedicated towards bringing long term empty properties back into use.

Warwick District falls within the West Midlands region for Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix reporting purposes. This includes Staffordshire, the West Midlands, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Warwickshire. The number of empty properties for the region are as follows:

Table 2 Regional data on Empty Homes (Source: Empty Homes Agency)

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Total empty homes (all tenures)</b> | <b>% of stock</b> | <b>Long term empty</b> |
|-------------|--|-------------------|------------------------|
| 2007        | 72135                                  | 3.11              | 31,071                 |
| 2008        | 72,329                                 | 3.09              | 34,511                 |
| 2009        | 69,002                                 | 2.94              | 33,780                 |

### 6.3 Sub-Regional

Warwick District is one of 5 districts within Warwickshire. Table 3 shows empty property data for each of the Warwickshire districts in the period 2007-2009. Nuneaton & Bedworth district contained the highest proportion of empty properties (3.48%) as of 2009 whilst Warwick district had the third highest proportion (2.43%).

Table 3: Data on empty private homes in Warwickshire (Source: Empty Homes Agency)

| District       | 2009<br>Total empty     | LTE*       | 2008<br>Total<br>empty  | LTE        | 2007<br>Total empty     | LTE        |
|----------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|
| N Warks.       | 234 (0.88%)             | 10         | 344<br>(1.29%)          | 326        | 212(0.81%)              | 197        |
| Nuneaton       | 1868 (3.48%)            | 983        | 2412<br>(4.03%)         | 941        | 1693 (3.2%)             | 924        |
| Rugby          | No data                 | No<br>data | 604<br>(1.44%)          | 234        | 974 (2.38%)             | 557        |
| Stratford      | 1541(2.87%)             | 880        | 1575<br>(2.95%)         | 900        | 2316 (4.36%)            | 800        |
| <b>Warwick</b> | <b>1446<br/>(2.43%)</b> | <b>698</b> | <b>2641<br/>(4.46%)</b> | <b>695</b> | <b>1739<br/>(2.97%)</b> | <b>885</b> |
| Total          |                         | 2571       |                         | 3096       |                         | 3363       |

\*LTE refers to long term empty, i.e. more than 6 months

### 6.4 Local

The Empty Property Strategy has links with the following strategies:

- Fit for the Future
- Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2026
- Homelessness Strategy 2010-2015
- Housing Strategy
- Financial Assistance Policy

### 6.5 Fit for the Future

This is the Council's Corporate Strategy and sets out the Council's vision to make Warwick District a great place to live, work and visit. This strategy has a 'systems thinking' approach to give it a strong customer focus.

Returning empty properties back to use will be central to improving the housing stock and re-vitalising neighbourhoods.

Council Tax revenue will be maximised and grant allocation through the New Homes Bonus will benefit local communities, as this could be used for any



purpose, for example, improving local facilities and services and renovating more empty homes.

## **6.6 Core Strategy**

The Council is preparing its first ever Core Strategy which will set the framework for managing this future growth and development of the District up to 2026.

It is anticipated that the Core Strategy will be adopted in 2013 after extensive consultations. It is clear that there is strong support for re-use of brown field sites and re-generation of the existing housing stock ahead of new development on Greenfield sites.

The Council's Core Strategy will set objectives for future housing provision, and the Empty Property Strategy will support that by making best use of already developed sites.

## **6.7 Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2026**

This Strategy has been published by the Warwick Partnership. This is the Local Strategic Partnership for the District, which is made up of representatives from a range of organisations across the voluntary and community sector, and the public and Tackling empty homes is at the core of the sustainability agenda, promoting the maximum use of available housing, re-use of brownfield sites and conversion of empty space over shops. At a neighbourhood level, the appearance and desirability of an area is enhanced, attracting investment and supporting economic regeneration strategies. The purpose of the Strategy is to ensure that we work in partnership to improve the quality of life for every resident in Warwick District by tackling the issues that matter most to people such as crime, improving health and well being and protecting the environment. It's about improving the quality of life for every resident in Warwick District and all the key elements such as housing, employment, education, health, children, young adults and older people are picked up under 4 main themes:

- Safe Communities
- Health and Well Being
- Housing
- Economy, Skills and Employment

Returning empty properties to use will impact on all of these themes, and embraces the concept of partnership working.

## **6.8 Housing Strategy**

The Housing Strategy sets out the Council's priorities for housing related issues for the District. The actions identified within the Strategy will be the responsibility of the District Council, partner agencies and stakeholders to ensure the targets and objectives are met. Partnership working is fundamental in providing housing related services on a local, regional and sub-regional basis. The Empty Homes Strategy will support the Housing Strategy by improving the quality of the housing stock both by adding to the provision of Decent Homes and reducing homes with Category 1 hazards.

The Council is in the process of reviewing its existing Housing Strategy which will be completed by the end of 2011/12. The Empty Homes Strategy is regarded as a key document to reinforce the Council's emerging Housing Strategy.

## **6.9 Homelessness Strategy 2010-2015**

An increased supply of affordable housing generated from empty property re-use will play a key role in tackling homelessness, covered within the Homelessness Strategy.

Not only will it increase housing provision within the District but also presents an opportunity to assist those households on the housing register through the Council's Rent Bond Guarantee Scheme.

## **6.10 Financial Assistance Policy**

This policy sets out a framework for assisting private sector homeowners with repairs, improvements and adaptations, through provision of grants and loans.

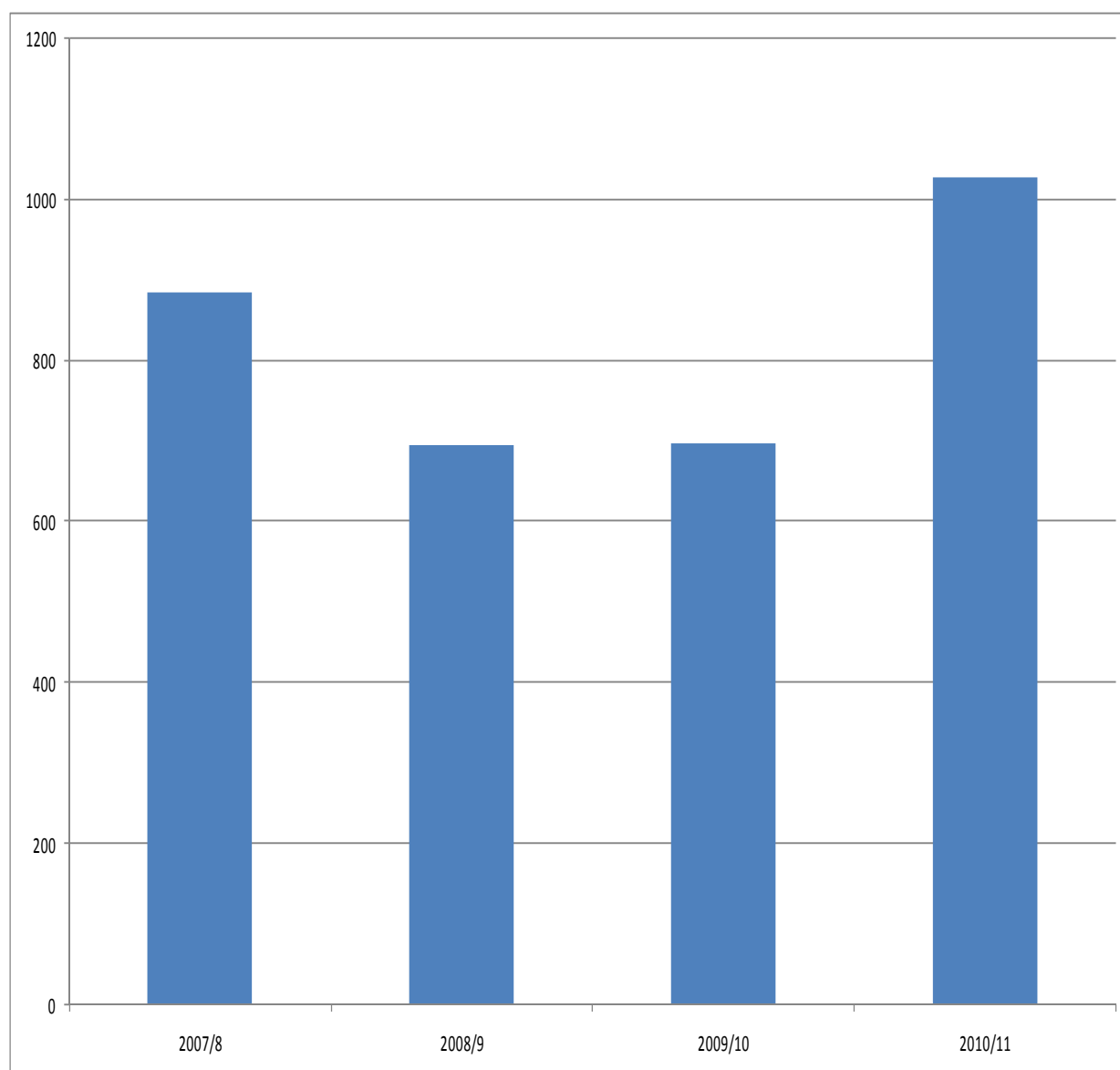
It enables the provision of Empty Property Grants (covering 25% of eligible cost) and Loans (covering a further 50% of eligible cost) to bring empty properties back into use as dwellings, where they have been empty for at least 12 months. The property is required to be made available for rent at social rent levels for a minimum of 5 years.

## 7. The Local Picture - Empty Property Data Analysis

### 7.1 Number of Empty Properties

Figure 1 shows Council Tax data from the last 4 years. This confirms there has in this time always been in excess of 600 long term empty properties within the Warwick district. The number has increased over the last year and this is likely to be as a result of the slump in the housing market, and the difficulties faced in selling property in a difficult economic climate.

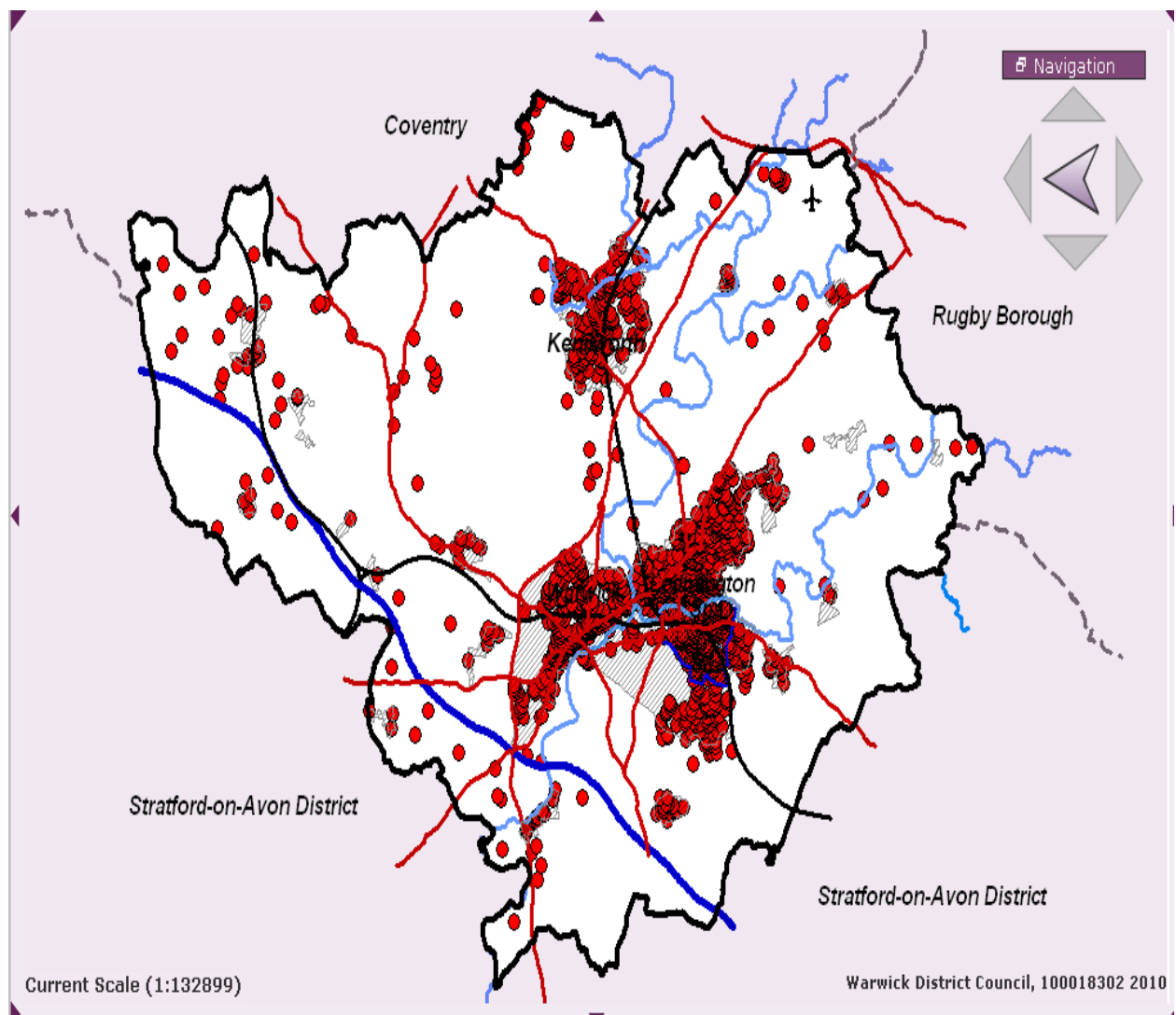
Figure 1: Number of long term empty properties in Warwick district 2007-2011



## 7.2 Distribution of Empty Properties

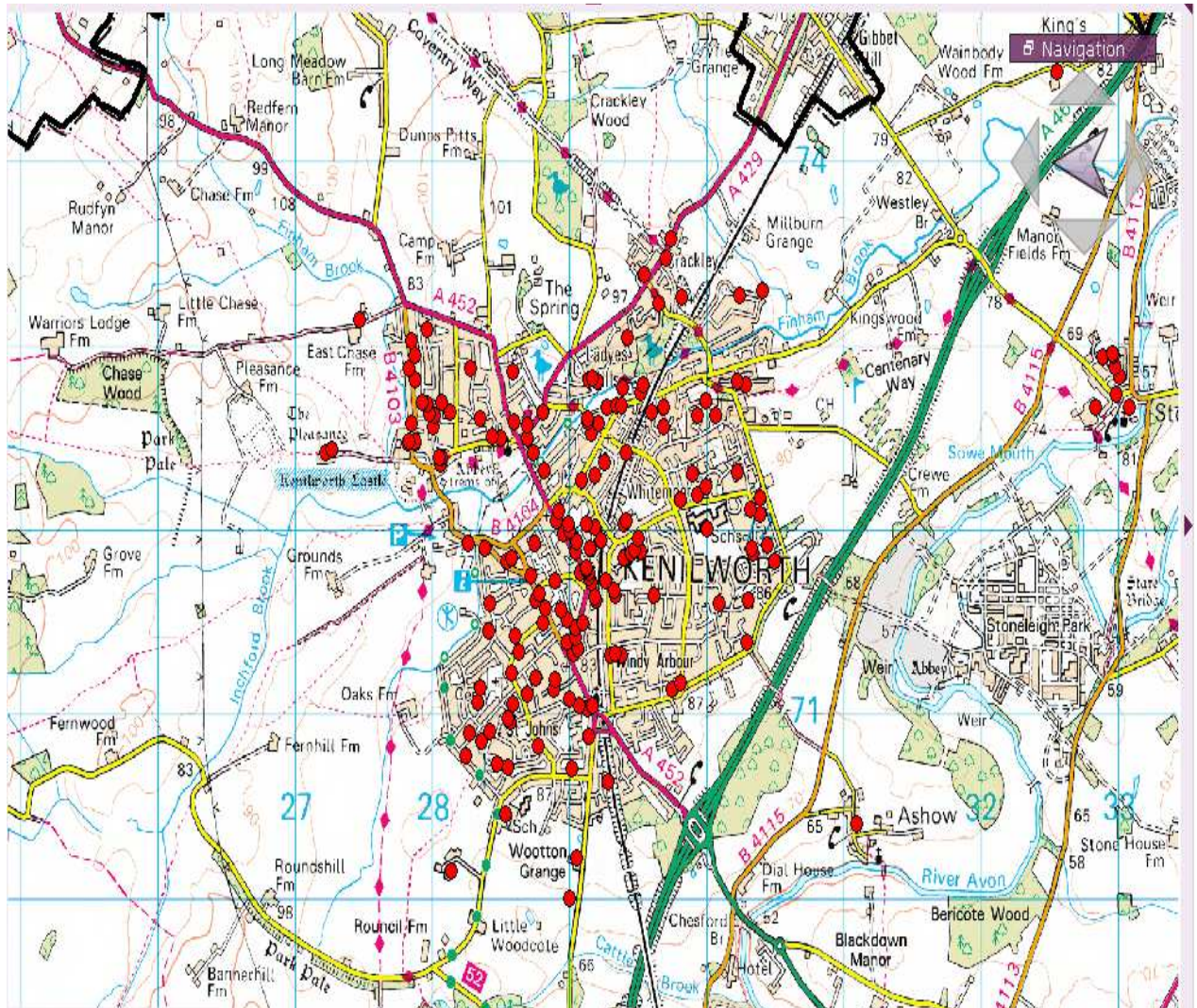
All empty property has been mapped using GIS digital mapping, and this is demonstrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4 below. This has been a very useful exercise in giving a visual dimension of where within the district empty properties are located. It is interesting to note, although perhaps not surprising, that concentrations predominate within the main urban areas of Leamington Spa, Warwick and Kenilworth.

**Figure 2: Distribution of empty property in Warwick District**



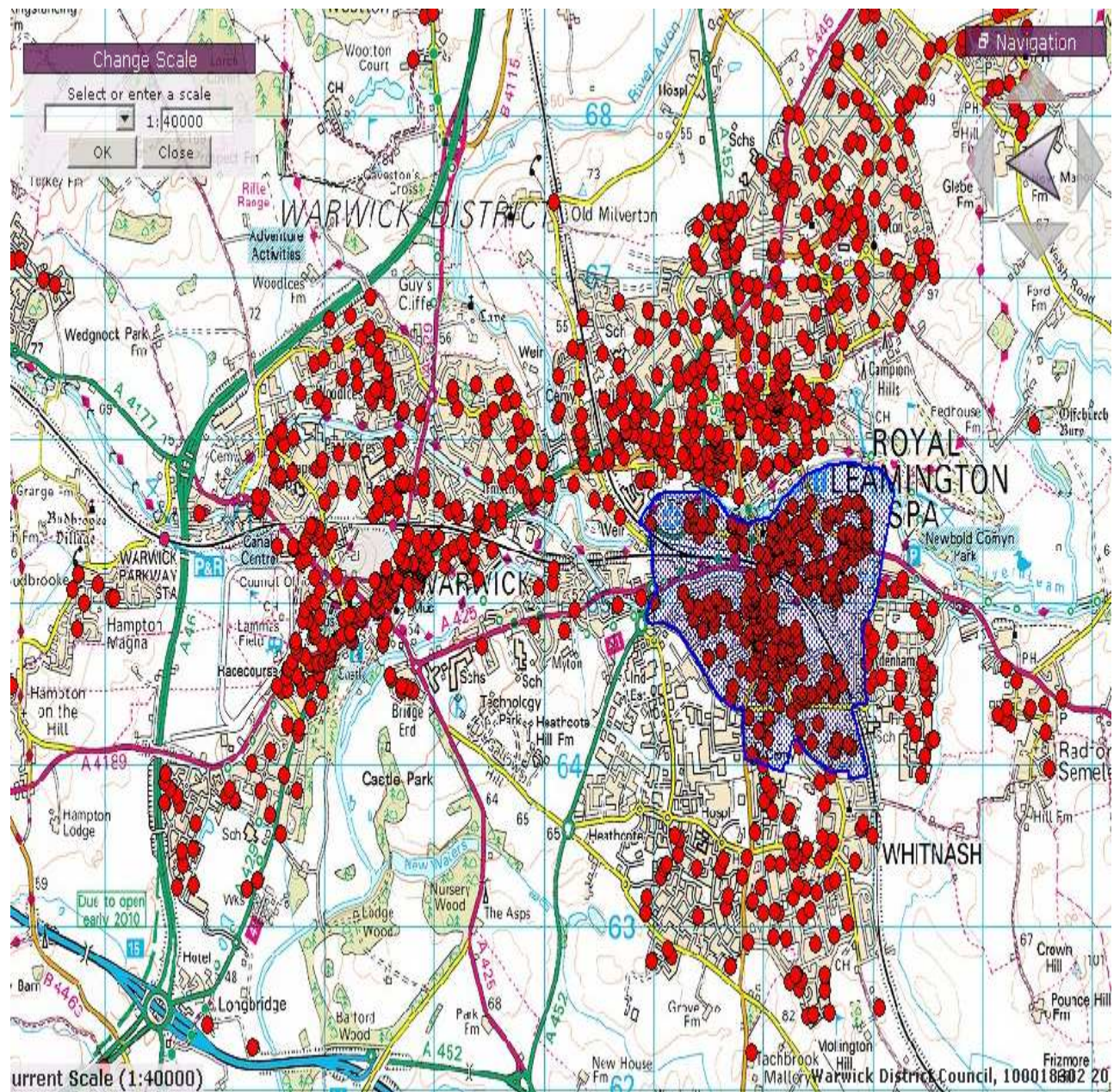
To give a clearer impression of the distribution in our main towns, the following maps show their location.

**Figure 3: Distribution within Kenilworth (126 dwellings)**



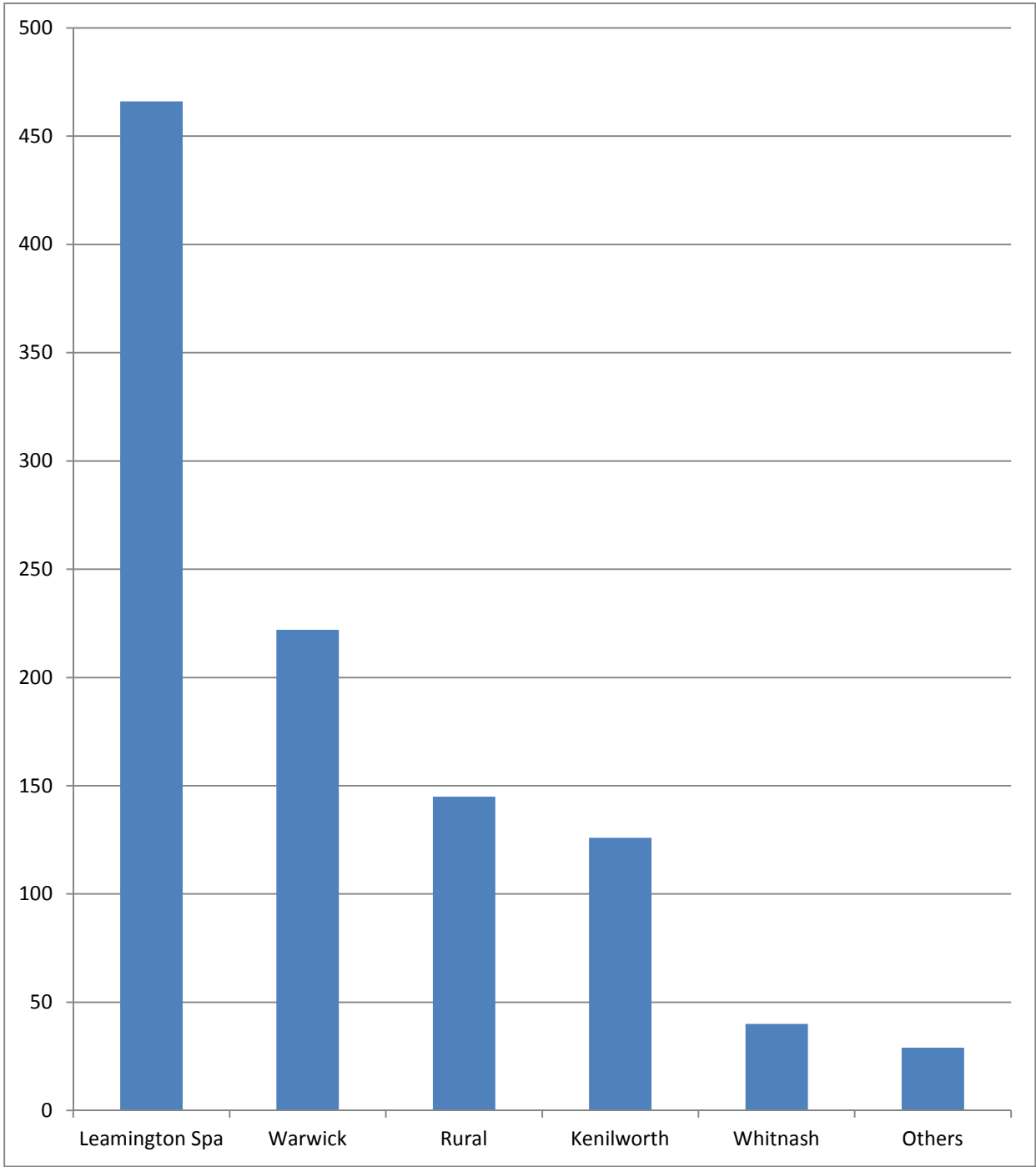


**Figure 4: Distribution within Warwick (222 dwellings) and Leamington Spa (466 dwellings). 'Old town' is edged in blue.**



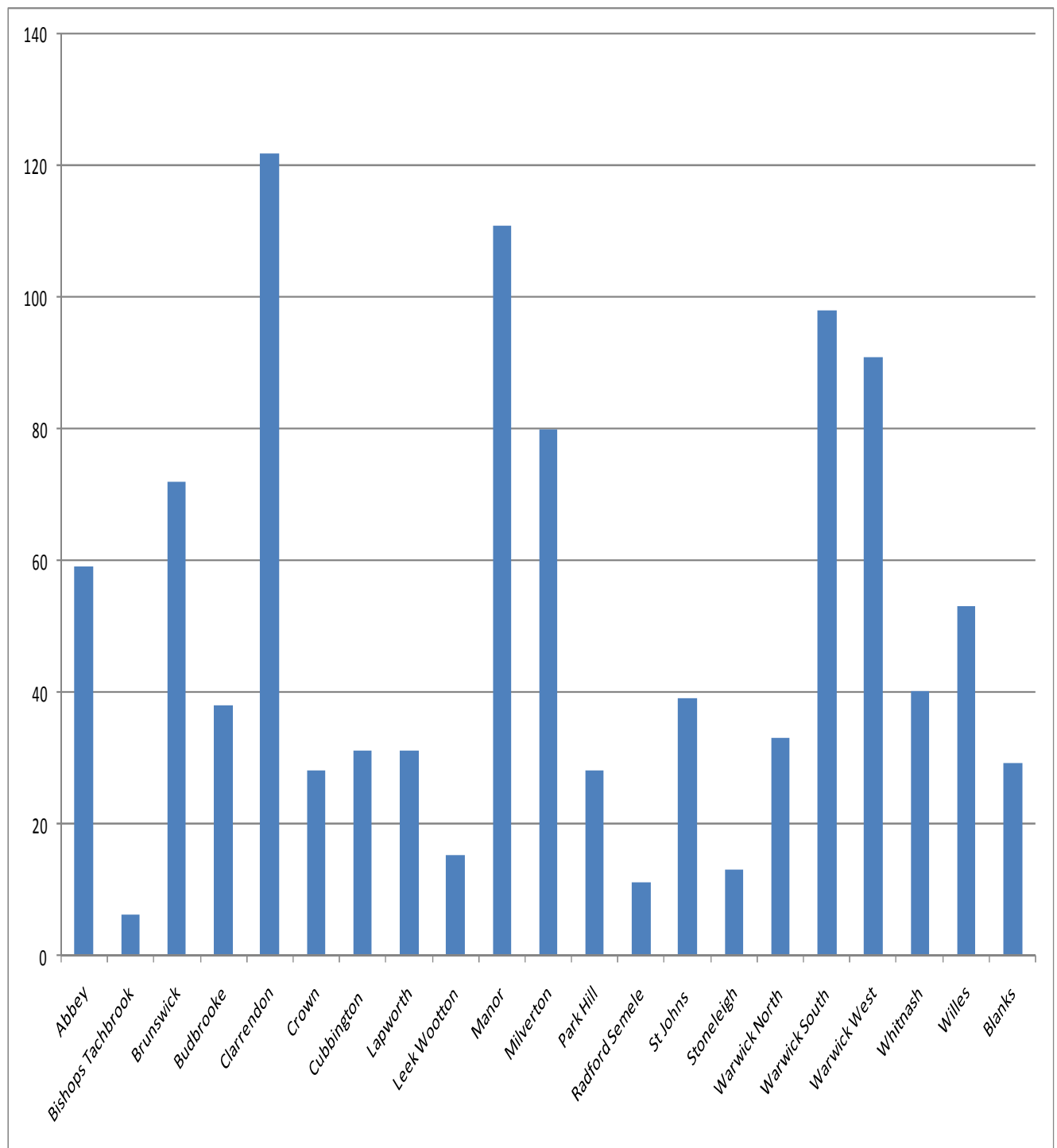
A graphical breakdown clearly shows that Leamington Spa has the largest number of empty properties, consistent with being the town with the largest number of dwellings, with Warwick and Kenilworth also having proportionate concentrations.

**Figure 5: Empty Property by Location**



When we look at distribution by ward, we can see that Clarendon and Manor wards in Leamington Spa have the highest concentrations, closely followed by Warwick South and Warwick West.

**Figure 6: Empty Property by Ward**





### 7.3 Period Empty

The length of time that a property had remained empty is an important factor in assessing its priority for action. Although there is a small majority of properties which have been empty for 6-12 months, surprisingly, there is fairly even distribution of properties that have remained empty over 1-2 years, 3-4 years and 5-10 years. Over 50 properties have remained empty for at least 10 years. Some of these will have been empty even longer than 10 years, but the data collected only goes back as far as 2000.

**Figure 7: Empty Property by Time Empty**

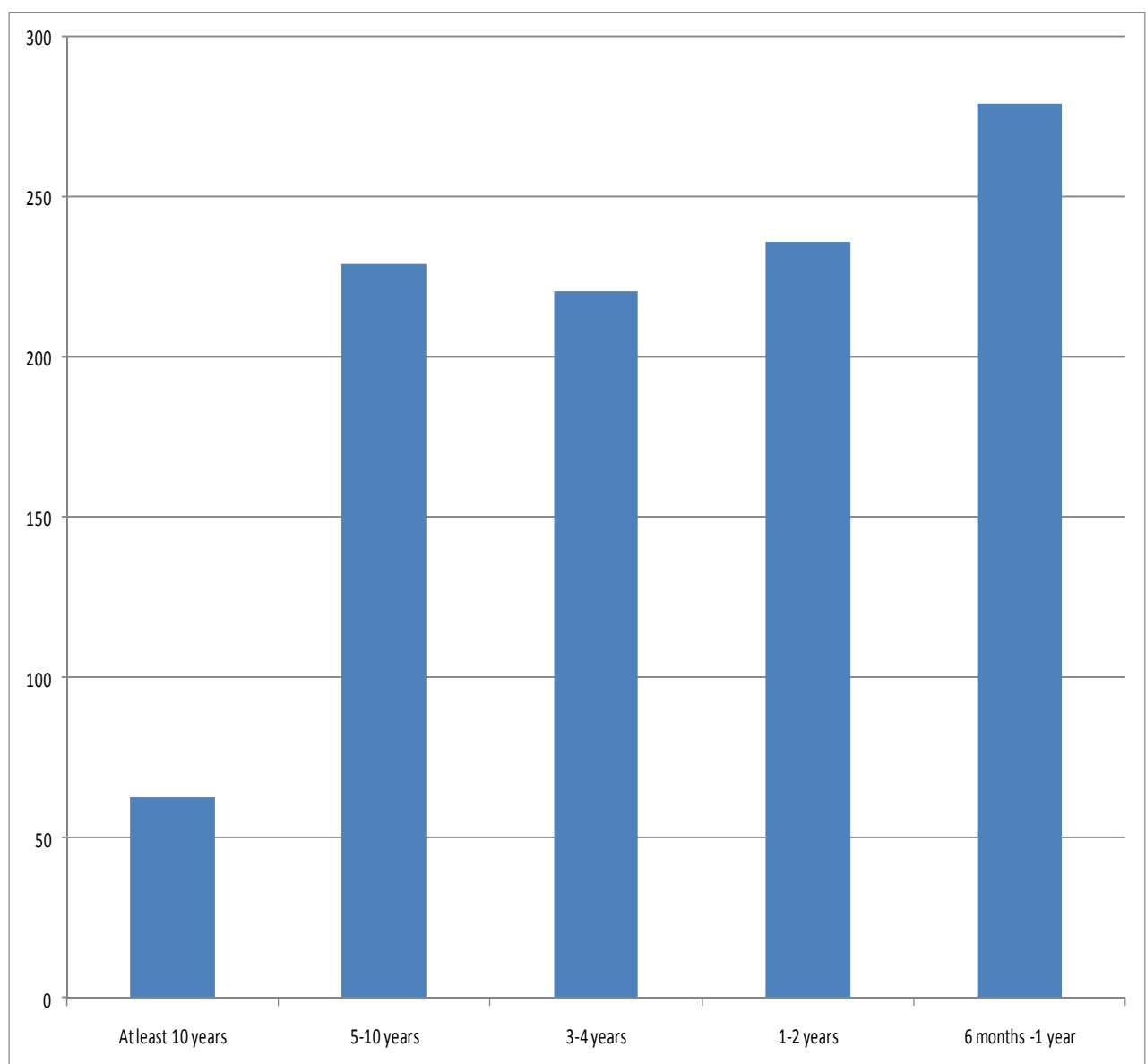
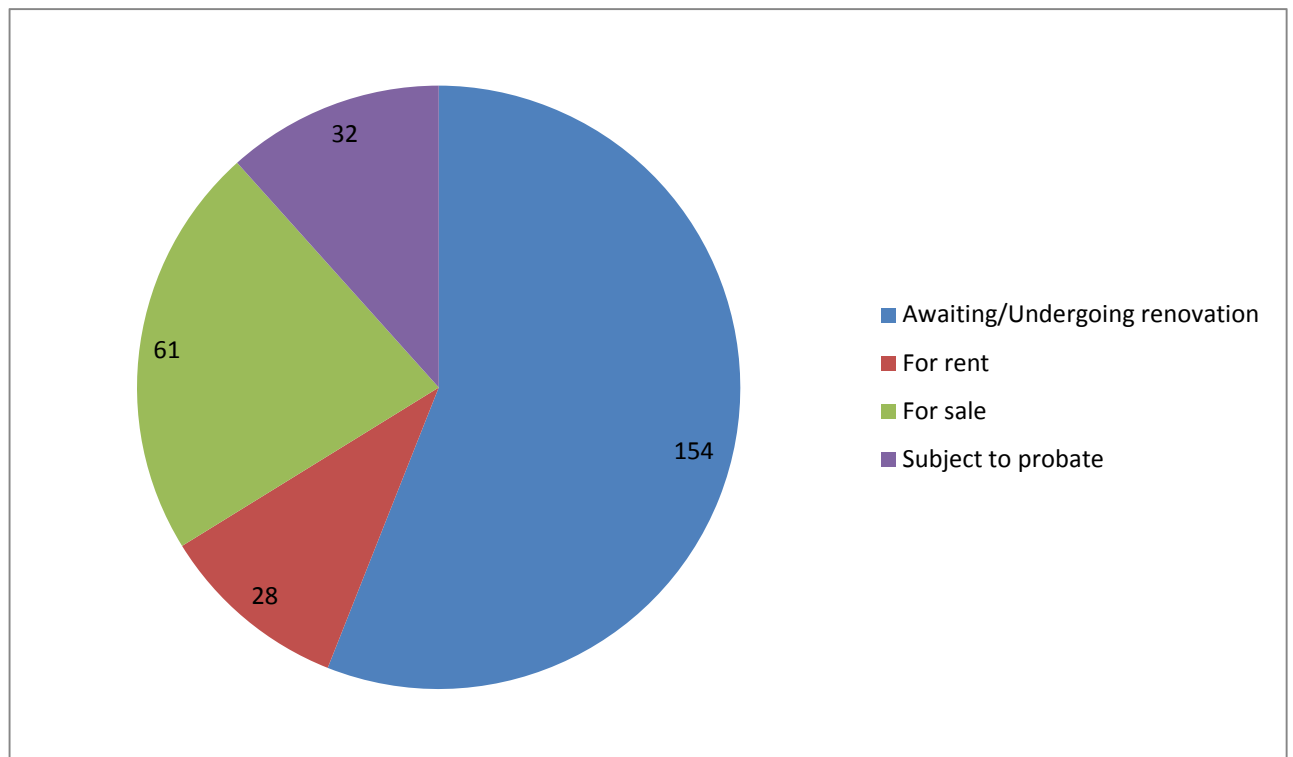


Figure 8 shows the reasons why properties remain empty. The reasons can be many and varied. In summary, information collected to date through site visits and receipt of information from owners to long term empty properties indicates that properties awaiting or undergoing renovation is the most common reason, followed by properties which are on the market for sale, and those subject to probate. Work is still ongoing to collect complete data on reasons why properties remain empty.

**Figure 8: Reasons why Properties are Empty**



## **8. Action Plan Programme**

The action plan programme is set out in Appendix 1. It details the mechanism that will be used to ensure that the strategic objectives are met.

## Appendix 1: Action Plan Programme

### Strategic Objective 1: better understand the numbers of empty homes in the district and reasons why they are left empty

| Action   | Lead Officer                           | Outcome  | Target Date                                 | Achievements   |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Work with Revenues & Benefits to develop and maintain database of empty property                   | Interim Private Sector Housing Manager | Clear picture of the number of long term empty properties in district  | On going                                    | Initiated in September 2010<br>Database established in November 2010. Weekly updates being received from May 2011.   |
| Create and publicise a variety of communication channels for reporting empty property              | EPO                                    | Increased knowledge of empty homes in district and involvement of the public                                 | On going                                    | Leaflet and poster campaign January 2011<br>Website updated February 2011 with web form to report empty property<br>Publicity at Landlord Forum April 2011 |
| Produce an empty homes awareness pack for professionals who may come into contact with empty homes | EPO                                    | To assist owners with information to enable them to make informed decisions to facilitate re-use of property | June 2011                                   |  |
| Map empty properties using GIS   | Corporate GIS Manager                  | To assist in targeting action and resources  | December 2010; to provide quarterly updates | Completed in November 2010 and updated in August 2011. GIS Manager now set up to report quarterly  |
| Use questionnaires to collect data   | EPO                                    | To assist with data analysis to determine why properties are empty and proposals to tackle them              | On going                                    | Over 290 questionnaires already received   |

**Strategic Objective 2: minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty by taking a proactive approach through early intervention and offering advice and assistance to owners.**

| <b>Action</b>   | <b>Officer</b> | <b>Outcome</b>  | <b>Target Date</b>  | <b>Achievements</b>   |
|---|----------------|---|---|---|
| Provide information leaflets regarding empty homes              | EPO            | To publicise the issue of empty property and raise awareness                      | January 2011  | Completed in January 2011 inc. production of posters for general distribution in public places and estate agents  |
| Continue mailshot to owners of empty homes regarding assistance | EPO            | To raise awareness of empty property with all known empty property owners quickly | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Mailshot May 2011, 3 <sup>rd</sup> mailshot July 2011 | 1 <sup>st</sup> mailshot issued in January 2011<br>2 <sup>nd</sup> mailshot issued in June 2011<br>Individual correspondence being sent to owners instead of 3 <sup>rd</sup> mailshot |
| Encourage the re-use of empty homes through Landlord Forum      | EPO            | Exhibit at high profile event to give advice and distribute leaflets.             | On going for future Landlord forums                                   | Completed in April 2011   |
| Develop assistance and support for marketing empty homes        | EPO            | Matching service – linking owners with prospective purchasers                     | June 2011   | Initiated in March 2011   |
|   |                | Publicise the use of Rent Bond Scheme   | June 2011   | June 2011   |
| Provide advice to owners who wish to let and sell their homes   | EPO            | To demonstrate the benefits of letting and selling and remove any misconceptions  | November 2011   | November 2011   |

**Strategic Objective 3: risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action**

| <b>Action</b>               | <b>Officer</b>                         | <b>Outcome</b>  | <b>Target Date</b> | <b>Achievements</b>     |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Devise scoring matrix form  | Interim Private Sector Housing Manager | To enable empty properties to be prioritised for action       | November 2010      | Completed November 2010 |
| Risk assess all empty homes | EPO                                    | To ensure each property is considered to determine priorities | On going           | On going                |

**Strategic Objective 4: Using the Council's enforcement powers where negotiation with the owner has failed to bring long term empty homes back into use**

| <b>Action</b>  | <b>Officer</b>                   | <b>Outcome</b>  | <b>Target Date</b> | <b>Achievements</b>        |
|--|----------------------------------|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Develop an enforcement strategy for dealing with empty homes | EPO                              | Enforced sale, EDMO , CPO procedures set up and agreed with Legal Services                                | June 2011          | June 2011                  |
| Agree a management partner for EDMO process                  | Interim Housing Strategy Manager | To enable the EDMO procedure to be fully utilised   | October 2011       |                            |
| Identify long term empty properties for enforcement          | EPO                              | To ensure that those properties which cannot be brought back to use informally are effectively dealt with | June 2011          | Initiated August 2011      |
| Establish use of Land Registry on line                       | EPO                              | To allow information on ownership to be confirmed instantly to aid enforcement                            | February 2011      | Completed in February 2011 |

### Strategic Objective 5: raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use

| Action  | Officer                                | Outcome  | Target Date  | Achievements   |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Produce literature to highlight the issues of empty homes and options available to owners to return them to use | EPO                                    | To assist owners with information to enable them to make informed decisions to facilitate re-use of property | January 2011   | Leaflets and posters printed January 2011<br>Articles in 'Focus' and 'Home News' publications March 2011   |
| Improve links with other Council Departments through regular meetings of Empty Homes Action Group               | EPO                                    | To ensure joined up working, share good practice and operate more effectively                                | On going   | Working Group established January 2011   |
| Produce quarterly empty homes monitoring and performance reports  | Interim Private Sector Housing Manager | To provide accurate information and data on the work and impact of the EPO                                   | On going   | Initial report March 2011  |
| Establish links with External Agencies  | EPO                                    | To ensure best practice and maximise networking opportunities  | On going<br><br>On going<br>On going<br>On going<br><br>On going | West Midlands Empty Property Practitioners Group Member –On going<br>Empty Homes Agency<br>Homes & Communities Agency<br>Warwickshire Fire Service |



## Appendix 2: Statutory Notice Actions where Debt from Works In Default can be Registered in Part 2 of the Local Land Charge Register

| <b>Legislation which may incur costs to the owner</b>   | <b>PRIORITY CHARGE</b><br>(over other Charges) | <b>INTEREST</b><br>(whether it accrues) |
|---|--|---|
| <u>Public Health Act 1936</u><br><br>Sec 45 (works to closets)<br>Sec 83 (filthy or verminous)  | YES  | YES                                     |
| <u>Local Government (Misc. Provs) Act 1976</u><br><br>Sec 33 (restore services)<br>Sec 35 (private sewer)   | YES  | NO                                      |
| <u>Local Government (Misc. Provs) Act 1982</u><br><br>Sec 27 (drains)   | NO   | NO                                      |
| Highways Act 1980<br><br>Sec 154 (hedges, trees)<br>Sec 165 (unfenced land)   | YES  | NO                                      |
| <u>Building Act 1984</u><br>Sec 59 (drainage)<br>Sec 60 (soil pipes)<br>Sec 76 (defective premises)<br>Sec 77/78 (dangerous building)<br>Sec 84 (yards)       | YES  | NO                                      |
| <u>Housing Act 2004</u><br><br>Sec 11 (Improvement notice category 1 hazard)<br><br>Sec 12 (Improvement notice category 2 hazard)<br><br>Sec 40(2) (emergency | YES  | YES                                     |

|   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| remedial action)<br><br>Sec 49 (powers to charge for certain enforcement action)<br><br>Sec 50 (recovery of charges under Sec 49) |     |     |
| <u>Town and Country Planning Act 1990</u><br>Sec 215 (land condition)<br>Sec 172 (planning breach)                                | NO  | NO  |
| <u>Environmental Protection Act 1990</u><br>Sec 80 (stat nuisance)  | YES | YES |
| <u>Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949</u><br><br>Sec 4 (rats & mice)  | YES | YES |

Note that even though some enforcement actions do not permit entry in the Local Land Charge Register, the debt can still be recovered if the property goes to sale through Enforced Sale Procedure.

## Appendix 3: Scoring Matrix

| Property Address: |                             |                          |                      |       |       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Date of Rating:   |                             |                          | Ref:                 |       |       |
| Officer:          |                             |                          |                      |       |       |
| Signature:        |                             |                          |                      |       |       |
|                   | Criteria                    | Answer                   | Variable             | Score | Notes |
| Q1                | Garden Overgrown            | Yes/No                   | Slightly – 5         |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | Very – 10            |       |       |
| Q2                | ASB at property             | Yes/No                   | Minor – 5            |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | Major – 10           |       |       |
| Q3                | Accumulated refuse/litter   | Yes/No                   | Minor – 5            |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | Action Req – 10      |       |       |
| Q4                | Boarded up/open to access   | Yes/No                   | Boarded – 5          |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | Open to access – 10  |       |       |
| Q5                | Property Up for Sale        | Yes/No                   | Discount max -20     |       |       |
| Q6                | Next door is Empty          | Yes/No                   | Left Property + 5    |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | Right Property + 5   |       |       |
| Q7                | House or flat               | House 2pts<br>Flat 0 pts |                      |       |       |
| Q8                | Located in Old Town area    | Yes/No                   | 10                   |       |       |
| Q9                | In town                     | Yes/No                   | 0 or 5               |       |       |
| Q10               | Other Empty Homes on Street | Yes/No                   | 0 or 5               |       |       |
| Q11               | Complaints                  | Yes/No                   | 1 or 2 complaints +5 |       |       |
|                   |                             |                          | 3+ complaints +10    |       |       |

|                            |                              |         |         |  |  |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------|---------|--|--|
| Q12                        | Previous Enforcement action  | Yes/No  | 0 or 10 |  |  |
| Q13                        | Length time house/flat empty | 1-2yrs  | +2      |  |  |
|                            |                              | 2-3yrs  | +4      |  |  |
|                            |                              | 3-5yrs  | +8      |  |  |
|                            |                              | 5-10yrs | +10pts  |  |  |
|                            |                              | 10yrs + | +20pts  |  |  |
| EMPTY HOME PRIORITY SCORE: |                              |         |         |  |  |

## Appendix 4: Equality Impact Assessment

|   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Service Area  | Housing Strategy                   |
| Policy/Service being assessed   | Empty Property Strategy            |
| Is this is a new or existing policy/service?<br><br>If existing policy/service please state date of last assessment | New strategy<br><br>Not applicable |
| EIA Review team – List of members   | Paul Hughes, Satnam Kaur           |
| Date of this assessment   | 23 February 2011                   |
| Name and signature of completing officer (to be signed after the EIA has been completed)                            | Paul Hughes                        |
| Name and signature of Head of Service (to be signed after the EIA has been completed)                               | Jameel Malik                       |

## Initial Screening for Strategies/Policies/Functions for Equalities Relevance to Eliminate Discrimination and Promote Equality



High relevance  
priority



Medium relevance  
priority



Low or no relevance  
priority

### Note:

1. Tick coloured boxes appropriately, and depending on degree of relevance to each of the equality strands
2. Summaries of the legislation/guidance should be used to assist this screening process

| Department:   | Relevance/Risk to Equalities                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| State the Function/Policy /Service/Strategy being assessed: | Gender                                       | Race   | Disability                                   | Sexual Orientation                           | Religion/Belief                              | Age  | Socio-economic                               | Priority status For EIA                      |  |  |  |  |
|   | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> |
| Empty Homes Strategy  | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> | <div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div> |

| <b><u>Stage 1 – Scoping and Defining</u></b>                             |  |
|--|--|
| (1) What are the aims and objectives of policy/service?                  | <p>To bring back into use long term empty private empty dwellings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understand the numbers of empty homes in the District and the reasons why owners have left them empty.</li> <li>• Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty (6 months or more) by taking a proactive approach through early intervention and offering advice and assistance to owners.</li> <li>• Risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.</li> <li>• Using the Council’s enforcement powers where negotiation with the owner has failed, to bring long term empty homes back into use.</li> <li>• Raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use.</li> </ul>  |
| (2) How does the policy/service fit with the council’s wider objectives? | <p>The corporate strategy objectives of making the district a great place to live and an increased supply of affordable housing are both relevant.</p> <p>The strategy is regarded as a key document to reinforce the Council’s emerging Housing Strategy.</p> <p>The Empty Homes strategy will have a positive impact on the sustainability of the existing housing stock and on local communities. By bringing empty homes back into use, the Council will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase housing supply and options and thereby help meet the increasing demand for housing in the District.</li> <li>• Help reduce vandalism and anti social behaviour associated with empty homes.</li> <li>• Contribute to the delivery of affordable housing</li> <li>• Enhance the environment and economic vitality of local communities</li> </ul> |

|  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>(3) What are the expected outcomes of the policy/service?</p> <p>Who is intended to benefit from the policy/service and in what way?</p>  | <p>To bring back into use 75 long term empty properties in the first 12 months. Beyond this, a combination of support and assistance and enforcement measures should ensure that the number of long term empty properties continues to fall year on year.</p> <p>The owner will benefit through sale or rent of the property. Those in housing need who are proposing to buy or let will benefit from an increased supply of accommodation from which to choose and the Council will benefit through increased revenue arising from Council Tax and New Homes Bonus.</p> |   |  |
| <p>(4) Does this policy/service have the potential to directly or indirectly discriminate against any particular group?</p> <p>Please identify all groups that are affected and briefly explain why.</p> | <p><b>RACE</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to race.</p>   | <p><b>AGE</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to age. However, there will a significant number of elderly owners who may need assistance in dealing with empty property.</p> | <p><b>GENDER</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to gender.</p>                         |
|  | <p><b>RELIGION/BELIEF</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to religion/belief.</p>   | <p><b>DISABILITY</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to disability.</p>  | <p><b>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</b><br/>NO</p> <p>Owners will be prioritised for action according to prescribed criteria which do not relate to sexual orientation.</p> |
| <p>(5) Are there any obvious barriers to accessing the service?</p>  | <p>No. The public are invited to report empty properties through a combination of media, including website, telephone, post and email. A leaflet highlighting our work on empty property can be made available in other formats and languages on request.</p> <p>Work on empty property is mainly proactive and based upon prescribed criteria not related to any of the equality strands.</p>   |   |  |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| (6) How does the policy/service contribute to promotion of equality?   | By ensuring that there is no adverse or negative impact on any particular group.   |
| (7) Does the policy/service have the potential to promote good relations between groups?                                   | Yes. There is potential to work with all groups to provide a positive outcome to the benefit of all.   |
| <b><u>Stage 2 - Information Gathering</u></b>  |  |
| (1) What type and range of evidence or information have you used to help you make a judgement about the policy or service? | Some data has been collected on the owners of long term empty property, but further data will be required before any judgement can be made.  |
| (2) What consultation/ information has been used?<br><br>What new consultation, if any, do you need to undertake?          | Mailshot letters have been sent to all long term empty property owners to invite comments to be recorded about their properties and policy in general.<br><br>Feedback will be required through Landlord Forums and Community Forums on how the strategy operates in due course. |

| <b><u>Stage 3 – Making a Judgement</u></b>   |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(1) From your data and consultations is there any adverse or negative impact identified for any particular group?</p> <p>Is there any evidence of needs not being met?</p> <p>e.g. language or physical access barriers; lack of appropriate resources or facilities.</p> | <p>No. Whilst no negative impact is expected, there will be routine monitoring. It is recognised that a significant proportion of long term empty properties are owned by elderly people, often those in residential or nursing care. In those cases, a solicitor or family member is usually appointed to handle their affairs.</p> <p>There is no evidence of needs not being met, but ongoing monitoring will take place.</p> |
| <p>(2) If there is an adverse impact, can this be justified?</p>   | <p>Not applicable.</p>   |
| <p>(3) What actions are going to be taken to reduce or eliminate negative or adverse impact?</p>   | <p>Not applicable.</p>   |
| <p>(4) Is there any positive impact? Does it promote equality of opportunity between different groups and actively address discrimination?</p>   | <p>Yes. Working with empty property owners is an opportunity to impart useful information and advice with positive outcomes for all, irrespective of equality groups.</p>  |

|   |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
|---|--|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b><u>Stage 4 – Action Planning, Review &amp; Monitoring</u></b>  |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
| If No Further Action is required then go to – Review & Monitoring   | EIA Action Plan  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
| (1) Action Planning – Specify any changes or improvements which can be made to the service or policy to mitigate or eradicate negative or adverse impact on specific groups, including resource implications. | <b>Action</b>  | <b>Lead Officer</b> | <b>Date for completion</b> | <b>Resource requirements</b> | <b>Comments</b> |
|   |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
|   |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
|   |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
|   |  |                     |                            |                              |                 |
| (2) Review and Monitoring<br><br>State how and when you will monitor policy and EIA Action Plan   | The strategy will be reviewed after 12 months. This will include an assessment on the relative merits of enforcement options and grant assistance. The EIA action plan will be reviewed after 3 years or earlier if there are significant changes to the strategy after 12 months. |                     |                            |                              |                 |