



# Empty Homes Newsletter

Empty Homes round-up for Cumbria - September 2019

News from Allerdale, Barrow, Carlisle, Copeland, Eden and South Lakeland District Councils

## Copeland's success – Turning over 100 long-term empty houses into homes!

**One of our longest empties, a three-storey town centre Georgian house (see right), has been empty for over twenty years causing a blight on a main thoroughfare in Whitehaven.**

It is located within a much-loved heritage area. Following persistence in tracing the owners to encourage action, it has recently been sold at auction and is currently undergoing a full refurbishment.

It will be wonderful to see the restoration of this historic property, enhancing the area and reflecting the care and pride shown in neighbouring houses.



• (above) A three-storey town centre Georgian house undergoing a full refurbishment

• (right) Some other fully refurbished properties on the street



**National**  
**empty**  
**homes**  
**Week 2019**  
23rd-29th September

Every year local authorities, housing providers, community-led organisations and others see Empty Homes Week as an opportunity to organise events and put out information so that people know about their work to tackle empty homes. Empty Homes Week is also the chance to celebrate successes and reflect on what more needs to be done to bring empty properties back into use to help meet housing needs.



## Copeland Borough Council round-up of news

### Copeland's Success – Turning over 100 long-term empty houses into homes!

The reduction of long-term empties is a core priority for Copeland Borough Council. We have agreed a targeted approach to tackle the 300+ houses that have been empty for more than two years. Our dedicated officer has been working diligently with owners, solicitors, contractors and agents to rejuvenate interest in these stalled and stagnating properties. This intensive approach has resulted in over 100 properties returning to use since September 2018.

One of our longest empties, a three-storey town centre Georgian house (see below left), has been empty for over



**Contact Paul Cowings, Empty Homes Officer, Copeland Borough Council on 01946 598300 or paul.cowings@copeland.gov.uk**

twenty years causing a blight on a main thoroughfare in Whitehaven.

It is located within a much-loved heritage area. Following persistence in tracing the owners to encourage action, it has recently been sold at auction and is currently undergoing a full refurbishment.

It will be wonderful to see the restoration of this historic property, enhancing the area and reflecting the care and pride shown in neighbouring houses (see below right).

Our Empty Homes Policy is currently undergoing review in time for a 2020 launch. One of our aims will be to align future work with the Council's vision for economic and physical regeneration. We aim to bring empty residential and commercial properties in our town centres back into use by identifying and securing inward investment, government grants and contributions to provide capital funding to address empty homes.

We continue to offer a range of supportive solutions for owners, strengthening our relationship with Homesmatch, which has resulted in a number of properties brought back into use, and securing our first success with Property Guardianship, which we hope to expand over the following 12 months.



## Barrow Borough Council round-up of news

The Council is attempting to take a proactive approach towards tackling empty properties and dealing with the problems of neighbourhood blight that comes along with ruinous and dilapidated buildings.

Over the past year, we have taken a tougher approach to enforcement as it is our belief that owners of empty properties need to take responsibility for ensuring that their properties do not cause a nuisance to the neighbourhood in general. We have served a number of enforcement notices section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act, and are actively considering a number of cases where use of Community Protection Notices (CPNs) may be appropriate.

We are taking a common approach across a range of departments in the Council, with regular liaison meetings taking place between Private Sector Housing, Planning, Conservation, Public Protection, Property Information and Legal Departments. An ongoing list of "Buildings of Concern" is kept up to date and reviewed, and co-ordinated action plans are agreed. We are also in the process of reviewing our Conservation Areas. This exercise will lead to us being able to collate a comprehensive list of Buildings at Risk. These will be logged onto the Council's GIS system so that the action plans for individual buildings can be refined into plans for wider neighbourhoods.



Already we have seen that improvements have been made to a number of high profile empty properties and we are hoping that this will lead to them being brought back into use. One such example is an enforced sale of a property that had been empty for many years and whose garden was causing a nuisance to neighbours. Following the service of a notice under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act, the garden was cleared and the costs of clearance recovered by enforcing the sale of the property (see photos).

We are always keen to engage with property owners wishing to bring empty properties back into use, and advise on technical matters etc. Where properties have been empty for over two years we are happy to confirm this in writing to allow the owners to carry out renovations at the reduced level of VAT (i.e. 5% rather than 20%).

**Contact Chris Jones on 01229 876543 or at cwjones@barrowbc.gov.uk or Jayne Parrington on 01229 876561 or at jparrington@barrowbc.gov.uk**



## Allerdale Borough Council round-up of news

Reducing the number of long-term empty homes in Allerdale is one of the key priorities in our 2016 to 2021 Housing

Strategy. We intend to work with empty home owners and with our internal and external partners to bring empty properties back into use.

Last year six empty homes were brought back into use with help from the Council's Empty Property Grant Funding. A further six grants were approved and work continues on these properties to bring them up to a suitable standard.

One of the Council's main priority programmes is Maryport Regeneration. A budget has been agreed for the current

financial year to offer empty home owners grants of up to £10,000 where properties in Maryport have been empty for more than twelve months.

We can also offer empty home owners the following :-

- VAT letters to save 15% VAT on repairs costs
- Matchmaker Scheme
- Advice and information on ways to bring empty homes back into use
- Drawing up schedules of work to guide empty home owners on works needed to bring the property up to a suitable standard.

For more information or to apply for an empty homes grant, contact Place Development and Housing on 0303 123 1702 or [housing.grants@allerdale.gov.uk](mailto:housing.grants@allerdale.gov.uk)



## Carlisle City Council round-up of news

### Strategy

The Empty Homes officer continues to concentrate primarily on the Long-term Empty Homes – those properties empty for over two years. It is considered that two years generally appears to be sufficient time for owners to attend to individual issues regarding re-establishing homes for habitable use and the turnover remains positive below this threshold. Communication with the long-term empty home owners has continued via letters, follow-up letters, questionnaires, telephone calls and visits. Physical visits are undertaken with (or independent of) the owner to visually assess the state of the property. Those properties identified as a 'blight' to the community are given further attention and action to address the disrepair. Council Tax rises to the 150% premium rate at the two-year point which encourages movement. The council now sends letters warning of the impending increase in the Council Tax rate to the owners ahead of the two-year point.

### Trend

**It is pleasing to see that Carlisle City Council are 'bucking the national trend' with a reduction from 1,005 empty properties in April 2018 to 916 March 2019. The Empty Homes Network reported in March 2019:-**

'In the last year, long-term empty homes numbers rose in two-thirds of English local authorities..... The problem of empty homes demonstrates its worst impacts, most often, in Northern housing markets.'

### Funding

Currently no direct Empty Homes funding exists however, progress is being made with a potential Long-Term Empty

Homes Grant using council funds. The proposed purpose of the Empty Home Grant would be to assist owners of Long-Term Empty Homes to complete works to their property in readiness for occupation. Funding will be limited but every effort will be made to try and assist movement on those homes that we can help.

### Enforced sales policy

We are tackling the impact of empty properties through statutory action and providing focus on long term empty properties. We are currently trying to implement the use of an Enforced Sales Policy to address properties that have been, for many years, a blight to neighbourhoods and where owners have been either unwilling to assist or we have been unable to contact. The sale will be used to recover costs incurred by the Council and will provide an opportunity for another owner to bring the property to a habitable state.

We can provide VAT letters to save 15% VAT on repairs costs. This letter gives details of how empty home owners can save 15% VAT on repairs costs. Provided the property has been empty for two or more years immediately before works start, owners can save 15% VAT on many repairs costs. This is proving a popular option and is increasing the number of empty homes renovated and brought back into use.

The Empty Homes officer is always available to provide advice and information on bringing empty homes into use and to use our legal powers to reduce the impact of empty properties on the local neighbourhood and community.

The Empty Homes officer will respond to all raised issues/complaints/enquiries/disputes from the public, council staff or councillors about Empty homes.

Contact Jack Dilley on 01228 817301 or [paul.dilley@carlisle.gov.uk](mailto:paul.dilley@carlisle.gov.uk)



## South Lakeland District Council round-up of news

**New tenants have moved into the lovely white-washed cottage situated in a village near Kendal. This is as a result of our joint Empty Homes Grant Management Scheme, working in partnership with South Lakes Housing, a local housing association. And already the third empty home in Ulverston has been refurbished as part of our Scheme and is currently waiting for its tenants to move in.**



There are lots of advantages to helping empty home owners to repair and rent their empty home via our Empty Homes Grants scheme. The owner gets their property repaired, receives regular rental income during the grant period (five years) and after the five years they can choose what to do with their property – continue to rent out, sell or occupy maybe? Tenants can choose to live in a lovely newly repaired and painted home (often with new kitchen and bathroom) and at an affordable rent. And the community benefits from a smartened up home which is occupied. Please read our Empty Homes Grants page at: [www.southlakeland.gov.uk/housing/empty-homes/empty-homes-grant/](http://www.southlakeland.gov.uk/housing/empty-homes/empty-homes-grant/) for more details.

There are many benefits for all of us to helping owners bring their empty homes back into use. For example bringing an empty home back into use leaves less of a carbon footprint than a new home. It makes sense to 'recycle' our empty homes whenever we can, in addition to building new homes. Bringing empty homes back into use sends out a positive message about an area, helping to restore confidence in the property market. As it is repaired, its appearance improves and the appearance of the area around it also improves. From potentially being a magnet for vandalism, being repaired can help neighbours feel safer in their own homes.

We are also helping empty home owners whose property has been empty for more than two years. This is for two reasons. Firstly if an owner is planning repairs and uses a VAT-registered contractor then the Empty Homes Officer

can provide a letter. The letter confirms that the property has been empty two or more years. An owner then gives the letter to their contractor and this allows them to charge the owner only 5% VAT on many repairs costs. The saving of 15% VAT on costly repairs can make a huge difference to owners and it is so easy. We also ask owners that if they plan to sell their empty property we would like them to make the new owner aware of these savings.

Secondly when a home has been empty for two or more years the council tax Premium of 50% is added to the 100% council tax being paid. We write to owners to remind them that they are paying 150% council tax and offer to help them bring their empty home back into use.

Another option we can 'signpost' empty home owners to is Homesmatch. For owners who would like to sell their empty home but who would prefer to repair it first this is another alternative. This option is generally aimed at owners who cannot repair their homes due to lack of resources, time or other reasons. In their leaflet Homesmatch offer a 'Pre-Purchase' Renovation service. With no up-front cash required from owner or buyer, they offer to advertise your property for sale with a standard renovation included. They then match a buyer to your property and Homesmatch funds and manages all the works. All costs and fees are agreed before any work begins so that owners know the net sales income. Homesmatch can be contacted on 07449 075 618 or 07713 627 883 for an initial discussion to find out if this is a suitable option for the owner.

This is just one example of the many options and advice available for empty home owners.

**Please look at our empty homes webpages [www.southlakeland.gov.uk/housing](http://www.southlakeland.gov.uk/housing) - More on housing – Empty homes. Or contact our Empty Homes Officer, Lynne Leach, on 01539 793375 or at [empty.homes@southlakeland.gov.uk](mailto:empty.homes@southlakeland.gov.uk).**



## Eden District Council round-up of news

**We offer empty home owners the following service –**

- VAT letters (to save 15% VAT on costs of repairs)
- Schedules of works to bring empty homes up to legislative standards
- Advice to owners on how to return their properties to use

- Interest-free loans of up to £15,000
- Empty home grants of up to £15,000, the property must be let at an affordable rent for at least 5 years after the property has been brought back into use.
- Addressing empty properties which are a statutory nuisance

**Contact Environmental Health Officer (Housing) on 01768 212331 or [env.admin@eden.gov.uk](mailto:env.admin@eden.gov.uk)**