Bringing clusters of empty homes into use
Project Plan 2012-2015
Introduction

This joint bid from West Cumbria comprises Allerdale Borough Council, Carlisle City Council and Copeland Borough Council.

There is a strong history of partnership working between the authorities through the well established Cumbria Housing Executive Group (CHEG), Cumbria Housing Officers Group (HOG), with support from four specialist groups. One of which specifically deals with empty homes.

The Cumbria Housing Strategy and Investment Plan 2011-15 has been endorsed by each of the districts and contained in the Cumbria Housing Strategy is key theme 3 encompassing market renewal. This theme requires that stock is used more efficiently, highlights our empty home match maker scheme and explores potential funding opportunities to deal with empty homes for example.

Independent of but having strategic links to the Cumbria Housing Strategy are our own individual Housing and Empty Homes Strategies. Each strategy highlights reducing empty homes as being a key priority.

In addition Allerdale Borough Council’s Council Commitment to Local Communities 2012-2015 (Council Plan) also prioritises bringing more long term homes back into use and monitors long term the cost of housing compared to income levels.

By working together we feel we can effectively and efficiently use the cluster bid money to bring empty homes back into use in the cluster areas specified.

Type of property brought back into use

The intention is to firstly utilise the funds to reduce the number of long term empty homes and secondly to assist those owners who wish to convert under utilised commercial property into affordable homes. This reconfiguration of stock, for example, is also reflected in the Allerdale, Carlisle and Copeland Council Plans.

The benefits to reducing the number of long term empty homes are:

- Increasing the availability of housing stock. The additional units will be let through Cumbria Choice, which is the method of letting social rented housing.
- Utilisation of an existing asset.
- Reduction in vandalism and anti social behaviour.
- Improved streetscape.
- Increased council tax and new homes bonus revenue.
- Stronger adjacent property values.
With a downturn in the occupation of commercial property, especially away from the “main high street” and subsequent investment, commercial properties have become a magnet for fly posters, for example, which detracts from the immediate streetscape and wider neighbourhood.

This reconfiguration of stock complements the funding requirements, adds to revitalizing town centres and provides increased presence to deter potential acts of anti social behaviour.

All properties have been confirmed by council tax as having been empty for longer than six months. Existing social housing will not be assisted but we will be proactively working with registered providers to ensure that the small number of long term empty homes they own are occupied as soon as practically possible, to add value to our work.

Use of properties

Properties will be brought into use predominantly for owner occupation and rent. Shared ownership will be considered but delivering such an outcome may prove difficult due to the financial complexities.

Negotiations with owners will determine whether an affordable or target rent will be applicable.

All properties receiving an interest free loan will be required to let or occupy the property within a specific time frame or immediate repayment will be required.

Bringing properties back into use

The plan involves offering a small grant as a quick fix or an interest free loan. The “menu of options” will give the three partners and customers flexibility to tackle empty homes which will be appropriate for their own area and distinct cluster areas within.

It is intended to offer:

- A £1-2k grant (quick fix incentive), requiring the property to be rented within 12 weeks and for a minimum period of 12 months. Repayment will only be required when conditions are contravened.
- A loan of between £8-10k, which will be registered as a local land charge. For owner occupiers they will be required to set up an interest free payment plan, the loan being repayable in full no later than three to five years after completion, dependant on an individual’s personal circumstances. If it is sold within the three to five year period then repayment will be required with immediate effect. For landlords if the property is not let within four months of completion then the loan will need to be repaid in full with immediate effect. Following occupation the landlord will be required to set up an interest free payment plan to repay the loan.
• The repaid loan money will be recycled and ring fenced for empty homes to ensure that long term empty homes intervention measures continue to be delivered and developed.
• Work carried out by the owner and or family will not be reimbursed but the submission of satisfactory material receipts will be acceptable.
• Landlords will be required to let the property for a minimum period of five years.

Standards

We want to ensure that competent local contractors are employed by the owner to achieve the decent homes standard.

Only those contractors registered with Gas Safe or who are members of a registered electrical organisation will be allowed to carry out relevant works for example. All work requiring Building Control supervision and or planning permission will be obtained.

We will also be working with the Cumbria Affordable Warmth Officer and future Green Deal providers for Cumbria when the scheme is launched, to ensure that we signpost customers to obtain funding for energy efficiency measures, thus reducing fuel costs and carbon emissions.

Strategic Fit

Cumbria

In addition to the three individual local authorities' housing strategies, the Local Investment Plan for Cumbria 2010-2011 (LIP) provides links to a number of projects which either directly or indirectly deal with the issue of empty homes.

The LIP document provides links to Britain’s Energy Coast West Cumbria which covers Allerdale and Copeland boroughs; a master plan was published in 2007. To accompany the master plan will be an Economic Blueprint, designed to take account of the new opportunities that have arisen and the economic challenges ahead which need to be supported by having the correct mix of decent homes for the workforce. Reducing the number of long term empty homes will assist this.

The blueprint is fully supported by the Local Development Frameworks and Community Plans for each authority, the Local Investment Plan, Local Transport Plan and the West Cumbria Tourism Strategy among other documents.

One of the aims of the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership is stimulating job growth within the private community and third sectors to compensate for job losses currently being experienced in the public sector (both directly and through the impact of spending cuts on public sector contracting) and
rebalancing the economy. Again essential to this is having enough decent homes in the right location to be able to support this economic aspiration and reducing empty homes remains a priority.

**Locally**

Each local authority has linked to its housing strategy an empty home policy/strategy and/or procedure document highlighting the local issues and addressing the need to bring back more empty homes back into use.

We are all members of the empty homes network and officers attend the Cumbria Empty Homes Group which shares good practice and consistency of enforcement.

Housing needs officers carry out a rolling programme of housing market assessments. The housing need results from Allerdale and Carlisle are detailed in the attachment sent with this submission.

Specific to Allerdale and providing strategic links to this bid is the future submission of a bid by the Regeneration Section to the Communities and Local Government with regards to The Portas Review December 2011.

The aim is to make “high streets the heart of towns and communities. With town centre vacancy rates doubling over the last two years and total consumer spend away from our high streets now over 50%, the need to take action has never been clearer”. The Portas bid by Allerdale Borough Council covers the town centre area of Maryport which is also a Conservation Area.

Maryport historically benefited from funding from the West Cumbria housing market renewal pathfinder, which helped to reconfigure part of the Ewanrigg social housing estate. Unfortunately since its demise Maryport has attracted little investment.

The Cockermouth cluster which is not linked to the Portas bid, but is also located within the heart of the Cockermouth main street and also happens to be within a Conservation Area and adjacent to the hugely popular Lake District National Park. This has resulted in Cockermouth having very strong housing need figures which prevent many locals from continuing to live there; the knock on effect is that this high demand causes inflated housing prices in neighbouring parishes and settlements.

Associated with rural public transport being infrequent and lengthy it is crucial that we facilitate those who wish to live and work, within a reasonable distance are able to do so, thus supporting local businesses. Allerdale’s Council Plan also details a key priority being investigating “living over a shop project”.

Carlisle City Council and Copeland Borough Council’s supporting information is detailed in the submission attachments.
Community Support

Working within the submission timescale we have received supporting letters from Rivers meet Community Cooperative of Cockermouth, Cockermouth Civic Trust and Groudwork North East and Cumbria. These independent charitable organisations promote working with residents and are able to forge and maintain strong links between funders and community interests.

It is anticipated that their involvement will be able to advise the owners of long term empty homes about waste recycling and community grow your own food projects. This bid will complement Rivers meet aspirations to develop small scale business units to encourage locally the development of new businesses employing local labour.

We hope to facilitate with Groundwork the maintaining of, or transforming of, green areas within the cluster and immediate area, involving community groups and local chambers of commerce.

We also have a letter signed by registered providers within Cumbria and the Carlisle Housing Partnership supporting our bid.

Copeland Borough Council has received strong support from Arlecdon and Frizington Parish Council.

Value for money

Research carried out by Allerdale Borough Council’s housing officers in December 2011 involved writing to 550 long term empty home owners asking them to complete a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire and subsequent discussions identified that some owners needed a relatively small injection of finance to “kick start” the completion of the necessary works because the national high street lenders were unwilling to lend further monies until the renovation works are complete. This results in a continuous cycle of no improvements being carried out and the home remaining empty.

The specific costs relating to our proposal are detailed on the cluster template but the intention is that the owner will have a contribution to make, which will be in excess of the maximum applicable interest free loan awarded.

In addition the owner will be able to apply for assistance via the future Green Deal and through the Cumbria Warm Homes Project funded by E.ON.

Although loans will be offered there will always remain the enforcement option supported by our individual enforcement policies. We would wish to negotiate and work with empty home owners but will when necessary utilise enforcement action.

Specific to Allerdale, we have a long track record of nearly 10 years of reducing the number of long term empty homes including commercial
buildings. Homes have been demolished and the site redeveloped, as well as commercial sites being developed into housing schemes. For example we are currently demolishing a long term empty home in default on the outskirts of Cockermouth.

When we were able to financially support renewal areas then we would concentrate staff resources to reduce the number of vacant properties in those priority areas. Historically there was a poor take up but this can be explained by the then buoyant housing market, lenders willing to lend and the conditions attached to any award of grant restricting what the owners could do with the property in the future.

Two senior housing technicians will prioritise up to 50% of their time to deliver this project and will be supervised by the Principal Housing Officer.

Summary

Housing portfolio holders are very supportive of the bid together with support from their colleagues and senior management.

All our housing strategies prioritise reducing the number of long term empty homes together with council plans and the Cumbria wide Housing Strategy.

This consistently and clearly shows local and Cumbria wide strategic support together with strong community support.

There is a proven track record of delivery, ability to quickly prioritise staffing resources. The bid offers value for money associated with strong demand for housing.

We believe the cluster of empty homes money is a great opportunity and enabling tool to bring empty homes in West and North Cumbria back into long term occupation.

Noon 4 May 2012