Foreword

Welcome to Oldham’s 2013 - 2016 Empty Homes Delivery Plan.

This delivery plan outlines our commitment as a partnership to tackle empty homes in the Borough. We hope that you find the format clear and concise and that it provides you with an understanding of the key issues and approach we are taking.

The issue of empty homes is both a national and local problem. In Oldham, at the time of writing, there are approximately 1,500 long-term empty homes in the Borough. This is a significant waste of a resource, particularly at a time of growing housing demand. Bringing these empty homes back into use can contribute towards meeting our housing needs and can improve the quality of our neighbourhoods.

Our new delivery plan clearly identifies how we will work together to reduce the number of empty homes in Oldham and has been developed based on robust research and consultation. The Plan outlines our key priorities and actions for addressing empty homes over the next three years.

It is important to note that the responsibility to address empty homes is shared by partners, particularly our housing providers, and that property owners and residents help play their part. By bringing empty homes back into use we will improve neighbourhoods, increase access to housing and help to improve our residents’ quality of life.

Councillor Dave Hibbert
Portfolio holder for Housing,
Transport and Planning

Bill Lovat
Chair of Oldham Housing Investment Partnership
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1. **Introduction**

According to the Empty Homes Agency there were 710,000 empty homes in England in 2010 and, of these, 259,000 were empty for more than 6 months. The Agency expects that these figures will continue to grow in the short to medium term.

In Oldham there were 1,494 long-term empty homes as at October 2012. The number of people on our Housing Register is growing and the levels of new build homes can’t meet demand for housing. Bringing these empty homes back into use can significantly contribute to meeting our housing need in the Borough.

There are, of course, other concerns with regards to empty homes. If we allow an empty property to deteriorate, it can blight a whole street or indeed an entire neighbourhood. Empty homes can also attract vandalism, fly-tipping and other criminal activity. All these activities can have a detrimental effect on the local community.

The introduction of the New Homes Bonus scheme and the allocation of three separate programmes of funding between October 2012 and April 2013 totaling just over £3 million mean that there are real financial incentives to reduce the number of long term empty homes.

This Delivery Plan will ensure that owners are both encouraged, and where appropriate, supported to unlock the potential of an empty home. This plan offers new solutions to the problem of empty homes and builds on the success of our previous delivery plan.
2. **Policy Context**

This Delivery Plan has been developed to reflect the national and local housing strategies on tackling empty homes.

2.1 **National Context**

The Government’s new Housing Strategy ‘Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England’ states that bringing empty homes back into use can help to increase the overall supply of housing and reduce the negative impact that neglected empty homes have on communities. To achieve this aim it has introduced a number of new initiatives, including:

- Awarding the New Homes Bonus to incentivise councils to bring empty homes brought back into use

- Providing information and practical advice to local authorities and communities to help them address empty homes

- Investing £100 million funding to bring problematic empty homes back into use and announcing £50 million of further funding to tackle some of the worst concentrations of empty homes

- Consulting on options to levy an ‘empty homes premium’ on Council Tax payable (whereby councils can charge 150% council tax for properties empty for 2 years or more)

- Proposing changes to Empty Dwelling Management Orders to target their use on the very worst long-term empty homes causing a nuisance to the community.

2.2 **Local Context**

It is part of the Council’s Corporate Plan 2012 -15 to maximise opportunities to increase the supply of homes across the Borough. In addition, the Oldham and Rochdale Housing Strategy 2012-15 includes an action on making best use of
existing homes and has set a target to bring 200 empty homes back into use over the next 3 years in Oldham.

This Empty Homes Delivery Plan takes forward the priorities set out in those two key documents.

3. **Definition of an Empty Property**

According to the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) there is no single definition of an empty property, although they class an empty property as one which has been ‘unoccupied for 6 months or more and has no reasonable prospect of being brought back into use by the owner working alone.’

The Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG) does not count second homes and other properties that may only be used occasionally (e.g. holiday homes and other seasonal lets) as empty. Properties that are empty for less than six months are categorised separately for statistical purposes from longer-term empty homes that are more likely to be problematic.

For the purposes of this Delivery Plan, an empty home or empty property is defined as ‘a dwelling that has remained unoccupied for 6 months or more.’

3.1 **Why Homes Remain Empty**

An empty homes study carried out by Oldham Council in 2009 revealed that homes become and remain empty for a variety of reasons. Some homes remain empty because they are being renovated or sold and this is expected. However, where homes remain empty for a significant period there are usually other underlying reasons, for example:

- The property has been inherited
- The owner cannot achieve a desired sale
- Inability to finance the cost of repairs
- Empty flats over shops are used for business storage and in many cases have no external access
Owner is retaining the property to benefit from house price increases
Reluctance to let out or sell
The occupant is in hospital or receiving care
Owner has died and the property is tied up in probate, or legal ownership issues.

Whilst the Council has a responsibility to tackle empty homes in the Borough, the nature and scope of the actions have to be determined by the legal and personal position of each owner of empty homes which has to be balanced against the needs of the wider community. The role of partners, particularly our Registered Providers, will be increasingly important in identifying solutions for empty homes.

3.2 Why Target Empty Homes?

Empty homes are a frequent cause of concern for neighbours. This is because they can attract nuisance, squatting, fly-tipping and other criminal activity. If they remain neglected for long periods of time, they can potentially become unsafe and dangerous and drive down the value of neighbouring properties. By reducing the number of long term empty properties in the borough, we can help to:

- Improve the local neighborhood
- Reduce vandalism and anti-social behavior associated with the empty home
- Increase value of properties
- Provide a range of good quality homes for people in housing need
- Reduce demand for building new homes
- Increase income from Council Tax
- Reduce demand on services – fire / police.

4. Achievements from Previous Delivery Plan

Since the last Delivery Plan was published in April 2009, the Council and its partners have continued to set challenging targets and introduced new initiatives and procedures to enable us to achieve our objectives, for example:
We changed our approach to tackling empty homes as reducing overall number of empty homes in the borough was identified as a key LAA target.

Established a dedicated Empty Homes Team

Developed an Empty Homes database to ensure we target key areas

Introduced a ‘scoring system’ to prioritise which homes we will bring back into use

Increased revenue through the New Homes Bonus

Improved information and advice to customers

Target specific neighbourhoods

Visited every empty property and contacted every owner to reduce numbers

We have brought back 409 empty homes back into use.

Our performance from 2009 - 2012

Fig. 1

*end of Qtr. 2

Fig. 1 above shows that in the last 3 years, 409 empty properties were brought back into use. This achievement demonstrates the commitment of the Council and its partners to use their resources to target towards empty homes in recent years.

5. **Our current position**

In October 2012 there were 1,494 properties on the Council Tax records identified as empty for more than 6 months. Of these, just under 500 have been empty for more than 6 months and 475 between 12-23 months. Of more significance is the number of homes that have been empty for more than two years, which is 375. Most of these longer-term properties are privately-owned and it is these which cause the most concern and undoubtedly a waste of a valuable resource at a time of growing housing need.

Fig.2
Fig. 2 above shows that empty homes are distributed evenly across the six district partnership areas and that there is no concentration or clusters of empty homes in one particular area. There are currently higher levels of empty homes in West Oldham as a consequence of properties which are due to be cleared as part of regeneration plans for Werneth and Primrose Bank.

The 2011, Census records showed that there are 89,703 residential properties registered in Oldham. Of these, 1,494 are empty which represents 1.3% of the housing stock, compared with the national average of approximately 3% (source: Empty Homes Agency statistics, 2012).
6. **Consultation**

We consulted a wide range of agencies in preparation of this delivery plan, including:

- Registered Providers
- Elected members
- Voluntary Organisations
- The HCA
- Overview & Scrutiny Committee

The feedback we received during the consultation has been crucial in reviewing our existing priorities and practices and identifying new priorities for the next three years.

7. **What have we changed?**

The previous delivery plan was published at a time when the Council was heavily involved in the Housing Market Renewal (HMR) programme in Werneth and Derker, with substantial funding from the Government. The Council was, therefore, able to set up a dedicated Empty Homes team to tackle empty homes in the Borough.

Due to the economic downturn and subsequent withdrawal of HMR funding, we have had to radically reconfigure our services in relation to the private sector and disband the Empty Homes team. Currently, we have two technical officers who have responsibility for engaging with owners of empty homes to bring them back into use.
7.1 Working in partnership

Lack of resources due to ongoing austerity measures means that the emphasis of this Delivery Plan is to work in partnership with our Registered Provider partners and external agencies to drive forward the implementation and improve communication.

We have appointed Aksa Homes as our 'Managing Agent' for the Empty Homes initiative and supported them in securing £650k from the Government to bring 75 empty homes back into use over the next 3 years. Aksa will match fund this with a further £650k from their own resources.

We have also set up a Social Lettings Agency (SLA) in partnership with Aksa Homes. The agency will help people in Oldham and the surrounding areas to find good standard, affordable homes, with long-term tenancies in the private sector. It will also encourage owners of empty homes to consider renting their homes out and allowing the agency to manage the home on their behalf.

In addition, the Council has supported Great Places Housing Group to secure £452k from the Homes and Communities Agency ‘cluster bid’ to match £1.4 m investment from their own resources for a scheme in South Werneth. This involves the refurbishment of 33 empty homes, including 13 x 2 lateral conversions. This forms part of wider plans for this area which include the sale of 36 empty terrace homes to local residents to be refurbished under licence over 12 months.

7.2 Empty Homes database

We have developed a working database of empty homes using information from Council Tax records, the property Gazetteer and Land Registry information. The database contains information of all homes in Oldham which are currently empty. The database is also a useful reference point enabling us to monitor the total number of empty homes, their current condition and ownership details.

7.3 GIS Mapping

We have access to the latest GIS mapping technology. This enables us to map empty homes across the borough to identify those areas where the problem is most acute in terms of scale and impact on neighbourhoods. This resource allows us to
allocate available resources in those areas before the problem escalates. This data is also useful for setting SMART targets for tackling the empty homes problem and inform our new priorities.

8. **How we will bring empty homes back into use?**

The Housing Partnership has a variety of tools at its disposal to tackle empty homes. Our primary approach is to build up a relationship with owners of empty homes to encourage them to bring the properties back into use. Only when this approach fails will we consider taking enforcement action. We currently offer a range of options to help the owners of empty homes.

8.1 **Help and advice**

Work undertaken since the development of the previous Delivery Plan has revealed that some owners of empty homes don’t know what to do with them or that help and assistance is available from the Council with regards to bringing an empty home back into use. Where a property has been identified by officers, they will initially work with them to make the owner aware of the issues and concerns about the nuisance that can be associated with empty homes and put them in contact with agencies that can assist with letting and leasing their home. The owners are also made aware of their legal obligations and the legal options available to the Council if homes are not returned to use. In addition the Council has a dedicated section on its website which provides advice and information to owners who are unsure what to do with an empty home. The site also gives the public the opportunity to report an empty property.

8.2 **GM Landlord Accreditation Scheme (LAS)**

The Greater Manchester Landlord Accreditation Scheme aim to promote good quality rented accommodation and high standards of housing management in the Greater Manchester area. It also gives tenants the peace of mind that the property is not only in a good condition but the tenancy will be managed to a good standard. If owners of empty homes want to rent out their property they will be encouraged to sign-up to the scheme. The LAS enables landlords comply with legal requirements and manage the tenancies successfully.
8.3 Social Lettings Agency

We recognise that some owners of empty homes would like to rent them out to generate an income but are fearful of doing so as they do not possess the necessary skills and knowledge to be a private landlord. Or they may not be keen to take this responsibility and prefer an agency to manage their home on their behalf. We have therefore commissioned Aksa Homes to set up and deliver a Social Lettings Agency. The aim of this initiative is to ensure that properties are let in the private rented sector by a reputable organisation. Aksa Homes procures good standard properties from owners and then finds tenants and lets the homes. There are no up-front fees for tenants (unlike in the High Street), and the properties are managed to Aksa’s own high standards.

The Agency also finds tenants for landlords who wish to manage the properties themselves.

The main aim of the social lettings agency is to ensure that households have a range of options to meet their housing need.

8.4 Empty Homes Initiative

The Empty Homes Initiative is delivered in partnership with Aksa Homes. This is a £1.3m programme, half of which is funded through the Homes and Communities Agency, and half through Aksa Homes.

It involves major refurbishment work to long term empty homes and Aksa carries out essential repairs to a home which the owner is unable to finance themselves. In return, the home is then leased out to Aksa Homes to manage on behalf of the owner. Part of the rental income is then used to repay the cost of the repairs and property management, with the remainder going to the owner. Leases are available for up to 10 years, and this is often the only option for owners who are unable to carry out major works to the properties themselves.
8.5 Great Places Housing Group ‘Cluster Scheme’
Following withdrawal of Housing Market Renewal funding, the Council was left with large areas or blocks of empty terraced houses which were blighting the South Werneth neighbourhood. As part of a comprehensive scheme for the area which included land assembly and empty homes for sale under license, a cluster scheme was developed in 2012 which enabled the Council to secure £452,000 from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) from its ‘Cluster of Empty Homes Programme. This has been match funded by Great Places Housing Group by £1.45m. This funding will help us to bring back 33 empty terraced houses in the area. The plan is to convert 33 terraced houses into 20 affordable homes for rent. These new homes will be managed by Great Places Housing Group.

8.6 Working with Council Tax
The Local Government Finance Act 2012 which received royal assent in October 2012 provides local authorities flexibility on how much Council Tax that can be charged on empty homes. From April 2013 Oldham Council will charge up to 150% Council Tax for properties that remain empty for more than two years, thus increasing the incentive for owners of empty properties not to leave them unoccupied for prolonged periods of time. This power also replaces the automatic exemption periods for certain types of empty property.

8.7 Enforcement tools
Where the above approaches fail or the owners are not willing to engage positively with the Council, there is little option but to proceed with a statutory solution. The options available to the Council, which is subject to funding, include:

**Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)**
The Housing Act 2004 provides discretionary powers to enable councils to take over the management of an empty dwelling with the aim of securing its occupancy. It also allows the council to take over the running of the property, carry out repairs required to bring it up to a suitable letting standard and then rent it out for up to 7 years, after which the property is handed back to the owner along with any excess rent received.
Demolition Orders
Demolition Orders are usually made on end of terrace or detached properties that are in very poor condition and beyond viable economic repair. The owner of the property would be legally obliged to demolish the property.

Enforced sale
Under Section 103 of the Law of Property Act 1925, the Council can force the sale of an empty property which has a local land charge, or charging order on it for money owed for works carried out by the Council in default following the service of a statutory notice.

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO)
Where an owner is not willing to sell by agreement, the Council can make an application under Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 to compulsorily purchase land / property for rehousing purposes, if it can show that there is a general housing need in the area. In addition, Section 226 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 gives councils power to compulsorily purchase land or buildings, if the Council thinks that the acquisition will facilitate the carrying out of development, re-development or improvement on or in relation to the land.

9. **How empty homes are identified**
Officers in the Council receive information from Council Tax, members of the public and Elected Members. On receipt of information they will arrange to survey the property in order to assign it a priority banding. This information is then used to pursue the property owner to get the property brought back into use if this is the most appropriate course of action.

A flow diagram showing the process for dealing with empty homes can be found at appendix C at the end of this plan.

10. **Resourcing the delivery plan**
This Delivery Plan will be resourced through a variety of funding streams. It is not possible, however, to identify all of the resources that will be available over the time period of this plan.

The key resource available to deliver the plan is staff within the Public Protection team, Aksa Homes and Great Places Housing Group. The overall responsibility for overseeing the implementation will be the Head of Housing and Response Services.

The following table highlights the resources Oldham Council and its partners will be using to help tackle empty homes in the Borough.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Registered Provider funds £</th>
<th>CLG Funds £</th>
<th>Council £</th>
<th>Total funds 2013-2016</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aksa Empty Homes Initiative</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>650</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Places Cluster Scheme</td>
<td>1m</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.4m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aksa Social Lettings Agency</td>
<td>240,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>330,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oldham Council Staffing Resource</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 FTE</td>
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The Council and its partners will continue to seek funding from government and other sources for schemes to bring empty homes back into use.

11. **Monitoring and Performance**

Our Action Plan contains clear targets on the key priorities which we aim to achieve over the next 3 years. The action plan will be reviewed on a yearly basis to ensure that it continues to reflect Oldham’s aims and objectives with regard to empty homes and the resources which are available. An annual review will also enable us to identify any further development.

It is also important to share our progress with Oldham’s residents and partners. Progress on the Empty Homes Action Plan will be made available to all residents.
and partners through the Housing Section of the Council and Oldham Partnership websites.

The action plan can be found at Appendix 1

12. **Contacts**

If you require any further information about this delivery plan, please contact the Oldham Housing team on the following:

**Housing Team**
**Neighbourhoods Directorate**
**Oldham Council**
**Civic Centre**
**West Street**
**Oldham**
**OL1 1UP**

Email: empty.properties@oldham.gov.uk
Telephone: 0161 770 1666

If you require any further information, or more specific information you might want to contact some of the agencies or organisations detailed below.

13. **Partners and agency websites**

Oldham Council [www.oldham.gov.uk](http://www.oldham.gov.uk)
Homes for All [www.homesforallaksa.co.uk](http://www.homesforallaksa.co.uk)
Aksa Homes [www.aksahomes.co.uk](http://www.aksahomes.co.uk)
Great Places Housing Group [www.greatplaces.org.uk](http://www.greatplaces.org.uk)
Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) [www.homesandcommunities.org.uk](http://www.homesandcommunities.org.uk)
Communities and Local Government Communities and Local Government [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)
Appendices
Appendix A: Empty Homes Action Plan (2013-2016)

Introduction
The Empty Homes Delivery Plan outlines our key challenges around empty homes in Oldham. A number of these issues have been compounded since following the economic downturn experienced towards the end of 2008 and subsequent withdrawal of Housing Market Renewal Funding.

This Delivery Plan highlights our evidence and experience of empty homes in Oldham, the tools we have available to tackle empty homes and sets out our priorities. The action plan attached to this delivery plan sets out key targets and milestones which we will work through over the next 3 years. The action plan has been developed around three key areas:

- Reduce the number of empty homes in the borough
- Improve information and advice
- Improve the evidence base

The actions reflect the challenges highlighted as a result of our evidence base and through consultations with a range of stakeholders.

Monitoring and Communications
The Action Plan will be monitored by the empty homes steering group on a quarterly basis and will be updated on an annual basis.

We recognise it is important to share our progress with Oldham’s residents and partners and therefore progress on the delivery plan will be made available through the Housing Section of the Council website. This will provide an update of actions and detail any key achievements or particular difficulties we might be having.
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough</td>
<td>Oldham Council</td>
<td>Complete sales of 26 empty homes under licence in Werneth.</td>
<td>Bring 50 empty homes back into use through information, advice and enforcement.</td>
<td>Complete review and report on Council Tax annual returns for New Homes Bonus funding.</td>
<td>Bring further 50 empty homes back into use through information, advice and enforcement (100 over the year).</td>
<td>Bring at least 100 empty homes brought back into use.</td>
<td>Oldham residents benefit from improved neighbourhoods, less anti-social behaviour and a greater choice of housing as empty properties are bought back into use.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AKSA</td>
<td>Bring 8 properties back into use through the Empty Homes Initiative.</td>
<td>Bring 8 properties back into use through the Empty Homes Initiative.</td>
<td>Bring 7 properties back into use through the Empty Homes Initiative.</td>
<td>Bring 7 properties back into use through the Empty Homes Initiative (30 over the year).</td>
<td>Covert 16 empty properties into 8 affordable homes. (All 32 homes converted).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Great Places</td>
<td>Start on site with scheme to convert 32 empty homes in Werneth.</td>
<td>Covert 16 empty properties into 8 affordable homes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve information and advice</td>
<td>Oldham Council</td>
<td>Review and update information and advice on website on empty homes.</td>
<td>Contact owners whose homes have been empty for over 24 months regarding 150% Council Tax.</td>
<td>In conjunction with partner agencies run marketing campaign to promote the work of the empty properties team and the new pack/factsheet that is available.</td>
<td>Send letters and information to owners of properties which are empty 12 months or months.</td>
<td>Send letters and information to owners of properties which are empty 12 months or months.</td>
<td>All residents of Oldham know how to find information and advice for what to do if they know of or own an empty property.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicise the new Empty Homes Delivery Plan.</td>
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| Improve the evidence base | Oldham Council | Refine database to enable categorisation of empty homes based on ownership, property type. | Review Social Lettings Agency agreement with Akasa Homes. Commission HQN to undertake mystery shopping of Empty Homes services. | Benchmark empty homes activities and performance with neighbouring authorities. | Provide update on performance on empty homes to Overview and Scrutiny. Support RPs bid to HCA and other relevant bodies for funding to tackle empty homes. | Review database against the Council Tax spread sheet to identify new long term empties. | Our improved evidence base and understanding of empty properties allows us to target resources in the most effective way. |