

Hastings Empty Homes Strategy 2008 - 2013

Making empty properties work again for our community

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Foreword

Suggested wording only – to be confirmed by appropriate Lead Member

There are over 600,000 empty homes in the UK. The government commissioned Barker review has identified that the demand for affordable homes is 23,000 per year. Like most parts of the UK, Hastings has a shortage of affordable and in this context it is a great waste of the town's resources to have over 800 privately owned homes standing empty for long periods of time.

Though these properties are privately owned the problems they create are the concern of our community. They can become an eyesore, provide a site for antisocial behaviour, they attract vermin and fly tipping and generally drag down our community's efforts to make this a good town in which to live.

The Empty Homes Strategy 2008-2013 draws on our successes and the experience of over 7 years of working with owners to bring their empty properties back into use. In extending the strategy we aim to help to bring even more homes back into use.

We have coordinated our working throughout the council and through establishing public and private sector partnerships. We will continue to develop and consult on our practice through the Hastings Empty Homes Forum, the Sussex Empty Homes Forum, and, nationally, through the Empty Homes Agency. We have adopted powers given to us through Government legislation, especially those relating to the scrapping of council tax discounts on empty homes.

Regeneration is the keynote in practically all the current strategies and plans for our town's future. The Hastings and Bexhill task force's Urban Renaissance is a major driver in developing regeneration through a five point plan. One theme of this is to improve the look and feel of the town with good quality public spaces and newly developed and refurbished buildings.

This strategy provides an opportunity to work with you to improve our town. Our Empty Homes Hotline **free phone 0800 0858967** will take you straight through to the Empty Homes Officer who will be only too pleased to hear from you.

Councillor X

Part 1 - Why work to get empty properties back into use?

‘There are too many pressures on land, resources, communities and finances to allow a valuable resource such as housing to lie idle and wasted’

The Governments Community Action on Empty Homes

This is especially true for Hastings and the south east of England as whole where there is a high demand for decent homes. The reasons why privately owned empty homes should be fully used and brought back into use are to:

- Meet the increase in demand for homes as the number of households increase
- encourage economic vitality – getting previously empty homes back in to use has a positive impact on new regeneration
- provide an environment of sustainability and conservation of resources, and to put to use existing buildings that would go to waste if not re-used
- discourage the crime, fear of crime and vandalism that surrounds empty properties
- Where possible conserve green-field sites from development, by making best use of our existing housing stock
- prevent the loss of the infrastructure that supports the community in areas where large numbers of properties are left empty
- discourage fly tipping which may attract vermin
- discourage local property price devaluation. An empty property in derelict condition will devalue neighbouring properties by as much as 20%.

Empty properties are a disincentive to anyone wishing to stay or move to an area. They are visually unattractive and create an impression of neglect and decline:

‘There is nothing more depressing to the eye or likely to provide a dampener to investment and regeneration than the sight of empty property’

Planning Inspectorate, planning policy guidance notes - Housing: Putting Empty Property First

'It's less expensive to have a property in use than to leave it empty. For example, these are the typical average annual costs of keeping a two bedroom flat and two bedroom house in Hastings empty'

Local Agents, Insurance Broker, Council Tax, RICS & The Empty Homes Agency

The costs of keeping a property empty

	2 bed flat	2 bed House
Rent loss	£5,400	£8,400
Excludes cost of		
Dilapidation & Vandalism	£1,000	£1,000
Maintenance & Security	£500	£500
Council Tax	£973	£1,398
Insurance (where obtainable)	£200	£480
Totals	£8,073	£11,778

Part 2 - Strategic objectives:

‘By 2013 we want our town’s community spirit, culture, youth population and extraordinary natural environment to be the foundations of a safer, healthier and more prosperous place with lasting opportunities for everybody’

Hasting Community Strategy 2003-2013

- To improve neighbourhoods and the existing built environment by helping to bring privately owned empty properties back into use
- To minimise the number of properties becoming long-term empty by identifying them at an early stage and working with owners
- To complement the provision of good quality affordable housing
- To complement the wider regeneration agenda for the town

Realising the Strategy Objectives:

To ensure that we are able to realise the objectives of this strategy we have in place a fluid and comprehensive Action Plan, setting out meaningful and challenging targets. Performance against these targets will be regularly monitored and reported on. Having a fluid plan in place allows for a flexibility of approach to ensure that emerging threats and opportunities are identified early to minimise/maximise their impact and to certify that targets remain current. A variety of tools will be used help attain the objectives, as set out below:

Informing, advising, enabling and co-ordinating

- Keep a regularly updated and monitored register of empty properties
- Maintain a pro-active and planned approach to identification and restoration of empty homes using Council Tax data
- Monitor the current range of initiatives aimed at bringing properties back in to use
- Meet the needs for affordable rented homes in Hastings by maximising the use of empty homes
- Provide point of contact within the council for empty properties
- To identify non-residential empty property and land that could provide potential residential use
- To give advice and assistance to owners of private empty properties, to those who wish to purchase or develop empty property, and those who are living near to empty property
- Co-ordinate the Hastings Empty Homes Forum to communicate with an established network of private landlords, registered social landlords, voluntary organisations, businesses and other statutory bodies
- Participate in the Sussex Empty Property Forum and contribute to the planned countywide strategy through involvement with the forum.
- Work in partnership with owners of empty properties, private sector landlords, accredited letting agents, lending organisations and registered social landlords to establish the most realistic and appropriate course of action to bring properties back in to use

Promoting the Empty Homes Strategy

- To campaign and lobby on issues related to or likely to affect the Empty Homes Strategy at local, regional and national level.
- Provide information about the Empty Homes Strategy on the Council's web site, through local advertising and through public events
- Advertise and provide a single point of contact for all parties who share an interest in realising the potential of empty homes
- Raise awareness of the issues and options highlighted in the strategy by the development of a publicity campaign

Part 3 - Our approach to making empty properties work again for our community

'In April 2000 there were 1,682 long-term privately owned empty homes in Hastings (empty longer than six months). In April 2007 this number has reduced to 801'

Empties by ward	Apr-00	% of total	Apr-04	% of total	Jun-07	% of total
Ashdown	39	2%	73	9%	19	2%
Baird	143	8%	15	2%	5	1%
Braybrook	39	2%	41	5%	42	5%
Castle Ward	168	10%	164	19%	129	16%
Central St Leonards	362	21%	260	30%	248	31%
Conquest	32	2%	8	1%	10	1%
Gensing	194	11%	136	16%	83	10%
Hollington	89	5%	10	1%	10	1%
Maze Hill	215	13%	45	5%	58	7%
Old Hastings	49	3%	23	3%	44	5%
Ore	144	9%	14	2%	26	3%
St Helens	37	2%	3	>1%	19	2%
Silverhill	30	2%	22	3%	29	4%
Tressell	68	4%	18	2%	29	4%
West St Leonards	54	3%	17	2%	31	4%
Wishing Tree	29	2%	8	1%	19	2%
Total	1692		857		801	

Table 1. Decline in long term empty homes by ward 2000 to 2007. Data derived from Council Tax figures – source Hastings Borough Council – figures are affected by ward boundary changes, which occurred in 2002.

This strategy outlines our commitment to helping bring privately owned empty homes back into use and to address the issues that they create.

The community consultation that makes up our Community Strategy 2003-2013 identified that a common aim for the town was to develop strong stable communities with a decent home for everyone.

Since the year 2000 our empty homes strategy has been in place to help owners of empty properties get them back into use. Our intention is to continue to build on the success of our strategy throughout the coming years by continuing our work towards realising the housing potential of empty homes. The empty homes strategy acknowledges that the potential of these homes can go some way towards addressing housing need. Our strategy also addresses the concerns surrounding empty and neglected property such as distress felt by neighbours because of the fear of crime through vandalism and antisocial behaviour, the devaluing of surrounding homes and the detrimental image they portray of the town.

Our dedicated empty homes officer works with a range of partnerships with the common aim of helping to provide an increased supply of homes and improve accessibility to affordable homes. The empty homes strategy is a coordinated approach which offers a range of services which enable us to make full use of all the resources that are available for bringing properties back into use.

We have a successful track record of a proactive approach towards getting privately owned empty homes back into use and recognise that they can contribute towards fulfilling the towns housing need.

Our Housing Strategy target was to bring 150 privately owned properties back into use between 2003 and 2008. We have significantly exceeded this target ahead of schedule and have been directly involved in bringing 432 (Oct 2007) privately owned empty homes back into use, more than double our target

Between 2000 and 2007 funding of £1.15 million has been invested in bringing empty homes back into use. The funding has provided for the employment of a dedicated Empty Homes Officer, provision of financial assistance packages, use enforcement options were necessary, etc.

We have been able to help private sector owners bring properties into use where there have been high levels of disrepair and fall short of the decent homes standard. Often bringing long-term empty properties into use can be uneconomical. As property prices have increased the purchaser can often find that rental income cannot cover the cost of the purchase and repair. Through the application of empty homes financial assistance we have been successful in bringing such properties back into use. Owners in receipt of assistance agree to place their properties in the rental market for the first five years, with the council reserving the tenancy referral rights. This effectively provides a home for a household from the Council's Common Housing Register. This Assistance has enabled the Council to facilitate the renovation of 55 privately owned long-term empty homes since 2000. The empty homes assistance enables us to bring a home back into the housing market for use by the people of our community.

Part 4 - How we help to bringing empty homes back into use

Case Studies

Financial assistance

(Picture here)

This building had been empty for several years. The shops below were empty and in poor condition, and the 2 flats above were uninhabitable. The property was bought at auction by a local woman. Prior to purchasing she approached our empty homes officer for advice on financial assistance. Though she wasn't promised assistance in advance we advised that this was the sort of property that fitted the criteria of the strategy. Once assistance was approved the owner was able to speed ahead with the works, being able to commit to the schedule of works and to a deadline made possible with backing from the empty homes financial assistance. Both flats are now under the management of the council's approved housing association's Private Sector Leasing Scheme and provide housing for tenants from the Council's housing register. Both shops are also leased. The owner has stated that this project would not have been feasible without financial assistance from us.

Taking tenants from the housing register

(Picture here)

A property owner had experienced a lot of problems with tenants who had rented his very large 6 bedroom house. The tenants had vacated the property leaving rent arrears in excess of the deposit and the flat had suffered some damage and was sitting empty with the owner unsure of what to do next. The owner spotted our strategy advertisement in the Environmental Guide which goes out both in the summer and at Christmas. He contacted us when he saw that we could assist owners in bringing their empty homes back into use. We put the owner in touch with our housing options team who were able to recommend a family with an excellent record for being good tenants. 3 years later the house is still occupied by the same family and the owner is very satisfied with the positive outcome for his property.

Multi agency working

(Picture here)

A house in the borough had been empty for several years and was creating an eye sore. We had written to the owners offering help in the form of both advice and financial assistance towards getting it back into use. Unfortunately they were resistant and the property remained empty. The appearance of the property was becoming increasingly problematic to neighbours. At this stage planning enforcement, known also as 'grot busters', got involved. They served a notice on the owner giving 6 months to remedy the appearance. The owner was not responsive and court action was threatened. The owner then decided to sell. The new owners bought the property for themselves to live in. They contacted us in order to get evidence to present to the VAT Office showing that the property had been empty for over 10 years. We were able to supply this and the renovation works were undertaken under a zero rating of VAT.

Reasons for properties being left empty

The approach that we take in this strategy is informed by the reasons why properties become empty and remain empty. Some of these reasons are:

- The Property is up for sale (transitional empty)
- The owners lacks information on the options that are available for bring properties back into use
- Properties are left empty by the resident moving into residential care
- Delays or disputes in the administration of the estate where the owner has died
- There are perceived problems with renting the property
- Owner awaiting further increases in the market before selling
- There are high renovation cost in older long term empty properties

Initiatives for bringing empty homes back in to use

Advice on becoming a landlord

We are able to encourage owners of empty properties who are unsure about letting their property. We can provide information for both existing and potential new landlords on tenancy agreements, health and safety requirements, methods for finding tenants, landlord's support groups.

Discretionary financial assistance

Financial assistance of up to £30,000 is available for the renovation of long-term empty buildings throughout the borough (empty for longer than 12 months or for change of use from commercial to residential on condition that the property will be leased to tenants referred from the council). Assistance of 50% of cost of eligible works will be paid to owners to bring the property up to the decent homes standard.

First time buyers' scheme

We acknowledge that having access to affordable homes is also about ownership and to meet housing need we have recently included a first time buyers deposit scheme in our Financial Assistance Policy. This will assist first time buyers in the purchaser of a home that falls

short of the decent homes standard, within the Central St Leonards Housing Renewal Area. This will be non repayable on the condition that the property is brought up to the decent homes standard within 10 years of the purchase.

Accredited Lettings Scheme (HALo)

HALo recognises the achievements of responsible landlords by accrediting lettings that meet the standards of the HALo Code of Practice. All landlords we work with are given the opportunity to become accredited. Where Empty Homes financial assistance is applicable immediate accreditation to HALo is awarded.

Enforcement Action

Our emphasis in the strategy is to work in a positive partnership with owners. However, not all owners respond to positive encouragement. Where negotiation with an owner does not bring the property into use enforcement action will be taken in accordance with the Housing Renewal Enforcement Policy, where the property has been empty for over 12 months. There are various enforcement options open to the Local Authority and below are a number of options (not an exhaustive list):

- General – there are various powers available under a variety of statutory instruments that can be utilized to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Some examples are:
 - Housing Act 2004 – If an empty property was found to have Category 1 hazards, we can make the owner carry out repairs, regardless of whether it is occupied. A property is assessed against prescribed hazards, e.g. trips and falls and if the risk associated with that hazard is sufficiently high then this could constitute a Category 1 Hazard.
 - Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – an owner can be made to clean, maintain, decorate the property and the land it sits on. This is enabled via the Council's Grotbusters Team where planning enforcement action is taken, to further encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. This has proved an extremely effective tool, which has seen vast improvements to the appearance of properties across the town.
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders - This involves the Local Authority taking over management of a property; carrying out works if applicable and then renting the property out. Management costs and any refurbishment costs can be reclaimed from the rental income – with any balance going to the owner.
- Enforced Sale - this allows the Local Authority to force the sale of a property with a local land charge on it. It is a step on from Works In Default action by the Local Authority (where the Local Authority has paid for works to be done in lieu of the owner who is unwilling to act or untraceable). However, if known, the owner has to be given the opportunity to repay the debt prior to sale. The Council does not acquire the property if it is sold to a third party. Any outstanding charges against the property, including any mortgage, are paid following the sale and the money remaining (if any) is put into an account for the owner to claim.

- Compulsory Purchase Orders - we have developed our own CPO policy and will consider using CPO powers as a last resort, where an owner's cooperation has not been forthcoming. CPOs allows Local Authorities to acquire property for various reasons. Once approved we would arrange the sale of the property, preferably to a Housing Association partner to develop as affordable housing. If this is not financially viable, the property will be sold on the open market subject to covenants ensuring the refurbishment and reoccupation of the property

Development Control

The Empty Homes Strategy aims to ensure that development of empty properties is in accordance with the Local Plan and is carried out in the best interests of the general public and the area. Owners are encouraged to work with Development Control at the initial stages of renovation projects and where an application for a renovation grant is made a copy of the applicant's plans and schedule of works are referred over for advice.

Registered Social Landlords (RSL)

Registered Social Landlords or housing associations manage a large number of properties in the borough. The Housing Corporation have funded a local housing association to purchase 20 properties in Central St Leonards which are in need of renovation. Our role is in identifying the empty properties suitable for the funding criteria and in liaising with owners who want to sell their property. The use of existing housing stock will be further maximised and these properties will provide permanent social housing to people on the housing register.

Hastings Empty Homes Forum

Every three months the Forum brings together our partners in working to maximise use of the housing stock of the town. The Forum provides an environment where ideas and experience can be shared with the Empty Homes Officer. Groups represented from the private sector are landlords, housing associations, supported housing groups, finance experts. Council representation comes from housing renewal, planning, conservation, council tax and environmental health.

Townscape Heritage Initiative Grants (THI)

The grant is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Council and is available to renovate the exterior of properties in designated conservation areas. A conservation area is one of special architectural and historic interest, where it is desirable to preserve or enhance the character or appearance. In these areas there are special controls over the external appearance of existing properties and new development.

Moving the strategy forward

In order to move the Empty Homes Strategy forward effectively, priorities need to be set. The priorities that have been identified within Hastings are:

Central St Leonards Renewal Area

After the success of the Southwater Road Renewal Area the focus for renewal has now moved to Central St Leonards. This ward has the highest number of empty and dwellings that do not meet the minimum statutory standard in the borough. By addressing the empty properties as a priority under the Empty Homes Strategy, any homes brought back into use will contribute towards the Council's aim to bringing the whole area up to a higher standard. The Empty Homes Officer will have strong opportunities to work within the Renewal Area and to assist in the delivery of the proposed programme of work.

Priorities for Empty Homes financial assistance: Priority Wards

The greatest numbers of empty homes are found in the wards of Central St Leonards, Gensing & Castle. We will continue to focus empty homes financial assistance in these wards for properties that have been empty for 12 months or longer. This is in keeping with the previous strategy. We will now also consider giving financial assistance to properties in all other parts of the borough where they have been empty for over 12 months.

Funding the empty homes strategy

Funding is dependant on the levels of allocation received from the Regional Housing Board. The Regional Housing Board is a partnership board chaired by the South East England Regional Assembly and among other things makes recommendations to central Government on the allocation of resources for private sector housing renewal. Indicatively, the Council intends to allocate £400,000 from this allocation over the next 3 years (08/09 – 10/11) to enable the continuation of the delivery of the aims and objectives of the strategy. This is subject to change depending on the availability of funding and the needs of the town.

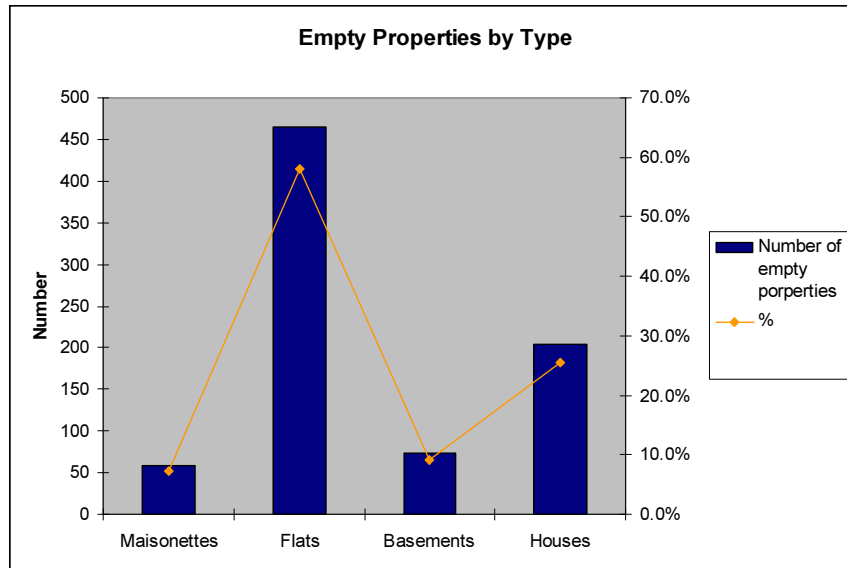
The resources available to us for implementing the strategy will enable us to:

- Employ a full time dedicated Empty Homes Officer to put the Strategy into action
- Offer financial assistance packages to help enable long term empty properties back into use
- Deal with difficult situations that are not easy to resolve, involving other stakeholders and agencies where appropriate

- Contact owners of empty properties and advise on the schemes available to help bring a home back into use
- Liaise between potential investors and property owners
- Work with other agencies in the council and the Council's partners to bring homes in to use
- Promote a range of schemes to make it easier for owners to repair and let their property
- Introduce owners to private sector letting through registered social landlords
- Work with Council Tax and other stakeholders to identify empty homes
- Publicise the strategy throughout the whole of the borough, thereby encouraging participation in identifying empty properties
- Use a variety of enforcement options when necessary.

Part 5 - Local Picture

Hastings has over 40,000 dwellings. Of these 801 (April 2007) privately owned properties are long term empties (over six months), The majority of these empties are flats within older blocks, as can be seen from table 2 below, which breakdowns the empty properties by type.



Property Type	Number of Empty Homes	% of total
Maisonettes	58	7.2%
Flats	465	58.1%
Basements	74	9.2%
Houses	204	25.5%
Totals	801	100.00%

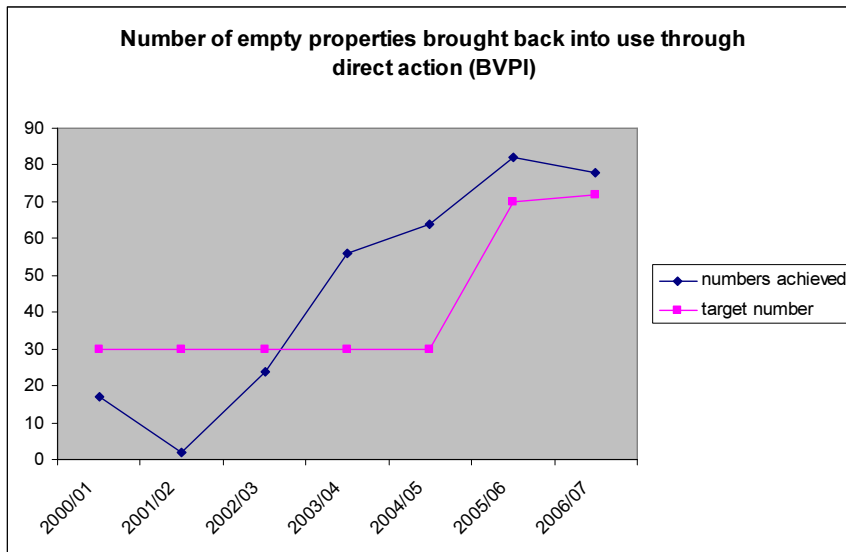
Table 2. The number of empty properties by type. Data derived from Council Tax records – source Hastings Borough Council (October 2007)

There are also 928 second homes/furnished properties (April 2007). It is important to recognise that there is a distinction between long term empties and these forms of properties. As an upcoming coastal town, second homes and holiday lets are a key factor of our economy, so although these properties are not available to the people of our community they do bolster the town's economy.

Although, we use the reference of 'over 6 months' to count the number of empties in the Borough, this number is often affected by what we call transitional empties, which are empty properties that are unlikely to be empty for long, such as properties that are up for sale or properties affected by probate or properties undergoing extensive refurbishment, etc. It is therefore useful to look at the number of properties that have been empty for over 12 months, which in the majority of cases, eliminates these transitional empties from the overall figure. This gives a more realistic picture of the number of long term empties in the Borough and is the reason why we focus our attention on empties over 12 months in terms of financial assistance and enforcement activities. The number of empties over 12 months is 370 (September 2007). Also of interest are empty properties that have been empty for over 10 years, which gives an indication of the types of property that for a variety of reasons are extremely hard to bring back into use. This number stands at 40 (November 2007).

How we compare to our neighbouring Local Authorities

'In Hastings, we have increased the number of empty properties brought back into use'



Year	Target	Total number achieved
2000/01	30	17
2000/02	30	2
2002/03	30	24
2003/04	30	56
2004/05	30	64
2005/06	70	82
2006/07	72	78
Total	292	323

Table 3. Number of empty properties brought back into use through direct action, including empty homes financial assistance (BVPI).
Data derived from BVPI returns – source Hastings Borough Council

Many of the reasons for properties becoming and remaining empty for long periods of time are shared with our neighbouring Local Authorities, though they of course have their own issues to contend with as well, such as pepper potting of empties across large rural areas. The figures below (table 4) give a good comparison of the number of empty properties (over six months) across East Sussex.

Local Authority	Number of empty properties over six months
Wealden	320
Eastbourne	420
Lewes	421
Rother	560
Hastings	801

Table 4. Number of empty properties by Local Authority area – source individual Local Authorities (September 2007)

When we compare our achievements, it is evident to see that Hastings leads the way in East Sussex in achieving results:

Local Authority	Number of empty properties returned to use in 2005/2006	Number of Empty Properties returned to use in 2006/2007
Wealden	7	0
Eastbourne	14	41
Lewes	24	21
Rother	27	17
Hastings	82	78

Table 5. Number of empty properties brought back into use by Local Authority area – source individual Local Area Agreement Return for 06/07

The local housing market

As can be seen in table 6, below, in 2006 the average gross household income in Hastings was £28,400. Since 2002, average incomes in East Sussex have grown by 24% in line with the national rate of increase. Highest growth in household incomes over the last three years can be seen in Eastbourne (28%) and Hastings (27%). Though significant in-roads have been made in to driving up income levels, these figures still show that in comparison to our neighbouring authorities in East Sussex, Hastings remains the area with the lowest average income.

Area	Average household income 2006	Percentage of households earning less than the 60% of national median income
Wealden	£35,000	21%
Eastbourne	£29,400	27%
Lewes	£33,200	23%
Rother	£30,000	27%
Hastings	£28,400	29%
East Sussex	£31,600	25%
South East	£36,300	20%
Great Britain	£32,400	24%

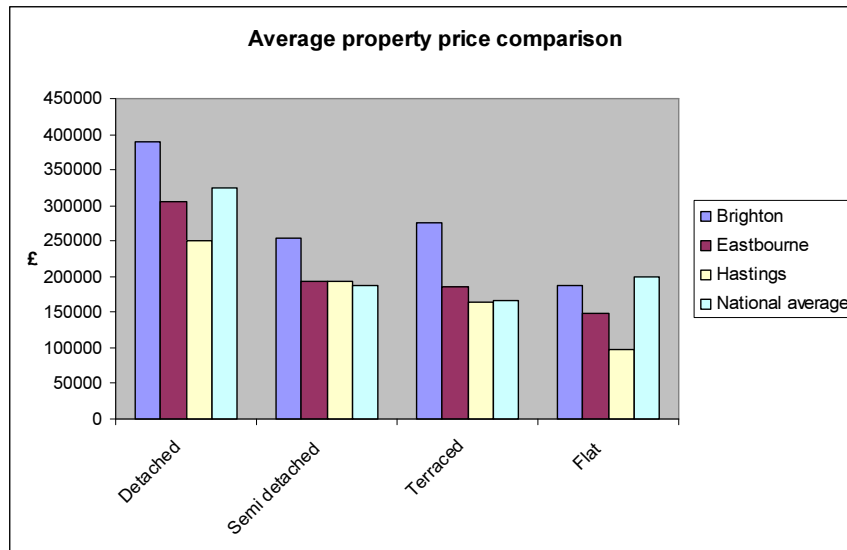
Table 6. Average household income levels for 2006 - source East Sussex County Council figures published 2006

Though property prices in Hastings are below that of our neighbouring coastal towns, lower average wages means that homeownership is not within the reach of many households in fulltime employment. With an under provision of social rented homes the demand for private rented property is such that Hastings now has more than double the average of private rented property than in rest of the southeast (excluding London). With 80% of those on the housing need register wholly benefit dependent the profile of low levels of homeownership and high levels of private rented will be slow to change. With predictions for a continuing national trend in the increase in the number of households we can expect further demands for homes to be supplied from the private rented sector.

The cost of buying a home in Hastings remains lower than our neighbouring coastal towns and compared to average prices nationally, however in recent years we have experienced percentage price increases above the national average. We will continue to monitor house prices to enable our strategies of maintaining a suitable supply of affordable housing for those in need.

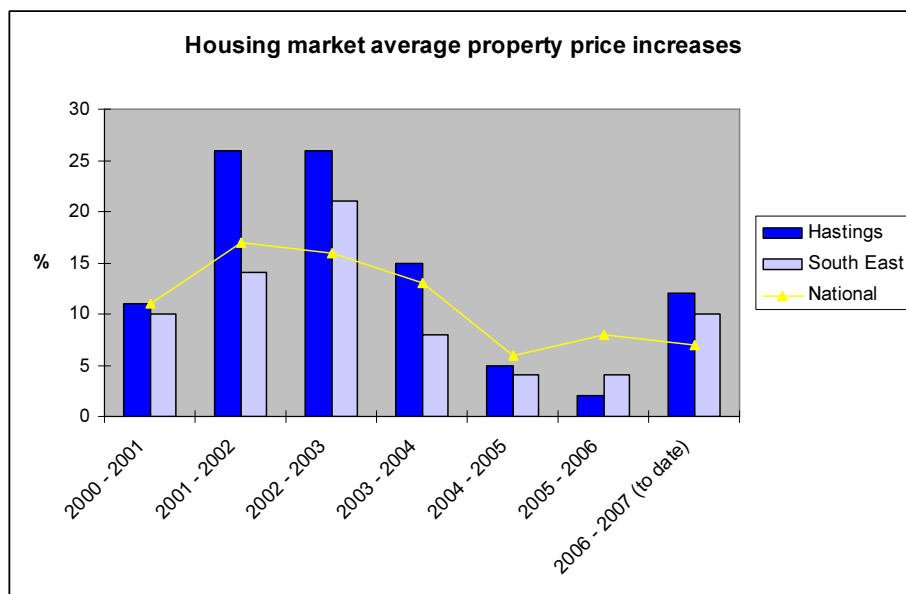
‘Local Housing Market – average property prices comparison –Jan-March 2007’

Land registry



Area	Detached	Semi detached	Terraced	Flat
Brighton	£388,707	£254,161	£276,008	£187,117
Eastbourne	£304,575	£194,091	£186,176	£148,383
Hastings	£250,108	£194,430	£163,975	£97,301
National average	£324,572	£187,685	£166,379	£199,903

Table 7. Average property price comparison (January - March 2007) - Data derived from house price index – source Land Registry



‘Housing market average property price increases’

Land registry

Area	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006	2006 - 2007 (to date)
Hastings	11%	26%	26%	15%	5%	2%	12%
South East	10%	14%	21%	8%	4%	4%	10%
National	11%	17%	16%	13%	6%	8%	7%

Table 8. Housing market average property price increases) - Data derived from house price index – source Land Registry (figures used up to April 2007)

What you need to earn to afford to buy a home in Hastings

Table 9, sets out the average asking prices for a 2 bed flat and a 2 bed house in Hastings and gives the likely cost of a repayment mortgage for each.

	2 Bed Flat	2 Bed house
Average asking price	£130,680	£163,833
Monthly repayment (25 year mortgage with a 5% deposit)	£795	£1,010

Table 9 Average property prices for a 2 bed hse/flat in Hastings and likely mortgage repayment costs – source Just Homes, Rush Witt & Wilson, Ward & Ptnrs (October 2007)

These figures show that when looking at the average household income (table 6) for Hastings a household would be looking to find a mortgage 4.5 times their annual household income in order to buy a typical 2 bed flat and 6 times the average household income for a typical 2 bed house. Mortgage lenders usually only recommend mortgages up to 3.5 times the annual household income. This demonstrates the difficulty that will be found by first time buyers, in particular, trying to get a foot hold into the housing market. This is one of the reasons why we have introduced the First Time Buyers Assistance (see page 12), which will help with finding a sufficient deposit for a property in the Central St Leonards Housing Renewal Area.

Part 6 - The regional context

Sussex Empty homes Forum

Empty homes officers meet quarterly to share best practice and work together on regional issues.

Sussex empty homes strategy

Throughout Sussex (East and West Sussex) there are thirteen local authorities all involved in writing a countywide empty homes strategy, which has now been published. The authority areas vary enormously – physically, demographically and in terms of housing need. There is also a great deal of difference in empty homes resources and in the level of action needed. Our common aims are to: Improve neighbourhoods; reduce the waste of empty homes; maximise available housing and reduce the need for new build housing. With the Government Best Value Performance Indicator requirement to provide targets and submit results for bringing empty homes back into use we are committed to providing a strategy for enabling achievement across the county. In sharing our experiences we aim to look at areas of overlap and differences and to learn from both and to make empty homes work more manageable. Above all the strategy will enable us to share good practice and improve service. This Strategy has been initially developed to:

- Share best practice and improve the quality of service in dealing with empty homes across Sussex.

- Provide a platform from which, innovative solutions to empty homes can be developed. This can take many forms, for example by working together we can look at ways of pooling of resources to achieve value for money and eliminate unnecessary duplication. This work can also assist us in establishing robust targeting methods, such as the recent work in East Sussex, which has produced a statistically robust evaluation of the condition of the stock in the area. This gives us further insights into where we have concentrations of empty homes in the coastal and rural strips.

- Produce a Directory of Good Practice for all Sussex Empty Homes Strategy partners to share.

This partnership can be further built upon to foster improvements in service delivery on empty homes for the future.

Southeast Regional Housing Board (SRHB)

The SRHB, formed as a result of the Sustainable Communities Plan published in 2003, were responsible for the South East Regional Housing Strategy (July 2005). The overall objective of the strategy was for everyone to live in a decent home identifying priorities of supply and affordability, sustainable communities and decent homes, and private sector renewal.

The SRHB is represented by The Government Office of the South East, South East England Development Agency, the South East England Regional Assembly, English Partnerships, and the Housing Corporation, cross party representation from elected councillors from across the region.

Part 7 - The National Context

Empty properties in England

Table 10, below shows the number of long term empties (over 6 months) across England by region in 2005, which includes empty homes in the private sector as well as the public sector, e.g. Housing Association properties or properties owned by the Government. In the South East alone the total number stands at 91,232 (not including London) and the trend for the South East is for numbers the of empty homes to increase.

Region	Total empty homes 2004	Total empty homes 2005	Difference from 2004
North East	39,597	39,148	-449
North West	127,473	128,733	+1260
Yorkshire & Humberside	84,224	79,505	-4719
East Midlands	58,192	58,419	+227
West Midlands	75,829	77,544	+1715
East of England	59,467	56,656	-2811
London	99,047	91,219	-7828
South East	83,371	91,232	+7861
South West	62,475	57,956	-4519
England	689,675	680,412	-9263

Table 10. Local Authorities HSSA returns to ODPM for 2005 – source CLG (2007)

The problems posed by the numbers of empty homes is a national issue. According to research carried out by the Halifax, in 2006 there were 300,000 private sector homes empty across England that had been empty for longer than 6 Months.

Government action

The government have given local authorities, owners and developers many tools to help bring empty homes back into use.

The Urban Task Force set up in 1998 looked at the causes of decline in our towns and cities and recommended measures to revitalise urban areas. The publishing of Towards an Urban Renaissance in 1999 recommended and lead to:

- All local authorities publishing or being expected to publish an empty homes strategy
- the reduction of VAT in the 2001 Budget on the refurbishment of empty property. VAT was reduced to 5% on properties empty for over 3 years and to 0% on properties empty for over 10 years. As of 1st January 2008, the time period has now been changed from properties empty for over 3 years to 2 years for the 5% VAT rate.
- full council tax charging on empty property and access to the name and address details of owners of empty homes for the purpose of bringing empty homes back into use.
- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO), streamlining procedures (DTLR produced a 5 Part guide to CPO in 2001)

Communities Plan-Sustainable Communities:

Building for the Future (2003) - This sets a long term programme of action for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas; the Plan includes housing and planning reforms and offers a new approach to how we build and what we build. It specifically refers to bringing empty homes back into use.

Housing Act 2004.

This introduced Empty Dwelling Management orders (EDMO), the first piece of legislation specifically targeting privately owned empty property. Local authorities are now in effect empowered to take over most of the rights and responsibilities of the owner of an empty dwelling, to refurbish and rent the property without becoming the titled owner.

Government response to the Barker Review of Housing Supply (2003):

In 2005 the Government referred directly to the important benefits to housing supply and to environmental concern in the use of existing housing stock.

Part 8 - Other Hastings strategies and key priorities

Community Strategy 2003-2013

'A town with a decent home for everyone'

The Community Strategy (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/community_strategy/default.aspx) is the Council's ten year vision for Hastings. The strategy outlines how making our town one with a decent home for everyone can affect and be affected by the six other things we're trying to make it into. These are:

A Town that's Good to Live in - Preventing dereliction and finding uses for empty properties

An Economically Successful Town - people are more likely to find and keep jobs if they have a good, secure home

A Healthier Town - Improving housing conditions creates healthier living environments

A Learning Town - People are more likely to succeed in learning if they have a good, secure home

An Inclusive Town - maximising the supply of affordable and sustainable rented homes

A Safer Town - Improving home security and providing safe accommodation for vulnerable people

Housing Strategy 2004-2009

'Improve residents quality of life and the condition of the towns housing, with particular emphasis on privately rented homes, empty homes and concentrations of properties that fail to meet the minimum statutory standard'

Our housing vision and priorities for the Borough have been developed within the context of Government housing policy - the Housing Green Paper and related policy paper The Way Forward for Housing. Whilst the strategy (http://www.hastings.gov.uk/housing_strategy/default.aspx) reflects local circumstances, we recognise that wider regional trends and issues affecting other coastal resort towns have an influence on our

housing market. The strategy, therefore, takes account of the priorities within the South East Regional Housing Strategy where they are relevant to us. Local issues and needs identified through our research and consultation are put in the context of the regional priorities throughout this document.

St Leonards Renewal Area

Central St. Leonards ward was declared a Housing Renewal Area in 2003. The Renewal Area will last for ten years. Here a quarter of all dwellings are classed as failing to meet the fitness standard and one fifth are in serious disrepair. In addition to poor housing conditions, unemployment and benefit dependency is high and almost half the households have an income of under £10,000. Out of the 16 wards in the town, Central St Leonards contains the greatest concentration of long-term empty properties. 31% (June 2007) of long term empty homes are to be found here. Our aim is to reduce these numbers in line with the general targets for the whole of the town, which is 30% by 2013. Initiatives to bring empty homes back into use will play a key role in achieving the vision for the area.

Urban Renaissance Programme (URP)

The URP will fund a 3 year £20 million package of action which has been identified by South East England Development Agency SEEDA, ourselves (Hasting Council), other partners and most importantly residents, as being one which will ensure that Central St Leonards both benefits from and contributes to the town's regeneration. It will do this by creating the physical environment in which business and community life can grow and prosper.

Regeneration of Hastings

Hastings is the most deprived town in the South East and 29th most deprived local authority area in the country, and regeneration is a major priority for all partners working in and for the town and the wider economic area of which Hastings is the core. The Hastings and Bexhill Economic Alliance is (February 2008) developing an Economic Development, Inclusion and Sustainability Strategy which aims **“to create an inclusive, successful and sustainable economy, which brings a decent standard of living and quality of life to all our residents.”**

The three overall aims of this 5 year strategy are to be:

- Successful - To increase business activity and create employment, providing a range of local job opportunities and increasing average earnings
- Inclusive – To enable local people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to raise their skills and aspirations and to get jobs offering stable employment and a living wage
- Sustainable – To achieve and maintain environmentally-sustainable prosperity, by maximising environmental benefits and opportunities, and minimising negative environmental impacts

The Hastings & Bexhill Task Force, a partnership of local and regional authorities, is working to a 10-year regeneration programme. Its 5 Point Plan aims **'to create an upward spiral of success and achieve a vibrant self sustaining economy'** through:

1. Urban renaissance: Creating 1 million square feet of education and commercial space and 1,400 new homes through the Millennium Communities programme
2. Business development: focusing on innovation, business support, growth and inward investment
3. Excellence in education: Creation of the University Centre Hastings (UCH) plus increased educational aspirations, participation and attainment
4. Broadband connectivity: Developing awareness, training and investment
5. Transport improvements: Improving transport links within the towns and to the rest of the region

Local Development Framework (LDF) – the spatial plan for the town

The Vision, policies and objectives in the LDF support the re-use of empty homes.

Extract from Vision Statement: Take a Trip To Hastings In 2026 (this describes how Hastings might be in 2026)

'it is not only new homes that are of improved quality; focused renewal programmes, investment and enforcement actions have vastly improved the quality of the private sector housing stock in Central St Leonards...'

Part 9 - Glossary of terms and contacts

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs)

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

A series of targets set by the government, administered by the Audit Commission to measure local authority performance in all areas. Please note that National Indicators have now replaced BVPIs and there is no longer an indicator dedicated to empty homes.

Brownfield Land Assembly Trust (BLAT)

www.seeda.co.uk

Set up by SEEDA, working closely with other partners, to specifically identify and acquire small, derelict sites in urban regeneration areas for recycling into the housing land market. These sites are likely to have specific development cost constraints, which means that they are not deliverable by Housing Associations or developers by conventional methods in the residential market.

Communities Plan

www.communities.gov.uk

Working name for the Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future publication (Feb 2003) 'The Plan sets out a long-term programme for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas. It aims to tackle housing supply issues in the South East, low demand in other parts of the country, and the quality of our public spaces.'

CLG - Communities and Local Government

www.communities.gov.uk

Created in May 2006 with a powerful remit to promote community cohesion and equality as well as responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government. Supersedes ODPM in these areas.

Empty Homes Agency

www.emptyhomes.com

The Empty Homes Agency is an independent campaigning charity, which exists to highlight the waste of empty property in England and works with others to devise and promote solutions to bring empty property back into use.

English Partnerships

www.englishpartnerships.co.uk

English Partnerships is the national regeneration agency, supporting high quality sustainable growth across the country. They are a key delivery agency for the urban renaissance and the government's new Sustainable Communities agenda.

Government Office for the South East

(GOSE) www.GOSE.gov.uk

Regional operations for ten central Government departments. Structured through multidisciplinary teams that include housing and regeneration.

Housing Association

A non-profit making organisation providing affordable housing. If registered with the Housing Corporation also known as registered social landlords (RSLs). Hastings works with a number of Housing Associations.

Housing Corporation

www.housingcorp.gov.uk

Funds and regulates housing associations in England, investing for the creation and maintenance of safe and sustainable communities. Through regulation it promotes a viable, properly governed and properly managed housing association sector.

National Association of Empty Property

Practitioners www.naepp.org.uk

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners was established in May 2001 to support people involved in delivering empty property strategies. It was launched by empty property practitioners with the support of government ministers, the Housing Corporation and the Empty Homes Agency. Its aims include: promoting unity and understanding amongst Empty Property Practitioners, promoting the role of Empty Property Practitioners and promoting policies and practices which offer effective responses to the challenges presented by Empty Property. NAEPP worked with the Audit Commission to set the definition of BVPI 64 [see also BVPI].

National Land Use Database

www.nlud.org.uk

'The objective of the full National Land Use Database is to develop a complete, consistent and detailed geographic record of land use in England, extendable to the other countries of the United Kingdom.'

ODPM – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Government departments now superseded by CLG.

Regional Housing Board / Regional Housing Strategy

www.GOSE.gov.uk

Set up by Ministers to develop regional housing strategies and advise on funding.

South East England Development Agency

(SEEDA)

www.seeda.co.uk

The South East development agency with strategic lead in promoting sustainable economic development in the region. Housing role includes brownfield land development programme and promotion of best practice in built environment skills and sustainable construction.

South East England Regional Assembly

(SEERA)

<http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk>

Grouping of local authorities with economic and social partners (CBI, TUC, voluntary sector etc) set up and funded by Government to promote South East England. Also the regional planning body.

Sussex Empty Homes Forum

Forum with representatives from all local authorities in Sussex specifically to discuss and share good practice on empty homes work.

Sustainable Communities

www.communities.gov.uk

'Sustainable communities are about things that matter to people: decent homes at prices people can afford, good public transport, schools, hospitals, and shops; people able to have a say on the way their neighbourhood is run; and a clean, safe environment'.

Part 10 – Further information

This strategy is available in large print, audio and other languages on request. Call 01424 451772

Vous pourrez réclamer ce document sous d'autres formats, par exemple en gros caractères ou en d'autres langues.

أنه بالإمكان الحصول على هذه الإستراتيجية بصيغ أخرى، لتشمل الحروف الكبيرة، بالإضافة إلى الحصول عليها بلغات أخرى، و ذلك عند الطلب.

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For more information or advice contact The Council's Empty Homes Officer:

Free phone: 0800 085 8967

E-Mail: emptyhomes@hastings.gov.uk

Web: www.hastings.gov.uk/empty_homes

Location:

The Empty Homes Officer, Renaissance House, The Old Christchurch School, London Road, St Leonards on Sea. TN37 6AN