

## EMPTY PROPERTY RENOVATION / CONVERSION GRANT

This is an effective way of enabling private owners to bring derelict empty homes back into use.

Specific properties are targeted - those in poor condition which have been empty for a long period of time, and especially those that are an eyesore and are environmentally and economically unsound. Large unfit properties that can be converted into a number of smaller units are particularly appropriate. Properties are identified from the database, having been highly scored by these criteria.

Recently, the Stonehouse HMO action area has been targeted as it contains a large proportion of these empty properties.

Applicants must prove that there is a 'development gap' and thus a need for gap funding, and conversions must be consistent with housing need.

The grant is offered at a rate of 50% of the cost of eligible works, up to a maximum limit of £15,000 per unit and £50,000 per property (currently under review).

The standard conditions of availability for letting for a minimum of five years apply. There is not a current Housing Association as Managing Agent (HAMA) scheme available, however Plymouth City Council is currently investigating the establishment of a Private Sector Leasing scheme, to be run either by the Council, or by a Housing Association, from April 2002. With nomination rights the completed properties could then be let to households from the Common Housing Register, for a period of five years.

Not only will this assist landlords, but it will link in with the policy to create mixed tenure communities, and will increase the choice of housing type for tenants.

The first four empty property grants approved in 2000 and 2001, are now complete. All are substantial Victorian properties, which had been empty and derelict for many years. The converted flats and maisonettes will now provide high quality homes for fourteen households.

Following the success of these conversions, the programme will be recommended for expansion in the future.

*(See photographs, page 32)*

## COMPULSORY PURCHASE

A programme has been initiated for the compulsory purchase of Plymouth's worst empty properties. Most of those identified have been empty for more than ten years, and all are in a condition of either serious disrepair or are derelict.

The first of these properties is an ex-council property on a part of the North Prospect estate which is being targeted for intensive improvement. The property was purchased under right to buy legislation and later abandoned. On acquisition it will be repaired and returned to housing stock.

A further two properties in the Renewal Area and Greenbank have been identified for Compulsory Purchase where the owners cannot be traced. If purchased, these properties will be sold on to Housing Associations working in the areas under established empty homes programmes.

They will be fully rehabilitated and let to families from the common housing register.

The initiation of compulsory purchase proceedings is often instrumental in encouraging owners to bring their properties into use. To date, five owners approached in this way have either sold or renovated their properties in order to avoid this legal action.

*(See photograph, page 39)*

## TOWNSCAPE HERITAGE INITIATIVE

The Townscape Heritage Initiative is a three-year national grant programme promoted by the Heritage Lottery fund.

In April 2000, Plymouth City Council Planning Department was successful in securing a Townscape Heritage Initiative grant of up to £500,000 over three years for the improvement of houses of architectural and historical interest. Designated areas have been chosen within Stonehouse, an area that contains 114 of Plymouth's 265 'Buildings at Risk' (a classification based on English Heritage methodology).

A number of empty homes have been identified as 'critical projects' - buildings at risk which would continue to blight the area without such investment.

During 2001/02, THI funding has been crucial in the redevelopment of key properties such as 1, Wyndham Square, 1A/B, Adelaide Street and 48, Wolsdon Street, (Single Regeneration Budget and renovation/conversion grant projects) within the Stonehouse Conservation Area.

The area has been blighted by these properties for a number of years; their improvement and reuse should contribute substantially to its overall regeneration. Further projects have been identified for 2002 and 2003.

## MINISTRY OF DEFENCE PROPERTIES

From 1994 - 2002, members of the partnership have worked with the MoD and Annington Homes to bring over 800 empty MoD properties back into social housing use. These comprise of:

### **Barne Barton**

This is a large estate to the west of Plymouth, fronting the River Tamar. Between 1995 and 1998, a consortium of four housing associations acquired and repaired 638 units for letting. These are mainly terraced two and three bedroom Wimpey 'no fines' houses, and flats.

The schemes attracted housing corporation funding at 'existing satisfactory purchase' levels. Further investment in the estate has been made over the last couple of years to allow for improvements such as external decoration of the houses, new porches and courtyard areas.

A residents group was set up at inception, and this still meets regularly. It is assisted by Plymouth Federation of Tenants and Residents Association in addressing anti-poverty and social exclusion issues on the estate. A Strategic Partnership Manager has been appointed to work with the landlords and a Community Action Trust, for ongoing improvements within the community.

### **Norfolk Road, Laira**

59 two and three bedroom semi-detached houses were acquired by Devon and Cornwall Housing Association for rental and shared ownership.

### **Beverston Way, Widewell**

20 three bedroom semi-detached houses were acquired by Sovereign Housing Association for a shared ownership scheme.

### **Leatfield Drive, Crownhill**

Sovereign Housing association purchased and repaired 55 three bedroom semi-detached and terraced houses for rent to families.

### **Tailyour Road, Crownhill**

In 2001, a consortium of three housing associations acquired 103 empty MoD properties at Crownhill. Apart from four houses to be demolished or converted for community use, this will provide 99 three-bedroom houses for letting during 2002.

In 1999, Annington Homes sold 83 properties on this estate for individual owner occupation; the remaining 133 houses are occupied by Armed Forces Services families.

The three housing associations have agreed a lettings plan for the estate (to include a common rent) with the aim of creating a sustainable community which will blend in with existing communities.

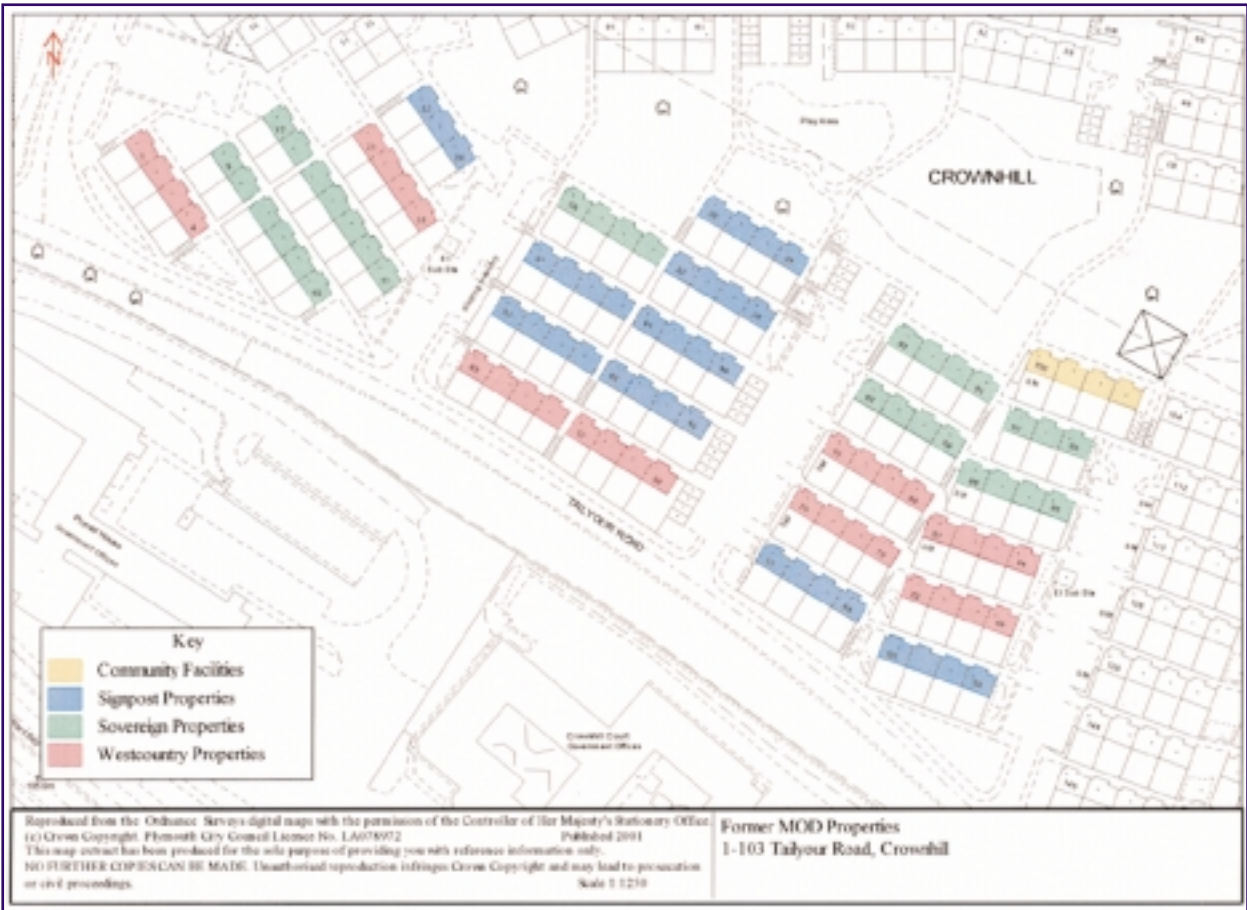
Substantial Housing Corporation funding has been approved for improvements to the properties, and the estate in general. Apart from minor works to the properties and new kitchens, more extensive work to the porches together with the reversal of the main access to some properties (providing front entrances to what is currently the rear of the property), will rebalance the existing narrow, poorly lit passageways.

Environmental works including the provision of a play area, improved street lighting and hard and soft landscaping will help to provide individual neighbourhoods.

The improved estate will provide good quality affordable family housing for rent to meet a range of housing needs and 25% of the houses will be reserved for households wishing to decant here from Devonport Urban Village.

(See photograph, page 37)

### CROWNHILL ESTATE



## SCATTERED PROPERTIES IN OWNER OCCUPIED AREAS

Plymouth has had an ongoing programme with Tamar Housing Society for the purchase and repair of empty properties citywide, within predominantly owner occupied areas. They are used to house families, to include those with special needs, and large families which cannot be accommodated elsewhere within the existing Council or Housing Association stock.

Around 50 households have been housed in this way so far. This is generally funded by the Housing Corporation, however some suitable properties have been acquired with SRB funding within the designated areas.

The majority of the empty properties re-used are in Victorian terraces, affording generous space standards and amenity areas. Placing families in this way allows for greater anonymity and integration within an existing community and a high level of tenant satisfaction has been reported, which is mirrored by the low void rate.

The programme also supports a move towards choice based lettings, and helps to create mixed tenure communities for the future.

### 2-32 ALMA ROAD

In the mid-1970's, Devon County Council proposed a new transport scheme, the 'Pennycomequick Flyover' and acquired 2-32 Alma Road, a terrace of 18 substantial Victorian properties for this purpose.

The scheme was not progressed, and the properties were blighted for at least 26 years. Occupying a key site on one of the major routes into the City Centre, the properties were an eyesore. Although a few were let to Council tenants, most were empty and boarded up, and became subject to arson attacks and other misuse.

In April 2000, the properties were transferred to Plymouth City Council as a Unitary Authority, allowing plans to be made for the future of the site. An options appraisal concluded that repair of the properties would not be viable (at a cost of at least £1.5m) and that demolition and site clearance was the best course of action.

The six remaining tenants were re-housed, and notices were served on the occupiers of the garages to the rear of the properties.

Following consultation with local residents, the properties were demolished in May 2001.

The site has now been cleared, and will be sold on the open market, following the implementation of a new transport scheme. Illustrative plans have been drawn up in accordance with planning policy, showing that 36 units (mixed flats and houses) can be accommodated on the site.

*(See photographs, page 39)*

**Compulsory purchase programme - including ex right to buy properties**



**Alma Road properties (above) and cleared site (right)**

***Tailyour Road, Crownhill, ex-MoD properties prior to redevelopment***



***Radiant House - office conversion***



## CROSS BOUNDARY WORKING

In 2000/01, Tamar Housing Society purchased 13 empty properties within the Plymouth area of economic activity, split between the Plymouth and South Hams districts.

The properties purchased were two and three bedroom family houses in the Woolwell (South Hams) and Staddiscombe (Plymouth) areas, both on the city borders, for which there was an identified housing need.

Households were allocated from the housing registers of both councils. The programme was supported by a 'strategic allocation' from the Housing Corporation, and social housing grant from both councils.

This joint working between local authority areas extended the choice for households to be placed near their required location, irrespective of the administrative boundary.

Further, a pooling of resources allowed for a substantial programme, which in smaller numbers may not have been viable and capable of attracting sufficient funding.

## PRIVATE INITIATIVES

Plymouth City Council has encouraged initiatives for the re-use of empty homes and buildings by Housing Associations, without the support of social housing grant or SRB funding.

### Keyham

Through the collaboration Plymouth City Council, the Housing Foundation, Proteus Ltd and Sovereign Housing Association, thirty empty houses were purchased by the Housing Association in the Keyham area of the city.

They were let to local people in housing need at rents significantly below market levels, without using any form of housing grant or subsidy.

Tenant satisfaction levels were high despite the financial constraints of the project. The properties were scattered between six streets allowing discreet integration of the tenants, which was positively commented on by the tenants and others.

The project also appears to have stimulated property acquisition, works by builders, and works by owner occupiers to their own homes, and to have raised house prices in the area, thus contributing to its overall regeneration.

### Radiant House

This redundant office block in Plymouth City Centre was converted in to 15 flats by Magna Housing Association for letting at market rent.

*(See photograph, page 40)*

## PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN

The Empty Homes Officer has used local TV and radio stations to broadcast the problem of empty homes, to promote successful schemes, and to encourage people to come forward with information on empty properties.

Radio interviews have been especially successful in attracting a response from the public, and regular press releases have also been made to promote the issue, and to publicise completed projects.

'Empty Homes Partnership' Signboards are fixed at empty homes being brought back into use, and leaflets are available offering general advice to the public.

**HOUSING: 165 empty properties will be brought back into use**

# £10.6m to restore our empty homes

by NICK LESTER

MORE than £10 million is to be spent on bringing 165 empty properties in Plymouth back into use this year.

Plymouth's Empty Homes Partnership, which is made up of the city council and eight housing associations, has been granted £4.4 million by the Housing Corporation - nearly a quarter of the South West's allocation and four times the amount granted last year.

The rest of the £10.6 million will be funded by the Single Regeneration Budget, housing associations, and the private sector.

**Renovated**

Last year, 71 empty properties were renovated as part of a £4.4 million scheme, with more than £1 million from the corporation.

The partnership aims to cut the number of privately-owned homes standing empty across the city by buying up the properties.

It is estimated that 1,500 properties have stood empty for more than 12 months in the city.

Under the scheme houses are renovated and then let as high quality accommodation, mainly to people on the city's housing list.

In Plymouth, there are 1.5 empty properties to every homeless household.

Low property prices and high repair costs mean these properties are likely to remain empty without public funding.

This year's 10 programmes include the redevelopment of homes throughout the city, but will focus on areas such as Stonehouse and Greenbank, and support the city's East End Renewal Area and Devonport Urban Village. Empty homes officer Jacqueline Rhodes said:

"Plymouth City Council is working with the housing associations to identify suitable schemes and deliver noticeable improvement across the city.

"We were very successful this year because we had strategic bids, which linked in with other city projects such as the renewal area."

Empty properties are often an eyesore, and targeted by criminals and vandals.

**Devaluing**

She added: "They can blight a whole area, devaluing neighbouring properties."

She said renovating properties not only improved the local environment and economy, but also helped in the regeneration of an area. It also reduced the need to develop greenfield sites.

Ms Rhodes said: "We are looking at housing need at the same time as reorganising the areas that need it."

Clare Shaw, development worker for the Plymouth Federation of Tenants and Residents' Associations (PFTRA), said: "One positive benefit is it will increase the choice and scope for council tenants on the transfer list, especially larger families looking for more suitable accommodation."

Anyone wanting more information about projects or who knows of empty properties can call Jacqueline Rhodes on 01752 307072.

**Tackling Plymouth's EMPTY PROPERTIES**

**PLYMOUTH'S EMPTY HOMES PARTNERSHIP**

**PLYMOUTH'S EMPTY HOMES PARTNERSHIP**

**Filling the Gaps**

## ADVICE TO OWNERS

The Empty Homes Officer is available to offer advice on a number of issues relating to empty homes.

- ◆ Sale - to Housing Association or on the open market
- ◆ Letting - via registered lettings agencies, or public sector leasing scheme
- ◆ Renovation - the standards required for letting
- ◆ Finance - via renovation grant or loan
- ◆ Environmental Health and Planning issues

# THE WAY FORWARD

## FIVE YEAR PLAN

A reduction in the amounts of funding available directly for empty homes projects via the Approved Development Programme and Single Regeneration Budget in the future will mean that it will be important to maximise any available funding, and to explore other sources and combinations of finance.

### Approved Development Programme

As a major area of economic and population growth, Plymouth City will continue to receive major funding from the Housing Corporation for social housing schemes. However two major regeneration areas in Plymouth, the East End Renewal Area and Devonport Urban Village, have recently started their ten-year programmes, and will be requiring a substantial proportion of this allocation (which currently amounts to approximately £7.3m per year).

It is likely, therefore, that at similar levels of allocation in future years, the empty homes funding received from this source (£4.4m during 2001/02) will return to a similar amount to that of previous years (approximately £1m). However, the resources allocated to the areas will still support targeting strategic empty properties. Also, joint commissioning will be developed to build on existing structures and partnerships.

In addition to opportunities within the major regeneration areas, the priority empty homes projects supported by the Housing Corporation are likely to be the long established programmes such those for the purchase of suitable houses throughout the city for large families, and to meet specific needs such as physical disability.

### Single Regeneration Budget

This source of finance is being replaced with new funding regimes thus no new projects will be approved in the future. The new funding regimes are likely to be area based, and will not be a major source of finance for housing projects.

Current SRB programmes will continue as planned:

#### Project 119

The project has one more year to run (2002/03), with approximately £200,000 to spend on empty homes in the St Peter's ward.

It will mainly be used to fund the purchase and repair of scattered empty properties for single family housing in the St Peter's ward, however schemes catering for specialist groups will also be considered.

High priority derelict properties have been identified for renovation and conversion within the Wolsdon Street area of Stonehouse; this area has had a concentration of such properties, and has been subject to intensive investment in recent years.

The programme will also be used to support the Devonport Urban Village, re-housing families from properties to be demolished.

### **Project 416**

It is anticipated that this programme will run for three years from April 2002. A project officer will be employed to manage and monitor the scheme.

### **Area Initiatives**

Major funding channelled into the Renewal Area and Urban Village over ten year programmes will be especially intensive for the first few years. Funding will be sought for empty homes within the areas for schemes such as flat conversions, to include the conversion of empty space over shops into flats, through housing associations and private renovation/conversion grants.

Community led initiatives may identify empty homes as a priority issue and a possible target for available funding; working closely with the area communities will be important.

New Deal for Communities finance may be used for social housing schemes and private sector renewal projects, so there is much potential for developing empty homes projects within the Devonport area.

### **Local Authority Social Housing Grant**

With a reduction of funding from other sources, it will be important to maximise any available funding in future years, however Plymouth does not have high levels of LASHG to allocate due to other demands from its portfolio. There will therefore be minimal scope for new projects from this source in the future.

### **Local Authority Empty Property Renovation / Conversion Grant**

This programme, initiated in 1999, has proved to be successful in bringing some of the City's most problematic long term empty housing back into use, whilst providing high quality units for rent.

It should be extended in future years, subject to resources, and will require a part-time officer to administer and supervise the schemes. During 2002/03 a provisional programme will provide 19 flats and maisonettes from the conversion of seven long-term empty properties.

Also, the viability of the Council acting as agent to private owners in order to manage the projects, will be considered.

## **Private Sector Leasing Scheme**

The City Council intends to establish a private sector leasing scheme. This would increase the number of social rented units available within predominantly owner occupied areas - thus contributing to a choice of accommodation, whilst helping to reduce the number of homeless households placed within bed and breakfast accommodation.

The owners of empty properties in good condition, especially those improved with the empty property conversion grant, would be invited to lease their properties for a term of five years, encouraged by a secure rent and management (including minor repairs) by the City Council or a partner Housing Association.

## **Living Over the Shop Schemes**

It will be increasingly important to maximise the use of buildings within the city by converting redundant commercial space above shops and offices into flats and maisonettes. Funding may be directed towards Housing Associations or private landlords for this purpose.

Schemes have been identified within the major regeneration areas of the Devonport Urban Village, the East End Renewal Area and the Stonehouse and Millbay Neighbourhood Regeneration Project, where a pooling of resources will help to revive these areas.

Within Devonport, for example, private rented schemes will be encouraged, and the first conversion of space above shops into eleven units has been identified for 2002/03. This conversion will meet many objectives of the Urban Village, by providing for mixed use and tenure, and increasing the number of properties whilst providing for an identified housing need.

## **Compulsory Purchase**

An effective way of returning the worst empty homes to use, this programme will be developed in future years. Current guidance from central government proposes the streamlining of compulsory purchase orders in order to accelerate what is now a cumbersome process.

## **Townscape Heritage Initiative**

Following the successful application of lottery money towards high priority schemes within conservation areas, this programme will be continued. Two further 'critical projects' within conservation areas, which are long term empty properties with a high cost of rehabilitation, have been identified for 2002/03.

## **MoD Properties**

Plymouth's Empty Homes Partnership will continue to negotiate with Annington Homes over the purchase of suitable properties for social housing schemes when they are released by the Ministry of Defence, subject to the approval of further resources by the Housing Corporation.

## **Section 106 Agreements**

Another potential source of finance for empty homes projects will be section 106 capital receipts for affordable housing, arising from planning proposals. Although mixed tenure developments are being encouraged, this is not always possible, and the Council will seek off-site provision through such agreements.

It will be a priority to investigate access to these funds during 2002/03, and also the possibility of a joint venture company being established to receive the funding, in addition to the current empty homes partners.

## **Cross Boundary Working**

Further schemes will be investigated with neighbouring authorities, in order to maximise social housing grant resources and help meet housing need in the Plymouth Travel to Work Area.

## **Private Initiatives**

Housing Associations will be encouraged to invest in schemes without the input of grant aid, where possible. Plymouth has a considerable amount of empty office space near the City Centre, which could be converted into residential units for letting (especially at market rent), or for sale.

## **Best Value**

For the last two years, the performance of the empty homes strategy has been monitored by performance indicator 64. This documents the number of homes brought into use per year as a result of the strategy, in relation to the number of properties that have been vacant for more than 6 months at the end of the year. These figures do not strictly relate to each other as the number of long term empty properties will vary according to market conditions, however Plymouth City Council will strive to maximise the number of empty homes brought into use each year.

## FIVE YEAR PLAN (PLUS 2001/02 FIGURES) ESTIMATED HOMES BROUGHT INTO USE

SCHEME / SOURCE OF FUNDING	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7
<b>Housing Association Grant - Housing Corporation and Local Authority</b>						
Full rehabilitation / purchase and repair including flats over shops	20	30	25	25	25	30
Existing satisfactory including cross boundary and MoD	99	10	10	10	50	50
Temporary Social Housing Grant	3		3	3	3	3
<b>Single Regeneration Budget</b>						
Project 119		6				
Project 416	2	3	2			
<b>House Renovation Conversion Grant</b>						
Including flats over shops	8	20	15	15	15	15
<b>Compulsory Purchase</b>	1	3	4	5	5	5
<b>Private Initiatives / SWRDA funding</b>						
e.g. Office conversions			70		30	20
<b>New initiatives and sources of funding</b>						
e.g. section 106 / joint venture company, private sector leasing scheme, renewal area and urban village initiatives		10	20	25	25	30
<b>Estimate of properties brought into use following advice to owners</b>	12	15	15	15	15	15
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b><u>145</u></b>	<b><u>97</u></b>	<b><u>164</u></b>	<b><u>98</u></b>	<b><u>168</u></b>	<b><u>168</u></b>

TOTAL ESTIMATED NUMBER OF HOMES BROUGHT INTO USE OVER SIX YEARS = **840**  
ESTIMATED AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOMES BROUGHT INTO USE PER YEAR = **140**

NB The figures appear to differ from those counted in the Urban Capacity Plan, as the latter counts conversions and MoD properties separately from empty homes.

Without conversions and MoD properties, empty homes brought into use as a result of this strategy amount to an estimated average of 50 per year.

## TARGETS

- ◆ To bring an average of 140 properties into use per year (to include approximately 100 non ex-MoD houses) subject to the procurement of new sources of funding
- ◆ To target the worst properties first, whilst supporting area renewal
- ◆ To meet housing need, by for example, continuing to support large families and other specialist supported housing needs as identified each year
- ◆ To monitor the effectiveness of programmes by reporting quarterly on their delivery
- ◆ To measure the impact of schemes in the long term by assessing factors such as tenant satisfaction and changes in the local housing market on an annual basis
- ◆ To increase research into the nature of the housing market within Plymouth during 2002
- ◆ To focus section 106 agreement funding into empty properties
- ◆ To provide an annual progress report and update of this strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ To further develop partnership working between the Council Departments, Housing Associations and other agencies
- ◆ To expand existing programmes, such as the empty property grant and private sector leasing scheme, the compulsory purchase programme, and the Townscape Heritage Initiative
- ◆ To establish joint commissioning for empty homes in Plymouth
- ◆ To investigate the viability of a joint venture company to deliver further empty homes programmes, and its possible receipt of s.106 funding
- ◆ To investigate 'Living Over The Shop' schemes especially in the Renewal Area and Urban Village
- ◆ To encourage and support the conversion of commercial premises
- ◆ To increase research into the nature and effect of Plymouth's empty properties, and the impact of schemes as a part of area regeneration
- ◆ To continue to identify new solutions and procure new sources of funding.



