

Written Questions – 24 May 2007 Annual Council Meeting

1. From Councillor Herbert to the Executive Councillor for Housing, Councillor Smart

How many Cambridge residential properties are currently empty?

Reply from Councillor Smart

It has been estimated that 1.1% of the residential properties in the city are vacant at any one time because they are between lets or in the process of being sold or being cleared after a death preparatory to being sold or being repaired so they can be reoccupied. It is doubtful if this percentage could be reduced in any way.

Of greater concern are the long-term vacant residential properties in the private sector. Various Acts of Parliament define long term vacant as vacant for six months or more. These acts empower a Council's Environmental Health officers to bring such properties back into use and over the last ten years Cambridge's Environmental Health officers have intervened to bring 118 such residences back into use. At the present time, there are known to be 36 long-term vacant properties and officers are using the various means at their disposal to bring them back into occupation, including renovation grants, compulsory purchase orders and partnerships with Housing Associations.

There are rumours that some new properties are being bought up in some of the new developments for investment purposes and held empty. This is purely anecdotal at the moment, and there is no hard evidence to support it. However, should this be the case, and properties are empty for over the six months, the Council will investigate the best way to bring these properties into use.

As far as the Council's own stock is concerned, the Housing Strategy Statistical Returns sent to the Department of Communities and Local Government giving the voids in City Homes on 1st April 2007, will indicate that 90 places had been empty for six months or more. 28 of these were in Mansell Court, which at present cannot be occupied but still have to be counted in that report. Of the remaining 62, all except two are in sheltered accommodation. These include places in schemes which are due to be refurbished in the near future so could be said to be suffering from "planning blight". The unpopularity of bed-sit accommodation, which is where most of the long-term voids are to be found, is one of the reasons why the council has a strategy for phasing out this type of accommodation. The two not in the sheltered accommodation sector were in Elmfield Close which are due for demolition to enable a high quality social rented development to be built. Since April 1st a couple of the flats have been let but otherwise little has changed.

The last Private Sector Housing Condition Survey in 2002 estimated 72 properties empty in the city. Another housing condition survey is due in the next twelve months and that also will give an estimate. It will also be an opportunity to clarify the position in the new developments.