



**TRAFFORD**  
**COUNCIL**

**EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY**  
**2011 – 2015**



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## Foreword

Over 300,000 homes around the country have been empty for longer than six months. Over a thousand of these are in Trafford. Empty properties are a wasted resource. Returning empty properties to use helps meet housing need in the Borough, and improves the neighbourhood environment.

There is a renewed national focus on empty properties. The Government has allocated £100 million to the Homes & Community Agency to bring empty properties back into use. Empty properties returned to occupation will also benefit from the New Homes Bonus, providing welcome additional income to the authority.

The Council will use the full range of powers available to reduce the number of empty properties. This document sets out the assistance that the Council will provide to owners to help them bring empty properties back into beneficial use. It also sets out the action that we will take against those owners who leave their properties vacant.

The Strategy particularly concentrates on those long term empty properties which cause the greatest nuisance, because they are in a dangerous condition, are a cause for complaint in the area, or have a detrimental effect on the local environment. This will enable us to make the best use of our resources.

We recognise that not all empty properties are a problem. Indeed, a number of empty properties are required to enable the housing market to work effectively. So, this Strategy also sets a target range for the proportion of empty properties required, to assist in our monitoring of the operation of the housing market.

The Council cannot deliver this Strategy on its own, and we will further develop our partnership approach to empty properties. As Executive Member – Economic Growth & Prosperity I am confident that through this Strategy the Council and its partners will be able to deliver real improvements for the Borough.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Cornes', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Councillor Michael Cornes  
Executive Member – Economic Growth & Prosperity

## Executive Summary

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of empty properties in Trafford has risen by 18.3%. However, over the last 3 years the number of empty properties has dropped by 19.6%. Over the last 10 years, Council Tax figures indicate that there was an average of 2,731 properties empty in any given year<sup>1</sup>.

Some 1,212 were vacant for 6 months or more in 2010/11.

The Council is committed to making Trafford a 'great place to live, learn, work, and relax.' The Community Strategy outlines how the Council will achieve this, with the aim of *"All Trafford's people and communities will enjoy the highest quality of life in a safe, clean, attractive, healthy and sustainable environment with excellent education and first class services."*

Empty homes are wasteful both because of financial expense and missed opportunity. They negatively effect the local community, attracting vandals and vermin and tying up the resources of local authorities and the police and fire emergency services. Bringing empty properties back into use is a sustainable way to help meet future housing demand and helps to alleviate pressure on housing supply in the Borough.

The Government is committed to finding solutions to the problems posed by empty homes and other redundant buildings that could be converted for housing use. The objectives that support this commitment are:

- To ease pressure on the housing stock in areas of high demand and reduce the necessity to develop on Greenfield land
- To reduce blight and opportunities for petty crime and anti-social behaviour
- To improve the desirability and sustainability of neighbourhoods
- To encourage private investment and raise asset values

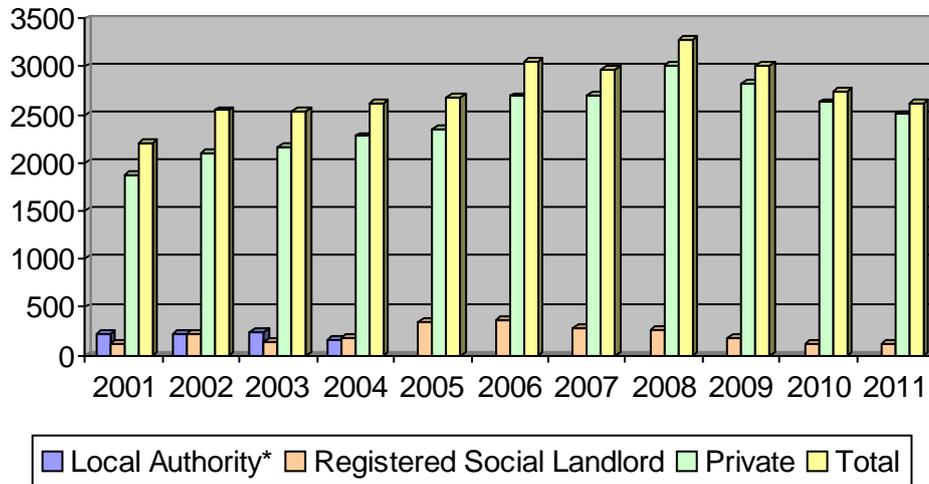
Trafford Council is aware of these issues and has produced this Empty Property Strategy with its aim of bringing empty properties throughout the Borough back into use.

Empty properties are recorded annually in the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix, (HSSA). The data in the chart below is drawn from the returns for Trafford from 2001 to 2011:

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<sup>1</sup> Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA)

### Empty properties in Trafford 2001- 2011 by tenure<sup>2</sup>



(\* Stock transfer to Trafford Housing Trust took place in 2005)

The national average for total voids identified by the English Housing Survey is 3.4%. The average percentage of empty properties in Trafford for 2001 to 2011 was 2.8%, with this figure currently standing at 2.7%. Although the total number of empty properties has increased by 18.3% between 2001 and 2011, there has been a significant fall over the last three years, and are currently the lowest they have been since 2004.

The Council is determined to continue the good progress in reducing the number of empty properties in the Borough.

A number of empty properties are necessary for a healthy housing market, allowing households to move into and within Trafford. The Council places empty properties into one of 3 categories:

- Transactional
- Potentially problematic
- Problematic

There are some 1,407 properties empty for less than 6 months, or 1.4% of total stock. The Council has set a baseline for this property type with a range of 1.9% to 2.5%.

There are approximately some 1,212 properties which have been empty for 6 months or more (with 122 properties empty for 5 years or more). Around a third of these fall into the category of empty between changing occupants, or undergoing modernisation, repair or conversion, which equates to about 400

<sup>2</sup> HSSA

properties. These are the properties which the Council is most concerned about.

The Council will target those properties which are problematic (properties which are perceived to be in poor condition and draw complaints from nearby residents) and set an annual target for those returned to use.

This will be done through a combination of partnership working and intervention, and will include:

- Developing and maintaining a database of empty properties in the Borough, which monitors the number, location, and type of properties
- Prioritising those properties in need of intervention and,
- Adopting a more robust approach in dealing with nuisance properties.

The Council will then intervene, where appropriate by making use of the range of available solutions, from advice to owners, to compulsory purchase orders and empty dwelling management orders.

This Empty Property Strategy outlines the key issues nationally, regionally, and in Trafford, highlights areas of concern to the Council and provides a robust Action Plan for proactive interventions to turn empty properties into homes for the people of Trafford.

Fewer vacant properties will contribute towards making Trafford a great place to live.

## 1) Introduction

Trafford Council wants to make the Borough a 'great place to live, learn, work and relax'. The Council's Community Strategy refers to the Housing Strategy 2009 - 2012, which outlines how this will be done. Two of the ways of achieving this are through:

- Realising the potential of the existing stock – addressing empty homes
- A decent home for all – creating a legacy we can be proud of

The Council's Housing Strategy 2009 – 2012 vision is: *"We aim to give everyone in Trafford the chance to live in an affordable, decent home of their choice in a thriving and secure neighbourhood."*

The Housing Strategy sets out the challenges and opportunities facing housing in the Borough. A number clearly stand out in terms of their scale and relevance over the next few years and are addressed through 5 Strategic Priorities:

1. Affordability and Access to Housing
2. Housing's Contribution to Economic Development - A Growth Agenda
3. Promoting Quality and Sustainability
4. Strong Neighbourhoods and Cohesive Communities
5. Housing for Vulnerable People

Specifically in relation to empty properties, Trafford's Housing Strategy states:

*"The presence of empty homes within neighbourhoods can have a detrimental effect on quality of place, resident's perceptions and their quality of life."* (Page 71)

One of the objectives of the Housing Strategy is to:

*"Implement the actions set out within the Empty Property Strategy to ensure that the current stock across Trafford contributes positively to meeting objectives set out within the other Strategic Priorities and does not impact negatively on existing neighbourhoods."* (Page 74).

Bringing empty properties back into use is a sustainable way to meet future housing demand and helps to alleviate pressure to develop Greenfield sites.

The Council will:

- Develop the recommendations / findings of the Stock Condition Survey to develop an Intervention / Action Plan
- Link the development of the Delivery Vehicle tasked with implementing the Growth Point proposals to the actions in the Empty Property Strategy - making best use of existing resources
- Continue to monitor the prevalence of empty homes - understand in greater detail concentrations of vacant stock / types / tenures

### **Causes of Empty Properties**

A property may be empty for various reasons. For example:

- problems with wills and probates
- hospital and care issues
- mental health issues
- owners abroad
- owners in prison
- investment purchases
- bought to rent, but tenants not forthcoming
- loss and gain concerns

Additionally:

- The owner may not be aware of the property's existence, for example where property records are not kept
- The owner may not fully appreciate the business case for bringing their empty property back into use
- The property may have been acquired solely for speculative investment purposes and the owner is not concerned that the property is empty

### **Effect of Empty Properties**

Through a significant body of research and reports by organisations such as Empty Homes, British Property Federation, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and the Urban Task Force, the negative effects of empty property are now relatively well recognised.

Empty homes represent waste, financial expense and missed opportunity. They blight communities, attract vandals, drug dealing, anti – social behaviour, arson, vermin, and tie up the resources of local authorities and the emergency services. Empty properties are a regular concern of the Fire

Service, with fears of arson attacks. However, in some cases the real status of an empty property is not always clear cut:

- A home which appears empty may be a person's second home and occupied infrequently.
- A room above a shop may be used for storage and may appear to be occupied. However, if there is other space at ground floor level which could be used for storage purposes, there may be conversion potential on the upper floor.
- An empty property may have been earmarked as part of a regeneration programme and demolition or re-use may already have been planned.
- Properties could be empty awaiting planning consent, refurbishment, or whilst awaiting the new resident moving in.

In addition to those properties that are recognised as empty, there is also a significant body of commercial space that is under-utilised. This includes office accommodation and space above shops. It is estimated that UK businesses could save up to £18 billion a year through improved use of their property. In these cases, owners are often unaware of the potential to free up space and the possibility of viable conversion to a residential use.

Even allowing for these factors, there are considerably more empty properties than is justified by the workings of the market. For example, around 291,000 homes in England have been empty for more than six months - the equivalent of a city the size of Leeds. In addition, an empty property will have a detrimental impact on the properties surrounding it and on the wider location. Property prices can become depressed. The Empty Homes Agency estimates that 10% can be wiped off the value of a property next door to a long-term vacant.

Through the broken window theory, a vacant property may present a risk to both crime and perceptions, as it presents a signal that no – one cares, thus becoming a crime enabler. The property may suffer from structural problems, which can spread to the property or properties next door. There are also wider multiplier effects, such as impacts on local businesses through reduced demand for their goods and services and, in areas of low demand, knock - on effects on the viability of public services, such as schools

Whilst individual properties may not manifest all of these characteristics, if a small group or cluster of properties become empty in an area, they can quickly begin to establish a culture of under-investment and a spiral of decline as confidence in the area is lost, encouraging homeowners to move away from the area before their equity is eroded.

There are around 2,619 empty properties in Trafford as at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011, with 1,212 properties which have been empty for 6 months or more. The Council receives complaints about empty properties through Members' surgeries and Neighbourhood Forums, and the issue often makes the letters pages in the local press.

The problem of empty properties exists in every local authority area. In areas where housing demand outstrips supply, such as Trafford, the re-introduction of empty properties onto the housing market increases choice for local people. This serves to impact positively on the local area, reducing a host of problems such as anti-social behaviour, arson, vermin infestations, and neighbourhood deterioration.

There are a range of Government policies aimed at strengthening sustainable communities and neighbourhood regeneration. The main themes of these policies are outlined below.

In light of the new legislation, a number of new policies and guidance, especially Empty Property – Unlocking the Potential (ODPM 2003), the Council's existing strategy was in need of updating and this document replaces the previous Strategy from 1995.

This revised document outlines the current issues and causes for concern, examining the national and regional contexts, before looking in detail at the situation in Trafford. It then outlines the range of options available to the Council and how the Council intends to use its powers to target empty properties. This proactive approach is shown in the Action Plan, which is both specific and long-term, as the problem of empty properties will require continued monitoring and intervention. Through partnership working with a range of people and organisations, the aims of the Action Plan are achievable, and will make a positive contribution to continuing improvements in Trafford.

### *Town centres*

Around 5,000 hectares of commercial floor space in properties across England have been empty for over a year. The Council is aware of the potential problems associated with empty commercial properties, both in terms of street scene, retail health and economic viability. Whilst such properties are not the focus of this strategy, which is concerned predominately with domestic premises, the Council will look for opportunities to take combined action, for example in developing living over the shop or similar schemes. This will bring new life back into town centres, which need more than just shops and offices. There is potential to convert vacant space above shops into high-quality housing.

### *Conservation areas*

The Council recognises that there should be effective protection for all aspects of the historic environment. The physical survival of our past, including buildings, is to be valued and protected as a central part of our cultural heritage and sense of identity. Historic buildings, which may or may not be in a Conservation Area, also add to the quality of our lives, being an important aspect of the character and appearance of our towns, villages, and countryside. Historic buildings which are at risk will, where possible, be sympathetically restored and if necessary converted, and used to provide accommodation, rather than simply being pulled down as a matter of course.

Since the last Empty Property Strategy document was produced, there have been updates to housing law in the Housing Acts of 1996 and 2004. The 2004 Act specifically addresses empty properties, and introduces the legislative tool of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs).

## **2) Strategic Links**

### **Supporting People**

Implementation of the protocol for empty properties may highlight vulnerable households, who have difficulties living in their home, and with maintaining the condition of their property.

The Council will seek to provide the required levels of support, advice, and assistance to property owners to enable them to live at home, or to rent out the property to private tenants or to tenants through partnership with a Registered Social Landlord, (RSL).

### **Homelessness**

The Empty Property Strategy will support the Council's Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2008 -11 by seeking to provide additional housing for homeless households, thereby easing the demand on housing resources in the Borough. To view the Homelessness Strategy, go to:

[http://www.trafford.gov.uk/cme/live/dynamic/DocMan2Document.asp?document\\_id=6621FEE3-A6AC-4935-A101-6104FEEDE5B7](http://www.trafford.gov.uk/cme/live/dynamic/DocMan2Document.asp?document_id=6621FEE3-A6AC-4935-A101-6104FEEDE5B7)

### **Crime Reduction**

The Council aims to reduce crime and the fear of crime, and to build confidence in Trafford as a safe place to live and to visit. Part of this involves residents' perceptions of the local neighbourhood. The return to use of empty properties will improve both property condition and perceptions of the neighbourhood. See:

[http://www.trafford.gov.uk/cme/live/dynamic/DocMan2Document.asp?document\\_id=AAAB31F9-7A99-4C0E-990F-254A9F205334](http://www.trafford.gov.uk/cme/live/dynamic/DocMan2Document.asp?document_id=AAAB31F9-7A99-4C0E-990F-254A9F205334)

### **Strategic Planning**

The Government in 2010 revoked Regional Spatial Strategies with the intention of returning decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils. The abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies indicates that the Government attaches importance to the development and application of local spatial plans, in the form of Local Development Framework, Core Strategies and other Development Plan Documents. Future reform in this area outlined in the Localism Bill will make it easier for councils, working with their

communities, to agree and amend local plans in a way that maximises the involvement of neighbourhoods.

The Homes and Communities Agency in October 2010 carried out an online debate about empty properties, which found that the Government's Big Society agenda has a large part to play in increasing the provision of affordable housing, and that empty properties have a role to play in housing provision. The Government announced in October 2010 a £100 million fund to bring empty homes back into use as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Government has introduced a New Homes Bonus, which will match fund the Council Tax, for each new home and property returned to use, for 6 years. There is therefore a financial incentive for the Council to reduce the number of empty properties in the Borough. The New Homes Bonus is not ring fenced, and therefore there is no requirement that it be reinvested in housing.

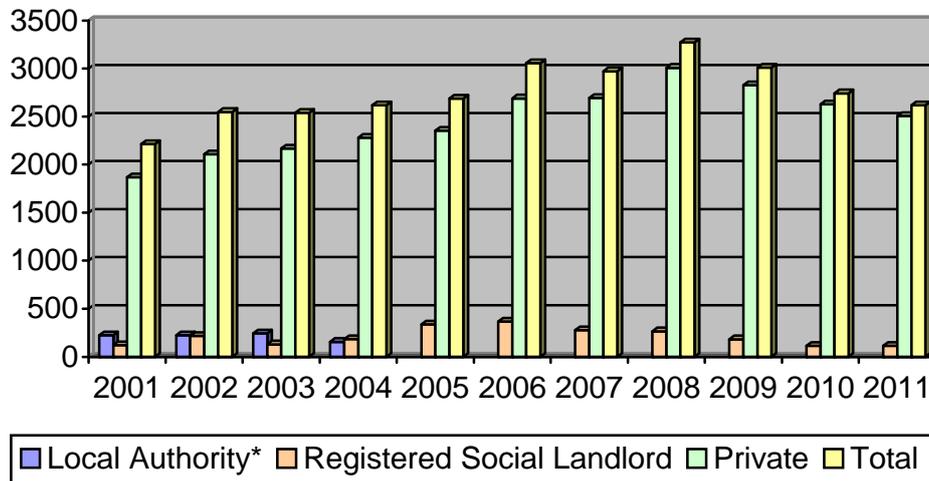
This empty property strategy has been revised to incorporate Government policy and guidance issued up to the end of May 2011.

### 3) Empty Properties in Trafford

Trafford is a place where people want to live and visit. It has a population projection of 213,300, living in an area of 10,556 hectares. The total population fell from 1991 figure of 212,073 but is predicted to increase to the above projected figure (the latest projection currently available). Of this population 18,085 are from black and minority ethnic groups<sup>3</sup>.

Empty properties are recorded annually in the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA). The data below is drawn from the last 10 years' returns for Trafford:

**Table 1: Empty properties in Trafford over the last 10 years by tenure<sup>4</sup>**



(\* stock transfer took place in 2005)

An average of 2,731 properties have been empty on any given date each year. Of these, 1,212 have been vacant for 6 months or more in 2011.

The national average for total voids identified by the English Housing Survey is 3.4%. National policy initiatives seek to reduce the existing levels of empty properties, and have chosen a figure of 3%<sup>5</sup>. The average percentage of empty properties in Trafford for 2001 to 2011 was 2.8%, and with a figure currently of 2.7%. The total number of empty properties increased through most of the last decade, having risen by 18.3% between 2001 and 2011, though with a significant fall of 19.6% over the last three years.

<sup>3</sup> 2001 Census

<sup>4</sup>HSSA Returns 2001 – 2011

<sup>6</sup>National Housing and Planning Advice Unit 2007

The Council places empty properties into one of 3 categories:

- Transactional
- Potentially problematic
- Problematic

As properties are bought and sold, or re-let, there will be a period of vacancy in between the changes in occupation. Such ‘transactional vacancies’ are not usually the cause of problems, but are a normal part of the operation of the housing market. These properties seldom require the intervention of the Council in order to ensure they are brought back into use within 6 months.

Household flows exist which affect both the number of households in an area and the number of properties which are occupied, as seen in table 2 below:

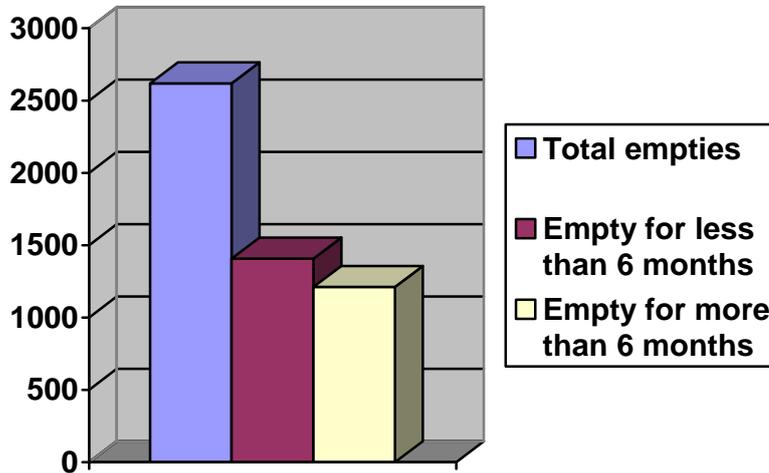
**Table 2: The impact of household movement on the number of households and properties in Trafford**

| Household flow  | Number of:        |                            |
|---|-------------------|----------------------------|
|   | <i>Households</i> | <i>Properties occupied</i> |
| 1. HH moving into Trafford and into an empty property                   | Increases         | Increases                  |
| 2. HH moving into Trafford and into an occupied property                | Unchanged         | Unchanged                  |
| 3. HH moving within Trafford, leaving empty and entering empty          | Unchanged         | Unchanged                  |
| 4. Whole HH moving within Trafford, leaving empty and entering occupied | Decreases         | Unchanged                  |
| 5. Whole HH leaves Trafford   | Decreases         | Decreases                  |
| 6. Splitting HH, person leaving enters vacant                           | Increases         | Increases                  |
| 7. Splitting HH, person leaving enters occupied                         | Unchanged         | Unchanged                  |
| 8. Splitting HH, person leaving leaves Trafford                         | Unchanged         | Unchanged                  |
| 9. Household dissolution  | Decreases         | Decreases                  |

A number of empty properties are necessary for a healthy housing market and to allow household flows 1, 3, and 6 above.

There are some 1,407 properties empty for less than 6 months, or 1.7% of total empty private sector stock.

**Table 3: Empty properties in Trafford 2011**



The Council has set a baseline for properties empty for more than 6 months, with a range of 1.9% to 2.5%. Less than 1.9% will produce stagnancy in the housing market, whereas anything higher than 2.5% will be indicative of low demand issues and is likely to translate into an increase in long - term empty properties, especially potentially problematic and problematic properties. This range allows the temperature of the housing market to be taken on an annual basis, based on housing completions, sales, average prices, and income – property price ratios.

Potentially problematic properties are perceived to be in a satisfactory condition, draw some complaints from nearby residents, and are in a location where demand for property of this type is high

Problematic properties are perceived to be in poor condition, draw complaints from nearby residents, but is in an area where demand for a property of this type is low.

There are approximately some 1,212 properties which have been empty for 6 months or more, with 122 properties empty for 5 years or more, as seen below:

**Table 4: Properties empty for 6 months or more**

| <b>Total Years Empty</b> | <b>Number of Properties</b> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 6 – 12 months            | 467                         |
| 1 – 2 years              | 306                         |
| 2 – 3 years              | 144                         |
| 3 – 4 years              | 81                          |
| 4 – 5 years              | 53                          |
| 5 – 6 years              | 54                          |
| 6 – 7 years              | 16                          |
| 7 – 8 years              | 13                          |
| 8 – 9 years              | 11                          |
| 9 – 10 years             | 3                           |
| 10 years +               | 25                          |

It is the figure of 1,212 which is the focus here, as it is not necessary to be concerned with homes empty for 6 months or less.

Homes can be empty for many reasons. The CLG only wants local authorities to include in the empty property total:

- dwellings that are empty between changing occupants or undergoing modernisation, repair or conversion
- awaiting demolition
- repossessed
- waiting probate
- newly completed but not occupied
- owned by a charity
- unoccupied annexes
- the trustee is in bankruptcy
- any group of bedsits, counted as one dwelling, only counted as vacant when all are vacant

whilst excluding:

- second homes
- holiday lets
- flats and houses normally occupied by students
- the owner is in prison
- the owner is receiving or giving care
- in the armed or visiting forces
- the dwelling is flood damaged
- awaiting clergy

Around a third of these long term empty properties fall into the category of empty between changing occupants or undergoing modernisation, repair or conversion, which equates to about 430 properties. These are the properties which are best placed to be targeted.

Some newly completed properties will inevitably be empty after completion, but the Council will be interested in taking action with those which are still empty after a period of 6 months.

The establishment of a baseline figure will allow the identification of 'excess' or surplus empty properties in the Borough. The CLG has stated that there are more empty properties nationally than is justified by the workings of the housing market. In an area that is desirable to live in, (such as Trafford), with high property prices, even properties in the least desirable areas of the Borough can be marketed at a good price. The market will usually solve a problem, if the owner is willing to cooperate.

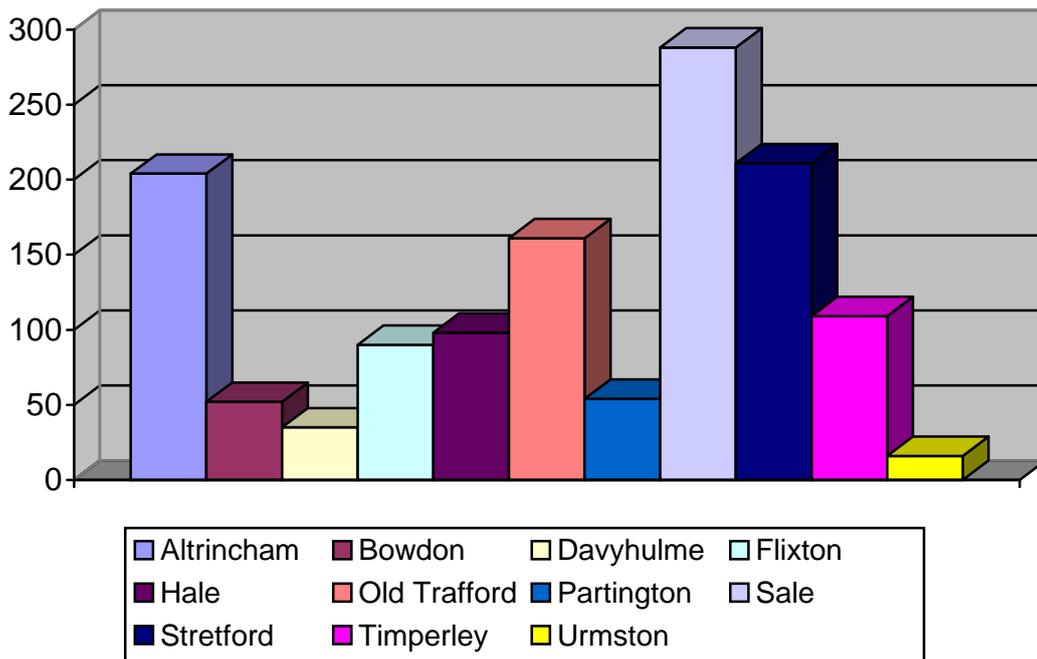
Action Plan 1a: Monitor the number of empty properties in the Borough, including commercial properties

Trafford has particular housing problems that are not generally shared in the North West:

- increasing property prices leading to a lack of affordable housing
- increasing pressures on the housing waiting-list and homelessness services

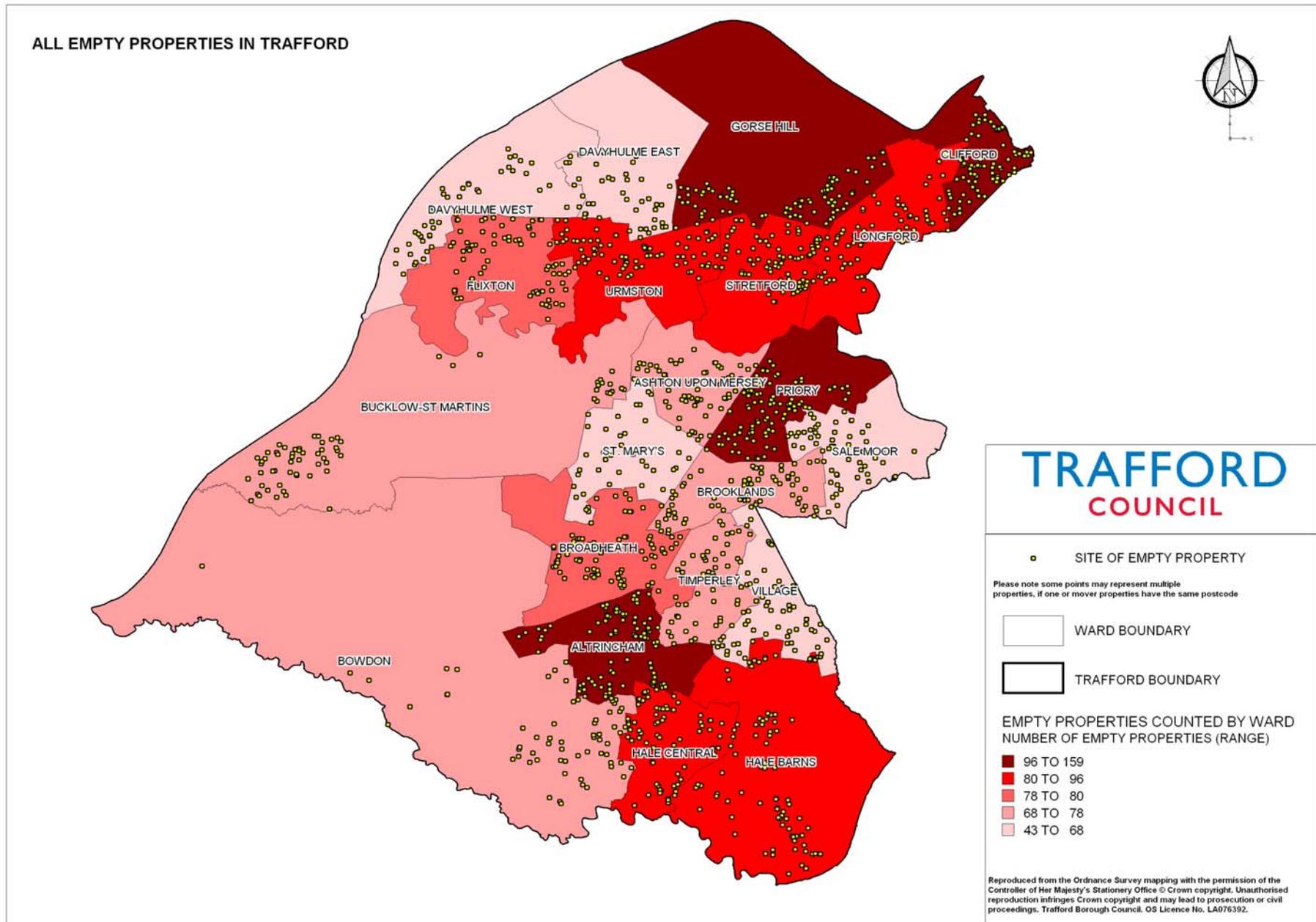
In April 2011, Trafford had a list of 1,212 properties across all tenures that have been empty for 6 months or more.

**Table 5: Trafford empty properties by district**

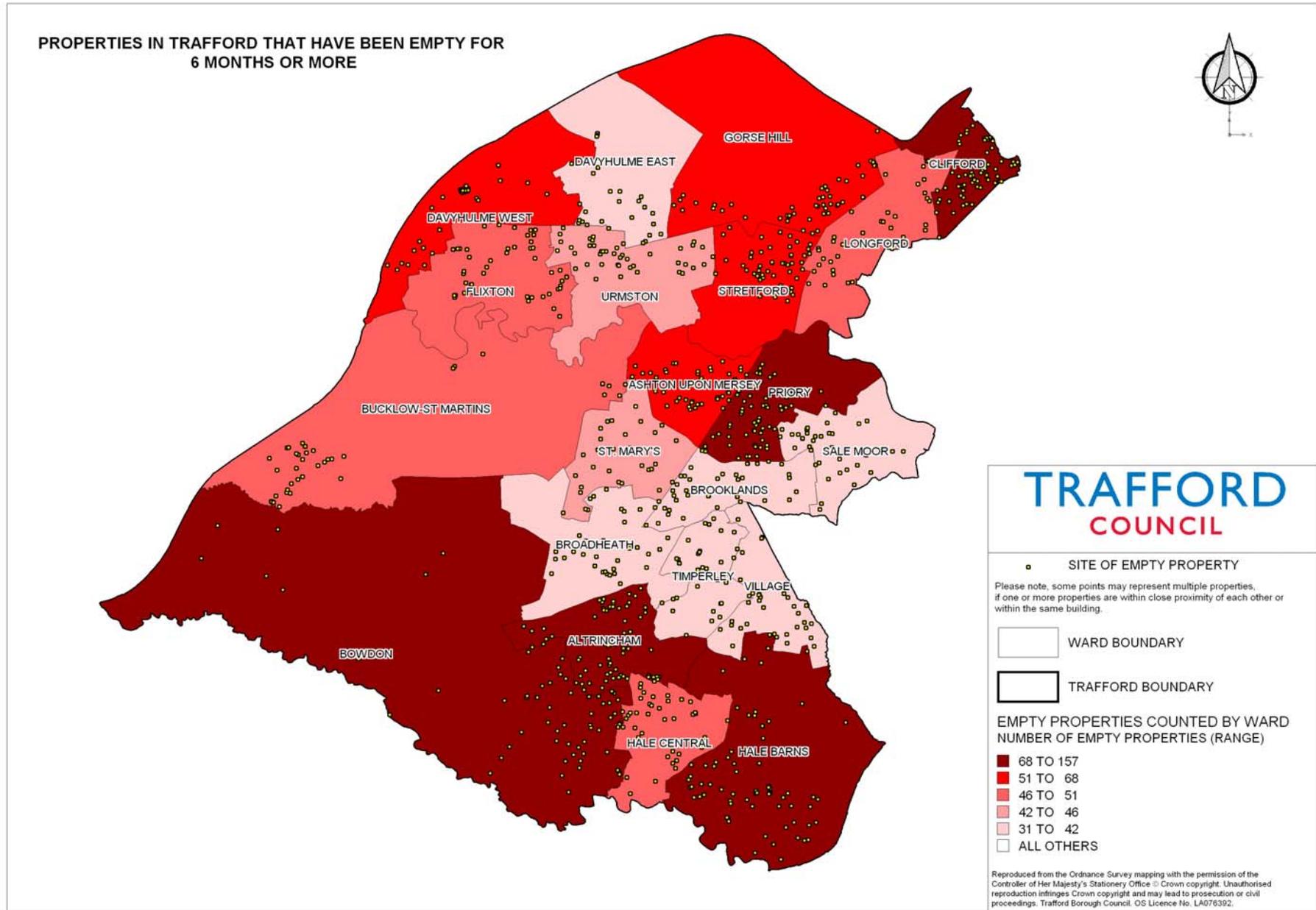


The maps below highlight the location of empty properties in Trafford. The first map shows all empty properties, with map number two showing the location of those properties empty for 6 months or more. This data allows the identification of clusters and hotspots, and will be a tool used when prioritising specific empty properties for attention.

Map 1: All Empty Properties in Trafford in May 2011



Map 2: Properties in Trafford in May 2011 empty for 6 months or more



Action Plan 1b: Build up a database of empty properties

Prior to April 2008, Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 64 collated information on “the number of non-local authority owned vacant dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the financial year as a direct result of action by the local authority.” Previously, this indicator asked for the percentage of vacant dwellings returned to occupation after local authority action.

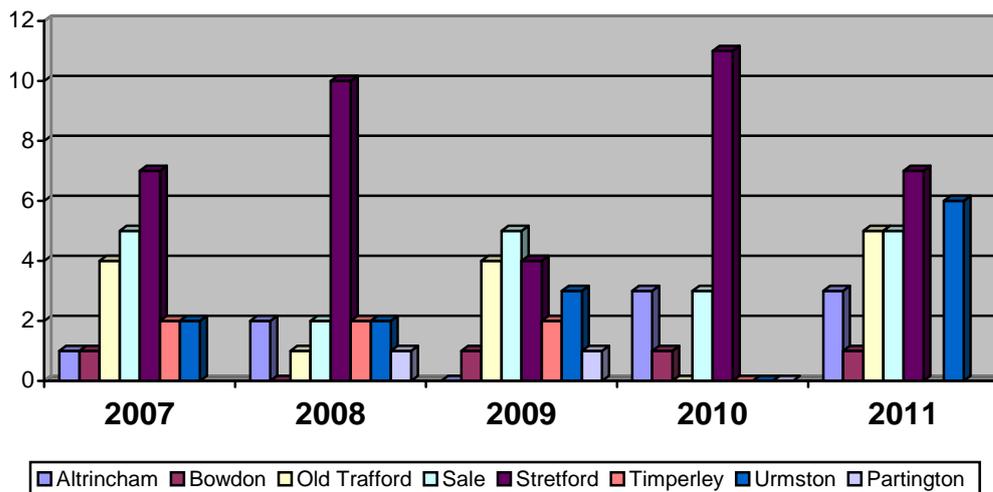
The Council will continue to use BVPI 64 as a local performance indicator, as the replacement National Indicators do not record empty homes work or achievements (NI 154 measures buildings vacant over 5 years).

**Table 6: Council interventions by type and year**

|                  | 2005/06   | 2006/07   | 2007/08   | 2008/09   | 2009/10   | 2010/11   |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Target</b>    | <b>32</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>20</b> |
| CPO              | -         | -         | 1         | 2         | 1         | -         |
| Demolition       | 2         | -         | 5         | 2         | 2         | 1         |
| Grant Assistance | -         | -         | -         | 1         | 1         | 1         |
| Persuasion       | 30        | -         | 19        | 17        | 16        | 28        |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>32</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>22</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>30</b> |

The locations of those properties brought back into use voluntarily are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7: Trafford properties brought back into use by area and by year**



This new Empty Property Strategy includes a series of measures to return properties into use. This involves the Housing Standards Team in Public Protection liaising with

owners, encouraging them to seek a private solution and advising them on the variety of solutions available:

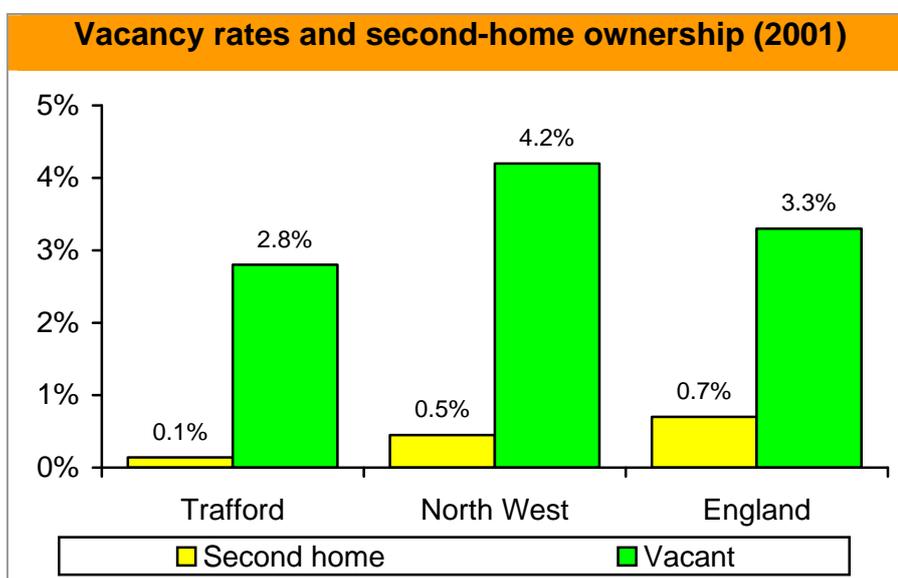
- Grant assistance
- Enforcement action
- Sell property for development by others
- Realise the asset and provide privately rented accommodation

### Empty properties and second homes

According to the 2001 Census, 2.8% of all household spaces in Trafford are vacant and a further 0.1% are considered to be second homes; taken together, this amounts to around 2,300 household spaces. These figures compare with a vacancy rate of 4.2% (excluding second homes) in the North West and 3.3% for England. This lower vacancy rate implies a higher degree of efficiency in utilising the existing stock in Trafford and may be related to the popularity of Trafford as a place to live.

The table below shows vacancy rates and proportions of second homes. The data shows that second home ownership in Trafford is slightly below the figure for the region as a whole and also below the national average. Second homes are not considered a problem in Trafford.

**Table 8: Trafford empty homes and second homes<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>6</sup> Census 2001

#### **4) Dealing With The Problem of Empty Properties**

To implement the actions arising within the Empty Homes Strategy, the Council will first need to determine the size of problem and to locate those properties which are empty. Baseline data from previous years has been provided earlier within this document.

The most accurate source of data for those homes which are empty is the Council Tax database. This provides information on those properties which have been vacant for 6 months or more. However, there are some problems with using Council Tax information exclusively, in that some properties are exempt from Council Tax and some property owners may give incorrect information.

To ensure that the information we hold is as correct and as up to date as can be, work with internal and external partners will be key. This will include working with colleagues from Greater Manchester Police, Greater Manchester Fire Service, other Council services and officers of RSLs, as well as the assistance of the Borough's residents.

A co-ordinated approach will need to be developed so that information is collected in a timely and accurate manner. From the above, a database will be created that can be used as a starting point for implementation of the Strategy. Through partnership working, the database should be as accurate as possible at all times and ensure that limited officer time is not wasted working on options for a property that is, in fact, occupied. Periodically, an officer will have to visit the properties listed on the database to perform a physical check to verify the status of the property.

#### **How the Council will Prioritise Empty Homes**

Once the database outlined above is collated, a decision will need to be taken in the first instance on how to prioritise properties for action. This will depend on a variety of circumstances, chiefly on the course of action agreed with the property owner. As far as possible, the Council will always seek to work collaboratively with a property owner to reach a solution that meets both parties' priorities.

However, there will undoubtedly be instances where the property owner does not want to work in partnership with the Council to bring the property back into use. At this stage, the Council will have to assess which properties to target for action.

As mentioned earlier, there are 1,212 properties within Trafford that have been empty for a period of 6 months or more. There are approximately 706 properties which have been empty for a year or more. To remove the problem of long term empty homes, in the short term, action will be targeted at those homes which have been empty for over one year. Longer term, it is hoped that action can be targeted at those properties which are empty for between 6 months and a year.

Prioritisation will be based on risk and the likely potential for success. Consideration will then be given to the following issues before further determining the priorities:

- Size of property in question
- Location of property
- Number of complaints received from nearby residents
- Likelihood of successful outcome
- Obtaining the views of local service providers (such as Police and Fire services) on the problems caused as a result of the property in question lying empty. This would include instances of vandalism, squatting, and other public nuisance issues.
- Condition of the property

To provide an idea of the decisions that will be taken, guidance is given in the table below. It is important to note that to ensure value for money, resources may be directed at properties where the likelihood of success is higher.

**Table 9: Prioritisation of empty properties**

| Priority | Issues  |
|----------|---|
| 1        | Property is seen to be in a very poor physical condition, is drawing complaints from nearby residents, and is in a location where demand for property of this type is high.     |
| 2        | Property is perceived to be in a satisfactory condition, is drawing some complaints from nearby residents, and is in a location where demand for property of this type is high. |
| 3        | Property is perceived to be in poor condition, and is drawing complaints from nearby residents, but is in an area where demand for a property of this type is low.              |
| 4        | Property is perceived to be in a satisfactory condition, is drawing some complaints from nearby residents, but is in an area where demand for a property of this type is low    |

In determining this risk an additional assessment is carried out.

### Operational Prioritisation

Additionally an assessment is carried out of the degree of risk that an empty property brings to:

- The immediate neighbours i.e. “broken window syndrome” often gives the green light to Anti Social Behaviour - causing more significant damage
- The immediate area – detrimental to sustainable value
- Negative impact of blight
- Situation within / close to regeneration area

Housing demand, which will enable the identification of empty properties to be targeted, will be based on housing waiting - list data, and on available information regarding sub – markets in the Borough.

The Council's Viability Study 2009 distinguished sub-markets in Trafford. These are as follows:

- Altrincham
- Carrington
- Old Trafford
- Partington
- Rural Countryside
- Sale
- Stretford
- Urmston

To ensure that spatial sub-market distinctions were accurately reflected in the economic viability assessment locations are categorised by market performance. The authority is therefore divided into 'hot', 'moderate' and 'cold' markets to reflect these spatial market performance distinctions. (See Appendix 8).

Value distinctions across Trafford's key sub-markets were assessed using Land Registry data over the past 2 years to reflect the functional markets operational at the sub-market scale and segregated into 'hot', 'moderate' and 'cold' markets by benchmarking achievable values against comparable developments across the Greater Manchester sub-region.

Further to this, actual transactions were sourced from Rightmove.co.uk for each sub-market location within Trafford to cross-reference achievable values by property type and to distinguish between values achieved for newly built property and re-sale property.

|  |
|--|
| Action Plan 2d: Establish a corporate protocol for tackling problem empty properties |
|--|

## 5) Solutions

There are a variety of solutions available to local authorities to enable them to bring empty homes back into use. These are detailed below, but it is important to recognise that, initially, the goal of the Council will always be to work with the property owner so that the property can be brought back into use without the Council getting further involved. It is also important to understand that each property will require a different solution and that what works for one may not necessarily be successful with another. We need to offer property owners a flexible range of solutions, as it is unlikely that using only one specific solution would achieve success.

There is a need for a stronger partnership approach between the public, private and civic sectors. An inclusive approach including the public and civil sectors will bring in leverage to generate social and economic capital.

The process that the Council will generally follow is shown later in Appendix 1, but some of the options available to Trafford to enable us to help bring empty properties back into use are outlined below:

### **Advice Provision**

In the first instance, we will seek to contact the owner of the empty property to discuss the issue. In some circumstances, it may be that the owner is simply waiting to generate funds to renovate the property or is waiting to sell the property. We will seek to provide the owner with information on any options that are available to them to bring the property back into use and seek to put the owner in contact with any agencies who they may be able to work with.

Action Plan 2a: Offer targeted assistance to owners of empty properties

### **Work with Estate Agents**

In some cases, it may be that an owner of an empty property is having difficulty selling a property. This may be because some estate agents are unwilling to advertise a property that is not in good repair. We will work with Estate Agents operating within the Borough to take on these properties and if they are unwilling, we would look to explore options for a solution like Empro<sup>7</sup> in Trafford. With the high house prices in Trafford, this is not an issue that we would anticipate occurring often.

Action Plan 3a: Develop partnerships around working with empty properties

### **RSL purchase of empty properties**

Many RSLs work in partnership with the local authorities by taking on management of empty properties for a time period agreed with the owner. The RSL will bring the property up to decent homes standard and then let the home to someone off the waiting list. The property can be returned to the owner once costs are recovered. Ownership is retained and often the management arrangement will remain in place once the condition period has expired.

It is possible that, if a property is in a state of disrepair and a buyer cannot be sought on the open market, one of our partner RSLs could purchase the property, carry out required repairs and then rent out or sell the property, (at an affordable level), to recoup their investment.

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<sup>7</sup> Empro is an online service that aims to bring together prospective landlords and developers with long-term empty properties to acquire and renovate, currently available in West London and Birmingham

Action Plan 2b: Offer responsible third party management of properties

### **Improve the conditions of empty properties**

Local authorities have a range of statutory powers available to enable them to require owners to improve their properties. Individual properties left in poor condition not only cause neighbour nuisance, but can devalue the price of adjacent property.

Using Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, and Section 79 of the Building Act 1984, Local Authorities have the power to deal with “*unsightly land or the external appearance of property*” and to deal with “*ruinous and dilapidated buildings or structures and neglected sites in the interests of amenity*”. Owners can comply by restoring or demolishing the property.

### **Compulsory Purchase Order**

One of the last resorts when dealing with an empty home which is in poor condition would be the option of Compulsory Purchase. This is not something that the Council considers lightly due to the pressures involved both for the Council and for the property owner. Under the Housing Act 1985 and the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the Council has the power to force a property owner to sell their property to the Council, albeit at full market value in its current condition. The Council would then sell the property on the open market with conditions attached to ensure it was fully renovated and brought back into use.

Action Plan 2c: Reduce the number of empty properties in Trafford

### **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)**

Potentially one of the most useful tools available to the Local Authority when dealing with problem empty homes is an EDMO. They were introduced under the Housing Act 2004 and give local authorities a legislative tool to tackle privately owned empty homes. An EDMO provides a framework that can assist both property owners and local authorities to find a solution that enables an empty property to be returned to use.

An EDMO authorises the local authority, (or a partner RSL), to take over the management of the property, completing any repairs required to bring the property up to a habitable level and then renting the property to recoup the costs incurred. Any rent received above the local authority's costs would be returned to the property owner. There are many caveats to prevent abuse of this procedure, and the local authority must justify the need for an EDMO to a Residential Property Tribunal for one to be granted.

There are also exemptions that apply when considering the use of an EDMO. The following circumstances would not allow the use of an EDMO:

- A property that has not been empty for at least 6 months.
- A property that is used occasionally as a guest home or holiday home.
- A property that is genuinely on the market for sale or rent.
- A property that is normally the owners' main residence but the owner is temporarily resident elsewhere, is empty because the owner is being cared for, (or is caring for someone elsewhere), or the owner is in the armed services.

The Council will not seek to obtain an EDMO unless all other options have been considered, as it could prove costly to use an Order and there is no guarantee that its expenses will always be recouped. A local authority must prove that it has offered other voluntary approaches to the property owner before applying for an EDMO. Further information on EDMOs can be found at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/emptydwellingmanagement>

Action Plan 2d: Develop a procedure with RSL partners for making use of EDMOs

## Resources

It is not anticipated that the Council will have additional resources to fund any of the initiatives above, although with the exception of EDMOs, they are generally carried out by the Authority already.

Previously, Trafford Council provided grants to owners of empty homes to enable them to be brought back into use via nomination rights for a determined period. However, under the current financial regime the grant budget is reducing and so other funding mechanisms will be explored.

When giving consideration to any of the above processes, it is important that they will be cost neutral to the Council as far as possible. For example, in the case of EDMOs, the rent recouped must cover the funds spent.

The Council will make the maximum use of current resources and continue to seek out new avenues of funding which will help the implementation of the Strategy, such as the New Homes Bonus.

## 6) Enforcement

The Council will always seek to negotiate with the property owner of an empty home and to provide advice and assistance where possible. We accept that, however, in some cases owners of empty homes may not be as keen as the Council to bring their property back into use. Therefore the process that the Council will generally follow is shown in Appendix1, with some estimated timescales. The Council intends to strengthen this process via a new Action Plan Key Task by January 2012.

## **7) The Way Forward**

This Strategy is available on the Trafford Council website ([www.trafford.gov.uk](http://www.trafford.gov.uk)).

The Strategy will be monitored closely by both the Housing Strategy Team and the Housing Improvements Team. An annual report will be presented to the Strategic Housing Partnership Executive. Following the annual report, the Strategy will be reviewed to ensure the targets are still relevant, achievable and updated to take account of changing national and local policies.

| <b>Strategic Priority 1: Establish an information base of empty properties</b>            |  |  |                  |                                  |                     |  |                         |
|---|--|--|------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|--|-------------------------|
| <b>Aim</b>  |  | <b>Target Completion Date</b>                    | <b>Resources</b> | <b>Links to Other Priorities</b> | <b>Lead Officer</b> | <b>Partners</b>  | <b>Expected Outcome</b> |
| 1a Monitor the number of empty properties in the Borough, including commercial properties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Record the number of empty properties via the HSSA return and Council Tax records.</li> </ul> | 1 <sup>st</sup> August each year – annual review | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Housing Strategy / Council Tax Housing Improvements Team                   |                         |
| 1b Build up a database of empty properties  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Liaise with a range of partners to identify empty properties.</li> </ul>                      | 1st April each year – annual target              | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Police / Fire Service / Planning / Neighbourhood Wardens / Council Tax     |                         |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase awareness within the Council of route for reporting problem properties.</li> </ul>   | September 2011                                   | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Housing Strategy / Council Tax Housing Improvements Team / Web Development |                         |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct a survey of empty properties to prioritise for action</li> </ul>                      | September 2011                                   | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Housing Improvements Team  |                         |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plot empty properties onto G.I.S. mapping</li> </ul>  | November 2011                                    | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Strategic Planning   |                         |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a web form for reporting empty properties</li> </ul>                                   | September 2011                                   | Staff time       | Housing Strategy                 | John Howard         | Strategic Planning / Web Development                                       |                         |

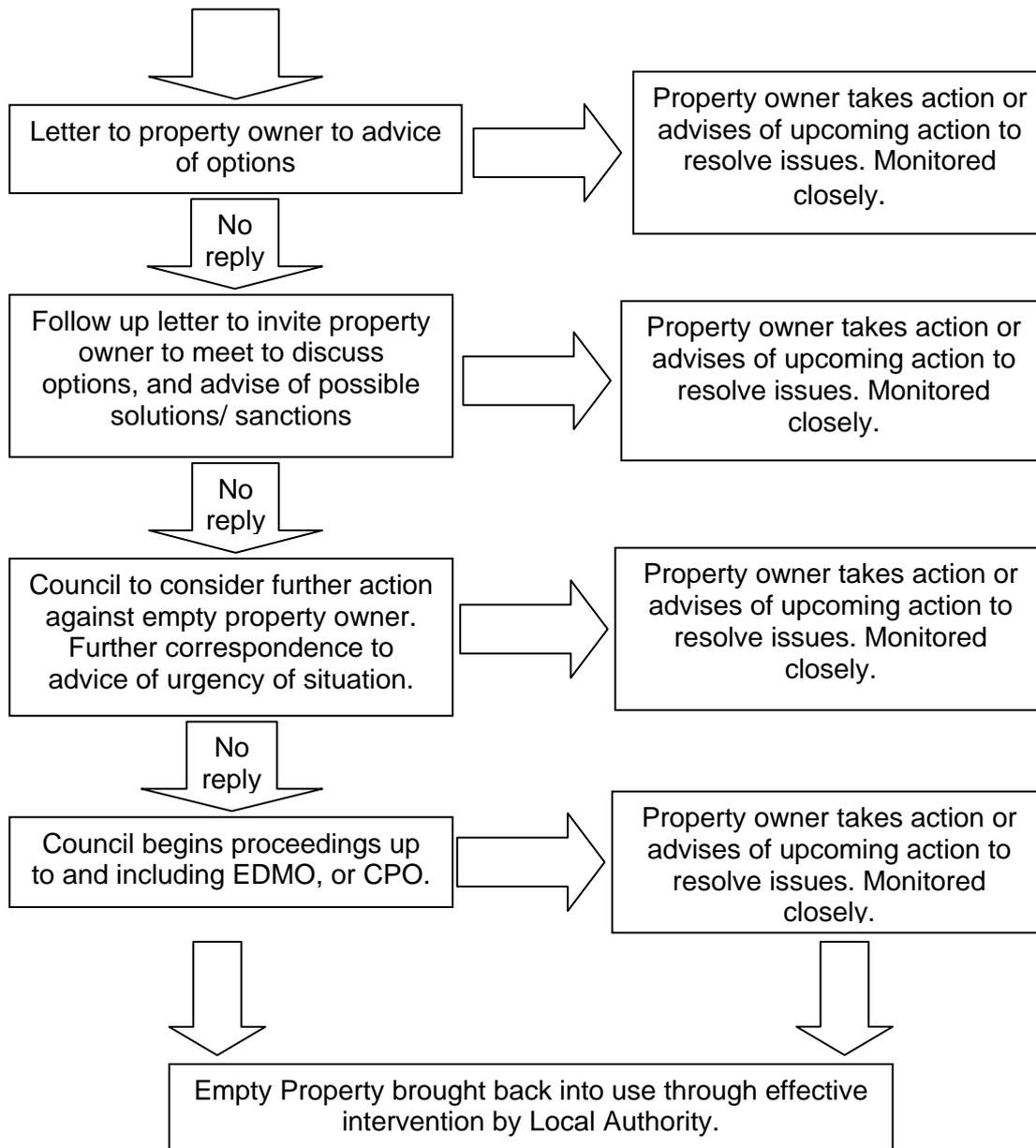
| <b>Strategic Priority 2: Introduce a range of options for owners, increase housing choice and take action against absent owners</b> |   |                               |                                |  |                     |  |                          |
|---|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---------------------|--|--------------------------|
| <b>Aim</b>  | <b>Key Task</b>   | <b>Target Completion Date</b> | <b>Resources</b>               | <b>Links to Other Priorities</b>   | <b>Lead Officer</b> | <b>Partners</b>  | <b>Expected Outcomes</b> |
| 2a To offer targeted assistance to owners of empty properties   | Develop, in conjunction with the Council's Housing Assistance Policy, suitable forms of assistance tailored to the requirements of this sector. | March 2012                    | Availability of capital budget | Review of Private Sector Housing Strategy<br><br>Review of Housing Assistance policy | Richard Roe         | Housing Strategy / Elected Members / Private Landlords Housing Improvements Team                     |                          |
| 2b To offer responsible third party management of properties  | To explore with an RSL and others the scope for developing voluntary management agreements  | April 2012                    | Staff time                     | Review of Private Sector Housing Strategy  | Richard Roe         | Housing Strategy / Housing Improvements Team/<br>Trafford Housing Trust / Other RSLs / Estate Agents |                          |

| Aim   | Key Task   | Target Completion Date                          | Resources                           | Links to Other Priorities  | Lead Officer                          | Partners  | Expected Outcomes |
|---|--|---|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------|
| 2c Reduce the number of empty properties in Trafford                    | <p>Agree an annual target for properties brought back into use</p> <p>Prioritise re-occupation of housing that meets identified housing needs</p>  | 1 <sup>st</sup> April each year – annual target | Staff time                          | Corporate Best Value Performance Plan / Community Strategy           | Dennis Smith                          | <p>Planning / Housing Strategy / Housing Improvements Team</p> <p>Housing Options</p> |                   |
| 2d Establish a corporate protocol for tackling problem empty properties | Publish and promote the Empty Property Strategy, outlining what measures the Council is prepared to take where owners are unable or unwilling to bring properties back into use.   | September 2011                                  | Staff time                          | Housing Strategy   | Richard Roe                           | Planning / Housing Strategy / Housing Improvements Team                               |                   |
|   | <p>Develop a procedure with RSL partners for making use of EDMOs.</p> <p>Ensure that actions on problem properties are in line with other work being undertaken corporately, reported through Strategic Housing Partnership Executive.</p> | <p>April 2012</p> <p>September 2011</p>         | <p>Staff time</p> <p>Staff time</p> | <p>Housing Strategy</p> <p>Housing Strategy / Community Strategy</p> | <p>Richard Roe</p> <p>Richard Roe</p> | <p>RSLs / Lands Group</p> <p>RSLs</p>   |                   |

| Strategic Priority 3: Engage partners in strategy implementation |   |                        |            |                                       |              |   |                   |
|--|---|------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|---|-------------------|
| Aim  | Key Task  | Target Completion Date | Resources  | Links to other Priorities             | Lead Officer | Partners  | Expected Outcomes |
| 3a Develop partnerships around working with empty properties     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Augment existing partnerships with a range of partners who will contribute to developing and providing solutions.</li> </ul> | April 2012             | Staff time | Housing Strategy / Community Strategy | Richard Roe  | Housing Strategy / Housing Improvement Team /RSLs/ Private Landlords / Estate Agents / Private developers / SHP Executive |                   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore funding opportunities within the commercial and voluntary sectors.</li> </ul>  | April 2012             | Staff time | Housing Strategy                      | Richard Roe  |   |                   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore any future funding opportunities from CLG</li> </ul>   | January 2012           | Staff time | Housing Strategy                      | Richard Roe  | CLG / Housing Improvement Team / RSLs   |                   |

## Appendix 1 - Empty Property Protocol

Property from database identified as priority requiring action



## Appendix 2 – The Regional Picture

The North West Regional Housing Strategy (2009) vision is for a Region working together to deliver housing that will promote and sustain maximum economic growth within the Region, ensuring all residents can access a choice of good quality housing in successful, secure and sustainable communities. This Strategy has 3 priorities:

Priority 1 – Achieving the right quantity of housing

Priority 2 – Continuing to raise the quality of the existing housing stock

Priority 3 – Connecting people to the improved housing offer

However, given this, the North West has topped a league of areas with the highest number of empty properties in England. Empty Homes data shows that 3.9% of properties in the region have been lying empty for more than six months, compared to 2.9% nationally. Burnley (at 8.0%), Liverpool (6.9%), and Pendle (6.5%) occupy the top three spots.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has produced a classification technique that groups local authorities into ‘families’, according to shared demographic and economic characteristics. Trafford has been identified by the ONS as falling into the ‘urban fringe’ family, into the ‘mixed urban’ group, and into the ‘most typical towns and cities’ cluster. The table below shows Trafford in comparison with regional local authorities in the same ‘family’:

**Table 10: Trafford empty properties compared to similar authorities<sup>10</sup>**

| Authority  | Total Stock | % Empty Properties | Empty Private Properties | Private Properties Empty 6 Months or More |
|------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Bury       | 80,670      | 2,343 (2.9%)       | 2,084                    | 1,357 (65.1%)                             |
| Chester    | 55,178      | 1,872 (3.4%)       | 1,795                    | 939 (52.3%)                               |
| Stockport  | 126,916     | 4,146 (3.3%)       | 4,037                    | 2,499 (62%)                               |
| Warrington | 87,281      | 2,825 (3.2%)       | 2,735                    | 1,187 (43.4%)                             |
| Trafford   | 96,511      | 2,743 (2.8 %)      | 2,629                    | 1,188 (45.2%)                             |

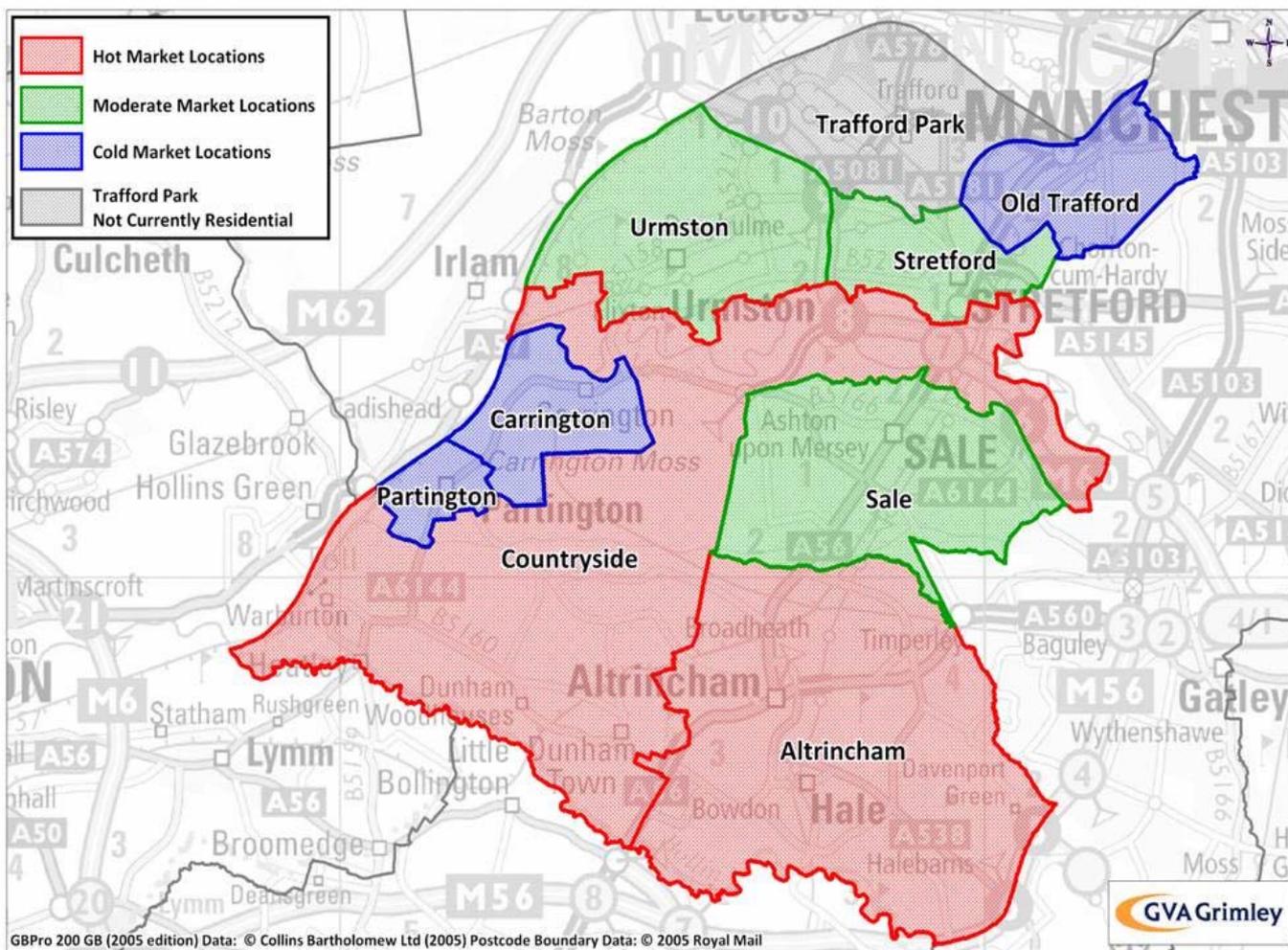
When compared with the other local authorities, Trafford has the second lowest percentage of empty properties. With an average of 3.1% of stock being empty in the authority areas, Trafford is slightly lower with an average of 2.8%. However, the Trafford percentage of empty properties has decreased over the last three years, as Table 1 shows.

<sup>10</sup> Empty Homes 2010

### Appendix 3 - Trafford Sub-market Performance Characteristics<sup>14</sup>

Trafford's locations are categorised by market performance (divided into 'hot', 'moderate' and 'cold' markets) to reflect sub - market performance distinctions.

**Table 11: Hot, Moderate and Cold locations in Trafford**



14 Trafford Council Viability Study 2009