

## Preston and Lancaster Shared Service Boost Collections with VISION Empty Property Review Service

Preston and Lancaster Shared Service was established in 2011 with the goal of ensuring that Preston City Council and Lancaster City Council delivered Revenues and Benefits services to their citizens in the most effective, efficient way and at reduced cost.

The shared service in its first year alone achieved £400,000 worth of much needed savings and is committed to exploring where additional revenues and cost savings can be achieved. With this in mind and against a backdrop of decreasing Revenues and Benefits resources as well as legislative changes around empty properties and business rates retention, it became apparent that Property Inspections could be conducted in a more targeted and proactive way.

### The Background

Historically, empty properties had been inspected on a quarterly rolling programme as they had an initial six-month exemption from council tax and a 50% discount thereafter, so it was not uncommon for residents to “forget” to inform the authority that they had occupied an empty property.

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*Julie Smethurst,  
Revenues Manager, Revenues and Benefits Service,  
Preston and Lancaster Shared Service*

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However, in April 2013, local authorities were given discretion to set their own level of discounts for empty properties, or none at all. This meant that after six months, an empty property in Preston and Lancaster would be subject to 100% council tax and therefore on the face of it, regular inspections seemed superfluous.

That said, there were still a number of different exemptions that applied to empty properties and these required annual reviews. However, as their inspections focus was on monitoring the upsurge of new developments in the area and business rate issues, there was little spare capacity to undergo such a review.

It was at this point that Destin Solutions provided a solution powered by Equifax enabling Preston and Lancaster Shared Service to achieve their objective of reviewing empty domestic properties whilst managing the project in-house and taking a targeted approach.

### The Process

Destin Solutions were able to extract the records of Preston and Lancaster Shared Service’s empty properties from their database and sent them over to Equifax, who then ran the records against their extensive data. Equifax checked against various credit and financial information, going back over a set period, and the results were fed back by Destin Solutions into Preston and Lancaster Shared Services management reporting tool.

Each site used different parameters, based upon the results received to select which properties warranted a visit. Once selected, visits were created in an Inspection module which was provided by Destin Solutions and added to the daily workloads for the Property Inspectors.

**The Results**

Out of 739 properties checked in Lancaster, 253 were selected for a visit and 41 of these properties were found to be occupied or 16% as an overall percentage. From the 909 properties checked in Preston, 249 were selected for a visit and 59 were found to be occupied representing 24% of those visits. Collectively the additional revenue generated by this exercise was £15,475 and for those long term empty properties brought back into use, they qualified for a 'New Homes Bonus' resulting in additional income for each authority.



**In Summary**

Julie Smethurst, Revenues Manager at Preston and Lancaster Shared Service notes that "the exercise proved to be successful and relatively pain free. A significant proportion of properties were found to be occupied and the parameters chosen have shown to provide useful results. As the occupation was then verified via a visit, there have been no challenges to date from occupiers and we were able to verify that most properties were empty for audit purposes without the need for a visit. We have been able to ensure that the Council Tax records are now accurately reflecting the actual number of empty properties."

**ABOUT DESTIN SOLUTIONS**

Destin Solutions specialise in developing technology that supports Local Authorities and other Public Sector organisations in their aim to improve performance whilst maximising efficiencies and minimising costs.

The company's expertise include; business intelligence applications, debt reporting and analytics, performance management dashboards, development of online procedure manuals and following consultation, the delivery of workflow applications designed to meet compliance adherence needs and ensure processes are bullet-proof.

