

18th September 2017

Community, Health and Housing Committee

Empty Homes

Report of: *David Carter, Environmental Health Manager*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Environment and Housing Management Committee on 8th March 2017, Members resolved to request a strategy document (Appendix A) outlining the proposed measures to effectively reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough.
- 1.2 The previous report set out the powers available and initial proposals to contact the owners of long-term empty property in the Borough.
- 1.3 The proposed Empty Homes Strategy outlines the measures and action that can be taken to encourage and enforce owners to bring empty homes back into use.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 **That Members adopt the proposed Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) following public consultation.**
- 2.2 **Officers are instructed to identify and prioritise current long-term empty property in the Borough and work to reduce the number of empty homes within existing resources where possible.**
- 2.3 **To seek to recover the costs of enforcement action where possible.**
- 2.4 **To approve Key Performance Indicators to monitor progress of the Strategy**
- 2.5 **To regularly update Members at meetings of the Community, Health and Housing Committee.**

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 Empty homes in the Borough lead to issues relating to anti-social behaviour, are unattractive and a waste of potential housing which could be better utilised.
- 3.2 As a result of these issues the Council has identified a number of empty properties in the Borough. Data is provided to the Government on properties which are 'unoccupied and substantially unfurnished' for a period of longer than 6 months.
- 3.3 The Council can levy an 'empty homes premium' where properties have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for over two years, which is 150% of the Council Tax normally applicable to the property.
- 3.4 These properties are being focussed on at the start of this project as they are the longest empty homes in the Borough but we will be looking at any empty over 6 months in the future to try to engage with owners at an earlier stage.
- 3.5 An initial list of the properties paying the empty homes premium was provided by our Council Tax team and the owners have been contacted to try to assist in bringing the properties back into use.
- 3.6 This initial contact has resulted in the total list of 75 properties now being reduced to 47.
- 3.7 Of the properties that have now being removed from the list 17 are not empty and are occupied and a further 9 are empty but being renovated or are on the market for sale.
- 3.8 The strategy document (Appendix A) has been written to identify a procedure to follow when we are aware of empty property.
- 3.9 Because of the relatively low numbers of properties in the Borough it is considered that action can be taken using existing resources within Environmental Health and Housing to identify and take action.
- 3.10 The next steps will be to focus on the remaining 47 properties on the initial list and to also check for additional properties which officers and members are aware of.

- 3.11 As homes can be temporarily empty for a period for various reasons, it is proposed that these long-term empty homes are addressed first. Further data will be requested from Council Tax records so that owners of empty homes can be contacted at an earlier stage to offer assistance.
- 3.12 Sites where anti-social behaviour or other concerns have been raised by complaints or other contact with the Council will be prioritised for action to deal with the issues identified through the most appropriate means in each circumstance.

4. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 The options available will depend on the individual properties and the owners' willingness and/or ability to work with the Council.
- 4.2 The aims of dealing with empty homes in the Borough will be to
- Reduce the overall number of long term empty properties
 - Minimise the anti-social behaviour associated with empty homes
 - Recover the costs of enforcement action where possible

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 To ensure that effective action is taken to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough within existing resources where possible.
- 5.2 To seek to ensure that the costs of enforcement action is recovered where possible.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The draft Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) will be circulated for comment from interested parties and made available for public consultation through the Council website for a period of 12 weeks if the recommendation is approved.

7. References to Corporate Plan

- 7.1 Environment and Housing Management
- Manage our housing stock to recognise the limited resources available and the importance of supporting those in greatest need.
 - Develop effective partnership arrangements with key agencies to deliver services.

7.2 Community and Health

- Provide advice, support, guidance and enforcement.
- Encourage thriving and engaged communities
- Support community engagement with residents and businesses

8. **Implications**

Financial Implications

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- 8.1 Any costs will be met from existing Environmental Health and Housing budgets as mentioned in the report.

Legal Implications

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- 8.2 The Government has allocated £130 million to its Empty Homes Programme encouraging Councils to adopt and implement a strategy to bring empty homes back into use. The number of enforcement powers available to do this are described in detail in the report at Appendix A to this report.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

- 8.3 None

9. **Appendices**

Appendix A - Empty Homes Strategy 2017-2020

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