

25th June 2019

Environment, Enforcement and Housing Committee

Empty Homes Update

Report of: *David Carter, Environmental Health Manager*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

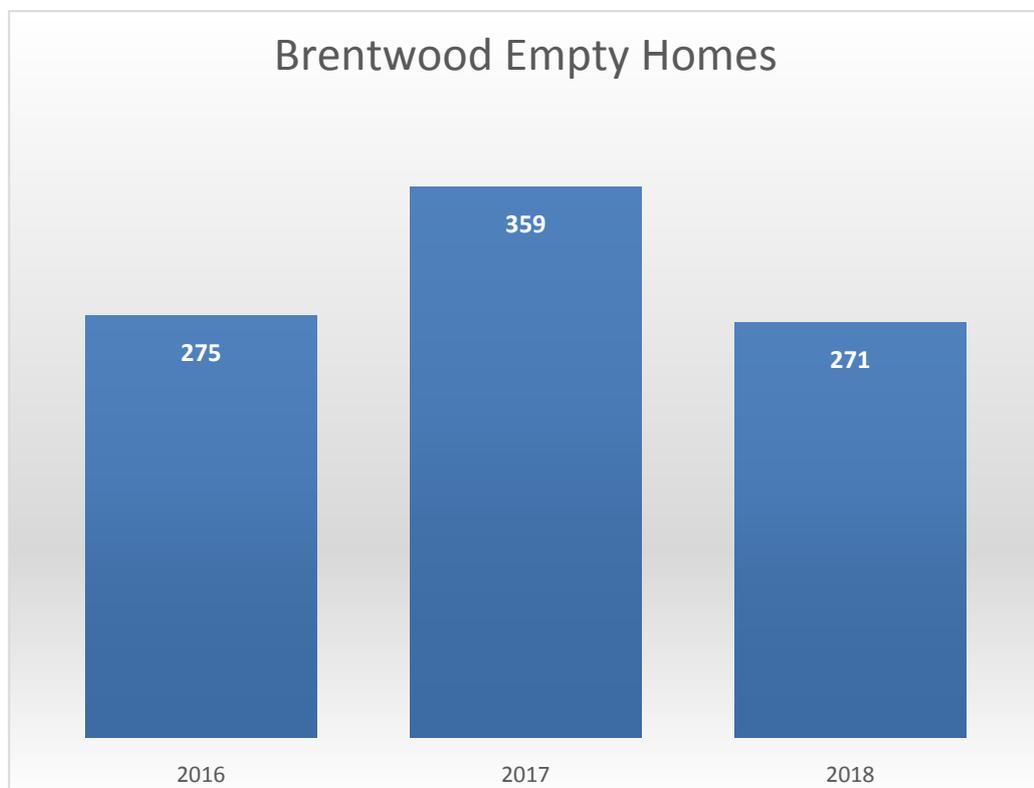
- 1.1 At the meeting of the Environment and Housing Management Committee in September 2017 Members adopted the Empty Homes Strategy 2017 - 2020 (Appendix A) which proposed measures to try to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough.
- 1.2 The Strategy set out the powers available and proposals to contact and engage with the owners of long-term empty properties in the Borough.
- 1.3 This report outlines the current position and proposals for next steps.

2. Recommendations

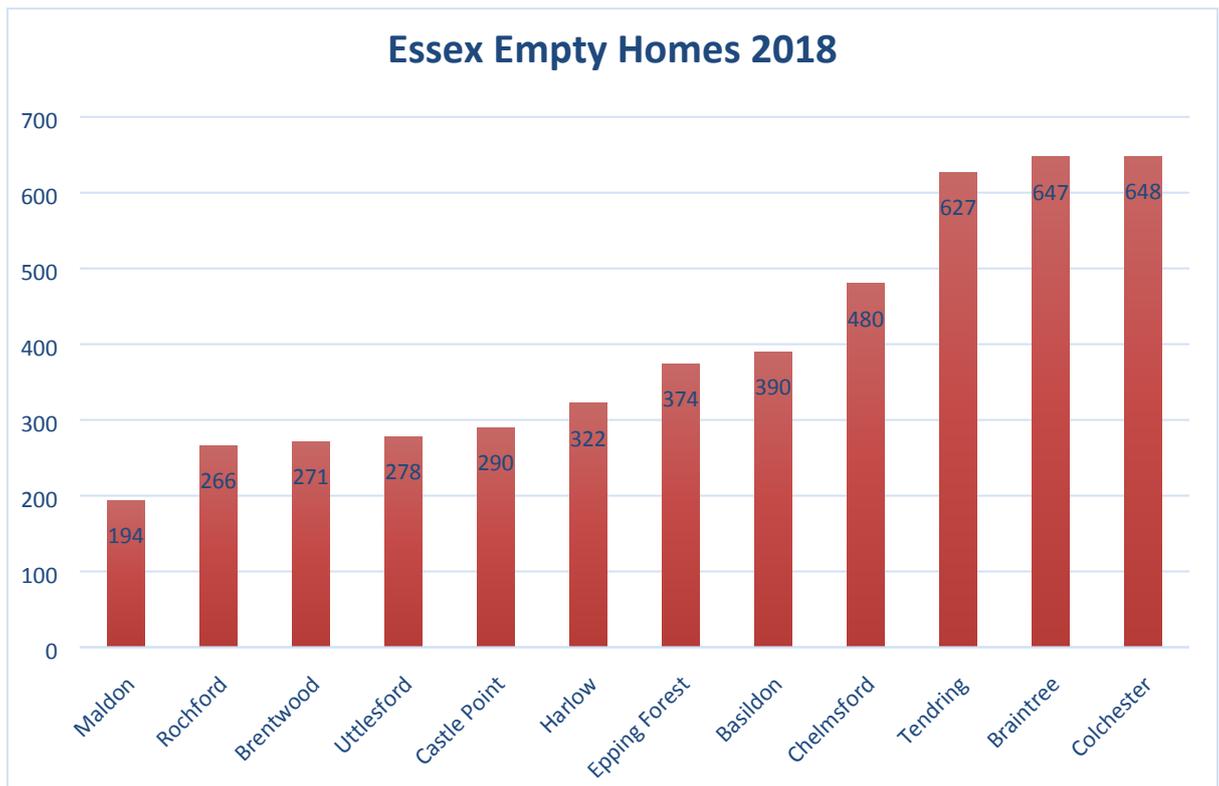
- 2.1 **That Members note the Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) and consider further actions to tackle empty homes in the Borough.**
- 2.2 **Officers are instructed to identify opportunities to work collaboratively with other Essex authorities to achieve outcomes**
- 2.3 **Officers seek to engage other agencies or authorities to assist where current staff resources limit progress on measures to encourage re-use of empty homes.**
- 2.4 **Officers report back to future Committees on actions to engage with partners.**

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 The Council has identified a number of empty properties in the Borough from Council Tax data. Data is provided to the Government on properties which are 'unoccupied and substantially unfurnished' for a period of longer than 6 months.
- 3.2 Since the commencement of this project there has been a reduction in the number of empty homes in the Borough, from a maximum of 359 in 2017 to 271 in 2018 (reported to Government annually in October). The total number of empty properties in Brentwood is now at the lowest level since 2015 and nearly 25% lower than in 2017. This is the biggest reduction in Essex from 2017 to 2018 (88 fewer properties empty).



- 3.3 Brentwood now has the third lowest number of empty homes out of the Essex authorities in 2018 (see below). This is a much better position than between 2015 and 2016 when Brentwood had the second highest percentage increase in empty properties nationally (143% increase from 113 in 2015 to 275 in 2016).



- 3.4 The Council has levied an 'empty homes premium' where properties have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for over two years, which is now up to 150% of the Council Tax normally applicable to the property.
- 3.5 These properties were being focussed on at the start of the project as they were the longest empty homes in the Borough, however it is now apparent that some of these are also the hardest to deal with due to the disrepair of the properties and the reluctance of the owners to engage.
- 3.6 Data on the properties paying the empty homes premium has been provided periodically by Basildon Council from Council Tax records and we have contacted some of the owners to try to assist in bringing these properties back into use.
- 3.7 Several of the properties originally identified were in the process of being renovated and some have come back onto the housing market through renovation or sale but there is little available information to enable us to identify those properties that have been brought back into use.
- 3.8 As a result of extremely limited resources within our Environmental Health Pollution and Private Sector Housing team which has arisen since the Strategy was established it is unlikely that further progress can effectively be made without some additional resource.

- 3.9 Officers are now investigating where other Councils in Essex are making efforts to tackle empty properties to see whether there is any available resources that we can use to assist in this activity to improve the possibility of dealing with some of the worst cases, where we have identified anti-social behaviour and other issues associated with long-term empty homes.
- 3.10 It is intended that following discussions with other partner authorities that we will identify what the next steps will be to enable collaborative working or other activity.

4. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 The options available will depend on the individual local authorities within Essex and their ability and willingness to work with Brentwood Council.
- 4.2 The aims of dealing with empty homes in the Borough will continue to 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 some action is taken to identify, contact and encourage the reduction of the number of empty homes in the Borough within the limited resources available, and to identify what resources would be needed or could be made available.
- 5.2 To seek to ensure that the costs of enforcement action is recovered where possible.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) was made available for public consultation prior to adoption.

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**

8.1 **Financial Implications**

Name & Title: Phoebe Barnes Interim Financial Controller

Tel & Email: 01277 312839 / phoebe.barnes@brentwood.gov.uk

The empty homes levy applied in 2018/19 was £51,494.85. This was applied to 72 properties. In 2017/18 there was 78 properties and the total levy applied to these properties was £52,527.35.

When considering additional resources, if this is to be a remunerated resource it would need to be met from within existing budgets. Costs not met within existing budgets would be reported as budget pressures through the Council's Budget monitoring process. Any budget pressure would need to be considered alongside the potential outcomes generated from opportunities identified.

8.2 **Legal Implications**

Name & Title: Paula Harvey/Solicitor & Deputy Monitoring Officer

Tel & Email: 01277 312705/paula.harvey@brentwood.gov.uk

The recommendations are within the Council's powers and duties. The Council has a range of powers within an existing legal framework which allows intervention to deal with empty properties.

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

Report Author Contact Details:

Name: David Carter, Environmental Health Manager
Telephone: 01277 312509
E-mail: david.carter@brentwood.gov.uk