

EMPTY HOMES IN THE DISTRICT - UPDATE

Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 8 June 2021

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive, Chief Officer - People and Places

Status: For consideration

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: To provide an update on empty homes in the district.

This report supports the Key Aim of: the Housing Strategy to deliver more affordable homes in the district.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kevin Maskell

Contact Officer: Rebecca Wilcox, Ext. 7272

Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee: To receive and note the report.

Reason for recommendation: Most local authorities have an Empty Homes Action Plan, setting out how they intend to minimise the number of long-term empty homes in their area. With a national housing shortage, leaving homes empty for long periods wastes a valuable resource. Empty properties can attract antisocial behaviour and negatively affect neighbourhoods.

Introduction and Background

- 1 A ‘long term’ empty home is defined as being vacant for over 6 months.
- 2 Council Tax date is used by Local Authorities (LAs) as a starting point for identifying long term empty home because there are specific classification and exemptions to determine liability for council tax purpose.
- 3 The main classifications we look at are ‘long term empty home’ and ‘long term premium’. (Premium means properties empty and unfurnished over two years - these are charged 200% council tax).
- 4 In addition, accessing council tax date allows us to obtain owner details and contact information.
- 5 Accessing council tax data is restricted to specific circumstances by law and subject to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data can be accessed as follows:
 - Section 85 of the Local Government Act 2003 is used when the Empty Homes Officer requires:

- a) Information regarding an individual property or properties on a reactive basis, and
- b) A periodic report on empty homes across the Borough.
- Section 237 of the Housing Act 2004. Use of information obtained for certain statutory purposes including:
 - a) For any purpose connected with the exercise of any of the authority's functions under any of Parts 1 to 4 in relation to any premises, or
 - b) For the purpose of investigating whether any offence has been committed under any of those parts in relation to any premises.
- Section 237 is used for individual empty homes that have progressed to a stage where the Council is exercising any powers under Parts 1 to 4 in relation to that particular property. Parts 1 to 4 include powers to enforce housing standards and the power to make Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

6 Empty homes are also identified through complaints by the public (typically where a property is unsightly, in disrepair, causing a nuisance etc.) and referrals from other council departments.

7 Many long term empty homes are 'transactional empty homes', so we generally focus on those empty over two years and/or properties causing a problem to the local area.

8 Why do properties remain empty?

- Long time to sell/sale falls through
- Disrepair
- Lack of funds to renovate
- Family disputes or probate issues
- Ill health/owner going into care
- Sentimental reasons (emotional ties to the property)
- Property inherited & owner unsure what to do
- Bad experiences of letting
- Planning issues
- Owner waiting for an upturn in housing market
- Lack of time/pressure of other commitments.

Position statement

9 The number of properties identified under the definition as of the 31st March 2021 can be seen in the table below (including previous years), this number has then been analysed, and 83 out of 346 have been empty for more than 2 years. As the data shows there has been a significant reduction in empty homes across this District in the last 12 months, at present we have not had

the opportunity to understand the reason behind the drop in numbers, however in the short term we can view this as a positive move.

a. Key data

Year	Total
2016	413
2017	324
2018	464
2019	484
2020	535
2021	346

- 10 People and Places underwent a structure review between September and December 2020, which assimilated the Empty Homes work fully into the Private Sector Housing Team while ensuring the team work alongside the Accommodation Team to understand the priority properties to consider. The reason for this action is to ensure best use of resources and support our long term vision of supporting additional housing provision for local households in need.
- 11 Following the departure of the Housing Policy Manager, recruitment has commenced for a new Housing Strategy Manager with interviews taking place in early June 2021, in the interim the Private Sector Housing Team Leader and Housing Enabling Officer are reporting directly to the Head of Housing.
- 12 A draft action plan was created by the previous Housing Strategy Manager. Following his departure we have set up an officer group (at present consists of housing officers) to review and progress the draft action plan to completion. In the interim the Private Sector Housing Team having been reviewing potential IT software to support our work going forward. The software includes full case management, policy support and enforcement suite.
- 13 It is noted other officers from across the Council will be requested to participate if required to support.
- 14 The key principles set within the draft action plan are as follows: Evidence, Funding, Promotion, Enforcement, Energy efficiency and carbon outputs, Economic development and Monitoring performance.
- 15 Due to the number of properties that are currently empty this paper recommends that on completion of the action plan review the team will concentrate on one and two bedroom properties as this is where the District's housing need lies at present. (Graph below highlights the bedroom need according to our housing waiting list, May 2021)



Other options Considered and/or rejected

Other options to consider was to re-write the action plan, which considering the key principles support the corporate and housing service planning would not be an efficient use of officers time.

Key Implications

Financial

There are no financial implications relating to this report.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

To comply with legal statute regarding the management of empty homes including enforcement.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

A healthy housing market will always include a proportion of empty homes, as houses are bought, sold and refurbished and tenants move in the private rental

market. The Council will concentrate its efforts on empty homes which are eyesores and/or causing problems to neighbours, but will also help owners of non-problematic empty homes to use, let or sell them. This includes efforts to bring homes back into use before they reach the definition of long-term empty (i.e. six months or more).

The proposed Empty Homes Action Plan will reduce the number of long-term empty homes, providing more homes for sale and rent in the district. The action plan will outline a range of options to help owners of long-term empty homes to use, let or sell their property. In cases where owners refuse to engage with offers of advice and assistance, and where the property is dilapidated and/or causing a nuisance to neighbours, enforcement action will ensure that homes are not wasted and do not blight neighbourhoods.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

Sarah Robson

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People and Places