

EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2023-2028

Housing & Health Advisory Committee - 22 November 2022

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer People & Places

Status: For Approval

Also considered by:

- Cabinet - 8 December 2022
- Full Council - 21 February 2023

Key Decision: No

This report supports the Key Aim of: the Housing Strategy 2022-2027

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kevin Maskell

Contact Officer: Sharon Donald, Housing Strategy Manager, Ext. 7131

Recommendation to Housing & Health Advisory Committee:

That comments on recommendation (a) are passed to Cabinet.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

That recommendation (a) is recommended to Council.

Recommendation to Council:

- a) That, subject to any amendments by Cabinet, the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2028 be adopted.

Reason for recommendation: To put in place an Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2023 - 2028, to enable the District Council to direct activity to bring long-term empty homes back into use.

Introduction and Background

- 1 The Housing Strategy 2022-2027 contains 4 key themes of focus for the District Council's housing service over the next 5 years. These include, Theme 2: Promoting quality and optimising range and suitability of new and existing homes, which has an objective of, fewer empty homes.
- 2 A proposed year 1 action within the Housing Strategy is the delivery of a five year Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan, to direct activity to bring empty homes back into use.
- 3 The table below details the current numbers of Long Term Empty properties in the District:-

Long Term Empty (6 months to 2 years)	Long Term Empty (2 years +)	Long Term Empty (Exemption Class F - Unoccupied, person deceased)
205	75	287

- 4 A key benefit of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan will be to help regenerate empty homes and provide much needed homes for rent in the district, which will be let to applicant's on the Council's Housing Register as a private rented sector offer or those currently placed in temporary accommodation.
- 5 Officers have obtained Portfolio Holder approval to use s106 affordable housing funds to support a fixed term (2 years, 0.5 FTE) Empty Homes Officer post. The officer will be expected to liaise with Kent County Council's No Use Empty funding scheme, to support bringing long-term empty homes back into use, which can play a key part in regeneration, not only providing homes, but also new sources of income and a sense of community.
- 6 The District Council is unable to use S106 affordable housing funds to employ staff direct. We are exploring with a range of partners, the possibility of hosting the post. Notwithstanding this, the Empty Homes Officer would work full-time within the Private Sector Housing Team and be directly managed by the Team Leader.
- 7 Returning empty homes to occupation ensures the best use is made of the existing housing stock. Co-incidentally, it can provide homes that tend to be more affordable to those on low to median incomes. Using S106 affordable housing funds in the way described in this report, falls within the permitted uses set out in the Affordable Housing SPD 2011, i.e. initiatives to make better use of the existing stock.

Other options Considered

Option 1 - continue with no adopted strategy and action plan.

Option 2 - formally adopt the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan. This is the preferred option as it is considered to be the most proactive and pragmatic approach to bringing empty homes back into use and to provide a clear framework for officers and clarity for the residents and homeowners of Sevenoaks District.

Key Implications

Financial

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Resource (non financial)

Staff resource will be required to assist in the delivery of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan over a 2 year period, which is detailed under point 4 of this report. Beyond this period, replacement funds will be sought. Without additional resources, our empty homes function will continue to be, by necessity, extremely limited and will not therefore deliver the aspirations set out in the Housing Strategy 2022-2027.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

Whilst there is no requirement to hold an Empty Homes Strategy, the Council does retain strategic housing responsibilities and this document helps towards continued delivery of its statutory duties. The Council's powers and duties in relation to enforcement are contained within various statutes including the Housing Act 1985, the Housing Act 2004, the Law of Property Act 1925 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981. In cases where enforcement action is required, advice and input from Legal Services is always sought. Risk to decreased income from the Council Tax premium charge. If this results from a home being brought back into use, this will reduce the amount of long-term empty homes used to calculate the reduction in the New Homes Bonus paid.

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.

Net Zero Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

Conclusions

As the strategic housing authority for the district, Sevenoaks District Council has confirmed its commitment to addressing long-term empty homes in the district as part of its recently refreshed Housing Strategy. The adoption of an Empty Homes Strategy will provide clarity to residents and ensure Sevenoaks District Council has a clear framework of the aims, options, and enforcement powers to deal with the issue of empty homes within the District and bring empty homes back into use.

Appendices

Appendix A - draft Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2028

Sarah Robson

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People & Places