

CONSULTATION ON THE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

Submitted by: Mike O'Connor

Portfolio: Regeneration, Planning and Town Centres

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To enable Members to consider the draft Empty Homes Strategy which is currently being consulted upon. The report outlines the main aims and objectives of the strategy and highlights ways in which the Council may seek to utilise to tackle empty homes in the Borough.

Recommendation

That Members give their views on the draft Empty Homes Strategy.

Reasons

The Council's current Empty Homes Strategy ceases this year, it is therefore appropriate that the Council reviews our approach and considers ways in which it may be appropriate to tackle the problem of empty homes. It is appropriate that the Scrutiny Committee considers the issue of empty homes and options available to the Council as part of the consultation on the draft strategy.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council's current Empty Homes Strategy expires this year and it is appropriate that the Council considers adopting a new strategy. Officers have drafted a new strategy to cover 2012-17 and this is currently out for consultation. This report outlines the key issues highlighted in the draft strategy and seeks Scrutiny Members views.
- 1.2 All empty homes represent waste, financial expense and missed opportunity. They can blight communities, attract fly tipping, vandals and squatters and tie up the resources of the Council and the emergency services. Bringing empty homes back into use is also a sustainable way to meet future housing demand and helps to alleviate pressure to develop green field sites. Bringing long-term empty homes back into use has a positive effect on the whole community.
- 1.3 The number of empty homes in England has declined steadily from a high of 869,000 in 1993 to 660,000 in 2006 however the number had increased again in 2011 to 720,000. Currently 279,000 of empty homes in England are long-term empties of six months plus. There remains a significant and long standing problem of empty homes, particularly those in the private sector which accounts for over 80 per cent of all empty homes.
- 1.4 Within Newcastle Borough in 2011/12 there were 1,829 empty homes; 1,725 in private ownership, 102 owned by Housing Associations. 655 private homes were empty for more than 6 months of which 312 of those have been empty for more than two years.

2. Issues

- 2.1 Considering the draft Empty Homes Strategy at the Scrutiny Committee enables Members to consider a range of issues.

- 2.2 The Council has taken a proactive approach to tackling Empty Homes since the adaptation of the current strategy. The new draft strategy recommends continuing this approach. In addition it highlights that efforts will principally be focused on the problematic properties which are usually those houses which are inactive in the housing market, often in poor condition and empty for six months or more. This definition usually allows enough time for market forces to return an empty property into use without intervention from an external agency. Taking this into account the draft strategy states:

The aim of the strategy is to bring empty properties back into use. To achieve this we have identified two key approaches:

- To provide encouragement and support to owners of empty homes to bring them back into use.
- To use appropriate enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.

Do members agree with the strategy aim and two key approaches?

- 2.3 Officers are aware that all Council services need to be efficient and effective, ensuring that the services offered in relation to empty homes have therefore been considered and the strategy has been drafted in order that the processes are both efficient and effective. It is important to recognise that whilst empty homes are a wasted resource in the community and often are regarded by neighbours as a problem when the properties aren't maintained there is often a home owner experiencing personal issues leading to the empty home. It is therefore recommended that the service therefore takes a firm but considerate approach to tackling empty homes. *Do members agree that this is appropriate and that decisions on individual properties should be taken on a case by case basis?*

- 2.4 Whilst, whenever possible, voluntary measures will be used to encourage owners to bring properties back into use. It must be recognised that in some cases owners will refuse to co-operate and enforcement action will be necessary. The statutory action which can be taken will depend upon the condition and location of a property and the circumstances of the owner. Properties in a poor condition which are a hazard to the health and safety of the public will be a prime target for enforcement action. The Strategy highlights a whole range of enforcement action that can be taken. *Do members think that taking enforcement action is appropriate where necessary?*

- 2.5 The costs of tackling empty homes vary greatly upon the type of problems that each home has, generally the longer the property is left empty the less maintenance is undertaken and therefore the costs of repair are greater for long term empties. Where significant financial resources are required or compulsory purchase/enforced sale are recommended by officers then the case will be reported to the Public Protection Committee or Portfolio Holder for authorisation. Should significant costs be expected in taking action against a specific individual property the case will be assessed on its merits prior to taking a decision as to how to proceed. As it can be costly to take action, whether by default or legal proceedings the Council will seek to keep costs to a minimum level and reclaim costs incurred from home owners. The Council has in the past made a small allocation and offered grants of up to 50% to owners of long term vacant homes linked to occupation for at least five years or letting to persons seeking social housing again for a minimum five year period. Such grants have proved successful. However due to restrictions in the housing capital programme no allocation has been made this year. Should circumstances change within the 5 year life of the strategy then the possibility of grant assistance for empty homes should be considered.

- 2.6 *Do Members agree that this individual property assessment should be undertaken and decisions to take action should vary accordingly?* The strategy recommends that the Council will wherever possible seek to work in partnership with appropriate agencies to

maximise expertise. Where opportunities arise the Council will seek to establish appropriate partnerships and make funding bids to secure external funding. *Do Members think this is approach should be included in the Strategy?*

- 2.6 Members may consider it appropriate that the draft Strategy identifies a performance target to measure the implementation of the strategy. Taking into consideration the current staffing resources and the potential usefulness of the proposed actions the draft strategy outline a performance indicator of 'We aim to bring 75 empty properties of which 10 will have been empty for two years or more back into for each year of the Strategy'. *Do members agree that having performance measures which not only consider the overall success but the difference in long term and short term empty homes are appropriate?*
- 2.7 *Do members think there are any other issues that need to be considered as part of the strategy?*

3. **Options Considered**

- 3.1 Members can give their views during the meeting and can forward further comments and suggestions direct to the Housing and Regeneration Service as part of the open consultation. The deadline for comments is 14 November 2012.

4. **Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution**

- 4.1 Comments from the Committee and individual representations are welcomed within the consultation period.
- 4.2 It is recommended that the outcomes of the discussion on the issues above and further individual representations are considered by officers as part of the consultation on the draft strategy. This will enable appropriate revisions to be made to the Strategy prior to Cabinet considering adopting the final strategy later this year.

5. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

- 5.1 Tackling empty homes clearly contributes to sustainable communities and all of the corporate priorities.
- Creating a Cleaner, Greener and Safer Borough-by reducing dereliction, vandalism, litter and anti social behaviour such as damage, theft and arson.
 - Creating a Borough of opportunity- by improving market values and the attractiveness of areas adjoining vacant homes reducing a spiral of decline and helping increase the number of residents who feel the Council is making the area a better place to live.
 - Creating a Healthy and Active Community –by ensuring access to a range of quality homes.
 - Transforming our Council to achieve excellence - by working in partnership with relevant organisations, together with taking effective and efficient enforcement action will deliver dwellings which can be occupied.

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 6.1 The strategy outlines a number of acts under which the Council can take enforcement action to tackle the problems associated with empty homes.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been drafted to reflect the draft Strategy.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 The proposed approaches will require officer time which is currently budgeted for within the housing service. The amount of capital resources allocated annually by the Council will be dependent upon the Housing Capital Programme.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 There will be significant reputational damage to the Council if the decision is made to not adopt an Empty Homes Strategy and implement appropriate action.

10. **Key Decision Information**

10.1 This affects more than 2 wards and is on the Forward Plan.

11. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

11.1 The current Empty Homes Strategy was adopted by Cabinet in March 2008.

12. **List of Appendices**

Appendix A - The draft Empty Homes Strategy 2012-17.

13. **Background Papers**

None.