



Cabinet

Tuesday, 12 May 2024

Empty Homes Strategy 2024-2029

Report of the Director – Neighbourhoods

Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing, Councillor R Upton

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. At its meeting on 12 February 2019, Cabinet approved the Council's first Empty Homes Strategy, which is now due for renewal.
- 1.2. The Empty Homes Strategy is a key document detailing the Council's approach to dealing with empty homes.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- a) approves the revised Empty Homes Strategy (2024-2029); and
- b) authorises the Director – Neighbourhoods to make minor revisions to the Strategy during its lifespan in accordance with the Constitution.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

The existing Empty Homes Strategy will shortly expire. This Strategy underpins all of the work the Council does to bring empty properties back into use and consequently a revised strategy is required.

4. Supporting Information

- 4.1. This is Rushcliffe Borough Council's second Empty Homes Strategy, following on from the implementation of its first in 2019, covering the period of 2019 through to 2024. This Strategy aims to give an understanding of the issues vacant properties can cause, how they impact residents and communities, and how the development and successes of the previous Strategy can shape and determine the Council's approach in its intention to bring more empty homes back into use.
- 4.2. The Strategy looks at why homes become empty, what advice and assistance is available to empty home owners, and how the Council intends to use the range of powers at its disposal in order to effect change and prompt action.

- 4.3. Across Rushcliffe, Council Tax records show there are currently 889 empty homes (December 2023). Of these, 498 have been empty for six months or more and are classed as long-term empty, equating to 1.64% of the Borough's housing stock.
- 4.4. Empty homes can be detrimental to the lives of local residents and communities for a number of reasons. A single empty home can blight a street or community, reduce surrounding property values and be a catalyst for nuisance to local residents. Empty homes can also attract vandalism, fly-tipping and other criminal activity, ranging from the minor to the extremely serious, but all increasing crime and the fear of crime, as well as having a detrimental impact on the local community. They also represent a risk for the emergency services and put added pressure on Council departments such as Housing and Environmental Health.
- 4.5. The Communities Scrutiny Group considered the effectiveness of the existing Empty Homes Strategy at its meeting on 20 July 2023, and were highly supportive of the approach taken.
- 4.6. At the same time as developing the first Empty Homes Strategy, the Council recruited its first ever dedicated Empty Homes Officer (0.6fte). The Strategy identified that the benefits of tackling empty homes are widespread, including:
- assisting in meeting housing need
 - improving housing stock conditions
 - assisting with a reduction in crime and the fear of crime
 - regenerating blighted areas and detrimental effects on local communities
 - identifying those empty properties subject to Empty Home Premiums
 - generating additional income through the New Homes Bonus (NHB) (although no longer expected to be received after 2024/25).
- 4.7. Since its inception, much has been done to develop procedures and protocols, research the location of empty homes and formulate methods of tracing their owners. Time was also invested in building relationships with local contractors and researching other agencies who could assist with getting empty homes back into use. An empty homes specific webpage was built to provide a first point of reference for both the public and empty homeowners alike.
- 4.8. There are no significant changes to legislation that this review needs to take into account; however, it does provide an opportunity to review progress and assess the effectiveness of the existing processes.

Key Achievements

- 4.9. The following activities have been undertaken during the last four years since the introduction of the Empty Homes Strategy:
- protocol and procedure documents have been completed to develop and enhance the Council's range of stricter enforcement options, including

Enforced Sales, Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders

- positive media coverage on the Council's Twitter and Facebook pages, along with Rushcliffe Reports highlighting the work the Council is doing to tackle empty homes, as well as encouraging owners to come forward for assistance
- an informative and accessible webpage has been developed, providing a single point of reference for complainants and empty homeowners, highlighting information on how to report, complain or seek support in relation to empty homes
- established relationships with key internal partners such as Revenues, Benefits and Planning to ensure that relevant and accurate data is shared to best enable their functions
- developed an empty homes database to record, monitor and categorise all reports and complaints. This allows the Empty Homes Officer to accurately record and track statistics, but also for the prioritisation of workload and the focusing of resources. The database is split into categories dependant on a number of factors. These categories are the priority cases, probate cases, those owned by housing associations or companies, and properties owned by private individuals. Those recorded on the priority list, have been scored and assessed on a number of criteria to create a rating that prioritises each case on its own merits.

4.10. Since the adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy in 2019, 83 long-term and problematic empty homes that would have otherwise remained empty indefinitely have been brought back into use, involving the active intervention and/or enforcement by the local authority. The Council has set an internal target of bringing 10 properties back into use annually.

4.11. The standard metric defines a 'long term empty' as a home that has been empty for six months or longer. As of April 2019, this figure for Rushcliffe was 511 homes. This included properties registered with Council Tax as empty, but also those where complaints had been received concerning those not registered as unoccupied but considered vacant by the Empty Homes Officer. This figure had reduced to 465 in April 2023. Monthly statistical monitoring shows the number of empty homes is relatively static, with roughly 10% of cases becoming occupied, balanced with the addition of a further 10% of newly empty properties.

5. Alternative options considered and reasons for rejection

No alternative options considered. We are unable to carry out our statutory enforcement responsibilities without a Strategy being in place.

6. Risks and Uncertainties

Failure to approve a revised Empty Homes Strategy would undermine the Council's ability to deal with problematic properties across the Borough.

7. Implications

7.1. Financial Implications

- 7.1.1. The Council receives additional income through Empty Home Premiums. For 2023/24 this amounted to £405,169 in additional Council Tax premiums (£30k Borough Council share)
- 7.1.2. The cost of the Empty Homes Officer is included in existing budgets.
- 7.1.3. All costs incurred by the Council whilst carrying out its enforcement operations including undertaking works in default following non-compliance with a statutory notice will be recovered in full from the property owner.
- 7.1.4. Any actions pertaining to the Strategy, with financial implications such as the acquisitions of Empty Homes will require the approval of the Council's Section 151 Officer and Finance Portfolio Holder and will be considered in relation to the Council's overall financial position and corporate priorities.
- 7.1.5. Any reduction in the premium levied or any grace periods granted would reduce the Council Tax income due to the Council.
- 7.1.6. Any changes to the Policy that affects the Council's ability to take enforcement action will delay the recovery of costs incurred by the Council and on recovery of Council Tax arrears.

7.2. Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with this report. As set out above, costs incurred including those relating to legal procedures are recovered from the property owner.

7.3. Equalities Implications

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out and is provided in Appendix 2.

7.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

Empty and unoccupied homes in the Borough can attract those with criminal intent. Additionally, these properties can have a negative effect on the fear of crime within a neighbourhood and suggest that an area is more prone to crime all of which have a negative impact on our residents' quality of life.

7.5. Biodiversity Net Gain Implications

No impact.

8. Link to Corporate Priorities

The Environment	Protecting the local environment by minimising environmental crime
Quality of Life	The visual appearance of the Borough is an important factor in terms of the quality of life felt by residents. Unsightly, neglected and run-down properties contribute to a feeling that a neighbourhood is unsafe which also has a bearing on quality of life
Efficient Services	Additional charges linked to Empty and Unoccupied homes in the Borough provides additional income which is used to take positive action in this area.
Sustainable Growth	None

9. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- a) approves the revised Empty Homes Strategy (2024-2029); and
- b) authorises the Director – Neighbourhoods to make minor revisions to the Strategy during its lifespan in accordance with the Constitution.

For more information contact:	Geoff Carpenter Service Manager – Public Protection 0115 9148229 gcarpenter@rushcliffe.gov.uk
Background papers available for Inspection:	Report to Communities Scrutiny Group 20 July 2023 “Review of the Empty Homes Strategy and Council Tax Implications”.
List of appendices:	Appendix 1 – Revised Empty Homes Strategy 2024- 2029 Appendix 2 – Equalities Impact Assessment