



Cabinet

Tuesday, 15 January 2019

Empty Homes Strategy 2019 - 2024

Key Decision

**Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing, Planning and Waste Management
Councillor Roger Upton**

Report of the Executive Manager – Neighbourhoods

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 It is proposed to introduce an Empty Homes Strategy in-line with the majority of other Local Authorities.
- 1.2 Following public consultation and shaping by the Community Development Scrutiny Group a draft strategy has been produced in Appendix 1. This document highlights how resources can best be targeted to address empty homes in Rushcliffe, and to tap into the rewards and positive outcomes, both financial and community based, that this approach brings.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet

- a) approve the Empty Homes Strategy 2019 - 2024, and
- b) the Executive Manager - Neighbourhoods be authorised to make minor revisions to the Strategy during its lifespan

3. Reasons for Recommendation

To create a strategic framework and associated action plan which will detail how the Council will seek to target and address empty homes in the borough.

4. Supporting Evidence

- 4.1. There are around 900 empty properties in Rushcliffe, around 375 of these have been empty for more than six months, while nearly 100 of these have been empty for more than two years. It is these longer term empty homes which cause most concern as they are more likely to remain empty for longer

without intervention, and are also more likely to be an increasing source of blight and complaint.

- 4.2. Empty properties can be detrimental to the lives of local residents and communities. Even a single empty property can blight a whole street or community, reducing the values of surrounding properties and causing 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 in addition to increasing crime and the fear of crime there is also potential for a wider detrimental impact on the local community. They also represent a risk for the emergency services and put added pressure on various council services such as Environmental Health.
- 4.3. Although the Environmental Health service have over recent years attempted to tackle empty properties with variable success it is clear that to deliver successful outcomes an agreed strategy is necessary to identify the problem, to determine what action is required, and to identify the resource required to successfully deliver the strategy objectives. This will be supported by enhanced cross-departmental working and the formation of external partnerships which are necessary to bring complex properties back into use. Empty Homes are an increasing feature of Central Government policy, which can be seen through both the New Homes Bonus and changes to the Council Tax regime. Leaving homes empty for several years or in some cases decades should not be considered acceptable and a robust and comprehensive strategy will help to bring such properties back into use.
- 4.4. The benefits of a strategy to deal with empty properties can be identified as social, regenerative, financial and strategic. A strategy can:
 - assist in meeting housing need;
 - improve housing conditions;
 - assist with a reduction in crime and the fear of crime;
 - regenerate blighted areas;
 - increase Council Tax collection rates and empty home premiums;
 - generate additional income through the New Homes Bonus (NHB).
- 4.5. Supporting the strategy is an operational action plan which ensures that resources and work is targeted to deliver the strategy in a planned way and to maximise its impact on the homes that are most in need of action. The action plan will be reviewed on an annual basis as part of the operational planning cycle.
- 4.6. The first draft of the strategy was issued for public consultation on 29 October 2018 for a period of five weeks. This was a successful exercise with positive engagement from a range of key stakeholders such as home owners, landlords etc and a total of fifty responses were received. The outcome was overwhelming support for the Council to adopt the strategy and provide appropriate resources to enable the action plan to be delivered. The strategy was also reported to the Community Development Scrutiny Group on 20 November 2018 and again there was unilateral support for the strategy, the

action plan and the Council using all of the powers at its disposal to bring empty homes back into use.

- 4.7. As a result of the consultation exercise, the strategy has been revised with minor amendments which will assist with clarification on the proposed approach of the Council to deal with empty homes.

5. Risks and Uncertainties

- 5.1. Resources - It is considered that an additional resource would be required to fully implement the action plan provided within the strategy. It is considered that initially this could be delivered with a part-time role working 2 to 3 days a week and work is underway to explore if there are existing internal resources that can be redirected to this area of work in the first instance.
- 5.2. Enforcement - When dealing with empty property owners, a voluntary way forward is always preferred. Advice, assistance and incentives reduce demand on Council resources and the need for enforcement action at a later date. In the vast majority of cases this is sufficient, but there are occasions where owners cannot be traced or are unwilling to enter into a voluntary dialogue. In these circumstances, the use of enforcement action needs to be considered. Though used as a last resort, the Council has significant powers, particularly compulsory purchase, but also enforced sale. There is therefore a reputational risk.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial Implications

- 6.1.1 There are costs arising from enforcement action including compulsory purchase (CPOs), enforced sale and works in default however any such costs incurred can be reclaimed through the appropriate legal process. The Council currently has a 'work in default budget' which would be utilised to support this area of work subject to the strategy being adopted.
- 6.1.2 Where the CPO process is used, the ex-owners will be entitled to compensation once the council becomes the owner of the property. If a claim is not settled, or a reference made to the Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber), within six years, the claim for compensation will be statute barred.
- 6.1.3 However there are also opportunities to maximise income via New Homes Bonus (NHB), debt recovery and unclaimed sales income from CPO's or Enforced Sales.
- 6.1.4 In order to maximise NHB, it is planned to develop a programme of property visits which, when combined with a close working relationship with colleagues in the council tax team, allows the data that is used to calculate NHB award to be as accurate as possible at the time of the data snapshot – usually early October. This ensures that NHB income to the council is maximised each year.

6.1.5. There are several types of debt that can be associated with empty homes, the most common being unpaid council tax, works in default costs and residential care charges for previous occupiers. This strategy will consider utilising the powers of enforced sale to recover unpaid council tax debt and works in default monies associated with empty homes.

6.1.6 Subject to the outcome of the work detailed in paragraph 5.1 any additional part-time role to implement the action plan would cost a maximum of £21k (22.5 hours) which would be an additional cost to the budget.

6.2 Legal Implications

As identified in 5 and 6 above.

6.3 Equalities Implications

The Council has undertaken an Equalities Impact Assessment. The assessment confirms that this strategy has a neutral impact and no further action is required.

6.4 Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

As identified in 4.4 an effective empty homes strategy can assist with a reduction in crime and the fear of crime.

7. Link to Corporate Priorities

This report links to the following corporate priorities:

Corporate Themes	Empty Homes Strategy Objectives
Deliver economic growth to ensure a sustainable, prosperous and thriving local economy	Objective 5 – Provide advice, assistance and guidance to landlords and property owners
Maintain and enhance our residents' quality of life	Objective 1 – To collect and record relevant, accurate and current information of empty homes in the Borough Objective 2 – To raise awareness of the Empty Homes and promote the Strategy Objective 3 – Reduce the number of empty homes and return empty homes back in to use Objective 5 – Provide advice, assistance and guidance to landlords and property owners

<p>Transform the Council to enable the delivery of efficient high quality services</p>	<p>Objective 1 – To collect and record relevant, accurate and current information of empty homes in the Borough</p> <p>Objective 3 – Reduce the number of empty homes and return empty homes back in to use</p> <p>Objective 4 – To maximise income opportunities including New Homes Bonus and debt recovery</p>
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8. Recommendations

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet

- a) approve the Empty Homes Strategy 2019 - 2024, and
- b) the Executive Manager - Neighbourhoods be authorised to make minor revisions to the Strategy during its lifespan

<p>For more information contact:</p>	<p>David Banks Executive Manager - Neighbourhoods Tel: 0115 9148438 dbanks@rushcliffe.gov.uk</p>
<p>Background papers available for Inspection:</p>	<p>Report to Community Development Group 20 November 2018 'Empty Homes Strategy'</p> <p>Empty Homes Strategy Equalities Impact Assessment</p>
<p>List of appendices:</p>	<p>Empty Homes Strategy 2019 – 2024</p>