

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**
Date: **23 February 2017**
Title: **Empty Homes Strategy update**
Portfolio Area: **Customer First**
Wards Affected: **All**
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken:
(e.g. referral on of recommendation or
implementation of substantive decision)

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Recommendations:

That the Panel endorses the approach to dealing with empty homes as a means of meeting the wider housing need.

1. Executive summary

- The Council adopted the latest Empty Homes Strategy in 2014. The aim of the strategy is to deal with the number of empty homes and return them to use as a way of providing housing to meet the housing need of the area. The strategy agreed a co-ordinated approach, identifying a number of measures that are available to the Council for dealing with empty homes.
- This report updates the work carried out under the Empty Homes Strategy

- The Council has continued to respond to requests for assistance regarding Empty Homes and considered taking action to return properties that are found to be vacant into use, as part of its day to day function. The Environmental Health team carry out inspections of private rented accommodation to work to improve housing standards in the area.
- The resource to proactively seek out and engage with empty property owners has not been available, however recent recruitment will now enable this work to go ahead
- The task of returning empty homes back into use has become more difficult, with many of the properties with relatively easy remedies have been dealt with.
- The monitoring function of the Council, to identify and report on numbers of empty properties, is now carried out by Locality Officers.

2. Background

- In 2014 the Council agreed its second Empty Homes Strategy. The strategy was in response to the growing concerns regarding Empty Homes which were identified as a wasted resource in light of the well documented housing shortage both nationally and in the South Hams. Empty Homes and other properties were also identified as having an adverse effect on the amenity and increasing crime and disorder in a locality. Members have requested an update on this work carried out during 2016-17.
- There are high levels of housing need and affordability of housing is a key issue for South Hams.
- According to South Hams Council Tax records there are approximately 418 properties empty between 1 month and 24 months and an additional 53 properties that have been empty for up to 1 month. There are a further 128 classified as "empty and uninhabitable" up to 12 months. The number of long term empty homes (empty over 24 months) is 54.
- Properties become empty for a number of reasons, the most common being when a property requires renovation and the owner lack the funds to carry out the works. Another occurs when a property is inherited and the new owners are unsure what to do with the property ie rent or sell on.
- The 2014 Empty Homes Strategy introduced a co-ordinated approach to tackling the problem of empty homes and identified the most effective solutions to meet local housing need.
- In the past year the Environmental Health Team has continued to respond to enquiries and service requests regarding empty properties.
- The monitoring work of identifying and reporting empty homes has been moved to the Localities team.
- The Environmental Health team has focussed resource on other key areas, notably Disabled Facilities Grants. This has meant that very little work has been done to proactively deal with empty properties.
- Bringing empty homes back into use is often a long term process. The task is becoming more difficult with the properties with the more willing owners have been dealt with, leaving the more difficult cases to resolve remaining.

- We now have a L4 Specialist in post to drive this strategy across the Council and an experienced L5 Housing based Specialist in post to support and deliver solutions.
- We intend to participate in the Wessex Loans "Empty Property Loan" campaign that will market the use of Wessex Loans to assist owners of empty homes bringing them back to a usable standard.
- We need to update the strategy to consider any Government policy changes, in particular the Government White Paper identifies a concern with Empty Properties. The Council should focus resource on pro-active work to engage with empty home property owners and use the options available to bring the property back into use.
- We will be working with other Communities of Practice and partners to identify opportunities for more successful interventions targeted on high risk areas, ie those areas where there is a distinct housing need and/or suffers from the effects of wider visual degradation that an empty home may contribute to.

3. Outcomes/outputs

- Appendix A shows the numbers of empty homes in South Hams over the last 3 years
- The number of Empty Homes in South Hams are reducing but at a slow rate

4. Options available and consideration of risk

- The Council may choose to not carry out work in relation to Empty Homes as it is a discretionary service.
- This would miss an opportunity to reduce the housing shortage and also risk blight to areas where empty homes are an eyesore and attract low level crime.
- Bringing an empty homes property back into use also attracts the New Home Bonus.
- Over the last decade the importance of reducing the number of potential homes that lay empty has been recognised by Government and been the subject of increased media and public pressure. There have been various initiatives and legislative changes designed to either force or encourage owners to bring properties back into use. These include increased powers for Local Authorities, changes to Council Tax to allow Councils to financially penalise owners and most significantly the introduction of the New Homes Bonus.

5. Proposed Way Forward

- Members are asked to endorse the Council's work to bring empty homes back into use.
- This approach is in accordance with the Councils' Homes priority
- This aspiration to reduce numbers of long term empty homes can be met by the focussing of expertise and existing resource onto the area of Empty Homes work

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance		Dealing with empty Homes is a discretionary service however it has the potential to have a significant impact upon housing provision. Bringing empty homes back into use fits with the Councils Homes Priority and its intention to provide good quality, affordable housing.
Financial		The report has no financial implications. The work in the report will be covered by existing staff resources. Long term empty homes brought back into use qualify for the New Homes Bonus
Risk		That numbers of Empty Homes in South Hams area increase, an opportunity to reduce the housing shortage is missed and properties become an eyesore and attract low level crime.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		There are no equality and diversity implications
Safeguarding		There are no safeguarding implications
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		The risk of not dealing with long term empty properties is that they will fall into disrepair and become a contributing factor to low level crime such as vandalism
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		There are no health , safety and wellbeing implications
Other implications		

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix A – Empty Homes by category
Appendix B – Empty Homes Strategy 2014

Background Papers:

None

Appendix A – Empty Homes by category

CTB1 - October 2016

Empty & Unfurnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLC	72	100	84	75	43	26	17	1	418
PCLC1M	5	16	12	7	8	1	4	0	53
PCLD	21	15	19	20	23	18	11	1	128
PREM	16	13	5	8	4	3	5	0	54
Empty & Furnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLB-2H	456	376	561	693	770	506	516	95	3973

CTB1 - October 2015

Empty & Unfurnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLC	90	102	80	76	49	21	30	4	452
PCLC1M	18	20	12	10	10	7	3	0	80
PCLD	9	10	23	18	17	5	6	2	90
PREM	15	17	5	9	5	3	2	1	57
Empty & Furnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLB-2H	442	385	563	683	788	524	517	93	3995

CTB1 - October 2014

Empty & Unfurnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLC	92	118	104	84	60	31	28	5	522
PCLC1M	16	16	25	8	7	4	9	0	85
PCLD	14	22	31	25	19	15	19	2	147
PREM	13	16	5	8	7	2	5	2	58
Empty & Furnished									
Disc type	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Total
PCLB-2H	434	370	545	696	751	509	500	89	3894

Key:

Disc type	
PCLC	Empty between 1 month and 24 months - no relief from Council Tax
PCLC1M	Empty up to 1 month - full relief from Council Tax
PCLD	Empty & uninhabitable up to 12 months - 50% relief from Council Tax
PREM	Empty over 24 months - 50% additional premium added to Council Tax
PCLB-2H	Empty but furnished - second homes? - no relief from Council Tax

