

Empty Homes Policy

Report of the Housing and Environmental Health Portfolio Holder

Recommended:

1. That Cabinet note the contents of this report and approves the Empty Homes Policy attached at Annex 1 to the report.
2. That Cabinet approves delegated authority to the Head of Housing & Environmental Health, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing & Environmental Health, to make minor amendments to the Empty Homes Policy.

SUMMARY:

- The number of empty homes in the borough is relatively low, to the extent that Test Valley reports the lowest level of long term empty homes of all Hampshire districts.
- Nevertheless, in light of local demand for housing, and with a very small number of specific properties generating issues for local residents, the Council has comprehensively reviewed its position with regard to tackling empty homes.
- The Council produced an Empty Property Strategy in 2005, and this was periodically reviewed. Aspects of this strategy were incorporated into the current Housing Strategy, in 2016.
- The Housing Service has recently undertaken a review of housing and homelessness matters, to inform an evidence base that will underpin new housing strategies from 2020. This work has included considering the level of empty homes in the borough.
- As part of its work to deliver the current Housing Strategy, and with a view to developing a new Housing Strategy from 2020, a new “Empty Homes Policy” has been produced at Annex 1.
- The Policy sets out a proportionate approach to the presenting issues associated with empty homes in the borough, including setting out some of the legal and regulatory considerations relevant to this area of work.
- In setting out a proportionate approach, the Policy is clear about the enforcement action it will consider taking, in instances where properties are allowed to remain empty for prolonged periods and become problematic.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 There are over 2,200 households currently registered on the Council’s Housing Register and increasing demands affecting the Housing Options Service.
- 1.2 Empty homes represent a wasted resource, and they can lower the quality of the local environment and affect the sense of community.

- 1.3 There are many and varied reasons why properties may become empty, and various reasons why they may remain so. Test Valley reports relatively low levels of longer term empty properties in the borough and since 2004, there has been a reducing trend in the number of long term empty homes.
- 1.4 Whilst the number of empty homes may be relatively low, it remains a concern that properties that could otherwise provide homes for local people are allowed to remain empty, and in a handful of instances, to remain empty for a considerable number of years.
- 1.5 In 2005, the Council published an Empty Homes Strategy. Whilst this remains relevant, aspects of the strategy were subsequently subsumed into the overarching Housing Strategy. The proposed Policy will update the Council's position and set out how it will deal with empty homes in future.
- 1.6 The proposed Policy supports delivering the aims of the outgoing Housing Strategy 2016 to 2019 and will support delivery of the forthcoming Housing Strategy 2020 to 2025.

2 Background

- 2.1 The proposed Empty Homes Policy provides a framework through which decisions can be made about how to move forward in specific circumstances, where it becomes apparent that an empty property has been vacant for a considerable period of time and is having a significant and deleterious effect on the local community.
- 2.2 It has also been drafted such that it proposes a proportionate approach; one that is sensitive to the rights and needs of private citizens, and with full regard to relevant legislation, regulation and guidance.
- 2.3 The policy sets out a graduated approach including a hierarchy of enforcement action that may be considered in specific circumstances.
- 2.4 The adoption of this policy will send out a message to those people with empty homes locally that have been allowed to remain empty for years and that are deteriorating. It sets out that advice and support is available to assist owners of empty homes to bring their properties back into use, and also, that the Council may consider taking robust enforcement action where no efforts are being made by property owners to address the situation.

3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 3.1 Preventing and tackling homelessness is a priority for Test Valley Borough Council. The Corporate Plan "Growing Our Potential" includes priorities that the proposed Empty Homes Policy will support, including those associated with 'Town Centres', 'Communities', 'People' and 'The Local Environment'.
- 3.2 The policy will also form part of the final stages of delivering the outgoing Housing Strategy, and as an emerging aspect of the Council's future Housing Strategy 2020 to 2025.

- 3.3 By setting out a clear policy position for the way the Council will respond to long term empty dwellings, it will support efforts to rejuvenate our town centres, build strong and cohesive communities, meet local housing need and improve the local environment.

4 Consultations/Communications

- 4.1 The proposed Empty Homes Policy has been drafted in consultation with operational staff who will be involved in the delivery of the stages set out in the policy.
- 4.2 It has also been produced in consultation with key services within the Council, including Legal & Democratic Services, Planning & Building Services, Estates, and Finance.

5 Options

- 5.1 The Council is not required to produce an Empty Homes Policy and could continue to operate on the basis of the 2005 Empty Property Strategy and subsequent Housing Strategy actions.
- 5.2 The proposed Empty Homes Policy has, however, been drafted to set out an up to date set of parameters within which action will be considered, and acts as guidance for officers. This includes establishing how decisions will be taken to move ahead with various enforcement options.

6 Option Appraisal

Option 1:

- 6.1 The Council does not adopt the proposed Policy. In so doing, it would not be in breach of any statutory requirements.
- 6.2 The Council remains able to exercise its powers to tackle empty dwellings in the absence of the proposed Policy, however, the introduction of a new Policy that reflects how the Council intends to tackle empty homes, not only sets out a clear position internally but also sends a message to owners of empty dwellings in the borough that the Council has reviewed its position and it is prepared to act.

Option 2:

- 6.3 The Council adopts the proposed Policy, which provides clear guidance and parameters for staff, in an explicit document, to support and inform future discussions and decisions associated with the targeting of problematic long term empty dwellings.
- 6.4 Option 2 is being recommended to Cabinet to refresh the Council's position regarding tackling empty homes, and in such a way that will support it to deliver the current Housing Strategy and complement the new Housing Strategy that will be published in 2020.

7 Risk Management

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified at this time.
- 7.2 The proposed Empty Homes Policy ensures that any decisions taken to deploy significant resource, may only be taken with senior officer and member approval.
- 7.3 The Council's Private Sector Renewal Policy is in the process of being revised and updated to ensure that the approach to the provision of any associated grants or loans, as referenced in the proposed Policy (section 4 of the Annex), is robust and up to date.

8 Resource Implications

- 8.1 The proposed Empty Homes Policy considers resources at section 6 of the Annex to this report. Each situation arising will be considered on its individual merits and with regard to achieving best use of public funds where they may be required.
- 8.2 The Council will seek opportunities to engage external sources of funding in implementing the Policy, subject to the individual circumstances of any specific case.
- 8.3 It is possible that in future, it may be considered appropriate to invest from either the General Fund or from the Housing Capital Fund to address specific empty properties, however, all decisions associated with enforcement and committing resources will be made through the executive processes at that time, as set out in the proposed Policy.
- 8.4 The day to day delivery of the Policy will be achieved within existing staff resources.

9 Legal Implications

- 9.1 The proposed Empty Homes Policy has been drafted in consultation with Legal Services and has taken relevant legislation, regulation and guidance into account.

10 Equality Issues

- 10.1 There are no equalities implications arising from this decision.

11 Other Issues

- 11.1 **Community Safety:** In some instances, bringing empty homes back into use may have a positive impact on community safety.
- 11.2 **Environmental Health Issues:** Environmental Health Officers will have a role in delivering the Policy and have been consulted in its development. The proposed Policy would, in some instances, have a positive impact on environmental protection, pest control and the enforcement of housing standards.

- 11.3 Sustainability and Addressing a Changing Climate: None.
- 11.4 Property Issues: Estates have been consulted in the development of the proposed Policy. Depending on decisions taken by the Council on a case by case basis, there may be Estates management issues arising for the Council, however, all decisions that would imply such an impact would be subject to senior management and member approval.
- 11.5 All wards and communities are affected by the recommendations.

12 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

- 12.1 The Council's strategic approach to tackling empty homes forms part of the current Housing Strategy and the proposed Policy seeks to refresh and add clarity to the pre-existing options and approaches that have been adopted and deployed historically.
- 12.2 The Empty Homes Policy will provide clarity and a roadmap for officers and members in considering individual instances of long term empty properties and has been drafted in light of the new Corporate Plan aims and ambitions.
- 12.3 The Empty Homes Policy will complement the new Housing Strategy from 2020 and also support the Council's strategic aims around preventing and relieving homelessness and rough sleeping.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
N/A			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	1	File Ref:	N/A
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