

CABINET

Empty Homes Strategy 14th February 2017

Report of Chief Officer (Regeneration and Planning)

PURPOSE OF REPORT				
To consider an updated Empty Homes Strategy for Lancaster District and the resource implications associated with it.				
Key Decision	X	Non-Key Decision		Referral from Cabinet Member
Date of notice of forthcoming key decision		16.01.17		
This report is public				

RECOMMENDATIONS OF COUNCILLORS KAREN LEYTHAM AND JANICE HANSON

- (1) That Cabinet approves the revised Empty Homes Strategy as the basis for the council's actions in terms of bringing empty properties back into beneficial use.
- (2) That cabinet notes the resource implications set out in the report.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Empty Homes are a wasted asset which should be providing much needed accommodation in times of housing shortages. They can also attract criminal and anti-social behaviour. Bringing empty homes back into use has financial and community benefits and has been a council priority since 2013 when an Empty Homes Officer was first appointed and the original Empty Homes Strategy was prepared.
- 1.2 Cabinet last considered this issue at its October 2014 meeting where it resolved to adopt the Empty Homes Strategy, continue the approach to dealing with empty homes until 31st March 2017, create a dedicated fund of £200k for pro-active works and to review the need for supporting resources as part of the 2017/18 budget process.
- 1.3 This exercise has now been undertaken and this report puts forward a revised Empty Homes Strategy for 2017 onwards and a proposal for the long term funding of this service.

2.0 Proposal Details

2.1 The draft Empty Homes Strategy 2017 to 2022 is reproduced for consideration at Appendix 1. This summarises how many empty homes exist and where there are particular concentrations, the reasons why homes remain empty and the range of initiatives available to the council and its partners to tackle the problem. It then looks at the impact made since 2013 and recommends a new Action Plan for the next five years. It is recommended that Cabinet approves this new strategy for immediate use.

2.2 The strategy proposes the following approach:

Through efficient and effective partnership working, the City Council will seek to reduce the number of empty homes in Lancaster District and bring as many properties as possible into beneficial use. This will be achieved by:

- **Maintaining an accurate and up-to-date record of empty properties shared as appropriate with key partners;**
- **Proactively targeting empty properties that have a significant negative impact on the surrounding neighbourhood and those which have been empty for more than two years;**
- **Working with owners of empty properties to raise awareness of the options available to them;**
- **Providing financial support towards the cost of necessary repair and restoration work;**
- **Where necessary, utilising statutory powers to require work to be carried out; and**
- **Monitoring the use of discretionary provisions (e.g. differential council tax charging) as a means of discouraging properties from remaining empty.**

2.3 The success of the strategy and action plan is heavily dependent upon having a dedicated Empty Homes Officer in post who can access technical, legal and financial support as necessary. The current Empty Homes Officer (the Council's second one) has been in post since May 2015 and has been successful in building up these internal working relations particular with key services such as Council Tax and Planning Enforcement.

2.4 The New Homes Bonus allocates funding to Local Authorities for a 6 year period (reducing down to 4 years), as a reward for increasing housing supply including the return to use of empty properties. The future of the New Homes Bonus scheme beyond 2020 is currently unclear.

2.5 Due to no specific budget being identified at the time, the Empty Homes Officer post was established on a temporary basis with the intention being to examine ways in which it could be permanently funded through savings elsewhere. The opportunity has now arisen through the retirement of another officer in the Regeneration and Planning Service to utilise these salary savings to make the Empty Officer's post permanent. This can be achieved by streamlining other areas of work and providing a more focused and co-ordinated service. Whilst there will inevitably be some impact on other parts of the service, it is considered that these can be managed without significant detriment to other areas of work.

- 2.6 In addition, a specific £200K capital budget was established during the 2015/16 budget process for pro-active empty homes work. This has been utilised primarily for partnership work with Methodist Action North West (see para 4.12 of draft strategy). This budget was established for a two year period to coincide with the contract of the Empty Homes Officer. For the reasons set out in the Strategy, this has not yet been fully utilised and £101K has been re-profiled into 2017/18 as part of the latest draft Capital Programme update.

3.0 Details of Consultation

- 3.1 The Empty Homes Officer reports regularly to both the Planning Policy and Housing Regeneration Cabinet Liaison Groups. In addition, the Overview and Scrutiny received a detailed presentation on the subject in 2015.

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

	Option 1: Approve the revised Empty Homes Strategy including the resource implications	Option 2: Do not approve the revised Empty Homes Strategy
Advantages	<p>Provides framework for the actions of the Council and its partners and promotes co-ordinated, efficient working.</p> <p>Provides certainty to allow longer term planning of actions</p> <p>Sets clear message that tackling empty homes is a council priority.</p> <p>Brings direct and indirect financial benefits together with community benefits</p>	None identified
Disadvantages	Requires dedicated resources that will have some impact on other areas of work.	Empty homes would not be identified as a council priority and would be dealt with on an ad-hoc basis by various council services with potential for confusion and overlap.
Risks	Requires continued commitment from key partners such as Methodist Action	Fewer empty properties would be brought back into use.

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

- 5.1 Option 1 is preferred due to the importance associated with this area of work.

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 This is an important area of work and a council priority. Approving a revised strategy and providing adequate resources are important steps in delivering this work.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

Bringing empty properties back into beneficial use contributes directly to the council's health and wellbeing priority by improving the supply and quality of the district's housing. It also contributes to the clean, green and safe priority by reducing the potential for anti-social behaviour and to the economic growth priority by improving confidence in an area for investment.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, HR, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

Impact Assessment attached.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Legal Services play an important role when formal action is required. Recently approved internal changes will improve the service's ability to respond to such requests.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As referred to in the report.

Estimated income from bringing empty homes back into use (be it through council tax charging or New Homes Bonus) is already reflected, as far as possible, within Cabinet's budget proposals, as part of those respective income streams. It will be monitored as part of usual arrangements and in addition, a review of council tax discretionary charging policy is planned during next financial year.

In terms of capacity, the cost of making the Empty Homes Officer (EHO) permanent can be met from the redirection of savings arising through the retirement of an existing postholder (31 March 2017) within the Regeneration & Projects team, and this is reflected in Cabinet's budget proposals. As an aside, a further internal re-organisation of the team is planned to follow to ensure sufficient capacity is still in place and it is expected that the overall impact of these changes will be cost neutral at worst with the potential for a small saving.

It is not anticipated that there will be any additional capacity needs regarding relevant council tax collection and recovery, but they too will be kept under review.

As previously reported, it is not possible to accurately quantify in financial terms how much additional income from the New Homes Bonus payment (the future of which is currently unclear) or additional council tax generated from the number of empty homes brought back into use is directly attributable by having a dedicated EHO in place and whether the City Council's share is more or less than the annual cost of the post.

That said, a successful empty homes programme can help address housing need, improve the economic prospects of an area and also complement other regeneration initiatives such as S215 untidy land and building work and ongoing enforcement work through planning and housing legislation. It is proposed that co-ordination between the various council functions with the EHO post continues and is improved in order to provide the most efficient service possible within existing resources.

Overall therefore, it is considered that allowing for both financial and social impact benefits, the proposal regarding the EHO post does represent value for money, acknowledging however that other stakeholders or affected parties may well perceive the business case differently.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**Human Resources:**

As set out in the report

Information Services:

None identified

Property:

None identified

Open Spaces:

None identified

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Empty Homes Strategy 2014 - 17

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