

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

**Report of
Corporate Director for People
to
Cabinet
on
17th March 2015**

Report prepared by:
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EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2015 – 2020

**Relevant Scrutiny Committee: Policy and Resources
Executive Councillor: Councillor Norman**

Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To seek Members agreement and comments on the draft Empty Homes Strategy.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That Cabinet agrees to the draft Empty Homes Strategy being endorsed for further consultation with other agencies the local community.

3. Background

- 3.1 Empty Homes are a very emotive issue both locally and nationally and can cause problems within the community if they are left empty for a long period of time. This can result in increased anti-social behaviour around the property and the overall appearance of a street or Estate deteriorating as a result. This can have an impact on the character of the area as well as property values. Empty Homes are also a wasted resource in the Borough where there continues to be enormous pressure for affordable housing. If a property can be brought back into use, it enables a household in housing need that are registered with the Council to have a home.
- 3.2 There are a number of reasons why a property might be empty for a short period of time and there are often problems associated with probate which can take months and sometimes years to resolve. Therefore the real problem is long term empty properties which have been empty for more than two years. These properties are the main focus of the Council's draft Empty Homes Strategy.

- 3.3 The Council has had a successful record in recent years in bringing empty homes back into use. The Council has a target to bring 50 empty homes back into use each every year and this has been exceeded every year. In 2014/15 we brought back into use 55 properties.

Current Position

- 3.4 Although the Council has been successful in bringing empty homes back into use, there are high profile empty homes that Members will be aware of in their wards and some frustration that there is a perceived lack of progress to bring the property back into use. This is often associated with complaints from the immediate neighbours who want the problems resolved as soon as possible. Officers keep a list of all the long term properties and have RAG (Red/Amber/Green) rating of these properties. In early 2105 there are 20 red rated properties which Officers are working on in order to bring these back into use.
- 3.5 Our approach is to work with the owner of the empty property to try and bring the property back into use and in many cases this is achieved through negotiation. If there are cases where the owner has not got sufficient funds to repair the property we can offer an interest free loan to do the works and this loan is repaid when the property is sold, or paid back directly to the Council through the rental income. A condition of the loan is that the owner gives the Council nomination rights to put forward a tenant when the works are completed.
- 3.6 In the majority of cases, either through negotiation or the offer of a loan, we are successfully bringing the property back into use. However if this isn't the case then the Council can use enforcement powers to do "Works in Default" to make the property safe and secure and the cost of any such works is reclaimed from the owner when the property is sold in the future. We can also try and enforce the sale of the property too and this has been successful in the past.
- 3.7 Members have expressed a strong view in the past that the Council should use Compulsory Purchase powers to bring long term empty properties back into use and wanted to see this being used more regularly on properties where there is a lack of progress. However the use of Compulsory Purchase powers is a difficult and complicated option to pursue and the Courts would not support an application unless all other options have been explored. The Council must obtain the Secretary of State's consent too which can take many months.

4 Empty Homes Strategy 2015-2020

- 4.1 The draft Strategy attached to this Report as Appendix A is a relatively concise document based on a simple format which describes what is meant by Empty Homes, what the position is in the Borough, what we've done to date and what we're proposing to do in the future based on the level of resources available to the Council.

5. Corporate Implications

5.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

The Empty Homes Strategy meets a number of corporate objectives including:-

- Reducing crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour by regenerating sites that currently attract such uses.
- Improving the Council's effectiveness in meeting the needs of adults including those who are vulnerable, by providing new affordable and rented accommodation.
- Improve the performance of the housing service by providing accommodation for nomination from the Homeseekers' Register.
- Improve community engagement by working with a social housing provider to improve the residential neighbourhoods.

6.1 Financial Implications

The Council has been very successful in using all of our allocation of funding from the Thames Gateway South East (TGSE) to bring back empty properties and were the only Local Authority within TGSE to do so. The TGSE programme is now being wound up and Officers have successfully lobbied that the balance of funding be allocated to each of the Councils within TGSE and this will be made before the end of the financial year 2014/15. Therefore there will be around £150,000 allocated to the Council and this will be used to provide interest free loans to owners of Empty Homes who have not got access to funding to resolve structural problems to the property to enable it to be brought back into use.

With the demise of the TGSE scheme the Council will need to have a new Policy which outlines how the Empty Home Loan scheme will operate in practice. There was a "Grant" element to the former TGSE scheme but it's not proposed to offer any grants but to use all of the capital funding as interest free loans either repayable through rental income or when the property is sold. There are financial implications if the Council charges interest on the loans and it's likely to be a deterrent to empty home owners if interest is charged too.

The Council's new Policy is attached to this Report as Appendix Two and there will be loans available up to a maximum of £40,000 on the basis of £10,000 per bedroom brought back into use. There may be extreme cases which would require more funding but if that is the case an exception Report will be made to Members to agree any funding above these limits.

6.2 Legal Implications

There are existing legislative options available to the Council to bring Empty Homes back into use which is highlighted in Appendix Two of the draft Empty Homes Strategy.

6.3 People Implications

The existing Empty Homes Officer post is funded on a Spend to Save basis in that the number of Empty Homes brought back into use meets more than meets the cost of the post.

6.4 Consultation

It is proposed that the draft Strategy will be subject to more detailed public consultation when it has been agreed by Members.

6.5 Equalities and Diversities Implications

None identified

6.6 Environmental Impact

Bringing empty homes back into use has a positive impact on the environment.

6.7 Background Papers

The Council's Housing Strategy 2011-21

7 Appendix

Appendix 1 – Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2015-2020

Appendix 2 – New Empty Home Loan Policy