

REPORT TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

Date of Meeting: 3 March 2015

Report of: Assistant Director Housing

Title: Empty Homes Strategy Update

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

1. What is the report about?

1.1 The Empty Homes Strategy was approved by Executive on 4th February 2014. The strategy was developed to provide a clear strategic approach to returning empty homes back into use. The strategy outlines the key housing issues faced by the city and the tools at the Council's disposal to deal with long-term empty properties. The current housing market pressures make it vital for the Council to encourage maximising the use of existing housing stock, in particular empty homes.

1.2 A year after being approved, this report outlines what has been achieved for empty homes in Exeter, and provides an update on five objectives set out in the strategy to ensure that all priorities and commitments made by the Council towards empty homes are being met.

2. Recommendations:

2.1 That Scrutiny Committee note progress in taking forward the Empty Homes Strategy.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

N/A

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

N/A

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

The report incorporates the comments of the Section 151 Officer.

6. What are the legal aspects?

N/A

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

8. Report details:

8.1 In Exeter, there are currently 286 properties that have been empty over 6 months. Included in this figure are 51 properties which have been empty for over 2 years (and pay a 150% Council Tax Premium because of this).

8.2 The Housing Development team works to reduce the number of long term empty homes by offering advice, support and assistance. This contributes to maintaining a low number of long term empty homes, resulting in the lowest number in 5 years in

2013. There has been a slight increase in numbers this year, due to major renovation works being undertaken at Mount Dinham and King Street by Cornerstone Housing Association.

8.3 Attached is an update of the Empty Homes Strategy action plan. The action plan is based on the five strategic objectives, which are set out below, with a brief explanation of how these objectives are being achieved:

8.4. Objective One: Maintain, and where possible improve the accuracy of the data held by the Council regarding the number of empty homes

8.4.1 Through working collaboratively with the Council Tax team, mail outs have been sent to landlords from March - October 2014 to encourage them to contact the Council to keep records accurate. 511 owners were contacted, with 368 people responding and of those 110 confirmed their properties were occupied. 19 properties were also visited. A total of 247 properties were removed from the long term empty lists during this period.

8.4.2 New Homes Bonus is awarded to the Council for reducing the net number of long term empty homes in Exeter. The Council gets 80% of the New Homes Bonus with the remaining 20% to Devon County Council. The New Homes Bonus in relation to empty homes equates to the national average Council Tax Band D over six years for each additional property returned to use (split 80%:20% between Exeter City Council and Devon County Council). The team works every year to maximise this income by ensuring the information on the Council Tax database is up to date.

8.4.3 An internal audit report completed in September 2014 on New Homes Bonus work found that, in regards to Empty Homes, the team have been pro-active in minimising the number of long term empty properties in Exeter.

8.5 Objective Two: To raise awareness of empty homes issue

8.5.1 Promotion of the Service this year included a full page article in the Express and Echo for National Empty Homes week in December 2014. The article provided information on when to contact Council Tax about an empty property, and encouraged owners of empty homes to access the information and help available.

8.5.2 An overhaul of the information available on the empty homes pages of the corporate website is also currently ongoing, in order to better signpost owners to advice on refurbishment, letting standards and letting. This is being done in conjunction with the Private Sector Housing team.

8.5.3 Informed by recent studies into engaging with empty home owners, the literature and letters sent to owners have been improved to increase response rates and promote the service. The latest mail outs received a 70% response rate from owners, an improvement of 10% from 2013.

8.6 Objective Three: To encourage empty home owners to return them back into use

8.6.1 All reports of empty homes made by colleagues, Members or the public are investigated and where appropriate picked up as part of ongoing case work.

8.6.2 All owners of empty homes are contacted regularly through mail outs, approximately 500 properties annually, including incremental letters A-E (standard letters encouraging the owner to get in touch through to enforcement action) and special mail outs for National Empty Homes week, or to publicise possible solutions such as low cost loans specifically for empty property owners.

8.7 Objective Four: To prioritise empty homes for enforcement action.

8.7.1 All empty homes under investigation are assessed and prioritised against a matrix which involves a number of factors such as how long properties have been empty, condition of the property, and the impact on the amenity of the area. This has resulted in a list of the highest priority cases and resources are focused on returning these properties back into use. Ongoing empty homes case work has largely focused on empty homes that are charged the empty homes premium, those empty for over 2 years and charged 150% Council Tax. This number has reduced from 69 in June 2014 to 51 in February 2015.

8.7.3 The 18 homes returned to use were prioritised for action due to the numerous complaints received by the Council and were also considered to be the most problematic and complex cases to resolve. Collectively, these properties have been empty for more than 135 years. This includes one property empty for over 22 years, and two properties empty for over 19 years each. The majority of these are now re-occupied by local families, with 6 properties finishing extensive refurbishment works before re-occupation.

8.7.4 These successes are due to a revised approach in dealing with empty homes, based on zero tolerance which includes continual, consistent engagement with owners alongside the threat of possible enforcement action as set out in the Council's empty homes enforcement policy.

8.8 Objective Five: To strengthen and develop new partnerships to reduce the number of long-term empty properties

8.8.1 The improvement of joint working internally has resulted in bringing long term empty homes back into use. A partnership group involving various departments across the Council meets once a month to discuss the most problematic cases. It is common that owners of empty homes are known to various Council departments including council tax, environmental health, planning and building control. These meetings help to facilitate a joined up strategic approach to tackling these cases and sharing information between departments. For example, this joint working enabled the billing over £14,000 in owed Council Tax and business rates to the owner of several long term empty homes which had been removed from the valuation banding; other examples include serving notice on owners with untidy gardens to encourage them to engage with officers.

8.8.2 Further partnerships are being developed with key stakeholders and services, including the Police and Fire Services, networking and knowledge sharing with other Local Authorities – including setting up annual South West Empty Homes Forum, which is well attended and self-financing. A Partnership Officer is employed by the Council who also works part-time for East Devon District Council and is able to share expertise and learning across the two authorities.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

- 9.1. The success of the Empty Homes Strategy contributes towards meeting three of the key purposes of the Corporate Plan 2014-15. These purposes are:
- providing suitable housing
 - keep place looking good
 - keep me/my environment safe and healthy

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

N/A

11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

N/A

12. Are there any other options?

N/A

Assistant Director Housing

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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