

REPORT TO PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 6 June 2019

REPORT TO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 9 July 2019

REPORT TO COUNCIL

Date of Meeting: 23 July 2019

Report of: Environmental Health and Licensing Manager

Title: Empty Homes Strategy 2019 - 2022

Is this a Key Decision?

No

* One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council.

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report sets out the new 2019-2022 Empty Homes Strategy including key objectives, actions and methodology of achieving them.

2. Recommendations:

2.1 That People Scrutiny supports the adoption of the 2019-2022 Empty Homes Strategy.

2.2 That Executive supports the adoption of the 2019-2022 Empty Homes Strategy.

2.3 That Council adopts of the 2019-2022 Empty Homes Strategy.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 It is best practice to have an empty homes strategy and this one sets out:

- Clear targets which can be measured;
- Links with other departments to provide a joined up housing service;
- The potential to increase revenue through the use of new homes bonus.

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

4.1 Accurate identification and reporting of empty homes has positive financial implications for the Council in two main forms. Firstly through New Homes Bonus, the central government grant paid to local authorities for newly created or returned to use units of housing. Secondly through Council Tax, in terms of ensuring that properties are correctly registered and therefore paying the right level of council tax e.g. properties

empty for longer than two years should be paying 150% council tax, but are not always correctly registered. Empty homes work contributes significantly to ensuring these sources of income are maximised through both its case work and data management.

- 4.2 This strategy can be met from existing resources. Where additional resources may be required in the future a business case will be made. This might have implications for legal work which could be recouped via legal action.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

- 5.1 There are no additional financial requests for council to consider in this report. However, Members should note the positive financial benefit that arises from this work. Both Council Tax and New Homes Bonus form significant sources of funding for the Council. This is of course on top of the benefit of providing additional homes for households in the City.

6. What are the legal aspects?

- 6.1 There are a range of enforcement powers that will be used to improve the condition of empty homes and ultimately bring them back to use. These are detailed in Appendix A of the Empty Homes Strategy. An increase in use of these powers, will have an impact on the resources in the legal team, or the use of external legal specialists where required due to a lack of internal capacity.
- 6.2 Where the council intervenes in arranging the renovation works on one or more long term empty homes, adhering to the procurement policy will be needed for the works to be carried out. Whether or not these works are arranged on a case by case basis, or properties are bundled into a larger contract, may have an impact on procurement and thresholds.
- 6.3 Procurement of a managing agent may be required for properties subject to an Empty Dwelling Management Order, if these cannot be managed by the council's Housing Department.

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

The report correctly identifies that in order to achieve policy objectives, the Council may have to resort to using all/some of the enforcement powers available to it. The legal cost/resource implications have not been calculated as part of this report.

All legal work which may be generated as a result of this new policy must be referred to the in-house legal team, who may decide to externalise it where there is insufficient in house resource to cope with this additional work.

8. Report details:

- 8.1 Empty homes in the City lead to issues relating to anti-social behaviour, are unattractive and a waste of potential housing which could be better utilised.
- 8.2 At the end of 2018, Exeter City Council had 403 long term empty homes and approximately 1000 households registered on Devon HomeChoice looking for accommodation in Exeter. When taken as a proportion this represents 0.76% homes in Exeter being classed as long term empty. This is below the average for England which is 0.82%.

- 8.3 As a result of these issues the Council has identified a number of empty properties in the City. Data is provided to the Government on properties which are 'unoccupied and substantially unfurnished' for a period of longer than 6 months.
- 8.4 The Empty Homes Strategy's over-arching aim is ***"To bring Exeter's empty homes back into use as lived in homes"***
- 8.5 An action plan contained within section 5 of the Strategy sets out 3 objectives:
- Objective 1: Bring empty homes back into use to increase the supply of quality, affordable housing in the city
- Objective 2: To continue to raise awareness and address issues relating to empty homes and to provide advice
- Objective 3: Improve the quality of neighbourhoods by identifying and tackling the issues associated with empty homes
- 8.6 The aims of dealing with empty homes in the City will be to
- Reduce the overall number of empty properties
 - Minimise the anti-social behaviour associated with empty homes
 - Recover the costs of enforcement action where possible
- 8.7 Exeter City Council has a range of tools and powers available including voluntary and enforcement options. These involve teams from across the council and some of the options will involve building effective partnerships with external organisations. These tools and powers will be further explored and developed and barriers to their use challenged.
- 8.8 The council's Environmental Health and Licensing Manager chair's a Private Property working group which contains officers from other departments in the council and other agencies such as the Police and Fire Service, to identify long term empty homes, in particular those causing a problem, and bring them back to use.
- 8.9 The strategy seeks to set an increasing annual target of bringing empty homes back into use. The increasing target over a number of years reflects the complexity and labour intensity of working with owners who are often hard to trace, difficult to engage, vulnerable and/or wilfully obstructive.

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

- 9.1 Bringing empty homes back into use will contribute to the council's new Corporate Plan 2018-2022 which sets out the key priorities for the city and the direction of travel in terms of addressing priorities including:
- Promoting health and active lifestyles
 - Tackling congestion and accessibility
 - Building great neighbourhoods

9.2 Specifically, empty homes work will impact the Council's key priorities, helping to deliver homes that are secure, affordable and healthy in a balanced and connected to great neighbourhoods that supports wellbeing and reduces social isolation.

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

10.1 The main risk of achieving this strategy is through the complexity and labour intensity of working with owners who are often hard to trace, difficult to engage, vulnerable and/or wilfully obstructive. Therefore achieving the targets set out in the Strategy over the 2019-2022 period may be challenging.

10.2 The dedicated Empty Homes resource consists of one full time Empty Homes Officer and one part time Housing Development Assistant. Both staff are currently on temporary contracts. Should the decision be made not to continue with this dedicated resource, then it will be difficult to achieve the strategy.

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?

11.1 The new strategy will have a positive impact on neighbourhoods by returning empty homes to occupation, thus reducing homelessness and the incidence of anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and vermin problems etc. frequently associated with empty properties.

11.2 An Equalities Impact Assessment forms Appendix B of this report.

12. Are there any other options?

12.1 There is no statutory duty to have an Empty Homes Strategy or to devote resources to the area. However it is recognised that the work not only delivers outcomes in its own right in proactively helping to maintain and create great neighbourhoods, but also benefits the wider community and provides an income source to the Council's General Fund via the New Homes Bonus and Council Tax receipts.

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