

Minutes

Policy Review Committee

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| Venue: | Committee Room - Civic Centre, Doncaster Road, Selby, YO8 9FT |
| Date: | Tuesday, 23 July 2019 |
| Time: | 5.00 pm |
| Present: | Councillors A Lee (Chair), K Arthur (Vice-Chair), J Cattnach, M McCartney, J Shaw-Wright, M Jordan and R Packham |
| Officers present: | Julie Slatter, Director of Corporate Services and Commissioning, June Rothwell, Head of Operational Services, Sarah Thompson, Housing and Environmental Health Service Manager, Hannah McCoubrey, Housing Strategy Officer, Victoria Foreman, Democratic Services Officer |
| Others present: | Councillor C Pearson, Executive Lead Member for Housing, Health and Culture |
| Public: | 0 |
| Press: | 0 |

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

9 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

10 MINUTES

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2019.

RESOLVED:

To approve the minutes of the Policy Review Committee meeting held on 11 June 2019 for signing by the Chair.

11 CHAIR'S ADDRESS TO THE POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE

The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting, and reminded them that they could make suggestions as to the content of the Committee's work programme and the subsequent focus of the work of the Committee.

12 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY (PR/19/3)

The Committee received the report of the Council's Housing and Environmental Health Service Manager, which asked Members to consider and comment on progress with the delivery of the Empty Property Strategy and Action Plan.

Members noted that the North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy and local Selby District Action Plan was agreed and adopted in January 2018. The North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy aimed to reduce the number of long-term empty homes through a co-ordinated approach, and the local Action Plan set out how the Council would target empty homes across the district and encourage, support and enforce owners to bring Empty Homes back into use. The report provided an update on the progress made since the implementation of the strategy and action plan in April 2018.

Officers explained that in 2018-19, 24 empty properties had been brought back into use; in the first quarter of 2019-20, this number was 14. There were currently 426 empty properties in the District, 151 of which had been empty for at least two years. The importance of the Council's involvement early on was emphasised by Members, in order to prevent properties from becoming empty in the very long term, i.e. over two years.

In response to a question regarding enforcement action, the Committee noted that there was currently one compulsory purchase of a property in progress. It was explained that this could be a long process, sometimes taking 18 months to two years to complete. Other enforcement action that had been undertaken included the boarding up of properties and investigation of complaints by neighbours.

Members learnt that properties empty for over two years were required to pay 200% council tax, which the Committee were surprised to hear, did not always act as a deterrent. Officers confirmed that the Council had the power to increase to 300% if it went over 10 years; in 2018-19, the proportion of council tax collected from properties that were empty for over two years was approximately £117k.

The Committee also noted that the money received in a grant from Homes England to tackle empty properties was not always used for voluntary or compulsory purchase costs, but also refurbishment.

Members suggested that Officers give special consideration to identifying empty flats and rooms over shops, which if reoccupied would meet a significant housing need in town centres. It was explained that the geographical spread of empty properties in the District was fairly even, and that the focus of Officers tended to be on areas that had particular housing need.

Members queried if there were other means by which empty homes were identified apart from the council tax register; Officers explained that others may come to light through complaints from neighbours or local residents, feedback from Neighbourhood Officers, and referral through the council tax Fraud Officer. The Fraud Officer identified both businesses not paying business rates as well as properties not registering for council tax. In the first year the Fraud Officer had identified £200k worth of unpaid rates across the District.

The Committee suggested that Officers also ensure that they were using information gathered as part of the annual canvass, which was the process by which the electoral register was updated. Canvassers out in the community and returned forms could be an important source of additional information for the work on empty homes.

Members queried whether more could be done to promote financial assistance that was on offer to people to help them bring empty properties back into use. Officers explained that there were incentives and encouragement, such as the tenant find scheme which matched prospective landlords and tenants, but that dealing with the issues around empty homes could be a slow process and that there was an opportunity to do more around promoting the help the Council could offer.

The Committee emphasised the importance of having a clear strategy and signposting that set out the approach of the Council to empty properties and how they were dealt with. It was acknowledged that some owners were reluctant to bring their properties back into use, which could cause significant delays. The preferred option for the Council was voluntary purchase, but compulsory purchase could be used as an ultimate sanction if required. It was hoped that the conclusion of the current compulsory purchase case would act as a deterrent to others helping to ensure that further compulsory purchases need not be pursued.

Members were pleased to note that the Empty Homes Officer had been actively inquiring into the compulsory sale of two properties, which had subsequently encouraged the owners to start to take action themselves. It was suggested that the Council's knowledge of these empty properties could be of strategic advantage for purchase and investment.

The Committee agreed that there should be specific targets set by the Council for the number of empty properties they aimed to bring back into use each year. It was suggested that Officers undertake some benchmarking of performance in comparison with other local authorities,

and report back to the Committee with a view to using this data to set such targets. Members noted that there was already a key performance indicator (KPI) for empty homes, which was reported on in the quarterly performance reports submitted to the Executive and Scrutiny Committee.

Officers confirmed that they would speak to colleagues at other authorities in order to share ideas and best practice, as well as gathering performance figures for benchmarking purposes.

RESOLVED:

- i. To note progress with the delivery of the Empty Property Strategy and Action Plan.**
- ii. To ask the Empty Homes Officer to specifically assess flats and rooms over shops across the District as potential empty homes that could be brought back into use.**
- iii. To ask Officers to ensure that relevant information on empty homes gathered as part of the annual canvass to update the Electoral Register be shared with the Empty Homes Officer.**
- iv. To ask Officers to report back to the Committee with benchmarking data from other local authorities on dealing with empty homes, with a view to the setting of a target for the number of homes being brought back into use.**

13 WORK PROGRAMME - POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE 2019-20

The Committee considered the 2019-20 work programme as set out at pages 13 to 15 of the agenda.

Members had a wide ranging discussion on the aims and interests of the Committee, and proposed the following changes to the work programme for 2019-20:

- That following an overview of the Council's housing service and related issues at the September meeting, the issue of North Yorkshire Home Choice be brought back to the Committee in October.
- That the two separate items on 'Housing at Selby District Council – An Overview' and 'Affordable Housing and Housing Need' be combined into one item for the September meeting.
- That the update item on Universal Credit be moved to the October meeting.
- That an item on future tech provision and infrastructure (such as

broadband in new homes, solar panels, electric car charging points) and the low carbon/'green' agenda be added to the work programme for future consideration, potentially at the October meeting. Members noted that such matters would need to be considered in the context of the new Local Plan, when that came to fruition.

- That an update should be provided on the Car Parking Strategy/Policy at a future meeting.
- That the Council's Private Sector Assistance Policy be considered by the Committee at a future meeting.
- The issue of empty industrial units was raised an issue attention but it was subsequently decided that this would be more appropriately considered at Scrutiny Committee.
- Whether the Council had or was developing an AirBnB policy was queried by the Committee; it was subsequently decided that, at present, the rental of properties managed by companies such as AirBnB was not an issue in the District, but that it could be added to the 'potential items' area of the work programme for future reference, should any problems occur.
- Lastly, the matter of Council owned garages was raised by the Committee' Officers confirmed that information on this could be covered in the Housing update due at the September meeting, as they formed part of the Housing Revenue Account.

RESOLVED:

- i. To note the work programme for 2019-20.**
- ii. That North Yorkshire Home Choice be brought back to the Committee for consideration in October.**
- iii. That the two separate items on 'Housing at Selby District Council – An Overview' and 'Affordable Housing and Housing Need' be combined into one item for the September meeting.**
- iv. That the update item on Universal Credit be moved to the October meeting.**
- v. That an item on future tech provision and infrastructure (such as broadband in new homes, solar panels, electric car charging points) and the low carbon/'green' agenda be added to the work programme for future consideration, potentially at the October meeting.**

- vi. That an update should be provided to the Committee on the Car Parking Strategy/Policy at a future meeting.**
- vii. That the Council's Private Sector Assistance Policy be considered by the Committee at a future meeting.**
- viii. That the issue of empty industrial units would be more appropriately considered by the Scrutiny Committee.**
- ix. That the use of AirBnB properties in the District be added to the 'potential items' area of the work programme for future reference, should any problems occur.**
- x. That issues around Council owned garages be covered in the Housing Overview item due at the September meeting, as they formed part of the Housing Revenue Account.**

The meeting closed at 6.00 pm.