



Report Reference Number: PR/20/12

To: Policy Review
Date: 12 January 2021
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Lead Executive Member: Councillor Chris Pearson, Lead Member for Housing Health and Culture
Lead Officer: June Rothwell, Head of Operational Services

Title: Empty Property Strategy and Action Plan

Summary:

The North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy and local Selby District Action Plan was agreed and adopted in January 2018.

The strategy aims to reduce the number of long-term empty homes through a co-ordinated approach and the local action plan sets out how we will target empty homes across the district, and how we will encourage, support and enforce owners to bring empty homes back into use.

This report provides an update on the progress of the implementation of the strategy and the action plan.

Recommendation:

That the content of the report be noted and any comments provided.

Reasons for recommendation:

To provide the Policy Review Committee with an update on the progress with the delivery of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan.

1. Introduction and background

1.1 High levels of empty properties are recognised as having a serious impact on the viability of communities. As the numbers within an area increase so can the incidence of vandalism which acts as a further disincentive to occupation.

Tackling empty homes can assist in meeting housing need; improve housing conditions and regenerate blighted areas, thereby supporting the growth agenda.

- 1.2 Some empty properties will be on the market for sale or to rent and will soon be occupied again and therefore our focus is on long-term empty homes, empty homes that have not become re-occupied within six months. At this stage by working to understand what is happening with the property and what the prospects of re-occupation are, a view can be taken as to whether we need to intervene and if so, how best to use our resources and powers to ensure that it does not remain empty.
- 1.3 The North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy 2017-2021 and action plan was developed to provide an overarching vision for the area and aims to reduce the number of long-term empty homes through a co-ordinated approach. The strategy highlights the importance of bringing empty properties back into use to meet housing need; to take advantage of any financial rewards such as the new homes bonus and to prevent anti-social behaviour and the blight empty homes can have on a neighbourhood.
- 1.4 The local Empty Homes Action Plan for Selby sets out how Empty Homes are targeted in the district, how owners are encouraged and supported to bring empty homes back into use and when enforcement action should be considered. The actions available to bring empty properties back in to use include:
 - Contact, encouragement and advice – this includes proactively working with landlords to help them resolve any issues that are preventing an empty property from being returned to the market either for sale or for rent
 - Grants and Loans – we will support landlords or homeowners to access funding or grants for improvement work where this will enable the property to be brought back into use
 - Direct Purchase (Voluntary) – a mutually agreed purchase of an empty property to enable the council to bring the property back into use
 - Enforcement (including Compulsory Purchase) – we will take enforcement action against landlords and property owners who neglect properties where this has a detrimental impact on the local area.

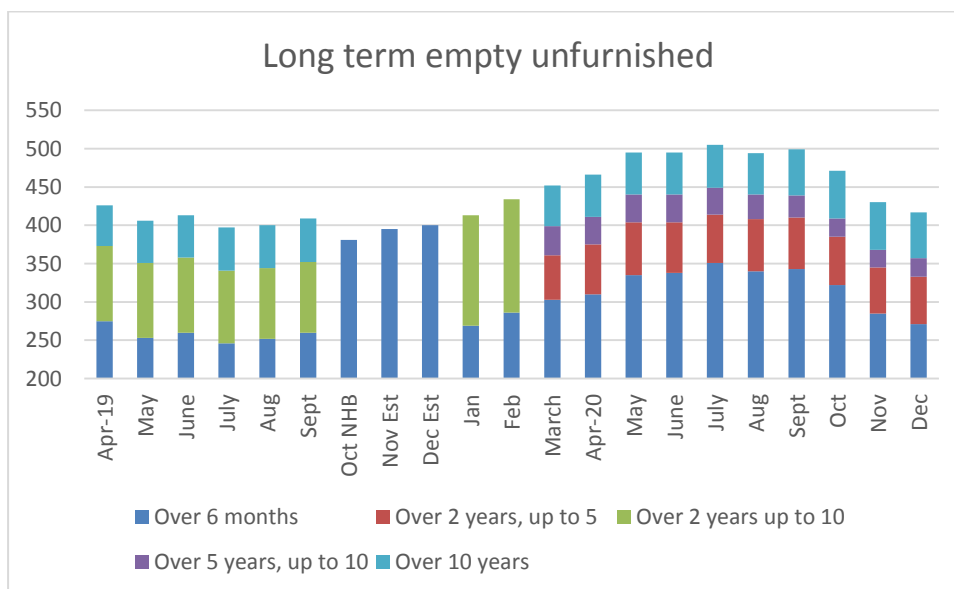
2. Performance Monitoring

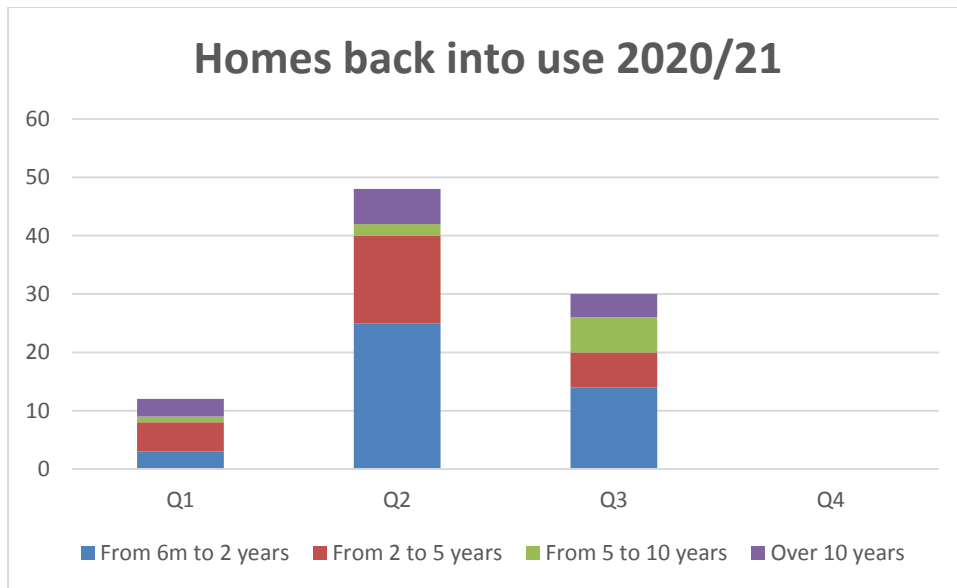
- 2.1 The majority of empty homes do not cause a problem. They occur because properties are between tenancies or ownership or are requiring some improvements or alterations. This is acknowledged and a Council Tax discount is available for empty property owners for a period of up to 6 months. Empty Homes are more likely to become a problem as the period empty extends. Some are a focus for anti-social behaviour and some cause problems for neighbouring owners.

- 2.2 There is a 100% premium for properties that have been empty for more than 2 years. From April 2020 properties that had been empty more than 5 years were charged an additional 200% premium and from April 2021 properties those that have been empty more than 10 year will be charged an additional 300% premium.
- 2.3 The introduction of the Empty Homes Officer post in 17/18 provided dedicated and intensive resource for empty homes management. This enabled the Council to gain a greater understanding of why properties become empty, what incentivises owners to bring them back into use and what enforcement options bring results.

Performance 20/21

- 2.4 The pandemic has directly impacted this area of work and earlier in the reporting year we saw a rise in the number of homes becoming long-term empty homes. House moves were delayed between March and June because of the restrictions in place but since then we have seen a lot of movement in the housing market and the number of long-term empties has reduced again.
- 2.5 On 1st of December 2020 there were 417 homes that had been empty and unfurnished for more than 6 months. This is back to the level at the start of the year. The 417 is the total figure. Of those 417, 271 were empty between 6 months and 2 years, 62 between 2 years and 5 years, 24 between 5 years and 10 years and 60 over 10 years. The diagram below demonstrates the curve we have seen.





New Homes Bonus

- 2.6 New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils to reflect and incentivize housing growth in their areas. It is based on the amount of extra Council Tax revenue raised for new-build homes, conversions and long-term empty homes brought back into use.
- 2.7 This year has seen an increase in the number of empty homes which count for New Homes Bonus from 381 in October 2019 to 433 in October 2020. A rise of 49. This is a rise of 14% and we ranked 118 of 350 Councils, putting us in the best performing third across England. 90% of Councils saw an increase in the numbers of empty homes this year.

Acquisitions

- 2.8 In 2018 the Council applied for and received approval from Homes England for grant to bring 10 Empty Homes back into use. The grant allows the Council to use up to £39,000 per property on acquisition and repairs to the housing in order to make a property habitable. A further £30,000 per property is available from Section 106 monies (per decision made by the Executive on 5 November 2015) to support the purchase and repairs to empty homes and the remaining financial support is available from the Housing Revenue capital receipts. Any property purchase is subject to a financial viability assessment and the necessary approvals.
- 2.9 We have purchased 7 properties through this programme and the properties purchased have now been added to our Housing Revenue Account. Four of the recent properties purchased were in Tadcaster and a local lettings plan was put in place to give priority to applicants with a connection to Tadcaster or the surrounding villages. All the properties have been let at an Affordable Rent. We are now looking to identify a further 3 properties to complete this programme.

Enforcement

- 2.10 We are still pursuing the compulsory purchase of a property in Selby. This work has been delayed due to the pandemic, but we expect to progress further forward now we are in the new year.
- 2.11 We continue to work closely with the Council Tax Team and are currently discussing the option of enforced sale on properties that have large debts from unpaid council tax on them.
- 2.12 The Empty Homes Officer continues to offer advice and assistance to owners in relation to renting and selling. Our Housing Options Team offer a Tenant Find service. This service helps a landlord find a suitable tenant and supports them to keep up to date with the requirements of them as a landlord in terms of property condition and management. We encourage owners to use this service and the use of the service is a condition of the Empty Homes Grant.

Grants and Loans

- 2.13 Our Private Housing Assistance Policy was updated to include Empty Homes Grants and Loans. The Empty Homes Loan is available to help homeowners bring their long-term empty properties back by providing access to funding to do essential repairs and maintenance works on their homes to bring them up to a saleable or lettable standard. Owners can borrow up to £15,000 per property interest free, with no repayments during the loan period, no interest charges and no charges for early repayment. An Empty Homes Grant is available to owners who agree to let the property throughout a five-year period at an affordable rent to tenants with a local connection on a minimum twelve month fixed-term, assured shorthold tenancy.
- 2.14 In 20/21 we have completed 3 grants providing 3 units of accommodation for housing options customers. We have another 2 grants on-going (which should complete this financial year) and which will provide 6 units of accommodation.

3. Next steps

- 3.1 We are working to identify properties that would be suitable for acquisition and would help meet housing need across the district. We are currently exploring several options, including properties that have been sold under the Right to buy.
- 3.2 Any purchase, like the previous ones, would require the approval of an individual business case demonstrating financial viability.

4. Implications

4.1 Legal Implications

There are no specific legal implications associated with this report.

4.2 Financial Implications

There are no specific financial implications associated with this report

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 We will continue to aim to increase the overall supply of available housing and reduce the negative impact that neglected empty homes can have on communities. We will target our financial resources where the demand for housing is at its highest and maximise the use of the affordable housing grant available.

6. Background Documents

York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Empty Homes Strategy
Selby Empty Homes Action Plan

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