



Report Reference Number: PR/19/3

To: Policy Review Committee
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Lead Executive Member: Cllr Chris Pearson, Lead Executive Member for Housing, Health and Culture
Lead Officer: June Rothwell, Head of Operational Services

Title: Progress with the delivery of the 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 North Yorkshire Empty Property 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 update on the progress made since the implementation of the strategy and action plan in April 2018.

Recommendations:

That the contents of the report are noted and any comments provided.

Reasons for recommendation:

To update Policy Review Committee on progress with the Empty Homes Programme 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 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 has been 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 return to the market either for sale or for rent
 - Grants and Loans – we will support landlords or home owners 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. Implementation of the Empty Property Strategy and local action plan

- 2.1 The introduction of the Empty Homes Officer post in 2017/18 provided dedicated and intensive resource for empty homes management. It has 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.

2.1.1 Performance in 2018/19

In 2018/19 24 long-term empty properties were brought back into use through the direct work of the empty homes officer of these 9 had been empty for 2 years or longer.

The Empty Homes Officer was absent during Qtr. 4 and this resulted in very little proactive work taking place on empty homes and this shows in the results.

Overall the project has progressed well and there were some good early results. The Empty Homes Officer was able to help bring a number of empty homes back into use through negotiation and by offering advice and support and now we are focusing on the more challenging cases.

2018/19	Total number of empty homes brought into use	Number of empty homes brought into use that were empty for over 2 years
Qtr. 1	6	3
Qtr. 2	11	6
Qtr. 3	7	0
Qtr. 4	0	0
Total	24	9

2.1.2 Advice and assistance

Advice given by the Empty Homes Officer is in relation to renting and selling and the financial assistance available. Our Housing Options Team offers a Tenant Find service - the Tenant Find Scheme helps a landlord find a suitable tenant and allows 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.

Properties that have been empty for over 2 years pay a premium council tax rate (this increased from 150% to 200% in April 2019) and the Empty Homes Officer works closely with the Taxation and Benefits team to raise awareness of the premium and of the empty homes support available.

2.1.3 Financial assistance

Our Private Housing Assistance Policy was updated in 2018 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.

In 2018/19 we approved and completed one Empty Homes Grant and one Empty Homes Loan and both properties were brought back into use, one as an affordable rented property available let through the Housing Options Service.

2.1.4 Voluntary Purchase

On 13th January 2019 the Executive approved a revision to our Affordable Housing Programme which enables the Council to Buy Back Ex Council houses, as part of the Council's Housing Development Strategy for increasing its supply of affordable housing stock and Empty Homes programme. The Council can now purchase empty properties and former Right to Buy Council properties where the Council has first refusal. Subject to favourable business cases, these purchases when completed will be returned to the HRA stock and will contribute to the Council's one for one replacement target for Right to Buy properties.

Following the approval officers are actively working on the purchase of the first Buy Back property in Selby and will also be seeking grant to support the purchase from Homes England.

2.1.5 Enforcement

Through offering advice and assistance to empty property owners we have increased their awareness of enforcement options. We have used some 'quick win' enforcement tools to improve the appearance and safety of empty homes to reinforce the message that we are serious about tackling empty homes.

Some enforcement tools take much longer and in December 2018 a report was presented to the Executive seeking approval to progress towards the acquisition of an empty property through the use of compulsory purchase powers. This was approved and since then we have made a formal offer to purchase the property. This was not accepted by the owner and we are progressing with the compulsory acquisition. Once we have purchased the property it will be added to the housing stock under the Housing Revenue Account.

3. Next steps

We have started the year positively and in the first quarter of 19/20 have brought 14 properties back into use. We are focused on maximising the use of

the Homes England Affordable Housing Grant and we have committed to purchasing 6 properties in 19/20.

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 a number of options, including properties that have been sold under the Right to buy and any purchase 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

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 a financial viability assessment and the necessary approvals.

5. Conclusion

The Empty Homes programme has had a successful start and there is an opportunity to build on the foundations built in 18/19. We will aim to increase the overall supply of 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

- I. York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Empty Homes Strategy
- II. Selby Empty Homes Action Plan

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