



## **Councillor Andrew Lee – Chair of Policy Review Committee**

### **Report to Council – 17 September 2019**

The Policy Review Committee has met twice, on 23 July and 10 September 2019, since the previous update given to Council in July 2019.

#### **23 July 2019**

The main items of business on the agenda for this meeting were as follows:

##### **Empty Homes Strategy - PR/19/3**

The Committee received a report from 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.

The North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy and local Selby District Action Plan had been agreed and adopted in January 2018 and aimed to reduce the number of long-term empty homes through a co-ordinated approach. 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.

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

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

Properties empty for over two years were required to pay 200% council tax, which did not always act as a deterrent. Officers confirmed that the Council had the power to increase to 300% if 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 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.

Officers were asked to give special consideration to identifying empty flats and rooms over shops, which if reoccupied would meet a significant housing need in town centres. The geographical spread of empty properties in the District was fairly even, and the focus of Officers was usually in areas that had particular housing need.

Officers explained that empty properties also came 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 information gathered as part of the annual canvass be used by Officers. 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 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 a clear strategy and signposting that set out the approach of the Council to empty properties and how they were dealt with. Some owners were reluctant to bring their properties back into use, but 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 in the future.

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 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. 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.

#### Work Programme 2019-20

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

- That 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.

### **10 September 2019**

The Policy Review Committee met on 10 September 2019. However, this meeting was after the agenda deadline for Council reports and therefore a verbal update will be provided at the meeting.

**Future Meetings:** The next meeting of the Policy Review Committee will be on 15 October 2019.

**Councillor Andrew Lee**  
**Chair, Policy Review Committee**