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To: Policy Review Committee
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Title: Empty Homes Performance Monitoring

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.

The aim of the North Yorkshire Empty Property Strategy is:

'To reduce the number of long-term empty homes across the sub-region through a co-ordinated approach'

Policy Review considered the progress of implementation of the Strategy and Local Action plan in July 2019 and asked 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.

The report considers best practice and makes a proposal for the future monitoring.

Recommendations:

To ask the Committee to consider and comment on the report and its contents.

Reasons for recommendation:

To provide Policy Review Committee with an overview of Empty Homes performance monitoring to enable them to provide comments on the proposals for future monitoring at Selby District Council.

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 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 In 2018/19 the results recorded against the key performance indicators were:

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

In 18/19 24 properties were brought into use due to the direct action of the Empty Homes Officer and of these 24, 9 had been empty for 2 years or longer.

On 1st April 2018 there were 416 empty and unfurnished empty properties and on 31st March 2019 there were 430. This means there were 14 more long term Empty Properties at the end of the year, than at the start.

2. Performance Monitoring

2.1 Identifying Empty Homes

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. Properties that remain empty and unfurnished for 2 years or more are currently charged a premium council tax rate which doubles the amount payable.

The strategic approach is to identify properties and assist owners where possible, then to carry out enforcement where necessary. The action plan includes communications, systems and monitoring.

By raising the profile of Empty Homes we are able to work closer with partners to tackle the issue.

A recent complaint about a dangerous tree overhanging a public right of way identified that the tree was in the garden of a long term empty home. The house had been empty for two years following the death of the owner; there was an exemption from Council Tax as probate had not been awarded. Partnership work with North Yorkshire Highways meant that they were able to deal with the immediate safety issue while the empty homes officer contacted the family. The property had been repossessed by a bank, then the bank had been subject to a merger and this property had become a little lost in the system. Working with the owners prompted them to sell the property. The house sold promptly and is now being renovated prior to the new owners moving in.

2.2 Empty Homes Data

By working closely with our Local Taxation department we have improved performance in the first two quarters of 19/20 and have exceeded the result of 18/19.

2019/20	Total number of empty homes brought into use	Number of empty homes brought into use that were empty for over 2 years
Qtr. 1	14	9
Qtr. 2	27	12
Total	41	21

The reported figure now reflects the joined up work of both private sector housing and council tax teams. The majority were been brought back into use following advice and support, three were reoccupied following receipt of an Empty Homes Grant or loan and two following enforcement discussions. The properties are spread throughout the district and include properties in Selby town and in Tadcaster, both areas of high demand.

Data on empty homes from Council Tax is limited and empty properties can be invisible. The data used is the number of long term (over 6 months) empty, unfurnished dwellings but this figure doesn't include all properties that have been empty over 6 months and specifically doesn't include properties going through probate, properties that are empty and furnished and any others receiving a council tax exemption. Furthermore when a dwelling is taken out of Council Tax banding by the Valuation Office they no longer show in the data. These properties are usually in serious disrepair and if they are not already known to us we rely on identifying these properties through complaints from members of the public or through reports from frontline visiting staff or ward members.

Council Tax data is also used on an annual basis to calculate the Local Authorities New Homes Bonus. New Homes Bonus is currently paid to authorities for every additional dwelling counted in Council Tax data collection. This is done annually in October. The number of empty homes reported in the Council Tax base returns and the changes in the numbers of long-term empties reported in relation to the New Homes Bonus cannot solely reflect the performance of the local authority in tackling empty homes as the changes reported reflect wider market forces and data inaccuracies over which we have limited control of. The Empty Homes Officer does however work closely with the Council Tax department prior to the collection to ensure that the data held is correct and that recently reoccupied properties are correctly coded.

2.3 Best Practice

Local Authorities are encouraged to follow guidelines for monitoring empty home interventions. The Empty Homes Network is a national empty homes practitioner's network who provide access to guidance, training and best practice for Empty Homes Officers. They encourage Local Authorities to adopt a

standard approach for recording and reporting on their successful interventions to address empty homes in their area. The network provides a common and transparent set of criteria for use in monitoring empty homes work and this then creates the opportunity for benchmarking between comparable local authorities and provides information that can be used in policy and strategy making.

The Empty Homes Network suggests that the following is recorded:

The number of eligible dwellings either demolished or brought into residential occupation (whether through re-use or conversion of empty property) attributable to eligible interventions by a housing authority.

The best practice guidance goes further to say each success should be reported under one of the following headings:

- Dwellings vacant for less than 6 months prior to re-occupation
- Dwellings vacant for 6 to 24 months prior to re-occupation
- Dwellings vacant for over 24 months prior to re-occupation
- Dwellings where the sole local authority intervention was to agree, approve, fund or issue a rent and/or deposit guarantee and/or rent-in-advance
- Dwellings never previously occupied and brought into use after standing empty for over 6 months following completion
- Dwellings demolished
- Additional dwellings created through conversion of vacant residential or redundant commercial space.

To record a success, the local authority needs to demonstrate that the local authority's intervention **made a material contribution to a positive outcome that occurred without unreasonable delay.**

This means that it should be possible to evidence a chain of events unfolding without unreasonable delay following the local authority intervention and to show that, on the balance of probability, one event led on to the next as a precondition or cause.

2.4 Benchmarking

In response to the request for benchmarking information our Empty Homes Officer met with the other North Yorkshire Council's to discuss Empty Homes performance monitoring. The information available at this time is limited and most only record the changes to the number of long term empty properties (as recorded through the Council Tax data). It was agreed that each local authority would start to monitor the work undertaken by their Empty Homes Officers and share this information with the group in the future.

It was agreed that any performance monitoring should be outcome focused and therefore in addition to the Empty Homes Network recommended monitoring, it was suggested the following could provide further indications of success.

1. A percentage of long term empty home owners engaging with the Council

2. A number of properties with enforcement action or positive actions (grants/loans/advice).
3. A number of additional homes with affordable rents as a result of Council interventions

This work is on-going but by the end of Q3 more information will be available.

3. Next Steps

We have started the year positively and in the first half of 19/20 have brought 41 properties back into use through the direct action of the empty homes officer.

We are now focused on maximising the use of the Homes England Affordable Housing Grant and we have committed to purchasing 6 properties in 19/20. One purchase completed in August 2019 and we are working on 1 compulsory purchase of a long term empty property. We continue to identify properties that would be suitable for acquisition and that would help meet housing need across the district and are currently exploring a number of options, including properties that have been sold under the Right to buy. Any purchase would require the approval of an individual business case demonstrating financial viability.

We propose to retain the current Key Performance Indicators which are in line with best practice. In addition to these we will monitor a wider range of performance management indicators that will help us understand the service fully.

- Annual change in the number of Empty Properties (New Homes Bonus)
- The percentage of long term empty home owners engaging with the Council
- The number of additional homes available as affordable housing as a result of Council Intervention
- The number of Grants and Loans completed
- The number of Enforcement Actions taken

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.

The delivery of the Empty Homes Action Plan has been supported through Council funding the Empty Homes Officer. A bid to continue this work for a further 3 years has been submitted.

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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