

Cherwell District Council

Executive

3 April 2017

Empty Homes Project Update

Report of Commercial Director

This report is public

Purpose of report

To provide Members with an update on the first 12 months work of the Empty Homes Project, based within the Private Sector Housing Team.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To note the progress of owner engagement with the project.
- 1.2 To note the proposals for use of enforcement powers to bring empty properties back into use.
- 1.3 To note the added value of addressing vacant properties to the Council.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Previously, Members had agreed to fund a shared Empty Property Officer post with South Northants Council on a 2-year fixed term contract. The officer came into post in April 2016.
- 2.2 The focus of the Empty Homes Project is to engage with owners of residential properties that have been vacant for a minimum of 6 months. The data used to identify these owners and properties is primarily provided from Council Tax records. Reports of empty properties are also received from other parties including the general public.
- 2.3 The principal approach has been to contact the owners or responsible parties as detailed on Council Tax records by letter enclosing an Empty Homes Survey. Owners are asked to return the surveys, giving details of:
 - how they acquired the property
 - the general condition

- the timescale when it would be brought back into use
- what assistance would help to bring the property back into use

2.4 It is not the intention of the project to contact owners who are trying to bring their properties back into use. In order to identify priority cases, and where the property may have become “stuck”, checks are made to see if any activity has been recorded against the address. For example, online marketing checks are carried out to see if the property is available for sale or rent. Planning and Building Control records that are available online are also checked. Where a property is being actively marketed, or recent applications have been made for works to the home then surveys are not sent. The activity is recorded against the address and the property record is monitored.

2.5 The letters have targeted properties by length of time vacant. A summary of those mail outs is as follows:

Length of time vacant	No. of addresses as per Council Tax records	No. of properties where activity has been identified	Surveys sent	Surveys received	No of properties back into use as a result of Project by 20 Mar 2017	Total No of properties back into use by Mar 2017
2+ year As at April 16	90	17	73	40	3	31
1 - 2 years As at May 16	106	48	58	27	3	78
9 - 12 months As at June 16	103	53	50	23	4	84
6 – 15 months As at Oct 16	83	39	44	20	2	44
6 – 8 months As at Dec 16	123	95	31	10	0	28
6 months As at Mar 17	61	40	21* to be sent	0	0	11

2.6 The database of empty properties is checked monthly against Council Tax records. Records are kept to monitor the churn in empty homes within the private sector.

3.0 Report Details

3.1 The gross number of private sector empty properties within Cherwell District Council that have been vacant for more than 6 months is 220. However, when the properties are analysed 137 (62%) are subject to activity by the owner, or have planning consent as redevelopment opportunities.

3.2 Council Tax data shows that approximately 530 properties have been void for less than 6 months. Analysis of these properties is not undertaken as they fall outside the remit of the project.

- 3.3 Since coming into post, the officer has established an Empty Homes Working Group. The group meet approximately every 3 months to discuss options for void properties that their sections may be dealing with. Officers from the following sections are invited to attend:
- Council Tax
 - Planning Conservation
 - Planning Enforcement
 - Building Control
 - Public Protection
 - Investment and Growth
- 3.4 In order to promote the project and raise awareness of empty properties, a number of initiatives have taken place, including:
- Revising the web pages and creating an online form to report empty homes
 - Presentation to the Landlord Forum
 - Issue of 3 press releases
 - Newsletter to owners to coincide with National Empty Homes Week
 - Drop-in session for owners organised as part of National Empty Homes Week
 - Production of short videos for use on the Council's Facebook and Twitter accounts
 - Use of social media to post a series of advice and guidance to owners on dealing with their empty homes and the risks involved in not managing properties such as damage, vandalism and fraud.
 - Articles in the Council magazines, encouraging owners to deal with their properties, but also highlighting risks of leaving homes void.
- 3.5 To date there are 37 active cases where owners of long term empty properties are working to bring their properties back into use. A number of these properties have been vacant for over 10 years. The properties may be causing issues for neighbouring homes, blighting neighbourhoods or accruing debt and arrears. There is clear correlation between the intervention of the council and the activity of the owner. This intervention can be very time consuming, but having a consistent and regular contact with owners reaps results by problematic properties being addressed.
- 3.6 Where owners continue to leave properties void and no activity is taking place, then enforcement action is considered. Properties causing most concern to neighbours or where there is a high housing need are prioritised. By working with Council colleagues the full range of enforcement options can be considered. At present a number of dwellings have been identified as suitable for Empty Dwelling Management Orders. Other options could be Enforced Sale or Compulsory Purchase. The Empty Homes Officer is working on cases for consideration of enforcement by Senior Officers and Members as appropriate.
- 3.7 Nationally it is recognised that Councils who have a dedicated Empty Homes resource do contribute to the number of available dwellings within their district. Not only is additional housing available, but the Council also benefits from the additional New Homes Bonus that reducing the number of empty homes delivers. Raising awareness of empty homes and assisting owners prevents the long term social issues that vacant properties attract, such as vandalism, disrepair and property

fraud. Addressing empty properties can also assist with recovery of Council Tax arrears.

- 3.8 Cherwell District Council has a range of financial measures to support owners through Landlord Grants, Flexible Empty Homes Loan and the Leasing Scheme in partnership with Housing Association. Cherwell District Council follows Best Practice when negotiating with owners is to remind them of the assistance available from the Council.
- 3.9 At present, 1 property is being repaired ready for occupancy through the Flexible Empty Homes Loan scheme, and owners of 2 other properties are obtaining estimates for refurbishment with the intention to apply for Flexible Empty Homes Loans. A number of owners have expressed interest in the Landlord Grant scheme.
- 3.10 The project has been directly involved in returning 12 homes to use in its first year (see table 2.5 above). The estimated income to the Council from New Homes Bonus from those 12 properties (based on the specified average Band C council tax) is a total of £12,660 per year and a cumulatively total of £75,960 over the 6 year payment period. In Year-2 of the project our target is for a further 12 properties to be brought back into use, which would result in an additional £12,660 per annum to the Council and a further cumulative total for those year-2 properties of £75,960 over the 6 year payment period.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 The Empty Homes Project has successfully engaged with owners of the longest term void properties. Whilst it should be noted that these properties will take time to come back into use, owners do now have plans and are positively pursuing their options.
- 4.2 It is hoped that through regular engagement with owners of homes that are just 6 months properties will not become stuck, falling into disrepair and causing concern for neighbours and wider amenity issues.
- 4.3 The estimated income from the first year of the Empty Homes Project is in the region of £75,960 from New Homes Bonus over the 6 year payment period. This is as a result of tackling the longest-term void properties and supporting owners where there has been no activity at the property for a long period.

5.0 Consultation

None

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 6.1 None

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Comments checked by:

Joanne Kaye, Principal Accountant, 01295 221545
joanne.kaye@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk,

Legal Implications

- 7.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Should any of the enforcement processes referred to in the report be activated the legal team would provide advice where appropriate.

Comments checked by:

Kevin Lane, Head of Law and Governance – 0300 0030107
kevin.lane@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

Risk Implications

- 7.3 The Empty Property Officer post is jointly funded by Cherwell District Council and South Northants Council for a 2 year period. The work is not guaranteed beyond this period. If the project is to continue beyond this point, additional funding would need to be identified.

The risks within this projected will be managed as part of the teams operational risk register and escalated to the corporate register if and when necessary.

Comments checked by:

Louise Tustian, Senior Performance & Improvement Officer – 01295 258104
Louise.tustian@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: No

Community Impact Threshold Met: No

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Housing Strategy objectives: Increasing the supply and access to housing.

Lead Councillor

Councillor John Donaldson, Lead Member for housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
None	
Background Papers	
None	
Report Author	Tim Mills, Private Sector Housing Manager
Contact Information	01295 221655 Tim.mills@cherwell-dc.gov.uk