

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee Briefing Note



DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

### Subject: Re-use of empty properties

Head of Service / Chris Stratford  
Officer Responsible / Tim Mills

<p><b>Background and Reason for Briefing Note</b></p>	<p>The Overview and Scrutiny Committee previously considered reports on empty homes in January 2012 and March 2013, and has confirmed its desire to see empty homes brought back into use and to monitor progress made. The Committee has requested this briefing note to provide it with an update.</p>
<p><b>Head of Service's update</b></p>	<p><b>2012</b> In 2012 the Committee endorsed an approach based on the principles that the council wished to see empty homes re-used, would facilitate and encourage that where possible but was prepared to use its enforcement powers where appropriate. Both the Delivery Team (DT) and the Private Sector Housing Team (PSHT) are involved in this work and have worked jointly on a number of schemes, although the PSHT primarily focuses on individual empties whilst the DT is primarily concerned with strategic sites and opportunities to deliver affordable housing (as well as possibilities involving non-residential buildings)<sup>1</sup>.</p> <p><b>2013-14</b> This was a successful year with completion of a number of schemes including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A renovation and leasing scheme that brought 4 self-contained flats in Broughton Road, Banbury, back into use as affordable housing.</li> <li>• The leasing, renovation and management of 5 bedsits in a house in Dashwood Road, Banbury.</li> <li>• The purchase and renovation of a long-term empty, former HMO, which has been brought back into use as 5 bedsits.</li> <li>• 2 further long-term empty homes returned to use as a result of engagement with their owners.</li> </ul> <p>Agreement was also gained towards the end of 2013 to use New Homes Bonus to fund a part-time post (on a 12-month contract) to help with identification and follow-up visits to empty homes. Unfortunately we were unable to recruit a suitable person and, given the progress made with visiting undertaken by the Customer Services Team on behalf of the Service Assurance Team (to check Council Tax records). We are not proposing to seek to recruit again at this stage.</p>

<sup>1</sup> A list of schemes was included as an appendix to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee report of March 2013.

**2014-15**

For 2014-15 the Housing Service Plan includes a target that 16 homes should be returned to use. Good progress is being made including:

- A further 4 self-contained flats in Broughton Road, Banbury, brought back into use as affordable housing through the renovation and leasing scheme (see above).
- 5 self-contained flats in Golden Villa, Banbury, renovated and restored to use (with nomination-rights for 4 years each) by means of our Landlords Home Improvement Grant (LHIG).
- 2 further flats with nomination-rights expected to be completed and re-occupied in a matter of weeks, again by means of LHIG. (These are ‘flats above shops’ in Church Lane, Banbury)
- Contractors appointed for complex redevelopment schemes at 1 West Street, Juniper Court and 2 Broughton Road, Banbury.

An enforcement budget of £100k was secured for 2014-15 through the Council’s Capital Appraisal Bid process. This is in effect a reserve budget that will be used to pay both for work-in-default<sup>2</sup> and for bringing empty properties back into use through the Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMOs) process<sup>3</sup>.

Officers have been working on what will be the Council’s first Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) and expect to submit the application for approval to the Residential Property Tribunal shortly. (The house in question is a long-term empty property that will require significant repair, but which can provide a good family home.) A successful application will provide opportunity to promote and publicise our empty-homes work and our preparedness to use enforcement to deal with problematic long-term empty homes, and should add positive emphasis to our conversations with their owners.

In addition we are exploring a newly identified power to enforce the sale of empty properties where the Council has incurred costs in resolving issues such as rubbish accumulation and rodent infestation. This may provide a swifter, more certain and less costly means of getting some long-term empty homes onto the market than does compulsory purchase.

**Future work**

Members have been asked to consider the use of Empty Homes Premium<sup>4</sup> when the annual review of Council Tax discounts and exemptions is undertaken, since use of this power has the potential to provide a further means of encouraging the re-use of certain properties that have been empty for in excess of 2 years.

**Summary**

The renewed focus on empty properties has already had some positive results

<sup>2</sup> Work-in-default is the term given to work undertaken by the Council if a notice recipient fails to carry out required actions. The costs incurred are recoverable with interest and (in most cases) can be secured by means of a charge made against the property in question. The work does however have to be paid for initially, hence the need for a budget.

<sup>3</sup> EDMOs allow the Council to take effective control of certain long-term empty property, to undertake remedial work and to arrange for them to be let and managed. The rental income is used to reimburse the costs incurred by the Council.

<sup>4</sup> Empty Homes Premium is a discretionary power to charge a premium of up to an additional 50% on the Council Tax payable for certain long-term empty properties.

Appendix 2

and officers are continuing to seek to take advantage of development opportunities and also to use enforcement powers (some for the first time). The results of these initiatives is expected to bear further fruit in due course. Members should have confidence that the Council's commitment to the use of the Principles approved in January 2012, and the work which is being undertaken to encourage, facilitate and, where necessary, to enforce re-use, will continue to reduce the number of long-term empty properties in the district.

**Completed by: Tim Mills**

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