

Report to Cabinet

Date of meeting 21st July 2016

By the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Protection

DECISION REQUIRED



**Horsham
District
Council**

Not Exempt

The Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020

Executive Summary

The Council's Empty Homes Strategy was reviewed on 26th April 2016 by the Private Sector Housing Policy Group to ensure that the strategy continues to deliver its objectives, reflects current best practice and is in line with legislation and national policy. It was considered that the existing policy meets these objectives and only minor amendments were required to the strategy to take account that delivery of parts of the strategy, previously undertaken by Brighton and Hove City Council, has been brought in-house. This report therefore seeks approval of a new Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020

Recommendations

That the Cabinet recommended to:

- i) Agree the Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020 as set out at Appendix 2 to this report

Reasons for Recommendations

- i) To enable the Council to maintain a robust Empty Homes Strategy and
- ii) to take into account that delivery of all of the strategy has been brought in-house.

Background Papers: Empty Homes Strategy 2010-2015

Wards affected: All

Contact: John Batchelor, Environmental Health and Licensing Manager, Ext 5417

Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Council's Empty Homes Strategy was reviewed on 26th April 2016 by the Private Sector Housing Policy Group to ensure that the strategy continues to deliver its objectives, reflects current best practice and is in line with legislation and national policy. It was considered that the existing policy meets these objectives and only minor amendments were required. The purpose of this report is therefore to seek approval for a new Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020.
- 1.2 The Council's first empty homes strategy 2004 -2009 was reactive rather than proactive. In 2008 the Private Sector Housing Policy Group was supportive of the Council taking a more proactive approach to tackling empty homes and a research project was undertaken to investigate and determine the severity of long term empty homes in the private housing sector within the District.
- 1.3 The project was completed in April 2009 and provided a detailed base line of long term empty homes in the District and recommendations on how the Council could proactively deal with empty properties. As a result the Empty Homes Strategy 2010-2015 was approved in February 2010.
- 1.4 As there were insufficient resources within the Council to take this strategy forward it was agreed to engage Brighton and Hove City Council's Empty Property Team to undertake part of the service. A service level agreement was entered into in August 2009 for Brighton and Hove City Council to maintain a database of current long term empty homes, to take action to persuade owners to bring long term empty homes back into use and to provide information to owners and people affected by empty properties about our policy and strategy. In addition an Empty Homes Enforcement Group was established comprising HDC Officers from a number of departments to take and co-ordinate enforcement activities to deal with empty homes which were giving rise to complaints.
- 1.5 The Empty Homes Strategy expired at the end of last year and as there have been some changes in the delivery of the strategy an updated strategy is required.

2 Relevant Council policy

- 2.1 The Empty Property Strategy contributes towards the District Priority of Support our Communities by providing environmental health and licensing services which make a fundamental contribution to the maintenance and improvement of public health, quality of life and wellbeing.

3 Details

- 3.1 The current Empty Homes Strategy 2010-2015 has been successful in bringing empty homes back into use over the past five years. A target to bring 10 empty homes back into use each year was set and this figure has been exceeded:
 - 2010/11 - 12
 - 2011/12 - 25

- 2012/13 - 18
- 2013/14 - 24
- 2014/15 - 23
- 2015/16 – 23

3.2 The Environmental Health and Licensing Department operate an empty homes database of homes that have been empty for over six months. The number of empty properties on the data base changes every month and over the last year has varied between 300 and 390 distributed throughout the District.

3.3 Letters are sent every month to those properties on the database, beginning with:

- A letter explaining that the home is classified as empty and asking whether this is correct, as well as offering assistance and information. This brings in many responses, and updates are passed to the Council Tax Department.
- A second letter is sent to those who do not respond within 3 months,
- A third letter is sent to those who have still not responded after 6 months, this final one includes a legal notice requiring information on ownership.
- Any properties whose owners still have not got in touch receive visits and further personalised correspondence.

We send on average 40 first letters, 15 second, and 5 third each month.

Empty properties which generate complaints from neighbours or build up large debts are referred to the Empty Homes Enforcement Group which determines whether enforcement action is appropriate.

3.4 The Private Sector Housing Policy Group reviewed the strategy and as it is successful, determined that there was no need to change the direction or priorities of the strategy

3.5 Due to the financial pressure on the Council and the need to make savings it was decided to end the service level agreement the Council had with Brighton and Hove City Council to deliver parts of the strategy on 31st March 2015. Brighton and Hove City Council were maintaining a database of current long term empty homes, taking action to persuade owners to bring long term empty homes back into use and providing information to owners and people affected by empty properties about our policy and strategy. These functions are now being undertaken by staff within the Environmental Health and Licensing Department.

3.6 Due to this change in the delivery of parts of the strategy it was agreed that the new strategy needed to reflect this and this has been incorporated into the new strategy as set out at Appendix 2 to this report.

4 Next Steps

4.1 Under this heading describe what follows or needs to be done next, inserting sub-headings and paragraph numbers if necessary.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

- 5.1 The Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020 was reviewed on 11th July 2016 the Policy Development Advisory Group which approved the strategy.
- 5.2 The Council's Empty Homes Strategy 2016-2020 was reviewed on 26th April 2016 by the Private Sector Housing Policy Group.
- 5.3 The Monitoring Officer comments are incorporated in the report.

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 Not to have a coordinated approach to deal with empty homes. As empty homes are a wasted resource in terms of housing available for people to live in and have a negative impact on their surrounding communities this was not considered to be an appropriate course of action.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 There are no additional financial consequences arising from this report.

8 Legal Consequences

- 8.1 There are no additional legal consequences arising from this report.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 As the direction and priorities of the strategy have not changed there are no risks associated with this strategy.
- 9.2 As the delivery of the strategy has now all been brought in house resourcing the delivery of the strategy will have to compete with other Departmental priorities in a climate of diminishing resources.

10 Other Considerations

- 10.1 Empty homes in poor condition are an eyesore blighting a neighbourhood, can attract vandalism and other antisocial behaviour. Therefore bringing empty homes back into use will have a positive impact in reducing crime and disorder.
- 10.2 Action under the proposed strategy would be taken without discrimination and is designed to give equal consideration to people's needs.
- 10.3 The proposed strategy is designed to bring empty homes back into use, thereby maintaining the housing stock and reducing the negative impact they have on their surroundings.