



Report to:	Cabinet	06/12/2021
Lead Cabinet Member:	Councillor John Batchelor – Lead Member for Housing	
Lead Officer:	Peter Campbell – Head of Housing	

Empty Homes Strategy 2021 - 2025

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to consider the draft Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) for wider public consultation.
2. The Strategy sets out the position of empty homes in the District and the tools available to the Council to help bring empty homes back into use. A survey of owners of empty properties was also undertaken in July 2021, the results of which are attached at Appendix B.

Key Decision

3. Yes

Definition of key decision:

(b) it is significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards or electoral divisions in the area of the relevant local authority.

The key decision was first published in the 2nd August 2021 Forward Plan.

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a) Approve the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2021 -2025, as set out at Appendix A, to go out to wider public consultation,
- b) Delegates authority to the Lead Member for Housing to approve the final Strategy subject to minor amendments, if any, arising from the consultation.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 5. To ensure we have an up to date Strategy, setting out how we deal with empty homes in the District.

Details

- 6. The draft Empty Homes Strategy was previously considered at Informal Cabinet in January 2021. At that time further work was requested to better understand the reasons why empty homes were left empty and what additional measures could be taken to help bring empty homes back into use. Following this, a survey was undertaken to all owners of empty properties, and an enforcement working group and a 'Challenging Buildings Forum' with Cambridge City and Huntingdonshire District Council have since been established. An Empty Homes Annual Report will also be published each year following the Strategy's publication to provide an update to Members.
- 7. The Strategy sets out the current situation with regards to empty homes both locally and nationally. There were 663 properties classed as empty for 6-24 months within the District in October 2021, which was a decrease from the previous year of 843 properties. The high rise in the number of short-term empty homes can be attributed to the restrictions due to covid 19 affecting people being able to sell, relet or return to properties. It should also be noted that these properties include those that are in the process of being sold, and whilst the overall trend may stay relatively stable, there will be a certain amount of churn.
- 8. The more relevant figures to note in terms of empty homes are the number of long-term properties empty for two years or more. There are currently 207 empty properties (October 2021) which have been empty for more than two years which represent 0.3% of the overall housing stock. Whilst any empty home is a wasted

resource, the number of enquiries the Council receives regarding empty properties that are causing an issue is low, averaging around 5 properties per year. These issues are usually dealt with by environmental health and/or planning enforcement and often relate to the visual amenity such as the upkeep of the garden or condition of the property.

9. South Cambridgeshire does not suffer the same problems as urban areas that have high levels of empty homes in particular hotspots that can lead to a haven for crime, vandalism, anti-social behaviour and squatting. The issue of empty homes within the District is more about the lack of housing available rather than empty homes being problematic. We will always try to work with owners to resolve issues rather than resorting to enforcement action where possible. Where properties are being well looked after, council tax paid and are not causing a particular nuisance or harm, the Council has very little powers to bring a property back into use.
10. Results from the survey, indicated that the main reason for properties remaining empty was because the property was on the market to be sold or that it was being repaired or renovated. When asked if the costs of repair were a factor in the property remaining empty, over 85% of respondents said no, with only 12% (15 respondents) indicating that they would be interested in grants for renovations. However, it is likely that any grant made available would need to be substantial in order to be attractive, as previous grants offered at £10,000 had no take up.
11. The main outcome from the survey identified that the lack of money was not the main reason for properties remaining empty and the majority of owners were not interested in services to help them bring properties back into use. A further breakdown of the survey results can be found at Appendix B.
12. On balance, there is only a handful of properties that particularly cause the Council an issue during the year and therefore the Empty Homes Strategy sets out a proportionate and balanced approach to tackling empty homes in the District. The Strategy sets out the tools available to the Council which include:
 - Incremental increases in council tax dependent on the length of time the property remains empty.

- Signposting to support, such as through Ermine Street Housing and Shire Homes Lettings.
- Providing letters of confirmation that the property has been empty so that the owner can apply for a reduced VAT rate of 5% for renovation works.
- Enforcement action through the use of legal notices. These notices can be applied where the property is adversely affecting the amenity of the neighbourhood, or where premises are in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance. This type of action does not mean that the property has to be occupied but must be brought up to a certain standard. In most cases, failure by the owner to comply with a legal notice can lead to councils arranging for the works to be carried out in default and charging the costs to the owner.
- Enforcement action to recover the property. This type of action is seen as a last resort and is very resource intensive in terms of staffing and costs, with no guarantee of a successful outcome. Compulsory purchase powers can only be used where it is expedient to do so, and only where there is a compelling case in the public interest. Unless there are associated problems, it is unlikely that an empty home that was in a deteriorating state would be reason enough to justify a case in the wider context of public interest to require the local authority to compulsorily purchase a property.

13. The establishment of the 'Challenging Buildings Forum' will collectively look at properties where there are significant issues in terms of disrepair, health and safety. Properties may not necessarily be empty, but this will be a forum to discuss such properties and agree the most appropriate form of action to take. The enforcement working group, is an internal cross-departmental group, that will ensure there is a joined-up approach to any enforcement action and that the measures taken are proportionate and appropriate to the issue. Again this group will not only look at empty homes enforcement action, but other areas of enforcement within the Council.

14. The Council does not currently have a dedicated officer who deals with empty homes. Whilst the issues of empty properties in the area are not significant, we

do take the matter of empty homes seriously. Whilst measures have already been put in place through the Challenging Buildings Forum and Enforcement Working Group, we are looking to secure funding for the 2022/23 budget to recruit a dedicated officer who would take the lead on complaints received relating to empty homes and any relevant action.

Options

15. To approve the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2021-25 to go out to public consultation. To delegate authority to the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing to approve the final Strategy subject to any minor changes arising from the consultation.
16. To reject the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2021-25. Without an up-to-date Empty Homes Strategy, the Council is unable to demonstrate how it is tackling empty homes in the District.

Implications

17. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-
18. There are no significant implications.

Equality and Diversity

19. An equality impact assessment has been carried out and no specific impacts on any protected groups have been found.

Consultation responses

20. Consultation with owners of empty properties has been carried out by way of a survey to find out why their property is empty and what barriers they face to bring it back into use. A breakdown of the survey responses can be found at Appendix B.

21. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered the report and Empty Homes Strategy at their meeting on 11 November 2021 and made the following recommendations:

- That Cabinet considers the further option of the Council buying empty properties by agreement with their owners under the terms of the Council's Investment Strategy.
- That Cabinet monitors the effectiveness of the measures outlined in bringing empty homes back into use and considers the option of increasing the premium charges if it considers there to be a reasonable prospect of such a step reducing the overall number of empty properties throughout the District

22. In terms of the Council buying empty properties by agreement, there is the option for Ermine Street Housing to consider purchase or through Shire Homes Lettings for owners interested in renting out their property (see paragraphs 6.2 and 6.3 of the Strategy). The recruitment of a dedicated officer to lead on Empty Homes can explore these options further through liaison with home-owners of empty properties and provide further analysis in terms of value for money for the Council and the success of bringing empty homes back into use.

23. It was further recommended that Cabinet monitors the effectiveness of the measures outlined in bringing empty homes back into use. The recruitment of a dedicated officer to lead on empty homes will mean that the Council can be proactive in this area. An annual report on empty homes will also be presented to Cabinet in January of each year from 2023.

24. Regarding the increase of the premium charges on empty homes, these are the maximum that can be charged on long term empty homes, as per the regulations.

25. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee also made the following additional comments:

- Purchase by South Cambridgeshire District Council of empty properties could provide the opportunity to install the latest energy-efficient features

and let as investments subject to owner co-operation negating the need for lengthy and expensive legal measures.

- While noting that it currently receives only between five and ten complaints a year about empty properties, South Cambridgeshire District Council should be prepared, if necessary, to become more proactive in dealing with 'challenging buildings'.
- Inclusion in the Budget for 2022-23 of funding for a dedicated Empty Homes Officer is welcomed and supported.
- In considering how to deal with empty properties, it is important to consider both the nature of ownership (tenure) and the circumstances of each individual case.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

Housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in

26. This Strategy looks to bring empty homes back into use as demand for housing in our District is high. There are currently around 1600 people waiting for affordable rented homes on the Housing Register. We are offering the owners of empty homes the services of our Private Lettings Scheme (Shire Homes) as well as our arm's length private lettings company (Ermine Street Housing) as possible options to bring their homes back into use.

Being green to our core

27. We will also look to signpost home-owners of empty properties to any grants and initiatives available at the time to make their home more energy efficient.

Background Papers

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/council-taxbase-statistics>

Appendices

Appendix A: Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2021-2025

Appendix B: Survey of owners of empty homes (July 2021)

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