

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Housing Portfolio Holder

21 March 2012

**AUTHOR/S:** Corporate Manager – Affordable Homes

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### EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

#### Purpose

1. To seek approval for the Empty Homes Strategy. The purpose of the Empty Homes Strategy is to set out the Council's plans for bringing empty homes back into use over the next 5 years.
2. This is a key decision because it raises new issues of policy, or is made in the course of developing proposals to amend the policy framework, or is a decision taken under powers delegated by the Council to amend an aspect of the policy framework and it was first published in the June 2011 Forward Plan.

#### Recommendations

3. That the Housing Portfolio Holder approves the Empty Homes Strategy 2012-2016.

#### Reasons for Recommendations

4. The new Empty Homes Strategy aims to bring together the key departments within the Council to work together towards reducing the number of empty homes in the district through joint working and implementation of the Action Plan.

#### Background

5. Empty homes are a wasted resource in terms of housing available for people to live in and they can also have a negative impact on their surrounding communities, as well as being a financial burden for many owners. Tackling empty homes is a national priority for the Government as a sustainable way of increasing the overall supply of housing and reducing the negative impact that neglected homes can have on communities.
6. Within South Cambridgeshire there were 561 empty homes vacant for over 6 months as of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011, this represents less than 1% of the total housing stock in the district. Although there are empty homes dispersed across the District, we do 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. For South Cambridgeshire the key issue is to make best use of existing stock. The Empty Homes Strategy therefore seeks to address this issue in a way that is both proportional and reasonable for the District.

#### Considerations

7. Bringing empty homes back into use has become a national priority and received much publicity over the past year. The number of queries relating to empty homes is increasing, from members of the public wishing to purchase empty properties or wanting to report one.

8. With the introduction of the New Homes Bonus, there is also a financial incentive to the Council when properties are brought back into use.
9. Without an up to date Empty Homes Strategy the Council could be criticised for not having clear leadership and direction in bringing empty homes back into use.

**Options**

10. The Housing Portfolio Holder is requested to consider the Empty Homes Strategy and the proposed actions and to suggest changes or additions where required.
11. The Action Plan in Appendix A of the Strategy identifies how we will improve our evidence base of empty homes, be more pro-active in bringing empty homes back into use and improving n the information and advice given to owners of empty properties. This will be monitored quarterly and reported on an annual basis to the Housing Portfolio Holder as part of the Affordable Homes performance monitoring.

**Implications**

12.	Financial	If empty homes brought back into use can be used for affordable housing this will make a positive contribution to the New Homes Bonus received by the Council.
	Legal	Legal advice has been sought to ensure that issues such as data protection are appropriately addressed.
	Staffing	The empty property officer role is split between Environmental Health and Planning Enforcement (where appropriate) who will act upon reports of empty properties and liaise with the owners; and the Strategic Housing Section who will oversee the implementation of this Strategy, develop new initiatives and provide advice and assistance to help owners get their properties back into use.
	Risk Management	Minimal Risk but without an Empty Homes Strategy the Council could be open to criticism for not having a clear direction and leadership in bringing empty homes back into use.
	Equality and Diversity	The Empty Homes Strategy is all inclusive and does not exclude any particular protected characteristic.
	Equality Impact Assessment completed	Yes Partial EQI completed. Future monitoring to include gathering information on the protected characteristics for owners of empty homes.
	Climate Change	Providing owners of empty homes with information relating to energy efficiency, insulation grants, empty homes grant etc. will help towards making properties energy efficient.

## **Consultations**

13. To kick-start the development of the Empty Homes Strategy, the completion of a survey from owners of long-term empty homes has helped to inform the direction of this Strategy. Following on from this, those that have indicated a wish to be further consulted have been sent a copy of the draft Strategy for comment.
14. Local Members and parish councils were also invited to comment on the draft Strategy. Feedback has been positive with many parishes welcoming the fact that the Council is taking a pro-active approach to bringing empty homes back into use. Following one query relating to requests for information on empty homes and data protection, further clarification was sought from our Legal Team and it was agreed that details of empty properties could be provided upon request but that individual owner's names and addresses are not allowed to be given out. The Strategy has been amended accordingly.

## **Consultation with Children and Young People**

15. Not relevant.

## **Effect on Strategic Aims**

16. The Empty Homes Strategy will contribute to the following aims:
  - (a) We will make sure that South Cambridgeshire continues to offer outstanding and sustainable quality of life for our residents.
  - (b) Work to deliver a range of homes that are affordable to all and where people want to live that will support economic growth and economic activity.

## **Conclusions / Summary**

17. The Empty Homes Strategy is a supporting document to the Council's Housing Strategy and sets out our plans for bringing the District's empty homes back into use over the next 5 years. The three main priorities for the Strategy are:
  - To improve our evidence base
  - Be pro-active in dealing with properties that are empty long-term
  - Improve information and advice to owners of empty homes

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: Empty Homes Survey – completed May 2011.

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