
Meeting: Social Care Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date: 18 October 2010

Subject: Empty Homes strategy

Report of: Councillor Rita Drinkwater, Portfolio Holder for Housing

Summary: The report informs Members of the main issues arising from the draft Empty Homes Strategy and provides a final opportunity to comment upon the content of the draft, which is attached.

The report also includes the consultation feedback received to date and Members are asked whether the issues raised should influence the strategy that is presented to Executive on 2nd November 2010.

Advising Officers: Julie Ogley, Director for Social Care, Health and Housing

Tony Keaveney, Assistant Director Housing Services

Contact Officer: Nick Costin, Head of Private Sector Housing Services

Public/Exempt: Public

Wards Affected: All

Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The Empty Homes Strategy will contribute towards the successful achievement of the Council's vision in terms of improving the quality of life of those affected by empty homes. Bringing empty homes back into use will enhance the immediate residential environment and contribute to meeting the housing growth agenda.

Financial:

There are financial implications associated with the Empty Homes strategy, in particular, the provision of capital and revenue funding required to progress enforcement action. A proposed capital programme of £160,000 (net) is being presented to Executive on 2nd November 2010 for approval. However, harmonisation of Council Tax discount could generate income of between £400K and £650K (see appendix C)

Legal:

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. There are legal implications within the draft strategy in terms of the proposed use of high level enforcement action for the worst empty homes. Legal Services would be required for Compulsory Purchase or Empty Dwelling Management Order action.

Risk Management:

There are no risks arising from this report. There are risks for local authorities that do not develop empty homes strategies as there could be challenge for operating unclear or inconsistent policies on empty homes. In addition, Government expects local authorities to adopt clear and evidence based strategies to tackle empty homes, and have developed criteria to judge such strategies, which are used during Housing Inspections.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

There are no direct staff implications. The adoption of the strategy and its proposed action plan would be undertaken within existing staff resources.

Equalities/Human Rights:

An Equalities impact Assessment has been produced for the strategy. This has indicated no adverse impacts from the proposals within the strategy.

Community Safety:

The adoption of the strategy will have positive impacts upon community safety. Empty homes can attract anti social behaviour and are at greater risk from arson. Proposals to prioritise action should ensure that the worst condition empty homes are made safer for the local community.

Sustainability:

The empty homes strategy should have positive impact for sustainability of the existing housing stock. Empty homes are a wasted resource and bringing empty homes back into occupation is a more sustainable option than building new homes.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

- 1. That the Social Care Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of this report and review the contents of the attached draft Empty Homes Strategy**
- 2. That the Committee reviews the consultation feedback, and provides direction to shape the Empty Homes Strategy before its presentation to Executive.**

Introduction and current situation

1. The draft empty homes strategy sets out the Council's approach to addressing the large number of empty homes in the area. At 1st April 2010 there were 1,160 homes that had been empty for more than 6 months. The strategy is not a statutory requirement but is regarded as a key document to reinforce the Council's emerging Housing Strategy and was a key focus for the Audit Commission during the recent inspection of Strategic Housing Services.

2. In September 09, Executive Members approved the use of high level enforcement action in respect of 5 identified long term empty homes, and the agreement to form a partnership agreement with Pathmeads Housing Association, who can provide specialist services for management of private empty homes. Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's) have been progressed in respect of four of the properties but will not progress further without the commitment of capital resources.
3. The draft strategy suggests a balanced approach consisting of 5 key actions to help meet the overall aim of bringing long term empty homes back into occupation. The strategy proposes that the Council does not focus on homes empty for less than six months unless they are in very poor condition. The draft strategy is included as appendix A.

Issues and options arising from the strategy

4. The strategy Action Plan sets out proposed activity with desired outcomes. All activity will however, be within available staffing resources and within available capital resources.
5. The strategy highlights the difference in Council Tax discount from legacy Council policies. It is intended that the Council introduce a harmonised policy of charging 90% Council Tax for empty homes from the beginning of 2011/12. Whilst such a harmonised policy is desirable, there is a risk that fewer properties will be categorised as "empty", as owners may claim that the property is occupied by a single person, which results in a 75% charge in Council Tax. Consequently, a more pro-active approach will be required to identify long term empty homes. However, the impact of harmonising discount policies could result in increased revenue of between approximately £400K and £650K based upon Council Tax income for band D (average) properties in the North of Central Bedfordshire. Appendix C clarifies the assumptions used to assess the potential impact.

Consultation feedback and Audit Commission views

6. A twelve week consultation period is running to mid October 2010. All Council Members were advised of the draft strategy at the end of July 2010 (through Members Newsletter) and all parish councils were notified about the strategy and advised of the opportunity to respond to the proposals. Landlords from the Private Sector Landlord's forum have been sent the draft strategy and members of the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership have been consulted. Neighbouring local authorities have been consulted and the draft strategy is available on the website for all residents and staff to view and comment upon.
7. The draft strategy was subject to significant feedback from the Audit Commission during their inspection in August 2010. The main weakness identified was the absence of a good action plan for the strategy. The attached version of the draft strategy has been amended since the initial consultation to take account of the Audit Commission's comments.

8. The responses received from Parish Council's to date have broadly agreed with the focus on longer term empty homes and have generally agreed that the 5 key delivery actions are correct. Most Parish Councils agree that we need to undertake local research into the reasons for homes remaining empty some requested that this must be cost effective. There was general agreement to the scoring criteria used to prioritise action.
9. Parish Councils were asked to state their preferred Council Tax charge for empty homes. There were a range of views provided from a full 100% charge (where there was "no good reason" for the property being empty) to no charge where there are "good reasons" for the property remaining empty. Most Parish Council's suggested a 50% or 75% charge (to provide incentive to owners to declare homes as being empty).
10. A report on all consultation feedback received is attached at appendix B. This includes Audit Commission specific comments on the strategy. Aspley Guise Parish Council provided a detailed response to the draft strategy and they were quite critical of most proposals. It is suggested that the Head of Service write to Aspley Guise Parish Council, thanking them for their views and offer to discuss their views in more depth.

Conclusion and Next Steps

11. The draft strategy is being presented to Executive on 2nd November 2010 so this report provides the final opportunity for Members of Overview and Scrutiny to influence the strategy.
12. The action plan and further progress on high level enforcement action is dependant upon the Council providing some capital funding. The capital programme is being presented to Executive for review on 2nd November 2010.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Draft Empty Homes Strategy

Appendix B – Consultation feedback and response

Appendix C – Impact of harmonisation of Council Tax discount

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

Executive Committee report – September 2009

Location of papers: Priory House, Chicksands