

Appendix B

Empty Homes Strategy refresh - Engagement Report Summary September 2017

The feedback given by residents and other stakeholders within 138 survey responses and engagement events has been collated into key themes below but an executive summary is as follows:

Summary

The majority of respondents agreed with the focus and approach to tackle empty homes. It was felt to be a positive initiative particularly in supporting the housing demand and that it should also have a focus in meeting housing need.

It was recognised that properties are left empty for many different reasons and direct contact with the owners is paramount to action with consideration given to why the property may be empty and what assistance might be needed. Most respondents felt with the current housing demand, management of existing empty housing is extremely important.

Restoring empty homes was seen to help reduce the impact of new development, particularly in green belt areas and our countryside. Activity in town centres also provides opportunities for joint approaches such as improving appearance and tying in with market towns initiatives for building improvements.

By tackling empty homes, respondents felt that working in partnership would provide a range of outcomes including improvements to town centres appearance and to help viability of businesses. The work will raise community awareness, contribute to creating a sustainable environment, and help meet housing demands.

A theme throughout the feedback was a desire for proactive marketing and to raise awareness of empty homes work of the Council. It was recognised that the use of social media and technology to promote the work was important but we should use a range of methods to reach the wider audience, such as face to face updates, newspapers and radio. Also consider site boards to advertise the work happening, use of Council Tax bills, and working with Town & Parish Councils and other partners. The benefits of highlighting success stories were mentioned.

Respondents felt that neighbours of suspected empty homes are key to providing information.

There was a desire to catch properties before they deteriorate too badly, and a need for the use of legislative tools and enforcements.

Feedback highlighted the need for councils to respond sooner, regarding the use of compulsory purchase orders and the length of time it takes to repair. It was stressed that 2 years may be too long and a more preventive approach be delivered to tackle empty homes. Respondents required that properties renovated under such action should be improved to high standards/quality.

Most respondents agreed with the proposed aims and objectives in the strategy, however, there was a strong emphasis on objective 3; *'increase availability of decent housing'*. Homes brought back into use need to be regulated under this policy to ensure they were "Decent Homes" and to meet standards of room size etc. At the same time, respondents commented that homes brought back into use are financially viable and can perhaps meet specific needs, such as supported housing.

There was an emphasis on partnership working to tackle the challenges presented with empty homes and returning back into use, such as working with Neighbourhood Planning, Town & Parish Councils, Community Engagement and Town Centre regeneration etc. There should be consideration of acquiring land / old industrial sites from businesses that hold on to bought land for years without developing.

Business review and feedback

Beneath each theme below is a business response to the comments provided:

Communications and Marketing Recommendations;

"There was an emphasis throughout the engagement activities for more awareness and promotion of Empty Homes support and services. Feedback shared looked for a pro-active marketing campaign that used a range of methods to reach the widest audience"

Response – the draft strategy Action Plan includes the development of a Marketing Plan to promote the work of the Council around bringing empty homes back into use. It is agreed that a range of methods are required but due to resource constraints, the marketing activities have to be considered in terms of effectiveness and targeted appropriately. The support for the work of the service is welcomed but the service is discretionary and has to be considered in light of competing resources for mandatory services.

Process and Timeframe Recommendation;

"To recognise that working direct with the owner is paramount to ideas and action. For a stepped approach, however, to consider catching properties before they reach a certain (poor condition) state and if required to use legislative tools and enforcement actions. Feedback highlighted the need for councils to respond sooner, use compulsory purchase orders (CPO) and shorten the length of time it takes to repair. It was stressed that 2 years may be too long and a more preventive approach be delivered to tackle empty homes. There was a strong emphasis with objective 3 'increase availability of decent housing....' it was felt that there was a need to enforce standards and works, and this needs to be regulated under this policy to ensure they were "Decent Homes" and more control of standards".

Response – the draft strategy includes the importance of working with empty homes owners but did not specifically include owners as Key Stakeholders in Appendix E. Owners are now included in this appendix in a revised draft of the strategy.

The concept of “catching” properties before their condition worsens is a valid argument in terms of prevention poor housing. In an ideal world, this preventative role makes sense. There is, however, an issue about where limited resources are focused. In terms of the Council’s Housing Standards enforcement role, it might be expected that the “worst condition” properties should be targeted due to their greater impact on the community. This does mean, however, that costs are greater. The service will provide advice and assistance to any home owner and it would be better if this was before the property deteriorated. In summary, there has to be a balanced approach, recognising that prevention is better (and more cost effective) than cure but also realising that poor condition properties have the greatest impact on local communities.

The Council responds to individual requests for service within a target timeframe of 3 days virtually every occasion. The Council is also ambitious in wanting to undertake a successful CPO but the timeframe is very much outside of the Council’s control, other than the internal approval process. CPO is the tool of “last resort” and is significant in removing the asset from a property owner. By it’s nature, Members and Senior Officers need to be satisfied that due process has been followed. This is also necessary for when a CPO is considered at a public enquiry. In response, there is a desire to proceed more quickly by those Officers providing the service and as lessons are learned, the process may become speedier.

In terms of standards being enforced, this is the role of the Housing Solutions team. It is agreed that there is an even greater role to ensure good (decent) standards for empty homes that are returned to use, particularly with financial assistance from the Council. Renovating an empty home to higher standards decreases ongoing maintenance costs. Appendix F outlines the different enforcement tools used as well as the assistance available to raise standards.

Working with Partners Recommendation;

“There was recognition and emphasis of working with partners to tackle the challenges presented with empty homes and returning them back into use, working with Neighbourhood Planning, Town & Parish Councils, Community Engagement and Town Centre regeneration managers etc. and well as linking to the Local Plan”

Response – The draft strategy recognises the need to work with these stakeholders, who are included in appendix E. Objective 2 is specifically concerned with maintaining partnerships and it is welcomed that partners are keen on wanting to work with the Council to bring empty homes back into use. This recommendation is agreed but does not result in a change to the strategy, more so a focus on the resulting implementation plan.

Reporting and Statistics Recommendations;

“Need to ensure it is easy and accessible to report empty homes, including increased awareness of the service and better identification of empty properties. With suggestions of a range of methods to highlight the way this is delivered in promoting and reporting as well as developing partnerships and understanding of what each area can offer, where empty properties are located, and areas where

more housing would be beneficial. There was a request to share where the empty homes are in particular areas. To review the reporting and statistics on empty homes as there appeared to be differences with the charts and the statistics quoted in the strategy”.

Response – It is agreed that the service needs to consider different ways that people can report empty homes. A facility similar to how people can report “pot holes” might be appropriate and will be considered as part of an implementation plan.

The sharing of specific empty homes information has to be considered against Data Protection requirements. A property might be empty due to the owner being unwell or vulnerable. Officers of the Council need to consider the sharing of information more carefully.

The difference in statistics/data within the strategy is due to the differences in data being examined. There are different categories of empty property data. Since engagement, more clarity has been added to the data within the strategy as to what it refers to.

Meeting Housing needs Recommendation;

“Need to ensure affordability in meeting housing demand. There was an emphasis to restore empty homes to help minimize the impact of ongoing development, particularly green belt areas and our countryside. Planning in town centres also provides opportunities for planning through section 215 activity and market towns initiatives for improvements. There was an emphasis to consider all homes along with businesses and offices. By tackling empty homes it was felt the work and partnerships would provide a range of outcomes including the improvements to town centres visibility and viability of businesses, raise community awareness and contribute to creating a sustainable environment and meeting housing demands”.

Response – The Council’s Housing Assistance policy provides a greater level of assistance (as an incentive) for owners willing to provide accommodation at affordable levels. This would be discussed in negotiations with owners who might be looking for such assistance from the Council.

It is unlikely, however, that empty homes activity will completely remove the need for further development to meet housing needs, which are significant. Bringing empty homes back into use is complimentary and may reduce some impact on new house building but is unlikely to replace the need to build new homes. It is not the intention of the Empty Homes strategy to become involved in discussion about new homes development, location, quantity etc.

The contribution towards regeneration of town centres is recognised in the new strategy. Any success that empty homes work has towards regeneration of town centres will be shared (and celebrated) but considered also as learning for future activity.