

REPORT TO	DATE OF MEETING
CABINET	Wednesday 4th September 2013



SUBJECT	PORTFOLIO	AUTHOR	ITEM
Empty Homes Policy	STRATEGIC PLANNING AND HOUSING	Jane Maguire	4

SUMMARY AND LINK TO CORPORATE PRIORITIES

This report links to the Council corporate policies of a clean, green and safe borough, strong and healthy communities and an efficient and effective Council.

This report recommends that the Cabinet consider and approve the Empty Homes Policy (appendix 1 attached to this report) as an effective way of dealing with empty properties and ensuring the Council make effective use of its statutory powers as recommended in the 2012 stock condition survey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 That Cabinet approve the Empty Homes Policy for dealing with empty properties.
- 2 That Cabinet confer delegated powers to the Director of Planning and Housing in consultation with Cabinet member for Strategic Planning and Housing where appropriate, to take the most effective course of action and to report to cabinet in accordance with the policy.

DETAILS AND REASONING

Background

In South Ribble the issue of empty homes has been set against a back drop of manageable numbers. Compared to the national average, numbers are low at 2.4% compared with a national average of 4.2% with long term empty homes (over 6mths) representing 1.1% of the stock profile. The August 2012 stock condition survey reported 456 long term empty homes in the district.

Over the last two years the national picture and priority to be afforded empty homes has changed significantly. This is especially noteworthy for South Ribble where bringing empty homes back into use can provide much needed accommodation and numbers are gradually increasing due to current housing market conditions.

Work is already underway ensuring that the Council optimises opportunities to attract funding through the various national incentives linked to the new homes bonus and empty homes grants, particularly through the work with Methodist Action – A Place to Live.

Current Situation

The Council currently monitor and prioritise all property that has been empty for more than 6 months and encourage owners to bring the property back into use.

In partnership with Methodist Action - A Place to Live we have identified homes that can be brought back in to use using the empty homes grant.

Whilst this work is on target to bring 18 units back into use over a two year programme there are issues relating to the more difficult owners and those whose homes that have remained empty for ten or more years where the advice and grants approach is no longer a negotiation option.

As a result we have prioritised all empty homes in to categories 6mths – 3yrs, 3yrs – 6yrs, 6yrs - 10yrs and over 10 years and completed a prioritisation sheet for those over ten years empty. This outlines the costs and potential options for each property.

However as the issues identified cut across a number of departments and have a cost implication a working group was established consisting of Officers from housing, legal, environmental health, property, revenues and planning, to produce a policy that subject to approval will be used in dealing with these properties.

The Policy

The policy requires a business case and cost benefit analysis to be produced to support any action. This is because taking any type of enforcement action on a long term empty property can be a potential risk and financial cost to the Council.

The policy outlines the stages that officers need to take before recommending a course of action and places an emphasis on working positively with owners to bring their property back into use.

The policy endorses the use of the most appropriate enforcement options when all options with the owner have been exhausted and when the property has been rated as high scoring for enforcement action.

A property will be rated high for enforcement action if it has been empty for more than six years, is in disrepair and attracting nuisance and complaints

Options

Officers will be required to follow a process of making contact, and encourage the owner to take action, then they will produce a business case including options for action, this could include:

- Empty Dwelling Management Order.
- Enforced sales
- Compulsory purchase order

There are supporting procedure documents for enforced sales and compulsory purchase to ensure all relevant actions have been taken.

The policy ensures that the Council will seek to recover any costs incurred as part of the process, and at all stages an owner can appeal against a decision taken.

Conclusion

This policy will ensure that the Council utilises the most appropriate option available when dealing with long term empty homes, and it provides assurances that full consideration and the most cost effective action will be taken to bring the property back into use.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

In the preparation of this report, consideration has been given to the impact of its proposals in all the areas listed below, and the table shows any implications in respect of each of these.

FINANCIAL	<p>There is currently no budget allocated to deal with empty homes enforcement action. A business case will be produced for each property taking account of the various options and the most cost effective solution will be sought.</p> <p>This may require a request for assistance from reserves on a case by case basis. However, the Council will seek to recover all of its costs where possible and will also look to secure external sources of funding available via Central Government initiatives.</p> <p>The Council secures additional council tax payments plus New Homes Bonus per long-term empty property brought back into use.</p>
LEGAL	<p>The policy and the supporting procedures explain the relevant statutory powers that authorise the taking of enforcement action. In all circumstances the Council must ensure that it acts in a proportionate way. Where ever possible the Council will seek to resolve any issues with the agreement of the owner.</p>
RISK	<p>Without taking action a precedent could be created which would make it difficult to take action in respect of any other similar site in the future.</p> <p>Property and surrounding areas can decline and attract anti - social behaviour and neglect if left</p> <p>There will be a requirement for the Council to recover costs</p>
Equality	<p>Initial screening indicates a low impact as the policy ensures transparency proportionality and consistency for all affected ensuring that human rights are not infringed.</p>

<i>Asset Management</i>	<i>Corporate Plans and Policies</i>	<i>Crime and Disorder</i>	<i>Efficiency Savings/Value for Money</i>
<i>Equality, Diversity and Community Cohesion</i>	<i>Freedom of Information/ Data Protection</i>	<i>Health and Safety</i>	<i>Health Inequalities</i>
<i>Human Rights Act 1998</i>	<i>Implementing Electronic Government</i>	<i>Staffing, Training and Development</i>	<i>Sustainability</i>

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS