

Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review of Empty Properties Report



What's the review about?

The estimated number of empty domestic properties in South Ribble has increased from 918 properties in 2005 to 1,462 in 2011, of this approximately 173 properties had been empty for over 12-months, with 13 of these empty for more than ten years. The availability of housing in South Ribble is a challenge and it was felt that any steps the Council and its partners could take through utilising empty properties should be maximised. As housing is a an objective in the Council's corporate plan and stock condition and housing needs surveys were being carried out this year, it was therefore an opportune time to carry out this review.

Who was on the review team?

- ▶ Councillor Mike Nelson (Chair)
- ▶ Councillor Steve Bennett
- ▶ Councillor Warren Bennett
- ▶ Councillor Melvyn Gardner
- ▶ Councillor Mick Titherington

What was the purpose of the review?

- ▶ To review the research and information available on empty properties in South Ribble
- ▶ To audit what existing work is being carried out to tackle empty properties in the Borough
- ▶ Consider the factors that contribute to empty properties in South Ribble
- ▶ Look at what more the Council, its partners and property owners can do to reduce the number of empty properties
- ▶ Make recommendations to the Council and its partners on reducing the number of empty properties and achieving the Council's priority of making more homes available.

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What has the review done?

- ▶ Identified the currently number and location of empty properties, the time they have been empty and the actions already being taken.
- ▶ Examined the factors that contribute to the number of empty properties and any barriers.
- ▶ Looked at the benefits of reducing the number of empty homes to help increase the number of homes available.
- ▶ Carried out best practice research from other councils and organisations.
- ▶ Met with the Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Housing, Directors of Planning and Housing, Housing Services Manager and Senior Private Sector officer.
- ▶ Met with representatives from Progress Housing Group and Accent Housing.

What is the outcome of the review?

The task group welcomes the Cabinet Member and Housing Team's work on empty properties to date and their enthusiasm to step up their work in tackling empty properties

Following the above extensive research, the task group have made the following recommendations in order to achieve the Council's adopted Housing Strategy:

1. As part of the 2013/2014 corporate and budget planning process the prioritisation and resourcing of tackling empty properties be considered as a cost effective way of helping to deal with homelessness, affordable housing and generating council tax income.
2. The Council reviews the discounts allowed for empty properties and timescales in which these are applied so that long-term empty properties pay up to 100% council tax and this funding be ring-fenced for housing issues, including empty properties.
3. A target is set as part of the corporate and budget planning process for the number of empty properties that we are going to proactively work on to bring back into use.

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4. The Committee appreciates the work of the Housing Team in its efforts to tackle empty properties within the existing resources available.
5. The Housing Team's success in attracting funding for Lancashire through Methodist Action be commended and to maximise this and other external funding an additional temporary staffing resource be provided to assist with delivering the proactive empty properties work.
6. Raise awareness of ward Members role in locating empty properties and working with the Council, partner organisations and relevant local people in bringing empty properties back into use.
7. Consideration be given to developing an appropriate incentive scheme for property owners to bring properties back into use, including working with social landlords to make use of the resources they have available.
8. The Council makes greater use of the statutory powers it has to bring properties back into use, such as empty dwelling management orders and use of section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act.
9. The information pack and process for contacting empty property owners is reviewed to ensure it is clear and helpful, linking in with the landlords events and existing networks.

What next?

We very much hope that the Council will agree and take forward our recommendations. The Scrutiny Committee looks forward to the Council's response and will monitor progress on the review in six-month's time.

We would like to thank all partners, employees, councils and others involved in the review for their time and help with the review.

How do I get more information?

For further information or to see the detailed and comprehensive information gathered as part of the review, please contact: Darren Cranshaw, Scrutiny and Performance Officer on 01772 625512, email: dcranshaw@southribble.gov.uk or visit www.southribble.gov.uk.