

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Christine Marshall, Executive Director - Commercialisation (S151 Officer)

To: Policy Development Panel 15th September 2020, Cabinet 27th October 2020.

Author: Phil Stacey, Housing Options Manager

Subject Empty Homes Strategy

Purpose: To consider a revised strategy, targeting long term empty properties and increasing the supply of homes brought back into use.

Recommendation(s):

- 1) That the panel consider the revised Empty Homes Strategy, provide feedback and approve the Strategy to go to Cabinet.

BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The number of empty homes in South Holland is monitored closely to ensure reasonable steps are taken to bring properties back into use. The Council's current Empty Homes Strategy requires updating to take account of changes in legislation including Council Tax reforms. An incremental empty homes premium has been approved which introduced higher charges for long term empty homes. The Empty Homes Strategy will cover the Council's overarching objectives with a clear link to the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy.
- 1.2 The number of empty homes in South Holland has seen an upward trend in recent years which is common across other Lincolnshire authorities. However, the overall number of empty homes in South Holland remains low and accounts for 0.93% of dwellings in the district.
- 1.3 The Empty Homes Strategy has been revised to deliver the following aims;
 - Reduce the number of long term empty homes (residential properties), and increase housing supply in South Holland by bringing them back into use
 - Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty (six months plus) by identifying them early and working with owners as soon as possible
 - Provide a contact point and resource for owners of empty properties
 - Work in partnership with other agencies to tackle the problem of empty properties.
- 1.4 The Empty Homes Strategy is intended to ensure the council can continue to provide advice, guidance and assistance to owners of long term empty homes. The Council seeks to work in partnership with owners, utilising a range of tools to encourage homes to be brought back into use. It is recognised that on occasion this may not be possible and the council may seek a remedy which utilises its enforcement powers. The council will have regard to the Empty Homes Strategy and follow the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy where instances of this type occur

2.0 **OPTIONS**

- 2.1 Consider the revised Empty Homes Strategy and approve the strategy for submission to Cabinet **(preferred)**.
- 2.2 Do not approve the Strategy for submission to Cabinet.
- 2.3 Propose amendments to the Strategy for submission to Cabinet.

3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 3.1 The Council seeks to adopt a responsive approach to tackling long term empty homes. Bringing homes back into use is vitally important to increase the supply of accommodation available within the district. Whilst it is acknowledged that regionally there has been an increase in the number of empty homes, overall the number of empty homes in South Holland remain comparably low. It is therefore considered that the aims and measures within the revised strategy are proportionate and sustainable.

4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 4.1 Greater clarity for owners on the assistance available from the council in supporting them to bring their property back into use.
- 4.2 An increase in the supply of available homes into the district.

5.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 **Constitution & Legal**

- 5.1.1 If enforcement action is considered necessary there would be legal implications in taking these matters forward.

5.2 **Corporate Priorities**

- 5.2.1 There is a strong link to the Council's corporate priorities under 'Your Home'. Particular emphasis is given to the following critical activity: 'Support the supply and suitability of private sector accommodation by reducing the number of empty homes in the district and providing targeted financial support to allow people to stay in their homes.'

5.3 **Crime and Disorder**

- 5.3.1 There is a link to the condition of empty homes which concerns vandalism, overgrown gardens and infestations. Addressing the issue of long term empty properties should contribute to wider efforts to address and reduce anti-social behaviour.

5.4 **Financial**

- 5.4.1 Bringing empty Homes back into use contributes towards income, including the New Homes Bonus and Council Tax receipts.

5.4.2 In the last financial year 2019/20; the total New Homes Bonus for South Holland was £341,311.

5.4.3 Up to January 2020, there were 107 properties subject to the 200% Council Tax premium.

5.5 Health & Wellbeing

5.5.1 There is a positive link between increasing the supply of housing, along with investing into the condition of private housing in the district. Bringing properties back into use can help regenerate and improve areas where people live and work that contribute to the wider health and wellbeing agenda.

5.6 Risk Management

5.6.1 If a suitable strategy is not adopted, the authority misses the opportunity to bring back much needed accommodation into use in the district and runs the risk of increased anti-social behaviour, vandalism and a deterioration in the areas where an empty home exists.

5.6.2 There are risks to the authority associated with certain courses of action designed to bring Empty homes back into use. For example, the use of non-mandatory enforcement powers (Such as Compulsory Purchase or Empty Dwelling Management Orders) carry with them certain degrees of financial risk. However, decisions to utilise these powers will be made on a case by case basis and will only be considered where enforcement action is deemed as the last option available to the authority to bring a dwelling back into use per the Council's enforcement policy.

5.7 Staffing

5.7.1 Currently, empty homes activities are undertaken across the Private Sector Housing Team.

6.0 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

6.1 All wards

7. ACRONYMS

7.1.1 N/A.

Background papers: - Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy

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Key Decision: N

Exempt Decision: N

This report refers to a Mandatory Service

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A: SHDC Empty Homes Strategy

Appendix B: Main Statutory Enforcement Options