
REPORT TO:	HOUSING & COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM: 12
DATE OF MEETING:	24th April 2008	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES	OPEN PARAGRAPH NO:
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	Denise Blyde Private Sector Housing Manager	DOC:
SUBJECT:	Empty Homes Strategy 2008/11	REF:
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE: HCS02

1.0 Recommendations

- 1.1 That Members approve the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2008 as a basis for wider consultation.
- 1.2 That authority is given for the Head of Environmental Services in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, to agree any minor amendments to the draft strategy arising from wider consultation prior to implementation on 1st May 2008.

2.0 Purpose of Report

- 2.1 To seek Members approval of the proposed Empty Homes Strategy 2008/11 (attached at Annex 1), which has been revised in the light of current corporate priorities and capital resources.

3.0 Detail

- 3.1 The Empty Homes Strategy forms part of the Council's wider Private Sector Housing Policy and guides our actions and interventions in relation to private sector vacant property within the district, particularly 'long term' empty properties, which have been vacant for more than six months.
- 3.2 In 2007/8 there were 882 properties on the district, registered with our Revenue department as being empty for more than 6 months. Approximately a third of these properties were empty for good reason, for example their owner was in care, they were awaiting sale/let or they were second homes/holiday lets. However, the remainder were 'long term' empty properties that require targeting through an effective empty homes strategy, to help bring them back into good use.
- 3.2 The existing Empty Homes Strategy was approved by the Committee on 17th June 1999 and was subsequently amended in February 2001. The document must now be revised in order to keep it relevant and up to date and to keep step with its parent document, the Private Sector Housing Policy approved by this committee on 13th March 2008.

- 3.4 The proposed strategy revision identifies four main objectives to help achieve our overall aim 'to reduce the number of long term empty homes in the district';

Objective 1: To develop and improve our baseline information

This will enable us to have a better understanding of why homes in the district remain empty and help us to prioritise and target our actions. We will compile a new empty homes register using internal data sources (e.g. council tax register), which will be verified by site visits and postal questionnaires to gather information about the property and why it is empty.

Objective 2: To raise awareness of the problem of empty homes

Raising awareness of empty homes and the wasted resource they represent is crucial to the successful delivery of the strategy. We will use a range of media to promote our work and publicise a new empty homes hotline number for South Derbyshire residents to report problematic properties.

Objective 3: To develop effective pathways to bring empty homes back into use

We will define and develop better mechanisms to encourage or enforce the re occupation of empty homes. A support pack for empty homeowners will provide comprehensive information and advice on the range of options available to them and the help they can get from the council. We also propose a Voluntary Leasing scheme for owners to lease their property to the Council, so avoiding the hassle of managing a tenancy themselves.

Objective 4: to adopt a systematic approach to tackle empty homes

Empty homes will be recorded and categorised according to the length of time they have remained empty and the risk they present in terms of their condition and detrimental effect on the amenity of the area. A systematic approach will then be adopted, at first to open dialogue with the owner and encourage them to make use of the property, but later to enforce, through legal action if necessary.

- 3.5 The delivery of the proposed strategy will be low cost and rely upon enabling, regulating and partnership working in order to maximise limited resources. However, capital funding will be required to operate the Voluntary Leasing Scheme.
- 3.6 A recent, successful bid to the Regional Housing Group has secured funding for this scheme and other initiatives proposed within the Private Sector Housing Policy 2008.
- 3.7 The proposed Strategy will aim to deliver the new Corporate plan (Theme 4 – Prosperity for All) action 4.4 'to achieve a 50% reduction in long term empty homes by 2011'.
- 3.7 The Strategy document also details services standards and arrangements for performance monitoring, consultation and review.

4.0 Financial Implications

- 4.1 The initiatives proposed in the policy will utilise existing staff resources. One of the Private Sector Housing Officers within the Private Sector Housing Team will be designated 'Empty Homes Officer' and will be primarily responsible for delivering the actions within the strategy.

- 4.2 There is adequate capital available from funding awarded by the Regional Housing Group to deliver the Private Sector Voluntary Leasing Scheme for 2008/9.
- 4.3 The Strategy will entail a rigorous monitoring of outcomes from intervention strategies and ongoing assessment of the value for money offered by different approaches.

5.0 Community Implications

- 5.1 Action to make use of empty homes addresses a number of social, economic and public health issues. Empty properties can attract vandalism, fly tipping and anti social behaviour and generally have a negative effect on the neighbouring area and the residents that live there.
- 5.2 Returning empty property to use can make a positive contribution to the overall health and well being of local residents as well as the district, increasing council tax income and reducing demand for new housing.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 The proposed Empty Homes Strategy 2008/11 has been drafted using best available information together with a review of current national, regional and local policy. The Strategy defines a new set of objective to guide the work of the Private Sector Housing Team and ensure our action is relevant and proportionate to the needs of the district and within the scope of the resources available. It is intended that the Strategy will be finalised and implemented from 1st May 2008.