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|-------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Meeting:</b>         | <b>Cabinet</b>   | <b>Date:</b>                    | <b>2 April 2014</b> |
| <b>Subject:</b>         | <b>Empty Homes Programme Update</b>                        |                                 |                     |
| <b>Report Of:</b>       | <b>Cabinet Member for Housing Health and Leisure</b>       |                                 |                     |
| <b>Wards Affected:</b>  | <b>All wards</b>   |                                 |                     |
| <b>Key Decision:</b>    | <b>No</b>  | <b>Budget/Policy Framework:</b> | <b>No</b>           |
| <b>Contact Officer:</b> | <b>Julie Wight, Private Sector Housing Service Manager</b> |                                 |                     |
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| <b>Appendices:</b>      | <b>None</b>  |                                 |                     |

## **1.0 Purpose of Report**

1.1 To update Cabinet on the Empty Homes programme

## **2.0 Recommendations**

2.1 Cabinet asked to

- (1) Note the contents of this report and the success of the Empty Homes Strategy to date.

## **3.0 Background and Key Issues**

3.1 Empty properties are not only a waste of a valuable housing resource, but often become the cause of complaint from residents either because their disrepair causes nuisance to neighbouring properties or their neglected state attracts vandalism and other anti-social behaviour.

3.2 The Empty Homes Strategy adopted by Cabinet in 2009 identified key activities to tackle this problem:-

- To prioritise action on a worst-case basis for the long term empty properties
- To target informal action on owners of all properties that have been empty for more than 12 months
- To take robust enforcement action (in partnership with planning services) on owners of empty properties that are subject to complaints of nuisance
- To work in partnership with the Townscape Heritage Initiative to bring empty properties in Southgate Street back into use
- To continue to provide financial incentives to encourage empty home owners to renovate and rent (subject to available funding).

- 3.3 Actions taken since the adoption of this strategy in 2009 have helped to reduce the overall percentage of empty homes in the city from 4% to the current figure 3% of the total housing stock (the national average is 2.8%).
- 3.4 The actions taken have been in line with the key activities outlined in paragraph 3.2 above and include taking enforcement action and giving incentives to property owners.
- 4.0 Enforcement
- 4.1 Targeted enforcement action on properties that have been empty for more than four years or are the cause of nuisance complaints has resulted in an average of 25 properties being brought back into use annually.
- 4.2 The majority are brought back into use because of the continuous pressure put onto the owners to deal with their empty home.
- 4.3 A variety of enforcement tools are also used which range from requiring owners to make improvements to empty properties to deal with immediate issues arising from the condition of the property (e.g. damage by pests, seriously overgrown gardens, damage to neighbouring properties etc) to taking ownership of the property away from the current owner by Compulsory Purchase (CPO), Enforced Sale or Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO's).
- 4.4 To date two properties have been subject to CPO action with a third one currently being considered for this action.
- 4.5 The adoption of an Enforced Sale Policy (adopted by Cabinet in 2012) enables the Council to take enforced sale action on properties where:-
- It has been empty for two years or more
  - The owner has demonstrated a failure to deal with the property conditions
  - A minimum debt of £1000 has been registered as a Local Land Charge
- 4.6 By working with Planning Enforcement, enforcement work has been carried out on a long term empty property which has consequently accrued a debt and is now being considered for enforced sale.
- 5.0 Incentives
- 5.1 The Government has made empty home funding available to Housing Providers and as a consequence, the Housing Charity, Chapter1 (with City Council support), has successfully secured Government funding to return 24 properties in Gloucester back into use.
- 5.2 The scheme enables empty home owners to have their empty homes renovated at no cost to themselves provided they are willing to hand the property over to Chapter1. They will then let it at an affordable rent to persons in priority housing need for a period of time that enables them to recoup the costs of renovation, after which time, the fully renovated property is handed back to the owner.

5.3 Chapter 1 are currently in discussion with six property owners who are interested in this scheme and we are also looking to combine this funding with the lottery funded Townscape Initiative Scheme enhancing the financial incentive for owners of empty properties in Southgate Street.

## **6.0 Alternative Options Considered**

6.1 Offering grants and loans to owners of empty homes owners is no longer an option as Government Housing Renewal funding is no longer available to support these schemes.

6.2 Do nothing to tackle empty homes. This is not an option as empty properties are a waste of a valuable housing resource and only add to the housing shortage.

## **7.0 Reasons for Recommendations**

7.1 Since the introduction of the Empty Homes Strategy the overall percentage of empty homes in the City has reduced from 4% to 3%.

## **8.0 Future Work and Conclusions**

8.1 Continue to implement the Empty Homes Strategy by targeting enforcement action on the long term empty properties using the full range of options available.

8.2 The number of Empty Homes will continue to be a key performance indicator in the Council Plan and actions to reduce the number of empty homes in the city will be monitored against this indicator. Although we have achieved a total of 3% empty homes in the city we will now work towards achieving a target of a total of 2.8% to align us with the current national average.

## **9.0 Financial Implications**

9.1 Progressing CPO's on empty properties requires the council to set aside a budget to implement the CPO and for the purchase of the property. The purchase cost will be recouped on the forward sale of the property but the costs of implementation might not be recovered. This cost is in the region of £10,000 and is mainly the result of officer resource costs in Public Protection, Legal Services and Asset Management.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

## **10.0 Legal Implications**

10.1 All enforcement action will be in accordance with the requirements of the relevant legislation and in line with the Public Protection enforcement policy.

(Legal Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

## **11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications**

11.1 There are no high risks identified in implementing this Strategy.

## **12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA):**

12.1 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact; therefore a full PIA was not required.

## **13.0 Other Corporate Implications**

### Community Safety

13.1 Vacant dwellings can attract vandalism and squatting. By ensuring properties are brought into use these opportunities are taken away. It can also help to restore confidence in an area.

### Sustainability

13.2 Vacant dwellings often result in increased complaints from neighbours about statutory nuisance e.g. causing deterioration to adjoining properties and problems relating to overgrown garden, dumping of rubbish and vermin.

### Staffing & Trade Union

13.3 None.

## **Background Documents:**

Empty Homes Strategy

Enforced Sale Policy