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| Report title | Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024 | |
| Decision designation | AMBER | |
| Cabinet member with lead responsibility | Councillor Peter Bilson City Assets and Housing | |
| Key decision | Yes | |
| In forward plan | Yes | |
| Wards affected | All | |
| Accountable Director | Kate Martin, City Assets and Housing | |
| Originating service | Housing | |
| Accountable employee | Helen Scullard | Service Support Manager |
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| Report to be/has been considered by | Housing Leadership Team | 5 September 2019 |
| | Vibrant and Sustainable City | 7 August 2019 |
| | Scrutiny Panel | |

Recommendation for decision:

The Cabinet (Resources) Panel is recommended to:

1. Approve the Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report outlines the new Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024. The Council's previous Empty Homes Strategy has expired. The Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan complements the Private Sector Housing Strategy, which in turn flows from the new Housing Strategy and Corporate Plan.
- 1.2 Prior to this meeting the report was presented to the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel on 5 September 2019. They recommended that Cabinet (Resources) Panel approve the new Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Most local authorities have an Empty Homes Strategy, setting out how they intend to minimise the number of long-term empty homes in their area. With a national housing shortage, leaving homes empty for long periods wastes a valuable resource. Empty properties can attract antisocial behaviour and negatively affect neighbourhoods.
- 2.2 A healthy housing market will always include a proportion of empty homes, as houses are bought, sold and refurbished and tenants move in the private rental market. The Council concentrates its efforts on empty homes which are eyesores and/or causing problems to neighbours but will also help owners of non-problematic empty homes to use, let or sell them. This includes efforts to bring homes back into use before they reach the definition of long-term empty (i.e. six months or more).
- 2.3 Wolverhampton has a higher proportion of long-term empty homes than the national and regional average. This may be partly due to the need to update Council Tax records, which are used to calculate the number of empty homes. As well as introducing new initiatives to improve performance in reducing long-term empty homes, this strategy proposes working with Council Tax colleagues to ensure that records are up to date and that Wolverhampton is not over-estimating the number of empty homes in the city.

3.0 Strategic Context

- 3.1 This strategy contributes primarily to the strategic objective four, quality and secure housing for all. By improving housing conditions, it also contributes to building strong, resilient and healthy communities. Proposals in this strategy to explore initiatives to provide training opportunities when homes are refurbished, contribute to the strategic objective of more good jobs and investment in our city, and well skilled people working in an inclusive economy.
- 3.2 The more proactive approach in the new Empty Homes Strategy complements the new Private Sector Housing strategy, to be submitted to Cabinet in November 2019, which also shifts the emphasis from a largely reactive to a more dynamic and proactive way of working. This in turn is supported by the revised Housing Enforcement and Charging Policy, approved by Cabinet on 17 October 2018.

4.0 Changes in the New Strategy

- 4.1 The new strategy builds on the work and successes of the previous one and broadens the range of options both to provide advice and assistance to the owners of empty homes, and to work with partners to reduce the number of long-term empty homes in the City.
- 4.2 Ensuring that the Council's records of empty homes are accurate is important. We propose to work with Council Tax colleagues to ensure that empty homes are up to date. Owners may forget to inform Council Tax of empty homes or may omit doing so to avoid higher charges for long-term empty homes.
- 4.3 The new strategy proposes increasing the options of financial assistance for owners of empty homes who may have low incomes and be unable to bring a dilapidated property up to the standard where it can be occupied or sold. Options for a loan which could be repaid through rent if the Council nominates the tenant, or through a charge on the property when it is sold, may be offered.
- 4.4 There is increased emphasis on partnership working in the new strategy. Examples of this include: working with Wolverhampton Homes and/or community groups to involve local people in refurbishing empty homes, offering skills training and increasing local residents' employment chances; working with reputable Property Guardian companies to use empty homes which are due for future major works or redevelopment; and exploring partnerships with companies offering to purchase empty homes and offer nomination rights to the Council.

5.0 Evaluation of alternative options

- 5.1 One alternative option is to continue with the previous strategy, with little or no change to the initiatives offered to owners of empty homes or to the range of potential partnerships to tackle the problem. The previous Empty Property Strategy emphasised advice and assistance to the owners of long-term empty homes, with enforcement as a last resort. While Housing Services will always seek to work co-operatively with the owners of long-term empty homes, a more proactive approach is required if we are to improve performance. The new strategy suggests a greater range of options to assist owners and an ongoing publicity campaign to encourage communities to report empty homes. However, when owners are unwilling to engage with offers of assistance, enforcement action may be required. Often preliminary steps to take enforcement action result in owners letting or selling their property, so full enforcement action is seldom required.
- 5.2 Another option is to cease work on returning long-term empty homes to use, and re-direct the resources for this work to general private sector housing work. If no action is taken to encourage the use of long-term empty homes, it is likely that the number of these wasted homes will increase. Large numbers of empty and deteriorating homes blight neighbourhoods, attracting anti-social behaviour. This would undermine work being done to improve the quality and availability of homes for rent and sale in the City.

- 5.3 The new strategy includes options intended to increase the supply of affordable privately rented accommodation. This will help to relieve and prevent homelessness, reducing the need for expensive emergency temporary accommodation for homeless households.
- 5.4 Empty homes staff attend regional events focussing on empty homes, and research best practice in tackling long-term empty homes. The new strategy extends the range of options we will explore to encourage and assist owners of wasted homes to use, let or sell them. We will continue to learn from national and regional best practice.

6.0 Reasons for decision(s)

- 6.1 The Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024 will reduce the number of long-term empty homes, providing more homes for sale and rent in Wolverhampton. The strategy outlines a range of options to help owners of long-term empty homes to use, let or sell their property. In cases where owners refuse to engage with offers of advice and assistance, and where the property is dilapidated and/or causing a nuisance to neighbours, enforcement action will ensure that homes are not wasted and do not blight neighbourhoods.

7.0 Financial implications

- 7.1 There is a revenue budget to fund incentives for owners of long-term empty homes to let or sell them, and there is an approved budget of around £400,000 in the Housing General Fund Capital programme for Empty Property Strategy for expenditure such as compulsory purchase acquisition.
- 7.2 This strategy suggests extending the eligibility criteria for incentive payments, within the existing revenue budget. Housing Services will be applying for additional central government funding to bring empty homes back into use for preventing and relieving homelessness. If additional funds are needed for new partnership initiatives, these will be requested in future reports.

[JM/10092019/P]

8.0 Legal implications

- 8.1 Whilst there is no specific legal requirement to adopt an empty homes strategy, a coherent approach is desirable in order to support the Council's wider objectives.
- 8.2 The Council's powers and duties in relation to enforcement are contained within various statutes including the Housing Act 1985, the Housing Act 2004, the Law of Property Act 1925 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981. In cases where enforcement action is required, advice and input from Legal Services is always sought.
- 8.3 If Housing Services wishes to progress partnership arrangements with private sector agencies or other potential partners, this will be referred for legal advice.

[DC/1109/2019/O]

9.0 Equalities implications

9.1 There are no direct equalities implications arising from this report.

10.0 Climate change and environmental implications

10.1 Bringing empty homes back into use reduces unkept properties, improving neighbourhoods. Improvement works to bring long-term empty properties up to a standard where they can be occupied often includes improvements to home energy efficiency, reducing carbon emissions.

11.0 Human resources implications

11.1 The Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan will be delivered with existing staffing resources Housing Services.

12.0 Corporate landlord implications

12.1 There are no corporate landlord implications arising from this report.

13.0 Health and wellbeing implications

12.1 Poor quality housing has an adverse impact on people's health and wellbeing. By improving the quality of the housing stock in Wolverhampton, and pursuing initiatives to prevent and relieve homelessness, this strategy will contribute to improving health and wellbeing. In addition, proposals to offer training opportunities in building skills when empty homes are refurbished will improve residents' skills and employment prospects.

14.0 Schedule of background papers

14.1 Empty Property Strategy 2010-2015

15.0 Appendices

15.1 Appendix 1 – Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024