

HOMES & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
20 JANUARY 2020

EMPTY HOMES UPDATE

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 To provide the Committee with information on the current position with empty homes in the district.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Homes become empty for a number of reasons and usually this is a short term situation pending sale or re-let. As a result, such properties are exempt from certain statutory actions.

2.2 Many remain empty while they are undergoing renovation or improvement prior to occupation, which accounts for a significant number of empty homes. It can be said that these empty properties are a consequence of the housing market. This period may be prolonged during times of low economic growth and such dwellings should be allowed to be brought back into use through the market without significant intervention.

2.3 There are numerous contributory factors to why homes become and/or remain empty, these include:

- Lack of funds for refurbishment.
- Reluctance to rent out.
- Abandonment.
- Employment linked homes.
- Capital investment properties.
- Probate, estate or legal ownership issues.
- Lack of awareness of options.
- Inaction of owners unable to sell or let.

2.4 It is also acknowledged that a long term empty derelict property can have a negative impact on the quality of the local environment, which in turn can create further problems in the local area that may lead to increased fear of crime, attract anti-social behaviour and make a place less attractive for local people to live in.

2.5 The main actions to bring empty homes back into use are done through agreement with the owners, compulsory purchase orders and grant funded schemes operated by a local authority.

3.0 The Local Picture

3.1 In Newark & Sherwood empty homes are pepper potted across the district and unlike authorities such as Ashfield and Mansfield the locality does not have large swathes of empty homes owned by portfolio holders.

- 3.2 The number of empty homes in the district can also be closely linked to activity in the housing market, which is currently fairly buoyant and from a strategic perspective it is positive to note that the upturn in the housing market is to a degree redressing the issue of empty homes across the district.
- 3.3 We currently have 54,914 banded homes for council tax purposes. Of these a total of 1,256 are empty, however, it should be noted that some of these will only be for very short periods.
- 3.4 In this respect the table below shows a pattern of decline in the number of long term (6 months+) empty homes across the district over the last 10 years:

Year	Number
2010	915
2015	695
2019	673

- 3.5 It should be noted that the 673 properties is not a static figure in that it will fluctuate with such things as the buoyancy of the housing market, as well as seasonal variations. Members should also be aware that the 673 will not always be the same properties. Some will remain as long term empty properties but many other will be empty for six months and then be brought back into use, whilst at the same time an occupied property becomes empty and remains so for a period of time. **Appendix One** to this report shows the number of empty properties per parish.
- 3.6 Currently 154 properties in the district have been empty for more than 2 years. Properties that have been empty for more than two years are subject to 200% council tax. These 151 long term empty properties represents 0.28% of the overall housing stock

Environmental Health - Enforcement Approach

- 3.7 As empty homes are often adjoined to or adjacent to occupied property complaints are inevitable. Empty homes can relatively quickly become problematic to the occupiers of neighbouring homes and complaints are generally referred to Environmental Health for action. Given the nature of complaint recording it is not possible to accurately identify how many specific empty homes complaints are received but this issue clearly generates a degree of work for the Business Unit.
- 3.8 The Council does not have a dedicated Officer that deals with empty properties and the number and distribution of the empty properties does not necessarily warrant such an approach. Unlike other districts Newark and Sherwood does have property owners with a large scale portfolio of properties that have been left empty. Neither do we have streets that have numerous empty properties bad are blighted by this.
- 3.9 Empty properties tend to come to the attention of the authority via complaints which may be about the condition of the property, the overgrown nature of the garden or anti-social behaviour associated with the property. In all initial cases efforts are made to open an informal dialogue with the property owner and identify viable options for returning the property back into use. This might include referring to other agencies, including the Council’s RealHome initiative, advice of renovation works, VAT exemption, how to become a landlord and let the property or simply how to go about selling the house.

- 3.10 During the last year there were 15 complaints made that were coded as derelict/empty property. Whilst this number does not capture all complaints (eg overgrown gardens) it does reflect the relatively low level of complaint relating to this type of property.
- 3.11 In cases where property owners refuse to co-operate the Council has and will continue to use, in a proportionate manner, a number of enforcement tools under various statutes (Housing, Environmental Protection, Planning, etc.) to encourage an owner to bring a property back into use. This can vary between relatively simple works such as boarding up and clearance of overgrown gardens to more radical measures of enforced sale and prosecution for non-compliance of enforcement notices. Additional powers including Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) and Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) powers are also available but are recognised as complex and consequently cumbersome and expensive to administer. Upcoming legislative change may see these powers simplified and become more useable.
- 3.12 The Council has over the past few years developed a number of grant aided schemes to encourage properties to be brought back into use. Despite the schemes offering financial benefits to the owners the take up these have been very poor with owners giving variety of reasons for not wanting to take advantage of the grant schemes. We do not currently have any grants available to encourage homes to be brought back into use.

4.0 Equalities Implications

4.1 None from this report

5.0 Financial Implications

5.1 None from this report.

6.0 Community Plan – Alignment to Objectives

6.1 Objective 1: Improve the cleanliness and appearance of the local environment. This is supported by the following actions:

Supporting communities to build civic pride and facilitating activities to enable communities to improve their local areas

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee note the contents of the report and the range of actions taken to bring long term properties back into use.

Reason for Recommendation

To update the Committee on the current position of empty homes in the District

Background Papers - Nil

For further information please contact Alan Batty (Business Manager – Public Protection).

Matthew Finch

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