

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Policy Development and Review Panel

Date **21 September 2017**

Report of: **Director of Operations**

Subject: **EMPTY PROPERTIES**

SUMMARY

This report provides the Panel with an update on the activities being undertaken to bring empty properties across the Borough back into use.

RECOMMENDATION

Members are asked to note the information contained within the report.

INTRODUCTION

1. Section 3 of the Housing Act 2004 requires local authorities to keep under review the housing conditions (including empty properties) in their district with a view to identifying what, if any, course of action should be taken. Properties become empty for many different reasons. In most cases, they remain empty for a short period, for example during a change in ownership, completion of probate or necessary renovations to enable occupation.
2. However, there are some homes that remain empty for long periods of time and are potentially a wasted resource. If left unoccupied they can quickly fall into disrepair, attract anti-social behaviour, encourage vandalism and reduce property values in the local area.
3. Bringing an empty property back into use is of benefit to the individual owner as it provides them with a tenant who becomes housed and/or a new owner with a home for them and their family, plus has advantages to the wider community and encourages economic activity.
4. The total number of empty properties in Fareham, including those currently exempted from council tax due to undergoing repairs, is 321. 147 of these fall into the definition of an empty dwelling under the Housing Act 2004, of which 51 have been empty for over two years (as of 31st July 2017).

HOW THE COUNCIL IS HELPING TO RETURN EMPTY PROPERTIES TO USE

5. The Council's approach to bringing empty homes back into occupation is through the provision of advice and support to owners. This can take the form of advice on selling the property to a private purchaser or developer, letting (either privately or through our Farelets scheme), as well as the provision of information on how and where to get financial help.
6. In some circumstances, an interest free loan will be offered to enable the owner to carry out essential works to a property which they will then lease to the Council until the loan is repaid. Two loans have been agreed in the last 12 months (details of which can be found later in this report), and whilst uptake remains relatively low, we have found this initiative to be a useful mechanism for engaging with owners who may otherwise be reticent to bring their property back into use. Following these interventions, several properties have been brought back in to use where the owners have decided not to apply for a loan but have funded renovation work themselves.
7. However, there will be some instances in which an empty property is having such a detrimental impact on a neighbourhood that more formal and direct enforcement action must be considered where it is evident that owners are unwilling or unable to participate in the voluntary measures detailed above. Whilst Councils have compulsory purchase powers, many take the view that the procedures for this are not practical in the context of empty homes as the approach requires a change in ownership before the issue of reuse can be addressed. The process can be drawn out and complicated, particularly if the proposed action is opposed. Therefore, it is generally more appropriate to pursue an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO), as provided for in the Housing Act 2004, which can bridge the gap between voluntary measures and compulsory purchase powers.

8. EDMO's are designed to operate along similar principles to private sector leasing arrangements however will only be granted if a Residential Property Tribunal are satisfied that the Council has exhausted all other alternatives.

RECENT SUCCESS – CASE STUDIES

Property One

9. The owner of a three bedroom, end of terrace Victorian property in Gosport Road which had been empty for over a year, responded to a mail shot as he was interested in our loan scheme. The property required modernisation but there was also the potential to convert it into two flats. Officers worked with the owner on the conversion because, apart from returning an empty property to use, the Council would ultimately acquire two flats to house homeless families and benefit from the new homes bonus payment.

Property Two

10. Due to complaints from neighbours, officers became aware of a one bedroom 1990's property in Locks Heath that had been empty for nine years. The garden was overgrown and strewn with rubbish, rats had been seen regularly and there was evidence of rising damp on the party wall of the adjoining property.
11. The owner had abandoned the property and was difficult to trace. Once eventually traced, the owner did not respond to any council correspondence until he was advised that we were considering an EDMO. The owner decided to hand us the keys and asked that we deal with everything required to bring the property back into use, he also suggested that we keep 100% of the rental income until our outlay was recouped.
12. Due to the condition, it took four months to renovate the property, but now complete, the Council has another property for a homeless household, the area is improved and the owner and neighbours are pleased with the outcome.

RISK ASSESSMENT

13. There are no significant risk considerations in relation to this report

CONCLUSION

14. Officers will continue to take steps to bring empty properties in the Borough back into use, including the use of enforcement action where necessary.

Background Papers: None

Reference Papers: None

Enquiries: For further information on this report please contact Giles Hearn. (Ext 4404)