

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision 09 October 2023

Portfolio:	Housing
Subject:	Empty Homes Strategy - Adoption
Report of:	Director of Housing
Corporate Priorities:	Providing Housing Choices

Purpose:

To seek Executive approval for the adoption of the Empty Homes Strategy.

Executive summary:

The Empty Homes Strategy provides an overview of the amount and type of empty homes in the Borough, together with two objectives relating to the Council's approach to long-term empty properties. The Strategy acknowledges the detrimental issues that can arise from a small number of empty homes and articulates the importance of proportionate and appropriate action in addressing these cases.

On 15 May 2023 the Executive approved that the Draft Empty Homes Strategy be subject to a period of public consultation. That consultation is now complete with the majority of responses positive as to the approach and objectives contained in the draft document.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken, and the Strategy is now recommended for adoption.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Executive agrees that:

- (a) the Empty Homes Strategy, as provided at Appendix A to this report, be adopted; and
- (b) the Director of Housing be authorised to add detail to the Strategy to reflect the adoption date.

Reason:

To provide an up to date and effective strategy for long-term empty homes that is proportionate to the issues that empty homes can present in the Borough.

Cost of proposals:

The costs of utilising the strategy are met within existing operational budgets across multiple service areas at the Council.

Appendices:

A: Empty Homes Strategy

B: Summary of responses from consultation on the Draft Empty Homes Strategy

C: Equalities Impact Assessment

Background papers: NONE

Reference papers: Report to the Executive for Decision: 15 May 2023 (Draft Empty Homes Strategy)

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Executive Briefing Paper

Date:	09 October 2023
Subject:	Empty Homes Strategy - Adoption
Briefing by:	Director of Housing
Portfolio:	Housing

INTRODUCTION

1. Fareham Borough has a lower number of long-term empty homes than the national average. This is despite the figures being distorted by a number of new retirement living schemes where apartments remain unsold.
2. Regardless of the relatively low number of long-term empty properties, some could provide a home for an individual or family if brought back into use; positively contributing to the provision of homes in the Borough. When left empty, some homes can also be more vulnerable to misuse and/or generate issues for immediate neighbours or the wider community if the property is not appropriately maintained.
3. An Empty Homes Strategy has been produced. The Strategy outlines the extent of the issue in Fareham Borough, provides two overarching objectives, and also explains the need for proportionate and appropriate action.
4. Public consultation on the draft Empty Homes Strategy took place between 03 June and 17 July 2023; responses were predominately positive.

THE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

5. The Empty Homes Strategy is included at Appendix A to this report. It incorporates three main sections: -
 - Empty Homes in Fareham
 - The Objectives
 - Proportionate and Appropriate Action
6. The Strategy explains the extent of the issue in Fareham Borough, focusing on those homes that have been vacant for two years or more (which are often those that have the greatest impact to the wider community).
7. Further detail around the empty home figures, including how they compare to national averages, and that the figures are currently distorted by a small number of retirement

living developments, was contained in the report to the Executive on the draft Strategy (May 2023).

8. National comparisons (Action on Empty Homes/DLUHC data) on the number of long-term empty homes by district/borough are generally based on homes vacant for 6 months or more. 2022 data showed that 0.78% of total homes in Fareham Borough were empty for six months or more, compared to a national average of 0.99%. Excluding the new build empty retirement properties would bring the percentage of homes in Fareham Borough vacant for 6 months or more down to 0.52%; nearly half the national average.
9. Privately owned empty homes that have been vacant for 1-2 years make up just 0.1% of homes in the Borough, with those empty for 2 years or more making up a further 0.07%. It is often a small number of these long-term empty, privately owned homes, where concerns from neighbours or the wider community can be focused. This is primarily due to poor (or complete lack of) management and maintenance of the property.

The Objectives

10. The draft Strategy includes two objectives.
11. Objective 1 is to 'encourage owners of empty homes to bring their properties back into use'. This objective focuses on the softer and encouraging tactics that can be (and often are) deployed by officers to try to bring homes into use. This is detailed on pages 8 & 9 of the draft Strategy. Even in instances where the homes cannot be encouraged back into use, retaining positive communication with the owner (or relatives of owners) can help to prevent the property from becoming problematic to neighbours or the wider community.
12. Objective 2 seeks to 'appropriately and proportionately use Council resources to address problematic empty homes'. On pages 11 to 13 of the draft Strategy the various tools available to the Council are articulated, recognising that they often fall to different departments and in turn may have differing determining bodies. These tools are articulated in the Strategy to provide transparency rather than intended to suggest they can and should be used on all cases.

Proportionate and Appropriate Action

13. Pages 14 to 15 of the Strategy introduce the idea of 'proportionate and appropriate' action. Every case of a problematic empty home will be different and have its own nuances. The Strategy provides a framework and understanding of the factors that should be considered before any action is pursued by the Council. This includes legislation, personal circumstances, the extent of harm vs. action (ensuring it is proportionate), and cost.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT STRATEGY

14. Public consultation on the draft Empty Homes Strategy took place from 03 June to 17 July 2023. An online survey was produced to gather feedback from local residents, and to understand if they agreed with the proposed approach contained in the Strategy.
15. 140 responses were received. 94% of respondents agreed with Objective 1, and 86% agreed with Objective 2. The comments received tended to represent a mix of views with some expressing concern that it should not be a Council concern if a property is occupied or not, or that there may be certain circumstances for a property being empty. It is important to highlight that the Strategy is not seeking to forcibly bring all empty

homes back into use.

16. Similarly specific concerns were raised with Objective 2, with three respondents considering it too heavy-handed. The case-by-case approach and having an awareness of personal circumstances (which is specifically mentioned in the Strategy) will ensure that any decisions to act against an empty home will be made following a careful balanced understanding of the nuances of the case, and whether action is appropriate (and proportionate).
17. Further details on the feedback from the public consultation is contained in Appendix B to this report.

DECISION MAKING ON THE USE OF ENFORCEMENT TOOLS

18. Most empty homes cases will be looked at and addressed by officers. In some cases where enforcement tools are being utilised this would be undertaken using delegated or emergency powers, or more formal approval will be required. When necessary, approvals will continue to be sought through the appropriate decision-making body at the Council. As explained on page 14 of the Empty Homes Strategy this might include the Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee, Planning Committee, or potentially an Executive decision.

CONCLUSION

19. The Strategy explains the extent of the empty home issue in Fareham Borough, recognising that in a minority of cases long-term empty homes can be a blight and amenity impact to neighbours and/or the wider community. Two Objectives have been identified, giving increased transparency on how the Council will approach empty home cases. This approach will ultimately achieve a balance between the level of the issue and the use of resources across the organisation to tackle it.
20. The draft Empty Homes Strategy was considered by the Housing Scrutiny Panel at their meeting on the 09 February 2023, with an additional table and wording then added at pages 15 & 16 of the Strategy. Public consultation subsequently took place which has raised no significant issues of concern or note that require amendments to be made.
21. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has also been produced (at Appendix C) raising no issues. The Empty Homes Strategy (Appendix A) is therefore recommended for adoption.

RISK ASSESSMENT

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

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Robyn Lyons (01328 824305)