

**REPORT FROM: CENTRAL AND REGENERATION SERVICE
ECONOMIC AND HOUSING REGENERATION MANAGER**

TO: EXECUTIVE

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EMPTY HOMES PLAN AND EMPTY HOMES LOANS UPDATE

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform Executive of the progress being made against the Empty Homes Plan and to update the Empty homes action plan. To provide an update on the Empty Homes Loans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Note the work already completed towards achieving the targets in the Empty Homes Plan
- (2) Adopt the empty homes action plan for 2015 – 2016 attached to this report
- (3) Note the progress with the Empty Homes Loans

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) To enable the Empty Homes Plan Targets to be met
- (2) To continue the reduction in empty properties across the Borough

ISSUE

1. Empty Homes are a key factor in low demand housing areas, they are a wasted asset, encourage anti-social behaviour and can cause neighbourhoods to decline. It is therefore essential that the problem is tackled as part of the overall regeneration of Pendle.
2. A range of proactive work has been undertaken by Economic & Housing Regeneration Services, as part of the Empty Homes Plan (2012 - 2014). The actions so far have resulted in a significant reduction in the numbers from over 2000 in 2008/9 to the present level of 1200 but there are still some problem areas across the Borough.

3. We need to look at ways of building on our successes and developing new ways to bring the more challenging long term empty properties back in to use and hence increase the level of New Homes Bonus brought into the district.
4. Since the appointment of the Council's dedicated Empty Homes Officer there has been a marked increase in the number of empty homes that have been brought back into use. In 2011/12 107 were brought back into use. Whilst in 2012/13 74 properties were brought back into use this trend has continued and we have identified over 500 properties that have been returned into occupation in the current financial year 2014/15 so far
5. Overall the number of long term (over 6 months) private sector empty properties has fallen from 2131 in 2008/9 to 1068 in 2014/15 a reduction of 1163 of which 862 have been as a direct result of the Council's intervention over the five years. This represents a current vacancy rate of 2.9% on average across the borough
6. Whilst the vacancy rate is below the target of 3.7% set in the Sustainable Communities Strategy there are still clusters of empty properties around the borough.
7. The wards within the Colne and District Area Committee and West Craven Area Committee areas have a vacancy rate of around 3.0% meeting the target set in the Sustainable Communities Strategy. Barrowford and Western Parishes have a vacancy rate of 2.5% whilst Brierfield and Reedley is 5.0% and the Nelson wards are 7.6%.
8. The introduction of the empty homes premium in the council tax of 150% has had a significant impact on the reduction of long term empty properties. A lot more owners are talking to us about the options to bring their properties back into use.
9. The Five Pennine Lancashire authorities along with Together Housing were successful in their bid to the Homes and Communities Agency to set up an empty property scheme and received £4.8 million of funding for the linked up project. This scheme has now been operating for 3 years and 160 property owners from Pendle have benefited from funding through this scheme.
10. Over the last 12 months we have sold all the remaining properties acquired under the Improvement for Sale project which had previously been empty for over 6 months and in collaboration with a private developer have improved 17 properties on Regent Street Nelson. Place First has taken over responsibility for the 27 properties in Walton Street Colne and it is expected that they will be completed by the end of March this year. A further 20 properties, that the Council owned have been refurbished by four developers prior to them being sold to the developers. All of these properties are now reoccupied. The remaining refurbishment work in Whitefield Nelson will be completed by the end of the financial year and we will continue to market these properties for sale. There are currently 29 properties still to be sold. However, we have accepted offers on 8 of these.
11. The Council also offers the owners of long term empty properties (over 6 months) anywhere in the borough the opportunity of an Empty Homes Loan. The loan will cover the cost of 80% of the renovation cost up to a maximum of £15,000. The loan is repayable over 5 years. However if repayment is made within 3 years it is interest free and loans only attracts interest on the 4th and 5th year.
12. Since the introduction of the Empty Homes Loans we have received 84 enquiries. This has led to 51 loans being offered. However it is important to note that although we have offered loans to improve 51 properties in 32 cases the properties have been improved but the loan has not been claimed. This means that we are able to continue to offer this assistance to other empty home owners across the borough.

13. The empty homes officer has received 7 enquiries since January and reports that the interest in the product is growing.

14. The Action Plan attached to this report, in appendix 1, sets out the actions that the Council has used and intends to use to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough, including the actions that have been taken since the report to the Executive in October 2013.

CONCLUSION

Whilst we must recognise what has been achieved in reducing the numbers of empty properties to below the target set in the Sustainable Communities Strategy there are still clusters of empty properties that are causing problems and attracting anti social behaviour. The emphasis must now be to tackle these clusters and reduce the long term vacancy rates in these areas to those seen in other parts of the borough by continuing to work with owners, partners and other Local Authorities.

IMPLICATIONS

Policy: There are no changes to Policy arising from this report

Financial: There are no additional costs to the council involved with the implementation of the action plan

Legal: Nothing arising from this report

Risk Management: There is a significant risk that without the implementation of the action plan the problem will continue to get worse

Health and Safety: Nothing arising directly from this report

Sustainability: Continuing to implement the empty homes action plan will assist in meeting the target set in the Sustainable Communities Strategy across all areas of the borough

Community Safety: Reducing empty properties can reduce the anti-social behaviour that is often associated with them

Equality and Diversity: Bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing through “linkedup” will provide a wider range of housing choice.

APPENDICES

Empty Homes Action Plan

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

Action	Lead	Project Start and End Date	Milestones	Milestone Completed date	Comment
Existing Actions					
Map empty homes in the Borough to show there locations	Andrew Bean	01/01/13 to 01/12/13	Pass data to Cleansing Receive maps from Cleansing	31/09/13 31/12/13	Ongoing Not being continued due to new methods of working
Investigate the use of empty property Council Tax premiums	Dean Langton	01/02/13 to 01/05/13	Review the changes to the legislation Assess the impact on Borough of Pendle Borough Council Report to Executive on the impact.	31/05/13	Completed
Map areas of housing need to identify whether any need for specific empty properties	Paul Lloyd/Wayne Forest/Andrew Bean	01/01/14 to 31/12/14	Request data from Housing Needs/Housing Pendle Pass Data to Cleansing Receive maps from Cleansing Overlay empty property maps with housing need map	30/07/14 31/09/14 31/12/14 28/02/15	Completed Completed Not being continued
Financial assistance	Paul Lloyd	01/01/14 to 01/07/14	Review the empty property loan and look to role it out to all areas of the Borough Report to executive	30/08/13 31/10/13	Completed Completed
Develop an empty property information kit	Jake Piergies	01/08/13 to 01/10/14	Produce a comprehensive guide for owners of empty properties to enable them to bring them back into use	31/10/14	Ongoing Carry forward
Investigate the use of Demolition Orders/Clearance of long term vacant properties	Paul Lloyd	01/08/13 to 01/02/14	Review the legislation Report findings with recommendations to Executive	30/11/13 31/05/14	Completed Being pursued under Planning Act powers
Seek funding to continue the Empty Homes Officer Post	Julie Whittaker	01/09/13 to 31/03/14	Submit growth bid as part of the budget process	31/12/13	Approval given for a further 2 year's funding
Complete the	Judith Stockton	01/03/13 to	Developers on site	01/11/13	Completed

refurbishment of Walton Street Colne		31/12/14	Works completed properties reoccupied	31/12/15	Carry Forward
Complete refurbishment of the IFS properties being improved by developers	Paul Lloyd	01/07/13 to 31/03/15	Developers on site	31/07/13	Completed
			Works completed and reoccupied	31/03/15	Completed
Review Properties bought in for clearance under HMR	Julie Whittaker	01/07/13 to 31/12/13	Discuss options with Members	31/08/13	Completed
			Report to management team	31/12/13	Completed
Review the enforced Sale process	Paul Lloyd	01/01/14 to 30/06/14	Review the process following the completion of the first sale	01/03/14	See new actions
			Report to management team on necessary changes	30/06/14	
New Actions					
Actively target the most long term empty priority properties.	Jake Piergies		Review data monthly Informal action Take formal action		Ongoing
Raise awareness of empty properties and Economic and Housing Regeneration's policies with other service units of the Council, partners and the public	Paul Lloyd/Jake Piergies	01/08/15 to 31/12/15	Produce information literature for other service units, partners and the public.	31/10/15	
			Circulate the information to other service units, partners and public.	31/12/15	
Identify all Registered Provider (RP) long term empty properties and work with the RP to bring them back into use	Jake Piergies	01/05/15 to 01/10/15	Ask RP for empty property data.	31/08/15	
			Agree action plan with RP to bring their long term empty properties back in to use	31/10/15	
Encourage the take up of empty homes loans	Jake Piergies	01/01/15 to 31/03/16	I identify properties empty for over 6 months	30/04/15	
			Contact owners with information and examples of the loan available	31/05/15	
			Monitor the take up and reasons why the loans are not being used	01/03/16	

Investigate the use of compulsory purchase in streets where there are blocks of empty properties	Jake Piergies	01/01/15 to 30/9/15	Identify blocks of properties Cost the options and identify partners Report to Management team	01/03/15 01/06/15 30/09/15	
Investigate the use of enforced sale for long term empty properties who have significant council tax debt	Jake Piergies	01/03/15 to 31/10/15	Identify properties Liaise with Council Tax to develop a protocol Report to management team	01/05/15 01/07/15 31/10/15	
Work with neighbouring authorities to tackle empty properties and share best practice	Jake Piergies	01/01/15 to 31/7/16	Attend empty homes meeting to keep up to date with best practice and innovative solutions to bring properties back in to use	31/07/16	
Review the need for the dedicated empty homes officer post	Paul Lloyd	01/01/16 to 31/5/16	Consider the need and role of the Empty property officer Report to management team	01/03/16 31/05/16	
Review and update the Councils empty homes strategy	Paul Lloyd/Jake Piergies	01/10/15 to 31/5/16	Review current strategy Update the Strategy Report updated Strategy to the Executive	01/01/16 01/03/16 31/5/16	

Key

Grey – Existing action

White – New actions