

**REPORT FROM: HOUSING, HEALTH AND ENGINEERING SERVICES
MANAGER**

TO: NELSON COMMITTEE

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VACANT HOUSES

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform the committee on the position regarding the management of vacant houses in Nelson.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) That the Committee note the action that is being taken to manage empty houses in their wards.
- (2) That the Committee receive an update report in six months time unless there is a particular issue regarding a property in the Committee's area.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) To ensure that empty properties in the borough are managed.
- (2) To ensure that the Committee is kept up to date with the position regarding the priority properties in their area.

ISSUE

1. There are a number of known vacant houses in the Nelson Committee's wards. These houses are a wasted resource, attract anti social behaviour and detract from the amenity of the area.
2. The Committee have asked for regular updates regarding the management of empty properties across their areas
3. Over the borough the total number of properties that have been empty for more than six months has decreased from 758 in July 2019 to 678 in January 2020 a reduction of 80 properties. This represents a vacancy rate of 1.73%. This is significantly below the average

for the North West of England (3.2%) and the average for England (2.6%). However there are still some problem areas across the borough.

4. There are currently 261 empty residential properties in Nelson Committee area which represents 2.16% of the housing stock covered by the Committees wards. The table below shows the number of empty properties in each ward for over 2 years and over 6 months up to 2 years.

Ward	Over 2 years	Over 6 months up to 2 years	Total
Bradley	18	29	47
Cloverhill	16	22	38
Marsden	10	13	23
Southfield	29	46	75
Walverden	17	22	39
Whitefield	17	22	39
Committee Area Total			261

5. The number of vacant houses in the Nelson Committees wards is below the average for the North West. Even though overall numbers are low there are a number of vacant houses in the area that are considered to be a priority and require action to bring them back into use and we are targeting these and in appropriate cases seeking to use compulsory purchase powers to bring them back into use.
6. The Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 19th September 2019 approved the use of compulsory purchase powers to enable the Council to acquire 24 Norfolk Street Nelson so that it can be brought back into use. The legal team are currently preparing the file to send to the Secretary of State. We are continuing to work towards the compulsory purchase of 32 Rhoda Street. However, the owner has now come forward and we are working with her to ensure that the property is returned into occupation. A report is being submitted to the policy and Resources Committee regarding the fire damaged property on Leeds Road Nelson.
7. The Empty Homes Officers from The Environmental Health Residential Team is constantly monitoring the properties and in contact with the owners and they are being encouraged to bring the property back into use. Where owners inform us of their intention to renovate the property we offer loan assistance and monitor the house to ensure that the renovations proceed and do not stall. The Empty Property Loan scheme is available to all owners of empty properties across the Borough. However we are finding that when we have provided schedules of work properties are being improved and the financial assistance is not being taken up.
8. Whilst 474 properties have been reoccupied in the last 9 months and overall numbers have fallen there is still a high turnover of properties which are left empty for over 6 months, explaining the discrepancy between the numbers brought back into use and the overall reduction in empty properties.
9. The Empty Homes Officer is also reporting that there are a large number of properties that are undergoing refurbishment and we anticipate that these properties will be returned to occupation in the near future.

IMPLICATIONS

Policy: None

Financial: Up until 2019/20 the number of empty homes within a borough was included in the calculation to determine the amount of New Homes Bonus grant awarded to Authorities over a 4 year period. This grant is due to be withdrawn with effect from 2020 and it is uncertain, at this stage, if there will be a replacement incentivisation scheme that will use empty home numbers within the qualification criteria.

Legal: Following the recent case in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea where the details of empty properties were released resulting in a substantial fine for the authority the decision has been made not to include a list of vacant properties as an appendix.

Risk Management: None

Health and Safety: As empty houses attract anti social behaviour there are potential risks for officers inspecting these houses. However there are departmental risk assessments in place to minimise these hazards

Sustainability: The reoccupation of empty properties will bring a valuable resource back into use.

Community Safety: Empty houses attract anti social behaviour and fly tipping bringing them back into use will reduce these activities and improve the neighbourhoods.

Equality and Diversity: None

APPENDICES

None

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

None