

Report of Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods

Report to Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board

Date: 27th November 2012

Subject: Updated progress on returning private sector empty properties back into occupation

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	Yes
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	No

Summary of main issues

1. Safer, Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board's April 2012 report into the private rented sector recommended that the issue of empty properties be driven forward to deliver the outcomes of the Empty Property Strategy 2012-15 and its associated action plan.
2. Reducing the number of long term empty properties is a top 25 priority for the council and a headline target in the City Priority Plan 2012-15. Progress is monitored via the Housing and Regeneration Partnership Board with quarterly reporting against an agreed target of 3200 empty properties returned to occupation per annum.
3. Progress has been made against this target. In 2011-12, 3243 private sector empty properties were returned to occupation as a direct result of actions by the Council. As at the end of Quarter two in 2012/13 1526 empty properties have been brought back into use.
4. No single action will bring empty properties back into use. The Council adopts a toolkit approach to deal with empty properties ranging from initial help and advice though to compulsory purchase and successful bids by the Council and partners for internal and external funding as and when funding is made available.

Recommendations

5. Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board is requested to note the progress made against recommendation 3 from the Safer, Stronger Communities Scrutiny report into the Private Rented Sector (2012)

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board on progress against recommendation 3 of the Safer Stronger Communities scrutiny enquiry into Private Rented Sector Housing.
- 1.2 Recommendation 3 was
- 1.3 That the Housing and Regeneration Partnership Board continues to drive forward the aims of the Empty Properties Project and explores how the council and its partners can work together in delivering the desired outcomes set out within the Empty Properties Action Plan and
- 1.4 That a progress report on the delivery of the Empty Properties Action Plan is brought back to Scrutiny before December 2012.

2 Background information

- 2.1 The Safer Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board carried out an investigation into the Private Rented Sector in 2011 and published its report in April 2012.
- 2.2 The Board made a number of recommendations which were endorsed by the Executive Board. One general progress report and an update on recommendation 1, locality working, have been given to the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board.
- 2.3 The Safer Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board report noted that returning private sector empty properties back into occupation is a headline indicator in the City Priority Plan 2012-15. It was also acknowledged that empty properties are a complex issue with no single action resulting in all empty properties being returned to occupation. The Council on its own, whilst undertaking considerable actions, can not provide all the answers. Therefore the Empty Property Strategy and its associated action plan includes working in partnerships to address this issue.
- 2.4 A long term empty property is defined as one which has been empty for over six months The target is to return 3200 long term empty properties back into occupation per annum. As of the end of September 2012 there are 17846 empty properties in the city of which 7,347 have been empty for over six months. The vast majority 6820 are in the private sector.
- 2.5 Progress against the target is monitored quarterly by the Housing and Regeneration Partnership Board. In 2011-12 3243 long term empty properties were returned to occupation. So far this year by the end of quarter 2, 1526

properties had been reoccupied. Between September 2011 and September 2012 there has been a net reduction of empty properties of 577. It is this net reduction which attracts New Homes Bonus.

- 2.6 The report noted that there was an Empty Property Action plan in place which had a range of activities targeted at reducing the overall number of long term empty properties in the city.
- 2.7 This report sets out the actions within the plan and gives an update of current progress. The Empty Properties Action Plan is attached at Appendix 1.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 Returning long term empty private sector properties back into use is a top 25 priority for the Council. It is a headline target within the City Priority Plan 2012-15.

3.2 EMPTY PROPERTY INTELLIGENCE AND REPORTING

- 3.2.1 A key issue is the need for intelligence on empty properties. Since 2005 city wide data and trends have been monitored as well as a number of priority areas, namely the City Centre, Cross Green, East End Park, Chapletown, Harehills, Beeston Hill and Holbeck. As part of the action plan all areas covered by the Leeds Investment Plan and the student area in Leeds 6 are monitored monthly. This allows trends in city wide and in priority areas to be monitored, any issues or hot spots identified and the appropriate intervention instigated. Reporting of progress against the Empty Property targets is on a quarterly basis to the Housing and Regeneration Board and other Corporate reporting structures.

3.3 CORPORATE AND DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGY FOR EMPTY PROPERTIES

- 3.3.1 The Empty Homes Strategy for 2012/15 has now been produced and agreed. The strategy illustrates that it is not just the function of Statutory Housing to address empty homes but a Council wide approach. As a result of this the steering group has been set up to ensure a coordinated approach is adopted when dealing with empty properties. Therefore colleagues from planning, building control and finance have been co-opted onto the group.
- 3.3.2 As part of the Chapletown Housing Investment Plan a protocol to ensure empty properties are disposed of in a coordinated approach to ensure that other partners investment is protected has been adopted. This will be a pilot and reviewed by partners in January 2013. If successful the aim is to adopt the approach city wide.

3.4 FUNDING TO ADDRESS EMPTY PROPERTIES

- 3.4.1 Funding to address empty properties is a key issue. Leeds has had access to the West Yorkshire Recycling Empties Fund which has allowed the Council to undertake compulsory purchase action and enforced sales in recent years.
- 3.4.2 In September 2012 Executive Board agreed in principle a 3 year investment programme to support empty property work. The funding is proposed to be used to support locality work as per the paper to Scrutiny Board on the 30th October 2012

and for capital investment in empty properties. At present it is still to be determined which will be the targeted areas. Discussions are ongoing including the Lead Member and local politicians. It is proposed that this investment be in the form of implementing our own empty property loan scheme and also to provide greater funding to allow more compulsory purchase actions to take place.

- 3.4.3 Funds are not always available to the Council but to partner organisations. It is important that the authority supports such bids and helps to deliver on their outcomes. Recently with the support of the Council partners, Connect, LATCH, Canopy and GIPSIL, were successful in obtaining empty property funding from the Homes and Communities Agency to bring back 48 long term empty properties by March 2015. Canopy is also being supported with commuted sums funding, via a loan to bring back a further 8 properties. This is a pilot and if successful could be used as potential model to support such organisations in the future.
- 3.4.4 All potential funding sources will continue to be explored. Currently the Council is exploring the potential of being a pilot authority for a national empty property loan scheme administered by Empty Homes. We are also supporting the third sector in bids for funds to support the outcomes of the Call to Action Day.

3.5 NEW WAYS TO BRING EMPTY PROPERTIES BACK INTO OCCUPATION

- 3.5.1 Following on from the Call to Action Day the Council is working closely with third sector partners to consider implementation of ideas that came out of the workshops at the event. These include the potential single website managed and developed by the third sector to provide a one stop service of help and advice for empty property owners; the potential for a Empty Homes Doctor service to help individual owners bring their properties back into use. and looking at access to funding which could be available to address these issues which are beyond the ability of the Council to obtain. Funding to develop this approach will be a combination of third sector funding streams and New Homes Bonus agreed by the Executive Board.
- 3.5.2 Previously the Council had considered establishing a private sector leasing schemes but developed instead a private sector letting scheme. However the Council is revisiting leasing with a view to increasing the supply of affordable housing. This may also prove to be an option to assist owners of long term empty properties to bring them back into use. This is at an initial stage and will be developed over the next few months to determine whether it is a viable option for the authority.

3.6 RAISING THE PROFILE OF EMPTY PROPERTIES

- 3.6.1 Quarterly meetings have now been set up between officers and the Communication Team to consider how to be more proactive when dealing with empty properties. It also considers future potential opportunities to link to media events or programmes so increasing the profile.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 Consultation occurs with partners regarding all aspects of the strategy. The form that consultation and engagement takes will be dependent upon the scheme and process that is being undertaken.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration (EDCI)

- 4.2.1 The work of the Empty Property Team and the Empty Property Strategy have both been subject to EDCI assessments. These have been agreed and published. Action Plans for both have been developed and work is on going to address issues raised by the assessments.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

- 4.3.1 The work will continue as described to assist the Council, in conjunction with its partners, to achieve this top 25 target of returning 3200 long term empty homes into use per annum.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 Currently there are resources available for this work within the Council and with partners working towards returning empty properties back into occupation. It is proposed to use the funding agreed by Executive Board in September 2012 to increase the resources available to target long term empty properties on an area by area basis.
- 4.4.2. Tackling empty properties are a top 25 priority for the city. In addition to the extra homes created by doing this there is a further financial incentive to maximise the numbers returned as these can count towards the New Homes Bonus allocation, provided there is a net reduction in the overall number of empty properties within the City on a year by year basis.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 Officers will continue to operate within their existing powers and to work with partners to secure new funding to help support returning empty properties back into occupation.
- 4.5.2. The Executive Board decision was eligible to call in. The staffing restructure proposals will be eligible for call in.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 The Council's normal risk management procedures have been and continue to be applied.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 Progress is being made against the outcomes of the Empty Property Strategy 2012/15 and its associated action plan.
- 5.2 Working with partners the Council is addressing the issue of empty properties and supporting funding bids to bring in monies to the city to deal with empty properties.
- 5.3 Executive Board has approved additional funding to allow the development of locality working to proactively target empty properties on a priority area by area basis.
- 5.4 There is work on going to develop closer working with new partners to improve the options available to owners to bring properties back into use. This will allow more owners to help themselves and will allow the Council to concentrate its resources on properties where the owner is not willing to bring it back into occupation without proactive enforcement, including compulsory purchase.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board is requested to note progress made against recommendation 3 from the Safer, Stronger Communities Scrutiny report into the Private Rented Sector (2012)

7 Background documents¹

- 7.1 Safer, Stronger Communities Inquiry report into the Private Rented Sector (2012)
- 7.2 Empty Homes Strategy 2012-15
- 7.3 Empty Homes Strategy 2012-15 Action Plan September 2012

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.