

 Executive 14th September 2011		Agenda Item No. 5
Title	Empty Homes Strategy 2011-2014	
For further information about this report please contact	Satnam Kaur – Ext:6422 Paul Hughes – Ext : 6729	
Wards of the District directly affected	All	
Is the report private and confidential and not for publication by virtue of a paragraph of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, following the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006?	No	
Date and meeting when issue was last considered and relevant minute number	N/A	
Background Papers	Nil	

Contrary to the policy framework:	No
Contrary to the budgetary framework:	No
Key Decision?	Yes
Included within the Forward Plan? (If yes include reference number)	Yes (B1)
Equality & Sustainability Impact Assessment Undertaken	Yes

Officer/Councillor Approval		
Officer Approval	Date	Name
Chief Executive/Deputy Chief Executive	17.8.11	Chris Elliott/Bill Hunt/Andrew Jones
Head of Service	16.8.11	Jameel Malik
CMT	17.8.11	Chris Elliott/Bill Hunt/Andrew Jones
Section 151 Officer	17.8.11	
Monitoring Officer	17.8.11	
Finance	17.8.11	Mike Snow
Portfolio Holder(s)	22.8.11	Cllr Norman Vincett
Consultation & Community Engagement		
Insert details of any consultation undertaken or proposed to be undertaken with regard to this report.		
Final Decision?		Yes
Suggested next steps (if not final decision please set out below)		

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The draft empty homes strategy sets out the reasons why empty homes in the District should be brought back into use and outlines the options available to achieve this.
- 1.2 The associated action plan lists some of the initiatives to be undertaken to increase the number of empty properties brought back into use.

2. **RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 That Executive recommends to Council:
 - i. the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2011-2014 and the supporting draft action plan that outlines delivery of the strategy's objectives;
 - ii. an amendment to the scheme of delegation authorising the use of Enforced Sale Procedure under Law of Property Act 1925 including service of notice under Section 103 of the Act, to Head of Housing & Property Services.
- 2.2 Executive agrees to delegate authority to the Head of Housing and Property Services in consultation with the Housing and Property Services Portfolio Holder to implement any minor changes to the final detail of the draft strategy and action plan prior to submission to Council.

3. **REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 The strategy is regarded as a key document to reinforce the Council's emerging Housing Strategy.
- 3.2 The Empty Homes Strategy will have a positive impact on the sustainability of the existing housing stock and on local communities. By bringing empty homes back into use, the Council will:
 - Increase housing supply and options and thereby help meet the increasing demand for housing in the District.
 - Help reduce vandalism and anti social behaviour associated with empty homes.
 - Contribute to the delivery of affordable housing.
 - Enhance the environment and economic vitality of local communities.
- 3.3 It will enable the Council to make use of government incentives that have become available when certain classes of empty homes are brought back into use by making a positive contribution to the Council's New Homes Bonus Allocation.

4. **POLICY FRAMEWORK**

- 4.1 The Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2026
 - Everyone's housing needs are met
 - Meet the Decent Homes Standard
 - Reduce and prevent homelessness
 - Make homes sustainable

- Support independent living
- Everyone is able to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and sense of well being
- Citizens are actively engaged in decision making and participate fully in community life

4.2 Fit for the Future:

- By bringing empty homes back into use the Empty Homes strategy will contribute towards the successful achievement of the Council's vision of making Warwick District a great place to live work and visit.
- Council Tax revenue will be maximised and grant allocation through the New Homes Bonus will benefit local communities, as this could be used for any purpose, for example, improving local facilities and services and renovating more empty homes.

5. **BUDGETARY FRAMEWORK**

- 5.1 The post of Empty Homes Officer is a fixed term 1 year post until October 2011 that is funded by a government grant of £53,000. Private Sector Housing Renewal funding can however be used to extend empty homes work until December 2011 when we will be better placed to determine long term funding and resourcing of empty homes work.
- 5.2 Empty Property Grants are part of the Private Sector Housing Financial Assistance Policy and funded through the General Fund element of the Housing Investment Programme.
- 5.3 At this time, future funding of empty homes work is under review. Options that are being considered include future funding of the Empty Homes Officer post through New Homes Bonus, or working within existing resources.
- 5.4 Any financial implications arising from the implementation of the strategy that cannot be met from existing budgets or through external funding sources will be reported back to Executive for consideration.

6. **ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S) CONSIDERED**

- 6.1 Executive could refuse to approve the strategy. However the risk of not endorsing this strategy is that there will be a missed opportunity to bring a wasted resource back into use that will not only enhance Warwick District as a great place to live, work and visit but also help meet housing need in the District by increasing housing supply.
- 6.2 Furthermore the Council may miss out on maximising revenue through Council Tax payments and the allocation of the New Homes Bonus as outlined in 3.3.

7. **BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 Long Term Empty properties are classified as properties that have been empty in excess of 6 months. Some of these are exempt for council tax purposes. This can be for a variety of reasons for example, they are uninhabitable, left empty by deceased person estate or person receiving care.

- 7.2 What happens to empty homes is not simply a matter of concern to those who own them. A property that is left unoccupied and not maintained will over time begin to impact on its surroundings including neighbouring properties whose condition and value might be adversely affected. Empty properties are also at risk from being broken into by vandals and squatters and in extreme cases might become a target of arson. Empty homes are frequently the cause of complaints to local authorities, for example in relation to environmental health issues, and the police and fire services are also regularly called out to deal with empty properties.
- 7.3 The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors have stated that a long term empty home can reduce the value of surrounding properties by at least 10 per cent.
- 7.4 The only effective way to reduce the negative impact of an empty dwelling is to occupy it. It is therefore in the public interest that empty homes are brought back into use.
- 7.5 The number of long term empty homes within the District has been falling since 2008. It is difficult to attribute this to any one particular factor.

Year	Number of long term empty properties
October 2007	695
October 2008	738
October 2009	659
October 2010	571

- 7.6 It can be argued that since the economic downturn owners know they cannot sell their properties due to the depressed housing market, so are therefore renting them instead. Conversely it can be argued that the downturn is having the opposite effect in that it has become more difficult for owners to raise money to carry out renovation works, especially those who are renovating properties for their own use without capital to draw on. For those owners who do have the funds to renovate their property, there is little incentive to redevelop and sell because house prices have fallen and owners may believe they will achieve a better price by waiting for a market recovery.
- 7.7 What is known is that since April 2010 the Council has increased the Council Tax liability for long term empty homes from 50% to 100% and this is likely to have had a positive impact in bringing down the numbers.
- 7.8 The work of the Empty Homes Officer since October 2010 can also be attributed to the decrease.
- 7.9 In order to maintain this reduction, the Empty Homes Strategy has 5 strategic aims:

1. Better understand the numbers of empty homes in the District and the reasons why owners have left them empty.
 2. Minimise the number of properties becoming long term empty (6 months or more) by taking a proactive approach through early intervention and offering advice and assistance to owners.
 3. Risk assess empty homes to determine their priority for action.
 4. Using the Council's enforcement powers where negotiation with the owner has failed, to bring long term empty homes back.
 5. Raise awareness of how to bring empty homes back into use.
- 7.10 The action plan within the strategy details the activities that will be taken forward to deliver the strategic aims.
- 7.11 The action plan will be monitored on a quarterly basis and updated accordingly.