Cheshire West and Chester

Report to Cabinet

Date of Meeting:	8 June 2022
Report of:	Director of Economy and Housing
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Matt Bryan, Cabinet Member for Housing, Planning and Climate Emergency
Title:	Empty Homes Strategy 2022-27

Is this a Key Decision*? **Yes**

*One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards
If this is a key decision then the item must be on the current forward plan of key decisions.

1 What is the report about?

1.1 This report seeks approval to adopt a new Empty Homes Strategy (attached as Appendix 1) following a review and 12-week consultation of the proposed strategy.

2 Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to:

i. Adopt the proposed Empty Homes Strategy 2022-27.

3 Reasons for the Recommendation

3.1 The Council is committed to continuing to reduce the number of long-term empty homes, to make use of this wasted resource, provide more housing for those in need and improve neighbourhoods.

3.2 The consultation results demonstrate strong support for the proposed Empty Homes Strategy.

4 Background

4.1 The aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes. Bringing more homes onto the market brings numerous benefits to the community, namely providing opportunities for more affordable housing; helping to decrease anti-social behaviour; reduce the risk to public health from unsafe structures; and help to maintain and improve the housing market.

4.2 The proposed target of the new strategy over the next five years is to bring 1,000 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of the significant progress already made in reducing the number of long-term empty homes across the borough. However, this target is realistic and achievable, and will build on the success of the 965 long-term empty homes returned into use during the lifetime of the last strategy, which was published in 2016. The proposed strategy has been developed with key stakeholders, and now that the consultation has taken place, the proposed strategy and consultation results are presented to Cabinet.

4.3 The proposed strategy links to the Stronger Futures Plan Objectives:

- Objective 1.4 Enable low carbon buildings, homes and development
- Objective 3.3 Deliver regeneration and housing programmes to drive local growth

5 Strategy Consultation

5.1 The proposed Strategy was subject to a twelve-week consultation period from 5th December 2021 until 27th February 2022. Residents and stakeholders were invited to take part by either completing the online survey, requesting a paper copy of the survey, writing to the Council, or by sending comments to the Housing Strategy inbox. Communication methods to ensure that key stakeholders were made aware of the consultation and given the opportunity to have their say included emails to key stakeholder groups such as empty property owners, private landlords and registered providers, Member Briefings, social media and presence of the consultation on the Council website. The online survey received 259 fully completed responses, and 730 partial responses.

5.2 The Empty Homes Strategy Consultation Results Report is attached as Appendix 2.

5.3 The key messages to emerge from the consultation were that the following are all well supported:

- The aim to bring empty homes back into use
- The objectives and intended outcomes of the proposed strategy
- The criteria proposed to prioritise which empty homes to target
- The proposed approach and incentives to help bring empty homes back into use
- The proposed use of enforcement when necessary to bring empty homes back into use

6 Summary of the new Empty Homes Strategy 2022-27

6.1 The Council's aim is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes and bring 1000 properties back into use through the lifetime of this strategy.

6.2 **How will the Council do this?**

- By raising awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource and the range of advice and support available

- Increasing the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need
- Improving our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect, and finally
- Developing effective partnerships with key stakeholders

6.3 **How will the Council prioritise which empty homes to bring back into use?**

6.3.1 To ensure that the Council allocates resources appropriately, a risk assessment will be conducted with a priority scoring methodology. The process uses a set of factors that takes into consideration the risk of leaving the home empty. A summary of the factors the Council will use are as follows:

- Environmental factors, such as boarded up windows, accumulated rubbish/fly tipping and overgrown gardens
- Social factors, which examines if the property is a source of crime, vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour
- Health and safety factors, such as disrepair or in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties, cause hazards to the public and pest activity and finally
- Length of time empty factor; this naturally forms part of our risk assessment process

6.3.2 The Council will prioritise those properties with the highest risk score following the assessment.

6.4 **What approach does the Council intend to take to bring long-term empty homes back into use?**

6.4.1 The Council will continue to combine enforcement activity with new and innovative initiatives, including specialist guidance, loan support and grant assistance.

6.4.2 The Empty Homes Strategy will continue to place a strong emphasis on partnership working, which will include working with empty homeowners and housing providers such as registered providers, who provide social housing and private landlords who provide private rented housing.

6.5 **How will the Council bring empty homes back into use?**

Enablement

6.5.1 The Council will make contact with every empty property owner, asking why the property is empty, what their intentions are, and explaining the options available to them to encourage them to bring the property back into use.

Inducement

6.5.2 Where necessary, and subject to qualifying criteria, the Council offers a range of financial assistance to help bring empty homes back into use:

- **Empty home grants** - These are available to owners to help them towards carrying out any required improvement works to an empty home.
- **Empty home loan** - We can provide a shared equity loan if the empty homeowner intends to let their property after completion of any required works.
- **Conversion grant** - This grant is for the conversion of long-term empty homes or obsolete commercial premises to provide new units of private rented residential accommodation.
- **Decent home loan** - This loan enables the empty homeowner to carry out necessary renovations using funds released from any available equity in their capital asset. The empty homeowner must occupy the home on completion of works.

6.6 In addition, the Council also offers the following schemes:

- **Landlord accreditation scheme** - This scheme aims to recognise those landlords who provide a high standard of housing management. Where an empty home has been brought back into use via the use of a grant or loan and the owner has agreed to let the property, the landlord will be required to be accredited.
- **Empty homes matching service** - This service allows the empty homeowner to sell their home to an accredited landlord or a managing agent who is either a member of the Association of Residential Lettings Agents (ARLA) or is a member of the National Approved Letting Scheme (NALS), who will then let the property and help bring the empty home back into use.
- **Empty homes buy and sell service** – This service brings together those empty homeowners who wish to sell their empty home with property developers or private individuals who wish to buy the home to refurbish and sell the property on the open market or live in the property themselves.

Enforcement

6.6.1 Where owners refuse to co-operate with us and the empty home is a high priority, then we will take appropriate enforcement action.

- **Enforced sale** - We can enforce the sale of an empty home if the owner has a financial debt owed to us and it is registered against the property.
- **Compulsory purchase order** - Section 17 of the Housing Act 1985 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order to acquire underused or ineffectively used homes for residential purposes if there is a general housing need in the area. Section 226 (1)(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows us to carry out a compulsory purchase order if we believe that

the acquisition will facilitate the carrying out of redevelopment, development or improvement of the land or building.

7 How does the decision contribute to the Council's Plan?

7.1 The proposed Empty Homes Strategy links to the following Council Plan Priorities:

- Enabling more adults to live longer, happier and healthier lives
- Making all our neighbourhoods even better places to call home

8 How does the decision contribute to Closer Working with Partners?

8.1 Partnership working is fundamental to the delivery of the Empty Homes Strategy. The Council will continue to work closely with key partners such as empty homeowners, private landlords and Registered Providers in particular, to bring empty homes back into use.

9 What will it cost?

9.1 The new Strategy will be delivered within existing resources. The majority of empty homes brought back into use are as a result of staff engagement with the empty homeowner, providing them with advice and encouraging them to bring their property back into use, which is delivered by the Regulatory Services team.

9.2 The 2022-26 capital budget includes an indicative annual allocation of £0.5m to fund various forms of financial assistance to empty home owners, as outlined in 6.5.

9.3 The Council applies the discretionary powers set out in the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill to charge double and triple council tax to eligible long-term empty homeowners. If a property has been empty for more than two years, the owner is required to pay an Empty Premium Charge (EPC), which is an additional 100% of the council tax rate. Once a property has been empty for more than five years, the EPC trebles. This is the maximum that the Council is able to charge under the legislation.

10 What are the legal aspects?

10.1 The work undertaken in relation to bringing empty properties back into residential use cuts across numerous statutes and legal advice will be provided on individual properties. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

11 What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

11.1 There is limited staffing resource to implement the strategy, however, partnership working and collaboration with other relevant council services reduces this risk.

11.2 Changes within the housing market and economy could pose a risk to elements of the strategy, however, the varied range of financial assistance, schemes and enforcement options set out in the strategy, provide a number of tools to deliver the aims of the strategy.

12 What is the impact of the decision on Health Inequalities and Equality and Diversity issues?

12.1 Long-term empty homes are located across the borough, in both urban and rural areas. They can have a significant detrimental effect on those living in close proximity, whether due to anti-social behaviour and vandalism, pests, structural disrepair, or the impact on sense of security and well-being. Risk assessments to prioritise the long-term empty homes which cause the greatest negative impact, take health inequalities into account.

13 What are the implications of the decision on Climate Change?

13.1 Engagement with homeowners of empty homes presents an opportunity to have informed discussions regarding the energy efficiency of the property in question. Signposting will be undertaken to ensure that homeowners can access energy efficiency funding and advice where appropriate. Empty homes are likely to be more vulnerable to flooding and other extreme weather events resultant from climate change therefore bringing these properties back into use will enhance community resilience.

14 Are there any other options?

14.1 The Council could choose not to adopt the strategy. This is not advised as empty homes are a wasted resource when there is identified housing need, and they are detrimental to surrounding properties and neighbourhoods.

For further information:
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Background Documents: None