

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP – 12 MARCH 2014

Title of report	RETURNING HOUSES TO HOMES UPDATE
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Purpose of report	To update Policy Development Group on the progress of Returning Houses to Homes
Council Priorities	Homes and Communities
Implications:	
Financial/Staff	A cross-service team works to an action plan to deliver the outcomes of the Returning Houses to Homes policy. Financial implications within the policy are those associated with potential future legal action to bring houses back into use.
Link to relevant CAT	Private Sector Housing CAT
Risk Management	Risks have been considered and are covered within the policy.
Equalities Impact Assessment	An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as part of the policy.
Human Rights	N/A
Transformational Government	This relates to the new ways in which council's are being asked to deliver their services.
Comments of Head of Paid Service	The report is satisfactory
Comments of Section 151 Officer	The report is satisfactory
Comments of Deputy Monitoring Officer	The report is satisfactory
Consultees	Corporate Leadership Team Private Sector Housing CAT

Background papers	Returning Houses to Homes Policy
Recommendations	TO NOTE AND COMMENT ON THE REPORT

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Making the best use of existing housing is an objective of the Council's 2011 Housing Strategy, contributing particularly to the outcome of "homes for all".
- 1.2 In September 2012 Cabinet adopted a refreshed Empty Homes policy titled Returning Houses to Homes which had been scrutinised by Policy Development Group in July 2012. This policy set out the Council's approach and available powers for tackling empty houses within the District.
- 1.3 The work on empty houses requires a corporate approach from Street Action, Housing Choices, Housing Management and Revenues and Benefits officers who now meet regularly as part of a Corporate Action Team. This team has been meeting for over two years, initially to refresh the Council's Returning Houses to Homes Policy and now delivering against an annual action plan.
- 1.4 The number of Empty Houses in the District can change on a regular basis but Long Term Empty homes are the focus for attention and these are captured annually each October through the Council Tax Base return form. A house has to have been empty for over 6 months to fall into the classification as a long term empty home.
- 1.5 The table below details the North West Leicestershire annual returns since October 2010 on long term empty homes.

	Total	Long term empties	%
Oct 10	40,130	498	1.24
Oct 11	40,332	485	1.20
Oct 12	40,660	378	0.93
Oct 13	41,069	367	0.89

- 1.6 The return in October 2012 showed a significant decrease of 107 long term empty properties which was due to a thorough inspection and reclassification exercise ie removing some properties that were no longer consider suitable for living in and some that had been brought back into use.
- 1.7 The table below details long term empty properties split by tenure.

Year	Council tax base Long Term Empties	Private Housing	Council Housing	Registered Provider owned homes
Oct 2010	498	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
Oct 2011	485	376	102	7
Oct 2012	378	277	93	8
Oct 2013	367	268	93	6

1.8 The table below is a comparison with other Districts in Leicestershire as at October 2013

	Total	Long term empties	%
Blaby	39,803	284	0.71
Charnwood	70,257	561	0.80
Harborough	36,631	369	1.01
Hinckley	47,224	400	0.85
Melton	22,320	77	0.34
Oadby & Wigston	22,767	156	0.69

2.0 KEY ACTIONS

2.1 In the last 24 months the Corporate Action Team has overseen and/or is working on the following actions:-

2.2 Private Sector Housing

- Signed up to the National Empty Homes Loans Scheme which allows the Council to promote the availability of loans to residents
- Completed survey visits to all long term private empty properties
- Sent questionnaires to owners of private empty properties which were no longer exempt from not paying Council Tax
- Implemented refuse round sheet data sharing to identify properties which become empty or come back into use
- Council Tax Inspectors visited properties where it was uncertain of their occupancy status
- Initiated categorising all long term private empty properties (High, Medium, Low) to risk rate in terms of priority for action
- Secured internal Invest to Save resources to fund a three month post focussed on initiating work on long term empty homes and five priority properties
- Agreed the first tranche of five priority properties requiring a graduated enforcement approach

2.3 Council Housing

- Disposal, on the open market, of Heather House, a former sheltered housing scheme containing 14 flats
- Undertaken a procurement exercise to enable essential high cost works to 29 properties (24% of the empty Council homes)
- Undertaken consultation with neighbouring residents of 'supported' properties and redesignated the properties to general needs for which there is greater demand.

2.4 Registered Provider Housing

- Assisted two Registered Providers to be funded through the Homes & Communities Agency to bring empty properties in the District back into use (Nottingham Community Housing Association, FcH Housing & Care)
- 9 empty privately owned properties brought back into use by Registered Provider's using funding from the HCA since 2012
- Further HCA funding available to bring back a further two properties during 2014-15
- Held Bi monthly meetings with Nottingham Community Housing Association to identify suitable empty properties & to monitor progress

3.0 NEXT STEPS

3.1 In order to continue working to reduce the number of long term empty homes the following actions are planned to be undertaken.

3.2 Private Sector Housing

- To recruit to the three month Empty Homes Officer post in February 2014

- To initiate a graduated enforcement approach on five priority properties (three in Whitwick, two in Measham). The graduated enforcement approach consists of informal steps to work with the owner including letters and visits to encourage bringing the property back into use. Depending on the co-operation of the owner this will determine how quickly the officer moves onto the formal stages of the approach, which can include legal notices, prosecutions and ultimately Compulsory Purchase Orders. These stages and actions are detailed in the Returning Houses to Homes Policy. The graduated enforcement approach can be a very protracted process and is likely to extend well beyond the temporary Empty Homes Officer contract. Therefore officers in the Street Action Team will continue this work subject to capacity.
- To implement a new internal reporting process on long term empty houses
- To programme and initiate contact with all long term empty house owners
- To establish clear systems and procedures for Street Action Team Officers to follow once the short term contract ends

3.3 Council Housing

- At an appropriate time consider the future of two sheltered housing schemes where there are currently 15 empty properties
- Determine the preferred option for two decommissioned sheltered housing schemes (Woulds Court, Moira and Greenacres, Coalville) where there are currently 29 empty properties
- Press campaign to increase demand for sheltered housing accommodation where there are currently 45 empty properties
- Complete high cost improvement works, including Decent Homes works at 29 empty properties

3.4 Registered Provider Housing

- It is still unclear whether there will be an Empty Property element in the new HCA national Affordable Homes Programme 2015-18 funding package. Registered Providers are currently working on their bid submissions which need to be submitted to the HCA by April 2014 to access this funding. Any future activity beyond 2015 will be determined by the outcome of this bid round.

4.0 SUMMARY

- 4.1 The Corporate Action Team continues to meet Bi-monthly to progress the actions identified in 3.0 as part of the annual action plan.