

EMPTY HOMES PLAN

Executive Summary

The previous Empty Homes Plan covered the period 2015 to 2018. The 2021 revision of the National Planning Policy Framework maintains the expectation that Local Authorities should implement plans and decisions to support efforts to identify, and bring back into residential use, empty homes and other buildings. This should be supported using enforcement powers where appropriate.

Houses that are left unoccupied can quickly fall into disrepair and impact local neighbourhoods. Bringing empty properties back into use can benefit individual owners, potential occupiers, businesses and the wider community.

This report seeks approval to adopt the Empty Homes Plan 2022 – 2027 which sets out in detail our priorities and how we intend to accomplish them. It also details how we will work to prevent properties becoming ‘long-term’ empty and how we will bring back into use homes that have been previously left empty.

Three strategic priorities have been identified to reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough, which are as follows:

1. Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council’s interventions.
2. Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives.
3. Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.

A public consultation was carried out and the Housing Task Group has been consulted on the new Empty Homes Plan strategy.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) **the Empty Homes Plan 2022 – 2027, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted; and**
- (ii) **the Strategic Director - Communities be delegated authority to make minor amendments to the Empty Homes Plan in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To provide a transparent framework for the Council to bring empty homes back in to use.

The item(s) above will need to be dealt with by way of a recommendation to Council.

Background Papers: None

Reporting Person: Louise Strongitharm, Strategic Director - Communities
Email: louise.strongitharm@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3599

Contact Person: Louise Strongitharm, Strategic Director - Communities
Email: louise.strongitharm@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3599

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ian Johnson
Email: cllrjan.johnson@woking.gov.uk

Shadow Portfolio Holder: Councillor Steve Dorsett
Email: cllrsteve.dorsett@woking.gov.uk

Date Published: 30 November 2022

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The 2021 revision of the National Planning Policy Framework maintains the expectation that Local Authorities should implement plans and decisions to support efforts to identify, and bring back into residential use, empty homes and other buildings. This should be supported using enforcement powers where appropriate.
- 1.2 The Council's Housing Strategy 2021-26 highlights that empty homes are recognised as a wasted resource, particularly in areas such as Woking where there is such a high demand for all types of housing. Houses that are left unoccupied can quickly fall into disrepair and impact local neighbourhoods. Bringing empty properties back into use can benefit individual owners, potential occupiers, businesses and the wider community.
- 1.3 The Plan details how we will work to prevent properties becoming 'long-term' empty and how we will bring back into use homes that have been previously left empty. Three strategic priorities have been identified to reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough, which are as follows:
 - Minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions;
 - Maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back to use through initiatives and incentives; and
 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.
- 1.4 The Housing Task Group has been consulted and a public consultation took place in September via Engagement HQ.

2.0 Local position

- 2.1 Nationally long term empty homes have risen steadily since 2016 and are now 19% higher than in 2016. There are 653,025 empty homes in England, of which 237,340 have been empty for over 6 months (DLUHC, October 2021) with 31,070 of the total number of empty homes being found in the South East region. Within Surrey, there are 12,485 empty homes, and 4,339 of these have been empty for more than 6 months. Woking is mid table in terms empty homes numbers when compared to other Surrey Districts and Boroughs.
- 2.2 In Woking there were 42,554 chargeable Council tax properties as of October 2021, of which 729 are long term empty homes, that includes properties that are exempt from paying Council Tax. In October 2021 there were 360 long term empty homes in Woking which equates to 0.8% of the total housing stock within the Borough. This is a 22% reduction from 460 in 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.0 Identifying empty homes

- 3.1 A property that is unfurnished and empty for more than 6 months and not exempt from Council Tax is classed as a Long Term Empty property. A property empty for 24 months or more and not exempt from Council Tax is classed as a Long Term Empty Premium Empty property.
- 3.2 Members of the public can report an empty property via the Council's website or Members may report direct to the team. A monthly report using Council Tax data is run to identify the Long Term Empty and Long Term Empty Premium properties.
- 3.3 Properties are prioritised for casework by officers completing a risk assessment, assessing the property condition, speaking to neighbours about the impact on them,

confirming debts to the Council, the level of engagement from the owner and whether it attracts anti-social behaviour.

4.0 Reasons a property is empty long term

- 4.1 While many properties routinely become empty as an inevitable consequence of being sold, and are soon re-occupied, there are often complex reasons why a property becomes a Long Term Empty and quick solutions may not be possible.
- 4.2 A large portion of empty homes are exempt from Council Tax liability and these are not usually investigated unless they become a safety or anti-social behaviour concern. Properties can be exempt if the owner is in a care home or hospital, the owner has passed away and probate has not been granted, the liable person is in detention and the property is a second home.
- 4.3 Much of officer's casework is concentrated on advising and supporting empty home owners that may have mental health issues (including hoarding) or lack of funds or skills to improve their property or they may be too embarrassed to ask for help or they may have a sentimental attachment to the property. Casework is often long term to allow building trust with the empty home owner, or in some cases to track them down in the first place.

5.0 Joint working

- 5.1 The Empty Homes Working Group was established in 2021 and meets bi-annually to discuss the top ten cases of concern, appropriate actions and to reduce duplication across teams that may be dealing with the same properties. The meeting is attended by representatives from Private Sector Housing Liaison, Housing Standards, Council Tax, Environmental Health, Planning Enforcement, Legal and Neighbourhood Services. When relevant, Community Safety colleagues will also be invited.
- 5.2 Due to the vulnerabilities of some empty home owners, Adult Services, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service and the Police are consulted from time to time. Empty home owners with hoarding traits in the empty property and their own home may be referred to the Woking Hoarding Protocol Team.
- 5.3 If suitable, a potential sale to Thamesway Housing Limited is facilitated. A potential sale is currently being negotiated and a long term empty property in Knaphill was sold to THL earlier this year.

6.0 Strategic priorities

- 6.1 Priority one - Advice and support to empty home owners. Information on generating an income by letting their property either through the Let's Rent service or an agent is provided alongside the offer of a fast track sale to THL.
- 6.2 Priority two - Initiatives and incentives include a grant and/or referral for a low cost loan to improve the property ready for occupation or sale. With housing repairs and maintenance services now in-house, there is an opportunity to provide expert surveying advice and to project manage property improvements.

The empty homes grant eligibility criteria and use has been defined in the Empty Homes Plan.

- 6.3 Priority three - Enforcement action is available to the Council should all other options be exhausted. This can include Compulsory Purchase Orders and Enforced Sales.

7.0 Corporate Strategy

- 7.1 The Council's Housing Strategy 2021-26 highlights that empty homes are recognised as a wasted resource, particularly in areas such as Woking where there is such a high demand for all types of housing. The Empty Homes Plan supports the Corporate Strategy for health and wellbeing for all, safe thriving and sustainable communities and engaged communities.

8.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 8.1 Empty homes are liable for Council Tax if they are not in an exempt category. If there are high Council Tax arrears, the Council Tax department will consider applying for a Charging Order to ensure the debt is cleared when the property is sold.
- 8.2 Long Term Empty Premium properties are subject to an empty home Council Tax premium of 100% of the standard occupied charge, doubling the amount of Council Tax that must be paid. After five years the empty home premium will double again, meaning a requirement to pay an additional 200% on top of the normal bill. If the property has been empty for more than 10 years the empty home premium will triple, meaning that the owner will be required to pay an additional 300%. These approaches both maximise the level of Council Tax income for those homes that are left empty and helps to encourage owners to return empty homes back into use.
- 8.3 The use of in-house surveying expertise to assist with improving properties can also attract a small fee of 3% to project manage the works.
- 8.4 Should a Compulsory Purchase Order be approved, the Council will need to ensure there is a back to back to sale to another entity to minimise the cost to the Council. Any enforcement action of this type should have regard to the Council's Debt Recovery Policy.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 8.5 The Plan will provide a framework for staff to bring empty homes back in to use.

Legal

- 8.6 A Legal Team representative attends the Empty Homes Working Group and would need to be consulted should high level enforcement action be considered for review by CLT.

9.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 9.1 The draft Plan was published on Engagement HQ for 4 weeks from 2nd September 2022 and residents were asked to comment on the Plan and if they supported each strategic priority. The full breakdown of the outcome is in Appendix 2.
- 9.2 The draft Plan was downloaded 78 times and the consultation received 22 responses. When combining the responses to all questions, 78% supported the approach outlined in the Plan.
- 9.3 Respondents were asked to provide information on any empty homes they are aware of, with 40% stating they are aware of an empty property and 13.6% providing specific addresses.
- 9.4 The Housing Task Group was consulted on the draft Plan on 15 March 2022 and 15 November 2022.

Empty Homes Plan

9.5 The Empty Homes Plan 2022 – 2027 will be available on the Council's website and will be referred to in future Empty Homes Questionnaires and Empty Homes promotion.

REPORT ENDS