

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Housing Services Cabinet Committee
Date: 2 February 2023
Reporting officer: Vicky May, Service Manager (Housing Options)
Subject: Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028

Purpose and summary of report:

To provide Housing Services Cabinet Committee with an overview of the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028 and an opportunity to comment on the draft strategy prior to it being ratified by Cabinet Member, Housing Services. The Empty Homes Strategy will ensure a consistent and robust approach to managing empty homes in the Borough, ensuring they brought back in to use where possible.

Recommendations:

1. For Members to discuss and provide feedback on the Empty Homes Policy prior to it being ratified by Cabinet Member, Housing Services.

Key Implications:	
Item	Implications
Legal	Empty Homes operate under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, Housing Act 2004 – Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) , Building Act 1984 – Section 77 and 78, the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions act 1982 – Section 29 and the Housing Act 1985 – Section 265. To ensure compliance, Legal Services are an active member of a Corporate Working Group.
Finance and Value for Money	A budget has been set that will enable officers to complete works on behalf of property owners which will be recharged to them once complete. Officers will also seek grant funding opportunities where possible to help reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough, including use of Kents ‘No Use Empty’ scheme.
Corporate Plan	#1 People Enforce a high quality of Private Housing, reporting quarterly on the total number of private sector homes brought back into occupation. "The corporate plan outlines in priority 1 that the council wants to ‘enforce a high quality of private housing’ and ‘work with landlords to tackle property standards, empty homes and homes in multiple occupation. This is measured via performance indicator 16 which reports ‘total number of empty private sector homes brought back into occupation’
Climate Change	The Empty Homes Strategy, with the Officers input will address upgrading measures to achieve increased thermal comfort, whilst looking to reduce/remove hazards and nuisance

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The draft Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028 outlines how the Council is committed to bringing long-term empty homes back into use. It will seek to reduce the number of empty homes within the borough, whilst promoting options available to property and land owners on bringing empty homes/land back into use as residential dwellings.
- 1.2 With around 1,060 households on the Council's housing register and limited social housing available, there continues to be a significant demand for housing within the borough and across Kent. Many people cannot access good quality housing, yet many homes remain vacant. Every empty home within the borough is an identified wasted resource.
- 1.3 In adopting this Strategy, the Council will improve the supply of homes across the borough and reduce the number of empty properties. This will potentially increase the choice of housing available and could assist in providing additional housing options to households in the borough looking to secure a new home. This will lead to improved environmental conditions and a reduction in nuisance to neighbouring properties and communities whilst making an economic benefit to the local economy.

2. Summary of Strategy Aims & Priorities

- 2.1 It is vital that the Council is doing all it can to reduce the number of empty homes within the borough and bringing them back into use. A collaborative approach will be adopted in partnership with colleagues and all external agencies to ensure an informed, consistent and robust approach. The strategy will focus on 3 aims:
 - 2.1.1 **Aim 1:** Maintain a proactive approach towards the identification and prevention of empty homes
 - 2.1.2 **Aim 2:** Bring long-term empty properties back into use that have been vacant for 6 months or more and use a range of tools to bring about the reoccupation.
 - 2.1.3 **Aim 3:** Work with our partners to raise awareness of the issues around empty home
- 2.2 The draft strategy sets out the routes in which Gravesham Borough Council will help to bring empty properties back into use so that owners and residents are fully aware of the Council's aims and objectives in order that successes can be monitored against agreed targets. In order to achieve our aims, our strategy focuses on 4 key priorities
 - 2.2.1 Priority 1 – Identification
 - 2.2.2 Priority 2 – Support and Advice
 - 2.2.3 Priority 3 - Partnership Working
 - 2.2.4 Priority 4 – Enforcement

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 The Strategy highlights the enforcement procedure and options to move the service forward. There are many benefits of bringing empty homes back to use including:
 - 3.1.1 Provides rental income to owners
 - 3.1.2 Sustains rural communities
 - 3.1.3 Resolves neighbour complaints
 - 3.1.4 Restores confidence in local property market
 - 3.1.5 Help increase housing supply
 - 3.1.6 Positive impact on the area
 - 3.1.7 Improves community wellbeing and pride
 - 3.1.8 Discourages antisocial behaviour
 - 3.1.9 Reduces crime
 - 3.1.10 Can reduce temporary accommodation expenditure
- 3.2 The Empty Homes Strategy also has an Action Plan that will be monitored by officers regularly to measure performance.
- 3.3 Priority 1 Identification – The service needs to understand where long term empty homes are located, who owns them and work with internal and external agencies to obtain a greater understanding. The Private Sector Housing Team will work with the Council Tax Team who will be instrumental in this identification process.
- 3.4 Priority 2 Support and Advice – It is important to develop a package of support and advice for empty property owners, promoting the service we offer. It is vital that we encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back to use with the need of the Private Sector Housing Team using enforcement action.
- 3.5 Priority 3 Partnership working – The Private Sector Housing Team will explore all avenues open to the Local Authority, working in partnership with other agencies, to secure funding opportunities to bring empty properties back into use.
- 3.6 Priority 4 Enforcement – Where appropriate the service will pursue informally however where necessary the Private Sector Housing team will use enforcement powers and compulsory purchase orders to tackle properties, where supporting empty homeowners has failed to result in properties being brought back into use.
- 3.7 The Empty Homes Strategy and action plan will be reviewed regularly to ensure it keeps up to date with relevant legislation and takes into account any significant changes in circumstances

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Secondary Implications	
Risk Assessment	Failure of pro-actively dealing with this piece of work will provide the public with a message that Gravesham Council do not care about empty homes and are not considering the wider housing objectives
Data Protection Impact Assessment	<p><i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i></p> <p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of personal data or special category data or criminal offence data? A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website via the above links. Yes</p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice? Yes</p> <p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at gdpr@medway.gov.uk. N/A</p>
Equality Impact Assessment	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer. No</p> <p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer. No</p> <p><i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i></p>
Crime and Disorder	Empty Homes can attract vandalism or illegal tenanting (aka squatters). Therefore, regular monitoring of empty homes will be required and liaison with the Community Safety Team who will form part of the corporate working group.
Digital and website implications	<p>The accessible document will be made available on the Gravesham Borough Council website.</p> <p>Information data taken from Council Tax system will be shared with the PSH Team via IT methods, feeding directly into Uniform. This is a new way of working, IT will too have access to the information provided by Council Tax.</p>
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	