

Agenda Item No:

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny (Services)

Date of Meeting: 16 March 2009

Report Title: Empty Homes Strategy 2009 - 2013

Report By: Andrew Palmer
Head of Housing Services

Purpose of Report

The draft empty homes strategy submitted to overview and scrutiny in March 2008 has undergone a critical reassessment in light of the prevailing set of economic and housing market conditions and a redrafted empty homes strategy is presented for consideration. A timetable is set out within the report for taking the strategy forward, which ultimately results in the strategy being considered by cabinet for adoption in June 2009.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. That following consultation with the community and stakeholders, the revised empty homes strategy is taken forward to cabinet in June 2009 with the recommendation that the strategy is adopted.**

Reasons for Recommendations

The existing empty homes strategy (2004 - 2007) has come to the end of its useful life. Though significant progress has been made in returning empty homes to use since 2001, further work is required to maintain and improve the position.

A management response to an overview and scrutiny review of a new draft strategy was considered by cabinet on the 8 November 2008. As agreed by cabinet the draft strategy has been reassessed to take account of the current economic and housing downturn.

Whilst reaffirming the priority and commitment of the council to tackling the high level of empty homes in the borough, the revised strategy has been amended to better reflect the very different housing market conditions that now exist.

Background

1. A report was taken to cabinet in November 2008, which set out the management response to the overview and scrutiny (O&S) review of the empty homes strategy. Cabinet agreed the recommendations of the report, which included the recommendation to critically reassess and refresh the draft strategy in the light of the prevailing set of economic and housing market conditions.

The Revised Strategy and Action Plan

2. A thorough reassessment of the strategy has been undertaken. The revised strategy and accompanying action plan is set out at Appendix 1.
3. The reassessment of the strategy has identified that the current economic and housing market conditions is increasing the number of empty homes that have been empty for over 6 months. In the main, this number is made up of transitional empty homes, i.e. homes which are not intended to remain empty by their owners, but due to market conditions are taking longer to re-enter the housing market. There are various reasons for this, such as an increase in the length of time to sell the property, owners being unable to realise the price they wish to sell for, owners taking longer to refurbish due to difficulties in obtaining credit, etc.
4. In response to this, the strategy adopts a targeted prevention and cure methodology and sets out the strategic priorities as follows:
 - a. To prevent homes from becoming long term empty.
 - b. To bring long term empty homes back into use (empty over 2 years).
 - c. Increase the amount of decent, affordable housing for those in housing need.
5. Research has identified that there are five wards where there are significant concentrations of long term empty homes (empty over 2 years). As a consequence it is these wards that will receive priority for intervention. The wards are:
 - a. Central St Leonards ward,
 - b. Castle ward,
 - c. Gensing ward,
 - d. Maze Hill ward and,
 - e. Braybrooke ward.
6. Where the council intervenes to assist in bringing empty homes back into use, we will continue to encourage and offer assistance to ensure the homes are of a decent standard and where possible encourage the owners to make these available to those in housing need. This will assist in helping prevent homelessness and will be achieved through interventions such as the councils' accredited landlords scheme (HALo), the councils' LetStart service and through the financial assistance offered by the council.

7. The action plan accompanying the strategy will be a fluid document, allowing for revision in response to change, such as further changes in the housing market. It sets out challenging targets, which will allow the strategic priorities to be realised.

Summary of Changes

8. The following summarises the changes to the strategy since it was presented to O&S in March 2008:
 - a. The strategy document has been restructured and shortened.
 - b. The strategic priorities have been revised to take account of the changes in the housing market and the current economic climate.
 - c. A greater emphasis has been placed on ensuring, where possible, empty homes brought back into use are used to support those in housing need. This will assist in curbing the anticipated increase in homelessness, due to the recession.
 - d. There is no longer a Government imposed Best Value Performance Indicator to monitor the number of empty homes (over 6 months) returned to use. Therefore, the focus of the strategy has moved from bringing empty homes over 6 months back into use to bringing back longer term empty homes into use (over 2 years). This is a direct response to the higher level of transitional empty homes, which has occurred largely due to the housing and economic downturn.
 - e. The strategy places emphasis on preventing empty homes from becoming long term empty, which responds to the increased time home's will be left empty due to the economic and housing downturn.
 - f. To ensure that the limited resources available are effectively targeted, an analysis has been undertaken of the empty homes in the borough, looking at the length of time they are empty and where they are. This has resulted in identifying 5 priority wards where the highest concentrations of long term empty homes are found.

Timetable

9. The proposed timetable for taking the strategy forward is as follows:
 - a. Following consideration by O&S, a period of community and stakeholder consultation between mid March and mid May 2009.
 - b. The revised strategy is considered for adoption by cabinet on the 15 June 2009.

Consultation

10. Some of the key stakeholders targeted for consultation via letter, email and attendance at meetings will include the Hastings Housing Partnership, the Housing and Support Services Group, the Sussex Empty Homes Forum, the Sussex Housing Group, the Healthy Hastings Partnership, the Hastings Intercultural

Organisation, the Landlords Forum, key Landlords Associations, Community Forums, etc. In addition the proposed strategy will be available via the councils' website.

Financial Implications

11. The funding for the empty homes strategy is via the regional housing board (RHB) allocation, acquired via the pan Sussex BEST bid for private sector housing renewal.
12. The level of funding currently allocated to empty homes for 09/10 and 10/11 is £375,000. This funding delivers the financial assistance offered to owners of empty homes and covers the salary for the empty homes officer. This indicative funding stream will be in place for the next two years. A review of the empty homes strategy will therefore be required in 2010/11.
13. These amounts are not fixed or ring fenced and maybe subject to variation. This allows for flexibility across the whole housing renewal capital programme, to enable the council to respond to fluctuations in demand on any of the financial assistance offered by the council. This is also necessary to ensure that we meet the requirements of the RHB, which, among other factors, looks at the BEST partnerships' ability to spend the allocation as a whole. This is demonstrated by the recent recommendations of the RHB to take funding back from other partnerships in the South East who, unlike the BEST partnership, have not been able to deliver on their targets.
14. As in past years, there maybe opportunities for our registered social landlord (RSL) partners to secure further funding from the Homes and Community Agency (previously the Housing Corporation) for the purchase of empty homes for social rented housing. Should this opportunity arise we will again work closely with our RSL partners in identifying suitable empty homes for purchase and renovation.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

15. The strategy reflects the councils' Community Strategy target of 'improving housing standards within the most deprived wards to reflect the decent homes standard'. The strategy is also consistent with the outputs required by the RHB.
16. A full equalities impact assessment has been carried out and considered by the directorate equalities group. This process concluded that the strategy does not have a differential impact on any particular group. However, it was also concluded that a more robust method of collection of equalities data is required for work around empty homes. This has now been implemented.
17. In conclusion, the revised strategy is a measured response to the scale of the empty homes problem in Hastings. The strategy recognises both the prevailing economic and housing market conditions and the level of resources that are likely to be made available over the next two years. Further significant variations in the either the economic outlook or the level of investment available have the ability to further effect impact upon the empty homes situation. It is important therefore that regular monitoring and review takes place throughout the life of the strategy.

18. It is recommended that strategy is now taken forward in line with the timetable set out in paragraph 9, with a view to cabinet adoption in June 2009.

Wards Affected

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

Area(s) Affected

Central Hastings, East Hastings, North St. Leonards, South St. Leonards

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	Yes
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	No
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes

Supporting Documents

Appendix 1 - Revised Empty Homes Strategy 2009 - 2013 & Empty Homes Strategy 2009 - 2013 Action Plan

Officer to Contact

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