

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 29TH JULY

REFERENCE FROM HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 16TH JULY, 2019

“ DRAFT EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2019 – 2024 (REF) –

The report was presented by the Principal Regeneration Officer who stated that the report had gone to Cabinet on 15th July, 2019 in order to provide an update on the issue of empty homes in the Vale of Glamorgan and also sought approval of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 (attached at Appendix A to the report) as a consultative document. The five recommendations within the report had been approved by Cabinet.

The Principal Regeneration Officer was at the meeting in order to complete Recommendation (3), namely that the report was referred to the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee for consideration as part of the consultation process.

The Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 provided the framework to ensure that the Vale of Glamorgan Council continued to be pro-active in its approach to returning empty homes back into use.

Empty properties could be detrimental to the lives of local residents as they were a magnet for crime and antisocial behaviour, could drive down property values locally and contribute to neighbourhood decline and blight. They also represented a risk for the emergency services and put added pressure on various Council teams and service areas.

The headline annual need for affordable housing in the Vale of Glamorgan Local Housing Market Assessment from 2017 to 2022 was 576 units per annum. Re-occupying empty homes was not the whole answer to this problem, but Welsh Government and Local Authorities recognised potential, both as units of accommodation and a source of income to the Council in times of continued budgetary pressures.

Long term empty private properties (standing empty for six months or more) were the main focus of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024. As at 1st April, 2019, of the 58,909 residential properties in the Vale of Glamorgan, 846 private properties were standing empty for six months or more. This represented 1.4% of the housing stock. Of the 846 private properties, 311 (36.76%) had been empty for over two years and 47 (5.56%) empty for over ten years.

When dealing with empty property owners, a voluntary way forward was always preferred. Advice, assistance and incentives reduce demand on Council resources and the need for enforcement action at a later date.

The empty homes issue required a joined-up whole Council approach to make the best possible use of the existing housing stock. Moving forward the key aims of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 were to:

- Assemble, maintain and improve the accuracy of empty homes data;
- Provide advice, assistance and financial incentives to reduce the number of long term empty properties;
- Promote the whole Council approach to tackling empty homes;
- Prioritise empty homes for enforcement action; and
- Raise awareness of the empty homes issue.

The Principal Regeneration Officer then provided a presentation that complemented the report looking at the current picture on empty properties in the Vale, a breakdown of distribution of empty homes by Ward, background as to why homes became empty, for example through the normal process of buying, selling and letting properties, absent / untraceable owners or legal issues such as probate of a will and looking at the strategic direction such as from April 2019 the Vale of Glamorgan had removed the 50% discount for Council Tax for properties which were empty for more than six months and the recent new post in place for a permanent Empty Homes and Loans Officer. Other considerations included opportunities to generate income and to secure additional affordable homes, for example through the Vale Assisted Tenancy Scheme. Additionally, the empty homes issue requires bespoke solutions as behind every home there was a different story. Finally, emphasis would be on a voluntary approach and enforcement would be the last resort. The officer went on to then mention the next steps, which would be Cabinet approval - which had already happened - and then for Scrutiny to consider the report.

After this there would be a public consultation for four weeks and then a further Cabinet report to consider findings and any changes prior to finalising for adoption. After that there would be an annual review of the Empty Homes Strategy, which would be reported back to the Scrutiny Committee.

Following the presentation a question and answer session was undertaken.

A Committee Member made reference to prior year performance data (PAM13) concerning empty homes and whether this was available within the report. The Principal Regeneration Officer stated that on page 13 of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 (attached at Appendix A to the report) that previous financial years' data were included, however this had to be caveated as the methodology had changed with the 2015/16 data, for example. The Committee Member, after looking at the figures, commented that they seemed to be erratic for prior years. The officer replied that he could not comment for the data prior to 2017/18 as he was not in post at the time but would look at the accuracy of the data going forward.

Another Committee Member stated that it was good to see the Council working on empty homes as these blighted local communities and involved lots of work in getting resolved. As there was now a dedicated officer for empty homes, this would be an important move forward and a testament to the commitment of the Local Authority in dealing with this issue.

A Committee Member queried the consultation process and exactly who the Council was consulting, was it just the public in general or specific groups such as landlords and estate agents. The officer replied that the consultation would be targeted going to for instance, the landlord forum and the RSLs, but there was also a need to go and consult with the wider public in order to draw their attention to this issue of empty homes.

A Committee Member asked about Table 2 of the presentation concerning the number of empty homes by Ward. She asked if this could be improved by having percentages of houses in each Ward and a breakdown of private homes and social housing. The Principal Regeneration Officer said that the figures concerned private sector only but would look into the Councillor's suggestions going forward.

A Councillor asked about the accuracy of the figures involved in the presentation and the report to which the officer advised that these were snapshots from the Council Tax team and therefore they had to rely on their records, however he did caveat that the Empty Homes and Loans Officer did cross reference and check this data as much as possible for accuracy. The Head of Housing and Building Services added that the Council was attempting to provide a holistic response to the empty homes issue and that the Councillor's point on the percentage of the total number of homes empty per ward would be useful in terms of reporting. In terms of the reliability of the Council Tax data and the figures around empty homes, he stated that if a house is declared as empty it is visited by Council Tax staff to assess the veracity of that claim. Regarding measuring going forward, different policies and regulations affected previous figures, looking forward to next year they would be looking to see how the current reduction in the Council Tax discount would impact those figures. With regard to previous rises in the numbers of empty homes, there was no Empty Homes and Loans Officer in order to analyse or monitor the data at the time of these and any such rise may have been with regards to new building projects such as at Barry Waterfront, where houses were empty for some time. The Principal Regeneration Officer advised that the Vale of Glamorgan Council was ranked third for 2017/18 in terms of the relevant Public Accountability Measure (PAM 13) for empty homes.

A Member mentioned an example of Cardiff Council which had charged a % premium of the standard rate of the Council Tax allowance for empty homes. A Committee Member suggested that the Scrutiny Committee should have an update on the progress of the recent changes to Council Tax policy in the Vale of Glamorgan and also to look at similar Authorities and how they dealt with empty homes, such as Bridgend and Cardiff.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration, with the approval of the Chairman, spoke to the Committee with regards to the Empty Homes Strategy. She stated that she had been surprised by the numbers of empty homes in the Vale and

wanted the consultation exercise to also see if the balance between gentle persuasion and enforcement was correct with regards to empty homes. The Cabinet Member mentioned similar previous initiatives such as the funding that had been provided for bringing flats above shops back into use and habitation. She stated that the Empty Homes Strategy report was very accessible and this hopefully would have the effect of encouraging people to look at the empty homes issue. Her question to the Committee was whether the Council had the right balance between gentle persuasion and enforcement with regards to empty homes or did the Council need to engage more forcefully.

A Committee Member suggested that the question of whether the right balance was struck between gentle persuasion and enforcement in terms of empty homes was correct and this should be put to the public as part of the consultation process.

A Committee Member asked if the Council could assist if there were home owners that needed to renovate empty homes as potentially they needed up to 80% equity in the house in order to do this. The Principal Regeneration Officer reiterated the need for bespoke solutions to the empty housing issue and to look at how valuation work was assessed in terms of making empty homes habitable.

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 be noted.
- (2) T H A T the comments of the Scrutiny Committee as set out in the minutes above together with the draft of the Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024 be referred to Cabinet for its consideration.
- (3) T H A T Cabinet consider the Committee’s recommendation that a question be put into the public consultation exercise asking if the right balance had been struck between persuasion and enforcement for empty homes.
- (4) T H A T the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee receive an update on the progress of the recent changes to Council Tax policy in the Vale of Glamorgan and how similar Authorities dealt with empty homes.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) That Members are aware of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024.
- (2) That Cabinet is aware of the comments of the Scrutiny Committee prior to the start of the public consultation exercise.
- (3) To ensure the right balance was struck between persuasion and enforcement around empty homes.
- (4) To ensure Members are updated on the recent changes to Council Tax policy and how similar Authorities dealt with empty homes.”