



**Policy, Finance and
Development
Committee**

**Tuesday, 28 March
2023**

**Matter for
Information and
Decision**

Report Title: Proposed Empty Homes Strategy (2023-2028)

Report Author(s): Ben Clark-Monks (Selective Licensing Team Leader)

Purpose of Report:	This report outlines the property strategy to engage and manage empty dwellings within the Borough.
Report Summary:	A robust empty homes strategy is an important element of the Authority's Private Sector Housing, Revenues, Housing and Planning functions and ensures a joint working approach to address empty homes within the Borough. This report will outline how this will be enacted operationally, how resource will be allocated and how progress will be measured, along with outlining the changes from the previous strategy and the reasons for those changes.
Recommendation(s):	A. That the contents of the report be noted; and B. That the Proposed Empty Homes Strategy (2023-2028) (set out at Appendix 1 to this report) be approved.
Senior Leadership, Head of Service, Manager, Officer and Other Contact(s):	Philippa Fisher (Strategic Director) (0116) 257 2677 philippa.fisher@oadby-wigston.gov.uk David Gill (Head of Law & Democracy / Monitoring Officer) (0116) 257 2626 david.gill@oadby-wigston.gov.uk Jon Wells (Senior Strategic Development Manager) (0116) 257 2692 jon.wells@oadby-wigston.gov.uk Ben Clark-Monks (Selective Licensing Team Leader) (0116) 257 2883 ben.clark-monks@oadby-wigston.gov.uk
Strategic Objectives:	Our Council (SO1) Our Communities (SO2) Our Economy (SO3)
Vision and Values:	"Our Borough - The Place To Be" (Vision) Teamwork (V3) Innovation (V4) Customer Focus (V5)
Report Implications:-	
Legal:	There are no implications directly arising from this report.
Financial:	There are no implications directly arising from this report.

Corporate Risk Management:	Decreasing Financial Resources / Increasing Financial Pressures (CR1) Political Dynamics (CR3) Reputation Damage (CR4) Organisational / Transformational Change (CR8) Economy / Regeneration (CR9)
Equalities and Equalities Assessment (EA):	There are no implications directly arising from this report. EA not applicable
Human Rights:	There are no implications arising from this report.
Health and Safety:	There are no implications directly arising from this report.
Statutory Officers' Comments:-	
Head of Paid Service:	The report is satisfactory.
Chief Finance Officer:	The report is satisfactory.
Monitoring Officer:	The report is satisfactory.
Consultees:	Due to the potential impact on other services, the following service managers and officers were invited to review and comment on the proposed strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Chris Eyre (Housing Manager) • Mr Jon Owst (Revenues and Benefits Manager) • Mr Jamie Carr (Planning Policy and Development Manager) • Mr Jeffrey Kenyon (Economic Regeneration Manager) • Mrs Louise Taylor (Housing Options Team Leader)
Background Papers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report entitled 'Oadby & Wigston Empty Homes Strategy (2020-2025)' to Policy, Finance and Development Committee on 10 March 2020. • Selective licensing in the private rented sector: a guide for local authorities • Housing Strategy 2019 - 2024 • Report entitled '41-43 Canal Street, South Wigston: Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)' to Policy, Finance and Development Committee on 31 October 2017.
Appendices:	1. Proposed Amended Empty Homes Strategy (2023 - 2028)

1. Introduction

1.1 Within the Authority there are several strategy and guidance documents that refer to increasing the supply or quality of housing within the Borough, these include:

- a. Corporate Plan (2019 – 2024) – There are three KPIs within corporate plan that can be supported through the regeneration of empty homes, these include:
 - GBE8 - Work with the Canals and Riverside Trust to develop housing on the important Kilby Bridge site. – One of the long term empty homes that has been empty since 2005 is on this site.
 - GBE11 - We will actively work to reduce homelessness and minimise the number of households in temporary accommodation, particularly given that the post pandemic could lead to an increase in homelessness – By proactively

offering an OWBC lease option to empty home owners, The Authority could increase its stock levels reducing waiting times for households in temporary accommodation.

- PES24 - Optimising our performance by maximising staff capacity through agile and flexible working practices – By establishing a working group the Authority is able to allocate resource flexibility as required.
- b. Local Plan (2011 – 2031) – The strategy will assist with the delivery of Spatial Objective 8 to deliver a balanced housing market by bringing more properties back to the market within the Borough.
- c. Our Vision (2022) – The amended strategy will help the Authority achieve multiple factors within the new draft vision if it is adopted, such as
- To provide a clean and safe place for everyone – Reducing empty homes further will help to make the Borough a cleaner and safer place to live.
 - To provide good, affordable and efficient housing for everyone – Bringing empty homes back into use will increase the number of available properties in the Borough.
- d. Housing Strategy (2019 – 2024) – The Authority’s Housing Strategy has four priorities, two of which can be related to management of empty homes within the Borough, these are:
- Priority One: Increase the supply of housing, which could be achieved by leasing properties from empty home owners to increase our own temporary housing stock and remove an empty home from the district.
 - Priority Four: Create great places to live, which by targeting “eyesore” empty homes will make the Borough a more pleasant environment to live in.
- e. Selective Licensing in the private rented sector: a guide for local authorities – The guidance advises Authorities that Selective Licensing is not a tool to be used in isolation and should complement the Authority’s Borough wide strategies relating to homelessness, empty homes, regeneration and anti-social behaviour associated with privately renting tenants.

2. Why review the current strategy?

- 2.1 Following the pandemic a number of the Authority’s strategic documents are being reviewed and it is important that our operational strategies support these documents, along with complimenting other functions the Authority is responsible for ensuring best service and value for money outcomes for the residents of the Borough and the Authority itself as outlined above.
- 2.2 There was a slight increase in empty homes across Leicestershire during the pandemic
- 2.3 It is essential that with the limited resources available to the Authority that we are ensuring best value for money within any service we deliver, it is therefore essential that unnecessary steps within a process are removed to ensure that limited officer time is used as effectively as possible, as outlined below.

3. Proposed Changes

- 3.1 Proposed changes and the existing text and justifications are shown below:

a. Definition of an empty home

- Original - Have been unoccupied for six months or more AND where there is little reasonable prospect that the owner will be able to remedy the circumstances without advice, assistance or support.
- Proposed - Properties that have been unoccupied for six months or more and where the Authority is concerned that the owner will not or be unable to remedy the circumstances without advice, assistance or support being offered.
- Justification – The revised definition allows for greater flexibility for the case officer to determine if a property may be at risk of becoming a long term empty home or may be detrimental to the area, as is the case with the Environmental Protection Act 1990, Prevention of Damages by Pest Act 1949 or Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing 2014.

b. Why bring long term empty homes back into use?

- Original – The original strategy only referred to Spatial Objective 8 in the local plan.
- Proposed -The revised strategy refers to all documents noted in section 1 of this report
- Justification – Since the original strategy was brought to the committee there have been a number of changes within the Authority that need to be reflected within our strategic documents, such as the need to have Borough wide empty homes strategy to support Selective Licensing which was not referred to or adopted when the original strategy was approved.

c. Identify

- Original – Long term empty properties are initially identified via Council Tax records. With properties that have been empty for over 2 years being subject to a 100% empty property premium. Wherever possible, the Council contacts owners to obtain current information and to encourage at an early stage the property to be returned back into use.
- Proposed -This section has been expanded to include reports of empty homes received by Environmental Health in the event that revenues have not been made aware of an empty home, along with outlining the makeup of the empty homes officer working group and details of how properties will be identified, such as the annual empty homes survey.
- Justification – This has been amended to more accurately reflect how empty homes are discovered and also more accurately reflect how the Authority intends to work in relation to the management of empty homes.

d. How the Private Sector Housing Team engage with home owners

- Original – The original strategy stated a questionnaire would be provided to the owner.
- Proposed - the Council will endeavour to contact the owner by phone, email, letter or by visiting the owner to establish why the property is empty, and what steps if any the owner is taking to return the property back into use.
- Justification – These property owners are typically less likely to engage with us so by conditioning that contact further reduces the likelihood of contact, whereas the case officer can capture all the required data using whatever method the property owner chooses to communicate with us.

e. OWBC private sector lease scheme

- Original Text – In some instances the Council may consider purchasing or leasing the property itself in order to increase its portfolio of temporary or affordable housing.
- Proposed Text – Following the introduction of the Housing Options, private sector leasing scheme more detail has been added detailing on how the process may work and details of the scheme.

- Justification – Provides further clarity to customers.

f. Reviewing the Strategy

- Original Text – The Strategy will be reviewed every five years or sooner should there be any major changes in National or Local policy.
- Proposed Text - The Strategy will be reviewed every five years or sooner if required. Changes to the strategy can be made under the scheme of delegation with the approval of a Strategic Director (or equivalent post) and the Head of Law and Democracy. With the renewal of the strategy being brought to Policy, Finance and Development Committee for approval.
- Justification – Provision has been added to the strategy to allow it to be amended with the consent of two senior officers with the policy coming back to committee upon expiry.

4. Operation and Resources

- 4.1 The empty homes function has historically moved between the Environmental Health and Planning services and has been generally successful demonstrating a year on year reduction in empty homes within the Borough, along with having one of the lowest number of empty homes within Leicestershire.
- 4.2 The Authority has seen over a 50% reduction in empty homes when compared to 2004 levels and the current published rate (2022) shows that empty homes account for 0.56% of the Authority's total stock which is the second lowest level in the County.
- 4.3 The current strategy was approved at the Policy, Finance and Development Committee on 10 March 2020 but was not fully implemented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition there has been a considerable amount of staff turnover. It is felt that as a result it is opportune to review the strategy.
- 4.4 There are a number of officers within the Authority who come in contact with empty homes for a variety of reasons, it seems appropriate that a cross departmental working group is established to ensure the greatest value for money is achieved with the following people and departments being involved and their responsibilities:
- Private Sector Housing – Will lead the empty homes officer working group, complete the annual empty homes survey, provide updates to Service Delivery Committee in relation to empty homes level within the Borough on a quarterly basis and take enforcement action when appropriate.
 - Revenues – Will complete the annual empty homes survey, reporting figures for the purpose of Council Tax and Business Rates data.
 - Planning – Will provide support for properties that may be empty due to planning issues and provide owners with guidance on suitable changes of use or other applications.
 - Housing Options – Will provide updates on properties that are going forward with leasing to the Authority.
- 4.5 The Authority has 132 empty homes which equates to 0.56% of the housing stock in the Borough, the second lowest in the County.
- 4.6 As a result the allocation of a dedicated resource (an Empty Homes Officer) is neither warranted or financially viable and the cross departmental working group is considered to be the most economically efficient way to address the issue and deal with the significant volume of work generated such as the annual survey to be conducted between June and

September, any resultant inspections and the completion of the annual empty homes return.

5. Current figures relating to empty homes within the Borough (Empty Homes Survey 2022)

- 5.1 As of October 2022 there were 132 empty homes within the Borough, these break down to:
- 31 Long term empty homes
 - 101 Empty Homes
- 5.2 Reports outlining progress will be provided to Service Delivery Committee for review.

6. How does OWBC compare to other districts in Leicestershire (Annual Return 2022)

- 6.1 In a comparison with the other Leicestershire Districts the Authority has the lowest prevalence of empty homes in the County (using 2022 figures) a breakdown of these figures is shown overleaf:

Number of Vacant Dwellings within Leicestershire by District/Borough (2022)	
Oadby and Wigston Borough Council	132
Blaby District Council	243
Charnwood Borough Council	642
Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council	301
North West Leicestershire District Council	281
Melton Borough Council	180
Harborough District Council	377

- 6.2 This means that the Authority accounts for approx. 6% of the County's empty homes.

7. Reporting Progress

- 7.1 An update of current levels will be provided within the Council Performance Update report presented to Service Delivery Committee using the information outlined above, so progress of the overall function can be monitored. Using the data outlined on pages 12-14 of appendix 1.
- 7.2 Where there are properties which members have specific concerns about enquiries can be raised through the member enquiry function. This will allow the Private Sector Housing team to address specific concerns regarding properties and provide further information and context that may not be appropriate or reasonable to share in a public meeting.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

- 8.1 In conclusion the Borough does not have an issue with long term empty homes (132) actually having the lowest number of empty homes in the entire east midlands with Rutland County Council having the second lowest (173) when reviewed against 2022 reported data.
- 8.2 OWBC has been successful at reducing empty homes in the district without the need to assign significant resource to a dedicated project.

- 8.3 An established working group will allow the Authority to further address what limited empty homes are within the Borough without the need for dedicated resourcing and will allow for flexible resourcing to be in place at times of high demand such as prior to the submission of the Authority's CBT1 form to confirm the number of empty properties that have been re-occupied and those that the Authority may be eligible to claim the new homes bonus for.
- 8.4 Whilst a range of enforcement options are available to the Authority these are often costly and time intensive for officers and are in some cases offer no guarantee of immediate results.
- 8.5 Therefore the use of these enforcement powers has a significant amount of corporate risk attached and should only be used in exceptional circumstances.
- 8.6 In conclusion a positive, informal and pro-active approach should be sufficient to deal with the majority of properties within the Borough and a risk rating system should be established to allow a consistent approach to be considered for more long term empty homes where the owners can either not be identified or located or have failed to engage with the Authority. This risk rating and the officer recommendations will then assist the Head of Law and Democracy in making any final decision on the action to be taken at the property.
- 8.7 This risk rating system will be prepared by the Selective Licensing team leader using existing systems in operation as a benchmark to operate from, brought to the working group for consideration and comments and final sign off falling with the Head of Law and Democracy.