



Service Delivery Committee	Tuesday, 05 July 2016	Matter for Information and Decision
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Title: **Private-Sector Empty Homes Strategy**

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1. Introduction

This report is to update members on the action taken to address the issue of empty homes in the Borough since the Service Delivery Committee on 22 March 2016.

2. Recommendations

Members are asked to note the information provided within the report and to endorse the action going forward.

3. Information

- 3.1. As part of the empty homes project 149 empty properties were identified by council tax and subsequently written to on 15th April 2016. During this time grant assistance and advice has been offered in an effort to try and return empty properties back into use and over 50 visits have been made. 31 responses have been received from owners and managing agents and 30 properties have been identified as now being occupied. This brings the total down to 126, which is the smallest in Leicestershire by some distance in both number and as a percentage of total housing stock. This is also some way below the national average for the East Midlands region and nationally.
- 3.2. The 30 properties identified as occupied will result in additional income generation through the New Homes Bonus which sees the government match the council tax on any new properties for the first six years including a premium for affordable units. Oadby and Wigston Borough Council, to date have been awarded £880,733 including the £313,174 2015/16 allocation. Council tax has been informed of all properties found to be occupied.
- 3.3. One owner wishes to pursue the offer of a grant and contact will be made to assess viability. This level of interest is lower than anticipated however currently only one initial letter has been sent to owners and this is likely to increase once owners become aware through future correspondence that enforcement may be taken if no action is taken. It should also be noted that the Council has no set budget for these grants and so it is not clear how many grants could be offered in the event of increased uptake.
- 3.4. Whilst there has been interest in the grant offer the main stumbling block has been the requirement for the property to be used for Council housing nominees due to the perception that the tenants may possibly be on benefits. This is likely to be a reflection of the relatively affluent areas that Oadby and Wigston consists of with some of the empty properties being £500,000 plus in value. If grant uptake does not increase it will be worth either amending the Grant Terms and Conditions (such as marketing the offer as an interest free loan so applicants can live in the property themselves or sell the property on rather than rent, offering a grant to cover marketing fees etc) or using the finance set aside for the grants to progress the formal enforcement options.

- 3.5. Further letters were sent out in mid June to those that have not responded to the initial contact and a record kept of all responses and applications for grant assistance. Contact will be made with those seeking grant assistance, a visit to assess viability will be made and any grants considered as meeting the criteria will be submitted to the Head of Community for approval.
- 3.6. Of the 32 long-term empty homes (those empty for over two years) a small number have been identified as requiring probable enforcement action. An options appraisal will be completed for each and a report submitted to committee for approval. The remaining long term empties are due to return to use through refurbishment, settlement of estates etc and some will remain empty for the foreseeable (such as MOD land, Canal and River Trust properties etc).
- 3.7. The majority of empty homes within the Borough assessed via external inspection and from conversations with neighbours etc do not appear to be detrimental to the area or causing any other problems within the locality. This is primarily because they are being maintained generally in keeping with the neighbouring properties and from the outside do not appear empty.
- 3.8. It is proposed that long term properties attracting complaints are targeted on a case by case basis alongside continuing the grant offer and advice for those posing no problem to the community. Presently the long term empty properties which have historically attracted complaints and warrant further action are:
 - 114 Uplands Road, Oadby
 - 30 The Morwoods, Oadby
 - 7 Moat Street, Wigston
 - 37 Newton Lane, Wigston
 - 34 Aylestone Lane, Wigston

It is anticipated that these properties may only be returned to use by enforcement action and therefore in order to ensure this action is successful, informal attempts must be made first to demonstrate the efforts made.

- 3.9. It is estimated that by end of July the Council will be in a position to start serving enforcement notices on those properties having a detrimental impact on the community and then by mid to end of August commencing with the formal enforcement options described in the Empty Homes Strategy such as enforced sale, compulsory purchase orders and Empty Dwelling Management Orders. In order to save time the above long term properties should be subject to an options appraisal before mid July in anticipation that no response is received from the owners which is highly likely. This should include the cost of each option to the Council, likelihood of success, whether the circumstances meet the criteria for each action and what the impact on the community is.

4. Future Actions

- 4.1. It is recommended that regular information from council tax be obtained so that any new empty properties can be targeted at an early stage to prevent them becoming long term vacant. New properties vacant for over six months will then be sent the same letters and join the process.
- 4.2. Any vacant commercial offices have not been targeted as yet and information should be gathered to target those which can be converted to residential dwellings. These do

not require full planning permission to be obtained and only require notification submitting to the planning department. Grant assistance should be offered as with empty domestic dwellings.

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Implications	
Financial [CR]	CR1 Decreasing Financial Resources - By taking action to address the issue of empty homes has generated additional income for the Authority.
Legal [AC]	CR5 Effective Utilisation of Assets/Buildings - Enforcement action may be necessary on certain properties.
Risk [SG]	CR4 Reputation Damage - Failure to address empty homes could have a detrimental effect on the community and damage the Council's reputation.
Equalities [SG]	No significant implications.
	Equality Assessment
	<input type="checkbox"/> Initial Screening <input type="checkbox"/> Full Assessment <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable