



<b>Policy, Finance and Development Committee</b>	<b>Tuesday, 10 March 2020</b>	<b>Matter for Information and Decision</b>
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**Report Title:** **Oadby & Wigston Empty Homes Strategy (2020-2025)**

**Report Author(s):** **Adrian Thorpe (Head of Built Environment)**

<b>Purpose of Report:</b>	This report provides an update with regard to the measures of success for 2019/20 relating to the issue of Empty Homes as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan.
<b>Report Summary:</b>	The Corporate Plan contains two actions and associated Key Performance Indicators in order to enable the Council to measure its success. This report provides an update on both actions and associated Key Performance Indicators.
<b>Recommendation(s):</b>	<b>A. That the contents of the report be noted; and B. That the Proposed Empty Homes Strategy (2020-2025) (set out at Appendix 1 to this report) be approved.</b>
<b>Senior Leadership, Head of Service, Manager, Officer and Other Contact(s):</b>	Stephen Hinds (Deputy Chief Executive) (0116) 257 2861 <a href="mailto:stephen.hinds@oadby-wigston.gov.uk">stephen.hinds@oadby-wigston.gov.uk</a>  Adrian Thorpe (Head of The Built Environment) (0116) 257 2645 <a href="mailto:adrian.thorpe@oadby-wigston.gov.uk">adrian.thorpe@oadby-wigston.gov.uk</a>
<b>Corporate Objectives:</b>	Growing the Borough Economically (CO2)
<b>Vision and Values:</b>	"A Stronger Borough Together" (Vision) Teamwork (V3) Innovation (V4) Customer Focus (V5)
<b>Report Implications:-</b>	
Legal:	There are no implications arising from this report.
Financial:	There are no implications directly arising from this report.
Corporate Risk Management:	Effective Utilisation of Assets / Buildings (CR5) Economy / Regeneration (CR9)
Equalities and Equalities Assessment (EA):	There are no implications arising from this report. EA not applicable
Human Rights:	There are no implications arising from this report.
Health and Safety:	There are no implications arising from this report.
<b>Statutory Officers' Comments:-</b>	
Head of Paid Service:	The report is satisfactory.

Chief Finance Officer:	The report is satisfactory.
Monitoring Officer:	The report is satisfactory.
<b>Consultees:</b>	None.
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None.
<b>Appendices:</b>	<b>1.</b> Proposed Empty Homes Strategy (2020-2025)

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Council's Corporate Plan refers to the valuable role that returning long term empty homes back into the market can have in relation to Corporate Objective 2 'Growing the Borough Economically' and the outcome 'Delivering on our Housing Need'.

1.2 One of the ways that the Corporate Plan seeks to achieve this objective and associated outcome is set out in the Plan as follows:

3. We will work to bring existing long-term empty homes back into the market through collaborative working and direct Council interventions.	Staffing Resource Internal Financing
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1.3 The Corporate Plan contains two actions and associated Key Performance Indicators in order to enable the Council to measure its success:

How we will measure success	Baseline (2018/19)	Target	Benchmark	Frequency
<b>GBE 10</b> Develop a cross/cutting corporate empty homes strategy to support the Empty Homes Group.	N/A	Q3	Local	Key Milestone
<b>GBE 11</b> Return 5 properties empty for 24 months or more onto the market/into occupation.	N/A	March 2020	Local	Annual

1.4 This report provides an update on both actions and associated Key Performance Indicators.

## 2. Develop a cross cutting corporate Empty Homes Strategy to support the Empty Homes Group

2.1 Managing empty homes in the Borough falls to a range of Officers working in different sections of the Council. Often it is only a small part of their role either on an ongoing basis or on an occasional basis when a particular matter requires their involvement. Therefore an Empty Homes Officer Group was established in order to bring these Officers together as and when necessary.

2.2 The Council already has in place an Empty Homes Strategy dated April 2016, so a review of this document has taken place in order to develop a new strategy. In reviewing the

document a number of key questions have been considered.

### **Is the number of long term Empty Homes a particular issue in the Borough?**

- 2.3 A home is considered to be empty when it has been empty for 6 months or more. In February 2020 there were 96 properties in the Borough recorded as being empty for 6 months or more. Of these, 26 had been empty for 2 years or more and are paying Council Tax premium and are therefore classified as long term empty homes. This differs from the belief that has previously been expressed in Committees that the number of empty homes in the Borough was significantly higher (and upon which the setting of the Key Performance Indicator target was based).
- 2.4 In comparison to other Leicestershire districts, since 2011, the Borough of Oadby and Wigston has annually recorded the second lowest number of empty homes within its administrative area, with only Melton Borough recording fewer. All of the other districts have recorded significantly more empty homes – generally over 250 each year.
- 2.5 In terms of long term empty homes (i.e. those empty for 2 years or more) these equate to only 0.11% of the total housing stock in the Borough. In terms of empty homes (i.e. those empty for 6 months or more) these equate to 0.40% of the total housing stock in the Borough. Whilst it is clearly desirable to minimise the number of empty homes and long term empty homes, these figures demonstrate that the current levels are not detrimental in enabling the Council to meet its Corporate Objectives.
- 2.6 It is also of note that at any one time there are between about 100 and 130 empty homes in the Borough. Since 2013 the number has not particularly decreased, nor increased, therefore indicating that the 'churn' of empty homes lies at around about this number. There will always be a churn of empty homes within a housing market and the level of churn in the Borough is not considered to be unreasonable.

### **What action can the Council take to reduce the number of long term empty homes?**

- 2.7 The April 2016 Empty Homes Strategy identified a three step approach to empty homes – Identify, Encourage, Enforce.
- 2.8 The review of the document found that the Council has not been particularly active in encouraging empty homes to be brought back to the market. For example, the Council does not employ a dedicated Empty Homes Officer and does not offer grants to owners of empty homes to assist owners to bring the empty home back into use. Despite this whilst the number of empty homes in the Borough has not declined, neither has it increased and the number of empty homes has remained fairly consistent since 2013, two years before the Empty Homes Strategy was introduced.
- 2.9 Therefore, in reviewing the Empty Homes Strategy and taking into account the factors mentioned in paragraphs 2.3 to 2.8, no specific additional methods to encourage empty homes to be brought back into use have been included. Such methods would require a significant financial investment by the Council to either offer grants or to fund an Empty Homes Officer and the relatively small numbers of empty homes in the Borough do not warrant this degree of investment.
- 2.10 Officers will however continue to liaise and offer encouragement to the owners of empty homes as and when appropriate as they do currently, such as the Revenues Visiting Officer, the Anti Social Behaviour Officer, the Planning Enforcement Officer and Environmental Health Officers.
- 2.11 All of the various enforcement measures referred to in the 2016 Empty Homes Strategy

have been carried forward. This ensures that there remains a range of enforcement actions to deal with long term empty homes should they become such a problem that enforcement action is necessary. However, enforcement can be highly labour intensive, lengthy and expensive for the Council so it will only be considered as a last resort.

2.12 The new Empty Homes Strategy arising from the review of the 2016 version is attached at **Appendix 1**.

### **3. Return 5 properties empty for 24 months or more onto the market/into occupation**

2.13 In light of the comments in paragraph 2.8 above that the Council has not been particularly active in encouraging empty homes to be brought back to the market this was always going to be a difficult target to meet. This is because the only tools available to achieve it have been verbal persuasion from existing Officers in their discussions with the owners of long term empty homes, or enforcement action which would only be considered as a last resort should a long term empty home become such a problem that enforcement action is necessary.

2.14 Although to date in 2019/20 no long term empty homes have been moved onto the market/into occupation, progress has been made in relation to 2 long term empty homes as detailed below:

- Number 30 The Moorwoods, Oadby - The Revenues Visiting Officer last visited on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019. A new builder has been instructed by the owner and work is progressing well and to a proper standard. It is anticipated that within 3-4 months the property will be in a state where it can be sold or let.
- Number 37 Newton Lane – Work was due to start in December 2019 however no progress has been made yet. The Revenues Visiting Officer is in weekly liaison with the Agent and it is intended that work will begin in the near future.

2.15 Given that the number of long term empty homes in the Borough is not detrimental in enabling the Council to meet its Corporate Objectives, and as set out in paragraph 2.3 is not significant enough for it to be necessary or appropriate for the Council to invest its money in encouraging long term empty homes to be brought back into use, it would appear appropriate for this key performance indicator to be removed from the Corporate Plan.

2.16 However, the number of long term empty homes will be monitored on a quarterly basis and will be reported to Members for their information in the Corporate Performance Update report to Service Delivery Committee.