

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

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WARD(S): All

PART I **FOR COMMENT AND CONSIDERATION**

EMPTY HOMES: HOUSING SOLUTIONS - A STRATEGY FOR SLOUGH

1. **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this report is to advise members on progress to date in dealing with empty homes in the private sector and to seek approval for a new strategy following on from the interim policy that was approved in March 2010

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Scrutiny Panel are requested to recommend to Cabinet that the Empty Homes: Housing solutions – A Strategy for Slough, as set out in Appendix A be approved.

3. **Community Strategy Priorities–**

By aiming to tackle empty homes and bring properties back into use the service is able to contribute to the Community Strategy Priorities:

- **Being Safe, Feeling Safe**
- **A Cleaner, Greener place to live, Work and Play**
- **Prosperity for All**

It contributes to the priorities by:

- maximising the supply of affordable housing and making best use of existing buildings
- Strengthening communities to make sure all of our neighbourhoods are safe, viable and attractive areas to live in
- Preventing homelessness and tackling housing needs
- Improving conditions in the public and private sectors

Empty homes represent a wasted resource within the Borough. They can deny potential homes to those in housing need. In addition they increase pressure for new development on Greenfield sites. If a property is empty it can attract vandals, squatters, drug users and arsonists. The gardens may be used for fly tipping and dumping of waste, which in turn attracts vermin.

By implementing the policy and guidance issued by the Government the Council is ensuring compliance with the law and so contributing to maintaining excellent governance within the Council to ensure that it is efficient, effective and economic in everything it does.

4. **Other Implications**

(a) **Financial**

Given Slough's relatively low level of empty homes, the strategy will recognise that empty homes are a lower priority than other private sector housing issues and must be tackled within existing financial and operational resources.

As part of our commitment to bringing empty homes back into use we have ensured that the grants and loans available for improving conditions in private housing are available to owners of empty homes in certain circumstances. Our budget for all grant assistance in 2011/12 is £120,000 with a maximum grant per property of £5,000. We have also made funding available through our Home Improvement Agency flexible Loan Scheme for low interest loans, £80,000 in 2011/12 and £120,000 in 2012/13.

Staff resources have also been committed to ensure the service continues to be successful and meets our new priorities. The staff allocation to the service includes:

- Enabling Officer – 0.2 post
- Housing Standards Officer – 0.2 post
- Continued support from community wardens in the monitoring and referral of empty homes.

As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 the Government announced plans to provide £100m to support housing associations to refurbish up to 3,000 homes for affordable rent for up to 10 years. The New Homes Bonus will provide match-funding for council tax receipts on new homes delivered and empty homes brought back into use for six years

Further details of the funding are awaited and the Government have also announced that bringing empty homes back into use will count as new supply for the New Homes Bonus, the incentive payment scheme proposed to encourage communities to support new development

An 'expression of interest' to the Homes and Communities Agency has been submitted confirming that Slough through the Flexible Home Improvement Loans Limited wishes to bid for funding in respect of the Affordable Homes Programme. Providers were required to submit a statement by the 3rd of May 2011.

(b) **Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications**

The principal legislation governing this area of work is the Housing Act 2004. There are no Human Rights Act issues in this report.

(c) Risk Management

Recommendation	Risk/Threat/Opportunity	Mitigation(s)
Enforcement of Housing Act 2004 sections on Empty homes without a policy agreed at cabinet	Threats to council on poor procedures leaving opportunities for council to be challenged and as a result impacting on the reputation of the council	Have policy in place before taking legal proceeding for compulsory purchase

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

Equalities Impact Assessment Initial Screening undertaken shows that there is no adverse impact on any section of the population.

5. **Supporting Information**

- 5.1 Empty homes in Slough represent a wasted resource. With 6,528 households on the housing register of which 972 are living in overcrowded conditions, the 249 empty homes in Slough that currently have an exemption from council tax appear to be a solution to meeting the needs of many local people.
- 5.2 Empty homes also incur costs for their owners and we understand that there are many reasons why owners keep a property empty. There are also a good many reasons for the council to work proactively with owners to bring empty homes back into use as quickly as possible, ideally to meet the needs of local people without a suitable home.
- 5.3 Reuse of empty homes is a Government priority. The use of existing homes to meet housing need also supports the Government commitment to improve value for money and to tackle climate change.
- 5.4 In the past in Slough we have focussed attention on empty homes in the private sector and those empty for long periods. Our first Empty Homes Policy approved in 2005 focussed on bringing empty private rented homes back into use. An interim policy agreed in March 2010 gave a greater focus on longer term empty homes that were causing a nuisance to local people. The success of both policies has been limited but the changing economic climate and the priority to resolve unmet housing needs in Slough means we must review our strategy for dealing with empty homes.
- 5.5 **Empty Homes in Slough – The Problem**
- 5.5.1 The Private Sector Stock and House in Multiple Occupation Condition Surveys carried out on behalf of the Council in 2009 estimated the number of empty homes at 740 or 1.9% of the housing stock. A breakdown of these properties by time vacant is shown in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1 – Empty Homes by Time Vacant

Length of vacancy	Number	%
Newly vacant (less than a month)	93	12.5%
Mid term vacant (1 to 6 months)	491	66.3%
Long term vacant (6 months or more)	157	21.2%
Second/holiday home	0	0.0%
All empty homes	740	100.0%

Source: Slough Borough Council Private Sector Stock and HMO Condition Survey 2009

5.5.2 The survey also provided an estimate of the repair costs for empty homes which, at an average of £4,844, were identified as the category of homes in greatest need of repair. However, many of the long term empties will need to have much more than the average cost spent on them

5.5.3 More recent analysis of the empty homes identified on the Council Tax register at January 2011 shows the number of homes empty and currently enjoying an exemption for Council Tax is 259. This suggests that the number empty between one and six months estimated through the survey has either decreased during the past two years or that owners have been unaware of the exemption. As the exemption ceases after 6 or 12 months the register provides no information about the properties empty beyond these periods.

5.5.4 Compared to the national and local picture Slough has a low proportion of homes empty for over 6 months. Table 2 below shows the number estimated in Slough by the survey in 2009 compared to the England, the South East and neighbouring authorities.

Table 2 Comparison of homes empty over 6 months by area

Area	Number dwellings	Number homes empty over 6 months	% of total dwellings
Wycombe	68900	159	0.2
Slough	50060	157	0.3
Spelthorne	41310	311	0.8
South Bucks	27220	333	1.2
Windsor and Maidenhead	59740	954	1.5
South East	3660700	32819	0.9
England	22693000	295519	1.3

5.6 Since the launch of our existing policy in 2005 we have succeeded in bringing a number of empty homes back into use through our advice and support to owners and our enforcement activity. Two long term empty homes causing a nuisance to local people have been identified for enforcement action, such as compulsory purchase. However this has resulted in the owner commencing refurbishment of the properties to bring them back into use informally.

5.7 Although staff resources are limited, a number of Council staff have dedicated time to dealing with empty homes as part of a wider role in housing. In addition the role of community wardens includes the monitoring and referral of empty homes identified to private sector housing for action. Over the last year the emphasis on monitoring and securing has become more relevant as the incidence of squatting is increasing

5.8 Future Challenges and Priorities

5.8.1 Our future challenges relating to empty homes are broad and significant. The main driver for our strategy is the opportunity that empty homes represent in resolving unmet housing need which is significant.

5.8.2 Through the survey of empty homes' owners and the Landlords' Forum we have sought stakeholder views on the approach we should take to encouraging the reuse of empty homes in Slough. The survey identified that around 30% of owners would be willing to rent their empty property and whilst 33% of these said they wished to rent to professional people, many indicated they wanted to rent to families with children and vulnerable people.

5.8.3 Other challenges include:

- Owners of empty homes need information, advice and help to bring them back into use. In recent years a number of owners have asked the Council for help and the survey carried out suggested that many would use the service.
- Neighbours of empty homes want a positive outcome following complaint and satisfaction ratings of these complainants has not been good to date.
- Empty homes are also referred to us by the Police and Fire and Rescue following criminal activity or fire.
- The condition of empty homes requires improvement. The average cost of repairs needed by empty homes (£4,844) was assessed as higher than any category of property in the Private Sector Stock Condition Survey 2009.
- The delivery of new affordable homes to meet housing need is expected to slow down in coming years. The number of homes forecast for 2011/12 and 2012/13 is 61 and 150 respectively despite the Council identifying sufficient land for housing development¹. Enabling the re-use of empty homes will help to provide additional affordable housing and will contribute to the calculation of the New Homes Bonus.
- Income generation is an important priority for the Council. The Council has produced plans to raise extra income and the re-use of empty homes can contribute to this. For every month a home lies empty the council loses between 10-100% of the normal Council Tax income (up to 6/12 months depending on condition).
- Keeping the information about empty homes up to date and keeping abreast of good practice is important. The information about empty homes available from Council Tax records is limited to a particular point in time because of the short term nature of the exemptions. The records also do not include information about the size and type of property. Hence the Council has to be proactive in finding out about empty homes. Activity in bringing empty homes back into use across the country is forever improving and we need to research this and learn from it to keep our approach fresh.

5.8.4 The challenges outlined above and the steer we have identified from the consultation have provided us with a clear set of priorities. These are:

- Providing better information, advice and support to owners
- Developing and offering a letting agency service to owners

¹Land available for housing development as identified in Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, March 2010.

- Helping owners sell or find tenants for their homes through our advertising service
- Providing grants and low interest loans where owners are unable to fund necessary repairs
- Enforcing the re-use of empty homes where our informal help fails
- Increasing the Council Tax income to the Council from empty homes
- Improving the way we identify empty homes
- Keeping up to date with best practice.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

This report will be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 18th July 2011.

7. **Conclusion**

The strategy was prepared with the support of a range of stakeholders (landlords, letting agents, owners etc) who were consulted during its preparation. Slough has a relatively low level of empty homes when compared to the rest of the South East region. While we recognise that empty homes will have a lower priority than other private sector housing issues in Slough, we will need to find ways of bringing empty homes back into use to meet our housing needs and reduce overcrowding. We will keep the strategy under review to ensure that it is suitable for the housing issues and concerns in Slough.

8. **Appendices Attached**

'A' - Empty Homes: Housing Solutions - A strategy for Slough

9. **Background Papers**

- '1' - Housing Act 1985
- '2' - Housing Act 2004
- '3' - Guidance issued by the Empty Home Agency
- '4' - Housing strategy 2005-2010
- '5' - Regional Housing Statement 2003

