

**To:** The Housing Panel  
**Date:** 26<sup>th</sup> April 2017  
**Report of:** Head of Housing and Property  
**Title of Report:** Empty Dwellings (Private Sector)

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	Briefing on the Council's approaches to dealing with empty properties in the City ahead of a refresh of the Council's Empty Property Strategy 2013-18.
<b>Corporate Priority</b>	Meeting Housing Need.
<b>Policy Framework</b>	Housing Strategy 2013-18
<b>Recommendation(s):</b> That the Housing Panel resolves to:	
1. <b>Note the brief ahead of the refresh of the Council's Empty Property Strategy 2013-18</b>	

<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1	Table of empty homes figures from 2009 to March 2017
Appendix 2	Table of New Homes Bonus achieved

## Introduction and background

1. The first Empty Property Strategy was introduced in 2009. Since 2009 there has been a substantial reduction in the number of empty dwellings in the City. This has been achieved principally through work by the Empty Property Officer with support from officers within environmental development, revenues/council tax, planning, corporate assets, property services, legal and external services including fire, police and social services. The attached table (appendix 1) shows empty dwelling numbers at the time of the introduction of the first strategy in 2009 to March 2017.
2. Empty dwellings are identified principally from council tax information but also through reports to the Empty Property Officer. Reports can be made by officers from internal and external services, Councillors and the public. The Council's website has a facility where a property can be reported, with a direct link to the Empty Property Officer. Each year in November there is a national Empty Homes Week and the Council ensures it is publicised both internally, by posters and Council Matters, and externally by the press.

3. There are three specific ways in which the Council deals with empty dwellings in the City.

3.1 Firstly, to contact owners of empty dwellings to inquire why their dwelling is unoccupied and to offer support and advice. This may include:

- a letter confirming in excess of 2 years vacancy for the purpose of VAT relief on works to bring a property back into use
- contact with planning and environmental development officers (EDO)
- contact with the home improvement agency
- support from adult social services
- contact details of people interested in purchasing empty dwellings
- provision of information on sale and rental value of their property, including details of agents local to the dwelling.

3.2 Secondly, where an owner is unable or unwilling to bring an empty dwelling back into use there are more formal ways to ensure it is. These include:

- Serving notices to improve the property with the assistance of Environmental Development. Where a notice is not complied with, the Council will carry out works in default. There is an empty dwelling budget to support work carried in default of the notices.
- Applying for an Empty Dwelling Management Order under the Housing Act 2004 (EDMO). The Council has previously applied for three, two of which were granted and one withdrawn. In 2012 the criteria for an EDMO to be applied for changed. Harm must be demonstrated and this usually means that complaints must have been received.
- Applying for a Compulsory Purchase Order to enable the Council to ensure the property is brought back into use. Papers have been served on the Secretary of State for a property in Rose Hill.

3.3 Thirdly, in 2011 the Government introduced the New Homes Bonus (NHB). The NHB is a grant paid by Central Government to local councils to reflect and incentivise housing growth in their areas and includes empty dwellings being brought back into use. The NHB until this year was paid over a 6 year period (now reduced to 4 years) for each new home and empty dwelling brought back into use. The yearly bonus equates to the council tax value for each property. A further major change introduced at a late stage by Central Government to take effect from 2017/18 onwards, was that only growth above 0.4% will attract NHB payments. In practical terms this reduced our allocation for 2017/18 from an estimated £611,193 to only £333,267.

3.4 In response to this a NHB working party, led by the Empty Property Officer, was created with officers from Council Tax/Revenues and Investigations. Each year in June and August, two letters with a questionnaire attached are sent out to establish if dwellings recorded as empty are in fact occupied. Electronic checks and site visits are carried out by Revenues and Investigations Team, particularly on properties where the owner has failed to respond. As a result of this initiative,

those properties found to be occupied are included in the figures submitted for NHB purposes and removed from the empty property database. Details of the results of the NHB since are attached at appendix 2.

## Empty Property Strategy 2018-21

4. Work to update the Empty Property Strategy 2013-18 will commence in June 2017 with a period of consultation with those living in Oxford, Councillors and internal and external services. The proposed new strategy will be presented to CEB for approval in autumn 2017.
  - 4.1 Within the new strategy there will be greater emphasis on how we will target and enforce against dwellings under the following categories to ensure they are brought back into use:
    - 'tough' enforcement on properties empty for 10 years or more
    - properties empty for 2 years or more (current figure is 66)
    - properties empty over 2 years which are owned by a deceased person and probate has not been applied for.
  - 4.2 Greater emphasis will also be placed on working to help enable the delivery of new homes. This can be achieved by identifying empty dwellings and commercial sites suitable for development and/or change of use to dwellings and mixed use sites.

## Conclusion

5. Whilst most empty dwellings are brought back into use without the need to take formal action, there is a hard-core of properties that will remain unoccupied without intervention. With continuing support and commitment from Councillors and officers from both internal and external services, these dwellings will be brought back into use. In addition, the continuing commitment to support empty property work financially, most recently demonstrated by the application for a Compulsory Purchase Order, will also ensure empty dwellings within the City do not remain unoccupied.

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