

Draft Empty Homes Plan 2020-23

Overview and Scrutiny Panel **27 August 2020**

Report Author	Richard Hopkins, Private Sector Housing Manager
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Helen Whitehead, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Services
Status	For Recommendation
Classification:	Unrestricted
Key Decision	No
Reasons for Key	Not applicable
Previously Considered by	Not applicable
Ward:	All wards

Executive Summary:

Long term empty homes can have a detrimental effect on neighbourhoods and are a wasted resource in a time of ever growing housing need. The council is proactive in its attempts to help bring empty homes back into use and has drafted an Empty Homes Plan to help inform the work of the Empty Property Team.

Recommendation(s):

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel are asked to:

1. Consider and comment on the draft Empty Homes Plan, attached at annex 1.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Financial and Value for Money	<p>The draft Empty Homes Plan 2020-23 does not propose any additional council spending, other than that which would be spent within agreed and approved budgets.</p> <p>The Plan does propose to increase the operational priority of empty homes that are either subject to a Council Tax debt of more than £4,000 or have been delisted by the Valuation Office Agency (“VOA”). As these empty homes represent a loss of Council Tax income, such prioritisation should provide for a positive financial gain in the longer term, which will help fund essential public services.</p>
Legal	<p>The draft Empty Homes Plan 2020-23 does not seek to introduce any new legal powers not already in place or adopted, but it does highlight those which are available. Where the council’s legislative powers could</p>

	be used in respect of an empty home, the Empty Property Team will consider using them when it is appropriate to do so and it is in the wider public interest.								
Corporate	The work undertaken by the Empty Property Team helps support two of the council's three Core Business Objectives 2019 - 2023. Primarily, the Communities objective in <i>"Delivering high-quality housing, safer communities and enhancing the health and wellbeing of our residents"</i> but also the Environment objective in <i>"Having a clean and well-maintained environment"</i> .								
Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty	<p>Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to the aims of the Duty at the time the decision is taken. The aims of the Duty are: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.</p> <p>Protected characteristics: age, sex, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief and pregnancy & maternity. Only aim (i) of the Duty applies to Marriage & civil partnership.</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="424 1021 1305 1281"> <tr> <td colspan="2">Please indicate which aim is relevant to the report.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act,</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it</td> <td>✓</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p>No significant positive or negative impacts have been identified in respect of the protected characteristics. However, some minor positive and negative impacts have been identified in respect of disability, age and social-economic background. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is annexed to this report.</p>	Please indicate which aim is relevant to the report.		Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act,		Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it	✓	Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.	
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CORPORATE PRIORITIES	
Growth	
Environment	✓
Communities	✓

1.0 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Empty and derelict properties have an adverse effect on neighbourhoods. They are often unsightly and can attract crime and anti-social behaviour such as squatting, arson, graffiti and fly-tipping. They may also affect the value of neighbouring properties by creating an impression of neglect and decline within a community. Such properties are not only eyesores and a source of neighbourhood distress, they are a

wasted resource in a time of ever growing housing demand. Many people cannot access good housing, yet many homes stand vacant.

- 1.2 Homes that have been empty for more than six months are of concern, and these are known as long term empty homes. The council's Empty Property Team ("the Team") is committed to taking action whenever possible to help bring them back into use. Council intervention helps increase overall housing supply and reduces the negative environmental and economic effects that empty properties have on neighbourhoods.
- 1.3 The Team has drafted an operational Empty Homes Plan. The plan sets out the background to empty homes in Thanet, highlights the main ways in which the council can intervene, and explores the opportunities that could be employed to help reduce the number of long empty homes in Thanet.

2.0 The Current Situation

- 2.1 The Team, which consists of one Empty Property Officer and one Empty Property Support Officer, is engaged in a range of interventions aimed at bringing long term empty homes back into use. It responds to complaints from members of the public and uses Council Tax data to identify empty homes.
- 2.2 In the first instance, the Team attempts to offer advice and assistance to property owners. This can often lead to successful outcomes. This advice will include raising awareness of the interest free loans available to help renovate homes which have been empty for more than six months. Loans are offered in partnership with Kent County Council through its No Use Empty initiative. Since 2007, over £10m in loans have been approved in Thanet, which has assisted with the renovation of some 364 homes.
- 2.3 When the informal approach is unsuccessful, the team has a range of legislative powers at its disposal which may, depending on the circumstances of each case, be used to help bring empty homes back into use. However, it should be noted that owning an empty home is not unlawful and formal intervention may not be possible or appropriate in every case.
- 2.4 The Team helps bring more empty properties back into use than any other council in Kent. In 2020/21, the Empty Homes Team helped bring 159 homes back into use.
- 2.5 As a deterrent to owning a long term empty home, the council also charges additional Council Tax premiums on homes that have been empty for more than two years.

3.0 Empty Homes Plan 2020-23

- 3.1 The Empty Homes Plan 2020-23 has been drafted to help inform the work of the Team for the next three years. It is primarily an operational document; however, the final version will be published for reasons of transparency and openness.

4.0 Next Steps

- 4.1 The Empty Homes Plan 2020-23 will be completed shortly. Any observations or suggestions that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel would like to make will be taken into account before the document is finalised.

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Annex List

Annex 1	Draft Empty Homes Plan 2020-23
Annex 2	Draft Equalities Impact Assessment

Background Papers

Title	Details of where to access copy
None	Not applicable.

Corporate Consultation

Finance	Matthew Sanham, Financial Services Manager
Legal	TBC