



CABINET

Tuesday, 07 December 2021

Subject	Review of Empty Homes
Report by	Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee – Councillor Stuart Bird
Supporting Officer	Sarah Davis Democratic Services Officer Sarah.davis@east Suffolk.gov.uk

Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
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Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not applicable
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:

One of the Scrutiny Committee's functions is to review Council services and, if necessary, make recommendations to Cabinet. This report gives a summary of the Scrutiny Committee's findings following its in-depth review of Empty Homes considered at its meeting on 16 September 2021.

The Cabinet Member's report, when published, included an appendix detailing written questions submitted by Committee Members in advance and the responses that Officers, in agreement with the Cabinet Member, had subsequently provided. The report and the appendix are available on the Council's website.

The minutes from the 16 September 2021 meeting form an appendix to this report.

Options:

The Scrutiny Committee having considered the contents of the report, the responses to its questions and the matters raised in debate, formulated the following recommendation: no other options were considered relevant.

Recommendation:

That Cabinet be asked to support this Committee's recommendation that the process for tackling long term empty homes in East Suffolk be reviewed within 3 months of the Cabinet decision, including liaising with other Local Authorities to ensure best practice, and a Business Case being drawn up to provide resources to engage a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

When Cabinet receives this report, it is asked that, where it is proposed that a recommendation be accepted, Cabinet provides a clear commitment on its delivery and to what timescales. Similarly, where it is proposed that a recommendation is not accepted, Cabinet provides its detailed and substantive reasons for refusal.

Corporate Impact Assessment

Governance:

This report has been prepared on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee. The Council is required by statute to discharge certain overview and scrutiny functions. These functions are an essential component of local democracy. Scrutiny Committees can contribute to the development of Council policies and can also hold the Cabinet to account for its decisions.

ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:

East Suffolk Strategic Plan 2020-24
East Suffolk Housing Strategy 2017-23

Environmental:

Empty homes represent a wasted resource and where opportunities arise to renovate and return these properties to use, the end result will be a modernised, more energy efficient home utilising fewer resources than a new build.

Equalities and Diversity:

Bringing long term empty properties back into use as affordable homes can support those on low incomes and suffering poverty.

Financial:

Councils can charge a Council Tax premium for homes that have been empty and substantially unfurnished for more than two years, with additional percentage charges made for those empty and unfurnished for more than five and ten years. In 2020/21, East Suffolk Council issued Council Tax bills including premium charges of £622,862 related to long term empty properties.

The Council also receives New Homes Bonus (NHB) and increasing the return of empty homes to occupation is an important element in the calculation of NHB but the current system is likely to be reformed in 2022/23.

The cost to deliver a comprehensive empty property programme cannot be quantified at this stage.

Human Resources:

Additional staff resources would be required to deliver a comprehensive empty property programme.

ICT:

Not applicable.

Legal:

The Council has a number of legal options to act in various situations but none by themselves are likely to bring a home back into use, although they do enable acute issues to be tackled.

Most long term empty homes need a change of owner to bring them back into occupation and the Council tries to achieve this by persuasion and support but sometimes a more forceful approach is needed, such as forcing the sale to recover debts or Compulsory Purchase under the Housing Act 1985. These legal options are complex and time consuming and require significant financial and staffing resources.

Risk:

The risks of not acting on empty properties include the deterioration of the property resulting in damage and nuisance to adjoining properties, and they can also be

detrimental to the amenities of the local area, both of which can result in costs to the Council.

Compulsory purchasing properties is time consuming and risks tying up specialist legal, enforcement and finance staff.

The delivery of an empty homes programme mainly funded through NHB could be at risk due to the imminent changes to the NHB as there is potential for the funding received to be significantly altered.

External Consultees:	Not applicable.
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Strategic Plan Priorities

Select the priorities of the Strategic Plan which are supported by this proposal: <i>(Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)</i>		Primary priority	Secondary priorities
T01	Growing our Economy		
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P02	Attract and stimulate inward investment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P03	Maximise and grow the unique selling points of East Suffolk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P04	Business partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P05	Support and deliver infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
T02	Enabling our Communities		
P06	Community Partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P07	Taking positive action on what matters most	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P08	Maximising health, well-being and safety in our District	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P09	Community Pride	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
T03	Maintaining Financial Sustainability		
P10	Organisational design and streamlining services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P11	Making best use of and investing in our assets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P12	Being commercially astute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P13	Optimising our financial investments and grant opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P14	Review service delivery with partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T04	Delivering Digital Transformation		
P15	Digital by default	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P17	Effective use of data	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P18	Skills and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T05	Caring for our Environment		

P20	Lead by example	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P22	Renewable energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P23	Protection, education and influence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
XXX	Governance		
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>How does this proposal support the priorities selected?</p> <p>Empty homes attract anti-social behaviour (PO8) and are a wasted resource (P21). Renovation and reoccupation addresses supporting infrastructure (PO5), tackling what matters most to communities by addressing an eyesore and restoring a home (PO7). The opportunity to utilise external funding to deliver the proposal makes good use of the rewards available (P13).</p>			

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1 Background facts	
1.1	<p>The Committee considered the Cabinet Member’s report on Empty Homes at its meeting on 16 September 2021.</p> <p>The written questions submitted in advance of the meeting, together with the written responses, form an appendix to the formal report which went to the Committee.</p>
1.2	<p>The following aspects of this topic were raised and discussed with the Cabinet Member and Officers at the meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the problems caused by the current definition of “empty homes” • the way New Homes Bonus was used to fund bringing empty homes back into use • that no resources had been identified to follow up on the annual exercise of reviewing empty homes • existing staff resources had been diverted to other duties • the experience and success of other nearby local authorities • the impact of empty properties in communities • the challenging legal process for dealing with empty homes
2 Current position	
2.1	<p>The current position with regards to the Council’s Long Term Empty Properties Strategy was stated by the Cabinet Member and Officers within the formal report received by the Committee in September 2021. It is not proposed to restate that position here, in this report, and for the sake of efficiency readers are referred to the Cabinet Member’s report on the Council’s website for this information.</p>

3 How to address current situation	
3.1	The Scrutiny Committee noted that clearly there was a desire to deal with empty properties but one of the main issues was that staff had been diverted to other important work.
3.2	Given the apparent success of other Local Authorities in dealing with this issue, Members were of the view that the existing processes should be reviewed to ensure best practice and that sufficient dedicated resource should be made available to address this very important issue, bearing in mind the wider impact of empty properties within a community.
3.3	The Committee, in forming its recommendations, wished to offer a constructive friend's view of the current situation. In conducting the review, it was, as always, the Committee's intention to challenge in a positive way that might also add value and assistance rather than criticism.

4 Reason for recommendation	
4.1	Having considered all the information provided and having had the opportunity to discuss matters with the responsible Cabinet Member and key Officers of the Council, the Scrutiny Committee wished to make constructive suggestions on bringing long term empty properties back into use.

Annexes

Annexes:	
Annex A	Confirmed minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – 16 September 2021

Background reference papers:		
Date	Type	Available From
	None, save the published report for the meeting in September 2021	www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk