

Meeting: Cabinet **Date:** 22 March 2022

Wards affected: All wards

Report Title: Empty Homes Policy

When does the decision need to be implemented? 22 March 2022

Cabinet Member Contact Details: Swithin Long, Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Tourism and Housing

Director/Divisional Director Contact Details: Tara Harris, Divisional Director Community and Customer Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 Request the Cabinet consider the draft Empty homes Policy and associated draft Action Plan (Appendices 1 and 2) that have been proposed. Note, that the action plan is indicative and will be developed further by the appointed Empty Homes Officer.
- 1.2 To advise the Cabinet of the work currently being carried out by the Council on empty homes and suggest further work that could be implemented, when an Empty Homes Officer is recruited into post.
- 1.3 Reduce the number of empty homes in the Bay to maximise much needed housing stock.
- 1.4 To follow up an action in the Housing Strategy 2020-2025 and subsequent Housing Delivery Group action plan to address empty homes in the Bay.

2. Reason for proposal and its benefits

- 2.1 The purpose of this Policy is to reduce empty homes through a range of measures, including support and enforcement. It complements our Housing Strategy 2020-2025 by supporting objectives, such as meeting housing need, improving housing conditions and preventing homelessness.
- 2.2 The Policy also supports other corporate projects, such as the Community and Corporate Plan 2019-2023 to 'improve the delivery, affordability and quality of housing', 'regenerate and re-invent our town centres' and to 'encourage a sustainably developed built environment.

3. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

1. Cabinet adopts the Empty Homes Policy as set out at Appendix 1.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Empty Homes Policy

Appendix 2 Action plan. This is an indicative action plan that will be developed further by the Empty Homes Officer.

Background Documents

Not applicable

Supporting Information

The draft Empty Homes Policy deals with homes that have been empty and details the aims and objectives to reduce long term empty homes and a draft action plan of how these objectives could be met.

Please note it is a draft action plan based on the level of investment. Further business cases would be developed for additional loan schemes etc.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Currently, work on reducing empty homes is limited, due to no dedicated officer being in post.
- 1.2 Whilst it is recognised that some empty homes can be brought back into use through direction from the Council, it is acknowledged that there are many longer-term empty homes that require a more proactive intervention from the authority via the Council's recruitment of a dedicated Empty Homes Officer and adoption of the Empty Homes Policy.
- 1.3 Once recruited, an Empty Homes Officer will enable secure reoccupation via the Empty Homes Policy actions, (Appendix 2)

2. Options under consideration

- 2.1 The implementation of the Empty Homes Policy, delivered through the new appointment of an Empty Homes Officer.

3. Financial Opportunities and Implications

- 3.1 Financial resources have been identified for the recruitment of an Empty Homes Officer post.
- 3.2 Full business case will be developed for additional intervention or proposals. The draft action plan is provided as an example of the work that could be undertaken, if appropriate investment was provided.
- 3.3 It is also recognised that, where necessary, options, such as compulsory purchase, empty dwelling management orders etc. may have a financial implication for the authority on bringing properties back into use. A member decision will be required prior to initiating any compulsory purchase procedure. If proposed, a report would first be brought to members dealing specifically with the property concerned, explaining what steps had been taken to

bring the vacant property back into use, outlining the proposed course of action and the costs implications of this.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications with the recruitment of an Empty Homes Officer, or the adoption of the Empty Homes Policy and draft Action Plan.
- 4.2 Where necessary, options, such as compulsory purchase, empty dwelling management orders etc. may have a legal implication for the authority on bringing properties back into use. However, several the intervention listed in the policy are standard practice and within existing procedures and enforcement policies.
- 4.3 A Member decision may be required, as per paragraph 3.3 with reference to compulsory purchase.

5. Engagement and Consultation

- 5.1 Within 'Priority 1 of the Housing Strategy 2020-2025, 'to increase the overall supply and range of housing in Torbay and make the best use of existing housing', there is an action to better understand 'how we can bring empty homes back into use', which was widely consulted on in 2019.

6. Purchasing or Hiring of Goods and/or Services

- 6.1 To provide some financial assistance, in the form of loans, to help owners to bring empty homes back into use, a third party, non for profit, community interest company would be employed (see Section 4.4 of the policy). This however is subject to a full business case being developed.
- 6.2 As there would be movement of funding from the Council to third party, a compliant procurement process would need to be undertaken to establish whether there are any other suppliers that could deliver the same service to ensure the Council achieves best value for money. The level of spend would dictate the procurement process to follow, as stated by the Council's Contract Procedures

7. Tackling Climate Change

- 7.1 The Policy is to reduce empty homes and increase existing housing stock, thus reducing carbon emissions on new build homes.
- 7.2 By offering advice and assistance to reduce empty homes we would potentially reduce carbon emissions arising from enforcement measures, for example, increased maintenance requirements, increased travel to site etc.

8. Associated Risks

- 8.1 Empty homes are a wasted valuable resource; not addressing the issue of under used dwellings could cause a reputation risk, particularly when homes are in short supply and green field development is undertaken.
- 8.2 To tackle empty homes without a dedicated officer would put further strain on existing departments, including Council Tax, Environmental Health, Planning, Building Control all of whom play a role in bringing empty homes back into use.
- 8.3 Empty homes can be a source of serious nuisance to the communities who live near them.
- 8.4 With no empty homes policy in place, the number of empty homes would increase, as would complaints to the Council.

9. Equality Impacts - Identify the potential positive and negative impacts on specific groups

- 9.1 Generally, the Policy would only affect the owners of empty dwellings, with some positive impact upon the communities in which the properties reside

	Positive Impact	Negative Impact & Mitigating Actions	Neutral Impact
Older or younger people			Neutral
People with caring Responsibilities			Neutral
People with a disability			Neutral
Women or men			Neutral
People who are black or from a minority ethnic background (BME) (Please note Gypsies / Roma are within this community)			Neutral
Religion or belief (including lack of belief)			Neutral
People who are lesbian, gay or bisexual			Neutral
People who are transgendered			Neutral

People who are in a marriage or civil partnership			Neutral
Women who are pregnant / on maternity leave			Neutral
Socio-economic impacts (Including impact on child poverty issues and deprivation)	Reduced homelessness		
Public Health impacts (How will your proposal impact on the general health of the population of Torbay)	Reduced anti-social behaviour and vermin		

10. Cumulative Council Impact

- 10.1 Attempting to tackle empty homes without a dedicated officer would put further strain on existing departments, including Council Tax, Environmental Health, Planning, Building Control all of whom play a role in bringing empty homes back into use.
- 10.2 An increasing number of empty homes may generate more complaints to the Customer Service Team and Members.
- 10.3 Not addressing empty homes, whilst developing green field sites, could attract negative interest from the community.

11. Cumulative Community Impacts

- 11.1 Taking action to improve existing housing and increase housing stock will promote confidence in the community that the Council is delivering on its promises by addressing the shortage of local housing, removing nuisance properties, and doing its best to develop brownfield sites.