

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Officer, Housing and Employability

Housing and Communities Committee: 3 February 2021

**Subject: West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy (Private Sector)
2021-24**

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This purpose of this report is to seek approval from members of the Housing and Communities Committee for our Empty Homes Strategy (Private Sector) for the period 2021-24.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1** It is recommended that the Housing and Communities Committee:
- (i) Note the progress and achievements made in implementing our previous Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2016-19 including the positive impact of the Council's dedicated Empty Homes Officer; and
 - (ii) Approve our new Empty Homes Strategy to cover the period 2021-24.

3. Background

- 3.1** According to the Scottish Household Survey 2019, there are around 130,000 households on housing waiting lists in Scotland and it is estimated that 23,000 new homes will need to be built each year to keep up with the growing number of households in Scotland.
- 3.2** In the year ending December 2019, 22,386 were completed across the country. At the same time Scotland has 40,000 long term Empty Homes in the private sector.
- 3.3** The Scottish Government has recognised and prioritised the issue of empty properties by asking Local Authorities to demonstrate in their Local Housing Strategies how the issue of empty homes is being addressed.
- 3.4** In July 2020 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership released a paper "Providing Homes, Helping Recovery" and expect that due to the Covid-19 pandemic the number of long-term empty properties is projected to increase, both as a result of more properties becoming empty, either through the deaths of owners, or downturns in the rental market, and fewer existing long-term empty properties being purchased and brought back to use.

4. Main issues

- 4.1 The most recent data published by the Scottish Government showed that West Dunbartonshire had 352 properties recorded as being empty for over 6 months at the end of 2020. This is a reduction from 439 properties at the end of 2019. The location of the empty properties is highlighted below.

Town	Number of Empty Homes (Privately Owned)
Alexandria	105
Clydebank	145
Dumbarton	102

- 4.2 The positive downward trend can be attributed to the role of West Dunbartonshire Council's Empty Homes Officer (EHO). This post has been in place since August 2012 and the EHO also provides a service for Renfrewshire Council and works closely with Shelter Scotland who run the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.
- 4.3 A system has been set up to allow Empty Homes to be tackled in a targeted manner using information provided from Council Tax records. The officer also attends national Best Practice Group meetings where best practice ideas are shared and knowledge developed.
- 4.4 Our previous strategy outlined the aim of bringing 25 Empty Homes per year back into use per year through direct engagement. Progress in relation to this target, with positive impact on council tax income is outlined below:

Properties brought back into use via direct engagement			
Year	Amount of empty homes	Council Tax - Band D	Accumulated figure
2013/14	2	£1,163.00	£2,326.00
2014/15	6	£1,163.00	£9,304.00
2015/16	20	£1,163.00	£32,564.00
2016/17	16	£1,163.00	£51,172.00
2017/18	0 (post vacant)	£1,163.00	£51,172.00
2018/19	19	£1,233.83	£74,614.77
2019/20	31	£1,293.55	£114,714.82
Total of all years			£335,867.59
Total amount of properties returned to use			94
Works in progress to bring property back into use			
2020	34		

- 4.5** Renovating empty homes will help local economies. Covid-19 has severely affected sole traders, independent businesses and local retailers working in building and construction. Where someone is repairing or renovating an empty home, they are likely to hire local builders and contractors who purchase materials from local suppliers. Scottish Government figures show that every £1 spent on renovating property in Scotland generates an additional £1.60 for the economy.
- 4.6** Empty Homes Officers can work with owners to help to bring these properties back to use and it is important that the work being done in relation to Empty Homes continues and that opportunities to bring properties back into use are expanded on.
- 4.7** The proposed Empty Homes Strategy 2021-2024 has the following key objectives:
- Maximise the re-use of empty homes;
 - Reduce the number of long term empty problem properties;
 - Help to alleviate the effects of homelessness and waiting list in WDC; and
 - Support Town Centre regeneration.
- 4.8** Owners of Empty Homes will be identified from the information sources and via individual engagement a tailored approach to the empty homes service will be developed.
- 4.9** The Empty Homes Officer will take an approach to engaging with owners that involves:
- Advice and information;
 - Financial and practical assistance; and
 - Enforcement.
- 4.10** The Scottish Government have said they intend to legislate to introduce a Compulsory Sale Order Power for vacant land and buildings. This would allow local authorities to force long term empty homes onto the open market. This would give the EHO an additional tool in those instances where all other means of engaging with the owner have been exhausted. The intended legislation that would introduce these powers has been delayed because of BREXIT and has further been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While no date has been set we anticipate the legislation will be introduced in 2021.
- 4.11** Our approach is outlined in detail in the proposed Empty Homes Strategy 2021-24 attached as Appendix 1 and we will continue to aim to meet the target to bring a minimum of 25 Empty Homes back into use every year in West Dunbartonshire.

5. People Implications

- 5.1** There are no people implications, as the strategy will be implemented by the Council's existing Empty Homes Officer.
- 5.2** As outlined, demand for Empty Homes work may increase due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resources available to carry out this work will continue to be reviewed.

6. Financial and Procurement implications

- 6.1** Actions required to take the Empty Homes Strategy forward will be delivered within current budgetary provision and the Empty Homes Officer will maximise potential income streams.
- 6.2** There are no procurement implications contained within the report.

7. Risk Analysis

- 7.1** The Scottish Government have a vision of a Scotland where every home is occupied and no homes are left empty for significant periods of time without good reason. There is a clear ambition to see empty homes services operating in every area of Scotland and for existing services to be enhanced where possible. Not having a Empty Homes Strategy appropriately resourced risks reputational damage to the Council, a growing number of Empty Homes not being tackled and leading to neighbourhood decline and impacting on our affordable homes targets.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 8.1** The Empty Homes Strategy has had an initial equality impact screening carried out. This identified that all correspondence used by the Empty Homes Officer should be reviewed to ensure that it is informed by best communication practise and that equalities monitoring in terms of owners engaging with the service would be beneficial. Actions have been taken to implement both of these recommendations.

9. Consultation

- 9.1** The Empty Homes Officer provides regular Empty Homes updates at both the Strategic Housing Providers Forum and the Landlord Forum.
- 9.2** A draft of the new strategy has been circulated to Shelter Scotland who run the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Positive feedback was provided and some changes made to the strategy as a result.
- 9.3** The new strategy was highlighted and consulted with all local housing providers at the Strategic Housing Providers Forum on 6 October 2020 and relevant officers in Legal and Finance have also been consulted.

10. Strategic Assessment

- 10.1** The implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy will continue to support all of the Council's key strategic priorities.

Peter Barry
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Date: 20 January 2021

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Appendices: 1. Draft Empty Homes Strategy 2021-24.

Background Papers: Empty Homes in Scotland, a report by the Local Government and Communities Committee, 10 November 2019

Empty Homes Strategy EIA Screening, October 2020

West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy 2016, West Dunbartonshire Council, <https://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/media/4313439/empty-homes-strategy-update-2016-2019.pdf>

Wards Affected: All