

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Infrastructure and Regeneration

Housing, Environment and Economic Development Committee: 7 May 2014

Subject: West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy (Private Sector) 2014-2016

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to seek approval of and authority to implement West Dunbartonshire's first Empty Homes Strategy which is our strategic response to bringing empty homes in the private sector back into use.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1** It is recommended that the committee:

- agrees West Dunbartonshire's Empty Homes Strategy 2014-2016 attached as appendix 1; and
- delegate authority to the Executive Director of Infrastructure and Regeneration to ensure the effective implementation of the strategy and associated action plan.

3. Background

- 3.1** The Scottish Government's review of the Private Rented Sector identified the need for more focus on bringing empty homes back into use. Following this review, the Scottish Government funded a partnership with Shelter Scotland and a number of local authorities including West Dunbartonshire Council to work together with empty home owners to bring these properties back into use.
- 3.2** There is an increasing amount of pressure on all Councils to meet housing demand as a result of key issues such as an ageing population, lack of affordability, homelessness and welfare reform. Bringing empty homes back into use can help to ease this pressure by being used as a realistic and effective housing option. Soon to be published guidance on the development of Local Housing Strategies will reinforce the priority of having a strategic response to tackling empty homes in the private sector.

- 3.3** West Dunbartonshire Local Housing Strategy (LHS) 2011-2016 contains a number of positive actions including the development of this Empty Homes Strategy
- 3.4** Empty homes are wasted assets in our communities. Homes lying empty in communities can cost an average of £7,500 a year (lost rent, lost council tax, cost of boarding up a property) without taking into account other costs associated with empty homes such as anti-social behaviour, crime, and lost spend in the community. There is also an estimated 18% drop in property values for homes adjacent to an empty property.

Bringing an empty home back into can play a vital role in:

- Increasing housing supply
 - Improving the quality of housing stock
 - Regenerating and sustaining communities
 - Stimulating local housing markets.
 - Reducing carbon emissions
- 3.5** Council Tax records have indicated that there are a total of 504 empty private properties in West Dunbartonshire. 292 of these are classed as long term empty and can be targeted to bring back into use.

4. Main Issues

- 4.1** The introduction of the West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy will build on the Council's positive response to this important issue of tackling empty homes which has contributed to the following outcomes:-
- 40 empty homes brought back into use in West Dunbartonshire
 - 17 in Dumbarton
 - 15 in Clydebank
 - 8 in Alexandria
 - Of these 40, five properties have introduced back into use through the Council's Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme, directly assisting the Council's statutory homelessness obligations.
 - Increased council tax revenue as a result of bringing these properties back into use.
- 4.2** The introduction of the West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy will support the main elements of the Council's approach to tackling empty homes in the private sector. These are outlined below:-

Empty Homes Officer - Homes Again West

In partnership with the Scottish Government and Renfrewshire Council, West Dunbartonshire Council deliver a shared service approach to tackling empty homes in the private sector. Both authorities have shared a dedicated empty homes officer since August 2012 responsible for delivering the Homes Again West project which looks at bringing empty homes back into use. The project targets properties that have been empty for a period of 6 months. To date the officer has been responsible for bringing a total of 40 empty homes back into use in West Dunbartonshire.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

The Scottish Government launched an Empty Homes Loan Fund to provide loans to owners to help them renovate empty homes and make them available as affordable housing (must be at least 10% below the Local Housing Allowance (LHA)). Seventeen projects were approved for funding including West Dunbartonshire Council which secured £150k to deliver the loan fund. The Empty Homes Officer works with owners and administers the scheme for the Council. Applications have recently been received and it is expected that the first loans will be approved early in financial year 2014/15.

Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012

On 6th February 2014, West Dunbartonshire Council approved the implementation of council tax charges for relevant empty properties from 1st April 2014 as enabled by the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties, etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012 and related legislation. One of the key considerations in introducing these powers in West Dunbartonshire is to encourage empty home owners to bring their properties back into use to increase the supply of housing (both to rent and to buy) and particularly to help tackle the shortage of affordable housing. The Empty Homes Officer will be the Council's key officer in ensuring that owners are provided with sufficient support to bring their properties back into use.

4.3 The principle aims of the Strategy are outlined below:-

- Maximising Housing Supply by bringing empty homes back into use; and
- Make positive improvements to housing conditions and the environment

4.4 To achieve the aims of the Empty Homes Strategy the following objectives have been identified

- Provide positive support to owners of empty homes and people within the area affected by empty homes and assist them where possible to bring the empty

home back into use.

- Raise public awareness of issues and problems associated with empty homes, providing easily accessible advice and information.
- Gather relevant and accurate information from a range of sources to understand why properties are unoccupied.
- Add to the supply of affordable rented stock and identify properties which maybe suitable for the empty homes loan fund.
- Bring back into use 25 properties per year in West Dunbartonshire as affordable housing.

4.5 The successful implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy will benefit the Council, homeowners and the wider West Dunbartonshire communities through the following:-

West Dunbartonshire Council	Increased supply of affordable housing with area (min 25 per year)
	Increased Council Tax revenue
	Assistance to meet statutory homelessness obligations
	Improved communities
	Positive contribution to local economy
	Improved knowledge on housing stock within area
Owners	Access to financial assistance to bring their properties back into use through the Empty Homes Loan Fund
	Access to support and assistance and expert advice from Empty Homes Officer.
	Access to a number of schemes supported through the Empty Homes Officer
West Dunbartonshire communities	Positive contribution to removing the problem of empty homes within communities.
	Increased affordable housing options choices for those looking for housing
	Benefits to local economy

5. People Implications

- 5.1** The Empty Homes Officer would be the lead officer in ensuring the implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy 2014-16. The post is jointly funded from Scottish Government and West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire Councils. The post is managed by West Dunbartonshire Council as the host authority and is managed within existing resources.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1** West Dunbartonshire Council currently funds 25% (£11,000) of the Empty Homes Officer post which will be key in implementing this 3 year strategy and this will continue to be funded from existing resources. The Scottish Government's committed funding for the project (50%) is only in place until the end of financial year 2014/15. An additional funding request will be made to the Scottish Government but if this proves to be unsuccessful there will be an additional financial implication for the Council which will have to be met from existing resources.
- 6.2** Effective implementation of the strategy will have a positive financial impact on the Council through increased council tax revenue. It will also contribute to reducing Anti Social Behaviour costs to the Council

7. Risk Analysis

- 7.1** The increase in housing supply has been identified as a key element in the drive for continuous improvement in the housing service. Maintaining the momentum in achieving successful outcomes within the Homes Again project and the development of the Empty Homes Strategy is therefore critical.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

- 8.1** The Empty Homes Strategy sits within our LHS framework which itself has been equality impacted assessed. A screening has however been carried out to show that it does not disadvantage any of the listed groups. The strategy will assist the Council in advancing equality of opportunity through warm, good quality accommodation and help foster good relations with private home owners.

9. Consultation

- 9.1** The Empty Homes Officer has provided empty homes updates at both the Housing providers Forum and the West Dunbartonshire Landlord Forum. The strategy has been discussed with the Scottish Government's Empty Homes Partnership. Internal consultation has also been carried out with relevant officers in Legal and Finance.

10. Strategic Assessment

- 10.1** The Local Housing Strategy is the overarching document setting out the strategic direction for housing across all tenures and informs the future investment in housing and related services across West Dunbartonshire.
- 10.2** The strategy in tackling empty homes and increasing the supply of affordable housing in West Dunbartonshire will contribute greatly to all of the Council's main strategic priorities and most significantly to improve local housing and environmentally sustainable infrastructure.

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Date: 22 April 2014

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Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Draft West Dunbartonshire Empty Homes Strategy (Homes Again)
Background Papers:	West Dunbartonshire Local Housing Strategy 2011 - 2016 November 2011 http://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/housing/housing-strategy/local-housing-strategy/ Report by the Executive Director of Housing, Environmental and Economic Development to Housing, Environment and Economic Development Committee 19 January 2012: West Dunbartonshire Local Housing Strategy 2011 - 2016 WD LHS Equality Impact Assessment November 2011 Empty Homes Strategy, EIA Screening, March 2014

Report by the Executive Director of Housing, Environmental and Economic Development to Member/Officer Working Group; Inspection of Housing Management - West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire Empty Homes Project Shared Services Proposal 11 January 2012

Review of the Private Rented Sector: Volume 4: Bringing Private Sector empty houses into use: Scottish Government
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/03/23135229/20>

Wards Affected:

All