

## BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY 2019-2024 – ACTION PLAN REVIEW MAY 2021

Key Action	Timescale	Priority	Performance Measure	Progress at May 2021 (Blue = Completed; Green = On Track; Amber = Off Track but will Recover & Red = Off Track but will Not Recover.)	Looking Ahead
<b>Key Objective 1: Reduce the number of long-term empty homes in the Borough</b>					
1.1 Keep a register of long term empty homes	Monthly	High	Long term empty homes listed and monitored.	The Housing Strategy Team maintains a list of long term empty homes and contacts with liable parties. The list is based on the information provided monthly by The Council Tax Team.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to maintain the empty homes list based on the information provided by The Council Tax Team.
1.2 Make contact with empty homes owners keeping them informed of options open to them to bring empty properties back into use	Monthly	High	Standard empty homes letters sent in sequence as required.	Contact is maintained through letters, phone calls emails and visits. Wherever contact is made liable parties are made aware of their options. Where permission is given, details are passed to other departments when they are better placed to offer advice. Standard Empty homes letters are usually sent out in sequence however there are occasions, for example	Contacts continue to be made with persons recorded as liable for empty homes and their options explained. Standard and bespoke letters will be sent as considered appropriate.

				change of ownership or circumstances, where bespoke or earlier letters are sent to liable parties.	
1.3 Maintain a record of all contacts with owners of empty homes	Ongoing	High	Details of all contacts recorded to show progress made with empty properties being brought back in to use.	Contacts made with, or received from, liable parties in respect of empty homes are recorded.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to maintain and record details of contacts with recorded liable parties.
1.4 Focus on properties empty for over two years	Ongoing	High	Effective action on two year + empty properties.	The focus of the empty homes programme is on properties recorded as unoccupied for > 2 years. Actions commenced from when properties have been recorded as unoccupied from this time, and where there is no evidence steps are being taken to bring them back in to use, has led to a reduction of 28.7% on properties empty for > 5 years since the programme commenced.	The focus of the Empty Homes programme continues to be on properties empty for > 2 years.
1.5 Make contact with Registered Providers about long term empty properties in their ownership	Ongoing	Low	Registered Providers contacted when their properties are recorded as empty for 6 months.	Registered Providers were being contacted when their properties were recorded as unoccupied for 6 months. With the arrival of Covid 19 and lock down	Going forward contacts regarding Registered Provider properties will be restored to 6 months as soon as

				restrictions however, this has been amended temporarily to 12 months. This affects only a small number of properties and is to acknowledge difficulties being experienced by RPs in securing contractors.	the Covid 19 situation eases sufficiently to enable a return to more normal working practices.
1.6 Work with colleagues to bring back into use empty properties owned by the Council	Ongoing	High	Council owned empty properties are identified and proactively managed to bring them back into use.	One former service tenancy property has been brought back in to use by the Council as Temporary Accommodation during 2020 / 2021. Work is shortly due to commence on a further property acquired through the empty homes programme to bring it back in to use as Council owned Temporary Accommodation.	Further empty properties in the Council's ownership have been identified for bringing back in to use. This process will continue whilst suitable properties exist and finances are available.
1.7 Keep under review the range of options to bring long term empty properties back into use	Ongoing	Medium	Options available to the Council reviewed.	As there is no one size fits all approach to bringing empty homes back in to use, options available to bring empty homes back in to use are regularly reviewed both overall (for example available legislation), and on a case by case basis.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to review the options available to bring empty homes back in to use and occupation.

1.8 Actively look for any Government initiatives that will help finance bringing empty homes back into use	Ongoing	High	Bids made for Government funding if made available.	No government initiatives providing finance for bringing empty homes back in to use were identified during the past 12 months.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to look for any government initiatives that will provide finance to assist the Council in bringing empty homes back in to use. Where suitable schemes are identified and resources permit, a bid for funding will be submitted.
<b>Key Objective 2: Raise awareness of empty property as a wasted resource</b>					
2.1 Produce annual Communications Project Plan	Annual	High	Communications Project Plan produced.	Following the arrival of Covid 19, the decision was taken not to produce a Communications Project Plan for 2020 / 2021. This is because the overwhelming communication priorities for the Council are those connected with Public Health. The National Empty Homes Week was cancelled in 2020 being re-arranged as a smaller affair in February 2021.	The decision on whether to produce a Communications Project Plan for 2021 / 2022 will be taken in September 2021. It will be based on whether the Council's communication priorities remain those connected with the promotion of Public Health.

				Other Councils are known to have taken a similar approach to Bedford Borough.	
2.2 Publicise on-going successes	Ongoing	Medium	Publicity initiatives completed.	Empty Homes successes have been publicised in the local press, on local radio, on the Council's social media sites and in reports to Housing Committee.	Opportunities will continue to be sought for publicising the successes achieved in bringing empty homes back in to occupation.
2.3 Advise empty homes owners of options available to bring their empty homes back into use	Ongoing	High	Letters sent to owners and advice given over the phone or in person where possible.	Contact is maintained through letters, phone calls emails and visits. Wherever contact is made liable parties are made aware of their options. Where permission is given, details are passed to other departments / organisations where they are better placed to offer advice.	Contacts continue to be made with persons recorded as liable for empty homes. Where required, the options available are explained.
2.4 Complete promotional PR campaign as identified in the Empty Homes Communications Project Plan	Ongoing	Medium	Promotional campaigns completed.	Following the arrival of Covid 19, the decision was taken not to produce a Communications Project Plan for 2020 / 2021. This is because the overwhelming communication priorities	The decision on whether to produce a Communications Project Plan for 2021 / 2022 will be taken in September 2021. It will be based on whether

				for the Council are those connected with Public Health. The National Empty Homes Week was cancelled in 2020 being re-arranged as a smaller affair in February 2021. Other Councils are known to have taken a similar approach to Bedford Borough.	the Council's communication priorities remain those connected with Public Health. Where the opportunity arises however, the Council will look to publicise individual empty homes success stories.
<b>Key Objective 3: Improve the supply of decent housing available across all tenures</b>					
3.1 Advise property owners of the Council's Tenancy Deposit Guarantee Scheme	Ongoing	High	Persons with liability for empty properties made aware of the Tenancy Deposit Guarantee Scheme.	The Probate Letter, Standard Letters 1 & 2 plus the Empty Homes website page make persons liable for empty homes aware of the Council's Tenancy Deposit Guarantee Scheme. When contact is received and it is appropriate, additional details are provided.	Standard Empty Homes Letters and the Empty Homes web page will continue to make liable parties aware of the Tenancy Deposit Guarantee Scheme. Where appropriate this will also be provided by the Housing Strategy Team when contact is received directly.
3.2 Work with Environmental Health to bring empty properties back into use and	Ongoing	High	Liaison with Environmental Health about relevant empty properties.	Where issues are identified regarding empty properties which require the intervention of, or guidance	The Housing Strategy Team continues to work closely with

<p>ensure they are a decent standard for occupation</p>				<p>from, Environmental Health details are forwarded directly to them. Once reported, and where appropriate, officers will liaise to try and work with the owner to undertake works to bring the property up to required occupancy standards. (NB – It may also be necessary to work with other departments to achieve this outcome for example, Building Control or Planning Enforcement.)</p>	<p>Environmental Health (and other departments as required), where disrepair issues concerning empty properties are received. Where appropriate we will liaise with them to ensure homes brought back in to use meet appropriate standards.</p>
<p>3.3 Provide assistance to ensure at least the minimum property standards are achieved</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Advice offered to property owners and liaison with Environmental Health.</p>	<p>Where issues have been identified regarding the condition of empty properties, the Housing Strategy Team provides basic advice. Where more detailed or specialist advice is required from Environmental Health or another department, a request is forwarded to them where the liable party has given their consent. Where appropriate, officers liaise to work with the liable party to undertake the works required to bring</p>	<p>The Housing Strategy Team continues to work closely with Environmental Health (and other departments as appropriate), where disrepair issues concerning empty properties are received. We continue to liaise with liable parties and departments to ensure homes brought back in to</p>

				the property up to required occupancy standards.	use meet appropriate standards.
<b>Key Objective 4: Use Compulsory Purchase Orders where they are appropriate and value for money</b>					
4.1 Ensure appropriate enforcement policies and procedures are in place in respect of compulsorily purchasing a property and with regards to the involvement of Property Services, Planning Enforcement and Environmental Health.	Ongoing	High	Enforcement procedures maintained up to date.	The Housing Strategy Team keeps up to date with changes to the enforcement powers available to bring empty homes back in to use. If clarification is required, this is sought from solicitors. Before enforcement action is instigated Property Services, Planning Enforcement and Environmental Health are consulted. Adult Protection are also contacted. Enforcement action is not normally instigated if the liable person / property owner is known to be a vulnerable person.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to keep up to date with empty homes legislation seeking legal advice as and when required.
4.2 Record information on those empty properties where contact with the owner has been unsuccessful and intervention is deemed appropriate	Ongoing	High	Property information recorded and monitored.	Contacts made with, or received from, liable parties or third parties in respect of empty homes are always recorded. Where the Council's intervention fails to encourage the liable party	The Housing Strategy Team continues to maintain details of all contacts regarding empty homes.

				to bring the property in question back in to use, this evidence forms the basis for compiling the compelling case in the public interest when requesting permission under delegated authority to instigate enforcement action.	
4.3 Obtain Approval for long term empty properties to be Compulsorily purchased.	As and when required	High	Executive agreement received – through delegated authority.	No authorisations have been requested under delegated authority to proceed with the compulsory purchase of long term empty homes in the past 12 months. This was a conscious decision taken due to the impact of Covid 19 in respect of the ability of liable persons to safely travel, the availability of contractors and meeting staying at home guidance. Whilst Covid 19 restrictions remain in place it is difficult to argue a liable party could have acted to bring their property back in to use, thereby reducing the chances of a successful	The Housing Strategy Team continues to identify empty properties for compulsory purchase where all avenues to encourage the liable person to bring them back in to occupation have failed. Authorisation will be requested to commence enforcement action in these cases as and when the Public Health restrictions to control the Covid 19 pandemic are lifted.

				outcome if the Council instigates enforcement action. Cases for potential CPO action continue to be identified and will be brought forward if the liable persons do not act to bring the properties in question back in to use when the public health situation returns to normality.	
<b>Key Objective 5: Maintain the data collected on empty homes</b>					
5.1 Record and maintain information on empty homes	Ongoing	High	Information recorded, monitored and where appropriate shared.	Contacts made with, or received from, liable parties or third parties in respect of empty homes are always recorded.	The Housing Strategy Team continues to maintain details of all contacts made in respect of empty homes.
5.2 Work with Local Taxation to obtain timely information	Monthly	High	Information providing the list of empty properties received from local taxation monthly.	Working with The Council Tax Team, the register of Empty Homes continues to be produced monthly.	The Housing Strategy Team works with The Council Tax Team to ensure the continued timely production of empty homes data.
5.3 Record and monitor identified metric indicators M56a, M56b, M56c & M58	Quarterly	Medium	Metric Indicators M56a, M56b, M56c & M58 monitored.	Statistics are collated, reported, published and analysed on a quarterly basis.	Empty Homes metric indicators continue to be collated, reported, published and

					analysed on a quarterly basis.
5.4 Record and monitor the number of empty homes brought back into use due to Council intervention.	Quarterly	High	Former BVPI 64 Guidance (excluding demolitions without gain).	The number of empty homes brought back in to use through Council intervention is collated, analysed and reported quarterly and at the end of each financial year.	The number of Empty Homes brought back in to use following Council intervention will continue to be collated, reported and published.