
**Executive Member Decision Session -
Neighbourhood Services (including Housing Ops)**

3 February 2011

Report of the Director of Communities and Neighbourhoods

Update on the Empty Homes Policy

Summary

1. This report advises the Executive Member of:
 - a) The results of the empty homes field survey carried out in November and December 2010 and the potential implications for the council's empty homes policy.
 - b) Recent empty homes policy proposals from the coalition government and the likely impact of these proposals upon the empty homes policy, having regard to the results of the field survey.

Background

2. In June 2010 a postal questionnaire was sent out to the owners of long-term empty properties (list provided by Council Tax) to advise them of the support available to help them bring their property back into use. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that 18% of properties shown as long-term empty (+6 months) on the Council Tax database were now occupied. Only 9% of respondents confirmed that their property was still empty.
3. A number of properties were excluded from consideration for a number of reasons, most notably those removed from the valuation list due to probate; imprisonment; undergoing structural repairs; receiving personal care.
4. An interesting issue identified as a result of the postal questionnaire was that as a result of the end to the discount on empty homes, owners are less likely to advise the council when a property ceases to become empty. Therefore when considering the scale of empty homes in the City the Council Tax database may not be the best source of data.
5. As a result of the above a field survey was carried out to establish the status of the remaining 161 properties whose owners did not respond to the postal questionnaire. The field survey incorporated an empty property environmental impact analysis.

2010 Field Survey (Results and Analysis)

6. All the remaining 161 properties were visited by officers in November/December 2010 to establish whether they were occupied or empty, and where they were empty, to establish the environmental impact upon the neighbourhood.

7. The collective results from the postal questionnaire and field survey have established the following about the status of properties classed as empty on the council tax database:
- 57% (126) were found to be occupied
 - 5% (12) were of unknown status
 - 38% (83) were confirmed to be empty or 43% (95) if those whose status is unknown are assumed to be empty.
 - 15 properties that were empty were to go on market or be occupied in the near future
 - 7 properties that were empty were currently for sale or rent
 - 8 properties that were occupied were second homes or holiday homes
8. When the above 95 empty properties are combined with the empty properties known to Housing Standards and Adaptations Team, (excluding those mentioned in Para 3) this gives a approximate figure of 133 empty properties known to the City of York Council. This cannot be taken as the total number of empty properties in the city as there is always the potential for properties to be empty which have not been brought to the councils attention.
9. The results of environmental impact analysis are shown in the table below. The majority of empty properties were found to have a low or very low environmental impact. The average score was 18 (out of a maximum possible total of 80). See Annex 1 for details of impact matrix.

Score Range	Impact	Quantity
0-20	Very Low	44
20-40	Low	24
40-60	Medium	4
60-80	High	0

10. This leads us to the conclusion that in general, empty properties in the city are not having a significantly detrimental impact upon their immediate environment, however it is acknowledged that individually where a property is empty regardless of its condition it can have an impact.
11. We are working closely with Council Tax to ensure that data is shared to ensure that our databases are as accurate as possible.

Recent National Policy Announcements

12. In *“Coalition Government: Our programme for change”* the government announced that it was committed to exploring "a range of measures to bring empty homes into use".
13. The first notable policy announcement following this commitment was the announcement of funding to encourage and incentivise Housing Associations to partner with local authorities in bringing empty properties back into use. Little detail has been released about this initiative but an announcement is anticipated early in 2011.

14. The second policy announcement was the New Homes Bonus which went out for national consultation on the 12th November 2010. The New Homes Bonus aims to incentivise local authorities to increase housing supply by rewarding them with a bonus equal to the national average for the council tax band on each additional property and paid for the following six years as an unringfenced grant. The proposal is that empty homes returned to use should count towards housing supply in the same way as new homes do.
15. A response to the consultation document has been submitted, which from an empty homes perspective included concerns regarding:
 - The use of council tax data to calculate the number of empty properties brought back into use, particularly in light of the field survey results and concerns over accuracy.
 - The use of 'net additions' to the housing supply to calculating payments, meaning any additional long term empty properties brought back into use will be cancelled out by other long term empty homes coming into the system (triggered by amendments to council tax charging after six months of being empty).
16. A further report will be brought to members once more is known about the details and implications of these policy announcements.

Consultation

17. Consultation has taken place with owners of empty homes through the Empty Homes Audit/Postal Questionnaire and Field Survey.

Options

18. The information provided by the questionnaires and other sources of information leads to the question of how best to address concerns about the accuracy of data available on empty homes within a changing policy context. There are two main options presented for Executive Member to consider:
19. Option 1 - To leave the existing empty homes policy unchanged and to note the results of the one off postal survey and associated fieldwork.
20. Option 2 - To leave the existing empty homes policy unchanged, to note the results of the postal survey and associated fieldwork and approve work to ensure that baseline data is more robust, including an annual field survey.

Analysis

21. Option One - The Housing Standards and Adaptation Team has a good record of working in partnership to bring homes back into use. This is achieved by using the following tools:
 - Free advice and assistance including advice on how to get any necessary repairs, safety or modernisation works completed, the availability of grant funding and leasing schemes with local housing associations;
 - Information presented on our website;
 - Forums to facilitate discussion of particular issues or concerns, including through the York Residential Landlord Association (for private landlords).

- The availability of financial help (where available) to be used for the repair and modernisation of properties owned by private landlords. Grants are channelled through housing associations that lease the homes for a minimum of five years with the council nominating homeless households to them;
 - Enforcement powers to secure properties against trespass and make them safe (although this doesn't necessarily mean bringing them back into use);
22. If option one is approved the Council will continue to rely on Council Tax data as the main data source and given the concerns raised within this report we will not be best placed to respond to changes in policy at both a local and national level.
23. Option Two – If option two is approved the Council will continue to deliver the above programme, however we will have a more robust evidence base from which to make local decisions. It will also be better placed to respond to emerging policy agendas and take advantage of likely funding streams.

Corporate Priorities

24. This report contributes to the following corporate priorities:
- *Sustainable City* - We aim to be clean and green, reducing our impact on the environment while maintaining York's special qualities and enabling the city and its communities to grow and thrive.
 - *Safer City* - We want York to be a safer city with low crime rates and high opinions of the city's safety record.
 - *Inclusive City* - We will do our best to make sure that citizens, regardless of race, age, disability, sexual orientation, faith or gender, feel included in the life of York. We will help improve prospects for all, tackle poverty and exclusion and make services and facilities easy to access.
25. It will also contribute/support a number of regional and local housing strategies:
- *Draft North Yorkshire Housing Strategy 2009-2013 - Objective 1.3:* Gain a better understanding of the housing markets and the alternative delivery mechanisms they can offer.
 - *York Housing Strategy 2010-2015 - Strategic Aim 2:* making the best use of existing housing stock (Priority 2.2: tackling empty properties).
 - *York Private Sector Housing Strategy 2008-2013 - Aim 4:* maximise the use of existing housing stock to increase the supply of Decent affordable homes in York & Aim 5: strengthen existing and develop new partnerships to support the private housing sector.

Implications

26. The implications arising from the report are:
- **Financial** – There are no financial implications associated with Option 1. Option 2 is estimated to have a total cost of £2000 per annum for the annual survey which can be met from within current resources, subject to 2011/12 budget setting.

- There are no Legal Human Resources (HR), Equalities, Crime and Disorder, Information Technology (IT), Property or other implications arising directly from this report.

Risk Management

27. The risks associated with the proposals in this report are low and score less than 16. In compliance with the Council's risk management strategy there are no direct risks.

Recommendations

28. That the Executive Member is approves:
- Option 2, To leave the existing empty homes policy unchanged, to note the results of the postal survey and associated fieldwork and approve work to ensure that baseline data is more robust, including an annual field survey.

Reason: There is no statistical or anecdotal evidence to justify changing the council's existing empty homes policy. However, possessing accurate information regarding the number of empty properties in the city is essential in order to inform local empty homes strategies, and enable us to respond to emerging national policy agendas and funding mechanisms. An annual field survey provides the best value for money response to these challenges and opportunities.

Contact Details

Author:

James Bailey
Senior Officer
Housing Standards and Adaptations
x4193

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

Steve Waddington
Assistant Director – Housing & Public
Protection

**Report
Approved**



Date 30th December 2010

Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Annex 1 – Empty Property Impact Matrix

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Criteria	Classification	Score
Location	Rural/Isolated	5
	Side Street/Estate	10
	Main Road	15
Boarded up	No boarding	0
	Up to 33% of dwelling	5
	Up to 66% of dwelling	10
	Over 66% of dwelling	15
Disrepair	None	0
	Slight	5
	Serious	10
	Severe	15
Overgrown	None	0
	Slight	5
	Serious	10
	Severe	15
Flytipping	None	0
	Slight	5
	Serious	10
	Severe	15
Marketing	Evidence of active marketing	0
	No evidence of active marketing	5