

<b>Item No</b>	<b>Referred from:</b>	<b>OVERVIEW &amp; SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>
<b>5A</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>29 JANUARY 2024</b>
	<b>Title of item:</b>	<b>EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY</b>
<b>To be considered alongside agenda item:</b>		<b>7</b>

The report considered by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at the meeting held on 29 January 2024 can be viewed here: [Agenda for Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday, 29th January, 2024, 7.30 pm | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](#)

**RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET:**

- (1) That Cabinet adopt the Empty Homes Strategy 2024-29.
- (2) The Cabinet should note that although there is no legal requirement for the Council to have an Empty Homes Strategy, there have been several significant Government-focussed documents and papers highlighting their importance, including a House of Commons Briefing Paper stating that each local authority should have such a strategy to help reduce the number of long-term empty homes in their districts.

**REASONS FOR DECISION:**

- (1) The recommendation and considerations are being made to allow the Council to formerly adopt the 5-year Empty Homes Strategy 2024-29 to allow the Environmental Health service to work directly or with others to identify and deliver the most appropriate intervention programme to allow the Council to aim to bring as many long-term empty homes back into occupation as practicable.
- (2) The strategy allows the Council to state its intention to consider every aspect linked to the housing sector to bring into use as many opportunities as it can to meet the district's housing needs, without having to rely solely on new build. Whilst the number of long-term empty homes is small, and the number likely to be brought back into occupation will be smaller still, this strategy does address this sector which would otherwise be omitted from the overall resource potentially available to form our housing stock.
- (3) By adopting the strategy and allowing for the development of a culture of greater awareness of vacant homes, allows for homes which become vacant to be highlighted sooner, and so they can be monitored and their owners challenged at an earlier point, thus also contributing to hopefully having more homes available for the residents of the district.

*Audio recording – 1 hour 28 minutes 44 seconds*

Councillor Sean Prendergast, as Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health presented the report entitled 'Empty Homes Strategy' and advised that:

- This strategy would feed into the current Housing Strategy of the Council and bringing empty homes back into use formed a key part of meeting the housing needs of the district.
- Empty homes were a wasted resource and, as often in bad repair, had a negative impact on the local community.

- This strategy would provide an opportunity to help bring the vast majority of empty homes back into use which would boost the local economy.
- This strategy was important for addressing shortages, revitalising the community, stimulating local economy and would also help to promote environmental sustainability.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Adam Compton

In response to questions, the Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health advised that:

- Most other local authorities have an Empty Homes Strategy in place.
- This report highlighted that the number of empty homes was increasing across the district.
- Currently the Council could only rely on Council Tax records to identify empty homes which was not sustainable.
- Having a new officer in post would help to provide resources to identify empty properties.
- The main aim of this strategy was to bring empty homes in the district back into use to meet the needs of the residents.
- It was important to set achievable targets with the resources available and to learn the reasons behind why properties were empty.
- Statistics had shown that there was an increase in the number of homes that had been empty for 2 years to 5 years and this needed to be investigated.
- The strategy would be published and it would encourage residents to report any empty homes to the Council.

In response to questions, the Environmental Health Manager advised that:

- It was not a legal statutory requirement for the Council to have an Empty Homes Strategy.
- The target of this strategy was to identify empty homes and to prevent them from being a negative impact on the community.
- This was a new target for the Council and it would take time to identify the empty homes and to work with home owners before any results would be seen.
- The residents of North Herts tended to remain in their properties for many years.
- 10% of the homes in North Herts had been vacant for over 2 years.
- The Council would be contacting owners in North Herts where homes had been vacant for 4 years or more to try to identify the reasons why they were empty.
- Homes that had been empty for longer periods had proved harder to reoccupy.
- There were several reasons why a property was empty.
- The new post of a part time officer had not yet been filled.
- This new post would enable research into identifying what funding was available for homeowners to improve their properties.
- The New Homes bonus available to the Council for every house that is brought back into occupancy was likely to cease and this was not the reason for this strategy. The main reason was to reduce the number of empty homes in the district.

The following Members took part in a debate:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor David Levett

Points raised in the debate included:

- Would the implementation of this strategy be an effective use of resources.
- There did not appear to be anything new to be gained from this strategy being implemented.
- It was up to the homeowner to decide if they wanted their property to remain vacant.
- Empty housing being reoccupied would be a benefit to the community of North Herts.
- The aims of the strategy were worthwhile but would only result in a small number of empty homes being reoccupied.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Clare Billing seconded and, following a vote, it was:

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