

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

22 JANUARY 2019

REPORT OF THE INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Cabinet to carry out a formal public consultation on the draft Empty Property Strategy 2019-2023.

2. Connection to corporate improvement objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate priority/priorities:
- Supporting a successful economy – taking steps to make the county a good place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focused on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions of all people in the county.

3. Background

- 3.1 Bringing empty properties back into use is a priority for the Local Authority and is a commitment for the leadership for the County Borough Council; *“turn empty properties in town centres into homes and invest more in tackling the blight of empty homes”* and *“play our part in delivering more affordable homes for local people in Bridgend to include more town centre properties”*.
- 3.2 In order to achieve this priority, an Empty Property Working Group has been formed, consisting of representatives from each service within the Authority that work with empty properties. The main objective of the Working Group is to ‘reduce the number of empty private residential and commercial properties across Bridgend County Borough by bringing them back into use’. The Working Group was initially chaired by the Head of Performance and Partnership Services but is now coordinated by the recently appointed Empty Property Coordinator.
- 3.3 One of the main actions of the Empty Property Working Group is to develop an Empty Property Strategy for the Local Authority. The purpose of the Strategy is to set out how the Local Authority and its partners shall seek to reduce empty properties across the County Borough and help contribute towards increasing the availability of housing for sale or for rent. The Working Group agreed that the focus of the strategy should be empty private sector residential properties, or properties that could be brought back into use as residential accommodation.

4. Current situation/proposal

- 4.1 The Empty Property Strategy has been drafted and is attached as **Appendix 1**. One of its key features is its intention to take a ‘blended’ approach to ensure that

the focus for action is based on key facts and information. Properties will be prioritised on key criteria such as nuisance value, detriment, location and housing demand and not only on how long a property has been empty. Once prioritised, the Empty Property Working Group will determine the most appropriate actions to attempt to bring the priority properties back into use.

- 4.2 The focus of the Strategy is empty private sector residential properties. As commercial properties require a more specific approach to bring them back into use as a continued commercial property, they do not form part of this Strategy. However, should opportunities arise to bring an empty commercial property back into use as residential accommodation, this will be considered as part of the Strategy.
- 4.3 The Local Authority and its partners seek to work cooperatively with owners to bring their empty properties back into use. Therefore, regular and effective communication with the owner is paramount, to establish the most appropriate course of action. Although enforcement options are available, they will need to be proportionate and have available budgets.
- 4.4 Working corporately is a key aim of the Strategy and continued collaboration as an Empty Property Working Group is essential. Where required, a targeted approach will be taken e.g. with owners and organisations in relation to empty churches and chapels which may require a specific approach to bring them back into use.
- 4.5 The consultation will last for 12 weeks and it is possible that the Strategy will require amendment to respond to comments received through the consultation. Once the consultation period has ended, Cabinet will receive a further report to consider formally adopt the Strategy.
- 4.6 In addition to reporting on the national empty property Public Accountability Measures (PAMs), the work resulting from the Strategy will be measured and reported on in terms of the quantity of engagement and enforcement carried out, in order to demonstrate the efforts that are being made to bring empty properties back into use. This will include recording numbers of letters distributed, responses received, and enforcement action taken. A quarterly update on Strategy activities will be reported to Cabinet/CMB.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 There is no effect upon the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 An initial screening Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been undertaken as part of the development of the Empty Homes Strategy. It identified that no further EIA is required at this time.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

- 7.1 The report contributes to the following goals within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:

- A prosperous Wales – by providing work to companies who can repair and improve the empty properties and by creating a rental or sale income for landlords.
- A resilient Wales – by improving the environmental consequences of empty properties such as rodent infestation, fly tipping and a poor impression of an area.
- A Wales of cohesive communities – by making an area more attractive to live and by improving the social consequences of empty properties such as reduced public confidence in the area.
- A globally responsive Wales – by contributing positively to communities and the housing needs of households in Wales.

7.2 A summary of the implications from the Well-being of Future Generations assessment, using the 5 ways of working, is as follows:

- Long-term - Bringing empty properties back into use can create long-term accommodation available for households to rent or buy.
- Prevention - Tackling empty properties can prevent the consequences associated with empty properties continuing or getting worse e.g. social issues such as arson, graffiti and squatting, environmental issues such as rodent infestation and dangerous structures and economic issues such as property devaluation and deterred investment.
- Integration - Bringing empty properties back into use can deliver economic, social, environmental & cultural outcomes as outlined in the “long-term” and “prevention” ways of working above. In addition, it can improve community cohesion in an area.
- Collaboration - Collaboration is paramount when bringing empty properties back into use. Whilst a number of services within the Council have different processes, powers and policies they can use, bringing empty properties back into use is a corporate responsibility. Therefore, these services will work in a more co-ordinated way as one Council to achieve the aims and objectives of the strategy. Working closely with external partners to develop new initiatives is also a key objective of the strategy.

- Involvement - The Council and its partners seek to work cooperatively with owners of empty properties to bring their properties back into use. Therefore, regular and effective communication with the owner is paramount, to establish the most appropriate course of action to bring the empty property back into use. Consultation on the strategy with all stakeholders will ensure they are involved with achieving the well-being goals.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 Services within the Authority utilise their existing budgets for any work undertaken on empty properties. Whilst there is currently budget available for the Empty Property Coordinator which resources the “front end” of the service, there is also demand on other departments within the Authority to progress any works on empty properties, which may not be currently resourced.
- 8.2 The capital programme approved as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2018-19 to 2021-22 included an allocation of funding previously used for the Caerau area housing renewal area which finished at the end of 2016-17. It was agreed to use this allocation of £100,000 to widen the scope to fund housing renewal/ deal with empty property issues across the County Borough.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 Cabinet are recommended to –
 - 9.1.1 Give approval to carry out a formal public consultation on the Empty Property Strategy and;
 - 9.1.2 Agree to receive a further report at the end of the consultation period to consider formally adopting the Strategy.

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Background documents: Draft Empty Property Strategy 2019-2023