

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CABINET

17 DECEMBER 2019

### REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

#### EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY

##### 1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Cabinet to formally adopt the Empty Property Strategy 2019-2023 attached at Appendix 1

##### 2. Connection to corporate improvement objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate priority:
- 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 Bridgend County Borough Council. The Strategy sets out the intention that *'Bridgend County Borough Council ("the Council") 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'*.
- 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 works with empty properties. The main objective of the Working Group is to deliver the strategic objectives of bringing back into use long-term empty residential properties. These are defined as private sector residential properties which are liable for council tax and have been unoccupied for a period of six months or more. This definition is taken from the national Public Accountability Measure that enables local authorities to give account of their performance to the public. Commercial properties that can be converted into residential accommodation will also be considered for action. The Working Group is co-ordinated by the Empty Property Co-ordinator.
- 3.3 One of the main actions of the Empty Property Working Group was 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.

3.4 An Empty Property Coordinator has been in place since 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018. The Coordinator is a qualified Environmental Health Officer employed by the Shared Regulatory Service (SRS) working on empty properties for 3 days per week. The postholder has been able to take a number of actions which has had a positive impact in delivering the Strategy objectives as highlighted in paragraph 4.5 below.

#### 4. Current situation/proposal

4.1 On the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2019, Cabinet approved formal public consultation on the draft Empty Properties Strategy.

4.2 The public consultation was undertaken over a twelve week period between 1<sup>st</sup> February 2019 and the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019. A letter outlining the Strategy proposals and details of the consultation was sent to all owners of empty properties across the county borough. The consultation received 109 (107 online and 2 paper) responses from owners of empty properties and the public.

4.3 A copy of the Consultation report is attached at **Appendix 2**. The Strategy has been revised to take into consideration consultation responses referenced in paragraph 4.6 below

4.4 Overall the Empty Property Strategy was supported by the survey respondents. A summary of the results are as follows:

- 99% of respondents stated that the strategy was written in plain language and was easy to understand;
- 97% of respondents felt that the strategy clearly explained why empty properties were a priority for the council;
- 95% of respondents said that the aims and objectives outlined within the strategy were the most relevant;
- 91% of respondents agreed with the council approach to identify and prioritise empty properties;
- 84% of respondents agreed with the councils approach for providing help and assistance to owners of empty properties;
- 90% of respondents agreed that the planned approach to ensure effective communication with owners and the public is appropriate.

4.5 The Registered Landlords Association recognises the impact empty properties can have on an area and community and welcomed the proposals, and supported the need for a robust strategy which provides clarification on the sanctions and enforcements actions available.

4.6 A number of updates have been made to the draft strategy following the consultation, with the updated strategy at **Appendix 1**. These are -

- Figures have been updated from April 2019 on the number of empty properties and location – pages, 7,8,9.
- Additional information on how the Council priorities empty properties has been included which identifies the criteria used to prioritise – pages 13,14, and 15.

- Additional performance measures have been added to show the efforts being made to bring empty properties back into use – page 19.
- Objective 5 on page 17 highlights the intention to take enforcement action where appropriate
- Updated contact details for the Council on page 12

### Progress to date

- 4.7 In addition to reporting on the national empty property Public Accountability Measures (PAMs) annually, 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. Statistics to date show –

#### **Statistics**

Number of Cases	211
Contact Made	200
Positive Progress Made*	200
Grant Information requested	83
Expressions of Interest in grant	52
1st letter sent	211
2nd letter sent	137
3rd letter sent	93
4th letter sent	52
5th letter sent	41

\* examples of progress includes -

- 1 Enforced Sale completed
- 1 other Enforced sale started
- 5 work in default completed (2 more imminent)
- 5 Section 215 (of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990) notices requested
- 3 Warrants obtained
- 13 other notices served and complied with

- 4.8 The impact of these activities has meant that, of the properties assessed and scored by the council using the criteria contained within the Strategy as being in the top 20 list of problem properties -

- 5 - are now in use
- 2 - are listed for auction this month
- 5 - are under discussion for possible Section 215 action
- 2 - are For Sale following extensive engagement
- 1 – is held by Planning due to Bats roosting in the property which requires Welsh Government Guidance
- 3 - grant applications submitted but refused as eligibility criteria not met
- 2 - are under discussion with legal in relation to further enforcement action to be taken

## **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.

## **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 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 The Empty Property Co-ordinator is core funded which resources the “front end” of the service, but there will also be increased demand on other departments within the Authority to progress any works on empty properties, which will need to be met within existing resources.
- 8.2 On the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2018 Council agreed a capital budget of £100,000 to deal with empty property issues across the County Borough.

## **9. Recommendation**

- 9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:–

9.1.1 Formally adopts the Empty Property Strategy 2019-2023.

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**November 2019**

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**Background documents:** None