



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 9 OCTOBER 2024
Subject	LONG TERM EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY 2024–2029
Wards Affected	All
Accountable Member	Councillor Alaric Smith – Executive Member for Finance Email: alaric.smith@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable Officer	Jon Dearing – Assistant Director for Resident Services Email: jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk
Report Author	Mandy Fathers – Business Manager for Environmental, Welfare and Revenues Email: mandy.fathers@publicagroup.uk
Summary	To present an updated Long Term Empty Property Strategy to support the management of long-term empty properties within West Oxfordshire district.
Annexes	Annex A – Long Term Empty Property Strategy 2024 – 2029 Annex B – Equality Impact Assessment
Recommendations	That the Executive Resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approve the implementation of the Long-Term Empty Property Strategy for 2024 – 2029.
Corporate Priorities	Enabling a good Quality of Life for all Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Executive Member for Finance, Chief Executive, Director of Governance, Chief Finance Officer, Interim Head of Legal Services, Interim Executive Director, Interim Managing Director (Publica)

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This strategy states the objectives West Oxfordshire District Council has set itself to bring as many long-term empty properties back into occupation as is practicable.
- 1.2 Work has continued over the years to address the impact that long term empty properties have within the district, and the objectives within this strategy aim to build on the this.
- 1.3 The Council's intentions are to work with the owners of such properties to initially understand their reasons for keeping them vacant, but then to support them, where possible, in bringing the properties back into use, to allow this unused resource to better serve the communities, mitigate the negative impact they have, and provide an increased opportunity to meet the Councils housing needs.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Section 3 of the Housing Act 2004 (the Act) requires local authorities to consider housing conditions within their district, with a view to determining what action to take under their duties and powers to deal with housing conditions, including empty properties.
- 2.2 The definition of an empty property under the Act is "a dwelling that has remained vacant for more than six months," although there are exemptions detailed with section 134(6) of the Act.
- 2.3 There is no legal requirement for a local authority to have a Long-Term Empty Property strategy, but it is good practise to have one and helps to give clarity, direction and focus to the issue of dealing with empty homes.
- 2.4 The adopted West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2031 describes housing provision as critically important and sets out ambition to provide 15,950 homes throughout the plan period. The plan describes the importance of protecting the existing stock in meeting the housing needs of our residents
- 2.5 Long-term empty homes are known to have a negative influence on a community, both in relation to the removal of a potential housing opportunity, but also, in that they tend to attract an element of anti-social behaviour. In some cases, the empty home is neglected further such that they become a local nuisance, sometimes becoming an eyesore, or needing the intervention of the council to mitigate a nuisance, all of which contributed to the negative impact they have on the local community. It is the latter group that tends to lead to the greatest number of complaints to the council, usually in relation to complaints about over-grown gardens the presence of household waste or pests, or that they have become insecure and a venue for attracting crime.
- 2.6 Whilst there are enforcement powers available and used by the council to deal with certain matters associated with long-term empty homes, the most effective way of bringing them into reoccupation does tend to be through working with owners, and trying to first understand why the home is vacant, and then trying to reduce the barriers so that the home can be reoccupied.

3. MAIN POINTS

- 3.1 At the end of March 2024 West Oxfordshire District had 1128 properties classed as long-term empty. This figure represents 2% of its total council tax base, which is currently set at 53,533.

3.2 The purpose of this strategy is to set out the five key objectives that the council aim to deliver on for the Long-Term Empty Property Strategy as detailed within Annex A of this report:

- 1) To gather relevant, accurate and current information about empty homes in the district.
- 2) To provide advice, assistance and guidance to landlords and property owner
- 3) To raise awareness of empty homes in the district and promote the strategy.
- 4) To introduce a Council Tax Premium on second homes and apply a premium to long term empty properties after one year
- 5) To reduce the number of empty homes and return empty homes back into use, through all available and appropriate means.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 This strategy outlines the intentions of the Council to work to reduce the number of long-term empty homes in the district, and although it refers to legal obligations under specific legislation, it does not directly identify or impose any additional financial obligations on the Council.

4.1 The Council has a share of 0.81 FTE of an officer to facilitate the work required to fulfil the objectives of this strategy.

4.2 Due to the recognised negative impact some long-term empty homes have on their communities, regulatory services of the Council may be required to intervene to mitigate the worst of these effects. This intervention costs the Council so any reduction in the number of long-term empty homes is likely to reduce this demand, thus reducing the costs to those regulatory services. This would be an indirect benefit of implementing this strategy, although one which would be difficult to financially quantify.

4.3 The Council may see a reduction in Council Tax income as long-term empty properties which are currently charged a Council Tax premium, and upon reoccupation this would be lost, but as a number of long-term empty homes also carry a charge owed to the Council for various reasons, this charge is likely to be either repaid, or written off as part of the sale, if it is deemed non-recoverable.

5 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Whilst there is no statutory provision requiring the Council to have or adopt a Long-Term Empty Strategy, the Government has set out the principles encouraging Councils to identify and then reduce the number of long-term empty homes in their district.

6 RISK ASSESSMENT

6.1 This strategy seeks to define how the Council will meet the challenges posed locally by long-term empty homes, especially with respect to trying to bring as many as practicable back into occupancy. Although this has been highlighted as a desirable obligation the Council should strive for, producing and adopting a strategy is not a legal requirement.

6.2 Whether long-term empty homes cause a local nuisance or not is not influenced by this strategy, and similarly, when such a home does pose a potential breach of a statute, for example, provide harbourage to rats, or allows for the accumulation of household waste even if dumped by someone else, these breaches remain actionable by the regulatory service authorised to act.

- 6.3** Long-term empty homes, even where there is no statutory detriment to the area are known to have a negative impact on a neighbourhood. Whilst this is unlikely to pose a direct impact on the Council, it can be a source of dissatisfaction and complaint by local residents, and risk lowering the acceptable standards otherwise present in the community.

7 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1** An equalities impact assessment has been completed that shows no negative impact on those who shared a protected characteristic and those who do not.

8 CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1** Creating homes from empty properties saves substantial amounts of material compared to building new homes, minimises the amount of land used for development and avoids wasting embedded carbon; helping to combat climate change.

9 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 9.1** The Council could decide not to approve the updated Long-Term Empty Property Strategy; however, this would not be recommended as it could fail to demonstrate a commitment to managing and reducing empty homes within the district.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1** None

(END)