



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	<b>Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee:</b> Thursday 25 <sup>th</sup> November 2021
Report Number	<b>Agenda Item 6</b>
Subject	<b>Long Term Empty Homes Report</b> Report produced by Paula Massey, Enabling Manager and Daisy Ball, Empty Homes Coordinator Any questions can be emailed to <a href="mailto:paula.massey@publicagroup.uk">paula.massey@publicagroup.uk</a>
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Councillor Merylyn Davies, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing, Group Manager Resident Services / Mandy Fathers, Business Manager Operations
Summary/Purpose	To inform Members about the current status of Long Term Empty Homes in the District.
Annexes	
Recommendation/s	That the report be noted
Corporate priorities	Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance: Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council  Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No
Consultees/Consultation	n/a

# Update Report

## What is an Empty Property?

There are broadly two main types of empty residential properties:

### 1. Transactional Empty Properties

- Empty up to 6 months, usually due to a change in tenant or ownership and are part of the normal cycle of people moving house
- They may be empty longer if subject to major renovation works
- Transactional empty properties are less of a priority to the council, however they can still present a concern should their condition become a hazard or contribute towards a poor street scene

### 2. Long Term Empty Properties

These are properties that have been empty for over 6 months. There are many reasons why properties fall into this category for example:

- Subject to major renovation works
- Awaiting probate
- Owner cannot be traced
- Owner is unable to afford to do renovation works
- Owner does not know what to do with the property
- Up for sale
- To Let
- Owner is in poor mental/physical health and unable to arrange refurbishment works to enable sale or let. (This is common following COVID)

## What is not an Empty Property?

In some instances, a property may be empty or appear empty, but is not classed as empty. A property does not have to be used all the time to be classed as occupied. For example, if it is:

- Fully furnished
- Second home or a holiday home
- Part of a wider regeneration programme and could be in the process of being developed or marked for demolition
- Pending planning permission, could be awaiting refurbishment or could be waiting for new occupants to move in
- The owner is living elsewhere to provide or receive personal care

## Empty Properties Legislation

The **Rating (Empty Properties) Act 2007** is an Act of Parliament to make provision for and in connection with the liability of owners of unoccupied hereditaments to a non-domestic rate. It implements recommendations of the Barker Review of Land Use Planning and the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government and proposals in the report Budget 2007: Building Britain's long-term future: Prosperity and fairness for families.

## Long Term Empty Homes Strategy 2019-2024

[Link to West Oxfordshire Strategy](#)

The overarching aim of this strategy is to help alleviate the housing need within the district, to offer wider housing choice to residents and to reduce the detrimental effects empty properties can have within the community.

In order to achieve the over-arching aim the strategy focusses on 3 key objectives:

- To maintain accurate information about the number of long term empty properties
- Provide advice and information to help raise awareness and address issues around empty properties
- Bring empty properties back into use to increase the supply of quality, affordable homes for residents in housing need

Whenever possible the Council will try to improve housing standards by providing information, guidance and support to landlords, leaseholders and owner-occupiers. However, when negotiations about an empty property do not succeed, there are a range of powers available to make sure the property is reused.

As a last resort enforcement action could be considered and taken where appropriate to ensure the property is brought back into use. The options available include, but are not limited to:

- Enforced Sale – Allows the council to force the sale of a property to recover debts owed to the council that are registered as a charge on the property
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) – Enables the council to secure occupation and responsible management of some privately owned house and flats that have been empty for two years or more
- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) – Enables the council to purchase and sell an empty property for the purpose of providing housing accommodation or facilities connected to housing accommodation

## Questions Raised by Councillor Jill Bull

Which empty homes could be adapted for people with disabilities?

- The Council are unable to identify these as the majority of long-term empty homes are in private ownership. Housing Associations do not tend to have any empty properties apart from those that are due for redevelopment or being demolished.

Are Cottsway Housing providing lifetime homes with wet rooms?

- Cottsway have recently advised that 50% of their bungalows have level access showers.
- Many clients applying for a disabled facilities grant for a level access shower will need ground floor accommodation so we always look to assist clients into a bungalow first. If it's a family then we work with the Housing Association to either adapt the current property or find a more suitable property that would meet their long term needs. We have recently moved a family from a three bed house to another three bed house in the same village, which had more garden to enable us to extend the ground floor to provide a bedroom and level access shower. This was jointly funded from the Disabled Facilities Grant and Cottsway Housing.
- Many of the new build properties already have a ground floor toilet and level access in the front door. Some of the properties also have scope to support a through floor lift, but these cases are rare.

## Data – as at 26.10.2021

Total number of long term empty homes = 577

10+ years = 2  
5 – 10 years = 5  
2 – 5 years = 32  
6 months to 2 years = 473  
Up to 1 year = 43  
For sale – 14  
Over 55 Property = 8

Housing Association = 38  
Retirement Home = 34  
Assisted Living = 3  
Awaiting demolition = 24

An increase in empty homes has been identified over the last 12 months. Some of the reasons identified:

Improved reporting  
Delayed sales due to pandemic  
Delayed lets due to pandemic  
Renovation work halted due to pandemic  
New build properties coming on to the market, being sold and Council not notified  
Retirement property market has been heavily impacted due to the pandemic and target market isolating

## **What we are doing?**

### **Council Tax Premiums**

- 100% premium from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 for properties that have been empty for two or more years.
- 200% premium from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 for properties that have been empty for five or more years.
- 300% premium from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 for properties that have been empty for ten or more years.

### **Resource**

- Current Empty Homes Coordinator has been in post since 15<sup>th</sup> March 2021
- Part time 24 hours a week post and fixed term contract for 18 months
- Covers West Oxfordshire, Forest of Dean and Cotswold District Councils

### **Work**

- Moved to Civica system in April 2021, introduced new reports
- New system flags created to enable more detailed analysis: For Sale; Awaiting Demolition; Unable to make contact; No further action
- Supporting owners by explaining discounts and options available and simply listening to their concerns
- Letter posted to all owners of empties for over 2 years requesting they make contact
- Use of recorded letters in instances of no response eliciting action
- Working closely with owners/builders on properties being renovated regarding eligibility for reduced VAT
- GIS mapping overlay to identify clusters for direct targeting or obtaining support from town or parish councils

- Proactively contacting owners about to go onto the Levy to see what can be done to help them
- Sage Housing, 80 new build, many flagged as Long Term Empty. Revenues Inspector visited the site and contacted the agent, the majority of the flats are now occupied. Empty Homes Coordinator obtained proof of tenancy and they have been removed from LTE list.

## **A couple of success examples**

### **Property 1**

Supported the property owner in trying to get the property back into use following the recent passing of his wife. A very sensitive case approached carefully with empathy and tact. Outcome is that property will be let to a staff member at Cotswold Wildlife Park at reduced rental.

### **Property 2**

A simple but effective investigation.

The property was recorded as empty over 6 years. Various long term empty and revenues forms had been posted along with several attempted phone calls and emails to contact the owner, but no response.

Sent a recorded delivery letter. The next day, the brother of the person named as care/of on the account called. The property had been inherited in 2015 and was not empty as the owner works in China for approx. 6 months of a year and the rest of the time it is his main residence.

Account was amended and removed from LTE list.

### **Property 3**

A proactive approach to an empty property not flagged as long term.

A neighbour raised a concern surrounding the condition of the property. It had been sold to We Buy Any Homes in Nov 2020 and resold by auction to the current owner in Feb 2021. We had no contact details for the owner.

The property is falling into disrepair but wouldn't reach the Council Tax Levy stage for a further 18 months.

Allsops (who sold the property by auction in 2021) were contacted and asked to forward a letter on to the owner. This has been done and the neighbour updated accordingly who is pleased that the Council are proactively trying to assist.

Further investigation was carried out and Empty Homes Coordinator managed to locate owner's correspondence address. Recorded letter was sent and signed for the next day by the owner.

Following this he made a visit to the property and advised the neighbour of his intention to renovate the property and the timeframe he is working towards. Neighbour was thrilled to hear this news.