

Prescrutiny of the Draft Empty Homes Strategy.

**18. DRAFT EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY**

The Head of Regeneration and Prosperity along with the Housing Strategy and Investment Manager presented the report in conjunction with a Power Point presentation.

The Head of Regeneration and Prosperity informed Members of the Council's proposed approach to tackling empty homes which is set out in the Council's draft Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2018- 2021.

In the presentation Members were given the current picture in respect of Rhondda, Cynon, Taf. It was explain that empty private sector homes represent a wasted resource, financial expense both to the owners and the Council and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for residents.

It was highlighted that Council Tax Records reveal that there were 3,556 private sector homes that were vacant for 6 months or more as at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017. This equates to 3.8% of Rhondda Cynon Taf's private housing (owner occupied and private rented). The average for Wales is 2.4% with the lowest (Torfaen) having 0.78% of their stock empty. However, of the 3,556 empty homes only 684 are classed as long term empty in that they have featured in each of the last four consecutive annual snapshots.

Officers explained that in 2015/16 a Scrutiny Working Group identified 9 recommendations across the following areas:

- Strategic approach and strong vision
- Identify funding opportunities
- Targeted approach
- Raise awareness
- Advice and Information

The Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee were informed that over the last few years the Council has developed many tools and approaches to encourage empty homes to be brought back into use which have had a positive impact, which includes:

- Housing Enforcement activity utilising various housing and planning legislation.
- Provision of Houses into Homes loans utilising Welsh Government repayable funding
- Provision of grants utilising the Council's own funding - £4.1M since 2016/17
- Affordable Housing Scheme that brings empty homes back in to use
- Advice and Assistance
- Provision of Homes above retail premises in Aberdare and Pontypridd
- Removing the 50% Council Tax reduction for empty homes (from April 2018 onwards)

Members were presented with various case studies which gave them an overview of what was being done across the Authority. The Case Studies showed a snap shot across Pontypridd, Treherbert Area.

Members were please to see the proactive approach Officers have taken over the last few years, however felt that more work is needed to raise awareness of what is offered to the communities to encourage home owners improve the properties and bringing them back in to use such as Housing Grants etc.

Members were pleased to see the objectives that were set out in the strategy that translate directly in to a series of projects and actions.

A Member questioned officers in relation to the advertising of the empty properties grants and suggested that the Authority could work together with Estate Agents letting buyers know that this would be available. It was explained that demands for the grant was extremely high with a waiting list. When houses go to auction it is proposed we do advertise the service a little more to raise awareness.

A Member asked with regards to the grant level what is the sum owners would get to do up the properties. Officers explained the grant available is up to £20,000 per property with a 15% contribution from the grant recipient.

Another Member commented on the report as being a very comprehensive report and felt that long term empty properties that were in a ruinous or dilapidated condition should be considered for demolition as these have a serious detrimental effect on the amenities of the neighbourhood.

Members of the Committee agreed with the new Council Tax amendments for empty properties and hope that this will discourage owners from leave the homes empty for long period of time.

All Members were in agreement that more work need to be done with private landlords as private rental landlords do have a role in the process.

After further consideration of the Report Members **RESLOVED:**

- To Acknowledge the Council's performance over the last few years in tackling empty homes
- Acknowledge the factors that affect the number and location of the empty homes and agree that that the strategy has identified the factors comprehensively.
- Acknowledge the proposal to proactively target the 684 long term empty private sector homes
- To recommend that demolition order be considered where long term empty properties are in ruinous or in a dilapidated state
- Recommend that the feedback of the Health and Wellbeing Committee be presented to Cabinet for Consideration when determining the matter