



Chelmsford City Council Cabinet

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Empty Homes - approach to bringing empty homes back into use

Report by:

Cabinet Member for Safer Chelmsford

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Purpose

This report outlines a proposed change of approach in dealing with empty homes.

Options

1. Approve the proposed approach to deal with empty properties.
2. Not approve the proposed approach.

Preferred Option and Reasons

Option 1 is the preferred option, to enable better use of the staff resource available to bring empty properties back into use. This change of approach will focus on properties that have been empty for shorter periods increasing the likelihood of the properties being reoccupied with less intervention and renovation works.

Recommendations

1. That the approach outlined in this report be approved.
 2. That if Compulsory Purchase arrangements are considered to be required following investigations into empty properties that the details of these properties are brought back to Cabinet to request approval to pursue a Compulsory Purchase Order.
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1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Empty homes are a wasted resource, especially when demand for housing in Chelmsford is so high, and in the context of the housing crisis. Empty homes in poor condition can also blight neighbourhoods and become a focus for anti-social behaviour.
- 1.2 The work around empty homes and bringing them back into use is carried out by the Housing Standards team within Public Health and Protection Services. The priority for the Housing Standards team is to deliver the Council's mandatory legal obligations to improve housing conditions, investigating complaints from residents living in potentially hazardous conditions and managing its licensing responsibilities (for example for Houses in Multiple Occupation and Caravan Sites).
- 1.3 The demands on the service from central Government and residents have increased following the tragic death of Awab Ishak as a direct result of exposure to poor housing conditions and the additional obligations imposed on the Council in relation to cladding on mid and high-rise buildings following the disaster of Grenfell Tower. Additional duties will also be imposed by the incoming Renters Rights Act in relation to privately rented properties. Unlike the Council's obligations under parts 1 and 2 of the Housing Act 2004, dealing with empty homes is not a statutory duty and, due to the loss of experienced officers and other demands on the team as outlined above, realistically the activity around bringing empty homes back into use will need to be reduced.
- 1.4 The reason for the existence of empty homes is complex and each property has a story attached as to why it may not be occupied. In more prosperous parts of the country (such as Chelmsford) the distribution and number of empty properties may not be the same as in deprived areas. The properties tend to be scattered in Chelmsford, and the actual properties that complaints are received about is very few. Many local authorities do not have a specific resource allocated to dealing with empty homes; each authority allocates resources as they see fit locally. A Council's duty to intervene would only be required when the property is causing a statutory nuisance or in a state of collapse.

2. Review of Empty Homes Strategy

- 2.1 The Council's Empty Homes strategy was last reviewed in 2018. The strategy is based on a 2012 Government 'toolbox' and although much may still remain relevant, more recent (2023) guidance from the Local Government Association (LGA) needs to be incorporated. In addition, the Strategy should also make reference to the recently introduced extended council tax premiums on furnished empty homes.
- 2.2 A Review of the Strategy is necessary and proposed changes in the Strategy are outlined below. This is also an opportunity to draw the Strategy in line with the Council's Housing Strategy, review the main priorities, help ensure that it remains relevant and is able to reflect national and local housing situation and demands.
- 2.3 The LGA guidance indicates the most successful approach is not to target homes that have been empty the longest, but those that have most recently triggered a council tax premium. These property owners are more likely to engage. The current assessment for potential action scores properties that are empty the longest and have most adverse street impact highly. Those that have been empty for a shorter time and appear in better condition would not score as highly even though these would potentially be more cost-effective, and easier, to bring back into use.
- 2.4 From 1 April 2025 Empty Home Council tax premiums have been applied to furnished empty properties. These have previously been exempt. This will mean that second homes (or properties claimed to be second homes or that may be let but are not let out) will be subject to similar council tax levels as unfurnished empty properties. The owners of these homes received written notification of this earlier this year. This may open opportunities to rent homes where owners currently live abroad but may wish to return to the UK at some future date. The impact of these Council Tax changes will be kept under review.
- 2.5 The joint PLACE consortium fund which has been referred to in previous Cabinet reports to fund interest free loans and compulsory purchase orders is greatly reduced. This is a shared fund between a number of local authorities and the scheme is due to close in August 2026. The number of PLACE loans applied for within Chelmsford is very low with none requested since 2017. The balance available to Chelmsford currently stands at around £500,000.
- 2.6 The Housing Standards Enforcement Policy highlights the adverse impact of empty property in terms of aesthetics rather than the loss of a potential home. The current empty homes strategy ('The Council's Approach to Long-term Empty Homes') leans towards focussing action on property that has been empty the longest. The aim of action under the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy is to bring empty homes into use. Where a property is derelict and uninhabitable, it may not be considered an appropriate building for bringing back into use.

Where such property is considered detrimental to the amenity of the neighbourhood, more appropriate action might be available under Planning legislation, including demolition.

3. Current Empty Homes Situation

- 3.1 The Housing Standards Team receives monthly updates from the Council Tax Department on properties which are empty from a Revenues perspective. At any one time there are around 1,000 – 1,200 unoccupied and unfurnished properties within the City Council area that are designated 'empty'. There are also additional properties (around 400-500) that are furnished and empty – these are the properties which are being charged an extra Council Tax premium from April 2025.
- 3.2 There is a constant number of around 300 properties at a time which are empty for a period of 6 to 12 months. These are often in probate and are eventually reoccupied. This is the UK average time for a probate case to be turned around. Using Council Tax information, previously owners have been invited to provide their proposals for the property. The majority of respondents relay that they have plans for the property which reflects that although the number of empty homes remains high these are not the same properties as there is a constant churn as properties become occupied and others start to trip the 6,12 or 24-month triggers.

4. Proposed change in approach

- 4.1 A change in strategy is proposed that shifts attention away from the properties that have been empty for the longest period of time and towards properties that may only have been vacant for a relatively short time. The reasoning being that action taken in respect of these properties will bring homes back into use that are less likely to require extensive works to allow them to be occupied and, therefore, assist in increasing the supply of housing.
- 4.2 It is anticipated that less intervention or /action will be required to deal with these properties, and this is relevant taking into the account the staffing resource implications within the Housing Standards Team, and Public Health and protection Services more widely, as previously outlined in this report.
- 4.3 The proposed changes can be summarised as follows.
 - Reduce the staff resource dedicated to dealing with empty homes so that officers can focus on the Council's statutory housing requirements
 - Adopt the recommendations of the LGA guidance to focus attention on those properties empty for two years and below, rather than long-term empty properties.
 - The work be more 'light touch' with proposed correspondence sent to empty homeowners, potentially with Council Tax communications, to advise on the

advantages of bringing properties back into use and to signpost to any assistance/funding

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 In light of these changes it is proposed that the Council's Empty Homes Strategy and elements of the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy be amended as appropriate and approved.
- 5.2 It is recommended that the proposed approach to bring back empty homes into use outlined in the report is approved.

List of appendices:

None

Background papers:

Chelmsford City Council's Empty Homes Strategy

Corporate Implications

Legal/Constitutional:

This is an executive matter for Cabinet to determine. Other implications are set out in the report.

Financial: No additional funding sought. The proposed approach should reduce the financial risk arising from failing to meet wider statutory duties.

Potential impact on climate change and the environment: None

Contribution toward achieving a net zero carbon position by 2030: None

Personnel:

Risk Management:

Equality and Diversity:

(For new or revised policies or procedures has an equalities impact assessment been carried out? If not, explain why)

Health and Safety:

Digital:

Other:

Consultees:

Relevant Policies and Strategies:

- Empty Homes Strategy
- “A practical approach for councils on dealing with empty homes” (LGA)

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/practical-approach-councils-dealing-empty-homes>
