

Report to Cabinet

7 December 2022

Subject:	Empty Property Strategy 2023-2028
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Housing Councillor Charn Singh Padda
Director:	Director of Housing Gillian Douglas
Key Decision:	Yes New Policy and Charges
Contact Officer:	Citizen and Consumer Protection (Accommodation) Team Manager, Richard Hawkins, Richard_Hawkins@Sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval be given to the Empty Property Strategy 2023 - 2028, including the introduction of empty property loans and the use of Planning Act enforcement powers by the Empty Property Officer.

2 Reasons for Recommendations







- 2.1 The private sector housing market is a key resource in providing the housing needs of the borough. Family homes are always in high demand, yet there are a large number of them remaining empty and unmanaged, blighting communities and removing good homes from the market. The Council has identified privately owned empty properties as one of its key priority areas in relation to private rented and owner-occupied housing.
- 2.2 Sandwell has had some success in bringing many private empty properties back into use through advice and persuasion as well as some limited enforcement. However; there are a considerable number of empty property owners who are unreceptive to the impact they are causing and are not addressing long-standing dilapidated properties that have



remained empty for many years and that are causing a disproportionately negative impact in communities in the borough.

2.3 The intended purpose of this strategy is to develop more pro-active solutions to empty properties that are unfairly impacting on communities across our borough to utilise a wasted resource.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People
	People Live Well and Age Well
	Strong Resilient Communities
	Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods Empty private sector homes are a wasted resource that when brought back into use will contribute to addressing housing need
	A Strong and Inclusive Economy
	A Connected and Accessible Sandwell

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 Our Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) identified the private sector housing represents 74% of the overall stock within Sandwell. The HNA further identified overall increasing demand for accommodation within the Borough with a 51% shortfall annually on the number of homes needed to meet need.

4.2 Empty and unmanaged homes can blight communities whilst also removing good quality homes from the market. Taking positive actions to reduce the number of empty privately-owned properties is a key priority which will support the objective of delivering quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods.



- 4.3 Sandwell has had some success in bringing private empty properties back into use through advice and persuasion as well as some limited enforcement. However, there are a considerable number of empty property owners who are unreceptive to the impact they are causing and are not addressing long-standing dilapidated properties that have remained empty for many years and that are causing a disproportionately negative impact in communities in the borough.
- 4.4 The intended purpose of this strategy is to develop more pro-active solutions to empty properties that are negatively impacting on communities across our borough and to utilise a wasted resource to meet housing need.
- 4.5 The aim of the strategy is to bring a minimum of 200 empty homes back into use from the private sector over a period of 5 years.
- 4.6 It is important that the council focuses its resources on bringing back the right types of empty housing. Priority will be given to family homes as they are currently viewed as most in demand, and where needs change, so will the focus to seek properties to fit the ever-changing needs of the borough.

Utilising assistance and enforcement

Off the Starting Block Loans

- 4.7 The council plans to develop a loan scheme offering some empty home owners financial assistance that will encourage and support renovations to bring properties back into use. The loans will be repayable upon sale or occupation.
- 4.8 The loans will be limited and subject to council discretion on a case-by-case basis against the merits of each individual situation. Loans will be subject to a legally binding agreement to bring the property back into use.
- 4.9 Loans will be aimed at empty owners who perhaps inherited a poorly maintained property and do not have the means to manage a second home. They will be able to enter an agreement with the council to carry



out works and sell or let their property when agreed works are completed. Often buyers cannot get a mortgage on dilapidated properties, restricting who the owner can sell to.

- 4.10 The development of the loan scheme will be part of the wider development of a Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy. The development of the empty homes element of the policy as well as the development of the terms and conditions will form part of the early work of the newly created Empty Property Officer post.
- 4.11 The budget for loans over the five years has been set at £750,000 and will be financed from unallocated capital funds for home improvements held within Housing Directorate budgets.

Enforcement Powers

- 4.12 Where encouragement and assistance fail, robust and wide-reaching enforcement powers will be used as well as housing standards enforcement and the use of wide-ranging enforcement powers.
- 4.13 Traditional empty property enforcement powers will be used along with new approaches utilising different powers to focus on empty properties with disrepair and untidy appearances as well as broader powers to help bring properties back into use.
- 4.14 The Empty Property Officer will have powers to make owners carry out repairs to remove hazards from empty properties to ensure they are managed and safe to live in. Civil Penalty powers will be used to charge owners for non-compliance with such notices. Revenue from such penalties will be recycled back into housing standards work.
- 4.15 Planning enforcement powers will be shared between the Empty Property Officer and Planning Enforcement Team to enable Empty Property Officers to take their own direct enforcement action against untidy and overgrown empty dwellings.



4.16 The strategy will commence from January 2023 with full mobilisation of the strategy from April 2023 following a current team restructure and recruitment of an Empty Property Officer from January through to April 2023.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 We could choose not to have an empty homes strategy and / or continue to provide a reactive service to complaints about empty properties dealing with nuisance and open to access only in addition to applying increased council tax charges.

6 Implications

Resources:	Financial, staffing, land/building implications The proposals in the strategy will be delivered within existing resources with an expectation of increased income through civil penalties
Legal and Governance:	Legal implications including regulations/law under which proposals are required/permitted and constitutional provisions There is no legal requirement to have an empty homes strategy. The enabling legislation to implement the strategy is set out in the draft strategy.
Risk:	Risk implications, including any mitigating measures planned/taken, health and safety, insurance implications Financial risks associated with issuing loans will be mitigated by a review of the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) 2002.
Equality:	Implications for equality (all aspects and characteristics) including how meeting Equality Duty, equality impact assessments Enforcement action will be monitored to ensure there are no unintended consequences against any protected characteristics
Health and Wellbeing:	Implications of the proposals on health and wellbeing of our communities Empty properties are a blight on our neighbourhood, which can have detrimental impact on communities



Social Value:	Implications for social value and how the proposals are meeting this (for e.g. employment of local traders, young people) There are no social value impact arising from this report
Climate Change:	Utilising empty properties is a less carbon intensive process than constructing new properties to help meet housing demand in Sandwell.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1. Draft Empty Property Strategy 2023 - 2028

