



EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

Title of Report:	Progress Report on Reducing the Number of Empty Homes in the Borough	To be marked with an 'X' by Democratic Services after report has been presented
Meeting of:	Corporate Management Team – 19 October 2021	X
	Leader and Deputy Leaders – 25 October 2021	X
	Leader's / Leader of the Opposition's Advisory Group / Independent Alliance Advisory Group [3 & 4 November 2021]	X
	Cabinet [15 November 2021] / Council [DATE]	
	Scrutiny Audit and Value for Money Council Services Committee [DATE] / Scrutiny Community Regeneration, Environment and Health and Well Being Committee [DATE]	



Is this an Executive Decision:	[YES/NO]	Is this a Key Decision:	NO
Is this in the Forward Plan:	NO	Is the Report Confidential:	NO
If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972:	NA		

Essential Signatories:

ALL REPORTS MUST BE IN THE NAME OF A HEAD OF SERVICE

Monitoring Officer: **Angela Wakefield**

Date Signature

Chief Finance Officer: **Sal Khan**

Date Signature

EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Cabinet

Date: 15th November 2021

REPORT TITLE: Progress Report on Reducing the Number of Empty Homes in the Borough

PORTFOLIO: Environment and Housing

HEAD OF SERVICE: Sal Khan

CONTACT OFFICER: Brett Atkinson Ext. No. x1123

WARD(S) AFFECTED: Multiple

1. Purpose of the Report

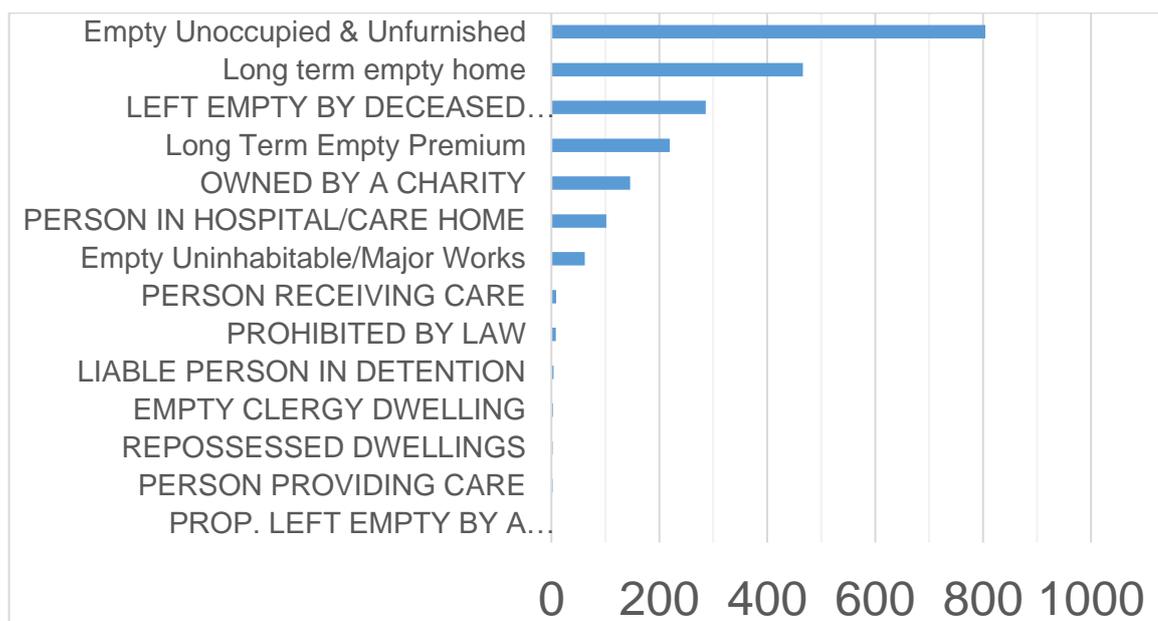
- 1.1. To review the performance of the Council's Empty Homes Service over the last 9 months, and assess the 44 empty homes where the escalating approach is nearing its end.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Council significantly expanded the programme to tackle empty homes in May 2019 when it appointed Grafton (UK) Ltd to provide an Empty Homes Service following a competitive tender exercise.
- 2.2. Since the last report in January 2021 the service has responded to a total of 324 empty homes, of these 105 homes have been successfully brought back into use and a further 2 do not require intervention. Of the remaining 217 empty homes, 44 are at the late stages of intervention.
- 2.3. Following analysis of the properties currently at letter 3 and 4, and taking into account the criteria for the Council's preferred approach to enforcement there are none in need of intervention at this time. The recommendation is to endorse the findings of the report, and express thanks to the contractor.

3. **Background**

- 3.1. High levels of empty homes are recognised as having a detrimental impact to the viability of communities; consequently restoring empty homes can have social, regenerative, financial and strategic benefits.¹
- 3.2. Empty homes are identified by liability for Council Tax,² and this is also how we have measured the performance of the Council's Empty Homes Service. This is also the mechanism by which reoccupied former empty homes which are eligible for contributing to the New Homes Bonus³ baseline are identified. All empty properties are visited each year to ensure the Council Tax records show the correct liabilities and state whether the properties are occupied or not.
- 3.3. The Service targets homes that reach 2 years or more of having been registered as empty, this attracts the Long Term Empty Council Tax Premium. Homes that are empty for less than 2 years are not targeted, as this shorter period can be regarded as part of the normal churn of the housing market.
- 3.4. Figure 1: Breakdown of all listed Empty Properties⁴



- 3.5. Figure 1 provides figures for July 2021 with a breakdown by the recorded reason for being empty. There is an increase in the overall number of empty homes over the past year, with a total of 1455 in July 2020 rising to 1524 in December 2020 rising to 2114 in July 2021. It is important to recognise that these totals include all empty homes regardless of length of time empty, therefore the totals include homes which have recently become empty for the first time as well as long term empty homes. It is possible that the amount of

¹ <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03012/SN03012.pdf>

² Local Government Act 2003, Section 85

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-homes-bonus-calculator-2020-to-2021>

⁴ Correct as at July 2021

newly empty homes increased at this time due to greater churn in the housing market amid rising property sales⁵ during the stamp duty holiday.⁶

4. **Contribution to Corporate Priorities**

4.1. Environment, Health and Wellbeing

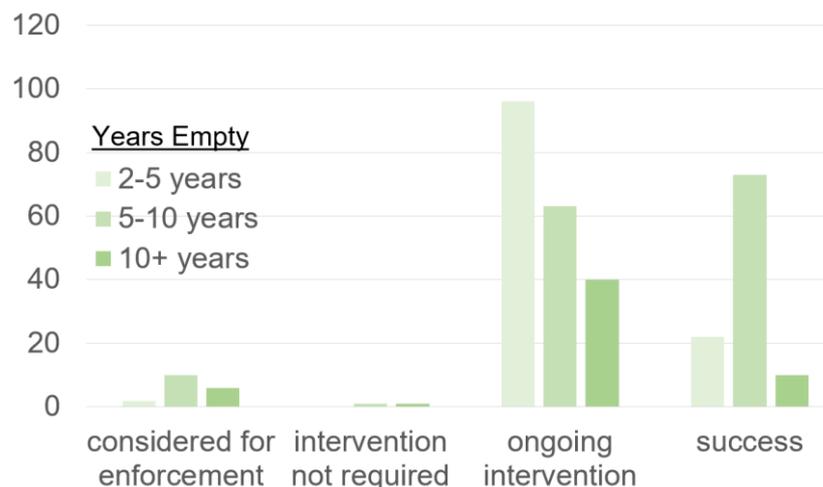
5. **Overview of Service Delivery**

5.1. Since the last report in January 2021 a total of 324 properties have been identified as paying the Long Term Empty Premium, and 105 properties have been successfully brought back into use exceeding the KPI. A further 2 require no intervention (e.g. because they have been demolished).

5.2. The remaining 217 empty homes are the subject of ongoing support, meaning that Grafton communicates with owners regularly to monitor the progress that is being made towards bringing the home back into use. Grafton’s contact with owners is based on an escalating approach which is measured by a series of letters, ending with letter 4. Of these 217, 44 empty homes are at letters 3 or 4 meaning that the escalating approach is nearing its end. These empty homes are considered in more detail at Section 6.

5.3. The graph below breaks down these figures by showing how they are distributed according to the number of years the property was empty at the time the data was downloaded from the Council Tax system.

5.4. Figure 2: Empty Homes Service activity since January 2021



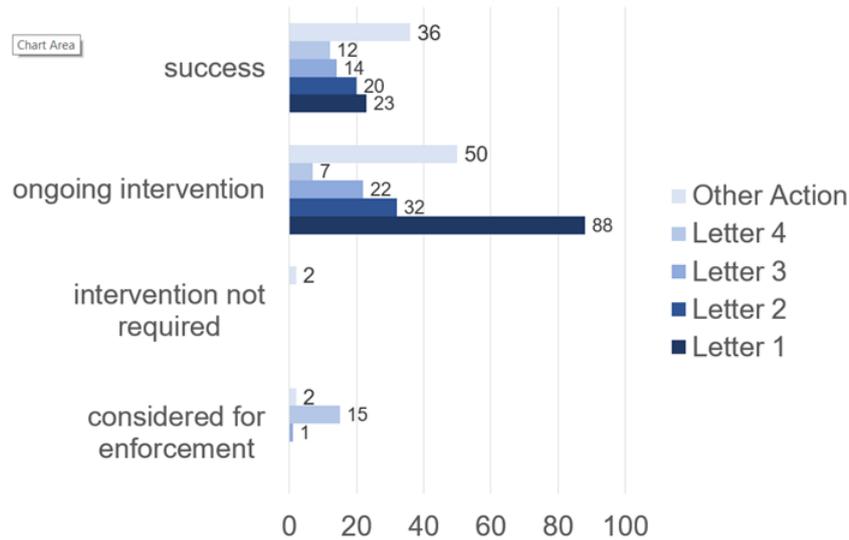
5.5. The challenges posed by empty homes vary significantly dependant on the length of time they have been empty, as homes which have been empty for

⁵ [UK enjoys property sales boom amid Covid-19 pandemic | Housing market | The Guardian](#)

⁶ [Stamp Duty Land Tax: temporary reduced rates - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

more than 10 years are frequently in a very poor state of repair and therefore the investment required to bring them back into use is greater.

5.6. Figure 3 - Outcome by Stage in the Escalating Approach



5.7. As can be seen most owners engage well at the letter 1 stage, but there are a number of properties at letter 3 stage who may spill over to letter 4 in the near future. There are a relatively large number of empty homes listed as 'Other Action', the other actions is most often clarification of whether intervention is still required, for example because the home is in fact occupied. There are currently 63 such potentially occupied homes listed as empty which have recently been sent an occupancy form by Council Tax with a view to updating the details if appropriate.

5.8. There is every reason to be satisfied with the performance of the contract to date.

6. Analysis of Empty Homes at Letters 3 and 4

6.1. As has been described above, the Council has an approach to tackling empty properties using a combination of advice, guidance, and persuasion. If there is insufficient response to a series of contacts culminating in letter 4, it is unlikely that any additional informal contact will yield the cooperation of the owner. To understand the particulars of these empty homes and whether enforcement should be formally considered, Council officers conducted a site visit to each of the 44 empty homes at the late stages of intervention. The outcome of these visits are set out in a table below.

6.2. Figure 4: Categorisation of Empty Homes at Late Stage Intervention

Row Labels	Count of Outcome of Site Visit	Average of Years Empty
Evidence of Recent Building Works	13	7.9
Listed For Sale	5	4.6
Modest Building Works	2	7.5
Occupied	6	9.8
Possible Enforcement	10	6.3
Unsuitable	8	9.6
Grand Total	44	7.7

- 6.3. It was noticeable when undertaking the visits how many of properties were making tangible progress toward being occupied, or were actually occupied,⁷ resulting in only 10 of the 44 requiring more detailed consideration. It is possible that the increase in house prices nationally⁸ will have impacted on the owner's motivation to make use of the property. Those identified as being unsuitable for enforcement include for example a caravan in a farmer's field and a singular empty home on an industrial estate scheduled for change of use.
- 6.4. In March 2021 Cabinet endorsed enforced sale as the Council's preferred mechanism for enforcement. The process required the identification of properties which have both received Letter 4 and where the Council has taken previous action on individual properties. Council action may include works to the property which result in a cost to the Council. In these cases the Council has the ability to register a charge against the property.
- 6.5. However, on investigation it transpired that there was no correlation at this stage between empty homes having received a Letter 4 and properties with land charges created by the Council. As a result of this the search was broadened and it became apparent that land charges are created by the Council in relatively few cases, although it remains possible that there will be a correlation in the future.
- 6.6. Given the level of positive action from owners that can be seen in respect of these empty homes overall, it is proposed that these 10 properties of concern are monitored and consideration is given to alternative routes to enforcement to be put forward in a forthcoming report which is due in March 2022.

7. **Financial Considerations**

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: Anya Murray

- 7.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report into the review of the empty homes contract. Any changes to the number of empty homes will be taken into account as part of the annual update of the council tax base and development of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

⁷ The occupied homes registered as being empty have been reported to Council Tax.

⁸ [Halifax UK | House Price Index | Media Centre](#)

8. Risk Assessment and Management

8.1. The main risks to this Report and the Council achieving its objectives are as follows:

8.2. **Positive** (Opportunities/Benefits):

8.2.1. Empty Homes Service is performing well, and is likely to continue to do so.

8.2.2. A relatively high proportion of the owners of empty homes are taking positive actions to bring the homes back into use, even when they are not communicating effectively with the service.

8.3. **Negative** (Threats):

8.3.1. The current contract for provision of an empty homes service is due to end on the 30 April 2022.

8.4. The risks do not need to be entered in the Risk Register. Any financial implications to mitigate against these risks are considered above.

9. Legal Considerations

*This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team:
Caroline Elwood*

9.1. There are no significant legal issues arising from this Report.

10. Equalities and Health

10.1. **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

10.2. **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed.

10.3. The main equality or health issues arising from this Report are as follows:

10.3.1. Reducing the number of empty homes will contribute to the regeneration of local areas; improving mental health and environmental living conditions.

11. Human Rights

11.1. There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report.

12. Sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures)

12.1. Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) N/A

13. Recommendation(s)

13.1. To endorse the progress that is being made in reducing the number of long term empty homes, thank the staff and congratulate the contractor.

14. Background Papers

14.1. The Housing Strategy 2021 – 2025

15. Appendices

15.1. None.