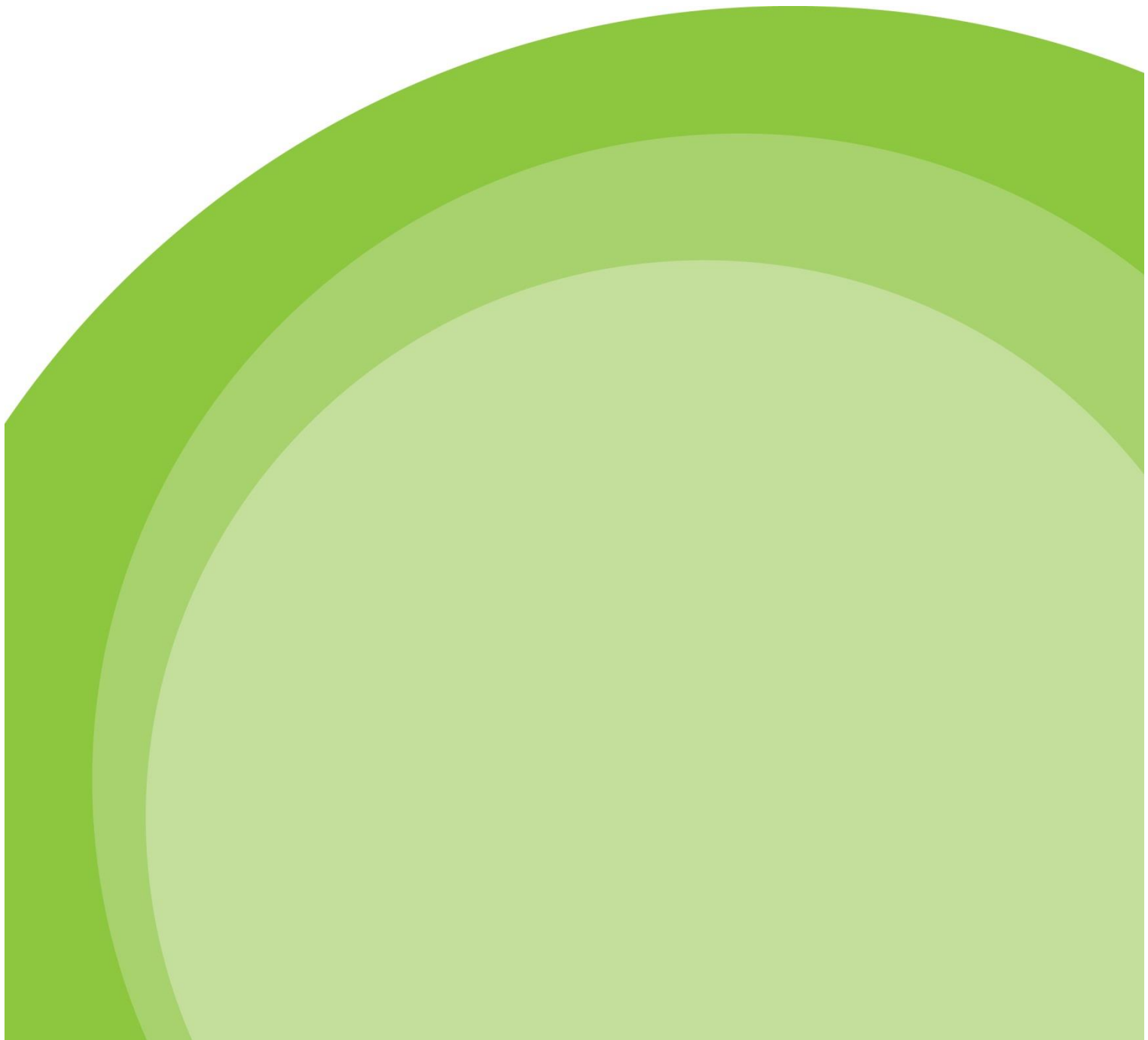**Central Bedfordshire**

Empty Homes Strategy

Engagement report
Refresh of Empty Homes Strategy 2017

Empty Homes Strategy engagement report

Introduction

The overall aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is to bring long-term empty homes back into use. Together with our partners we aim to seek innovative solutions to the problem and contribute towards creating a sustainable environment. The strategy provides a framework for tackling the various issues associated with long-term empty homes in the private sector, in a cost-effective manner.

The Government has devised a range of legislative tools to support empty properties being brought back in to use. The Empty Homes Strategy builds on the success of the 2010 strategy which set the foundations for a well-refined empty homes service that balances support and advice with a range of enforcement options.

The aim of the strategy continues to focus on partnership working, using the tools available effectively and appropriately. The council has been reviewing its Empty Homes Strategy which was introduced in 2010 and 275 properties have been brought back into use through Council interventions between 2012 – 2017.

The Council is now refreshing the strategy in light of changes since 2010. It will again balance support and advice with a range of enforcement options. The strategy will continue to focus on partnership working, building relationships, and making effective and appropriate use of the tools available to maximise the benefits of bring empty homes back into use.

Engagement has been taking place with a range of stakeholders on the Empty Homes Strategy to see if there are any elements of the offer that can be improved, if there are any problems we had not already thought of that need to be addressed, and if there were any other viable ideas of support that we have not already thought of.

Activities:

To ensure we are delivering the right service we invited customers and stakeholders to share their feedback and experiences on the refresh of the Empty Homes Strategy.

We engaged through a number of different activities to gain feedback from a range of stakeholders which included:

Communications
Awareness of the refresh of Central Bedfordshire's Empty Homes Strategy was distributed via a range of channels, information on the web pages,

articles in staff newsletters Connect and Staff Central, targeted email distributions and "other publications" e.g. Ezine to inform Stakeholders of the Refresh.

A **Members Briefing** was produced informing members of forthcoming engagement activity and development of Central Bedfordshire's Empty Homes Strategy refresh

Communications were developed to inform local people and customers of the engagement activities to raise awareness of the strategy and how people can report any issues relating to an empty home and the support services available around this.

From the use of **social media** the four Facebook posts have had a combined 6,525 views, 610 link clicks and 52 likes, comments and shares. The feedback included for the website and forms to be mobile optimized. It was highlighted the importance of sharing your feedback and how empty homes has an impact on each and every one of us and should help every community. Comments also asked why there were empty homes when there are people on the waiting list for housing. It was raised and feedback shared on downsizing which was shared with the relevant team to support. There were also comments on specific areas which could be considered.

There were a number of **press releases** shared and coverage was included in publications like the Dunstable Gazette and Biggleswade Chronical.

Information and an **invitation** to contact the council for further information about the engagement activities were also shared via the following networks:
- Central Bedfordshire's Council Empty Homes web page,
- Members Information Bulletin,
- Targeted email to all Town & Parish Councils,
- Homelessness Forum,

Engagement
Previous engagement of the 2010 Strategy provided stakeholder a better understanding of the Empty Homes service available to neighbourhoods and partners through a variety of methods including:
- Newspaper adverts
- Promotional events
- Factsheets
- Empty Homes National Week of Action.
- Joint marketing through existing services such as Let's Rent and Private Sector Housing Assistance.

The 2017 strategy proposed to build on this success through more interactive and targeted methods to encourage residents and partners to engage in bringing homes back in to use. It was suggested that You Tube videos on the service available via the website and more frequent reports could be used to provide a better understanding of the added social value empty homes action

brings to the community. Feedback from the engagement emphasised that although this could be positive, we should ensure other methods are also shared as it was felt that this would not be the best media to reach out to everyone.

Appendix A in the strategy shares the action plan which includes the development and delivery of a keys actions and measurable outcomes

Once the strategy is refreshed it is proposed as part of the action plan to develop an implementation and marketing plan to share case studies and support available. It is proposed for an event spring/summer 2018 to show case the pilot activities and development of the service. From the engagement this was well received and felt would have positive outcomes.

The Let's Rent scheme is part of the Council's housing option approach that aims to increase the availability of good quality affordable homes within the private rented sector to assist in preventing homelessness. It was felt this will be an attractive option for some empty property owners, as the scheme's incentives, such as a rent guarantee, can mitigate many tenancy related issues that landlords have. Engagement activities for the Let's Rent Scheme took place from October 2016 – April 2017

Information on the refresh was also shared via engagement opportunities like the Just Ask events. The engagement activities will inform and raise awareness and aim to encourage feedback around the recommendations suggested.

Workshop activity

A workshop on **2nd February 2017** with Housing colleagues reviewed the progress on the current strategy's action plan to check whether the tools and priorities of the current strategy are still fit for purpose.

As part of the workshop discussions took place with the range of stakeholders who are involved to look at how we engaged as part of the refresh

To make this strategy a success, the Council needs to continue to build on the existing working relationships within and outside the Council to raise the profile of the empty homes issue in Central Bedfordshire.

A workshop on **24th July 2017** was planned to liaise with a range of stakeholders including internal colleagues from Strategic Housing, Regeneration, Planning, Council Tax and community safety along with Police and Fire to see if we have missed anything significant. It was hoped the feedback would also help with the development of the regeneration of town centers element.

The workshop aimed to identify what stakeholders do, which impacts on empty homes and if are there any other areas which are missing. The

feedback will also help with the development of the regeneration of town centres proposals.

The purpose and objectives of the workshop included:

- To increase the level of understanding / what do you know about empty homes

- To raise awareness of the refresh of the Empty Home Strategy. Enable stakeholders to receive information, participate in discussions and feed back qualitative information.

- To understand the impact of other stakeholders and the support they offer to bring empty homes back into use

- Raise awareness of the challenges; reflect on current work practices, identifying areas for improvement and change. Identify any service improvements

- Maintain and further develop partnership working to meet the objectives highlighted in the strategy.

See appendices for a full summary of the workshop activity

Town and Parish Council meeting

The Town & Parish Meeting was held on 18th July 2017 with a focus on the Local Plan consultation. The event was a drop in rather than the standard conference format and we where invited to hold a stand of information and raise awareness of the Empty Homes activity along with Neighbourhood Planning team.

The information was well received and feedback shared that the councilors had seen the communication and thought it was very positive. Information on the refresh of the strategy was shared along with the grants and loans assistance which can be offered to support.

At the event, Town & Parish Councils were very interested to learn where the empty homes are in their particular areas. There was also a question on the figures stated in the strategy. Feedback given was that previously there was a discrepancy on numbers as empty homes were included that were new homes which were not ready for occupancy / council tax charge. A request was submitted to understand if the figures have been updated.
It was also raised that the numbers quoted in the strategy did not correspond with the figures within the table in the strategy.

There were a number of requests to ask if the strategy would consider supporting housing which is lived in but not maintained.

It was also asked if the strategy would consider empty offices or businesses. Some shared that they knew developers who were interested in empty homes. There was a case study shared where public houses had been brought and the owners had refused to do anything with them as they wanted them as home. However concerns were expressed as the buildings are listed and it was felt the community still wanted it as a public house. It was reported the owners have removed all interior / stripped building. It was understood there had already had enforcement notice and applications have been made on building.

Throughout the event it was felt there were connections within the development of the local plan, neighbourhood plans and the work with empty homes and strong links should be maintained.

SCHH Overview and Scrutiny meeting

On 24th July SCHH OSC was delighted with the results of the Empty Homes Strategy. The Committee was also webcast, to hear the debate; this link will take you to where the webcast is held.

<u>**Survey**</u>

To ensure we are delivering the right service, a survey ran from **Monday, 10th July until Friday, 28th July** with the opportunity for residents and stakeholders to share their feedback and experiences on the refresh of the strategy

There were 138 responses received where the survey was available in paper format; online via the CBC website, via network opportunities like the Just Ask project and Town & Parish Council meeting. Residents, CBC staff, and elected members were informed about the survey, social media was utilised and press releases were issued to the media to raise awareness of the engagement activity with Central Bedfordshire residents.

A copy of the refresh of the Empty Homes Strategy was shared along with a survey that was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data from the tenant. The full survey feedback can be found in appendix 1.

<u>**Key themes and feedback**</u>

In summary, the majority of respondents agreed with the focus and approach to tackle empty homes. It was felt to be a positive initiative particularly in supporting the housing demand and that it should also have a focus in meeting the housing needs.

It was recognised properties may be left empty for many different reasons and direct contact with the owners is paramount to ideas for action with consideration given to why the property may be empty and assistance in resolving issues. A question was raised that if homes are privately owned,

should it be their choice. The majority of respondents felt with the current housing demand, management of existing empty housing are extremely important.

There was an emphasis to restore empty homes to help minimise the impact of ongoing development, particularly green belt areas and our countryside. Planning in town centres also provides opportunities for planning through section 215 work (improving appearance) and market towns initiatives for building improvements. There was an emphasis to consider all homes along with businesses and offices too. By tackling empty homes it was felt the work and partnerships would provide a range of outcomes including the improvements to town centres visibility and viability of businesses, raise community awareness and contribute to creating a sustainable environment and meeting housing demands.

A theme throughout the feedback was around a proactive marketing campaign, promoting and raising awareness of empty homes. It was recognised that the use of social media and using technology to promote the work was important but there was a need to offer a range of methods to reach out to the widest audience and that videos may not be the best media. To also consider more traditional methods like face to face signage, newspapers and radio as not every one uses the internet.

There was a range of methods shared including use of on-line and media outlets: website, Facebook, twitter, press releases, celebrating a 'Housing Day', working with internal stakeholders already liaising with communities and with the communities that engage themselves.

It was shared that neighbours of properties will know occupied properties and whether they are occupied infrequently enough to be classed as empty. Neighbours can help fill in gaps in council tax records. Also consider opportunities like site boards to advertise the work happening, use of Council Tax bills and working with Town & Parish Councils.
The benefits of highlighting success stories was mentioned.
A concern raised, however, was that we don't want attention from property sources, so maybe the awareness is targeted only to accredited companies / trade companies

It was also highlighted that although promotion was important and that there needs to be a stepped approach, it was also recognised that there is a need for catching properties before they reach a certain state and a need for the use of legislative tools and enforcements too. Feedback highlighted the need for councils to respond sooner, regarding the use of compulsory purchase orders and the length of time it takes to repair. It was stressed that 2 years may be too long and a more preventive approach be delivered to tackle empty homes.

Feedback shared the need to ensure the process is tight but transparent and that developers and landlords do not take advantage of the scheme. Consideration for developing partnerships and links with Trading Standards

regarding Builders lists and getting better contracts of works. This would provide high quality workmanship

The majority agreed with the proposed aims and objectives outlined in the strategy, however, there was a strong emphasis with objective 3; 'increase availability of decent housing". It was felt there was a need to enforce standards and works needs to be regulated under this policy to ensure they were "Decent Homes" and more control of standards of room size etc. The need was identified to address where properties are left empty due to high rents and affordability and to work productively with private owners and landlords to achieve the aims of the strategy to ensure the empty houses are financially viable. There was also an emphasis on supported housing demand, for groups like the military and homelessness.

The feedback included increased awareness of the service and better identification of empty properties. With suggestions of a range of methods to highlight the way this is delivered in promoting and reporting as well as developing partnerships and understanding of what each area can offer where empty properties are located, areas where more housing would be beneficial. This could also link to support from colleges and developing employment opportunities.

There was a large interest to learn where the empty homes are in particular areas. There were a number of questions raised about the reporting and figures on empty homes. There appeared to be differences with the charts and the statistics quoted in the strategy.

There was an emphasis of working with partners to tackle the challenges presented with empty homes and returning back into use, working with Neighbourhood Planning, Town & Parish Councils, Community Engagement and Town Centre regeneration managers etc. there was a desire to ensure the feedback is linked to the activities around the Local Plan. It was suggested the there should be consideration for including Gypsies and Travelers and their empty housing. There should be consideration of acquiring land / old industrial sites from businesses that hold on to bought land for years without developing.

Next steps

The revised Strategy was shared with Overview & Scrutiny in July 2017.

The feedback given by residents and other stakeholders has been collated to develop the following recommendations for consideration in the refresh of the Empty Homes Strategy:

1) **Communications and Marketing-** There was an emphasis throughout the engagement activities for more awareness and promotion of Empty Homes support and services. Feedback shared looked for a pro-active

marketing campaign that used a range of methods to reach the widest audience.

2) **Process and timeframe –** To recognise that working direct with the owner is paramount to ideas amd action. For a stepped approach, however, to consider catching properties before they reach a certain (poor condition) state and if required to use legislative tools and enforcement actions. Feedback highlighted the need for councils to respond sooner, use compulsory purchase orders and shorten the length of time it takes to repair. It was stressed that 2 years may be too long and a more preventive approach be delivered to tackle empty homes. There was a strong emphasis with objective 3 'increase availability of decent housing….'' it was felt that there was a need to enforce standards and works, and this needs to be regulated under this policy to ensure they were "Decent Homes" and more control of standards.

3) **Working with Partners –** There was recognition and emphasis of working with partners to tackle the challenges presented with empty homes and returning them back into use, working with Neighbourhood Planning, Town & Parish Councils, Community Engagement and Town Centre regeneration managers etc and well as linking to the Local Plan.

4) **Reporting and statistics** – Need to ensure it is easy and accessable to report empty homes, including increased awareness of the service and better identification of empty properties. With suggestions of a range of methods to highlight the way this is delivered in promoting and reporting as well as developing partnerships and understanding of what each area can offer, where empty properties are located, and areas where more housing would be beneficial. There was a request to share where the empty homes are in particular areas. To review the reporting and statistics on empty homes as there appeared to be differences with the charts and the statistics quoted in the strategy.

5) **Meeting Housing needs** – Need to ensure affordability in meeting housing demand. There was an emphasis to restore empty homes to help minimise the impact of ongoing development, particularly green belt areas and our countryside. Planning in town centres also provides opportunities for planning through section 215 activity and market towns initiatives for improvements. There was an emphasis to consider all homes along with businesses and offices. By tackling empty homes it was felt the work and partnerships would provide a range of outcomes including the improvements to town centres visibility and viability of businesses, raise community awareness and contribute to creating a sustainable environment and meeting housing demands.

6) **Equality and diversity** –

The engagement captured feedback from a wide range of stakeholders and this report offers opportunities to address points raised through changes to the strategy or the way in which the service is delivered.

The Action Plan also proposes to include an O&S bi annual report and reporting via the Directorate Performance Board

Business review and feedback

Communications and Marketing Recommendations;

"There was an emphasis throughout the engagement activities for more awareness and promotion of Empty Homes support and services. Feedback shared looked for a pro-active marketing campaign that used a range of methods to reach the widest audience"

Response – the draft strategy Action Plan includes the development of a Marketing Plan to promote the work of the Council around bringing empty homes back into use. It is agreed that a range of methods are required but due to resource constraints, the marketing activities have to be considered in terms of effectiveness and targeted appropriately. The support for the work of the service is welcomed but the service is discretionary and has to be considered in light of competing resources for mandatory services.

Process and Timeframe Recommendation;

"To recognise that working direct with the owner is paramount to ideas amd action. For a stepped approach, however, to consider catching properties before they reach a certain (poor condition) state and if required to use legislative tools and enforcement actions. Feedback highlighted the need for councils to respond sooner, use compulsory purchase orders (CPO) and shorten the length of time it takes to repair. It was stressed that 2 years may be too long and a more preventive approach be delivered to tackle empty homes. There was a strong emphasis with objective 3 'increase availability of decent housing…." it was felt that there was a need to enforce standards and works, and this needs to be regulated under this policy to ensure they were "Decent Homes" and more control of standards".

Response – the draft strategy includes the importance of working with empty homes owners but did not specifically include owners as Key Stakeholders in Appendix E. Owners are now included in this appendix in a revised draft of the strategy.
The concept of "catching" properties before their condition worsens is a valid argument in terms of prevention poor housing. In an ideal world, this preventative role makes sense. There is, however, an issue about where limited resources are focused. In terms of the Council's Housing Standards enforcement role, it might be expected that the "worst condition" properties should be targeted due to their greater impact on the community. This does mean, however, that costs are greater. The service will provide advice and assistance to any home owner and it would be better if this was before the property deteriorated. In summary, there has to be a balanced approach, regnising that prevention is better (and more cost effective) than cure but also

realising that poor condition properties have the greatest impact on local communities.

The Council responds to individual requests for service within a target timeframe of 3 days virtually every occasion. The Council is also ambitious in wanting to undertake a successful CPO but the timeframe is very much outside of the Council's control, other than the internal approval process. CPO is the tool of "last resort" and is significant in removing the asset from a property owner. By it's nature, Members and Senior Officers need to be satisfied that due process has been followed. This is also necessary for when a CPO is considered at a public enquiry. In response, there is a desire to proceed more quickly by those Officers providing the service and as lessons are learned, the process may be "speedied up".

In terms of standards being enforced, this is the role of the Housing Solutions team. It is agreed that there is an even greater role to ensure good (decent) standards for empty homes that are returned to use, particularly with financial assistance from the Council. Renovating an empty home to higher standards decreases ongoing maintenance costs. Appendix F outlines the different enforcement tools used as well as the assistance available to raise standards.

Working with Partners Recommendation;

"There was recognition and emphasis of working with partners to tackle the challenges presented with empty homes and returning them back into use, working with Neighbourhood Planning, Town & Parish Councils, Community Engagement and Town Centre regeneration managers etc and well as linking to the Local Plan"

Response – The draft strategy recognises the need to work with these stakeholders, who are included in appendix E. Objective 2 is specifically concerned with maintaining partnerships and it is welcomed that partners are keen on wanting to work with the Council to bring empty homes back into use. This recommendation is agreed but does not result in a change to the strategy, more so a focus on the resulting implementation plan.

Reporting and Statistics Recommendations;

"Need to ensure it is easy and accessible to report empty homes, including increased awareness of the service and better identification of empty properties. With suggestions of a range of methods to highlight the way this is delivered in promoting and reporting as well as developing partnerships and understanding of what each area can offer, where empty properties are located, and areas where more housing would be beneficial. There was a request to share where the empty homes are in particular areas. To review the reporting and statistics on empty homes as there appeared to be differences with the charts and the statistics quoted in the strategy".

Response – It is agreed that the service needs to consider different ways that people can report empty homes. A facility similar to how people can report "pot holes" might be appropriate and will be considered as part of an implementation plan.

The sharing of specific empty homes information has to be considered against Data Protection requirements. A property might be empty due to the owner being unwell or vulnerable. Officers of the Council need to consider the sharing of information more carefully.

The difference in statistics/data within the strategy is due to the differences in data being examined. There are different categories of empty property data. Since engagement, more clarity has been added to the data within the strategy as to what it refers to.

Meeting Housing needs Recommendation;

"*Need to ensure affordability in meeting housing demand. There was an emphasis to restore empty homes to help minimise the impact of ongoing development, particularly green belt areas and our countryside. Planning in town centres also provides opportunities for planning through section 215 activity and market towns initiatives for improvements. There was an emphasis to consider all homes along with businesses and offices. By tackling empty homes it was felt the work and partnerships would provide a range of outcomes including the improvements to town centres visibility and viability of businesses, raise community awareness and contribute to creating a sustainable environment and meeting housing demands*".

Response – The Council's Housing Assistance policy provides a greater level of assistance (as an incentive) for owners willing to provide accommodation at affordable levels. This would be discussed in negotiations with owners who might be looking for such assistance from the Council.

It is unlikely, however, that empty homes activity will completely remove the need for further development to meet housing needs, which are significant. Bringing empty homes back into use is complimentary and may reduce some impact on new house building but is unlikely to replace the need to build new homes. It is not the intention of the Empty Homes strategy to become involved in discussion about new homes development, location, quantity etc.

The contribution towards regeneration of town centres is recognised in the new strategy. Any success that empty homes work has towards regeneration of town centres will be shared (and celebrated) but considered also as learning for future activity.

Appendices

Reports from engagement activities:

Stakeholder workshop

Workshop.pdf

Survey

170622 Empty
Homes Strategy refre

Survey feedback

Survey Feedback.pdf

Central Bedfordshire

A great place to live and work