EXECUTIVE

26th June 2012

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

1.1 This report provides a brief overview of the Empty Homes Consultative Draft Strategy and associated Action Plan, which has been developed for 2012-17.

1.2 The report provides a background to the development of the Empty Homes Strategy and how it is proposed to address the issues surrounding empty properties over the next five years and would seek Member endorsement to undertake a 3-month public consultation exercise.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 I recommend that Executive approves the publication of the Empty Homes Draft Strategy and Associated Action Plan.
THE EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

3.1 The Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan have been produced to focus on issues associated with empty private sector housing properties in the Scottish Borders. The strategy has been developed to highlight key issues and priorities for the Council in relation to tackling empty properties and bringing them back into use.

3.2 The Strategy aligns with the Local Housing Strategy 2012-17 (LHS) vision that ‘every person in the Scottish Borders has a home which is secure, affordable, in good condition, energy efficient, where they can live independently and be part of a vibrant community’.

3.3 Addressing issues surrounding the number of empty properties in the Borders assists Scottish Borders Council in meeting its strategic housing objectives outlined in the 2012-2017 LHS.

3.4 The attached Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan:

(a) Provides information on the development of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan
(b) Highlights the national and local strategic contexts that have informed the development of the strategy
(c) Incorporates a wide range of sources to provide key information on empty homes in the Scottish Borders, including the Council’s Local Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Council Tax data and an Empty Properties Survey in order that the strategy’s objectives and targets are evidence-based.

4. The Development of the Strategy

4.1 The Strategy aims to supplement housing supply within the Scottish Borders by making better use of existing homes through reducing the number of empty properties. This should help ease the pressure on the housing stock.

(a) The Strategy aims to:

i. Make it easier for property owners to bring empty homes back into use
ii. Set clear targets for reducing the number of empty homes
iii. Improve housing standards
iv. Create homes for people in housing need
v. Create greater choice for prospective tenants
vi. Increase Housing Supply
vii. Improve the environment; and
viii. Raise the profile of empty homes

4.2 The objectives ensure that empty homes issues are appropriately contextualised and integrated with the wider aims and objectives of the LHS and linked to national and local outcomes and priorities.

4.3 The Strategy provides definition of ‘what is an empty home’ and identifies a wide range of reasons why properties may become empty. The majority of private homes are most likely to become vacant when the previous occupant died, moved to hospital or was evicted or repossessed. In
addition an unwillingness to let is also a major barrier.

4.4 Benefits to properties being brought back into use potentially include:

(a) Increasing housing supply for both social and private occupiers which can assist SBC in meeting it’s strategic housing objectives
(b) An environmentally friendly solution to meeting housing need.
(c) Cost savings to the public sector.
(d) Financial benefits for the owner
(e) Improving community pride, well being and sustainability

4.5 The Strategy provides a structured approach to information gathering and strategic thinking about empty private homes It examines future Housing Need and Demand in the Borders and issues surrounding future supply.

4.6 Supply projections are not going to be able to address demand within the local housing system, and there will continue to be a large and increasing level of unmet need for affordable housing across the region. Given the continuing pressure in the housing market and need for more effective supply, we need to make the best use of existing stock

4.7 In respect to housing, the Council’s overarching priorities are to reduce homelessness and increase the availability of decent and affordable housing for local residents, something that addressing the empty homes issue can help facilitate.

(a) Currently 2% [1197] of private dwellings in the Borders are categorised as long term empty. This is double the national average which is just under 1%.

(b) The areas with the highest level of empty properties are Galashiels and Hawick - which also equates to areas of high unmet housing need.

4.8 A postal survey of empty properties was carried out over December 2011 and January 2012 with a 39% response rate.

(a) Key points arising from the survey include:

i. Half of empty properties are found within the central area
ii. 55% are houses and a further 24% are flats
iii. Almost half of respondents said the standard of the property was ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’
iv. A quarter are trying to sell the property
v. Grants for renovations and repairs would be the most welcome solution
vi. Half would prefer assistance to come from the Local Authority
vii. Almost half don’t know how long it will take for the property to become occupied again

4.9 A summary of key issues are outlined within the Empty Homes Strategy.

4.10 Five primary aims and objectives are outlined in the Action Plan. The overall aim is: ‘to reduce the number of long term empty homes in the region’
4.10.1 Aim 1: To identify empty homes by collecting relevant, accurate and up to date information

Development and improvement of our baseline information will be achieved through the maintenance of a database of all empty homes using information from Council Tax data and other qualitative and quantitative data sources, supported by information from owners and other individuals to help us to prioritise & target our actions.

4.10.2 Aim 2: Raise Awareness on the issue of empty homes

Raising awareness of the empty homes issue in the Scottish Borders is crucial to the successful implementation of this strategy. An understanding and commitment to tackle the issues associated with empty homes and to promote the benefits of returning empty homes back into use is key.

4.10.3 Aim 3: To Assess empty homes to determine their priority for action

(a) With increasing resource constraints and the changing nature of empty properties it is important to focus efforts on those areas of the Borders with the greatest concentrations of empty homes and high levels of unmet affordable housing demand.

(b) A prioritisation matrix to better target resources will be developed considering such factors as location, affordability, length of time the property has been empty, impact on neighbourhood and other variables.

4.10.4 Aim 4: To develop effective options and incentives to bring empty property back into use

Actions that are taken to bring an empty home back into use will depend upon the principal reasons for it being empty. A Coordinated approach will help us to establish the most realistic and appropriate actions. The Action Plan explores specific options in further detail.

4.10.5 Aim 5: To address empty properties that are in dereliction or disrepair

The guidance to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 requires the Council to lead a marked improvement in the quality of private housing in their areas. The action plan outlines the intention to develop specific policies and procedures for addressing the issue of empty homes. SBC will also consider whether any enforcement action is appropriate and value for money and identify potential enforcement measures.

5 ACTION PLAN

5.1 The Action Plan and Performance Indictors provide a more detailed description of the specific aims and objectives to address the problem of empty properties in the region. Many of the Actions identified in the
Strategy are hard to quantifiably measure, however a number of key indicators have been identified to help monitor performance and effectiveness of the Strategy.

6  IMPLICATIONS

6.1  Financial

(a) There is no direct financial implication but delivery of the Strategy is dependent on SBC’s continuous provision of core services, financial resource allocations from Scottish Government, the Council’s Affordable Housing Budget (2nd Homes/Council Tax) and developer contributions arising from the Council’s Affordable Housing Policy, partner agencies and private individuals.

(b) However, where there are specific actions considered as having a resource implication for the Council, Officers will bring back proposals to Council as they arise over the period of the strategy.

(c) The Council’s Affordable Housing Investment Budget is often referred to as the Council Tax/2nd Homes Budget which is funded through the Council’s decision to reduce the Council Tax discount to 10% in certain cases. This budget is used to support the delivery of Affordable Housing and could be used to tackle long term empty homes. When long term empty homes are brought back into use, 100% of the income will go to the Council as Council tax income.

(d) Scottish Government is supporting the Shelter led Empty Homes Partnership and through this initiative the Council is part funding an Empty Homes Officer post for a twelve month period in concert with East Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway Councils.

6.2  Risk and Mitigations

(a) Delivery of the Empty Homes Strategy, Action plan aims and key actions are largely dependent upon a number of variables most of which relate to resource and other political, personal and organisational decision making processes beyond the control of the Council.

(b) Notwithstanding the above risks it is anticipated that the Council will adopt a Partnership working approach in order to address long term empty homes.

6.3  Equalities

A Rapid Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out on this proposal and it is anticipated that there are no adverse equality implications. As a full EIA has been undertaken on the Local Housing Strategy (2012-17), the overarching strategy to this document, and no adverse impacts were identified, it was concluded a full EIA was not required for this specific proposal.

6.4  Acting Sustainably

(a) The Empty Homes Strategy contributes to developing sustainable communities. Empty homes are generally not maintained and can often impact on the built environment and on quality of life.

(b) Reducing the number of empty properties reduces opportunities for
crime, vandalism, squatting, arson and other antisocial behaviour, which can result in neighbouring properties becoming devalued.

(c) For the owner, an empty home represents the loss of an economic opportunity via rent or a capital. In addition the owner may be paying council tax, insurance and maintenance costs. Improved income to the owner is increased income in the local economy.

(d) On an economic level there is lost spend in the local community as a result of one less family or tenant in the property.

(e) There are no adverse economic, social or environmental effects resulting from the proposed Empty Homes Strategy.

6.5 Carbon Management

There will be no impact on the Council’s carbon emissions.

6.6 Rural Proofing

A Rural Proofing Exercise has been completed for the Strategy. It identifies a range of positive impacts for rural communities.

6.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes to be made.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 The Chief Financial Officer, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, the Head of Audit and Risk and the Clerk to the Council have been consulted and their comments have been incorporated in the report.

7.2 This is a consultative draft document which will be widely distributed to a range of individuals, organisations and available to the general public.

7.3 In addition there will be extensive internal consultation throughout various Council departments.

Approved by Acting Director of Social Work

Signature .................................................................

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Background Papers: The Council Tax (Discount for Unoccupied Dwellings (Scotland) Regulations 2005
Guidance from Scottish Executive 13 December 2005
“Guidance on Local Authority Discretion to reduce Council Tax discount on second homes and long-term empty properties”

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Diane Milne can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at Social Work, Council HQ, Newtown St. Boswells, Melrose, TD6 OSA