

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL  
CABINET – 6 FEBRUARY 2023

Recommendation from the Cabinet Housing Panel on 26 January 2023:

19. EMPTY HOMES POLICY

Report of the Service Director (Resident and Neighbourhood) which proposes the introduction of a policy to outline how the council will deal with empty homes.

The recommendation is for the panel to review the draft policy with a view to a public consultation taking place. Although not a legal requirement to do so, it would be good practice to undertake a public consultation on the draft policy.

The Empty Homes Policy only relates to privately owned or privately rented homes and not social or council housing. There has not previously been an Empty Homes Policy as it was not considered necessary, but due to seeing an increase in empty properties there is a need for a policy to utilise certain enforcement powers like Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

As of December 2022, there were 961 empty properties in the borough; one third of which are second homes. Over 100 of the 961 homes have been empty for two or more years (this is about 20 more properties than in July 2022).

Empty properties are considered nationally as a wasted housing resource and can lead to issues with antisocial behaviour and detriment to the visual amenity of the neighbourhood. In most cases, the council work with owners to try to bring empty homes into use by negotiation and may only need to resort to formal action in a small number of cases where the properties are of concern.

If approved by the panel, then the council plan to undertake a consultation for one month. This will be advertised via the website, social media and through the PAL scheme. The consultation responses will be online, but residents would be able to request a hard copy of the consultation to complete and return if needed. Once the consultation is concluded officers will report back on the feedback, with recommendations.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- A question was raised in regard to Council Tax implications on privately owned empty properties. Officers clarified that after a two-year period empty properties have a 200% council tax increase placed upon them. The council may lose some income if a property is brought back into use, but this is preferable over any ASB issues arising from an empty property.
- Officers clarified that the consultation will be communicated to residents using social media and the council website. It is the intention for the public to complete the consultation online via the website and make hard copies available for those who request them.
- Members noted that this policy will be helpful as it is currently difficult to do anything to address properties that are falling into disrepair without a policy in place. Members said it is important that this is used as a last resort, and to try and engage with the homeowner beforehand, as there could be a variety

reasons why property is left empty. It will be interesting to see what feedback is received and it good that the consultation will also include landlords.

- Officers confirmed the council do have Compulsory Purchase Powers. Members asked that under Compulsory Purchase Orders would these properties be repurposed as social housing as this is not stated in the policy. Officers said there may be situations where that may not be appropriate. There is a separate policy on high-value properties which, if a property is over double the average for the Borough, the council would seek to dispose of that property.
- Members noted that in the report it says officers have looked at whether to offer a grant, but it was viewed that there are more favourable low interest rate loans available from the banks. Members asked that with the interest rate increase would this now be reconsidered as part of the consultation. Officers said that at the moment this is not being considered, but it is something that can be put into the consultation document. This would mean having to change our grants policy to include that, and to reflect on that if there was enough feedback from the consultation to suggest this would be helpful.

**RESOLVED (Unanimous)**

- (1) That members recommend approving the draft Empty Homes Policy to go out to public consultation.
- (2) That the draft empty homes policy will be presented again to the Cabinet Housing Panel for consideration following the public consultation.

The reports of the Cabinet Housing Panel can be viewed in full here:

<https://democracy.welhat.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=265&MId=1521&Ver=4>