

Briefing Note: Exmoor LCN Housing Working Group – November 2023

To: Exmoor LCN Housing Working Group Members

From: Steve Perry - Empty Homes Officer, Somerset Council (currently covering the areas of the former Somerset West and Taunton Council)

Background

I received an email from Colin McDonald who informed me that Exmoor LCN had set up a housing working group and that empty homes is a topic which might be discussed. One of the queries is what is Somerset Council doing about empty properties?

This briefing note will help outline what the Council is currently doing.

The Strategic Approach to Dealing with Empty Homes

The authority's primary approach to tackling the issue of empty properties is to work with the owners to encourage them to bring properties back into use voluntarily. In cases where properties are still empty for a significant length of time (without good reason) enforcement options might be used. The options are not only limited to those shown below:

- **Enforced Sale** – Enforced Sales allow local authorities to force the sale of a property to recover debts. Debts may be secured either against a property or a person.
- **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)** – Compulsory Purchase Orders allow local authorities to apply to the Secretary of State for the purchase of properties that have been empty for a minimum of 6 months.
- **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)** – Empty Dwelling Management Orders allow local authorities to secure occupation and responsible management of privately owned houses and flats.

Enforcement action really is a last resort particularly with reference to CPOs and EDMOs which can be expensive to see through. The one exception about enforcement is when there are environmental health issues (vermin) and building control issues (tiles coming off roofs, walls collapsing). These need to be dealt with at once because they could be a risk to members of the public. These are dealt with by the other teams working with the Empty Homes Officer. However, they rarely resolve the long-term issue of the property being empty. They are simply a short-term intervention about public safety.

Council Tax Premium

Properties that have been empty for more than two years must pay an empty property premium, charged at 100 percent. This means owners of these properties will have to pay, in total, a 200 percent charge. For example, if a property was normally charged £1500 a year, after two years this figure would increase to a charge of £3000 (doubling the council tax paid).

From April 1st, 2020, a premium of 200 percent was added for properties kept empty for between 5 and 10 years (tripling the council tax charge) and from April 1st, 2021, 300 percent was applied for properties continuously empty for more than 10 years (quadrupling the council tax charge).

The Role of the Empty Homes Officer

As the Empty Homes Officer, I continue to collaborate with owners to bring empties back into use, using council tax data to find potential owners and approaching them to offer information, advice and guidance. I now work five days a week and have done since 1st March 2019.

An annual 'Empty Property Review Form' is sent out every summer to known empty property owners. Previously, this has supplied excellent data to update our system and reduce the number of empties recorded on it. This survey was suspended this July due to the council's transformation into becoming a Unitary authority. Hopefully this valuable survey will commence again next year.

On a day-to-day basis, I'm involved in database management, empty property visits and most importantly direct contact with owners (face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails and letters).

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