

Briefing on Empty Homes

Homes PDG January 2017



1.0 Introduction

The private sector housing team has implemented an empty homes plan which aims to focus on those properties that have an adverse effect on the local community and have been empty for two years or more.

The main objectives of this plan are:

- To regenerate areas where empty homes are having an adverse effect on the community
- To maximise the use of the districts existing housing stock
- To provide more homes to meet the demand for affordable housing
- To alleviate the pressure on the Councils own housing stock
- To improve the visual impact of derelict and eyesore properties.

These objectives link to Mid Devon District Councils corporate plan 2016-20 which has four main priorities concentrating on economy, homes, community and environment. The empty homes work relates directly to these priorities and in particular to economy and homes. There is a target within the corporate plan to bring 15 empty homes back into use each year.

Economy - Improving and regenerating our town centres

The private sector housing team contributes to this priority by:

- Intervening in empty homes,
- Ensuring that flats over shops are safe for occupation, and

Homes – Facilitating the housing growth that Mid Devon needs, including affordable homes

The team contributes to this by:

- Bringing empty homes back into use as housing across the various tenures including private rented, affordable rent and home ownership.
- Providing loans to assist landlords, home owners and empty home owners to improve their properties, carry out essential repairs and install energy efficiency measures.

2.0 Approach

Council tax data has been obtained which identifies the addresses of the long term empty homes across the district. Those properties that have been empty for two years or more have been plotted on a map (below) to identify if there is a pattern or 'clustering' of properties. This map has formed the basis of the initial inspection programme which aims to prioritise the properties for action based on the condition of the property and its impact on the community.

When a property is confirmed to be vacant, it will be subject to a priority assessment based on a number of factors. These include:

- Condition of the property: Appearance (the degree to which the premises are unsightly and detrimental to the area, including matters such as decorative repair, rubbish accumulations and overgrown vegetation); General condition (physical condition of the premises, both internal and external; for example, whether the building is in an uninhabitable condition);
- Community impact: Crime and anti-social behaviour (historic and future risk; including arson, trespass, squatting, fly-tipping and graffiti); Prominence (property size and location; for example, whether the property is in a high profile location seen by many, or down a side street only ever seen by very few if any people); Physical effect (whether the condition of the property is causing damage to other residential buildings; for example, whether the roof is leaking to such an extent that water penetration has begun to affect neighbouring homes);
- Time vacant (the length of time the property has been empty).
- Whether there have been complaints about the property

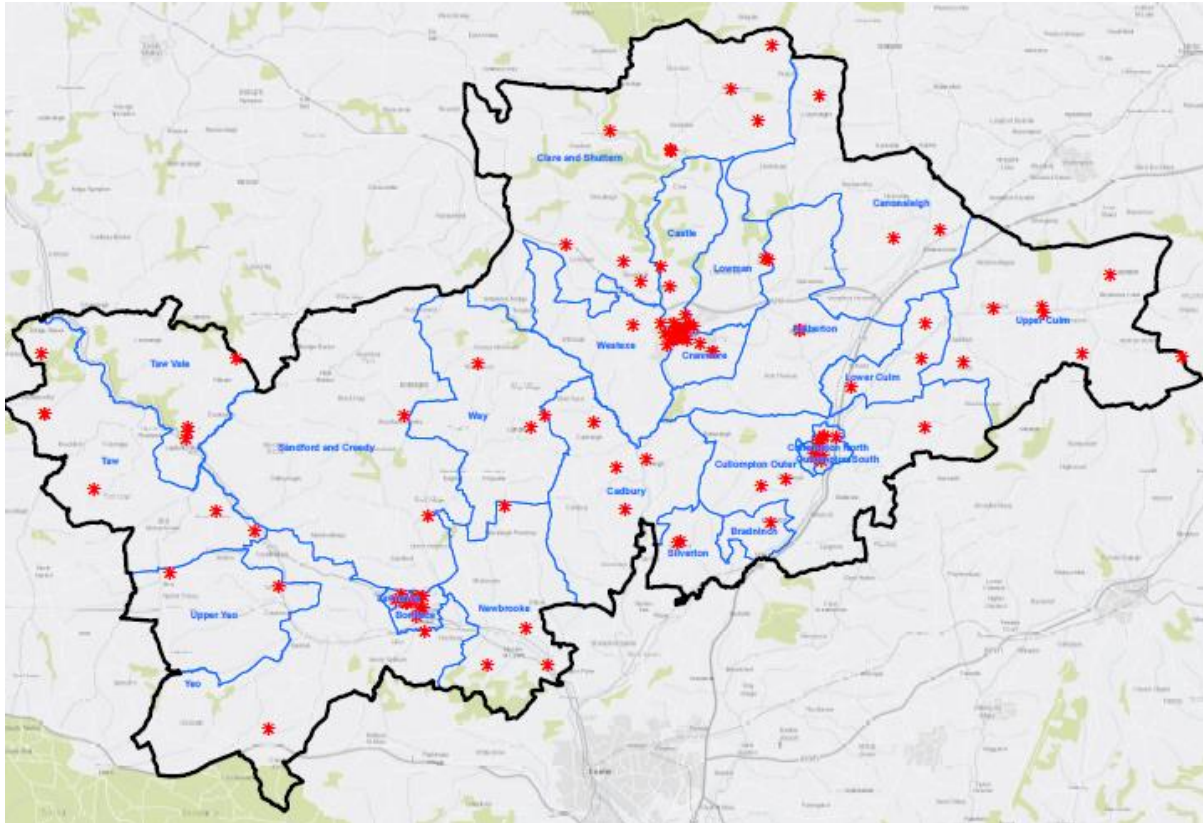
For each category, the property will be assessed as having no effect, minor impact or a major impact. Based on the assessment, points are awarded for each category.

The points awarded are totalled and each property is given an overall score, with the maximum score being 90. The overall score is then placed into one of three bandings, namely:

- High (Red) priority = 40 and over;
- Medium (Amber) priority = 25-39;
- Low (Green) priority = 24 or less

Any empty residential property given a High rating will usually be recommended for enforcement action should informal intervention be unsuccessful. Properties given a Medium rating may also be considered for such action.

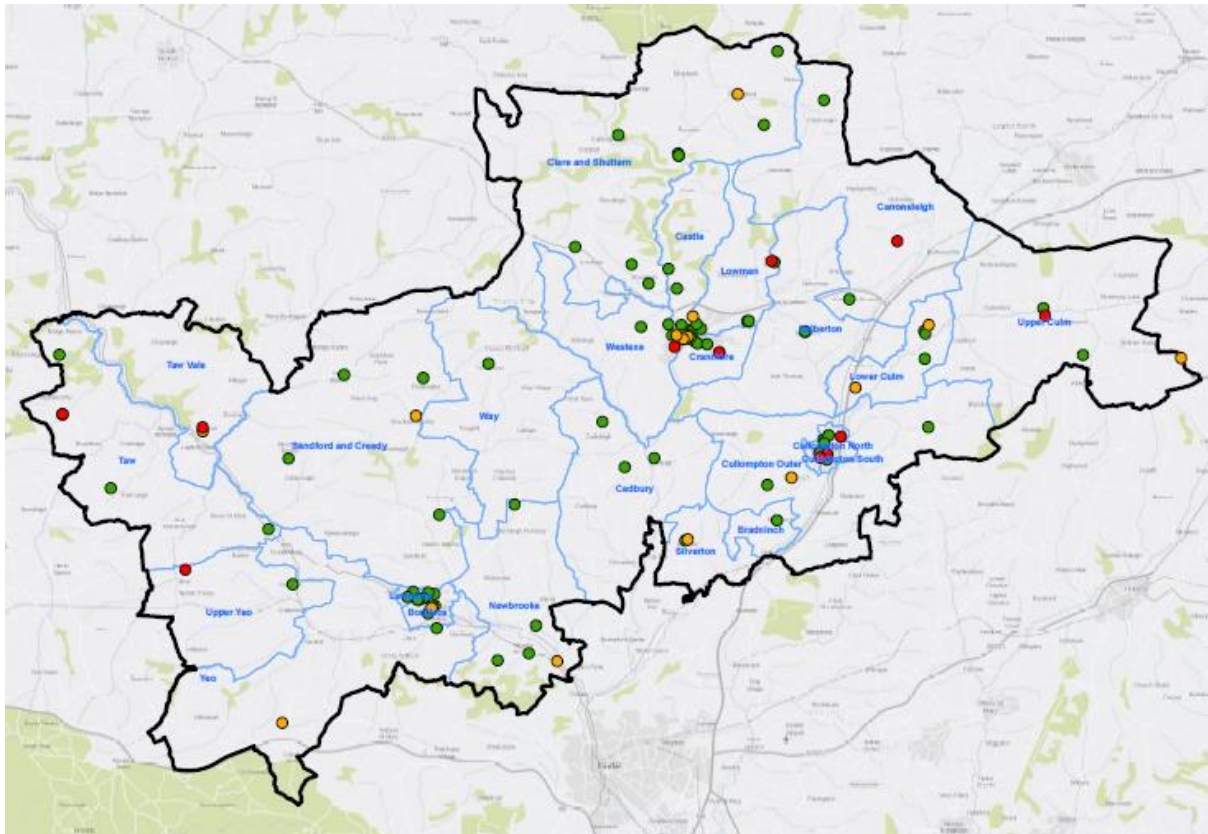
Properties given a Low priority are unlikely to be subject to enforcement action unless there are particular circumstances that render such action in the public interest.



Map showing council tax data of all properties that have been empty for 2 years or more as of September 2016.

During October 2016 the team undertook an intensive inspection programme to visit all those properties mapped above. These inspections were carried out by officers across the public health team and with assistance from council tax officers. 132 properties were visited, of which, 12 properties were identified as a high priority (red), 23 were medium priority (amber) and 84 were low priority (green) 13 properties were either occupied or inaccessible.

The 12 high priority properties are now been targeted for action and an initial letter has been sent to the owners requesting they make contact with the private sector housing team by the end of January 2017. At which point further intervention will be considered.



Map showing the location of the long term empty properties that have been prioritised as high (red), medium (amber) or low (green) priority.

3.0 Options for intervention

There are a number of options available to the council to tackle empty homes and no single type of action fits all circumstances.

The private sector housing team are developing a toolkit of options that range from informal assistance through to enforcement action.

The team are currently working on the following initiatives:

- Partnerships with local Letting Agents, Estate Agents, and auction houses.
- Potential for lease-repair schemes and/or purchase-repair schemes
- Promoting the loan scheme.

The team are also exploring enforcement options such as:

- The compulsory purchase of the land or building concerned to ensure that the site is brought back into use;
- Following the service of a statutory notice, the carrying out of works-in-default to improve property conditions. This would result in the placing of a charge on the

property to secure the repair costs as a debt. This debt can be registered with the land registry as a first charge and therefore has priority for repayment;

- The enforced sale of a property, as a means of recovering any debt owed to the council (such as a debt resulting from works-in-default).

4.0 Next steps

- In 2017 the team will focus on the highest priority properties in an attempt to bring those back into use.
- In November an email to update all ward councillors on empty homes activity was sent out. There was also a request asking for information on any known empty properties that are causing problems in the community for the team to check our records and then visit and prioritise as necessary.
- The team will continue to review the empty property list held by council tax for any changes on a monthly basis.
- The properties that have been empty for 6 months to 2 years will also be mapped and visited in stages to be prioritised.

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