

COMMUNITY HOUSING AND ASSETS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	13 th October 2021
Report Subject	Progress of Empty Homes Scheme in Flintshire
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Planning and Public Protection
Report Author	Chief Officer – Planning, Environment & Economy
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welsh Government launched the Houses into Homes scheme in April 2012 to help tackle the substantial numbers of empty homes in Wales. The scheme is supported by a Wales-wide £20million recyclable loan fund which provides loans to bring empty houses or commercial buildings back into use as homes for sale or rent.

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an insight of how this scheme works in Flintshire, and outline the work undertaken since January 2019 when Community and Business Protection Service began to manage the scheme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	To note and support the contents of the report.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND TO EMPTY HOMES AND THE 'HOUSES INTO HOMES' SCHEME
1.01	Welsh Government launched the Houses into Homes scheme in April 2012 to help tackle the substantial numbers of empty homes in Wales. The

	<p>scheme is supported by a Wales-wide £20million recyclable loan fund which provides loans to bring empty houses or commercial buildings back into use as homes for sale or rent.</p>
1.02	<p>The loans are interest free and are available to individuals, charities, companies and businesses. A maximum loan of £35,000 is available per property and this has to be paid back within two or five years, depending on whether the property is sold or let. The scheme is operated by individual local authorities though they work together in regional groups to ensure a consistent approach.</p>
1.03	<p>In 2016 a joint Steering Group was established by Welsh Government to monitor and review the Houses into Homes Scheme and Home Improvement Loans Scheme. The group meets on a quarterly basis with membership from the WLGA, Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities.</p>
2.00	OVERVIEW OF THE FLINTSHIRE SCHEME
2.01	<p>Since early 2019 the scheme has been managed and administered by the Empty Homes Development Officer, who is based within the Community and Business Protection Services. His role entails:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining the register for the Empty Home Loans; • Assessing the eligibility of applications, including eligibility of the property; • Liaising with Legal Services to ensure awards of loans are legally binding; • Monitoring the work undertaken by applicants; • Signing off works undertaken by the property owner; • Collaborating with other portfolios and services including Planning and Building Control; • Identifying suitable properties through research; • If capacity allows, project management of property improvement ; • Enforcement action, if appropriate
2.02	<p>Due to the increasing demands on the Empty Homes Development Officer, in September 2021 a Contracts Inspector was appointed on a fixed term basis for twelve months. The focus of this new post is primarily to undertake monitoring and compliance checks of schemes that have commenced. The postholder also investigates properties that have been identified through the Council Tax Register as being empty.</p>
2.03	<p>The benefits of this scheme to Flintshire are significant. The outcomes supported by this service is consistent with the aspirations of key strategies such as the Housing Strategy and the Council Plan. 'Affordable and Accessible Housing' is a theme that is featured in the Council Plan, with 'Empty Properties' being an in-year priority area. Bringing properties back into use reduces the housing deficit for the county.</p>
2.04	<p>Flintshire has approximately 400 long term empty properties. This number has been calculated based on Council Tax records.</p>

2.05	The Empty Property Loan is provided to help owners bring empty properties back in to use. It is an interest free loan product to cover works which bring the property up to the Decent Homes Standard. An example would be, works to remedy serious disrepair, provide modern kitchen and bathroom facilities, improve heating systems and insulation, and to remove any serious hazards which could affect the well-being of the occupier, such as dampness, dangerous stairs or electrical wiring. The maximum amount is £35,000 per unit of accommodation (£250,000 per applicant maximum).
2.06	To be eligible for a loan an applicant must have sufficient equity within their property to cover the loan amount/or offer a different property with sufficient equity for security. In addition the property must have been vacant for over six months. On completion of the works, the property must be habitable and of a lettable standard (no category 1 hazards, as defined by the Housing Act 2004).
2.07	In terms of performance since April 2019, the following has been achieved by the Service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £930,000 has been provided in loans • This has created 38 units of accommodation, from 21 applications <p>In addition, through the work of the Empty Homes Development Officer two additional properties have gone through the enforced sales procedure (the first in September 2020, and the second in July 2021).</p> <p>Currently there are three further applications that are being evaluated, which could represent a further £117,000 in loans.</p>
2.08	The Welsh Government have made an additional £15m available for local authorities to tackle complex, long term, empty properties. To support this work, Welsh Government has commissioned specialist consultants to work with authorities to provide bespoke advice. In July 2021 a number of officers from a range of portfolios participated in training provided by the aforementioned consultants.
2.09	At present the Empty Homes Development Officer is reviewing each application as they come to his attention. The appointment of a Contracts Inspector has freed up greater capacity.
	If Members are concerned about an empty property in their ward please send details to: emptyhomes@flintshire.gov.uk .

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	None as a result of this report.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	Impact assessment is not required as this is a report on progress and is for information only, and is not a strategic report.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
4.01	None as a result of this report.

5.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
5.01	None as a result of this report although each application is assessed on its own merits.

6.00	APPENDICES
6.01	The refreshed Council Plan for 2021-23 can be found using the following link: https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/Resident/Council-and-Democracy/Council-Plan.aspx

7.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
7.01	Contact Officer: Sian Jones, Community and Business Protection Manager Telephone: 01352 702132 E-mail: sian-jones@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	CATERGORY 1 HAZARDS Category 1 Hazards are defined by the Housing Act 2004. These are the hazards that are the most serious, and could potentially lead to serious harm or death. The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) is the method by which hazards are identified.