

Empty Homes

The Federation of Bath Residents Associations (FoBRA - which represents more than 5,000 residents through more than 30 individual associations) has come out strongly in favour of our Council's policy proposals to update and increase the actions that can be taken to bring empty properties back into use as homes, whether private sector, affordable homes or social rented homes.

A report currently before the Cabinet of Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES) says a majority of the shorter term empty properties will be bought back into use without the need for intervention, but by offering support and advice early on, the Council can help empty property owners who are overwhelmed by the issues of dealing with an empty property. There are, presently, some 587 properties that have been empty for more than six months, with 153 of them empty for two years or more. The current Empty Homes Policy was adopted in 2013 and focused on properties that had been empty for two years or more. Since its adoption, 317 long-term empty properties have been brought back into use with almost a third of them, 98, brought back into use over the past two years. This is all good news for which our Council should be applauded. It seems there is, though, more that can be done.

The new policy also seeks to use Community Protection Notices (CPN) and formal warning letters to force engagement with owners of nuisance empty properties. We are told that CPNs are being used with good effect by other local authorities to tackle problem empty homes, who report a 95% success rate in terms of engagement and compliance. Success in B&NES, and particularly in the City of Bath, could make a significant difference to our local housing shortage, especially for affordable and social housing. The council is also considering targeted action on empty properties that can be used for affordable rented housing. This would be done through identifying suitable properties and grant funding for registered housing providers to acquire properties, with appropriate enforcement action to ensure the sale if needed.

The report states that the council's Empty Property Officer and the Council Tax Service will identify and investigate council tax fraud such as the wrongful claim of Single Persons' Discount, and non-payment of the Empty Property Premium. Empty properties that are the cause of nuisance or significant complaint or are considered as an appropriate addition to the affordable housing supply will be prioritised and action plans created for each so resource and officer time can be effectively targeted at the highest priority cases.

FoBRA's Chairman, Robin Kerr, commented: "It should come as no surprise that FoBRA is backing the Council on this issue. We have long campaigned for more and better use of empty properties. Supporting and, where necessary, enforcing owners to bring properties back into housing use is cheaper, quicker and more effective than building from scratch, ensuring that communities do not die."

Mr Kerr went on to say "We have one suggestion and one wider concern : we suggest that the Council, as a significant property owner with Bath's retail core, should work harder on its own properties to bring empty and unused upper floors over shops back into residential use; and we are concerned by the continued growth of unregulated holiday lets, and of party houses. These party houses are regularly unoccupied during the week but let out to hen parties and other visitors only at the weekend, in many cases for up to 20 guests in one house, and often operating with only a residential planning consent, when they are in reality a business. Sometimes they are paying neither Council Tax nor Business Rates. In a small city like Bath, such hollowing out of the city centre, or 'doughnut effect', can only have a detrimental effect on the city centre residential community, which we and many others, including Council Leaders, simply deplore".