

(CCC) Empty Homes

I am very concerned about the shortage of affordable housing in the city and have a number of questions about empty houses that I hope you could answer.

1. According to the council website, Cambridge is concerned about empty properties and has engaged with the national campaign to bring empty properties back into use.

Did any specific activities take place this February?

2. Does the council routinely contact owners of long standing empty homes? For example, there is a terraced house near to me in Canterbury Street that has been vacant for at least 8 years. Can I assume the Empty Homes officer knows about it and has contacted the owner at some point? I assume the council has been collecting double council tax for this property. It would be ironic if they had been missing out on double if not triple payments. It does rather look like the council prefers to sit back and collect the extra tax if there have been no attempts to put tenants back into this property.

3. I have wondered for years why certain buildings have remained empty for so long. For example, there is a terraced house at 78 Castle Street next to the Area cafe that has been empty and a complete eyesore for 20 years plus. A few doors down from the eyesore are the offices of a solicitors firm that moved out about 4 years ago. Are there plans for a development of these buildings? Is this why they are just sitting there deteriorating after all this time. It seems such a complete waste when there are so many people desperate for accommodation.

4. Could there be a register of empty properties that can be viewed?

I would be most grateful for an explanation of how your department works.

Response

I am very concerned about the shortage of affordable housing in the city and have a number of questions about empty houses that I hope you could answer.

1. According to the council website, Cambridge is concerned about empty properties and has engaged with the national campaign to bring empty properties back into use. Did any specific activities take place this February?

This year we published a press release to mark Empty Homes Week:

<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/news/2021/02/15/council-helps-put-vacant-properties-in-cambridge-back-into-use>. The public do respond to this and we got various referrals of suspected empty properties through the City Council website which we are currently investigating.

Unfortunately, in February 2021, due to the COVID-19 lockdown in place at the time it was not possible to carry out anything more pro-active as we have done in the past. Previously we have organised a consultation surgery and invited empty property owners to attend.

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I understand your concern with regard to empty properties. We advise members of the public to alert us straight away to any home they perceive to be unoccupied. It is easy and quick to do this via the link on our website:

<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/empty-homes>

Following a referral of any private empty property we immediately work on finding and contacting the owner of that property to begin working with them to return the property to use. Our initial approach is to write to property owners advising we are aware of their empty home; we include a questionnaire for them to complete which informs us of the reasons for the property remaining unoccupied. This procedure can vary in length and can also end in enforced action being taken by the City Council when it becomes apparent the owner is not willing to work with us or on their own to return the property to use.

With regards to Council Tax, a premium charge can only be imposed on dwellings that are substantially unfurnished and have been empty for over two years.

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We appreciate your concern over long term empty properties, we do follow up each and every referral we receive. The best thing to do is to advise the City Council of any property you believe to be empty through the website, as described above.

It is not in the remit of the empty homes officer to work with commercial properties. It is possible for members of the public to access the Planning Portal to find out if there are any pending planning applications for particular properties:

<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/view-and-comment-on-a-planning-application>

4. Could there be a register of empty properties that can be viewed? I would be most grateful for an explanation of how your department works.

I am afraid there cannot be a register of empty properties which is open to the public. I can confirm the City Council does hold this information, however this information is exempt under sections 31(1)(a).

Under section 31(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act, an exemption applies where disclosure would be likely to prejudice the prevention or detection of crime. Disclosure of information of empty residential properties could provide an opportunity for criminal acts to be committed, either through crimes against property, anti-social behaviour or identity fraud.

In line with the terms of this exemption in the Freedom of Information Act, we have

also considered whether it would be in the public interest for us to provide you with the information, despite the exemption being applicable.

Public interest considerations favouring disclosure:

- There is an inherent interest within the Freedom of Information Act that public disclosure promotes better government through transparency and accountability.
- This information may add to local discourse surrounding housing shortages or help bring properties back into use.

Public interest considerations favouring withholding the information:

- Empty properties are vulnerable to illegal occupation or other forms of anti-social behaviour which will affect not just the owners but also any nearby residents.
- Cambridge is an area of high levels of identity fraud (CIFAS UK fraud trends report 2014), publishing of excessive identifying information could facilitate identity theft.

In this case we have concluded that the public interest favours withholding the information. Although there is public interest in this matter, disclosure of this information may pose a risk to property, the property owners and also any neighbouring communities.

There is a real risk that this information could be used for fraudulent activity and the disclosure of this ready collated information increases that risk of prejudice to the prevention of crime, in the form of criminal damage to property and squatting, arson and anti-social behaviour.

There is also a strong public interest in avoiding personal distress to the victims of crime and in relation to damage to properties those in the neighbourhood may be negatively affected. The risk of prejudice to the prevention and protection of crime ranging from anti-social behaviour to identity fraud at significant public expense means the public interest in avoiding prejudice and maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

The Empty Homes Policy is available on the City Council website. You can find it here: <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/search/?q=empty+homes+policy>. This gives an overall explanation of how the City Council works to bring empty homes back into use. We also work closely with Town Hall Lettings to contribute to the pool of affordable housing in the City: <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/find-private-rented-accommodation>

We aim to provide a quality service to you and hope that you are satisfied with this response, if you have any questions please contact us.

Further queries on this matter should be directed to foi@cambridge.gov.uk
