

Newton St Cyres Parish Council

Position on Empty Homes – for Discussion

Background on Council Tax Regulations for Empty Homes

In line with Government policy¹, Mid-Devon District Council's stated policy is to charge additional Council Tax on homes that are empty and substantially unfurnished for a period of time². Whether or not MDDC actually implements this policy is another matter. According to their policy, CT payable under these rules is as follows:

Empty under 3 months:		No CT payable
Empty more than 3 months:		1 x CT
Empty more than 2 years:	Standard CT + 100% premium =	2 x CT
Empty more than 5 years:	Standard CT + 200% premium =	3 x CT
Empty more than 10 years:	Standard CT + 300% premium =	4 x CT

(there are discounts in certain situations, such as for properties deemed uninhabitable or being refurbished to make them habitable).

In addition, Local Authorities may charge a premium of up to 100% (i.e. charge 2 x CT) for homes that are largely empty but furnished (i.e. used as second homes and similar).

Impact of Empty Homes.

Nationally and locally we face a housing crisis, with homelessness at historic levels. Even when properties are available to buy or rent locally, their scarcity means they are unaffordable for many local people, particularly younger people. To have viable homes deliberately left unoccupied seems morally unacceptable.

In addition, the pressure to deliver additional housing threatens to fundamentally change the character of Newton St Cyres, both the main village and the various hamlets in the parish, particularly if large scale greenfield developments occur. Whilst the PC accepts a degree of development is inevitable, and potentially desirable, the local population has been unanimous in supporting the retention of the fundamentally rural character of the parish. It is unlikely that empty homes can meet local housing need (although the 2021 census revealed there were 1,640 unoccupied homes in Mid Devon³, compared to 1,671 on the Council's housing list in 2023⁴), but bringing empty homes back into use should take priority over new build.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/council-tax/second-homes-and-empty-properties>

² <https://www.middevon.gov.uk/residents/council-tax/reduce-your-bill/empty-property-discounts/>

³

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/datasets/numberofvacantdwellingandsecondhomeswithnonsualresidents>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65733c1f049516000d49bf14/LT600_accessible.ods

We are also facing a climate emergency. Building new homes on greenfield sites requires much greater capital outlay, and much greater carbon emissions, than to carry out minor works to bring empty homes back into use, even those which require substantial modernisation. New homes are costly, both in terms of finance and carbon.

Finally, empty homes are a nuisance for immediate neighbours, often resulting in unkempt gardens, visually unattractive properties, and in the worst cases vermin infestation and structural damage.

In summary:

- Empty homes are a blight on neighbours
- Empty homes deprive people of desperately needed housing
- Empty homes both contribute to climate change and threaten the rural character of the parish by encouraging the building of greater numbers of new houses on greenfield sites to meet housing need.

Proposed recommendations:

1. That the PC lobby MDDC to take effective action to charge CT premiums of empty homes to encourage these to be brought back into use whilst also obtaining additional council revenue for public services.
2. That the PC recommends to the Neighbourhood Planning Group to include bringing empty homes back into use as a key strategy for meeting local housing need, as opposed to sole reliance on greenfield development.
3. That the PC discuss this issue with neighbouring PCs with the aim of having a common policy and a shared lobbying of MDDC on empty homes, including holiday homes.
4. That a notice is placed in Newton Wonder encouraging parishioners to report empty homes to both MDDC and the PC so that we can understand the scale of the issue, and where appropriate lobby MDDC to take action to charge the relevant CT premium.

(Note: Previous Governments have had empty homes strategies with capital grants available to bring empty homes back into use as affordable housing. By gathering intelligence on empty homes in the parish, we will also be in a better position to lobby to bringing such properties back into use if such grants become available again in future)

Peter Stephenson

29/02/24