

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

2 MARCH 2009

ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE

MAKING BEST USE OF EXISTING HOUSING – EMPTY PRIVATE SECTOR HOME

Purpose of the Report

To provide an overview to the committee of the measures that are being developed by the council to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use in light of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

Background

The CAA stated that ‘The previous four district councils were not proactive in managing the quality of private sector housing. Performance in bringing empty homes back into use has been weak....’

The previous district council’s considered Empty Homes work as low priority and the observation made by the CAA is recognised as providing an accurate picture.

Main Consideration for the Committee

Reason for Bring Empty Homes Back into Use

The advantages of bringing empty properties back into use include:

1. Increasing the housing supply.
2. Brings about an improvement to the street scene and local environment and therefore residents wellbeing.

Number of Empty Homes

Each year council’s make an annual return of the numbers of empty properties in their area to Government. The information is generally derived from Council Tax records. Examination of these returns suggest that the number of empty homes in Wiltshire is slightly lower than the regional average and lower than the national average (see Appendix 1, Numbers of Empty Properties). The council has recently received the first draft of the Private Sector Stock confirms this and states ‘compared to the national picture there are a smaller proportion of vacant dwellings in Wiltshire.’

Council Tax records show the number of longer terms empties (those vacant over 6 months) in February 2010 is approx 1703.

Wiltshire Approach

Local Government Re-organisation has allowed Wiltshire Council to establish a dedicated Private Sector Housing Team. Prior to reorganization the function had been split in a variety of ways between Environmental Health and Housing. This has provided an opportunity to take a more strategic approach to Private Sector Housing and should improve our performance in our approach and delivery of Empty Homes work.

Progress since Local Government Re-organisation:

1. The provision within the structure of a dedicated part time (18.5hr) Empty Homes Officer (£17,800-19,621 pro rata). A job advert has recently been placed in the local paper so we are hoping that recruitment into this post is imminent. Thus far we have been unable to recruit to the post through the redeployment process plus three round of advertising internally and externally. The resources provided for this function are compared with other council in Appendix 2 Comparison of Council Spend on Empty Homes Officers.
2. Full Councils adoption of the Housing Renewal Strategy in November 2010. The strategy offers owners of empty properties a variety of options including advice and incentives through the provision of an Empty Homes Assistance (See Appendix 3). The assistance will allow the council to offer incentives for owners of empty homes to bring their properties to standard suitable for letting providing the council with nomination rights for five years. In addition the council can negotiate terms on an individual basis. The Strategy also sets the key goals of establishing an empty home strategy and procedure and targets for dealing with empty homes by November 2010.
3. Work is being carried out with council tax to identify long term empty homes. Lists of empty homes have been provided, however, these are in a format which cannot be manipulated and do not give the names and addresses of the owners. As the council operates 4 council tax systems with different reporting mechanism there will be a need to commission bespoke reports and undertake manual extraction of data where the cost of bespoke reports are prohibitively expensive (for example the IT suppliers have quoted £3000 for a suitable report for the East Hub). Once the information is available in the required format then mailings, questionnaires and surveys can be arranged.
4. Arrangement are being made to meet with legal and other departments concerning powers to deal with empty properties which impact different services areas, so that we can agree procedures on how to take this forward. It should be noted that the Law of Property protects the owner's interest in a property or land and as such the council's main tools to encourage reoccupation of empty homes is advice, persuasion, financial help and publicity. There are other options available, some of which can be onerous in terms of staff time and prohibitively expensive for example Compulsory Purchase, Empty Dwelling Management Orders and enforced sale. If the council's objective is to improve the appearance of a location and provide encouragement to owner to do something to their properties then the Town and County Planning Act and Building Act contain options that may be available.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

Not Applicable

Risk Assessment

That there is a risk to the council reputation should adequate measures not be taken by the council to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Other risk are considered low.

Financial Implications

None of the costs are expected to increase the cost of the budgets.

Legal Implications

The legal implications will need to be considered on a case by case basis when dealing with empty properties and would need to be in keeping with best practice and legal guidance.

Recommendations

That this report be noted

Background Papers

None

Appendices

Appendix 1: Number of Empty Properties

Appendix 2: Comparison of Council's Spend on Empty Homes Officers

Appendix 3: Empty Homes Assistance

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