

Stourbridge Area Committee 15th November 2010

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Empty Shops Grant

Purpose of Report

1. To update the Area Committee of the progress of the Empty Shops Grant initiative in Stourbridge Town Centre and Local Centres, and to seek Members' views on the allocation of funding under this programme.

Background

2. Following its April 2009 report in response to the effect of the worsening economic climate on the nation's high streets, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) granted the Council, along with 51 other local authorities, £52,623 to spend on revitalising empty shop units in the Borough.
3. In February 2010 Cabinet agreed to allocate £10,000 to each of the Borough's four principal town centres (Brierley Hill, Dudley, Halesowen and Stourbridge) and £790 to each of the 16 district and local centres for projects such as:
 - Using vacant shop windows to post information about their local area
 - Applying removable designs to windows to brighten areas and detract from the vacant front
 - Using vacant shops for use as galleries, museums, or as community services centres.
4. In March 2010 this Committee agreed to match fund the allocations for the Stourbridge area local centres of Amblecote, Lye and Wollaston.

Projects

5. Stourbridge Town Centre Projects
 - 5.1. Working in partnership with Stourbridge College Black Country Skills Shop (part of the Retail National Skills Academy) plans are in place to create showcases in the Empty Shop fronts for local groups to display their goods and services. The windows will be dressed by construction, retail and art students from the college providing work experience and employment opportunities in both shop fitting/construction and visual merchandising.

It is hoped that this project will:

- develop new interest in the town, provide publicity and increased awareness of and demand for local businesses and voluntary organisations
 - Increase footfall into the area and throughout the town centre.
 - make the town generally appear more attractive places for new businesses to consider locating to
- 5.2. A map of the town centre is planned to be erected on the former MacDonald's unit opposite the subway from the bus station
- 5.3. Alternative window dressing options are being considered for remaining empty properties.
- 5.4. A number of properties have been identified as suitable for vinyl window coverings and permissions are being sought from owners or occupiers for access to their properties or to fix artwork to the windows in order that these projects may take place. It should be noted that such projects can only proceed with the agreement of the shop owner or occupier, and that the Council cannot compel any owner or occupier to take part in the scheme.
- 5.5. An issue borough wide has been that occupiers have resisted participating in the initiative on the basis that they do not want the whole of the shop front obscured as they fear it may prevent prospective tenants seeing the inside of the property prior to viewing, and that if 'fake' shop fronts are used similar to those in other towns prospective tenants may not realise the unit is empty and it may impede letting.
- 5.6. Gaining permission of property owners is proving to be very difficult. We have been advised by the Council's lawyers that to do any work to properties without the full agreement of the occupier could place the Council at liability of legal action for damage.
- 5.7. Some vacant units have shutters installed. Shuttered units cost around £1,000 to cover which does not represent good value for money.

6. Stourbridge Area Local Centre Projects

- 6.1. Amblecote Local Centre currently has just 3 vacant properties, one of which is classed as office use and is not considered to have a detrimental visual impact. The remaining 2 units are in Brettell Lane and will benefit from vinyl window dressing. Permissions for this are currently being sought from the landlords for this work to take place.
- 6.2. Lye District Centre has 17 vacant properties in varying conditions. A number of these properties may benefit from vinyl window dressing however several of the properties are secured with metal shutters. It is proposed that permission is sought from landlords of these properties to paint the shutters to create a clean and cared for appearance. If funding was available it may also be possible to decorate the shutters with vinyl graphics.
- 6.3. Wollaston Local Centre is a vibrant local centre and, fortunately currently has no vacant properties within the defined local centre boundary. It is therefore

proposed that the empty shops funding allocated to this centre be reallocated to those centres where there is a greater need

Finance

7. The £52.632 is grant from DCLG and the Area Committees have Capital allocations that they are able to allocate to projects that meet their agreed criteria.

Law

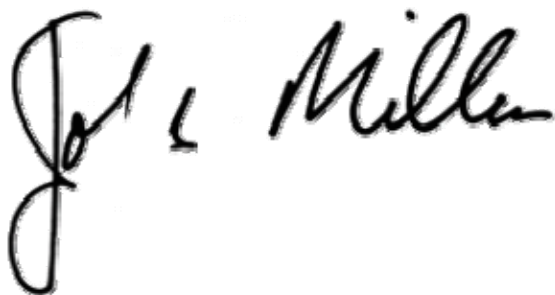
8. Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 enables the Council to do anything which it considers likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well being of any part of the Borough. The reuse of empty shops may need to be subject to planning, building control or licensing laws.

Equality Impact

9. This report takes into account the Council's Equality and Diversity policies. The revival of the Borough's town centres will benefit the whole of the community and the needs of children and young people are considered in any planning and implementation of specific projects.

Recommendation

10. That the Committee
 - a. Note the content of this report
 - b. Agree to reallocate the Empty Shops match funding from Wollaston local centre to Amblecote and Lye local centres and request Cabinet agree to the reallocation of the grant on the same basis.



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