

Central Dudley Area Committee 9th March 2010

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Empty Shops Grant

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the Area Committee of the Government's Empty Shops Grant initiative, and to seek Members' views on the allocation of funding under this programme.

Background

2. In April 2009, in response to the worsening economic climate, particularly on the nation's High Streets, DCLG produced advice for local authorities and town centre partnerships called "Looking after our town centres". This advice, attempted to provide practical help for town centres and high streets. It :
 - Set out the benefits of looking after town centres, showing how strong partnerships and positive management can help keep them attractive and vibrant places
 - highlighted the range of powers, guidance and tools that can help town centres and showed some examples of the creative approaches that partnerships are already taking in response to the downturn
 - explained the steps that the Government is taking to help local authorities and their partners take positive action, particularly in enabling temporary use of vacant shops
3. One of those initiatives was providing funding for bringing empty shops back into temporary if not permanent use. This funding was announced in August 2009. A total of £3m is available in England and is allocated to the 57 most deprived authorities based on the index of Multiple Deprivation. Each qualifying Local Authority, of which Dudley is one, has received £52,623, and there appears to be no time limit for its expenditure
4. In addition the Arts Council has specifically identified £500,000 to support this grant for projects that bring shops in to use for arts projects. Such a scheme, although not benefiting from this programme, was undertaken in Stourbridge in June/July 2009 using vacant shops in Victoria Passage to display the work of students from Stourbridge College. This was brokered by the Council's Town Centre Manager with the managing agents for Victoria Passage. Also in Dudley, the Council and Dudley Arts Council has taken a 6 month lease on a property in the High Street to set up a venue to display artwork, hold workshops and signpost to other arts based workshops.

5. The Arts Council allocation for the 7 West Midlands Boroughs is £60,000, so Dudley can expect in the region of £10k and has to be allocated to specific projects by the 31st March with submissions entered by the 18th January 2010. Therefore work has been progressing to identify schemes that can take up this grant.
6. However the grant from DCLG does not necessarily have to be allocated to arts type projects and DCLG refer to their previous guidance in 2009 and suggest such projects 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.

However the Council has a relative free hand to pursue any projects it thinks appropriate to bring empty shops back into use, subject to any planning (listed buildings or conservation areas) building control restrictions or licensing laws.

7. At its meeting on the 10th February the Cabinet considered a report on the Empty Shops Grant and agreed to allocate £10,000 to each of the Council's 4 principal town centres (Brierley Hill, Dudley, Halesowen and Stourbridge) and £790 to each of the 16 district and local centres and to seek match funding from each Area Committee for the district and local centres in their area. The centres eligible for this Committee are Netherton and Quarry Bank.

Finance

8. The £52.632 is grant from DCLG which may be spent on either revenue or capital activities and the Area Committees have Capital allocations that they are able to allocate to projects that meet their agreed criteria.

Law

9. 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

10. 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

11. That Area Committee

- a. Consider suitable projects that may benefit from the Empty Shops Grant initiative,
- b. Agree the principle of supporting the Empty Shops Grant initiative available from the Committee's Delegated Capital Allocations budget
- c. Authorise the Liaison Officer in consultation with the Chairman to agree specific allocation on a scheme by scheme basis up to an agreed maximum.



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List of Background Papers

Looking after our town centres – DCLG April 2009
Letter from DCLG 13th August 2009
Report to Cabinet 10th Feb 2010