

Meeting of the Cabinet – 10th February 2010

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Empty Shops Grant

Purpose of Report

1. To seek authority to spend the Empty Shops Grant allocated to the Council by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), to request Area Committees to match this funding and to inform Cabinet of the potential schemes that are currently being developed.

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 and a verbal update will be provided at the meeting.
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. In terms of allocating the grant the Borough has 4 principal town centres and 16 district and local centres. Appendix 1 to this report sets out a list of these centres and also shows the current % of vacant units in the principal centres compared to the national rate of 13%. It is proposed that the principal town centres are allocated £10,000 each with the remaining 16 centres receiving £790 each and that the relevant Area Committees be requested to match this funding from their Capital allocation for each of the centres in their area.
8. Brierley Hill has 1 principal and 4 other centres, Central Dudley 1 principal and 2 others ,Halesowen 1 principal and 3 others, North Dudley 4 other centres and Stourbridge 1 principal and 3 others.

Finance

9. 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

10. 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

11. 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

12. It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a. authorise the Director of the Urban Environment to accept the £52,623 Empty Shops grant and, in consultation with the Director of Corporate Resources, enter into any grant contracts required by the DCLG
- b. approve the allocation of the grant on the basis outlined in paragraph 7
- c. authorise the Director of the Urban Environment to incur any expenditure on individual projects up to the limit of the DCLG grant allocation.
- d. authorise the Director of Corporate Resources to enter into any leasing of town or local centres properties as required to deliver projects, subject to planning/building control requirements.
- e. authorise the Director of the Urban Environment to submit reports to Area Committees seeking allocations from these Committees' Delegated Capital budgets to support the Empty Shop Grant scheme
- f. authorise the Director of the Urban Environment to apply for any other appropriate grants to support the Empty Shop Grant scheme, and in consultation with the Director of Corporate Resources, enter into any grant contracts required by the DCLG
- g. recommends to Council that any related capital expenditure be included in the Capital Programme



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List of Background Papers

Looking after our town centres – DCLG April 2009
Letter from DCLG 13th August 2009

Hierarchy of Centres

Principal Centres

Vacancy Rates (National 13%)

Brierley Hill	15%
Dudley	21%
Halesowen	9%
Stourbridge	9%

District Centres

Kingswinford
Lye
Sedgley

Local Centres

Amblecote
Cradley/Windmill Hill
Gornal Wood
Netherton
Pensnett
Quarry Bank
Roseville
Shell Corner
The Stag
Upper Gornal
Wall Heath
Wollaston
Wordsley