

Meeting of the Cabinet – 10th September 2008

Report of the Director of Adult Community and Housing Services

Empty Homes Strategy 2008-2011

Purpose of Report

1. To consider and approve the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2008 – 2011 (full copy in the Member's Room and on the Committee Management Information System on the Council's website) and an amendment to the existing Housing Assistance Scheme.

Background

2. Empty homes have become an important national issue over the last few years, with more pressure on Local Authorities to develop effective strategies for tackling this problem. Bringing empty properties back into use also helps to tackle low demand and market failure, anti-social behaviour, the provision of affordable homes and ensuring that all homes meet a decent standard.
3. Dudley published its first Empty Homes Strategy in September 2003. The 2008-2011 strategy aims to build on the broad objectives contained therein that assisted the authority in establishing a baseline position on the private sector empty properties across the borough.
4. The strategy identifies six key objectives that are supported by a number of key actions. They determine the action we will be taking to achieve our overall outcome and outline our future priorities to effectively improve this service. We will make the greatest impact on reducing the number of long-term empty properties by focusing activity, targeting resources effectively and developing appropriate partnerships. The strategy is supported by an action plan, which will be implemented by the Empty Homes Development Officer. The strategy and the action plan will be reviewed on an annual basis to incorporate changes in both local and national policy.
5. Although the number of long-term private sector empty properties has reduced in recent years in the borough there is still significant work to be done to address the existing level. Currently assistance is given to owners of properties where their properties have been empty for more than 12 months. In return the property must be brought up to the decent homes standard and be occupied for a period of five years. If these conditions are breached the grant becomes repayable back to the Council. The grant is 50% of the cost of the improvement works up to a maximum of £5,000.
6. However many properties have been brought back into use as a result of the buoyant housing market with owners of empty properties selling their properties on the open market. This route has become less favourable as the housing market

has slowed down and with mortgages for first time buyers more difficult to access this situation is likely to affect performances in achieving our target of bringing empty properties back into use. It is therefore suggested that maximum grant assistance is increased to £10,000 to enable owners of properties to improve their properties where they are unable to sell them on the open market and either live in them themselves or rent them out.

Finance

7. Demand for assistance will be met from the existing Housing Assistance budget.

Law

8. Local authorities have a duty under Section 7 of the Local Government Act 2003 to maintain and enhance the health of the housing market across all housing tenures.

Equality Impact

9. A level one initial/partial impact assessment has been carried out against this strategy and has shown that the empty property strategy does not discriminate on the grounds of race, gender or disability. There was also no adverse impact on any particular groups and no concerns in terms of meeting the general duty on race equality. The strategy is first and foremost aimed at bricks and mortar and is not person specific. The Council records used to identify empty properties does not show ethnic origin, gender or disability
10. This stage has identified that there is no need to progress to a full assessment as there is not significant differential impact on particular groups or communities.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that:-
 - The Empty Homes Strategy 2008 – 2011 be approved, and
 - The maximum grant assistance allowed for owners of empty properties is increased to £10, 000.



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List of Background Papers

Empty Homes Strategy
Empty Homes Strategy Action Plan
Equality Impact Assessment