

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

8 October 2007

Joint Report of the Director of Health and Housing and Cabinet Member for Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 TACKLING EMPTY HOMES

Summary

This report explains the Kent County Council's 'No Use Empty' initiative currently running in East Kent. The Council has been invited to join the initiative when it is rolled out across the whole of Kent in January 2008. This report sets out the benefits for the Council in joining the scheme and seeks authority for its adoption.

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Kent County Council developed the East Kent 'No Use Empty' initiative in partnership with four East Kent district councils using Public Service Agreement grant funding. The three year scheme was launched in 2005 and runs to 2008.
- 1.1.2 Under the initiative Kent County Council are seeking to increase the availability of affordable housing and assist in the long term regeneration of the East Kent coastal towns by bringing empty homes back into use.
- 1.1.3 The scheme aims to tackle and reduce the negative impact of empty properties, for example vandalism, rubbish dumping, and bring them back into use as housing accommodation.
- 1.1.4 Kent County Council report that the No Use Empty campaign has successfully supported the East Kent Districts to return over 320 long term empty properties back into use to date.

1.2 How the No Use Empty initiative works

- 1.2.1 Kent County Council works in partnership with the East Kent district councils to support and develop:
 - a widespread publicity campaign regarding the benefits of bringing empty properties back into to use for both the owner and the local community;

- a No Use Empty website, providing a one stop shop for those interested in empty properties, incorporating a specific local authority area on the site to allow local authorities to develop and share best practice in dealing with empty properties; and
- the appointment of a professional housing consultant to provide in-depth support and advice to district councils on specific empty property work.

1.2.2 As part of the East Kent initiative Kent County Council has also provided £5 million pounds of capital funding to run:

- an empty property loan scheme aimed at assisting empty property owners and prospective owners to bring their properties up to the Decent Homes Standard either to sell or let;
- this isn't very clear – what actually is being paid for here – works or enforcement costs? Or both? a partnership fund to provide funding to councils to undertake works when enforcement action is taken and Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs); and
- a direct purchase fund allowing Kent County Council to purchase empty properties for redevelopment and sale.

1.3 Proposed Kent wide initiative

1.3.1 As part of 'Towards 2010' policy document Kent County Council is committed to roll out the current initiative across the whole of Kent from January 2008 to help reduce empty properties across the county.

1.3.2 Along with other remaining Kent councils, Tonbridge and Malling have been invited to join the Kent wide initiative from January 2008. No funding contribution, capital or revenue, is required for councils to enter the initiative.

1.3.3 The Kent wide initiative will build upon the existing scheme by extending the empty property campaign, availability of capital funding and specific empty property work support across the county.

1.3.4 Kent County Council have indicated that an additional £3 million pounds capital funding is available to support the roll out of the wider initiative, and that these monies will be available on a first come first served basis.

1.4 Benefits to Tonbridge and Malling in joining scheme.

1.4.1 Although not a widespread problem in Tonbridge & Malling there clearly are benefits to us in joining a county wide initiative:

- allows the Council to participate in No Use Empty publicity campaign highlighting the negative impact of empty properties in the borough and what can be done to bring them back into use;

- our Council logo will feature on the No Use Empty website allowing our residents to identify with the website which provides information for empty property owners and those interested in empty properties;
- the Council will receive support and advice from the No Use Empty housing consultant to assist with empty property work. (Informal meetings have already been held with the consultant to discuss several complex cases and very useful advice has been received);
- we would continue to benefit from training days on empty property enforcement issues;
- empty property owners in the borough would have the opportunity to access KCC's empty property loans to carry out works to bring properties up to the Decent Homes Standard. These could be utilised to top up the Council's own empty homes grant.
- access to the partnership fund for works undertaken as part of enforcement action and CPOs; and
- access to direct purchase funding on a first come first served basis.

1.5 Conclusion

- 1.5.1 The No Use Empty initiative has supported the work of East Kent district councils over the last 3 years. The Council could potentially benefit from joining the scheme through access to capital and revenue funding which would represent an additional resource in our work to bring empty properties back into use.
- 1.5.2 In addition the Council would benefit from specialised support on empty property projects which will assist the effective delivery of our empty homes strategy.

1.6 Legal Implications

- 1.6.1 None arising from this report.

1.7 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.7.1 All capital and revenue costs relating to the No Use Empty scheme will be funded by Kent County Council for the duration of the initiative 2008-2010. The Council will not have to contribute revenue or capital funding. It is anticipated that there will be a limited amount of 'in kind' funding, for example attendance at No Use Empty meetings.

1.8 Risk Assessment

- 1.8.1 None arising from this report.

1.9 Recommendations

1.9.1 Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to **APPROVE** joining the 'No Use Empty' initiative when it is rolled out Kent wide in January 2008.

The Director of Health and Housing confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

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Nil

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