

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITIES and HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

14 November 2016

Report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 EMPTY HOMES UPDATE

Summary

This report updates Members on progress with Empty Homes work following the review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2015.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee met in January 2015 to consider and review how the Council dealt with the issue of empty homes in the borough. From this review the following recommendations were agreed:

- The Housing Service is the corporate lead on empty homes
- A corporate working group be established to tackle the issue of empty homes
- To raise public awareness of empty homes through a variety of communication medium and simplify the process of reporting empty homes.

1.2 Current Position on Empty Homes

1.2.1 As at 26 October 2016 there were 397 long term empty properties in the borough. These are properties that have been empty for over six months. This is a slight reduction on the position in March 2016 when there were 414 long term empty properties.

1.2.2 There are a number of reasons why homes become empty and the most common include:

- The property is difficult to sell or let, particularly if it is in a poor state of repair
- It is being renovated

- The owner does not have the finances/time/skills to manage and maintain the property
- The property has been repossessed
- Probate/inheritance issues
- The owner is being cared for elsewhere or is in hospital.

1.2.3 To bring empty homes back into use the Council in the first instance will always try to work informally with the owners to offer advice and information. This may include signposting owners to available funding such as a 'No Use Empty' loan to enable properties to be renovated to be let or sold on; or to Council Housing Assistance funding for renovations to enable the owner to move in or let to a Housing Service nominated tenant. If this informal approach is not effective the Council will look at taking appropriate enforcement action to deal with any specific issues where possible and looking at available options for bringing the property back into use. This whole process of returning the property back into use is resource intensive and can take many years particularly if the owner will not engage with the Council.

1.3 Officer Working Group

1.3.1 The Private Sector Housing Team (PSH) is the corporate lead for empty homes and has established a corporate officer group which meets on a quarterly basis. As work related to empty homes work spans a number of services the group is represented by Officers from Planning, Legal, Finance, Council Tax, Environmental Protection, Housing and Building Control.

1.3.2 The terms of reference of the group recognise that the group plays both an operational and strategic role in seeking to ensure a co-ordinated and cost effective approach to enable empty homes being brought back into use. Where necessary the relevant enforcement action will be taken with regard to any breaches of legislation by the appropriate service and any action is considered within the context of the corporate aim of bringing the empty home back into use.

1.3.3 The objectives of the Group are to:

- have a coordinated approach to bringing empty properties in the borough back into use,
- have a coordinated approach to sending out empty property correspondence,
- seek to maximise the outcome of empty property work from available resources,
- determine those empty properties to be targeted for bringing back into use,

- utilise an agreed criteria for prioritisation of bringing back into use problematic empty properties, and
- agree targets for bringing empty homes back into use and regularly review progress to meeting agreed targets.

1.3.4 The group are focussing on a case list of 113 homes. This case list has been compiled from a snapshot of council tax records for homes that:

- have been empty for over two years and are attracting a council tax premium
- have been empty for between 1-2 years
- are long term empty (empty for longer than six months) awaiting probate, where no action is being taken or information is known regarding bringing the property back into use.
- are long term empty “problematic” properties.

1.3.5 The case list is updated by members of the group as an action is completed or a home becomes occupied.

1.3.6 The owners of those homes that have been empty for over two years and are attracting a council tax premium (150 per cent) have been sent a short survey regarding their intentions for the property. For those who did not return the survey an officer from PSH visited and completed an empty property assessment. The empty property prioritisation criteria agreed by the Group has then been applied to determine whether the empty home has a high, medium or low priority for bringing back into use.

1.3.7 For three of these high or medium rated properties PSH have met with the owners to offer advice and information on the options available to bringing their properties back into use. As a consequence one owner is now considering putting their Tonbridge property forward for sale at auction this month; and a second owner is to undertake renovations to his terraced property in Wouldham and has expressed an interest in working with the Council to let the property to homeless/housing register applicants. For the owner/manager of the third property in Wateringbury we now have a better understanding of why the property remains empty.

1.3.8 For another three of these high or medium rated properties two owners have now submitted planning applications to develop the properties and for the other the PSH team are looking to obtain a warrant to enter the property to look at the conditions as the owner has not turned up for a meeting on two occasions.

1.3.9 Also the PSH team will be writing to the owners of a further five high or medium priority properties to arrange a meeting at their empty property.

- 1.3.10 Significant progress has been made with two of the long term empty problematic properties. One that Members will be interested to note is that following an application to the Residential Property Tribunal the Council has been granted permission to make an interim Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) on a two bedroom terraced property in West Malling. The Council has been working over the last five years to get it to this point. The EDMO allows the Council to take control of the property and manage any necessary renovation works, before letting the property. Funding for the renovation works will be provided by KCC under the 'No Use Empty' loan scheme and repaid back from the rent obtained for the property. The Home Improvement Agency, Family Mosaic will manage the necessary renovation works and once completed the property will be let at a market rent and managed on our behalf by Ashford Borough Council Lettings Service. For the other property in Snodland, which the Council has been working to bring back into occupation for the last eight years, has now been sold.
- 1.3.11 As at the last meeting of the Group on 24 October 2016, 33 of the 113 homes on the case list had been returned to occupation following various interventions. At the next meeting which is due early in 2017 the list will be revisited and new properties added to it.

1.4 Raising Public Awareness of Empty Homes

- 1.4.1 Through the combined work of the PSH team and Council Tax colleagues information is now included on the back of all council tax bills on how the Council can help bring empty homes back into use. The team have also developed an empty homes advice leaflet that officers from all services can distribute when visiting empty properties.
- 1.4.2 Social media has also been utilised with a particular focus on 'Empty Homes' week in December. The website process for members of the public reporting an empty home has also been simplified.
- 1.4.3 A press article will be released regarding the success of the Council in being authorised to make an interim Empty Dwelling Management Order.

1.5 Legal Implications

- 1.5.1 None arising from this report.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.6.1 None arising from this report.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 None arising from this report.

Background papers:

Nil

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