

EMPTY HOMES

Item HP 24/9 referred from Housing and Planning Scrutiny Select Committee of 19 March 2024

The report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health provided an update on the current position in respect of empty homes in the borough, outlined a new Local Government Association (LGA) report on dealing with empty homes and recommended the introduction of a new Empty Homes Officer post.

Members were reminded that 'improving housing options for local people, whilst protecting outdoor areas' was a key priority for the Borough Council and bringing empty homes back into use played an important part within this priority. It was reported that as at 7 February 2024 there were 950 empty homes within the borough although it was important to note that there were two developments/sites accounting for approximately 120 of these, one of which should soon not appear on the list due to demolition.

Attention was drawn to the LGA report which aimed to inform, educate and support all councils irrespective of their current levels of resource and activity on empty homes. The key points and recommendations arising from the LGA report were detailed and summarised in 1.2.2 and 1.2.3. Due regard was also given to the recommendation that councils should consider opportunities to employ a dedicated resource where possible.

Concern was expressed at the number of empty properties within the borough and Members recognised the importance of adopting measures to get these back into use. However, it was also noted that the number of empty properties within Tonbridge and Malling was comparable to similar sized local authorities. There was also detailed discussion on the powers available to local authorities to tackle the longer-term empty properties and it was explained that legislation such as Compulsory Purchase Orders and Enforced Sale could be complex and challenging. It was recognised that there were many reasons why properties remained empty and it was hoped that the engagement of a dedicated resource would enable the Borough Council to explore a number of options to address empty homes, including incentives for tenants to downsize.

The Committee welcomed the establishment of a fixed term Empty Homes Officer post to focus attention, monitor progress and consider a longer-term approach, and supported the recommendation set out in 1.3.2. The financial and value for money considerations detailed in 1.5 were noted and Members supported the creation of a budget of £30,000 to fund work that enabled the facilitation of empty homes being brought back into use. The total cost of the Empty Homes Officer post (estimated at £91,000) and the empty homes budget was circa £121,000 which could be funded from the Housing Assistance Reserve.

Finally, Members supported the suggestion that progress in respect of empty properties should be reviewed and monitored as part of the Key Performance Indicators.

***RECOMMENDED:** That it be commended to Cabinet that

- (1) a two-year fixed-term post of Empty Homes Officer be established;
- (2) the cost of the post (£91,000) and empty homes budget (£30,000) be taken from the Housing Assistance Reserve; and
- (3) the Local Government Association report on empty homes be noted and that this approach be utilised as the basis for the fixed term Empty Officers' work programme.

***Recommended to Cabinet**