
To: Transport and infrastructure Development Scrutiny Board (6)

Date: 28th November 2012

Subject: Private Sector Empty Homes

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 This report provides an update on performance and initiatives with respect to private sector empty homes.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report and progress to date.

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 On 1st April 2012 Council tax records indicated there were 134,181 dwellings (excluding student halls of residence) in Coventry of which 2,225 were private empty homes and of which 1361 had been empty for longer than 6 months.

- 3.2 Your officers continue to progress work to bring empty properties back into effective use. This has included targeting resources at the highest profile and highest risk properties, whilst in so doing bringing as many others back into use as possible. The table below details the team's performance over the past few years:

Period	No. of empty homes brought back into use	Those which had been empty for more than 2 years
2010/11	142	52
2011/12	201	73
2012/13 (first 6 months)	145	65

- 3.3 The issue of empty homes is also a key part of the Coventry Housing Strategy, which is currently open for consultation.
- 3.4 Government encourages local authorities to create more new homes, either by facilitating new builds or bringing long term empty properties back into use. The New Homes Bonus Scheme Grant Determination commenced in April 2011, and will match fund the additional council tax raised for new homes and empty properties brought back into use, with an additional amount for affordable homes, for the following six years. To date the empty

home element of the grant determination has resulted in £812,685 being allocated to the Council. This funding supports the Council's overall bottom line.

4 Recent changes - Fundamental Service Review

4.1 Public Safety and Housing were both subject to a fundamental service review (FSR) during 2011/12. One of the key aims of the FSR was to bring together relevant enforcement capability to tackle the key corporate objectives of:

- Coventry, proud to be a city that works for better pavements, streets and roads, where streets are cleaner and there is less litter and fly tipping
- Coventry, proud to be a city that works to protect our most vulnerable residents, where we have less crime and anti-social behaviour in our most vulnerable neighbourhoods

4.2 This led to the creation of Environmental Services, which consists of the Environment and Housing Enforcement Team (this combined both Private Sector Housing Enforcement and the Environmental Crime Unit), Neighbourhood Wardens and the Pest Control and Animal Welfare Service. Environmental Services brings together a range of officers responsible for street scene enforcement with a mandate to target the key priorities of fly tipping and empty properties.

4.3 Ultimately, the aim of the new service is to train and equip all officers in the Environment and Housing Enforcement Team with skills to deal with empty properties. This will ultimately provide greater resource to deal with these priority issues. Six months on, officers from both teams have started to work with empty properties.

5 How empty properties are brought back into use

5.1 Properties are brought back into use by a mix of persuasion, advice and enforcement under a range of statutory Acts. The Environment and Housing Enforcement Team work closely with colleagues in Planning and Legal Services, to collectively utilise their enforcement powers to achieve this aim.

5.2 In order that the authority can target and prioritise its resources at those empty properties which represent the greatest nuisance and risk to health i.e. anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and arson etc. we have recently purchased some specific software. This software 'bolts on' to the existing software used within all of Public Safety and Housing and will 'risk rate' empty homes and identify those for priority action by the enforcement team.

5.3 In addition, the software is also capable of giving a 'city wide' picture of all empty properties, the types of house, their geographical spread and the reasons why they are empty. To minimise data entry, a proportion of this data can be readily refreshed with current information from the Revenue and Benefits Service (all properties that have been empty for six months or longer); the enforcement team are currently negotiating with the Information Governance Team to ensure that this data can be accessed and used to benefit the people of Coventry.

5.4 This information will enable officers to work with owners of empty properties to support them, where appropriate, to bring their property back into use. This can be done in a number of ways including bringing together the owner with property investors.

6 Strategic Initiatives

6.1 In addition to the above mentioned programmed work, the Environment & Housing Enforcement Team work closely with colleagues in the Housing Service and partner agencies to bring empty properties back into use. For example:

- **WM Housing Group – Property Leasing Scheme**

WM Housing Group have successfully bid for funding from the Government's Affordable Homes Programme to acquire, improve and lease 40 long-term empty properties (which would not have come back into use without additional financial intervention).

This funding is available over the period 2012-15 and negotiations are ongoing with the Council as to how appropriate properties in this area may be identified and targeted.

- **Partnership Working - Cyrenians**

Coventry Cyrenians and Citizens Advice Centre have been awarded a DCLG contract to help single people and couples get a private tenancy. They are seeking landlords with vacant properties to house people registered on this scheme.

- **Private Sector Landlords Working Group**

This initiative follows direct approaches to the Council from a number of private sector developers, wishing to acquire and renovate long term empty properties. A marketing/information leaflet is being developed for provision at the first point of contact with empty home owners. This is envisaged to be a valuable option for owners wishing to undertake their own negotiations, merely requiring an introduction to interested developers.

- **Private Sector Accommodation Team**

This team will be based in Housing Options and has been set up as part of the Fundamental Service Review. The aim of this team will be to facilitate access to the private rented sector for households in need, to prevent homelessness and discharge the main homelessness duty. It will be actively seeking vacant property available for rent.

- **Emmaus**

This charity has gained funding to bring a property back into use through a leasing scheme. Our officers are assisting Emmaus in finding a suitable empty property.

Craig Hickin
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