

Subject: Empty Properties Policy
Statement and Action Plan

Status: For Publication

Report to: The Cabinet

Date: 15th November 2006

Report of: Executive Director of Resources

Portfolio

Holders: Regeneration and Street Scene and Liveability

Key Decision:

YES

Forward Plan

General Exception

Special Urgency

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To seek approval for consultation on the attached Empty Properties Policy Statement and Action Plan.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

2.1 The matters discussed in this report are linked to and support the following corporate priorities:

- *Delivering Regeneration Across the Borough – through bringing unoccupied and disused buildings back into beneficial use.*
- *Delivering on the District Vision – through making efforts both to improve the quality of the local environment and to increase the supply of affordable housing.*

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

3.1 All the issues raised and the recommendation(s) in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:

- *Regulatory / Legal risks exist in relation to any enforcement process, and in relation to changes in planning policy. These risks are mitigated through ensuring access to appropriate legal advice and ensuring that due process is followed.*

- *Financial risks exists in relation to the overall scale of the issue to be addressed relative to the council resources available. This can be mitigated through working with RSL partners and developers to increase the resource available.*
- *Partnership risks exist related to the need to develop effective delivery partnerships with RSL's. This form of risk is not unique to this policy area and exists in relation to all parts of the Strategic Housing function. This risk can be mitigated through ensuring fit for purpose governance arrangements for any delivery partnership.*

4. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

4.1 In 2003 the Council agreed an Empty Properties Strategy, which set out in basic terms how the Private Sector Renewal Team will address empty properties from a relatively traditional housing perspective. This strategy has been effective in increasing the number of properties brought back into beneficial use as a result of the Council's action as measured by BVPI 64. However, empty properties are not just a housing issue, they represent an issue in terms of:

- The quality of the local environment in terms of the blight that long term empty properties can cause.
- Community safety, where empty properties can provide a "home" for certain types of anti-social behaviour.
- Sustainability, in that they represent a waste of scarce resources particularly where new housing continues to be built while large numbers of houses remain empty.
- The local economy in that empty properties are a form of asset within that economy which are lying idle.

4.2 Given this and while progress continues to be made through the implementation of the existing strategy it is clear that to deliver some form of step change in relation to this issue an approach which addresses the issue on a wider front is now necessary. An approach of this sort is set out in the attached policy statement and action plan.

4.3 The focus of this policy statement is the setting of an objective to bring the number of empty properties in the Borough in line with the current regional average by 2020, the timescale for the long term housing objectives in the Community Strategy. Clearly it would be desirable to bring the total to the national average, but this would mean a reduction of over 600, and at this stage it is important to set realistic goals. This target can, however, be revised when the policy statement is reviewed.

4.4 The policy statement aims to address empty properties as an economic issue and looks to a series of economic levers utilising statutory powers across the full range of the Council's services, including the removal of Council Tax discounts recently discussed by the Cabinet. Importantly the policy statement looks to a continuum of

interventions which will result in formal intervention in the market by the Council only at the stage where the market has failed to address an issue effectively. This is in line with the Council's role to balance the housing market, addressing issues where the market has collapsed and where it is not delivering a sufficient supply of housing which is affordable.

4.5 The policy statement also looks to the Council working with RSL's to utilise off site affordable housing contributions to both increase affordable housing supply and address empty property issues. This may involve creative use of property conversion in order to turn low demand two bed terraces into larger houses. Work done by Urban Splash for the Manchester / Salford HMR pathfinder shows this is possible and can contribute significantly to rebuilding mixed communities in target areas. It is also intended that work with RSL's will deliver an increased supply of temporary accommodation using former empty properties. Again this addresses an identified need within the Housing Strategy.

4.6 The Policy Statement and Action Plan need to be consulted on through the same process as that used for other recent housing policy documents and it is recommended that subject to approval by the Cabinet amendments following consultation are delegated to the Head of Economic Regeneration and Strategic Housing and the portfolio holders for Regeneration and Street Scene and Liveability.

5. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

5.1 At this stage no additional resource requirements have been identified, although the changes to the Council Tax discounts policy will have a beneficial impact upon the tax base as previously reported. Any issues which emerge, for instance a potential need to provide resources for default works will need to be fed into the budget process for member consideration in coming months.

6. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

6.1 The Empty Property Strategy will contribute to the regeneration aspirations of the Council . Such a strategy will provide clarity in how the Council deals with such properties

7. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

7.1 Training has already been provided for staff in relation to the use of the enforcement powers identified within the action plan, and further training will be provided if identified through Personal Development Reviews.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Empty properties are a blight on the Borough and the Council needs to take more concerted action using all the powers at its disposal. The attached action plan signifies the Council's determination to deliver step change in this area.

9. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 9.1 That the Cabinet approve the attached policy statement and action plan for consultation and delegates authority to make any changes following consultation to the Head of Economic Regeneration and Strategic Housing in consultation with the portfolio holders for for Regeneration and Street Scene and Liveability.

10. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 10.1 Chief Executive, Strategic Housing Team, NEAT Manager, Environmental Health Manager, relevant Portfolio Holders.

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No background papers