

21 September 2011

REPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR QUALITY OF LIFE**Empty Homes and Financial Assistance Policy****EXEMPT INFORMATION**

None

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet approves the revised Financial Assistance Policy attached at Appendix 1
That Cabinet approves the Empty Homes Policy attached at Appendix 2
That Cabinet endorse the progress made on returning Empty Homes into use

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to approve a revised version of the Financial Assistance Policy due to the inclusion of financial assistance geared towards preventing homelessness, the ending of the Kick Start Partnership and the introduction of the Home Improvement Trust and changes in the way Empty Homes Grants are delivered. Additionally, to approve the Empty Homes Policy and advise members to date of the progress made on returning Empty Homes back into use in the private sector.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Delivery of these policies will be met from within previously approved budgets.

There are therefore no direct resource implications arising as a result of this report.

LEGAL/RISK IMPLICATIONS BACKGROUND

The Regulatory Reform Order (England and Wales) (Housing Assistance) 2002 requires all Councils to produce a Financial Assistance Policy which sets out how they intend to provide financial assistance under this order. Without a policy the Council would be unable to administer a Financial Assistance Scheme. Where financial assistance is provided without a policy the Council could be open to legal challenge. The Council has already adopted a policy and this report recognises the changes in the way Financial Assistance is delivered by the Council.

Risks to reputation may arise in taking enforcement action on an empty property or, in not doing anything thus allowing a dwelling and the surrounding area to deteriorate. Risk may be minimised by showing that the council has a consistent approach to empty homes as set out in the new policy and that the Council has exhausted all other options prior to any enforcement action being taken and that this approach is consistently applied.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

By delivering financial assistance and returning empty homes back into use this contributes to the preventing homeless and providing much needed affordable housing in Tamworth.

CONCLUSIONS

Bringing Empty Homes back into use is an important area of activity for the Council with the potential to increase the supply of housing within the Borough.

This report outlines changes to the Council's Financial Assistance Policy which will increase

effectiveness in bringing Empty Homes back into use and maximising the delivery of rented housing within the borough.

The Empty Homes policy sets out the Council's approach to bringing vacant residential dwellings back into use. The application of this policy supports an enabling approach with the Council working closely with owners to facilitate best use of vacant dwellings. Application of the Policy will provide a consistent approach with enforcement action on empty homes remaining as a measure of last resort.

Finally it highlights the progress and successes relating to ongoing activity to bring empty homes back into use.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2010 Cabinet approved a new Financial Assistance Policy. This Policy has been reviewed to take account of the end of the Kick Start partnership and its imminent replacement with the Home Improvement Trust, the inclusion of Homelessness Prevention Financial Assistance into the policy and changes in the way Empty Homes Grants are delivered.

Historically the Council received funding through CLG to enable the provision of Home Repairs Assistance Grants to private home owners whose homes failed to meet the basic standards of decency or fitness. These grants were open to all home owners meeting a specific set of means tested criteria.

In 2009 funding for these grants were withdrawn from Local Authorities and paid directly into the Kick-start Loan scheme. Funding is no longer available for Kick-start and as a result the Kick-start partnership is ceasing to exist with no new applications from 1st April 2011.

In response to the loss of Kick-start a capital budget of £120,000 per annum has been agreed at Cabinet for the next four years. An alternative scheme to Kick-start is available and is administered by the Home Improvement Trust. The Home Improvement Trust offers equity loans to homeowners over the age of 60. The packages are available to homeowners and are tailored to meet specific needs. Loans will be delivered in a manner which seeks to ensure that the security of tenure is not jeopardised. The trust operates a no repossession policy. The Financial Assistance Policy has therefore been amended to reflect this change in delivery of funding for Private Sector home owners.

Work undertaken by the Housing Strategy team indicates that there are approximately 250 empty homes in Tamworth. Many of these are transactional which means they are on the market to be sold or are going through legal processes. These properties are likely to return to residential use without intervention. However, there are a number of properties which have been empty for a significant period of time and for which the owners have no plans. Often this is due to a lack of available capital to undertake essential improvements to the property to make it habitable. The Council's Financial Assistance Policy attached at Appendix 1 will enable the provision of grants of up to £10k to ensure that such properties can be brought back into use. The grants are given on the basis that the property becomes a private rented home, at Local Housing Allowance rent levels, and the Council is granted three years nomination rights. In addition to the benefits to neighbourhoods in reducing the number of empty homes this will enable the Council to provide much needed affordable housing and reduce homelessness. In addition the Council will require the owners to become an accredited landlord or employ a reputable letting agent to manage the property on their behalf.

Also attached at Appendix 2 to this report is the Council's Empty Homes Policy. This policy outlines the various practical services the Council can provide to support the owners of empty homes to bring them back into use.

Over the past six months the Council has successfully brought 10 empty homes back into use through a variety of means. The Council has a target to bring 10 properties back into use for 2011/2012. This target is therefore expected to be exceeded by the end of the year.

REPORT AUTHOR

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

APPENDICES

Financial Assistance Policy Appendix 1

Empty Homes Policy Appendix 2

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