

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY AND LEISURE SERVICES

REPORT OF HEAD OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Report prepared by Neil Coles
Date Issued: 31 January 2013

1. Adoption of Empty Homes Plan

1.1 Key Issue for Decision

1.1.1 To consider adopting a new Empty Homes Plan that details the council's approach to returning empty homes back into use.

1.2 Recommendation of Head of Housing and Community Services

1.2.1 That the Cabinet Member agrees that the new Empty Homes Plan detailed at Appendix 1 is adopted.

1.2.2 That the Cabinet Member gives delegated authority to the officers specified in the Action Plan to take the actions contained within the Empty Homes Plan.

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

Background

1.3.1 Empty homes are a wasted resource, especially given the current high demand for all forms of housing across Maidstone. In many cases they also impact negatively on local neighbourhoods, and detract from Maidstone being a great place in which to live, through:

- i) detracting from the visual amenity of the local area;
- ii) encouraging vandalism, anti-social behaviour and other criminal activity;
- iii) attracting vermin where gardens become unkempt and overgrown, or are subject to fly-tipping;
- iv) providing harbourage for pigeons where windows and/or the roof structure is insecure;
- v) creating concerns for immediate neighbours due to lack of general maintenance and disrepair, and;

vi) being targeted by squatters.

1.3.2 Empty homes are also attributed to fuelling a 'spiral of decline' in a local area where a sense of neglect discourages inward investment, and new households are dissuaded from moving into the area.

1.3.3 Apart from many properties that are routinely empty through property transactions, other homes become empty for a wide range of reasons including:

i) the owner is unable to organise extensive building works that are required;

ii) the property is subject to probate;

iii) the property has been inherited and the beneficiary is unaware of their options;

iv) the owner has moved into a nursing home, residential care, or other supported housing;

v) the property is subject to redevelopment proposals;

vi) the owner has moved away or abroad;

vii) the options for bringing the home back into use are not understood by the owner;

viii) the owner perceives that renting to tenants is not appropriate, and;

ix) the owner is waiting for an increase in its capital value.

1.3.4 Since October a dedicated officer has been appointed within the Private Sector Housing Team to tackle empty homes. This post has been funded through the New Homes Bonus and will end in March 2014.

Statistics

1.3.5 According to the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as at April 2012 there are some 710,000 empty homes in England, of which 259,000 homes have been empty for over 6 months. There are almost 100,000 empty homes across the South East region.

1.3.6 In Kent and Medway there are 22,500 empty homes, of which 8,000 have been empty for longer than 6 months ('long-term' empty homes). In Maidstone there are around 1420 empty homes, with 420 of these being long-term empty.

- 1.3.7 Although the level of empty homes in Maidstone is of concern, it is important to note that this equates to only 2.12% of the total housing stock within Maidstone, and this compares favourably to the Kent and Medway average of 3.14% of homes being empty.
- 1.3.8 In Maidstone the majority of empty homes can be found in the private sector, with only around 5% of empty homes being owned by housing associations or public bodies.

Priorities

- 1.3.8 The Empty Homes Plan sets out three key priorities to support empty homes being brought back into use across the borough:
- i) Minimise the number of empty homes through the council's interventions;
 - ii) Maximise opportunities for returning homes back to use through initiatives and incentives, and;
 - iii) Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.
- 1.3.9 For each of these priorities, the plan details key actions that will be implemented to support the priorities, and these are collated in an action plan which provides a clear focus for the council's activity.

Key Actions

- 1.3.10 The Empty Homes Plan details the following actions in respect of each priority:
- i) Priority 1- Minimise the number of empty homes through the council's interventions:
 - a) Maximise the number of empty homes returned to use or demolished for redevelopment;
 - b) Introduce an online reporting form for residents to report empty homes to council officers;
 - c) Relaunch the telephone reporting hotline for empty homes
 - d) Review the information and advice available on the website to reduce the number of empty homes;
 - e) Promote private sector leasing opportunities to owners of empty homes, and;
 - f) Develop an innovative scheme to return empty homes back to use working with homeless households.

- ii) Priority 2 – Maximise opportunities for returning homes back to use through initiatives and incentives:
 - a) Provide an alternative property selling option for empty home owners through the council’s Commercialisation Project;
 - b) Dedicate capital funding for empty homes assistance within the council’s Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy;
 - c) Endorse partnership agreement for working with ‘No Use Empty’;
 - d) Promote the rent deposit bond scheme to empty home owners and landlords, and;
 - e) Deliver the Homes and Communities Agency funded empty homes scheme.
- iii) Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use:
 - a) Adopt a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy to include empty homes interventions;
 - b) Introduce an evaluation matrix to ensure enforcement interventions are proportionate to the impact of the empty home;
 - c) Expedite the commencement of enforcement action following failed informal action, and;
 - d) Introduce the Empty Homes Premium within the Council Tax charging policy.

1.3.11 The action plan includes the adoption of a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy which will be the subject of a future report, and this will consider the Human Rights implications linked to enforcement action.

1.3.12 The action plan also includes the details of responsible officers, outcomes, performance measures and delivery dates for each action.

1.4 Alternative Action and why not Recommended

1.4.1 The council is not required to publish a strategic plan relating to empty homes, and consequently there is no requirement for the proposed Empty Homes Plan to be adopted.

1.4.2 The absence of a strategic plan detailing the council’s priorities for empty homes interventions, significantly weakens the council’s position when taking enforcement action, and importantly sends a negative message to both residents and partners given the known demand for housing in the borough.

1.5 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.5.1 The Empty Homes Plan directly supports the council’s priority to be a decent place to live through reducing the number of empty homes across the borough.

1.5.2 Where empty homes are brought back into use through the use of grants or other financial incentives, funding will be conditional on the council receiving nominations rights for future tenants. This will ensure that the council’s funding returns a home back into use as well as providing a valuable home for a homeless household, and hence reduce expenditure relating to the council’s obligation to provide temporary accommodation for these households.

1.5.3 The majority of the interventions to return empty homes back into use will result in financial investment from empty property owners, and this will result in a proportion of expenditure supporting local businesses and hence will support the council’s priority for Maidstone to have a growing economy. This will also impact positively on the council’s finances in terms of new Homes Bonus funding, and other Government funding streams.

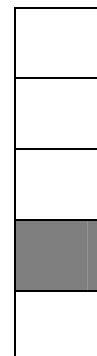
1.6 Risk Management

1.6.1 The risks associated with the failure to deliver this plan, and the reputational risks associated with adverse publicity following enforcement action are detailed within the action plan along with appropriate mitigation measures.

1.7 Other Implications

1.7.1

1. Financial
2. Staffing
3. Legal
4. Equality Impact Needs Assessment
5. Environmental/Sustainable Development



6. Community Safety
7. Human Rights Act
8. Procurement
9. Asset Management

1.7.2 There are no negative financial implications resulting from the adoption of the Empty Homes Plan. The reduction in the number of empty homes resulting from the actions contained within the proposed plan will increase potential New Homes Bonus funding.

1.7.3 The council has previously delegated authority to the Head of Housing and Community Services to enter into the grant agreement with the Homes and Communities Agency. This was contained within the West Kent Local Investment Plan which was agreed by Cabinet.

1.7.4 An Equality Impact Assessment for this plan is included at Appendix 2.

1.8 Relevant Documents

1.8.1 Appendices

1.8.2 Appendix 1 –Empty Homes Plan (2013–2015)

1.8.3 Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment

1.8.4 Background Documents

1.8.5 Strategy for Tackling Empty Residential Homes (2007)

IS THIS A KEY DECISION REPORT?

Yes

No

If yes, when did it first appear in the Forward Plan?

12 June 2012.

This is a Key Decision because: All wards are affected

Wards/Parishes affected: All

How to Comment

Should you have any comments on the issue that is being considered please contact either the relevant Officer or the Member of the Executive who will be taking the decision.

Cllr John A Wilson

Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services

Telephone: 01622 720989

E-mail: JohnAWilson@maidstone.gov.uk

Neil Coles

Housing Services Manager

Telephone: 01622 602103

E-mail: neilcoles@maidstone.gov.uk