

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITY, ENVIRONMENT AND HOUSING OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2014

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY
SERVICES

Report prepared by Neil Coles

1. REVIEW OF THE EMPTY HOMES PLAN 2013-15

1.1 Issue for Consideration

- 1.1.1 To note progress made in delivering the actions contained within the council's Empty Homes Plan 2013-15.

1.2 Recommendation of the Head of Housing and Community Services

- 1.2.1 That the Community, Environment and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

Background

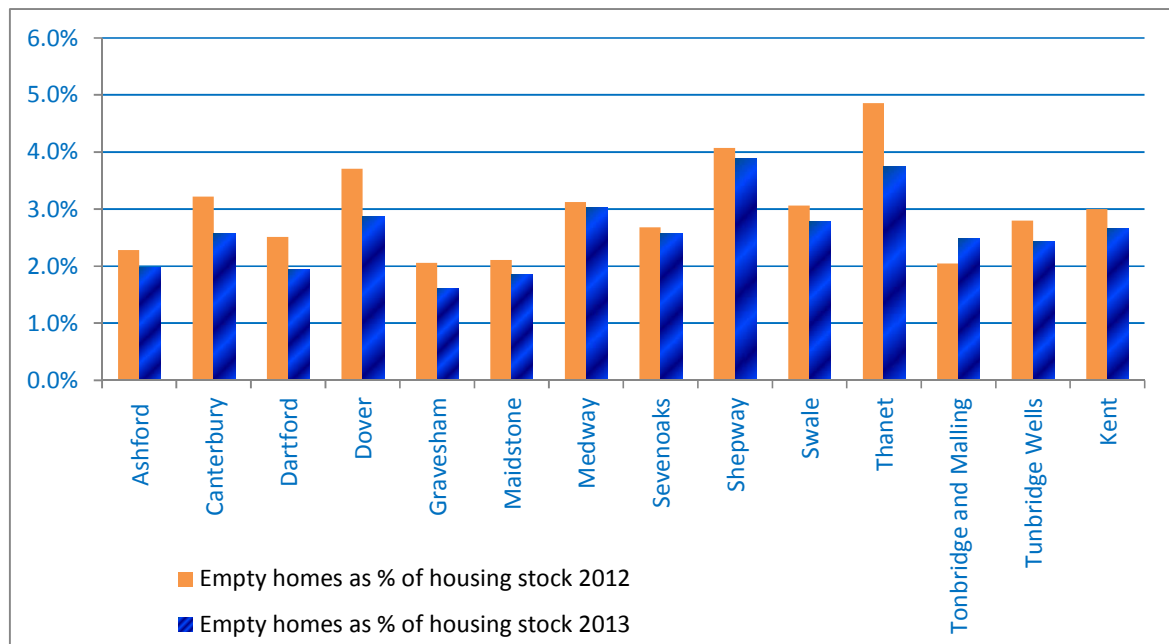
- 1.3.1 Homes that are empty and unoccupied are a wasted resource, and this is especially the case in Maidstone given the high demand placed on the housing market in the borough.
- 1.3.2 The council's Empty Homes Plan was adopted in January 2013 and set out three priorities to support empty homes being brought back into use across the borough:
- § Priority 1 – Minimise the number of empty homes through the council's interventions;
 - § Priority 2 – Maximise opportunities for returning homes back into use through initiatives and incentives, and;
 - § Priority 3 - Maximise the effectiveness of enforcement action to bring empty homes back into use.

- 1.3.3 The Empty Homes Plan includes an action plan that details a range of actions that will be completed to return empty homes back into use and meet the three priorities of the plan.

Performance update

- 1.3.4 Between January 2013 and July 2014, 212 empty homes have been returned to use following the council's intervention. Of these, 60 (28%) had been empty for less than one year, 124 (59%) had been empty for between one and three years, and 28 (13%) had been empty for over three years.
- 1.3.5 This demonstrates that resources are being targeted to those properties that are long-term empty homes, rather than properties which are transactional empty homes that would return to use without the council's involvement, e.g. properties being marketed for sale.
- 1.3.6 Between November 2012 and October 2013, DCLG statistics show that the number of empty homes across Maidstone reduced by 11% from 1,401 to 1,239. The number of long-term empty homes (i.e. those empty for longer than 6 months) also reduced by 1.4% from 420 to 414.
- 1.3.7 The number of empty homes across Maidstone as a percentage of the totals dwelling stock has also fallen from 2.11% to 1.85%. Maidstone continues to have the second lowest percentage of empty homes in Kent and Medway as shown in Table 1.
- 1.3.8 Although this provides a useful snapshot of the position, the data can be misleading as the number of empty homes can be very fluid, with properties being brought back to use and becoming empty on a daily basis.

Table 1 – Empty homes as a percentage of housing stock – 2012 and 2013



Action Plan update

1.3.9 Since the inception of the Empty Homes Plan the following actions have been delivered as set out in the action plan:

- § EHP 1.1 – 212 empty homes returned to use during January 2013 – July 2014;
- § EHP1.2 – Online reporting form implemented;
- § EHP1.3 – Telephone reporting helpline re-launched;
- § EHP 1.4 – Website information reviewed and updated;
- § EHP 1.5 – Four empty homes returned to use through private sector leasing;
- § EHP 2.2 – Capital funding for empty homes assistance incorporated into the council's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy;
- § EHP 2.4 – Maidstone Homefinder bond scheme continues to be promoted to empty home owners;
- § EHP 2.5 – Four properties returned to use through the HCA Empty Homes Scheme;
- § EHP 3.2 – Evaluation matrix for enforcement options implemented, and;

- § EHP 3.4 – Empty Homes Premium implemented for properties empty over two years.

1.3.10 The following actions have not been delivered within the agreed timeframe:

- § EHP 1.6 – The development of an innovative scheme to return empty homes back to use working with homeless households

This work has not been progressed following a lack of engagement from empty home owners which resulted in potential properties not being available for the scheme. Properties have also not been able to be sourced through the council's Commercialisation Project which has targeted strategic projects.

- § EHP 3.1 – Adoption of a Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy to include empty homes interventions

This work has not progressed as officers have experienced significant success in working collaboratively with empty home owners to return properties back into use.

1.4 Alternative Action and why not Recommended

1.4.1 Not applicable

1.5 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.5.1 The work to return empty homes back into use supports the council's priorities for Maidstone to be a decent place to live, and to have a growing economy.

1.6 Risk Management

1.6.1 Not applicable

1.7 Other Implications

1.7.1

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

X
X

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

1.8 Financial – The reduction in empty homes contributes towards maximizing tax income and the council may also receive New Homes Bonus for returning empty homes back into use. In addition the empty homes programme can help reduce the amount of temporary accommodation that is needed to meet the council’s statutory duties to homeless families. Returning empty homes back into use provides a cost avoidance opportunity when the average cost of providing households with B&B is £60 per night.

1.9 Staffing – The council has employed an Empty Homes Officer on a fixed term contract to support the work to promote bringing empty homes back into use and to work with homeowners over the past two years. The post is funded until March 2015 and given that the cost of the post is less than providing B&B for two households over a year, there is a financial case for extending the post, as the post holder has had a positive impact on bringing empty homes back into use.

1.10 Conclusions

1.10.1 Since the adoption of the council’s Empty Homes Plan in 2013, 212 properties have been brought back into use following the council’s intervention, exceeding the performance target set for the life of the policy.

1.10.2 Work is continuing to deliver the remaining actions contained within the Plan, and this will continue to deliver positive results in returning empty homes back into use.

1.11 Relevant Documents

1.11.1 Empty Homes Plan 2013-15

<u>IS THIS A KEY DECISION REPORT?</u>		<u>THIS BOX MUST BE COMPLETED</u>	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If yes, this is a Key Decision because:			
.....			
Wards/Parishes affected:			
.....			