

HOUSING, ECONOMY & INFRASTRUCTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing, Economy & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee held on Friday, 1st November 2013 at 10.00am in the Large Meeting Room, Wellington Library, Wellington, Telford.

PRESENT: Councillors C. Turley (Chair), E. Carter, C. Mason.

Also attending: Cllr. C. Smith, Cabinet Member Housing, Development & Borough Towns Development; T. Keever, Home Improvement Team Leader; S. Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

HEISC-5 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs. S. Bentley, C. Mollett, R. Sloan, J. Thompson, K. Tomlinson and Co-optees D. Johnson and S. Reynolds.

HEISC-6 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

HEISC-7 REVIEW OF EMPTY PROPERTIES AND ROGUE LANDLORDS

The Chair said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss and ask questions about the September Cabinet report on Empty Properties and Rogue Landlords, the information gathered to date by scrutiny and to plan further scrutiny work.

The Home Improvement Team Leader summarised the Cabinet report and made the following points:

- There were around 400 long-term (6 months +) empties in the borough – this was a rolling number as properties come in and out of occupation.
- The report set out a number of recommendations for Cabinet
 - capital allocation of £150k to help bring empties in Sutton Hill back to use
 - the establishment of a Landlord Accreditation Scheme
 - delegated authority to officer to serve Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) or Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO)
 - use of Enforced Sales Procedure on empties where there is a minimum £1,000 outstanding debt.
- The report listed some of the main reasons why properties were empty, often for personal reasons which could be very emotional. The HIA first response was always support and encouragement. Since publication of the report, there had been some positive feedback to letters sent to owners of empties. A few owners said they were pleased that the HIA had contacted them because they had not known what to do or where to go for help – one was the owner of a long-term

empty. The HIA was working with them to support and encourage them, but there was no magic wand – bringing empties back to use could be difficult and complex and take a very long time. Cllr. Mason said any progress was good, and Cllr. Carter said he was pleased the Council was trying to deal with these issues.

- The Landlord Accreditation Scheme was described in the report. This would be a voluntary scheme. The aim was to raise standards, support good landlords and connect Council services and tenants with accredited landlords. It was also about educating tenants, getting tenant feedback and having a database of accredited landlords for tenants to use. The work would be done jointly with the Housing Options team who deal with tenants, and the HIA who deal with the property element. Cllr. Carter asked how rogue landlords were identified and the Team Leader said it was usually from tenants.
- In terms of financial assistance owners could access Empty Homes loans of £5k-£15k for repairs to bring properties to the Decent Homes standard for renting out at affordable rents. The Council could either refer owners direct or carry out a schedule of works in support of the owner's application.
- The HIA linked into the Housing Action Team (HAT) and other Council services to co-ordinate appropriate support and action. The first course of action was always encouragement – there are often emotional reasons why an owner has left a property empty - but the HAT can use enforcement powers (serve Section 215 notices) or Enforced Sales. EDMOs or CPOs would only be used as a last resort because of the complexity and cost.
- It was key for the Council to bring the empties back to use to generate income from the New Homes Bonus. The New Homes Bonus is paid on new homes and empties which have been turned around. The amount is calculated from Council Tax Base data submitted to DCLG each October (the number of taxable properties plus new properties minus empties). For each property brought back to use the Council would receive around £1100 per year for 6 years.

A number of points were raised and discussed:

- Cllr. Carter raised an issue with a property in his ward which belonged to a housing association but the tenant was not looking after the property and the overgrown garden was affecting private neighbours. Cllr. Mason said the walkabouts in his ward with housing association staff were useful for spotting these kinds of problems. The Team Leader said members should report this sort of issue because the Home Improvement Agency may be able to work with other departments and use enforcement powers.
- The Team Leader suggested a useful issue for scrutiny would be to look at how to prioritise the empties for work. Cllr. Carter said the focus should be on empties which are easy to get back to use in order to maximise financial gain. The Team Leader said there needed to be a balance between properties which were the easiest to get back to use and those which cause the most blight to neighbourhoods. She emphasised again that it was not easy to get properties back to use and it would take time.
- Cllr. Carter asked about Rough Park House and Cllr. Smith said the building was listed and of historic value but the owner was absent and it was being looked at. Wrekin Housing Trust was looking to build around it. The Chair said this had been

discussed at the last meeting and there was information in the minutes.

- The Chair pointed out that the number of empties by ward in Appendix A of the Cabinet report was a snap shot in time and would change.
- The Chair asked members if they had any questions about the Targeted Work Flow chart in Appendix 2 but there were none.
- Cllr. Carter welcomed the work that was taking place and felt it was important because one empty property could blight a whole neighbourhood.
- The Chair said he understood that the work was still in the early stages but that the team had come a long way in 4 months.
- Cllr. Mason asked specifically what had been achieved so far and whether there were any examples of empties that had been brought back to use. The Team Leader said none had been brought back yet but gave examples of two properties which had been blights but repairs were in progress so that they were getting ready to come back to use or to come to market. Cllr. Mason said it would be good for the public to know that the Council was doing something.
- Cllr. Carter requested updates to come to the Committee so members could monitor the flow of properties. Cllr. Smith said there would be a report to Cabinet every 12 months and that he held regular meetings with the Team Leader to monitor progress. He said the letter had pushed things into action. The Team Leader said it was not always easy to turn a property around - there was story behind every property and quite often there were emotional issues that had to be handled very sensitively so it was not a quick turnaround. Cllr. Carter said it could be difficult with houses in probate where there were multiple owners and the Team Leader agreed there was one such case in Sutton Hill now. Cllr. Smith said probate could take a long time. Cllr. Carter said the Council needed to be in a position of saying what it was doing and why.
- The Revenues service had inspected properties which had been empty and exempt from Council Tax until April 2013 to see if they were still empty because since the removal of the discount owners had no incentive to notify the Council that the property was empty. The Team Leader said this was good work, but it would not pick up all the empties and some had already been found that were not on the list. For this reason any work scrutiny could do on helping identify empties would be useful.
- The Chair drew members' attention to Appendix A3 which summarised the information gathered by the Committee including the Stockton scrutiny report and the Welsh Assembly report on the private rented sector. The Scrutiny Officer explained that the summary highlighted case studies of work in other authorities on bringing empty properties back into use and tackling rogue landlords and members may want to suggest ideas to the service area or look at some of the case studies in more detail to see whether they would benefit Telford & Wrekin.
- Cllr. Carter asked whether Manor Heights was included in the list of identified empty properties and Cllr. Smith said it was not but it was being worked on. The Team Leader said it highlighted some of the issues with empties – this was a massive building with massive issues which required a massive amount of investment to bring back to use. Cllr. Carter asked if any funding would be available via the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Cllr. Smith said this was being explored but the funding was tied up in such a way that it was difficult to unlock for residential projects. In future 40% of the new homes bonus would be

top sliced and allocated via the LEP and this would be looked at to see how funding could be accessed. Cllr. Carter suggested that all efforts should be made to see if funding for Manor Heights could be accessed via the LEP. Cllr. Smith said the Council did not have the money to CPO the building, and the other authorities in the LEP – Herefordshire and Shropshire - would need to approve investment decisions. Over £2m was needed to get the building back to use. Cllr. Carter said the Council should highlight the problem to DCLG and make a direct approach to Eric Pickles.

The Chair opened a discussion about scrutiny work in the light of the discussion, and whether the Terms of Reference and schedule of activity agreed at the last meeting needed to be revised. A number of ideas were put forward:

1. Contact Stockton for more information about the EDMOs - how they had worked and what they cost.
2. Incentives for landlord accreditation schemes. The Cabinet report set out a number of ideas, but it would be useful for scrutiny to look at how other authorities had incentivised landlords, and possibly the option of joining a regional or national scheme. It was agreed that an update from Sandwell would be useful.
3. How to raise awareness through local networks. The Chair updated members on his discussion with officers in the Community Engagement Team who had made a number of suggestions about potential links into communities, but also suggested members should consider their approach carefully so that they do not raise unrealistic expectations. Members agreed that scrutiny should look at how the Council can work with Town and Parish Councils on this issue and that members would visit Town and Parish Councils in the areas with the highest concentration of empties (e.g. Cuckoo Oak, Ketley and Oakengates) to discuss their ideas and views on how to work together. It was also agreed that members would visit resident or community groups in similar areas to discuss the issue.
4. The suggestion at the previous meeting to contact other organisations such as utility companies about sharing information about empty properties had not been progressed. It was agreed that Severn Trent would be approached to find out if this was possible.
5. There was a discussion about how the owners of empty flats above shops are identified. The Team Leader said the owner could be identified from the land register, but if there is no forwarding address there is no way of knowing where the owner is or how to contact them and Cllr. Carter agreed this had been a problem historically.
6. The Scrutiny Officer would chase up copies of the presentation material from the Shelter conference on Tackling Rogue Landlords.
7. As already discussed, it would be useful for scrutiny to look at criteria for prioritising empties – there were 400 properties and limited resources so there had to be some way of prioritising. The Scrutiny Officer reminded members that Stockton had

developed a score card and recommended a number of properties to focus on and this may be worth looking at.

8. The Terms of Reference would be amended to read 97% of empty properties are “privately owned”, rather than “owned by private landlords”. The activity schedule would be updated to take account of what had been agreed at the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the scope of the scrutiny review of empty properties be updated and implemented as agreed in the meeting.

HEISC-8 WORK PROGRAMME AND CHAIR’S UPDATE

Members considered a suggestion from Cllr. Mason that the Committee should look at the introduction of 20mph speed limits outside schools. Members considered a statistics on the number of children injured in road accidents across the borough, and comparisons of accidents involving children outside three schools before and after the introduction of 20mph speed limits and the reasons for the accidents. This no accidents had been caused by speeding vehicles but a number of accidents had been caused by parked cars.

Members agreed that the suggestion should be adopted into the work programme, and incorporated into the review of Car Parking Enforcement as so many of the accidents related to parked cars.

The next meeting on 15th November was noted to consider the consultation process for the local plan Shaping Places.

The meeting ended at 11.25am.

Chairman:.....

Date:.....