

**ITEM No ...3.....**

**REPORT TO: NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES COMMITTEE – 13 NOVEMBER 2017**

**REPORT ON: EMPTY HOMES OFFICER PROJECT – UPDATE REPORT**

**REPORT BY: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES**

**REPORT NO: 341-2017**

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the progress of this shared service project between Dundee City Council and Angus Council.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1. Committee are asked to note the ongoing progress and successful outcomes achieved by this project.
- 2.2. Committee are also asked to note the proposal to extend funding of the Empty Homes Officer post from December 2017 until March 2019 and that this proposal has been approved by Angus Council.

**3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1. Extending funding of the Empty Homes Officer would cost £40,000 over 15 months. The full cost will be shared equally between Dundee City Council and Angus Council.
- 3.2. Dundee City Council's contribution can be contained within the Neighbourhood Services Revenue Budget and met from landlord registration fee income.

**4. MAIN TEXT**

**4.1. Background**

- 4.1.1. Reference is made to Article II of the minute of meeting of the Housing Committee of 9th May, 2015 when it was agreed to the creation of a shared service arrangement with Angus Council and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to appoint an Empty Homes Officer for an initial period of two years. The current shared service arrangement will come to an end in December 2017. We are looking for approval to extend this post to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. Angus Council have approved the extension of the post to 31 March 2019.
- 4.1.2. The general aim of this project is to increase the available property stock within the Private Sector (including the Private Rented Sector) by encouraging owners of long term unoccupied properties to bring these back into residential use. The Empty Homes Officer has been embedded within the Private Sector Services Unit since the projects establishment in December 2015.
- 4.1.3. The continuation of this shared service project will not only support the extension of active engagement with empty home owners within Dundee, but this will also allow the post holder to explore the expansion of support and assistance that is available to empty homes owners within Dundee.
- 4.1.4. Within Angus Council the continuation of this shared service will support the continuation of pro-active empty homes work, including the administration and further development of the Angus Council Empty Homes Loan Fund.

#### 4.2. Long Term Empty Properties in Dundee

- 4.2.1. A database received from the Customer Services and Benefit Delivery team in June 2017 highlighted that at this update there were 818 long-term empty private sector properties within Dundee. 37.4% of these properties were also receiving the 100% additional Council Tax surcharge applied to properties unoccupied for 12 months or more.
- 4.2.2. To implement a strategic approach to empty home owner engagement, properties have now been clustered into postcode locality groups. A breakdown of all postcode area percentages can be found following. These findings highlight that long-term empty private sector homes can be found consistently throughout the City of Dundee:

Postcode Region	Percentage of all Empty Stock
DD1	14.8%
DD2	24.9%
DD3	28.1%
DD4	24.4%
DD5	7.8%

#### 4.3. Progress of the Dundee Empty Homes Project

- 4.3.1. Over the second year of this project empty homes work in the city has continues to progress encouragingly, this has led to a further 20 properties being returned to use (as of September 2017). To date 40 long-term unoccupied private sector properties within Dundee have been returned to use through help and assistance from the Empty Homes Officer.
- 4.3.2. Within Dundee, this project has grown significantly as its profile has been raised. In April 2016 there were 13 active cases, with this increasing to 85 active cases as of early July 2017. In each of these cases the Empty Homes Officer has been actively engaging with owners to provide advice and assistance to help bring their property back into residential use.
- 4.3.3. Outcomes and responses from local empty home owners has helped to stimulate this projects development. As a result, the Property Matchmaker Scheme was designed and launched. This scheme has continued to generate interest. As of September 2017 there were 38 interested buyers registered with 16 long term unoccupied properties listed with this scheme. There have also been 31 notes of interest from registered buyers. In each of these cases the buyer has been linked with the property owner in order to take communication forward. 2 long term unoccupied property has been sold on directly to an interested buyer.
- 4.3.4. Ties have been established with the Customer Service and Benefit Delivery team in relation to the vacant dwelling additional council tax surcharge. To date the Empty Homes Officer has referred 37 cases to be looked at for discretion as the owners are actively engaging and making attempts to return their long term unoccupied properties to residential use. The Empty Homes Officer and Customer Service and Benefit Delivery team now meet on a monthly basis to discuss communal cases.
- 4.3.5. Council tax data has been fundamental to the growth and progress of this empty homes project. The initial approach to empty homes work in Dundee was to target owners being levied with the additional Council tax surcharge. Case referrals received on a monthly basis from the Customer Service and Benefit Delivery team have decreased. The Empty Homes Officer has subsequently used Council tax records on unoccupied properties to generate a private sector empty homes database. This database will now being used to increase and enhance owner engagement. The Empty Homes Officer is currently developing an active engagement model that will target all long term empty home owners within Dundee.

#### 4.4. Benefits of an Empty Homes Officer

- 4.4.1. The empty homes work undertaken has had notable benefits for both long-term empty home owners and the council.
- 4.4.2. Benefits for long-term empty home owners includes: support to secure a receipt through a potential sale or rental income; sign-posting to assist in securing ongoing occupation, and as such a reduction in deterioration where a property is left vacant. In turn, ongoing costs remain day-to-day rather than escalating to significant sums, helping to sustain the property value for both the owner and neighbouring residents, while minimising security costs associated with vacant property and the impact security measures can have visually on a neighbourhood.
- 4.4.3. Benefits for the council includes: enhanced community safety by promoting vacant property occupation; a reduction in neighbouring complaints normally associated with vacant properties; increasing local housing supply to assist in alleviating pressure on associated waiting lists and housing demand; a reduction in resources utilised by partners, e.g. Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to tackle anti-social behaviours associated with vacant properties; providing a single point of contact for all empty property matters for members of the public as well as the Council providing a consistent and co-ordinated approach.
- 4.4.4. Other benefits include securing the timeous receipt of Council tax income to support the delivery of vital services across communities; as well as data cleansing through the provision of accurate occupancy details. Empty homes work can help to ensure that Council tax arrears are not allowed to accrue. If arrears are in place then empty homes work can also play an essential role in the collection of these arrears, often helping owners to clear debts sooner rather than later.

## **5. SUMMARY**

- 5.1.1. It is important that the council is supporting owners to bring empty homes back into use, particularly where it is imposing an additional surcharge on empty home owners. The Empty Homes Officer has therefore been proactive in contacting owners of empty homes and offering support and advice to help owners bring these properties back into residential use.
- 5.1.2. To fully support the work associated with addressing the problem of long term empty homes in Dundee, it is proposed that this project is extended from December 2017 until March 2019 as a shared service with Angus Council. Scottish Government funding will finish at the conclusion of the current shared service pilot scheme in December 2017. Ongoing costs will be shared equally between Dundee City Council and Angus Council. Angus Council have agreed to the extension of the project.

## **6. CONSULTATIONS**

- 6.1 The Council Management Team have been consulted in the preparation of this report and agree with the content.

## **7. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 7.1 None.

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3<sup>rd</sup> October 2017

