



Enterprise and
Growth Scrutiny
Committee

9 December 2014

10.00 am

Item
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Public

**MINUTES OF THE ENTERPRISE AND GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING
HELD ON 9 DECEMBER 2014
10.00 - 11.40 AM**

Responsible Officer: Julie Fildes
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Present

Councillor Steve Davenport (Chairman)
Councillors Martin Bennett, Nicholas Bardsley, Dean Carroll, Jean Jones, Hannah Fraser (Substitute) (substitute for Charlotte Barnes) and Andy Boddington (Substitute) (substitute for Andrew Bannerman)

Also in attendance:

Councillors Tim Barker [Portfolio Holder for Performance], Roger Evans [Leader of the Liberal Democratic Party], Mal Price [Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Housing and Commissioning (Central)]

46 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillors Andrew Bannerman, Charlotte Barnes, Pauline Dee and John Hurst-Knight.

Councillors Hannah Fraser and Andy Boddington attended as Substitutes for Councillors Andrew Bannerman and Charlotte Barnes.

47 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were none disclosed.

48 Public Question Time

There were no Public Questions.

49 **Member Question Time**

There were no questions from Members.

50 **Call-in Empty Homes Strategy 2014/2017**

The Chairman invited Councillor Roger Evans to outline the reasons for requesting the call-in of the Portfolio Holder's decision to approve the Empty Homes Policy 2014-2017. Councillor Evans explained that he had requested the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee to examine the decision as Shropshire Council was failing to return sufficient empty properties to residential use. He continued that this view was supported by the National Statistics.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning, Housing and Commissioning (Central) welcomed the opportunity for the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee to review the Empty Homes Policy. He continued that he would also welcome the establishment of a Task and Finish Group to look at the policy in more detail, but was confident that it was as robust as resources would allow, and gave officers a clear process to follow when addressing the issue of empty homes and their return to the available residential housing stock. Referring to the paper tabled by Councillor Roger Evans [copy attached to the signed minutes] he stated that he was disappointed that the statistics contained within it were out of date and that it should be noted that Shropshire Council was in a better position than indicated by the information provided.

The Empty Homes Officers were invited to give their presentation. [Copy attached to the signed minutes.]

The Empty Homes Officer confirmed that the data used to produce the statistics for long term empty properties and exempt properties had changed. Prior to April 2014 the Council Tax section had not included in their Exempt Properties Monthly Report properties granted exemption where owners were in residential or hospital care. Once this data was included there appeared to be a substantial increase in properties classified as exempt, which was not the case. She also confirmed that residential units which were created in ex-commercial premises were not included in National Return to Use statistics.

In answer to a Member's query, the Empty Homes Officer clarified that 'Exempt' meant exempt for Council Tax purposes. She explained that due to the demographic nature of the County, this figure was higher than the National average. She confirmed that all cases were considered on their individual merits, and there was often a clear relationship between exemption and the age of the resident.

Members noted that the New Homes Bonus (NHB) was paid on each dwelling returned to use, and the Council received on average, dependent on Council Tax banding, £1,500 per annum per unit for six years. Furthermore, to claim the grant it was necessary to identify the properties returned to use and apply for the funding. Additional staff resources in the Empty Homes Team to perform a data cleansing activity could generate a higher level of NHB payments.

The Empty Homes Officer confirmed that Oswestry, Whitchurch and Market Drayton were designated as Empty Homes Action Zones due to high concentrations of empty properties and high levels of affordable housing need. Grant funding was available for property improvement in these areas for projects which met the scheme's criteria. Funding remained available for Oswestry and Whitchurch, although all funds allocated for Market Drayton had been committed and no further applications were being accepted. In response to a Member's query regarding the allocation of funds in Market Drayton, the Empty Homes Officer advised that, a single £5,000 grant had enabled one property to be returned to open market use. A further three large projects would create approximately fifteen units of affordable housing, largely from empty commercial premises or disused space above shop premises.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning, Housing and Commissioning (Central) stated that the Empty Homes Policy laid out a clear procedure for Officers to follow, although he agreed that the recommendations at the end of the presentation, if followed, would further improve the policy, particularly the data cleansing exercise to generate a higher level of NHB. He also supported better communications between the Empty Homes Officers and the Council Tax Department. Referring to the use of Compulsory Purchase and S215 remedies, he stated that these exposed the Council to a high level of financial risk and should only be applied as a last resort when all other approaches had failed. He commented that the Empty Homes Policy allowed for an initial softer approach with the property owner being encouraged to participate in the process, but in cases where the property owner was not willing to co-operate stronger remedies were available.

Councillor Evans questioned the merits of including the Empty Homes Officers within the Council's Public Protection Service and whether this was the correct place for the team. In response, a Member commented that it was immaterial where the Officers were placed, as the Council aimed to change its way of working to move away from traditional silo working practices.

A Member outlined the initiatives that Ludlow Town Council and the Ludlow & Cleve Local Joint Committee were taking to address the issue in their area. The Portfolio Holder agreed that it was important to return empty properties to use but cautioned on individual areas taking a fragmented approach which could lead to the inefficient use of resources. He continued that it was important that additional work undertaken outside the Policy framework should be self-funded due to limited resources.

RESOLVED:

- i. that The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning, Housing and Commissioning's decision to approve the Empty Homes Policy 2014-17 be endorsed;
- ii. that delegated authority be given to Lead Officers and the Chairman of the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee to agree the terms of reference for the establishment of an Empty Homes Task and Finish Group.

51 Dates for Future Meetings

RESOLVED:

That the Committee next meets at 10.00am on Thursday 29th January 2015.

Signed (Chairman)

Date: