

Committee: Housing Board

Agenda Item

Date: 4 November 2013

6

Title: Empty Homes – update

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Item for decision

No

Summary

1. This report updates the Housing Board on different initiatives to tackle empty homes in the district.

Recommendations

2. That the Housing Board notes progress in dealing with empty homes.

Financial Implications

3. The New Homes Bonus is payable where empty homes are brought back into use

Background Papers

4. None

5.

Communication/Consultation	N/A
Community Safety	N/A
Equalities	N/A
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	N/A
Sustainability	N/A
Ward-specific impacts	N/A
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

Situation

Empty Homes Project

6. In July 2013 the Council commenced a joint project with Liberata, a company that provides a service to LA's to investigate long term empty properties on the Council Tax list.
7. Long term empty properties are those that have been empty for more than 6 months. If after this time they have become occupied they can be removed from the Council's empty properties list and can be claimed under the Governments New Home Bonus (NHB) scheme.
8. Liberata was chosen as it has a proven track record in delivering savings to LA's and was able to provide additional resources to the Council Tax team through its own infrastructure that includes a call centre, website, database system and a team of inspectors able to visit properties.
9. NHB is calculated as a rate for each property based on the national average – band D (£8,636) and is paid over six years. To date Liberata claim to have identified 63 properties as being occupied from the Council Tax list. They have predicted a significant income to the Council from this project over six years.

Empty Homes and Private Sector Housing Officer

10. On 4 November Craig Grant will commence a two year contract as the Empty Homes and Private Sector Housing Officer (EHPSO). The focus of the post is to continue to identify long term empty properties and to work with the owners of properties where there is no indication that they are progressing plans to improve or sell the property to return it into use.
11. We continue to write to the owners of certain categories of long term empty properties as we are notified of them by Council Tax and in most cases we get a response explaining the owner's intentions. The Liberata project and new EHPSO will help in this respect.
12. There are a range of grants and scheme's available to property owners to assist them with returning a property to habitable use which will be offered and facilitated by the EHPSO. Where this action fails to provide a solution then formal enforcement powers including the service of Empty Dwellings Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase will be considered and actioned if appropriate.

PLACE Scheme

13. Three properties have currently been let through the PLACE scheme and we have recently approved another grant for a one bedroomed house in Elsenham.

14. We will shortly be offering loans through PLACE as well as grants. These do not require the owner to lease the property to Genesis, but it must be let or sold once refurbished and the loan repaid after 2 or 5 years. We believe there are several owners who will be interested in this scheme.
15. In a few cases we have also been able to put potential purchasers and vendors in contact with each other.
16. We have advised the Planning section of some derelict properties that could potentially be dealt with under S215 of the Town and Country Planning Act. We are also aware that agricultural ties are preventing the use of some properties and are seeking to discuss this with the planners.
17. The property in South Road, Saffron Walden that was compulsory purchased by the Council in 2012, has now been fully renovated and is currently on the market for sale. This has been a successful example of how a long standing empty property can be returned to habitable use through enforcement action.
18. Once the Empty Homes Officer is in post we have a list of properties for future potential enforcement action.

Risk Analysis

19.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Properties remain empty for long periods of time	2 Range of informal and formal actions available to the council	2 Empty homes are a wasted housing resource and can have a considerable negative impact upon a local community	This could be mitigated through on-going case management to ensure empty homes work is targeted and prioritised appropriately

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.