



## Policy and Resources Committee - 13 September 2010

### Empty Homes Grant

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#### Summary

To summarise the implications/options for Corby, East and South Northamptonshire following a joint award of £53,000 from the Communities and Local Government (CLG), to assist the three Councils to step up efforts to get empty homes in the private sector back in use and reduce anti-social behaviour.

#### Attachment(s)

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#### 1.0 Background

- 1.1 East Northamptonshire Council first developed its Empty Property Strategy in 1999; we have had an active and successful Empty Property Strategy ever since, with an update approved by Members in January 2008. An empty property is a nuisance, a wasted asset and most of all, a wasted home. More recently, people have questioned why Councils get involved in dealing with privately owned empty properties; some say it is none of our business. This Council has not agreed and recognised that an empty property is not a stand alone issue. All property is part of a community, which can be greatly affected by a building's condition and use. This Council recognises that an empty property can be very distressing for neighbours, as it can become a magnet for anti-social behaviour, and at risk from squatters. Owners often live elsewhere, which means they do not experience the direct negative impacts of an empty home. An empty property brought back into use is another home for someone in the district, whether a private buyer or tenant. East Northamptonshire Council has a responsibility to our residents, including those who own property, those living near an empty property and those in housing need. This is why the Council has supported bringing empty properties back into use and thereby contribute to affordable housing provision and improve the economic and environmental sustainability of East Northamptonshire.
- 1.2 The Empty Homes Agency, has informed the three councils in Northamptonshire, that they have been awarded a collective grant of £53,000 from this financial year's budget which is already held at East Northamptonshire Council for management. This grant is to support Empty Homes focused work across the three councils with a view to reducing anti-social behaviour.
- 1.3 Under the announcement, plans include focusing on *'efforts to train key staff on how best to get empty homes back in use as residents want to see more effective local action.'* It is acknowledged that assistance for Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) and Enforced Sales may be useful but a capital budget to carry this work is necessary as both come with significant costs. The announcement also indicates that, *'proposed action will be to renovate derelict houses for letting out as social homes, and the use of private funding to turn empty homes into properties that allow local people the chance to take a more affordable step onto the housing ladder.'*
- 1.4 We have not been consulted on this matter previously and within the current year's budget there are no financial resources to engage with some of the proposed work that that announcement outlines, however there are potential funding streams through the Homes and Communities Agency and partnership opportunities to explore with registered social landlords (RSLs), Social Care and Landlord Accreditation. The CLG anticipate that the initial grant could be used to set up a work plan with positive

outcomes that can be used as a leverage for continual support for further activities with respect to bringing properties back into use.

## 2.0 **Why tackle empty homes?**

- 2.1 Empty homes, particularly those in disrepair, can be a magnet for vandalism, drug-taking, gangs or other forms of anti-social behaviour. Other negative impacts of long-term empty properties include neighbourhood blight, unauthorised occupation by squatters, litter and in extreme cases arson. Such properties can be the cause of damage to adjoining properties and are frequently the cause of complaints to local authorities e.g. in relation to environmental health issues. Empty properties also have a degenerative effect on the properties and communities surrounding them. The owners of these empty properties often live elsewhere, which means they do not suffer the direct negative impacts.
- 2.2 The number of long-term empty properties in East Northamptonshire has reduced in the last three years from 446 empty properties to 426 empty properties all due to the informal actions of the private sector housing team. Long-term empty properties are those that have been empty for longer than six months. Some of these are re-occupied again after a six-month period and within the following year; however, there are a number of properties that lie empty for considerable periods of time, often for many years.
- 2.3 Clear benefits for local authorities and the local community accrue from the re-use of empty properties. They include the provision of improved quality and choice of housing accommodation for the residents of East Northamptonshire, increased Council Tax revenue and reduced expenditure by eliminating the need to board them up to keep them secure. Each empty property brought back into use will not only save hours of Council, but also, potentially, Police and Fire Service officers' time and enable scarce resources to be targeted into other areas.
- 2.4 Local authorities have extensive legal powers to force private landlords to sort out their properties and can even take properties over if necessary, but all such action comes with a significant cost.
- 2.5 In East Northamptonshire and Corby the approach we propose to take is to identify the properties that are proving to be the most problematic and also those where we can make a significant impact relatively quickly. We will then, from a prioritised short list of ten properties aim to return three properties in each area back into useful use, employing the monies awarded.

## 3.0 **Conclusion**

- 3.1 The available funding awarded, could be used as an opportunity to support Empty Homes work across the three Councils and specifically to provide assistance with targeting some of the worst long term empty properties in East Northamptonshire. The type of work would include exploring additional funding that may be available and which can be used to capitalise projects, coordinate and lead on possible legal actions and publicise successes which in turn can be used as leverage for further funding to return further properties back into use for the future. East Northamptonshire Council is responsible for ensuring that properties are decent and safe for human habitation and is committed to identifying empty properties and bringing them back into use. The geographic spread of the three Councils presents a particular challenge in respect of working jointly. A request has been made by South Northamptonshire Council to access separately their proportion of the award to pursue their own initiatives. Economies of scale and the close proximity of ourselves with Corby lends itself to the two Councils working together to maximise value for money from the remaining monies.

#### 4.0 Recommendations

4.1 Members are requested to approve the use of the monies awarded to support the delivery of empty property initiatives jointly with Corby Borough Council and that one third of the award is released to South Northamptonshire Council to enable them to progress local initiatives.

<b>Implications:</b>	
<b>Corporate Outcomes or Other Policy/Priority/Strategy</b>	
Good Quality of Life	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good Reputation <input type="checkbox"/>
Good Value for Money	<input type="checkbox"/> High Quality Service Delivery <input type="checkbox"/>
Effective Partnership Working	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strong Community Leadership <input type="checkbox"/>
Effective Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of our Customers and Communities <input type="checkbox"/>
Employees and Members with the Right Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Other:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Decision(s) would be outside the budget or policy framework and require full Council approval	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Financial</b>	There are no financial implications at this stage <input type="checkbox"/>
	There will be financial implications – see paragraph <input type="checkbox"/>
	There is provision within existing budget <input type="checkbox"/>
	Decisions may give rise to additional expenditure at a later date <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Decisions may have potential for income generation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Risk Management</b>	An assessment has been carried out and there are no material risks <input type="checkbox"/>
	Material risks exist and these are recorded at Risk Register Reference - inherent risk score - <input type="checkbox"/> residual risk score - <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Staff</b>	There are no additional staffing implications <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Additional staff will be required – see paragraph <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Equalities and Human Rights</b>	There will be no impact on equality (race, age, gender, disability, religion/belief, sexual orientation) or human rights implications <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	There will be an impact on equality (see categories above) or human rights implications – see paragraph <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Legal</b>	Power: <input type="checkbox"/>
	Other considerations: <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Background Papers:</b>	
<b>Person Originating Report:</b> Mike Deacon, Head of Environmental Services	
<b>Date:</b> 08 July 2010	
<b>CFO</b>	<b>MO</b>
<b>CX</b>	

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