

Regeneration and Transport Select Committee

Update to Executive Scrutiny Committee – 18 December 2012

Review of Long Term Empty/Abandoned Properties

In Stockton there are currently over 1,300 long term empty properties. A long term empty property is a property that has been empty for longer than 6 months.

At its meeting on 3 December the Committee considered the following possible areas for recommendation.

- The main focus for the Committee is the availability of funding and staffing of the Private Sector Housing Division to best facilitate the return of empty properties back into use. Initial support as an invest to save measure has been for a defined financial support package for the service such as a fixed proportion (6 months or x%) of the council tax charged on an empty property provided to the service.
- A funding allocation (£150,000?) to cover the costs of works in default for those Divisions taking enforcement action to be made available – this will ensure that Divisions can be more effective in their actions against owners who blatantly refuse to take steps to prevent their properties from being eyesores and cause the Council to incur substantial costs in dealing with these properties. Such funding investment will see properties brought back into use and the resultant income continually recycled to cover further future service costs.
- The Committee has asked about financing/recouping the cost of work using a third party such as community payback team to carry out the remedial/making safe works to empty properties or a private business who could take it on, sharing the risk/reward.
- The Committee is interested to explore further the reprioritisation of empty properties (empty just over 6 months) to identify those that can be brought back into use sooner than those appearing on the current priority listing that have been empty for several years with limited signs of reoccupation. This option needs to be balanced against the break in the ongoing continuity of working to encourage property owners to bring their long term empty (over 12 months) properties back into use as documented evidence is required for the majority of enforcement actions the Council can take.
- The Committee believe that increased publicity of successes when empty properties are brought back into use should be sought to assist tackling this issue.

It is anticipated that the Committee will present its findings and recommendations to Cabinet on 7 February 2013 to coincide with the presentation of the Council Tax Discount Scheme consultation findings.