

ANGUS COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE– 3 MARCH 2015

APPOINTMENT OF SHARED SERVICES EMPTY HOMES OFFICER

REPORT BY HEAD OF PLANNING AND PLACE

ABSTRACT

This report seeks approval to enter into a shared services agreement with Shelter Scotland to appoint a Regional Empty Homes Officer operating in partnership between Angus and Dundee City Councils.

1. RECOMMENDATION

1.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

- (i) Approves a proposal for the Council to participate in a shared services project which will employ a Regional Empty Homes Officer to work across Angus and Dundee. The post will be funded by Angus Council, Dundee City Council and the Scottish Government for a period of two years.

2. ALIGNMENT TO THE ANGUS COMMUNITY PLAN/SINGLE OUTCOME AGREEMENT/COPORATE PLAN

2.1 This report contributes to the following local outcomes contained within the Angus Community Plan and Single Outcome Agreement 2013-2016:

- Angus is a good place to live in, work and visit
- Our communities are safe, secure and vibrant
- Our communities are developed in a sustainable manner.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Since 2010 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, funded by the Scottish Government and co-ordinated by Shelter Scotland, has been working with councils and their partners to develop services aimed at bringing private sector empty homes back into use. One focus of the partnership is to support local authorities to develop a shared services approach to empty homes work, providing dedicated resources to work with owners. There are currently four such projects operating in Scotland covering ten local authorities.

3.2 Angus Council has a successful Empty Homes Loan Fund Project in operation which is funded by a loan of £120,000 from the Scottish Government. The Loan Fund provides interest-free loans to owners of empty homes who are required to let the homes at an affordable rent for a minimum of five years. The Council must repay 60% of the Scottish Government funding by 2020 and the remaining 40% by 2024.

3.3 Report No 205/14, Review of Council Tax Long Term Empty Property Discount, was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee on 29 April 2014. The report provided details of a new Council Tax charging policy to replace the previous 10% discount granted to empty properties after a year with a phased additional charge of 50% from 1 October 2014 and 100% from 1 April 2015. The report set out that all additional revenue (minus administrative costs) would be made available to help increase affordable housing across Angus, including funding the continuation of the Empty Homes Loan Fund.

4. CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Empty homes represent a wasted resource in Angus (as elsewhere) and can also cause significant problems for neighbours and surrounding communities. Limited staff resources have inhibited our ability to develop dedicated services for this type of work, and it is recognised that working proactively with owners to bring properties back into use can be time-consuming and complex.
- 4.2 The current loan fund of £120,000 will be fully utilised by the end of the financial year and will have brought seven empty homes back into use by 31 March 2015. Although the success highlights that there is an appetite for this type of funding in Angus, the provision of loan funding represents just one option to support owners of empty homes.
- 4.3 At present there are over 450 long term empty properties in Angus affected by additional Council Tax charge. From 1 October 2014 to 31 March 2015 it is expected the additional income generated will be £80,000. From 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 the additional revenue income is anticipated to be £300,000, although this estimate cannot be finalised until the end of March 2015 when collection rates will be determined. These resources could be used to fund a shared services post to manage a continuance of the Empty Homes Loan Fund previously established.

5. PROPOSALS

- 5.1 Through the Scottish Empty Homes Network the Scottish Government has agreed to part fund a shared services post within Angus and Dundee City councils. The post would be established in 2015/16 and operate as a pilot scheme for a period of two years.
- 5.2 The total funding requirement for the post is £48,354 per annum. The Scottish Government will provide funding of £20,000 in the first year, and £10,000 in the second year. Angus and Dundee City councils will provide the remaining funding of £14,177 each in the first year and £19,177 each in the second year. The role will be full time, with the officer splitting their time equally between the two local authorities.
- 5.3 It is considered that there are significant benefits to piloting the shared services approach in Angus:
- It is recognised that establishing the policies and procedures required to operate a successful empty homes service requires dedicated officer time which cannot be met from current staff resources. Participating in a pilot shared services approach (which takes advantage of Scottish Government funding), enables the Council to establish a robust approach to managing empty homes with the opportunity to review the resource requirements at the end of the pilot period.
 - Shelter Scotland will recruit and line manage the officer for a period of two years, providing the officer with access to the well-established resources, policies and procedures developed through the existing shared services projects and the Scottish Empty Homes Network. Shelter Scotland has a track record of managing shared services projects of this nature and will provide added value to the project.
- 5.4 The aim is for the existing Empty Homes Loan Fund to be continued and expanded using revenue raised through the Council Tax Long Term Empty Homes charging policy. The Loan Fund will be developed to respond to the specific needs of empty home owners in Angus with the necessary safe guards in place to protect the Council's interests. A further report will be brought to the Committee outlining the full details of the fund in due course.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Funding of £14,177 in 2015/16 and £19,177 in 2016/17 is required to support the Regional Empty Homes Officer post. This will be met from the revenue raised from the Council Tax Long Term Empty Home charging policy.
- 6.2 Funding of the Loan Fund will also be met from the revenue raised from the Council Tax Long Term Empty Home charging policy. As this will be a revolving loan fund the Council will recoup funds loaned to owners which can then be directed towards new applications.

- 6.3 At the end of the pilot there will be a review of the scheme and the resource requirement, to assess the potential to appoint a full time empty homes officer for Angus if appropriate, or alternative action as deemed necessary.

NOTE: The background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) which were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report are:

- R205/14, Review of Council Tax Long Term Empty Property Discount, 29/4/14

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