

**REPORT TO:** PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
**Date of Meeting:** 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016

**Report of:** Cllr Lyons, Deputy Chair of the Empty Commercial Properties Task and Finish Group

**Title:** Empty Commercial Properties Task and Finish Group Report.

**Is this a Key Decision?**

No

**Is this an Executive or Council Function?**

Council

**1. What is the report about?**

To report the findings and recommendations of this Task and Finish Group to the Place Scrutiny Committee.

**2. Recommendations:**

The Council:-

- a) Encourages owners of privately owned empty commercial properties to consider discussing the potential to change the use of their premises to residential with Exeter City Council's Planning Team.
- b) The list of empty commercial properties identified by this Task and Finish Group is refreshed and reviewed on a 6 monthly basis.
- c) An annual update is provided to the Place Scrutiny Committee detailing usage outcomes in respect of those properties identified through Recommendation (b).
- d) A new Task and Finish Group is formed specifically to investigate ways in which the usage of empty commercial properties may be increased across the City.

**3. Reasons for the recommendation:**

- To realise and maximise the potential use of empty commercial properties across the City for residential purposes.
- To continue to identify empty commercial properties across the City which may be suitable for residential use.
- To actively engage with owners to encourage them to consider alternative use of empty commercial properties.
- To look at ways of encouraging owners to consider residential use as a viable alternative.
- To investigate further issues in relation to this topic which fell outside the remit of this Task and Finish Group.

**4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources:**

Officer time in the event that the recommendations contained within this report are approved.

**5. Section 151 Officer comments:**

Any decision to change the use of commercial property would have a financial impact on the Council, which could be positive or negative. The section 151 Officer has not been asked for an analysis of what the impact would be at this stage, however given the number of properties involved (16) it may not be significant either way.

**6. What are the legal aspects?**

Any change of use of a property will be subject to any necessary planning and building control approval.

**7. Monitoring officer Comments**

Please see comment on legal aspects above.

**8. Report Details:**

The area of privately owned empty commercial properties was identified as a high priority topic for Task and Finish Group investigation at the Annual Scrutiny Work Programme Meeting which took place in July 2015. It is recognised that empty commercial properties represent a wasted resource across the City, particularly in so far as their potential for residential use is concerned.

Membership of the Group consisted of:-

Cllr Raybould (Chair)  
Cllr Lyons (Deputy Chair)  
Cllr Baldwin  
Cllr Brimble  
Cllr Morse  
Cllr Pearson

Council Officers:-

Assistant Director, City Development  
Corporate Manager, Property  
Economy and Tourism Manager  
Senior Housing Development Officer  
Housing Development Officer  
Joint Housing Needs Lead  
Senior Rates Officer

## **The Scope**

The key objectives established by the Group were:-

- To identify privately owned empty commercial properties across the City which could be suitable for residential use.
- To encourage owners to consider a change of use to residential.
- To provide owners with contact details for organisations so that they can access the relevant information about converting their properties for residential use.
- To investigate whether the Council's systems can be updated to generate a regular report identifying empty commercial properties on an ongoing basis.

## **A Context of the Work**

Housing is a key priority for the Council and the City with a focus on being able to provide sufficient homes to meet housing needs and to create a City with homes for everyone.

The Group met on four occasions between January and April 2016 and were keen to explore the opportunities for creating more housing across the City. One of the main questions to be addressed was whether the approach taken on returning empty residential properties back into use could also be applied to empty commercial properties.

The Senior Housing Development Officer provided an overview as to the current position in respect of empty residential properties and their return back to use. Promotion was an area which had been specifically concentrated upon this year and efforts included a press release for National Empty Homes Week in December. The article provided information as to who to contact at the Council and encouraged owners of empty homes to access the information and help available. An overhaul of the information available on the Council's website was also ongoing in order to better signpost owners to advice on refurbishment, letting standards and letting and to encourage the public to report empty homes.

The Group heard that the owners of empty homes are contacted regularly through mail outs (approximately 500 properties annually) which include standard letters encouraging owners to get in touch. The literature ensures that owners are aware of the potential benefits of renting or selling their property, as well as the resources available to achieve this. Information is provided on becoming a landlord, private letting, agents and grants.

The Group decided that initial investigations should focus on the information held within the Commercial Property Register and Business Rates records so that a list of privately owned, empty commercial properties could be established. The main considerations for the list would be properties which had been vacant for a longer period of time (ie, 12 months) and which would be suitable for potential residential

use given the type of building and the location. Former small shops with flats above were viewed as the most suitable.

All Councillors were asked to highlight any empty commercial properties of which they were aware and a press release appealed to members of the public to do the same.

During the course of the Group's meetings, officers from the Planning Department, Housing Development, Estates, Housing Needs, Business Rates and the Economy Department, attended and provided advice which enabled the Group to narrow the suitability criteria and a final list of properties was settled upon at the last meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

The final list contains details of 16 potentially suitable properties which would provide the main focus in respect of Recommendation (a) and will also provide a basis for the implementation of Recommendations (b) and (c).

**9 What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, Economy safety and the environment?**

Should the recommendations contained within this report be approved, there could be a benefit in respect of health and well being through the potential creation of more housing opportunities within the City.

**Cllr Lyons, Deputy Chair of the Empty Commercial Properties Task and Finish Group**

**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**

**Background papers used in compiling this report:**

None

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