

Kent County Council – No Use Empty: Kent Empty Property Initiative

Kent County Council launched its 'No Use Empty' campaign in 2005 to examine better ways of delivering services and working more effectively in partnership with district councils. It was originally focused on the towns of the four districts of Thanet, Dover, Shepway and Swale, as the majority of empty properties were in these four areas. In January 2008 the initiative was expanded to all 12 district councils due to its success. The No Use Empty Scheme and its partners have won several awards for partnership working most recently in the Regeneration and Renewal Awards in 2014.

Setting up the Scheme

Prior to the launch of the Initiative a large amount of research was undertaken including:

- Identify the location of the empty properties through a empty property condition survey
- Business and local residents perceptions survey
- Appointment of a PR and media company to raise and promote the profile of the initiative
- Development of the No Use Empty Campaign and associated website

To start with the project ran an awareness campaign aimed at owners to highlight the issue of empty homes. An information resource was set up for owners, residents, and anyone else with an interest in empty properties and this led to the creation of the No Use Empty web site www.no-use-empty.org, and regular newsletters. For the council, training and practical support for officers helped them use the full range of legislation options and wider mechanisms to bring empty homes back into use.

No Use Empty offers three strands of financial assistance supported by capital funding from Kent County Council (£5 million):

Loan Scheme – loans are available to help owners/developers for the refurbishment or conversion of empty homes or redundant commercial buildings to provide good quality residential accommodation. On completion properties must be made available for sale or rent. The loan fund is operated as a revolving fund, so that as loans are repaid, the money is then re-lent to support new schemes. Loans are offered at £25K per unit, max £175K per applicant, secured as 1st or 2nd charge based on a max 90% LTV (loan to value).

Partnership Fund – funding available to help the Districts undertake enforcement where deemed necessary e.g. Compulsory Purchase Orders, works in default or direct purchase. District Councils have extensive powers to deal with run down empty properties but often lack both financial resources and personnel or knowledge to effectively utilise these powers.

Direct Purchase Scheme – involving the acquisition of empty properties by Kent County Council for redevelopment into good quality housing accommodation.

Resources

The Initiative is delivered by the Empty Property team made up of the Kent County Council project manager, private sector consultant and the district empty property officers (mainly part time officers). This team operates as a "virtual team" and work from different locations. Additional resources are provided by the County's legal team and property group as required.

In 2012, Kent County Council launched an Affordable Housing loan scheme which has a Capital fund of £2 million. The scheme is jointly funded by KCC and the Homes & Community Agency and works with AmicusHorizon, who manage the refurbished properties on behalf of the owners for a 5 year period, providing a guaranteed monthly rental income. It aims to return a total of 45 affordable units by March 2015.

Results

The success of the project has been measured by the tangible results achieved through the number of empty homes brought back into use, which amounted to 487 properties in the first three-year period. In total, since its inception the scheme has brought back into use 3,120 properties (up to January 2014)

The scheme has approved over £10.8 Million of interest free loans. This has leveraged in excess of £15.3 Million of private sector funding (owner's contribution), giving a total investment through the loan scheme of £26.1 Million (up to August 2014). The loans scheme created over 609 jobs & homes for approximately 893 people. For each £1 spent on interest and administration, there was an estimated £20.63 being spent in local economy (labour & materials). A survey of businesses and residents demonstrated an increase in confidence in localities as a result of bringing empty properties back into use.

In partnership with Bristol City Council, the No Use Empty Initiative brand was rolled out to the West of England Local Authorities in 2010. No Use Empty introduced KCC Legal Services to Eden Council (2011) who are due to formalise an agreement with KCC to provide Legal support for the registering of charges in relation to their own smaller loan scheme which is now operational across six local authorities.

Lessons Learnt

The main lessons learnt from establishing the project were the length of time it took to develop to bring all the components together and the need for customer care. It was essential to keep clients informed of progress (or lack at times) in order to keep them on board.

The lack of resources at District level to undertake empty property work was a limiting factor. The capital funding by KCC has helped with the project finances but the people resources are stretched and not all the districts are able to employ dedicated empty property officers.

The partnership approach has brought about a culture change towards tackling empty homes. Providing training for staff in non-housing roles such as legal and planning has helped to unlock difficult cases. Access to specialist expertise on the legal issues has also helped the delivery of the scheme.

Coverage of No Use Empty in the local and national press and media has built the brand name and brought property owners forward to talk to the council, knowing that threats to take action will be followed through.