

Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel

2 August 2016

Commenced: 6.00pm

Terminated: 7.30pm

Present: Councillors K Welsh (Chair), Beeley, Bowden, Bowerman, Fowler, Glover, A Holland, Homer, Newton, Patrick, Pearce, Reid, Sharif, Sidebottom, F Travis, Whitehead.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Piddington (Deputy Chair), Affleck, Feeley.

The Chair opened the meeting and received apologies.

6. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel held on 14 June 2016 were approved as a correct record.

7. EMPTY HOMES AND HOUSING STRATEGY

The Panel welcomed Councillor Gerald Cooney, Executive Member (Healthy and Working); and John Hughes, Housing Strategy Officer, to receive updates on the Council's empty homes and housing strategies.

The Panel heard that the Council has developed and evolved its housing and empty homes strategies over the last 12-18 months and has incorporated the recommendations in the Empty Homes – Housing Strategy report published by the Strengthening the Economy and Communities Scrutiny Panel in 2014/15.

Mr Hughes advised members that following the recommendations in the report, the Council has put a greater focus on engaging with owners of empty commercial properties with a view to converting them into residential accommodation. This hoped to both reduce the issue of empty properties in the borough and help to meet the growing need for smaller, more affordable¹ and 2 bedroom properties in Tameside. The funding for these projects is fronted by external grants and inputs from the owners, which they will earn back through rental payments from tenants.

Members were advised that three conversions are currently being undertaken, all of which will be managed by Ashton Pioneer Homes once completed:

- A former County Bank in Ashton being converted into nine separate 1 and 2 bedroom apartments
- Ashton Methodist Hall being converted into twelve separate 1 and 2 bedroom apartments
- A former office building in Denton being converted into nine separate 1 bedroom apartments

The Panel were made aware that the Council has also implemented another recommendation included within the Scrutiny report to utilise Council Tax to engage with more empty property owners. Mr Hughes informed members that Council Tax brochures and webpages now contain information on the Council's empty homes programme and the different ways that it can help empty property owners to make the most of their properties.

Although this strategy has resulted in some empty property owners coming forward, it has not yet yielded the significant results that the service had hoped it would, and it is acknowledged

that more innovative strategies involving Council Tax are needed to continue to raise the amount of empty property owners coming forward to the Council.

Mr Hughes informed members that as part of the Tameside Empty Property Strategy 2013-15, the Council secured funding to collaborate with the University of Salford to develop a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) that aimed to introduce a more academic approach to housing strategy. The Council's approach to empty homes was awarded the highest grade of 'Outstanding' by the KTP Grading Panel, received the Jonathon Sime Award for Research and has also received international recognition.

The Panel heard that partnership work has also commenced between the Council, Police, Fire services and a number of other external partners through new Neighbourhood Partnership arrangements. The aim of these arrangements is to connect and engage with as many communities in Tameside as possible to prevent anti-social behaviour in empty properties and reduce the cost implications to the Council and other public services.

Members were informed that effective planning of resources is crucial in order to account for the growing pressure on resources and the significant reduction in funding and grants provided to local authorities to tackle empty homes. Mr Hughes emphasised to the Panel that the Council's housing and empty homes strategies will strive to ensure that the most positive outcomes for residents and the Council are being achieved despite the financial and operational resource pressures facing the service.

The Panel asked if the Council has already planned future redevelopments and/or conversions of empty commercial properties into residential accommodation.

Mr Hughes advised members that the Council is aware of a number of suitable sites across the borough, however, due to the fact that work is almost entirely reliant on unavailable grants and funding inputs there are no confirmed plans in place at present.

The Panel asked how the Council plans to engage with owners of empty properties and reduce the total number of empty homes/properties in the borough.

Mr Hughes informed the Panel that the Council has undertaken a number of measures including hosting events for empty property owners to attend and receive information on the grants and funding available to convert their empty properties into new accommodation. Focus groups and interviews were also carried out for 12 months to assess how the Council can best tackle empty homes and ensure the health and wellbeing of residents.

The Panel asked if empty homes and/or derelict properties can be put forward to contribute to the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework initiative.

Councillor Cooney advised members that this is a decision that only a property owner can make, but emphasised that the Council has been active in informing empty property owners about this as a potential option for their properties.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Cooney and Mr Hughes be thanked for attending the meeting.

8. PEOPLE AND PLACE SCORECARD

The Panel received an update on sections of the People and Place Scorecard performance report that are relevant to this scrutiny panel.

9. ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel discussed a range of potential topics to be added to the Annual Work Programme for 2016/17, deciding that the first subject for review will be Impact of Bin Swap and Delivering Future Improvements to Recycling.

RESOLVED: That the Annual Work Programme be circulated to all Panel members outside of the meeting.

10. ESTABLISHMENT OF WORKING GROUP

The Chair invited Panel Members to express an interest in joining the new working group for the review of Impact of Bin Swap and Delivering Future Improvements to Recycling and initial interest was noted.

RESOLVED: Details for the first working group meeting to be circulated to members by email and calendar invitations will be sent.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair informed Panel members that the next meeting of the Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel will take place on Tuesday 13 September 2016.

12. URGENT ITEMS

The Chair reported that there were no urgent items for consideration at this meeting.

CHAIR