

Briefing Paper to the Brownhills/ Pelsall/ Rushall/ Sheffield Area Panel

Briefing

Void properties proliferate throughout the borough. Sometimes creating health and safety risks for the residents and visitors to the borough and sometimes creating an “eyesore” in the local neighbourhood and/or a public health hazard.

These void properties may range from houses to factories, a particular problem at the moment are empty public houses.

Powers to address these issues sit within various teams within the Council with significant powers sitting with Building Control, Public Protection and planning. Dealing with void properties is a priority issue for the Council.

Two recent fires at one property in Pelsall over a single weekend highlight the importance of the issue we are facing. There are two key areas that need to be addressed:

- Firstly a need for better co-ordination of public safety issues around void properties. This has been dealt with by a change in the responsibility of the Area Managers who will now take on a co-ordination role for void properties that offer a public safety issue within Walsall. They will be driven by public safety and will work with enforcement officers to ensure an appropriate response is in place. Public Safety will be the number one priority for this work.
- Secondly a need for greater collaboration amongst partners to deal with high priority issues and the heavy cost burden to the public purse of incidents which could have been avoided by appropriate prevention activity. The void property group, current terms of reference attached (appendix (a)) will review issues around void properties at a strategic level identifying changes in processes and appropriate legal tools to improve the overall system that responds to void properties.

Supporting this report will be a presentation giving more detail about the powers available to manage public safety issues around void properties and the appropriate use.

The area panel is asked to discuss the change in process and the powers available to the Council and make any comments or recommendations it feels is appropriate.

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VOID PROPERTY GROUP – Terms of Reference

Representation

The Void Property Group (VPG) is a cross service/agency group with representatives attending from Environmental Health, Area Partnerships, Planning, Building Control, Regeneration, Communities and Partnership, Legal, Council Tax, Anti Social Behaviour Unit, Police Arson Task Force and Fire Service. The group aims to manage the identification, assessment and prioritisation of void properties for enforcement action.

Scope

There is different and overlapping legislation that can be used by service areas and agencies to deal with the problems associated with void properties. Generally, the use of this legislation is not mandatory with the result that it has not always been used when it could have been. Its use has also been curtailed by a lack of funding to underwrite works in default in pursuance of enforcement action.

The VPG seeks to improve joint working and the likelihood of achieving a satisfactory enforcement outcome by enabling a greater understanding of the respective powers and difficulties faced in different service areas and agencies and agree an appropriate use of legislation, where appropriate, both on a short-term and long term basis.

Purpose

The group seeks to improve the use of resources and avoid the duplication of visits. For this purpose it provides a forum for regular liaison and case review with each service area whose work impacts on the issues relating to Void Properties. A database of properties will be maintained for discussion at meetings.

The group seeks to share information and develop monitoring and reporting processes to enhance service delivery and target actions.

The group also has a strategic role in addressing the constraints of limited resources particularly in the case of undertaking works in default. . As yet a route to securing changes in the council tax regimes for void properties has not been explored, but this might introduce more revenue from absent landlords to contribute to the cost of addressing dilapidated / derelict buildings.

Outcomes

The group has developed a reporting form and procedures for officers from the Emergency Services to report any void or derelict properties to the Council and for Council Officers to respond to the reporting Officer with progress updates. The system

is now in use. The interagency referral forms were originally designed by the Fire Service for use in reporting of potential fires – fly-tipping, combustible materials, abandoned vehicles, discarded gas bottles etc – and are in use by some Neighbourhood Watch representatives and Street Champions. Currently these reports are sent to the relevant Council services for reporting and arranging site visits.

Meetings

Will be held every two months.

Meetings will enable service areas and partner agencies to raise any new cases that may need attention.

The cases will be discussed and agreement reached on whether to retain or remove the case.

The database will be broken down in to residential, commercial and regeneration areas.

Terms of Reference

- 1 To promote a more effective, coordinated and proactive use of legislation to tackle troublesome void properties.
- 2 To provide a forum for regular liaison and case review with each service area whose work impacts on issues relating to void properties.
- 3 To promote the development of procedures and service standards to manage the identification, assessment and prioritisation of void properties for enforcement action
- 4 To promote the consistent use of legislation by through use of “best fit” legislation and protocols.
- 5 To identify current and best practice in respect of void properties.
- 6 To explore alternative funding to support enforcement action in respect of void properties.

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