

REAL HELP NOW - EMPTY SHOPS FUNDING

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks to allocate the Empty Shop funding of £52,632 which was made available to the Council by the Department of Communities and Local Government and follows on from the report considered by Cabinet on 14th January 2010 on this issue.
- 1.2 This report recommends that the Empty Shops funding be divided equally between three shopping areas across the borough – New Ferry, Bromborough and Egremont (King Street/Brighton Street) but that the final decision on how the money should be spent within the centre should rest with Cabinet following the involvement of the relevant Area Forum.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 On 4 December 2009 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced an extension of the Real Help Now scheme to support families and businesses through the economic down turn.
- 2.2 This fund is seeking to ensure that shopping areas remain vibrant places in the economic downturn and it is providing financial help to certain areas (on the basis of Index of Multiple Deprivation) to re-open or re-use empty shops.
- 2.3 The fund was allocated in equal amounts to each Local Authority in England that qualified on the level of deprivation within its communities in December 2009 - this amounts to £52,632.
- 2.4 As members will be aware following consideration of the initial report on 14 January 2010 Cabinet resolved that:
That bids be invited from all area forums and a participatory budgeting process used to decide on the best overall bids with money allocated to a small number of strong bids with a demonstrated evidence of need. (Minute 262 refers)
- 2.5 Following the Cabinet decision proposal forms were prepared along with guidance notes, drawing on national best practice, which covered technical issues including a standard lease for this type of project, advice on business planning, on sustainability of projects in the medium to long term and a range of business rates, planning and tax issues.
- 2.6 It was planned to go to the June cycle of Area Forums but following the General Election in May 2010 there was a period when the Government reviewed a number of grant schemes and there was debate as to whether the Empty Shops Funding would remain available to the Council.
- 2.7 This position has now been clarified and the money is available to address the issue of empty shops. Subject to the approval of this report by Cabinet the availability of the funding will be raised with the relevant Area Forums at their next cycle of meetings in February/March 2011. It is then hoped that projects can be implemented in mid to late 2011.

2.8 At around the same time (January 2010), Cabinet considered the Retail Report by Roger Tym and Partners concerning Wirral's retail centres. A number of recommendations were made and the Town Centres report elsewhere on this agenda responds to these issues. This work has helped to target the allocation of this Empty Shops grant.

3.0 **ALLOCATING THE FUNDING IN WIRRAL**

3.1 In proposing an allocation of the funding in Wirral consideration has been given to (1) the shopping area vacancy rates across the Borough using the findings of the Retail, Town Centre and Commercial Leisure study produced by Roger Tym and Partners (Cabinet 14 January 2010) and its own data collection of vacancy rates across these and other shopping areas (2) the current economic conditions in each and around each centre and (3) the geographical location of areas and their contribution towards regeneration in Wirral. Appendix 1 presents a schedule of vacancy rates in the Borough's shopping centres. This is a combination of data collected as part of the Roger Tym and Partners work in 2008 (to be updated this year as part of the work to be undertaken for the Town Centre Strategy which is reported elsewhere on this agenda) and more recent data collected by officers in 2010. Brighton Street/King Street was not included in the Roger Tym and Partners survey work in 2008 (which was limited to the centres listed in UDP Policies SH1 and SH2) and therefore a recent survey was undertaken and Bromborough was recently surveyed as part of ongoing discussions with local traders. .

3.2 The areas recommended to receive an equal share of the empty shops funding are New Ferry, Bromborough and Egremont (Brighton Street/King Street).

3.3 The rationale behind proposing these three centres is the relatively high vacancy rates of retail properties in each centre which are 31% in New Ferry, 13% in Bromborough and 22% in Brighton Street/King Street and the considerations set out below

3.4 Although not one of the centres listed in the UDP or emerging LDF Core Strategy, Brighton Street/King Street has a previously approved strategy undertaken by Roger Tym and Partners in 2005 (Cabinet 26 January 2005). Unfortunately despite strenuous efforts by Officers, the centre has not been able to secure any targeted regeneration funding and it has not been possible to progress implementation of recommendations of the Strategy. The modest amount of money from the Empty Shops fund will help to make a start on improvements to the centre. Additionally the funding will help improve the appearance of what is a key access route between Wirral Waters and the New Brighton regeneration investments (now under construction) in line with the approach outlined in the 2005 strategy.

3.5 In relation to Bromborough Village, while the centre has been traditionally considered to be vibrant and trading well, recent Council survey evidence shows that vacancy rates have increased from the 7% (5 units) identified in the 2008 Roger Tym study to 13% (11 units) in October 2010. The deterioration in vacancy rates reinforces local concerns that the centre is showing signs of decline; as such, the proactive allocation of empty shop funds is proposed to help sustain the centre and avoid further long term deterioration. It will also enable the effectiveness of early intervention measures to be assessed and compared with the other two centres where the regeneration challenges are more significant.

3.6 New Ferry has high levels of vacant shops, and has been in long term decline as a shopping centre. There is a previous strategy which was produced by NFRAG (New Ferry Regeneration Action Group) in 2008. The document highlights the importance of any funding available to improve the appearance and help to bring empty shops back

into use. New Ferry is also in close proximity to the Wirral Coastal Park and Port Sunlight which is one of the Borough's most significant heritage assets and tourist destinations. The appearance of the area could be improved through the allocation of the funds.

- 3.7 In line with the Cabinet resolution it is recommended that the issue of how the money is spent within each of the three centres should be discussed through the Area Forums for New Ferry and Bromborough (Bromborough and Eastham Area Forum and Brighton Street/King Street (Liscard and Seacombe Area Forum) with proposals emerging for the allocation of the fund which can then be considered by Cabinet.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Projects undertaken through this initiative will be funded from the grant that has been made available by the Department of Communities and Local Government.

5.0 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The projects will be managed by existing staff within the Corporate Services Department.

6.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

- 5.2 None

6.0 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Re-opening and/or re-using empty retail properties makes a positive contribution to improving community safety by bringing premises into an active use.

7.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None.

8.0 PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Depending on individual proposals planning permission maybe required. This will be addressed as appropriate through the planning process.

10.0 ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None.

11.0 SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The projects undertaken in empty retail premises can positively promote social inclusion within communities.

12.0 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 This report will be of interest to Members in the Bromborough and Meols, Liscard and Seacombe Wards.

13.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 Cabinet report paper January 14 2010 Real Help Now – Empty Shops Funding

<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&Mid=734&Ver=4>

13.2 Cabinet report paper January 2005 – Egremont Shopping Area Strategy

<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/CeListDocuments.aspx?MID=1054&RD=Agenda&DF=26%2f01%2f2005&A=1&R=0#1>

14.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

14.1 It is recommended that the three shopping areas of New Ferry, Bromborough and Brighton Street/King Street are allocated an equal proportion of the £52,632 Empty Shops Fund and that bids are invited through the relevant Area Forums for the funding.

K Adderley
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TABLE 1 – VACANCY RATES IN RETAIL CENTRES

2008

New Ferry	31%
Laird Street	29%
Seacombe	27%
Birkenhead Oxtan Road	23%
Hoylake	21%
Birkenhead Grange Road West	18%
New Brighton, Seabank Road	17%
Birkenhead Town Centre	16%
Borough Road (Prenton Park)	15%
Liscard	14%
Prenton (Woodchurch Road)	12%
Wallasey Village	12%
Dacre Hill	10%
Irby	9%
New Brighton, Victoria Road	7%
Heswall	6%
Lower Bebington	5%
West Kirby	4%
Moreton	4%
Oxtan Village	4%
Tranmere Urban Village	4%
Upton Village	1%
Claughton Village	0%

2010

Brighton Street/King Street	22%
Bromborough Village	13%