

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET
21st AUGUST 2008

Wyre Forest District Empty Shops Strategy

OPEN	
COMMUNITY STRATEGY THEME:	Shared Prosperity
CORPORATE PLAN THEME:	Promoting Economic Prosperity
KEY PRIORITY:	Regeneration
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Stephen Clee
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:	Head of Planning Health and Environment
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APPENDICES:	Appendix A – Draft Kidderminster Empty Shops Strategy

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 For Cabinet to agree an Empty Shops Strategy to encourage businesses to take up vacant retail units within the District's town centres.

2. RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is asked to DECIDE that:

- 2.1 **The Empty Shops Strategy set out in Appendix A to this report be approved.**
- 2.2 **Delegated authority be given to the Head of Planning, Health & Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Enterprise, to monitor grant take up and review and, if necessary, amend the strategy to ensure satisfactory implementation.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 As part of the budget setting process for 2008/09, £20,000 was set aside to deliver an Empty Shops Strategy. This followed concerns expressed about the vitality and viability of a limited number of more traditional shopping streets. It followed a series of reports to the former Community & Regeneration Committee looking at empty shops in Kidderminster. The most recent briefing was given on the 9th January 2008 and a summary is set out below.

3.1.1 Members noted that the overall unit vacancy rate since November 2006, had remained relatively stable (From 8.86% to 8.14%) and the percentage of floorspace vacant (9.29%) has decreased from 10.76%. It was also noted that both of these vacancy figures were below their respective national averages and on the whole, it was considered that Kidderminster had a relatively healthy centre in terms of vacancy rates. (This is still considered to be the case).

3.1.2 Members also noted that a number of initiatives were taking place aimed to improve the profile of the town :-

- The scope to reinvigorate the Worcester Street axis will be greatly influenced by the Council's proposals for KTC.3, the Local Development Framework's Kidderminster Central Area Action Plan and the emerging Kidderminster Prospectus. This is likely to involve the preparation of a new Town Centre Strategy to underpin the plan.
- The restructured Kidderminster Town Centre Partnership and the proposed Town Centre Manager would enable a more strategic and targeted approach to take place regarding the marketing and promotion of the town centre as a shopping and visitor destination.
- The Town Centre Partnership was to lead on the development of a Web site for the town centre, to provide information on shops, businesses, events and opportunities in the town.
- In terms of maintaining activity in the "traditional" town centre the District Council's outdoor market had been expanded from one, to two days per week and the number of stalls was increased to enable to market to locate in most of the pedestrianised area of Worcester St as well as in Vicar St and High St.
- The removal of the current 50% National Non Domestic Rate relief (after the first 3 months void period) on empty commercial property, from April 2008, would mean that, after the first 3 months of non occupancy, the owners of vacant units will be liable to pay the full annual Rates bill. The aim of this was to encourage owners of vacant units to seek more competitive ways of ensuring their property is occupied, eg by reducing asking rents, offering more competitive lease terms, so that the occupier, rather than the owner pay the Rates.
- Officers were to arrange meetings with representatives of the owners of units in the Worcester St area to discuss the Council's and their own issues and concerns. This would ensure the owners are aware of both the Council's concerns and of its more strategic proposals for the town. In addition it would enable the owners to raise their concerns with the Council. It is anticipated that the net result could be a focussed plan, designed specifically for Worcester Street, aimed at making it more vibrant in the future.

- 3.1.3 The Paper concluded that whilst Weavers Wharf and Crossley Retail Park have provided a step change in the retail offer of the town, it was clear that some areas of the traditional town centre are struggling.
- 3.1.4 This highlighted the need for further regeneration work including proposals to redevelop and reinvigorate those parts of the centre where vitality and viability is on the decline.
- 3.1.5 This may involve redefining the role of certain areas whilst strengthening the argument in favour of introducing more robust town centre management practices.
- 3.2 The £20,000 budget provision covers the district as a whole and in Kidderminster is intended to act as a working budget for the Town Centre Manager.
- 3.3 Any strategy to get shops units back into use will necessarily involve close working with property owners and agents with a view to connecting prospective businesses and retailers with available premises.
- 3.4 A good example of this is the recent announcement that Pavers/ Leading Labels, who currently occupy the anchor Slingfield Mill property at Weavers Wharf, are about to relocate to the former Marks and Spencers building in High Street. It is understood that the premises are being modified ready for the move. This all follows planning permission being granted for a new Debenhams store in Slingfield Mill.
- 3.5 In May 2008, the Regeneration and Economic Prosperity team, including the Kidderminster Town Centre Manager, held a business breakfast with local and regional property agents. The purpose of this event was twofold; firstly, it was an opportunity to introduce the Town Centre Manager and initiatives including 'Connecting Kidderminster' the Prospectus and second it provided an opportunity to discuss the emerging Empty Shops Strategy.
- 3.6 As part of a wider discussion on the proposed Regeneration Prospectus, the Council's Regeneration & Enterprise Committee also considered the emerging Empty Shops Strategy at their meeting on 23rd July 2008.

4. THE STRATEGY

- 4.1 It is proposed that the £20,000 budget be targeted at the physical improvement to the shops themselves in the form of an 'empty shop improvements grant' This will be supported by the existing grants which are available from the Council for new business start ups and the promotional work already carried out by the Regeneration & Enterprise Prosperity team.
- 4.2 It is important that the grant is targeted to the harder to let areas of the towns where units can remain vacant for longer periods. The grants scheme will

therefore be available for improvements to empty shop units in Bewdley (Load Street), Stourport on Severn (Lombard Street) and Kidderminster (Worcester Street, Blackwell Street and Coventry Street). Any unit that has previously been occupied and has been empty for more than one month will be eligible for a maximum of £4,000 grant.

- 4.3 In Kidderminster, it is envisaged that the initiative will provide a working budget for Kidderminster Town Centre Manager who will assist the Head of Planning, Health and Environment in administering the scheme. The Empty Shops Strategy will be supported by discussions with the owners of the former Littlewoods store and adverts promoting the existing businesses in the key shopping streets. Additional physical improvements may also be considered as part of the mainstream regeneration work, including improved signage and street improvements. A marketing action plan is currently being developed to assist in guiding promotional activity and this will aid the development of such aspects within the Empty Shops Strategy.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The costs of implementing the Empty Shops Strategy will be met from existing budgets.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no legal or policy implications arising from this report.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising for the Council from this report.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1. The Empty Shops Strategy set out at Appendix A has been developed following feedback from local and regional agents and is considered to offer a reasonably comprehensive programme whilst remaining focussed on the areas of greatest need. The process has also been considered at the Regeneration and Enterprise Committee.

10. CONSULTEES

- Head of Financial Services

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

N/A

Wyre Forest District Council

“Town Centre Empty Shops” Strategy – August 2008

1. Introduction:

- £20,000 allocated by WFDC for 08/09 financial year
- The Framework:
 - Grant funding for physical improvement to the buildings - i.e. to assist in bringing about the sustainable active use of the building

2. Shop Improvement Grant Scheme to include contributions towards:-

- Shop fitting out
 - Repairs to structure and/or services
 - Shop Fronts
 - Subject to application and geographical coverage to focus on existing empty units* in:
 - Worcester St, Blackwell St and Coventry St in Kidderminster
 - Lombard St in Stourport
 - Load St in Bewdley
- * Only applicable for a unit that has previously been occupied and has been empty for more than one month
- Maximum grant of £4,000 per unit.
 - Approval of grant funding applications to be delegated to the Head of Planning, Health and Environment, subject to receipt of proof of expenditure on qualifying items.

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