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<b>Report To:</b>	<b>Education &amp; Communities Committee</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> October 2017</b>
<b>Report By:</b>	<b>Corporate Director Education, Communities &amp; Organisational Development.</b>	<b>Report No:</b>	<b>EDUCOM/77/17/DH</b>
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Drew Hall</b>	<b>Contact No:</b>	<b>01475 714272</b>
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Empty Homes Officer Shared Service</b>		

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## **1.0 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise of the new Empty Homes Officer shared service pilot with River Clyde Homes.

## **2.0 SUMMARY**

- 2.1 At its meeting of 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2015, the Policy and Resources Committee approved a proposal to amend the Council's Council Tax Policy in relation to long term empty (LTE) homes. The policy amendment increased the Council Tax charge for LTE properties to encourage owners to return those properties to be available units within Inverclyde's housing stock.
- 2.2 It was further agreed at the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2016 meeting of the Education & Communities Committee, that the additional income resulting from the removal of discounted Council Tax charge on LTE would be used for the development of an Inverclyde Empty Homes Initiative to support absent owners to return LTE properties to Inverclyde's affordable housing stock.
- 2.3 In order to directly engage with absent owners to encourage, advise and support them to return LTE homes back into to the Inverclyde housing stock, the Council, in partnership with River Clyde Homes, utilised Scottish Government seed funding from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (Shelter Scotland) to establish an Empty Homes Shared Service in Inverclyde.
- 2.4 Empty homes are both costly and wasteful for owners and will blight the surrounding area if the home and garden are not regularly maintained. The Empty Homes Officer will identify these homes , their owners and assist the owners to help them to bring the home back into use.

## **3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 That the Committee notes the provision of this new 2 year Empty Homes Officer Shared Service to tackle long term empty homes in Inverclyde.

**Wilma Bain**  
**Corporate Director Education, Communities & Organisational Development.**

## **4.0 BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 A long term empty (LTE) property is a property which has been empty for over 12 months and is not subject to current or appropriate marketing activities for sale or let. There are estimated to be 27,000 LTE private sector properties in Scotland, 600 of which are in Inverclyde.
- 4.2 Empty properties can have a negative impact on a neighbourhood. They increase the risk of crime, vandalism, squatting, vermin infestation and structural damage to an adjoining property. With so many people priced out of decent housing across Scotland these could offer opportunities to create new affordable homes. At the same time, bringing empty houses back into use can help address neighbourhood blight by improving the look of the street and reducing the impact of empty and deteriorating properties on neighbouring buildings and encouraging a vibrant local community
- 4.3 Encouraging and facilitating the return to use of an empty property can be a lengthy and time consuming process; there is no single or simple solution to the problem, from identifying empty properties from council tax records, to engaging with owners and providing advice and information. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (Shelter Scotland) has been in place since June 2010 and has shown that the key to bringing empty homes back into use is through one to one engagement by a dedicated member of staff.
- 4.4 The Scottish Government has provided 2 year seed funding for a number of empty homes Shared Service projects across Scotland with support from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP). These projects provide full time empty homes officers shared between the council and partners to work pro-actively with owners offering a range of support from advice and information through to financial incentives where they are available.
- 4.5 At its meeting of 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2015, the Policy and Resources Committee approved a proposal to amend the Council's Council Tax Policy in relation to long term empty (LTE) homes. The policy amendment increased the Council Tax charge for LTE properties to encourage owners to return those properties to be available units within Inverclyde's housing stock.
- 4.6 It was further agreed at the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2016 meeting of the Education & Communities Committee that the additional income resulting from the removal of discounted Council Tax charge on LTE would be used for the development of an Inverclyde Empty Homes Initiative to support absent owners to return LTE properties to Inverclyde's affordable housing stock.
- 4.7 In an effort to provide this much needed service and utilise the seed funding, the Safer & Communities Service sought partnership to help share the cost of funding the service. River Clyde Homes agreed to support the proposed service and share the post and cost.

## **5.0 SERVICE PROVISION**

- 5.1 A joint application was made to the SEHP. The application was approved and £20,000 of the cost of a shared Empty Homes Officer Service was granted from the Scottish Government via the SEHP at Shelter Scotland in year 1 of the project, followed by £10,000 in year 2.
- 5.2 The cost of the Service for 2 years is £92k after grant the balance of £62k split between both the Council and RCH. The Council's contribution over the 2 years of £31K is funded from the Empty Homes Budget as outlined in 4.6 above.
- 5.3 River Clyde Homes agreed to be host organisation for the project. The Empty Homes Officer will be managed by River Clyde Homes, however the officer would report to an Advisory Board made up of lead officers from each member organisation as well as a representative of the SEHP.
- 5.4 The SEHP provides extensive support and training for the officer as well as ongoing mentoring support
- 5.5 The Empty Homes Officer will identify LTE homes, their owners and assist the owners to help

them to bring the home back into use. Primarily, an advice, information service incentives will be provided to encourage owners to take action to bring these properties back into housing use. The Empty Homes Officer will work in partnership with other Council departments and external agencies as well as participating in the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network in order to ensure that the best service possible is delivered. The role ensures empty homes are identified to allow the appropriate council tax to be applied.

5.6 The Empty Homes Officer will be based at the Council for 2.5 Days per week and will be with RCH for the remainder providing a similar service in relation to their stock.

## 6.0 IMPLICATIONS

### Strategic

6.1 The implementation of an Empty Homes Shares Service will make a valuable contribution to several strategic aims and objectives as set out in the:

- Community Plan; and
- Inverclyde Local Housing Strategy 2017-2022

### Financial

6.2 The Council's financial commitment to the Empty Homes Initiative is as follows:  
One off Costs

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	Budget Years	Proposed Spend this Report £000	Virement From	Other Comments
Scheme of Assistance	Empty Homes	17/18	13,254		Costs are contained within existing budgets
Scheme of Assistance	Empty Homes	18/19	17,773		Costs are contained within existing budgets

Annually Recurring Costs/ (Savings)

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With Effect from	Annual Net Impact £000	Virement From (If Applicable)	Other Comments

### Legal

6.3 There are no legal implications to consider.

### Human Resources

6.4 The Initiative has been delivered by an additional staffing resource. River Clyde Homes act as host organisation for the project. However, both Inverclyde Council and River Clyde Homes will provide office facilities for the officer.

### Equalities

6.5 Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out?

Yes See attached appendix

No This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a change to an existing policy, function or strategy. Therefore, no Equality Impact Assessment is required.

## **Repopulation**

6.6 This plan is intended to increase the supply of housing in Inverclyde and therefore create additional opportunities to meet housing needs and demands.

## **7.0 CONSULTATIONS**

7.1 The current Local Housing Strategy consultation process has identified empty residential and commercial properties as an overwhelming public concern for residents within Inverclyde. Furthermore, research has shown that empty properties impact on people's perception of safety and anti-social behaviour in an area.

## **8.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 2016/17 Saving – Long Term Empty Council Tax – P&R, September 2015. FIN/69/15/AP/CM
- Empty Homes Initiative – Empty Homes Initiative - E&C, January 2016. EDUCOM/07/16/DH