

**Report of Richard Marshall**

**Report to Environment and Housing Decision Panel**

**Date: 3 June 2016**

**Subject: To include the community centre at Beckhill Avenue in the HCA Empty Homes Programme – 17 – 21 Beckhill Avenue LS7 2RG**

Are specific electoral Wards affected?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	Chapel Allerton	
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number:		
Appendix number:		

**Summary of main issues**

The Council House Growth programme includes an allocation of £9m for phase two of the Empty Homes Buy Back project that will run until April 2018. The budget is made up of £1.836 m from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and £7.164m from Housing Revenue Account (HRA) capital resources.

Phase two will deliver a programme to bring 100 properties back into use across the city.

Beckhill House community centre on Beckhill Avenue was vacated in early 2015 and has stood empty since. It was originally three Council homes, two two bedroom maisonettes above a two bedroom flat. It received full planning permission in 1996 for conversion into a community centre with office space but is now empty as there is currently no demand for office space or a community centre in the area. Housing Services officers have expressed a desire to move the centre back into the Council's housing stock as it will help improve the immediate surroundings by returning an empty property to use.

The HCA has confirmed that the property can be included in the empty homes project.

## **Recommendations**

The Director of Environment and Housing is recommended to approve the inclusion of the Beckhill House community centre in the empty homes buy back scheme. This will include decontaminating the centre of asbestos and returning it to its original layout of two two bedroom maisonettes and a two bedroom ground floor flat. The cost for the work is estimated at £134,000. The refurbished properties will be let to applicants on the Leeds Homes register in line with the letting policy for Council housing.

### **1 Purpose of this report**

- 1.1 The report provides information on the Beckhill House community centre, which has been formally vacant for over a year.
- 1.2 The report seeks approval to include the community centre conversion in the empty homes programme to refurbish and let as council housing.

### **2 Background information**

- 2.1 The HCA 'Bringing Empty Homes Back into Use as Affordable Housing' funding has been made available as part of the government's priority to bring empty homes back into use. The programme also supports the City Priority Plan to increase the number of long term empty properties brought back into use. A requirement of the HCA funding is that properties have been empty for more than six months, that properties are refurbished to the HCA's Rehabilitation Standard and must be let as affordable housing. Existing social housing is not eligible for the funding.
- 2.2 For this project an average of £90,000 per property is available to purchase 100 properties by April 2018. This will cover the costs of purchasing and refurbishing privately owned homes or refurbishment of Council owned none social housing buildings that have been empty for longer than six months. The budget for the scheme is made up of £7.164m from HRA capital funds and £1.836m from the HCA.
- 2.3 Based on the HCA criteria Housing Leeds decided to consider the following categories of properties as a priority for the project:
  - Properties which were built as Council Housing, and located in areas where there is a significant presence of housing still within Council ownership.
  - Properties which are causing blight to the neighbourhood / management problems.
  - Properties in the areas of high demand.
  - 1 and 2 bed properties.
  - Flats within blocks.
- 2.4 The Empty Homes Project Group has been established to co-ordinate the delivery of the programme.

### 3 Main issues

- 3.1 In 1996 a planning application was approved to convert three properties – 17, 19 and 21 Beckhill Avenue – into the Beckhill House community centre. The centre was initially taken on by the Family Support Unit, a charity group, who carried out the original conversion into office and community centre space. They leased the property until 2005 when it was vacated and remained empty until 2009 when it was taken on by the CHESS and NETWORKS Cluster Family Support Service for schools.
- 3.2 In March 2014 a report for Children’s Services to the Asset Management Board recommended the transfer of the service provision from Beckhill House to Reginald Terrace. This was due to the condition of Beckhill House, its location and the inefficient insulation and heating system in it. They declared it surplus to requirements and pulled out in March 2015; a formal handover of the property to Housing Leeds’ Asset Management section was carried out in December 2015.
- 3.3 Options for the property are limited as it is part of a block of flats and maisonettes and cannot be considered for disposal or demolition in isolation. Also, there is no demand for use as a community centre and office space in the area, confirmed by the long periods it has been empty since the conversion in 1996.
- 3.4 Housing Services officers have expressed a desire to see it brought back into housing use, stating that it would be “an improvement for the area.”
- 3.5 The properties would meet a number of the agreed priorities for the buy back scheme, including being purpose built Council housing, in a block, in an area with significant housing stock and currently causing management problems. Others are outlined below:

<b>Current designation</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Ward</b>	<b>Empty since</b>	<b>CBL bids for similar properties</b>
Beckhill House community centre	17 Beckhill Avenue	2 bed maisonette	Chapel Allerton	March 2015	33
	19 Beckhill Avenue	2 bed ground floor flat	Chapel Allerton	March 2015	35
	21 Bechill Avenue	2 bed maisonette	Chapel Allerton	March 2015	33

- 3.6 If the decision to include it in the buy back scheme is agreed, the community centre would be returned to its original layout as three individual properties. They would be brought to the Council’s letting standard and let to applicants on the Leeds Homes Register as either Secure or Introductory Tenancies on a social rent.

3.7 To allow the conversion back to three properties full planning permission will be required. An officer from Housing Leeds' Asset Management team will make the application.

## **4 Corporate Considerations**

### **4.1 Consultation and Engagement**

4.1.1 There has been consultation with Housing Leeds' Housing Management and Property and Contracts divisions and they support the conversion plans.

4.1.2 Ward members have been consulted about the conversion and support the proposal.

### **4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration.**

4.2.1 An equality, diversity cohesion and integration screening exercise has been carried out. This has confirmed that equality, diversity, cohesion and integration considerations have been effectively considered in relation to this proposal and that a full impact assessment was not required.

### **4.3 Council policies and City Priorities**

4.3.1 The conversion of the property to let as social housing supports the City Priority 'Best City to Live' to increase the number of long term empty properties brought back into use.

### **4.4 Resources and value for money**

4.4.1 The community centre is an asset that rests with Housing Services. There is, therefore, no funding required to either purchase or transfer it from another Council department.

4.4.2 The estimated cost of refurbishment is £134,000, which is made up of:

- A planning application - £2000
- Asbestos removal - £30,000
- Refurbishment work - £102,000.

4.4.3 The return on the initial capital investment is 12 years. The refurbishment price fits within the budget of the project and the repayment period for the investment represents value for money.

4.4.4 These properties will be charged at a social rent as they are within areas of existing Council Housing. This will avoid a situation where tenants living in adjoining properties are being charged significantly different rents. The HCA are supportive of this approach.

## **4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In**

4.5.1 The property is Council owned and not subject to conveyancing.

4.5.2 There are no other legal implications relating to this property.

## **4.6 Risk Management**

4.6.1 While the property has been surveyed to assess its condition, there is a risk that unforeseen works are required to it which weren't identified during the survey. A contingency of the refurbishment works has been included within the budget and Value for Money assessment in order to cover any unforeseen works required to the property prior to letting.

## **5 Conclusions**

5.1 The Beckhill House community centre has been declared surplus to requirements by Children's Services. It was originally part of the housing stock as three properties: two two bedroom maisonettes and a ground floor two bedroom flat. It currently sits in the Housing Services portfolio awaiting a decision on future use.

5.2 Options for the centre are limited as it is part of a block of flats and maisonettes so cannot be treated in isolation of other properties alongside it. There is no demand to retain it as a community centre and office space.

5.3 Housing Services and local councillors support a move back into housing use as it would help improve the area. It has been vacant for longer than six months and is not currently being used as Social Housing. It can, therefore, be included in the empty homes buy back scheme.

5.4 Funding the conversion back to Social Housing through the empty homes scheme will prevent pressure on other budgets. It will also add towards meeting the target of 100 empty properties brought into use by April 2018. The conversion cost for three properties of £134,000 fits within the budget of £90,000 per property of the scheme.

## **6 Recommendations**

6.1 The Director of Environment and Housing is recommended to approve the inclusion of the Beckhill House community centre in the empty homes buy back scheme. This will include decontaminating the centre of asbestos and returning it to its original layout of two two bedroom maisonettes and a two bedroom ground floor flat. The cost for the work is estimated at £134,000. The refurbished properties will be let to applicants on the Leeds Homes register in line with the letting policy for Council Housing.

## **6.2 Background documents**

None