

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: April 2024

Subject: Technical Services Portfolio Holder

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ken Williamson

Recommending:

That the report of the Portfolio Holder be noted.

1. Regulatory & Technical Services:

Private Sector Housing

The team has been busy dealing with a number of illegal evictions, unlicensed HMOs, filthy and verminous premises, alleged carbon monoxide poisoning and have supervised an exhumation in March.

Officers were called to a multiple occupied property where a landlord had changed the locks on the room for arrears, thus illegally evicting the occupier from the property. Using experienced negotiation skills with the intervention of the team, the tenant was back in their room within hours. Enforcement action is underway against the landlord for the unlicensed HMO.

The team have also dealt with a number of hoarded properties, known as filthy and verminous (F&V). Often these properties come to light after the residents are taken into hospital and we become aware of the conditions via third parties. These cases are always highly sensitive, complex, and challenging to deal with as there are usually deep-seated mental health issues behind the conditions. Officers have to work closely with the resident, mental health, and social work professionals to achieve a good outcome. It is important to strike a balance between going at the correct pace for the resident and resolving the matter as quickly as possible.

As well as health concerns for householders, hoarding can lead to further problems such as rat infestations affecting neighbouring properties. In such circumstances, the Council can use powers under the Public Health Act to employ pest control for the eradication of the rats, and contractors for clean-up of the hoarding property to remove the environment in which the rats thrive. Cost of the clean-up and pest control are passed onto the resident or property owner.

Private Sector Grants

As of 29 February 2024, the team have paid a total of £1,069,641.52 for completed Disabled Facilities Grants. The budget for the year was £971,213.00 and in September 2023 we also received an additional £84,748.00 from the Better Care Fund making our total budget for 2023/24 £1,055,961.00. We have exceeded our own expectations with one month to go and can comfortably continue to complete and pay as many grants as possible in March by tapping into our accumulated pot of unspent monies from previous years as this is 'ring-fenced' and cannot be used for any other purpose. The team have also approved over £152,000 in

Disabled Facilities Grants for the residents of Castlepoint Borough Council which is another excellent achievement in such a short time period.

Environmental Health

The team are investigating a number of complaints relating to Brazilian Butt/Bum Lift (BBL) procedures carried out at premises within the district. As a result of we have issued a Prohibition Notice preventing one practitioner from carrying out any further procedures in an unsafe way and has also issued Improvement Notice under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. Further investigation is ongoing. We are working with several other councils across the UK in areas where BBL procedures are taking place to investigate complaints that such procedures are not being undertaken safely. Practitioners undertaking these procedures are not legally required to have any medical qualification and are not subject to mandatory licensing. The Government has recognised concerns at the lack of a licencing regime for such procedures, and the Health and Care Act 2022 includes a provision for the Secretary of State to introduce a national licencing scheme for a range of aesthetic procedures. This scheme is still being developed and currently at the consultation stage.

Procedures including BBL, thread lifting, and platelet-rich therapy are not always performed by medically trained practitioners. Outside the medical profession, there are few, if any, training courses that are accredited by an awarding body that oversees the content and quality of the training being provided. Basic training courses like the one featured in recent ITV News coverage are unlikely to give the quality of the training needed.

The team have also run a competition for the food businesses to raise the profile of allergen labelling for pre-packed foods for direct sale (PPDS). Those entering needed to complete the Food Standards Agency free online allergen labelling. They then sent us a certificate of completion and they were entered into a free draw for a label printer. The team has delivered two label printers to those who were successful in the draw. The money to purchase the printers came from funds provided to each LA to raise the awareness of changes to allergen labelling for pre-packed foods for direct sale (PPDS).

Licensing

Taxi Tariff

On 9 October 2023 Cabinet agreed to the public consultation on the proposed taxi tariff increase and to reconsider the proposal, in light of any objections received.

Cabinet met to consider the responses on 15 January 2024, and agreed that the tariff detailed in the consultation represented a fair increase for drivers, whilst maintaining a reasonable fare that passengers can be expected to pay. In reaching its decision, Cabinet acknowledged the concerns expressed by some respondents who believe the starting fare for the first mile to be too low and agreed that the fare will be subject to further review in 12 months' time following the implementation of the new tariff and at regular intervals going forward to ensure that fares remain reasonable and fair to both the licensed taxi trade and the fare paying public.

The taxi tariff proposed in the consultation was agreed and came into effect on 28th February 2024. All Hackney Carriage drivers were advised of the decision and the meter update took place at North Weald Airfield on 28, 29 February and 7 March 2024.

Over this three-day period, the Council updated 173 meters to the new tariff, which represents 81% of the fleet. The remaining 19% of drivers have been given guidance on how to update their meters going forward.

It should be noted that the Council can only set a maximum taxi tariff, it is permissible for Hackney Drivers to charge a lesser fare should they wish to do so. The remaining 19% of drivers can continue to operate under the previous taxi tariff until such time as the meter is updated to reflect the increased permitted fare.

Community Resilience

Fly tipping is increasing and has increased by 33% in the same period for last year, which has increased active investigations by 79%.

The PFCC visited the district looking at our Safer Streets and Operation Dial areas. We received great feedback from the PFCC office on the work that has been achieved so far and the improvements made.

A Crimestoppers zone day of action at Ninefields, Waltham Abbey was held on 5 February. The team engaged with the community and gave Crimestoppers literature out.

As part of the ongoing work for Project Minerva- Violence against women and girls, two team members have been trained as safe space quality assurance officers. This means they can go into establishments in the district and ensure they know how to respond to their safe space for domestic abuse victims. Self-defence sessions have also been held in February as part of the Project Minerva work.

The team attended PFCC Expo 2024 conference on 29 February. The conference enables the team to understand the wider work that is happening in Essex and gives ideas and direction for our current work.

The CCTV project strategy for 2023/24 has been completed ahead of time and on budget with over 12 projects delivered.

EFDC Policing Team

In February PS Fitt was tasked with arranging police resources to assist with the production of a short video for the Association of Police Crime Commissioners highlighting the good work being done on the Broadway as part of Op-Dial.

PC Baggley joined the CRT for Ninefields Crimestoppers Zone engagement event, and as this is linked in with "Op-Grenadier" burglary intensification week he also handed out burglary prevention information. During free time for the rest of the week we concentrated on burglary hotspot zone patrolling.

While off duty PC Amner was doing his weekly shop and spotted a shoplifting in progress, he assisted store staff in detaining the suspect who was then arrested when on duty officers arrived.

Week of 19 Feb was "Op-Stronghold" which is an intensification week around town centres, ASB related to these areas and local crime trends that plague our high streets.

Highway Rangers

The Highway Rangers have undertaken some successful project work recently including the installation of Speed Indicator Devices for Buckhurst Hill Parish Council. This required new equipment and training for the team to work at height and linked well with existing highways experience.

The Rangers can now provide this service to help parishes with similar projects to both help raise speed awareness and safety and as an on-going service to periodically move the devices.

Recently the team have installed a brand-new finger post at Manor Road Chigwell as the previous finger post was rotten and damaged and removed from site. The team have replaced plastic bollards in Epping that have been missing for many years and some recently vehicle damaged bollards in Buckhurst Hill. The Rangers have also replaced concrete bollards as they become damaged and constantly remove fly posting and graffiti and pass information to our Community Resilience team to contact companies undertaking the flyposting.

In recent wind and storm conditions the Rangers have assisted in keeping paths clear with minor tree branch clearances that have come down in winds. Many reports that are made to the team are rejected as they are works that the rangers cannot work on such as defective streetlights, potholes or private hedges which remain the responsibility of Essex Highways.

Appendix 1 contains pictures of some of the Ranger's work detailed above.

Grounds Maintenance

The grounds maintenance winter-works programme is drawing to a close, the Qualis gardening teams have made a tentative, but necessary start to the grass cutting programme. However, with the ground conditions still very soft, the mower operators must proceed with caution and only cut the grass where it is safe to do so. This may result in certain areas such as grass banks and slopes being excluded from the initial cut; these will be picked up as ground conditions improve. Hand-mowing has also commenced within communal lawn areas and back gardens. Suitably trained staff are undertaking weed spraying operations around obstructions within the grass verges, this single application of herbicide significantly reduces the number of mechanical operations required throughout the growing season.

The Qualis nursery team continue to maintain the numerous seasonal bedding displays located throughout the district. The many hundreds of winter flowering pansies, and spring flowering bulbs are bringing a welcome splash of colour to our towns and villages. The nursery staff will also be responsible for providing the numerous floral displays required for this year's Civic Awards ceremony.

Tree Team

The team has been busy with planting this Winter, with the additional street tree planting funded by the Forestry Commission, and undertaken by Essex County, under our stewardship. We have also been implementing the New Winter works programme which we have created to proactively manage the street trees, which have been overlooked for some time, as well as looking forward to creating similar systems in the future for Housing trees, beginning with an initial asset survey, which we hope to continue rolling out throughout the spring and summer months.

An updated Council Wide Tree Policy has been drafted and went to Place Scrutiny for consideration in February, it is on the Cabinet agenda recommended for approval in March.

Fleet Operations

Fleet recently supported the licensing team in carrying out taxi meter calibrations and meter replacements to support the new increase in taxi charging tariff.

A new SLA has been agreed with Oak tree group of schools 36-month contract for the supply of servicing and maintenance the Oak Trees fleet of 26 motor vehicles. A very busy February for public MOT's and third-party work, work slots at 85% capacity. All Council vehicle and plant tyres are now carried out at the fleet workshop facility, we no longer use third party suppliers a saving of more than £40k pa.

2. Planning Services:

Building Control

Registration of Inspectors

The Building Control team have been heavily focussed on 6 April deadline for all staff delivering newly designated 'restricted functions' to be competency validated and registered with the Building Safety Regulator. Authorities that do not have registered staff will not be able to deliver their statutory service and there is concern in the industry about the knock-on effect on housebuilding delivery. I am pleased to report that the team at Epping Forest now have one member registered as a Specialist Inspector (able to work on all types and heights of buildings) and two members registered as General Inspectors (able to work on most buildings in our district). This reassuring position will enable the team to continue to work with supervision arrangements in place for those still awaiting results or their exam date.

Operational Standards Rules

From 6 April all Building Control Bodies (private or Local Authority) will be regulated by the Building Safety Regulator at the Health and Safety Executive. New protocols require regular reporting of substantial and detailed information concerning the handling of applications, inspections, and enforcement activities. We are working with our back-office software supplier to build additional data collection and reporting tools and are running workshops with the staff to convey the additional requirements. The additional time collecting, recording, and reporting on data is substantial enough to affect the cost of delivering the service. This will need to be monitored and reflected in future schemes of charges.

Cancellation of Private Building Control Providers notices

All existing Approved Inspectors wishing to continue to provide a private Building Control service must register with the Building Safety Regulator as a Registered Building Control Approver. As they are unable to enforce against a breach of Building Regulations, they are required to cancel their notice and hand work back to the Council where non-compliance is not addressed in a timely manner. This was previously a rare event, however as the date for the new regime approaches all Councils are experiencing an influx of cancelled notices for historic works where the Approved Inspector has not issued a Final Certificate. This is creating substantial work for Local Authority teams as they attempt to obtain records, gain access to inspect and make reasoned decisions over enforcement interventions.

Development Management

Planning Appeals

Members are reminded that Planning Appeal details are published in the weekly Bulletin, and links to the appeal documents are now provided to enable members to view a relevant appeal by clicking the link.

Planning Skills Delivery Funding

Planning Services were partially successful in their bid for Planning Skills Delivery Funding from Central Government and were awarded £36,000 to assist in clearing a backlog of planning applications. This funding has subsequently been utilised to bring in two short term contractors to help with the processing of planning applications to reduce the backlog of planning cases and assist the overall workload of permanent staff.

Planning recruitment

As part of the 10% budget savings that Planning Services recently offered up, some resources are to be reallocated across the service where they are most needed, particularly to boost Development Management in the assessment and determination of planning applications and meet customer needs. As a result, several new and existing vacant positions are soon to be advertised to supplement the existing teams.

Enforcement action

The following enforcement notices have been issued:

Location: Hainault Hall, Lambourne Road, Chigwell, Essex, IG7 6JU

Alleged breach of planning control: Without planning permission, the installation of a swimming pool

Date issued: 20 February 2024

Date compliance due by: 25 March 2024

Appeal received: not at present

Enforcement Appeal Decisions

None in this period.

Parking

National Parking Platform

The Council has expressed an interest in the National Parking Platform (NPP), which has been established by the Department for Transport to simplify cashless parking in local authority car parks. The NPP would enable motorists to use any parking app in any car park nationally, with future enhancements to link up Electric Vehicle charging and payment into any providers' phone app, without having to struggle with new apps or account every time. This lays the groundwork for future vehicles to handle parking payments for themselves, paving the way to truly effortless parking.

Further information on the platform is expected to be launched later in the year. There is no obligation for the Council to join the scheme, however, the expression of interest means the joining fee is £0, should the Council decide to join in future (otherwise £10,000).