

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 19 September 2019

Subject: Commercial and Regulatory Services Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor A Patel

Recommending:

That the report of the Commercial and Regulatory Services Portfolio Holder be noted.

Empty Homes Week 23-29 September 2019

I am pleased to report that the Private Sector Housing Team will be supporting this year's Empty Homes Week that runs from 23-29 September. This will be promoted on the EFDC website and via social media to inform readers about the issue of empty properties, the affect they have on the district and residents, the support that the Council can offer and how people can report an empty property to the Empty Property Officer.

This Council is committed to bringing empty properties back to use. We have a designated Empty Property Officer whose role it is to identify empty properties, to engage with owners to help them return their property to use and take enforcement action where it becomes necessary. Properties are left empty for a variety of reasons but they can be the source of much misery to neighbours and residents who have to live nearby. For the owner, an empty property is a wasted resource and can be costly in terms of increased insurance, increased council tax premiums, property fraud, emergency repairs, break-ins and increased fire risk

The Empty Property Officer will engage with all owners who have a property that has been empty for more than 6 months to provide advice and assistance where appropriate to bring it back to use. Work is however primarily focused on those that have been empty for more than two years to try to understand the underlying reasons and to engage as far as possible to achieve a positive outcome. Since April 2019 the owner of a property that has been empty for more than 2 years is liable to a Council tax of 200% which is a significant disincentive.

It is recognised that a stumbling block to bringing a property back to use can be that the empty property is in disrepair and cannot be lived in, let, or easily sold in its existing condition. We can therefore offer the following schemes

The PLACE Loan provides an owner an interest free loan of up to £25,000 per unit to renovate their empty home. There are two loans available, loan to sell which is repayable after two years and loan to let which is repayable after 5 years. Both loans are subject to eligibility and upon repayment the money will be recycled back into the PLACE Scheme funds for future use.

The Council also offers **Empty Homes Repayable Assistance**, which is effectively an interest free loan. This is up to £10,000, repayable upon the sale of the property

and is available to owners wishing to either live in the property themselves or let it to a tenant.

Where a problematic empty property exists and the owner is either absent or is uncooperative in bringing their property back to use, the Empty Property Officer may consider enforcement action as a last resort. This could be by Enforced Sale, Compulsory Purchase (CPO) or making an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO). Officers follow the Council's Corporate Enforcement Policy in such cases, seeking Member approval where appropriate.

An article was included in the 23 August 2019 Members Bulletin

Filthy and verminous premises

Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) have responsibilities for dealing with situations that are prejudicial to health. This can include, in extreme situations, residents that are living in filthy and verminous conditions often brought about by complex circumstances or mental health condition that leaves the individual unable to cope and neglectful of their immediate living environment. The EHO function in these circumstances is to arrange and oversee, through informal engagement with family or interested parties where practical, or through enforcement where necessary, the removal of waste and cleaning of the property. In practice the role of the EHO is much wider than that and officers will work closely with our Safeguarding Team, Essex Adult Social Care and Mental Health Teams to ensure that follow up support is put in place to assist the resident and try and prevent a recurrence of the problem. In a recent case our EHO assisted a resident who was living in squalid conditions and arranged for contractors to remove 2.5 tonnes of rubbish from his flat. The number of cases varies, but typically EHOs will deal with 6 cases a year.

Anti – idling

I am pleased to report that the Public Health Team as part of their promotion of anti-idling now have five large banners (three 3m and two 2m) which can be placed around the district in response to complaints or by rotation outside of school. Currently, two have been placed on the approach to and outside Epping underground station. This is as a result of a Councillor complaint and investigation by our Air Quality Officer. Initial indicative monitoring of Nitrogen Dioxide was high with a potential link to idling buses. The bus companies and taxi drivers have been written to and drivers have been spoken to on visits to the station. At present no FPN's have been issued as drivers have complied with officer request to switch off engines. The Dept of Transport have emphasised in their guidance that, education and promotion of anti-idling is the primary focus with the FPN intended as a deterrent. The location continues to be monitored.

North Weald Airfield

The new National Police Aviation Service (NPAS) hangar construction is now complete and operations are due to start next month.

The Essex & Herts Air Ambulance Trust are waiting for their planning application to be approved before they can commence work on their new base. There are issues relating to clean air / pollution and Natural England. Hopefully, this will be resolved shortly.

NWA Master planning exercise

Tenders have been received from companies wishing to undertake the master planning exercise and are currently being evaluated.

HRMC

We are currently in negotiations with HRMC regards a two year agreement to hire part of the Airfield to use as a facility to circulate vehicles that are transporting high value goods. The vehicles will be visiting the site to have their documents stamped in order for them to pass through / visit the country.

Race for Life

The recent Cancer Research UK (CRUK) Race for Life event at the airfield raised £74,000 which is the highest amount since 2015. The Council contribute to the event by allowing the organisers free use of the airfield.

Update on Building Control issues

Changes to the way in which private Building Control Inspectors operate have resulted in a number of them finding themselves in a position of not being able to obtain insurance. The final consequences of this is yet to unfold but it could result in an increased workload for the in-house team.