



East Suffolk House, Riduna Park, Station Road,
Melton, Woodbridge, Suffolk, IP12 1RT

Scrutiny Committee

Members:

Councillor Stuart Bird (Chairman)
Councillor Mike Deacon (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Edward Back
Councillor David Beavan
Councillor Judy Cloke
Councillor Linda Coulam
Councillor Andree Gee
Councillor Louise Gooch
Councillor Tracey Green
Councillor Colin Hedgley
Councillor Geoff Lynch
Councillor Keith Robinson
Councillor Caroline Topping

Members are invited to a **Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee**
to be held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House,
on **Thursday, 16 September 2021 at 6.30pm**

This meeting is being held in person in order to comply with the Local Government Act 1972. In order to comply with East Suffolk Council's coronavirus arrangements and guidance, the number of people at this meeting will have to be restricted to only those whose attendance is reasonably necessary.

Ordinarily, East Suffolk Council encourages members of the public to attend its meetings but on this occasion would encourage the public to watch the livestream, via the East Suffolk Council YouTube channel instead at <https://youtu.be/iFaxXDMlppk>

If you do believe it is necessary for you to be in attendance we encourage you to notify Democratic Services, by email to democraticservices@eastsuffolk.gov.uk,

of your intention to do so no later than 12 noon on the working day before the meeting so that the meeting can be managed in a COVID secure way and the Team can endeavour to accommodate you and advise of the necessary health and safety precautions.

However, we are not able to guarantee you a space/seat and you are advised that it may be that, regrettably, we are not able to admit you to the meeting room.

An Agenda is set out below.

Part One – Open to the Public

	Pages
1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions	
2 Declarations of Interest Members and Officers are invited to make any declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Local Non-Pecuniary Interests that they may have in relation to items on the Agenda and are also reminded to make any declarations at any stage during the Meeting if it becomes apparent that this may be required when a particular item or issue is considered.	
3 Minutes - 17 June 21 To confirm as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2021.	1 - 11
4 Minutes - 15 July 2021 To confirm as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 July 2021.	12 - 19
5 Housing Development Programme Update ES/0881 Report of the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing	20 - 35
6 Empty Homes Update ES/0880 Report of the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing	36 - 54
7 Cabinet Member Update - Housing To receive an update from Councillor Kerry, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing on the key deliverables for the next six months.	
8 Appointment to Outside Bodies 2021-22 (Scrutiny) Following the appointment on 20 May 2021 of Councillor Hedgley as this Committee's representatives on the Suffolk County Council Health Scrutiny Committee, Members are now asked to consider a request from Councillor Hedgley that he and Councillor Back (the appointed nominated substitute), formally swap places.	

9 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

To consider the Committee's Forward Work Programme

Part Two – Exempt/Confidential

Close



Stephen Baker, Chief Executive

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Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House, Melton on **Thursday, 17 June 2021 at 6.30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Keith Robinson, Councillor Caroline Topping

Other Members present:

Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Janet Craig, Councillor James Mallinder

Officers present: Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Kerry Blair (Head of Operations), Helen Buckingham (Regulatory Consultant – Environmental Services & Port Health), Karen Cook (Democratic Services Business Manager), Simon Gilbert (Commercial Contracts Manager (Facilities)), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Matt Makin (Democratic Services Officer), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Andrew Reynolds (Environmental Protection Manager) and Daniel Wareing (Environmental Sustainability Officer).

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

There were no apologies for absence.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the Extraordinary meeting held on 18 February 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Review of waste management (Part 2)

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for the Environment and invited him to make any opening remarks before the report was considered by the Committee.

The Cabinet Member stated that litter affected everybody and the current situation was a combination of a lack of local social engagement, lack of responsibility of producers dealing with their packaging, a lack of education and parental skills and a lack of being a responsible member of our society. He explained that more than 2

million pieces of litter were dropped in the UK on a daily basis from crisp packets, cigarette butts to a bag of rubbish and everything in between. Litter cost the taxpayer over £1billion per year for street cleaning, was unsightly and made our local areas look untidy and uncared for. He pointed out that litter also took years to break down causing harm to wildlife and habitats. Dropped food could attract pigeons and vermin and it then migrated to the water system and seas as it slowly polluted the world and eventually entered the food chain. The Cabinet Member continued that litter was unattractive and could ruin views and countryside/seaside rambles. It was a huge danger to wildlife and he reported that the RSPCA received over 7000 calls a year about litter related incidents and Keep Britain Tidy had similar concerns as they had many reports of mammals stuck on disregarded bottles. He pointed out that there was also a need to remember that other materials than just plastic could be equally dangerous to our wildlife. Litter increased negative behaviour, reduced people's sense of wellbeing and attracted crime. It polluted locally and across the world at a huge cost to the taxpayer. The Cabinet Members reported that, in dealing with local litter, there was a need to focus on partnership working and encourage residents to be proud of where they lived and worked. The Council was part of the solution but so was individual behaviours, initiatives from MPs and Ward Members also had a role to play. He acknowledged that bins needed to be in the right place and emptied at the right frequency. He stated that he spoke to Parish/Town Councils regularly to understand the issues in their areas and Ward Members were asked to identify and report to him any local concerns. The Committee was informed that, this year, the number of bins and the frequency of collections across the tourist parts of the district in particular had been increased with three collections in one day in some areas. Pavement recycling bins had been piloted and a project with the University of Suffolk had seen bins microchipped so that they notified Norse when they were full and ready to be collected. The Cabinet Member stressed that another priority was the need to educate and influence and this was being undertaken in particular through the Greenprint Forum and the Plastic Champion Initiative which empowered residents to organise litter picks and make their environments litter free. He added that the annual Love Suffolk event had been moved from Spring to Autumn and it was hoped that a litter pick would take place in every Ward in the Autumn. He mentioned that a lot of information was put out on social media and partnership working remained the key. He added that he was currently working with Suffolk County Council and other local Authorities to introduce a Suffolk wide campaign which would include a full week of litter picks and engagement. He referred to the Council's website which contained a lot of information and reminded Members that they could contact him direct at any time with any specific issues. He concluded that, in light of Members' questions and information requested, he had arranged a briefing session on fly tipping and litter for all Members.

The Chairman then directed Members' attention to the report and invited questions.

Councillor Robinson referred to litter problems in two particular areas of Lowestoft and the Cabinet Member responded that he had already spoken to all Lowestoft Ward Members about dealing with this issue across Lowestoft rather than piecemeal so that resources could be focussed across the whole area. In addition, he had spoken to Lowestoft Town Council to get their involvement. The Head of Operations acknowledged this was a significant issue as the two rounds referred to had the worst contamination figures for East Suffolk and across Suffolk but he pointed out that there

might be specific streets or individual properties within the round area that contributed significantly to the figures so there was a need to look at the data. He added that HMOs generally posed high levels of contamination too. He explained that another potential option would be to look at changes in the way collections were made if there was a persistent problem with core compliance. People needed to know what should go in the right bin and education was key. Members were informed that, if a bin was contaminated, a sticker was placed on the bin to say what could go in the bin and Officers might have a conversation with the householder but where there was a continued problem, enforcement was looked at. The Environmental Protection Manager stated that the whole process of enforcement started with education so the first step to achieve that was to use the stickers and provide information. If they continued not to do it then sanctions can be delivered through the Waste Management Enforcement Officers employed by Norse on the Council's behalf who enforce the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act. A difficulty experienced with enforcement of putting bins out on the wrong day etc was that the enforcement process was weak so there was a need to build the case and gain evidence.

The Chairman firstly referred to the cost in lost recycling payments because of contaminated collections and the need to address that quickly and secondly he suggested that there seemed to be a staggering disparity between the figures in the north and south and queried why that was. The Environmental Protection Manager responded that a map of social deprivation indicators was overlaid over the waste enforcement problems map there would probably be a good deal of correlation so it was possibly due to social economics. The Strategic Director echoed this comment, adding that there were a range of disparities in the north of the district and he pointed out that a one size fits all approach would not deal with this. He suggested that a wider view needed to be taken rather than looking at it as a single issue problem. The Head of Operations acknowledged that, whilst there were external factors beyond the Council's control such as social economics, in recognition of the scale of the problem, resources were being committed to a project to reduce contamination and this was one of several projects launched with Norse to improve this area of performance eg looking at the historic contamination patterns, identifying specific areas down to individual properties and developing and implementing improved operating process. He added that some of that would be about education with the householder but some was good practice in refuse collection by ensuring there was diligent checking of waste before it got to the MRF and at transfer stations. The additional costs to East Suffolk and Suffolk County Council for this made a simple case to putting additional resource into dealing with this issue as it saved all parts of the system money. The Cabinet Member stated that, as chair of the Suffolk Waste Partnership, it was a great concern - contamination in blue bins such as bottles, dirty nappies and food waste were the main issues and he added that the Partnership ran campaigns across Suffolk so East Suffolk worked on this as well as Suffolk as a whole.

Councillor Topping commented that she had seen stickers being put on to bins but knew that those same bins were contaminated in other weeks when they did not get a sticker so she suggested that operatives needed to check the bins more thoroughly to deal with it on the doorstep rather than at the transfer station.

Councillor Coulam queried if the new equipment at the Haddenham Road site meant that the waste was separated better now. In terms of material being brought into the

recycling centre, the Head of Operations stated that because it went down a chute into a segregated area, it did not seem much of an issue. He explained that he had some evidence from Suffolk County Council that the booking system at Haddenham Road or at the other recycling centres had not increased fly tipping. Positive feedback had also been received about the new booking system itself, that it was a much better managed process and people did not have to sit in a long queue. Councillor Coulam also pointed out that some people might only have one large item rather than three and the cost for bulky item collections might encourage some to fly tip. The Head of Operations responded that it cost £40 for up to three items and the charge was benchmarked across several nearby local authorities. He added that people could take items to recycling centres or various charities would collect so maybe there was a need to promote the ways large items could be collected for free. The Cabinet Members stated that the key was about individuals taking responsibility - it was not acceptable to drop items round the corner and he suggested that Ward Councillors could publicise means of disposing of unwanted items freely.

Councillor Deacon referred to the report and queried how East Suffolk did actually compare with other local authorities. The Head of Operations acknowledged that his response in the report might not be what Members wanted to hear but added that it was difficult to get to a number for the collection cost at a district level. He added that Councils might get a headline cost for the waste service that was publicly available but there was so much variance within that and it was difficult to know how much of that budget went on frontline services. There were no costs per household figure publicly available. He stated that he would argue it was the effectiveness of each collection authority that Members and residents were interested in eg how much material was recycled. He referred to Three Rivers District Council who had recycling rates of 62/63% and stated that it would be difficult to know the cost of that because it was probably undertaken by a private company but he would like to know how they had achieved their recycling rates. Waveney had been in the bottom three quarters and Suffolk Coastal had been in the top 25th in the country so, perhaps to be expected, East Suffolk as the merged authority was just in the top half at 45% recycling. He explained that East Suffolk would need to hit 60% under the new RAWS so there was a real seachange that needed to happen to achieve that. He concluded that this was what needed to be focussed on rather than the costs as it would be difficult to find out those costs.

Councillor Robinson expressed concern at the recycling rates and queried how much it affected the rates for those people that just did not bother and put things that could be recycled in the black bins. The Head of Operations reported that an annual compositional analysis of black bins was undertaken to inform publicity and education campaigns and it showed what was put in bins and could be recycled such as food, glass and garden waste but there was no enforcement around black bins unless someone put in a load of garden waste so the idea was to educate.

Councillor Lynch queried what powers the Council had to enforce against individuals or companies that continually contaminate. The Environmental Protection Manager stated that, under Sections 46 and 47 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the Council could serve notice if someone did not do the right things eg put something in that they should not, put a bin out on the wrong day or left it out too long. The Deregulation Act had severely trimmed enforcement powers as it used to be an

offence by prosecution or Fixed Penalty Notice if a notice was not complied with but the Deregulation Act had added loads of clauses requiring several stages to be taken and it was now a civil enforcement issue so the process was virtually useless, therefore, it was very difficult to use those provisions. He added that, under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, a notice could be served requiring people to do something and can have a Fixed Penalty Notice but again it was a long winded process to serve the notice, very labour intensive with uncertain results.

Councillor Hedgley referred to practices abroad where every town or village had a recycling facility and he queried if consideration had been given to having that here with Towns/Parishes being responsible. The Cabinet Member stated that this was something he would like to see and he explained that different types of recycling would be looked at as part of the Environmental Bill so he suspected there would end up being some more localised recycling facilities. The Strategic Director stated that the EU was ahead of the UK - Germany were quite strict and would fine people and in France the local Mayor ran it. He added that the main issue was that the waste legislation was out of date - districts were the collection authority and the County Council was the disposal authority which created difficulties. He suggested Districts were best placed to be the only responsible authority working with Parish Councils. He reminded Members that Parishes had previously been able to get recycling credits for schemes and this had worked well for a period. He concluded that he hoped the new Environment Bill would give some scope for a more localised approach but he felt that it was likely it would have a more centralised approach instead.

Councillor Gooch referred to the discussions at the previous meeting and the schedule at the end of the report relating to litter pickers/street cleansers and she queried how staff deployment was determined in terms of routes and if staffing levels were adequate given population growth and levels of fly tipping. The Head of Operations responded that he would need to get back to Members regarding the rostering but additional resource had been added this summer in the coastal towns in anticipation of the huge influx of visitors so frequency was reviewed regularly. Discussions were also being held with Norse about having walk throughs to assess the frequency streets needed to be cleaned or the standard was not correct and it appeared that in Lowestoft it might not be correct. He added that there were about 20 people dedicated to this in Lowestoft and that was the same as when Norse had been formed but the strategic approach to identifying what should be done in particular areas was also under review to check the operation was effective and efficient.

Councillor Gooch also queried how communication was facilitated between the community litter picker groups, what mutual support was offered to them and how was it ensured that these helpful community volunteers were not displacing Council contracted workers. The Environmental Sustainability Officer stated that he was aware of a number of groups that carried out ongoing litter picks across the district and he had been helping them raise their profile and make them aware of each other so they could contact each other if they wanted. He added that he was not sure if everyone was aware though because there might be some groups out there that he was not aware of but he stressed that he was happy to facilitate that mutual support. The Cabinet Member suggested that this was an example of where Ward Members could assist and talk to the groups to see if they wanted to talk to other groups. He added that he was happy for groups to contact him directly and he stressed the need to

ensure that everyone who picked litter was thanked. In response to Councillor Gooch's question regarding the displacement of Council contractors and her query about what ideas were being explored to support vulnerable residents where free time civic engendering activities were not an option, the Environmental Protection Manager outlined the long list of duties the three Waste Management Enforcement Officers had in addition to dealing with litter across the whole district. The Strategic Director stated that he did not have an exact figure but hundreds of thousands were spent per year dealing with anti-social behaviour from residents who did not care and they know it was difficult to enforce so it should be about individual and community responsibility as the problem would not be solved without community support. He added that litter picks were essential and it was everyone's responsibility - if you see litter pick it up! The Head of Operations stated that it was relatively easy to get people to pick litter up from certain areas such as beaches and beauty spots but not other more urban places so posts were needed and volunteers were an enhancement to the street cleansing operation. In relation to civic pride, he agreed that there was a need to use all our powers to support people who had other issues in their life or did not understand the system and if necessary use education and then enforcement. He added that the operational and strategic review would be the key to answering a lot of the questions raised tonight. The Cabinet Member agreed with the comments about reaching out to the vulnerable and he added that he regularly talked to Housing colleagues about any areas of concern.

Councillor Deacon queried if this Council could be a pilot for returning deposits on plastic bottles and packaging similar to schemes in Germany and the Strategic Director responded that the deposit scheme was likely to be brought in as part of the Environment Bill so it would be looked into more deeply in the next few years. He also pointed out that the Council had contracted a company to run the re-process of the district's recyclables, therefore, if a significant amount of waste was taken out to run a deposit scheme then there might be some contractual issues.

Councillor Deacon also queried what mechanism there was for communicating with the County Council about clearing highways and verges and what provision there was if Ward Councillors were not happy. The Head of Operations responded that this year there had been an increase in weeds going through pavements etc and East Suffolk and other Local Authorities had asked County when they would be sending their contractors out to do this work. He clarified that, as the County was the responsible authority, there was no service level agreement, therefore, other Councils could only add political pressure to get County to undertake the work rather than enforcement. The Cabinet Member stated that he had recently spoken to County Councillor West who was the new relevant Cabinet Member to express dismay at the state of some of the pavements and highways and ask him to get rid of the weeds. He added that he urged residents and Members to contact the County Councillor for their area to add pressure about this.

Councillor Back referred to the amount of fines and he queried how much control the Council had in setting the Fixed Penalty Notices fines. The Environmental Protection Manager stated that the Council had some degree of control as the range of Fixed Penalty Notices for littering was approximately £50-£100 but he would check. He explained that currently it was set at £60 if paid within 10 days and £80 within 14 days and if people did not pay then they were taken to Court. He suggested it was the

amount of people who get fined rather than the amount that was the key issue. He added that there was between 100-150 fines issued per annum. The Chairman queried if there was any statistical monitoring that an increase in fine levels decreased the amount of littering. The Environmental Protection Manager responded that there was none that he knew of but added that the levels had originally been set approximately ten years ago in unison with the rest of Suffolk and he thought the other Councils had subsequently increased their fines so this was an area that could be reviewed. He added that he would check the maximum level of fine.

Councillor Topping queried what would happen to the contract that the Strategic Director referred to earlier if there was less to recycle, for example the Council was successful in getting people to stop using single use plastics. She also referred to the response to her question 18 in the report and asked if it would be possible to have a schedule of where Norse was litter picking in advance to ensure that community groups were not picking in the same area a few days later. The Strategic Director clarified that the contract was not a set volume or weight but the company was contracted to supply the Council's residential recyclable collection material to the MRF so if a rival recycling scheme was set up which took out a valuable product that the MRF expected to receive then there would likely be some problems, although that did not mean pilots could not potentially be operated. The Head of Operations stated that he would be happy to ask Norse to provide the schedule to help coordinate volunteers but he stressed that if there was any feedback on the details of the Schedule then that would be dealt with as part of the wider review.

Councillor Green expressed concern that the north of the district had such high tonnage of contamination and she asked whether it would be worth only having black bins in those specific areas given it was so difficult to get the message across. She added that some vulnerable residents would never be able to do it and suggested that Housing Associations ensure that when someone moved in or out that they were given information about local charities to dispose of packaging and items etc. She also suggested a roadshow across the district to say what could/not be recycled. She referred to the report which stated that bring banks would be fully reviewed and queried if any new sites had been identified. The Cabinet Member stated that working with Housing Associations was an ongoing project and he was engaging with them to ensure that where bins were in communal areas they were kept secure and reemphasising what should be recycled. He agreed that for those areas where there was a turnover of tenants they needed to be informed. In relation to clothes and bottle banks, he stated that if any community wants to arrange to have some in their areas then he was happy to assist. The Head of Operations stated that it was recognised that in some housing schemes maybe the Council should only fulfil the statutory responsibility to collect refuse rather than collect recycling because if it was contaminated from a few properties this then contaminated huge loads that would hinder our efforts. He added that some Councils had decided to only have black bins in those small areas whilst still trying to educate the residents. In relation to roadshows, Members were reminded that the RAWS Member Briefing session next week would give more details but an example was if glass and food were not being put in black bins but collected separately that would make a significant difference, although obviously that meant there would be costs of having more collections.

The Chairman queried if it was possible to have a combined bin to separate out

different types of recyclables. The Head of Operations stated that there were options eg a separate container for food waste could sit within a wheelie bin. He explained that the huge advantage to having lots of separate containers were high recycling rates but the disadvantage was that crews struggled because there was lots of manual lifting and bending and it could contribute to littering if boxes of newspapers for example blew down the street. It was noted that the Officers were working with EELGA on the way the Council would implement RAWs including the type of bins and vehicles.

Councillor Gooch referred to the process on the website for reporting littering and fly tipping and queried why residents had to give a lot of their own personal details before they even got to the point of reporting the incidence and she queried why there could not be a dedicated number to make it easier to report. She also asked how officers and Norse monitored the reporting of littering and fly tipping on social media such as Facebook and Next Door as well as how much notice was taken of cleanapps/websites. The Cabinet Member stated that Officers were not looking at app technology because it could be too restrictive and a lot of people did not have access to technology particularly the elderly and the Council had an adequate reporting process in place that went straight to Norse. He added that residents could contact Ward Members or himself if they were struggling to report it. The Environmental Protection Manager agreed that it should be made as easy as possible to report to the Council for the reason that complaints were better than customer services and that the current process captured every litter report and mapped it out which gave good data for statistical planning. In relation to apps and third party sources of reports, he pointed out that the call centre operators used a script to capture details of the fly tip etc which was useful but when the Council only had a photo from an app it was completely disassociated with that person and the Council had limited ability to ask any questions to find out more to help provide context to determine the level of response and follow up action. He also queried why people would want to go through a third party app when they could ring or email the Council direct.

Councillor Gooch referred to the trial period of the new microchip bins and queried the cost implications of a full or partial roll out and also asked if the solar powered crusher bins would be in remoter areas not easily accessed by dustcarts. The Commercial Contracts Manager (Facilities) reported that there were 18 bins being monitored as part of the project with Suffolk County Council, University of Suffolk and Norse and the data so far looked very positive. He added that the data was a live feed that went to himself and Norse to enable Officers to monitor the status of each bin. He stated that he had asked for a report on how it had impacted on collection times and if it had reduced mileage as the idea was that bins would only be collected when required. The estimated cost was being assessed by the County Council and University and details would be sent to Members in due course. He explained that the solar powered bins were approximately £5K each and a business case would be needed to proceed but there was some scope for them. It was noted that if the project was successful, the sensors could be deployed in many different locations such as grounds maintenance, gulleys, street lighting etc and the Council should know the results of the bin sensor trial in approximately six months time. The Cabinet Member stated that if the price of solar powered crusher bins was reduced then that might be something that would be looked at in future but, in the meantime, the microchipped bins looked like the way to go.

Councillor Deacon queried what the barriers were for tackling fly tipping on private land particularly in rural areas, how the Council was liaising with Police Crime Commissioner and Suffolk Constabulary to address this and what initiatives were being designed by the Suffolk Fly Tipping Action Group. The Strategic Director stated that this was something they would take away and come back with a detailed answer but, in the meantime, he responded that whilst he acknowledged that this was a real issue, fly tipping on private land was a private issue and whilst the Council could do a lot of education to try and stop it, when it was on private land it was generally an issue for the landowner. The Environmental Protection Manager clarified that if someone fly tipped on private land it was the landowners problem but it was still a waste offence which the Council had a duty to investigate and prosecute if possible.

Councillor Gooch asked if it was a waste of time for Officers to look through bins for names and addresses etc if it did not lead to successful prosecutions and queried how Breckland achieved so many prosecutions. She also asked if CCTV evidence could be used if a perpetrator could be clearly identified for example in the case of HMOs or flat occupations and how was this Council going to raise the bar of prosecutions. The Environmental Protection Manager acknowledged that the number of prosecutions was low with the last being in 2018. He explained that the reason was because Fixed Penalty Notices provided a much more cost effective method of following up on waste offences and 24 Notices had been issued in the last financial year for fly tipping. He added that the main issue was that there were only three Norse Waste Management Enforcement Officers who, as he had detailed earlier, had a very wide range of duties.

Councillor Gooch queried if there was a pan-district schedule of street and pavement cleaning and if there was any redress if there was a lot of takeaway waste from fast food outlets. The Environmental Protection Manager stated that there used to be a Street Litter Control Notice under the Environmental Protection Act which could be served on frontages of businesses to require the business operator to provide bins and sweep up outside on pain of a Fixed Penalty Notice or prosecution but when that law had been replaced, we now had Community Protection Notices under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to serve notice on the occupier of a property that caused detriment that was unreasonable and likely to reoccur. He added that the Waste Management Enforcement Officers could use them but again stressed that they had a lot of other duties. The Head of Operations stated that streets were not washed routinely but each street was cleaned according to a grading system, although it was felt that this was not a particularly satisfactory system or if it was then it might be that it was not being applied very well, therefore, the KPIs had recently been reviewed with Norse and changes would be introduced on how streets were graded, the frequency and priority. He added that it was also being reviewed as to who would assess and make the judgement because if it was the crews then it would not be an independent view so that would also be part of the new KPIs. The Cabinet Member stated that big brand fast food restaurants in particular should be forced to take responsibility for the litter that was left across the district but they did not engage in their local communities and did not tend to be interested in things like sponsoring litter picking etc. The Strategic Director stated that the Council realised that there was a need to take a new approach to street cleaning as part of the HAZ work and Town Centre Regeneration project so he suspected that in those heavy footfall areas there would be more pavement washing in future than done at the moment.

Councillor Gooch stated that, following the last Scrutiny review meeting on waste, Radio Suffolk had interviewed an RSPCA officer who said that there had been 4000 reports of litter damaging wildlife and she queried if this fact could have a higher profile in our education programme as school children loved animals and this might make them think before littering. The Cabinet Member responded that he agreed but schools were the County Council's responsibility. He added that the Greenprint Forum was working with schools and was focussing on Nature First this year with various campaigns and grants available so it was possible to focus on this in future but in the meantime he urged people to contact County Councillors and for Ward Members to engage with their local schools to emphasise this as well. The Environmental Sustainability Officer reported that the Council had produced some lesson resources on the theme of plastic pollution on behalf of the Greenprint Forum and these were available to download from the Council's website. He explained that the lesson touched on the environmental harm that plastic litter and other litter had when it escaped into the environment including the impact on wildlife and one of the learning objectives was to get children to think about what the impact on animals were. He added that the pack was being reviewed and he was happy to incorporate this before hopefully relaunching it again later in the year.

Councillor Gee expressed concern that there were only three officers dealing with this issue and given the amount of development particularly in the north of the district that would result in more residents, she queried if the Council should consider having more officers. The Chairman stated that this was a potential recommendation the Committee could consider.

Councillor Green observed that Felixstowe Town Council had been required by Norse to pay an additional fee for deep cleaning one of the streets in Felixstowe so they felt Norse had not been working with the Town Council.

Councillor Coulam expressed concern at an earlier comment that street cleansing would be looked at within a year and commented that this was an urgent matter. The Cabinet Member reassured the Committee that Lowestoft was a top priority for the whole Cabinet and improvements would be made as quickly as possible.

The Committee discussed potential recommendations and the Chairman stated that, once the general recommendations were agreed, they would then be turned into SMART recommendations and circulated to Members for final approval. The Cabinet Member reminded Members that he was also the Chairman of the Suffolk Waste Partnership in case the Committee wanted to make any recommendations to that group.

RESOLVED

1. That, having considered the report on Waste Management in East Suffolk, it was agreed that a number of recommendations would be circulated to Committee Members for approval prior to submission to Cabinet.
2. That the Cabinet Member and Officers be thanked for their assistance on this review and be asked to email details of the Norse litter picking schedule to Members to avoid duplication with

community litter pick groups, and further details be sent to Members on the approach to fly tipping on private land particularly in rural areas.

5 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Committee received and reviewed its current Forward Work Programme including receiving updates on the progress of several Scoping Forms. It was noted that, although the Covid-19 Task and Finish Group had now been disbanded, it did have a positive impact because a group had now been set up between Adult and Children Services at County and East Suffolk's Housing Department.

The meeting concluded at 9.15pm.

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Chairman

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Conference Room, Riverside, Lowestoft on
Thursday 15 July 2021 at 6:30 pm

Members of the Cabinet present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Keith Robinson, Councillor Caroline Topping

Other Members present:

Councillor Stephen Burroughes, Councillor Steve Gallant, Councillor Tess Gandy

Officers present: Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Matt Makin (Democratic Services Officer)

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Deacon; Councillor Gandy acted as Substitute.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest received.

3 Minutes

It was, by majority vote,

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the Meetings held on 25 March 2021 and 20 May 2021 be confirmed as correct records

4 Cabinet Members' updates

(i) The Chairman invited Councillor Burroughes to provide an update on the strategic priorities for his portfolio which included customer services, customer access, channel shift, complaints, commercial partnerships, IT and digital transformation. This was the last of the first round of updates by Cabinet Members.

Councillor Burroughes provided the Committee with a brief presentation which outlined the challenges and priorities of his portfolio. In summary,

Customer Services

- Channel shift and demand reduction: One front desk, virtual call centres, 'My East Suffolk' online accounts, increased digital customer experience and interactive services
- Customer satisfaction: Data led service improvement, customer service dashboard, comments module, every contact counts, Customer Charter, and robotics
- Streamlined services: New software, customer service booking system, housing triage service, and, integrated service model
- Customer access: Virtual call centre model, managed 'walk-ins', digital coaching, proposed 'digital hubs', and avoiding digital exclusion

IT and Digital Services

- Digital by default: Upgrading and replacing systems (Citrix, Uniform), improving connectivity and doubling band width, agile working approach, constant and continual skills and training
- Lean and efficient services: Interaction across service areas, greater use of laptops and tablets, asset management, greater network management and capacity
- Effective use of data: Detailed intelligent performance management, Orchard Technology Housing Repairs, Food Safety team's data transfer, dashboard infographics, 'LIFT' project, and corporate dashboard
- District-wide digital infrastructure: Digital service integration, increased internet capacity, and digital communities

Commercial partnerships

- Providing value for money: Greater management and oversight of performance and cost management through improved service efficiencies, improved key performance indicators and service level agreements
- Increasing performance and improving efficiency: Greater use of digital technology, smarter working and data gathering. Intelligent routing of vehicles and detailed quality assurance. A 'challenge and change' mentality
- Creating growth and business development: Increase third-party business through the Joint Venture. Improve access and communication with Towns and Parishes, create greater social and community interaction.

The Chairman invited questions.

Councillor Gooch, with reference to the ambition to be digital by default, suggested this signified barriers to access for some residents in terms of literacy, skills, finances, technophobia etc., and asked how the Council could assist them. Councillor Burroughes replied that digital coaching would be available to help people go online. He added that a digital audit would create opportunities and, where areas of digital exclusion were identified, the Council would offer what help it could. Councillor Gooch asked if there were further plans to widen digital inclusion and, if so, what these might be - for example, she referred to residents for whom English was not their first language. Councillor Burroughes replied that translation services were available via the Council's customer services team.

Councillor Green said the channel shift had worked well at the customer services team at the Marina Centre in Lowestoft, but that the customer services team in Felixstowe did not currently have the technology to enable channel shift; she asked what plans

there were to address this. Councillor Burroughes replied that a review of customer access was proposed in order to make it the best it could be. The review would include real customer experiences and interactive screens which would connect customers to staff at other locations. Councillor Burroughes said technology would be used to advance how the Council interacted with its customers and to transform peoples lives for the better.

Councillor Topping referred to the number of complaints quoted in the presentation, 41: Councillor Burroughes clarified that this was for one month and most related to green waste collection and benefits. In response to a further question about remote meetings, Councillor Burroughes said these had contributed to a 60% reduction in the Council's carbon footprint and said that it was hoped a change to the legislation would mean these could continue.

Councillor Lynch stated that technology sometimes brought problems such as cyber attacks and asked how much more effort had been necessary to protect the Council's system, and if more and more would be required. Councillor Burroughes said the Council's firewall and security was the best possible and it regularly checked for any potential attacks. He added that the need to ensure the system was completely secure was always a priority and he referred to the phishing hook now available in Outlook.

The Chairman asked if Councillor Burroughes was satisfied that the system was sufficiently robust to cope efficiently with the additional demands of remote meetings. Councillor Burroughes replied that the system was very robust.

Councillor Gooch asked about the security of residents systems and referred to media coverage of large corporations who had had their details copied to formulate a scam; she asked if the Council could protect its residents' details. Councillor Burroughes said that the Council issued very clear advice to residents about being careful what they accessed on line. He said the Council's systems were secure but that, generally, there was a need to raise awareness of the dangers. However, he also felt that individuals also had to take responsibility for their actions too. Councillor Gooch said the Council would be liable if residents' details were stolen and then utilised in a scam. Councillor Burroughes said that Trading Standards issued alerts of scams and the Council then alerted its residents.

Councillor Back stated that the live-streaming of Council meetings had opened up its democratic business to the public and that the vast majority of virtual meetings had been 'attended' virtually by around 100 people, on average. He stated that this was good for open democracy and asked if remote meetings would continue so that public engagement could continue to be enhanced. Councillor Burroughes said he hoped so and that the Leader of the Council was working to press the Government to update legislation to enable this to continue. He added that, personally, he would be concerned if there were a return to physical meetings.

Councillor Green referred to the Council's staff who now largely worked from home and asked if the Council was ensuring they were able to do so safely and in accordance with health and safety legislation and requirements. Councillor Burroughes said this had been raised at a meeting with line managers.

Councillor Hedgley asked if the introduction of the phishing facility to report suspicious emails was being used by the Council's members and Officers. Councillor Burroughes said this was a very valuable additional piece of security which was being used, but not by everyone. He did not have the exact figures with him but undertook to provide these after the meeting.

Councillor Gooch if the Council's systems and hardware were fit for purpose in terms of what it had now, or planned upgrades. Councillor Burroughes referred to the successful upgrade to Windows 10 software. He added that the Council was well-placed to make sure it had the systems that did what was needed and wanted. He said the market and what was available was monitored but, equally, items would not be upgraded if they continued to be fit for purpose. Councillor Gooch welcomed this as it minimised impact on the environment when it could be avoided. Councillor Gooch also asked about the apps which the Council might require its customers to use and referred to the potential impact on the capacity of people's mobile telephones; she asked if the Council was able to safeguard against 'forcing' residents to upgrade. Councillor Burroughes said that a minimal number of apps would be used and that the Council would endeavour not to 'force' anyone to upgrade their technology in order to be able to use them. He undertook to get further details on the apps and to provide this after the meeting.

The Chairman referred to a recent social media campaign, by the Council, on how to recycle correctly and said that this and a significant majority of the Council's publicity was only online. He suggested there might be a risk of indirect digital exclusion as not everyone used social media and, therefore, some residents were not receiving important messages. Councillor Burroughes said corporate communications was not within his portfolio, but agreed that the Council needed to be mindful of this. *(Clerk's note: The Leader of the Council spoke further on this under his update later in the meeting).*

Councillor Green referred to the compliments, complaints and comments page on the Council's website. She suggested that it would benefit from examples of good practice and also examples of where a complaint had resulted in a service improvement. Councillor Burroughes said he would take the suggested improvements away and consider them further.

There being no further questions, the Chairman thanked Councillor Burroughes for his portfolio update.

(ii) The Chairman invited Councillor Gallant, Leader of the Council, to provide an update on his key deliverables for the next six months. This update was the commencement of a second round of Cabinet Member updates and so the focus had altered from that at (i) above.

Before providing his update, Councillor Gallant referred to the earlier question to Councillor Burroughes on the Council's communications, which was within his portfolio. He referred to the use of social media to get urgent messages or updates to as many residents as quickly as possible; he agreed that not everyone used social media but the immediacy of it had many advantages. Councillor Gallant emphasised that those residents who chose not to use social media were not forgotten and articles were placed in parish magazines, local newspapers and the Council's quarterly publication to

residents.

In summary, Councillor Gallant provided updates on the following:

Delivery of the Strategic Plan: Review performance/risks of all five themes. Possible revision during 2022.

Maintaining an effective communications strategy: With Members - monthly bulletins, verbal updates, sharing of key Government/Suffolk Public Sector Leaders' correspondence, regular meetings with Group Leaders. With the Council's communities including town and parish councils – residents' magazine, tenants' magazine, social media, press releases, radio/tv interviews, consultations. With Officers – working as 'One Council', staff briefings. Supporting all Members to better represent their constituents

Progressing the Member development programme: Reaccreditation of Charter Status – interim review in March 2022. Review the induction programme. Councillor satisfaction survey. Review Member Development Strategy and how to attract a diverse range of new Councillors in the 2023 elections.

Community Partnership Board: To ensure it provides effective strategic support and oversight of the eight Community Partnerships and ensure that the Community Partnerships were an effective mechanism for maintaining/enhancing existing local connections and addresses local issues identified through data and insight

Supporting the Council's peer reviews: Virtual peer review of Community Partnerships in October 2021 focussing on membership, funding and outcomes. Corporate peer review (face to face) in early 2022 focussing on five core components - Understanding of the local place and priority setting, Leadership of place, Financial planning and viability, Organisational leadership and governance, and, Capacity to deliver

Raising the profile and influence of East Suffolk: Maintaining liaison with the district's three MPs. Interaction with other Suffolk authorities and key stakeholders. Liaison with/feeding back to central Government

Ensuring the Council remains committed to working towards its goal to be net carbon by 2030

Ensuring the Council's major projects are delivered on time and budget: Roll out of various LATCOs. Development of the former Deben High School site in Felixstowe. Towns Deal for Lowestoft. Flood barrier. Freeport East. Seeking to achieve the best for our communities in relation to major, national infrastructure projects.

The Chairman invited questions.

The Chairman asked Councillor Gallant, in a few words, to say how he saw East Suffolk Council being different in 2023 than it was in 2019. Councillor Gallant said East Suffolk was a fantastic place and that the change he was most proud of was the One Council approach which saw members and Officers working together. Councillor Gallant said he hoped that would continue and become embedded as second nature for the Council of

2023 to take forward.

Councillor Back asked what benefits the joint bid for City of Culture would bring to the district, if successful. Councillor Gallant said the bid would bring benefits whether it was ultimately successful, or not. The benefits he referred to were an opportunity to showcase the district, to attract economic development and investment, to increase cohesion, and to raise the tourism profile. The criteria for the bid had been opened up and so was no longer a focus mainly on arts and culture, but also on communities and civic pride.

Councillor Bird asked for Councillor Gallant's thoughts on how the Council might be able to increase residents participation in the election process and so increase democratic legitimacy. Councillor Gallant said that, in his opinion, to get people to vote you needed to make them care - and to make them care, he suggested, you needed to either deliver great things or very poor things. Therefore, he said the Council needed to work hard to continue to deliver great things that would give the electorate reason to go and vote in order to have that continue.

Councillor Lynch said the Council's focus on the environment was important and he referred to several green projects already underway; he asked where Councillor Gallant saw further impetus to the environmental agenda. Councillor Gallant said the Council was committed to the environmental agenda and the environment was the golden thread running through everything it did. He referred to the cross-party Environment Task Group (ETG) which, he said, had been very successful in investigating issues and, he suggested, was a more effective approach than Motions to Full Council. He suggested that the ETG was the more appropriate forum to deal with the matters raised as Motions. However, it was for central Government to make the Council's efforts easier by relevant regulation and legislation.

Councillor Topping asked what Councillor Gallant hoped would be his greatest achievement when he ended his term as Leader. Councillor Gallant said that this would be ensuring the new Council was cohesive and effective in its delivery of many and significant projects. This, he said, had been achieved by team work by members and Officers and had not been slowed or halted by the pandemic.

Councillor Gooch said the full effects of Brexit might be hidden by the impact of the pandemic and asked what Councillor Gallant saw as Brexit's benefits and drawbacks. Councillor Gallant said the impact of Brexit was significant and across all areas - it had, he said, required a huge effort on the Council's behalf to set up a 24/7 port health facility, but the challenge had not only been met but done in an exceptional way. The impact on the local economy was not, he said, as great as might have been imagined in that the Port of Felixstowe's main traffic was not from Europe and so had not been significantly impacted upon. Councillor Gallant said the wider impact was around employment particularly in various sectors such as haulage, hospitality and agriculture where it was proving difficult to recruit staff. Councillor Gallant said that, obviously, it was not possible for the Council to solve this issue but it could petition those who were in a position to do so and also offer support to local businesses. Councillor Gooch referred to the City of Culture bid and noted the date for expressions of interest of 19 July, and to the need to then prepare the full application - she asked if it was possible for Councillors to contribute to the fact-finding and evidence gathering aspects of this

process. Councillor Gallant said the full application would include a lot of existing strategies and policies, that there would be a period of pulling the application together and a 'call-out' to members to make sure everything was covered - however, he said, clearly it was not possible to have 55 Councillors preparing the bid.

Councillor Hedgley asked what had been Councillor Gallant's worse moment as Leader. Councillor Gallant said the pandemic had brought many challenges but the Council had emerged and evolved. He said he was sad when a Councillor stepped aside before the end of their term of office. He added that he was sad when the Council drifted into political point scoring.

Councillor Beavan noted Councillor Gallant's earlier comments about how best to encourage more people to vote and asked if he agreed that identification checks at polling booths would not help as the problem did not exist, and, if the Government should be urged to re-think their proposals. Councillor Gallant replied that he did not agree - he asked Councillor Beavan what evidence he had for saying that a problem did not exist and added that being asked to provide identification before voting was not unreasonable if it helped to avoid voter fraud. Councillor Gallant added that he did not wish to rehearse the debate at Full Council on 28 July 2021 in response to the Question on the agenda. He stated that he had faith that the Government had examined the matter and proposed a realistic response.

Councillor Bird asked if Councillor Gallant felt politicians should continue as long as they were elected or if there was a point at which they should perhaps step aside. Councillor Gallant said that the key was that politicians remained passionate about their role, if a level of enthusiasm could be maintained then experienced politicians should continue to serve whilst elected, but they also needed to be self-aware enough to know when it was time to step aside.

There being no further questions, the Chairman, on behalf of the Committee thanked both Councillor Burroughes and Councillor Gallant for their full and informative updates.

Before leaving the meeting, Councillor Gallant said he wished to issue a challenge to the Scrutiny Committee. He said that he was a fan of the Committee because it could add value to the work of the Council and of Cabinet, if its reviews were efficient and effective. It was, he said, his observation that, at times, the Committee's remit was too wide and this resulted in what he described as 'scatter-gun' recommendations. He challenged the Committee to think about how it could hone in on the key issues of work and provide well-evidenced recommendations to Cabinet. He asked the Committee to look at one key aspect and provide detailed recommendations. In response, Councillor Gooch said she accepted the principle but that the recommendations from the recent review of waste management were detailed and focussed.

5 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Scrutiny Committee received and reviewed its current forward work programme.

The Committee received a draft scoping form, prepared by Councillor Gooch, which proposed a review of the NHS dental health provision in the district. Councillor Gooch stated that the Council had a duty of care to its residents and so it should do what it could to bring pressure to bear to seek improvements from the bodies with responsibility. It was clarified that, if approved, the review's findings would be presented to Health Scrutiny by Councillor Hedgley, as the Council's appointed representative. The Chairman reminded the Committee that, as a constructive friend, it was its role to suggest solutions and not to apportion blame. Councillor Hedgley agreed the need to discuss the matter and bring its thought to the attention of Health Scrutiny; the Health Scrutiny had, he said, also agreed to review the topic after the implementation of the new Integrated Care System. There was discussion of the suggested witnesses and agreement that they should be invited to attend either physically or remotely. The item was agreed and added to the work programme.

The Meeting concluded at 8.50pm

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Chairman



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16 September 2021

Subject	Housing Development Programme Update
Report by	Councillor Richard Kerry, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing
Supporting Officer	Bridget Law Housing Development Programme Manager Bridget.law@eastsoffolk.gov.uk 07824 456011

Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
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Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	n/a
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:

Arising from the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 24th September 2020, and having received report ES/0504, on the Housing Development Strategy, the Committee made recommendation to Cabinet.

“That the Scrutiny Committee welcomed and encouraged the Housing portfolio’s ambition to build 50 council houses per annum. The Committee, mindful of the limited resources available, recommended to Cabinet that it explore the potential for modular construction, carbon neutral where possible, on appropriate sites at the earliest and most realistic opportunity”.

The Scrutiny Committee asked that an update be provided to the Committee in one year (16th September 2021) to review overall progress and, if necessary, the implications of staffing resources on the attainment of the ambition.

Options:

n/a

Recommendation/s:

That Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report will make any further recommendations to Cabinet as required.

Corporate Impact Assessment

Governance:

In response to the Scrutiny Committee recommendation to Cabinet in September 2020 this report offers an update on the progress of the Housing Development Programme and give details of the projected development pipeline.

ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:

The Housing Development Programme, which this report is updating on, proactively contributes to the Council’s Strategic Plan with primary and secondary priorities in 3 of the 5 key theme areas including *“Building the right environment for East Suffolk”* ‘Enabling our Communities’, ‘Caring for our Environment’ and ‘Maintaining financial Stability’. The work undertaken within the programme also aligns with the following strategy documents:

[We are East Suffolk Strategic Plan 2020-24](#)

[East Suffolk Housing Strategy 2017-23](#)

[ESC Housing Development Strategy 2020-24](#)

[ESC HRA Business Plan 2018-2048](#)

Environmental:

The Council's Housing Development Strategy 2020-2024 identifies 'Environmental Sustainability' as an essential element in the creation of homes and communities in which people want to live and work. It notes that lowering the whole-life carbon footprint of properties will help tenants save money and deliver lasting environmental, social, and economic benefits.

Housing, both our existing stock and new build programme, has a huge role to play in the current environmental challenges we are facing. The team are developing a revised 'new build design guide' which outlines our minimum requirements in terms of energy standards and environmental impact.

Extensive research into greener development was outlined within the previous report. The report concluded that the Council is committed to leading by example in a movement towards delivering more sustainable housing as standard. Following a period of market research and stakeholder engagement, it was recommended this could be achieved initially by progressing pilot 'green' build schemes utilising fabric first principles. Research and learning from these projects would then be used to inform the future development proposals withing the programme.

A number of innovative design solutions across several projects recognise the benefit of fabric first principles and the value of carbon neutral design, some examples of this work are outlined below:

1. Since September 2020, the Former Deben High School site in Felixstowe has obtained planning permission for 61 homes and is progressing with an anticipated completion of 2022/23. This scheme aims to provide all homes as PassiveHause certified and over 68% will be retained within the Councils HRA portfolio.
2. The first modular site has been tendered and successfully awarded, a scheme of 6 units is due start on site in Spring 2022 and will complete later that year. The project uses a panelised system, manufactured off-site to ensure an airtight envelope and speed of delivery.
3. Planning permission is being sought for a single dwelling that will be part of an EU-funded project for a new generation of eco homes. Following an approach from a local Architectural firm investigating '*energy efficient alternatives*' to traditional bricks and mortar, ESC agreed to host a pilot project. Co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund and led by University of Plymouth, the project runs until 2023. Once built and occupied, the home will feed back information to assist with the research project and give real life data.
4. Planning permission has been submitted for the redevelopment of a currently unoccupied building within Lowestoft town centre. The project goes beyond the minimum specification and propose an enhanced refurbishment / extension which will meet current Building Regulations. Whilst the level of refurbishment does not go as far as the 'zero carbon standard' in this project the quality of the accommodation provided goes beyond a basic refurbishment aiding the longer-term sustainability of the Councils own

Housing stock. This level of refurbishment pays particular attention to the environmental aspirations of the council and seeks to set the standard for other empty property refurbishments within the town.

A full summary of development numbers can be seen in section 2 of this report.

Alongside the Council's new build and redevelopment programme, it is recognised that the Council's existing HRA portfolio has a significant role to play in reducing the Council's carbon footprint. In line with ESC's ambition to reach carbon neutrality by 2030, the wider housing team are assessing the council's existing housing assets. Data driven decision making is assisting in preparing detailed programmes of work to ensure Council homes positively contribute towards this ambition whilst also provide truly sustainable and affordable homes for our tenants.

Equalities and Diversity:

Increasing the number of affordable homes is the development programme's main priority. The success of the programme is measured in numbers delivered; however, the success could also be measured through.

- Improvements in the health and wellbeing of our tenants.
- The reduction in rent arrears due to homes being more affordable to live in
- Reduction in void periods through the creation of more desirable properties, tenant turnover is reduced thus reducing void income losses.
- Cost savings within the repairs and maintenance teams due to better quality homes being delivered.
- Reduction in customer services enquiries due to the installation of smart tech within new homes.
- A reduction in anti-social behaviour and criminal activities in areas where redevelopment intervention takes place.

The supply of new build properties from our development programme must deliver to the housing needs of residents in the district. We use evidence-based data to support the building of the right homes regarding mix and tenure in the right locations. We know the demand for housing is high and prioritising what and where to build has previously been driven by planning policy and insights from our Housing Needs Officers, who manage our Housing Register and our Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

The Housing Team are currently working with the East Suffolk Data Analyst to develop a more data-led approach. Our aspiration is to understand and measure the demand for properties from Applicants on our Register, who are searching for properties using our Choice Based Lettings scheme. We hope to use new software to visualise and analyse historical data (2016-2021) and identify locations and property types which have a high level of unmet demand.

This work has developed a new metric called 'bid ratio'. If this ratio is high, then a high number of applicants have bid for the available properties (and if the ratio is low then only a small number of applicants have bid for the available properties). Analysis of these bid ratios will identify specific locations and property types (eg number of bedrooms) for which there is a high demand, and this information can inform our

development programme. This data, along with other internal analysis of Housing Needs information, will help us to define key areas for development.

If this data-led approach proves to be successful it will be shared with the Suffolk Office of Data Analytics (SODA), who will share the learning with other stock-holding Councils in Suffolk to rollout a data-led approach. SODA is a collaboration of all local authorities, Suffolk police and other public sector organisations to share valuable data about the communities within Suffolk.

The previously mentioned design guide also identifies what 'good development' looks like in a post Covid world. Access to private external amenity space and space to work from home comfortably are defined as minimum requirements within the new build design guide and acquisitions criteria.

Financial:

Following legal changes to the HRA, the Council took on £68 million of council housing debt in exchange for not paying future Housing Subsidy to Central Government. This has allowed the Council to retain its housing rental income and undertake housing investments based on local decisions.

The HRA had £10 million of existing debt before going self-financing in 2012, giving it a total debt of £78 million. To date, £7 million of this debt has been repaid, with a further £10.7 million due to be repaid during 2021-22, bringing the debt down to just over £60 million as at 31.03.2022. This is due to be repaid in full by 2041-42.

As of 31.03.2021 the HRA has 4,459 properties with a market value of £585.7 million, demonstrating a £60 million debt position is relatively low and could be increased if required.

The HRA has approximately £21 million in income per annum, with fixed expenditure of £16 million. Leaving £5 million per annum to contribute to debt repayments and invest in the HRA Capital Programme.

The HRA Capital Programme approved at Full Council on the 27 January 2021 included £7.725 million for redevelopment projects and £42.121 million for new build development from 2021-22 to 2024-25. All of which are to be funded by existing HRA income, reserves and balances, with no requirement to increase borrowing.

A 30-year financial business model is used to support the delivery of the HRA objectives, and this business plan ensures our targets and aspirations are achievable and affordable. It uses assumptions about the level of income available and the key risks facing the housing service over the next 30 years. The current HRA capital programme is financially sustainable within the 30-year financial business plan, however the costs associated with achieving a carbon neutral status on the HRA's existing housing stock has yet to be identified. If grant funding cannot be secured, then decisions will be needed on where budget is allocated, to new build or to sustainability improvements. Alternatively, consideration could be given to additional borrowing for the HRA in order to deliver on both objectives.

Working to achieve an average payback across the programme of 30 years, there are a number of projects which secure a much lower payback which then enables projects with wider reaching benefits, and therefore longer payback periods, to be undertaken. This can include projects with regeneration or economic benefit, embarking on development opportunities which the private sector would consider unviable from a purely financial perspective. The average payback for completed projects across the programme is currently 24.8 years and ranges from 15 to 39 years.

To help achieve the best value for money on each housing development, a financial appraisal is carried out. Depending on the housing tenure being provided either Right to Buy (RTB) receipts, Homes England (HE) grant funding and/or S106 commuted sums will be used to contribute to the cost of the development.

RTB receipts held by the HRA will always be the first choice if possible, as generally they can contribute more than HE grant funding. Following the RTB consultation held in 2018 the government has recently announced changes to the way in which RTB receipts can be used. These changes are positive for the HRA. The main changes include:

- i) The time frame in which they must be spent has been increased from 3 years to 5. If not spent in this time frame they must be returned to central government with a 4% interest charge for the period held.
- ii) RTB receipts can now fund up to 40% of the capital costs of a development, previously this was 30%. However, both will calculate to more than Homes England grant funding.
- iii) RTB receipts can now be used to fund shared ownership properties where previously this was not possible.
- iv) A percentage cap will be in place on the use of RTB receipts on acquisitions.

The HRA has never had to repay any RTB receipts to central government, however due to delays caused by COVID this was becoming increasingly likely. However, these changes mean there is no expectation of any RTB receipts needing to be repaid.

With the current development programme, of the £2.3 million RTB receipts held, it is anticipated these will be used in their entirety by 2023-24. Future receipts will be used for developments but cannot be relied on until received.

In addition to the Council's own HRA capital funding and RTB receipts, external sources of grant funding are explored for schemes which can be delivered in accordance with grant requirements. Early engagement with Homes England regarding the Affordable Homes Programme 2021-2026 has seen a positive response in relation to one of the proposed new build schemes. Enhanced environmental credentials within the proposed specification allow the scheme to be eligible for funding under the programme.

Human Resources:

As mentioned within Housing Strategies and the 2020 Scrutiny report, investment in staffing is recognised as key requirement in relation to our capacity to deliver the development targets as well as expanding upon the capabilities within our workforce.

We recognised that the Council needed to make a long-term commitment to development and enabling to ensure objectives of building more homes is achieved.

In March 2020 the team recruited two new Housing Development Officers and a Housing Enabling Manager. Over the past 12 months the additional resource within the Development Team has helped to assess development opportunities creating a strong development pipeline and enabling the year-on-year projected completions to increase. In May 2021 we recruited a further Assistant Development Officer in response to the increase in workload.

Traditionally the Council's support services have been in place to assist individual service area with specialist expertise in the field of Legal, Procurement, Finance etc. The current infrastructure works well to support the activity that has been delivered to date, however with the growth of the Housing Development Programme alongside the scale and nature of projects the team are now embarking upon requires further specialisms in areas such a development contracting, construction law and commercial procurement. We are currently recruiting for a HRA Estates Surveyor to help fulfil duties which are often outsourced and also to enable the team to appraise new development opportunities more efficiently.

In response to the current growth within the Housing Development Programme and with support from our in house Legal and Procurement teams, Housing has sought both external Legal and Procurement advice on particularly complex projects which require construction sector expertise.

ICT:

Over the past 12 months we have begun to formalise the Development Programme enabling the team to evaluate where the majority of Officer time is being spent and where efficiencies can be made. Recording this information also enables the team to quickly identify potential challenges and where projects are stalling. Formally recording the programme and identifying initiation, milestone and completion dates provides valuable information on the number of projects identified, explored and progressed even if these do not result in additional new homes.

The recent purchase of ARGUS Developer software will help the team to manage complex, multi-staged development projects with confidence. The software provides a far more robust appraisal system than has previously been used and will allow the Council to take a more commercial view and bring transparency to risks.

The recent migration to MS Teams has also allowed the team to work more efficiently, utilising the software's capability has enabled the team to collaborate on projects and engage efficiently with stakeholders.

Assistive technology is becoming more common within homes and the innovation within this sector enables occupants to make the most of the buildings whilst relying less on external sources for energy. Studies show that people who are aware of their energy consumption are more likely to make reductions and minimise their environmental impact. These monitoring systems will not only help tenants understand their homes better but also providing the Council with valuable data about our stocks energy requirements.

The Housing Team are currently working with the East Suffolk data analyst to enable more detailed analysis of Housing Needs information to ensure the direction of the programme is catering accurately to the needs of the local communities within East Suffolk.

Legal:

The team have sought external legal advice on a number of projects to ensure the Councils interest are protected and project risks are minimised wherever possible. Discussions are currently being held with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services concerning future specialised construction and development legal support for the HRA.

Risk:

All development programmes contain an element of risk. Failure to deliver the Housing Development Programme is identified on the Councils corporate Risk register and monitored through this process.

All projects within the programme have a project specific risk assessment carried out at the commencement of the project. This seeks to identify potential risks to the delivery and provides mitigation recommendations.

Traditionally the most common risks to development projects are not being able to successfully deliver the project brief within budget and on time. Within all projects there will be many identified risks that threaten the successful completion of a project in terms of time, cost, or quality. These project specific risks will be monitored and managed using project specific risk registers which are maintained throughout the duration of the project.

Wider programme risks which have potential to impact on multiple projects would include non-project specific factors such as changes in the housing market, skills shortages or economic and political changes impacting the construction sector directly. Currently we are seeing an emerging risk with the availability of raw materials and imported goods for use within construction. A risk of this nature, depending on the outcome and any mitigation we can be put in place, has potential to impact on multiple projects within the programme.

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External Consultees:	n/a
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Strategic Plan Priorities

Select the priorities of the Strategic Plan which are supported by this proposal: (Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)		Primary priority	Secondary priorities
T01	Growing our Economy		
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P02	Attract and stimulate inward investment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P03	Maximise and grow the unique selling points of East Suffolk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P04	Business partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P05	Support and deliver infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T02	Enabling our Communities		
P06	Community Partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P07	Taking positive action on what matters most	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P08	Maximising health, well-being and safety in our District	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P09	Community Pride	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
T03	Maintaining Financial Sustainability		
P10	Organisational design and streamlining services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P11	Making best use of and investing in our assets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P12	Being commercially astute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P13	Optimising our financial investments and grant opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P14	Review service delivery with partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T04	Delivering Digital Transformation		
P15	Digital by default	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P17	Effective use of data	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P18	Skills and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T05	Caring for our Environment		
P20	Lead by example	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P22	Renewable energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P23	Protection, education and influence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
XXX	Governance		
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How does this proposal support the priorities selected? The primary objective of the East Suffolk Housing Development Programme is to meet housing need by providing high quality sustainable housing at affordable rents or sale values and to develop appropriate housing solutions in all areas of East Suffolk which are			

effective and cost efficient.

As a direct response to the primary priority of *“Building the right environment for East Suffolk”* The current and future development programme seeks to directly provide, good quality affordable housing which meets the current and future needs of local communities throughout East Suffolk.

Secondary priorities such as *‘Enabling our Communities’* and *‘Caring for our Environment’* shape the projects undertaken within this programme ensuring we priorities those which have the most social and environmental benefit to East Suffolk and its residents.

Investing in capital development projects, both new build and redevelopment of existing assets is facilitating the drive for carbon reductions and demonstrates the Council is delivering projects which make best use of our land and property assets. Maintaining housing numbers and a strong pipeline is essential in maintaining income for the HRA and remain financially sustainable.

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1 Background facts	
1.1	<p>Since the Council commenced its own house building programme, 99 new homes have been added to the HRA portfolio. These have been delivered through the new build development programme, redevelopment of HRA assets and S106 acquisitions.</p> <p>Early new build development opportunities were progressed with assistance from the E2 Consortium with Orwell Housing Association which enabled ESC to quickly make use of HRA land and begin developing. Following the success of initial schemes, further opportunities were explored however challenges from Planning and legal covenants on HRA owned land proved the land to be unsuitable for development. This, alongside delays caused by COVID and the associated social distancing measures, saw a dip in housing numbers delivered in 2020/21. However, following the easing of restrictions, delayed developments were able to recommence albeit with a delay to planned completions dates. A proactive decision to explore development opportunities on land in 3rd party ownership and actively pursuing s106 opportunities where the Registered Provider market was failing to deliver saw the numbers begin to climb again in 2021/22. Further growth of the team and positive collaboration with internal colleagues and external stakeholders saw the projections for 2022 onwards progress in line with numbers identified within the Housing Development Strategy and the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) Business Plan.</p>
1.2	<p>Key updates:</p> <p>The first shared ownership properties were built in 2020 and all 6 are now sold and occupied.</p>

Following recommendations made by Scrutiny committee in September 2020 that Cabinet “*explore the potential for modular construction, carbon neutral where possible, on appropriate sites at the earliest and most realistic opportunity*” The first modular site has been tendered and successfully awarded, a scheme of 6 units is due start on site in Spring 2022 and will complete later that year. The project uses a panelised system, manufactured off-site to ensure an airtight envelope and speed of delivery.

East Suffolk Council’s first PassiveHaus scheme received planning permission in May 2021. This will also be the first Council led housing development scheme in the former SCDC area of East Suffolk.

The Council’s second high quality House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) was completed in June 2021, the property provides a home for some of the most vulnerable residents within the district and is supported by funding from the MHCLG Next Steps Accommodation Programme.

2 Current position

2.1 Following recruitment in March 2020 and a further Officer appointment in May 2021, the team is growing its capability and the development programme is building momentum.

The impact of social distancing and site closures in 2020 resulted in some delays to the housing delivery programme. Access to materials and on-going social distancing is still a risk to the programme however projections show Council led housing delivery is increasing and will continue to do so subject to the availability of land and funding.

The projected number of units delivered in this financial year (2021/22) is 24, 100% of these are affordable homes. This increases to 66 in 2022/23 with 68% of these units already having planning permission or positive Pre-Application feedback. In 2023/24 this increases further to 86 units with 47 of these being a direct provision for the HRA portfolio.

Year	Target	No. units	Affordable provision	New Build S106 purchase or ESC delivered	Redevelopment Refurbishment / conversions of existing assets or acquisitions.	Percentage Certainty Planning permission obtained
2016/17	50+	11	11	9	2	100%
2017/18	50+	5	5	5	0	100%
2018/19	50+	33	33	24	9	100%
2019/20	50+	38	38	36	2	100%
2020/21	50+	12	12	9	3	100%
2021/22	50+	24	24	10	14	100%
2022/23	50+	66	44	64	2	68% 42 - Planning approval 3 - Positive Pre App
2023/24	50+	86	47	81	5	48% 31 - Planning approval 10 Positive Pre App

	<p>In order to secure development sites to feed this pipeline the council has embarked on a number of 'mixed tenure' sites. This approach allows the proceeds from a small number of open market sale units to cross subsidise and facilitate the delivery of affordable dwellings at a higher ratio than is required by Planning Policy. Projections for 2022/23 and 2023/24 show the number of affordable units due to be delivered reaching 44 and 47 respectively.</p>
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3 How to address current situation

3.1	<p>Good progress has been made with the Housing Development Programme recently, with target projections for 2022/23 and 2023/24 far exceeding the 50+ target. Whilst the current projections demonstrate the Council is on target to meet and exceed development targets, there are a number of challenges the programme is facing, <i>and will continue to face</i>, in achieving and sustaining the 50+ units a year as outlined within the Councils strategy documents.</p>
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Land

Currently the programme targets opportunities on Council owned land / property with some acquisitions adding to the development portfolio. As HRA and GF land is developed these opportunities are becoming less viable as the less challenging sites have been developed first. Many of the remaining land assets are more difficult to progress with restrictions such as covenants, 3rd party ownership or environmental challenges such as risk of flooding. These sites are still being considered and progressed, however, by their nature will take longer and potentially less beneficial to the Council.

The benefit of using Council owned land is the land value is essentially removed from the development appraisal meaning the cost of the development is the only consideration for the HRA. With the reduction in Council owned land opportunities, the team will be required to purchase land on the open market to continue with the programme at its current level. This is likely to result in an increase in budget required to deliver the same number of units. Other potential challenges of purchasing land on the open market include the Council's ability to move at a pace which is competitive and subsequently delivering schemes which meet our strategic objectives.

Funding

The HRA has a number of competing priorities, all of which have an associated budget. Whilst the HRA portfolio has been maintained to a good standard over the years the drive for carbon neutrality adds a significant strain to the existing maintenance programme. Much of the work required to decarbonise the existing HRA stock goes beyond the planned maintenance which has traditionally been done to ensure the homes are in a good condition and comfortable to live in. These interventions will give the properties a longer life span, reduce running cost for tenants and most importantly reduce the properties reliance on non-renewable sources of energy. Whilst this work is extremely beneficial for the longer-term sustainability of the HRA portfolio it will not generate additional affordable homes. The cost of these works can, at times, be significant and this

	<p>will need to be considered when reviewing budget priorities.</p> <p>Capacity and Capability</p> <p>To maintain the programme at its current level, just short of the affordable target, Cabinet may wish to consider delivering commercially competitive schemes on open market land opportunities. This will require more in-house expertise and further Development Officer resource to project manage the increased level of speculative work required.</p>
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4 Reason/s for recommendation	
4.1	<p>The Scrutiny Committee asked that an update be provided to the Committee in one year (16th September 2021) to review overall progress of the Housing Development Programme and, if necessary, the implications of staffing resources on the attainment of the ambition.</p> <p>The report requests Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, to make any further recommendations to Cabinet as required.</p>

Appendices

Appendices:

n/a

Background reference papers:

Date	Type	Available From
24 th September 2020	ES/0504 - Housing Development Strategy Report to Scrutiny	

Response to Members Questions: Housing Development Programme Update

16 September 2021

Q1: Is East Suffolk achieving the target of building 50 new Council properties per annum?

(a) The LGA has called for 100,000 new social homes a year which would mean 400 in East Suffolk. ([100,000 social homes a year needed as part of COVID-19 recovery - councils warn | Local Government Association](#)). How many have we built this year and what is our target for 2021/2022? (Cllr Beavan)

The LGA article seems to use 'affordable' and 'social' in the same context. This question has therefore been interpreted as asking how many new social homes have been built in East Suffolk in 21/22 and what is the target for the year. Given we are only halfway through the year, the response is that 17 social homes were built and a further 3 homes were added to the HRA through acquisition by East Suffolk led developments in 21/22.

Throughout the district a total of 83 social homes across six sites have been built to date in 21/22 and the target for the year (21/22) is 250 as noted within the East Suffolk Housing Strategy. This response also makes reference to the Council's recently published (early August) Housing Action Plan. [2021 -East-Suffolk-Housing-Action-Plan.pdf \(eastsuffolk.gov.uk\)](#) . Page 47 has a table that documents progress in delivering the ES housing programme and also pages 69 and 70. The 'Actions' pages 79 to 83 at the back of the document includes specific actions to increase and speed up housing delivery generally.

Total AH completions 2020/21 is 132 dwellings

(b) How might the creation of a LATCO have an impact on the purchase of or construction of local authority housing? (Cllr Gooch)

When the LATCo develops sites with a required affordable contribution, it is anticipated that these properties will be acquired by ESC via its Housing Revenue Account and will become part of the Council's housing stock.

(c) The local plans etc. obviously help with the targeting of locations, but are there any other brownfield sites that could be zoned for development? (Cllr Gooch)

The Council is required to maintain a brownfield register that is reviewed annually. This includes all previously developed land considered suitable, available and achievable for residential development. [Brownfield land register » East Suffolk Council](#)

The register comprises:

- Brownfield sites that have been granted planning permission and are either under construction or not started
- Brownfield sites that are allocated in adopted Local Plans or made Neighbourhood Plans
- Brownfield sites identified in the Strategic Housing and Economic Housing Land Availability Assessments that have been assessed as being suitable, available and achievable for housing. It should be noted that inclusion of a site on the register does not imply that planning permission would be granted for residential use. Any planning application would be considered in relation to relevant planning policies and other material considerations.

So, the register provides a basis for considering other sites that currently aren't in the Local Plans or have the benefit of planning permission that may could be appropriate for affordable housing.

(d) Is there enough involvement from town and parish councils in the housing development plans? (Cllr Gooch)

More involvement will always be welcomed, whether it be to advise on an identified local need or to suggest local sites that could be developed for affordable housing.

(e) Is it always the case that a concentration of house-building creates economies of scale in cost? (Cllr Gooch)

Usually, yes. Developing a number of properties on one site will almost certainly involve lower planning and survey fee costs in the pre contract stages, and significantly lower mobilisation and infrastructure investment within construction than developing the same number of properties across a number of sites.

(f) Accepting that it is more economic to build social homes where land is cheaper, i.e., in Lowestoft and Felixstowe, is it socially acceptable that our social home owners will be concentrated in these towns and unable to live elsewhere in our District. Can we defray some of the extra land costs by increasing the social rent in high value areas? (Cllr Beavan)

The presumption behind this question is not necessarily the case. Much of the land in Lowestoft is challenging brownfield land and may involve significant remediation costs that might not be incurred on green field site developments elsewhere in the District. The other unavoidable fact is that the bulk of the Council's developable land is in either Lowestoft or Felixstowe, so developing in these locations does not involve the cost of buying the land. That said, the ESC development programme has a number of sites within ES market towns and more rural areas. Currently - 7 sites out of 12 new builds are NOT in Lowestoft or Felixstowe.

Q2: Types of new Council properties

(g) Is the Council intending to buy any more properties to convert into an HMO as was very successful at 141 St. Peters Road, Lowestoft? (Cllr Coulam)

In short, yes. Where housing need data confirms a specific client group that would benefit from a shared accommodation model, this type of accommodation will be provided. Often, there is an element of support required for these schemes to operate successfully as we have seen in our two Council owned HMO's to date.

(h) Does the Council intend to build any more disabled properties in the foreseeable future? (Cllr Coulam)

Looking at the housing needs data we have, the highest demand is for 2 bed accommodation therefore this has to be our initial driver to ensure we provide as many homes as possible to those in the most need. Where sites can successfully accommodate disabled properties, we are actively pursuing this as demonstrated with the 3 fully accessible wheelchair units being provided at Deben. In addition, we are identifying properties which can be adapted and extended within our current stock to ensure best use of existing assets. A 'flagged' property has recently become void and before being relet it will be extended to provide a ground floor accessible home.

(i) Mention is made of analysis of applicant needs; are we considering constructing or purchasing properties that allow multi-generational occupancy (eg having properties with 'granny annexes' etc) or creating single person communities (eg individual single person occupied dwellings in a communal complex) in a bid to address loneliness and isolation (Cllrs Gooch & Topping)

Developing or acquiring multi-generational properties has not been a priority to date, but we are in the process of developing an older persons' housing strategy which will look more closely at this type of approach. The Council has not created single person communities for the purpose of addressing loneliness and isolation. However, the Council has acquired and converted several properties each of which have then provided a number of units of single person accommodation. 560 London Road and 141 St Peter's Road are two examples. The residents in these properties have then formed small communities which has helped avoid issues of isolation.



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16 September 2021

Subject	Empty Homes Update
Report by	Richard Kerry
Supporting Officer	Teresa Howarth Principal Environmental Health Officer - Housing Teresa.howarth@eastsoffolk.gov.uk 07990848926

Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
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Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not applicable
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:

This report has been prepared in response to a request from Scrutiny Committee for an update on the issue of empty homes.

Options:

Do nothing to encourage the re-occupation of long-term empty homes, other than continue to charge the permitted Council Tax Premium.

Continue to deal with problematic long term empty homes on an ad hoc basis as resources are available.

Develop a business case to employ additional resources to tackle problematic long term empty homes.

Recommendation/s:

That Scrutiny Committee, consider this report and advise on any changes it may recommend to the current approach to tackling long term empty properties.

Corporate Impact Assessment

Governance:

The Council is the Strategic Housing Authority for East Suffolk. One housing challenge within the district is that presented by long term empty homes. A long-term empty property is defined as a residential property that has been empty for more than two years. The challenge presented by these properties is managed within the Private Sector Housing team with oversight by the Head of Housing.

ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:

[We are East Suffolk Strategic Plan 2020-24](#)

The approach in dealing with empty homes proactively contributes towards the Council's Strategic Plan with primary and secondary priorities in 3 of the 5 key theme areas including Growing our Economy, Enabling our Communities and Caring for the Environment.

[East Suffolk Housing Strategy 2017-23](#)

Empty homes are a wasted resource at a time of housing crisis and can cause blight on neighbourhoods: attracting anti-social behaviour, vandalism and fly-tipping.

Each year the councils review all those properties that are identified by Council Tax data as having been empty for more than 6 months. We will continue to prioritise within the list of long term empty properties so that the service focuses on those where re-occupation would bring most benefit in housing and community terms.

[Private Sector Housing Strategy](#)

"There is recognition of the value of bringing an empty home back into the housing stock when compared to building a new house. During the life of this strategy a case will be made,

along with other housing priorities, to bring in more resources to address the empty home problem, which at a time of housing shortage is not acceptable.

The solutions need to be tailored to each case and owner. They often require an empathetic approach and time to explore all options and present comprehensive arguments. Owners who have left properties vacant for years do not tend to be swayed by one letter or telephone call! Options considered may include encouraged or forced sale, private sector leasing, renovation plans and compulsory purchase."

The Council's Acquisitions policy sets out the principle of when a property may be purchased and this includes, on occasions an empty home:

"The Council will on occasions seek to purchase a property, either to meet a need or take an opportunity that assists us meeting a wider strategic objective. The Council may seek to purchase units where there is a wish to extend its housing stock to meet the demand for affordable housing within the district. When the financial opportunity permits, the Council will seek properties that meet our stated criteria (which is reviewed annually). Acquisitions will only take place when funding is identified during the year and they meet a strategic desire to increase our council housing stock or a critical operational objective. It is not expected that any acquisition will take place that does not meet these requirements."

Environmental:

Empty homes represent a wasted resource. Where there are opportunities to renovate and return to use, the end result will be a modernised, more energy efficiency home utilising fewer resources than a new build. The solutions are often in the private sector, but the council can have a key role in opening up the opportunity for investment and restoration where this has stalled.

Equalities and Diversity:

ESC has declared Deprivation and Disadvantage as a 10th 'characteristic' for the purpose of assuring Equality in our District. Many of the private sector housing initiatives seek to assist those on low incomes who are suffering from poverty. There are opportunities in working to bring back into use long term empty homes (LTEH), to develop housing units offered at affordable rents, thereby supporting those on low incomes.

Some empty homes may become part of the Council's own stock and provide affordable accommodation, whilst also addressing much needed regeneration. An example of this is 87 The High Street, Lowestoft. This property was a long-term empty home and retail unit in very poor condition within the Heritage Action Zone. Having been empty for over 6 years the property was recently purchased by the Council and plans are being prepared for conversion to flats to be retained as part of our Housing Revenue Account stock to provide homes for future council tenants. Other properties (560 London Road and 87 Park Road, both in Lowestoft) have been brought into use in a similar way and yet more are now occupied via private sector leasing schemes with housing associations or private landlords as partners. Appendix A provides some more detailed examples of solutions that have been implemented.

Financial:

The Local Government Finance Act 1992, amended by the Local Government Finance Act 2012, allows Councils to charge a Council Tax Premium for homes that have been empty and substantially unfurnished for more than 2 years. Subsequent Regulations have been introduced to increase the amount of that premium such that from 1 April 2020, if a property has been empty and unfurnished for more than 5 years, then an extra 200% is payable (meaning a 300% charge) and from 1 April 2021 if a property has been empty and

unfurnished for more than 10 years, then an extra 300% is payable (meaning a 400% charge). In 2020/21 ESC issued Council Tax bills including premium charges of £622,862 related to long term empty properties.

The New Homes Bonus (NHB) was introduced in 2011 to provide an incentive for local authorities to encourage housing growth in their areas. The aim of the bonus was to provide a financial incentive to reward and encourage local authorities to help facilitate housing growth. Where housing growth occurred, each annual in-year reward was initially paid for six financial years, such that allocations built up incrementally over time. The longevity of these legacy payments was reduced when the Bonus was reformed in 2017/18. The Council uses this funding to support the delivery of community projects and initiatives.

The local government funding settlement for 2020/21 was for one year only and included payment of NHB for one year instead of four years, i.e. no legacy payments. Another one-year only round of NHB funding (year 11), was announced in the settlement, for 2021/22 so the total payments of NHB to be received in 2021/22 will be a NHB allocation for the year of £103,529, and two legacy payments in respect of years 8 and 9, and one payment in respect of year 11, amounting to £1,073,380.

Increasing the return of empty homes to occupation is an important element in the calculation of NHB. Under the current system, NHB allocations are based on growth in the number of properties between one year and the next as shown on the Council Tax CTB1 forms, and an allocation is payable over a growth threshold of 0.4%. In this calculation, bringing an empty home back into use effectively counts as the equivalent of an additional new home. Conversely, an increase in the number of empty homes compared with the previous year reduces the amount of the NHB allocation.

During the current year, the government has undertaken a consultation on the future of NHB and is looking to reform the scheme to ensure it provides an effective incentive, focused and targeted on ambitious housing delivery. The scheme intends to complement the reforms outlined in the government's Planning White Paper and dovetail with the wider financial mechanisms, including the proposed infrastructure levy and the National Home Building Fund. The Government's response to this consultation is currently awaited and the reforms are intended to be introduced in 2022/23. It is expected that bringing long term empty properties back into use will continue to be a feature of the scheme, and in its response to the Consultation, the Council responded to the relevant question regarding this as shown below:

Question 7:

Should a reformed Bonus continue to reward local authorities for long-term empty homes brought back in to use?

We consider that rewards for bringing long-term empty properties back into use should continue to be part of the system. In addition, we are of the view that the workload involved for authorities in this is greater than that for new properties being developed in the district. Consequently, we would suggest that a premium be considered in respect of Bonus for empty properties in addition to the standard per property allowance. A measure such as this would both make better use of existing housing stock and incentivise authorities in areas where new development may be more problematic or less attractive to developers.

Human Resources:

Additional staff resources and supporting budget would be required to deliver a comprehensive empty property programme.

ICT:

No issues

Legal:

There are few legal provisions that specifically relate to empty homes, but there are a number that can be applied to empty homes in the same way as to occupied housing. Legal interventions tend to be implemented when the condition of the property deteriorates to the extent that it impacts on the community. Options to act in various situations are listed below:

- Rodent infestations can be dealt with under the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 where action can be taken in an owner's default to clear land and property of pests.
- Properties that are in such a condition as to be seriously detrimental to the amenity of the neighbourhood, often badly overgrown gardens, can be dealt with under Town and Country Planning Act 1990.
- Dangerous structures can be dealt with under the Building Act 1984.
- Vandalised buildings can be boarded up to prevent unauthorised entry under Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982
- Buildings causing damage or disrepair to neighbouring ones can be dealt with under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 as a statutory nuisance.

None of these options by themselves are likely to bring a home back into use but they do enable acute issues to be tackled.

Most long-term empty homes need a change of owner to bring them back into occupation. This can sometimes be achieved by persuasion and support but sometimes needs a more forceful approach.

- Where there are debts on the property, which can arise from action under the above provisions, or Council tax debts linked to additional premiums, there are options to force sale to recover debts.
- The most complex option is Compulsory Purchase under the Housing Act 1985. Government guidance states that Compulsory Purchase Orders for housing may be justified as a last resort in situations where there appears to be no other prospect of a suitable property being brought back into residential use. When considering whether to confirm such an order the Secretary of State will normally wish to know: how long the property has been vacant; what steps the authority has taken to encourage the owner to bring it into acceptable use and the outcome; and what works have been carried out by the owner towards its reuse for housing purposes

Both of the legal options above are complex and time consuming and, whilst there are specialist law firms that can take on the challenge and deliver efficiencies, the financial and staffing resources required are significant.

Risk:

There are risks associated with both acting and not acting on empty properties. The risks of not acting include: the deterioration of the property resulting in damage and nuisance to adjoining property and deterioration over time resulting in detriment to the amenities of the local area. Both examples can result in costs to the Council.

Acting and financing the additional resources to deliver an empty homes programme on receipts from New Homes Bonus, risks proposed changes to this scheme significantly altering the funding received. If individual properties cannot be negotiated back into use quickly and compulsory purchase becomes the only option this can be time consuming and risks tying up specialist legal, enforcement and finance staff.

External Consultees: Not at this stage

Strategic Plan Priorities

Select the priorities of the Strategic Plan which are supported by this proposal: (Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)		Primary priority	Secondary priorities
T01	Growing our Economy		
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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T04	Delivering Digital Transformation		
P15	Digital by default	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P17	Effective use of data	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P18	Skills and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T05	Caring for our Environment		
P20	Lead by example	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
P22	Renewable energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P23	Protection, education and influence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
XXX	Governance		
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

How does this proposal support the priorities selected?

Ensuring there are sufficient homes for our residents and these homes are safe, secure and suitable is a key priority that sits within the priority for maximising well-being and health. Empty homes can also attract anti-social behaviour. (PO8) Empty homes are a wasted resource and can be brought back into use at a fraction of the cost and material used on new builds (P21). Renovation and reoccupation addresses supporting infrastructure (PO5), tackling what matters most to communities by addressing an eyesore and restoring a home (PO7). The opportunity to utilise external funding to deliver the proposal makes good use of the rewards available. (P13)

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1 Background facts	
1.1	There are a number of ways of defining Empty Homes. Councils report on all empty homes that are unoccupied and unfurnished, and then further defines them by the length of time they have been empty. Long-term empty homes (LTEH) are those that have been empty for more than 2 years. These homes are significant because their numbers are deducted from any net increase in housing units, when calculating the New Homes Bonus (see financial section above). Unoccupied homes that remain furnished are not part of this recording process but can also be significant and problematic.
1.2	Having a proportion of empty homes is a normal phenomenon in the housing market as they are empty for reasons such as being under renovation; for sale; or have been recently re-occupied, but the Council have not been notified by the new occupants. The numbers of empty properties fluctuate throughout the year and during the pandemic, rose to reflect the extended time matters such as probate and marketing were taking.
1.3	<p>Each LTEH has its own complex and specific reasons for being left empty. Owners tell us of ill-health, family disputes, sentimental attachment, apathy, “too hard” to dispose of, planning to renovate when they retire, they are too old to cope with doing anything or the owner is living abroad or occasionally can’t be traced. The longer the situation has remained, the more difficult owners are to engage with and persuade to act and the costs of remediation rise.</p> <p>A whole variety of incentivised tools have been developed by East Suffolk to support owners in these situations, from private sector leasing schemes, discounted auction fees and renovation grants, all of which have been successful in resolving some cases but, the remaining LTEHs are very challenging and require significant resources to resolve.</p>
1.4	There is no statutory requirement on Councils to deal with empty homes and only if their condition impacts significantly on the community or neighbours (rodent infestation, squatters, antisocial behaviour, dangerous structures) can any action be taken. This means that LTEH cannot take priority over other statutory work and there is limited resource available to support the sustained action required to achieve significant results.
1.5	Appendix A includes examples of some empty homes where we have been involved and the types of situations the council has encountered.

2 Current position

2.1 East Suffolk figures for long term empty homes in 2020/21. There are approximately 117,000 homes in East Suffolk. The number of LTEH represents less than 0.25%.

<u>Empty homes 2020/21</u>	<u>Number</u>
Empty between 2 and 5 years	212
Empty between 5 and 10 years	59
Empty 10+ years	45
TOTAL	316

In the same year the **total number of homes** identified as empty across the District were 1,976. (Empty in this context, for any length of time). As explained above, most of these are empty due to normal flux in the housing market. The pandemic has led to higher numbers due to an increase in the time taken for disposal of property and re-occupation. In 2019/20 the number was approximately 1,158 LTEH in total.

2.2 Of the 316 LTEH, the majority are in council tax bands A, B and C.

Total Dwelling Numbers	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H	Totals
Empty 2 years +	64	45	49	20	16	8	9	1	212
Empty 5 years +	22	16	9	6	3	2	0	1	59
Empty 10 years +	20	12	8	3	1	0	1	0	45
Total	106	73	66	29	20	10	10	2	316

2.3 The map at appendix B shows the distribution of the 316 LTEH across East Suffolk.

2.4 The annual exercise of reviewing empty homes is about to begin. This involves an initial letter to all homes identified as empty to encourage occupiers that have moved into previously empty homes, to register their occupancy, so the homes come off the empty list and normal Council Tax charges are applied. The letter also stresses the financial implications of the Council Tax Premium and details support available to bring homes back into use. No resources have been identified this year to follow up beyond this point to carry out visits, calls and trace owners.

3 How to address current situation

3.1 There is potential to utilise receipts from New Homes Bonus and/or Council Tax Premium to employ additional resources to take concerted action on LTEH. Further action will require a mix of technical administrator, housing inspection and legal skills. Properties earmarked for Compulsory Purchase could be outsourced to a specialist law firm. There are resources ear-marked in the Sizewell Accommodation Strategy to work on LTEH in the Leiston area, as a means of increasing housing supply but this will only address a small number of properties in the locality.

3.2	Any reliance on the NHB system to fund increased activity on LTEH brings a risk that the new system may not reward this type of activity or may result in reduced funding. The holistic assessment of LTEH as a wasted resource, however, brings into play other considerations that may warrant investment. The gains of dealing with LTEH are many: community eyesores removed, reduction in anti-social behaviour, adjacent buildings protected, new homes created at a fraction of the cost of new build, opportunity to add to social housing stock, publicity leading to self-generated action on other empty homes.
3.3	There are no immediate solutions to this situation, but investment in a programme of action could yield a significant reduction in numbers and address the issues listed above and create homes for local residents.

4 Reason/s for recommendation

4.1	The report enables Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, to make recommendations to Cabinet for further action to tackle empty homes, or not as the Committee considers appropriate.
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Appendices

Appendices:

Appendix A	<p>Examples of some Long-Term Empty Homes.</p> <p><u>Property A</u> – Empty for over 20 years.</p> <p>Bought by owners as a renovation investment in late 1990s.</p> <p>Personal circumstances changed and they had to move in with elderly mother to care for her – taking much time and energy. She lived until she was over 100!</p> <p>Husband then became ill and again there was a prolonged period when the house was not a priority.</p> <p>Property owners received the standard annual Council Tax letter about empty homes support, over a number of years – no engagement.</p> <p>The Council received complaints from neighbours of overgrown garden attracting vermin and the general condition of the property. Visits to site and specific letters sent.</p>
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Engagement with owners by letter and telephone calls. Keen to sell to Council, if viable as a Council house.

Option considered but not suitable. Momentum with owner maintained and persuaded to put for auction. Auctioneer took on to sell for them at reduced fee in late 2020. Realised substantially above reserve. New owners undertaking full renovation.

Before:



Now:



Properties B – Empty for over 40 years

Semi-detached properties in prominent rural location. Owned by elderly owner as part of farming estate. Extensive engagement over many years including previously with mother, who died a few years ago. Unable to convince the owners that the financial losses accruing as a result of leaving empty, outweigh the potential tax liability of renovating and renting out or selling. Renting seen as too difficult.

Interest from potential purchasers who see it as an opportunity – diminishing interest as the condition of the properties deteriorate. At one point, just one of them was put up for sale. The liability of the other one meant no sale was forthcoming

Property C – Empty for 17 years

The property near Wickham Market had been occupied, but the owner left to care for relatives in about 2004 and never returned. The Council took emergency action (Dangerous Building Notice) in 2005 to deal with structural problems with the property that required the building to be shored up!

Property remained vacant and neighbour became increasingly concerned about its condition and the detriment to his own property. The Council undertook extensive enquiries to locate owner which took many months to bear fruit. Once contact was made, he was keen to sell but matters only moved forward when the Council agreed to act for him. The Council assisted with meeting the auctioneer at the property; helping with the completion of the various forms; corresponding with the auctioneer and the solicitors; arranging for the property to be cleared before the auction and helping with the completion of the transfer of the property at the Land Registry.

The property sold well above guide price, was fully renovated and extended by the new owner and has recently been put up for sale again.

Before:



Property D – Empty for 11 years

The property in Felixstowe was a 3-bed mid terraced property. The owner purchased it in 1978 and lived in it until 2010 when it became empty. The condition of the property had been a concern since 2003 when it was considered to be ‘filthy and verminous’ and was cleared using Public Health legislation. Further enforcement work was then undertaken by the Planning Department in 2005 to clear the garden. The property was in disrepair, but the owner wouldn’t engage and had considerable health concerns.

Complaints were received in 2010, but owners whereabouts unknown. In late 2011 the Police managed to obtain a mobile phone number for the owner. There followed months of attempted contact with some success but no action.

Finally, a warrant to enter the property was obtained in 2012 and initial targets for clearance agreed with the owner. He again failed to deliver. Further Planning Notices were served to clear outside areas and replace windows and doors. Threats to do this work in owner’s default finally

brought him to the discussions. At every step of the way he had to be cajoled, persuaded and assisted which was a huge commitment of time.

With the help of grant aid, a 10-year lease to Orwell Housing Association, a repayment agreement for accrued debts from collected rent, the property was brought back into use at an affordable rent. The same family that took the initial tenancy still call it home.

Before:



After:



Property E – Empty for 24 years

The property in Lowestoft is a large three-bedroom property which was in a very poor state of repair, with a significantly overgrown rear garden, affecting neighbouring properties and the amenity of the area. Neighbours had complained of pests and the property had also been subject to vandalism and on occasion, reported as a potentially Dangerous Structure.

The property had been vacant since January 1995 and despite repeat contact with the executors of the previous owner occupier, on and off since 2009, no resolution had been achieved to the issues the property had created. The Private Sector Housing team took the property forward to Cabinet in April 2018 to seek consent to compulsorily purchase the

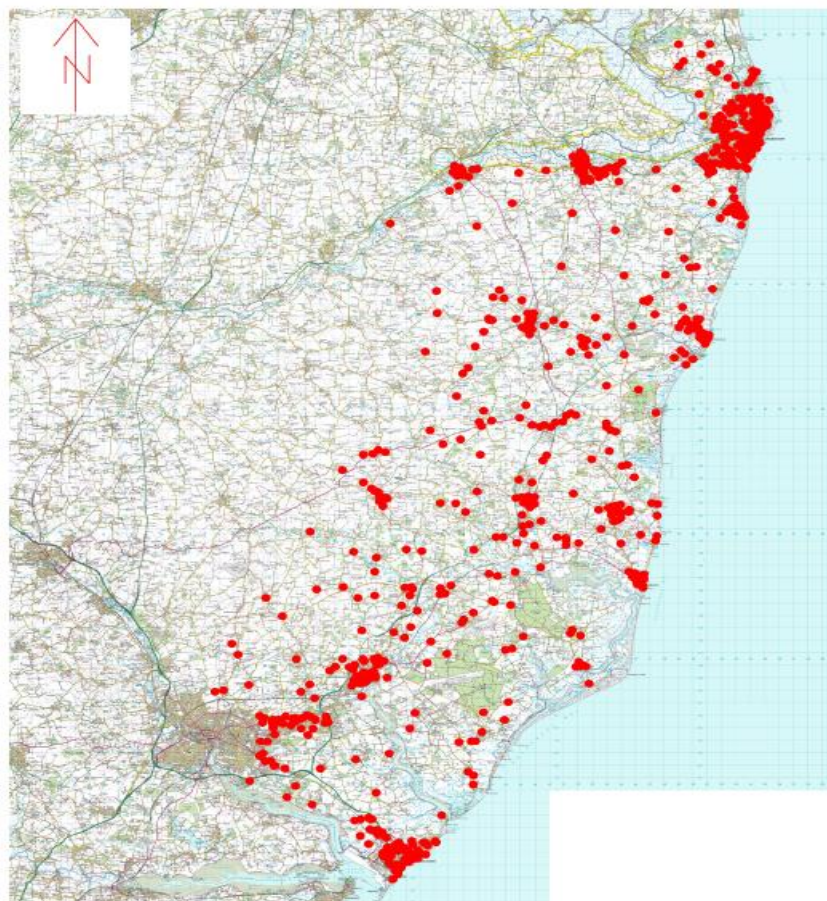
	<p>property, working with a law firm specialising in compulsory purchase. Permission was obtained to pursue the CPO, however once this was declared to the executors, they appointed a solicitor to handle disposal of the property, at which point, the Council itself secured the purchase of the property and completed this in early January 2019.</p> <p>Following the purchase, the Council's own housing development team worked with the Council's in-house building maintenance team and managed the refurbishment of this property. Once completed, the property was let to a local family, in desperate need of a four-bedroom home.</p> <p>Before and after photos front elevation</p>  <p>Before and after photos rear elevation</p> 
<p>Appendix B</p>	<p>Map Showing distribution of 316 Long-Term Empty Homes (empty for more than 2 years) across East Suffolk (August 2021)</p>

East Suffolk Council

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Scale 1:300000

Empty Homes East Suffolk



Background reference papers: None

Response to Members Questions: Update on Empty Homes

16 September 2021

Cllr Topping

1. How many long term voids do we have empty and how long has the longest void stood empty and why?

11 long term voids the longest being just over 8 years. This longest case is a flat in a development that is being reviewed for redevelopment or sale. All these are vacant due to either major structural works or improvements planned such as conversion of a bedsit to a 1 bed flat or impending disposal. The length of vacancy has been impacted by project delays due to covid.

2. Do we have enough tradespeople and staff for getting voids repaired and back in occupation quickly? If not, what skill gaps do we have?

We have struggled to recruit general builders who can plaster/do brickwork etc. We still have 3 vacancies for these. We also have had vacancies for carpenters that we have now managed to fill after two rounds of trying to recruit. We also have had constraints on the numbers allowed in void properties due to COVID which has restricted numbers inside voids which in turn has prevented works being completed. We are going to review this as with everyone being double jabbed and working socially distancing the risk of losing staff should be reduced if there were a case of COVID

3. How many 5 and 10 year plus empty properties do we have in ES and can we have a 3 year picture to show what has happened over that time?

<u>Empty homes</u>	<u>2016/17</u>	<u>2017/18</u>	<u>2018/19</u>	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2020/21</u>	<u>Aug-21</u>
Empty between 2 and 5 years	352*	343*	355*	253	247	199
Empty between 5 and 10 years				66	73	60
Empty 10+ years				*	38	46
TOTAL	352	343	355	319	358	305

* Breakdown not available for the years, only recorded after changes to bring in Council tax Premium at different levels for different vacancy lengths.

As can be seen from this table the numbers show a slight downward trend, apart from the pandemic year when so many housing projects halted. The rate at which properties are re-occupied is small and new properties are added each year meaning the problem is still a long way from being solved. The team has knowledge of a large number of properties, particularly those in the old Suffolk Coastal area, that have been empty for more than 5 years and an understanding of what the barriers are to reoccupation.

4. With reference to the “Legal” Section of the report, why has the Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) not been mentioned? Requisitioning of empty properties in wartime. The Housing Act 2004 allows local authorities to take out an EDMO to ensure empty property is used for housing. How many EDMO’s has WDC (formerly) and ES now taken out? If we have not used this option, why not?

The Housing Act does indeed allow for the, making of EDMOs, whereby the Council effectively takes over the property and can act as if they owned it, arranging works and reoccupation. However, the process is complex, requires a social housing partner to manage the property which, with an initial interim phase of only 12 months is difficult to secure as there is no long term certainty. There is also a requirement to work with the owner and the need for sign off by the Residential Property Tribunal. No EDMOs have been made in East Suffolk, the former authorities nor in the rest of Suffolk. Other options have always proved more compelling, however, EDMOs should have appeared in the report as an option.

5. How much funding do we get for bringing a previously uninhabited dwelling back into use as compared to how much NHB we get?

The only funding we get for bringing an empty home back into use is if there is a net increase in new homes. This is not a calculation that is easy to bring down to an individual property level. If Council Tax Premium is being charged on a Long Term Empty Property then once re-occupied the Council tax will return to normal rate, so up to 3 times less income.

6. With reference to the below EADT article on 17th April, how many dwellings in ES have become uninhabitable over the last 5 years and can we have a year on year picture to see how this has come about and compare.

EADT Article:

“East Suffolk has the largest number of empty homes for 2020 with 1,401, and when combined with the number of second homes (4,111) one in every 22 homes is without a permanent resident.

Long term empty and 2nd homes

2019	2020	%change	homes not in use
1126	1401	24	5512

Source Ministry of Housing Community and Local Government.

A spokesperson for **East Suffolk Council** said: "Empty properties can have an impact on local communities, attracting anti-social behaviour and raising concerns about neighbouring property values.

"Our Private Sector Housing Strategy sets out the importance of dealing with empty properties within the district and identifies several initiatives to help bring these properties back into use. This includes the offer of Discretionary Renovation Grants, support from our officers to put owners in touch with estate agents and auction houses, or, in the very worst scenarios, using legal powers to ensure properties are brought back into occupation.

"Whilst the total number of properties empty for more than six months has risen by 24%, this will include a large number of properties which are empty for a justifiable reason, such as renovation or family bereavement. Due to this, the council's Private Sector Housing team more actively focuses on those properties which have been empty for more than two years and are generally more problematic.

"Anyone who is aware of an empty property, particularly one which affects their local neighbourhood, is asked to contact the council's Private Sector Housing team."

The figures in this article include all the houses in "flux", in the housing market and empty whilst they are sold and renovated, and also all second homes. In the year quoted the figures were particularly high due to the impact of the pandemic - 1401. The current comparable figure is 1173, down by 228.

The table included in the response to question 3 above shows the fluctuation in long term empty homes. Not all long-term empty homes are uninhabitable some are just abandoned but, over time, their neglect leads to disrepair.

Cllr Gooch

7. Do we use some kind of flow-diagram or chart to triage appropriate actions when properties become known to us?

Unfortunately, for the reasons detailed in the report, there is no active review of properties when we become aware they have been empty for a prolonged period, and therefore no triaging, as we do not have the resource to deal with them proactively. Our actions are likely to be limited to the annual letter detailing the help available, but leaving owners to respond. Our interventions are usually prompted by contact from an owner, or an issue impacting on neighbours that creates another priority. The example cases in Appendix A illustrate this.

8. How is the relationship between ESC and legal companies effected? Do we always use the same lawyers? Is there some kind of permanent contractual rate?

When we need to use legal companies to support compulsory purchase action the services would be procured under normal Council rules.

9. Is the communication to absent householders standardized in the form of a pack of information that gives them options?

We do have standard letters for initial contact but the uniqueness of each property we deal with means that standard approaches have been found to be ineffective. The owners are often wrestling with many other problems and standard packs of information are ignored, which is why resolution so often needs persistent and prolonged input to engage and build up trust, usually on a face-to-face basis. Once a single member of staff becomes the trusted individual, action follows. It is not a rational or logical decision to leave a valuable asset empty and it follows that many of those who own such properties have problems in approaching the solution, in that manner. Hence there is an added layer of complexity that must be dealt with and this requires significant time.

10. Do we use some kind of mediation service when the problem rests with disputes between parties?

This could be suggested but beyond our remit

11. How are budgets allocated for officer training and time? Is this decided on an annual basis?

All staff training is planned and agreed in line with HR policy with budget proposals for each year agreed in advance.

12. What specific actions are we able to take if the owner is residing in a care or nursing home because of diminished capacity and when there might be no power of attorney?

This is not a situation we have come up against. It is likely their home would not be classed as a long-term empty home as it would be furnished.

13. Has good practice in dealing with these cases been sought from other local authorities? Do we know how we compare with other similar profile LAs?

Yes, we are members of the Empty Homes Network where best practise is shared. We are particularly proud of the work we have done to partner with an auction house who provide extra support and discounted fees for empty homeowners who chose to use them, making the actual sale process so much simpler. The Council has officers with experience of successfully delivering empty homes programmes, but they are currently employed on other roles. Those authorities with dedicated empty homes officers achieve more than those without, for the reasons stated in the report.

14. Is any new national legislation on the cards?

No

