

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Department of the Chief Executive

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POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WEDNESDAY, 10TH OCTOBER, 2018

Please find enclosed a copy of the questions from members of the public and the responses given at the meeting of the Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 10th October, 2018.

Agenda Item

No

3. Questions from Members of the Public

Fiona Abbott
Principal Democratic Services Officer

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Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee – 10th October 2018
Public Questions

Question from Mr Webb to Leader – Cllr John Lamb

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Question 1

“A few years ago the Council was given the authority by government, after two years of a residential property being empty, to require the property owner to pay Council Tax at 50% above the normal payment required. Has the Council the authority to require the freeholders of empty shops, workshops and offices to pay 50% above the normal Business Rates? If this is not the case, has the Council made representations to Government to seek to address the situation and if not, why not? This will produce income for the government and a portion of the income will be returned to the council which could go to support services within the community.”

Answer

We do not have the authority to charge an extra 50% above standard Business Rates for a property that has been long term empty however there is already a mechanism within the Non-Domestic Regulations that allows for an Empty Rate charge to be applied once a property becomes unoccupied. If a property has a rateable Value below £51,000 then they are charged Business Rates using the Small Business Multiplier however when a property becomes unoccupied the liable party becomes subject to Empty Non-Domestic Rates and the charge is calculated using the higher Standard Multiplier. However, this is a negligible extra charge for an unoccupied property.

We currently actively deal with cases of rates avoidance where a property has been long term unoccupied and the owners will occupy on a temporary basis (42 days) in order to take advantage of the 3 or 6 month empty exemption that can be applied. Various local government sector lobbying has occurred on this issue to get government support and changes in the regulations to tackle this issue which causes a greater loss to authorities. The Council is not aware of any representations being made by the Local Government sector to the Government to enable councils to charge a premium for empty properties.

Question from Mr Webb to Cabinet Member for Public Protection – Cllr Mark Flewitt

Question 2

“In Westborough there is areas of drug dealing and anti social behaviour. This has been reported back to our ward councillors and at the Local community Meeting. The police ask residents to send in observations over 2 weeks to them as well as SMAART and Youth Offending team.

Question - What do you expect the police to deal with anti social behaviour and drug dealing when they have reports and do you think they should get back to the resident to state what is happening about the investigation (this is not happening)?”

Answer

Thank you for your question. In the first instance, we always ask residents and local Councillors to report all crime and ASB activity in order that we have record of the activity (recorded incident), and can add those reports to others we receive. By doing this, it provides Police and partners with an intelligence picture, by which we can deploy resources to, if the area becomes a hotspot. Without the reports, we don't know about it, and the opportunity for targeting the area may be lost.

If the reports increase, and the area is recognised as something of a hotspot (be it crime, drug dealing or ASB) then Police and partners will meet to discuss targeted action – working with the local community. Sometimes this involves covert Police operations, other times it may involve increasing Police high viz patrols at site, or the Council's outreach teams engaging with the young people within the hotspot zone. Action can vary dependent upon the problem.

Feedback to local residents is important. Sometimes we can't do that because of ongoing covert Police operations at the site following reports. Other times we can, and normally this would be done at the next Local Community Meeting – or directly through local Councillors.

Finally, the Council and Police have a very strong working relationship in respect of ASB, working together to share intelligence and information, and also to target resources to priority areas, based on intelligence.

Questions from Mr Grubb to Cabinet Member for Adults and Housing – Cllr Tony Cox

Questions

“When a Tenant of a residential Council Property decides to purchase their property, under the Right To Buy Scheme, if I understand correctly, part of the agreement is, If the Tenant/Purchaser then decides to sell the property at a later date. The council has to be offered the property before the property is put on the open market.

If this is correct can you please ask the following questions.

Since the Right To Buy scheme which I understand is still in force:-

Q 1 How many tenants of Freehold Properties have purchased their properties and how many tenants of Leasehold Properties have purchased their Properties?

Q 2 How many of the Freehold Properties where the purchaser has decided to sell, has the council been given the chance to buy the property and how many of the Leasehold Properties, where the purchaser has decided to sell, has the council been given the chance to buy the property?”

Answers

When a Tenant of a residential Council Property decides to purchase their property, under the Right To Buy Scheme, if the purchaser then decides to sell the property within ten years they must give the Council, as their former landlord, first refusal of purchase of the property before the property is put on the open market.

Since the introduction of the Right to Buy scheme, which I confirm is still in force, 941 tenants of Freehold properties and 619 tenants of Leasehold properties have purchased their properties.

Unfortunately we do not keep records where a purchaser contacts to offer first refusal of purchase of a property previously bought under the Right To Buy scheme.

Questions from Mrs Grubb to Cabinet Member for Adults and Housing – Cllr Tony Cox

Questions

“Since the Right to Buy Scheme came in force:-

Q 1 How many of the Freehold Properties has the council brought back?

Q 2 How many of the Leasehold Properties has the council brought back?”

Answers

I can advise that the Council have not bought back any Freehold properties however they have bought back eight Leasehold properties.