

**TITLE OF REPORT:**           **The Council's Approach to tackling problematic sites and derelict spaces**

**REPORT OF:**                 **Colin Huntington, Strategic Director, Communities and Environment**

## **Summary**

The purpose of this report is to set out the approach to dealing with vacant sites in private ownership in Gateshead.

At future meetings examples of a range of different sites and proposed solutions will be presented to demonstrate the complexity of tackling the issues associated with some sites and highlight the range of tools and powers available.

## **Background**

The Council has limited powers to deal with vacant sites in the private sector. It can serve a notice under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act if the land is untidy to the extent of affecting the amenity of adjoining residents. If the site is filthy and verminous then action can be taken under public health legislation. However, there are many empty and vacant sites which do not meet the criteria for such action but their improvement and redevelopment would be welcomed by the community and provide a valuable contribution to regeneration or meeting housing need in the area.

## **Approach**

Planning and Development Committee receive a report at each meeting which identifies the action that has been taken against such sites. Behind the scenes there has often been a considerable amount of work to get to that stage. Budget cuts and losses of external funding mean that the Council now has only one dedicated officer to deal with all vacant and problematic sites and empty properties in Gateshead. This officer has been seconded into the environmental enforcement team to ensure a multi disciplinary approach is taken to try to bring the vacant sites back into effective use, using all the powers the Council has at its disposal. In addition a working group made up of relevant officers from services across the Council has been created to focus action and co-ordinate resources to address the issues associated with these sites.

Initially this group developed a comprehensive list of significant vacant and problematic sites within the Borough and then prioritised actions for each site to ensure progress.

## **Current position**

There are currently 46 vacant and problematic sites identified. The list has been informed by using the Brownfield register, planning application data, Ward Based Issues and personal knowledge from officers on the working group. Ward Councillors have also provided information regarding sites in their wards which have been added to the list for the group to work towards resolving.

## **Case studies**

A lot of work takes place behind the scenes and because of GDPR and legal issues it will not be possible to share precise details in this forum of work in hand. As ever officers are happy to speak to members individually about any sites of concern in their wards. The following case studies should give committee an example of the type of case studies that will be presented:

**Example of success** – A property on a main shopping street was noted as a priority case by the working group due to long standing problems that this property has caused. The site was in a significant state of disrepair and potentially dangerous due to structural issues with the building. Improvements to the surrounding area also resulted in the vacant property causing significant harm to the visual amenity of the street scene in a Conservation Area.

To tackle this issue a joint Council plan was developed resulting in a Section 215 Notice being served on the owner with a legal pathway in place to demolish the building should the owner not carry out the instructions in the notice to resolve the issue in a timely manner.

**Example of ongoing work** – A site in the centre of a regeneration area is a long-term vacant site with the last owner operating an A4 class use from the premises. The site is in a prominent location and influences the Council's future regeneration of this area. Along with this, the successful redevelopment of the neighbouring site has further highlighted the problems with this vacant property.

Currently there is no interest in the site mainly as a result of the current owner's valuation of the site, with the forthcoming regeneration within the immediate vicinity it may make a proposed development more attractive and increase developer demand for the site.

## **Recommendation**

Committee are asked to:

- (i) Note the contents of the proposed approach to presenting the case studies
- (ii) Agree to receive case studies in September 2019 and March 2020 as set out in the committee work programme