

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee 12 December 2018

WFRS Activity in Addressing the Risks Associated with Derelict Buildings

Recommendation

That the Committee consider and comment on the content of this report

1.0 Key Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to highlight the local and national issues attributed to derelict/void properties and more specifically to inform the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the work being carried out locally across the Rugby District by a team formed by District Station Commander Cecil Benjamin to address this increasing issue.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 This section of the report highlights the potential local and national impacts of derelict/void buildings on communities:

Anti-Social Behaviour – These buildings can be an unwanted attraction to individuals that participate in anti-social behaviour in communities and therefore result in vandalism and destruction creating dangerous structures.

Drugs Abuse – Members of the public and emergency service personnel are regularly put at risk by the high number of used and discarded hypodermic needles as a result of drug abuse occurring within derelict and void buildings.

Sexual Exploitation – Recent national evidence has uncovered that some derelict/void buildings have been accessed and used to hide the participation of sexual exploitation of individuals.

Criminal Activity – The remote, unmonitored and unsecure locations of many derelict/void buildings provide an ideal base to hide and sometimes launch various types of criminal activity.

Environmental & Health issues/fires/chemicals/vermin – When buildings become derelict/void it is rarely, if at all, emptied of all of its contents. As a result various types of hazardous materials such as cylinders, chemicals, tyres, oils, fuel etc. are left behind causing a significant health risk to members of the public and emergency services in the event of a fire.

Community Safety – The effect on a community of unsecured derelict/void buildings that fall into disrepair can be profound. The appearance of such buildings can stifle investment and accelerate further buildings becoming empty, causing blight on the local landscape. Anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and fires can make life unpleasant for local residents and communities.

Fatalities – Every year across the country there are a number of fatalities and injuries to children whose curiosity and boredom draws them to derelict/void buildings as a ‘sense of adventure’ and ‘something to do’.

Dangerous Structures – Many landlords allow derelict and void buildings to fall into a state of disrepair. This situation, coupled with the desire for intruders to start fires, tends to result in dangerous and unsafe structures increasing the possibility of serious injury or the loss of life.

Fly Tipping - Derelict/void buildings become an attraction to fly tipping due to their remote and unmonitored locations. Once one deposit of fly tipping is made it becomes an attraction for additional fly tipping, even from members of the public who would not normally participate in that activity.

Cost to Economy – Fires, falls from dangerous structures, drug abuse, and anti-social behaviour all pose a drain on the economy and public finances. This can be attributed to the cost of policing, firefighting, ambulance services, accident and emergency and ongoing NHS costs, investigations, coroner reports, local authority reports and any legal action.

- 2.2 It can be evidenced that persistent reoccurring problems will continue to occur if unchallenged by positive pro-active action by the local authority and its partners and therefore continue to increase the risk to the public, emergency services and public finances.

3.0 Actions to Date

- 3.1 The Derelict/Void Building Conference initiative was introduced as a result of a series of fires at the Old Imperial Inn public house in Oxford Street, Rugby where the structure had become so unsafe it was clear that it was only a matter of time before a serious injury, or worse a fatality, could occur due to either trespassers or children exploring the site following the fire. This also created the increased risk to emergency service personnel when responding to further incidents.

- 3.2 A number of enquiries were made around the ownership of the building and during this it was found that both WFRS and Environmental Health were both independently, and frustratingly, trying to take action about the state of the building.

It was following this that the Derelict/Void Building Conference initiative was introduced where a group of key stakeholders who have a shared responsibility (see Stakeholder List) met on a quarterly basis to resolve the District issues.

- 3.3 One of the most significant benefits since the start of the conferences is the manner in which all agencies have worked collaboratively together to resolve issues quickly.

Since the inception of this group in 2016:

- Three buildings have been demolished - Crazy Daises Nightclub, Mill Road Rugby and the Royal Imperial Public House
- Three buildings have been served a notice to demolish
- Five buildings have been served a notice to secure
- Four other buildings have been put on a monitoring list.

Before the introduction of the Conferences, WFRS, Police and Environmental Health would all work independently trying to achieve the same outcome. The Conferences have proven that, when all the stakeholders and agencies work together to put pressure on landlords and property owners, positive results can be achieved and therefore reduce or eliminate the risk of further fires and injuries and make the community safer.

- 3.4 The demolition or redevelopment of derelict/void buildings to a statutory standard or local regulation will make the following improvements to society:

- Eliminate risk of injuries or fatalities in derelict/void buildings.
- Reduce the burden on public finances allowing funds to be redirected to essential causes within the County.
- Make local communities safer.
- Increase the opportunity to support local business and the community.
- Improve the appearance of the local landscape.
- Reduce the burden on the NHS.
- Improve property prices within the area.
- Increase local and Parish Council tax receipts.
- Assist local employment with new builds and employment opportunities.
- Assist local businesses by improving the aspect attracting footfall.
- Reduce anti-social behaviour.

- 3.5 To make further long term sustainable impacts on this issue a change in legislation is required in order to devolve more powers of enforcement to deal with uncooperative landlords, further financial support to assist with compulsory demolition and improved boarding and securing of derelict/void buildings which would assist whilst action is been taken.

- 3.6 At a local level, the implementation of this project across the other districts within Warwickshire will potentially see the same benefits realised in the Rugby District.

4.0 Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

4.1 This proactive positive initiative carried out within the Rugby District by planning, organising and running the Derelict & Void Building Conferences has proven that working together, using the current limited enforcement powers, can have a positive result in reducing the risks through the demolition and redevelopment of the sites.

If all stakeholders, partner agencies and the Government work together to put further legislation and regulation in place it may have the potential to save further lives, improve communities and reduce the burden on public finances.

4.2 Moving forward WFRS now taking the following steps:

- Implementing this initiative across all five Districts within Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service to maximise the benefits.
- Exploring respective legislation on how to harness greater enforcement powers for the Fire & Rescue Service and Environmental Health.
- Adopting a joint letterhead with all key stakeholders which will add weight to respective correspondence with property owners.
- Considering inclusion of the dangers of frequenting derelict/void buildings in the WFRS schools educational program.

4.3 To date this work has been managed with existing resources.

4.4 Below is the list of the Key Stakeholders:

SC Benjamin	Station Commander Rugby District Command Team (RDCT) Chair
David Ashwell	Response Commander RDCT and Vice chair
Adam Coope	Response Commander RDCT
Joanne Liddell	Derelict Building Conference co-ordinator RDCT
Rebecca Roberts	Arson Reduction Officer
Lisa Hayes	Environmental Health Officer, Rugby Borough Council
Nick Freer	Head of Planning, Rugby Borough Council
Barry Rose	Head of Enforcement, Rugby Borough Council
Andy K Fowler	Head of Building Control Warwick District Council
Stuart Baker	Sergeant Warwickshire Police
Mayor/Cllr Mahoney	Derelict buildings of concern in constituency and is answerable to local residents.
Cllr O'Rourke	As above
Cllr Edwards	As above
Cllr Bearne	As above
Cllr Sally Bragg	As above

Background Papers

None

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

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Cllr Andy Crump
Cllr Kam Kaur
Cllr Maggie O'Rourke
Cllr Heather Timms