

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 27 July 2010

Subject: Legal and Estates Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Lesley Wagland

Item: 6(f)

Recommending:

That the report of the Legal and Estates Portfolio Holder be noted

Since the last Council meeting I have had the opportunity to spend some time getting to know some of the officers who work in my portfolio areas and finding out more about their current projects.

Information and Communications Technology

Mobile working is one of the ways to work smarter and improve efficiency across the Council. Officers in Benefits and Planning already use mobile technology and other services are keen to develop better ways of working. When I visited ICT the staff were excited about trialling live links from the Council's Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rate systems to a laptop that officers were taking to Court that afternoon to recover money owing to the Council. When officers attend Court to obtain liability orders they can be dealing with hundreds of cases and cannot possibly take all the paperwork on every case with them. The live links enabled the officers to demonstrate to the Magistrates the current balances and exact payment histories on accounts and refer directly to correspondence. This ensured that officers were able to deal robustly with any challenges or payment queries and obtain liability orders in cases that would have previously been adjourned.

Another issue where ICT have assisted in getting money into the Council is the new cash receipting and income management system. To provide greater confidence in electronic transactions a standard has been brought in called PCIDSS, which is Payment Card Industry Data Security Standards. The old system could not be amended to comply fully with these requirements and if the Council failed to put in a compliant system it could have lost the ability to accept payment by card. I am pleased to report that the new system went live earlier this month and is working well.

The final ICT issue to bring Members up to date with is the 'virtualisation' project, which involves replacing old servers with newer faster ones that are much smaller and require far less power and air conditioning. This project is currently ahead of schedule and of the 87 servers being virtualised 66 have now been completed.

Estates and Valuation

The proposed development of Langston Road Depot is being progressed on a number of fronts with emphasis on finding a solution to upgrading the traffic flows in Chigwell Lane. Further meetings are taking place between Essex Highways Authority

and the consultant jointly employed by the Council and the owners of the adjacent development site. These discussions will include defining the parameters necessary to prepare a model of traffic flows which will allow a detailed assessment of the traffic impact of the proposals. Following these discussions a meeting will be held to discuss whether it is felt that a viable scheme has been proposed that can be taken forward with the Council's Planning Department.

The Council have appointed Colliers International to provide development and valuation advice in respect of Langston Road and they are currently considering proposals in detail before advising on different options that the Council will have.

On 26 May 2010 the Council completed the purchase of the long leasehold interest in 148 Brooker Road, Waltham Abbey from the receiver. The Council already own the freehold interest and now have full vacant possession of the property which will be occupied by the Museum Service for storage and other services.

The Council currently leases 25 parking spaces from Punch Taverns the owners of the Black Lion Public House and have negotiated the purchase of the freehold interest subject to contract and Council approval. This will secure these parking spaces for the Civic offices in the future and provide a valuable return on the money invested due to the future saving in rental payments (6-7% Yield).

The Valuation & Estate Management Section has been very active in re-letting the Council's commercial properties including shops at the Broadway, industrial units and Hanger 5 at North Weald Airfield. It is seen as imperative to re-let vacant properties as soon as possible to maintain income flow.