

West Lothian rates relief change will save £1m a year

Empty commercial properties in West Lothian will have to pay rates far sooner under changes being brought in by the council in a bid to save more than £1 million a year.

West Lothian's Executive has agreed the changes which will see an end to rates relief on empty properties after six months, and in some cases three months.

The move could also bring wider benefits to communities including an improvement to well-being, said one councillor.

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick said: "It's very important that we encourage owners of empty properties to bring properties back to occupation as possible."

The current rates relief programme in the county cost West Lothian £2.278m in 20223/24.

The move was welcomed across the chamber in Livingston with both minority Labour-led administration and main opposition SNP group believing the new rules would encourage the re-let of commercial property.

Under the current scheme non-industrial Properties such as shops and offices have 50% relief for three months followed by 10% relief until occupied. Under the new scheme that will be cut to just 50% relief for three months.

For industrial industrial properties such as factories,

warehouses, workshops or stores the current set up is: 100% relief for 6 months followed by 10% relief until occupied. That will be cut to 50% relief for 3 months.

And for listed buildings, buildings in a preservation area and ancient monuments, the current scheme offers. 100% relief until occupied. That will be cut to 100% relief for 6 months.

A report to the Executive said: "As at 31 December 2024 there were 757 live Non-Domestic Rates accounts in receipt of EPR.

"There were a total of 196 non- industrial properties in receipt of EPR during 2023/24, of which 108 (55%) were reoccupied within the three months 50% relief period. The remaining 88 (45%) empty properties then moved on to 10% void relief until occupied.

"The total relief awarded in 2023/24 was approximately £161,000. There were a total of 47 industrial properties in receipt of EPR during 2023/24, the majority of which, 39 (83%) were reoccupied within the six months 100% relief period. The remaining 8 (17%) empty properties then moved on to 10% void relief until occupied."

Kenneth Ribbons, Acting head of finance said: "The proposed changes to the scheme are expected to generate recurring budget savings of approximately £1.14 million."

SNP depute group leader Councillor Pauline Stafford asked if there would be further reports on collection rates and the rate of turnover on empty properties.

Mr Ribbons said he'd be happy to provide such.

Councillor Stafford said: "We welcome the review of the scheme. It's really good to see the report. The implementation in other local authorities has not had an impact on their collection rates and it has anecdotally reduced the number of

empty properties.

“Just thinking about my own ward of Bathgate I know what a drag this had on the local economy and people’s sense of pride in the town as well as impacting on their well-being when buildings are left empty and bordered up for long periods of time. So this is very welcome.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter