REQUEST   18109

I am writing to make a request for information under the **Freedom of Information Act 2000**.
I would like to request the following information:

1. A list of all commercial properties owned by the council currently vacant in the council region along with the empty rates charges.

RESPONSE

The Council maintains that this information is exempt from disclosure for under Section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The information you have requested is exempt from disclosure under section 31(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on the grounds that disclosure of this information would prejudice the prevention and detection of crime. Disclosure of this information would involve releasing the addresses of empty properties which could make the properties more vulnerable to criminal and anti-social activities. In particular, the Council believes that disclosure of the information could have the following effects:

Disclosure would provide a ready-made list of empty properties which could be used by criminals who could target empty properties to commit property crimes and fraud.

Release of information which is not easily available at present would better enable a fraudster to persuade the council that they were the ratepayer. It would entail significant time and expense for the Council to alter its security system to protect against any potential fraud.

Disclosure of the information would make it easier for criminals to target empty properties in which waste could be dumped.

Release of information could be used to locate potential venues for illegal raves, construction of cannabis farms or other associated crimes such as criminal damage in accessing the property, further drug offences and public order offences.

A list of empty properties could be used by urban explorers to locate new properties to explore and could lead to an increase in crimes associated with urban exploring such as criminal damage to gain entry

Disclosure of a list of empty properties may lead to an increase in crimes such as criminal damage, arson and anti-social behaviour, which are often associated with squatting.

There is a real and significant risk that fraud would be made easier by the release of this information and that the provision of a readymade list of empty properties makes it easier for criminals to identify targets for the crimes listed above. Therefore, disclosure would be likely to prejudice the prevention of crime.

This is a qualified exemption and requires a public interest test to consider whether the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in the disclosure of the information.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosing the information
Openness and transparency in relation to procedures and decision making of public authorities and collection of taxes and management of finances

Public interest arguments in favour of maintaining the exemption
The release of this information would make it much easier for a fraudster to pose as an account holder and bypass the Council's security systems.

Disclosure would also facilitate a fraudster posing as the Council to obtain confidential information from a ratepayer.

Fraud is a real and current problem and the consequences to the Council of a loss of a significant sum of public money are serious.

Urban exploring and illegal raves are a current problem in Greater Manchester and disclosure could contribute to this problem.

Disclosure may lead to an increase in other property crimes such as criminal damage, arson and anti-social behaviour. Tackling issues like these would involve significant public expense and it is in the public interest to protect property and to ensure that public resources are used efficiently.

There is also a compelling public interest in avoiding personal distress to the direct victims of the crime and to those in the wider neighbourhood who may be affected.

On balance, the Council believes that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.