

COUNCIL – 21 JULY 2021

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley -

'I am fully aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused major financial problems for Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL), but why was careful financial monitoring not carried out to highlight problems earlier and will there be strict monitoring with any new contract, when the present one expires in 2023?'

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry)

SLL's performance against the leisure contract is monitored rigorously. Throughout the contract period officers have maintained a monthly liaison meeting with SLL to review their financial and operational performance, including a review of monthly profit and loss accounts. At these meetings operational issues are highlighted and any remedial action is agreed. Since becoming Portfolio Holder I have also chaired a quarterly Partnership Board meeting to maintain strategic oversight of the leisure contract and to consider innovation and new leisure propositions, through an Innovation Group, which the Council also established post an external review of SLL's performance to drive new opportunities through its leisure assets.

It is thanks to these mechanisms that the Council already had in place that officers were able to identify with SLL, very early on in the pandemic in March 2020, the financial impact that Covid-19 the first national lockdown would have on their business.

Since the pandemic began officers have also held a monthly strategic meeting at Director level to ensure the right mitigation measures are in place for contract to succeed. SLL have adopted an open book accounting approach with the Council to allow for sufficient scrutiny to take place. With the aforementioned in mind I would state that because of SBC's proactive contract management the leisure contract is currently in a far stronger position than it would have been, with no additional financial support from the Council having been provided to SLL to date. The Executive has maintained pro-active oversight of this situation over the past year having considered 2 reports on this issue.

You will also recall that SLL successfully bid into the Cultural Recovery Fund in two concurrent rounds and received £708,281. The Council then successfully bid into the Leisure Recovery Fund for £282,000 towards SLL's losses. Other councils were unfortunately not so successful. This has helped to mitigate some of the financial losses SLL have incurred, but by no means all of them. It is due to such a proactive approach between the Council and SLL that SBC has not had to close leisure facilities as some councils have because operators have gone bust. Through my role on the Local Government Association's

Culture, Tourism & Sport Board, I can assure you that the situation nationally is concerning, and the outlook for the sector is still uncertain.

I would very much hope that the Council maintains such an effective and proactive approach to managing leisure delivery arrangements in any future contracts beyond 2023.

(B) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC -

'Do you believe the Council has done enough to move towards paperless working?'

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

The Council is committed to reducing the use of paper – which supports both its financial security objective and its climate change ambition. The overwhelming majority of internal Council business and communication is digital – for example via e-mail and the intranet, as well as a range of technology solutions. All of SBC's key internal processes (e.g. via HR, Facilities, ICT) can be accessed via phone/e-mail, or web portals such as the MyView portal. As part of its Workforce Strategy, the Council has set a commitment to move to new and more efficient ways of working. This includes reducing the amount of paper printed by staff and Members, but also recognising the need to make sure the right tools and technology are in place to support them. This year the Council has confirmed its offer for staff working from home and is rolling out laptops to those staff identified as remote workers. The ICT Team has issued over 250 Laptops in the past year. All remote workers are able to access a second screen to make viewing/working on documents digitally easier. The ICT Team has also removed 4 printers from Daneshill House and has set a target to reduce usage to 50% of the 2019/20 volume. The Council used 400,000 less sheets of paper over the period. The aim will be to sustain this through behaviour change campaigns, and the provision of digital alternatives. Steps are also being taken to scan and store paper documents digitally as the Council reconsiders the use of its office space.

From a customer perspective, there are very few customer processes that still require application on paper. These include applications for a garage, and setting up a direct debit, but there are projects underway to provide digital solutions. The Lettings process has moved from a paper-based to a digital system in the past year. The Council is also encouraging residents to use digital versions where they can, including for example the online benefits application process. The majority of planning applications are now submitted online. SBC has also, through implementation of a new waste system and digital processes, reduced the reliance on paper for SDS staff. The Council knows there is more work to do to reduce its reliance on post in order to communicate with residents. The aim is to invest in new technology which will improve the ability to do send out e-mail communications to people who sign up via the Digital Platform (my account). The options for issuing digital newsletters will also be investigated as part of our Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme.

The Council is at the early stages of supporting Members to access committee papers digitally, which is one of the key enablers for reducing the need for an internal print room, and part of SBC's 2021/22 financial security plan. A platform (ModGov) is in place and is available to Members to download as an app onto their Council laptop. Members will be contacted individually in due course to arrange this. All Members have been offered an SBC laptop and 17 of 39 Members have taken this up. Officers will continue to encourage and support Members and will be rolling out additional training and support from August in order to ensure that Members are well supported to use digital papers. The Council Chamber has been refitted with additional plug sockets to ensure that Members can use laptops during committee meetings. Any Members who wish to opt out of papers now can contact Constitutional Services.

(C) Question from Councillor Nicholas Leech -

'How would you describe your record on delivering more electric car charging devices?'

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

As you know, SBC tends to target locations for new Electric Vehicle parking schemes where parking provision is most scarce. With this in mind the Council has elected to site them in what is known as "Destination Charging" locations, such as town centre parking zones, and such like - a theme advocated by the Herts County Council's Head of Highways Strategy and Implementation.

Earlier this year, Stevenage Borough Council published its Annual Review of our 'Future Town - Future Transport' policy. The review concluded that a number of proposed schemes were outside the control of the Council and required funding from numerous sources, including Herts County Council.

On June 15th this year, Herts County Council presented an Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Strategy to the Highways and Transport Cabinet. An appendix to that report illustrated the extent of Electric Vehicle Charging Points (EVCPs) across the ten boroughs within the county whereupon Stevenage Borough Council is fairly typical of other authorities, especially toward the north of the county.

Herts County Council's draft strategy expresses a preference for EVCPs to be sited off-street in car parks and dedicated charging bays.

Herts County Council is now proposing to amend its parking agency agreements with the ten district councils to install EVCPs on its highway network - or licence others to do so. It should be noted that discussions are ongoing and that no such delegation has yet been made.

With regard to Stevenage Borough Council, I can inform that of the EVCPs deployed around the town most have twin sockets allowing two cars to be charged at the same time.

Two more units are currently in the process of being installed on-street in Marshgate. It is the Council's ambition to double the number of EVCPs in its car parks and to introduce chargers to the neighbourhood centres where feasible. Discussions are currently being held with potential suppliers. Meanwhile, officers will continue to work closely with their counterparts in Herts County Council, supporting a unified county-wide strategy, as referenced in the Herts County Council document LTP4 and the Electric Vehicle Technical Report (Summer 2018).

(D) Question from Councillor Wendy Kerby -

'I would like to ask the following question with regard to the article in the Comet "Council breaks safety laws in major refurb of flat blocks" and the Council's subsequent response:

Have the Council reviewed the results of the contractor's internal investigation into this incident? What corrective action have they taken to mitigate the situation and what further action are they taking to prevent recurrence?'

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

Council officers have investigated and made recommendations regarding corrective actions and carried out a number of actions to mitigate as far as possible the prevention of a recurrence.

The Council has reviewed the contractor's internal investigation report and findings. The report concluded that an operative had failed to follow correct procedure and should have stopped work at the point of seeing the asbestos warning stickers.

In mitigation of the situation itself, the contractor sealed off the area immediately upon them becoming aware of the incident and bought in their licenced asbestos removal contractor to remove the asbestos under controlled conditions. Officers have inspected the other storage cupboards in the neighbouring flats to ensure this was an isolated incident. These inspections confirmed that this was the only storage cupboard that contained asbestos.

The Council's Corporate Health and Safety Manager has undertaken an audit of the Council's management of asbestos for the Flat Block refurbishment project. The audit investigated both the Council's and contractor's compliance with the asbestos regulations and SBC's own asbestos procedures.

Following the audit, the Council's Corporate Health and Safety Manager was satisfied that the Council was fulfilling these requirements and, whilst there were improvements identified, these were not as a result of a material breach of the asbestos regulations. However, they were highlighted to support the drive for continuing improvements.

As part of these improvements the Council has taken the following actions:

- 1) *Written to its contractors setting out the requirements of the legislation they and the Council are required to comply with.*
- 2) *Officers are reviewing all the asbestos surveys carried out in preparation for works to identify any work areas which may have been omitted from the surveys to ensure they are surveyed before works begin.*
- 3) *Council staff are carrying out site inspections with the contractor's staff before works commence at each block to ensure all work areas have been identified by the asbestos survey.*

The Council has published an open letter on its website which responds to the concerns which have been raised and a link to this is included below.

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/news-and-events/news/flat-blocks-refurbishment>

(E) Question from Councillor Graham Lawrence CC -

'Is the Council's support for thousands of new flats in Stevenage appropriate and realistic for the Post-COVID world?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Across the country, there is a growing shortage of housing, and Stevenage is no different. The Local Plan process identified SBC's housing target. This is required by all Councils, in accordance with the policy of the national Conservative government. Locally, the Council has sought to deliver those homes as effectively as possible, and to the highest standard. To grow sustainably, the Council must ensure that it has a diverse housing offer, and this is reflected through family-orientated housing on edge-of-town and infill locations through the work of SBC's Planning Team, higher-density living in central areas through the Council's regeneration programme, the direct provision of new social and affordable homes (one of the few councils in the region doing so), and unprecedented investment in the Council's existing housing stock.

As part of this mix of housing, flats will continue to play an important role – boosting footfall in the Borough's urban centres to support existing businesses and attract new ones, and providing attractive places for people to live with high-quality public spaces, good connections and well-designed homes and amenities, such as roof terraces. It is the Council's continued focus on regeneration and high-quality homes that has attracted significant investment for the town, and Members are proud of the Council's efforts to provide high-quality homes for as many people as possible, despite the challenges the last 18 months have given everyone. SBC's regeneration programme is about creating a vibrant town – with places to enjoy, leisure facilities, outdoor spaces, places to work as well as new homes. The pandemic has certainly highlighted the importance of having access to high-quality outside spaces and well planned developments, and through the hard work of our development and street scene colleagues, the Council continues to provide a wide range of spaces for people to enjoy safely.

(F) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson –

‘Do you believe the current relationship between the Council and staff trade unions is appropriate and in the tax payers’ best interest?’

Answer (Cllr Sharon Taylor / Mrs Joan Lloyd):

At a national level in Local Government, trade unions are recognised and involved in directing employee related policy and terms and conditions. Locally, the Council has a trade union recognition agreement with 2 recognised Trade Unions - Unison and Unite. Any amendments to locally agreed employee terms and conditions are negotiated collectively with representatives of these unions in line with this agreement, as is standard in the public sector. Trade Union officials play a role in supporting SBC’s employees in a number of ways, such as reviewing new policy documents when they are created, supporting existing employees through restructure or employee relations related issues and supporting the job evaluation process. Locally, the Trade Unions have worked actively to support workplace learning schemes for colleagues across the Council in improving literacy and numeracy skills.

The Chief Executive and Directors meet with the Trade Unions on a monthly basis to review any ongoing concerns or matters that either side wishes to raise. Should officers be unable to resolve any issues through these meetings, then trade union colleagues can ask for a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) to be convened with elected Members. In the last 5 years, only 1 JCC meeting has been requested.

(G) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness –

‘What is the Council doing to maintain our town’s cherished woodlands?’

Answer (Cllr John Gardner):

In recent years the Council has undertaken a range of activities to support the management of the Borough’s woodlands, including:

- Each year an acre of Whomerley Wood is coppiced to improve the vertical structure of that woodland and leading to habitat creation and greater biodiversity;*
- Ongoing improvements have been implemented to designate formal footpaths through Martins Wood in order to minimise the trampling and destruction of the bluebells;*
- Clearance of invasive species;*
- Felling dead trees where they become dangerous and cannot be safely retained to provide useful habitat;*
- Creation of leaky dams to Marymead Springs to temporarily hold back water;*
- Installation of owl boxes which have subsequently been used by tawny owls;*
- Engagement with volunteers and community groups to support them in the delivery of activities within the woodlands*

During 2022 the Council plans to invite local residents, community groups, schools etc to grow trees from local seeds that they find in their gardens / parks.

During winter 2022/23 the Council will deliver opportunities for anyone with a young tree to come along and plant it within one of the sites identified for a Community Woodland.

Also during 2022 officers will be developing a Tree and Woodland Strategy that will set out how the Council will protect and improve the Borough's woodlands, and how trees and woodlands can connect people to nature, help combat climate change and support biodiversity.

(H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell -

'Given that the proposed changes to Lytton Way will not take place for several years, what changes will be made to help passengers with mobility difficulties travel between the new Bus Station and the Train Station?'

Answer (Cllr Lloyd Briscoe):

Given there are a number of proposed changes being looked at on Lytton Way. The Council along with HCC as Highways Authority and the GTR as station operator are looking short, medium and long term changes to support not only disabled but also abled bodied passengers to move between the new bus station and the train station. In the very short term the lift in the railway station is being refurbished in the next few months to improve reliability and the passage experience for those needing the lift, in addition the down ramp from the SALC has been re-surfaced to improve safety. In the medium term HCC and SBC are working on improved at grade crossing with safety measures to provide an alternative to the bridge. In the longer term, through the Station Area Action Plan which we are currently consulting on, we are looking at more options for how Lytton Way operates and how pedestrians, cyclist, public transport users and motorists can better use the space.