

COUNCIL – 13 OCTOBER 2021

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley -

'In the past there used to be provision for substitute Members to attend committee meetings in the event that a Member of a Committee cannot attend. Why is this not being re-instated?'

Answer (Councillor Sharon Taylor)

The Council does not operate a formal substitution scheme; the Constitution sets out the required numbers of Councillors for each Committee and, where required by law, the number of seats allocated for each political group to ensure that political proportionality is maintained. Council appoints, at the start of each civic year, councillors ("Appointed Councillor") to sit on each of its Committees (save the Executive which is determined by the Leader of the Council).

In the event of an Appointed Councillor being unable to attend a Committee meeting Political groups can, through their group leader, nominate a Replacement Councillor to sit on an individual committee, subject to:

- (a) notice being given to Committee Services of the change in attending Councillor to the Replacement Councillor, 5 clear working days in advance (save in exceptional circumstances);*
- (b) the Replacement Councillor having completed the required training if attending at a Regulatory Committee (Planning & Development and Licensing);*
- (c) the legal requirements for the Audit and Overview and Scrutiny Committees being maintained;*
- (d) overall political proportionality being maintained.*

Following the appointment of a Replacement Councillor, it will be necessary to follow the process outlined at (a) to reinstate the Appointed Councillor to the Committee.

The Monitoring Officer will prepare a formal substitution scheme forward for consideration as part of the Constitutional Issues and Updates Report for the next Annual Council.

(B) Question from Councillor Nick Leech -

'Can you explain who owns and is responsible for the derelict oil container in Waverley Close, Roebuck ward?'

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

Council officers in the Finance and Estates Team have carried out an extensive review and have found that the oil tanker referred to (North-East of Hertford Road) is part of a larger freehold grouping comprising land at Hazlemere Road and land associated with Hertford Road.

According to the Official Register of Title (as at 30 September 2021), the proprietor of this bundle of properties is Crest Nicholson Residential PLC.

(C) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC -

'The current "line of sight" policy for trimming hedges results in hedgerows looking unfinished and messy. Will you consider reviewing this policy and start trimming Stevenage's hedgerows properly?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The Council currently undertakes a broad pruning programme in the Winter and a reduced safety 'sight-line' only prune in the Summer. Officers are planning to extend the hedge pruning programme from the Summer of 2022 following the completion of a service review. A key outcome from this review will be the engagement of additional summer seasonal staff to increase the amount of pruning that takes place during the growing season.

(D) Question from Councillor Chris Howells -

'The safety of local people should be a priority, but in the town centre pedestrians are having to dodge cyclists, e-scooters and skateboarders. They are frightening the elderly, the disabled and children. What is being done to stop this anti-social behaviour?'

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

A group has been set up which includes councillors to discuss the issues and concerns which are raised. Further to this, Council officers are awaiting Government guidance given it is not illegal for people to own an e-scooter, however they cannot be insured for use on the roads or pavements. Following related discussions at the All Member Police Priority setting meeting in September 2021, the Local Government Association was contacted for advice, and a response is awaited. With regards to monitoring the actions of cyclists and skateboarders, the police and SBC Neighbourhood Wardens patrol the town centre regularly and take the matter of public safety very seriously. The Council would urge any person that is affected by this matter to contact the police on 101 to report their concerns. SBC works closely with the police to ensure that appropriate enforcement action is taken against anyone who is causing a nuisance. The Council and police also use CCTV to help tackle ASAB and crime and ensure residents and visitors to the area feel safe.

(E) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren -

'Why is it taking so long to prepare and submit final accounts for refurbishment works to leaseholders of SBC owned flats? In many instances the work has long been completed, yet without a final and settled account, meaning that sales cannot take place.'

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The delay has largely been due to the pandemic over the last 18 months - the Government/national pandemic responses, including lock down and social distancing, have impacted the major works post-completion follow up processes as outlined below:

- *Contractors submitting block final accounts;*
- *Council Clerks of Works carrying out checks to confirm all the completed works, quality and quantity;*
- *Project Managers and external Quantity Surveying consultant assessing final accounts submitted by the contractors;*
- *Major Works Officers checking the final approved accounts to remove costs that will not be recharged to leaseholders; and*
- *Final bills and information pack preparation to be sent to leaseholders now completed.*

If it were not for the pandemic, the Council would have expected to see completion and handover by the contractors at an earlier date and the property inspections would have taken place sooner so as to allow for the sign off of works and completion of the final accounts.

As a result of these matters the Council has not been able to complete all the billing preparations and send invoices to leaseholders as originally expected.

It is appreciated that this is an important issue for leaseholders who are waiting for the detail of the costs of works, and officers are striving to get the bills dispatched as soon as possible. Officers are now finalising billing preparation for the first phase of the major works programme and will start sending these out within the next 3-4 weeks. The details sent to leaseholders will initially be in batches of approximately 25 at a time to ensure that officers can ensure any resulting enquiries can be responded to as fast as possible.

(F) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth –

'Why is it taking so long for simple queries to be dealt with by the "Your Say" system? Should not all queries from councillors be responded to within a week?'

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

The complaints policy states that councillor enquiries will be responded to within 10 working days, although officers strive to reply within 5 days and typically achieved this before the pandemic.

There has been a growth in Member enquiries this year, with around 150 member enquiries to YourSay each month since April. This is approximately double the volume of last year, and is 45% higher than the levels recorded prior to the pandemic. This was highlighted within the Quarter One Performance Report which was presented to the Executive in September 2021.

This increase in enquiries has affected some services more than others, along with their response times. Targeted actions have been identified to seek to improve performance within the available resources envelope. By way of an example within Residents & Estates, a new temporary complaints manager post has been introduced. The post holder is working with the team to catch up on their responses and assist with the often complex investigations of neighbourhood issues. They are also helping to identify any underlying issues which will improve the services provided to residents going forward. The work of the Repairs & Voids service has been more widely disrupted by changes required to work safely during the pandemic along with the rising cost of materials and their availability. Nonetheless the service has taken concerted action during Quarter 2 and reduced their overdue responses by 80%.

At the same time, responses remain robust in many parts of organisation. The Housing Lettings and Street Scene & Amenities services received a third of all Member enquiries this year, and have answered all bar one of 285 Member enquiries on time.

Addressing resident concerns remains a key priority for the Council and further steps are being considered with regards to both addressing the backlog of issues that have been raised during the pandemic and to seek to avoid matters escalating to becoming complaints in the first place.

(G) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness –

‘What is the latest update on progress to provide a permanent home for the Covid-19 Cobra snake?’

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

Derek Howarth, a renowned sculptor, is leading on the design of a lasting piece of public art incorporating the original stones to commemorate Covid Cobra in partnership with the Founder, Dawn Parnell and Junction 7 Creatives. It is expected that work will commence in January 2022 with hands-on community based workshops involving local people to give them an opportunity to input into the final design with a view to the project being completed by the summer of 2022. The final commemoration will be located close to its original beginnings on Grace Way.

(H) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC -

‘Why are opposition parties not allowed to be Chair of any Scrutiny functions?’

Answer (Councillor Sharon Taylor):

First, may I offer my thanks to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, who have completed a thorough review of the Council's approach to Scrutiny in recent months. There are a number of helpful recommendations that can further strengthen SBC's arrangements, and I look forward to seeing how this important piece of work progresses. There are a number of reviews underway and planned this year, from completing the review on the impact of Covid-19 on the local economy, reviewing the Council's local leadership on the Climate Change Emergency, through to helping inform the New Towns Heritage Centre and I am grateful for the work of Chairs and the Committees in their review activities, and for the skills that they bring to bear in their roles.

The appointment to Chairs of Committees takes place each May, through our Annual Council Meeting and is voted on by Council at that point.

(I) Question from Councillor Graham Snell -

'Why does it take so long for the Council to evict tenants who are in clear and continuing breach of their tenancy agreement when backed with reported and documented instances of repeated anti-social behaviour? Will the Council lobby the Government to grant stronger powers to local authorities to act in such situations?'

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The Council has an arrears recovery framework, which includes the arrears procedure and arrears escalation policy. This is kept under regular review. Officers work to ensure quick, prompt and fair escalation action in line with the framework, with eviction as a last resort for appropriate cases and where all other avenues have been explored.

In other cases where there are documented instances of repeated anti-social behaviour, housing officers work jointly with the community safety team to ensure that these cases are dealt with as quickly as possible, subject to due legal considerations and process.

The delays that have occurred over the last 18 months have been mainly due to external factors, such as the extension on legal notice periods from 4 weeks to 3 months, and the Government suspension on eviction action that was put in place from March 2020, and extended numerous times ending on 31 May 2021. These restrictions have been tapering off from June 2021 and this has had an impact on the level of total arrears as outlined below:

- *Since March 2020 the Council has carried out one eviction (in July 2021) with an outstanding debt of £6,476.66;*
- *There is one imminent eviction pending, which has been signed off with an outstanding debt to us of £8,796;*
- *SBC had 4 cases which officers were pursuing eviction action, but they were put on hold by the court with a total outstanding debt to the Council of £11,992.19; and*

- *SBC currently has 15 cases with arrears totalling £58,474.45 which are at the stage where officers are preparing eviction and that the income team are working through.*

Although Government suspension of legal proceedings in court was lifted and SBC has resumed taking cases to court, there are delays in obtaining hearing dates due to the courts' substantial backlogs. This clearly has had an impact on arrears recovery objectives.

(J) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson –

'Can the Leader expand on her stance towards GSK's £400 million investment in Stevenage?'

Answer (Councillor Sharon Taylor):

Members will have seen national and local press coverage in relation to GSK's intention to seek a development partner to expand the current life science campus into a leading European facility. It is the Council's understanding that they are working through a procurement process to secure a development partner, to help them to expand this thriving sector within the town.

Should this planned investment go ahead, it would provide an extraordinary opportunity for Stevenage to cement its standing as a cutting edge STEM city within the UK and beyond, reflecting the proud pioneering history of the town and breaking new ground with world-leading medical treatments.

I am deeply proud that Stevenage is home to a world-leading life science cluster and I welcome the plans, which open up opportunities for local people and businesses, and will attract investment into the local economy. This is another ringing endorsement of the Council's commitment to make Stevenage Even Better, transforming the town centre and creating opportunities. Should the planned investment go ahead, it could result in 5,000 more jobs over the next five to ten years. It is vital that these jobs benefit local people and businesses.

To get to this stage has taken substantial efforts by a number of partners including Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, alongside the significant efforts of Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst and the Stevenage Development Board. Only last year, Stevenage was listed as a High Potential Opportunity Zone by the Government's Department of International Trade, with Stevenage at the centre of the largest cluster of cell and gene therapy companies outside of the US and with Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst occupiers and other science firms having raised over £1.6bn of private investment in recent years.

This project will be coupled with SBC's continued efforts to develop even better opportunities for local people to access high quality jobs. Through the Council's successful Towns Fund bid – the joint second highest award in the country at £37.5m – funding has been secured towards a Sci-Tech centre working in conjunction with North Herts College to help provide training and learning opportunities for local people to access jobs in the thriving STEM

industries within the town. SBC is redoubling its efforts too, through the cutting edge Stevenage Works programme, with the college and Job Centre Plus, to ensure that developments within the town provide training and job opportunities for young people in sectors such as construction.

The Council has bid for funding through the Levelling Up Fund to improve travel and sustainable connections around the southern part of Gunnels Wood Road, to help create jobs and improve connections for local people.

The Council's shared commitment is to make Stevenage Even Better, working with businesses, residents, community groups and partners to help regenerate the town and create many new jobs and opportunities for local people.