

COUNCIL – 15 DECEMBER 2021

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Graham Lawrence -

'In light of this councils commitment to protect our environment and reduce climate change, together with the government's recent announcement that all new homes should be fitted with EV charging points, will it be insisting that all new developments and current approved but unbuilt schemes,

- a. Have EV charging points
- b. Exclude gas fired heating systems
- c. Have sustainable electrical energy systems

Answer (Councillor Gardner)

Planning has a crucial role to play in the management of climate change, with sustainability now at the centre of policy at Stevenage Borough Council.

It is estimated that 50 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions come from energy used to heat, cool and light buildings. With the threat of climate change escalating, sustainable construction techniques and fittings are becoming increasingly important. Reducing energy demand in buildings can not only reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but will also help to reduce energy bills.

When new developments are required, local authorities can often take the easy option of building to design regulations which will include use of basic construction standards and use of fossil fuelled heating. However, the policy in Stevenage is to urge developers to take the environment and sustainability into consideration when building housing owned by the Council, so that energy performance standards exceed national regulations.

In relation to Electric Vehicles (EV), through our recently adopted Sustainable Transport Supplementary Planning Document, the Council requires new developments to have 25% of their spaces to have EV connections, with a further 25% of spaces having the enabling infrastructure designed in, ready for future demand.

Our approach means that planners, designers and developers work together to ensure that climate change is taken into account at all stages of the development process. At Stevenage Borough Council, we will always encourage developers to incorporate as many sustainable features as viable into new builds, including triple glazing, air source heat pumps and solar photovoltaic electricity.

An example of this is Helston House in Symonds Green. Set to open in 2022 and provide 29 affordable homes, the site represents the future of new council owned developments for sustainable living.

The homes will be heated entirely from electricity rather than gas, with much lower use of fossil fuels and better local air quality, as there will be no gas flue emissions. The

heating demand will also be minimised by the use of intensely insulated walls with a rigid full fill system with increased cavity size. The demand for grid-based electricity will also be reduced by the installation of a 16kW solar photovoltaic array with 50 panels. A battery storage system will also be fitted to store solar energy when excess is generated and used for communal electricity requirements for the lift, lighting, and car charging points, reducing service charges for residents. The remainder will be exported to the local grid. Helston House will also be fitted with triple glazing to reduce heat loss to the minimum.

Looking to the future, environmental performance standards for new homes are set to significantly improve with national policy. A new Future Homes Standard means that by 2025, all new builds must be zero carbon ready and low-carbon heating options will need to be installed in new homes. It will also mean that upgrades to existing properties will be expected to use technologies such as heat pumps, cooling systems and fixed lighting.

We believe the NPPF and new Environment Bill should give a firm requirement from government towards best climate change and sustainability measures that are at the heart of place making.

(B) Question from Councillor Mitchell –

Do you think the level of spending on consultants by your administration is acceptable

Answer (Councillor Mrs Lloyd):

The Council uses consultants to support the delivery of short term projects such as ICT installations or specialisms not within the Council's normal establishment. The Future Town Future Council programme sets out a series of complex projects for the Council. This programme works across a range of subject matters, from transforming the town centre, to building social and affordable homes, working cooperatively in neighbourhood areas, and transforming Council services to achieve the savings required by the Making Your Money Count programme.

The skillsets required to deliver these projects are often highly specialised and hence consultancy support is engaged to support the relevant in-house Council team. Examples of this include specialist IT skills to support the ongoing upgrade of IT infrastructure for both Stevenage Borough Council and East Herts District Council and consultants advising on complex tax and land matters in relation to our regeneration programme. Some of the consultancy costs will also include software costs such as for the website and our HR system. In specialist technical areas like Development Control, consultancy support will be engaged to provide advice on technical design, heritage, viability and legal matters which require highly specialised technical knowledge, and where costs can often be recovered from developers.

Several projects have successfully bid for, and secured government funding bids, requiring swift delivery and the need to add short-term capacity to help achieve the best results for the town and communities we serve

(C) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren -

In view of local and national calls in recent years for 'silent' fireworks:

- a. What changes have been made to SBC organised displays?
- b. What (if any) powers does the council have over noise levels from fireworks sold and used in the borough?

Answer (Councillor Henry):

- a. *The overall level of noise from the SBC organised firework display has been partially mitigated over the last few years. This is due to the introduction of lasers and pyrotechnic flame jets, which has reduced the number of fireworks used. As part of our event management work, the Council has also asked the supplier to not include fireworks that are designed primarily to make loud noises. However, the height required for fireworks to be seen in a public display in Fairlands Valley does require a form of explosion to enable line of site for audiences. Silent fireworks are currently unable to achieve this. The Council is also exploring the future use of drone technology, although this will need to be considered in relation to the Luton Airport flight path.*
- b. *The Council does not have any powers over the retail of fireworks. In general terms the same applies to the noise level of fireworks unless it is deemed to be a persistent and regular noise that causes a disturbance and may be investigated as a statutory nuisance.*

(D) Question from Councillor Booth –

- a. How many council houses have been fitted with solar panels and what criteria have been adopted in identifying which ones are suitable?
- b. Which committee of the council has approved this programme, what is the annual budget for it and for how long is it planned to run?

Answer (Councillor Thomas):

- a. *58 existing Council homes have been fitted with Solar Panel systems. This work is being delivered as part of the Business Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) funded Local Authority Delivery Fund. Properties receiving works must have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of band D or below to be eligible. The range of measures delivered to homes is determined by what works are required to improve the energy efficiency to an EPC rating of band C. This work is identified by a mixture of both in person and desktop analysis of the energy performance of a building.*

In terms of new builds, not all properties would benefit from solar panels because of their layout and orientation. However through a mixed use of air source heat pumps and solar panels more properties can benefit from renewable energy generation. Presently there are 210 new homes in the construction programme that will benefit from this approach of using solar

panels and air source heat pumps. Should Councillor Booth require further details, the Housing & Investment team are able to provide further information in relation to existing homes and the Housing Development team in relation to new build homes.

- b. As is the case of the BEIS fund, bids are made to grant funding opportunities and the rest of the work is mainstreamed into existing programmes in planned maintenance and new build. The budgets for these are determined as part of the Housing Revenue Account business plan cycle and approved by Executive and Full Council. By adopting this approach, sustainable development considerations are not regarded as an optional item or as a bolt on to our housing development plans. Rather, they are a fundamental part of our approach to delivering good quality sustainable council homes and will run indefinitely. This is evidenced in our Five Star housing development programme that delivers: 1.Sustainable Development, 2.Truly Affordable Rent, 3.Tenure Blind Design, 4.Best Use of Land, and 5.Delivery through Community Led Consultation.*

(E) Question from Councillor McGuinness -

Has an assessment been done about the roll out of the recycling bags and, if so, what did it show?

Answer (Councillor Gardner):

Approximately two years ago the Council started to provide 60lt recycling bags to replace the 55lt boxes previously used. Since then over 10,000 bags have been issued to Stevenage residents.

In early 2020, some of the initial recipients of the new bags did raise some concerns. However, since then the small amount of feedback that we have received has been largely positive. The bags are standing up well to regular use, and although boxes and lids can be blown along residential roads on windy days, the weighted bags remain where they are left even when empty.

We have received 20,000 bags over the past two years, at a cost of £25k. The same number of boxes and lids would have cost £84k.

(F) Question from Councillor Parker -

Will SBC commit to continuing information and publicity locally about all known publicly available 24/7 automatic external defibrillators (AEDs) in the borough including locations and maps?

Answer (Councillor Thomas):

The AED's are published on the circuit (<https://www.thecircuit.uk/>) which is provided by the British Heart Foundation and is the only recognised national defibrillator network, which connects defibrillators to NHS ambulance services across the UK. The website is currently developing its functionality that will

allow anyone to find out the location of registered defibrillators in their community. There will be a link to this on the SBC website.

(G) Question from Councillor Graham Snell –

Reference the Covid Cobra snake, why is SBC now doing something different with it from that which residents voted for in the public consultation?

Answer (Councillor Henry):

The Council remains absolutely committed to preserving the legacy of Covid Cobra. Hertfordshire County Council determined that the complete stone installation could not be preserved in the underpass. We are however continuing to work with the community project originators and Junction 7 Creatives to ensure an artistic legacy remains in the vicinity of Grace Way as per the public consultation. We have also established an information stall in the Indoor Market charting the development of the project, which I would encourage Members to visit.

(H) Question from Councillor Wren –

How much money from central government grants has the council used to insulate the following;

- a) Council Houses
- b) Flat blocks as part of the major refurbishment contract

Answer (Councillor Thomas):

- a. *The Council has successfully bid in two rounds of Local Authority Delivery Fund, securing £930k in the first round and a further £465k in the second round when the scheme was extended to run to March 2022. The total funding of £1.395m has to be matched by a Council contribution of at least 33% of the cost. Works delivered under this scheme include insulation works to Council homes, which are estimated to equal a value of £406k, subject to detailed surveys (known as PAS2035 surveys). All works under this scheme will be delivered by March 2022.*

In addition the Council has submitted a bid to the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF), which totals £1.8m. This Fund is also matched by a minimum contribution from the Council of 33% of the project cost. If successful, this funding is estimated to deliver insulation works of £1.6m between January 2022 and January 2023. We are due to be notified if we have been successful in our bid in December 2021.

There is a further round of SHDF funding which is due to be open in April 2022, and the Council is likely to make a further bid to this Fund.

- b. *At this point there has been no government grant secured to deliver insulation works to flat blocks as part of the Major Refurbishment Contract (MRC).*

(I) Question from Councillor Howells -

How much does the Council spend on the public firework display? and why are we not supporting the RSPCA's campaign to update our firework regulations to make fireworks less dangerous and threatening to pets and animals.

Answer (Councillor Henry):

The 5th November Firework event usually attracts over 20,000 to 30,000 residents, and is clearly valued by the local community. The Council allocated £9,489.40 towards the firework display in 2021.

The RSPA is concerned with the increase in private use of fireworks and private displays due to the pandemic. Large gatherings were restricted in 2020 and as a consequence, public displays were cancelled leading to an increase of 29% private use and displays since 2019.

Other than standard event management public safety requirements and firework industry best practice protocols, there are no national regulations in relation to firework displays. The firework show is provided by a professional firework display company and is managed through a team led by SBC officers, the Event Management Plans and Risk Assessments are submitted to the Safety Advisory Team for due consideration. We will be keen to work with the RSPCA on any other ways we can improve the event.