

COUNCIL – 19 OCTOBER 2022

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

‘Do you believe that SBC offers sufficient information about properties (such as their amenities and layout) to residents bidding for Council properties, to allow them to make an appropriate bid for a property which meets their needs?’

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

I agree that as much information as possible should be made available to residents to allow them to bid on the properties that best meet their needs. This helps to both avoid potential disappointment for our residents as well as ensuring properties are re-let more effectively. We have recently added a link to a map to show the general location of a property. It is though recognised that further improvements may be possible as the related technology develops. We are of course constrained by the immediate financial challenges to our Housing Revenue Account, following Government proposals on rent linked to the cost of living crisis.

Our Housing Team are working with the Community Select Committee to review the end to end process of re-letting a property to improve customer satisfaction and performance. Customer feedback will be gathered and the information included in our adverts will be carefully reviewed. The new Empty Homes Co-ordinator will also focus on ensuring the details of each property on our systems is up to date and available to our Lettings Officers before a property is advertised. The Housing Team are committed to making improvements to the Voids process. Improving the ways in which we match tenants’ needs to the homes which are available will be an important part of this.

(B) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell

‘Do you think the current SBC approach to Police Priority setting is still fit for purpose?’

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

The purpose of the Police Priority Setting sessions is to provide Members with an update concerning the overall crime figures and trends across the town ahead of then focussing upon specific issues and priorities at a more local level. These sessions are greatly valued by our Police colleagues for the insight SBC Councillors provide. If any Member has views as to how these sessions could potentially be run more effectively going forwards I would be happy to talk to them.

(C) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren

'Since the changes to the carriageway of Lytton Way earlier this year, there continue to be many complaints and reports about regular, long traffic jams for vehicles exiting from the Town Centre onto Lytton Way. Acknowledging that HCC is the Highway authority, nevertheless this issue is causing huge inconvenience to Stevenage shoppers and should be of concern to SBC. What actions (with HCC) are SBC taking to put right this apparently erroneous new traffic flow design?'

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

The works carried out to Lytton Way were designed by Hertfordshire County Council, who are responsible for the junction and road in question. SBC Officers are aware of ongoing issues of congestion at certain times at the Swingate/Lytton Road junction, and have asked HCC colleagues to explore options for remedial action.

(D) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

'What method does the Council use to track and monitor absenteeism amongst its employees?
How does absenteeism compare with surrounding authorities?'

Answer (Councillor Joan Lloyd):

Council employees report sickness absence via a third-party sickness reporting company called Good Shape. Good Shape provide a nurse lead triage service allowing employees to talk to a clinically qualified professional when they report their sickness absence. Absence reporting is available real time through this platform for line managers and assistant directors. The Good Shape service also provides proactive absence monitoring and follow up with employees who remain absent from work for longer periods of time. Absence is then monitored and managed in line with the SBC sickness absence policy. Overall absence rates are reported to Executive on a quarterly basis as part of the Executive performance reporting report. Absence is reported as day lost per FTE over a rolling 12-month period.

SBC largely provides its services directly in-house rather than via contractors. This is not the case in all councils which makes benchmarking difficult because we would not be comparing apples to apples. However, the Office of National Statistics reported that the 2021 Public Sector absence rate was 3% and it is forecast to increase in 2022. At the end of Quarter 1, SBCs sickness absence was at 11.07 days per FTE (4.54%) which included the impact of a significant Covid 19 spike in May/June of this year. This reduced slightly to 10.54 days per FTE (4.32%) for Quarter 2, again with another significant Covid spike in July 2022. Although levels of absence vary, the trend of increasing absence since the national record low levels of 2020 are broadly consistent with what is being experienced at other authorities as are sickness absence levels.

(E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

'What steps are the Council taking, in conjunction with the Highway authority HCC, to ensure that the proposed redesigning of Lytton Way (Station Gateway Area Action Plan) will not result in a clogged up town?'

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Council is developing options for the 'Station Gateway' area and has consulted widely with residents, businesses and interested groups to gather their views. Over 300 responses have been collected so far, and further consultation will take place in the months ahead. This is a key area of the town, and the draft Area Action Plan (AAP) sets out the vision and objectives to help ensure it will be a high quality, well connected, attractive and sustainable area.

The Council is working closely with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) Highways, using their Highways modelling software to fully understand the impacts of car traffic displacement related to the different options. Mitigation and improvements to those more heavily used road and junctions will form an integral part of any final APP or and subsequent Planning Permission. As we have this work underway with HCC Highways, the current stage of the consultation is about exploring a vision for the space and to understand what local people might want from it. There will be further rounds of consultation including with Planning & Development Committee, Executive and Overview and Scrutiny.

(F) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

'Following the partial collapse of Swingate House earlier this year, several reports were due from a number of sources (e.g. SBC, HSE, the demolition contractor and maybe others) on the causes and blame for the incident – which could have so easily proved fatal.

Have any of these reports yet been received and, if not, when do we anticipate them? Will they be made public?'

Answer (Councillor Sharon Taylor):

[ANSWER TO FOLLOW]

(G) Question from Graham Snell

'Has working WiFi yet been installed in the new Bus Interchange, so that passengers can receive real time information on bus services? If not, when will it be installed?'

Answer (Councillor Sharon Taylor):

[ANSWER TO FOLLOW]

(H) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

'Not only did the SBC housing development at Tabor Close result in trees being felled without permission but, although the dwellings were complete months ago, the houses (as of October 2022) are still not occupied because – we are told – a short length of highway was not complete. What exactly was the problem with allowing occupation? And why is it taking so long to resolve the issue, thereby leaving 13 badly needed Council housing units standing empty for many months?'

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

Members may recall from previous information provided concerning this scheme (dating back to July 2022) that this is not an SBC Housing Development. It is in fact a scheme led by a private developer, Keepmoat Homes Ltd, and Origin Housing Association (HA).

The Council's role in this has been limited to promoting and securing the scheme for affordable housing development. This goal was successfully achieved. From this November, 13 families will be living here with affordable rents.

As was previously explained, it has never been in the Council's gift to nominate to these homes sooner than was lawfully possible. Planning & Highways regulations exist principally to protect public safety and ensure development takes place in a consistent and approved manner. These regulations mandated that the highways works were completed to the satisfaction of the Highways authority prior to occupation. A number of factors related to the pandemic, a shortage of materials, a shortage of skilled contractors, as well as a backlog of highways works throughout the County, have contributed to the delay in carrying out and inspecting these highway works. Both Keepmoat Homes Ltd and HCC Highways have worked hard to ensure challenges were overcome.

HCC Highways have now inspected the works to the highway and determined them to be substantially complete. As such, they have begun the process of certifying completion and we would expect the homes to be in occupation during November. This will follow a process whereby Origin HA as landlord will request nominations from Stevenage Borough Council.

(I) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

'Is SBC satisfied that our grass cutting program is thorough enough?'

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

There are approximately 4 million square metres of grass in Stevenage that is maintained to different cutting frequencies depending on location, usage and environmental management.

We are satisfied that we are able to respond to the grass cutting demands each year, which can vary, and the programme generally consists of grass being cut

on a 3 to 4 week rolling schedule, between late March and early November each year.

We have also reduced the amount of grass cutting in recent years through the creation of additional areas of meadow grass, which is generally cut and collected once per year.

We regularly review our operations in light of sector developments and will continue to optimise the service wherever possible.