



COUNCIL

15 JULY 2020

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

PART 1

6. QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

The Answers to the Questions are attached.

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7. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

The Answers to the Questions are attached.

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8. LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

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Updates from the Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees on the recent activities of those Committees attached.

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10. NOTICE OF MOTIONS

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11. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Answers to the Questions are attached.

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COUNCIL – 15 JULY 2020

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

- (A) Are there any environmental projects planned which Stevenage Youth Council could be involved with?**

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The short answer is yes and your support would be greatly appreciated.

For example, there could be an opportunity to undertake a biodiversity project at Weston Road Cemetery to:

- *Create and position some hedgehog homes;*
- *Create a log pile;*
- *Install bird / bat boxes; and*
- *Sow a wildflower meadow.*

This is a project that could be completed in one day, with support from SBC staff.

If the Youth Council would prefer an ongoing project, we have lots of opportunities within the Biodiversity Action Plan, including:

- *Pond clearance;*
- *Woodland management; and*
- *Habitat surveys.*

SBC officers would be happy to meet with representatives of the Youth Council to discuss further and are very grateful for the offer of support.

- (B) As a Youth Council we have been having discussions around the Black Lives Matter movement, and we are interested to know if SBC is planning on running any projects on this and if we could be involved from a young person's perspective?**

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

The Council would welcome the involvement of the Youth Council in the shaping of ideas around projects from a young person's perspective related to Black Lives Matters. Noting the Council debate on the Black Lives Matter motion later on the agenda, the involvement of the Youth Council in a broader local Equalities Commission would help ensure that young people's views are heard alongside those of the broader Stevenage community.

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QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC AND ANSWERS

Questions to Portfolio Holders

(A) Question from Tina Walker

“Transport is responsible for about 27% of all emissions. We need to find innovative ways to reduce the reliance on motorised vehicles. With this in mind **Cycling UK Stevenage** have formed a group looking at the provision for cycling and active travel in the town and we would like to ask whether cycling permeability and accessibility is to be properly built into all developments including the Town Centre and Forster Country that links up to the existing network within Stevenage and linking up to route 12 towards Letchworth and beyond; whether in every new **planning** proposal will the existing network be protected, and in line with your declaration of a climate emergency, priority will be given to enhancing the network with Cycling UK Stevenage being consulted/involved at the planning stage?”

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Together with Hertfordshire County Council we are working to improve and expand our fantastic cycle network. New sizable developments have and will continue to be required to connect into and where appropriate further expand our cycle network. Cycling UK and other interested stakeholders are welcome to subscribe and have their say during the relevant planning applications.

(B) Question from Councillor Richard Briers

“Over time the priority that the cycleways had (and should remain) over crossing minor side roads has been eroded. We need to reclaim our routes for active travel. Will cyclist priorities be reinstated as a matter of urgency at existing junctions and incorporated in future planning decisions? This should not need planning to correct priority issues at existing junctions.

Examples: Costco development and most of the other junctions on Gunnels Wood Road.”

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Hertfordshire County Council is responsible for the segregated cycleways in Stevenage. Stevenage Borough Council is committed to active travel, and secured the improvements linked to the Costco development and will continue to secure other improvements where appropriate. Stevenage Borough Council will seek external funding opportunities where available to help promote active travel options such as cycling.

(C) Question from Loyd Davies

“I understand that responsibility for the maintenance of the Stevenage cycle track surfaces rests with HCC but in many locations, it is the hedgerow and surface vegetation that narrows the cycle-track and causes a hazard. In some places the usable surface has been reduced by more than half. Cycling UK

Stevenage riders are using the network daily; we could assist you with identifying places that need attention.

Examples:

1. The short spur link from the A602 down the hill to join the Gresley Way cycleway south of Ridlins Stadium is dangerous because going downhill you are forced onto the wrong side of the track.
2. The cycle-track junction with Brittain Way on the north-east corner of the roundabout opposite Ken Brown Motors; here a tall hedge blocks more than half the cycleway and blocks the cyclists view of the road traffic and vice versa.
3. Broadhall Way cycle way near Broadwater Crescent junction - vegetation on the surface narrows cycleway on a sloping section which is hazardous as cyclists coming uphill move across towards the path of oncoming cyclists descending at speed.

Will the frequency of hedgerow maintenance and surface vegetation clearance along the cycleway and footpath network be increased to ensure that cyclists can safely use the cycle-tracks, particularly while Social Distancing?"

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Our pruning schedule includes a summer sightline prune and a full winter prune.

The summer prune takes place between June and September, where hedges are cut in their entirety and shrubs are cut back from paths, roads, vision splays and any other health and safety infringements.

A full winter prune, where hedges and shrubs are all cut in their entirety is conducted between November and March. With this specification in place, each hedge is pruned twice a year, with some shrubs being pruned either once or twice a year.

There are approximately 40km of cycle tracks within Stevenage. Until recently a quarterly sweep was completed but this has recently been updated to categorise the cycle tracks and highways lanes into three priorities of weekly, monthly and quarterly inspections, with work completed where required.

In conjunction with our schedules, and our pruning and sweeping operatives reporting issues, we would very much welcome collaborative working with Cycle UK Stevenage riders to understand where cycle ways are being narrowed due to vegetation.

*Launching a reporting network to resolve the issues identified in suitable and practicable timeframes and by those responsible will undoubtedly help to address the concerns that have been raised, and supports our Co-operative Neighbourhood approach. Please report any concerns to:
Depot.Reception@stevenage.gov.uk*

Please also bear with us in the meantime as we are still operating under Covid-19 restrictions.

COUNCIL – 15 JULY 2020 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL’S UPDATES

AGENDA ITEM 8

The Leader of the Opposition (Councillor Phil Bibby CC) has chosen to raise the following matter relevant to the Borough that has risen since the last meeting of the Council:

“Given that the Leader was quick to distance herself from the press comments about the possibility of issuing a s114 and potential bankruptcy, is she now embarrassed that Sir Keir Starmer has prompted similar inflammatory comments in a recent front page article in the Comet?”

The other updates are as follows:

Cllr. John Gardner – Planning Committee and determinations

In May 2020 the Council held its first virtual Planning & Development Committee meeting, which was a success for Members, the public and the applicants who were all able to watch it live streamed on Youtube. The Committee approved applications which will lead to the direct investment of millions of pounds in Stevenage and can create new jobs.

A second equally successful virtual meeting followed in June 2020, which included granting permission for the new Bus Interchange in the town centre, which supports the wider plans for regenerating the town.

Since the start of lockdown the Council has determined over 200 planning applications and dealt with a similar number of Planning enquires / enforcement cases.

Cllr. John Gardner – People’s Orchards and Green Flag Awards

Locality Community Budget funding enabled the planting of a new People’s Orchard in an open space in Symonds Green in early March 2020. This orchard is planted with apple, pear, cherry and plum trees. The area was also sown with a wild flower meadow seed mix to further increase the biodiversity further.

Following discussions with Ward Councillors, a further two People’s Orchards are planned for Bandle Hill and St Nicholas in winter 2020/21.

Officers also submitted applications for five Green Flag Awards in 2020. We are seeking to retain the existing sites at Fairlands Valley Park, Town Centre Gardens, Hampson Park and Shephalbury Park, and also attain an award for Weston Road Cemetery. We hope to have assessments during the remainder of the year, subject to government guidance. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is likely that the application for Weston Road Cemetery will be deferred until 2021.

Cllr. Lloyd Briscoe – Reopening the Town and Supporting Business

The Council has been working hard to support businesses in the town centre to reopen, following the lifting of lockdown restriction on the 15th of June 2020.

Social distancing measures, including street marking and signage have been introduced to the town centre and most neighbourhood centres. The car parks are now fully reopened, and wardens and officers have helped visitors to the town centre navigate the queueing systems for shops and the walking routes around the town centre. Businesses have been supported with central government guidance and advice, including from our Environmental Health Team to help them to reopen.

We are working with HCC and local businesses in the Old Town to see how we can best support the reopening of businesses there to include introducing additional outside seating space and increase cycle facilities.

Cllr. Jeannette Thomas – Housing Programme

The Council's housing delivery programme is continuing to develop new much needed social and affordable homes for Stevenage residents whilst ensuring a safe environment is maintained for staff, contractors and the public.

15 units for social rent have recently been completed at Burwell Court. Work continues on sites at Addison House on Shephall Way, Scarborough Avenue and North Road, a combined 59 new homes for Stevenage residents.

The scheme conversion at Ditchmore Lane is due to complete in the coming weeks, with sales remaining strong, ensuring vital cross subsidy and capital receipts for the Council during these unprecedented times.

The Council is now ready to move forward with the Kenilworth neighbourhood centre regeneration scheme that will deliver new homes, better shops and a more pleasant public open space. The demolition and clearance of existing buildings at the site is now complete and the necessary infrastructure work to gas utility supplies has been commissioned. Work to finalise the detailed designs and meet the pre-commencement planning conditions is ongoing, with the ambition being for construction to begin in September, starting with Malvern Close. Following this, construction of the main site will begin in October.

Given the challenges posed by the pandemic and noting efforts being taken by the Council to aid the recovery of the town, work on this scheme and the delivery of additional social and affordable homes is more important than ever including the construction of the state of the art independent living scheme.

Cllr. Jeannette Thomas – Healthy Stevenage Partnership

Since lockdown our work around health and wellbeing has continued at pace, albeit with a renewed focus. We introduced zoom meetings for the partnership in April and have worked hard to reframe the work we had planned around a healthy hub for young people which we had planned to launch with local Schools in April. We have since developed this into a virtual offering to support the wellbeing of young people which is particularly important at this difficult time. The partnership has also started to consider other areas of focus as we strive to emerge from Covid-19. Loneliness and social isolation and family wellbeing will be key

themes, as will our partnership work with the health sector and the University of Hertfordshire moving forwards.

Cllr. Jeannette Thomas – Housing First: Response to Rough Sleepers

In response to the “everyone in” campaign to get all rough sleepers off the streets the team have been working hard to accommodate all those who are rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping. During the pandemic we booked a number of rooms at several hotels to help keep rough sleepers safe during the lockdown.

At the June Executive meeting, additional funding was made available to keep those either rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping in hotel accommodation for a further 6 weeks, until the end of July.

The team are now working with all those we have placed in the Holiday Inn Express to determine their support needs going forward so that we can assist them into the most appropriate accommodation. This may be a combination of solutions such as the Private rented sector, temporary accommodation or accommodation run by some of our partners. This is, of course, a short term solution and our aspiration is to provide a legacy solution, which could, potentially, be a hostel where we can apply the Housing First principles to provide a holistic support (with partners) as well as the accommodation.

Although a number of funding streams have been announced by Government, at the time of writing we have not had our allocations confirmed. This is of great concern given the significant costs incurred by the Council to date (which far exceed the grant received) and our absolute wish to support this client group to the best of our ability.

Cllr. Jeannette Thomas – Housing online

I am very pleased to be able to confirm that we have gone live with our Housing online offer which will enable our customers to create their own account and contact us 24/7 through the portal on the website. We have seen a high number of customers sign up to this offer which is greatly encouraging. Customers can log a repair, view their rent account, make a payment and view documents associated with their tenancy. We aim to go live with our online applications for housing later this month. Members support in helping to promote this very important service to our residents would be greatly appreciated.

Cllr. Jackie Hollywell – Community Safety during COVID-19

The work to keep our communities safe across the town has been significant over the past few months. The work to house rough sleepers during the pandemic led to 56 referrals to our No More, Drug and Alcohol Service over the past 3 months. Our domestic abuse service has seen a 90% increase in referrals compared to this time last year. In response to this we have worked hard to secure external resources both from the National Lottery and through a partnership bid with Citizens Advice Stevenage to the MHCLG for just over £70,000. A fantastic result I am sure you will all agree.

As Members will be aware, a number of Black Lives Matters events were held in the town in early June. These were peaceful vigils and those attending worked well with the police in maintaining social distancing.

Cllr. Jackie Hollywell – Environmental Health during COVID-19

During the Covid-19 outbreak the Environmental Health and Licensing Team have been heavily involved with providing support and guidance to Stevenage businesses, initially to assist closure, but more recently to aid them with their plans for safe and effective re-opening.

The Team have worked closely with the countywide local resilience forum to manage existing environmental health issues and to prepare for possible future Covid-19 outbreaks.

There has also been an increase in reports to Environmental Health of neighbour disputes linked to BBQ's, bonfires and informal garden gatherings.

Cllr. Richard Henry – Leisure and Culture at the heart of our recovery

Nationally we have seen the impact of Covid-19 on the leisure and cultural sector. Key community facilities that we hold dear in Stevenage, such as our Museum, the Gordon Craig Theatre and Leisure Centre and our Swimming Centre, had to close abruptly in line with lockdown measures, along with the cancellation of major events such as Stevenage Day. We are working hard to plan for the safe re-opening of these facilities and Members will be aware that the Government made announcements regarding the reopening of some of the facilities last week. We also know that leisure operators have been significantly impacted financially by Covid-19. This is also true for our operator SLL. We are working with SLL to look at these implications on their financial position, which is evolving based on Government guidance.

As we strive to recover from Covid-19 we will be working hard to ensure a strong cultural, events and leisure offer is resumed effectively. We know that culture and leisure play a vital role in good mental health and community wellbeing. I am pleased that these facilities and services have been established as vital components of the council's recovery plan.

Cllr. Richard Henry – Stevenage Covid Snake

As Portfolio Holder for Culture I was humbled to see the community spirit across the town during lockdown. Many of you will have seen the media coverage of the Covid snake started by a local family. This became a wide community effort consisting of over 9,000 stones. In order to recognise the efforts we have been working with HCC to look at options for a long-term installation to commemorate the snake. We launched an online poll and 5,300 votes were cast. The winning option is an installation in a local underpass. We will work with HCC to plan for this and look forward to updating you as the scheme progresses.

Cllr. Rob Broom – Stevenage Helps

As Members will be aware, on 6 April we launched a dedicated Community Response team to support those who were vulnerable and self-isolating at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. The support ranged from the delivery of essential food items to support to collect prescriptions, financial advice and other forms of guidance. Over the course of the last 3

months we have supported over 600 residents through the team and delivered almost 600 food parcels. The support from local volunteers, businesses and other partners has been tremendous. I would like to thank the team from across the Council and SLL who have come together along with our Members who have provided generous support through Local Community Budgets. As lockdown eases and shielding arrangements come to an end we know there will be many vulnerable people who may not have the confidence to re-engage in public spaces. We will maintain Stevenage Helps over the coming weeks and months to ensure those who still need assistance receive it.

Cllr. Mrs Joan Lloyd – Business and Council Tax support

To support businesses during the Covid-19 crisis we have given out 872 grants to small and retail businesses, totalling just over £11Million. We are in the process of giving out a further £500,000 to those businesses that were not eligible for the small and retail grants. In addition to that, we have applied reduced business rates for our businesses in the town by over £21Million so a lot of businesses in the retail hospitality and leisure sector will pay no business rates at all.

We will shortly be reducing council tax bills for those on council tax support by just under £800,000 to help them during the current time and I would urge any business or resident struggling to pay their bills to talk to us.

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**COUNCIL – 15 JULY 2020
UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS**

AGENDA ITEM 9

Cllr Lin Martin Haugh (Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee)

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee held its first virtual meeting under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) Regulations 2020, on 17 June 2020 and held its second meeting under these regulations yesterday evening on 14 July. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were encouraged to watch the broadcast of the Executive meeting and submit written questions in advance based on the Executive reports and discussion. These questions were then circulated to the Strategic Leadership Team for a written response which was in turn circulated to the O&S Committee before its meeting. At the meeting the questions were verbally raised by the relevant Member and the responses were provided by officers – it was hoped that this would help those viewing the virtual meeting to better understand the discussion and the supplementary questions raised. This format will continue to be used for the foreseeable future. If Scrutiny Members wish to raise an issue that is not directly related to the Executive business in hand they will need to do so in writing outside of the O&S Committee meeting, and the response provided by officers will be circulated to all Scrutiny Members.

Cllrs Michael Downing (Chair of Environment & Economy Select Committee) and Sarah Mead (Chair of Community Select Committee)

There is no specific update to provide to Council other than to say that it has not been possible to meet since the start of the lockdown because of the added strain on resources that this would cause. We are intending to re-commence the activities of these Committees in September.

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COUNCIL – 15 JULY 2020

AGENDA ITEM 10

NOTICE OF MOTIONS - AMENDMENT

The following amendment to Motion (i) – Black Lives Matter has been submitted by the Liberal Democrat Group:

Second para:

Insert in line 2 after "minority ethnic" in brackets: "(BAME)"

Third para:

Delete words in line 3: "in public life"

First bulleted point:

In first line delete word "black" and replace with "BAME"

Second bulleted point:

In second line delete words: "Black, Asian and minority ethnic" and replace with "BAME"

Fourth bulleted point:

At end of sentence add words "and that racial awareness and bias training is available to all staff in management and customer facing roles."

Sixth bulleted point:

In first line add after "we are" word "particularly". In second line delete word "black" and replace with "BAME"

For clarity, the amended motion should now read (note changes emboldened):

(i) Black Lives Matter

"That Council notes with serious concern the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in America on 25th May 2020 and the systemic racism towards black people that continues to exist around the world.

Council also notes the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and minority ethnic (**BAME**) people in the UK and that decisive action needs to be taken to mitigate these risks on sections of our community.

Council welcomes the decision to light the Clock Tower purple on 2nd June 2020 in commemoration of George Floyd's unnecessary death and all those who have died because of racism in public life.

Council also welcomes the progress that has been made in Stevenage over a number of years to build community cohesion and strengthen the voice of those who are marginalised, but recognises that there is more we can and must do.

That Council resolves:

- To stand in solidarity with **BAME** people in Stevenage, Britain and around the world.
- To lobby government for immediate action to address the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on **BAME** people in the UK including here in Hertfordshire where we will continue to work with our Director of Public Health on this issue.
- To lobby government and the county council on racial inequality in education, including recruiting more black teachers and reforming the curriculum to fully reflect British history including the history of slavery empire and colonialism.
- To ensure the Council's HR and management policies fully meet the requirements for equalities, diversity and inclusion in the recruitment and career progression of all staff **and that racial awareness and bias training is available to all staff in management and customer facing roles.**
- To establish wider community dialogue with BAME Community organisations to make clear recommendations to the Council and other public bodies of further actions required to tackle discrimination and reduce inequalities across the town.
- To work with our partners in Stevenage Together to ensure we are all listening and engaging with our **BAME** community as we plan the future of our town together."

COUNCIL – 15 JULY 2020

AGENDA ITEM 11

MEMBERS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Questions to Portfolio Holders

(A) Question from Councillor Doug Bainbridge

“How much has been spent on “consultants” by the Council over the last 5 years. Year by year?”

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

The Council uses consultants to support one off projects such as Regeneration advice, planning studies and also for advice on rent renewals and stock valuations which are required by our insurers or for the Statement of Accounts.

This supports the delivery of some of our key FTFC ambitions and as such, one off consultancy costs are often funded from specific growth bids or via business rate gains which approved by Members at part of the budget setting process.

Based on the gross spend of the General Fund and HRA for 2020/21 this represents an average of 0.26% of annual revenue spend and 0.05% of capital spend.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total
Revenue General Fund and HRA:						
Regeneration projects	99,781	5,065	232,503	121,518	48,046	506,912
Planning (including local plan)	18,872	17,004	13,257	4,384	31,052	84,570
Other (includes rent reviews, ICT, community & leisure)	131,198	103,645	161,892	87,898	75,367	559,999
Total	249,851	125,713	407,652	213,800	154,465	1,151,482
Estimated percentage of gross spend (revenue)	0.28%	0.14%	0.46%	0.24%	0.17%	0.26%
Capital Projects	27,263	72,068	828	35,553	35,825	171,536
Estimated percentage of gross spend (capital)	0.04%	0.10%	0.00%	0.05%	0.05%	0.05%
Total Consultants costs (revenue & capital)	277,114	197,781	408,480	249,353	190,290	1,323,018

Note: percentages based on 2020/21 gross costs for revenue and capital.

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“Given the impact on the ability to open facilities due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, what discussions has SBC had with Stevenage Leisure Limited about the need for additional support measures and what contingency plans are being

developed by the Council in this regard to ensure the future sustainability of these invaluable leisure facilities?”

Answer (Cllr Richard Henry):

The impact of Covid-19 is having a profound impact on the leisure industry nationally, with the sudden closure of gyms, sports halls, swimming pools and theatres by the Government in March. The LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board has made strong representations to the Department of Culture Media and Sport about government support for council leisure provision.

The Council has been in regular communication with SLL since the Covid-19 outbreak began. SLL have introduced a number of measures to maintain financial security, including applying to the Government’s furlough scheme and other sources of finance. The Council has also supported SLL with the advance payment of the quarterly management fee. A piece of work, part-funded by Sport England, is running alongside this to ensure the Council has sufficient contingency plans in place to protect leisure services into the future.

Members will be aware that the Government made an announcement last week regarding the reopening of specific leisure facilities. The Council will work with SLL to ensure our related services are brought back into use in accordance with that guidance.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

“When will SBC commit to fully functioning IT, e-mail and telephone services and what has been the cost of the many repeated failures in these since the start of 2019?”

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

Our ICT Strategy was approved by both Stevenage Borough Council and East Herts Council in December 2019. This Strategy is supported by a comprehensive programme of work will greatly improve the performance, security and resilience of our IT infrastructure. The programme included a number of major schemes such as a network upgrade, replacement of the hosted desktop (VDI) and implementation of a new suite of Microsoft Office tools that Members and Officers can use to access different systems. These changes will greatly enhance the performance of our ICT systems and give higher levels of resilience.

Post lockdown a comprehensive effort was made by the ICT service to ensure the successful transition of 600 staff across two Councils to homeworking arrangements, while also responding to an up to 30% increase in service desk requests. This essential support, as well as contractor availability due to the Covid-19 crisis has impacted on the delivery of the ICT strategy programme. As part of our recovery efforts, work is now progressing well.

We recognise the importance of investing in high performing ICT services to support efficient and effective service delivery. We do not have a mechanism to automatically estimate the cost of any outages, and have focused our efforts on resolving challenges when they emerge and delivering the improvement programme.

However it is important to note that the majority of major incidents have been the result of third party issues. For example the most recent major incident related to services provided by a supplier, whose own business continuity arrangements failed to take effect. In each of these instances we ensure a thorough investigation is undertaken in order to seek to prevent similar issues arising in the future. We have also had a number of planned outages for example to install a generator to deliver power resilience, to conduct electrical works and to resolve issues with aging hardware. While this is essential, we do minimise the impact by undertaking this work at weekends outside of normal working or service hours.

(D) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

“SBC has been without a website which is fit for purpose for at least 3 years, so what is the date when residents can expect the new website to be launched and how will this be communicated to residents?”

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

We are now in the final stages of preparing our new website for launch in September 2020. We are conducting a thorough testing process in advance, and will use a ‘soft launch’ approach to implementation. This approach will allow us to identify and resolve any snags. This is a standard approach for new websites and will allow us to ensure a smooth launch, which will then be followed by an extensive communications campaign. In order to ensure frequent users of the sight have advanced notice of the changes, we will be putting a message on the current website in advance of the launch. At the same time, we continue to promote use of our online services through mechanisms like social media, and when customers telephone Customer Services, and this will continue and be developed as our self-service functionality improves. We will be inviting a cross-party steering group of members to preview the new site in early August to provide feedback on aspects such as images and content prior to its launch. This follows on from prior member and user engagement in 2019 which influenced the design and layout of the site.

(E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

“Please can an explanation be given as to why 16 mature trees were felled at the former Chells Play Centre site on Eliot Road, without any planning permission being in place for the development?”

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The site was previously used as a school and Stevenage Borough Council are in the process of disposing of the land. The site has been allocated in the approved Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031, for residential development and has been approved in the Council's Capital Strategy for disposal.

In advance of acquiring the site, the prospective purchaser identified a need, and sought permission to access the site to carry out Arboriculture works prior to the nesting season commencing. This request was acceded to and does not pre-determine planning permission for the construction of the new homes which are subject to a separate planning application.

Of the trees that were removed, the majority, were low grade, self-seeded trees or diseased. I am advised by Officers that there is no need for any further tree works, but should there be, they will first be consulted with the Council and will not take place automatically.

(F) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC

"There has been significant delay to the implementation of the new Council website, at a time when it is most needed by the residents of Stevenage during the COVID-19 outbreak. What is causing this delay?"

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

We are now in the final testing stage for the new website, and are confident we will be in a position to launch the site in September. From inception, our priority has been to ensure the new website provides residents with easily accessible, quality information, advice and services. This has included meeting stringent new accessibility standards set by central government. These requirements have been a key factor in the design and content for the new site, which will present a step change from the current website. The main causes of delay have been supplier-related issues, including ensuring that we extract maximum value from our contract. More recently the supplier was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic which resulted in staff availability issues. Both of these issues have now been resolved. In the meantime, the current site has been kept up to date with relevant information in response to Covid-19, including dedicated pages for Coronavirus information, as well as links to Stevenage Helps support.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

"What work has the Council's Environmental Health department been engaged on in connection with the Coronavirus outbreak, including work carried out in conjunction with Hertfordshire County Council's Public Health department, since the beginning of March 2020?"

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

Environmental Health and Licensing have continued to operate since the start of the pandemic, undertaking a range of roles and focusing on:

- Responding to significant increases in complaints about both residential noise nuisance and smoke nuisance from bonfires/BBQs;*
- Enforcing the pandemic business closure requirements and advising businesses on how the evolving requirements apply to them;*
- Working with Engineers and Town Centre Management regarding social distancing measures in respect of individual retail units as restrictions are progressively lifted;*
- Preparing for and contributing to the implementation of the Hertfordshire pandemic outbreak plan;*
- Lending assistance to other SBC teams including Cemeteries and Corporate Health and Safety; and*
- Representing SBC at the SCG Death Management cell and the countywide Burial and Cremations Group.*

All staff have been working from home and remotely since lockdown commenced.

(H) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

“Would you describe the number of highly paid Council officers and the amount of taxpayers’ money paid to them as acceptable?”

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

In short yes. All local authorities have been through a decade of austerity and for Stevenage Borough Council, this has meant cumulative cuts of £10m. At the same time, this Council has committed to the ambitious Future Town Future Council programme to make investments in regeneration, neighbourhoods, building new Council homes and transforming services for customers.

Our Council provides a wide range of services in house, to ensure that our residents get the best possible service and opportunities available to them. Our teams deliver over 120 services directly, including Housing and Waste services which in many Councils are outsourced. This model has allowed real flexibility in how we have been able to respond to the extreme challenges brought by Covid-19 pandemic.

The Officer structure of the Council has undergone significant review since 2015, being streamlined through the senior management review. No two Councils have the same breadth of services, but we are confident we have the right structure and skills in place to manage services provided for residents and to deliver our Future Town, Future Council programme. We have completed a full single status review of all our roles, evaluated and benchmarked all roles to ensure good value for money in each of them.

A pay policy statement is presented to members every February, detailing the scope of remuneration of all chief officers. (Chief Executive, Strategic Directors, Statutory Officers and Assistant Directors). All pay received by senior officers within the Council is in line with this statement which was approved by members for this year in February 2020 and will be submitted for review by members again in February 2021.