

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 site 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.