

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.