

COUNCIL – 16 DECEMBER 2020

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders

(A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley -

'Research by Clean Up Britain has found that Stevenage did not issue any litter fines during 2018-19. The campaign group wants the enforcement of fines by Councils to be made compulsory. What is this Council's response to this suggestion and in the meantime will this Council now take a more proactive approach and issue fines?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Fixed Penalty Notices are one tool for the enforcement of littering and fly-tipping. The Council issued four Fixed Penalty Notices over the past six months. The Council has also utilised Community Protection Warnings and Notices, which also act as an effective form of enforcement for those caught committing enviro-crime and other forms of neighbourhood nuisance. 18 Community Protection Notices have been issued since April of this year.

Littering remains an offence, which will warrant the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices or a Community Protection Notice if a Council officer witnessing the act or if a member of the public witnesses the offence and is willing to give a statement which can be used as evidence.

We have run a media campaign over the summer to encourage reporting and to highlight the neighbourhood issues caused as a consequence of littering and fly-tipping. We also hope that new neighbourhood teams will enable us to target and problem solve particular hot spots with local communities in local areas.

(B) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth -

'How many SBC employees have received race awareness and race bias training over the last 12 months?'

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

In terms of training, we have a range of equality and diversity learning programmes in place.

We developed a new and interactive equality and diversity programme which commenced rollout in January 2020. All of the Communities and Neighbourhoods Business Unit have completed this. However, due to the impact of the pandemic, this programme was paused and is currently being adapted to work for virtual delivery.

In addition, there are already e-learning programmes as part of our resources, and all of these programmes contain elements of race awareness and race bias training. Dignity at Work is an equality and diversity module which all staff are required to complete. There are further courses which are either role specific or optional additional learning. Completion figures are included below:

eLearning courses include:

<i>Dignity at Work</i>	<i>1311 delegates</i>
<i>Equality Act 2010</i>	<i>912 delegates</i>
<i>Equality in the Workplace \ E & D</i>	<i>415 delegates</i>

Of the above, 109 were completed during 2020.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

'In view of the minimal use of the areas of highway cleared by SBC for seating for hospitality outlets in the High Street and adverse public reaction:

- (a) exactly which businesses were consulted?*
- (b) when and how did the consultation take place?*
- (c) what did the responses show?*
- (d) why did SBC volunteer to take on this task, which is a Highways (HCC) matter?*
- (d) should some or all of the measures now be reversed?'*

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

- (a) exactly which businesses were consulted?*

Pretty much all of those businesses operating adjacent to the 'safe spaces' were consulted.

- (b) when and how did the consultation take place?*

SBC had to work within a very short deadline. The consultation was conducted on a single day by a Council Officer, who personally visited all of the affected businesses, following the lifting of the lockdown restrictions in the summer. Social distancing rules were strictly observed and essential PPE worn at all times.

- (c) what did the responses show?*

Our consultation indicated that all but one of the businesses who were consulted were in favour of the proposed measures being implemented.

- (d) why did SBC volunteer to take on this task, which is a Highways (HCC) matter?*

It was the intention of HCC to look at Stevenage Old Town in the later stage of their Tier 2 works. SBC would have much preferred the HCC to have delivered these safety measures as soon and as quickly as possible. As a consequence, SBC offered to do the work on their behalf.

(e) should some or all of the measures now be reversed?’

There is still the need for social distancing and the creation of safer spaces. The intention, therefore, is to maintain the safe spaces which are in place whilst keeping the matter under review, as circumstances dictate.

(D) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

When will we have a functional IT system that avoids constant drop outs and loss of email drafts?

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

The ICT team has been working hard to support service delivery during the pandemic, facilitating major changes in ways of working for staff, managing the business as usual service operations – some of which have increased demand linked to remote working - and implementing a complete overhaul of the IT infrastructure.

The latter programme is a core part of our IT Strategy, which was approved in late 2019 by both Stevenage and East Herts. This programme is progressing at pace and will support improved resilience and performance overall. While the service tries to prevent impacts on service delivery, there has been some intermittent disruption (including recently on 2nd December) related to work to deliver essential upgrades.

The Council’s storage servers have been upgraded and this will be followed in quarter four, 2020/2021 with a complete replacement of the core network devices, which will improve performance and security. This will be followed by a complete replacement of the councils Virtual Desktop (hosted desktop) software and hardware, upgrading all staff and members to Windows 10 and also supplying Office 365. The latter will also enable access outside of the hosted desktop to email, providing enhanced access. This will complete the second phase of the infrastructure replacement programme. The next and final stage will be replacement of Firewalls and additionally network monitoring tools.

Disconnections from the Council’s systems can be caused by many issues, but the above programme of work should remove any internal issues. With staff and Members are working remotely, there are also other potential factors outside our control, particularly the stability and speed of a user’s home broadband connection. The Service Desk team are able to provide support to help resolve any specific issues for an individual user.

(E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

'Will the Council agree to extend the current 3 hours free parking in the Primett Road (former Waitrose) car park, from its current end date in January 2021, for another period of 6 months, to encourage business and trading in the Old Town?'

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

The decision to commit to this initiative was introduced in August 2020 for a period of six months. This, along with Government affording local Councils new powers to offer pavement licences for food and drink outlets, was considered complementary to aid sector recovery and enable safe movements in the Old Town.

The Council will continue to monitor the situation and will avail itself of any funding or support from Government or elsewhere for the benefit of Stevenage-based businesses. Given the fluidity of the situation, we will review the position in the New Year, and ahead of February 2021.

(F) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

In view of the recent announcement by Rishi Sunak of the £4 billion Levelling Up Fund for local infrastructure projects that Councils can bid for, subject to receiving support from the local MP, and deliverable before the next planned general election in 2024, how many projects, and on what items, does SBC envisage bringing forward under the Levelling Up agenda that will satisfy the Stevenage MP?

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The Council welcomes the opportunity to bid for funding to help deliver much-needed infrastructure improvements in the town. The strength of our regeneration programme, and the proactive role the Council has taken in prioritising town centre regeneration and housing development, should put us in a good position to bid for any funding that we may be eligible for. It is important that the Government recognises that "levelling-up" is not just about a north-south divide. Many places like Stevenage are in need of investment and regeneration, as recognised through our inclusion in the Towns Fund programme. We await further details of the specific criteria of this fund before being able to comment on the nature of any potential submissions, and we would welcome constructive involvement from the MP of Stevenage.