

**COUNCIL – 24 FEBRUARY 2021****MEMBERS QUESTIONS****Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs**

(A) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth -

'Why has it taken so long for the Council to apply planning enforcement proceedings to a house under construction at 8 Magellan Close, despite repeated and detailed e-mails to the Planning Department from local residents and councillors recording blatant breaches of planning permission?'

***Answer (Councillor John Gardner)***

*The Council is committed to ensuring that Developers working in the Borough respect planning law and planning conditions. Each case is assessed on its merits and legal action taken where necessary. It is not appropriate to comment on individual cases in this public meeting. Officers will be happy to discuss this matter outside the meeting of Council if that is helpful.*

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness -

'What updates have the Council been given about progress on the commencement of works to the Gresley Park Development?'

***Answer (Councillor John Gardner)***

*The Gresley Park Development is in East Hertfordshire District Council area and they would be best placed to advise in relation to this application. The Developer of this site (Pigeon Developments) has also provided an update and is in a position to provide updates directly to Members where requested: "In summary, the S106 was signed in December 2020 and the permission was issued on 18<sup>th</sup> December....the next steps now will be to discharge the various pre-commencement conditions attached to the hybrid permission and submit applications for Reserved Matters approval (later this year)."*

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC -

'The 7 replacement Stevenage 'town entry' signs recently appeared at the main entrances to the town, and my investigations reveal that the cost to Stevenage Council Tax payers is £5,240, which includes paying an artist to design them, and that the decision to spend funds on this project was that of the Leader alone.

- a. Why was such an important and publicly visible symbol of Stevenage not allowed to be discussed with other councillors or the tax paying public?
- b. How many complaints about the old signs were received, and from whom?
- c. What was wrong with the old signs?
- d. Why has the information contained on the old style of signs been omitted?

- e. Why was this project imperative at a time when, largely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, SBC's finances are in a precarious position and savage service cuts are being made by the Labour Executive Members?'

**Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):**

*Introductory response - The Council has replaced several town entry signs at the main entrances to Stevenage. Many of these signs were in a poor state of repair and existing budgets were used to erect replacement signage to welcome visitors and residents to the town.*

- a. Why was such an important and publicly visible symbol of Stevenage not allowed to be discussed with other councillors or the tax paying public?

*The "Welcome to Stevenage" signs were in need of replacement as several were in a poor condition. There was a small cost for adapting an existing design, which was met from existing maintenance and repair budgets. The allocation, design and principle of replacing the signs were agreed by the relevant Assistant Director and Strategic Director, in consultation with the Leader and Portfolio Holder.*

- b. How many complaints about the old signs were received, and from whom?

*Officers had identified several of the signs were in poor condition. Some complaints had also been received from members of the public, but personal details of those making comments on the signs have not been recorded.*

- c. What was wrong with the old signs?

*The steel frames supporting the old signs were corroded through in places. Sign faces were faded, there were examples of the front of the signs cracking, and in some cases the surface had also become wrinkled.*

- d. Why has the information contained on the old style of signs been omitted?

*In the interests of simplicity and decluttering it was felt appropriate to keep the signs focussed on the central "welcome" message.*

- e. Why was this project imperative at a time when, largely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, SBC's finances are in a precarious position and savage service cuts are being made by the Labour Executive Members?'

*The project was first identified in September 2019. Due to an underspend with regards to nameplate signage in 2020/21, the replacement of the signs was completed within existing approved budgets.*

(D) Question from Councillor Graham Snell -

'At the last Planning and Development Committee meeting, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, an item was discussed about various options regarding dramatic changes to Lytton Way and the area around it in the Town Centre. This

included a list of options for long term redevelopments including a new Railway Station, Leisure Centre, Theatre and various other new buildings. A very detailed report was discussed in brief and noted at the P&D meeting which was produced in part by David Lock Associates, described as 'Stevenage Connection, Area Action Plan'.

- a. How long has this project been in the planning stage?
- b. How much did the David Lock Report actually cost including an estimate of the cost of officer involvement?
- c. Has the Public Consultation timetable taken into account the long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and the widely projected changes to work practices, particularly on much of the Retail Industry?'

**Answer (Councillor John Gardner):**

*Introductory response - This report has been considered by Planning and Development Committee, Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee during January and February 2021.*

*Following consultation with stakeholders and the public, the Area Action Plan will be further considered through relevant Committees. The plan is at an early stage of formation and is being widely consulted upon in order to seek to identify the best possible redevelopment options and plans for this 'gateway' area.*

- a. How long has this project been in the planning stage?

*The requirement to produce the Stevenage Station Gateway Area Action Plan (site area TC4 as identified in the Local Plan) resulted from a letter from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in March 2019. This letter lifted the Holding Direction which had been placed on the Stevenage Borough Local Plan in 2017. The first version of the Area Action Plan (AAP), the "Issues and Options" report, has been developed by consultancy David Lock Associates for Stevenage Borough Council. David Lock Associates were appointed in 2019/20 to commence preparation of the draft Issues and Options AAP.*

- b. How much did the David Lock Report actually cost including an estimate of the cost of officer involvement?

*To date, costs incurred for procuring and utilising the services of David Lock Associates have totalled c. £18,000 (including VAT). The Planning Policy Manager is responsible for the output on the Stevenage Borough Council side, with support from the Assistant Director: Planning & Regulation and colleagues in the Regeneration team. In addition, Hertfordshire County Council are very likely to be involved in the near future in Highway Modelling and Scenario work related to the AAP on Lytton Way and surrounding areas of Stevenage for which there will be cost implications.*

- c. Has the Public Consultation timetable taken into account the long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and the widely projected changes to work practices, particularly on much of the Retail Industry?'

*Yes. At the Executive meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021 and Overview and Scrutiny Committee it was confirmed that there will be a full consultation plan in place to seek wide contributions from statutory consultees, businesses, residents and stakeholder groups. A number of methods will be used to inform this plan. The impact of Covid-19 on working practices and in particular, employment and retail has been recognised in the Issues and Options draft and will continue to be recognised in the Area Action Plan as it develops.*

- (E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren -

'According to the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership 2019/2020 Annual Report, the percentage of household waste recycled in Stevenage has now declined to less than 40%. Stevenage has also had the lowest recycling rate of all the ten local authorities in Hertfordshire for the past 5 years and with very little improvement in this time. What action does the Council plan to take to improve this rate?

The Annual Report can be found here:

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/environment-and-planning/waste-and-recycling/residual-waste-treatment-contracts/hwp-annual-report-2019.20.pdf>

**Answer (Councillor John Gardner):**

*During 2019/20 the recycling rate in Stevenage dropped by 0.5% to 39.5%. Recycling rates can be affected by a number of factors, such as the type of housing in an area, density of homes, and the relative deprivation of an area. For example, in 2018-19, 85% of local authorities that are among the top 20% most deprived, have household recycling rates below the overall average of 42%. By contrast, just one in five of the 20% least deprived areas have a below-average recycling rate.*

*The Waste and Recycling team have worked hard to maintain a visible, efficient, safe and effective collection system during the pandemic. At different points, increased time at home has meant a level of increase in materials collected. The work of the Waste and Recycling team to support the town in this difficulty chapter has been widely recognised by the public and by Members.*

*The restrictions in place over the last 12 months due to Covid, have had a significant impact on our ability to engage with the community to promote waste minimisation and improve recycling / reuse. We hope that later in 2021 we can re-start our events, school visits, community presentations and face to face engagement again.*

*A report that the Waste & Resources Action Partnership (WRAP) produced for Stevenage in 2019 showed that:*

- When compared to all other UK authorities, the Council falls into the top 50% for the capture of metal cans, plastic bottles and mixed plastic packaging.*
- When compared to other authorities in the eastern region, the Council falls into the top 50% for the capture of metal cans, plastic bottles and mixed plastic packaging.*
- When compared to similar authorities in the using Office for National Statistics (ONS) area classification, the Council falls into the top 50% for the capture of metal cans, plastic bottles and mixed plastic packaging.*

*Across the country a number of authorities are at a relatively consistent level in terms of their recycling rate. Following the approval of the Household Waste Policy in 2020, Officers are developing a strategy to support residents in minimising waste and maximising recycling and reuse of materials. Some of the potential actions identified to date could include:*

- reviewing the criteria for larger residual bins or use of smaller residual bins*
- considering a separate weekly food waste collection service in 2022/23 in line with pending legislation, reviewing recycling facilities for residents living in flat blocks, with the aim of improving access to these facilities, alongside a campaign to encourage greater uptake;*
- supporting local re-use initiatives, and*
- consideration of on-the-go recycling facilities, and associated education / campaign, in the town centre, High Street, and Neighbourhood Centres.*

*Early work with WRAP suggests that steps such as these, including a reduction to 180litre bins and separate food waste collections, could result in increase in our recycling rate.*

*WRAP also noted that we perform comparably or better than average, in terms of the efficiency of our kerbside collections.*