

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Nicholas Leech

'Why are Stevenage Borough Council recycling rates so far below our neighbouring councils according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS)*?'

* See [Table 1: Local Authority Collected and Household Waste Statistics 2014-15 to 2020-21, England](#)

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The "waste hierarchy" ranks waste management options according to what is best for the environment. It gives top priority to preventing waste in the first place, but where waste is created it then gives priority to preparing it for re-use, followed by recycling. In the five years prior to Covid (2014-15 to 2019/20), Stevenage achieved a 7.5% decrease in the amount of residual waste produced by residents, despite an increase of around 4.5% in the number of households within the town. During this same period recycling rates rose from 38.2% to 39.5%. The Council will continue to campaign for less waste, but to also increase up-take of re-use and recycling where necessary. The Council has developed a range of options to increase recycling participation, and is awaiting the release of the Government's Resources & Waste Strategy to ensure consistency of approach and access to 'new burdens' funding.

There are a number of contributory factors to the recycling rate in Stevenage:

- Many of the other Local Authorities in Hertfordshire offer a separate food waste collection service. Regular weekly collections tend to encourage residents to be more proactive in their recycling of food waste. Hertsmere and Three Rivers are pilot study districts for a food waste recycling initiative, which could be increasing their food waste collections.*

A report by WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) advised that the introduction of separate weekly food waste collections in Stevenage would help increase household recycling rates by an anticipated 4-5%. Officers have been undertaking work to consider this, alongside the emerging national Resources & Waste Strategy, with the intention of rolling the new service out when Government 'new burdens' funding is available to cover the additional costs.

- We currently experience lower recycling rates at our many flat blocks in the town. We will begin to address the issue through improving understanding and education of recycling to flat block residents. However, not all of Stevenage flat blocks are currently provided with on-site recycling facilities. This is due to lack of access and/or lack of space for recycling facilities. A*

project is being developed to provide or improve recycling facilities in some flat blocks, as a pilot, when funding is available.

- Many of our neighbouring authorities provide a 180lt or 140lt refuse bin to their residents. This limits the amount of space for their residents to dispose of residual waste, thereby encouraging them to recycle more. Historically, Stevenage has provided a 240lt bin for residual waste, and that is what the vast majority of our residents have. The Stevenage Waste Policy, adopted in 2020, sets out that SBC will provide residents with a 180lt bin in future. However, the cost to provide a new 180lt wheeled bin to every household in Stevenage would be in excess of £750,000, so the new smaller bins are currently being rolled out on a needs basis, ie. the smaller bins being provided to residents as a new one is requested. Over time with smaller refuse bins in place for all households in Stevenage, WRAP indicate that a 4-5% increase in recycling rates could be achieved.*
- Most Hertfordshire authorities offer their residents a co-mingled recycling collection ie. one wheeled bin for tins, cans, plastic, paper and card, which may encourage higher recycling rates. In Stevenage we currently collect recycling in separate receptacles. Historically, the Council's ability to sell separate recycling materials has enabled us to obtain the best prices to offset the cost of operating the service, and the annual income from these sales has been in the region of £500,000 plus. However, with the proposed changes in the national Resources and Waste Strategy our ability to generate income to help off-set the cost of delivering waste management services may be reduced. Officers have already undertaken some preliminary work to consider our options (benefits and implications) for delivering our recycling services, including separate weekly food waste collections, differently in future.*

Consultation on the national Resources & Waste Strategy has been carried out on a phased basis since 2019. Many of the local considerations for how we deliver, and fund, recycling services in the future are dependent on the outcome of the consultation. It is currently anticipated that further guidance will be made available by Government in Spring 2022, but initial indications are that it should be possible to increase the recycling rate in Stevenage to 50%+.

(B) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren

'Even before recent storms damage, we were receiving numerous reports about SBC owned fences not being repaired for months, sometimes years, after having been reported.

- a. What was the reason for this?*
- b. What actions has the Council taken to put the matter right?'*

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

We have received over 300 reports of damaged fences following the most recent storms, and we are expecting this figure to rise, which places a huge burden on our capacity and resources. We appreciate the work of Stevenage

Direct Services colleagues in responding swiftly and effectively to the challenges presented, from fallen trees and safety challenges, to cleansing and clean-up operations, and other repair works.

Annual storms and high winds increase the demands on the Repairs service, which means cases sometimes have to be re-prioritised, resulting in delays to some cases.

As with a wide number of councils and Registered Social Landlords, the impact of Covid-19 has also been a factor, at times resulting in the delivery of essential / urgent works only across all Repairs trades. A resultant impact of the pandemic was also a global materials shortage, affecting a range of sectors.

We are assessing and prioritising the most recent reports, and are undertaking repairs via this analysis, using in-house staff and contractors, but it will take some time to work our way through these and we are grateful for customers' understanding during this period.

Maintaining fencing is a challenging aspect for many social landlords, who are balancing investment decisions in housing stock, alongside issues such as fencing.

We are assessing the longer term challenges and implications, to identify the options going forward for further consideration.

We are reviewing our Asset Management Strategy and supporting plans to help inform the refreshed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30 year Business Plan, and our approach to fencing and future programmes will be incorporated as part of the review.

(C) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

'Which of the following has been the cause of the additional funding necessary to complete the new Bus Interchange:

Was it a failure by the contractor to include the additional works in their tender?; or

Was it a failure by the Council to properly scope the works before inviting tenders?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

The Bus Interchange project has seen the delivery of new indoor passenger waiting facilities, a covered concourse with bus gates, bus priority improvements on Lytton Way, enhanced pedestrian links between the rail station, bus interchange and Town Square, and the refurbishment of the station lift. The early stages of the project were exceptionally challenging. As Growth Deal 3 funding was restricted by the Government for over three years, this Council had to invest at risk, to ensure that if the money was released, designs and contracts would be sufficiently advanced to enable us to use the money for

the betterment of the town, rather than see it returned to Government, without any extension to the spend window.

In addition, the construction period of the bus interchange has coincided with the pandemic, causing untold pressures on material prices and availability, supply chains and safe working practices on site. Whilst a small increase to the overall budget was required to ensure that all of the benefits could be delivered, the project delivers excellent value for money, and we are proud of the way the project has been delivered in the face of adversity.

(D) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

'What steps are the Council taking to alleviate the impact on local residents of the unwelcome and unnecessary development at Gresley Park?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Stevenage Borough Council raised concerns over the impact of the Gresley Park development during the planning application that was considered by East Herts Council. It was acknowledged that although the development is in East Herts, the new residents would use parts of Stevenage's infrastructure to meet their needs.

Working collaboratively with East Herts Planning team, officers were able to secure direct payments in the Section 106 Obligation to SBC of £668,000 for Stevenage leisure and sports facilities; £437,000 to the NHS for Stevenage surgeries; £5.5M to Hertfordshire County Council (as education provider) for secondary schools in Stevenage; on site primary schools; subsidised bus routes into Stevenage and extended cycle routes and crossings into Stevenage. We trust this will go somewhere to mitigating the impacts of the development and providing access for the new residents to Stevenage as a whole.

(E) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

Reference the recent traffic difficulties along Lytton Way, and acknowledging that HCC are the highway authority:

- a. What part did SBC play in the arrangements implemented?
- b. In retrospect, what should have been done better?
- c. What further disruption to traffic on Lytton Way is expected as a result of future town centre regeneration works?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Works to Lytton Way have been carried out for a number of months, in conjunction with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and Ringway, to implement the highway improvements required by the bus interchange planning permission. Recent lane closures to carry out works to the central reservation, which was previously in a state of disrepair, were consistent with the methodology used over the past six months. However, due to the increase in traffic following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, and high demand for the

Town Centre, the lane closures resulted in a significantly greater level of disruption than at other stages of the project.

Despite the impact of Storm Eunice, the works were completed on time, ensuring the period of disruption was as short as possible. The Council is delivering a large-scale town centre regeneration programme, with the aim of keeping the town centre operational during the programme, rather than closing it down. This will unfortunately result in a level of disruption that is unavoidable at different stages in the works, but is essential to enable us to deliver an improved town centre.

(F) Question from Graham Snell

'On the recently installed hoarding around the now closed Swingate car park in Stevenage Town Centre, there has been a number of information boards telling the story of Stevenage, which are very interesting.

- a. Are these the same boards that were previously around the new bus station?
- b. What was the cost of (i) supplying them (ii) installing them and (iii) who paid?'

Answer (Councillor John Gardner):

Following positive feedback relating to the digital Stevenage timeline, which is available in full on the Stevenage Museum website, the existing design has been re-used on the hoardings currently located at Swingate House. This will enable the design and content to provide maximum value for money, by being used multiple times within the town centre. The total cost for the design, manufacture and installation of the timeline at Swingate is approximately £5,000, which will be funded by external project funding. The hoardings provide an excellent opportunity to showcase art and culture, as well as inform people about the regeneration proposals.

(G) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

'Supplementary question to the question submitted by Cllr. Wren to Council for the 15th December 2021 meeting. Were any Government grants or funding schemes available for the Council to use for insulation or other works as part of the Major Refurbishment Contract?'

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

At the time the Major Refurbishment Contract (MRC) was procured there was not any applicable funding available to support the delivery of the programme. Whilst there has since been some Government funding which the Council can bid for, this has been focused on individual properties in an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band D or below and not flat blocks. We do not have certainty over any future funding which may be available, and to date the Council has not secured any funding which would be applicable to, or support, the delivery of works to flat blocks through the MRC programme.