

COUNCIL – 14 DECEMBER 2022

MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

“Does the Council consider the warmth residents suffering from fuel poverty in the south of Stevenage as equally important as those residents living in the north and centre of the town?”

**Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):**

*It is a real tragedy that even before the current national energy crisis, the Office of National Statistics highlighted that over 3M people in the UK were living with fuel poverty. It is an even greater tragedy that research from Citizens Advice, the Social Market Foundation and other organisations further highlighted that over 2M people are in debt on their utility bills, and up to 7.2m people could be in fuel poverty by next spring. It is also reported that 40% of the population don't have £500 set aside for a rainy day.*

*As the largest social landlord in the town we are delivering a number of work programmes including Decent Homes, the Major Refurbishment Contract (MRC) and Social Housing Decarbonisation (SHDF) which will help reduce fuel poverty by making our homes more energy efficient, including work being undertaken at homes in the south of the town. These works include measures, where required, such as loft, cavity and external wall insulation, solar panels and other measures aimed at improving the energy efficiency of the residents' homes. We have just submitted another ambitious funding bid to government to help further drive this programme.*

*I am a proud and passionate advocate for equality, working with the Equalities Commission to look at all the steps that can be taken to tackle inequality, which limits the opportunities and affects the lives of so many families.*

*I am also deeply proud of our work to create a warm spaces network across the town. We will continue to reach out and work with any community group or business across the town, who can provide access to warm space, regardless of which part of the town they are based in:*

*<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/stevenage-warm-spaces-network>. Please direct interested organisations to [community.development@stevenage.gov.uk](mailto:community.development@stevenage.gov.uk) to help us expand the network.*

(B) Question from Councillor Chris Howells

“There are ongoing issues with a lack of response to residents on housing repairs. They are then contacting Councillors, and this is no doubt creating more work for Officers. How can the Council improve communications with residents, so they stop feeling ignored?”

**Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):**

*The majority of responsive repairs works are completed to the customers satisfaction, for example at Quarter 2, 84.8% of customers contacted by telephone reported that they were satisfied with their repair.*

*91.7% of repair appointments were kept and 93.9% of repairs were fixed first time. That said, the service remains under considerable pressure and there are ongoing resourcing as outlined clearly within the quarterly performance reports to the Executive and complaints challenges that officers are working hard to address.*

*Members will be aware that a key area of complaints was the backlog for fencing renewals and repairs. This is being addressed through a new funded programme of works across the Town, but will take some time to complete.*

*Improvements to the digital systems that support the Repairs Service are progressing well, an example is the text messaging service that went live at the end of November which messages to tenants to confirm appointments made, sends reminders, and also sends a message when the operative is on route to the repair. We will launch the self-service function in early 2023 which will enable tenants to book their appointments online 24/7 at their convenience.*

*Beyond this our Officers remain focused on enhancing and optimising the Repairs Service going forward.*

(C) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

“Does the Leader of the Council believe that all politicians aspiring for public office in Stevenage should uphold the highest standards of honesty, trust and transparency?”

**Answer (Baroness Taylor of Stevenage):**

*Yes. That is why the Council has very robust and long-standing procedures for dealing with complaints against conduct. This means that any complaint can be thoroughly investigated and dealt with appropriately according to the Council's Code of Conduct.*

(D) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren

“Are other options for the inappropriate location for the proposed primary school in the Town Centre being considered?”

**Answer (Baroness Taylor of Stevenage):**

*Hertfordshire County Council have a duty to ensure there are sufficient school places for all children and young people in Stevenage. All district and borough Councils need to have a Local Plan in place, to allocate land for new jobs, infrastructure such as schools and health services, homes and protecting vital green areas.*

*Through the process to adopt the Local Plan, Hertfordshire County Council identified the need for new primary school provision, in Stevenage North, Stevenage West, and the town centre, along with other school expansions. As a result of this, sites were considered that could meet this requirement.*

*The Local Plan was adopted in May 2019 and includes policies which enable Hertfordshire County Council to provide a new primary school, in a suitable urban form in the town centre and meet their obligations. This is reflected in the resolution to grant permission made by the Planning and Development Committee in respect of the SG1 programme (October 2020).*

*We would expect Hertfordshire County Council to ensure any new urban school learns from others around the country and will provide high quality education for local children.*

*It is not appropriate to discuss this matter further in a meeting of Council, given it relates to adopted planning policy and could potentially relate to a future Reserve Matters application to be received from Hertfordshire County Council.*

*In relation to a petition submitted to the Council regarding another planning matter, the legal advice Officers received concluded that a 'decision to review planning decisions and Local Plan policy at a Council meeting is highly inappropriate and undermines the statutory planning processes'*

(E) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

"IT failures at SBC have continued since this Group last raised the issue. In the last year:

- (a) how many major failures have occurred?
- (b) how many (estimated) work hours have been lost or disrupted?
- (c) what has been the (estimated) cost to council tax payers?"

**Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):**

*In the last year there have been two major ICT incidents.*

*The first, on the 28 April 2022, occurred because there were not enough desk top computer log in slots available on the servers. To address this issue a strict log in protocol was implemented which prioritised access for key services.*

*The second one was on the 9 November which lasted for 7 days. It was triggered by the need to undertake a vital upgrade to our networks. The related issues impacted mainly on those who had migrated to Microsoft 365. Those remaining on windows seven were not greatly affected. Initially the officers and Members who were affected could not access their shared files, but the position improved throughout the week as the fixes were undertaken. However, it should be noted that e-mails were available throughout on mobile devices and some files could still be accessed subject to where they were stored on the Council's ICT system.*

*Without staff time recording it is not possible to assess the actual amounts of time lost and costs incurred due to the outages. Members will recall through past briefings that we are undertaking a major upgrade to our IT infrastructure, the likes of which has not been completed previously. Post each incident we consider lessons learned to help inform our preparations for future changes/upgrades to the IT system.*

(F) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“Given the significant financial pressures the Council will find itself in the future, what assessment has been or will be undertaken to establish any possible efficiency savings from either outsourcing or pooling current council services with other neighbouring authorities?”

**Answer (Councillor Mr Joan Lloyd):**

*All Councils have faced a challenging financial environment for more than a decade and there is no immediate prospect of this changing for the better. The local government sector has shouldered a significant burden of cuts. For Stevenage, this has meant the loss of £5.2m government grant funding whilst also having to absorb over £6m of inflationary pressures. We also now need to find £1.5m savings in 2023/24, a large part of which has been driven by increased energy and staffing costs following agreement of the 2022/23 pay deal.*

*Our teams have been working hard to identify savings to seek to ensure the Council remains financially resilient, while continuing to invest in local priorities and key services. The Council continues to progress a wide range of financial improvement options including the approved transformation programme and our Co-operative Commercial Strategy driven initiatives which are aimed at improving the quality and responsiveness of our services. The Council is also currently working with the other Herts Districts & Boroughs and the County Council to consider opportunities to improve waste and recycling services along with any associated efficiencies.*

*SBC is already part of shared services with other Council's in a range of areas including ICT, Audit, Revenues and Benefits, parking enforcement, CCTV services, Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse, legal services and Building Control. The Council remains willing to consider other shared service options as long as the related benefits are deemed to be acceptable and worth pursuing on a business case by business case basis.*

(G) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

“Response and answering times for telephone contacts at the SBC Customer Service Centre have been appalling for several years and local social media continues to be full of complaints about this. Recognising that we have also repeatedly raised this issue and that not all customers either can go online for their particular query, or may not want to do so:

- (a) what plans have SBC management got to address this issue by deploying additional resources?
- (b) will you undertake to rectify this gross failing by June 2023?"

**Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):**

*We remain committed to providing both telephone and other access options, so that all customers can use our services. No other district in Hertfordshire has longer opening hours for telephone enquiries.*

*This year and as reported through the quarterly performance reports to the Executive we've seen a significant number of Customer Services staff moving on to more senior roles elsewhere in the council. While this has been of considerable benefit in terms of SBC retaining trained and committed staff, the converse of this is that it also reduces capacity in Customer Services.*

*In the face of considerable local, county level, regional level and national pressure on the jobs market we have made a number of interventions to improve staffing including an improved pay offer, additional recruitment advertising and fast-tracked shortlisting of candidates. We have also boosted our capacity to train our new starting staff so we can get them up to speed as fast as possible.*

*We have also put in place new telephone options to better prioritise enquiries, and provide more digital services for people who can use them. Our Transformation programme is focused around providing good quality on line 24 hour 7 day a week services so residents can access them at a time convenient to them if they wish and are able to do so.*

*I would also add, although we will continue to strive to improve the service offered, the average wait to be answered time fell by a third in Quarter two of this year compared to the performance in the first Quarter.*

(H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

"SBC is sometimes slow and unresponsive over dealing with perceived breaches of planning conditions. Will a dedicated Planning Enforcement Officer now be appointed?"

**Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):**

*All local authorities are operating in a difficult financial climate. For Stevenage, this has meant the loss of £5.2M government grant whilst also having to absorb over £6M of inflationary pressures. Members are aware that much work is underway to ensure the Council has a robust budget for 2023/24. Part of our financial strategy is to ensure there are sufficient resources to support statutory functions and priorities such as Planning.*

*Our Planning team is structured to provide development management support, and for officers to be able to investigate and take enforcement action when required. The vast majority of developments do not require enforcement action,*

*and we are able to oversee our enforcement functions within existing resources and without additional cost to tax payers.*

*Around 90% of cases raised with the team by residents and other members of the public result in no action as no breach has occurred or no action is deemed to be required. Where officers assess as breach has occurred and action is needed, steps have been taken including resolutions at Committee, use of Planning Contravention Notices and other enforcement tools under officer delegated powers.*

(I) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

“SBC consults only with immediate neighbours on planning applications. Will SBC widen the scope of such consultations, so that, for example, those with a clear view of the proposed development are also consulted?”

***Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):***

*I support the spirit of this question, and believe that, whilst legislation sets down minimum requirements, we should look to arrive at a ‘Stevenage Standard’, in those circumstances where we can see that wider consultation is likely to be needed. I do not think that you could just say ‘with a clear view’ of the proposal, since that itself is often debateable, and subjective.*

*As Council will be aware, the issuing of notices on prospective planning applications is guided by legislation. Stevenage Borough Council has adopted a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which sets standards above this and guides how Officers issue notices.*

*Generally, the legislation sets out that we notify adjoining neighbours and, or put up a site notice. For larger developments (called major applications) or listed buildings, letters are issued to neighbouring properties, site notices and press notices.*

*In addition, residents and businesses can sign up for online notifications, and for larger developments, the Council encourages developers to undertake early stage consultation ahead of submitting an application.*

*Our approach meets and exceeds legislative requirements, and any change to the issuing of notices would require an update to the SCI, and additional funding to be allocated.*