

COUNCIL – 19 JULY 2023

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Graham Lawrence CC

“After spending so much time on children's play areas in the Borough, inspecting, reviewing upgrading some and closing others, does the Council think it should maintain those that remain, rather than allow them to become damaged and overrun with plant growth and rubbish?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Council has a two-person team who are responsible for the inspection, maintenance and repair of all the play equipment across the Town.

All equipment receives a routine weekly visual inspection to check that it is safe for use. There is also a programme of comprehensive quarterly examinations, plus each year all play areas receive an independent inspection to make sure that they meet the British and European safety standards.

Broken equipment can sometimes be repaired straight away, but if this isn't possible it will be immobilised until it can be fixed. Standard items can typically be repaired within two working days.

The Council is nearing the end of a £1.5 million investment programme to improve play areas across the Town. Larger sites, like main parks and bigger open spaces, will have provision for toddlers through to teenagers. Smaller sites will include equipment for younger children. The Council wants to make sure that play areas are fun and exciting places for children and teenagers to enjoy. This programme was delayed by Covid and more recently due to an ongoing vacancy, but the Team aiming to complete these works over the next two years.

Weed spraying to suppress growth is undertaken up to 3 times during the growing season. Litter picking is undertaken every two weeks and street bins are emptied weekly. If reports are received on matters such as broken glass or damaged equipment in between the scheduled visits, arrangements will be made for the area to be visited within one working day of the report being received.

Residents can report any concerns about a play area via the Council's web pages at <https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/leisure-culture-and-wellbeing/parks-and-open-spaces/play-areas>

(B) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby CC

“To try and avoid road sweepers having to skirt round parked cars, leaving unsightly detritus on the roads, could the Council advise residents in advance, asking them not to park where there is such detritus on planned routes?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Council has a 3 monthly schedule for the sweeping of the Borough’s main roads, which can vary a bit, subject to seasonal conditions. The Council is now operating a 7 day a week operation. The early signs of this are positive in relation to the outputs achieved.

Logistically it is not possible to put advanced warning signs out asking for residents to keep roads clear, again noting that the schedule must remain flexible to account for seasonal conditions which presents a further challenge. Also, the practical implication is that this would divert parking into neighbouring streets which may not have the capacity to absorb it.

The Council has sought to work with residents in some locations, including one road which has poor access and parking at capacity. The residents contact the Team to arrange a date for cleansing, and then liaise between themselves to try and ensure that the road is clear. It is not always 100% successful, but works better than if the sweepers were to just arrive without notice.

(C) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

“Does the Leader still believe that the £110,000 refurbishment of Shephalbury Park's tennis courts, which was funded by the Lawn Tennis Association and Conservative government, is ‘fantastic news’ for Stevenage people?”

Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):

The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), working in partnership with Sport England, developed a £30.4 million package to refurbish 4,500 public tennis courts in areas requiring investment. Over recent years, the Council has pursued conversations with the LTA to rejuvenate tennis provision in the town and a number of schemes were looked at, as the LTA had identified Stevenage as an area of significant need. We were and continue to be delighted that Stevenage was successful in this programme and welcome this long overdue investment in one sport and believe it is fantastic news (but long overdue) for Stevenage people.

After years of having funding removed from this Council by the Conservative government, which has severely impacted our ability to upgrade leisure and sports facilities for our residents, we welcome any opportunity to work collaboratively to secure improvements, including with Government departments. A range of sport clubs and groups across the town talk to us about ongoing lack of investment from previous funding bodies due to central government’s shifting priorities. We therefore have to be creative as a Council

and do our best to secure scarce resources for sport facilities as they become available.

In the absence of core funding from Government, securing such funding is fundamental to the Council and local groups, in terms of being able to provide and sustain facilities and services to the town's residents. Developing these funding bids is not a simple process - it requires dedicated work and precious resources and unfairly pitches councils in direct competition with each other, with no guarantee of success. Funding is therefore often awarded based on the resources that councils have for bid-writing rather than community need.

(D) Question from Councillor Chris Howells

"When will this Council start to take the safety of pedestrians in the Town Centre seriously? We are having to dodge cyclists, skateboarders and e-scooters in what is meant to be a pedestrianised zone. It is hardly surprising that Stevenage as a Town suffers from a poor reputation across the County when this is what visitors get to see."

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

The SoSafe Community Safety Partnership takes any reports of dangerous cycling, skateboarding and e-scooters very seriously. The Council has worked with the Police for a number of years to identify individuals and take appropriate enforcement action against them. In addition to this, the Police have also run local awareness campaigns and periodic 'crackdowns' in the town centre.

In relation to this type of incident, Council powers are limited and the criminal prosecution in respect of cycling in pedestrian areas rests with the Police. Through its partnership approach, the Council is supportive of any local campaigns to tackle anti-social behaviour such as this.

The Council's Community Safety team have not received recent reports from residents on this topic, so will continue to liaise with the Police, who have been proactive this month which includes a police presence in the town centre. The Council would urge members of the public to report concerns to the Police, the Council's Neighbourhood Wardens or Community Safety Team.

(E) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

"Will SBC undertake to consult with ward councillors ahead of Council sales of green space or other land for development?"

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

The Asset Management Strategy approved at the 11 July 2018 Executive included a key action for the Council to undertake locality reviews which identify potential sites (land and buildings) to release for sale to support the required investment in the Council's assets. Two reports were presented to Members at the Executive (and Overview and Scrutiny) dated 16 September 2020 and 20 January 2021 identifying a number of land sites for sale. As part of the disposal

process, consultation on potential sites was carried out with relevant departments (Green Spaces team and Planning department) and crucially Ward Councillors. As a result of the consultation, a number of sites were not recommended for sale. For those sites approved for disposal in the two reports, any officer or Member comments were included in the reports for transparency.

In addition, there are a number of smaller land sales (below £10,000 and categorised as a revenue transaction) approved by the Section 151 Officer. These are generally enquiries from residents looking to extend gardens or improve access to their homes and can relate to planning permissions obtained.

(F) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“What progress is being made on decarbonising the Council by its target of 2030?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Environment & Economy Select Committee has led a review into the Council’s performance on climate change over the last few years, and I thank Cllr McGuinness and the Committee for their valuable contributions. It is vital that we all work together, across all political parties, and across all parts of society to cut emissions and create a healthier environment for us all to live in.

No one organisation can tackle the climate crisis on its own, and to help engage widely in the town, the newly formed Climate Change Progress Group, is championing community initiatives across Stevenage.

It has been my pleasure to be a regular visitor to the E&E Select Committee, where I have set out the vital work on several pathways to reduce emissions, including the Council’s fleet and fuels, buildings, waste, the Council’s operations and engagement with our community. Officers are working on a detailed and comprehensive decarbonisation pathway for the Council’s fleet and fuels, including switching to biofuels, battery electrical vehicles for the smaller fleet, and on how vehicles are used.

Work is underway on the buildings the Council owns, conducting energy monitoring and audits and our key sites, investing to retrofit hundreds of Council homes, and supporting county-wide efforts on a Solar Together purchase scheme to deliver solar generation programme.

I have been clear throughout that we need to see Government helping broker financial solutions that can help us deliver locally. In a very difficult funding environment, we will need to see further support in future spending rounds, as this remains an obstacle across all of local government.

Officers have developed a climate tracker tool and are preparing a carbon action map to comprehensively understand all the different actions across the

Council related to carbon reduction. On top of that, we are trialling an Environment Impact Assessment Tool to support the decision-making.

The challenging areas remain around funding and behavioural change, but we are working with collaboratively to make the most of the opportunities available.

A full update on the Council's and Stevenage carbon footprint in 2022 will also be included in the annual Climate Change update report to the Executive in October 2023.

(G) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

“What publicity or other actions are the council promoting, in conjunction with the police, about the use of electric scooters being illegal when used other than on private land?”

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

As stated in my response to Cllr Howells' question, the Council's Community and Neighbourhood team, and other partners, will continue to support the police with any publicity and events to help raise awareness regarding the use of electric scooters. For example, our team of Officers supported the police with local engagement on cycling and e-scooters in the town centre in the first week of July this year.

The Police have published clear information on the use of e-scooters on their website: <https://www.herts.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/rs/road-safety/advice-escooters/>. In addition, the Road Safety Partnership have also released guidance and information on the topic, advising on the use of other solutions such as electric bikes, pedal bikes, and walking.

However, I recognise this is a national challenge, with trials of e-scooters rentals taking place in some parts of the country, and I would urge all Members of the Council to make representations to the Department of Transport to ensure clear guidance and appropriate regulation is forthcoming.

(H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

“Can the Council explain what the long-term plans are for the use of the currently vacant former car park area to the north of the new multi-storey car park on the train station site?”

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe)

The new Multi-Storey Car Park next to the railway station is up and running, providing over 600 new spaces for commuters, residents and business users, along with cycle facilities too. Part of the longer-term plan for the area is to make other parcels of land available for development to further improve what is a well-connected and highly visible part of the town centre.

Through the Stevenage Town Investment Plan funding package (£38.5M), funding has been allocated to support masterplanning around the station area,

to help this become a vibrant and attractive front door to the town and its economy.

The land to the north of the MSCP will be available for high-quality development, but no decisions have been reached at this stage.

(I) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

“Does the Council think that an electric bicycle hire scheme could be viable in Stevenage and help to meet our climate change objectives?”

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

The Council is currently undertaking a technical study to inform a procurement for a cycle hire scheme which will be progressed later this year. We hope to include e-bikes and cargo bikes within the scheme. Subject to funding we hope to launch it in Spring 2024. For those that are interested we are planning a public event at Stevenage Football Club about cycle hire in August and will confirm the exact date and time in due course.