

COUNCIL – 18 OCTOBER 2023

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

“A planning application for a large telecommunications mast on the pavement at The Glebe was refused by SBC recently, but SBC failed to ensure that the refusal was received by the applicant within the statutory period, so the large mast can go ahead. This is likely to upset a lot of residents.

Exactly what new procedures will be or have now been introduced to make sure that a debacle like this cannot be made by SBC in future?

In particular, why are such important legal notices sent by Royal Mail even though Royal Mail deliveries are notoriously unreliable these days? Are they sent by Royal Mail first class service?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

As Councillors Parker and Booth have been advised, this was particularly disappointing for the Council as we had allowed seven days for first-class postal delivery. Whilst our allowance of time for posting and processing have been increased to try and address this, the central Government approach to ‘approval by default’ for telecoms masts places the Council and local community at a disadvantage. This topic is a matter of concern which has been subject of discussion and focus by the Planning and Development Committee along with being raised directly with the Secretary of State.

(B) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

“Is the Executive Member satisfied that the Council robustly punishes the perpetrators of fly-tipping?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Council investigates all reports of fly-tipping by working in partnership with partners and the community to seek to tackle this crime. We have been successful in obtaining funding from DEFRA, which we used to purchase mobile CCTV cameras and no fly-tipping signs along with other merchandise.

In Stevenage we use a range of enforcement tools to tackle fly-tipping, including Fixed Penalty Notices and Community Protection Notices. We also encourage those guilty of fly-tipping to remove their own tips. As part of our commitment to tackling fly-tipping we introduced mobile CCTV and ‘No Fly-tipping’ signage to raise awareness of hotspot locations to deter possible perpetrators. We also increased our community engagement to raise awareness and improved their partnership working to ensure positive results.

Fly-tipping is a blight on our community, but by working co-operatively we can reduce it. From 1 March 2021 until 1 July 2022 we investigated 203 cases - in the same period 2022 until 2023 we investigated 130 cases which represents a 36% decrease in reports of fly-tipping to the team.

(C) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC

"Could you please provide an update on the progress and status of the Community Centre and associated shops within the Bragbury End development?"

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

I am pleased to see the regeneration of Kenilworth Close making great progress. I am sure Cllr Mitchell and all Members will join me in welcoming the new shops, and community space at the Kenilworth Close. The new shops and community space are at the advanced stages of construction and are being readied for handover to the Council.

This is anticipated to take place in a staged manner beginning February and March 2024 for the new shops. All being well, we hope that the community space and café will be handed over in around April or May. The development provides well-integrated and complimentary new facilities for the local community to enjoy.

A community space of approximately 57sqm will be available for residents to meet in and for bookings. This is located next to a large modern café, with a fantastic new outdoor public community area, in the heart of the neighbourhood and accessible to all.

Following this, we will then focus on Phase 2 of the construction project. The Phase 2 planning consent includes the provision of a new community centre and more much needed new housing for local people. This will be preceded by public consultation, given the length of time that has passed since the community was consulted at the start of the project. I look forward to us engaging with the local community in the months ahead.

(D) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

"Does the Executive Member believe that robust safeguarding measures are in place at the 108 Oaks Cross development to protect both the tenants and neighbouring properties?"

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The accommodation at 108 Oaks Cross provides an invaluable service for single non-priority homeless people within Stevenage. Without this provision there would be 25 individuals homeless and potentially rough sleeping in and around Stevenage. One of the rooms within the main house at 108 Oaks Cross is now an office for the Rough Sleeper Team to work from and to have meetings with the residents as they sometimes struggle to attend appointments

in town at the Customer Service Centre. This has increased engagement dramatically and residents' are pleased that there is someone is on hand to talk to. This also helps with safeguarding neighbouring properties as officers are more present on site and can swiftly respond to any issues.

The Rough Sleeper Team are in regular contact with residents and have a weekly meeting to discuss each case. Support agencies also work closely with the team to provide a holistic approach. The wrap around support offered to the individuals is provided by several local organisations:

- *Change, Grow, Live provide the support for drug and alcohol issues. Two floating support workers, as well as a part time doctor, attend the site and see the residents in person;*
- *MIND provide mental health floating support for residents, as well as helping them access mental health services through their GP; and*
- *OneYMCA (previously The Haven) also provide a dedicated support worker who works very closely with the Rough Sleeper Team, and is based at the site several days a week. He supports resident with any day-to-day issues they have, including benefits and job searching.*

Earlier this year officers received one complaint from a neighbouring property regarding a previous tenant. The Housing First Manager responded immediately and went to visit the couple. He investigated the issues they raised and took proportionate action in relation to the resident in question, who was asked to leave the property. Officers will continue to engage neighbours and take appropriate action where necessary.

Should Councillors have any specific concerns, please pass the details on to me for further investigation.

(E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

"What impact will the Prime Minister's recent announcements to delay the implementation of our net zero commitments have on the Council's operations?"

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

Thank you for the question. Our Annual Climate Progress Report was shared with the Executive last week, and along with discussions at Overview and Scrutiny Committee and E&E Select Committee, I welcome the ongoing interest and input from fellow Members into this vital topic.

In September 2023, the Prime Minister announced changes to the UK Government's green commitments, including a delay on the ban of new diesel and petrol vehicles from 2030 to 2035, noting though that most cars sold by 2030 will be electric due to decreased costs, improved performance, and a growing charging infrastructure. The Government also stated that no measures will be imposed on replacing current gas boilers with heat pumps until 2035, and with exemptions for particular types of home. The boiler upgrade scheme, was announced giving cash grants to replace boilers up to 50% of the value of

the boiler (£7,500). The Government also scrapped plans to compel landlords to improve the energy efficiency of their properties.

While Stevenage's target to be carbon neutral by 2030 remains in place, I see two particular challenges to our net zero ambitions. Firstly, ensuring there is sufficient funding for local authorities to undertake our local leadership role, acting as climate exemplars and conveners while also delivering statutory services. Secondly, if funding programmes or policies are postponed or uncertain, that could detrimentally impact upon any organisation in making the change to lower carbon alternatives.

Rest assured though, I remain committed to achieving net zero in the Council and in Stevenage, working across parties, with business, across the community and at grassroots level – local leadership and local action is vital.

(F) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

“What action is the Council taking to reduce tenancy fraud and the sub-letting of Council properties?”

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The Council takes action to prevent tenancy fraud and to ensure that its housing stock is only occupied by those with a legal right to do so.

The Council's approach to fraud is to comply with the Social Housing Regulatory Framework, including the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act 2013. This is done through working in partnership with other agencies including the Department of Work and Pensions, the Police and the Hertfordshire Shared Anti-Fraud Service (SAFS). Partner organisations share expertise, training, and information to target fraudulent activity across the whole county. SAFS has access to data-analytics, financial investigators and specialist intelligence functions to support its work and it provides training for front line officers in Housing to make them aware of new and emerging fraud risks, as well as know red-flags indicating fraud.

The Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy covers all aspects of tenancy fraud and sets out the Councils 'fraud response' roles of officers at all levels of the Council and its engagement with SAFS to provide a fraud awareness/prevention/investigation/prosecution resource. The types of fraud investigated include fraudulent housing applications, mutual exchanges and assignments; and property subletting and abandonment. All allegations are investigated by highly trained and professional Fraud Investigators working to guidelines and legislation laid down by the Government.

To prevent and identify suspected cases of fraud the Council also undertakes a range of actions including settling in visits for all new tenants, a programme of tenancy audits and spot visits; and checks on the habitants of a property at the point applications are received and/or repairs or gas safety checks are undertaken. The Council also subscribes to the National Fraud Initiative and the Herts FraudHub to help identify fraud occurring.

The Council will act against any tenant found to be committing tenancy fraud and will publicise successful prosecutions, where appropriate, to help prevent future cases arising. The Council website contains information on how residents can report tenancy fraud, including on how to contact the Council, SAFS and the National Fraud Hotline.

Dealing with fraud including subletting can be a lengthy and costly process. However, over the past three years the Council and its partners have recovered 15 properties and revenue and benefit overpayments linked to tenancy fraud totalling £139k. The Council has also prevented one fraudulent Right to Buy and delivered savings to the public purse of circa £464k.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

“Could the Leader of the Council please update the Council on progress following the passing of recent and future motions, including those on 19 July 2023 regarding consultation and the planning process; 8 March 2023 regarding pay for council and school workers and 8 March 2023 regarding Vaping?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

Thank you for the question.

Following the 19 July motion, the Portfolio Holder joined a meeting of the Planning and Development (P&D) Committee (2 October), to discuss measures to extend consultation in relation to smaller sites promoted by SBC, as it is important that those Members on P&D Committee had the opportunity to help shape the way forward. In the shorter-term, Councillors will continue to be made aware of all new applications via the weekly list they receive from the Planning team. In addition, the Planning and Development Committee Members supported a proposal to extend the consultation for relevant applications beyond those that adjoin the property, to other neighbouring properties, more than doubling the consultees, along with the publication of site notices. In the medium-term, Officers are looking to update the next iteration of the ‘Statement of Community Involvement’ to include a more comprehensive Stevenage standard in consultations, and the Council will also look to engage with local Councillors on small land sales at an earlier stage.

In relation to the motion for pay for Council staff, Officers submitted correspondence to Government, seeking central Government funding to cover the cost of any nationally agreed pay award. This submission noted the severe financial pressures faced by local authorities and the steep cost of living crisis affecting the community and our teams. The Council continues to meet local trade unions and participate through collective bargaining mechanisms. Employer-side representatives have made a final offer of £1,925 or 3.88% onto every scale point, whichever is higher, for 2023/24. No final agreement has yet been reached.

In respect of the motion on vaping, the Licensing Committee has not met since March 2023, but at its next meeting it will receive a presentation from the

Licensing Team, and will invite HCC Trading Standards colleagues to identify actions that they can take locally using their powers.

(H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

“The arrangements for traffic flows exiting Tesco’s into Swingate and into Lytton Way have been changed again. Has the Council consulted with the Highway Authority about these changes and is the Council working with the Authority to get a workable and permanent solution to traffic entering Lytton Way at this point?”

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

Over recent weeks, Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have been working on a design solution that was expected to be implemented in October, based on a suggestion from a local resident with significant transport planning experience. HCC officers had discussed the proposal with Tesco’s transport consultants and SBC officers and secured support from both. The new layout reduces the length of the slip road into the car park. The shorter slip road should lead to gaps in traffic which will help provide greater opportunity for traffic to join Lytton Way, whilst not disadvantaging traffic joining Lytton Way from the Fairlands Way roundabout.

If successful, this design could be implemented permanently, but it is important that the layout is tested on a temporary basis first, particularly with the busy Christmas period approaching. Officers are assured that if the layout does not operate well during busy periods, the design could quickly revert to the previous scheme that prevented the build-up of traffic on Swingate. It was unfortunate that the County Council’s contractors implemented the changes before HCC was able to communicate the adjustment to the local community and to SBC. I would though like to thank HCC officers who then provided me with a briefing on the scheme and issued public communications. We will continue to monitor the success of the temporary solution and provide feed back to Hertfordshire County Council.