

COUNCIL – 20 DECEMBER 2023

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley

“Since the near disaster that occurred with the collapse of part of the structure during demolition of Swingate, we know that a Health and Safety investigation took place, but the report has never been provided by the Health and Safety Executive. In view of the public concern that death or injury could have easily been the outcome, does the Executive Member not agree that they have the right to see this report to get the necessary assurances that appropriate safeguards were in place, with measures recommended to avoid a recurrence?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

*Thank you for the question. Group Leaders may recall that a full update on this topic was provided at the Group Leader meeting in February 2023. Group Leaders were informed that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) had concluded that Stevenage Borough Council was not in material breach of related regulations and no action was being taken against SBC or its Development Partner. The HSE did not share a report but within their letter from November 2022 they stated “**It is anticipated that HSE will be releasing a (national) safety alert, in due course, in relation to a number of recent incidents of buildings collapsing into roads and of the need for emergency road closures because demolition work has rendered the remaining structure unstable, and therefore subject to dangerous structures interventions by enforcing authorities**”.*

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“How many cases of enforcement action (non-parking) have the Council undertaken over the past 2 years, including (a) planning, (b) ASB, (c) fly tipping, (d) noise, (e) environmental health, and (f) dangerous dogs?”

Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):

- (a) *Planning Enforcement cases opened in the last 2 years - 225*
- (b) *ASB cases – 571 (including interviews, Community Protection Notices/Orders, court action, etc.)*
- (c) *Fly tipping cases – 364 formal actions (Officers have taken a proactive approach, including funding for 4 mobile CCTV cameras and extra signage to target hotspot areas)*
- (d) *Noise enforcement cases - 24*
- (e) *Environmental Health cases - 88*
- (f) *The Council has no legal responsibility in respect of dangerous dogs (as distinct from strays). Dangerous dogs are dealt with by the police, hence a nil response.*

(C) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

"Does the Executive Member believe that the maintenance fee charged to owners of garages within Council-managed garage blocks is fair and value for money?"

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

Where residents have bought garages from the Council, Clause 5 of the Third Schedule of the transfer document requires the owner "to pay on demand, a fair proportion of the expenses, from time to time payable for the maintenance, cleansing, repair, or renewal of the hard surface of any land the use of which is common to the owners and the occupiers." For garage licensees, this charge is incorporated within their weekly rent. Historically the Council did not charge freeholders until June 2022 a charge was introduced to help ensure fairness. The cost in 2023 is £14.52 per annum which covers the cost of providing the service for garage owners. This equates to 28 pence per week.

(D) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

"What options are being considered for the land currently occupied by garages which have been condemned due to contamination with asbestos fibres?"

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

All affected garage sites will be considered on a case by case basis, and options include demolishing and rebuilding, reviewing parking opportunities and, potentially in a smaller number of cases, considering housing opportunities. The Capital Strategy submitted to the October 2023 Executive identified that a number of Asset Management Strategies needed to be completed by Autumn 2024, including the Garage Asset Strategy, in order to determine the business case as to how the Council's assets can be funded going forwards. Decisions will be made on an individual business case basis.

(E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

"What timescales does the Council think are acceptable for responding to and dealing with issues raised by councillors?"

Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):

We ask that officers prioritise queries from elected Members on behalf of their residents, and strive to respond quickly and thoroughly. Typically, this will be within a few working days, depending on the complexity of the issue and the capacity of the relevant team. There is no current service standard for responding to Member enquiries, aside from the local service standards which are in place for customer enquiries – typically between 5-10 working days. The Executive agreed in October 2022 that Member enquiries were to be handled informally and outside the complaints process. Members were also encouraged to go direct to the relevant officer to aid resolution.

Addressing resident concerns remains a key priority for the Council and further steps are being considered to address a new Complaints Handling Code we believe the Local Government Ombudsman will issue in January 2024.

(F) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren

“Considering the aim of the Council for a modal shift, would it be possible to focus attention on the issues of cars around schools at drop off and pick up times? All schools are plagued by issues of parents parking on pavements, on yellow lines or idling in their cars whilst also blocking main roads.

Unfortunately, the level of traffic enforcement is not able to prevent or deter such behaviour, despite being illegal, dangerous and often causing pollution in areas where children, who are walking, are exposed to it.

What measures are SBC doing to change the mindset of parents by working with schools to encourage more children to walk to school and ensure that there are adequate resources for enforcement of illegal parking?”

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

Since the start of this school year the SBC Parking Enforcement Team have allocated significant resources to try to help with existing school parking issues.

Our contractor, APCOA Parking, provides the Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) patrolling and enforcing parking restrictions on our behalf. APCOA has been asked to introduce the school patrols in their monthly performance monitoring (KPI) reports and to highlight the worst affected areas so we can prioritise existing resources. SBC only have five or six CEOs on duty each day who cannot cover over 30 educational establishments in Stevenage on a daily basis. This is why schools are visited on a rota system and additional attention is given to those sites which are worst affected.

In addition to CEOs patrolling at school hours, we have engaged in conversations with the management of some schools and spent several thousands of pounds to provide those schools with specially designed school parking signage to raise awareness amongst drivers and parents about vehicle speed and illegal parking. Schools used this opportunity to raise the parking issue with all parents via their communication channels, as well as via social media.

Furthermore, a couple of joint patrols with Stevenage Police Officers were carried out in the last year near schools to seek to deter illegal parking and Police Officers tackled speeding and drivers/passengers not wearing seatbelts.

We will continue to allocate as much resource as possible to educate motorists and improve parking behaviour near schools, however, SBC's powers are limited to strictly enforcing illegal parking within the resources available to us. In addition to this, active and safe travel to schools is a matter dealt with by colleagues at Hertfordshire County Council with whom we continue to work with.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

“To what extent is the Council's geographical information system being used to help inform departments, officers and work teams to locate critical information on topics such as occupation and ownership of properties, domestic dwellings, public buildings, commercial premises, land parcels, footpaths, pavements etc.?”

Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):

The Council's Geographical Information System (GIS) is a valuable tool that provides departments, officers, and work teams with quick access to essential spatial information through an easy-to-use web browser interface. This seamless accessibility enables various departments to use spatial data effectively for informed decision-making and efficient operations. For example, some of the departments that use the system are:

- *In Housing, Resident and Estates Services use GIS for boundaries, right to buy and are considering of issuing a copy to tenants/leaseholders so it is clear what land comes under their tenancy/purchase due to prevent any boundary disputes.*
- *Garages use the system to locate garages and plot them and their current status (void/let/sold).*
- *Engineering Services use GIS to gain immediate access to a wealth of spatial data, including street lighting and cable information, legal land ownership, parkland information, maintenance information for HCC and SBC maintained areas (the roads and footpaths), parks information (grass types, woodland, shrubs, etc.), parking bays, sewers, flood, and borehole data.*
- *The Estates Team use the GIS system on a day to day basis to help manage the Councils land and property assets for instance to generate land registry compliant lease plans for lettings of the Commercial portfolio and GIS helps maintain an accurate record of the Council's assets.*

(H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

“There has been recent local social media comment about this year's poor offering from SBC of the (alleged) Christmas tree in the Town Centre near the former bus station.

Who decided on this object and on its location?

Why was it changed from the previous long-standing design?

Can we have a proper, traditional Christmas tree back next year, please?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

This year's town centre Christmas tree which is artificial and reusable can be used for years to come and stored carefully, rather than being disposed of with the other millions of trees that are thrown away each year. Using an artificial tree also reduces the associated transportation and disposal costs. They can also be relocated more easily than a real tree as the plans for the regeneration

of the town centre evolve. This tree will result in a carbon saving for Stevenage in under 8 years.

With the introduction of the Event Island stage the tree was located to better sit within the Square which was also helpful for the Town Centre Christmas lights switch on event.

(I) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC

“Do you agree that the Council's communication should have been clearer to tenants of its asbestos contaminated garages?”

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The issue of asbestos affected garages is complex and we have communicated at regular intervals when there have been updates to share. In October 2023 we wrote to those residents who were affected with an offer of a disturbance payment and ceasing their licenses. To date, we have received 76 positive responses from licensees which assists the Council in planning for the future of the sites.

(J) Question from Councillor Wendy Kerby

“What are your plans for the Bandley Hill Play Centre site?”

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

As part of the savings options to fund the 2023/24 budget gap, Members approved the letting of the play centres where possible to raise rental income. The Bandley Hill site was marketed by the Council's commercial lettings agents and attracted several offers that were carefully reviewed by the Estates Team. The site was marketed twice, as the original bidder subsequently withdrew, but the site was subsequently awarded to “Monkey Puzzle”, a nursery. The lease period is for 25 years and they are fully responsible for the building, with a full repairing and insuring lease and with a rent review every five years (upwards only based on CPI). The lease is with the shared Legal Department and the estimated start date is February/March 2024.

(K) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

“The Scrutiny committees are stated by the Government to be an important integral part of the local government process, and are supposed to gather evidence on issues affecting local residents and to make recommendations to the Executive, all done under the watchful eye of the public.

Therefore:

1. Why has SBC decided (with no public discussion amongst councillors or announcement to councillors or to the public) to stop streaming, or reporting on, all Scrutiny meetings?
2. Who made this decision, and when?
3. Will this decision be reviewed soon?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

There is no statutory requirement to live stream any Council or Committee meeting. The decision to stream the Planning & Development Committee, rather than O&S Committee, was made by officers in October 2023, following consultation with the Leader and the Chair of the O & S Committee. Officers were often asked to live stream special planning meetings, due to the level of public interest and to allow those that wanted to view proceedings to do this from home, rather than at Daneshill House (where there is limited capacity).

The Chair of the O&S Committee was content with the change, accepting that there is a greater public interest in the Planning & Development Committee meetings. The Chair of the Planning & Development Committee was also supportive of the change. No additional resource has been provided to live stream meetings. The streaming of meetings thus far has been absorbed by the Democratic Services Team through good will. Additional resourcing would be required if Members wished for more meetings to be streamed.