

COUNCIL – 24 JANUARY 2024

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley

“Is the Executive Member satisfied that residents find it convenient to contact the Council via the telephone enquiry system?”

Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):

We have seen Customer Service telephone performance improve throughout the year across a range of measures. This strong performance is particularly crucial to anyone who needs extra help and support or has a particularly complex enquiry.

Average wait time on the phone has dropped from 6m58s in Q1 to 2m15s in Q3, and the proportion of abandoned calls has also fallen during the same period from 27.5% to 12%, beating the target of 15%. Customer satisfaction with our telephone service has also risen from 88% in Q1 to 91.6% in Q3, beating its target of 90%.

These improvements have been supported by a range of actions including a new ‘knowledgebase’ of documentation and training for staff, call quality monitoring, and improvements in the Repairs service.

At the same time, we recognise the importance of encouraging and enabling residents to resolve queries themselves, where possible, so that we can prioritise telephone support to those who need it most. To support this, we launched a pilot during the last quarter of an additional level of support by way of telephony automation for Revenues and Benefits, and Environmental Services. This pilot service offers to text residents a link for the relevant online self-service for transactional enquiries, but still enables them to speak to a member of staff if they would like to. We have seen a strong take up for this service thus far of 42% (Revenues and Benefits) and 72% (Environmental Services) with no complaints received either. This pilot will help to guide further such developments in this emerging area and broaden our support offer for residents.

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“What formal assessment or analysis has been made of the success of the Councillors’ locality budget scheme?”

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

The Local Community Budget (LCB) Scheme empowers our Members to address needs within their communities and is an invaluable resource for the communities of Stevenage to have available to them.

55 projects have been funded across the town during 2023/24 thus far including:

*Funding to support 9 Fetes/Festivals;
Purchase of bleed control kits for Bedwell;
Installation of 4 new park benches;
Financial support to enable 9 events/outings to go ahead for young people/older people and those living with disabilities;
3 Independent Living Schemes garden improvement projects;
9 projects directly benefitting young children including, a new library for the Valley School, transport for children to Keech Hospice Care, and the sign choir at Invis-ability CIC; and
5 additional defibrillators installed, now totalling 26 across Stevenage. Location details available from the Community Development Team.*

Officers within the Community Development Team carry out an end of year financial analysis of the previous year's spending, highlighting patterns and capturing recommendations for further refinement of the system. These continuous improvements have included further automation to messaging for both councillors and applicants and steps to provide additional clarity on monitoring requirements.

To build on this learning, an independent external audit of the 2022/23 Local Community Budgets has just been completed – we are waiting for a final report to be shared but understand that the recommendations will include:

- A more comprehensive set of guidance notes should be developed for officers involved in the assessment of grant applications;*
- Monitoring of LCB needs to be more robust and include a methodology as to how this is carried out; and*
- That an annual report is provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to confirm monitoring has been completed.*

Work is already underway with the system suppliers (Rapid) to update the system to ensure a more robust monitoring system is available and this will be implemented in time for the new financial year and the re-opening of the process following local elections.

Our primary communications channel for promoting the success of LCB projects has been through the digital newsletters created through the GovDelivery platform. Since 2022, we have been releasing quarterly newsletters across all our neighbourhood areas within the town. As of December 2023, nearly 6,000 residents have signed up to receive these newsletters, with this figure growing by roughly 200 each month. These stories are shared with elected Members ahead of publication for them to sign off on their inclusion.

As we move into the last quarter of the financial year, the Community Development Team are working in partnership with Members to ensure that all LCB's are allocated to projects to leave a zero balance when the system closes

ahead of the pre- election period. The team welcome feedback from all Members regarding the 2023/24 LCB scheme, and in particular how they would like to see it improved. Contact will be made once the system closes (date tbc).

(C) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

“How long was the Portfolio Holder aware that running two separate payrolls (one for staff and one for Councillors) had been costing the Council £5,000 per year?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

Prior to Autumn 2022, the Council had two members of payroll staff to undertake the payroll function, and historically we always ran two payrolls (plus elections when required). However, due to the difficulty in recruitment and as part of the review of payroll provision, the Council appointed a partner to support remuneration for staff and Members. A review of processes was undertaken to limit third party costs. This started with a reduction in the number of deductions taken from payroll which was implemented in 2023/24, followed by this further measure of reducing from two monthly payrolls to one, scheduled for implementation in February 2024 and reducing further the cost of external support to the Council. Before implementing the single payroll, engagement with HMRC and our payroll system provider has taken place to ensure a seamless transition. The Portfolio Holder for Resources was briefed by the joint Heads of HR at the start of this work in early 2023 and regular updates have been provided throughout the project.

During 2024/25, as part of the Council’s wider transformation programme, further digitisation of our payroll processes will take place with a view to further reducing the reliance on external support in line with the Council’s insourcing ethos and our ongoing work to secure efficiency savings.

(D) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

“As we know, local radio (both BBC and Independent, but particularly the former) has been decimated in recent times and in addition local newspapers have been cut severely.

What effects have these changes had on the ability of SBC’s Media and Communications Team (or others in SBC) to:

- (a) Obtain coverage for SBC related news and events?
- (b) Find out what is going on in both Stevenage and its surrounding area?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

I am grateful for this question which recognises the changing nature of media and communications in the modern world and allows me to outline how we are responding.

As Members are aware the communications and marketing team work hard to share information to update residents, businesses, community groups, staff and partners about the Council's work, and share a weekly events schedule with Members. Traditional media titles are declining and the way in which people access information has changed.

The team regularly considers what is influencing local people and uses a variety of print and digital platforms to ensure our work is shared with key audiences. This is not restricted to Stevenage and includes surrounding areas where people may work, travel to, study or socialise. The comms and marketing team regularly meets with journalists from the Comet, Herts Live, BBC 3 Counties Radio, Global Media, and the Hertfordshire Local Democracy Service reporter to engage and secure article opportunities about the council and its initiatives and impacts.

The Local Government Association have examined how people get information about local councils. Over 1,000 people from the UK responded to the survey and it showed that 63% of respondents relied on word of mouth (e.g. friends, neighbours, relations) and 60% used council websites This can be compared with 48% utilising local media (e.g. newspapers, TV, radio, news websites).

However, in terms of reach, social media is good for advertising and sharing information that we wish to get across. Lots of people within Stevenage message us on Messenger and engage with our posts and we can measure the impact and effectiveness. 11,000 people are following the SBC Facebook page and many residents view our social media messages. It's free or very low cost to arrange boosted posts when running campaigns which reaches local people.

The team recognise that not everyone uses social media. Accordingly they work closely with colleagues in community development to share information in more traditional methods (print) and face-to-face where possible.

Ultimately the way the Council communicates will continue to evolve and officers will strive to keep pace with developments and opportunities in this space as they present themselves.

(E) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell

"Does the Portfolio Holder believe Right to Buy sales of our housing stock have had a positive impact on our town and residents?"

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

It is not uncommon for policies to present both opportunities and challenges. This is certainly the case for Right to Buy (RTB). Since 2015, the Right to Buy has allowed 371 households in Stevenage to purchase their Council homes and take their lives in a different direction towards home ownership that brings with it new freedoms and choices.

For the town and the Council's housing stock, RTB has posed significant challenges related to a loss of homes to meet need and the associated reduction in rental income to the Housing Revenue Account.

I am though pleased that since 2015, Stevenage Borough Council has been able to also deliver 495 new homes for the town, of which 401 have been retained for Council social and affordable rent housing. This success is in part due to the leadership which has been provided at Executive Member level and the endeavours of our officers working across the Council. It also reflects the extensive lobbying undertaken by this and like-minded Councils to seek amendments to the regulations concerning the retention of Right to Buy sales receipts. Councils need to be permitted to retain these receipts for longer periods and to be able to use larger amounts to deliver worthwhile housing projects before this money is taken away by Central Government.

The wonderful work achieved by team Stevenage in using retained Right to Buy sales receipts and income from private sales has enabled us to deliver positive new housing numbers and improved housing opportunities with homes that meet higher environmental and sustainability standards. A feat that was recently recognised at a national level when Stevenage Borough Council was designated "Council of the Year" at the Affordable Housing Awards 2023.