

COUNCIL – 31 JULY 2024

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

What progress has been made since the Council meeting of 20 December 2023 when Council agreed, inter alia, to investigate the installation of wildlife-friendly lighting in Fairlands Valley Park?

Have similar sites in other local authorities been researched?

Has suitable technology been fully considered?

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

In December 2023, the Council received a petition for lighting to be installed along the full length of Fairlands Valley Park (FVP) to improve safety of users during periods of darkness, and encourage greater usage of the park during these times. A number of actions were subsequently agreed:

- The request for lighting to be included for consideration as part of the public consultation regarding the development of the new Green Spaces Strategy;
- Officers be asked to identify budget costings for the installation of reflective edging / markers for use on the pathways;
- Officers be asked to seek the views of the Police and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust regarding community safety and ecology considerations;
- Subject to the outcomes of the wider consultation and strategic review of our green spaces, that this request be considered for inclusion in the accompanying action plan; and
- Officers be asked to identify any suitable external funding opportunities that might support this request, in the context of the extremely challenging financial position of this Council and local government in general.

Due to the general election and the forthcoming county by-election County in the Bedwell Division, and the rules around council activities during the respective pre-election periods, the consultation events to inform the Green Spaces Strategy are now scheduled for August and September. Dates and venues are being finalised now in order that the opportunities for residents and community groups to participate can be promoted in good time.

For views on community safety officers have contacted both the Stevenage Neighbourhood Policing Team, who have provided figures for reported crime and ASB in Fairlands Valley Park over the past 5 years, and also the Hertfordshire Police Crime Prevention Design Advisor / Designing.

Officers have also contacted the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust and Herts & Middlesex Bat Group for their considerations on possible ecological impacts of a lighting scheme. This consultation has identified that Fairlands Valley Park is considered of county importance as it supports eight species of bats. They have also confirmed that legislation protecting bats (The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended by the EU exit Regulations 2019) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981) means it is an offence to cause any significant disturbance to bats that could affect their ability to survive or affect their local distribution or abundance, and that any lighting of FVP that changes the behaviour of bats could therefore constitute an illegal disturbance. Surveys are therefore required to understand the key areas used by bats – for roosting, for travel and for feeding. There is currently no budget provision for this and officers will therefore be making a capital bid for Members to consider as part of the wider capital programme for 2025/26.

Officers have developed some indicative costs for a range of options. However, following the results of a bat survey, if a lighting scheme is to be considered it will be necessary to commission a lighting consultant to undertake this specialist work and potentially a further capital bid.

Some existing sources of potential external funding for a lighting scheme have been identified. Research into solutions delivered to similar sites elsewhere in the country will form part of the next steps once we understand the findings of the bat survey, and there is approval to progress with a lighting scheme.

Officers are maintaining regular contact with Jennifer Huygen, the lead petitioner, and I will continue to provide updates to ensure that Members are kept advised of progress at key stages. I will also be inviting Ward Councillors from Bedwell, Chells and Shephall, and relevant Portfolio Holders to attend an officer / Member walkabout in Fairlands Valley Park in the coming months.

(B) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

Following the successful trials by South Cambridgeshire Council of switching council employees to working a four-day week, what has the Council done to investigate the important outcomes of this important trial, and what impact it could have specifically for Stevenage Borough Council?

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The council is assessing reports related to this initiative including the high-level feedback which was shared by South Cambridgeshire District Council following the review undertaken by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, (completed at the 3 month trial point).

The four day week trial commenced in January 2023 therefore it will be some time before the longer term implications can be assessed.

It should be noted that South Cambridgeshire District Council is subject to a Best Value notice, imposed by the previous Government, regarding concerns over its ability to deliver continuous improvement under its Best Value Duty. Officers will need to consider any published findings from that process.

The council also has a watching brief on the 4-day working week campaign led by Timewise, a flexible working consultancy, with research support from the University of Cambridge and others. This six-month pilot, due to begin on 4 November 2024, will provide valuable data and insights.

The council is committed to maintaining a flexible working culture. The Senior Leadership Team and Administration believes that flexibility in work arrangements is key to enhancing employee well-being and productivity while ensuring the continued delivery of high-quality services to the community.

The council will continue to monitor developments and evaluate the suitability of flexible working arrangements.

(C) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

What is the total amount received in capital receipts from land sales owned by the Council (excluding Right to Buy & property receipts) in each year covering the financial periods since 2019-2020?

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

I can confirm that the Council received £8.4Million of land sales receipts between 2019-2020 and the last full year 2023-2024.

The breakdown is as follows:

2019/20	£200,000
2020/21	£1.6Million
2021/22	£6.2Million
2022/23	£200,000
2023/24	£200,000

This funding has been used to support the council's capital programme.

(D) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby

Does the Cabinet Member consider there is enough 'Grey Belt' land in Stevenage to cater for the Labour Government's likely increase in house building targets?

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

I am proud that the Council has planned to meet its housing target since the Local Plan was adopted in 2019. Given the deep and acute housing challenges faced locally and across the country, the Council has maintained its 2019 housing targets rather than seek to reduce them under the policy recently introduced by the previous Government.

Providing quality affordable homes for our residents is something we will continue to champion. Most of the green belt around Stevenage is within other local authority boundaries, and while those authorities at the time chose to release green belt, we would hope they would look at their own grey belt for future release.

We have previously reviewed our green belt and are unlikely to release more. We will be seeking to protect the most important green belt and direct new homes into sustainable locations in and around the town centre to meet our current and future needs for new homes and to make sure sustainability is at the heart of our plan.