

COUNCIL – 16 OCTOBER 2024

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby

How important does the Cabinet member believe defence industries based in Gunnels Wood Road are to Stevenage's economic prosperity

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

I believe all the businesses in the town are important to our economic prosperity. We have positive and proactive relationships with many local businesses. For example, there are a range of businesses based in Gunnels Wood Road. Through the fantastic Business and Technology Centre we support SMEs and startups, all the way through the relationships we have with large scale global corporations like Airbus, GSK and MBDA who through their innovation and with the strong skills of their employees have created a local Stevenage eco-systems for defence, advanced engineering, life science and other STEM industries. This provides careers, jobs and investment in our town, alongside advanced technologies to help keep our country and allies connected and safe around the world.

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

Why has progress on Town Centre Regeneration stalled and what reassurances can be provided to concerned residents?

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):

I am delighted to provide a further update on regeneration of the town centre and the great progress that we are making. Indeed, only last week we commenced two new projects on site and I look forward to the town realising the associated benefits in due course. You can read about the numerous live projects in the Regeneration Update that is being circulated to all Members shortly.

Standout projects completed in recent years include the fantastic Bus Interchange creating modern facilities and a better connection to the rail station, 300 new jobs being created in Co-Space, and the arrival of Autolus's £65million European base bringing 400 jobs.

The remodelling of significant parts of Queensway through a £50million scheme backed by SBC with new shops and leisure uses, together with 110 homes, has brought vibrancy back to a struggling street, and acted as a catalyst for the neighbouring landowner to seek planning approval for their own development proposals. Large areas of public realm have been renewed, starting with the Town Square, and our award-winning new car park at the station has doubled

the parking capacity and supports wider regeneration. We've just introduced a brilliant new bike hire scheme, and are making further changes to improve pedestrian routes with better lighting, paving and public art.

Just last week I was thrilled to see the commencement of the SG1 scheme at Swingate, which will deliver 261 homes. Working with the Guinness Partnership, their first 143 affordable homes are nearing completion on the former Matalan Site. We've also just started work on a further expansion of Co-Space, making room for a further 150 jobs.

Reef and UBS are about to start work at the Forum with lab space, offices and shops, eventually creating a further 1,800 jobs in the town centre and driving investor confidence for future developments.

Members and the public will soon be asked for their views on our fantastic new circa £45m leisure and sports facility that should be submitted for planning in the next few months with construction beginning next year. After years of prep work, visible changes are appearing in our town centre and beyond, and we look forward to further exciting transformation taking place over the next few years.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

How is the UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocated between wards, by whom and on what basis?

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

The previous Government implemented the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), as a replacement for EU structural funding and committed to fund £2.6bn to local authorities through this programme, to the end of 2024/25.

Over £13m was allocated to Hertfordshire authorities, and of this, £1m was for Stevenage. Funding was split over three years, reflecting the commitment to matching previous EU structural funding levels, by the end of year 3 (2024/25).

Our Local Investment Plan for UKSPF covered three investment priorities: Communities & Place, Supporting Local Business & People and Skills, and was approved by the Executive at the time. This resulted in a blend of projects covering areas from skills, to crime prevention, to arts and culture. Our plan included funding into local neighbourhood areas and each ward was awarded £3,000 available for the 2024/25 financial year. We were not required to do so, but chose to make this a priority given our commitment to working cooperatively with our communities.

The Executive also agree a proportion of funding would be prioritised to areas of greater deprivation, where there is greater need and work with particular community groups could have further impact. A further £22,000 funding was allocated to five neighbourhood areas, based on a priority assessment of deprivation, size and reach of the local centre, and visual inspection. The final

scheme also included town-wide investment in key areas like street art, tackling graffiti and neighbourhood cleansing. I was delighted to consult with my Cabinet colleagues in developing the overall plan, and grateful for the support of senior Officers in finalising the approach to this project and a delivery plan.

I am pleased to work closely with a wide range of ward Members to develop ideas and with communities, to improve their neighbourhood areas, and from different political parties.

I hope we have an extension of UKSPF funding so that we can continue to deliver across the town.

(D) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

How many enquiries/complaints has the council received regarding garage block cleaning charges and how many charges have not been paid by residents?

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

We have received 161 enquiries/complaints regarding the garage block cleaning charges sent out to private garage freeholders this year. Some of these enquiries relate to payments and some to changes in people's circumstances, but the majority relate to the weeding programme.

The town-wide weed treatments take place 2 to 3 times per year and are intended to suppress weed growth, and are not able to completely prevent weeds from growing.

The new contract for weed spraying commenced in September 2024 and the contractor is working its way through the town, trying to avoid periods of heavy rainfall which reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.

Inspections take place on garage blocks that have been treated for weeds, and the team will cut down any tall weeds that are found.

Garage freeholders can find useful information on the website such as details about the service, including schedules and when their block was last swept and litter picked.

Charges are applied to garage freeholders to cover the cost of cleansing activities, rather than their costs falling to the taxpayer. To summarise, 55p of the annual £15.68 charge to garage freeholders relates to weeding.

The charges were issued 8 weeks ago and 32% of freeholders have paid to date.

(E) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

What efforts are being made by the Council to address the numerous flooding hotspots on roads across the Town in conjunction with the Highways Authority?

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

There is no doubt that there has been a challenging start to the autumn, with some of the September rain the heaviest on record. Many Members will be aware, drainage of roads across the town is the responsibility of Hertfordshire County Council as Highway Authority and the Local Flood Authority. Where we are aware of flooding or flooding in road or pavements, we report these to Hertfordshire County Council for action. We encourage residents to report all highway flooding should be reported to them. While Stevenage Borough Council has no statutory responsibility or resources for highway drainage, Officers and Members alike support HCC where we can in identifying road flooding issues and support improvements when HCC or other environmental bodies can fund them.

(F) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

Why has the Garage Improvement Programme only delivered around a quarter of the planned refurbished garages target despite almost the entire allocated budget being spent already?

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

By the end of March 2025, the garage stock that will have been refurbished or rebuilt is forecast to be 1,290 garages across 121 sites. Members will have seen real improvements at some very challenging sites, and an improvement in the number of garages that are leased.

The programme has covered 21% of the stock identified in the initial scope of the Garage Improvement Programme (GIP), back in 2016.

The GIP commenced in 2018 with a focus on sites with the highest void and worst condition, however the combination of older data and inflation reduced the scope of what was originally intended to be completed.

In addition, the initial scope focused on works to garage structures. However it became apparent upon commencement of the programmed works that additional elements such as adjacent hardstanding repairs or replacements, boundary walls and fencing and localised tree work were also required in some locations which also impacted on the budget.

By the end of March 2025, the programme will have bought 462 void garages back into a lettable condition, which will generate £330k additional income per annum.

The overall return on investment (ROI) for sites completed through the GIP is 6.84%. This applies to completed and in-progress sites.

A new Asset Management Strategy is currently being developed by our Estates team which will focus on responsive repairs and planned preventative maintenance (PPM), ensuring income levels are maintained and voids are kept to a minimum. This will be presented to a future meeting of the Cabinet.