

## **COUNCIL – 16 JULY 2025**

### **MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

#### **Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs**

(A) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby

Is the Major Refurbishment programme running on schedule and within budget?

***Answer (Councillor Jackie Hollywell):***

The Major Refurbishment Contract (MRC) is on schedule for delivery and this year (2025/26) is the final year of the programme. One of the two contractors is due to complete their programme shortly with the second continuing through to the end of the financial year. The programme is being delivered in line with the approved capital strategy and budget. Overall average costs for works and leaseholder recharges are also within the original projections for the programme.

When complete the programme will have delivered improvements to around five hundred flat blocks and Independent Living Schemes across the town.

(B) Question from Councillor Wilkins

The town has had no Beryl bike from 24th April to 30th June, over two months. Can you advise what financial losses or expense SBC has incurred while the bikes were recalled and if there is any provision in the contract to claw back some of these losses from Beryl?

***Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):***

The scheme operates under a contract where Beryl is responsible for the operational and maintenance responsibilities, including the costs associated with repairs. The Council did not incur any additional costs nor financial losses during this period.

It remains the Council and the operator's shared priority to ensure the long-term success of the scheme, which supports our climate goals and provides residents with a sustainable and affordable transport option.

(C) Question from Councillor McGuinness

What consideration has been given to the viability of current Stevenage Town Centre regeneration plans due to impending local government reorganisation?

***Answer (Councillor Richard Henry):***

Stevenage is one of the few Local Authorities in the county that has well developed regeneration plans, several of which are underway or scheduled to begin soon, with many of them directly supported via significant government funding packages.

Officers are in regular dialogue with funding bodies/officials who have endorsed SBC's approach to maintaining momentum on regenerating the town and the schemes completed and underway are gathering pace and visibly transforming Stevenage for everyone's benefit.

In a continued climate of scarce financial resources, a key focus for the Council has been on attracting both public and private investment into the town centre; whether in successfully bidding for government Growth Deal Funding or Town's Fund, supporting Registered Social Landlords such as the Guinness Partnership in their developments, or attracting world-leading cell and gene companies into the town centre.

While cognisant that local authority boundaries will change the expectation is that Stevenage, which is home to a significant concentration of some of the world's most cutting-edge businesses/employers, will continue to be a key economic driver in Hertfordshire. As such, it is vital to maintain optimism and progress by continuing to develop the town as set out in current plans.

(D) Question from Councillor Booth

Recognising that under the Environment Act 2021, local councils have a responsibility to help halt the decline seen nationally in biodiversity by a deadline of 2030; and that specifically bee numbers are in decline, what measures is the Council taking to halt this decline and work towards making our green spaces bee friendly, e.g. by eliminating the use of glyphosate and other harmful chemicals, reviewing any current bee-friendly practices to see how they can be improved and pledging to make 'no-mow May' as widely as possible?

***Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):***

Stevenage Borough Council has been actively working for wildlife since the launch of our first Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) in 2010. The BAP seeks to protect and enhance existing wildlife habitats and deliver new sites where appropriate. The plan sets out actions for the key habitat types found in Stevenage, which includes woodland, grassland, ancient hedgerows, wetlands and neighbourhood nature (residential gardens, allotments etc). Until very recently we were the only District/Borough Council in Hertfordshire with a BAP.

Since 2010 we have created several new wildlife meadows and grassland areas, increasing the area by over 1800%, and thereby increasing the range of insects, including bees, butterflies, crickets etc. Stevenage has been

proactive in supporting Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) ahead of the statutory deadline. We were the first District Council in Herts to deliver BNG to site, and officers are working on the required 30 years management plan for other sites.

Officers work in close partnership with Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, to ensure that biodiversity remains central to our work. Funding from the Climate Change Community Fund (CCCF) can be applied for to support placing pollinator friendly plants into the public realm, where appropriate, and the hope is that members and residents continue to engage with the scheme to this end.

The Hertfordshire Beekeepers Association (HBKA) offers a structured and comprehensive training roadmap for individuals and community groups interested in beekeeping. Their programme is designed to support all levels—from beginners to advanced practitioners.

Over recent years significant progress has been made in reducing our reliance on chemical treatments. Historically three applications were the standard during the growing season. This has been reduced to two. In 2019 we discontinued the practice of obstacle spraying (targeting areas around bins, lampposts, trees).

We continue to actively explore, and trial alternative weed control methods. One such method uses a hot foam derived from rapeseed oil to destroy plant cells. Whilst effective, it is slow to apply and cost prohibitive for widespread use.

We are also actively reviewing practices in other local authorities and we are committed to reducing chemical use by:

- Monitoring emerging technologies and practices.
- Engage with Councils to share insights.
- Seek appropriate opportunities to trial sustainable methods.

(E) Question from Councillor Ashley-Wren

We are already receiving complaints from residents that the new bus interchange is not being properly cleaned and maintained and users feel unsafe at night. What assurances can the Council give that these aspects will be improved in the coming months?

***Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):***

The Council has received one complaint about the cleanliness of the bus station, with no recorded complaints about safety at night.

The new bus interchange has, since opening, been well used throughout the week, both during the day and evening. However, the high level of footfall is

having an impact on the interchange paving. The paving is cleaned weekly via jet washing, but this can only be carried out when the interchange is not in use, so as not to adversely impact passengers. This means cleaning every Sunday at 6.30am, however, officers acknowledge that the surface can appear dirty after a few days of heavy footfall.

Officers are currently reviewing the cleaning regime to see if paving cleanliness can be improved, including the feasibility of a mid-week jetwash before 06.00. Officers are also investigating options around applying a dirt/scuff resistant coating throughout the flooring.

(F) Question from Councillor Wren

Considering that a number of destination retail stores have now left the town centre and relocated to Roaring Meg, what plans do the council have to improve public transport links between the town centre and other retail/leisure areas?

***Answer (Councillor Loraine Rossati):***

The Council recognises the importance of strong public transport links between the town centre and key retail and leisure destinations like Roaring Meg. As Roaring Meg is under private ownership and with some major retailers on site, there is nothing preventing the owners and businesses from developing a free shuttle service.

As Members will know, our direct role in delivering public transport is limited but we are actively working within our remit to support better connectivity. This includes:

- Embedding sustainable transport principles in our emerging Local Plan and Sustainable Town strategies, which prioritise active travel and integrated transport networks.
- Developing infrastructure that supports walking and cycling, making it easier and safer to travel between key areas without a car.
- Engaging with transport providers to lobby for improved bus services and more frequent, reliable connections between the town centre and out-of-town retail hubs.
- Exploring opportunities through partnerships and funding bids to enhance sustainable transport options.

We want all parts of the town to be accessible and well-connected, supporting both economic vitality and environmental goals.