

COUNCIL – 15 OCTOBER 2025

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Peter Wilkins

Does the council have a strategy to limit or manage the number and siting of HMO's (Houses in Multiple Occupation.) For private development and for use by the public sector?

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

In 2010, the Government introduced legislation that permitted the conversion of a dwellinghouse (Use Class C3) to a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO – Use Class C4) without the need for planning permission. This change enabled a number of properties to be converted to HMOs under permitted development rights.

The increasing number of HMOs has exacerbated car parking pressures across the town. In response, the Council implemented an Article 4 Direction, which removed these permitted development rights for conversions from C3 to C4. This Direction came into effect on 20 September 2017.

As a result, any new HMO proposed in Stevenage on or after 20 September 2017 now requires planning permission from the Council. Furthermore, as part of the Local Plan Partial Review, the Council is proposing a new planning policy (Policy HO14). Under this policy, planning permission for HMOs will only be granted where the proposal has an acceptable impact on housing supply and complies with other relevant policies in the Plan. These include considerations relating to noise, parking availability, and antisocial behaviour.

With the Article 4 Direction in place and the introduction of Policy HO14, the Council is confident that future HMO proposals can be appropriately managed to ensure they are acceptable in planning terms.

(B) Question from Councillor Phi Bibby

Would the Cabinet Member please inform us as to what sporting and leisure activities, currently provided by the Leisure Centre, will not be accommodated within the planned new Leisure Centre, and how many residents will be affected?

Answer: (Councillor Simon Speller)

The new leisure centre will not include a dedicated indoor six-rink bowls facility. Instead, it will offer short mat bowls. Although there is no accredited indoor bowls club at the current centre, an estimated 150–200 users regularly use the facility, many of whom also play outdoors. The Council provides 18 outdoor rinks and has established the Stevenage Bowls Forum to support the transition and development of bowls in the area. A dedicated indoor bowls venue is available in Hitchin.

Two squash courts at the current centre will not be replaced, as usage has been consistently low and no formal clubs exist. Squash will continue to be available at a gym based at the rugby club. The new centre will feature three studios offering a range of popular, high-demand activities.

The existing diving pit, originally designed for diving boards that were removed due to low demand, will not be replicated. Stevenage Aqualina, an artistic swimming club with around 50 members, currently uses the pit for one hour per week. The new pool, with a maximum depth of 1.8 metres, will support low-level artistic swimming but not high-level training or competitions. The club also trains at other venues, and officers will assist in identifying suitable alternatives.

The new facility will include a 10-lane main pool (up from six lanes) and a larger teaching pool (17m x 10m), both with moveable floors to adjust depth. This will enhance the learn-to-swim programme, which currently serves 3,000 school children weekly and 1,400 in after-school lessons. The swimming club, with over 250 members will be able to increase its membership, as it will benefit from increased water space and be able to host larger galas with electronic timing.

The disabled swimming club (which will have free use of the facility) will significantly benefit as the pools will have much shallower water so access will be much improved, for example pool specific wheelchairs will be able to be simply wheeled into the pool or for more mobile users pool pods (a specialist walk on/ wheel on lift) can be used to safely lift people into and out of the pools, this is also beneficial for any users who have mobility issues.

The facility will also have a specialist “Changing Places” changing facility which is specifically designed for people with severe disability issues, which includes a hoist and, bed and a toilet for those who cannot use a toilet independently.

Additional features include an interactive splash pad, similar to the one at Fairlands Valley Park, designed for babies and young children. The sports hall will have a semi-sprung floor and courts marked to Sport England standards, unlike the current non-compliant badminton courts.

The new facility will also provide a multi-level state of the art soft play facilities, aimed at families with young children located in the Reception area.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

Reference the charges for routine domestic garage forecourt maintenance which SBC introduced, please let me know:

The start date of the charges; the reason why the charges were introduced and which cabinet member(s) or committee made the decision to introduce them; whether tenants and owner occupiers pay the same; the way the charges are collected; the percentage collection rate for (a) tenants (b) owner occupiers; the action taken against (a) tenants and (b) owner occupiers, who fail or refuse to pay the charges; the process by which (a) tenants and (b) owner occupiers know for certain that the work that they have paid for has in fact been done; and what physical checking and monitoring there is to make sure that the work paid for has been done.

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The Executive agreed to the annual charge at its meeting on 8 December 2021, and garage cleansing recharges were introduced in June 2022.

The Council is able to recharge freeholders in accordance with the transfer document issued at the time each garage was sold.

This is an annual recharge to garage freeholders who own their garages, covering their proportion of the cost for cleansing, weeding, and sweeping of the garage block in which their private garage is located.

The current annual cost is £16.40 (equivalent to 32p per week). Prior to 2022, the Council had been subsidising this cost. The charge was introduced to ensure that all garage users contribute their fair share towards these services. All garage freeholders are charged the same amount each year, with minimal annual increases to reflect inflation and rising service delivery costs. For those who rent a garage (via a licence), their share is included in the weekly licence fee, which also increases annually in line with the Fees and Charges process.

A charge letter is typically issued around July/August each financial year. This letter explains the cost for the year and provides details of the expected works to be carried out. The Council is working towards a minimum recovery rate of 50% from freeholders each financial year. The average recovery rate over the past four years is 47%.

Each freeholder is encouraged to set up an annual Direct Debit. A statement is provided when issuing the current year's charge to prompt and collect any overdue payments from previous years. Outstanding payments are also recovered during the sale of a garage, as solicitors acting on behalf of freeholders request information relating to this charge.

The cleansing work undertaken includes:

- A fortnightly litter pick.

- Mechanical sweeping on a continuous cycle, moving counter-clockwise around the town, starting in St Nicholas and finishing in Martins Wood.
- Up to three weed treatment applications per year to suppress weed growth.
- Ad hoc works outside the stated schedules.

From September 2025, information about which blocks are due for cleansing the following week will be updated weekly on the garages news webpage to provide transparency for customers.

Records are maintained of when works are undertaken, enabling the Council to respond to customer queries. It is hoped that additional information will also be made available on the Council's website in future. Staff also carry out ad hoc inspections of garage blocks to monitor their condition.

(D) Question from Councillor Booth

Can you please inform Council when the current IT system used by councillors, involving Microsoft Outlook and Civica's ModGov application, will be improved and will councillors be consulted ahead of changes?

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

There are currently no plans to upgrade these applications beyond the routine Microsoft and Civica updates scheduled throughout the year. However, if you could outline the areas where you're experiencing difficulties, the ICT and Democratic Services Teams will be happy to assist and provide any training you need.

(E) Question from Councillor McGuinness

What is the cleaning regime for high foot fall destinations like neighbourhood and shopping areas across the Town?

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

Neighbourhood centres are attended to each day, 7 days a week. The duties undertaken include emptying the bins, litter picking and clearing fly tipping from the Bring Banks.

The Town Centre / Old Town High Street have a cleansing team presence all day, 7 days a week, clearing litter, emptying bins, cleaning the public toilets and undertaking chewing gum removal.

A mechanical sweeper is also present in the Town Centre / Old Town High Street all day, 5 days a week.

Jet washing and graffiti removal is competed as a reactive service as and when required.

