

## **COUNCIL – 17 DECEMBER 2025**

### **MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

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

(A) Question from Councillor Peter Wilkins

'What air quality monitoring systems are currently in place across Stevenage, how is the council using any data generated to control and manage pollution hot spots, especially around our schools and nurseries?'

**Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):**

The Council monitors air quality through a dedicated station and 26 testing points across the borough, with live data published online. Stevenage has no Air Quality Management Areas, unlike many districts, because our air quality consistently meets national targets. To protect vulnerable groups, we place some testing points near schools and busy roads. Even in these locations, results remain well below national limits, confirming there are no pollution hotspots.

(B) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby

Does the Cabinet member consider that the level of compensation agreed for the period of stall holders being unable to trade, caused by the delay in relocating the Indoor Market, is sufficient?

**Answer: (Councillor Jeannette Thomas)**

Stevenage is proud of its indoor market, which has been a key retail destination in the town centre for over 50 years. The move to its new location in Park Place heralds the market's next chapter in a fully refurbished, modern, and visible building, with its on-street glass frontage showcasing the market's diverse offer and vibrant atmosphere. In tandem, the former market building will become part of North Herts College, driving new footfall and custom for the market.

In recognition of the disruption caused by the move traders have been provided with a combination of rental relief and compensation. In addition, where traders were able to submit audited accounts, compensation for lost profit has also been provided. Officers are continuing to encourage all traders who have not submitted claims for profit loss to do so as soon as possible to ensure processing and payment prior to the festive break. As a public body the Council has a fiduciary duty to spend public money to achieve best value, and its finances are subject to external audit. The compensation payments to traders were assessed in this context.

The logistics of the market decant, combined with the relatively complex refurbishment, and fit out at the market's new home, unfortunately delayed the

traders' re-location to Park Place by two weeks. We understand that moving can be stressful and were committed to supporting traders throughout the delay period.

The combination of rental relief and compensation during periods where trading was not possible is deemed to represent a 'fair and reasonable' offer by the Council.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker

Has a suitable small mechanical sweeper now been obtained, if so when did it start being used, and what proportion of the borough has now been covered using it?

**Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):**

The team have reviewed the garage cleansing operation and the mechanical sweepers that are used to support this work.

There are three small mechanical sweepers currently in the fleet, and these are very manoeuvrable and are able to access the compounds without difficulty.

There are even smaller ones available, however their capacity is very limited and this would reduce the operational effectiveness of the service and therefore they are not viable.

The team continue to focus on completing the scheduled cleansing operations, and this information is regularly updated on the Councils website.

(D) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

Can councillors please have a regular monthly summary statement of staff and employee movements and changes, including new postholder appointments and people leaving and joining the Council.

**Answer: (Councillor Jeannette Thomas)**

Thank you for your inquiry regarding regular updates on staff and employee movements. We would be pleased to provide a monthly summary of changes at the senior level within the Council. However, reporting on all staff changes would result in approximately 30 updates each month, which I believe may be excessive and not particularly relevant.

For your convenience, the organisation chart is available on MyView (where you can access your payslip) and is kept up-to-date directly from the HR system. We can also publish this information on the intranet to ensure easy access and the SLT organisation chart is also available on the council website.

(E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

When letting commercial property, what due diligence checks does the council undertake on prospective tenants to safeguard against properties being used for illegal activity or money laundering?"

**Answer: (Councillor Jeannette Thomas)**

When letting commercial property, the Council undertakes a series of due diligence checks to ensure that prospective tenants are suitable and that the risk of properties being used for illegal activity or money laundering is minimised. These checks are proportionate to the type of tenant and the nature of the proposed use, and include the following:

- **Credit checks**  
The Estates team carries out credit checks using the Experian and Dun and Bradstreet portal on prospective tenants to assess their financial standing and ability to meet rental commitments. This includes reviewing company accounts where applicable and assessing the risk rating provided by the portal
- **Identity verification**  
The Council verifies the identity of prospective tenants and any directors or beneficial owners. This helps ensure that the Council understands who is behind the business and that they can lawfully enter into a lease.
- **Anti Money Laundering Screening**  
Any prospective Tenant will provide an Information and Credit Check Form which is verified by SBC with ID checks, Companies House & Charity Commission register checks and Right To Work checks.
- **Business Use and Legitimacy Checks**  
The Council reviews the proposed use of the property to ensure it is lawful and appropriate for the premises and the wider area. Where necessary, the Estates team requests further information about business activities and may seek confirmation of professional accreditations or licences.
- **Reference checks**  
Where appropriate the Estates team seeks references from previous landlords or professional contacts to confirm a tenant's track record of responsible occupation.
- **Ongoing monitoring**  
Once a lease is granted the Council's Estates team maintain an active dialogue with tenants and undertake routine inspections. This allows us to identify any concerning behaviour or unauthorised use at an early stage and to take enforcement action where required. Any suspicious activity is reported to the Shared Anti-Fraud Service (SAFS).

(F) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

When can council leaseholders expect to receive final bills for the major refurbishment works? Please could the answer be broken down to include the years when work was completed and when final bills will be issued?

**Answer: (Councillor Jackie Hollywell)**

The MRC programme comprised of 8 phases across 449 blocks with completions taking place over the period 2019 onwards as summarised below:

Phase 1 – 2019-2022 (55 blocks)  
Phase 2 – 2020-2022 (64 blocks)  
Phase 3 – 2020-2023 (85 blocks)  
Phase 4 – 2022-2025 (66 blocks)  
Phase 5 – 2022-2024 (81 blocks)  
Phase 6 – 2023-2025 (25 blocks)  
Phase 7 – 2025 (33 blocks) with 12 blocks to be completed  
Phase 8 – 28 blocks to be completed

Of the 449 blocks included in the MRC programme 425 have leaseholders. To date 117 blocks with leaseholders have been billed, leaseholders in 191 blocks are expected to be sent bills in 2026 and those in the remaining 117 by the end of 2027. To date 73% of the total invoiced has been recovered. We support leaseholders through offering different payment options. There is also a discount available for prompt payment.

The reasons for the time lag between completion of works and invoicing, together with assurance on our invoicing approach and the steps in place to improve future turnaround times are summarised below:

**Assurance on Invoice accuracy and protection for Leaseholders**

Before any final invoice is issued, each project undergoes a detailed final-account review. This process involves reconciling contractor claims, validating variations, checking compliance with contractual rates, and ensuring all costs are apportioned correctly. These checks are carried out thoroughly to ensure that leaseholders are invoiced accurately and never above the estimates previously provided.

This has been a long-standing commitment and remains central to the way we manage major works charging.

**Reasons for the delays between completion and Invoicing**

There are several factors that have contributed to delays in issuing final invoices:

- COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery period: During the height of the pandemic, and for a period afterwards, the Council took a conscious decision to suspend issuing major works invoices. A significant number of residents were facing financial hardship, including furlough and employment uncertainty, and pausing invoicing was considered the most responsible and supportive approach.

This decision, while appropriate at the time, created an unavoidable backlog of unissued invoices.

- Complexity of final accounts: Major works projects often include multiple contractors, unplanned variations, and extended defect-liability periods. For blocks delivered in the same year, the timing of final accounts can vary considerably depending on the contractor's reporting, the responsiveness of supply chains, and the verification required before certifying the final cost. This means some schemes completed within the same year are not ready for invoicing simultaneously.
- Resource limitations during the pandemic and recovery phase: The combined effect of operational disruption and limited staffing capacity also contributed to slower progress in closing final accounts and preparing invoices.

### **What we are doing to reduce the delay going forward**

We now have a dedicated and stable team in place whose core responsibility is to ensure final accounts and invoices are completed in a more timely and consistent manner. This includes:

- prioritising outstanding blocks according to age and complexity
- introducing clearer processes for monitoring contractor submissions
- improving coordination between project delivery and invoicing teams
- issuing regular progress updates to ensure accounts are moved forward without unnecessary delay.

The effect of this structured approach is already visible and we expect the rate of finalising and issuing remaining invoices to continue improving as the backlog is cleared.

#### **(G) Question from Councillor Rob Henry**

Does the Leader agree that this council has a duty to be financially responsible and to keep our debt as low as possible?

#### **Answer: (Councillor Richard Henry/Jeannette Thomas)**

As at the 1 April 2025, the Council had £316Million of borrowing (including internal borrowing). The majority of this relates to the self- financing deal enacted by the coalition government in 2013 and required the Council to pay £199Million to the Treasury to retain all rental income from Stevenage's council homes in the town.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt of £271Million consists of £195Million of that self- financing debt still outstanding and the remaining amount has been borrowed as part of the HRA Business Plan to provide new properties in the HRA to replenish those lost through right to buy and to help to meet the housing register list need. The Business Plan demonstrates the ability for the HRA to fund the borrowing and the latest plan was approved by the Cabinet in November 2025.

The General Fund must demonstrate that all borrowing is prudential and has been used for specific projects backed by:

1. increases in income such as commercial property or additional income from parking or garages.
2. Assets purchased for regeneration in the town centre with the debt costs funded from the ringfenced account where the costs and income of the assets are held
3. Investment in leisure assets with a return paid through the leisure contract
4. Short- term borrowing for housing or regeneration investment which is repaid through sale receipts.

The Council maintained an under-borrowed position for 2024/25 whereby all loans were not taken by using investment balances instead, which is called internal borrowing. This strategy is used when borrowing rates are higher than estimated or higher than investment balances can achieve.

(H) Question from Councillor Mason Humberstone

Does the Leader agree with me that community cohesion remains of paramount importance, and that it is increasingly at risk due to the rising number of illegal migrants arriving in our town?

**Answer: (Councillor Richard Henry/Tom Plater)**

Community cohesion is indeed of paramount importance to this Council, and Members and Officers work hard to ensure all residents feel safe, included, and supported. Our focus is on fostering strong relationships, promoting understanding, and addressing concerns through constructive dialogue.

It is important to be clear about responsibilities. Decisions regarding asylum accommodation, including contingency hotels and dispersed accommodation are made by the Home Office, not by district or borough councils. The Council is pressing the Home Office to be transparent as to when Stevenage can expect the use of contingency accommodation to end under the Government's commitment to stop its use by 2029. Where concerns are shared by residents, the Council takes them seriously and continues to fulfil our local duties on cohesion, safeguarding, and community safety.

Locally, we take measured steps to support cohesion, including regular coordination with the police and the Strategic Migration Partnership as well as representatives from the Home Office and contingency provision agencies. The Council also provides clear factual communications to counter misinformation and ensures preparedness for any public events to keep people safe. We will continue working closely with partners to manage concerns responsibly, particularly around the misperception of an increase in crime and disorder attributed to asylum seekers. Members who attended the recent Police Priority Setting forum, will have noted that crime and ASB remains low in Stevenage. Our priority remains maintaining harmony and ensuring everyone in our town can contribute positively to community life.