

COUNCIL – 22 JULY 2026

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Daryl Osborn - BUGS

With reference to the Environment and Economy Select Committee report entitled 'ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE: FINAL REPORT - REVIEW OF BUS SERVICES' dated 06/02/24, and the recommendations contained therein, what progress has been made in relation to each individual recommendation set out within that report?

Answer (Councillor Rob Broom):

Answer:

I would like to thank both the Environment and Economy Select Committee and BUGS for their continued interest in improving public transport across Stevenage.

Following publication of the Committee's Review of Bus Services in February 2024, progress has been made against a number of the review's recommendations. This includes improvements to real-time passenger information, enhanced engagement with disability groups, ongoing work to improve accessibility at Stevenage Bus Interchange, investment in newer and cleaner bus fleets, and the continued development of Hertfordshire County Council's proposals for bus franchising and network accessibility.

Many of the recommendations relate to matters that fall primarily within the remit of Hertfordshire County Council as the local transport authority or Arriva as the principal bus operator. However, Stevenage Borough Council has continued to work closely with both organisations to champion the interests of Stevenage residents and support improvements to public transport across the town.

Recommendations arising from Select Committee reviews are subject to formal monitoring and periodic reporting back to the relevant Scrutiny Committee. To assist that process, updates have been sought from Hertfordshire County Council, Arriva and Stevenage Borough Council on the progress made since the review was completed.

The detailed response to each of the Committee's 13 recommendations is set out in Appendix A. Members are therefore referred to Appendix A for a recommendation-by-recommendation update, including the actions taken, progress achieved and ongoing work associated with each individual recommendation.

Overall, whilst progress has varied depending on the organisation responsible for delivery, there is evidence that each recommendation has either been

implemented, is currently being progressed, or remains under active consideration by the relevant partner organisation.

(B) Question from Jack Downie-Webb

The latest data from the CPRE reveals that there are currently 273 long-term empty homes sitting unused within Stevenage. Stevenage Borough Council frequently justifies the ongoing development and loss of our town's green spaces, such as those in and around Symonds Green, by citing housing need. However, other local authorities, including councils like Mid Suffolk and Lewes District Council, are successfully using their legal powers to tackle this issue without further loss of green space. They're implementing Council Tax premiums, using Empty Dwelling Management Orders, and pursuing targeted Compulsory Purchase Orders to bring wasted properties back onto the market. While these tactics are already described in Stevenage Borough Council's own Empty Homes Strategy, the fact that 273 properties remain unused suggests these powers are not being used to their full effect.

Will the council commit to prioritising bringing these empty homes back into use, which it already has powers to do, before approving further loss of our green spaces?

Answer: (Councillor Loraine Rossati)

The Council agrees that long-term empty homes represent a wasted housing resource and that, wherever possible, properties should be brought back into use for local residents. Empty homes can have a negative impact on neighbourhoods, particularly where they fall into disrepair, attract anti-social behaviour or become a source of concern for nearby residents.

However, it is important to consider this issue within the wider context of the housing challenges facing both Stevenage and the country as a whole. The UK continues to experience a significant housing shortage, particularly of affordable housing.

Demand for social rented and affordable homes continues to outstrip supply in many parts of the country, creating real pressures for local communities and councils.

Like all local authorities, Stevenage Borough Council is required through the planning system to assess and meet the housing needs of its area through an adopted Local Plan.

The Stevenage Local Plan identifies a requirement for approximately 7,600 additional homes over the plan period, alongside new employment opportunities, infrastructure, community facilities and environmental improvements. The Local Plan seeks to achieve this in a sustainable way, balancing the need for new homes with the protection of valued green spaces,

investment in regeneration, support for economic growth and the delivery of new council homes for local people.

The latest Council Tax data shows that there are currently 277 long-term empty homes in Stevenage. Whilst every empty property is one we would prefer to see occupied, this figure represents approximately 0.71% of the town's housing stock of around 38,700 homes. It also equates to only around 3.6% of Stevenage's identified housing requirement of approximately 7,600 homes. In other words, even if every long-term empty home in the town were brought back into occupation immediately, there would still remain a substantial need for additional housing, particularly affordable and social housing.

It is also important to recognise that not all empty homes are abandoned properties. Homes can become vacant for many legitimate reasons, including bereavement and probate, refurbishment works, major repairs following damage, legal disputes, changes in ownership, relocation of occupants, or because they are being prepared for sale or letting. Some properties may also be held pending wider regeneration proposals. Consequently, not all empty homes are suitable for intervention by the Council.

In comparison with other areas, Stevenage performs relatively well. Government statistics show that Stevenage has one of the lowest proportions of long-term empty homes in Hertfordshire. Based on the latest published figures, only Three Rivers has a slightly lower percentage. Furthermore, the Council's 2024 Stock Condition Survey found that Stevenage's overall vacancy rate of 3.2% was lower than both the East of England average of 4.3% and the national average of 5.4%.

That said, the Council remains proactive in tackling long-term empty homes. We have an updated Empty Homes Policy and undertake proactive monitoring of properties that have been vacant for extended periods. Following the recruitment of additional officer capacity, inspections are carried out on long-term empty homes and properties are assessed based on factors such as their condition, impact on neighbours and the length of time they have remained empty.

Where appropriate, the Council works informally with owners to help bring homes back into use. In more serious cases, where properties are causing nuisance or have remained empty for prolonged periods without a clear prospect of reoccupation, the Council can consider formal action. Powers available include enforcement notices, Empty Dwelling Management Orders, enforced sale procedures and in exceptional circumstances, compulsory purchase powers. In addition, through the Housing Development Programme, the Council has periodically acquired existing properties where this has represented a good opportunity to increase the supply of affordable housing.

The Council is always willing to explore additional tools and opportunities to bring long-term empty homes back into use. However, the reality is that resolving the empty homes issue alone will not address the scale of housing need facing Stevenage. As of 17 July 2026, there were 1742 households on

the Council's Housing Register, demonstrating the significant demand for affordable housing within the town.

For that reason, our approach is not an either/or choice between tackling empty homes and building new homes. We must do both. The Council will continue to work proactively to reduce the number of long-term empty properties, whilst also delivering new homes, including new council homes such as those being delivered through our housing development programme, to ensure that local people have access to the housing they need both now and in the future.

This balanced approach enables us to address under-used housing stock where appropriate, whilst continuing to meet the wider housing needs of a growing town in a way that remains true to Stevenage's values of sustainability, regeneration, opportunity and community