

RESPONSES TO MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1

Councillor Ben Crystall to ask Councillor Graham McAndrew, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability:

According to the final report from the Climate Change Task and Finish Group, received by Council on 5th March 2019, it was recommended that existing capital grants for loft and cavity wall insulation are extended to provide greater assistance grants to cover solid wall insulation and secondary glazing in energy efficiency priority areas of the District. It was also suggested that this could be achieved from within the existing capital budget, as current loft and cavity wall grants are under-utilised by residents. Has this extension to the grant offer been provided, and if so, can he provide specific figures for the total amount allocated to solid wall insulation and to secondary glazing, and how much of this allocation has been actively granted to residents for this purpose?

Response:

The council is keen to maximise domestic energy efficiency across homes in the district. I can confirm that in line with the recommendation of the Climate Change Task and Finish Group, as approved by full Council, £12,000 of unspent resources have been brought forward into 2019/20 to 'top up' grants available to East Herts households through the national Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme which aims to assist the most vulnerable and fuel poor households. This enables residents to benefit from an ECO grant without having to self-fund the top up while at the same time 'stretching' the benefits of the council resources.

ECO grants are focused on maximising the reduction of carbon produced when heating a domestic dwelling. The council is guided by

the recommendations of the ECO surveyors. To date, although the council would be very happy to fund solid wall insulation and/or secondary glazing installation if specified by the surveyor, the interventions identified through the ECO programme have called for loft insulation and new boilers.

The most recent Queen's Speech included the government's intention to invest £2.5bn over the coming five years providing "Home Upgrade Grants" for fuel poor homes in order to significantly improve domestic energy efficiency. The council will wish to support this new grant regime, especially if it provides opportunities for the installation of solid wall insulation.

Question 2

Councillor Ben Crystall to ask Councillor Graham McAndrew, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability:

The Council, as a trusted local information source, should continue to promote information on energy reduction to local residents. The Grantham Institute at Imperial College recently published a list of 10 straightforward actions that individuals can take to reduce their own carbon emissions; will EHDC commit to placing this list in a prominent place on its website and publishing it in the Council's publications such as Link and Network?

Response:

I fully concur with Cllr Crystal that the council should be a trusted local source of information about environmental sustainability. Indeed, I was very encouraged to learn that participants in our inaugural Environmental and Climate Forum held in Ware in January told us that they see the council as an 'honest broker'; an organisation that can be trusted to give clear advice on this agenda.

The Grantham Institute is highly regarded in the field of environmental sustainability. Their list includes a number of useful and practical steps that can be taken to tackle climate change. Many other bodies have also provided guidance and so my only concern at this time is that by endorsing one particular list of actions, we may compromise the council's valued 'honest broker' position. Some could ask, why is the council promoting the Grantham Institute's list in preference to other information?

Therefore, while I whole-heartedly support Cllr Crystal's call for the council to provide clear advice, I would like to see the council draw on the actions advocated by the Grantham Institute, though not be restricted to them, and consider these along with others' advice and indeed the ideas emerging from the East Herts Environmental and Climate Forum to form a detailed set of guidance for promotion by the council.

Question 3

Councillor Rosemary Bolton to ask Councillor Peter Boylan, Executive Member for Neighbourhoods:

What steps is the Council taking to tackle anti-social behaviour within our District?

Response:

Anti-social behaviour can have a significant impact on the lives of those it directly affects. This council takes a robust, joined up approach to tackling anti-social behaviour in our district. At strategic level, members and officers actively participate in the East Herts Community Safety Partnership Board alongside colleagues from Police, Fire & Rescue, Housing Associations, the county council, town councils, probation service and other partners. Recently, the Board has considered the impact of fireworks-related anti-social behaviour. This council has also joined a local working group to tackle this and

our Leader has also written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to seek his support in tackling this serious emerging form of anti-social behaviour.

Operationally, the council's work is co-ordinated on a day-to-day basis by our Community Safety and ASB Manager who, among other duties, chairs the East Herts Anti-Social Behaviour Action Group which considers the most complex individual cases and agrees multi-agency responses. The council's work also includes providing advice and guidance on anti-social behaviour on the council's website and funding diversionary activities for young people during school holidays.

The council's joined up approach to tackling anti-social behaviour was recognised by Hertfordshire Constabulary in 2018 when they were awarded the Mick Fogarty Problem Solving Award for the effective way the council and local police came together to remedy a particularly difficult crime and anti-social behaviour in a block of flats in Bishop's Stortford.

This council prides itself on the pivotal role it plays alongside partners in tackling anti-social behaviour while at the same time supporting victims.

Question 4

Councillor Jeff Jones to ask Councillor Graham McAndrew, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability:

Could the Executive Member assure me that this council is committed to supporting Community Transport projects in our district? These services rely heavily on the financial support given by East Herts Council, until they become self-sustaining.

Can the Executive member assure me that there are no plans to reduce this financial commitment?

Response:

East Herts Council understands the value community transport holds in enabling our communities to live independently and lead fulfilled lives. There are many benefits to be gained from good community transport including reducing social isolation and encouraging more environmentally sustainable transport choices.

There are no plans to reduce the council's overall level of financial support allocated to community transport as we understand the role played by council subsidy in helping schemes get established. The council's Community Transport Strategy 2018-21, approved by Council in December 2018, makes clear our intention to provide financial support to assist schemes to develop viable business models to maximise the longevity of the scheme. The Strategy also makes clear the council's desire to help community transport providers move towards greater levels of self-sufficiency so as to enable us to redirect resources to support the start-up of new community schemes in the district.

So, in 2020/21, we will be willing to provide existing community transport schemes with the same level of funding as in 2019/20 where this is part of a plan to, year-on-year, to reduce East Herts' contribution, as our aspiration is to use a greater share of the community transport budget to support the growth of new schemes in areas not currently served.

Question 5

Councillor Devonshire to ask the Councillor Jan Goodeve, Executive Member for Planning and Growth:

How is this council seeking to protect employment land within our District?

Response:

The council is very concerned about the loss of employment space in the last 5-10 years and our main priorities are to ensure we retain the viable employment land we have and ensure that the 20Ha of new land allocated within the district plan gets built.

Our officers are negotiating with landowners and developers to make sure that all the employment allocations are built on new developments and that they are appropriate in terms of size and mix to compliment the local economy. Land at Gilston, Bishop's Stortford and Ware is currently under discussion.

We have 33 existing designated employment sites in the district, however, I am concerned that some of these could be under threat from the use of permitted development rights which allows owners to convert certain types of office and industrial units to residential without the need for planning permission. Also, unfortunately when this does happen the homes provided are often not of the quality that we would like to see and the public realm is of poor quality.

Whilst this has been a key part of the government's approach to accelerating housing delivery by making residential use of unused premises, in Hertfordshire, it has led to the forced displacement of viable businesses in the district alongside poor public realm, no section 106 contributions and no affordable housing.

We recently consulted on the introduction of an Article 4 Directions, which means owners will have to apply for the normal permission if they wish to convert to residential. The response has been overwhelmingly positive with only two objections to which we will be responding shortly. We have also explained to the MHCLG that in East Herts, employment land lost to residential is essentially irreplaceable due to the Green Belt, and that protection of this land is key to the commercial sustainability of our towns. The Direction is due to come into force at the start of next year. You may have seen our video on LinkedIn about this which had over 1000 views. This is a key, pro-active measure to ensure employment land is protected from uncontrolled development.

Question 6

Councillor Chris Wilson to ask Councillor Graham McAndrew, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability:

During the full Council meeting on 23rd October, this Council unanimously agreed to a motion proposing that the Environmental and Climate Change Forum would investigate the possibility of working with Hertfordshire County Council to research the possibility of setting up an "On-Demand" Transport service in East Herts. As planned developments are continuing to progress within the District, it is vital that we set up more viable alternatives to private car use as soon as possible. Therefore, I would ask Councillor G McAndrew to update the Council on any progress that might have been made with such an investigation, and if no progress has been made, please inform us when we are likely to hear any updates about the possibility of putting an On Demand Transport system in place?

Response:

I agree with Cllr Wilson that a wider range of alternatives to car use in the district will assist in meeting the challenges of climate change. To that end, transport is a keen theme being addressed by the Environmental and Climate Forum and indeed the next planned Forum meeting will focus on transport issues.

Public transport policy, including demand responsive transport solutions, and financial subsidy is overseen by Hertfordshire County Council. The county council gathers views and input from all partners, including East Herts Council, through the Intalink Enhanced Partnership which they facilitate.

Recently, the government has announced its 'Better Deal for Bus Users' programme. This includes the allocation of £20 million for a Rural Mobility Fund to trial demand responsive transport solutions. Hertfordshire County Council is co-ordinating bids on behalf of

Intalink. The council is currently assessing the case for making an expression of interest, possibly in partnership with others. The deadline for expressions of interest is 30th April. I would be happy to keep members informed of progress.

Question 7

Councillor Mione Goldspink to ask Councillor Peter Boylan, Executive Member for Neighbourhoods:

Several years ago this Council made a commitment to help with the Government's programme for resettling vulnerable Syrian refugees. These were vulnerable people from the Refugee Camps who, had been assessed by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) as being in genuine need. Could the Leader please give an update on this Council's activity with this programme, and tell us how many Syrian refugees have been settled in East Herts?

Response:

In 2016, the council committed to assist delivery of the national programme to resettle refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. The council's efforts have been co-ordinated by the Housing team. Unlike other local authorities who have worked with private landlords, the council was able to negotiate the support of Network Homes housing association who have offered housing from within their stock. This has meant those Syrian families resettled in East Herts have been able to benefit from more stable accommodation which is also more affordable than private rented homes when the government's tapered financial support ends after five years. To date, we have assisted seven families, consisting of a total of 24 individuals. The council's input includes working with the Home Office to match families, kitting out the accommodation to the prescribed specification, ensuring the families are suitably supported with their resettlement and co-ordinating the required government reporting.

The Refugee Council, funded by the council's Home Office support grant, provide the specified support to the families, (including English for Speakers of Other Languages classes), on a tapered basis over five years. The Refugee Council are a national organisation that work directly with refugees providing support from the moment they arrive in the UK including crisis advice and practical support, helping them to integrate into their new communities. Further, Herts Welcomes Refugees, a Hertfordshire based charity working with resettled refugees, provides much welcomed additional informal support.

We anticipate assisting another family as part of our participation in the programme this year, subject to Network Homes being able to make available a further suitable property.