

COUNCIL – 22 July 2020
MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1

Cllr Ben Crystall to ask Cllr 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, EHDC should consider looking to procure 100% “green” energy (i.e zero carbon) in terms of corporate electricity supply contracts. How far has the Council got with this process? Is he aware that Green Energy UK, one of the UK’s only wholly green energy suppliers which is offering 100% renewable electricity and 100% non-fossil fuel derived gas, is based in Ware, at the heart of our district?

Response:

May I thank Cllr Crystall for his question. In the first instance the council is identifying ways to reduce its base line energy use in its own premises so as to reduce carbon emissions at source. This is particularly important as an immediate switch to non-fossil fuel-derived gas is likely to be hampered by insufficient supply at present.

That said, procurement of green energy is an important means of moving to carbon neutrality and so the council’s Property Services Manager continues to reassess the existing procurement contracts for both gas and electricity which run until 2024. Until that time, we will seek to maximise the ‘green energy’ within the mix of energy bought and also investigate the possibility for an option of an earlier review in 2021. At contract renewal, we intend to effect a more substantive switch to renewable energy. To that end, we would be very keen for Green Energy UK to become one of the suppliers included in the energy procurement framework we use and will advise them on applying.

Question 2

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

The final report from the Climate Change Task and Finish Group, received by Council on 5th March 2019, recommended that the Council should investigate energy investment options that have potential to produce ongoing revenue return for the Council, along with carbon saving opportunities, e.g. electrical battery storage technology, renewables etc. on Council land. It was also recommended that an audit was conducted of Council owned sites which may be suitable for such projects. Apart from existing projects at the theatre, the hydro-scheme in Hertford and the two new leisure centres, has the Council made any progress in investigating investment options in renewables and how far has it progressed with the audit of Council owned sites?

Response:

May I thank Cllr Crystall for his question. As Cllr Crystall rightly identifies investment in carbon reduction measures in relation to energy consumption can also include the opportunity to generate income from renewable energy generation or storage.

Unfortunately, the council has not been able to identify sites in its ownership for viable solar PV generation. We recognise, however, that there is considerable theoretical potential for solar PV installation on community buildings that are not necessarily in the ownership of the East Herts. While the national economic mechanism to encourage installation has reduced the previous rate of return on investment I am hopeful that this will improve with the continued decrease in solar installation costs and possible new government support. We are keeping the situation under review.

In relation to battery storage, this is a relatively fast moving area. On behalf of Hertfordshire, East Herts Council led the development of a

regional energy strategy for BEIS which looked at sites that were under most stress in terms of grid capacity both now and from future housing development. We believe that major development sites such as Gilston may offer opportunities for use of future battery technology. In addition, the council has recently become one of only three partner authorities in Eastern New Energy, a major ERDF-funded project, which is looking to develop innovative renewable generation and battery storage options as well as developing the associated technological skills for construct of such infrastructure.

I am therefore confident that East Herts Council will continue to play a very active role in identifying and deploying opportunities for energy generation and storage.

Question 3

Cllr Andrew Huggins to ask Cllr George Cutting, the Executive Member for Corporate Services:

What measures are being implemented to support officers' and Members' wellbeing during this period of remote working, with particular focus on their mental health?

Response:

Cllr Huggins thank you for advance notice of your question
It is important to not only say what measures have been implemented but also to ensure members understand that we have a core set of measures already in place which have been adapted to the home working situation as well as adding more support to deal with challenges caused by home working and the pandemic.

The council has continued to support staff with existing measures:

- Line management – which includes regular 1 to 1s with staff, this has continued but is carried out through Zoom or on the phone with staff working from home (WFH)

- Access to mental health first aiders has continued, again access has moved to email, with Zoom and phone support as required.
- Access to the My-rewards Wellbeing Centre – which provides exercises, training, advice and guidance to maintain wellbeing/mental health
- Access to the Employee Assistance Programme which provides both telephone counselling and face to face counselling as appropriate. This access is also given to members.
- The majority of our line managers have been trained to support staff with mental health, this training took place in January/February 2020
- Regular team meetings and Staff Briefings to ensure staff remain informed, engaged and feel less isolated – again this has moved to Zoom
- MiCollab phone system chat system has continued to be used and it allows chat rooms to keep up less formal team working practices whilst WFH

In terms of additional support during this period of remote working the following are key highlights:

- Advice/guidance was given to staff/managers to help staff to improve their resilience whilst working at home
- Article featured in Connect reminding staff of the wellbeing support available to them including further mental health support from Able Futures a new partnership which provides staff with up to 9 months support around their mental health. Advice from the council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), support from Mental Health First Aiders, access to the MyRewards Wellbeing Centre, and for further sources of support the Wellbeing Hub on the Intranet. The article also provided support for those juggling childcare and work.
- Mental Health Awareness Week (18-24 May) was promoted with a series of daily articles on for example how employees can be kind to themselves and others during lockdown, how

physical activity can help with wellbeing and promoting what's on offer at the council for example online yoga sessions, exercise videos available on MyRewards website and promoting other sources of support mentioned above.

- Managers have agreed support for employees e.g. for those with caring responsibilities, having flexible start and finishing times and allowing staff to come into the office to work (on a limited and appropriate basis).
- Staff have been allowed to return to the office to collect further equipment to support them working more effectively from home for example laptops, mouse, keyboards.
- Bereavement guides for those who had lost loved ones due to Covid-19 or during the pandemic were shared with staff.
- A Wellbeing Survey was sent to all staff to identify how they could be supported further whilst working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. The response rate was excellent (89% of all staff completed the survey) and the results were positive overall. Where staff experiences have not been so positive, managers are contacting staff to follow up discussions and put further support in place. The survey results and actions the council is proposing to take are being shared with staff
- The Wellbeing survey allowed staff to raise any issues or concerns they had about working from home or eventually returning to the office so that the council can support them and address any concerns , each employee is being phoned by their line manager with HR support to follow up on their survey, confirm support where appropriate (this includes staff who did not respond & was completed on 10/7/2020).
- The Survey asked staff to inform us if they are currently shielding in line with government guidance so that further support can be provided to support this including further equipment being delivered to their home where appropriate
- Also in order to support mental wellbeing as well as complying with Government Guidance and H&S requirements: Risk Assessment have been completed for all council services in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and safe practice. (Unison

have been consulted on all as well as the staff who will then follow them. We have a main Wallfileds Risk Assessment which allows limited numbers of staff to return to the office on a limited basis with clear Office Protocols for staff and Members to follow in order to adhere to social distancing requirements. Where a service requires work to be done away from the office or home, risk assessment have been undertaken and implemented to ensure this is done safely and relevant measures but in place including PPE being provided where identified.

Further Measures which are being developed and implemented based on the Staff Survey Results which will also support mental wellbeing are:

- East Herts Together have been tasked with developing guidance and briefings for employees to reduce email traffic/make more effective use of email.
- East Herts Together have also been tasked with sharing best practice from Revenues and Benefits in terms of effective home working including more use of MiCollab chat to avoid emails and sharing advice regarding building in breaks from the screen and having informal interactions with the team etc.
- East Herts Together have also been tasked with creating Zoom guides which focus on building in breaks and etiquette to make use more effective and less demanding.
- The Leadership Team will explore whether team, service or council-wide level events could be arranged with social distancing measures in place which allows there to be a physical employee presence at an event to help support staff engagement and reduce feelings of isolation.

Thank you.

Question 4

Cllr Joseph Dumont to ask Cllr Graham McAndrew, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability:

Residents in my Ward are very concerned about the levels of litter they see in public spaces and I receive regular emails from concerned individuals. I am sure this will be familiar to other Members. Is the Executive Member aware of our Contractor's performance in relation to meeting the cleaning schedules for public spaces and what is he doing to hold them to account?

Response:

We are aware that litter dropping and overflowing bins has increased since lockdown measures were introduced. In terms of our contractors we have two that manage this issue, Urbaser in terms of street cleansing and Glendale services in relation to parks and open spaces.

Both of these contracts have performance management regimes in place which bear financial deductions should cleansing not be achieved at the standard we expect, I have regular meetings with the officers who manage these contracts.

We have been in unprecedented times with more people using our parks and open spaces whilst other social venues have previously been closed. We have recognised this and both the frequency and standard of cleansing in parks and open spaces has increased, however it is not possible within our resources to patrol all areas to keep them free from litter all the time whilst there is an greater influx of people using our parks and open spaces.

The frontline staff are doing everything they can to stay on top of the new demands. I would ask that we all encourage our residents to log any concerns with our customer services team so that we can monitor any trends and respond to these accordingly.

We also need to explore how we can change the behaviours of those that produce litter in the first place, we need to deal with the cause of the problem not just the symptoms else we are simply reinforcing that we will continue to clean up after those that litter.

Question 5

Cllr Alexander Curtis to ask Cllr Jan Goodeve, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth:

What measures will be implemented by the Council, other than those related to land use/spatial planning or involving the direct provision of financial support to local businesses, in the coming months and years to maintain and enhance the prosperity and vitality of East Hertfordshire's town centres?

Response:

What is going on now?

Major capital projects which will increase footfall:

- Bircherley Green Regeneration – private sector initiative to include homes, shops, restaurants, recording studio, NHS facility, hotel, refurbished bus station and waiting room. This project is anticipated to take 3 years to complete.
- Hertford Theatre Transformation to include first release cinema
- Old River Lane, Bishops Stortford
- New Grange Paddocks Leisure Centre, Bishop's Stortford – well-being is of course one of our objectives
- Hartham Leisure Centre, Hertford - refurbishment and extension
- Castle Park Project Bishop's Stortford – raising the profile of this heritage asset to near to the town centre to increase visitors

Events

Town Centre Events Programmes to recommence when safe to do so.

Partnership working

East Herts has established Town Centre working groups including;

- Town Councils
- BIDs
- Hertford Hub
- Ware in Bloom
- Volunteers
- Night-time Economy Group in Hertford
- Mama Hive
- LEP
- Herts Chamber of Commerce
- Local Police
- Other local groups

Post Covid-19 - Where do we go next?

This is not a conventional economic slow-down and we don't know yet how consumers, retailers and manufacturers are going to react. Localisation is coming through, global trade will of course continue but modify. The stop in the economy has allowed people and businesses to think about what they want and need next. Above all businesses need to be flexible.

Historically our towns have proven to be quite resilient and we have a small number of empty units compared to some other areas, retail was already struggling but post Covid-19 there are greater challenges, people have got used to shopping online and staying at home.

On the supply side, digitisation has been accelerated, structural change cannot be stopped, town centre retail will be smaller and may have to change the way it does business. The hospitality sector faces other pressures from social distancing requirements and a public lack of confidence in face to face gatherings.

Both sectors need assistance; the former in business transformation, the latter in terms of increased capacity to ensure viability.

Local councils could have a role in facilitating strategic advice for small businesses and networking opportunities. East Herts are working with the Hertford Hub, Bishops Stortford BID and the county business support organisations to ensure that the advice and support is available for business transformation. We are also organising the Town Centre working groups to give locally derived strategic direction and vision to changes to the road layouts and licensing of chairs and tables and in the public areas of our towns. This includes on our assets where possible, for example Tudor Square in Ware is now being used by restaurants nearby to create a European style café culture by allowing al fresco dining whilst still leaving plenty of space for social distancing.

On the demand side, some households have been negatively affected by Covid-19 and their income has dropped, others are better off not paying for rail travel into London and lunches away from home. However, people are reluctant to spend when their future incomes are seen as at risk.

What can towns do to attract those working from home for the foreseeable future to take a walk and pop into town – even once a week would be a help – or even work from a location in town to get out of the house? 45% of jobs can be done from home going forward, particularly in an area such as ours where knowledge based employment is so prevalent. We recognise the rapid changes in working patterns and working practice. The use of cash has declined rapidly, banks firstly being shut and now being open limited hours has led to people having to learn how to use internet banking. This

will accelerate the closure of high street branches – freeing up more units on the high street.

So how do we attract people to the town centres? We want to create new, flexible workspace environments built around buzzy, active places, both in and around the town centre and out on the edge of town. This is already happening with a mixture of both private and public sector initiatives. We need to support innovation and start-ups, providing the space and facilities not available at home. We opened our Launchpad facility just over two weeks ago after undertaking the necessary risk assessments and limiting numbers. Clients can book desk space and time slots on line and of course as these businesses often spend money in the town centre when they use the space. I'm also pleased to announce we plan to re-open the Ware Launchpad shortly in conjunction with the Town Council and have secured new tenants for the space.

Shifting the balance of priority given to movement across our towns we need to encourage sustainable transport, incorporate more/better bike storage, places to sit and dwell, places to learn new skills, could opening hours be changed – become more continental as peoples working hours become more flexible?

Pavement seating is being encouraged, people still want to connect with one another. Creative use of urban spaces to be encouraged and we are in discussions with Herts Highways about more permanent street furniture arrangements to the town centres, involving the local traders to make best use of the space available. More residential in town centres – 98 apartments as part of the Bircherley Green regeneration in Hertford, more homes being created above shops, new homes in Ware (Crane Mead nearing completion), Sawbridgeworth and Bishops Stortford strategic sites will all provide potential new customers and service users. We may, however, lose some shops to residential particularly those that are on the periphery of towns and perhaps more difficult to let especially under the new PDR regulations.

What other attractors can we have in our town centres – do we consider moving some of our Council services to town centres? What’s happening about our MP having an office/shop space in the constituency rather than in another County? Are there community groups that could be better placed in a town centre? Please could members give this some thought.

Local branding and marketing

Our Town Centres Forum are in the process of co-ordinating a series of videos to reassure our community that it is safe to venture out into our towns again. You may have seen the #ShopLocal campaigns that have been taking place in our towns and the district council has produced videos in Buntingford and Sawbridgeworth on behalf of the Town Councils. Data capture of footfall, Town Councils, BIDs and other partners may be willing to contribute funding towards said monitoring. Through the working groups, we will be looking to promote events, specialised markets, pop up shops and more exciting attractions to give people reasons to come safely to town and want to foster an environment where our towns are great places to work and enjoy oneself.

We want to re-establish our town centres and the social, economic and commercial hubs of our communities in the post-Covid world. This will of course rely on consumers, residents, stakeholders, Councillors and staff supporting local businesses where possible.

Question 6

Cllr Louie Corpe to ask Cllr George Cutting, the Executive Member for Corporate Services, and Cllr Suzanne Rutland-Barsby, the Executive Member for Communities:

Name-blind recruitment is a process which involves removing the candidate’s name and other personal information to ensure that

people will be judged on merit and not on their background, race or gender.

In an effort to build a more diverse, inclusive workforce that better reflects the community we serve, will this Council commit to follow the example of numerous public sector organisations, such as TfL and the Civil Service, and implement this recruitment technique?

Response:

Dear Cllr Corpe, thank you for advance notice of your question.

The council does not plan to implement 'name blind' recruitment for the following reasons:

The chair of HR Committee (Cllr Bolton) on behalf of the Committee has confirmed that they are satisfied that a robust and fair recruitment process is in place.

The Head of Paid Service (Richard Cassidy – CEO) has stated the following:

From my perspective as Head of Paid service it makes absolute sense to ensure that as an organization we employ staff from as diverse a range of candidates as possible, to reflect our whole community at East Herts. After all, a diverse team will always bring new and different perspectives to the problems we face and help drive the innovation that we have been proud of over a number of years.

I am very happy that Head of HR and OD review our current recruitment policies with our HR Committee as part of the reports provided. We have a devolved recruitment process that is based upon demonstrably matching candidates applications to a written person specification prior to selection for interview and this is independently audited on a regular basis by SIAS so we can have some confidence that the process is working and this is also supported by our last annual Equality Report. In terms of

BAME candidates I would be more inclined to focus on such things as how and where we are advertising, the language and visuals in any recruitment adverts and putting forward positive examples of how we have developed staff (including BAME staff) rather than simply adding a name 'blind' phase into the actual selection process. HR are developing the recruitment advertising and employer brand to support this, all our adverts state:

EHC is an equal opportunity employer committed to embracing a diverse and inclusive work environment. We aim to attract and retain the best people regardless of their gender, marital/parental status, ethnic origin, nationality, age, background, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity

Head of HR & OD commented: The current HR and Payroll system does not provide a 'name blind' recruitment platform, however there is not sufficient evidence to support the need to implement this process:

All equality information and criminal record declarations are removed before shortlisting by capturing this on separate forms. It is important to outline that recruiting managers are supported by HR to recognise and manage unconscious bias (a guide is provided and recruitment training also covers promoting equality and removing any bias conscious or otherwise). More significantly the last annual Equality Report which was received by HR Committee at the beginning of 2020 covering the 18/19 period did not suggest bias was a concern based on statistics. As stated by the Chief Exec we are working on our employer brand and recruitment messages to continue to attract more diverse applicants in terms of BAME and other equality areas i.e. disability and gender.

Thank you.

Significant additional data & interpretation of it can be made available on the website.



Ethnic origin

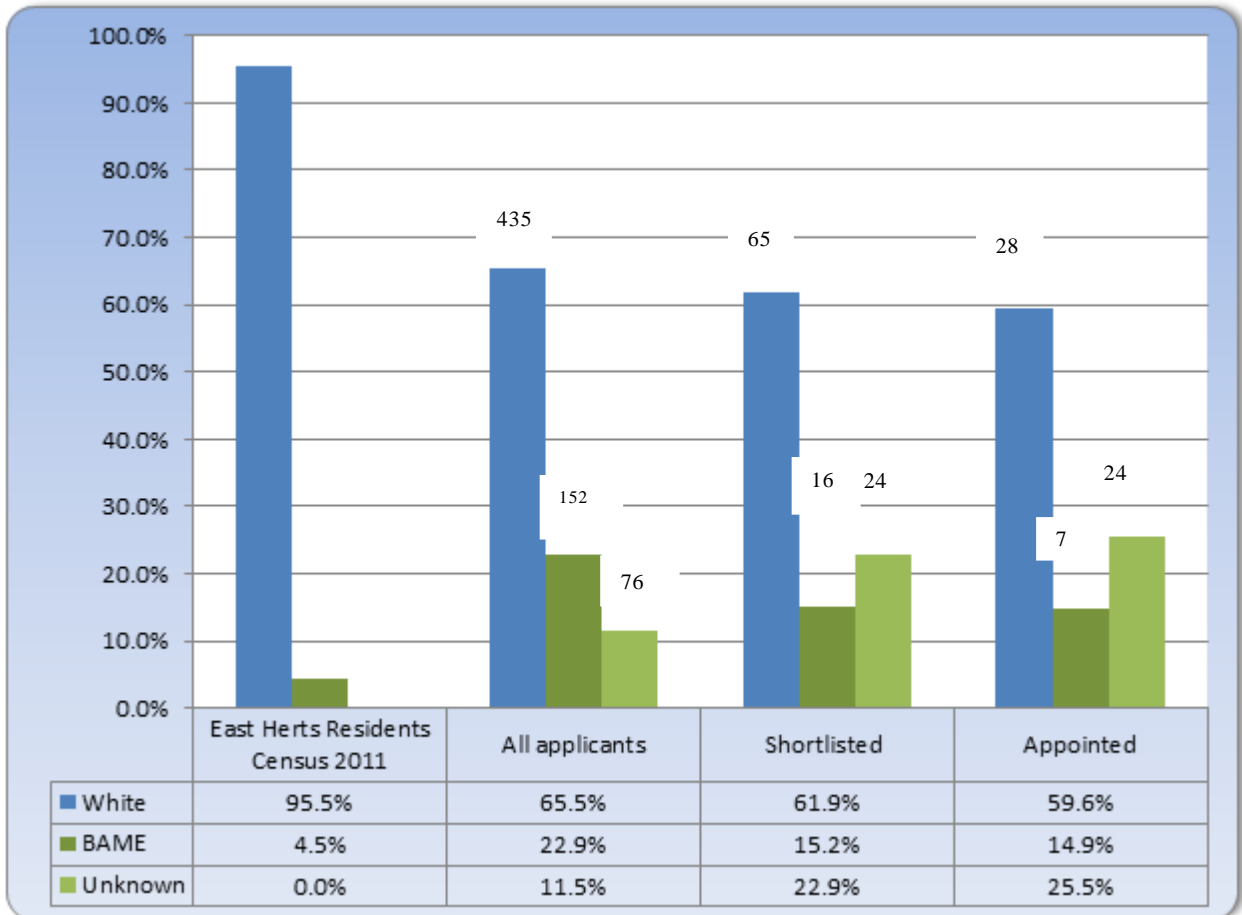


Figure 8.0 Applicant profile by ethnic origin compared to the population of East Herts

Source: ONS Census 2011 - Ethnic Group by Measures

Figure 8.0 shows that in 2018/19 the council attracted applicants from a diverse range of ethnic origins reflective of those of East Herts residents; 152 applicants (22.9%) were from BAME groups which is significantly higher than the percentage of East Herts residents in these groups (4.5%). This is also significantly higher than 2017/18 where 13.2% applicants were from BAME groups.

There is a close consistency in the percentages of applicants in the different ethnic groups at the application, shortlist and appointment stage. It is particularly pleasing to see that there is a close alignment

in the percentages of applicants from BAME groups moving from the shortlisting to the appointment stage because it is at this stage that the applicant's ethnic origin can be easily identified and there is an opportunity for bias to occur.

Both white applicants and those from BAME groups see a reduction at the shortlisting stage, which is in part due to the number of unknowns.

In terms of progression within ethnic groups, in 2018/18 there was a concern regarding the percentage of applicants from BAME groups being shortlisted for interview (16%) compared to white applicants (26%). This year that gap has reduced by 4 percentage points; of the 152 applicants from BAME groups, 16 (11%) were shortlisted for interview and of the 435 white applicants, 65 (15%) were shortlisted for interview. Clearly with much smaller numbers of applicants from BAME groups, one individual can make a big difference to the percentages and this difference is not of statistical significance. Of the 152 applicants from BAME groups, 7 (5%) were appointed compared to 28 of the 435 white applicants (6%). This gap between these percentages has reduced since 2017/18 where 4% of applicants from BAME groups were appointed compared to 11% of white applicants.

Question 7

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

Is the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods aware of the plans being made by Manchester City Council to build 500 Affordable and Social Houses? Would he be willing to look at these plans as part of his current research into all the different methods of providing Social Housing?

Response:

I wish to thank Cllr Goldspink for bringing to my attention Manchester City Council's publicity about their proposals for building homes in their city. It is my understanding that Manchester City Council has only just approved a proposal to establish a housing company, something East Herts Council did back in February 2018 with the setting up of Millstream Property Investments Ltd.

Over the last three years, Manchester City Council has enabled a total of 1,105 new affordable homes, that is, 20 new affordable homes per 10,000 residents. This lags far behind East Herts Council's performance of 45 affordable homes per 10,000 residents, some 675 homes in total over the same period. So, it is absolutely understandable that Manchester City Council is keen to explore new ways to provide more affordable housing tailored to the city's particular needs.

Despite East Herts Council's relatively strong performance, as I have outlined previously, I am equally eager to explore the full range of options available for affordable housing matched, of course, to our own district's specific needs. As you are aware, a detailed piece of work has been commissioned from the Housing Quality Network which will draw on the approaches of other authorities, such as Manchester City Council, as well as members' views and officers' professional expertise, to provide us with a robust base on which to assess our opportunities for affordable housing delivery in the years to come.