

COUNCIL – 16 DECEMBER 2020

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1

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

More than a year after declaring a climate motion, East Herts Council still has no visible message on its website giving residents advice on measures they can adopt to reduce their carbon footprint.

Given that East Herts Council plays a leading role as influencer in the district, and the fact that adding a page of guidance on the council website would have minimal cost implications, isn't the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability concerned that East Herts Council is missing out a simple but crucial step in providing its residents with actionable guidance on cutting their own, and the district's, carbon emissions?

Response from Cllr McAndrew

Can I thank Councillor Crystall for advanced warning of his question.

East Herts Council recognises the important role it can play as a purveyor of trusted, impartial information on environmental sustainability which can help residents to reduce their own carbon footprints. The Council's website has in fact carried a wealth of information for some time although the problem, as highlighted by Cllr Crystall's question, has been that the information has not been as easy to find as it should be.

I am therefore very pleased to announce that today, the council has launched a totally updated Environmental Sustainability webpage which links together all the Council's existing and additional information. It is now far easier to access practical guidance on the steps residents can take to reduce their carbon footprints, including advice on home insulation, tips on maximising home energy efficiency, how to access national and local grants and the ways to get involved with the council's sustainability work. The page can be found on www.eastherts.gov.uk/sustainability

This is just the start. We have recently employed a Sustainability Projects and Policy Officer for six months and, having revamped our website, she will now be improving our overall communications on sustainability issues.

Given the Council's leading role as an influencer, we must think carefully about promoting any particular service providers or signposting to other parties' personal or business carbon footprint calculators. We are aware, however, that some other Councils are providing this kind of useful information and so our new Officer has already started identifying the options for plugging any obvious gaps on our website.

We believe that upgrading and publicising our website will help strengthen the ways East Herts Council can support local residents to take the necessary steps to reduce the overall carbon footprint of our District. My thanks for the question which has allowed me to promote the new page.

Supplementary Question from Cllr Crystall

Thank you very much for the answer and I am delighted that the page has been put up, that's great news. Next May, her majesty the Queen is launching the Queen's green canopy project, which is a nationwide tree planting programme to celebrate her 70

years in service. I wonder whether you think it might be possible to use the green canopy programme in May as an ideal project with which to launch this new page to the public.

Response from Cllr McAndrew

That is a good idea. Please email me the details we can look to see how we can actually do that if we can. We won't rule it out at this stage.

Question 2

Cllr Norma Symonds to ask Cllr Peter Boylan, Executive Member for Neighbourhoods (asked by Cllr Bob Deering on behalf of Cllr Symonds):

I am very concerned about the impact that Covid-19 may have on our homeless in the District. Losing your home often through no fault of your own, and at any time in your life is totally devastating. What is East Herts Council doing to support families and individuals at this very challenging time?

Response from Cllr Boylan

I would like to thank Cllr Symonds for prior notice of this question.

As Cllr Symonds has stated in her question, becoming homeless can be totally devastating for individuals and for families at any time. The Covid-19 pandemic has only added to this devastation.

Many of you may be aware that during the first national lockdown in March, this Council used government funding to quickly secure hotel accommodation in Stevenage for rough sleepers and those with nowhere else to go other than sleeping on friends' sofas.

What is perhaps not so well known, is that the Council's help has continued once government funding ceased in the summer. Of the 24 people with complex histories of entrenched rough sleeping housed in the hotel, we have secured longer term housing for 11. We are continuing to provide temporary accommodation for another six as we continue to support them, with the remaining seven finding their own housing solutions.

In addition, this year we will again provide revenue support to the winter night shelter in Bishop's Stortford which is due to re-open in a Covid-secure way in January.

Even without the Covid-19 pandemic, high local house prices and private rents have seen increasing numbers of people turning to the council for help. So, even while the government has put a temporary halt on evictions, the council continues to help people facing homelessness due to the breakdown of relationships or the need to escape domestic abuse. Our contract with the Survivors Against Domestic Abuse support service operated by Stevenage Borough Council, which started in the spring, has supported 12 local families over its first six months.

With increasing numbers turning to the Council, we have had to make more use of bed and breakfast hotels for temporary accommodation, typically outside of this District. On average there were just five households in bed and breakfast accommodation at any one time during 2018/19, but now there's an average of about 21, excluding the additional need resulting from the coronavirus emergency.

I am particular pleased, therefore, that the Council recently purchased a building in Stanstead Abbots, to be known as The Rectory, to provide 13 self-contained one-bedroom and studio flats. This accommodation is not only far more suitable than hotel rooms but would provide much needed accommodation

on the western side of our District to complement the other 11 temporary accommodation flats the council already owns just outside of Bishop's Stortford.

To add to this, the Council has been successful in its bid to Government to convert three flats into six one bedroom and studio flats specifically for those making the move from rough sleeping towards a more permanent home again. We will also use Government funding for a Specialist Support Officer for three years, working with other agencies, to provide a wraparound service to improve the health and welfare and future access to accommodation and employment for these former rough sleepers.

Question 3

Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Cllr Geoffrey Williamson, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Financial Sustainability:

The Hospitality Sector throughout this country is suffering badly from the economic effects due to the restrictions being imposed to protect the public from Covid-19. Can the Executive Member please tell us how this Authority is helping to support the hospitality sector, including hotels, bed and breakfast and leisure accommodation, who have been under some form of restriction this year since March.

Response from Cllr Williamson

Thank you Councillor Devonshire for raising this very important issue and yes the hospitality sector is one of the worst-hit industries globally and locally. Visit England estimate that there has been a 48% drop in domestic tourism this year and that international visits are unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels before 2023 at the earliest.

One of the ways we support this sector is through our relationship with Visit Herts, who provide destination management services for East Herts and the county. They have been focusing on providing advice and guidance to businesses through regular updates and a series of virtual workshops and seminars.

They are also managing a crowdfunding platform which is supported by the Herts LEP. This allows businesses to outline a new initiative to help them diversify and stay relevant amongst covid-19 restrictions. The public are able to pledge their support and if the business hits its target, it is topped up with LEP funding. So far, five businesses from within East Herts have put ideas forward: an example is "Standon Calling" who are offering rewards and experiences for next year's festival (assuming it can go ahead of course). By getting people to crowdfund they have managed to raise £88k so far which will certainly help them with their cash flow challenges. So this shows how we can support these industries by all getting involved and I would urge fellow Councillors to look at the crowdfunding site if they have not already done so.

But very importantly we have been providing direct financial support. The Government has provided a number of grant schemes to support businesses suffering the impact of Covid-19 which we are administering, in addition to the variety of other support for business detailed on Government websites.

In the first round of Discretionary grants from March, the council specifically supported Bed and Breakfast establishments, which paid Council Tax rather than just Business rates. More recently the lockdown produced a mandatory scheme called **Local restrictions support grant (closed) - addendum**, for those businesses liable for business rates which were mandated to close. This will include those in the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors that fell into those definitions.

A further mandatory grants scheme called **Local restrictions support grant (SECTOR)** is also enacted at this time for businesses such as nightclubs which have been mandated not to open since March. A discretionary scheme was also announced, called the **Additional restrictions grant scheme** which runs until March 2022. The Council is using this opportunity to prioritise in the first tranche of grants those businesses which it considers may have fallen outside of the mainstream grants previously offered, and this is particularly helpful for those who supply to, or manufacture for, the hospitality and events industries.

Specific support is also targeted at taxi drivers and market traders, and provision is made for those whose businesses were mandated to close during the lockdown but did not qualify for the main lockdown grant as they do not have a liability for business rates.

As we entered Tier 2 on 2nd December, a further discretionary grant scheme called **Local restrictions support grant (open)** became available, which is directed at businesses that are not legally required to close but which are severely impacted by the localised restrictions on socialising put in place. The government is encouraging Councils to prioritise those in the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors.

A further mandatory scheme called **Local restrictions support grant (CLOSED)** is also available for those businesses mandated to stay closed for as long as we remain in Tier 2 (or indeed should we ever move into Tier 3). This again will support those businesses in this sector that have to remain closed. And finally for the moment at least, we have the **Christmas support payment of £1000 for wet service pubs. i.e. those** that derive less than 50% of its income from food service.

Supplementary Question from Cllr Devonshire

Does this Council proactively go out to these hospitality companies to inform them of the grants that are available to them?

Response from Cllr Williamson

Yes, indeed we are. In terms of communicating the grants programme Comms have been promoting the schemes via social media, concentrating on LinkedIn and Facebook. We have also used existing business networks including the Chambers of Commerce, Bishop's Stortford BID, Hertford Hub and Visit Herts to make sure we are getting to as many businesses as possible.

In addition, the Business Rates' team have been actively contacting businesses that may be eligible by both email and telephone. We want to make sure every eligible business is receiving the money they are entitled to, so if any Councillor here knows of businesses that aren't aware of these schemes I would encourage you please to direct them to the Council website and the application form.

Question 4

Cllr Mione Goldspink to ask Cllr Jan Goodeve, Executive Member for Planning and Growth:

Is it true, as was reported recently in a local newspaper, that the Builders of the new houses on the Old Goods Yard Site in Bishop's Stortford, have abandoned the Carbon Dioxide reduction prediction of 24%, and have now settled on a tiny 3.2% reduction? The original prediction was included in the overall Planning Application for the site, which was granted with conditions. A revised prediction, for 3.2%, was submitted in 2019. I believe that this has not yet been approved by the Council, but,

the building works are none the less going ahead. Can the Executive Member please tell me what level of CO2 reduction has been accepted, and is it compatible with this Council's stated ambition of making the whole of the district Carbon Neutral by 2030?

Response from Cllr Goodeve

I would like to thank Cllr Goldspink for the advance notice of this question.

The planning application documents submitted for the redevelopment of the Goods Yard site indicated that a carbon dioxide reduction of around 24% was achievable at this site.

However, since the grant of planning consent, part of the site has been sold onto a developer (Bellway Homes) who are intending to implement part of the planning permission (Blocks A1 – 5 which comprises of two commercial units and 149 residential units). Bellway Homes have proposed a lower carbon dioxide reduction level of 3.2%. This has been sent to specialist consultants for review and discussions are on-going with the developer with the aim of seeking to improve this carbon dioxide reduction level.

Given this, I can confirm that the current offer from Bellway Homes has not been accepted but we do need to be mindful that the Council's planning policy is not prescriptive on this matter in that no specific target level is outlined. Policy CC2 requires developments to achieve standards above and beyond the requirements of the Building Regulations (Approved Document L. The current offer exceeds the requirements of the Building Regulations and therefore technically complies with the Council's Policy CC2, notwithstanding given the previous offer of 24%, and whilst being mindful of overall development viability (as outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework), it is

considered appropriate to seek to encourage the developer to be more aspirational on this matter.

Supplementary Question from Cllr Goldspink

I am interested to hear that this reduced percentage ambition has not yet been accepted. Is the Executive Member able to tell me when the Council will make the judgement and what is happening in that the building is still proceeding, should it not be halted whilst the Council decides whether to accept this lower level, or do we just have to accept it and hope that everything will turn out alright?

Response from Cllr Goodeve

All I can say is that discussions are still ongoing and that the conditions have not been discharged.

Question 5

Cllr Tim Page to ask Cllr Jan Goodeve, Executive Member for Planning and Growth:

Buyers of new build properties in my ward have brought alleged building control breaches to my attention. Building Control compliance is often undertaken by approved inspectors who are engaged by developers. Could the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Growth clarify how this work is monitored and enforced, across the District, and if the enforcement regime also covers compliance with planning conditions.

Response from Cllr Goodeve

I would like to thank Cllr Page for the advance notice of this question.

There are two parts to this question. The first part relates to Building Control and how this is monitored and enforced across the District and the second part relates to planning enforcement and compliance with planning conditions.

Building regulations approval works differently from planning permission, and is open to competition so people can apply to any local authority building control service or Approved Inspectors for building regulations approval. This means that whilst Hertfordshire Building Control provide the local authority statutory building control service across Hertfordshire, their services are not necessarily used by everyone, and building regulations for some new developments can be signed off by Approved Inspectors.

Unfortunately, if there is a problem with the buildings on a development which has been signed off by an Approved Inspector then Hertfordshire Building Control cannot necessarily step in unless they receive a complaint that shows that the approved inspectors recklessly issued completion certificates. Proving this can be very difficult although not impossible.

This means that any concerns about compliance with building regulations needs to be made directly to the Approved Inspector and Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register (CICAIR) who govern Approved Inspectors. CICAIR have a complaints procedure and residents should complain through the Approved Inspector to them.

If there are specific snagging issues with the new properties relating to minor faults and finishing off then this would be a

matter for the house builder to resolve rather than anything more significant relating to compliance with building regulations.

In terms of planning enforcement and compliance with planning conditions, if there is a concern that new developments have not been built in accordance with approved plans and planning conditions, then this would need to be reported to the planning enforcement team who would investigate the concern and depending on the nature of the breach would consider whether it was expedient in the public interest to take enforcement action having regard to the level of harm caused.

Supplementary Question from Cllr Page

Is the portfolio holder content that on site monitoring of building control regulations is sufficiently objective and robust?

Response from Cllr Goodeve

I think that is a broader question Cllr Page and is something that applies not just to East Herts, but up and down the country now that approved inspectors are now permitted rather than just local authority building control.