

Council – 20 October 2021

Responses to Members' Questions

Question 1

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

In September, the World Health Organisation slashed its recommended air quality limits for six pollutants including particulate matter PM10 and PM2.5, and nitrogen dioxide. For example, the annual average recommended limit for PM2.5 has been halved, and the annual limit for nitrogen dioxide has been reduced by three quarters. This change is a response to the huge, and growing, body of evidence showing that air pollution causes serious harm at much lower levels than previously thought.

Given that these pollutants are known to cause lung and cardiovascular disease, and play a major role in a host of other illnesses including diabetes, cancers and dementia, and given that the latest available air pollution data for a number of roads in East Hertfordshire's AQMAs shows that they breached current limits, what action will EHC take to cut the levels of damaging air pollution that our residents are exposed to?

Response from Councillor Graham McAndrew:

"The council has been committed to tackling the scourge of air pollution for a number of years but there is no time for complacency."

"The council is concerned about particulate levels. PM_{2.5}, that is, particulate matter of less than 2.5 microns, can penetrate the lungs and bloodstream, with cardiovascular and respiratory impacts."

“In 2005, the World Health Organisation set a guideline of an annual average of no more than 10 micrograms of this particulate matter per cubic metre. I am pleased to inform members that data from our monitoring station in Hertford show steady drops over recent years to only 8.1 micrograms in 2019, with just a small and hopefully temporary increase in 2020. I hope our continued efforts will see the downward trend continue towards the World Health Organisation updated guideline of just 5 micrograms.”

“Levels of NO₂ continue to steadily drop in all three of our Air Quality Management Areas continue to steadily drop; this is not just a one-off result of less traffic last year due to Covid. In 2020, the average across all sites was 23.1 micrograms per cubic metre, well under the World Health Organisation’s previous guideline and indeed the national target of 40 micrograms.”

“Let me briefly explain our ongoing work that I hope will lead to further reductions toward the World Health Organisation’s new guideline of just 10 micrograms.”

“Air pollution in East Herts largely stems from fossil-fuelled road transport and so the need to reduce these emissions is fundamental to the updated Air Quality Action Plan officers are currently preparing. This will be informed by the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership’s new Transport Action Plan.”

“Our work across Hertfordshire highlights that we are just one part of the solution, however, I believe we are punching above our weight. For example, of the 50 or so e-vehicle chargers in the district currently available for public use, a quarter are provided by the council with this number set to increase dramatically in the coming months as 56 new chargers become available in Bishop’s Stortford and another three in Sawbridgeworth. In addition, officers are talking with town councils, parish councils and village halls about

assembling a joint bid for government funding to install chargers in more locations and we are working to switch our own van fleet to electric vehicles.”

“Our work to promote anti-idling, something that can have an immediate, positive effect on air quality demonstrates our ongoing commitment as does our participation in the Lynx demand responsive transport service in the north eastern part of our district and our emphasis on green alternatives to car use such as walking and cycling.”

“And of course, don’t forget our Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document which sets out more detailed guidance for developers.”

“So, I look forward to consulting colleagues on our new Air Quality Action Plan in the new year and working with the East Herts Environmental and Climate Change Forum to bring about lasting behaviour change to reduce air pollution for everyone’s benefit.”

There was no supplementary question.

Question 2

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

EHC's Sustainability Action Plan is an excellent document offering many key steps towards a lower carbon district. It includes the recommended action: "Explore a pilot to incentivise EPC A properties through the council tax system". EPC is an Energy Performance Certificate and grade A is the most sustainable rating.

The plan states this action is "COMPLETE - Reviewed and concluded not to take forward. Will retain for review. Determined other methods to incentivise domestic energy efficiency.”

Poorly insulated homes are one of the district's most significant sources of carbon emissions, and contribute significantly to fuel poverty and ill health in many residents. Why has the decision been made not to take this action forward, given it has considerable potential for helping to tackle climate change in East Herts and improving housing stock, as well as resident's health and wellbeing?

Response from Councillor Graham McAndrew:

"I'd like to thank Councillor Crystal for this question and, indeed, his scrutiny of our Sustainability Action Plan."

"The possibility of a pilot to incentivise EPC A rated properties through the council tax system was one of a long list of ideas that we have investigated. We concluded, however, that this would be a rather blunt instrument with a limited incentive impact which stood the risk of depriving the council of much needed revenue income to tackle sustainability and domestic energy efficiency. A 10% reduction in Band D would equate to around a £190-£200 benefit to the household in the year while East Herts would have to fund this discount in its entirety as it could not simply pass on the value of the reduction to the County Council and other precepting bodies."

"In addition, we concluded that it would be likely that those least able to afford to improve their property would thus be the least likely to benefit from a council tax discount, thus, we have decided to focus our efforts on other activities to promote domestic energy efficiency, especially as carbon emissions from domestic energy use currently account for some 219 kilotonnes of CO₂ per year, only a little less than the 277 kilotonnes arising from transport."

"East Herts has long offered grants for loft and cavity wall insulation. We have also worked jointly with other Hertfordshire districts for

several years to promote the delivery of energy efficiency and home insulation schemes to those residents with reduced financial means and/or medical need through the ECO scheme. Currently we are finalising arrangements for the implementation of potential delivery of initiatives to lower income households through the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery scheme (LAD), which will be delivered in partnership with the South East Energy Hub.”

“Advice and guidance is provided on the East Herts website and indeed even simple measures such as draught proofing, LED bulbs, loft insulation and hot water cylinder jackets can make an important difference.”

“That said, we probably all recognise that national interventions are required to make a step change in domestic energy efficiency and so I would hope that Councillor Crystal, and all my member colleagues, will join me in welcoming the government’s announcement of its new Heat and Buildings Strategy which is set to include financial incentives and other measures to support households switch to low carbon heating technologies such as heat pumps. Officers will keep these new developments under review and we will, of course, do everything to promote local uptake.”

“I think these initiatives, both locally and nationally led, when coupled with our Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document which provides detailed advice in terms of reducing carbon emissions from new developments and stresses the importance of taking a fabric first approach, will see the council making considerable strides over coming years to improve domestic energy efficiency.”

There was no supplementary question.

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

As the newly appointed Executive Member for Community Engagement what initiatives are you hoping to develop in order to improve Council/resident relationships to enhance the listening role of council?

Response from Councillor Jonathan Kaye:

“A few months ago we had a Town and Parish Council meeting on Zoom with councillors and clerks which included a mini presentation on electric cars and car charging and on the 30th September, three members of the planning team were present answering a range of questions some put in advance and some on the night. We will have another one on planning on 24th March 2022 and our next general Town and Parish Zoom meeting is on the 30th November 2021”

“Our Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (East & Equal) was adopted by Council in July. Staff training has been undertaken and the next phase will be to do this with East Herts Members so that we feel more informed and better equipped on various issues. I will be linking the District and County Council work on equalities more strongly to ensure a joined up approach. A good example is our involvement in the BAME – Black and Minority Ethnic community in Hertfordshire so we have a better way of engaging with different communities.”

“Together with East Herts Grants Officer Claire Pullen we held a meeting with Mercy Bwomono and Danielle of the CDA in Hertford on accessing grants. From this we recognised that some community groups find it difficult to complete the relevant forms or don't feel they will be successful.”

“I am also planning to open a dialogue with the Gypsy, Roma and Travelling community through working with GATE (Gypsy and Traveller Empowerment) to see if we can have any constructive forms of communication outside of planning enforcement matters”

“I’m also keen that the council raises its profile and takes part in more national and international awareness days. Some of you may have seen the video we recently did the International Day of Remembrance for the abolition of slavery at the Thomas Clarkson Memorial in Wadesmill, the Black History Month quiz earlier and our next event will be an event focused on LGBT+ history month in February. Although some of these are relatively small events, it is something we haven’t typically been involved with in recent years and I hope it demonstrates to different communities across the District that we very much welcome diversity in whatever form that takes.”

“Furthermore, the Cultural Strategy was developed in partnership with a number of individuals and organisations from our cultural community. A public engagement exercise was conducted to provide the opportunity for the Council to listen to the views of interested parties in our district. This received 52 responses.”

“On Thursday we’ll be hosting the East Herts Creative Cultural Conversation, in partnership with our community organisations. It will be held at Southern Maltings in Ware and will be the first in a series of ongoing events aimed and continuing the conversation between Council and interested parties in East Herts to develop to cultural offering in the District.”

“A similar approach of a public engagement exercise was also undertaken in the development of the Housing Strategy which received excellent feedback.”

“We also host forums on other topics such as sustainability, and the night time economy, giving opportunities for community groups and interested individuals to become involved and support the development of work in this area. This has been evident in the East Herts Environmental and Climate Change Forum and Hertford At Night groups.”

There was no supplementary question.

Question 4

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

Is the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods aware of a recent Report from the LGA (Local Government Association) in which it calls on the Government to give Local Councils the powers and funding to actually build 100,000 houses for Social Rent each year? (Building these houses could potentially save the Treasury £24.5 billion over 30 years by reduction in Housing Benefits and by increase in tax receipts from the construction industry). Is this request from the LGA something which the Executive Member and East Herts Council would be willing to support?

Response from Councillor Peter Boylan:

“Along with all Members here tonight surely, we all welcome any moves at national level to see more new affordable homes built across the country and therefore efforts by the Local Government

Association to mobilise all stakeholders to increase supply is to be applauded.”

“I note that Councillor Goldspink refers to recent calls by the LGA for government funding for councils to increase new supply. I would like to point out that the LGA is calling for more social housing rather than specifically more homes with social rents, as opposed to affordable rents. I would like to take a moment to dispel any confusion that simply because a council builds affordable homes it automatically has a social rent. This is not the case as councils across the country can and do charge affordable rents of up to 80% of market rents where they are built via a funding agreement with Homes England. On the flipside of the same coin, housing association properties do not always have to be built with affordable rents.”

“I think it is important to focus on two key issues here, the number of additional affordable homes and the rent levels of those properties. I believe it should be a matter of pride that East Herts Council has facilitated a supply of affordable housing that far outstrips the countywide and England-wide numbers.”

“Of particular note, national figures collated by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities each year show that in the ten years to 2020, the number of affordable homes in East Herts, that is new build net of any sales, rose by some 10.2% to over 8,300. Over the same period, the affordable homes in the rest of Hertfordshire increased by only 3.5%, and 3.4% across England. It's interesting to note that our council house stock-holding neighbour, Stevenage, recorded a 0.1% *decrease* in the number of affordable homes over the same period.”

“With regard to homes with social rents, I am very pleased that a number of registered providers operating in the District have

reversed their historic policies of swapping existing homes from social rents to affordable rents when they become vacant. This will reduce the decline in social rent properties we have seen in the past.”

“That said, I am concerned with the limited numbers of new homes built for social rent. However one interprets the statistics, it is clear that more homes for social rent are needed in the District. Indeed, this was the conclusion of the independent study into local needs I called for last year that was conducted by the Housing Quality Network. It has also come up in discussions with members and stakeholders during the drafting of the revised Housing Strategy. Later this year, the new strategy will be brought forward for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Executive and in due course full Council. The revised strategy will set as a priority the development of more homes for social rent whether through planning negotiations or the imaginative use of section 106 commuted sums already held by the council for affordable housing development.”

“May I conclude by returning to the detail of Councillor Goldspink’s question. I would of course welcome more resources to those councils with their own housing stock to enable them to build more homes but I would like to make it clear that having transferred our housing stock has **not** prevented the delivery of affordable homes in this District, compared with our neighbours as the government statistics I quoted earlier have shown. The council has robust planning policies in place and enjoys excellent working relationships with a range of registered providers. Therefore, I see no reason why the combination of a renewed commitment to social rent coupled with the ingenuity and drive of our partners will not result in

additional homes for social rent coming forward, something we would all like to see.”

Supplementary question from Councillor Mione Goldspink:

Councillor Goldspink thanked the Executive Member for his response and asked if he was willing to hold cross party discussions on how to increase homes for social rent.

Response from Councillor Peter Boylan:

Councillor Boylan said yes. He had also tried to engage with other parties and would continue to do so moving forward.