

## MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

<b>Question 1</b>	<b>Cllr Norma Symonds to ask Cllr Peter Boylan, the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods</b>
<p>Our council agreed a five-year housing plan in May this year. Six months has now gone, and I would like to ask the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods for an update on what has happened so far, especially with social housing.</p> <p><b>Response</b></p> <p>Since Council's approval of the Housing Strategy in May this year, considerable progress has been made. Members may recall that delivering more affordable homes with lower rents – and even social rents where possible – is the <i>very first objective</i> listed in the Strategy. I was therefore particularly pleased to officially open the new housing scheme in Pegram Drive, Buntingford last month where Hightown Housing have delivered nine homes at social rent. Added to this, B3 Living's new scheme in Bengoe sees rents capped at the local housing allowance, meaning they are just 60%-70% of private market rents in Hertford. I think both schemes show that low rents can and are being delivered when the council and registered providers work together. On top of this, officers are currently exploring new ways to ensure low rents, including talking to two registered providers about building homes for social rent on the few small plots of land still in the council's ownership.</p> <p>The Housing Strategy is, however, about more than simply rent levels. Providing homes for our most vulnerable residents is another major priority and so the development of affordable</p>	

rented bungalows on two sites this year, in Buntingford and in Bishop's Stortford, is especially welcome when we remember that there are 33 people on the Housing Register with significant mobility-related needs, who would greatly benefit from level access homes.

Furthermore, the Strategy prioritises making homes more energy efficient, thus I was thrilled to see so many of Network Homes new affordable rented and shared ownership homes at the Blakemoor Manor development in Hertford had solar panels and e-car charging points when I visited earlier this year. I know that Network are currently drawing up a proposal to build homes to the Passivhaus specification in the district. Added to this, private home owners have also been able to benefit from the county-wide 'solar panel bulk buy' scheme which the council was part of this summer. The scheme was so over-subscribed that another round next year now seems likely.

Finally, we cannot overlook the importance of getting the day-to-day work of helping homeless people find accommodation and running an effective housing application and nomination process. I am currently working with officers on options for speeding up the assessment of applicants' medical circumstances and I am very grateful to Cllr Symonds for agreeing to look over those proposals when they are ready in the new year.

So, although we only six months into the five year Housing Strategy, I hope I have been able to demonstrate that work is already well underway to deliver the priorities so resoundingly endorsed by members back in May.

There was no supplementary question.

**Question 2****Cllr Stephen Reed to ask Cllr Peter Boylan, the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods**

Due to the previous death in Rochdale due to damp and mould, could the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods explain if any measures have been taken to avoid East Herts repeating what happened.

**Response**

I'm sure all members were as shocked and saddened as I was to learn of the death of two year old Awaab Ishak who had endured prolonged exposure to damp and mould in his social rented home in Rochdale. Whilst this council does not hold any housing stock, it does, however, have a very important role to play in helping to avoid a similar tragedy here in East Herts.

This council has a specialist Housing Standards team within Environmental Health which employs several different techniques to tackle damp and mould, culminating, where necessary, in the use of formal powers to take punitive action. More typically, however, a resolution can be achieved through practical advice and support, with cases remaining open until confirmation that the problem has been remedied or it returns or worsens, prompting further investigatory visits and remedial action.

A high quality, responsive service is provided to the public with detailed advice on the council's website, such as a helpful checklist of things to consider which could be causing the problem and an easy-to-use form for reporting problems. Of note, over the 12 months of 2021/22, the Environmental Health team were approached by 62 tenants in social and private rented housing whose complaints primarily concerned damp and mould.

Perhaps understandably, the numbers of enquiries have increased in recent weeks so I would like to assure members that the Environmental Health team has reviewed all current and recent cases and are confident that there are no open cases which mirror the conditions which led to the young boy's needless and preventable death.

Of course, social landlords also have a key role to play in tackling damp and mould. At the council's request, the district's largest landlords – covering nine-out-of-ten affordable homes – have provided details of how they are supporting their tenants. I have passed this information to fellow members as soon as I have received it. Officers from both the Housing and Environmental Health teams are continuing to work with all social landlords to ensure no tenant's reports of damp and mould go unheeded. It is also worth noting that on 22 November, the Regulator for Social Housing also wrote to all housing associations asking for a range of assurance to prevent a recurrence of such an incident.

Finally, if a tenant approaches the Housing service feeling a need to transfer to another property due to damp and mould, Housing and Environmental Health officers immediately work closely with the landlord to alleviate the problem and so avoid a disruptive move. If, on the rare occasion, a move may be necessary, officers discuss this with the medical advisor currently commissioned to assess housing applicants' circumstances. The medical advisor has assured the council that she always carefully considers the impact of reported damp and mould on an applicants' health and has reported that she will remain vigilant of any new national guidance or best practice issued.

I hope I have been able to reassure members that the council takes *all* reports of damp and mould extremely seriously. The council will

*always* work with tenants, landlords and householders to find effective, permanent solutions and will *not* shy away from using its powers to require and force landlords to carry out remedial works if necessary.

There was no supplementary question.

**Question 3**

**Cllr Alexander Curtis to ask Cllr Graham McAndrew, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability**

Great Amwell residents have reported that on multiple occasions the paper boxes contained within their cardboard/glass/metal recycling bins have been tipped into the waste collection lorry instead of being emptied into a separate container. What steps is East Herts District Council taking to ensure that the contractor, Urbaser, stops doing this, in line with our contract with them?

**Response**

We are moving away from inner paper boxes which will prevent this from happening in the future. Urbaser have reminded their staff to check recycling bins before emptying. Unfortunately, we are operating on a high level of agency staff which can exacerbate the issue. If residents are concerned that their box or items in the box are being tipped into the chamber incorrectly, we encourage reporting so we can review CCTV and take further action.

**Question 4**

**Cllr Mione Goldspink to ask Cllr Geoffrey Williamson, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability**

What would be the effect on the Council's future Budget of cancelling the plans to build a cinema on the Old River Lane site in Bishop's Stortford? Would cancelling this project free up money for general revenue expenditure?

## **Response**

My thanks to Councillor Goldspink for raising this question. I refer Members to the Business Plan for the Arts Centre which was presented to Council in March last year. This stated that the Arts Centre would need a subsidy of just shy of £700k for the first seven years but thereafter will return a surplus amounting to £7.6m over the remainder of the period in which we will be repaying the loan. This is taking into account all the finance costs as they were calculated at the time the Business Case was prepared. Hence, in answer to the question if the Arts Centre project were to be cancelled this would cost the Council £6.9m over the next 30 years.

Whilst borrowing for the Arts Centre has revenue implications in terms of Minimum Revenue Provision and interest payments, if the Arts Centre did not proceed these savings would only be notional, as we would need to decapitalise all expenditure to date and that would become an immediate charge of in the region of £2 million to the revenue account. That £2 million deficit would then reduce the General Fund balance below the minimum recommended by our Section 151 officer, and the Council would have no choice but to use earmarked reserves to restore the General Fund balance back to a minimum level. As we intend to use our reserves judiciously in the coming years to smooth out our savings requirements in the MTFP, using these reserves to bolster the General Fund instead would cause significant further savings requirements to be met in the first two years of the new Council, which I don't believe is a position anyone in this chamber would advocate.

There would also be of course the non-financial cost to our residents by depriving them of this grand new facility.

There was no supplementary question.

**Question 5**

**Cllr Alexander Curtis to ask Cllr Geoffrey Williamson, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability**

Could the Executive Member please confirm that sufficient savings will be made in his upcoming 2023/24 budget to ensure that the Council can keep to its Medium Term Financial Plan?

**Response**

I thank Councillor Curtis for raising this. In answer, I would refer Councillor Curtis and other Members to the report on the budget and Medium Term Financial Plan that was considered by the Executive last week. The report indicated that after planned increases in revenue are taken into account we have a savings target in 2023/24 of £822k; the major causes of this being the local government pay settlement for staff, and higher contract inflation.

We have already identified measures that enable us to meet that target. In particular, we have worked with the Leadership Team on savings that relate to efficiencies within the organisation and which do not affect our delivery of services to residents, and as such these do not require Member approval. These savings have a combined value of £866k, which being in excess of the target means in relation to Cllr Curtis's question that sufficient savings have been identified to allow us to present a balanced budget for next year in line with our Medium Term Financial Plan.

I can remind Members that the budget and MTFP will be considered by the Audit & Governance Committee on 24<sup>th</sup> January, prior it coming before Full Council on 1<sup>st</sup> March.

There was no supplementary question.

**Question 6****Cllr Carolyn Redfern to ask Cllr Geoffrey Williamson, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability**

In view of the Transforming East Herts Programme and the plans to severely slim down East Herts spending, when will Executive publish the plans in full, to let residents know what they are doing to ensure services are protected and they will not be underserved?

**Response**

The business case for the Transformation Programme was published in July and this gives the details for what the programme comprises and what it will achieve. Its aim is to enable the Council to protect its delivery of its services but at lower costs through efficiencies and greater use of technology. We believe this will give our residents a better experience overall yet at the same time contributing to our need to reduce expenditure. With reference to my reply to Cllr Curtis, this is already bearing fruit with the savings that have been identified for the next financial year which will save £822k but with no impact on the quality of our services to our residents.

Going forward beyond next year there are further savings that will be required and the Transformation Programme will be at the heart of this, and in conjunction, the new Administration after next May will be tasked to set the new Corporate Plan and alongside that to undertake a Reconciling Policy, Performance & Resources exercise to ensure its future spending is aligned with its new corporate plan priorities.

There was no supplementary question.



**Question 7****Cllr Carolyn Redfern to ask Cllr Graham McAndrew, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability**

What is the Council doing to address issues of parking, speed limits and rat runs throughout the district but in particular the serious issues in West Street, Hertford?

**Response**

The management of speeding and inappropriate use of roads, as a through route, is for Hertfordshire County Council (the Highway Authority) to consider. East Herts council has no powers to manage these types of issues.

The power to enforce the associated Traffic Regulation Orders would be for the police to undertake. East Herts has no powers to engage. We will of course direct correspondents to the appropriate authority, and if possible, highlight the issues directly to the police.

We will carry out parking enforcement when obstruction of residential driveways, or dropped kerbs, are reported by the public.

In relation to parking in West Street, there are very limited parking restrictions in the road. These are checked daily through the mobile patrols carried out by Civil Enforcement Officers.