

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Angus Parsad-Wyatt to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council
<p>The new Executive has expanded with the addition of the Executive Member for Resident Engagement. Given engaging with residents is a function of all Councillors' roles, can the Leader please explain what the purpose of this role is, and by what metrics the Member's work will be judged?</p>	
Response	
<p>Thank you for the question. You're correct that engaging with residents is already a fundamental part of every councillor's day to day activities – clearly we all spend time answering queries or talking to our residents. And that one-to-one engagement works perfectly well when questions are single issues or where you're looking for a localised response, from a single street, say or from part of a ward.</p> <p>But EHC regularly consults residents on new policies or strategies or on planning applications, or wider schemes covering town centres, for example, where there is no single yes/no answer and where the council is looking for residents to address a much broader range of issues.</p> <p>The key questions here are: 1) how do we engage to ensure that as many residents as possible are notified about a consultation – and again ward councillors have a role to play here – and 2) how do we ensure that the consultations themselves are clear, ask the right kinds of questions and are delivered in the best way to achieve those aims.</p>	

In the past we may have posted out questionnaires to everyone but that's expensive and people often miss them amongst junk mail. At the other extreme we have online consultation systems. No single approach works for everyone. You could just accept that we'll always miss some people. I don't think that's good enough and in the last few years I have become acutely aware of large numbers of residents who feel that their voices aren't being heard. This is also about trying to restore trust in local politics.

So the aim of the new post, and the challenge for Cllr Chris Wilson, is to take a careful look at how we consult and engage with our residents, and how we can improve that process, to try to reach as many people as possible, but also to look at opportunities for more in-depth discussions with residents, so that they start to have a real voice in local democracy.

As far as metrics are concerned, have metrics have ever been applied specifically to executive roles at EHC? The council monitors customer feedback and that could be used as a judge of success. The ultimate metric is the ballot box, as we saw in May. There is also the opportunity for the Overview and Scrutiny committee to be involved in assessing how effective we are at improving consultation and engagement. But if you or anyone else have ideas for metrics that could be effective, please let me know.

Supplementary question from Cllr Parsad-Wyatt

Cllr Parsad-Wyatt said that six of the nine Members in the Executive represented wards in Hertford. He asked how they would ensure that they were working and engaging with all resident across the whole District. He also said that the additional Executive Member position would cost the council an estimated £40,000 over the four-year term of the council and asked where the additional £40,000 would come from and which service charge may be raised or cut to fund the Executive's allowances.

Response from Cllr Crystall

Cllr Crystall responded and said he did not think where the Executive Members' wards were relevant. He said the new role was about how the council engaged with all residents across the district. He said as far as costs were concerned, he said there would be an additional cost but engaging and listening to residents was clearly something that people were very passionate about. He said the council had seen the response at the ballot box and he said what a lot of councillors had heard on the doorstep came down to anger at feeling disconnected and feeling like they were not listened to. He said he felt it was a cost worth paying for this council and said it was absolutely worth the money to get the public's faith back in democracy.

Question 2

Cllr Geoffrey Williamson to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council

There is an inconsistency between the pledge to halt our Old River Lane scheme made by parties leading up to the recent election and comments made in public following the election by the same parties who now form the new administration. Can the Leader please provide clarity on the plans this Council has for the development to proceed?

Response

Cllr Crystall referred the question to Cllr Goldspink, Deputy Leader to provide a response.

I would like to thank Cllr Williamson for his question. The new joint administration of this council wishes very strongly to provide a first class development on the Old River Lane site in Bishop's Stortford and it wishes to proceed with it as soon as possible whilst still allowing time for public consultation on the arts centre element of the proposals. As Cllr Williamson will remember, there was a meeting of the Council in March 2021 at which the Old River Lane scheme was discussed and approved. The Delivery Board was

instructed and authorised to bring the scheme into being. There was a procurement process which the developer, Cityheart, made a successful bid. The Delivery Board duly met regularly and progress was made. However, there was considerable public discontent about the idea of a cinema as the main component of the Arts Centre. In May this year at the local election, there came a change of control at the council. The new joint administration discovered, to its great dismay, that the previous administration run by the Conservatives, had already made some legal and financial commitments on behalf of the Council which it would be impossible to change. In short, the Conservatives have bequeathed to us, the new administration, a project that was beset with problems and lacking in public support and we had very little power to make changes. They had handed us, in effect, a poisoned chalice.

So we now have to pick up the pieces and try to provide as good a development as possible at this important town centre site. The Development Board met on 29th June and sought advice from the legal and financial officers. The Board was mindful of the public's concerns about the project and the public's urgent wish to be fully informed. By this time, Cityheart had submitted a planning application for the main part of the development but not for the Arts Centre. Following the advice which it received, the Delivery Board decided to pause the Arts Centre element and to arrange a full public consultation. The residential and retail parts are the subject of planning applications and they will have to run their course and be determined by planning policies and regulations. The Arts Centre Steering Group is being reconstituted with a wider membership this time and its ideas will feed into the public consultation.

The consultation with the public is being designed at the moment and should be publicised within the next few weeks. We intend to publish the results of the consultation and future decision about the Arts Centre subject to financial and commercial confidentiality and we will make the minutes of the Delivery Board meetings available on the council's website. In fact, there are already some things on the council's website with the frequently asked questions. We do want to be as open and transparent as possible.

In conclusion, the new administration wishes to make positive progress on delivering the development at Old River Lane and intends to keep Members and the public fully informed at frequent intervals.

Supplementary question from Cllr Williamson

Cllr Williamson thanked Cllr Goldspink for her response and said it confirmed that the project would, in part, be put on hold for some period. He said that advice from the S.151 Officer and as reflected in the recent coverage of Old River Lane in the Bishop's Stortford Independent, stopping the scheme would be financial suicide. Equally, even to delay progress in the plans as put down by the previous administration either in whole or in part, comes with severe financial risks to this council as to delay and potentially change the scheme will lead to increased costs due to inflation and would have knock on effects on risk which could put the whole project in jeopardy. What measures are the Executive putting in place to protect the project and counter the financial fallout which would most likely ensue from any delay in proceedings which could lead to this council going bankrupt?

Response from Cllr Goldspink

We have been taking legal and financial advice about this and we have been advised that a short pause will not cause any financial or legal problems. The development agreement is being redrawn to

take account of the fact that the Arts Centre element is being taken out from the original agreement. We have been assured that a short pause of a maximum of nine months will be alright and we will not incur any financial penalties. The delay is for a short time to allow the consultation to take place and be assessed and a new design to be drawn up.

Question 3

Cllr Sue Nicholls to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth

According to DEFRA, nutrient pollution is an urgent problem for the country's freshwater habitats and rivers. Increased levels of nutrients (especially nitrogen and phosphorus) can speed up the growth of certain plants impacting wildlife by the process of eutrophication.

Natural England has previously advised 32 Local Planning Authorities that where protected sites are in an unfavourable condition due to excess nutrients, development should only go ahead if it will not cause additional pollution to sites. In March 2022, Natural England advised a further 42 LPAs that their areas are covered by this advice.

This advice from Natural England means that new residential development must achieve 'nutrient neutrality' - meaning that the nutrient load created through additional wastewater (including surface water) from the development is mitigated.

Can I ask whether East Herts Officers have been contacted by Natural England over concerns about nutrient neutrality in any of the district's nature reserves, waterways or bodies of water?

[Nutrient Neutrality FAQs | Local Government Association](#)

Response

At this time East Herts is not one of the LPAs which fall into the areas affected by the nutrient neutrality advice issued by Natural

England and Natural England hasn't contacted the Council to identify East Herts as an area of concern regarding nutrient neutrality. Officers will continue to work closely with Natural England who are a statutory consultee on planning matters and will notify members if any advice regarding nutrient neutrality changes in the future.

Supplementary question from Cllr Nicholls

Does the council have any protected sites where excess nutrient levels should be a concern even though the council may not have been advised of them?

Response from Cllr Glover-Ward

Officers are not aware of any protected sites in the district where excess nutrient levels are a concern. Officers will continue to work with Natural England to ensure that their advice on nutrient neutrality is considered in both plan-making and decision-making.

Question 4

Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Cllr Tim Hoskin, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability

At the recent Much Hadham Parish Council Annual General Meeting, a concerned resident raised the issue of EV chargers for the village hall. I recall that there was a previous call to parish councils and a Teams meeting was arranged to request their buy-in on this matter. Additionally, I understand that the previous Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability expressed enthusiasm for East Herts' collaboration with suppliers of EV chargers to ensure wide coverage of appropriate charging infrastructure, including Fast Rapid and Ultra Rapid chargers throughout East Herts.

Therefore, I would like to enquire about the current progress of the EV charging infrastructure in East Herts District Council. Can the Executive Member provide a comprehensive progress report on the situation? Specifically, I am interested in knowing the status of

the Much Hadham Parish Council's request for EV chargers at the village hall and the overall implementation of the initiative to ensure a wide coverage of appropriate EV charging.

Response

Thank you, Cllr Devonshire for your question.

I am aware of the work of the previous administration regarding e-v chargers and I'd like to confirm the joint administration's commitment to continuing this and, if anything, accelerating charger roll out.

To this end, in June this year, the council invited tenders for the provision of e-v chargers in the council's car parks and/or land owned by our partners, such as parish councils and village halls.

The default position is for the installation of *fast* chargers. These are suitable as an alternative to on-drive charging. That said, the tender includes a requirement to also install some *rapid* chargers in at least Hertford and Bishop's Stortford. At the same time, the council recognises that national power infrastructure and capacity may mean that in some rural areas, only *standard* chargers may be practicable.

Of crucial importance, tenderers have been required to make proposals which do *not* rely on financial input from the council, beyond officer support, and indeed the income to the council from the parking spaces must still be provided for any spaces used for chargers. In this way, the council, and thus residents, can benefit from the rapidly evolving commercial e-v charger market. Of course, the council will continue to work with Hertfordshire County Council and partners on identifying any subsidy which could be

channelled to the successful bidder to further increase the number of chargers installed.

I am particularly pleased that the specification requires the successful company to install at least 20% of all chargers in more rural locations outside of our five market towns. Thus, residents in rural areas won't miss out as the company will be required to cross-subsidy less viable, rural locations from their income from the more heavily used town centre e-v chargers.

The council specification listed the locations are every village hall in the district, including, of course, Much Hadham's. In due course, the council, successful tenderer and village halls and parish councils will work together to assess the viability of individual locations and priorities for installation.

The bidding window closed on Monday, just two days ago, and while officers are now starting the tender evaluation process, I am very pleased to announce that six tenders have been received which I believe demonstrates the high level of market interest in working with the council to increase e-v charger coverage across the whole of the district. I look forward to sharing the outcome of the evaluation with members later this summer and the installation programme being mobilised as soon as possible thereafter.

Question 5

Cllr David Willcocks to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, Executive Member for Wellbeing

Cool spaces provide opportunities for people to shelter from the sun, cool down and rest during hot weather, for example, Libraries, leisure centres, places of worship and community centres. Cool spaces can offer respite and recovery in urban areas during hot weather and may contribute to reducing heat-related harm to

health. Following record-breaking temperatures exceeding 40C in the UK last year, and with further extreme weather events predicted this summer, have the council any plans to list and advertise available cool spaces for the residents of East Herts?

Response

Thank you very much Cllr Willcocks for this question, and it highlights a really important issue. We are fortunate to have so far been spared from the extreme heat that has been hitting so many parts of Europe. However, we know that climate change means we can expect to see more intense heat in the future, for which it is essential that we as the council take robust measures to help protect residents, especially those at higher risk.

In terms of advertising available cool spaces, last winter East Herts Council started to set up a warm spaces directory separate from that by Hertfordshire County Council. However, it quickly became apparent that hosting a separate directory was not helpful, and the preferable option was for us to support the countywide directly developed by HCC. For cool spaces, we similarly plan to fully support the cool spaces directory already set up by Hertfordshire County Council. We have already put information and links to this on the East Herts Council website, and this page can be found here: [Find a cool space | East Herts District Council](#). We will also share the information on social media platforms and via our weekly email update ahead of any anticipated heatwaves.

I appreciate of course, that some of the most vulnerable residents, and those most in need of cool spaces facilities will not necessarily have internet access, and we want to ensure that we take all steps to reach these residents with information. We will do this by working with our partners through the Healthy Hub, where there is a strong network of partners organisations, including Citizens Advice East Herts, Age Concern Bishops Stortford, Herts Mind Network, and Carers in Herts. We will also share information with

local housing associations. Collectively, these organisations and partners have regular interactions with residents in the community and provide an important avenue for ensuring the information gets out. We will also support any measures recommended by HCC.

While I hope these measures will collectively reach everyone who needs the information, if there are any other avenues that you feel we should be exploring, please do let me know. Lastly, in the event that anyone here knows of a suitable venue or space that could provide a 'cool space', I encourage members to register this space on HCC's website. The page for this including all the related about the scheme, can be found here: [Community Spaces - professionals area | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

Thank you again for your question.

Question 6

Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Joseph Dumont, Executive Member for Corporate Services

Following the recent changes to voter ID requirements, will the Executive Member for Corporate Services confirm in the elections of 4th May 2023:

- a) how many polling station electors were refused a ballot paper due to insufficient or invalid Voter ID at the polling station?
- b) How many of those refused polling station electors returned with valid IDs and proceeded to vote?

Response

Collated figures show that 26,713 electors voted at the 100 polling stations across the district on 4 May. The data shows that 99.9% of electors voting in polling stations brought photo ID that met newly introduced voter ID requirements.

At the end of polling day, 23 electors who tried to vote in a polling station were not given a ballot paper because they did not meet the new voter ID requirements – 0.1%.

The figures also show while 68 electors were initially turned away, 45 returned with acceptable ID and were able to vote. This means 66.2% of those initially turned away returned and were issued with a ballot paper.

Question 7

Cllr Nahum Clements to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, Executive Member for Wellbeing

The Hertford Theatre will be a thriving hub for arts and culture in Hertford and the surrounding area. It stands to be a fantastic asset for residents and community groups. However, the previous administration committed to spending significant sums on the project and concerns were raised about the viability of the original business plan. It is important that we exercise great care when spending public money.

Will the Executive Member for Wellbeing please confirm:

1. The total spending committed to the Hertford Theatre project to date; and
2. Which aspects of the project are still to be funded, and the estimated cost of each; and
3. What funding the council has secured for the remainder of the project; and
4. When the Hertford Theatre business plan was last updated; and
5. What plans are in place for addressing any shortfall in funding

Response

Thank you Cllr Clements for this question. As it is in five parts, I have taken each part in turn. I hope this information is helpful.

1. The total spending committed to the Hertford Theatre project to date;

The current committed budget is £24.105 million.

2. Which aspects of the project are still to be funded, and the estimated cost of each;

£24.105 million is fully funded as part of the Capital Programme approved by full Council on 1 March 2023. The council is working with our consultants, Bristow Consulting, and remain in dialogue with GPF Lewis to agree the final guaranteed maximum price (GMP). With discussions on going, this is commercially sensitive information and so we are unable to share further details in an open meeting or via a written response after the meeting. I am hopeful that this decision will be made soon, and I would be happy to share any further information with regards to this question, once agreed.

3. What funding the council has secured for the remainder of the project;

The funding shortfall was addressed through a Heritage Lottery Fund bid, support from Hertford Town Council, and the reprofiling of 2022/23 capital budgets to allow underspent contingency on Hartham Leisure Centre to be transferred to the Theatre. The revenue costs of the Hartham project were already built into the base budget so there were no additional costs from this transfer.

4. When the Hertford Theatre business plan was last updated;

Barker Langham, our consultants who have extensive experience of the cultural sector, reran the business plan in March 2023, with updated costs and reflecting current audience habits. This showed the theatre maintaining the medium term financial plan assumed contribution to the savings target and also generating additional surplus to repay

the borrowing attributed to it by the transfer of the unused Hartham contingency.

5. What plans are in place for addressing any shortfall in funding

Officers are working through the implications of any cost increases by examining the specification of spaces fit out and, where necessary, seeking to reduce the cost by altering the specification. Officers are also considering the implications of phasing the opening of certain parts of the building to a later date. Fundraising through sponsorship is also being considered. This could include offering the public the opportunity to sponsor a seat, for example, which has been successful elsewhere. Elements of the grounds work outside the building are now being taken forward through a Lottery Grant.

The overriding priority for officers is to ensure the main auditorium and cinema screens are opened, and that the overall budget envelope for the scheme is kept to at this stage. Any overrun on budget will directly impact the other projects in the capital programme as their budgets would need to be reduced. The section 151 officer has advised Members that increasing overall borrowing is neither affordable nor prudent.

I hope this information answers your question, and I will endeavour to provide updates on this project as it continues.

Many thanks again for the question, answers to which I understand are important both to members here and to the residents of East Herts.