

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth
<p>Please could you let us know why there have been so few Development Management Committees since the election in May of this year. Up to the end of November 2023, there has only been two DMC meetings in seven months.</p> <p>It was reported last year that this Authority was the ninth busiest planning authority in the country. Therefore, it is worrying that we are having so few DMC meetings.</p> <p>The Development Management Committee is, obviously, very important to demonstrate transparency in the planning process, so please could the Executive Member explain why applications are not coming to DMC.</p>	
Response by Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward	
<p>Thank you for your question Cllr Devonshire. As you have mentioned the Council has a very busy planning department and we receive around 2,500 planning applications a year. The majority of these applications are minor, householder related applications and are determined under delegated authority by officers. We receive around 50 major planning applications a year although this can vary. Not all of these applications are considered by DMC but we do currently have a number of important planning applications in the system such as Birchall Garden Suburb, Ware 2, Hert 3 and Hert 4 which will be considered by DMC at the appropriate time.</p>	

Major planning applications are generally more complex, with us receiving a huge number of comments on them alongside needing to resolve several technical planning matters. This all takes time and, in most cases, they can't be determined within the statutory timeframes. To manage this, we have Planning Performance Agreements (known as PPAs) in place with the applicants to guide them through the process and more realistic timeframes.

Officers will only present applications to DMC for consideration when they consider that the planning issues have been resolved and can recommend a robust planning decision.

This means that on some occasions, applications won't quite be ready to be considered by DMC and meetings will have to be cancelled. Having looked back at DMC agendas since May 2019, I can see that this approach is not uncommon, with between 4 – 6 meetings per year having been cancelled during this period

Whilst there have been some DMC meetings have had to be cancelled this year because there is no business for the reasons I have outlined, there are a number of applications that will need to be considered by DMC in 2024.

The officer team have an indicative 3 monthly forward plan that they work towards but as I have highlighted previously this can change for reasons outside of our control and it is important to ensure that we encourage quality applications to be presented and considered by DMC.

Supplementary question by Cllr Ian Devonshire

Councillor Devonshire said that in the same time period, North Herts Council had eight Development Management Committees compared to two at East Herts Council. He asked if it was possible

that applicants would be going to the inspector and approved due to non-determination.

Response by Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

Councillor Glover-Ward responded and said that in 2022/23, there were six DMC meetings and in 2020/21, there were five meetings. She said the first DMC meeting was ten days after the election which was understandably cancelled and other meetings have not gone ahead because applications had not been ready.

Question 2

Cllr Eric Buckmaster to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth

Following the disappointing news that this Council is closing Ward Freman Swimming Pool, concerns have been raised yet again by a number of residents about the current condition and future status of the two other joint-use pools in the District, including Leventhorpe Leisure Centre in Sawbridgeworth, which is in desperate need of refurbishment.

In August, an unnamed spokesperson for this Council was quoted in the Bishop's Stortford Independent stating that 50% of the allocated £122,760 of Section 106 money from the SAWB2 and SAWB3 housing developments - which was ring-fenced in the S106 agreement for 'Grange Paddocks and/or Leventhorpe Leisure Centre' - remains unassigned.

As Grange Paddocks is now complete, open and operational, could the Executive Member for Planning and Growth confirm that this unassigned £60,000 will be spent on refurbishing Leventhorpe Leisure Centre, which will help to attract additional users and

therefore ensure its continued operation for the benefit of all residents in Sawbridgeworth?

Response by Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

Councillors will be aware that papers are to be published imminently on proposals for the budget and medium term financial plan ahead of Executive next week. Proposals for the joint use pools, including use of Section 106 contributions, will be considered as part of this process

Members will be aware that the Section 106 funding can only be allocated in accordance with the identified contribution wording and the Council has ten years in which to allocate and use the received funds. Therefore the identified Indoor Sport & Recreation contributions from the SAWB2 development, which is for either Grange Paddocks and/or Leventhorpe, are required to be allocated and used by 2034, so we have time to ensure the best use of this funding for the benefit of the Council, the residents and the pool users.

Supplementary question by Cllr Eric Buckmaster

Councillor Buckmaster said that the residents on Sawbridgeworth wanted something done and said the service was viable with the gym and pool and use was higher than pre-pandemic, he asked if the administration would confirm their support to encourage use of the pool and gym to maintain the health and wellbeing of residents.

Response by Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

Councillor Glover-Ward said that she understood the question but felt it should be directed to the Executive Member for Wellbeing. She said she could not comment on the leisure strategy but would seek a written answer from Councillor Hopewell on that point.

Question 3**Cllr Joseph Dumont to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, the Executive Member for Wellbeing**

Local Councils, including this one, have responsibility for licensing dog breeders and ensuring puppies are bred in safe and healthy conditions.

Illegal puppy farms – in which large numbers of litters are bred in poor conditions without proper monitoring – continue to be used throughout the UK. It is estimated that 400,000 farmed puppies are purchased each year.

Does the Executive Member have any intelligence on the scale of this issue in East Herts and what steps is the Council taking to make sure the public is aware of the importance of acquiring puppies from licensed breeders?

Response by Cllr Sarah Hopewell

I would like to thank Cllr Dumont for his question as I understand and agree that animal welfare is something that many of our residents are very concerned about.

Promoting the welfare of animals, including ensuring dog breeders are licensed, is the responsibility of the council's Environmental Health team. Over the last four years, the team have been contacted twice by members of public concerned that a puppy farm was operating in their area. On both occasions, the allegation was investigated by an Environmental Health Officer.

In the first instance, there was no breeding found to be taking place. The officer provided general animal welfare advice and no further complaints were received.

The second case was of more concern and so the Environmental Health team brought in the RSPCA and Hertfordshire County

Council's Trading Standards team to work with them. During the investigation, the owner of the establishment unfortunately died. This resulted in the all the dogs being rehomed by the RSPCA and dog breeding ceasing. Officers are keeping in contact with the establishment with the aim of ensuring no illegal activity takes place in the future.

The animal welfare page on the council's website includes detailed advice and information about dog breeding both for those considering breeding dogs and prospective purchasers of puppies. The webpage includes a link to the government's extensive information about the topic as well a form for contacting the Environmental Health team with any concerns about illegal or unsafe activity.

I believe that although the problem is thankfully small in East Herts, the council is doing its best to inform breeders and the public alike about safe puppy breeding. I would urge members hearing of any possible illegal activity contact to our Environmental Health team as a matter of urgency.

Question 4

Cllr John Wyllie to ask Cllr Tim Hoskin, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability

Some Bishop's Stortford high street businesses struggle with staff recruitment and retention due to the proximity of Stansted Airport, where many employees get free parking. The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability published a scheme in July, which would allow some Bishop's Stortford Town Centre workers to benefit from reduced parking charges. This scheme was supported by the Bishop's Stortford BID, the Executive Member then promptly withdrew his own scheme.

At the Full Council meeting on the 18th October the Leader of the Council said that the scheme was withdrawn so that an alternative scheme could be introduced.

Can the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability tell me what the proposed new scheme is and when it will be launched?

Response by Cllr Tim Hoskin

Councillor Hoskin said the parking scheme in Bishop's Stortford was on the agenda for tonight's meeting and Council would be able to debate it later.

Supplementary question by Cllr John Wyllie

Councillor Wyllie said he thanked the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for his initial proposal and asked if the Executive Member regretted that the decision was paused.

Response by Cllr Tim Hoskin

Councillor Hoskin said that he felt he had come up with a fairer proposal and hoped Councillor Wyllie would be able to contribute to the debate later in the meeting.

Question 5

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

With the first phase of the Hertford Theatre opening next Spring, could the Executive Member for Wellbeing please provide an update on what the total expected cost of the Theatre is, and are any specific alterations being undertaken or any aspects that remain to be funded as a result of cost increases?

Response by Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Thank you for your question. Regarding the expected cost of the theatre, the papers detailing these in full will be published next week.

In terms of alterations to lower the price, a number of have been considered. For the most part, we explored the savings impact of either not completing one of the cinemas, or not completing the studio. The business case indicated that the cinema screens represented most potential to provide return on investment. With Hertford Theatre always intended as an invest-to-save project, to risk the loss of income through not having a cinema screen, and especially if this risked the theatre's ability to show 'first release' films, would have undermined any savings potential from not completing these areas.

There was a period of time when not completing the studio was considered the best approach to reduce the costs of the theatre. We also explored the option of a partial fit, so that the space could still be used for something, even if not its intended purpose. However, we wanted to make sure that we had considered all angles. Part of the business plan, and the theatre being able to pay for itself, involved not just the spaces being used as is, but also sales of food and drink. Not having the studio would mean losing both on ticket sales and sales of refreshments. Deeper analysis indicated that, by investing in the studio in its entirety, assuming the business plan is roughly correct, the theatre should start providing a return on investment between years 3 and 5. Failure to invest, while initially saving money, would over time reduce profit margins to the point that the pay-back period would increase, and possibly the project would ultimately end up costing more in the longer run due to delays on interest repayments.

Having made these considerations, it became clear that whilst a larger initial outlay, the theatre stands the best chance of recouping the investment by fitting out the cinemas and the

studio. The full paper will be brought to full council for consideration in due course.

Question 6

Cllr Carolyn Redfern to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, the Executive Member for Wellbeing

How many extra car journeys into the centre of Hertford are expected as a result of the theatre opening and what plans are in place to:-

- a. promote the use of public transport, and active travel
- b. ensure adequate parking is in place to support the remaining car journeys

Response by Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Thank you for your question Cllr Redfern. I know that we both feel strongly about promoting public transport and active travel, and there are many benefits to doing so, including reducing congestion, improving air quality, reducing road noise, and reducing negative impact on the environment.

As part of the work of developing Hertford Theatre, a travel management plan was commissioned, which included analysis of travel patterns, existing patterns to the theatre (prior to closure), available parking and public transport routes, and existing cycle and walking options. Many suggestions were put forward, including improving information on the website about bus and active travel routes, and having up-to-date details about the train timetables clearly available to customers. Along with the website, it was advised that this also be provided with the booking confirmation email to reinforce public transport options. Another option currently under consideration is to have a discounted system where customers can claim back a percentage of their

ticket price if they can provide evidence of having travelled either by public transport or active travel.

In terms of remaining parking, an analysis of all applicable car parks was undertaken. Customers will be informed of the most appropriate car parks, and the walking distances from these sites. It is proposed that a parking survey take place a year post-opening once use patterns have been established, and if it transpires that more spaces are needed, greater use of Wallfields parking can be considered.

While this question doesn't address specific numbers, hopefully it gives a flavour of the options, and I have provided you with the full report which has far more detail and recommendations. I will try and obtain specific numbers around anticipated car use, and will share this update as well.

Question 7

Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability

Can the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability confirm how much funding this council has received from the following central Government development funds (the figure in brackets being the total value of the funds across England and Wales)?

Future High Streets Fund (£1bn)

Towns Fund (£3.6bn)

Levelling Up Fund (£3.8bn)

Levelling Up Partnership (£400m)

Long Terms Plan Towns Fund (£1.1bn)

Response by Cllr Carl Brittain

The amount East Herts received from each of the funding sources is:

Future High Streets Fund £NIL

Applications for this fund had to be made by April 2019 and East Herts could only make one application. An application for Old River Lane in Bishop's Stortford was made but was unsuccessful.

Towns Fund £NIL

The government chose the towns that qualified for the Towns Fund, based on deprivation indices and no town in East Herts qualified. There was no application process.

Levelling Up Fund £NIL

Funding goes to those with Priority 1 or Priority 2 status. East Herts is Priority 3 and would be unlikely to have any bid approved therefore no bids have been submitted in the first 2 rounds.

Levelling Up Partnership £NIL

The Government chose the 20 places that qualified for funding using deprivation indices and no town in East Herts qualified. There was no application process.

Long Terms Plan Towns Fund £NIL

The government chose the towns that qualified for the Long Terms Plan Towns Fund, based on deprivation indices and no town in East Herts qualified. There was no application process.

In terms of other Levelling Up funding, we have received a proportion of the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** to cover the years 2022/23 - 2024/25.

This is **£1,773,136** in total.

This is distributed via a formula that ensures that all areas receive some funding.

This has been topped up with an additional amount from the **Rural Prosperity Fund** covering 2023/24 and 2024/25.

This is **£472,841** in total.

Again, this is distributed via a formula.