

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Joe Thomas to ask Cllr Tim Hoskin, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability
<p>Over the Winter period, residents have been reporting to me an uptick in dog fouling in our villages. Could the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability confirm to me the number of reports of dog fouling in the Watton-at-Stone ward to East Herts District Council for the month of December 2023 compared to the month of December 2022 (following the ward boundary as of May 2023)?</p>	
Response from Councillor Tim Hoskin	
<p>Thank you, Councillor Thomas, for the question.</p> <p>Watton-at-Stone currently has a total of 11 dog fouling bins, as well as another 29 regular street litter bins, situated within its area, making it one of the best served areas for litter and dog bins within East Herts.</p> <p>I was therefore perturbed to hear that you are receiving an increased number of complaints around dog fouling in the village, given that there are 40 bins available for people to dispose of dog waste when out with their pets.</p> <p>Looking at the two periods highlighted in your question, that is, December 2022 and December 2023, there were no recorded reports of dog fouling in Watton-at-Stone for either month, and looking at Watton-at-Stone in general, there has only been one</p>	

report of dog fouling since the start of the current street cleansing contract, which was received in October 2023.

Where members of the public want to report incidents of dog fouling, the most effective way to do this is via the online reporting portal that goes through directly to customer services, who can then action it. This also allows us to keep a track of any increased instances of dog fouling in the area, as clearly there is currently a disconnect between what is being reported to you as the ward member and what it being reported onto our systems.

Supplementary question from Councillor Joe Thomas

Councillor Thomas asked if the Executive Member would be willing to explore a communication campaign to tackle the issue of dog fouling?

Response from Councillor Tim Hoskin

Councillor Hoskin said he would be happy to explore a communications plan. He said that public bins had QR codes on them to make it easier to report incidences.

Question 2

Cllr Diane Hollebon to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability

Within the recommendations attached to the Budget that we will all be looking at this evening is that Council will provide £170K for “essential maintenance” works for the URC Hall in Bishop’s Stortford. The URC was keen to sell the Hall to EHDC as part of our land assembly for the ORL scheme and thus divest itself of ongoing maintenance and repair liabilities. Given that previous structural reports suggest that the Hall is not fit for purpose, why is the

Executive proposing that we spend this money on a Hall that the Council purchased only in order to demolish it?

Response from Councillor Carl Brittain

Awaiting written response

Supplementary question from Councillor Diane Hollebon

Councillor Hollebon reiterated the need to have a control on capital spending and asked if the hall should be paused, the same as the rest of the Old River Lane project. She asked the Executive Member if he could explain how this spend represented value for money for the residents of Bishop's Stortford and the wider district.

Response from Councillor Carl Brittain

Councillor Brittain said that although there was a restriction on capital spending, it did not mean that the council could not spend anything at all. He said that the repairs to the hall were based on an estimate provided to bring the hall up to standard for operational use and felt that it would be beneficial to the community to keep it open whilst options were considered for the Old River Lane project.

Question 3

Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader provide a progress report on the Old River Lane project, with as much detail as possible including information about any projected milestones in 2024?

Response from Councillor Ben Crystall

Thank you for your question David. There have been a number of changes to the project as a result of the budget situation we find

ourselves in. Nevertheless our intention is to continue with the commercial, retail and residential scheme, with Cityheart as the developer, and the Old River Lane Board continues to meet regularly to oversee progress.

Our primary aim this year is to get the Development Agreement with Cityheart signed so the scheme can proceed. Clearly this has been on-going for a number of years and we are currently in the process of making some final adjustments to the agreement to accommodate some additional changes.

This includes amending the red line boundary of the scheme to remove 1,2,3 Old River Lane and Water Lane Hall from the development, along with plans for creating a public space until such a time that we have the funds for an arts centre or similar facility to be constructed. These changes are significant enough differences to the original scheme that we require independent legal advice before we can go ahead with including them in the development agreement. We also need to agree the boundary changes with the leaseholders affected, specifically the John Lewis Partnership Group. Officers are making progress on these issues and we expect to be in a position to sign the Development Agreement within a few months.

Our second aim, once the Development Agreement is signed, is for our planning team to work with Cityheart in order to get a good-quality planning application submitted. As we know the previous application submitted in December 2022 had a number of issues associated with it. Cityheart are aware of this feedback and will be required, under the terms of the development agreement, to meet the Old River Lane Board and provide updates on its proposals. We

would also expect there to be an ORL masterplanning steering group convened prior to any planning application being submitted.

Our third aim, which again is something that Old River Lane Board Members and officers are working on now, is to determine what form the interim public square will take, and how it could be used. At our last Board meeting we discussed some principles and ideas around this and we plan to explore these ideas with councillors, and with members of the public and community groups in the next few months. We know there is a demand to make use of this town-centre space and there are already a number of events lined up including pony riding and crazy golf. We're not suggesting that the space be designed specifically to support crazy golf or pony riding: the point is that we want to create a space which is flexible and accessible for a variety of people and activities, and so we will be really interested to hear ideas from councillors and the community.

I hope that answers your question. Should anyone want to know more, I would remind Councillors and residents that the ORL Board minutes are published on our website and the FAQs are updated as new information is requested.

Supplementary question from Councillor David Jacobs

Councillor Jacobs said that minutes from the ORL Delivery Board in January had not been published on the website. He referred to the planning permission for the site and asked if the Leader could provide a date for this.

Response from Councillor Ben Crystall

Councillor Crystall said that the ORL Delivery Board did not meet in January. He said that the council were expecting a planning application this calendar year.

Question 4**Cllr Angus Parsad-Wyatt to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council**

Even though it is plainly challenging to arrive at a balanced budget, it appears that the Administration intends to continue with the role of Executive Member for Resident Engagement which it has newly created at an additional cost to the taxpayer of around £10,000 per annum.

Please will the Leader of the Council itemise all the engagement activities undertaken by the Executive Member for Resident Engagement, Cllr Chris Wilson in the year to date and explain why he believes this represents good use of taxpayers money?

Response from Councillor Ben Crystall

Thank you for your question Councillor Parsad-Wyatt, clearly in tough financial times, we need to account for the money we spend. And based on this question, and much the same question that you asked me last July, you clearly have doubts that spending on resident engagement is worthwhile. Of course, if you don't feel that resident engagement should be a priority, that's up to you. We don't agree.

You ask about itemisation: I am far from convinced that this is a useful measure of what Councillor Chris Wilson does, any more than it would be for any councillor post - and perhaps demonstrates a lack of understanding of the purpose of his role. Would you judge me by the number of leadership activities that I engage in?

The point of the Resident Engagement role is about working, much of it behind the scenes, in championing a shift in approach within the council, and amongst members, as to our relationship with residents. Clearly that can be done in all sorts of ways including by being accessible to local groups that would like talks or

information, and by building relationships in person or on social media, which isn't just about posting updates, it is about responding, answering questions and having real conversations, as Councillor Wilson has been doing. It's about explaining what we can do, but equally what we can't do – helping to tackle one of the big frustrations for residents in a 3 tier system.

I'm sure you know that Councillor Wilson prepared the Listening Council paper which underlies a key part of our Corporate Plan, and you'll hear later how we plan to put that to effect.

He and Councillor Tim Hoskin took the Air Quality Action Plan proposals out into the community to complement the online consultation, where they met more than 80 people in three different towns to hear and discuss their views on what should and shouldn't be done.

Councillor Wilson has been involved in a number of other resident engagement events, with the BS BID, with the town's Hong Kong community and with the Neighbourhood planning group at Gilston. He has pushed for changes to the way budget proposals are presented so that all proposals, both those accepted and those rejected, are made available for all to see. And he will be starting work with Councillor Carl Brittain on a budget tour – to take the discussions of future budgets out to the towns in the District so that residents will have a chance to hear for themselves about future budget proposals, to discuss them and to contribute ideas in person.

While you focus on the cost, ultimately Councillor Wilson's role is about trying to rebuild links with an electorate that is clearly losing faith in politics and politicians – we see the evidence from survey after survey, and from low turnouts in general and local elections -

last May the average voter turnout in East Herts was 34.1% - in your ward the turnout was just 32.8%. Increasing resident engagement brings more trust in local politics, better council decision making, and higher turnouts at elections. You may not agree but I think that's a good use of taxpayer's money.

Supplementary question from Councillor Angus Parsad-Wyatt

Councillor Parsad-Wyatt said that he agreed that trust in politics and politicians were fundamental to democracy and the relationship with residents. He said there were no performance indicators for the role and asked if the Executive Member post was to create a perception of engagement rather than conducting meaningful consultation?

Response from Councillor Ben Crystall

Councillor Crystall said he did not think it was. He was surprised that Councillor Parsad-Wyatt did not feel there were any metrics available because he would suggest that there were multiple. For example, social media engagement, responses to consultations, and understanding how residents feel. He also said that the ballot box was a strong indicator on whether the council was listening or not. He said he was always happy to receive suggestions for how better to measure the success of the role.