

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Question 1	Patrick Kane to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council
<p>Following EHDC’s purchase of Water Lane Hall in 2019 and its subsequent designation as an Asset of Community Value, the building is falling into a state of serious disrepair. It is our understanding that EHDC is responsible either directly for maintenance (as the building owner) or indirectly (enforcing maintenance actions as the landlord of URC). In particular the toilets are backing up and overflowing because of drainage issues and water is leaking through the roof. Hirers have reported these and other issues to the URC and EHDC, but they have not been addressed and are getting worse. Without this work being done-before the winter the hall will almost certainly become unusable and unsafe, thus failing to remain an Asset of Community Value.</p> <p>Does EHDC intend to conduct essential maintenance on the building before the start of the winter, using the £170k budgeted for this work, or to compel the tenants to do so?</p>	
Response from Cllr Ben Crystall	
<p>Thanks for the question Patrick. It’s clear that Water Lane Hall is valued by the community and in the original plan for the ORL site, developed under the previous administration, the hall was due for demolition. However we have worked hard to find a way to bring it outside the ORL development boundary so that it can be saved for continued community use.</p> <p>As you know Water Lane Hall is currently leased by the URC which manages the building and is responsible for ensuring it is operational, and this arrangement is likely to extend into the middle of next year. The leaseholders are responsible for day to day maintenance including cleaning and internal, non-structural repairs. The Council has a good relationship with the URC who are committed to keeping the venue open. Problems around drainage and leaks have been discussed and</p>	

recently they organised a plumber to fix the issue in the toilets and a roofer to patch the leak on the roof. We must remember that it is an old building and these are likely to be short term fixes. This Council has allocated up to £170k towards maintenance at Water Lane Hall and as a first stage we will undertake a structural survey to ascertain the state of the building and any estimates for repair. A separate sewer survey will also be required to look at wider issues around drainage. As some may be aware we have not yet commissioned that work on the basis that until the ORL development boundary is changed, Water Lane Hall remains within the scope of the ORL development. At its meeting on the 19th September, the ORL Board Members received an update to say that we expect the Development Agreement to be signed imminently and with this in mind, the board pressed officers to begin work on the survey as soon as possible. An update will be provided at the next ORL Board meeting but until the costs are known, we are unable to say with any certainty what work will be undertaken. And once we have a better sense of costs involved, we can begin to look at options for the future of the building.

Supplementary question from Patrick Kane

When might we see a schedule of works for the £170,000 spending?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

It was a difficult question to answer but the Executive would like to get it in place as soon as possible. He said that the development agreement needed to be signed first before the surveys could be carried out. He could not give a timeline at the moment but would provide it as soon as possible.

Question 2

Graeme Smith to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council

Since the designation of Water Lane Hall as an ACV in 2023, Friends of Water Lane Hall (FoWLH) have shared a proposal to renovate WLH to face onto the new Old River Lane, relating positively to the new ORL development. We understand that EHDC is currently re-negotiating with the United Reform Church about the re-location of URC parking spaces which were allocated in 2019 to URC on a 100 year lease behind the Lemon Tree. The renovation opportunity - and the future viability of WLH - would be invalidated in the event that the 11 leased car parking spaces are moved back into the area of the current WLH car park (part of

the EHDC purchased property), and would lose our community the opportunity to harmonise this area of the town centre with the new Old River Lane development. Essentially, moving the car parking to the back into the WLH boundary would block public access forever.

What assurances can EHDC council give that this community space to the Old River Lane side of Water Lane Hall (but within the WLH boundary) will not be given away to car parking?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Thank you for your question Graeme. As we have just heard from the answer to the previous question, the very first action is to complete the structural survey and ascertain costs involved to bring the building up to an acceptable standard for keeping it open after the lease arrangements with the URC come to an end. Until such costs are known we are unable to speculate on any future arrangements.

Officers have met with the Friends of Water Lane Hall to discuss their proposals for the Hall but as of now the Council has only allocated £170k towards essential repairs and maintenance. Should any conversations take place about longer term arrangements there will be a number of issues to consider, of which parking is only one. Rest assured however, that public access will be maintained, regardless of parking issues.

Supplementary question from Graeme Smith

When can we expect EHC to unveil its long term strategy for the hall? Are the decisions about the hall delegated to officers or made by elected representatives?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

He said that the decisions would be made by the Executive, not delegated to officers. He said that he wanted to see community use continue and was open to discussion with community groups but he was not able to provide a timeline at the moment.