

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, the Executive Member for Wellbeing
<p>Following confirmation by the Hertford and Stortford MP Josh Dean that DFE exceptional circumstances funding is available for applications for 2025/26 to avert the closure of the Leventhorpe and Fanshawe swimming pools announced by the council in a joint statement with the schools and Hertfordshire County Council on 24th October, can the Executive Member for Wellbeing confirm that East Herts Council has assessed the financial impact of any reversal of the closure decision? Will the member also confirm that EHDC is working closely with the schools, Everyone Active and HCC to do all that can be done to avert the closure of these pools?</p>	
Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell	
<p>Thank you for your question. I would also like to extend my thanks to our MP Josh Dean, who I know has been working hard on this issue and has met with me and EHDC several times to see what would be possible. With respect to both facilities, I'd also like to thank Cllr Parsad-Wyatt and Cllr Buckmaster for their huge efforts in Leventhorpe, along with Sawbridgeworth town council's support for Leventhorpe, and Ware town council for their offer of support to Fanshawe. A great deal of work has been taking place and a lot of cross-party efforts to find a way forward with respect to both Leventhorpe and Fanshawe.</p> <p>To answer your question, I met with our head of operations and our interim Section 151 officer yesterday, and they have been working with Everyone Active to understand the potential financial</p>	

impact of a reversal of the closure decision. There are several scenarios being explored at present, and we hope to have the fully updated information in the coming days.

In terms of the joint-use agreement, for both Leventhorpe and Fanshawe facilities, decisions can only be taken by the landlord, in this case each of the respective schools. I know that work at length has taken place to swiftly apply for the Exceptional Circumstances funding, and we are currently awaiting the decision on this. In the interim, there are ongoing discussions with the school and with Everyone Active, as well as work to explore any other options that might be available around funding and managing any impact on the council. I am sorry not to be able to provide a fuller update on this at present, but hope to be in a position to do so shortly.

Supplementary question from Cllr David Jacobs

Councillor Jacobs asked if the Executive Member could confirm that other facilities in the district were secure and were not facing similar threats of closure.

Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Councillor Hopewell said that the other leisure facilities at Hartham and Grange Paddocks were working well and there were not any financial concerns. She said she was happy to look at specific sites outside the meeting.

Question 2

Cllr Nahum Clements to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council

The UK government is currently consulting on potential changes to the law that would allow remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings¹. The proposal aims to encourage a wider diversity of people to stand for election and participate in local democracy. Given that many groups remain underrepresented

among local Councillors, and that balancing career, caring responsibilities, and council duties can be a significant barrier to entry² do you agree that this issue is important for ensuring a more inclusive and representative local democracy?

Furthermore, will you be responding to the consultation to support the principle of remote attendance and proxy voting, and will you encourage fellow members of the Council to do the same?

¹ [Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings - GOV.UK](#)

² [Councillors' Census 2022 , Virtual Council Meeting Survey - 2023 | Local Government Association](#)

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Thank you for your question Cllr Clements. Those members who were Councillors here in 2020 will no doubt remember the speed at which we had to shift to virtual meetings for all our committee and sub-committee meetings at the start of the pandemic. The first virtual Council meeting we at East Herts Council held, after the first lockdown was announced, took place on 13th May 2020, and saw us achieve a 100% attendance from Members - for the first time in many, many years.

There were, of course, teething problems to begin with but these evened out as everyone became used to the technology. Officers worked hard on and implemented virtual meeting protocols and etiquette guides to assist everyone to get the most out of the virtual meetings, and it allowed many Members and officers to attend meetings they may otherwise not have been able to get to.

As the Coronavirus restrictions began to be eased, there was a desire amongst many local authorities to maintain some element of virtual meeting capability, but this was not entertained by the government of the day. So I welcome this survey and would be keen to respond in a positive manner to proposals to bring virtual

meetings back in one way or another. I understand that councillors are free to put in their own views to the consultation and encourage that. However, in the spirit a listening council, I would also be very keen to understand the views of the wider membership here before we submit our views as East Herts Council. So I invite all members to contact myself and the Monitoring Officer ahead of that final submission being made in just under a week's time, with a cut off of midday on Wednesday 18th December.

Question 3

Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council

The recent 2024 Autumn Budget change to Inheritance Tax relief announced by the Government will introduce a Family Farm Tax and will have a detrimental impact on Family Farms and farmers' ability to pass on their farms to the next generation. I am very concerned by these tax changes and how it will impact our local farming community. Farming is very important to East Herts which has a number of substantially rural Wards (including my own). East Herts Council also promotes farmers markets across our District.

Does this Council have any further plans to support our farming community and if so, what are they?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Thank you for the question Cllr Devonshire. We are a rural district, and the farming community in East Herts is integral to the region's economy, environment and way of life.

Clearly though many farmers here are feeling the pressure. Tax breaks for agricultural land have inflated land values in our area, making it harder for new entrants and for existing farmers. The government is right to try to clamp down on those who buy farmland just to avoid tax but we also need it to take action to ensure that our hard working farmers can earn a decent income.

In particular they have suffered badly from Brexit, both through reduced subsidies and new checks at the border which complicate trade. A recent study shows that since Brexit, exports of British food to the EU have dropped by nearly £2.8bn a year. On behalf of our farming communities, we should all pressure the government to negotiate a new agreement with the EU that smooths trade and cuts post-Brexit red tape, making it easier for East Herts farmers to export their products.

So what is EHC doing? As you mention, Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward has been working hard with the licensing and Economic Development teams to put support in place for existing farmers markets and to encourage new entrants, helping farmers and other rural businesses with stalls bringing local food and products to more of our residents.

Cllr Alex Daar and officers have set up the Our Arts in East Herts programme which has helped fund and publicise events and activities across the District, and will hopefully continue to help attract visitors to our rural areas where they can enjoy arts offerings or events, and support businesses in our farming communities, whether they are tea rooms, farm shops or bed and breakfasts.

In terms of funding, this year we have £40,000 for community grants that are available to voluntary and community groups right across the district. In many cases, our grants have been used by parish councils and local groups to improve facilities for farming communities in rural areas of East Herts. Our UKSPF funds have also been spent right across our District, with many tens of thousands providing benefits to parish councils, businesses and cultural events in farming communities.

From Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics we also know that households in rural farming communities have a higher rate of fuel poverty and a much larger fuel poverty gap so improving energy efficiency in

these communities is vital. Right now East Herts Council is running a scheme giving homeowners across the District the chance to apply for a free home decarbonisation survey, as well as access to up to £4,500 of match funding to help residents improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Since they are disproportionately impacted we need to make sure our farming communities know about these grant opportunities, and all of us here can help spread the word.

Meanwhile our waste team has continued to work hard to help farming communities tackle fly tipping on their land. We know fly tipping is distressing and puts a financial burden on farmers, and our team, and Sam Wood in particular, has done a great job with limited resources, working with the police and other agencies, most recently to issue a penalty notice and fines to four companies after incidents in Braughing and a fly tip on a farm near Watton-at-Stone. And in July two men were fined after being caught fly-tipping on farmland in Brent Pelham. The council's activities will continue to send a clear message: don't think about fly-tipping in our farming communities.

Lastly East Herts Council is also playing a key role in helping to create a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the County. Our own Eric Buckmaster is the board chair through his role at County and myself, Vicky Glover Ward and Alex Daar are all involved in various roles. One of the key aims of the Strategy is to provide a framework that will help farmers and other landowners identify where practical action would be most beneficial to create, enhance or recover habitat so that nature can benefit, as well as helping to provide a route by which farmers or landowners can access funding for this work. This should be a win win, with both nature and our farming communities reaping direct benefits. Sorry that's a long response, clearly we are doing a lot with our limited resources, but we would always love to do more – we hope there

may be a replacement for UKSPF funding next year so watch this space.

Supplementary question from Cllr Ian Devonshire

Councillor Devonshire asked if this Council would write to the Labour government to call for a reversal of the tax hike in the recent budget.

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Councillor Crystall said he was happy to write to the government as the Leader and said he would circulate a draft response to all the Group Leaders first.

Question 4

Cllr Geoffrey Williamson to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, Executive Member for Financial Sustainability

As part of the budget presented on 30th October the Chancellor announced her uplift on Employers National Insurance contributions. Can the Executive Member please explain to this Council the financial impact not only to our own payroll budget but also the increased costs that we can expect on our contracted services, for example our leisure centre operation and our waste collection service, due to the higher salary overheads our contractors will now face.

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

The estimate of the associated increase in cost on the council's own staff (directly employed) from the changes to Employer's NI will be around £347k.

Currently, we are not able to quantify the actual bottom-line impact on the council or any of the associated service providers including the Waste and Leisure centres.

It is too early to estimate with any level of certainty what will be covered or the level of funding we will be provided, or if this

funding will extend to any of the services such as Waste or Leisure contracts.

Once the details become available we will be able to work through any implications.

Supplementary question from Cllr Geoffrey Williamson

Councillor Williamson said that the £347k cost was worse than his expectations. He asked the Executive Member how this increase would be covered.

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Councillor Brittain said that he was expecting the government to provide some relief in the local government settlement to offset the National Insurance Contribution increase.