

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Eric Buckmaster to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth
<p>Given the recent experience with the Buntingford application that was sent back to committee and eventually approved owing to the lack of 5 year housing supply, has the council undertaken a proper assessment to understand the scale and risks of more speculative applications that are not allocations in the District Plan.</p>	
Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward	
<p><i>Awaiting full response</i></p>	
Supplementary question from Cllr Eric Buckmaster	
<p>Cllr Buckmaster said it had taken two years to produce the decision notice for Gilston and the developers have said there will be no spades in the ground for five years. Other major allocations such as Ware North are progressing slowly and the council is unlikely to have a five year housing supply for the life of this council. call for sites assessment. The Executive Member had confirmed that she had been in touch with the Ministry and asked would she also be in touch with the Planning Inspectorate to negotiate terms that enable a review of the District Plan that doesn't add to further pressure to an already very serious situation.</p>	
Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward	
<p>Cllr Glover-Ward said that the planning team were talking to MHLGC last week about updating the District Plan. She said that until secondary legislation had come through from the government and they could contact the Planning Minister to talk about this but East Herts were amongst a lot of other councils doing the same thing and were not alone in applications were on the tilted balance. Increasing</p>	

the housing requirement by nearly 300 houses per annum did not help the situation.

Question 2

Cllr Aubrey Holt to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability

We know that when formulating the proposed budget for 2025/26 year the Green/Lib Dem coalition administration considered cutting back on planning enforcement officers. This comes as a big surprise given the importance of planning enforcement to very many of our residents, as all our post bags will testify.

Can the Executive Member please give us an assurance that this idea was dropped and that it will not be revived in future years?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Thank you Cllr Holt for the question. With the legacy of the debt we inherited, and the continual erosion of funding from central government, budget setting presents a difficult challenge, this year being no exception. When significant savings need to be made it is important at the early stage of budget setting to consider all the options. When these options were laid out in front of us it was clear to the executive group that planning enforcement represented one of our red lines, one of the items we were determined not to cut in our quest to reach a balanced budget. Despite being a non-statutory service, we recognise that planning enforcement is there to preserve the integrity of, and public confidence in, the planning system by ensuring that development accords with the rules.

I have no doubt that in future years our views on the importance of planning enforcement will not change, and it will remain a service which we try to preserve.

When we look at the MTFP later we will see that next year is likely to see a new round of required savings. The leadership team are already looking for new transformation projects that will bring savings, but finding savings of this magnitude in the required time scale will be very difficult, and I fully expect in just over 6 months' time we will like

last year, be presented with a long list of savings options by the leadership team.

As a non-statutory service, I expect planning enforcement will be one of the options presented to us, and like this year I expect it will be rejected quickly. But I think it is important it is still included as an option, as it is helpful when making decisions to see the whole picture, to always understand the full range of choices we are faced with. It also helps to review whether services could be delivered differently, whether there could be ways to become more efficient.

As Government continues to reduce our funding, the choices will become more difficult, and at some point, possibly even next year, we may be faced with making what now appear to be unpalatable decisions, not out of choice but out of necessity. If we do get to that point, we need to be sure that all alternatives are considered, because as the decisions we need to take become more difficult, the scrutiny of those decisions is bound to become more intensive.

So, I cannot realistically give assurance that this idea will not be revived, as an option to save money it is always present, and rightly so. But I can assure you that this executive fully recognises the value of planning enforcement to the community, and that we will do everything in our gift to preserve its effectiveness in future years.

Supplementary question from Cllr Aubrey Holt

Cllr Holt said that the budget papers should that the Executive considered introducing parking charges blue badge holders which had caused concerns and distress amongst residents. He said that parking charges should not be applied to blue badge holders and said he would be grateful if the Executive Member could confirm that blue badge holders would never be asked to pay for parking.

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Cllr Brittain said that the Executive had rejected blue badge parking charges for 2025-26. He said that the proposal would be presented in further budget rounds for the Executive to consider. He said that blue badges were to be considered in the Parking Strategy which was on the agenda later.

Question 3**Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, the Leader of the Council**

Has the administration considered the possibility of holding council meetings, either full council or sub-committees, in venues outside of Hertford? Doing so would enhance the council's visibility in the community, improve accessibility to members of the public wishing to attend meetings in person and address perceptions that the council is overly Hertford-centric. What considerations would need to be taken into account to identify suitable venues, and what investigations have been done to date?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Thanks for the question Cllr Jacobs. Like you, and I'm sure many other councillors, I'd welcome the opportunity for some meetings to be held beyond this Council Chamber. But there are some obvious challenges: firstly capacity and accessibility – we'd need somewhere accessible, with space for at least 60 seats plus space for the public if we were going to consider moving a Full Council meeting.

The second challenge is technology: we do webcast our meetings and not to do so would be a step-backwards in my view. The system in here is not portable but we do have a more portable OWL webcasting system which could potentially be used, but it is really only suitable for smaller meetings. And as many of us know from bitter experience, webcasting systems can be very temperamental, especially if moved to new sites.

Thirdly, there is an issue of cost: using this Chamber comes at minimal cost so pricing would also need to be a consideration.

All that said, we'd be very happy to consider proposals from yourself or other councillors – you know what venues are available to you locally, their cost to hire (and perhaps you can negotiate a significant discount) and whether they can offer webcasting or have suitable wifi technology. So if we think about holding a committee meeting elsewhere then perhaps we would be looking at accessible space for 10 or 15 people plus space for the public, which shouldn't be impossible to find.

Supplementary question from Cllr David Jacobs

Cllr Jacobs asked if any investigations had taken place already about relocating council meetings.

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Cllr Crystall responded and said no investigations on specific locations had taken place.

Question 4

Cllr Graham McAndrew to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability

Can the Executive Member explain the rationale behind proposing a £10 increase to Green Waste charges in East Herts, given that our partner in the joint waste contract North Herts Council is proposing only a £6 increase? How does East Herts Council justify this disparity in charges under a shared contractual arrangement?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Thank you Cllr McAndrew for the question. The proposal to increase the charges for Green waste was presented as part of the savings options in the budget setting process. As an authority we have a duty to produce a balanced budget each year, in order to achieve this some difficult decisions need to be made. It is our belief that most residents are very keen for the council to maintain or improve the standards of service wherever possible, and are happy to pay the appropriate charge for those services to be provided.

The council has very few options to increase its income. We have little say in the level of Government funding received, whilst council tax increases are currently capped by the government without recourse to a costly referendum.

The other way to increase the council's income is through fees and charges. The council receives income from a number of fees and charges, and the Garden Waste service is one of our largest sources of income. It is not however a profitable service for the council, our findings suggest the true costs of providing the service are roughly in line with the new proposed charge, once the indirect costs are factored in. These indirect costs will be different between East Herts and North Herts. It would not be at all fair for the 30,000 or more households who do not use this service to subsidise those that do use it.

The charge had not been increased since it was introduced by the previous administration in April 2021. Applying contract price inflation to the original £49 charge would bring the charge to £59.81 in April 2025. The decision was therefore made to increase the garden waste charge to £59 to reflect that contract inflation, and to recover the costs of providing the service. The fact that North Herts Council is planning to increase charges by a lesser amount was discussed, but we did not feel there was a need to align ourselves with their charges, they are fully entitled to make their own decisions on their charges. Had we decided to increase the charge by £6 as North Herts have done, we would have needed to find an additional £120,000 of savings. The only single saving that the Executive rejected that could have been used to plug a gap of that size would have been to significantly reduce planning enforcement.

With specific reference to the disparity of charges, this has always been the case since East and North Herts rolled out their services. At the beginning of the current contract in 2018 North Herts operated a chargeable garden waste service, East Herts operated a free service. Differences in garden waste charges has been common practice for a number of years including the concessions available in North Herts.

So, with no history of exact alignment of prices, the need to allow democracy to be truly local, for East Herts Council to balance its budget, for fairness for those residents that do not use this service, and for essential services to be protected, we feel this decision is completely justified.