

COUNCIL – 22 OCTOBER 2025

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Question 1	Huw Jones to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability
<p>Is the Executive Member aware of the offer made by Bishop’s Stortford Town Council in December of last year (and then repeated on several occasions thereafter) to purchase the Freehold Title of Thorley Community Centre from East Herts District Council in order to ensure that the site can continue to operate in this way by providing a much needed community service and, if so, can he say when the Council will be able to take a decision on this matter?</p>	
Response from Cllr Carl Brittain	
<p>I would like to thank Huw Jones, Chief Executive of Bishop’s Stortford Town Council, for his question. I am aware of the offer made by the town council to purchase the freehold of Thorley Community Centre site from East Herts Council.</p> <p>Just for clarity, I’ve noted that the question could be read as suggesting that selling the community centre to Bishop’s Stortford may be the only way to allow it to continue to operate. That isn’t the case. The current trustees, who hold the ground lease issued by the council, have told us they would ideally like to step down and are having difficulty finding replacements and we are open to a discussion at any time with the trustees about alternative management arrangements should the trustees find that useful.</p> <p>The town council approached East Herts about possible acquisition of the community centre late last year. We had not had any contact from the trustees at this point, however, we informed the town council that we would look at any proposals so long as, in line the duty on the council to achieve ‘best consideration’ for any disposal, the town council sought and shared professional valuations for the site based on (a) the current lease, (b) vacant position with a restriction requiring continued community use and (c) market value based on the most valuable use. This is standard practice which the council follows, most latterly for example, when seeking to dispose of the Elizabeth Road shops and flats in Bishop’s Stortford.</p> <p>The town council had some reservations about providing an unrestricted market value, however, the council has continued to consider its proposal to acquire the freehold. That said, a decision on</p>	

this is not as straightforward as some may believe for several reasons including:

(a) the multiple adjoining landholdings the council has in the area which would militate against fragmenting the overall site by disposal of just one part of it. Severing a wider site is not best estate management practice as it can fetter future use of the whole landholding

(b) the issue of access to the adjoining football club site in the council's ownership which would need to be carefully considered along with any impairment to the site's use and/or value if the community centre site were to be sold

(c) more latterly, a need to consider the future position of a successor unitary authority with regard to landholdings that would transfer from East Herts Council into its ownership.

None of the above factors rule out assisting the trustees or investigating disposal. Indeed, the possibility of working with the trustees and town council to enable their ground lease to be assigned to the town council or in some other way affording the town council a lease has been raised with the chief executive of the town council.

Given both the complexity relating to the site and the possibility of a range of different ways in which the various parties could find a way forward, I am pleased that discussions are now in progress between officers of both councils. I hope that through this dialogue an agreed way forward can be found. I trust you will understand that this means I cannot give a definitive date by which the matter will be settled although I would hope this can be within the coming few months.

Supplementary question from Huw Jones

What confidence can the portfolio holder provide to the Chamber this evening that the following factors have been or will be taken into account in the decision-making process about this issue:

- 1) the fact that the current trust running Thorley Community Centre has actually notified East Herts District Council of its intention to cease to operate in terms of its current membership and staffing provision. In fact, they had hoped to do so by earlier this year
- 2) the possibility that should the lease be relinquished, the responsibility for running the centre would actually fall to the District Council with the associated implications or staffing capacity and any desire of the Council to take on board that service.

3) the risk that this much loved and local amenity space and the enjoyment of it by dance groups, martial arts clubs, and casual bookings for birthday parties and children's parties and the like could be lost.

4) the fact that the proposal by the Town Council is designed specifically to meet one of its strategic plan objectives of acquiring new assets and similarly assisting one of the District Council's objectives of disposing of assets to raise capital receipts.

5) the Council's commitments to covenant to use the site solely for the purpose of community use in perpetuity, thereby protecting the site from development.

6) the Town Council's commitment to upgrade the facility, should it be the new owner, by installing an environmentally friendly and efficient air-to-air heating system and upgrade any fixtures and fittings as it has done with the three community centres previously purchased in the past three years from East Herts District Council, namely Bishop's Park, Havers, and most recently St. Michael's Mead.

Finally, the assurance that if it is the wish of this Chamber, any decision about disposal will be taken by democratic vote of Elected Members of this authority rather than by delegated officer powers?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Cllr Brittain confirmed that many of the factors had been considered. He noted that he was aware the trustees wanted to cease their operation and would check if the Council had been officially notified. He advised that he did not believe there was any risk of loss of the facility and that the District Council could take it on and run it effectively, as it had done with many other community centres.

Cllr Brittain acknowledged the desire of the Town Council to acquire new assets, however consideration around the strategic land holding of the District Council and how any acquisition would affect that was required. He acknowledged the commitment of the Town Council to run it as a community facility and to undertake any upgrades needed.

Cllr Brittain was unable to provide assurance that the decision would be delegated to the whole Chamber. He acknowledged the process for selling assets was normally via the Executive.

Question 2

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

When EHDC disposes of Water Land Hall, whether by sale or long lease, can it commit that it will dispose of the whole of the site as originally purchased from United Reform Church (edged in red on the

plan attached to its 30 September 2019 Lease Agreement with the United Reformed Church) – including the area currently allocated for parking between the hall and Old River Lane?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall

Thank you for your question Graeme. If East Herts Council decides to dispose of or grant a long lease on the site - and it is very much an "if" at the moment, as the Council has not yet decided what to do with the building - then yes it would be the whole site, including the car park area.