

COUNCIL – 10 DECEMBER 2025

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Bob Deering to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability
When did the cross-party asset disposal group last meet and what items were on the agenda?	
Response from Cllr Carl Brittain	
<p>Thank you for your question. The cross-party, member-only group was formed at the end 2023 to consider the list of assets identified by officers for potential disposal as part of the 2024/25 budget-setting process. The group last met on Friday 26 January 2024.</p> <p>Members considered the nine assets on the list, these being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· the main Old River Lane site in Bishop's Stortford· the car park leased to Waitrose, adjacent to the Old River Lane site· the commercial and residential block at Lime Kiln, Northgate End, adjacent to the Old River Lane site· the car park leased to Tesco in Ware· Southern Maltings in Ware and· small plots of land at:<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Widford Road, Hunsdon· Great Innings North, Watton-at-Stone· King George Road, Ware· Sele Road, Hertford. <p>The group was content for all disposals to proceed, except the sale of the car park leased to Tesco in Ware, with all these disposals since being formally approved by the Executive. To date, the sale of two of the assets have completed, four have been sold subject to contract and plans are in place for the disposal of the other two.</p>	
Supplementary question from Cllr Bob Deering	
Councillor Deering asked how much of the planned £10.8m had been achieved and why the group had not met for nearly two years?	
Response from Cllr Carl Brittain	
<p>Councillor Brittain advised that he would provide exact details of the figures in writing.</p> <p>He advised that the reason the asset group had not met was due there not being that many new assets coming through. In December 2024, a</p>	

further set of three assets were identified and brought forward for consideration. Details of these were shared with members of the group by email and the opportunity to meet provided.

During this year there had been a total of another six assets that come up. The largest of these was Millstream which was discussed at Full Council. The other major asset this year was the shops at Elizabeth Road, where discussions were held with Board Members, Councillor Jacobs and Councillor Estop.

Councillor Brittain advised that he was happy to hold more discussions with members in the future. It was noted that the prospect of Local Government Reorganisation had led to expressions of interest from some of the Town Councils in relation to acquiring further assets. Officers were currently working with town clerks to identify assets that might be suitable for further investigation. Once this process was complete and the list of potential sales was available, Councillor Brittain would be happy to reconvene the group if Members wished to do so.

Question 2

Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Cllr Mione Goldspink, Deputy Leader

From the recent survey report (carried out by Aecom) we understand that the repair works will cost £1.6 million to make the hall good and enable it to be reopened.

What is the Administration's plan for the United Reformed Church Hall now that it has been closed and is unused?

Response from Cllr Mione Goldspink

Following publication of the report, Old River Lane Board Members held two public information sessions in the hall over July to discuss its future. The events were well attended with around 20 – 25 people at each, and it was clear there is a lot of enthusiasm to keep the hall going as a hireable venue. Equally the Council had to be frank about the scale of investment required to do this. Unfortunately, the £170,000 set aside for improvement won't be anywhere near enough to get it re-opened and therefore when the URC surrendered their lease, the Council had no option but to close the building. Fortunately, all the regular hirers had found other venues, so this did not have a big impact.

In the absence of The Council being able to keep it open, there are a number of options available which include disposal or demolition.

However, before these are considered in detail, Old River Lane Board Members have committed to exploring a collaborative model with the Friends of Water Lane Hall whereby they may be able provide the necessary funding to re-open the hall. This could be staggered, with an initial investment of £500,000 needed to get the main hall open for hiring. There would then be another 18 – 24 month window to raise the additional funds required to complete all the necessary works.

However, in the meantime with the building closed there is likely to be further deterioration whilst in addition we continue to be liable for business rates and insurance costs, despite the building being mothballed. The Council therefore have a limited window in which to explore the community collaboration model. By April of next year, the Council want to be clear whether this is realistic or not.

In late September, it was agreed with the Friends of Water Lane Hall that the Council would firstly need to see a business plan by the end of November 2025. This needed to outline plans for raising investment and operational management of the venue. Assuming this business plan is sound the second expectation is that necessary funds are in place by 31 March. With a funding target of £500,000 to re-open the main hall for hiring, £330,000 of funding was required on top of the Council's £170,000. If these milestones cannot be met, the Council would need to discount the option of community collaboration and assess the remaining options.

Supplementary question from Cllr Ian Devonshire

The Old River Lane development has now been stalled for two and a half years. While the delay regarding the URC Hall continues, will there be any progress on the ORL project before this Council ceases to exist in a few years' time, as investing in assets was going to be very important prior to Local Government Reorganisation?

Response from Cllr Mione Goldspink

Councillor Goldspink advised that she was hopeful that there would be good progress on the Old River Lane site, now that hall had been taken out of the site. It was advised that it was hoped that a planning application would be submitted very soon, following a good level of consultation.

Question 3

Cllr Yvonne Estop to ask Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability

At the Council meeting in July, Cllr Britain answered a question about impediments to selling the former restaurant in Water Lane, Bishop's Stortford, including boundaries and access issues. This relates to land at the rear of the restaurant. In 2019, the previous administration agreed a lease for land behind the former restaurant, for the United Reformed Church (URC Eastern Province) to use for private parking. The lease is for a peppercorn rent, and the private car park is to be constructed and paid for by EHC. We understand officers have asked URC Regional Synod to surrender this scandalous lease.

Precisely how much is the United Reformed Church Eastern Region demanding EHC to pay them for surrender of this lease?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Thank you for noting that the lease arrangement was taken out under the previous administration. I understand that, at the time, it made sense to do this as part of the overall land assembly arrangements for the Old River Lane scheme. It was still the intention in 2019 to build an arts centre and re-provide lost Waitrose car park spaces on site. As many will recall, the purchase of Water Lane Hall, The Lemon Tree and 1,2,3 Old River Lane were a key part of making this feasible. A condition of the sale of Water Lane Hall was that the URC would have then access to parking spaces on this site.

So, this all made sense at the time and fitted in with the overall intention for the scheme. So, I don't agree this is scandalous, however given the changes to the Old River Lane scheme since then, it is one of the legacy issues that brings an added complexity.

Officers have had tentative discussions with representatives of the URC about alternatives to providing car parking spaces on this site. However, the URC are keen to ensure they have spaces as close as possible to the Church and have not identified any suitable alternatives. To answer the question, URC do not have any interest or desire to surrender the lease. In the meantime, the URC continue to have access to spaces within the surface car park of Water Lane Hall.

Supplementary question from Cllr Yvonne Estop

If the lease is not surrendered and the Council is obligated to fund and build a private car park, is there an estimated ballpark cost for those works?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Cllr Brittain advised that whilst he understood that the Council was obliged to provide car parking spaces, he was not aware that it would necessarily involve works and may be a consideration of the overall management of the site. There was not a ballpark figure available at this time.

Question 4

Cllr David Jacobs to ask Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability

Will the Executive Member provide a progress report on the Council's property Water Lane Hall in Bishop's Stortford with specific reference to the remedial and restoration work recommended by Aecom in their report from earlier this year and any discussions with community groups or other potential tenants about the long-term future and use of the property?

Following the comprehensive response received at question 2, Cllr David Jacobs moved directly to a supplementary question.

Supplementary question from Cllr David Jacobs

A very detailed timescale had been provided for the potential work to lease to the Friends of Water Lane Hall. Has the Council given any consideration to the option of selling the site to the Friends of Water Lane Hall for an affordable sum?

Response from Cllr Mione Goldspink

Councillor Goldspink confirmed that the Council was waiting for a business plan to be submitted by the Friends of Water Lane Hall before any further decisions were taken and therefore this was not yet under consideration.