

COUNCIL – 4 MARCH 2026

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	Cllr Joe Thomas to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, the Executive Member for Wellbeing
<p>Hartham Leisure Centre Car Park is operated by a private parking company, Civil Enforcement Limited (or CEL). For those that do not enter their car registration into a tablet found behind the set of gates, a "parking charge" of £100 is issued to the registered keeper.</p> <p>CEL are known to be one of the most prolific issuers of County Court Claims among private parking companies - a scaremongering tactic in the industry to make people panic and pay the "parking charge" when court paperwork arrives, even when they are not liable to pay the charge.</p> <p>This is in stark difference to Grange Paddocks Leisure Centre. Its car park is operated directly by East Herts District Council, who are able to issue proper parking penalties of £50 and £70 respectively through the standard manner.</p> <p>Could the Executive Member confirm as to why there has been a historic difference in car park operations between the leisure centres, and as to who receives the money from "parking charges" at Hartham Leisure Centre Car Park?</p>	
Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell	
<p>Thank you very much for your question, and I am aware that parking for both leisure centres is an important issue.</p> <p>In terms of the differing parking arrangements, officers have advised that the inclusion of the carpark in the Hartham Leisure Centre lease has been a very long term arrangement, and has been in place for at least 20 years. Due to the historic nature of the arrangement, I do not have the details available behind the initial decision to include the carpark in the lease for Hartham, but if any further information on this becomes available, I will of course share this with you.</p>	

The decision by Everyone Active to have the carpark managed by a private company was made in response to multiple customer complaints about parking problems. After the refurbishment and reopening, concerns were raised that people were parking and not using the centre, or were using the centre but remaining parked for much longer after their visit, which was preventing other centre users from being able to park. Everyone Active did not want to start charging for the parking, but also wanted to ensure that those parking were centre users. As such, they introduced the carpark management, with a limit of 2 hrs 45 minutes - allowing sufficient time for using the centre, but also ensuring turnover of spaces.

I am aware that this introduction has in itself caused problems for customers, especially early on. Everyone Active quickly worked to add large signage, and to ensure reception staff remind people to register their parking. There have also been several occasions where EA has worked with the parking company to ensure incorrectly issued fines, for example where customers have used the centre, are addressed. Everyone Active will continue to monitor this and will be revisiting the arrangement when the contract is due for revisiting. Everyone Active also do not receive any income from the parking fines, with these going to the management company.

Supplementary question from Cllr Joe Thomas

Cllr Thomas noted that he had received contacts from a couple of residents stating parking charges from CEL appeared to claim the charge was coming directly from East Herts District Council. This was worrying as residents thought the Council was essentially taking them to court over parking. Cllr Thomas asked if the Executive Member could raise this directly with Everyone Active in relation to their arrangements with CEL?

Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Cllr Hopewell confirmed that she would raise the issue and noted that Members could pass on any further concerns to her.

Question 2**Cllr David Andrews to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, Leader of the Council**

Where does East Herts currently stand with regard to Housing Land Supply and what effect could this have on Planning Applications currently being considered?

Response from Cllr Ben Crystall and Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

Cllr Crystall advised that a response would be provided by Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, Executive Member for Planning and Growth.

When the District Plan was adopted in 2018, the annual housing requirement was 839 new homes per year. However, as the District Plan is now more than five years old, the NPPF sets out that the housing requirement shall be calculated using the standard method. Using this methodology, the Council's housing requirement has increased significantly to 1,265 new homes per year plus the NPPF also requires a additional 5% buffer to ensure choice and competition in the market. This means that the Council's overall housing need requirement for 5YHLS purposes is currently:

1,265 + 63 = 1,328 new homes per annum.

The consequence of this increase is a supply deficit. The Council is currently reviewing its land supply trajectory to understand the deliverable supply of homes over the next five years and will publish an updated Five-Year Housing Land Supply Position Statement in due course. An interim calculation, based on recent completions and a reassessment of the Council's District Plan allocated sites in the housing trajectory, suggests that the housing land supply calculation is around 3.7 years.

The effect that this has on planning application for new homes is that paragraph 11d) of the National Planning Policy Framework is engaged. This tilts the balance in granting planning applications unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework taken as a whole, having particular regard to key policies for directing development to sustainable locations,

making effective use of land, securing well-designed places and providing affordable homes, individually or in combination.

Supplementary question from Cllr David Andrews

Residents and Parish Councils have advised that they were extremely concerned that having engaged over a number of years in district and neighbourhood plans, applications for housing that had been previously refused by the Committee, and which had also failed at appeal were now being passed, seemingly because there was not sufficient housing land supply. Earlier in this administration, Members were assured that there was a housing land supply of over 6.25 years, more than the 5 years required. Where has the LA housing land supply gone and what is the administration doing to restore it and protect our villages from speculative overdevelopment?

Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

Cllr Glover-Ward advised that the Council could work to restore a 5-year housing land supply, however noted that when Members were assured that the Council had over a 5-year land supply, it was before the current Government increased annual targets by 30%. It was advised that the current district plan was made in 2018 and was set to supply approximately 839 homes per annum. The current target was 1,328 which was almost 60% higher than the district plan was designed to achieve.

Cllr Glover-Ward noted that in line with a previous response, Members had been advised that the planning team were proactively working alongside Hertfordshire County Council and other relevant statutory consultees, stakeholders and applicants to progress the remaining allocated sites in the district plan towards a position whereby the sites could be considered deliverable within the next five years. Cllr Glover-Ward confirmed officers had successfully secured progress on both the Gilston and HERT4 strategic sites, despite judicial review challenges. HERT2 had also been brought forward with additional units and was back on site after a five-year pause, with the efforts of the planning team being rewarded. It was emphasised that the Council could not extract 60% more homes from strategic sites designed for far fewer, meaning a

five-year supply was unlikely to be achieved for some time. Responsibility for this position was attributed to Government housing targets being repeatedly increased.

Question 3

Cllr Ian Devonshire to ask Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability

It would appear from the Budget Papers that this Council is still preparing to spend another £170,000 on the United Reformed Church Hall in Bishop's Stortford. Does the Executive Member not agree that this will simply be a waste of tax payers money given that this Council has been professionally advised (in a recent survey report, by Aecom) that it will cost £1.6 million to put the building into good order?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

We are currently out for consultation with Bishop's Stortford residents for their views on the future of the hall. This includes an option of transferring the building to a community group to see if they can raise the necessary funds to make it viable. Other options also include selling or demolishing it for other uses.

We are fully aware that £170,000 is nowhere near enough to get the building up to a standard where it can be re-opened. However, this has been put aside in the event that a community ownership option is of interest to residents and would represent our cash contribution to the community ownership option, allowing any group to get started on obtaining funding from elsewhere to reach the goal of £1.6m. It's a tall order of course but if our contribution can be used to leverage investment from elsewhere, it will have been well used.

The consultation closes at the end of this week and we are committed to making a decision on the hall's future by the end of the financial year. Just to note, our contribution of £170,000 is contingent upon funding from elsewhere being forthcoming. If there isn't a clear pathway to meet the overall funding targets, then it is unlikely we will commit our share.

Supplementary question from Cllr Ian Devonshire

If this £170,000 was taken out of the budget, could it be used to pay off some of the debt to reduce interest payments or used to reduce council tax, both of which would benefit residents?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Once the decision was made on the future of the hall, the money would either be spent as part of the contribution towards the £1.6 million or it would be taken out of the budget. If it was taken out of the budget then it could be used to effectively reduce future spend, which would impact on the MRP in future years and would be a benefit into the budget.

Question 4

Cllr Carolyn Redfern to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, the Executive Member for Wellbeing

The Hertford Theatre has now been fully open for nearly 18 months and needs to increase its attendance figures. What steps have the administration taken to improve both the car parking and coach drop offs for BEAM attendees?

Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Thank you very much for your question.

In the year to date, BEAM has welcomed 114,840 ticketholders through the doors, and the venue expects to hit the target of 125,000 ticketed visits this financial year. The team at BEAM have worked incredibly hard to make this happen, and are highly focused on developing an appealing and diverse programme that reaches a range of audiences. Extensive work has also taken place to improve the website, making it much more agile and user-friendly, and new measures will enable better tailoring of information to customers about upcoming shows and events based on their purchase history. The new website will be launching shortly and should contribute to the wider customer growth.

In terms of parking, the two main approaches we have looked at are improving awareness of the carparking options available, and encouraging visitors who are able to, to travel to the venue without a car, to help ensure sufficient spaces for those who are travelling by car.

Across Hertford, there are approximately 800 parking spaces managed by East Herts Council, including at Gasgoyne Way, St Andrews, Old London Road, and Hartham. However, an identified challenge has been people not knowing which car parks have spaces available. In response to this, East Herts council and Hertford Town Council have worked together to install Variable Message Signs across Hertford, alerting drivers as to which car parks have spaces in. These signs have now been installed, and the final work is taking place to enable them to begin working. Once active, the signs will hopefully go a long way towards making parking easier for people visiting BEAM.

In terms of boosting sustainable travel where possible, at present, about 58% of the BEAM audience travels from SG14, SG13 and SG12, with others travelling from further afield. While of course there are many reasons why people living nearby might still need to drive, we are working to encourage people who are able to, to consider travelling to the venue by other means. This includes improving information on the website, and wider work to increase positive messaging around travelling by foot, cycle, bus or train where available. Alongside this, the administration is exploring an app that incentivises sustainable journeys through rewards at participating businesses, and we look forward to sharing more information on this soon.

For coach parking, this is mostly a challenge when BEAM has large school groups attending. To help address this, BEAM introduced a specific liaison person between BEAM and local schools. As a result of this, the venue has been able to manage coaches with a good deal of success, with arrangements in place for coaches to drop off at the bus station and walk the short distance during especially busy periods of coach travel.

Supplementary question from Cllr Carolyn Redfern

Cllr Redfern raised concerns about coach parking causing congestion and queues onto the A414 and questioned whether alternative evening parking options, such as opening supermarket car parks had been explored and whether improved signage had been considered.

Further information on the points raised was to be shared following the meeting.