COUNCIL – 22 July 2026

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1	**Cllr Aubrey Holt to ask Cllr Sarah Hopewell, Executive Member for Wellbeing**
Following the shocking revelation of a near-£1 million operational loss at BEAM, on exactly what date did the Executive Member first become aware that the facility's finances had run out of control?	
Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell	
Many thanks Cllr Holt for your question. I would say that I first became aware that the facility's finances had, to use your words, "run out of control" shortly after being elected in May 2023. While I cannot pinpoint the exact date, it was at this time that I learnt that the capital investment originally agreed in July 2018 had been £13.5m. However, multiple challenges meant a further £6m was sought in 2019, followed by another £4m in 2022. And as we know, build costs continued to increase, necessitating a further £6m which was agreed in January 2025. While I suspect with your question, you meant when did I learn about the 2025/26 financial year loss, it is useful to recall that the project has repeatedly faced challenging fiscal pressures which have spanned both administrations. In terms of the 2025/6 loss, Executive Members were made aware by officers of a potential loss of £500k at the start of May. However, after finalising the accounts and making necessary adjustments, this loss increased to £970k. This information was shared with me on the 7 May. I requested urgent meetings with officers to understand the position in more detail and explore actions and mitigations to be put in place. This work took place throughout May and involved several meetings between myself and key individuals. A full briefing was then provided to Executive Members in early June covering an explanation, actions being implemented and a new business plan to ensure adequate controls	

going forward. This same briefing and action plan was later provided to Audit and Governance Committee on 30 June.

Supplementary question from Cllr Aubrey Holt

Cllr Holt asked if Cllr Hopewell would now take responsibility and do the right thing by East Herts residents and resign?

Response from Cllr Sarah Hopewell

Councillor Hopewell referred back to the early part of her response, which referenced the multiple capital requirement increases under the previous administration and noted that she did not recall a request for the Executive Member at that point being asked to resign, which suggested an awareness of multiple unexpected challenges. At the recent Audit and Governance meeting it was noted that there had been many challenges with this venue and a revised business plan had been drawn up and would be discussed in full at the next Audit and Governance meeting on the 29 July 2026.

Question 2 — **Cllr Bob Deering to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability**

At the recent Audit & Governance meeting in relation to BEAM it was reported that the accounting principles that apply to this Council do not align with the approach that BEAM would wish to take to its accounts. I therefore asked if consideration has been given to changing the corporate owning structure of BEAM. I did not receive an answer. Please will the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability advise if any consideration has been given to this in his 3 years in post. If so, when and what conclusions were drawn?

Response from Cllr Carl Brittain

Although it is reasonable to say that accounting procedures between BEAM and the council don't align, the council procedures still apply.

It is true that BEAM operates differently to traditional council service areas as it is effectively several "mini businesses" working along profit and loss lines in the live programme, cinema and cafe. The budgeting and forecasting process has to be slightly more dynamic to account for these things but the same levels of transparency and controls are

required. As was reported to the Audit and Governance Committee, the financial loss has primarily been caused by not generating enough income which is nothing to do with non alignment of accounting procedures. If the Council were to consider changing the corporate ownership structure the case for doing so would need to be clear in terms of the benefits to the bottom line. Currently, Executive is not actively exploring different ownership models and we are minded to support the new business plan, which will be presented in full to Audit and Governance Committee on 29 July, within the existing model of Council ownership. At some point in the future that may be revisited however it may best be done as part of the impending Local Government Re-organisation. The new authority will inherit other in house arts venues alongside BEAM and the greater scale may lead to a different delivery model.	
Supplementary question from Cllr Bob Deering	
Councillor Deering noted the misalignment of accounting practices. He acknowledged that a number of theatres in this area were not owned by the local councils, and that ownership structures outside of the council were well established and asked whether this would be considered as a priority?	
Response from Cllr Carl Brittain	
Cllr Brittain advised that it would not be pursed at this time due to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). He advised that now was the wrong time to consider alternatives as there was not going to be enough time to carefully consider the options and implement them ahead LGR. He added that any future decision on the matter would be for the new unitary council to consider.	
Question 3	**Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Ben Crystall, Leader of the Council**
Following the introduction of legislation allowing local authorities to conduct High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs) to tackle persistently vacant commercial properties (which was introduced through the	

Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023) and noting that new burden funding is available to support any local schemes, what plans does the administration have for using this legislation to revive our local high streets?
Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward
I'd like to thank Cllr Jacobs for his question. First, I would like to say that, thankfully, high streets across East Herts are not characterised by the level of vacancy shops seen elsewhere in the country. Savills' quarterly shop vacancy monitor shows that in March this year – the most up-to-date data – 13.4% of high street properties across the UK were vacant and 16.3% of shops in shopping centres were vacant. In contrast, business rates records held by the council show that of all shops in Bishop's Stortford – not just in the town council – 8.8% are currently empty, with even fewer, 7.1%, in Hertford currently empty. Outside of these towns, there is only one vacancy in Buntingford showing on the system across the remaining market towns. The relative buoyancy of Bishop's Stortford's and Hertford's high streets is further demonstrated by the fact that percentage of shops vacant for over a year is particularly – 5.5% in Bishop's Stortford and 3.1% in Hertford. One only has to walk round our town centres to see that they are not suffering the problems encountered elsewhere in the country, however, this cannot be a cause for complacency. I welcome Cllr Jacobs' interest in the High Street Rental Auctions power granted under the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act 2023 and I am as keen as he is to see thriving high streets across our district. I must, however, share some initial concerns about whether the High Street Rental Auctions (HSRA) power is the right, 'go-to' tool for East Herts. This instrument appears designed to assist more economically deprived town centres, with council having to conduct considerable market research and consulted to designate a high street for intervention. I've noted, for example, that one of the pilot authorities, Bassetlaw District

Council in Nottinghamshire, justified the investment in the scheme because Worksop high street area alone was suffering from 23 empty shops. That's only just shy of the 25 shops that have been empty for at least 12 months – a requirement for intervention under the HSRA – across the *whole* of East Herts.

Cllr Jacobs has rightly pointed out that new burdens monies are available from the government to support the High Street Rental Auctions process. The amounts relate to the work related in securing a relet of an empty property, with some recompense for abortive work on a particular property. The resources, however, do not cover the full costs of the market analysis, consultation and legal work necessary to simply get to the point of designating a high street for intervention. That work cannot be underestimated as getting even one element of the preparatory legal work wrong could lead to a successful challenge by a landlord compelled to carry out works and let the property, possibly to a tenant not of their choosing.

While I may be painting a negative picture of the HSRA powers, I am pleased to say that the council's influence, grant giving and partnership approach to date have all contributed to keeping high street vacancies relatively low. For example, first using Covid money and then UKSPF resources, between 2021 and 2025 the council choose to make 84 'new premises' grants to businesses to allow them to move to bigger premises or downsize to remain viable; 59 of these grants were to Bishop's Stortford and Hertford businesses. While a tally of empty shops brought back into use wasn't kept, I understand that the grants did avoid some shops falling vacant while also bringing some premises back into use.

Added to this, licensing and economic development officers maintain regular contact with businesses, including those wishing to start-up or grow in the district; all this helps maintain the vibrancy of our high streets. Furthermore, I myself, as well as other officers and members, keep in close contact with the Bishop's Stortford BID. The BID works with local commercial lettings agencies and traders to share market intelligence about long-term vacancies and local demand, while also helping find and support new shop tenants in the town.

One shouldn’t also forget the various business rate relief schemes that are available to high street businesses.

So, I hope I’ve been able to assure Cllr Jacobs and all members that work is continuing to identify all opportunities for supporting our high streets. At present, I feel that the High Street Rental Auctions powers have been designed for, and are more relevant to, the struggling high streets in more economically challenged areas. That said I will, of course, keep the potential use of the power under review.

Question 4	**Cllr Chris Hart to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth**

In the absence of any planned upgrades the Rye Meads STW in the current Thames Water business plan to 2030, what robust measures does EHDC intend to enforce its condition 21 attached to planning permission at Gilston "that no occupation will take place until such upgrades are in place"?

Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward

The question relates to condition 21 of the planning permission for villages 1-6 which is being developed by Place for People. It does not apply to Village 7, which is being developed by Taylor Wimpy.

Condition 21 does not require East Herts Council to secure or deliver upgrades to Rye Meads Sewage Treatment Works. Responsibility for wastewater infrastructure rests with Thames Water as the statutory sewerage undertaker.

The condition applies to the Village 1–6 permission and requires evidence that appropriate wastewater infrastructure arrangements are in place before occupation occurs. This may be demonstrated either through confirmation that the necessary upgrades have been completed or through an agreed phasing plan with Thames Water, identifying how capacity will be provided to serve the development.

The developers have entered into infrastructure and connection agreements with Thames Water. While these are private contractual arrangements, the Council will require satisfactory evidence from the

developer and Thames Water before discharging the relevant parts of Condition 21. The condition can be discharged on a phased basis to reflect the long-term delivery of the Gilston Area. If the required evidence is not provided, the condition cannot be discharged and occupation of the relevant development would be contrary to the planning permission, at which point the Council would have recourse to its planning enforcement powers. It should be stressed however that taking formal planning enforcement action is not the first option but the last. The Gilston Area will be delivered over several decades, and the Council, developers and Thames Water have worked together since the District Plan was prepared to ensure that wastewater infrastructure requirements are planned alongside the phased delivery of development.	
Supplementary question from Cllr Chris Hart	
Cllr Hart sought clarity on the how the measures would be enforced.	
Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward	
Cllr Glover-Ward advised that generally on a condition like this, if there were 400 homes coming forward per year, there would be evidence from Thames Water on how their infrastructure had been upgraded to meet the additional load that would be placed on their sewage works. This would be provided through the developers and delivered to show that the conditions had been met. It was noted that it would not be expected to put in the capacity for 10,000 homes from the outset, as an overcapacity sewage works was inefficient and could cause more problems. A phased plan would be expected to ensure the capacity required was met.	
Question 5	**Cllr David Jacobs to ask Cllr Carl Brittain, the Executive Member for Financial Stability**
Noting that the Executive decided on 3 June 2025 that 'the freehold of the commercial and residential block owned by the council at Elizabeth Road, Bishop's Stortford be marketed for disposal, in its current condition and with the current short-term leases in place'. Can	

the Executive member provide a progress report on the sale of these properties, including an indication as to when the sale might be completed and then reasons for the significant delay, which is preventing any investment in the parade?
Response from Cllr Carl Brittain
I would like to thank Cllr Jacobs for raising this question. As Cllr Jacobs notes, last June the Executive made the decision to sell the commercial and residential block at Elizabeth Road. Cllr Jacobs may recall that I made efforts to include him in the discussion of the proposed disposal prior to the matter being put before the Executive and, at his suggestion, I was happy to amend the proposed red line for the disposal to exclude a piece of council land on the opposite side of the road. Following the Executive's decision, officers embarked on the disposal process which saw marketing until the end of September leading to several high quality offers. The next couple of months saw work to assess the offers, including due diligence, secure approval of the preferred offer and engage solicitors to handle the conveyancing. Since that time, the council has been responding to enquiries from the purchaser. Of particular note, without going into details for data protection reasons, one matter that has taken up much time is that a commercial leaseholder running a business at the parade didn't provide the information requested by the purchaser and that they were required to provide under their lease. This jeopardised both the business's lease and possibly the sale of the block. I know that Cllr Jacobs is aware of the background to this and I trust he will recall that instead of seeking possession, the council chose to expend considerable time and effort to work with the business to assist them to comply with their lease and thus avoid them breaching it, which could have led to possession being sought. I would like to inform members that the council's support for the business owner resulted in him investing in his property to the benefit of the workers and patrons of the business.

In his question, Cllr Jacobs has characterised the timeline to date as representing a 'significant delay', however, I do not see it that way. In fact, having accepted a favourable offer from a local company that has informed us that they wish to maintain the tenancies and carry out improvements, officers have worked to the purchaser's timetable, promptly responded to their requests and, as I've outlined, acted to safeguard an existing business that wished to remain in situ when seeking possession instead would have expedited matters. Earlier this month, the council commissioned some further surveys requested by the purchaser; the results have been shared with the purchaser. As the council has provided all the information requested, officers are now seeking a date from the purchaser to complete the acquisition.	
Question 6	**Cllr Yvonne Estop to ask Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward, the Executive Member for Planning and Growth**
I understand the Council has formally adopted the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for East Herts, in partnership with Herts County Council, for which we have waited three years. It is part of the Government's strategy to make walking, wheeling, and cycling the natural choice for shorter journeys. The jointly adopted LCWIP is a set of locations for conceptual improvements. Which projects in Bishop's Stortford are EHC officers now recommending to HCC for priority design, funding and implementation?	
Response from Cllr Vicky Glover-Ward	
The LCWIP has indeed now been adopted both by East Herts Council on 2 June and, subsequently, by Hertfordshire County Council on 17 June. Officers at EHC and HCC will be working together over the coming weeks and months to jointly look at those schemes which have been prioritised within the LCWIP, of which a total of 63 priority routes were identified across East Herts. The 10 highest scoring routes in the LCWIP are detailed within Table 6-3 at page 129 of the main report, with the full table available in Appendix D showing the results for each route individually along with the	

applicable costing estimate. A separate document at Appendix C shows the location of each of these routes along with high level details of the proposed infrastructure improvements. However, it should be noted that the delivery of any routes will be dependent on available funding to support them, we will continue to seek opportunities through S106 contributions, S278 works, through external funding and working with partners to seek opportunities. Note – LCWIP documents can be found here: [East Herts Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan | Hertfordshire County Council]()	
Question 7	**Cllr Yvonne Estop to ask Cllr Tim Hoskin, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability**
Trade waste is collected by several different waste companies, not just our own contractor Veolia. Trade bins, trade sacks and the other litter they attract are a blight on our high streets. In our own trade waste contract with Veolia, the contractor provides a service whereby businesses take Voelia sacks, and place them on the pavement for collection. Can you undertake to review all Veolia trade sack collection sites to minimise detriment to the public spaces of our towns?	
Response from Cllr Tim Hoskin	
I'd like to thank Cllr Estop for this question. I recognise that collection of trade waste, especially in our town centres with narrow lanes and pavements, can cause problems from time-to-time. If a business signs up to the council's trade waste collection service, operated by Veolia, where limited space restriction makes waste bins impractical, Veolia will provide blue trade waste sacks. Only a small proportion of businesses rely on sacks, although these customers are typically in our town centres. Both the council and Veolia stress the importance to trade customers of presenting sacks for collection in a considerate and timely way. While	

businesses will often place sacks out the night before collection, where this causes a particular problem, special arrangements can be put in place for presentation in the morning for collection later that day. These flexible approaches help minimise the time waste is left on the public highway, reduce any obstruction to pedestrians and maintain the appearance of our town centres.

Where problems persist, the Shared Waste Team and Veolia are happy to work with the business and others, such as the BID in Bishop's Stortford, to find solutions that minimise problems.

Trade waste sack collections typically run smoothly without undue detriment to the environment; problems that do arise are most often due to specific issues associated with the constraints of a particular location. Therefore, rather than instigate a district-wide review of trade waste sack collections, I would like to suggest that should any member identify a persistent issue, they raise it with me or directly with the Shared Waste Team so that all parties can review the situation and identify how best to remedy the particular problems at that site.