

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING – 22 JULY 2019

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO. 15 QUESTIONS – QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS

Notice of the following questions has been received in accordance with Council Procedure Rule No 15:-

1. Question to the Leader from Councillor Kieran Thorpe

“Does the leader agree with me that it was disappointing that the County Council’s community safety committee recently voted to reduce crews on Fire Engines in Hertfordshire, despite this Councils repeated calls that this would put residents and firefighters alike at risk?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question.

We have over the last twelve months discussed the importance of the fire service in the county a few times and agreed cross party that no merger should happen with the PCC, which we were successful in helping prevent. We also wrote to the Leader of the county council expressing opposition to any reduction in the fire service in Welwyn Hatfield. However, I said the last time that we discussed this as a motion that came to council in November, that although we did not support a merger with the PCC, we did want an efficient and value for money fire service and believe that decisions made by the county council are on the basis of efficiency without affecting the level of service. This decision is one of these and so I cannot agree with the main sentiment of your question.”

2. Question to the Leader from Councillor Anthony Dennis

“The recent application for change of use of the Debenhams building from retail to part residential contained an accompanying marketing report from Brasier Freeth.

This report sets out in the clearest terms the striking lack of interest there is by a long list of established retailers in locating a branch in the Debenhams building, or even in Welwyn Garden City itself, and the market reasons for this. It paints a very worrying picture for the future of the town centre.

In the light of this report, and the need to follow a strategy which will give us the best balance of the right kind of retail, are the Council seriously prioritising a proactive approach (as similar authorities around the country have done), to planning decisions in the town centre, including the proposed Town Centre North plan, which will reflect this harsh reality?

Does Welwyn Garden City need a 'Town Centre Tsar'?

Answer

“Thank you for your question Cllr Dennis.

Like you, we were all concerned when we heard the news regarding the Debenhams store in Welwyn Garden City and the impact this could have on the high street. We also recognise that the nature of town centres are changing, but it is important that they are thriving for our communities and creating and maintaining jobs. This year we have been successful in being awarded £6.1m of Accelerated Construction funding from Homes England for town centre north, and the council has also acquired other key parts of the town centre to ensure that we can contribute to keeping our town centre thriving.

To assist with the delivery of this, I have recently discussed with the Chief Executive the need to set up a partnership board for the town, as we are successfully doing in Hatfield. This partnership would include and engage with key stakeholders, including the WGC BID, the LEP, John Lewis, the Howard Centre and Oaklands College to look at wider strategic issues covering health care, skills, employment and transport infrastructure associated with our regeneration plan. Building on the success of the Cross Party Hatfield Regeneration Member Board, I would also wish to set up a Cross Party Welwyn Garden City Town Centre Regeneration Board, to take forward all of the regeneration plans and the procurement of a developer and ensure our strategy and regeneration of the town is appropriate for everyone. So we do have a plan, we do have funding and we will now taking steps to set up the partnership and a Cross Party Board as soon as possible, these are effectively our town centre tsars.”

3. Question to Councillor Nick Pace from Councillor Drew Richardson

“Could the executive member for housing and community provide an update on the number of households that are being housed in hotels and B&Bs?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question.

The current number of households in hotel accommodation is three, all single adults. Arrangements have been made for all 3 households to move out of hotel accommodation in the next 10 days.

The team have worked hard to secure these households suitable alternative accommodation as quickly as possible.

To further add, there are no families in hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation, this is in the main due being able to place households in Inspira House and Minster House. The last time any family with children resided in hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation was 31 May 2019.”

4. Question to Councillor Stephen Boulton from Councillor Lucy Musk

“Given that when asked, only 38% of residents living within the area of Welwyn Garden City covered by the Estate Management Scheme voted to support its continuation, can the Cabinet member for Executive Member, Environment and Planning explain how not only retaining the EMS but adding fees too - serves the view of the 62% of people who did not vote to keep the EMS?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question.

Section 3 of the report to Cabinet on 7 November 2017 set out the results of the EMS consultation which took place in late 2016. It advised that 1,700 responses were received. It advised that 81% of respondents who live in the EMS area and 80% of respondents who live outside the EMS area think that the context and history of WGC justifies additional rules and controls.

The table in paragraph 3.7 set out what people said in response to particular options. The highest level of support was for maintaining the status quo, which was supported by 38% of EMS residents who responded and 33% of non-EMS residents who responded. This does not mean that the status quo option was actively opposed by 62% of respondents however. It means that their preference was for another option. The table shows that only 8% of EMS residents who responded and only 5% of non-EMS residents who responded favoured the termination of the Scheme without any alternative controls.

Paragraph 3.12 concludes by stating that “It is clear from the responses received to the consultation that residents of the town value the EMS in terms of the protection that it provides to the special character of Welwyn Garden City as the World’s second Garden City. The responses to the question regarding how the Scheme should be administered in future are also clear, but only insofar as they do not comprehensively identify one single option as being preferred. As a result of this ambiguity, Officers have continued to consider the available options.”

The report goes on to consider the available options in more detail. Paragraph 3.17 accepts that application fees were not fully supported by residents but argues that fees are common to most other towns where such Scheme exist. Paragraph 3.14 observes that without application fees the Scheme would continue to be funded by a combination of planning application fees and council tax. The report therefore ultimately recommends the principle of creating an EMS team and the principle of establishing fees for EMS applications.

Cabinet accepted these recommendations as being the best way of protecting the context and history of the garden city in a fair and equitable way.”