

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING – 26 SEPTEMBER 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 Julie Cragg

“I was very pleased to hear that we did well in the very beautiful and fragrant Anglia in Bloom competition.

We had several entries in our area under different categories, can you please advise the outcome so that we can be aware of and celebrate the hard work put in by volunteers and others to make our area lovely and nice to live in.”

Answer

“Thank you for your question, Councillor Cragg.

The Anglia in Bloom competition had a hugely successful outcome for Welwyn Hatfield, building on last year’s success!

The borough took home three ‘Special Awards’ after the judges shortlisted ten local initiatives – up against hundreds of entrants from across the region. These were: Environmental Quality – for Welwyn Garden City; Grow You Own – for Longcroft Allotments, Welwyn Garden City, and a Public Open Space award for Parkway in Welwyn Garden City.

Welwyn Hatfield also claimed two bronze, three silver and two golds in the ‘Category Awards’ – including a best in the region accolade for Sherrardspark Wood.

Our success was declared ‘exceptional’ by the panel of judges, who also described the colourful view of Parkway as “very special”. They went on to praise the work of the ‘All Aboarders’ community group in helping to brighten up the WGC train station.

Sherrardspark Wood and the dedicated volunteers who help manage the woodland also received a special mention from the panel, which labelled the 200 acre woodland a “local gem” and an “outstanding local facility.”

It should be highlighted that our own council officers did a fantastic job of co-ordinating the campaign, in particular preparing and accompanying the judges on their judging days. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our Lemsford and Danesbury Fernery volunteers, plus our partners Serco, Maydencroft, WGC BID and Welwyn Parish Council, who all contributed to such a fantastic success.”

2. Question to the Leader from Councillor James Broach

“As we enter the eye of the chaotic storm the government has made of Brexit, can the leader tell us how much has been spent by this council in terms of time and money, on Brexit preparations since the 2016 referendum?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question. The council is required to plan for all relevant emergencies, [even ones with uncertain consequences] in partnership with organisations such as the police, fire, ambulance, and county council. For some of our officers - activities such as emergency planning, training, reporting, responding and recovering from emergencies is part of their day to day work. Others take part as required according to specific risk or need.

The Corporate Management team and all Heads of Service have been engaged in BREXIT planning since the referendum result; with the emphasis of considering how BREXIT [what ever form it may take] may affect their service and planning for things that this council can directly control or influence. Each time we have moved towards potential exit days, this planning has increased.

Additionally the Chief Executive and Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) have been actively involved in representing local authority interests at the Statutory Local Resilience Forum, including the Strategic and Tactical Co-ordination groups where joint planning and work for the wider Hertfordshire area is discussed.

Workshops have been held with our officers, and member bulletins have been produced to advice members on work being undertaken. Since August all councils have been required to appoint a Lead Senior Officer for BREXIT and our lead officer [Corporate Director, Public Protection, Planning and Governance] has also been meeting with colleagues from other districts and boroughs to help understand and plan for potential impacts.

There has been a dedicated Brexit area on the One Welwyn Hatfield website for some months now. Additionally there have been selected posts to the council's social media accounts including raising local awareness of the new EU Settlement Scheme. Our risk register has been updated to reflect the UK's expected exit from the EU and we have reached out to local businesses as well through our partnerships and networks.

As much of this work falls within the council's statutory responsibilities a lot has of course been funded from existing service area budgets, however at present some specific money [roughly a couple of thousand] has been spent on things such as communications and imported food safety training for our environmental health officers. As the uncertainties around BREXIT become clearer, we are of course ready to use the money which has been allocated by central government as required.”

3. Question to the Leader from Councillor Malcolm Cowan

“The Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in June, when discussing the Food Safety annual report, agreed that ‘members are concerned about the tightness of staffing and the potential risk to the public from not having a full complement of staff in the area and ask Cabinet to review the situation.

What decision has Cabinet come to?”

Answer

“The work of the Public Health and Protection Service is considerably broad with the underlying theme of protecting the public and one such function is food safety. Within this role, local authorities are expected to not just merely undertake “routine hygiene inspections” they are also expected to operate a risk based enforcement system that values educational initiatives together with formal legal enforcement tools and ‘non inspection interventions’ for example targeted sampling, imported food controls, investigation of food poisoning outbreaks, and investigating complaints about food businesses or food products.

All food safety officers who undertake any of these tasks have to be suitably qualified and competent to do so. The Food Standards Agency set out the required criteria that we must follow and local authorities can be audited against this standard. It is therefore essential that when we recruit into these posts that we recruit only those applicants who are suitably qualified, as detailed by the Food Standards Agency.

The Council is aware of the challenges faced when recruiting into these posts. However I would like to point out that this is a national problem and not one just limited to Welwyn Hatfield or indeed Hertfordshire. We continue to work with our Human Resources team to ensure our job adverts reach the widest range of our target audience but there is often very limited numbers of suitably qualified applicants available.

The Environmental Health team currently have one vacancy for an Environmental Health Officer and we are working with HR in respect of the recruitment process. Once we have recruited into that post, the team should have adequate resources to deliver risk based food safety interventions and therefore I do not believe a further review of the team and resources is required at this stage.

The team are also aware of a new Environmental Health apprenticeship scheme which is being finalised and this may assist in contingency planning for these roles. Hopefully this is something that we can bring to WHBC in the new future.”

4. Question to the Deputy Leader from Councillor Edward Boulton

“Does the deputy leader agree with me that the redevelopment of White Lion Square represents a milestone in the regeneration of Hatfield Town Centre of which we can all be proud, and will he join me in thanking the efforts of all those on the council involved?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question Councillor Boulton.

As members will know already, the Council has been investing heavily in Hatfield Town Centre since 2013. The redevelopment of White Lion Square is a crucial step in the ongoing regeneration plans to make the town centre a more attractive and vibrant place. The council has received many positive comments from the public and businesses about the newly refurbished square. I was also very pleased to see the positive coverage about the opening of White Lion Square on the front page of Welwyn Hatfield Times. It was an incredibly proud moment for all of us and hopefully we will continue to see many positive headlines in the local paper in the future!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the officers involved in this project, our community champion, Mark Lampert in his effort to help to bring the Pearl sculpture back into the Square.

I am very grateful for the support from Members of all political parties that we have received.

Last week, we were delighted to show the progress of our Hatfield Town Centre regeneration projects to Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership. They are an important partner to the council, who are providing a total of £6m funding to support our work in Hatfield Town Centre including £1.2m for White Lion Square redevelopment. I am pleased to report that they are very pleased with the council’s regeneration progress in the town centre.”

5. Question to the Leader from Councillor Helen Quenet

“The recent document Councillors were sent on no deal Brexit preparations gave us only a very broad outline on what has been planned. We are now 6 weeks away from this if the PM gets his way.

I for one would like some more specific details of what help will be available for the residents of my ward. Let’s start with this. What will happen when a resident phones me and tells me they are a type 1 diabetic and have no insulin left?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question. The updated Member Briefing sent to all councillors this month summarises the work Officers have been doing in recent weeks in re-assessing potential Brexit impacts on our services in view of the expected leaving date on 31 October.

The Corporate Management team and all Heads of Service have been engaged in BREXIT planning since the referendum result with the emphasis of considering how BREXIT [what ever form it may take] may affect their service.

The overall aim of our planning is to manage the impact of BREXIT on WHC and to work with multi agency partners to help manage any impact(s) affecting the Borough. Our objectives can be summarised as: understanding potential impacts, ensuring effective representation, sharing information, fulfilling our statutory responsibilities, providing community leadership, maintaining local democracy and returning to a normality.

Overall our attention is focussed on what the council has control over, and members will be aware this council is not a primary or secondary health provider. It does not have direct responsibility for the supply and availability of drugs/medicines to local residents. Residents should be talking to their local GP and pharmacist if they have particular concerns relating to their medication. In this specific case I also note the British Diabetic Association and Diabetes UK have relevant information on their websites.”

6. Question to the Executive Member, Leisure, Culture and Communications from Councillor Samuel Kasumu

“I am aware and very pleased that there were many activities over summer organised by, or supported by the council. Can the portfolio holder comment on some of the highlights and feedback from the Welwyn Hatfield community.”

Answer

“Thank you for your question Councillor Kasumu.

I am pleased to report there were a full range of family friendly films showing at Campus West over the summer, including Toy Story 4 and The Lion King, which were both well attended. The mixed weather also ensured there were plenty of visitors to Roller City and Soft Play City during the summer school holidays either escaping the rain or enjoying the air conditioning.

The Jim MacDonald Centre in Hatfield also hosted great opportunities for young people and families to get involved in through their holiday clubs this summer, which were very well attended

Over at the Mill Green Museum and Mill, and at the Welwyn Roman Baths, there were numerous activities to engage young people during the holidays ranging from seaside crafts to clay sculpturing, puppet making and fabric painting on t-shirts. The annual and popular Teddy Bear Fun Day in August attracted 300 people to Mill Green. Craft demonstrators also ran sessions on wood turning, weaving and corn dollies and bee keeping for older visitors.

Our leisure contractor, Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL), ran a full activity programme across the sport and leisure sites it manages in the borough including aqua splash inflatable sessions in the Stanborough Park south lake and at the Hatfield Swim Centre.

The Community Partnership team were also extremely busy over the summer months being the driving force behind the annual BIG Summer programme; now in its 3rd year it was the most popular and successful to date with more than 300 different activities and thousands of families and individuals taking part. The team also delivered the family friendly Xplora navigational and educational challenge across King George V, Moneyhole Lane and Stanborough Parks.

In addition the council funded the following:

- A Live and Creative Event in Hatfield which was an arts and culture day aimed at engaging the entire family.
- Welwyn Garden City Fun Day.
- A Girls Only Football Tournament.
- Two Water sports activities run in partnership with YMCA.
- Two Crazy Golf Events in Hatfield.
- Three Basketball coaching sessions.
- Three Skate and Scooter Sessions in different locations. *
- Friday Night Football sessions.
- Climbing wall sessions in local parks,

(* 1 in Hatfield, 1 in WGC and 1 in KGV)."

7. Question to the Leader from Councillor Jane Quinton

"There are increasing instances across the country where developers, especially those of larger house building projects are claiming that they cannot build as many social and affordable homes as were initially stated when the planning permission was granted, citing viability problems.

These changes often amount to significant material variation from the plans originally agreed and should therefore be subject to re-examination by the council's planning committee. Some councils (for example Bath and NE Somerset) have now agreed to implement a policy that any significant changes to the plans should be brought back to the planning committee for re-examination, since they no longer conform with what was agreed. This allows for open scrutiny of the viability issues and might discourage the unnecessary loss of affordable housing or other benefits in a development.

Will you introduce a similar policy in the near future? Developers making a planning application will then be aware that major changes made after planning permission is granted could be subject to subsequent public scrutiny."

Answer

"The Council ideally wants all development proposals to provide the policy-compliant amount of affordable housing. It accepts however that national guidance allows provision to be reduced where it is not viable to provide the full amount. The Council requires developers to submit a viability appraisal and has expert consultants retained to assess the veracity of such appraisals. This information will then be taken into account when the application is decided by officers and presented to Councillors when it is determined by Development Management Committee. The agreed provision is then incorporated into the

planning permission and associated Section 106 planning obligation legal agreement.

Any developer who subsequently seeks to vary the amount of affordable housing must submit a new planning application. Where the original application had been determined by Development Management Committee the default expectation is that the new application should also be determined by the committee. Councillors have the ability to call-in applications to make sure this happens.

The Council has the ability to take enforcement action against any developer who fails to provide affordable housing in accordance with their planning permission and legal agreement.

The Council is unaware of any examples within the borough where developers have failed to provide the agreed amount of affordable housing. Councillor Quinton is welcome to identify sites to the Planning Portfolio Holder or Head of Planning where she believes this has happened.”

8. Question to the Leader from Councillor Paul Zukowskyj

“This council is responsible for parking issues and yet the hugely problematic issues faced by South Hatfield residents have been ignored repeatedly despite being raised multiple times over years. All we hear is ‘it’s not on the work programme’.

Since the verge parking is so utterly out of control and this council is sticking it’s head in the sand, I’ve had to get the County Council to intervene and institute a verge parking limitation to ensure appropriate sightlines around a pedestrian crossing and mini-roundabout on safety grounds before a resident is seriously injured or even killed by a driver unsighted due to the rampant and utterly uncontrolled verge parking.

I ask the leader of this council, does he really think this authority is performing reasonably when other authorities are having to step in to do their job for them?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question, Councillor Zukowskyj.

The Council recognises that parking is an important priority in the Borough. As members know already, there is only a finite amount of resources available and the parking work programme is agreed by a Cross Party Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel each year, which Cllr Zukowskyj is a member of.

It is important to note that the responsibility for the safety of the highway and verge protection rests with Hertfordshire County Council, however in order to provide more support, the Borough Council has been including verge and footway protection order as part of our parking consultation since 2017.

In fact, 88 roads across the Borough have had a verge and footway prohibition introduced, with the majority of the 319 roads having double yellow lines introduced on junctions to improve road safety since 2017.

So yes we are performing reasonably and we are in fact doing more than our duties by supporting Hertfordshire County Council who are responsible for Highway safety.”

9. Question to the Leader from Councillor Ayesha Rohale

“The parking spaces around the Moors Walk shops are inadequate. On behalf of residents of Panshanger and Haldens wards who are regularly inconvenienced, what action does this council intend to take to improve the situation, one which will be made worse when the additional nearby homes already approved are occupied? Will it be additional parking, which would also allow the businesses to run more successfully?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question Councillor Rohale.

There are currently 104 parking spaces in the Moors Walk shopping parade. Due to the popularity of the businesses, we note that the car park can be busy during peak trading periods. Our Estates team have written to all the shopkeepers and residents above the Moors Walk shops recently reminding them of the location of their dedicated bays in order to free up spaces in the main shoppers car park.

As members will know already, public transport links have been established to the area as there are bus stops within close walking distance of the shopping parade. It should be noted that the site has limited opportunity for additional parking, as to do so is likely to involve the removal of green open space and a number of trees in the area. If there are any specific proposals that Cllr Rohale would like us to explore, I would be happy to ask our officers to consider them and if necessary and appropriate, to refer to the Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel for consideration of the parking work programme.”

10. Question to the Leader from Councillor Lucy Musk

“We have seen exemplary measures undertaken by the officers in ensuring private and housing association homes are fit for purpose, notably the actions taken in Stanborough Close when I requested assistance, however it is shown that we are falling behind in standards and time taken in dealing with repairs to our own housing stock.

What is being done to ensure timely and satisfactory work is being carried out to ensure our homes are fit for habitation?”

Answer

“I disagree that our own housing stock of almost 10,000 homes is falling behind the private rented sector and housing associations in respect of standard and time taken to deal with repairs.

All of our homes are fit for habitation however, of course, a number are in the process of being prepared for re-development involving tenants being decanted and transferred to new homes.

The long term partnering agreement with Mears to maintain our housing stock is closely managed through a combination of pre and post inspection surveys, site inspections of work in progress, and a suite of nineteen Key Performance Indicators measuring such items as;

- repairs completed in time,
- first time fix,
- appointments made and kept
- customer satisfaction.

The latest data (from August 2019) has demonstrated all 19 KPIs are above target.

In addition to spending £9m each year on responsive repairs, void properties and service contracts, £12m per year is invested in the housing stock on planned investment projects such as kitchens, bathrooms, windows, roofs, energy saving works and refurbishment of sheltered schemes to meet changing standards and the needs of our tenants.

A rolling programme of stock condition surveys help ensure that long-term planned investment is targeted and programmed in line with budgets.

Members can be reassured that stringent controls are in place to manage contracts and officers take pride in maintaining the housing stock to a high standard. Whilst, with approximately 24,000 responsive repairs being carried out each year, it is inevitable that occasionally a repair does not go to plan or there is a service failure. Such instances are dealt with as quickly as possible through the Councils complaint process which involves investigations and, where appropriate, visits to complainants.

The portfolio holder for Housing & Communities has regular meetings with the Head of Property Services (Housing) who, along with his team, is dedicated to delivering a high quality, efficient service to council tenants and leaseholders.

In summary, I am fully supportive of the processes in place to maintain our housing stock and reassured by the current and programmed investment by the award winning Council / Mears partnership.*

Thank you.”

*The partnership won the CIPFA “Alternative Service Delivery Model of the Year, 2018.”

11. Question to the Leader from Councillor Kieran Thorpe

“Will the leader join with me and I’m sure the whole council, in congratulating Mrs Maggie Herod who is 77 years old - and her beautiful rescue dog Kiwi, as they recently completed a sponsored walk from Leagrave to London following the trail of the River Lea, in just 6 days, in order to raise money and donations for food-banks desperately in need of resources, including those here in Welwyn Hatfield.”

Answer

“Thank you for your question. I know Mrs Herod walked specifically to support the Luton Food Bank but passed through our Borough and presented food hampers to food banks along the way. The Food Bank there is important to its community as those in our Borough are to ours. I would be delighted to congratulate her and I’m sure the rest of the Council would like to do likewise. It is always heartening when local people do work to support their communities and I know there are various ways that many of our residents and councillors also work in the community, supporting important and good causes both big and small. Mrs Herod’s work and those of others are greatly appreciated and I thank them for their time and efforts.”

12. Question to the Leader from Councillor Jane Quinton

“In light of government policy to ban gas boilers in new built homes from 2025 and this council’s own ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030, will the council take the logical step of planning alternative heating methods in new council homes immediately? Building new council homes with better insulation and ventilation and with suitable electric heating will not only improve their energy efficiency, but also help future proof the housing stock of this borough and make better places to live.”

Answer

“Through our Affordable Housing Programme the council has recently built new homes on four sites creating 52 new homes for local people in the borough. All these homes have been built using a ‘fabric first’ approach, which involves maximising the performance of the components and materials in the building itself, rather than relying on the use of mechanical or electrical systems. This can help reduce capital costs and costs to our tenants, improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. This method can also reduce the need for maintenance during the building’s life.

We use the following methods:

- Maximise air-tightness in the building
- Use super-high insulation
- Optimise solar gain through the provision of openings and shading
- Optimise natural ventilation
- Use the thermal mass of the building fabric

The efficient gas combination boilers installed in the new homes produce both the heating and hot water without the need to store water in a cylinder or storage tank so are well suited to households with limited space. As the boilers only heat the water used they are also economical to run for our tenants. These systems are also installed in the council's current housing stock so sit well within the current maintenance programme.

Whilst not a policy requirement for residential developments, our exciting new development at Minster Close is proposed to be constructed to BREEAM "Very good" standard (Building Research Establishment's Environmental Standard). A range of design features are included - fabric first strategy, solar gain and water recycling. The plant room has also been designed to future proof the option to connect to the University's energy centre, should this prove a viable opportunity in the future.

Alternative environmentally sustainable systems that will reduce carbon emissions are being reviewed for new projects on the drawing board, but currently these systems are often more expensive and less effective for the end user. We want to continue to deliver housing of the highest standard, carefully balancing environmental sustainability, economics and ease of use/costs for our tenants.

We will continue to research alternative, more sustainable heating methods as we near 2025."