

COUNTY COUNCIL – 8 JULY 2025

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1) Question from Jeremy Richardson, Etchingham, East Sussex

How much did the rejigging of the dropped curb at St Phillip's Church/ Playing field Car Park, at Burwash Common cost and why was it necessary to use new curb stones when the old ones were undamaged and obviously cut to fit the gap?

Response by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

The parish initially highlighted concerns over water pooling at the location, which prompted the Local Highway Steward to assess the issue. Following this, a request was raised to address the situation by raising the kerbs in order to mitigate water and detritus accumulation on the footway. The proposed works were reviewed and approved and subsequently authorised to be delivered under a Minor Works Order. These works were completed on 18 March 2025.

In response to the query regarding the use of the original kerb stones, please be advised that while we always endeavour to reuse kerb stones in sound condition, it is not always possible. In this instance, the original kerb stones could not be reused due to difficulties in removing them intact, and as a result, new kerb stones were installed instead.

The total cost for this Minor Works project amounted to £2,496.89.

Thank you again for your correspondence on this matter. I hope that the information provided above is helpful to you.

2) Question from Paul Turner, Hailsham, East Sussex.

STEP Multi Academy Trust manage a number of Schools in East Sussex including 4 primary schools in Hailsham, Burfield, Hawkes Farm, Pheonix and Whitehouse. In September 2023 STEP moved out of Burfield to allow substantial building remedial works to take place and temporarily co-located pupils across town onto the Pheonix site a mile and a half away.

STEP academy applied to the County council to waive the planning condition to have a 'kiss and drop' facility at Burfield. The application was denied by the County planning committee and within hours of that decision STEP academy informed the Council that they would not be taking up occupancy of the site again and would permanently co- lo-cate both schools on the Pheonix site.

In November 2024 STEP formally applied to the Regional Schools Director (RSD) to merge both schools. Despite clear evidence of the amount of 1700 housing units

being built in the southern area of the town and the representations of Parents/carers the Lead Member did not oppose the closure of Burfield. The application by STEP was denied by the RSD after a campaign by the parents/carers and local Councillors.

STEP Academy again applied to merge the schools in March 2025. The parents met with the senior civil servants from the DFE and impressed upon them that issues relating to the Governance of STEP academies in Hailsham and the difficulties the parents/carers were experiencing in the handling of the whole matter by STEP. However, this time the application was approved, and the decision was not published for 6 weeks.

To date the parents have been denied access by the RSD to the minutes of the March meeting and the evidence that STEP academy submitted that enabled the initial decision to be reversed.

The County Council has recently announced in April 2025 that the empty Burfield site will be occupied by London and South East Academy Trust from September 2025. This decision by the lead member seems strange as there is no details of the reason for this decision or an explanation why another Academy Trust application who were very interested in making a contribution to improve the SEND provision in the County was not considered fully.

Is the Lead member aware of the connection of Mr Rama Venchard MBE has to STEP Academy Trust and London South East Academy Trust in relation to the Burfield school site?

Response by the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Academies, STEP confirmed to ESCC that they would not be moving back into the Burfield school site. As an education site, the Children Services Department (CSD) is responsible for considering whether the site is needed for other educational purposes.

There is an urgent need for new accommodation for local authority commissioned Alternative Provision in East Sussex. CSD have confirmed to the new Alternative Provision provider, London South East Academy Trust (LSEAT), that the former Burfield site can be used for this purpose. The school site will be known as East Sussex Academy Hailsham and will open to pupils from September 2025.

As Lead Member I was made aware of the connection of Mr Rama Venchard as Trustee at STEP and LSEAT, alongside other trustee/public roles that he holds. Mr Rama Venchard was not involved in the Local Authority's decision about the use of the site and it is my understanding that he is no longer a Trustee at STEP.

3) **Question from Bernard Brown, Battle, East Sussex.**

This question relates to two projects undertaken by East Sussex Energy Infrastructure and Development Limited trading as Sea Change Sussex under Service Level Agreements with East Sussex County Council.

Pacific House, Eastbourne. This matter was raised by way of a Public Question at the Full Council Meeting of 20 March 2025. In reply to a supplementary question the Leader said he did not recognise the figures I had quoted. He recognised I would expect a written follow up answer which would also be published. It is in excess of 3 months since that meeting and no response has been received. It should be provided now. A follow up request has been made separate to this question.

Queensway Gateway Road. The primary subject of this question, however, relates to the continuing management of the Queensway Gateway Road project. I am sure the Leader will acknowledge that I do not come to this matter late in the day, as some MPs may have done, but that my first 'contribution' was in early 2021. This is when I was first advised there was nothing to worry about, it was all in hand and that the road would be open and operational by August 2021. I advised him then that I did not believe this to be the case. Every two months throughout 2021 and 2022 senior officers of East Sussex County Council attended Accountability Board meetings of SELEP where they submitted progress reports and estimates of completion dates. These reports were at best inaccurate and, as each succeeding report demonstrated, were completely misleading. In November 2022, despite repeated questioning by SELEP, ESCC ceased giving projected completion dates.

Everyone clearly understands there have been very serious problems in the County's relationship with Sea Change Sussex. It is less clearly understood that ESCC and Sea Change Sussex jointly wrongly attempted to place the blame for the delays at the door of Seat Bartlett a local employer providing real jobs in the local community. When it had been reported to SELEP that the full £10m in the SELEP approval had been spent I submitted a question asking how much would the road cost to complete and where would the money come from? At the time the revised cost was unknown and it was said funding was 'being sought'. A 'Light touch business review' was undertaken and the budget for completing the road was set at £2.5m.

In 2024 it was disclosed this £2.5m from DLUCH, originally for use on new projects, would be granted to ESCC to complete the road.

It was not until last autumn that it was disclosed that Sea Change Sussex were no longer responsible and that Balfour Beatty were undertaking the final stage and the road would be open by 31 December 2024. It is necessary, for clarity, to quote from The Newsroom press office of East Sussex County Council the following:

Cllr Glazier said, "we are delighted the DLUCH has recognised the importance of this project and the need to complete this road. The completion of the Queensway

Gateway Road is a top priority for the County Council as we know the difference it will make for people living, working and visiting the Hasting and Rother area.”

The Council said in September the work would be finished by 31 December and would use the £2.5m levelling up funding. There is still no clear estimated completion date nor has a revised total forecast cost been put in the public domain. It is not unreasonable to assume if the work was scheduled to be completed within 3 months at a cost of £2.5m the costs will be somewhat greater when the works remain incomplete after 9 months.

So once again a member of the public is left to perform the role of the opposition and get the true costs of this troubled project and the failed relationship between ESCC and Sea Change Sussex out into the open. The council and general taxpayer are entitled to ask how has it been possible for this project to be so badly managed.

What process has been followed to scrutinise what has happened, determine who was responsible in order to take steps to correct previous errors and ensure there is no further repetition. Obfuscation and denial seems to have taken up all the energy which could have been used to deliver these projects in anything resembling their original business plans. Members were thwarted in Place Scrutiny.

Two major projects, Pacific House Eastbourne and the Queensway Gateway Road were both commenced by Sea Change Sussex under contract with East Sussex County Council and have resulted in severe difficulties.

On the Queensway Gateway Road I previously asked for a formal referral to Place Scrutiny. This was denied. We can now see how beneficial this could have been and could still happen if the Leader so wished. However, the current final budget is reported to be £12.5 million. The source of funds to meet this budget being the £10m from funds received via SELEP and £2.5 granted by DLUH last year as per the Light Touch Business Review Case (2024).

Given that the final stage will be at least 6 months late on a estimated 3 month construction schedule, will the Leader please advise what is the latest cost forecast for the project and how any difference will be funded?

Response by the Leader

Thank you for your question and I will take this opportunity to clarify and respond to the matters you have raised.

a) On management of the project:

The QGR is a large and complex infrastructure project which we are committed to completing as soon as possible, which has required working with several third parties such as National Highways and Southern Water. Each party is ultimately responsible for their respective processes and protocols to ensure the necessary

approvals are in place to proceed at each stage of the scheme's delivery. I would like to assure you and the public that as part of our procedures in closing-out this project we will undertake a lessons-learned exercise, as a matter of routine, which will consider all aspects of the project.

- b) On your statement that we have provided inaccurate and misleading reports to SELEP:

You make the assertion that the County Council has previously provided inaccurate and misleading reports to SELEP and the public. I disagree with that assertion, and the County Council has submitted the information it had available at that time to enable the SELEP Accountability board to be informed of the matters being addressed and progress made on the scheme.

- c) In terms of blaming a local employer for delays:

I must also strongly challenge your statement that the County Council has blamed a local employer for the delay. The County Council has not at any time directly or indirectly placed any blame on any local employer.

- d) Being clear on the funding of the project and a revised total forecast cost:

As you have highlighted the County Council has secured and spent £10m from the SELEP Local Growth Fund programme on Queensway Gateway Road (QGR) and further secured £2.5m from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2024. In March 2024, the County Council resolved to complete the project through its Highways Contractor, Balfour Beatty Living Places. The detailed cost of the County Council stepping in to complete the project is currently being finalised and as the project is ongoing, we cannot provide regular updates on the financial costs.

- e) Finally, in regard to their being 'No clear estimated completion date':

I am pleased to announce as indicated recently on our website, we have provided an indicative timeline for completion and opening of the road by the end of August 2025. However, should any further delays occur, we will provide updates via:

[https://live.eastsussexhighways.com/highway-schemes/queensway-gateway-
junction-improvements](https://live.eastsussexhighways.com/highway-schemes/queensway-gateway-
junction-improvements)