

**COUNCIL – 2 November 2017  
QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

Agenda item 7 refers

**1. Mr Mick Patrick, Hull Grove, to Councillor Mark Wilkinson, Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

Harlow Council already has a backlog of repairs deficit set by Government of around £109 million over a 30 year business plan and a 1 per cent rent reduction for four years.

Due to advice from the Government as a result of the tragic fire disaster at Grenfell, why are the additional works on fire safety to heating at Willowfield, Nichols, Moor, Edmonds and Stort Towers, at a cost of £1.8million and works at Spring Hills tower at £2.8million, being paid for from Harlow's HRA, as after the disaster, Teresa May promised funding from Government.

**Response from Councillor Mark Wilkinson, Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

The tragic Grenfell Tower fire in North Kensington on 14 June 2017 has focussed national attention on fire safety and regulation in tower blocks. Whilst the Council's Tower Blocks are considered inherently safe, a national Public Inquiry has commenced which will consider the cause of the fire; tower block design, construction; and, the scope/adequacy of the relevant regulations relating to high-rise buildings. An initial report is expected around Easter 2018.

A review of Harlow Council's fire risk assessments confirms that all are fit for purpose. However, the Council has taken the opportunity to review its fire safety short, medium and long term priorities aligning to other asset management priorities. Following clarification and written communication received from the Government, the funding of these works is expected to come from landlords themselves. It is the government's expectation that building owners will fund measures designed to make a building fire safe, and will draw on existing resources to do so which will impact on current priorities and resource allocations as well as future projects.

**2. Mr Mick Patrick, to Councillor Mark Wilkinson, Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

Reduction in benefits to non-working families and a reduction in Essex County Council Support may have an adverse effect on tenants to pay rent. Also, the Governments Homeless Reduction Bill will have extra costs to Council.

What measures is the Council taking to help reduce this effect and what are the additional costs to Council?

**Response from Councillor Mark Wilkinson, Portfolio Holder for Housing.**

Recent information has identified that rent arrears among tenants receiving universal credit are running at three, four, or even five times previous levels.

The Council continues to support affected tenants in a pro-active way by working jointly with Support Agencies and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to support clients through Drop-Ins and Benefit Cap Support Days held at the Jobcentre in Harlow. In addition, a new arrangement with the Citizen's Advice bureau has been established to provide money advice where required. In addition, concerns from landlords have been handed to the parliamentary inquiry investigating the programme.

The funding of supported housing funding from Essex County Council ended in April 2017. Scrutiny Committee, as part of its review, has assessed the potential impact of this cessation and have recommended to Cabinet users in receipt of this service either stop or pay a service charge. These charges, where adopted, were passed onto service users/tenants on a phased basis of two years for dispersed alarm users and three years for sheltered housing tenants. Whilst some users have stopped using the service, a number have continued to request the support service. Tenants have been supported through the implementation of this change with personal visits from a Supported Housing Officer to ensure maximisation of income through benefit entitlement and where appropriate tenants have been referred to charitable organisations e.g. Royal British Legion for ex-servicemen who will support its members.

The Homeless Reduction Act seeks to place more duties on Local Authorities to take steps to prevent families and single people becoming homeless. The key element is to intervene to prevent homelessness at an earlier stage as a statutory requirement. The new provision will have potential financial implications for the Local Authority which is still to be costed, awaiting guidance from the Government. The guidance is expected to include implications for information technology, the use of temporary accommodation costs, enhanced legal processes, and likely to indicate an increase in homeless approaches. The Government is intending to provide Local Authorities with additional funding for the proposed implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act. The Council, in preparation for the Act's implementation in April 2018, are also reviewing their approach to prevention and to overhaul existing working processes, alongside introducing new policies and procedures, increasing staff establishment costs and improving information technology. The Council is not certain that the extra funding from

Government will cover the additional strain on the Council, in particular the increase in numbers and costs of temporary accommodation required.

**3. Mr J Rogers, Bishopsfield, to Councillor Jon Clempner, Leader of the Council.**

The recent Grenfell Tower block fire tragedy highlighted the necessary safety features pertinent to living in high rise buildings and to the relevant bodies legally responsible for overseeing the enactment of the safety measures and regulations. However, high rise blocks previously used solely for offices, but which have been entirely converted to residential accommodation are exempt from these regulations.

Apparently this can be achieved without gaining planning consent from of the local planning authority, and a 'Risk Assessment' can be completed by the property owner without reporting to either the planning authority or the Fire Authority Service.

In this respect do Joseph Rank House, Redstone House, and Terminus House reach the same fire compliance regulations as the other Harlow high rise blocks, subject to the same fire inspections, constructed to resist fire spread or explosion, have smoke/fire alarms installed, stairways designed to be safe escape/evacuation routes from the buildings, and are dry or wet risers or sprinklers installed?

Have the owners briefed the Council in anyway about these issues?

Lastly has/was the redevelopment of these buildings taken into account in the Essex Fire Authority consultations that have resulted in the withdrawal from Harlow Fire Station of the Aerial Ladder Platform?.

**Response from Councillor Jon Clempner, Leader of the Council.**

Changes to the General Permitted Development Order made in 2013 initially for a three year period were made permanent in April 2016 and mean that Planning Permission is not now required for conversion to housing of a building that has previously been used as office accommodation.

Building Regulations Approval is required when offices are converted to flats as this is deemed a "material change of use" under the Regulations. However the developer need not approach the Council for approval as approval can be given by an Approved Inspector operating in the private sector.

The person or organisation managing such a building is responsible themselves under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 for making

a Fire Safety Risk Assessment: for the common parts of the building, identifying hazards and safety measures to be taken, managing identified risks, and implementing remedial measures. Fire and Rescue Services are responsible for enforcement of the requirements.

The use of Joseph Rank House was changed some time ago before changes to Planning law. The owners obtained Planning Permission from the Council and applied to the Council for Building Regulations approval. The Council is satisfied that the changes complied with the Building Regulations requirements in force at the time.

Planning Permission was not required for the conversion of Redstone House and Terminus House to residential accommodation, and Building Regulations Approval was sought from Approved Inspectors and not the Council.

Terminus House is currently undergoing conversion.

Officers have consulted Essex County Fire and Rescue Service with regard to current compliance with the requirements of the Fire Safety Order in all three buildings and on any influence their conversion has had on the decision regarding the location of an Aerial Ladder Platform at Harlow Fire Station.

I am advised that all three buildings named will be subject to exactly the same fire inspections as those owned for example by the Council. Each went through, or is going through, the Building Regulations process and was converted in line with the Building Regulations, which means that they would have the same provisions in place as purpose built flats.

Fire Safety Officers from Essex County Fire & Rescue Service have recently inspected the common parts of two of the three buildings, in line with the Service's inspection programme under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and letters of compliance have been sent to the Responsible Persons.

The remaining building is still undergoing the conversion.

The question regarding the Aerial Ladder Platform has been directed to the Station Commander for Harlow Fire Station for a response and I will provide an updated reply when this response has been received.

**4. Ms E Harvey, Churchgate Street, to Councillor Mike Danvers, Portfolio Holder for Resources..**

A global climate crisis is underway, with extreme weather and rising sea levels threatening the lives of millions of people around the world.

Essex County Council's pension fund, into which Harlow Council staff contribute and on which they will rely in their retirement, holds around £24 million worth of direct investments in fossil fuels and around £200 million of indirect investments. These investments are bad for the planet and they're risky for your staff – Mark Carney the Governor of the Bank of England has warned that investors relying on returns from fossil fuel investments face huge climate change losses.

Will Harlow Council use its influence on the County Council's Pension Fund to secure a public commitment to a gradual 5 year divestment of fossil fuels in its Investment Strategy Statement? We know it is possible because Waltham Forest and Southwark made this commitment last year

**Response from Councillor Mike Danvers, Portfolio Holder for Resources..**

Yes I am quite prepared to ask Essex County Council to do this. There is a problem with pension funds generally. It is driven by an outdated ideology of infinite growth.

The Essex Pension Fund consults upon its Investment Strategy Statement and the most recent consultation closed in June 2017.

Set out in the statement is the following –

“The fundamental responsibility of the Fund is to ensure that it has adequate monies available to pay pensions as they fall due. This objective must be achieved in a cost effective way for members, employers and the taxpayer. Moreover, in reaching decisions, the Fund must comply with its fiduciary responsibilities.”

Under the Governance arrangements of the fund the Investment Steering Committee (ISC) does not place restrictions on investment managers appointed by and working on behalf of the fund in choosing investments in quoted companies except in limiting the size of single investments.

I know from first-hand experience of trying to get ECC pension fund members to change their outdated policies about investment. With my colleague Karen Clempner we tried to persuade the pension fund to look at the advantages of ethical investment. We were turned down flat.

Pension funds could do so much more to make a positive contribution to society without putting their investments at risk. So yes I am quite prepared to urge the course of action suggested and thank you for your question.

