

Full Council – 9 December 2021

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

Will the council confirm that the council tax cut that was promised before last May's election to be 'immediate' will be incorporated into their budget next year?

Reply from Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

As we have previously stated, the Cabinet has been reviewing the Council's finances since taking control in May and will be finalising its financial plans and budgets prior to the Cabinet in January.

2 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Joel Charles (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

Fireworks are used by people throughout the year to mark different events. While they can bring much enjoyment to some people, they can cause significant problems and fear for other people and animals. What work did the council do to encourage residents to attend our own, excellent display, opposed to their own private displays?

Reply from Councillor Joel Charles (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

Harlow Council encouraged residents to attend the Town Park fireworks display through advertising on the Council's website with a dedicated events page, which received over 27,000 visits. The event was also advertised on the Council's Facebook and Twitter pages. 50,000 Facebook users were reached by the Council's posts. Press releases were also issued and published by Your Harlow alongside other local media outlets. The Council also shared advice on social media from the Essex Fire Service, which encouraged people to attend public firework displays where possible. Posters advertising the event were also put up on-site.

The Council's approach to promotional activity was proportionate and appropriate given the on-going concerns about public gatherings as a result of Covid-19, weighed against the benefits of providing a safe public display. All the press releases issued by the Council about fireworks night carried our administration's latest position on the pandemic.

In the lead up to fireworks night, an officer-led working group plans for and assesses risk factors when organising the event logistics and also considers the best approach for managing the flow of people attending. Animal welfare is an important area of focus too, particularly because Pets' Corner is in close proximity to the fireworks display. Work is always undertaken to mitigate the impact on the animals housed at Pets' Corner on the night. The outcome of the work undertaken by the Council was one of the best attended fireworks displays in recent years with an estimated crowd of over 20,000 people.

3 Councillor John Steer to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

What steps are being taken to regenerate the town centre?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

The administration is working around the clock to plan and deliver the rebuilding of the town centre. The new Corporate Strategy upon which we will vote tonight made very clear that regeneration is our number one corporate priority.

That means not just talking about regeneration and designing pretty images of plans, but finally getting on to deliver the regeneration that our town centre needs.

We have already passed a key milestone in the name of the town centre masterplan planning framework, which is the first planning framework the Council has ever put in place for the town centre. That document begins to tackle the historic land ownership issues in the town centre and for the first time arms our planning colleagues with the material considerations they need to take back control of our town centre. I cannot understate the importance of that document which is the first in the history of the Council.

To that end, a series of announcements will be made in due course setting out how we will deliver that regeneration.

Our ambition knows no bounds, but that ambition will not just be a pipedream as has been the case in the past, it will be realised.

Harlow town centre will be thriving as one of the best places in the country to enjoy high-end retail, leisure, hospitality, arts and culture including a night-time economy and an excellent quality of environment and public realm with people travelling to the town centre from other areas in the region to enjoy its offerings.

4 Councillor Gareth Williams to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

What plans does the administration have to build new council homes?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

We are going to build hundreds of new high-quality Harlow Council homes for Harlow families. In order to do that, a new ambitious Council house building pipeline will be unveiled early next year.

Our commitment to building new Council homes for social rent was displayed with the recent announcement that we have secured £640,000 from Homes England to ensure that the new homes being built at Bushey Croft will be let at the lowest possible social rent levels for Harlow families – as opposed to the previously so-called affordable rent levels that the Labour party had proposed for the site.

It begs the question as to why they never used the £640,000 to do the same thing for which they were eligible. Only one conclusion can be drawn from that question: that the Conservatives are the party of social housing.

5 Councillor Matthew Sagers to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

First may I welcome you to you to your new post and I would like to ask you if you can tell me what your plan is to do with regards the bushes and overgrowth in many of the estates as it is a thorn in the side of most residents in Harlow, but up to now we have been told it was due to Covid-19 and staffing and then it was the wrong season to cut them due to wildlife they cannot be trimmed?

Now we are in the winter wonderland do we now have a plan that the last administration did not as this time of year to look after the green areas and return them to a manageable level I hope you can bring some festive joy to those in Harlow and not turn it into the winter of discontent and you are not another scrooge.

Reply from Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

Rather than scrooge, I would like to think of myself more as the ghost of Christmas future. We are working around the clock to restore pride in our estates, including by:

- Reviewing the service level agreement between HTS and the Council

- Walking ward-by-ward with HTS and Officers to carry full environmental and street scene audits
- Speeding up the planned roll out of the winter programme works through the delivery of a new Task Force
- Visiting each area after the winter programme work has been carried out to see if the work meets the expectations of residents and the administration
- Beginning work on a new tree maintenance policy

There is much more work going on but we will do whatever it takes to fully restore pride in our wonderful estates as the people of Harlow elected us to do.

As with the winter of discontent caused by the Labour party in 1978, it is the Conservatives that have to clean it up and we will.

6 Councillor Tony Durcan to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Would you agree with me that it's important that all councillors of the planning committee are independent in regards to any decision they make as a collective committee.

Whilst not making any reference to the actual planning appeal would you please reassure all councillors that as stated in the CRC Church's open letter that you oppose her derogatory comments that the committee were "so openly discriminating against a Christian church" and that the councillors on this committee "so easily swayed by what we see as irrefutable discrimination against our organisation and church".

In light of the Church's statement can you question why officers have accepted such an appeal in such an unfair and unbalanced application in this type of format?

Reply from Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

The letter referred to in the question relates to an appeal statement issued by the CRC church in relation to their planning application for part of the Leisurezone site. This is an appeal made to the independent Planning Inspectorate, not to Harlow Council. It is the Planning Inspectorate that has accepted the appeal, not Harlow Council officers. Any appellant is entitled to make their own statement to the Inspectorate and as this is now part of a

formal appeal process the Council cannot request a retraction of their statement. The Council is simply a party to the appeal process and is not in control of it.

However, Harlow Council has to submit its own statement to the Planning Inspectorate on this matter by 28 December. Within this statement we will be making it clear that Councillors are entitled to express their views as part of the democratic process and also that all decisions of the Development Management Committee are collective decisions. Given that this is a quasi-judicial process I am not able to make any further comment on this matter.