

Full Council – 3 February 2022

Questions from the Public

1 Mick Patrick to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

I attended a consultation event at our Lady Fatima Church on 27 November. In a dialogue with one of the team I was informed that council housing was included in the Harlow and Gilston Development.

As a housing campaigner for decades I knew this was not true. After further dialogue I found that because housing association homes are allocated by council the development team are stating that these are council homes.

Council homes are not housing association homes, both are entirely different. Housing association are private companies, some are not even social landlords and can charge up to 80% market rents, a social landlord can charge 60% market rents.

Council homes rent formula sets rent at 40% market rent, and are accountable landlords i.e. local Councillors. This is no accident with this size of development. My question is how has this deception been allowed to happen?

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

I am not able to comment on statements that may have been made by a private developer at a consultation event about a housing development that is taking place outside of Harlow's boundaries. Although Harlow Council is a member of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town partnership, the development that Places for People are undertaking at Gilston is in East Hertfordshire and they are the Local Planning Authority for that development.

You are correct however that the affordable housing contributions in private developments are not necessarily Council homes even though the relevant local authority may have the nomination rights. I have asked my officers to make representations through the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town to ensure that developers do not provide misleading information about their developments.

2 Mick Patrick to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Can the Harlow Council ensure that the terminology of saying council homes are housing association homes in any dialogue or script does not happen in

the future? Housing association homes allocated by the Council should be used as housing association and not council homes.

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

I do not believe that Harlow Council has issued any documentation that misrepresents the differences between Council Housing and Housing Association housing. I am happy to provide an undertaking that this will not happen in the future either.

3 Gary Roberts to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

As I understand it the current council has pledged to regenerate the town with an increase in police officers and local council services, therefore please could you outline your plans to reintroduce neighbourhood policing, neighbourhood council offices and local NHS health services including a doctors' surgery in Potter Street?

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

Whilst, Harlow District Council does not have any direct responsibility for Health and Policing, the Council continues to have a proactive approach to engaging with its partners to improve the level of health care provision within our district and the number of police officers that serve our community.

This year, a further 200 officers will be recruited by Essex Police to help prevent crime, tackle violence and improve visible policing in our communities. The extra officers will take the total growth of the force since 2016 to over 900 officers, making it the largest it has ever been. This has meant over 20 more officers on Harlow streets so far.

In a recent visit to Harlow the Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex, Roger Hirst, met with the Deputy Leader of Harlow Council, Cllr Joel Charles, local police officers and the council's community safety team to find out how they are tackling crime in the town.

As part of this partnership working Roger Hirst made a commitment to crime prevention and reducing anti-social behaviour, with more officers, more funding and more powers for the police.

Turning to the point in your question regarding local NHS services, the Council continues to work in partnership with the West Essex CCG to ensure that the delivery of local NHS services meets the needs of local residents. This week, in the Government's Levelling Up White Paper, it has been announced that Harlow's Princess Alexandra Hospital will not receive a

refurbishment or indeed receive a new building but that Harlow will receive a new integrated, high-tech healthcare campus to replace the ageing Princess Alexandra Hospital. This Council continues to work with its neighboring partners and the MP Robert Halfon to ensure that Harlow's new health campus meets the needs of Harlow and surrounding districts.

Finally, on Osler House, I shared the local upset that the CCG decided to close Osler House surgery. However, the Council is working with local residents to deliver a new Potter Street Health and Community Hub. This has been supported by the Council's staff to get this over the line. I am informed refurbishment work will start soon on the site.

4 David Forman to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

The Local Government Ombudsman upheld a complaint by a local business owner against Harlow Council on 3 December 2021 with a case number of 21-000-231. The complaint related to a failure to adequately investigate allegations of racist comments made by a council officer in a telephone conversation on 27 January 2021.

The Ombudsman stated in paragraph 36:

"However, I am satisfied Miss X was offended by the conversation and her actions in making a complaint the same day support this."

The Ombudsman further stated in paragraph 39:

"I consider the Council should have done more to investigate this part of the complaint. I note there was no recording of the call but also that no notes were made by the officer at the time of the call."

Consequently, I would like to know the following:

- a) Does Harlow Council possess or subscribe to any system to routinely record telephone conversations both inbound and outbound;
- b) If Harlow Council routinely records telephone conversations, why was the conversation in this case on 27 January 2021 not recorded; and
- c) What processes and procedures are in place to ensure that when notes of conversations are taken they cannot later be destroyed to avoid discovery?

Reply from Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

Harlow Council has a continuing commitment to promoting equality, diversity and inclusivity within Harlow. The Council celebrates difference and works to tackle inequalities throughout its core business within both the services that it provides to the community and in its role as an employer. The Council condemns racism in all forms and is proud to serve our diverse communities. The allegations referred to regarding racial discrimination were investigated by the Council at the time and those investigations did not find any grounds to support the claims that had been made. The Council has accepted the Local Government Ombudsman's decision in relation to the case, which were on the basis of ensuring clarity and the covering of all elements of complaints in its responses.

The Council has supported many local businesses through the processing of central government grants over the course of the pandemic and at the start of the year received £516,000 in government funding to pay one-off grants of up to £6,000 to hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses. The Council identified 137 businesses likely to be eligible under the scheme and contacted them directly to help them apply for the funding. We recognise the challenges that local businesses are facing and have faced with the uncertainty due to the recent Omicron wave and moved quickly so those businesses most in need get the support they need.

With regard to the specific questions in relation to the Council's telephony system; the Council commenced with the upgrade of its telephony system in September 2020, with the new system going live on 13 February 2021 which now allows recording of specific call types. The Council has recorded calls inbound and outbound to its Contact Harlow team, and Revenue and Benefits team since the go live date.

The call, which was the subject of the complaint, was not recorded as it predated the telephony upgrade and the Council had no recording facility for calls at that time.

Notes of conversations taken prior to the call recording functionality being in place were entered into the Council's customer and case management systems; these systems all have audit functions that allow any changes or deletions of records to be tracked and reported on. This remains the case and also covers the areas or teams within the council who still do not use the call recording functionality.

As a result of the Councils' response to the recommendations made by the Ombudsman the case has been closed. The Council will ensure that it continues to improve the way it responds to and deals with complaints from its customers, and for those teams whose calls are not currently recorded.

5 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

At the meeting of the Cabinet Policy Development Working Group on 7 October 2021, Councillor Souter stated that a better bus service should be provided. As this is a County Council matter and he is a County Councillor, has he been able to get them to provide this and if so, when?

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

I regularly meet with ECC to discuss matters relating to Harlow and the services they provide. I will press ECC in my future meetings to improve our bus services. I will also ask Cllr Souter to respond to you in writing to give you an update on the progress he has made on this matter.

6 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

Every year of the last Labour Council there was an increase in Council Tax, but the maintenance of green space has gotten worse. As Council Tax is not being increased this year, can the Portfolio Holder confirm that maintenance of green space will not deteriorate this year?

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

Thank you for your question I can reassure you that you will very much see an improvement of the green space around the town since taking my position as portfolio holder for environment we have put many things into action.

The first being a Covid-19 recovery support team which means that HTS can continue with the winter programme of works.

second ward by ward audits with myself and the management of HTS to make sure the work that has been carried out is to the residents expectations.

Review of the service level agreement which hasn't been reviewed in the last 10 years.

The tree planting programme costing £250,000 and the management of the trees for the next 3 years and a tree policy which will take 3 years to undertake.

I would like to reassure you that I will do my best to restore pride back into our beautiful town.

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Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Jean Clark to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

The Labour Council agreed to declare a climate emergency and to adopt a strategy of moving towards net zero emissions. It was agreed that the Council would aim to install electric charging points across its car parks within 5 years. I understand that the Council is looking to install fast charging points.

When will the charging points be installed and can the Council explore the installation of faster charging methods?

Reply from Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

At the September 2021 Cabinet, Harlow Council committed to working with BP Pulse to install Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points in six of its pay and display car park, subject to contract.

The proposal is for multiple charge points rated at up to 7.4kW. These meet the classification of fast charging. They would cater for top-up charging whilst visiting a neighbourhood shopping centre, or an overnight charge for those who do not have access to private off-street parking, for example.

The installation of these charge points would fulfil the commitment set out in the amended Climate Emergency motion proposed by Cllr Perrin and seconded by the late Cllr Tony Hall at the July 2019 Cabinet, which was unanimously supported on a cross-party basis. Minutes from that meeting suggest that the motion made no reference to the speed of the charge points that should be installed.

This contract would be the first phase only of an approach to making public EV charging widely available in Harlow, which is estimated to require. The Council will continue to explore a range of options as part of its approach to supporting residents in making the switch to electric vehicles. These may include among others electric vehicle charging stations, home charging, and the viability of installing rapid EV chargepoint infrastructure.

Officers continue to progress an appropriate legal agreement with BP Pulse to underpin proposed chargepoint installations, and final designs for chargepoint bay locations and sizes, necessary to submit a formal funding bid to the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV).

2 Councillor David Carter to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

The council has not built council houses for Harlow families for many years now. I have seen in the Budget that the council has put aside £26 million pounds to build new homes.

I would like to ask if these will be proper council homes for Harlow families who are on our waiting list, and if these will be built on areas that need regeneration or on any of our precious green field sites?

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

Tonight we will vote on proposals to spend more money on council house building in Harlow than this council has spent in the last 30 years combined. And that £26 million figure is just the start.

In March, I will announce our full New Build programme which will deliver hundreds of new Harlow homes for Harlow families, of the highest standards and in the right places.

We will be delivering on people's priorities, on a message that we hear loud and clear to build, build, build.

Build to give Harlow families the home they deserve.

Build to restore pride to neglected parts of our town.

Build to deliver on the pledge we made to the people of Harlow.

My 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.

The New Build Programme will be historic and it will deliver new homes for Harlow families on our waiting lists because for too long this Council has failed to tackle that issue.

It would be beggars belief for the party of Attlee to vote against £26 million for council house building, alas we will see in just a few moments time.

And if they do not vote for this investment, they will only be confirming what the people of Harlow already know – that we are the party of house building.

3 Councillor David Carter to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

The old Lister House site on which I understand the previous administration spent £750,000 on consultancy fees and plans for new buildings, is still just a building site. It has a fence around it which is now being vandalised, can you tell me when, if ever, work on this valuable piece of land will start?

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

The Lister House site is a disgrace. As Cllr Carter highlights, no building work has taken place on the site. It is a shameful failure.

We all have different political views on what value for money may be. But I'm sure we can all agree that spending money on something that never happens, is not value for money.

It is therefore with sadness that I say that Cllr Durcan, when in this role, did draw up a scheme for the site that was not delivered.

That scheme was described by specialists and I quote as "too expensive, too much and a management nightmare."

In fact, not only that, there was not one, but two water mains under the site meaning that the scheme could never have even been built. For reference, that's why the old Lister House building was situated to the North West of the site.

Sadly, the lack of development alone is not the issue, the failure is that £695,733.30 was spent on nothing. No development of that site. That figure alone equates to three years' worth of Council Tax increases.

In fact, it is not only the Perry Road site. The Yorkes, Brenthall Towers, Elm Hatch, Stackfield, the Readings, the list goes on. None of those sites saw any development but they cost the taxpayers of this town.

£1,130,668.78 does that figure sound familiar? It should do. The amount of money spent on projects that never happened.

Never so much as a spade in the ground, or even out of the van, or even a van turning up, or even the van being started, in fact there was no van at all.

£1,130,668.78 of Harlow taxpayers money wasted.

It begs the question as to whether Cllr Durcan is the most expensive Councillor Harlow has ever seen.

So yes, it will be delivered providing value for money, new homes and much needed regeneration.

The full details will be set out in the New Build Programme this March and work will start as soon as possible once the scheme is approved.

4 Councillor Matthew Siggers to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

As I was elected for the beautiful ward of Mark Hall I promised the residents of my ward that I would 1) cut the cost of this Council's part of the tax which tonight has been achieved but next part of my promise is to regenerate and restore the ward of Mark Hall back to its glory days and to on and move it into the 21st century and make it a jewel in Harlow's crown which it once was.

Great areas like the stow shopping who under the previous administration has been abandon, under this administration had their first Christmas market in a decade and in the last 6 months have tried to shake the bad reputation it has got. its 70th anniversary this area of which the residents and shop owners would like to show what a great area it is with many more celebration days, it would be good to hear that this and may other areas in my ward like that in Edinburgh way will get the much needed TLC they missed in a generation and help to put them back on their true path.

I, like my residents wait to hear more on what is the plan, when will we hear it and hope it will be a great birthday present?

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

In March, we will celebrate Harlow's 75th birthday. 75 years of innovation, enterprise, aspiration and community.

Mark Hall has pioneered all of those things. I am reliably informed that it was in Mark Hall that the first fibre optic cable was manufactured which are now sprouting in every country around the globe.

It was Mark Hall in which the first estates of the glorious new town were constructed with the wonderful landscape and architecture.

And it is in Mark Hall that we will kick start our once-in-a-generation programme of estate renewal.

Our Budget this evening shows in no uncertain terms our commitment to regenerating our whole town and Mark Hall will certainly be part of that.

Indeed, I can confirm that the Mark Hall ward will benefit from both the Estate Renewal Fund we are to vote on this evening and further that it will have its very own Estate Renewal Programme to be announced later this year.