

Cabinet – 22 September 2022

Questions from the Public

1 David Forman to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

I congratulate Harlow Council for developing a housing, shops and offices scheme to rectify the eyesore in Perry Road that the last Labour administration left behind. However, would you please consider including in the contract documents traffic management conditions and penalties to discourage contractors vehicles parking on and damaging the lawn surrounding St James' church?

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

I thank Mr Forman for his question and greatly appreciate his support for our fantastic scheme on the Old Lister House site which is just one part of our package to transform the Staple Tye neighbourhood.

In response to the concerns about the contractors parking arrangements, we will ensure that appropriate compound facilities are available for the contractor and will certainly look at contractually binding options to prevent inappropriate parking in neighbouring areas to the site. We will also liaise with St James Church as to what best meets their needs as well as others in the immediate vicinity to the site.

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

Under Agenda Item 11 on page 124 the KPI CS50 shows the average waiting time for calls received by Contact Harlow. Despite a target of 40 seconds, the average waiting time increased successively in each quarter of 2021/22 from 1m 15s to 2m 56s. In quarter 1 of 2022/23 the average waiting time was 2m 43s and this was despite increasing the target time to 44 seconds.

In relation to Contact Harlow, under Agenda Item 10 on page 61 it shows that Harlow Council saved £32,000 in staffing costs due to staff vacancies.

Therefore, do you think:

- a) There is a correlation between excessive waiting times and fewer staff in Contact Harlow;
- b) That filling the staff vacancies would consistently achieve your less rigorous target waiting time of 44 seconds;

- c) The stress levels of the existing staff in Contact Harlow would be reduced by filling staff vacancies;
- d) That staff in Contact Harlow would suffer less verbal abuse if waiting times achieved your target of 44 seconds; and
- e) Conservative local election pledges in 2021 to run services better than the last dire Labour administration are now looking dubious?

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

I thank Mr Forman for the question as it gives me the opportunity of specifically thanking our Contact team who have, since the beginning of the pandemic, worked extremely hard to field the many enquiries from the public whilst the offices were shut and during a period of a significant shift in the channels the public have chosen to contact us.

Contact Harlow now do far more for customers than they ever have done. Many more calls are being taken. (Average daily calls have risen from 475 in 2019/20 to 600+ in 2022/23) The types of enquires they receive are also far more wide ranging and so whilst the wait to speak to an advisor is increased, the depth and quality of advice when they do speak to them means that they are far more likely to have their issue resolved on that call. This has meant that individual calls to our team have taken longer to resolve, (average call length has gone from 3m 24s in 19/20 to 4m 9s in 22/23. It was as low as 2m 25s in 2012/13 so this shows just how much the service has developed) but they are being resolved. Our emphasis is on providing accurate information and services on each call for customer satisfaction.

Yes, there has been staff turnover within Contact Harlow in the last six months and this has had an impact on the call waiting times. The underspend in the staffing budget is due to this. This is not the only factor in the increase in wait times.

But I am pleased to say however that the vast majority of the staff have moved to other Council departments, seeking new opportunities and have not just left the Council. They take with them the excellent knowledge and experience they have gained whilst working in Contact Harlow.

There are some delays between a staff member leaving and a new one being starting with us, but I am happy to say that all vacancies are now filled and the new staff are undertaking their training. I envisage that in the coming months there will be a reduction in call waiting times as these staff are brought online.

I re-emphasise that we have a zero tolerance policy to any verbal or other abuse of our staff. I would also highlight the many ways that residents can contact the Council

as an alternative to calling, these include the many services offered through our website and face to face contact.

We are shortly due to launch a new Customer Service Strategy with an associated action plan and we will be reviewing our targets and measures as part of this.

3 Cliff Phillips to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I am still fully not convinced that the only 2 tenders submitted were coincidentally almost identical. Previous quotes on other major works on The Hides and The Hornbeams for example were 20-30% difference between the highest and lowest estimate.

Therefore, my question is:

Of the original 7 tenders for this work offered to various builders, 2 were dismissed as non-compliant. Why were they non-compliant and why would they have been offered to tender in the first place?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you for your additional question to Cllr Carter's written response. As I set out to Mr Phillips when we met last week, we fully recognise the concern these works are causing leaseholders and I am committed to ensuring they receive all information possible about the process.

Specifically on the point Mr Phillips raises, Financial Standing Orders for the Council require that, for works with an estimated value in excess of £350,000, Officers must seek at least five written tenders from suitably qualified suppliers. On this occasion, seven suitably qualified suppliers from the initial investigation were identified and invited to tender, using selective tendering from an Accredited Supplier List.

The Council received four tenders by the deadline, and upon careful review of all submitted tenders, two of the four tenders received were found to be non-complaint, either owing to the omission of quality information and/or being unable to deliver the contractor design portion for elements of the works specified.

4 Cliff Phillips to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

One of my questions that mysteriously got lost before the last Council meeting has now been answered by Councillor Carter's. He stated "an intrusive survey of the pitched roofs would be carried out by Harlow Councils specialist consultant Stace.

These would be analysed and communicated with leaseholders with next steps outlined so there is clarity going forward before an instruction will be issued to the contractor.”

We as leaseholders are not happy that the same company (Stace) who formalised the specification, will also be carrying out the survey for the possible roof work.

Will we be able to fully inspect and possibly challenge the surveyors report before the work goes ahead?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I thank Mr Phillips for his further question. I would like to clarify the issues regarding the surveys.

The surveys, such as the one he mentions, are being carried out by the contractors appointed through the tender process.

The role of Stace is to independently review the surveys and subsequent findings to advise the Council. Stace are not carrying out the surveys.

The surveys are underway now to identify exactly what works are required.

Once the surveys are complete, leaseholders will be written to with copies of the survey reports and asked to comment before works commencing.

5 Sally Jones to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Unfortunately I find your last response to our questions at Cabinet in July are replies not answers.

Yes indeed the leaseholders of Five Acres have received: A Notice of Intention; a 'Notice of Estimate'; the intended works specification; and a breakdown of works

However, I ask you:

- a) 'Notice of Intention' Surveys are still to be conducted, we look forward to viewing the results.
- b) My Notice of Estimate is one of the lower estimates but still comes in at £26,000 - an amount of money that most people would struggle to pay back even if extended to a period of 10 years. What guarantee can you give us

that the Council will work with us to understand our positions to pay any monies owed?

- c) The intended works specification is incomprehensible when clearly the buildings appear not to have been visited before this being written. We state we delighted to know the individual surveys will take place on each block.

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you for your questions, Ms Jones. As I said to Mr Phillips, I fully recognise the concern this has caused, and I hope that clarity on the process will be helpful.

The Notice of Intention (NOI) details is formed by information currently available, and indicative list of works developed by the Council's stock condition data and initial external inspection. Further surveys, which are now underway, will develop information for the particular works considered to be required for each block.

Each individual leaseholder will then be informed and will have the opportunity to discuss their situation and positions. The Council, as outlined previously, has put in place several repayment options to spread the cost and provide support.

Following the end of the Notice of Intention (NOI) stage and insight into the observations received from consultation and shared with the surveyors, more intrusive surveys are carried out in order to develop a specific schedule of works.

6 Sally Jones to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

You state in your reply in July that "The formal consultation processes and information provided are aimed to ensure that only works that are appropriate and necessary are carried out." Clearly the leaseholders and the Council have huge discrepancies on this matter, so who will make the final decision about what is appropriate and necessary?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you for your further question. I hope that the surveys and their findings will help both parties in this case. As I have detailed, each individual leaseholder will be written to. Ultimately, at the appropriate time, it is the responsibility of the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, to approve Housing Contract Awards and review their progress.

Leaseholders can challenge the intended work and/or costs through the First Tier Tribunal (FTT). As I highlighted to Ms Jones last week, these challenges can be undertaken at any time, even when the works are complete or when an invoice for works has been received. They are an independent statutory body which will hear the case for both the Applicant (leaseholders) and Respondent (the Council), and consider all the evidence provided by both parties and reach a considered decision. I will write to you with the details for the First Tier Tribunal.

7 Denise Gillies to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

After my questions disappeared at the last Council meeting, I was told to resubmit those questions and I would receive a reply within 10 days. It took over 3 weeks for Councillor Carter to reply, but only after I sent an email stating that I would take it further if I didn't get a reply by the of the week.

My question to Councillor Carter is after waiting so long for a reply is, can you explain to me why my answers are word for word identical to those of Mr Phillips answers when we asked 4 completely different questions?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you for your further question, Ms Gillies. I am sorry to hear of the delay in responses getting to you and I do sincerely recognise the concerns of all leaseholders in these blocks. I understand that Cllr Carter grouped the responses for clarity, but if you have any further questions or concerns, I would be more than happy to discuss those, as we did last week.

8 Janet Jackman to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The pitched roof at 45 to 49 five acres does not need a new roof. I have photos & a video evidence showing roof is in perfect order & just needs a few minor repairs on valleys & verges. Can you guarantee work will not go ahead till we leaseholders get our own surveyors in. When are roofs getting surveys done?

Why do we need a tin hat when other council properties in the same borough not using them. In this current difficult climate surely you should be trying to keep costs to a minimum.

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you, Ms Jackman, for your further questions.

I have set out the process in terms of the surveys to previous questioners, but I understand that it is expected for the roofing survey to be completed and reviewed by middle of October. The surveys will be revised by Harlow Council and independently assessed by Stace LLP. Stace LLP is a leading, independent property consultancy, delivering services to local authorities across the country. The Council will ensure works to be undertaken are required and completed to a satisfactory standard.

It is important that under no circumstances must any persons not instructed or employed by Harlow Council access the roof of any block as they are not insured for their own safety or safety of others.

These works are to be completed with the aid of a tin-hat roof. This provision has been put in place to protect the properties from the elements and potential damage through bad weather. All projects are specified on an individual basis.

9 Janet Jackman to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Our block is a unique block. It is totally different from the other blocks. It seems the blocks have not been assessed individually.

It has UPVC Facias & cladding which is in perfectly good order & below the 11mts of the fire regulations. It was renewed under 17 years ago to plastic.

Why are you replacing something that doesn't need doing? It is unnecessary.

Can you answer how you are going to dispose of hundreds of feet of UPVC which does not need replacing. Not very environmentally friendly.

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Thank you for your further question. As I have set out the works will be informed by surveys and the independent review. Therefore, until these surveys are complete, I cannot comment on specific work is required. When the surveys are done, leaseholders will be written to and have the opportunity to respond, as I have already set out. Any leaseholder may also appeal this through the tribunal system I detailed earlier.

Cabinet – 22 September 2022

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Steve LeMay (Portfolio Holder for HTS, Properties and Facilities – with Special Responsibility for the Roads):

Could you please detail, both verbally and in writing, what action has been taken and what progress if any has been made since the last Cabinet meeting to develop the Strategic Short Term, Medium Term and Long-Term Ambitions the Strategic Outcomes with respect to Harlow's roads?

Reply from Councillor Steve LeMay (Portfolio Holder for HTS, Properties and Facilities – with Special Responsibility for the Roads):

As Cllr Edwards knows, getting work done by Essex Highways in Harlow has been historically tough which has led to unacceptable states of our roads. Often it has taken months to get small jobs done and therefore, I hope he does not underestimate how challenging this is.

That's why we are committed to changing this and we have worked through three very complex options on how best to affect that change and are now working on a fourth with Essex County Council - which we are making good progress on. Both myself and Cllr Perrin have worked very hard on this, and we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member at Essex to resume these talks in the next week or so.

I look forward to updating Cllr Edwards and all members on our progress to improve Harlow's roads. I would also point out that since June, that under the Members scheme Essex Highways are fixing at least 144 potholes in Harlow and this figure does not include 'make safe repairs'. Furthermore, thanks to the work we are doing, a number of major roads are scheduled to be or have already been resurfaced and properly repaired since June including: A414 (between Edinburgh Way and First Avenue), Cambridge Road, Elizabeth Way, Third Avenue, Millersdale, Watersmeet, Second Avenue, Momples Road, Harefield Road - some of which have already been completed and others starting very soon – in fact, Second Avenue is starting this week and Third Avenue is starting next week.

2 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

It has been stated in Your Harlow that Councillor Morrison has reportedly carried out an audit of 350 neighbourhoods at your request. Will all Ward Councillors be

given copies of these audit reports together with the criteria for “agreeing the order in which restoration work could be done”?

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

I am sure ward councillors often carry out visits in their ward to identify issues that need resolving and take the appropriate action to do so. My administration is committed to restoring pride in our great town and that is why I appointed Cllr Morrison to the member champion role and champion that ambition she has. It is telling that we are needing to carry out such thorough work because the previous administration neglected our town and allowed our estates to tire. That’s why we also set aside record investment into estate renewal in our budget this year – which he voted against. These audits are for internal purposes, and I hope we can count on his support in our next budget which will further invest what is needed to restore pride in our town.

3 Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

Plastic is polluting our planet, our oceans, our forests, our beaches, even the Arctic. The figures are stark. Only 12% of our plastic is recycled. More than 90% of plastic is made from fossil fuel; greenhouse gases from plastic continue to pollute and damage.

The UK exports more than 2.5 Olympic-size swimming pools of plastic waste every day because we can’t cope with the quantity we generate. We’re overwhelming other countries’ recycling systems, particularly India, Indonesia, Malaysia. We’ve all been horrified by the toxicity in soil and ash in Southern Turkey dumpsites containing UK waste. In 2020 210,000 tons of UK plastic were dumped in Turkey. We’re not doing well.

A deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers is planned for 2024, to try to catch up with Denmark, Sweden and Germany. The government’s environment plan aims to eliminate all avoidable plastic by 2042.

How important is eliminating the scourge of plastic waste to you? Will you commit to a ban on all single-use plastic where possible? Will you support supermarkets which choose re-use?

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

Making best use of resources will be critical to our efforts to combat and adapt to climate change, and minimising waste of all kinds including plastic waste is an essential part of those efforts. This will require action on a national, if not international, level. The Government’s current published approach to minimising

packaging waste goes beyond deposit return schemes, including extension of the producer responsibility obligation so manufacturers will pay the full costs of managing and recycling their packaging waste, with higher fees being levied if packaging is harder to reuse or recycle.

The Council has a role to play in ensuring that its domestic waste collection functions support County level waste management strategy designed to reflect government guidance, while supporting practical national policies. The Council itself eliminated single use plastics from all of its public buildings in October 2019 and at its meeting on 4 November 2021 Cabinet resolved to end the use of single use plastics in all of its tree planting and bio-diversity work with effect from the 2022/23 winter programme.

4 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

We know that residents in Harlow face a hard winter with the cost-of-living crisis, food and energy bills spiralling out of control. What steps have been taken by the council to help support our council tenants, many of whom will have to choose between feeding their families and heating their homes, during this difficult time?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration) on behalf of Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The Council fully recognises the challenges the cost-of-living crisis is presenting tenants and our whole town. This will, of course, be disproportionately felt by those who are already struggling, and the Council is fully committed to doing everything we possibly can to support tenants and residents. Cllr Vince will have seen the Government's recent announcement about financial support in terms of energy bills as well as other measures announced earlier in the year such as the Council Tax rebate and Household Support Fund. The Council through Contact Harlow, Housing Officers, the Revenues and Benefits team as well as others will actively support residents and tenants to access any support available to them.

A range of signposting is available on the Council's website which includes:

Government's [Help for Households](#) (income support, help with energy bills, help with childcare costs, housing support, help with transport costs, help with finding work) service to see what cost of living support residents could be eligible for. Additional support - 'Housing Support Fund' and locally as Essential Living Fund. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/household-support-fund-final-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england>

[Benefits and financial support you can get](#) [payment to help with the cost of living](#) if you're getting certain benefits or tax credits. Pension Credit gives you extra money to help with your living costs if you're over State Pension age and on a low income - [check if you are eligible for Pension Credit](#).

Local support includes:

[Harlow Citizens Advice Bureau](#) (0808 278 7856) - a local registered charity who offer free, confidential, impartial, accredited advice and information on a wide range of areas.

[Harlow Foodbank](#) (01279 724515) - designed to help individuals and families in crisis by providing free emergency food until the appropriate agencies are in a position to assist.

[Essex Essential Living Fund](#) - funding for people who live in Essex, which can help pay for furniture, household furnishings, white goods, clothing and footwear, including school uniforms in exceptional circumstances, general living expenses such as groceries, nappies, toiletries and money for pay-as-you-go fuel meters.

National support includes:

[Money Helper](#) - free and impartial help with money, backed by the government.

[National Debtline](#) (0800 808 4000) - free and independent debt advice over the phone and online.

[StepChange Debt Charity](#) (0800 138 1111) - expert debt advice and fee-free debt management.

Help with council bills

Please contact the Council straight away if you are having genuine difficulty in paying your council bills. If you are having difficulties call 01279 446655.

Help with Council Tax

You can apply for [Council Tax Support](#) to help you pay your Council Tax if you're on a low income or claiming welfare benefits. If you receive Council Tax Support, but still struggle to pay your Council Tax, you may be able to apply for an [Exceptional Hardship Payment](#) (EHP). An EHP is usually paid for a short time to help you make steps to pay your Council Tax in the future.

Help with your rent

You may be able to [claim Universal Credit](#) which can include help with housing costs.

You may be able to receive extra short-term help with your rent by applying for a [Discretionary Housing Payment](#) (DHP). You can claim a DHP if you already receive the housing element of Universal Credit, or receive Housing Benefit, but need help to meet your rent.

Supported housing tenants

If you are having problems paying your rent, please speak to your Housing Support and Telecare Officer.

Council leaseholders

If you are experiencing difficulties paying your annual service charges or major works invoice, contact the Home Ownership team on 01279 446206 or email homeownership@harlow.gov.uk