

Cabinet – 1 December 2022

Questions from the Public

1 **Colin Thorpe to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):**

Osler House refurbishment is quoted as being £114,000 more than the available budget but as Councillor LeMay hasn't allowed me to be part of the discussions as promised and my FOIA application has only been partly addressed, which may force me to ask the Commissioner to look into why this is.

At this moment in time I have no way of knowing how much the Trust will be contributing to those costs over and above the amount £22,000 allowed in the Trusts' budget.

So, my question is twofold: when will I be allowed to see those costings rather than being presented with a fait accompli; and why are the funds allocated to the Neighbourhood Office being transferred to the Latton Bush Centre when they could be used to refurbish Osler House?

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

Thank you for your question and I fully recognise your passion and commitment to this project.

As you are aware, this has been fully reviewed in light of rising construction costs, the state of disrepair to the building and ultimately, value for money to the taxpayer.

At the time of the proposal coming forward, before the pandemic, a capital budget of £225,520 was allocated to cover the works and the professional fees required to bring the building up to a lettable standard. Since then, construction costs and inflation have risen dramatically and financial restraints on the Council have increased.

The most recent quote for the works to bring the property up to a lettable standard from HTS, submitted through a business case, was £349,172. However, given the rising inflation, construction costs and worsening state of the building it is a realistic and accurate assumption that the works required would be in excess of £400,000.

I must be honest that this presents a difficult situation and certainty about the project is urgently required. Therefore, officers and I will arrange to meet with you next week to discuss this and the next steps.

We are absolutely committed to investing in health and wellbeing as Cllr Charles will set out shortly and further to the regeneration of the Potter Street neighbourhood and I will announce further plans to do so in the very near future.

With regard to your question about the virement from the neighbourhood office and the Latton Bush Centre, this is in line with the regeneration plans we are working on and allows us to address an urgent situation at the Latton Bush Centre.

2 Colin Thorpe to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

The Potter Street Health and Wellbeing Trust's proposal clearly follows not only the Robert Wood Johnson Model, but also Core20PLUS. If Harlow is classed as the 2nd worst town in Essex and the 20th in the whole of England for Deprivation, Child Poverty, Health, Crime etc. and the various different bodies I've been working with such as Harlow Poverty Alliance and Herts & West Essex ICB recognise the value of Wellbeing Hubs such as the Trust is proposing, why is this Council putting costs before the Wellbeing of Harlow's population when adequate funds are available in Capital Budget to push the Trust's proposal forward?

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

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy includes a number of statistics that paint a sobering picture of the key public health issues facing the town today. That is why the Council has taken the decision to depart from the previous approaches used to tackle health and wellbeing challenges to look at ways, as a community leader, to curb the socio-economic determinants that compound the issues highlighted in the strategy. The Council's approach will be governed not only by the strategy, but also the actions it agrees to take forward with key partners to address health and wellbeing inequalities in the town. Part of the ambition of the strategy is to seek further investment from Essex County Council as the lead public health authority and other health bodies to arrest the trend of avoidable wellbeing issues.

The Council is looking at how it achieves the better outreach of wellbeing services across the town, and part of that work has been the continued funding of the Community Hub operated by Rainbow Services. There is a continued dialogue with our local healthcare leaders and Essex County Council, through a partnership approach that the council hopes to build on further as officers provide evidence to them about the effectiveness of the hub approach.

In taking this all forward, it is always important to look carefully at how we deploy the Council's limited resources across the town.

The Council is committed to actively working with the Potter Street Wellbeing Hub Trust to seek to find venues from which it can commence running some wellbeing activities in the Potter Street area.

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Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

Following the terrible news about Awaab Ishak what work has Harlow Council done to inspect it's housing stock to ensure that our properties are free of mould and that damp management and damp controls are in place and being used properly?

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

The harrowing case of Awaab Ishak highlights the potentially devastating effects of damp and mould. Any case of damp and mould must be treated with absolute seriousness. We are reviewing every case of damp and mould in our properties and will do all it takes to deal with all issues appropriately and immediately. I have put in place changes to internal processes with immediate effect which I am confident will improve our response to any such case and we keep this under daily review from now on.

As the Secretary of State Michael Gove has made clear, it is absolutely not acceptable to pass these problems as a 'lifestyle issue'. No one in our town should have to live in a home plagued with damp and mould – that should not be a high bar to set – and that is why we will be taking real action to address all cases.