

**MINUTES OF THE CABINET
HELD ON**

25 February 2021

7.40 - 9.13 pm

PRESENT

Committee Members

Councillor Mark Ingall, Leader of the Council
Councillor Eugenie Harvey, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resilience and Recovery
Councillor Mike Danvers, Portfolio Holder for Resources
Councillor Tony Durcan, Portfolio Holder for Growth and Prosperity
Councillor Danny Purton, Portfolio Holder for Environment
Councillor Chris Vince, Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing
Councillor Nancy Watson, Portfolio Holder for Governance, Equality and Diversity
Councillor Mark Wilkinson, Portfolio Holder for Housing

Other Councillors

Councillor David Carter
Councillor Simon Carter
Councillor Joel Charles
Councillor Tony Edwards
Councillor Michael Hardware
Councillor Andrew Johnson
Councillor Russell Perrin

Also Present

Scot Morrison – Pinsent Masons

Officers

Brian Keane, Chief Executive
Andrew Bramidge, Head of Environment and Planning
Simon Freeman, Head of Finance and Property and Deputy to the Chief Executive
Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing
Simon Hill, Head of Governance
Andrew Murray, Head of Housing
Adam Rees, Governance Support Officer
Lisa Thornett, Corporate Governance Support Officer

94. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

None.

95. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Simon Carter declared a pecuniary interest, in Item 13 (HTS (Property and Environment) Limited Contract Awards 2021/22) as a remunerated Council appointed Director of HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd. He would leave the meeting for consideration of the item.

Councillor Joel Charles declared a pecuniary interest, in Item 13 (HTS (Property and Environment) Limited Contract Awards 2021/22) as a remunerated Council appointed Director of HTS (Housing and Regeneration) Ltd and HTS Group Ltd. He would leave the meeting for consideration of the item.

96. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2021 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Leader.

97. **MATTERS ARISING**

None.

98. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

The questions, together with the answers, are appended to the minutes.

99. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

The questions, together with the answers, are appended to the minutes.

100. **PETITIONS**

None.

101. **FORWARD PLAN**

Simon Hill, Head of Governance, explained that the Award of Framework Agreement for Legal Services in Support of Special Projects had been delayed due to the amount of interest when the tender was first advertised. It was now in a position to be considered at Cabinet on 25 March 2021.

Andrew Bramidge, Head of Environment and Planning, explained that the Implementation of an Article 4 Direction relating to Houses of Multiple Occupation, had been agreed in principle by Cabinet, following a recommendation by the Cabinet Overview Working Group.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan is noted.

102. **RECENT RELEVANT DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE LEADER, DEPUTY OR PORTFOLIO HOLDER(S)**

RESOLVED that the following decision is noted.

- a) Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing - 22 January 2021

103. **HARLOW INVESTMENT FUND**

Cabinet received a report which sought approval of in principle for the Council to invest £5 million in the Harlow Town Centre Investment Fund.

Proposed by Councillor Mark Ingall (seconded by Councillor Mike Danvers) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet agrees that:

- A** In principle that the Council will invest £5 million in the Harlow Town Centre Investment Fund.
- B** The Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, enters into an agreement to subscribe to purchase shares in the Harlow Investment Fund Limited Partnership and such other entities as may be required.
- C** The Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, will nominate a representative to the Board of the General Partner.
- D** Agreement of all operational matters and approval of the draft Board documents are delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council.

104. **SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT (AFFORDABLE HOUSING)**

Cabinet received a report which sought approval to publish the draft Affordable and Specialist Housing Supplementary Planning Document for consultation.

Proposed by Councillor Danny Purton (seconded by Councillor Mark Wilkinson) it was:

RESOLVED that:

- A** Cabinet approved that the Draft Affordable and Specialist Housing Supplementary Planning Document (attached as Appendix A to the report), is published for the purposes of consultation under Section 12(b) of The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended).
- B** Authority be delegated to the Head of Environment and Planning, to make and approve any minor or inconsequential amendments to the Draft Affordable and Specialist Housing Supplementary Planning Document arising from the statutory consultation.

105. **FIRE SAFETY WORKS - EDMUNDS TOWER, HUGH'S TOWER AND THE LAWN**

Cabinet received a report which sought approval of a contract award for fire safety works at Hughs Tower, Edmunds Tower, and the Lawn.

Proposed by Councillor Mark Wilkinson (seconded by Councillor Eugenie Harvey) it was:

RESOLVED that:

- A** The most advantageous tender in consideration of price and quality combined as submitted by Contractor A is accepted in the sum of £1,445,493.51 for the delivery of updated Fire Compartmentation between floors, in service duct and ventilation system, internal and front entrance fire doors programme, subject to contract and Leaseholder consultation.

106. **HTS (PROPERTY AND ENVIRONMENT) LIMITED CONTRACT AWARDS 2021/22**

Councillors Simon Carter and Joel Charles left the meeting whilst this item was considered.

Cabinet received a report which sought approval for the award of business cases to HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd for the 2021/22 financial year.

Proposed by Councillor Mark Wilkinson (seconded by Councillor Mark Ingall) it was:

RESOLVED that:

- A** The following Business Case is awarded to HTS (Property and Environment) Limited, subject to clarification and agreement on the terms and conditions, and that a contract is entered into for the activity, not exceeding the value below:

i) Internal Works - £2,015,000

ii) External Works - £1,000,000

107. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM COMMITTEES/WORKING GROUPS/PARTIES AND PANELS**

None.

108. **MINUTES OF PANELS/WORKING GROUPS**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings are noted.

- a) Minutes of meeting Tuesday, 12 January of Harlow Local Highways Panel
- b) Minutes of meeting Thursday, 14 January 2021 of Covid-19 Recovery Working Group

109. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

It was noted that Essex County Council were holding a public Zoom consultation on proposals for Harlow Library on Friday 26 February at 4pm. It was agreed that details on how to attend the meeting would be circulated to all Councillors.

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

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Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

Over the last eight years how much has the Harlow Council element of the Band D Council Tax increased by and how much has the Essex element (including the Police and Fire precept) increased by?

Reply from Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

From 2014/15 to 2021/22 the Harlow Council element of Council Tax on a Band D property increased from £259.12 to £288.90. This represents an increase of £29.77, a weekly increase of £0.57. This is an 11.49 percent increase.

Over the same period, the element for other Precepting Bodies has increased from £1,297.44 to £1,623.33. This is an increase of £325.89, a weekly increase of £6.27. This is a 25.12 percent increase. Please also see the table below which sets out the increase for both Band C and D properties.

8 Year Council Tax Increases

	Precepting Bodies		Harlow	
	Band D	Band C	Band D	Band C
2014/15	£1,297.44	£1,153.28	£259.13	£230.34
2021/22	£1,623.33	£1,442.96	£288.90	£256.80
8 Year increase (£)	£325.89	£289.68	£29.77	£26.46
8 year increase (£ per week)	£6.27	£5.57	£0.57	£0.51
8 Year increase (%)	25.12%	25.12%	11.49%	11.49%

Precepting Bodies = (1)Essex County council, (2) Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex,(3) Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire & Rescue Authority

2 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

How much will it cost Harlow Council Tax payers to implement the Conservative stated proposal to re-bill residents in the event of change in the Council Tax?

Reply from Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

The direct costs to the Council are estimated to be £60,000 to re run a council tax billing process during the year.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tony Edwards:

Is the cost really £60,000.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

Yes, and it would be a completely unnecessary cost.

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Questions from the Public

1 Mick Patrick to Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The Government has given £180 million in the 2020/2021 Budget for Housing Debt Hardship Discretionary payments. How much of this has been allocated to Harlow and how much has been paid out to Harlow tenants within Harlow's Budget to date?

Reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The Council was allocated £294,598 by the Government towards the costs of Discretionary Housing Payments in 2020/21. To date the Council has used £225,562.41 of this allocation.

2 Mick Patrick to Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Given the present Covid pandemic and the mass of tenants in all sectors that are in arrears caused by unemployment or big loss of income, what plans has Harlow Council put onto place to avoid Evictions or Homelessness and have mediation services been put in place for all sectors of Tenancy?

Reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Harlow Council recognises the significant impacts the Covid-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have on many tenants and leaseholders abilities to meet their financial obligations, including rent and service charges.

Throughout this period, Officers have sought to work with tenants/leaseholders to understand any specific difficulties that the pandemic has caused (whether through loss of employment, a reduction in income or illness) to provide practical support, and advice based on individual particular circumstances.

The Government has also introduced constraints to the current enforcement / evictions processes. This has included a ban on evictions in England recently extended to the end of March 2021 together with changes to the Court application process that landlords are required to follow. Further initiatives they are planning include independent "mediation" services, a "Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space)" which seeks to ensure a rounded approach is undertaken for what they classify "problem debts" allowing a breathing space during any enforcement action that may need to be undertaken.

Supplementary question from Mick Patrick:

Does the Council have any figures on the number of tenants that are currently in the judicial system awaiting for the end of the moratorium for the process of eviction?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I will arrange for a written response to be provided.

3 Alan Leverett to Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

In the private sector, house sales are booming as people try to complete the sale and purchase of a home whilst there is a stamp duty holiday.

In response to my question about Prentice Place at the last Full Council meeting, Cllr Durcan stated that the procedures used to re-let vacant council homes ceased when the last Covid lockdown was announced. I have to say I think residents on Harlow Council's Housing Register in desperate need of a new home would have been most surprised that the council have not adopted the safe practices used in the private sector, particularly as many of these vacant homes will have been empty for some time whilst being made available for occupation again.

How many council homes are standing empty as a result of this pause in re-letting homes?

Reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Harlow Council agreed to temporarily reduce its lettings activities in January 2021 due to cases of Covid-19 in the town increasing at then an alarming rate with Harlow having one of the highest case rates in the country.

Whilst urgent lettings continue to be made, based upon an evidenced urgent/emergency housing need, non-urgent lettings were temporarily reduced with visits inside homes stopped. These additional steps taken by the council both protected our residents and staff from the spread of this virus. The health and wellbeing of our residents and staff remains our number one priority and our service provision continues to be regularly reviewed alongside Harlow's latest infection rates with any further decisions by the government on easing the lockdown restrictions in a safe manner.

Covid-19 safe practices under public health guidance were established in June 2020 and again will be used to address the 31 properties that are awaiting an offer to be made to the applicant and an additional 30 properties awaiting accompanied viewings.

4 Alan Leverett to Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

With the likelihood that many applicants for a council home are in the younger age group and therefore some months away from being fully vaccinated, will the council be making any changes to the re-letting procedures which will enable it to start offering homes to those on its Housing Register?

Reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Offering homes to those applicants on the Council's Housing Register is/continue to be based on evidenced housing need based on principles, processes, and priorities outlined in the Housing allocations Policy. This is always kept regularly under review, to be able to respond to national/local priorities where appropriate.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

Will the Council consider using virtual viewing methods similar to those which have been seen in the private sector?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Mark Wilkinson (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The Council is looking at all available options.