

Cabinet – 25 March 2021

Questions from the Public

1 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Mark Ingall (Leader of the Council):

At the Full Council meeting 28 January 2021, an increase of 1.99% on the Harlow Council element of council tax was approved. As this is the same increase for the previous two years can you assure me that you have properly prepared the budget and not just gone for the maximum allowable increase?

Reply from Councillor Mark Ingall (Leader of the Council):

A great deal of consideration and time for debate is given to the budget every year. Any decision rests on balancing the need to continue to provide services that the public value, sustainability into the future with a desire to minimise the burden on the Council Tax payer. Council Tax increases come against a backdrop of a reduction in core Government funding of 69.5 per cent, since 2010. If the cumulative loss were restored to Harlow that would be enough to give every Council Tax payer at least a two year holiday from any Council Tax at all. Against this backdrop Harlow's increases have been necessary to protect services in the long term, and were part of a three year strategy which was first signposted in 2019.

I know that because of Covid-19, this year has been especially challenging for residents. Covid-19 has also had an impact on the Council's financial position, and as a result the 1.99 percent increase in the Harlow Council element of Council Tax has been necessary to ensure that services and much loved facilities such as Pets Corner can be run sustainably.

Furthermore, over the past eight years the Harlow Council element of Council Tax for a Band C property has increased from £230.34 to £256.80, an 11.49 percent increase. Over the same period, the Essex element has increased from £1,153.28 to £1,442.96 for a Band C property. This represents a 25.12 percent increase.

2 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

I submitted a question to Council on 10 December 2020 regarding the land sale policy as it is clear that a land sale can have a detrimental effect on neighbouring properties and their occupants and a decision to sell without consulting neighbouring residents and member involvement lacks any kind of transparency.

In your reply you said you would advise Officers who are leading on the preparation of the new policy to consider the position on these points carefully and to provide clear recommendations to Members on the most appropriate approach.

The previous land sale policy made reference to neighbour consultation but residents will be disappointed to see that this has been entirely removed from the revised policy.

Please would you explain why neighbour consultation has not been included in the revised policy?

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

The new policy has introduced the requirement for a planning application to be undertaken to achieve approval of a change of use from public space to private space (notwithstanding that fact that should the land be required for house extensions or other development that in itself would in most instances also trigger the requirement for a planning application process to be undertaken).

The planning application process will involve consultation and as such the policy has indirectly incorporated the requirement for consultation to be undertaken with land sale proposals. The sale would only be agreed if planning consent was obtained as set out at 6.5 of the policy.

3 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Mike Danvers (Portfolio Holder for Resources):

The revised land sale policy makes reference to 'stakeholders' in sections 1.5 (Policy Statement) and 6.4 (Land Sale Decision).

Please would you define what is meant by 'stakeholders'?

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

The stakeholders are defined in 6.3 of the Policy and include the following Council's Teams:

- a) Landscape and Biodiversity
- b) Housing
- c) Regeneration
- d) Finance
- e) Waste and Street Scene
- f) Building Control
- g) Covenant Control

Furthermore and as outlined in my response to the previous question, via the planning process needed as part of the agreement to sell, neighbours and residents will also be consulted.

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

Could you update me on the number of the flats at Prentice Place have been occupied by those on the housing needs register?

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

I would refer you to the answer given to your question at Full Council on 28 January.

This outlined that, unfortunately, the allocations processes like many of the Council services were suspended following the Governments second lockdown for the protection of residents and staff. These processes recommenced on 8 March 2021 following the announcement of the Government “roadmap” outlining the stages of emerging from lockdown.

Prentice Place properties continue to be prepared for letting with work ongoing aligned to latest government Building Safety guidance in readiness for advert. Contact already has been made for those applicants that already had been offered properties prior to the lockdown with the bidding process overall being reopened on 11 March 2020, prioritised. The adverts/bidding process will be enhanced over the coming weeks, aligned to the properties available to let.

This Council believes in being transparent and therefore, whilst our Constitution does not require us to answer this question until six months after 28 January, we have provided this answer to be open about progress on this matter as we know that residents will want to see these homes allocated to those on the Council’s Housing Needs Register at the earliest opportunity.