

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.

Supplementary question from Gary Roberts to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Firstly let me thank the Leader of the Council for his answer. I am 62 years old and have lived in the Potter Street area for 38 of those years. When I first moved to the Potter Street area and set up the local residents group, the residents told me that they had been forgotten, but then the Council's neighbourhood office came, neighbourhood policing came and a doctors surgery was opened. Now, we don't have a neighbourhood office, closed over a decade ago with the building still empty. We have no neighbourhood policing and no doctors surgery. If you are really wanting to regenerate the town of Potter Street, re-install all of those services otherwise warm words and a money tree budget isn't it.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for that. I share Mr Robert's sadness that at the decline of what I see is many of the estates in this town over a great many number of years and that's why my Administration have set out a comprehensive regeneration plan. There will be a new house building plan coming later on in the March Cabinet and we will be announcing tonight an estate renewal fund to tackle some of the issues that he has mentioned. I would also add that we will be investing a record amount into our environment team to tackle some of the quite sad decline of the state of the environment around the town and we have been working with our partners, HTS, and we have set up at no further cost to the Council an Estate and Environment Task Force to actually tackle some of the decline in the estates which have been seen as part of the pandemic. I would add to that as well that we also will be investing record amounts into our housing stock which you will hear about tonight, £122 million over the five years to try to help the declining standards in the housing stock. We will also be investing £26 million into our council home building programme which as you'll hear later on is one of the biggest Council funded programmes that we have seen in the last thirty years. So, I totally share Mr Robert's frustration at the decline. It was one of the very things that drove me

into local politics because I, like him, saw the decline where I live and I think it's an absolute travesty and that's why Mr Robert's I sit here as our number one priority to set up the regeneration of the town and the town centre will be one of the main focal points for our regeneration as well as the estates which surround it. So I thank you very much for your question and I am very glad that there are people like you are also interested in the state of our town so thank you very much indeed for being here with us this evening, thank you.

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.

Supplementary question from David Forman to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

I thank Councillor Gunn for his detailed reply. Why did the complaint regarding an alleged racist comment continue at stage one service manager

level when it came apparent that the service manager was also the subject of the complaint and, therefore, it should have been escalated especially if one considers the following;

- a) The Council's written complaints policy states at paragraph 4 on page 2 "regardless of the point of access, any complaint will be dealt with at the lowest stage possible unless there is good reason to escalate it to the next stage"
- b) Managers should be conversant with ACAS guidance which states "where possible, the employer should get somebody who's not involved in the case to carry out the investigation" and I've included the ACAS link to that
- c) On 28 January 2021, the complainant asked why a complaint made about an officer and her manager was responded to by the manager complained about and asked for the details of a more senior manager? (Please see LGO report paragraphs 25 & 26)

Supplementary reply from Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Governance)

Thank you Chair and thank you Mr Forman for the follow up question which I'm aware you've submitted to the Council already in writing and I think you may get a more detailed written response but just to say that the Council's written complaints procedures were followed. The complaint in question was made in respect of a specific officer and in line with the procedures the line manager of that officer completed the stage one response. The Ombudsman found no fault in respect of the decisions taken regarding the officers appointed to investigate the complaint. On the other points, I understand that Mr Forman has submitted the question in writing and will get a detailed response to that email.

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.

Supplementary question from Hugh Hoad to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

In Nicky Purse's reply to me, it mentions that there will be an audit after the winter clear up and that was also the case with the question that I raised with Councillor Saggars on 6 December 2021. I happened to speak with the supervisor doing the weekly clear up in Green Hills and pointed out various things that I felt should have been carried out which still haven't been carried out. Is the audit being carried out as there are still points of maintenance such as trees overhanging the footpath? Is this audit going to take place? Because I am fed up with all of our complaints getting the standard complaint not upheld.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

In reply to your supplementary question, currently at the moment the ward by ward audits are being done as each area is being cleared by the winter programme so in terms of areas I haven't been and other officers haven't been to your area because it hasn't been cleared as fully finished and will need an inspection. There will be, going out onto the website, a winter programme which you can see area by area and which you can see has been signed off but they are actually being signed off gradually as the work force goes round. The audits will carry on right through until the end of March.