

Cabinet – 24 March 2022

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Joel Charles (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Community and Business Resilience):

Can you give an absolute assurance that the priority of HTS is and should be property and environment of Harlow above and beyond the profit of other aspects of the new business plan?

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

One of the cornerstones of the plan is to continue to focus on the performance of the core service that HTS was established to deliver. In the first year of the new business plan, for example, there are commitments to update the service level agreement, key performance indicators and value for money benchmarking to ensure a focus remains on the core activity sitting within property and environment. The revenue target, predicted to land at over £31 million by 2026/27, reflects the ambition for property and environment within the now HTS Group.

My colleagues within the Cabinet are taking forward various elements of this focus on property and environment, particularly Cllr Nicky Purse who is working closely with HTS on the ground. The new subsidiaries sitting under the group structure, two of which are subject to a feasibility study and options appraisal respectively, enable the HTS Group to grow to support its future viability and pave the way to access new market opportunities to drive a commercial approach that was always envisaged as the next logical step for our local authority trading company. This is a commitment reinforced in the council's corporate strategy, complementing the work to deliver the best possible core service.

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

As you are aware following the evidence provided at the Hertfordshire County Council health scrutiny committee it is now clear that there is no current agreed funding for the design and development of a new PAH.

Could you explain your understanding of the situation?

Whist the MP and your own cabinet members have indicated that funding had been agreed could we ask you to facilitate an urgent meeting to understand what is fact and what is fiction, with key partners including the political leadership from each party?

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

We have received no correspondence from the Department for Health to contradict the Government's recent detailed announcement about Harlow's new hospital as part of their "Levelling Up White Paper". The announcement stated that "a new integrated, high-tech healthcare campus will replace the ageing Princess Alexandra Hospital. As such we continue to be one of the 8 pathfinder hospitals as part of the national new hospital programme (NHP).

The NHP is working to secure a clear funding settlement from HM Treasury through a complete new hospital programme business case that supports the 48 new hospital schemes planned for 2030.

Our understanding is that the NHP is making the case for an increased level of investment, sufficient to enable preferred options to be delivered across all pathfinder schemes and all other schemes.

This is aligned with a review by the NHP of the minimum standards required (for example including the percentage of single rooms and the amount of digital investment required). Detailed costs for the outline business case cannot be finalised until final guidance on minimum standards has been received.

It is clear that the cost of delivering a new a new integrated, high-tech healthcare campus on a greenfield site, including digital investment and investment in net zero carbon technology, significantly exceeds the original indicative allocations announced in 2019 (£350m).

We understand that the NHP programme business case will be presented to HM Treasury at the end of the spring.

3 Councillor David Carter to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

I understand the cabinet member for regeneration has announced a new house building programme that we will see tonight. I want to know whether any more money will be wasted on consultancy plans and fees that lead to nothing and if these schemes will actually be delivered and not just left on the shelf as they have been in the past?

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

Thank you for your question.

The New House Building Programme (NHBP) we are setting out tonight will not only deliver hundreds of new council homes for Harlow families, but it radically overhauls the way that the council goes through the process of housebuilding.

As set out in the report, a new three-stage process will ensure value for money is at the forefront of every decision. At all three stages, both myself and the Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration must sign off formal reports setting out in depth detail of the scheme and its ambitions.

This comes of top of a dedicated section in the report about value for money. This follows an internal review when it came to light that £1.13 million had been spent by the former Cabinet Member for Regeneration on housebuilding projects that never happened.

The NHBP also focuses on delivery.

The 2021 Scrutiny Report into housebuilding highlighted the litany of failures in the process. I will not go through those well-versed issues, but this report addresses them all.

The new process will ensure that never again will £450,000 be spent on designs, plans and consultant's fees only to discover a water main under the site.

It goes further and makes clear that there will be absolute transparency and accountability at every stage.

And finally, it shows how we will be on site building new council homes for Harlow families within months.

So, no schemes will be left on the shelf. Never again will taxpayers money wasted and yes, we are delivering hundreds of new council homes for Harlow families.

4 Councillor David Carter to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

For many years people have promised to do something about the Town Centre. I see that a new three-part plan has been announced, but when will we see action? Not just more plans, but actual construction work.

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

Our new three-step plan to regenerate the town centre is a crystal-clear roadmap to the future we want to see. A future in which Harlow is one of the best towns to shop, eat, drink, entertain and enjoy leisure.

Tonight, we will be passing the first step in that roadmap with the first ever planning framework for the town centre.

This cannot be understated, it arms our planning department with powers they did not previously have to safeguard our town centre, as they liberation that has been so long overdue – proper regeneration - steps forward.

As the three steps set out, there will be no more dither and delay. We are getting on with the job of regenerating our town centre and construction work will be underway in parts of the town centre within the next financial year.

This will be followed by much greater construction work as set out in step three of the plan.

I also just want to address one final point, I have read back through nearly fourteen years' worth of press reports about the town centre – dating back to when the Stockland scheme did not progress – and the thing that struck me more than anything was the absolute comfort in underperformance. The excuses that “we can't do anything”, “it is all down to the private sector” and that “the Government won't give us the money”. I say to those people, you should be ashamed. You have held Harlow back and let down our town.

We are getting on with the job and rebuilding our town centre.