

Full Council – 31 March 2022

Questions from the Public

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

Harlow Council's Community Engagement Strategy 2018-2021 ran to 13 pages, stating that 'Harlow Council takes its responsibility for consultation with local people and businesses seriously and aims wherever possible and practical, to take their views and opinions into consideration when making decisions about things that affect them'. It goes on to list many ways that it will carry out this engagement.

I would be interested to note how many responses the Council has received from residents to the following consultation exercises:

- a) Harlow Design Guide (concluded 1 October 2021);
- b) Community Resilience Strategy (concluded 20 December 2021);
- c) London Road North LDO Amendments (concluded 24 December 2021);
- d) Town Plan (concluded 16 January 2022);
- e) Interim review of Polling Stations (concluded 17 January 2022);
- f) Town Centre Masterplan SPD and Public Open Space Standards and Biodiversity SPD (concluded on 11 February);
- g) Planning Validation checklist (concluded 11 February 2022); and
- h) Statement of Community Engagement (concluded 11 February 2022).

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

The 2018 to 2021 Community Engagement Strategy was developed by the previous administration – it was clear at the start of our administration that it was not fit for purpose. That is why I launched a new, far more inclusive strategy, at Cabinet on the 24th of March to reposition the Council to be more proactive in the way it engages residents in, for example, future-focused conversations about estate renewal, improving community safety and new ways to stimulate economic growth. Each of the engagement opportunities

identified, not an exhaustive list, will be backed up by an action plan of activities that aim to work towards increasing engagement levels.

The total number of responses received as a result of the consultation exercises you identified, commissioned using the previous administration's engagement strategy, was 185. It is also important to note that all planning consultations are advertised online, in the local media and on social channels digitally. Additionally, the Council holds a database of 210 organisations and individuals who have specifically requested that their details be retained for planning policy consultations and material is automatically sent to these. For the LDO consultation, a further 200 letters were also sent to neighbouring residents in Newhall immediately adjacent to the Enterprise Zone site. I think this Council should be doing better than that and that is why our administration's new strategy includes the introduction of a key performance indicator to measure and encourage better community engagement activity across all Council services.

The five outcomes and enabling objective contained in the new strategy aim to empower residents to have a greater say – giving them more of a direct route to have meaningful conversations with the Council. Our administration is going further than any other before it by committing to the use of more accessible forms of engagement tools to open up opportunities to interact with the Council through the use of braille, large print and easy read versions of publications.

There is also a recognition that more needs to be done to engage with residents who get frustrated at times when communicating with the Council – the new Community Engagement Strategy, covering the remainder of this year and will be up for renewal in 2025, aims to encourage more of a two-way conversation so that people feel their views are being listened to and action, not words, is a clear result of the consultation exercises they decide to participate in when looking to provide feedback in the future.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor:

Do you agree that engagement needs to be carried out through more than just social media?

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

The Strategy covers lots of different methods of which social media just one part. Consultations will reach out to groups as part of a two-way conversation.

2 Alan Leverett to Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

On the 8th September 2021 I asked a question of you, that is, when are the cycle tracks and footpaths that are in council ownership going to be maintained. I was informed to watch this space. Well I am still watching this space some 6 months later, in the meantime the winter weather has seen the condition of the cycle tracks and footpaths fall even further into dis-repair.

Can you inform me if funding has been found and when can residents expect work to repair the towns cycle tracks and footpaths to be carried out?

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

As Mr Leverett will know, at present, 90% of the cycle track network is owned by Essex County Council and repairs on that 90% are the responsibility of Essex County Council.

The other 10% is owned by Harlow Council. The majority of Harlow Council sections are deemed to be of a satisfactory standard.

With regard to the 90% owned by Essex County Council, I have had a series of meetings with the Cabinet Member for Highways at Essex County Council and further, I understand that the ECC Local Highways Panel has invested more this year into repairing cycle tracks than compared with any year in the existence of the panel.

However, the Corporate Strategy we passed in December set out an ambition to deliver a “a fully independent and interconnected cycle track network”. This is a much bigger project than that to which he asks.

I am talking about the entire network and the rebuilding that is needed. To that end, an announcement will be made after the May election, and I am certain that he and everyone in the town will welcome that announcement.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

How long will it be before issues are addressed, 3 months, 6 months, 12 months?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

The whole network is not fit for purpose and needs fully rebuilding. The announcement will address this.