

Cabinet – 13 October 2022

Questions from Councillors

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

Monday was world mental health day. What steps will the Council take to support the mental health of our town who are facing not only the fallout from the pandemic but also the cost-of-living crisis?

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

This year's World Mental Health Day theme was focused on making mental health and wellbeing for all a global priority. It is the council's ambition as a community leader to look at new ways to raise awareness of maintaining good mental health and to break down barriers associated with talking about personal wellbeing.

The Council is currently working with local primary care leaders and Essex County Council to refresh the town's existing Health and Wellbeing Strategy with the clear intention that mental and physical health will be considered on an equal footing. One priority to structure the strategy is a focus on an evidenced-led approach to help determine the specific response to mental health needs in the town. The Strategy and Action Plan is currently subject to a consultation process with the Health and Wellbeing Partnership, which the Council leads. The document will come to the Scrutiny Committee in November and Cabinet on the 1 December.

Cllr Nick Churchill is the Member Champion for Mental Health and Wellbeing. In his role, Cllr Churchill continues to be a passionate advocate for parity in the way mental and physical health is treated.

During the course of this year, officers have undertaken activities to highlight help available, ranging from outreach support in the Civic Reception to the Care House creative outreach project delivered by Harlow Playhouse at the bandstand in the Town Park, which again offered the opportunity to recognise mental health issues and provide ways to connect with support services.

In recognition of the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic challenges this coming winter, the Council will continue to fund the Community Hub. Some of the core aims of the hub are to help people deal with financial and other worries, and to ensure they can be referred to help, including mental health support services.

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince:

What actions are being taken by the Member Champion?

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

I am pleased that the Our Health Matters project is progressing. Councillor Churchill is focussing on ensuring that mental health issues have parity with physical issues within the workplace.

2 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

Please can you give us an update on the new Harlow Hospital and UK Health Security Agency developments?

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

Both developments will have significant positive benefits for Harlow and the surrounding areas. Not only will they transform healthcare, research, and innovation in our town, but they will help to create more jobs and growth. In recent months, I have met with both parties and been involved with meetings with Ministers about the progress of these projects.

The Hospital has submitted a fantastic business case for the new development and is awaiting approval of that from the Department of Health and the Treasury to proceed with the next stages of the development. It is believed that announcements on this are expected this autumn.

At the UKHSA site, significant progress has been made on the site with demolition works completed and the installation of all utilities supplies for the new development. Work has also commenced on the fit out of the main building to create new lab space. UKHSA is awaiting confirmation of budgets from the Treasury before being able to finalise plans for the completion of the development.

The Council remains in regular dialogue with both PAH and UKHSA and will continue to do everything possible to ensure these projects are delivered as quickly as possible.

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince:

Can we push for a meeting with the ICS?

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

I will arrange for a written response to be sent to you.

3 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

Given the “Cost of Living Crisis” please tell us what specific actions are being taken by the Council to increase community resilience over the forthcoming winter period?

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

One of the Council’s most important priorities is to work relentlessly to promote prosperity. Enabling people to access opportunities, through skills development and employment is crucial. The Council’s approach to addressing concerns about the cost-of-living will be focused on supporting people to enhance their life chances. To do this there must be a focus on local economic growth, that is why the Council’s Economic Development Strategy, to be published next year, will set out a plan to attract further inward investment in the town.

The Council is also setting up an internal working group to look at what practical action can be taken regarding the cost-of-living. One step already taken by the Council has been to further fund the Community Hub to ensure this outreach provision for residents will continue through the winter, connecting residents with sources of help and support. The Council continues to have a good working relationship with Citizens Advice Harlow and the town’s Foodbank, where some hub users are referred, alongside the offer of mental health support.

Further opportunities are being explored through the Council’s work with colleagues in primary care on the Harlow Health and Wellbeing Partnership, and the West Essex Health Partnership structures. The Council is also engaging with the local Poverty Alliance and listening to the issues raised to look at ways to assist. A separate meeting request has been sent to leading members of the Poverty Alliance to discuss what more the Council can do to help residents during the winter months.

The Council’s website has been updated to include support and advice about the cost-of-living, and this will continue to develop. Projects under current consideration are the development of a campaign throughout the winter to ensure that residents can get the right advice on a range of matters, including additional benefits information, fuel efficiency and insulation best practice, and debt and mental health support. These matters have already been highlighted in

the Harlow Times and further information will be posted on the Council's social media channels. As part of the Council's winter planning, the provision of warm spaces for vulnerable residents who may need support is being considered.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tony Edwards:

What more do you anticipate the Council will do?

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

We will be working with community leaders, and are also considering using the Playhouse as a Warm Space. I want to work with you to develop the best solutions

4 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Given the current cost of living crisis and the recent concerns expressed by Five Acres leaseholders regarding the cost of refurbishment of their Housing Blocks (estimated at 30k per leaseholder), would the Council be willing to extend the interest free repayment period from 5 to 10 years?

Reply from Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

At present one of the repayment options available to Leaseholders who reside in their property is an interest free loan up to a maximum of 5 years. On receipt of the completed application form the Homeownership Officers will assess the affordability of the applicant(s) before agreeing the loan. Harlow Council are prepared as responsible Landlord on a case-by-case application to extend the repayment period to a maximum of 10 years for those Leaseholders who reside in the Leasehold property.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tony Edwards:

Will you go through the arbitration process with residents?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Simon Carter (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Residents have been provided with information about the arbitration process. It is recommended they seek independent advice, as the Council may be seen as having a conflict of interest.