

Full Council – 15 December 2022

Questions from the Public

1 David Forman to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

The charity Crisis stated on 28 October that "housing benefit has been frozen since early 2020 and is based on rents from 2018-19". They further stated that: "With rents rising at their fastest rate in 16 years and inflation soaring, Crisis is urging the Government to act with urgency and commit to increasing housing benefit in line with inflation in the upcoming Autumn Budget on November 17."

In the House of Commons on 5 December, in response to questions by five Labour MPs regarding the Local Housing Allowance, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Mel Stride, stated: "Those who need assistance with housing costs also have recourse to the discretionary housing payments (DHP) administered by local authorities."

Therefore, for each of the last three years, that is 2019/20 to 2021/22 inclusive, would you please tell me:

- (a) The number of DHP payments made annually;
- (b) The total amount of DHP money paid out annually;
- (c) What percentage each annual total represents of DHP money allocated by central government for each corresponding year, excluding additional government money provided for additional administrative burden;
- (d) The amount of money that Harlow Council has added annually to the DHP fund given that rules allow local authorities to top up DHP funding up to a maximum of two and a half times using their own funds?

Reply from Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance) (Question answered by Councillor Russell Perrin in Councillor James Leppard's absence):

In answering the questions raised I think it important to clarify that housing benefit is paid to tenants across all rental sectors and the charity Crisis is in fact referring to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates which are used to

calculate the maximum amount of housing benefit a tenant renting from a private landlord can receive.

Discretionary Housing Payments provide financial support to tenants in all rental sectors who are in receipt of either Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit.

In response to your questions -

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
a) The number of DHP payments made annually	355	250	206
b) The total DHP awarded annually	£245,548.00	£285,581.00	£ 245,855.00
c) The percentage of Government allocation awarded	102%	97%	102%
d) Harlow Council's Annual contribution to DHP's	£ 5,000.00	£ 5,000.00	£ 5,000.00

Supplementary question from David Forman to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

Crisis charity CEO Matt Downie made a dire prediction in late October, stating: "The fact that affordability has deteriorated so drastically in just five months shows the pressing need for benefits to increase in line with real world costs – and just how punishing it is to freeze Local Housing Allowance rates for even a short period of time. Without urgent action we face the bleakest of winters. The new Prime Minister and the Chancellor have a choice: increase housing benefit or make thousands of people homeless. There's only one option if we are to avoid the misery and devastation of mass-homelessness."

Consequently, what extra measures have Harlow Council put in place to deal with increasing homelessness this winter?

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

Thank you Mr Forman for your question, a very important question this time of year, more so than any other. This Council, following Bob Blackman Members Private Bill which came through a number of years ago, takes a more proactive stance to preventing homelessness in the first instance. Then further Government duties through the pandemic to make sure that nobody was homeless over the course of the pandemic. The Council has maintained that proactive initiative all the way through and continues to be successful. Furthermore, we have a very very close working relationship with Streets2Homes and, again, we work closely with them to maintain that proactive stance to try and reduce any levels of homelessness which may occur.

2 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

As you and your deputy are covering the Portfolio for Housing are either of you receiving any further enhanced allowances than you were receiving before the sacking of the former Portfolio Holder?

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

No, we will not receive any further allowance. Under the Council's Councillors' Allowance Scheme, Councillors are entitled to the Basic Allowance, which is paid to all Councillors, and one Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA). As myself (as Leader) and the Deputy Leader already receive a SRA for these roles, we cannot receive any additional SRAs.

Supplementary question from Hugh Hoad to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

In view of such, what I consider a very important Portfolio Holder, and the questions that have been raised by various Councillors about the non-performance of HTS, especially the roofing repairs, why hasn't a Portfolio Holder been appointed as you do have a former Portfolio Holder for Housing, when you were last in Administration, Councillor Souter. Why hasn't he been considered to take this post over?

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

The important thing is that we are delivering on the important changes which need to happen within the housing department and if I can tell you that, within a month, the number of temporary roofing situations has halved. I think that is incredibly important to those people living in those houses rather than who is delivering that change. A new Housing Portfolio Holder will be announced soon but it is absolutely important that we are focussed on making the necessary changes to deliver for our residents.

3 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

I raised a stage one complaint CO 465820469 received by HTS 16th November 2022, as reported to HTS 3rd November 2022, the fact that when it rains it comes through ceiling of my living room and my property was still not water tight and still has not been inspected a priority for leaks stated by the former Portfolio Holder for Housing at Full Council 3rd November 2022 in a reply to a question raised by Councillor Edwards. Can you advise me when I can expect my property to be water tight?

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

We have carried out a full review of our records and can confirm initially a roofing job was raised under ticket 982807 on 29 May 2018 as it was reported there was a roof leak into your property and the ceiling had collapsed. Our operatives attended your property on 30 May 2018 and carried out a make safe by fixing timber to your ceiling to make it safe. The plastering was completed on 17 October 2018, subsequently the roofing job was closed on 18 October 2018 due to no leaks identified.

On 22 June 2020 another roofing job was raised under ticket 1082933 due to report of water ingress into the property. We carried out an inspection but the ticket was cancelled as it was found that no roof leak was present at the time as it was concluded upon inspection that the marks on the plastering were just watermarks from the drying out process.

A further roofing job was raised on 1 February 2021 under ticket 1109906 as it was reported the property was experiencing water ingress into the living room. Our Roofing Team Leader attended your property to carry out an inspection, and it was ascertained that the watermarks on your ceiling were caused by the plastering where it had dried out and there was no water ingress.

There was another report of water ingress on 23 May 2022 to the lounge ceiling. This job ticket was then cancelled at the time as it became apparent that the mark on your ceiling was a watermark on your plastering and not a leak.

A further job was reported on 29 November 2022 and we have arranged a site visit by a Housing Officer from Harlow Council and our Roofing Team Leader and can confirm that a joint visit has been booked for 16 December 2022. This will be an initial inspection to ascertain if there is a leak.

Supplementary question from Hugh Hoad to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

I can certainly assure you that there is a leak in the roof. I do not sit in the heavy rain that occurred on 3 November 2022 and get wet. I agree that a surveyor came round this morning at 10:30am. My next door neighbour, 115, I will not give the full address but from the question I could say my address of 114 whatever that road may be, and asked him to inspect that property as well. His property is ten times worse than mine and still nothing has been done. When can I expect a water tight property as, at Cabinet on 1 December, there was a statement that systems had been changed to ensure property water tight. I am 73 years old. When can I expect my property to be water tight?

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

I entirely sympathise if the property is leaking. That is not an acceptable situation and I do not doubt that you construct these things. I have been reliably informed that if after the initial inspection the property is found to be leaking water that will be repaired within 24 hours. So we await the outcome of the initial inspection.