

Full Council – 15 December 2022

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

At a previous Council meeting we weighed up the need to do more about providing and facilitating Warm Banks. Since then, temperatures have plummeted, sometimes to well below zero, forcing all of us to find ways to keep warm. For people already struggling with everyday bills forcing terrible choices between heating and eating, it's a whole lot worse.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, says action is possible so we need not despair. Acknowledging the 'real hardship and pain' experienced now, he backs the Warm Welcome campaign involving faith groups, charities and businesses which let people in to keep warm.

Harlow Playhouse, considered as an option and is undoubtedly a wonderful, versatile building, may not be ideal, as I think you recognise. What progress has been made in providing Warm Banks for Harlow people to help them in their hour of need? It's certainly time for an update.

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

Helping to keep people warm this winter is something the council takes seriously. This authority believes it has a moral obligation to help the hardest hit by the cost of living.

The adverse weather conditions this week highlight that it was the right decision by the council to open the Playhouse as a warm space for vulnerable residents to go. Because of the facilities available at the Playhouse, free hot drinks can be served and representatives from local support services can be on hand to provide guidance in a warm and friendly environment.

There is a coordinated approach to manage the impact this winter. Essex County Council has rightly opened the doors of the town's library for people to use as a warm space too. Streets2Homes is continuing to provide similar support to those in the town who are currently homeless. The council is working with other public services, community organisations and the voluntary sector to identify other warm spaces in the town. If these warm spaces meet the council's criteria for supporting vulnerable residents, they will be included

on the council's dedicated webpage for information about such facilities and be included as part of the ongoing social media campaign. Posters and flyers are also in production to be distributed. The council plans to provide access to a suitable room at the Latton Bush Centre as a warm space by next week.

The cold weather protocol, triggered when temperatures are forecast to be lower than zero degrees for three nights, has already been activated and is in place for those with no place to stay during freezing winter temperatures. This means accommodation is offered by the council in collaboration with other organisations in the town to keep people safe.

As work continues to review the potential for other communal spaces in the town to be used as warm spaces. The council must assess if they offer the right facilities, are accessible by public transport or within an acceptable walking distance for residents to use. The Community Hub run by Rainbow Services is also providing support and referring cases to specialist agencies for additional help if required.

The council is keeping its approach to winter challenges under review and will take steps to adapt, where appropriate, to offer the best possible support to those struggling this winter that it can.

Supplementary question from Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

Thank you very much Councillor Charles for that information, measures that are badly needed in this extremely difficult time. I know that these matters are very close to your heart, I know how very seriously you take all of this. Will it be possible to provide a further update given that the work is ongoing?

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

Chair, I can. As of this week, Councillor Morrison I am grateful for that question to be able to give a fuller update, Council officers have been looking at a range of locations that achieve a wider geographical footprint of warm spaces in the town. That is our ambition and what will then happen, as those spaces meet the Council's criteria as set out in my response, they will be uploaded onto the website. Currently we have a number of locations. Churches are of course doing a fantastic job and, of course, Streets2Homes. There are other organisations in conversation with us. There is another organisation in the town centre which the Council is in close conversation with that charitable organisation because that could be potentially an important community asset, and so, we will endeavour to provide further updates to the Council and wider public. I am conscious, and what you said, this is a matter of great concern to residents across the town. There are many vulnerable

residents that have been impacted by the adverse weather over the last few days so it is incumbent upon us as an authority to provide more warm spaces. We are working to do that and work with others as we work on a collaborative basis so I am thankful for the question.

2 Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

On 25 November some of us held a candlelit vigil at the Obelisk, to mark International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. We read out the names available to us then ... well over 100 women killed by male partners, in the main, aged from 16 to 80s.

I didn't know those women ... but I could have. They could be our sisters, daughters, nieces, friends, mothers, aunts, our grandmothers, us. I want next year's event to be inclusive and for the Council to work to make it so. We have a duty to remember those women.

We have the White Ribbon Campaign which is an important step in the right direction. We can do more. Will you help me to do that?

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

The safety of everyone in our Town, whoever they are, is of the utmost importance. However, certain crimes disproportionately affect women and girls, manifest themselves in different ways, and demand targeted solutions.

Crimes such as rape, female genital mutilation, stalking, harassment, and digital crimes such as cyber-flashing, 'revenge porn' and 'up-skirting' are taking place every day. It is often said these things have no place in our society. It would be more accurate to say that they should have no place, because they are still all too prevalent. They illustrate appalling, often outdated, attitudes and prejudice towards women and girls.

Specifically on domestic violence towards women the Council is taking a zero-tolerance approach to such criminality and is a priority in the council's new Community Safety Strategy 2021/22 – 2024/5 which was adopted at Cabinet earlier this year. The strategy sets out the framework to support and strengthen the Council's work with partners to identify and tackle all forms of anti-social behaviour and crime and support victims of crime where that is necessary.

The Community Safety Strategy has a supporting action plan which is currently being developed. I will ensure that we will do what we can to support the White Ribbon campaign by looking at the possibility of Harlow Council as an organisation seeking White Ribbon accreditation.

Through the Safer Harlow Partnership (the membership includes the council, police and other criminal justice bodies) – tackling domestic abuse is a priority too. A collaborative approach is adopted in Harlow to confront such issues.

I re-iterate that we want Harlow to be a place where residents know their safety is important to us and have confidence in the way in which the council, police and other agencies respond to issues and concerns.

I also want to be quite clear that whatever action we take making sure that the needs of victims of violence are always put first and that the right support is in place is imperative.

I therefore support the Councillor's efforts to do more in this regard and would be happy to hear her ideas on how we could further do more in this area as a Council.

Supplementary question from Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Thank you Chair and thank you Councillor Perrin for your response. It's a lengthy response, there are plenty of words here and, whilst I welcome your answer, I would like to see more action as you probably would have been surprised if I hadn't of said that. I would like to see everybody here, everybody in the council chamber at the vigil next year and there will be a vigil, I'm pretty sure. It would be wonderful if we didn't need one. If we didn't need one next year it would be absolutely amazing. In the meantime though, I welcome your offer to meet together to discuss what else we can do and I look forward to hearing from you to arrange that meeting. I know there are people in the Labour group and our Labour leader who would like to participate in that meeting so I look forward to hearing from you.

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

And I you.

3 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

Harlow has a proud footballing history, be it Harlow Town's historic win over Gary Lineker's Leicester city to our many grass roots football teams, not to mention our walking football, helping to reduce social isolation and improve mental health. Football is more than just a game. It is about friendship and community. However, last week we heard that Harlow Town FC, Harlow ladies and Harlow reserves were forced to resign from their league siting

ongoing issues with their pitch. What support if any can Harlow council give to ensure the long-term future of the club and football in our town?

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

Harlow has an incredibly proud footballing history and I share the sadness of Cllr Vince and indeed the whole town with the news that the club had to withdraw its senior teams from their respective leagues last week.

This Council pledged to do everything possible to support the club, alongside our MP, Robert Halfon, and that's why myself, the MP, and senior officers met with the Chairman and Owner of the club on Monday.

I am pleased to say that the club continues to operate fully in all other respects with the ground still being used for training schemes, youth teams continuing to play, and the venue still being used for functions.

The issues are solely with the pitch and our MP has spoken with the Football Foundation who have agreed to provide expert advice to the club on the pitch and the best way forward.

The Council is working with the club to ensure all youth team games can take place on council-owned pitches and we will continue to support the club in any way possible with its senior sides.

We remain in almost daily dialogue with the club, and I will continue to update Cllr Vince on progress and appreciate his offers of support in this process.

Whilst there are challenges in the months ahead, I remain absolutely confident that we will protect Harlow Town FC and that the senior teams will be playing again in the new season and youth football will continue to go from strength to strength.

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Dan Swords (Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration):

In the same spirit of working together for the good of the football team in this town and I won't put my scarf on on this occasion but it is here. We know that the issue from the football club comes from the issue which they have with their pitch which, as we are aware, is a 3G pitch. There are massive advantages of having a 3G pitch not the least as you know people like me can play at 11am and the first team can still play at 3pm without the pitch being ruined but part of the reason that Harlow Town had a 3G pitch is because of the site which they are on and it is limited to the one pitch. I just

wondered what we can do moving forward, and this is a cross party, to support the teams to have training pitches or alternative pitches to ensure that if, anything like this were to ever happen again, that at the very least they had training pitches to play on. I would like your response on that.

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

Thank you for your further question and as Councillor Vince knows I've been working with the football club for a number of months on maximising options using the town for the club whether that be for support for the first team, the ladies and of the reserves and I think we are moving in a very positive direction for the long term sustainability for the club. In terms of the facilities, as I have set out in my response as well, we have been able to ensure that the youth teams throughout the club have been able to use council owned pitches. As I say I am confident that we can continue to work with the club to ensure that they have all of the facilities that they possibly need.

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

Shocking figures released last week reveal that Harlow is in the top 12 places in the country for people smoking, with one in five people across our town are habitual smokers. We as a party welcome the recently published health and wellbeing strategy. In this strategy the link between mental health and smoking is recognised, but in light of this revelation what specific support and guidance can we as a council provide to reduce smoking numbers in Harlow?

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

The council's health and wellbeing strategy, approved by cabinet on the 1st of December to go forward for consultation, recognises that smoking is a serious public health issue. It is a council priority to arrest the current negative trend of poor levels of health and wellbeing in the town.

In the health and wellbeing strategy, it points out that Harlow has a higher than the national average smoking prevalence in adults. There is also concern that high smoking prevalence is linked to residents with long-term mental health conditions.

The way forward is to deliver the 2028 outcomes set out in the health and wellbeing strategy. There are outcomes in the strategy covering addiction and substance misuse that look to tackle the number of people in the town being diagnosed with preventable health issues.

It is important to educate people about the risks associated with smoking. Part of the work the council will undertake with public health officials at Essex County Council and through its relationships with local healthcare leaders, is to support targeted campaigns to help people understand the consequences of their choices, so they can make a more informed decision about their own health in future.

The council's supporting action plan, that will take practical steps to implement the health and wellbeing strategy, includes a specific commitment to tackle issues associated with smoking. It is also the council's intention to use its own communication channels to ensure residents are aware of the support available to cease smoking.

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

In the last paragraph you talk about the practical steps and the implementation of the health and wellbeing strategy with regards to smoking. As the opposition, please could we be in that process? That would be much appreciated.

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

The health and wellbeing strategy, of course, one of its key focus is around substance misuse and addiction and that is something that we have got to address the trend of in this town. When it comes to smoking, the prevalence of adult smoking, particularly to those who have a mental health illness is something that we have got to recognise as well. As part of the Council's action plan towards the delivery of the health and wellbeing strategy we are putting in specific commitments around tackling smoking. That will need to be done though in combination with our Public Health colleagues but also primary care leads particularly in the town. What I want to see is greater awareness through campaigns highlighting the choices that people need to make about their lifestyles. Smoking is a particular public health issue we need to recognise that and the authority will be working with health colleagues to monitor that.

5 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Noting that the renovation work on the Five Acres Housing Flat Blocks was abruptly halted in November. Will the Portfolio holder for Housing please state the total costs of drawing up the contract specifications, costs of the work undertaken and any incurred costs for the abrupt cessation of the contract.

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

Following suspension of the Five Acres refurbishment project several roof leaks were reported to block 106-116 five acres and flat 7 and 8, issues with damaged tiles and blocked gutters were identified, instructions given to clear these gutters and temporarily patch repair roof. The repair costs for these works is not yet available and are wrapped up in the abortive costs of the project. I am therefore unable currently to give a definitive sum as to the abortive costs.

I can say however that the costs for the repair works I have outlined will not be passed on to the tenants and that no costs have been passed onto the tenants. Furthermore the £500K that had been identified by the council to undertake the Five acres project has been rediverted for urgent roof renewals.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Firstly, it is a little disappointing them not giving me, whilst I can accept that its not possible to give a definitive sum, I would have expected an estimate. Secondly, I am quite surprised by the figure of £500k as I understood the sum for the contract was £1.2m. Moving on, in Your Harlow on 7 November a Council spokesperson said that we are going to review our entire process of major works and consultation so I would like to ask what will be the process, what will that review process consist of, when are we likely to know its outcome and in what form will we will be given that outcome?

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

I will pick one of them about the review process. Further detail on what that review process will be will be forthcoming shortly and the outcome will be in January.

6 Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

There is much concern and speculation amongst allotment users of Harlow with regard to possible use of allotment sites for future development, this includes those currently in use and those awaiting clearance and a return to use.

Will the Portfolio holder for Environment please take this opportunity to allay these fears and acknowledge the important contribution allotments make to the health and wellbeing of users, the community spirit they engender and

their contribution to the environmental health of the town and confirm that no designated allotment sites are being considered for any use other than as allotments?

Reply from Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

I welcome Councillor Griggs' question as it highlights the importance of allotment sites for the social opportunities they bring, their contribution to Harlow's green spaces, their benefits to wellbeing from working constructively outdoors, and now more than ever, the opportunity to grow good food to offset the increasing cost of living that they provide.

The Council's policy for development is set out in its Local Plan adopted in 2020 which recognises the importance of allotments as an integral part of the green infrastructure of Harlow, and contains policies that will both prevent loss of existing allotment sites by development, and ensure the provision of additional sites as opportunities arise through planned development.

I am therefore confident that there should be no concern about the loss of existing allotment sites through development.

I am aware that Scrutiny Committee intends to review allotment provision at a future meeting, and this will provide the opportunity to consider how management of existing sites can be enhanced, and the exciting opportunities that working with voluntary groups and extending self-management may offer to bring empty sites back into use.

Supplementary question from Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

Thank you for that answer. I felt absolutely sure that we would be on the same page on the importance of allotments from our previous conversations. Given the increasing demand for allotments, for example the First Avenue site has a waiting list of 27 people, will you please advise how many sites have been returned to use this year and when those waiting return to use, such as the Felmongers site which given its close proximity to the First Avenue one could be used by them to ease some of their waiting list, when will those awaiting return be returned to use?

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

I welcome that you are highlighting some of the actual sites. There are pilot schemes which are underway and I would like to take the opportunity to invite any members of the opposition to attend our visits on some of the sites which we are going to reinstate. There is a pilot actually going on at this very

moment to reinvigorate the self-managed sites. I will contact you and invite you.

7 Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

We have heard much recently about the Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Harlow. This is very much to be welcomed.

One area of continuing concern is the provision of safe spaces for men. The subject of men suffering domestic abuse is often neglected and regarded as taboo but it is a very real and present problem. Harlow, quite rightly, provides safe spaces for women but there is a distinct lack of similarly supported spaces for men.

The wonderful charity Streets2Homes can support men in these circumstances but it has limited resources to do so. Recently, Harlow Council provided a safe space in a hotel for a man in this situation, but he was there for months. A hotel rarely provides facilities for cooking, leading to expensive meal costs or a poor diet and it does not provide the right environment for men to spend time with their children.

Would Cllr Charles please advise how the council plans to address this situation?

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

Domestic violence against men and women is not acceptable. The priority must always be the victims and putting their needs first.

The Centre for Social Justice has stated that one third of domestic abuse victims nationally are men. It has been estimated by the Office for National Statistics that 757,000 men reported abuse in 2020 alone.

Addressing the social stigma preventing men to come forward and seek help about domestic violence must end. The Safer Harlow Partnership, which Harlow Council, the police and other criminal justice bodies are active members of, includes domestic violence as one of its priorities. In the council's own community safety strategy, a zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence against men and women is a key priority too. The council is committed to raising awareness and understanding of domestic abuse, is working to help ensure professionals are trained to recognise signs of such criminal activity and backs laws designed to confront the impact on victims.

The lack of appropriate safe spaces for male domestic abuse survivors is an issue that commands cross-party support in terms of the need to take action. Councillor Griggs is invited to work with members of the administration and council officers to look at what practical steps can be taken to provide more support for male domestic abuse survivors in Harlow. By working together to confront this matter, the council will be in a far stronger position to develop a case to secure support services commissioned by Essex County Council to support victims of domestic violence.

Supplementary question from Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

I thank you very much for that answer Councillor Charles. I think you recognise from our previous conversations that I am keen to work with you this and other matters so I willingly accept your invitation. Given the statistics that you reported, would you agree that Harlow should therefore be providing a number of spaces for men which is at least equal to one third of those available for women?

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

I think the argument of parity is always a powerful one Councillor Griggs and it is something that the working group that I suspect will be born out of this question exchange and our previous conversation will look at how we can push forward to achieve such a balance. As I said, the clue in my answer was that by working together on a cross party basis we can make a more powerful case to Essex County Council who will be pretty much the commissioning authority we need to engage with to look at how we can achieve parity for safe spaces for men and women who are domestic abuse survivors. The other aspect to this of course is knowledge and breaking down barriers. I have to say that there are very good charities, in particular the Man Kind initiative. That charity in particular looks at engaging with male domestic abuse survivors, working with practitioners and a range of organisations to change perceptions on what is a tragic situation for individuals and men across the board that are subject to this abuse. That must give course on the basis of gender inclusivity, men and women who are domestic abuse survivors must be treated with complete parity and so that's what we will work to achieve together and other councillors who are interested, from all sides of the political spectrum, I'm sure want to engage in this process.