

HARLOW COUNCIL

INVESTMENT STRATEGY REPORT 2023/24

Introduction

1. The Council invests its money for three broad purposes:
 - because it has surplus cash as a result of its day-to-day activities, for example when income is received in advance of expenditure (known as **treasury management investments**),
 - to support local public services by lending to or buying shares in other organisations (**service investments**), and
 - to earn investment income (known as **commercial investments** where this is the main purpose).
2. This investment strategy meets the requirements of statutory guidance issued by the government in January 2018 and focuses on the second and third of these categories.

Treasury Management Investments

3. The Council typically receives its income in cash (e.g. from taxes and grants) before it pays for its expenditure in cash (e.g. through payroll and invoices). It also holds reserves for future expenditure and collects local taxes on behalf of other local authorities and central government. These activities, plus the timing of borrowing decisions, lead to a cash surplus which is invested in accordance with guidance from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. The balance of treasury management investments is expected to fluctuate between £10m and £35m during the 2023/24 financial year.
4. **Contribution:** The contribution that these investments make to the objectives of the Council is to support effective treasury management activities.
5. **Further details:** Full details of the Council's policies and its plan for 2023/24 for treasury management investments are covered in a separate document, the treasury management strategy.

Service Investments: Loans

6. **Contribution:** The Council lends money to its subsidiaries and a local businesses, to support local public services and stimulate local economic growth.
7. HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of Harlow Council which began trading on 1 February 2017. £0.7m was loaned to this

company on 15 February 2021 for the purchase of vehicles, plant and machinery. The outstanding balance on these loans was £0.4m as at 31 March 2022.

8. HTS (Housing & Property) Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of Harlow Council and has been provided with loans of £1,0m to enable the acquisition of Property for rent. These loans are repayable over a 40 year period on a commercial interest basis set at 4% per annum. These loans were advanced during the period October to December 2020 and represent a LTV (Loan To Value) ratio of 70% which provides security that the value of the assets would be sufficient to cover any outstanding loan balance.
9. Harlow Property Limited was provided with two loans to support the development of a part of the Harlow Enterprise Zone, approved on 23 January 2014. The amounts loaned were £1.0m on 15 March 2016 and a further £1.5m on 3 March 2017. Interest accrues on these loans. The total outstanding as at 31 March 2022 was £3.2m and they are secured through the placement of a property charge over the wider property portfolio at KAO Park, valued at the time at over £40m.
10. **Security:** The main risk when making service loans is that the borrower will be unable to repay the principal lent and/or the interest due. In order to limit this risk, and ensure that total exposure to service loans remains proportionate to the size of the Council, upper limits on the outstanding loans to each category of borrower have been set as follows:

Table 1: Loans for service purposes in £ millions

Category of borrower	31.3.2022 actual			2023/24
	Balance owing	Loss allowance	Net figure in accounts	Approved Limit
Subsidiaries VPFE	£0.4m	-	£0.4m	£0.4m
Subsidiaries HTS H&P	£1.0m	-	£1.0m	£1.0m
Local businesses	£3.2m	-	£3.2m	£2.1m
TOTAL	£4.6m	-	£4.6m	£3.5m

11. Accounting standards require the Council to set aside loss allowance for loans, reflecting the likelihood of non-payment. The Council considers that this loss is zero because HPL loans are a charge secured against property which considerably exceeds the value of the loan.

12. **Risk assessment:** The Council assesses the risk of loss before entering into and whilst holding service loans. In particular, cash flow forecasts and business plans have been completed for subsidiary companies to show that there is expected to be adequate cash flow to repay loans. Where appropriate, legal advice has been sought. As these loans are small relative to the size of the Council, the overall risk they pose is limited.

Service Investments: Shares

13. **Contribution:** The Council invests in the shares of its subsidiaries HTS (Housing and Property) Ltd to support local public services and stimulate local economic growth. The Council has acquired 450,000 £1 shares in HTS (Housing & Property) Ltd. The Investment is to enable HTS (H&P) Ltd to provide rented accommodation within the Harlow District.
14. **Security:** One of the risks of investing in shares is that they fall in value meaning that the initial outlay may not be recovered. In order to limit this risk, upper limits on the sum invested in each category of shares have been set as follows:

Table 2: Shares held for service purposes in £ millions

Category of company	31.3.2022 actual			2023/24
	Amounts invested	Gains or losses	Value in accounts	Approved Limit
Subsidiaries HTS H&P	0.5	-	0.5	0.5

15. **Risk assessment:** The Council assesses the risk of loss before entering into and whilst holding shares. Cash flow forecasts and business plans have been completed to show that the enterprise expect to generate income in the future. Risk assessments will also have been undertaken by other partners in the town centre LLP. Where appropriate, legal advice has been sought and detailed contractual arrangements have been created. This includes a legal charge on property. As these shareholdings are small relative to the size of the Council, the overall risk they pose is limited.

16. **Liquidity:** The 2018 MHCLG Investment Guidance requires Harlow Council to determine the maximum periods for which funds for service equity investments are committed and how they will stay within these limits. These shareholdings are long term investments designed to be held for an indefinite time frame and are therefore not considered a liquid investment. The Council help minimise the risk to overall liquidity by staying with the limits specified in table 2.

17. Non-specified Investments: Shares are the only investment type that the Council has identified that meets the definition of a non-specified investment in the government guidance. The limits above on share investments are therefore also the Council's upper limits on non-specified investments. The Council has not adopted any procedures for determining further categories of non-specified investment since none are likely to meet the definition.

Commercial Investments: Property

18. The Council purchased the Harvey Centre, a shopping centre in Harlow town centre, for £21.0m in December 2022. This was partly funded by short term borrowing of £9.0m. Short term borrowing has been used to avoid locking in the currently high interest rates for a long term period. The Council plan to replace the short term loans with longer term loans at a future date when interest rates are expected to be lower, to enable more certainty over long term interest costs.

19. **Contribution:** The purchase of the Harvey Centre is primarily for service reasons, with any yield gained on the Centre being a secondary objective. The Council is thus not in contravention of the CIPFA Codes' prohibition on borrowing to invest primarily for financial return.

20. The Harvey Centre was acquired to support the Council's ambitions to meaningfully regenerate Harlow Town Centre. The asset forms a significant part of the town centre extending to 8.5 acres. The acquisition gives the Council a greater ability to positively shape Harlow's future for its residents and businesses.

21. The Harvey Centre is overall expected to generate a net yield of 11.8%. A small annual income is expected from the Harvey Centre in the short term, income of around £1.1m is expected from approximate the year 2024/25.

22. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) defined property to be an investment if it is held primarily or partially to general a profit. The Harvey Centre is thus included within the commercial investment section in this strategy despite being classified as a service investment in the Capital Strategy.

23. In addition to the Harvey Centre the council also holds four commercial and residential properties for the purpose of making a profit that will be spent on local public services. These include a golf club and three other properties. Annual income from these assets is around £82,000.

Table 3: Property held for investment purposes in £ millions

Property	Actual	31.3.2022 actual		31.3.2023 expected	
	Purchase cost	Gains or (losses)	Value in accounts	Gains or (losses)	Value in accounts
Harvey Centre	21.0	-	21.0	-	21.0
Golf Club	0.8	-	0.8	-	0.8
Stewards Farm	0.3	-	0.3	-	0.3
Barrow Farm Cottage	0.2	-	0.2	-	0.2
Cannons Cottage	0.1	-	0.1	-	0.1
TOTAL	22.4	-	22.4	-	22.4

24. **Security:** In accordance with government guidance, the Council considers a property investment to be secure if its accounting valuation is at or higher than its purchase cost including taxes and transaction costs.

25. Expert property sector and legal advice has been sought in acquiring the Harvey Centre and its purchase price of £21.0m fully reflects its value. Other independent valuations of the Centre have valued at or higher than this value, so even in the unlikely event of having to sell the Centre the council would expect to recoup the purchase price paid.

26. The golf club, Stewards Farm, Barrow Farm Cottage and Cannons Cottage are historically purchased properties and their valuation now exceeds their purchase price: the underlying assets thus provide security for the capital investment.

27. Should the 2022/23 year end accounts preparation and audit process value these properties below their purchase cost, than an updated investment strategy will be presented to full council detailing the impact of the loss on the security of investments and any revenue consequences arising.

28. **Risk assessment:** Full due diligence and assessment of risk has been carried out prior to the purchase of the Harvey Centre. The quality of the tenants, anticipated future performance and fabric of the Centre has all been assessed in detail. The council has sought expert advice from property consultants and legal and financial advisors throughout the process: the quality of this advice has been monitored by the Council.

29. **Liquidity:** Compared with other investment types, property is relatively difficult to sell and convert to cash at short notice, and can take a considerable period to sell in certain market conditions. Harlow Council

recognise that these investment are considered long term and use other types of investment to meet immediate liquidity needs.

Loan Commitments and Financial Guarantees

30. Although not strictly counted as investments, since no money has exchanged hands yet, loan commitments and financial guarantees carry similar risks to the Council and are included here for completeness.
31. In 1987 and 1992, the Council agreed to undertake joint liability with a number of other local authorities to guarantee loans of £66.3 million and £17.3 million to Home Housing Association (previously called Borth Housing Association) in support of their private initiative for the provision of housing in Harlow and surrounding authorities. The guarantee is for a 50 year period ending 2037. The Council's proportion of the total liability is £4.5m. The Council considers that the probability of the guarantee being called upon is low.

Proportionality

32. The Council expect to receive £322,000 in income from treasury investments and £203,000 in income from loans made and shares owned for service purposes in 2022/23.
33. The income from commercial investments excluding the Harvey Centre for the financial year 2022/23 is expected be around £82,000 and it is expected to remain at approximately this level over the next four years. The Harvey Centre is expected to provide income to the Council from the final quarter of 2022/23..
34. This investment income is a tiny fraction of the amount the council spends on services each year. The Council is therefore not reliant on investment income to fund its services and would be able to continue to meet its service delivery objectives even if there was a significant drop in this income.

Capacity, Skills and Culture

35. **Elected members and statutory officers:** Strategic investment decision are subject to the advice from officers or treasury management advisors. Elected members are also invited to formal or informal training. The process is subject to scrutiny through the Cabinet Policy Development Working Group, Cabinet and Full Council.
36. **Specialist expertise:** The Council has been assisted in the purchase of the Harvey Centre by Property Consultants, legal advisors and financial advisors. Arlingclose have been the Council's financial advisors.

Investment Indicators

37. The Council has set the following quantitative indicators to allow elected members and the public to assess the Council's total risk exposure as a result of its investment decisions.

38. Total risk exposure: The first indicator shows the Council's total exposure to potential investment losses. This includes amounts the Council is contractually committed to lend but have yet to be drawn down and guarantees the Council has issued over third party loans.

Table 5: Total investment exposure in £millions

Total investment exposure	31.03.2022 Actual	31.03.2023 Forecast	31.03.2024 Forecast
Treasury management investments	36.6	10.0	10.0
Service investments: Loans	4.6	4.6	3.5
Service investments: Shares	0.5	0.5	0.5
Commercial investments: Property	22.4	22.4	22.4
TOTAL INVESTMENTS	64.1	37.5	36.4
Guarantees issued on loans	4.5	4.5	4.5
TOTAL EXPOSURE	68.6	42.0	40.9

39. How investments are funded: Government guidance is that these indicators should include how investments are funded. Since the Council does not normally associate particular assets with particular liabilities, this guidance is difficult to comply with. The only investment clearly funded by borrowing is £9m of the total £21.0m purchase of the Harvey Centre which took place in 2022/23.

40. Rate of return received: This indicator shows the investment income received less the associated costs, including the cost of borrowing where appropriate, as a proportion of the sum initially invested. Note that due to the complex local government accounting framework, not all recorded gains and losses affect the revenue account in the year they are incurred.

Table 7: Investment rate of return (net of all costs)

Investments net rate of return	2021/22 Actual	2022/23 Forecast	2023/24 Forecast
Treasury management investments	0.9%	3.6%	4.3%

Service investments: Loans	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%
Commercial investments: Property	0.1%	1.3%	3.5%
ALL INVESTMENTS	0.9%	2.7%	3.9%