

Cabinet – 23 March 2023

Questions from the Public

1 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

On 24 March 2022 Cllr Swords presented a report outlining the Council's house building programme. This included a list of areas which would be subject to a feasibility and viability assessment.

Three of these areas, Fishers Hatch, Pollard Hatch and Sumners Hatch already had an architect employed to carry out this assessment.

In the meantime, residents will have had concerns about what might happen to land near their homes indeed in the case of Pollard Hatch what might happen to their homes in the event that the Council decides to re-develop the site.

I would ask that you let me have a detailed update on the progress on each site made during the last year and when residents can expect to be made aware of what the future holds for these three sites?

Reply from Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

The hatches at Fishers, Pollards and Sumner's are included within the list of potential future sites for the Council House Building Programme, although feasibility assessments are yet to be undertaken.

Residents will be consulted should any of these be taken forward following these preliminary assessments, but the sites would need to meet viability requirements before being progressed.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor:

Do you know when the preliminary assessments will take place?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

In the next six months.

2 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Having worked for Harlow Council for many years I know only too well that failing to fill vacancies as they occur can only mean two things, that is either a service is no longer provided or that a poorer service is provided. Having spoken to many residents across the town it is clear that they are not receiving the kind of service they should expect.

Will you please provide me with a list of jobs which have been permanently deleted since your administration took control of Harlow Council and a list of jobs which have not been deleted from the establishment but have been vacant for more than 6 months?

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

I do not agree with your subjective assessment of this Council. Staff here continue to provide good quality services to the residents of the town during a period of pressure on the Council's finances.

The Council current vacancies greater than six months is 40, this figure does reflect a period of control during Q3 and Q4 on vacancies whilst the Council was putting together its budget for 2023/24. These controls have now been removed and the Council is now actively recruiting for most of the posts, the remainder have either been unsuccessful in recruiting, subject to restructure and/or job evaluation prior to advertising.

The posts are:

- Appeals Officer
- Apprentice - Corporate and Governance Support
- Apprentice - Playhouse
- Apprentice- Monitoring Officer (Planning)
- Assistant Solicitor/CILEX/Barrister
- Cleaner (LMC)
- Cleaner Playhouse
- Clerk of Works
- Clerk of Works
- Empty Homes Officer
- Empty Homes Technical Officer
- Enforcement and Compliance Planning Officer
- Environmental Protection Officer
- Estates Officer
- Facilities Manager (Civic Centre)
- Housing Business Analyst
- Housing Fraud Officer
- Housing Property Surveyor

Insurance and Risk Officer
Landlord Liaison Officer
Legal Assistant
Major Works and Disputes Resolution Officer
Planning Technical Officer
Playworker (Saturday)
Principal Environmental Health Officer
Principal Planning Officer (Development Management)
Property Maintenance Officer
Rent Officer
Revenues and Benefits Officer (Generic)
Revenues and Benefits Officer (Generic)
Revenues and Benefits Officer (Generic)
Revenues and Benefits Officer (Generic) 16 hours
Senior Landscape Officer
Senior Planning Officer
Senior Planning Officer (Development Plan)
Service Business Partner General Fund
Service Business Partner Housing
Systems Development Officer (0.8 FTE)
Treasury & Finance Manager
Visitor Information Point Assistant

In terms of the posts that have been deleted, they number 22. Nine of these posts relate to a management restructure in 2022. The remaining post deletions were as a result of the ending of a fixed term scheme or were deleted as a part of organisational restructure.

The posts are:

Place Brand Manager
Revenues and Benefits Manager
Planning and Building Control Manager
Environment and Licensing Manager
Housing Development and Regeneration Manager
Human Resources Manager
Senior Housing Operations Manager - Property
Environment and Licencing Manager
Senior Housing Operations Manager - People
Systems Team Leader
Town Park Trainee (Kickstart)
Animal Carer and Education Officer
Economic Development Trainee (Kickstart)
Museum Trainee - Kickstart
Senior Service Accountant
Museum Trainee - Kickstart

Principal Finance Manager
Economic Development Advisor (CZA)
Project Officer
Strategy and Economic Development Manager
Care and Support Officer (LMC)
Director of Communities and Environment

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor:

Has a staff survey been carried out to look at the impact of not filling these vacancies?

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

A staff survey is starting next week.

3 Stephen Barnes to Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

A year ago today a Planning Application was made to demolish Sherards House and replace it with 14 houses. Over 50 residents objected to the proposal, giving a number of reasons why the application should be refused. It is clear from looking at the Council's Planning Portal that residents were not the only ones to raise concerns and a revised application was made on 27 January this year. During the course of the last year no feedback has been provided to residents, but a notice was placed on a lamppost stating that demolition would take place after 6 February. Then suddenly early last month contractors turned up and removed trees and shrubs from the site.

Will you please inform me of why a notice to demolish the house was placed on lampposts but residents were not informed, why the site has been partially cleared and when residents will be formally consulted about the new plan?

Reply from Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

There is indeed an application currently progressing through the planning system for Sherards House and it is available on the planning portal with all relevant correspondence and consultation published thereon. A formal decision on the application is anticipated in June.

The site has been partially cleared of self-seeded brush, brambles, and dead specimens to allow for site investigations to take place, including Topographical and arboriculturally investigations.

Whilst the demolition of Sherards House would allow for the future use of the area subject to the relevant permissions, the immediate security of the site including safety concerns, trespass, and Anti-Social Behaviour, will also be substantially improved.

An application for the demolition was validated as of the 24 February 2023 date and is registered on the planning portal under HW/DEM/22/00368.

Aside from the site notice (which is the responsibility of and was placed by the Council as Developer), there are no publicity requirements for applications made under Part 11 Class B. However, the Planning Officer emailed Mr Barnes directly to advise that the application had been validated and letters were also posted to 26 neighbouring properties.

Supplementary question from Stephen Barnes:

Have any trees been removed from the site?

Supplementary reply from Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

Some small seeded trees have been removed.

4 Stephen Barnes to Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

As a near neighbour of Sherards House I am aware that there are bats, a protected species living in close proximity to the house. I am also aware that the client's consultant ecologist would have advised that a Bat Activity survey should be carried out in the summer.

Can you advise me if such a survey was carried out last year or if such arrangements have been made for the summer months this year?

Reply from Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

An Ecology report including a bat survey inspection was carried out in February 2022 and no evidence of roosting was found.

A summary of the report reads:

“No trees or buildings with roosting potential are situated on site, nor would be lost to the proposal. The buildings are considered to offer a negligible level of roosting potential.

Further surveys are neither necessary nor appropriate. Since there was no evidence of bats at the site, a European Protected Species Licence will not be required for this project. Although no evidence of bats was found, it is probable that bats from nearby roosts will forage across the site and in the gardens of adjacent properties. This behaviour would be expected to continue after any building work has been completed and therefore it is considered that the planning proposal for this site will not have a detrimental effect on the local bat population.”

In line with this, no further surveys will be required.

Supplementary question from Stephen Barnes:

Do you agree that the surveys pre-determine the outcome of the applications?

Supplementary reply from Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

The application is in the remit of the Development Management Committee to determine.

5 Alan Leverett to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

A question was asked of you last year about the construction of new off-street parking areas on housing estates.

Can you advise me if any further progress has been made to construct a new parking area adjacent to Barn Mead or indeed anywhere else in the town or if this whole programme had now been abandoned?

Reply from Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The Barn Mead Scheme is still on the Parking Steering Group workplan, and this project is being submitted for full planning permission following the completion of the resident and councillor consultations together with pre-app advice from Planning.

An initial information gathering exercise through estate inspections has been undertaken that will inform the development of the Work Plan to identify other schemes that could be taken forward.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

How much is in the budget for off-street parking schemes.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I will arrange for a written response to be provided.

6 Alan Leverett to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

I asked a question of Cllr Swords in December 2021 concerning the problem of potholes and poor maintenance of cycle tracks that are in the ownership of Harlow Council. I was told at the time to watch this space! Fifteen months has now elapsed during which time I have been watching this space and it seems evident that little if any work has been carried out to Harlow Council's cycle tracks.

If work has been carried out, can you please provide me with a list of sites attended to and how much work has been done in each location?

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

Thank you for your question Mr Leverett.

The town's cycle tracks are a key network used by residents to get around the town. Maintaining them, in particular the parts of the network under the responsibility of the council, is a matter this administration takes seriously. Approximately 10 per cent of the network is under Harlow Council responsibility.

I share your desire to see more progress being made. To take this work forward on a more proactive basis, I've asked officers to progress two key actions: firstly review the core capital budget for a phased scheme of repairs to be factored into future plans over multiple years; and secondly prepare an investment case that can be presented to access new funding streams.

The council is aware that more funding for pothole repairs has been announced by the Government as part of the Spring Budget. A further £200 million has been allocated to the Potholes Fund by central government to help local communities tackle the problem. The council's ambition is to put forward a case to ECC secure additional funding to help maintain the network, but this is dependent on the criteria in place to be able to do so.

There remains in place a commitment to the principle that a well maintained cycle track network is a priority. The council has advanced its thinking about how to achieve that.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

How much is in the budget for cycle track maintenance?

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

I will arrange for a written response to be provided.