

**MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL
HELD ON**

6 April 2023

7.30 - 8.40 pm

PRESENT

COUNCILLORS

Andrew Johnson (Chair)
Sue Livings (Vice-Chair)

David Carter	Ash Malik
Simon Carter	Colleen Morrison
Joel Charles	Kay Morrison
Jean Clark	Russell Perrin
Bob Davis	Daniella Pritchard
Jodi Dunne	Nicky Purse
Tony Durcan	Stacy Seales
Tony Edwards	Lanie Shears
Michael Garnett	Clive Souter
James Griggs	John Strachan
Alastair Gunn	Dan Swords
Michael Hardware	Chris Vince
Eddie Johnson	Mark Wilkinson
James Leppard	

OFFICERS

Andrew Bramidge, Chief
Executive
Simon Hill, Director of
Governance and Corporate
Services
Adam Rees, Senior
Governance Support Officer

94. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nick Churchill, Matthew Saggars and Nancy Watson.

95. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

96. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 February 2023 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

97. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR**

The Chair thanked the Councillors who attended his quiz night on 30 March. Tickets for Celebrate Harlow were now on sale with the event taking place on 27 April. He asked as many Councillors as possible to buy tickets for what promised to be an excellent evening.

The Chair informed the Council of the sad passing of the Mayoress of Castle Point Council, Dawn Tucker.

Lastly, the Chair said that two long serving Councillors, Jean Clark and Bob Davis, would both be stepping down in May. He thanked both of them for their work as Councillors.

98. **PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

None.

99. **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

The questions, together with the answers, are appended to the minutes.

100. **HARLOW YOUTH COUNCIL UPDATE**

Ella Braby gave an update on the work of Harlow Youth Council (HYC) over the last year. A copy of the update is appended to the minutes.

101. **QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL**

The question, together with the answer, is appended to the minutes.

102. **QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

The questions, together with the answers, are appended to the minutes.

103. **MOTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

a) Multi-Year Approach to Local Government Finance Settlement

Proposed by Councillor Chris Vince (seconded by Councillor James Leppard):

“This council support's the Local Government Association's campaign calling on the government to implement a multi-year approach to the local government finance settlement.

Currently the settlement is worked out on an annual basis, with the final details of this year's settlement only coming in December, giving little time for the council's finance team and finance portfolio holder to form a budget.

This is the fifth one-year settlement in a row for councils which continues to hamper financial planning and their financial sustainability.

With a multi-year settlement Councils like Harlow would be better able to plan for a sustainable future.

This council will, on a cross party basis;

- a) Actively work with the LGA to support this campaign and promote the advantages of a multi-year settlement.
- b) Write to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government asking for a review of local government finances and for the adoption of a multi-year approach.”

RESOLVED that the above motion be carried.

104. **REFERENCES FROM CABINET AND COMMITTEES**

- a) Referral from Cabinet - Changes to Delegations and Contract Standing Orders

Full Council received a referral from Cabinet to approve changes to delegations and contract standing orders.

Proposed by Russell Perrin (seconded by Councillor Stacy Seales) it was:

RESOLVED that the changes to the Constitution and Portfolio Holder Delegations (attached as Appendix A to the report) be approved.

105. **REPORTS FROM OFFICERS**

- a) Annual Report from Councillors Appointed to Outside Bodies

RESOLVED that the Annual Report from Councillors Appointed to Outside Bodies be noted.

106. **MINUTES OF CABINET AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

- a) Minutes of meeting Tuesday, 14 February 2023 of Scrutiny Committee
- b) Minutes of meeting Thursday, 16 February 2023 of Cabinet
- c) Minutes of meeting Wednesday, 22 February 2023 of Development Management Committee
- d) Minutes of meeting Wednesday, 1 March 2023 of Audit & Standards Committee
- e) Minutes of meeting Tuesday, 7 March 2023 of Licensing Committee

- f) Minutes of meeting Tuesday, 14 March 2023 of Scrutiny Committee

107. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL

Full Council – 6 April 2023

Questions from the Public

1 Hilda Cook to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

I'm Mrs Hilda Cook. I'm 90 years old and I've dealt with quite a few challenges during my life, including going on a lengthy strike because my employer refused to recognise our trade union. I was blacklisted and lost my job ... but I was far from beaten.

This is my current campaign. If people cannot get out of their homes they become isolated, depressed and lonely. That can be extremely dangerous. If they can't afford taxis, they're trapped. Workers and students, like older people, depend on public transport (which should be publicly-owned and publicly-run, in my opinion!). Hundreds of people depend on the Number 9 bus service. We won't be able to get to work, to school, to the shops or to hospital.

I know that you councillors care about our wellbeing. You care about what's happening to us. Whilst Harlow Council doesn't control the bus service, it has plenty of influence. It has ideas, interest and initiative. We need your help now.

What will you do to support Harlow residents at the mercy of bus service stoppage?

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

Thank you Mrs Cook for raising this question. I agree with you that bus services are vital to many people and for some buses are the only affordable mode of transport. I also agree with you that if people cannot get out of their homes they can rapidly become isolated, depressed and lonely. Loneliness, for what it is worth, in my opinion is a cruel infliction which we all have a duty to eliminate. As you will hear in my answer to Cllr Vince, I have asked officers to refer this to our bus users group to see what can be done. I also give you my personal assurance that I shall keep a close eye on the work of the bus user group and offer them any support I can to raise awareness of this important issue.

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

In March of last year, a resident made enquiries of the Council about placing an advert for a potential Neighbourhood Watch scheme in the councils notice

board at Pollard Hatch. This board had been damaged for at least a couple of years and nothing had been placed in it during that time.

The officer tasked with finding out who had the keys to the board made extensive enquires within the council but responded some six weeks later that he could not find this information and concluded by “apologising for not being able to help this time”. It was clear that the notice board at Katherines Hatch was suffering the same fate because the council had to advertise the local elections by sticking notices on the door of the room rather than use the notice board just a few feet away.

It came to light in November that eight notice boards around the town had been replaced with new ones. Since 15 December two residents have been making enquires of Cllrs David Carter and Steve LeMay. To date no information has come forth about who has the keys to these boards or how members of the public can gain access to them to advertise community events.

Can you please advise me who has the keys to these notice boards and how residents can gain access to them?

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

The Council's Communications Team have access to the notice boards and will be providing content shortly. Residents can email the team on communications@harlow.gov.uk should they wish to suggest content.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Do you agree that the contact information should be put in the noticeboards and what was the cost of the new notice boards installed throughout the town?

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

I will ask for the contact information to be included and I will arrange for a written response to be provided to you about their cost.

3 Jake Shepherd to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Since December 2020, Essex has adopted and further extended the Department for Transport's (DfT) trial of electric scooters in pilot-areas. The data from Basildon, Chelmsford and Colchester demonstrated a clear modal

shift with 82% of users replacing their private car with a hired e-scooter for short journeys (average journey of less than 3km/23 minutes).

What work has the Leader of the Council done to ensure Harlow is included in future pilot-schemes, or to explore developing our own e-bike/bike rental scheme as seen in Essex, Cambridge, Manchester, Bristol and London?

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

I have undertaken no work to include Harlow in a future pilot schemes. I take at face value your statistics on modal shift and agree they appear impressive. However, I think there are many questions that the existing pilot schemes need to answer in terms of pedestrian safety. I also think we need to look wider than just the pilot schemes in Essex and look to where these scooters have been introduced in other places around the world.

Mr Shepherd will no doubt be aware of the recent referendum in Paris. Despite Paris being one of the first cities to adopt the electric vehicles 90% of voters voted in favour of banning the scooters. The referendum was called in response to a rising number of people being injured and killed on e-scooters in the French capital.

There have been growing concerns amongst Parisians with the way some people were driving the scooters - weaving through traffic, dodging pedestrians on pavements, and getting up to speeds of 17mph (27km/h). There was also criticism that groups of parked e-scooters were cluttering pavements.

In 2021, a 31-year-old Italian woman was killed after being hit by an e-scooter carrying two people. She fell and hit her head on the pavement, suffering a cardiac arrest.

I am therefore not keen that Harlow takes part in any pilot scheme until such safety concerns have been adequately addressed. I would like to take this opportunity to remind the public that riding an e-scooter in Harlow is illegal. Electric scooters are currently classed as 'powered transporters' by the government and fall under the same laws and regulations that apply to all motor vehicles. This means that it is illegal to use them on pavements, in cycle lanes and in pedestrian-only areas. In parts of the country where it is legal the driver of the e-scooter still needs to hold a full valid or provisional driving licence and insurance.

The penalties for driving an e-scooter illegally can be quite severe:

The police can issue a fixed Penalty notice:

- With a £300 fine and six penalty points on your licence for having no insurance
- Up to £100 fine and three to six penalty points for riding without the correct licence

You could also be committing an offence if you're caught riding on a pavement. In such an instance you could receive a

- Fixed Penalty Notice and possible £50 fine.
- If using a mobile phone or other handheld mobile device while riding you could receive £200 and six penalty points.
- Riding through red lights could lead to a potential Fixed Penalty Notice along with a £100 fine and possible penalty points.
- Drink driving is treated the same as if you were driving a car, you could face court-imposed fines, a driving ban and possible imprisonment
- If you're using an e-scooter in public in an antisocial manner, you can also risk the e-scooter being seized under section 59 of the Police Reform Act.

Supplementary question from Jake Shepherd to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

What progress has been made on the actions promised on cycle paths since a question was asked at the Cabinet meeting on 23 March 2023?

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

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

4 Jake Shepherd to Councillor Michael Hardware (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Growth):

What has this administration achieved in tackling congestion, pollution and improving air quality when it comes to offering a sustainable vision on sustainable transport?

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

The development of sustainable transport options for new and existing residents is essential as part of delivering the longer term growth of Harlow over the coming 30 years.

This administration recognises this and, as such, we adopted the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Transport Strategy at Cabinet in November 2021. This sets out the ambition for 50% of journeys within Harlow being through sustainable means and 60% of journeys that originate from within the new Garden Town settlements. The Transport Strategy now has weight as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. Over the last 18 months, new developments in appropriate locations, such as the town centre, have been approved on the basis of being at or near car-free developments. This is a direct consequence of the policies set out in the Transport Strategy.

The implementation of the Transport Strategy will, largely, be a matter for Essex County Council in their role as Highways Authority, and the Garden Town. This will see the development of a network of Sustainable Transport Corridors which will prioritise public transport, cycling and walking across the town. The first of these will be constructed, commencing this year, from the town centre to Gilston and will be in place in advance of the bulk of the Gilston development commencing. The same will happen with the other developments if and when they come forward.

The Council has also been involved in the Section 106 discussions for the Gilston development that will see the developers providing a substantial subsidy for bus transportation. Again, the same will happen with the other developments if and when they come forward.

Although the delivery of the Sustainable Transport Network will largely be a matter for the County Council, this administration will continue to work with them, with developers and with our neighbouring authorities, as well as in consultation with existing residents, to ensure that sustainable transport solutions are delivered to support growth.



Thank you for inviting Harlow Youth Council to the meeting. My name is Ella and I am a Harlow Youth Councillor. Harlow Youth Council is a locally elected group of 13- to 19-year-olds who live in or attend school in Harlow. As a group, the Youth Council represents the views and opinions of young people in the town.

Harlow Youth Council is not affiliated to any political party. All young people can have their say, through their youth councillor, about issues that affect them.

I am here to share an update on the work that Harlow Youth Council are doing. Our current priorities are –

Promote positive physical and mental health and wellbeing for children and young people.

And

Protecting the environment and supporting the council's climate change agenda.

HYC have supported Essex Safeguarding Children's Board social media campaigns which include 'Operation Henderson' raising awareness of child criminal exploitation at train stations and on transport networks. Youth Councillors also use their social media platforms to raise awareness of Safer Internet Day, Mental Health Awareness Week, and suicide prevention campaigns.

Youth Councillors get involved in community events. Last year this included having stalls at Harlow Museum community fete and PATACC Black History multicultural festival at Harlow Town Park. Youth Councillors delivered activities for children and families that supported current HYC priorities. Our activity at the multicultural festival was aimed at raising awareness of positive mental health and wellbeing. People were invited to come and create their own Happy Box which they decorated and took away to place in items that make them feel happy. People were also encouraged to scan a QR code that linked into leaflets produced by Youth Councillors. The leaflets give information and tips on positive mental health and wellbeing for young people.

At the community fete people were invited to design their own Tote bag to be taken away and used again and again. Youth Councillors feel that it is important to support the Council's climate change agenda and help to raise awareness within the community of how everyone can do little things in their everyday routines to re-use and recycle more. Youth Councillors also volunteered their time to get involved in The Council's Big Clean Up, where they collected litter from around the Latton Bush Centre and surrounding areas. Youth Councillors decided to donate the £100 to the Chair's charity Streets to Homes.

Harlow Youth Council Update

Young people in Harlow are passionate about climate change and Youth Councillors have discussed things that everyone can do to influence climate change at a local level. Youth Councillors identified a need for more recycling bins alongside general waste and dog bins to encourage people to recycle their rubbish when out in public places. The recent Big Clean Up initiative indicated that lots of plastic drink bottles were being left at football and playing fields so we thought Church Langley playing fields would be a good place to start. Youth Councillors have submitted a project plan to the council's Environment team which has been agreed in principal. Youth Councillors are working with the Environment Team to move forward with this as a pilot project. Once the bin is in place Youth Councillors will use social media to raise awareness of the pilot with the local community. We would welcome the support of ward councillors to promote and encourage use of the bin.

Youth Councillors have recently given feedback on The Councils' Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Economic Growth and Development Strategy and were consulted on the Community Safety Strategy and Public Space Protection Orders in the Town Centre (PSPO).

We have also been consulted on the HGGT Garden Town Quality of Life mapping project and are being consulted on the Epping Forest District Council Latton Priory Design Code. Youth Councillors feedback on behalf of Harlow young people and we hope that our views are considered to help shape the growth and development of Harlow going forward.

Youth Councillors are very keen to work more closely with Ward Councillors and in an effort to help foster closer working relationships they invited adult Councillors from all political parties to an activity evening on Monday 20 February. The event was held at The Latton Bush Centre.

The activity evening was delivered in the style of The Apprentice. Teams were mixed with Youth Councillors and adult Councillors working together to come up with a fictional idea for an exciting new facility for Harlow. Teams were given a brief about a fictional new development for Harlow and were set a budget. Teams were asked to consider The Council's climate change agenda and the health and wellbeing of the community when designing the facility.

Teams had 3 minutes to pitch their idea to a panel of 4 judges. In their presentation they had to persuade the judges why their idea should be chosen, give a breakdown of costs showing how they had stayed in budget, and share the name their team had chosen for their facility. Three teams were fired, and one team was hired!

The evening was great fun with an opportunity for adult and Youth Councillors to get to know each other, work together as a team and help to build a foundation for strong working relationship in the future.

We welcome any opportunities to work with Ward Councillors on any issues that affect young people in the Town.

Thank you.

Full Council – 6 April 2023

Questions from the Youth Council

1 Nicoleta Cerescu to Councillor Joel Charles (Portfolio Holder for Business and Community Resilience):

Harlow Youth Councillors were really pleased to be able to share feedback on the Council's health and wellbeing strategy. Childhood obesity is a real concern as Harlow has the highest percentage of children overweight/obese in year 6 in Essex. Can you tell us what resources the council will make available, financial, or otherwise, to support and encourage families to make better lifestyle decisions around eating habits and being physically active during the cost-of-living crisis?

What do you suggest Youth Councillors could do to help/get involved?

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

The Council very much welcomes the continued role the Youth Council is playing to keep a focus on some of the key priorities included in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. It should also be recognised that the Youth Council played an important role in helping to develop the strategy before it went out to wider consultation.

It is right to raise the issue of obesity levels amongst young people in the town as stored up health issues are awaiting a whole generation if the trend is not arrested soon. Obesity is linked to a wide range of diseases, including type two diabetes, heart disease and mental health conditions. At a national level, the Department of Health and Social Care estimated late last year that obesity costs the NHS £6 billion annually and this is set to rise to over £9.7 billion each year by 2050.

Action on obesity is being taken at a local level. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy has completed the consultation phase required as part of the adoption process. Council officers are working with partners, including some of the town's healthcare leaders, who sit on the Health and Wellbeing Board locally to refine the emerging action plan. One of the outcomes set out in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, to be achieved by 2028, is to enable weight loss in the town by addressing environments that support or promote obesity. This 2028 outcome is included as a central feature in the emerging action plan. The aim is to facilitate the ability for the Youth Council to take a leading role in supporting the delivery of the obesity outcome target.

There is also a great opportunity for the Youth Council to develop a relevant project to address childhood obesity and to bid for some of the public health funding that is provided by Essex County Council to deliver the Health and Wellbeing Strategy priorities, or indeed, other forms of support that might be relevant. Council officers are committed to working with the Youth Council to explore how more progress and a specific intervention can be designed to prevent more young people having to live with the long-term health consequences of obesity.

Full Council – 6 April 2023

Questions from Councillors

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

This winter many Harlow residents were forced to choose between heating their homes and feeding their children. That we're no longer shocked by that is shocking.

Parents skipped meals so that their children could eat. Food banks struggled to meet demand.

We prompted and questioned; we flagged up the need for the timely provision of Warm Banks. We encouraged the Administration to be proactive, rather than wait while need escalated.

How will you ensure that measures are in place for next winter, rather than left to the 11th hour?

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

The Council's priority during the winter was to make sure those people most in need received support. For a four-month period during the winter, the Council took the decision to do what it can to keep vulnerable residents warm. Spaces were provided at the Playhouse and the Latton Bush Centre for people struggling to make ends meet to come and stay for a few hours in a welcoming environment. On top of the warm spaces initiative, the Council launched a campaign to encourage those who were in financial difficulty to seek help.

It is important to recognise the role the Community Hub, that received Government funding that was allocated by Essex County Council, has taken to help people in need in the town. Rainbow Services, working in partnership with Mind in West Essex, Harlow Foodbank, Citizens Advice and the Volunteer Centre Harlow, continue to do all they can to help residents who have been hardest hit by cost of living pressures. The response by the Library Service and a number of voluntary sector organisations in the town to provide warm spaces ensured there were options every week for someone to seek a place to go if they were in need.

In preparation for next winter, the Council will take a decision in the late summer this year about whether or not to proceed with the warm spaces

initiative. This decision will be taken in collaboration, as was the case last winter, with the charitable and voluntary groups in the town who work closely with the Council to support those residents most in need. Energy costs and wider economic data at the time will also have a bearing on what decision is taken.

There cannot be any complacency on this issue, so Cllr Gunn and I recently met with the Harlow Poverty Alliance to discuss what steps can be taken to develop a wider action plan to deal with the impact of poverty in the town. Making sure nobody is left behind or forgotten in the town is something my colleagues and I care passionately about.

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

Would you agree that tackling poverty should be the Council's priority?

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

One of the first things this administration did was freeze Council Tax. I am proud to work with some of the town's standout community leaders and help people get the best support possible. We cannot become complacent about the challenges faced

2 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Considering the number of bus routes which are currently being cut or decreased by Arriva would the administration join me in calling for Arriva to work with the council, the county council and bus passengers to address some of the issues and also re-instate the bus users group which hasn't met since before the Covid pandemic?

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

I welcome this question from Cllr Vince. Bus travel forms a vital component of our transport system and is heavily relied upon by a great many of our residents. I too am concerned by the reduction in the number of routes. Whilst the district council has no responsibility or control over bus routes I would be willing to support any efforts to reverse the trend in reducing bus services. To that end I have asked officers to refer this concern to the bus users group and ask that they meet with Arriva and the Essex wide bus users group to see what can be done to address this situation.

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Will you keep me up to date?

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

Yes.

3 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

In the last budget you announced 19 job vacancies which would not be filling including 4 which have been vacant for less than 6 months and 4 currently filled. What work will you do to assess the impact of these cuts and ensure that further cuts/redundancies, are not required next year?

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

Work to ensure the effective working of the Council is under constant review as it is in most organisations. Our work to bring forward a balanced budget for 2024-2025 will commence immediately after the elections and will be linked to work to bring forward a new Corporate Strategy and linked MTFs to be considered later this year.

4 Councillor Jodi Dunne to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

Our play equipment is looking decidedly tired, what investment has been spent in our play parks over the last 12 months and what effect is continued cuts to local government finances from this Conservative government having on the management of our play parks and green spaces?

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

Maintaining the provision of play facilities for young people to get outdoors and enjoy the town's many green spaces is something the council remains committed to delivering on.

The annual inspection report is detailed, HTS use it for general maintenance, nuts bolts etc and with higher risk priorities identified to enable the next years

Capital programme to be drawn up. HTS has a Capital programme and a limited budget for works.

HTS commission an independent annual inspection which looks at risk on play area equipment and highlights maintenance tasks. The last full audit of play provision was 2008 under the last administration. This is now long overdue It's not a small piece of work which can be produced easily, and it is this administration commitment to deliver on our parks and green spaces.

One way the council can better understand what different types of play facilities for young people and their families and what they would like to see is by making sure their views do help to form future council policy and funding decisions. My colleague Cllr Charles is going to take forward, as part of the council's new corporate strategy, the development of a Play and Recreation Action Plan. The more people can enjoy outdoors, the better it is for their health and wellbeing. This is a great opportunity to engage young families and the Youth Council, so the Play and Recreation Action Plan will be added to the council's forward plan for the Cabinet to take forward during the next municipal year.

Supplementary question from Councillor Jodi Dunne to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment):

Would you agree that properly funded local services are essential to works programmes for green spaces and play equipment?

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

Yes, I would. Government funding was higher this year than last year.

5 Councillor Mark Wilkinson to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Despite the 7% increase on council rents being a maximum increase and not a requirement the Conservative administration have nevertheless ploughed ahead with it despite warnings from the opposition of the effect it will have. What evidence will the council collect to the impact of this 7% increase and what additional support will they give tenants unable to cope with this increase?

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

I welcome the Conservative Government's introduction of a ceiling on social rent for 2023/24 and note that it is estimated capping rent increases at 7% will

save social tenants £200 this year compared to what would otherwise be the full permitted increase of CPI+1 percentage point (11.1%).

Harlow Council's decision to freeze Council Tax for three years, in addition to last year's £50 efficiency dividend will also be of direct help to many of our social tenants.

Moreover, I note that 7% represents a 'real terms' reduction in social rent and falls below this year's 10.1% increase to the State Pension due to the Triple Lock, the minimum 9.7% increase to all rates of the National Living Wage and of the Apprentice Rate, and the 10.1% increase to Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Carer's Allowance, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit.

However, I do recognise Cllr Wilkinson's concern about the financial wellbeing of Harlow Councils' tenants and can assure him that the Council continues to monitor rent recovery performance monthly to identify any trends or contributing factors.

The Council has a designated page on its website to provide support and advice to all Harlow residents on dealing with the rise in the cost of living. A link was included in the last three quarterly rent statements sent to all Council tenants and the site has been advertised on social media and in the last edition of Harlow Times. It links to local and national support providers and advice agencies, details of financial help and support available, and information for tenants struggling to pay their rent or Council Tax. It also includes information on health and wellbeing support services.

In addition, Rent Officers are highlighting available support to tenants wherever possible and additional information is being made available as part of rent recovery process of the support available, similar to the support letters used during the Covid pandemic. As well as directing tenants to support agencies and charities who may be able to assist, the letters highlight the extra short-term help with rent available via Discretionary Housing Payments, administered by the Revenues and Benefits department.

Tenants continue to be encouraged to contact the Council as soon as possible if they are experiencing financial difficulties, to enable officers to work with them to address issues impacting on them paying their rent.

Supplementary question from Councillor Mark Wilkinson to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Do you share my concern that rent arrears have increased by 6.4 percent in the last quarter, serious arrears over £1,000 have increased by 9.89 percent, arrears over £2,000 by 4.91 percent?

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

It is concerning, but we need to see if it is a trend, or a blip.

6 Councillor Mark Wilkinson to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

With an increase in heating bills hitting Harlow families only made worse by the Conservative government's failed economic policy rising inflation to 10%, what is Harlow council doing to look at improving insulation of council house stock and sign posting to those in the private rented/home ownership sector?

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

Harlow Council recognises the difficulties rising heating bills are having on our tenants and the affect high energy costs are having on the cost of living. The Council is committed to help by delivering energy efficiency improvements to its housing stock and is targeting its Housing Asset Management Programmes towards properties with the lowest energy ratings.

Current works include the replacement and renewal of the Council's Communal and District Heating Systems, including moving the charging of heat and hot water to an individual household basis through the installation of heat meters within properties. We are also improving the energy efficiency of the poorest performing properties which pose the clearest risk of fuel poverty to our tenants by improving insulation.

Through obtaining grant funding, additional insulation works to 181 properties has been completed.

Work to ensure the Council is fully compliant with its obligations under the 'Heat Network (Metering and Billing) Regulations 2014' continues, through which district heating renewal programmes are being delivered that are also helping tackle fuel poverty.

Housing is undertaking major refurbishments to its poorest performing flat blocks, for example the recent refurbishment of the Hides which has resulted in reduced energy costs for residents.

During 2023/24, a retrofit pilot of a shared temporary accommodation unit, with a further two other pilots in Foldcroft and Milwards will take place to give understand how we can go further in future to make our housing stock energy efficient, and better protect our tenants from high heating costs.

7 Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

At the Council meeting held on the 15th December, I asked the following question:

“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.”

I was told at the time by the Leader of the Council:

“The repair costs for these works was not yet available and were wrapped up in the abortive costs of the project.”

Given that we are now in April, can either the Leader of the Council or the Portfolio Holder for Housing please detail the costs to date of the work undertaken on the Five Acres Flat Blocks?

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

Further to the information provided by the Leader of the Council to Cllr Edwards in December 2022, I can advise that the cost of the repair work referred to in that answer came to £13,742. This included work to tiles, guttering and other repair works.

As the Leader advised in December, the cost of these repair works was not passed on to tenants. Further, £500,000 from the original budget for these was diverted to the completion of urgent roof renewals, and I welcome the priority Cllr Edwards continues to give to this pressing challenge through his Chairing of the Scrutiny Committee.

Cllr Edwards may also wish to be aware that materials had been purchased for the suspended works to Five Acres. However, I can assure him these have been stored and remain available for future use.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tony Edwards to Councillor Alastair Gunn (Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Given that there had been scaffolding on the site for at least two and a half months, as well as portacabins, how could I possibly accept the total cost was £13,742. Please could I be given a detailed breakdown of how these costs were arrived at?

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

This is the information which has been provided as relates to your question. If you require further information, I am happy to provide this to you.

8 Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Given the growing number of vacancies within the council, some at very senior levels, and the freezing of or failure of recruitment to fill many roles would you please give me an update on how this is impacting service delivery and the number of complaints received in the last year?

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

Vacancies at the Council are not 'growing'. Indeed, there are currently live advertisements for 10 posts on our website and a further 10 about to be advertised. There is no freeze on recruitment. As I indicated in my reply at Cabinet recently, the remainder have either been unsuccessful in recruiting, subject to restructure and/or job evaluation prior to advertising.

In terms of complaints, I can report that, following our efforts to improve the number of complaints we were receiving, there has been a decrease of almost 450 complaints this year.

Supplementary question from Councillor James Griggs to Councillor Russell Perrin (Leader of the Council):

Could it be that you are recording a reduction in complaints at the same time I'm receiving copies of emails to residents stating that their complaints aren't being treated as a complaint. When is a complaint not a complaint?

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

A complaint is a complaint. If you are sitting on information where residents are not getting the level of service they are entitled to, you should pass that on to the relevant officer.

9 Councillor Bob Davis to Councillor Stacy Seales (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

I am advised that the cash office in the Civic Centre is to close on 28th April. There is a small notice to this effect on the Cash Office window ledge listing a decline in use of the office as the reason for closure. Is this the reason for closure and what measures other than the small notice have been taken to inform residents of this decision.

Reply from Councillor Stacy Seales (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

The use of the cash office facility has been declining since it was shut for a number of months during the pandemic. That period of closure has shown that Harlow residents have adopted alternative methods of payment, online, phone and by using payments cards available for free from the Council. Online and telephone payments are significantly easier for residents and at a lower cost to the taxpayer.

The facility will close at the end of April. Staff have been redeployed into our contact centre with no loss of jobs.

Members of the public are being assisted to use alternative methods of payment going forward and this is part of a coordinated effort with our Council Tax and rent teams. They are working directly with the few residents still paying in this way to ensure that they can use one of our many alternative options available for making payments, including:

- Direct Debit
- Online via our website www.harlow.gov.uk
- Using our 24 automated payment line 01279 446600
- Internet banking
- Standing Order

Correspondence sent to residents on ways to pay has been updated to reflect the available methods to pay and any resident presenting themselves at the contact centre will be likewise supported.

Supplementary question from Councillor Bob Davis to Councillor Stacy Seales (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

How are payments expected to be received from residents who do not have the internet, online banking, or those without a bank account, and how will deaf and blind people pay by phone?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Stacy Seales (Portfolio Holder for Governance):

Those who need face to face interaction will be supported.