

Full Council – 14 December 2023

Questions from the Public

1 Jennifer Steadman to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Harlow Council want to make Harlow a modern town to be proud of and bring the town centre into the 21st century for its residents.

So, what plans do you have to ensure that the residents of Harlow, their pets, and the incredible wildlife we can boast of are protected from firework damage, injury, upset and being fully aware of the pollution they cause to the planet and to our town? The amount of gunpowder charred, shattered plastic and concrete bungs that I collected just from my own property is astonishing, so imagine this spread around the town and in our rivers!

With drone displays starting at £9000 for a 20-drone display, they are certainly well worth considering for the financial benefit to Council budget as opposed to the £26,000 plus for this year's display. (£32,000 total) I presume these were professional pyrotechnic category 4 fireworks.

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question. As you will be aware, Harlow Council holds an annual firework display in the Town Park free for all the residents of Harlow to enjoy.

I do recognise the concerns you raise, and I will take each point in turn.

On the matter of the scale of disruption and upset caused, this public event, which this year was attended by approximately 10,000 residents free-of-charge, discourages lots of residents from having their own smaller events at home and so reduces the noise, litter, and detritus from their fireworks to the environment. Attending a public event also improves people's safety by reducing many potential accidents from home displays.

Second, on the matter of costs. The cost of the fireworks accounts for approximately £6,300 of the total allocated budget £28,750. The main costs are operational costs, staffing, road closures and of course public safety. It is a complex operation and I commend everyone who makes the spectacular event happen. This is therefore significantly cheaper than the display which you reference, given that for the size of the audience it is recommended that

at the very least a 500-drone display would be required, which even by your figures would therefore cost £225,000 plus the operational costs of £22,000 bringing the overall cost to over £250,000 compared with the current budget of £28,000. It is also the case that we are confident that all fireworks displays moving forward, including that in 2024, will be fully sponsored and therefore, all costs met by a sponsor and no costs for the council or taxpayer. This would not be possible for a drone display.

With regard to debris and the environmental impact, the Harlow Council firework display ensures that there is a designated area where debris falls and is then collected and disposed of by Environmental Services the very next morning - ensuring minimal impact to the surrounding area and wildlife.

We are continually looking at ways to improve events and to offer the best value for money. Drones have been considered. However, at present drones are a much more expensive option - particularly given the number needed to create an effective public display - compared to the current cost of fireworks and therefore, it is not feasible to take this forward.

Supplementary question from Jennifer Steadman:

Would you be prepared to work with me to create a display fit for the 21st century?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

We have taken steps to reduce the environmental impact of our display.

2 Brian Kasule to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Council housing repairs effect people's livelihoods especially during the winter months. Please can you confirm what the backlog was on 1 June, how much of that backlog has been cleared and also specifically what the roofing backlog was on 1 June and how much of that has been cleared?

Reply from Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

One of our key priorities is to fix Council Housing and we have been working with our colleagues and partners in HTS to improve services. The backlog in June was 5,481 outstanding jobs. I am pleased to report that we have made significant progress on reducing the backlog with over 80 per cent of the outstanding jobs completed.

In respect of the roofing work, historically, the backlog was as high as 1,722 outstanding jobs, with the June figure being 1,058 and has now been reduced to 214.

Supplementary question from Brian Kasule:

What is the long-term plan to deal with fixing council housing?

Reply from Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

We are aiming to clear the backlog of repairs by the end of the financial year. The timeframe to complete jobs will be 30 days. With the tenancy audit and stock condition survey being undertaken, we will be able to reduce the number of jobs being received.

3 Brian Kasule to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

We desperately need more social housing for Harlow residents. What is your short term plan to increase the number of social homes in terms of building new homes, bringing existing homes back into use and making better use of your current homes?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question. We are taking three very clear steps to deliver more council housing for local residents because we absolutely recognise the significant injustice facing Harlow families and we are on a mission to rebuild our town and fix council housing.

First, as part of our priority to rebuild our town we are building hundreds of new council homes for local families.

I am proud that phase one of our council house building programme, which has 11 schemes on site before Christmas, will deliver 103 new council homes for local families and regenerate left-behind neighbourhoods. Phase one of our programme alone will deliver more than three times the number of council homes, this council has built in the past three decades, showing that it is the Harlow Conservatives who are the party of council housing in Harlow. Further to this programme, we have established the groundbreaking Harlow Regeneration Partnership with Hill Group to deliver hundreds of more homes in the coming years for local families and renew left-behind neighbourhoods.

Second, as part of our priority to fix council housing, we are investing over £85 million into our existing council homes this year.

The action we have taken since June has resulted in a reduction in the housing repairs backlog of 81% and the average turnaround time on void properties being reduced from over 60 days in June, against a target of 24 days, to an average of 23 days, and the lowest number of void properties this council has seen in a number of years. This means more Harlow families moving into council properties quicker. We have also slashed the standard wait time for a repair from 9 months to two months, which by the end of the financial year, will be down to just 30 days. This comes alongside the stock condition survey now underway to better inform our planned maintenance, our new tenancy audits to ensure we support our tenants as best as possible and for instance, those in oversized properties can be encouraged to downsize, and our transformation of HTS.

Third, as part of our priority to fix council housing, we are radically overhauling the way we allocate our council homes to ensure that Harlow's council homes are truly for Harlow families and that they go to those most in need. We are currently consulting on the biggest shakeup of Harlow Council's Housing Allocations Policy in decades, potentially doubling the time the applicant would have to live in Harlow to be eligible, giving greater priority to those born in Harlow, ensuring that London Boroughs can no longer push their residents here and force us to house them ahead of local people, and tackling some of the longstanding injustices in our allocations system.

We are tackling the issue of social housing in Harlow head on and I am proud of what this council is achieving.

4 John Wake to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

The Leader of Harlow Council issued a statement in support of the people of Ukraine in February 2022.

Given that the number of civilians killed in the current war in the Gaza Strip in two months is at least ten times greater, per capita, than the number of civilians killed in the war in Ukraine in twenty-two months, why has the Leader of Harlow Council remained silent about the bombardment and the blockade that are destroying the very fabric of society in the Gaza Strip?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Nobody wants to see this conflict and the tragic loss of life or injury to any innocent civilian is truly horrific including those who have been taken as hostages by the proscribed terrorist organisation, Hamas. Our thoughts and I am sure, the thoughts of the whole chamber, are with all those who are suffering in any way and we all very much hope that peace will come forward as quickly as possible.

Supplementary question from John Wake:

Will the Leader condemn the violations of international law by Israel?

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

This is a district council to provide local services, not the UN, and foreign policy matters sit with the government.