

Full Council – 14 December 2023

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Matthew Sagers to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

I was recently contacted by a resident in my ward, who has lived in Harlow since 1959, regarding council housing. He was extremely angry that he feels that Harlow's council housing is not going to local residents and he has asked me to raise this directly with you in a council meeting.

So please can you clarify what steps you are taking to ensure that local council homes are for local residents?

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

Thank you for your question and I absolutely recognise the concerns your constituent raises which reflects the views many residents raise with me every day. We have two significant injustices here in that first, Harlow residents often feel that local homes are not going to local people and second, that London Boroughs are placing hundreds of residents into temporary accommodation here in order to meet our current local connection criteria therefore, be able to move into a council property here.

Those are historic challenges, but this administration is absolutely determined to end those injustices, and we will.

That's why, as part of our priority to fix council housing, we are bringing forward the biggest shakeup of Harlow Council's Housing Allocations Policy in decades.

We are currently in the process of conducting a consultation on our comprehensive review of the Housing Allocations Policy. It is this policy that determines how we allocate social housing in Harlow for both council-owned stock and housing association properties. It also determines who is allowed to apply for social housing, and who gets priority.

The changes we are proposing could potentially double the local connection time, ensure priority for those born in Harlow, uplift the salary cap, drive out the longstanding injustices and ensure local homes are for local people and that those who are most in need are the ones that have access to council

housing. The proposed new policy will come to Cabinet in February and will make clear that it is this administration that is tackling the big issues facing our town.

We are also proposing changes that will make the policy easier to administer and therefore simpler for applicants to understand and navigate their way through the application process whilst significantly reducing the waiting time for a response.

I would encourage your constituent and all residents to respond to our consultation as several hundred have already.

Supplementary question from Councillor Matthew Saggars:

It has been reported that in many areas council house building has stalled. Is that the case in Harlow?

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

We have 11 council house building schemes on site before Christmas meaning in the next financial year, we will build more homes than any council in Harlow for the last 30 years.

2 Councillor Kay Morrison to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Some time ago I asked for a definition of committee attendance as applied to an elected Harlow District councillor. At that time, I read aloud the Local Government Association's advice: that a committee member sitting in the public area for a short time, without participating, while the committee meeting conducts its business is not recognised as attendance. That's unsurprising but the response to my question was very surprising. I was told that the LGA is wrong and that a councillor does not have to sit amongst the rest of the committee or, indeed, to appear to participate in any way.

Understandably, Harlow residents are perplexed, observing that a councillor is elected to play a full part in every required area. One resident exclaimed 'That's why you're elected!'

Well, yes.... I agreed to ask again, this time in pursuit of greater clarity. Do you seriously believe that non-participation and distancing oneself from the committee members and discussion constitute attendance? If so, how many councillors can sit amongst the audience? All of us? We would count as attendees, after all, according to your interpretation.

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

In my previous answer I did not state that the Guidance was wrong. I said the Council defines attendance at meetings in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972, which it continues to do. Any Councillor can attend meetings and observe. Indeed, many members attend meetings and do not say anything at all – or are you suggesting there should be a requirement for each member to verbally contribute, otherwise the only distinction is where in the room their seat is placed.

Supplementary question from Councillor Kay Morrison:

Do you agree?

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

I've made it clear that we have acted in line with the law.

3 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance):

In October of this year the LGA wrote to the chancellor exchequer outlining their concerns about local government finances and the effect it will have on services, 'Council spend is increasingly concentrated in fewer services and on fewer people', which, whether we like it or not is a reality for this council. Part of the letter made these suggestions:

- Provide multi-year and timely settlements for councils to allow them to plan and make meaningful financial decisions.
- Provide clarity as soon as possible on funding streams in the 2024/25 settlement, such as the New Homes Bonus, where there are uncertainties.

Considering the fact, we have had no response from the treasury with regards our request for multi-year and timely settlements, and the budget gap if funding as the same as last year already sits at £1.7m, can I ask we write to them again (on a cross party basis) and do all we can to push for the certainty this council needs?

Reply from Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance):

Thank you for your question. The initiative of seeking multi-year settlements continues to have cross-party support. In that vein, the Leader, officers, and I engage with the LGA, DCN, other authorities and other local government

bodies on a daily basis. I understand that the Section 151 Officer has updated you on this matter. The Leader has written several times to the relevant Ministers and bodies on this matter, and we will continue this campaign.

However, the financial settlement will be announced next week following the Secretary of State's very useful policy statement a few weeks ago.

This administration continues to deliver sound financial management, having frozen Harlow Council Tax and investing record amounts into delivering our five priorities. I am proud of our financial position and continued strong management of the council's finances and await the settlement next week which will inform our final budget position in February.

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince:

Is it true that financial position is because of vacancies?

Reply from Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance):

No.

4 Councillor Chris Vince to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

The same letter from the LGA from October states 'Spend on homelessness services is budgeted to increase by 19.9 per cent in 2023/24. Government data published in July shows that more than 104,000 households were in temporary accommodation at the end of March 2023 – the highest figures since records began in 1998.'

Can I ask what additional support is being given to homelessness services in Harlow this winter including how many families are currently in temporary accommodation and the additional cost to the council compared to this time last year?

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

Total number in Temporary Accommodation as at 11.12.23 is 303.

The council is working around the clock to ensure that homelessness and rough sleeping in Harlow are tackled head on.

We have seen an increase in the number of those for which we are providing temporary accommodation, and as of 11 December the number of people in temporary accommodation is 303. Our Housing Teams are working at pace to ensure we are providing temporary accommodation wherever it is required and ensuring that we can move those in temporary accommodation into permanent accommodation as quickly as possible.

In terms of rough sleeping, we continue to work closely with partners such as Streets 2 Homes to ensure that no one in Harlow is sleeping rough. We have instigated SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) a number of times already this winter to ensure that anyone at risk of sleeping rough is in accommodation.

We will continue to do everything possible to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping by utilising the Homeless Prevention Grant and other such funding.

In terms of annual cost comparisons for Temporary Accommodation for 22/23 and 23/24, for period 9 (end of November) the actual spend for temporary accommodation was as follows:

2022/23 – Actual Spend £1,016,425

2023/24 – Actual Spend £1,131,054

Supplementary question from Councillor Chris Vince:

Are you concerned that the spend will increase next year?

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

No.