

**MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL
HELD ON**

12 December 2024

7.00 - 8.24 pm

PRESENT

COUNCILLORS

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

Danielle Brown	Kay Morrison
David Carter	Stefan Mullard-Toal
Joel Charles	Russell Perrin
Jodi Dunne	Daniella Pritchard
Tony Edwards	Nicky Purse
Hannah Ellis	Matthew Saggars
Michael Garnett	Stacy Seales
Emma Ghaffari	Lanie Shears
James Griggs	Jake Shepherd
Alastair Gunn	Clive Souter
Michael Hardware	Dan Swords
Luke Howard	Nancy Watson
Mark Ingall	

OFFICERS

Nicole Parker, Corporate
Support Officer
Hannah Marriott, Governance
Support Officer
Rebecca Farrant, Assistant
Director - Corporate Services
Jacqui Van Mellaerts,
Assistant Director - Finance
Simon Pipe, Customer and
Business Insight Manager
James Gardner, Assistant
Director - Regeneration

OTHER ATTENDEES

Ben Standing, Governance Support

69. **WEBCAST INTRODUCTION**

The Chair said the meeting was being webcast live and would be available for repeated viewing after the meeting has ended. By continuing to attend the meeting, you were consenting to being filmed and to appearing in the webcast.

70. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Linda Clark, Tony Durcan, Michael Houlihan, Maggie Hulcoop, James Leppard and Aiden O'Dell.

71. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

72. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2024 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

73. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR**

The Chair advised that he held a reception for his photo competition that evening. He advised that over 500 photos were submitted and that there were 30 finalists, with one winner and three highly commended photos.

The Chair wished everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

74. **PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

None.

75. **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

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

76. **QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

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

77. **MOTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

None.

78. **REFERENCES FROM CABINET AND COMMITTEES**

- a) Referral from Cabinet - Annual Treasury Management Report 2023/24

Full Council received a referral from Cabinet on the Annual Treasury Management Report for 2023/24.

Proposed by Councillor Dan Swords (seconded by Councillor David Carter) it was:

RESOLVED that Full Council approved the Annual Treasury Management report for 2023/24, as set out in Appendix A, to the report.

- b) Referral from Cabinet - Review of Local Council Tax Support Scheme

Full Council received a referral from Cabinet on the review of Local Council Tax Support Scheme.

Proposed by Councillor Dan Swords (seconded by Councillor David Carter) it was:

RESOLVED that:

- A The new banded Council Tax Reduction Scheme be approved.
- B Delegated authority be given to the Assistant Director – Finance in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance to implement the scheme by April 2026.

79. **REPORTS FROM OFFICERS**

- a) Independent Person - Audit and Standards Committee

Full Council received a report on the re-appointment of the independent members of the Audit and Standards Committee.

RESOLVED that Laura Kirman is re-appointed as the independent member of the Audit and Standards Committee.

- b) Minor Amendments to the Constitution

Full Council received a report on proposed minor amendments to the Constitution.

RESOLVED that the proposed minor amendments as detailed in the report be made to the Constitution and the Monitoring Officer arrange for the minor amendments be made without delay.

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

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings be noted.

- a) Minutes of meeting Wednesday, 6 November 2024 of Development Management Committee
- b) Minutes of meeting Wednesday, 20 November 2024 of Audit & Standards Committee
- c) Minutes of Meeting Thursday, 28 November 2024 of Personnel Committee

81. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

82. **EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED that that the following item be taken in private session on the grounds that it is likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as specified under Paragraph 3 of Part One of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, if and so long as in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Paragraph 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

83. **REFERRAL FROM CABINET - TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY**

Full Council received a referral from Cabinet on the Town Centre Strategy.

Proposed by Councillor Dan Swords (seconded by Councillor David Carter) it was:

RESOLVED that:

- i) Delegated authority be given to the Leader of the Council and Assistant Director of Finance (s151 officer) to finalise the capital financing for the redevelopment site as detailed in the report.
- ii) Delegated authority be given to the Leader of the Council and Assistant Director Regeneration and Commercial Development to procure and appoint a main contractor for the redevelopment site as detailed within the budget profile set-out within this report and in accordance with Council's procurement framework.
- iii) A budget is allocated for the negotiated purchase price and associated costs per the agreed Capital Programme and the terms of this report and approve that associated Capital Strategy and Treasury documents are amended to reflect the capital acquisition as detailed in the report.
- iv) Delegated authority be given to the Leader of the Council and Assistant Director of Finance (s151 officer) to finalise any required capital financing for the acquisition of as detailed in the report.
- v) Delegated authority be given to the Leader of the Council, Assistant Director of Finance (s151 Officer) and Assistant Director of Regeneration & Commercial Development to negotiate and complete the acquisition as detailed in the report.
- vi) Delegated authority be given to the Leader of the Council and Assistant Director of Regeneration and Commercial Development to enable the occupation of the building as detailed in the report.

CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL

Full Council – 12 December 2024

Questions from the Public

1 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I was pleased to note that following the last Full Council meeting you were able to supply me with the information I had sought in respect of the number of homes in Harlow which have been empty for more than six months. I was very surprised to see that they numbered more than 1000. I understand that one of these, in the Bush Fair Ward has been empty for over 10 years. I am aware that other councils have taken action to try and reduce this number, one way of doing this is to approach the owners and offer an arrangement whereby the Council enters in to a lease agreement, which then allows the council to provide a rented home to a family from the councils Housing Register, the owner is guaranteed a rent income and knows that the home will be kept in a good state of repair.

In view of the severe shortage of homes in Harlow, does Harlow Council ever make contact with the owners of homes which have been empty for a long time to establish why that is so and make any attempt to get them occupied in such a way as I have suggested above?

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

To date housing have not approached private owners of empty properties in terms of entering into lease agreements to assist with the housing pressure, however this is something the council is now considering.

There is also extensive work done by our Revenues and Benefits and Environmental Health teams to tackle such problems and as a result of your question, we will review this alongside any opportunities for the council to lease such properties.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Since sending the question in, I have become aware that the percentage of empty homes in Harlow is the highest in Essex. Can I ask that the Council contact Epping Forest's District Council who do have such a scheme which is

known as Popular Lets whereby they make the arrangements that I have discussed earlier on?

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

Empty homes pose challenges for communities and local authorities. In the country we have about one million homes currently standing empty in England. Founded in 2001 there is a group called the Empty Homes Network which exists to support partner local authorities to deliver practical results and driven solutions to issues of empty homes. Taking place on Wednesday 21 May they have a conference in Birmingham which I wish to attend. If we were actually as a Council to join this body, the National Empty Homes Conference, it would cost us £95 annually to join and that would give us 900 housing professionals who deal with empty homes matters. We could use them with their practice guides, templates and enforcement resources etc. So I think that we will intend to join this and see what we can actually do. A community of professionals who share ideas and insights, a library of tools and templates and practice guides to streamline this work.

2 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I note that the council advertises area inspections on its website, the latest list is dated April 2024, listing area inspections across the town up until September. The last of these in Great Parndon took place in August. Each estate is shown with a starting place and time. A closer look of the inspection on 3 July reveals that Deer Park was not listed at all.

Can you advise me how, other than on the council's website, the inspections are advertised, how often the forward list of dates is published, how often the visits take place and what if any feedback is given to residents about what action is being taken as a result of these visits?

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

The Council publishes its annual estate inspection calendar at the end of January for the forthcoming year. This programme provides an inspection for each estate, where the Council has social housing stock. The Housing Officers will inspect all of the estate, in relation to its condition, considering a number of factors including repair requirements, general cleanliness, anti-social behaviour and a visual condition rating. This information is then used to inform matters such as maintenance and improvement programmes and is available to residents and members upon request.

Residents and members are encouraged to attend these inspections, which are published on the council's website, by email to ward Councillors and more recently at our resident engagement groups. We are always looking for ways to increase all areas of resident engagement and this will feature heavily in our work to review our resident engagement strategies over the coming months to meet the new consumer standards in this area.

In response to the specific matter regarding Deer Park not featuring on our estate inspection calendar, this estate does not contain any Council owned social housing and therefore is not visited by the Housing Officer. However, this does not impact on other types of inspection that forms part of wider Council operations for example, street cleaning or landscape maintenance.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

In view of your response, does this mean that residents in all areas like Monksbury and Upper Park are not able to participate in area visits?

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

If they want to attend these, if they contact officers they will be allowed to.

3 Alan Leverett to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I note that in the Councils Transformation Framework, the comments made in the Corporate Peer Challenge of February 2023 include "There was a lack of identified evidence behind the Councils strategies, policies and decisions. More crucially, that the voice of the residents was not heard as much as it should be within the Council. With this in mind, at Full Council on 11 April I asked you a question on the subject of tenant and leasehold panels and boards. Despite the assurances you gave, I am sorry to note that the last published minutes of these meetings shown on the councils website are still dated 7 and 23 June 2023. There is no information about when meetings may have taken place since then or indeed dates for future meetings.

Can you explain how residents are informed about the dates of these meetings and what attempts if any have been made to increase attendance since the meeting of 11 April?

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

Every year Housing Services produces a Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Timetable, which lists the dates, times, and locations of its meetings. The timetable for each financial year is then included in the Council's events diary, which is published on the council's website and is updated every three months. I will ensure that this is up to date on the website. In addition, our Communications team have run campaigns to promote awareness of our Tenant and Leaseholder engagement service and how tenants and leaseholders can get involved, providing details of any meetings or events happening at the time of the campaign. The Housing Service is also in the process of drafting an article to be included in an edition of Harlow Times for next year, which will list details of the engagement timetable for meetings taking place during 2025/26.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

I am pleased to obviously hear that you are publishing the dates of the meeting for 2025/26. I'm wondering if you can actually ask the question of whether you can publish them in advance prior to the start of the year so people can put it in their diaries and get to the times of when they can attend and when they can ask questions?

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

Yes, I will have a look at that. The leasehold meetings are every month. Every month of the year we have tenants and leasehold meetings. There are people here tonight who go to those meetings, members of the public, and they are better attended at the end of the year than they were at the start of the year. The tenant meetings are not so well attended, they are in the afternoon and they are also published. There are only eight of those a year where the leasehold meetings are at least once a month but we will do our best to communicate this a little bit more. Both sets of meetings have better attendance than they had at the start of the year so I'm hoping this will continue.

4 Alan Leverett to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council)

I am sorry to note that to date you have not responded to the question I asked of you at the last Full Council meeting about staff vacancies. There is no doubt that this is affecting service and I am compiling a list of issues for you which demonstrates this.

A report has very recently been published which highlights the public sectors working from home obsession, which is crippling the countrys economy and has effectively created a two tier workforce. The report goes on to say that productivity is down 7% when staff work from home.

Are you able to advise me what percentage of staff time overall is being undertaken by staff working from home? Many businesses in the public sector are now seeing the benefits of getting staff back in an office. Has the council taken any steps to get staff back into the Civic Centre?

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

The council is here to serve residents and working patterns reflect those requirements. I am a great believer in the benefits of office-based working and the majority of staff time is spent in the office (whether that be at the Civic Centre or other council offices). Indeed, many staff work from the office for all of their working hours.

As I have repeatedly said, the needs of our residents drive the operation of this council – so if residents wish to meet with officer's face to face then that will be offered. As you may also be aware, we also monitor our customer service performance every single day and I am proud to highlight our extremely well performing Contact Harlow team.

Their work means that call waiting times have been lower than target across the year to date, with residents waiting under 2 minutes on average, well below what the private sector can achieve and abandoned call rates for Harlow Council are amongst the lowest of North Essex authorities.

I again hope that you will raise with me the matters you are concerned about so these can be investigated. I will also send him the information he has requested directly in writing.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

I thank you for the response but it's not answering the question again which I asked about the number of staff vacancies and the services being run by consultants in the Council. I never got a reply and I still haven't got a reply.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

As I said, I will send you that information in the morning. One thing to clarify, we don't have any council services run by consultants in the council. Our vacancy rate is below that of the national average for councils. We have a lower number of vacancies than we did this time last year and, again, for the third meeting in a row, if you have got such concerns I look forward to receiving them so they can be investigated.

5 Hugh Hoad to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

In view of the work being carried out in the Town Centre, do you agree that the Public Space Protection Order should be amended to 24 hours per day?

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

There are two Public Space Protection Orders in place for the town centre - one prevents cycling between 9am and 6pm and the other prevents alcohol consumption and ball games. The current order is due for review in August 2025, I would encourage you to engage in this consultation.

Supplementary question from Hugh Hoad to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Thank you very much for that reply, the typical non-committal reply I expected. Is there any point in taking part in the consultation as I spent an hour with your predecessor when the last review was on, coming up with suggestions which have not been taken into consideration so I am very very annoyed as my health and safety are breached every time I walk into that town centre.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

I'm not aware of the specifics of what Mr Hoad raises. As I say the PSPO's will be under review. I would encourage him to engage in the consultation with that. When they come forward he will of course have a chance to question and interrogate those further.

6 Natalya Moon to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

Do you stand by the comments you made regarding Muslims? You claimed that they "add nothing" and that we should "not allow any to come here" as well as showing support for other Islamophobic comments.

Reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council) in the absence of Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

Just for the sake of making it understandable, the first thing I would say is that Councillor Leppard sends his apologies. He is at his sons wedding in Argentina which has been planned for over a year.

These matters have been extensively investigated by an independent body whose outcomes are final. I have nothing further to add.

Supplementary question from Natalya Moon to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

If the wedding has been organised for a year, why has it not been published on the Council's website? It said he was to be in attendance for this meeting.

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Chair, I don't understand the question. The Councillor has given his apologies to the meeting as is usual practice. I don't think its ordinary for the Council to publish the engagements on the Council's website a year in advance.

7 Natalya Moon to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Considering his previous hateful comments, why has Councillor James Leppard not only been allowed back onto Harlow Council, but also been given a promotion to Portfolio Holder for Finance?

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

I refer to my previous answer.

Supplementary question from Natalya Moon to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Does the Council have any proof of things that Councillor Leppard has done to improve his behaviour, such as any courses he has gone on for his interaction with the public and do you believe that he will be able to unbiasedly serve his constituents considering his views on the religion of some of his constituents?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

The matter of a member serving their constituents, is not one for me. It is for the constituents to elect such a member but, as I say, I have nothing further to add. An independent investigation was carried out, the findings are final and I have nothing further to say.

8 Michael Szpakowski to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Tory councillor James Leppard has been 'cleared' by an internal Tory party investigation and subsequently promoted to finance portfolio holder on HDC despite a long line of clearly Islamophobic and racist posts on social media, including one which is effectively a call to violence against anti-racist

protestors. Does this mean that the majority group and indeed the Tory party as a whole endorse his vile views?

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

I refer to my previous answer.

Supplementary question from Michael Szpakowski to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

People here will remember the murder by fire of six members of the Shakoor family here in Harlow in October 2012. They will have seen the attempted by racists and islamophobes across the UK this summer. Crimes for which one person was sentenced to nine years in prison today. In light of the appearance of racist graffiti in Harlow last weekend, which included the liberal use of the n word, the p word, and suggested that people should burn the homes of these people, is it not to their eternal shame that the tory group should offer cover, sucker and promotion to someone who thinks it is amusing to celebrate the gunning down of people of colour and suggest it might be expedient to do the same with anti-racist protestors? Will this shame not be what they are remembered for or any other of their accomplishments?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Chair, I can only comment on council business so I have nothing further to add.

9 Christophe Uhlin to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Despite an appalling record of racist and Islamophobic posts, incitement to violence against anti racist protestors on social media and an internal Tory party investigation, why has the Tory party not distanced itself from James Leppard?

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

I refer to my previous answer.

10 Christophe Uhlin to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Is it now a Tory party policy to welcome racists and people who call for violence in its rank?

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

I refer to my previous answer.

Supplementary question from Christophe Uhlin to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

Why the silence? Where is my answer?

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

I have nothing further to add, because as I said, I answered the question which are all on the exact same matter in response to question six.

Full Council – 12 December 2024

Questions from Councillors

1 Councillor Mark Ingall to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

At the last Council meeting Councillor Swords said he would investigate the revelation of a social media post made by Councillor Leppard that many people would see as normalising racism, a post that was in addition to those social media posts described by Hope not Hate as "Islamophobic." What process has the Councillor put in place to investigate this additional material?

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

These matters, including the one he references, have been extensively investigated by an independent body whose outcomes are final. I have nothing further to add.

Supplementary question from Councillor Mark Ingall to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

The material that was presented at the last Council meeting was not material that was investigated by Hope Not Hate. It was new, additional material that the question makes clear and in our last Council meeting Councillor Swords said he would investigate these revelations, that was the promise that he made to this Council. If he is going to rely on a previous tory party investigation which this material didn't cover, would he now like to apologise to the Council for promising to investigate when clearly he isn't going to?

Supplementary reply from Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

The first thing I would say is that I think Councillor Ingall has inadvertently misled the chamber, I never said would investigate it, I said I would look at it. I know language is important to your side of the chamber as I am often reminded. I would also add that Councillor Ingall is not aware of what matters were investigated or not, that is not something that has been made public. As I have referenced, these matters including this one, have been extensively investigated and there is nothing further to add.

2 Councillor Jake Shepherd to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability):

Volunteers have noticed that when HTS carry out seasonal hedge-cutting and landscaping, litter is often left in the wake of machinery and trimmers used to carry out this work. Some might reasonably ask whether it should take Harlow Wombles to report and highlight litter left by HTS's landscape maintenance in the first place, instead, I would like to ask...

What steps will this administration take to ensure better communication and coordination with volunteer litter-pickers, to stop exposed litter being left to blow across streets or fester in hedgerows? Or better still, how can working practices be reformed so that exposed litter is collected immediately after hedgerows and shrubbery is cut back?

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

Thank you for your question and for joining me on my recent on-site ward work.

The HTS Grounds Maintenance team carry out the seasonal hedge cutting activities. The team are required to remove as much visible litter from the hedge as possible before commencing the works to prevent it being shredded during the cut.

At times the cut reveals litter that has blown deep into the hedges, not visible when the hedge is in leaf. The Grounds Maintenance teams should then notify their supervisor so that arrangements can be made for this litter to be cleared by the HTS Street Cleansing team. HTS are currently phasing in field management software which will allow these reports to be made directly by the staff on the scene, cutting down the time between the cut being completed and any residual litter being removed.

In terms of improving working practices so that litter is removed immediately after hedges are cut back, this would currently require Street Cleaning operatives to permanently work alongside the hedge cutting teams during the winter works programme in case there is litter exposed by the works. This is because the Grounds Maintenance teams have limited space on their vehicles to separate litter and green waste, which is necessary to ensure that the green waste is not contaminated by litter when it is delivered to the disposal facility. Clearly this is not a productive use of resources. The improvements that will be made with the introduction of the field management software will allow levels of productivity to be maintained.

3 Councillor Alastair Gunn to Councillor Danielle Brown (Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing):

Harlow's charities contribute hugely to our town and the support available to the people we serve. It is hugely welcome that the Butterfly Effect, now located at the Latton Bush Centre in my ward, is growing quickly in its new home and has recently achieved charitable status.

What is Harlow Council doing to support local charities like the Butterfly Effect, as we head into 2025?

Reply from Councillor Danielle Brown (Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing):

Firstly I'd like to congratulate the Butterfly Effect in the amazing work that they are doing in the town, and their charity status. We have a fantastic range of charities in Harlow, all supporting local residents, and the council has a long history of supporting local charities within the town through our partnership grant scheme.

Working with our partners the Health and Wellbeing board also supports and funds local charities providing projects to local residents, which support a wide range of needs aligning to the Boards five priorities. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to bring attention to two such projects that will launch in 2025. Working with chef Theo Micheals the council and partners will run a project with Rainbow Services called 5 Dinners, that will support residents in making healthy and affordable meal choices. This will include taking some of the most popular items from the Harlow Foodbank and using these ingredients to make nutritional meals encouraging residents to engage in cooking.

Harlow Council are also leading on an exciting project funded by Sport England. Working with many local partners, including charities, it will focus on getting current inactive residents more active by addressing the current barriers to being active and tackling equality to being more active which as we know is good for both physical and mental health. The partners will be key in delivering this work at grass roots level.

The council also works with the Harlow voluntary sector forum, and this week hosted its December Networking event, in association with Harlow Connected. Council officers also attend a Suicide prevention and awareness group along with The Butterfly Effect supporting in the great work they do.

The council is currently reviewing its partnership grants scheme alongside our support for the voluntary and charity sector as a whole to ensure we are maximising our support.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank the chair of the council for his work in supporting local charities each year, highlighting the good work this year of Rainbow Dementia Support Network and Harlow Steel Band.