

**MINUTES OF THE CABINET
HELD ON**

12 June 2025

7.00 - 9.10 pm

PRESENT

Committee Members

Councillor Dan Swords, Leader of the Council
Councillor David Carter, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing
Councillor Danielle Brown, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Community
Councillor Joel Charles, Portfolio Holder for Public Protection
Councillor Hannah Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Transformation
Councillor Michael Hardware, Portfolio Holder for Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution
Councillor Alastair Gunn, Portfolio Holder for Garden Town and Planning
Councillor James Leppard, Portfolio Holder for Finance
Councillor Nicky Purse, Portfolio Holder for Environment

Other Councillors

Councillor Tony Edwards
Councillor Lanie Shears

Officers

James Gardner, Managing Director
Daniel Dickinson, Assistant Director - Legal and Democratic Services (Interim)
Rebecca Farrant, Assistant Director - Corporate Services and Improvement
Amanda Lucas, Graphic Designer
Adam Rees, Senior Governance Support Officer
Alan Townshend, Executive Director
Jacqui Van Mellaerts, Assistant Director - Finance

5. **WEBCAST INTRODUCTION**

The Leader 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.

6. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

None.

7. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

8. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 April 2025 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Leader.

9. **MATTERS ARISING**

None.

10. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

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

11. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

None.

12. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE LEADER**

The Leader said that tonight, Building Harlow's Future was being presented. It was a bold plan that would transform Harlow Council. He outlined the six missions within the plan.

13. **PETITIONS**

None.

14. **RECENT RELEVANT DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE LEADER, DEPUTY OR PORTFOLIO HOLDER(S)**

None.

15. **SAFER HARLOW PARTNERSHIP FUNDING**

Cabinet received a report on Safer Harlow Partnership Funding.

Proposed by Councillor Joel Charles (seconded by Councillor Danielle Brown) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

A Approved the allocation of earmarked reserves to deliver projects against the priorities of the Safer Harlow Partnership (SHP).

B Delegated authority to the co-chair of the SHP (Julie Ellis, Executive Director of the council) to allocate funding in line with the criteria contained within this report.

- C** Would receive an annual report on the activities of the Safer Harlow Partnership in line with the outcome to revitalise the partnership.

16. **BUILDING HARLOW'S FUTURE**

Councillor Charles left the meeting.

Cabinet received an update report on the Building Harlow's Future plan.

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

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Noted and endorsed the approach being taken to implement the Building Harlow's Future plan.
- B** Noted and endorsed the proposed structure for reporting progress of delivery of the missions to each monthly Cabinet meeting.

17. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND DEVOLUTION – UPDATE**

Cabinet received an update report on Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution.

Proposed by Councillor Michael Hardware (seconded by Councillor Dan Swords) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Noted the update on Local Government Reorganisation for Greater Essex and the Interim plan feedback: Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), as set out in Appendix A to the report.
- B** Endorsed Harlow Council's continued participation with the production of Business Case A and Business Case B.

18. **REGULATOR OF SOCIAL HOUSING - UPDATE**

Cabinet received an update report on the council's progress against actions agreed with the Regulator of Social Housing.

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

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Noted the progress being made and actions agreed with the Regulator of Social Housing to manage our ongoing social housing compliance responsibilities and the wider elements of the Safety and Quality standard, and to improve our performance in this area.
- B** Kept under review the option of making a voluntary undertaking to the Regulator for Social Housing as work on finalising and implementing the improvement plan continues.

19. **PERFORMANCE, FINANCE AND RISK**

Cabinet received the Performance, Finance and Risk report for April 2025.

Proposed by Councillor Hannah Ellis (seconded by Councillor James Leppard) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Noted and endorsed the proposed review of the Performance, Finance and Risk reporting structure in light of the new Building Harlow's Future plan.
- B** Noted the performance of key performance indicators for April 2025 which demonstrate strong performance on majority of indicators.
- C** Noted the financial position as of April (period 1) of 2025/26 financial year across the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and Capital Programmes.
- D** Approved the virements for the Non-Housing Capital Programme identified within the table included in paragraph 25 of the report.
- E** Delegated Authority be given to the Leader of the Council in consultation with the Section 151 Officer to approve the carry forwards of 2024/25 budgets into the financial year 2025/26.
- F** Noted the current strategic risks for the council's operations in Appendix C to the report.

20. **MUSEUM IMPROVEMENTS**

Cabinet received a report on proposed improvements to Harlow Museum and Gardens.

Councillor Lanie Shears declared a non-pecuniary interest as a ward Councillor for Mark Hall.

Proposed by Councillor Danielle Brown (seconded by Councillor James Leppard) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Noted the progress made on the development of plans to improve the layout and flow of the Museum buildings with new café/education facility.
- B** Supported the submission of funding bids for the proposed improvements.
- C** Agreed in principle to consider allocating appropriate levels of match funding, to the value of a maximum of £500,000 in order to finance funding applications as part of future budgets.

21. **IN-HOUSE CAFE OPERATIONS PROPOSAL**

Cabinet received a report on operating models for three council café facilities.

Proposed by Councillor James Leppard (seconded by Councillor Dan Swords) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet noted the options presented for the operation of the three council café facilities and delegated authority to determine the final operating model(s) to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, in consultation with the Leader of the Council upon the completion of further due diligence.

22. **APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES**

RESOLVED that the appointments to outside bodies be approved as set out in the agenda pack.

23. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM COMMITTEES/WORKING GROUPS/PARTIES AND PANELS**

None.

24. **MINUTES OF PANELS/WORKING GROUPS**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings are noted.

- a) Minutes of meeting Tuesday, 29 April 2025 of Shareholder Sub Committee

25. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

26. **DISPOSAL OF CHURCH LEYS GARAGES**

Cabinet received a report on the disposal of 76-107 Church Leys Garages.

Proposed by Councillor David Carter (seconded by Councillor James Leppard) it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- A** Authorised the sale of the freehold of garages Nos.76 to 107 Church Leys.
- B** Delegated authority to the Assistant Director – Housing Operations, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, to finalise the terms of the disposal.

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Cabinet – 12 June 2025

Questions from the Public

1 Jennifer Steadman to Councillor Nicky Purse (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability):

Since I last questioned Council in July 2024 on the use of dangerous weedkillers around Harlow, I note that the Harlow Council website now states 'HTS strim weeds to stop unsightly growth - they do not use harmful weed control solutions.'

On behalf of our wildlife and Harlow residents I thank you sincerely for removing the use of these dangerous chemicals.

Can you please clarify the date at which this method was introduced and confirm that this is now a total blanket ban and that the use of dangerous weedkillers such as Glyphosate based solutions will now be confined to the Harlow history books as a method to control the weeds in Harlow?

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

Thank you, Ms Steadman, for your continued engagement and for your kind words on behalf of Harlow's wildlife and residents.

I can confirm that the Council instructed HTS to stop using weedkillers on all grassed areas from the start of the 2025 grass cutting season, which began on 5 March 2025. This marked the formal introduction of our updated service standard, which now prioritises mechanical weed control methods such as strimming to maintain green spaces without relying on chemical herbicides.

To clarify: the use of Glyphosate and similar chemical weedkillers is now prohibited on all grassed and soft landscaped areas managed by HTS on behalf of the Council. However, for the time being, targeted application on certain hard surface areas, such as pavements and kerb lines, is still permitted where mechanical control is not yet a viable alternative.

We recognise the importance of moving toward a more environmentally sustainable approach and are actively exploring and trialling alternative methods to manage weeds on hard surfaces as well. Our long-term goal is to phase out chemical weed control entirely where safe and practical alternatives exist.

We are committed to transparency and continuous improvement, and I welcome further dialogue as we progress in this important area.

Supplementary question from Jennifer Steadman:

Do your plans to control weeds include scheduled strimming, monitoring and mapping specifically of growth hotspots, mulching or ground cover planting, manual removal systems?

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

I will provide you with a written response.

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

There are quite a few hoardings around town advertising the building, by Harlow Council, of 3-4 bedroom houses that will be wheelchair accessible.

Wheelchair accessible homes are in short supply because retro fitting existing properties to meet accessibility standards is often expensive, technically challenging and limited by structural constraints.

Can you please provide a construction timeline, when building will commence and ultimately when families can expect to move in?

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

The council is delivering its mission to rebuild our town and the construction of the biggest council house building programme for a generation.

As each site completes, they will be made available for residents on the Housing Needs register, and we look forward to welcoming families to their new home from September this year when the first of this phase of council homes will be completed.

Of the first eleven sites within Phase 1 of our Council House Building Programme, four are currently in main construction with the remaining seven sites moving into main construction within the next six weeks.

Supplementary question from Jennifer Steadman:

What features will these properties have to make them wheelchair accessible?

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

I will write to you providing a specification for the properties, including accessibility features.

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

At the meeting with supported housing officers in November 2024 it was agreed that the rubbish left in the entrance to Greenhills, which came from the work carried out by the BM solutions be removed.

As this had not occurred in January 2025, I asked my ward councillor, James Griggs, at the Special council meeting, to look into what has happened, which he agreed to do.

The rubbish was still there in March 2025, so expecting the usual non-action from a Labour councillors to a non-party member, I asked you to ensue that the rubbish was removed, and that BM Solutions were charged, which you agreed to do.

At the Annual Council meeting in May 2025, I advised that the rubbish had still not been removed, and it still has not been removed. Can you advise me if there is any intention to remove the rubbish at no cost to the council?

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

The fencing and signage that was left behind by a contractor has been cleared, the grass cut and the company contacted to address the cost.

Supplementary question from Hugh Hoad:

When was this done?

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

Monday

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

Devolution and Local Government reorganisation are the two biggest issues faced by councillors across the country and you would imagine that they would want their constituents to be aware of possible changes. The Government produced a consultation about devolution in Essex which ended in April. I noted that many councils across the County, including Essex, Uttlesford, Epping Forest, Braintree, Chelmsford, Thurrock and Tendring all had an article about this on their website and a direct link to the Governments questionnaire. Contrast this with Harlow Council, nothing on the website, not a word in Harlow Times.

Why did Harlow Council not help publicise this important consultation?

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

The council's communications team did support the cascading of the relevant Essex County Council and Government information both on online platforms and in hard copy in the Civic Centre and libraries.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

How would residents who can't access these facilities be made aware of the consultation?

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

This was a Government consultation and I'm content they disseminated the consultation as was needed.

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

Some councils have already provided estimates of what they expect the cost of devolution and Local Government reorganisation will be including the firing and hiring of staff.

I would expect council leaders across Essex to have provided such estimates when carrying out a cost benefit analysis of the proposed changes. Can you tell me what you estimate this figure will be in Harlow?

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

Essex authorities are currently working through an extensive process of data collection, validation, and assessment, which is being supported by specialist advisors.

As part of this work, Harlow is working through an options appraisal process that is considering various configurations and numbers of potential Unitary Authorities.

These assessments consider several factors including, but not limited to scale, financial sustainability, localism, and growth forecasts. Once this process has concluded, it will then be possible to project the transitional costs associated with the establishment of a proposed configuration, which would be informed through service design, operating cost projection, and workforce mapping, among other elements.

Ahead of this work, it would not be useful to attempt to provide an accurate projection, as the multiplicity of factors that will inform it are yet to be fully assessed.

As these details become clear, further updates will be provided to Cabinet.

Supplementary question from Alan Leverett:

Are you aware of a timeline to put forward proposals?

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

Proposals are due to be submitted in September.

There are a large number of unknown factors at present. Questions about costs and savings are premature.

6 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

In 2010 the Local Government Boundary Commission for England published a guidance note entitled Community Governance Reviews. At 1.3 in the guidance it points out that since 13 February 2008 councils have had responsibility for undertaking Community Governance Reviews and to take account of the responses received when consulting local people. At 2.18 it is noted that these reviews can be triggered by petitions from residents and at 2.37 a review must be completed with 12 months. The outcome of such reviews can be the creation of Town and or Parish Councils and Parish meetings.

Has Harlow District Council ever carried out such a review, if so when and where can I find its conclusions recorded?

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

The council has not carried out such a review.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor:

Why not?

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

There has been no need to.

7 Nicholas Taylor to Councillor Dan Swords (Leader of the Council):

The most recent case I can find of the creation of a Town Council is just a few miles away at Wickford which followed a Community Governance Review carried out by the council in Basildon. It took some 3 years to formally create a Town Council, during which time a shadow Council was formed.

With the abolition of Harlow District Council just two years away, will the Council carry out a review as described or will it just leave it until residents seek such a review?

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

As I am sure Mr Taylor is aware, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government recently published a policy paper entitled: Local government reorganisation: summary of feedback on interim plans.

This paper sets out advice for how localism and community participation should be best approached considering Local Government Reorganisation.

It sets out that Local Government Reorganisation should facilitate *“better and sustained community engagement and needs a clear and accountable system of local area-working and governance”*.

In the Government’s view *“Neighbourhood Area Committees led by frontline ward councillors, offer a model of place-based engagement and leadership which maximises the structural efficiencies brought about by Local Government Reorganisation and strengthens localism and community participation across all areas”*.

The paper also recognises *“the value that town and parish councils offer to their local communities, but being independent institutions, are not a substitute for meaningful community engagement and neighbourhood working by a local authority”*.

In this regard, *“rather than the creation of parish and town councils, local authorities should hardwire local community engagement into proposed structures, preferably through neighbourhood Area Committees”*.

Supplementary question from Nicholas Taylor:

Am I right that Area Committees are not statutory consultees for planning applications?

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

You are correct, but a planning authority can determine who is consulted on applications. Area Committees can also be given delegations to determine applications themselves.

8 Steve Barnes to Councillor David Carter (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing):

Last November it was reported that you said that residents would be taking up occupation of the flats at Burnt Mill the following month. Seven months on, very few have been occupied.

Can you advise me why it is taking so long to get the block fully occupied and whether those offered one on the open market have to have lived in Harlow for at least seven years, a residency qualification required before an applicant is accepted on the councils Housing Register?

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

The purchase of Millbrooks Studios ensured that this important building was protected from becoming a Temporary Accommodation facility for a London borough and instead provides quality accommodation options to those seeking rental properties within Harlow, including 52 affordable units at Local Housing Allowance rates that are designated for use by individuals and families on the council's register with the remaining 120 available for Harlow residents.

We have welcomed numerous tenants to the building already and have a pipeline of leases currently being worked through that will see full occupancy over the coming months with our operator instructed to ensure those properties are for Harlow residents.

Supplementary question from Steve Barnes:

The Leader previously said he had structured a financial deal with a long term institutional investment at no cost to the taxpayer or the council. Can you tell us the amount of loss of rental income in the 18 months the majority of the flats have been unoccupied, who is responsible for that, plus the security and electricity cost?

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

I will provide you with a written response

9 David Forman to Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

In agenda item 15 the report says in paragraph 14 (j) the following:

"A continued significantly worse than forecast Government settlement across the lifetime of the MTFP with considerable reductions in core funding year on year."

Given that this Conservative council administration is continuing to freeze council despite the Labour government's punishment for keeping council tax down, what are:

- a) The total funds cut from Harlow Council's core funding over the MTFP period 2025/28;
- b) The risks to discretionary services;
- c) The effects on local democracy and voter turnout when a Labour government 'wields the axe' for citizens exercising their democratic right to freeze council tax?

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

The Government sets its Local Government Finance Settlement on an annual basis and this year cut Harlow Council's core funding by 25%. Future years are even more uncertain with greater cuts expected.

This is coupled with the huge increase of National Insurance costs the council has to bear as a result of the tax increase.

Taken together, these measures put considerable pressure on the council and all of its services. But in line with our Building Harlow's Future plan, the council remains committed to fully funding all six missions whilst freezing council tax.

Supplementary question from David Forman:

Do you agree that Labour's potential council tax increases show that they are out of touch?

Supplementary reply from Councillor James Leppard (Portfolio Holder for Finance):

I'm sure Labour will get a response at the ballot box.