

HARLOW COUNCIL BUDGET 2005/06

This Q&A sheet has been produced by Harlow Council to answer questions regarding the setting of its priority-led budget for 2005/06.

What services will be affected by the Council's priority-led budget?

As part of the budget savings Sumners and Norman Booth Leisure Centres, The Wreck Youth Centre, Contact Point offices at the Stow and Staple Tye, and Harlow Study Centre will close. The Council will withdraw from its involvement in the provision of services at Stewards Pool. The Council will also be stopping its community partnerships meetings, holidays for over 50s and child care provision for over 5s, as well as reducing the cost to the Council of its bus pass scheme.

The Council will be investing more money to extend its work in the following priority areas: anti-social behaviour (£20,000), homelessness (£60,000), street cleaning and broken glass (£25,000), playgrounds maintenance (£60,000), skateboard park cleaning (£10,000) and communicating and consulting with the community (£100,000).

When will the services affected close?

The Study Centre, Norman Booth, Sumners, Stewards Pool services and The Wreck will close on 31 March. The centres operating child care for over 5s - Dashes, Ladyshot and Hobby House (based in Kingsmoor House, which is not closing) - will remain open until July, to allow parents who use the service time to find alternative care providers. The child care scheme at Sumners Leisure Centre will cease on 31 March, but places will be provided at other venues until the end of July.

Community Partnerships and holidays for over 50s will cease on 31 March.

Why is the Council doing this/why close those services?

The Council received much publicised criticism in its "Poor" Government Inspection Report for not having clear priorities. The report also concluded that the Council is one of the highest spending councils in England. The findings were made very clear. If the Council doesn't make difficult decisions about services and spending, then the decisions will be made for it.

As a result of the report and financial pressures the Council faces one of its toughest budgets ever. Difficult choices have to be made. Dwindling reserves, limits on how much the Council can increase its Council Tax share and increased costs are all pressures that the Council faces. For 2005/06 a gap of nearly £2 million needs to be found to balance the Council's books. The Council also needs to set priorities and spend money to achieve those priorities, rather than spend money on a lot of things and not do any well.

The services closing are ones that the Council has historically provided but doesn't have a legal obligation to. To help make these priority decisions the Council undertook a major public consultation exercise.

How did the Council make decisions on its priority-led budget?

Following the “Poor” Inspection report the Council undertook a major public consultation last year to find out local residents’ spending priorities. 507 residents – a representative sample of the population - were interviewed by Research for Today.

Research for Today used a method called SIMALTO budget modelling which has been used by other councils facing similar decisions. MORI were also employed to run a community workshop to identify local people’s priorities and a vision for the Council.

The Council’s Recovery Working Group considered the outcomes of the SIMALTO exercise and MORI workshop, and evaluated these before reaching a unanimous recommendation on the way forward.

The Policy and Resources Committee on 10 February recommended the budget to Full Council. The Special Full Council Meeting on 17 February formally agreed the budget. For the first time ever the budget was agreed by all three political parties on the Council.

What will happen to the buildings left after services close?

No decisions have been made at this stage as to what will happen to the buildings. The Council would welcome the opportunity to consider options for alternative uses put forward by individuals or organisations, provided these are financially sound and do not involve the Council in any unbudgeted expenditure.

How many staff are affected?

Thirty-six staff have received ‘at risk’ notices. Staff will receive help and support to find alternative employment. Opportunities will be explored to see whether staff with certain skills and experience can be retained if other jobs in the Council become available.

How will the priority-led budget affect the Council’s bus pass scheme?

As part of the budget £390,000 will be saved on the cost of providing the Council’s bus pass scheme. This scheme is referred to as the Fare Paid Pass - Bus pass £17.50, every journey free. To make this saving, options are currently being considered by the Council and consultation will take place with the Pensioners’ Action group. The options include: increasing the cost of the Fare Paid Pass, introducing 20p flat rate fee for all journeys or provide Half Fare pass only, but supplement with travel tokens. All Council bus pass holders will be informed of the final decision when the Council writes to them regarding the renewal of their pass in March.

After the saving has been made the Council will still be spending more on bus passes than any other council in the Essex Consortium. All councils in Essex, except Thurrock, belong to the consortium.

The budget does not affect the statutory (Government) Half Fare Pass scheme – free bus pass, every journey half price.

How much will the Council's share of Council Tax rise by this year?

The Council has agreed an increase of 3.9% in the Harlow share of the Council Tax - an increase of £8.37 a year on a Band D property. This means local people's Council Tax will be made up as follows:

	Harlow Council	Essex County Council	Essex Police	Essex Fire	Total £
Band A	149.58	611.82	69.84	38.10	869.34
Band B	174.51	713.79	81.48	44.45	1,014.23
Band C	199.44	815.76	93.12	50.80	1,159.12
Band D	224.37	917.73	104.76	57.15	1,304.01
Band E	274.23	1,121.67	128.04	69.85	1,593.79
Band F	324.09	1,325.61	151.32	82.55	1,883.57
Band G	373.95	1,529.55	174.60	95.25	2,173.35
Band H	448.74	1,835.46	209.52	114.30	2,608.02

For future budgets Harlow Council has made the following commitment in its Medium-Term Financial Strategy: "From 1 April 2005 any increase in Council Tax shall be no greater than 2% above the Retail Price Index, with a review to take place on the appropriate inflation index to be used in future years."

What else is the Council doing in response to its "Poor" Government Inspection report?

The Council has a Recovery Plan, which is being used to improve the Council and the overall service it provides to local people. As part of the plan the Council has now agreed and produced:

A Corporate Plan – this sets out the Council's priorities and vision for the town and the Council.

A Medium Term Financial Strategy – this sets out how the Council will manage its money now and in the future and ensure money is put into its priorities.

Along with the setting of a priority-led budget these documents will help the Council progress and move forward following the Inspection report.

Where can I get further information on the priority-led budget and Government Inspection report?

The following reports and documents are available from Contact Harlow (Civic Centre) or from the Council's website - www.harlow.gov.uk/budget

Budget presentation to staff and local media – 18 February 2005

General Fund Budget 2005/6 – report to Special Council – 17 February 2005

Results from SIMALTO and MORI public consultation – 24 January 2005

Harlow Council's Corporate Plan – 2005/06 – 2009/10

Harlow Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy – 2005/06 – 2009/10

Harlow Council's Recovery Plan

Harlow Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment Inspection Report