

Councillor Mark Ingall
Leader
Harlow Council
Civic Centre
The Water Gardens
Harlow, Essex
CM20 1WG
www.harlow.gov.uk

Tel: 01279 446001
E-mail: mark.ingall@harlow.gov.uk
Date: 7 February 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

I hope you were able to watch the "Panorama" programme "Cashing in on the Housing Crises" which aired on BBC1 on the 3 February 2020.

It showed residents living in converted office blocks in Harlow with some examples of alarming evidence of inadequate security, alleged examples of inadequate support/supervision which were developed under Permitted Development Rights (PDR) that really falls well short of adequate housing standards.

We are all aware the acute housing crisis and the need to provide homeless and vulnerable persons with a roof over their head. However, as I have mentioned before the Council has made known its need for the law in relation to Permitted Development and office conversion to be changed, as some local authorities have been using them to discharge their homelessness duty, where placements are housed in unsuitable housing conditions which have an impact on local services. Major issues continue to surface regarding the mix of tenants without suitable identification of need, appropriate support, with the mix of tenants having competing life styles without family or proper infrastructure in PDR developments.

The use of PDR for London Boroughs to discharge their homelessness duty without appropriate support, and improved Landlord supervision is both unsafe and unfair for some have chaotic life styles which include recovering addicts who have a history of drug dealing. I have instigated in every area of housing policy the need for more formal and accountable protocols for outer borough placement importantly, to appropriately involve local councils so that they can influence placements, support required, and resources required so that housing need can be met.

I am passionate to do all we can to help recovering addicts reintegrate into society without identification of need/and appropriate support into a suitable allocation could mean the current mix of tenants in PDR developments seriously jeopardises. Just last summer the Bleak Houses report by the independent Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield OBE, revealed the terrible reality of children living in converted office blocks.

The Commissioners report referenced Harlow's converted office blocks and stated: "Crime and antisocial behaviour is a constant problem. As with Bed & Breakfasts, homeless families may find themselves living in close proximity to vulnerable adults also being housed by the council, including people recently released from prison, exposing children to possible harm. The Children's Commissioner's Office has heard from children that they are sometimes afraid to go home at the end of the day." The report went on to say: "Living in the developments can also be a stigmatising

experience for children and families. There are reports of children being referred to “office block kids”, compounding their sense of isolation and difference to their peers.”

There is also much more general point to be made about removing people from their support and social structures. Harlow Council is aware of many instances of children having to commute into London each day for school. This cannot be sustainable for the children, and cannot be financially sustainable for their parents. The current cost of a return train fare for a child from Harlow Town station to Tottenham Hale is £9 per day.

We are not alone with our serious concerns about this issue and the impact of converted office blocks. In the Local Government Association’s recent call to Government for PDR to be scrapped, they also highlighted the serious concerns Councils have about the quality, design and safety of housing converted under Permitted Development, as well as the location of these developments. A bilateral agreement is being developed between London Borough’s and Essex County Council which is due to be considered at the Essex Leader and Chief Executive’s meeting in March 2020.

If you take the commissioner’s report and Panorama’s expose of life inside a converted office block, it is pretty shocking and we must all stop placing people in these developments. I know there is a serious lack of social housing and temporary accommodation. We face the same problems in Harlow and it is a hugely challenging issue. However, we took the decision last November to start the process of removing the small number of our residents that house in the one converted office block we used, and some other Councils who place people in Harlow are doing the same.

It is clear that the concentration of “hard to house” tenants together in such large blocks is hazardous, and the impact on families and children is life changing. I would ask that you review your housing policies too, ending out of borough placements in PDR developments in Harlow, and beginning to take back to your own areas those residents you have moved so far away from their vital support networks.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Ingall', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Mark Ingall
Leader of the Council