

**CABINET MEETING held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN on 14 JULY at 7.30pm**

Present: Councillor H Rolfe (Leader)
Councillor S Barker (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for
Environmental Services)
Councillor S Howell (Cabinet Member for Finance and
Administration)

Also present: Councillors A Dean (Liberal Democrat Group Leader and Chair
of Scrutiny), M Felton (Portfolio Lead for Housing Board), N
Hargreaves and B Light (Residents for Uttlesford Group Deputy
Leader).

Officers in attendance: D French (Chief Executive), D Barden (Press Officer),
R Dobson (Principal Democratic and Electoral Services Officer),
R Fox (Planning Policy Team Leader), R Harborough (Director
of Public Services), A Knight (Assistant Director – Finance), M
Perry (Assistant Chief Executive - Legal), and A Webb (Director
of Finance and Corporate Services).

CA18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Lodge, J Redfern and
L Wells.

Councillor S Barker declared a non-pecuniary interest in the item regarding
the Local Council Tax support scheme, as a member of Essex County
Council.

CA19 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2016 were received and signed
by the Chairman as a correct record.

Councillor Rolfe said an item on the structure of building control, which had
been due to be included on the agenda for this meeting, had been withdrawn
following discussion at the Scrutiny Committee meeting. The item would be
reconsidered and brought back in some form in due course.

**CA20 QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS FROM NON-EXECUTIVE MEMBERS OF
THE COUNCIL**

Councillor Hargreaves asked questions regarding the report on the Council's
financial outturn for 2015-16, particularly with regard to increases in reserves
each year. He questioned why when the council was cash-rich, there was
evidence of some departments not performing very well, for example by failing
to reply to reasonable requests by councillors. He was aware the finance

department seemed to be struggling to recruit sufficient qualified accountants. He considered there was a need to concentrate on core activities, rather than initiatives such as the special purchase vehicle. If the government saw significant reserves within a local authority's accounts it could find a way of taking it.

Regarding interest on council deposits, Councillor Hargeaves said better interest rates could be found than those in which the council's funds had been placed. He asked whether a better return than last year was being obtained.

Regarding New Homes Bonus money, Councillor Hargreaves said it was surprising and disappointing that members had underspent by £42,000, as 14 councillors had not spent the money allocated to them from this money. He suggested the money should be allocated to the other wards, rather than being rolled over. The budget for voluntary activities was also underspent. He suggested there was a need for consultation on how to fund projects which had previously benefitted from sources of funding which were now not available to them.

Councillor Rolfe said he spoke for himself and for the Chief Executive in agreeing that customer service was a priority. It was important to attract the right staff at the right salary. Good service was a pre-requisite. Where officers had not responded to queries from members, he was sure the director of any service concerned would ensure any instances would be addressed.

The Chief Executive would be reviewing the correct salary levels for the accountancy service.

Regarding the point raised about reserves, the Council had a clear strategy. *Aspire*, the Council's special purchase vehicle, had been set up and would benefit Uttlesford.

Regarding interest rates on investments, Councillor Rolfe said whilst the Council's experience with an Icelandic bank had required it to take precautions against risk, which entailed lower returns on investments, he had sympathy with the point that the Council should try to obtain the best rates reasonably possible.

Regarding councillors' underspend of ward allocations from the New Homes Bonus, Councillor Rolfe said he agreed a stricter regime should be imposed but the Council had already specified when the money was to be spent.

Regarding the point which had been raised about the voluntary sector, Councillor Rolfe said he would introduce a paper on that subject later this evening, and this council was the most generous in Essex.

CA21

REPORTS FROM PERFORMANCE AND AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

Councillor Dean said he wished to raise three points discussed at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 5 July. The Committee had recommended that the

proposals for a Building Control partnership should not proceed, as the report had not allayed concerns which had been expressed at the previous meeting in March.

Councillor Rolfe reminded the meeting that the Building Control report had been a part 2 item, therefore detailed discussion could not take place in public.

Councillor Dean said there were insufficient reasons for putting at risk a successful building control service, and summarised the Scrutiny Committee's concerns. He said there was an imbalance of the service in the proposed area, and there would be limited opportunity for the Uttlesford team to gain more of a market share. There was concern at the attrition rates of councils involved in the partnership, and scepticism over the points regarding the resilience of the team; and there was concern that comparisons had been drawn using unfairly distorted information. It was felt removal of the service would not reduce back office costs. The Committee felt a strategic approach to partnerships rather than a piecemeal one was required. Finally there was concern that officers had been instructed not to speak to members of the Committee.

Councillor Rolfe said there was no suggestion that building control was anything less than first class. Some of the partnerships of the Council were very successful, and in the next two years the Council's financial position would become more challenging. The status quo was not an option.

Councillor Dean reported on the Scrutiny Committee's examination of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS). The Committee was content the Council should continue with the scheme as it stood and that contributions should be frozen for a third consecutive year, with a return to the removal of the remaining 50% next year. It would be necessary to go back to basics in the discussions officers would be holding next year.

Councillor Dean referred to the recommendation that the LCTS scheme should be aligned with legislative changes to Housing Benefit and Universal Credit. The remaining three reforms which were likely to be implemented by April 2017 were also recommended to be aligned with the LCTS. However there had not been enough information at Scrutiny. Councillor Dean asked that members be provided with more information before making a decision tonight. He referred to the national context in that the new Prime Minister had stated the government would not protect the interests of the privileged at the cost of those of the less well-off.

Councillor Dean welcomed the review of grants, and asked that Scrutiny Committee be kept informed. There was an anomaly in that grants given to sports organisations were subject to a ceiling of 500, whereas for community projects the ceiling was £3000. There was support for a two-year rolling programme, rather than the current three year basis.

Councillor Rolfe said Councillor Howell would address the comments made when the above items were considered.

CA22

UPDATE ON REFUGEES

Councillor Rolfe gave an update on refugees. Planning was underway for the expected arrival of the first family of refugees in September 2016. The current assumption was for a minimum of three families to arrive in West Essex. Councillor Rolfe outlined the way in which they would be supported. Migrant Help, an organisation which Essex County Council had commissioned to support families arriving in September 2016 in West Essex, would assist with furnishing and equipping houses in the six week intervening period prior to arrival, and would co-ordinate offers of charitable help for provision of additional resources such as computers or access to broadband.

Councillor Rolfe reported on the re-settlement of families in Colchester, which was the only area in Essex so far to have taken in refugees. Whilst it was early days, progress was positive. The main challenge pre-arrival was the need for suitable and sustainable properties being identified at viable rent levels, effectively ruling out private sector stock in Uttlesford. No problems had been encountered so far with schools, and children were being offered language support, as were adults via Adult Community Learning.

CA23

2015-16 FINAL OUTTURN

Councillor Howell presented a report on the Council's final outturn for the year 2015-16, which was to be taken to the meeting of Performance and Audit Committee on 28 July. He said some of the numbers were subject to external audit, and as there were multiple different income streams, inevitably in a year there were updates. There were some significant changes which were outside the Council's control, and for the most part these were in areas for which the Council had tried to budget effectively.

Councillor Howell said he shared Councillor Hargreaves' disappointment that some councillors had not spent the New Homes Bonus. As a whole the Council had underspent, and in his view this was better than overspending. Regarding reserves, he was pleased given the context of forthcoming reduced funding from government that the Council had reserves. These reserves fell into two broad areas, funds which were ringfenced for the fulfilment of statutory duties, and those which were not the Council's money.

Councillor Howell described in detail the Medium Term Financial Strategy fund and the transformation reserve, which were maintained expressly for the purpose of accommodating the transition to reduced government funding. In the meantime the Strategic Initiatives Fund had been made available. The Council could not rely on Council Tax or Government income for all its funding, therefore it had to set its own budgets accordingly. He drew attention to the fact that a significant part of the Strategic Initiatives Fund was for *Aspire*, the council's special purchase vehicle. He objected to phrases such as "hoarding", as reserves should not be held without purpose.

Regarding the Housing Revenue Account, Councillor Howell said the Council continued to invest in exciting projects. Councillor Lodge had endorsed the strategy on deposits and in response to Councillor Hargreaves' point, the

council under its Treasury Management policy aimed to obtain the best rates of interest for significant deposits, depending on the term for which the money was deposited. The blended effect of the return on deposits was 0.63% for 2014-15. The policy which was put in place halfway through the year would show an improvement in the rates of interest for the council's deposits.

Councillor Light asked what the implications and financial consequences were of the financial forecast where outturn differed from the budget.

Councillor Howell said preparing a budget was not an exact science, and the Council's budgeting had improved. Outturn figures helped inform the budgeting process and all items under the Council's control would be subjected to greater scrutiny.

RESOLVED to:

- 1 Approve the 2015/16 outturn position set out in this report;
- 2 Approve the reserve transfers and reserve balances set out in the report;
- 3 Approve the Capital Programme slippage requests.

CA24

2017-18 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

Members considered a report on the annual requirement to review the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) Scheme. Changes to the scheme for the following financial year were proposed.

Councillor Howell drew attention to the recommendation that the discretionary subsidy grant for town and parish councils be reduced by 50% in 2017/18. The proposed change was to working age recipients, the number of which had been reducing year on year. The number of working age recipients had fallen, and there was a cost to Uttlesford and other preceptors who had forgone income as a result of setting it at 12.5%. To date those preceptors had not objected.

Councillor Howell highlighted the fact that there was an increase in the cost to the Council from £209,000 in 2016/17 to a forecast £340,000 per annum for 2017/19. An increased contribution rate of 2.5% would generate an additional council tax potential income of £31,770 of which £26,640 would be shared between the major preceptors. The Council would retain £5,130. The impact on a working age claimant who received the maximum amount of LCTS would be an additional 75p per week to pay, making £39 during a year. Similar local authorities paid a reduced grant. The Revenue Support Grant was being reduced to zero in 2018/19. So far this council had not increased the contribution rate, but the situation was untenable going forward. It was important to flag the consultation now so it allowed parish and town councils to prepare their budgets.

Housing Benefit and Universal Credit reforms had taken place, and it was recommended that the scheme adopt those changes to ensure all benefits were aligned.

The number of people affected by the changes was very small, and about 50% of the number of recipients changed constantly, as people came in and out of using the benefits system. Councillor Howell said in his view the proposals were sensible, and he had asked officers to keep the Scrutiny Committee informed.

Councillor Light asked that further detail be provided about the further reforms as there was concern in the Scrutiny Committee about the impact of the measures. She also had a concern as a Saffron Walden Town Councillor about the halving of the precept, and also felt concerned at the impact on people who were struggling and could not pay.

Councillor Howell said he would write to the Scrutiny Committee and to Cabinet with details. It was important to recognise that Parish and Town Councils had at the discretion of the District Council received a subsidy for over 5 years. There was no requirement on the Council to provide the protections from the precept. It was important not to rush it, but to phase in the changes. There was a hardship fund specifically for those who faced difficulty.

Councillor S Barker said town and parish councils already received an 87% discount, and the report was very clear in setting out the facts. She asked what the uptake was on the hardship fund last year.

The Assistant Director Finance said there had been an underspend of £9000 on the hardship fund.

RESOLVED to approve that

- a) a consultation process be carried out on the following draft proposals:
 - i. The 2017/18 LCTS scheme is set on the same basis as the 2016/17 scheme and therefore the contribution rate is frozen for the third consecutive year.
 - ii. The discretionary subsidy grant for town & parish councils to be reduced by 50% in 2017/18.
- b) The LCTS scheme is aligned with the Housing Benefit and Universal Credit reforms as detailed in paragraph 26 of the report.
- c) The LCTS scheme is aligned with the Housing Benefit and Universal Credit reforms as detailed in paragraph 27 of the report as and when the legislation is implemented.

CA25

COUNCIL TAX WRITE-OFF

Members considered a report detailing monies owed to the Council by a former housing benefit claimant, who had entered into an individual voluntary

agreement (IVA) with their creditors. The terms of the agreement prevented the Council from pursuing recovery of the outstanding debt separately from the IVA. After six years full recovery of the monies was expected, so the income would be categorised as a credit to the revenue account rather than as debt on the balance sheet.

RESOLVED to approve the write-off of a debt of £7,655.07

CA26

DEVELOPMENT SITE – NEWTON GROVE, NEWTON GREEN, GREAT DUNMOW

Members considered a report presented by Councillor Felton on behalf of Councillor Redfern, regarding proposed development of a site at Newton Grove, Newton Green, Great Dunmow.

Councillor Felton said it was a pleasure to report on a further site which had been identified as having potential for the development of council-owned homes, as part of the Council's ongoing development programme. The site had originally been identified as suitable for construction of a Domestic Violence Refuge. However, following a change in Essex County Council priorities with regard to domestic violence services, it was proposed to use the site for development for council houses. The Housing Board had considered options for the site, and recommended progressing option 1 in the attached plan. This option was for three two-bedroom four person houses.

Councillor Light welcomed the development of more council-owned houses.

Councillor Rolfe agreed, and said last year the Council had built 40 council houses. He would seek further dialogue with Essex County Council on safe refuge accommodation, but revisiting that subject should not hold up this scheme.

RESOLVED

1. to authorise the site at Newton Grove to be progressed through the planning application stage;
2. to note the design options considered by the Housing Board for the Newton Grove site and that the preferred option to be taken forward as part of a planning application was option 1, being a development of three 2 bedroom 4 person houses.

CA27

DEVELOPMENT SITE – SHEDS LANE, SAFFRON WALDEN

Members considered a report regarding proposed development of two garage sites at Sheds Lane, Saffron Walden, for council owned housing. Councillor

Felton, presenting the report, said this was a unique site, which was suitable for a wheelchair-compliant bungalow for a family with particular needs.

Councillor Light said she supported the proposals.

RESOLVED

1. To authorise the sites at Sheds Lane to be progressed through the planning application stage;
2. to note the design options considered by the Housing Board for these sites, which for the northern site would be two 2 bedroom 4 person houses, and for the southern site would be a 3 bedroom 5 person fully wheelchair compliant bungalow.

CA28

LOCAL PLAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Councillor S Barker presented a report regarding the preferred distribution strategy for the Local Plan to be recommended to the Council. She then referred to the recommendation from the Planning Policy Working Group.

The options considered were set out in the report presented to members this evening, and were as follows:

1) **All development allocated in new settlement(s)**

Benefits

- Comprehensively plan the provision of infrastructure
- Critical mass to provide additional infrastructure
- Reduces development pressure on the historic settlements

Risks

- Relying on only 1 or 2 large sites to deliver the housing
- Deliverability within the Plan period
- Deprives other settlements of sustainable growth
- Negative impact on 5 year land supply

Conclusion - not a sound distribution strategy.

2) **All development pepper potted in villages**

Benefits

- Sustains village vitality

Risks

- Scale of development is likely to have a detrimental impact on their character, the countryside and the highway network in many circumstances
- uncertainty that the scale of individual developments would provide the infrastructure required - Infrastructure deficit

Conclusion - not a sound distribution strategy

3) All development in the two main towns (Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow)

Benefits

- Generally sustainable locations for development
- Supports existing services and facilities
- Help improve infrastructure deficit

Risks

- Significant impact on their historic character and landscape setting
- Restriction of the pooling of S106 for infrastructure.
- Insufficient deliverable sites

Conclusion - not a sound distribution strategy.

4) Combination of development in main towns and villages

Benefits

- Towns are generally sustainable locations for development,
- Sustains village vitality and diversity

Risks

- Some villages are more constrained than others – could result in disproportionate growth
- Uncertainty that the scale of individual developments would provide the infrastructure required - Infrastructure deficit

Conclusion – potentially a sound option but not recommended

5) Hybrid involving new settlement(s), main towns and villages

Benefits

- Towns are generally sustainable locations for development,
- Provides an opportunity for some growth to sustain village vitality in the most sustainable locations
- New settlements allows us to provide for the highest level of infrastructure demands and comprehensively meet development needs
- Reduces development pressure on the historic settlements
- Helps to maintain a 5 year supply of housing
- It can lessen the impact on the highway network

Risks

- Similar to scenarios 1-4 but to a lesser degree
- Loss of countryside
- Development may have detrimental impact on historic character of existing settlements

Conclusion – preferred distribution strategy

Councillor Barker said the recommendation from the Planning Policy Working Group had been circulated to all members, and was as follows:

1. the preferred strategy for the Local Plan is Scenario 5 (Hybrid Distribution Strategy – New Settlement(s), Main Towns and Villages), as attached at the Appendix to the report, and that contingency is built into the Plan to allocate further homes if necessary;
2. the following conditions are stipulated as part of the adoption of Scenario 5:
 - i. that a five year land supply is available;
 - ii. the required building rate can be maintained;
 - iii. infrastructure in existing towns and villages will be enhanced and taken into account in planning developments wherever possible; and
 - iv. Garden City Principles will be used and application made to Government for funding
3. Scenario 4 (Combination of Development in Main Towns and Villages) will become the fall-back position if Scenario 5 cannot be adopted, but only in the circumstance that it becomes impossible to proceed with New Settlement(s)

Councillor Light said Option 5 had been preferred at the workshop, on the garden city principles. She was shocked that a back-up recommendation had been suggested, which she considered showed a lack of commitment to the main recommendation.

Councillor S Barker said there was no lack of commitment, as the Council was obliged to produce a plan.

Councillor Rolfe said the Council was 100% committed to option 5, and this option had been unanimously recommended by the Planning Policy Working Group. The key word regarding the fall-back position was “cannot”, so that there was a position only if the first recommendation became impossible.

RESOLVED to recommend to Council a preferred distribution strategy for the Local Plan as follows:

1. the preferred strategy for the Local Plan is Scenario 5 (Hybrid Distribution Strategy – New Settlement(s), Main Towns and Villages), as attached at the Appendix to the report, and that contingency is built into the Plan to allocate further homes if necessary;
2. the following conditions are stipulated as part of the adoption of Scenario 5:
 - i. that a five year land supply is available;
 - ii. the required building rate can be maintained;
 - iii. infrastructure in existing towns and villages will be enhanced and taken into account in planning developments wherever possible; and
 - iv. Garden City Principles will be used and application made to Government for funding
3. Scenario 4 (Combination of Development in Main Towns and Villages) will become the fall-back position if Scenario 5 cannot be adopted, but

only in the circumstance that it becomes impossible to proceed with New Settlement(s)

CA29

STREET CLEANSING – JOINT WORKING WITH SAFFRON WALDEN TOWN COUNCIL

Members considered proposals to part fund the employment by Saffron Walden Town Council of an operative to carry out manual cleansing activity to improve the cleanliness of the town centre, together with provision of suitable equipment.

Councillor S Barker presented the report, which set out the financial implications for a 12 month period, requiring approval of additional provision to be included in the budget for 2017/18.

Councillor Howell endorsed the proposals, which would improve the appearance of this part of the district. Town and district councils worked best when they worked together.

Councillor Rolfe agreed a harmonious approach was desirable. He said many parts of Essex benefitted from participating in competitions to promote their clean and attractive appearance.

Councillor Light endorsed the proposals, which had been noted by residents as an example of good collaboration.

RESOLVED

- 1 to contribute to the cost of Saffron Walden Town Council employing an operative to carry out manual cleansing work in Saffron Walden Town Centre for a period of 12 months, and to purchase a handcart for the operative to use;
- 2 the arrangement to be reviewed after 12 months to assess whether a Business Improvement District has been established and whether businesses would be prepared to fund the arrangement on an ongoing basis.

CA30

GRANTS

Councillor Rolfe presented a report on behalf of Councillor Wells, regarding the administration by the Council of various grant funding schemes.

The Council's contribution to the voluntary sector was nearly double that of other councils within Essex. The grant funding schemes supported the voluntary sector, charities and community groups. Revision of the processes relating to the schemes was needed, including addressing of governance issues. This was the start of an ongoing process to consider how the Council could more effectively target resources at the voluntary sector, both to

strengthen the sector and to assist the Council to achieve its corporate objectives. The principal change was to voluntary support grants, to recommend they were offered for a two year rolling period, to enable the groups to have advance information about forthcoming support.

Councillor Rolfe said he took Councillor Hargreaves' point in that these were all very worthy groups, but there might be more such groups which needed assistance. The funding for community projects was subject to a maximum figure of £3,500, which would be match funded from funds raised by the group elsewhere. The support was usually for structured projects. No funding was given to religious organisations, as they tended to have alternative funding streams. The Council provided help for sports regarding modest applications for funding.

Councillor Howell said the Council's generosity compared favourably with that of other councils. He had seen at first-hand how much support came from the District Council for projects administered by parish councils. He had been impressed at the presentation he had attended this year regarding voluntary sector grants, and was receptive to the idea that there might be other organisations to which the Council could offer support.

Councillor Light said she was concerned about how groups that did not meet the Council's criteria could obtain funding.

Councillor Rolfe said voluntary support grants organisations submitted bids which were considered against the criteria, and last year there was only one organisation which put in a bid which was unsuccessful. He would be interested to see what could be done to help any groups which were unsuccessful. It was fortunate the Council had the new homes bonus money to be able to provide support of this kind.

Councillor S Barker said it was good to see all the grants listed in one place, and that they were being reviewed to ensure all were fit for purpose.

RESOLVED

- 1 to develop a new grants policy to centralise the various guidance documents that exist, sets out how grant funding should be used to support the council's key corporate aims and objectives and the criteria and timetable for awarding grants under the different schemes.
- 2 To approve specific recommendations as set out in paragraphs 31, 38, 44, 47, 52 and 56 of the report.

CA31

APPOINTMENT TO OUTSIDE BODY

RESOLVED to appoint Councillor G Sell as the Council's representative to Uttlesford Community Travel, in place of Councillor E Parr.

The meeting ended at 9.05pm.