

**EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 16 SEPTEMBER 2015 at 7.30pm**

Present: Councillor S Harris – Chairman
Councillors H Asker, G Barker, S Barker, R Chambers, P Davies,
A Dean, P Fairhurst, T Farthing, M Felton, J Freeman, R Freeman,
T Goddard, J Gordon, E Hicks, S Howell, M Lemon, B Light, J
Lodge, J Loughlin, S Morris, E Oliver, E Parr, J Parry, J Redfern,
H Rolfe, H Ryles, G Sell and L Wells.

Officers in attendance: J Mitchell (Chief Executive), D Barden (Communications
Manager), R Harborough (Director of Public Services), M Perry
(Assistant Chief Executive – Legal), and P Snow (Democratic and
Electoral Services Manager)

C33 PUBLIC SPEAKING AND PRESENTATION OF PETITION

Isabelle Antunes-Bridge, together with her young son David, presented a petition calling on the Council to offer to home 50 refugee families in Uttlesford. She explained the petition had been completed online via the 38 degrees Refugees Welcome Campaign and included 237 signatures.

The Chairman welcomed the petitioners and accepted the petition on behalf of the Council.

Rebecca del Tufo made a statement about the refugee crisis and set out what she saw as the Council's responsibilities in dealing with the humanitarian crisis developing in Europe. She said the Council had a duty of care by standing up to the need to take refugees into the district. She asked the Council to accept 50 refugees to the district and to work with residents to support refugees welcomed to come here.

The Chairman confirmed that officers would respond to the questions she had asked.

C34 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Anjum, Artus, Davey, Foley, Hargreaves, Jones, Mills and Ranger.

C35 SYRIAN REFUGEES

The Leader of the Council spoke of the tragic context to this meeting brought about by the exodus of large numbers of people from Syria to escape the war in that country. He acknowledged receipt of the petition and thanked the organisers for presenting it. It was quite clear there was a collective feeling of great sympathy within the Uttlesford community and it was important for the Council to respond in an open hearted and compassionate way.

The response set out in the motion to be put before this meeting was consistent with the Government initiative and proposed multi-agency approach to dealing with the problem of refugees. The proposed action was for the Cabinet to set up a Refugee Working Group to consider the Council's response to accommodating refugees. He had already asked Councillor Redfern to chair the working group and to co-ordinate the work with the key external groups.

For the duration of the refugee emergency he had decided to ask the portfolio leads for economic development and communications to report directly to him rather than to Councillor Redfern.

The first refugees were expected to arrive in the UK in the next few days. The distribution of the refugees would be determined by a central command post in the Home Office.

The working group would have to determine the key priorities in relation to accommodating refugees into the district and in doing that would liaise with the churches refugee network, the national database and all other resources available. Special skills would be required to help local people offering the use of their homes.

Links had already been established with the task force set up in Essex and with the Home Office. The next task was to explore ways to make the accommodation of refugees a reality. He would make sure that regular update reports were submitted about the progress made.

The Leader then proposed the motion supported jointly by the three group leaders and their deputies.

Councillor Dean then co-proposed the motion. He said it was in response to the worst humanitarian crisis in his lifetime in Europe. There was no quick fix available and many people would want to play their part. Many volunteers and agencies were already taking supplies to those marooned in Calais and in Turkey as well as to other places.

The priority now was to understand the Government's position and to work with them to achieve the best result possible. The Council had responded on a previous occasion to welcome refugees from Lebanon. A positive start had been made but a lot remained to be done.

Councillor Lodge then co-proposed the motion. He thanked Councillor Rolfe and the Chief Executive for the prompt actions taken in the nine days since the formal request for an extraordinary meeting. He was grateful to Councillor Redfern for taking on the role of co-ordinating the response.

The plight of the refugees was a matter of great concern locally. Uttlesford was a very rich area and the perception was that more could be done here than elsewhere. No quota system had yet been established and the Council must respond to whatever needs were identified.

The Leader then read out in full the terms of the motion as follows:

“ The Council has great sympathy for refugees from the conflicts in Syria and elsewhere and will co-operate with Government initiatives to accommodate and support refugees who come to this country.

The Council considers that an Essex-wide multi-agency approach to accommodating refugees is the best way forward and will contribute positively and constructively to meet assessed needs.

The Council further supports the Churches’ Refugee Network and will work with other initiatives, local communities and individuals to find accommodation and other human needs for refugees within the Uttlesford area such as secure access to education, health, welfare and other vital services as may be required.

Working with Community representatives and other organisations, and being mindful of the refugee status granted by Government, the Council will start and maintain a database of organisations and individuals who are able to offer accommodation or make other contributions to the welfare of refugees in the Uttlesford area

The Cabinet is recommended to establish a Refugee Working Group to oversee and manage the implementation of these policies. A report from the chairman of the working group will be a standing item on each Cabinet agenda for the duration of the emergency.

The working group will include representatives of all political groups on the Council to be established at the Cabinet meeting on the following evening.”

The motion was seconded by a number of members including Councillors Morris, Fairhurst and Loughlin.

Councillor Morris reiterated thanks to everyone present for coming to the meeting. She confirmed that she had signed the online petition presented that evening and supported its aims. She welcomed all measures to support refugees coming to Uttlesford and asked the Council to work with the National Refugee Welcome Board to help them to resettle.

Councillor Sell said that there were still contacts with Lebanese refugees settled in Uttlesford. They may be able to help with advice about resettlement support. The refugee crisis affected the whole of Europe and he suggested contacting Members of the European Parliament.

Councillor Redfern confirmed that she was happy to chair the working group. The Council had the necessary experience to respond in an appropriate way. She suggested setting up a dedicated email address to which people could respond with offers of help, or to seek further information.

The Leader confirmed he was content with the suggestions made by members.

The motion was put to the vote and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED to adopt the motion set out in the text of this Minute and to invite the Cabinet to establish a Refugee Working Group at the meeting scheduled for the following evening.

The meeting ended at 7.55pm