

COUNCIL held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor G Driscoll (Chair)
Councillors M Ahmed, S Barker, N Church, M Coletta, A Coote, J Davey, A Dean, B Donald, J Emanuel, J Evans, C Fiddy, M Foley, R Freeman, R Gooding, N Gregory, N Hargreaves, P Lees, T Loveday, S Luck, J Moran, E Oliver, R Pavitt, A Reeve, N Reeve, B Regan, G Sell, R Silcock, M Sutton and M Tayler

Officers in attendance: P Holt (Chief Executive), B Ferguson (Democratic Services Manager) and N Katevu (Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal Services)

Also present: Steven Dale (Independent Remuneration Panel) and Brigid Dyson (Independent Remuneration Panel – Chair)

C57 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Criscione, Loughlin, Martin, Asker, Armstrong, Lemon, Bagnall, Haynes and McBirnie.

Councillors Barker, Foley and Gooding declared an interest as members of Essex County Council in respect of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme.

C58 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2023 were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Hargreaves proposed an amendment in respect of Minute C56 of the meeting held on 30 October 2023. Council consented to the following additional wording being added to Councillor Hargreaves statement:

“The document was three times the length of the NPPF and twice that of the 2005 Local Plan and required far fewer words. He was concerned that too many words would “make easy picking for lawyers”.

Councillor Dean said the Leader’s contribution to the meeting held on 30 October 2023, as denoted in C56, was too brief and required further wording in respect of her statement pertaining to the Local Plan and no political deal making by members, which she had said led to previous Local Plans failing, and the future commitments to the member working group that would play a role in the ongoing Local Plan process.

The Chair said the officer would make the necessary alterations. Council approved the minutes of the meeting on 30 October, subject to the forementioned alterations, as a correct record.

C59 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair listed his activities since the previous Council meeting, which included Remembrance Day commemorations at Hall Green School and Birchanger, the Christmas tree lights at the Birchanger Light Up and a charity event on the Saffron Walden common.

C60 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Leader updated Council on the proposed devolution of power to Essex councils and said a plan had been put forward to combine Southend on Sea City Council, Thurrock Council and Essex County Council into a single Authority. District Councils would not have a vote at the table but talks were ongoing.

The Chair invited questions on any matter set out in Cabinet member reports.

Councillor Sell said it would be good to see a written report from the Leader in future.

In response to a question from Councillor Barker regarding Airport Parking issues, Councillor Hargreaves said the notes of a meeting with Manchester Airport would be circulated in the coming days.

In response to a question from Councillor Fiddy regarding the use of hydrogen energy, Councillor Reeve confirmed that he did not believe hydrogen energy would be utilised for domestic consumption. It would, however, have a role to play in the renewable energy sector and would be relevant to the industries based at Stansted Airport and for Heavy Goods Vehicles.

Councillor Emanuel thanked Councillor Coote, the Portfolio Holder for Housing, for the recent work at Reynolds Court, Newport. She also thanked Mark Dyer for his excellent communication throughout the project.

C61 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS (UP TO 30 MINUTES)

Councillor Gregory confirmed he did not have a question of clarification.

In response to Councillor Sell's clarification question, Councillor Hargreaves said free parking at Christmas was reviewed every year and would be reviewed again next year.

Councillor Silcock confirmed he did not have a question of clarification.

Councillor Fiddy confirmed she did not have a question of clarification.

Councillor Barker said she was disappointed that the number of planning permission granted since 1 April 2023 had not been made available and she had submitted a Freedom of Information request in order to acquire the data.

Councillor Barker confirmed she did not have a question of clarification in regards to question 8.

Councillor Gooding said he was also disappointed that the requested information had not been provided; he would be submitting a Freedom of Information request in regards to the Council's investment portfolio and the cost of borrowing, revenue income and estimated interest costs over the next 5 years.

Councillor Moran highlighted the press article which stated Uttlesford District Council was in the top 20 indebted councils in the country. Councillor Hargreaves said the council had responded to this via a press release at the time of the article.

Councillor Church confirmed he did not have a question of clarification.

Councillor Oliver confirmed he did not have a question of clarification.

Councillor Regan confirmed he did not have a question of clarification.

C62 **MATTERS RECEIVED ABOUT JOINT ARRANGEMENTS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

There were no matters received regarding joint arrangements or external organisations.

C63 **MATTERS REFERRED FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES**

There were no matters referred from the Executive nor the Council's Committees.

C64 **MEMBERS SCHEME OF ALLOWANCES 2024/25**

Brigid Dyson, Chair of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP), spoke to the report produced by the IRP in respect of the Members Allowances Scheme for 2024/25. The report recommended a 4% uplift to the Members' Basic Allowance, and she highlighted the proposed uplift to a number of Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs), specifically those relating to the Planning Committee Chair, Planning Committee members and portfolio holders. She said it had been a difficult review, what with issues such as the Cost of Living Crisis and high inflation to consider, but it was important to acknowledge members' workload as well as ensuring that the remuneration available to members did not disincentivise candidates from standing for office in future. She thanked her fellow Panel members, Steve Dale and James Dyson, and Democratic Services for their support throughout the review.

Councillor Lees proposed the IRP's recommendation set out in the report. She said it was a fair proposal and she was pleased that the work of all Planning Committee members had been acknowledged. She said individual members who did not agree with the uplift to the Allowance Scheme were free to forgo, in full or in part, the allowance but they should respect the independent recommendation.

Councillor Luck seconded the proposal. He said it was right that fair remuneration was available to councillors to ensure that the Members Allowances scheme did not prove to be a disincentive for anyone thinking of standing for local government.

Councillor Sell said he was pleased with the recommendations and agreed with the uplift to SRAs in those roles which were particularly time consuming, such as Planning Committee.

The Chair took the proposal to a vote.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Agrees to a rise of 4.00% to the current level of basic allowance.
- II. Adopts the changes to the individual SRAs as set out in Appendix A and detailed in the report, for the municipal year 2024/25.
- III. Notes the addition of details relating to the remuneration for Parish and Town Councils.

C65

LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SCHEME PROPOSALS 2024/25 AND CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Councillor Hargreaves presented the report regarding the Local Council Tax Scheme Proposals (LCTS) 2024/25. He said there was an annual requirement to review the LCTS Scheme and consult on proposals for the following financial year. He said the Council had the lowest percentage contribution requirement of any authority in Essex and this had been the case for ten years. He also highlighted the fall in claimants for the second year running. He said the consultation had received 70 responses, with over 62% of responses supporting, in full or in part, the proposed scheme. He proposed approval of the recommendations set out in the report.

Councillor Emanuel seconded the proposals.

Councillor Alex Reeve commended the report and said vulnerable people should be supported. He praised the work of the Council and officers for overseeing a system that had seen a fall in claimants while ensuring a high rate of revenue collection at the same time. He said this was a great result for the district.

Councillor Fiddy said that the true number of people assisted by the Scheme was

greater than that set out in the report, as the published figure of 3,187 related to the number of households, not the number of people, benefitting from the LCTS scheme.

In response to a question from Councillor Barker relating to the rate of council tax collection, Councillor Hargreaves confirmed the collection rate was higher than 90%.

The Chair moved to a vote. The proposal was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED to approve the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024/25 as set out below:

- I. The contribution rate is frozen at 12.5% for 2024/25.
- II. The Council continues to protect Pensioners, Vulnerable and Disabled Residents and their Carer's on a low income.

C66 **CALENDAR OF MEETINGS 2024/25**

The Calendar of Meetings 2024/25 was received and noted by Council.

C67 **COMMITTEE APPOINTMENTS**

Councillor Barker proposed the following changes to the Conservative Group's committee appointments:

Appointments Committee – Councillor Moran to replace Councillor Criscione.

Investigatory Disciplinary Committee – Councillor Regan to replace Councillor Criscione.

Councillor Loveday seconded the appointments.

The proposal was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Appoint Councillor Moran to the Appointments Committee, in place of Councillor Criscione.
- II. Appoint Councillor Regan to the Investigatory Disciplinary Committee to replace Councillor Criscione.

C68 **MEMBER MOTION: SEWAGE**

Councillor Sell spoke to his motion regarding the discharge of raw sewage in Uttlesford's rivers and waterways. He said a similar motion had been carried at

East Hertfordshire District Council and he also recognised the good work on the issue from Councillors Pavitt and Emanuel and former Councillor Isham. He said the state of the sewage system in this country was indicative of crumbling infrastructure, a symptom of the privatisation of the water companies that prioritised profit over modernisation and the natural environment. He said 75% of rivers were polluted and the Environment Agency had reported that there had been 300,000 spills in the UK since 2022. In terms of Uttlesford, “storm overflows” had been conducted 321 times in 2022, although he said the figures released may not present an accurate reflection of “storm overflow” incidents. He said investment in the system was required. He asked members to support the motion.

Councillor Dean seconded the motion and said this was relevant to the emerging Local Plan process. He said policies 34 (contamination) and 35 (protection and enhancement) already covered this subject and the Council was “plugged in” to the issue.

Councillor Gooding cited the adage that “plumbers did more for health in Victorian England than any other profession” and this legacy needed to be upgraded. However, he said upgrading the infrastructure was not straight forward and would cost billions of pounds, and he noted that while Anglian Water had made a profit of £185 million, this was a “drop in the ocean” compared to the investment required. He said it would be unfortunate if the taxpayer had to bail out the water companies.

Councillor Coote supported the motion and said the poor state of infrastructure was due to the privatisation of state industries and the water companies needed to put the money back into the system to ensure the system was fit for purpose. He said investment should be backdated and it was estimated that water companies would need to payback 18% of profits in order to cover the lack of investment in the past 30 years.

Councillor Pavitt said the water companies had been “given away” when privatised. He said this was a useful motion which reinforced previous work on the issue. He said the motion did not identify the invisible elements that made up a healthy waterway, such as nutrients. Furthermore, when water companies pledged to upgrade their systems, they were talking in capacity terms, not upgrading the technology to ensure pollutants and microplastics were extracted from the water. Members would need to be mindful of this when considering Local Plan proposals in future. He asked the Chief Executive to note in his letter that there was a need to control what was recycled into rivers, not just what was dumped into them.

Councillor Emanuel said the UK was the only country on the planet that had privatised its water companies. She said there had been great news in the River Camb in Newport as otters had been reintroduced and trout had begun to lay their eggs. However, effluent was being discharged into the river, harming the prospects of these creatures, and constant monitoring was required. She said she had an issue with point 4 of the motion and asked the Chief Executive to include reference in his letter to the Prime Minister regarding the need for constant monitoring of sewage discharge.

Councillor Lees said profit should not be the priority of water companies and she referenced a recent summit in parliament whereby Anglian Water made commitments to invest in water infrastructure. She asked whether the Chief Executive could incorporate member comments into the letter to Government, such as the importance of monitoring rivers and sewage works to ensure compliance.

The Chair confirmed that this could be done.

Councillor Moran said he agreed with the sentiment that “what gets measured, gets done” in terms of monitoring the health of the district’s rivers. He said otters had also returned to the River Bourne in the parish of Ashdon.

Councillor Sell said he was delighted to hear that wildlife was returning to the district’s rivers. He asked the Portfolio Holder for Planning to monitor the capacity of sewage works in the district, particularly in light of emerging housing developments. He added that the Council had a role to play in improving the health of the area’s rivers and thanked members for their support.

The Chair took the motion to a vote; it was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Note that despite repeated calls to put a stop to the dumping of raw sewage into our precious rivers and chalk streams, the latest annual assessment by the Environment Agency showed “totally unacceptable” performance on pollution for most of England’s water and sewage companies. Thames Water was given just 2 stars for performance for 2022, meaning that they require significant improvement.
- II. Call on the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for the Environment to strengthen the legislation on the discharging of raw sewage into our rivers by:
 - 1) Tightening and clarifying the regulations and law on the circumstances in which discharge of sewage might be permitted.
 - 2) Requiring prompt prosecution and fining of all offending companies.
 - 3) Requiring the Environment Agency to audit the Water and sewerage companies regularly, every year, to ensure that they are reporting their operations accurately.
 - 4) The Council also requests the Government to bring forward the date by which Water Companies are required to reduce their discharges by 50% -to bring it forward from 2048 to 2030.
 - 5) This Council authorises the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for the Environment and to our Member of Parliament to make these four requests.

The meeting was closed at 8.10pm.