

COUNCIL held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on MONDAY, 11 MARCH 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor G Driscoll (Chair)
Councillors M Ahmed, H Asker, G Bagnall, S Barker, N Church, M Coletta, A Coote, J Davey, B Donald, J Evans, C Fiddy, M Foley, R Freeman, N Gregory, N Hargreaves, R Haynes, P Lees, T Loveday, C Martin, D McBirnie, E Oliver, R Pavitt, A Reeve, N Reeve, G Sell, R Silcock, M Sutton and M Tayler

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

C83 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Chair said he had agreed to read out a question on behalf of a member of the public, Mr. J. Holloway, as follows:

“Are all members of the council satisfied that all recent FOI requests pertaining to the loss of Uttlesford's vehicle operating licence have been answered with full honesty and accountability?”

Councillor Hargreaves said the Council had received five Freedom of Information (FOI) Act requests on this topic, and received around 650-700 such FOI requests a year, which were answered by council officers and not by elected councillors. He said that any requester who was not satisfied with any given answer was entitled to request an internal review, which was carried out by an objective officer not involved in the original response. Anyone still not satisfied after an internal review could also complain to the Information Commissioner. He added that in the case of the five FOI requests on this topic, all had been replied to, although two requests were now being internally reviewed. Furthermore, the documentation that had been released in response to these five requests was extensive, containing 35 documents, with none withheld under any of the allowed exemptions, and only limited redactions to black out small parts. Therefore, he was confident that the process had been properly followed in relation to Freedom of Information Act requirements.

C84 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong, Criscione, Dean, Emanuel, Gooding, Lemon, Loughlin, Luck, Moran and Regan.

In respect of the Business Rates Relief Policy item, Councillors Barker and Foley declared non-pecuniary interests as members of Essex County Council.

Councillor Silcock declared a pecuniary interest as a business owner in respect of the Business Rates Relief Policy and said he would recuse himself from the meeting for Item 8.

C85 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2024 were approved as a correct record.

C86 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Councillor Davey entered the meeting at 7.15pm.

The Chair said he had attended a number of civic events since the previous meeting, including events in Castle Point, Chelmsford Cathedral and the High Sheriff of Essex Community Foundation Awards. He added that he had arranged a quiz for the benefit of Accuro later this month and he urged members to sign-up to ensure there were sufficient numbers for the event to go ahead.

C87 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

Councillor Evans provided an update on a recent East of England Water Summit that he had attended at Chesterford Research Park. He said fifty local authorities had been represented, as well as water companies and academics, and the purpose was to bring stakeholders from across the region together to discuss relevant water issues. He thanked the Chief Executive for starting the initiative.

Councillor Hargreaves spoke on the Uttlesford Business Awards ceremony that he had attended in February. He congratulated all participants for a great event and referred to the winner, Capture House, a visual content agency. He said many businesses in the district were awe inspiring. He also referred to the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) and said there had been financial issues at the organisation but these had now been resolved.

Councillor Barker raised a question regarding a "mini-Mortimer's Gate" in Takeley, which referred to four electric car charging points which had disrupted the lives of residents in the immediate vicinity. She asked whether there were any planning conditions that could be looked at in future. Councillor Evans said he would meet with her to discuss this specific issue.

In response to a question from Councillors Bagnall and Sell regarding the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP), Councillor Hargreaves confirmed that 'Traffic Regulation Orders' (TROs) had been temporarily paused until its financial problems had been resolved on the instruction of its membership.

In respect of the aforementioned Business Awards, Councillor Asker added that Café Cornell, who had catered for the event, had recently been awarded the King's Voluntary Award for its contribution to the community.

In response to a question from Councillor Fiddy regarding housebuilding and the five year land supply, Councillor Evans agreed that developers had been granted permission to build homes but were delivering these at a slower rate in order to maximise profit, rather than to fulfill housing needs.

Councillor Bagnall asked whether the Portfolio Holder for Planning would write to the Secretary of State on the issues raised by Councillor Fiddy, in order to make representations on land supply and housebuilding.

C88 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS (UP TO 30 MINUTES)

Councillor Gregory had provided notice of an urgent question; he asked Councillor Sutton, as the Council's representative on Essex Police, Fire and Crime Panel, what steps she would take when she attended the Panel meeting on Thursday to address with the Chief Constable and Police Commissioner the operational failure within Uttlesford to deal with brazen and overt drug dealing across the district?

In response, Councillor Sutton said she fully agreed that this was a serious issue and she would continue to champion the point as the Council's representative. She said she had written to the Panel to formally ask the question and would take this forward.

The Chair moved onto the written questions as set out the agenda papers.

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Gregory regarding Reynolds Court, Councillor Coote said he was not aware of any further investigations that had taken place but he would ascertain the answer and respond in due course.

No further questions of clarification were asked.

C89 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS TO PLANNING CODES AND PROTOCOLS

Councillor Oliver, Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee, said it had been brought to his attention that members felt the proposals regarding Planning Codes and Protocols required further work. He moved to formally withdraw the proposal.

There were no objections and the report was withdrawn.

C90 MATTERS RECEIVED ABOUT JOINT ARRANGEMENTS AND EXTERNAL

ORGANISATIONS

There were no matters to report.

C91 BUSINESS RATES RELIEF POLICY

Councillor Silcock recused himself and left the meeting at 7.50pm.

Councillor Hargreaves spoke to the report regarding the Business Rates Relief Policy and referred to the changes from the previous year, including the back dating and extension of existing reliefs, as specifically set-out in paragraphs 8 to 18. He proposed approval of the recommendation.

Councillor Alex Reeve seconded the proposal.

Councillor Barker asked whether a “catch-all” or “any other reliefs” category could be established within the policy in order to assist with the administration of Government directions with urgency, as per the experience with the various Covid-19 relief grants.

RESOLVED to approve and adopt the Business Rates Reliefs Policy 2024/25 as set out at Appendix A to this report, to take effect from 1 April 2024, using its discretionary powers under section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (as amended).

The meeting was closed at 7.55pm.