

**EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on WEDNESDAY, 17 JANUARY 2024 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor G Driscoll (Chair)  
Councillors M Ahmed, A Armstrong, H Asker, G Bagnall, S Barker, N Church, M Coletta, A Coote, J Davey, A Dean, B Donald, J Evans, C Fiddy, M Foley, R Freeman, R Gooding, N Gregory, N Hargreaves, R Haynes, P Lees, T Loveday, S Luck, C Martin, 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), D Hermitage (Strategic Director of Planning) and N Katevu (Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal Services)

**C69 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors McBirnie, Emanuel, Loughlin, Criscione and Lemon.

Councillors Barker, Foley and Gooding declared an interest as Essex County Council members.

**C70 REQUISITION FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING: RESPONSE TO THE LETTER RECEIVED FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES**

The Chair said Members had been summoned to consider the requisition regarding the Leader's proposed response to the letter received from the Rt Hon Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities dated 19<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The purpose of the meeting was for the Leader to present her proposed response, which was attached to the agenda papers, and to answer questions on the proposed response.

The Leader said the draft response to the Secretary of State had been attached to the agenda papers for Members consideration, and that an email had been circulated before Christmas to all councillors, which had expressed surprise at receipt of the letter relating to the Local Plan, as the Council had been in regular contact with department to keep them updated. She said the proposed response was factual and calm in tone; she did not intend to politicise the Local Plan.

Councillor Barker said the requisition had been submitted as she felt the response to the letter should be in the public domain. Furthermore, she had concerns regarding the spatial strategy and allocation numbers pertaining to the Regulation 18 decision in October 2023. Days before that decision, the Planning Inspector had approved 1,200 houses in Little Easton, which she said demonstrated that the spatial strategy was now "out of the window" as the site

had not been deemed suitable by officers working on the Plan. These permissions were also a “game changer” in terms of the number of houses that needed to be allocated. She said questions relating to planning permissions had been raised at Council and by a Freedom of Information request but she had not received a response. She asked whether Council believed that there would be substantial changes to the Local Plan before the Regulation 19 stage, as the Chief Executive had previously said, or whether these would be less significant. She welcomed the recent information received regarding the establishment of a new Local Plan working group, which suggested that changes were forthcoming, and more work was to be done before Regulation 19. She asked the Leader to reconsider her response and include reference to the permissions that had been granted between April 23 and April 24, which would reduce the Council’s housing allocation numbers before the Regulation 19 stage. In addition, she asked that the Leader reflect on ECC’s comments on the draft Plan as the statutory Highways and Education authority.

Councillor Gooding raised the issue of education and lack of school places in the district; particularly, he was concerned with the number of places for pre-school and early years learning, and special education needs were not mentioned in the draft Local Plan. He said the Council had to ensure such omissions did not cause any future delays.

Councillor Sell said he considered the Secretary of State’s letter political as he saw little merit in sending such an instruction when the Council had recently reached the Regulation 18 stage of the process. He said the Leader’s proposed response was a “model of restraint” and he supported such an approach.

Councillor Moran asked what the strategy would be for villages in the district, such as his ward of Ashdon. He said the Council needed to be open with the community in terms of any further changes to the Local Plan.

Councillor Fiddy said the Secretary of State was already aware of the Council’s timetable and that this was a political vanity project. She said there had been no need for this meeting, which would be at the cost of the taxpayer and reduce officer time spent working on the Local Plan.

Councillor Pavitt agreed and said this was a waste of time and “gesture politics”.

Councillor Bagnall urged caution and said it was worth reflecting on ECC’s comments to ensure the timetable was kept on track.

Councillor Gregory said it was the Leader of the Opposition’s role to hold the administration to account in public, as per this extraordinary meeting. However, a Local Plan was needed in the district to prevent speculative development and he felt the letter was politically motivated. He urged the local MP to support the constituency.

Councillor Reeve said the Local Plan was an exercise in community building and there was an opportunity to “build better” rather than impose development on the district. He said officers had not been put under political pressure in producing the draft Local Plan, which had also been subject to public consultation.

Councillor Hargreaves said ECC were the local educational authority and were responsible for school places. He cited an instance in Newport whereby ECC refused a free parcel of land which would have allowed the expansion of a local primary school.

Councillor Coote said the Government was responsible for the lack of school and pre-school places across the nation and referred to Councillor Gooding's earlier speech and Rt Hon Michael Gove's appointment as Education Secretary in 2010, whereby he decided to not proceed with a future school building programme. He said this would have saved the current Government £1.2billion.

Councillor Gooding said the scheme was dropped due to extraordinary costs, with repayments still being paid today.

Councillor Coote said there were 1,600 under-ones who could not find a nursery place in Essex. He said this was not a real local plan, rather one imposed on the district by a Conservative Government.

Councillor Freeman said he thought the Secretary of State had been ill-advised in sending the letter and he had little confidence in the current Government. The district required a Local Plan in order to prevent speculative development and he was confident that the Council was on track to make this happen.

Councillor Asker said the meeting had been a waste of time. She asked the Conservative Group to read the draft response in the agenda papers, specifically bullet points 4 and 5, as these were the main reasons for the requisition.

Councillor Evans said the Local Plan would be dealt with in the public domain and a new iteration of the Local Plan working group would begin work in February. The planning policy team were currently working on responding to the consultation comments and these too would be published in due course. He said the Council would be extending its duty to co-operate with ECC, although this was a reciprocal arrangement and officers had been surprised at the county council's comments in relation to education. In respect of the village communities, he said they would have an opportunity to request where housing allocations were located. Changes would be made to the Local Plan following consideration of the representations made in response to the Regulation 18 consultation. He said he felt that the issues raised by the Opposition had been adequately addressed.

Councillor Church said the meeting had been called to ensure member concerns regarding the response to the Secretary of State's letter were heard. He said he had concerns regarding the timing of the letter, which was sent after the Regulation 18 decision, and he felt the Plan was flawed. He asked that in future the Local Plan leaflets were delivered to the public in a timely manner.

The Leader was invited to summarise the debate. She said the points raised today could have been better made in a different format, such as a group leaders' briefing, and very few material matters had been raised at this public meeting. Comments relating to ECC and school places were a surprise as ECC

was the authority responsible for education. In regards to housing allocations, she stated that 7,546 planning permissions had been granted up to November 2023. She said the draft response was deliberately apolitical and based on facts, and the Local Plan was too important to be politicised. She asked that members work collaboratively in order to produce a Local Plan for the district and to contact her in the event they had questions or concerns regarding the process.

The meeting was closed at 7.59pm.