

COUNCIL held at ZOOM, on WEDNESDAY, 22 APRIL 2020 at 7.30 pm

Present: Councillor R Freeman (Chair)
Councillors A Armstrong, H Asker, G Bagnall, S Barker,
M Caton, A Coote, C Criscione, C Day, A Dean, G Driscoll,
D Eke, J Evans, P Fairhurst, M Foley, A Gerard, N Gregory,
N Hargreaves, V Isham, R Jones, A Khan, P Lavelle,
G LeCount, P Lees, M Lemon, B Light, J Lodge, J Loughlin,
S Luck, S Merifield, E Oliver, R Pavitt, L Pepper, N Reeve,
G Sell, A Storah, M Sutton, M Tayler and J De Vries

Officers in attendance: A Bochel (Democratic Services Officer), B Ferguson
(Democratic Services Manager), D French (Chief Executive),
C Gibson (Democratic Services Officer), R Harborough (Director
- Public Services), S Pugh (Assistant Director - Governance and
Legal) and A Webb (Director - Finance and Corporate Services)

C69 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meetings on 25 February and 10 March were signed and approved subject to an amendment proposed by Councillor Gerard to minute C64 of 25 February meeting, "Felsted Neighbourhood Plan".

Additions are highlighted in bold:

Councillor Gerard seconded the proposal and commended the hard work of the local team who had put the plan together. He said Newport had an **emerging** Neighbourhood Plan but the challenge they faced was a lack of a three-year land supply. He urged Members to support the proposal.

C70 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Leader gave a report to Council. A copy of his statement is appended to these minutes for information.

C71 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS (UP TO 15 MINUTES)

In response to a question from Councillor Sell regarding whether more could be done to engage with residents, the Leader said there was already a tremendous amount of information being provided to residents from a variety of sources.

In response to a question from Councillor Khan regarding risk assessments against investments, the Leader said he had already responded to Councillor Khan's letter. The matter could be reviewed at the Investment Board and could continue to be discussed offline.

In response to a question from Councillor Dean, the Portfolio Holder – Planning and the Local Plan said he did not intend to seek clarification from the Inspectors on the reasons for the Local Plan being found unsound because they were clear. It was not appropriate to approach the promoters about public support for the sites.

The Portfolio Holder – Finance and Budget noted that town and parish councils would still get their precepts paid, and the Council was being moved onto a green energy tariff which would cost approximately an additional £30000.

In response to a question from Councillor Barker, the Chief Executive said the Council was not furloughing any staff, and staff who were self-isolating would be receiving full pay.

In response to a question from Councillor Light, the Leader said that headline figures about how the coronavirus public health emergency was affecting Council finances had been provided to councillors. The Council was doing a tremendous amount of work with charities at this time.

C72

REMOTE MEETINGS

Members considered the report on remote meetings, which summarised the steps that needed to be taken to hold remote meetings in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

RESOLVED to:

- a. Approves the holding of remote meetings in compliance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (“the Regulations”) for so long as is reasonably necessary.
- b. Authorises the Chief Executive to summon remote meetings of the Council, its Executive, committees and working groups.
- c. Confirms that references in the Council’s Constitution to attendance at meetings shall be satisfied by remote attendance in accordance with the Regulations.
- d. Confirms that references in the Council’s Constitution to publication, deposit or inspection of notices, agendas, documents and other information shall be satisfied by publication, deposit or inspection in accordance with the Regulations.
- e. Amends the Council Procedure Rules as set out in the Appendix to this report as they apply to remote meetings.
- f. Authorises the Chief Executive to develop and implement protocols for the holding of remote meetings, subject to consultation with Group Leaders and the Scrutiny Chair.
- g. Authorises the Chief Executive to take such other steps as, in her view, are reasonably conducive or incidental to facilitating remote meetings.

C73 TREASURY MANAGEMENT PRACTICES, PRINCIPLES AND SCHEDULES

The Portfolio Holder – Finance and Budget gave a summary of the report which set out Treasury Management Practices, principles and schedules in line with the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management in the Public Services. Local Authorities are required by Law to have regard to the Treasury Management code.

RESOLVED to approve the Treasury Management Practices, Principles and Schedules as set out in Appendix A.

C74 COUNCIL TAX DISCRETIONARY DISCOUNTS POLICY

The Portfolio Holder – Finance and Budget gave a summary of the report which said that in December 2019, Leaders and Chief Executives of the County, district, borough and city councils in Essex agreed that they would like to support care leavers with their council tax liabilities.

In addition, Council Tax Premiums currently applied to all unoccupied and unfurnished properties in Uttlesford after a period of 2 years had elapsed since the property became unoccupied. Where there were mitigating circumstances it might be deemed that the premium is not appropriate and that this could therefore be waived subject to qualifying criteria.

REOLVED to approve the recommendations as set out in the report and associated appendices;
a. That a Council Tax discretionary discount for Essex Care Leavers as set out in Appendix A is applied
b. That the Empty Property Premium Waiver as set out in Appendix C is applied

C75 FINANCIAL REGULATIONS AND CONTRACT PROCEDURE RULES

The Portfolio Holder - Finance and Budget gave a summary of the report which said that the Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure rules had been reviewed in order to ensure that they remained relevant and fit for purpose.

In response to member questions, the Portfolio Holder - Finance and the Budget said the rules and regulations were all about providing value for money. He would look into how these rules took account of environmental and ethical concerns.

RESOLVED to approve the updated Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules.

C76 BUSINESS RATES RELIEF AND GRANTS

Members noted the urgent officer decision that had been made on 30 March 2020 to update the business rates relief policy and to approve the additional Small Business Grant and the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Grant.

C77 HARSHIP GRANT FUNDING

The Portfolio Holder – Finance and Budget gave a summary of the report which said that in response to the Public Health Emergency, Covid-19, the Government had provided £500 million to Local Authorities for additional support to council tax payers. Government had requested that these funds be administered using Local Authorities discretionary powers, under Section 13a (1) (c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

RESOLVED to approve the Exceptional Hardship Fund Policy (Appendix 1) using their discretionary powers under Section 13a (1) (c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992:

- To provide working age Local Council Tax Support recipients with an award of £150 or the total of their Council Tax liability whichever is lower
- To provide council tax relief via the Exceptional Hardship Fund to residents suffering extreme hardship

C78 GOVERNANCE, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

The Chair of the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee presented the report which summarised the work of the Committee in the 2019-20 year.

Members noted the report.

C79 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee presented the report which summarised the work of the Committee in the 2019-20 year.

Members noted the report.

The meeting ended at 9.40pm.

Cllr John Lodge, Leader of Uttlesford District Council

Statement for Full Council, 22 April 2020

I would like to open by expressing my gratitude and thanks, on behalf of the council, to our brave NHS workers and carers, other key workers and volunteers. Like many others, I am on the doorstep at 8pm each Thursday applauding those on the frontline in this crisis. Let's continue to show them the admiration they deserve. And thank you for remembering that 'stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives' is as important as ever.

I'd like to say how proud I am at the way the council has prepared and reacted to this crisis. Despite the many challenges, essential services have been maintained and we've continued to support businesses and residents, particularly those most vulnerable and at risk.

The following is a brief summary of some of the key areas:

Benefit claims/change of circumstances

The Benefits team is continuing to provide the most vulnerable residents with an efficient and effective service throughout this crisis. Every member of the team is working remotely, with many working overtime to ensure financial support is provided to those who need it most in a timely and accurate manner. It has been an exceptional effort.

New Claims (NC's) to Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) have seen the biggest increase in demand. Some 181 claims were made in March – this is an increase of 99% compared to the average received per month from April 2019 to February 2020. From 1 to 20 April, a further 196 NC's have already been received. A 62% increase this month (to 294 claims) is therefore forecast.

Despite this substantial increase in workload, the team is continuing to process applications and changes in circumstance within targets. NC's are currently taking an average of 15 days, and changes in circumstance four days, to process.

Housing and homelessness

The **Housing Options Team** is providing the service by phone/email and continues to offer housing advice, homelessness assessments and carry out homelessness prevention measures. They have maintained a duty service over the telephone 24/7, including a number of out of hours calls. They

are managing 54 homelessness applications at the moment and are maintaining our priority of providing applicants with accommodation whilst minimising the use of B&B. Currently there are 16 homeless households in temporary accommodation and two currently in B&B.

With regard to rough sleepers, the council is following government guidance to accommodate anyone who is at risk of rough sleeping. We are still able to secure B&B accommodation if we need it and have been able to maintain a small supply of our own temporary accommodation available for emergency access. We've also secured accommodation that can be used for people at risk of rough sleeping if they have Covid symptoms.

The team is working closely with Citizens Advice, Social Care and Peabody Floating Support, amongst others, to support our homeless applicants.

We have temporarily suspended the allocation of social housing as people are unable to move at this time unless it is an emergency situation. Registered providers have also stopped sending through their properties for advertising. We can direct let properties if there is an urgent requirement to do so and are concentrating void works, where there is a limited supply of materials, to where it is most required – for example, to help free up temporary accommodation and then to get temporary accommodation ready for re-letting.

The **Housing Management Team** has phoned as many of our 70+ tenants and those with a disability to check on their welfare and whether a lack of family or other support meant they required assistance with food shopping, collection of a prescription or just feeling socially isolated and require someone to talk to. A total of 958 welfare check calls have so far been made and referrals made for support services to be linked in where required. In addition, calls are being made to tenants who are newly on Universal Credit to check on their welfare and to see if they require any advice or assistance, especially as a number of these were first time claimants of UC.

The team is also calling those tenants in rent arrears to check on their welfare and see if they require any welfare benefits advice or debt counselling, or even whether they require a food parcel via the foodbank.

The Tenancy Sustainment Officer has been keeping in touch with all tenants to offer support to them during the current lockdown.

Whilst the team can't be working face to face with tenants at this time they are ensuring tenants have support – they are finding the vast majority of people have been very appreciative of the call.

Community activity

The Uttlesford Community Response hub, launched with voluntary sector partners, the Council for Voluntary Services (CVSU) and Volunteer Uttlesford only a few weeks ago, has taken over 850 calls, responded to 825 emails and registered more than 200 volunteers who they continue to link to those who need support. The hub has been able to help over 250 people with their shopping, almost 500 people with collecting their prescriptions, and over 300 people by offering a befriending service.

Alongside this, the team is supporting some very vulnerable people with their food boxes and any other help they may need as part of the nationwide 'Operation Shield', which is being led locally by Essex County Council. The team continues to link in with partners such as the West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group and doctor surgeries to ensure no-one is missed.

Working with our partners at Immigration enforcement we have been able to set up a bulk prescription delivery service two days per week, which has proved beneficial for residents, volunteers and local pharmacies.

Through the CVSU we are looking forward to being able to offer to our elderly and vulnerable residents in care home/sheltered scheme settings the chance to connect with their friends and families through a Facebook Portal device.

The response hub continues to link with many local partners who are also offering support and help to residents on a daily basis e.g Citizens Advice, Foodbank and West Essex Mind.

Throughout this crisis, the voluntary and community sector have proved pivotal in our ability to be there for those most in need. We know there is more great work happening in the district – this is something we are supportive of, and would encourage any group offering support in the community to make contact with the hub:

- Call: 03333 408 218 (8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday)
- Email: communityresponse@uttlesford.gov.uk

Sheltered Housing and Lifeline

The team is calling all our sheltered tenants at least once a week, more frequently for those who would normally receive a daily visit. They are making sure all our sheltered residents are accounted for and making sure they have everything they require. Half of the team is still able to be mobile and are responding to emergency calls, and doing shopping and prescription collections for sheltered

residents who have no-one else to help them. They also continue to carry out all health and safety checks at each site to ensure fire safety systems and warden call systems are working correctly.

The team has called round all our 730 lifeline users, twice, to check on their welfare. Letters have been sent to all customers informing them of potential bogus callers as this appeared to be an issue at the beginning of the lockdown.

They are still responding to any Lifeline equipment failure call outs and are installing lifelines if these are in emergency circumstances.

Business grants

Local businesses are the backbone of our community and it is important we do all we can to help and support them through this crisis. The Revenues team has been working hard to ensure money from the government reaches those in need as quickly as possible. As of 21 April, we have handed out £13m in cash grants to almost 1,100 local businesses.

We know businesses are struggling and that more will be entitled to this grant funding. Please get in touch with the team. Further information, including links to other funding sources not administered by the council, is available on the UDC website

<https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/article/6635/Business-support-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>).

Waste collection

The crews and the waste management team continue to do a great job under very challenging circumstances. Despite an initial reduction in staffing levels, the recycling and waste bin collections have continued largely as normal. This week the garden waste bin collection and bulky waste collection services were reinstated this week, thanks to the hard work of the crews and management team. It's been a team effort.

I would like to thank residents for their patience and understanding at this difficult time, but most importantly for their support. The crews have been clapped, cheered and waved at on their rounds, and seen some lovely notes and pictures left on bins. We've also seen a huge number of messages of support on social media. This show of support has been overwhelming – it has not gone unnoticed and I know it is greatly appreciated by the teams.

Customer services

Since closing its doors to the general public during the week of 23 March, the council has seen a marked increase in the number of other ways customers can contact us. Emails have increased (by about 25%) as well as the number of payments made both online and via the Automated Telephone Payment (ATP) system (up by 30%). However, call levels have remained at 'normal' levels where we believe those that would usually visit our Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow or Thaxted sites are now picking up the phone as a 'preferred' alternative method of contact. A re-structure of the telephone messaging system has further enhanced our customers experience by offering clearer options for query resolution.

The service is being provided with at least 70% of customer services staff currently based at home on any one day. Many customers have been surprised the level of service has not been affected by the move to remote working. This has been down to the efforts of IT to get everyone up and running but particularly to the CSC advisors supported by the CSC management team who have adapted to the revised working processes and environment seamlessly.

Staff

Around two-thirds of staff are working from home and have been adjusting to a way of working. This has been a huge undertaking and particular thanks goes to the IT team who have worked tirelessly over a number of weeks to enable this to happen. Only a skeleton staff are still based in the office (observing strict social distancing). Others cannot work from an office and are still on the frontline, such as the refuse crews, but are following and sticking to the latest government advice around social distancing so ensure safety.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank staff for their hard work and dedication – not just those workers that residents see (such as the refuse crews), but everyone who is working behind the scenes to ensure essential services can continue to be provided for our communities at this difficult time.

Stay up to date with the latest information

The council continues to monitor government guidance daily and issue communications to staff, members and the public regularly. Lots of information is being made available through a wide range of means. We'd encourage people to keep an eye on our website. There is a lot of useful content including a dedicated section with the latest updates/changes to services as well as links to trusted sources of information, at www.uttlesford.gov.uk/coronavirus. We're also putting information out

regularly through our other comms channels – we would encourage people to sign up to receive our regular e-newsletters (www.uttlesford.gov.uk/keepmeposted) or to like/follow us on Facebook and Twitter (search @UttlesfordDC).