

Uttlesford District Council

20 April 2022

Written Questions to Members of the Executive and Committee Chairs

Written responses published on 19 April 2022

1. By Councillor Khan to the Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Uttlesford NORSE

'The arrangement with Uttlesford NORSE brokered under the previous Conservative administration which commenced in 2020 to provide Uttlesford District Council with maintenance services of its Council Housing stock as well as repairs and cleaning services, has been subject to scrutiny by the incoming CEO following a failure by NORSE to complete services on time as well as report progress.

- Can the Lead Member who sits on the NORSE Partnership Board as a representative of Uttlesford District Council provide an explanation of why the matters of concern were not raised at earlier meetings.
- Can the Lead Member provide Council with information on value for money and quality of service delivered through the arrangement with Uttlesford NORSE.'

Reply from the Leader of the Council, Lead Member for Uttlesford Norse:

Operational issues have routinely been raised by officers and directly with UNSL colleagues since the partnership was agreed two years ago.

These processes speedily addressed the concerns around a legionella incident. I set the New Chief Executive a personal objective of addressing concerns we had regarding the working of the UNSL Partnership. These objectives were agreed by a Cross Party Panel of Councillors, as a priority for our new Chief Executive. Resulting in our Chief Executive investigating the situation, focusing on the health and safety issues following the Legionnaires incident, he escalated the matter including writing the first draft of the paper that was presented at the UNSL Board meeting in September. This successfully led directly to the introduction of a new reporting system within UNSL and in March 2022 a response to the November paper has answered satisfactorily questions raised by the Chief Executive. With agreement the Chief Executive reported his concerns in detail to Members through the UDC Governance Audit and Performance in November 2021 and has comprehensively updated each GAP committee since then. Our administration has shown a clear process of dealing with important health issues, involving councillors of all parties.

The budget provided to Norse is the same as that which used to support the in-house delivery. Norse are providing the core service we require of them.

2. By Councillor Dean to the Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Housing

'I invite the Leader of Council, Cllr Petrina Lees, to fully and accurately inform this Council Meeting about the following observations by answering the single question below.

1. OBSERVATION: In February 2020 (*) – now over two years ago – Cllr Lees personally committed to deliver 183 council homes during the lifetime of this Council ending in May 2023. Little has been done to date to deliver that two-year old commitment both before and since she became Council Leader. Little progress has been made towards delivering that commitment by May 2023. Cllr Lees' administration has not even created a policy and delivery plan for increasing the stock of Council-owned homes to meet or exceed Cllr Lees' published target to achieve 183 new homes and to further "aspire to build more".

2. OBSERVATION: There is evidence that Cllr Lees' administration does not intend to deliver 14 council homes already agreed by the Housing Board and contained within the 2021/26 Housing Strategy on land that Uttlesford District Council owns at Auton Croft in Saffron Walden. There is further evidence that Cllr Lees and her R4U colleagues have attempted to bypass proper Council processes to achieve their apparent negative objective of undermining the Housing Board's agreed objective.

3. OBSERVATION: Cllr Lees' R4U administration has not adopted the policy followed by the South Cambridgeshire District Council's Lib Dem administration to deliver 346 homes into Council ownership during the same 4-year period by bidding to buy affordable homes on development sites across its district.

NOTE: (*) The minute C67 from the Council Meeting of 25 February 2020 sets out that: "Councillor Lees said she would commit to building 183 council houses over the next four years. She said the Administration would aspire to build more".

4. QUESTION: Are these observations true statements and, if so, what does Cllr Lees intend to change in the next 13 months to recover her administration's reputation by improving the Council's delivery of council housing for people living in Uttlesford who cannot afford to buy a home on the open market?'

Reply from the Leader of the Council, Lead Member for Housing:

The housing development programme has continued over the past 2 years in spite of the global pandemic which has disrupted everything and has resulted in a slow down in all development across the district. There is no doubt that the pandemic has caused delays in the delivery of some Council development sites. Contributing factors include labour and staff shortages, supply chain issues and prolonged uncertainty. Despite these issues the development programme has delivered 25 new build properties since the start of the

pandemic and a further 27 properties have started on site and are due to complete this summer.

During this administration, all Council owned (HRA) land holdings have all been assessed for their potential for affordable housing development/re-development/re-modelling. All of those that have been identified have either commenced on site, are submitted for Planning Approval or are shortly to be submitted for Planning Approval.

The Housing Board's agreed objective of making best use of housing assets and land continues to be met despite the ongoing pressures caused by the pandemic. Members of the Board have considered and asked to be put forward to Planning Committee for decision all viable sites for Council housing. These sites, including Auton Croft, will provide a further 76 new Council built properties. Whilst these sites are supported by the Housing Board they will need to be determined by the Planning Committee.

We have had a policy of looking at opportunities of buying on Section 106 sites and currently have submitted a bid on 18 properties on a site. However, bidding on the affordable housing on Section 106 sites will not increase the overall numbers of affordable housing being delivered as these have to be built anyway and will be bought by one of our Registered Provider (RP) partners. The council also does not want to increase the price of these properties by entering into a bidding war with RPs and to put off RP partners working in Uttlesford in the future. We want to identify different routes to delivering additional affordable housing outside of the section 106 process.

In order to further increase supply moving forward, and as discussed at the Housing Board, a Council wide housing investment strategy will need to be agreed. This needs to be done in conjunction with the Local Plan process, as landowners will want to receive a market value for their sites. The investment strategy will need to consider the setting up of a joint venture partnership or wholly owned company, so that both market housing and social housing can be provided, which will enable the appropriate market land value to be achieved. Funds to purchase and invest in the development of sites will need to be made available as part of this process.

3. By Councillor Caton to the Cabinet Member for Economy, Investment and Corporate Strategy

'Can Councillor Reeve please provide the Council with an update on progress of the development of the former Banana factory into the Little Canfield Business Park? Please include detailed information on:

- Timings regarding the Refuse service moving onto the site.
- Any tenancy agreements completed with businesses for the Business Park unit(s).

- Details on any plans to let out surplus office space in light of the likely reduction in staff numbers as a result of the Blueprint Uttlesford 2022-27 transformation programme.
- The total costs of the conversion and whether the project remains in budget.'

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Economy, Investment and Corporate Strategy:

'I would like to thank Cllr Caton for his questions and trust he and colleagues saw the videos of the site that were sent to Members last week. In respect of your specific questions:

Timings regarding the Refuse service moving onto the site.

The Environmental Service team move into the new depot the weekend of 14/15 May

Any tenancy agreements completed with businesses for the Business Park unit(s).

Whilst no agreement has yet completed a 20-year lease for the whole commercial space, to a single tenant, is currently with our Legal team for completion

Details on any plans to let out surplus office space in light of the likely reduction in staff numbers as a result of the Blueprint Uttlesford 2022-27 transformation programme.

The tenant taking the commercial space is also taking an element of the office space. No specific plans have been drawn up this far for any additional letting of office space but it will form part of the Blueprint Uttlesford action plan.

The total costs of the conversion and whether the project remains in budget.

I am happy to say the project remains within budget. Spend to date, including the acquisition cost is £14.67m.'

4. By Councillor Sell to the Cabinet Member for Planning

'Can Councillor Evans, in his capacity as portfolio holder for Planning, provide an update on staffing in relation to the Planning Department, including details on the following, please:

- The current full time equivalent number of staff in the Planning Department;
- The staff turnover in the current financial year in the Planning Department;
- The vacant posts which are currently unfilled.'

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Planning:

There are four teams which make up the Planning Department. The ftes are given by team.

Team	FTE
Building Control	06.3
Local Plan and New Communities	09.0
Support and Registration (Development Management and Building Control)	14.2
Development Management (Including Enforcement and Investigation)	21.35
Total	50.85

The staff turnover in the current financial year in the Planning Department April 2021 – March 2022:

Job Title	Leaving Date
Assistant Director Planning	30/09/2021
Planning and Building Control Support Officer	31/01/2022
Planning and Building Control Support Officer	01/10/2021
Planning Officer (Career Grade) Development Management	05/09/2021
Planning Enforcement Officer, Development Management	26/01/2022
Planning Enforcement Officer, Development Manager	16/04/2021
New Communities Senior Planning Policy Officer, Pollicy	03/01/2022
New Communities Senior Planning Policy Officer, Policy	15/08/2021
Senior Planning Policy Officer, Policy	31/03/2022

The staff turnover in the current financial year in the Planning Department April 2022 – March 2023:

No leavers.

The vacant posts which are currently unfilled:

Post	Details
1x Team Manager South	Role had been filled with an Agency Interim for 18 months since early 2020. There has been one failed round of recruitment which took place at the end of 2021. Agency Interim finished at end of March 2022. New Agency Interim due to start with UDC on 09/09/22.
1 x Principal Planning Officer	Role currently being filled with agency person. There have been two failed rounds of

	recruitment. Recruitment and advertisement of role took place at end of 2021.
1 x Senior Planning Officer,	Role currently vacant. Has been vacant for less than eight weeks. Backfilling with an agency person. Newly appointed SPO has accepted the role. Start date is to be confirmed.