

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on THURSDAY, 16 JUNE
2022 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors C Criscione, R Jones, G LeCount, S Luck and G Sell

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Assistant Director - Corporate Services), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer) and P Holt (Chief Executive)

Also in attendance: Councillor J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning and the Local Plan) and Councillor P Lees (Leader of the Council).

SC11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lavelle and De Vries.

A non-pecuniary declaration of interest was made by the Chair regarding agenda item number 8. Councillor LeCount would take over as Chair for that item.

SC12 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th May 2022 were approved.

SC13 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

It was noted that the preferred options for the Local Plan process due to go to Cabinet shortly had been delayed.

The Chief Executive summarised the current position of the Local Plan and said that there was a potential opportunity that had not been put forward in the 'call for sites.' He said that this could substantially change the current site allocation, and therefore the decision to move the proposed Regulation 18 Consultation to the beginning of November had been taken.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the benefits of the possible new large site outweighed the disadvantage of the delay to the process.

Councillor Criscione said on going transparency was important and requested that relevant Ward Members were involved as soon as possible.

Councillor Evans confirmed that new site allocations could be made throughout the Local Plan process and were legitimate and legal.

The Chief Executive confirmed the new dates for the Local Plan process: -

Commence Regulation 18 – November 2022

Commence Regulation 19 – November 2023

Submit for Public Examination – April 2024

Adoption of the Local Plan – April 2025

In response to questions from Councillor LeCount the Chief Executive made the following points: -

- The delay to the Local Plan process had gone beyond the timetable set out in guidance from the Government, however he was confident that given the reasons for the delay they would not intervene in the process but would continue to ask questions and provide guidance.
- Communication with residents was important and the most effective options were being considered.
- The Chief Executive said that he would write to all parishes explaining the delay, and he said there was an opportunity for face-to-face discussion at two upcoming meetings involving the majority of the parishes.

Councillor Evans said that the delay to the process meant that the additional prospects would be considered alongside all the other sites to ensure all promoters were treated the same and avoid further delay through judicial review.

The Chief Executive said that the new Director of Planning was starting shortly and would drive forward the details of the new timetable within the next six weeks.

Councillor Lees clarified that the Local Plan was a Members plan and the cross-party Local Plan Leadership Group with support from their parties would lead and direct the Local Plan process.

SC14 **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The addition of a Local Plan Scrutiny meeting on 30th June 2022 and the confirmation of the Stansted Airport Appeal Review on 14th July 2022 were noted.

SC15 **PLANNING SERVICE REVIEW UPDATE**

Councillor LeCount took over as Chair for this item.

He said that big changes had been made and he highlighted the following improvements: -

- A list of major applications and where they were going.
- Speed and quality report.
- Appeals and which were won and lost.
- A report from Planning Enforcement with an update of the current position.

- S106 monies available to the Parishes.

Councillor Evans thanked the Planning Transformation Lead who authored the report, he said the data within the report related to May 2022.

He clarified the S106 position, and said that historic data was being uploaded into the EXACOM system and a soft launch would take place in October and it would go live in November.

Members raised the following concerns: -

- Retention of Staff – and whether the designation was making this more difficult.
- The vacancies within the Planning department which were crucial to the running of the department.
- The importance of exit interviews to understand issues within the department.

The Chief Executive said that exit interviews were requested and he would check the details and send information to Members after the meeting. He thought that morale was low within Planning and said that he would be collaborating with the new Director of Planning to turn this around. He said market supplements were not currently offered but would be kept under review.

In response to Members questions Councillor Evans made the following points: -

- It was difficult to recruit throughout the planning industry and was not specific to Uttlesford District Council (UDC).
- Due to remote working it was easier for staff to move around and get higher salaries.
- He agreed to raise with the new Director of Planning whether consultants could be temporarily instructed in the absence of senior officers to specifically deal with place making.
- Quality control for applications going to the Planning Committee were being looked at by the Planning Committee Working Group (PCWG). Councillor Evans agreed to speak to the Chair of the PCWG and report back at the next meeting.

There was discussion regarding the availability of Planning Officers for residents and the Parish Councils and the following points were made: -

- Developers entered into a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) and were then paying for the service.
- The number of major applications with a PPA would be circulated to Members after the meeting.
- Statistics on response times to e-mail would be circulated.
- It had been decided that due to limited resources major applications and S62a applications would be the main focus.
- There were 'frequently asked questions' on the website to help with a number of standard queries.
- E-mail was the preferred option for contact to the Planning Department.

The Chief Executive said that once all the posts in Planning were filled there would be the opportunity to re-introduce other services but currently the department were providing the best service with limited resources.

Councillor Gregory agreed to provide details of residents who were struggling to get a response from Planning.

Councillor Criscione suggested that Key Performance Indicators which were looked at by the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee were extended to include how enquiries were dealt with in the Planning department and the timescales expected for responses.

SC16 **BLUEPRINT UTTLESFORD**

The Chief Executive said that Blueprint Uttlesford was a change programme.

There were four objectives: -

Policy objectives

Mainly driven by Members but the Chief Executive said that he would ensure there was a link between the Corporate Plan and what this programme would deliver.

Systems and structures

The Chief Executive said that changes to the senior staff structure had been completed and included the new Planning Director who was due to start shortly and the new Assistant Director of Finance who would start in August as well as structures in other areas including Planning.

The Chief Executive said that he had started the process to change the performance culture in the organisation and this was reflected in the upcoming GAP Committee. A new approach would be taken whereby a service area would be chosen and a qualitative discussion regarding the service would take place. He said that this would not only cover the figures but all aspects of the service in order to drive improvements to performance outcomes.

Financial savings

The Chief Executive said that there was good news. The amount of monies initially put aside in the budget for the potential loss of income, due to major applications going direct to the Planning Inspectorate could now be reduced.

He said the amount added into the budget was £500k in each year for two years and he was now confident that this could be revised down to £200k per year.

In addition to this saving he said that the Government had also decided that they were not yet ready to replace the New Homes Bonus scheme. This meant that the relief provided would remain for at least another year, adding an extra £1m of income.

The net impact was as follows:

Previous savings required and agreed in February:

- 2022/23 – nil
- 2023/24 - £1 million
- 2024/25 - £1 million
- 2025/26 - £800,000
- 2026/27 - £800,000
-

Revised figures announced today:

- 2022/23 – nil
- 2023/24 - £400,000
- 2024/25 - £1 million
- 2025/26 - £1 million
- 2026/27 - £800,000

The Chief Executive said that only two major applications had gone through to the Planning Inspectorate so far, which was a vote of confidence in the Planning department. He said that Planning had taken the initiative and spoken to Developers and as a result Developers had continued to put their applications through UDC.

Councillor Evans added that there was a further initiative within the Planning department to discuss with the Inspectorate the retention of some fees if developers went directly to them. This was an acknowledgement that a great deal of the work was being carried out within UDC.

The Chief Executive was confident that the £400k savings for next year had already been found through commercialisation including an increase in rental income and better use of the London Road building. He said that this avoided service reviews for at least another year.

Behaviours and culture

The Chief Executive said it was important to get the culture right in order to drive best behaviours and performance.

He gave three examples of how the change in behaviours were affecting outcomes for Uttlesford residents:-

The extension of external partnerships with the NHS, and the recognition that a large proportion of residents used hospitals out of the designated area for Uttlesford. This included conversations at Member and Officer level with those who commissioned services at Addenbrookes and Broomfields in order to represent residents and gain positive outcomes for them.

Through the Local Plan, ensuring that the additional demands on infrastructure were addressed as much as possible by developers and landowners. As well as formulating a plan to deal with the historic infrastructure deficit by building better partnerships focusing on issues around water, roads, schools, GP practices and Broadband.

Through the DWP meeting vulnerable residents face to face at sites within UDC hosted by the Parish Councils.

In response to questions from Members the Chief Executive said: -

- The Shire Hill depot was owned by UDC and would be sold or rented out.
- The impact of Blueprint Uttlesford had been front loaded to look at equalities, environment and health impacts and the development of an anti-poverty strategy would be used to establish gaps and to use targeted interventions to deal with poverty disadvantage.

The meeting ended at 9.00pm.