

Uttlesford District Council

19 July 2022

Written Questions to Members of the Executive and Committee Chairs

Written responses published on 18 July 2022

1. By Councillor Pavitt to Councillor Evans - the Cabinet Member for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan

“What is the Council doing to enable the Planning department to understand and accurately assess BNG (Biodiversity Net Gain) and hold developers to account for their baseline biodiversity reports and the gains they claim to achieve?

Sadly, the process is wide open to abuse and there are frequent reports of ‘copy & paste’ biodiversity reports produced by desk-based consultants.

For Uttlesford District Council to rely exclusively on external consultants is costly and fallible.

How far has the council advanced the appointment of a specialist Ecology officer to provide oversight and ensure targets are accurately set and achievable?

Such an officer will also provide much needed resource towards achieving the ecology aims of the Council’s Climate Change & Ecological Emergency declaration.”

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan:

“I share Cllr Pavitt’s view on the importance of bio-diversity in the planning process and the need for specialist ecology input into policy-making, planning decision-making and post decision-monitoring. This will only become more important with new development being planned and with forthcoming regulatory changes. UDC currently procures ecology advice from Essex Place Services. In liaison with my Climate Portfolio colleagues, a budget has been set aside to fund in-house ecology advice. Officers are currently considering our specific needs and the most effective options for securing in-house advice. It is anticipated that we will go out to recruitment in September.”

2. By Councillor Barker to Councillors Lees and Coote - the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Housing

“Can I please ask the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Housing what steps are being taken to amend the Housing Waiting List Scheme to ensure that exception

sites in village locations, planned and carried through by Parish Councils such as High Easter, over many years, are built for and allocated to those identified in that Parish's Housing Needs survey?"

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Housing:

"Officers are currently undertaking a review of that part of the Allocations Policy that relates to rural exception schemes as set out on Appendix 2 of the policy. Officers are consulting with the Rural Community Council of Essex co-ordinator who works with the parishes on exceptions schemes, the housing associations who deliver these schemes and other local authorities. Any changes to the policy need to be considered carefully to fully understand the consequences of changing the way that the current cascade works. The intention is to then bring a report to the next Housing Board for consideration of any changes to the policy which if agreed will be recommended to Cabinet for approval."

3. By Councillor Gregory to Councillor Pepper - the Cabinet Member for the Environment and Green Issues; Equalities

"Could I ask the Portfolio Holder for Environment, Green Issues and Equalities to:

1. Provide details in respect of the following: the cost differences between the procured "Green" utilities and previous standard utilities for each year of the contract period, split between gas and electricity; the due diligence undertaken in establishing the "green" nature of the utilities; the verification process undertaken and the nature of any offsetting used to establish the "green" source of said utilities?
2. Explain the process of validation and verification undertaken to ensure any such offsetting is robust and accurate?"

Reply from the Cabinet Member for the Environment and Green Issues; Equalities:

Question 1:

"In October 2020, the Council entered into Green Tariff call off contracts with N-Power for the supply of Electricity and Total Gas for the supply of Gas. These contracts are managed by LASAR which is part of Kent County Council and specialises in managing utility contracts including energy.

The cost of Green Tariff compared to conventional standard tariffs are set out in the table below and in total cost an additional £32,000 (previously misquoted as £37,000) per annum compared the Standard tariff. The Contract was procured following the Council's financial regulations using a procurement framework arrangement."

| | Standard Annual & (Total Contract) Value | Green tariff Annual & (Total Contract) Value |
|--|--|--|
| | | |

| | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Electricity | £180,826 (£723,305) | £182,087 (£728,346) |
| Gas | £117,164 (£468,656) | £147,876 (£591,504) |
| Total | £297,990 (£1,191,961) | £329,963 (£1,319,850) |
| Additional financial cost of Green Tariff | | £31,973 (£127,889)* |
| *There is a £3 variation between figures due to rounding. | | |

Question 2:

“The UK energy regulator Ofgem manages and monitor the schemes that ultimately leads to energy suppliers being able to offer Green Tariff solutions to commercial and domestic customers. These are accepted standards, and due diligence to ensure compliance, is undertaken by Ofgem rather than individual customers. Green Tariffs currently allow organisations to claim 100% reduction on CO₂Equivalent Emissions compared to Standard Tariffs for electricity and 72% reduction in CO₂ Equivalent Emissions for gas. These figures are used to generate in the Council’s Greenhouse Gas Emission report.

The reality is that at present CO₂ Equivalent Emissions are offset through regulated carbon offsetting schemes and while not a perfect solution, do offer organisations and householders a way to improve environmental performance. Signing up to green tariffs also sends a message to energy companies that consumers would prefer to support renewable energy production.”

4. **By Councillor Khan to Councillor Sutton, the Cabinet Member for Communities, Health, Youth, Public Safety, Emergency Planning and Liaison with the Police and Fire & Rescue Service.**

“Many of our residents will be impacted by the current cost of living crisis and we know that many families are under pressure, worried sick about the future and therefore seeking help with mental health services via our General Practitioners. Earlier this year Council agreed our motion to provide a one off £100 grant to nearly 1000 working households in Uttlesford to help towards their Council Tax bills in 2022/23 providing some assistance.

Can the Portfolio Holder inform us what specific action is now being taken in conjunction with the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to help residents with poor mental health due to financial worries?”

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Communities, Health, Youth, Public Safety, Emergency Planning and Liaison with the Police and Fire & Rescue Service:

“There is close collaboration and ongoing work with the West Essex one health care partnership. Work has been undertaken to establish those

residents at greatest need across the district and this work will progress under the Cost of Living and Wellbeing group that has been established. The Uttlesford Health and Well Being strategy is currently being refreshed and a workshop was held with partners to establish priorities going forward, mental health will be a priority for the Board. Health and Wellbeing monies will be available through the board for projects to help those with mental health concerns.

The community response hub continues to be available to those people in crisis and referrals can be made to the most appropriate agencies, including the social prescribers and the mental health outreach.

The Frontline referral Service is available for both individuals and agencies to access help and support.

In regards to Household Support Funding:

1. Essex County Council (ECC) have received funding from the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) to support Households in most need. ECC have distributed some of this funding to lower tier authorities to provide additional support of £80 to pensioner households.
 2. At the Council meeting on 25 February 2022 an amendment to the budget was approved to increase support by providing a council tax rebate of £100 to working age residents on low incomes in receipt of Local Council Tax Support (LCTS).
 3. The current additional support schemes highlight the fact that the vulnerable, disabled and their carers on low incomes are not receiving any additional support at all. It is proposed that the above amendment to the budget is extended and that the vulnerable, disabled and their carers receive a council tax rebate of up to £80.
 4. The original motion approved stated the eligible date as the 31 January 2022, it is further proposed that the eligible date is extended to include claimants receiving LCTS at the 1 April.”
- 5. By Councillor Smith to Councillor Hargreaves - the Cabinet Member for Finance and the Budget**

“In the December 2021 meeting of Council, both Cllr Sell and I asked for the Council to find ways to increase public participation in the LCTS consultation. Could you advise what additional methods of engagement are being used for the current consultation?”

Reply from the Cabinet member for Finance and the Budget:

“The publicity for the consultation is:

1. The District News e-newsletter and that has a distribution of 9,433.
2. UDC Facebook. At the time of writing the posting has had 24 shares and a 4,147 reach, although this will be significantly higher by the end of the consultation. The shares are mostly town and village groups: Great

Chesterford, Dunmow Town Council, Takeley and Canfield, Stansted Matters and Stansted Really Matters, Saffron Walden Residents, Felsted, Manuden, Clavering, Newport, Quendon and Rickling, Widdington, Henham, Elsenham and Henham, Debden Parish Council, Residents for Uttlesford.

3. Emails to all UDC Cllrs advising and asking them to distribute. (Have members put this in their parish magazine entries? Also publicising the scheme?)
4. Email to the other preceptors (Essex, PFCC, towns and parishes)
5. Press release 21st June
6. Promotion on the homepage picture feature on the UDC website with direct link to the Let's Talk Uttlesford consultation portal
7. Email to key UDC colleagues (Benefits, CSC etc.)
8. New since last year is that posters and paper copies will be sent to parish clerks

The Facebook posting is scheduled to run at least another three times between now and the consultation closing in early September. The consultation is available online and with the option for anyone who wants to complete it on paper to request a printed copy via the CSC.

The certain way to get an increased response is to pay a market research company to do cold calling. This has been done once before and based on that, the cost could be about £10k to get 500 responses. This year's survey is entirely an 'open ender' i.e. it is 'what do you think?' rather than ticking boxes. This means the cost could be significantly more as the callers would need to take down and summarise a conversation, and the script and training would need to weed out the (many) other matters people may want to mention, and indeed those which may have nothing to do with UDC.

The considerations are:

- Would a larger response rate produce a different result? The survey has asked the same question every year. The responses are consistent; most saying happy with 12.5%, and those wanting less, and those wanting more, roughly balancing each other out.
 - Would paying a market research company get a better quality result? Currently all respondees are self-selected. However phone calling is also dependent on a) having a landline (my children don't have them), b) being in the phone book, c) Answering the phone, d) Doing the survey and e) giving relevant answers. To mitigate these biases the results can be normalised i.e. adjusted to match the population profile. But to do this requires a large sample size, say at least 1000.
 - Are the previous responses what we would expect? With the most generous scheme in the County, and respondents being generally of a public spirited nature to even complete the survey, I think they are.
- Finally, please note that within the survey is a link to the application process. It does both LCTS and Housing Benefit from the same application. When I posted the survey on a village group, a person commenting appeared to want to apply for LCTS, and may or may not have done the survey. I think encouraging people to apply for LCTS who may need the help is of direct

benefit, compared with the indirect benefit of getting more consultation responses.

To that end, please will members look at the list of village Facebook pages and share to any of theirs which are not on the list. And put it into their village magazines, and promote the scheme as well as the survey.”

6. By Councillor Smith to Councillor Freeman - the Cabinet Member for Council and Public Services

“Could you provide an update to the Council on what progress has been made since the beginning of this year, in reopening a Saffron Walden day centre.

When might the local community be able to have access to the types of facilities available in Great Dunmow, Stansted Mountfitchet and Thaxted?”

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Council and Public Services:

“The residents in Saffron Walden have restricted access to Cornell Court on Smallbridge Road/ Radwinter Road. Cornell Court incorporates a community café which is part of the Enterprise East group CIC and operates as a work-based training academy. It provides job opportunities to the long-term unemployed facing barriers and challenges to work and to empower our most vulnerable residents through a ‘real work, paid work’ opportunity. Its primary purpose is to provide a service to the occupants of Cornell Court which is a privately-owned commercial venture. As such the services which the café can provide are defined and proscribed by the owner, residents, and shareholders. Public access is restricted and could be modified or terminated at any time, without any consultation or democratic inputs from councillors.

Privatisation of essential services is not in the wider interests of the community, especially those of limited means. For this reason, we require a genuinely independent Community Hub run by a public entity (not by a profit-making company) and which is under democratic control. The Café at Cornell Court does not satisfy this requirement. Saffron Walden has a population approaching 19,000 inhabitants, yet it has no public Community Hub or Day Centre since the closure of the Garden Rooms at the beginning of the Covid pandemic.

Saffron Walden Town Council (SWTC) has submitted a detailed proposal to run a Community Hub re-imagined in its offerings along similar lines to those currently re-opened in Thaxted and Stansted, and which continued throughout the pandemic in Great Dunmow. It would use the Garden Rooms (owned by UDC) which are in the centre of Saffron Walden. We believe that this will provide a better and more flexible provision for the public than one which is located on the edge of the town and run as part of a profit-making commercial enterprise.

The SWTC proposal will be considered by Cabinet and Council in the near future, so hopefully the Garden Rooms will soon be usefully employed again, to the wide benefit of the community.”

7. By Councillor Dean to Councillor LeCount - the Chair of the Standards Committee:

“It has recently come to my attention that the Standards Committee, of which I am a Member, has not met since the 16th March 2020. Moreover, I am aware that the Chief Executive Officer wrote to all Members last month that “an absolutely extraordinary number of Councillor-on-Councillor complaints” have been made.

Can the Chair of Standards please confirm the number of Councillor-on-Councillor complaints that have been made since May 2019, the number that have been upheld and a breakdown of the complainants by political grouping?

Secondly, when is the Standards Committee due to consider and publish a revised version of the Councillors Code of Conduct that has been talked about for some three years but has not yet been started?”

Reply from the Chair of the Standards Committee:

“The Standards Committee has met twice informally since the summer of 2020. They met in April 2021 and June 2022.

The first meeting in April 2021 was informal as there was no formal business to attend to at that time. An anonymised complaints breakdown was circulated to the then members of the Committee for information beforehand. Names were redacted to avoid breaking confidentiality. In the run up to the April meeting there had been a high number of complaints from UDC against UDC and some also involving members of the public on the same subject. Most of the UDC complaints were submitted by cross party members against each other in an even spread. All were dismissed bar one which was successfully resolved by mediation. There were also a high number of complaints in a similar vein regarding a small number of Parish Councils these went to investigation, recommendations were made but they did not necessitate hearings. At this point in time the LGA were still debating the new code of conduct and had not settled on a final version– Essex Monitoring Officers were also meeting regarding whether recommendations should be made to adopt the new code or not across the whole County.

The recent meeting in June 2022 was also informal to provide an introduction for new members, a new Chair and a general update and ‘getting to know each other’ session. This meeting was delayed in the first instance as it was agreed to prioritise Standards Hearing Training first. The Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer also reported to Group Leaders in May prior to this informal meeting that there would be a short delay before the next formal Standards Committee now booked on August 8th. This was partly due to extensive

workload in the legal team but was exacerbated by the wait for feedback from the Essex Monitoring Officers on the new model code.

The model LGA code is now settled and reports have been received very recently that some other Essex Authorities are adopting it (although not all and during discussions with the Committee there was more informal support for retaining the current Code).

For the meeting on 8th August, there will be reports as follows:

New model code – to consider adoption

A complaints report. Going back to the summer of 2020 when records began accompanied by an analysis.

A report in relation to discourse in public life, as per the Council motion carried on 7 December 2021.”

8. By Councillor Caton to Councillor Pepper - the Cabinet Member for the Environment and Green Issues; Equalities

“The Corporate Plan commits the Council to deliver outstanding levels of transparency and accountability, and I note that that the Annual Report on UDC’s Greenhouse Gas emissions in the 2021/22 financial year was published in early June.

Firstly can the portfolio-holder please tell the Council why this Report was not considered by the Energy and Climate Change Working Party, the Cabinet or the Scrutiny Committee before being publicised in a party political press release and whether the data within the report was validated by external experts?

Secondly, I note that only about £80k of the £1m of revenue spending allocated towards Climate Change action has been spent to date. Can the Portfolio-holder please tell the Council what criteria are being used to assess applications from Parish Councils and other Community Groups for funding projects to tackle Climate Change at a local level within the District and who is responsible for determining any such bids for funding?”

Reply from the Cabinet Member for the Environment and Green Issues; Equalities:

“The Council is required to publish its annual performance in relation to Greenhouse Gas emissions (GHG) each year. This year’s report was published on the Council’s website on 30 May and circulated to Members of the Energy and Climate Change Working Group for their information the following day. There was a slight delay in publishing the report as a result of the need to check some of the raw data relating to the Council’s fleet emissions and usage of bunkered fuel. The report is produced using guidance and standardised conversion data provided by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. While there is no requirement to

have the data or calculations externally verified, a recent internal audit provided assurance on the methodology for the 2020/21 calculation. The same methodology and data sources were used to prepare 2021/22.

A number of Parish Councils and community groups have expressed an interest in receiving some of the Council's Climate Crisis budget for local green projects. Officers are in the process of developing a draft Environmental Grants Scheme which will then be considered by the Climate Change work group and their comments fed into a report that will be then considered by Cabinet. As a matter of principle, the draft scheme will need to have a transparent bidding process and decisions around funding will need to be defined over the coming weeks. However it would be sensible to mirror the Council's existing community grants application and evaluation processes."