

# Uttlesford District Council Meeting

## 6 December 2022

### Written Questions to Members of the Executive and Committee Chairs

#### Written responses to be published on 5 December 2022

**1. By Councillor Criscione to Councillor Lees - the Leader of the Council:**

"Can I please have details of the present staff headcount by department and details of how many positions are unfilled for each department? Please identify how many staff in post are Uttlesford Employees and how many are agency or other third-party staff."

**Response from the Leader:**

"As you can see in Table 1 of the appendix, as at 30 November 2022, we have 362 roles in our structure of which 57 (16%) are vacant. Of these vacancies 32 are being filled by agency workers/secondments (9% of our total roles) and 25 are unfilled (7% of our total roles).

Of the 57 vacancies, 40 (70%) are either being advertised, are at the interview stage or successful applicants have been offered the role and are subject to pre-employment checks or working their notice periods.

Table 2 on the appendix shows our corporate vacancy levels going back to 2019, using a snapshot date of 1 September. You can see that our vacancy levels were slightly lower in 2019 at 14.45%, compared to 16% now. September 2020 and 2021 were exceptional years due to Covid.

Many other councils are reporting difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff particularly in areas such as Planning, Finance, Legal, Human Resources, IT, Drivers and Environmental Health. We are therefore looking at ways to overcome this such as reviewing our structures to offer better career paths and support, to 'grow our own' and to build our brand to become 'an employer of choice.'

We have recently reviewed our pay and grading structure in Environmental Services with a clear career path to become a driver and/or chargehand. This has resulted in us successfully offering jobs to 8 new loaders and 5 new drivers in our recent round of recruitment. We are also 'growing our own' drivers by developing our current employees by funding their LGV driving courses so that they can

progress into driver roles and 2 of our employees have successfully passed and are now employed as drivers.

We have also recently reviewed the structure and career paths in planning ahead of our current recruitment campaign and attended the Uttlesford Careers Fair on Monday to raise awareness of the careers that Uttlesford District Council and local government can offer our young people.

We have recently taken on an IT apprentice and are recruiting an apprentice to the vehicle workshop at the Little Canfield depot to be a mechanic. We are also utilising our apprenticeship levy for 'growing our own' by upskilling current employees: 2 are training to become accountants, 2 building control surveyors and 1 planner. We hope to take on another entry level planner from our current advert.

I prepared some turnover figures in September that you may also find useful. See table 3 of the appendix. The national average turnover rate is around 15%. In the year 2021/22 ours was 15.8% and in September 2022 we were forecasting that this year would be 11.7%.”

**2. By Councillor Sell to Councillor Armstrong – Portfolio Holder for Sport, Leisure and the Arts:**

“Given the forecast £5 million black hole and cuts to the budget as a result of the R4U Administration's management of the Uttlesford District Council finances, can you tell this Council what your current management plans are to protect the services you are responsible for as portfolio lead?”

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Armstrong:**

“This question sits alongside others that are clearly a coordinated slew of questions. Not only do they contain a false premise, but a premise risking disproportionately worrying staff and residents alike.

Members were briefed for two hours on how the national and international economic situation is affecting the council's finances – only two days prior to submitting the questions. It appears that the motivation of the questioners was not to listen to what is happening and how to go forward- but how they can USE this to their advantage. Councillor Hargreaves and the rest of the Cabinet have found those questioners consistently absent in constructive collaborative discussions on the budget, instead of engaging in constructively addressing the economic challenge facing every single council in the county, including for example our neighbours in South Cambridgeshire and Chelmsford. At least two councils have written to the Government stating that unless additional support is provided, they will shortly run out of money. A recent survey suggested that one sixth of all English councils are forecasting that they will use all their available reserves to set their 2023/24 budgets.

Uttlesford is not in this position. We are not in this position because of our effective financial management.

Without our highly successful commercial portfolio the forecasted shortfall would be closer to £9 million, which would be comparable with the challenges faced by many other councils.

In April 2020 when the rest of us were working very hard setting up support arrangements in our communities at the height of the first covid wave there was a long copy-to-all attack letter on the commercial investments by the Lib Dems and Green Councillors and said 'no further investments should be made' and gave the impression that they would have nothing to do with them. In four years, those investments have turned a net profit of £16.5m and a multi-million pound capital gain.

In February 2022, the council announced a balanced 2022/23 budget alongside a medium-term financial strategy that set out how it would need to make between £3.5 to £4 million savings over the next five years. This was based on the reasonable assumptions and forecasting at that time. In the half-year predictions based on current forecasts, the council is anticipating it will have to make 20 to 25% net reductions in spending – up to £5 million – by 2027. These predictions already consider immediate tighter spending controls across all departments and a review of existing budgets to see where further savings and efficiencies can be made. The contributing factors for the increasing pressures are outside of local authority control and include rising inflation rates and additional utility costs – over £800,000 extra for inflationary costs in goods and services, and especially utility bills (including leisure centres), and £600,000 to pay for the nationally-set pay rise averaging 6% for council staff, as well as changes to government policy that would potentially substantially reduce income, such as from business rates.

An option is being developed over coming weeks and months for the sale of one or more of the council's commercial assets which may potentially bring down the five-year savings target from £5 million to £3 million. These proposals will be brought forward when they have been worked up, both over coming weeks, when we set our budget in February, and then with more longer-term options next summer.

Uttlesford District Council is facing "tough but manageable" financial challenges over the next few years as it continues to monitor and respond to the impacts of the UK and global economic crisis.

Residents and business owners across the district and beyond are taking tough choices as they see their shopping bills, their fuel bills and their mortgages go through the roof.

Could the questioners explain how the administration party is responsible for energy bills going up and Uttlesford needing to find hundreds of thousands of pounds extra.

Would they like us to:

- Not find the hundreds of thousands needed extra to heat our pools and leisure centres over this winter, and to padlock their doors
- Not honour the legally binding long-term contracts we have entered which see annual inflation-linked uplifts, then perhaps he should say so
- To pull out of the legally binding national agreement to pay our employees

We are weeks away from seeing detailed officer proposals on next year's budget and the next five years' medium term financial plan. Members will not have long to wait before seeing and debating this detail all in public.

I have accepted that when we stated 'we would like the Council to work differently under our administration, more collaboratively and collegiately' we hadn't realised that we needed others to share that ambition. We would prefer that the questioners commit to being constructive partners in addressing the national recession locally and realise that the difficulties that will be faced by our council and residents far outweighs the need for political electioneering."

**3. By Councillor Sell to Councillor Sutton – Portfolio Holder for Communities, Youth, Public Safety, Emergency Planning and liaison with the Police and Fire & Rescue Service:**

"Given the forecast £5 million black hole and cuts to the budget as a result of the R4U Administration's management of the Uttlesford District Council finances, can you tell this Council what your current management plans are to protect the services you are responsible for as portfolio lead?"

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Sutton:**

"See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions."

**4. By Councillor Loughlin to Councillor Freeman – Portfolio Holder for Council and Public Services:**

"How do you intend to protect the community services and Council services for which you, as portfolio holder, are responsible now that such a huge deficit, as much as £5 million, has been forecast and which is bound to have a disastrous impact on the residents of Uttlesford and many of the community benefits they rely on?"

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Freeman:**

"See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions."

**5. By Councillor Khan to Councillor Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing:**

"Given the forecast £5m black hole and cuts to the budget because of the R4U led Administration's management of Uttlesford District Council finances, can you tell this Council, as Lead Member for Housing, what your current management plans are to ensure a quality Housing service for Uttlesford residents."

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Coote:**

"See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions."

**6. By Councillor Khan to Councillor Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing:**

“Following the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak, caused by mould in his home that his parents rented from Rochdale Borough Wide Housing, could you provide the following information:

- How many residents by ward have complained about damp issues since May 2019 and how many of the problems identified since 2019 have been fixed?
- How many damp surveys have been undertaken by Uttlesford District Council of council owned properties since May 2019?”

**Response by Councillor Coote:**

I share the deep concern about the tragic death of Awaab Ishak.

The records obtained by the Council from Uttlesford Norse Services Limited show that there were 561 repair requests which included damp and mould in council homes since April 2020. The Council is unable to confirm at this stage how many reports were made between May 2019 and April 2020. Pre-April 2020, the information was held on a different system and further work is being carried out to obtain this information as part of the wider piece of work being done by the Council to assure itself that all works have been completed to the satisfaction of tenants. The data is not reported at ward level however we do have the name and addresses of all properties concerned.

Damp surveys are undertaken on a reactive basis when UNSL receives reports of damp and mould. The Council is reviewing present and past complaints of damp and mould to gain assurance that works have been satisfactorily completed. There have been no proactive damp and mould surveys undertaken, however the Council is arranging a full stock condition survey so that it can assure itself that there are no properties with damp and mould which have not yet been reported by tenants. In advance of the new stock condition survey, the Council is gaining access to the asset management system currently managed by UNSL, to identify whether historic, pre-2020 surveys highlighted any issues of damp and mould in properties.

The Council will also be launching a promotional campaign to encourage tenants to report any concerns of damp and mould straight away. There is also an item in the Christmas edition of the tenants’ newsletter, soon to be sent to all council tenants.

All new reports of damp and mould are now given high priority when reported to UNSL or the Council.

**7. By Councillor Isham to Councillor Evans – Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan:**

“Given the forecast £5 million black hole and cuts to the budget as a result of the R4U Administration's management of the Uttlesford District Council finances, can you tell this Council what your current management plans are to protect the services you are responsible for as portfolio lead?”

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Evans:**

“See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions.”

**8. By Councillor Smith to Councillor Evans - Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan:**

“It was reported that in July the Government had requested an action plan setting out how UDC intends to exit Designation, and that this was required urgently. Can you confirm when this was submitted and what response has been received to date.

Will the Council be kept informed of progress in this action plan via Cabinet or the Planning Committee?”

**Response from Councillor Evans:**

“My portfolio holder’s quarterly update report notes that on 3 October 2022 we submitted our Performance Improvement Action Plan to the Secretary of State. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities officials responded on 10 November 2022 and stated that it was *‘...encouraging to see that a number of proposed actions have already been completed on immediate actions and that efforts are being made to take forward some of the medium to longer term actions, particularly in relation to recruitment and introducing a new pre-application process’*. The Action Plan builds on the performance improvement plan that we have been implementing following the East of England Local Government Association review of August 2021. DLUHC officials are visiting the district this week to see for themselves the progress we have made. Formal updates will be reported to Members at key stages. I will also be including information in my quarterly reports to Council.”

**9. By Councillor Fairhurst to Councillor Lees – the Leader of the Council:**

“On Tuesday November 28, 2022 we were informed by senior officers that there was a black hole in Uttlesford District Council finances despite an exposure to £280 million which was supposed to support Uttlesford District Council finances. We were told that any discussions of this black hole would be held in secret Part 2 council meetings, but any suggestion of commercial risk must be weighed against the democratic right of residents to know how the Council has exposed them to the likelihood of reduced services. Can you tell us how it can be democratically justified to hide the truth of the dire financial situation at Uttlesford District Council from residents on the eve of an election?”

**Response from the Leader:**

“See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions.”

**10. By Councillor Light to Councillor Lees – the Leader of the Council:**

"In light of the most recent delay to the Local Plan, why were 3.5 years wasted on this Plan when it was so clearly destined for failure from the outset?"

**Response from the Leader:**

"Councillor Light's assertion is entirely without merit and lacks all substance and particularity and indeed barely justifies a response. The Local Plan was not and has never been 'destined for failure'. Councillor Light, who is a member of the Plan leadership group, has never in that forum advanced such a suggestion. She is now recommended and urged, instead of seeking to advance such an unjustified and unsupported distortion, to remind herself of the detailed and substantive documents published and submitted to the local plan leadership group and the Scrutiny Committee on 10 October and again on 10th November which in each case set out the updated, positive and comprehensive local plan work status and forward schedule.

I would like to assure our residents and our staff, both long standing and newly joined, that we are determined and shall submit a draft Local Plan that will satisfy the Inspectors at public examination and thereafter be capable of adoption."

**11. By Councillor Light to Councillor Sutton - Portfolio Holder for Communities, Youth, Public Safety, Emergency Planning and liaison with the Police and Fire & Rescue Service:**

"Can you please update this Council on the progress of the Youth Council, when the last meetings were held, the political and civic work the Youth Councillors are involved in and how they are engaging with Members of this Council?"

**Response from Councillor Sutton:**

"The last formal meeting of the Youth Council was held on 10 September 2019, with a subsequent meeting cancelled on 24 April 2020 due to Covid-19, although working groups continued up until the pandemic. Youth councillors were involved in various subject matters, such as mental health, the environment and transport, but as has previously been explained in this forum, the work of the youth council was prevented from continuing during the pandemic and many young people who were actively engaged departed for higher education at this time, or decided that they needed to concentrate fully on their education in order to negate the disruption caused by Covid-19.

During Covid-19 lockdown members of the Youth Council attended and contributed to every session of the Community Stakeholder Forum between November 2020 and April 2021.

In terms of progress, Members will note that a Student Voice event was conducted in partnership with SWCHS on 30 November, and young people were invited to sign-up if they were interested in participating in a UDC Youth Council. Discussions are being held with other schools in the district in order to promote further engagement and opportunity."

**12. By Councillor Caton to Councillor Pepper – Portfolio Holder for Environment and Green Issues; Equalities:**

“Given the Senior Management Team is forecasting a black hole in the Council’s future financial strategy requiring £5m cuts to the budget over the next five years because of the current administration’s management of the council’s finances, can you tell the Council what your plans are to safeguard the vital Climate Change Action Plan and Equalities activities that you are responsible for as portfolio holder?”

**Response from the Leader and Councillor Pepper:**

“See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions.”

**13. By Councillor Caton to Councillor Lees – the Leader of the Council:**

“As Councillor Lees is aware the Senior Management Team (SMT) of officers forecast that any new administration elected at the May 2023 local elections will have to cut expenditure by £5m by the end of their term.

What plan of action does Councillor Lees and the Cabinet have to ensure that any incoming administration has the up to date information to enable it to take informed decisions on their priorities and the Council’s finances by the summer 2023 deadline suggested by the SMT?”

**Response from the Leader:**

“See response to question 2 provided to this coordinated set of questions.”