

Councillor John Evans

Portfolio Holder for the Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure & Local Plan

Full Council report – 21 February 2023

Local Plan

Staffing issues within the Local Plans team have been reported in detail and discussed at the Local Plan Scrutiny Committee meeting on 17 January and at Scrutiny Committee on 28 February. The staffing establishment of nine (consisting of a Team Manager, Urban Designer, Project Officer, Transport Planner, Neighbourhood Plans Officer and four policy planners) was affected by the departure of two policy officers and the manager in January – two of which were interim appointments on short notice periods. This was in addition to the departure of the Transport Planner in November.

Recruitment and retention of staff has been our top priority for some months and I can report that we have appointed an experienced interim Team Manager and an experienced Transport Planner, who both join us in March, as well as an experienced principal policy planner from April. We also have two career-grade planners joining in February and early March, one of which has previously completed a period of work experience with the team and will be supported in working towards a planning degree. The team is expected to be at full capacity by the first week of April although less-experienced appointments will require and be given support and further training.

At time of writing, Local Plan work is just one-to-two weeks behind the schedule developed late last year. It will be difficult to maintain momentum throughout February and March as a result of carrying vacant posts followed by the induction of and bringing new recruits up to speed. This is likely to result in some slippage against our project plan, the extent of which will be known shortly.

The team has been reviewing some 400 sites submitted in the 2021 Call for Sites, and has started to finesse draft local plan policies which will be consulted on as part of the Regulation 18 consultation. Local Plan evidence base documents have also been published online at www.uttlesford.gov.uk/localplanevidence

Since my last update we have consulted on our draft Developer Contribution (S106) Supplementary Policy Document (SPD). The team has reviewed consultation responses and will be taking the final version through governance for intended adoption following the election. The team also supported the Chesterfords Neighbourhood Plan which was ‘made’ on 2 February 2023. The district now has eight ‘made’ plans, four of which have been made this municipal year.

In January we held a meeting of the Local Plan Working Group and officers and members began to formulate a response to the government’s NPPF consultation. Work on a design code for Uttlesford is progressing and we propose to appoint a ‘design champion’ for Uttlesford in order to support this work and good quality design in general. It is proposed that an elected member of the council will be nominated and receive relevant training and briefing following the election.

Development Management & Enforcement

The development management and enforcement teams have all but completed work on the performance and transformation programme which began in February 2022 following the EELGA Review of the Planning Service. As part of this work we now have a legally compliant and online planning enforcement register, and a publicly searchable planning obligations (S106) database – Exacom. We are meeting all statutory obligations and requirements. At time of writing, the number of unresolved planning enforcement cases is 297 compared to around 900 a year ago; a marked improvement.

The Planning Validations Team has validated 100% of planning applications within 5 working days this quarter (in fact, some 97% were validated within 3 working days – well above target).

Performance in development management continues to improve as a result of the programme, with the percentage of major applications decided in-time rising from 83.6% in September 2022 to 84.5% at time of writing. Non-major applications are now at 88.4%, well over the government threshold of 70%.

The measure for which Uttlesford is designated (quality of decision making on major applications – i.e. percentage of appeals lost which must be kept under 10%) improved from 17% across 2018-2020, to 10.45% in September 2022, and at time of writing to 5.8%. We have 6 major application appeals pending and it remains to be seen whether this figure will increase by year-end, depending on the outcomes of those appeals.

As requested by DLUHC, on 3 October 2022 the Planning Service submitted its draft Performance Improvement Action Plan to the Secretary of State. Officers met with Officials in December. We are currently working with DLUHC officials to develop a series of performance metrics in order to be able to demonstrate continuous improvement.

In terms of staffing we are in the process of appointing an in-house conservation officer. This will be the first time we have had our own conservation officer since 2019.

A review of the budget shows planning income will exceed this year's income target by some £300-400k. Despite designation, developers chose to submit 75% of all major applications in the district to UDC with only 25% going direct to the Planning Inspectorate.

Our non-statutory pre-application advice and PPA service has generated £216k at end of Q3 this year. However, as a result of staffing issues spend on agency staff across the serviced has increased.

The team is now reviewing the fee levels for the pre-application service and other paid-for services in order to meet costs and assist with budget pressures. Fee proposals have been put to Cabinet and service standards will be refreshed and published at the end of Q4.

Building Control

Our Building Control Team has maintained a market share of 80% of all building control contracts in the district throughout the year, and is currently inspecting an 89 house scheme in Newport. This is exceptionally high for a council building control function that operates in a competitive market where there are 28 'Approved Inspectors' also operating in the area (i.e. private companies licensed to provide Building Control services). The team further remains on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in respect of urgent and dangerous structure callouts (e.g.. bridge strikes, building collapses etc).