

Uttlesford District Council Meeting

21 March 2023

Written Responses from Members of the Executive and Committee Chairs

Responses published on 20 March 2023

1. By Councillor Gregory to Councillor Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing:

“What progress has been made on Reynolds Court remediation, and at what total cost to UDC to 28 Feb 23?”

Response from Councillor Coote:

“The contractors are currently on site and works are in progress. We anticipate completion by the end of April. UDC has not paid anything for the works as the original developer, Lovell, are meeting this cost. The Council has, up until 28 February paid £18,459 for the waking watch, which will be onsite until the works are completed and signed off.

The Council is paying an independent fire safety company £1500 to independently verify that the works have been properly carried out.”

2. By Councillor Gregory to Councillor Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing:

“What efforts are being made to recover those sums and what investigations have/are being carried out as to culpability in this matter?”

Response from Councillor Coote:

“The Council has been very clear with Lovell that they are accountable for these issues and Lovell has accepted responsibility. Once the works are completed and properly signed off as I have previously described, the Council will be seeking full recompense from Lovell. Lovell are aware of this.”

3. By Councillor Barker to Councillor Coote – Portfolio Holder for Housing:

“How many of our Council properties have had a condition survey done within the last six months and what percentage of our properties is that?”

Of those properties surveyed how many have been identified as having defects requiring remedial work/maintenance and what is the timescale to complete such works?”

Response from Councillor Coote:

As at 14 March 2023 2273 homes have had a stock condition survey conducted by Savills, who have been commissioned by the Council to do this work. This represents a proportion of 80.86%. The survey is scheduled to be completed by April 2023, with the exception of where we have to follow up on non-access cases.

To date, 1112 homes have been identified as having either a slight, moderate or severe hazard, or a combination of these. Plans are in place to address the hazards, depending on the type of hazard and whether they are slight, moderate or severe. Severe hazards, such as electrical safety hazards, are attended to as an emergency, on the same day. For other types of works, responsive repairs are scheduled by UNSL. Where the surveys identify issues with heat/CO alarms, these are being inspected by the heating contractor. The Council has also commissioned an external specialist surveying company to bring added resource. The Council is in the process of procuring a further external resource for this purpose, so that works can be planned. The Council has employed an experienced repairs administrator to co-ordinate this as part of a new Council client team. Some of the works will go into next year's planned maintenance programme, currently being developed to accommodate the issues identified through the stock condition survey. Damp and mould cases are investigated as part of the Council's new approach for managing damp and mould, including a mould wash within 7-14 days, to remove the immediate health risk. Given that there are different types of hazards, each requiring a different solution, combined with the fact that some defects are more urgent than others, I cannot give you an exact date for the completion of all the works. However more detailed project plans will be provided once all the surveys are completed, and Members will be kept informed.

4. By Councillor Smith to Councillor Hargreaves – Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Budget:

“The CEO has suggested that a newly formed administration in May should expect to receive a paper on potential increases to UDC owned car park fees. What proposals are currently in development that would potentially increase the Councils income?”

Response from Councillor Hargreaves:

“Consultants have prepared a wide ranging review of on and off-street parking covering the whole of Uttlesford, and including fly parking, and bench marking against other locations. The review was given to the relevant town and parish councils for their comments and which are being factored into proposals which officers will be bringing forward.

It is a work in progress and needs to get the best use of the car parks and manage the flow of users versus the capacities of those car parks which are typically full at

peak times. The proposals will incorporate keeping traffic moving in the busier town car parks to the benefit of businesses, and the review says that car park charges will assist in doing this, as an example possibly making the Common Car Park short stay and to encourage this the charge could be slightly more to park here and with cheaper longer stay parking at Swan Meadow. There is also work to be done in Stansted and Dunmow and elsewhere, and some expenditure on improvements and signage, and each location is different

The outputs will be more than about parking charges and the proposals will be based on obtaining the best use of street parking and car parks rather than seeking to maximise income. As noted in my budget presentation, no alterations to parking charges are included in the 23/24 budget.”

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

“The Uttlesford Norse Partnership, which R4U implemented in 2019, has clearly been a disappointing venture, as has been reported to this Council and the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee. In addition, the failure by R4U to put in a place a robust process to manage the Partnership has contributed to the poor performance of the service.

The proposal which R4U negotiated offered several areas of benefit. Can the Lead member provide clear evidence that the following areas in the proposal have been achieved:

Page 1 states that profits will be shared 50/50. How much has Uttlesford Council received and where can this be evidenced.

Page 22 states the following benefits to the people of Uttlesford:

- Improvements to people’s lives.
- Raised service standards.
- Greater customer satisfaction.
- Continuity of service.
- A boost to the local economy.
- Community partnerships.
- Improved environmental standards.

What evidence can the Lead Member provide to corroborate on **each** of the above points?”

Response from Councillor Coote:

UDC receives its benefit from UNSL in the form of an in-year discount on the charges that it pays to UNSL. This is a financially rational solution as it occurs at a pre-tax level. The amounts are as follows:

2020/21 - £66k

2021/22 - £69k

2022/23 – forecast to be £74k

These have been included in the Council's end of year outturn reports for 2020-21 and for 2021-22.

For the current year forecast (also shows last year's actual) it has been accounted for under the definition of 'Uttlesford Norse Partnership Profit Share' on page 17 (appendix D) of the Q3 forecast outturn report, which was presented to Cabinet on 16th March 2023.

The Council has been working to improve all aspects of the services provided by UNSL, so that the above benefits can be realised. Members will be aware that the joint venture partnership has not been delivering to the required standards and the Council acknowledges this. The Council's early priority has been to ensure that its homes meet legal and regulatory standards in relation to health and safety. Success has been achieved in this area, recognised by the Regulator of Social Housing, in its recent decision that the Council has not breached its Homes Standard and as such the Council will not be placed in special measures. The Council is working tirelessly to address the other areas, including creating a new specialist Client Team, with qualified technical officers to robustly manage the services provided by UNSL and in doing so, achieving the stated objectives for the partnership as you have quoted above. The Council is also embarking on a district-wide tenant conversation this summer, so that more can be understood about how tenants feel about the housing and repairs service and importantly, what the Council can (and will do) to drive greater satisfaction. The Council is also taking a lead role in creating a new stock investment programme which will incorporate de-carbonisation and energy efficiency measures and as such, drive improved environmental standards.

6. By Councillor Khan to Councillor Lees – Leader of the Council:

“The impact of not building council homes can have far-reaching consequences for both the council and the residents we serve. When R4U were elected, the Leader of the Council, Cllr Lees, pledged to build 184 new council homes over the lifetime of this administration. So far 55 have been built, a number of these were projects started under the previous administration. Now all new council home building is frozen.

Does the Leader of the Council agree that the impact of not meeting the pledge will be the following:

1. **Increased housing costs:** The freeze on new council homes means that the demand for social housing will further outstrip supply, increasing costs for residents seeking properties that have higher rents. This aggravates the inability of people on lower incomes to find suitable accommodation and may result in overcrowding, homelessness, or people being forced to move away from the area.

2. **Social inequality:** The lack of affordable housing can lead to social inequality, with those on lower incomes being disproportionately affected. This can have a knock-on effect on health, education, and employment opportunities.
3. **Increased pressure on services:** A lack of social housing can also put pressure on other public services, such as healthcare and education. For example, overcrowding can lead to increased demands on healthcare services, while children living in inadequate housing may struggle at school, which can impact their future prospects.
4. **Reduced income for UDC:** Building council homes generates income for UDC through rents and other charges. Failure to build new council homes will lead to reduced income for the council, and poor-quality service to existing tenants. ”

Response from Councillor Lees:

“I would like to thank Cllr Khan for his question.

Our ambitious building plan was based on the premise that we would inherit an established Housing Stock that was fit for purpose and had been well looked after. As a member of the Housing Board he will be aware that has been revealed as not the case. Councillors, and of course our tenants, will no doubt agree that safety and remedial work must take priority over new construction. Significant remediation expenditure is in progress, and this all comes out of the same funds from which new houses are built and which by statute the council is not allowed to subsidise.

He will also be aware that many other circumstances entirely outside of any council’s control have changed, all of which reduce the spending ability of the HRA.

We all agree that we need proper affordable social rent homes in this District. But we must also ensure that our existing stock receives a level of service that our Council House tenants deserve. Given the current operating environment, the Council is not alone in having to scale back its aspirations in terms of new housing development. Housing Associations and local authorities alike are taking hard decisions and making informed trade-offs between new builds and upgrading existing stock.

This is a result of the many challenges to the housing sector across the country, which include financial strains arising from:

1. Increased construction costs
2. Higher borrowing rates
3. Protecting tenants with a below inflation rent increase but which reduces the funds available to the HRA. In 2023/24 this reduction will be £486,000, but of course this loss is repeated for every year unless above inflation increases are imposed.
4. An unprecedented new regulatory burden from April 2023, brought about, rightly, following the Grenfell Tower tragedy
5. The recently highlighted issue of damp and mould.

From April 2023 councils will be subject to a much tighter regulatory and legislative regime. In response we are required to put in place extensive arrangements to respond to this. This includes investing more in our existing housing stock and preparing for an ever-increasing list of requirements which are emerging from the Social Housing Regulation Bill. There have been two amendments to the Bill in the last few weeks alone, the latest of which will require landlords to ensure that housing staff gain professional qualifications, where previously transferrable skills and qualifications were acceptable.

Due to inheriting a housing stock that needed improvements a full stock condition survey has had to be commissioned, therefore unforeseen charges to the Housing Revenue Account have occurred. New spending pressures have been identified. We have the additional costs of professional interim leadership of the housing. The cost of a new and necessary, housing client function to ensure that our tenants receive a gold star service.

The costs of dealing with these are £500,000 on the full condition surveys, and the remedial works, project management and monitoring costs and contingency have required a further £1million to be set aside. Added to the £486k above, that is £2 million no longer available for new builds.

The Housing Revenue Account is the only source that can be used for building Housing Stock. The account is ringfenced and funded by tenants of our Social Housing. Government legislation does not allow for monies from other accounts to be transferred. The HRA can borrow to build but the higher building costs and higher interest rates are making this less viable - the capital repayments, and interest payments still have to come out of rent payments.

There have been many years if not decades of underinvestment in council houses nationally, all in the context of national policy. It is the subject of a motion to Council, but since 1980 about £75 billion has been lost to HRAs as a result of Right to Buy and about 2 million sales have taken place. Added to this is the strong disincentive for councils to build homes, only to sell them at a discount, lose income from future rental payments and not receive the full sale receipt. There is the never ending merry ground of different housing ministers showing what a Cinderella Service this is in Westminster and Whitehall. Where for us locally it is a genuine priority and passion, and I agree that it is detrimental for our residents not to build council houses.

In August 2022, the Council referred itself to the Regulator for Social Housing in respect of a potential breach of the Home Standard. Since then, significant work has been undertaken at speed in order to identify, understand and rectify the underlying issues in accordance with a detailed 'Path to Compliance Action Plan'. We are delighted that the Regulator of Social Housing has recognised our plan is well prepared and workable to address issues that have been presented and has validated our path for continuous improvement. They also thanked the council for its openness.

The Housing Board recently agreed unanimously to increase rent and service charges for Council Tenants due to the necessity of having enough income. We must ensure that the HRA is adequately funded and continue our upward trajectory of improvement in the service. We all recognise the need for social housing in the district. The factors mentioned have resulted in the council rightly re-thinking its priorities, and as a result, taking the difficult decision to defer some of its development plans.

This position will be regularly reviewed so that the development program can be re-invigorated as soon as possible. In the meantime, the Council is still progressing with its committed development programs, with 26 new homes expected to be completed in 2023-24. I am pleased to report that a funding stream has been identified so that housing for our local residents can be developed by using commuted Section 106 funds, to develop three of these new homes to meet identified housing needs in the district. The Council will also be refreshing its approach to working with other local providers and taking the strategic lead in driving our shared purpose, so that housing for our local residents can be developed through collaboration.”

7. By Councillor Caton to Councillor Armstrong – Portfolio Holder for Sports, Leisure and the Arts:

“As you will recall the Council provided a £500,000 contribution towards establishing a running track at Carver Barracks. Can Cllr Armstrong please provide the Council with a progress report, including reference to the following:

- the level of use of the running track by Uttlesford residents;
- who is responsible for the management of the track;
- what is being done to promote the use of the track and
- any other action that the council is taking to ensure that the £500,000 investment is providing value for money for local Council Tax payers.”

Response from Councillors Armstrong and Evans:

“I am pleased to respond to the questions raised as to use of the Track and Field Facility at Carver Barracks (the” Facility”):

- the level of use of the running track by Uttlesford residents;

The Army is responsible for the administration of hiring of the Facility to organised sporting clubs and schools. UDC does not have access to the particulars of individual athletes’ usage broken down by the number of Uttlesford residents’ using it, as the schools and clubs, being the principal users, are made up of both Uttlesford and non-Uttlesford resident members.

- who is responsible for the management of the track;
The Army is responsible for management of the Facility, and its cost is met by the Army and through fees charged for its use.

- what is being done to promote the use of the track and

The Facility is being used by many clubs and schools, including primary schools. The Army manages the usage/bookings and they are well placed to promote any spare capacity. They also undertook when planning permission was granted to generate and maintain publicity regarding its availability. The Army and Council under the Armed Forces Covenant will be further promoting its use and availability once the final work (flood lighting) to the Facility is completed shortly.

- any other action that the council is taking to ensure that the £500,000 investment is providing value for money for local Council Tax payers.

The Facility is a regular item discussed in meetings held between the council and the Army, which includes ensuring that it continues to be a useful addition to sporting facilities generally in the district. As such, its availability will also be referenced in the Local Plan policies concerning sporting facilities.”

8. By Councillor Light to Councillor Lees – Leader of the Council

“I would like to thank those Cabinet members who have regularly presented to Council reports on their portfolios.

Could the Leader of the Council explain, however, why some Cabinet members and all councillors who are designated Topic Leads have not submitted any written reports to the Council providing an update on activities they have undertaken since the administration came to power in 2019?

In the case of Cabinet Members who receive an additional allowance, given the lack of reports, does the Leader think that the public are getting value for money?”

Response from Councillor Lees:

“I would like to thank Cllr Light for her question.

After the election, we decided to increase the membership of the cabinet from 6 to 10, to utilise the extensive range and depth of the calibre of elected members and to ensure that decisions were not taken by a small clique which we thought was a significant weakness of the previous administration. BUT in order not to increase costs we took a voluntary reduction in the allowance for cabinet members to keep total cost the same.

As a previous cabinet member Cllr Light was part of the decision-making process regarding reports. In that the Cabinet members would produce written reports when there is something useful to be said extra to all the many streams of information members are flooded with and we will not be writing reports, and spending officer time, just for the sake of “writing a report.”

I most certainly do believe, actually I know, that the public are getting value for money. The measurement of time and work ethic is not reflected in how many reports are written. To use officers time for report writing for a box to be ticked for example, is not a good use of staff or members time. Being a member of Cabinet can and does involve reading reports, meeting officers, decision making, supporting colleagues with their decision making, understanding changes in legislation, attending regular meetings to discuss Cabinet issues. Visiting relevant areas within their Portfolios, for example Eco Fayres, Business Awards, every Sheltered Housing Scheme in the District. Alongside the everyday job of representing their ward and attending Surgeries.

Our website is updated regularly with information regarding Initiatives, grants available, events that are occurring. Our regular Group Leaders meetings cascade information. All of our Council Committee meetings are minuted and available for perusal.

In terms of the Topic Leads these are non-remunerated positions that hold no formal status in the constitution. When Cllr Lodge established these positions, our raison d'être was to utilise the talents/capabilities in R4U and to share authority/power within the wider group, and to shadow County functions where we can lobby for improvements but have no direct power.

I would also note that the opportunity for members to ask questions is greatly improved and the time for verbal follow up doubled from 15 to 30 minutes."