

COUNCIL held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 21 MARCH 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor H Asker
Councillors G Bagnall, S Barker, M Caton, A Coote, A Dean, G Driscoll, J Emanuel, J Evans, P Fairhurst, R Freeman, N Gregory, N Hargreaves, V Isham, R Jones, A Khan, P Lavelle, G LeCount, P Lees, M Lemon, B Light, J Lodge, S Luck, T Loveday, S Merifield, E Oliver, R Pavitt, L Pepper, N Reeve, G Sell, G Smith, M Sutton, M Tayler and J de Vries.

Officers in attendance: P Holt (Chief Executive), N Coombe (Interim Assistant Director Governance and Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer), B Ferguson (Democratic Services Manager), and A Webb (Director - Finance and Corporate Services)

C86 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong, Criscione, Eke, Loughlin and Foley.

There were no declarations of interest.

C87 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2023 were approved as a correct record.

C88 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair said it had been a difficult year as her mother had passed away. The most important words in her mother's vocabulary had been "courtesy and kindness" and such attributes had been lacking during debate in the past year. She said this had been demonstrated by the lack of responses to the Chair's Civic Dinner invitation, which had now been cancelled.

C89 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Leader provided an update on Ukrainian refugees and said funding had been secured which would be utilised to assist Ukrainians in the district. Furthermore, she said the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were now seeing clients in Stansted every week, negating the need to travel. She thanked Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council, Touchpoint, the DWP and the Chief Executive for implementing this change.

In response to a question regarding Local Plan site assessments as detailed in Councillor Evans report, Councillor Evans said that officers had recently reviewed almost 400 of the 427 sites to be assessed. This work was known as the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). So far approximately 3% had been found not developable in the plan period. This compared to 17% which were found not developable last time around. Once all 427 were completed senior officers would further review the conclusions reached.

C90 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS (UP TO 30 MINUTES)

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Khan regarding the profit share between Norse and UDC, Councillor Coote said he would provide the figures in writing.

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Gregory regarding whether associated management time and costs had been identified at Reynolds Court, Councillor Coote said the Council would look at all issues and would seek to recover costs.

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Barker, Councillor Coote said stock survey and control costs would be identified.

In response to a question from Councillor Smith, Councillor Hargreaves said any cost saving measures had been included in the budget in February.

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Khan, Councillor Lees said the administration were committed to social housing and the reasons for not hitting the ambitious target was due to reasons outside of their control.

In response to a question from Councillor Caton regarding the Carver Barracks Running Track, Councillor Evans said a key performance indicator could not be simply imposed on the track, as the Council wanted it to be used and athletic clubs were utilising the facility.

In response to a question of clarification from Councillor Light regarding the duties of Topic Leads, Councillor Lees said the administration had been keen to utilise the many talents within the majority group. These Topic Leads had provided expertise to their colleagues in aid of council work, such as Councillor Tayler, a General Practitioner, who was topic lead for health.

C91 MATTERS REFERRED FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES

No matters had been referred from the Executive or the Council's Committees.

C92 MATTERS RECEIVED ABOUT JOINT ARRANGEMENTS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

No matters were received regarding joint arrangements or external organisations.

C93 RETURNING OFFICER FEES AND CHARGES

Councillor Hargreaves presented the report, which asked Members to review and approve the Returning Officer's scale of fees and expenses for use at all relevant local elections and referendums held in the Uttlesford district from 1 April 2023. He proposed approval of the recommendation.

Councillor Jones seconded the recommendation.

The proposal was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Approve the scale of fees and expenses set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- II. Review the fees and expenses every four years in the year immediately preceding the ordinary election of district and parish councillors.
- III. Delegate authority to the Director of Finance and Corporate Services to increase the scales annually to reflect the local government pay award.

C94 POLITICAL BALANCE - WITHDRAWN

The item had been withdrawn from the agenda.

C95 MOTION: COUNCIL TAX EXEMPTION FOR ADOPTERS AND FOSTER CARERS - WITHDRAWN

The motion had been withdrawn by Councillor Criscione.

C96 MOTION: RIGHT TO BUY

Councillor Barker left the meeting at 7.35pm.

Councillor Coote presented his motion regarding Right to Buy (RTB). He said that social housing was pivotal in giving those less fortunate a stable home. The decades of right to buy had depleted the council's housing stock and he contested the merits of the way in which RTB receipts could be used by local authorities to ensure a supply of social housing. He said conditions of the old housing stock were poor and local authorities did not have the funding available to adequately repair or build new homes. He proposed his motion, which asked the Council to call on Government to reimburse councils losing out from RTB, or

to follow the leads of the Welsh and Scottish Governments and abolish it entirely.

Councillor Merifield seconded the proposal.

Members discussed the motion and the following points were raised in the debate:

- In regards to house prices, Uttlesford was the third most expensive district in Essex and the average house price in the district required an income of at least £90,000 per year. A significant portion of social homes sold under RTB were now in the ownership of private landlords.
- Council homes provided security for residents and a stable environment for families with children. This was vital during a cost of living crisis.
- Uttlesford only lost 1% of its total stock to RTB in the past twelve months.
- Since the introduction of RTB, Uttlesford's total housing stock had been reduced from 6000 to 2800.

In summary, Councillor Coote said there was a great need for social housing and something needed to change. He urged members to support his motion.

The motions was carried with 29 for, 0 against and 4 abstentions.

RESOLVED: The Council believes that this and other councils are tackling the health issue of mould in houses, accruing substantial investigation and remediation costs in the process, which are required by statute to be paid for out of rents from council tenants. The viability of the Housing Revenue Account is degraded by the loss of houses, and their rental income, through Right to Buy (RTB), from which this council loses on average 12 properties a year. A significant burden of rules and restrictions surrounds RTB which means that the Council cannot replace houses sold without adding in additional funds. The resulting loss is not only rental income, but a shortage of homes and a lengthened wait for housing applicants who need to move. This leads to over-crowding which in itself heightens the likelihood of homes suffering from damp and mould.

Therefore, in order to support the financial viability of providing quality homes for tenants in the district, this Council instructs the Chief Executive to write to Government to request that they either:

- I. fully reimburse councils' Housing Revenue Accounts for losses arising from Right to Buy, or
- II. follow the leads of the Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly and abolish Right to Buy entirely.

C97

MOTION: SAFFRON WALDEN AMENITY CENTRE BOOKING SYSTEM

Councillor Tayler presented the motion regarding the introduction of a booking system at Saffron Walden's Amenity Centre, operated by Essex County Council (ECC). He said residents did not want a booking system imposed on the site, as

demonstrated by the Group's survey, which showed that the vast majority were happy with the previous setup. He said issues such as fly-tipping, access problems for those without the internet and inefficiency could arise from the change, and that decisions such as these should be taken at a local level and not be imposed. He proposed approval of his motion, which requested that the booking system be abandoned.

Councillor Lodge seconded the proposal.

Members discussed the motion and the following points were raised:

- Residents in the south of the district could also no longer use the recycling centre in Bishop's Stortford, resulting in a long drive to Saffron Walden. This was not conducive to an environmentally friendly strategy.
- The staff at the Saffron Walden site were commended for being very helpful and informative.
- The booking system was trying to fix a problem that did not exist. The 'no appointment required' setup had worked very well.
- The new system was a trial for nine months only and was a 'one size fits all' policy for Essex. The county were attempting to deal with instances of trade waste.
- Fly-tipping could increase and the costs would be picked up by the district council, rather than ECC.

Councillor Khan asked whether the motion could be amended in order to express disappointment that residents in his area of the district could no longer use the recycling facilities in Bishop's Stortford, as operated by Hertfordshire County Council.

The proposer of the motion and the meeting expressed consent for the motion to be altered.

The Chair moved to a vote on the motion, as altered. The motion was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED: The Council believes that the Civic Amenity Site in Saffron Walden does not have queues. Council therefore calls on the Chief Executive to:

- I. write to Essex County Council and request that plans for a booking system are abandoned and that the drop-in, no-appointment-necessary operating system is continued at the Saffron Walden site.
- II. write to Hertfordshire County Council to express disappointment on behalf of Uttlesford residents in the south of the district who are no longer able to use the Amenity Centre located in East Hertfordshire despite living nearby.

Councillor Hargreaves presented his motion, which requested the Chief Executive to call on Government to implement a programme to fully fund councils before considering any further devolution deals. He said there was no need for any additional layers of government, such as a mayoralty, but what was needed was the ability for councils to plan in the long term. This would only be brought about when councils had long term funding secured, which would bring stability and the ability to deliver better services.

Councillor Evans seconded the proposal.

Members discussed the motion and the following points were raised:

- What works for Greater Manchester would not necessarily work for Essex; Essex was not a natural entity for devolution.
- An elected mayor concentrates too much power into one person's hands.
- Government should be brought closer to the people, not further away, and the tiered system was already too complex.
- There was a democratic deficit in respect of the Essex Devolution deal and UDC did not have a formal vote on the matter.
- Local accountability was necessary.
- Fair funding for local councils was a major issue as there was no long term security in the budget, which made it very difficult to plan service delivery in future years.
- There was a lack of trust in the county, and the example of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) was cited, whereby the relevant district councils in Essex were not consulted on matters that directly related to them. This was in contrast to the districts in East Sussex, which were involved. Further local democratic input was needed.

The Chair moved to a vote. The motion was carried with 30 votes for, 0 against and 3 abstentions.

RESOLVED: The Council considers that 'Greater Essex' is too diverse for a mayor to effectively represent and support all parts equitably, and that the extra cost of the precept, to pay for a fifth layer of governance, would be unwelcome for the residents of Uttlesford. The council believes that the possible 'Devolution' option for 'Greater Essex' is not a substitute for setting local government finances on a sound basis, and may result in wasteful projects.

The council therefore instructs the Chief Executive to write to government urging them to implement a programme to fully fund councils on a long term stable basis, that will enable them to deliver all of the high quality services needed, before further considering Devolution deals.

The Chair closed the meeting at 8.35pm.