

Councillor John Evans

Portfolio Holder for Planning

Full Council report – 18 July 2023

I feel privileged to have been re-elected in May and to be once again reporting to you as the Portfolio-Holder for Planning.

Since my last report in February work on the Local Plan has been progressing and we remain on course to publish a consultation draft (known as a Regulation 18 draft) of the plan this October. Substantive work has also been ongoing within Development Management, Planning Enforcement and Building Control.

The department is now all-but fully staffed and includes:

- a Conservation Officer;
- a Local Plan Team which now consists of 87% permanent staff members (including a recent graduate whom we are supporting through a planning masters degree);
- an additional planning enforcement officer;
- with a qualified Ecologist due to join us in August.

We have made significant strides in the recruitment and retention of staff, in what remains the single most difficult profession to recruit to in local government; by way of example, Planning Authorities in Essex have 31 planning officer positions currently unfilled. We have also reduced our reliance on agency staff.

In May and June senior planning staff organised and delivered planning training for our new planning committee, all elected members, and also ran two sessions for parish colleagues. Some 50 parish council colleagues attended the sessions which ran over two days.

Development Management & Enforcement

During the week beginning 19 June 2023 the Planning Service was subject to a peer review. This was led by the government's Planning Advisory Service (PAS) acting on behalf of the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The outcome of the review will be reported to DLUHC Ministers and assist them in their deliberations with respect to our designation.

The Peer Review panel and DLUHC themselves have acknowledged that there is no express methodology set whereunder LPAs might be re-assessed or considered for de-designation. So, they are looking for sufficient positive steps having been taken and verifiable measures identified towards lasting improvement. I, along with a selection of other elected members (cross-party), officers, stakeholders, parish councils and partner organisations were invited to meet with the panel, when they attended here over two days, to describe our current and future plans and actions.

The Council is currently 'designated' for its performance in terms of 'quality of major planning decisions'. The designation was based on performance between 2018-2020. We prepared a Performance Improvement Action Plan in discussion with officials at DLUHC and have been working to achieve the actions identified. In June, DLUHC published the latest statistics available which indicate that Uttlesford now falls below the threshold for designation for the first time since 2018. We have thus "leapfrogged" a number of other English councils. The challenge will be to maintain this level of performance and continue to improve it.

The outcome of the peer review is expected later this summer.

Last year the department determined **2891** planning and related applications, approximately 85% of which were decided within target timescales. This is far above the government threshold. The Development Management service attracted £1.8 million in application fees last financial year, and some £300,000 in non-statutory fees, by offering planning advice and performance agreements (PPAs) to applicants. This assists in making elements of the Planning Service financially self-sufficient.

In April, our pre-application and PPA service was refreshed. Challenging service standards have been set and fees charged to developers increased in order not to cause a financial burden to the rate payer in this respect.

In Planning Enforcement, we have so far this calendar year served seven enforcement notices on those considered to be breaching planning controls. This is our highest number of notices served post-covid. Planning Enforcement Officers still seek to arrive at negotiated solutions with transgressors, however and importantly are further supported and resourced to take formal action where necessary and justified.

Local Plan

Since my last report, we have an adopted Developer Contribution (S106) Supplementary Policy Document (SPD) which will assist officers in securing necessary infrastructure to support new development.

We also have a draft District wide Design Code, in an advanced state. We were selected as a design code pathfinder authority by government and could be one of the country's first local authorities to have our own design code. This will assist in raising the bar for the design of new development in the district.

During the pre-election and election period (early April – May) the team has been working on improving the local plan evidence base, visiting and assessing sites, and monitoring sites currently under development.

The Local Plan Leadership Group was formally appointed on 30 June and meetings of the group will now resume. We have reached a crucial point in the Regulation 18 stage of the local plan, and the LPLG will soon be considering draft site allocations. Following these meetings the draft plan, along with LPLG recommendations, will be considered by Cabinet and an agreed draft is due to be published at the end of

October. A public consultation will then run for at least six weeks. Responses will be considered in early 2024 and feed into a final draft, due for publication in summer 2024.

Building Control

Our Building Control Team continues to maintain a market share of approximately 80% of all building control contracts in the district. This is thought to be some 15%-20% higher than the local authority average in the region and 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).

Stansted Airport

Earlier this month Stansted Airport advised us of their plans to seek to extend the current terminal building to the rear to create some 16,500 sqm of floorspace, to provide more space for existing customers. The planning application will be for the expansion of the building to support moving towards their existing approved passenger number cap of 43 million passengers per year. Whilst the application is to be made directly to the Planning Inspectorate the airport has committed to fully engage with the Council and the public.