

COUNCIL held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor G Driscoll (Chair)
Councillors M Ahmed, S Barker, N Church, M Coletta, A Coote, C Criscione, J Davey, B Donald, J Evans, C Fiddy, M Foley, R Freeman, R Gooding, N Gregory, N Hargreaves, R Haynes, P Lees, M Lemon, J Loughlin, T Loveday, S Luck, C Martin, D McBirnie, E Oliver, A Reeve, N Reeve, B Regan, G Sell, R Silcock, M Sutton and M Tayler

Officers in attendance: P Holt (Chief Executive), B Ferguson (Democratic Services Manager) and N Katevu (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer).

Public

Speakers: D Ashton (Uttlesford Foodbank) and D Perry (on behalf of Walden Place residents)

C41 MINUTE'S SILENCE

The Chair called for a minute's silence as a mark of respect for all those affected by the recent violence in Israel.

C42 ALDERWOMAN PRESENTATION

The Chair congratulated former Councillor Cheetham on her appointment as Honorary Alderwomen of Uttlesford District Council.

Councillor Barker praised former Councillor Cheetham's long and exemplary history in local government. She had held senior roles during her time as councillor, including deputy Leader of the Council and Chair of the Planning Committee.

She was presented with a certificate of office for her distinguished service to the public and the Council.

C43 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong, Asker, Bagnall, Emanuel, Moran, Pavitt, Haynes, Dean and Loveday.

There were no declarations of interest.

C44 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meetings held on 18 July and 24 August 2023 were approved as correct records.

C45 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair said he had been on two engagements since the previous meeting.

He had attended the Mayor of Rochford's dinner and a Civic Service for the High Sheriff of Essex.

C46 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Leader provided an update on the Mortimer's Gate electricity sub-station issue and said Bloor Homes' representatives had agreed to contribute to the noise mitigation works. She said the Ukrainian scheme was now up and running and the first Ukrainian guest was receiving their rent guarantee and were in their own home. She provided further updates in relation to the Electric Car scheme, which would allow people to rent an electric car and was going live next month.

Councillor Coote asked Scrutiny Committee to review the matters raised by Mr Perry relating to Walden Place. Councillor Gregory said he was happy to do so.

C47 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS (UP TO 30 MINUTES)

In respect of Question 1, Councillor Loughlin said her question was separate from Councillor Dean's query and warranted a separate answer. She said she had not implied that there had been any reputational damage to the Council. She asked that if any debtors reneged on their debts in future, that members be informed.

In respect of Question 3, Councillor Silcock asked that the minutes of the Norse Partnership Board meetings be made available to members in a confidential manner, such as through the Scrutiny or Audit and Standards Committee.

In respect of Question 4, Councillor Sell asked that members were kept informed of any operation difficulties in respect of waste collection.

In response to Councillor Barker's question, asked on behalf of Councillor Moran, Councillor Evans said maximum effort was being put into clear the backlog of enforcement cases.

In response to Councillor Martin's clarification question, Councillor Hargreaves said the CBRE report had been published with the written answer papers. He explained that the asset was valued differently depending on whether one was looking at the Aspire or Council accounts.

C48 **MATTERS REFERRED FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES**

No matters were received from the Executive or the Council's Committees.

C49 **MATTERS RECEIVED ABOUT JOINT ARRANGEMENTS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

No matters were received regarding Joint Arrangements.

C50 **APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSONS TO THE AUDIT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

Councillor Oliver presented the report regarding the appointment of an Independent Person under s28(7) of the Localism Act 2011 to fulfil the various roles that could be required in the event of Code of Conduct complaint against district, town or parish councillors, and in the capacity of a "relevant Independent Person" for the purposes of the Statutory Officer Discipline and Dismissal Panels. He proposed approval of the recommendation set out in the report.

Councillor Barker seconded the proposal.

The proposal was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED to appoint Daniel Paul to the position of an Independent Person under s28(7) of the Localism Act 2011 with regard to Code of Conduct complaints, and in the capacity of a "relevant Independent Person" for the purposes of the Statutory Officer Discipline and Dismissal Panels as set out in the Council's disciplinary procedures for statutory officers in Part 4 of the council's Constitution.

C51 **LOCAL JOINT PANEL - PROVISION FOR SUBSTITUTES**

Councillor Coote presented the report regarding the provision and appointment of substitutes to the Local Joint Panel, a working group of Council. He proposed approval of the recommendations set-out in the report.

Councillor Hargreaves seconded the proposal.

The proposal was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Amend the Local Joint Panel's Terms of Reference in order to permit the appointment of a substitute member for each participating political Group (Appendix A);

- II. Appoint Councillors Lees (Residents for Uttlesford), Barker (Conservative) and Sell (Liberal Democrat) as the nominated substitute members.

C52

MEMBER MOTION: COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Councillor Fiddy spoke to her motion regarding the Cost of Living Crisis and the impact it was having on low and medium income households in the district. She said national data demonstrated the fall in disposable income experienced by households, and this was also true of local data from the Uttlesford Food Bank which showed the rise in struggling families. She said high interest rates and inflation were eroding resilience in the community and people were utilising savings to get by. She called on the Government to tackle these issues and proposed her motion as set out in the agenda papers.

Councillor Sutton seconded the motion.

Councillor Barker had given notice of an amendment and was invited to speak. She thanked Councillor Fiddy for the motion and commended the research behind it. She said the issue with the motion was that the Government had no additional monies to fund local authorities and therefore it was up to the Council to reprioritise its own budget to support struggling residents, rather than calling for more funding. She also asked for the motion to call for assistance for families across the UK. She moved the following amendment:

“Council therefore resolves:

To reprioritise our Budget to free up additional funds to support those most in need.

*To call on the UK Government and our local Members of Parliament to effectively tackle the cost-of-living crisis facing Uttlesford families **and those across the United Kingdom** and act now to support them with the following specific measures;*

- a) Introduce a guarantee that benefits will cover the essentials so that people don't have to resort to debt or emergency charitable support to meet their basic needs, and that deductions will never pull benefits below this level, and thereafter ensure that benefits are uprated in line with inflation.*
- b) Unfreeze Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and bring Housing Benefit back in line with rents so it covers at least the cheapest 30% of private rents in every part of the country and uprate it every year to reflect changes in rents.*
- c) Increase in Discretionary Housing Payment, which provides additional financial support for claimants who are in properties with rents above LHA rates*
- d) Household Support Grant is allocated proportionately to District Councils in line with local needs. For example, those in receipt of Housing Benefit only were not eligible to claim the cost of living payments*
- e) To ensure that New Burdens administration funding is sufficient to deliver new initiatives effectively*
- f) ~~A new revised local government settlement that adequately funds local councils to protect and operate vital front line services.~~”*

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Councillor Gooding seconded the amendment. He said Uttlesford was often held up as a comparably wealthy district, as shown by comparative deprivation indices, but he was aware of pockets of deprivation. He said the motion was well intended but the Government would not single out Uttlesford for preferential treatment and the amendment would enhance the motion.

Councillor Tayler said he was puzzled by the amendment; it was central Government that had failed to tackle the Cost of Living Crisis, not local councils. Uttlesford already had the most generous Local Council Tax Support Scheme in Essex, and provided additional cost of living support grants for those in need. He said he could not support an amendment which struck out the motion's call for adequate funding for local authorities in order to maintain services.

Councillor Sell said he could not support the amendment and asked how it enhanced the original proposal. He said even Conservative Leaders of local authorities had called for adequate and fair funding from Government.

Councillor Coote spoke against the amendment; fair funding was critical if local government services were to be maintained.

Councillor Criscione said more could always be done to help those in need and the amendment called for assistance to all those in need across the country. Furthermore, the amendment was not calling on Westminster to fix problems but put the emphasis on what the Council could control.

Councillor Hargreaves said he could find no good reason for removing the proposal calling on Government to implement adequate funding for local authorities. He would not support the amendment.

Councillors Criscione and Barker asked the Chair whether the motion could be altered to only include reference to "and those across the United Kingdom."

Councillor Fiddy said she was willing to alter her motion to include this wording. The meeting consented to the alteration and debate was held on the substantive motion as altered:

"Council therefore resolves:

To call on the UK Government and our local Members of Parliament to effectively tackle the cost-of-living crisis facing Uttlesford families and those across the United Kingdom and act now to support them with the following specific measures;

- a) Introduce a guarantee that benefits will cover the essentials so that people don't have to resort to debt or emergency charitable support to meet their basic needs, and that deductions will never pull benefits below this level, and thereafter ensure that benefits are uprated in line with inflation.*
- b) Unfreeze Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and bring Housing Benefit back in line with rents so it covers at least the cheapest 30% of private rents in every part of the country and uprate it every year to reflect changes in rents.*

- c) Increase in Discretionary Housing Payment, which provides additional financial support for claimants who are in properties with rents above LHA rates*
- d) Household Support Grant is allocated proportionately to District Councils in line with local needs. For example, those in receipt of Housing Benefit only were not eligible to claim the cost of living payments*
- e) To ensure that New Burdens administration funding is sufficient to deliver new initiatives effectively*
- f) A new revised local government settlement that adequately funds local councils to protect and operate vital front line services.”*

Councillor Sell said the motion could have gone further and could have cited specific examples of what the Council was doing to help those in need.

The Leader commended Councillor Fiddy’s hardwork and detailed research into the subject of her motion. She said the next Portfolio Holder’s report for Communities would set-out what the Council was already doing to help low income and struggling families.

Councillor Sutton endorsed the motion and the earlier comments from Uttlesford Foodbank. She said while Uttlesford was an affluent district there were families who were struggling. She highlighted recent data that showed that 7/10 of children living below the poverty line in Uttlesford were from working families.

Councillor Fiddy summarised the debate and said deprivation had a huge impact on an individual’s physical and mental health. She said it was vital that councillors continued to advocate on behalf of those residents in need of support.

The proposal was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED:

Council notes that:

- I. Inflation and rising interest rates have caused a dramatic fall in real household disposable incomes:

According to the House of Commons Library in August 2023, the UK’s annual inflation rate of 6.7% was higher than in most comparable economies. Key drivers of inflation are food and energy prices, both of which have risen since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Over the two years from August 2021 to August 2023 food prices rose by 28.4%. To provide context, it previously took over 13 years, from April 2008 to August 2021, for average food prices to rise by the same amount.

The Bank of England has been raising interest rates to try and get the inflation rate back to its 2% target, and as a result, the cost of mortgages and rents have risen.

Real household disposable income is the amount of money that households have available for spending after tax and social contributions (such as National Insurance Contributions) have been deducted.

The Office for Budget Responsibility reports that real disposable income is falling at the fastest rate since comparable records began, and forecasts that even by 2028 it will still be below pre-pandemic levels.

II. Low-income households are particularly affected by rising prices:

Low-income households such as those on Universal Credit are already making savings for instance on food and heating wherever they can and have little headroom for cutting their expenditure further as prices rise. Rises in the cost of food and energy therefore have disproportionate impacts on their budgets relative to households with higher incomes.

51% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living in August – September 2023 compared to a month ago. Of those who reported an increase in the cost of living in this period, almost all (95%) said which was because of an increased price of food shopping, while 57% cited an increase in gas and electricity bills.

67% of those who reported a rise in the cost of living between 23 August and 3 September 2023 said they are spending less on non-essentials as a result, while 45% report cutting back on essentials like food shopping and 44% reported using less energy at home.

Here in Uttlesford the Foodbank distributed 1,670 parcels in the year to March 2023 compared to 1,160 in the year before. This number would have been considerably higher had it not been for two Cost of Living payments made to low-income individuals as part of the central government emergency cost of living measures.

This provided emergency food to 4,310 individuals, 44% of these being children compared to the 3,100 who needed help the year before. It is estimated that 18% of children in Uttlesford are in low-income families, and that 7 in 10 of these are in working families.

III. The number of people struggling financially in Uttlesford is rising:

The Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) model illustrates that socio-economic factors carry the most weight (40%) for determining health outcomes, highlighting the importance of this. We must therefore find ways to support our communities through these challenging and unprecedented times.

The UDC Health and Wellbeing Strategy notes that Uttlesford is one of the 20% least deprived local authorities in England, however about 18% (3,272) of children live in low income families, after housing costs* (JSNA, 2020). This figure is likely to increase with rising costs of living. Deprivation in affluent areas can be very challenging. It has been suggested that a poorer individual living in a wealthier area may have worse health than a poorer individual living in a

deprived area, for example (Stafford & Marmot, 2003), although the evidence for this is not conclusive. We must, however, be mindful of this and focus efforts on areas of need within the district as part of our work to support the UK's Levelling Up agenda to reduce inequalities.

Despite ranking highly in great places to live surveys, Uttlesford has a high number of families in receipt of Universal Credit. In April this year (2023) there were 4,247 people claiming Universal Credit, for comparison in November 2021 there were 1,290 claimants.

Benefit uprating lags the wider economy. The April 2023 annual uprating took them back to the real level they were a year earlier. It is not until April 2025 that benefit rates are set to recover the ground they lost over the autumn and winter of 2021.

The number of people on UDC's housing register rose 17% from 1,145 in September 2019 to 1,338 in June 2022.

In Uttlesford 36.7% of households are owned with a mortgage and 14.6% of households are privately rented which means that over 50% of households are exposed to the impacts of high interest rates on their housing costs. Of the 33,815 properties in Uttlesford, over half 17,259 have EPCs of D,E,F,G, the least efficient rating. These households are particularly affected by increased costs of energy.

Council therefore resolves;

To call on the UK Government and our local Members of Parliament to effectively tackle the cost-of-living crisis facing Uttlesford families and those across the United Kingdom and act now to support them with the following specific measures;

- a) Introduce a guarantee that benefits will cover the essentials so that people don't have to resort to debt or emergency charitable support to meet their basic needs, and that deductions will never pull benefits below this level, and thereafter ensure that benefits are uprated in line with inflation.
- b) Unfreeze Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and bring Housing Benefit back in line with rents so it covers at least the cheapest 30% of private rents in every part of the country and uprate it every year to reflect changes in rents.
- c) Increase in Discretionary Housing Payment, which provides additional financial support for claimants who are in properties with rents above LHA rates
- d) Household Support Grant is allocated proportionately to District Councils in line with local needs. For example, those in receipt of Housing Benefit only were not eligible to claim the cost of living payments
- e) To ensure that New Burdens administration funding is sufficient to deliver new initiatives effectively

- f) A new revised local government settlement that adequately funds local councils to protect and operate vital front line services.

The meeting was closed at 8.04pm.

Summaries of Public Statements: Council 10 October 2023

Des Ashton

Ms Ashton said she was the Advocacy & Campaigns Officer for Uttlesford Foodbank and that she had previously addressed Council to highlight concerns regarding the growing level of need across the District. She had called on Councillors to help identify and promote support that would strengthen the local safety net for the most vulnerable in the community.

She said that in the period since she had dedicated a large proportion of time to collating and sharing data with various partners, including UDC, which repeatedly showed that foodbank use was on the increase. Foodbank data in particular was a lagging indicator of need as those that used the service had often endured weeks or even months of extreme hardship.

More recently, she said she had been grateful for the support from a number of Councillors, who had campaigned alongside the Foodbank to call for an Essentials Guarantee – including an increase to the standard rate of Universal Credit. She said that currently it did not offer enough money to cover life's essentials, and people's living situations were exacerbated by the way in which sanctions were applied.

She said she had been hugely encouraged by the support from Councillors who campaigned on the National Day of Action on 9 September, which secured an impressive record of public support within the Saffron Walden constituency, in the form of 125 signatures for the Essentials Guarantee petition. She said this was a strong signal that the wider community wanted to see greater equity for all. She asked Councillors: how well did they know their wards and to what extent were they informed on what was impacting most on those they represented.

Doug Perry

Mr Perry spoke on the situation at Walden Place, a sheltered housing complex of 26 units that facilitated assisted living arrangements for local residents. He said complaints relating to high service charges, limited visitor access and ongoing building works had been ignored and representatives of the Council had not attended meetings to discuss such problems.

Mr Perry presented a list of issues petitioning the Council to resolve matters such as easement, noise, dust, access (including disabled access), lighting,

drainage and health and safety at Walden Place, and said compensation should be considered for those affected. He said that residents felt ignored and he urged the Council to take remedial action.