



UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Felsted & Stebbing Ward
District Councillors John Evans & Richard Silcock



DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT: JULY 2023

We are pleased to submit our monthly Report to the Parish Council.

As usual, there are a number of matters of District wide relevance discussed but which potentially have significant impacts upon our Parish and Community. However, those following Felsted related matters in particular might find the following item regarding “solar farms” a useful update.

So many matters of concern to the Community, as noted during the recent election campaign, relate to “planning” in the general sense and because it is an area of the District Council’s function which is always active and which involves change, it is inevitable that these Monthly Reports will contain what to some might be regarded as a disproportionate amount of reporting in this context. We believe and hope however that their relevance will be widely understood by Members and the wider public readership.

SOLAR FARM DEVELOPMENT

As yet, no further news of their intentions has been received by us from the promoters concerning the two solar applications previously announced (and “consulted upon” at the two presentation exhibitions) in the Bartholomew Green/School Lane areas.

As will be recalled, these were originally each proposed at 49.9 MW of generating capacity ie of a scale falling below the National Infrastructure threshold, being those in excess of 50 MW – (“NSIP”), which requires reference to and to be decided upon by the Energy Minister and not by the local planning authority. However, the last intimation (several months ago) from the scheme promoters was that they proposed to combine their two concepts and submit them as one ie to become of a NSIP scale and thus decided upon in the Ministry in Whitehall . As we reported last month, we think that the community needs to anticipate that this is likely to happen in the near future.

In this context, one such large NSIP scale application has very recently been permitted, being not far from the south eastern boundary of the Parish. EDF Renewables UK, a wholly owned subsidiary of the French utility EDF Group, has with a partner, secured consent to develop Longfield Solar Farm, on land which lies

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west of Terling/Fairstead and north east of Beaulieu Park. This is on land understood to be in the same ownership as one of the sites proposed at Bartholomew Green.

Longfield Solar Farm will have a generating capacity of up to 500MW, set on a 380-hectare (939-acre) net area and would also have battery storage and of course grid connectivity via two sub-stations. It is expected to provide adequate energy to power more than 96,000 households annually and would be the largest “solar farm” in the country once completed. The project construction will take around two years and would be expected to start exporting electricity to the national grid at the start of 2028.

The Decision of the Minister and the report of the Planning Inspectorate leading to it, plus associated links, may be found here:

<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/eastern/longfield-solar-farm/>

No doubt, Members and residents would wish to know about the means of consultation in the context of a NSIP scale application. That would certainly involve officers at both Uttlesford and Essex County Councils as well as the Parish Council and ourselves as District Councillors. The Planning Inspectorate Chief Executive Paul Morrison said in relation to Longfield:

“The Planning Inspectorate has now examined more than 100 nationally significant infrastructure projects since the Planning Act 2008 process was introduced, ensuring local communities have had the opportunity of being involved in the examination of projects that may affect them. Local people, the local authority and other interested parties were able to participate in this examination. The Examining Authority listened and gave full consideration to all local views and the evidence gathered during the Examination before making its recommendation to the Secretary of State.”

That observation is as may be but, perhaps in our case, it would be helpful to discuss with your Planning Sub-Committee the approach best thought likely to assist Felsted and its residents once the promoters next come into contact.

LOCAL PLAN

Now that the composition of the working groups and committee membership has been confirmed at the first UDC Cabinet meeting post the Election, being held on 29 June 2023, the work of the Local Plan Leadership Group can resume. This means that the review by it of “spatial options” including the suitability of the various sites put forward in the Call For Sites exercise, with which you are familiar, can resume in earnest with a detailed appreciation being undertaken of the strengths and weaknesses of each site, always in the context of sustainability per the NPPF tests and requirements.

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This means that the Council is working towards a Regulation 18 Local Plan (ie the initial draft which will include not only the necessary policies but also identify the locations for sizeable development) expected to be available for consultation and comment in October 2023. It will then be essential to secure as wide consultation on its contents as possible from the Parish Councils and residents. The timetable for further consultation stages and being examined by the Planning Inspectorate means that the Local Plan will likely be in place by late 2025/early 2026. We will keep you advised in our next Report.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT MATTERS - UDC

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;
- a qualified Ecologist is due to join us later this summer (this will be of importance in the context of compulsory Biodiversity Net Gain about which we will report again later this Autumn).

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.

UDC PLANNING – DESIGNATION BY DEPARTMENT FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING & COMMUNITIES

The background to the reasons why UDC was designated by the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities (“DLUHC”) was set out in last month’s Report. Effective steps are being taken to secure de-designation.

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 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.

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. In June, DLUHC published the latest

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statistics available which indicate that Uttlesford now falls below the threshold for designation for the first time since 2018, ie the threshold being the exceedance of planning appeal “overturns” beyond 10%.

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

UDC - PLANNING PROCESS

Last year the planning department determined **2891** planning and related applications, approximately 85% of which were decided within target timescales. This is far above the government set threshold. The volume of planning applications in a rural district like Uttlesford, with its population being in the low 90,000s is very substantial indeed, compared with other similar LPAs. 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.

However, planning activity does not come cheap and the outcome of planning decisions made by the UDC Planning Committee (which is as will be recalled is composed of members from all political parties and is run on non-party lines) is critical. When applicants for permission are “disappointed” in a planning committee decision which goes against them and they decide to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate, inevitably significant costs (as well as officer time) are incurred. By way of example, this is a table of costs incurred and external fees paid in planning appeals relating to housing developments in the District over the past six years.

Year	Awards of Costs	Consultants
2017 - 2018	£ 102,660	£ 33,697
2018 - 2019	£ 21,325	£ 10,241
2019 - 2020	£ 182,013	£ 78,776
2020 - 2021	£ 144,117	£ 70,481
2021 - 2022	£ 129,453	£ 152,057
2022 - 2023	£ 306,407	£ 169,873

The stakes are high. As we know, while the ownership of land was not nationalised in 1947 in reality, the right to develop land is and given the popularity of Uttlesford as a place to live and work, we will continue to see demand for development opportunities continue wherever a prospect appears.

UDC PLANNING – ENFORCEMENT MATTERS

Planning enforcement is a topic which attracts local consideration where there is perceived to be a breach of development rules or conditions. In planning enforcement, UDC have so far this calendar year served

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seven enforcement notices on those considered to be breaching planning controls. This is the highest number of notices served post-covid. Planning Enforcement Officers still seek to arrive at negotiated solutions with transgressors however but importantly, are now further supported and resourced to take formal action where necessary and justified.

STANSTED AIRPORT

Stansted Airport advised UDC on 3 July 2023 of their plans to seek to extend the existing terminal building at the rear by approximately the width of three airplane stands, some 16,500 sqm, to provide more space for existing customers – ie c. 40% more departure space, shopping facilities, baggage processing etc.

This is not therefore a proposal to increase passenger numbers beyond the 43 million number they currently have permission for post their successful planning appeal – it is to accommodate up to that number as they continue to bounce back post Pandemic. They expect to have some 28 million passengers transiting the airport in this financial year.

They are now progressing this scheme ahead of development of the new arrivals building for which they secured approval some long time ago.

They will be consulting on this potential development later this month and further details of their intentions are to be found here:

[London Stansted Airport Terminal Extension | London Stansted Airport](#)

We will report further as matters evolve.

ANGLIAN WATER - GET RIVER POSITIVE – 14th July 2023

This event, organised remotely, might well be of interest to some members and residents too with a particular interest in the environment and ecology and especially to those with an interest in the health of Stebbing Brook/River Chelmer.

Anglian Water have arranged a **Get River Positive** Webinar on **Friday 14th July at 10am-11am**. The purpose of the webinar is to share with land owners and members of the community their Get River Positive commitments and how it is possible to apply to their *Get River Positive Fund*. Details of the funding available are not known to us but might be of possible interest. Their commitments include the following:

- Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers
- Create more opportunities for everyone to enjoy our region's rivers
- Support others to improve and care for rivers
- Enhance our rivers and create new habitats so wildlife can thrive
- Be open and transparent about our performance and our plans

The webinar will include the following topics

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- i. Introduction to *Get River Positive* and its 5 commitments
- ii. The *Get River Positive* application process including how to apply, timescale for hearing back about successful applications
- iii. Q&A

To join the meeting (community members may join):

Teams link:

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

Meeting ID: 393 110 020 238

Passcode: PCjupV

[Download Teams](#) | [Join on the web](#)

UTTLESFORD HOUSING MARKET REPORT

As you will recall reports are prepared periodically by UDC recording house price statistics in the District on a ward basis. This is the link to the latest report, just published on the central UDC website:

[UDC website](#)

It reveals for our Ward that the average house price is in the region of £ 650,000, compared with that for the District as a whole of c. £ 555,000. The statistics for all wards in the District range between some £ 830,000 and £ 390,000 - they continue to reflect the reality that our District continues to provide formidable price barriers to entry onto the housing ladder particularly for younger members of our community.

ON-GOING BUSINESS – DISTRICT COUNCILLORS

We are settling in to our “routine” of meetings and attendances required of us, but it might be noted that we have since the Election attended a considerable number of training courses, designed to help and prepare us for our roles and tasks over the period of this Council. Some meetings have also involved Parish Councillors across the District and we think this proves to be very useful indeed. We are delighted that your relevant Members are always well represented at such meetings and very engaged in them.

DISTRICT COUNCILLORS’ AND CONSTITUENTS’ SURGERY

We will continue to hold our joint Surgery in the URC Hall immediately prior to the monthly Parish Council Meeting and we look forward to meeting any resident who wishes to discuss a matter of concern. As usual, no appointment is necessary.

Cllr John Evans

Cllr Richard Silcock

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