



UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Felsted & Stebbing Ward

District Councillors Sandi Merifield & John Evans



DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT: MARCH 2023

Cllrs. Sandi Merifield and John Evans are pleased to present their Monthly Report to the Parish Council.

As appears to be the case often, much of this report relates to matters of a District or County wide nature, rather than being specific to the Parish but perhaps that is increasingly a reflection of the wider complexities of Local Government nowadays. Nonetheless, we believe that they are worthy of inclusion here as they will in one sense or another impact our residents.

COST OF LIVING SUPPORT

We have written on previous occasions about the help which UDC can provide in material terms and other assistance and the comprehensive information drawn together on this very important subject may be referred to here. We know that your Clerk has this information source readily to hand:

<https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/article/4782/Cost-of-living-support>

See also the next section re Council meeting and the following which gives full details of the **newly** to be introduced Cost of Living Support Fund.

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s31244/Cost%20of%20Living%20Support%20Fund%20Policy%20202324.pdf>

UDC COUNCIL - BUDGET 2023/2024

At a lengthy meeting of Council on 21 February 2023, the 2023/24 UDC Budget was set and an increase of the UDC share of Council Tax precept of 3.5% was approved in order to arrive at a balanced budget. This is the maximum permitted by central government and is indeed the same rate of increase set by Essex County Council for their share of the Council Tax precept.

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The increase in UDC council tax revenue to be received amounts to some **£ 195,000** in total derived across the District/all domestic property tax bands.

It was proposed and in the event agreed at Council after some debate that this increase will **not** be used for Council purposes at large but will be dedicated for use in a **Cost of Living Support Fund**, which will be applied in a discretionary manner to applicants during the forthcoming municipal year. We think that Members and your Clerk will wish to be aware of the existence of this Fund and perhaps it can be borne in mind for anyone who might qualify and benefit from it.

The Council Tax calculations and demands will be following in the next weeks and a full breakdown will be contained there as to UDC revenue and spending, in the usual way.

The meeting was very long and a detailed agenda is attached for convenience, giving details of the Budget and its components among several other subjects (in a 350 page Agenda pack).

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/mgChooseDocPack.aspx?ID=5962>

We are happy to discuss any matters of the budget in further detail with Members as appropriate.

UDC PLANNING SERVICE

We know that Cllr Freeman had the opportunity recently of discussing a number of matters of planning concern with Mr Dean Hermitage, the Director of Planning. Mr Hermitage is a very energetic head of this departmental function and we were pleased that he joined UDC in the Summer of 2022 from a policy function in central government at DLUHC, after some years spent in Local Government in Southend and London Boroughs.

The department continues to be challenged however because of personnel shortages and we mention this not by way of excuse to justify but rather, to explain to the PC and to residents any shortcomings to which you and we all give expression from time to time.

The departmental budget (some £ 800,000) is sufficient to meet the costs of its establishment and recruit personnel (set by reference to benchmarking in the local government field) but the difficulty arises in the availability of sufficient trained persons in the planning disciplines. There are simply not enough available nationally. It is not a problem unique to smaller or rural local planning authorities like UDC or East Herts DC (where similar difficulties to UDC are presently experienced) but also exists in large urban authorities.

Portsmouth council is one of **17** local authorities, warned by DLUHC them that they face “special measures” because they did not hit government targets for processing planning applications in a timely way. That council has recently lost its head of development management, three principal planning officers and three senior planning officers, while other staff have reduced their working hours as they move

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towards retirement. This is a situation not dissimilar to Uttlesford which in order to meet work loads is filling posts with interim appointments at a senior level in consequence.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPER CONTRIBUTIONS – Section 106 Agreements

You will recall that a consultation exercise on the content of a Supplementary Planning Document took place some months ago. In light of the responses received, this document has now been finalised and will be brought forward in support of the existing policies in the current Local Plan. No doubt it will be further updated after the next Local Plan is examined.

This SPD provides detailed advice on developer contributions and provides for:

- negotiation of Section 106 agreements
- charges for monitoring of obligations
- detailed considerations on a range of infrastructure such as:
 - affordable housing
 - biodiversity
 - community facilities
 - education and school transport
 - flood and water management
 - healthcare
 - landscaping and open space
 - accessibility
 - sports facilities

It is intended for use by developers of residential schemes and the Council and will aid the consistent application of policies by it. A key aim is to assist developers in the better making of planning applications, taking into account the scope for benefits for the community (enabling fuller discussion to take place particularly during pre-application negotiations) and to secure greater transparency. It will come to Cabinet for approval with a view to adoption on 16 March 2023 and we will provide further details of its materiality thereafter.

The text of the consultation document and responses received are found in this link:

<https://uttlesford-consult.objective.co.uk/kse/event/37222>

DEVOLUTION (“DEVO”)

This is a topic which has received attention in the past six months with proposals outlined by central Government to grant additional powers and funding to a combination of larger local authorities with the

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possibility of their representative being an elected mayor. It is something with Essex CC are actively promoting with all Councils in the County and an initial presentation has been made to us on 27 February.

Since we await copies of the slide presentation and other written materials received from ECC, we are not able to provide a detailed account of these concepts yet detailing which/what they might be considered in Uttlesford but hope to do so in our Report next month.

Devolution is described by Central Government as involving the transfer of money and powers down from central government to local level. It is intended to give greater powers to local people and local place so that “decisions are made closer to the local people, communities and businesses they affect”.

In Greater Essex, this could mean more funding and greater control over fundamental issues such as health, planning, transport, skills, economic growth, and infrastructure and it is thought that based on similar deals arrived at in other areas of England. It could also mean as much as £1 billion in new Government funding for the County. It is stated that DEVO is not about local Government reorganisation, but mainly involves the transfer of certain powers and money from central Government.

There are three ‘levels’ of DEVO which would be on offer via the Government’s new Devolution Framework, which sets out which powers and resources on offer for local and combined authorities depending on their governance arrangement:

Level 1 constitutes informal joint working between authorities such as through a joint committee arrangement.

Level 2 constitutes a single lead institution or county council working across a functional economic area - in practice, for Greater Essex, this would mean the creation of a Combined County Authority that would deal with the areas of devolved power.

Level 3 requires a single lead institution or county council working across a functional economic area, such as a Combined County Authority with a directly elected mayor responsible for the areas of devolved power. According to the report, Level 3 deals offer the greatest range of devolved powers and funding on offer through the framework.

Meanwhile ECC have published a draft Expression of Interest document to be returned to Government.

This might be thought a rather esoteric subject but it is gaining traction across a swathe of English local authority areas and the LGA have assembled some background information on DEVO which might provide an initial view for those interested:

[Devolution explained | Local Government Association](#)

This would, if progressed, represent a very significant possible change in funding and who controls the purse strings and merits a much more detailed briefing than we are able to provide at this moment.

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ECC RECYCLING CENTRE FACILITIES - BOOKING IN REQUIRED FROM 13 MARCH 2023

We reported at length on this trial arrangement proposed by ECC in our last month's Report, requiring booking in before arrival at the Centre and from the results of a Survey conducted, it does not seem to be a popular proposal at all in our part of the world. It was trialled in South Essex to some reported success but that does not mean it is suitable in our rural area. Further details of the workings of the scheme are found here:

<https://www.lovesessex.org/news-and-ideas/essex-recycling-centre-booking-system/>

Our County Councillors have objected to the scheme being introduced in Uttlesford and so far of 2,700 residents who have responded to a survey on its suitability here, 99% have responded in the negative. Those wishing to take part in the survey may do so via this link:

<https://www.residents4u.org/2023/02/04/survey-should-ecc-require-booking-to-use-their-waste-recycling-centres/>

No doubt the usefulness of the scheme will be followed closely and in particular whether it will (as we fear) lead to an increase in fly tipping on our rural verges and remoter locations.

PLANNING REFORM – NATIONAL POLICY MATTERS GENERALLY

We were very pleased to note the proposed responses to be submitted by your Planning Sub-Committee to the proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF") to be delivered by 2nd March 2023 which we referred to in last Month's Report. If we might say so, they represented a very thoughtful approach to the questions posed and will be taken into account also (along with those from other Parish Councils) in the response submitted by UDC to the consultation exercise. For those residents wishing to have another ready reference to the exercise the links are repeated for convenience:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/levelling-up-and-regeneration-bill-reforms-to-national-planning-policy/levelling-up-and-regeneration-bill-reforms-to-national-planning-policy>

together with a mark-up of the current NPPF showing the proposed amendments to it:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1126647/NPPF_July_2021_-_showing_proposed_changes.pdf

The Government have stated that they propose to make speedy amendments to the NPPF following conclusion of the consultation so it might be anticipated that these will be published in the late Summer.

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THE FORTHCOMING DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTION – 4th MAY 2023

As you are aware, the District Council Election will take place on Thursday 4th May 2023.

Sandi and John will both be standing as candidates in the Election as a “Team”. They have very much enjoyed working together and relished the opportunity provided by the election of May 2019 to represent the residents of Felsted at Uttlesford District Council. Of course, attending you at your monthly meetings, reporting as we do and otherwise supporting the community has been a genuine privilege.

They have both been heavily engaged in the business of the Council generally since 2019 and by reason of Sandi’s role as Chair of the Planning Committee and John’s Cabinet Portfolio function in Planning, the Local Plan, Stansted Airport and Infrastructure, they have been well placed to convey their views at Council and within these bodies appropriately, for the benefit they believe not only of the District at large but of the Parish also.

Pre- Election “Purdah” period begins on 22nd March 2023 but this does not of course prevent us from undertaking our representative responsibilities as usual in the period leading up to the Election.

REGISTERING TO VOTE – MAY 2023

An extensive campaign has been taking place, prepared by the Electoral Services Team at UDC, to advise the community of the new Voter ID requirements coming into effect at this Election for the first time.

It will be necessary for voters exercising their vote in person to show some form of photo ID at the voting station and this link sets out the relevant information in detail:

<https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/ier>

This further link provides information as to the [accepted forms of photo identification](#) and if voters do not already have an accepted form of photo ID, or if they are not sure whether their photo ID still looks like them, they can [apply for a free voter ID document know as a Voter Authority Certificate \(VAC\)](#).

We urge residents to check that they have appropriate photo ID and of course take it with them when they attend the Polling Station on the day. Many will have a suitable ID tucked away in their wallet or purse already and it is perhaps just worth listing examples of what are appropriate photo ID documents, namely:

- [Passport](#) issued by the UK, any Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, A British Overseas Territory, an EEA state or a Commonwealth country
- [Driving licence](#) issued by the UK, any Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or an EEA state
- [Blue Badge](#)
- [Older Person's Bus Pass](#)
- [Disabled Person's Bus Pass](#)

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- Oyster 60+ Card
- Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) or a temporary VAC
- Biometric immigration document
- Identity card bearing Proof of Age Standards Scheme hologram (a PASS card)
- National Identity Card issued by an EEA state

If the photographic identity has date expired, it will still be accepted if the photograph is still a good likeness.

OUR ASSISTANCE

Of course, we are always incredibly happy to hear from any parish councillors and residents and very pleased to meet them, whether at our Surgery meeting held in the URC prior to your monthly meeting or otherwise, should there be anything they think we can help with or answer any questions.

Cllr Sandi Merifield

E: cllr.merifield@uttlesford.gov.uk

Cllr John Evans

E: cllr.evans@uttlesford.gov.uk

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