



## UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

### Felsted & Stebbing Ward

District Councillors John Evans & Richard Silcock



### DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT: APRIL 2025

Please find below our monthly Report to the Parish Council.

#### **A FURTHER SOLAR FARM (TO BE KNOWN AS HEDGEHOG GROVE SOLAR FARM)**

We anticipate that a further report on this matter will be made to you by your Chairman and Cllr Freeman, and so perhaps it suffices for us to confirm that we have been very actively engaged, since our last report, in discussions and meetings with the proposed developers, Total Energie.

As we previously reported, a Community Liaison Group ("CLG") will be established and we proposed that your chairman act as chair of that body, and whose membership will include Cllr Freeman and both of us (John in his portfolio capacity for UDC and Richard as Ward District Councillor) and this has been agreed by Total. In addition, the CLG will include representatives from Rayne/Braintree DC, Friends of the Flich Way, CPRE and other local interests.

We hesitate to repeat what was written in this connection in our last report, but in case our observations were not read by residents on that occasion, we repeat them at the end of this report by way of an appendix.

Our last meeting with Total, we put to them that if there were to be community benefits arising out of this development [in the event it were permitted], then those benefits should be received and administered by the community itself, in which connection, Felsted already had established a body, the Felstead Community Trust, which would be suitable and capable of being used for that purpose. That suggestion was not met with immediate objection by Total, but it has yet to be formally approved. However, John, based upon discussions which he has had with Terling Parish Council regarding their adverse experiences with community benefit arising from the Longfield Solar development (also NSIP scale), when Essex County Council sought to receive and administer the community benefits, is of the strong opinion that any attempt by ECC to repeat that policy approach should be strongly resisted. He has communicated this view also to officers at UDC.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to provide a further detailed report at the May PC meeting, by which time an additional meeting of the CLG will have taken place

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM (“LGR”)**

We hope that this subject will not prove to be a standing item in our reports, but we fear it will!

However, there is little substantive news to report, save to say that all the existing district councils in Essex have, together with Essex County Council and the two unitary authorities, Southend and Thurrock, Submitted a joint letter to the government expressing their willingness to proceed with reorganisation along the lines previously outlined by us, namely the creation of a mayoral body - in place of Essex County Council - and a number of unitary authorities in both its place and that of the existing district councils.

However, there is no agreement as yet as to the number of unitary authorities Which it would be appropriate to create. Most of the district councils are of the view that a greater number would be more appropriate than a fewer number, although it remains the case that Essex County Council and some district councils would prefer the outcome to involve perhaps as few as two or three unitary authorities.

Both we, as individuals, and UDC as a body, are strongly of the opinion that a greater number - perhaps four or five - would be preferable, so as to enable the new unitary authorities to be seen as more accessible to the resident and for counsellors to the new bodies to be closer to those they will represent. Despite our personal views being that we consider the reorganisation as Likely to lead to a lesser form of representation for residents, this process is inevitable, being a fundamental plank of this government's agenda, despite not being expressly provided for in its pre-election manifesto.

This topic was discussed in full Council on 19th March and members collectively resolved to agree that a joint letter, submitted together with all of the other Essex councils be sent to Government, expressing interest in further work being undertaken was dispatched, and a copy of the letter is reproduced here:

[Interim Plan Final ID26 ELCE2](#)

So, we are not in a position to anticipate still whether UDC will end up joined with for example, Harlow and Epping Forest Councils or whether a different combination will result. We will keep you advised when the next stage of analysis is reached.

## **UDC DE-DESIGNATION - PLANNING**

Members will wish to read the latest statistics published by UDC in the context of major planning applications (developments in excess of 10 dwellings and which therefore come to the Planning Committee). In the period April 2023 – March 2025, there were:

93 applications made; 21 were refused by Committee; 9 were appealed to PINS; 3 were dismissed; 3 were allowed; and 3 are pending

The resulting/applicable statistic under the MHCLG tests which provide for potential designation (which as you know permits an applicant to apply directly for permission to PINS) is now **3.23%**, a level well below

the maximum threshold of **10%**. UDC has been below this threshold now for three years. The resulting improvement in this statistic will enable discussions by the Director of Planning to take place with MHCLG as to whether or not UDC should be de-designated. Should that come about, then it means that future major applications will all be dealt with by UDC directly and not by PINS. Currently, about 15% of these are the subject of direct application to PINS, but the proportion continues to decline. We will keep you advised of developments

### **SUSTAINABLE UTTLESFORD**

Richard has previously reported of a new body which has been established, *Sustainable Uttlesford*, and to which he is also the representative of Felsted PC. It will be hosting an evening at UDC Little Canfield on **9 April at 1900** in the evening, in order to celebrate projects that have been supported through the Zero Carbon Communities Grant Scheme, established by UDC a little while ago. Its purpose is to celebrate district-wide community environmental projects and learn from the local action being taken to tackle climate change and protect nature.

*Sustainable Uttlesford's* aim is to motivate and support village, town and other local community sustainability groups, by providing them with expertise, advice, financial and other support in this important arena. The evening will include presentations, discussion, and Q&A with the opportunity to network and learn about practical ways for the community to take collective action and so, there will be presentations and discussions relating to:

- Projects providing community energy advice and installing renewable energy on community buildings
- Local projects that are acting to restore and enhance nature and biodiversity in their community
- Farmers who are working to provide greater benefits to wildlife, water and soil
- Community collaborations working to clean up and restore our rivers

This will be a good opportunity for community groups and like-minded individuals to connect with others and if members or residents would like to hear more about it afterwards or indeed possibly attend themselves, please let us know so that attendance arrangements can be made .

### **A HANDY DATA AND INFORMATION SOURCE**

It might come as a new place to bookmark, but members and residents will, we think, find this particular source of general use, particularly as to forthcoming legislative changes and matters of policy impact [including for example, changes to NSIP procedures which might be relevant in the context of the proposed Hedgehog Solar Farm]. Historic England publish a Monthly Note

#### **[Planning Bulletin March 2025](#)**

which highlights some of the recent and forthcoming developments in the world of planning, particularly from a heritage perspective. It will serve as a useful information source as to what changes lie ahead under the important Planning & Infrastructure Bill for which a Briefing Note was prepared for the House of Commons and also provides a handy reference source:

**<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10216/>**

## **UDC HOUSING STOCK**

As you will recall, UDC has a substantial (close to 3,000) housing stock which is let by way of social housing. This is an important provision for the benefit of many in our community and we think that UDC is to be commended for having retained as many homes in this sector as it has (being reduced only by the purchase of homes under *Right to Buy* legislation). Many local authorities by contrast (including Braintree DC and City of Chelmsford) disposed of their social housing stock some long time ago.

We include reference to this topic in this Report so that Members might be made aware that UDC has with effect from 1st April, contracted the maintenance and management of their housing stock to a new provider, namely Axis Europe. This has come about after detailed and competitive tendering under the supervision of a new strategic director of housing, who comes to UDC with impressive and long experience in the sector from elsewhere in London Boroughs and Housing Associations.

The need for a senior/Directorship appointment of this nature has become critical against the background of increased regulatory requirements and the need to provide improved housing standards to UDC's tenants. The tenants' association has of course, been fully involved in the arrangements leading to the change in management structures, as well as the internal UDC housing team.

## **GOVERNMENT FUNDING SUPPORT**

Members might have heard of the **Rural England Prosperity Fund** (REPF), which is administered by DEFRA, and which has just announced an update regarding the funding for 2025/2026 and whose purpose is to enhance economic growth in rural areas, being an enhancement of any funding available via **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** (UKSPF). REPF focuses specifically on the unique needs of rural areas and it supports a range of initiatives, including:

- Development of new products and facilities by rural and farm businesses, aiming to diversify income streams and bolster the local rural economy
- Enhancement of community infrastructure, which is vital for providing essential services and supporting local rural economies.

We are pleased to report that UDC has been awarded **£244,210** from the REPF for 2025/2026, a reflection as to the thoroughness of the application submitted by the economic support team of UDC for the support (significantly greater than our neighbouring authorities, incidentally). This is in addition to an award of **£327,146** from UKSPF. A Report as to all of this was submitted to Cabinet on 27 March, for which this is the link to the relevant Report papers:

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38995/UKSPF%20and%20REPF%20Cabinet%20report.pdf>

The primary goal of UKSPF is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. The Fund has three investment priorities which are to support not only local businesses, but the sense of community, well-being and place, as well as bolstering skills. Cabinet approved specific Investment Priorities under the detailed categories broken down and described in the Report. We will keep you advised of opportunities

which might present themselves further in the relevant categories. We are sure that local businesses will be keeping themselves abreast of opportunities available to them, since the UDC economic team have provided details to the business community with whom they keep in frequent contact.

### **STANSTED AIRPORT – EXPANSION**

Members and readers will recall that it is the intention of MAG, as ultimate owners of Stansted Airport, to apply for planning permission to increase its potential capacity in way of passenger throughput, but not of individual flights, to 51m pa but, even so, the scale of increase represented by this application is not such as to amount to an NSIP. So, the application will be made to UDC and it is expected that this will be submitted by midsummer, and will be considered by the planning committee.

We will not be commenting on the merits or otherwise of the forthcoming application, but would simply report as a matter of possible interest to the community, that future County Council have suggested that the application be delayed until the position as to road and rail access is better managed and also that it is demonstrated that the plan “is fully compatible with the country's carbon and climate change commitments”. We have not seen what position has been taken by Essex County Council, but its typical approach is one of supporting expansion at the airport. That became apparent from their recent representations upon the airport's draft sustainable development plan [upon which we reported last month].

Readers will also be interested to learn of a challenge which is being heard in the Administrative Court in London this week, over four days, made by a group objecting to the expansion of Leeds Bradford airport (from 4 m to 7 m passengers pa) on climate and carbon/greenhouse gas grounds. The outcome of that case will be very interesting in the context of any future proposed expansion of airports. It will be recalled that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is MP for one of the Leeds constituencies and so might be expected to have her own strong opinions on the prospects of this possible expansion, which had previously been rejected.

However, in a different context, we might see drone services and flying taxis operating in our skies at a commercial scale in the not too distant future. The Government has confirmed over £20 million funding today to “launch new flight technologies” which is apparently designed to:

“advance aviation technology to support healthcare for the NHS, assist police forces in combatting crime, help inspect and survey critical infrastructure and unlock delivery services for businesses and communities across the country”.

Communities would not, we are sure, welcome “buzzing” drones operating freely in the skies above their homes and businesses, whoever are their operators. We anticipate that there will have be early regulation and licensing of this sector but nonetheless, given our proximity to parcel operations based at and around Stansted and with the prospect of a greater number of logistics operations being introduced in large warehouses on the horizons, it is a topic to be aware of.

### **BUS SERVICE – 133/Braintree to STN via Rayne, Felsted, Dunmow & Takeley**

Since our last Report, news has been received that this is to be continued (but re-numbered) but will be provided by a different operator, on commercial terms, and with a different timetable which would not

involve the same extended service at the beginning and at the end of the day. The curtailment of the service in this way will be not just be inconvenient but prejudicial to residents who use it to commute to work at Stansted Airport and need, for example, to start work on an early shift at Stansted Airport.

This matter has been raised by John and many others with the operators of the airport in the context of some subsidy possibly being required by and being made available to the commercial operator in order to provide support for the “early and late” service. We think that some practical solution and support may be found in this regard and will report further when we hear more from Stansted Airport.

As you appreciate, it is in their interest and consistent with their policy to encourage transport to/from the airport in a sustainable way and indeed some of the income derived by STAL from car parking charges is applied towards support required for coach and bus linkage with the airport.

### **WARD MEMBER’S INITIATIVE**

We are very happy to consider requests for financial support, utilising our Members’ Initiative Grant as appropriate and which can be made available to community groups for suitable purposes. We draw to your attention however, as previously reported by us to you, that this will be the last year (2025/2026) that the grant will be available. The reason for this is that all members’ grants are to be consolidated with other larger grant funding [such as those allocated by central government, to which we have referred above] in order to avoid some duplication of funding.

For example, UDC has been supporting from central funding Uttlesford Community Transport and the good work provided by the Food Banks and Citizens Advice but on occasion, members have also been supporting, these and other bodies. It was considered that a “bigger and better bang for the buck” would be obtained for these and similar organisations, who are well deserving of voluntary support from the community and from UDC, if across the district, a more coordinated approach were taken to provide support to them.

### **DISTRICT COUNCILLORS’ AND CONSTITUENTS’ SURGERY**

We will be holding our usual monthly surgery at 1730 in the URC Hall, immediately prior to the PC Meeting. We are always, of course, pleased to meet up, by appointment as required, with any resident who wishes to discuss a matter of concern or indeed anything we have commented upon in our Monthly Reports.

If any resident would like to receive a personal copy of our Monthly Reports, we shall be pleased to send one directly to them by e mail.

Cllr John Evans

E: [cllr.evans@uttlesford.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.evans@uttlesford.gov.uk)

Cllr Richard Silcock

E: [cllr.silcock@uttlesford.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.silcock@uttlesford.gov.uk)

## **FELSTED PC - DC REPORT – APRIL 2025**

### **APPENDIX - HEDGEHOG SOLAR DEVELOPMENT**

An extract from our March 2025 Report

For example, it will be essential for those wishing to comment on the proposed development to be in a position to make their representations and the way in which this can be accomplished is by registering an interest with the Planning Inspectorate at the appropriate time via this link:

<https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/having-your-say-guide/registering-have-your-say>

As to matters of possible objection, there will be many and various (including use of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land, landscape considerations, development in the countryside, wildlife, drainage and Biodiversity Net Gain, to name but a few) as have already been pointed out to us by several residents, whose strong wishes and objections they have asked be relayed to the Parish Council. While those representations can and should be made as vigorously as possible, at the same time, it is prudent to discuss with Total the extent to which they would be willing – in case of approval of their Scheme by the Secretary of State - to contribute to community benefits. This, as we reported last month, is however a matter of voluntary payment and is not capable of being secured (as in the case other major developments) typically through section 106 obligations.

Based on initial research, it is our opinion that the proposed community benefit is set at far too low a level by comparison with the levels offered by other developers in the country (particularly in Scotland) in the context of sustainable energy developments. John had a meeting earlier this week with the planning officers at Uttlesford and described to them the research available to date and emphasised that Uttlesford should not take a back seat in dealing with any community benefit negotiations that were to come about. In particular, the evolution of such negotiations at Longfield Solar Development (Terling) which were led by Essex County Council seemed (as have been described to him) to be most unsatisfactory from the viewpoint of that Parish Council and that community.

Again, while emphasising the necessity to put forward such objections as are available to the proposed development, in the context of community benefits, Total, when asked, stated at the meeting that they would not be proposing to include rebated electricity bills schemes for the local community. This type of benefit has been made available to other communities affected by similar schemes, but it would seem that Total have already “sold” the proposed energy output from this potential development to the National Grid.

At the meeting, we inquired as to whether or not battery storage was proposed to be installed on this site and the answer given was in the negative. While we have some initial idea as to the area to be covered by the proposed solar farm, we do not know the route which would be taken for cabling running from it to the major substation at Notley, but suffice it to say that it would run through the neighbouring parishes lying in Braintree District Council and for this reason, we would wish to remain in close contact with our Parish and District Councillors in Rayne. Having said this, the principal objections and concerns that are

likely to arise will come from residents within this Parish who will be principally affected and the way (type of information, documentation, exhibitions, venue etc) in which they might be consulted will need early consideration.

By way of postscript, perhaps we could be forgiven by repeating part of last month's report concerning potential community benefits, including questions to be posed as to the following:

- How might they be negotiated?
- By whom?
- Would The Felsted Community Trust be an appropriate body to be the recipient and administrator?
- Or should such a body have a "stand alone" single purpose eg carbon related and have no interrelationship with FCT and its entirely separate purpose and funding?
- Would community representation (beyond that of the Parish Council) in any such a body be appropriate?
- What would be the governance and long term management arrangements to be put in place concerning such negotiated benefits?
- How should benefits arising from negotiated/voluntary arrangements be secured, policed and enforced?
- How would the role of Uttlesford (and its successor body) as regards these matters (eg as enabler/mediator/negotiator/contract party or under something like a s 106)?

By listing these, we do not seek to minimise in any way the relevance nor importance of the objections and representations which will need to be made by the Parish Council, residents and other interested parties (such as the Friends of the Flich Way) but simply to emphasise the benefit of considering the potential community benefits at the same time, without prejudice (as it were) to the substantive objections and representations which will undoubtedly be made through the formal Planning Inspectorate process.

As to other bodies which might be interested to comment on this proposal, we suggested to Total that they include the Ramblers' Association and CPRE among the list of early consultees.