



UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Felsted & Stebbing Ward

District Councillors John Evans & Richard Silcock



DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT: MARCH 2025

Please find below our monthly Report to the Parish Council.

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

We turn to this subject first since we imagine that there may be residents who will wish to ask the Parish Council and us questions in connection with the proposed scheme. We have been contacted by residents who are most concerned about the prospects of such a large scale solar development on their doorstep.

It may be that some residents will not have noted our extensive commentary on this subject in last month's Report and we recommend that they refer to it, and so in the interests of saving space, do not repeat it again here. Instead, we report on a meeting attended last week with the proposed developer, Total Energie (a world leader in the oil and gas giant fields and increasingly, alternative sustainable energies) by your Chairman, Cllr Freeman and ourselves (with also representatives of Rayne PC, Braintree DC and Friends of the Flitch Way).

As we previously reported, a Community Liaison Group will be established to which those previously mentioned have been invited to join. A draft set of terms of reference for it has been supplied to us which will be reviewed with your representatives, with a view to securing clarity as to the function/purposes of that group and setting its responsibilities towards the community. The establishment of such a group is "best practice" but it should not be a substitute for real community engagement, which must remain the responsibility of Total as prospective developer. We know that the Parish Council will want to be in the forefront of securing that engagement by way of disseminating information in the most effective way possible.

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.

LAND USE

Having written about the use of land potentially in the context of a large solar development, it is probably helpful and indeed in context, also to draw to your and residents' attention a consultation which has been launched by the Government into Land Use and the conflicting demands upon it. It did not receive a great deal of publicity in the national press and for that reason, we have decided to make reference to it here.

This is an extract from its Foreword, the full text being found here in full:

https://consult.defra.gov.uk/land-use-framework/land-use-consultation/supporting_documents/Land%20Use%20Consultation.pdf

"Our land is our greatest natural asset - the source of food, the bedrock of nature, the support system of the environment on which we all rely. It is the place we live, work and rest. The people who work on and look after the land, and make decisions about how land should be used, have been pivotal in this country's history and are central to its future. Because these decisions are not marginal, the use of our land underpins everything in our economy and our society. The land can do so much at once. Growing fresh produce and rearing animals, storing carbon and creating habitats for precious wildlife, providing homes and community spaces, siting the infrastructure that supports our society - a single plot can contribute in so many ways."

These observations might seem obvious but responses to the consultation from our residents, being rural dwellers, seems to us essential if we are to have any voice at all in the debate for the future use of the land. The Consultation closes on **25 April**.

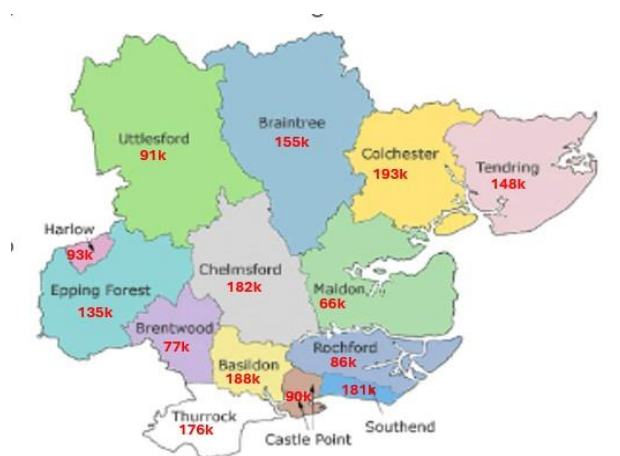
<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/land-use-framework/land-use-consultation/consultation/>

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM ("LGR")

We provided a very full report last month concerning LGR (to which residents are referred) and there is not a great deal of additional clarity which we can provide yet as to what will befall Uttlesford District Council, beyond stating that the unitarisation of our Essex District Councils will definitely be happening.

A joint letter is to be submitted to the Government from all the Essex Councils by 21 March reaffirming the combined willingness of Essex County Council and the district councils to the process, but not identifying the way in which the unitarisation will come about among the constituent councils themselves. The reason for this is that the data underlying the councils' financial, administrative and socio-economic makeup is being assembled and analysed. It will only be in the Autumn that the final decision will be taken by the government approving (or not) the arrangements which shall by then have been put forward by the several councils among themselves. It remains the preference of Uttlesford that the combination to be entered into by it should be with no more than two other councils, so that the resulting body would represent something in the region of 300-350,000 population – not more, although it does remain the Government's preference that such combinations should cover 0.5 million population!

The 'building blocks'



We have previously commented on the democratic deficit (in our opinion) leading to this exercise and its implementation, but notwithstanding, the government remains determined to bring it about. This is the ECC information page concerning the process, for bookmarking:

[Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation: Local Government Reorganisation | Essex County Council](#)

However, a Government consultation has just been launched in regard to it and we bring this opportunity to the attention of residents and responses may be submitted through the following, the closing date being 13 April 2025:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/greater-essex-devolution>

As we observed in our last Report, none of this proposed reorganization (however the new building blocks are to be arranged) will be simple, let alone cheap. Indeed, the latest UDC Budget 2025-2026 (see further below) has now been obliged to provide for an expense line to anticipate the costs likely to be incurred in this regard which is put at close to **£ 3 m**.

An extraordinary UDC Council Meeting has been set for 19 March to hear the latest proposals as they shall stand at that time and consider a response to Government as to Uttlesford's position statement at that time (which is likely to be one arrived at jointly with other relevant/like minded District Councils).

UDC BUDGET 2025 - 2026

As we reported last month as coming forward, the UDC Budget has now been finalised and is now made, having passed Council at its annual budget setting meeting held last week. This meeting is always presented with a large pack of supporting documentation and only the most keen of residents will wish to go through it, but the link to the papers and supporting Report/Recommendation spoken to by the Cabinet Member for Finance (Cllr Neil Hargreave – Newport – and a retired Chartered Accountant) is here, together with the Budget:

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38785/Covering%20Report%2025.02.2025%20Update.d.pdf>

and

https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38784/Budget%20-%20Council%202025-26_21.05.2026.pdf

In addition, there are detailed supporting papers Appendices A – G to the Budget which were published in support.

To summarise, in accordance with Cabinet's guidance, an increase of £ 5.28 (2.99%) upon Council Tax (the maximum permissible) has been used, giving a UDC band D council tax figure for 2025/26 of **£182.02**. Multiplied by the council taxbase, this produces a council tax income for UDC of **£7,381,304**, ie a sum which does balance against the council tax requirement as required by statute, although an element of reserves has been brought into account for this purpose.

COUNCIL AND PORTFOLIO REPORTS

It may be that Members of the Parish Council and Residents will not be aware that the Cabinet Portfolio Holders submit to Full Council when it meets (typically to at least at its quarterly meetings) Summary Reports of the work undertaken and main issues that fall within their portfolio responsibilities. These are regarded by Councillors who are not members of the Cabinet, or those perhaps not extensively involved in the work of the Council's main Committees, as helpful to their awareness of evolving policy and its implementation. As to the latter, reports of the work of the Cabinet are found in the Minutes of that body, which incidentally is also reviewed critically as to process by the Scrutiny Committee. Councillors can and do ask questions in Council of the Portfolio Holder by written request submitted in advance and to which

responses are given in writing but questions can and are put orally in Council and answered from the floor. All of this is of course broadcast and recorded so may be viewed at their leisure by all members of the public interested !

So, for example, and for possible interest/information, the range of typical Portfolio Reports as given at last week's Council may be found here on the following Portfolio topics. We are sure that the descriptions of the wide-ranging range of work undertaken will impress readers and encourage them to follow these Reports in future. Perhaps we shall include them as regular notes by way of links in our future Reports:

Communities

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38790/Communities%20Report.pdf>

Planning

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38791/Planning%20Portfolio%20Report.pdf>

Housing

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38792/Housing%20Report.pdf>

Environment

<https://uttlesford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s38793/Environment%20Portfolio%20Report.pdf>

The matter of Finance was not reported upon in a Portfolio style at last week's meeting since its purpose was Finance and The Budget and was covered by oral presentations given by the Finance Portfolio Holder and his reports that are described in an earlier section above.

STANSTED AIRPORT – CONSULTATION

Last month, we reported on the intention of MAG/Stansted Airport Limited to apply for planning permission to increase passenger numbers from the currently permitted 43 million pa to 51 million pa. That application has not yet been made, but is likely to be submitted to UDC towards the end of late spring or early summer. The scale of the increase means that the application is capable of being made directly to UDC, since it is not a NSIP scale project, which would (like the solar farm development described above) involve an application directly being made to the Planning Inspectorate, on behalf of the Ministry.

We will let you know when we hear further as to the submission of a planning application.

However, Stansted Airport limited have meanwhile prepared a draft Sustainable Development Plan, which describes the airport operations as they presently are and also their intended plans running through until the early 2040's. It is a lengthy document (100 pp) but some residents interested in aviation and airport affairs might well be interested in reading it. It may be found here in easily readable form (in full, summary format and active page modes):

<http://www.stanstedairport.com/about-us/development-plan/>

The consultation period will close on 10 March 2025 and feedback is invited through Email at developmentplan@stanstedairport.com with correspondence marked as 'Sustainable Development Plan Consultation'.

A cross party Committee of UDC (STAAP) has reviewed the draft and prepared a response to the draught consultation, which has now been sent to Stansted Airport limited, following an executive decision, a copy of which is here:

[NOTICE OF EXECUTIVE DECISION\(S\)](#)

John and Martin are Chair and Deputy Chairs of STAAP and provided active input and review in connection with the response provided enabling the response to be submitted. The range of subjects and concerns raised in it is extensive and cover not merely noise and environmental matters, but of course, access/to and from the airport, fly parking and importantly bus services.

A chapter is given over to “The Community”. It will be recalled that the airport has long operated a Community Fund which is distributed to projects established within 10 miles of the Airport. Our Parishes of Felsted and Stebbing both qualify in these geographic terms and so we take this opportunity of reminding clubs and societies within the Parish of the existence of this Fund (standing annually at £ 150,000 at present) in case they might wish to submit requests for support. Awards are made quarterly and further information can be provided.

Reports as to qualifying grants are submitted to Stansted Airport Consultative Committee (STACC) upon which John is the UDC representative and also published by the Airport. For example, several schools and youth groups across the District were successful in their bids in 2024.

BUS SERVICE - 133

The matter of airport bus services is particularly topical and of especial concern to very many, including in particular those of our residents who work at the airport, this being so in light of the announcement last week of an intention to withdraw the 133 service bus which runs from Braintree to the airport, via Felsted and Great Dunmow.

As to this last point, all of Martin, John and Richard (as well as the Councillors representing Flich Green, Little Dunmow, Great Dunmow and Rayne) have taken up the issue concerning it in common cause with the “powers that be” at Essex County Council who administer the subsidy provided to the commercial operators of service buses/routes. It appears that the subsidy has been exhausted which has led to the commercial decision being arrived at; however, some of the service bus subsidy typically comes from transport contributions secured from new development under section 106 arrangements. We have sought clarification as to whether the subsidy can (and indeed should) be further funded from, for example, the s 106 contributions levied in connection with the extensive developments on Station Road, Felsted and Little Dunmow in recent years. We are seeking to ascertain the extent to which those contributions have yet been levied and/or paid and collected.

A transport survey organised by Essex County Council has just come to our attention and residents might well like to participate in it. It refers to modes of transport, their usefulness including *DIGI-GO*, but unfortunately does not expressly refer to the service provided by Uttlesford Community Transport which is also a very popular service actively taken up by our own residents. This is the link to what John found to be the easily accessible and easy to answer survey.

<https://url.uk.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/Q4u2Cqx7BsrnpgFZfEUEaR3U?domain=uwe.eu.qualtrics.com>

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.

Finally, we remain 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.

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