

Styles

Following representations from a member of the public at your Parish Council meeting in May, I have been in regular contact with Officers at UDC. As I understand, the Council's intention is to resurface the road this year. To this end a consultation took place a few weeks ago, and the Council is currently obtaining quotes for those works. Once quotes are obtained and the cost of the project is understood, the Council will hold a second consultation with the residents of Styles before the works can proceed.

The District Council is the landowner for the road at Styles. However, it turns out that within that budget is a liability for some effected households. Given that Officers had confirmed that the works were budgeted for, that some households will have to pay for some of the cost will have come as a shock to many. I have been to speak to the residents living at Styles and understand that the officers are willing to offer flexibility in any payment terms that may be required from those households with a liability.

Local Plan

As residents may be aware, the Local Plan was due to go to public consultation in the spring of this year. That consultation (known as the Regulation 18 consultation) has been the subject of a number of delays this year. One of the reasons for the delays was that the cabinet were not happy that the evidence base for the site allocation was robust enough.

A further delay was announced until November of this year, to explore what was described as an exciting new opportunity. However, a recent Freedom of Information (FOI) request revealed that discussions with a landowner in Saffron Walden had in fact commenced in October 2021.

The administration has now announced further concerns over the evidence base for the site allocation mean that a 4th delay to the local plan consultation has been announced. The administration has decided that rather than hold the consultation in February, to delay it until after next year's local elections.

Whilst it is critically important that the Local Plan is robust and stands up to scrutiny, and it goes without saying that all Councillors should want a Local Plan to be successful after two previous failed attempts. The lack of progress this year is concerning and in my view is not the sign of an administration who are serious about making difficult decisions. Their decision to re-explore site allocations says to me that they were not happy with the officer recommendations. What is not clear is whether those recommendations will be any different next time, or whether newly elected members in 2023 will be any happier.

The longer we are without a new Local Plan, the more developers continue to have the upper hand with unplanned and speculative large-scale planning applications. Two recent applications have been submitted in Thaxted that have local opposition but without a local plan the District Council may find it difficult to refuse them.

Housing

In the summer the Council self-referred itself to the Housing Regulator due to the failure to meet the required standard in performance indicators with respect to health and safety reporting in our

Council House stock. The specific issues are that we are not compliant in Fire safety checks, and are asbestos records have not been recorded in the official electronic records. It is essential to state that the necessary asbestos checks have been conducted but the failure is purely one of reporting. In 2020 UDC went into a Joint Venture with a Company called Norse to provide Facility Maintenance services in our Council House stock. The data transfer to Norse's systems failed and it turns out that no attempt has been made to revisit this.

The Council has put together an action plan to resolve these issues, and we are now waiting for the Housing Regulator to decide whether the Council will be placed into special measures. That the Council self-referred itself should count in our favour.

Planning

Residents will be aware that in February the Planning department was Designated (put into special measures), this came about because the Council has failed to meet the performance indicator in respect of the quality of decisions for major planning applications. Major planning applications are any single application of 10 dwellings or more, or on a site that is 1 hectare or larger.

The Council having failed the metric for the period of 2018-2020, have also failed the metric in the subsequent periods 2019-2021 as well as the current period of 2020-2022. Officers are required to submit an action plan to demonstrate how we will improve our performance, to the Department that includes Planning, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The Council will also continue to receive additional support and training from the Planning Advisory Service which is a part of Local Government.

Whilst Uttlesford District Council continues to be in Designation, applicants for major planning applications have the option to continue to submit their applications to UDC. However, they also have the option to submit applications direct to the Planning Inspectorate, this being the body who determine planning appeals. In either case, both residents and the Parish Council are able to make representations regarding any such application. In addition, if applicants by-pass UDC and have the application refused, they have no right of appeal. This may explain why to date very few applicants have taken this new route.

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