

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,  
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 3  
FEBRUARY 2026 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)  
Councillors G Bagnall, C Criscione, B Donald, R Gooding,  
R Haynes, J Moran, A Reeve and G Sell

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Director of Corporate Services), B Burton (Interim Director of Property), A Cuthbert (Assistant Director of Property Services), M Fretwell (Assistant Director of Housing and Communities), A Knight (Strategic Director, Chief Operating Officer), J Procter (Democratic Services Officer), A Webb (Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services).

Also in attendance: Councillors A Coote and N Hargreaves.

**SC39 PUBLIC SPEAKING**

Mr Deane-Bowers addressed the Committee. A summary of his statement has been appended to these minutes.

In response to points made by Mr Deane Bowers, the Chair said that the authorities which UDC would be joined with in the LGR process would not be known until March 2026. It was reasonable to assume that the new authority would have less than 39 Members representing the area covered by Uttlesford District.

**SC40 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies were received from the Leader.

There were no declarations of interest.

**SC41 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the following previous meetings were approved as accurate records:

- 22 September 2025
- 11 November 2025
- 11 December 2025
- 6 January 2026

**SC42 RESPONSES OF THE EXECUTIVE TO REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE**

There were no responses to reports of the Committee.

**SC43 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL IN OF A DECISION**

There were no matters referred to the Committee in relation to a call in of a decision.

**SC44 CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

Regarding the Cabinet Forward Plan, the Chair noted the Local Plan adoption, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), Planning Enforcement, Compliance/Mechanical Electrical Contract and the PFI Update as areas worthy of potential further oversight.

There were no further comments.

**SC45 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

Councillor Bagnall said that he and Councillor Sell had discussed the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) and felt the issue required further consideration in future.

Councillor Sell said they were not satisfied with the communications from NEPP.

**SC46 HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE**

The Chair commended Councillor Coote's reputation for transparency but said that elements of the report could be considered evasive.

Councillor Coote presented the report. He said: -

- The report was limited in certain details so that it could be published publicly in the interest of transparency.
- It was not possible at this point to provide the Committee with specific dates and financial figures for the transition of the Housing Repairs and Maintenance contract.
- Council housing across the country was outdated in the way that it was funded and had become more difficult for authorities to run; modern amenities required more maintenance and repair funding than in the past.
- He had always believed in in-house maintenance staff and looked forward to communicating with staff directly.

The Interim Director of Property said: -

- Officers were in the process of demobilising the Axis contract and mobilising the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO). A project for this had

been set up which included project governance, a service delivery workstream and development plans.

- Officers would continue to engage and meet with stakeholders including tenant representatives.
- The detail provided on some activities was limited due to commercial sensitivity.
- The recruitment strategy included onboarding, recruitment of new staff and the determination of new job descriptions.
- New processes for health and safety were being drafted “from scratch” to ensure they were fit for purpose.
- The data recorded by activity on Axis’ system belonged to the Council and could be used.
- Officers continued to engage regularly with Axis to determine which work they could not complete so the Council’s sub-contractors could start to reduce the backlog.
- The Council had engaged specialist contractors for voids, damp and mould and were looking to geotag issues so that works could be carried out efficiently.
- The work with Axis was audited to ensure it was only paid if completed. Where payment had already been made for incomplete work, further payments could be withheld. This protected public money and ensured funds remained available to run the service.
- Usually, commercial “tie-ups” were completed within ten days. A minimum of thirty days would likely be required with the Axis contract.
- Axis would work up until the last day, but the Council’s team would begin taking over routine works before then.
- Any further report to Scrutiny Committee containing more detail would likely need to be in Part 2 due to the commercial sensitivity element.

In response to questions from Members, the Interim Director of Property said: -

- In addition to engaging the Council’s existing subcontractors, officers were directly employing six operatives, one supervisor and two schedulers to deliver in parallel with Axis to eliminate loss of service. They would look to carry out any legacy work Axis could not prove they could complete.
- The urgent decisions taken on 29 January 2026 relating to contract awards were due to work contracted to be completed by Axis which they could not carry out for commercial reasons. A contract for the work therefore needed awarding in a short space of time to meet promises made to residents. There was an added risk in making use of the related grant funding, which needed to be used before 31 March 2026. Although it was possible this deadline could be extended, it was not guaranteed and therefore the urgent decision was required to ensure a legally compliant contract. Any further governance that needed to Cabinet would be taken for consideration by Scrutiny Committee first.
- Uttlesford differed from many other districts due to its rural nature, which could explain the difficulties faced by Axis despite their continuing contracts in other areas.
- Repair warranties would be included as part of the commercial settlement with Axis.

- A lot had been learned from the previous two contracts.

In response to questions from Members, Councillor Coote said: -

- He and officers would do their utmost to ensure there would be no break in service for residents, particularly those who were vulnerable.
- It was not possible to reimburse residents for any private work under the council housing system due to issues of health and safety and accountability.
- There was an existing policy regarding response times to issues raised by tenants.
- Funding for repairs could only be drawn from the HRA budget, which was charged through rents.

In response to question from a Member, the Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said: -

- The housing repairs and maintenance budget for 2026/27 was built at the same level as the Axis contract for 2025/26, aiming to deliver an improved service for the same cost. However, some savings were anticipated in the long term.

Councillor Moran said he had spoken to a tenant in his ward who was concerned about having a company they did not know or trust entering their home to carry out repairs. There had been two failures in this area and there could not be a third. There needed to be a culture of accountability should the new contract fail. He commended Councillor Coote and Housing Officers. Another tenant in his ward, who was a pensioner, had a boiler failure in November 2025. He contacted the Interim Director of Property and Councillor Coote and the issue was fixed within two weeks.

Councillor Sell said he supported Councillor Coote's decision to keep the report in the public domain, as it was his view that tenants should have as much information available as possible.

Councillor Gooding said he did not expect the report to contain extensive detail at this stage. His concern was whether tenants were adequately informed of the process. It was important that tenants had an accurate view of the situation, even if it was not positive.

Councillor Criscione said he agreed that the report needed to be public.

Councillor Bagnall agreed with Councillor Coote's comments that there were nationwide difficulties surrounding social housing funding and maintenance. He agreed in principle with the in-house team but was unhappy to be in the position of seeking a new maintenance solution despite the assurances made regarding Axis prior to the contract commencement and questioned whether lessons had been learned from the contracts with Norse had been applied to Axis.

Members discussed the possibility of a future report to update the Committee on the contract's progress. The Director of Corporate Services suggested a revisit of the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Contract be built into the Scrutiny Work Programme for around six months' time.

*Councillor Hargreaves joined the meeting at 8.20 pm.*

*The Interim Director of Finance, the Assistant Director for Housing and Communities and the Assistant Director of Property Services left at 8.20 pm.*

#### SC47 **LGR TASK AND FINISH GROUP, TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Chair introduced the item and said the purpose of the group was to ensure a degree of democratic oversight once the Government's decision was known regarding LGR and that the issues were accordingly managed.

Group leaders had nominated Councillors Driscoll, A Reeve and Silcock for the group.

Councillor Gooding volunteered himself as a member until he could discuss the matter with his group.

In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Director and Chief Operating Officer said the administration would attend LGR meetings to put forward the Council's views, however the decisions regarding structural changes would come from Government.

In response to a question from a Member, the Director of Corporate Services said ensuring adequate communication with residents on LGR should be covered by the existing terms of reference, but he would take this forward and ensure it was carried forward with the group.

Members discussed: -

- The scope of the Task and Finish Group and its limitations on informing the decisions of Cabinet.
- The membership of the Task and Finish Group which included reserve Committee Members.
- Whether the terms of reference for the group would evolve going forward.

Members confirmed they were content with the group's terms of reference, subject to minor amendments.

#### SC48 **CORPORATE PLAN 2026/27**

The Chair introduced the item. He said it had changed over time and included clarity, detail, accountability and measurability.

In response to a question from a Member, the Director of Corporate Services said the final version of the Corporate Plan before LGR would be for 2027/28. Whether this plan would inform the shadow authority would be their decision.

Councillor Hargreaves presented the report. He said: -

- The four over-arching priorities were the environment, encouraging economic growth, strong communities and putting residents first.
- The plan had been written at a time of uncertainty e.g. LGR
- The plan included decarbonisation programmes and sector-leading biodiversity policies
- The plan detailed the first Big Green Uttlesford festival due to take place in June 2026.
- The plan acknowledged the success of the Local Plan.
- The workstream around rural priorities no longer appeared as a standalone project due to pressure on staff related to LGR.

In response to questions from Members, Councillor Hargreaves said: -

- Councillor Reeve included examples of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in the District in his reports to Full Council. BNG must be included on planning applications and Cabinet would continue to identify further BNG opportunities. Councillor Donald said there was a piece of green land in Elsenham owned by UDC which had been rewilded in partnership with the Parish Council.
- The Executive were responding to ECC regarding plans to reduce bus services between Saffron Walden and Audley End Train Station. The plan was concerning as Saffron Walden was considered a high-connectivity area due to its public transport links.
- The plan to enable soft plastic recycling by March 2027 was on track and there would be an increased budget for dealing similar recycling issues. Councillor Donald said that a limited amount of soft plastic was already recycled by the Council's recycling reprocessor.

Members commended the report.

The report was noted.

## SC49 **BUDGET 2026/27**

Members consented to continue the meeting after 9pm.

The Chair introduced and commended the Budget papers for 2026/27.

Councillor Hargreaves presented the report. He said there had been challenges in this budget due to changes implemented by the Government during the consultation period.

He drew Members' attention to the following points: -

- The Local Plan had been approved.
- Reserves were expected to last beyond the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- All audits were on track.
- 68% of respondents to a consultation said they thought the Council provided good value for money.
- The Fair Funding Review had scheduled a 5% reduction in UDC's funding which had disadvantaged the Council.
- The Council was in net gain on all its investments.

- Interests were expected to fall slightly, but a provision was included in case they did not.
- Chesterford Research Park remained profitable. If the Council did not continue to invest in the asset, their holding would become less than 50% and the value of the asset would decrease.

*The meeting was adjourned between 8.50pm and 9.00pm to address a fault with the broadcast.*

*Councillor Coote left the meeting at 9.00pm.*

In response to questions from Members, Councillor Hargreaves said: -

- The last time car parking charges were increased, businesses nevertheless reported an increase in footfall. With this increase, parking charges were in line with other authorities. There was no intention to increase the parking charge again within the lifetime of UDC.
- Parking charges were applied uniformly across the District.
- Like the implication of resident parking zones, it was inefficient to use marked spaces. It was not feasible to differentiate parking for those working locally and those commuting to London.
- Increases to parking charges did not displace cars, as people always prefer to make use of available free parking regardless of charges.
- He was unaware of any issues with broken parking machines in the District; in the event of a broken machine, residents should be able to leave a note in the window of their car or dispute a ticket with NEPP.
- The sale of assets e.g. Chesterford Research Park was not budgeted for. Revenue from all assets were positive.
- It would be unviable to freeze council tax raises; since the increase had been capped below inflation at 2.99%, this represented a real-term decrease in tax over a long period.
- The Council had no control over business rates; it was their job to collect them only.
- Every decision had an equalities impact assessment.
- Housing rents needed to rise as income to the HRA was required to deal with the issues associated with housing e.g. the Repairs and Maintenance contract, as its funding could not be drawn from other sources.
- There were only 94 properties in the District subject to the tax premium on second homes. The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said the Revenues Department could arrange to allow a grace period of twelve months for second homes to be sold.
- The fund for the construction of council houses needed to be budgeted, but the HRA could borrow if the opportunity arose, therefore the funds available for this were subject to change. The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said the 30 Year Business Plan would contain details of potential HRA borrowing. The cost of borrowing remained relatively high, and it was important to ensure individual developments would become sustainable to prevent existing tenants from paying for them. The HRA had its own small reserves but could not take from the general fund.
- The Tenant and Leaseholder Panel and the Housing Board had approved the changes relating to Housing e.g. rent increases.

- LGR had taken a significant amount of officer resource that could otherwise be directed to Blueprint. Government funding is forecast to drop severely towards the end of the five-year period. Reserves were adequate to take UDC up to LGR. The Strategic Director of Finance, Corporate Services and Commercialisation said there was a breakdown of Blueprint savings on page 71 with targets. A plan was already in place for how savings would be achieved.

In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said the recharge of work split between the HRA and general fund was reviewed each year. This was carried out scrupulously as the HRA needed funding to maintain an aging housing stock. If the increase to housing rents was not applied, this deficit could not be recouped.

Members discussed the report and the following points were raised: -

- Legislation was strict around budget setting and therefore there was little flexibility for the Committee to comment on.
- Housing waiting lists in the District had increased between 2018/19 and 2023/24 indicating a housing problem.

Councillor Sell said he was concerned with long-term parking charges and had received a letter of complaint from a resident in his ward over the increases at the dental surgery in Stansted.

Councillor Bagnall said it was unfortunate that tenant rents and carparking charges were increasing.

Councillor Criscione said it was important to consider the cumulative impact of raising council tax, even if it was necessary. He recommended exploring whether raising it could be avoided and funding could be drawn from other sources.

Councillor Gooding said he was concerned that tenants affected by the Housing Repairs and Maintenance contract would then receive rent increases, particularly as it was not their fault that the housing stock was aging.

Councillor Donald thanked officers for their hard work and acknowledged the difficult decisions that had to be made.

*The meeting ended at 9.55 pm.*