

Cllr John Evans, Portfolio Holder for Planning

Report to Full Council – 14th July 2026

Local Plan

Since my last Report to Council, we have made substantial progress across a wide range of planning policy work. As Members will know, the Uttlesford Local Plan was formally adopted on 25 March, representing a major milestone for the Council and providing the district with an up-to-date development plan for the first time in more than 20 years. We are also seeing and assisting with the development and reviewing of a number of Neighbourhood Plans which will support Local Plan housing requirements and providing further detailed, locally-specific planning policies for our individual towns and villages.

Other Policy Documents

Over the past three months, we have also adopted and published a new Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and an updated Design Code SPD. The Planning Obligations SPD provides clear guidance on how developer contributions will be secured through planning obligations, helping to ensure that new development contributes fairly towards the infrastructure, services and facilities needed to support growth. The updated Design Code SPD sets out expectations for the design and quality of new development across the district, promoting attractive, sustainable and locally distinctive places and giving greater certainty to developers, communities and decision-makers.

In addition, we have produced new guidance on solar farm development and on the retrofitting of heritage buildings to improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. These documents are intended to support the Council's climate change objectives while ensuring that renewable energy projects and improvements to historic buildings are delivered in a way that respects the character and significance of Uttlesford's landscapes and heritage assets.

Community Infrastructure Levy

Alongside all of this, we have continued to progress the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which is before Council for adoption this evening. Members will note that the charging rates originally proposed by the Council were moderated through the independent examination process to ensure that the levy remains viable and does not unduly affect the delivery of development. Nevertheless, once fully established, the levy is still expected to generate around £1.5 million per year to help fund infrastructure such as transport improvements, community facilities, green spaces, and other projects needed to support growth across the district, with a proportion of the funds going directly to the parishes within which the chargeable development occurs.

Overall, the planning policy framework in Uttlesford in 2026 is significantly stronger than it has been at any point over the past two decades. We now have an adopted Local Plan, updated design guidance, a modernised approach to planning obligations,

emerging CIL funding, and a growing suite of climate and sustainability guidance. Together, these provide a much clearer and more robust basis for managing growth, securing infrastructure investment and delivering high-quality development across the district.

Five Year Housing Land Supply

The Council is currently only able to demonstrate a 4.77 year housing land supply. This is entirely the consequence of the continued delay in the publication of the Government's latest Housing Delivery Test (HDT) results by MHCLG. Until those figures are released, the Council is unable to rely on the most up-to-date housing delivery data, meaning that, under the current planning framework, some policies within our Local Plan may not be afforded full weight in the determination of planning applications. Recognising the significance of this issue, the Council has taken a proactive role in coordinating correspondence, through the Local Government Association, to the Secretary of State requesting the urgent publication of the outstanding HDT figures. This call has also been supported by one of our local Members of Parliament and a Member of the House of Lords, both of whom have written separately to Ministers highlighting the importance of releasing the data without further delay.

Ministers have acknowledged the concerns we have raised and have confirmed that the updated results will be published as soon as practicable, recognising their importance in supporting plan-led decision-making and providing certainty to councils, communities and developers. Once those figures are released, I am confident they will demonstrate that Uttlesford can evidence a full five-year housing land supply, enabling our adopted Local Plan to carry the full weight intended within the planning system.

Development Management & Planning Enforcement

Application Performance

Performance across all areas of the planning service remains strong. In particular, performance in relation to major planning applications continues to be excellent, with 100% determined within the statutory or agreed time periods over the past year, and this high level of performance has been maintained into the current year. For non-major applications, performance currently stands at around 86% determined within time which is fairly standard nationally. However, improving consistency in this area is now a key focus for the team, alongside ongoing work to streamline validation and case management processes to further improve turnaround times.

In terms of appeal performance, or the quality of planning decisions, the Council continues to perform well. Only around 3.4% of major applications were overturned at appeal up to the end of 2025/26, with less than 1.5% of non-major applications being overturned. So far this year the figures are 1.8% and 0.6% respectively. These figures demonstrate that decisions being made are robust and are being upheld through the appeal process, reflecting sound officer recommendations and Member decision-making.

Sharing our Best Practice

Members may also be aware that MHCLG recently designated nine local planning authorities under its performance criteria, including authorities where performance on appeal decisions and decision-making quality fell below the required thresholds. One of our neighbouring authorities, Epping Forest District Council, was among those designated in relation to its performance on major appeal decisions. Our Planning Team has been invited by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and MHCLG to share best practice, learning and operational approaches with a number of those authorities including Epping. This reflects the strength of our service and the confidence placed in it at a national level.

Planning Enforcement

In this quarter alone, our small Planning Enforcement team of four officers has delivered a significant volume of impactful work, including the service of two Temporary Stop Notices, one of which related to a major national housebuilder, as well as securing two High Court injunctions.

Members will be aware of the unauthorised traveller encampment at Willows Green over the May Bank Holiday, as well as the heightened risk of a second encampment on a nearby site. Following a series of court proceedings, the team successfully secured a permanent injunction in relation to the first site, and a temporary, pre-emptive injunction on the second site, with a further court hearing scheduled for the end of this month. This has been a complex and resource-intensive area of work, requiring swift legal and operational coordination, but it has been essential in protecting the amenities of the district and maintaining confidence in the planning system.

Demand on the service remains high. This year, we have already received more enforcement referrals in Q1 than in either of the previous two years at this point, reflecting both increased development activity and greater awareness within the community. In response, the team continues to adopt a risk-based approach, prioritising the most serious and high-impact breaches to ensure resources are directed where they can have the greatest effect.

Building Control

Our building control team remains high performing, maintaining a significant proportion of the district's building inspection work set against a competitive market. Along with Development Management, it generates a source of income for the council. Between the two we generated some £800,000 in excess of budget over the last financial year.

Following last year's inspection of the Building Control Service, a small number of improvements were recommended by the Building Safety Regulator (BSR). These were implemented earlier this year and in May the BSR confirmed that no further work is required and the inspection is successfully concluded.

The Building Control team continues to carry out non-statutory work, at cost, for small developments across the country.

National Recognition

I am pleased to report that the Planning Service has received significant national recognition for its work over the past year. Last month, the team was named Planning Team of the Year at the 2026 Planning Awards, one of the profession's most prestigious national awards. In addition, the service received the Editor's Award, recognising the exceptional breadth and impact of its achievements, while the Council's adopted Local Plan was shortlisted in the Climate Change Award category in recognition of its strong sustainability and environmental policies.

The service has also been recognised beyond the planning profession. At the 2026 Local Government Chronicle Awards, the team was awarded Large Team of the Year, reflecting the significant transformation that has taken place across the service. More recently, the team was also commended at the RTPI East of England Awards, recognising the pace and quality of our planning policy programme and the sustained improvements in Development Management performance.

These awards acknowledge not only the successful adoption of the Local Plan and the delivery of an ambitious programme of planning policy work, but also the transformation of our Development Management service into one of the highest-performing planning authorities in the country.

In addition, the Service has also recently secured funding through the MHCLG's PropTech Innovation Fund. Working in partnership with a software provider and our neighbours in Harlow, the project will develop and test AI to assist in the preparation of Section 106 agreements, automating elements of the drafting process to improve efficiency, consistency and the speed of negotiations. The project is expected to conclude in January 2027.

Taken together, I hope you will agree that these achievements represent an excellent start to the year and demonstrate the progress the Planning Service continues to make. While it is important to recognise what has been accomplished, we are not standing still. A substantial programme of work lies ahead, including the implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy, the next phase of our Planning Transformation Programme, the delivery of our Digital Strategy, and preparing the service for forthcoming planning reforms and local government reorganisation.