

COUNCIL MEETING – 19 February 2025

CABINET QUESTION TIME

1. Question from Councillor P Clark to the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford

How many urgency decisions were put to Cabinet/Leader of the Council and not supported?

Can you outline examples of urgency decisions not supported.

2. Question from Councillor Hyland to the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford

The Recent LGA Peer Challenge in December 2024 provided recommendations, its first of which was specific to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, what steps have been taken to strengthen overview and scrutiny since that report?

“Commission the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to review and strengthen overview and scrutiny and wider governance”

The Peer Challenge report stated that O&S currently fails to provide pre-scrutiny or policy suggestions as it looks at issues retrospectively. Will LGA Peer Challenge recommendation be taken forward to ensure, it is within current, and any future design of the Local Governance?

3. Question from Councillor Steel to the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford

The City Council recently purchased land at Little Waltham, in my ward, for a significant sum of residents' money. This is land that is in the Green Wedge and it appears to have been purchased solely with the purpose of filling it with trees as part of the Liberal Democrat's grand strategy to reach net carbon neutral.

The land is currently pastureland, so not without biodiversity. This is not the place to question this policy, as my biggest concern is with the secrecy of the amount of money the administration has paid for this land.

It is in the public domain that the land was up for sale for £420K, but the actual price paid is confidential. When I questioned this at Cabinet, I was told that that the price could not be revealed because it was still being negotiated.

However, I have now been told that the sale was completed in May 2024, but the price can't be revealed because “disclosure would prejudice the commercial interests of any legal person (an individual, a company, the public authority itself or any other legal entity.”

I have registered my objection to this view, with the Monitoring Officer. It seems to me that the amount paid – which is apparently more than the asking price, - still remains secret.

Whilst I personally question the wisdom of reducing to net zero by spending significant amounts to absorb carbon emissions, rather than stop them at source, it is not necessary in the Cabinet member's response to explain the Council's reasons for their green policies, as these are already included in their Our Chelmsford document.

There are clearly many other places to plant trees in the City without the cost of acquiring additional land. For example many Parish Councils would welcome any additions to the scheme to plant trees on their land and we recently discussed the use of the John Shennan field which has plenty of space.

It is surely embarrassing for an Administration that has paid to get land on which to plant trees rather than using the money to acquire land to provide much-needed social housing or, for example, to use this money to update our fleet of vehicles from diesel?

Of course, I welcome protection of the green wedge, as do the residents of Little Waltham. but I note that the land has been purchased with an overage provision of 30% for a period of 50 years, triggered by non-agricultural or non-equestrian development. The inclusion of this clause means that the Council has the ability to use the land for development in the future, and pay the seller a part of the gain. Surely, if there was an intention to keep the land as a nature reserve, no such clause would be necessary?

Therefore, could the Cabinet Member please:

- State the amount spent to acquire this land?
- If not, explain why this has to remain confidential given that the sale has been completed, and the land register will record the price when completed
- Justify why, given the homeless crisis, there is a need for this purchase rather than use it to provide permanent accommodation for homeless families.
- Confirm that the land will remain a nature reserve and not be used for development in the future.