



PRESS RELEASE: CLLR GODDARD'S COUNCIL TAX EXCUSES RAISE MORE QUESTIONS

A set of new questions over Cllr Goddard's non-payment of council tax has arisen since Saffron Walden Labour Party highlighted the matter on 26 February which cast doubt on his future as a council portfolio holder and committee vice-chair at Uttlesford District Council (UDC).

Saffron Walden Labour Party submitted a Freedom of Information request to UDC on 1 March and received a prompt response which indicated that Cllr Goddard had been summonsed for non-payment in the 2017/18 tax year in addition to the non-payment for 2015/16 and 2016/17. In the light of facts revealed by UDC's FOI response, we believe that some of Cllr Goddard's statements to the press lack clarity and in fact contradict information now on public record. UDC's FOI response has also corrected some errors in the *Private Eye* investigation, although it has not undermined the gravity of Cllr Goddard's recurrent council tax non-payment.

Uttlesford District Council court action against Tory Councillor Thom Goddard (Stansted South and Birchanger) for non-payment of council tax

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Reminders	Three	One	One
Court summons	One	One	One
Bill (including court costs)	£2,548.95	£3,033.25	£3,136.17



Facts Private Eye got wrong

Private Eye reported that for the 2016/17 council tax bill, Thom Goddard was ordered by the courts to pay £2,637.25 including costs. In its response to a Freedom of Information request, Uttlesford District Council (UDC) states that the amount was nearly £400 more at £3,033.25. The amount *Private Eye* quoted for 2015/16 was, however, correct at £2,548.95.

Private Eye reported that Cllr Goddard was barred from voting on the 2015/16 budget. UDC's response suggests this is wrong, but "for a period of time each year whilst he was in arrears he was prevented from voting on budget items that were before council committees" under Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act, 1992. However, as he did not attend meetings where financial decisions were being made, he did not have to make a declaration stating that he was unable to participate in a vote.

Private Eye claimed that Cllr Goddard received three reminders for 2016/17, but UDC confirms he was only sent one before his court summons. *Private Eye* also claimed that Cllr Goddard received one reminder for 2015/16, but UDC confirms he was sent three before his court summons.

Cllr Goddard's statements to the press

In relation to the non-payment for 2015/16, Cllr Goddard gives a confusing explanation as to why he failed to pay after three reminders. He told the *Saffron Walden Reporter* (8 March 2018): "I did not attend the hearing in 2015/16. I did get permission to find out if I could pay Council Tax in full before granting the order but that is not how Council Tax is collected. As soon as I received the notification, I paid the amount in full."

If Cllr Goddard is referring to the court order, it is unclear why UDC would prevent him from paying in full before he was sent a summons. He had received three reminders as well as the original bill before he was summonsed. Councils tend to avoid taking legal action where possible due to the costs involved. Cllr Goddard needs to explain this matter more fully.

In relation to the non-payment for 2016/17, Cllr Goddard said UDC "say they sent three reminders for Council Tax. Unfortunately, I did not receive one of them. I live in a postcode with 14 houses with a combination of "White", "Horse" and "House", and we constantly receive each other's mail. As soon as I realised I was in arrears I paid the full amount of the Council Tax for the entire year."

However, UDC's response indicates that he did not pay the full amount until after he was summonsed.

In relation to the non-payment for 2017/18, Cllr Goddard told *the Saffron Walden Reporter*: "When moving banks my direct debit for Council Tax 2017-18 was affected. The first I heard of this was through a legal notice, not 'taken to court', from Uttlesford District Council. As soon as I received that I paid all of my Council Tax in full. I have never been fined for 'non-payment of Council Tax'. This incident has not affected my role as a councillor and I continue to work hard for Birchanger, Stansted and the district of Uttlesford."

This is contradicted by UDC which says Cllr Goddard received a court summons following one reminder and was told to pay £3,136.17, including costs. The incident did affect his role as councillor as while he was in arrears he was unable to vote on financial matters in committee, although he was absent at those committees. His absences from these committee meetings may or may not explain why his attendance at the meetings he is

expected to attend has consistently fallen below 50 per cent since he was elected in May 2015.

Cllr Goddard told the *Walden Local* (28 February 2018) that his non-payment in 2016, not 2017, “occurred from a simple mistake while moving bank accounts.” While there may have been confusion on Cllr Goddard’s part over which non-payment he was being asked to explain, a full statement explaining what happened is crucial to gaining greater clarity.

Response

Saffron Walden Labour Party calls on Cllr Goddard to give a fuller explanation and statement on some of the vague and sometimes contradictory information in his comments to the press. The matter should be brought before council in the same manner as the debate relating to Cllr Tina Knight’s chairmanship of the standards committee in February.

Failure to pay council tax can result in a prison sentence of 90 days, which underlines the gravity of the offence. If his personal administrative affairs have been in such a chaotic state over a three-year period, how can voters have confidence in him to carry out his responsibilities as a councillor, particularly in the light of his non-attendance on council business? Ordinary people are often shamed by councils for prosecution for council tax non-payment. When it comes to Cllr Goddard, it was only the *Private Eye* investigation that brought the matter to light, not any effort by the council leader to demonstrate transparency and accountability.

While £80 court costs are typically charged in such summons, the cost of UDC pursuing the matter in terms of staff time is likely to be more. Councillors persistently going into council tax arrears sets a poor example to the community and undermines public faith in the council. Paying council tax is the basic duty of any household. Timely payment is crucial to maintaining our local public services and councillors must set a good example.

UDC leader Cllr Howard Rolfe says the issue of Cllr Goddard’s repeated non-payment of council tax has been concluded through the appropriate channels, suggesting it is no longer a relevant issue. We do not believe this is a sufficient response to repeated failure by a councillor to pay council tax on time. Moreover, we do not have confidence in Cllr Goddard’s ability to hold the sports portfolio and fulfil the duties of vice-chair of the licensing and environmental health committee, two roles that confer authority to the holder.

Labour does not yet have representatives on the district council, so we call on councillors from other parties to debate a vote of no confidence in Cllr Goddard in relation to his council roles.

Appendix One: Freedom of Information request response from Uttlesford District Council, 9 March 2018

1. The number of council tax reminders sent to Cllr Thom Goddard.

2015/16 – 3

2016/17 - 1

2017/18 - 1

2. Court summons of Cllr Goddard for non-payment of council tax.

2015/16 – 1

2016/17 - 1

2017/18 - 1

3. The amount Cllr Goddard was required to pay in council tax and costs.

2015/16 – 2,548.95

2016/17 - 3,033.25

2017/18 - 3,136.17

4. In which courts he was summonsed to appear.

Chelmsford Magistrates Court

5. Whether Cllr Goddard was prevented from voting on the budget in each occasion.

Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act, 1992 sets out that where a member is two months or more in arrears with council tax they are unable to vote on any matter that might affect the setting of the council tax. In effect this means voting on any financial matter. At the start of any meeting where financial matters are to be voted on, the member in arrears must declare that in accordance with S106 they are unable to take part in the said item due to council tax arrears.

Cllr Goddard was not barred from voting on the budget itself (February meetings each year) as by that time the debt had been settled. However, for a period of time each year whilst he was in arrears he was prevented from voting on budget items that were before council committees.

During those periods of time when Councillor Goddard was in this position he did not attend any meetings where financial decisions were being made and therefore did not have to make such a declaration.

'Post code error' to blame for Council Tax summons

A district councillor who was summonsed to court for a second time following non-payment of council tax said it was due to a postcode mix-up.

Councillor Thom Goddard was sent three reminders from Uttlesford District Council (UDC) and one summons to court after failing to pay Council Tax in the financial year 2016-17, according to a Private Eye investigation.

Cllr Goddard said: "Uttlesford are a very truthful council, unlike many Labour councils in the UK who protect their councillors from such scrutiny, and they say they sent me three reminders for Council Tax.

"Unfortunately, I did not receive one of them. I live in a post code with 14 houses with a combination of "White", "Horse" and "House", and we constantly receive each other's mail. As soon as I realised I was in arrears I paid the full amount of Council Tax for the entire year."

In 2015-16, the Private Eye

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report said that Cllr Goddard went to court for Council Tax non-payment after receiving one reminder from UDC and one summons.

Cllr Goddard said: "I did not attend the hearing in 2015/16. I did get permission to find out if I could pay the Council Tax in full before granting the order but that is not how Council Tax is collected. As soon as I received the notification I paid the amount in full."

It was reported by Private Eye that Cllr Goddard was barred from voting in the UDC 2015-16 budget meeting, however Cllr Goddard denies being barred from voting in any council budget meeting.

Cllr Goddard paid £2548.95 including £80 court costs and, at the time, he said the non-payment of Council Tax in 2015-16 was a

"genuine error".

For the financial year 2017-18, Cllr Goddard said: "When moving banks my direct debit for Council Tax 2017-18 was affected. The first I heard of this was through a legal notice, not 'taken to court', from Uttlesford District Council. As soon as I received that I paid all of my Council Tax in full. I have never been fined for 'non-payment of Council Tax'.

"This incident has not affected my role as a councillor and I continue to work hard for Birchanger, Stansted and the district of Uttlesford."

Cllr Goddard did not attend the full UDC council meeting on February 22 and did not vote on the budget, however he said he was not barred from voting and sent his apologies for absence as he was "held back late at work".

Cllr Goddard is a deputy cabinet member with responsibility for sport and he is also vice-chairman of the licensing and environmental health committee.

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UDC LEADER ACCUSED OF 'HYPOCRISY' OVER 'VALUES AND STANDARDS'

FOLLOWING THE REMOVAL of Tina Knight as chairman of Uttlesford's Standards Committee last Thursday, Saffron Walden Labour Party this week asked Uttlesford Tories why they failed to act against two of their councillors Robert Chambers and Thom Goddard who have been accused of expenses mismanagement and council tax evasion.

In a press release the Labour group claimed that in 2016 Cllr Thom Goddard (Stansted South & Birch-changer) had to pay £2,637.25, including costs, after Uttlesford took him to court for non-payment of council tax. The matter came into the public arena after a *Private Eye* investigation but Uttlesford Tories appear to have taken no action in response.

In December 2011 it was revealed that Cllr Robert Chambers (Littlebury, Chesterford & Wenden Lofts) was asked to pay back expenses he wrongly claimed as chairman of the Essex Police Authority.

NO CHARGES

Cllr Chambers was investigated by the Metropolitan Police but no charges were brought over what he called a 'genuine mistake'. In 2013, Essex's first PCC Nick Alston revealed that while Cllr Chambers chaired the EPA retention bonuses that fell outside national police negotiating board agreements were paid to the then Essex Chief Constable.

Cllr Chambers resigned in February 2011 after nine years as chairman of the EPA, saying he planned to stand in the PCC elections but he did not.

Saffron Walden Labour Party Secretary Tom van de Bilt said: "Cllr Knight said something that made her role as chairman of Standards untenable. However, there has been a great deal of hypocrisy from the Tory leadership in relation to two councillors who have broken the rules."

"At the very least both councillors have displayed incompetence in dealing with financial matters that questions their ability to fulfil their public office. How can UDC leader Howard Rolfe talk about values and standards in relation to Cllr Knight but waive these when it comes to councillors Goddard and Chambers?"

RESPONSIBILITY

"While the Tories are happy to have these councillors as party members we believe they have no place in our local council with responsibility for our money and making policy on local services.

"They should not be on committees such as housing, scrutiny and planning which are far more strategically important than the standards committee that Cllr Knight chaired.

"We call on Uttlesford District Council to debate a motion of no confidence in these councillors' committee memberships. Serious questions should also be asked of the leader Cllr Howard Rolfe about why his party has given them such important roles."

Said Cllr Goddard: "My difficulty with Council Tax, that occurred from a simple mistake while moving bank accounts, has not hindered my work for the Council."

Cllr Chambers declined to comment.

Howard Rolfe, Leader of the Council said: "Both these cases were dealt with and concluded through the appropriate channels."



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