

Trust between council officials and members 'has decreased' - chief

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Uttlesford District Council chief executive Dawn French has said that trust between councillors and officers at the administration has decreased, and is not the same standard as at other authorities.

One councillor said that the chief executive's statement, made at a scrutiny meeting on September 24, was "greatly concerning" and he did not remember a comment "like that" from any former chief executive.

Discussions around the level of trust between councillors and officers as well as between the public and the council were sparked after the leader of the council, Councillor John Lodge, received a complaint regarding the appointment of the company AECOM to review a section of the local plan.

Speaking to committee members at the meeting, chairman Councillor Neil Gregory, said: "What started out as concerns about AECOM's commission and whether that had been properly conducted very soon evolved into a discussion of when appropriate information had been provided to the council, to members and to the public and following extensive discussions, it was clear some errors and omissions were made and it was clear these were not intentional and they were regretted and measures have been put in place to address that.

"But it does come back to this concern in some quarters which this individual member of the public perhaps brought to light, that the council was not always being as open as the public and residents might expect."

Cllr Gregory asked Ms French if she thought there was a lack of trust, to which she responded: "I have worked for a number of authorities and I think the trust that members have in the officers here is not as good, not at the same



Dawn French, the chief executive of Uttlesford District Council.

standards as I have enjoyed elsewhere and I think it isn't at the same standard as has been historically the case, which is a regret. I think the discussion is about what do we do about it and that's a question I put to members."

In response, Councillor Geoffrey Sell said: "Coming from the chief executive [this] is something that greatly concerns me because we as the council, members and officers, if we are to achieve things for the residents we have to have a good working relationship. I do not remember a comment like that from any former chief executive."

Councillor Arthur Cooté spoke about the public's perception of the council. He said: "The people that we speak to in Saffron Walden do not trust us and I say us because we are all heaped together. The public do not see Dawn French and Arthur Cooté they see them up there in Uttlesford. I think we have to be careful as members and officers to rebuild the trust of the public."

However, Councillor Geof Driscoll said: "I am not sure it's an Uttlesford problem, the lack of trust. It's a whole political class... Most of us are here because the population didn't trust the other lot. I think we are a new council and we have an opportunity to wipe the slate clean."

In the May district council elections, the Conservatives were swept from power by Residents for Uttlesford (R4U), who

now have a majority of 26. Cllr Lodge said: "What I think we have got is a carry over issue. I think a lot of new members have been campaigning members and they were campaigning against primarily the former administration but there is always massive collateral damage with that and some people have said there is a perception that we have a problem with Uttlesford, so it's the whole council, and so that has carried forward to a degree to the kick-off of the relationship with the new administration. I am really pleased with the co-operation I am seeing with officers since May. I think that it will resolve itself and I am committed to make sure that it does."

Ms French finished the meeting by saying: "If any member has any concerns about the quality of the relationship they have with an officer, it's important to call it and to call it out there and then. This is a very new council and 26 members are new, many have not had experience of being a members before so it's important that we understand the needs...we just need to ensure there is an honest and open conversation that goes on and mostly it's about misunderstanding, mostly it's about either not appreciating something or not communicating clearly.

"The member officer protocol very clearly references that we are all on the same side, on the pitch together, nobody standing on the sidelines criticising."

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