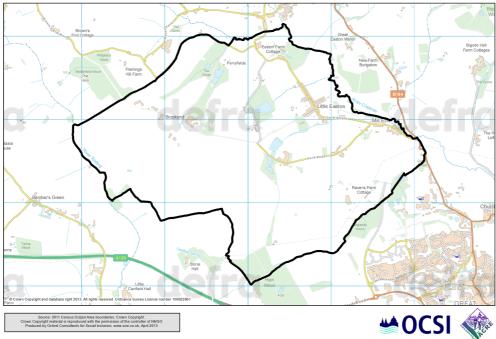
Business Plan to end-March '24



Little Easton Parish



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PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The financial year for the Parish runs from 1st April to 31st March. This business plan focuses on the 2023-24 financial year. To give context and allow comparison some references are made to previous years.

There will be annual updates to this business plan, covering income (the precept) and expenditure budget. Updates to projects for the current year and those planned for future years will also be included.

As time progresses it is envisaged that this plan, as consultation with parishioners increases, will become more detailed and exacting in its detail of how the parish addresses future issues as well as the projects it needs to retain all the elements of village life in an ever-changing and increasingly urbanised society.

Little Easton parish councillors welcome comments on this document and future versions in order to make them more relevant to parishioners. If you have suggestions for improvements and additional sections please let the Parish Clerk know or attend LEPC meetings and make your views known in the public forum

WHAT IS A PARISH COUNCIL?

A Parish Council is a statutory local authority established under the Local Government Act 1972. It's role is to represent the interests of the whole parish community, supporting the democratic process to identify concerns and projects, and endeavour to solve them locally wherever possible. A Parish Council is granted powers by Parliament including the authority to raise money through taxation - the precept, and a range of powers to spend public money.

A Parish Council typically has sole or joint responsibility for the following issues:

- Drainage of ditches and ponds
- In conjunction with Highways:
 - Lighting, parking places, right to enter into discussions about new roads and road widening, diversions or discontinuation of highway, traffic signs and other notices, tree planting and verge maintenance
 - Rights of Way footpath and bridleway maintenance
 - Signs danger signs, place names and bus stops signs
- Litter provision of litter-bins and support for any anti-litter campaigns
- Planning parish councils may be notified of any planning applications for the area
- Recreation provision of recreation grounds, public walkways, open spaces, village greens, community buildings and playing fields
- War Memorials
- Influencing and shaping the long-term development policy for the Parish, and as part of the planning process, commenting on planning applications in the Parish and oversight of Neighbourhood Plans.

The primary role of parish councillors is to represent the views of ALL residents within the Parish and it is important that electors are consulted by all viable means. Parish councillors are elected representatives, not volunteers or employees, and serve for a 4-year term, UNLESS co-opted or elected in a by-election when they serve until the next election.

Councillors cannot assume that they represent the interests of electors without consulting them. They must apply the law and comply with the Code of Member Conduct. Alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct by individual councillors can be discussed first with the Chairman of the Council for resolution or directly with Uttlesford District Council's Monitoring Office.

Councillors contribute to the work of the Council by suggesting ideas, influencing policy, engaging in constructive debate and by responding to the needs and views of the community. Individual councillors cannot make decisions on behalf of the Council, but they can actively lead and engage with local projects.

The public have a legal right to attend meetings of a parish council and its committees, except where they are excluded for specific items which need to be discussed in confidence, for example, staffing matters or tenders for contracts. Although the public have no legal right to speak at meetings of the council or its committees, as part of its community engagement a parish council will set aside time for public participation at meetings.

LITTLE EASTON PARISH COUNCIL (LEPC)

There are six councillor roles on Little Easton Parish Council plus a standing qualified Parish Clerk employed by the council who ensures that the council as a whole conducts its business properly and provides independent, objective and professional advice and support.

As with all parish councils, the LEPC elected council runs for a period of four years with the next election taking place on 4th May 2023. Any parishioner can put themselves forward to join the Council provided they are at least 18 years old and registered to vote in Little Easton or have lived, worked, or owned property in the parish for at least 12 months before an election. However there are certain disqualifying aspects. For more information see:

https://www.local.gov.uk/be-councillor/becoming-councillor-0#4-who-can-be-a-councillor-

If a vacancy occurs between elections then, subject to no disqualifying aspects, a parishioner can be co-opted onto the council and become a councillor with exactly the same rights as existing councillors. It is not necessary to be selected onto the Council by existing councillors unless there are more candidates than vacant roles. However, it is good etiquette to give a short speech outlining the value you can add to the parish by joining LEPC. This freedom of co-option in addition to the election process allows continued diverse and independent decision-making to prosper for the benefit of ALL parishioners.

The Council meets monthly (typically on the last Wednesday of each month) with the exception of August and December. Extraordinary meetings can be called at any time but all Council meetings must be published at least five clear days before the meeting is scheduled to occur. For LEPC publishing means posting notices on village notice boards, on the LEPC website (<u>https://www.littleeastonpc.co.uk/</u>), by e-mail (if you are signed up to receive LEPC information) and the village Facebook page.

For further information about the Council please contact the Parish Clerk via Iteastonclerk@gmail.com.

VISION

Little Easton Parish Council ("LEPC") aims to improve the quality of life for Parishioners by focusing on their collective needs, influencing District/County decision-making and encouraging an inclusive community spirit.

OBJECTIVES

LEPC seeks to achieve their vision by:

- Regularly seeking the views of ALL parishioners through council meetings, e-mail and pertinent social media
- · Securing the development, appearance, and environment in which we live
- Being proactive in the introduction of measures to enable the community to live healthily and safely
- · Representing parishioners in discussions about the future of the parish
- Recognising that our countryside is under threat from, inter alia, global warming and reckless development
- Providing sound governance and financial management

PARISH PROFILE

Little Easton is a picturesque village and civil parish popular with walkers and anglers. It is recorded in the Domesday Book in 1086 as Estaines Parva. The village is situated approximately 7 miles (11 km) east from the town of Bishop's Stortford, and 12 miles (19 km) north-west from the county town of Chelmsford. Little Easton parish is defined at the west by the River Roding, and the east by the River Chelmer. The village and civil parish of Great Easton lie one mile (1.6 km) to the north.

Parishioners will know that Little Easton is a picturesque village with a variety of flora and fauna with many footpaths and bridleways. The parish has approximately 450 parishioners and 200 dwellings. Assets include a pub (The Stag), a 12th century church (Church of St Mary the Virgin), Almshouses, a Conservation Area hosting Little Easton Manor, a cricket and recreation green, a village hall (the Memorial Hall), the world renowned Gardens of Easton Lodge and many Grade I and II listed buildings.

Arguably the parish's most famous resident was Daisy Greville, the Countess of Warwick, a colourful socialite and latterly a philanthropic figure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who lived at Easton Lodge and entertained many famous people at her estate. HG Wells also lived in the village at Easton Glebe for some twenty years and one of his most popular novels *Mr Britling Sees It Through* is thought to have been based on the parish and people of Little Easton whilst he was living at Easton Glebe.

During the second world war the US Air Force created an airfield at nearby Easton Lodge, which was the base of the 386th Bomb Group (Marauders) of the 9th AF USAAF. Although the airfield has long been transformed back into fields, the outline of the airport is evident from the air, as seen through Google Earth, just to the east of the current Stansted Airport.

This document is not intended to be a history of Little Easton and the famous events that have occurred over the centuries, but there is plenty of reference material available should anybody wish to search the web. Here are a few links people may wish to explore:

Books to look out for are Mind's Eye - An Autobiography 1927-1972 & Seven Ages - An Autobiography 1888-1927 both by Basil Dean, The Five Parishes by Claire Squibb, The History Of Easton Lodge by Imogen Magnus and Rae Spencer-Jones, Life's Life's Ebb And Flow and An Old English Garden by the Countess of Warwick.

On the web, a search for "Little Easton" will bring a wealth of information but particularly look at UDC's appraisal of the Conservation Area: <u>https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/media/4647/Little-Easton-Conservation-Area-Appraisal/pdf/Little_Easton_CAA_01_July_2015_Low_res.pdf?m=635713485074870000</u>

Also the history on Stop Easton Park's web site has a good summary of Easton park through the centuries: <u>https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/media/4647/Little-Easton-Conservation-Area-Appraisal/pdf/</u> <u>Little Easton CAA 01 July 2015 Low res.pdf?m=635713485074870000</u>

2011 SELECTED CENSUS DATA (2021 DATA CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE)



LOCAL & NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (AKA LOCAL PLAN)

Uttlesford District Council is responsible for developing local plans gathering the necessary evidence, and consulting with local communities, gathering the necessary evidence, and consulting with local communities, businesses and interested parties. The new Local Plan for Uttlesford will bring together all major planning policy for the District into a single document. It will also need to meet the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Easton Park has long been touted as an opportunity to build a new town consisting of up to 10,000 houses. After two failed local plans there is eagerness to get the third attempt adopted. Whilst Little Easton Parish, in common with other parts of the District has to take its fair share of new housing (as decreed by central government) it should not be at the expense of destroying the Parish's heritage and the loss of valuable open countryside. 'Stop Easton Park' works with LEPC to ensure that Parishioners are represented in Local Plan negotiations but more volunteers are badly needed.

Ultimately UDC will produce a local plan which then goes for consultation to all interested parties (Reg 18) and after comments are incorporated to a government appointed inspector (Reg 19). LEPC may need to employ consultants to produce professional reports to argue against aspects of the plan that adversely affect the Parish. For the last (failed) Local Plan, Great Dunmow Town Council funded the majority of the cost (barristers and consultants) to argue the case against adoption. It is unlikely that GDTC will fund to the same level again as the cost will certainly be well into six figures. With good barristers costing £3,000+/day LEPC will never be in a position to match GDTC's previous funding. Therefore it has to spend money wisely, carefully choosing the weaker points of the Local Plan that will ensure the impact on the Parish is minimised.

The timetable for the Local Plan is constantly changing. Currently, the Reg 18 proposal where the sites for housing in the district will be detailed together with reasoning will be issued by UDC on 27th October 2023. There is a six week consultation period where the population of the district can comment together with planning professionals. Comments will then be integrated and a resultant Reg 19 report will be issued to the government-appointed inspector with the examination occurring during 2025. It is anticipated that final adoption will occur in 2026.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

Neighbourhood planning is a way for communities to have a say in the future of the places where they live and work. It gives Parishioners the power to produce a plan with legal weight that strongly informs potential development in communities. Essentially, it provides an opportunity to choose the style and where new homes, shops and offices should be built.

However, a Neighbourhood Plan requires a number of volunteers to work together over an average three year period before it can be adopted. And in the last resort it cannot override the District's Local Development Scheme. An attempt to start a Neighbourhood Plan process in May 2020 resulted in a Parish survey in June 2021 but little else since. Due to a lack of volunteers there is currently nobody working on the plan although LEPC would encourage and assist volunteers to kick-start the process again.

BUDGET, PRECEPT & PROJECTS

NOMENCLATURE

The annual **budget** is a financial representation of a business plan, estimating the fixed operating expenditure necessary to ensure continuation of essential services for which LEPC is responsible. Additionally, the budget includes project expenditure driven by LEPC initiatives on behalf of parishioners. **Of great importance is the concept that** *the budget provides capacity to spend but not the ultimate authority*.

The **precept** is the main source of finance for the Parish Council. Depending on budget discussions LEPC makes a demand upon UDC to raise funds from Council Tax payers of the Parish as part of their Council Tax bill each year. The demand may be more or less than the set budget; the exact number dependent on the current level of funds (cash in the bank) that LEPC currently controls.

Projects are expenditure items that are not part of the fixed operating expenditure of the Parish. Projects are prioritised into order of importance and may not all be accomplished in one financial year, hence the need for a rolling four year plan. A key task of LEPC when setting the budget is to ensure that there are no sudden increases in the precept in any one year caused by high cost but essential long-term projects. This is accomplished by accruing (ear-marking or putting aside) some of the precept every year until enough funds have accumulated to implement the project.

PROCESS

Around late Autumn LEPC begins consideration of the budget it should set to ensure its objectives are met as well as the continuation of essential services for which it is responsible. Additionally one-off projects are considered, strongly bearing in mind parishioner views. Once a budget is set the level of the precept can be considered. Depending on available funds this may be more or less than the determined budget.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

- 1. JPAG¹ recommends that a general reserve should be between three and twelve months of day-to-day expenditure; the smaller the council, the larger the reserve. [JPAG Practitioners Guide 2022, paras 5.32 to 5.38]
- 2. Local councils have no legal powers to hold reserves other than for reasonable working capital or for specifically earmarked projects, therefore the year-end general reserve should not be significantly higher than the annual precept. Additionally, councils may hold 'earmarked reserves' for projects, where funds are allocated for specific purposes and may be spent either in the current or future years.

¹ Joint Panel on Accountability & Governance, responsible for issuing proper practices about the governance and accounts of smaller authorities. Amongst many other public bodies its membership consists of sector representatives from the National Association of Local Councils.

2023-24 BUDGET

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Total operating expenditure for 2023-24 to be £19k, a 5.2% inflationary increase
- Expenditure on specific Parish projects in 2023-24 to be £24k.
- Annual precept for 2023-24 to be reduced from £32k to £28.5k, an 11% decrease

The total projected expenditure budget for 2023-24 is £43k including £24k of specific projects as listed on page 11. ($2022-23 = \pounds18k$ with only £3k being categorised as specific projects.) Operating expenditure for 2023-24 is estimated to be £19k. ($2022-23 = \pounds15k$ nett of grants. See paragraph on grants below.) Note that the average fixed operating expenditure for the past five years has been around £14k although Covid explains lower spending in recent years.

Projected bank balance for LEPC as at 1st April 2023 is £57k. (1st April 2022 = £43k.) The precept of £28.5k (2022-23 = £32k) will result in a projected bank balance as at 1st April 2024 of £42k. A twelve month general reserve as recommended by JPAG should be around £20k. Thus, assuming the earmarked projects for 2023-24 do not exceed their budget, that leaves approximately £22k not ear-marked but together with the £5k already ear-marked for the Easton Park defence this does allow LEPC to ear-mark a maximum of £27k for Easton Park consultant reports should parishioner so wish. HOWEVER, this money will ONLY be spent IF the case for a consultant report has a high probability of protecting Easton Park. Any unused budgeted expenditure may be channelled into other parish projects which, in turn, may be accelerated from future years.

A consensus economic view is that UK Inflation will gradually reduce from around 10% at the start of 2023 to 5% by the end of the year. LEPC's objective is to minimise increases in operating expenditure regardless of any increase in inflation and ensure long term value for money from the projects it embarks upon. Operating expenditure has materially increased over the past five years, sometimes making up for lack of expenditure previously (e.g. tree maintenance where 2022-23 expenditure was £2,250, the first year of a three year contract totalling £6,100) but also recovery from the impact of Covid which resulted in more visitors being attracted to Little Easton creating unforecast maintenance work.

Budgetary estimates for projects listed on page 10 are simply that - estimates. Once again it's important to bear in mind that a project budget is a *capacity to spend and not authorisation*.

GRANTS

From time to time UDC and ECC offer various grants that can off-set expenditure that councils may be committed to. LEPC needs to keep aware of all grants that are on offer and, where appropriate, apply vigorously for such funding. There is no assumption in the 2023-24 budget that UDC or ECC grants will be received. Therefore any grant for which LEPC is eligible and receives will reduce expenditure or may result in bringing a project forward from future years.

HISTORICAL & PROJECTED BANK BALANCES

Starting from April '18 the following table highlights total operating expenditure and one-off projects and how it affects the bank balance. One-off repairs are generally classified as 'Operating expenditure' if less than £500.

Bank balance @ 1st April '18	£17,804	
+ Precept	17,567	
- Operating expenditure	(12,367)	
- Projects	(6,890)	Cableway repairs, Reg 18 GDTC contribution (£6k)
= Bank balance @ 1st April '19	£15,843	
+ Precept	23,540	
- Operating expenditure	(11,231)	
- Projects	(9,033)	Playground - surface, Manor Road fencing & notice board
= Bank balance @ 1st April '20	£19,120	
+ Precept	25,612	
- Operating expenditure	(10,673)	
- Projects	(5,009)	Playground - seesaw, cableway & swings
= Bank balance @ 1st April 21	£29,050	
+ Precept	27,355	
- Operating expenditure	(13,241)	
- Projects	0	
= Bank balance @ 1st April '22	£43,164	
+ Precept	32,364	
- Operating expenditure	(15,430)	
- Projects	(2,996)	Playground fence
= Projected bank balance @ 1st April '23	£57,102	
+ Projected precept	28,500	
- Projected operating expenditure	(18,885)	
- Projected projects*	(24,250)	
= Projected bank balance @ 1st April '24	£42,467	

* Specifically only includes £5k for Easton Park consultants

2023/24 BUDGET BY MAJOR EXPENDITURE LINE

		2022-23				2023	-24	
Category	Op	Actual berating benditure	Project Expenditure	Actual Total Expenditure	Projected Operating Expenditure	Operating Expenditure Inflation	Project Expenditure	Proposed Budget
Salary		4,989	-	4,989	5,010	260	-	5,270
HMRC		800	-	800	850	40	-	890
Clerk Expenses		524	-	524	590	20	1,500	2,110
Training		-	-	-	700	50	-	750
Chairmans Allowance		-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Subscriptions		363	-	363	480	40	-	520
Insurance		793	-	793	800	70	-	870
Admin		-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Audit & Legal & Bank Charges		354	-	354	1,070	135	-	1,205
Printing		-	-	-	100	10	250	360
Lighting & Utilities		824	-	824	870	-	-	870
Play Area		(53)	2,840	2,788	320	20	3,500	3,840
Parish maintenance		2,990	-	2,990	3,800	200	5,300	9,300
War Memorial		-	-	-	-	-	5,500	5,500
Grass & Trees		2,690	-	2,690	2,550	50	-	2,600
S137 Grants		50	-	50	100	-	-	100
Hall Hire		(25)	-	(25)	300	-	-	300
Capital projects		-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Website		385	-	385	420	30	700	1,150
Events & Parties		-	156	156	-	-	2,500	2,500
Sundry		-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contingency		-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Local Plan & Neighbourhood Plan		-	-	-	-	-	5,000	5,000
Nett unclaimed VAT		746	-	746	-	-	-	-
Total Expenditure	£	15,430	£ 2,996	£ 18,426	£ 17,960	£ 925	£ 24,250	£ 43,135

Notes for 2022-23:

• Nett unclaimed VAT is input VAT accrued during the year and reclaimable from HMRC annually.

• Expenditure is nett of all grants received from UDC and others but a £500 grant received from Cllr Foley for the Play Area has yet to be spent.

RECOMMENDED PROJECTS FOR 2023/24

The following are projects that have been identified from the Neighbourhood Plan survey carried out in June 2021 and from informal discussions. They are NOT in priority order but all have been allowed for in the 2023-24 budget. If parishioners are keen for another currently unspecified project to take higher priority than those listed then a decision will have to be made as to what project is deferred to another year although if the actual cost of a project is less than the estimate then that may provide scope for project additions.

1	War Memorial refurbishment to clean and re-mortar brickwork and paving plus install granite slabs on all faces and the two apexes. This will ensure longevity as the three non-granite faces have hairline cracks and one face is sounding hollow.	£5,500
2	Bench refurbishment and renewal. There are nine benches and four picnic tables. Most will need some form of refurbishment (cleaning and re-oiling) but five benches and the picnic tables almost certainly need replacing. The budget assumes a worse case - that LEPC are responsible for all benches and picnic tables. (Though LEPC will only pay for those benches/tables it is clearly responsible for.)	£5,300
3	Local Plan consultation provision. Giving capacity for consultant reports to be commissioned where these are deemed to be critical and make a difference in ensuring that unfettered building on Easton Park is challenged.	£5,000
4	The ground in front of the junior goal on the playing field is extremely worn from use. It is proposed to stabilise the ground and lay artificial grass (similar to that in front of the cricket nets).	£2,000
5	Install a small concrete pad with an in-ground steel tube together with a power socket (run from the Memorial Hall) where the beacon is currently sited. This will allow the site to optionally install either the beacon or a Christmas tree at appropriate times.	£2,000
6	Local elections take place on 4th May 2023. An election has not been held in Little Easton for at least 25 years. This sum funds the cost of a Parish council election that may be charged by UDC. (Voting papers and counting.)	£1,500
7	To lay a 'safety matting' path from the Memorial Hall path direct to the Children's Playground to make it easier for parents with pushchairs to access the playground.	£1,500
8	Create neutral gov.uk e-mail addresses for LEPC Councillors and the Parish Clerk and secure cloud storage to provide access to all council discussion documents.	£700
9	Event at Memorial Hall for the coronation of King Charles.	£500
10	To improve LEPC communication across the Parish by expansion of e-mail.	£250
		£24,250

OTHER PROJECTS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

PROJECTS ALSO IDENTIFIED FROM THE 2021 VILLAGE SURVEY AND DISCUSSIONS

- Village shop. Requested for provision of consumer staples (milk, bread, etc) for Parishioners who have no means of accessing the local supermarket. Deliveries to the door from supermarkets may make this unviable but the sale of local produce, the opportunity to meet other Parishioners and see of cold drinks/ice cream during the summer could make it a useful asset, especially if based in or adjoining the Memorial Hall.
- **Tree and roadside planting.** As a result of the three year arboreal agreement with Essex Tree Brothers there may be further trees that need removing. We should plan for their replacement. Also, as a traffic calming measure road planting has been successful in other villages similar to Little Easton. We should investigate pros and cons.
- Footpath clearance. Historically it is the responsibility of Highways to ensure public footpaths remain open and are not hazardous. However, Highways recently announced a "managed decline" of the road infrastructure in Essex due to budget constraints. The impact on footpaths will therefore be severe. As 76% of respondents to the Neighbourhood Plan survey stated they used footpaths regularly and only 7% rarely or never, we need to consider how to address.
- Manor Road refurbishment. As the only access route to key village amenities Manor Road is an eyesore and becoming increasingly dangerous to traverse by foot and vehicle, especially in winter. Whilst some residents of Manor Road are partially responsible for its upkeep it is the volume of non-parishioner vehicles causing the most damage to the surface. If the Memorial Hall is to continue to attract revenue-earning rental fees the state of this road must be addressed and LEPC should co-ordinate agreement as to necessary action.
- Glebe Lane refurbishment. Not as heavily used as Manor Road as there are no amenities located along the road but, nonetheless, Glebe Lane has been the source of complaints re its surface since the early 1950s. As more houses are being built fronting Glebe Lane LEPC needs to address surface issues far more stringently with UDC Planning and developers than has occurred in the past.
- Local Plan consultants. The Local Development Scheme (aka Local Plan) is not scheduled for examination by the government appointed inspector until the end of 2024. There will be a continuing need to identify consultants for advice from 1st April 2023 onwards to ensure the threat to Little Easton is minimised. See page 5 re Local Plan & Neighbourhood Planning.
- Neighbourhood Plan. If enough volunteers can be identified a Neighbourhood Plan should be restarted but there is little need to provide funds in 2023-24 as grants should be available to get the plan started and, in any case, it is unlikely costly consultancy help will be required for the first year. See page 5 re Local & Neighbourhood Planning.