

Date: September 9, 2010

Title: LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT

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Author: Diane Burridge, Director of Operations,
01799 510580

Item for information

Summary

1. This report advises members of any updates from the previous meetings and provides information put forward by officers regarding the services that report to this committee.

Recommendations

2. That the report be noted.

Situation

3. **Emergency Planning Workshop for Members**
13:30-17:30 on 16 September 2010, Council Chamber

Essex Police Contingency Planning Officers will tell us about the command structure of the emergency services and where local authorities fit in during an emergency. There will be information on UDC emergency control procedures; our communications systems and time permitting, a chance to see how some of our hi-tech equipment works. Information about how we work with other agencies in peace time and during an incident will help to build a picture of the UDC resilience. You will learn about the different types of emergency assistance centres and how our response staff would be utilised within them. Media is always lurking at the forefront of an incident, so take this opportunity to learn how we deal with this in an interactive session. Additionally, there will be an up to date presentation on the planning for the London 2012 Olympics and how they will affect Essex and what implications that might have for Uttlesford. Bookings via lipscombe@uttlesford.gov.uk or 510624 or 07976 071836 ASAP please.

4. **Community Achievement Awards and Community Project Grants**

By the time this Committee meets, twenty awards will have been given out at the Council's bi-annual Community Achievement Awards evening (6 September) in celebration of the recipients' significant contribution to their local community.

Additionally, Members are updated on how this year's Community Project Grant fund has been allocated. Details of the recipients of the Community Achievement Awards and the Community Project Grants are attached are appended to this report (Appendix 3 & 4).

5. **Museum Service**

The Museum's 175th birthday was celebrated with a family event on 15 May. This attracted 621 visitors, and the Museum Society underwrote the cost of free admission for May/June half-term week, when 613 visitors were welcomed (representing an increase of 35% on same half-term 2009). Events, plus outreach work and use of the Museum by community groups, led to an exceptional result of 4,716 visitors and 7,128 service users for Quarter 1 (35% and 51% above target respectively).

A new Learning Officer is to start in September, working 2 days per week for the Autumn and Spring terms (fixed term contract pending the outcome of the Museum Service review). This will bring school visits back to the Museum, providing access to local heritage for hundreds of children and increasing visitor numbers and income.

The Museum Society is funding new display lighting for the main galleries, and the first stage (Ceramics Gallery) is completed, with further galleries in progress. This will reduce energy costs and carbon footprint, as well as providing better rendition within lighting limits set by museum conservation standards.

6. **Empty Homes** – Empty Homes Update

At the March meeting the problems caused by a few problematic long term empty properties were raised and since that time advice has been obtained on the best way forward in each case. In relation to the property in Saffron Walden a full survey has been carried out and identified an approximate cost of £70,000 for renovating the premises, in this case the option of a Compulsory Purchase Order was being considered as the owner was said by his family to be abroad and not contactable. There has been further correspondence with the owner of the property in Widdington who is resisting engagement with the Council on her reasons for leaving the premises vacant for such a long time and there has been a similar lack of response from the owner of the premises in Stansted. In both cases evidence to support an application for an Empty Dwelling Management Order is being compiled.

7. **Microchip Event** – National Pet Microchip event

The Animal Warden advises that the previously reported microchip event was particularly successful and a total of 54 pets were "chipped" during this promotion (18 cats and 36 dogs). Chipping 54 animals in one month compares very favourably with previous years where the total number of animals coming forward for chipping was very low, only 10 in the whole of 09/10, and 16 in the whole of 08/09. A further promotional event is planned for the end of the year. Pets that are clearly identified can be quickly reunited with their owners avoiding distress for owner and pet and costs being incurred by owner and the council.

Stray dogs are a particular problem currently as Uttlesford is also impacted upon by the volume of Staffordshire Bull Terriers in re-homing establishments. These dogs create a shortage of kennel spaces for our stray dogs and any "staffies" we need re-homing are increasing likely to be refused by the re-homing charities.

8. Recession Impact – Housing Options/Homelessness Update

The number of people seeking housing advice remains high up from 229 in quarter 1 2009/10 to 242 for quarter 1 2010/11.

The number applying to the housing register has also risen from 198 in the first four months of 2009/10 to 274 for the same period for 2010/11.

Despite the number of people coming in for assistance the number of homelessness presentations remains similar to last year and for quarter 1 2010/11 we have managed to prevent 37 cases of potential homelessness.

There has however been a requirement to use bed and breakfast on 5 occasions so far in 2010/11 but hopefully the need to use this type of accommodation will be greatly reduced once our new four units of temporary accommodation at Molehill Green come on-line.

The building works are nearing completion and internal fixture and fittings have been ordered. Once the properties are ready for occupation the Housing Department will be holding an open day for Members to come and visit the site. Details will be put on the member's bulletin shortly.

9. Holloway Crescent

At the last meeting concern was raised regarding the HCA grant for this project as work had already started on site. The MP has spoken to the HCA on our behalf and as a result another bid has been submitted for funding to be allocated.

10. Sheltered Housing Update

Officers stated that they would provide Members with an update of the new sheltered housing service which was introduced in May 2010. The new service enables tenants of sheltered housing to have more choice over the level of housing support they receive from their sheltered housing officers (SHOs) as well as the introduction of a 'handy person', which tenants made clear during the review was something they very much wanted the council to provide.

Although it is still early days officers have received some very positive feedback from tenants. The only negative feedback related to the SHOs, visiting schemes on a seven week rotation, which tenants did not like. This has subsequently been changed to a fortnightly rota which tenants have said they much prefer.

The trial partnership with Carecall, who now provide the weekend and out of hour emergency response service to all sheltered tenants in the district, continues to be closely monitored by officers. Early indications regarding the level of service provided are encouraging.

Officers are currently carrying out a further round of consultation to ascertain if service users are satisfied with the new arrangements and to see if any aspects of the service can be further improved upon. A detailed update will be provided to Members later in the year.

11. Budget and Corporate Plan Consultation

Consultation on the council's corporate priorities and budget was carried out via the Uttlesford Voices Citizens' Panel – a representative sample of more than 500 district residents. Consultation was also carried out via Uttlesford Life and on-line.

A summary of the key findings is set out below. In addition, more detailed results are in the following **two appendices**.

A second round of consultation will be conducted in the autumn, focusing on the current level of spending in service areas and asking residents to pick the areas of spending they feel most strongly about and whether they believe the council should spend more, the same or less on those services or whether they believe the council should stop providing that service.

Uttlesford Voices Key Results

Panel members were asked to rate the importance of the council's current corporate priorities under the four headings of Finance, Partnerships, People and Environment. Under the "Finance" priorities, well over half of respondents thought that "continually improving financial management" should be the most important priority (58.4%). In partnerships, improving prosperity, safety health and well-being was considered most important (36.3%) while "developing and maintaining a motivated and high performing workforce" was the most important priority under "People" (36.7%). Opposing further expansion at Stansted Airport was the most important environmental concern (43.3%).

Under the Financial management section of the questionnaire, the majority of panelists (53.9%) tended to agree that the council provides enough information to residents about its financial performance and management. However, while 33.6% believe value for money has improved and 19.7% believe it has not, some 37.6% were unable to give an opinion.

When asked about council tax rises (the questionnaire was formulated prior to the Government's announcement of a council tax freeze) 48.9% said they would favour an increase in the district part of the bill in line with inflation compared to 35.6% who wanted no increase and 15.5% who wanted a 4% increase (i.e. about 2% above inflation).

The survey also asked about spending on council services. Respondents consider the council should maintain the same level of spending on the majority of services, with Benefit Fraud being the only area identified as requiring extra funding (55%). By comparison, 56.2% said less money should be spent in committee information and members. A significant majority (68.4% to 31.6%) believe pursuing partnerships for service delivery was the right way to go.

When asked to consider whether a selection of frontline services represented good value for money, refuse and recycling collection was considered to do so by 80.1%. In contrast, members, elections and democracy was not considered good value for a majority of more than 2:1.

Uttlesford Life and Online Consultation Key Results

This consultation was based on a simplified version of the council's corporate priorities to those presented to the citizens' panel and asked respondents to rate each priority from 1 to 5 depending on how important they considered them (1 being not at all important, 5 being very important).

By totalling the scores, it is possible to demonstrate the relative importance of each priority.

All three elements listed under "Finance" scored highly, with "Ensuring the council remains financially sound" the most important. Elsewhere, "Stepping up enforcement against environmental crime" was highly rated, closely followed by "Promoting recycling" and "Working with other organisations... to improve the safety and health of people in the district, including those affected by the recession".

The lowest scoring priority overall was "Improving access to services for all sections of the community" despite this being rated "very important" by more than a third of respondents (34.9%).

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