

28 October 2007

Alasdair Bovaird
Chief Executive
Uttlesford District Council
Council Offices
London Road
Saffron Walden
Essex CB11 4ER

Dear Alasdair

Review of Corporate Arrangements

As promised, I am setting out my draft conclusions from the recent review, for presentation to the meeting of the Performance Select Committee on 6 November. I look forward to attending the meeting, when I will be happy to try to deal with any queries.

Background

This review was undertaken in the light of a number of issues (not all of which were known at the time that the work was agreed). The Commission's Annual Audit and Inspection letter for 2005/06 expressed doubts about the Council's capacity to deliver objectives within timeframes it has set itself. A number of improvements identified in the 2004/06 CPA Improvement Plan and recommendations from the 2005 inspection report on user focus were outstanding. The letter pointed out that the Council risked damage to its reputation as a consequence of repeatedly missed targets and timeframes.

There are ambitious plans for transforming the Council, through the Uttlesford 2011 project (agreed by Council in December 2006) which has 12 work streams. Organisational restructure has taken place, with a view to ensuring that the council had the necessary capacity at management level. A training programme for the new Heads of Division is underway.

Organisational re-engineering is being undertaken, but budgeted savings are not being achieved. The Customer Service Centre approach (CSC) is underway.

The two services that have been the subject of inspections by the Commission (Waste Management and Access to Services) have both assessed as 'fair' services with 'promising' prospects for improvement. However, it is not clear whether recommendations emanating from these reports have been taken forward by the Council.

A recent review of the council's budget for 2007/08 has shown a net projected shortfall of £1.1million.

Interviews and document reviews

The review comprised interviews with appropriate key officers and selected members, whose remit is to take the organisation forward. The project also involved analysis of relevant documents and data.

As a result of this work, I fed back informally to you and also to leading members of the administration and my draft conclusions are now set out in the following paragraphs.

Draft conclusions

The Council needs as a matter of urgency to

- Prepare action plans that flesh out the detail behind the administration's newly stated priorities, and the extent to which these impact on the previously agreed 2011 transformation programme, including organisation reengineering.
- Keep under review progress in implementing recommendations from the two most recent Audit Commission inspection reports on waste management and access to services.
- Adopt a clear strategic approach to partnership working, so that both the Council and its potential partners can be aware of the purpose and extent of any partnership working and the required impact on services to local people.
- Address the lack of financial management skills and ensure that performance and financial management systems are sufficiently integrated to allow for monitoring and management on a consistent basis.
- Review progress on the CSC and ensure that there are appropriate levels of project management, including the engagement and ownership of the project within the services that are already linked to the centre, or are about to do so.
- Ensure that the Council has the appropriate level of HR policy advice and that the HR work is prioritised.
- Take steps to engage with staff to ensure a clear understanding of the issues facing the Council and to encourage staff input and ideas.

Subject to the need for any additional work following the Committee, I would expect to be in a position to issue my final report within three weeks of the meeting.

Yours sincerely

Colin Rockall

Performance Specialist

cc Paul King, Relationship Manager