

Uttlesford District Council

Organisational Assessment

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of local public services

Uttlesford District Council

Overall, Uttlesford District Council performs adequately

Managing performance	2 out of 4
Use of resources	2 out of 4
Managing finances	2 out of 4
Governing the business	2 out of 4
Managing resources	2 out of 4

Description of scores:

1. An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements, Performs Poorly
2. An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately
3. An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Well
4. An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Excellently

Summary

The Council scores 2 in the organisational assessment because although it is improving services, this is not consistent in all areas. The Council's use of resources is adequate.

The Managing Performance score is 2 because although Uttlesford is improving, and some services are good, there are still variations in performance in others, such as planning. Uttlesford has a top performing waste and recycling service and its streets are clean. It is also pioneering a scheme to increase access to energy efficiency improvements to all residents irrespective of benefits status. Housing services are good with 151 more affordable homes in the last year. It has been proactive in offering choice based lettings with neighbouring councils. It has responded well to local community needs for example by providing new playgrounds, and works well in partnership. It has also responded positively to the recession with advice services and good joint working with JobCentre Plus. However, the time taken to decide new benefit claims increased in 2008/09 following a significant increase in the number of people claiming benefit. Accuracy when processing benefit claims is still well below average although improvements are being made. In 2008/09 the Council also took a relatively long time to relet council housing but is taking measures to address this.

The Council is working in partnership effectively. Services tailored to local need are delivered through this approach, for example, joint working with the Citizens Advice Bureau at Thaxted and a 'Home MoT' project which combines home energy conservation and home safety advice. The Council is also forging partnerships with neighbouring organisations in order to deliver services more efficiently.

The Council is starting to integrate financial planning with strategic and service planning processes. It recognises it needs to develop expertise in risk management and procurement. It is going through a time of radical change and is looking at various strategic options: however these have yet to be agreed.

The Use of Resources score is 2 because the Council manages its finances, governs its business and manages its resources adequately. It has improved its management of costs and budgets and has revised its medium term financial strategy, so that it reflects agreed priorities. The Council set a balanced budget in 2009/10 and achieved a small underspend in 2008/09. The Council has strengthened performance management and has an effective approach to underperformance. Although the Council has good internal communication arrangements and a range of HR policies, it has no formal workforce plan.

About Uttlesford District Council

Uttlesford is a rural district within the county of Essex, comprising of the main towns of Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow. In terms of geographical area it is the largest district in Essex, although in terms of population it is one of the smallest in the county. The population density is low compared to the regional average, suggesting the population is dispersed. Both the younger and older age groups constitute a slightly larger proportion of the population than regional and national averages. The black and minority ethnic population is considerably smaller than regional and national averages. However there are growing migrant worker communities. Uttlesford is the most affluent of the Essex districts. Unemployment is low, wages are high, and qualifications and skills levels are high when compared against regional and national averages. Uttlesford faces increasing pressure for housing and economic growth due to its position within the M11 corridor development and from the expansion of Stansted Airport. However, due to its rural nature there are accessibility issues for some without private transport, especially in outlying villages.

Average house prices are some of the highest in the county, and Uttlesford has experienced one of the smallest drops in price over the past year. People in Uttlesford are generally healthier than the England average. However inequalities exist by deprivation, location and gender.

Organisational assessment

The Council has an ambitious vision 'to sustain a high quality of life in which the benefits of the unique character of the district are equally available to all residents, workers or visitors'. The Corporate Plan sets out the priorities to support this vision, which are:

- Environment;
- Finance;
- People; and
- Partnerships.

The Council contributes to Uttlesford Futures, the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which has the priorities of: Children and Young People, Staying Healthy, Developing Business, Feeling Safe, Protecting the Environment and Getting Around. Uttlesford Futures partners carried out an effective and thorough consultation process to identify all community priorities, which included a questionnaire to every household in the district and demographic profiling.

Uttlesford has limited the negative impact on its service performance while carrying out major cost reductions and re-organisation. The Place Survey 2008 shows that local people are satisfied with the area, the Council and identified a strong sense of community. People reported that they felt they belonged to their neighbourhood and could influence decisions in their locality.

Environment

Uttlesford is delivering well against its environment priority with clean streets and high levels of recycling. It successfully met its recycling target and now achieves a rate of 55.7 per cent. Levels of household waste are reducing. The area is well kept, with low levels of litter. The Council is making good progress with carbon reduction work. It is doing this by promoting energy efficiency in homes and led a funding bid on behalf of 15 authorities to obtain £6.63m from the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA). This aims to reduce fuel poverty through measures such as insulation free for homeowners receiving benefits and at a much reduced rate for others. The Council has also made progress with reducing its own carbon footprint and has made savings in electricity and gas emissions of around nine per cent in the last year. Emissions from business travel have also fallen by 16.7 per cent, showing that the Council intends to lead by example on climate change mitigation.

Housing services are improving. The Council has provided 151 affordable homes in response to local need, exceeding the target of 100. It continues to have good performance on non-decent homes. The Council has been progressive about choice based lettings and from November 2008 became part of a scheme with neighbouring councils. A subsequent survey showed that most customers were satisfied. The Council's last inspection of strategic housing services in May 2008 resulted in a judgement of a fair service with poor prospects for improvement. Since then the Council has received good feedback from the Audit Commission for its work on recommendations including updating its customer information, agreeing customer service standards and improving homelessness prevention. Performance on re-letting its own housing stock has improved from 50 to 40 days. However this is a long way short of its target of 29 days. This loses the Council money and it is working to address this.

Finance

The Council has improved its financial arrangements and performance. The Council stayed within its budget in 2008/09. Formal budget monitoring and revised financial regulations were introduced in 2008/09. Costs are now under much tighter control, for example the cost of waste collection has reduced from £62.60 to £54.50. The Council achieved its aim to set a balanced budget for 2009/10 and to revise its medium term financial strategy, which is focused on delivering corporate priorities. In depth work on asset management to feed

the capital programme is planned for 2009/10, but the Council has already taken the opportunity to sell its former council building in Great Dunmow. This will contribute to capital funds and save running costs. It is also maintaining good collection rates for council tax and non domestic rates.

The Council's Use of Resources and management of costs are improving. It is starting to integrate financial planning with strategic and service planning processes. A new financial strategy is in place and the financial challenges facing the Council in the medium term have been identified. Financial standing in the short to medium term is reasonable; with the Council setting a balanced budget in 2009/10 and achieving a small underspend in 2008/09. The savings targets for the next five years are challenging. The Council is fully aware of the scale of this challenge and is investigating the best ways in which to manage this.

The Council recognises the need to develop its expertise in risk management and procurement. It has strengthened its performance management arrangements over the last year, and has specific procedures for addressing underperformance, including reviewing business processes. However, there are still some fluctuations in performance, such as planning. The Council is also going through a time of radical change and is looking at various strategic options. While formal workforce planning is not in place, the Council has a range of human resources policies, good staff communication and a well motivated workforce.

People

The Council has mixed outcomes in its people priority. It has achieved its target of Level 2 of the Equality Standard and diversity is part of divisional action plans. Work on equality impact assessments is ongoing across the Council with some services more advanced than others. It has led to changes in Planning Policy and Environmental Health, such as sending a questionnaire to ethnic food premises to see how services can be better tailored to their needs. The Council's Access Officer is in regular contact with, and is a regular speaker at meetings of Carers' Groups and Hearing Help in Uttlesford. Their feedback has resulted in separate telephone and induction loops in interview rooms. Awareness of the needs of disabled persons has resulted in the introduction of a 'wheelchair housing' allocation in developments involving more than ten properties. Customer satisfaction with customer information centres is almost 100 per cent, and the website was brought up to date in August 2008, making it more accessible. It is also implementing a new system so that it can learn from customer feedback. Uttlesford residents report there is good community cohesion.

Services for vulnerable people are mixed. The Council's performance on families needing bed and breakfast accommodation was within its target time of two weeks, but other priority cases spend longer in temporary accommodation. The number of households living in temporary accommodation is less than targeted, at 17 rather than 26. The time taken to decide new benefit claims increased in 2008/09 from 25 days to 33 days following a significant increase in the number of people claiming benefit. The time taken to process change events improved slightly. However, accuracy of processing is still well below average. The Council has responded by adding a temporary staff member to address this. With an increasing benefits

workload, and difficulties sustaining performance, the Council is actively exploring partnership working as the medium to long term solution.

The Council has made progress on its own staff capacity. Around 95 per cent of staff had received a new style appraisal (U Perform) by May 2009. This ensures that training needs are systematically recorded and brought together which means training can be provided more cost effectively. Staff sickness absence at 7.6 days per employee is an excellent performance, and ensures the Council has the people in place to help it improve.

Partnerships

Uttlesford is delivering services effectively in partnership. The Council is involved in a range of partnerships to enhance services and secure efficiencies. This includes joint working with Essex County Council on emergency planning and on HR. It has worked with the County Council to set up a replacement Community Information Centre (CIC) which opened this year in the new library at Great Dunmow. It has replaced the old day centre in Thaxted with a new, better building. There is joint working with the Citizen's Advice Bureau at the Thaxted CIC. The Council has also funded newly opened play parks for children in Chrishall, Ashdon and Stansted Mountfichet.

Uttlesford adapts its services to local needs. It has developed a proposal for a family intervention worker for families who need support and are at risk of getting involved in antisocial behaviour. It has a 'home MOT' project which combines action on energy efficiency with advice on home safety. Partnership working with the LSP has delivered a number of projects particularly for children and young people, including Operation Moonscape which tackles underage drinking. These have been effective in helping young people to turn their lives around, as 44 young people attended last year but only four re-offended.

The Council listens to its local communities and takes action. In January 2009 it introduced two multi-agency community forums aiming to solve problems at a local level. This has helped communities take action, for example, monitoring speeding vehicles.

Uttlesford provides effective leadership for the community. It has started a Transport Forum to draw attention to the district's access issues, aiming to strengthen joint working on public transport with the County Council. It has provided leadership for the LSP. Over the past year it has reviewed partnership action plans and ensured that they are robust and address targets such as carbon reduction and supporting local businesses. In addition, partners have developed a range of projects using LSP performance reward grant which supports healthy living, community safety and access to services initiatives. Although action planning is in progress, detailed performance measures are still to be defined and the sustainable community strategy has yet to be embedded in the work of the Council.

The Council has responded positively to the recession. It has promoted employment opportunities by inviting Job Centre Plus to offer a service from its Uttlesford and Thaxted premises, so that there is a job centre in the district for the first time. The Council has also produced a leaflet called 'Helping you through the Recession' and introduced procedures to speed up the payment

of invoices.

The Council is building its capacity through joint working. It is in active discussions with Essex County Council with a view to setting up a procurement partnership and an asset management partnership, similar to the successful HR arrangements established in 2008. With other district councils, it is actively exploring joint working on revenues and benefits, environmental health, building surveying, insurance, legal, and performance management and business improvement. The Council is supporting this with a change management reserve of £364,000 to deal with one off costs associated with joint working or shared services, showing its commitment to this priority.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>



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