

49 Recreation Ground
Stansted CM24 8BD

19th August 2012

Cllr Simon Howell
Chairman of Performance & Audit Committee
Uttlesford District Council

THE PERFORMANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

Dear Simon

An audit committee of any public organization must have unhindered freedom to investigate any matter to any depth if it is to have credibility in the eyes of the public whose interests it exists to serve. If an audit committee does not add value to the audit process by, for instance, initiating investigations and audits, it may as well not exist, in my opinion. Indeed, it would be better that an audit committee did not exist if it gives a false assurance to the public that it is providing a thorough audit role.

Your manner and a statement made by you at Thursday's performance and audit committee meeting would suggest that such public confidence in Uttlesford's audit committee is not unquestionably justified.

On the question of my view that there is a need to probe and understand the performance of the benefits process, you said that the committee would not play a role whilst you remained its chairman. That could be interpreted as an attempt to restrict the remit of the committee and its members. I was given the impression that you see the committee's role as largely restricted to reading and questioning data on existing performance measures put before the committee by council officers, but only at a superficial level; and no more.

Yet you will recollect that even on Thursday evening my own probing beneath the surface of the paper on the planning application process brought to light that committee members have been served with data that has been manipulated by officers to disguise the true service performance. That was, in my opinion, a shocking revelation that needs further exposure.

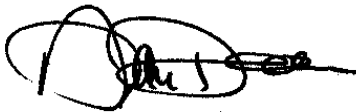
Can we be confident that no similar manipulation of other service performance data has taken place? How can we be assured that more-difficult benefits claims have not been placed in a "too hard to handle pending tray" (like planning applications have been exposed to have been treated), in order to deal with the easier ones that improve performance indicators; but causing major claimant distress? How can the public be given assurance that attempts that began 12 months ago to suppress public discussion of the performance of the benefits system were not reactions to cover up long-standing but disguised uncertainties about the benefits partnership with Harlow? How can the public be given assurance that the culture at Uttlesford District Council is one of openness and accountability founded on honesty?

I have considered my resignation from the committee on more than one occasion in the past 12 months. I am aware that one Conservative member did resign from the committee last year because you suppressed debate on benefits' performance. That is to be much regretted.

In writing this memorandum I am not making a formal complaint. I am not convinced that formal complaints within this organization are treated seriously by today's administrative and political leadership when complaints challenge the administration itself (as opposed to complaints which attempt to protect it from embarrassment). I will, however, copy my opinions herein to all members of the committee and others present on Thursday in the hope that a change of approach by you can rapidly take place through more informal mechanisms.

I have recently written in public about my current disbelief of much of what I am told by people within this council. You will have noticed how difficult it has been over many months to get a frank and truthful statement about the benefits partnership with Harlow. I have remained concerned about the benefits service for over 12 months, despite obstruction and intimidation by senior council officers. I am hesitating going public about my fundamental concerns with this audit committee, but my patience must of necessity be limited if my own integrity as an audit committee member is not to be compromised and if the standing of the audit principle at Uttlesford District Council is to be maintained and not be brought into disrepute.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Dean', with a large, loopy initial 'A'.

Alan Dean
Liberal Democrat Opposition Spokesman for Finance & Administration
Uttlesford District Council

Cc: Committee members and attendees, Leader of the Opposition