

Uttlesford District Council Leaders Report To The Scrutiny Committee 24th June 2014

This is a relatively brief overview of Uttlesford Districts Councils activity over the past year and is in no way a comprehensive or exhaustive account

Finance

2013/14 has proved to be another very successful year financially for Uttlesford District Council. Thanks to the prudent and effective monitoring and management of our budgets during that year we have again a favourable variance on budgeted expenditure. The seventh successive year we have contained spending within budget. We thank all of our staff for this achievement.

In February of this year we also saw a conclusion to the Landsbanki issue which has been an issue since 2008 - removing that uncertainty from our accounts.

Once again our external Auditors gave us a clean bill of health for 2012/13 with yet another unqualified annual audit of our Accounts. However the outcome of this audit was delayed because of an objection to the accounts by a member of the public. The objection has been found to be without foundation by the Auditor but cost this council an additional audit fee of £6,624.00

In accordance with our Corporate Planning and Medium Term Financial Strategy we still propose that there will be no council tax increase during the plan period. Given that we have not increased Council tax for four Years and in fact have cut Uttlesford District Councils council Tax by 1% in 2013/14 and 2% in 2014/15 is something that I believe we can take great pride in as a council and is a result of great team work between elected members and our management and staff

Our financial position has also enabled us to have one of the most generous Council Tax Support Schemes in the East of the England and we have not only maintained but continue to improve financial support for the voluntary sector and community groups in Uttlesford.

As a result of our position Uttlesford received the best government financial settlement in the country measured by spending power.

We are Planning for a future where there will be little or no “Core” Government funding for local authorities.

Aviation

The past year has also seen representation by the council both in correspondence and by members to the Airports Commission led by Sir Howard Davies whose remit was and is to examine Airport Capacity. Accompanied by Mr Harborough I attended a meeting in London Where the Commission presented its interim report which as you will know did not include Stansted in its findings for new runway capacity at this time.

Planning

The Uttlesford Local Plan is reaching its final stages and is expected to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate very shortly after taking into account representations made in the recent consultation into the soundness of our proposals. This has been a very difficult and contentious issue as it has in virtually every district and borough in the country.

However, the process is not entirely over as we still to plan for Gypsy and Traveller sites which we are dealing with separately from the Local Plan and will not impede its progress. We currently still await the findings of a county wide survey into the future requirements for Gypsy and Traveller sites and I understand that these finding are likely to be available by the end of August.

Housing

Allied do the Planning issues is of course the districts requirement to provide affordable housing by which I mean housing for rent or to purchase by shared equity. The number on our waiting list for council or Housing Association accommodation continues to grow.

Another of the benefits of our strong financial position is that we are able to build new council housing. Whilst the numbers are relatively small and only scratch the surface of housing need it is something that this council has been unable to do for many years.

Our policy of requiring 40% of affordable housing from commercial housing developments is the only way at present that this council or any other council can make a serious contribution to the Social Housing stock.

Economic Development

Another key aspect of our Corporate Plan is ensuring the future Prosperity of our District. The local Plan brings forward a number of new areas for economic growth as well as the improvement and improvement of existing sites. We are working with businesses to attract, promote and enhance local companies.

A range of initiatives using the Strategic Initiatives Fund included in our budget are to be considered by the Cabinet on 25th July 2014.

On 7th July 2014 we shall see the Cambridge to London Leg of the Tour de France pass through parts of our district. Once again this is a massive boost for Uttlesford which will be seen on TV in many parts of the world that receive coverage of the race. Coming on top of the 2012 Olympic torch relay that travelled through Uttlesford we are the envy of many neighbouring authorities.

That said we continue to work with our neighbours both within Essex, Herts and Cambridgeshire and play an active part in the West Essex Alliance and Greater Cambridge and Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership. We are represented on the South East Local Enterprise Partnership by Cllr Chris Whitbread, Leader, Epping Forest District Council

Elections

Our Democratic and Electoral Services Team conducted the European Parliamentary Election and it was pleasing to see that Essex were the second county to declare the outcome of that poll. We often underestimate the amount of planning and resources that goes into a district wide election.

The Democratic Services Team has also grappled with the new Individual Electoral Registration scheme which became live on 10th June 2014. Members may recall that we had a presentation and workshop on this topic earlier in the year.

Preparations are now in hand for the Electoral arrangements for the ward boundaries and changes in council size from 44 to 39 that will take place next May.

Last September we were honoured by a Ministerial Visit by Don Foster, MP, who chose his visit Uttlesford to launch the Governments “You’ve got the Power” document. Uttlesford was chosen for this launch because of the strides it had made in the registration of Community Assets

We are never complacent about our performance and continually strive to innovate and improve

Finally residents of Uttlesford enjoy the best quality of life of any rural area in Great Britain, according to the 2014 Halifax Rural Areas Quality of Life Survey.

With last year's winner Waverley dropping back to third in 2014, Uttlesford tops the annual survey with South Northamptonshire taking second spot.

The annual Halifax Rural Areas Quality of Life Survey takes a wide range of factors into account, including residents' health and life expectancy, crime rate, weather, employment, school results, broadband access, and personal wellbeing. This is the first time Uttlesford has come top, although prior to this Uttlesford had made the top five on three separate occasions, coming second in 2013, third in 2011, and fourth in 2010.

We should all be proud of that I know I am.

Jim Ketteridge

Leader, Uttlesford District Council

June 2014