

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 1.00 pm on 10 FEBRUARY 2006

Present:- Councillor P A Wilcock – Chairman.
Councillors C A Bayley, J F Cheetham, C M Dean, S Flack, M A Gayler, E J Godwin, B M Hughes, R M Lemon, J I Loughlin and A R Thawley.

Also present:- Councillors C A Cant and A Dean.

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird, R Chamberlain, S Clarke, R Harborough, P Snow and T Turner.

SDAG43 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R T Harris, S C Jones and A J Ketteridge.

SDAG44 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute SDAG42 – Strategic Vision for Uttlesford

Councillor C Dean drew attention to efforts that had been made to engage with young people through the mechanism of the Youth Forum and said that these had been largely unsuccessful. Comment had been made at the last meeting about engaging with migrant workers in the District. She said that an East of England publication “Investing in Migrant Workers” was now available and suggested that this document would contain data of use to the Council in developing further contact with this vulnerable group.

Councillor Hughes said that a recent meeting had taken place in Saffron Walden with Polish workers. A great deal of work was being undertaken in this field including a recent seminar at Stansted Airport. It was felt that much of this work, in a regional context, would ultimately be to the benefit of Uttlesford in developing further communication networks.

SDAG45 ESSEX LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

The Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) presented a report attempting to draw together the varying strands of the partnership work currently being undertaken on the Essex Local Area Agreement, and in other contexts, following on from the Strategic Partnerships briefing in January this year. It was intended to present a report, in identical terms, to the Council meeting on 16 February. That report would recommend the Council to agree to wind up this Group, create a Strategic Partnerships Engagement Group, and sign up to the Essex Local Area Agreement.

The report suggested that this Group had now completed its work to produce a strategic vision for Uttlesford encompassing 23 indicators on the broad

themes of social, economic and environmental objectives. The report proposed outline terms of reference for the proposed Strategic Partnerships Group and said that a process of community engagement and consultation would be required on the vision identified by this Group, and that this would be most effectively achieved via the Area Panels.

During the ensuing discussion, a number of Members cast doubts on whether the work of SDAG had been successfully achieved. Councillor Cheetham expressed the view that the 23 listed indicators did not amount to a strategic vision of the future direction of Uttlesford. There was a feeling that the Group had become bogged down in statistics, but had not yet addressed core issues such as the provision of sustainable and affordable housing.

The Chairman did not agree that the 23 indicators amounted to a short-term document, but was not convinced that there was a coherent linkage to the delivery of outcomes. He felt that the Group should be allowed to continue with its work to develop the mid term objectives identified into a broader policy agenda.

Councillor Gayler said that the report linked together the future policy direction of this Council and the Essex Local Area Agreement in an unhelpful way. Before signing up to the LAA, he wanted to know what the implications were for Uttlesford. As a quite separate issue, he had not seen any evidence of a fundamental long-term policy agenda for this Council to pursue as envisaged when the Group had been established.

Councillor Cant said that she had attended the initial meeting of SDAG, but was bitterly disappointed with the outcome to date. The 23 indicators listed in the report amounted to a predictable LSP type document and did not constitute a vision statement.

The Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) said that the defined objectives were set out in full in the appendix and there was a good match with a lot of the elements contained within the LAA. She agreed that it was not clear what the benefits would be from signing up to the LAA, but that the Council must participate in order to receive any benefit.

Members then discussed in more depth the implications of the LAA for Uttlesford and the mechanisms for tapping into available funding streams.

The LAA was a three year agreement setting out priorities agreed between central Government and a local area, represented by the local authority and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and other key partners at a local level. Essex was presently operating the LAA under a pilot scheme agreed last year. Various types of funding were available, including area specific funding allocated and distributed directly by a Government department.

Fears were expressed that funding would be diverted to other parts of Essex as Uttlesford was seen as relatively prosperous. The LAA was seen as a vague and ill-defined concept that would be unlikely to be of much benefit to Uttlesford.

Other Members felt that the Council needed to be at the table to avoid being sidelined, but with the proviso that existing funding levels must be protected.

The Chief Executive said that he shared the concerns of Members. It was difficult to see the upside of the LAA for Uttlesford, but not signing up would not protect, for example, the crime and disorder reduction money available to the Council. On the other hand, he suggested that signing the agreement would not disadvantage the Council, although he acknowledged that this was a relatively weak endorsement.

It had become clear that the recommendation in the report to wind up SDAG and replace it with a Strategic Partnerships Engagement Group did not command the support of Members. The Chief Executive apologised for having misread the views of members on this issue, and accordingly for misdirecting the Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) in compiling her report. He accordingly proposed withdrawing the report from the Council agenda and substituting a report that would recommend signing up to the Essex LAA. A Strategic Partnerships body would still be needed to drive the Council's engagement in this process and this would form part of the revised paper also.

Reflecting on comments about the role of this Group, he agreed with the view that SDAG had never really fulfilled its intended role. He volunteered to write a short paper written in a challenging manner that would seek to identify two or three key areas needing further policy development. If Members agreed with this approach, then SDAG could continue towards the drafting of a strategic policy document.

Members accepted that this would be an appropriate way forward and it was agreed accordingly.

The meeting ended at 2.30 pm.