

Uttlesford 2021 – a provocation

By Alasdair Bovaird

As a young local government officer, the Chief Executive had been sent to interview a group of centenarians - gathered for a party to celebrate the centenary of the creation of county councils. It had been a depressing experience: in a county of 700,000, there were only 14 who had reached the age of 100 - and most of them were present only in body. Last night, he had been part of a gathering of 104 recipients of the Queen's telegram who lived in Uttlesford. What was the rate of increase, he wondered? 14 out of 700,000 in 1989 - to 104 out of 85,000 in 2021 ... no, the sum was too hard to do in his head.

Thoughts turned to the changes that he had seen since he moved to Saffron Walden in the early years of the century: there had only been one runway at what was then called Stansted: and just over a third of the number of passengers then compared to the 60 million that flew into or out of Uttlesford International Airport last year. And Stebbing had been just a village then - no town of 9,000 people then, nor the De Ferrers High School. He wondered when the promised sixth form would arrive: harder to get the numbers now with so many 16 year olds choosing to attend the virtual colleges that have been launched from Cambridge: ironic that so many spent their learning hours logged onto www.hillsroad.ac.uk, when Hills Road itself had been redeveloped five years ago.

Still, the electronic systems were good enough that hardly any visits to the new site of the college at Madingley were necessary. Not that getting there was as difficult now - the determination of the council to deal with the problems of accessibility in the district had really borne fruit in the network of heavily subsidised minibus routes that took clusters of youngsters (and some not so young) from place to place from six in the morning until midnight.

Of course, some things hadn't changed - while the minibuses allowed people to get around, there were still too many cars on the road - even more than had been predicted - and still it was a struggle to use the rail services in any comfort. The proposal for an express link from the airport to St Pancras via Stratford was still just a proposal, and there was still a huge amount of pressure to build more houses and eat further into the green spaces that separated the six main towns of the district. Mind you, you could be sure that the proposals would be fiercely resisted: the decline in farming, replaced by EU-subsidised land management, and the promotion of the country park and a fine district-wide mesh of public footpaths

meant that the open spaces were genuinely accessible now: actually used, not just looked at.

The morning battle to London was just as much of a struggle as ever: trains with inadequate capacity, promised roads yet to materialise and with 40% of the working population of the district heading to London, and a further 20% joining the 300,000 who worked in the new Greater Cambridge City area, Uttlesford continued to export labour (but, he supposed, import income).

The airport had become the centre of a significant business growth area: the Elsenham Enterprise Hub was a real feather in the cap of the economic development boffins: 2,000 jobs on a single site. Twenty five companies in energy efficient buildings, operating a shared combined heat and power plant, powered by a combination of biomass and incinerated waste. Only last week a delegation from California had been impressed to hear of what the Hub Manager called ZEUS (Zero Eco-Use System) which had been the centre of the whole scheme. And the option of placing several more, smaller scale, sites now looked like a reality.

And so much else had been done: when Uttlesford District Council was named the 'most-improved council of 2007' by the Local Government Chronicle, who could have known it was only the beginning: "yes, we did get a few things done!", he thought.

- promoting healthier populations, by taking over the community health services in the district, linking them to the local sports facilities. Getting GPs to prescribe membership of the local sports clubs. The ability of local sports clubs to recruit players and volunteers - immeasurably boosted by funding from the Department of Health to promote healthy activity in localities. Much easier to find a fixture secretary or someone to put the flags out on the pitches on Saturday afternoon if they are getting rewarded for doing it.
- The Saffron Screen initiative had taken root and was now accompanied by its own mobile annex - the Screen Machine East - taking (relatively) current movies into the villages and towns of North Essex and South Cambridgeshire every night of the week.
- The shared facility for rehousing the homeless: true, the 'Friends Hotel' was in Harlow, but natives of Walden, Dunmow, Takeley and the rest of the district could safely accept placement there knowing that the flexibility of use of other accommodation in the district meant that a return to Uttlesford would not be long delayed. Maybe, the council didn't own the houses anymore (the 2011 Housing Act had put paid to that) but North Essex Homes were a very responsive association: and the requirement placed on them by the council to

maintain 2% of homes vacant at all times meant that the waiting time for placement in housing had all but vanished. Using funds generated by the Stansted Area Housing Partnership to buy housing on the open market and make it available for joint purchase, subsidised rents or reduced interest mortgage helped keep the tenancies circulating. We were still a property-owning democracy, but the routes into owning the property had become much easier to negotiate. Youngsters still left the small towns of the district looking for city life and excitement, but if they wanted to stay, they could afford to live here.

- The quality of housing, their impacts on the environment and the social infrastructure had been addressed through the local development framework and supplementary planning guidance. The Masterplan of the new village had been a real success, with additional housing being permitted following the developers' agreement to conform with the more demanding Uttlesford Sustainable Housing Charter. A real win-win: more money for the developer, less cost for the residents, lower impact on the environment.
- And pollution was improving: car emissions were coming down, aircraft emissions rising more slowly than the number of flights, new lighting standards meant that some towns could see the milky way at night for the first time in decades. And as the new Airbus 480 and Boeing 7J7 came on stream, noise levels might start to come down as well. Of course, some of the pollution management had been about the council's actions. The Saffron Walden relief road had relieved congestion in the town and improved air quality, but so too had the agreement in the old 'Uttlesford Futures' group to deliver a staggered start to each working day, to ensure that the morning and evening rush hours might last longer, but never came to the complete standstill that was considered normal in 2006.

So, 'most improved council' was just the beginning? Well, no - it was actually in Churchill's phrase, 'the end of the beginning'. The beginning had been a year before: when the council identified the things it wanted to achieve, how it was going to achieve them, and what it would have to accept and manage. So the beginning was not at the Savoy awards in March 2007, but in the Committee Room of the old London Road offices on March 8, 2006 ...