

**MEETING OF UTTLESFORD FOCUS GROUP - SOUTHERN AREA held at THE COUNCIL OFFICES  
GREAT DUNMOW at 7.30 pm on 27 JANUARY 1999**

Present:- Lillian Adams, Craig Hirons, Julia Hirons, Francis Isacke and Nick Ray.

Officers in attendance:- Brian Perkins and Mick Purkiss.

**I. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Norman Roads and Barbara Stopher.

**I. NOTES OF LAST MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING**

The Notes of the last meeting were agreed as a correct record. A number of matters had been raised at the last meeting which had been investigated by the officers. Copies of relevant tourist leaflets, including the Dunmow Trail, were circulated. Statistics for crime and road safety were also circulated and officers informed the group about the arrangements for running and funding the Saffron Walden Drop-In Centre. Details of the unemployment statistics for Uttlesford together with the numbers of school leavers over the next few years were also reported and it was generally agreed that there were no major unemployment problems in the district at this time.

**I. FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS**

The focus group was advised that it would have the opportunity of presenting its report to a committee of the Council in mid-April 1999. It would therefore be necessary to finalise its report by mid-March. The Group were also asked whether it would be advantageous to meet with a small group of councillors before submitting its formal report to a committee. It was agreed that this would be a useful opportunity.

**I. HEALTH ISSUES**

Some concern was expressed at the distance from casualty departments and minor injury units. These problems were exacerbated by the traffic congestion on the A120, the M11 roundabout and Stansted Airport. However, Dunmow was well served by doctors and dental surgeries, although improvements could be made by providing 24 hour on call emergency cover. It was also felt that there was a role for the voluntary sector in providing transport to health facilities.

Reference was made to the Woodlands Park development and to the process for ensuring that health and educational facilities could cope with the influx of a large number of new residents. It was reported that both the health and education authorities had all the relevant information to enable them to make informed decisions on these matters.

In relation to health matters generally, Uttlesford District Council had no direct control, but had a degree of influence and had developed closer links with the health authority in recent years.

**I. EDUCATION**

It was noted that the level of influence which the district council had over educational matters was minimal. The main involvement was to safeguard sites for schools where new large developments were approved. The group felt that greater liaison was needed and the Council needed to be more proactive to ensure that provision met demand when need arises.

**I. INVOLVING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

The group considered that it was important to find out what the Council's customers wanted and to look at different ways of involving them. However, they appreciated the difficulty of generating interest and accepted that most people only got involved when they had a complaint. Some members of the group felt that more

information needed to be made available on the structure of the Council, details of the services provided by Essex, Uttlesford and the town/parish councils and who the public needed to contact when they had a problem. The Group considered that the A - Z of Council Services had been a very useful initiative in identifying responsibility for services within the district council and felt that more information could be included on structures. The officers also informed the group that the Council produced a complaints leaflet. A leaflet on how to get involved in meetings was also being published and later in February the Council would be taking out a whole page for council news in the Saffron Walden Reporter and Dunmow Broadcast on a monthly basis. In relation to the structure of the Council, the Group were informed that the Government White Paper - "Modern Local Government: In Touch With the People", set out plans for an ambitious reform of local government which could result in fundamental changes to the structure of local authorities.

The focus group then discussed the election process. They considered that one of the problems in encouraging people to vote was the fact that there appeared to be very little difference between the candidates, the political parties and their policies. It was felt that more information could be provided on the role of councillors and the work which they undertook. The group also recognised the problem of getting a representative cross section of the population to stand as councillors. The group felt it was important to make the best use of councillors' time by reducing the time spent at committee meetings. One particular problem for Uttlesford in generating interest in elections and local government generally was the fact that it was a large rural community. It was apparent that the knowledge about the Council in some of the villages was very limited and some members of the group felt that it would be useful to have a mobile unit visiting village fetes and school fairs etc.

A number of other issues were discussed including holding a public meeting. However, it was felt that this would be difficult to manage, unless it was arranged in relation to a specific issue. The group considered that having an open day at the council offices could be worthwhile if it could be made interesting. The issue of Saturday morning opening was discussed, but it was generally felt that this would be of little benefit except for tourist information and planning applications (the officers undertook to provide more information about the types of enquiries which were received at the Community Information Centre).

## **I. KEY ISSUES**

The focus group felt that it would be more useful if, in the first instance, they concentrated their final report on three or four of the original nine issues identified in the briefing paper. Each member of the group stated their preference and the following four key issues were the most favoured:-

- \* Housing
- \* Transport
- \* Environment (including recycling)
- \* Involving the local community

The group considered that it would be useful if the Recycling Officer could attend the next meeting to answer a number of questions.

The group was also asked if they wished officers to write their report or whether they would prefer to undertake this themselves. The group decided that it would probably prepare its own report with relevant assistance from the Council officers.

## **I. NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the group would be held at the Dunmow offices at 7.30 pm on Wednesday 10 February 1999.

The meeting ended at 10.00 pm.