

Local Government Productivity Plan 2024 – Uttlesford District Council – prepared in response to DLUHC requirement

Uttlesford District Council [UDC] is a small district council serving a rural population of c95,000 residents over 247 square miles in the NorthWest corner of Essex, also bordering Herts, Cambs and Suffolk to the North and West, and is a landlord to 2,800 council housing tenants. UDC employs some 330 staff, with a net annual General Fund revenue budget of some £18 million, as well as a Housing Revenue Fund of a further £18 million, each with also a modest capital programme spend.

1. How have you transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources

Uttlesford District Council is a small and extremely rural district (recognised by DEFRA as R80, the highest category of rurality), with a very wide geography and population spread. Government funding has reduced very significantly over the last 10 to 15 years and the council has had to manage these funding reductions against its net expenditure. There have been a number of specific and targeted projects over the years to ensure the council is delivering the best quality of services possible within these financial constraints. This has meant that we are a very resource-lean organisation, and therefore our organisational resilience is a constant risk we need to manage in regard to single points of failure.

The 2023/24 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) predicted a funding shortfall of £6.6m by 2027/28, updated in the 2024/25 budget/MTFS refresh to £7.35m. The council launched a new five year + organisational change programme in the summer of 2022, 'Blueprint Uttlesford' to take into account the impacts of new regulations and funding reforms which will lead to further significant budget shortfalls. Blueprint Uttlesford is well on track to deliver this transformation and meet these financial targets, delivering £2.15m savings in its first year, whilst avoiding any appreciable service level reductions or closures, and resulting in (just) 5 compulsory redundancies. Individual projects are scoped over the remaining years of the programme to deliver the remaining necessary £5.2m savings.

The Blueprint Uttlesford programme sets out an ambitious plan including workstreams on:

- how we work, alternative and more effective ways of delivering services
- automating processes and investigating AI solutions
- further sustainable income generation
- engaging and co-creating solutions with communities, voluntary organisations, other key stakeholders and residents

In addition the council are looking at their organisational culture and investment in People, with the Introduction of a Workforce Plan. This will support staff by setting out how we will invest and develop our workforce through this change programme.

The performance of the council is measured against a suite of performance indicators and the introduction this year of benchmarking against our statistical near neighbours. Corporate Management Team monitor all performance indicators on a quarterly basis and the Core Corporate Indicators are presented to the Cabinet on a quarterly basis, as well as scrutinised by our cross party Scrutiny Committee.

We work closely in partnership with other authorities, particularly our neighbouring authorities, on both joint initiatives and also in sharing services to improve resilience and boost performance.

2. How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

This year, the council has invested in Power BI software to support our existing Planning, Environmental Health, Land Charges, Building Control and Waste services. Power BI is an analytics digital data platform that will enable us to bring data to life and help us realise the art of the possible with information that is already held by us and is available for us to use in a multitude of ways. It is currently being used in the Planning Service and is in the process of being rolled out to the other service areas.

One theme within our Blueprint change programme is 'How we work' which looks to challenge all aspects of how our services operate, including the use of data and the opportunity that new technologies such as the use of AI and bots give us in both making better use of data but also for making it more readily available to residents and partners.

The Council is currently working with a number of other Essex councils to undertake a feasibility study to look at the benefits and costs of developing a new Planning, Environmental Health, Environmental Services, Land Charges and Building Control system to replace the existing legacy system. The current system is expensive and limited in its potential for integration with modern technology. Data we currently publish is available via our transparency pages on our website.

Most council legacy systems are such because of the prohibitive cost of moving to new technology. This does not mean that a legacy system is a barrier in itself, but that it can be more costly and time consuming in linking it using technology such as AI and bots. System suppliers are also reluctant to open up access to systems and can charge significant annual sums for application programming interface (API) access and licences.

Legacy systems are also traditionally 'service' systems rather than cross council systems and you therefore get SILO working and a lack of data sharing. As a small council we do have legacy systems and the costs involved with moving or interfacing modern technology could be prohibitive.

We regularly share data but that is of a traditional transactional basis and essential for us to be able to perform our role, for example daily data sharing with the Department for Works and Pension

We recognise we can do more and part of the 'How we work' theme will look at ways of using predictive analytics and AI that enables targeted focus of our scarce resources. An example would be identifying areas of deprivation in the district with overlays of anonymised benefits claims, citizens advice and foodbank data to help us and our partners identify and target hot spot parts of our district that are at high risk of poverty.

We are presently running a bot pilot and we are keen to explore more. However, as a small local authority there are significant cost and human resource implications. It would be good if there were standard apps etc. for large data sets such as Stat-explore that could be made readily available to all councils thereby avoiding the need for everyone to reinvent the wheel.

3. Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems

The council undertook from 2018 through 2022, a detailed zero based review of services with detailed options appraisals for all service areas, cutting out and leaning out services to the maximum extent. Since it exhausted this approach, it has moved onto Blueprint Uttlesford, with its focus on transformation, investment and new ways of working including AI, automation and much more.

Naturally, in year, it has a rigorous budget monitoring process where each budget line is examined on a quarterly basis to ensure that there is no unnecessary spend. This approach means that not only are net spend trends identified that might lead to overspends, which allows for budget tightening in year to ensure the council keeps delivering to budget but that the council's savings targets are tracked. Uttlesford has a proud record of not seeing a February/March spending spree in a rush to spend budgets before year end so as to somehow illustrate that they must not be cut.

CMT (corporate management team) meet on a bi-weekly basis to track Blueprint savings, which are the mechanism by which the council intends to meet its 5 year savings target. This target is refreshed annually and any new savings identified are immediately set against these targets.

A current example of cost control is that the council is examining how we can reduce paper billing for council tax and business rates where it is unnecessary. For example, where an individual entitled to Council Tax Relief Scheme is in work but on low wages, any one-off in-month income changes (such as working a few hours of overtime) prompts a recalculation of their entitlement and a rebilling, meaning that some people can receive 13 bills a year. This can be reduced in future by some system redesign and enhancement of marginal benefit entitlement tolerances to substantially cut red tape.

The council spent less than £2k on trade union facility time or less than 0.01% of the the paybill. The Council's EDI expenditure this financial year is £17.5k including on-costs for 2024/25 and the last time we spent money on any non-staff activities was

2022/23 when we spent £6.6k. £1.9k of this was on EQHiA training, which ensures we are fulfilling our statutory duties against the Equalities Act (2010).

The authority spent £2.157m on agency staff (11% of total staffing bill) and £0.733m (8%) on specialist consultants to help produce the Local Plan, which is a one off specialist item, for which the council would not normally maintain in-house.

The council currently has a procurement shared service, where all procurement is managed by a larger council with more resources and managed via an SLA. This provides us with economies of scale within our procurement and resources, and as a small council we would only employ one person for this role and the shared service mitigates the risk of a single point of failure.

The council are launching an Agency Worker framework in July 2024, partnering with Essex County Council to use the MATRIX Dynamic Purchasing System with over 350 agencies currently onboarded and continuing to join.

This framework brings together recruitment agencies into one place, operating at pre-negotiated and set rates and provides a full overview of the agency workforce, including spend.

4. Barriers preventing progress Government can help reduce or remove

Long term funding uncertainty is the biggest barrier in local government to sustainability. Councils rely on large long term contracts and committed staff to keep costs as low as possible.. Not knowing the resource envelope till December limits the ability to deliver transformation investment in prevention and leads to knee-jerk cuts.

Unnecessary ring-fencing of grants with detailed conditions and the costs of competitive bidding waste resources, where councils know their local areas and where it is worth investing and when it is not.

A particular barrier is the administration of funding/grant initiatives. The detail guidance is often not available for a number of weeks after an announcement, criteria and rules change during the scheme which impacts on delivery quality and value for money.

The UKSPF scheme was announced in April 2022. We were required to submit an investment plan by 1 August, with full stakeholder engagement/workshops and external preliminary bid submissions. An addendum (REPF) was announced in September 2022 with more complex criterion. Both initiatives required member sign off and new policies, but with tight timescales and associated red tape. Simply increasing the amount of money available to us to fulfill our duties would allow us to dedicate more scarce resource to existing initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for local people, and less time and money on gimmicky funds apparently more driven by politics than policy.