

Committee:	Cabinet	Date: Thursday, 8 May 2025
Title:	Update on Blueprint Uttlesford and the impacts of Devolution/Local Government Reorganisation	
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Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Petrina Lees Leader of the Council	Key Decision: No

Summary

1. This report updates councillors on progress made with the authority's change programme, Blueprint Uttlesford in terms of its prospects for delivering the budgetary requirements set out in the recently-agreed Medium Term Financial Strategy [MTFS], as well as in organisational development/cultural change terms.
2. The report particularly highlights the substantial pivot in approach following the publication in December 2024 of the Government's Devolution White Paper, and the subsequent successful application for Essex to join the Devolution Priority Programme (and thus be on a fast track to seeing a Mayor for Essex elected in May 2026, and the Local Government Reorganisation(LGR) process in which the current fifteen districts/county/unitary councils in Essex are set to be abolished and replaced in April 2028 with a to-be-determined number of new unitary authorities.

Recommendations

3. That Cabinet notes and endorses this revised approach.

Financial Implications

4. The revised approach is designed to ensure the required MTFS savings are achieved over the coming years, whilst minimising cost and effort on shorter-term changes to the way Uttlesford District Council operates and delivers services, which may not align with future service design on merger of the authority into a new unitary council.
5. Closer to Vesting Day (most likely 1 April 2028), the newly elected Shadow Authority (due for election in May 2027) will start taking decisions that will impact on spending – such as appointing a (shadow) chief executive and other senior staff for the new authority, as well as determining the new authority's Council Tax rates. The Parliamentary process formally establishing the new authority (the Statutory Change Order) will also likely impose some restrictions on the current authorities expenditure of money, so that the new authorities have a stable and prudent set of finances to be handed over. Although light

touch, these restrictions on spending by the current authorities will prevent inappropriate short-term expenditure when it will be the new authorities that inherit the longer-term knock on effects thereof.

Background Papers

6. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.
 - [MHCLG English Devolution White Paper](#), December 2024
 - [Minister's letter](#) to Leaders of 16th December 2024 inviting upper tier/unitary authorities to apply to join the Devolution Priority Programme.
 - [Minister's letter](#) to Leaders of 6th February 2024 inviting submission of initial proposals for LGR by 21st March 2025 and detailed proposals by 26th September 2025
 - Previous reports to full Council on LGR and devolution on 8th January 2025 and 19th March 2025.
 - Previous Blueprint Uttlesford updates to [Cabinet](#) on 24th October and to full [Council](#) on 17th December 2024

Impact

7.

Communication/Consultation	<p>Blueprint Uttlesford and Devolution/LGR remain ongoing items for discussion with staff at various levels including team meetings, quarterly staff conferences, and also more formally at the 1st April 2025 Local Joint Panel meeting.</p> <p>They have similarly been on the agenda for lengthy discussions with Parish Councils at the four Parish Council Forum meetings in March 2025.</p> <p>They are also discussed at various Essex-wide meetings with other authorities, which generally happen at least twice a week at chief executive/leader level, and increasingly in various other workstreams too involving more colleagues.</p> <p>They are similarly the topic of conversation are various partnership meetings, such as the West Essex Health and Care Partnership meeting.</p> <p>There has to date been little formal or structured public engagement in Devolution/LGR with the general public – although the Government is (at time of</p>
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	writing) currently running a public consultation exercise on the Devolution proposals for a new Mayor and Combined Authority for Essex. There are plans being urgently developed across Essex for greater public and stakeholder engagement as detailed proposals for LGR are developed ahead of the 26 th September 2025 deadline.
Community Safety	There is a prospect that the new Mayor for Essex may (either immediately or later) take over the role of the current separately-elected Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.
Equalities	-
Health and Safety	-
Human Rights/Legal Implications	As well as the various legislative frameworks within which Mayors and Combined Authorities are established, and also those governing the abolition and creation of new councils, Uttlesford District Council remains under a general fiduciary duty to balance its books and set legal budgets, planning credibly for stability within a five year medium term window, which must not be ignored during structural churn.
Sustainability	-
Ward-specific impacts	All wards
Workforce/Workplace	See communication/consultation section above

Situation

8. Previous Blueprint Uttlesford updates to Cabinet and full Council (as above) have shared the initial years' success of the programme in delivering the necessary savings to keep pace with the annually-refreshed MTFS requirements.
9. Those updates have also indicated which areas of council operations were due to be focused on over the 2025/26 year (just started), and those pencilled in for later years (in varying degrees of detail). As 2025/26 is the third year of the original four-year Blueprint Uttlesford Programme, it was always going to be the case that a new approach was going to be required from year five

onwards (ie 2027/28) as the age of austerity continues and further annual savings become required to continue to meet the unrelenting demands of the MTFS.

10. Details of the Blueprint Uttlesford review of performance and of the shifting MTFS demands are included in the officer Blueprint Uttlesford board report at Appendix A.
11. The seismic shift of the Devolution/LGR agenda which commenced in December 2024, and with Uttlesford District Council now due to be abolished and replaced in just three years' time (April 2028, with elections to the new Shadow Authority in May 2027), it now no longer makes any sense for Uttlesford to plan to 'consume its own smoke' of those ongoing MTFS savings by continuing with the round of Blueprint Uttlesford service reviews as originally envisaged, and as operated successfully over recent years. This is because those reviews have essentially taken a long-term approach, service-by-service or function-by-function of how to most economically, efficiently and effectively operate for many years to come – typically addressing staffing structures, systems (computer or otherwise) used, charging regimes, eligibility criteria, shared services, joint procurement.
12. The service reviews have taken considerable time and effort at each stage of work; research, options appraisal, implementation and stabilisation. Producing a payback in terms of sustainable cost reduction has typically taken significant time. There is therefore simply no time left to go through such an exercise solely on an Uttlesford basis, only then to immediately start folding in all those services/functions with the other existing councils with whom Uttlesford will merge.
13. To continue without a substantial change of approach would likely deliver the worst of all worlds: all the instability, service disruption, challenges to recruitment and retention, and up-front effort and costs, only to see the benefits fail to materialise over the longer-term as a second round of LGR churn follows immediately on.
14. Therefore a pragmatic approach to fundamentally change Blueprint Uttlesford has been adopted. Firstly, tactical opportunities to realise the unavoidable and essential savings requirements are being maximised – focusing particularly on commercial asset disposal, as well as on sustainable income development. Beyond that, focus is being given to tactical savings opportunities that might arise from early joint working opportunities being scoped out with those existing neighbouring Essex Councils with whom Uttlesford might ultimately merge.
15. The narrative line that has been used to update staff on this situation is attached as Appendix B. This is designed to minimise uncertainty and to provide maximum reassurance, to support recruitment and retention of our valued staff team.
16. It is important in considering these tactical savings opportunities with neighbouring councils to understand that the decision on which councils will

merge with which others is not expected until February 2026 – ie until the Government makes a final choice between the likely competing detailed LGR proposals that look set to be submitted by the 26th September 2025 deadline.

17. At present, Uttlesford District Council's Leader is one of ten (out of fifteen) Essex Council leaders whose authorities are all included in the LGR process (ie all 12 districts, Essex County Council, and Thurrock and Southend unitary councils) to express a clear in-principle preference for there to be five new unitary authorities from April 2028 onwards.
18. The remaining five council leaders have not yet settled on a preference, though discussions indicate that there is a considerable likelihood that as well as the majority of Essex councils submitting a five-unitary proposal, a smaller number of others may simultaneously submit a competing proposal to Government for a smaller number of larger new unitary councils (though it is not yet clear whether this will be for four, three, two or even potentially one single unitary covering the whole of Essex's 1.85 million population).
19. The prospects for Uttlesford making tactical savings ahead of February 2026 are therefore limited by the uncertainty of not definitively knowing whether we are to merge with (say) Epping and Harlow areas (under a five unitary model) or (purely as an illustration of a very different option) merging with Braintree, Colchester and Tendring (under a four or three unitary model).
20. To an unusual degree, Uttlesford District Council's approach to its MTFS savings requirements is influenced by world affairs. For example, as of the writing of this paper, international stock markets are in free fall following unilateral US Trade Tariff introductions. It is possible that such churn in the markets may lead to changes in financial institutional appetites for purchasing commercial assets that Uttlesford owns – though it is possible that bricks and mortar assets may potentially become more attractive and not therefore only represent a downside risk.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
That Uttlesford District Council will be distracted by Devolution/LGR and consequently fail to balance its budget/deliver its MTFS savings requirements	2 – some risk	3 – significant impact	This revised Blueprint Uttlesford programme

That Uttlesford District Council will not be able to achieve the ongoing savings intended through commercial asset disposals	2 – some risk	3 – significant impact	Contingency planning for more traditional service reviews/spending reductions if and when necessary. Uttlesford District Council will not need to dispose of assets if the market is not prepared to pay their worth, and would be able to keep hold of them for later disposal during more optimum market conditions.
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1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.