

Appendix B

Blueprint Uttlesford and Local Government Reorganisation: The State of Play

As colleagues will be aware, we have been considering the implications of Local Government Reorganisation on the Blueprint Uttlesford programme; in particular what it means for services which have yet to be reviewed or are part way through a review.

You may recall the recent triage process, through which CMT and the Cabinet considered all areas of work in each service to see what could be stopped or reduced to try to create the capacity that will be needed as reorganisation work ramps up in the coming weeks and months. That process has led to some projects being stopped or scaled back (e.g. work on our new initiative to coordinate the work we do on rurality in a new way), but also identified that many areas of work need to continue (such as our work on the climate and biodiversity crisis, which remains a top priority for us).

With regard to the Blueprint Uttlesford transformation programme, we have decided to narrow its focus, concentrating mainly on income-generation measures and, in time, joint working opportunities with our likely future partners Epping Forest and Harlow councils.

There is still a requirement for the council to demonstrate to the auditors that we have plans in place to deal with the financial shortfalls set out in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, so scrapping all Blueprint work is not an option.

The financial gap remains large – to give an illustration by the likely vesting date of the new Essex unitaries in April 2028 it would be £6.294 million, of which Blueprint was targeted with achieving £3.777 million of ongoing savings with the rest coming from reserves.

However, there is a plan in place to deal with the financial shortfall over the remaining life of Uttlesford District Council that does not involve proceeding with the planned service reviews. If the council sells one of its major commercial assets, the 50 per cent share of Chesterford Research Park, this will largely deal with the financial shortfall we would otherwise have faced over the next few years and this is the strategy we are pursuing.

What this means is we are stopping the formal reviews of services, including considering changes to staff structures. These Blueprint Uttlesford reviews will not take place **unless we are unsuccessful in selling our share of Chesterford Research Park**. The likelihood of it being sold for a good price is in the 80 to 90 per cent range – with the issue being when we will get an offer that properly reflects its value, as we would rather hold onto it until then than take an early too-low offer. The council is of course not in control of the market so cannot give a 100 per cent guarantee with regard to the sale and if it proves unsuccessful then the council will still need to take a substantial amount of money out of its budget, which may mean resuming full-scale service reviews. But as it stands, the reviews planned for 2025/26 onwards will not be starting and those that were already underway will not be progressing any further.

We will of course continue to take advantage of cost-saving or income-generating opportunities as they arise, and down the line look at the potential for joint working with our future merger partners in neighbouring councils.

With regard to the Local Government Reorganisation programme, a high-level initial proposal from all Essex districts, the two unitaries and the county council, was submitted by the deadline of last Friday (21 March). If you want to read it, look for the Full Council meeting from last Wednesday (19 March). This proposal is very much an expression of interest. However, the direction of travel is clear and it is better to be at the table actively influencing than watching from the sidelines.

The next stage will see detailed proposals developed for submission in September. It is almost certain that there will be competing bids, with the majority of districts favouring a five unitary model and the county council and one or two others likely pushing for a smaller number. In this situation, the government will pick one of those two proposals. Whether there are one or two bids, we won't get confirmation from the government until January or February next year what the final decision is.

However many new unitaries there ends up being, it is very likely – in the region of 90 per cent likely - that Uttlesford will merge with Epping Forest and Harlow. The question remains whether it will just be these three councils, plus part of Essex County Council (the five unitaries model) or whether we will be joined by other current councils and we won't know that for many months yet.

The main takeaway message is therefore: service reviews including exploring how to reduce service size and staffing numbers are for now off the table for the next couple of years, with only a modest risk that our other plans won't deliver enough for us to have to reinstate them.