

District Council Report to the Annual Parish Meeting – May 13, 2019

I am pleased to be able to report a year of solid progress.

The Council's Finances

In the last four years Uttlesford has successfully navigated a one-third reduction in funding and grants income from Central Government. Despite this, there have been no reductions in front-line services and the Council has increased investment in a number of core areas – including funding extra PCSOs, more money on litter picking and a programme of investment to replace the Council's vehicle fleet. We end the year with a surplus.

Chesterford Research Park

The Council's investment in Chesterford Research Park, in partnership with Aviva, is continuing to prove its worth. In its second year of ownership the Park will generate net income of £1.6m, following net income to the Council of £1.5m in the previous year. Further investment in the Park, including planned reburbishment of one unit will further increase revenue from 2019/20. Although any commercial venture brings new challenges, not least cultural, I firmly believe if we had not made this investment, we would by now be experiencing significant cuts in services.

Uttlesford's Local Council Tax Support Scheme

The Local Council Tax Support Scheme contribution has been frozen for 5 years. The Council is to hold the contribution rate for working-age recipients at 12.5% for a further 12 month. Our local scheme continues to be the lowest of any council in Essex.

Supporting local businesses

Changes to the business rates regime has resulted in over one-third of the businesses across the District paying no business rates. In the last year the Council has put in place additional transitional arrangements to smooth the implementation of the new business rates arrangements, including further reliefs for many of our High Street properties.

Supporting the voluntary sector

An area that is particularly important is the Council's continued support of the voluntary sector across the District. I have been privileged to serve as a member of the Voluntary Sector Grants Board for the last four years, which awarded £300,000 to 11 organisations in the year, including Citizens Advice (both in Uttlesford and East Herts), Support4Sight and Uttlesford Community Travel. I am pleased the Council has been able to support numerous community, sports and cultural organisations across the District. In total the Council awarded grants of more than £540,000 in 2018/19. I believe that per-head of population, Uttlesford is the highest grant awarding council to the voluntary sector in Essex.

Investment in Superfast Broadband

Superfast Essex has reported that it forecasts 97.8% coverage of superfast broadband in Uttlesford by July 2020 and Gigaclear contractors are laying fibre in various of the more isolated communities across the District. This is good progress on the position four years ago, when it looked likely coverage might only exceed 90% of the district's households. Uttlesford's grant funding of £500,000 towards extending coverage of superfast broadband is particularly important in the more rural areas.

Delivering good quality affordable homes for local people

A key priority for the Council is delivering good quality affordable homes for local people. You will recall that in 2012 the Council borrowed £80m to purchase its estate of over 2,000 sheltered housing and council properties. As a result of this investment, Uttlesford is one of only a handful of councils across the country that owns and continues to build council houses. This year Uttlesford's development programme delivered 43 new council houses, and a further 309 new build affordable properties were completed by registered providers, such as housing associations. The Council's programme of refurbishing and redevelopment of its sheltered housing continues, including Reynolds Court, Hatherley House and Walden Place. The Council has also been working closely with Essex CC and L&Q to deliver the district's first Independent Living Scheme, Cornell Court, in Saffron Walden, which will provide 71 units of accommodation. A total of 11 properties were sold under the Right to Buy. The proceeds from such sales are always reinvested in new council housing.

Waste & Recycling

Uttlesford residents continue to achieve excellent recycling rates. Across the District we consistently achieve a recycling rate of 53% and in the period from April-June 2018 achieved an all-time high of 59% of household waste recycled or composted. Some areas across the District continue to achieve much higher recycling rates than others and the focus is on trying to improve some of the poorer performing areas. The programme to replace the Council's fleet of refuse vehicles is underway and will ensure we have a fit-for-purpose service well into the next decade.

Council Tax

Uttlesford's share of your council tax bill is approximately 8.5% of the total. The Council agreed a 2.99% increase in Council Tax for this year. For a Band D property Uttlesford's share of the Council tax bill is £151.611p per annum - an increase of £4.40p per annum. In 2010/11 Uttlesford's council tax for the same band property was £147.42 – representing a 2.8% increase in total over 10 years. Uttlesford continues to have the lowest council tax in Essex.

As you will be aware, I am not seeking re-election to the Council in May: after 20 years as a councillor, it feels like the right time to retire. I have enjoyed greatly the challenge and the opportunity to represent my community and my neighbours. It has been a privilege and an honour to serve you.

Cllr. Simon Howell
Member for the Sampfords Ward