...follow history - revive villages - connect communities...

...linked-countryside, a series of villages hamlets and towns, linked, very much as they once were by the land and a common purpose, *but now by technology and new infrastructure*.

A TABULA RASA
Uttlesford without a Local Plan.

by Michael Culkin

with Brian Smith and Richard Till
commissioned by Thaxted Society in the absence of a current Local Plan.

The failure of Uttlesford's local plan may be seen as either curse or blessing. The curse is obvious enough, but the possible blessing less evident.

If there were, as the Inspector alluded to, manifest flaws in the plan then it may be that both the thinking and the plans direction were in themselves flawed and the failed plan simply a by-product of failed thinking. It may also be true that the failed thinking, twice, was in both instances believing a commonplace plan for Uttlesford was sensible.

Therefore, we have the self-evident *curse*, of not having a plan, *but*, and this is simply a question of viewpoint, because of this failure we also have the *blessing* of a 'tabula rasa' upon which a new vision may now be written.

Whilst there are proscribed demands for compliance, against the background of a more imaginative 'vision', compliance may be introduced as a requirement but not the driver. Putting compliance first may prove the inhibitor of vision and thus the opposite of its true purpose.

While imagination may well get a tough response from those married to *due process* and compliance, in truth, imagination is very much at the heart of planning. Foresight in planning is imagination at work?

The application of imagination to the question, *where we might be in the next thirty years?* Although not an exact science imagination may well throw up truths and possibilities overlooked in a plan driven by institutionalised thinking and due process alone.

For the Thaxted Society, against this background, some kite flying is deemed essential in reaching a vision which might well be etched upon this tabula rasa.

...is this a joke

Uttlesford formally came into being on April 1st 1974. For someone, other than those celebrating its inception, this may have been a private joke but the record does not make clear how or why the date was chosen. With hindsight, the new authority might have taken a moment to reflect and refuse that particular date.

Uttlesford was the outer reaches of influence, mostly rural, and important only for having an expanding business prospect within it, in Stansted Airport. It certainly wasn't a burgeoning rates revenue stream.

If on that day the nascent Stansted Airport featured in importance within Uttlesford, its proximity to Cambridge did not and the pressures for growth were not yet manifest.

This was a sleepy corner of North Essex. It was also one other important thing. It was largely filled with well established, but mostly *small* landowner farmers, who had arrived from Cornwall Scotland and Somerset to buy the manorial farms being sold off cheaply.

As pressures for housing grew, so their land became valuable for an utterly different reason to what had brought their forebears to the area, and they were tempted.
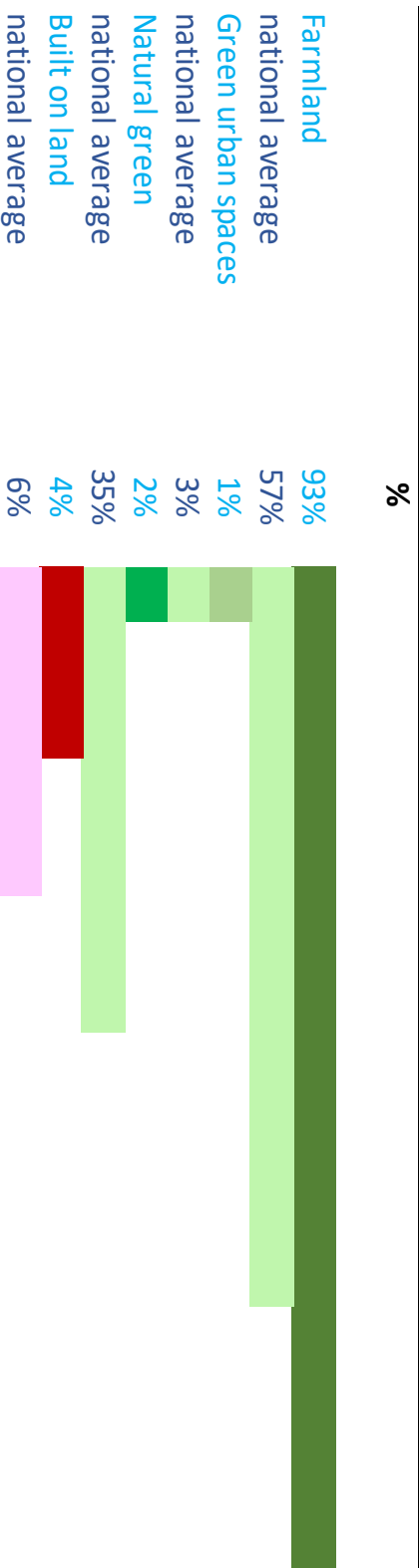
If growing demand has an evident and eager supply then two of the factors for growth are manifest. But without a plan, these two factors ride rough shod over the sensitive rest - and we are concerned here with that *sensitive rest*.

For the Thaxted Society the failed plan appeared to pay little heed to these historic facts and Uttlesford's largely rural make up. In fact, the plan appeared to do the very opposite and apply generic thinking in an attempt to make the *numbers* work rather than responding to the area's extraordinary qualities first.

The fact that Uttlesford today is largely agricultural, with ratios that exceed the national norms, increases pressures on the area to respond to demand for housing against the overriding presence of the area's medieval past and layout

Granted the numbers are problematic but the area's unique qualities may demonstrate inherent solutions to this.

UTTLESFORD LAND USE 2019 COMPARED TO NATIONAL AVG USE

%

Farmland **93%**

national average **57%**

Green urban spaces **1%**

national average **3%**

Natural green **2%**

national average **35%**

Built on land **4%**

national average **6%**

Uttlesford has less green urban space, parks and recreation.

Less natural green space ie habitat that is not farmland

2% less built land than the average

and a huge 36% more agricultural land than average

This data is based upon the latest ONS figures. The graph bars are for illustration only. This data is the basis for certain assertions and proposals in th document. The assertion that Uttleford remains largely rural is borne out by these figures and gives rise to the proposals herein.

…it is what it is but what might it be?

'Uttlesford' came to be as set out in the Royal Commission Redcliffe - Maud 1969*: "to recognise the requirements of planning and communications in the modern age."* and *"To end the anachronistic division between town and country. A new structure which will permit services to be provided more efficiently than is possible at present and create a more effective system of local democracy."*

Clearly localism is not a new idea, what is important however is the implication that the provision of infrastructure and services would benefit from economies of scale when a larger authority took charge*. These have not been forthcoming.*

As for the suggested anachronism between town and country, this is not evident at Uttlesford, as the towns are too small, and the countryside too large. It is the 'rural' that dominates the towns. There is mud on boots in town and country.

Of course, the demand placed upon the area for housing forces the Local Planning Authority's hand, but *what might a plan look like if the rural and historic nature of the 'place' were the driver and not the demand for housing.*

Much of the layout of Uttlesford is medieval. That is to say most roads, fields, and water courses, all remain much as they were in the late medieval period. Our roads are not new, they are very old 'high ways and by ways'.

Because we live among the buildings and bones of our past and have come to value these. We may be obsessed in this country with the past, but where it still lies it does have affect and impact until it is ignored and at Uttlesford that does appear to be the case.

The LP proposals at Chesterford, in ignorance of the Roman site there, attest to this blindness. "*The Roman fort at Great Chesterford is one of the rare examples in the south east of England and one of only four in Essex".* The Inspector drew the Local Plan authors to this worrying oversight.

It is true that there had been award winning planning before Uttlesford was formed, but post inception, no more awards for farsighted planning. No more *'greens or closes'.* It is the form of growth that matters here and its sensible response to 'legacy' and how that growth stands amongst and alongside it.

Any change is an awkward sell and Uttlesford has its own cadre of opposing voices, not all NIMBYS, except by inferrence. This said there is too the silent majority which should not be overlooked. As Edmund Burke remarked: "*Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their   of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field."*

Further as a French counterpart to a British guest remarked on the opening of Charles de Gaulle Airport, when asked how they got the locals to agree, *'Oh, but when we want to drain a swamp, we do not ask the frogs'.*

But in the event that the vision is both farsighted and exciting it is possible to engender broad enthusiasm for the idea and move onto the detail where the devil does *not* necessarily lurk.

- transparent sustainable development
- including low cost housing
- and evident community benefit
- with provision for recreation and habitat
- and new infrastructure to enable the above.

Of the needed factors for a Local Plan, local planners have some factors within their control and others without. In fact, the list of what they may *not* control is longer than the list of what *they do*.

1. Education   ECC
2. Highways   ECC
3. Health   ECC
4. Policing   ECC
5. Public transport ECC

6. Recreation   UDC
7. Legacy   UDC
8. Planning   UDC

The last two of these carry with them weighty implications for the first five, but over these the Local Authority has no proper control. Whilst ECC has a requirement to co-operate, this has proved a clumsy and ineffective process. Also, what none of these may control is demand as this is driven by the larger conurbations of Cambridge and inevitably London.

The need for housing in the area is not organic but imposed by outside forces.

If the planning authority then is without control of the greater factors at play, an LP is in so many ways a redundant exercise, and simply a prosaic response to requirement and not planning at all. In this the field must be levelled if the Local Planning Authority is <u>required </u>to produce a plan.

It is a matter of compliance that housebuilding be located in locales that provide levels of measurable amenity and service. This requirement excludes many spaces from growth while robustly including others.

But if a plan were organic in the holistic sense it might suggest further *like-provision* in order to spread the growth as before. The new growth would flow organically from the established historic truth and purpose.

Thaxted, as an example, does not have: a large church, a Guildhall, and a broad main street, because they were good ideas, but because they grew organically with the town, and with the arrival of the cutlers and then weavers, who were encouraged to come.

It might follow therefore if we are to continue this established trend that providing houses and *more* is a gentle way to encourage growth without leaving others behind and accidentally building 'country cities' in error.

*Surely the real meaning of the sustainable is: where **life** is sustained.*

The recent Conservative Manifesto indicated that the planning rules would be reformed to ensure that there is more infrastructure in place before new homes are occupied. This would provide part of that basic encouragement.

The Queen's Speech 2019 confirms that: *there will be a £10bn investment in a new Single Housing Infrastructure Fund" to help deliver what is needed to support new homes; roads, schools, and GP surgeries.*

The current model of 'go to centre's' utterly denies the realities of rural living. If to live rurally one has to hop in the car for every eventuality, then in some sense one is living an urban life in the country. And an unsustainable one at that.

The Prime Minister has also announced new funds to improve bus routes particularly in rural areas. This may well be a first step towards the sensible provision of one vital element of the needed infrastructure at Uttlesford.

There are many small communities in Uttlesford which are *discounted* for growth because they do not possess the required amenities to support such growth. But if the Government means what it appears to be saying and if there are funds to enable that vision, then all areas in Uttlesford maybe in a position to support some moderate growth.

There is a total of fifty-eight towns, villages, and clusters, in the district. Of these, 26 are excluded from the failed plan for not meeting requirements for growth. But if these small 'places' have both legacy and connectivity as a result of their history, then advances in technology and provision of innovative services and infrastructure might make them suitable for some growth. (Planned not windfall).

Of the Uttlesford population, there are approximately fifteen thousand people who may work from home, self-employed, and retired. This is almost as large as the fulltime employed. This suggests a changed requirement for 'other' services to support these people in a changed environment, where living in the countryside no longer means inevitable disconnection and isolation.
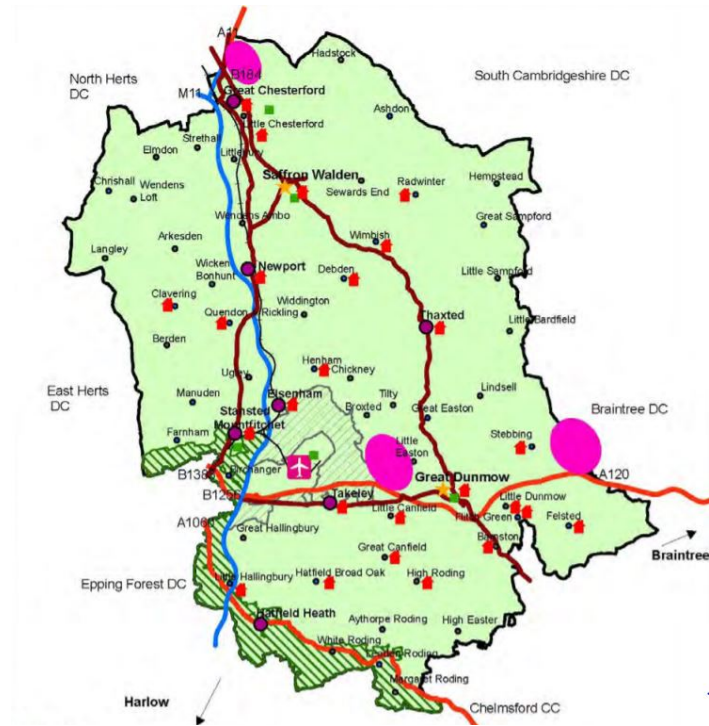
From the current 'failed plan' showing proposed areas for growth, development, housing. Unlabelled settlements are excluded from the plan.

A map of all settlements in Uttlesford, including those excluded from the plan.

...promises, and possibilities.

Given that manifesto promise, the incredible advances in technology and sustainable building, it might be possible to imagine something other.

A linked-countryside. A series of villages hamlets and towns, linked, very much as they once were by the land and a common purpose, *but now by technology and new infrastructure.*

Joined up thinking and places is at the heart of these ideas and the areas future.

If the new funds and impetus for infrastructure were real, then all of the district's myriad communities could take some sensitive growth and provide housing figures which might aid in meeting requirements. In addition, such an innovative approach might provide the return of long-lost assets.
- the village pub/ post office.
- the village shop
- the village health clinic weekly
- a village hall/offices/community centre.

In suggesting what has been lost one is not suggesting replication, but rather a single multifunctioning 'hub' where all these services might be concentrated. Lessons from the French may not be popular but their 'polyvalent hubs' are a shining example.

The economic realities of the village shop are mostly unworkable but if for instance the 'shop' did not stock goods but received deliveries of them, then much of the value of 'village shop' might be replicated without the economic difficulties.
- community interaction.
- provision of product.
- allied services
- ordering and supply services (medicines, library services, and groceries)

The Royal Mail provides delivery and posting points to every corner of Britain. Subsidised or not the postman and the pillar box suggest an analogue service in a digital world, which might well serve as a pointer for this innovative growth.

People's belief in the 'specialness' of where they live gives rise to the opposition to change but if that change responded *to* rather than *overrode* those unique qualities, then perhaps opposition might be sated.

If these links were on the one hand technological and on the other physical, might not the whole of many be one unified community separated by countryside but joined by these factors.

This would require:
- new community services
- new public transport,
- up to date technology

However, these would be benign in nature, responding directly to the particulars of the locality's legacy and need. These needs would be met in conjunction with growth, but the added benefits would outweigh impact.

The impact of this thinking could:
- reduce road use and increase sustainability.
- improve social well-being and community cohesiveness.
- increase renewable energy supply and reduce household costs.
- increase property values and desirability.
- provide uplift in local employment and engagement.

It is clear today that 'connectivity' has dramatically altered the working landscape and that in many cases some degree of home-work is allowed or encouraged.

The three abandoned railways in the district are an example of what was once discarded and now under the cloud of climate change might be repurposed to respond to both the global issue and the local.

The roads of Uttlesford still possess many of the medieval characteristics which made them. While cities under pressure for a sustainable future respond to demand for more pedestrianisation, the removed curbs, and often cobbled surfaces, are a surprising throwback to an older model recognised in an historic rural landscape like Uttlesford's.

The village school's isolation will have contributed to falling numbers and may have disappeared because it was isolated and disconnected. It did not have the breadth of resource which a larger school could provide and those pesky economies of scale demanded centralisation.

Today the village school may be easily connected. May swiftly access all resources available to a larger school and will respond to moderate village growth as proposed. Thus providing:
- child community cohesion
- parental local participation
- a gentle introduction to education
- social cohesion
- a more sustainable model without car use.

There are a number of transportation models at work in the area among them:
- school transport
- public transport
- community transport

The last provides services to the residents of Uttlesford who find it difficult to access normal public transport, the over 60's, the disabled and those who are rurally isolated. But these services are not joined up with others and are perversely complex to access. They are not a timetabled service ensuring rightful independence and convenience.

Also transport in the private sector:
- local taxi services
- local grocery deliveries
- online shopping deliveries
- Royal Mail deliveries

This duplication of service is hugely unsustainable and a clear example of non joined up thinking. It is worth noting that such public sector fiefdoms of service may hark back to the medieval model and in this instance not in a good way.

The ideas here respond to the changes in train and encourage more of the same, increasing allied local employment, and sustainable work and home patterns.

Much as changes in working wrought the changes at Thaxted with the cutlers, so today's work changes might illuminate and suggest forms of growth and change which are in step with peoples lives and not imposed growth out of step.

The implication of these ideas is the need for government support, and broad joined up thinking with the participation of responsible authorities across the board. With these in place, much of what is suggested is by no means a stretch of the imagination or the government purse, but a new future which responds to: a mistaken post 1974 past and an historic rural truth.

...legacy of April 1st 1974.

The 'new' Uttlesford is required to provide a plan and yet not truly given the tools to so do. Meanwhile demand upon the *underdeveloped* becomes more stringent as growth nearby marches on. It may be treated like a backwater, but for new housing Uttlesford is prime for imposed growth.

Requirement and pressure to deliver without the means is untenable.

If those means are held by another layer of government then 'localism' is a hollow gesture. If the means are vested in the developer then planning is just another sop to localism and undeliverable.

National government, as well as many cross -boundary departments, must play their part for this to work. Joined up thinking and real co-operation are not just bywords here but much needed actors in the whole.

For now, Uttlesford may, through no fault at home, be lacking:
- it may not have the expertise.
- nor the heft for implementation.
- it does not have the infrastructure to support the wish
- or control the means to provide it.

These factors have to be part of the root cause of planning failure at Uttlesford. And the fact that some are inherently historical and overlooked and others beyond us suggests that we need help...