

**CAA Organisational Assessment**

Agenda Item 8b

**Portfolio Area:** Efficiency and Resources  
**Report Presented by:** Councillor Lager

**Background Papers:** Braintree District Council Organisational Assessment  
Oneplace website [www.oneplace.direct.gov.uk](http://www.oneplace.direct.gov.uk)  
**Corporate Implications:** Please refer to table at end of report  
**Options:** To receive the organisational assessment for Braintree District Council for 2008/09

**Risks:** N/A

**Executive Summary**

The Comprehensive Area Assessment for the Council was published on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009 by the Audit Commission.

The aim of the report is to provide the organisation with an up to date assessment of its performance. It is divided into two key parts.

- The **managing performance** assessment looks at how well the organisation is delivering the outcomes and services that are important to local people. It looks at how well the organisation is working with other partners and how well it is improving.
- The **use of resources** assessment looks at how well the organisation is using its resources (such as money, staff, land and buildings) to meet the needs of local people in a way that provides value for money.

The report is very positive and states that 'The overall organisational assessment score is 3 because the Council provides good services to local residents and uses its resources well. The managing performance score is 3 because Braintree District Council is making good progress against its priorities. These are based on what is important for local people and are kept under review to ensure that they remain relevant'.

A copy of the full report is provided as an Appendix to this paper.

An area highlighted for improvement within the report is the quality of some performance data. A new Data Quality Policy has been introduced and the PMO and Internal Audit have developed a governance structure to ensure the quality of performance data that is reported.

The Use of Resources assessment provides an action plan which identifies areas in which the Council could improve. The action plan was received by the Audit Committee at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010 and the Committee will monitor delivery against the plan.

**Decision**

To receive the CAA Organisational Assessment for Braintree District Council.

<b>Corporate Implications</b>			
<b>Financial:</b>	N/A		
<b>Legal:</b>	N/A		
<b>Equalities &amp; Diversity:</b>	N/A		
<b>Customer Impact:</b>	N/A		
<b>Environment &amp; Climate Change:</b>	N/A		
<b>Consultation/Community Engagement:</b>	Local Committees		Partners
	Public		Staff
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No		
<b>Public/Private Report:</b>	Public		
<b>Officer Contact:</b>	Trevor Wilson and Cherie Root		
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# Braintree District Council

## Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



**oneplace**

for an independent overview  
of local public services

## Braintree District Council

Overall, Braintree District Council performs well

Managing performance	3 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	2 out of 4
Managing resources	3 out of 4

Description of scores:

1. An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements, Performs Poorly
2. An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately
3. An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Well
4. An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Excellently

## Summary

The overall organisational assessment score is 3 because the Council provides good services to local residents and uses its resources well.

The managing performance score is 3 because Braintree District Council is making good progress against its priorities. These are based on what is important for local people and are kept under review to ensure that they remain relevant.

The Council is working with partners to improve open spaces. More waste is being recycled with less being sent for landfill. Braintree is now showing a reduced carbon footprint through better use of environmental resources.

The Council provides strong community leadership in helping the local economy to prosper. It is developing plans to revitalise the town centres and supports small businesses especially those affected by the economic downturn.

Braintree is actively working with Mid Essex PCT to improve the opportunities for local people to improve their health. The Council is helping to provide better access to services in rural areas. Progress is being made to deliver the affordable housing needs of the district.

Braintree is becoming safer. All categories of crime fell in 2008/09 and there is good joint working between the Council and the police.

The Council and its partners are delivering community projects that are enhancing the quality of life in the area, particularly amongst the most vulnerable groups. Opportunities for young people are improving.

Braintree is working well with other councils to deliver joint services which provide better customer service and improved value for money. Access to services is improving, making it easier for customers to contact the Council.

The Council is improving its capacity in key areas. The skills of managers, employees and councilors are being enhanced. As a result, the effectiveness of the Council is improving.

The LSP structure has been strengthened and made more businesslike. This helps to ensure that the vision and ambitions are up to date and meet the needs of the district.

The approach to diversity and equality is improving. In 2008 Braintree achieved Level 3 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government.

The use of resources score is 3 because the Council governs its business effectively and manages its finances and resources well.

The Council manages its finances well and lives within its means. Braintree's priorities reflect what local people think is important. The Council sets targets against which progress is measured. It is well led and councillors actively watch what the Council is spending against its plans.

The Council has delivered some savings and knows what its expensive services are; it is taking steps to reduce costs in these areas. Councillors are kept well informed as to how the Council is doing and take action where necessary if performance is off course. However, the information supplied is not always robust.

Braintree is developing the skills of its staff to help it better meet the challenges of the future. The Council is planning what staff it needs for the future. It communicates well both with staff and the trade unions which has helped to smooth some big changes.

## About Braintree District Council

Braintree is the second largest (by area) district in Essex and is largely rural in character. The district has a population of around 140,900. This is expected to grow faster than the regional and national averages with a large increase in the number of older residents. Nearly half the population lives in the rural areas and just under half in the three main towns of Braintree, Witham and Halstead. The proportion of black and minority ethnic groups is small. The district is generally affluent and deprivation levels are slightly lower than Essex as a whole. However, there are pockets of isolated and deprived communities. Unemployment is higher than the regional but below the national average. Wage levels are slightly higher than average. However, large numbers of residents commute out of the district for their work. Housing in Braintree is relatively affordable and the district has seen one of the largest falls in house prices in the county over the past year. Government plans require a minimum of 4,340 new houses to be built in the district by 2021, with a large number of new jobs to be created as well. The health of the population of Braintree is generally better than average. Whilst the population enjoys a higher than average life expectancy, this varies across the district.

Smoking and obesity are still widely prevalent and only a minority of the population meets physical activity guidelines.

Braintree District Council's priorities are reflected in the Corporate Strategy for 2008-2012:

- The environment is clean and green
- Business is encouraged and the local economy prospers
- Everyone can enjoy a healthy lifestyle
- Housing and transport meet local needs
- People take pride in their local areas
- To deliver excellent, cost-effective and valued services

## Organisational assessment

Braintree District Council provides a good service to residents. The Council is making progress against its priorities. These are based on what is important for local people and are kept under review to ensure that they remain fresh. This means that the Council is focusing on the right things for Braintree.

### The environment is clean and green

Open spaces are becoming more accessible. For example, joint working between Braintree and Essex County Council at Great Notley Country Park has provided new facilities and a play area. As a result, more people are visiting the park. A Green Flag award was given to Halstead gardens in 2008. The Council also gave support to the Bocking Blackwater nature and environment community project. This has created a nature reserve that local people can enjoy.

The environment is becoming cleaner. More waste is being recycled. Last year, recycling and composting levels increased from 43 per cent to 46 per cent. The use of wheeled bins has been extended to a further 2,500 properties in the district. This means that less waste is being sent for landfill. Last year over 8,500 trees were planted to capture 5000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. Cavity wall and loft insulation grants through council tax rebates have helped cut back the carbon dioxide produced by home heating. As a result, the Council's own performance data for 2008/09 is now showing a reduced carbon footprint through better use of environmental resources.

### Business is encouraged and the local economy prospers

The Council is actively helping those residents affected by the current economic climate. The Supporting our Communities initiative identifies a range of actions being delivered by the Council and partners to help reduce the

social and economic effects of the recession in the area. Examples include freezing charges for Council services and the ability for residents to pay their council tax over 12 months rather than 10. The Council has provided £15,000 to the Citizens' Advice Bureau to help provide support and advice to those most in need. In addition, the Council has set up an economic support fund of £50,000 to meet the costs of extra support services for communities affected by the recession.

There is good support for small businesses in Braintree. The Council is successfully working with a local business advice agency, Business Development Services (BDS), to promote and encourage small businesses as part of a thriving local economy. This has been successful as 93 per cent of new businesses supported by BDS are operating successfully after three years. In April 2009, BDS was awarded £95,000 from the Local Area Agreement to implement a full programme of support for the district's small businesses. This supports those businesses that are vulnerable in the present economic downturn.

Plans to redevelop the town centres are well advanced. Proposals for town centre improvement schemes in Braintree, Witham and Halstead have been produced. The Council and its partners are seeking the views of local people about the schemes. In Braintree town centre, Council land is being used to help further the improvement plans. Detailed development plans are now being produced with the involvement of voluntary organisations, businesses and other interested parties. This demonstrates the Council providing strong community leadership in helping the local economy to prosper.

## Everyone can enjoy a healthy lifestyle

The opportunities and facilities for local people to improve their health have been increased. For example, the Council, the leisure contractor and Mid Essex PCT worked together to provide a two year free swimming programme for over 60's and those under 16 from April 2009. It has also negotiated a 'free swimming for all' project at all district swimming pools between January and March 2009. As a result, more people are taking part and there are now 16,800 registrations on the programme. More than 1,300 people are taking part in the Council's "Heart and Sole" healthy walking programme which is a considerable increase on last year. Joint working between the Council and PCT has also delivered a 12 week 'Shape-Up Healthy Eating' course and a "green gym" which has been funded and located on council land. The Council and the PCT have jointly appointed a health worker to develop and implement initiatives to help improve the health of local people in the future. As a result, progress is being made on improving the health of local people.

## Housing and transport meet local needs

Local people now have better access to services in rural areas. For example, the Council has introduced new minibuses for community transport. These help people living in rural areas who don't have transport to be able to get to their nearest town. Joint working through the Local Strategic Partnership is helping to develop a network of village agents to provide a point of access for isolated vulnerable groups in rural areas. Services are therefore becoming more accessible in rural areas.

Progress is being made to meet the housing needs of the district. During 2008/09 several schemes to provide new affordable housing schemes were started and Phase 1 of the housing scheme at Bailey Bridge Road was completed. The Council also potentially secured the provision of 57 new affordable homes on the former Riverside Pool Site in Braintree. The Council is making good use of external funds to develop housing for those most in need. For example, the Homes and Communities Agency allocated £8.2 million to new housing schemes in Braintree during 2008/09. The biggest single allocation was to the River View Extra Care housing scheme in Witham which attracted £2.49 million. Completion of this scheme is expected in 2010. As a result, there are now more affordable homes available for local people.

Less time is being taken to process planning applications. In 2008/09 the percentage of minor and other applications allowed within the 8 week limit significantly improved, whilst the percentage of major applications approved within 13 weeks fell slightly. As a result, householders are receiving decisions quicker.

## People take pride in their local areas

Local committees are improving their focus on meeting community needs and are well received. They have acted on the views of community groups in relation to a range of local issues including support for a group at Braintree enhancing the local environment and support for swimming lessons for young people at Halstead. As a result, the projects undertaken by the area committees meet community need.

Braintree is becoming safer. Although the 2009 Place Survey showed that people in Braintree perceive anti-social behaviour to be a problem, all categories of crime fell in 2008/09 compared to 2007/08, including a 20 per cent reduction in reported anti-social behaviour. There is good joint working between the Council and the police. For example, the Council's wardens share vehicles with the police and the Council provides space in its offices for police officers twice a week to answer public enquiries.

The Council and its partners are successfully working to promote the welfare of young people. For example, Braintree worked with Essex County Council and others to setup a Children's Centre in Silver End. The Braintree District Youth Council provides information and advice to 4,000 young people across the district through the production and distribution of a young people's magazine. In partnership with others, Braintree distributed over £160,000 of funding to support speech and language services, children's mental health and well-being, parenting support and youth work provision. As a result, opportunities for young people are improving.

Housing benefits are being paid quicker. The speed of processing new housing and council tax benefits is down from 22.9 days to 18 days in 2008/09 and the speed of processing changes of circumstances of for housing and council tax benefits down from 6.3 days to 6 days in 2008/09. This means that those most in need do not have to wait as long for payment as previously.

The Council and its partners are delivering a good range of community projects that are enhancing the quality of life in the area. Notable examples include community regeneration in the Bailey Bridge Road area and work to

integrate Polish migrant workers into the community. Funding has been extended to continue the migrant workers project with Uttlesford and East Herts District Councils. All these projects are delivering benefits for the community, particularly amongst vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The approach to diversity and equality is improving. In 2008, Braintree achieved Level 3 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. Areas for improvement identified in the report have been pulled together into an improvement plan.

## **To deliver excellent, cost-effective and valued services**

Braintree is working well with other councils to deliver joint services. For example, a partnership with Colchester and Uttlesford councils to control parking started in April 2009. Plans are advancing for a joint waste collection contract with Uttlesford and Colchester. Local people now have better access to Council services through joint working with Essex County Council at Witham Library. This provides face to face contact and helps people resolve their queries at the first point of contact. A choice based lettings on-line system was introduced in April 2009 which can be accessed at libraries. As a result, partnership working is delivering benefits in terms of both better customer service and improved efficiency.

The Council is putting in place measures to help improve value for money in the services that it provides and address an £800,000 budget shortfall over the next 3 years. Service efficiencies have already been achieved in the customer services centre, waste management and revenues & benefits. Braintree is reviewing its business plans to help ensure that services provide value for money and restructuring parts of the Council to help ensure they are better placed to deliver services for the public.

Customer access to services is improving. The Council has reviewed the types of calls that go through the customer service centre and revised the staffing arrangements so that call handling and response times match demand at peak periods. The automated call distribution centre was reviewed to ensure that the system allows customers to get to the right person as quickly as possible. A new customer access strategy and action plan have been approved by the Council. Customers can now pay for Council services on-line. Planned improvements include easier access for customers to Council services using the website. Therefore, it is now easier to contact the Council.

The Council and its partners are actively using community funding to deliver projects that are beneficial to local people. When the Greenfields Community Housing Association was established, an £11 million fund was allocated for community projects. Currently, three new funds totaling £175,000 are being managed jointly by the Council and Greenfields for a range of different projects across the district. This funding will help to improve facilities and opportunities for local people.

The Council is improving the skills and capability of its workforce. All service managers have received management training in key skills and knowledge areas. This will help them be better equipped to undertake their roles and

deliver improved services. Sickness absence amongst Council employees fell dramatically in 2008/09 to 8.25 days from 11.13 days in 2007/08. As a result, the capacity and effectiveness of the workforce is improving.

The skills and capacity of councillors are being developed. Capacity has been improved through a skills framework and training programmes. A Member Services manager has been recently appointed to support the work of councillors. These developments are supporting councillors in their role.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>

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