

**Braintree District Council
Rural Issues and Parish Liaison
Review of Service Provision**

1. Introduction

The Rural Issues and Parish Liaison Team conducted a review in 2007 to seek the views of all the Braintree District parish and town councils on the level of satisfaction with, and effectiveness of, this new service. Having completed a further year, a second review was carried out in July 2008 to assess and compare the current standard in relation to the previous year. (The 2007 score is shown in brackets in the table)

2. Use of the Review

The review will be used to identify areas in which the service can be improved and to acknowledge the team's achievements.

3. Review Method

On 10th July 2008, a letter enclosing a questionnaire was sent to all parish/town clerks in the Braintree district. *(As a result of feedback on last year's questionnaire, a slight change was made to question 1. Instead of 'When contacting the Rural Issues and Parish Liaison Team', it now reads 'Have you needed to contact the Rural Issues and Parish Liaison Team during the past year either by telephone/letter/email or personal visit? If your answer is yes, how do you consider the service performs?'*

There are four main questions, requesting a score - using a sliding scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates very poor and 10 excellent. These questions covered contacting the team, information sent to parishes, events, and comments and suggestions for improvement. A copy of the letter and questionnaire is attached to this report (Appendix 1 and 2). A completion date of 22nd August was given for return of the document.

4. Response from the Parish and Town Councils

25 questionnaires (46%) were returned from the 54 sent out which was nearly 10% down on 2007. However there were a number of new parish clerks who felt they hadn't been in post long enough to give a balanced response for 2008.

5. Analysis of the Questionnaire

The following is a summary of the responses given by the parish/town clerks. The right-hand column of the tables shows the **average score** (top score being 10) taken from the 25 returned questionnaires. To compare, the 2007 score is shown in brackets.

Question 1. Have you needed to contact the Rural and Parish Liaison Team during the past year either by telephone/letter/email or personal visit? If your answer is yes, how do you consider the service performs?

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| a. Initial contact, i.e. are you treated in a courteous and helpful manner? | 9.5 (8.4) |
| b. How well and efficiently do the team respond to and follow up on enquiries? | 9.1 (8.3) |

Question 2. When receiving information from the team:

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| a. Is the language used, for example, in letters, emails and newsletters easy to understand, i.e. is plain English used? | 9.3 (8.5) |
| b. The Parish Update (newsletter), in terms of content and layout – is the information relevant and helpful? | 8.4 (8.3) |
| c. Is the information on the website useful? Please note: There are still 3 parish clerks who do not use the internet. | 8.3 (8.3) |

Question 3. Events - from time to time the team organise events/forums/network meetings

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| a. In general, how interesting and helpful do you consider these are? | 7.7 (8) |
| b. How well do you consider the team feeds back information from these events. | 8.7 (8.1) |

Question 4. Overall, how good do you consider the support given by the Rural Issues and Parish Liaison Team?

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| 8.9 (8.5) |
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6. **Comments and Suggestions for Improvement**

The following are comments and/or suggestions, for improvement from the parish clerks. Where a note has been added, these areas will be considered and improved on. *(Please see 7. Conclusions)*

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| (i) Clerks' Network – I have only been in post since February and have not yet attended the Clerks meeting. |
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(ii) Forums - clerks' network - Personally, I don't find evening meetings easy to get to so I haven't been to any. Also I think it's hard to find enough issues to make a meeting worthwhile. Any other comments - Are there opportunities for streamlining these activities with EALC and ECC?

(Note: At the first meeting of the Network, clerks were requested to indicate whether they would prefer evening or daytime meetings. The majority chose evenings. However, we will be holding February 2009 meeting during the daytime to give an opportunity for attendance to those unable to make evening meetings. The September 2009 meeting will still be held in the evening for the majority to attend. Braintree District Clerks' Network is specific for this district and items covered reflect this. Feedback from meetings indicates the subject matter is helpful as the following quotes show:-

"the Agenda sounds well put together";

"I thought the evening was very worthwhile from my point of view – I was impressed by how positive everyone was, new and more experienced clerks alike, with regard to undertaking training"

"Thank you very much indeed for arranging such a valuable and interesting meeting last night. I liked the new format of joining tables to have an informal chat with guests which worked very well. I should be very pleased if this successful pattern continues in future. Will you please convey my grateful thanks to all concerned?"

"Thank you for arranging the network meeting. I was pleasantly surprised at how interesting it was. It was also good to put some names to faces and I gleaned some interesting points on parish clerking!")

(iii) A contact list for BDC personnel on the website would be helpful for parishes.

(This request is being looked into and as soon as an up-to-date list is available we will be posting it on the website.)

(iv) I have found this initiative very helpful and a first 'port of call' for queries and problems.

(v) Parish Update - layout fine, content - not all of it is relevant.

(Note: We always endeavour to include relevant information in the Parish Update. However, we acknowledge that not all the content is relevant to all the parish and town councils and will look for ways to improve.)

(vi) Parish Update – could be earlier.

(Note: Having spoken to the parish councillor who made this suggestion to clarify the point, it's been agreed this may be due to how the document is circulated.)

(vii) If there is no provision in the Parish budget for training, i.e. attend the Clerks Network, Clerks are not inclined to attend. Able to obtain help or advice on most Parish Council matters from EALC (to which we pay an annual fee), District Councillors, Parish Liaison Team or other Parish Clerks by telephone or email and therefore feel that the Clerks Network is not necessary.

(Note: This informal meeting enables parish clerks to meet BDC officers face to face in an informal setting and is popular with many of the clerks in the district. The agenda subjects are chosen to try to reflect current parish issues which are linked with the district council's aims and ambitions. Braintree District Clerks' Network is specific for this district and items covered reflect this. Note: please see quotes 6(ii).

(viii) Since the appointment of a Parish Liaison Officer communications with BDC have been excellent.

(ix) At the recent cluster meeting with Hatfield Peverel, we expected an A12 update, but no speaker came and nothing was sent to us in writing, which was disappointing.

(Note: This issue has been investigated and responded to – the briefing note was available at the meeting but not handed out. County Highways will be requesting an update and/or speaker for the next meeting.)

7. Conclusions

The Team were scored a '10' (excellent) from many of the Clerks, two of the questionnaires recorded '10's across the board. The average score came out at 8.9 (between good and very good) which is a 5% increase on 2007. These scores indicate that most Parish/Town Clerks are very happy with the service they receive and we have improved on last year.

Only one of the questions recorded a lower score than 2007 – this related to how interesting and helpful events had been this year. We haven't held a major event for parish councils this year and our previous review followed on from the 'Parish Fete' event held at the end of 2006 which was very successful.

However, although we've received another good review from our parish and town councils, the following areas have been identified for improvement:

- Clerks' Network – consider holding a daytime meeting to address the needs of those clerks unable to attend during the evening.
- BDC Website parish information pages – continue to update and improve these pages with the inclusion of a service information contact page.
- Parish Update – continue monitoring the advice/information to ensure it's usefulness to the parish councils.
- Parish Events – a project plan is being put together for a major parish event in March 2009.