

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES THROUGH ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

Agenda Item 6a

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Background Papers:- Cabinet Report Dec 08

Financial Implications: - The financial implications of the actions in this report are covered by the Economic Support Fund.

Equalities Implications:- Equalities Inclusive

Legal Implications:- None

Options: None

Risks: None

Executive Summary

The Council has prioritised its activities and provision of services as well as taking specific actions to ensure that the most vulnerable within the District can receive support and assistance during the current economic climate. The report demonstrates all the current actions and additional support to be made available to support our communities and those most in need during the economic downturn.

Recommendations

- (i) That a local economic summit be organized to consider the impact upon business and the local economy.
- (ii) That monthly information be gathered to monitor the current economic situation. This to include a range of indicators from level of benefit claimants, job losses or house repossessions.
- (iii) That the Council develops the current campaign with partners to signpost all potential advice and guidance to residents.
- (iv) That Local Committees consider the impact of the economic position on the locality and how they could support the different communities.

1.0 Introduction

The residents of this District, as well as others throughout the country are facing economic challenges which are unprecedented in recent years. The lack of financial stability in national finances is affecting the quality of life of many individuals.

- Increase in utilities costs
- Lack of credit
- Low interest rates affecting investments
- Downturn in the retail sectors
- Increase in fuel costs
- A general lack of confidence in the world economy is affecting individuals within the Braintree District

As the community leader, the Council, during these exceptionally challenging times needs to be at the forefront of supporting the local communities in any practical way it can. This can be directly through the services it provides, through signposting individuals to effective advice and guidance, to stimulating the local economy through investment and growth, which is sustained during any economic recession.

Recently, the three main towns within the District have been affected through the loss and closure of a number of major retailers. There has been further job loss through other businesses folding.

Set out in this report are numerous positive contributions the Council can make during these challenging times. However, it is suggested that the Council, as part of its corporate planning for 2009/10, should focus on three major themes:

- Supporting and stimulating the local economy through direct and indirect investment so as to ensure a vibrant and prosperous District for years to come.
- Focus on partnerships that will deliver meaningful support, advice and guidance to the most vulnerable groups within our District.
- Ensuring that Council services and resources are focused over the next twelve months to meet the short-term challenges which could make a difference to the quality of life for individuals.

This is a corporate challenge and will require significant focus to meet the short and medium term objectives of supporting our communities. Each of our actions should also contribute to improving the quality of life for all, over many years to come.

2.0 Background Information

A recent survey conducted by the LGA, IDeA and SOLACE revealed that across the country businesses, residents and public sector organizations are feeling the effects of the recession. It shows that as the downturn bites, people are increasingly turning to local authorities and public services to help them through tough financial times.

"The report shows a rise or expected rise in:

- People applying for housing benefit in nine out of ten Council areas

- Homelessness in eight out of ten Council areas
- Demand for free school meals in two out of five Council areas
- Mental health problems in two out of five Council areas
- Debt advice in nine out of ten Council areas
- Businesses asking for support in three out of four Council areas

The report shows a fall in:

- Planning applications in three in five areas
- Large scale construction projects in almost four out of five areas, with the lack of developers' finance the main reason given"

3.0 Actions to Support Communities and Businesses

3.1 Older, Disabled and Vulnerable Residents

- ◆ Provide community transport that supplies subsidised transport services for those residents with mobility difficulties, those who are wheelchair users and non-profit making groups
- ◆ Organise Older People Wellbeing Fairs to help them feel less isolated and provide advice and practical help on a range of topics such as benefits, community safety, health and welfare.
- ◆ Provide Concessionary Fares for residents aged 60 or over and those with special needs
- ◆ Leisure Card discounts for those aged 60 or over
- ◆ Free health walks aimed at over 60s
- ◆ Free swimming for over 60s and 16 year olds and under from 1st April for 2 years
- ◆ Special collections discounts of 50% for all those over 65

3.2. Financial and General Support For All Residents

- ◆ An Economic Support Fund of £50k to be set up to meet the costs of extra support services for communities
- ◆ Council Tax to be limited to a maximum 2.5% for 3 years until March 2011.
- ◆ All increases in charges under Braintree District Council control will be deferred until March 2010
- ◆ Provision of £15k extra funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to meet the extra demand for their advice and support services
- ◆ Funding provided to the Braintree District Voluntary Services Association for voluntary and third sector organisations to receive free advice and help.
- ◆ New benefits claims and changes of circumstance will be processed quickly – 16 days and 6 days respectively
- ◆ Loan assistance up to £15,000 to bring homes up to the Decent Homes Standard
- ◆ Grant assistance of up to £3,000 for those residents on low incomes for housing repairs
- ◆ Free energy saving light bulbs and water saving devices
- ◆ Loft and Cavity wall insulation schemes available for benefit recipients
- ◆ Increase of Discretionary Housing Allowance by 10% for tenants
- ◆ Provide home visits for the hard to reach groups in the northern area of the district to provide Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit advice on a trial for 6 months.
- ◆ Hardship claims and Council tax recovery service to be dealt with more sympathetically

- ◆ Run a housing benefit and council tax benefit awareness day
- ◆ Make claims for benefits easier and quicker for those residents who are made redundant and where the employer may not be able to provide evidence

3.3 Young People

- ◆ Leisure activities provided at discounts
- ◆ Free swimming for 16 year olds and under from 1st April for 2 years.

3.4 Businesses

- ◆ Discretionary Rate Relief is given to clubs, post offices and charities plus shops and public houses in rural areas
- ◆ Local suppliers will be paid as soon as possible and no later than within 14 days
- ◆ Rent free periods for new businesses and nominal rents for community organisations for 1-3 months depending on the length of the lease
- ◆ Visit businesses who are facing the possibility of making redundancies to give advice and assistance
- ◆ Council Tax, Business Rates and Trade Waste payments can be spread over 12 months rather than 10 to reduce the monthly payment for those in hardship.

3.5 Working with Partners

- ◆ With the Police, NHS (Mid Essex), Age Concern and Voluntary Sector organise a range of self help workshops, training days and activities to provide practical help for residents
- ◆ Work with Parish Councils to ensure residents receive extra help and advice on benefits through organising surgeries in rural areas
- ◆ With other Authorities BDC has been successful in obtaining extra funding for enhanced Housing Options so that tenants can have greater choice on where they live
- ◆ Extra funding through the Performance Reward Grant will enable a project to be run in the district to ensure the elderly in isolated rural areas can receive support and information on issues such as health, social care, personal safety, fuel poverty, benefits and pensions
- ◆ A Handy-Person Service is provided to all tenants by Greenfields Housing Association to undertake small jobs around their homes for a small charge of £5 per hour
- ◆ Braintree District Voluntary Services Association provides a Green Fingers gardening service for the elderly and vulnerable at a small charge
- ◆ Hanover Home Improvement Agency specialises in helping the over 60s or people with a disability with housing advice, support covering repairs, gardening, legal entitlement advice, welfare benefits etc.
- ◆ With the Financial Services Authority provide Money Management Workshops for residents

3.6 Communications

- ◆ Provide direct telephone access for residents to obtain help and advice as quickly as possible
- ◆ Up to date advice and information will be published on the BDC website to raise awareness and promote services
- ◆ Provide on-line application form for benefits on website

- ◆ Provide leaflets and information to enable residents to help themselves and point them in the right direction and make these available in doctors surgeries, shops, etc.
- ◆ Surgeries to be held in rural areas to provide additional help and advice on Benefits
- ◆ Run various campaigns to inform residents of entitlement to benefits
- ◆ Use market research to identify and target where help is most needed
- ◆ Advertise benefit services in local media, parish newsletters, doctors surgeries
- ◆ Use fetes/fun days to have stands to advertise services and benefits and provide help and advice.

4.0 Further Support

Later on this agenda is a paper on the Local Area Agreement, which sets out the local projects which will be funded through the performance reward grant and significantly contribute to supporting the communities within the District through this challenging economic period and build improved foundations for the future.

We will monitor these actions and continue to look at other ways to meet the needs of residents and businesses. We will also work with our Partners such as NHS (Mid Essex), Police, ECC and the Voluntary Sector to provide more ways of helping and assisting our communities.

As part of this corporate initiative, it is further suggested that Local Committees should monitor the impact upon their locality and, where appropriate, direct some of their local funding to support their local communities.