

Epping Forest District Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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for an independent overview
of local public services

Epping Forest District Council

Overall, Epping Forest District Council performs adequately

| | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Managing performance | 2 out of 4 |
| Use of resources | 2 out of 4 |
| Managing finances | 2 out of 4 |
| Governing the business | 2 out of 4 |
| Managing resources | 2 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 2 because the Council delivers some good quality services and uses its resources adequately.

The managing performance score is 2 because whilst the Council delivers some good quality services, the track record of improvement is weak. Its rate of improvement is slower than some other councils and it only met 58 per cent of its performance targets in 2008/09. The time taken to pay people their benefits is slow. While there has been some improvement in the last year, this has varied and the service needs to do more to encourage take-up of benefits and offer a more accessible service. Provision of affordable homes is slow with progress affected by limited availability of sites. Some performance needs to improve and this is leading to some tensions between some senior officers and some councillors. The Council has the money needed to deliver its ambitions though it needs to focus more on value for money and quality of service delivery.

Some services are improving particularly in relation to some of the Council's top priorities. Nearly all council homes in the district meet the decent homes standard. Residents are safer as crime is reducing with 745 fewer crimes in 2008/09 than the previous year. In response to the recession the Council is paying invoices more quickly, it has not increased car parking charges and has rental land and mortgage rescue schemes. Recycling rates improved slightly from 42 per cent in 2007/08 to 43 per cent in 2008/09. However, by September 2009 recycling was at 46 per cent. Recent changes to the delivery of the service have extended recycling collection and should lead to further improved collection rates.

There are some strong and effective local partnerships. For example, the Council has worked with partners to put in place Stay Safe and Sanctuary schemes for those suffering from severe racial crimes and women experiencing or threatened with domestic violence. This includes making properties safe and giving extra support to the victim. There have also been a range of community based schemes which have led to improved facilities available for different groups some of which have resulted in reduced anti-social behaviour.

Senior politicians are providing improved community leadership. The Leader is taking a proactive role in key partnerships and now chairs the LSP. This has led to a focus on health inequalities and education needs across the district. However, the gypsy and traveller consultation continues to take significant staff time; however no decision on the preferred options has yet been made.

The use of resources score is 2 because the Council governs its business, manages its finances and resources adequately. Council Tax is the second lowest in Essex. The Council has a history of managing spending within resources and has increased its reserves in recent years. It does not yet effectively maximise use of information on costs and performance to improve services.

The Council and its partners share a clear vision for Epping Forest. The Council is exploring different ways to deliver services and improving its partnership working. The Council is developing its workforce and improving succession planning. The Council has recognised the threats and opportunities it faces in developing a skilled and productive workforce and is actively addressing them. It already has a well established management development programme centred on providing solutions to real issues faced by the Council.

About Epping Forest District Council

Epping Forest is in south west Essex, most of the 131 square miles of the district are green and rural. There are six main centres of population. The population of Epping Forest is around 123,300, with about half living close to its boundary with London. The East of England Plan proposes an extra 3,500 new houses to be built by 2021 plus an estimated 3,000 more where the boundaries of Harlow might expand into what is currently Epping Forest District. There is an above average number of older people and the number of people from black and minority ethnic communities is below average. The district has one of the largest traveller populations in Essex.

Epping Forest is a relatively well-off area although pockets of deprivation do exist. Unemployment is higher than the regional average, although the proportion of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance is lower than national and regional averages. Earnings are comparatively high, with many people commuting to London to work. There is a shortage of affordable housing, with house prices the highest of all the districts in Essex and around 50 per cent higher than the national average. People of Epping Forest are generally healthier than the England average, although there are inequalities - male life expectancy varies by around five years between the most and least deprived areas, although overall life expectancy is better than the England average.

The Council Plan 2006 - 2010 states five strategic priorities that support the vision to be a safe, healthy and attractive place in which to live and work;

- Green and unique
- Homes and neighbourhoods
- A safe community
- Fit for life
- Economic prosperity.

Organisational assessment

Green and unique

Levels of recycling have increased. Performance increased slightly in 2008/09 from 42 per cent to 43 per cent between 2007/08 and 2008/09. During this period the Council negotiated changes to the service with its contractor and reports that by September 2009 the rate was 46 per cent. A second wheeled bin and new food and garden waste collection started in September 2009 which is expected to improve performance further.

The volume of responses to its consultation on options for meeting current and future needs for gypsy and traveller site provision has been a significant challenge for the Council. The consultation has taken a lot of staff time particularly within the Planning service and the Council has yet to make a decision on meeting the needs of the travelling community. Despite the pressures on the service performance in relation to planning applications was mostly maintained, although it did not meet its targets. The exception was in relation to the number of major applications decided in 13 weeks which reduced. Progress on the core strategy and local development framework has been slow. This has been because of delays to the East of England plan caused by legal challenge.

Homes and Neighbourhoods

Local people are benefiting from an increased supply of decent and affordable homes. In 2008/09 there was a reduction in the number of non-decent homes leaving only 97 homes out of 6500 not meeting the standard required. The Council has made good progress in reducing the number of families made homeless. The time taken to relet vacant Council properties has reduced. Progress delivering affordable homes has been slow with 34 provided in 2008/09. The Council is facing problems in this area caused by the economic conditions and limited availability of sites. Progress bringing empty privately owned homes back into use continues to be slow. Most tenants are satisfied with the service provided by the Council as a landlord. The Council is delivering against its priority for decent homes but some areas of service delivery are weaker for local people.

Neighbourhoods are improving. Graffiti has reduced. Residents' satisfaction

with how the Council has kept the area clear of litter and refuse is in the top 25 per cent of councils nationally. However, the Council narrowly failed to meet its target in relation to levels of litter. Progress is being made implementing the 'Safer, Cleaner, Greener' strategy. Neighbourhood Teams have been recruited and an Environmental Response Unit is undertaking a wide range of environmental 'improvements', which are making a real difference to the environment.

There are some strong and effective local partnerships. For example, the Council has worked with a range of partners to put in place Stay Safe and Sanctuary schemes for those suffering from severe racial crimes and women experiencing or threatened with domestic abuse. This includes making properties safe and giving extra support to the victim. There have also been community based schemes delivered through partnerships. These have led to improved facilities available for different groups some of which have resulted in reduced anti-social behaviour. For example, its work with a regional professional football club at Limes Farm Estate and its support to set up a youth club at Roundhills.

The Council is progressing a range of initiatives to improve services for diverse groups in the community. However, some outcomes cannot yet be demonstrated. Action plans in relation to its disability and gender equality schemes have been further developed. The Corporate Equality Action Plan was reviewed in March 2008. Changes to the Council's Equality Impact Assessment toolkit are being piloted in several service areas. An Engagement Group comprising people with disabilities has met regularly throughout 2009 to develop an action plan for the Council's Disability Equality Scheme. It is too early to assess the impact of some of these initiatives.

The Council is taking some action to improve access to services. All its main public meetings are webcast. The housing service has almost completed a Housing Customer Perspective Programme. This has considered and challenged all communications the service has with its customers and all existing policies and practices and an action plan has been developed setting out improvements. However, there has been little progress on wider initiatives to improve access such as its customer transformation programme.

A safe community

Crime has reduced. Overall crime levels for 2008/09 were down eight per cent compared to 2007/08 resulting in 745 fewer crimes. Areas of success include a one per cent fall in theft, criminal damage has fallen 20 per cent and violent crime by five per cent. However there are some areas where crime is increasing such as domestic burglary which is up by 13 per cent. The Safer Communities Partnership continues to perform well. Cross-border arrangements with neighbouring councils have started for CCTV and sharing information and intelligence on persistent and prolific offenders. The Council part-funds six Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) and jointly tasks all the PCSOs within the Epping Forest Police Division.

Fit for life

The Council is delivering initiatives to improve health but outcomes are not yet

demonstrated. The Active Health Programme continues to develop well. To help elderly people to exercise a DVD has been produced and older residents are benefiting from an allotment created at Parsonage Court in Loughton. The Council has entered into a partnership with Harlow, Brentwood, Basildon and Thurrock Councils to fund a health promotion officer who promotes the Essex healthy eating award and carries out smoke free visits. It is too early to assess the impact of some of these initiatives.

Provision of leisure centres in the district remains an area of concern. The future of Epping sports centre has been secured and there are plans to improve playing fields at Ongar leisure centre. However, the joint use agreement at Waltham Abbey Sports Centre is not being extended or renewed. Although councillors have agreed to pursue, through a Task and Finish Panel, the feasibility of adding a sports hall alongside the facilities at the Waltham Abbey Pool complex no alternative provision has yet been agreed. However, the Council is providing support to King Harold school, the owners of the facility, to try to ensure it remains available for community use.

Economic prosperity

The Council has an overriding focus on keeping Council Tax low. It increased its Council Tax for 2009/10 by 2.5 per cent in line with its target. There are ongoing tensions in delivering the ambition to have the lowest Council Tax in Essex against the way that services are designed and delivered.

Some important services to people in vulnerable circumstances are weak. In 2008/09 it took too long to decide benefit claims. No work was undertaken to encourage take-up of benefits. Access to the service can also be difficult for those who work or who rely on public transport. The Council reports that increased workload, staff absences and transition to a new IT system, in part, contributed to this fall in performance. The Council has invested in the service with some success but this is not yet sustained month on month. This leaves people most in need receiving a poor benefits service.

The Council has acted to support local business and residents through the economic recession. Undisputed invoices are paid within 20 days; ensuring contracts are accessible to small businesses and giving priority to local suppliers and contractors when buying goods and services. It has frozen car parking charges and continues to provide free Saturday parking. To help residents struggling to keep or secure new accommodation it has implemented rental loan and mortgage rescue schemes. These measures help the local community during the economic downturn.

Consultation with young people is effective. An Epping Forest Youth Council survey obtained young people's views. This information was then used in the Big Youth Debate in November 2008. At this event an audience of young people questioned a panel of representatives of the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as local Members of Parliament and councillors. An action plan is being developed and implemented by the Local Strategic Partnership and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. Effective consultation allows the Council to show that it is providing services tailored to the needs of local people.

Improved community leadership is being provided by senior politicians. The

Leader is taking a proactive role in key partnerships and now chairs the LSP. This has led to a focus on health inequalities and education needs across the district. The LSP has reviewed its purpose and structure and agreed clear priorities. Strong community leadership is helping to tackle some locally important issues.

Capacity to deliver future improvement

Some individual relationships between portfolio holders and senior officers are effective and supporting service delivery. However it is recognised that some performance needs to improve and this is leading to some tensions between some senior officers and some councillors. This is impacting on the confidence and relationships between some councillors and some officers. The Council has the money needed to deliver its ambitions though it needs to focus more on value for money and quality of service delivery.

A lack of capacity is impacting on delivering priorities. The Council has undertaken a major management restructure with the aim of producing more corporate capacity, a better focus on priorities and a clearer strategic view across directorates. However, this restructuring has adversely affected capacity in the short term as after two years not all staff are in place. There are signs of the restructuring having a positive impact, with more cross directorate working. There are other pressures on capacity. There has been a strong reaction to the Travellers and Gypsies consultation, which is taking up much officer and councillor time. Long-term sickness absence among key senior staff and difficulty in recruiting to some posts has also affected capacity. Sickness absence levels increased in 2008/09 from 8.5 days to 10.5 days. The Council is now taking suitable action to improve the management of sickness absence. Capacity pressures are adversely impacting on the delivery of services and corporate priorities.

The Council's track record of improvement is weak. For the three years to 2007/08 its rate of improvement was slower than other councils. Only 44 per cent of performance targets were met in 2008/09. Although the delay in the adoption of the East of England Plan meant that the Council missed some targets, it only achieved 58 per cent of targets excluding these. This progress does not point to accelerated improvement. To address this weakness service planning started earlier for 2009/10, and the Council is moving to two-year plans to improve continuity. These changes should lead to more robust plans for improvement. The performance development review process has improved with completion rates improved and smarter action plans which link to corporate priorities. This improves the clarity around outcomes and focus on performance.

The Council is developing its workforce and improving succession planning. It has an internal management development programme and some staff have taken part in the Essex leadership course. The Council has put in place training programmes to support women wishing to apply for promotion. The Council has secured Investors in People re-accreditation.

The Council has the money to resource its objectives and has kept its debt-free status. It has a track record of delivering against its medium term financial strategy. However, to restrict the council tax increase to 2.5 per cent for 2009/10 the budget set means it has to make savings or use reserves to

meet a budget shortfall rather than invest in services. Value for money is adequate. The Council adopted a value for money strategy in March 2009. Overall, the Council's plans to deliver value for money are leading to some improvement but are not having a consistent impact across the organisation.

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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