



Gosfield & Greenstead Green Ward

Annual & 4 year administration report to the Parishes in the Gosfield & Greenstead Green Ward 2019-2023

By District Councillor Peter Schwier

As this is the last year of the Braintree District Council administration 2019-23 I have unashamedly taken reports on the various achievements and actions in order that you can gain an overview of what has happened across the district that affects all of us, as residents, as businesses, as communities.

I make no apologies for the length of the report as I wanted you to be able to 'see' and hopefully, understand the vast amount of work, services and investment that has been undertaken and delivered by Braintree District Council.



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Overview – Leader

As this is the final meeting of the 2019-23 Administration, I thought it would be appropriate to reflect upon the significant work that has been carried out and the many achievements over the last four years. The four years have been unlike any other in history of the Council since it was formed. The COVID pandemic brought huge challenges for the whole organisation and new and different ways of working had to be learnt at speed.

Our staff stepped up to the challenge and we were able to maintain a high level of service throughout the period. We were also highly successful in implementing many new requirements asked of us by Central Government which had to be understood and implemented quickly.

I am sure we all wish to thank BDC staff for their efforts. It was also challenging for us as we got to grips with virtual meetings and responding to the advice, "You're muted".

Members elected in May 2023 will almost certainly face new challenges. Although our financial position is much stronger than most other Authorities there will be a financial gap to close and tough decisions will need to be taken.

In addition the face of local government is likely to change significantly over the term of the next Administration and it will be important to ensure that the District is well positioned in any new arrangements.. This election will see several long serving colleagues standing down and a lot of experience of public service will be lost.

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES

Communities Community Safety Achievements 2022/23

BDC is the coordinating organisation for the Braintree District Community Safety Partnership chaired by the Cabinet Member for Communities. The partnership is made up of the regulatory authorities working in the district and is a statutory responsibility. The partnership and the Council have achieved several new initiatives, including working in partnership with the Essex Office of Police Fire and Crime Commissioner secured £297,000 funding from the Home Office Safer Streets initiative (with an additional £150,069 match funding from all partners) for an area in Witham. This project includes working with Essex Police, CARA, Fusion Lifestyle, Neighbourhood Watch and Witham Town Council to deliver interventions over a 2-year period in efforts to reduce anti-social behaviour, neighbourhood crime, Violence Against Women and Girls and overall perception of crime and safety in the area.

The Council also recently secured £29,000 from Essex County Council via the Changing Futures fund to provide an SOS Bus (a medically equipped mobile vehicle) in identified locations across the district providing those with complex needs and vulnerabilities with access to a range of services in one place including drugs and alcohol, mental health, housing, debt).

An additional responsibility of the Council is to oversee the Community Triggers process and request giving victims of Anti-Social Behaviour the right to request a review of their case and bring agencies together to take a joined-up approach to problem solving. In the last year alone 7 requests have been received and undertaken with the Council as the lead authority.

The Community Safety team working with other services have set up two operational subgroups: A Housing Support subgroup to work with those at risk of losing their accommodation due to ASB and a Domestic Abuse subgroup to better support victims of abuse where housing is a factor. The Council has also recruited a Domestic Abuse specialist officer to better support victims who approach the organisation. The Council in their role in the Community Safety Partnership work with other agencies to either share or create social media campaigns to raise awareness. A recent example includes a domestic abuse social media campaign targeting both victims and perpetrators and 10,000 people were reached. In addition, 25 participants from a wide range of organisations including ECFRS, faith groups, local businesses, and local government, attended a J9 Domestic Abuse Awareness raising session hosted by the Council Community Safety team.

The Community Safety team have developed and led on a local exploitation group for a range of professionals to discuss issues of exploitation locally and work to combat exploitation and also continue to train local businesses, sports clubs and individuals through the Spot it Stop it scheme.

Braintree District Museum

The partnership between the Council and the Braintree District Museum has gone from strength to strength with the Council providing continuing to provide grant funding on an annual basis. The museum works hard to achieve its own objectives whilst aligning with Braintree District Council priorities. Examples of work that has been achieved by the museum includes the Warner Textile Archive opening as a research centre for textile design and history by appointment or online off the back of the Covid pandemic.

The museum also has hosted Special Exhibitions in the last 4 years to encourage people back to the museum including Space Fact & Fiction, The Art of Friendship by Denise Hoyle & Marianna Straub, Dinosaurs from Egg to Extinction and the Wonderful world of Ladybird book artists.

The museum works with the Council to ensure it is inclusive to all audiences and hosts the governments Holiday and Food (HAF) activity sessions in the school holidays ensuring those children who receive free school meals can access free activity and lunch in the school holiday's and providing an alternative to sporting and physical activity. They have also introduced warm spaces sessions giving free access to the museum for those either struggling with cost-of-living issues and heating their own homes. The museum works in collaboration with and in support of the Braintree Cultural Education Partnership delivering continuing professional development, grant programmes and projects to schools throughout Braintree District. It also hosts a number of other events include Braintree Textile Fair, East

Anglian Festival at Heddingham Castle, Braintree Christmas Light Switch on and workshops since returning from Covid lockdowns.

40 people attended the Together in Sound Sharing Event at Braintree Museum and Braintree Town Hall celebrating participation of those living with dementia, their companions and family members, Guests included the Chairman and Leader of Braintree District Council, Deputy Lord Lieutenant High Sheriff, Chief Executive of Saffron Hall, Professor of Music Therapy at Anglia Ruskin University. There are new tenants at the museum café 'Something Scrummy' which re-opened up in August 2022 and offers a range of food and drink.

Cycling Strategy

Since the Cycling Strategy was adopted in September 2021 work has taken place over the last 17 months on cycling project activity and behaviour change communications.

The Active Travel Fund cycle route is being implemented this year, including Healthy School Streets, 20mph limits and a cycle route from Braintree railway station to the north of the town centre.

Cycling and Walking Plans are being developed for both Braintree town and Witham town which will give Braintree District the opportunity to coordinate the delivery of walking and cycling infrastructure for example through new development, or other roadworks or maintenance programmes as well as having schemes ready for funding opportunities.

We have established good partnership working with local cycle clubs which resulted in successful grant applications being received for 3 cycle groups, established relationships with cycle retailers who are now offering discounts to residents, promoted active travel plans to schools and businesses and worked closely with colleagues in Essex County Council.

The production of a range of cycle maps of the district has been a great step forward in promoting routes to both families and leisure cyclists.

Cycling communications have promoted initiatives and opportunities for businesses, residents and visitors to support our Cycling Strategy and make changes to everyday life.

Councillors Community Grants 2019 – 2023

Since April 2019 288 grants have been awarded through the Councillors Community Grants scheme to a total value of £245,847. This makes the average grant over the time to be £854. Awarded grants ranged from £95 to £6,000. The smallest, £95, was given to fund a sign for the village toddler group. The largest, £6000, saw 13 councillors contributing to the costs of providing the "Space – Fact or Fiction" exhibition at Braintree District Museum Trust. Whilst there were multiple grants for noticeboards, defibrillators, equipment, running costs and planting projects some of the more unusual activities included recording a CD for a brass band's 50th anniversary, speed sign stickers and a potato rumbler. Grants were provided to help with Covid related activities, celebrations for the Queen's Diamond jubilee and most recently cost of living help. The latter will include a fund provided to Community360 for cost of living support.

Health & Wellbeing

It is tempting to look back over the past 4 years and consign to memory some of the difficulties we all faced during the pandemic and its aftermath. Queuing outside supermarkets, closed schools and offices, travel restrictions, inability to meet family and friends, lost loved ones, health uncertainties, vaccine availability, face masks, cancelled holidays, closed football grounds, swimming pools and other leisure activities, and many, many others.

I remain very proud of my fellow councillors, council officers and communities across the District who pulled together to recognise the problems and health issues faced by all residents and helped organise vaccines, make Covid testing kits available, arrange food and prescription deliveries, providing emotional support, looking after the most vulnerable. These and many others activities all created many unsung and uncredited heroes.

Even now, there are still residents cautious about leaving their homes and some who continue to need support.

Council staff and our partners in both the voluntary and private sectors have introduced a number of schemes and initiatives to recognise the ongoing issues but above all we can reflect and acknowledge on a huge number of achievements in the Council's Health and Well-being activities.

INNOVATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Finance and Corporate Transformation

Covid Support to businesses and individuals

In the two years 2020/21 and 2021/22 the total amount of Covid related grants & reliefs provided to businesses and individuals was £59m and £2m respectively.

Grants and reliefs were provided to businesses across many different schemes covering varying periods of the Covid pandemic and reflecting different levels of lockdown and local restrictions in place. Mandatory and discretionary schemes were administered and included some collaboration with Essex County Council on several schemes.

Financial support given to individuals included the Council Tax Hardship Fund, and payments under Test & Trace for self-isolation.

Energy Rebates

In 2022/23, £7.7m of Council Tax Energy Rebates paid to eligible households in Council Tax Bands A to D.

A discretionary scheme was also administered providing a further £213k of financial support to households not included in the core scheme and 'top-ups' to those households in receipt of Local Council Tax Support.

Council Tax Support Fund

Administration of a new government funded Council Tax Support Fund in 2023/24 providing up to £25 discount to those who are on Local Council Tax Support, with additional discretionary support to be provided by the Council for exceptional hardship – in total over £200k of financial support.

New Homes & Growth Dividend

Up to £25 provided to all eligible council taxpayers at the time of annual billing distributing around £1.6m to c 64,000 households.

Savings & Efficiencies

Over the period of the current administration savings and additional income have been identified and agreed as part of the annual Budget totalling £2.5m, whilst also protecting and investing in key service priorities.

Council Tax Level

The Council has consistently remained the 4th lowest Council tax rate set in Essex amongst City/ Borough/ District Councils. The Council's Band D rate has also been below the shire district average for England and has increased at a lower rate.

Shared Payroll Service

The Council was one of the original partners in the establishment of a Shared Payroll Service and is the Lead Authority. The service has generated financial benefits for partners alongside strengthening resilience and creating a centre of payroll expertise. The service was expanded in April 2021, with the addition of three Essex councils taking the total number of authorities supported by the service to six.

Governance

In 2020/21 a full review was undertaken of the Council's Constitution and the Council's Governance arrangements. This was the first full review for many years and looked to bring consistency to the contents of the Constitution, remove duplication, simplify and standardise the language used and bring its contents up to date to reflect the practices of the Council and ensure compliance with its statutory obligations. The review ensured that the Constitution remains a useable document for our Members, Officers, and residents of Braintree District. The review was undertaken through a programme of works which ensured Members were engaged and revisions were considered through a variety of gateways before formal approval at the Council's AGM in April 2021.

ICT

The Digital Strategy 2017 to 2021 laid out the how the authority would meet its cost and service challenges using technology, and when the Covid-19 virus caused the authority to review its working practices the delivery of the strategy was accelerated. This enabled staff, members, partners, and customers to continue to function through distributed working supported by technology underpinned by the infrastructure of the council. During 2022 a revised and updated Digital Strategy 2022 to 2026 was developed and agreed by Cabinet and Council. The infrastructure is being upgraded to support the greater use of mobile devices, home working, increased use of online service provision.

Shared Procurement

This opportunity for efficient and cost-effective procurement is led by BDC officers with ECC supplier specialists. During the second half of 2021 the terms of reference were agreed and initial collaborative sourcing opportunities identified and in early 2022 training of officers involved shared procurement process. The authorities taking part vary across contracts and categories but include: Essex CC, Harlow, Uttlesford, Southend, Thurrock, Brentwood, Castlepoint, Epping, Colchester, Basildon, Maldon and Tendering. The new approach, already tested, will be launched summer 2023.

Customer Service Excellence

In September 2022, the Council was successful in retaining the Customer Service Excellence accreditation for a seventh year in a row. The Customer Service Excellence Standard is nationally recognised and designed to drive customer-focused change. The accreditation is a testament to the hard work of our people and the results of the assessment applauded the Councils strength in using customer insight to determine service delivery. This was particularly highlighted in our quick reactions and the depth of the support provided to residents, communities, and business through the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis which can only be made possible through the continuation of a number of years of understanding customer needs.

The assessment also concluded that the Council performs well, can evidence strong partnership working and has high customer satisfaction rates.

I have listed a large number of success and achievements in the following bullet points.

Environment Parks, Open Spaces Parks & Cemeteries

- Planted 200,000 bedding plants
- Refurbished 16 play areas across the District.
- Installed new inclusive play area at Halstead Public Gardens with PiPA accreditation (Plan Inclusive Play Areas).
- Achieved Gold Award for Halstead Public Gardens in Anglia in Bloom and Best Overall Park.
- Won Gold for the fourth year running in the Anglia in Bloom 'Best Medium Sized Park' category for Halstead Public Gardens.
- Won Silver Gilt for Halstead Cemetery in the Anglia in Bloom competition.
- Installed fencing/bollards to protect various open spaces across the District to prevent unauthorised access.
- Renewed the synthetic surface to the Artificial Grass Pitch at Great Notley County Park.
- Received 140 awards from the Essex Playing Fields Association for the quality of our parks and open spaces.
- Installed drainage to the sports pitches in Deanery Gardens & King George V Playing Field, Braintree.
- Extended the Cemetery at Bocking to create additional burial capacity.
- Held 1,077 funeral services at our four cemeteries.
- Delivered a community project that planted 78,000 bulbs and 31,700 tree saplings.
- Completed grounds maintenance work to 40 schools in the District.
- Took 69 bookings for use of the Council's parks and open spaces.

Street Scene

- Removed over 3,344 fly-tips across the District.
- Installed 57 litter bins on the A12 & A120.

- Introduced Anti-Littering signage to discourage littering.
- Investigated 1,621 reports of Abandoned Vehicles.
- Collected 280 stray dogs.
- Emptied 0.5 million litter and dog bins.
- Removed 219 incidents of graffiti.
- Issued 309 Fixed Penalty Notices and secured 22 prosecutions for various environmental offences.

Environmental Services

- Covid – update provided as part of the Climate Strategy Update Report
- Climate Change – Update provided as part of the Climate Strategy Update Report.
- Emergency Planning and Business Continuity - refreshers with The Essex Resilience Forum and Parish and Town Councils continue.
- The Handy Man service is going from strength to strength with the installation of many key safes and mobility rails in order to facilitate the discharge of patients from hospital.
- Food, Health and Infectious Diseases continue to be investigated.
- Health and Safety and Fire Safety training modules continue, also First Aid training.
- Public Health Team continue to deal with cases.

Operations and Commercialisation + Waste Management & Recycling

- Collected 214,707 tonnes of waste and recycled 106,435 tonnes, an average recycling rate of 49.57% over the 4 years.
- Provided a commercial collection service to over 1,000 businesses and organisations.
- Negotiated and commenced 10 year contract with Suffolk County Council at the recycling facility (MRF) at Gt. Blakenham, Suffolk, for plastics and paper/cardboard.
- Consistently low figure of missed bins – averaged only 3.65 per 100,000 over the period.
- Cross-party agreement to an ambition to reach a 75% recycling rate in the District.

Parking

- Maintained Park Mark (Quality and Safety) Accreditation at the Council's car parks.
- Upgraded the lighting at our car parks to low energy consumption LED lamps.
- Introduced two new car parks – Victoria Square (covered) and The Plaza.

Licensing

- Policy Reviews of Licensing Act 2003 and Gambling Act 2005.
- Supported Covid 19 response by the Council (licensed premises and taxis in particular).
- 6,024 applications received and processed, and 1,021 taxi and Knowledge Tests completed.
- Increased size of Licensing team in 2023 to manage a significant increase in licence applications.

Commercialisation

- Creation of a sales function supporting improved income generation through advertising, sponsorship and events.
- Creation of a shared Venues team for bookings at BDC venues – including new venues at I-Construct and The Plaza.
- Procurement of a hybrid mail solution (currently awaiting final approval) to deliver savings and increase efficiency of the Council.
- A Commercial.Gov review of opportunities for increased or new commercial income was undertaken, and the results are being analysed and acted upon.

CONNECTING PEOPLE, PLACES AND PROSPERITY

Economic Growth

- Supported the economic strategy that master planned 65 acres of employment land at Horizon 120 and The Plaza Enterprise Centre.
- Pedestrianised Braintree High Street with works planned in Witham and Halstead to begin shortly.
- Supported town centre initiatives to increase footfall in our three town centres.

- Developed I Construct innovation hub to support the development of new goods and services in the innovative construction sector.
- Dispatched tens of millions of pounds of Government grants to support businesses during the pandemic.
- Worked with neighbouring north Essex authorities to pool Government funding to offer business support, promoting economic recovery - post pandemic.
- Developed a new economic strategy for the Braintree District and launched 'Locate Braintree District' to promote the district and to continue to attract inward investment.

Housing, Assets and Skills Homelessness

Between March 2018 and January 2023, the Housing Options Team prevented homelessness for 1,156 households and helped another 477 households to secure accommodation after becoming homeless. This work continued throughout the pandemic, ensuring that some of the most vulnerable members of our community were protected. 8.2 19 individuals were accommodated during the pandemic under the 'everyone in' initiative, the majority of whom were supported into longer term housing.

Affordable Housing

- 1280 affordable homes were completed between 2018 – January 2023
- In the last full year, 417 affordable home completions were recorded, which is the highest number ever delivered by Braintree District Council
- We continue to set a high target and are on course to exceed that again this year

Rough Sleeper Initiative

Funding was secured through the Rough Sleeper Initiative which, in partnership with ECC and some of the other Essex Housing Authorities, has enabled the provision of an outreach service to anyone found to be rough sleeping in the district. Other RSI funding has been used to provide a 6-bed scheme, with support, for former rough sleepers and/or those at risk of rough sleeping, with a further 3-unit scheme, due to come on-stream in summer this year. Some RSI funding was also re-purposed during the pandemic to trial a Mental Health Navigator role, shared between BDC and Epping Forest District Council. The value of this post was recognised by all, and funding has been extended for a further 3 years (until 2024/25).

Braintree worked as part of the Mid Essex Sleeper Initiative which won a 'Working in Partnership' Award and came second in the Covid-19 Recovery category in housing.

Housing Strategy

We have been developing our new Healthy Housing Strategy, to guide the approach to housing need and demand up to 2028, which has gone through a nine-week public consultation process. The three main commitments from the Council in the draft strategy have been facilitating a consistent programme of high quality, affordable homes which best meet the needs of the current and future residents, supporting communities and enabling housing across the district to meet the needs of all our residents, especially those who are vulnerable, and improving access to and the quality of the Private Rented Sector and make best use of assets and existing properties.

Victoria Square

The £30 million town centre regeneration, commissioned by Braintree District Council, was completed in 2022 which included the build of:

- 35 high quality affordable apartment homes
- 70-bed Travelodge
- A Live well hub with capacity to serve 20,000 patients
- A pharmacy
- A restaurant or café and retail unit
- A new modern business inter change with added capacity to support future improvements in the bus network
- Public toilets
- A garden and plaza area to complement Braintree's historic Town Hall
- A twin-level car park

While resident in Braintree, Kier created apprenticeships and job opportunities, as well as supported small businesses and the local supply chain during the construction phase.

Horizon 120

- landmark £24m investment by BDC to secure 65 acres of prime employment land, stalled by the private sector

- Delivered the Council's first Local Development Order to promote development of the site
- Site infrastructure completed in July 2021, with 27.6 acres, of a developable 38 acres, now having been sold
- 6 buildings now completed, including The Plaza.
- 9 buildings nearing completion as part of the EoS 'grow on space' development
- Another building (Essex Xray) will begin development on site within the coming months
- New wildlife area, 470 trees, thousands of plants & shrubs, swales & wild-flowers, Public art, links to country park
- New electric on-demand bus service, Digigo, delivered in partnership with ECC.
- Have agreed at Cabinet to assign the land we have under option, known as H120 phase 2, to Marshgate Developments, which if and when planning is agreed will release another 26 acres of employment land to the market.

The Plaza

The Plaza, Braintree District Council's new £15.6 million enterprise and innovation centre created to support start-ups and small businesses, officially opened in 2022.

The three-storey centre consists of:

- 42 private offices for small businesses
- Aco-working space with dedicated desks and hot desks
- Shared meeting and seminar rooms with roof terrace
- Conference and event spaces
- CaféPlaza

Planning and Infrastructure

After several years of hard work and preparation by Officers and Members, and an examination by two Inspectors, Section 2 of our District Local Plan was finally approved in July 2022. Whilst it remains disappointing that this District is not able to proceed with two of the Garden Communities, this important document sets out our planning policies to 2033 and performs a key role when deciding planning applications. We welcome many of the Secretary of State's proposed planning reforms and have submitted our response to the consultation.

In tandem with the Local Plan, Neighbourhood Plans also have a role to play in where our towns and villages want to see development in their area. Neighbourhood Plans take time to pull together and require the dedication and effort of a group of local volunteers together with the support of their Parish Council and BDC Officers. We have seven Neighbourhood Plans in place with another eight in progress.

The structure of the Development Management team underwent a review resulting in some positive changes to staffing levels and responsibilities. Alongside this, a new Scheme of Delegation was introduced which led to only major planning applications coming before the Planning Committee, with the minor applications being decided by officers under delegated powers. There is still the opportunity for minor applications to come to Committee, with the Chair and Vice-Chair using their discretion as to the suitability of applications for a wider debate. This streamlining of the Planning Committee's work is widely accepted to be a positive development.

The Planning Committee members are always conscious of their responsibilities in ensuring that developments are appropriate for our District. In that respect, good design is a key factor when making decisions and the Committee has set a high bar when approving applications and impressing upon developers the need for quality housing for the benefit of our residents.

In 2022, as part of the budget discussions, and following a successful Member Reference Group scrutiny, it was agreed that the Enforcement team would receive additional funding of £200k to boost staff resources and improve the back-office processes. This has resulted in much improved efficiencies; the Enforcement officers are to be congratulated in obtaining some excellent results following particularly difficult investigations, including two cases that went to the High Court and resulted in judgements in favour of Braintree District Council.

In addition to planning applications that are decided by the District Council, an increasing number of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) have come forward. Together with the support of Officers, Councillor colleagues and other bodies such as Essex County Council, the Cabinet Member has been working on a number of

schemes including the A12/A120 upgrades, Longfield Solar Farm, East Anglia Green energy upgrade and the Bramford-Twinstead energy project. These schemes are time-consuming and complex; discussions and, importantly, consultation with residents are ongoing.

As part of our aim to improve travel around Braintree town itself, Braintree DC is collaborating with Essex County Council on producing the Braintree Town Transport Strategy. Meetings have also been held where we have been able to input our views on the wider and vital Transport East project.

The Cabinet Member from planning also represents Braintree District Council on the Essex Coastal Forum and the Essex Planning Portfolio Holders Group and regularly attends these meetings.

Working with the Planning Development Manager, the Cabinet Member approved the establishment of the Members Forum for the Planning Committee. This gives developers the opportunity to present an application at an early stage to the Committee, and relevant Ward Members, take questions and receive feedback on their scheme as a whole. It's early days for this Forum, but already appears to be beneficial to all concerned.

The Cabinet Member has received, and answered, numerous emails and phone calls from District Council colleagues, Parish/ Town Councils and residents asking for help and advice, which she has been pleased to provide.

If elected to Braintree District Council again, I will look forward to continuing to serve the rural Gosfield and Greenstead Green Ward and help run Braintree District Council as an efficient Council with excellent services - as I have during the last four years.

ENDS