

Hart District Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



oneplace

for an independent overview
of local public services

Hart District Council

Overall, Hart 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	1 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

Hart District Council performs adequately overall. The Council is tackling issues that local people recognise as priorities. These are: looking after the countryside, making the area a clean place to live and providing affordable housing. Councillors and staff generally work well together. The local area is well kept by the Council and a lot of people's rubbish is recycled. But the Council has provided very few affordable homes in the last two years. The Council is reducing the money spent on higher cost services, but is not managing staffing as well as it should.

Hart scores 2 out of 4 for managing performance. The Council achieves a high level of recycling at 40 per cent. Residents are satisfied that the streets are clean and that parks and heathland areas are well looked after. They are less satisfied with the refuse collection service, although this is now more reliable. The Council has a plan to help deal with problems caused by climate change and is starting to measure its own carbon footprint. Crime is low and the Council and its partners are successful in preventing and reducing anti-social behaviour. Residents like living in Hart. However, the Council needs to do much better on providing affordable homes as only 14 homes were delivered last year. The Council was too slow to make more sites available for new affordable homes. This is stopping people on low incomes from living in the area.

The Council's leadership is improving, but is not strong enough on affordable homes. The Council is working better with local people to improve services such as rubbish collection. The Council is working better with other organisations, but needs to make sure that together they deliver improvements for local people. It has to do more to understand the needs of the most vulnerable so that its new customer contact centre will be helpful to them.

The Council scores 2 out of 4 for Use of Resources. The Council has reduced the money spent on its high cost planning service, but planning decisions take too long. It is sharing services with other councils and private companies run some of its services. This is saving money and improving some services, as benefits are paid more quickly. The Council is not doing enough to train its staff, morale is low and too many days are taken off sick.

About Hart District Council

Hart is a small rural district in the north-east of Hampshire comprising the main towns of Fleet, Yateley and Blackwater in the north east with much smaller towns and villages to the west and south. The M3 and main Southampton to London rail line run through the district providing excellent communication links to London and the rest of the country.

Around 90,000 people currently live in the district and this is expected to grow to over 104,200 by 2020, with increasing numbers of older people. There is a large working-age population, mostly made up of those in the mid to late half of their working lives.

Hart is one of the least deprived areas in the country and people's health is generally better than the England average. Weekly wages are nearly £100 more than the national average and are the highest in Hampshire.

The Council is led by the Conservatives who hold 17 of 35 seats. The remainder are held by 10 Liberal Democrats, 6 Community Campaign Hart and 2 Independent candidates.

Organisational assessment

How well is the organisation delivering its priority services, outcomes and improvements that are important to local people?

Hart District Council's aims and priorities match the concerns of local people. These priorities are:

- Enhancing the environment
- Ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing
- Maximising efficiency and effectiveness.

The Council is delivering well in some but not all of its priority areas.

Enhancing the environment

The Council continues to achieve good rates of recycling, keep its streets and town centres clean and provide a more reliable refuse collection service. A

high proportion of Hart residents are pleased that public areas are kept clean. The Council recycles, composts or reuses almost 40 per cent of household waste and over two thirds of residents say they are satisfied with this service, which is close to the national average. Satisfaction with the refuse service has improved, but is much lower than the national average, even though the number of bins not collected has reduced over time.

Parks and the countryside are well looked after and are meeting the needs of local people. Levels of public satisfaction with parks and other open spaces are higher in Hart than for other areas. The Council is working well with local people and interested groups to agree management plans for the district's important environmental sites such as Hazeley Heath and Fleet Pond. Half of these sites now have management plans and the Council is developing plans for the remainder. These plans help local people have a say in how Council and other money is spent on these sites and mean that local people and visitors to the area can enjoy the sites and help protect wildlife species and habitats.

Hart is a safe environment for residents as crime is low and actions by the Council and its partners to prevent or stop anti-social behaviour are successful. The number of recorded crimes is the lowest in Hampshire and low compared with Hart's most similar group of councils. A range of summer activities for young people and a new bike repair project are starting to show results by stopping vulnerable young people from being involved in anti-social behaviour or other crime. Only 10 per cent of Hart residents see anti-social behaviour or drug or alcohol abuse as a significant problem across the whole district, which is low compared to other areas. A higher number of Hart residents, compared to other areas, think that the police and other public bodies deal successfully with any such problems.

The Council is starting to deal with problems caused by climate change in the local area, but it does not know how many CO2 emissions the Council itself produces. The new climate change partnership has agreed an action plan for reducing CO2 emissions in the local area. The 'Heat seekers' project is helping residents by providing advice on improving the energy efficiency of their homes. The Council is showing good leadership on climate change and now needs to focus on delivering the partnership's action plan. It is just starting to work out which areas of the Council's business produce the most CO2 emissions so that it can then plan how to reduce them.

The Council is starting to improve value for money in the planning service. A re-organisation of the service means that residents have better access to expert advice and the cost of the service is reducing. More needs to be done to reduce how long it takes the Council to decide planning applications which did not meet government targets last year. The time taken has recently started to improve and the Council is looking at other ways to speed up decision making which provide a faster service for residents and businesses.

Ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing

The Council is not delivering sufficient affordable housing to meet the needs of local residents and has failed to get agreement from most parish councils to

build affordable homes in villages. There are over 1,500 residents waiting for an affordable home in Hart, but the Council provided only 14 new affordable homes last year and 17 in the previous year. These low numbers are well short of the Council's target of 80 affordable homes per year. The Council has also failed to deliver any homes in the last year to meet the needs of families who want to live in villages but cannot afford to buy. Continuing negotiations with parish councils have resulted in their agreement to only one affordable housing site in a village. Although the recession is having an impact, affordable housing delivery is poor in Hart compared to other councils, including other Hampshire districts. Local people in need of affordable housing in Hart are waiting longer than they should for a new home.

The Council has been slow to improve the delivery of affordable housing to meet local need, but is now taking action on its own and with its partners, to try to turn around its poor track record. The Council was slow to change a planning policy to make large sites available for affordable housing as the new policy was only decided last year. It is using this new policy to prepare for developing these sites when the rate of house building starts to improve and three of these possible sites could provide about 500 affordable homes. The Council is taking new action to deliver affordable homes by selling Council land to housing associations to build homes. It aims to provide about 25 homes on these smaller sites but this needs the support of local councillors who have a poor track record of supporting smaller housing developments. This is not helpful to local people who need low cost homes. The Council's plans for future affordable housing delivery show that it expects the number of new affordable homes to increase from 2010/11 onwards as the recession ends.

The Council, working with its partners, does well in preventing homelessness. A high proportion of residents at risk of homelessness do not go on to become homeless because of the advice they receive from the Council and local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Only three homeless families were placed in temporary housing last year while waiting for a permanent home. A few homeless families complained about the quality of advice they received from the Council and the housing service is now improving its staff training and information to customers. Due to the recession, the number of Hart residents needing advice about mortgage arrears has increased and the CAB has received more money from Hampshire County Council to help manage this. The Council is working with partners such as Job Centre Plus and the CAB to make sure that its homelessness advice service is well publicised in their offices.

The Council is working well with the gypsy and traveller communities to meet their housing needs. It continues to make available a temporary site and is working with this community and other local residents to identify replacement permanent sites.

The economy, health and well being

The Council recognises that it needs to do more on the economy. The Council and its partners are taking some practical steps to help local businesses and local people. These include quicker payment of bills to local businesses and basic skills training for adults including from the gypsy and traveller community.

The Council and its partners work together to improve the health of local people including the most vulnerable. Over 80 per cent of residents consider themselves to be in good health. More Hart residents take part in sport and physical activity and a higher proportion are satisfied with sport and leisure facilities compared to other areas. More local people with disabilities are taking part in sports such as swimming at the leisure centres. The Council is addressing health issues which matter to local people such as helping them continue travelling by bus to the nearest hospital providing mental health services.

Maximising efficiency and effectiveness

The Council's plans to become more efficient are resulting in some improvements, but it is too early to assess the results of its newer plans. Being more efficient is a priority for the Council and it is making big changes to the way it provides services compared to most other district councils in Hampshire.

The Council is delivering better value for money in some of its priorities and higher cost services by making savings, having more streamlined processes and improving the service for customers. The shared legal service provides better advice and the Council has plans to share other services such as environmental health to improve service quality at a lesser cost. The Council is not able to benefit from a proposal to share its refuse collection service with seven other Hampshire councils as this is not going ahead. But it is trying to form a smaller partnership with neighbouring councils.

Council services being run by private sector companies is another way in which the Council is seeking to make efficiencies and benefit its customers. The revenues and benefits service has been run like this for over a year. New housing and council tax benefit claims are decided in an average of 21 days, although some of these claims were not calculated correctly last year which means that some residents may not be receiving the right amount of benefit. The service loses less money in financial penalties for poor performance and the collection rate for council tax and business rates is improving and above the national average.

More Council services are being run by one private company from September 2009. These changes include an agreement to improve the customer contact centre with better handling of calls and more services included. Investment in new technology, improved financial reporting and better quality advice for managers on staff matters are all part of the changes. The Council aims to save £170,000 per year.

Working with town and parish councils is improving as the Council is giving them more responsibility for local facilities such as play areas. Four new parish councils are being set up with support from the Council and it is discussing plans with parishes for the handover of local facilities. The aim is to give local communities more say in local services and bring financial benefits to the Council.

Does the organisation have the leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future

improvements?

The Council's leadership is improving but it needs to act more decisively to provide enough affordable homes. The Council needs to increase staff capacity, otherwise it may not be able to achieve all its plans for the future.

The Council is able to take some difficult decisions, but has not acted quickly or decisively enough to help local people who need low-cost housing. The Council recently made a difficult decision for a private company to run four of its services which involved redundancies. But it did not decide quickly enough to change its planning policy to help with building affordable homes and is slow to make sites available for affordable homes.

The Council has some but not all of the high level plans it needs to deliver its ambitions. The Council has developed a new plan to help it to manage its buildings and land more efficiently, but lacks an up to date people strategy. This means that the Council does not yet have a clear way forward for developing its staffing.

The Council has agreed shared priorities for the area with its partners and its partnership working is improving, but not yet getting results. Although the community safety partnership is good, others focused on the economy and children and young people are relatively new and it is too early to see the results of actions. The Council is starting to contribute to the shared Local Area Agreement priorities, for example climate change, and it takes part in some of the county-wide partnerships, such as the environment partnership.

'Access to services' was assessed as 'fair' in June 2009 by the Audit Commission. The Council has improved its consultation with residents through the citizens' panel and is starting to engage with black and minority ethnic communities and young people, but this needs to be better. The Council lacks a community engagement strategy to help it better understand the needs of the most vulnerable people in its area. It is going to develop this strategy in the coming year.

Senior managers and councillors work well together, but staffing problems need urgent attention so that the Council can develop the new plans it needs and manage the private companies running some of its services. The Council is using shared or privately run services to bring in more expertise and help manage workloads better. But it still faces staffing problems. There are not enough senior managers, morale is low and sickness absence levels, although reducing, remain high. The Council supports staff well when they are affected by changes in the way a service is run but it has been slow to develop a staff training programme.

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/>

Alternative formats - If you require a copy of PDF documents in this site in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call: 0844 798 7070

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ
Telephone: 0844 798 1212
Fax: 0844 798 2945
Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946
www.audit-commission.gov.uk



for an independent overview
of local public services