

District Councillor's Annual Report to Parish Councils - April 2023

Cllr. Diana Garrod - Braintree District Council Member for the Bumpstead Ward

As your District Councillor, I have pleasure in providing this end of year report which outlines some of the activities and achievements relating to Braintree District Council. It is not exhaustive, but contains subjects which will probably have an impact on the Bumpstead Ward.

About your District Councillor (Diana Garrod)

I live in Sturmer and became your Braintree District Councillor in October 2016. In April last year I was elected Vice Chairman of the Council where I have undertaken a number of duties throughout the district. I have attended all Full Council meetings during the year, these often have agendas containing hundreds of pages. I am also Chairman of the Community Development Scrutiny Committee where I have overseen scrutiny reviews this year in to Cycling and Walking, The Cost of Living Crisis, where I personally put forward 20 out of the 22 recommendations to Cabinet, and Markets and Associated Events which is currently awaiting a response from Cabinet. I am a member of the Climate Change Working Group and have participated in shaping the Council's Climate Change Strategy, and I remain the Council's outside representative for the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Advisory Committee; part of this ward is placed in the AONB; Stour Valley 'project area' and is considered a 'valued landscape'. I also remain a Mental Health Champion as peoples' mental wellbeing should be considered a priority and of course, I liaise with parish councils, local organisations and residents.

Councillor's Community Grant Scheme

I am allocated a Councillor's Community Grant which is used to support a range of projects and initiatives to benefit residents through local groups and organisations. Since April 2019, 288 grants have been awarded by Councillors, totalling £245,847. This money has gone into the heart of the districts' towns and villages to meet local needs.

Fly-Tipping

Your Council will always respond within 24 hours to remove the dumped rubbish. During 2022, 680 fly-tipping incidents were reported and cleaned up, 37 fixed penalty notices were issued and 13 cases were sent for prosecution.

Financial Support

In the two years 2021/22 and 2021/22 the total amount of Covid related grants and reliefs provided to businesses and individuals was £59m and £2m respectively. These relate to both mandatory and discretionary schemes. Financial support given to individuals included the Council Tax Hardship Fund.

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.

Rough Sleeper Initiative

Funding was secured through the Rough Sleeper Initiative which, in partnership with Essex County Council 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).

Warm Spaces

Since the beginning of the year, a number of new warm spaces activities have been established and in February this number was 73. Contact was made with 22 of the organisations participating to see if other support is required. On the whole, these have been received very well.

Stray Dogs

Unfortunately, the Council has seen an increase in the number of stray dogs being reported and abandoned. In the calendar year ending 31st December 2022, a total of 60 stray dogs were reported of which 15 were not claimed. Unclaimed dogs are signed over to the RSPCA to be assessed and to be put up for adoption.

Planning

Last year BDC received and validated 3,088 planning applications. The Council formally adopted Section 2 of the Local Plan in July 2022. Section 2 contains local policies and allocations to guide development of homes, employment, infrastructure and community facilities between now and 2033. Section 1 of the Plan, which was adopted in February 2021 is shared with Tendring District and Colchester Borough Councils, sets the key vision, objectives, and overall strategic direction for growth. The Local Plan has full weight in determining planning applications.

In tandem with the Local Plan, Neighbourhood Plans also have a role to play where 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 the Parish Council and BDC Officers. I am delighted that Steeple Bumpstead's is currently in the consultation phase.

In addition to planning applications, an increasing number of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) have come forward such as 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,

A Members Forum for the Planning Committee has also been established. 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 is early days for this Forum, but already appears to be beneficial to all concerned.

The Enforcement Team has received a further £200k to boost staff resources and have covered some particularly difficult investigations.

Community Safety Achievements

In August last year, the Council 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, etc.

Health

The Medical Centre at Sible Hedingham is making good progress and also a Community Diagnostics Centre will be opening in Braintree which will be able to provide CT and MRI scans amongst other things. The ward space which has opened in Halstead Hospital is also to become permanent.

I continue to campaign for better healthcare services in this part of the district and raise this at every opportunity.

Finance and Council Tax

Many local authorities are under more financial pressure than ever and although good financial management over the years has put Braintree District Council in a better position than others, there may still be some difficult decisions to make. Of course protecting the services that residents rely on will be a priority. This year, an unprecedented £1million will be invested to support the vulnerable and those who need it most by providing food security, supporting community groups and organisations, and enabling physical and emotional health and wellbeing during this cost-of-living crisis.

BDC recognises the cost of living pressures faced by residents and have tried to keep the increase in Council Tax as low as possible. The Council Tax increase for the next financial year will be 2.5% which is half the maximum allowed. You may well have noticed £25 by way of a refund shown on your council tax statement, which has been provided to all eligible council taxpayers. This will be the largest Council Tax reduction of any District Council in the country. This money originally came from a New Homes and Growth Dividend. Between 2017 and 2022 1,159 affordable homes were completed with 417 in 2021/22, exceeding the target of 250. The Council requires 30-40% of new housing developments to be affordable. It is recognised that population is growing and people are living longer; more people want to live in this district. The Council wants to ensure that housing is decent, sustainable and genuinely affordable as it is the foundation of people's lives and essential to good health and wellbeing. There are also 2,000 empty homes in our district and the Council is also exploring ways to reduce this number.

Local Elections

Elections for Braintree District Council will take place on 4th May. Voting in person will require presentation of Voter ID. Acceptable ID includes a UK or EU passport, a photocard driving licence, a blue badge, a bus pass or a PASS card. If residents do not have ID, they can request a Voter Authority Certificate from BDC.

Assuring you of my attention at all times.

Cllr. Diana Garrod
Braintree District Councillor - Bumpstead Ward