

Harlow District Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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of local public services

Harlow District Council

Overall, Harlow District Council performs well

Managing performance	3 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 3 because the Council has delivered good improvements for local people. Its use of resources is adequate. It continues to deliver good quality services while having dealt with some significant financial pressures. However, some processes need to improve.

The managing performance score is 3 because Harlow District Council is delivering a range of good services and improvements for local people. The Council is responding effectively to changing economic conditions and is supporting businesses affected by the recession. The Benefits service has worked with partners to provide support to those in need. As a commercial landlord, payments have been changed from quarterly in advance to monthly in advance with payment plans available on request. There is a rapid redundancy response team which is a partnership between the Council, Jobcentre Plus, Harlow College and Business Link.

Performance has improved in key services to customers. Local people are benefiting from an increased supply and better quality housing. Resident satisfaction with the cleanliness of the area is good and recycling rates have improved, although they are still below average. People claiming Housing and Council Tax benefit wait less time to get their money.

Harlow is a safer place to live and anti-social behaviour is reducing. Regeneration of the town is progressing with a new athletics track open and new leisure centre which is shortly to open.

There are a range of plans to continue physical improvements such as developers have been agreed for town centre north and some estates. Facilities for young people have improved with the opening of Youth Café and

a skate park. Support for families has also improved through extension of the children's centre network.

The Council provides good leadership across the district and has clear ambitions for the district. It works well with partners to deliver priorities. Performance management arrangements are good. The Council has responded well to financial constraints and has maintained and improved performance in some key service areas. The Council is already exploring options to deliver more services in partnership to address future budget challenges.

However, this is not yet leading to confidence from residents. The Council and its partners have more to do to improve public perceptions.

The use of resources score is 2 because the Council manages its finances, governs its business and manages its resources adequately.

There are regular meetings where Councillors check budgets and look at how money is spent. The Council has identified reductions in unit costs in some areas, but this level of analysis is not used for all services. In its decision making the Council does not always consider the whole life cost of projects and risk management though developing, is not yet fully effective.

Overall the Council performs well because it is delivering a range of good services and improvements for local people. It has addressed some difficult financial issues without any loss of key services, partly through greater efficiency. It has also funded some new initiatives and facilities. Areas it needs to address to improve its use of resources have not affected its provision of many good services to local people.

About Harlow District Council

Harlow is a small town in West Essex within the M11 growth area. As a result it could double in size by 2031. It has a population of around 78,300, which means the population density is high compared to the regional and national average. Harlow was built in the 1950s onwards using often experimentally designed housing. The town is designed as a series of neighbourhoods separated by green areas, which are highly valued by local people. Harlow has one of the highest proportions of council housing in the country, and house prices are some of the lowest in Essex and lower than the national average.

The proportion of young and working age people is higher than regional and national averages, with the proportion aged 50 and over relatively small in comparison. The black and minority ethnic population is comparatively small, although the Irish and Chinese communities are greater in Harlow than regionally and nationally. The number of migrant workers is greater than the average for the region but smaller than the national average. Harlow is one of the most deprived districts in Essex. Unemployment is higher than the average, which increases demand for some council services. The number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance is high, and wages are relatively low. The health of people in Harlow is generally worse than the England average. Levels of teenage pregnancy are worse than average, as are levels of physical

activity in school children.

Harlow's new priorities are set out in its Corporate Plan 2009/10 - 2013/14. Its Corporate Plan 2008/09 - 2012/12 set out its priorities for 2008/09:

- A clean, safe and sustainable environment
- A prosperous community
- Decent affordable homes
- High performing, customer focused services
- A caring community with a higher quality of life.

Organisational assessment

The Council has delivered well against its priorities. In 2008/09 the Council achieved or exceeded 82 per cent of its performance targets.

A clean, safe and sustainable environment

The Council has made good progress against its top priority of a clean, safe and sustainable environment. The Council is delivering improved recycling and street cleaning services. Recycling rates improved from 22 per cent in 2007/08 to 24 per cent in 2008/09. However, this remains comparatively low. A new waste contract which significantly changes collection arrangements came into operation in September 2009. The Council anticipates this will improve performance. Street cleanliness has been improved by encouraging the use of cigarette and chewing gum disposal pouches and revised street cleaning approaches.

The Council is working effectively with partners to make communities safer. Working with the Safer Harlow Partnership, crime in Harlow reduced in a number of areas in 2008/09. For example, the number of young victims of crime was down 17 per cent, vehicle crime down seven per cent, and common assaults which cause injury down by 20 per cent. However, there are some crimes the partnership is finding challenging to reduce, for example, criminal damage, theft and domestic abuse. Overall Harlow is now a safer place in which to live.

Through the Safer Harlow Partnership there has been success at reducing anti-social behaviour. The Council has accessed funding from the Family Intervention Programme which combines support for families committing anti-social behaviour with enforcement to bring about a change in behaviour. Twelve families were referred to the scheme between September 2008 and March 2009. From December 2008 new tenancy agreements set out the families' responsibilities and state clearly what will happen if a tenant commits anti-social behaviour. From January 2009 family intervention tenancy agreements have been used as an alternative to eviction where families are involved in anti-social behaviour. Nuisance caused by illegal mini-motorcycle usage has been eliminated. Alcohol related crime has reduced particularly in the town centre. This was achieved through a number of initiatives: radio

adverts; police visits to licensed premises with a view to enforcement of licensing breaches, and taxi marshals in the town centre. A partnership approach has also led to operation Nano. This targets young people drinking and causing anti-social behaviour, with those identified subject to a red and yellow card scheme that addresses the issues with the young people and their families through various levels of intervention. Despite the progress made, residents' perceptions of anti-social behaviour are high and feelings it is being effectively tackled are low.

The Council's approach to sustainability is developing. A sustainability strategy and supporting action plan were agreed in January 2009. The Council secured external funding of £440,000 which has allowed it to provide home insulation to over 1,000 homes thus reducing fuel bills for owners and cutting the town's carbon emissions. The effective implementation of the strategy supports the priority for a sustainable environment. However it is too early to measure the Council's success in reducing its carbon emissions.

A prosperous community

Through partnership working the Council has supported initiatives to progress its priority of a prosperous community. The Enterprise Hub has been affected by the recession but target occupancy rates are achieved. Responding to changing economic conditions, the Council is adapting so that the Enterprise Hub not only supports start up businesses but also now supplies accommodation for some firms who are downsizing and some transferring from home working. Some major projects are going forward with the developers appointed for the redevelopment of the town centre north project, Old Harlow, Clifton Hatch and Prentice Place.

The Council has acted to support residents and businesses through the recession. The Benefits service has worked with partners to provide support to those in need. As a commercial landlord, payments have been changed from quarterly in advance to monthly in advance with payment plans available on request. There is a rapid redundancy response team which is a partnership between the Council, Jobcentre Plus, Harlow College and Business Link. The team offers employers and employees advice surgeries at employers' offices when notified of redundancies. A redundancy guide has also been produced which is available, for example at GP surgeries. A contract with one landlord has saved £100,000 of increased homelessness costs. An on-line advice service has been created to help Harlow residents struggling in the current economic downturn. This provides support for those with financial difficulties.

Decent affordable homes

Local people are benefiting from an increased supply and better quality housing, though progress has been slowed due to the current economic conditions. The average time to re-let empty properties in 2008/09 was 28 days compared to 34 for 2007/08. The Council has made good progress in reducing the number of families made homeless and the numbers living in temporary accommodation. Progress delivering affordable homes has been slow with only 35 provided in 2008/09. This was below the target of 87 because of developers not proceeding with developments in the current economic climate. The Council planned to reduce the percentage of homes

which were non-decent to 11 per cent. However, it still has 13 per cent of homes which do not meet the Decent Homes standard. This reduction in achievement is because of reduced funds available to the housing capital programme. Better housing with more decent and affordable homes will improve the quality of life for tenants and residents.

Strain on the Council's capital budgets is slowing the speed of progress in some areas. The non-housing programme is restricted to essential regulatory or health and safety work with funding gaps addressed by borrowing in the short-term until such time as asset sales can be realised. The housing capital programme shortfall was addressed by creating a balanced programme covering work towards the Decent Homes Standard and environmental and other work meeting the council's corporate plan.

High performing, customer focused services

The Council is making progress to address equalities and diversity issues. It has achieved Level 2 of the equality standard for local government. It is engaging with disadvantaged groups to understand their needs and find out what are their priorities. The results will be used in the development of a new Corporate Equalities Action Plan. Equality impact assessments were effectively carried out on the new waste contract and in the review of the Welfare Rights and Advice service resulting in changes to the services to address the needs of specific groups. Because it has not completed equality impact assessments for all policies and services it cannot yet demonstrate its services are meeting the needs of all sections of the community.

Performance has improved in key services to customers. Service reviews of housing and the benefits service have resulted in improved performance. People claiming Housing and Council Tax benefit wait less time to get their money. In 2007/08 they waited on average 32 days this reduced to 26 days in 2008/09. However, performance in dealing with planning applications deteriorated in 2008/09 partly due to vacancies within the service.

The Council uses partnerships effectively to increase its capacity to deliver its ambitions and priorities. Kier Harlow has provided financial savings and improved performance. Work with the Harlow Gateway Partnership and Harlow Renaissance is contributing to the growth and regeneration of Harlow. The Council's good use of partnerships is increasing its capacity to deliver its priorities.

Performance management is supporting the delivery of its priorities. Councillors challenge and scrutinise progress to ensure actions are enabling corporate priorities to be achieved. The Council has reviewed services and made changes to improve outcomes for local people. For example, a review of housing services has helped reduce a backlog of work from seven weeks in November 2008 to two weeks by the end of May 2009.

The Council has clear priorities that reflect local need. It has revised its priorities to refocus them on what matters to local people, making regeneration its new top priority. The Council's financial position means it will face significant challenges to delivering its priorities in the medium term. However, during 2008/09 the Council reduced its budget for that year by £1.3 million to address cost pressures. Budget savings were identified and

implemented. A combination of reduced costs and use of reserves addressed the shortfall. During this period, performance was maintained or improved across a range of performance indicators. In spite of the continuing economic situation the Council managed to limit the council tax rise to 3.9 per cent for 2009/10. It has invested in high priority services such as waste and benefits and achieved efficiency savings in 2008/09 of £782,000. The Council is aware of the impact of limited resources and recognises the need for change. It is exploring the shared service agenda with other councils and its role as a commissioner rather than provider of services.

Councillors are willing to tackle difficult problems and to take and stick to tough decisions to resolve them. The budget pressures resulted in financial resources being redirected away from discretionary services. The Welfare Rights and Advice service was identified as high cost and reviewed. An equality impact assessment identified key aspects of the service to be retained and the Council secured a new contract to provide those services at a much reduced cost. Partnership working secured the future of the Leah Manning Centre. By working closely with Essex County Council and the Primary Care Trust, the Council was able to ensure that the Leah Manning Centre could remain operational, providing services for those most in need while still achieving the financial savings. At the same time, a senior officer restructure and increased remuneration package was agreed as Councillors identified a risk and sought to retain skilled officers and enhance capacity in relation to regeneration, now its top priority.

A caring community with a better quality of life

Working with its partners, the Council has made good progress towards its priority to deliver a caring community with a higher quality of life. Working with Harlow Youth Council, a Youth Café was opened in March 2008. This project has had a number of positive outcomes including providing a safe environment for young people to meet. A new skate park has been provided. Working with Active Harlow, participation in sports has increased. A new athletics track has been provided. Work continues on the new leisure facility as part of Harlow Gateway which is due to open late in 2009. Parks and open spaces have been improved. Harlow Marshes and Parndon Wood nature reserve were both improved, with Parndon Wood achieving green flag status. The Council is the lead agency for the Children's Centres Network, funded through Essex County Council. It has grown from one centre to two main centres and four satellites. Now every home within the town is within easy reach of a range of services for families with children under five.

Steps are being taken to reduce obesity. The Council helped to promote healthy eating by recognising 45 catering establishments in the Essex Healthy Life, Healthy Eating awards.

Support for victims of domestic abuse is increasing. Harlow has the highest rate in Essex for repeated domestic abuse. Harlow Sanctuary Scheme enables victims of domestic abuse to remain in their own homes and feel safe and also prevents a homeless application. The Safer Harlow Partnership has contributed to the funding of Women's Safety Workers who support the victims of domestic abuse. This contributes to the safety of victims and helps reduce repeat incidents of domestic abuse.

The Council has a proactive approach to its gypsy and traveller families. There is good liaison on a day to day basis with residents on the two permanent sites. A new protocol on illegal encampments is being prepared in consultation with the community. Illegal encampments are usually cleared within two weeks, with support to travellers to leave the site clear such as providing bin bags. It reduces nuisance from the grazing of travellers' horses by having a clearly stated seizure policy. It has designated areas where horses are allowed to graze provided they are tethered and tagged. As a result it has few problems.

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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