

District Councillor's Annual Report to Parish Councils - April 2022
Cllr. Diana Garrod - Bumpstead Ward - Braintree District Council

As your District Councillor for the Bumpstead Ward, I have pleasure in providing this report for the past year.

I have undertaken my duties at Braintree District Council attending Full Council meetings, also as Chairman of the Community Development Scrutiny Committee, the Climate Change Working Group, a member of the Appeals Committee, also BDC's outside representative for the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Advisory Committee and more recently as one of two Mental Health Champions for the Council.

I have a Councillor's Community Grant which I can allocate to support a range of projects to benefit residents. In the last year I have been able to assist Helions Bumpstead Sports Pavilion Club with a replacement specialised pavilion clock, Birdbrook Ladies Group with a new microwave and kettle for their kitchen and Helions Bumpstead Community Benefit Society Ltd for the installation of bike racks to encourage exercise and wellbeing. I have facilitated an application for Sturmer Parish Council for LED footway lights which is in the pipeline and contributions have recently been offered to Birdbrook, Steeple and Helions to assist with their Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations. Overall, BDC's councillor grant scheme has provided approximately £64,000 of an available allocation of £73,000 allowing some vital support to our town, parish and rural groups to respond on the easing of Covid.

Climate Change

The Councils Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, to make the District Carbon Neutral as far as practical by 2030, was unanimously approved by Council in September 2021. Since then the Climate Change Working Group continues to meet to work on the implementation of the Action Plan. As part of the Climate Change Strategy and to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's Platinum Jubilee 13,000 native British tree whips and 73,000 bulbs were made available to groups throughout the District for planting. The uptake was very good and groups were asked to add them to the data base for H.M.'s Jubilee Green Canopy. The trees and bulbs that were left over were planted on Council owned land. In addition, special trees with a plaque to celebrate the jubilee were planted in Weavers Park Braintree, Halstead Public Gardens and Witham Town Park.

A Letter of Concern has been sent to Rt Hon Grant Shapps and Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng in relation to the cessation of the EV Homecharge scheme and the Council will soon be embarking on its procurement process as part of the Air Quality Monitoring Methodology Review

Throughout the pandemic Environmental Services and Enforcement Officers were an integral part of working to keep our citizens safe.

Following the successful conclusion of the Litter Signs Trial, Essex County Council and National Highways have agreed to the signs becoming a permanent feature along the strategic and link roads throughout the District and Officers are currently preparing a programme of site locations for the coming year. District and County Councillors, along with Parish and Town Councils have been invited to identify suitable locations for inclusion in the programme and it is proposed to re-launch the initiative as part of the Great British Spring Clean (25 March – 10 April 2022). In the continuous effort to keep the district clean and tidy, and tackle the impact of litter on the environment, 57 brand new bins have been purchased and installed across the district. New yellow bins have been installed on the strategic network (A12, A120 and A131) funded from a Government grant. In accordance with WRAP guidelines, the Council opted for a brighter colour as the more visible the bins are, the more people are likely to see them and use them. In a new innovative approach 7 customised bins are being trialled that have a large single opening, which will allow people to dispose of their litter without having to leave their vehicle, helping to increase bin usage and decrease bags of rubbish being dumped.

Planning

The examination of BDC's draft Local Plan Section 2, conducted by two Inspectors, took place in July 2021 and then went out to public consultation on the proposed modifications. The Inspectors are now considering the responses to that consultation, and we await their decision on whether the Council can find the Plan 'sound'.

The Planning Committee has continued to be extremely busy throughout the year with meetings continuing to be held fortnightly, rather than monthly, to determine the large numbers of applications being submitted. During the latter part of 2021 several major applications went to Appeal, with their developers hoping to overturn BDC's refusal to grant permission. Although the refusals were upheld, frustratingly, each Inspector also gave different interpretations of BDC's 5 year land supply, which is crucial to determining applications. Finally, it was declared by one Inspector that our land supply stands at 5.1 years. Good news, but it is a slender safety margin.

A successful review of the Enforcement process, undertaken by a cross-party group of District Councillors over the summer months, resulted in a number of recommendations to improve the service; these proposals were presented to Full Council in February this year and were unanimously approved. There will be a staffing increase of five new officers for the team and improvements to the way Enforcement complaints are reported and monitored.

Health & Wellbeing

Rising levels of childhood obesity, reduced fitness levels, social isolation and loneliness all featured strongly during the pandemic. However, with the support of the voluntary sectors, parish and town councils and many individuals, we were able to recognise and help minimise some of the effects. By using our assets, including the leisure centres, swimming pools, community transport, council officers and elected members and operational workforce ; together with our strong links with the County Council and NHS, many examples of individual support and community activities have been created which will leave a lasting, positive legacy from the devastating effects of the coronavirus outbreak.

Economic Development & Business Support

As part of the changes required to meet the Covid-19 restrictions, early in 2021 BDC acquired the technology to enable hybrid meetings to be held in the committee area and webcast to the public making it possible and for some attendees to be physically present in the committee area and others to attend remotely and contributing virtually. This has allowed the public to speak in person at meetings when Public Question time is on the agenda and maintain an open and democratic authority. During the last two years BDC staff in the Economic Development and Finance Departments have been actively supporting residents and businesses through financial support where needed and acting as rapidly as possible to minimise the damage that the pandemic caused to the local economy. BDC has paid the following grants:

Exceptional Hardship Fund: 2020/2021 £3,302 9 awards; 2021/2022 £8,687 17 awards

Discretionary Housing Payments: 2020/2021 £291,592 277 awards; 2021/2022 £249,649 257 awards

Government grant of £150 per LCTS claimant: 2020/2021 £846,445 5,643 awards; No 2021/22 grant

Test & Trace Support Payments (Isolation Payments): 2020/2021 £217,500 435 Claims; 2021/2022 £869,000 1,738 Claims

Business Grants – Various schemes: 2020/2021 £47,308,844 paid, 9615 claims; 2021/2022 £8,637,458, paid, 1617 claims

A key priority remains supporting our businesses through this period of adaptation and recovery. We continue to dispatch government grants and support. In addition, we continue to offer local support packages including the recent £30,000 opportunity, consisting of small grants for High Street shops and businesses to improve the look and feel of their frontages. Due to the unprecedented impact on our local business community, we are in the process of refreshing our economic plan to ensure BDC continues to play its part in supporting the needs of our businesses both urban and rural. This is building on our strong record of engagement with business over the years and our desire to help turbo charge new sectors that will create well paid jobs, post pandemic and attract new businesses to the area.

Skills

The Council continue to build on our work with local businesses and education providers to enhance the skills offering within the District. This is as important as ever as part of our bouncing back together plan, as we come out of the pandemic. We are reviewing the work we have been proud of in recent years with the Braintree District Education and Skills Board, and look to revitalise vital skills relationships for the benefit of residents of the District.

Housing

The Council has continued its very good record on affordable housing delivery from the previous two years, and this year the affordable housing delivery programme will comfortably exceed the annual plan target of 250 and the number of completions for the year will be the highest annual delivery of affordable housing ever achieved in the District.

Operations

Braintree Local Highways Panel is contributing some of its annual funding to the initial research stages of the proposed Earls Colne-Coggeshall cycle route. An officer and Member Working Group has carried out a review of the BDC Taxi Licensing policies, to ensure that best-practice is followed in the taxi and public hire vehicle provision in the District. The relatively new bring-bank recycling collections of textiles, and of food and drink cartons, have proved popular and are being more and more used by residents. 19 tonnes of textiles, and 7 of cartons, were collected during 2021, plus an additional 7 tonnes of small electrical material - all these collections provide a revenue to the Council.

Ukraine

At a Full Council meeting on Monday, 28 March, all four political Group Leaders at our council expressed their support for the people of Ukraine and are working with partner agencies to provide support to those affected by the war. BDC is working with Essex County Council to provide support to those arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, a scheme that invites residents to apply to sponsor a named Ukrainian and their immediate family to come over to the UK, as long as they can provide accommodation for at least six months. BDC is supporting the home check process through home visits, which will work alongside the DBS and safeguarding checks to provide assurance for sponsors and guests. Local welcome packs have been put together for sponsors and their guests, highlighting the wide range of support available in the Braintree district and across Essex,

including mental health support, help with finances and benefits, applying for school places and accessing NHS services. Updates are provided via the Essex County Council website and BDC's Facebook page and dedicated web page at www.braintree.gov.uk/ukraine.

Assuring you of my attention at all times.

Cllr. Diana Garrod
Braintree District Councillor - Bumpstead Ward