

Maidstone Borough Council

Organisational Assessment

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of local public services

Maidstone Borough Council

Overall, Maidstone Borough Council performs well

Managing performance	4 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	3 out of 4
Managing resources	3 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

Maidstone Borough Council is performing well overall. It has a clear view of local people's priorities with ambitious and wide-ranging plans to achieve them. In particular, these include a long term commitment to a broad and proactive approach to tackling local disadvantage, both for specific groups of people and communities within the borough. These priorities are: a healthy environment; sustainable communities; prosperity; lifelong learning; quality living and decent homes that people can afford. At the end of 2008/09, there was good progress against all priorities, with strong outcomes in meeting local housing needs. It gives good support to the local economy and health improvement programmes, as well as providing a range of high quality educational, recreational and cultural opportunities. The Council is well led with a strong track record of improvement. Services perform at least consistently well and it makes good use of its resources.

There is a difference between the scores for managing performance and use of resources. We have decided that the overall score should be that the Council performs well instead of excellently. This is because in some priority areas, for example a healthy environment and prosperity, the Council's actions and investments have yet to make their full impact which local people would recognise.

Maidstone scores 4 out of 4 for managing performance. It is making good progress against all its priorities with excellent outcomes in some areas, for example in the supply of affordable homes. The numbers significantly exceeded the targets set, despite the challenging conditions of the housing market. Streets are clean and recycling facilities are much improved. The Council works well with other organisations such the County Council, Police

and Health Services to do things that are important to local people, but that it cannot tackle on its own. For example it is working hard to reduce high levels of teenage pregnancies in some parts of the town. There has been excellent progress in reducing crime and it remains low. It has a strong focus on helping local people to beat the recession. It has worked hard to understand the problems of local businesses and to support them, for example by the 'Make it Maidstone' campaign. At the same time it has continued to provide good support to vulnerable people needing help, for example people who are homeless or requiring benefits. It also works closely with parish councils, making grants available for them to deal with community priorities. The opening of the Maidstone Gateway is transforming how local people can access local public services more easily. The innovative one stop shop located in Maidstone Town Centre brings most local public services and numerous voluntary and community organisations under one roof. This is giving local people a much wider range of advice and support than before at their convenience, and is proving popular. Satisfaction and numbers using the Gateway are high and increasing.

Local people are generally happy with the Council's services, though overall satisfaction with the Council does not fully reflect the high-quality of service that it provides. Compared to other Kent councils, local people think the Council gives good value for money. People are very happy with Maidstone as a place to live and they think that people from different communities get on well together. They like the museum, theatre and other amenities and they feel that the Council keeps the area clean. Their main concerns are over levels of recycling and bus services.

Maidstone has managed the impacts of the recession well. It has listened to local businesses and it is refining its longer term plans to protect the economic prosperity of the County Town. The Council has fine tuned some services to meet the challenges of the recession, for example council tax payments and homelessness services. The time taken to process new benefits claims has increased slightly but, although demand has doubled, performance still compares well with other Councils. The Council has altered the way that it buys goods and services to make it easier of small firms do business with it. The Council has good contact with vulnerable groups and it is involved in a variety of partnership programmes to address their needs, for example actions on health inequalities. These programmes reflect on the Council's proactive approach to local disadvantage.

The Council scores 3 out of 4 for Use of Resources. It understands what local people think is important and it focuses its spending on these areas. Maidstone is a higher spending council, but it provides a wide range of high-quality services, reflecting its role as a county town. It has sound financial plans and it manages its budgets well and it has established a range of best practice, monitoring and reporting arrangements. The Council has a vigorous and innovative approach to making its services more efficient. It has led the way on comparing costs across the County and achieving efficiencies by doing things in new ways and joint working with other councils. This is helping it to make significant savings to help it manage its budgets and move resources to priority areas. The website has been significantly improved in the past year and provides the Council's customers with easy access to services and information. Sound policies and procedures and high quality information help the Council to make consistently good decisions. The Council understands the risks to its services and it takes appropriate action to reduce them. It

understands the needs of different communities and it is planning its services accordingly. The Council has a clear view of the type of workforce that it will need to deliver services in the future. It is taking steps to recruit and train the right people to complement the skills of existing staff.

About Maidstone Borough Council

Maidstone is the county town of Kent. One hundred and forty-five thousand people live in the district and 75,000 people go there to work. It is an important shopping centre and has a museum, theatre and art galleries. The rural weald of Kent lies to the south and west of the town and there are several small towns and villages in this part of the district. Ninety-two per cent of the population have their origins in Britain. The largest minority group are people from Asia. Maidstone is growing and it is relatively prosperous, with life expectancy above the national average. However, there are three areas that are more deprived, Park Wood, Shepway and Tovil

Maidstone Borough Council has 55 elected councillors, 28 Conservatives, 21 Liberal Democrats and 6 from other groups. This means the Conservatives are in charge. The Council has worked with local people to agree six priorities These are:

- A healthy environment
- Sustainable communities
- Prosperity
- Lifelong learning
- Quality living
- Quality, decent homes that people can afford

Organisational assessment

A Healthy Environment

The Council is working well with health organisations and other partners to help people lead healthier lives. Overall, people live slightly longer in Maidstone than they do in the country as a whole. The Council is working to tackle local problems, for example the high number of teenage pregnancies in parts of the town. It has appointed a healthy lifestyles coordinator who is running campaigns to encourage healthy eating and exercise and to reduce smoking. A Healthy Living Centre has been established by the Council in Park Wood, an area where local people have an above average number of health problems. The Centre provides programmes, including cheaper access to play schemes and leisure centres, to encourage exercise as an aid to health. The Council is investing in its leisure centres and open spaces to improve facilities and make them more attractive. It has helped create an Older People's Forum which considers health issues. The Council has identified areas where pollution, particularly traffic pollution, is a problem and put forward proposals

to make things better. These are long-term programmes and it is too early to see significant changes because of them.

Sustainable communities

The Council is making good progress to improve the sustainability of the Borough. It works effectively with parish councils to make sure that it meets the needs of local communities. This includes grants made by elected representatives for schemes that local people want. Local liaison groups have been established by the Council in priority areas to work out how best to tackle local problems. The Council also works with the Youth Forum Older People's Forum and Disability Focus Group to make sure that it meets everyone's needs. The Council has a good web site and now broadcasts its meetings to give people a clearer view of how it makes decisions. The Council is protecting more vulnerable people. It has campaigned to make sure that people entitled to benefits are receiving them and it has worked with the Pensions Agency to make it easier for older people to get the service they need. The new innovative Gateway reception service has made it easier for people to use a wide range of public services. Customers have increased by 20 per cent since last year and convenient automated systems are now helping staff to give more time to more complex enquiries. This has improved customer satisfaction with face-to-face enquiries. The Council is helping to cut Maidstone's greenhouse gasses. It has cut emissions from street lighting and buildings by 9 per cent and it has installed a special heating system in the Council offices to help with this. Overall emissions have increased slightly, during the transfer to the Council's new energy-efficient building.

Prosperity

The Council gives good support to the local economy. Working closely with its partners, the Council is bringing land forward for development and promoting investment in the Borough. It has provided new job opportunities - for example by completing the first phase of the Eclipse Business Park. The Council's regeneration strategy for the High Street Area is progressing well and it is launching a competition to redesign this part of the shopping area. Maidstone has managed the short term impacts of the recession well, listening to business to understand impacts of the recession and refining its longer term plans to preserve economic prosperity of the County Town. The Council's 'Make it Maidstone' campaign has provided effective support for local traders. A skills studio, being developed by the Council, is helping disadvantaged young people into work. These initiatives are helping the local economy, with a particular focus on vulnerable people.

Lifelong learning

The Council gives good support to lifelong learning. It has invested in Maidstone Art Gallery and Museum to improve the services that they offer. It has appointed an outreach worker who is working to increase educational visits - particularly from minority communities and young people. As a result the number of education visits has gone up by about 900 or 10 per cent. National programmes, such as Train to Gain are improving educational

opportunities for local people in disadvantaged parts of the Borough. The Skills Studio will provide training for children excluded from school. The teenage pregnancy programme provides education opportunities and the Council also provides recreational opportunities and activities for young people who are likely to commit offences. In the disadvantaged Park Wood area, the Council has provided WiFi access and communal computers. These are helping local people to get access to education, employment and other information. It provides a similar service at the Gateway with free internet access, and has participated in a trial in the town centre. The Council is helping to lay long terms plans for a significant Further & Higher Education establishments in Maidstone. These initiatives focus on vulnerable people and are helping them to improve their education and employment prospects.

Quality living

The Council has been behind other councils in providing a modern recycling service that achieves high levels of recycling. It is now rolling out a new scheme for collecting recyclable materials and it is now increasing recycling levels. With recycling levels at 27 per cent for 2008/09, it still has some way to go to match the best Councils. but the figures continue to improve as the new recycling scheme becomes established. The Council has been successful in reducing the overall amount of waste using a number of high profile campaigns. The Borough streets are cleaner than they are in other council areas and cleaner than they were last year. The Council has used volunteers to clear litter in its expanded 'clean sweep' campaigns. It has also run a successful campaign to catch fly-tippers. The Council has revamped the Hazlitt Arts Centre and secured government funding for a three year programme of arts events to improve the vitality of the town centre. The Council is working with the County Council to improve congestion in Maidstone and it has run a 'Maidstone - in town without your car' campaign. New ticketing arrangements have helped people make over half a million trips on the Park and Ride bus service, cutting the number of trips by car. This has achieved a small reduction in town centre traffic levels. With its partners, the Council is making excellent progress in reducing crime. Overall crime levels are low and have fallen by 10 per cent between 2006 and 2008. The partnership has met its targets for violent crime, burglary, vehicle crime and robberies. The Council has helped through a range of crime prevention activities, for example Operation Safer Summer, which tackled drug and alcohol problems in public places. The Council supports a CCTV system and council staff work alongside Police Community Support Officers and KCC wardens

Quality, decent homes that people can afford

The Council has made a very good job of providing new homes and it is on track to meet government housing targets. Development has slowed in 2008/09, but Maidstone has a good supply of planning permissions for new homes when the recession ends and the housing market improves. The Council has helped improve the supply of affordable homes, exceeding its targets despite the recession. Three hundred and fifteen affordable homes were provided in 2008/09 compared to 241 the previous year. This included 64 homes bought from private developers to help combat the effects of the recession. The Council has clear plans to deliver a further 450 affordable homes over the next three years. It has used its own funds to supplement money from government in order to maintain the programme. The Council is

working with parish councils to maintain a supply of affordable housing in rural parts of the borough. The Council is making better use of existing houses. It returned 63 long term vacant properties to use in 2008/09 by working with property owners using grants and enforcement powers. It has also used grants to improve housing for vulnerable people, helping 247 households in 2008/09, compared to 221 the previous year. As a result, it is on track to meet its government targets. The Council has helped vulnerable owner occupiers. It has increased its budget for disabled facilities grants, though the increase in the number of grants has meant that it is not meeting its targets for waiting times. Nearly 900 people have been helped to stay in their own homes, an increase of 80 per cent since 2007/08.. The Council has taken effective action to reduce homelessness - helping 50 per cent more people this year to avoid becoming homeless. However, the number of people on the housing register is still increasing significantly, reflecting growing problems in the housing market across the south of England.

Prospects for improvement

The Council has good prospects for improvement. It is well led and well organised and it has sound plans for the future. It has a vigorous approach to reviewing its services to sure that they compare with the best. It has led the way in Kent on joint working with other councils to identify efficiencies and on cooperation to provide more cost effective services. It has good systems to help it provide consistently good performance. As a result, the Council achieves most of its own performance targets and it has a good track record of improvement. Like many councils, Maidstone is in a challenging financial position, but it has good planning and budgeting to help it deal with this. It has been good at getting funding from other agencies to help it achieve its priorities. The Council understands what sort of workforce it needs to achieve improvement in the future and it taking the right steps to give staff the skills that they need and to recruit the right people to help them. Staff turnover and sickness levels are amongst the best, compared with other councils

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/>



for an independent overview
of local public services

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