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Maidstone Borough Council

Annual Report for 2008-9

Welcome to Maidstone council's annual report for the year to 31 March 2009.

The council has done well this year in how we managed and made use of our resources...the Audit Commission awarded us a top score of 4 'Performing Strongly' for our use of resources and top marks for value for money. However, we are not complacent and we will be looking for further improvements.

We have had much success in looking for new ways in which to do things and providing quality services in a cost effective way. We have developed working partnerships with other councils - Ashford, Swale, Tunbridge Wells and Kent County Council - to look at how services can be provided jointly to improve them and reduce costs. This approach, along with other measures, has helped us reach our efficiency targets and kept council tax as low as possible.

Towards the end of 2008 many of you took part in our Place Survey and told us how well local services were delivered and how you felt about your local area. Eight out of ten people said that they were satisfied with their local area as a place to live.

We consulted you on our budget for 2008-9 using an online survey. You told us that you wanted more money spent on waste and recycling, affordable homes, street cleansing and enforcement, and young people; whilst keeping council tax at an affordable level.

Last year, we also went out and about asking you what you thought was good, bad, your dream and something green that would make Maidstone a better place in which to live – all in all, we spoke to over 600 people. Your suggestions formed the basis of our Sustainable Community Strategy which we developed with our partner organisations in the borough – through the Local Strategic Partnership. This strategy sets out the Partnership's vision and priorities for Maidstone until 2020, and as a result we have changed our priorities in the council's Strategic Plan 2009-12.

Performance is measured against a range of indicators and we have performed strongly and continue to work hard to improve on them. For a full picture on how we did, see the Best Value Performance Plan available on our website.

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Achieving Our Key Objectives

Good progress has been made on our key strategic objectives over the last year: We have:

- Closely monitored our performance to make sure we achieved our goals and targets. Last year we published targets and we met almost 75% of them, whilst reducing costs by £1.5 million;
- Worked with young people through the Youth Forum to promote positive activities such as Peace One Day and attracting significant funding to provide a youth café in town;
- Prevented 376 households from becoming homeless and reduced the number of families living in temporary accommodation to 49;
- Moved offices and opened up the Maidstone Gateway in King Street – improving access to our services and those of our partners;
- Submitted, and subsequently won, a bid for £2m of Lottery Funding to make improvements to Mote Park;
- Ensured that every home in the borough has a doorstep recycling service – we increased our waste reuse, composting and recycling rate by 3% to 27%;
- Achieved a high level of resident satisfaction with Maidstone Museum – higher than any other museum in Kent;
- Using money from the government we launched our international design competition to regenerate the High Street which attracted 76 entrants, as well as starting work on improvements around the Archbishop’s Palace and Brenchley Gardens areas;
- Entered into a shared benefit fraud and visiting service with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, saving £50,000; and
- Held a number of blockbuster events including Radio One’s Big Weekend that gave us national coverage, the Battle of Maidstone and the Maidstone Mela and ensured that the River Festival event could go ahead.

Achieving Our Priorities

Prosperity

- Enabling the planning and completion of the first phase of Eclipse Park – we encouraged a number of businesses to move their headquarters to the business park;
- Development work and planning permission has been achieved to build a £85m world class medical centre, the Kent Clinic off junction 6 of the M20, for NHS and private patients creating 300 job opportunities;
- Kent Conference Bureau, run by the council, won two national awards – ‘Best Brochure’ at the Meeting Industry Marketing Awards and a gold award for ‘Business Tourism’ at the Tourism ExSellenence Awards;
- We collected 98% of council tax and business rates; and

- We reviewed the Kent International Gateway plans for a rail/ lorry freight depot and, more recently, recommended that the Secretary of State refuse the planning application.

Lifelong Learning

- The number of people visiting Maidstone Museum increased thanks to school visits, classical concerts and events staged to celebrate its 150th birthday (23,000 people visited our Kaleidoscope exhibition);
- 9,404 students benefited from Maidstone Museum's educational service – 900 more than last year; and
- A 18.5 metre high Maidstone Marker sculpture was erected by the River Medway - funded by the Channel Corridor Partnership, it incorporates an interactive lighting scheme that measures wind speed.

Sustainable Communities

- Our 'In Town Without You Car' campaign gave people the chance to leave their car behind and make a positive difference to the town;
- Our 'Sign-Up for E billing' campaign resulted in thousands of residents signing-up to receive their Council Tax bills and Housing Benefits information by email;
- We worked with Kent County Council Social Services to fund 87 free places on play schemes and provided a further 108 places for children from families on low incomes. We also introduced a new sports club for children with disabilities called DMAX;
- We have improved the CCTV system and made it more cost effective; and
- 'Operation Safer Summer' resulted in arrests for drug offences and increased enforcement activity in alcohol control areas. Extra patrols were deployed in Mote Park and Brenchley Gardens to tackle anti-social behaviour.

Quality Living

- We launched the renovated the Hazlitt Arts Centre – creating new spaces –for comedy, new musical theatre, community art and a new entrance and reception area in Rose Yard. We also unveiled the Maidstone Music website and brochure listing music events throughout the borough;
- We introduced new flexible Park & Ride tickets and discounts to encourage people who travel less frequently to use the service. 517,000 return journeys were taken on our Park & Ride service last year and the number of season ticket holders increased by 723;
- We strengthened our 'Clean Sweeps' bringing together volunteers and community groups to collect hundreds of sacks of rubbish;

- Satisfaction with our Environmental Health service – dealing with pest control, food and safety, dog fouling and pollution – went up to 96%.
- Operation Lasso was undertaken to catch flytippers and unregistered waste carriers; and
- Crime has reduced in the borough. In 2008-9, there were 900 fewer crimes than in the previous year. All recorded crime in the borough has decreased by 7% and violent crime in the borough has decrease by 10% compared to last year.

A Healthy Environment

- We established new air quality management areas to monitor and improve air cleanliness, as well as securing £10,000 from DEFRA to support our air quality work;
- We were exceptionally energy efficient at the leisure centre and reduced our carbon footprint by 30% from 2005. The centre had over a half a million users last year and funding has been agreed to further improve facilities this year; and
- Clare Park was the first park in Maidstone to be awarded a national 'Green Flag' as a mark of excellence.

Quality, Decent Homes that People Can Afford

- We have made sure that housing developments of over 15 homes contain at least 40% affordable housing – last year that meant 315 new affordable homes were built;
- 63 empty homes were brought back into use due to our help;
- We assisted 440 households from the housing register into affordable housing and a further 78 households into the private rented sector with our help;
- 874 people were able to stay in their homes through the Staying Put Partnership – compared to 485 last year – this is more than an 80% increase on last year's figures;
- We secured £1.5m funding through the North & West Kent Partnership to use for energy efficiency measures, first time buyers grants and other efficiency measures; and
- We helped 110 people with disabilities to continue to live in their own homes by providing grants.

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(Financial Report to be inserted here)

Your views...

We want to know whether you have found our annual report informative and what information you would like to see in next year's report.

I felt that the annual report was

I would like to know more about

Please send your comments and ideas to: The Communications Team, Maidstone Borough Council, Maidstone House, King Street, Maidstone ME15 6JQ email pr@maidstone.gov.uk www.digitalmaidstone.co.uk

This report can be made available in other community languages and formats upon request, such as large print, Braille or audio tape. Please call our Communications Team on 01622 602351. Minicom number 01622 602224.