

## Babergh District Council

### Overall, Babergh District Council performs well

<b>Managing performance</b>	<b>3 out of 4</b>
<b>Use of resources</b>	<b>2 out of 4</b>
Managing finance	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

Babergh District Council performs well overall. The Council is tackling issues that local people recognise as priorities and reflect the challenges facing the local area. These are: quality affordable homes, making Babergh cleaner and greener, safer and healthier, building a strong local economy and making Babergh a vibrant place to live with strong local communities.

There is a difference between the scores for managing performance and use of resources. We have decided that overall the score should be that the Council performs well instead of adequately. This is because there are a number of good outcomes and progress against the council's priority areas which are benefiting local people. Services perform well overall and are recognised through high levels of public satisfaction, including with the Council and the local area as a whole. The Council's work in support of vulnerable people and communities is broad and proactive, with successes in a number of its priority areas. It is clearly ambitious for the local area with a longer term vision of what it wants to achieve. This includes tackling some of the more difficult issues such as rural exclusion, tackling inequality, improving health through to securing a strong and sustainable local economy. As a result we felt that outcomes for the public outweighed the areas for improvement identified through use of resources, many of which were on internal processes.

Babergh scores 3 out of 4 for managing performance. The Council consults people on their views and these influence its plans.

The Council has made good progress in providing affordable homes, achieving its five year target early for new affordable housing either completed or in the development pipeline. It is making good progress in improving the quality of its own housing stock and is on track to meet or, in some cases exceed, national standards by 2010. Empty council homes are now relet much quicker ensuring they are available for use and the Council is working well to help people who have become homeless or who are threatened by homelessness. The Council has also invested in specialist accommodation support and an advisory service for vulnerable teenage parents. Work with the private sector, particularly during the economic downturn, is not delivering the level and quality of housing planned. However an externally funded project is now in place to improve this.

The Council does a good job of keeping the streets clean, winning a national clean Britain award for environmental cleanliness along with high levels of satisfaction with

the area as a place to live. Household recycling and composting performance is good, and overall levels of waste collected are reducing. Further improvements to the recycling service are being delivered through the expansion of the green waste collection service. However, plans to introduce food waste collections and trade waste recycling were not progressed this year on the grounds of cost effectiveness.

It is contributing to county wide targets for carbon reduction through insulation of its properties. Targets to improve energy efficiency have not been met this year, but additional resources and investments in systems such as air source heat pumps for rural homes will start to deliver improvements.

The Council is working well with other organisations like the police and health services to reduce anti-social behaviour and improve people's health. The 'Be Active' scheme has been successful in providing opportunities for increased participation in leisure activities particularly for vulnerable children. It is decreasing anti social behaviour. Overall crime fell by seven per cent in Babergh, with significant reductions in incidents such as burglaries and thefts from and of motor vehicles. Where there were rises, such as in recorded violent crime and sexual offences these were in line with the focus of partners activities for example on the night time economy and in increasing confidence in reporting. Investments are being made to reduce fuel poverty and provide free swimming for some groups, which has proved popular and increased participation in regular exercise.

The Council is supporting the development of new jobs and businesses. More money is being made available to help the Citizens Advice Bureau offer more services for those who are being made redundant. There is special support for the more rural areas such as economic development schemes and community grants. Benefits claims are paid effectively and performance is being maintained despite an increased number of claimants caused by the economic downturn. Long term plans to regenerate Pin Mill are progressing, but some of the Council's other development and regeneration projects are not being delivered to planned timescales due to delays outside of the Council's control.

The Council scores 2 out of 4 for its use of resources. Local residents feel that people get on well together, are treated with respect and can influence the Council's decisions. The Council is improving its systems to ensure that issues of equality and diversity are dealt with but there is some way to go before this is fully integrated into all aspects of service planning and delivery. The lives of some vulnerable people are being improved though the Council's actions for example translation facilities on the web site and taxi vouchers for those with disabilities who cannot use public transport.

Overall spending by the Council is low although the cost of delivering benefits services is higher than average when compared to other councils. How well services are delivered is improving in most areas and is comparable to similar Councils. An increasing number of people agree that the Council gives value for money (the best result in Suffolk in the Place Survey) and are satisfied with the way the Council runs things, (the second best result in the Suffolk Place Survey). The Council is saving money by working with partners for example with joint waste collection saving £140,000 per year making it one of the cheapest rural councils. However plans to deliver further efficiencies through a joint waste depot are now being reappraised. The Council is changing the way it delivers services improving access and reducing costs for example the customer access project saves £118,000 each year.

Suffolk Chief Executives are developing options for a way forward for public services if local government is not re-organised as proposed. Proposals focus on organisations working closer together and empowerment of local people to solve local issues. This should help reduce costs at a time when public service funding is likely to fall.

## About Babergh District Council

Babergh is a predominantly rural area in south Suffolk covering approximately 240 square miles. It has two main centres of population, the market towns of Hadleigh and Sudbury, but over 76 parishes have less than 1,000 residents.

Around 86,000 people live in Babergh. 2.7 per cent of people are from black and minority ethnic groups. There is a higher proportion of older people than the average for the United Kingdom.

Babergh has a small local economy, with much of the workforce commuting outside the district. Many of the jobs are less skilled and lower waged. House prices are high compared with wages and so affordable homes are a significant issue.

Babergh Council has 43 elected councillors. Since its formation no one party has held overall control. It has a committee system with the overall budget and policy framework being determined by all members of the Council and decision making within that framework vested in the Strategy Committee or delegated to officers.

Babergh District Council has listened to local people, including those who are new to this country, and agreed five priorities for improvement. These are detailed in the Council's strategic plan 2008 to 2018:

Quality homes local people can afford

A cleaner, greener Babergh

A safer and healthier Babergh

A strong and sustainable Babergh economy

Vibrant places and strong communities

## Organisational assessment in detail

### Quality homes local people can afford

The Council is improving the availability of some housing for local people. The time taken to make vacant council houses available for reuse has fallen to 22 days, exceeding the Council's own target of 25 days. Babergh has successfully led the development and implementation of a sub regional choice based letting scheme providing more choice and better information on properties. The ambitious piloting of private homes for rent as part of the same scheme, unfortunately has not taken off this year. However, a separate private sector leasing scheme did meet the needs of vulnerable households at risk of homelessness during 2008/09. A review of empty private homes is underway but the data relating to them is inaccurate in some cases. Of the 600 properties identified the target is to bring ten per year into use, so this will take some time to resolve. External funding is available for 2009/10 to renovate long term empty properties.

The Council is making good progress in providing affordable homes, exceeding both the target number of completed affordable housing units and those in the delivery pipeline. By March 2009, some 529 new affordable homes were delivered. Despite meeting the five year target, this is still not meeting local needs – an issue affecting many other areas in the country. The impact of the recession has affected the housing market. In response, more effort is being made to bring forward rural exception schemes and developments on Babergh owned land, which do not rely on private developers.

Good progress is being made in improving the quality of housing in Babergh. The Council is improving the standard of council houses in line with government targets and is on track to achieve, and in some cases, surpass national standards by 2010. Its repairs service is improving and there is now an effective maintenance programme in place. Ensuring empty council homes are relet quickly has significantly improved, exceeding expectations. There has been no increase in the energy efficiency of housing stock this year. However the benefits of additional investments of £100,000 in improving insulation in some of the worst properties will start to deliver improvements.

The Council is working well to help people who have become homeless or who are threatened by homelessness. It is providing new quality accommodation at reduced costs in Sudbury. The first units are planned to be available for let in October 2009. It is the first council in Suffolk to provide housing for individuals with 'chaotic' lifestyles. This is for people who would otherwise have difficulties living on their own in private or council houses and need help to learn to live independently. The Council's homelessness team has helped 23 households from becoming homeless in the first 3 months of this year. This is more than the total for the whole of the previous year. Five thousand pounds has been allocated to reduce the number of single homeless people.

The time the Council takes to make planning decisions is improving. The Council has not performed well in this area in the past but during the last year the speed of decision making increased to close to, or above, the government's minimum targets. There are some concerns that continued progress may be affected by staff time required for other projects even though the level of planning applications has fallen by 14 per cent since last year.

### **A cleaner, greener Babergh**

The Council is keeping the streets of the district clean, exceeding its own targets in 2008/09 and being one of the top performers when compared to others. Various initiatives to reduce littering have contributed to these improvements, including for example working with businesses to reduce the littering of cigarette butts outside shops and offices. As a result, overall public satisfaction with the local area is high and the Council received a four star rating from the 'Clean Britain' awards for environmental cleanliness. The Council is contributing to environmental sustainability targets for Suffolk. It is replacing storage heaters in some of its properties with air source heat pumps which are significantly reducing CO2 emissions and heating costs. It has also fitted photo-voltaic cells to Council homes in Sudbury which are providing peak rate electricity for tenants.

Waste collection and recycling performance is above average when compared to other Councils. Suffolk is one of the best performing Councils for recycling with an overall rate of fifty per cent. The overall recycling and composting rate in 2008/09, at 39.8 per cent, was only just below the Council's own target with recycling levels falling but composting increasing as a result of increased participation in the green waste collection service. The amount of waste collected continues to reduce, with a four per cent reduction last year. Overall levels of waste are lower than the national average which is good, but are still high in comparison with other Suffolk districts. Plans to further improve recycling through the introduction of a food waste collection service are not being progressed at the moment on the basis of cost effectiveness. Future improvements will be delivered through the expansion of the green waste collection service. The proposed trade waste recycling service has not been progressed further this year following a review that found that the necessary investment in additional fleet would not offer value for money.

The joint waste collection service is saving the Council £140,000 per year however delays in replacing the fleet of waste freighters has resulted in increased maintenance costs. Plans to develop a new joint waste depot have been progressed through 2008/09 on the basis that it would deliver significant efficiency savings. A review by the waste contractor, and County Council proposals to develop waste transfer stations, means that these plans are now being reappraised.

### **A safer and healthier Babergh**

Overall levels of crime continue to remain low, with some significant reductions in incidents such as burglaries and thefts from and of motor vehicles. The Council is making a good contribution with partners to improving community safety. Local actions to reduce anti social behaviour for example in Glemsford and Sudbury have proved successful and there are plans to extend them into the Shotley peninsula. The 'Be Active' scheme has been particularly successful in providing opportunities for increased participation in leisure activities particularly for vulnerable children. It has also been effective in dealing with anti social behaviour. Investment through the community safety partnership has increased the use of CCTV and reduced alcohol related crime in town centres. These initiatives are having an impact as less people than elsewhere in the country feel issues like anti social behaviour, drunk and rowdy behaviour and drug use are a problem. As a result people feel safer in Babergh.

The Community Safety Partnership has focused on the night time economy contributing to a greater detection of crimes linked to violence and disorderly conduct. During 2008/09 recorded violent crime rose significantly, by 19 per cent, and sexual offences rose by 43 per cent, which was an increase of 17 cases. Whilst there has been an expected increase as a result of partner's activities, the actual number of cases still remain low overall and in comparison to other areas. It is taking positive action to increase awareness of the issues relating to domestic violence, including awareness raising and promotion of confidence to report these types of incidents. Initial feedback from support programmes for those experiencing domestic abuse are positive.

Deaths from road accidents in Babergh have risen, but overall numbers remain low. Further research is being undertaken by the Council and its partners to try to understand why, and what, if any action is needed.

The Council is investing, where possible, to deliver health improvements in Babergh. It is successfully encouraging a more active population with healthier lifestyles through a range of activities. A high and increasing number of adults are participating in sport. It has a strong focus on increasing access to sport and is providing free swimming for those under seventeen and over sixty in accordance which is proving popular. It is targeting three deprived wards in west Babergh to improve awareness of healthy eating opportunities. It is investing £230,000 to reduce the impact of fuel poverty for some council house tenants and it is taking action to speed up disabled adaptations to properties although these can still take a long time to complete. Babergh has invested in a specialist accommodation based support and advisory service for vulnerable teenage parents but the decision was taken on financial grounds not to make additional investment in addressing high levels of teenage pregnancy in some deprived areas of Babergh.

### **A strong and sustainable Babergh economy**

The Council is helping people who have been affected by the economic downturn. It has played a strong role in the 'response to redundancies' programme in Suffolk and

it is supporting the development of new jobs and businesses. More money is being made available to help the Citizens' Advice Bureau to increase capacity and enable outreach facilities and to provide more community grants during 2009/10. There is special support for the more rural areas such as economic development schemes, the community grants process and support for local transport.

The Council deals with benefits claims effectively and performance against targets is being maintained despite the increased caseload due to the economic downturn. The Council has improved its benefits performance over recent years. The cost of the Council's benefits service is higher than average.

Long term plans to regenerate Pin Mill are progressing with the various necessary agreements now in place. However, plans to deliver the Hadleigh Community Facility, a high priority for the Council, have been delayed following advice from the Council's insurers regarding the potential for a legal challenge. Plans to develop a joint waste depot with Mid Suffolk District Council were progressed during 2008/09 but are now subject to review.

### **Vibrant places and strong communities**

Most local residents feel that people get on well together and in higher numbers than other people in Suffolk and elsewhere in the country. When compared to other councils many more than an average number feel they belong to the area and that it is a good place to live. Most people believe in general that they treated with respect and can influence the decisions taken by the Council. The Council consults people on their views and these influence its plans. It has a proactive approach to ensure people are not excluded, for example holding meetings for migrant workers from Poland and Russia.

Good progress is being made in improving the quality of housing in Babergh. The Council is improving the standard of council houses in line with government targets. Its repairs service is improving. Targets to improve the energy efficiency of council houses will not be achieved but additional investment of £100,000 to improve insulation in some of the worst properties and investments in the use of air source heat pumps in rural homes will start to deliver improvements. Actions to improve the quality of private sector homes have had little impact overall, although with partners the Council has been proactive and has facilitated over £0.5m worth of insulation and heating works to private sector homes.

The Council wants to make sure that it deals with people equally and is investing in improvements. The Council has assessed itself to be at level 2 of the Equalities Standard. It is introducing new systems and taking effective action to improve staff awareness of equality and diversity issues. It is implementing a programme to assess the impact of its own policies and procedures on how different groups access and experience services. This has been an important part of the introduction of choice based letting for example making sure that people who do not have easy access to computers are not disadvantaged and are able to use computers in libraries to take advantage of the service. It has learnt from other councils which are more advanced in this area. At the moment it does not consistently monitor the data it gets to make sure that all groups can access services equally.

The Council is improving the lives of some vulnerable people living in Babergh. It provides £100 taxi vouchers to some severely disabled residents who are unable to use local bus services. It responds to repairs and maintenance requests from vulnerable older people more quickly. Braille labels are used on refuse and recycling domestic bins.

The Council is making it easier to access its services. A customer access project (CAST) has introduced teams who deal with enquiries more quickly and efficiently. The target is that 80 per cent of calls are dealt with by the teams. At the moment general enquiries are well above this target but more specialist enquiries for example planning are not always meeting the target. Not all council services are part of the CAST arrangements which can lead to some confusion. Web pages are available in several formats for those with sight or hearing impairments and translation facilities inbuilt for people whose first or preferred language is not English. Customers can access information through the website for example on the progress of planning enquiries.

Action is being taken to deal with some of the issues linked to living in rural areas. Housing services are ensuring that the quality of council housing in rural areas is being upgraded. Work with Parish Councils saved 28 telephone boxes from being closed. The Council is supporting projects such as 'Flicks in the Sticks' allowing people who live in more isolated areas to see cinema films.

### **Corporate**

The Council is planning for the future. Despite challenging circumstances such as the government's review of local councils in Suffolk (LGR) there is clear leadership for the future. Councillors and senior managers are clear about what they want to do which is to maintain public services and move the Council on. Suffolk Chief Executives are developing options for a way forward for public services. Proposals focus on greater collaboration between organisations and empowerment of local people to solve local issues. Outcomes would include reduced costs to deal with the predicted significant reduction in resources available for public services.

The Council plans to leave a legacy for the people of Babergh. It is making sure that staff are available and have the right skills for the future. Individual targets link to the delivery of strategic priorities and identify training and development needs. It is starting to measure the impact of its training programme. Its Organisational Development Plan has been developed to support the workforce through a period of considerable change and uncertainty. An appraisal system for all staff identifies training and development needs, although more could be done to achieve consistency in all service areas. Staff are taking less days off through sickness, improving from 9.05 days per person in 2007/08 to 7.15 days per person for 2008/09, which means that the Council is similar to the best performing councils. Managers are making sure that staff are well informed about local government review and providing opportunities for them to develop their skills and experience.

The Council is making some progress in dealing with significant challenges which need to be overcome if the Council is going to continue to improve. These include a drop in income of £700,000 as a result of the economic downturn and the need to deal with a predicted budget gap in the region of one million pounds in the current financial year. The Council holds limited financial reserves. It also needs to manage extensive change with a comparatively small number of staff and managers. This is made worse by staff vacancies not being filled automatically although this is contributing £250,000 a year of savings. Some decisions such as the future of council housing are being delayed by local government review. Plans are in place to deal with immediate issues and also those which may occur in the longer term. It has set aside two million pounds to complete a number of community projects such as the new leisure facilities in Hadleigh.

In 2009/10 the increase in the Babergh element of the Council Tax was a below inflation rise of 2.9 per cent, following a similar at or below inflation pattern over the

preceding six years. Overall spending by the Council is low. Services are mostly good, as measured by national indicators of performance. For those that perform less well such as planning, these have shown signs of improvement in the last year. The National Place Survey 2009 ranked Babergh as the top performing Suffolk Council in terms of “proportion of residents that think the local Council provides value for money”. The same survey ranked Babergh second of all Suffolk Councils in terms of “Proportion of residents satisfied with the way the local Council runs things”. The Council has not always made the progress it wanted to make in improving some of its services during 2008/09. The Council saved £411,000 during 2008/09 a total of £800,000 when savings from the previous year are added. A number of initiatives and partnership working have helped it deliver savings through the year for example the customer access initiative (CAST) saves £118,000 each year. The joint waste collection service with Mid Suffolk District Council is saving £140,000 per year.

Councillors monitor how well services are being delivered and are taking action where things are not working well. Each year they set targets for improvement although these do not always expect big improvements. Steps have been taken to make sure all staff are involved in improving services. Services publish standards, available on the web site, to tell people what they can expect although some of them are not clear. The Council has reviewed what its partnerships deliver to make sure they provide value for money. There is evidence of good engagement with partners in a number of key partnerships, although greater consistency could be achieved for example in service planning.