

Cheltenham Borough Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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of local public services

Cheltenham Borough Council

Overall, Cheltenham Borough Council performs well

Managing performance	3 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	2 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

Overall, Cheltenham Borough Council performs well. The Council delivers value for money well. It manages its performance well.

The Council has a good track record of consulting with the community to inform its priorities and plans and these reflect the concerns of local people. But increasing pressures on resources and the impact of the recession means that the Council is now unable to deliver improvements consistently across all of its aims. The Council is working with others to deliver the best services for local people and other organisations view the Council as a strong leader for the town.

The Council continues to invest well in the arts and culture of Cheltenham and residents are very satisfied with the services provided. Residents are also very happy with parks and open spaces. The Council has got better at preventing people becoming homeless and reduced the number of people in temporary housing. And it exceeded its own target for building new affordable houses in Cheltenham in 2008/09. But a great need remains for more affordable homes in the area. The Council has a good track record of tackling poverty and improving run-down areas.

The Council has made limited progress on improving the cleanliness of Cheltenham and residents are not as satisfied as people in similar areas with the cleanliness of the streets. And the Council failed to meet its recycling target for the year. In Cheltenham, fewer people are satisfied with the recycling service than most other places in the Country.

The Council is delivering an ambitious change programme and it recognises

that it is facing financial pressures. It is putting a range of things in place to address this. It will be necessary to make difficult decisions about what are (and are not) priorities for the Council in the future

About Cheltenham Borough Council

Cheltenham is an urban Borough in Gloucestershire with a population of 112,300. The area is home to Cheltenham Racecourse, a number of theatres, art galleries, museums and heritage buildings. The ethnicity of the area is mostly white, but the non-white population is above the regional average.

Overall, the Borough is not deprived; however some areas are amongst the poorest in the country. People are generally better qualified than in other areas and wages are above average. Unemployment and the number of people claiming jobseekers allowance is higher than average for the South West. Cheltenham has a varied economy with many jobs in distribution, hotels, catering and retailing. People are generally healthy and people live longer than the England average. Men in the least well off areas can expect to live seven years less than those in the wealthiest areas.

Cheltenham Borough Council has no overall political control. In May 2008, the council elected a Liberal Democrat cabinet. Cheltenham's vision is "we want Cheltenham to deliver a sustainable quality of life, where people, families, their communities and businesses thrive; and in a way which cherishes our cultural and natural heritage, reduces our impact on climate change and does not compromise the quality of life of present and future generations."

The Council's aims are:

Promoting community safety

Promoting sustainable living

Promoting a strong and sustainable economy

Building healthy communities and supporting older people

Building stronger communities and supporting housing choice

A focus on children and young people

Investing in environmental quality

Investing in travel and transport

Investing in arts and culture

Being an excellent, efficient and sustainable council

Organisational assessment

The Council has a good track record of consulting with the local people to

inform its priorities and plans. It has tested a new approach to finding out the views of people in local areas of Cheltenham and has plans to extend this approach across the town. It is also improving its understanding of the views and needs of minority groups and vulnerable people such as young people. It is doing this through its new community resource centres and with a member of staff who works with minority groups, but it recognises it could do better in this area. A high proportion of people feel that they can influence decisions in their local area. This compares well to similar councils in England and is the second best rating for councils in Gloucestershire.

Improving services

Cheltenham Borough Council's aims and priorities reflect the concerns of local people. The Council is delivering its services well overall. Its services have performed well in recent years compared to other district councils in England, and it has a good track record for improving services. But increasing pressures on resources and the impact of the recession means that the Council is now not delivering improvements consistently across all of its aims. The Council understands this and regularly reviews progress. This means that it will be able to restart key projects quickly, such as the town centre improvements, when the economic climate improves.

Investing in arts and culture

The Council continues to invest well in the arts and culture of Cheltenham - improving the vibrant festival and cultural activities on offer. The Council has improved access to its art gallery and museum by introducing Sunday opening. It has funded plans to extend the art gallery and contributed to improvements to the Playhouse Theatre. It also continues its substantial support for the Cheltenham festivals which enjoyed increased ticket sales to over 150,000 in 2008. The Council re-opened its leisure@cheltenham facility after closure in 2007 caused by flooding. Residents are very satisfied with Cheltenham's museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls - the best rating of all districts in Gloucestershire.

Promoting sustainable living

The Council is working well with Gloucester City and Tewkesbury Borough councils to produce a joint plan for future development in the area. This is very important as opportunities to build in Cheltenham are restricted and the Council needs to work with neighbouring councils to plan to meet its future housing and business needs.

The Council also performs well in other areas. For example, it deals with planning applications very quickly and people are very satisfied with the waste collection service compared to similar councils. The Council has made limited progress on improving the cleanliness of Cheltenham. It has worked well with city centre businesses to improve cleanliness and it supports the successful Cheltenham in Bloom. It has also trialled some improvements to its street cleaning service. But it failed to meet its own targets for graffiti and illegal tipping in 2008/09. Residents' satisfaction with the cleanliness of the streets is average compared to the rest of Gloucestershire.

The Council had plans to improve its recycling service in 2008/09 by recycling food and garden waste. But councillors could not agree the detail of the plan so the improvements did not take place. It also failed to put in place a recycling service for businesses. As a result, the Council failed to meet its recycling target for the year. Residents are less satisfied with the doorstep recycling service when compared to other councils in England and satisfaction is the lowest of all councils in Gloucestershire.

Investing in environmental quality

People in Cheltenham are very satisfied with the borough's parks and open spaces - the highest satisfaction of all districts in Gloucestershire. The Council has made limited progress on its Civic Pride programme that seeks to improve the town centre roads and the appearance of the town. The Council is working closely with the County Council to study traffic flow and the County has provided some funding support. But the recession has made it hard for the Council to sell property that would have funded major investments. The Council was late in completing its consultation on green spaces in Cheltenham but it did complete its planned works on flood prevention on time.

Investing in travel and transport

The Council made little progress during 2008/09 in its ambition for good public transport, to encourage walking and cycling and to reduce car use. It has recently appointed a new transport officer to progress this area of work.

Promoting a strong and sustainable economy

The Council has developed closer working with businesses through an initiative called Business Pride. This has helped to support new businesses and give help to companies to cut their energy costs. The Council also developed a three year action plan to help deliver Cheltenham's Economic Strategy. Actions focus around business support and getting people back to work. But, unemployment in Cheltenham more than doubled from 1.9 per cent in March 2008 to 3.9 per cent in March 2009. And the number of young people not in education, training or with a job, rose to 7 per cent - the highest level in Gloucestershire. The Council contributes funding to Gloucestershire First - an organisation that leads on economic development across the County. The Council, and Gloucestershire First, are developing new plans to support business growth that aim to address current unemployment and the future economic prosperity of Cheltenham.

Building stronger communities and supporting housing choice

The Council has got better at preventing people becoming homeless and is reducing the number of people in temporary housing. It also has a good track record in dealing with benefits claims. It exceeded its own improvement targets in 2008/09 in all these areas of its work.

The Council exceeded its own target for new affordable houses in

Cheltenham in 2008/09 with 43 houses completed against a target of 35. However, this is a small number compared to the large number of people in need of affordable housing. The Council is working well with neighbouring councils to develop plans for future housing development in the area. Their next step is to consult the public on options about where to build the new houses.

The Council's own affordable housing stock is managed by an organisation called, Cheltenham Borough Homes. It has performed very well in bringing all its housing stock up to a decent standard - two years ahead of the national target. But work to demolish and rebuild poor quality housing in St Paul's was delayed - as was the introduction of a county wide system to allow people to be able to move to a rented house in any part of Gloucestershire if they needed to.

The Council is good at working with its poorest neighbourhoods. It is good at tackling deprivation through its neighbourhood partnership in Hester's Way and is also making progress through the Oakley Regeneration and West End Partnerships. It opened two new resource centres in 2008 - at Springbank and Oakley - bringing the total to four in the town. The resource centres act as a focal point for community support and activities, such as, doctors' surgeries, nurseries, leisure activities and clubs. However, involvement of partners that deliver services to these communities varies greatly. And the county strategic partnership is not yet making sure that all partners act together to tackle the variations in life chances for people in Cheltenham. The Council is extending its neighbourhood working to cover the whole of the Borough.

The Council has organised some events, such as Fiesta in the Park, aimed at improving relationships between groups of people in Cheltenham. And it responds well to issues as they arise. For example, responding to local concerns raised at residents meetings. But the percentage of people in Cheltenham who think there is a problem of people not treating each other with respect is the second highest the Gloucestershire and above the South West England average.

A focus on children and young people

The Council works well with the county youth service to provide activities for vulnerable young people. It has funded activities targeted at people in poorer areas of the Borough. It also provides the use of two sports pavilions for informal youth work. The Council also built three games areas in local parks during 2008 and supplied training for partners on keeping children and young people safe. These activities improve the quality of life for young people and may also help reduce anti-social behaviour.

Building healthy communities and supporting older people

The Council works well with other public services to reduce the differences in health experienced in different parts of Cheltenham. Most people in Cheltenham enjoy good health compared to the rest of Gloucestershire, but some people do have worse health - particularly in the poorer areas and

those with mental ill-health and learning disabilities. The Council works with NHS Gloucestershire to provide physical activities such as establishing a wheelchair football club. They are also working on a project that provides learning support for people with mental health needs in deprived communities.

Promoting community safety

The Council is an active member of the Cheltenham Community Safety Partnership. The partnership met its three year target (for 2010) to reduce crime by 17.5 per cent in June 2008. From April 2008 to the end of March 2009, crime dropped 5 per cent compared to the previous year. But the assault with injury crime rate did increase. The partnership focuses on reducing anti-social behaviour and the fear of crime. And the percentage of residents that think that the police and other public services understand and deal with local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime is the second best in Gloucestershire. But despite this, one in six residents think that anti-social behaviour is a problem in their area. This is above the Gloucestershire and South West average.

Being an excellent, efficient and sustainable council

The Council is working with others to deliver the best services it can for local people. The Council provides strong leadership in the local strategic partnership - a local group of public, private and voluntary organisations who work together to improve services in Cheltenham. The Council is well represented on this partnership with regular attendance from senior managers and councillors. The Council is clear that it needs the help of other organisations to meet local priorities and, as a result, is keen to lead and shape partnerships in the Borough. Other organisations view the Council as a strong leader in the local community.

The Council has started work with some neighbouring councils on delivering joint services but progress has not been as good as the Council would like. The Council is working with two district councils to produce a core strategy - the plan that sets out what development can happen where. Developing joint services is a priority to bridge its financial gap. It does now have agreed plans to share legal, building control and audit services with other councils, but progress has been slow.

The Council is managing an ambitious programme of change but there is a danger that it does not have the people or the money to do as much as it wants as quickly as it wants. It has introduced a range of things such as training and development programmes for senior officers and improvements to the way that it manages projects. But it has failed to meet a number of its own targets for improvement. Managers may not be focussing on all the things that they need to. For example, despite strong leadership around the importance of treating everyone fairly, the Council has made slow progress towards adopting the new equalities framework for local government.

Despite no overall political control in the Council, political leadership is satisfactory. An independent review recently found that the political

leadership is working well and providing good stability despite frequent political changes because of elections. It will be necessary to make difficult decisions about what are (and are not) priorities for the Council in the future. This is important given the financial pressures that the Council is now facing.

The Council's arrangements for managing service performance are working well. The Council has worked well to ensure that its services are well managed. Managers have to set clear targets and report progress against them. This has allowed the Council to concentrate on areas that needed improvement such as reducing the number of people in temporary housing. The Council has plans in place to address its future needs. It knows that it is facing financial pressures and is putting a range of things in place to address this. For example, it plans to review its own properties with a view to saving money by selling some of them and so reducing running costs. It also plans to look at joining with other councils to deliver services together to reduce costs and review its own services to make sure they deliver good value for money. But it is too early to know whether these plans will deliver enough savings to plug the Council's predicted financial gap. The Council has been good at making efficiencies in the past. In 2008/09, its target was to achieve £901,000 and it achieved over £1 million. And the Council has a plan that sets out what staff it will need in the future.

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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