

Annual Report 2009-10, plain text version

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Building on our success

In many respects 2009-10 was a tough year for all of us, caught in the midst of a national recession. And yet it was also the year we really started to build on our success and see the benefits of the last few years of wholesale improvement at the District Council.

It is now over a year since we waved goodbye to our reputation as a “poor” performing authority, and it is not difficult to see why.

Our services to the District cost over £1.5m less to run this year than last. We are pleased to see the tough decisions we have taken providing better value for money across the authority, especially as this allowed us to keep our Council Tax rise to a below-inflation 2.5%.

And 2009-10 also saw some significant service improvements. Better, more widespread waste and recycling collections enabled an excellent 37% of our residents’ waste to be recycled, a new community transport service benefitted residents with impaired mobility and we made key mortgage advice and support available to homeowners affected by the recession.

We also worked in even closer partnerships with other authorities and agencies.

We believe more co-operation helps provide better services and also puts those services in a stronger position to deal with the public spending cuts we know are coming. Recent reports naming Bromsgrove as the West Midlands’ sixth most well-equipped area to cope with the cuts were also welcome news. The next few years are not going to be easy, and will require a lot of hard work, but as we keep saying “no change is not an option”.

We hope that this report demonstrates the work towards our clear objectives of Regeneration, Improvement, One Community and the Environment - and here’s to an even better year next year!

Roger Hollingworth

Kevin Dicks

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1. About us

The 84 mostly green belt rural square miles of Bromsgrove are home to 92,000 residents. The District is a mixture of urban and rural communities, with a third of the population based in Bromsgrove town and other population clusters in Hagley, Rubery and Wythall.

More residents of Bromsgrove are aged over 60 than is the average in Worcestershire, and the population is known to be ageing. Over a quarter of the District's 39,000 households are single older person households. In particular, older people account for a lot of Bromsgrove town centre's population.

Younger people tend to live in the District's larger population centres rather than the rural areas. Around 45% of our working population commutes out of the District towards the Birmingham area. The number of households with one or more person identified as having special needs, primarily physical disability or frail elderly, is significantly above the national average.

Vision

Working together to build a District where people are proud to live and work, through community leadership and excellent services.

Objectives and Priorities

- Regeneration: economic development and Bromsgrove town centre.
- Improvement: providing value for money.
- One community: working for one community and meeting housing needs.
- Environment: climate change.

The District Council is based in Bromsgrove town and includes the Worcestershire Hub Customer Service Centre on School Drive for residents to access services, the Aston Fields Depot, and our main offices at The Council House.

All our strategy and decision-making is based on our four stated objectives. Priorities are laid out to give firm direction to service planning and working towards our objectives. You will notice the objectives and priorities running throughout this report.

2. How the Council works

Decisions that shape local services in Bromsgrove District are made by our elected District Council Members supported by the Senior Management Team. The political decision-making structure is as follows:

The Council

The 23 wards of Bromsgrove District are represented on the Council by 39 councillors: 26 Conservative, 6 Independents and Wythall Residents' Association Coalition, 6 Labour, and one unaffiliated councillor.

Governance

We work under a Leader and Executive Cabinet form of governance – with the full Council of 39 Members having the final say on matters of strategic policy, budget and Council tax.

Executive Cabinet

All our services are grouped into seven portfolios with a Cabinet Member responsible for implementing the Council's policy in each portfolio, with the Cabinet chaired by Council Leader Roger Hollingworth.

- Portfolio Holder for Policy, Performance, Partnerships and Economic Development: Roger Hollingworth (Leader and Cabinet Chairman)
- Resources: Geoff Denaro (Deputy Leader and Deputy Cabinet Chairman)
- Business Transformation: Del Booth J.P.
- Planning and Regeneration: Jill Dyer M.B.E.
- Older People, the Young and Vulnerable People: Margaret Sherrey J.P.
- Community Cohesion and Engagement: Roger Smith
- Community Services: Mike Webb
- Regulatory Services and Affordable Housing: Peter Whittaker.

The Cabinet works to a four-month Forward Plan that outlines key upcoming decisions, and the decisions of the Cabinet are examined by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Overview and Scrutiny (O&S)

O&S scrutinises decisions or actions taken and, where necessary, sets up task groups to examine particular decisions or services in detail. It takes a post-decision role and therefore concentrates on current practices and decisions already taken by the Cabinet.

3. Working Together

Whether it is through shared services with other Councils, partnerships or joint working with other agencies, outsourcing can provide better value for money

for our residents. This works both ways – some services we outsource, and some we provide for other authorities.

Key relationships include:

Redditch Borough Council

We share a single management team with Redditch as well as a range of back office and operational services (more on the Shared Services project later).

Worcestershire Regulatory Services

We host the County's single shared service for regulatory services, which includes the environmental health, licensing and trading standards services of all seven local Councils in Worcestershire.

Wychavon Leisure

The Dolphin Centre is run by this charitable trust on our behalf.

Bromsgrove District Housing Trust

The housing trust took over the management and administration of the District's former housing stock in 2004 and supports our strategic objectives.

Age Concern

Age Concern runs Amphlett Memorial Hall on our behalf, providing services to older residents.

The Bromsgrove Partnership

We are part of a local strategic partnership of public, business and voluntary sector organisations aiming to “make Bromsgrove District a better place to live, work and visit by driving forward positive change”. Priorities include the regeneration of Bromsgrove town centre, development of the new train station, crime, housing, employment, the environment, and health and well-being.

Artrix

Managed by a charitable trust, we provide Bromsgrove's 300-seat arts centre with £120k a year and work together to help provide arts and culture in the area.

Services

We do more than just empty bins! Here are some of the services we provide:

- CCTV
- Community safety and neighbourhood wardens
- Economic development and the Town Centre partnership
- Electoral services
- Housing needs and homelessness

- Licensing services including taxis, street traders, pubs, and hairdressers
- Parks and grounds maintenance
- Planning and building control for new houses, extensions, listed properties etc.
- Public car parks
- Regulatory services including noise, fly-tipping, pollution, and food safety
- Sports and leisure services
- Street cleaning and dealing with litter and graffiti
- Tourist information
- And we also collect all the Council Tax for Worcestershire County Council, the emergency services and Parish Councils. 13% of it goes to us.

4. Top stories of 2009-10

Against a backdrop of national economic downturn and recession, Bromsgrove District Council continued its journey of improving services to residents. Here are just a few stories that helped make 2009-10 a year to remember.

- Mortgage Rescue scheme helps out homeowners at risk of repossession.
- Numbers soar at refurbished Fit 4 All gym at Bromsgrove's Dolphin Centre.
- The TRUNK multi agency drop-in centre opens in Charford.
- Over 4,000 attend local youth opportunities showcase High 5.
- Regional and national awards success for sports projects.
- District Street Theatre events thronged with revellers in 15th year.
- Formal Shared Services agreement reached with Redditch Borough Council.
- Council tax rise kept to 2.5%.
- Standards for England national report highlights good practice on Members' democratic standards.
- New Multi Use Games Area opens in Sanders Park and new BMX track opens in Rubery.
- Local firms flock to Fit 4 Biz business support seminar.
- Total overhaul of www.bromsgrove.gov.uk brings more to residents.
- New green-bin co-mingled recycling and brown-bin garden waste collection services launched.
- Success in getting housing allocation increased to 4,000 and resisting most green belt encroachment.
- New facilities crowned "best in England"
- BURT community transport launched
- Building a better Bromsgrove Street market now the biggest in Worcestershire
- Sanders Park earns the Green Flag.

5. Performance

Over the next section we have set out some of the results brought about by our work towards the priority areas based on our four stated objectives: Regeneration, Improvement, One Community and Environment. Overall, performance in 2009-10 continued on the trajectory of 2008-9 by demonstrating a good direction of travel.

“Key priorities... have been refined and now better reflect customer, stakeholder and staff ambitions. Improved management of performance and service delivery is securing improvement in services.” Comprehensive Performance Assessment, Audit Commission 2009.

5. i. Regeneration

Bromsgrove town centre

Our town centre partnership with Worcestershire County Council and other local agencies resulted in a lot of work taking place in the town in 2009-10. Revamped bus station shelters, lighting, landscaping, departures board.

- New toilet facilities, including a high dependency unit, officially the British Toilet Association’s Best Public Toilets in England 2009.
- Worcestershire’s largest regular street market three days a week.
- Multi-agency health centre on the Stourbridge Road confirmed and begun.
- Significant development opportunity created with removal of redundant market hall.
- £20,000 scheme to assist landlords to renovate historic shop fronts.
- Scheme to assist landlords convert town centre empty space into town centre living space.
- Site identified for new ‘blue light’ emergency services complex.

Boosting new business in Bromsgrove

Our eighth annual Bromsgrove Business Showcase brought together businesses people and key stakeholders in a promotion of local enterprise. At the showcase two more young local businesses, which were given a leg up by our Business Start-up Programme, celebrated breaking the million-pound turnover mark in 2009-10.

With 48 new businesses given help to start up in 2009-10 we have kick-started over 300 new businesses in nine years, with five going on to break £1m turnover and with 75% surviving at least 18 months. This is estimated to have created over 750 jobs in the District.

Regeneration: Equality of access

Access to Bromsgrove town centre was improved with a new “tactile” map of the town for the visually impaired, the opening of the town’s Changing Places high dependency toilet facilities, and the BURT community transport service.

Regeneration: Aiding local business

To help businesses during the recession we shortened the time taken to process and pay suppliers' invoices by two thirds, from 30 days to 10 days - and successfully paid 83% of all invoices within 10 days (98% within 30 days).

5. ii. Improvement

Value for money

Continuing our strong focus on improving value for money into 2009-10, we saw a second year of significantly improved efficiency while maintaining or improving service levels.

Shared Services

The Shared Services project with Redditch Borough Council began to properly take shape in 2009-10. The creation of a single management team for both Councils significantly reduced management costs, and some services became fully shared services, including the first shared electoral service in the country:

- Payroll
- Procurement
- Community Safety
- Electoral Services
- CCTV Services.

We are now looking at all our services to assess the benefits of sharing with Redditch. With government funding expected to fall by no less than 5% per year for the next three years, we feel that pooling resources to achieve greater efficiency and value for money is an innovative alternative to making sharp cuts to service budgets - and authorities across the country are now looking at our example.

The Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) shared service was also brought into being in 2009-10. Hosted by Bromsgrove and Redditch, WRS brings the County Council's Trading Standards service and all seven Districts' Environmental Health and Licensing services into one single service for Worcestershire, reducing the cost of providing the essential services by £1.3m.

Improvement: Customers serviced

95% of residents contacting us in 2009-10 resolved their query without any additional time or administration at first point of contact. 85% of all incoming calls to BDC were answered in an average of 20 seconds.

Improvement: Helping staff to work

Around £40,000 was saved as a corporate drive to improve employee health and wellbeing saw 4,000 hours worked that were lost to sickness last year.

Improvement: Desired result, fewer resources

The cost of our services fell by £759,000 in 2009-10 without reducing their effectiveness. On top of £2.6m saved in 2008-09, two year efficiency savings in Bromsgrove equal £94 per band D dwelling – 50% more than the national average saving of £63.

Improvement: Complaints well down

The continued improvement to quality of service saw total complaints fall 26 per cent on last year.

5. iii. One Community

Engaging with the community

We know from the results of the 2008 Place Survey that over one in four (27%) of our residents would like to be more involved in the decisions that affect their local area, and that fewer than one in seven (15%) actually felt involved that year. We therefore carried out an increasing range of engagement activities, especially as we geared up for our Democracy Year 2010-11 campaign – more on that later.

Budget Jury

The Budget Jury brings residents together with officers and Members to study our spending in genuine detail, in order to have their say on which areas they feel we should be prioritising.

First the group learns the reality of how we operate and which areas are mandatory or statutory services. Then their final opinions are sent to our Executive Cabinet, and finally the jurors are invited back to the budget-setting meeting of the Council to see the actual decisions first hand.

Our portfolio holder says: “Councils are required by law to provide a host of services with a limited and shrinking pot of cash, so it is important that we invest the funds we do have in areas people feel are important - and our Budget Jury is a powerful way to find out what a group of informed residents would decide to do.” Cllr Geoff Denaro

Udecide

Udecide was our way of getting young people genuinely involved with the allocation of funding from the County Council’s Funding Lots Of Super Stuff (FLOSS) scheme. We supported young people to bid for funding to a panel of peers, which then drew up a shortlist of bids to put to a vote to decide which bids got what from the £50,000 FLOSS funding!

Our portfolio holder says: “It was fantastic to see young people coming together from all walks of life to have their say and vote on projects that directly affect them. Their enthusiasm made the day a big success.” Cllr Margaret Sherrey.

BURT (Bromsgrove Urban and Rural Transport)

Our mobility impaired residents have quickly made good use of their community transport service launched in September 2009. BURT not only

gets people from A to B, but also helps them to access services they may have otherwise been unable to access. BURT made 1,010 journeys in its first seven months from September to March last year, and in that time 267 new users registered for the service.

“There was a lady just before Christmas that hadn’t been out of the house for eight months. Hadn’t seen a soul. What we did was bring her into town, she did a bit of shopping and it made her day. Job satisfaction, that’s what I call it.” Mick Booth, BURT driver.

“I want to see a better quality of life for people who’ve got disabilities – and BURT is actually getting people with disabilities out into the community. It’s been such a help to so many of my friends. It’s made a difference to people’s lives.” Mary Collett, Bromsgrove Disabled Access Group.

Housing - regional centre of excellence

We were very proud to spend 2009-10 as the Department of Communities and Local Government’s (DCLG) regional centre of excellence for youth homelessness. This was in recognition of work in partnership with the Bromsgrove Youth Homelessness Forum and bdht to combat youth homelessness in our District.

“You’ve been one of the most active centres and made a fantastic contribution.” DCLG.

Mortgage Rescue

After a marked increase in enquiries from home owners worried about financial security during the recession in early 2009, we funded a Mortgage Rescue Advisor for our local Citizens’ Advice Bureau. The specialist advisor helped over a hundred people that felt their homes were at risk with benefit entitlements, drafting letters to lenders, budgeting and financial advice and guidance for access to the Government’s Mortgage Rescue scheme.

Our portfolio holder said: “There isn’t a day when I don’t wake up and feel privileged to have my own home. In 2008 we recognised some very difficult times ahead for many home owners and looked to provide help in a number of ways.” Cllr Peter Whittaker.

One community: Crime down

401 fewer offences were committed in Bromsgrove District in 2009-10 than the previous year, a drop of 7%, and the agencies of the Bromsgrove Community Safety Partnership are continuing their combined efforts into 2010-11.

One community: Arts events popular

Our local arts events (such as those found in Shindig – live arts on your doorstep) were attended by around 24,000 people in 2009-10. This excludes events at the part Council-funded Artrix theatre.

One community: Helping homelessness

We assisted 14 local households facing homelessness into temporary accommodation in 2009-10. Despite pressures on the housing market, initiatives such as a housing options early preventative scheme with bdht and domestic violence safehouses in Bromsgrove helped prevent homelessness.

One community: Housing

More affordable homes 88 new affordable homes were built in Bromsgrove District in 2009-10, 8 above our target of 80 homes.

One community: sport and active recreation

Developing sport and active recreation Our sports and active recreation events were attended by over 30,000 people in 2009-10, smashing the year's target by almost 8,000 people – or over 35%.

5. iv. Environment

We made large scale improvements to our waste and recycling services in 2009-10. The improvements, particularly changes to allow use of the new Envirosort waste processing facility near Worcester, enabled our residents to reduce, re-use or recycle record levels of their waste.

- Universal introduction of wheeled recycling bins across the District
- Simpler “co-mingled” single bin service
- More types of waste material able to be recycled
- New collection vehicles able to access narrower roads
- Over 1,500 more households on recycling collections (including new large communal recycling bins)

2009-10 also saw us employ a Climate Change Manager to carry out work on this priority and to produce our first ever corporate Climate Change Strategy. The strategy, which we are due to adopt in late 2010, will bring climate change to the forefront of our decision making process.

Environment: Greener fleet

600 fewer tons of carbon was emitted to the atmosphere from our waste and recycling fleet as a result of upgrades to more efficient vehicles in 2009-10, a drop of 7% on the previous year's fleet emissions.

Environment: Facing the emissions challenge

Our overall emissions actually went up in 2009-10, mostly due to issues with outdated and unsuitable buildings. We recognise the issue and are working on it.

Environment: Reduce, re-use, recycle

37% of all residents' household waste was re-used, recycled or composted in 2009-10, well over our target of 30%.

5. v. Finances

How our services are paid for

A tough financial climate in 2009-10 saw our investment income fall, but this was more than offset by improved efficiency that saw our spending on all services come in £459k or almost 3% better than budgeted.

Lowest risk investments

Investment incomes fell not only due to reduced interest rates but also because in 2009's deeply uncertain financial climate we felt our invested money should be as safe as possible. Naturally, the safer lower-risk investments yielded lower returns.

Income

The income required to run our services came from Government grants (40%) and local taxpayers (56%), with the rest from investments and other sources. Our total income was £11.8m.

With the Council Tax rise kept to 2.5% the average Council tax bill for a band D property in 2009-10 was £1,447.06, of which 12.85% or £188.15 came to us – that's £3.62 per week.

Capital projects

We spent £5.6m investing in our assets in 2009-10. We worked with Registered Social Landlords to invest £0.3m in the provision of affordable housing in the District, and put £0.65m towards disabled facilities grants to enable the disabled to continue living at home. Other projects included:

- £1.7m on replacement fleet vehicles and co-mingled waste collection service
- £2.5m including monies carried over from 2008-9 for improved infrastructure to enhance our service provision
- Town centre regeneration projects.

6. The future

One of our biggest challenges for the next few years will be to minimise the effect on residents of the combination of a recovering national economy and significant cuts to spending in the public sector. Through the shared services project with Redditch Borough Council and the business transformation project that runs alongside it, we will continue on our path to turn the District Council into a leaner, more efficient authority. We expect to assess all of our services on this basis in 2010-11.

Democracy Year 2010-11

We are kickstarting a year-long campaign for a stronger, better local democracy in 2010-11 after recommendations from a Scrutiny exercise. With improved processes, more projects and engagement activities and a consistent thread through all our promotional work throughout the year, we aim to enhance community involvement in the democratic process.

Our Leader says: "A vibrant healthy local democracy is more important than ever - and we are prepared to take the lead on working with partners and the community to achieve this. I hope we can create increased interest, debate and ultimately turnout at the polling booths." Cllr Roger Hollingworth.

With our commitment to the environment in mind, this report is not being printed. Please do not print it unless you have to. A plain text version is also available on www.bromsgrove.gov.uk.

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