

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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of local public services

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Overall, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council performs adequately

Managing performance	2 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

The overall organisational assessment score is adequate because it is delivering a mixed level of service in areas that matter most to people, satisfaction levels vary but the Council delivers value for money. It is gradually improving service performance.

There is a difference between the scores for managing performance and use of resources. We decided that the score should be that overall Welwyn Hatfield District Council performs adequately rather than performing well. This is because despite the Council having robust financial aspects of the business they are not consistently delivering quality services and outcomes that matter most to local residents.

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council scores 2 out of 4 for managing its performance. The Council consults with local people and knows that they want to improve the town centres, feel safe, recycle more and tackle problems with parking and traffic congestion, whilst keeping council tax as low as possible. Performance overall is variable. There are services which compare with the best performing councils, such as dealing with housing benefits applications and planning applications. There are also service areas which compare badly to others, such as recycling. There are low levels of satisfaction amongst residents, especially around the Council doing a good job, local people feeling they belong to their immediate neighbourhood, and people not treating each other with respect and consideration. Residents also feel they cannot influence council decisions. But, four out of five local people feel that Welwyn Hatfield is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together.

The Council is gradually improving its services. The impact of the recession poses even greater challenges, but the Council has strengthened its approach to planning, revised its budgets and improved monitoring of progress. The area is becoming safer but the area needs to be cleaner. Recycling levels have not improved and compare poorly to others and public satisfaction with litter is mixed. Affordable housing and decent homes targets are being met but are not improving.

The Council has a good approach to equalities and has a strong and inclusive approach to partnership working. It has slimmed down its management structures so that it can work more efficiently, made considerable efficiency savings over the last few years by outsourcing a number of services. Its approach to monitoring and managing its performance is improving.

The Council scores 3 out of 4 for Use of Resources. The Council links its financial planning with the corporate promises that the community helped to develop. It has low council tax and achieves this by understanding its costs, delivering excellent efficiency savings and delivering value for money. The Council manages the business and performs well in managing its staff.

About Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Welwyn Hatfield is located within Hertfordshire County, covering the main towns of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield. The population is around 108,300, but is expected to grow faster than the national average over the next ten years. There is a high working age population when compared regionally and nationally, particularly a high student population. There is a relatively high non-British white population, and other minority ethnic groups are also larger than the regional and national averages, including Indian and Chinese communities. There are a high number of migrant workers in the area. The borough is affluent, with low levels of unemployment and a relatively high proportion of self-employed workers. Wage levels are high. Qualification levels vary, with a high proportion of the population within the highest and lowest bands (i.e. NVQ4 and above, and those with no qualifications). House prices in Welwyn Hatfield have risen over the past year, going against national, regional and county trends. Although there are inequalities, the health of people in Welwyn Hatfield is generally better than the England average.

The Council is led by a Conservative administration. The Conservative party hold 38 seats, the Labour party has seven, and Liberal Democrats have three councillors.

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's priorities, known as the Five Promises, are: People and safer communities; Maintain and enhance a cleaner and greener environment; Encouraging prosperity and a healthier community; Improving homes and neighbourhoods; Accountable to the community.

Organisational assessment

How well is the organisation delivering its

priority services, outcomes and improvements that are important to local people?

Priorities match local needs. These have emerged from a sustained effort to build public engagement. However, Welwyn Hatfield has one of the lowest satisfaction rates in Hertfordshire. According to the national Place survey, it is in the bottom 25 per cent of places in which people feel that the council does a good job and that they can influence local decisions. This is due to recent decisions about the future of local hospitals and the delay to the redevelopment of Hatfield town centre.

The percentage of residents who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together remains high at 79 per cent. This is above average when compared to other parts of the region and other similar councils. But percentages are below average for residents who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood and for treating one another with respect and consideration, 50 and 39 per cent respectively.

People and safer communities

In line with the Hertfordshire average Welwyn Hatfield is a safe place to live. The crime rate is low. The overall recorded crime rate for the borough in 2009 is 33 per cent lower than it was in 2004. There is very little violence. Burglaries are down by around 40 per cent since 2004, but are still more common than in the majority of places in England and the second highest level in the County. The Council and the Police work closely together to tackle crime and to address the things that make people feel unsafe, such as rowdy behaviour and graffiti. This work is helping to make the Borough to be and feel a safer place.

The Council and its partners are working to improve the perception of young people, and to keep them safe. They are publicising the community achievements of young people. The Police and street wardens are using additional powers to tackle under age drinking. The SPACE centre for young people in Welwyn and a new one in Hatfield provide safe places for young people to gather. The Crucial Crew' event at the University of Hertfordshire equips year six children with 'crucial' life skills as they prepare for secondary school and their teenage years, including messages about healthy lifestyles, water safety, personal safety and road safety.

Resident satisfaction levels with the area are mixed. 31 per cent of people in Welwyn Hatfield think that older people in their local area get the help and support they need to live at home for as long as they want to, which is above the England average and the second best in Hertfordshire. However, 20 per cent of the people who are over the age of 65 are not satisfied with their home and their neighbourhood. This is the poorest level of satisfaction for over 65's in Hertfordshire and one of the lowest in England.

Maintain and enhance a cleaner and greener environment

The people of Welwyn Hatfield want to recycle more and are not satisfied

with what the Council has done to make this possible. Recycling rates are below the average for other councils and the Council is in the bottom 25 per cent of all councils for people's satisfaction with tips and waste recycling centres and doorstep recycling. The Council has responded by introducing the collection of additional materials, but the rate of recycling and composting for the borough has not improved compared with 2007/08.

Efforts to deal with litter are working but public satisfaction is mixed. In April 2006, the Council responded to increased levels of litter by entering a 10-year Street Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance partnership with Serco. This has resulted in significant improvements in 2008/09, with performance levels now above average compared to others. Independent customer satisfaction surveys commissioned by Serco show that satisfaction has increased, but the results of the Place Survey show that public satisfaction with keeping public land clear of litter and refuse is still one of the lowest in Hertfordshire.

The Council is effectively tackling traffic congestion and parking. Over 200 additional off-street parking spaces in 16 separate schemes has reduced traffic congestion and proved popular with locals.

Promote a sense of community in the Borough

The Council is working effectively to support the local economy. It manages a programme of regeneration projects in its neighbourhood shopping centres to help boost local job and business opportunities, for example improvements to the Hilltop Shopping parade in High View, Hatfield were completed in September 2008. Regular meetings take place with the Hatfield Town Centre Forum and almost £500,000 of improvements have been completed.

There is mixed resident satisfaction with sport, leisure and recreational facilities. Satisfaction is high with sports and leisure facilities. But satisfaction with parks and open spaces is below average and the lowest in Hertfordshire, and satisfaction with museums and galleries is in the bottom 25 per cent of councils. Investment in playground equipment has been made in Stanborough Park and Moneyhole Lane Playing Field to improve resident satisfaction.

The Council is improving access to services. In March 2009, 12 new community buses were delivered to take people to and from their destination be it post office or to the shops. Free lunch club transport is available to three day centres where home cooked meals are served.

The way the Council engages and participates with local communities has improved. The councillor-led Ward Improvement Scheme, known as "Community Chest", has been much more successful in its second year. Ward Members have talked to their communities about projects they would like to see. 54 projects have been successfully funded and completed across all the 17 wards in the Borough up to the end of July 2009.

Decent homes

The Council and its partners exceeded their affordable homes target but future challenges remain. In 2008/09, 185 affordable new homes were completed against a target of 157. However, this is far fewer than in recent

years. The Council is projecting only 57 new completions in 2009/10 due to the limited availability of sites and the impact of the recession on developers. The Council has agreed a new policy for 2009/10 to support community priorities such as creating construction employment and providing business for local suppliers to help achieve the government target of 10,000 new homes by 2021.

Homes continue to be built despite the recession. Another 327 homes were provided in 2008/09, not far below the target of 386.

The quality of council housing continues to improve. About 200 more homes were brought into line with the national Decent Homes Standard in 2008/09, with just four per cent still to do in the next year.

The Council is working to support those made more vulnerable by the recession. The Council and its partners have provided a new and bigger women's refuge, and a mental health unit of individual flats in a block. This was funded through an innovative mix of grants, including mental health grant funding, on land provided by the County Council. The HOLD (home ownership for learning disabilities) programme has provided grants to support people with learning difficulties to buy homes and achieve independence.

The Council has provided additional resources to help those made more vulnerable by the recession. An extra grant of £20,000 has been made to the Citizens Advice Bureau to take on another officer to provide debt advice. The Council has also increased the advice it provides on the benefits system, including a set of new leaflets explaining the options and encouraging the take-up of benefits people are entitled to. The leaflets have been shared with other Hertfordshire authorities.

Accountable to the community

There is clear officer and political leadership. Relationships between officers and councillors is good. The recent senior management reorganisation has resulted in a more strategic role for directors. The strengthened role of the Heads of Service and their inclusion in the Performance Clinics ensures that operational performance is effectively managed and challenged. The performance management structure is well defined and understood by directors, service heads and cabinet members.

The Council works well with partners to deliver future improvements. Members of the Welwyn Hatfield Alliance have a positive view of the Council and the Alliance continues to mature as an effective partnership. Clear performance targets developed with and agreed by the partners are monitored and reported to partners via the Council's performance management system.

The Council is treating people fairly. It has achieved level three of the new equalities framework which is above average for councils. All staff and councillors get equalities training. Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are conducted for all services and functions and lead to service improvements.

The Council provides good value for money. It uses public money well to deliver services and has both reduced costs and improved quality. Council tax

increases have been kept below inflation and the Council is committed to maintaining this policy. However, this is not the perception of local residents. Only 30.2 per cent of residents feel that the Council provides value for money. This is below the average for England and one of the lowest satisfaction rates in Hertfordshire.

The Council makes effective use of alternative methods of service delivery. It has continued to make use of opportunities to outsource services. In partnership, it has entered into a 12-year commercial contract to provide services such as IT, council tax, benefits, business rates, customer contact centre, and reception and switchboard services on its behalf. Over time, the Council expects this to improve services to residents at a lower cost than if it had continued to provide than itself.

The Council is effective at working with others to keep service costs low. It led the way in establishing a partnership with other Hertfordshire authorities which ensures that they all get the best possible price from selling waste paper. The Council also shares some of its posts, such as its procurement manager, and training for housing planning and emergency planning, with other Hertfordshire authorities to keep costs down and share good ideas.

The Council has demonstrated that it has the necessary finances to deliver corporate promises. It understands its costs and the factors that affect them, so it is able to make good decisions about how services should be delivered and made more efficient. The proactive outsourcing of services has achieved savings and will continue to do so, but also means there are few opportunities to make further savings through that approach. The Council recognises that increased partnership working with other Hertfordshire authorities will be its best opportunity to achieve further efficiency improvements.

The Council has taken robust steps to address the impact of the recession on its delivery of services in coming years. It has reviewed and revised its budget setting process to ensure greater rigour, with an extended planning horizon of five years instead of three. Plans and bids have been revisited using the new approach, taking account of any known issues which may affect budgets after 2010/11.

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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