

Report for Parish Councils from Cllr Iona Parker, Braintree District Council – March/April 2024

1. The Council's budget for 2024/2025 of £19.6m was approved at the meeting of Full Council on 19th February. Despite ongoing cost pressures and increased demand for services, the Council remains in a sound financial position for the forthcoming year compared to other councils.
2. There remains a forecast deficit over the medium term to 2027/28 of £2.3m. The Council will be looking at ways to address this and will be developing a "Fit for the Future" transformation programme to look out how resources can be used more effectively and how we can work better with other partners. A sum of money has been set aside for this work from the New Homes Bonus the Council receives from the Government. A further sum has been set aside from the NHB to add to the risk reserves to recognise uncertainties over future costs and demand.
3. Full Council also passed a resolution on Council Tax for the forthcoming year. The Braintree District Council element of Council Tax will rise by 2.96% which represents an increase of 11p per week for a band D property.
4. The main highlights from the Budget as far as my ward is concerned are:
 - Councillor Community Grants to continue – each Councillor to be allocated £1250 to award to community projects in their ward.
 - Street cleansing grants to Parish councils to continue.
 - The garden waste subscription service has proved more popular than anticipated with a take up of over 50% bringing in an income to the Council of around £900k.
 - The Council is looking to charge a Council Tax premium of 100% on second homes in the district with effect from 1st April 2025.
5. The new business park near Gt Notley, Horizon 120, has proved a success. This was delivered by BDC who secured over 50% match funding from the South East Local Enterprise Board. There is now nearly 90% occupancy and as well as providing jobs, is providing an income to the Council. BDC is also undertaking a review of the way in which it manages its asset to improve efficiency and income.
6. The Council has updated its Livewell Health and Wellbeing strategy in conjunction with partners in the health services. The aim of the strategy is to focus on prevention and early intervention and to move beyond simply treating health conditions after they have arisen. The intention is to create an environment where everyone has the right facilities available to them to actively participate in improving their own health and wellbeing. The data shows a strong link between deprivation and poor health and we are particularly conscious that parts of Braintree and Halstead feature in the 20% most deprived areas in the country.
7. The NHS was due to approve consider the final business case for the Sible Hedingham medical centre on 22nd March (this may now have happened). Once it is approved, the land can be transferred by BDC to One Medical who can then start construction. This is in addition to the new Community Diagnostic Centre due to open shortly in Braintree and the ward space that has opened at Halstead hospital for patients who are medically fit to be discharged from hospital but not ready to go home.
8. We have delivered 1064 new homes in the District in 2021/22, the highest in Essex. For this year, we have delivered 329 affordable homes against a target of 250. So that

we keep an up to date Local Plan (important for avoiding speculative planning applications on unallocated sites), we will shortly be undertaking a call for sites for the next iteration of the Local Plan.

9. We are trying to address the increasing demand for affordable (social) housing which has been exacerbated by the reduction in private lets. As part of this we have produced an empty homes strategy to bring empty properties back into the market. There are over 3000 empty homes in the District. Our housing team prevented 50 cases of homelessness in the third quarter of this year.
10. The Council has launched a small grants scheme providing funding of up to £10,000 to start or enhance existing community projects that support local residents with the cost of living. See <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/news/article/630/braintree-district-council-launch-cost-of-living-grant-scheme>. The Council has also launched a £100,000 fund to support community groups and parish councils who wish to reduce their carbon footprint. Grants are available for up to £10,000 and monies for the fund have come from the Government's Shared Prosperity Fund. See <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/braintree-district/climate-change-1/7>.
11. The Government has secured a Special Development Order for the use of Wethersfield airfield for a further 3 years but the maximum number of asylum seekers will be reduced from 1700 to 800. The Council receives funding from the Home Office for the asylum centre but this is per bed not per person and is solely to cover the cost of our statutory duties eg waste collection. For the latest updates regarding Wethersfield, please see the Council's website.
12. Finally, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner elections for Essex are taking place on 2nd May. This is an important election which affects how the police and fire services are run in the County. The deadline for applying for a postal vote is 17th April. For further information see <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/elections2024>.