

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Organisational Assessment

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of local public services

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Overall, South Cambridgeshire District Council performs adequately

Managing performance	2 out of 4
Use of resources	2 out of 4
Managing finances	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

Overall South Cambridgeshire District Council performs adequately. It is improving in many areas that matter to local people. Satisfaction with services is generally good and ease of access to services is slowly improving. High numbers of houses that local people can afford have been built. The Council works well with partners. The skills and abilities of staff are improving through training but the Council does not have a clear picture about the number of staff and skills needed for the future. Key vacancies have affected achievement during 2008/09. Progress in making sure all people are treated fairly has been slow. Resident satisfaction with the way the Council runs things is average. Council finances are okay at the moment but by relying on its reserves it will have to make more difficult decisions in the future such as reducing some of its services.

South Cambridgeshire District Council scores 2 out of 4 for managing its performance. It is improving in many areas that matter to local people. It performs well on waste and recycling, council tax collection and paying housing benefits. The streets are clean and satisfaction with services is generally good. High numbers of houses that local people can afford have been built. But, it is slower at working out planning applications. Crime levels are low compared to other areas but burglary and car crime has increased.

The Council works well with partners to plan for housing development but progress has slowed down because of the recession. Progress on economic development is slow, but £150,000 is being used to help local businesses through the recession.

Access to services is improving slowly. The Contact Centre is good.

Complaints are dealt with more quickly, but satisfaction with complaints handling remains low. Progress in making sure all people are treated fairly has been slow.

Council leaders are clear about what they need to achieve and are now better able to deliver. They have set five aims for 2009/10 which are linked to those of other public and private sector partners. More training is provided for councillors. Scrutiny Committee has improved, contributing to better decision making. Most planned improvements have been achieved. But, some have not because some targets have been unrealistic. The skills and abilities of staff are improving through training but workforce planning is not fully developed.

The Council scores 2 out of 4 for its use of resources. Council finances are sound for the short term. Efficiency savings have been made. However, there is a gap in the budget between spending and income which will need to be dealt with. The recession has reduced income. Future levels of service for housing tenants are uncertain but the Council is considering the best way forward.

About South Cambridgeshire District Council

South Cambridgeshire is a mainly rural district. The population is around 140,000 and is expected to increase faster than national averages over the next ten years. The area has a slightly younger population than average. It is a mainly white British population although there is a large traveller population compared to other areas. South Cambridgeshire is one of the most well-off districts in England. Unemployment is low, wage levels are much higher than regional and national average, and the number of people with no qualifications is almost half the regional average. Major housing developments are planned for the district as part of one of the government's growth areas, to house the growing population. House prices are higher than the county, regional and national average, although they have fallen by more than the all the other Cambridgeshire's districts over the last year. People of South Cambridgeshire are healthier than the England average. Road injuries and deaths are worse than average, which is similar to other parts of the county.

South Cambridgeshire District Council has 57 elected councillors each representing an area of the district. The Council is led by a Conservative administration.

For 2008/09, the Council had three priorities and 21 supporting service aims. These are:

Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future;

Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community; and

Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work.

New priorities for 2009/10 have been developed.

Organisational assessment

Council priorities match local needs. The 2008/09 priorities are based on public consultation, undertaken by the Council, health service, police, and other partners. Compared to other areas, a high number of people in South Cambridgeshire feel they can influence local decisions. Councillors and senior managers have developed a new set of priorities for 2009/10.

Local people think South Cambridgeshire is a good place to live. In the Place Survey 90 per cent of residents said they are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the area as a place to live. This is above average for other similar places. But, under 44 per cent of people are satisfied with the way the Council runs things which is lower than previous survey results and about the national average.

Overall the Council is not meeting its own targets. Only 30 of its key 54 targets were met in 2008/09. Fourteen targets were only just missed. Nine key measures, of which five were related to growth and dependent on developers and partners, were not met at all. Results for the last measure are not yet available from government.

Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future

The Council works well with neighbouring councils to plan for development, but the impact of this is not currently being seen, because housing growth in the district has been badly hit by the recession. The arrangements to support growth are in place. The 'Cambridgeshire Horizons' partnership manages long term growth in the sub-region and is well established and effective. Joint planning committees are in place for the new housing developments at Northstowe and the Cambridge Fringes. A Joint Urban Design Team is in place with officers from South Cambridgeshire, Cambridge City and the County Council. But, progress on the major housing development at Northstowe has been affected by the economic downturn with no formal planning decision expected until late 2010.

Targets for building houses that local people can afford have been met. In 2008/09 274 affordable homes were completed against a target of 239. A further 40 were given planning permission. But this is a big reduction on the 408 built in 2007/08. This is due to the economic climate.

Improvements to local communities are being made. Cambourne has a new church and community hall; the new town of Northstowe has improved footpaths. Improvements have been made to the River Cam as a result of the Trumpington meadows development.

The future levels of service for council housing tenants are uncertain. The Council effectively managed the housing stock transfer proposal up to the ballot on transfer and delivered to timetable. But, tenants decided to remain

with the Council as their landlord. The Council is planning to deliver future housing services under the national framework for housing finance.

There has been little impact on tackling climate change. Funding has been agreed to provide wind turbine and solar hot water heating at the Orchard Park primary school and to run travel planning projects for residents. The Sustainable Energy partnership is producing some savings in energy costs and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. But work is at an early stage and impact is limited.

Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community

Most Council services are improving, but performance is not consistently high. High levels of recycling and composting have been achieved and amount of waste to landfill reduced. Recycling has increased through kerbside collection of plastics. This has contributed to a big rise in the cost of waste collection from £47.31 to £54.56 per household.

The district is kept clean. Over 61 per cent of people are satisfied with the Council's efforts to keep public land clear of litter and refuse, this is above the national average.

People who need financial help get it more quickly. New housing benefit applications are now worked out within 21.2 days. But planning requests are worked out slowly. Council targets for planning applications were not met in 2008/09 and more successful appeals were made against planning decisions.

Housing performance is improving from low levels in the past. The time taken to re-let empty council houses improved from 40 days (in 2007/08) to 13 in 2008/09. The target for the number of households in temporary accommodation was achieved. But targets on preventing homelessness and reducing the length of time that homeless families spend in hostel accommodation were missed.

The Council is slowly improving access to services. The Contact Centre has a satisfaction level of 95 per cent. This was judged the best public sector call centre in an independent survey. Complaints to the Council have been dealt with more quickly following complaints handling training for managers. However, public satisfaction with complaints handling remains low and below the Council's own target. The quality of customer services remains variable.

Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work

The Council recognises it needs to work more with its local residents, but progress is slow. A plan to achieve this is being worked on. The Council is increasing its work with and support of parish councils, for example, in developing and delivering parish plans. It is consulting local people to see if neighbourhood panels should do more than focus on crime and anti-social behaviour issues. Scrutiny Committee, which monitors the performance of

those leading the Council, and scrutinises services and policies throughout the district, meets in locations across the district to encourage public involvement in its meetings.

Limited work has been done to support the local economy during 2008/09. But, the Council has done some practical things to support local businesses during the economic downturn. It has allocated £150,000 in 2009/10 to fund work like freezing fees for taxi licensing or trade refuse collection or providing specialist business support with the Chamber of Commerce. But, the Council recognises it can do more. It now has an Economic Development Officer and research on the local economy is underway. This will be used to plan for economic development.

Crime levels are relatively low but are increasing. According to the Place Survey anti-social behaviour is not seen as a major problem. And only 13 per cent of residents think drug dealing or use to be a major problem. This is the lowest level compared to similar places. The percentage of residents who agree that the police and other local public services seek people's views about anti-social behaviour and crime in their local area is over 27 per cent, which is higher than other areas. But levels of burglary and vehicle crimes rose during 2008/09. Serious theft increased compared to other similar places but more recent information shows some reduction. The Council and partners such as the police and fire service make effective use of limited funding to deal with crime. For example, holding four anti-social behaviour days as part of 'The Streets' programme and reaching over 500 young people and working with parish councils to tackle vehicle crime, burglary and anti-social behaviour.

Tackling inequality and improving outcomes for people in vulnerable circumstances

The Council has made slow progress in tackling inequality. In June 2009 it achieved level two (out of five) of the Local Government Equality Standard. This standard recognises the importance of fair and equal treatment in local government services and employment. The Council is developing policies to improve its performance but there are few improvements that local residents can see.

The Council faces a challenge to identify possible sites for gypsy and traveller pitches and travelling showpeople plots. Regional targets mean the Council must provide 88 pitches by 2021 and consider its part of the countywide requirement for transit pitches. Consultation on draft planning policies and site options is to be completed by October 2009.

In the recent Place Survey, just over 82 per cent of local people agree people from different backgrounds get on well together. This is below average when compared to similar places and worse than 2006/07.

Future delivery of high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community

The Council uses its resources, such as people and money adequately. The

Council has a good medium term financial plan and budget process and there is a clear policy on levels of reserves. Councillors are involved in the budget process but the effect of financial changes are not always fully thought through. Spending is made within budgets. About one third of local people believe the Council provides value for money and this is about average compared to similar places.

The Council understands its costs but understands less well what can influence business costs. Fully costed options are usually produced for new projects but what impact projects might have on service delivery is not always clear. Cost comparisons, reviewing initiatives once they have been implemented and the sharing of knowledge and learning are not standard features across the Council.

Financial reporting is regular and timely. However, explanations of changes in spending do not always identify whether these are due to changed circumstances or poor budgeting.

The Council involves public, private and voluntary sectors when it contracts for services. But, when adopting new approaches or setting up new partnerships, it does not always set out clear and measurable objectives and targets.

The service review programme, which has previously identified performance efficiencies, was not completed in 2008/09. No cashable financial savings have been identified through the services review programme.

There are adequate systems to ensure good quality information, but these systems are not used consistently. The Council has established good governance principles and councillors get training. But, as objectives are not agreed before training starts, its effectiveness cannot be properly assessed.

Risk management is sound and the Council works well to prevent fraud.

Councillor leadership has improved recently. The Council has developed a clear picture of what it wants to achieve for the area. Clear aims have been agreed in the 2009/10 corporate plan. These are: being a listening council providing first class services accessible to all; ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place for you and your family; making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live; assisting provision of local jobs for you and your family; providing a voice for rural life. Each aim is supported by specific actions and targets. Council leaders are also clear about how the Council contributes to the targets and priorities set by local partners, and agreed by Government.

Executive councillor skills are improving. More training is provided for councillors as part of the councillor development strategy. Scrutiny Committee has improved and is helping the Council to make better informed decisions. Senior officers and councillors have improved the way they work together.

A key vacancy has restricted the Council's ability to deliver plans. The Council was unable to appoint to an executive director's post until August 2009. As a result much needed enhanced managerial capacity was not available to the Council and its existing two chief officers. The Council's review of financial services is in two phases with corporate managers taking on additional work in the short term to provide additional capacity. Phase one is now completed

and recommendations are being carried out. Phase two gives the new executive director the opportunity to consider suggestions for improvement.

Finances are currently sound. Reserves are in line with medium term financial plans. Budget management has improved and targets for 2008/09 were met. Revenue spending was under spent by 1.3 per cent and capital spending by 2.5 per cent. The Council continues to exceed targets for efficiency savings, achieving £997,000 in 2008/09 against a target of £820,000.

But, the recession has reduced the Council's income, especially with fewer houses being built. This affects planning and land charges income and council tax income. The rejection of the stock transfer proposals means the Council will not have enough funds for investment in council housing in the future. The Council's general fund budget is supported by reserves and more difficult decisions will need to be made in the future to tackle the gap between what the Council spends and the income it gets. Each of these reasons poses a risk to the Council's future ambitions.

There are good plans in place for improvement. The Council has improved the way that it manages its business and a plan is in place to improve further. In January 2009 it was agreed that a formal Improvement Board, with external support, was no longer needed to help the Council progress. The 2009/10 corporate plan brings together all planned improvements and should help these to be delivered. Specific actions and targets have been set to achieve each new aim.

The Council has improved its approach towards minority communities. It is consulting on its first gypsies and travellers strategy for adoption in October 2009. Gypsies and travellers are the largest minority ethnic community, making up 1 per cent of its population. They are often more disadvantaged than other groups in getting access to healthcare and education. The Council aims to make sure that gypsy and traveller communities enjoy equality of service and are part of communities, where people from different backgrounds get on well together with equal rights and responsibilities.

The Council is meeting most planned improvements. Management team and Cabinet get regular reports on finance and performance so they can take action where necessary. There are also individual project plans. Some of these have met target dates, for example the plan to prepare for housing stock transfer. However, some other plans have not been delivered on time, for example the equalities action plan or the service review programme. The Council operates with limited staff. The loss of key staff or failure to fill vacancies has affected some projects and timescales and some targets have been unrealistic.

The Council works well with other organisations. The Council has worked with others to buy goods and services at a better price. For example on gas maintenance contracts and with the County Council to buy performance management software.

It works well with partners planning new housing and new communities. A partnership project has identified the needs for new housing across Cambridgeshire. This information is essential to co-ordinate growth and help negotiations with developers about community facilities and housing they might be asked to provide. Partnership working provides specialist skills and

brings in external funding. This can be seen in the countywide partnership on waste management and work with Cambridgeshire Horizons, which project manages the strategic delivery of new homes, new jobs and new infrastructure in the county.

The Council is not clear about the type and size of workforce it needs for the future. It refreshed its existing workforce plan in September 2009 but recognises that it must be strengthened through 2010 to give a clearer picture of staffing needs on a service by service basis. The Council achieved Investors in People (IIP) status in February 2009, a process designed to help organisations get the most from the workforce. But the Council has not fully worked out how it can use IIP to improve services. It uses e-recruitment with other public bodies to make jobs more accessible and quicker to fill. It is developing a framework to ensure managers continuously develop all the skills necessary to their jobs. This is being set up in 2009/10.

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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