

## **REPORT FOR ANNUAL PARISH MEETING – 2024**

I am very pleased, and proud, to continue representing The Colnes Ward on Braintree District Council; it's a privilege to be a voice for all the residents in our four lovely villages. I remain on the Council's Cabinet with responsibility for Planning and Infrastructure and am still a member of the Planning Committee

### **DISTRICT COUNCIL ACHIEVEMENTS - REPORT FOR 2023/24**

#### **Overall Strategy and Finance:**

- Braintree District Council has continued with its priorities of delivering high quality statutory services in difficult times.
- A council tax increase for 24/25 of 2.96% means a balanced budget and allows investment to continue in supporting communities, parishes, and the economy.
- The Council is developing a 'transformation and shared services' programme, all with the purpose of improving financial efficiency and performance. BDC is already part of a shared procurement hub with Essex County Council, Epping Forest DC, Castle Point BC, Colchester City and Tendring DC. We are also working with other North Essex Councils to look at the possibilities of shared service opportunities around HR, IT, Revenues & Benefits and Finance
- A business case has been agreed to repurpose Causeway House, to ensure it is better placed to service modern ways of working and free up space to generate additional income for the authority.

#### **Environment:**

- Braintree District Council continues to receive awards for the maintenance of parks and open spaces.
- We continue to prioritise litter picking and responding quickly to fly tipping.
- The introduction of an all-year-round garden waste subscription service has meant an additional income of nearly £957k, with residents continuing to sign up. This income is helping to close BDC's budget gap and contributes significantly to producing a balanced budget – a government requirement.
- Significant projects from the Climate Change Action Plan have been delivered, including: BDC managed lighting using LED light bulbs, more

electric charging points in BDC car parks, Council carbon heavily reduced since 2019 and Home Upgrade Grants 2 are being promoted by the Council.

### **Planning and the Economy:**

- The council currently has a 5-year housing supply.
- A review of our Local Plan will be undertaken in the months ahead, to ensure future housing development is well planned across the district.
- Thanks to requests from Braintree DC, the deadline for the Minerals Plan consultation was extended to 9<sup>th</sup> April 2024. Strong representations were made at the Local Plan Committee to protect rural communities and the rural way of life.
- Planning Forums continue to be held prior to large planning applications being heard by the Planning Committee, this enables greater community and Councillor engagement with developers and leads to a higher quality of applications coming forward for consideration.
- Rural England Prosperity funding has been allocated to communities and businesses.
- Funding has been secured to support businesses with desk space at the Plaza, on the Horizon 120 site, Braintree.
- BDC have hosted Job Fairs with more to be held in the future.

### **Housing, Health and Communities:**

- The Livewell Strategy for 2024 – 2028 has been adopted, we will be working with partners to help residents with their health and wellbeing.
- The draft of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for 2024-29 has been approved, to support the most vulnerable in society. The Strategy commits the Council to putting in place the advice, support and tools for residents who are either at risk of or who were homeless to ensure everyone has the help they need, and that no one in the Braintree District is facing homelessness alone.
- The Housing Team prevented fifty cases of homelessness in the third quarter of the year through various interventions.
- There have been 329 affordable homes completions by the end of the third quarter, exceeding the annual target of 250, with three months left to go.

- Participation levels at the leisure centres continue to exceed target with over 268,000 attendees in the third quarter: 31,000 over target.
- BDC Community Safety Partnership continues to work with the Police and other agencies on safety initiatives.

## **MY NEWS**

I continue to be very busy with my Cabinet responsibilities, particularly in relation to Planning. I was especially pleased (and relieved!) to be given the news by officers in December that the District does now have a 5-year housing supply. It currently stands at 5.8 years and provides protection from unwelcome, speculative developments on sites not allocated for housing in our Local Plan. A 5- year supply does not stop applications coming forward, but it does make it easier to refuse unsuitable planning applications and defend them at appeal.

My role in Planning means that I deal with everything from very small, local issues – and I'm always happy to help and give advice where I can – up to the huge Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) such as Bramford-Tinstead energy supply scheme and National Grid's Norwich- Tilbury project which proposes multiple pylons crossing through Braintree District's countryside. Solar Farm applications continue to come forward and meet with a mixed reception i.e. we do need alternative energy sources but where they are placed can be a real issue for many residents.

Over the last year I have regularly attended Parish Council meetings and as many local events as possible.

I allocated all my District Councillor Community Grant fund of £1,250 before November of last year to support a number of projects within the Ward and I am delighted to say that this fund has been renewed for 2024/25. So, get your bids in!!

Finally, a big 'thank you' to all four Parish Councils, their Members, and the Clerks, for everything they do to support the villages. It's a voluntary role and I certainly appreciate the hard work involved.

Best Wishes to you all

Gabrielle Spray

