

Three Rivers District Council

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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for an independent overview
of local public services

Three Rivers District Council

Overall, Three Rivers District Council performs well

Managing performance	3 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

Three Rivers District Council performs well overall. The Council is addressing local people's concerns. These include reducing crime and recycling more waste. It has strong leadership and works well with other local organisations. Most local people like living in Three Rivers, and more than half are happy with the way their Council runs things.

There is a difference between the scores for managing performance and managing resources. We decided that the overall score should be that Three Rivers District Council performs well. This is because it has continued to deliver high quality services which matter to local people. Examples include reducing crime by 26 per cent over the last two years, continued provision of high quality waste and recycling services with above average public satisfaction. In addition, a range of council initiatives have contributed to increasing the numbers of children and older people participating in regular exercise thereby improving their long term health and well being.

The Council scores 3 out of 4 for managing performance. The Council is working well in partnership with the police and other local bodies. Together they are making the area a safer place to live and reducing the fear of crime. The Council has ensured that more waste is being recycled, re-used or composted and most local people are satisfied with the Council's waste and recycling services. The Council is helping local people to be physically active by running a variety of popular exercise programmes. Its local parks have won awards for being clean and tidy. Both its benefits and planning services are processing their customer's applications more quickly.

Local people are able to influence decisions in Three Rivers. The Council

consults with people from a wide range of local communities. More than 4 out of 5 people think that people from different backgrounds get on well together. The Council is doing a lot to try to help vulnerable people locally, although it is not clear how successful it is.

The Council scored level 2 out of 4 for use of resources. It has a good track record of managing its spending and maintains healthy levels of financial reserves. The Council is particularly effective at financial planning. This has helped it become more efficient. The Council has a satisfactory understanding of the cost of its services and is effective at reporting and monitoring its performance. It gets adequate value for money when it buys goods and services. The Council follows the basic principles of good governance. Risk management and internal controls are satisfactory. The quality of data, which the Council uses to measure its performance is acceptable, and getting better. The Council has an effective and skilled workforce that it manages adequately.

About Three Rivers District Council

Three Rivers District Council is situated in South West Hertfordshire. It borders Greater London to the south and east and Buckinghamshire to the west. About 87 700 people live in the district. The population is expected to grow faster than the rest of the country up to 2020. Three Rivers has a relatively high proportion of young people, but there are also more people over 75. There are a high proportion of White residents of non-British origin and a relatively large Indian population.

The district is relatively affluent. Unemployment is low. The workforce is highly skilled, and wage levels are higher than average. A lot of people are employed in the construction industry, and in the distribution, hotels and restaurants sector. House prices are higher than in most other parts of Hertfordshire, but in the last year these have dropped faster than anywhere else in the county. The people of Three Rivers are generally healthier than average, but there are differences between the most and least prosperous areas.

Most people like living in Three Rivers. In a recent survey, over 89 per cent of people were satisfied with living in the area. This is above average for Hertfordshire.

Three Rivers District Council is run by the Liberal Democrats. The Council consists of 31 Liberal Democrats, 12 Conservatives and 4 Labour and 1 British National Party member.

The Council has worked with local people to agree their priorities and these are grouped together under three themes. These are Safer Communities, Sustainable Communities and Towards Excellence.

Organisational assessment

How well is the organisation delivering its

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

Safer Communities

Three Rivers is becoming a safer place to live. Crime and anti social behaviour in Three Rivers has fallen by 26 per cent in the last two years. The Council, police and voluntary groups work well together to tackle problems in the area. They have asked local people about their main concerns and then taken action to address them. This includes providing more Police Community Support Officers. They have also provided activities such as football for young people who live in areas where there is more crime.

The Council and its partners are helping to reduce the fear of crime. According to the Place Survey, 34 per cent of local people agreed that the police and other local public services were successfully dealing with crime and anti social behaviour in their area. This is above average with similar places. Only 13 per cent of people think that anti social behaviour is a problem in their area. This is lower than most other districts in Hertfordshire. More people have reported that they feel safe after dark and during the day.

Domestic abuse is an increasing problem and the Council is working hard to address this. The numbers of victims who have been abused more than once has risen locally. A Domestic Abuse Intervention Worker is being funded by the council to help victims with issues such as safety, housing and child welfare. It is too early to tell how successful this has been.

Sustainable Communities

Three Rivers District Council continues to actively engage with partners in creating sustainable communities for the area. All new houses are built within 30 minutes public transport time of a GP surgery, primary school and secondary school. However, due to the recession, the Council did not achieve their affordable housing target. 70 homes were built instead of 200.

The Council is processing planning applications more quickly. It is meeting both national and local targets by adopting better work practices.

People who want to rent now have more choice. The Council is working with other councils on a scheme called Choice Based Lettings. This gives people more choice and makes it easier for them to move to a different area. It is too early to tell how successful this has been.

The Council is helping to meet the needs of vulnerable people. It has built up knowledge of the energy efficiency of the area's housing stock over several years. This has been combined with benefit claimant data to target residents most at risk of fuel poverty with energy saving advice and benefits checks. So far, 97 people have been referred to the scheme resulting in a reduction in their fuel bills.

The Council is helping local people to be physically active. More children have been going swimming since 2007, when the Council began offering them free

sessions. The Play Ranger Scheme has been successful in getting more children playing outdoors. Over 300 children are attending the scheme, some of whom have special needs. The Council provides free swimming for older people and new outdoor gyms to encourage more adults to be physically active. Last year, there were over 4000 more visits by older people to leisure centres. It has also introduced schemes to encourage residents in sheltered housing schemes, and people with learning disabilities, to participate in exercise. It is also running single sex exercise classes and offering subsidised gym membership. It is too early to tell how successful these projects have been in improving people's health.

Local parks and open spaces have met high quality standards. The council have been given an award for the high quality of their two of their parks at Chorleywood House and the Aquadome Nature Reserve. 77 per cent of local people are satisfied with parks and open spaces. This is above average compared to similar areas.

More waste is now being recycled, re-used or composted. Local recycling rates have improved for the sixth year. According to the Place Survey, 83 per cent of local people were satisfied with the Council's recycling service. This is above average when compared to similar areas.

Towards Excellence

The Council's leadership is strong and management is effective. The Council's has improved its management structure to help it deliver its priorities. It has created a new team to improve sustainability. Councillors work well with senior managers, particularly when difficult decisions have to be made.

Council staff are effective and highly skilled. The Council knows what staff it needs for the next three years and has got good plans in place to develop its workforce. Sickness absence has fallen since the Council introduced new procedures a few years ago.

Councillor training is good but they do not have clear plans to improve their skills. Councillors have decided not to work towards the Member Development Charter.

Local residents can influence Council decisions. The public are able to attend and speak at all meetings. Local Area Forums are held at least twice a year. Each forum has a budget to spend on small projects. A forum can be used by local people to discuss planning applications. Their views can then be reported back to the Council. In the Place Survey, 32 per cent of people agreed that they can influence decisions in their local area. This was above average when compared to similar areas.

The Council helps different communities and interests to get together and be involved in making decisions which matter to them. It has set up a Youth Council which meets twice year and has some money to spend. Members of the council come from local schools and the Youth Advocacy Service. It has been consulted in the last year on community safety issues and marketing. The Pensioner Forum meets twice a year and is very well attended. New services for older people such as the outdoor gym were presented at this forum this year.

People from different backgrounds get on well together in Three Rivers. In the Place Survey, 83 per cent of people agreed that the local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together. 62 per cent felt they belong to their immediate neighbourhood. This was above average when compared to similar areas.

Council plans are robust and thorough. Each service has its own plan and focus on delivering the Council's priorities. Councillors monitor progress against these plans at quarterly meetings to ensure they are delivered.

Councillors and managers are enthusiastic about how they can improve performance in the next three years. They are working together to plan what needs to be done to achieve better services and outcomes.

The Council is working well in partnership, to deliver better services at reduced cost. The Council is working with Watford Borough Council to provide some services together. The first four services to be shared are intended to be in place in 2009. These services are Human Resources, Finance, In the Place survey, 54 per cent of people were satisfied with the way the Council runs things. This is the best satisfaction rate in Hertfordshire. Also, 39 per cent agreed that the council provides value for money, which is above average when compared to similar areas.

The Council has improved its benefits service. It is now processing benefits claims more quickly. It took 14 days to process a new claim last year, which was an improvement on 17 days the year before. Accuracy levels remain high, almost 98 per cent of claims are processed accurately.

The Council got slower at responding to calls from its customers last year, but this is now improving again. The slower response was due to changes it made to the service, including reducing the number of staff. More calls are now being answered within 15 seconds and the majority by 17 seconds.

Tackling inequality and improving outcomes for people in vulnerable circumstances

The Council is attempting to meet the needs of vulnerable people, but it is not clear how successful it is being. It runs an Equal Opportunities Forum. This involves people such as parents of children with disabilities and people from the Muslim community. This forum has looked at council policies to check if they have a negative impact on any part of the community. The council uses information about health and deprivation in Three Rivers to decide which people need most help. It works well with partners such as health and the police to find out the reasons why some people and communities are not doing as well as others. Surveys and discussions with groups of people are also used to check what extra help would make a difference.

The Council is working with other local bodies to help the long term unemployed. A poverty action group is using local knowledge to find out what people need and how the group can make a difference. These groups have been set up in the last few months so it is not yet clear if they are succeeding.

The Council is working towards treating people fairly. It is at level two of the Local Equality Standard and is working towards achieving the new Equality Framework in 2010. All staff and councillors have had equality training and the Council plans to take action to reduce inequality.

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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