



Inside

Focus on Harlow Council



Leaders-chief executive interview

Regeneration

Housing

Customer Services

Operational Services

Community Services

Policy & Performance

Scrutiny



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Forward on all fronts

Harlow's 'incredible journey' is described by Chief Executive **Malcolm Morley** and joint leaders **Tony Durcan** and **Chris Millington**.



front back left Andrew Murray, head of housing; Nick Cave, head of policy and performance; Cllr Chris Millington, Joint Leader; Malcolm Morley, Chief Executive; Cllr Tony Durcan, Joint Leader; Graham Branchett, Strategic Director; Nick Ridgment, head of finance; (front from left) Mike White, head of legal; Lynn Seward, head of community services and Martin Hone, strategic Director

Harlow Council was officially designated as one of the worst in the country by its CPA categorisation in 2004. It has

gone through a transformational change internally that has enabled it to be effective externally. It now looks forward to being able to get rid of its 'poor' CPA rating officially to enable its progress to be recognised.

'We can't be an effective Council and partner externally unless we are first of all effective internally,' says chief executive Malcolm Morley. Achieving that level of effectiveness has been, in his

words, 'an incredible journey'

Since the CPA inspection, with Mr Morley only having recently joined the Council, it has been accelerating on all fronts with a streamlined top Management Team and two Joint Leaders. The progress has been impressive with two Best Value inspections during 2006 confirming the progress made and confidence in future progress with excellent prospects for improvement and a SOLACE

peer review which has provided positive feedback on the Council's direction of travel. The Council will request the Audit Commission to carry out a CPA re-assessment this year and hopes that this will take place around July.

'We are keen to illustrate the progress that has been made and intend to challenge and change the perceptions that people may have about Harlow as a place and about the Council,' says Mr

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Morley. 'We have already delivered a huge amount and will continue to make progress.'

The Council's Liberal Democrat Joint Leader Chris Millington agrees: 'We're playing into some big agendas externally and are delivering locally. We are seen by the Government as a major player in the region.'

This recognition, says Joint Leader Tony Durcan (Labour) has been achieved despite the need for the Council to be inward looking immediately after its poor CPA rating. 'We had to focus internally to sort out various elements and, initially, we could not concentrate on community leadership. But now we've emerged from this phase with a clear vision and new delivery vehicles.'

The Council has initiated a new company (Harlow Renaissance Limited) with partners for the regeneration of the town and is already successfully delivering a complex £44 million Gateway scheme of leisure and sporting developments which will additionally provide 600 new homes (30% of which will be 'social housing'). It has also just initiated an ambitious joint venture company with Kier plc for environmental and housing services.

Major improvements to the built environment and public realm

around the civic centre and retail core in the south of the town are already in place and remain faithful to the concepts of space, greenery, convenience and innovation pioneered by its masterplanner architect Sir Frederick Gibberd. The Council recognises that more needs to be done.

Harlow is a key centre for development and change as part of the Government's proposals for the East of England. The Council has played the leading role in ensuring that the needs of Harlow, now and for the future, have been fully recognised.

None of these achievements would have been possible without a rejuvenated Council capable of developing credibility at a strategic level with Government, regional bodies, the private and voluntary sectors; being able to form effective partnerships and responding positively to the challenges it faced.

The Council's progress has been underpinned by consensus across the three political parties. 'It shows a maturity about understanding each other's issues,' says Cllr Durcan.

Mr Morley describes the key benchmarks in moving the Council forward as recognising the reality of its situation, achieving political consensus for the way forward, having both confidence



Members of the Harlow Youth Council

and drive to make the decisions required, consistent decision-making based upon priorities (and being clear about non-priorities), customer focus, people believing that they can improve performance and delivering evidence of improvement.

Public perception often lags behind reality but the Council now gets much more positive coverage in the local media. The Council has undertaken extensive community research and even commissioned a national opinion formers' survey. 'It is critical to us that people feel part of the future and believe that we listen and learn. One of the ways of ensuring this is the creation of a People's Panel to consult with on a regular basis,' says Cllr Durcan.

The Council is improving its contact with traditionally hard-to-reach sections of the population and has already had considerable success with the local Youth Council which is active and well-supported. A forthcoming venture will be bringing the Youth and Full Councils together to debate jointly a number of policy issues.

The role of the Ward Councillor is also being enhanced. 'Our thinking,' says Cllr Millington, 'is in advance of the White Paper on this front.' The Council recognised that it had to re-assess the balance between its roles as community leader, service commissioner and service provider. It is now at the forefront of partnership working and continues to re-allocate its resources to match its priorities.

One further signal of the Council's renaissance is that it is the only English Council on the board of an organisation of European New Towns. This lead in Europe-wide urban regeneration will be cemented later this year when Harlow hosts a European New Towns assembly as part of its own 60th anniversary celebrations.

When, in the early 1950s Harlow New Town was created it was widely recognised as an exemplar in urban living. 'We are,' concludes Cllr Millington, 'getting back to this cutting edge once again.'

Harlow Council's Five Key Priorities

1. A clean, safe, sustainable environment
2. A prosperous community
3. Decent affordable homes
4. High performing customer focused services
5. A caring community with a higher quality of life

A year of progress

- 81% of Performance Indicators on target
- Awarded Civic Pioneer status
- Mar '06: Environment BV inspection – 'fair' with excellent prospects
- Oct '06: Housing BV inspection – 'fair' with excellent prospects
- Sept '06: Contact centre wins West Essex Business Award
- Business Process Re-engineering shows £75,000 savings
- June '06: meets temporary accommodation target early



Fact and figures

Population	77,700
Under 16	21.46%
Over 65	14.70%
Unemployment	2.2%
Deprivation	Fifth highest East of England
Housing stock	30% council-owned
Housing Revenue Account expenditure	£39.4 million
General Fund	£54.3 million
Capital expenditure	£15.5m
Council control	Joint Lab/Lib Dem

GROWTH

Going for growth

A plaque recalls Harlow masterplanner Sir Frederick Gibberd's vision for the town



Harlow is strategically located close to London, Stansted Airport and Cambridge and has been identified by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government as a Key Centre for Development and Growth. Proposals out for consultation include increasing the number of homes within and adjacent to Harlow by 16,000 by 2021 with the potential for an additional 20,000 further homes by 2031. The housing growth is pro-

posed to be accompanied by growth in jobs as part of Harlow's role as a regional strategic employment location. Harlow's key sub-regional town centre/retail offer is also to be improved to match its place in the hierarchy of town centres within the region. The Council recognises that all of the above present considerable opportunities to make a significant contribution to the regeneration of the town. It also knows that they provide significant challenges in terms of infra-

structure investment, the timing of development, the review of the green belt within Harlow, the tightly drawn boundaries of Harlow and the need to work in partnership to deliver growth whilst improving the quality of life for the people of Harlow. It is a sign of how Harlow Council has improved that there is political consensus about the way forward in terms of growth and that the Council, as community leader, is consulting its community and stakeholders to inform its detailed response

to the proposals. The Council is also leading the development of partnership working with neighbouring Councils and is working closely with the Local Strategic Partnership on this vital issue for Harlow's future. As the political leaders within Harlow state: "We will continue to work together on a cross party basis to get the best deal for Harlow. We wish to do this by working co-operatively with our neighbours."

The Council has been very successful in attracting Growth Area Funding to support its plans for the regeneration of the town. A total of £10.5 million was awarded last September in a second Growth Areas Funding (GAF) round and this will be used primarily to fund enabling works which, it is hoped, will lever in a further £120 million worth of development over the coming decade.

The Council has worked hard to ensure that it not only gets funding to match its priorities but to ensure that it influences the priorities of other organisations.

Plans are already underway to develop a £6.5 million Innovation Centre and to revitalise the town's neighbourhood areas (known locally as the 'hatches'). Government departments already recognise the Council's strengths in regeneration, most clearly demonstrated by the transformation of the area south of the town centre. From 2001/02 to 2004/05 the Coun-

cil attracted inward investment of £17.5 million against match funding of just £3.1 million – an uplift of 555%.

'We are targeting the high tech industries with our business innovation work providing a bespoke business support service,' explains Regeneration Manager Joanna Beaumont. 'The Council has been successful in attracting European funding to enable it to support particular sectors of the population including young people at pre-entry level, women returners and BME groups.'

The improvements to the built environment in the south of the town centre have already achieved increased footfall and visitor numbers which bodes well for the new focus of redeveloping the town centre north area. The Council is confident that Harlow's role as an important sub-regional centre will be reflected in the private sector's investment in the town centre. The Council is playing a key role in this process.

A proposed campus for Anglia



Computer-generated image of planned public sculpture in the Town Park.

Ruskin University at Harlow College will result in £10 million worth of development and plans are also well-advanced for refurbishing the Town Park with new facilities including an adventure playground, boating lake and skateboard facility.

The Council's approach to regeneration involves the development of the skills base. Harlow has important research,

development and technology sectors. The Council is working with employers, Harlow College, the Learning and Skills Council and the County Council to build on the progress that is being made to increase educational attainment. Anglia Ruskin University's investment in Harlow will be another important part of the regeneration of the town.

HOUSING

Housing full speed ahead

The speed at which housing services in Harlow have improved is accelerating rapidly. 'In only two years we have moved from being 'poor' with poor prospects to 'fair' with excellent prospects,' says chair of the Housing Committee Councillor Mark Wilkinson. The results of the Best Value inspection published last October have certainly boosted the Council which now shows an upper quartile performance on its route to achieve the Decent Homes standard.

The Council has over 10,000 dwellings – nearly one third of local homes – which date from the late 50s and early 60s. It has been focusing on preventing homelessness and, says Head of Community Services, Lynn Seward, has eliminated reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation. 'We have achieved the government's homelessness targets four years early and have been praised for this work by the DCLG.'

The secret has been a homelessness prevention policy. 'We have been speaking to people before they present themselves as homeless to look at the

alternatives available. We have worked with people proactively rather than just been a reactive safety net. This policy has led to big savings allowing us to restructure the Housing Strategy team and also to invest in other areas such as tackling anti-social behaviour and improving the cleaning of estates,' she says.

Tenant participation measures have also been improved with a new model of engagement drawn up. 'We tore up the one we had and started over again,' says Cllr Wilkinson. A joint conference for tenants and leaseholders has been held and tenants have been able for the first time to have a real impact on housing policy. A choice-based lettings system has been introduced and a Sounding Board set up to get regular feedback and suggestions from tenants who can now make direct contact with the Council by text message in addition to phoning or visits to the offices.

The improved channels of communication have, quite literally, begun to pay dividends with the Council's rent collection performance in the upper quartile for the past two years.



New homes for Harlow.

The Council is also part of the Stansted Area Housing Partnership working with neighbouring Councils to respond to targets for future housing growth. 'We could access funds but have no more land whereas they have the land but not the money,' says Cllr Wilkinson. The Council is now an effective partner and everybody wins.

A further innovation has yielded the first self-build housing for rent in the public sector. Working in partnership with an RSL and local college the council supported the development of 12 flats which opened last summer.

Joint venture heralds the future



Council staff deal with dumped shopping trolley problem as part of the 'Together We Can' campaign.

Environmental and housing services in Harlow are entering a new and exciting era next month as a joint venture company Kier Harlow Limited gets to work. It's a big initiative illustrating the Council's new approach to partnership working and change which also attracted cross party support.

The £100 million plus venture between the Council and its partner Kier plc will take charge of street scene. This will include environmental services, housing planned maintenance and responsive maintenance, fleet management, care of parks and landscape, building cleaning and maintenance.

The Council retains a 19.9% share in the new company and the development will build on the Best Value inspection of the Council's environmental services carried out in early 2006 which

resulted in a verdict of 'fair' with excellent prospects.

'In the past 12 months we have improved productivity and response to customer needs. Our PI's have improved accordingly and we have done all of this in the knowledge that the Council was about to embark on the joint venture partnership,' says Head of Operational Services Steve Presland. The Council's approach has been don't stop improving just because you think that something better is coming.

The partnership with Kier is for an initial 7 years with an option to extend to ten. It will improve efficiencies and deliver some approximately £11.5 million in cashable savings. The Council has ensured that it will improve value for money for its existing services and that it will get a share of future profits as the company extends its activities into other geographic areas.

Some 40% of the Council's total workforce will transfer under TUPE to the new joint venture company with no compulsory redundancies. The new approach to delivering services was backed by all three of the political groups on the Council. Conservative Group Leader Cllr Andrew Johnson said 'We were impressed with the quality of Kier's bid and were pleased to be able to agree cross party support for this partnership.' The partnership will work with the already well-established Together We Can initiative which has engaged public support in cleaning the public realm, a campaign backed by £150,000 in the current year.

Targeted areas under the Together We Can initiative are tackled twice a year linked with grounds maintenance with dramatic effect. This has been linked to a new way of encouraging the residents of

flats to be more pro-active in recycling.

Cllr Eleanor Macy, Chair of the Environment and Community Committee says: "A cleaner Harlow is one of our top priorities for local people. Our aim is to get people to be proud of where they live. After the clean ups people are more aware of what they can do and what services are available to help."

Another recent high-profile campaign tackled the issue of dumped shopping trolleys by creating a well-publicised 'trolley mountain' and using the publicity to encourage supermarkets to be more responsible in safeguarding their trolleys.

'We have also increased staff productivity by introducing night-time road sweeping which means traffic congestion can be avoided,' says Mr Presland.

Customer service success

Contact Harlow – the Council’s contact centre – won the West Essex Business Award for customer service last year against competition from both the private and voluntary sectors. This is a clear independent measure of the successful implementation of high performing customer-focused services. Commenting on this success joint Council Leader Tony Durcan said: “I’m absolutely delighted for our staff and for everyone else in the Council who are working hard to improve our reputation. Our staff in Contact Harlow work hard to deliver high performing customer focussed services and this award recognises their efforts.”

The aims of Contact Harlow, says Head of Customer Services Keren Mallinson, were increasing the ease of access to the Council and the quality of the service provided and statistical analysis bears out the improvement. Whereas there was a ‘lost call’ rate near 20% in 2004/05 this had recently dipped to just 3%. First call resolution of an enquiry was now hitting the 80% target and regular satisfaction surveys registered an average of 90%.

‘We are really beginning to see the results of our actions taking

hold,’ says Ms Mallinson. A further innovative way of testing this was a ‘mystery shopper’ exercise that equipped the role playing enquirers with hidden cameras through which the response of contact centre staff was filmed secretly.

‘They came through this very well and everybody agreed it was a useful exercise,’ says Ms Mallinson. New developments in keeping the public informed involve video screens in the Council’s reception area providing details of services, methods of payment and other information while people are waiting to be seen. Also, a growing number of residents have opted to receive information and alerts from the Council by text message. A new complaints procedure has also reduced the process by up to 18 days.

A revision of customer service standards is now underway and this will be assisted by feedback from the newly formed 1100-strong People’s Panel which goes into action for the first time this month.

An ambitious service development strategy is being implemented with Contact Harlow looking to achieve Charter Mark status this year.

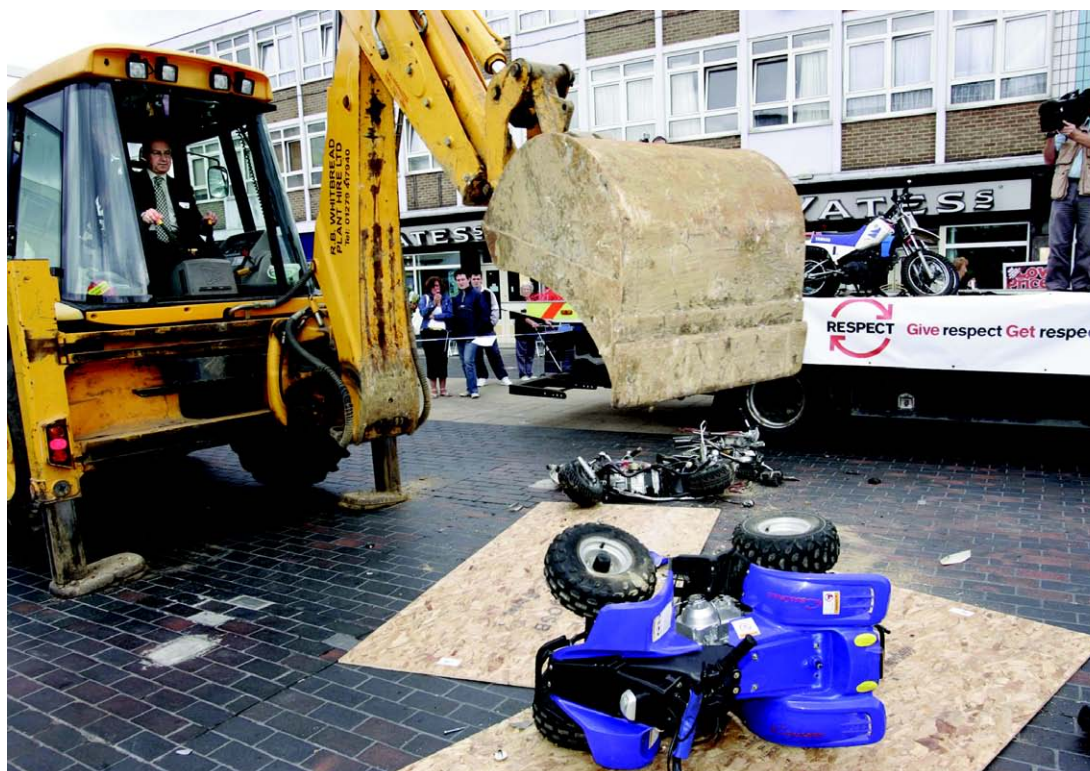
COMMUNITY SERVICES

No-nonsense approach to anti social problems

A range of crime and disorder reduction initiatives are making their mark on the quality of life in Harlow, says the Council’s Head of Community Services Lynn Seward. The Council’s work in tackling anti-social behaviour has earned it Respect Action Area status, won praise from the Prime Minister and led to a number of Ministerial visits to Harlow and visits from other Councils.

Among the various projects run by the Council in partnership with the police, Essex CC and other local agencies are taxi marshals to help disperse revellers from pubs and clubs; the Behave or Be Banned (BOBB) scheme and the high profile use of sniffer dogs to detect drugs.

Young people have been enlisted to help by becoming Street Scene Champs undertaking a range of environmental tasks in return for which they receive credits that can be exchanged for books, videos, DVDs or school equipment. The work with young people earned the Council national recognition and Civic Pioneer status.



Council joint leader Chris Millington at the controls of a JCB at the launch of the mini moto “Catch and Crush” campaign

The Council took a tough line in response to a spate of illegally ridden mini motobikes. Funded through the Government’s Catch and Crush campaign the Council seized and destroyed a number of the vehicles. Chair of the Environment and Community Committee Cllr Eleanor Macy believes local support was crucial

to the campaign’s success. ‘Positive action like this can have a big impact on people’s quality of life. These bikes are being ridden illegally, are noisy and cause concern to residents. They are a serious nuisance.’

Further initiatives with local young people include supporting their request for a non-alcoholic

drinks bar to be established in the town centre. A six-month pilot, staffed by volunteers, will run this year in shop premises. The Council has also supported the setting up of a youth bank which provides grants to young people’s organisations; the decisions to award funding being taken by the young people themselves.

SCRUTINY

Under the microscope

The Scrutiny Committee focuses on subjects of major importance to the community as part of the Council's leadership role' says Committee Chairman Joshua Jolles.

'We must ensure that we have decent homes in a clean, safe and sustainable environment and a high quality of public services' he adds. 'Our emphasis is to engage fully with local people on things that matter. We have an ambitious work plan – community health, followed by transport and education.'

In the wake of flash floods in both June and July following

intense rainstorms the Committee decided a wide-ranging public examination of the Council's preparedness and response to this kind of emergency was urgently needed. Questionnaires were sent to all those affected by the flooding and on October 30th the Scrutiny Committee held a 'challenge day' to review all of the available information and what could be done to minimise the effect of floods in future. Representatives of the County Council and the water company also attended.

The Committee were concerned that residents should have the opportunity to participate. In

addition to the statutory agencies and Council officers, 140 people turned up to air their views. Three weeks later, an action plan based on lessons learned was agreed by the committee at a public meeting attended by about 100 residents. Progress had already been made in tackling some of the objectives of the plan.

The Action Plan was approved and the community will see tangible action as a result of the scrutiny review of this important issue. 'People are realising that something is happening that wasn't happening before,' says Cllr Jolles. 'It shows the public that we are listening.'

The community will see a tangible action as a result of the scrutiny review of this important issue

BVPIs

A culture of performance

The number of Performance Indicators reaching their targets has increased from just over 40% in June 2005 to 81% a year later. 'We have put in place a clear performance management system that is really showing benefits and moving us quickly towards our aim of developing a performance management culture,' says Head of Policy and Performance Nick Cave.

New computer software was installed last year to track and monitor progress which has helped to manage performance. 70% of its BVPIs have improved compared with a year previously.

A range of performance improvements includes an 'excellent' rating in dealing with fly tipping, some 94% of new homes built on previously developed land and nearly 14% of BVPIs operating at maximum possible outturn.

Re-inforcing the importance of performance management the team reports direct to the Chief Executive. Best Value reviews in key corporate priority areas have confirmed progress with fair service with excellent prospects results for both the strategic housing and environmental services being achieved. The Council is one of very few to get two services rated with excellent prospects for improvement in the same year. The team has also played a key role in developing the Council's scrutiny function to the point where it is proving an effective tool for improving services and investigating a wide range of activities that extend far beyond the Council's own service provision (see separate article).

'We have developed our efficiency agenda and carried out Business Process Re-engineering reviews that have already saved £75,000 in addition to our Gershon Savings,' says Mr Cave.

The Council now has a five-year forward procurement plan

that aligns to the National Procurement Strategy. Spend data is shared with the Essex Procurement Agency and is assessed alongside all other Essex councils. £140,000 in savings have been realised.

'From being a Council in recovery after our "poor" CPA categorisation, we have now become an improving Council. A key part of this transition was the move from performance monitoring to performance management. We now understand both how we're performing and how our actions and decision can drive improvement,' says Chair of Audit and Improvement Committee Cllr Lorna Spenceley.



The environmental services best value review highlighted excellent prospects for improvement