

# Cherwell District Council

## Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



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of local public services

# Cherwell District Council

## Overall, Cherwell District Council performs well

Managing performance	3 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	3 out of 4
Managing resources	3 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 Cherwell District Council performs well. Its ambitions are strongly challenging in addressing local needs and it is delivering well against these to make a noticeable difference for local people. It plans and manages its money and people well and is making savings. The Council and its partners are making the district a better place to live. It is safer, cleaner and there are better healthcare and leisure facilities. There are more affordable homes and fewer homeless people in temporary housing.

The Council has many of the characteristics of a top performing council. But its benefits service is poor and people have to wait long periods for these to be paid. Too many people in Cherwell feel unsafe or think that communities don't get on together. Also, people in some parts of the district aren't as healthy as others and don't get the same opportunities. The Council has shown in the past that it sorts out problems quickly and effectively. It is working to improve these areas as a priority.

Cherwell District Council scores 3 out of 4 for managing performance. Together with local partners, it is delivering consistently good results that are improving the quality of life for local people. Overall crime has fallen and there is less burglary, robbery and car crime. Older people are helped to lead active lives and more people are keeping healthy by using the Council's newly modernised leisure centres. The district is clean and recycling is high.

Partnership work has provided a new health centre in Banbury, providing GP services 7 days a week. It is easier to use Council services because they are now provided under one roof in the main towns and there are better ways for people in rural areas to contact the Council. Fewer people than ever before in Cherwell are living in temporary housing. But there is more for the Council to do to improve quality of life for everyone. Job clubs in Bicester and Banbury

set up by the Council and partners are helping people through the recession. But some people are suffering undue hardship because the Council is not paying benefits fast enough. In 2008/09, residents had to wait longer to receive their new benefits claim than they did the year before.

There are some parts of the district where people's health and quality of life is not as good and people are more likely to have lower skills, wages and housing. Also, too many people are still afraid of crime and think that people from different backgrounds do not get on together. The Council and its partners need to work harder and faster to deal with these problems.

The Council scores 3 out of 4 for managing its resources. The Council manages its money well and has good plans in place so that it can continue to deliver its priorities even with the uncertain financial future. The Council consistently meets its savings targets. Services are better value than in the past because challenging service reviews are identifying better ways of doing things. It has improved how it buys goods and services and this is also saving money. The Council is planning well to ensure it has the staff it needs for the future. Leadership of the Council is excellent and councillors and officers work at a fast pace to make improvements.

## About Cherwell District Council

Cherwell is a rural district in north Oxfordshire, situated around the M40 motorway and the river Cherwell. Much of the area is farmland and 14 per cent lies within the Oxford Green Belt. The three main towns of Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington are home to about two-thirds of the 138,200 population with the rest of the district comprising small villages.

Despite relatively high numbers of young people living in the area, the proportion of older people is growing faster than average and a 6.9 per cent increase is expected by 2029. The ethnicity of the area is mostly white, with numbers of black and minority ethnic people below regional and national averages.

People's health is generally better than average but there are cases of inequality. For example, men living in the most deprived areas can expect to live 5 years less than those in the least deprived. Unemployment is relatively low but residents tend to have lower weekly wages than the rest of the South East.

The Council is made up of 50 councillors representing 28 wards. The Conservative Party holds 44 seats and there are four Liberal Democrat and two Labour councillors.

## Organisational assessment

Cherwell's residents benefit from many opportunities to influence the way the Council spends taxpayer's money and uses its staff. Resident satisfaction with their ability to influence decisions affecting their area is higher in Cherwell than other Oxfordshire districts. This means the Council and its partners focus on providing the services that matter most to local people and do so in a fair

and equal way across different communities.

Customer overall satisfaction with the Council and its most important services has increased, particularly with the service they receive when making face-to-face and telephone contact. Eighty four percent of people responding to the National Place Survey are satisfied with the local area as a place to live but this is below average for similar districts.

In 2009 the Council was recognised by the Audit Commission as an 'excellent' Council. It has excellent leadership, skills and the ability to deliver its services and outcomes in the future. The Council is ambitious for Cherwell. Its vision is to provide a better quality of life for local people and together with its partners, it has set challenging targets to achieve this, especially around homes, jobs, skills and health. This means that the Council's strategies and plans are focused on making a real and noticeable difference to the community. It works well with other partners to help it deliver on its priorities which are to provide:

- a safe and healthy Cherwell;
- a cleaner, greener Cherwell;
- an accessible value for money council; and
- a district of opportunity.

Performance against each of these is set out below:

## A Safe and Healthy Cherwell

Overall crime has fallen for the last three years and in 2008/09 there was less serious violent crime, house burglary, robbery and car crime. The district council and police work well together. Based on the 2008 national Place Survey, anti-social behaviour, drunkenness, drug use and drug dealing is considered to be less of a problem for people in Cherwell than it is for those living in other parts of the country. People also have more confidence that crime and anti-social behaviour is being dealt with. However, local people's fear of crime is high. And residents' feelings about how well people from different backgrounds get on together or belong to their neighbourhood are less positive than in other parts of the country and are the lowest in Oxfordshire. The Council and its partners need to find more effective ways to reassure people that Cherwell is a safe place to live.

More people are helped to lead healthier lifestyles. The Council does excellent work to support older people and improve their quality of life. For example, it has set up Tai Chi sessions, IT courses and exercise classes. It supports the voluntary sector and local communities to run these events themselves once they are established and profitable. Better sport and leisure opportunities exist in the district. The Bicester and Kidlington and Gosford Leisure Centres are now modernised and now provide extended health and fitness areas and much better facilities. More people now take part in recreational activities than last year and more activities have been created for young people.

The Council's work with the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust (PCT) to develop

a new health centre in Banbury is an excellent example of partnership working to improve health care for the community. Local people now have access to GP services 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, as well as dental and other health care services. Through the Council providing the building and expertise to develop and manage the centre, the PCT has been able to provide additional services. This provides better value for money for local taxpayers.

But although people are generally healthy in Cherwell, there are some parts of the district where people's health and quality of life is not as good. For example, people living in Bicester South ward are likely to live on average nearly 15 years longer than those living in Grimsbury and Castle. The Council and its partners are focusing on improving health in these areas, and on tackling issues such as poor education, skills, wages and housing that can contribute to poor health.

While work is progressing amongst the Oxfordshire Partnership to tackle issues of deprivation in Banbury, the amount of money available and what has been done so far, is not enough in the face of long standing needs. The Council and its partners know they need to work harder and faster to agree joint area or theme action plans capable of withstanding the recession.

## A cleaner, greener Cherwell

Cherwell is a clean place to live and enjoys high public satisfaction with the way its streets and parks are kept. There is less litter and fewer dirty kerbsides in the district than in many other areas and levels of graffiti and fly tipping are amongst the lowest in the country. More waste was recycled in Cherwell in 2008/09 and less waste was sent to landfill. The Council's performance in dealing with waste is amongst the best nationally. The Council has made bin collection and recycling easier by now collecting four days a week across the district. This has reduced the number of missed bins, means that collections are no longer disrupted by Bank holidays and the Council is able to catch up quickly on lost collections. This is saving the Council money which it is investing in reducing litter and dog mess to make Cherwell even cleaner.

Senior officers and councillors show strong leadership both strategically and in the community. For example, the Council's resistance to the Weston Otmoor Eco town involved the Council leading work to put forward an alternative to government proposals for a 15,000 eco town at Weston on the Green. The alternative proposal developed by the Council and its partners for a much smaller development, more suitable for the district, has recently been given the go-ahead by the government. This will create an environmentally friendly community with 5,000 new homes, as well as attracting new jobs and investment into the district. The Council will need to make sure that its planning service has enough people and the right skills to manage this major scheme. This will be a challenge because it will have less government money and less income from planning services than it has in the past.

The Council did not achieve its target to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions during the year because this was set too high. However, it has worked to make sure that it has a better understanding of its emissions so it knows where it can make cuts in future years and measure these more accurately.

## An accessible value for money Council

The Council is good at managing its money and its people. It knows what it needs to do to continue to deliver its priorities into the future and has plans in place to do this. This has involved making difficult choices to address future financial challenges. For example, because of the current economic climate, it has changed its financial plans so within the next four years it will no longer be dependant on the income from its investments to fund services. The Council consistently achieves its savings targets.

Staff are highly motivated and well managed and the Council has good plans to make sure it has the people it needs for the future. It is currently talking to all staff to explore how their individual aspirations and plans match with the skills that the Council thinks it will need in the future. This approach has been recognised as innovative practice. The Council reviews how it organises staff so that they are used where they are needed most. This means that it can respond quickly and flexibly to changing situations. For example, by moving staff from its Improvement Team into Economic Development the Council was able to set up the Banbury and Bicester Job clubs to help local people get back into work.

The Council has improved the way it manages performance and this is helping it to improve at a fast pace. Targets are more challenging and councillors and senior officers respond quicker when performance is off track, such as working with the police to reduce crime rates. It responded quickly and effectively to improve councillor training and development after its 2009 Comprehensive Performance Assessment identified this as a weakness. It is also open about where performance is not as good as it expects, such as local people's fear of crime and inequalities and targets action to address weaknesses.

The Council is improving value for money for local people. It regularly looks at its services to see how it can save money and provide them more effectively. For example, it reduced the cost of its housing service by changing the way it deals with homeless families. By offering better help and advice, fewer families need to stay in temporary housing. This saves money and is a better solution for families faced with homelessness. It is also saving money by working in partnership with others and in the way that it buys goods and services.

It is easier to use Council services. The Council's One Stop Shops at Bodicote, Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington provide access to services under one roof. The Council has also installed more Link Point kiosks so people in local communities have access to all the Council's on-line services and those of its partners. This means that customers do not have to travel to Bodicote and can access services outside normal business hours. This supports the local community and gives customers choice on how they can access services and information. The Council's new website is one of the best in the country and significantly more people are doing their business with the Council electronically.

## A district of opportunity

The Council is doing excellent work with its partners to help local people and businesses through the recession. It has launched job clubs in Bicester and Kidlington, drawing together services and support under one roof. The approach was the first of its kind in the UK and the clubs have helped over 1,000 job seekers get support, training or advice. While, just like in the rest of England, unemployment has risen, in 2008/09 817 new jobs were created in the district against a target of 200. The Council also secured a £50 million development scheme for Bicester's town centre, investing £10 million of its own capital to make it happen.

In 2008/09 the Council provided more affordable homes than it expected. New homes were built in communities such as Banbury, Ambrosden and Bloxham, including nine properties to help families living in overcrowded conditions and 30 homes for the over 55's. It has good plans to help it continue to deliver affordable homes despite the recession. Fewer families are becoming homeless and fewer than ever before are living in temporary accommodation. But in 2008/09 the Council's performance in dealing with benefits was not as good as 2007/08 and people in Cherwell waited too long for benefits to be paid. The Council has brought in more people and better IT and performance is now gradually improving. During times of hardship and recession the fast and efficient payment of benefit is vital.

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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