

## Annual Report 2024/25

Cllr. Iona Parker – BDC Stour Valley North Ward

This is the end of my 10<sup>th</sup> year as your District Councillor for the Stour Valley North Ward, which takes in the villages of Ridgewell, Ashen, Little Yeldham, Tilbury-Juxta-Clare, Ovington, the Belchamps, Pentlow, Foxearth, Liston and Borley. I aim to do my best to represent the interests of your communities on Braintree District Council, help residents with their enquiries and serve on Council committees.

I am a chair of the Planning Committee and am also a member of the Local Plan sub committee, Corporate Scrutiny Committee and Licensing Committee. I also represent the Council at meetings of the Essex Rural Partnership. In addition, I endeavour to attend Parish Council meetings in my ward or send a written report if I am unable to attend in person.

I received £1,250 under the Councillors Community Grant Scheme and was able to provide funds for a new picnic bench in Ridgewell and a new fridge/freezer for Belchamp Walter village hall. Since the inception of this scheme, I have tried to distribute the funds equally around my ward. I am pleased that despite ongoing pressures on the Council's budget, the Council will be continuing this scheme in 25/26 and has maintained the Street Cleansing grant given to Parish Councils and allocated an additional £50,000 for new dog waste and litter bins across the District, something I know has concerned some Parish Councils.

As always I have been dealing with a variety of issues raised with me including bus transport, planning issues and the never ending potholes. Resurfacing has taken place on various sections of road in my ward and I know more is planned, including in Foxearth and Tilbury. I continue to report potholes on the Essex Highways website when I see them as well as reporting any fly tipping to BDC. I have been pressing cabinet members about the grass verge obstructing visibility on single track roads in the summer and am pleased to report that it has been agreed that twice yearly verge cutting should resume. I know that solar farms cause deep concerns for many residents. It is very difficult to resist solar farms under current Government policy but along with others, I have been working behind the scenes to make sure the planning conditions are as robust as they can be, that hedging is planted as early as possible to provide an effective screen and that traffic issues during construction are addressed.

In wider terms, Braintree Council has continued with its priority of delivering high quality services on a balanced budget (unlike a number of well-publicised other Councils). Residents will be aware of the plans for devolution in Greater Essex which will have a Mayor elected next year, and the creation of 3, 4 or 5 new unitary Councils in 2028 which will take on the responsibilities of both District and County Council – in our case at Braintree we will be merged with a number of neighbouring Essex Councils and have a population of 400-500,000.

Some highlights of the Braintree District Council achievements or activities during the 2024/25 year are:

- Continued to support residents and communities impacted by the cost of living crisis. A new Cost of Living Grant Scheme has just been launched for groups and organisations.
- Delivered over 250 affordable homes.
- Awarded grants from the Rural England Prosperity Fund to a number of businesses and community organisations, including one for refurbishment of Borley village hall.
- New 3G all-weather pitch at Witham Sports Ground
- Delivered the Home Upgrade grant Phase 2 (HUG) for people living in cold homes or

struggling with winter fuel bills.

- Introduced a landlord incentive scheme to help prospective renters.
- Launched round 2 of the Halstead Community Fund (a large part of which went to the upgrade of the Empire Theatre in Halstead).
- Put in motion the construction of a Witham Community Centre.
- Supported local investment in a number of local communities through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (Year 3)
- Starting work on physical improvements to Halstead and Witham town centres.
- Increased capacity at the successful The Plaza, Great Notley, to support local businesses, and continued work towards sale of the last remaining plots at Horizon 120.
- Organised well-attended jobs fairs and a Digital Business Expo in Braintree.
- Provided funding for transport to Essex University for 13-14 year olds from local schools to enable them to learn about further education.
- Installed solar panel arrays and LED lighting at Witham Leisure Centre to make the building largely self-sufficient in electricity.
- Collaborated with other Essex authorities to establish and begin to implement a new Waste Strategy for Essex, as well as consulting on a proposed new waste and recycling regime for Braintree, in line with government requirements, and with the aim to reducing residual waste and raising the proportion of material which can be usefully recycled.
- Continued to collaborate with other Essex Councils on shared services and begun to take part in the the process of devolution and local government reorganisation in Essex, as per government mandate.
- Followed up on the Action Plan which stemmed from the Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in late 2023 and which found BDC to be a well-run and ambitious council.
- Started work on a new Local Plan for the District to extend the current plan to 2041. A review of employment need has already been considered and additional housing sites will be considered in May and June.
- Responded to Government changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.

Cllr Iona Parker

3<sup>rd</sup> April 2025