

Civic Office of the Year 2013 Submission by Bracknell Forest Council

Introduction

The aim of this submission is to appraise the National Association of Civic Officers of the work and progress Bracknell Forest Council has made in evolving its civic office, promoting the work undertaken in our civic office and the service that our Mayors have provided to the community.

Our main focus this past year has been one of consolidation after a period of significant change. The required direction of travel to ensure a successful support office has been established and this year we have been making good progress to achieving that end. Building upon previous success, the team is dedicated to promoting the civic role and embedding the Mayoral function in the heart of the community.

The economic climate has focussed attention on the importance of working smarter and this has been a significant factor driving the significant changes in how the office works. In turn this has resulted in high quality support to our Mayor and Deputy Mayor: the ultimate objective of this function.

The civic role is truly embedded in the Council's culture, the community's consciousness and the benefits of this show in many ways.



Context

Bracknell Forest is one of six unitary authorities within Berkshire in southern England. 115,000 residents live in the borough and there are a number of different communities here. Each area has its own identity and is served by a Parish or Town Council. The Borough Council is made up of 42 Councillors who represent 18 Wards.

The borough is made up of many distinct geographical areas, from Sandhurst and Crowthorne in the south of the borough, to the semi-rural communities in Binfield and Winkfield and Warfield in the north of the borough. Bracknell Town sits in the centre and contains most of the commercial and industrial areas. Bracknell Forest is a base for high-tech industries and the software development and computer services side of the industry also thrives in the borough. The employment rate is high; however there are pockets of deprivation. The Council employs over 4000 staff; these include school teachers, social workers and staff responsible for a wide range of services benefiting the local community.

There has been a very clear trend of growing diversity and a total of 77 languages are spoken in the borough's schools. Recent changes to the UK's HM Forces Immigration rule have led to the arrival of many new migrants from Nepal and Eastern Europe. Bracknell Forest also has a small but significant Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT)



population, many of whom are long settled. The borough's BME population is younger in its age profile than the population as a whole, with the Black African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Mixed heritage groups having the highest proportion of young people.

Bracknell Forest's Faith and Belief Forum was launched in 2011, enabled by funding from 'Faiths in Action' secured by Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action. The work has left a legacy of raised awareness of faith and belief organisations, sharing and working together. The Forum, involving many different faiths and beliefs, has evolved into a positive working partnership of diverse faiths learning from each other through mutual respect and understanding. The Mayor is fully involved in its activities and provides a figure head for this group and actively encourages links to the growing Nepali community.

The Council has forged strong links with the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, supporting the integration of service leavers into the community, co-ordinating on civic events and granting the Academy Freedom of the Borough.



As the figurehead of the Council the Mayor reaches out into all parts of the community whether celebrating or marking significant events. The Mayor is supported to use those opportunities to act as a link between various bodies and organisations, and feed back the views and concerns of the people into the Council. Similarly when providing a civic welcome to official visitors to the Borough and attending local events the Mayor can take the Council's message and themes out into the community and work towards achieving the Council's social, community, educational and economic aims.

Our performance on Community Cohesion measured by the Council's Resident Survey 2012 showed that 87% of local people believe that people from different backgrounds get on well together. This is an increase on the Place Survey 2008 result of 82%. This demonstrates that performance has been maintained against a backdrop of a significant increase in diversity within the borough and the economic downturn. The 2012 Resident Survey results for community engagement improved on the 2008 Place Survey; the number of people who feel they can influence decisions in the local area is now 30% an increase from 28% in 2008.

The dedicated support for the Mayoral Office was first established for the unitary authority in 1998 and since then 13 Mayors have been supported through their civic year. On average each Mayor undertakes 300 engagements per year, of which approximately 90% are within the borough.

The service currently operates with a non staffing budget of £46,950 which includes a civic dignitary allowance of £12,703 for the Mayor and £4,234 for the Deputy Mayor.



Quality and Innovation

An increasing role for the civic office has been to be proactive in balancing the traditions and protocols of the role with a modern approach to engaging with the community. This

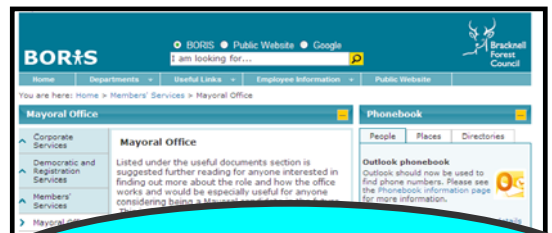


is recognised as being pivotal to ensure the longevity of the function so that it remains relevant and appropriate rather than outdated and archaic. A Mayoral handbook has been in place for some years which captured the 'Bracknell Way' and the traditions of the role. This has been modernised and will be updated annually to reflect the changing expectations of the role and the changing tone and focus of engagements.

A Mayoral induction programme has been developed to consider all the immediate issues and concerns for an incoming Mayor and includes question and answer sessions with Finance and Communications officers.

A one to one session was commissioned last year with South East Employers to support the incoming Mayor with public speaking skills and tips on chairing Council meetings. This was very successful and will be repeated in the future.

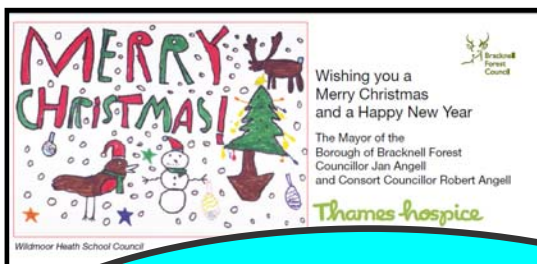
As part of the work for the Member Development Charter the Mayor and Deputy Mayor role descriptions were created and published for Councillors to understand the roles and the skills required to carry them out successfully. Each Immediate Past Mayor undertakes an exit interview to capture the year's successes, impart feedback on the support received and to identify areas that may require improvement.



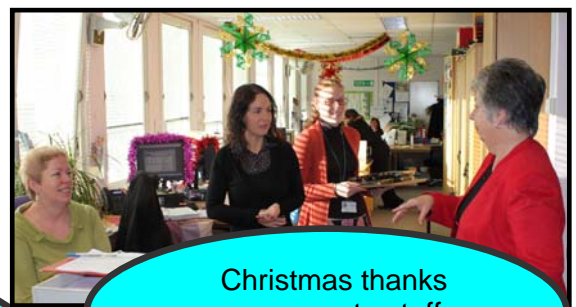
Councillors can view resources on preparing for the role on the Council's intranet pages

The support team has been working with other Council officers to ensure that when the Mayor is attending an event to celebrate the hard work of the Council that she is fully briefed to deliver an appropriate and enlightening speech. This ensures that the impact of the event is maximised both for the Mayor and the Council.

The annual Christmas event with staff was re-evaluated as it had become clear that coverage of those attending from the staff was limited. To maximise the impact of the event the Mayor visited all town based office buildings, delivering mince pies, chocolates and Christmas spirit. The Mayor spoke to hundreds of back office staff and feedback was really positive. This shift in how festive thanks are delivered saved 50% of the cost of previous events and tripled impact in terms of attendees.



The Mayor's Christmas Ecard was designed by a local school and was sent out as a message of thanks to all community groups and volunteers through Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action which covers over 600 different groups.



Christmas thanks message to staff December 2013



In March 2013 previous attendance at the Annual Civic Service was reviewed and it was identified that the majority of attendees remained consistent and were not reflective of the whole community. The invitation list was completely revamped to accommodate 100 invitations to community and voluntary group representatives. This resulted in the highest ever attendance at a Civic Service with over 120 guests drawn from the widest range of groups. The feedback received was really positive.



Each year the Bracknell Forest Mayor selects a local charity to support and promote throughout their year in office. Given the hard economic time Mayors are encouraged to think of other ways in which they can both support their Charity beyond raising funds for them. An example of this was the charity's Santa Dash in Swinley Forest when the Mayor took part and talked to many of the charity's supporters. The event was picked up in the press locally, nationally and through social media promoting the work of the charity.

As part of the national Take-Over Day event the Mayor visited the charity with the member of the Youth Council shadowing her which was another opportunity to raise the profile of the charity through the coverage of this national event.

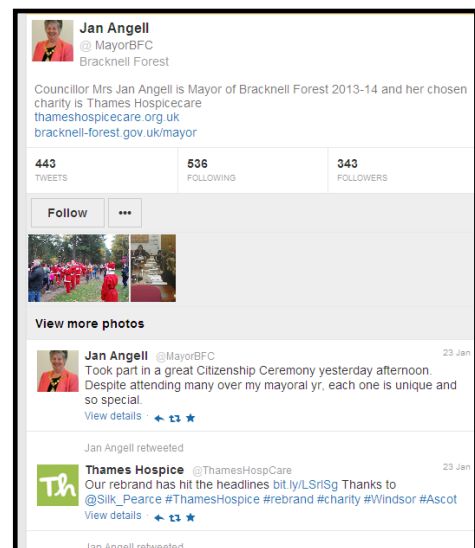


Promotion of the Office of Mayor

The civic office continues to publicise upcoming engagements through traditional methods such as emailing the local press to generate coverage of activities. The office is also developing the use of social media, integrating the Mayor into Council wide schemes or initiatives and supporting the Council's activities to promote democracy with schools and other organisations.



The civic office encouraged the Immediate Past Mayor, Councillor Mrs McCracken to launch a Bracknell Forest Mayor twitter account in August 2012 and regular tweets were posted to briefly describe and promote the engagements she attended. The account was taken over by the incumbent Mayor, Councillor Mrs Angell and the civic office continue to tweet about upcoming events and report activity.



Twitter posts are regularly re-tweeted by followers and the local press. This has encouraged new community groups to invite the Mayor to their events. Followers are increasing with 343 at the time of writing.



Following their elections the Bracknell Forest Youth Council held one of their meetings in the Council Chamber in December 2012 including a question and answer session with the Mayor. It was such a success that the event was repeated and expanded in November 2013 to also involve members of the Executive.



In October 2012 Easthampstead Park School took part in a Citizenship Ceremony at Easthampstead Park Conference Centre and read out pieces about what it means to be a citizen of Britain and why Bracknell Forest is a good place to live. Former Bracknell Forest Councillor Jacqueline Ryder attended the ceremony in her new role as Deputy Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire. In October 2013 this successful event was repeated with Edgbarrow School.

In July 2012 a work experience student from Garth Hill College was invited to interview the Mayor and wrote up the article for the Local Democracy blog.



In September 2012 the Warfield Beaver Scouts were invited to meet the Mayor in the Council Chamber to understand more about her role.

The Mayor has invited all schools in Bracknell Forest to visit the Council Chamber to discuss not only civic life but the role of Councillors and particular topics of interest for each school. The opportunities are tailored to school's curriculum needs and also vary depending on the age of those attending. Capturing the imagination of young people's discussions encourages an understanding of how a Council works, its impact on the students, their families, their schools and the wider community. Some examples of events are:

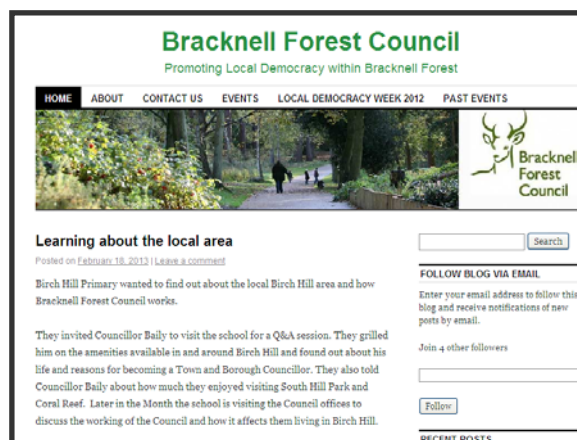
- In February 2013 Easthampstead Park School had a question and answer session with the Mayor, Executive Member for Culture, Corporate Services and Public Protection, Neighbourhood Police Officer, Chief Officer - Planning & Transport and Community Safety Manager. Topics included: buses, lighting, partnership working with the police to keep children safe and how to get involved in politics.
- Birch Hill Primary School wanted to know how the Council works and Councillor Baily visited the school in February 2013 to answer their questions on the local area and decision making processes. A group of students followed this up by meeting the Mayor in the Council Chamber in March 2013.
- Crowthorne Church of England Primary School visited the Council Chamber in April 2013 and talked to the Mayor and Councillor Finnie, Freeman of the Borough.
- In February 2013 Great Hollands Primary School wanted to know about how the Council runs and Councillor Mrs Temperton joined the Mayor to answer their questions.
- Harmans Water Primary School held their School Council meeting in the Council Chamber in April 2013 and have arranged a second visit in February 2014.

A pupil from Harmans Water Primary School said of their visit "It was a super, epic afternoon (the best day of our lives!) and we would like to go again"

- In November 2013 St. Joseph's Primary School were interested to see the phases of the town centre's regeneration and asked questions about building new schools in the borough.

A school council leader from St. Joseph's Primary School said of their visit "The school council were buzzing when we got back to school! A fantastic experience"

One of the methods used to promote the civic office has been contributions to a Bracknell Forest Council blog which promotes local democracy events. Short articles are included to report on the success of activities such as school council elections to encourage more schools and groups to get involved.



Meadow Vale Pupils meet the mayor and learn about local politics

By **Becky Barnes**
March 13, 2013

Pupils learnt about local Government politics and tried on the mayoral chain during a visit to the borough mayor's parlour.

Children in Years Three to Six at Meadow Vale Primary School, in Priestwood, visited Councillor Jennie McCracken at Easthampstead House, in Town Square last Thursday.

Gaynor Dalrymple, Year Five teacher, said: "It was really lovely.

"The children got to sit in the mayor's seat and ask her lots of questions.

"The chair of the school council then chaired a council meeting and all the pupils had to speak through the chair."

Pupils also presented to the mayor what they had learnt at school about rights and responsibilities.

Mrs Dalrymple added: "It was good for the children to learn how it all works in their own town."



Cllr Jennie McCracken with pupils from Meadow Vale School

Meadow Vale Primary School had a discussion on rights, respect and responsibility in February 2013.



In March 2013 St. Joseph's Primary School wanted to know more about the local environment and recycling and had a question and answer session with the Mayor, Executive Member for the Environment and Executive Member for Culture, Corporate Services and Public Protection together with recycling officers.



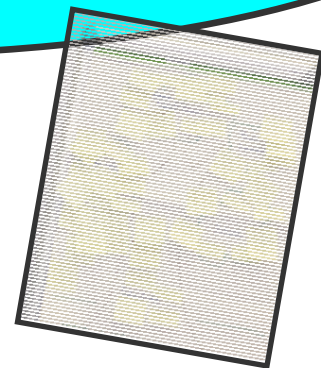
The civic office arranged for Wildmoor Heath Primary School to borrow election boxes and a polling booth so the pupils could experience how formal elections are run. The Mayor then visited the school in October 2013 to announce the results. Following the successful election the Mayor invited the new school council to hold a school council meeting in the Chamber.

A teacher from Wildmoor Heath Primary School said "The children got so much from the visit, and have gained a much deeper understanding of what it means to be on the school council"



College Town Junior School held their School Council meeting in the Council Chamber in October 2012 and held a discussion on how to make people feel included.

Brakenhale School held a discussion in October 2012 on the Bracknell Forest local area and what was important to them. Using a democracy tree they wrote down their priorities and discussed their thoughts on who was responsible for delivering them. They appreciated the opportunity to question the Mayor directly on what was important to them as part of the young community of the borough.

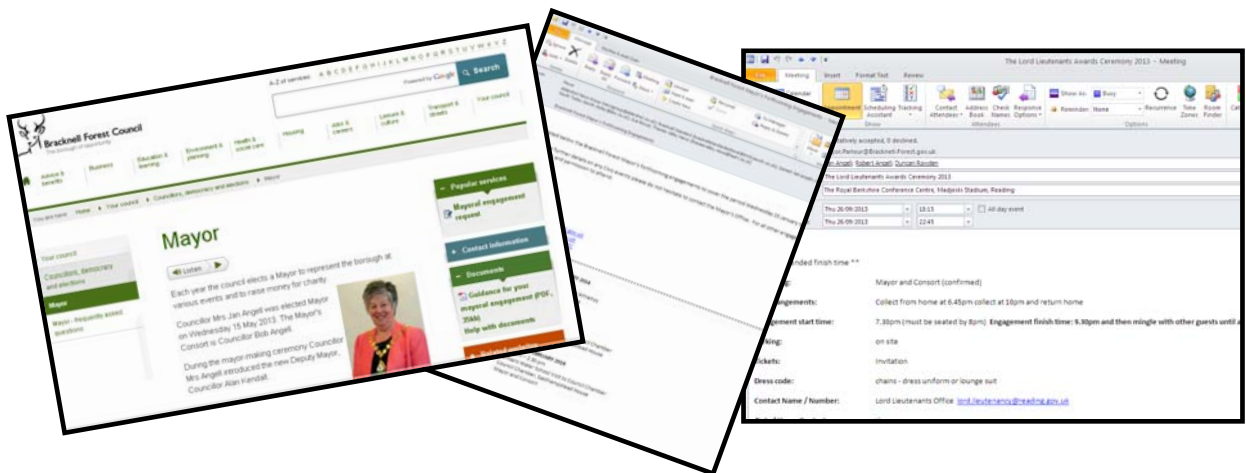


Value for Money

During 2012 the Mayoral function participated in CiFPA benchmarking and was included in a review of administrative functions conducted by external consultants. Analysis of the outcomes was used to inform a review of the service which resulted in a shift from a full time Personal Assistant role to a team-based approach including a dedicated support role for 20 hours per week. The restructure was preceded by a reduction in the cost and focus of the Chauffeur role as the use of the car and the role of the driver were reviewed; the job description was revised and was recruited to at a reduced level to match demand. Both changes refocused the team's approach to realigning the Mayoralty with the corporate aims of Bracknell Forest Council, the Strategy for community engagement and the objectives of the Member Development Charter.

Integral to the restructure process was the streamlining of high frequency administrative tasks. A process reengineering exercise was completed and the following were amongst the changes implemented:

- redesign of an online engagement form
- update to web information to include detailed frequently asked questions and guidance on receiving the Mayor at events
- scripting for Customer Services to deal with enquires using their CRM system and handle ticket sales to events
- management of all engagements through Outlook appointment system including full briefing and event information so that all support officers could resolve queries
- creation of standardised responses to enquires
- regularised circulation of engagement information to the press



The streamlined processes have led to an efficient service to the Mayor and improved access by residents without lowering the service offered or compromising the autonomy of a Mayor. The incumbent Mayor is encouraged, through provision of a blackberry device to accept or decline the engagements electronically but the process includes the flexibility to respond to different Mayor's needs. In many respects the service offered is better as the focus is on gathering as much information for the Mayor as early as possible which has led to consideration of events being made by a more informed Mayor.



All of the Mayoral team are now co-located which has led to seamless administrative support and a broader understanding of the issues facing the Council gleaned from Democratic Services colleagues to inform the 'critical friend' function of the service and to identify opportunities to involve the Mayor in a wider range of community events.

The new processes have increased capacity to support the Mayor or Deputy Mayor and the resources available to the incumbent Mayor are now focused upon the promotion of the civic role and the Council's objectives. A better informed civic office makes for a better informed Mayor with a wider understanding of the Council's current issues and helps the Mayor assess the impact of engagements to prioritise, where necessary, activities with new community groups and those celebrating milestone achievements. This includes providing the Mayor with website details, details of the organiser and background to the organisation. The Mayor is able to get more involved in activities and ask more informed questions of attendees. Organisers feedback that they feel that the Mayor is fully engaged in what they are trying to achieve.

A key element of the success of the office has been a widening network of interaction and support which has spread from within the Member Services team, across neighbouring authorities, into the Lord Lieutenant's office and attendance at the NACO conference.

Future Developments

The Member Services team continues to be committed to improving Mayoral support at Bracknell Forest to ensure that its Mayor and Deputy Mayor are equipped to provide the best possible services to its residents as efficiently as possible.

Future developments include:

- Review of official car support: The 2013/14 budget proposals include a £17k reduction in the cost of provision of a car service to the Mayoralty. A key objective for the team will be to implement the significant changes required to achieve this saving whilst maintaining an appropriate service. The changes already made to the support function mean that the team is well placed to achieve this as seamlessly as possible.
- Expansion of the induction programme to include public speaking support from South East Employers for every Mayor.
- Extension of the evaluation scheme for engagements to ensure the Mayor's attendance is adding value to community events and allows us to build on our successes.
- Further promotion of democracy events and building on relationships with schools and community groups to ensure that the Mayor's involvement is relevant to their needs.

Conclusion

During the past 14 months the civic office has been transformed into a modern, interactive and integral function within the Council providing a high quality service to the Mayor and the integrated community of Bracknell Forest as a whole.

