

BILLERICAY TOWN COUNCIL

Business Plan 2023-2026



Billericay Town Council

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Business principles of Billericay Town Council

The business mission of Billericay Town Council is to utilise funds obtained through the parish precept and other income to add positively to the lives of the Town's residents; supplementing services provided by the Borough and County Councils and the national Government of the day; as agreed by legal, democratic process.

Our six core priorities are:

1. Provide and develop facilities and services that are accessible, inclusive and promote health and well-being.
2. Play an active role in the future development of the town through collaboration with partners, stakeholders, and our community.
3. Help to create a future that is carbon neutral, environmentally sustainable and resilient to the impact of climate change.
4. Maintain and create opportunities to enhance our green spaces and provide a clean and safe environment.
5. Provide and develop facilities and services that promote Billericay as an attractive and vibrant market town and celebrate its rich history, heritage and culture.
6. Maintain effective and efficient governance and management of resources.

In carrying out these functions the actions of the council will be:

- Legal
- Ethical
- Responsibly economical
- With best consideration for the wishes of the constituents
- With respect for environmental and ecological considerations
- Proactive insofar as such is practicable
- Flexible
- Transparent



Objectives of the Business Plan

The purpose of this business plan is to define the manner in which the Town Council will carry out its commitments during the five-year financial period 2023-2028. It is anticipated that the Plan will be reviewed annually, along with other policies.

In the pages that follow, this Business Plan considers its current business commitments and methodology under the following broad headings; and attempts to lay a business pathway to deal with future developments: -

- Scope of council responsibilities and processes – basic council formation and organisation, powers of competency
- Financial – income, outlay, budget, reserves and decision processes, etc.
- Community – grants, services
- Additional funding – facilitation, where appropriate and practicable, external funding for benefit of the community
- Environmental – future developments
- Staffing – current and projected manpower requirements, council responsibilities
- Future Outlook – Working Together Commission, partnership with borough council
- Communications – internet activity, social media, newsletter, website etc.
- Promotion of Billericay as a high-quality area for businesses, residents and visitors
- Development and planning scrutiny

Throughout this Business Plan references to “the Council” or “Town Council” should be deemed to refer to Billericay Town Council, unless otherwise specified.



Town Council administration

The civil parish of Billericay is the foundation level of elected local Government for its area consisting of the following three wards:

- Southwest Ward (3 seats)
- East Ward (8 seats)
- West Ward (9 seats)

The parish is predominantly an urban area and at 5th May 2022 comprised an electorate of 22,504. The Principal Authority is Basildon Borough Council within whose boundaries the entire parish is contained.

There are twenty town councillors, elected every four years by default. If any councillor resigns or leaves the council for any reason a replacement may be elected if a minimum number of constituents requests a poll. Usually, a replacement is co-opted from applicants after the position has been advertised according to statute, but the number of co-opted councillors can be significant.

In order that the General Power of Competence is maintained, in addition to minimum qualification requirements for the Town Clerk, a minimum of two-thirds of the Council must be elected (as compared to councillors who have been co-opted); a consideration to be borne in mind as the four year electoral period advances and there is a greater likelihood that the proportion of co-opted councillors may become higher. This does not stop council decision processes, but there is a lesser degree of management flexibility if the General Power of Competence cannot be invoked.

Income

The primary source of income for Billericay Town Council is by means of a parish precept, supplementary to council tax, and passed onto the Town Council. The level of precept can be impacted to some extent by central or local Government legislation which can be either limiting or beneficial. There is currently no support grant input from Basildon Borough Council – the Local Council Tax Support grant (LCTS) was withdrawn some years ago.

The Precept is requested annually by the Town Council before the start of the financial year, after consideration and acceptance of a budget by the Council.

For year 2023-24 the precept is £25.74 for a Band D property raising a total of £317,235.72. The corresponding estimated budget for the same period is £385,946.00.

There are also peripheral incomes, for contractual and ad-hoc hire of the main hall and meeting rooms in the Chantry Centre, and the mechanics of this service are dealt with below. There is likelihood that this income will increase over time, but the primary objective of space hire is as a service to the local community, with income set to defray costs rather than generate profit.

Whenever possible and appropriate the Council will also seek to attract funding into our area, either by applying directly for grants or supporting applications from other local bodies. The availability of assistance may evolve from a variety of sources and the Council will review such opportunities, and others, as and when they are available and appropriate; and maintain a proactive stance towards promoting the needs of the Town. In this respect the Council's General Power of Competence may be of particular use.

Spending and Disbursements Procedures

The opening section of this Business Plan lays down the basic tenets for the way in which Billericay Town Council will conduct its business.

The guidelines for achieving this; and the measures by which the quality of BTC business dealing is judged; are multi-faceted. Some measures are subjective, being enshrined in good judgement and ethics, but most can be measured against solid yardsticks of written regulations such as: -

- The strictures of national legislation. Various local Government acts, with amendments and appendages, form the foundations for everything that the Council undertakes, from the conduct of councillors to the manner in which financial transactions are conducted.
- Local Government legislation also clearly defines the role of the Clerk to the Council as a legal and advisory arm. Delineation between the Clerk and the council is clearly defined; the Clerk cannot lead or take part in debates *per se*, but there are also times when the Clerk is required to offer guidance.
- Our own policies and guidelines state how we shall operate within legal strictures to deliver value to our constituents. Purchasing procedures and

expressed qualifications for grant applications to be successful are two areas where these written procedures are important, as tangible measures against which actual events can be judged.

- Billericay Town Council has also adopted the General Power of Competence under the Localism Act 2011 which, in short, allows the Council to “do anything that individuals generally may do”. This allows a degree of good judgement to be used in business decisions while remaining clearly within other written strictures, rather than choosing the “safe options” of convoluted procedure, or lowest price under all circumstances, For example, the Council is not compelled to take the lowest bid for any goods or services as a matter of course, if a somewhat higher bid provides better quality or value for money; or it may choose to utilise services of a local supplier within the area rather than a national supplier, if the overall benefit is in favour of such a decision.
- Business relationships are important, and the Council may opt to use a supplier of goods or services that has in the past delivered a good quality end product for competitive price – especially but not necessarily solely in an emergency – without reference to a full tendering procedure. In such manner the Council is more able to build a reputation such that businesses will compete to provide services.
- Valid invoices are paid as soon as reasonably practicable after verification. These payments are approved electronically by two of the four authorised bank signatories which means that online payments can be made to suppliers on a regular basis without a long wait to get authorisation at council meetings.
- It is a specific practice that invoices are never held for any minimum period before payment: once the goods or services have been delivered and verified, the provider is entitled to similar courtesy.

Summarising, budgetary restraint and cost control are important to the constituents of Billericay, but these must be accompanied by sensible quality control.

Budget

The budget, simply put, is a statement of cash outlay that the Council projects as being required to carry on its business during the year. It is usually agreed in December each year for the following financial year so that an appropriate precept can be requested through the Primary Authority.

It is arrived at by taking all the known and likely outlays for the year to come. A degree of flexibility is built in for minor contingencies, but line items are largely a matter of empirical experience and can be estimated fairly reasonably.

In all circumstances the Council is committed, through specific concentration of effort from the Finance and General Purposes Committee and oversight from full Council, to ensuring that their spending supports the requirements and objectives of Town Council constituents; and that the requested precepts will be responsibly estimated with these objectives as guidance. However, it has been somewhat difficult to set an accurate budget during recent years due to large scale projects being processed so there has been need for a level of conservatism in the budgeting. Examples of such projects have been:

- Takeover of the old Day Centre from Basildon Borough Council and demolition of this to erect a brand-new purpose-built community centre for the benefit of local residents
- Moving the Council's operational base from rented premises to the Chantry Centre

There is scope for further uncertainty in future as the Principal Authority retrenches towards concentration on core, statutory functions in response to legislative requirements, but the budget requirement is now better known so adjustments can be better anticipated and made as and when required.

The Council has also accumulated a sufficient reserve to cover operational costs for around a year, plus Earmarked reserves specific to various commitments, such as redecoration of the Chantry Centre and renewal of the Christmas Lights.

Three Year Financial Forecast

Year 2023/24	Income	Expenditure
Precept	£317,000	
Chantry Centre	£70,000	£160,000
F & GP (inc. staff costs)		£167,000
Environment		£42,000
Special Projects*		£8,000
Ear Marked Reserves**		£20,000
Outside Funding/Interest	£10,000	
Total	£397,000	£397,000

Year 2024/25	Income	Expenditure
Precept	£330,000	
Chantry Centre	£80,000	£167,000
F & GP (inc. staff costs)		£173,000
Environment		£49,000
Special Projects*		£12,000
Ear Marked Reserves**		£20,000
Outside Funding/Interest	£10,000	
Total	£421,000	£421,000

Year 2025/26	Income	Expenditure
Precept	£343,000	
Chantry Centre	£90,000	£180,000
F & GP (inc. staff costs)		£185,000
Environment		£46,000
Special Projects*		£12,000
Ear Marked Reserves**		£22,000
Outside Funding/Interest	£10,000	
Total	£445,000	£445,000

*includes potential provision of allotments/play area refurbishment

**includes funds for new employees and IT equipment

Grant Facilities

The Council offers two different classes of grant assistance, as follows:

- The Small Grants Scheme offers grants of up to £500 to formal community groups, clubs etc. Use is specific to capital expenditure only and grants awarded have historically covered a wide variety of items. The emphasis is on benefit and involvement for the local community.
- The Community Start Up Fund is for brand new groups looking to hold their meetings in the Chantry Centre and the Council will provide £100 of free room hire whilst the group becomes more established.

For both of the above guidelines are laid down for qualification, but the Council has a degree of discretion so that worthwhile causes do not slip through the net. The Council takes a very positive view to this aspect of their remit, in line with commitment in other areas, to supporting self-help and community effort.

The Council would like to see full take up of the annual £2,500 grant scheme every year; and there may be other areas where a wider take-up might be beneficially encouraged. Sport's clubs and organisations such as the Guide and Scouts movements are well-acquainted with the mechanics and availability of grant schemes, but there are several volunteer organisations, newly forming, that may be able to make successful applications for the wider community benefit.



During the Covid-19 Pandemic the Council offered emergency assistance grants to local groups and £475 was distributed as follows:

- £75 – Billericay Community Cinema – to provide prize money for an online community competition
- £100 – Billericay Foodbank – purchase of PPE equipment for deliveries
- £100 – Hypohounds – training fees for assistance dogs that detect hypo in Type 1 diabetics
- £100 – BASIS – personal trainers fee to keep providing online exercise classes for blind and partially sighted residents
- £100 – Forget Me Not Memory Café – postage costs for activity packs sent to members living with dementia

Monetary Reserves

A budget is drawn up every year that attempts to cater responsibly for anticipated outgoings during the following year: and this forms the basis for the council precept (the amount of money taken from council taxpayers). As in any responsible business, reserves need to be retained from income, above and beyond anticipated budget requirements for the period in question, to cater for unforeseeable circumstances that can draw heavily and/or unexpectedly upon Council funds.

These reserves cater for different circumstances and are either General or Earmarked in nature.

General reserves are intended to cater for sudden variations in routine activity that can add significantly to costs of administration and activity such as:

- Cover for long term illness – short illnesses of a few days can be easily handled, but in case of long-term absences that qualify for paid leave it is necessary to employ cover; and temporary staffing costs can be substantially more expensive than permanent staff.
- Short-term support – if appropriate within the objectives of the Council – for ongoing local services or projects, support for which may be, in the longer term, considered and itemised as part of future budgets for more orderly support.
- Liability issues – in an increasingly litigious society we would be remiss not to consider the impact on having to meet some uninsurable costs in response to legal suits or similar. Changes in legislation such as, for example, Data Protection rules, can add to the complexities of such.

The policy of Billericay Town Council is to hold a General Reserve of one year's precept. This is currently approx. £320,000.

Earmarked Reserves are reserves held by the Council for specific purposes such as:

- Elections. Wards in the parish do not often have contested elections, even at the four-yearly full elections, in that the number of candidates for election to the Council is equal to or less than the number of vacancies; and vacancies that occur between the four-yearly cycle of full elections have been filled by co-option in the past, but such may not necessarily be the case. It is therefore difficult to budget accurately for such on a year-to-year basis. An earmarked reserve of £16,000 is therefore held to cater for those occasions when such must be carried out and paid for. If an election is paid for from this reserve (assumed to be during the four-yearly full elections) it is anticipated that the reserve would be built up gradually, again, over the succeeding four years; so that it was fully funded by the time the next cycle comes around.
- Building Repairs. The Town Council has ownership of the Chantry Centre a brand-new community facility which also houses the Council offices, and although some repairs are catered for in the annual budget it is expected that in the future large scale repair and replacement of equipment and fixtures will be required which are likely to be costly and/or complex. The policy of Billericay Town Council is to build up an Earmarked Reserve fund to cover

these costs by putting approx. £20,000 into it during each financial year. These funds could also be used if a significant non-budget repair was to be identified.

- Christmas Lights. The Town Council believes this is something they provide which has large scale community impact and an Ear Marked reserve is held and added to over a three-year period to enable the lighting scheme to be replaced when the tender is up for renewal.

If significant changes to any of the above is envisaged, a further vote in Council would be taken.



Town Council Offices

Since the Town Council's formation office premises have been rented from a local landlord, however it was always the intention to find premises which the Council could own and develop into a community hub/facility.

In 2016 the operational management of the Day Centre building and site was obtained from Basildon Borough Council on a 99-year lease. This building was demolished to make way for a brand-new purpose-built community centre in 2018 which was named the Chantry Centre after the road it is located on. The Chantry Centre is the sole responsibility of the Town Council to run and maintain. In addition to the council chamber there is a large hall, office space for three employees and several smaller meeting rooms which are well used by local groups and companies.

The development of the Chantry Centre was a result of the Council considering various alternative locations for a permanent home within the High Street that would provide residents with meeting spaces and a community venue. The direct costs of maintaining the Centre are probably more than it would have cost to rent a simple shop front, but this would not have provided much space, if any, for future expansion of the Council; and the fate of the old Day Centre would have been very much in doubt if the principal authority had, instead, sold the building on the open market. Long term the asset value of the building will only increase to the Town Council.

Both the build and management of the building involved some steep learning curves for all involved parties, as there was a tight budget to adhere to, but the Council were determined to provide a high quality facility to residents.

With a borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board of £1.32m and a building fund Earmarked reserve of £500,000 which included fit out costs, the Council were able to bring the project in at just slightly over budget.

Original Budget	£1,900,000	Based on original estimates made prior to initial design
Feasibility Study	£5,955	
Surveys	£11,785	
Site Clearance	£5,357	Demolition of the Chantry Way Day Centre
Squatters Costs (Day Centre)	£8,398	Eviction of squatters / early installation Heras fencing, additional window/door boarding
Architect's fees	£85,511	
BTC legal costs	£8,015	Land transfers, Mr Green's Legal costs re car park, planning applications etc.
Main Construction	£1,619,440	Original quote
Contract Amendments	£119,497	Changes during construction, requested by architects/builders or BTC
BTC costs	£40,202	Fit out costs
Total Actual Cost	£1,949,160	
Over Budget	2.59%	

There is a significant increasing income, accruing from hire of the main hall and meeting rooms within the building. Ad hoc room hire for single, one-off purposes is becoming more commonplace, especially with companies moving to permanent working from home which then require premises for staff meetings/training events. One meeting room is being used twice a week for the provision of a community banking hub by Barclays Bank following the closure of their Billericay branch and it is hoped the other banks will follow suit.

There are two charging bands – corporate and community. Charges are deliberately lowered for community groups and not for profit organisations because they provide an important local service, but the corporate rate is still extremely competitive when compared with similar facilities nearby. The amount of take up increases the viability of owning the building instead of continuing to rent space in both monetary and public service terms.

The outlook for the period of this report is that the building will need at least one more redecoration of the main hall (first redecoration was undertaken in January 2023) and a full redecoration of the upstairs rooms. It is envisaged that expenditure on more expensive maintenance/repairs will not be required until 2026 when the building is five years old, but costs will become better known each year thus allowing a more predictable budget. The Council is establishing an earmarked reserve for this future building maintenance which currently stands at £20,000. Careful monitoring of the expenditure will lead to a gradually tighter control of costs and a more even cost/benefit pattern.

The long-term picture is a development of the continuing trend towards making use of the building as a community resource, whilst allowing space for potential increase in Council workload as it takes on an increasing share of services within the area.



Staff Resources

At the start of 2023 the Council had three employees: Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, Committee Clerk and Bookings Clerk. The Town Clerk is the only full-time employee whilst the Committee Clerk and Bookings Clerk work mornings and afternoons respectively for a total of 20 hours each per week.

Whilst all positions have job descriptions, due to the rapidly changing environment, particularly in regard to the Chantry Centre, the workload and duties are not always clearly defined and may change significantly during the period under consideration.

The Town Clerk is currently managing the mandatory duties of the Clerk to the Town Council as laid down in various local government legislation; plus, the various manifold tasks that also arise and are normal in the position. The Clerk also meets requirements as the Responsible Financial Officer and has handled the Chantry Centre build project and building administration tasks as these have arisen.

The Committee Clerk is primarily responsible for Planning Committee and deputises for the Town Clerk in her absence, plus she also looks after the facilities management side of running the Chantry Centre and deals with hirers. The Bookings Clerk is new to the role and is employed to deal with hirers and building administration.

These roles will likely expand as time progresses and the Council may require an additional member of staff. In the financial year 2023-24 a caretaker is being employed to perform various maintenance and security duties in and around the building.

The discussions currently taking place with the principal authority within the framework of a Working Together Commission may see services being managed at a more local level and any additional tasks taken on by the Town Council will require additional members of staff to implement them.





Health and Recreational facilities

A central function of the Town Council is to enhance and improve life for its constituents through physical and intellectual involvement; and a primary means of achieving this is through support for recreational facilities.

There are a number of means by which this is currently achieved, as examples:-

- Financial and logistical support for community groups looking to hold meetings in the Chantry Centre. The Council provides free or reduced rate room hire for groups looking to support those experiencing social isolation and loneliness.
- Each year community groups are encouraged to apply for small grants of up to £500 towards any qualifying project.
- The Town Council actively supports physical activities for all ages and cultural groups, as a means of supporting better mental and physical health. This again, arises primarily through reduced hire rates of the Chantry Centre, and impacts a very wide range of activities such as:
 - Uniformed organisations
 - School holiday clubs for children from low-income families
 - Youth groups
 - Good Companions Senior Citizens Club
 - Local Parkrun group
 - The Men's Shed Scheme

Billericay Town Council will continue with active involvement in any qualifying scheme or project that involves its constituents in such activities as those exemplified above; and any others that may arise in future. Firm financial commitment will continue to be granted where considered applicable.

Environmental Considerations

Although primarily a large town with a high density of residential properties there are surrounding areas of Billericay which can be termed as rural. The residents have made it clear via their attendance at Planning Committee and their comments on the Local Plan that they value their countryside surroundings. The Council therefore views environmental and ecological issues as important in any decision process where such is a factor.

Considerable resources are already invested in maintaining our environment in a manner that adds to quality of life for current residents and preserves it as much as is practicable for future generations. We work closely with the Borough's parks and arboricultural officers to ensure all green area in the town are managed and maintained to high standards. The Council already independently manages Jim Shields garden at the end of the High Street and The Festival Garden in Crown Road.

We give significant support to the Billericay Tree Wardens, an independent sub-group of the Town Council, as they work hard to preserve the heritage trees in the town and also get involved with tree planting at various locations. The Friends of Lake Meadows is another voluntary group that has benefitted from Council support and assistance whilst they work with the Borough Council to maintain and improve facilities in Lake Meadows park.

This effort will continue to be a high priority during the period under consideration and, as other agencies and/or the Principal Authority divest themselves of functions that are considered extracurricular to their core activities (currently being looked at as part of the Working Together Commission brief), the resources the Council devotes to these activities may well increase.

Such functions (not as policy objectives, but as possible examples only) might extend to maintenance of other open areas or public rights of way; eventual allotment provision should an appropriate site become available; or natural habitat management for rare or locally important fauna and flora. Such commitment can only add to workload costs and could involve increase of our financial commitment on behalf of the Town.



Development and Planning

There is probably no area of local authority administration that evokes comment of constituents more than those changes in their immediate environment that can be brought about by building works, both industrial and residential. Significant governmental and demographic pressures are brought upon principal authorities to build more homes, and, in an area surrounded by Green Belt designated land, these pressures are often vehemently resisted by local residents.

Planning applications are made to the Principal Authority. In turn they are required, where practicable, to seek comment from the Town Council on applications within the parish. The Planning Committee meets fortnightly to consider and issue comments on these, but the Council does not have any power of veto on applications and has no statutory powers to impact such.

Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to pass comment which may be taken into account and there is also opportunity to request consideration for limitations or conditions on developments to neutralise negative impact on constituents or suggest positive steps with regard to infrastructure.

With larger developments, the developer is required to provide a contribution – negotiated with the principal authority – towards supporting infrastructure costs if the development is deemed to impact negatively on current facilities, most commonly referred to as Section 106 funds or more recently, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). However, there are drawbacks to this system from a parochial standpoint, in that such money is not required to be spent in the area impacted by the development that generated the need: indeed many councils have significant surpluses of CIL money that has not been spent at all.

These factors are set against a constantly changing backdrop of central Government directives that impact the detail of CIL distribution. The current legislative position is fluid and changes in the law require partial localisation of these funds, whereby a proportion of CIL payments will be passed directly to the district in which the levy was generated, for discretionary use in improvement to local infrastructure, through such bodies as Basildon Borough Council.

This is an area which, dependent upon the precise requirements and allowances of final legislation, would allow Billericay Town Council to address some of the issues that arise from large scale developments and substantially improve the daily life of its constituents. It is a potentially impactful change that may offer substantial opportunity to react, at street level, to the concerns of relatively small sectors of the community that are affected by such developments. It is intended that the Council will take advantage of such opportunities if and as they exist.

There is also a possibility that this new legislation may allot a greater proportion of CIL to local councils that have prepared a Neighbourhood Plan. The Council has considered such in the past and concluded that there is little community benefit to justify the cost in money and resources, but this may be reconsidered in the future.

Communications

The primary purpose of Billericay Town Council is as a parochial arm of local government representing the people of Billericay, however much of the work undertaken would be of little value if constituents were not aware of the existence of such.

It is therefore very important that outward communications should continue to be an innate part of council systems and decision processes, to react to the needs of the community in as efficacious a manner as possible in an era of instant and more complex communications. The Council will seek continuous improvement in this area. Examples of means by which outward communication currently takes place are:

- The Town Crier newsletter. This is a quarterly publication delivered to every household in the town as a free news organ and is also archived on the Town Council website. This has been circulated electronically in the past, but feedback from the core base of readers shows that hard copies are preferred.
- The Council website is an important means of outward communication and a first stop for finding councillor contact details. All policies are a matter of public record through this medium; as are agendas for forthcoming meetings, archived minutes, account records, annual reports, and other assorted documents.
- All information pertaining to the hire of the Chantry Centre is clearly displayed along with clear pricing
- The website also carries links to support organisations, local groups, organisations and charities, heritage, and visitor information sites amongst others; information about local events; and facilities including community and Borough and County council services.
- There is always scope for improvement of the website, probably in ways as yet unimagined, and this is likely to grow as a cost item. As the population at large becomes increasingly dependent upon the internet as a source of information, it will become the case that information that is not on the internet is less likely to filter through to the people most impacted by the policies of the Council.
- The Town Council is a facilitator for important national celebrations such as the Platinum Jubilee and The Coronation of King Charles III
- Councillors interact with other groups by representing the Town Council on external bodies
- The Chairman has links with many social groups attending their functions if requested
- Councillors attend joint meetings with other local councils to provide help, ideas and support
- The Town Council belongs to both the National and County Associations for local Councils

Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is equally important that constituents can make known their thoughts, ideas, and concerns to the Council. The Council office is the centre of the council wheel, and most communications will at some stage pass through the Clerk. Everyone involved with the Council, either as paid employees or on a voluntary basis, is a mode of public communication to and from the Council.

The public face of the Council, though not necessarily showing up on specific budget lines, is a vital part of what Billerica Town Council does. The opening sections of this Business Plan refer to integrity and transparency, and the most effective business tool at our disposal for meeting these obligations is by personal demeanour and demonstration. Billerica Town Council can run the most business efficient operation, but it will be without value if the people whom the Council serve are not taking benefit from that efficiency.