

Inspection report

April 2005



Comprehensive performance assessment

**Corporate Assessment Report
Halton Borough Council**

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Introduction

- 1 The local government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Service* encourages greater focus on improved services for local people. Better performing councils are freed from central government controls and restrictions and poorer councils receive better focused support for improvement. The first step in this process was to make an overall judgement, a comprehensive performance assessment (CPA), of where each council stands.
- 2 In December 2002 the Audit Commission reported the results of the comprehensive performance assessment, for the first time, for each council. Your council was categorised as good.
- 3 In December 2003 new CPA information was published for each single tier and county council, based on reported changes in service performance during 2003 and your council was again categorised as good.
- 4 This report presents the results of a corporate assessment carried out in January/February 2005. The judgements are based on the Audit Commission's published key lines of enquiry, and include an update and analysis of your council's progress against:
 - ◆ the strengths and weaknesses contained in the 2002 report; and
 - ◆ the council's own priorities for improvement.

Summary of comprehensive performance assessment judgements

- 5 Halton Borough Council has done much to address the issues raised in the corporate assessment carried out in 2002. In doing so, it has maintained a strong focus on its priorities and on service improvement.
- 6 The council has strong ambitions for the area which are shared with the Halton Strategic Partnership. These ambitions are based on a very good awareness of the issues facing the borough, particularly in health and regeneration. The council and the Strategic Partnership reviewed and updated the priorities in 2003; the council has interpreted the updated priorities into actions and targets for its own services. The council's ambitions are linked well to national priorities and it has worked hard within the sub-region to bring benefits to the borough to help to achieve the ambitions.
- 7 Leadership by senior councillors and managers is good. Councillors and staff understand the council's priorities and focus on their delivery. The council has provided extra resources for its priorities and strengthened the way it manages and supports its staff to deliver improvements. It has begun to use different forms of procurement and works well in partnership to deliver services. Better performance management is helping the council to improve services and direct its resources. However, the council has made slow progress in developing its approach to equal opportunities.
- 8 Services have improved in all of the council's priority areas, including services which were weak in 2002. The council now provides much better social care services, better housing and benefits services, and improved access to the council's services. Crime is lower and there are new urban renewal projects and more jobs. There have been some improvements in educational achievement although overall the rate of improvement has levelled since 2002. The council has more to do to promote race equality and to help people from disadvantaged groups to access its services.
- 9 The council is building well for the future, continuing to invest in its staff and improving the way it works. It has identified its improvement priorities for the next three years and is now developing its ambitions and plans for the future alongside the Halton Strategic Partnership. These include proposals for the new Mersey crossing, for which the council has secured much support. However, the council has more to do to develop its approach to involving and engaging with local communities.

Corporate Assessment Score

Key Question	Theme	2002 Final Weighted Score	2004 Un-Weighted Score	2004 Weighted Score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	4	4
	Prioritisation	3	3	3
	Focus	3	4	4
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	2	3	3
	Performance management	2	3	3
What has the council achieved to date?	Achievement	9	4	12
	Investment	6	3	6
In light of what has been learnt, what does the council plan to do next?	Learning	3	3	3
	Future Plans	2	3	3
TOTAL THEME SCORE		33	29	41

Context

The locality

- 10 Halton is in the north-west of England, between Liverpool and Manchester and adjacent to Warrington. It is an urban industrial area containing two large towns, Runcorn and Widnes, on either side of the Mersey. There are now 118, 208 people living in 47,948 households. The council's research indicates that the population has recently stabilised after a period of decline. The proportion of young people in the population is greater and the proportion of older people is less than the national averages. 1.2 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic communities¹.
- 11 The economy has traditionally been based on the chemical industry and much of the land in the borough suffers from contamination. However, the economy is now diversifying and a number of major companies have established headquarters in the borough. House prices are rising and unemployment has fallen to 2.6 per cent² (compared with the national average of 2.2 per cent) from 3.5 per cent in July 2003. Crime levels in 2003/04 were at national average.
- 12 The borough suffers from multiple deprivation and is ranked as the 21st most deprived borough in England and Wales; in 2000 it was ranked 16th most deprived. The health of many people in Halton is poor: the district is one of the worst four boroughs in the country for death from all causes. Halton has the second worst standard mortality ratio and has the worst infant and cancer mortality rates in the country. 21.5 per cent of the population have a limiting long term illness³, compared to 18.5 per cent for all England and Wales.

The council

- 13 Halton became a unitary council in 1998; the borough was previously a district of Cheshire. It has 21 wards with 56 councillors and is controlled by the Labour party which currently holds 35 seats; the Liberal Democrat party holds 14 seats and the Conservative party holds 7 seats. Before May 2004 the political composition of the council was Labour 47 seats, Liberal Democrats 7 seats and Conservatives 2 seats. The council has a leader and cabinet model of governance, with six scrutiny committees (Policy and Performance Boards) and has established seven Area Forums which together cover the borough.
- 14 The council's net revenue budget for 2004/05 is £147 million with a capital programme of £31 million; it employs around 5,500 staff across all services. The council has significant external funding including European Community funds, Single Regeneration Budget, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, lottery funding, Surestart and the Children's Fund.

¹ Figures from 2001 census

² Claimant count December 2004

³ 2001 census data

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 15 The council's ambition is now strong. It has robust ambitions for the area which have been further developed since 2002, resulting in a 'mid-term' revision to the Community Strategy and the council's own corporate plan in 2003. The council knows its area well and its ambitions are firmly based on evidence, on a detailed understanding of local problems and opportunities and on consultation with local people. The ambitions are clearly articulated and are well understood by the council's partners and by the council's own staff.
- 16 The ambitions of the local strategic partnership, the Halton Strategic Partnership (HSP), and the council are very clear. Both share an overall vision: 'Halton will be a thriving and vibrant borough where people enjoy a good quality of life, with good health, a high quality modern urban environment, opportunity for all to fulfil their potential, greater prosperity and equality and safe and attractive neighbourhoods'. To deliver this vision, HSP and the council share the same five priorities: improving health, promoting urban renewal, enhancing life chances and employment, increasing wealth and equality, and ensuring safe and attractive neighbourhoods. The vision and priorities are set out in the Community Strategy 2002-2006 and the Corporate Plan 2002-2006. Both Strategy and Plan were revised in 2003 to update them in the light of progress, new information, work with partners and a need to clarify targets⁴. The updating process was informed by a comprehensive 'State of the Borough' report and by detailed consultation with local people. Five thematic partnerships, each with its own action plan developed on the basis of local consultation, support the delivery of the five priorities at HSP level. The council is active in these partnerships.
- 17 The revised Corporate Plan contains the council's vision (framed around the five priorities) and sets out the role of the council and actions it needs to take in delivering the ambitions. It contains targets based on the outcomes the council seeks, some of which extend to 2010, but not all of these targets are SMART. The council's 'sixth priority' of improvement in its services was revised in 2003 from an aim of 'top quartile' performance in all Best Value Performance Indicators to a more realistic 'year on year improvements in 75%' of BVPIs (and 'excellent' rating in Comprehensive Performance Assessment by December 2006).
- 18 The council's Corporate Plan includes links to national priorities and targets, for example, targets in the 'health' section of the Corporate Plan are based on national 'Saving Lives – our healthier nation' targets, and the government's targets for street cleanliness are reflected in the Corporate Plan.
- 19 The council's political and managerial leadership continues to be active at sub-regional level, particularly in relation to Merseyside, to promote the interests of Halton. The council has influenced sub-regional developments, bringing benefits to the borough to support the delivery of the council's ambitions, particularly to regenerate the borough in line with the 'urban renewal' priority. New developments are providing a mix of jobs in offices and factories and new

⁴ The revision to the Community Strategy and Corporate Plan included the renaming of the previous 'tackling poverty and deprivation' priority as 'increasing wealth and equality'.

housing. Recent and agreed developments include the strategic rail freight park, Daresbury Business Park, the Science and Technology Park and the extension of the Mersey Waterfront Park to the Halton district. A key plank of the council's ambition for the borough is the proposed new Mersey crossing, for which the council has secured support across the sub-region.

- 20 The current Community Strategy and the Corporate Plan end in 2006, and so longer term ambitions are not yet detailed. However, the HSP and the council have already begun a well planned process for developing the next community strategy and corporate plan (from 2006).

Prioritisation

- 21 There continue to be more strengths than weaknesses in council's approach to prioritisation. Targets are now aligned to priorities. The council continues to allocate additional funding to its priorities, and it identifies key priorities for each year. However, while high-level priorities are based on wide consultation, the council's approach to community engagement is not fully developed and the council cannot be sure that it takes the views of all sections of the community into account.
- 22 The current Corporate Plan lists 27 objectives to support the five priorities, with 110 targets and actions for the delivery of the priorities. These are not prioritised within the Corporate Plan. However, the new Chief Executive is continuing the practice of his predecessor in producing an annual 'The Year Ahead' document which identifies service and resource priorities based around the five Corporate Plan priorities. The draft 'Year Ahead' for 2005/06 is the third of these statements and clearly identifies what the council's departments should prioritise, within the context of national and local policy.
- 23 The Priorities Fund continues to be the mechanism by which the council allocates additional resources year on year to its priorities. Each year this additional funding is mainstreamed and further additional funding is allocated; this year the cumulative total of redirected funding is approximately £5 million (since 2000). The additional funding is top-sliced from the total budget before departmental budgets are allocated. In addition the council has used efficiency savings and revenue increases to provide additional funding where service improvement is needed, for example in Social Services. However, the council has not had a systematic approach to identifying what are not its priorities or to the withdrawal of funding from low priority services since a base budget review in 2000 (the council will carry out a further base budget review during 2005).
- 24 Good consultation informed the development and revision of the high-level priorities, but although the council carries out ongoing consultation through quarterly surveys of its Citizens Panel, it does not yet engage fully with local communities and there is no clear and consistent way in which the council identifies the views of minority groups within the community.

Focus

- 25 The council's ability to focus is now strong. It has built on the strengths identified in the 2002 corporate assessment and has improved the way that councillors and staff are able to focus on key priorities.
- 26 Political and managerial leadership is strong and is focused on the priorities. Progress against the targets for the priorities in the Corporate Plan is monitored and used to inform council activity. Service plans are framed around the five priorities and performance is reported to councillors under the priorities. The staff appraisal scheme (EDR) has been developed since 2002, is now consistently applied and clearly links individual staff objectives to the council's priorities. The council has recently embarked on a restructure of the organisation which is specifically designed to reflect the council's strategic direction and to release resources for 'frontline services, priority areas and where they make a real difference to the people of Halton'.
- 27 The five priorities are set out within the council's constitution and inform the way the council works. The council's scrutiny committees, the Policy and Performance Boards (PPBs), mirror the priorities and are increasing their ability to focus. The PPBs use checklists and annual work programmes to help their agendas to reflect the priorities, and regular meetings of the PPB chairmen with the scrutiny co-ordinator (who is also a councillor) co-ordinate work programmes.
- 28 The council's ability to focus has brought results in improved services for local people, for example in social care. A Joint Review of the council's social care services in 2001 found a poor service, serving nobody well. The council focused on improving these services, and directed an additional £3.7 million funding to support the improvements. In 2004 the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) awarded the service two stars. Service improvement is reflected in the performance indicators, for example number of older people helped to live at home and the percentage of children with three or more placements per year improved from lowest quartile to top quartile in the period from 2001 to 2004. A CSCI inspection of children's services in 2004 found that there were excellent prospects of further improvement.
- 29 The borough is especially disadvantaged in respect of the health status of its citizens, and health improvement is the council's first priority. The focus on health demonstrates the council's willingness to own and lead on issues that are traditionally seen as outside the remit of a local authority. The council partially funds the post of Director of Public Health, employs a health policy advisor, and is currently completing a best value review of health improvement.
- 30 Councillors and staff are clear about the priorities. The council has significantly improved internal communications since 2002. There is now a variety of publications, from briefings to newsletters, which communicate the council's priorities and activities.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 31 The council has done much to improve its capacity since 2002 and strengths now outweigh weaknesses. The council has strengthened its human resources policies and practice. Budget setting and financial management are sound, the council has strengthened its approach to strategic procurement, and it works well in partnership with other organisations to deliver services. However, the council has more to do to embed its procurement strategy and its approach to equal opportunities is weak.
- 32 The council adopted a new human resources strategy in 2003, supported initially by its own action plan and more recently by actions integrated into departmental service plans. The strategy links the council's people management to the five priorities and includes local targets for the achievement of national targets. Sickness absence is now better than the national target as a result of good sickness management. Better recruitment and retention policy and practice have led to improvements, for example in Social Services, where the vacancy rate is now 3.9 per cent compared to a national rate of 10.7 per cent⁵. An effective Corporate Staff Development Group monitors progress and instigates further action.
- 33 The Employee Development Review (EDR) system is now a full appraisal system for staff, supported by training for managers in implementing the system. A new Corporate Training Centre has been established, offering training programmes which are linked to training needs identified through the EDR process which is in turn linked to the council's priorities through departmental service plans.
- 34 Leadership and management by senior councillors and officers is good, councillors and officers work together effectively, and staff morale is high. The council enjoys excellent relationships with the local trade unions and has now started job evaluation as part of the single status negotiations.
- 35 The council's approach to equal opportunities has improved since 2002 but has limitations. The council has adopted an equal opportunities policy and has achieved level 1 of the Equalities Standard (with a target to achieve level 2 by December 2006). However, it developed its policy without consultation with local minority groups and its practice so far reflects the statutory requirements for race equality rather than a more comprehensive approach to diversity. Even in carrying out its statutory duties, the council could do much more: in 2003/04 it scored 26 per cent on the checklist for promoting racial equality, which compared very poorly with other councils. The council's figures for the percentage of ethnic minority employees are based on incomplete data. It is not yet reaching its target for numbers of disabled people in its workforce.
- 36 The council continues to have sound budget setting and treasury management arrangements, an adequate level of financial reserves and a good record of meeting financial targets. The council makes good use of external funding and

⁵ Council's own figures

has a strategic approach to asset management. This has enabled the council to maintain an effective capital programme whilst at the same time investing in a number of long-term flagship projects. Current financial forecasts indicate that available resources are expected to decline over the medium term which will require difficult decisions to be made if existing policies and programmes are to be maintained.

- 37 Since 2002 the council has adopted a procurement strategy which commits it to using partnerships and alternative forms of service delivery to achieve quality services. It has introduced some alternative forms of service provision, for example framework contracts for the provision of engineering and architectural design services and for property and legal services and a new contract for leisure centre management. The council has strengthened its corporate procurement function, but the implementation of the procurement action plan is behind schedule and the procurement strategy is not embedded across the council's services. The council is not explicit about the circumstances in which it will consider alternative forms of service provision.
- 38 The council works well in partnership, both with other organisations in the borough and with other councils. Partnerships, shared facilities and pooled budgets are in place to deliver health outcomes, for example the joint arrangements for children with disabilities. Partnerships with other councils include arrangements for out of hours calls for social services and legal services. There are many examples of partnerships between the council and voluntary organisations to provide front-line services.

Performance management

- 39 Performance management has been improved since 2002 and strengths now outweigh weaknesses. The performance management framework is now substantially embedded in the way the council works, with clear responsibilities and reporting systems and links to staff appraisal. Risk management is beginning to be integrated with corporate and service planning.
- 40 The council has taken action to address the weaknesses in its performance management framework which were identified in 2002. A corporate performance management unit has been established to provide support to and scrutiny of the service planning process in departments. Service plans are now three-year plans and are increasingly integrating resource issues and risk management. The service plans currently being drafted for 2005/08 show improved and more consistent linkage to corporate priorities and outcome targets compared to the service plans for 2004/05, and include a small number of key indicators to address the issue of too large a volume of service targets which was raised in 2002.
- 41 Good quality information is presented to councillors and managers to enable them to measure and manage performance, for example reports to the Chief Executive's Management Team make clear links between performance as measured by indicators and the way services are being delivered. The Management Team receives quarterly reports for all services, bringing together service developments, performance against objectives and targets and financial information to provide a holistic overview of all aspects of performance. The council is able to take action to drive performance in support of its priorities; for example, the council has met its targets for the condition of principal roads in the

borough, but the percentages of other roads needing maintenance have steadily increased since 2001/2002 and currently exceed targets. In recognition that this is not desirable, the council has raised, rather than lowered, the standards set for next year.

- 42 The council has improved its performance on Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPs) in parallel with the improvements in its performance management systems: in 2001/02 46 per cent of all BVPs improved on the previous year, in 2002/03 53 per cent improved and in 2003/04 73 per cent improved.
- 43 The council has adopted a risk management policy and toolkit. It is currently embedding risk management into the day to day working of the council, and is currently updating departmental risk registers. Risk management is now being integrated into service planning for the first time, but it is too early for the council to be able to demonstrate the impact of its risk management processes on service performance.
- 44 Staff objectives, targets and performance are now linked into the overall performance management framework ; the EDR process links to service plans which in turn link to service objectives and council priorities. This is a clear improvement since 2002.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement of improvement

- 45 Achievement of improvement is now strong. There have been improvements across all of the council's priority themes since 2002 against a background of high levels of deprivation in the borough.
- 46 The council has continued to work with its partners to improve the health of local people, supporting improvements in health and promoting healthier lifestyles by joint working (for example for children with disabilities) or complimentary services (for example promoting healthier lifestyles for local children). Deaths from heart disease have fallen by 25 per cent (national average 22%) and from cancer by 12 per cent (national average 10 per cent) and the council and its partners are ahead of target to achieve reductions by 2010 of 40 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. The council's work with its partners has contributed to a fall in teenage pregnancy rates in line with HSP targets. All schools are now accredited to Phase 1 of the Healthy Schools Standard, two years ahead of target. The council's social care services have shown dramatic improvement from poor performance ('serving nobody well') three years ago, reaching 'two stars' ('serving most people well') standard in 2004.
- 47 The council is working well with partners to promote urban renewal and encourages business investment and job creation alongside the development of new homes by the private sector. A number of major schemes, some on previously derelict land, have come to fruition since 2002, providing housing, retail, culture and learning developments. Processing of planning applications is top quartile and improving, and public satisfaction with the planning service is high. Joint venture partnerships have improved the Widnes and Runcorn town centres. A significant proportion of brownfield land in the borough is unsuitable for housing because of industrial contamination or because of proximity to installations handling hazardous substances. The council has therefore reclaimed such sites and has successfully developed them as open space or for employment use, for example the Widnes Waterfront economic development zone is using former chemical sites. The council's housing services have improved significantly since 2002, when they were an area of weakness; in 2003/04, relet times, repair response times and rent collection were better than both the previous year and the national average. The council will transfer its housing stock to a housing association later this year to accelerate achievement of the decent homes standard; the number of council homes which meet this standard has risen and is above average, but improvement has been slow. The condition of the district's roads remains above average although it did not improve in 2003/04.
- 48 The council is making progress on its priority to 'enhance life chances and employment'. It has worked with its partners to create jobs and has delivered projects to get people back into work. Ofsted assessment of the LEA improved from 'satisfactory' in 2002 to 'highly satisfactory' in 2004; the inspection identified strong leadership and commitment to raising standards. The level of improvement in educational attainment has varied since 2001/02 (after significant improvement between 1998 and 2000), with improvements at key stage 3 in maths and science but mixed performance at GCSE, but overall educational achievement in Halton remains better at all levels than in comparable districts.

Secondary school absence, amongst the worst levels nationally, improved slightly in 2003/04.

- 49 The council has taken action to 'enhance life chances' on a broader front. In July 2004 the council opened the Brindley Arts Centre, which contains a 420-seat theatre and exhibition, gallery and craft spaces. The Centre has averaged 73 per cent capacity since opening, with 70 per cent of audiences from within Halton.
- 50 There have been improvements in relation to the council's objective of increasing prosperity and equality. The council's award-winning mobile benefits service (the Benefits Express) has been instrumental in the reduction of over 60 per cent in the average time to process new benefit claims (from 55 days in March 2003 to 20 days in August 2004). The council has improved access to services through the establishment of Halton Direct Link, with two one-stop shops already in place and a third planned. 100 per cent e-enabled services were achieved by the council one year ahead of the Government's target. The council has Beacon Status for Better Public Transport, pathfinder status for Shared Transport and has recently been accepted as a Centre of Excellence for better urban transport and accessibility; it has had particular success with take-up for accessible transport schemes for disadvantaged groups.
- 51 The council has made improvements for some of the more disadvantaged people in local communities. A dedicated officer for liaison with gypsies involves these communities in plans for investment in their site and the council has facilitated outreach work with Halton College to provide them with access to educational facilities. The Ofsted inspection in 2003 noted the effectiveness of the LEA in promoting racial equality; the LEA is the fourth best in the country in this respect. The council recognises that it has more to do to ensure that all its services address diversity; in 2003/04, the council overall scored only 26 per cent against a checklist of progress in promoting race equality, and in the same year, the accessibility of council buildings for people with physical disabilities was below average at 24 per cent, well below the council's target of 50 per cent. The council's website is not easily accessible for minority ethnic groups whose first language is not English, and at the new one stop shop, Halton Direct Link in Widnes, signs for the facilities for people with physical disabilities are hard to find.
- 52 The council can demonstrate improvements in its 'safe and attractive neighbourhoods' priority. It works closely with the police to prevent crime, and domestic burglary and vehicle crime both fell by 16 per cent in 2003/04 (compared to 8 per cent and 8.9 per cent nationally); overall crime levels are low compared to comparable council areas. The council has implemented a number of initiatives which have resulted in reduced youth nuisance. Road casualties in 2003/04 were down 57 per cent from the 1994/98 average, well ahead of the Government's target of a 40 per cent reduction in this period. Four parks gained the Green Flag award in 2003/04.
- 9 There have been significant improvements in the council's services as measured by Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs). In 2003/04, 61 per cent of the BVPIs used for CPA purposes improved. 73 per cent of all BVPIs improved, very near the council's target of 75 per cent, with 68 per cent in the top two quartiles, compared with improvement in 53% of BVPIs in 2002/03. The council is on target to achieve 14 out of 18 LPSA improvement targets, including Key Stage 3 maths, older people's care, children with disabilities, household waste, road safety, youth re-offending and e-government.

Investment

- 53 The council has continued to invest in the building blocks for improvement and strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. It is in the process of reorganising to meet new needs and drivers, is continuing to develop and embed corporate strategies and processes, and services continue to invest for the future. There are weaknesses in the council's current approach to engaging with local communities.
- 54 The integration of service and financial planning has reached a relatively advanced stage and is being further developed within the performance management framework. The council is implementing its risk management policy and is starting to integrate risk management into service plans.
- 55 The progress made to develop the council's HR policy and practices since 2002 is continuing. A new management development programme will be introduced from April 2005. Workforce planning is in place at service level and is to be brought together in a corporate workforce plan during 2005. The council is working with the North West Employers Organisation and four other councils to develop an electronic tool for skills auditing, and is currently piloting its use.
- 56 The council is responding to changes in its environment by modernising its organisational structure. It has implemented changes at Executive Director level, partly driven by the new requirements for children's services, and will implement a restructure of the whole organisation during 2005, once the new Corporate Plan has been developed.
- 57 The council has continued to be successful in attracting external funding to secure improvements in its priorities. A £1.2 million healthy eating project is funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The major redevelopment and refurbishment scheme at Castlefields is in partnership with a housing association which is providing significant financial investment in the scheme. The Widnes Waterfront Economic Development Zone has been started with support from the North West Development Agency. LSVT plans are well advanced and, following a positive vote by council tenants, are due for completion (handover to a new housing trust) in October 2005, to secure investment in housing.
- 58 The procurement strategy was designed to provide a strategic approach to procurement, but the council does not yet fully apply the strategy. Additional capacity is currently being put in place to improve the council's ability to implement its procurement strategy action plan, which has suffered some slippage during the past year.
- 59 The council has invested in ways of communicating with local communities, but it does not have a clear and consistent approach to community engagement or to identifying the views of all groups within the community. It has many ways of linking with its local communities, to provide information, to consult and to develop community participation on specific initiatives and projects. There is a Citizens Panel which is consulted four times a year, and there are good examples of community participation in regeneration schemes and in council service initiatives. However, there is no overall framework for the council's engagement with local people and their participation in specific initiatives is not brought together within a coherent approach to the involvement of local communities.

- 60 The Area Forums provide a useful means for local people to contact local councillors, to receive information on council activities and for decisions on the allocation of the approximately £90,000 budget devolved to each Forum to be made at a local level; however, they are not providing real community engagement. Each Area Forum has a three year neighbourhood renewal strategy which was developed in consultation with local people, but these local strategies are as much about promoting the achievements of the council as about responding to local need. They do not clearly distinguish between borough wide policies and locally determined outcomes, actions are not linked to agreed outcomes for local communities, and the strategies are not set out in a way which is easily accessible to local people or which enables progress in improving outcomes to be measured.
- 61 The council has recognised that it needs to do more to develop its engagement with local communities; working with HSP, it has begun to review its current arrangements in the context of current government agendas with the aim of developing a more strategic approach to community engagement.

In the light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

Learning

- 62 The council has continued to demonstrate its ability to learn from its own experience and from external challenges and information. Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses.
- 63 There are good examples of the council's ability to take an evidence-based, learning approach to the development of major strategies and of its services, notably in the review of the current Corporate Plan in 2003 and the commissioned research which is already informing the development of the new Community Strategy and Corporate Plan. The council and its health partners commissioned a study (published in spring 2004) to identify reasons for ill health in Halton; four working groups have now developed policies and action plans on the basis of this research.
- 64 The council is self-aware. It identifies areas for improvement while it celebrates its successes, for example in the Chief Executive's 'The Year Ahead'. The performance management framework is now mature enough to provide learning from performance reports; Chief Executive's Management Team includes learning in its discussions on performance. There is benchmarking in some services which informs learning, for example landscape services' service plan includes ongoing benchmarking as a routine element of planning.
- 65 The council has demonstrated that it is open to challenge and that it learns from this; examples are its progress since CPA 2002, its response to the Joint Review of social care services, and its own best value reviews (which are structured around the Corporate Plan themes). It learns from others, for example in the development of its new arrangements for managing external funding. Staff are encouraged to innovate and the council has won many awards for its initiatives. It is also willing to pilot new ideas, for example the new approach to skills auditing.
- 66 However, while there are many individual examples, learning is not yet shared or embedded in a systematic way across the council.

Future plans

- 67 The council has a coherent approach to its current future plans and improvement priorities, and strengths now outweigh weaknesses. However, there is no clear longer term vision for the future of the borough apart from the general vision included in the Community Strategy and Corporate Plan. Future plans are therefore limited to an extent by the 'life' of the Community Strategy and the Corporate Plan (both end in 2006).
- 68 The HSP and the council have put robust plans in place for the development of a new Community Strategy and Corporate Plan by mid-2005; this process has already started. The partners are again adopting an approach based on research and consultation with local people, and on the basis of work so far anticipate that the current five priorities will continue.

- 69 The council is looking ahead: it has identified its improvement priorities for 2005/08, set out as 'outcomes for local people' under the five priorities and 'resource priorities'. Three-year service plans (2005-2008) are currently being drafted which incorporate the current Corporate Plan's shorter and longer term outcome targets. The Chief Executive's 'The Year Ahead' document focuses the council on the priorities for the immediate future in the context of national, regional and sub-regional agendas; it also identifies 'resource priorities' for finance, people and skills and management of change to ensure that the organisation is 'fit for purpose'. 'The Year Ahead' identifies the immediate improvement priorities, both in terms of its services (for example in education) and in its internal arrangements (for example in procurement).
- 70 To plan for the increasing financial pressures it faces, the council will undertake a base budget review during 2005/06 to identify efficiencies and ensure that resources are effectively targeted to priority issues. This review will coincide with the development of the new Community Strategy and Corporate Plan. An external funding strategy has been approved which is based around the creation of a corporate team to improve cohesion and efficiency in accessing external funding opportunities.
- 71 The council and its partners have not set out a clear vision for how they see the borough developing over the longer term, apart from the generalised vision which is the basis for the current Community Strategy and Corporate Plan. However, there is a shared understanding of what is needed to deliver the priorities particularly in regeneration and bringing prosperity to Halton. A key example of this is the proposal for a new Mersey crossing, which the council views as of vital importance to the borough and to the sub-region. The proposal has the support of a wide range of partners in the sub-region and as part of the funding for the project, the council has secured £250,000 European Objective 1 funding through its links with Merseyside Objective 1 areas, although Halton itself is not an Objective 1 area. The proposal is currently with the government for approval.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robust ambitions for the area further developed from 2002 • Evidence-based mid-term revision to Community Strategy and Corporate Plan • Close links between Community Strategy and Corporate Plan • Corporate Plan has targets for outcomes sought by the council, some extend to 2010 • Good links to national, regional and sub-regional strategies and priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all targets in the Corporate Plan are SMART
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets now align to priorities • Service and resource priorities for each year are identified • Funding directed to priorities • Good consultation informed development of priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council has no systematic approach to identifying what are not priorities or to the withdrawal of funding from low priority services • The council cannot be sure that it takes the views of all sections of the community into account
Focus	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong political and managerial leadership • Service plans framed around the five priorities of Council and Halton Strategic Partnership; progress against targets used to inform council activity • Staff appraisal scheme (EDR) improved since 2002, now links staff objectives to service plans and corporate priorities • Scrutiny improved since 2002 • Clear focus on health, identified as the first priority for the council and Halton Strategic Partnership • Significantly improved internal communications since 2002 	

Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved HR policy and practice since 2002: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Development Review (EDR) system now a full appraisal system, consistently applied • Good sickness management • Sound budget setting and treasury management, adequate reserves, good record of meeting financial targets • Good partnership working, including with voluntary organisations to deliver front line services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaknesses in the council's approach to equal opportunities • Implementation of procurement strategy action plan is behind schedule; triggers for consideration of alternative procurement are not clear
Performance management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance management systems improved since 2002, supported by corporate unit; • Clear links between corporate planning framework and staff appraisal • Good reporting of and learning from performance information • Three year service plans beginning to show clear links to corporate priorities and increasingly integrate resource and risk management; good performance monitoring and review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2004/05 service plans still show some inconsistencies in approach and linkages to corporate priorities • Too early for risk management to show impact on service performance
Achievement	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements in all priority themes since 2002: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better health outcomes • Significant improvement in social care services • Major urban renewal schemes achieved • Improvements in housing services • Work with partners to create jobs • Educational achievement still better than in comparable districts • Significant improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slower improvement for disadvantaged people

		<p>in benefits performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% e-enabled services a year ahead of government target • New Halton Direct Link one-stop shops • Reductions in crime • Majority of BVPIs improved in 2003/04, significantly more than improved in 2001/02 	
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing development of performance and risk management • Further developments in HR: management development, workforce planning, skills auditing • Reorganisation commenced to respond to new demands • Ongoing success in attracting external funding • Increased corporate capacity to support implementation of procurement strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no overall framework for community engagement, and investment in communication with local communities is not yet resulting in community engagement
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence-based approach to the development of strategies and services • Council is self-aware and open to challenge, learns from others • Performance management now mature enough to enable learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No systematic sharing of learning across the council
Future Plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherent approach to future plans • Robust plans in place for development of new Community Strategy and Corporate Plan; work already started • Improvement priorities 2005/08 identified; Chief Executive's 'The Year Ahead' document • Base budget review in 2005/06 • Plans for new Mersey Crossing as part of overall aim to increase prosperity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future plans limited by lack of longer term vision and by current Community Strategy and Corporate Plan ending in 2006

Framework for comprehensive performance assessment

- 72 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003. This section imposes a duty on the Audit Commission to, from time to time, produce a report of its findings in relation to the performance of local authorities in the exercise of their functions. This report must categorise local authorities as to their performance.
- 73 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
 - ◆ the council's improvement plan;
 - ◆ the Audit Commission's qualitative assessment of continuous improvement;
 - ◆ updated performance indicators;
 - ◆ inspection findings; and
 - ◆ the 2002 corporate assessment and supporting documentary evidence.
- 74 The assessment for Halton Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 31st January 2005 to 2nd February 2005.
- 75 This report has been discussed with the council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the council.

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