

Inspection report

April 2005



Comprehensive performance assessment

**Corporate Assessment Report
Oxfordshire County 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 fair.
- 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 fair.
- 4 This report presents the results of a corporate assessment carried out in October 2004. 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 judgements

- 5 Oxfordshire County Council has put in place many building blocks to provide the foundation for progress and has strengthened its position since its last assessment in 2002. It is clearer about what it wants to achieve in the short to medium term and is strengthening its leadership of the community, including its work on equalities and diversity. It has yet to express clearly its long term ambitions, which limits agreement on how it will work with partners. Capacity has improved through political stability, changed ways of working and the quality of its people resources. This has helped increase its standing as a local partner. Service performance has been maintained at its previous level of good overall quality but the level of improvement does not show step change.
- 6 The council is clearer in what it wants to achieve in the short to medium term. It has reduced priorities and these include important national issues such as children's attainment. It has increased its focus since 2002 on getting the organisation in shape and tackled some difficult areas well such as political arrangements. These areas are stronger than in 2002 but the council still has no long term ambitions with clearly defined outcomes. This limits longer term planning and means it is unclear how work with partners will develop in the absence of shared long term goals for the county.
- 7 The council has strengthened its capacity over the past two years to allow it to do what it wants to do and there are now more strengths than weaknesses. It has built stronger corporate capacity and political stability helps keep improvement on track. The development of important partnerships is producing better value for money and the council wants to do more in this area such as in procurement. However an area of weakness remains in its systems to monitor and manage its performance and the council has not overcome its weaknesses in setting realistic targets. Whilst it has paid more attention to the progress of its priorities there are important gaps in corporate monitoring limiting the council's ability to take timely corrective action. Financial systems are improving though a lack of reliable financial information limits effective deployment and confident management of the council's resources.
- 8 Since its last assessment in 2002 the council has generally maintained the standard of its services. Broad assessment of service quality through inspections rate most services of good quality with some areas of improvement sustained. The county's services have delivered improvements in outcomes for local people and good progress has been made in some cross cutting areas in line with strategic objectives, such as community safety. The trend of improvement in the council as measured by key performance indicators is positive overall with fifty one per cent of PI's improving. Whilst the majority of indicators are in the top and second quartiles the rate of improvement has not been significant and comparative performance has some weaknesses. Progress in the star rating of social care has not been sustained at two stars due to slow progress in some key performance measures.
- 9 Over the past two years the council has learnt that it needs clear goals, strong leadership and an ability to respond to change to be successful. It is now revisiting its long-term goals based on better intelligence of the local community and county and regional context. The council is clearer about what it needs to do next and this is an improvement on the previous assessment.

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	2	3	3
	Prioritisation	2	3	3
	Focus	2	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	2	3	3
	Performance management	2	2	2
What has the council achieved to date?	Achievement	6	3	9
	Investment	6	3	6
In light of what has been learnt, what does the council plan to do next?	Learning	3	4	4
	Future Plans	2	3	3
TOTAL THEME SCORE		27		36

Context

The locality

- 10 Oxfordshire is a mainly rural county in the south of England situated to the west of London. Oxford is the principal service and employment centre, and an international centre of education and culture. Beyond the Oxford green belt are the growing towns of Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney. Almost 75 per cent of the county is an Area of Outstanding Natural beauty.
- 11 The county's population is 607,500. Its ethnic population continues to grow with 10 per cent from groups other than 'white British' compared to the national average of 13 per cent. The elderly population continues to rise and the number of 18 to 25 year olds is swelled by students attending universities in Oxford. Twenty two per cent of the population live in the city of Oxford with a further 40 per cent living in the market towns or larger villages.
- 12 The county has strong economic links with London and the Midlands, supported by good transport links. Unemployment is low, but there are pockets of deprivation, most notably in Banbury and Oxford. The county has a prosperous economy, but this brings associated problems of labour shortages, pressures on the transport infrastructure, and recruitment problems linked with high house prices.
- 13 Schools within Oxford have recently been restructured to provide two phase children's education, eliminating the requirement to attend middle schools. Town centre regeneration is also taking place in towns including Abingdon and the west end of Oxford.

The council

- 14 The council consists of 70 councillors with the following political composition; Conservative 24, Labour 24, Liberal Democrat 21 and 1 Green. Following a 16-year period without clear political control, the council agreed a joint administration of Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors in November 2001. The executive has five Conservative and four Liberal Democrat councillors. The Labour group form the opposition with elections for the whole council due in May 2005.
- 15 The council has restructured its senior management team within the last two years. The County Council Management Team (CCMT) has been reduced from ten to six members. It consists of the Chief Executive and five corporate directors which focus on corporate management and performance issues with service issues managed by heads of service.
- 16 The Oxfordshire community partnership has recently agreed the Oxfordshire community strategy. Its implementation is being delivered through a series of 'ambition groups' reflecting the priorities contained within the strategy.
- 17 Total service expenditure for 2003/04 was £485 million.

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 18 Oxfordshire County Council now has a clear strategy for the future, underpinned by a stable balanced administration for three years, following sixteen years as a hung council. In the last three years it has concentrated on producing a strengthened management structure whilst working with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to produce a clear and realistic vision for the county. This vision is further developed through the service planning process. The council's internal leadership has improved with staff being clear about what the council wants to achieve and enthusiastically supporting the clearer direction. The council is improving its partnership working generally and has built some good relationships. The council's leadership to the community is also improving, including its work on equalities and diversity but still lacks clarity in setting out a long term vision and is not consistently communicating and consulting with the public. The council has more strengths than weaknesses in this theme.
- 19 The council has clear and realistic ambitions expressed in the short to medium term. Their ambitions are set out in a range of documents, such as the Corporate Plan and Structure Plan and the priorities and actions are contained in the annual Service Plans and are realistic and robust. Staff are clear about what the council wants to achieve.
- 20 The council is improving its working relationships with partners. The council is engaging with partners on many initiatives and historically poor relationships with some neighbouring district councils have improved. This is resulting in some good collaborative working on projects such as the West End development and with the LSP where the council's positive contribution is recognised and beginning to achieve outcomes for community safety and combatting litter.
- 21 Leadership of the council both politically and managerially has significantly improved. Staff have responded well to the challenge of raising performance and being set a clear direction and are re-energised with a sense of common purpose. Staff now understand their roles as helping the council to achieve its ambitions and are working in new ways across the council.
- 22 The council has had a clear and longstanding understanding of equalities and diversity evidenced by the attainment of Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) level 3 and their work with black and minority ethnic and deprived communities. This has recently been revisited through a comprehensive review carried out by scrutiny. The council has introduced a corporate social inclusion strategy to build on and pull together the existing work carried out by officers and social inclusion features strongly in the corporate plan and service plans, as well as other strategies. Ofsted also found that social inclusion was a strength of the Council.
- 23 The council has not yet articulated a long term vision for Oxfordshire. The ambitions in the Corporate Plan are expressed in the short to medium term. Long term ambitions can be found in other strategy documents such as the Structure Plan but the council has not joined these together and communicated consistently to the community an overall vision for Oxfordshire. This is hindering engagement with the public and partnership groups.

Prioritisation

- 24 This is an improved area for the council since its last assessment having reduced the number of priorities and continued to test the basis of these through public consultation. Communication of the priorities has improved inside and outside the council. Within directorates, redirection of resources is developing. The council can not state lesser priorities and engagement with communities traditionally regarded as hard-to-reach is inconsistent. Overall this area has improved since 2002 with now more strengths than weaknesses.
- 25 The council has set clear priorities based on the views of local people, national priorities, areas of low performance and gaps in community leadership identified two years ago such as community safety. It has reduced its original 49 priorities to 10 with an additional 3 to be delivered through partnership. These include priorities in social care, such as to strengthen services for children at risk of neglect or abuse and for families at risk of breakdown. Priorities in the environment area include delivering local and national targets on waste minimisation and recycling. Areas of lower performance have been prioritised, such as to reduce the numbers of delayed discharges from hospitals. An example of a partnership priority is affordable housing where the council seeks to increase the availability of affordable housing for people working in essential services. Clearer priorities are giving greater direction to the work of the council.
- 26 The council's priorities are effectively informed by consultation. Resident surveys, citizen's panels and the crime and disorder surveys assess and inform appropriate priorities. The council is also using a cycle of consultation to review the corporate goals of the council in 2005. Consultation on levels of council tax informed the internal and political debate about the budget for 2004/05 and consequent tax levels.
- 27 Oxfordshire's priorities are well communicated through the Oxfordshire Plan and show the links to the strategic objectives. A redesigned county magazine invites further comment from the public as well as providing useful information on community issues. The council has not effectively engaged with communities regarded as hard-to-reach at a corporate level to shape priorities and action plans. Although some good examples can be seen at project and directorate level the overall approach is inconsistent.
- 28 More flexible use and movement of resources to support priorities is developing. Within the new broader directorates advantage is being taken to make efficiencies to redirect to priorities. For example closure of one special school led to the redirection of resources to establish improved quality of provision elsewhere and integrated within a mainstream school. Similar closures in social care have been used to redirect funds to other forms of provision often giving wider county service. However, the clearest relationship of resources to priorities is demonstrated where additional funds are distributed in the budget process.
- 29 The council has not made explicit choices of what are not its priorities and therefore these are often implicit not explicit, for example those services not referenced in the 10 + 3. This means it is unclear how far resource decisions take into account the whole of the council's expenditure across priority and non priority areas.

Focus

- 30 Overall this area has improved since 2002 with now more strengths than weaknesses. The council can sustain focus on important internal and external areas. Since 2002 it has increased focus on building capacity through more effective partnership working within the LSP, developing better dialogue with district councils and acting on local concerns, such as community safety. It has not been distracted from completing difficult but necessary change. Roles are clear at the political level, increasing the effective use of resources. The council has a number of systems to sustain focus but has not always maintained progress due to the numbers and complexity of initiatives.
- 31 Oxfordshire has the ability to focus, including in some areas relating to its priorities. For example it reorganised Oxford City schools from a three tier to two tier system which included the provision of some new schools. It was not distracted from completing the reorganisation despite some local opposition and completed the changes to increase efficiency as well as improve attainment in schools. Since 2002 it has remained focused on delivering outcomes from working with partners to tackle community safety. Regular use of bilateral meetings with each district council allows important issues, such as housing development, to retain focus across the county.
- 32 Roles within the political coalition are clear, based on a 'pairing' system of members of the main parties participating in the coalition. Portfolios are clearly linked to key priority areas increasing accountability.
- 33 The council has good mechanisms which allow it to retain focus, such as the leader's monthly monitoring meetings of the council's financial performance. Agendas and meetings reflect the key areas of focus and scrutiny processes have been tightened to conduct business in a more efficient way, for example, through the annual report by members of the executive and directors.
- 34 Some areas of improvement have not progressed successfully due to the overall number of initiatives being pursued and also a lack of appreciation of the requirements for successful implementation. For example, the introduction of a new suite of management information systems using new software (SAP) is not yet producing better business processes. This was due to the council taking a technical focus on replacing a system rather than considering how the system would accommodate service objectives and relevant processes. This has led to increased investment costs to remedy the situation. Some corporate projects have proven more challenging reflecting the council's stage of development and the complexity of successful implementation. These include the implementation of the actions in the race equality scheme.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 35 The council's capacity has improved since the last assessment reflected in a higher score. The quality of its workforce, leading councillors and corporate capacity is a strength. The introduction of new skills and restructuring to more clearly support its priorities has added to the corporate capacity of the council. Greater political stability is supporting improvement. There are several examples of extending capacity through partnership and the council is starting to achieve efficiency savings to maximise the use of current budgets. Key methods to increase capacity such as IT are at an early stage of implementation. Overall there are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 36 The quality of leading councillors and staff is a strength. Senior managers are using the corporate responsibilities of their posts to give direction and execute important corporate improvements, such as in procurement and asset management. Management of human resources is generally effective. For example, there are low sickness levels and there is good morale. However, there is not a sufficiently strategic and needs led approach to training.
- 37 There is clarity about roles and responsibilities. The leader's and chief executive's roles and contribution in external relations are recognised by those outside the council. Clarity of councillors' roles in relation to scrutiny have been strengthened which means scrutiny can more effectively address community concerns.
- 38 Oxfordshire has some strong and innovative examples of partnerships that are realising benefits for local people. The council has reduced the number of delayed discharges from hospitals through working with local health trusts and at the same time has improved this key relationship. Direct payments are at a high level nationally and the local organisation of disabled people is commissioned by the council to guide clients through the process.
- 39 The council has a history of low financial reserves which is a concern expressed by the appointed auditor for 2003/04 and the council recognises this. Although the council took action in its 2004/05 budget and directed £4 million to reserves it has not always met its balances target. Although the council is pursuing a programme of efficiencies, low reserves in the context of seeking to make improvements limits its ability to adapt to changing financial pressures.
- 40 IT does not yet fully support services. For example systems are not providing good information systems to allow the council to manage and control its performance. Overall, electronic access to services is not strong with limited interactive facilities.

Performance management

- 41 The council has more weaknesses than strengths in this area despite its efforts to improve its systems. There is therefore no change in rating for this theme since 2002. There are no outcomes by which the council can measure progress against its strategic objectives so it places more emphasis on short term progress. Serious weaknesses have occurred in financial controls affecting service delivery and financial management is not strong in some key areas. CCMT's level of review has been insufficient given the council's change agenda. Good frameworks have been put in place and directorate attention to monitoring and correcting performance is taking effect but overall its mechanisms to confidently manage its performance are not yet robust.
- 42 Financial control and internal audit are weak. There were serious lapses in financial controls in 2003 when client finances accounts in the Social and Health Care directorate could not be reconciled. This meant that service users were both under and over charged for services. Provision to ensure accurate reconciliation is being made but the accounts for 2002/03 were qualified by their appointed auditor. A recent OFSTED inspection found weaknesses in the quality of the financial support to schools citing system weakness within the council and between the council and schools. These failures mean the council is not able to manage financial resources effectively to deliver improvement.
- 43 CCMT is too distanced from the important detail of the council's performance and progress given the level of change the council is trying to make. It relies on high level statements on whether goals are achieved, not achieved or progressing. This means that corporately there is not a shared understanding of the degree of challenge or ease of achievement against the council's priorities. The frequency and timing of these digest reports also limits the council's opportunity to take prompt action.
- 44 Target setting at service level is limited to high level national and LPSA targets and the council has not overcome past problems to set realistic targets as evidenced by the number of targets which it has not achieved. Information on its performance is not yet strong and important social care measures can not be compared year on year due to qualification of the data. The council's local transport plan has received a lower rating this year due to problems in accurately reporting progress of schemes. Weaknesses in its systems mean the council is unable to assess overall how services are contributing to achieving its strategic objectives and priorities.
- 45 Some aspects of performance management are still developing or are at an early stage. Customer service standards are not yet operable across the council and there is not systematic use of complaints to drive improvement. The council's risk management processes are stronger but still developing. A corporate risk management register has been put in place and is reported to the Best Value committee. Risk planning was integrated into this year's service planning process and the council is starting to share risk more appropriately on large schemes

such as Oxford Castle. Management of corporate projects such as property and ICT are now being organised well through working groups led by individual members of CCMT.

- 46 The council has put in place some good systems to manage performance, in particular in Directorates. Through the organisational planning framework the council links its overall objectives and priorities through corporate, directorate, service, team and individual plans. In addition it uses the appraisal system well. Systematic use of performance management is clear at directorate level and there are examples where corrective action has been taken to raise performance, such as with statements of children with special education needs and payment of invoices. A recent OFSTED inspection found that performance management was being taken seriously with weaker school performance being tackled and provisional results for 2004 GCSE suggest an impact has been made.
- 47 Value for money achieved by the council is mixed. It is developing a corporate strategy on procurement but this has yet to impact on direct service spend. Social and Health Care have, however, progressed schemes to increase value for money. For example additional services have been delivered through contracting agreements with providers of older people's homes. Pooled budgets with health partners are producing efficiencies in the purchase of residential and nursing home places.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement of improvement

- 48 Since its last assessment in 2002 Oxfordshire has generally maintained the good standard of its services with most performance indicators above average and external inspection confirming the quality of services. Better outcomes have been delivered that people and users can see and the council's track record in cross cutting areas is improving. Improvements in general have been incremental rather than demonstrating a significant change in service quality and the council's comparative position shows weakness given its overall context. Social care has received a decrease in overall star rating due to some slow progress in key indicators for children. Overall strengths outweigh weaknesses and there is an improvement since 2002.
- 49 The council has demonstrated some good progress against its priorities through improved service quality and positive outcomes through joint working. The council's efforts to redirect the organisation and put in appropriate building blocks have delivered incremental rather than significant changes in performance. It is improving progressively with fifty one per cent of performance indicators improving and is sustaining good performance with the majority of indicators within the top two quartiles. For its local context Oxfordshire does not always compare well with other councils such as in educational attainment although it is now more conscious of the need to improve on this.
- 50 Against the council's strategic objective of 'helping people to fulfil their potential' performance reflects the overall pattern in the council with some good performance sustained such as social inclusion and gradual improvement such

as in educational attainment. A recent inspection of the LEA found that the service was highly satisfactory overall and the service has now been assessed as a three star education authority. A concurrent inspection of the council's youth services found the service to be very good and providing the council with very good value for money. Cultural services showed improvement through more library visits and improved satisfaction with museums and galleries.

- 51 Within 'protecting our environment' and 'sustaining prosperity' there is a similar pattern of performance and improvement with assessment beyond key PI's showing a more positive picture. There are approximately an equal number of indicators improving as are not, although there is a higher proportion in third and bottom quartiles in this area. An inspection of sustainable development including transport, planning and waste rated the services as contributing well and rated the overall service as good. The council has sustained good performance in some of these areas such as waste but not all such as planning. Achievement against local priorities is showing absolute improvement such as bus use and road accidents although again comparative performance is less strong.
- 52 Achievements in line with the objective 'safeguarding our communities' has been mixed with improvement in some key PIs for children not being sustained resulting in a fall in star rating this year. A wider consideration of social care performance indicators shows more mixed results than other services with some in lower bands. There is gradual improvement in some areas but Oxfordshire can also demonstrate how changed working and partnership has improved outcomes for users. These include a reduction in delayed discharges, strong emphasis on rehabilitation thus reducing the need for care outside the home and increased respite care. Concerted effort has attracted good assessment results such as in Supporting People which also received beacon status.
- 53 Community safety also falls within this strategic objective and performance and outcomes are positive. There are low crime rates overall which have largely been sustained through good joint working and there have been improvements in higher crime rates such as theft from vehicles. Targeted campaigns have produced good impacts such as the reduction in street robberies in Oxford City by 42%. The youth offending team was assessed recently as a good service and youth crime is reported as having fallen by six per cent in 2003.
- 54 Achievement against the corporate objective of 'raising our performance' shows some good results in employment with areas of sustained improvement but there has been less progress on outward facing areas. Provision of electronic access to services is in the worst performing group; satisfaction with the council overall is also in the worst performing group as is the handling of complaints and both are worse than the previous survey results.
- 55 The council's own data for this year 2004/05 suggests that some patterns of lower performance could be changing due to an increased focus on priority areas, such as improved levels of GCSE attainment and faster action on planning applications. Reporting on the council's priority areas which are not covered by BVPI's indicates some progress such as the cumulative take up of the affordable housing scheme. Other progress reports reflect the development of plans and programmes such as within the priority to 'better use of our property'.

Investment

- 56 The council is continuing to invest effectively to deliver improvements to services. It has put in place a range of sound and appropriate building blocks, although some of these are at an early stage of development. Some earlier investments have already delivered improved ways of working, such as scrutiny. The council is also pursuing other investments such as the corporate customer strategy and has continued to seek external challenge to help support improvement. Strengths still outweigh weaknesses and there is no change to the scoring in 2002.
- 57 The council has invested effectively in strengthening its corporate capacity through restructuring. This addressed the inefficiencies that had developed through the highly devolved culture that the council had developed. The council has improved its corporate processes and support services which are important to help improve services and develop the organisation's ability. These include improvements to information technology, councillor and manager training, and gaining corporate IIP status. These investments, together with a more positive approach to partnership working and improved community engagement, are already bringing about change.
- 58 There is a well developed and effective medium term financial strategy in place that sets a clear, financially sustainable framework within which the council can take forward its future plans. The strategy has influenced how it sets its priorities and has informed its decision-making. The council clearly identifies forward commitments and provides top sliced funds for supporting priority service developments. The council also has a challenging forward programme of required savings of approximately £5m a year for the next 4 years to release £20m to develop priority services. The council is on course to meet its budget and savings targets for the current year, and has also returned £4 million to balances, bring reserves up to average for county councils, in line with its stated priority of improving the council's financial resilience. The council's external auditor confirms that the use of resources has improved, and that the right building blocks are in place.
- 59 The council uses external challenge positively. It makes use of consultants where it determines it does not have the in-house capacity or expertise required to deliver a project. Its best value review process routinely involves external challenge and produces clear improvement plans that have delivered service improvements. The council has a reasonable track record of accessing external funding, but recognises that it could do more in this area and has created a post to help maximise opportunities.
- 60 Some key building blocks are at an early stage of development. The rationalisation of corporate functions around training and development, IT and procurement has focused attention on producing revised strategies that are now emerging but many of these developments are yet to bed in and demonstrate their robustness. For example, although the corporate procurement team has recently been strengthened, and has had some early success, a strategy has yet to be formally agreed. Other corporate developments such as around management training and development and ICT management systems are yet to deliver tangible results. It is investing £7.5m in new computer systems, staff and staff training, but has yet to deliver the new ways of working that will deliver better value against this investment. Its capital strategy is rated 'good' and it has undertaken a review of its office requirements that have already led to some

improvements, however, it has only recently initiated a wider review of its substantial property portfolio linked to its capital strategy.

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

Learning

- 61 Since its last assessment the council has continued to learn from experience about what works, what does not work and has adapted accordingly. It is self aware of the issues it faces and knows how much it needs to do to deliver improvements. Major change is being managed more corporately but learning from its success and failures is not yet systematically shared across the council. Overall this is an area of strength in the council and is scored higher than the last assessment.
- 62 The council is self aware of the success it has made and the level of investment and development still to be done to improve the running of the council. It has acted to support improvement, for example continuing to develop a stronger and corporate approach to project management and the relaunch of the SAP MIS.
- 63 The coalition administration has learnt effectively to deal with problems which might impair the new arrangements and adapt accordingly. Principal was the need to refocus the role of scrutiny, which had become the system of opposition and was not adding to the council's capacity. With shadow roles given to scrutiny councillors and a programme of reviews, the function has improved and is having more impact.
- 64 Oxfordshire has taken learning from experiences and used this to improve. The council had problems with project management at the time of its last assessment. It has now learnt to manage projects and share the risk where possible with partners such as in regeneration projects. It is able to accept when mistakes have been made and make changes to its practice such as problems it experienced with the management of travellers site and inappropriate publicity of waste issues.
- 65 The council proactively takes learning from work with partners such as the pilot area focus groups in South Oxfordshire. Evaluation showed engagement with the public had not been successful so the council learnt more about local community networks and parish and town councils and adjusted its future approaches.
- 66 Examination of practice in other councils has helped make improvements such as in client finance in Social and Health Care. The county developed better communication with the public on flooding which has been used by the Environment Agency showing that its own learning can be shared outside the council.
- 67 However learning is not systematically shared across the council. It is a feature of more specific projects or directorate practice where it can remain, limiting the organisation's learning to influence its cultural change.

Future plans

- 68 Oxfordshire has improved its ability to plan clearly for the short to medium term which gives direction to areas of the council's operations. It also plans well to achieve authority wide improvement. This area is now stronger than in 2002 and the scoring has increased. A range of reviews continues to assess how the council needs to react to implement major change and improvement. The continued absence of a long-term vision limits the level of connection and consistency between plans. Overall strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 69 Authority wide plans, such as RoP2 and the Oxfordshire plan are properly addressing areas of weakness or areas where the council has previously failed to improve and respectively cover internal improvements and those that are public facing.
- 70 Statutory plans are generally rated good including the Education Development Plan (EDP), Asset Management Plan and Capital Strategy. These also relate to the council's priorities with school and building modernisation seen as a high priority where assets realise receipts.
- 71 Many key plans, such as the Local Transport Plan and Community Safety Strategy, have engaged a range of stakeholders and partners and there are plans for the future for more engagement in the council's own corporate priorities as well as reviewing the community strategy.
- 72 The council has good capacity to review its progress through officer and councillor structures and has consequently made a number of difficult decisions to provide needed capacity for its plans to improve. These include schools closures as part of the reorganisation of the three-tier system and to provide new schools and closures of some care homes to reprovide better quality homes. The council has also taken action to remedy failures in service management such as finance.
- 73 The new data observatory, set up with partner organisations to assess the changed profile and needs of the local community, will reassess current and future priorities. This research tool will produce a clearer assessment for the council's review of priorities in 2005.
- 74 The lack of long-term vision limits some precise plans. For example the local transport plan is not clear about the future of major schemes although there is a strong relationship between this plan and the economic development strategy. The current waste strategy is working well but long term vision with district councils is not yet secured nor investment determined. The extent to which significant plans can coherently support the council's ambitions is therefore limited.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved community leadership; community safety outcomes • Positive collaboration with partners; LSP campaigns • Improved political and managerial leadership which has given the council a common purpose and energised staff • Clear short/medium term ambitions translated into service plans and owned and understood by staff • Clear and longstanding commitment to social inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No expressed long term vision of intended outcomes for Oxfordshire • Communication with stakeholders is not fully effective
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer priorities • Better use of research and consultation to define priorities • Service reconfiguration and efficiencies allow some redirection of funds • Good communication of priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesser priorities can't be stated – limits overall view of funds to priorities • Engagement of hard to reach groups not consistent
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can keep focus and not get distracted; e.g. closure of schools • Clear member roles and political accountability strengthened • Monthly financial monitoring by leader • Improvements in scrutiny processes increased focus and improved review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost focus on some improvements -number and complexity of initiatives underestimated
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of leading Councillors and staff • Roles and contributions clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of track record to realise targets • IT not yet supporting services – information system gaps

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some good outcomes from partnership with other sectors • effective management of HR 	
Performance management	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directorate approaches systematic, corrective action taken • Appraisal operating • VFM demonstrated – S&HC • Risk management developing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak financial controls and qualified accounts in 2002/03 • CCMT level of review insufficient given change agenda • Weak target setting • Performance data weaknesses • Some elements not present e.g. service standards
Achievement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of PI's above average and several sustained • Public impacts; community safety, supporting people • New improved facilities; schools, care homes • Good services credited in inspections; Youth, Youth Offending, Culture, Sustainable Development • Education service increased star rating to 3* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradual improvement and low comparative performance in key areas • Social care rating decreased from 2* to 1*
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many key building blocks in place • MTFS now delivering against targets • Open and responsive to challenge by external reviewers and Scrutiny providing effective challenge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some key investments at an early stage of development, i.e. training and development; IT; procurement.
Learning	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self aware of need for further improvement and takes action • Learns from experience e.g. scrutiny arrangements • Seeks learning with other partners • Other council practice applied • Learnt where it is less proficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning confined to projects/directorates not systematically shared

Future Plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved planning for key operations and authority wide improvement• Responded to failure• Can take difficult decisions e.g. rationalise number of care homes• Good intelligence developing to inform on changing needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of long term vision limits connections between key plans e.g. transport and economic prosperity
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Framework for comprehensive performance assessment

- 75 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.
- 76 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.
- 77 The assessment for Oxfordshire County Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 11th to 15th October.
- 78 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.

Corporate assessment team leader:

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