

Inspection report

April 2005



Comprehensive performance assessment

**Corporate Assessment Report
Wokingham District 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 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 Wokingham district council has continued to build on the strengths identified in its last corporate assessment and has shown a commitment to dealing with its weaknesses. This is showing positive benefits for its community in improved services and a clear direction for the organization. It has shown major improvement in a number of areas and is well placed to improve still further. There remain issues with its sub-regional partners over the scale of housing development in the district and the investment in improving all its key services to the standard of its best is yet to bear fruit. Nevertheless, the overall picture is positive.
- 6 The council has worked successfully to develop its community leadership role. It has played a leading part in developing the local strategic partnership (LSP) and there is a clear understanding of the issues facing the district. Long term ambitions have been established. Leadership within the council is strong at both councillor and officer level. Priorities for improvement are clear and based on consultation with the community. The council has maintained a focus on local priorities such as education and keeping the council tax down, and has shown determination and purpose in addressing its weaknesses identified in the CPA of 2002.
- 7 Wokingham faces pressure for development and, based on its electoral mandate, the council has adopted a position that seeks to restrict this to levels below that envisaged by regional and national guidance. This is creating some tensions with its neighbouring councils and remains an issue for resolution. It has recognized the need, in what is an affluent area, to deal with issues of social inclusion; this has yet to be fully developed through the LSP, though work has started on this.
- 8 The council has a capable and well motivated group of councillors and officers. The arrival of the current chief executive in mid 2003 gave added impetus to the changes begun following the 2002 CPA. Relationships between officers and councillors are good and the mutual trust created helps the council work in a coordinated and generally harmonious way. It has developed a range of partnerships, particularly with those organizations in the LSP, to help it achieve its broader ambitions. It has improved the way in which it manages performance and has a range of mechanisms that help officers and councillors know how it is performing, although a lack of accuracy of some targets hinders its ability to use targets consistently to drive improvement.
- 9 Although the council is operating effectively, political relationships between the administration and opposition are poor. This, coupled with an ineffective scrutiny system, means that the level of challenge to policy development and implementation is relatively weak. The council is taking action to improve this but this has yet to have any significant effect.
- 10 The council continues to provide a range of good quality services. It has maintained its high performance in education and has been able to improve across most of its priority areas. Performance indicators show improvement across a broad range. The council has invested strongly and successfully to deal with the weaknesses identified in the CPA of 2002. New staff structures have helped largely to break down barriers between departments and effort has been put into improving services that were weaker, such as planning and benefits. There are areas where improvement has been limited. This includes the provision of affordable housing and the determination of major planning applications, where it is failing to meet national targets for the speed of processing. It has not yet made the most effective use of s106 agreements and its limited investment in

building relationships with some key sub-regional partners on planning and development issues has hindered its ability to work collaboratively.

- 11 The council has learned from experience; its successes as well as failures and has acted on this knowledge. It tries to learn from others and share this information across the organization. It has also improved the way in which it plans for the future. It has a good knowledge of what can be achieved and links this to the plans it prepares. It has most of its key plans in place, though some remain to be developed, such as its plans for cultural provision in the district. The main area of weakness remains an agreed view, with its sub-regional partners, on the nature, scale, and distribution of development in the district, and this has an impact on the progress that can be made on aspects of its longer term planning, for example for community facilities and school places.

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	3	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	3	3	3
	Performance management	2	3	3
What has the council achieved to date?	Achievement	9	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		32	28	37

Context

The locality

- 12 Wokingham district lies in the Thames Valley. Its three main towns are Wokingham, Woodley and Earley. The remainder of the district is rural/semi-rural with a number of smaller towns and villages. The district is prosperous, being ranked as the third least deprived area in the country on the index of multiple deprivation (2004). Unemployment is low, with the claimant count in July 2004 being less than one per cent, lower than the regional and national levels. A large proportion (87 per cent) of those in employment work in the service sector, with a significant number involved in banking and finance. Average household income is high, though this masks some pockets of relative social deprivation. While wage levels are high, so is the cost of living, with average house prices above regional and national levels. The district faces significant pressures for development, an issue that sits in contrast to the desire, strongly expressed in political terms and in the Community Strategy, for maintaining the character of the area.
- 13 The district has a population of 151,200 (2001), an increase of just over six and a half per cent over the previous decade, and higher than regional and national rates of growth. Twenty-one per cent of the population are under 15 years of age, slightly higher than the regional and national averages. The proportion of the population of pensionable age is, at 15 per cent, lower than the regional and national levels.
- 14 All other ethnic groups account for 10 per cent of the population. This is slightly higher than the regional average, but less than the national average of 13 per cent.

The council

- 15 The council is one of six unitary authorities formed from the Royal County of Berkshire and the local district councils, following local government reorganization in 1998. The district council comprises 18 wards returning 54 councillors. It has been controlled by the Conservatives since 2002 who, since elections in June 2004, have 39 seats, with the Liberal Democrats having 15. The council has been operating under the 'cabinet and leader' system since July 2001, as provided for by the Local Government Act 2000.
- 16 The council's net revenue expenditure for 2004/05 is £137 million, with a capital budget of £19.8 million for the same year. It employs some 1,674 staff, excluding schools, or 1,136 full time equivalent posts. In terms of its finances, it raises about 45 per cent of its expenditure from council tax against a national average of around 25 per cent. This is due in part to the nature of the local government funding system but is also a reflection of the fact that the council is ineligible to receive funding targeted at the most deprived areas. It is operating within the context of tight revenue and capital finances and this is clearly a significant factor in how it will plan for the future as well as the way it runs and delivers its services.
- 17 As part of the comprehensive performance assessment carried out in 2002, the Audit Commission made a number of recommendations to the council. These are summarised as:
 - ◆ Clearly define a community vision and desired outcomes for the local community and residents.
 - ◆ Develop a longer term financial plan (at least three years).

- ◆ Cascade priorities into service plans, action plans and individual officer targets.
- ◆ Drive forward progress on social inclusion, crime reduction and customer service.
- ◆ Develop councillor engagement (especially backbenchers) with the council's priorities, processes and outcomes.
- ◆ Communicate clear decisions to the public about the strategies agreed for tackling issues of affordable housing, crime and traffic congestion.
- ◆ Increase focus on the community and seek to harness the district's 'social capital'.
- ◆ Develop staff appraisal as part of an effective performance management culture.
- ◆ Apply learning and successful techniques across the council.

- 18 Following the inspection, the council and the commission agreed a detailed improvement plan that addressed the areas of weakness identified and the recommendations noted above. The improvement plan focused on: developing community leadership; longer term planning; performance management; strengthening political leadership; and improving key service areas, including housing benefits, housing and development control.
- 19 The emphasis on internal management arrangements in the improvement plan reflected the need for investment in these areas, the desired outcomes being improvements in service delivery for the residents of the district.

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 20 Since 2002, the council has made progress in strengthening its long-term ambitions, in partnership with others, and developing its community leadership role. It has invested significant time and effort, in establishing and leading the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and in the development of a long term community strategy. Relationships with LSP partners are good. It has begun to deal more explicitly with social inclusion issues, though it has yet to fully define an overarching approach to this. Strengths now outweigh weaknesses in ambition.
- 21 The council and the local strategic partnership (LSP) understand the scale of the problems and opportunities that Wokingham district is facing and what they can achieve for the locality. The community strategy, 'Building on Success', covers the period from 2002 to 2012. It contains four broad ambitions: balancing economic prosperity with a sustainable quality of life; being a healthy and well-educated community; supporting and caring for people who need help; and being a community where everyone feels safe, welcome and respected. These are supported by ten specific key objectives for sustaining and improving the quality of life within the district. This provides clarity and direction for the council and the LSP.
- 22 It has clearly set out what its contribution to the community strategy will be in its corporate plan. The plan is realistic as it outlines the local context, constraints and the resulting key challenges. It sets out the council's priorities for the next three years within the framework of the LSP's objectives. In so doing, it draws together key elements from a number of the council's strategic documents. These include its CPA Action Plan; local public service agreement (LPSA); and best value performance plan (BVPP). Together, these plans clearly set out the outcomes that the council is working towards.
- 23 It has developed its ambitions with other stakeholders and with communities and has played a pivotal role in the development of the LSP and community strategy. Relationships with most key partners are generally good and significant consultation has been undertaken to inform the community strategy.
- 24 There is clear and effective internal leadership within the council. Executive councillors, senior managers, staff and LSP partners share a common purpose, and are enthusiastic about achieving the overall ambitions which have been set.
- 25 The council has not fully embedded its approach to social inclusion in all its work. Though it has a social inclusion strategy, it has not fully implemented this in a clear and co-ordinated strategic manner. It deals with this to some degree in its services and is working with partners to develop this as a separate theme in the community strategy. It has not yet effectively mainstreamed its approach to community safety issues. There is a lack of co-operation and co-ordination on issues at a service level although the council and its partners are working to resolve these issues.
- 26 The council has not engaged all key stakeholders in sharing its ambitions. The operation of the new political system has created a feeling of 'disenfranchisement' amongst the opposition and backbench councillors. Some key external stakeholders have not been sufficiently involved in playing a part in shaping the longer-term ambitions for the area, thus limiting their potential contribution to these.

Prioritisation

- 27 The council has made progress in improving its ability to prioritise, and has improved its consultation practices with the community and with specific interests in the district. It moves resources to support its priorities. Tensions remain unresolved between the national pressures for local development with the wishes and concerns of local residents. Some aspects of its communication processes are not well developed. However, strengths now outweigh weaknesses in prioritisation.
- 28 The council has clearly set out its priorities for improvement that underpin its ambitions for the area. A clear thread runs through the corporate plan, service plans and individual targets. It uses communication and consultation via surveys, road shows and its annual state of the district debate to understand the local context and issues. As a result, it has improved awareness of its internal and external environment. Staff and partners also have a clear understanding of its agenda.
- 29 The council has made significant strides in recent years to improve two-way communication with key stakeholders and residents. It bases its priorities on consultation with users. It is developing its consultation strategy and uses feedback from its citizens' panel of 2,000 residents to gauge opinion of its priorities and service delivery. It has also helped to establish a black and minority ethnic (BME) forum, which is working well. The district also has a youth MP representing the voice of young people. Through these processes, it has established the following priorities for the next three years: maintaining and enhancing the quality of education in the district; ensuring that vulnerable residents receive high quality support services; delivering improvements to town centres to support the local economy; keeping the district moving; managing housing growth; tackling crime and the fear of crime to make the district an even safer place (and feel a safer place) for all; and community leadership and partnership working.
- 30 The council has shifted human, capital and revenue resources to match its priorities. Staff with responsibility for preparing service plans and contributing to the building of its financial plans, are clear about the priorities. The council emphasises the importance of maintaining council tax increases at a low level. Advice is offered to staff on the potential means of achieving savings. Officers are required to identify the linkages to the corporate plan or other pressures when making bids for revenue growth. Key areas of capital investment are also identified aligning with the council's service priorities (services to children and young people, residential care and community based facilities for the elderly). It has moved in excess of £600,000 revenue expenditure out of residential care into domiciliary care and has identified significant additional monies over the next three years. It has also established a Community Safety Team to include drug, traveller liaison and community safety wardens officers to help tackle the priorities, and invested in a purpose designed centre to provide support and enable young mothers to develop parenting skills.
- 31 The council has not resolved the tensions between the delivery of the national priority for housing development with local priorities. The political administration has placed emphasis on responding to local needs and demands, citing the legitimacy given in the local elections of June 2004. In some instances these local priorities, such as education, and crime and disorder issues, accord with national ones. In others, most notably in the area of housing provision, they do

not. The council disagrees with the suggested housing allocations in the deposit structure plan for Berkshire and remains at odds with the other Berkshire councils on this issue. It is taking steps to strengthen its ability to cope with development pressures, and has taken legal advice on the housing allocations issue. It is restructuring its housing and planning services and has produced a 'fit for purpose' draft housing strategy.

- 32 The council has not been explicitly clear about what are not its priorities, although areas of low priority are implicit and understood by councillors and staff. Though funding decisions have demonstrated in practice which services are lower priority, such as cultural services, the council has not consistently made clear the rationale for these decisions, especially to groups outside the council. This failure can make the reasons behind some of the difficult decisions that it has to make hard for its external stakeholders to understand.
- 33 The council has not yet developed some aspects of its communication processes. Internal communication to councillors is patchy. While it tries to keep them informed by means of a 'round up' of the minutes of meetings, it has yet to introduce a rigorous, regular summary of decisions, portfolio by portfolio. This has the effect of marginalizing backbench councillors.

Focus

- 34 The council has shown positive results in focusing on many of its key priorities and has strengthened many of its mechanisms for maintaining focus. It has sustained its attention on these key priorities since the CPA inspection in 2002. It has strengthened its mechanisms for keeping its focus on budgetary control. But, its scrutiny system is not contributing effectively and there has been insufficient focus on some housing issues. The balance of its strengths and weaknesses remain the same as in 2002 and therefore strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 35 The council knows what matters most to local people and its focus is on achieving impact in priority areas. It has successfully concentrated on keeping the level of council tax down and improving key services such as education and social services. It has sustained its attention on the priorities within its corporate plan and this has resulted in real benefits for the local community. It has worked effectively to deal with deprivation issues in the Rainbow Park area of Wokingham and has implemented a 'Safer Routes to Schools' programme since 1998.
- 36 Senior officers and councillors maintain their focus and are not distracted by minor operational matters or crises. The council has many effective mechanisms in place to enable it to stay focused on its priorities. It has recently re-structured its senior management team to more clearly reflect its priorities and strengthen corporate and cross-cutting working. Reporting by officers to the corporate management team on a range of key financial and performance indicators is timely and well presented. This includes action planning and progress reports on the achievement against the corporate plan and LPSA targets. This enables the council to identify potential problems and take corrective action where necessary.
- 37 The council has maintained its focus on key areas for improvement following the CPA inspection in 2002. It has corrected weaknesses in planning and the benefits service and has concentrated its efforts successfully in dealing with internal issues such as the management restructuring and the establishment of the Children and Young Peoples Service.

- 38 The council has maintained its focus on the need to control annual expenditure in line with its budgets. The council has made significant improvements in this area after an overspend in 2002/03 of £1.5million was not identified by the council until late in the day. In response to this it formed a special finance group which meets on a regular basis to monitor current spending. This has helped to bring the situation under control and in 2003/04 there was no significant overspending. It is supporting this improvement with a new financial management system in order further to improve monitoring and control.
- 39 The council's overview and scrutiny function is not yet effective at ensuring that it stays focussed on what matters. It has not produced an annual work programme for overview and scrutiny and issues are decided on an ad hoc basis. This reduces its effectiveness at ensuring political focus.
- 40 The council has not maintained its focus on issues related to people in need of housing. The number of families in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation has been high. It has since taken corrective action to bring the problem under control and usage has reduced significantly from 60 in 2003 to 10 households in 2004.
- 41 The council has not kept a focus on ensuring affordable housing targets are met. While the council is facilitating the delivery of the required number of houses in line with the existing Berkshire structure plan of 7,755 units (1991 – 2006) against a target of 7,750, it is not meeting the needs of those in need of affordable housing. The council is only achieving 10 per cent affordable homes on all new sites – although it is meeting 23 per cent on larger (15 units or more) sites – against an overall target of 26 per cent. This target of 26 per cent is lower than many of the neighbouring Berkshire authorities.
- 42 The recently drafted housing strategy outlines a number of measures that the council can take to improve this. The council is now working across boundaries on key workers. It is conducting a joint key worker study with Reading, Bracknell and West Berkshire. There has been joint commissioning of consultants and ultimately the council hopes to share an allocations policy with the partner authorities. However, there remains a significant shortfall and this will contribute to increased pressures on homelessness and a shortage of supply of the affordable housing needed to support the local economy.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 43 The council has continued to develop its capacity to meet on-going challenges. It has reviewed its organizational structure in order to be able to respond to a more cross-cutting agenda. Managers and staff are well motivated and work effectively with members to improve services. It uses partnerships effectively to deliver more complex priorities, but this takes place largely at a service level. While improvements have taken place, the council needs to continue its efforts in working effectively with all strategic partners to ensure it is fully contributing to wider service improvements. The ineffective operation of the scrutiny system is hampering the ability of the council to effectively challenge some aspects of the decision-making process and service delivery. However, overall strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 44 The council is supported by effective use of staffing resources. The chief executive is well regarded by officers and members. Staff are empowered and there is a mature, 'no blame' culture. There is a commitment to provide training in priority areas, which has been recognized in the IIP (Investors in People)

assessment. All key managers and some Executive councillors have undertaken a management development programme. Internal communications and personnel practices are effective and these are supported by strong corporate health performance indicators such as low levels of staff absence through sickness and good representation of women and staff from black and minority ethnic communities in senior positions.

- 45 The council is in a sound financial position and it has overcome problems with overspend and insufficient balances in reserves. A medium term financial plan is in place and reserves have now been built up to £6 million as a result of examining efficiencies and making savings. There is now strong attention given to financial performance by councillors and managers. This effective internal working is helping to increase the ability of the council to meet external pressures and prepare for the future.
- 46 There is a strong framework around operating structures for councillors. Relationships between councillors and officers are generally effective. Portfolio holders receive good support and information from officers and there is clarity over their respective roles. The recent changes to the senior management structure and the composition of the executive portfolios are helping the breakdown of service based silos. Political structures are supported by an up-to-date constitution and code of conduct. The Standards Committee is active and has a strong external membership. These sound structures help to ensure that the council maximises the contribution from all concerned.
- 47 Partnerships and procurement are used effectively to support the delivery of more complex priorities and the council demonstrates an open approach to the provision of services. Waste collection is procured from a private sector company and in a partnership contract with neighbouring councils. The private sector has been commissioned to provide a wide range of services including information & communications technology (ICT), payroll, internal audit, leisure and catering as well as many of the more traditional areas. The council engages with the voluntary sector (including organizations representing minority groups) at an operational level to deliver joint outcomes. The relationship between the council and the citizens' advice bureau (CAB) is positive and it has recently entered into a three-year funding agreement to ensure both organizations can plan ahead sufficiently. These initiatives are helping to ensure that the public receive better, more efficient services.
- 48 The council is not maximising the contribution of all its strategic partners to help to deliver improved outcomes for people in the district. Although structures are now fully in place, all partners are not yet being used to their full potential, and enhancing the capacity of the council's services.
- 49 The capacity of council members is not being fully utilised. Training for councillors is offered, but attendance is voluntary, even on regulatory issues such as planning and licensing. Opposition councillors feel disengaged from the decision-making process and its relationship with the administration is poor. Policy teams include external representatives and contribute to policy formulation, but overview & scrutiny are not adding value to the leadership framework and there is insufficient challenge to decisions. The Scrutiny Committee has been restricted to calling in items, but it has not met this year. There is limited dedicated officer support to the scrutiny process. Though the council accepts the need for change (some changes have been made recently) there is much work for it to do before it will significantly add value to the decision making process.

Performance management

- 50 The council has developed its performance management systems since the last corporate assessment. It has a range of systems to provide information to officers and members, and this is supported by specific measures to deal with one-off activity such as inspection reports. It is demonstrating a more robust approach to providing value for money. Some of these systems are relatively new and are therefore not fully embedded. Nevertheless, strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 51 The council has an effective performance management framework in place. Service plans link into the corporate plan and staff objectives are set through the appraisal system in order to meet corporate plan outcomes. This is supported by a strong approach to monitoring financial growth pressures. It has procedures in place to enable councillors and managers to measure performance on revenue and capital monitoring and this has been used to identify opportunities to redirect funds to priorities and support savings initiatives. Cross-cutting aspects, including a CPA action plan, LPSA agreement, best value and service reviews, are also subject to formal reporting arrangements. Officers produce monitoring and feedback reports to CMT and councillors, to enable them to deal with variances in progress. This is helping the council to identify problems at an early stage.
- 52 The performance management systems are starting to have an impact on service performance. In education, the council uses monitoring information to identify performance issues in schools. It then makes appropriate interventions to raise standards. At the end of the autumn term it holds a standards review and sets targets via discussions between secondary school improvement officers and the schools senior management. This has resulted in improved performance in under performing schools, Ryeish Green for example. This active performance management is having a direct affect on the quality of education in the district.
- 53 The council has a track record of meeting targets where they have been set. Overall increases in the percentage of targets met were recorded in 01/02 and 02/03, although in 03/04 the level stayed the same.
- 54 Service standards are in place for key service areas and enable customers to determine the level of service they can expect to receive. The council actively monitors the progress against these standards, with the results reported to senior managers and members. The results are also reported on the council's website. This helps it to closely manage important customer facing services, such as answering telephones and letters, as well as benefiting customers.
- 55 The council has developed its approach to managing risk in the organization and has recently integrated this fully into all its service plans. A risk register is in place for all services and this is discussed at management meetings. Managers have had risk management incorporated into their job descriptions and retain overall responsibility for managing the risk in their service areas. Although only recently integrated into all service plans, the system has started to help the council identify potential risks in delivering its services.
- 56 The council is not consistently using targets effectively. Many of the plans it uses as the basis for its performance management framework do not contain specific, measurable, resourced and time-bound (SMART) targets. This includes key documents such as the BVPP, the corporate plan and some service plans. This hinders its approach to measuring and evaluating its performance.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement of improvement

- 57 The council has continued to make progress in a wide range of services since 2002. Education remains very strong and environmental services also show excellent levels of overall performance. Although there has been an overall improvement in most services, there remain concerns in some important areas such as housing, benefits and major planning applications. Overall, strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 58 The council is showing consistent improvement in key service areas. Performance indicators have continued to improve. In 2002/03, 56 per cent improved, and some significantly, for example recycling rates have improved by 3 per cent over the last 2 years to 24 per cent – ahead of the Government target of 22 per cent for this council. Provisional figures for 03/04 show that this trend is continuing. Performance in the top quartile takes place in 32 per cent of PIs – including key priorities, such as education, where 12 of 17 indicators are in this category for 2003/04. Environmental performance remains broadly in the top quartile and continues to improve. Social services performance is mixed and there have been particular weaknesses in some housing indicators, namely, the time people are in bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation. However, it met the Government target to reduce the number of families in bed and breakfast by 31 March 2004. Benefits indicators remain mainly in the lower quartile, as recognized by the BFI in its assessment. However, there are signs of improvement, as shown by improved customer satisfaction ratings. Generally, the council is providing local people with good performance against a range of service indicators.
- 59 In addition to the general improvement in service performance, the council has improved the quality of services in its priority areas, whilst at the same time restricting council tax increases, in line with residents' wishes, to 3.94 per cent. It has achieved a range of improvements in education, including a £7 million modernisation programme and meeting the need for school places in Earley. It has an improved social care rating with promising prospects for improvement. It has effected a reduction in the number of children looked after from 101 in January 1998 to 49 in September 2004. It has implemented a number of initiatives to reduce traffic congestion through the 'safe routes to school' schemes. There has been a decrease of congestion on principal roads. It is on course to meet the PSA target relating to vehicle crime, which has reduced by 31 per cent over the last 18 months. The LSP is starting to deliver results for the community. Partnership working has increased the speed that those in need of acute care are dealt with. There has been a decrease in the number of people smoking following community activity targeted at smokers – this success is a direct result of the organizations working together.
- 60 The council is facilitating the delivery of the required number of houses in line with the existing Berkshire structure plan. It is on course to deliver an overall housing target of 7,755 units (1991 – 2006) against a target of 7,750. Whilst this is helping to meet the targets in the plan, it does not meet the needs of those in need of affordable housing. Around 184 affordable units have been built in the three years up to 2003/04. This is against a demand of 468 for the three years 2001 – 2004 and represents a shortfall of 94 units a year or 60 per cent. The housing strategy does acknowledge the need to improve performance and lists action points to do so but the planning target of 26 per cent is unlikely to be achieved with limited housing development in the district.

- 61 The council is continuing to have difficulties in one area of its planning performance. Whilst performance in most areas has improved recently, problems remain with major planning applications, with only 20 per cent being dealt with on time, compared to the target of 60 per cent. The council is aware of the difficulties and has started to implement a restructure of the service in order to rectify the problems.
- 62 Its progress in its priority to deliver town centre improvements to support the local economy has been limited. Some development has taken place in Wokingham town centre and there are plans for more, but progress has been slow. The council has initiated a new partnership to work on issues around economic development, but this is in its early stage. Although the council has stated its priority for this area, there are as yet no clear outcomes that local people or business would recognize.

Investment

- 63 The council has continued to build on the strengths identified in 2002. It has invested soundly in areas of weakness and has developed the necessary building blocks to support and sustain continued improvement. It is renewing financial systems and important underpinning strategies are in place, including ICT and risk management. Some of the systems are relatively new but significant effort has been put into their development. There are some areas of weakness. It has not invested sufficiently to improve some aspects of the way it challenges itself. It has not used the s106 process effectively, and relationships with some key stakeholders are not as constructive as they might be. Nevertheless, strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 64 The council is generally securing resources necessary for investment. It has reviewed the need to retain its land and property assets. It has drawn up a capital disposal programme and successfully disposed of some of the corporate estate to realise capital receipts to support its own investment priorities. It has also put in place mechanisms to ensure that its capital investment and revenue growth enable future improvements in crosscutting issues. All bids are considered by officer evaluation teams and members are involved in the process at an early stage. The new financial system is due to 'go live' in December 2004. The system will improve on the quality of management information, as well as being more efficient; eleven jobs will not be needed as a result of the system. It has adopted an innovative approach to 'Invest to Save/Invest to Contain' schemes that has helped secure resources for investment. These important initiatives are helping to ensure that resources are maximised and that spending can be targeted at priorities.
- 65 It responds effectively to external challenge. The council prepares action plans and uses them to track progress against inspection recommendations. This helps the council to ensure the appropriate action is taken. It achieved the action plan arising out of the Ofsted inspection of the local education authority (LEA) on time. This has resulted in it implementing a number of systems, for example, to improve the effectiveness of monitoring, challenge and intervention at secondary schools.
- 66 The council has invested effectively to support the development of the LSP. A significant amount of officer time is spent on projects to help deliver important improvements in cross-cutting areas, such as health and community safety. This is an important step for future engagement with the council's organizational stakeholders and partners. It has started to secure resources for investment to help deliver its priorities. Through its community strategy partnerships it has

obtained funding from the Government's Partnership Development Fund scheme. This will help to fund initiatives, in particular, for children with disabilities and special learning needs. It has secured a total of approximately £350,000 since 2002/03 from this programme for seven projects. This demonstrates the potential for improvement when partners work closely together within the LSP.

- 67 It is putting processes in place that will help improve its management of staff. The management restructure has now been completed. The new 'strategic core' is well established and the service heads now form part of the overall corporate management team. There are already signs that the previous 'silo' working is starting to break down and the new changes to the structure will help this further. The main council forum is supported by 11 service unit forums and is helped by training for both staff and managers. Generally, the relationships between staff and management are good. The open approach to these forums is helping to ensure that problems are dealt with and resolved at an early stage at a local level.
- 68 The council has started to identify the importance of culture in contributing to its achievements of the shared priorities. It has brought all aspects together within community development to develop a more co-ordinated strategic overview. A lead officer and councillor for cultural services have been appointed. The officer structure has been reorganised to give culture a higher profile and make cross section working more effective. This is already starting to ensure ideas are taken forward more quickly
- 69 The council has not invested sufficiently to improve mechanisms for internal challenge. Reference has been made earlier in the report to the ineffective operation of the scrutiny system. Though some changes have been made, these are yet to show any significant signs of improvement. In its present form and style of operation, the council is not maximising the benefit that this type of challenge can bring to its operation.
- 70 The council has not fully exploited some sources of funding. The operation of s106 agreements, and its ability to derive funds for community benefit has been hindered by poor coordination and a lack of a truly corporate approach. Though plans are in preparation to improve this, they are at an early stage. The council is thus not using the system to its optimum benefit

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

Learning

- 71 The council has strengthened its systems for learning since the last CPA inspection. It has shared learning from successful services to help those that have been less successful. It learns from others as well as its own staff. It is generally self aware, though some gaps remain. This is an area of strength with few weaknesses.
- 72 The council has learned from the experience of successfully achieving desired results. It has used the improved performance management system to learn from its high performing services to tackle outstanding issues in weaker performing areas. This has led to the introduction of a housing repairs appointments system. It has also learnt from its successes and failures around securing services from external suppliers by forming a procurement unit. This has already started to have a positive impact. The council has already made £200,000 of savings in the transport

budgets and has identified more that can be achieved. Further, costed savings in service areas are currently being considered by councillors..

- 73 It also proactively seeks out learning from others and has used this to drive improvements. It has formed a group in the children and young peoples' service to examine and learn from the experiences of other councils. It has used learning to bring about improvements in the way that it provides services for children and has been recognized as a childrens' trust pathfinder as a result. It is also sharing best practice with other councils on road safety and waste management.
- 74 The council's mechanisms for sharing learning across the organization are strong and effective. It celebrates successes and staff achievements through awards and publicity in its staff bulletin and district newspaper. It has established a number of working groups to share learning, such as the middle managers' forum. It has good systems in place to deal with and learn from complaints from members of the public. The information is captured electronically and reported to the corporate management team. This is supported by reports to the middle managers' forum. It has identified complaint leaders from across the organization to meet regularly to examine the council's response to complaints. The Matrix Management system developed to help engender corporate working in the Education service has been shared with the Council's Strategic Core, and senior Members. These mechanisms have enabled the council to share learning.
- 75 It has demonstrated a growing self awareness. It thinks and acts corporately and has established realistic ambitions in its corporate plan. The council has restructured its services to better support the delivery of service priorities and cross-service issues and is working hard to remove vestiges of 'departmentalism' across services..

Future plans

- 76 The council has strengthened its approach to planning for the future since the last CPA inspection. It has established sound relationships with LSP partners and has demonstrated a real commitment to engage its community in developing its plans. It has developed the community strategy with the LSP and this is driving its future plans. Some aspects of its plans are still developing, such as its approach to economic development. Differences of opinion with its neighbouring councils over the scale and shape of development represents a risk to future partnership working. Nevertheless, strengths now outweigh weaknesses in future planning.
- 77 The council has assessed what capacity it needs to implement its plans for the future and is taking steps to address any gaps. Re-structured its senior management team and is encapsulating its developing approach towards workforce management in its draft people strategy. It uses its three-year medium term financial plan to ensure future financial capacity to deliver corporate plan priorities.
- 78 It continually reviews its progress against priorities, tries to influence national priorities and responds to the needs of the local population. The council is reviewing the scope and approach to education, children and young people and adult community care services. The outcome of these reviews will be influenced by the results of its discussions around housing allocations. It will use these reviews, alongside the budget planning process, to revise the corporate plan early next year.
- 79 It has some robust future plans in place to support the delivery of its corporate plan priorities. The council has quality statutory plans in place, such as its current

Best Value Performance Plan, Local Plan, Local Transport Plan and Asset Management Plan.

- 80 The council understands why some services are not improving and is beginning to reflect these in its future plans. In response to poor performance around housing homeless families and balancing the housing market, it established a councillor/officer working group to develop a draft strategy. The draft strategy has been described as 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) and is expected to receive approval by the full council in December 2004. In recognition of its incomplete approach to arts, leisure and culture across the district, the council has established a cultural partnership. It is developing a cultural strategy that will form part of the community strategy. It has engaged consultants to develop a sports strategy and to review its provision of open spaces. It is also reviewing its approach to economic development.
- 81 It is still developing some of its subsidiary plans. It is evolving its approach to procurement and economic development, although it does not yet have the strategies in place. Though it has established a business forum to share views and improve partnership working, it does not have a clear, overarching approach to economic development in the district. Although a prosperous area, the problems of dealing with growth are more apparent. Without integrating its approach with the wider growth objectives for the community, the council may miss opportunities to maximise the contributions and resources of key partners.
- 82 The council's failure to engage effectively with some key sub-regional stakeholders in planning for the future represents a risk to future partnership working. It has adopted a challenging stance in its negotiations on housing allocations with the other Berkshire councils. Senior councillors have maintained a consistent view opposing future development targets. The council needs to work on their relationships with the other Berkshire authorities in order to overcome any effects of what councillor's feel was a mandated and principled stand on development targets.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear understanding of issues facing the district • Strong role in developing Community Strategy and LSP • Clear and effective internal leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social inclusion and community safety not yet mainstreamed • Not all key stakeholders fully engaged
Prioritisation	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear priorities for improvement • Priorities based on community consultation • Resources shifted to priority areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some tensions between local and national priorities • Non priorities not explicit • Some aspects of communication processes underdeveloped
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong focus on what matters to local people • Staff and councillors not distracted • A clearer focus since last CPA • Effective focus on financial management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of consistent focus on housing • Scrutiny ineffective at helping maintain focus
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well motivated staff • Strong Chief Executive • Active use of personnel systems • Low sickness levels • Good relationships between staff and members • Range of partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not yet maximising contribution of all strategic partners • Poor political relationships and weak scrutiny operation
Performance management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good performance management framework in place • Systems having positive impact on performance • Open approach to mixed service provision • Service standards in place and actively monitored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets not used consistently as a means to drive improvement • Some performance management systems are new and as a result are not yet fully embedded.
Achievement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good and improving services • Strong improvement across a range of PIs • Improvements in most priority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing progress is limited • Poor performance on major planning applications

		<p>areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LSP starting to deliver improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of progress on town centre improvements
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important building blocks in place • Effective approach to external challenge • Investment in LSP • Improved staffing structures • Cultural services being used to contribute to priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineffective system of internal challenge • Not capitalising on S106 opportunities • Investment in partnerships with some key external stakeholders
Learning	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared learning from successful services • Seeks learning from others • Mechanisms in place to share learning internally • Learning used to drive improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
Future Plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity assessed to meet future plans • Regular review of progress against priorities • Good quality statutory plans • Plans starting to reflect identified weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some subsidiary plans not yet in place • Lack of engagement with some key stakeholders on future plans

Framework for comprehensive performance assessment

83 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.

84 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.

85 The assessment for Wokingham District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 11 to 15 October 2004.

86 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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