

CPA Progress Assessment

23 June 2005



CPA Progress Assessment

Wyre Borough Council

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Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county councils (ST&CCs), and at district councils in 2003/04, as a way of supporting councils to deliver improvements in services to local people.

CPA brought together existing information on service performance in councils with a corporate assessment of each council's ability to improve. This was used to reach an overall conclusion about whether a council was 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

Those councils classified as 'poorly performing'¹, were the subject of formal and voluntary engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and were required to produce a recovery/improvement plan following their CPA. Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with the lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme for the recovery/improvement plan.

The progress assessment will measure the impact and sustainability of the Council's improvement activity. Where necessary, it will report on regress. The progress assessment is tailored to local circumstances, provides appropriate public assurance and contributes to improvement reporting. It will report an evidence-based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but it will not give a score.

The progress assessment is part of the Commission's commitment to helping councils ensure continuous improvement to services for local people. It does this in the context of its strategic regulation principles which look to minimise the burden of regulation at the same time as maximising its impact. We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators and the ODPM in this aim.

¹ 'Poorly performing' is defined as councils that were classified as 'poor' or 'weak' with a corporate assessment score of 1.

Introduction

- 1 In June 2004 the Audit Commission published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment of Wyre Borough Council. This assessment categorised the Council as **weak**. The key strengths and weaknesses from this assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress to date based on the Council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Summary and recommendations

- 3 Wyre Borough Council is making good progress in addressing the CPA weaknesses and in putting in place the building blocks identified in its improvement plan. Inevitably, many of the changes are very recent and there is much more work to do to embed and realise the impact of change. Plans are, however, in place to realise the benefits in improvements for the local community.
- 4 The Council has made good progress in establishing a strategic planning process and a corporate plan that sets out its priorities and what it is trying to achieve for the local community. The Council's improvement plan has acted as a focus for improvement activity. However, the key challenge is to turn these changes in to improved outcomes for the community. In some areas it has not yet developed action plans or monitoring arrangements which will allow it to demonstrate and monitor the delivery of desired outcomes from its improvement activity. Particular recognition has been given to the need to improve community engagement and to understand the needs of its diverse communities. The Council has enlisted financial and consultancy support to develop its knowledge and approach in this area.
- 5 Substantial investment is being made in developing capacity and performance management. It is, however, generally too early to see the impact of this investment on the quality of service delivery and improvement in outcomes. Capacity to tackle strategic issues has been strengthened through a revised organisational structure and a number of new appointments. Managerial and political leadership is continuing to strengthen in support of the Council's re-focusing of its strategic direction. The Council is taking a positive approach to the use of partnership working to address capacity issues and is exploring additional and innovative opportunities for collaboration and efficiency gains, most notably through joint procurement opportunities and the development of a good procurement strategy.
- 6 Performance for 2004/05, based on unaudited data, is showing improvement with 54 per cent of best value performance indicators having improved since 2003/04. Performance in some service areas remains strong and there have been a number of examples of a recent improvement to more poorly performing service areas such as housing benefits and planning. The direction of travel is positive but the Council still needs to develop a culture and track record of consistent service improvement through performance management. There are signs that this is happening. Public satisfaction overall is lower than in comparable authorities but is generally better in the higher performing service areas. The continuing challenge for the Council is to ensure that its investments are translated into better outcomes that are recognised by local people.

- 7 It is recommended that the Council:
- actively and promptly shares the findings of this progress assessment with staff;
 - takes it to an appropriate public committee meeting; and
 - uses the key findings as the basis for revising the recovery plan in conjunction with any direction from the Improvement Board.

Context

The locality

- 8 Wyre is a district within Lancashire in the north-west of England. Wyre incorporates the towns of Fleetwood, Thornton Cleveleys, Garstang and Poulton-le-Fylde together with Knott End/Preesall. The population of around 105,000 is largely concentrated along a coastal strip with only one in four people living in the rural areas of the borough. It shares borders with Blackpool, Fylde, Lancaster and Preston.
- 9 Twenty-two per cent of the population are over the age of 65 which is well above the national average. Disability levels in the working age population are high at almost 13 per cent and the ethnic minority population currently stands at 1.2 per cent.
- 10 The economy of the borough is diverse and includes retail, light industry, tourism, agriculture and fishing. Transport links to the area include the M6 motorway, the M55 and the A585. The area as a whole is relatively prosperous but there are pockets of deprivation, particularly in the Fleetwood area where two wards feature in the 10 per cent most deprived in England.

The Council

- 11 During 2004 the Council put in place a new strategic management team with the appointment of a new Managing Director and two Executive Directors. This team is supported by ten Heads of Service. The Council's gross revenue budget for 2005/06 is £50.8 million and there is a capital budget of £9.7 million.
- 12 The Council continues to be controlled by the Conservative Party who hold 33 of the 55 seats. A new Leader of the Council was chosen in November 2004. The Council operates an executive model with a cabinet comprising a leader and five portfolio holders. It has five scrutiny committees focusing on resources, economy, social environment, physical environment and culture.
- 13 A voluntary Improvement Board was established following the CPA review. This board provides a critical friend role in the monitoring and review of progress against the Council's CPA Improvement Plan.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 14 The Council has made progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the CPA report and in particular in relation to its strategic planning process. Its approach to diversity and community engagement is still developing, and is recognised as a weakness. Developing a greater outcome focus remains a key challenge.
- 15 A new community plan for Wyre was developed in July 2004, based on a vision and six high-level key themes developed in consultation with partners and the public and agreed by the Wyre Strategic Partnership (WSP). However, detailed action plans are still being developed to clarify what the ambitions in the themes mean in practice for local people and the delivery partners. A partnership development manager has now been recruited to assist with the development of the WSP and to ensure that there are effective systems for the delivery of the community plan. There will be an inevitable time lag in being able to show improvement against the key themes.
- 16 The Council has mapped out its strategic planning process and improved its approach to corporate planning. A new corporate plan for 2005/08 clarifies the Council's priorities and what actions it intends to take to address them. The corporate plan contains five corporate priorities which draw on the work done in developing the community plan including relevant links to the improvement plan, for example through the living organisation priority. The five corporate priorities are supported by sub-priorities including cross-cutting issues such as regeneration in deprived areas and developing services for young people. The corporate plan identifies key actions and there are targets in a number of areas, for example in the living healthily priority. These focus the Council's efforts on delivering improvements and where there are clear targets enable local people to know what to expect.
- 17 Following on from the development of the Council's strategic plans, the setting up of managerial cross-cutting task groups has happened in some areas but not consistently across the Council. The task groups are intended to help the co-ordination of Council activity to ensure the effective delivery of the cross-cutting strategic priorities identified in the corporate plan.
- 18 The Council's improvement plan has provided focus on making progress against the plan and in developing the Council's ability to improve. However, the Council recognises the importance of developing its focus on customers and on outcomes that will impact directly on local people. The Council is seeking to improve customers' experience, for example through the establishment of a new customer contact centre.
- 19 Community engagement remains weak although this has been identified as a priority for improvement. There are examples of community consultation but the Council does not yet have a comprehensive understanding of what matters most to local people. It is recognised that the new corporate plan was developed quickly without community consultation and will need further development.

- 20 The Council has made progress in laying the foundations to address the diverse needs of its communities but the Council recognises that its approach is still developing. For example, the Council has developed a new equalities strategy and equalities groups and the race equality scheme has been developed but it is too early to see the direct impact of this activity. Service impact assessments have not been carried out and there is no systematic process for building diversity into service plans and monitoring to ensure diverse community needs are recognised and effectively addressed by council services.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 21 The Council is making good progress in developing its capacity and performance management in line with its improvement plan but developments in these areas are recent and the potential impact on improved outcomes for the community has yet to be fully realised.
- 22 The Council has strengthened its capacity to tackle strategic issues through the implementation of its new management structure. The Managing Director and the two executive directors meet as the strategic management team with the Cabinet in a management board to consider strategic issues. Managerial and political leadership has improved around a re-focusing of the strategic plan and the Council's improvement plan. Wyre are working with outside assistance on the development of management and leadership skills and competencies. The number of service heads has been reduced to provide better focus on the operational delivery of services.
- 23 The Council has been reviewing the political structure to deliver the Council's strategic direction and whilst decisions regarding changed structures have been made these have yet to be implemented. A review of the Council's overview and scrutiny function and of the Cabinet portfolios in the light of corporate priorities has recently taken place. Overview and scrutiny processes and support are developing but they do not deliver a fully effective challenge to the Council's performance. The Council is considering the introduction of area committees to improve community involvement.
- 24 Action has been taken to improve the management of human resources. A new human resources strategy has been agreed which identifies a wide range of activities to build core capacity within the organisation. However, workforce planning remains a key area that has not yet been developed. The Council has been working to address high levels of sickness absence but has not yet reduced absence rates and hence improved the capacity to deliver services. Additional staffing capacity has been invested in to support the delivery of priorities, for example in relation to e-government.
- 25 Action is being taken to improve performance management but this is still developing. There are examples of individual services, for example in housing benefits where better performance management has led to improved services, but this is not consistent. The Council has just launched a revised performance appraisal process including strengthening the links between staff appraisal, performance management and corporate priorities.

12 CPA Progress Assessment | How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 26 The Council approved a medium-term financial strategy in August 2004. This provides a framework that shows how resources are to be corporately managed over the next three years whilst also establishing that budget proposals must be aligned to corporate objectives. The Council's overall financial position is generally sound. The Council has identified that it will need to make budget savings and that this will require it to determine more clearly what are not its priorities to ensure resources are available to deliver the corporate priorities for service improvement. The Council's approach to efficiency savings is developing and it is reviewing savings opportunities in a number of areas, for example in the provision of area offices.
- 27 A constructive and innovative approach to the use of partnerships has developed. This is helping to address capacity issues and there are examples of partnership working and the sharing of resources, for example with the major work on sea defences with Birse. A significant example of the extension of partnership working is that Fylde Borough Council has recently taken over the provision of Wyre's waste management services. The Council is actively exploring further opportunities for partnership working with Fylde and others although these discussions are at an early stage and will be built around robust business cases as decisions are considered.
- 28 The Council is assessing its involvement in wider partnerships against a partnership toolkit to ensure that it considers the risks and benefits from its role in the partnerships. All of these developments are part of a wider procurement strategy.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 29 Overall, the Council is improving the quality of services and can demonstrate good public satisfaction with some services but overall this is variable and remains a key challenge. The Council is, however, making significant changes and substantial investments in order to strengthen its capacity to improve.
- 30 Based upon the Council's unaudited data, the Council's performance on the best value performance indicators is improving. Figures for 2004/05 show that performance against 54 per cent of indicators improved on the previous year, compared with audited figures of 36 per cent of indicators improving in 2003/04. The level of street cleanliness was amongst the worst councils' performance though current figures show performance in this priority area has now improved. The level of waste generated remains high although the Council proposes to reduce this through its new waste management contract.
- 31 Performance in relation to determining planning applications deteriorated in 2003/04 but recent unaudited data indicates that performance in relation to minor planning applications has now improved and that on other planning applications has reached government target levels. Delivering a more effective housing benefits service has been identified as a priority. A report from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate found that the Council has improved its performance on housing benefits with the average time taken to process new benefits claims reduced substantially.
- 32 The Council's performance in relation to private sector housing remains good. However, the Council's performance on the time spent by homeless households in hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation had deteriorated as the workload had increased. Reducing homelessness has been targeted by the Council as a priority. The Council has taken steps to address capacity issues through a dedicated homelessness officer and performance has improved. A new homeless hostel is due to open in June 2005.
- 33 There are a number of other examples of improvements to services to the public in priority areas. For example, the Council has recently established a customer contact centre in Poulton le Fylde which is improving accessibility to Council services and the types of interaction delivered electronically have improved.
- 34 There is extensive investment in the development of capacity to support future improvements. There is significant use of ODPM capacity building funds and Wyre's own funds to support the delivery of the improvement plan. For example, the Council is investing in a major capacity building programme with Solace Enterprises to develop the Council's approach to community engagement, management and leadership, process improvement, performance improvement and partnership improvement. The investment in these areas is very new and not yet having an impact on delivery or outcomes.

14 CPA Progress Assessment | What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 35 The Council is investing in other areas. The Council has identified a substantial investment programme in its information technology infrastructure in order to implement the requirements of electronic government and improve services to users. The Council has recently agreed with the IDEA a development programme for councillors. This includes leadership development, councillor training and the development of competencies for councillors. However, it is too early to see what effect there has been in improving overall political capacity.
- 36 The Council is seeking to develop its strategic approach to procurement to support it to deliver its corporate priorities and secure continuous improvements in priority areas. The Council has now approved a revised procurement strategy and action plan which should support improved service delivery for the public and ensure value for money is obtained.
- 37 Satisfaction with council services, when compared with that of other district councils is mixed.
- Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the Council is below average and fell between 2000/01 and 2003/04.
 - The Council is amongst the best 25 per cent for satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities.
 - Satisfaction with recycling, with museums and galleries, with arts activities and venues is above average.
 - Satisfaction with housing benefits service overall is below average.
 - The Council is amongst the worst 25 per cent for satisfaction with cleanliness, with parks and open spaces and with handling of complaints.

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

- 38 The Council has made good progress on the development of its core plans and is actively seeking out learning from others. Whilst there is evidence of learning impacting upon improvement it is not yet systematically putting that learning into use.
- 39 Wyre is actively seeking out learning from other organisations as a means of developing its capacity to deliver improved services. The Council is willing to learn from best practice and responds positively to recommendations from support agencies, for example from the IDEA in relation to agreeing a member development programme and for e-government where additional funding has been obtained from the ODPM. The Council is using learning from external support extensively, for example in the review of leisure services. However, the Council recognises that a corporate and systematic approach to sharing learning is still developing.
- 40 The Council has developed its strategic planning framework and calendar. This provides a 'golden thread' linking the community plan to the corporate plan down through service plans to individual staff performance appraisal. The Council has made good progress in developing its core plans. The community plan has been established although action plans for its implementation are still being developed with partners.
- 41 The new corporate plan is a significant step forward in providing an overall planning framework to provide focus for delivery against the Council's priorities over the medium-term. This provides the basis against which service plans are developed. However, the Council has not finalised a framework to enable it to monitor the impact the plan is achieving in priority areas.
- 42 The Council's improvement plan incorporates actions to address key weaknesses identified in the CPA process and has provided focus for the Council's improvement agenda. The Council plans to review the improvement plan in the light of progress made and future requirements with a view to incorporating a revised improvement plan in an updated corporate plan in the autumn of 2005.
- 43 Whilst there are examples of consultation in the development of some plans, the mechanisms to engage the community in corporate planning for the future remains an acknowledged weakness. The Council is addressing this through work that Solace Enterprises are carrying out to identify how the Council should engage with the community more effectively. The objective is to improve its understanding of community needs to enable it to plan improvements for local people.

16 CPA Progress Assessment | In the light of what the Council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

- 44** Statutory plans have generally been rated as satisfactory or good by Government Office North West. The housing strategy, which had been rated 'unsatisfactory', has recently been resubmitted for approval and the Council is awaiting a response.
- 45** The Council has identified that it needs to establish a more consistent customer focused culture of continuous improvement in order to achieve its objectives to deliver improvements for local people in priority areas. The Council plans to use its programme with Solace Enterprises to support the achievement of the desired culture and continuous improvement processes across the organisation. Work is planned also with other consultants to assist with improving performance to customers through redesigning services. A key challenge for the Council will be to ensure that the planning and delivery of this improvement activity is effectively co-ordinated and that the impact is measurable including on the outcomes for the delivery of services for local people.

Appendix 1 - Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

| Theme | Grade | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|----------------|-------|--|---|
| Ambition | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft community plan developed through consultation and articulates the impact delivery will have. • Plans to develop improved strategic leadership in hand. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambition for the district not clearly articulated. • Corporate objectives not supported by sustainable outcomes and long-term targets linked to quality of life. • Council does not fully understand its role and input to partnerships. • No overall approach to addressing the diverse needs of communities. • Strategic leadership within the organisation has been weaker because of operational focus. |
| Prioritisation | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some low level decisions on what is not a priority. • Priorities for improvement have some foundation in consultation and statistical data. • Targeted information is effective and well received. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priorities are operational and refer to specific service areas rather than cross-cutting issues. • Unclear how national priorities translate into local ones. • Plans and strategies have too many priorities. • Service and financial planning model is not an effective mechanism for financial prioritisation. |

18 CPA Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 - Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

| Theme | Grade | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|----------|-------|--|---|
| Focus | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear meeting agendas, forward plan, reports and minutes and meetings well managed. • Focus on delivering operational services. • Focus on exploring local issues such as A585, ICI site. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge about what matters most to local people means that it doesn't know which areas to focus on. • Limited focus on strategic and cross-cutting issues throughout the Council. • Scrutiny function under developed. |
| Capacity | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steps being taken to address people issues. • Training and development good. • Standards committee contributing to addressing capacity issues. • Satisfactory financial standing. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow to embrace modernisation. • Interim senior management has not provided clear strategic leadership. • Senior managers group is too large, lacks real purpose and focuses on internal issues. • Management of people is weak. • No strategic approach to procurement. • Effectiveness of partnership working is variable. • Variable performance in 'corporate health' indicators. |

CPA Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 - Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 **19**

| Theme | Grade | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---|---|
| Performance management | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service plans linked to objectives and appraisals system linked to corporate objectives, service plans and training. • Isolated examples of reasons for poor performance against PIs being examined and addressed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still to develop a performance culture across the Council. • Planning of services is operationally focused. • Underdeveloped approach to risk management. • Complaints not used to drive service improvements. |
| Achievement in quality of service | 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performs well in customer satisfaction. • Some good services identified through inspections. • Chartermarks for several services. • Clean and well maintained area. • Good performance in relation to private housing indicators, planning and recycling. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fifty-six per cent of key indicators are in the bottom two quartiles. • E-government and waste are weaker compared to other councils. • Low satisfaction for parks and open spaces. |

20 CPA Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 - Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

| Theme | Grade | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|----------------------------|-------|--|---|
| Achievement of improvement | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BVPI performance improved in 2002/03 including some areas where the Council is in the worst quartile. Some cross-cutting Improvements are in line with the broad corporate objectives. Schemes that the Council has been a partner in have resulted in improvements in local people's quality of life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weak evidence of consistent improvement over the last three years compared to other councils and direction of travel. Improvements are not targeted against priorities in cross-cutting areas or the areas that the Council knows matter most to local people. Improvements may not be sustainable, eg community safety. Impacts of improvements/schemes not measured. |
| Investment | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council is investing in some areas of weakness such as the management restructure and improvements in member development and work life balance. Track record of attracting external funding. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the need to address weaknesses but many are at an early stage and not embedded. Gaps in investments lacking in key areas such as risk management, strategic procurement and strategic HR. Lack of external funding strategy to meet priority goals. |
| Learning | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some examples of informal learning between services. Seeks information from outside the Council to improve services and systems. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aware of its successes but does not have a full understanding of the issues it faces. Systematic learning is weak. |

CPA Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 - Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 **21**

| Theme | Grade | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--------------|-------|---|---|
| Future plans | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of statutory plans assessed as satisfactory or above. • Some plans supported by service plans. • Council is aware of the need to improve capacity and strategic working. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some plans not robust – they lack resources, timelines and accountabilities. • No overarching plan that will assist in focusing on delivery of strategies, workforce planning and medium-term financial planning. • Lack of mechanisms to engage particular groups of community in planning for the future. |

Scoring key:

1 - Weak

2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths

3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses

4 - Strong

Appendix 2 - Progress monitoring against the findings of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 46 The original comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in 2004.
- 47 Under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999, best value authorities have a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. By virtue of sections 10 and 13 of the Act, the Audit Commission may carry out inspection activity to ensure that a best value authority is complying with this duty, and may issue a report as to its findings. This progress monitoring activity and reporting to assess improvement falls within sections 3, 10 and 13.
- 48 The main elements of this progress monitoring report were collation and analysis of evidence from:
- self-assessments of progress made, completed by the Council;
 - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
 - audited performance indicators;
 - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
 - interviews with managers and councillors.
- 49 This progress monitoring report for Wyre Borough Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from June 2004 to April 2005.
- 50 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 reporting progress to the Improvement Board and updating and improving the Improvement Plan.