

Service Inspection Report

January 2006



Planning Service

Swindon Borough Council

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Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	10
Report	12
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	13
The Council's planning service	13
How good is the service?	15
What has the service aimed to achieve?	15
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	16
Access, customer care and user/community focus	16
Diversity	18
Service outcomes for users and the community	19
Is the service delivering value for money?	21
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	23
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	23
How well does the service manage performance?	25
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	27

Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from the Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003). Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

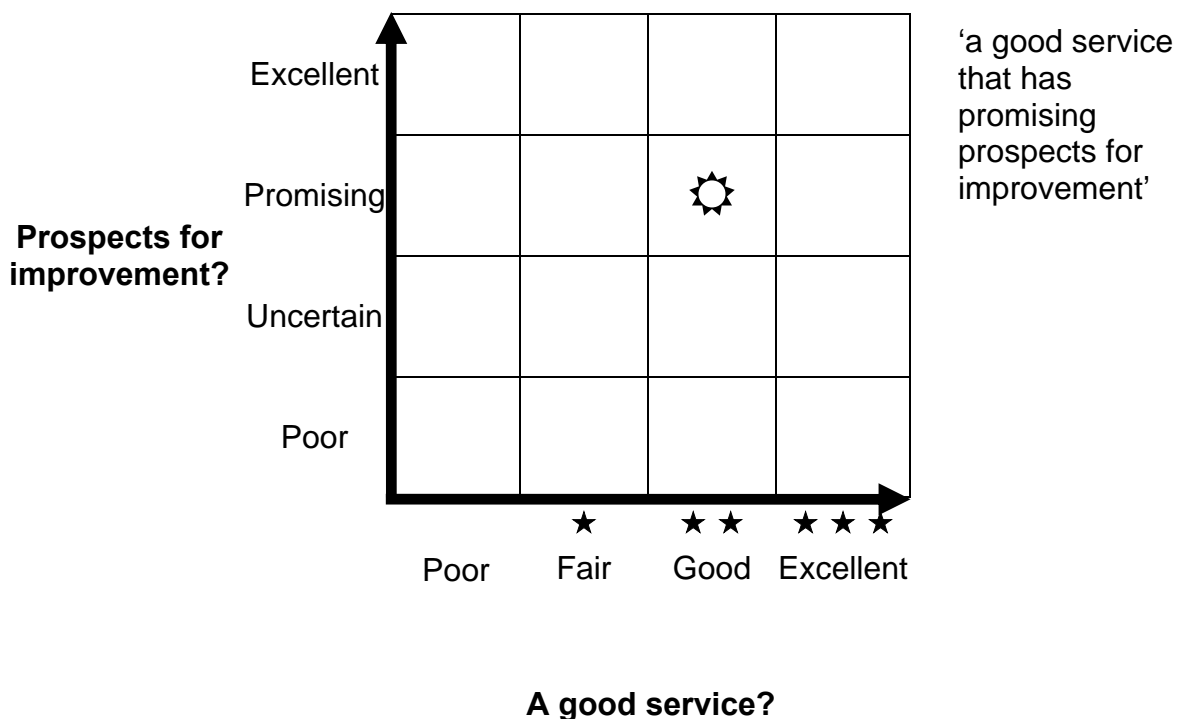
- 1 Swindon Borough Council provides a good planning service and there are promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Planning is a corporate priority for Swindon. The Council is clear about what it wants to achieve for the area and has placed the planning service at the heart of delivering its longer-term vision to achieve balanced economic and housing growth as well as regeneration. Stakeholders understand this vision and are working constructively with the planning service to deliver it.
- 3 The Council has a good understanding of local needs and holds regular forums with stakeholders to identify the scope for improvement. The Council is getting better at focusing on the needs of customers and this is reflected in improved user satisfaction. Forward planning is particularly strong and all elements of the service work constructively together and with other Council services to a common corporate purpose that focuses on the needs of the community.
- 4 The service successfully secures developer contributions towards community infrastructure to meet the needs of the growing population. It is taking steps to improve this further in the future, and in particular, to secure more affordable housing in the borough. The Council keeps the local policy framework up-to-date and provides extensive supplementary guidance for developers.
- 5 The Council is becoming more strategic in its approach to controlling development and is starting to work proactively with developers and other services to deliver key sites. The speed of deciding all categories of applications is now in line with national targets. However, there is more to be done to improve the effectiveness of enforcement and compliance monitoring and the service is not fully accessible to all users. In addition, there is not a consistent approach to equalities and diversity to ensure that the service meets the needs of all users.
- 6 The service has achieved efficiency savings - allowing costs to be reduced - at the same time as improving performance. However, service costs are above average when compared with similar councils. The service is becoming more aware of the importance of value for money in its activities but does not yet routinely consider value for money when developing aims or monitoring performance.
- 7 There is a recent track record of rapid and significant change both across the Council and within the service. Strong and effective leadership supported by sound performance management mean that stakeholders are increasingly confident about the future. The Council is aware of what it needs to do to improve further and ambitious plans are in place to do so.

- 8 The Council has improved its corporate and service capacity to deliver its vision for the area. Systems are in place to secure external funding for staff resources and infrastructure needs. Staff morale is high. Some weaknesses remain, including the need for a more systematic approach to value for money and to ensure fair and equal access. Despite this, the Council is well-placed to achieve what it wants for the area by creating a planning service that is fit for purpose to deliver this.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Swindon Borough Council as providing a good two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- 10 The service is a good, two-star service because:
- the Council consults extensively with the local community and is responsive to local needs;
 - feedback from stakeholders about service quality is generally positive;
 - the Council has taken steps to ensure that its strategic and local planning policy framework is up-to-date;
 - forward planning is strong and supports the Council's wider ambitions for the area through an integrated approach to growth and regeneration;
 - the Council has taken steps to improve the speed of deciding planning applications (including major proposals) which now meets national targets;
 - all elements of the planning service work to a common purpose and cross-service working is strong;
 - partnership working with other councils, services, agencies and developers supports effective forward planning, regeneration and the release of key sites;
 - the Council successfully secures community infrastructure through developer contributions and work is under way to improve this further; and
 - value for money considerations are driving efficiency improvements to benefit users.
- 11 However:
- the service is not fully accessible to all users, for example through restricted opening hours and the lack of a single point of contact; and
 - there is insufficient focus on compliance monitoring.
- 12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- the Council has a good understanding of local needs, is clear about what it wants to achieve for the area and has placed the planning service at the heart of delivery;
 - significant improvement in the quality and speed of service is consistently recognised by stakeholders;
 - strong leadership and sound management are providing a clear focus on improvement and staff are committed to achieve this;
 - effective systems to manage performance are in place and are used to tackle weaknesses and areas of under performance;
 - steps are being taken to improve value for money, for example through better ICT, efficiency savings and recouping staff costs;
 - stakeholders are confident in the service's ability to deliver improvement; and
 - the Council has the corporate capacity to support delivery of the Council's ambitions for the service and the area.

13 However:

- a systematic approach to managing value for money is not yet in place; and
- plans to ensure fair and equal access to the service for all users are not yet in place.

Recommendations

- 14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Achieve a culture change and better understanding of the needs of all sections of the community that improves the service's accessibility to all users by:

- *reviewing opening hours in consultation with existing and potential users;*
- *reduce inconvenience to users of the two separate office locations in the town centre, eg through availability of information and/or staff expertise;*
- *using baseline profile data to measure improvement, eg disabled people's satisfaction with committee meetings, ethnic minorities satisfaction with telephone enquiries;*
- *using complaints and feedback to understand any differences in quality of the service received by different groups;*
- *using a range of methods to engage effectively with different communities;*
- *testing the service using extended mystery shopping by using diverse sections of the community; and*
- *making use of consultation and engagement undertaken by other council services, eg Social Services, education, youth.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- better understanding of community needs;
- a service that is responsive to identified community needs and user preferences;
- evidence that all sections of the community such as young, old, disabled and ethnic minorities - have fair and equal access to the service; and
- improved user satisfaction with the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **low** costs. This should be implemented by **June 2006**.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the effectiveness of enforcement and compliance monitoring by:

- *in consultation with stakeholders, establishing aims and priorities for enforcement that support the wider aims of the service;*
- *ensuring adequate capacity is available to meet the aims; and*
- *developing opportunities to work in partnership with other services to improve capacity and a more co-ordinated response to users.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- enforcement is used more effectively to support Council's wider aims and ambitions for the area;
- users experience a faster, more co-ordinated response to complaints; and
- improved effectiveness of decision-making to assure quality outcomes for local people.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by **June 2006**.

Recommendation

R3 Establish a systematic approach to managing and improving value for money by:

- *undertaking a systematic analysis of all elements of the service to understand the breakdown and allocation of costs across the service and challenge the reasons behind this;*
- *establishing value for money (VFM) indicators for different elements of the service and establishing targets for performance;*
- *maximising opportunities for benchmarking to improve understanding of costs and to learn from experience of better performing councils; and*
- *in consultation with stakeholders, establishing mechanisms to identify opportunities to improve cost effectiveness, eg through stakeholder forums, VFM champions and staff input.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- improved cost effectiveness of the service;
- stakeholder involvement in contributing to improvement and ownership of outcomes;
- raised awareness of VFM within the service and externally; and
- enhanced capacity to target priorities and deliver benefits for users.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **low** costs. This should be implemented by **June 2006**.

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 The borough of Swindon (SBC) occupies a strategic location in Wiltshire on the M4 corridor, with direct links by motorway and rail to London, the west of England and South Wales. It covers around 23,000 hectares, with the majority of the population of 181,200 living in the town of Swindon and the remainder in surrounding settlements and villages.
- 16 Although primarily urban, the borough also incorporates rural and natural landscape including the Great Western Community Forest, three country parks, a large number of protected wildlife sites and two nature reserves. Part of the southern area of the borough falls within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- 17 Originally a railway town, Swindon grew rapidly in the the1950s and 1960s to house post-war overspill from London and the south east. Its population has more than doubled over the past 50 years and further significant growth is planned, amounting to 33,600 dwellings by 2026 - more than doubling the current population.
- 18 During the past 50 years, Swindon has diversified from its traditional manufacturing base to become a recognised centre for banking and finance, new technology and knowledge-based industries as well as engineering. Its economy is very successful, with unemployment at 2 per cent³, which is below the national average. Gross value added per head well is in excess of regional and national averages. About 100,000 people are employed in the borough which is greater than the number of employed residents, resulting in significant inward commuting. There are skills shortages in some areas. However, there are pockets of relative deprivation, with Parks, Penhill and East Walcot wards being among the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country.
- 19 The borough has a number of distinct communities. Around 4.8 per cent of the population describe themselves as 'other than white', compared to 9.1 per cent nationally and 2.3 per cent in the south west.⁴ There are established Polish, Italian and Irish communities as well as more recent arrivals from the Balkans and Middle East. The age structure of the population broadly reflects the national picture, although Swindon has a higher proportion of people under 40. A significant trend is an increasingly ageing population, with a forecast increase of 50 per cent per cent in over 65s by 2021, compared to 13 per cent nationally.

³ December 2005.

⁴ 2001 Census.

The Council

- 20** The Council is responsible for all local authority services in the area. The Conservative Party leads the Council, with 33 of the 59 councillors. There are 17 Labour councillors, 5 Liberal Democrats, 3 Independents and 1 non-aligned councillor. A leader and cabinet of ten councillors direct the business of the Council, with five overview and scrutiny committees. There are a number of regulatory committees, including one for planning.
- 21** The Council employs 8,000 staff across five recently re-structured directorates; Children, Housing and Social Care, Environment and Leisure, Resources and Partnership and Performance. Staff are led by an interim part-time chief executive and new senior management team. Planning, together with related services is within the Environment and Leisure directorate.
- 22** The Council's CPA rating improved from 'poor' to 'weak' in 2004 and then to 'fair' in 2005. Its overall budget for 2005/06 is £333.8 million.

The Council's planning service

- 23** Through regulating the use of land, the planning system aims to deliver homes, jobs, better transport, lively town centres and a quality built and natural environment. A key government objective for planning is to achieve sustainable communities that are self-sufficient and minimise their impact on the environment and use of non-renewable resources. The planning function in SBC is carried out by four separate teams under the leadership of a director. These are:
- forward planning - responsible for the preparation and monitoring of strategic and land use plans as well as conservation;
 - development management - more generally known as development control (DC) - responsible for deciding planning applications, appeals and dealing with enforcement and compliance;
 - landscape and countryside - a council-wide function that provides advice to the planning service under the terms of a service level agreement (SLA); and
 - a business support unit that includes customer information and advice.
- 24** A key function of the planning service in SBC is to deliver balanced housing and employment growth to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. New communities have been created to the west, north and east of the town, each making significant demands for new infrastructure such as transport, schools, open space and affordable housing. However, as an expanded town, SBC has not benefited from the same financial advantages as a designated new town and so infrastructure provision has tended to lag behind. A further challenge is the need to regenerate the poor quality environment of the town centre. An urban regeneration company (URC) - The New Swindon Company - was formed in 2002 to assist with this. As a major landowner, the Council is well-placed to exercise wider control than is possible through planning powers alone.

- 25 The service determines around 2,500 planning applications each year, employs 70 full-time equivalent staff, and costs £4.9 million in 2005/06. However, this figure is off-set by fee and other income of £2.7million, resulting in a net cost of £2.2 million. Poor performance in deciding major applications led to the Council being a 'standards authority'⁵ for major applications in 2004/05 but performance has now improved in this area.

⁵ The Government identifies poorly performing Planning Standard Authorities , based on performance indicators and offers a programme of support to guide progress.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26 The Council recognises the planning service is central to the delivery of its long-term vision for Swindon. This is for the town to become a major centre for economic and housing growth that supports a thriving retail centre with a range of leisure and cultural facilities. The original context for this is set in the community strategy (2004 to 2010) in its vision for the future, six themes and 26 priorities. This sets out a comprehensive framework for strategic growth, regeneration of the town centre and neighbourhood renewal based on cross-cutting values such as sustainable development and social inclusion. This forms part of a longer-term, 30-year vision that is evolving for the area.
- 27 The overall aim of the planning service is to *'ensure that the future growth and regeneration of Swindon is planned effectively and that the planning process is used to deliver corporate, service and community priorities'*.⁶ This not only recognises planning's strategic role in for example, balancing economic growth with housing and infrastructure needs; it also sets the agenda for delivering other corporate objectives such as improving customer care and ensuring fair and equal access to services.
- 28 The Council is in the process of reviewing its corporate plan. However, clear aims for the planning service are in place that draw together and build on the emerging policy frameworks. For example, planning aims draw on the '50 promises' of the new Conservative administration in *Swindon 2010*, the corporate 'full recovery plan' and the town centre regeneration framework prepared by the URC. These combine to inform four core objectives for the service that are set out in its business plan for 2005/06.
- 'Planning effectively for the future (effective strategic planning to ensure that Swindon's regional and sub-regional role as a major centre for growth is fully realised).
 - Regenerating the town centre and local communities (in partnership with the URC and supported by the LDF and area action plans).
 - Delivering planning applications in a timely and efficient way (assisted by supplementary planning and other guidance).
 - Providing a framework for service delivery (ensuring that the planning service works with other services within and outside the Council to deliver corporate objectives and secure infrastructure).'

The aims are supported by a clear statement emphasising the role of planning in shaping and delivering corporate objectives that reinforces DC's role as integral to achievement.

⁶ Planning Service Business Plan 2005/06.

- 29 A policy framework to deliver strategic and local ambitions is well-advanced, based on a good understanding of local constraints and national priorities. The development plan is up-to-date, with the local plan nearing adoption. Preparation of the local development framework (LDF) that will replace the current system is on track. Work is under way to prepare a regional spatial strategy (RSS) which includes Swindon as one of four centres of significant planned growth in the south west. To support this framework, the service has commissioned specific research, such as an urban capacity study, and undertaken extensive community consultation. Partnership working with other councils is informing collective planning for the future of the region. Links to the community strategy and national priorities are explicit, for example in the way that the waste local plan forum has informed policy development. As a result, the Council has a clear policy framework to realise development opportunities and fulfil its aims for the area.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Access, customer care and user/community focus

- 30 At the strategic level, the service places the needs of the community at the heart of delivering sustainable development. The Council has engaged widely with the local community through a range of mechanisms to understand local needs and plan for the future. A good example is the planned urban expansion in the southern development area (SDA) between the town and the M4. The potential development of this land raised strong local opposition. In consultation with the local community, a detailed and systematic sustainability appraisal of alternative sites identified the SDA as the preferred option to accommodate 4,500 new homes. Although local opposition remains, the transparency of the process has assisted wider ownership of the proposals and supported timely progress in bringing the land forward for development.
- 31 The structure of the service supports delivery of the Council's aims. By merging the former local plan and strategic policy teams, the Council has strengthened its capacity to plan more effectively for Swindon's future. The three development control teams - major projects, regeneration and (other) development - provide a strong focus on delivery. The location of the council-wide landscape and countryside unit within the planning service emphasises the importance of the natural landscape and the community forest in contributing to sustainable development. As a result the service is well-placed to deliver community aspirations for the area.

- 32** A clear, up-to-date policy framework is in place to support delivery. The development plan is up-to-date. As well as working towards the regional spatial strategy and bringing forward the SDA, the Council has prioritised the review of the local plan, for example to encompass the URC regeneration strategy. In addition, work on the LDF is on track, supported by a statement of community involvement and good progress on a wide range of new supplementary planning documents (SPD) to augment its existing range of guidance (SPG). As a result, there is a sound basis for planning decision-making.
- 33** The Council is proactive in the way it supports the release of major sites. It has built constructive relationships with key developers and is responsive to their needs. The use of site briefs and extensive supplementary planning guidance (SPG) provides clarity for developers and allows community involvement at an early stage. Pre-application advice and a protocol for major applications ensure that proposals are of a high standard, in line with policy objectives and efficiently processed. The use of standard section 106 agreements that run in parallel with applications and closer partnership working with developers supports faster, more consistent decision-making. This is helping to support assured and quality outcomes.
- 34** Effective cross-service working supports delivery. A development team approach to major applications, with input from other related services ensures that development proposals support wider corporate objectives. As a major landowner, the Council makes sure that its property and planning interests align to support corporate ambitions, for example by recycling capital receipts from land disposals within the URC area to support regeneration. To reinforce this, property disposals within the SDA will be managed by the head of the planning service to ensure that planning objectives are met. This is a powerful signal of the Council's corporate commitment to the planning service's role in meeting community needs.
- 35** The Council listens and responds to user input. Development and community forums allow constructive dialogue and better understanding of user needs. Mystery shopping is used to check the quality of advice offered by telephone. Mechanisms are in place to secure ongoing feedback from users of the DC service including surveys and cards that are sent out with every decision notice. These measures help the Council address weaknesses and tailor services to meet users' needs.
- 36** Planning decisions are made in a fair and transparent way. Users have open access to all application files and can speak at planning committee which is held at times and locations convenient for them. Councillors are trained in probity and planning decision-making and adhere to codes of conduct. Delegated decisions are regularly reviewed by a scrutiny panel to monitor fairness. Much of the written business of the service is conducted in plain English. Technical reports are quality controlled for brevity and ease of understanding. This gives users greater access to the service and supports integrity in decision-making.

- 37 There is a clear focus on meeting the needs of customers in day-to-day service. But although customer service is now improving, the Council is not achieving consistent standards. Customer standards and charters are in place, although users are not consistently involved in their preparation. A dedicated customer service team is trained to deal promptly with general enquiries from users visiting the Council and by telephone, and online enquiries are now available.
- 38 However, mystery shopping reveals that the quality of advice and personal greeting to telephone callers is variable. A good range of guidance notes and leaflets provide information on the most common types of development. But there are no leaflets to explain complex procedures or specific measures to make visiting members of the public feel welcome at planning committee. Poor or variable service can leave a lasting impression for users, particularly as many may use the service only rarely.
- 39 The Council cannot guarantee ease of access to all users. Access to the duty planning officer and planning enquiries is limited to 9.00am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday, although a limited out-of-hours service is available on request. Many customers call for planning advice at the main civic centre but have to be redirected to the planning department, a good 10 to 15 minutes walk away. This is inconvenient for users, especially those who are elderly, infirm or are accompanied by young children.
- 40 Until recently, a fully interactive electronic access to the service was not available. However, since the on-site period of our inspection, the Council has added to its existing online enquiry facility and the ability to submit applications electronically. It is now possible for users to view application details and progress via the internet, thus enhancing user convenience and involvement.

Diversity

- 41 The Council cannot be sure that all its communities have fair and equitable access to the service. While there are examples of good practice and the Council is committed to fair and equal access at a strategic level, this is not yet translated into a consistent approach to delivery. Services complete impact assessments, staff are trained in equalities, support groups are in place and equalities are built into business plans. However, the Council is not specifically monitoring the impact of its policies and decisions on minority groups or exploiting existing mechanisms such as complaints to better understand their needs. As a result some users may be unintentionally disadvantaged.
- 42 Tailored arrangements for consulting minority groups are not consistently in place. Traditional methods such as newspaper articles, exhibitions, meetings and forums do not necessarily engage effectively with racial minorities. Engagement with young people is not systematic. However, there are examples of good engagement with ethnic communities through sports and arts projects in the Streets for Living project. And plans are in place to better engage minority groups in the future through the statement of community involvement for the LDF.

- 43 The Council is not aware of the needs of non-users of the service or how it can improve accessibility for them. For example, the planning service recently trialled extended opening hours on weekday evenings but discontinued this due to a lack of take-up. However, it has not followed up the reasons for low take-up or considered ways of accessing potential users' views to understand how it could make the service more accessible and convenient for them.
- 44 On the other hand the service responds sensitively and practically to individual and minority needs. The emerging local plan contains policies to ensure that new buildings are accessible to all. This is supported by SPG. Human rights are routinely addressed in committee reports and in decision-making. Documents are available in other languages and formats and an interpretation service is available, although it is not clear how well this is used or if it meets users' needs. The planning reception area and committee meeting venues are accessible to wheelchair users and hearing loop systems are provided. All Council buildings where the public need easy access meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 45 The Council has a good track record of securing community infrastructure from the development process via section 106 agreements. Local needs are identified through community involvement and proactive partnership working with other agencies and services such as leisure, housing, Social Services and education. Through its clear policy framework, supported by SPG the Council has secured £40 million from future developers of the urban expansion in the SDA. This will contribute to a wide range of infrastructure including education, public transport, open space, community facilities, green travel plans as well as town centre regeneration. This supports sustainable communities.
- 46 The service is now maximising opportunities to deliver affordable housing. To date delivery has been limited by the terms of planning permissions granted some years ago. However, through changes to the policy framework and new SPG, the Council is now securing 30 per cent of all new homes as affordable, which is in line with identified need in the housing strategy.
- 47 National policy guidance on sustainability is used effectively to deliver quality outcomes. Sustainability principles inform decision-making at a strategic level and in local design. Historically, the Council has been at the forefront of creating new sustainable communities in the form of urban villages. It has built on this approach, for example, in the later phases of the northern development area by achieving higher densities, better integrated retail centres and more distinctive designs. The Council encourages environmentally friendly design, such as the new National Trust building in Churchward and new affordable eco-homes at Groundwell. The regional retail outlet centre in former railway workshops demonstrates an imaginative new use for historic industrial buildings. However, these flagship examples stand in stark contrast to the poor overall quality of the adjacent town centre.

- 48 Development control (DC) performance is generally satisfactory. According to unaudited data for the year ending December 2005, performance in minor and other applications now exceeds national targets. Performance on majors has steadily improved over the past year and is now in line with the national target of 60 per cent. User satisfaction with the service - 71 per cent - in 2003/04 is below average but more recent local surveys suggest that this is also improving. However, according to a national planning quality checklist, DC performance in 2003/04 was below the national average.
- 49 The Council makes sound decisions that it can defend on appeal. The overall success rate in defending appeals is in line with the national average, although this is not the case for councillors' decisions that were made against officers' recommendations. The actual numbers of overturned decisions are very small, amounting to less than one per cent of all decisions taken over the past two years. However, over the past six months, councillors have reversed officers' recommendations on 20 per cent of all applications before committee, a quarter of which concerned major proposals. The Council understands the reasons for this and is working to address it through greater use of site briefs and better engagement of councillors earlier in the decision-making process.
- 50 The Council is not systematically using its enforcement powers to deliver its planning aims. There are examples of a proactive, community-based approach, such as the well-received work with ethnic communities in the Manchester Road and Broad Street areas. But on the whole, enforcement is reactive and prioritised according to risks that do not relate to the wider aims of the service. Monitoring of compliance is minimal. As a result the Council cannot ensure that enforcement is supporting what it wants to achieve for the area or monitoring the quality of what is built.
- 51 Some skills gaps are currently limiting the Council's ability to deliver consistent standards. The high proportion of graduate trainees has effectively added to staff capacity and brought new enthusiastic staff and fresh ideas into the service. However, their relative inexperience imposes demands on other staff and sometimes limits the ability to negotiate consistent standards of design quality and provide the appropriate level of support for key partnerships. However, the Council is working to resolve this issue through career development programmes for trainees and the new design codes that are currently under preparation

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 52** The Council has successfully reduced its costs at the same time as improving performance. Over the past year, through re-structuring, re-designating posts and reviewing DC processes, the Council has reduced service costs by £100,000. A further £40,000 savings have been identified for next year. The Council keeps cost effectiveness under review and identifies opportunities to improve efficiency. As vacancies arise, opportunities are taken to review structures to release savings and improve effectiveness. Costs are recouped, for example through section 106 agreements and by substituting fee-earning applications for the formerly free informal written advice. Partnership working with developers allows the administrative costs of handling major applications to be shared as well as releasing efficiency savings in the form of staff capacity. Value for money is improving and is delivering outcomes that meet the needs of the community.
- 53** Service costs are managed effectively. Sound budgetary processes allocate resources in line with priorities and identify potential overspends. Resources have recently been focused on development control in order to address poor performance. The Council recognises that once improved performance has been sustained, it needs to address poorer performance in enforcement and compliance monitoring.
- 54** Despite the absence of a systematic corporate approach, value for money is kept under review and challenged in a number of ways. The Council recently reviewed the costs of all services, including planning, based on the comparative information set out in the Audit Commission value for money profiles. A subsequent review challenged whether different elements of the planning service could be delivered more cost effectively by out-sourcing to other agencies and external suppliers. Although this process did not lead to any specific changes to delivery arrangements, it encouraged councillors to challenge value for money and consider options on the basis of their cost effectiveness.
- 55** Greater awareness of value for money is developing within the service. The Council has challenged the fact that service costs are high and compare unfavourably with similar councils. Based on data submitted to the Audit Commission, costs were the highest in the family group of similar councils - almost double the group average in 2004/05 and rose twice as fast since the previous year. Over the same period, performance on applications was among the lowest of the group, indicating a poor match between costs and effectiveness at that time.

- 56 The Council understands why the costs of the planning service appear to be high. In the Council's view, the submission of incorrect data for 2004/05, the inclusion of building control and the allocation of corporate overheads has seriously distorted the picture on costs. Recent adjustments using corrected (though unaudited) data demonstrate that costs appear to be significantly lower than originally thought, although they are still above average for the family group. Based on a survey of similar councils the Council attributes these above average costs to the well-resourced forward planning function and the costs associated with the preparation of the local plan. These costs are now expected to fall, linked to the establishment of a specific reserve fund to deal with future peaks and troughs in expenditure. An effective forward planning function is a priority for the Council and is recognised as a key strength of the service. Above average costs in this area are compatible with the strong performance of forward planning that we have identified during the inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 57** There is a clear track record of improving the service to benefit users in recent years. In particular, the development and community forums provide opportunities to actively engage users in identifying weaknesses and the scope for change. Improvements to date include better accessibility of officers, better feedback to customers, an improved website, better partnership working, improved speed of deciding planning applications and responsiveness to user queries and phone calls. Stakeholders value the improved level of engagement with the Council and consistently report improvement in the quality of service. Customer experience of the service is improving.
- 58** The service uses feedback from users to drive improvement. For example, it has responded to criticisms of being reactive and developer-led by assuming greater control of negotiations, supported by a developer protocol, greater use of development briefs and SPG. Stakeholders recognise this is an improvement. In response to complaints from developers about lack of feedback on major proposals the Council has introduced arrangements to track progress and keep applicants informed. The Council is aware that it needs to extend this approach to all applications. Firm plans are in place to do so through improved online access to application details.
- 59** This improvement is reflected in the results of user surveys. A nationally-based survey of users of the DC service indicates that satisfaction has increased from 59 per cent in 2000/01 to 71 per cent in 2003/04. Although this figure is below the national average, more recent local surveys based on the same criteria suggest that satisfaction has now risen to 84 per cent. This matches consistently favourable feedback from internal and external stakeholders, including more responsiveness and openness from staff and the Council's growing awareness of users' needs.
- 60** The speed of deciding planning applications is improving. The most recent (but unaudited) information for the year ending November 2005 shows that the Council decided 63 per cent of major applications in 13 weeks compared with 36 per cent in 2003/04. Over the same period performance on minor applications improved from 53 per cent to 74 per cent in eight weeks and other applications from 68 per cent to 83 per cent. The improved performance in dealing with major applications means that the Council is no longer subject to the government standards that applied in 2003/04. The Council wants to improve still further and has set challenging local targets that exceed those set nationally. Speedy decision-making benefits users and supports delivery of the Council's ambitions for the area.

- 61 The service has made good progress in establishing a sound policy framework. The review of the local plan has taken only five years to complete. This is quicker than many other councils and much quicker than Swindon's previous plan which took nine-and-a-half years. Good progress is due to efficient running of the public inquiry, good project management and identification of clear goals. This progress was specifically recognised in an award of a Planning Delivery Grant of £91,300 in 2005/06. The Southern Development Area took only five years from inception to obtaining planning permission, despite strong local opposition and the competing demands of other forward planning work. This sound policy framework is a key building block to support delivery of the Council's ambitions for the area.
- 62 There is a clear track record of corporate change and improvement, supported by strong leadership and a full recovery plan. The Council's CPA rating improved from 'poor' to 'weak' between 2003 and 2004 and to 'fair' in 2005. It has been described as 'improving well' in its recent Direction of Travel statement. Historically, the Council has not invested in corporate systems and had been an organisation of separate departments without clear strategic direction. A new corporate management structure is in place, with a clear agenda to improve the effectiveness of the Council and the quality of its services. The Council is now well-placed to sustain improvements in services.
- 63 Service efficiency is improving. Recently improved IT access is enabling customers to make planning enquiries online and view applications and comment on them from selected access points. This is expected to significantly reduce the amount of telephone traffic and release staff capacity. As already discussed, the Council recoups costs to improve service delivery, for example by using section 106 contributions to fund staff posts, including a dedicated solicitor to manage the processing of agreements. Through a range of efficiency improvements in DC, the Council has substantially reduced its service costs over the past year, at the same time as improving performance, indicating improved value for money.
- 64 Service improvements compare favourably with other councils in some areas, but this is not consistent across all indicators. The Council's improved performance in minor, major and other applications compares favourably with the national averages for the same period. Using brownfield land for more housing is in the worst quartile although the lack of available brownfield land in Swindon's case makes this inevitable. Service costs are nearly double the average for similar councils and increasing twice as fast although as mentioned in paragraph 54, the Council has queried the accuracy of the data on which this assessment is based.

How well does the service manage performance?

Improvement planning

- 65** The Council has a good understanding of local needs, is clear about what it wants to achieve for the area and has placed the planning service at the heart of delivery. As already discussed, this includes the reform of its traditional development control function to one that plays a key role in implementing the Council's corporate plans and strategies. The vision to achieve a sustainable balance of housing and employment growth and the regeneration of the town centre is well-understood by staff and other stakeholders. There is good awareness and ownership of what the Council wants to achieve.
- 66** Service aims are based on a sound knowledge of what is important to local people. A wide range of consultation techniques are used including facilitated debates, user forums, focus groups, exhibitions and workshops. Customer feedback and complaints are analysed to identify the need for improvement. In response to customer surveys, the Council has planned improvements such as a one stop customer contact centre and an improved reception area. The service is responsive to user needs in general and embeds this within the aims of the service.
- 67** Robust plans are in place to improve the area for local people. The Council has translated the vision into tangible aims and objectives through business plans. Timescales and responsibilities for completion are clear, and the resources needed to deliver the plans are identified. The corporate recovery plan, emerging corporate plan and service business plan address the key corporate and service weaknesses. The 50 promises in 'Swindon 2010' set a clear agenda for the immediate future. Based on engagement with the community and development forums, the Council understands what it needs to do to improve the service further to meet the needs of these users. The service is self aware and well-placed to improve delivery - and users have influenced this.
- 68** The links between corporate aims through to individual priorities and targets are clear. The new long-term vision expressed in the draft corporate plan is also planned to link to personal and team objectives through an improved performance appraisal scheme. This means individuals know what is expected of them and how their work contributes to overall aims and improved service.
- 69** Although stakeholders are aware of the Council's wider vision, an explicit written statement which can be disseminated to current and future stakeholders is still in draft. As a result, there is some uncertainty among stakeholders about the status and cohesion of the Council's many strategic documents such as the 2010 strategy, the corporate recovery plan, the community strategy and the local area agreement programme. These plans are currently being brought together in a cohesive way in the draft corporate plan. This is important as historically stakeholders have criticised the Council for its lack of vision leading to inconsistent decision-making and ad hoc approach to development.

Performance management

- 70** Strong and effective leadership both corporately and within the service supports sound management. This is well-recognised by staff, partners and other stakeholders. Corporate leadership sets the tone of the organisation by creating a climate of openness, empowerment and mutual respect and a culture of customer care. This means that despite a recent history of repeated cycles of change, people in the organisation are optimistic about the future and feel well-supported to achieve their goals.
- 71** Senior managers and political leaders provide clear direction to the organisation. The management team has been restructured to increased corporate capacity at the centre, address cross-cutting issues and support service improvement. Political leaders have communicated the vision, aims and priorities so that staff and partners have a good understanding and are clear about the culture and values of the organisation necessary for improved service delivery.
- 72** The Council takes a systematic approach to performance management. Progress is reviewed systematically and where targets are not met, corrective action is taken, including allocating the necessary resources. For example, in response to poor and inconsistent design quality, the Council has secured external funding as an ODPM⁷ pilot authority to produce innovative design codes and a design guide. It has ensured that staff are closely involved in this work so as to capture learning. The Council is able to identify underperformance and take corrective action.
- 73** Performance management is well-embedded across the service, with a track record of the active involvement of managers and councillors in managing performance and solving problems at an early stage. Project monitoring and tracking arrangements are in place and progress is reported corporately. Effective systems are in place to monitor performance including monthly directorate meetings, monthly monitoring reports and quarterly performance evaluation to councillors using a traffic light system. This has contributed to improved DC performance and encourages councillors to become involved in monitoring and challenging progress. The Chief Executive facilitates a quarterly performance review of all indicators. This raises the profile of performance management in delivering what the Council wants to achieve.
- 74** The Council is responsive to user needs. It has a well-publicised, easy to access system for service users and staff to submit compliments, complaints and suggestions. Its response to these is positive and timely and the results are used to improve the service. For example, the customer service team has simplified application forms as a result of feedback from users. However, the service has not yet used the available information to address any disparities in levels of satisfaction within its diverse communities which is a missed opportunity.

⁷ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, with responsibility for planning and other environmental matters.

- 75 The service learns from its own experiences as well as that of others. Mystery shopping is increasing knowledge of customer experience. The Council also learns from staff and user groups. Visits to high performing councils have led to efficiency improvements in DC processes such as validation. However, the Council is not involving councillors in systematically learning from other similar councils facing major growth and regeneration challenges. Sharing learning in this way improves ownership of problems and potential solutions.
- 76 The Council is self aware and understands the strengths and weaknesses of the service and the challenges it faces. This is reflected in the quality of its self assessment for this inspection although weaknesses could have been expressed more clearly. However, the service is aware of what it needs to do and this is reflected in the openness, transparency and enthusiasm for improvement which is evident throughout the organisation.
- 77 The Council's performance management arrangements do not provide sufficient focus on managing value for money. VFM principles are not embedded within the core service aims and there is currently no systematic approach to managing value for money or improving it. The absence of specific VFM indicators for the service limits the Council's ability to improve VFM through its current performance management arrangements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 78 As a result of systematic forward planning, the service has the people, skills and capability it needs to deliver its service priorities. Career progression and new organisational structures are in place to ensure the right people are doing the right things. Peaks and troughs in workload are managed through using temporary staff and partnerships with external consultants to fill vacancies. Capacity gaps have been filled by a greater use of graduate trainees. Although supporting graduate trainees currently uses the time of experienced staff, this is an investment to increase staff capacity. Enforcement capacity remains stretched, allowing only limited monitoring of compliance. To address this, the duties of graduate trainees within each of the three DC teams have recently changed to include enforcement as well as planning applications although the effectiveness of this has yet to be tested. On balance, staff capacity is in place to support improvement.
- 79 The Council is ensuring that the planning service has the financial capacity needed to deliver its ambitions. All of the planning delivery grant (PDG) is committed to the service and none is used to underpin FTE posts as the Council recognises that it must maintain delivery beyond the life of the grant scheme. Identified savings of £40,000 for 2006/07 will be recycled within the service to ensure that sufficient resources are available to deal with major applications and enhance delivery of section 106 contributions. The aim is to increase the resources available without increasing base budget, so value for money considerations are also taken into account. For example, section 106 funding is anticipated to fund further posts over the next ten years as the SDA is developed. Resources are effectively targeted at sustained improvement.

- 80 The Council is building capacity to allow the service to deliver tangible improvements for the community. A successful bid for funding through the Forestry Commission's community forest programme is improving the integration of built space into the open country side. Planning is working closely with other services such as education, housing, Social Services and leisure to identify their specific infrastructure needs to meet the planned expansion of the town and embody this within new SPG. This investment is building capacity to deliver community needs and improve the local quality of life.
- 81 Councillors are equipped to fulfil their roles. They have access to a wide range of training opportunities that are monitored by the planning committee. A comprehensive training strategy is in place covering all aspects of councillors' roles including performance management, community leadership, ethics and probity. There is a dedicated budget to support councillor induction, personal development plans and an overall development programme. However, apart from compulsory elements such as planning, councillor training opportunities are not consistently taken up and the Council has still to find solutions to this problem.
- 82 Staff are strongly committed to improvement and morale is good. The recent restructuring and corporate climate of cultural change has had a positive impact despite repeated cycles of change in the recent past. There is strong leadership of the service, staff feel valued and able to learn and develop their skills. Internal communication and cross-departmental liaison is improving. DC's awareness of its corporate role is growing, for example through its involvement in the preparation of supplementary planning guidance and multi-disciplinary teams. This means the service has the skills, motivation and working practices to sustain improvement.
- 83 Stakeholders are confident in the service's ability to build on this further. They share a good understanding of what the service wants to achieve and are committed to supporting delivery. They are realistic about the challenges facing the service but are optimistic that these can be overcome, based on a growing spirit of openness and trust. The Council has developed sound building blocks such as increased corporate and service capacity to support future improvement and deliver the Council's ambitious targets for the area.
- 84 However, the Council is still to develop systems to ensure the service offers value for money and achieves fair and equal access to the service. These relative weaknesses mean that currently the service cannot fully demonstrate that it will improve its cost effectiveness or that it is working to improve access to all sections of the community to meet the needs of existing and potential users.