

Service Inspection Report

February 2006



# **Environment - Planning Services**

**Mid Suffolk District Council**

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## 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 coordination 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](http://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

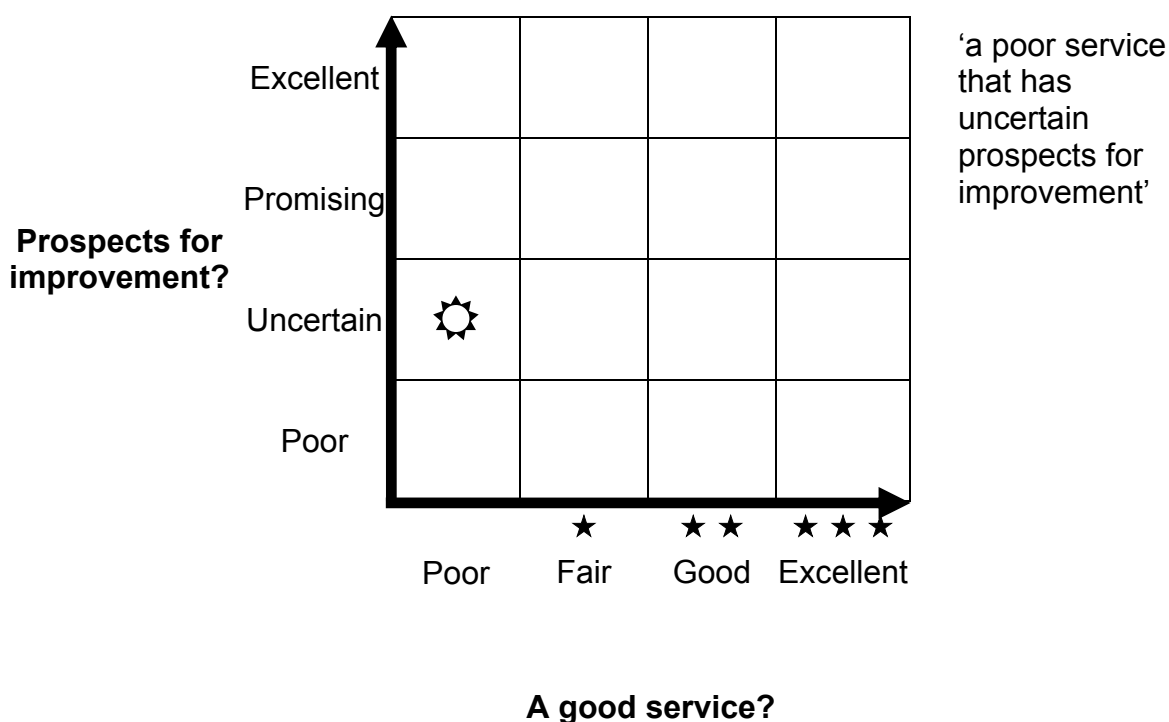
- 1 Planning services at Mid Suffolk District Council are 'poor' with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The planning service does not know about the needs of the whole community or whether it is meeting their needs. It is not engaging or communicating effectively with the public in particular hard to reach groups. The service is not customer driven, it does not publish service standards and the planning control service varies in quality because it does not have robust systems and procedures.
- 3 The Council achievements are not fully meeting national priorities and the added value of the planning service is currently limited, in part due to an old adopted local plan.
- 4 Capacity is stretched within the service. Some decisions made to try to recover the performance of the Planning Control service are detracting from the quality of the planning service delivered to the public. Strategic capacity to support the planning service in the short and medium-term is limited.
- 5 The Council is not delivering value for money through the planning service. Planning control is high cost and poorly performing. There are no service focused value for money targets and opportunities to improve value for money are not being taken. Procurement processes are not fully effective.
- 6 Satisfaction is mixed. Although the Council is maintaining its customer satisfaction rates and taking some effective action to improve access to its services, some stakeholders are not satisfied with the service. Planning decisions are being used to support some vulnerable groups and human rights issues are being addressed through the planning process.
- 7 The Council's track record in improving planning control and planning enforcement is poor. There is slippage in some key corporate initiatives such as the introduction of business process re-engineering which have delayed the recovery of the service.
- 8 The Council has improved its financial management to deal with historic budget deficits. It has made additional investments in the planning service with a view to improving performance but as yet, this investment has not had major impact.
- 9 Planning policy is working effectively with some local communities. It is progressing to target on the new local development framework.
- 10 There is an emerging, challenging vision for the planning service. The Council is investing in performance systems and planning capacity. It is seeking to improve things which will lead to overall service improvement, in particular reviewing the way in which planning services are delivered.

- 11 However, the future vision for the planning service is not yet supported by plans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. Performance management arrangements are having little impact on improving the planning services over the past three years. Plans for improvement are at an early stage of development and have had limited impact. The capacity to bring about change is still stretched.

## Scoring the service

- 12 We have assessed Mid Suffolk District Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>:**



Source: Audit Commission

- 13 The service is a poor, zero-star service because:
- the planning service does not know about the needs of the whole of the community or whether it is meeting those needs;
  - the service is not customer driven;
  - service outcomes against national and local priorities are weak;
  - value for money cannot be demonstrated;

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 8 Environment - Planning Services Summary | Scoring the service

- planning control is high cost and poorly performing and measures to try to improve the speed of determining planning applications is impacting negatively on service quality; and
- procurement processes are not fully effective.

However:

- the Council has taken some effective action to improve access, support vulnerable groups and consider Human Rights.

### 14 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- the Council's track record in improving planning control and planning enforcement performance is poor;
- there has been slippage in implementing key actions to improve the service such as business process re-engineering;
- performance management arrangements are having little impact on improving the planning services;
- the new future vision for the planning service is not yet supported by plans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable; and
- the capacity to bring about change is still stretched.

However:

- the new emerging vision for the planning service is challenging; and
- the Council has made additional investments in the planning service with a view to increasing capacity and improving performance.

## Recommendations

- 15 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 costs<sup>1</sup> 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 Improve the quality of communications with customers and the public in general by:*

- *using effective service monitoring to understand the needs of the whole community and taking action to meet those needs;*
- *implementing whole service protocols which will lead to a more customer focused approach to service delivery; and*
- *integrating learning from high-performing internal services such as building control and other high-performing planning authorities.*

- 16 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction with the planning service; and
- improved service efficiency through better communication.

- 17 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by Spring 2006.

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Consult with service users and the public to, establish, implement and monitor robust, challenging service standards by:*

- *establishing the customer expectations of the service;*
- *establishing the standards which will enable the service to deliver its local and national targets;*
- *engaging all planning staff in the delivery of the standards; and*
- *establishing performance management systems which will ensure that the standards are delivered.*

<sup>1</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

- 18 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- improved service performance; and
  - improved customer care.
- 19 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by Spring 2006.

***Recommendation***

*R3 Improve value for money in planning service delivery by:*

- *understanding the costs of planning service delivery and how they compare to other planning authorities;*
- *linking clear targets for service improvement to future decisions to invest in the service;*
- *integrating value for money considerations and targets into business process re-engineering of the planning service; and*
- *taking effective action to improve corporate and service level procurement.*

- 20 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- improved value for money; and
  - better procurement.
- 21 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by Spring 2006.

***Recommendation***

*R4 Establish, in consultation with internal and external customers, the public and staff, fully resourced plans which will deliver the challenging new vision for planning services by:*

- *determining what criteria need to be met to meet the vision of becoming the 'best planning service in Suffolk';*
- *producing SMART lplans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable to achieve this vision; and*
- *implement the co-ordinated plan to achieve service improvements for local communities.*

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<sup>1</sup> SMART means specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound

- 22 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- effective progress towards becoming the 'best planning service in Suffolk';
  - planning performance which compares favourably to the top 25 per cent of district councils in England; and
  - customer satisfaction which compares favourably to the top 25 per cent of district councils in England.
- 23 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

***Recommendation***

*R5 Ensure the strategic capacity is in place to manage and develop the planning service by:*

- *developing capacity of the service through effective corporate leadership;*
- *seeking alternative approaches to service delivery which are more effective and efficient;*
- *ensuring there are sufficient staff and expertise to deliver the service; and*
- *developing processes throughout the service which will lead to effective service delivery.*

- 24 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- improved council capacity to manage and improve performance in the planning service; and
  - improved council ability to procure planning services more strategically.
- 25 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium cost. This should be implemented by June 2006.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 26 Mid Suffolk District Council is a large rural district covering 87,000 hectares, located to the north west of Ipswich in the county of Suffolk. The population of the district is 87,400 located in 122 parishes. Seventy-three of the parishes in Mid Suffolk have a population of fewer than 500 people. 0.9 per cent of the population come from ethnic minority groups compared to 10.3 per cent in the country as a whole. There are three main market towns, Needham Market, Stowmarket and Eye. Seventy three per cent of the population is located in small villages and hamlets.
- 27 The population of the district grew by 10 per cent between 1991 and 2001, however, the rate of growth is expected to slow down below national and regional levels of growth by 2010 to just under 4 per cent unless external factors such as SnOasis<sup>1</sup> and the Haven Gateway Partnership have an additional impact. One fifth of the population is currently below school leaving age and by 2016, the elderly population is predicted to be 40 per cent of the total population of the district.
- 28 The character of the district has two distinct parts: the north area which is very rural, more sparsely populated and less accessible; and the south, which is more accessible to the A14 where the population is largely located in Needham Market and Stowmarket and larger villages. It is the southern part of the district which has the most pressure for growth.
- 29 Although more than 45 per cent of the population have access to two or more cars or vans, one in eight of the population have no access to cars and rely heavily on public transport.
- 30 Unemployment was at 1 per cent in May 2005 which is very low and below national and regional rates. However, incomes are lower than the rest of the region and the country. Average gross weekly pay in Mid Suffolk is £349.66 per week. Eighty-seven per cent of businesses employ less than 10 people and are therefore sensitive to change. Manufacturing, particularly food related, accounts for nearly one in five jobs. Agricultural jobs are in decline, representing 7 per cent of all jobs. Further decline is expected in these areas of employment over the next five years.

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<sup>1</sup> SnOasis is planned to be the worlds largest indoor winter resort. It is proposed that it will be built at Great Blakenham in Mid Suffolk. In addition to the main development there are also separate proposals for a new railway station, an improved road infrastructure and a substantial housing development in the area.

- 31 Overall deprivation, as measured by the index of multiple deprivation, is low. However, 13 of the 32 wards in the district are in the 10 per cent most deprived in the country in terms of access to services. This deprivation is centred in the east of the district which has been designated as an Objective 2 Transitional area, because of economic difficulties associated with low incomes.
- 32 The district has a rich heritage, with for example just under 5,000 listed buildings because of architectural importance, 28 Designated Conservation Areas, 28 Special Landscape Areas, 1 Ramsar site (Ramsar is an international convention on the conservation of wetland sites), 9 Special Sites of Scientific Interest, 149 County Wildlife sites, 2 Environmentally Sensitive Areas and 75 ancient woodlands. This has an impact on both planning policy and the decisions the Council make on planning applications.
- 33 In addition, many villages now lack essential services such as post offices, shops, health provision and frequent public transport. The availability of affordable housing for young people and the specialist demands of an ageing population are also issues for the planning service.

### **The Council**

- 34 Mid Suffolk is one of six district and one borough council in Suffolk county. The Council is led by a Conservative administration in alliance with the Independent Councillors. There are 30 wards represented by 40 Councillors.
- 35 Under the alternative arrangements the Council chose to adopt the Leader and Cabinet form of political structure. The executive committee is politically balanced and chaired by the leader of the Council. In addition, scrutiny and standards committees are in place. The work of the executive is assisted by three policy panels covering the social, economic and environmental well-being of the district.
- 36 The Council's gross budget for the year 2005/06 is £9,537,000. This was an increase of 6.2 per cent on 2004/05. Financial constraints in 2004/05 meant that the Council had to make 30 posts redundant. Services are currently delivered through seven divisions: Corporate Services; Environment and Planning; Financial Management; Housing; Information and Communications Technologies; Leisure and Amenities; and Social and Economic Development. There are 290 full time staff equivalents employed by the Council.
- 37 The Council is undergoing an operational re-structure which has reduced the number of divisions and altered managerial arrangements. The third and final phase of the re-structure will be complete on 1 December 2005. In addition, frontline services provided by the Council are being seconded to the Council's strategic technological partnership with British Telecom (BT) and the County Council, called Customer Services Direct (CSD). Thirty-five staff have been seconded to CSD so far.

- 38 The Council's aims direction and priorities are outlined in the Corporate Plan 2004 to 2009 which have been informed by public consultation. The headline objectives in the Corporate Plan are:
- a safe community;
  - a healthy community;
  - prosperous, thriving towns and villages;
  - active community involvement;
  - access to fair and affordable services;
  - equal opportunity in a just society;
  - an improved inheritance for future generations; and
  - good corporate governance.
- 39 The Council's longer-term priorities have been developed through public consultation and are supported by its' medium-term financial plan:
- minimise waste through recycling;
  - generate opportunities to improve the supply of affordable housing;
  - meet the decent homes standard;
  - reduce the fear of crime and the opportunities for crime;
  - work with others to continue to improve the equality of access to key services;
  - create a robust financial and management performance culture;
  - achieve effective communication and engagement; and
  - work with others to address the special needs of the younger and older generations.
- 40 The Council is part of a local strategic partnership, the Mid Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which draws together different agencies and organisations to work together to help the delivery of a common set of objectives and priorities. The Mid Suffolk LSP produced a Community Strategy in November 2003 called 'Caring for the Heart of Suffolk'. The headline objectives of the partnership are aligned to those in the Corporate Plan for Mid Suffolk District Council so that the Council is clear in its direction and contribution to achieving the collective aims of the LSP. The Council is part of the Suffolk Local Area Agreement (LAA) but as yet this is not impacting on service planning or delivery.

### **The Council's planning service**

- 41 The comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) carried out in 2004, identified the performance of planning control as weak. Planning control has also been identified as a 'standards authority' by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2005/06 and 2006/07 because it failed to meet the required standards for processing speed of all types of planning applications.

- 42 The purpose of the inspection was to assess how good the service is now and the likelihood of improvement. The focus of the inspection was on planning policy including building conservation and planning control including enforcement however it has not reviewed the building control function. The inspection also considers how the planning service works with other services to achieve council aims and delivers corporate and national objectives. It considers how the service is driven by the needs of the public and service users, whether the service is providing value for money, and if the service is delivering what it plans to do.
- 43 The planning service has a gross budget of £1,063,496 in 2005/06<sup>1</sup> and employs 17 professional staff in planning control including a team of four delivering the enforcement function and 5 professional staff in planning policy. The planning function is supported by two area planning sub-committees and a planning referrals committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: MSDC 2005/06 Budget Book

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 44 The Council has a clear understanding of local challenges and issues such as the need to provide affordable housing and to protect the environment, reflecting the district's rich environmental and historic heritage. The planning service plans priorities and actions are linked to the corporate plan and community strategy.
- 45 The main priorities of the planning control service as set out in the service plan are to speed up the determination of planning applications, to provide a more publicly focussed service through greater engagement and to 'control development in the District through the Local Plan/Local Development Framework (LDF)<sup>1</sup> by applying planning guidance fairly and sensibly for the benefit of the wider community'.
- 46 The planning policy service priorities are largely linked to the preparation of the LDF. This will replace the adopted local plan, preparation of the Council's transport strategy. It should also facilitate the provision of affordable housing.
- 47 The quality of planning guidance is mixed. The local plan is supported by supplementary planning guidance (SPG). For example, the Council has adopted guidance to protect village facilities like pubs and shops from alternative development. This is important given the number of parishes which lack such services and retention of such services is important for social inclusion and to help sustain villages. The Council has produced some specialist guidance such as conservation area appraisals to inform development, however, overall design advice is dependent on the Suffolk Design Guide which is out-of-date.

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

#### Access, customer care and user and community focus

- 48 User focus is not yet central to service delivery. For example, planning control, planning policy and enforcement have not adopted any up-to-date service standards in conjunction with service users and stakeholders, tailored to local need. Customers are not aware of what level of service to expect from the planning service, what is expected of them and are not informed on how well the service is doing in meeting set standards.

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<sup>1</sup> The Local Development Framework is a suite of documents designed to replace the local plan, to provide planning policy and proposals which can be updated more quickly with a focus on delivering wider corporate policy on the ground.

- 49 The enforcement service is not operating to a public set of priorities and the planning enforcement service is not signed up to the Enforcement Concordat.<sup>1</sup> Customers and other stakeholders report that planning enforcement continues to be limited by the need to address the historical backlog of enforcement issues. The public are not aware of priorities and the enforcement function is not yet proactive in its approach to dealing with breaches of planning control.
- 50 Some actions taken by the service are leading to a deterioration in the quality of the services for users. The focus on improving the speed of determining planning applications has led to decisions being made that reduce the quality of service to the public. For example, pre-application discussions with agents have been suspended and the Council has just taken a decision to renew this for a further three months. This led to high levels of dissatisfaction with the service and a lack of clarity as to what was expected of applicants by the service.
- 51 The planning service does not communicate well. Communication with internal customers is ad hoc and informal. External customers have reported that the level of service received from planning control is generally poor. For example, external customers are dissatisfied with the speed and accuracy of communications such as responses to letters, telephone calls and e-mail enquiries. Users reported that decision notices were not clear and had material errors; officer advice was contradictory and sometimes inaccurate and varied according to the level of seniority in the service. Service complaints handling is not fully effective and many of the complaints are associated with poor communication.
- 52 The planning service is not customer driven. Both customers and agents report that some planning staff see customer focus and care as peripheral. Customers were not being routinely informed of delays. Delays are resulting in additional costs to service users. There are concerns that planning control is not sufficiently aware of the impact of planning delays on local people. Poor customer focus could result in a reduced trust in the service.
- 53 The service lacks some specialist skills valued by the community. The service has lost its experienced specialist design officers in Conservation through the Council's cutbacks and staff leaving. The Council has made no arrangements to replace this design expertise or find alternatives despite having the highest number of listed buildings in Suffolk. Service users are concerned about this loss. This decision limits the ability of the service to shape future development effectively.
- 54 Historically, the Council has maintained but not improved customer satisfaction rates in comparison to other Councils. User satisfaction rates as expressed by BVPI 111 has remained unchanged over time relative to other authorities, lying just outside top quartile position in both the 2000/01 and 2003/04 surveys. However, in absolute terms, performance has slightly decreased from 82 per cent to 77 per cent. User satisfaction with the planning service is relatively static but fairly high. More recent customer satisfaction has not been measured but stakeholder views are that it may have deteriorated.

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<sup>1</sup> The Enforcement Concordat is a guide setting out the principles, standards and policy and procedure associated with good planning enforcement agreed by central and local government organisations

- 55 The service has introduced some improvements to service access. Service users report that website developments have improved access to planning services recently through the Planning Portal<sup>i</sup>, allowing the electronic submission of planning applications and progress tracking online leading to the prediction of a significantly higher Pendelton<sup>ii</sup> score. Customer Access points are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant and are providing more access to services, through for example, longer opening hours. The service improved visual aids at planning committees and produced clearer planning committee reports to meet the needs of the public.
- 56 Planning policy is working effectively with some local communities. Planning policy is involved in the support of the development of village appraisals and actively seeks to include relevant land related issues as policy. Local people are helping to shape development.
- 57 The Council applies planning codes of conduct effectively. The Council has a code of conduct and there is evidence that Councillors follow this in reaching planning decisions, for example interests are declared and Councillors receive appropriate probity and planning training before sitting on planning committees. Effective implementation of the codes has an impact for good quality planning decisions.

## Diversity

- 58 The planning service does not understand the needs of the whole community or whether particular groups, such as hard to reach groups, are being disadvantaged by current service delivery. The Council adopted an equalities scheme in 2002 but it is not implementing it. The planning service does not proactively monitor whether any groups are disadvantaged by how the service is delivered and make appropriate changes to ensure equity. For example, planning policy have not yet defined how to tailor techniques of engagement to meet the needs of hard-to-reach groups including gypsy and traveller communities. The service has some more to do to ensure that it fully embraces equality, diversity and human rights.
- 59 The Council has not addressed how it will consult with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. The Council has taken the decision that it will not invest disproportionately in consulting with BME groups. The Council is placing additional investment into revised Suffolk Speaks which could include a further focus on diversity engagement. Opportunities to learn from other work on equalities undertaken by Customer Services Direct<sup>iii</sup> (CSD) have not been fully explored. The Council doesn't currently know whether all users have fair and equal access to services.

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<sup>i</sup> The Planning Portal is the UK Government's planning resource. The site helps the public learn about the planning system, apply for planning permission, find out about local development, appeal against a planning decision and research the latest government policy.

<sup>ii</sup> Pendleton Associates have been appointed by the O.D.P.M. to examine ease of access of planning websites for users. This has resulted in two major surveys in 2003/04 which gives Councils a score up to 21 which is high. In 2004 Mid Suffolk gained a score of 9.

<sup>iii</sup> Customer Services Direct is a joint venture company established between Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk District Council and British Telecommunications plc.

- 60 The adopted local plan has not fully embraced equality and diversity in its policies. The local plan contains a design objective and policy to ensure new development recognises the needs of all users, including people with disabilities and policy relating to the travelling community. However, proposals connected with care in the community such as hostels and refuges and youth such as youth shelters and skateboard parks are absent. The Council is not providing planning policy to meet the needs of the whole community.
- 61 The Council is using some aspects of planning to support some vulnerable groups. The Council has sought to ensure that isolated communities in the rural areas are not disadvantaged by the loss of local facilities and services in villages. It has adopted supplementary planning guidance to seek the retention of local shops, post offices and public houses in villages recognising that vulnerable groups in the local community for example the unemployed, low paid, young and elderly would be affected severely if they are lost.
- 62 The Council is taking some action to address human rights issues effectively. All staff and Councillors have received human rights training although there is need for a further refresh. Human Rights considerations are considered in the preparation of planning reports. It has had no Human Rights claims made against it. Service information can be tailored to support the needs of users. Service access points have access to a translation service if required and service documentation can be made available in Braille or large print on demand.

### **Service outcomes for users and the community**

- 63 The Council local plan policies are based on old research and therefore impact on the planning service's current ability to deliver what it needs to do. A number of the documents which the Council has used to create policy in the adopted local plan are out-of-date. For example, the plan refers to the 1992 'Stowmarket Shopping Study' to inform shopping policy in Stowmarket and the 1991 'study of the Ipswich Travel to Work Area Economy'. In addition, affordable housing thresholds are relatively low but suggested threshold changes have been informed by an up-to-date comprehensive housing needs survey and market appraisal prepared in 2004/05.
- 64 The age of the local plan is not maximising the Council's ability to be sustainable in what it is trying to achieve. The local plan was adopted in 1998 and provides the current policy basis for determining planning applications to 2006. For example, the local plan focuses new development to existing settlements such as Stowmarket. In addition, the local plan seeks to ensure high-quality design using sustainable materials, promote affordable housing, help the farming community diversify, encourage employment opportunities whilst protecting local built and environmental heritage, encourage energy and resource conservation and crime prevention through design. However, there is no recognition of home working and e-business activities in employment policies and public and sustainable transport policy is limited and not proactive.

- 65 The planning service has failed to deliver all it has sought to achieve through the policies in the adopted local plan and it does not fully meet the current government agenda. For example:
- the service has delivered limited outcomes against adopted local plan policies for sustainable transport and affordable housing performance is poor, between 1997 and 2002 it only reached half its target and has remained below annual targets since. Whilst there were some improvement in 2003 it remained below it's own annual target;
  - there is no evidence of delivery against some key government objectives such as renewable energy and the Council is working to densities for new housing below current government expected levels; and
  - the service is not proactive in driving the crime and disorder agenda forward, for example, the onus is put on the developer to engage with Suffolk Constabulary and this is not monitored by the Council.
- 66 Planning Control activity is not based on the implementation of robust systems or procedures. Formal arrangements to co-ordinate planning delivery through a development team approach are not fully embedded. Staff report that systems once in place are now defunct. For example, the enforcement procedures book is no longer used. Leaflets on enforcement priorities no longer up-to-date or in the public domain. Planning control staff report that some are setting up their own systems. A lack of formal systems will detract from the consistency of service delivery.
- 67 Planning enforcement is not fully effective. The quality of how cases have been managed is mixed. Inconsistencies and communication issues have been observed through examination of cases such as letters with contradictory advice issued two weeks apart and not keeping those reporting breaches informed. Very recent cases observed in October and November 2005 are being managed more effectively.
- 68 The Council is achieving some community benefits through S106 agreements with local developers but some are in an ad hoc way. Financial contributions are being achieved for education through a Suffolk-wide protocol. In Eye, on land off Wellington Road it has achieved a financial contribution of £3,096 per dwelling. It is also ensuring that residents in rural areas are not disadvantaged by development through for example, imposing restrictions on the use of concrete pads for the purposes of the storage of animal waste. It is protecting the countryside from inappropriate residential development by restricting subdivision of property and imposing occupancy restrictions.
- 69 Planning is directly contributing to the achievement of some corporate and community objectives. The adopted local plan seeks to provide a balance between environmental, social and economic issues. Planning services are contributing for example to environmental enhancement and increased public access for example through the creation of Hoppit Wood and Lake and seeking to secure housing schemes to meet some community needs such as the very sheltered housing scheme in Haughley. Planning is helping to improve some of the things which are important to local people.

- 70 Planning is protecting some local communities. The planning service has had some success since the introduction of supplementary planning guidance to protect local services in villages. Since its introduction in February 2004, it has saved three local facilities from being lost to other uses
- 71 Planning Policy is making satisfactory progress in delivering some of its service priorities. The government office has confirmed that the council has taken a reasoned approach to developing its LDF. The service has submitted the required first stage documents for the new LDF within government timescales and is on target for completing the framework. It has prioritised the Stowmarket Area Action Plan, an area which has the highest development pressures, and is currently preparing this in tandem with the Core Strategy, Generic Development Control Policies making use of and supplementing consultation used in the local plan review.
- 72 There is some evidence of the planning service working with others to benefit the public. For example, it was instrumental in helping to deliver environmental improvement to Eye, working with the Civic Trust and county Council including the removal of heavy goods vehicles from the town centre which were affecting the historic fabric of the town. The Council used grants to restore key features and improve pedestrian areas.
- 73 The planning service has made good progress in achieving the county Structure Plan housing targets but has not achieved good use of brownfield<sup>1</sup> land (BVPI 106). Between 1996 and 2004, the Council had exceeded the annual completion rate of 400 units per year with 415 units on average being completed and is on target to meet the 2004 to 2016 structure plan requirement of 400 units per year. However, only 40 per cent of new housing was achieved on brownfield land in 2002/03 and 2004/05, although in 2003/04 this improved to 55 per cent. The Government requires councils to develop 60 per cent of new homes on brownfield land by 2008 and Mid Suffolk's performance in 2004/05 was amongst the worst performing district Councils in England.
- 74 The Council is addressing some areas adequately where it is currently out of line with current government policy. For example, it is seeking to reduce thresholds for the requirement of affordable housing issues to increase the potential to deliver more affordable housing, a corporate priority through its first alteration to the adopted local plan which is currently out to consultation. This is ahead of the production of core development control policies in the LDF. In addition it has made progress on preliminary stages of the LDF which will replace the local plan process.

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<sup>1</sup> Land/buildings which have been in previous use. The government definition excludes redundant agricultural buildings and barns.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 75 The planning service is not delivering value for money. The service is not making efficient and economic use of resources.
- 76 There is no corporate framework to steer and guide procurement decisions and the Council's procurement processes are not fully effective. The Council does not have a procurement strategy or a procurement champion. Other than some types of stationery there is no corporate approach to the purchase of goods or services such as those provided by consultants. In the absence of good procurement practice the Council does not know whether it is getting value for money or not.
- 77 There is no corporate requirement for service-led value for money targets. Corporately the Council has identified savings and investments which mean that it can demonstrate achievement of its Gershon targets. There are no efficiency or economy targets identified at service level. The Council anticipates that savings will result from a process of business process re-engineering but this has not started yet. Bids for planning service growth are not being linked to targeted improvements in service quality. The Scrutiny Committee has not undertaken reviews of budgets and costs. Councillors have not received training on budget and value for money issues except the portfolio holder for finance.
- 78 The Council has not used robust financial reporting to underpin service delivery. During the first half year (2005/06), robust financial reporting was not in place, for example, no data on forecast outturn was available. The poor reporting was primarily due to difficulties with the introduction of the Oracle financial management system. Whilst the system is now in place financial reporting remains limited, for example, the allocation of costs to priorities is not in place.
- 79 Some aspects of the planning service are high cost but have poor performance. The planning service is not aware of all of its costs. The cost of planning per head of population has been in the most expensive quartile in comparison with other district Councils in both 2002/03 and 2003/04 and in absolute terms marginally increased over the same period. While costs are relatively high, the service is under-performing in terms of the time taken to determine planning applications across all types of planning application.<sup>1</sup> The gross planning cost of the service is relatively expensive to council tax payers in comparison to other councils.

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<sup>1</sup> The cost BVPI, for 2002/03 and 2003/04 shows that the service is high cost and yet the service is under performing against planning speed indicators. For example, in 2003/04 the council was in the worst performing of similar councils in relation to the determination of 'minor' and 'other' applications within eight weeks. Unaudited performance in 2004/05 show that the council has improved its performance in these areas from 33 per cent in 2003/04 to 43 per cent in 2004/05 for 'minor' applications and from 62 per cent in 2003/04 to 69 per cent in 2004/05 for 'other' applications determined in eight weeks. 'Major' applications performance however has declined from 43 per cent (a below median performance against other councils) to 25 per cent over the same period. Performance against planning speed performance indicators for 2004/05 are in the worst performing district councils in England for all categories. This is against government targets of determining 60 per cent of major applications in 13 weeks; 65 per cent of 'minor' applications and 80 per cent of 'other' applications in 8 weeks. The majority of the council's planning applications determined are 'other' and 'minor' applications, comprising over 90 per cent of applications determined in 2002/03 and 2003/04. The council is a 'planning standards' authority against all speed indicators in 2005/06 and 2006/07, a government designation, where performance against planning speed indicators is below the minimum standard expected by government. An authority can be designated as a 'planning standards' authority on the basis of performance against any one/or more of the categories of planning application type.

- 80 There is little awareness of service costs. Other than the planning cost performance indicator which is now no longer a Best Value Performance Indicator, there is no measurement of the cost of service delivery. Accurate information on costs has not been used by the overall service to decide priorities and strategically manage resources. Service plan priority actions have not been costed in the planning service plans over the last three years. The overall service is not able to ensure that it has adequate resources to implement its identified priority actions and to demonstrate effective value for money.
- 81 The planning service is not making use of opportunities to improve value for money. The poor performance of planning control against the speed in which it determines planning applications has resulted in lower than average awards from the government in the form of planning delivery grant to invest in improving services. In 2004/05, the planning service received £102,975 against a Council average of £320,000. Some opportunities have been taken to pool resources, such as the preparation of sustainability appraisal with other Suffolk Councils. However, other opportunities have been missed, such as combining consultation on the Local Development Framework with other corporate consultation to help pool resources and share financial burdens on consultation and engaging the public in relation to the Local Development Framework. In addition there is no evidence that the planning service has fully explored alternative methods of service delivery.
- 82 The service is not attracting sufficient inward investment from developers to contribute effectively to corporate objectives. The service is using legal agreements to seek some appropriate investment for example in education and children's play space to deliver improvement, however, little seems to have been achieved for example in relation to affordable housing, regeneration, older children's play space, health services, crime reduction and habitat protection.
- 83 The planning service is not improving value for money by learning from others. There is little internal learning from other high performing services in the Council such as building control. The Council has withdrawn from the rural benchmarking club and there is no evidence that the planning control service has learnt from high performing services in other Councils. The service cannot demonstrate that it is learning from information about public need and satisfaction.
- 84 The Council has improved its financial management and dealt with historic budget deficits effectively but future capital expenditure is uncertain. The Council's zero-based budgeting approach has led to greater stability in the budgeting process. It has replenished its reserve fund and earmarked reserves for the planning function primarily by ring fencing the planning development grant. The Council is the highest performing Council in Suffolk in terms of achieving Gershon savings. A new medium-term financial strategy for 2004/09 is now in place linked to Council priorities. However, an affordable capital programme has not been agreed.

- 85 The Council has sought to invest in improving then planning service. The Council has ring-fenced the planning delivery grant to improve planning services. In order to deal with high staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment the Council has paid market supplements and increased salaries for planning staff. In response to concerns about the quality of information technology available to the planning services, the Council invested £600,000 of its e-government income in the purchase of the ACOLAID system.<sup>1</sup> The Council is improving value for money through some effective investment.
- 86 Partnership working has resulted in some improvements to value for money. Systems are in place which ensures that planning control is informed of relevant issues by building control. The Council consults and engages effectively with some parish councils eg over village appraisals. Effective partnership working with Councils, the developer and other agencies has resulted in progress with the SnOasis initiative.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ACOLAID is a computer software package which provides a system for information storage and performance management. It was introduced in 2005 across a number of departments in the Council.

<sup>11</sup> SnOasis is planned to be the worlds largest indoor winter resort. It is proposed that it will be built at Great Blakenham in Mid Suffolk. In addition to the main development there are also separate proposals for a new railway station, an improved road infrastructure and a substantial housing development in the area.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 87 The track record of improvement in planning control is weak. Improvements in planning control performance are limited and have not reflected the additional investments placed in them. Performance in planning control is also poor.
- 88 The Council is regarded by ODPM as having a poor track record and is deemed a 'planning standards authority'. The Council was designated a standards authority in 2002/03, because of slow determination times for 'other' planning applications. Although the Council showed improvement in 2004/05, it was re-designated as a standards authority in 2005/06 against all types of planning application and it has recently been indicated by the ODPM that it will remain as a planning standards authority in 2006/07.
- 89 There are recent marginal improvements in some of the planning indicators but overall performance remains weak. The service is prioritising improvements in its performance in relation to the speed of processing of planning applications, a national priority. For example, between 2002/03 and 2004/05, the number of applications received fell by 6 per cent although over the same period, the number of applications determined rose by 26.9 per cent, thereby helping to reduce the backlog. Although, speed in determining planning applications showed some improvement over this period, the council is still operating at below expected standards on the speed of determining planning applications in 2005/06 on all types of application. It is therefore performing significantly below the government expected targets. In addition, the number of planning decisions made by officers has dropped from 84.6 per cent in 2003/04 to 65.8 per cent in 2004/05 below the 90 per cent target expected by government.
- 90 The Council believes that planning control performance will remain weak for some time. Corporate performance management reports identify that the resolution of issues affecting planning control performance is unlikely to lead to overall improvements in the short-term. Performance with respect to the registration of plans is weak. The time to register plans was reduced from 25 to 5 days in early summer 2005 but staffing issues relating to holidays and sickness has led to it increasing to 20 days. Planning costs remain high and relative performance when compared to other districts is unchanged.
- 91 The planning enforcement service is improving but remains weak. The number of complaints has risen due to action designed to increase awareness. The enforcement team has made progress in addressing backlog of 450 visits. Poor enforcement will mean that planning policy and guidance may not be implemented effectively.

- 92 There is evidence of slippage in key initiatives which could support the recovery of planning services. There have been delays in initiating a business process re-engineering (BPR) of planning services. The new IT system, ACOLAID, has been introduced but is not fully functional in planning services. The Council is unable to deliver its communication and community engagement action plan. Aspects of the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) improvement plan such as improvements to planning administration have not been delivered.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 93 The future vision for the planning service is not yet supported by plans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. The delivery of the vision is being linked to a business process re-engineering process to be undertaken by an external consultancy. Whilst the consultant has been identified and £80,000 of planning delivery grant ring fenced to pay for the process, no formal agreement is in place.
- 94 The planning services improvement plan (2004/07) is being monitored but as yet is having limited impact. The improvement plan is monitored on a monthly basis by the Planning Control Manager and progress is reported monthly to management team and quarterly to Scrutiny Committee. Whilst progress with the plan is recorded, its impact on service delivery and outcomes is mixed. There is not a common understanding of its relevance and importance amongst Councillors and officers.
- 95 The service is not systematically benchmarking its planning performance against other councils and there is little evidence that they are seeking to learn from the best. The Council has determined not to use benchmarking to inform its improvement plans. Whilst there is some limited evidence of good practice being introduced from other councils, particularly in planning policy, this is not widespread and has had little impact on planning control improvement.
- 96 Performance systems are not fully embedded. 'Performance plus' is being used to reflect information provided by services in a corporate context but it is not adding value. The project to introduce ACOLAID did not meet all of its targets and the system is not fully embedded, for example, it is not being used by planning policy. Planning control has not undertaken all of the required staff appraisals. The impact of training on decision-making is not monitored robustly. There is no overarching performance framework for planning services.
- 97 Future plans for the planning committee have not been agreed. Officers have not made clear to Councillors the benefits of introducing a single planning committee. Councillors are not convinced that capacity would be enhanced through the creation of a single planning committee or that the speed of planning decisions would be increased. Councillors are concerned that they would lose local decision-making.

- 98 Councillors are not monitoring performance effectively. Whilst Scrutiny Committee undertakes a quarterly review of planning service performance, there is little evidence of impact. The portfolio holder for planning established an ad hoc group of Councillors and senior officers to monitor planning performance. This group is informal and has no specific powers which will allow it to make a difference. However, the group does have the power to request policy reviews. Whilst checklists are in place to ensure that Human Rights legislation is being considered they are not monitored to ensure completion.
- 99 The Council is not managing the risks and performance of some external consultants effectively. The Council has not addressed the risk of losing key consultants effectively and there is limited succession planning for consultants. The selection of consultants is not formal and is based on informal networks. Reporting lines and management responsibility for consultants is not always clear. Unclear management of consultants could prejudice expected outcomes being achieved.
- 100 There is an emerging, challenging vision for the planning service with publicly stated commitment from senior councillors and officers. Councillors and senior officers have proposed that, within the context of delivering the corporate objectives three areas should be prioritised: planning; housing benefit; and waste. The aspiration for the planning service is that it should become 'the best planning service in Suffolk'. These proposals will be presented to full Council, for ratification in December 2005. A clear and challenging vision will support service improvements.
- 101 Performance management focuses on the delivery of corporate objectives. The appraisal process clearly links individual performance to the delivery of service and corporate objectives. The service planning process demonstrates how individual services contribute the achievement of corporate plans. In response to the SnOasis initiative the Council has established a task and finish group to identify the outcomes required by the Council.
- 102 The Council has invested in new performance systems that are not yet driving required improvements. The Council purchased 'Performance plus' software in 2003 and uses it to provide corporate information on the achievement of corporate priorities. ACOLAID was purchased using £600,000 of e-government money in order to replace an obsolete IT system used by planning services and a number of other departments such as building control and environmental services. The system can provide detailed information about service performance but this information is not being used effectively.

## **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 103 The Council has taken some action to try to address capacity issues but these are short-term and not embedded:
- internal secondment, for example, economic development seconded a member of staff to planning control for a year and the head of planning policy led the Planning Control section for six months;

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- appointing an external consultant to increase its specialist capacity in response to receipt of a major planning application for SnOasis; and
- extending its resources with appropriate in-house expertise for example, it is taking a team approach to the development of the Local Development Framework.

- 104** The Council has taken some effective action to reduce staff turnover. The Council is investing in succession planning to develop new professional planners in-house. It has introduced 'golden hellos' to attract staff to join the Council's planning service and increased salaries to make them more competitive. These actions have been effective in decreasing staff turnover identified as a key issue in some aspects of poor performance.
- 105** The planning service is seeking to improve some of the right things but there is no measurable impact at this time. Over the last year the Council has created a planning enforcement team. In the current year, the planning delivery grant will be used to appoint three additional staff. Legal services have invested in a locum solicitor to support the dedicated enforcement team. Two additional staff will be dedicated to improving the achievement of planning benefits through S106 agreements. The third post will be focused on complaints handling and improvements to customer care. The introduction of 'plans online' via local libraries across the district and by general internet will be in place in January 2007. The public will be able to access comprehensive planning information locally and outside of office hours.
- 106** The Council is seeking to improve its procurement function. In the current round of management restructuring a new post with responsibility for corporate procurement has been established and an additional procurement post supported. There are proposals to work with two other district councils and the county Council to undertake some joint purchasing of goods and services. A procurement day has been arranged with an external consultancy which will also offer coaching and mentoring for officers over the next year. Improved procurement should lead to the Council delivering better value for money for the local community.
- 107** The Council is investing in changing the way that the planning service is delivered but this is at an early stage. In 2003/04, recharged planning expenditure was £939,000, in 2004/05 it had risen to £1,220,000 demonstrating the increased investment in the service. The Council is also investing in the business process re-engineering(bpr) of planning services. The project management of the bpr process has not clearly identified what the Council wants from this process Councillor expectations are that it will improve both efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

- 108** Training opportunities for staff and Councillors are improving. Customer services Direct is increasing the breadth of training available to all staff in the Council. Service Heads retain training budgets for professional updating and staff report that they are able to attend qualificatory and professional updating courses. Councillors who are members of planning committees are required to attend training. Training programmes are also available both on charring skills and planning policy. Special training will be provided for those who will consider the major SnOasis planning application in 2006. Effective training will enable the Council to develop the capacity of its staff and councillors.
- 109** Many of the Council's plans to improve the planning service are at an early stage and, as yet, untested. For example, no formal process or timescale has been agreed concerning the proposed business process re-engineering of the planning control service. There are plans to introduce i-procurement through the strategic technological partnership (CSD) but these are at an early stage. Whilst front office planning staff will transfer to CSD at the end of the November, some key decisions and processes have not been agreed. Some Councillors consider that planning related training is not sufficiently practical and interactive. It is unclear how the planning service ensures that Councillor training adds quality to decision-making.
- 110** The service has lost some specialist capacity due to staff cuts. Two conservation officers and a linked administration post have been lost and not re-advertised. Some posts remain unfilled. Service users identify that this has had a significant impact on the quality of service provided by the planning service particularly in an area with a large number of listed buildings. Users report a lack of flexibility and experience. The service has not yet demonstrated an awareness of the resources required to implement the statement of community involvement, a key part of the successful development of the Local Development Framework in conjunction with local communities.
- 111** There is insufficient IT support for the introduction and embedding of new systems. The planning control champion for the introduction of the ACOLAID system has had to be moved to other duties. Other systems users report similar problems and additional resource has been made available for more support time from CSD. The updating of the 'Performance plus' system has also been delayed by the loss of dedicated IT support. IT systems which are not supported effectively will be inconsistent and their full capacity will not be available.