

Corporate Assessment Report

December 2005



Corporate Assessment

Stoke on Trent City Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

- sustainable communities and transport;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities;
- older people; and
- children and young people.

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Stoke-on-Trent City Council is performing adequately. The Council has undergone a significant amount of change in recent times. The Council and its partners are now focused on the wider strategies that the city needs in order to deliver its vision of a successful city. The Council is putting in place many of the building blocks that will achieve this and enhancing its capacity but has some way to go. The pace of change could have been faster and there is variability in the quality of the services that are provided. Housing services have improved significantly and there have been successful outcomes in the fields of education and safer communities. However, the services provided in children's social care are poor. The benefits service has been poor and this is critical in such a deprived community although this is now improving.
- 6 The Council faces a challenging agenda. By any measure the city of Stoke-on-Trent is a highly deprived city with significant areas of multiple deprivation. The area is ranked the 18th most deprived district in England and this level of deprivation is tangible to visitors to the area. The Council has set a clear vision for the future - 'Making Stoke-on-Trent a better place to live, learn, work and enjoy'. Five corporate priorities have been set on which to measure progress of delivery of the vision. The corporate plan and community strategy have been cross-referenced to strengthen links. This framework will help the Council to plan improvements that reflect the needs of the local community. Stronger alignment of programmes and strategies has now emerged, including the key areas of planning and economic development, which are vital to the city's future success.
- 7 The Council is starting to work well in partnership in order to achieve the vision. The Council has a track record in this area but partnership working is now more purposeful around common agendas and the Council is showing effective community leadership. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) involves a wide range of stakeholders and its ambitions and actions clearly link to the Council's key strategies. The Council is preparing for the introduction of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and this will become the business plan for delivering the aims of the community strategy.
- 8 The Council is a low spending authority, spending approximately £200 per head below authorities in similarly deprived areas. The Council manages its costs effectively against a low budget but the achievement of future ambitions is based on the delivery of challenging efficiency savings and the attraction of external funding from a variety of sources. The approach to value for money is hampered by not bringing cost and quality measures together.
- 9 The Council has a clear understanding of what matters to local people and priorities do take into consideration the needs of all parts of the community. The Council has strategies and plans in place which relate to the ambitions determined for the local area. However, the Council has not comprehensively translated its vision and ambitions into clear and measurable priorities for improvement and there has been a lack of robust action to deliver the strategies.

- 10 The capacity of the Council has lagged behind its ambition. Some aspects are positive, such as the Council's willingness to explore and use alternative methods of procurement and partnership working. However, despite having able and committed staff the Council has had significant problems in recruitment and retention in some areas. Many of the human resource systems are not fully embedded and some basic systems are not effective.
- 11 The Council's unique political structure has endured some teething problems but is now starting to focus on a more coherent agenda for the city. The multi-centre nature of the city has resulted in some decision making being made on the basis of more localised interests. The current political and managerial leadership is working hard to make the elected mayor and council manager arrangements chosen by the people of Stoke-on-Trent work well. The use of vehicles such as the council manager's forum and the operation of overview and scrutiny is allowing members to be effectively drawn into the decision making process and this has produced a clearer focus on the solutions to the area's problems.
- 12 The Council's approach to performance management is adequate. There is a clear hierarchy of plans in place leading from the community strategy down to directorate service plans. Performance information is reported regularly to members and senior officers with some innovative approaches being used in some areas to manage performance. The approach across the Council is not consistent and performance management systems have not prevented significant failures occurring in important areas such as benefits and social care. Not all service plans are of the same quality. Service standards are comprehensively used, acted on and reported in some areas but are not available in others. Some basic systems in human resources are inadequate. The Council is developing a number of other systems which will support the existing systems in due course but are not yet fully developed.
- 13 The Council has provided positive leadership to the community cohesion agenda through a number of mechanisms. Individual members have been given the roles of champions for older people, diversity, communication and consultation. The Council faces some significant challenges in dealing with race relations issues. The number of racial incidents remains in the worst 25 per cent and race relations are perceived to be getting worse. The Council has a good record of making sure further action is taken after racial incidents occur. The Council employs a number of consultation methods which have provided a solid base upon which to base policy decisions. Some methods have been well planned and the results used, but others methods have not been utilised to the same extent. Whilst it is clear that the Council consults across a wide spectrum, there is still a lack of clarity about the overall type and depth of the consultation. The current LSP sponsored consultation audit should provide a basis to achieve this clarity.
- 14 There is a low level of customer satisfaction with services. The overall satisfaction with the Council fell from 59 per cent in the 2000/01 survey to 39 per cent in the 2003/04 survey but has risen 10 percentage points to 49 per cent in 2004/05. This is a positive result, albeit from a low baseline when the trend nationally is of falling satisfaction.

Areas for improvement

- 15 Stoke-on-Trent City Council is undergoing a considerable period of change at the present time. The political structure still needs further time to mature and is subject to referendum and there is a new staffing structure which has only been implemented at senior level to date. There are many new policies and practices being introduced which are still incomplete or need time to be fully embedded in the organisation. As such the areas of improvement are as much to do with embedding policies and strategies that are already in place to ensure that they achieve meaningful outcomes as they are to do with new actions.
- 16 Critical to the future success of the Council in its ambitions is that the current practices in recruitment, retention and human resources strategies generally are fully developed and embedded. The new staffing structure below the most senior level which reflects the realignment of directorate functions is critical to the achievement of future ambitions and needs to be effectively implemented in full consultation with staff on the aims and objectives behind it.
- 17 The achievement of ambitions is based on the delivery of the stretching efficiency savings projected in the annual efficiency statement and the delivery of the medium term financial strategy, including the zero based budgeting exercise. This process requires rigorous project and performance management in order to ensure its delivery and staff need to be fully engaged over any budget reductions or savings.
- 18 There is extensive community engagement through a number of processes. The results of the LSP led consultation audit should be built on to ensure there is a clearer strategic focus on how that community engagement and consultation takes place for the future.
- 19 The Council needs to improve its performance management so that it is more consistent, rigorous and identifies and remedies underperformance at an early stage. Performance management within the organisation should be more about outcomes and needs to develop shared learning.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
Overall corporate assessment score**		2
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 20 The city of Stoke-on-Trent is located close to the M6 motorway mid way between the conurbations of the West Midlands and Greater Manchester. Stoke-on-Trent forms the core of the sub-regional conurbation of North Staffordshire. The geography of the area is unusual in that the city is long and narrow in nature. It is approximately 16 kilometres from north to south and six kilometres from east to west. A key feature is its multi-centre nature. There are six towns (Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton) making up the city. The city centre itself is actually in the town of Hanley not Stoke-on-Trent. Although Hanley is the main centre it does not constitute a city centre of the scale that would normally exist in a city of this size.
- 21 The population is around 238,000 living in around 108,000 households. There is a relatively small population from BME communities at around 5 per cent with around half of this group being of Pakistani origin. The population at school age shows the BME population is around 10 per cent however. Over the last decade the area has had a declining population mainly as a result of outward migration. Birth rates have been falling more rapidly than average and there is an increasing older population. There is little in the way of inward migration which may be a reflection of the levels of deprivation in the area.
- 22 The area was founded on the mining and pottery industries. Mining no longer exists in the area and the pottery industry has suffered major decline in more recent years. Previous industrial land use has left the area with ground instability affecting significant parts of the city as well as a worn out infrastructure. The levels of decline are highly visible throughout the area. However, one third of the area is devoted to green space much of it reclaimed from previous industrial usage. The city faces major challenges in regenerating the area and restoring the infrastructure and currently has the lowest business start up rate per person in the West Midlands.
- 23 The area experiences high levels of deprivation and the area is ranked 18th most deprived local authority district in England out of the 354 Local Authority areas. The levels of deprivation are reflected in the health of the population and the area has high rates of long term limiting illness. The people of the city are more likely to die early and suffer poorer health than most other areas. Around one in four of the population live in areas that are in the 10 per cent most deprived areas of England. Average household income is more than 25 per cent below the national average and levels of income support are 50 per cent above the national average. House values are amongst the lowest in the country with 94 per cent of the housing stock falling into council tax bands A-C.

The Council

- 24 The City Council has a total of 60 members of which one third are subject to election in three years out of four. Currently 33 seats are held by the Labour Party, 11 are from the Stoke-on-Trent Independent Group, 5 are from the Conservative Party, 5 are from the Liberal Democrats and the British National Party has 2 members. There are also four non-aligned members.
- 25 The governance arrangements of Stoke-on-Trent are unique in England. The Council operates an elected mayor and council manager model which was chosen following a referendum in 2002. The current mayor has been in post since May 2005 and is a member of the majority Labour group. The previous mayor was an independent member although the Council was Labour controlled during his time in office.
- 26 Under this system the executive is made up of the council manager and mayor and the remaining members are effectively placed in a scrutiny role. Under the constitution the executive is responsible for most day to day decisions although in practice these matters are often delegated to officers. The executive constitutionally has to make decisions in line with the Council's overall policies and budget. Decisions which are outside the budget and policy framework must be referred to the Council as a whole. When major decisions are to be discussed or made, these are published in the executive's forward plan in so far as they can be anticipated. Overview and scrutiny have been realigned to eight commissions with one management committee. Constitutionally the role of overview and scrutiny is to report and recommend to the Council as a whole and the executive on policies, budgets and service delivery and monitor the decisions of the executive. They can 'call in' decisions made by the executive which have not yet been implemented although in fact there are a low number of 'call ins'.
- 27 The Council has a revenue budget of £281 million for 2005/06. The council tax for a band D property is £946. Overall the Council is a low spending authority spending an estimated £200 per head of the population less than authorities in similarly deprived areas. Council tax rises are projected to rise by around 5 per cent per annum over three years based on the medium term financial strategy. The Council has publicly reaffirmed its commitment to set a low council tax, which has resulted in it being a low spending authority in the context of the current spending formula.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 28 The Council is performing well in this area.
- 29 The ambitions of the Council are based on a shared understanding, which is integrated within the community strategy, and reflect government priorities. Through the community plan and the LSP the Council has developed an overarching strategic vision and set of clear and challenging ambitions, aims and objectives for the community. These are designed to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area. Working groups are formed around the priorities of the community plan which involve parties outside the LSP partners themselves. The focus of the LSP is on the delivery of floor targets and closing the gap with other areas given the levels of deprivation in the city. The ambitions are appropriate for an area that has suffered major decline with the high levels of deprivation prevalent in the city.
- 30 The vision for the future - 'Making Stoke-on-Trent a better place to live, learn, work and enjoy' is supported by six core values namely, promoting social inclusion, diversity, openness and transparency, confidence, high standards and robust partnerships. Five corporate priorities have been set on which to measure progress of delivery of the vision. The corporate plan and community strategy have been cross-referenced to strengthen the links.
- 31 The Council has underpinned its ambitions with a close alignment of the scrutiny function to the ambitions. The LSP and the Council are working together and with other partners to gather resources to deliver the ambitions and are well prepared for the introduction of a LAA in 2006. This framework will help the Council to plan improvements that reflect the needs of the local community.
- 32 There are 20 ward plans covering the whole city which set out plans for those areas. Stronger alignment with other programmes and strategies is emerging, including the key areas of planning and economic development. Council staff, members and partners have a clear understanding of the objectives of the Council. This will help the Council to ensure that services direct their efforts to achieving the key priorities.
- 33 Whilst the Council has been involved in partnership working for some time this working is now more purposeful. There is real enthusiasm amongst the partners for the LAA as they are beginning to see a clear line of sight towards the LAA as the business plan for the LSP and the outcomes that are being sought.

- 34 The Council has underpinned the ambitions with a robust knowledge of the community. The Knowledge Management Unit has been in operation for some years and has an impressive range of information down to a local level. The unit has developed data down to 'natural neighbourhood' level and this information has been used to inform a number of strategies. The Council has used the data to generate the strategies of both the housing market pathfinder (RENEW) and the regeneration strategies of the Council. The work of the unit has been influential in helping partners such as the LSP improve their data. Whilst the data that is available gives a solid evidential platform for decision making the work of the unit is not fully embedded in the policy making framework yet. Not all of the elements of the Council are using it to its full potential.
- 35 The Council employs a number of consultation methods, such as surveys, citizens panels, service user groups and similar, and community forums. Some methods have been planned and the results utilised, such as the MORI Staff Surveys, other methods appear not to have been utilised to the same extent. Some teams have used extensive consultation mechanisms, such as the neighbourhood renewal teams, whilst others have limited themselves to one method. Whilst it is clear that the Council consults on a wide spectrum and is able to point to the use of the results in many areas, there is potential to improve the co-ordination of consultation efforts. This has started to be supported by the consultation audit which is currently underway.
- 36 The Council uses a range of methods to engage with communities and understand their needs using vehicles such as neighbourhood forums and area implementation teams (AITs). AITs are made up of diverse groups including black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. There is further involvement with representative groups, for example disabilities groups and the Race Equalities Council (REC). BME groups are also members of the LSP. Area facilitators were removed at the last budget round but subsequently quarterly community events have been held across all wards in the City. Changes to the Ward plans have been made following these events. This is helping the Council to ensure that decisions are based on the needs of the community.
- 37 The multi-centre nature of the city has often previously shown itself by the presentation of localised interests on the Council. However, the Council has more recently shown itself willing to take difficult decisions and members have become increasingly focused on the wider agenda as evidenced by the support for Hanley as the city centre and major area of investment. The integration of the plans for RENEW, the Regeneration Zone and the consolidation of the strategies of English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation support this. Work is under way to combine the boards of RENEW, and the Regeneration Zone to foster this integration. The elected mayoral system itself, whilst not particularly liked by many members, has brought focus to wider regeneration agenda in particular. This is important given the critical nature of regeneration of the area to the achievement of ambitions.

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- 38** The Council is demonstrating community leadership through its support for the BME community. The mayor was active in engaging the Muslim community after the London bombings in order to allay fears. The Council actively supported the building of a community centre as an extension to a local mosque as a 'community centre for all'. This is important in helping race relations and focusing the community on the ambition to be a 'thriving and diverse city by 2014.'
- 39** The Council is striking a balance between competing demands and expectations in the light of available resources. This involves matching the levels of council tax and the expenditure needed for the Council to achieve its ambitions and deliver its statutory functions. The Council has used a SIMALTO survey on what matters to customers in order to facilitate decisions on future spending priorities. As a low spending authority the achievement of the aims is based on the delivery of ambitious efficiency savings and the attraction of significant levels of external funding.

Prioritisation

- 40** The Council's performance is adequate in this area.
- 41** The Council has a clear understanding of what matters to local people and priorities do take into consideration the needs of all parts of the community and those of the area. The Council's priorities as specified in the Corporate Plan 2005/08 are:
- creating a vibrant city with thriving communities;
 - building a safer city;
 - delivering better outcomes for children and young people;
 - promoting health and independence; and
 - managing resources and delivering value for money.
- 42** The Council has strategies and plans in place which relate to the ambitions determined for the local area, especially in relation to physical regeneration, education, community safety and housing. However, the Council has not comprehensively translated its vision and ambitions into clear and measurable priorities for improvement and there has been a lack of robust action to deliver the strategies. Priorities are underpinned by a variety of action plans but these are of varying quality. As a result, the Council's priorities to date have not been fully integrated with policy objectives, service and financial plans and organisational and individual performance targets.
- 43** Since 2001/02 the Council has used a resource allocation framework which has been used to assist in the development of the City Council's budget strategy. The process seeks to allocate budgets to services by awarding scores over a number of criteria, one of which is its corporate priority. This can result in budget protection for some services and a 10 per cent cut in the budget for others. Whilst such a process has allowed some high level budget allocation based on overall service priority this has not happened at a lower level.

This is in the context of the high levels of deprivation within the city and the difficulty the council faces in 'prioritising' activities. Although there has been a previous lack of clarity about priorities and non priorities at a more detailed level, the Council now has a shared understanding of the priorities around regeneration and children's services. While not widespread, the Council has disinvested in certain areas and has plans in place to use procurement vehicles to target investments, in line with the Resource Allocation Framework. The Council has recognised the need to improve its resource allocation process and so has developed a policy and resource prioritisation framework which will focus on this area in 2006.

- 44 Linkages between priorities and resources have not been made consistently and budget changes have mainly been incremental. However the Council is in a much better position now to determine budgets based on priorities due to greater coherence of plans and strategies. It is currently consulting internally on a three year financial plan from 2006/07. This plan introduces zero based budgeting into the financial planning process and will allow the Council to focus resources better on corporate priorities.
- 45 The Council can point to some individual examples of directing resources to meet priorities however. For example the Council has successfully delivered a number of private finance initiatives (PFI) schemes the most notable of which is the project will have refurbished or replaced all infant and primary schools in the area. Recently the Council agreed to fund ten extra community support officers in addition to the 18 already funded by the police as a means of delivering its ambitions for a safer community. This has been reinforced by adopting a policy of clearing broken glass immediately and operating a 24 hour clean up rota for the city centre. On a small scale the Mayor's service improvement fund has been used to direct some resources to identified priorities.
- 46 There is clarity around the decision making process with the opportunity for scrutiny commissions to influence the policy and performance of the Council in the delivery of services. The Council has recently enhanced the officer support to members to enable them to participate in the overview and scrutiny role more effectively. This should ensure that there is a more rigorous approach to the direction of resources and the articulation of priorities.
- 47 There are some examples of evidence of learning from experiences and successes. The Council has also been positive in responding to the results and recommendations of external scrutiny. However, the Council has not consistently reviewed and monitored priorities and their outcomes to ensure that a clear focus on outcomes is maintained and the necessary changes made in the light of this learning. Whilst the communication of priorities has not been clear and effective to members, staff, partners and the community in the past this is changing and the Council is becoming far more explicit. Some stakeholders feel that decisions about plans and priorities have not been clear and timely. Politicians and officers are now giving more effective strategic direction to the work of the Council.

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- 48** All departments have undergone equalities impact assessments feeding into business plans. This results in the needs of disadvantaged groups being better addressed, for example a programme in schools to enable reporting of racial incidents and targeting prejudicial practices.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 49 The Council's performance in this area is adequate.
- 50 The Council does not yet have all the systems in place to maximise its capacity. It has recognised the need to improve key building blocks, but some of this remains at a relatively early stage. For example, the procurement function is being re-enforced and a new HR strategy is in place. Although the HR framework is in place, this is not yet fully embedded and as a result it is limiting the capacity of the Council to deliver its ambitions.
- 51 The Council has a robust financial strategy which focuses on priorities and clearly lays out that council tax rises will be limited to around 5 per cent. It has based future strategies on the delivery of ambitious efficiency gains to help to supplement the significant sums of money generated through regeneration activity. It is restructuring budgets to ensure services are adequately financed and work has commenced to 'zero base' budgets in education and social services. Active monitoring takes place through the corporate management team and members. The annual efficiency statement (AES) seeks to identify the means for extracting £8.7 million of cashable and non-cashable savings from the Council's budget. The AES is subject to active management through a quarterly monitoring process by the executive and it is currently on track to achieve the necessary savings.
- 52 The Council has taken steps to build capacity through the strategic use of partnerships a good example of which is the work of the LSP. The voluntary sector compact sets out the framework within which partnership, joint working, communication, support and agreements are conducted, supplied and negotiated. This is a clear and comprehensive framework setting out the Council's approach to working with the voluntary sector. This is helping to provide a more co-ordinated approach to delivering services.
- 53 The implementing e-government (IEG) statement outlines the progress made to date and is on target to meet the December 2005 deadline. A key part of the infrastructure for e-government service delivery is a new customer relationship management system (CRM), currently scheduled to be in place by March 2006. It is delivering the system in partnership with the nine other councils in Staffordshire as part of the Staffordshire e-government programme (Staffordshire Connect) which has recently been recognised with a national award.

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- 54** The Council is using sound procurement practice in some areas to improve cost effectiveness but good procurement practices are not consistently applied across all services particularly in the area of contract management and social care commissioning. This is leading to an inability to provide the capacity to achieve change and deliver the priorities in social care.
- 55** The Council can demonstrate savings from changes in procurement practice in some areas, for example water and energy. Private finance initiatives have been used for schools building and the replacement of street lighting in the city. The corporate procurement section is responsible for £6.5 million and supports a further £28.5 million of the Council's £180 million procurement and commissioning expenditure. There are also four Joint Commissioning Units with health partners covering health and social care. The corporate procurement section operates effectively following good procurement practice, but the arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of the remaining expenditure are less robust. There needs to be a clear link in order to ensure that the good practice is used across all procurement functions. The Council has developed an innovative toolkit available on the intranet to assist directorates with procurement and has recently formed a steering group of directorate representatives. It is too early for the Council to show any significant results from this initiative.
- 56** The Council has recently enhanced its systems for managing risk and has made good progress in assessing and managing the risks inherent in strategic decisions. However, it has still to make significant progress in respect of operational risks and programme/project risks but a project is in place to deliver this to an agreed timescale. Project management procedures and systems are in place and the Council demonstrates considerable use of project management skills through the use of Prince 2 principles and controls.
- 57** The political structure is maturing and there are generally good relationships between members and officers. Whilst the current system is not especially liked by members it has brought sharper focus to the wider agenda and is being made to work more effectively. Decision making roles are clear. The Council has strengthened the support for members and the mayor's office and there are examples of some effective member input, for example in improved street lighting and reducing prostitution. The role of overview and scrutiny has been reshaped around a number of commissions. The Council runs a number of public forums which allow local people to challenge issues, and they actively participate. There is a structured approach to recording delegated officer decisions. The standards committee is active and has a good quality of external membership. The Council is therefore able to rely on robust support to their decision making process.
- 58** The Council manages costs within tight budgets and both monitors and compares its performance but is not achieving consistent value for money across its services. The Council manages its costs effectively and takes appropriate action when it identifies high and low spending. The approach to value for money is however hampered by not bringing cost and quality measures together. Although there are some examples, such as in the education service – where low spend produces average or above average performance – the quality of service delivery does not consistently match with comparative spending in other authorities.

The capital strategy and programme are not yet sufficiently refined or not consistently linked to the Council's corporate objectives and medium-term financial strategy, although developments are being made.

- 59 The Council is not fully maximising its human resources (HR). It has able and committed staff that are very clear about their roles and at senior level have the skills and capability to deliver priorities. A new staffing structure being implemented senior management level reflects priority areas. This should enhance capacity but the 'top-down' approach being used to develop the structure at each level means that it is taking time to be progressed through the organisation. There has been a reliance of interim managers in some services to date. The Council has a workforce development strategy which has been in place since July 2005. This has identified the main areas of difficulty for the Council in having the right skills in sufficient numbers to deliver its priorities in the future. However there is a need to speed up the action on this is to be able to gear up to deliver its ambitious agenda. Only 64 per cent of staff have received an appraisal in the last year.
- 60 Sickness levels remain relatively high particularly in Social Care. A new HR and payroll system is in place but this is not yet able to produce robust information consistently to assist managers in tackling issues such as absence management. There are a number of different systems in place which tend to rely on the individual strength of service managers rather than a common approach throughout the organisation.
- 61 The Council is developing systems to help it take into account the needs of diverse groups and has established a corporate diversity group. It is effectively integrating diversity and equalities into its strategic planning. The equalities and diversity strategy aligns with the community strategy and a corporate diversity group of officers is working to ensure that diversity and equalities issues are integral to strategic and tactical planning. It has a wide range of information available to enable people to access services. An example of this is the Voluntary and Community Compact which is available to download from the internet in different languages. It has appointed 35 neighbourhood impact officers to undertake cross-cutting duties including minor repairs, supporting and advising tenants, tackling graffiti and vandalism and looking out for anti- social behaviour. This is helping to ensure that services remain accessible and reflect the needs of all parts of the community. Staffing does not yet reflect the make-up of the local community although the Council has used a number of measures to recruit a more diverse workforce. These include two diversity recruitment events in partnership with the REC (Race Equality Council). These initiatives will help the Council to reflect the needs of the whole community.
- 62 The Council is making positive efforts to underpin its commitment to improving customer service. It is a member of the Institute of Customer Services and a number of staff are undergoing accreditation training through them. The housing department has been awarded a customer participation award. The department now maintains a database of 1,000 customers that they use to consult on any policy changes being considered.

- 63 Relationships within the corporate management team work effectively but have been less so at a cross departmental level. There has been a lack of effective communication between departments. This has manifested itself in customers being transferred from one department to another on occasions due a lack of understanding of the roles of each part of the Council. It also reflects a lack of clarity over priorities. This is both frustrating for customers and also does not use the capacity of the council officers to the full.

Performance management

- 64 The Council's performance in this area is adequate.
- 65 Performance management across the council is providing members and staff the information they need to monitor performance and there is clear evidence of action following reported performance. There are however varying levels of performance management throughout the Council with some gaps in the performance management system.
- 66 A corporate performance management framework provides broad guidance within which Directorates can operate. This is supported by a corporate database to record performance information and monitor progress. Whilst some of the supporting systems are working effectively they lack consistency and clear targets to help drive improvement. There are varying levels of performance management throughout the Council with some gaps in the performance management system. The Community Strategy is a good example of a clear plan with outcomes and targets but some of the plans below this are inconsistent. There are other positive examples, such as the directorate plans, but the service plans are of variable quality with some targets not clear. There is also a lack of distinction between the directorate and service plans which is potentially diffusing the focus on performance monitoring. The insufficient coverage of the staff appraisal system - from 85 per cent to 45 per cent compliance - means that individual targets are not fully utilised to help meet the Council's ambitions. This lack of consistency and clear actions make it more difficult for the services to show how they contribute to Council aims and objectives.
- 67 The Council's process for reporting information about its service performance is varied in quality. Performance standards are in place in many areas and these standards are monitored and reported on, for example in the housing services. This does not happen universally across services however and the publication of performance against these standards is variable. Service users have been involved in developing the standards in some areas – notably in street cleaning where residents monitor and report on performance. Housing services have extensively developed service standards in conjunction with customers. Other important customer facing services lack robust information to help the Council improve, for example, the telephone service. As a result, the Council is not consistently assuring the public that it is meeting their needs.

- 68 Performance management is well co-ordinated amongst our key partnerships but less so for smaller partnerships arrangements. Monitoring of performance and financial information takes places on a regular basis with the LSP Board ensuring accountability. Key partners receive regular reports and attend scrutiny meetings and overall partners feel that the Council reports transparently about levels of performance.
- 69 The Council is not making best use of the mechanisms that are in place to enable it to identify and remedy performance problems. Performance indicators are reported on a monthly basis to its corporate management team (CMT) and members. Overall the Council improved 60 per cent of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) between 2002/03 and 2004/5 but 52 per cent in the worst 25 per cent had not improved. 34 per cent of BVPIs are in the worst 25 per cent, 26 per cent in the worst 50 per cent, 19 per cent in the best 50 per cent and 21 per cent in the best 25 per cent.
- 70 Performance management systems have not prevented significant problems occurring in high profile areas such as benefits and children's social care.
- 71 The Council has an accessible complaints procedure that is applied across the organisation. The Corporate Compliments, Comments and Complaints Procedure was revised in 2004 and the new culture, processes and learning have become embedded. Examples of learning activity are included in reporting and have been publicised to members of the public to show what the Council are doing differently as a result of their views. There are examples of where it has learned from benchmarking exercises. But there is a mixed picture in the sharing of learning in the organisation - for example, the serious case review incidents in social care. The council has a mixed picture in relation to some external inspection recommendations some of which has been slow to implement. It has not fully implemented the requirements of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry and the recommendations from the inspection of child protection services, both published in January 2003. As a result, opportunities are being lost to improve services for the community.
- 72 The Council has made some positive efforts to ensure that data collection and analysis includes the need of black and ethnic minority groups and others at risk of disadvantage. It has collected baseline data about community cohesion using the new computer system to collate relevant performance information about under represented groups. This data is being used to improve the quality of service plans.
- 73 The Council is improving its approach to managing performance. It has recently introduced a new system which enables departments to record and report a range of performance information. It will be developed further to include links to service action plans. It has also introduced an effective system to challenge existing ways of delivering the service. The CPI scheme has been supported by CMT and six pilot areas are being undertaken. Some positive results are emerging, and it is to implement a three to five year programme. The Council intends to build this in to the way it manages organisational development. This will help the Council to identify improvements in services when problems have been identified.

What has been achieved?

- 74 The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council's priorities closely align to national priorities and shared priorities. There is a good understanding of and responsiveness to community needs but the Council faces a considerable challenge given the levels of deprivation in the area.
- 75 Against the priority of creating a vibrant city with thriving communities there is a mixed picture. In the past there has been a lack of coherence around the plans that go to contribute to the creation of thriving communities. This has changed and there is now a gradual coming together of economic, environmental, transportation and housing and regeneration plans. Some of the outcomes from this will inevitably follow later but there have been some achievements to date. Local neighbourhood initiatives are producing better living environments and there has been a significant improvement in the delivery of housing services. The Council has had limited success in the creation of a thriving economy.
- 76 Against the priority of building a safer city there are some significant achievements with reducing levels of domestic burglaries and car crime being examples of this.
- 77 Promoting health and independence is one of the priorities of the Council but the facts and figures show that Stoke-on-Trent is not a healthy city. However, better health outcomes are being delivered and the Council makes a strong contribution to health improvement. Life expectancy has increased for males and females and for females at a greater rate than average reducing the gap between Stoke and all England.
- 78 Against the priority of delivering better outcomes for children and young people there is a mixed picture. Overall children and young people achieve adequately. Most young people are able to access education and training opportunities to meet their needs though it is limited for those who wish to progress to a higher level. However, too many children were looked after and too many placed outside the city.
- 79 Achievements for older people have been minimal. Overall the Council is not delivering a comprehensive, co-ordinated range of services to older people. The focus of work on services for older people has been mainly within the health and social care arenas. However the number of admissions to residential care homes has reduced and the numbers of people living independently has increased.
- 80 There is a low level of customer satisfaction with services. The overall satisfaction with the Council fell from 59 per cent in the 2000/01 survey to 39 per cent in the 2003/04 survey but has risen ten percentage points to 49 per cent in 2004/05. This is a positive result, albeit from a low baseline when the trend nationally is of falling satisfaction.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 81** Three of the six priorities within the community strategy relate to the creation of sustainable communities; the creation of a wealthier city; a green city and a strong sense of community. Creating a vibrant city with thriving communities is the first priority within the corporate plan.
- 82** There has been significant progress made in the delivery of housing services in the last two years and plans are advanced for the enhancement of neighbourhood working. This will help services focus on the needs of individual communities. Following the recent option appraisal the Council has clear plans to meet the decent homes standard. The housing strategy is rated as fit for purpose by the Government Office for the West Midlands. The multi centred nature of the city, lack of a major city centre and need for regeneration are substantial challenges in the creation of sustainable communities. Housing developments over recent years have tended to be located at the periphery due to the lack of a coherent spatial strategy and this has produced a hollowing out of the urban core. Planning policy to date has not supported the development of sustainable communities. There has been a lack of effective use of section 106 agreements. A spatial master plan and local development framework are now being put in place and the Council recognise the need for planning decisions and investments to be made based on the support of the city centre business district. The benefits service has been performing badly which is particularly important given the high levels of deprivation in the area and the corporate vision to close the gaps in inequality.
- 83** There has been some progress in the achievement of ambitions for a sustainable economy and labour market. One thousand, three hundred new jobs have been created since April 2002 and the Hothouse concept is being used to develop new ideas and markets for design-based technology. The numbers living in low income households is high as is the percentage of working age population in receipt of benefits. The Council has, in conjunction with others in the North Staffordshire conurbation, recently finalised an integrated economic development strategy which has ambitious targets through to 2021. The Council has a good record of providing regulatory services that are recognised and respected by the business sector as being supportive and helpful.
- 84** The Council has a mixed record of success in achieving its ambitions for the local environment. It has developed an environmental strategy but this has been in draft form since late 2004 with little progress being made to produce a final agreed report. It does however have a corporate environmental management plan for 2005/06 which covers such areas as waste, energy, water, green procurement, vehicle fleet and office matters. Following an operational review, street cleansing is now delivering a more effective service.

- 85 Progress towards achievement of statutory recycling targets has been slow but some improvement has been made in raising awareness of issues around waste minimisation and recycling. The City is in the top quartile in relation to reliance on landfill as well as household waste used to recover electricity through the city's Waste to Energy Plant. There has been positive progress in partnership working with local communities and schools in developing a greater understanding of general environmental matters. The response to such issues as graffiti and fly tipping has been improved through the use of a rapid response team. Neighbourhood environmental management proposals will provide for a more localised response to these issues. The North Staffordshire group of authorities has attracted significant funding in recent years for its 'Greening for Growth' programme which has enabled progress to be made in improving greenways and parks within the Stoke area.
- 86 Transport planning to date has not reflected the requirements of other key strategies to date. However the development and delivery of the new local transport plan (LTP), which is underpinned by an integrated transport study in conjunction with neighbouring authorities and agencies, is critical to the success of the other key strategies and particularly the new integrated economic development strategy. There has been a failure to maintain sufficient funding for road, footway and car park condition. The projected reduction in LTP funding over the next five years could exacerbate the problem unless the Council can ensure that adequate resources are made available. The Council has however an awareness of these challenges, is currently exploring other funding options to close the financial gap and is not afraid to utilise a range of procurement routes to enable it to achieve its corporate objectives.
- 87 The Council has recognised the importance of having an effective transport infrastructure, the effect this has on the achievement of sustainable communities and the particular need for transport in linking people and communities to their place of work. The advanced transport telematics system provides real time traffic flow information to the public and the 'cityrider' network of buses complements the existing public transport network.

Safer and stronger communities

- 88 The Council has made building a safer city a corporate priority and this reflects a robust 'golden thread' and corporate vision for the safer stronger community agenda. It has set some challenging targets for itself over the life of its strategic policies, including reducing crime overall by 20 per cent in three years.
- 89 The Council is playing an important part in its contribution to improving community safety. There is a well established trusting partnership through the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). A joint approach to tackling issues has enabled an improved access to funds which has resulted in a more effective use of resources to tackle the local issues. This has helped the Council to develop effective local initiatives to tackle crime and deal with the associated social problems. For example, it has helped to secure local funding and worked with partners to tackle the problem of prostitution in one of its areas.

Supported by an effective out reach project to help the women involved, the project has led to a reduction from 182 to 119 women involved. A significant number of the women have a drugs problem, and around 50 per cent of them are now actively participating in a detoxification programme. The police have supplemented this with improved enforcement against kerb crawlers.

- 90 The Council has been proactive in addressing anti-social behaviour both through the community safety partnership and its own services. Initiatives include: anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs); anti-social behaviour contracts (ABCs); and a rapid response team from the youth service. This has contributed to a 12 per cent reduction in reports of anti-social behaviour since 2003. A local anti-social behaviour forum is run by multi-agencies, and action is taken as a result of identified problems. Local residents are encouraged to assist monitoring following the multi agency action, and this helps to encourage local participation. This action has helped to reduce problems for local residents.
- 91 The youth service has become part of the comprehensive community safety partnership. It has worked closely with partnership members and the drug and alcohol action team (DAAT) to deliver on four shared priority outcomes over the next three years. The youth justice plan will be an effective tool in providing clarity and direction for the youth offending service over the next 12 months including detailed actions and targets. Resources are already committed to cross partner projects to prevent young people from offending in the Stoke area. The DAAT is supported by a commissioning group to ensure that funds are allocated in the most effective way. The multi-agency approach has included supporting prisoners before release from prison to try to eliminate the possibility of returning to a drug culture.
- 92 The Council has made good use of the initiative to pilot a 'policing priority area'. This involved a co-ordinated approach by a number of agencies to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour on a local estate. The agencies worked closely with the community to identify the problems and deal with the issues. The initiative resulted in a significant reduction in the level of crime and improved feeling in the community that it was a good place to live.
- 93 Street safety is an important aspect of the Council's environmental improvements. Local services have worked together to improve outcomes, including the extensive provision of CCTV in town centres and neighbourhoods. The Council works both within the safer city partnership and with county partners to reduce death and accidental injury on the roads. A road safety co-ordinator has been appointed by police to co-ordinate activity within the road safety partnership. Two child pedestrian training co-ordinators have been appointed as part of a national pilot scheme.
- 94 The Council is engaged with key Staffordshire agencies. A service level agreement (SLA) has been agreed between the Council and the fire authority. In recent times the effectiveness of the emergency planning procedures has been tested and lessons learned. The Council has invested in updating its emergency equipment and call handling facility.

- 95 There is a mixed picture in terms of reducing crime. Motor vehicle related crime and burglaries are down but robberies are increasing but are below average compared to other areas. Violence is increasing and sexual offences have stayed the same but both are in the worst 25 per cent in the country. Most indicators from the general user survey put the Council in the worst 25 per cent.
- 96 The concerns of local people identified through the recent crime audit have made issues such as anti-social behaviour, violent crime, racial harassment, drug related crime and safer travel priorities of the Council. There is a strong local partnership to support community safety and a proactive approach to tackling racism and racially motivated crime. The safer city partnership has a clearly defined structure and focus for all partners in addressing by crime reduction and the fear of crime. It is responsible for delivering on five out of six public service agreement targets which support the safer stronger community agenda.
- 97 The Council has not yet built a clear picture of the reasons for why people have a relatively high fear of crime. Despite the fact that crime is reducing in some areas, levels of fear are among the highest. The Council has encouraged the reporting of crime, especially from victims of hate crime cases. However, there is no robust information which will further improve the effective action the Council is already taking.

Healthier communities

- 98 'A healthier city' is one of six key priorities in the community strategy. 'Promoting health and independence' is one of five key priorities in the Council's corporate plan 2005/08.
- 99 Improved health outcomes are being delivered in a number of areas. Partnership work has improved sex and relationship education in schools and developed the Clinic in a Box service which gives contraceptive and sexual health advice to young people. Mortality rates from circulatory disease and cancer are dropping at a quicker rate than average and are on course to meet government targets by 2010. Rates of teenage pregnancy have dropped and the gap between levels in the area and other parts of the country for 13 year olds to 15 year olds is closing although the rates are still high. Life expectancy in Stoke has increased for males and females and for females at a greater rate than average reducing the gap between Stoke and all England. Although male life expectancy is rising it is rising faster elsewhere meaning that there is an increasing gap in male life expectancy between Stoke and all England.
- 100 The Council makes a strong contribution to health improvement. It led the Smoke Free Stoke initiative aimed at reducing smoking and supports the Health Promoting Schools Programme by introducing healthier school meals and a fresh fruit in schools scheme. The Council's sport and active recreation strategy recognises the importance of exercise to health.

- 101** Effective partnerships at strategic and operational levels have been established. Stoke has been granted healthy city status by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for its commitment to make improvements. The healthy city partnership, the health sub-group of the LSP, uses the WHO framework to aid planning. The primary focus is to tackle inequalities in health which contribute to much of Stoke being the twelfth most deprived area for health in England. The strategic plan recognises the need for actions to deliver long term improvements in health. Healthy urban planning, healthy ageing, health impact assessments and physical activity are the four core themes which have influenced developments. Examples of such actions included traffic calming in Cliffe Vale, land reclamation at Trentham Lakes, a large reduction in falls in older people and increased off-road routes for pedestrians and cyclists.
- 102** The Council is working with its partners to integrate the delivery of services and target socially excluded groups. A joint commissioning unit was established with health partners in 2002 and has recently been divided into adults and children's commissioning. A five year mental health strategy has been published for public consultation. Mental health services for children and young people are variable with limited access to specialist services for the most disturbed children and poor recognition of the impact on children of parents with mental illness. Jointly delivered services have increased by aligning local health and Council neighbourhood boundaries.
- 103** Health inequalities within Stoke are identified in ward and neighbourhood indices and services are targeted to the most disadvantaged. In the SureStart schemes where staff from different agencies work together breastfeeding rates and birth weights have increased and smoking has decreased particularly during pregnancy. Circulatory diseases are targeted in Burslem Grange, Norton and Bradley and Fenton Green. The Council and health services jointly fund an interpreting service for people whose first language is not English. A discount scheme for access to sport and leisure facilities is available to people on low incomes and other disadvantaged groups. The Council and its partners are tackling fuel poverty, for example a programme has been developed in the RENEW programme and will be implemented by a voluntary organisation.
- 104** Some health indicators are not improving. Infant mortality remains high and the gap between Stoke and the remainder of the country is not closing.

Older people

- 105** Older people are not identified as a specific priority within either the corporate plan or the community strategy. However older people are reflected within the vision for Stoke-on-Trent that 'by 2014 Stoke-on-Trent will be a thriving and diverse city where people want to live, work and study' in the community strategy. The ambition is that older people will be supported to live independent lives where appropriate and have access to quality services that meet their needs.

- 106** Overall the Council is not delivering a comprehensive, co-ordinated range of services to older people. The elements within the community strategy relating to older people focus predominantly on social care and health solutions to the problems faced by older people and this is a theme that runs through the Council's work to date. The focus of partnership working for services for older people has been mainly within the health and social care arenas with little evidence of work on older people across the Council. As a result older people cannot expect to receive a holistic solution to their needs. This reflects the finding that although only 15 per cent of older people are in touch with care services, the 85 per cent who do not need care have traditionally received very little attention from public services.
- 107** The Council is currently consulting on a draft older people strategy that has been produced by the older persons partnership board but this strategy also fails to consider the wider agenda for older people and focuses mainly on the 400 older people in care. This strategy is central to the modernisation of the services for older people but the strategy does not yet have the support of members overall and is primarily focussing on the future of the residential care. The residential care homes currently do not meet modern standards of living.
- 108** There have been a number of achievements which have tangible outcomes. The 'Race into Work' scheme aims to identify and employ BME workers who, following training, can act as key workers working on a one-to-one basis with BME elders. This assists them to access to mainstream services. The number of admissions to residential care homes has reduced and the numbers of people living independently has increased. The sheltered housing team won Public Servant of the Year 2005 Award for transforming the service and the involvement of older people in the shaping of services. The Council has developed an intermediate care team and an integrated single assessment process. A Direction on Choice protocol, developed with partner agencies, due to be implemented during 2005 aims to reduce delayed transfers of care. The Council is also converting two residential care homes to provide an additional 65 'extra-care' housing places.
- 109** The Council has not taken action to engage with older people and their representative groups on the strategic approach to older people and service provision. Older people themselves were not consulted during preparation of the older persons strategy but the Council has now started to engage meaningfully with older people and their representative groups. There is now a better understanding of what now needs to be done to deliver a more strategic approach. Recent staff changes, departmental structural change and change in political leadership mean that the Council is better able to follow the wider agenda. One of the members has been established as older people's champion.
- 110** Plans to reduce the fear of crime are not specifically focussed on older people who are disproportionately affected.

Children and young people

- 111** There is a shared ambition for children and families in the area which is reflected in the strong political and partnership commitment to children and young peoples services in the community plan and the Council's corporate plan. There is strong commitment to the children's strategic partnership, a Director of Children's Services has recently been appointed and the Children and Young Peoples Plan is under development. Overall outcomes for children and young people in Stoke are adequate, capacity overall for improvement is adequate but there are serious weaknesses in the capacity to improve of the council's social care services.
- 112** Children and young people are generally less healthy than found in other similar areas of the country and this is reflected in a number of key measures. Despite this there is evidence of good health advice, information and support for children and young people particularly in good collaborative working in Sure Start areas. Similarly there is evidence of good joint partnership working on health education issues such as substance misuse and teenage pregnancy. However progress and co-ordination in other areas such as some aspects of children and adolescent mental services (CAMHS) and joint services for children with LDD require significant development.
- 113** Although most children and young people surveyed reported feeling safe in school they expressed significant anxiety about bullying, violence and gangs outside school and did not feel that the current community safety measures effectively addressed these problems. The council's children's social care safeguarding arrangements were found to be inadequate and have been so for some time. Safeguarding arrangements were better among other agencies although overall this area was judged inadequate. Too many children were looked after and too many placed outside the city. Persistent failure to address social worker recruitment, retention and learning and development is a key aspect of a general history of ineffective leadership and performance management which has contributed to the current position. There was evidence that this was now finally recognised but there was no significant evidence of recovery and financial commitment to resolve these issues.
- 114** Overall children and young people achieve adequately. There is a good range of early years childcare and education provision. Many children begin primary school from a very low baseline and this requires further improvement. Progress in raising educational attainment of all children and young people remains uneven. Children in Primary schools achieve less well than those in similar areas across the country though secondary school pupils achieve as well as in comparator areas. Children looked after and children with LDD achieve satisfactorily. The education service has been successful in attracting external investment to rebuild or refurbish its schools and overall is well led and managed.

- 115 Overall children and young people have good opportunities to take decisions responsibility and many make a positive contribution to their communities. There are good opportunities for social learning as well as a range of sports and cultural activities. Anti-social behaviour caused by young people is a widely perceived problem within the city. Youth offending statistics are above average although the Youth Offending Service is working well to address this although further work is needed to co-ordinate action across agencies.
- 116 Some young people are able to achieve economic well being. Most young people are able to access education and training opportunities to meet their needs though it is limited for those who wish to progress to a higher level. Achievement rates post 16 years are below the national average. Connexions offers a robust advice support and guidance service though many young people leave their first further education choice within the first year. There are high rates of unemployment for young people under 25 years. Youth homelessness is high and the availability of suitable and affordable accommodation is low.

Appendix 1 – Framework for corporate assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Stoke on Trent City Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 26 September to 7 October 2005.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.