

Environment - Planning

North Hertfordshire 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 co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

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

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

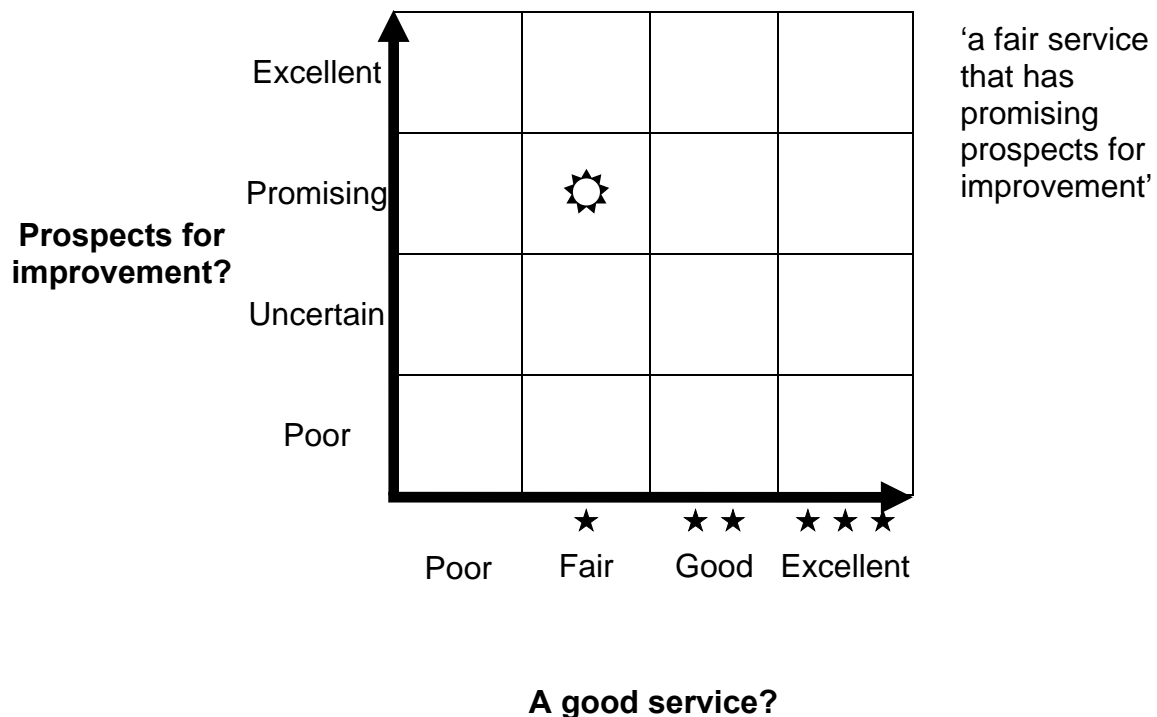
Summary

- 1 The planning service provided by North Hertfordshire District Council is 'fair'. A core of experienced planning officers has enabled the Council to maintain the quality of its planning advice and policy development. As a result the character of the district is being preserved and enhanced, while housing provision is increasing.
- 2 The speed of determining planning applications has improved and is matching, or exceeding the interim targets set for the Council by Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) for the three different categories of planning applications. However these targets are below the national standards and are below the level of performance that is being achieved by other councils. When compared nationally the Council was still amongst the worst performers for two out of the three categories of applications for the latest full year for which national comparisons can be made (2004/05).
- 3 There are promising prospects for improvement due to the strengthened capacity that has been developed within the service and due to the sustained improvement being achieved during the first half of 2005/06. There is now a full complement of staff. Action taken to develop and retain staff includes training graduates to become qualified planners. New career grades posts have been established and terms and conditions are competitive. The experience of officers who have recently retired or who are due to retire in the next few years is being harnessed through a training programme for new and less experienced planners. This is ensuring effective transfer of knowledge.
- 4 Financial resources are allocated according to corporate and service priorities. This approach ensures that service levels will be maintained and priority issues addressed.
- 5 The track record of performance has been mixed. Although the general trajectory is one of improvement, the rate of improvement has not been consistent across all areas, and has not been sufficient to significantly improve the Council's comparative performance when considered against the achievements of other councils in key areas, such as planning and building control applications handling.
- 6 Weaknesses remain in performance management. There is clarity regarding the main issues to be addressed. However, it is not clear to all staff what individual roles they play in achieving service and corporate objectives.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed North Hertfordshire District Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is a fair, one-star service due to the following reasons.
- The service is delivering good outcomes that contribute towards the Council's strategic objectives relating to sustainable communities, preserving the built and natural heritage of the district and providing health and recreation opportunities.
 - There is a strong emphasis on delivering a quality service and customer satisfaction levels are high.
 - The service is effectively promoting local priorities, achieving a balance with national priorities relating to the growth agenda.

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

- Effective consultation on policy development captures the views of service users and all groups within the community.

However:

- the service has not effectively addressed some key national priorities, for example performance on the speed of determining planning applications (2004/05) is below national standards;
- the local plan and much of the supplementary planning guidance is dated;
- there is a lack of sharpness in customer focus;
- the service is unable to demonstrate significant progress to date in addressing the Council's strategic objectives relating to promoting local economic development, the vitality of town centres and sustainable transport; and
- the planning service overall does not provide good value for money. It is a relatively high cost service, giving variable levels of performance.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.

- The service has a track record of improving performance, and delivering better outcomes.
- Value for money is improving.
- The service is focusing on the right areas for improvement including gaps in the planning policy framework.
- Capacity to improve has been strengthened, with effective action to recruit and retain staff and to develop skills and experience.
- There is good collaborative working with other services within the Council and with partners outside the Council.
- The Council has a sound approach to providing resources to address planning priorities.

However:

- the pace of improvement has been too slow in the priority area of determining planning applications quickly according to the national standard. Improvement has been inconsistent and the Council's performance relative to others has not improved significantly;
- awareness of improving value for money is variable across the service;
- while performance management arrangements are in place, service planning is not fully exploring how corporate aims can be addressed, and monitoring of the delivery of planning outcomes has been variable; and
- learning within the service takes place, but it is not routine or systematic.

Recommendations

- 10 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 costs¹ 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 That the council ensure that planning applications are determined in a timely and appropriate manner by:

- *streamlining planning control procedures to avoid delays;*
- *identifying, and implementing, actions to ensure that the committee arrangements do not cause undue delay; and*
- *ensuring all councillors involved in planning decisions receive appropriate training to develop and update their knowledge on planning issues.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that the council should meet the national standards for speed of determining planning applications; and
- improved consistency in decision making.

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

Recommendation

R2 That clear service, team and individual targets are set and progress against these targets is monitored, reported and acted upon.

- *There should be clear linkage to enable individual members of staff to see how their targets feed into service aims, and how service aims address local and national priorities.*
- *Targets should be set that are specific, measurable, realistic and timely, with responsibility for their attainment clearly identified.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved performance against national, corporate and service priorities; and
- clarity on behalf of councillors, officers and customers regarding what the service is achieving.

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

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendation

R3 That the service sharpens its customer focus to ensure that the service is tailored to the needs of the people of North Hertfordshire by:

- *engaging a full range of stakeholders in the formulation of clear and measurable service aims, and monitoring and reporting performance against these aims;*
- *investigating reasons for dissatisfaction, as indicated by survey results as well as through complaints, and ensuring these are addressed and that actions taken are reported back to the public so that they know what changes have been made in response to comments and complaints; and*
- *ensuring that the service is fully accessible, with particular attention to website organisation, and arrangements for visiting the planning reception and attending committees.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- higher levels of public satisfaction with the planning service; and
- clarity for the service and the public about what it is trying to achieve and how well it is performing.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2006.

Recommendation

R4 That a systematic approach be taken to improving value for money by:

- *using the comparative data already collected, supplemented where necessary, to identify areas in which performance is low compared to that achieved in other councils;*
- *identifying and implementing actions to improve VFM; and*
- *managers and councillors using cost information alongside performance information to challenge and drive up performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that improved value for money will be secured by the service; and
- improved performance.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2006.

Report

Context

The locality

- 11 North Hertfordshire is the second largest of the ten districts in Hertfordshire, occupying 37,537 hectares. It is bordered by Essex, Bedfordshire, and Cambridgeshire, and by the four district councils of East Hertfordshire, St Albans, Stevenage and Welwyn Hatfield.
- 12 The four main urban areas are Letchworth Garden City, and the market towns of Baldock, Hitchin and Royston. There are 33 parish councils in the large rural area, some of which falls within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The green belt along the A1 corridor encompasses Baldock, Hitchin and Letchworth and east of Luton, and covers around two thirds of the district.
- 13 There are 40 conservation areas and over 2,500 listed buildings within the district. As the first Garden City, Letchworth is unique, with a Master Plan upon which development has been based. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation holds 'landlord consent' rights regarding any proposed alterations to properties.
- 14 The cost of housing in the district is relatively high. The average house sales price (October to December 2004) was £226,281. This compares to £242,237 for Hertfordshire, but £175,550 for the region. The cheapest dwelling type - a flat in south-east Letchworth costs about 4.4 times the local annual average income.
- 15 The 2001 census recorded a population of 116,908, with people from black and minority ethnic groups accounting for 6.8 per cent of the total. Indian and black Caribbean communities form the largest minority ethnic groups. Predictions to 2012 indicate that the District will have grown to a population of 125,100, an increase of 7 per cent.
- 16 The unemployment rate was 1.4 per cent in May 2005. This compared to 1.7 per cent for the region and 1.9 per cent for England. The district is relatively affluent, ranking as 292nd out of 354 council areas (with 1 being the most deprived) but there are with some pockets of deprivation. There are no wards within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally, 16 per cent fall within the 50 per cent most deprived, and 56 per cent are in the 25 per cent least deprived. Recorded crime in the area is lower than the average for England.

The council

- 17 The Council is Conservative controlled, the political balance being Conservative 28, Labour 14 and Liberal Democrat 7. The Council has a leader and cabinet supported by a scrutiny committee, a performance audit and review committee and a standards committee. Area planning committees have existed in the district since 1974. There are currently five area committees representing the major towns and the fifth representing rural areas. These double up as area planning committees and each determines planning applications that fall into its area.
- 18 The Council employs 423 full time equivalent staff. The senior management team comprises the chief executive and two strategic directors. One director is responsible for Financial and Regulatory Services and planning services fall within this directorate. A recent corporate restructure has led to the appointment of a head of planning and building services, and the reorganisation of professional officers and service support teams within the service.
- 19 The planned gross revenue expenditure for 2005/06 is £55.2 million, with a capital programme of £13.8 million and planned income of £39.4 million. Revenue reserves stand at £3.6 million. The council transferred its housing stock to a registered social landlord in March 2003 which secured a net receipt of £47 million.

The council's planning service

- 20 The planning service consists of three sections.
- Planning policy, which sets out the policy framework against which proposed developments are assessed. Potential for future development and areas for protection are identified, together with requirements to ensure that developments make a positive contribution to the built and natural environment. Specific projects such as town centre strategies, the local development framework and regional and strategic issues are dealt with by the planning policy section.
 - Planning control considers planning applications against the policy framework and decisions are made to grant or refuse applications accordingly. Planning conservation is part of this section ensuring that the built heritage is protected against adverse effects of development and enforcement staff take action if developments are carried out contrary to planning permissions.
 - Building control ensures compliance with building regulations.
 - Our inspection focuses primarily on planning policy and planning control, but with reference to building control where relevant.
- 21 The Council handles around 1,750 planning applications (as defined by government statistical returns) a year which is slightly higher than the average level for district planning authorities in England. Building control receives around 1,200 applications a year and enforcement officers handle around 300 cases a year.

- 22 Local considerations impact on the planning service. Area action plans have been developed through visioning exercises and contain a planning theme that is taken into account in planning policy formulation and decision making. The service works closely with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation on applications that require their consent as landlords for the world's first garden city.
- 23 North Hertfordshire District Council has been designated as a Standards Authority by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) for three consecutive years (2003, 2004 and 2005) due to its failure to meet Government standards for the speed with which planning applications are determined.
- 24 The planning service has received £848,000 in planning delivery grant (PDG), over the past three years. PDG monies reward plan making, and improvement and good performance in planning decision making, as well as address the needs of high growth housing areas.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 The Council is aiming to make 'North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper'. This is to be delivered through collaborative working with partners and communities and is underpinned by six recently agreed strategic objectives. These relate to:
- promotion of sustainable communities and provision of affordable housing;
 - creating prosperous communities including vibrant town centres and local employment opportunities;
 - protecting the environment and conserving the heritage of the district;
 - making communities safer and healthier with equality of opportunity for all; and
 - providing customer focused services and high quality.
- 26 The service aims to deliver against all corporate objectives, although does not state explicitly how it will do so. It has placed strong emphasis on challenging the growth agenda and airport expansion, and on improving the speed of decision making to give better value for money.
- 27 The North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No 2 with Alterations (LP2) was adopted in April 1996 and covers the period 1986-2001. Much of the supplementary planning guidance (SPG) dates from the 1990s and therefore does not cover more recent national guidance. A draft replacement Local Plan (LP3) was placed on deposit in 2000. However, LP3 was not progressed since the overarching county structure plan review was suspended during 2003 and so it was no longer possible to adopt a conforming LP3.
- 28 The current Hertfordshire Structure Plan was adopted by the County Council in April 1998. This covers the period to 2011 and provides more current guidance in relation to housing and employment growth, transport and the environment.
- 29 The East of England Plan was published in December 2004, and is the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for planning and development in the region to the year 2021. Proposals contained in the strategy would result in 15,800 new dwellings in the district by 2021, of which 8,500 would be on greenbelt or greenfield sites. However the East of England Regional Assembly has suspended its endorsement of the Plan in the light of representations, especially relating to concerns surrounding infrastructure development.
- 30 Land west of the A1/M was designated for housing development in the county Structure Plan of 1998. However, the proposal does not align with PPG3 which was published in 2000, and the district's existing local plan (LP2) has enabled higher than anticipated annual levels of housing completions to be achieved.

14 Environment - Planning | How good is the service?

A strategic reassessment of the need for this urban expansion to the west of Stevenage is being carried out as part of the development of the new regional spatial strategy. Two planning applications for a total of 5,000 dwellings within the areas of North Hertfordshire and Stevenage have been called in by the Deputy Prime Minister and decisions on these are still outstanding.

- 31 The Council was part of the coalition of local authorities that made a successful legal challenge to the Air Transport White Paper and is part of the steering group overseeing the production of a Master Plan for Luton Airport.
- 32 The service has a strong commitment to providing a quality service so that development improves the built and natural environment. Greater emphasis is now also being placed on improved efficiency and effectiveness within an improvement plan outlining service developments to 2006/07, including increased speed of decision making.

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

- 33 We examined how the service delivers against the corporate objectives.

Promotion of sustainable communities and provision of affordable housing

- 34 The service is effectively promoting sustainable communities. Implementation of local and national planning policies is helping improve the re-use of previously developed 'brownfield' land), and maximise urban capacity. The figure for the re-use of brownfield land overall across the district is close to the government's national target of 60 per cent. Houses continue to be built on land allocated in the 1980s and 1990s on major green field sites such as at Royston and Great Ashby at North East Stevenage but in other parts of the district, the percentage of brownfield housing development in 2004/05 was 93 per cent. Housing densities are regularly being achieved above the minimum government guideline figure of 30 dwellings per hectare, especially in urban areas. Twelve developments achieved densities in excess of 100 dwellings per hectare in 2004/05. This helps maximise the use of the district's available land.
- 35 The Council is making good progress in delivering affordable housing through close collaboration of housing and planning officers. The annual level of provision of affordable housing has been variable in the past. However, completions are now being achieved at the Council's target rate of 100 units a year. In addition, through the implementation of the rural housing exceptions policy over the last four years, 43 affordable dwellings have been completed in rural villages. For example 12 dwellings have been completed in Therfield since 2001/02 as result of the rural exceptions policy. The impact is that the service is successfully meeting the changing needs of householders and homebuyers in rural and urban communities.

- 36 The planning service is successful in encouraging a range of dwellings sizes to be built in response to different housing needs. Annual monitoring indicates fewer bungalows, semi-detached and large houses are being built, in favour of apartments and two-bedroomed dwellings. According to annual monitoring reports of average house prices in the district, housing became more affordable in relation to local incomes between 2003/04 and 2004/05, in part due to the location and housing types brought forward onto the open market. This means that planning policy is helping deliver affordable housing to local people through the open market as well as through social housing.
- 37 The service has actively promoted sustainable modes of transport, but has not been systematic in its approach or measured the impact. Green travel plans have been secured in some developments, for example at North Hertfordshire College. A task group within the local strategic partnership was charged with looking at the wider use of green travel plans across the district, but limited progress has been made. Planning policy is reducing the provision of private car parking in town centre sites to encourage use of alternative modes of transport. However, lack of a systematic approach was evident in the original Churchgate proposals for Hitchin. Public car parking needs had not been taken fully into account and was one of the reasons that the proposals had to be reworked. Section 106 agreements¹ (S106) have been used to extend the network of cycleways within the district. However the Council has not evaluated how many people now cycle or use other modes of transport where they would otherwise have driven. It is therefore unclear about the degree of impact of its policies and whether it is achieving maximum benefit.
- 38 There is limited general guidance relating to where and how benefits to promote sustainable communities will be secured through planning obligations. The absence of SPG that clearly specifies what will be expected from developers means that applicants and the public have no assurance that contributions for community facilities are secured fairly, proportionately and in a consistent manner.

Creating prosperous communities including vibrant town centres and local employment opportunities

- 39 The Council's planning policy framework is not fully safeguarding or developing the district's economic base in relation to creating vibrant town centres and local employment opportunities. The local plan reflects the economic strategy of the Council in the 1990s rather than the Council's new strategic objective for prosperous communities 'to create opportunity for all by promoting sustainable local economic development'. This means that there is an absence of clear, current economic development objectives at the core of planning policy.

¹ Section 106 of the Town and County Planning Act 1990 enables developers and the planning authority to agree additional community benefits that mitigate the negative impact of proposed development in order to make the proposal acceptable

- 40 The Council is in the process of identifying which employment sites are most suited to changes of use, for example, to housing. Sites for employment were historically allocated or employment uses protected in the local plan, but this designation has not been updated. Although very few employment sites have been lost to other uses, a significant proportion remains at risk of being lost to other uses in the absence of an up-to-date assessment of suitability. An analysis is currently being undertaken to identify which sites are best suited to continued employment uses or to change of use in order to address local and regional priorities. This shows that the service is taking action to ensure land use planning reflects changing needs.
- 41 Existing local plan policies relating to town centres, and town centre strategies are not sufficiently robust to enhance the vitality of town centres. A 2004 study indicates that there has been significant leakage of retail spend, particularly in Hitchin, to centres outside the district. The retail study and town centre strategy work recognise the need for better restraint of non-retail development and an increase in the range of shops. This further demonstrates that the service is taking action to address policy gaps.

Protecting the environment and conserving the heritage of the district

- 42 Preservation of historic town centres is carefully balanced against essential development. There is a long-standing commitment to an in-house conservation service. Character assessments have been carried out for town centre conservation areas, although guidance for the 36 conservation areas in villages across the district has not been updated. Improvement grants have been used to safeguard listed buildings. Together with S106 monies these grants have been used for projects identified in area action plans, such as street scene enhancement in Baldock with the provision of new railings. Through the use of an effective planning brief for the William Ransom's site in Hitchin the service is enhancing the town centre environment by creating a continuous riverside walk along the river Hiz. This demonstrates that the service is helping to preserve, and when opportunities arise, to improve the district's built and natural heritage.
- 43 Buildings at risk are noted on a risk register, but the service does not have the resources for systematic monitoring, even of those buildings at greatest risk. Measures are not fully in place to ensure that all historic buildings are protected and preserved.
- 44 The Council is ensuring that development is sustainable while maintaining the mainly rural character of the district. Most new build, other than within allocated sites, is occurring in the district's towns or in the larger villages designated in the local plan as having potential for growth.
- 45 Protection of the natural environment is promoted, with environmental impact statements required where appropriate. Proposals are expected to embrace issues such as water conservation and biodiversity. Examples of biodiversity outcomes achieved include the protection and management of protected woodland as part of the development of Royston Business Park, and protection for bats and roosts in a listed building.

However, there has been no analysis of the impact achieved against the overall aims of the biodiversity strategy for the district. While the Council's requirements in relation to the natural environment have been set out, and some outcomes are evident, it is unclear how successfully the aims have been met.

- 46 Enforcement activity is reactive, rather than proactive, that is, enforcement action is only taken when breaches are reported. There is no system for monitoring and ensuring compliance with permissions. This means that unauthorised development or use may be well advanced before it comes to the Council's attention.
- 47 However, when contraventions are reported enforcement action is effective, risk based and proportionate. Rapid action is taken in priority areas for example where listed buildings or trees are under threat. For less serious breaches, negotiation and a search for practical resolution is the first step. This is usually successful, but legal action is taken where necessary. All appeals against enforcement notices have been lost by contestants and a barrister has been successfully employed and recovered costs. Readiness to take court action where necessary to curtail unauthorised development helps give a firm message that contraventions will not be tolerated.

Making communities safer and healthier with equality of opportunity for all

- 48 There is an increasing awareness of community safety issues, and outcomes are beginning to be delivered. The police architectural liaison officer has addressed the planning and conservation customer panel and planning guidance contains requirements to design out crime. Community safety has a high profile in the design of major schemes such as for Hitchin town centre. Increased CCTV coverage in Baldock has been secured through a S106 agreement. However, the effectiveness of planning policy in promoting community safety has not been assessed and it is unclear that the service is maximising the potential gain in this area.
- 49 The planning team is identifying opportunities to secure health benefits for the community and actively pursuing them. The service has worked closely with the Council's leisure services to develop strategies to secure play and amenity space in line with National Playing Fields Association standards. An outcome has been the development of enhanced sports pitch provision at Knights Templar School in Baldock. Subsequently the school has applied for specialist sports school status. Co-operative working enabled the building of a leisure facility for Royston, with land and a financial contribution being secured from the developer. Within the Great Ashby development a number of health related gains have been secured. In addition to a community park and play facilities, health infrastructure requirements have been taken into account with a S106 agreement securing land for a health centre. The improved levels of provision contribute towards opportunities for healthier living.

- 50 Local plan policies provide general guidance on disabled access. Design briefs provide limited coverage, but more in depth guidance on disabled access is provided in more current strategies, such as those covering play areas, playing fields and sports pitches. These complement building regulations guidance provided by building control.

Providing customer focused services and high quality

- 51 The service addresses the corporate emphasis on customer focus and there are strengths in this area.
- Customers, such as the developers who use the planning service, are highly satisfied with the quality of service that they receive. They respect and value the soundness of officers' knowledge and advice. There are a low number of complaints about the service that go to the Ombudsman, with no findings of maladministration in recent years. The constructive approach to pre-applications discussion saves applicants time, improves the quality of applications and results in outcomes that meet the needs of the developers and of the community.
 - Customer panels enable effective exchange of information with customers and partners, although so far only resulting in some minor service improvements.
 - Effective community involvement has been achieved in the formulation of planning guidance, such as development briefs for specific sites. Consultation is conducted in accessible locations and a portable hearing loop is used. A range of approaches ensures that the views of different groups within the community are obtained, for example by discussing issues with a school council and visiting a Sikh temple to meet members of that community. This information exchange and involvement of the community helps ensure a shared view of what is valued by local people and of how developments are expected to enhance the environment and protect the built heritage.
 - The service's awareness of, and commitment to, equality issues is endorsed by a staff survey. Policies, procedures and practices have not yet been systematically overhauled but there has been transference of learning from other services, for example notes in eight different languages on documents advising of the availability of translation services. Appropriate consultation has led to Unity House in Hitchin being developed as an effective resource centre for the diversity of ethnic minority groups in the town. Awareness of the needs of different groups helps the service to ensure that it is not inadvertently discriminating against sectors of the community, and that it makes appropriate provision.
 - Documents are clearly written, with the recent local development framework options paper being a particularly good example of clear and unbiased presentation of options. Clear and informative letters keep agents, applicants and objectors informed of the progress of individual planning applications.
 - Scanned images of original documentation, plans and elevations are available on line. Users can access committee reports and information about the status of recent applications.

- Building control publishes targets, monitors performance and reports on progress against these targets.
- The telephone call system and protocol ensure customer contact via the telephone is effectively managed with 97 per cent of calls being answered within 12 seconds according to monthly monitoring reports during 2005.

52 However, there is a lack of sharpness in customer focus.

- The public has not been effectively engaged in the formulation of customer service aims for planning control. These aims are not effectively promoted, not all are measurable and some do not fully align to corporate standards. There is no monitoring or reporting. The outcome is that neither the public nor the staff can be clear what level of service is expected and what is being achieved.
- Investigation into reasons for dissatisfaction and reporting on action taken as a result is limited. There has been no analysis of the reasons for the decline in satisfaction in the planning service among the general public, as indicated by a citizen's panel survey. Customer complaints are analysed, but resulting actions are not reported back to the public and a majority of complaints are dismissed as 'unjustified'.
- Customer access is impaired by shortcomings in on-line information. Visitors to the Council's planning reception are unable to access on line information, and documents on the website are not consistently current and well organised to ensure that information is easily accessible. For example opportunities to make helpful links have been missed, such as between How to make a planning application and the application forms.
- When area committees are considering planning applications the process is not structured around enabling effective public engagement, for example there can be long waits before applications are discussed, insufficient seating and agenda papers, and lack of appropriate notification of venue changes.

Through this lack of sharp focus, the service is missing the opportunity to fully engage with the people of North Hertfordshire to ensure that the service is tailored to their needs.

- 53** Clear reasons are given for refusal of applications. Policies used to support decisions are analysed and reported annually to councillors. There is a high level of delegation of decision making to planners with 92 per cent of planning applications being determined by officers. When applications go to committee, officers give sound guidance that is generally accepted.
- 54** While all councillors are involved in planning decision making, they do not all have current knowledge of planning issues. Councillors have basic induction training before being able to vote on planning matters, but thereafter further training and updating is not mandatory. This means planning officers sometimes have to press councillors to specify the planning grounds behind their decisions. Developers who routinely make applications across more than one area perceive inconsistencies between committees and between councillors' knowledge regarding planning.

High quality

- 55 Quality is important to the Council and the effective pre- and post-application negotiations help to secure quality outcomes that enhance the appearance of the district and provide community benefits. Value added through negotiation includes environmental gains, for example an energy efficient roof at the new Royston Leisure Centre.
- 56 Good quality outcomes are being achieved, with an award-winning gatehouse design at Ashwell, redundant agricultural buildings being brought back into use as attractively designed business premises and the centenary design competition winner for affordable housing in Letchworth. These outcomes have been promoted through the range of clear design guidance. This includes some produced in collaboration, for example with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF) that has been adopted as SPG. Development briefs emphasise that local styles should be taken into account. Building materials complementary to those traditionally used in the area are to be used where possible, preferably procured from local or recycled sources.
- 57 Planners are working well with officers from other services within the Council and are able to effectively contribute to the development and delivery of strategies. For example, in the case of recreational space in the district, there is now greater clarity regarding levels and quality of provision, areas that are surplus to requirement and gaps in provision. The outcome is that developers are able to contribute in a co-ordinated way towards improved open space and play equipment across the district.
- 58 Both planning control and building control provide quality services. Planning control is a top quartile performer in comparison to other councils for the number of quality (BV205) criteria satisfied as at the end of the 2004/05 year. Building control scores highly in the District Surveyors Association quality checklist. The service holds a Chartermark and has maintained its ISO 9001/2 registration for ten years. The service retains a much higher than average share of building control inspection business within the district compared to other local authority building control services elsewhere. Co-ordinated working with planning control officers has helped ensure smooth progress of applications such as the Brookers car park scheme where early involvement avoided the need for the proposal to be reworked. This ensures service users experience consistent quality across planning services.

Balancing regional, national priorities and local priorities

- 59 The Council is clear about the issues that are important to local people regarding the potential impact of national and regional agendas, and local aspirations. Consistent focus on key planning issues affecting the district is evident in the Council's challenge to the growth agenda and to airport expansion. There is a high level of coherence across a range of actions the council pursues in order to ensure the interests of community of North Hertfordshire are served. These issues have continued to attract significant public concern over the past five years and there is political consensus that these are the right areas of focus for planning effort.

- 60 The Council has a pragmatic approach. It recognises the potential benefits from Luton airport expansion in terms of increased employment opportunities and wider economic development, as well as the adverse environmental impacts. While sustaining its challenge to the allocation of land west of the A1(M) as a strategic site for housing development over the past five years it has ensured that the best interests of the district will be protected as far as possible if the development does go ahead. It has also continuously sought to maximise the urban capacity of the district by maintaining up-to-date information on housing needs, supply of land and housing completions, and by using this information to influence policy choices. This concentration on urban capacity over greenfield development is consistent with local and national priorities.
- 61 Although the Council has a 'saved' local plan, the local plan was adopted nine years ago. Over 80 per cent of councils currently have an up to date (less than five years old) plan or have a replacement plan on deposit. The datedness of the local plan and related formally adopted policy documents impacts on the quality of planning decisions and the ease with which planning applications can be made. Lack of up to date policies hinders the delivery of developments that meet local needs. Officer time is consumed in negotiations and in defending decisions. While the volume of appeals is broadly in line with that of other districts, the appellants' success rate has recently been high relative to other councils and placed the Council in the poorest performing quartile in 2004/05, and there is a track record over the last three years of a high number of decisions made which have been advertised as departures from local plan policy.
- 62 There has been a practical and purposeful approach to development of a local development framework (LDF). Aware that the absence of a current local plan impairs its ability to successfully manage the development of land, the Council has progressed work on the LDF as a priority. A local development scheme was agreed in March 2005. Draft documents for the statement of community involvement and the strategic environmental assessment, development control policies and options on the core strategy are currently out to consultation.
- 63 Speed of determination of planning applications has been poor, with the Council being designated a Planning Services Authority by the ODPM for three consecutive years. Data for 2004/05 indicates that performance is still currently average for one category and in the bottom quartile for a further two categories, and below the government's planning standards. However, this data indicates that the speed with which planning applications are determined for two of the three categories is now at, or slightly above the interim 2005/06 targets set by the ODPM for planning standards authorities. There has been recent improvement, as indicated by in-year, quarterly unaudited data compiled by ODPM. This shows the service's performance for minor and other applications is improving, and is no longer in the worst performing quartile. However, applicants in North Hertfordshire still receive a slower service than in the majority of councils elsewhere.

- 64 Processes are not streamlined to ensure efficient handling of applications. Only 75 per cent of planning applications are registered within seven days, against a local target of 100 per cent in five days. The committee cycle adds in delay for some applications, with applications having to wait for the next meeting of the area committee. However, there is evidence of the Council's increased commitment to achieving better speed of determinations. For example, an area committee was convened in early September after the planned August meeting was inquorate, to ensure that planning applications were not further delayed. This shows that the Council accepts that it needs to aim at greater speed of decision making as well as at providing a quality planning process.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 65 The planning service overall does not provide good value for money. It is a relatively high cost service, giving variable levels of performance.
- 66 Service costs were in the highest 25 per cent nationally in 2002/03 and 2003/04. In 2004/05 costs per head of population fell to £13.64, but this was still close to the top quartile for both similar authorities (ie 'nearest neighbours') and for all authorities. A number of factors contribute towards these higher planning service costs, some of which are within the control of the council, which others are beyond the immediate control of the council. These factors are as follows.
- The number of applications lodged per year is higher than average for district planning authorities.
 - There is an extra dimension to the Council's planning responsibilities in terms of conservation issues, with the requirement to co-ordinate work with the Heritage Foundation for England's first Garden City.
 - The district's response to national priorities has required greater planning policy provision than would be the norm elsewhere. Sustained focus has been maintained on influencing major national and regional policies with regards to airport expansion and the level of housing provision that could impact on the district.
 - Specific allocated sites, such as the site west of the A1 near Stevenage, have generated additional planning control and planning policy activity, particularly relating to responding to the call in inquiry. Through the budgeting process the Council is able to identify specific expenditure over the past three years associated with dealing with this inquiry.
 - The dated local plan is not fully effective. It results in the need for the Council to respond to more departures and appeals, and to invest more in ensuring consistency of advice.
- 67 Performance against key indicators is mixed. The speed of decision making has been historically poor and remains below that achieved by most district councils. Performance has fallen short against local indicators such as the speed of validation of planning applications and the time taken to register and to check building regulations applications.

- 68 However, planning control is a top performer in terms of customer satisfaction. It has a high level of delegation of decision making to officers, who provide good quality advice resulting in well constructed applications and quality outcomes on the ground.
- 69 There are no national BVPIs or cost data for building control, but building control fees are lower than average when compared with other building control services in Hertfordshire and in Essex, according to the service's own benchmarking assessment. Performance against building control's own targets over the past two years has been variable. The service has not been successful in bringing down the rate of rejected submissions. However, it has achieved a 100 per cent record in providing same day site visits by building inspectors and in making decisions within the statutory timescales despite a significant increase in the number of applications.
- 70 Planning enforcement is reactive and the caseload per officer has been consistently high, but good clear up rates are being achieved.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 71 There have been year-on-year improvements in performance as measured by key national performance indicators (BVPIs) for aspects of the service which reflect national and local priorities. These include speed of planning decision making (BV109), sustainable development (BVPI 106 which measures the reuse of brownfield land), and satisfaction with planning control (BV111). Over the past three years the reuse of brownfield land for housing has risen from 25 per cent to 55 per cent. Satisfaction has risen relative to other planning services. These improved areas of performance indicate that the service has the capacity, commitment and management arrangements in place to deliver improved planning services in key areas which address national priorities.
- 72 There have been improvements in performance against local performance indicators. Over the last 18 months the proportion of planning applications registered and validated within five days has increased from 20 to 50 per cent. For the past three years building control has made more statutory and routine site visits year on year. It has responded to all 'same day' site visit requests, even though the number of these requests has increased from 5,200 to 7,400 per year. The speed at which building control initially acknowledges building regulations applications and then checks these applications fell during the last three years but has latterly increased again. The trajectory for most local performance measures has been upwards over the past three years.
- 73 The planning policy team, working in conjunction with housing strategy colleagues, have a growing track record in enabling the provision of affordable housing in the district. Achievement of affordable housing completions is improving rapidly with 84 units completed during 2004/5, 112 for 2005/06 (year-to-date). There are resourced plans for even higher rates of completions beyond 2005/06 against a target of around 100 units per year in the corporate plan. This outcome contributes to the delivery of the corporate aims, which in turn have an impact on the quality of life of those living in the district.
- 74 The service has made progress against its improvement plans. For example, 80 per cent of internal audit's recommendations following the 2004 review of planning control performance were implemented within six months. A review of progress in 2004 of the 2001 FSR action plan found that all but four of the 42 actions were on target or had been completed. This illustrates that the service is able to plan and deliver improvement actions in key areas.
- 75 The pace of progress has been insufficient in one important area over the past three years. In 2003, planning control was identified by ODPM as failing to achieve sufficient progress towards the national standards for the speed of determining planning applications. At this point poor performance was being monitored by the Council, but not robustly challenged and remedied.

Progress was made initially in addressing the one element of the national planning speed standard (for major applications) which was poorly performing, but in the next two years the other two elements (for minor and other applications) became poor performers. This demonstrates the problem was initially displaced rather than resolved. Lack of sufficient timely action resulted in the Council being one of very few identified as still failing in this area in both 2004 and 2005.

- 76 However, more recent and consistent improvement has been achieved across all three categories of planning applications during 2004/05 and the first half of 2005/06 and levels of performance are now converging on the national planning standards required by the year 2006/07.
- 77 Planning control has been effective in addressing the balance of efficiency against quality of delivery. It has challenged the case loading of officers and reduced the workload from 300 per officer to a figure more closely aligned to the nationally accepted target figure of 150 cases per officer per year. Similarly, the enforcement case load per officer which was over 300 a year for the one officer is being brought down to a more sustainable level as a result of the appointment of the assistant enforcement officer. This is resulting in quicker risk assessments on newly received cases, and progress in dealing with the backlog of cases. Speed in handling planning applications is also improving with no indication that the quality of advice or of outcomes is falling.
- 78 Value for money is improving over time for the service as a whole. Planning services have fallen from the highest costing 25 per cent of district councils in the last two years to above average. Planning control has been successful in reducing the level of expenditure on overtime and temporary agency staff in the last three years while increasing the number of establishment posts. No agency planners are currently employed. This reflects improved economy in securing officer time.
- 79 The service is not able to demonstrate improving value for money over time for every part of the service. For example, planning policy expenditure amounts to around £1 million a year. This covers projects, strategic sites' work, development of the LDF. Officers have limited awareness of comparable spending elsewhere by other local planning authorities, although there is a growing awareness of service unit costs, for example with officers looking at local plan preparation costs during the 2005/06 budget setting process. Conversely building control has a clear focus on its costs, its fees and non fee work, its quality and service activity level, and how these change over time. This level of VFM awareness is not found in other planning services.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 80 The Council now has effective arrangements for maintaining its focus on planning service delivery. Team meetings within planning services are effective in focusing team effort. Staff across planning services report a high level of satisfaction with the extent to which team meetings keep them informed.

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Risk management arrangements are in place and being applied within the service to highlight and address potential weaknesses, such as the resilience of the building control function. High level performance indicators are monitored by the Performance and Audit Review Committee (PARC), and this has developed well in the last twelve months. All PIs are monitored on a monthly basis by corporate and departmental management teams. There is topical analysis within planning of areas of concern to councillors through scrutiny and executive committee arrangements. For example in the last year councillors have focused their attention on the effectiveness of area committees as part of the decision making process on planning matters. This year the executive have focused on the use of planning delivery grant and improving planning control caseloads. These arrangements effectively support and sustain improvement in the service.

- 81 Plans are in place to address key gaps in strategic plans and legislative requirements such as the preparation of LDF, and to focus improvement effort within planning control. Work already underway includes addressing policy gaps relating to employment land, car parking in the district and to planning obligations. Recent work in negotiating planning obligations for the Ransom's site in Hitchin and at Icknield way in Letchworth already demonstrates a more comprehensive approach to securing community benefits through S106 agreements. An area wide employment study is near completion which will help shape the scale, likely uses, and the location of land allocated for employment within the new local development framework. This demonstrates that the service is aware of where it needs to concentrate its effort, and is making progress in tackling weaknesses.
- 82 Political and professional leadership regarding the contribution of planning services to the wider corporate agenda is generally strong. There is cross party recognition of the importance of the planning service in fulfilling the ambitions of the council. For example there are councillors from all parties on the LDF steering group. Councillors work collaboratively to support an ambitious improvement plan for planning control through to 2006/07. Councillors have taken and stuck to difficult decisions as to how to present the views of the community in the debate over the region's growth agenda. However, there is a public perception that councillors have not been effective in providing political leadership over the development of Hitchin town centre. The Council's most recent staff survey (December 2003), staff across the Council ranked 'a clear senior management vision' relatively low with 45 per cent in agreement. Staff within the planning service marked this lower still at 35 per cent. Despite identifying in the FSR the need for a clear direction for the service to secure its future, leadership of building control has failed to provide this.
- 83 The service has a good track record in contributing to the delivery arrangements for local area planning that has arisen out of the area visioning of the LSP. Planning officers have been engaged in visioning within the five areas partnerships and the development of local area plans over the past four years. The service is having an impact in helping achieve wider community aims.
- 84 Service planning does not set out the role the service is able to play in delivering specific aspects of the corporate aims. The corporate plan has clear strategic objectives that align with the main themes identified in the community strategy.

Short, medium and longer term actions and high level success measures are stated. However, while the role that planning services are expected to play is implicit, it not spelt out clearly in the service plan in terms of the specific activities or targets that will deliver the particular short, medium and long term actions of the corporate aims. Some staff are also unclear about their own service aims. Building control is clearer on its contribution to corporate aims since it sets this out in a policy statement bi-annually. However for other planning services this basic building block upon which team and individual plans can be placed is not in place.

- 85 This lack of clarity is evident in the inability of councillors and officers to specify exactly what the Council aims to achieve in relation to the economic prosperity of the district. There is for example no measure of how effectively the Council is fulfilling its ambitions to generate local employment opportunities across the district even though this is a theme that occurs in two separate corporate aims. Neither service plans nor planning policies address this aim. Specifically.
- 86 The process of setting of performance targets for the service is improving and is now rigorous. Target setting is improving as management teams and PARC are challenging proposed performance levels more confidently for example, over the level of performance likely for the reuse of previously developed land (BV106). In the past target setting for this indicator was more arbitrary, but it is now arrived at following a clear assessment of the applications likely to come forward over the next twelve months. This more rigorous approach to target setting will strengthen the Council's ability to drive overall improvement.
- 87 Planning performance monitoring is limited, such as in the monitoring of service standards in planning, in the routine evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and strategies, and in the monitoring of planning conditions. The absence of monitoring represents a missed opportunity to learn from what works or does not work, and to improve the outcomes for service users and the wider community.
- 88 The service is not systematic in its drive to achieve value for money. There is limited management information available within the service on costs and outcomes in comparison with others. Some information is collected such as CIPFA financial statistics but it is not applied as part of the decision making process. This leads to a low level of awareness of relative cost, with the exception of the officers in building control.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 89 The planning service has good capacity to improve.
- 90 The service has a range of key strengths within its human resources which will enable it to continue improving. It has been able to retain a core of experienced staff. Through engaging in the debate over the regional growth agenda, senior planners have developed significant expertise which provides the skills needed to deliver the Council's priorities.

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However, there have been staff shortages. Building control suffered short term difficulties two years ago when it saw a 50 per cent turnover of staff and the loss of a total 53 years' experience of building control. Planning policy and planning control had only five of its ten permanent posts filled three years ago. These problems have been largely addressed.

- 91 The service is successfully recruiting and retaining staff and is now close to a full complement of staff. A number of additional career graded posts were established two years ago and trainees are now graduating within the service. In the last two years market forces supplements and the outcome of job evaluation have lifted salaries of professional staff. Terms and conditions are now highly competitive with other local authority employers within the region. Service managers are well regarded by staff. Officers recognise planning and building control work in North Hertfordshire offers a great deal of interest and variety. The staff survey confirms that there are good opportunities to demonstrate initiative and that staff have a sense of accomplishment.
- 92 There are positive prospects for the service to be able to sustain the capacity that has been built over the past two years and improve value for money. Senior officers in planning policy and planning control with a wealth of experience are providing structured training and development to staff. An increasing amount of initial customer advice is now being provided to service users through the technical support staff team. This is more efficient as it frees up professional officers' time. Technical staff have been trained to deal with basic enquiries and do most of the work relating to householder applications, apart from validation. They act as case managers for the planning officers and plot the timelines for major applications. A review of technical support functions is underway. A new flatter management structure has resulted in efficiency savings and makes better use of resources.
- 93 The Council is ensuring its resources are applied to corporate planning priorities. A priority budgeting approach is applied at the corporate level. This means specific priorities are assessed each year, such as ensuring the best outcome is achieved in considering land use west of the A1(M) and taking forward the LDF. These two issues are also stated in the medium term financial plan as being corporate priorities, and councillors consistently emphasise their commitment to these priorities. There is a corporate policy of identifying two per cent savings from recruitment drag. In exceptional circumstances this can be waived by the corporate management team. This has been the case in planning services in recognition of the need to maintain capacity to improve the speed of determining planning applications. This means that priority issues affecting the planning service are financially resourced so as not to have a negative impact on other aspects of the service.
- 94 Resources are applied to service level priorities in a logical and consistent way. Councillors and officers are clear that resources secured for planning through the planning delivery grant (PDG) are ring fenced and additional to the service's base budget. PDG monies are being moved between years in order to smooth out the investment to make it more sustainable.

Gross expenditure for planning control shows a ten per cent annual increase for the last two years. Councillors recognise that the service has the capacity to generate and reinvest savings. For example, the service restructure has resulted in savings amounting to £80,000 even after investment in new front line posts within the service.

- 95** The distinct roles of officers and councillors are clearly understood and applied. There are high levels of delegation to officers. There is officer independence in prioritising the enforcement case load and due regard is given to officers' professional advice when councillors are involved in planning decision making. This has enabled good relationships between officers and councillors, and efficient use of officers' and councillors' time.
- 96** The service is effective at working in partnership with other services in the Council in most instances. For example, case officers are good at bringing together the advisory functions within the service, such as conservation, building control and trees specialists. Services such as leisure and housing when acting as advisors, or as beneficiaries in the case of planning obligations, are very positive about their relationship with the Council's planners. Outcomes they have jointly secured include affordable housing and improved open space and play equipment across the district. This ensures integrated delivery to service users and more effective delivery of corporate aims.
- 97** Joint working with neighbouring councils, despite tensions, has been generally good and has enabled better outcomes, or more efficient use of resources to be secured. For example the council has worked with:

 - Stevenage Borough Council on the jointly commissioned a landscape character assessment for land west of the A1(M);
 - neighbouring councils to prepare and launch a successful legal challenge to the government's airport white paper relating to the expansion of Luton Airport;
 - 15 partners to produce the Chilterns Buildings Design Guide; and
 - Luton Borough Council and South Bedfordshire District Council over proposals for the expansion of the town of Luton.
- 98** Some detailed arrangements are ineffective, such as the joint arrangements between enforcement, planning control and building control officers for the monitoring of planning conditions, or between planning control and Hertfordshire highways as a statutory consultee, but these are widely known and attracting management attention in order to resolve them.
- 99** The Council is positive about developing alternative service delivery options, for example through more formal partnership working, outsourcing or externalisation. Its procurement strategy encourages joint procurement initiatives. For example the Council has recently agreed a strategic partnering arrangement in order to develop its access to services, and planning services will be one of the first services to benefit from on-line access to all file documents. A more corporate approach to the provision of support services is now in place as a result of planning support staff being managed through the management support unit.

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- 100** Limited progress has been achieved in exploring options for developing the building control service. This is a priority first identified for action in the 2001 FSR of regulatory services. Slow progress towards this has resulted in a lack of direction for building control. This is now being addressed by the new management arrangements arising from the restructure within planning.
- 101** Learning within the service is inconsistent. Learning opportunities exist and are pursued, such as the training programme for technical support co-ordinated by senior planning staff. There is sharing of some elements of planning practice between area committees, and learning is evident from the experience of consultation on the first Churchgate development brief in Hitchin. In response to specific issues councillors have made visits to see how these are dealt with in other councils. For example, visits have been made to review area committee arrangements. Councillors looked at the use of energy efficient materials elsewhere to inform their decision regarding the Royston leisure centre roof. However other learning opportunities are lost. Learning from planning appeals is limited to the individual area committee in which the appealed decision falls. The Member Code for Best Practice for Planning Applications Procedures is dated (adopted in 1998) and has not been used constructively to develop a full awareness of issues of openness, fairness and planning policy in planning decision making, although the code has recently been updated and re-adopted. Encouraging councillors to reflect on the local successes and failures in design terms has received little attention to date. This demonstrates that the Council is learning from others, but this is not routine or systematic. The service is not maximising the benefits of learning from itself or from others.