

Service Inspection Report

March 2006



Environment - Street Scene

Castle Point Borough Council

Audit 2005-2006

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission's Inspectorate under powers 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 (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

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

Summary

- 1 Castle Point Borough Council's street scene service is fair, with promising prospects for improvement. The inspection in January 2006 covered refuse collection and recycling, street cleaning, clearing fly-tips, dealing with abandoned vehicles and graffiti, and maintaining street name-plates as well as the Council's trade waste service, car parks, parking enforcement, bus shelters, public conveniences, and maintenance of grass verges.
- 2 The Council is keeping the streets clean, to a good standard, and refuse collection is reliable. There is prompt removal of fly-tips and abandoned cars. The Council provides plain English service standards, has a 24-hour litter hotline and provides a variety of methods to access services. Refuse collection costs are low and the market testing period has led to service improvements and better value for money in street cleansing.
- 3 However, the current level of recycling is lower than average and public participation levels are low due to a previous lack of promotion for recycling. Council-run public conveniences are of poor quality and the condition of car parks and bus shelters is variable. Graffiti is noticeable within the borough. Public satisfaction with the services is mixed. Satisfaction with and recycling facilities is above average but satisfaction with street cleaning and graffiti is below average. Although the Council offers an assisted refuse collection service for elderly or disabled people, it has not fully addressed diversity in the street scene. It has not formalised working with private landowners and lacks a corporate approach to the environment and environmental sustainability. It has been unable to formalise arrangements with partner agencies on the overlap between local highways and street scene issues.
- 4 The prospects for improvement are promising because the Council has embraced the need to change and recognised many of the areas requiring improvement, such as improving recycling and public conveniences. It plans a broad range of improvements in its service plan which extends to 2010 and in the best value review improvement plan. Over the past year it has demonstrated a strong track record of taking effective action, particularly on street cleaning. The Council has made Environment - Civic Pride, including the street scene, a very high corporate priority. This is reflected in plans, resources and investment in the service, but also in commitment from councillors, management and staff.
- 5 Castle Point Borough Council is developing its approach to value for money, particularly through joint working with neighbouring districts and the market testing of street cleaning. The decision to outsource the service from 1 April 2006, under a performance contract, will enhance capacity and drive performance to top quartile, which is a contractual requirement.
- 6 The Council is engaging positively in the development of the Essex Joint Waste Management Strategy. It is likely to be able to draw on financial support from Essex County Council to raise recycling levels beyond 30 per cent in the future.

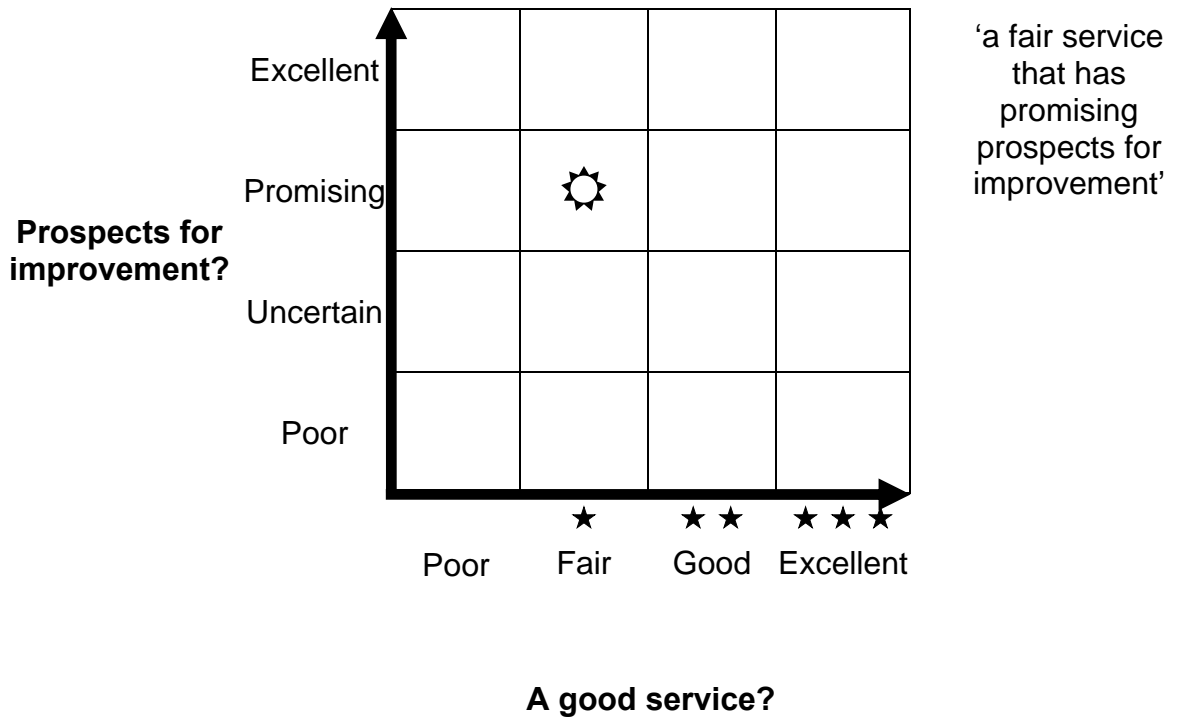
6 Environment - Street Scene | Summary

- 7 However, the Council has improved recycling only incrementally, and car parks have not improved significantly. It lacks a detailed strategic long-term vision for the environment generally and has had limited capacity in terms of officer numbers to develop and maintain strategy. Councillors sometimes focus on operational issues which detract from the big picture.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Castle Point Borough 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.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is a 'fair', one-star service.
- The Council is now keeping the streets clean to a good standard and there is prompt removal of fly-tips and abandoned cars.
 - There is a reliable and efficient refuse collection.
 - Street scene services are accessible to residents through a variety of different methods and there is a 24-hour litter hotline.

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.

8 Environment - Street Scene | Scoring the service

- The Council has conducted effective recent consultation and engagement with the community which has led to changes in street scene services.
- Refuse collection costs are low and integration of street scene services has resulted in improved value for money.
- The market testing of street cleaning shows a focus on value for money.

10 However:

- recycling is below average and the public are not participating fully in recycling schemes;
- customer satisfaction with the services is mixed and the Council is not addressing diversity fully in the street scene;
- graffiti is evident in the borough and is not being removed promptly in accordance with the service standards;
- car parks are of variable quality and public conveniences are generally poor;
- the Council lacks formalised working arrangements with other agencies and has not worked effectively with private landowners on clearing litter and fly-tips; and
- the Council has underinvested in street scene infrastructure, including bus shelters, car parks and public conveniences, and the absence of a strategic approach has created inefficiencies.

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement.

- The Council's track record of improving these services is strong over the past year.
- Performance indicators for street cleansing, recycling and removal of abandoned cars reflect the improvements.
- The street scene is important to the Council and this is reflected in its corporate prioritisation of Environment - Civic Pride.
- Commitment to Environment - Civic Pride is shown by councillors, senior managers, service managers and staff across the Council. It is backed up in service plans, budgets and resourcing.
- The Council has an improvement plan which recognises many of the aspects of the service which require action, such as upgrading certain public conveniences, and increasing participation in recycling. A broad range of improvements are planned in the Council's street scene service plan, which extends to 2010 and in the best value review improvement plan.
- The Council is developing its approach to value for money, particularly through joint working with neighbouring districts.
- Market testing of street cleaning has led to improved efficiency. The decision to outsource the service, under a performance contract, will enhance capacity and drive future improvements.

- The corporate approach to Environment - Civic Pride ensures that street scene services can draw on resources across the Council and this enhances capacity.
- The Council is engaging positively in the development of the Essex Joint Waste Management Strategy and is exploring opportunities for joint working with neighbouring councils.
- The Council has invested in the services and has been successful in accessing external funding. The planned improvements are included in spending plans and will be resourced from the Council's revenue budget and external funding sources.
- The Council learns from its own performance through pilot exercises and seeks out best practice.

12 However:

- Castle Point's record of improvement on waste recycling shows only incremental improvement until quite recently, despite being amongst the best performers in early years;
- improvement has been at times ad hoc and lacks co-ordination within a strategic vision. Plans do not fully outline what the Council will do about some of the broader aspects of street scene, such as partnership working and car parks, and environmental sustainability;
- officer capacity, in terms of numbers, is limited at the strategic level and for project management.
- councillors sometimes focus on small isolated operational issues which distract from strategic objectives and divert limited capacity; and
- staff capacity in the some parts of the service continues to be affected by high sickness levels and service-level training has been limited.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Clarify the medium to long-term aims for, and linkages between, the elements of the wider street scene service by:

- developing a medium to long-term plan which sets out a comprehensive, integrated vision for the street scene service;*
- developing strategies and targets for environmental sustainability through the emerging Community Strategy and the Local Development Framework; and*
- establishing a timetable of key milestones and decisions and encouraging senior councillors to focus on these, providing additional training where necessary.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater efficiency due to better co-ordination and focus on strategic objectives; and
- improved effectiveness as stakeholders, partners and the public will be able to get involved more easily.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the focus on user needs and service integration by:

- *establishing a street scene forum of external partners and user groups;*
- *widening the training of frontline staff to cover customer care, waste minimisation and environmental sustainability;*
- *extending the diversity impact assessment to other parts of the street scene service; and*
- *enhancing the street management aspect of the street scene service, including information, community involvement and enforcement, and co-ordination with partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved outcomes, including recycling and waste minimisation, through better targeting and better use of the resources of the Council and wider community;
- a better understanding of the diverse needs of the community regarding the street scene; and
- better information for the public.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Castle Point is a borough council with a population of 87,000 covering an area of 17 square miles bordering the Thames Estuary in south-eastern Essex. It includes Benfleet, Hadleigh, Canvey Island and Thundersley. It is surrounded by the unitary councils of Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea and the districts of Rochford and Basildon. Proximity to London, the small size of the borough and the lack of local quality employment has resulted in high levels of commuting. Sixty per cent of the population work outside the borough.
- 16 The Council is the largest employer within the borough. Unemployment is below the regional and national averages. Over 50 per cent of the total area is green belt and forms a natural boundary between the distinct communities which together form the borough. However, the result is that development opportunities are very limited and this is coupled with high house prices. Privately owned housing accounts for over 94 per cent of all households, well above the national average of 78.5 per cent. Only two wards feature within the top third of councils on the national deprivation index.
- 17 The population reduced slightly between 1981 and 2001, and there is a growing elderly population. With 24.3 per cent of the population of pensionable age, this is higher than the national average of 20.8 per cent; and 3.35 per cent of residents are from a minority ethnic background, which is below the national average of 13 per cent and represents an increase from 1.2 per cent since 1991.

The Council

- 18 The Council has had a Conservative administration since May 2003, with a majority of 34 out of 41 councillors. There are six Canvey Island Independent councillors and one Labour councillor. Prior to this, the Labour party had been in control since 1995. The Council adopted the 'fourth option' form of political structure. The Council has a committee system with four policy committees and a recovery committee. There is also a planning committee and three regulatory committees. The previous six area forums have been replaced by five neighbourhood meetings, mirroring the revised county electoral divisions.
- 19 The structure comprises two service departments and three support service departments. The strategic management of the Council is led by the Chief Executive and four directors. The Council employs 365 full-time equivalent staff.
- 20 The Council's net revenue expenditure for 2005/06 is £11.6 million and the housing revenue account gross expenditure is £9.9 million.

- 21 Since the comprehensive performance assessment in 2004, the Council has made a number of changes. It has outsourced its golf course and is pursuing the outsourcing of other leisure facilities. It has completed a housing options appraisal. It is market testing its grounds maintenance service and may outsource it. During this period the highways agencies across Essex were terminated by Essex County Council and in April 2005 delivery reverted to Essex County Council.

The Council's street scene service

- 22 In its publication *Street Scene - Learning from Audit and Inspection* (2002), the Audit Commission defined street scene as

'all the work that a Council does to care for its streets, including maintenance and management functions. This includes waste management and cleansing services, highway services, car parking services, grounds maintenance and integrated services.'

- 23 We have taken these services as the scope for this inspection, except for highways services (delivered by Essex County Council) and grounds maintenance. This is a broader definition of street scene than that used by the Council. The inspection covered:

- waste management, including refuse collection, waste minimisation and recycling;
- street cleaning, fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti;
- grass verge maintenance;
- car parks and on-street parking enforcement;
- public conveniences;
- street furniture, including bus shelters and street nameplates;
- partnership working on integrated services, such as highways maintenance and enforcement delivered by partners; and
- environmental sustainability.

- 24 In Castle Point, most, but not all of these services are the responsibility of the Borough Council. These responsibilities include refuse collection and recycling, street cleaning, clearing fly-tips, dealing with abandoned vehicles and graffiti, and maintaining street nameplates. The Council exercises its discretionary powers to also provide a trade waste service, car parks, bus shelters, public conveniences, and to maintain the grass verges. Essex County Council is the waste disposal authority, the highway authority and transport authority. Essex Police are responsible for enforcement of highways laws. However, Castle Point Borough Council provides the parking warden service under decriminalised parking enforcement arrangements through a formal highways agency agreement. The Council delivers these services predominantly through its own staff and in-house resources and has done so since the mid-nineties. It has contracts with commercial recycling merchants for handling and sale of materials collected. Bus shelters on main routes are provided by Adshel, under contract to the Council, in return for advertising rights.
- 25 The Council has a refuse and recycling depot on Canvey Island, adjacent to the Civic Amenity (waste and recycling centre) which is run by Essex County Council. Refuse is collected weekly in black sacks; paper, cardboard, glass and garden waste are collected from the kerbside for recycling. There are 21 local recycling centres, most of which accept glass, cans and textiles. There are 21 car parks, some for use free of charge and others on a pay-and-display system. The Council also provides five public conveniences. (A further six were closed in 2004.)

National context

- 26 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to reduce the amount of waste that is collected and to encourage more recycling. The Government is currently consulting on setting councils a recycling standard of up to 30 per cent by 2007/08. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.
- 27 Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) gives a local authority power to deal with litter based problems affecting its area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach and specific levels of cleanliness for various environments. Under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act, an authority has the power to issue a notice to a private landowner to clean up their land and to undertake the cleansing itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2003 has strengthened council's legislative powers for keeping the area clean.
- 28 The Government has promoted the *Cleaner, Safer, Greener* agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.

- 29 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, *Securing the Future*, 2005. Indeed, many local authorities are at the forefront of efforts to achieve greater social, economic and environmental sustainability. District councils, such as Castle Point, are expected to use their powers as planning, housing and waste collection authorities, as well as their general wellbeing powers and community leadership, to achieve sustainable development. This includes working with others to promote energy conservation and efficiency, protect wildlife habits and promote biodiversity, reduce and mitigate climate change, and promote more sustainable patterns of development.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 30 Improving street scene services has been a recent high priority for the Council. The Council has three community priorities including *Environment - Civic Pride: We want clean streets, good maintenance of 'green' areas, footway lighting, recycling, air quality and good planning policies*. Specific standards and targets were set in the service plans for street cleanliness, removal of graffiti and fly-tips, maintenance of street furniture and nameplates, for 2004/05 and onwards. A street scene improvement plan was adopted in 2004 aimed at preparing the services for market testing.
- 31 Some aspects of the service, such as recycling, have been long-term priorities, although commitment has fluctuated. Over the past three years the Council has adopted the statutory performance standards set by the Government as its targets for recycling.
- 32 Other targets relating to best value indicators are set in the Council's BVPP. For 2004/05 these included:
- waste collected per head of population - less than 400 kilogrammes;
 - cost of waste collection per household - £32.33;
 - street cleanliness - less than 30 per cent of streets with significant litter;
 - energy efficiency of housing stock - 63 per cent rating; and
 - BV106 new homes built on previously developed land - 60 per cent.
- 33 The Council does not have a strategy or targets for car parking, parking enforcement or bus shelters. Following a review and public consultation, the Council had decided to reduce the number of public conveniences, but this policy has been recently modified, due to adverse public reaction.
- 34 Part of the vision for Castle Point set out in the Community Strategy (2003) is *Making our environment greener and cleaner*. The Strategy includes commitments to increase recycling and promote composting, promote water and energy efficiency, protect the natural and built environment, and to promote public transport and alternatives to the car. However, the local strategic partnership lapsed in 2004. The Council is working to reinvigorate it and the Community Strategy is being rewritten.

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

Access, customer care and diversity

- 35 The Council has improved its capacity and preparedness to consult and listen to the local community over the past two years. Partners and residents that we spoke to commented that the Council was now very open in its approach. The neighbourhood forums were well received and the Council newspaper, Castle Point Borough News, has generated interest and valuable feedback. This consultation has been used to shape priorities and services, including the street scene service. However, the Council does not have the regular, detailed communication with users and stakeholders to support active management of the street scene.
- 36 The street scene service is accessible to residents and others by various means. The Council website contains detailed information about the service. This includes service standards which are written in plain English and in a format that is accessible to the general public. Residents can check the day of their refuse and recycling collections online by entering their street name. They can also see the cleaning standard that applies to their street. Information, such as recycling leaflets, is also available in the Council offices. Calendars are distributed annually to residents and an additional copy is provided to residents who leave their refuse out on wrong day. The service responds to individual customer's needs, for example, elderly or disabled residents can request a 'back door' bin collection, and changes are sometimes made to collection rounds in response to customer comments.
- 37 In addition to the Council switchboard, a dedicated 24-hour 'litter hotline' number is provided and promoted. We tested both these numbers and obtained prompt and polite responses; and the fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles were dealt with promptly. The Council is now implementing customer relationship management technology as its own monitoring shows a significant proportion of all calls are lost after transfer from the switchboard. This currently frustrates those callers and means that some information will not reach the Council.
- 38 Councillors play a prominent role at community level. They are well known in the borough and are accessible to the public, through meetings, supporting community groups and other channels. However, there is a tendency to focus on ad-hoc local requests, sometimes at the expense of strategic issues.
- 39 Customer satisfaction with the service is mixed. Satisfaction with refuse collection and recycling facilities is above average but satisfaction with street cleaning and graffiti is below average (2003/04 data). There is also considerable public concern about community safety which overlaps with street scene issues, such as abandoned cars, fly-tipping and graffiti. The recent improvements in street cleaning had been noticed by the local people and staff we spoke to.

- 40 The street scene service has not yet addressed diversity issues in a comprehensive or systematic way. For example, the Council did not consider the diversity implications of the closure of several public conveniences, which particularly impacts on older people. It then had to partially reverse the decision due to the adverse public reaction. The Council has not evaluated the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act on the street scene. It has completed a Diversity Impact Assessment of the service in December 2005 but is starting to implement this now. Consequently, the full range of community needs is not yet addressed.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 41 We have grouped the service outcomes under the four headings below.

Waste hierarchy – refuse, recycling and composting

- 42 The Council provides a reliable and efficient refuse collection service, using black sacks. Rates of missed collections are low. Staff know the routes well and operate a team 'task and finish' system within a 37.5 hour week. However, public satisfaction in 2003/04 (best value satisfaction surveys) was only average.
- 43 The Council provides an adequate recycling service but has yet to exploit its full potential to maximise participation rates and levels of recycling. It provides a kerbside collection service to 100 per cent of dwellings in the borough and collects four different materials for recycling. In 2003/04 public satisfaction levels for recycling were in the top 25 per cent of councils, when adjusted for deprivation. However, participation rates are only around 40 per cent and the Council has only recently employed a dedicated waste minimisation and recycling officer. Frontline staff, such as refuse collectors, are not trained in the reasons for recycling and ways of minimising waste, which limits their ability to act as advocates for the street scene service.
- 44 The Council's performance on recycling is adequate. It met its statutory standard but is now below average. The Council exceeded its statutory recycling and composting standard of 16 per cent in 2003/04 by achieving 18 per cent. In 2004/05, it achieved 19.8 per cent, just short of its own target of 20 per cent. It is on track to achieve 25 per cent in 2005/06, which would meet its statutory standard of 24 per cent. Taking account of refuse recycled at the Civic Amenity on Canvey Island, 29 per cent was recycled or composted in 2004/05, with 39 per cent projected for 2005/06. However, although the Council's recycling and composting performance has improved, relative to other district councils, the Council has slipped from being a leading recycler in 2002/03 to being below average in 2004/05.
- 45 Waste minimisation performance is adequate. The Council promotes reduction and reuse campaigns in partnership with Essex County Council. The amounts of waste collected per head were slightly below the average for the past three years and, including waste taken to the Civic Amenity, total tonnages fell in 2004/05 and are projected to fall again in 2005/06. However, there is no effective limit on the amount of waste that is collected and refuse staff will take non-standard items if asked.

Keeping the district clean

- 46 The Council maintains the streets to a good standard. Prior to 2005, levels of street cleanliness were poor and the Council did not meet its own targets. Some 40 per cent of streets had unacceptable levels of litter or detritus. Public satisfaction with cleanliness, particularly in shopping areas, was low. The 2003/04 best value surveys showed public satisfaction levels to be in the lowest 25 per cent of councils or below average when adjusted for deprivation. In April 2005, the Council introduced a new cleansing regime, and this combined with the clear priority for this service and improved investment has led to cleanliness standards improving noticeably. Unaudited results for 2005/06 to date indicate only 11 per cent of streets were of an unacceptable litter standard.
- 47 To reduce problems of refuse spilling from split sacks, and to improve the overall cleanliness of the streets, the Council has introduced a Street Scene Team in Benfleet, which combines refuse collectors and a litter picker. This synergy makes a greater impact on the street has proved popular and effective. This innovation is being tested and may be extended to other rounds but this has yet to be decided.
- 48 Fly-tips on public land are removed promptly by the Council. A variety of frontline staff, police community support officers, councillors and the public take responsibility for reporting fly-tipping, in addition to the street scene officers.
- 49 Problems of litter and fly-tipping on private land remain and the Council has taken relatively little enforcement action in this regard. It has improved monitoring and increased the number of letters sent over the past year but has not fully used its existing powers.
- 50 The Council has worked with some fast food outlets to reduce littering, for example, in Tarpots and Canvey Island. This has reduced littering in certain locations but a general problem remains. The Council is proactively using the new licensing powers to impose conditions on take-away food premises to reduce littering. It has also drawn up enforcement procedures that could result in loss of licence.
- 51 The 2003/04 public satisfaction surveys showed high levels of concern about graffiti and abandoned cars in Castle Point. The Council's performance in removing abandoned cars has improved greatly and is now very prompt. In 2005, 94 per cent of reports of abandoned vehicles were investigated within 24 hours and 92 per cent were removed within 24 hours of the legal entitlement. Graffiti, however, remains a problem and the Council is not meeting its own service standards.

Maintaining and managing the street scene

- 52 Overall maintenance and management of the street scene, including the infrastructure, is inconsistent and inadequate in some important areas. Public conveniences have been allowed to deteriorate to a very poor condition in some cases. The bus shelters owned by the Council are also in a very poor condition and are excluded from the bus stop improvement programme being undertaken by Essex County Council. Apart from making the street scene less attractive, this undermines the Community Strategy aim of promoting public transport.
- 53 Car parks are maintained to a mixed standard: some are of a good standard and secure with CCTV whilst others are rudimentary and spoiled by graffiti and vandalism. No car park map of sites in the borough is available for the public. The public receives a variable service and car parks are not easy for visitors to locate.
- 54 Verge maintenance is good and the Council has recently started a programme of trimming verge edges which have encroached on the footway. Opportunities to manage the verges in more ecologically-benign ways have not been explored, overlooking opportunities to promote local biodiversity.
- 55 Councillors and some partners are not sufficiently clear about street scene management responsibilities. Some aspects of enforcement, such as footway parking and cycling on footways, are not being properly addressed. Equally, there is a tendency for some councillors to involve the Council in issues that are best left to other partners or should be ruled out on strategic grounds. This can set up false expectations and divert scarce resources from key tasks.
- 56 Partnership working is not fully effective. Following the termination of the highways agency arrangements by the County Council, the Borough Council has formally agreed to enter the successor partnership arrangements but these are not yet finalised. Consequently, the Borough Council and County Council have not been able to develop a new understanding on street scene enforcement. For example, effective action is not being taken to prevent parking on grass verges, which means that some verges in the borough are being damaged.

Environmental sustainability

- 57 The Council cannot demonstrate a clear policy or consistent achievement in the area of environmental sustainability. It has made some useful 'green' contributions but has not set out clear, comprehensive objectives; delivery is variable and piecemeal. It has improved energy efficiency in local council housing to top quartile standard and improved energy efficiency in the general housing stock by 15 per cent under the Home Energy Efficiency Act provisions. As noted above, it is promoting recycling but in-house recycling at the Council offices is at a low level. Unlike some other district councils, it has no travel plan, has no clear actions to enhance biodiversity, and does not practice 'green' or sustainable procurement. It does not operate any environmental management systems such as ISO 14001 or EMAS.

- 58 The Council is not taking adequate measures to protect the most important local wildlife sites. Thundersley Great Common, a site of special scientific interest (SSSI), is owned by the Council, and the current management regime is inadequate. (Management needs to be targeted at reducing the extent of the scrub and achieving the appropriate conditions for the notable grass-heath communities to flourish through cutting or grazing.) Benfleet and Southend Marshes site is suffering 'coastal squeeze' due to sea level rises. Castle Point Borough Council is not responsible for the decline but, through its functions, it has an important role to play in partnership with English Nature and other agencies towards mitigating the damage and improving conditions. Only 10 per cent of sites of special scientific interest in the borough are in good condition. The poor condition of these sites undermines progress towards the national public service agreement target for improving sites of special scientific interest. The result is that biodiversity is diminished.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 59 The Council does not fully understand its position regarding value for money in the street scene service. It does not regularly monitor costs to performance. The Council does not regularly benchmark costs, although this is a feature of best value reviews. It has sought to control costs across the service but has not always achieved value for money. Cost-cutting rather than policy objectives have predominated. As a result, costs are generally low but there has been underinvestment in some important areas with consequent poor outcomes.
- 60 The Council is achieving value for money in its refuse collection service where costs are low at £32.00 per household (lowest quartile) and the service is reliable. However, despite investment in a reasonably comprehensive kerbside recycling collection service, participation rates are low due to inadequate promotion. The Council is actively exploring options for joint collection contracts with neighbouring boroughs through the Essex waste management partnership.
- 61 There has been serious underinvestment in some aspects of the street scene service, notably public conveniences, bus shelters and bottle banks. Although the Council is now promoting recycling through a range of initiatives, lack of recycling promotion until recently has contributed to low participation rates and a decline in recycling performance relative to other councils.
- 62 Car parks, trade waste and the parking warden service return a surplus to the Council. However, in the absence of clear strategic objectives (easing traffic congestion, road safety, supporting local shops and businesses or maximising income), it is not clear that they are achieving value for money. Parking charges for similar car parks are inconsistent across the borough.

- 63 The changes that the Council has introduced to the street scene service over the past year have improved value for money. Whereas departments previously worked in isolation, there is now much more sharing of resources and joint working to achieve better outcomes and more efficient use of resources. For example, sharing of grounds maintenance and verge maintenance budgets and staff. The Council has market tested its street scene service. This process has brought about a better understanding of its costs and improvements in efficiency and service quality.
- 64 Short-term changes in priorities requested by councillors draw capacity away from the street scene service. Some local issues, such as residents parking bays, have distracted from strategic objectives. The absence of a strategic approach and a desire by councillors to help everyone can cause a short-term change in priorities and create inefficiencies.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

- 65 Castle Point shows a record of implementing change which has improved the street scene in relation to the Council's Environment - Civic Pride priority. It used the introduction of the mandatory street cleanliness indicator (BV199) to refocus the service, integrating grounds maintenance activities with street cleansing and also consulted on where extra effort was needed. At the same time, street scene activities gained a higher profile through the Council's Environment - Civic Pride priority. The street cleansing service has implemented changes from its best value review and peer reviews, such as introducing a new team to focus on cleaning shopping areas and encouraging the set up of Eco Schools in the borough in conjunction with ENCAMS. The prospective Eco Schools spoke positively about the Council's involvement. The kerbside recycling service has been extended to collect a wider range of materials. The Council has also taken over parking enforcement duties from the police and is operating these cost-effectively. These changes have resulted in improved cleanliness, increased levels of recycling and improved efficiency.
- 66 Performance indicators and user experience demonstrate recent improvements. BV199 'the proportion of relevant land that is littered to a significant or heavy extent' has improved from 40 per cent of land (qualified in 2004/05) to 11 per cent currently. Partners told us that the Council removes abandoned cars quicker now than it used to, and this is confirmed by current performance data which shows over 90 per cent are removed within 24 hours of the legal limit. Service users told us that recent improvements had been noticeable, such as recycling improvements, weekend cleaning of shopping areas and more frequent emptying of litter bins. Verge maintenance has also improved, improving the look of the street scene.
- 67 The direction of travel of key performance indicators in these services is positive. The Council has a good track record on cost of waste collection. In 2002/03 the cost was £29.71, in 2003/04 it was £29.98 and in 2004/05 it was £31.45. This low cost placed the Council consistently second lowest in Essex and in the best performing 25 per cent of councils in 2002/03 and 2003/04. Participation in recycling has increased by 23 per cent between April and October 2005. The level of recycling has improved from around 18 per cent in 2003/04 to 25 per cent currently (unaudited projection to year-end). This means that performance is currently on track to meet the Council's statutory standard and the target it set itself when Environment - Civic Pride was launched. The Council has also improved performance over the past two years in promoting energy efficiency in local homes. This shows that the Council can focus on the street scene over the long-term.

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- 68 The street scene service is achieving against aims set in the past. The best value review clarified aims for street cleanliness. The Council has successfully acted on reducing levels of litter and detritus and focused action on shopping areas. The Council also achieved its 2003/04 aim of recycling or composting 18 per cent of waste and achieved 19.8 per cent in 2004/05 towards a target of 20 per cent.
- 69 The Council can demonstrate a focus on value for money in the street scene. It has made some procurement decisions jointly, for example, setting up joint glass collection with Basildon which involved joint procurement of special freighters. As a result of the best value review, the Council decided to market test its street cleaning and associated services. The process has led to a restructured service, for example, improving integration with grounds maintenance, and improved the service efficiency and overall appearance of the area. This is an improvement in value for money.
- 70 Although heading in the right direction, the Council's improvement on recycling and waste minimisation has been incremental and has lost ground relative to the performance of other councils. Between 2002/03 and 2004/05, the kilogrammes of waste collected per head has remained at second quartile level, ie below the average amount collected, compared to other councils but moved closer to the average; it is currently not improving. Recent recycling data suggest that performance is accelerating. The projection of over 25 per cent recycling/composting for 2005/06 (unaudited data) indicates that the extended kerbside collection service and promotion of recycling and waste minimisation are now having an impact. Overall, however, the track record is one of gradual progress rather than the step change needed to be one of the top performers.
- 71 The Council has a poor track record of enforcement on litter and graffiti. Until now the Council has drawn attention to environmental law by writing to the business or landowner but has not followed up with further action. Fixed penalty notices have not been issued which means that the Council has not been able to publicise successful enforcement activity or benefit from the deterrent effect.
- 72 Some aspects of the wider street scene have not demonstrated significant improvement. Car parks, bus shelters and public conveniences have not improved over time and there is no significant improvement in dealing with graffiti. The Council has not taken effective actions for these areas and this shows a lack of comprehensiveness in its vision of street scene activities.
- 73 The Council's track record does not show regard for diversity in street scene work. For example, the Council has not developed a co-ordinated approach with Essex County Council to deliver a Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant street scene, without obstructions caused by bins or street signage. The Council very recently piloted its Diversity Impact Assessment in the street scene services resulting in a review of accessibility with timescales to be determined. This means that it is not yet clear what the street scene service will do to meet diversity and when.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 74 Street cleaning, waste and recycling are clear priorities for the Council under Environment - Civic Pride. This priority is reflected in service plans, the best value review improvement plan and the budgets. The service plan aims such as 'to provide a high quality cost effective street cleansing service' and 'to provide high quality cost effective and efficient refuse collection and recycling services'. Other aims are mostly clear such as to maintain five public conveniences in strategic locations and to maintain roads, footpaths and related land in a clean, litter free condition.
- 75 The Council's Environment - Civic Pride priority is well supported. There is strong cross-party support and commitment from councillors, including the appointment of member champions. The Corporate Management Team and the service management show strong leadership on the street scene. Staff who work in street scene functions show a strong commitment to improving the appearance of the area. Internal communication has improved within the Council, with more frequent team meetings for environmental staff and with a spirit of openness in addressing improvement. This minimises the internal barriers to improvement.
- 76 The Council's plans for the street scene service address many of the right things, including current service weaknesses. For example, the best value review improvement plan includes actions such as appointing an enforcement officer, introducing a new cleaning team for shopping areas, a litter reduction plan and ensuring highways access arrangements are improved. The Council has just launched a graffiti-response service operating 24 hours per day, seven days per week. It has carried out a market testing process for street cleaning and has improved service delivery throughout this process, with top quartile performance a requirement of the new contract.
- 77 The Service Plan 2006 to 2010 also identifies a range of actions which will make a difference to the local community and which will help achieve of national objectives. Examples of these actions include diverting bulky waste to reuse, training frontline staff on customer care, diversity and environmental legislation and broadening the range of mechanisms to consult residents. The Service Plan also includes clear targets, an analysis of risk and a diversity action plan.

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- 78 Performance management arrangements are improving and the 2006/07 service plans incorporate a new framework, called 'Cutting the Mustard'. This includes risk analysis and value for money. The Council now has a strategic planning timetable, which includes engagement with the public and has recently launched medium-term service planning arrangements with clear guidance and a template. There is also clear guidance on target setting and roles and responsibilities within the Council. It is implementing a performance management software package to monitor service planning and progress against performance indicators. The Council has also analysed the reasons why performance indicators have been qualified in the past and has taken action on this. Street scene indicators, such as street cleanliness, the number of missed refuse recycling collections and abandoned cars, are now being closely monitored with demonstrable improvements in outcomes. This means that the Council has stronger arrangements to keep improvements on track. For example, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has closely monitored the street scene improvement plan. The new street cleansing contract is performance based. Payments will depend on achieving top quartile performance using BV199 indicators.
- 79 The service learns from others and from its own experiences. It has worked with Brentwood Borough Council to develop a review of car parking options for Castle Point. It has also looked at glass collection in the London boroughs and co-mingling of recyclables in Colchester. The Service is also not afraid to learn from its own experiences and has piloted new approaches such as following the refuse collection round with street cleansing.
- 80 The Council is engaging positively in the development of the Joint County Waste Strategy for Essex. For example, the Chairman of the Council's Environment Committee also chairs the South Essex Waste Forum. As a result, the Council has an outline vision for the development of its waste and recycling service based on the Joint County Waste Strategy. Due to partnership working timescales, this is in the early stages without clear timescales and detailed planning. Currently, the Council has targets and plans for short to medium-term improvements in recycling. Its longer term plans for recycling are explained in the service plan as achieving and maintaining top quartile status.
- 81 The Council has yet to make some hard decisions about recycling in the medium to long-term, although its aims are clear. If it is to be a top quartile recycler, it will need to decide whether alternative week collection with wheeled bins, which is the partnership's preferred method, is suitable for its local context and the possible costs of its approach. Essex County Council has indicated that it will fund performance improvement in districts above BVPI target levels, but the Government is likely to increase BVPI target levels in future, so the level of Essex County Council funding and arrangements are not yet clear. Castle Point's statutory performance standard for recycling and composting was 14 per cent by 2003/04 and is 24 per cent by 2005/06. The Council has set itself a target of 30 per cent recycling and composting by 2007/8. It has a longer term aim, agreed with Essex County Council, to recycle or compost 40 per cent by 2009/10, but the detail of this has yet to be worked out. The Council also has to work out the detail of its medium to longer term plans for car parks and bus shelters.

- 82 The Council lacks a fully co-ordinated approach to street scene strategies or a comprehensive integrated vision. These initiatives are co-ordinated through the Corporate Management Team and with senior councillors but they are not all fully set out in longer terms plan. For example, service development strategies have appeared in isolation, such as bringing collection from recycling banks back in house, and the public conveniences strategy, and have not been joined up to the rest of the strategic approach to street scene. Some short-term plans lack a project planned approach such as action on participation. Although the service plan and improvement plan are wide ranging, they are not comprehensive, as they do not include explicit action on biodiversity, partnership arrangements or waste minimisation. An overall strategic steer on environmental sustainability from the Local Strategic Partnership is missing because it lapsed and has recently restarted. The LSP has now drafted a new Community Strategy. However, currently, the lack of strategic overview means that prioritisation of actions within the service is sometimes unclear.
- 83 The Council has arrangements for consultation, such as its neighbourhood forums and a citizen's panel. However, it lacks a regular consultation mechanism specifically for the street scene, which could provide ideas to improve the service and also extend the service's capacity. It has not engaged with hard-to-reach groups, which means that improvement is not fully owned by the community or tailored to their needs.
- 84 Plans for diversity in the services are not SMART. The street scene service was a pilot service within the Council for the Diversity Impact Assessment. It has a list of actions resulting from the assessment but there are no timescales as yet.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 85 The Council is identifying funding for its key priorities. It has invested in its Environment - Civic Pride priority, and in the street scene service, both through external funding and its own resources. DEFRA awarded a total of £131,000 in 2004/05 and £252,000 in 2005/06 to Castle Point. Since then, the Council has accessed additional DEFRA funding of £35,000 a year over two years to increase recycling participation through a taskforce approach. It has also boosted staffing levels and purchased new street cleaning equipment. This shows the Council is serious about its Environment - Civic Pride priority.
- 86 The Council is identifying resources to fund improvements to achieve its targets. It is in a position to borrow or release assets to fund future investment in services. This is important as finance for wheeled bins and alternate week collection is a concern to some people within the Council and the County Waste Strategy is indicating that alternate week collection is the preferred best practice option. The Council will be able to draw on resources from Essex County Council to fund improvements to recycling services beyond 30 per cent. This will enable a step change in outcomes. It has also made short to medium term financial provision for improvement. It has allowed for investment in five public conveniences for example, and for more dog bins and an extension of the stray dog collection service.

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- 87 Castle Point has identified resources to work jointly with neighbouring councils. For example, the joint glass collection service in conjunction with Basildon and sack procurement with Brentwood. The Council is developing its procurement strategy and can show some savings through the Procurement Agency for Essex, for example in recruiting temporary staff and placing recruitment advertisements.
- 88 The Council has taken action to ensure future service capacity. The recent decision to outsource the street cleansing service from April 2006 enhances the capacity of the service by reducing demands on operational management and drawing on the wider resources of the contractor.
- 89 The Council can show it is boosting capacity through working with the private sector, charities and community groups. It has worked with Cleanaway Trust, Morrisons supermarket and the Royal Society for Protection of Birds to develop a new 800-acre nature reserve on Canvey Island, and has contributed £250,000 towards the project. In 2005/06 joint work with Castle Point Wildlife Group to carry out woodland management saved the Council £15,000. The Council has also identified efficiencies through using its existing plant and equipment more effectively, for example, by collecting from glass recycling banks using its own glass freighters, which will save the Council approximately £6,000.
- 90 Castle Point now has diversity strategy which includes an action plan at corporate level. This maps out how the Council will reach level 3 of the Equality Standard by March 2007 while sustaining levels 1 and 2, and includes action on seeking agreement on diversity targets in partnership working and ensuring that diversity mechanisms are active in contract management.
- 91 The Council has invested in technical appraisals of various environmental sustainability issues through the local development framework process. For example, a wildlife sites appraisal has been carried out in collaboration with the Essex Wildlife Trust. The appraisals enhance the Council's capacity to improve the environmental management of the borough but have yet to be turned into firm policies or action plans.
- 92 Although recently the Council has made progress on service planning and workforce development, it recognises that it still lacks capacity for strategic working. For example, it has not developed a corporate approach to environmental sustainability, or a designated officer to promote sustainability issues. It has lacked capacity to project manage or oversee cross-cutting environmental work such as street scene. This means that the Council makes improvement in certain areas of service, such as street cleansing, but not others, such as car parks. Several senior officers are due to retire in the next few years which will impact on capacity. The Council plans to restructure to provide more strategic management capacity and to develop an approach to succession planning.
- 93 Strategic capacity among councillors is limited. Councillors react to operational requests from the public without always considering the Council's overall priorities within that activity, for example requests for residents' parking bays. This, combined with the lack of co-ordinated plans, can result in resources becoming diverted away from agreed priorities.

- 94** ICT provision to support the street scene services is developing. Call recording technology for environmental services is basic and not integrated with the Council's other systems. The Council has bought a car park software package and plans to implement customer relationship management technology in the future to boost capacity in the street scene.
- 95** Capacity has been unpredictable within the street scene services. Staff capacity is variable due to high sickness levels, currently 12.5 days per employee, in spite of an absence management procedure, and this leads to a high dependency on agency staff in the street scene service. Training so far has not added to the capacity of the service and has concentrated on essential health and safety related issues, partly as a consequence of the staff appraisal system which is not fully effective. The recent Staff Survey revealed some inconsistencies in approach to appraisals and the Council plans to evaluate the system in order to improve it and make it fairer. However, the new street cleansing contractor will now take responsibility for some of these arrangements, releasing some operational management capacity.
- 96** The Council is not fully extending its capacity through work with others. It lacks formal local agreements with major partners such as the Environment Agency which can make it easier to react in a short timescale. The Council's arrangements with the police, highways and transport bodies are also informal and there is a need for a firmer understanding on work on bus stops, highways and parking. Work with private landowners on litter is in early stages: the Council has worked well with fast food operators, but not other types of landowner. The result is that there are eyesores of littering and unkempt land, which detract from the overall impression of the borough.