

Progress Assessment Report

March 2006



# Progress Assessment

**Torridge District Council**

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## Progress assessments

In 2002, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced at single tier and county councils (ST&CCs) and at district councils in 2003/04, as a way of supporting councils to deliver improvements in services to local people. CPA brought together existing information on service performance in councils with a corporate assessment of each council's ability to improve. This was used to reach an overall conclusion about whether a council was 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'.

Councils have prepared improvement plans following CPA and those councils classified as 'under performing' have received annual progress assessments by the Audit Commission. Those cases giving most cause for concern have also been the subject of formal engagement by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). Through its network of relationship managers, the Commission worked closely with lead officials assigned by the ODPM in developing an appropriate monitoring programme.

Audit Commission progress assessment work has sought to measure the impact and sustainability of improvement activity. The progress assessment work has been tailored to local circumstances to provide appropriate public assurance and to contribute to improvement reporting. It involved an evidence-based judgement on progress against the original corporate assessment criteria, but without producing a score.

The progress assessment is part of the Commission's commitment to helping Councils ensure continuous improvement to services for local people. It does this in the context of its strategic regulation principles, which look to minimise the burden of regulation at the same time as maximising its impact. We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators and the ODPM in this aim.

## Introduction

- 1 In October 2003 the Audit Commission published a CPA category for Torridge District Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'poor'. The key strengths and weaknesses from the original corporate assessment are set out in Appendix 2. Subsequently the Audit Commission assessed the progress made by the Council, reporting in February 2005.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress since the last report based on the Council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and subsequent progress assessment.

## Summary

- 3 Progress in addressing weaknesses has been slow. However, recently there has been strong improvement which provides confidence that the Council is beginning to move forward. This progress remains fragile as it is largely dependent on the work of the chief executive and the Council faces significant budget pressures.
- 4 The original CPA highlighted the Council's lack of direction and weak leadership and found few areas of strength in relation to the way the Council had set out what it wanted to achieve. Now the strategic plan provides a clearer long term vision and leadership is stronger. In 2003, the CPA highlighted the Council's lack of capacity to improve and performance management was found to be weak. These problems largely remain although there are plans in place to address them. At the time of the CPA service performance was mixed and the subsequent progress assessment in 2005 reported that performance had declined. The Council has however made significant investments in process improvement and in a few services this has begun to improve performance. In terms of future plans to improve, the CPA found that there was not a consistent acceptance of the problems the Council faced or a clear and resourced plan to address them. Now the Council has an improvement plan in place, with resources allocated and this is consistently supported across the Council. As such, the Council is now in a stronger position to support improvement.
- 5 The Council's progress had been uneven until the appointment of the new chief executive. Although the previous progress assessment recognised developments in a number of areas including leadership, this was not sustained and there continued to be significant problems. However, in the nine months since the new chief executive was appointed considerable progress has been made in addressing areas such as leadership, corporate planning and management and in setting up the systems and processes that will support improvement.
- 6 The new strategic plan provides a clearer direction which reflects the views of the community and partners and has been endorsed by the Council. The developing business plans for 2006/07 support it as they have a clearer focus on corporate priorities. They also contain an outline of the risks and pressures that services face and begin to set out how progress against objectives will be measured. The budget for 2006/07 and medium term financial plan are aligned to priority areas and therefore provide a stronger means of ensuring resources are allocated to delivering objectives.
- 7 The Council still faces significant pressures in terms of skills, staffing levels and resources. The current levels of skills and resources within the Council are insufficient to deliver improvement. Its focus on internal matters has limited its contribution to the local strategic partnership. Sickness levels, already at a high level in 2003/04 have increased further. Finances are tight, and the Council also now has to meet the costs of the restructuring exercise. It recognises that its previous approach of using reserves is no longer sustainable.

- 8 Performance indicators show performance as weak. In 2004/05, 59 per cent of indicators were below average when compared nationally with 45 per cent among the lowest 25 per cent of councils' performance. There are signs of improvement though, as between 2002/03 and 2004/05, 49 per cent of indicators improved.
- 9 The Council was previously criticised in relation to human resources practices; financial management information and financial planning; communications; partnership working; and an integrated approach to corporate plans. It has worked to address these areas and is making significant investment in processes and systems that should support improvement in the majority of these areas and these are beginning to have an impact. In some services, for example the planning and benefits services, recent figures show a considerable increase in performance. The Council still needs to address partnership working arrangements in some areas, notably the local strategic partnership.
- 10 The Council's new and radical approach to improvement offers promise. Much rests on the ability of the chief executive and councillors to deliver on these green shoots. However, risks exist, for example the need to be able to attract or maintain staff with the right skills and experience and the lack of a strong track record of successful restructuring. The Council's ability to meet its new ambitions and sustain progress remains uncertain.

## Recommendations

- 11 It is recommended that the Council:
- actively and promptly shares the findings of this progress assessment with staff;
  - takes it to an appropriate public committee meeting; and
  - uses the key findings as the basis for revising the recovery plan in conjunction with any guidance from the Monitoring Board.

## Context

### The locality

- 12 Torridge is a largely rural authority in the South West of England, and covers around 996 square kilometres. The population is 61,900 with population density very low at 62.9 people per hectare (compared to 211.4 for the region and 384.5 for England) due to the rural nature of the district.

### The Council

- 13 The Council has undergone significant change since the original CPA report and subsequent progress assessment. In the last three years, the Council has had three different chief executives, and undergone two restructuring exercises. These changes, as outlined in the previous report, have often been disruptive and have distracted the Council from delivering improvement. The Council is governed by 36 councillors with no party with overall control. It is led by Independents which include several Independent Alliance groups.
- 14 In July 2005, a new Chief Executive was appointed. This appointment has been the catalyst for a review of the direction of the Council generally and more specifically through revision of its ambitions.

## What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 15 The Council has developed a clearer approach to managerial leadership and improved the clarity of its plans for the local community.
- 16 The new strategic plan sets out a clearer long term vision for the district and links to community strategy priorities. It is based on consultation with partners and residents, reflects local needs and sets out the priorities for the Council for the next five years. It provides a vision for the work of the Council - 'Torridge, a great place to live, work and visit'. This is supported by four goals – to become an excellent council; to improve the quality of life for all; to promote sustainable growth; and to safeguard the environment. The Council has also set out the activities that it will undertake in order to deliver each goal. The strategic plan reflects both the issues within the community plan and the improvements that the Council needs to deliver. The Council is starting to work together in achieving this vision as a result.
- 17 Managerial leadership has improved and the Council continues to strengthen political leadership. The new chief executive is driving improvement and providing clear direction for the Council. There is strong councillor support and commitment to the new strategic plan and the work being undertaken on improvement. This, and the recent improvements demonstrated in some service areas, is giving staff and partner organisations confidence that the Council is moving forwards.
- 18 The Council has recently begun to integrate the strategic plan fully into decision making and corporate planning. The Council agreed the plan in late summer and so it is currently going through its first full budget process. Service plans for the current year (2005/06) have now been replaced by business plans which reflect the new corporate objectives. The medium term financial plan now reflects the new strategic plan.
- 19 The Council is adopting a strong community leadership role on some issues. The Council has carried out work with another neighbouring authority on developing a marketing bureau for the North Devon area. In addition, it has worked with partners to strengthen work on health within the community and has focused resources on areas of deprivation.
- 20 The Council has not worked effectively as part of the local strategic partnership (LSP). Partners feel that the Council has undertaken a restricted role and the Council accepts that recently its focus has, out of necessity, had to be on the activities within its own organisation. This represents a missed opportunity to increase the capacity of the Council. It has also still to develop a strategic approach to diversity and equalities issues. There has been little work to engage with hard to reach groups or to ensure that there is a consistent approach to ensuring equality is built into all aspects of service delivery.

- 21 Until recently the Council has failed to focus on key issues. The recent housing inspection highlighted serious failures in service delivery relating to landlord services which the Council were unaware of previously. Financial management systems have been poorly implemented and, as a result, the Council did not have management accounts in place until December 2005. Performance management is another area which has not been effectively focused on. The recent focus on two poorly performing services has been more successful and is delivering improvement. The lack of a sustained focus on all issues of concern has held back the progress of the Council.
- 22 The structure of the Council does not assist in maintaining a focus on corporate priorities. The Council has recognised this and is in the process of a restructuring of both officer and political structures in order to have a closer alignment.

## How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 23 The current levels of skills, resources and underpinning systems within the Council are insufficient to deliver improvement.
- 24 The Council continues to face a difficult financial situation and recognises that the previous approach of using reserves to support the budget is unsustainable. As a consequence it faces difficult decisions in delivering a balanced budget this year. An historical underinvestment in IT and difficulties in implementation of systems have also not supported improvement.
- 25 The Council still faces significant pressures in terms of capacity. It has comparatively high and increasing levels of sickness amongst its staff. Levels of absence have increased from an average of 7.7 days per officer in 2002/03, to 12.2 days in 2003/04 and then further to 13.1 days in 2004/05. The Council is beginning to put in place policies to manage these issues more effectively.
- 26 The Council does not currently have all the skills and resources it needs to improve. It has had a weak approach to appraising staff and has not developed clear workforce planning processes to ensure that the right skills and abilities are in place to deliver corporate objectives. In order to increase skills within the Council, it has secured the use of consultants in two services, planning and benefits. The Chief Executive is currently carrying out a significant restructuring exercise to address this skills shortfall, which includes development of job descriptions, core competencies and measurable objectives. The Council aims to complete the exercise quickly and therefore avoid the problems that previous attempts have experienced.
- 27 Performance management continues to be a weakness for the Council. As outlined above, the Council has not had management accounts in place until very recently. In addition, performance reporting is inconsistent and not linked to the development or amendment of policy. While some services carry out benchmarking, there are few examples where this has been used to change and improve delivery arrangements. Services lack a consistent approach to customer focus, with only some services having developed customer service standards. A new appraisal process has been developed but has not been implemented, pending the restructuring. As such, any appraisals carried out to date have not been aligned with the new strategic plan. There is inconsistency in performance management. For example, in planning there is close monitoring of performance on deciding planning applications. However the lack of performance management in the housing service meant that the inspection judgement of a 'poor service with poor prospects for improvement' was a shock to the wider Council which was unaware of the significant problems discovered.

- 28 Morale within the organisation appears to be improving. Despite the high levels of sickness, staff are generally motivated and confident that the changes planned will deliver the improvement needed by the Council. Councillors share that confidence and are consistently supportive of the way that the Chief Executive is approaching the challenges that the Council faces. The development of the appraisal scheme and staff competencies is seen as tangible evidence of how the Council is changing to a more accountable organisation. The positive approach being adopted across the board should help to maintain momentum in its change programme.
- 29 There is confidence and trust between councillors and the chief executive. Resources have been directed at areas of poor performance, for example in the planning and benefits services. In addition training and development opportunities are now focused on internal improvement and are recognised as valuable by staff. This will provide a sound basis on which to build.
- 30 The Council continues to increase its ability to deliver through the use of consultants and secondments. It has used consultants to develop a stronger approach to human resources, developing clearer job descriptions and policies. Consultants are working alongside staff in benefits and planning services to streamline processes and ensure that there is a strong customer focus. The Council is about to enter into an extended contract to transfer these skills to a wider staff group to increase the skills available within the organisation. This will put the Council in a stronger position to roll out an improved approach to customer focus and efficiency.
- 31 Some aspects of the performance framework are developing. The Council now has an IT system in place which will provide a means of monitoring performance at a corporate level and will produce performance reports. The approach to risk management is improving, with services being required to identify the risks they face and actively plan to address them. There are also individual examples of services which are closely monitoring performance and using that information to correct poor performance at an early stage, for example, planning.

## What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 32 The Council has made further significant investment in the infrastructure needed to ensure that improvement is sustained. Performance remains weak but there is evidence of improvement in some areas.
- 33 Performance indicators show performance of Council services as being generally weak but improving. Audited figures for 2004/05 indicate that 31 per cent of CPA indicators are above average and 69 per cent are below average. Forty-five per cent of performance indicators are comparable with the performance of the lowest 25 per cent of Councils. The extent of improvement is increasing, with 49 per cent of indicators improving compared to only 35 per cent the previous year.
- 34 Individual service areas show a mixed picture of delivery. Recycling levels are high, and after recent investment in them, planning and benefits figures show improvement (unaudited figures). Inspections have shown that landlord services and planning are not performing well, with judgements of poor and fair services respectively.
- 35 The Council is making significant investment in areas that should support improvement. There has been significant investment in information technology. After 18 months of problems, the financial management system has been able to produce the first set of management accounts, allowing the Council to understand exactly where they stand financially. In addition, the Council has purchased and begun to implement a computer based performance management system which provides the potential for improved reporting on performance. This improves the ability of the Council to review the value provided by its services. Investments are also being made in human resources, with new policies being implemented and job descriptions developed for posts within the new structure which include clear targets. Also there is recent investment in the housing service in order to address the weaknesses identified.
- 36 There is a greater focus evident in business planning and delivery. The Council is developing more specific, results focused business plans for 2006/07 to enable progress to be measured. Information on risk and the pressures facing the services are being included and the strategic plan is driving the activities planned. In addition, staff in the planning and benefits services are being supported by consultants to refine their business processes and ensuring that the needs of the customer are at the forefront of everything they do. The budget process for 2006/07 and the medium term financial plan are both aligned to the areas of corporate priority outlined in the new strategic plan. A central procurement team has been set up and is already starting to deliver savings. In this way, the Council is putting in place systems which will ensure that its activities and resources are aligned to priority areas.

- 37 The Council is actively changing its structure in order to align with its corporate priorities. Having developed a new strategic plan, it is reorganising the officer structure to ensure that business managers are responsible for particular corporate objectives. The re-structuring is focused on assessing the skills and competencies needed and available to ensure the best fit and is intended to be undertaken quickly to reduce any potential disruption. The Council is also considering how councillor structures and committees may need to be realigned to facilitate delivery. This will allow a clearer focus on what the Council is achieving against what it set out to achieve.

## In the light of what the Council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

- 38 The Council is aware of and seeking to manage the significant risks it faces in delivering future plans.
- 39 The Council is aware of the areas where improvement is needed and is beginning to put in place building blocks that have clear potential to ensure a consistent and systematic approach to active performance management. The restructuring of management positions, and plans for a subsequent review of the whole organisation are also being undertaken to ensure that the right skills and experience are available to drive forward improvement. By being self aware, the Council can actively plan to address its known weaknesses.
- 40 There are significant risks attached to the delivery of its plans. There continues to be a heavy reliance on the chief executive for leadership. There is a risk that the Council will not be able to find staff with the skills required either internally or from outside the organisation. There is also a risk that momentum will be lost during the re-structuring process and staff morale may be affected. The Council has a weak track record on restructuring. The outcomes of previous attempts have represented a compromise between the desired result and a structure that presents the fewest problems. The current plans represent a far more radical approach than that adopted previously and so such a track record does not aid confidence in its success. Potentially the Council could repeat its earlier mistakes and end up with a structure that only partly meets its needs. The Council has now identified the costs of the restructuring and the medium term financial strategy has been updated to reflect how the ongoing costs of the new structure will be met.
- 41 The strategic plan provides a clearer basis for directing the future work of the Council. It provides a clear long term vision which reflects the needs and concerns of the local community. Business plans have been developed to provide operational detail that shows how the strategic plan will be delivered. The budget for 2006/07 is closely linked to corporate objectives. These developments also represent a more integrated approach to strategic planning as there are clear links to the community plan and medium term financial planning arrangements. Other new strategies and plans are providing a clearer direction, for example a housing improvement plan and a procurement strategy linked to the national guidelines. The improvement plan has been refined and sets out a clear timetable for the activities planned. There are also plans in place for quarterly business reviews to determine progress on objectives.
- 42 The Council uses its own experiences and those of other organisations to learn. For example, it has piloted new processes within planning and benefits before implementation of the new approach across the service and used consultants to increase skills within the Council. This is helping to maintain progress.

## Appendix 1– Progress monitoring against the findings of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 1 The original comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999 and published in 2003/04.
- 2 Under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 ('the Act'), best value authorities have a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. By virtue of sections 10 and 13 of the Act the Audit Commission may carry out inspection activity to ensure that a best value authority is complying with this duty, and may issue a report as to its findings. This progress monitoring activity and reporting to assess improvement falls within sections 3, 10 and 13.
- 3 The main elements of this progress monitoring report were collation and analysis of evidence from:
  - self-assessments of progress made and completed by the Council;
  - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
  - audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments;
  - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
  - observations, interviews and focus groups with managers, staff, customers and partner organisations.
- 4 This progress monitoring report for Torridge District Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from January 2005 to February 2006.
- 5 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for reporting progress to the Monitoring Board and updating and improving the improvement plan.

## Appendix 2 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in October 2003

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	1	Effective member of the community safety partnership.	<p>The council has not yet developed a clear vision for the area or for the council itself.</p> <p>Fragmented approach to partnership working and ineffective leadership of the LSP.</p> <p>Weak leadership of the council and over-reliance on the chief executive alone.</p>
Focus	1	There are examples of sustained focus in tackling key issues at a service level.	<p>Committees are not effective in allowing councillors to focus on key issues.</p> <p>Best value reviews lack a systematic approach to monitoring implementation of action plans.</p> <p>The council has been slow to implement recommendations – there is a reliance on fire-fighting.</p>

Progress Assessment | Appendix 2 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in October 2003 **19**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Prioritisation	1	The council has responded to some local issues.	<p>The council has not clearly prioritised areas for improvement.</p> <p>No joined up approach to consultation.</p> <p>The council has not prioritised allocation of resources and projects have been allocated funds on a first come first served basis.</p> <p>No clear links to national priorities.</p>
Capacity	1	<p>Low levels of recorded sickness and voluntary leavers.</p> <p>Individual senior managers are capable and credible.</p> <p>Some effective and constructive partnership arrangements.</p>	<p>Councillors unable to provide effective leadership and management team is not effective.</p> <p>Inappropriate behaviour by some councillors.</p> <p>Lack of delegation and ineffective meetings leading to slow decision making.</p> <p>HR policies and practices not used to manage staff effectively.</p> <p>Cross-departmental working reliant on individual relationships.</p> <p>Weak approach to procurement.</p>

**20 Progress Assessment | Appendix 2 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in October 2003**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Performance management	1		<p>No systematic approach to planning services.</p> <p>Performance information is inaccurately recorded.</p> <p>Service development is not informed by information from or on users.</p> <p>Staff are unclear about their priorities.</p> <p>Lack of joined up approach to monitoring financial performance.</p> <p>Risk management not developed.</p>
Achievement	3	<p>Fifty-seven per cent of performance indicators above average.</p> <p>Low levels of crime.</p> <p>Positive support to partners for community safety objectives.</p> <p>Good performance in waste management.</p> <p>Good performance of street cleaning services.</p> <p>Well maintained housing.</p> <p>Good levels of satisfaction with waste management, benefits, leisure and housing services.</p> <p>Active support for small businesses and job creation.</p>	<p>Benefits service below department for works and pensions standards.</p> <p>Little homelessness prevention work.</p> <p>Affordable housing target not met.</p> <p>Poor performance in determining planning applications.</p> <p>Some leisure centres and swimming pools of poor quality.</p> <p>Access to services for people with disabilities is limited.</p> <p>Online access to council services is limited.</p>

Progress Assessment | Appendix 2 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in October 2003 **21**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Achievement of improvement	1	<p>Improved condition of housing for many tenants.</p> <p>Continued improvement in recycling performance over the past three years.</p> <p>All indicators relating to crime and disorder have improved with the exception of the reporting of racial incidents.</p> <p>Willingness to drive forward necessary improvements.</p>	<p>Uncertain or poor prospects for improvement in most services inspected.</p> <p>Insufficient progress in private sector housing renewal.</p> <p>No holistic approach to ensure all housing stock will meet the decent homes standard.</p> <p>Performance is deteriorating in respect of planning decisions made within eight weeks.</p> <p>Aspects of the benefits service are getting worse.</p> <p>Slow progress on meeting the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.</p> <p>Delivery of the e-government agenda has not progressed as quickly as planned.</p>
Investment	2	<p>The council is developing aspects of its service planning framework.</p> <p>Examples of the council working in partnership to attract external funding.</p> <p>Beginning to address equalities and diversity issues.</p> <p>The council is opening itself to external challenge.</p>	<p>The medium-term financial plan does not identify spending priorities.</p> <p>The impact of best value reviews has been variable in driving improvement.</p> <p>The role of scrutiny is not effective.</p> <p>Some key weaknesses not yet addressed.</p>
Learning	1	<p>Use of BVRs to benchmark with other councils.</p> <p>Emerging self awareness of problems.</p> <p>Progress in tackling some important areas.</p>	<p>Inconsistent ownership at a senior level of problems faced by the council.</p> <p>Culture of the organisation has prevented staff from taking risks or being creative.</p>

**22 Progress Assessment | Appendix 2 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in October 2003**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
			<p>Few examples of systematically learning in order to improve.</p> <p>No formal approach to disseminating lessons learned from individual BVRs or inspections.</p>
Future plans	2	<p>Inconsistent ownership at a senior level of problems faced by the council.</p> <p>Culture of the organisation has prevented staff from taking risks or being creative.</p> <p>Few examples of systematically learning in order to improve.</p> <p>No formal approach to disseminating lessons learned from individual BVRs or inspections.</p>	<p>No clearly resourced plans to deliver the improvement plan contained within its self-assessment.</p> <p>No track record of ability of councillors and managers to deliver improvement.</p> <p>No plans to address weaknesses in how the management team functions.</p> <p>Ambitions of the new administration are not clearly articulated.</p>

**Scoring key:**

- 1 - Weak
- 2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- 3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- 4 - Strong