

Progress assessment report

March 2006



Progress Assessment

Northampton Borough 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 March 2004 the Audit Commission published a CPA category for Northampton Borough Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'poor'. The key strengths and weaknesses from the corporate assessment are set out in Appendix 1.
- 2 In June 2005 the Audit Commission published a progress report which found that the Council had made slow progress, and that services had not improved for local people.
- 3 This report presents an analysis of the Council's progress to date based on the Council's implementation of its improvement and recovery plan and comparison with the baseline position of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Summary

- 4 Starting from a very low base in 2004, Northampton Borough Council has made progress but this is limited overall. The Council still has much to do including applying a greater focus on improving some of its weakest services. It is putting in place some of the key building blocks for future improvement.
- 5 The Council's ambitions for recovery and its short and medium-term priorities are now clear but it has not yet set out its longer-term ambitions for the area. Focus on internal improvements has improved but as yet there is insufficient focus on the needs and views of residents and on service improvement overall. Some first steps have been taken in consulting residents about plans but much remains to be done to achieve good and meaningful engagement.
- 6 The Council is putting in place some key building blocks for sustainable recovery. These include streamlined political structures and improved councillor leadership. Streamlined management structures and permanent senior management are mainly in place. Below this level, managerial and operational skills and capacity are unassessed. The Council is also planning a three-year programme of service reviews to ensure that the organisation is fit for purpose in the longer-term. Some staff energy employed in the initial review of the organisation has not yet been harnessed to best effect for this next stage of recovery.
- 7 Partnership working is enhancing capacity in areas where historically the Council lacks the skills and expertise to bring about change such as the benefits service.
- 8 Financial capacity is a concern. Financial management has been poor with impenetrable budgetary information and the Council has had difficulty balancing its budget in the last two years. Effort is rightly being put into ensuring that basic systems and processes are in place for the future but until the Council more fully understands its budget by reviewing its services there is uncertainty about whether it can resource its ambitions for the future.
- 9 Mechanisms for delivering and sustaining improvement remain underdeveloped. Devolved budget management will take place for the first time this year. Corporate planning is beginning to take shape with a revised recovery plan. A review of the corporate plan is beginning. The Council has developed strategies, such as human resources, medium-term financial, communications, community engagement, performance management, and IT, but it is too early to gauge their impact. Performance management systems are developing from a very low base but the Council is not yet managing performance effectively. Communication has improved and the Council has recognised the need for continuous communication using different methods, but this remains a challenge in terms of accuracy and transparency about progress. Learning is not yet formalised into a system which effectively captures the lessons learned from the Council's continuing change process.

- 10 Service improvement in priority areas is mixed. Some well performing priority and non priority areas are showing improvement but poor Council services are not yet demonstrating sustained improvement despite their priority status. Improvements in services that local people would recognise include faster telephone response times for housing benefits, an increase in neighbourhood wardens, more recycling and faster removal of fly-tipping. Re-assessment of weaker areas of housing services in October 2005 showed that homeless people were being offered more opportunities to obtain suitable accommodation and customer access was being developed. Some weaker aspects of the Council's housing services such as gas servicing showed some improvement but remained weak, with the Council not meeting its statutory responsibilities in this area. There were more weaknesses than strengths in responsive repairs services. Improvements in housing benefits are being achieved through joint working with Bedford Borough Council but are not yet sufficient or assured.

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 direction from the Monitoring Board.

Context

The locality

- 12 Northampton Borough Council is the largest district council in Northamptonshire with a population of about 194,500, living in 85,000 households. Minority ethnic communities form 8.5 per cent of the population. The town is part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands area identified for economic and population growth as part of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities Plan. The newly formed West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC) is planned to deliver economic, social and housing growth in West Northamptonshire including Northampton.
- 13 The Council is ranked 168th out of 354 local authorities in the Indices of Deprivation. No wards are in the worst 10 per cent for deprivation but 33 per cent of Northampton's wards are in the 25 per cent of most deprived wards in England. Unemployment is lower than the national average with lower than average take-up of benefits by working age people.

The Council

- 14 The Council comprises 47 councillors elected every four years. There is no overall political control of the Council. There are 20 Conservative, 17 Liberal Democrat and 10 Labour councillors. The Council has a leader and cabinet system; the cabinet includes the leader, deputy leader and five other councillors. All are Conservatives and have individual portfolios covering: leader and citizen engagement; residential operations; finance and democratic services; economy and infrastructure; local environment; and performance, people and e-government. A cross-party Improvement Board focuses on the recovery-agenda and co-ordinates the work plans of the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny. Overview and scrutiny is chaired by a Liberal Democrat councillor. The Council also has an audit committee, chaired by a Labour councillor and operating under the CIPFA best practice guidelines.
- 15 Since CPA, the then chief executive and three directors have left the Council and 23 service head posts have been disestablished. The new chief executive took up her post in November 2004. The three new corporate directors were all in post by May 2005. Eight permanent and two interim corporate managers were in post by the end of September 2005; the team leader structure below this was completed by December 2005, although not all posts are yet filled; recruitment is underway for the final two permanent corporate managers. Some consultancy and partnership working continues to provide management and service improvement support to the Council.

- 16 The Council employs approximately 1,800 full and part-time employees. The Council's overall budget for the year 2005/06 is £27.6 million and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is £38 million with a working balance of £2.8 million. In 2005 the Council made the decision to retain its own stock and to achieve the decent homes standard for its stock itself.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 17 The Council has made some progress in this area. Its ambitions and priorities for a sustainable programme of recovery and for the local area are clear. It has improved its focus on the internal improvements it needs to achieve and it has taken a first step in consulting the public about its plans. But it is not yet sufficiently focused on delivering improvements in its weakest services and is not accurately measuring, reporting and communicating its achievements.
- 18 The Council's ambitions for recovery are now articulated more credibly in the revised recovery plan. The revised plan has 34 actions arranged around six themes:
- corporate
 - governance;
 - strategic planning; and
 - customer engagement and citizen focused services
 - service specific
 - benefits;
 - street scene; and
 - housing.
- 19 The majority of the actions are categorised as 'green', that is on track against the targets that the Council has set, but these are not true measures of what it needs to achieve. For example the aim of effective political leadership has an action to put in place a councillor development programme. Green indicates that the programme is now available, but this is not a measure of how far the Council has come in delivering the outcome of effective political leadership. While the themes and actions are clear, the Council's methods of recording delivery do not provide an accurate view of overall progress.
- 20 The Council's corporate plan for 2005/06 clearly identifies its vision and values and its priorities. The plan has three themes:
- Citizen-focused services;
 - strong political and managerial leadership; and
 - how the Council will change.

- 21** The themes are supported by eight priorities which are mostly focused on improvements in services and the quality of life for local people and which are supported by short and medium term targets:
- working with partners to reduce crime and disorder across Northampton;
 - improve the cleanliness of the street scene in Northampton and reduce environmental crime;
 - continue to improve housing benefit and revenue services;
 - reduce deprivation in Northampton working with partners;
 - ensure the availability of decent and affordable homes for all;
 - invest in neighbourhood wardens;
 - improve the overall political and managerial leadership and efficiency of Northampton Borough Council; and
 - create and sustain an attractive economic environment for inward investment and regeneration.
- 22** Longer term, robust ambitions and priorities are not in place. While the Council plans to develop a revised corporate plan for 2006/07 this will provide clarity about its ambitions for only a short time ahead.
- 23** The focus of the Council's leaders on delivering improvements in the way the Council works has improved. Councillors are working effectively together across parties to deliver improved corporate working and arrangements. A new Improvement Board has replaced the Recovery Board arrangement and has given added impetus to the focus on improvement. Councillors are taking part in a targeted development programme with 80 per cent attendance and a lead councillor is encouraging their improved participation. Peer mentors and coaches are proving effective and councillors are officially linked with corporate managers for mutual support and information sharing.
- 24** The Council is not yet sufficiently focused on the needs and views of its citizens and service improvement. The Council has taken a first step in engaging residents in the development of its plans and priorities. While local people were not involved in the development of the 2005/06 corporate plan and priorities the Council has successfully carried out public consultation on its 2006/07 budget. This has led to a level of consensus about spending on priorities. The role of the ward councillors is crucial for engagement with the public but is not fully developed. Plans for enhancing their community leadership and engagement role are being trialled and reviewed. At present the limited engagement and opportunities for the public to contribute continue to mean that the Council's plans and priorities may not be well founded.
- 25** The Council does not yet have an integrated approach to setting priorities and allocating resources against its priorities. Impenetrable financial practices meant that the centrally held budget offered no robust or reliable financial management and this resulted in resources not being directed to service areas. For the first time in 2006/07 the budget is being related to service delivery and set alongside

service plans. The aim is to set a balanced budget which will deliver the current levels of service. Services will be cash limited with no growth bids allowed.

- 26 Communication has improved but continues to be a challenge. The Council recognises the need for continuous communication using a variety of methods. It has begun to ensure that the messages and vision filter effectively through the organisation and out to partners and stakeholders including local people. A communications strategy is now in place but it is too early to assess its delivery or effectiveness.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

- 27 Capacity has improved considerably but there are still gaps. In particular the financial capacity of the Council to support improvement is not assured.
- 28 The Council has improved its senior management capacity by undertaking a 'root and branch' review but whether the right skills and capacity are in place below the most senior levels is unclear. The review of senior management has led to a more streamlined structure and to the recruitment of new managers to provide more effective leadership. Some gaps remain, for example in the key post of a permanent corporate manager responsible for finance. The Council is now planning a three year programme of service reviews to ensure that the organisation is fit for purpose throughout. However the energy and the impetus for improvement generated amongst the wider staff group involved in the initial structural review of the organisation is not being built upon and harnessed to best effect for this next stage. Staff morale varies. Sickness absence remains high. But relationships with the trade unions continue to be constructive and a strength.
- 29 The Council is using consultancy and partnership working effectively in some areas to enhance its capacity. It is rightly drawing in extra capacity for management and service improvement where it lacks the skills and expertise to bring about improvement quickly enough on its own. For example, it is working with Bedford Borough Council, which has an 'excellent' benefits service, to inject capacity to support much needed improvement in its own housing benefits service. This has been poor over a number of years and systemic failings are embedded. There are some early signs of success but systems and work processes are not yet mature enough to enable Northampton to improve the service on its own. Plans for future collaboration to sustain the improvements are not yet agreed.
- 30 Political structures are improved but it is too early to assess their effectiveness. A cross party Improvement Board is made up of councillors and officers and chaired by lead councillors. The Board focuses on the recovery agenda and co-ordinates the work plans of the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny. Seven overview and scrutiny committees have been streamlined into one with task and finish groups. The more streamlined structures provide opportunities to work more efficiently and to improve focus further.
- 31 It is unclear whether the Council has the financial capacity to resource improvement and its future plans. The Council dealt with a significant budget shortfall in 2004/05, and faces overspends in 2005/06 estimated to be £1.8 million in January 2006. It is setting a balanced budget in 2006/07 and is re-directing net savings of £1.5million from the 'root and branch' review into under-budgeted front-line services and some new priorities including staff training. It is working to understand its budget but has been hampered by impenetrable financial practices in the past. General reserves are at a minimum level at under £3 million.

It has developed a medium-term financial strategy but as yet has no medium-term plan. Until the Council fully understands its financial capacity and future demands on its budget this poses a threat to future improvement and has the potential to undermine its plans.

- 32 The approach to financial management is improving. Financial management is undeveloped throughout the tiers of management with budgetary control having been almost wholly exercised by its finance department. The Council is developing alignment between services and budgets and this year will devolve budgetary responsibilities to corporate managers.
- 33 The Council now has some key strategies and policies in place to enable it to function effectively but it is too early to gauge their impact. For example, recently approved strategies include human resources, communication and community engagement, and IT. External consultants are developing the internal control and governance arrangements for programme management. The Council is beginning to use these strategies to guide its work. The Council recognises the need to link its plans and aims to incorporate its recovery plan into the new corporate plan for 2006/07 with the aim of providing one core plan for the mainstream recovery and improvement of the Council.
- 34 Performance management arrangements are developing slowly but the Council is not yet managing performance. Interim arrangements are being refined and replaced by an overall performance management framework but this is not yet in place. Service planning and staff appraisals are all at an early stage. An independent review of performance information commissioned by the Council found that much of the Council's BVPI information was inaccurate and systems and controls showed varying degrees of weakness. Performance reporting is developing but is not sufficiently outcome focused and does not contain any comparative information to enable councillors, staff and other stakeholders to have a realistic view of how well the Council is doing. Performance 'clinics' are beginning to develop as a way of managing service performance and improvement. The early stage of development means managers, councillors, staff and the public cannot readily know how well the Council is performing, and it cannot ensure that it is well focused on its priorities.
- 35 The Council is taking positive steps to enhance the capacity of its managers. It is working with the County Council to deliver a successful joint management development programme, funded through capacity building monies provided by ODPM. The programme focuses on customer service, skills development, leadership, managing change and performance management. The Council has set aside 2 per cent of its staff budget for training and development specifically to address capacity issues and has built this amount into the budget.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

- 36** Improvement in priority service areas is mixed with limited improvement in the Council's most poorly performing services. The Council has made progress with investment to improve its capacity and the way it works.
- 37** Overall performance as measured by BVPIs has improved although given the weaknesses now identified in the Council's performance information the data needs to be treated with some caution. Performance information for 2004/05 shows improvement and a reversal of the deterioration in the Council's overall profile in 2003/04.

	BVPIs below average	BVPIs in top quartile
31 March 2003	62%	30%
31 March 2004	64%	24%
31 March 2005	44%	32%

- 38** Improvement in the Council's priority service areas is mixed. There are improvements in some better performing priority areas such as recycling, waste, and neighbourhood wardens. There are also improvements in better performing non-priority areas such as sports development. Reducing crime and disorder is a Council priority. Levels of crime in three key indicators (burglaries, car theft and robberies) decreased in 2004/05 but remain in the worst quartile.
- 39** The weakest service areas, which are also amongst the Council's priorities are not showing sustained improvement. Processing times for housing benefits improved in 2004/05 but remained at 63 days for new claims against a government standard of 36 days. Local unaudited performance information shows further improvements this year to around 40 days with the joint work with Bedford Council, but accuracy has deteriorated.
- 40** Progress in the worst performing areas of housing (responsive repairs, gas servicing, void repairs and resident involvement) were re-assessed by the Audit Commission in October 2005 to support the Council in achieving improvement. There were substantive weaknesses found across all the areas that were checked. The Council is delivering some improvements including opportunities for homeless people in the area to gain accommodation. For example, the Council re-established its rent assistance scheme which aims to help potentially homeless households to either remain in or gain alternative private rented housing. Gas servicing had improved but the Council was still not meeting statutory requirements. More weaknesses than strengths remained in relation to responsive repairs. Strategies to improve housing are being put in place with the stock options appraisal to deliver decent homes being approved by Government Office.

- 41 Customer access, which is an element of how the Council is planning to improve its customer focus, is improving. The one-stop shop has been refined and new processes enable people to be directed to the right place for their needs. The Council's website has improved. The Council piloted the outsourcing of their Revenues and Benefits telephone answering services for a trial period and this resulted in 75 per cent of calls answered within the agreed timescales, (although performance against the target percentage figure is not clear).
- 42 The Council has rightly invested in the last two years in developing its leadership and management, in performance and project management, in ICT and e-government but these investments are not yet having significant impact in the poorest areas of service or in step-change service improvements that local people can see.

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

- 43 Self awareness has developed across the Council but to varying degrees and learning is not yet embedded in corporate systems. Future plans are not fully developed so the delivery of improvements is not assured.
- 44 The Council's level of self awareness about its successes and what remains to be achieved is variable across the organisation. It is at a crucial stage in its recovery process and accepts the need to change, recover and improve. But some staff and managers at times present an over-positive account of what has been achieved. The Council now has the leadership capacity to enable it to assess realistically the difference between internal improvements and a fit for purpose organisation delivering tangible service improvements for local people, and to provide a model for staff throughout the Council.
- 45 Much has been and is being learnt on an individual level. For example working in partnership on the 'End of Life Vehicle Impound Scheme' (ELVIS) has shown councillors and staff how services can improve and result in outcomes recognised and appreciated by local people. Both councillors and staff have begun to visit other authorities to see how they operate, to understand what a 'good' council feels like. But knowledge systems for capturing and sharing learning are not embedded. This means that the Council cannot be sure it is making the best use of the knowledge and learning of its staff and councillors.
- 46 Plans for future improvement are not yet robust or sufficiently long term. The Council's planning is aimed at ensuring that it has capacity to identify, implement and maintain further improvements but there are significant gaps at present. Future plans include a review of governance arrangements and the three year programme of service reviews. Other plans include developing the role of the Council in the county wide local area agreement, improving housing services and stock, and further improving customer access. The Council is clear about the importance of regularly reviewing its plans against priorities. For example the recovery plan is to be incorporated into the new corporate plan for 2006/07. Plans such as IT, performance management, customer access as well as financial and performance information which are not yet fully in place are also to be reviewed and evaluated. However, as the new corporate plan will only be for 2006/07 the Council does not have a longer-term over-arching plan for improvement, and resources for delivery are unclear.

Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Table 1

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear high-level ambitions in community strategy following consultation. • Housing development, cleanliness and community safety clearest council ambitions. • Clear local plan. • Political ambition developing. • Led community in creation of LSP, community safety, flooding. • Examples of participation; tenants, town centre. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No strategic objectives behind broad values and vision. • Scope of proposed ambition not realistic in financial context and need for consensus in NOC. • Housing plans not robust; HRA, DH - high risk of deficit by 2005/06 as SOA decision timed for April 2004. • Need and diversity of community not clearly incorporated, eg no strategy for social inclusion, race equality scheme lacks focus. • Lack of managerial leadership to drive change and ambitions; Staff continue to report lack of clear vision. • DH ambition weakened by latest investment decisions. • Ambitions and outcomes not defined, eg housing, leisure.

20 Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented modernised structure. • Stayed focused on key areas:- community safety; regenerating sites; and - cleaner and greener. • Organisational structure changes providing strategic focus on key areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not kept a focus on critical peer findings eg O&S, pace of change, corporate plan. • Not kept focus on housing management performance and DH programme. • Missed deadline of some elements of Secretary of State's direction. • Examples of slow to act on priority areas eg benefits, graffiti. • New CMT format but corporate steer not given. • Scrutiny not part of system to consider performance and drive improvement.

Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 **21**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Prioritisation	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People’s panel used in budget consultation, some service specific consultation. • Balance of local and national housing priorities. • Developing evidence base and focus on youth work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of no clear priorities. Following elections/NOC detailed prioritisation not determined - no indication of what is not a priority. • No overall measurement of need to guide priorities, eg scale of total leisure provision. • Inconsistent communications to staff about council priorities and key developments. • Communication of plans/progress in BVPP is poor. • Resources not targeted, budget gaps continue.

22 Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillor contribution and direction. • Representative workforce, some good service heads. • Better than adequate reserves. • Strong record of leverage of external funds in partnership has led to improvements on the ground. • Section 106 agreements brought in financial capacity for schemes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient corporate management of organisation, no overall plan for change. • Lack of leadership repeatedly reported, directorate have own approaches. • Inadequate councillor support. • Ineffective HR management. • High sickness. • No corporate training strategy. • Scrutiny ineffective, less of priority for officer support. • Budget shortfalls continue. Deficit risks in housing. • Medium-term financial strategy does not fill annual estimated gap. • LSP not affecting capacity and Council's attitude still criticised. • Slow to pursue large scale alternative options - in-house service decisions. • IT underdeveloped.

Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 **23**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Performance management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountabilities framework in place. • Corporate reporting systems active. • Some examples of resolving poor performance, eg fly tipping, abandoned cars. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No corporate plan to shape priorities and outcomes. • Councillors not getting appropriate performance information. • Senior managers' views of Council's relative performance is unrealistic hindering improvement. • Service plans, target setting are inconsistent, of variable quality and not adhering to council policy. • Key gaps in risk assessments eg decent homes. • Lack of timely preventative or corrective action eg in housing, and a large percentage of targets are being missed. • Lack of local indicators and standards reflecting what matters to local people. • Poor handling of complaints. • Many areas not able to demonstrate VFM, eg trade waste, highways, housing maintenance.

24 Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National neighbourhood regeneration award. • Good brownfield development and acting on contaminated land. • Affordable homes delivery. • Private sector housing BV PIs top quartile, innovative services, eg energy improvements. • DDA access top quartile. • Most national environmental and planning national PIs best quartile 2001/02. • Top quartile satisfaction for museums, parks and open spaces, just below best quartile for leisure and cultural services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of service PIs show bottom quartile performance. • Low public satisfaction overall - lower than levels of deprivation would predict. • Poor satisfaction with cleanliness of streets, waste collection and recycling facilities. • All aspects of public satisfaction with housing benefit are poor. • Key frontline services are poorly performing, eg housing management and benefits. • Local initiatives are having a limited impact on crime figures - majority of crime PIs in worst performing quartile.
Achievement of improvement	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing improvements in some estates. • Improved feelings of safety and well-being in Blackthorn, eg now a waiting list for homes. • Eyesores being cleaned up and new facilities delivered. • Recent BFI report fair to good on prospects for improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many key service PIs show 'stationary' position from previous results with very small increases and many remain in worst quartile of 2001/02, eg benefits, rent collection. • 2002/03 has seen more local PIs showing deteriorating performance compared to 2001/02.

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of abandoned cars and fly tips much improved. • Satisfaction with planning is improving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key crime figures rising; burglaries and vehicle crime. • HR corporate health indicators show deteriorating 2002/03 performance - sickness, leavers, ill-health retirements. • Reversal of improvement in 2002/03, eg speed of determination of planning applications and missed bins.
Investment	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing significant external funds, eg sustainable communities, DEFRA, healthy living. • Improvements to the IT infrastructure etc support the delivery of electronic government. • Procurement expertise developing. • Continuing to implement key systems; risk, project management, best value. • CRISPIN project beginning to improve customer focus. • Effective needs based youth work. Partnership work with NCC evolving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invited but not fully acted on external challenge in a timely manner. • Significant feedback that managerial leadership and corporate working not strong, not being acted upon. • Have not resolved scrutiny weaknesses or enhanced councillor support. • Investment gaps: - prioritisation and resolution of annual budget gaps; council-wide vision for management of change; and performance management to drive and measure service improvement.

26 Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Learning	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing partnerships following peer feedback. • More inclusive relationship between CMT and departmental heads. • Political awareness on reality of unitary status and learnt not to set their plans against this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness is low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - appreciation of actual performance of the Council; and - rate of progress seen as satisfactory. • Not learnt from external feedback - over arching change management strategy absent. • Failure to recognise current failings within the DHS self-assessment. • No formal mechanism exists to share good practice across the Council. • Staff have limited ability to influence service improvements.
Future plans	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for sustainable development in strong partnership, eg Upton Park. • Milton Keynes South Midlands plan supported. • Better plans - draft cultural strategy, waste, IEG - longer-term and outcome-led. • Good rating on asset and capital plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No overarching corporate plan giving context to other plans. • Weak BVPP. • Stakeholders and communities not involved in key future plans. • HRA business plan not robust and landlord plans not driving improvement. • No tangible housing investment progress. • Race equality scheme not implemented fully and lacks focus.

Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 **27**

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate development plans not co-ordinated and timely 'change management'. • Staff not yet effectively engaged in planning for the future. • Council not good at difficult decisions; staffing reviews, terms and conditions, large-scale outsourcing.

Scoring key:

1 - Weak

2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths

3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses

4 - Strong

Appendix 2 – 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, completed by the Council;
 - appointed auditor evidence from performance and financial audit activity;
 - audited performance indicators and inspection reports;
 - 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 Northampton Borough Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from March 2004 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 any Monitoring Board and updating and improving any improvement/recovery plan as appropriate.