

Environment - Waste Management and Open Spaces

Rochford District Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	10
Report	12
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	12
The Council's environment services	13
National context	14
How good is the service?	16
What has the service aimed to achieve?	16
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	17
Access, customer care and user focus	17
Services outcomes for users and the community	18
Waste management - recycling and refuse collection	18
Street cleaning	21
Maintaining open spaces	22
General environment issues	22
Is the service delivering value for money?	23
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	25
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	25
How well does the service manage performance?	26
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	28

Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and strategic regulation. They also reflect the principles from 'The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services' (July 2003).

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self-assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's 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 Rochford District Council delivers 'fair' one-star environment services, but prospects for improvement are promising.
- 2 The Council has clear priorities for environment services. They contribute directly to the corporate aim to provide a 'green and sustainable environment'. Streets and open spaces are generally well-maintained and kept free from litter, graffiti, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles. Woodland and green spaces are managed in such a way as to encourage biodiversity.
- 3 The cost of services is low when compared to other councils. Residents are generally satisfied with the cleanliness of the district and with refuse and recycling services. The quality of refuse and recycling collections has seen recent improvements through close working with the contractor. However, the Council was not successful at implementing a fortnightly collection of domestic waste. Following significant public pressure, a trial which had lasted over two years, came to an end and weekly collections were resumed.
- 4 Services are generally accessible and delivered in a way to meet the needs of users. No charge is made for the collection of bulky household waste and there is a high number of bring recycling sites offering facilities for a range of materials. However, access to the green waste composting service is not available to all and for those that are offered the opportunity, the service is not widely publicised. Due to limited access and to charges made for the kerbside collection of green waste, the Council still allows green waste to be included in the domestic waste bin. This does not support the diversion of waste from landfill.
- 5 The rate of recycling is poor. In 2004/05, only 12 per cent of household waste was recycled. This placed Rochford in the worst performing 25 per cent of English district councils. The Government's statutory recycling standard for the Council to recycle 18 per cent of household waste in 2005/06 will not be achieved. Although the Council is to increase the coverage of the kerbside recycling service to approximately 95 per cent of the district in spring 2006, it has been slow to roll-out this service.
- 6 There is currently not an effective balance between education and enforcement. Only limited enforcement action has been taken and there is not a clear programme of education activity in place.
- 7 The service has promising prospects for improvement. A clear plan has recently been approved detailing improvements to the range and coverage of recycling services. Key actions are costed and funding is in place. The plan details how the rate of recycling will increase to 21.4 per cent by 2007/08.
- 8 Capacity is improving. The Council has recently agreed funding of £45,000 for a new post of Environment and Street Scene Manager with the purpose to drive through service improvements and prepare the Council for re-tendering of the services. Additional resources have also been agreed, including additional funding of £7,500 to speed up graffiti removal.

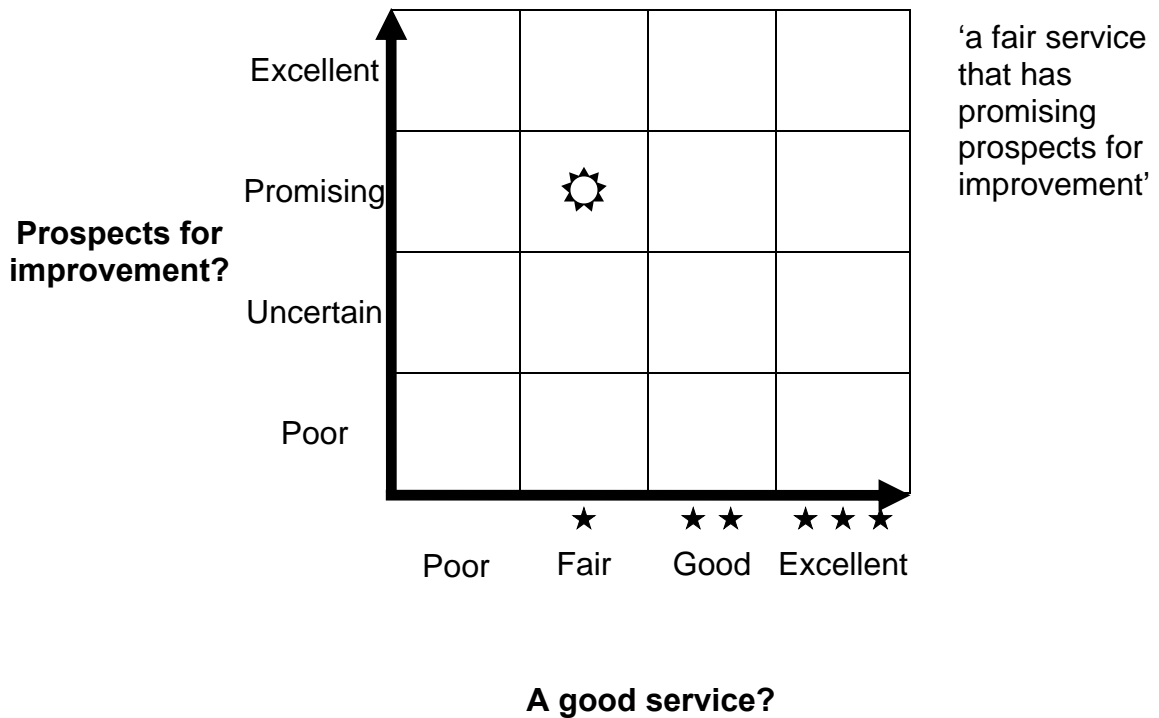
Existing staff capacity is also being increased through a targeted training programme, part of which has been delivered by external consultants. Contracted staff have also been trained and this is considered, in part, to have brought about a reduction in service complaints.

- 9 Political support for environment services is now clearly demonstrated. The committee structure is being revised to enable a greater focus on environment services. There is an openness to work jointly to deliver services with neighbouring councils. In addition, the Council is considering the longer-term delivery of services, including the potential for fortnightly waste collections.
- 10 Kerbside recycling is being expanded. Rolling out a kerbside service to the majority of the district in spring 2006 will result in an improvement in accessibility and hence recycling rates. The collection of new materials, including cardboard, should further improve services.
- 11 However, an effective corporate performance management system is not yet in place. Without a clear performance management system, the robust monitoring of the recently agreed waste management and recycling plan cannot be assured.
- 12 Previous internal reviews and external inspection have not routinely led to a step change in service performance. In 2003/04, the best value review of 'Our Environment' failed to result in significant service development.

Scoring the service

- 13 We have assessed Rochford District Council as providing a 'fair' one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 14 The service is a fair, one-star service because of the following.
- The Council is effective in keeping the streets free from litter and maintaining open spaces to a good standard. This is achieved by appropriate schedules of cleaning and maintenance together with targeted action in litter hotspots and on private land.
 - An effective response is made to graffiti, fly posting and abandoned vehicles resulting in a tidy district.
 - Satisfaction with the standards of cleanliness compares well.

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 - Waste Management and Open Spaces | Scoring the service

- There are a high number of appropriately positioned bring recycling banks that cater for a wide range of recycling materials.
- A strong emphasis is placed by the Council on promoting biodiversity.
- Services are provided at comparatively low cost, including offering a bulky household waste collection service for no charge to the recipient.
- The overall cost of environment services are low and some parts of the service are performing well such as street cleaning and grounds maintenance.

15 However:

- performance on recycling is poor; the rate of recycling is comparatively low and the Government's statutory recycling standard for 2005/06 will not be achieved;
- kerbside recycling has yet to be rolled out across the whole district;
- opportunities to publicise the green waste composting services are not maximised. In addition due to limited access to these services, and charges made for the kerbside collection of green waste, the Council still allows green waste to be included in the domestic waste bin. This does not support the diversion of waste from landfill;
- the Council has not maximised opportunities for efficiency savings and improvements in recycling performance through the introduction of fortnightly collections of domestic waste;
- there is not an effective balance between education and enforcement for environment services;
- although waste collected per head is rising in line with the national trend, there is no clear approach to waste minimisation; and
- the quality of complaint handling is sometimes poor.

16 The service has promising prospects for improvement because of the following.

- A clear waste management and recycling plan has now been agreed, is funded, and details how the Council will increase the rate of recycling to 21.4 per cent by 2007/08.
- Capacity is being increased through an additional post at a senior level and through staff training to drive through improvements in environment services.
- Resources have been increased and are now more aligned to meeting environment priorities.
- Political support for the services is now strong and the committee structure is being revised to enable a greater focus on environment services.
- Kerbside collections for some recyclables are to be rolled out across most of the district, including to those living in flats. The Council has recently invested in vehicles that will enable delivery of services to previously hard to reach areas.

- The Council is to pilot the introduction of cardboard collection, and with its partners, explore how recycling facilities can be offered to those living in flats.
- The Council learns from others as well as using complaints and suggestions from its own residents to bring about service improvements.

17 However:

- the Council's track record on recycling is poor. The recycling rate has been consistently low and the roll-out of kerbside collection facilities has been slow;
- performance management is weak. This was highlighted in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 and its subsequent progress assessment in 2005; and
- external inspection and internal reviews have not resulted in step change service improvements.

Recommendations

- 18 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. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Develop and agree plans to address future methods of delivering services.

- *Ensure that all options for the delivery of services after current contracts expire in 2008 are thoroughly explored. Robust plans, with clear timelines, are developed to support these procurement decisions to ensure continuity of services regardless of the outcome of joint service procurement.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to minimise risk, both of service failure, and financial risk whether services continue to be delivered by a contractor, directly by the Council or in partnership with other councils; and
- a clear timeline will be in place, detailing all options for the future delivery of environment services, when current contracts expire in March 2008.

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

Recommendation

R2 That the waste management and recycling plan is further developed; with progress against these targets being robustly monitored, reported and acted upon.

- *Ensure that targets are broken down to include interim milestones with responsibility for their attainment clearly identified.*
- *Ensure there are clear linkages to enable individual members of staff to see how their targets feed into service aims, and how service aims address corporate aims and national priorities.*

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.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a clear and co-ordinated delivery plan for environment services with targets and milestones;
- improved performance against national, corporate and service priorities; and
- clarity on behalf of councillors, officers and customers regarding what the service is aiming to achieve.

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

<i>Recommendation</i>
<p><i>R3 Adopt a clear approach to promotion, education, awareness rising and environmental enforcement.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ensure that services are effectively promoted to encourage use.</i> • <i>Agree a programme of education activity, including school visits, and, where possible, monitor of the impact of the activity undertaken.</i> • <i>Agree an approach to enforcement activity in line with community expectations.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased awareness of environmental issues resulting in greater community engagement thereby supporting corporate aims to improve the recycling rate and improve the environment and quality of life.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 19 Rochford is a small district located in south east Essex. It is bounded by the River Crouch to the north and the urban areas of Southend and Castle Point to the south. The district has three towns, Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley. Much of the remaining area is green belt with a large area around Foulness, largely under Ministry of Defence control. London Southend Airport straddles the district's southern boundary with Southend.
- 20 The district has a population of 78,900 people, living in 33,534 households. This is predicted to rise to 80,300 by 2011, with a forecasted large increase of those over the age of 85 years. People from black and minority ethnic communities represent 3.22 per cent of the population.
- 21 The area is relatively affluent, ranking 316 out of 354 most deprived authorities nationally. The most deprived ward, Foulness and Great Wakering East, ranks 2,680 of 8,414. Owner occupied homes constitute 75.1 per cent of households. This is the fourth highest in the country. Private renting accounts for 15.4 per cent. The Council's housing stock is currently 1,700 dwellings, of which 665 are allocated to elderly people. House prices are higher than the average for England and Wales.
- 22 Unemployment levels are below regional and national averages at 1 per cent. Sixty-eight per cent of the workforce commutes out of the area. Only five local businesses employ more than 250 staff. A small part of the district around Rochford and the airport falls within the Thames Gateway regeneration area. TGSE has developed an ambitious sub-regional agenda for growth, development and regeneration, and is delivering its vision through the TGSE partnership which Rochford has signed up to.

The Council

- 23 Rochford has been under a Conservative administration since May 2002, which holds 32 of the 39 seats. Prior to this there were minority administrations in place involving the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Independents. New political management arrangements based on alternative committee structures were introduced in May 2002. There are three policy committees, each mirrored by an equivalent overview and scrutiny committee, a regulatory committee and a standards committee. This arrangement is under review. A new Leader was appointed in May 2004 and a new Deputy Leader appointed in May 2005.

- 24 The Corporate Management Board (CMB) is made up of the Chief Executive and two corporate directors supported by six heads of service making up the Operational Management Team (OMT). The Council employs 228 full-time equivalent staff. Many of the frontline services are externalised. The revenue budget for 2004/05 is £8,468,800 (estimate), with low reserves and a capital budget of around £3 million.
- 25 The Council is aiming to make Rochford 'the place of choice in the country to live, work and visit'. This is to be delivered through collaborative working with partners and communities and is underpinned by six principal aims, to:
- provide quality, cost effective services;
 - work towards a safer and more caring community;
 - provide a green and sustainable environment;
 - encourage a thriving local economy;
 - improve the quality of life for people in the district; and
 - maintain and enhance the local heritage.
- 26 The Council's aims are closely aligned to the six aims of the community strategy: 'Feeling safe', 'Looking after our environment', 'A good education, good skills and good jobs', 'Healthy living', 'Getting around', and 'An inclusive community'. The strategy sets a clear long-term vision for the district to which environment services contribute, especially to 'Looking after our environment'. This long-term vision, over 25 years, becomes more focused in the ten and five-year visions. There is reference to the wider challenges facing the district, including climate change and the need to develop flood risk management policies and encourage sustainable development, including through the use of locally derived materials.
- 27 Thames Gateway regeneration will bring increased demands and opportunities. It is a national priority led by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The strategy makes clear that the district has the potential to develop for leisure, recreation and tourism activity. Rochford therefore has opportunity to position itself to take advantage of opportunities presented by the TG regeneration project.

The Council's environment services

- 28 The Council's environment services consist of refuse collection, recycling, street cleaning, grounds maintenance and the management of open spaces. In 2004/05, the total net expenditure of waste collection and recycling was £1,163,822; management of recreation grounds and open spaces £848,960; and street cleaning £477,915.

29 In summary, the services offer the following.

- Refuse collection - a weekly collection is made from 33,534 dwellings with 92 per cent of households provided with a wheeled bin; the remaining 8 per cent using black sack collection. This includes those living in flats and hard-to-reach rural areas. A private contractor has delivered the service since 1988.
- Recycling - a fortnightly kerbside box/bag recycling collection service is provided for paper, glass and cans. In addition, the Council manages and maintains 57 bring recycling banks that cater for a range of materials including plastics. Since July 2005, an optional fortnightly 'buy-in' green waste collection service has been offered to part of the district using an additional wheeled bin. Some other parts of the district are offered a free bring service to a collection vehicle on a Saturday morning. The green waste collection service is delivered under a different contract.
- Street cleaning - a seven-day a week schedule of street cleaning is delivered by the contractor who provides the waste collection and recycling service.
- Management of grounds and open spaces - open spaces including those in housing areas, football pitches and large woodland areas are either maintained directly by the Council or through a range of contracts.

National context

- 30 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. Early indications are that the new standard for Rochford will be 20 per cent. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.
- 31 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 strengthens a council's legislative powers for keeping the area clean.
- 32 The Government has promoted the 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.

- 33** 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 Rochford, 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?

- 34** The service aims to contribute to the six principal corporate aims, particularly these are to: provide a green and sustainable environment, to provide quality, cost effective services, and to improve the quality of life for people in the district. To achieve these aims, the service has developed its own specific aims.
- To provide an efficient and value for money refuse collection service.
 - Ensuring the district remains clean, litter is controlled and high environmental standards are achieved.
 - To deal effectively with associated areas such as fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles, dog fouling and graffiti.
 - To provide a kerbside recycling service to all residents that enables government standards to be achieved in an environment of continuous improvement.
 - To increase awareness and promote and educate on recycling issues.
 - To work with partners to achieve long-term waste management solutions.
- 35** The Council has signed up to the county-wide waste management strategy. The district councils, including Rochford, are responsible for waste collection and the County Council is responsible for disposal. The partnership between the 14 district/unitary councils and Essex County Council aims to achieve an average recycling rate of 36 per cent by 2009/10 for district councils. Rochford District Council's performance plan does not make a specific commitment to meet this target, although the section on plans to 2010 specifically includes re-tendering the refuse collection and recycling contract by March 2008.
- 36** The emerging local area agreement (LAA) includes a clear priority to actively manage the environment. 'Priority 11' in the draft LAA makes clear the intention to reduce or limit the increase in size of Essex's ecological footprint in terms of household waste collected per head of population and carbon dioxide emissions from domestic energy use and car travel. The target is to reduce the weight of waste collected per head from approximately 533 kilogram per head in 2004/05 to 525 kilogram per head in 2008/09. This includes waste collected by the County Council and not just Rochford. Without the LAA, the amount of waste generated is expected to increase to 545 kilogram per head in 2008/09. Although the LAA is still being developed, it is clear that management of environmental issues is a key issue for Essex and services, such as those being inspected are key to the delivery of jointly agreed priorities.

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

Access, customer care and user focus

- 37** The Council is effective in responding to consultation to ascertain what community and local priorities are. Consultation undertaken as part of the community strategy's development identified areas where the community was less satisfied and included the cleanliness of the district and issues around litter, graffiti and vandalism. As a result, resources were moved to assist in the delivery of locally-focused 'Environment Days' designed to address concerns, for example about litter hotspots.
- 38** Effective steps are taken to ensure easy and equitable access to some services. Waste collections are made from travellers' sites. Assisted 'pull-outs' are available to residents who may experience difficulty placing their wheeled bin/recycling box at the boundary for collection. A recently redesigned application form for 'pull-outs' has been introduced to reduce the likelihood of abuse of the service. Bulky waste collections of furniture and white goods, such as refrigerators, are currently free of charge for residents. Although telephone bookings for such collections are easily made and collection dates are provided, it is not possible to book online. Equal and fair access to services contributes to a number of service and corporate aims.
- 39** Information about environment services is generally clear and widely available. The Council's website provides clear information on waste and recycling services, including answers to frequently asked questions. Information on service standards is also available, such as how reports of a missed collection are managed. In response to concerns raised by the public, the Council has redesigned an information leaflet detailing refuse and recycling collections for the year, including bank holidays. It also states key service standards that can be expected from the refuse and recycling service. This is hand-delivered to every household in the district. Posters notify customers of various hotline numbers for the reporting of environmental issues including fly-tipping. Whilst information is generally clear and available some services, such as the kerbside green waste collection service are promoted less. In addition, service standards for some services such as grounds maintenance and street cleaning are less widely available. This is likely to impact upon awareness of services resulting in either lower usage or a lack of understanding about what can be expected.
- 40** There are barriers to accessing particular services. The green waste collection service is not accessible to all. Parts of the district have access to a kerbside collection service, others are provided with a bring facility whilst some parts of the district have no service. The civic amenity (CA) site in the district, at Raleigh, is free for all residents. However, those living in the west of the district whose nearest CA site is located in a neighbouring council's area, are charged £3.50. The fee can, however, be reimbursed by sending the receipt to the County Council.

18 Environment - Waste Management and Open Spaces | How good is the service?

Rochford's attempts to resolve this, at an officer and councillor level, and jointly with the County Council has not resulted in a change of policy by the adjacent council. Despite these efforts such barriers to facilities do not support the sustainability agenda, do not provide easy access to facilities and can encourage fly-tipping.

- 41 Complaints handling and the quality of some correspondence is variable. Where a complaint is made about a service that is delivered by a contractor, a letter is sent from the Council stating that it will be investigated by the contractor within a specified timescale. Most letters apologised at this stage prior to the matter having been investigated and some letters are poorly written. On several occasions the contractor failed to meet the promised timescale. A new complaints procedure has recently been introduced. This aims to overcome some of these issues. Not complying with timescales and poorly constructed letters does not support the corporate aim to provide quality services.
- 42 The Council has made poor progress in promoting racial equality. The published Race Equality Scheme action plan comprises appropriate intentions but no detail of timescales or who is responsible for delivery. Level 1 has not yet been achieved. The Council had planned to reach Level 2 by the end of 2003 and Level 3 by the end of 2005.

Services outcomes for users and the community

Waste management - recycling and refuse collection

- 43 Performance on recycling is poor. In 2004/05, only 12 per cent of household waste was recycled or composted in Rochford. This was a slight increase from the 10.3 per cent achieved in the previous year (2003/04), against a statutory standard of 10 per cent, but the Council still remained in the lower part of the worst performing 25 per cent of all English district councils. Compared to other Essex councils, Rochford performs poorly, being almost 4 per cent below the next worst performer and almost 18 per cent below the best performer in 2004/05. The Council is currently recycling 14 per cent of domestic waste, but recognises that it is unlikely to meet the statutory standard for 2005/06 of 18 per cent. It is likely that the service will remain in the worst performing quartile in 2005/06 despite the recent increase in coverage of kerbside collections and introduction of a green waste collection service. This poor performance does not support the corporate principal to provide a green and sustainable environment.
- 44 The Council's kerbside recycling service has a low level of coverage. In 2004/05 only 83 per cent of households had access to kerbside recycling, missing the Council's own target of 90 per cent. This was, however, a significant increase on the 19 per cent reported in 2003/04, one of the worst levels when compared to all English district councils. The Council acknowledges that its performance has been poor and is extending the coverage of the scheme to much of the remaining parts of the district in spring 2006 through the introduction of a new vehicle designed to access hard to reach areas.

- 45 The Council has increased opportunities for kerbside recycling collections. Green waste collections are now being provided to some areas. For a charge of approximately £40 per annum, an additional 240 litre wheeled bin for garden waste is provided and collected fortnightly all year round. For some of the less densely populated east side of the district, where such a service is not economically viable, a collection vehicle is positioned in a locally accessible location on a rota basis for the free disposal of garden waste. The service has been operational since July 2005 and has achieved a participation rate of approximately 90 per cent from the 1,050 households served on the kerbside scheme. Up to 33 tonnes of green waste is collected each month. The Council is, therefore, tailoring the provision of services to some parts of the district to encourage an increase in the amount of waste recycled but has yet to deliver green waste recycling facilities to all households.
- 46 The Council does not optimise all opportunities to promote the green waste collection service where it is available. Whilst the contractor has the main responsibility to promote the service, the Council does not proactively advertise the service in its own literature. For example, the leaflet hand-delivered to every household has no reference to the green waste collection service provided by the contractor. Promotion of the bring facility to those parts of the district where it is provided is limited. These missed opportunities are likely to result in reduced participation.
- 47 The Council has been successful in the number of households having a home composter. In partnership with the County Council, various schemes have led to over 11,000 home composters being distributed in the district. Nearly 50 per cent of all homes with a garden now have home composting facilities. This is the second highest level of all Essex councils.
- 48 The high number of appropriately positioned recycling bring banks, are well used and cater for materials that are not economically viable when collected by the kerbside scheme, such as plastics. However, some of the bring sites are unsightly due to old equipment and litter problems resulting from a lack of bins. The Council is offering services in a range of ways to residents to encourage recycling and in a manner that is economically viable.
- 49 The Council is supporting and encouraging the recycling of trade waste. An initial £5,000 investment has led to greater awareness by business people, for example through breakfast meetings. An additional £13,000 has been made available for a research project to look at the feasibility of the Council facilitating the linking of businesses to appropriate recycling companies. The Council is therefore engaging with the business community to promote recycling.
- 50 The Council promotes re-use. It supports the re-use of furniture through working with a charitable trust to recycle furniture. In partnership with the private sector, it provides re-use facilities for computer ink cartridges.

20 Environment - Waste Management and Open Spaces | How good is the service?

- 51 The amount of waste collected per head is increasing. In 2004/05, the 424 kilogram of waste was collected per head. Although this is line with the national trend, this exceeded the Council's own target of 410 kilogram per head and was worse than the average performance secured by most councils. There is currently no clear programme of activity in place to support waste minimisation. This does not support the Council's principal aim for a sustainable environment.
- 52 Satisfaction with the recycling and refuse collection services is average. In 2003/04, 74 per cent of residents were satisfied with recycling facilities. This is just below median performance when compared with all English district councils. In the same year, 85 per cent of residents reported being satisfied with refuse collection. Whilst this is a median performance it indicates a drop from the best performing quartile for satisfaction reported by Rochford 2000/01 when 91 per cent were satisfied.
- 53 The Council has not maximised opportunities for efficiency savings and improvements in recycling performance through the introduction of fortnightly collections of domestic waste. This collection pattern was introduced to 6,500 households, supplemented by the kerbside recycling scheme. It remained in place for two and a half years. However, following significant levels of complaints and dissatisfaction with the arrangements, the Council decided to revert to weekly collections as provided to the rest of the district. The potential benefit of a more cost effective collection in the longer term, together with likely increase in recycling rates, as realised by many other councils, was thus lost.
- 54 The reliability of the waste collection service has improved. In addition to significant dissatisfaction arising from the fortnightly refuse collection service, complaints were also received for bins not being returned to the correct place. Targets to rectify missed collections (for both waste collection and recycling) were also not being met. Only 72.40 per cent were collected within 24 hours against a target of 90 per cent in 2004/05. The Council has effectively applied penalties, including financial penalties as set out in the contract. This, together with working closely with the contractor, resulted in a change of working practices, including all operatives now being NVQ trained. This has had a significant impact on performance resulting in a large fall in the number of complaints received and penalties imposed. A reliable refuse collection service is now being delivered to residents.
- 55 The service for removing bulky household waste is accessible to all. There is no charge at the point of collection. In 2005, over 8,000 items of furniture and over 4,000 white goods (including refrigerators) were collected. However, the Council is reviewing this service and considering charges in line with other councils. Accessible services are likely to reduce the amount of fly-tipping, although the current system does not encourage waste minimisation.

Street cleaning

- 56** The Council is effective in keeping the streets free of litter. Street sweeping is proportionate to need and effectively undertaken resulting in a low level of litter in litter hotspots such as school routes and around shopping centres. Litter bins, which are regularly emptied, are appropriately located, such as near fast food outlets and at bus stops. Through the provision of its street cleaning service, the Council is contributing towards its aim to improve the quality of life for those in the district.
- 57** Clear arrangements are in place to monitor the cleanliness of the district. Streets are monitored at least once per fortnight with shopping zones inspected twice daily and key roads daily. Contract monitoring officers assure the cleanliness of the district and, as appropriate, issue a rectification notice when an area falls short of the required standard.
- 58** The effective approach to street cleaning is reflected in performance information. Performance against the code of practice for street cleanliness is good, with 99 per cent of streets in shopping areas, 91 per cent of streets in residential areas and 73 per cent of streets in rural areas meeting required standards. Recent unaudited data for the current year indicate that 22 per cent of sites were below Grade B for cleanliness (BVPP 199a). This exceeds the Government's recommended level where it is acceptable to have 30 per cent of sites below Grade B and exceeds the national average of 25 per cent.
- 59** The Council identifies and targets hotspots. Between May and September 2005, leading up to the 'Environmental Campaign', 161 hotspots were identified. The subsequent campaign, run in partnership with church groups and other voluntary groups, assisted the Council's hit squad to collect a total of 13 tonnes of waste. Signs were subsequently erected in 54 hotspot areas providing information to the public for reporting. This cost-effective targeting of resources has a significant impact on the cleanliness of the district.
- 60** An effective response is made to fly-tipping and graffiti. In 2004/05, the Council removed fly-tipped waste, on average, within 1.15 days. This exceeded the Council's target of two days. However, the speed of removal where other agencies are involved is considerably longer, reported in 2004/05 as 13.64 days against a target of 7.5 days. Graffiti is removed promptly with an escalated approach made to remove offensive/racist graffiti.
- 61** The procedures to deal with abandoned vehicles are effective and are part of a county-wide approach. Detailed monitoring is carried out. Reports are investigated and then attempts are made to contact owners. A notice is posted once a vehicle is deemed abandoned and, if unclaimed, the vehicle is collected and destroyed by the Council's contractor. Between April and the end of December 2005, the Council received reports of 208 vehicles, and of the 34 abandoned, 32 were successfully removed within 24 hours. A prompt response to abandoned vehicles supports a number of corporate aims including that to work towards a safer community.

- 62** Satisfaction with the standards of cleanliness is high, although the percentage of residents expressing satisfaction dropped from 78 per cent in 2000/01 to 67 per cent in 2003/04. This still represents levels of satisfaction that match those of the best performing councils. As part of a best value review of public regulation, inspection and protection, 600 householders were contacted by telephone to obtain their views on a range of issues including litter, dumped rubbish and abandoned vehicles. Approximately two-thirds expressed a view that the cleanliness of the district was acceptable or better and a large majority confirmed that this issue is a major priority to them.

Maintaining open spaces

- 63** Grassed areas, including verges, shrubs and borders, are well-maintained. The grounds maintenance service is delivering an effective service resulting in public open areas being tidy and attractive. Maintaining open spaces to a good standard contributes to a number of corporate aims including the aims to improve the quality of life and to provide a safer and more caring community.
- 64** Sports grounds and open spaces are well-maintained and used, particularly the football pitches. They are inspected over a one-month cycle with pitches checked weekly and cemeteries daily. The inspection process is effectively monitored, with prompt action being taken if an area falls short of the standards required.
- 65** The Council is effective in ensuring that land outside its control is maintained. A fly-tipping clearance protocol for private land is in place whereby the Council will clear the land on behalf of the land owner or where the landowner is unknown. This ensures speedy resolution. Planning enforcement powers are also used appropriately to ensure that privately owned land does not prove detrimental to the amenity of the area. Action has been taken against a landowner upon whose land a significant amount of waste was deposited by travellers. A clear approach to ensuring that land beyond the control of the Council is maintained supports the corporate aim to improve the quality of life for local people.
- 66** Users are satisfied with the management of open spaces in Rochford. In 2000/01, 70 per cent of residents were satisfied with parks and open spaces; this increased to 79 per cent in 2003/04. This level of satisfaction matches that obtained by the best performing councils. Results of the Joint Consultation Panel of Rochford, Castle Point and Rochford and Castle Point Primary Care Trust returned a satisfaction rate of 77 per cent good or better for the parks and open spaces in Rochford. The Council is, therefore, delivering against corporate and service aims to provide a green environment.

General environment issues

- 67** The Council has a robust approach to promoting biodiversity and sustainability in the management and maintenance of open spaces. A biodiversity action plan is in place and the Council actively promotes maintenance of open spaces to encourage habitats that support wildlife. Four significant woodlands totalling over 400 acres are managed, including the new 100 acre Cherry Orchard Country Park.

The effective and sensitive management of Hockley Woods has resulted in other organisations using it as a training location for best practice in woodland management. A proactive approach is taken to grass-cutting with fewer cuts within designated areas in parks to encourage wild flower meadows. While other grassed areas, such as within residential locations, are cut with greater frequency for amenity purposes. The service is, therefore, contributing to the corporate aim to provide a green and sustainable environment.

- 68 Rochford is successful in encouraging visitors to the well-maintained woodlands in the district. In 2004/05, approximately 40,000 visits were made to Hockley Woods. This 300 acre woodland is designated as a site of special scientific interest. Visits are encouraged through offering guided walks, schools visits, and special events. Accessibility for all is ensured by including a hard surface route for disabled visitors and the provision of toilets with facilities for disabled people. The Council undertook consultation with user groups, including those with disabilities in developing the facilities offered. Such actions contribute to the corporate aim to improve the quality of life for people in the district.
- 69 The Council does not have a balanced approach of education and enforcement. There is some awareness raising activity including school competitions and the Citizen of the Year awards that have been expanded to coincide with the Council's environmental campaign. The Council recognises that there is no clear programme of co-ordinated educational activity. Enforcement of issues which are high priorities for local people, such as dog fouling and littering, have been considered but rejected on the basis of cost and a lack of perceived need. The use of parking wardens for wider enforcement has been considered but not progressed. The current lack of enforcement is recognised by the Council and remains under review. Whilst the standard of street cleanliness is generally good, a lack of a strategic approach to education and enforcement is limiting the Council's ability to make further improvements.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 70 The overall cost of environment services is low but the quality of services is variable. The cost of waste collection and recycling, at £35.93 per head in 2004/05, was just outside the cheapest 25 per cent of English district councils. Whilst street cleaning and grounds maintenance are of a good standard, the rate of recycling is low.
- 71 There are specific examples where the Council has taken action to improve value for money.
- Contracts which have been awarded on the basis of value for money and quality of service offered. Although offered flexibly as separate/combined contracts, a 2 per cent saving to the Council was secured by accepting the current provider to deliver all functions - waste collection, recycling, grounds maintenance and street cleaning.

24 Environment - Waste Management and Open Spaces | How good is the service?

- The procurement process for the kerbside recycling scheme which provided an option for the provider to include profit share once a certain tonnage threshold is reached. In 2004/05, the Council secured almost £37,000 from profit-sharing. This was reinvested in the service to implement and sustain the green waste collection service.
- One of the two bring site paper collection contracts was not renewed. The remaining contractor became responsible for servicing all paper banks. This resulted in savings of approximately £11,000 which supported the introduction of nine plastic recycling bring banks, thereby providing a service that had previously not been available to residents.
- The re-tendering of the abandoned vehicle contract which resulted in a 40 per cent saving.

72 Value for money is also secured at a lower level. In 2005/06, the annual refuse/recycling calendars distributed to all households were redesigned, achieving a reduction in cost from £5,548 in the previous year to £2,199. These examples of securing value for money contribute to the corporate aim to provide cost-effective services.

73 The Council is effective in securing sponsorship to support its activities. It has been successful in obtaining sponsorship from a national company for subsidising the dog waste bins in the district. In addition, the inkjet and laser toner cartridges recycling banks are offered to residents in partnership with an environmental company. Effective partnerships are assisting in delivering value for money.

74 Procurement decisions are taken to increase the likelihood of future efficiency savings. The green waste contract was let on a comparatively short-term basis, up to March 2008, to coincide with the end date of other key contracts. This places the Council in a good position to tender a wide range of services together, therefore, making further efficiency savings. This timescale has also been set in order to dovetail into the Essex Waste Management Procurement process and therefore increase the possibility of entering into future integrated contracts either horizontally or vertically.

75 The effective management of woodlands is demonstrating value for money. Wood arising from coppicing and general maintenance is either seasoned and sold as fire wood, realising approximately £6,000 per annum, or 'chipped' and sold locally to local gardeners. Through effective management, the service is providing an income source from waste, demonstrating value for money and contributing to the corporate aim to provide quality, cost-effective services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 76 Service changes resulting from external inspections and internal reviews have had mixed success in leading to real service improvements. For example, the 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment identified the need for a robust performance management framework. This was also highlighted in the progress assessment in 2005. Although fully accepted by the Council, little progress has been made and it remains to be resolved due to capacity issues. It is unlikely that the implementation of enhanced performance management arrangements planned for March 2006 will be achieved. In 2003/04, the best value review of 'Our Environment' failed to result in significant service development. Of the three actions, the first, an environmental audit, is now a non-priority, the second represents work already in progress (ongoing development of the Essex waste management contract) and the third resulted in additional resources to deal with issues such as graffiti and chewing gum. The Council's failure to maximise the benefits from inspections or reviews limits the potential for service improvement.
- 77 The Council's track record in delivering improvement in the percentage of household waste recycled is poor. In 2001/02, a rate of 8 per cent was achieved. This increased to 11.15 per cent in 2002/03, but declined to 10.31 per cent in 2003/04 (against a statutory standard of 10 per cent). In 2004/05, it was 12.31 per cent. The statutory standard and the Council's target for 2005/06 is 18 per cent but the Council predicts that it is unlikely to achieve this. Not only has the Council failed to achieve year-on-year improvements but the overall rate, when compared to other Essex councils, is poor. The Council is, however, now making progress to drive through improved performance. Resources are being targeted and services expanded to increase the recycling rate.
- 78 Progress to roll-out kerbside recycling collections has been slow. The current investment in kerbside recycling and green waste composting during the year has meant that the kerbside collection scheme currently reaches only 83 per cent of households with a planned rise to 95 per cent by March 2006. A further expansion to flats is planned for June 2006 and the Council is seeking to include cardboard within its recyclables. The recent investment in recycling is insufficient to ensure statutory recycling standards are met in 2005/06.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 79 The Council has recently agreed a waste management and recycling plan. It details improvements to the range and coverage of recycling services. Key actions are costed and funding is in place. The plan details how the rate of recycling will increase to 21.4 per cent by 2007/08. Having a clear plan in place supports the delivery of services to meet the Council's principal aims for a green and sustainable environment.
- 80 The Council is actively seeking to increase the availability of recycling services to residents. In early spring 2006, approximately 95 per cent of residents will be receiving a kerbside recycling service for glass, paper and cans. Trials for the collection of an increased range of materials are planned including the collection of cardboard. A study is currently underway with other councils to ascertain the best way of providing recycling services to those living in flats. RDC is also supporting 'Recyclable Market Development' (ReMaDe) Essex, an ambitious project which contributes financially to create new markets and secondary users for recycled materials. It has the support of all Essex councils in providing support, establishing trials and projects, organising workshops for priority materials, and running a communications campaign to raise awareness of the need for new markets amongst businesses.
- 81 Capacity is improving. The Council has recently agreed funding of £45,000 for a new post of Environment and Street Scene Manager with the purpose to drive through service improvements and prepare the Council for re-tendering of the services. Additional resources have also been agreed including additional funding of £7,500 to speed up graffiti removal. Existing staff capacity is also being increased through a targeted training programme, part of which has been delivered by external consultants. Contracted staff have also been trained and this is considered, in part, to have brought about a reduction in service complaints.
- 82 Councillor support for environment services is now strong. Councillors are now very supportive of the recycling agenda and the need to meet statutory standards. The Council remains open to the introduction of alternative methods of waste collection including fortnightly collection of domestic waste. In addition, proposed changes to the committee structure should allow a realigned environmental services committee greater time and opportunity to focus on forthcoming key waste collection and recycling issues. A waste management sub-committee has been established to facilitate faster and more effective decision-making.
- 83 The Council is working well with the County Council and other districts in considering an integrated approach to waste management for the future. Although little has been delivered to date, the Council is committed to the county-wide joint municipal waste strategy and is open, both at a political and officer level, to positively consider the options for joint waste collection contracts with neighbouring councils.

The Council has synchronised its own contracts to coincide with potential joint collection. However, there remains a risk that joint procurement of waste collection may not be completed before the current contracts may expire. An open approach to procurement of services helps maximise the potential of securing better value for money for residents.

- 84 The complaints system is used to drive service improvements. For example, complaints about unclean streets or shopping areas result in increased attention. In addition, following challenges from many residents, the bank holiday collection schedule is now delivered to every household. This has reduced subsequent complaints and enquiries. Making effective use of feedback is supporting the development of services.
- 85 The Council actively learns from the experiences of others. The experiences of another council have been considered in the development of the forthcoming kerbside collection of cardboard. Learning from others and implementing new schemes on a trial basis minimises risk.
- 86 An effective corporate performance management framework is not in place and it is unlikely that the target of March 2006 for the implementation of a new framework will be achieved due to a lack of capacity. Each service is required to develop a service action plan, but there is no corporate requirement for a divisional plan or for a service improvement plan. Clear and robust service improvement planning allows services to be resourced and effectively managed in a way that supports strategic aims.
- 87 The Council does not have a rigorous approach to reducing the amount of waste per head. In 2004/05, 424 kilogram of waste was collected per head. Targets in 'Our Plans for the Future' are not challenging with an annual increase of almost 3 per cent forecast resulting in an anticipated 459 kilogram per head being collected in 2007/08. Although the Council takes part in some campaigns such as the 'real nappy' campaign, activity to reduce waste arisings is ad-hoc. This is recognised by the Council and the waste management and recycling plan has funded actions to increase education and awareness raising activity.
- 88 The approach to setting targets is not consistently challenging. The document 'Our Plans for the Future' sets targets up to and including 2007/08 for recycling. It plans to achieve a level of 18 per cent in 2005/06, 22 per cent in 2006/07, and 22 per cent in 2007/08. Achievement of these targets is likely to leave the Council amongst the lowest performing authorities. The Council also has a target for the next three years to remove fly-tipped waste, for which it is responsible, within two days. Fly-tipped waste has been removed faster than this target for the past two reported years. Retaining the target shows a lack of ambition to improve. There is a lack of the ambitious but realistic target setting that is essential for a culture of continuous improvement.

28 Environment - Waste Management and Open Spaces | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 89 The development of a corporate risk management culture remains incomplete. Delays in implementation of risk management processes have occurred due to lack of capacity and competing priorities. The corporate risk register is incomplete. Most of the 21 entries fail to identify a risk owner, and the detail within the register is sparse. Risk management processes within the service are not robust. For example, the risk of delay in delivery of the narrow bodied recycling vehicle was not identified and recorded as a risk, and no control measures were introduced to minimise the likelihood or impact of any delay. Without the necessary cultural change, risk management will not become embedded at either the strategic or operational level.
- 90 The Council has not taken an effective approach to enforcement to support the delivery of priorities. Frontline Council and contractor staff feel there is a strong need for the exercise of enforcement powers to help address community concerns over low level environmental crime. Despite this, no enforcement action has been taken regarding littering, dog fouling or fly-tipping. The Council is missing the opportunity to provide a deterrent and to support staff in ensuring compliance with environmental requirements

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 91 A more inclusive approach to preliminary budget discussions is now allowing all councillors greater opportunities to contribute to the budget setting process. Prior to the start of the 2005/06 financial year, councillors met with senior officers to agree objectives and priorities, and to develop a five-year budget commencing in 2005/06. This process is being followed for the 2006/07 budgetary process. Greater opportunity for debate is supporting the allocation of resources to corporate aims.
- 92 Human resource practices have been developed which support the needs of the Council. A comprehensive workforce development plan is being implemented with ownership now being taken on by service departments. 'Investors in People' status accreditation was achieved in March 2005 and a new payroll/human resources system has been introduced. The Council is working with the IdEA and other councils to develop member training programmes.
- 93 The Council is building capacity within services. It has recently agreed to employ a senior officer to specifically manage the programme of work associated with the new waste management contract. This helps address the limited capacity that is currently inhibiting strategic planning, delaying progress on recycling and preventing speedy implementation of initiatives. In addition, the skill base of frontline staff has been enhanced through training in order to improve services. External consultants (ENCAMS) have been employed to train staff to effectively monitor street cleaning. The potential for service improvement is being increased through this capacity building.

- 94** The Council has been successful in securing external funding. In 2004/05, it secured £351,800 from the DEFRA³ waste management fund for the purchase of four kerbside recycling vehicles. In 2005/06, a further £61,335 was obtained to purchase a narrow bodied vehicle to enable the rolling out of kerb side recycling collections to the less accessible parts of the district. In order to maximise value for money the contractor, with its greater purchasing power, purchased the vehicles on the Council's behalf. This resulted in savings in the region of £15,000. In addition, other environmental enhancements have resulted from securing over £300,000 that has gone towards establishing Cherry Tree Country Park, together with associated signage and public information boards. This extra funding is enabling the Council to achieve more than it would otherwise.
- 95** The Council is organising services with a view to future procurement options. Contracts have been synchronised to ensure that they terminate at the same time, thereby maximising the chances of economies of scale realised in future procurement options. This has included tendering the green waste collection service for a two-year period so that it coincides with the end of existing waste contracts in March 2008. Such an approach to procurement demonstrates a focus on providing value for money.
- 96** The Council's financial capacity is limited. The five-year budget strategy provides no growth in 2006/07 for either the waste collection or street cleansing services although detailed budget decisions for 2006/07 had, at the time of inspection, yet to be finalised. This compares with estimated growth of 14.5 and 12.4 per cent respectively (including grants) between 2004/05 and 2005/06. Excluding waste performance and efficiency grants, the estimated budget for waste collection will decrease by 1.4 per cent from 2005/06 to 2006/07. Without sufficient financial resourcing, step change in environment services is unlikely.

³ DEFRA - Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.