

Progress assessment report

March 2006



# Progress Assessment

**Wyre 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 June 2004 the Audit Commission published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) report on Wyre Borough Council. The Council was categorised as weak. The key strengths and weaknesses relating to the CPA assessment are reproduced in Appendix 1.
- 2 Following CPA the Council developed an improvement plan containing 15 objectives and 44 tasks under the six headings of ambition, prioritisation, focus, capacity, performance management and investment. The improvement plan identified the outcomes that the Council was seeking to achieve.
- 3 In April 2005 the Commission reported on the Council's progress against the improvement plan and in addressing the CPA weaknesses. We concluded that the Council was making good progress in addressing the CPA weaknesses and in putting in place the building blocks identified in its improvement plan. This report presents a further analysis of the Council's progress to date.

## Summary

- 4 The Council is progressing well in addressing its improvement priorities and the weaknesses identified in the CPA and Progress Assessment Report 2005. Most of the tasks in the CPA improvement plan have been completed or are continuous actions that directly or indirectly address the Council's priorities for improvement.
- 5 The Council has made good progress in strengthening its corporate and service planning. It has set out more clearly its ambitions and priorities for the area and the promises that it intends to fulfil to achieve them, but some priorities are not linked to key indicators that enable the extent of intended achievement to be measured. Community engagement has been strengthened, through for example, a People's Panel to help the Council focus on strategic issues and its approach to addressing the diverse needs of the community.
- 6 The Council has established a systematic approach to the prioritisation of capital and revenue budgets. It allocates and diverts resources to priority areas and services that need improvement. The Council currently has the financial capacity to deliver its priorities but faces critical decisions in future years about its priorities and levels of services to maintain the minimum level of balances. It has stayed focused on its improvement priorities and delivering service improvements through a range of mechanisms, which are ensuring the delivery of strategic priorities and its promises.
- 7 The Council continues to make good progress in strengthening its political and managerial capacity to achieve its priorities. It has established a new political management structure to support the strategic direction but these revised arrangements are yet to have an impact. The skills and capacity of the political and managerial leadership have been, and continue to be, developed to deliver the improvement agenda. The Council makes effective use of partnerships with the community, private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver its priorities.
- 8 Performance management is being strengthened and has resulted in service improvements such as improved responsiveness. However, a strong performance management culture does not exist across all service areas where data is used to manage, rather than report, performance against the Council's priorities. Overall, the Council achieves value for money with costs commensurate with service delivery, performance and outcomes, but some services are low performing and high cost.
- 9 The Council has made good progress in improving the overall quality of services, in line with its corporate priorities, and addressing areas of under-performance. In particular it has made good progress in improving access to services and facilities through connectwyre, a single point of contact for council services, and working with partners. User satisfaction is high across a range of services but is currently not measured for all services.

- 10 The Council has made further good progress with investment to secure continuous improvement in priority areas. These include enhancing the effectiveness of community engagement, partnerships, performance management and procurement and investing in information technology. Service reviews have achieved, or identified, significant savings in value through lower costs, efficiencies and improved performances. This is creating the capacity to implement future improvements but immediate benefits are not apparent.
- 11 The Council is making good use of learning and good progress with its future plans to achieve its priorities. It has a good level of self-awareness and a realistic understanding of what it has achieved. The Council's continual review of progress against priorities ensures that it is aware of where further action is needed. This includes updating the community and corporate plans, progressing regeneration initiatives and pursuing further opportunities for partnership working to improve services.

## Recommendations

- 12 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 its improvement plan in conjunction with any direction from the Improvement Board.

## Context

### The locality

- 13 Wyre is a borough within Lancashire. It covers an area of 283 square kilometres and includes the coastal towns of Cleveleys and Fleetwood, the market towns of Garstang and Poulton-le-Fylde and outlying villages. The population of 109,000 is largely concentrated along the coastal areas with only a quarter of people living in rural areas. Around 26 per cent of the resident population is retired, above the national average of 18.5 per cent; 1.1 per cent of the population are from ethnic minority communities.
- 14 Wyre is ranked 161st (out of 354) in the indices of deprivation for local authority areas in England (with 1 being the most disadvantaged). The borough as a whole is relatively prosperous but it has pockets of deprivation – one third of its areas are amongst the most disadvantaged 10 per cent nationally for access to housing and key local services. The percentage of people with a limiting long-term illness is above average. Some individuals and groups are vulnerable to experiencing poorer health, due to factors such as poverty, housing and access to jobs and services.
- 15 The Wyre Strategic Partnership, comprising public, private, community, faith and voluntary organisations, has produced a community plan which identifies visions to make Wyre a better place to live, work and visit. The overall vision is *‘Thriving communities, prosperous businesses, with opportunities so that all our residents can achieve a good quality of life’*.

### The Council

- 16 Wyre Borough Council is governed by the Conservative party with 33 of the 55 seats. A Leader and Cabinet are responsible for decision-making. The Council’s mission statement is *‘to work with local communities to make Wyre a better place to live, work and visit.’* Its vision is *‘we will ensure that Wyre is a place where all our customers can access our services easily by whatever means they prefer and have their enquiry dealt with speedily at the first point of contact’*.
- 17 Five corporate priorities set out what the Council is seeking to achieve under the themes of Living Places, Living Community, Living Economy, Living Safely and Living Healthily.
- 18 The net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £13.3 million with a capital budget of £8.9 million.

## What is the Council trying to achieve?

- 19 Through its corporate and service planning the Council has made good progress in strengthening its ambitions and priorities for the area. In particular the Council has more clearly articulated how it aims to put the customer at the heart of everything that it does by providing quality services and equality of access and outcomes. The priority 'Living Organisation' has been changed to 'Living Community' to provide more focus on community leadership.
- 20 The Council's ambitions and priorities are clear. The corporate plan and best value performance plan set out priorities within the five corporate priorities and the promises that it intends to fulfil to achieve them. They identify the medium-term aims that link to the longer-term visions contained in the community plan. Action plans to achieve these visions, supported by clear outcome measures, are not in place but the Council is addressing these issues. It has appointed a Development Manager to drive forward the work of the Wyre Strategic Partnership (WSP). The Council has established a People's Panel to inform its and the WSP's priorities and strengthen community engagement.
- 21 The promises give more clarity to how the Council intends to achieve its priorities. These include actions, outcomes, outputs and service standards. They are the critical issues that the Council needs to address to deliver improvements in services and the quality of life for local people. Service plans identify how individual services contribute to the corporate priorities and identify how individual services contribute. However, the corporate priorities are not always linked to key indicators that enable the extent of intended achievement to be measured. Standards and performance against the priorities are not regularly communicated for all services so that users can judge quality and improvement.
- 22 The Council's community leadership has been further strengthened through its approach to diversity and equalities. It engages with, and facilitates, a range of community groups. These groups include faith, homelessness, multicultural, pensioner and youth forums and a Disability Partnership, but it has not made the best use of these groups for consultation. The Council has now achieved level 1 of the equality standard for local government. Its score for the duty to promote race equality has increased from 21 per cent in 2003/04 to 79 per cent, which is amongst the best 25 per cent of councils for 2004/05. All council buildings have public areas that are suitable for, and accessible, to people with disabilities.
- 23 The Council allocates resources to priority areas, such as parks and open spaces, improving the transport infrastructure and promoting healthier lifestyles. It is diverting resources to areas that need improvement, for example, to address homelessness and provide community support officers. It has strengthened its approach to the prioritisation of capital and revenue budgets. The Council stays focused on achieving improvements through its CPA improvement plan, corporate and service planning framework, human resource strategy and performance reporting arrangements. Scrutiny arrangements are used effectively to challenge the Cabinet and decision-making.

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

- 24 The Council continues to make good progress in strengthening its political and managerial capacity to achieve its priorities. A member development programme has been completed. Cabinet portfolios are now aligned with corporate priorities to provide a more strategic focus. Community, Corporate and Customer Watchdogs provide a revised overview and scrutiny function. These new arrangements are yet to have an impact and further development is being provided so that councillors can more effectively exercise strategic leadership.
- 25 Officer capacity has improved through training and development. This has provided managers with the skills to deliver the Council's priorities with an emphasis on community leadership, customer focus, performance management and maximising partnerships. More effective use is made of staff, such as generic enforcement officers. Sickness absence is improving with an estimated loss of 10.6 days per employee for 2005/06 compared with 12.6 days in 2004/05 when the Council was amongst the worst 25 per cent nationally. The Council's workforce, however, does not reflect its community - people with disabilities and the economically active ethnic minority community are under-represented. This is being addressed through the Human Resource Strategy.
- 26 The Council currently has the financial capacity to deliver its priorities. A balanced budget has been set for 2006/07 with no reductions in services. Financial management is sound. Action is taken to manage risks and sustain resources to meet priorities. However, it faces making critical decisions in future years about its priorities and levels of services to maintain the minimum level of balances.
- 27 The Council makes effective use of partnerships with the community, private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver its priorities. It has an open, innovative approach to procurement as demonstrated by the contracts for leisure and waste management services, coastal protection and environmental improvements. A range of services are provided by, or in partnership with, other councils. Such partnerships have reduced costs whilst improving performance. They are delivering positive outcomes and improving the quality of life and access to services for local people, such as a Healthy Living Centre. Major procurements reflect good practice but this is not applied for all activities. This is now being addressed by an action plan following the appointment of a Procurement Officer.
- 28 The Council is strengthening its performance management arrangements. In particular this has improved responsiveness for users. However, a strong performance management culture does not exist across all services where data is used to manage, rather than report, performance against priorities. Some key outcome measures are lacking and targets, whilst generally ambitious, are not always realistic; services and not priorities generally influence activities. Overall, the Council achieves value for money with costs commensurate with service delivery, performance and outcomes, but some services are low performing and high cost.

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

- 29 The Council has made good progress in improving the overall quality of services, in line with its corporate priorities, and addressing areas of under-performance. In 2004/05, 20 of 37 service performance indicators improved with only three (relating to processing benefits claims and recovery of overpayments) declining significantly. Homelessness indicators improved with no stays in hostels, compared to an average of 18 weeks in 2003/04, and the average stay in bed and breakfast accommodation reduced from 11 to 6.9 weeks. The Council was amongst the best 25 per cent for 8 of 27 service indicators but ten indicators were amongst the worst 25 per cent. These included the determination times for major and minor planning applications, environmental cleanliness and household waste collected.
- 30 Progress continues to be good in 2005/06. Unaudited data for April to December 2005 indicates further improvements across most services, including those that were amongst the worst 25 per cent. Recycling/composting has increased significantly - all households have a collection of at least two recyclables in advance of the 2010 requirement. However, the introduction of the new collections generated a high number of user complaints. Determination times for minor and other, but not major, planning applications are now better than the national targets. Processing times for new benefit claims (but not for change of circumstances) are now close to the best 25 per cent in 2004/05 and recovery of overpayments is well above this level.
- 31 Access to services and facilities has improved through connectwyre, a single point of contact for a range of council services, libraries' information points and post offices. The national e-government target for public interactions has been achieved. In June 2005 the Council's approach to Customer Access and Focus was judged as 'fair' with 'promising prospects for improvement'.
- 32 Satisfaction with building control, leisure centres and tourist services in 2004/05 was above 80 per cent. Users consider food safety and health and safety functions to be good or excellent. Satisfaction with all services is not known as regular surveys have not been undertaken. The quality of some services has been recognised by, for example, a Chartermark for Building Control, a Green Flag for the Wyre Estuary Country Park and a national award for Food Safety.
- 33 The Council continues to make good progress in investment to secure continuous improvement in priority areas. Most of the tasks in the CPA improvement plan have been completed or are continuous actions that directly or indirectly deliver improvements for users. These include enhancing the effectiveness of community engagement, partnerships, performance management and procurement and investment in information technology. In 2005/06, 63 promises have been delivered, 15 are on track and 4 will not be delivered.

The Council has attracted external funding to support local priorities and regeneration initiatives. Service reviews have achieved, or identified, some significant savings in value through lower costs, efficiencies and improved performances.

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

- 34 The Council is making good use of learning and good progress with its future plans to achieve its priorities. It has a good level of self-awareness and a realistic understanding of what it has achieved, as well as where further improvements are needed. The Council has changed its governance arrangements to enhance strategic leadership, provide more focus on its priorities and improve performance monitoring and policy development. It is strengthening community engagement through area forums in co-ordination with other public agencies. The Council responds to users' feedback on, for example, the provision of Community Support Officers and regeneration schemes.
- 35 The Council seeks out good practices and learns from its own experiences, such as the new governance arrangements and the contract for leisure facilities – this reflects the 'Rethinking Construction' principles, embodied in the coastal protection contract. Learning has influenced the development of connectwyre and revised waste collection systems to provide more user-focused services.
- 36 Good progress is being made on introducing a 'Customer First' culture with customer focus increasingly the key driver for service delivery, linked to the Living Community priority. The Council has responded positively to the inspection of Customer Access and Focus. Staff are involved in a range of activities to improve efficiency and responsiveness. Such mechanisms mean that the Council has become a more learning organisation, sharing good practices amongst services - for example, the development of generic service standards, information management, and communications.
- 37 The Council is making good progress with its future plans and other preparatory work, linked to the corporate priorities. These include market town initiatives, regeneration, coastal protection and environmental improvements. The Council's Housing Strategy has been assessed as fit for purpose. It has identified opportunities for significant efficiency savings through procurement, transaction costs, productivity and back-office functions to create the capacity to implement future improvements but immediate benefits are not apparent. An action plan has been developed to improve value of money in service delivery.
- 38 The Council's continual review of progress against priorities ensures that it knows where further action is required. It is aware that the community and corporate plans need to be updated to reflect the aspirations of more defined communities and acknowledge the development of local area agreements. This is being driven forward in 2006. The Direct Works Organisation will cease to exist as a separate entity. Elements of the service will become part of a new 'street scene' approach. Customer focus is increasingly the key driver and business transformation techniques in areas such as revenues and benefits are being used to change service delivery to meet users needs.

This approach is being extended into areas such as planning and housing. The Council is also pursuing opportunities for partners to provide other services, for example, community halls and public conveniences. It has evaluated the effectiveness of its partnerships to ensure that their contributions can be maximised to achieve its and the WSP's priorities.

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

Table 1

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	1	<p>Draft community plan developed through consultation and articulates the impact delivery will have.</p> <p>Plans to develop improved strategic leadership in hand.</p>	<p>Ambition for the district not clearly articulated.</p> <p>Corporate objectives not supported by sustainable outcomes and long term targets linked to quality of life.</p> <p>Council does not fully understand its role and input to partnerships.</p> <p>No overall approach to addressing the diverse needs of communities.</p> <p>Strategic leadership within the organisation has been weaker because of operational focus.</p>
Focus	2	<p>Clear meeting agendas, forward plan, reports and minutes and meetings well managed.</p> <p>Focus on delivering operational services.</p> <p>Focus on exploring local issues such as A585, ICI site.</p>	<p>Lack of knowledge about what matters most to local people means that it doesn't know which areas to focus on.</p> <p>Limited focus on strategic and cross cutting issues throughout the Council.</p> <p>Scrutiny function under developed.</p>

Progress Assessment | Appendix 1 – Summary of theme scores and strengths/weaknesses as reported in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in June 2004 17

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Prioritisation	2	<p>Some low level decisions on what is not a priority.</p> <p>Priorities for improvement have some foundation in consultation and statistical data.</p> <p>Targeted information is effective and well received.</p>	<p>Priorities are operational and refer to specific service areas rather than cross cutting issues.</p> <p>Unclear how national priorities translate into local ones.</p> <p>Plans and strategies have too many priorities.</p> <p>Service and financial planning model is not an effective mechanism for financial prioritisation.</p>
Capacity	2	<p>Steps being taken to address people issues.</p> <p>Training and development good.</p> <p>Standards committee contributing to addressing capacity issues.</p> <p>Satisfactory financial standing.</p>	<p>Slow to embrace modernisation.</p> <p>Interim senior management has not provided clear strategic leadership.</p> <p>Senior managers group is too large, lacks real purpose and focuses on internal issues.</p> <p>Management of people is weak.</p> <p>No strategic approach to procurement.</p> <p>Effectiveness of partnership working is variable.</p> <p>Variable performance in 'corporate health' indicators.</p>

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

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Performance management	2	Service plans linked to objectives and appraisals system linked to corporate objectives, service plans and training. Isolated examples of reasons for poor performance against PIs being examined and addressed.	Still to develop a performance culture across the Council. Planning of services is operationally focused. Underdeveloped approach to risk management. Complaints not used to drive service improvements.
Achievement	3	Performs well in customer satisfaction. Some good services identified through inspections. Chartermarks for several services. Clean and well maintained area. Good performance in relation to private housing indicators, planning and recycling.	Fifty-six per cent of key indicators are in the bottom two quartiles. E-government and waste are weaker compared to other councils. Low satisfaction for parks and open spaces.

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Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Achievement of improvement	2	<p>BVPI performance improved in 2002/03 including some areas where the Council is in the worst quartile.</p> <p>Some cross cutting Improvements are in line with the broad corporate objectives.</p> <p>Schemes that the Council has been a partner in have resulted in improvements in local people's quality of life.</p>	<p>Weak evidence of consistent improvement over the last three years compared to other councils and direction of travel.</p> <p>Improvements are not targeted against priorities in cross cutting areas or the areas that the Council knows matter most to local people.</p> <p>Improvements may not be sustainable eg community safety.</p> <p>Impacts of improvements/schemes not measured.</p>
Investment	2	<p>Council is investing in some areas of weakness such as the management restructure and improvements in member development and work life balance.</p> <p>Track record of attracting external funding.</p>	<p>Recognition of the need to address weaknesses but many are at an early stage and not embedded.</p> <p>Gaps in investments lacking in key areas such as risk management, strategic procurement and strategic HR.</p> <p>Lack of external funding strategy to meet priority goals.</p>
Learning	2	<p>Some examples of informal learning between services.</p> <p>Seeks information from outside the Council to improve services and systems.</p>	<p>Aware of its successes but does not have a full understanding of the issues it faces.</p> <p>Systematic learning is weak.</p>

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

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Future plans	2	<p>A number of statutory plans assessed as satisfactory or above.</p> <p>Some plans supported by service plans.</p> <p>Council is aware of the need to improve capacity and strategic working.</p>	<p>Some plans not robust – they lack resources, timelines and accountabilities.</p> <p>No overarching plan that will assist in focusing on delivery of strategies, workforce planning and medium term financial planning.</p> <p>Lack of mechanisms to engage particular groups of community in planning for the future.</p>

**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;
  - audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments;
  - reviews of key corporate documents including performance reports, committee papers and management reports; and
  - interviews with councillors and managers.
- 4 This progress monitoring report for Wyre Borough Council was collated by the Audit Commission and reflects evidence gathered over the period from April 2005 to February 2006.
- 5 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for reporting progress to the Improvement Board and updating and improving any Improvement Plan as appropriate.