

Corporate Assessment Report

April 2006



Corporate Assessment

Bristol City Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

- sustainable communities and transport;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities;
- older people; and
- children and young people.

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Bristol City Council is performing adequately with the challenges it is facing. It is providing strong corporate leadership, with a more outward looking and visible approach to fulfilling its vision as a regional leader with a European presence. The vision for the city is clear and ambitious and is shared with statutory and voluntary sector partners. It reflects national agendas and local needs and is supported by staff. However, the council still has important service and systems improvements to achieve. It is capable of excellent performance such as in regeneration while at the same time achieving poorly in education. Whilst it now targets resources to priority areas better, performance management is not embedded within the organisation. The council has moved on well since its last corporate assessment in 2002, but it still has work to do to deliver improvement consistently across all services.
- 6 The restoration of the Chief Executive post in 2003 and the drive of the current political leadership has begun the transition from a previously departmentalist council which lacked clear priorities and did not see things through, to one recognised by partners as providing strong leadership and drive. The council has given direction to the LSP, the Bristol Partnership, to clarify and align its vision, resources and priorities. The Community Strategy has been updated, through extensive community consultation, setting out a clear vision for the city, the priorities to be addressed and the actions required of partners. The community strategy and Council's corporate plan are now fully aligned and the council has moved resources from lower priorities to boost the corporate and community strategy priorities.
- 7 Some improvement to systems and processes is evident. User focus is being enhanced through a strong consultation framework and a new Customer Service Centre. Performance monitoring resulting in corrective intervention is now evident though not in all areas. Councillors are generally well informed and are supported by well-designed, well attended, development programmes. However, scrutiny is underdeveloped and only just beginning to support policy making. Value for money is also underdeveloped, particularly in education where achievements are low despite high costs. The Council's Human Resource (HR) policies have variable impact. It has award-winning work-life balance policies and training and development programme for managers. However workforce planning is embryonic and the development and training of non-managerial staff is not systematic.
- 8 The Council is now taking difficult and timely decisions to improve services. These include a major and sensitive appraisal of the voluntary sector contribution to Bristol Partnership outcomes. It has also closed some out-of-date facilities and is realigning the Council's staffing structures. Whilst there is now increased corporate responsibility it is patchy. Departmental approaches are still evident in some areas, notably in Education where there is no sense of collective responsibility across the council for tackling poor educational standards.

Councillors and staff must now ensure that the work on embedding cultural change is completed.

- 9 The Council is doing well in regenerating the city. Its work in areas like St. Paul's, Barton Hill and Knowle with new community multi-use buildings, improved access to services have reflected the diversity of the areas, and successfully strengthened community capacity. The Council's strong approach to diversity gained Beacon status for promoting race equality in 2005 and in Barton Hill has resulted, for the first time in three years, in no inter-cultural clashes. City centre improvements such as the reconstruction of the Broadmead shopping area and the harbourside are delivering the priority of building a thriving economy. The Council, working through the Safer Bristol partnership, is tackling most crime and disorder issues well. Anti-social behaviour has been reduced and residents feel relatively safe. Nuisance families have been successfully targeted and high levels of people undergo drug treatment. However, alcohol use amongst young people, and violent and sexual crimes are high and increasing.
- 10 The Council's approach to older people and healthier communities shows limited success. It has no corporate approach to older people and no shared understanding of what constitutes an older person. Consequently it focuses on those needing domiciliary or residential care. Its new, Very Sheltered housing developments do support the independence of a large number of older people and there have been successes in reducing delayed discharges. However, little is done on building co-operation between the younger and older generations as a way of strengthening community cohesion. Little attention is given to engaging older people to change lifestyles in order to increase their chances of a healthy old age. The Council's work with partners on healthier communities shows variable results. Whilst it understands local health issues and is tackling high smoking levels, teenage pregnancies, and heart disease in the Asian community, overall success is limited. However, levels of physical exercise within the city have increased with more people walking and cycling and new facilities are being developed.

Areas for improvement

- 11 The Council needs to embed performance management in every department and ensure Councillors and managers are comfortable with measuring and interpreting data and taking the necessary action.
- 12 The council needs to develop and instil corporate and cross departmental ownership of the integrated children's services agenda and specifically the improvement of educational attainment.
- 13 The Council needs to drive high achievement in all services and improve the way it learns from benchmarking against best-in-class performers and from customer feedback and complaints.
- 14 The council needs to achieve value for money more consistently, and routinely make the link between the cost of the service, its performance and public satisfaction. Linking value for money to the corporate plan priorities is a first step.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
Overall corporate assessment score**		2
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 15 Bristol with a population of 393,000 is a major city in the West of England, and is the eighth largest city in the country. It is a relatively prosperous city with the second lowest unemployment rate of the major English cities. There has also been a 10 per cent increase in businesses between 1994 and 2003, well above average. It is a well connected city by road, rail, sea and air. Its port is one of the fastest growing and its airport is one of the busiest regional airports.
- 16 However, Bristol faces a number of significant challenges. Despite two very successful and popular universities, and a highly educated and skilled workforce with 36 per cent educated to degree level, educational attainment, at all ages is poor, particularly among 14-16 year olds. Bristol's economic success has also brought with it problems and challenges, such as environmental pollution and high house prices. This causes major problems for key workers and younger people looking for affordable housing and contributes to social cohesion problems. Traffic congestion is a major problem and is seen by citizens as one of the worst things about Bristol.
- 17 Bristol's prosperity is also not shared by all its citizens: many areas of the city suffer from multiple deprivation. Some of the most prosperous and most deprived areas in the country are in Bristol. Thirty-five out of Bristol's 252 Super Output Areas (local neighbourhood and postcode level areas) were in the worst 10 per cent nationally in terms of multiple deprivations. The highest levels of deprivation in the city are in education, skills and training. The numbers of people claiming benefits is in the top 25 per cent in England. As a result, the government has allocated considerable resources to Bristol from its Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF), Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and New Deal for Communities programme, and Bristol has succeeded in securing European funding through URBAN and Objective 2.

The Council

- 18 Bristol City Council became a unitary authority in 1996. There are 70 Councillors representing 35 wards, elected annually. There has been no overall political control since 2003, resulting in either shared or minority administrations. The current balance is 32 Liberal Democrats, 27 Labour and 11 Conservatives, with the Cabinet drawn from the Liberal Democratic Group. All key decisions are taken by the Cabinet as a whole.

- 19 The Council employs 18,000 staff, and following recent restructuring they work in seven departments. A Chief Executive post was approved in 2003 after the 2002 CPA. This followed a period of four years without a Chief Executive. In April 2006 the Council plans to establish two new departments: Children's Services, encompassing elements of Education and Lifelong Learning and Children's Social Services, with the current director of Education and Lifelong Learning as director designate; and secondly, an Adult Social Services Department, which will be headed by the Director of Social Services and Health.
- 20 The Council's general fund budget for 2005/06 is £441 million. Bristol's Council tax increased by 4.9 per cent in 2005/06, falling relative to the national average from second highest in 1998 to 60th in 2005. The annual efficiency statement is on course to deliver the 2.5 per cent target. The capital programme for 2005/06 is £133 million. In addition the Council received Neighbourhood Renewal Funds (NRF) of £6 million, Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding of £6 million, and European funding of £4 million.
- 21 Scrutiny chairs are shared proportionately between the two opposition parties. The Overview and Scrutiny Management (OSM) Committee aligns scrutiny with the Corporate Plan priorities. In addition, there are seven Scrutiny Commissions; and three time-limited Select Committees: staff health and welfare, sustaining voluntary organisations, and property assets.
- 22 The Council is active regionally and within the city. For example, it works with regional institutions to develop and deliver the South West Sustainable Communities Plan, and at the sub-regional level, to establish and develop the leadership and strategic capacity of the West of England Partnership (WoEP). The LSP is called the Bristol Partnership, which is chaired by the Leader of the Council and has 30 members drawn from business, voluntary and community sector and public agencies. It is responsible among other things for the delivery of NRF to achieve regeneration objectives.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 23 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and partners have clear and challenging ambitions that encompass city-wide, regional and national aspirations, and have begun to explore the city's potential for an international role. Partners see the council as giving strong community leadership underpinned by innovative and extensive community engagement mechanisms, and recognise difficult decisions being taken by the council to drive ambitions and improve the needs of all of the city's communities.
- 24 These aims have been agreed with the LSP and there is strong alignment between the corporate plan and community strategy, which was updated in 2005. The shared aims of the corporate plan and community strategy are:
- a city that realises its full potential and exerts influence appropriate to its status at the regional, national and European level;
 - a modern, cosmopolitan, ambitious city at the heart of a prosperous and confident area that is the gateway to the South West;
 - a diverse and accessible city made up of vibrant and balanced communities where everyone is valued and can thrive economically, culturally and socially;
 - a safe city that promotes health, learning and sustainable development; and
 - and a city where no-one is disadvantaged.
- 25 The longer term vision for the sub-region that includes Bristol is well set out in Vision 2026 and the council has played a leading role in clarifying the vision and bringing forward plans for action, a view supported by Government Office of the South West (GOSW). The Council is also a member of the national Core Cities Group, which is exploring issues of common application. The Council is also developing its international role, and has just hosted the European Union Ministerial meeting on Sustainable Development. The Council's engagement in these areas has enabled it to produce a co-ordinated, strategic vision of what needs to be achieved for Bristol and the South West region. This vision is underpinned by ambitious targets for its work in most areas.
- 26 Ambitions are supported by local people who are engaged well through extensive and inclusive consultation. The Council consults well, winning the European e-Democracy Initiatives award 2005. There is a well-established Corporate Consultation Strategy and Compact and a range of standing consultation mechanisms: the Bristol Citizen's Panel and Quality of Life surveys; Fair Comment; and regular employee surveys. These inform the council's clear understanding of local needs. Its corporate approach to equalities and diversity is strong and steers community consultation.

Although a balanced Council, the corporate plan has the backing of all political parties and managers were able to identify with its aims. The clarity of vision and purpose shown by the Council and its partners for developing Bristol provides a strong basis on which to improve services.

- 27** The Council has a clear vision for most if not all of its aims. It takes a balanced approach to regeneration, and for example, aims to improve areas like St. Pauls by tackling economic, social, educational and environmental issues as well as ensuring the correct levels of policing and intervention. The Council also has well grounded aims for improving health. The legacy of the tobacco industry means that the prevalence of smoking in some areas is very high and is an important contributory cause to inequalities in health in the city. Through the five-year Smoke Free Bristol initiative the Council is aiming appropriately to work towards smoke-free internal public spaces as well as working in targeted areas of the city to reduce smoking. On the other hand, the Council's approach to older people is developing only incrementally. Older people are well-consulted on what needs to be improved but the current focus is mainly around people needing social care services. Also, the vision for older people is included within the aim for health and well-being and there is no integrated and strategic approach to the needs of all older people although an older people's strategy is currently being developed by the council, in conjunction with the Bristol partnership.
- 28** Councillors and officers are adopting challenging but appropriate leadership styles in a changing environment. Partners have commended a willingness for the current administration to take difficult decisions, such as closing swimming pools and Elderly Persons Homes to redirect resources. This is countering the council's traditional reputation for not seeing things through. The work within the Bristol Partnership on the Outcomes Framework is correctly aiming to realign spend on NRF and other regeneration monies. The Council's strong leadership is enhancing the likelihood of delivering its ambitions.

Prioritisation

- 29** The Council's approach to prioritisation is adequate. It is beginning to translate ambitions into short and medium term resourced action plans though this has not been achieved in all departments. It is taking steps to build a shared understanding of the priorities amongst internal and external stakeholders of what are the targets for action. The Council is also able to move resources from lower to higher priorities and is able to maintain focus when dealing with the need to take difficult decisions.
- 30** The Council, with the Bristol Partnership, understands from thorough consultation what matters to local people and neighbourhoods. The Council has taken into account the needs of hard to reach groups and BME communities through using consultation mechanisms like an extension to the Citizens Panel; and Hear/Say workshops with young people. As a result it is well placed to decide what are and are not key priorities for improvement for local people.

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- 31** The refreshed corporate plan 2006-09 has five priorities:
- a thriving economy;
 - learning and achievement;
 - health and well-being in Bristol;
 - a high quality environment; and
 - balanced and sustainable communities.
- 32** The Council's priorities are understood and broadly supported by internal and external stakeholders. Councillors, managers and staff talked confidently about what are and are not priorities. There was understanding that a reprioritisation of resources was necessary although not consensus of what should happen. External partners also understood and broadly supported the Council's priorities.
- 33** The priorities are translated into strategies and action plans in some but not all cases. It does this well in the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) with specific targets on the City Centre Strategy, economy and safety, where it is clear what is planned and how it will be achieved. The Council is providing drive to clarify the roles and responsibilities of partners in delivering community strategy outcomes. The Council has introduced a measurement framework within the Bristol Partnership, and outcome targets are agreed by the full group, driven and measured by Delivery Groups and supported by an equalities action group and sustainable development advisory group. The Outcomes Framework is being introduced as a way of reviewing and reallocating future fund allocations. Some partners, especially voluntary and community organisations, are finding this an unsettling process, fearing cuts in their allocation, but the Council is holding firm in providing a robust process to review and reallocate scarce funds. There are some clear and agreed targets for improvement such as in the housing strategy, but this is less so in the Community Cohesion strategy so target setting is not comprehensive.
- 34** The Council has a robust strategy to deliver ambitions in most but not all cases. The Council's priority of a thriving economy with balanced and sustainable communities is reflected well in its approach to the harbourside and the city centre. It has led the redevelopment of the harbourside as a mixed use residential, cultural and business hub and is requiring affordable housing units as part of the development brief. Similarly, city centre improvements such as the expansion of the Broadmead shopping area reflect well the regional West of England partnership's vision for the sub-region well as the community strategy. The Council is dealing holistically with the consequences of deprivation by tackling low incomes, workless households, environmental degradation, drugs and crime, and a loss of confidence in the school system. This approach matches well the complexity of the needs of the area, and is well received by local black and minority ethnic groups. However the focus on older people is mainly around improving services to those needing social care services and does not take into account the full breadth of older people's needs.

- 35** The Council is actively breaking down departmentalism and promoting cross cutting work particularly on neighbourhood renewal and safer communities. Managers and staff are being involved through team briefings on how priorities are to be delivered and councillors and staff are confident about their contribution to deliver most priority improvements. This is less so in other areas, particularly educational achievement where corporate and cross departmental ownership is lacking. Consequently whilst the Council is better able to drive change in some areas important priority areas remain where progress is hampered due to a lack of corporate responsibility.
- 36** The Council is beginning to tackle the reprioritisation of resources from lower to higher priorities. The 2006/07 budget proposals reallocate significant levels of resources to priorities. There is a general presumption of base budgets being held at last year's cash levels. The headroom created from holding back increases through government and council tax funding is being reallocated to corporate priorities with c. £5 million being identified and used in this way. This includes £485,000 to strengthening school support and intervention, c. £1 million to improve waste collection and £150,000 towards homeless prevention. In addition, the Council is proposing that the medium term financial plan builds in capacity over the next three years to enable further movement from areas that are not priorities to those of higher priority. It is also able to take difficult political decisions to achieve higher priority objectives, for example, the closure of area housing offices to achieve joined up neighbourhood facilities, despite opposition in some quarters. The link between priorities and resources means that the Council is better placed to target spending in areas of most need.
- 37** The Council is now good at maintaining focus. For example, social services overspend reached £7 million last year. Previously this would have been a major distraction for the council and threatened spending plans elsewhere. However, robust action was taken, including a review of out-city placements, a reallocation of budgets and close review of spend to budget. The deficit has been closed and in doing this the Council was not diverted from other priority work.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 38 The Council's capacity to achieve its ambitions and priorities is adequate. The direction for the Council is being driven coherently by its leadership, and partners notice an increased drive from the corporate centre over the last two years. Councillors and staff work well together and there is a drive for value for money though not yet fully achieved. The council is taking steps to build capacity through partnerships.
- 39 The overall quality of Councillors and staff is good, with clarity about their respective roles and responsibilities for decision making. Relationships between Councillors and officers are positive, based on trust. Portfolio holder responsibilities have been reviewed with a greater focus on cross cutting areas and decision making is now a collective Cabinet responsibility, resulting in more effective decisions not based solely on departmental concerns.
- 40 Scrutiny is improving incrementally in challenging executive decisions and in contributing to service improvement. There are positive examples of scrutiny making positive impacts, such as on office rationalisation, though not all scrutiny processes have had the same impact. The Council, following an internal review recognises that improvements are necessary and is now using the results of the review to strengthen scrutiny's role. At this point however, Scrutiny has not effectively held the executive to account and activity is insufficiently outcome focussed.
- 41 The infrastructure to support effective decision-making is strong. The Council has a sound financial position, significant reserves maintained at an agreed and budgeted level and a balanced budget. The Council is good at attracting external funding such as £1.5 million for sport based activity over the past three years. The Council has a strong approach to managing risk with effective systems in place and clarity about the roles councillors and staff play in managing risks. There are risk registers at corporate, service and operational levels. The Council has protocols in place governing officer and councillor relationships and appropriate arrangements to ensure probity and propriety in the conduct of its business including a standards board and relevant codes of conduct and registers. The capacity of the council to support decision-making is enhanced through this strong infrastructure.

- 42 The Council is committed to securing value for money (VFM) but is not achieving this in some key priorities. The Council uses internal reviews and the annual budget process to focus on VFM, with targets for improving efficiency and for moving resources to priority areas. This approach is having mixed success with below average spending and high satisfaction on cleansing, low spending but low satisfaction and usage for leisure and culture and high spending with low attainment in education. The Council has only recently contained social services expenditure in line with budgets. The current budget proposals include fewer staff, reduced costs and resources moved to areas of higher priority. Good use of e-recruitment through the Council's website has reduced costs. Through its procurement activities the Council is on course to achieve savings of £3 million, for example through the Avon Procurement Forum work on stationery. The drive for value for money for local people is evident in some but not all services.
- 43 The Council's HR strategy does not address all operational and strategic matters well. It has a proper focus on sickness absence monitoring, recruitment and retention and increasing the diversity of the workforce. Strategies are in place to promote work life balance, Single Status, addressing diversity and maximising the retention of staff. But workforce planning only works well in some service areas and sickness absence although reducing is still high. Training and development of Councillors and staff is well-provided and departmental training plans are in place though not managed through a corporate framework and not all staff training is linked to the competencies staff require to deliver excellent services to residents. Discipline procedures are long and cumbersome. The HR strategy is not therefore making a full impact on developing Council staff.
- 44 The Council has a strong focus on improving access. Consultation takes into account the diversity of the population and is strong in engaging hard to reach groups such as in BME communities. Customers have good access to services provided through the Customer Service Centre (CSC) with high customer satisfaction. The CSC achieved Charter Mark in April 2005. The Council provides information to local people through a variety of means including the Council newspaper, an e-communications newsletter and information terminals in the city. Information is provided in different formats and translation to meet the needs of different communities. Methods of access fit customer needs well.
- 45 The Council's capacity is boosted by using IT resources to support delivery of its priorities. It has a clear vision for IT and for extending this within the community through a network of e- points and making good use of the website. This is well regarded and the Council's customer satisfaction survey show that over 80 per cent of customers rate e-enabled services as good or very good.
- 46 The council is not effectively managing all projects. It has robust project management processes and a significant number of staff have received project management training. But their expertise is not widely spread through council departments. This means that the Council does not have an embedded approach to ensuring that key projects are delivered on time and to cost.
- 47 The Council is taking steps to build capacity through partnerships. Its work with statutory partners such as health and the police has enabled different partners to lead on priorities with others playing a supporting role, reducing duplication.

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Health partners are leading on smoke-free Bristol and reducing delayed discharges from hospitals, which is making a positive impact and financial savings. The police are leading on dealing with crime in the night time economy with the council supporting this with street closures and a co-ordinated city centre licensing strategy, leading to reduced crime and less police resources required. The Council is successfully supporting private sector landlords to bring commercial properties back into use through area-based advice.

Performance management

- 48 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It has invested in improving its corporate performance management systems and processes and has made good recent progress. The Council is taking steps to introduce and embed a performance-driven culture but some inconsistencies remain. It has established arrangements to secure accountability and monitor performance with its key partners.
- 49 Councillors and managers are intervening to address weaknesses found through monitoring though this is not embedded within the whole organisation. The Leaders Performance Group meets monthly and challenges progress in a number of areas including individual projects as well as areas such as customer focus, productivity, education attainment, procurement. The basis of the challenge is the use of the Sparnet PI system which produces indicators for each area. Portfolio holders receive performance data monthly and meet with managers weekly and the council reports quarterly on performance information to scrutiny and cabinet. Portfolio holders are intervening to deal with low performance such as the value for money of a recycling project in Knowle West. Other positive examples of performance monitoring leading to service improvement are in the youth service, youth offending team and library services. However, in children's services there are inconsistencies in the quality of performance monitoring, and quality assurance is not securely embedded.
- 50 The Council has taken steps to learn from complaints. The corporate complaints monitoring has begun to highlight patterns of concern and guidance is provided for managers on identifying themes in complaints. This approach is not yet embedded in all services so complaints are not used systematically to drive performance improvement. Until recently, the Council reacted to external evaluations like inspection reports rather than having a proactive approach. This has limited the Council's ability to identify underperforming services and improve them or to recognise success.
- 51 The Council has strengthened the Bristol Partnership's performance management frameworks. The latest community strategy contains targets, action plans and monitoring procedures, driven by the Council. Performance management and monitoring arrangements within partnerships are well developed for the Safer Bristol partnership and the neighbourhood renewal projects, but less so with partners jointly providing services to children and young people. The Council has put a sound structure in place but cannot be sure that all objectives for partnership working are being delivered.

- 52** Internal monitoring systems are developing well and tackling poor performance. These include a performance database to track corporate and departmental performance, and comprehensive guidance and training for Councillors and managers on performance management. The Corporate Performance Management and Improvement Group (CPMIG), led by the Chief Executive, has begun targeting areas of underperformance and holding service managers to account for the performance of their services. The CPMIG process is finding and rectifying instances of poor contractor monitoring and the failure to measure performance against standards. Monitoring is highlighting that the performance management system is not fully embedded.
- 53** The use of benchmarking is developing. The Council uses information to understand its performance against other local authorities, especially against the Core Cities group, and to disaggregate the information to explore key success factors and barriers to progress. There are a number of examples where it has visited other Councils to look at good practice. The Council however does not consistently review what the ingredients of relevant successes and failures are and share this across services. As a result it is not making full use of learning from other organisations on what actions and approaches result in improved services.
- 54** Individual performance management is extensive though not universal. Between 72 per cent and 96 per cent of staff receive appraisals according to the department and the council is currently working to achieve 100 per cent coverage this year. The Council plans to strengthen performance appraisal for directors from April 2006 and the Chief Executive already uses PI data from Sparnet in the regular structured discussions with directors; this emphasises the integral part that performance needs to take at a strategic level. The Leader now also uses Sparnet PI data in meetings with executive members, focussing on low performing areas. On the other hand, competency standards derived from corporate priorities that are used below manager level exist only in some parts of the Council. This means that some key areas of training need may not be effectively targeted or aligned with corporate priorities.
- 55** Connections between service planning, financial management and corporate planning are improving but they are not fully integrated. There are corporate guidelines on business and service planning in place. Action planning is variable with some plans not having clear milestones, timelines and targeted outcomes. Service standards are not fully developed, vary in quality and are not consistently monitored or communicated to service users. Service reviews and post project implementation reviews involving staff are limited and vary from directorate to directorate. The Council is therefore missing the opportunity to develop services as a result of these mechanisms.

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- 56** Financial management is developing appropriately. Corporate financial discipline and budget management and control processes work adequately. The necessary corrective action is being taken to deal with projected overspends in children services for 2005/06, as happened with the £7 million overspend in adult social services. Work is progressing on the medium term financial strategy to map resource plans against planned and forecast service needs and is a necessary step.

What has been achieved?

- 57** Overall, the Council's performance in achieving outcomes is adequate. The picture of achievement against local and national priorities is a mixed one. It is successful in regeneration, community cohesion and making Bristol safer for its citizens but educational achievement is inadequate. The Council has a good understanding of what needs to be better and is busy and active with some good local initiatives in a number of areas but it cannot always demonstrate a strategic approach to some issues, nor clear outcomes.
- 58** The Council's five corporate priorities are aimed at improving the infrastructure, educational attainment as well as the health and economic well-being of the town and are based on an understanding of local need and political priorities. Its priorities of neighbourhood renewal and within the Safer Bristol partnership are multi-dimensional, well connected and achieving well in some areas. The cross-sector sharing of problems and solutions is building capacity and improving quality.
- 59** The Council performs well in regenerating poorer areas, dealing with diversity in a positive and partnering way, and attracting investment and wealth, resulting in growing employment. Through local initiatives such as in St.Pauls, the city centre and the harbourside it is successfully strengthening communities. It is strong also in dealing with some aspects of crime, through the Safer Bristol partnership, with particular hotspots in drug dealing and use and tackling anti-social behaviour. A multi-agency approach has achieved high numbers of drug users diverted into treatment programmes and a reduction in youth crime.
- 60** Achievement is not universal. Recycling performance is in the worst 25 per cent of Councils. The Council's approach to the older people agenda is mainly delivered from a care perspective though with some examples of cross-sector thinking. The health agenda prioritises reducing smoking and teenage pregnancies though can only point to limited success, unlike increasing physical exercise where it has had success. It is successful in tackling drugs and anti-social behaviour but violent and sexual crimes remain high and are increasing.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 61** The Council is effective in promoting the economy of the city, and of the wider sub-region. It is a strong leader in the sub region and recognises that continued successful economic growth in the city requires consideration of issues that extend beyond its own administrative boundaries, for example, to address the transport infrastructure. It is working well with other local councils and businesses to this effect.

- 62 The Council has succeeded in attracting investment and wealth, resulting in growing employment across a range of sectors including small businesses and larger firms. Examples include 'Bristol At Work' a scheme to help over 450 unemployed people take advantage of economic growth in construction and retail jobs. However, inward investment is also causing pressure on house prices and on traffic congestion.
- 63 The Council is performing well on housing affordability. Completion of affordable housing is increasing partly by achieving high densities of building on brownfield land. The Council has an appropriate strategy to meet the Decent Homes Standard for both Council stock and for vulnerable residents living in the private sector and is on target to achieve its aims for the number of homes made decent by 2010.
- 64 The Council is performing well on reducing the proportion of waste going to landfill, but is not achieving its recycling target and although recycling rates are improving this is from a very low base. The Council is effectively addressing environmental issues with the wider community. It promotes work on green issues through the development of Create, an environmental centre, which aims to illustrate best practice in the use of technology and the more efficient use of natural resources. River quality is improving following work with utilities companies over the last decade but there are significant problems with air quality in the city centre, particularly along main transport routes. The climate change strategy addresses both the Council's own contribution to minimising climate change, and the wider issue as it affects the city.
- 65 The Council has a robust long-term strategy in its local transport plan (LTP) but short and medium-term opportunities for action are being missed. The Council has built on the LTP through the more recent joint local transport plan. This sets out a coherent approach to transport for the next five to ten years. The local transport plan focuses on long term solutions, but the Council has only recently started to focus on short and medium term improvements which do not rely on major funding bids. These include improving the bus service through working with the bus operator to reduce bus breakdowns and improve punctuality. Accessibility of buses is not adequate and the roll-out of raised pavements is slow. An employer travel plan award scheme has delivered a reduction in car travel for those employers by an average of 7 per cent. The first high quality showcase bus route showed a 12 per cent increase in usage in the first year and rail usage went up by 26 per cent through working with the local Community Rail Partnership. Park and Ride sites have shown continuous growth in usage with the latest site showing 28 per cent increased usage in the past year. Current traffic management developments include the installation of new measures to monitor congestion, monthly meetings with the bus company to monitor performance and problem solve, bus lane enforcement and weekly traffic reports and events warnings to operators and public, available on the website. These are appropriate initiatives to improve congestion in the short term. Approaches on travel and transport are therefore of variable quality.

Safer and stronger communities

- 66 The Council makes a positive contribution to successful outcomes in reducing most crime and the fear of crime through effective partnership working.
- 67 The crime and disorder strategy is comprehensive and links well to other strategies such as the community strategy and neighbourhood renewal strategy. Partnership working is inclusive and effective with some examples of innovation including work with the Primary Care Trust to assess the impact of crime on health. The graffiti partnership with Transport police is effective in identifying and prosecuting offenders and a rapid response team for drug and sex related litter has helped inform police activity contributing to the closure of crack houses. Work to address crime and the fear of crime is mainstreamed within the Council through cross departmental links. There is effective working to support ex offenders with hostel provision. Domestic burglaries, robberies and theft from motor vehicles are all reducing though violent and sexual offences are increasing.
- 68 The Council's work with the police on anti-social behaviour is strong. A clear strategy was published by the Safer Bristol Partnership following an earlier Home Office pathfinder initiative. The Council partnership with the police to control anti-social behaviour at major venues is successful. It has a city centre licensing strategy implemented through a city centre crime team including the use of street closures to allow police containment. A family support project piloting use of demoted tenancies is having an impact. This uses community impact statements to check the success of its work. Of 19 problem families participating, it has 17 successes with a consequent 75 per cent reduction in their anti-social behaviour. The Home Office is promoting this project as a national example of good practice.
- 69 The Council, with partners, has made good progress in tackling the city's drug problem, but progress on developing a strategy for dealing with alcohol misuse has been slow. The Council is allocating substantial resources for drug treatment programmes. The number of problem drug users receiving treatment has increased, and arrangements for directing offenders into treatment are now working well. However, the supporting people programme does not fully meet the need for alcohol and drug users and there is not a balance between services focused on harm reduction and abstinence. Nominations and referral routes to drug and alcohol projects are not in place and links between treatment services and supported housing projects are not formalised. The needs of young users (under 18) for drug and alcohol support are not considered.
- 70 The Council is making slow progress in providing pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people. Although performance increased from 48 per cent in 2002/03 to 65 per cent in 2004/05, this compares to average performance of 95 per cent for all Councils in 2004/05.

- 71 There is good leadership and commitment for emergency planning underpinned by an active civil contingencies unit. The Council's emergency plans are well thought out and related to local need, with clear roles for key staff. The civil contingencies unit collaborates with partner agencies and neighbouring authorities in developing and testing plans. The Council works with city centre businesses to enable them to respond appropriately, and is promoting continuity planning to them.
- 72 The Council works well with partners to build cohesive communities. It worked successfully with the police to anticipate and alleviate tensions between specific racial groups. It promotes community cohesion across the city through holding events such as a refugee week, holocaust Memorial Day, black history month and a scheme where places of worship such as Sikh temples are opened to the public. However, these events are not consistently well publicised and this reduces their effectiveness.

Healthier communities

- 73 The Council is clear about its priorities for addressing health and is providing leadership to the health agenda, with some success. It is a priority in the corporate plan, there is an executive health member champion and the Council is leading the campaign to achieve a 'Smoke Free Bristol'.
- 74 The legacy of a tobacco factory in the city has resulted in very high levels of smoking within some families. The Council has identified smoking as the biggest contributor to ill health and has a joint strategy and five-year plan. Smoking quit rates show that the Council is having an early impact in reducing the incidence of smoking in neighbourhood renewal areas, though this is against a backdrop of slight increase in smoking across the city.
- 75 The Council works well with a wide range of partners to promote health improvement and to tackle other significant health issues through physical activity and healthy lifestyle schemes. GP referral schemes work well and the Council makes use of partnership facilities such as Bristol City Football Club to deliver these. These schemes have had a marked impact on patients' health with demonstrable weight and heart disease reductions.
- 76 There are other good examples of projects aimed at reducing health inequalities. These include a locally based health environment action group which has a market garden and works to encourage healthy eating among local residents, as well as a number of sports based projects. These address the need of a wide range of groups, from health walks for teenage mums to chair based exercise for older people. Work is targeted at vulnerable groups using effective engagement mechanisms. For example a scheme to work with the Asian community on Asian heart health used peer educators, and the Council engaged effectively with young women as part of the development of the swimming strategy, responding positively to their feedback.

- 77 Through its own research and data sharing networks the Council has a good picture of local health inequalities. However, despite some monitoring and evaluation of projects it does not currently have a comprehensive picture about whether the health of local communities is improving as a result of its activities.
- 78 The Council is engaging well with residents and landlords in private sector housing to reduce the number of vulnerable residents living in homes that do not meet the Decent Homes Standards. It is improving standards for home energy efficiency and is addressing fuel poverty. It has secured £360,000 from energy utility companies for energy efficiency works to Council homes and work is targeted at people likely to be fuel poor.

Older people

- 79 The Council and its partners do not have a comprehensive strategic approach to older people as citizens beyond health and social care.
- 80 The approach to older people is strong for those needing care but not holistic for the bulk of those deemed to be older. Older people are mentioned under the Health and Well-being priority and the Council has a nominated Councillor lead. The Community Strategy 2006 mentions that work is under way to produce an older people's strategy and Council managers have a task group that is seeking to co-ordinate all services for older people in a pilot geographical area to see whether such an approach makes a positive difference to older people. As yet however the Council does not have an agreed definition of older people and different departments define older people anywhere from 50-65 years. There is little evidence of approaches to building co-operation between the younger and older generations as a way of building community cohesion. As a result there is not a coherent approach to the needs of all older people.
- 81 The Council engages older people well. The Bristol Older Peoples Forum has a membership of more than 3000, and the Council consults it on broad issues, not just on care. Other consultation with older people is conducted via focus groups, individual interviews, the citizen's panel and press adverts. The Council has responded to the results of consultation well, through improvements to buses through lowering platforms, grab rails in community areas and increased crime prevention advice in the home.
- 82 The council, with its partners, has developed 150 out of a planned 600 Very Sheltered housing units based on the identified needs of older people. The units support community involvement and combat social isolation, and provide a range of facilities to cater for leisure, health, fitness and social activities. Action plans are in place for the remaining 450 housing units to be delivered. Services meet a range of needs such as the aspirations of older Chinese people, with one scheme incorporating feng shui principle in its design, and has interpreter services available. The Council has worked successfully with health partners on delayed discharges. Improved assessments have enabled many older people to return home. As a result, delayed transfers have dropped dramatically - from an average of 120, to 40.

- 83 However, this comes at a time when the number of older people being helped to live at home had dropped from above the top 25 per cent to below average. The recent Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) review of adult services in September 2005 found overall reduced performance, including high costs and increased time for assessments. Although there were some good improvements in some activities, only eight performance indicators improved while 12 reduced.

Children and young people

- 84 Bristol City Council and its partners achieve mostly adequate outcomes for children and young people in Bristol. Most children and young people are healthy and safe and those most at risk are adequately protected. However, standards achieved in education are much too low and inadequate.
- 85 Challenging ambitions to improve the life chances for children and young people have been set out by the local strategic partnership. Improving education and work skills for children and young people and improving health and well-being are key priorities in both the council's 2006-09 corporate plan and the community strategy.
- 86 Services to support children and young people are of mixed quality and are having uneven effects on improving outcomes for children and young people. Though many are effective, performance management arrangements are typically underdeveloped and the services thereby find it very difficult to demonstrate their impact.
- 87 Children most at risk from abuse are mostly well protected through satisfactory multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. However, the general quality of social care assessment and care planning is too variable and the experiences of children receiving these services vary widely across the city. Determined action to reduce the number of looked after children is starting to be effective, reflecting moves towards a more preventative approach towards young people at the edge of care. Attempts to commission and re-balance services to reflect this shift are nonetheless at an early stage. The incidence of bullying within schools is generally low and is monitored satisfactorily.
- 88 Although helping children and young people to enjoy and achieve is a high priority for Bristol, the efforts of the council and its partners have had little impact. Early years provision is of good quality, but by the age of 16 educational standards are poor. The proportion of young people gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C is low. Many children enjoy school, but attendance levels are poor. Exclusions from school, especially for a fixed period, are high and include a high proportion of children and young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make relatively satisfactory progress. There remains a high number of schools with serious weaknesses or in need of special measures.

- 89 There is good support to help children and young people to take personal responsibility and to contribute to their communities. Opportunities for children and young people to be involved in decision making on issues which affect them are good. Good multi-agency partnerships are in place and effectively address behaviour issues through school-based projects and personalised support programmes. Action taken through the Youth Inclusion Programmes and Youth Inclusion Support Panels is also effective in addressing anti-social behaviour.
- 90 Despite the weaknesses in education up to the age of 16, opportunities for young people to prepare for working life are adequate. The new 14–19 strategy provides a detailed framework for development. Progress has been made in addressing some long standing weaknesses and compared to similar cities, a high and increasing proportion of 16–19 year olds engages in education, employment and training. There remains, however, a significant core group of young people with low expectations about what education, training and employment can offer. Success and retention rates in local colleges are generally above the national benchmark, but in school sixth forms, achievement remains well below average. Participation in work-based learning is increasing, but patterns vary considerably across the city. The shortage of affordable housing affects almost all young people and those with complex needs face particular difficulties in finding a decent place to live.

Appendix 1 - Framework for corporate assessment

- 91** This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 92** The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
- key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 93** The assessment for Bristol City Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 7 December 2005 to 20 January 2006.
- 94** 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 improvement planning by the Council.