

Environment - Planning Services Inspection

St Albans City and District Council

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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 (KLOEs) 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

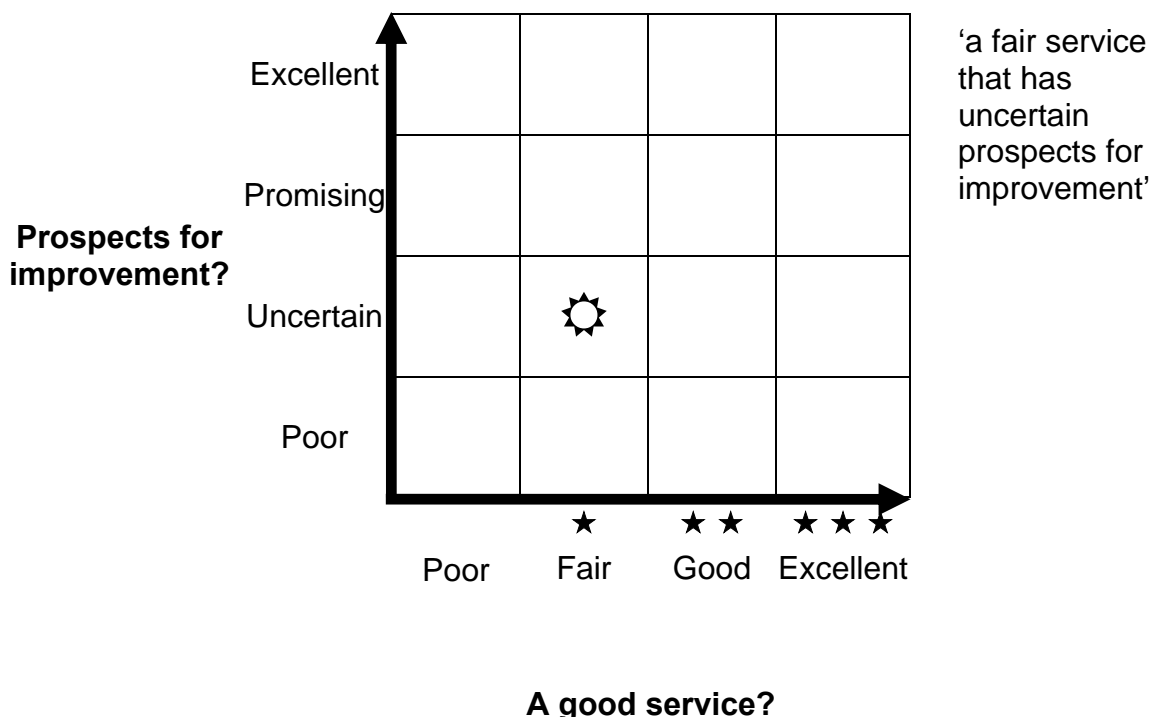
- 1 Planning services at St Albans District Council are 'fair' with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 Citizens and service users are not yet at the heart of service design and delivery. There are only limited examples to show how the views of the public are used to shape the planning service. Human rights are being adequately addressed but the service cannot prove whether the service is being delivered equitably across all community groups. A robust understanding of customer needs is not yet driving the service to help it improve.
- 3 In some areas the service is actively engaging with service users. There is a proactive approach taken to pre-application discussions and the service operates a development team approach involving other services and external bodies to help developers better understand what is required by the service and others before the submission of a formal planning application.
- 4 Customer experience of the service is variable and customer satisfaction in comparison to other councils is weak. Service users and external stakeholders are happy with the improvements to the planning services website and the MORI survey in 2005 shows the public consider the quality of the environment is improving. However, the service receives a high level of complaints and public satisfaction while improving, remains among the worst 25 per cent of councils.
- 5 The existing policy framework for the district is out-of-date. The adopted local plan runs to 2001 and does not reflect current national and regional planning priorities. The local plan review was abandoned by the Council, in part due to external causes. The service has successfully attempted to mitigate against the age of the local plan in some areas. For example, through producing supplementary planning guidance such as affordable housing and revised parking standards to reflect the government's current agenda on sustainable development and key worker and affordable housing. The council as a result is now achieving 46 per cent affordable and key worker housing on major sites.
- 6 The planning service is achieving some high quality development on the ground and is delivering some notable environmental improvement schemes. For example, the Vintry gardens enhancement scheme won a top Civic Society design award.
- 7 There is a wide range of planning information and guidance available to the public to help them understand and engage effectively with the planning service. For example, a published enforcement policy including enforcement priorities, how to respond to a planning application, a guide for third parties to planning appeals and design and other specialist planning advice.
- 8 Some aspects of service access are notable. For example, the planning service has had Saturday opening for several years and the website is well developed. In some areas the service has adapted service delivery to accommodate the needs of the public.

- 9 The service has a good range of expertise available within the service to deal with public queries in-house. For example, the service is the only Hertfordshire district to have a conservation architect and its own archaeologist, reflecting the wealth of archaeological and historic heritage in the district.
- 10 Some aspects of the service are seen by users as working well. There is a well established developer's forum which is valued by its members both as an opportunity to learn about the plans of the service and as a focus to bring issues to the attention of the service which are acted upon.
- 11 There is a wealth of technical guidance available to the public such as development briefs for all major sites and design guidance including specialist information relating to historic buildings.
- 12 The service has been successful in protecting sensitive environments through measures such as local listing of buildings in the district which are important historically in a local context in conjunction with the county council and defending the Greenbelt from inappropriate development.
- 13 The planning service has a mixed performance in achieving wider corporate aims and national planning objectives. For example, it has achieved high levels of affordable housing and is successfully protecting the greenbelt; however, it has had limited impact on designing out crime and economic regeneration.
- 14 The planning service is not managing value for money effectively. Planning services are low cost, overall performance is mixed, and public satisfaction is low. However, the service is not able to prove that it is providing value for money due to a lack of information about unit costs, inadequate benchmarking and analysis of performance trends.
- 15 Senior management, councillors and service managers have the will and desire to improve, but recognise there is still some way to go to achieve service excellence. For example, clarifying and delivering the service's overall contribution to corporate objectives.
- 16 The service's improvement track record is good in part, although its improvement focus has been too narrow. For example, it has improved the electronic capability of the service and the speed in which it determines planning applications. However, several fundamental issues have not been resolved such as improving cross-departmental working, customer focus, and managing value for money.
- 17 Performance management arrangements are improving but are under-developed and not embedded. For example, learning from complaints and customer contacts is weak; little use is made of benchmarking and notable practice; and equity of service delivery is not measured.
- 18 Short term plans for improvement are supported by adequate financial arrangements but the service has not fully developed plans to sustain improvement. There is no planning delivery grant exit strategy or resourcing plan to deliver and sustain the local development framework as the driving force to delivering corporate priorities on the ground. Some issues to secure a stable and experienced workforce are not resolved.

Scoring the service

- 19 We have assessed St Albans City and District Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has uncertain 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

- 20 The service is a fair, one-star service due to the following reasons.
- It is adding value to the quality of development on the ground.
 - It is delivering a mixed but generally above median performance against Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPs).
 - The service is adequately addressing human rights.
 - There is a wide range of expertise and technical guidance available to the public.

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.

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- Some aspects of service access are notable, for example, Saturday opening for planning enquires over a long period of time and well developed electronic service delivery.
- There is a well established developer's forum enabling participants to learn about the plans of the service and to bring issues to the attention of the service which are acted upon.
- The service has attempted to mitigate against the age of the local plan through producing supplementary planning guidance.
- There is a proactive approach taken to pre-application discussions and the service operates a development team approach involving other services and external bodies to help developers better understand what is required by the service and others before the submission of a formal planning application.
- The service has been successful in protecting sensitive environments through measures such as local listing of buildings and defending the Greenbelt from inappropriate development.

However:

- citizens and service users are not yet at the heart of service design and delivery;
- full customer and community engagement is not embedded;
- customer experience of the service is variable and customer satisfaction in comparison to other councils is weak;
- actions to ensure the equality of service delivery are inadequate;
- the existing planning policy framework for the district is out-of-date. The adopted local plan is the oldest and the least up-to-date in the region and policies run to 2001 meaning that much of the plan is out of step with the modern national and regional planning priorities for example, designing out crime and the Council's corporate plan;
- the planning service has a mixed performance in achieving wider corporate aims and national planning objectives;
- the over-focus on improving the speed in which planning decisions is made has impacted negatively on other areas the service is trying to achieve; and
- the Council has not embedded a systematic approach to the delivery of wider corporate and national aims for the planning service.

21 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.

- There is a will and desire to improve expressed by senior managers, service managers and councillors but a recognition that there is still some way to go to achieve service excellence.

- There is doubt about delivery of some key areas to service improvement, for example the Planning Delivery Grant exit strategy, existing capacity to deliver the Local Development Framework, ensuring a stable and experienced workforce to sustain service improvement and embed change.
- For some key areas of improvement it is too early to see the full impact. For example, business process re-engineering has been initiated but not yet completed and it is too early to judge the impact of this on the efficiency of the planning service.
- The service improvement planning has been too narrowly focused. For example it is not geared towards delivering an overall vision of 'excellence' or containing robust plans for delivering efficiency targets or value for money.
- The service does not have a track record of improving value for money.
- Corporate and service performance management arrangements are improving but are under developed and not embedded.
- Benchmarking and notable practice is not used consistently or effectively in all service areas to drive service improvement.
- Short-term plans for improvement are supported by adequate financial arrangements but the service has not fully developed plans to sustain improvement.

However:

- track record in improvement is good in part, for example, significant improvement has been made in key targeted areas such as improving the electronic delivery of the service, the level of decisions made by officers and the speed in which planning decisions are made in line with government expectations; and
- national planning service performance indicators, except public satisfaction have seen significant improvement overtime.

Recommendations

- 22 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 the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Deliver the local development framework as a corporate priority by:

- producing a medium term resourcing plan (by August 2006) to ensure adequate resources, priority and contingency planning to support the delivery and continual future review of the local development framework;*
- creating clear, vision driven links between the corporate plan, emerging community plan, other corporate strategies and the local development framework; and*
- ensuring the service works systematically with other Council services and partnerships to develop and deliver the local development framework.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an up-to-date planning policy framework to determine planning applications against;
- a framework to deliver wider corporate objectives that have land use implications for the district and local people and that better reflects national planning objectives; and
- greater certainty that the local development framework will be produced in expected timescales.

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

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Develop the relationship between service delivery and the delivery of wider corporate objectives by:

- *re-assessing the role of planning in the delivery of the Council's aims to 'cherish and promote the district's heritage, arts and culture', 'safeguard the environment' and 'ensure the district is a desirable place to live and work';*
- *reviewing service plans and implementing staff appraisals to reflect service and staff contributions to delivering corporate aims and priorities; and*
- *setting up and carrying out a departmental workforce plan, in line with the corporate workforce plan to ensure staff stability in the service and that staff are developed to meet the future needs of the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improved service focus on what the Council is trying to achieve for local people and the contribution made by the service to those aims; and
- improved service efficiency and ability to sustain service improvements.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve the customer focus of the service through placing the needs of the public and service users at the heart of service delivery by:

- *analysing, learning and implementing change arising from service contact with the public, including complaints, in a systematic way to continually improve;*
- *reviewing and updating of the one-stop shop customer service centre so appropriate information is gathered to help the service improve in a measured way;*
- *reviewing service delivery and documentation to ensure specific groups of citizens are not disadvantaged;*
- *ensuring frontline staff are sufficiently involved in developing the service; and*
- *reviewing charters, other service documentation and communication arrangements to ensure the public have enough knowledge to engage effectively with the service and help shape service design and delivery.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service that meets the needs of all local people; and
- a service that continually improves through effective engagement with the public.

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

Recommendation

R4 Focus the performance management of the service to deliver its vision of 'excellence' by:

- *developing SMART³ local indicators to measure what matters to service users and other stakeholders and to track service contribution to corporate priorities;*
- *fixing a baseline of the value for money the service provides which will include identifying the true costs of the planning service and comparing this and service performance with excelling councils;*
- *tracking, analysing and reporting trends in performance measures to comprehensively gauge the extent of service improvement and success of service policies and guidance;*
- *ensuring surveys; analysis of contact with the public and stakeholders; and any use of external quality standards, are geared to improving service delivery;*
- *undertaking an externally facilitated business process re-engineering of the service;*
- *using findings arising from the business process re-engineering to:*
 - *inform a strategic review of the planning delivery grant including the production of a robust exit strategy;*
 - *ensure that work processes are efficient and deliver the service's vision for 'excellence';*
 - *assess the future information technology needs and to further shape the electronic delivery of the service; and*
- *reviewing the service improvement plan for 2007-2010 to ensure that proper priorities are set and account taken of the actions of all the recommendations above.*

³ SMART means, Specific, Measurable, Attributable, Realistic and Time based

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service that meets the needs of local people;
- improved value for money from the service; and
- more precise targeting and resourcing of priorities and improvement work.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 23** St Albans City and District Council lies within the eastern region of England in the county of Hertfordshire. The population of 132,200⁴ lives in 55,327 households. The population is growing faster than the regional average and has a lower than average elderly population. Ethnic minority communities make up 6.9 per cent of the population. The main settlements are the cathedral city of St Albans and Harpenden. Outside these settlements, the majority of the district and the villages are protected from inappropriate new development by designated Greenbelt.
- 24** More than half (51 per cent) of the St Albans' resident workforce commute out of the district for work and 42 per cent of local jobs are taken by people commuting in. Unemployment is low in comparison to the rest of the region and the country, 0.9 per cent in the district compared to 1.9 per cent in the rest of the east of England and 2 per cent in England. Average house prices are a third higher than the region and nationally at £302,786 in 2005.
- 25** Deprivation is also low in comparison to the rest of the country. Currently the district is ranked at 298 (354 is the least deprived). However, local unemployment has increased by 38 per cent over the past two years while it has fallen nationally. There has been a significant loss in industrial and commercial floorspace in St Albans which has in part been compensated by an increase in retail and office accommodation but there still a shortage of office space.
- 26** The district is under pressure for growth due to its strategic location in relation to main transport routes and its proximity to London. For example, a number of strategic transport routes pass through the district including the M1/M10 to the midlands and the north of England; the M25 and the A414 running east to west; the mainline railway to St Pancras and the 'Thamesline link' from Bedford through to London and Brighton. The A1 (M) and the Kings Cross to Edinburgh train line lie to the east of the district. Luton Airport is three miles from the edge of Harpenden. The district is only 20 miles from central London.

The Council

- 27** The Council comprises of 58 councillors. The business of the Council is governed by the largest group; the liberal democrats. A Cabinet structure has been adopted, with three Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

⁴ Office of National Statistics, 2004

- 28 The Council has an overall net budget of £15,823,000 for 2005/06 and employs 423 full time equivalent staff. The Council operates under three directorates: Community Services; Enterprise and Civic Environment and Corporate Services. Currently, the strategic director post for Enterprise and Civic Environment is vacant and the Community Services strategic director is acting as Interim Director for Enterprise and Development as well as his Community Services role. The strategic director for Corporate Services is also the head of paid services in the absence of a Chief Executive at the authority. A new Chief Executive has been appointed who is due to start later in the year.
- 29 The Council's aim is for '*historic St Albans District becoming Hertfordshire's premier community*'. The Council's vision is to '*preserve and enhance the distinctive character of St Albans city and district, making it an outstanding place to live, work and visit, where everyone enjoys a range of quality, efficient services, in a progressive, caring and environmentally concerned community.*'⁵
- 30 To do this the Council aims to:
- build a community that is open, fair and inclusive;
 - work in partnership for the health and well being of the community;
 - cherish and promote the district's heritage, arts and culture;
 - safeguard the environment; and
 - ensure the district is a desirable place in which to live and work.

The Council's planning service

- 31 The purpose of the inspection was to assess how good the service is now and the likelihood of improvement. The focus of the inspection was on planning policy, development control including enforcement and conservation and design; however it has not reviewed the building control function.
- 32 The inspection also considers how the planning service works with other services to achieve Council aims and delivers corporate and national objectives. It considers how the service is driven by the needs of the public and service users, whether the service is providing value for money, and if the service is delivering what it plans to do.
- 33 Development control performance has been weak over the last couple of years. It was designated as a 'planning standards authority' by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2003/04 for 'minor' and 'other' applications because it failed to meet the required standards for processing these types of applications. However, the speed of determining applications has improved significantly to a level that no longer requires this designation for 2006/07.

⁵ The vision and overall aims are in the corporate plan 2004/05, 2006-09 corporate plan and the 2005/06 Best Value Performance Plan.

- 34** The planning service, (inspected elements) has a gross budget of £1,129,900 in 2005/06 and employs 30 full time equivalent staff excluding support staff. The planning function is supported by three area sub-committees and a planning referrals committee. The Council receives around 2,500 planning applications a year and around 800 planning enforcement enquiries.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 35 The Council produced its first corporate plan in 2004/05 setting out the corporate direction for the district. Prior to this the Council's vision was included in the best value performance plan.
- 36 The 2004/05 Corporate Plan identifies the production of the local development framework as a priority action under the aim of 'To safeguard our environment' and the provision of affordable housing at a number of sites, developing leisure facilities and preserving parks and green spaces are identified as key priorities under 'to ensure the district is a desirable place in which to live and work'.
- 37 The planning policy service priorities outlined in the service plan are largely linked to the preparation of the Local Development Framework⁶ (LDF) which will replace the adopted local plan. The adopted local plan is old, adopted in 1994. Attempts to review the adopted local plan have failed in part due to external factors. The service has attempted to mitigate the effects of this through adopting more recent supplementary planning guidance documents such as affordable housing, revised parking standards and guidance for dealing with residential extensions and replacement dwellings in the Greenbelt. However, the lack of a current, up to date planning policy framework to judge planning applications against makes the establishment of an LDF for the Council increasingly important.
- 38 The emerging LDF has identified appropriate key issues and policy areas for the district. For example, the local development scheme produced by the service provides for an appropriate balance between protecting vulnerable elements of the environment such as the Greenbelt and a focus on plans to support key areas for development. The Council plan to include adopted supplementary planning guidance such as the 'Residential Extensions and Replacement Dwellings' supplementary planning guidance adopted in May 2004, which aims to ensure a supply of smaller housing is maintained to meet local need.
- 39 Key priorities outlined in service plans for development control relate to continuing to improve the speed that planning applications are determined, improving the number of applications determined by officers in line with government expectations, achieving and maintaining external quality accreditation and exceeding government targets for the on-line provision of the planning service. Conservation and design priorities are focussed on completing conservation area statements and reviewing listed buildings in St Albans.

⁶ The local development framework is a suite of documents designed to replace the local plan, to provide planning policy and proposals which can be updated more quickly, with a focus on delivering wider corporate policy on the ground.

- 40 The adopted local plan policies outline what the planning service is seeking to achieve overall. Although out-of-date, they do address some key areas which the service is seeking to achieve are still of relevance in planning terms. For example:
- strong environmental protection policies;
 - affordable housing (though thresholds are lower than current government thinking);
 - shopping policy to encourage the protection of the vitality and viability of existing centres;
 - specific proposals are in place to create new open spaces in the district, extend leisure opportunities for the whole community and encourage dual use of facilities;
 - strong design advice with an emphasis on energy efficiency and the use of high density development and the promotion of a good mix of housing types; and
 - encouraging public transport and alternative transport to the car when considering new development.
- 41 However, the adopted local plan does not address some key areas it would be expected to. For example, regeneration and equality issues are not comprehensively addressed and there are no policies linked to designing out crime. The data and surveys it was based on such as the hotel survey are out-of-date.

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

Access, customer care and user and community focus

- 42 Citizens and service users are not yet at the heart of service design and delivery. Although there are a few examples where the views of the public have led to service changes such as the appointment system for applicants and agents, this is not routine to service delivery yet. For example, the developer's forum has not been used by the service to discuss how the Customer Service Centre (CSC) is working for them even though some are dissatisfied. The service has a wide variety of information available to the public, but it is not widely promoted or displayed at the new CSC (CSC - the Council's new one-stop shop that opened in April 2005).
- 43 The service is not systematically using local needs to inform service provision. For example, the planning service is not proactively seeking the views of the public to help shape service delivery and improvement. Equally, the CSC is only in the first phase of development and does not yet provide feedback from customers at a service level to help the service improve. The service is not robustly learning from complaints - this is recognised by the service.

- 44 Local people were not invited to put forward ideas for local buildings which they felt were important to retain when the service prepared its locally listed buildings register. As a result, the service is not able to prove how well it is meeting the needs of the public and service customers.
- 45 There are no clear, comprehensive service standards in place so that the public knows what to expect from the service. Only development control of the planning service elements inspected has a charter. Customers have not helped shape the charter, the service is not monitoring whether the standards that it has set are being met and the charter is not promoted apart from on the website. For example, a copy or a weblink reference is not sent out with application forms to potential applicants.
- 46 There is a wide range of planning information and guidance available to the public which is in plain English to help them understand and engage effectively with the planning service but it is under-promoted. Published guidance includes an enforcement policy including enforcement priorities, how to respond to a planning application, a guide for third parties to planning appeals and design and other specialist planning advice. However, neighbours who are consulted on planning applications are not routinely sent the leaflet on how to respond to planning applications when they are notified of an application or told where to find it on the website.
- 47 The service has made some good progress to broaden potential access to the service. For example, service users report that the website developments have improved access to planning services relatively recently through the Planning Portal⁷. Alongside other functions, this allows for the electronic submission and on-line tracking of planning applications and the viewing of planning policy documents and guidance leaflets. This has led to a maximum Pendleton⁸ score in the December 2005 survey. Customer access points are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant, and the service has had Saturday opening and a 24-hour hotline with planning committee information for a number of years, reflecting the needs of resident commuters.
- 48 The planning service has a good range of expertise available in-house to help the public. For example, it is the only district in Hertfordshire to have an in-house conservation architect available for local residents to seek detailed advice. In addition the planning service has an archaeologist. As a result the service is well placed to deal with a large variety of queries from the public relating to planning matters.
- 49 In some areas the service is actively engaging with service users. There is a proactive approach taken to pre-application discussions and the service operates a development team approach involving other services and external bodies to help developers better understand what is required by the service and others before the submission of a formal planning application.

⁷ The Planning Portal is the UK Government's planning resource. The site helps the public to learn about the planning system, apply for planning permission, find out about local development, appeal against a planning decision and research the latest government policy.

⁸ Pendleton Associates have been appointed by the ODPM to examine the ease of access of council planning websites for users. This has resulted in three major surveys which gives councils a maximum score of 21 points against set criteria. In 2003/04 the Council scored 9, however in the December 2005 survey, it scored 21.

Diversity

- 50 The service is not proactively checking to ensure that specific groups in the community are not disadvantaged through service design or delivery. For example, the service equalities action plan is weak and no quality impact statements have been prepared by the service. Consequently, the service does not know whether any groups within the community are being disadvantaged by service design or delivery.
- 51 The adopted planning policy framework for the service does not include sufficient reference to equal rights and diversity issues. For example, the adopted local plan does not cover this area with the exception of disabled parking.
- 52 The planning service is working with others to ensure compliance with the DDA such as the local disability access group and building control. For example, the Council has published a list on the website of 500 buildings in St Albans that are DDA compliant to help residents and visitors.
- 53 The planning service is applying the requirements of the Human Rights Act appropriately. All service reports consider human rights in their preparation and staff are trained appropriately. The service has received no challenges or claims relating to the Human Rights legislation. Legal and democratic services monitor case law and work closely with the planning service to ensure compliance with human rights issues for example on enforcement.
- 54 In some areas, the service is seeking to better engage with hard to reach groups. The Statement of Community Involvement, which outlines the service's approach to engaging the public in the LDF and planning applications has included mechanisms to reach a wider range of the public. For example, groups for who English is not a first language, youth and other community groups.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 55 The Council has tried to offset the effect of an old local plan through adopting supplementary planning guidance to help deliver priority Council aims such as affordable housing successfully. Affordable housing delivery has improved in the district to high levels. In 2004/05, 98 per cent of new housing used previously developed land and the Council delivered 46 per cent affordable housing on major housing estates against a relatively stretching target of 35 per cent. This represents extra 239 homes completed in 2004/05 including shared ownership, rented and key worker housing.
- 56 The service is achieving high density housing developments in line with government expectations. In 2004/05 in urban areas the Council has been achieving housing densities of 48 dwellings per hectare and has been achieving average densities of 47 dwellings per hectare since the mid 1970s.
- 57 The Council is meeting the housing requirements of the Hertfordshire County Structure Plan. The structure plan has a housing requirement of 315 dwellings per year and the Council has averaged an annual rate of 383 over the last three years.

- 58** The service has been achieving a good mix of housing in the district and has increased the supply of smaller units in line with the objectives of the adopted local plan. For example, at the former Territorial Army site in Camp Road St. Albans.
- 59** The service is using a wide range of initiatives to protect the historic environment successfully such as Article 4 directions⁹ in conservation areas, 'area of special control for advertisements'¹⁰ and local listing¹¹. A new archaeology strategy is in place to provide a framework for developers so that they are both aware of archaeological heritage in the district and what measures are required to record and protect archaeological sites. This will help developers evaluate the costs of development more effectively and ensure development is handled sensitively.
- 60** Conservation monitoring has shown that the service has been successful in protecting statutorily listed buildings from inappropriate development. For example, the Cumberland House scheme (a Grade 2* listed building) includes the restoring the listed building to its former use as a single dwelling, creation of a village doctors surgery, provision of a high quality, high density housing scheme and incorporates appropriate links to the main village. Design of the new buildings picks up and echoes design elements of the listed building. The development also makes a positive contribution to the conservation area through the provision of a public walled garden, echoing the design of what was attached to Cumberland House some years ago. Residential density is achieved at over 45 dwellings per hectare. The Verulamium Museum extension, in contrast, is a modern addition to the listed building which in its modernity, manages to echo traditional roman features very well.
- 61** The planning service has worked appropriately to deliver environmental enhancement. For example: the Sumpter Yard and Vintry Gardens environmental enhancement schemes which have improved the environment and disabled access for local people. The Vintry Gardens scheme won the top Civic Society award.
- 62** Local listing has proved successful in retaining buildings of local historic interest. For example, the council has only lost four out of 15 appeals over the last 20 years involving local listed buildings which are below the council average of lost appeals. Local listing has resulted in the retention of a number of important buildings from loss or inappropriate development such as Trevelyan House and outbuildings, Holywell Hill and the George Public House and outbuildings as well as many others.

⁹ Direction removing some or all permitted development rights, for example within a conservation area or curtilage of a listed building. Article 4 directions are issued by local planning authorities.

¹⁰ A designation that has to be confirmed by the Secretary of State to require special protection of an area on the grounds of amenity. The local planning authority has to consider at least every five years whether it should be revoked or modified. In this district, the council has protected the rural area from advertisements.

II Locally important buildings valued for their contribution to the streetscene or local historical importance but not meriting listed building status.

- 63 The Council has recognised the particular pressures on the greenbelt for housing and has been successful in mitigating this. For example, it has adopted supplementary planning guidance on 'residential extensions and replacement dwellings in the Greenbelt' to deal with the development pressure and to help maintain a supply of smaller housing to cater for the wider needs of the population. This has been successfully defended at appeal.
- 64 The planning service has been proactive in implementing its DDA requirements. For example, it runs a competition for commercial premises to find the best adapted building. In addition, the Council is leading by example, 87 per cent of Council buildings are now DDA compliant, putting the Council with the best performing councils. This has improved from 39 per cent in 2002/03.
- 65 The planning service is working hard to address the deficiencies of the adopted local plan. For example, it is proactively working to rationalise the Council's employment sites to ensure they are deliverable and based in sustainable locations. The planning service has engaged a consultant to prepare a study of its employment sites to ensure they meet the needs of the business community and the sustainable aims of the Council. It is actively working with other southern Hertfordshire districts to identify appropriate sites for the travelling community.
- 66 The service is working to improve the vitality and viability of St Albans shopping area but with mixed results. For example, work has commenced on improving the attractiveness, public transport and pedestrian environment of the main shopping street but the service has been less successful in bringing the cinema site proposal to fruition. This scheme also includes housing and a number of restaurants.
- 67 The service has started to deliver the local plan objective of more leisure facilities. For example, in the last three years it has preserved the historic parkland at the Napsbury Hospital housing site as open parkland with a management agreement and secured the provision of cricket pitch facilities and restoration, provision of two equipped children's play areas and one full-size and one junior football pitch at the same site. The service has also worked with leisure services to provide supplementary planning guidance to provide a more systematic approach for the future.
- 68 Planning Committees are working effectively. Planning committee members are informed and decisions are transparent. Interests were declared appropriately at the two planning committees attended and legal officers are routinely in attendance to ensure probity.

- 69 However, the enforcement function is not fully proactive in its approach. Although it has well developed and proactive conditions monitoring, there are service issues still to address. For example:
- although it is signed up to the Enforcement Concordat¹² and is working to a set of enforcement priorities, an annual report on the concordat has not been produced and the priorities are hard to find, as they are part of the Council's enforcement policy publication;
 - the legal constraints within which the enforcement function works are not well publicised;
 - enforcement is seen as mainly reactive by stakeholders;
 - investment in the service has been recent and the impact has yet to appear in improved service performance indicators; and
 - although conservation and building control work closely with enforcement, this is not fully integrated.
- 70 There has been mixed progress against the service's own improvement objectives outlined in paragraph 39 of this report. For example, the service has not achieved its ISO 900 environmental management system accreditation, and a review of alternative methods of service delivery has not been undertaken.
- 71 The existing adopted planning policy framework for determining planning applications is out-of-date. The adopted local plan was adopted in 1994 and is the oldest and least up-to-date in the region. The Council has abandoned the review of the local plan, partially due to external factors and does not plan to adopt the local development framework until May/June 2009. This has led to increasing appeals and challenge of the Council's planning decisions by the public.
- 72 The focus on planning speed performance and staff turnover has had some negative impact on service outcomes for the public. This is recognised by the service. For example:
- conservation and planning policy work have been deflected by development control for example, only 50 per cent of conservation areas have character statements in place;
 - the planned business process re-engineering to improve the efficiency of the service has not yet been undertaken;
 - there have been some inconsistencies in how development control advice gives weight to material considerations such as conservation issues;
 - planning obligations are not being delivered to task; and
 - planning decisions have too many conditions attached which are onerous for customers and the service.

¹² An agreement to abide by the principles, policy and procedures to ensure good enforcement practice by the local planning authority as set out in the concordat. The concordat was produced in conjunction with the local government association and government offices.

- 73 The service record in terms of securing community benefit through section 106 agreements¹³ is mixed. The service is achieving high levels of community benefit in some areas such as: over £7 million for sustainable transport related actions; £79,927 for library services; £1,339,169 for education facilities; and £121,808 for childcare and youth provision. However, the service is not achieving against a full range of corporate and national objectives. For example regeneration benefit has been limited and designing out crime has not been addressed. (There have been no developments in the district that have secured by design status).
- 74 Planning service protocols may not be having the impact on service delivery which they set out to have. For example, the service has adopted a new protocol with county highways, but still reports delays in issuing planning decisions because of delays in county highway responses to consultations such as on section 106 agreements.
- 75 The planning service has not been adequately engaged in shaping and delivering corporate priorities. The historical lack of service involvement, identified in the 2003 Planning Service Inspection report, has in part continued. For example, the service was not involved in the production of the Council's 2004/05 Corporate Plan, Local Agenda 21 Strategy, Sustainability Policy or the Crime and Disorder Strategy. This has affected the ability of the service to contribute to some local and national priorities such as improving air quality, energy efficiency and designing out crime. However, it has worked closely with some other departments to develop the affordable housing and green spaces supplementary planning guidance and to deliver affordable homes and improve leisure facilities.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 76 The planning service is not managing value for money effectively. Planning services are low cost, overall performance is mixed, and public satisfaction is low. The service is not able to prove the extent to which it is providing value for money due to a lack of information about unit costs, inadequate benchmarking and analysis of performance trends.
- 77 The planning service is not examining costs against performance effectively. Finance and performance information is not routinely considered together by planning committees or overview and scrutiny committee to ensure councillors consider value for money. The new corporate Procurement Strategy 2005-07 has yet to make a demonstrable impact on the service.
- 78 Accurate information on unit costs has not been used to decide priorities and strategically manage resources. The planning service is not aware of the financial implications of external factors on service costs such as the impact of high house prices in the area.

¹³ A legal agreement under section 106 of the 1990 Town & Country Planning Act. Section 106 agreements are legal agreements between a planning authority and a developer, or undertakings offered unilaterally by a developer, that ensure that certain extra works related to a development are undertaken such as providing community benefits on site such as play areas to serve the development or to mitigate the effects of the development on the local community infrastructure and services such as financial contributions to schools.

- 79** Service led value for money targets are not in place. There are no efficiency or economy targets identified at service level. Bids for planning service growth are not being linked to targeted improvements in service quality. The service is still working on identifying Gershon savings and this work is not yet well developed. The Council expects that savings will result from business process re-engineering but this has not started yet.
- 80** The planning service is not learning from others systematically to improve value for money. There is little evidence that the service has learned from high performing councils, service users or across service teams to help improve service quality, public satisfaction and efficiency. The service is not making robust service cost comparisons that show how well its costs are commensurate with the level of service delivery.
- 81** Some key decisions for improving the service have been undertaken, without a robust value for money appraisal. For example, the decision to move from four area planning committees to three did not involve the analysis of value for money, even though the decision resulted in the service saving £4,000 per year.
- 82** Satisfaction with the overall planning service is low and despite improving between 2000/01 and 2003/04 remains low in comparison to other councils – among the lowest 25 per cent of councils. A large percentage of the public believe things have got worse since 2001. The majority of councillors also think things have stayed the same or deteriorated.
- 83** As detailed in the second judgement, service performance against the national best value performance indicators in comparison to other councils is mixed.
- 84** Overall service costs remain low and there is some evidence of contingency planning in some areas. For example, retention of £100,000 planning delivery grant in 2004/05 to offset uncertainty of grant level for 2005/06.
- 85** The planning service has had some success in leveraging in external money to help improve the service. For example, it has been awarded The council has achieved £635,000 in 2005/06 and £304,609 in 2004/05 in planning delivery grant from the ODPM, lottery funding for environmental enhancement schemes such as Vintry Gardens and planning obligation money from developers to secure community benefit.
- 86** The planning service is extending its capacity in some areas through partnership working. For example, it is working closely with other southern Hertfordshire districts through employing consultants to develop sites for travellers and gypsies.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 87 Significant improvement has been made in key targeted areas.
- The Council has exceeded ODPM expectations as a standards authority, and has improved its performance in terms of the speed taken to determine planning applications to a level of the best performing authorities from a low base in just over two years. Latest unaudited data for 2005/06 shows the speed of determining planning applications has continued to improve, all national targets are now being met and current performance matches that of the top performing councils for 2004/05.¹⁴
 - Investment in web services has provided measurable improvement in service provision for the public. The planning service, through its investment in the 'Plans on the Web' project from 2003 has enabled the service to improve its Pendelton criteria score from 9 in 2003 to a maximum 21 points in December 2005 (initial findings).
 - The service has developed a useful tracking database available for key stakeholders to improve monitoring of planning obligations which is being tested.
 - The new scheme of delegation has significantly improved the number of applications determined by planning officers. Levels of delegation are now at or above 90 per cent.
 - The new customer service centre was created three months ahead of target.
- 88 Improvements against most BVPIs have been sustained over the past three years. For example:
- the planning service is performing at the level of the best English councils on housing development on previously developed land;
 - the Council achieved above average performance on the planning quality checklist, despite having an old adopted local plan;
 - planning speed indicators are operating at levels above government expectation for 'major' and 'other' applications;¹⁵ however, in 2004/05 only 'major' applications are above average in comparison to all councils; and
 - the Council's performance on appeals allowed by the Planning Inspectorate following refusal of the Council to grant planning permission, at 33 per cent is below average performance against other districts.

¹⁴ Eighty per cent of major applications are being determined in 13 weeks, minor applications are at 91 per cent and other applications are at 95 per cent against government targets of 60 per cent for major applications, 60 per cent for minor and 80 per cent for other applications respectively. (Unaudited 2005/06 data.)

¹⁵ The government expects 60 per cent of 'major' applications to be determined in 13 weeks, 65 per cent of 'minor' and 80 per cent of 'other' applications to be determined in 8 weeks. In 2004/05, St Albans City and District performance was 65 per cent, 62 per cent and 82 per cent respectively.

- 89 The planning service has been achieving high levels of planning delivery grant which is being spent to improve planning services. The Council has invested in improving staffing levels, improving information technology and research material from consultants.
- 90 The service has produced appropriate supplementary planning guidance over time to deal with particular local pressures for development and to help shape the development of major sites which are delivering appropriate outcomes. (There are a number of examples cited in the first judgement).
- 91 However, the targeted focus of improvement has hindered the pace of improvement in other areas, for example, business process re-engineering to improve efficiency has been initiated but not completed; progress on the local development framework has slipped by a few months; and some weaknesses and recommendations arising from the 2003 Planning Inspection have not been actioned or have not been actioned effectively such as investigating alternative service procurement options.
- 92 Track record in some other areas of service delivery is mixed. For example, the Council is still working to improve the tracking of section 106 agreements (due to be operational in the summer of 2006) to measure how the money is spent and there are still highways issues with the county to resolve. However, the provision of leisure facilities through section 106 agreements is improving and delivery of affordable housing has been improved.
- 93 The service is not yet learning systematically from the public and others so that service design and delivery meets people's needs. Customer surveys are leading to some service improvements in service delivery such as 'flagging' up applications for parish councillors and ward councillors, but complaints' learning has been weak and there is a lack of substantive impact arising from the Agents Forum.
- 94 The Council has not updated the local plan. The adopted local plan is the oldest and the least up-to-date in the region. This has hindered the Council's ability to deliver current local, regional and national planning objectives and means that the Council will have to wait until the local development framework documents are adopted to address this.
- 95 There is no demonstrable track record of achieving value for money by the planning service because of weaknesses in value for money activity in the service such as a lack of trend analysis on unit costs in comparison to other councils.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 96** The future long term vision for the planning service as an 'excellent' service is not yet supported by plans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. For example:
- the service as a whole has not fully developed a comprehensive picture of how to achieve 'excellence' , including benchmarked targets across all areas of service delivery;
 - there is acceptance by the service that the current improvement plan focus for the service has been too narrow due to a concentration on ODPM requirements;
 - there is a lack of clarity about what the planning service as a whole has been tasked to achieve under the corporate aims such as 'to cherish and promote our heritage, arts and culture' although this is seen by councillors and senior management as the main priority for the service; and
 - there is a lack of a fully developed approach to risk management, value for money focus and clear mapping to corporate priorities to help achieve 'excellence'.
- 97** Despite recent corporate investment in performance systems, effective service planning is not fully embedded. For example, three-year service planning in the Council is new for 2006/09 and the service's plan is still evolving. The existing 2005/06 service plan for the planning service does not provide a co-ordinated and comprehensive set of aims, objectives, priorities and measures reflecting corporate priorities or value for money considerations.
- 98** Effectiveness of engagement with other internal services is mixed. For example, the service has not been involved in the development or delivery of some key corporate strategy such as the Sustainability Policy. However, some areas have been more effective, for example joint working with planning policy and leisure on the green spaces strategy and housing on affordable housing is good.

- 99 Some performance management practices are improving such as developing medium term focus to service planning but there are still several weaknesses to be addressed. For example:
- some performance indicators have not improved, such as consultation response times on planning applications;
 - the planning service is not measuring equity of service delivery across the community;
 - monitoring service achievement against Council priorities through local performance indicators across the service is underdeveloped;
 - benchmarking is not routine across all service elements;
 - monitoring, handling and learning from service complaint is underdeveloped - this is recognised by the service;
 - service level learning from information obtained through the new customer service centre is underdeveloped; and
 - reporting on performance to planning committees and overview and scrutiny is insufficiently strategic in its approach. There is a lack of trend data, progress against targets, mapping against corporate priorities and cost considerations.
- 100 Mechanisms to allow staff to input effectively into planning improvements are not robust. For example, team meetings are not working fully effectively and are too hierarchical; monthly one to ones to oversee staff performance are not routinely taking place and the quality of staff appraisal is reported as varied.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 101 Senior management, councillors and service managers have the will and desire to improve, but also recognise there is still some way to go to achieve service excellence.
- 102 The Council has taken some effective action to improve staffing in the medium term and reduce staff turnover in the shorter term. It is investing in succession planning to develop new professional planners in-house and is sponsoring students at Oxford Brooks University which includes summer placements. It has also agreed market supplements for staff. Some placement students have returned to the workforce as full-time officers on graduation. Staff turnover is now below the average for the Council as a whole.
- 103 The Council's own investment in the planning service has led to some improved areas of service delivery. For example, extra staffing has led to more responsive enforcement action. IT investment has significantly improved the electronic capability of the planning service and associated user satisfaction.
- 104 The service is extending existing capacity through the use of consultants, sometimes in partnership with other councils and leveraging in external funding to improve historic buildings and the local environment. For example it is working jointly with other southern Hertfordshire districts to produce sustainability assessment for the new LDF. Heritage Lottery funding has been secured for environmental enhancement schemes.

30 Environment - Planning Services Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 105** The Council is working towards ensuring that the LDF is used effectively to deliver all corporate policy with land use implications. The importance of the LDF to corporate aims is recognised, and its role towards the delivery of corporate priorities is developing. Consultation on the Community Strategy and the LDF is now programmed to be undertaken together in May and June 2006. A series of presentations at the corporate management team have been undertaken including a joint presentation with those responsible for the community strategy review.
- 106** Some of the service's improvement plans are at an early stage and, so far, untested. For example, the business process re-engineering of the planning control service is not yet completed. The service has had approval for a new officer to improve Section 106 procedures and improve complaints handling. This is a key service recognised weakness and identified improvement priority but this post has yet to be advertised even though agreement for the post was made a year ago.
- 107** There is still some uncertainty about the capacity to deliver some key areas to service improvement.
- The LDF might not be delivered to plan: there has been some minor slippage in early LDF milestones; contingency planning is not fully developed to ensure delivery; currently longer term budget is in place to deliver and review development documents overtime; service managers are concerned about the capacity of the existing staff resource to deliver the LDF.
 - It is uncertain, how information technology and business process re-engineering will sustain service improvements when the planning delivery grant is no longer available to fund temporary posts.
 - A feasibility study on introducing an electronic document and a management and workflow system for the planning department (including building control) has been drafted but this is in its early stages. How far the work is driven by IT or by the needs emerging from a fundamental review of business processes is unclear.
 - Some additional work is required to ensure a stable and full complement of staff to maintain improvement. Job evaluation work is still in progress and agreed market supplements to staff have not yet been paid. The planned overview and scrutiny review of staff retention and recruitment issues has not yet taken place (although is imminent), and the timeliness of the recruitment process is slow.
 - Customer relationship management is being implemented to support e-enablement of services and improvements to customer service via the Customer Service Centre and Telephone Centre (subject to budget). This work seeks to automate efficiency savings emerging from a review and improvements to the way services work. However, the Council has not finalised how planning services will be integrated into this work and therefore it cannot be gauged yet how this project will fully impact on the planning service.

- The Council recognise the need for more proactive enforcement. It is in the process of considering re-structuring the Council's enforcement services to provide a cross-departmental enforcement service more responsive to public need and to provide better value for money. Planning enforcement is one of the services being considered for inclusion. However, plans are not well developed yet.