

Service Inspection Report

May 2006



Planning Service

Mid Devon 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.

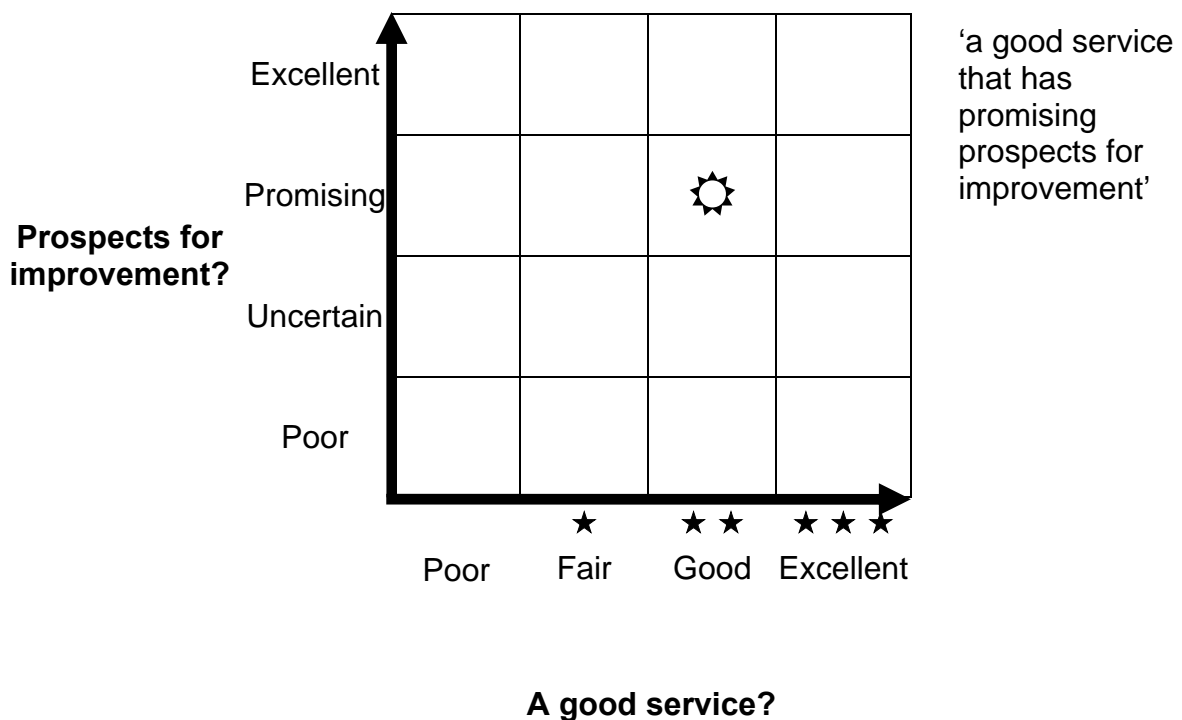
Summary

- 1 Mid Devon District Council provides a good planning service and there are promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Customers are satisfied with the services they receive and they get a responsive and helpful service. Most people can easily access the service by a variety of means including the website. The service seeks feedback from its customers and acts on it to make service improvements. Service users have information on the standards of service they can expect to receive for most parts of the service.
- 3 All categories of planning applications are dealt with quickly and performance on this exceeds national targets. The decisions the Council makes on planning applications are transparent. Local people have opportunities to have their say on development proposals. The service takes effective enforcement action on development that does not comply with planning regulations.
- 4 It engages and negotiates with applicants applying for planning permission to raise the quality of design in the early stages of a development proposal. It also secures developers contributions to provide benefits for the community such as providing affordable housing.
- 5 The Council has up-to-date and challenging planning policies that meet local, regional and national priorities and it delivers against them. It keeps this policy framework up-to-date and consults local people on these.
- 6 There is a strong record of significant improvement in the service. Over the last two years, fundamental changes to the way the service is managed has led to significant improvements, such as moving from being one of the worst performing councils in England on processing planning applications to one of the best.
- 7 This improved performance is leading to better value for money. Although costs are higher than average in comparison with others, so is performance. However, the service does not have a systematic approach to evaluating value for money and lacks an understanding of the relationship between spending and service performance.
- 8 The service manages performance and the workflow well. It has some well-developed future plans, including its service business improvement plan. Staff have a clear sense of purpose, morale is high and there is an openness to change. The Council has invested in new ICT systems to support service delivery and it will receive significantly more planning delivery grant, which it proposes to spend on planning services.
- 9 However, there are some areas at a corporate level within the Council that adversely affect the development of the planning service. There is slow progress on equalities and a lack of control over the way the Council develops its future plans and strategies. The Council does not have a strategic approach to communication and consultation that supports its interaction with the whole community. There are also significant financial pressures affecting the Council and it is unclear how this will affect the service in the future.

Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Mid Devon District Council as providing a 'good', two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

- 11 The service is a good, two-star service because:
- customers are satisfied with the services they receive;
 - people contacting the service receive a responsive and helpful service;
 - most people can easily access the service;
 - it seeks customer feedback and acts on it;
 - it deals with planning applications quickly;
 - it makes sound planning decisions that are transparent;
 - it takes effective action on development that does not comply with planning regulations;
 - it engages and negotiates with applicants applying for planning permission leading to raised quality of design and benefits for the community; and
 - it has challenging planning policies that meet local, regional and national priorities and delivers against them.
- 12 However:
- the approach to equalities is underdeveloped; and
 - the Council does not routinely test the value for money of the service or fully understand the relationship between the cost of the service and its performance.
- 13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- there has been a significant improvement in performance across all parts of the service and a strong track record of implementing change;
 - the service manages performance and change well and has some well developed future plans, including its service business improvement plan;
 - the Council has made a clear commitment to delivering a high quality planning service;
 - there is a positive relationship between councillors and staff in the service;
 - the service has improved its computer systems and has taken effective steps to help build its capacity;
 - staff have a clear sense of purpose, morale is high and there is an openness to change and drive for making further improvements; and
 - the Council has provided additional finance to support change and improvement in the service and it will receive significantly more planning delivery grant which it proposes to spend on planning services.

- 14 However, there are some areas at a corporate level within the Council that adversely affect the development of the planning service such as:
- a lack of corporate control over in the way the Council develops its future plans and strategies;
 - the lack of a strategic approach to communication and consultation that supports its interaction with the whole community; and
 - the Council is facing significant financial pressures and it is unclear how this will affect this service in the future.

Recommendations

- 15 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the service provided to local people particularly by:

- *ensuring that information about the service is clear, uses plain language and is available widely in appropriate alternative formats;*
- *developing its services to encompass equality and diversity issues;*
- *developing future plans for improving customer access; and*
- *regularly testing the service's value for money and the relationship between costs and performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better service provision and value for money for users and local people; and
- better 'fit' between the needs of local people and the service provided.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

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

Recommendation

R2 Strengthening the links between the planning service and the Council's wider corporate processes by:

- *linking risk management within the service to corporate strategic risk management; and*
- *co-ordinating the development of the service's future plans with those of the Council and its partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved links between services across the Council and with partners priorities; and
- to provide added value and greater efficiency from public communication and consultation exercises.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 16 Mid Devon District Council is in south west England. The population of the area is 72,400 people. The district is a predominantly rural area covering 365 square miles. It extends from the edges of Dartmoor in the south west, to Exmoor in the north east. The principal towns are Tiverton, Cullompton and Crediton.
- 17 There are major urban areas of Exeter and Taunton just beyond the southern and eastern boundaries of the district respectively. Major east to west lines of communication run through the district, including the M5, A361, A30 and the Great Western Mainline Railway. Outward commuting to Exeter is significant.
- 18 The environment is characterised by its rural landscape of hills and valleys. The district has a very low population density with small historic settlements. It has a high proportion of heritage buildings within its area; 2560 listed buildings, 50 conservation areas and 49 scheduled monuments. A small part of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) falls within the boundary of the district.
- 19 Compared to the national picture, there are a significantly higher proportion of people employed in agriculture and slightly more in manufacturing and construction. Significantly, the proportion of retail employment in Mid Devon has fallen from 91 per cent of the regional average to 78 per cent in the ten years to 2001. Unemployment is low at 1.1 per cent but average yearly earnings are also low. The national indices of multiple deprivation rank Mid Devon in the mid-range of councils at position 175 overall out of 354 districts. However, there are some pockets of deprivation, with six wards among the most deprived 25 per cent of wards nationally.
- 20 The district has a number of distinct communities. Around 2.4 per cent of the population describe themselves as 'other than white British', compared to 13 per cent nationally and 4.6 per cent in the south west. The overall population is growing faster than the regional and national average. There are some significant trends in the population with a higher proportion of people over 65 and this is predicted to grow significantly. The proportion of younger people in the population is reducing.
- 21 The district has a shortage of affordable housing for low and average income households. A housing needs survey in 2001 (updated in 2004) identifies a need for 353 new affordable dwellings each year. The modified Local Plan provides for an average of 65 new affordable homes per year on allocated sites. The recently revised Corporate Plan has set a target of providing 300 affordable homes over the next five years. The South West Regional Strategy has an objective of providing 4,300 new homes in Devon per year, of which, up to 50 per cent could be designated as affordable homes.

The Council

- 22** The political structure of the Council is comprised of 20 independent councillors, 13 Conservatives, 8 Liberal Democrats and 1 Green Party councillor. The Leader is an independent councillor but the independents are not grouped and no party has overall political control.
- 23** The Council operates the streamlined committee system of governance available to districts with smaller populations. The Council has two policy committees, Resources and Community Services and two overview and scrutiny committees overseeing the work of the policy committees and the Council as a whole. The Council also has a Licensing Committee and a Planning Committee that deals with both planning policy and deciding planning applications. Fifteen councillors are members of the Planning Committee and to complement this there is a planning working group.
- 24** There is a corporate management team made up of a Chief Executive, the Director of Corporate Services and the Director of Community Services. The Director of Community Services is responsible for a portfolio of service areas covering housing, environmental health, planning and operations. A head of service manages each of these services. The Council employs approximately 375 staff.
- 25** The Council delivers its main services from a new centralised office in Tiverton, which opened in 2004, and from area offices in Crediton and Cullompton. The Council also owns the Town Hall from where it conducts most of its Planning Committee meetings.
- 26** The Council's net revenue budget for the year 2005/06 is £9.9 million. The Council has recently become debt free and is planning to use the flexibility this brings to support provision of affordable housing up to 2007. It was pursuing a large scale voluntary transfer of its housing stock but this process has recently stalled.

The Council's planning service

- 27** The Council is a local planning authority, with district level functions within a two-tier system of local government. The Planning Service carries out the following functions:
- preparing development plans and associated documents;
 - development control and enforcement;
 - building control;
 - historic conservation; and
 - economic development and tourism (since April 2005).

- 28 The service determines around 1,625 planning applications each year with a high proportion of listed building and conservation area applications (286). The service has a net cost of £1.06 million in 2005/06 and it employs 46 staff. Poor performance in deciding major applications led to the Council being a 'standards authority'³ for four years up to 2005/06 but performance has now improved and the Council will no longer be in this category in 2006/07.

- 29 The Mid Devon Local Plan was adopted in 1998, and was designed to have an end date of 2001. As such it is increasingly out-of-date in terms of recent and emerging national policies. However, the Mid Devon Local Plan First Alteration covers the period to 2011 but at present, is still to be adopted. The modified plan has been through two deposit periods and objections heard at public enquiry that ran for nine months to April 2004. Despite it not being adopted, it is the Local Plan modifications, such as the increased provision of affordable housing (40 per cent for housing developments above a threshold size), that are informing the current planning policy of the Council and directing and controlling development.

- 30 The Council is also preparing its Local Development Framework (LDF). Progress has been made in line with the Council's Local Development Scheme on the preparation of the Statement of Community Involvement and Core Strategy, which is currently at the 'Preferred Options' stage.

³ The Government identifies poorly performing Planning Standard Authorities, based on performance indicators and offers a programme of support to guide progress.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31 The Council is a member of the Mid Devon Local Strategic Partnership. The Community Plan *'Promoting Achievement, Tackling Disadvantage'* was published in 2001. This sets out eight aims to be achieved by the partnership.
- Achieving a safer community.
 - Improving travel choices and making roads safer.
 - Investing in children and young people.
 - Achieving a healthy and caring community.
 - Working for increased prosperity.
 - Protecting and enhancing the environment.
 - Improving cultural choices and lifelong learning.
 - Providing better information and undertaking consultation.
- 32 The Mid Devon Local Strategic Partnership has recently reviewed the Community Plan and it has now adopted an updated plan. This sets out three areas the partnership plans to concentrate its activity on over the next three years.
- Developing Stronger and Healthier Communities.
 - Improving Access to Information and Services.
 - Providing Affordable and Decent Housing.
- 33 The role of the Council in contributing to the delivery of the Community Plan is set out in its Corporate Plan adopted in June 2005. This set out its objectives covering what it plans to do over the next five years under its four priority areas.
- Managing the environment.
 - Delivering a well managed Council.
 - Decent and affordable homes.
 - Community well-being.
- 34 The Corporate Plan also has goals and targets that the Planning Service has a key role in helping the Council deliver, such as facilitating more retail outlets in the district, to be among the best performing 25 per cent of councils on planning and achieve 70 per cent satisfaction with Council services by 2007. The service contributes to other targets including providing 300 units of affordable housing over five years, improving access to services including the Mid Devon website and delivering £1 million savings to balance the Council's budget.
- 35 The Council recognises the need to refine the Corporate Plan to produce a much more specific set of priorities underpinned by clear and specific targets with the aim of making it more focused on the key things that it hopes to achieve for its community.

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

Strategic planning and policy development

- 36 The Council's planning policies set out a clear and challenging set of criteria for assessing needs and directing development for the district. There is a clear planning policy framework to support the delivery of local, regional and national aims. The Government Office describes the Local Plan as being one of the clearest and most concise that they had seen. The Local Plan Inspector also commended the Plan for aiming to improve quality of life of all sectors of community. Many of the key policies within the modified Local Plan are challenging. For example, the target for 40 per cent affordable housing from new housing developments above a certain size and high housing densities. There are also challenging policies relating to transport that encourage greater use of public transport and for mitigating the affect of development on biodiversity. The policies and targets are also realistic in terms of the local context such as recognising the difficulties of achieving high levels of brownfield development in a rural setting.
- 37 The Council demonstrates a thorough understanding of the need to promote more sustainable development by ensuring an ongoing assessment of the sustainability impacts of decisions on its planning policies. It has undertaken a Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental Assessment for the LDF. This predicts and assesses the likely impact of current policies and lists the main risks to the sustainability of the economic, social and environmental well-being of the community. It identifies the threats to biodiversity and flooding that are key risks in many areas of the district and in particular the threat posed by climate change. The Council also has specific policies for those groups who have particular needs such as gypsies and travellers.
- 38 The Council is on track in preparing its LDF even though it is also working on the Local Plan modifications at the same time. It chose to continue with the Local Plan modification because work on this was well developed by the time that the new LDF proposals were proposed by the Government. The Council submitted a Local Development Scheme for consideration by the Government Office for the south west during 2004, six months in advance of the deadline. It has now prepared the Core Strategy and Statement of Community Involvement in line with the Local Development Scheme and is well advanced towards the submission of both documents. It also met the Government's timetable to complete its annual monitoring report showing how well it has performed in implementing its planning policies with most key areas covered. Where there are gaps in its monitoring these are now being addressed so that it will be in a better position to achieve full compliance next year. Although staff within the service are aware of how well planning policies are being implemented, until very recently this information had not been shared with councillors which meant they did not have the latest information on how well the Council as a whole is performing on this.

- 39 The Council is sensitive to the need to protect its natural and built heritage through its planning policy and control of development. It has prepared Conservation Area Appraisals for seven areas focusing on areas that are subject to the greatest development pressures, with more appraisals underway. A listed buildings at risk survey was carried out in 2001 and a strategy adopted by the Council to provide direction on how they are to be protected. For instance, every building on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register since 1999 has received funding and advice that has led to its rapid removal from the register. However, promoting and educating owners, local builders and the public in general on the sensitive repair and development of heritage buildings is limited to providing general advice and conservation leaflets. This is in the context of an area with a high number of owners of heritage buildings.
- 40 The service seeks to negotiate and engage with developers to secure consistent standards of design quality. Some design standards are expressed in the Local Plan modifications and there is a specific policy for this. Although it does not have Supplementary Planning Guidance to formalise minimum design standards, it has published a '*Planning Design Guide for Mid Devon*' to guide applicants on the standard of design they should aim for. The service is also developing an Urban Design Strategy for key central sites in Tiverton. In addition, it encourages developers to prepare development briefs for key sites, which provide it with a mechanism to influence the quality of design.
- 41 The Council has delivered a range of development supporting community priorities, such as affordable housing. There are many examples of schemes where the Planning Service has influenced the outcome through its statutory functions and by negotiation to produce developments that make a greater contribution to the quality of the environment and to community needs. One of the most recent and notable examples of this, is the work it is currently undertaking on the Tiverton Pannier Market enhancement scheme, which aims to protect a important historic building, improve the street scene and provide more retail and business space in the town centre. There are other examples where the Council uses its own land and its planning powers to deliver benefits for the community such as gaining affordable housing and retail development.

Development control and enforcement

- 42 The service deals with planning applications quickly. Its current average performance on processing applications for the period 1 April 2005 to 13 March 2006 is well above government targets for all three categories of planning applications and is equivalent to the standard achieved by the best performing councils in 2004/05. There have been no adverse affects from processing applications quickly on other aspects of processing planning applications, such as the time taken to validate applications or the increased use of planning conditions. The number of refusals, the frequency of appeals and withdrawals have remained relatively constant. Likewise, the service is relatively successful at defending appeals, with about 27 per cent of appeals against the Council's decisions being successful. The number of cases in the system has not changed significantly and the backlog of cases has reduced. On most of these measures the service has improved significantly and exceeds national benchmarks of performance.
- 43 The Council takes effective action on development that does not meet planning regulations. This extends to using its statutory powers to force owners of private land and buildings to clear up untidy and unsightly sites. It proactively monitors planning conditions with building control staff in addition to planning enforcement staff checks. Its takes a risk based approach to prioritise its enforcement work, which is governed by its 'Enforcement Policy Statement'. This is broadly consistent with the enforcement concordat⁴. It uses an enforcement database to monitor cases to help manage caseloads and performance. However, the service has a backlog of outstanding enforcement cases, and although it is making progress on reducing these, this is affecting its ability to meet its own targets for enforcement visits.
- 44 Planning decisions are made in a fair and transparent way and are based on sound planning considerations. Councillors on the planning committee are all trained in planning decision-making and probity. They adhere to codes of conduct and receive annual update training. No complaints in respects of members of the planning committee have been referred to the Standards Board and the service has a better than average success rate on appeals (27 per cent). In 2005, only 1.5 per cent of all applications determined by the committee were decided against the officers' recommendation. Planning officers have delegated powers to decide 92 per cent of planning applications and this is better than the government's national target (90 per cent). The service's application records are well documented and accessible. The public are given the opportunity to speak at two points in the discussions on applications at the planning committee. The outcome and progress of planning decisions are published on the Council's website. Public meetings are held on major and controversial planning applications.

⁴ The enforcement concordat is a general policy document that sets out the 'rules' by which any government body will operate.

- 45 The service has a good track record of securing community benefits from the development process using section 106 agreements. It has a clear policy framework supported by systems and processes to target and monitor its performance on this. There are many examples of developer contributions resulting in outcomes that support corporate priorities and delivering community benefits such as the Tiverton Street Sports Area. However, some developers feel that the arrangements the Council has for formulating the legal agreements for developers' contributions are complicated because it frequently varies its approach and does not currently use standard clauses.
- 46 The Council promotes, encourages and offers pre application advice at an early stage of a proposed development. Approximately 30 per cent of applications currently in-hand have had pre-application discussions and the proportion for larger applications is much higher. The service has produced guidance on pre-application discussions for both major and minor applications setting out what is expected from the service and from applicants. The timescale for the consideration of major applications is agreed in advance and preliminary discussions held on section 106 contributions before the application is submitted. This approach to pre application negotiation helps to provide a smoother planning application process for applicants, quicker processing when the planning application is submitted and aims to produce better quality developments.
- 47 On major applications, the service takes a development team approach to proposals. The service brings together other sections of the Council, other relevant public agencies and consultees in a team approach to development proposals. The contributors to the team vary according to the scheme but an example is the current development of the former hospital sites for housing which has involved the Council's Corporate Projects Officer, Planning Policy, a Housing Association, and others in pre-application discussions with the developer.
- 48 The Planning Committee does not always maintain focus at its meetings. This means that at times councillors on the Planning Committee do not give the same level of diligence to all planning applications. The committee offers all councillors on the committee unconstrained discussion, but in doing so, it frequently loses focus on delivering the agenda within reasonable time constraints. People that regularly attend the meeting report that contributions from councillors are often repetitive and stray from the issue in hand. The consequence is that agenda items near the end of the meeting do not receive the same degree of scrutiny as those at the beginning. This is important because applicants, objectors and supporters or the public in general deserve the same treatment irrespective of where the proposal is scheduled on the agenda.

Customer access and experience

- 49 Customers are satisfied with the service they receive. Service monitoring in 2005 identified that 82 per cent of respondents found the service 'good' or 'very good'.

- 50 Most customers can easily access the service. The Council provides a face-to-face service to customers from three offices across Mid Devon. The planning service is provided principally from the main council office, Phoenix House in Tiverton with 'surgeries' held at the Council's area offices in Crediton and Cullompton. Phoenix House is easily accessible for visitors to use all Council services at a single location and people can travel there on foot, cycle, by public transport or by car. There is a dedicated planning reception in Phoenix House where people can get comprehensive information and guidance about the service and meet with a duty planning officer during 'traditional' office hours of 9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday and 9am to 4.30pm on Friday.
- 51 The Council provides access and facilities for people with disabilities in most but not all of its buildings. Phoenix House is a modern purpose building that meets the regulatory standard for physical access for people with disabilities. For example, it has low-level counters for wheelchairs users and a hearing loop. However, the Planning Committee is normally held in the Town Hall, which is not currently fully accessible to people with a disability.
- 52 It is easy to contact the service by telephone. The service includes a direct dial number on all service information and letters. We found that telephone calls were answered promptly and that staff were responsive, polite and helpful. Most people contact the service by telephone and customers we spoke to were generally pleased with their quality of experience when using the telephone to contact the service.
- 53 The service does not ensure that its written communications to the public are always clear for all sections of the community. The service does produce a range of information that will be clear for the majority of customers but its quality does not always meet the standards of corporately produced information, for example, its use of plain language and availability of alternative formats.
- 54 The Council has made some progress in its approach to equalities and diversity. It has worked with partners on specific policies for those groups who have particular needs such as gypsies, staff have had training on equality and diversity and have access to translation services when needed. The Council exceeded its own target on the duty to promote race equality in 2004/05. However, it is currently at level 1 of the Equalities Standard, which uses a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest. This means that the Council has so far only set out its commitment to service equality. Importantly, the service has not carried out an equality impact assessment to help improve its approach to promoting equality and ensure that it does not discriminate.
- 55 The service provides a customer-focused service. This is reflected in the conduct of the staff and the friendly manner in which they deal with customers. They treat customers with respect and demonstrate a commitment to delivering high quality services. We found that telephone calls were answered promptly and that Council were responsive, polite and helpful. Customers we spoke to found it easy to contact the service and were generally pleased with their quality of experience when they contacted the service by telephone.

- 56 The service is available electronically and this is easy to use for people who have access to the website. The website provides users with 'self-service' options such as applying for planning permission or responding to consultation on a new development proposal. The website provides a range of useful features and meets high standard for accessibility - level AAA⁵. The service's electronic service options meet in full the requirements of the national standard for planning service websites (Pendleton). This standard reflects the wide range of services provided via the website. Users can use the website to make a planning application, monitor its progress, comment on it, see decision notices and use an interactive map of the local plan policies. The site is easy to navigate around and it has an online payment facility. Since October 2005, the service has received approximately 60 planning applications through the website.
- 57 The service uses a range of consultation techniques to inform its various forward plans and to develop the service. The service has consulted and responded to the views of local people on its Local Plan and its Local Development Scheme. Consultation on the Statement of Community Involvement and Core Strategy has included exhibitions in Crediton, Cullompton, Bampton and the main council office in Tiverton. The service has carried out equalities monitoring as part of this process and has made special efforts to consult under-represented groups, for example, young people. On service development, it consults a user group, town and parish councils and others. It has recently tried to expand its user group to include local residents.
- 58 The service is proactive in seeking customer feedback. It uses customer service surveys, complaints monitoring, questionnaires and a user forum to do this. It meets regularly with a group of local agents and architects and it uses this forum to consult on its performance and its improvement plans. The Service monitors, analyses and reports on what customers think of the service and uses the results to inform its business planning.
- 59 Although, the Service seeks customer feedback some aspects of its arrangements for doing this are not wholly effective. For instance, the way that it collects complaints does not differentiate between issues that relate to the way the service is delivered and those that relate to the outcomes of planning decisions. This means that the service risks missing opportunities for identifying improvements in service delivery from overall trends in customer feedback. Likewise, the user forum is at an early stage of its development and has yet to move from an information sharing forum into full participation where the forum helps shape the way the service is delivered.

⁵ AAA accessibility standard is a way of measuring the accessibility of web pages to people with disabilities through for example, not only making the language clear and simple, but also providing understandable mechanisms for navigating within and between web pages. A basic level of accessibility is the level A standard. Government guidelines suggest that councils should aim for the level AA standard.

- 60 The service provides information to users on the standards of service they can expect to receive for most parts of the service but not all. The Council has introduced a corporate customer care charter setting out the standard of service customers can expect. A Parish/Town Council Charter and a planning service charter support this. The planning service charter contains service performance standards that the service monitors and publishes quarterly. However, the service charter does not cover the whole planning service.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 61 The service is improving its value for money through improved performance. Although the cost of the service is above average compared to other councils, so is its performance. An analysis of revenue estimates submitted by all council's in 2004/05 show that Mid Devon planning costs are high compared to other providers of this service. Since then, the cost of the service has increased as more resources have been allocated to the service. However, looking forward, the service anticipates that next year these increased costs will, to some degree, be offset by increased government grant to reflect the improved performance.
- 62 The service manages its costs effectively. Sound budgetary processes allocate resources in line with priorities, and these costs are effectively managed. Development control has benefited from additional resources aimed at addressing previously poor performance on processing applications. Resources are also being focused into other areas of the service such as enforcement.
- 63 The Council has taken a sound financial approach to its investment in the planning service using the principles of investing now to save costs in the future. In order to fund the recent investment in the service, the Council shifted money within its overall budget to pay for the new ICT systems, processes and procedures. Not only has this investment helped the service to raise its performance but it has also secured significant government grants. In 2006, the Council will receive £400,000 in planning delivery grant, which will be used to pay for the investment in service improvement work so far and to invest in further service improvements.
- 64 The service takes account of future trends on its costs, income and performance with the aim of sustaining a cost effective service. It projects its costs and income into the medium-term. The service is conscious that its investment in service developments must lead to greater efficiency in the future. It recognises the financial pressures facing the Council, the need for efficiency savings and the impact withdrawal of planning delivery grant in the future will mean for the service. For instance, the more effective working arrangements it has achieved to date has meant that it is now proposing to make a senior management post in the service redundant this year.

- 65 The Council as a whole and the Planning Service demonstrates that it is open to procuring its services from other providers to deliver value for money. Much of the specific studies to support planning policy development and specialist advice are procured from external providers. The Council explored the option to outsource parts of the planning service in 2004 in partnership with the South West Best Practice group but the response from the market did not meet the Council's expectations. The service undertook a smaller scale market testing exercise later that year but the tender cost was higher than the in-house costs at that time. In the case of Building Control, this service already operates in a competitive market and it is to be transferred to a county-wide partnership from April 2006.
- 66 The Council lacks a systematic approach to measuring, reviewing and managing value for money of the Planning Service. Although the Planning Service has recently undertaken a value for money benchmarking exercise, it does not have a track record of doing this. Importantly the Council does not routinely review service cost alongside service performance or analyse the cost benefits of its investments in the service. While the improvements to the service are readily apparent, the relationship between the level of increased spending and the level of performance is not understood. The recent work it has done on assessing value for money, while being commendable, has been in response to external challenge from the Audit Commission. The service's approach so far has been restricted by the limited number of comparisons with providers with similar characteristics. The information has been used to try to justify current costs and provision rather than to identify opportunities to achieve greater economy and efficiency. The results of the benchmarking do not yet inform the business planning for the service, nor have councillors or the senior management of the Council had the opportunity to challenge them.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 67 The service has a strong record of significantly improving the services it delivers to its customers. The service had a long history of poor performance and was a 'standards authority' for four years up to 2005/06. However, over the last two years, fundamental changes to the way the service is managed and delivered has led to it moving from being among the worst performing councils in England on the speed of processing planning applications, to one of the best. The government has commended the rate of improvement on this and the service is now listed as one of the most improved planning services in England. This level of improvement also means that the Council will receive a substantial increase in the level of grant that it receives from the government, which is the largest amount in the south west. The range of improvements the service has delivered recently are many, but include the following:
- taking a key role in exceeding the Council's affordable housing targets with 76 more units of affordable housing secured during 2005/06;
 - making decisions on planning applications quicker and in a way that is more transparent;
 - taking more action on breaches of planning regulations;
 - improving electronic access to the service;
 - reducing the number of complaints and raising the level of customer satisfaction;
 - positive progress on preparing the Local Development Framework;
 - better monitoring of performance on implementing planning policies;
 - providing more guidance to the public on the services provided and the standards they can expect; and
 - providing more opportunities for users to engage in dialogue with the service.
- 68 The service has a track record of implementing change that have transformed the planning service. It has made changes to team structures and has developed a discrete culture within the service. The service is focused on performance, delivering better outcomes for customers and the pursuit of continuous improvement. The managers and staff recognise the importance of staff development and the key role of middle managers in supporting and sustaining change.

- 69 Service performance reports show improvements in customer satisfaction. Service, monitoring in 2005 identified the percentage of respondents who found the service good or very good was 11 per cent higher than 2004 a smaller number finding the service poor during the same period. There was also a reduction in the number of respondents who found the information provided by the service unclear and the number of complaints received.
- 70 There is a recent track record of providing additional resources to improve the service. As part of the Council's commitment to be among the best performing 25 per cent of councils by 2007 the Council has provided additional resources to improve the service and in particular its approach to enforcement which in 2004 had no dedicated staff and now has three people.
- 71 The service has a track record of responding to external challenge. The service used external consultants to carry out a best value review and gap analysis in 2005. The findings of this review have been integrated into the service business plan. The service also has a track record of delivering targets it set itself in its improvement plans. For example, the first service improvement plan was published in 2003 and 90 per cent completed by March 2005. The service has contributed to improvements in the Council's approach to the delivery of affordable housing following the Audit Commission's inspection in May 2005 when the Council was judged as providing a 'fair' service, with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement. Because this service had been designated as a Planning Standards Authority, it has been the subject of regular assessment and monitoring by the government. After a slow start, it has now responded rapidly to the recommendations arising from this external scrutiny and has addressed many of the weaknesses identified.
- 72 The Council has made slow progress on equalities issues and achieving level 1 of the Equalities Standard. The service has not carried out an equality impact assessment to help improve its approach to promoting equality and ensure that it does not discriminate.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 73 The service has some well developed future plans. There is a clear planning vision and strategy for the area that links well to corporate objectives and national agendas, such as sustainable development and meeting the needs of the whole community. The Council intended to adopt the modified Local Plan in January 2006 but it is currently delayed because of an issue relating to the allocation of a specific site for employment. Despite this, it is the Local Plan modifications such as the increased provision of affordable housing that are informing the current planning policy of the Council and directing and controlling development.
- 74 Alongside its work on the Local Plan modifications, the Council is also preparing its local development framework (LDF). Progress has been made in line with the Council's Local Development Scheme on the preparation of the Statement of Community Involvement and Core Strategy, which is currently at the 'Preferred Options' stage. The Council is also working with other local councils in contributing to the preparation of the regional spatial strategy (RSS).

- 75 The service business improvement plan is clear in setting out the things the service is planning to do over the next few years. It shows the areas for improvement over the next three years drawing upon the findings of the Council's best value review, which used the EFQM Excellence Model to identify improvements within the service. Targets are generally clear, and timescales and responsibilities identified. In most cases, resources are in place or identified.
- 76 The service manages performance well. The service management team are focused on performance management and continuous improvement. They are committed to the use of the corporate performance management system and are enabling and supporting staff through effective monitoring of performance and proactive management of peaks and troughs in workloads. There are regular meetings between staff and managers to discuss workloads, which are open and constructive. The focus on targets and performance monitoring are viewed by staff in a positive manner. Staff working in the planning service are clear what is expected of them and how this links with the aims of the service and corporate priorities.
- 77 Service performance is reported to a corporate performance group monthly and progress on improvement plan targets reported quarterly. This arrangement is relatively new and its effectiveness in managing the performance of the Planning Service has yet to be tested.
- 78 The service sets itself ambitious and challenging targets. It aims to achieve the highest standards of performance such as its target to be one of the best performing councils on dealing with planning applications. It is also stretching itself to meet high standards of service delivery by preparing for and seeking external awards, such as meeting the national Chartermark standard and achieving Investors in People (IIP) accreditation.
- 79 The Council has made a clear commitment to improving the service. The Council recognises that the planning service is key to achieving many of its corporate ambitions. This is demonstrated by the Council's recent track record of investing in the service and the commitment to have the service among the best performing 25 per cent of councils by 2007.
- 80 Change has been well managed and led within the service. The management team within the service have communicated effectively to staff what they wanted to achieve and have built strong support among staff for change. The management team within the service are respected by staff, councillors and senior managers.
- 81 The service has been proactive in challenging its current processes and procedures to identify areas to make efficiencies. The service has led this process well using project management principles to manage delivery. Positively staff have been included throughout the process to help ensure 'buy in' to the outcomes. However, there is not always a clear business case for embarking on each project and there is a lack of understanding of the expected outcomes.

- 82 The service demonstrates openness to learning and a high level of self-awareness about the strengths and areas for improvement. The Council has used specialist resources to provide external challenge, for example, through the best value review and gap analysis of the service. The service has responded well to the opportunities provided corporately to share its learning across the Council and is well placed to learn from its own experience and that of others to improve services.
- 83 However, improvements in the service have taken place in isolation from the Council's overall improvement work. This means that opportunities to maximise capacity with other services and 'fit' with corporate improvement plans may have been missed. Staff across the Council perceive that the change process has been led solely from within the service rather than being corporately driven. This coupled with corporate weaknesses around leadership and a perception among some staff across the Council that they are not able to influence change in the Council is likely to be a weakness for the Council in driving forward corporate improvement plans.
- 84 The risks arising from work within the Planning Service on the Council as a whole are not always fully assessed at a corporate level. The issues arising from the potential late adoption of the Local Plan modifications include extended periods of there being a planning policy gap and additional assessment work being required to meet new planning regulations. However, the impact on the whole organisation is not recorded in the corporate risk register. This gap in the Council's processes heightens the risk of issues arising that could have been controlled or even prevented.
- 85 While the service has clear targets in its business plan, at a corporate level it is not clear what the Council expects from the service. Although the Council's Corporate Plan for 2005 to 2010 sets high level targets for the service such as to be among the best performing services it does not contain more specific priorities and explicit targets for the service. The Council recognises the need to set more specific priorities and clearer targets and is currently reviewing the Corporate Plan to make it more focused.
- 86 Likewise, the Council does not have a clear plan for how it will improve access to the service. It has stated that it wants to develop a corporate customer services centre and has started work on developing this in phases. However, it has not developed a customer access strategy that sets out both a vision and overarching strategy to improve access to services based on a clear understanding of patterns, volumes and types of customer contact. This means it is unclear what impact this proposal will have on the users of the planning service and the way it currently delivers its services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 87** The Council's investment in ICT offers a solid base from which to deliver improvements. The achievement of Pendleton 21 means that customers can resolve many queries with little or no direct contact with staff. Customers can view decision notices, make comment and applications through its website. This is the most cost effective way of communicating, consulting and transacting with local people. The improvements to the ICT extend to the systems and processes that the service uses to support the delivery of its work. These include new graphical and information databases used to record, monitor and analyse data and to communicate information across the service.
- 88** The Council recognised the difficulties facing the service in terms of recruitment and retention of staff and as a result the service has worked effectively with the human resources (HR) department to help build capacity and support change in the service. This includes some positive steps to addressing the national issue of recruiting and retaining planning staff and tackling performance issues and improvements in the way the service deals with sickness absence. Recent unaudited performance reports show that levels of sickness absence in the Council overall and the service in particular are improving and are much better than in 2004/05 when the Council was among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils. The service has also responded positively to the Council's approach to developing its managers. Planning staff are developing their skills through the Council's corporate management development programme.
- 89** Positively, staff across the service are open to change and support the need for it. Staff have a clear sense of purpose and direction and there are high levels of morale and motivation. The service has worked with external consultants to help build capacity through better team-working and increased ownership of performance.
- 90** The service is maximising the capacity of its staff. It manages the flow and distribution of work well to maximise the capacity of all staff. On planning applications, the workloads of staff match national benchmarks for the number of cases per member of staff. It has also reviewed its structure to identify efficiencies and ensure that it has the skills and capacity to deliver improvements. For example, the service has held a Development Control Manager post vacant and created a new supervisory role to ensure more effective workload management and address recruitment and retention issues. The service has also identified the need to introduce new competences to the service skills to help deliver improvements for example, an Information Systems post.
- 91** There are some concerns and uncertainties among staff that may impact on their ability to sustain change. Staff are concerned about their capacity to sustain the present rate and scale of change and are concerns among some staff about the level of resources available for 'professional' training. In addition, there remain uncertainties among staff about the impact of corporately led service reviews and the corporate customer services centre on the service.

- 92 Within the service, there are good relationships between councillors and officers and communication is open and constructive. Committee members and officers are clear about roles and responsibilities and the boundaries between them. The increased use of delegations has increased officer and councillor capacity.
- 93 The move to the new centralised office in Tiverton has enhanced internal communication and supported better team working across the Council for example, on affordable housing. The Council is also now moving towards remote working for staff. This way of working is recognised as having benefits to organisations that contribute to increased value for money.
- 94 The service has not benefited from a strategic approach to communication and consultation that supports its interaction with the whole community. The lack of capacity on corporate communications has meant that communication has not been well planned and structured. Staff have been identified to provide a focus for communication in each service but they have not been provided with training on the use of plain English or design and presentation. The Council is not controlling the content or design of its published guidance leaflets and web based material to ensure the consistent use of an editorial style guide or corporate branding.
- 95 Likewise, the Council is missing opportunities to avoid duplication of effort and overlaps in public consultation and communication initiatives carried out by different services, by coordinating these at a corporate levels. The Council is currently working on further developing a wide range of separate future plans covering its corporate and community priorities, while at the same time developing its planning policy framework. Consultation on one plan is often undertaken in isolation of others. For instance, potential benefits of aligning the public consultation on the LDF with that being conducted by another service for the Leisure Strategy were not considered. If opportunities for aligning consultation had been taken, it might have helped the Planning Service to be more successful in its attempts to gain the views of all sections of the community, such as getting a wider involvement of young people.
- 96 The Council is now beginning its first annual review of the Corporate Plan. The Council intends to refine the Corporate Plan to produce a much more focused set of priorities underpinned by clear and specific targets. This greater clarity will allow the Council to focus its capacity in priority areas such as the planning service.
- 97 There are significant financial pressures affecting the Council and it is unclear how this will affect the service. However, the Council has been awarded a significant increase in planning delivery grant and there is a track record of levering in external funding and securing community benefits for example, through section 106 agreements and funding for schemes. The service is also examining opportunities to create increased income to support service improvement.