

Corporate Assessment Report

June 2006



Corporate Assessment

Blackpool Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

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

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

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

Executive summary

- 5 Blackpool Council is leading the recovery of an area that has suffered massive decline in its principal industry - tourism. The Council works well with partners to provide better services and is producing tangible results for people and communities. However, some of the formal mechanisms for maintaining improvement are not in place. Performance overall is adequate.
- 6 The Council and its partners have a visionary agenda for Blackpool. The local strategic partnership (LSP) knows what needs to change and has most of the high level plans in place. Partners are using economic regeneration, based on leisure and tourism, as the means of addressing deprivation in the longer term. Local people are well informed about the plans for physical and economic regeneration but the Council and its partners have not articulated the social impact of these plans adequately to all local people.
- 7 The Council organises its resources to meet its top priorities for regeneration, children and vulnerable people, and adapts national priorities to reflect the local context. Staff and stakeholders know what these top priorities are. However, the Council has not clarified its priorities sufficiently in its plans, and plans to support the top priorities are not all in place or lack clarity about how progress will be measured. The Council is building relationships with its service users and the wider community although it is still working on listening and feeding back to some local groups within a very diverse community. Diversity as a feature of planning and service delivery is not well developed.
- 8 During the last two years the Council has taken significant steps to improve the way it works and to increase its capacity to deliver a demanding agenda. It is beginning to change the culture of the organisation through an emphasis on customers, and improvements to the way that people can access services are making a positive difference to local people. Councillors and senior managers are providing good leadership; they have an entrepreneurial style that energises people and encourages innovation. Top management has been reorganised to create more strategic capacity and release others into their programme responsibilities. Modernised approaches to procurement and HR are beginning to yield benefits and improve capacity.
- 9 The Council organises itself to support improvement although some areas are more developed than others. Financial management is sound and value for money is generally good although approaches for delivering value for money, particularly through some of its partnership operations, are not in place. Significant capital investment has been introduced for physical regeneration but the financial demands of the economic strategy remain high and much depends on the success of the Council's bid for the regional casino; the Government's decision on the location of the casino will be made in early 2007. The Council is seeking to manage the uncertainty of long-term funding by gathering widespread support for its proposals.

- 10 Performance management has improved and is driving service improvement although there are weaknesses to be addressed in some areas.
- 11 The Council is increasingly using its resources to achieve improvements for local people and performance against the national shared priorities is good. It is delivering major programmes of physical regeneration and is having significant influence in the most deprived areas. With its partners the Council has achieved some notable successes in tackling crime and disorder and the harm resulting from drug misuse. Underlying conditions are still very poor but the Council is working well with partners to improve the health of people living in the town. The Council's contribution to achieving outcomes for children and young people is good and it has been effective in achieving higher than average rates of improvement in pupil attainment.
- 12 The Council is good at innovating and learning but does not always support its actions with clearly articulated strategic thinking. The high proportion of transient households in the borough has a significant impact on communities and services; the Council is ahead of most similar councils in tackling this issue but has not developed a clear way forward. It is working with others to address the issues of inappropriate housing but without the benefit of a well developed strategy. Older people who are users of services are well served by the Council. Current levels of engagement, however, are limited and the Council's focus has been in line with its priority of protecting vulnerable adults.

Areas for improvement

- 13 The Council needs to make stronger links between the strategic thinking that is guiding what the Council does and delivery plans. These plans should be more specific in terms of the strategic outcomes they are intended to achieve. This would enable the Council to be sure that all of its plans and activities are focused on delivering its ambitions and to track progress and demonstrate success.
- 14 Local people are well informed about the plans for physical and economic regeneration. The Council should further develop this dialogue with communities to better demonstrate the anticipated social and economic transformation of their areas and to encourage community engagement and ownership of the Masterplan.
- 15 The Council should clearly express its key medium term priorities in its corporate plans and strategies. This will ensure that the process of selection is transparent to local people and to staff and the priorities can clearly inform the Council's service planning and decisions on the allocation of its resources.
- 16 To further encourage increased engagement with the community and other stakeholders the Council should develop a more strategic and integrated approach to diversity, user focus and human rights to ensure that it can reach all communities at risk of discrimination. This approach should be integrated into the future development of all of its strategies and service plans.

Summary of assessment scores

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

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

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

Context

The locality

- 17 Blackpool is a densely populated urban resort on the coast of North West England. The Council gained unitary status in 1998.
- 18 Tourism, the principal industry, has been in steady decline for several decades, though it is still the most popular resort in the country, with more than 10 million visitors annually. Significant areas of deprivation are left and the town's assets and infrastructure have deteriorated. Overall, the borough is the 24th most deprived of 354 in England, and the sixth most deprived in the North West; 27 per cent of its population of almost 142,700¹ live in the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. Relative deprivation has worsened since 2000.
- 19 At 41 people per hectare the borough has the highest population density in the North West and one of the densest urban communities outside London. There are approximately 64,000 households in Blackpool. Only a small proportion (8 per cent) lives in property owned by the local authority, compared to a national average of 13 per cent. In 2001, 37 per cent of the borough's households had no car². Approximately 3.5 per cent of the population were born outside the UK³; 1.6 per cent are from black and minority ethnic groups. Blackpool has a higher percentage of older people (19.3 per cent) than the average for England (16 per cent).
- 20 Health deprivation and disability is a serious concern. Over 40 per cent of the borough's neighbourhoods are in the bottom 10 per cent nationally for health deprivation, and a higher than average proportion of residents describe their health as 'not good'. Blackpool has the second lowest life expectancy for men, the highest incidence of alcohol related deaths, the highest suicide rates in the country (at twice the national average) and the third highest rate of teenage pregnancy. 42.9 per cent of households have a least one person with a long-term limiting illness.
- 21 Blackpool has over 4,000 unfit properties, a shortage of larger family accommodation and is over-supplied with barely habitable rental accommodation, including approximately 3,000 houses in multiple occupation.
- 22 Unemployment is high, 3.3 per cent compared with a regional average of 2.1 per cent⁴. The percentage of the population of working age claiming incapacity benefit (13.1 per cent) is significantly higher than regional and national averages. Over 16,000 residents of working age have no qualifications. Aspirations and skill levels are both low.

¹ ONS mid-year population estimates 2004

² ONS census 2001

³ ONS census 2001

⁴ Claimant count March 2005

Seventy per cent of jobs in Blackpool are connected with tourism, a low wage industry. Average annual earnings are the fourth lowest of any local authority area in the UK. The local labour economy is heavily influenced by the seasonal nature of the tourist industry which also accounts to some extent for the high numbers of people frequently moving into and within the borough. These factors have a significant impact on delivery of local services.

- 23 Educational attainment is below average. Attainment levels among those children from transient households are substantially lower. Crime has fallen in recent years with the exception of violent and sexual offences. Fear of crime is average for England; local residents think that anti-social behaviour, criminal damage and violent crime are the factors which most influence their quality of life.
- 24 The borough connects to the motorway network via the M55 and has reasonable transport links north to south via the M6 motorway. Blackpool Airport links the town to domestic and European destinations.

The Council

- 25 The Council has 42 councillors, representing 21 wards. Labour has been the controlling party since 1991. It currently holds 25 seats, the Conservative party 13 and the Liberal Democrat party 4.
- 26 The Council has a one party executive with a leader and five cabinet councillors. Councillor portfolios are Regeneration and Tourism, Lifelong Learning and Children's Services, Culture and Leisure, Adults, Community Safety and Health, and Urban Environment. A Service Development Management Committee has a remit for overseeing policy development.
- 27 The scrutiny function has recently been restructured. Business is supervised by a Policy, Overview and Scrutiny Management committee, which has two sub-committees for Audit and Health. The structure is completed by four others: Regeneration and Tourism, Adults and Community Safety, Children and Young People, Neighbourhood and Culture. Five of the seven committees are chaired by councillors of the minority parties.
- 28 The Council is organised into three strategic directorates: Tourism and Regeneration Services, Business Services, and Community which incorporates the directorate of education and children's services. The Council's revenue budget in 2005/06 is £180 million whilst the capital budget is £63 million. The level of reserves is adequate. There was a 4.9 per cent increase in Council tax for 2005/06.
- 29 Blackpool is a second wave Local Area Agreement (LAA) pilot.

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

Ambition

- 30 The Council is performing well in this area. Ambitions for the physical, economic and environmental regeneration of the town are clear and challenging. The Council is showing strong leadership in taking them forward; the level of associated risk is high. However the Council's communication of the resulting social and economic benefits for local people is less well developed.
- 31 Ambitions for the community towards 2020 are clear. The LSP envisages 'inclusive, healthy and safe communities, living in a regenerated, attractive and prosperous resort'. The community plan cascades this vision into six delivery themes which broadly match the shared priorities. They are based on extensive consultation and shared, underpinning knowledge about local conditions and needs. The plan is clear about what needs to change. An intermediate three-year plan, '*The First Steps 2005 – 2008*' translates the six themes into a set of priority actions. Negotiated agreements between the relevant partners are being developed for each one, setting out a needs analysis, the key actions, resource commitments, accountabilities and intended outcomes over the three-year period.
- 32 Major strategies and future plans mostly support the delivery themes. The Council has used the most recent LAA process to focus support on the most vulnerable and to align resources around the national priorities. The Children & Young People's Plan and the draft Local Plan contain clear and consistent ambitions for the area, which are based on detailed analysis and wide consultation. Sectoral strategies such as health and the joint waste strategy equally give clear direction, contributing to an alignment between partners and what they are trying to achieve.
- 33 The Council has a guiding vision for Blackpool which reflects the town's unique identity and sense of place. It is expressed in the phrase 'a world class resort destination that is a great place to visit, a better place to live'. It supports this vision by pursuing three goals, cross referenced to the community plan, and described in the corporate performance plan 2005–07. These are: The New Blackpool; Quality Services; Stronger Communities, and are broken down into a further sixteen activity areas. However in some areas the intended benefits for local people have not been communicated sufficiently to all local people.
- 34 In pursuit of its vision the Council has been very effective as a community leader. The Council has persistently championed the locality at regional and national level for example with North West Regional Assembly, Government Office North West, Regional Development Agency, Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has meant that it has been able to influence key decision-makers and representative bodies, generating realistic support for its ambitions.

The Council has led the regeneration agenda and has been instrumental in the creation of the local urban regeneration company (URC) which will take lead responsibility for major projects. It has been effective in promoting that agenda locally and has gained widespread stakeholder support for its programme, adding credibility to its efforts to bring about change for the locality.

- 35** The Council provides strong and effective leadership through the LSP and local partnership activity. It works well in partnership to achieve shared objectives at both strategic and operational level. For example the Council works with the primary care trust (PCT) to develop shared priorities and has created joint appointments, a joint citizens' panel, pooled budgets and integrated front-line teams, providing greater efficiency in delivering health programmes. It is also well regarded by the voluntary and community sector for its willingness to engage. Six area forums represent an effective community engagement mechanism at local level that enables the Council and other stakeholders to understand local views, for example on the Council's budget proposals. These forums are supported but not dominated by the council; they are well managed, have good public attendance and enable people to raise neighbourhood issues.
- 36** The Council has been very pragmatic in prioritising the transformation of Blackpool. In order to seize opportunities and create conditions that are favourable to its success it has promoted the economic regeneration of Blackpool as the catalyst for change. The main vehicle is the Masterplan which is based on extensive public consultation. It is a highly ambitious programme to transform the tourism and leisure offering of the resort. Partnerships are in place to carry it forward. The Council and its partners are relying on the achievement of Master Plan and in particular on the success of the Casino bid for the achievement of their overall ambitions for the transformation of Blackpool. The Council's bid for the regional casino licence will not be determined until early 2007.
- 37** The social element of the regeneration work is less well understood by some local people who are concerned about the potential problems and social impact of the proposals and are unclear about their prospects for improved quality of life. Current plans do not adequately address these perceptions and a proportion of residents are therefore at risk of becoming disengaged from these ambitions for their community.
- 38** The Council's ambitions are not consistently supported by clear delivery arrangements. There are a number of significant areas where further detailed work is still required with regard to more effective community engagement, especially amongst groups which are harder to reach. Action is in hand to mitigate risks such as project management, budgetary control and community impact. This work is still underway and the Council and its partners cannot yet demonstrate that they can fully deliver their ambitions for long term sustainable benefits for local people.

Prioritisation

- 39 The Council's performance in this area is adequate. It has allocated resources to meet its top priorities which are in line with the community plan. Staff and stakeholders are aware of these priorities but the Council has not clarified its priorities sufficiently and plans to support the top priorities are not all in place or lack clarity about how progress will be measured. The Council is improving relationships with service users and the wider community although arrangements for listening and feeding back to some local groups within a very diverse local community are underdeveloped. Diversity in service planning and delivery is not well developed.
- 40 The LSP has identified its priorities for the next three years in its community plan. The Council has placed its own priorities within this framework, namely regeneration, the attainment and protection of vulnerable children, and vulnerable adults. National priorities have been used to give due emphasis to local circumstances by focusing, for example, on the needs of vulnerable people. These priorities are being co-ordinated through a series of negotiated agreements that include all relevant partners and which integrate their individual plans and resources. For example the availability of national funding through NRF is being deliberately targeted, using a multi-agency approach, towards those families identified as having multiple needs (Springboard project). Internal resources have been directed towards key priorities such as school improvement. The Council has de-prioritised its interest in the zoo and the airport, releasing funds and attracting new investment.
- 41 Priorities are based on a shared understanding of need and the key factors driving deprivation in the borough, particularly poor health, the lack of opportunity due to unemployment and poor education, and vulnerability to crime and anti-social behaviour. Partners use information about the areas of highest risk to prioritise neighbourhoods and communities where interventions are likely to be most effective. The integrated neighbourhood improvement areas are good examples where prioritised and co-ordinated action by various departments and agencies, including the voluntary and community sector, is having an impact.
- 42 Councillors, officers and staff are clear about the Council's overall priorities. Indeed the recent employee survey shows that staff feel they have a significantly improved understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve. The Masterplan proposals are widely acknowledged and well understood. A strong culture of openness and informal communication means that these messages are quickly and readily conveyed.
- 43 However, the corporate plan, the Council's key policy document, does not define the council's top priorities clearly. It sets out 16 priorities in support of its corporate goals, covering vulnerable adults to town centre regeneration, alongside the continuous improvement of all services. This approach does not provide a firm foundation for planning purposes or provide sufficient direction when difficult investment or resource decisions have to be made.

- 44 The Council's record on diversity is underdeveloped. It is beginning to implement the emphasis in the community plan on understanding exclusion and engaging with different community groups. The Council has consulted with local people on major leisure and cultural projects as in the case of Stanley Park. However the Council has not always engaged effectively with isolated or disadvantaged groups, for example people with disabilities, on issues that matter to them. There are mechanisms for engaging with older people, young people, equality and diversity groups and faith groups. Some of these are relatively recent and have yet to influence decision-making.
- 45 The Council has taken the first steps to improving the delivery of services to people from diverse backgrounds. It has established an equalities unit, it has been explicit about the various strands of diversity on which it wants to concentrate, and has begun to assess the impact of key policies from an equalities perspective. The approach is not yet routine and in the one area it has tested (fair access to care services) information in some key categories, namely sexual orientation and marital status, was incomplete. The Council is developing an integrated approach to diversity across all services and with the PCT but currently the Council cannot ensure that all of its services are responsive to the various needs and preferences of all of its communities and interest groups.
- 46 Integrated strategies for the delivery of the Council's priorities are variable. Supported by the PCT, the Council is in the process of drafting its own health plan to give focus in this area. There is strong cross departmental support for the health inequalities policy. The Council has a soundly based plan for supporting people (vulnerable adults) but it lacks an overarching strategy for older people as citizens. The URC business plans are programmed to feed into the Council's budget process in recognition of the importance of the Masterplan. However, other related plans such as housing, heritage, town centre, LTP and streetscene do not feature the regeneration agenda so prominently. For example, the Council is only in the initial stages of commissioning a comprehensive study as a prelude to a new housing strategy for the town, to guide investment and inform local interventions. The Council cannot therefore always be sure that its priorities, plans and resources are properly aligned.

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

Capacity

- 47 The Council's performance in this area is adequate. During the last two years it has taken significant steps to improve the way it works and to increase its ability to deliver a demanding agenda. With partners, it is beginning to make an impact on conditions for local people and the delivery of services. However some plans to improve its capacity, particularly around equalities and diversity and workforce planning are not yet fully developed.
- 48 Its progress has as much to do with relationships as with structures. Relations between councillors and officers are open, constructive and respectful; roles are clear and balanced, enabling councillors to lead policy and decision-making and officers to function efficiently. There are frequent regular meetings between senior councillors and managers which are conducted efficiently.
- 49 Councillors operate within an ethical framework with sound, independent support from the standards committee. The Council has recently remodelled some political arrangements - Full Council and Scrutiny - to make decision-making more transparent and to provide more opportunity for debate. Councillors are well supported by induction, training, personal development planning, IT and administrative assistance. Their capacity is developed through an extensive programme that is systematic and well resourced. These measures have helped to equip councillors for their role in a modernised council.
- 50 In the last two years the Council has successfully reorganised its management structure to create additional corporate capacity. Three strategic directors are now in post, supported by a third tier with programme responsibility. Previously unsustainable workloads have been eased, which puts the Council in a better position to deliver its priorities.
- 51 Staff are energetic and committed, in part due to the leadership and management style of the leader and the chief executive. They feel valued, trusted and encouraged to tackle the change agenda. Customer focus has been a key driver and is proving instrumental in shaping the culture of the organisation. The political culture is generally mature, with broad agreement about the Council's overall vision and objectives, and there is good cross-party working.
- 52 The Council has productive relationships with its statutory partners, notably the PCT and the police. There is good exchange of information and participation in local partnerships. Partners are increasingly aligning budgets for joint activities such as the Awaken project, and pooling budgets in some areas - for example the Learning Disabilities Service.

The Council works well with delivery partners such as Advice Link in the voluntary, community and contracting sectors, particularly in addressing exclusion and impaired quality of life in local neighbourhoods. These relationships, through measured risk-taking and innovation, are leading to positive outcomes for local people.

- 53 The Council is strengthening partnership working in areas such as skills development, and improving links that previously were weak, for example with local business. These changes enable the Council to be more effective in co-ordinating its priority for regeneration.
- 54 Though its financial strategy does not yet link to corresponding strategies among the Council's partners, financial planning and management within the Council are sound and provide a strategic framework for setting project priorities. Plans covering capital investment and asset management complement the medium-term financial strategy; budget allocations are explicitly linked to service priorities and outcomes. These arrangements have helped the Council to achieve its objectives in key areas such as regeneration and social services.
- 55 There is strong pressure on spending as the Council balances the needs of the Masterplan against its policy of maintaining Council tax levels as the lowest in Lancashire. The resource requirements to deliver the Masterplan are set out but the long timescale makes it premature to say how they will be met. The Council is seeking to manage this uncertainty by securing regional and national support for its plans.
- 56 The Council's approach to managing corporate risk generally is under-developed. There is no corporate risk register, though recent policy debates show awareness of risk: the budget and capital programme build in risk assessments but do not incorporate regular formal reporting on corporate risks. Business plans show that risk management principles are understood but managers do not always put them into practice. Senior officers and councillors are aware that they need to increase capacity in this crucial area and have created a corporate risk group and a councillor champion – the deputy leader.
- 57 Though value for money (VFM) overall can be demonstrated and there is a general awareness of costs, VFM is not routinely considered in assessing the Council's management processes or its partnership arrangements. The Council has taken key decisions, for example in disposing of the airport and the zoo; however, the approach within services tends to focus narrowly on cost control, so that it cannot consistently demonstrate effective use of its resources. More positively, procurement arrangements have been modernised and the Council is using procurement to fulfil community plan objectives for strengthening the local economy. Greater use of e-procurement is beginning to produce gains in efficiency and capacity.
- 58 The Council is making progress on a range of strategic HR priorities such as single status, which it expects to achieve during the next twelve months. Sickness absence levels are still high but have fallen in 2005/06. Senior managers are more involved in developing corporate HR policy and reinforcing its implementation throughout the council.

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Communications with staff are also improving; 53 per cent of staff are now satisfied with communications, compared with 35 per cent in 2001, although this is still an area for development.

- 59 The Council lacks a number of elements of good workforce planning. Directorate workforce plans are in draft form and incomplete, as are succession plans for managers and action plans to address recruitment and retention 'hotspots'. Workforce planning is not yet a collaborative exercise with partner organisations. However other initiatives have started to make an impact on the Council's capacity. Recruitment is successfully tackling staff shortages – numbers of social workers are up from 48 per cent of quota in 2003-04 to 98 per cent in 2004-05 – and new recruits receive training clearly linked to corporate strategies and priorities.
- 60 Access to council services in most areas is improving, but some groups are less well served. The council has radically overhauled its approach to service users over the last seven years. It has made good use of ICT to improve customer contact and to offer more methods by which customers can access services. The Council has also taken the step of creating a customer services role and career path and continues to improve systems and processes. Satisfaction surveys for example show that people are happier with the benefits service. Housing repairs have also benefited from these changes and access is now good. However, although 15 schemes to improve facilities for people with a disability were implemented in 2004/05, the number of pedestrian crossings with suitable facilities remains in the worst quartile, which is particularly disappointing for a tourist destination.
- 61 The Council has been slow to address equalities, although it has supported activities such as the Equality and Diversity Conference to raise local awareness of equality and diversity issues. Its own staff profile is non-representative and it is still only at level 1 of the equalities standard for local government. It is developing staff capacity to meet the needs of a diverse community, including training. The Council is beginning to assess the impact of its own policies and has established a joint equalities unit with the PCT to co-ordinate work on action planning, impact assessments and the development of a joint race equality strategy.

Performance management

- 62 The Council's performance in this area is adequate.
- 63 The Council has made significant progress in developing its performance management arrangements. It is developing a culture of performance management which is becoming increasingly customer focused. It addresses what is important for local people and is beginning to transform the way the Council works.

- 64 The local strategic partnership has made some progress towards delivering the community plan themes but the Council and its partners do not consistently know how they are performing. The Council has taken an innovative approach with a set of recently negotiated agreements for each theme. These are evidence-based and describe the key actions to be taken over a three-year period. They identify the resources and the principal partners who are responsible. However, some of these negotiated agreements are more advanced than others and it is not always clear where they are monitored or by whom, risking a lack of ownership and follow through.
- 65 Partnership groups are at different stages in managing performance. The community safety and drugs partnership sets targets against clear priorities and reports to the partnership strategy group on a quarterly basis. Information is clear and accessible and of good quality. This enables this partnership to have a clear understanding of progress against their priorities and to evaluate the effectiveness of their plans. Other groups, for example the children and young people's partnership and the health inequalities partnership group have not been using performance management systematically to drive improvement. The children and young people's partnership has recently reached agreement on key shared performance indicators as a first step to developing a new regime to drive improvement.
- 66 The Council has clear goals and a sound framework for managing its own performance and driving improvement. The corporate plan makes explicit commitments to improving services and to using performance management as a key driver of organisational change. The framework is clear and concise, explaining roles, processes, tools and timescales for the Council's approach. A performance toolkit provides a clear explanation of the context for setting targets, how to collect performance indicators, different approaches to performance improvement, and is a good reference document for managers.
- 67 However, the framework has not been implemented across all areas. Service plans are variable and do not always provide an effective basis for planning and delivering service outcomes. Use of performance data and targets to drive improvement is mixed, and service business plans do not all link PIs with service objectives. The streetscene service plan has links to the corporate goal of the 'new Blackpool' but it makes only passing reference to the Masterplan, which is surprising given the potential contribution of the service to the transformation of the public realm. Neither do its key PIs reflect the emphasis given in its aims and activities to customer care and to improving residents' experience.
- 68 The Council has appropriate mechanisms for challenging service performance, with different tools being used to identify the need for improvement. This includes comments and complaints from service users. Portfolio holders and strategic directors are active in the challenge process. A corporate performance improvement group holds lead officers constructively to account, an approach which has been further improved in 2005. Financial performance is monitored at senior level and service managers have a general role in assuring VFM in service delivery. However, this is not an explicit duty and there are no systematic mechanisms for making sure that it happens.

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- 69** The role of scrutiny in performance management is under developed. The framework for deciding scrutiny activity is ad hoc and not firmly related to corporate plans. Exception reports are taken to committees, but evidence of improvements to services is inconsistent. It is intended that councillors should have an active role in reviewing outcomes, for example, against the procurement strategy but the appropriate scrutiny mechanisms are not in place. Councillors have realised that scrutiny is not fully effective and have introduced a new system in which opposition councillors hold most of the chairs. Portfolio holders and senior officers attend and are required to give account of decisions and key areas of performance but councillor awareness of their own role in performance management is still developing. Impact on outcomes has been limited.
- 70** Employees have a good understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve in the long term. In a recent survey 83 per cent agreed that this was the case, compared to 45 per cent in 2001. The Council's performance appraisal scheme is applied to all of the Council's staff; it is supported by good guidance.
- 71** There are examples of service areas which have made intelligent use of appropriate methods to challenge and improve what they do. Following external inspection, housing repairs has improved significantly, with the introduction of clear standards and a clear priority system. Performance clinics, a regular forum for senior managers to review performance on a systematic basis, have addressed key issues in children's attainment at Key Stage 4. This resulted in the redirection of resources and the development of the 'Stepping Stones' initiative, informed directly by the analysis of data on pupil registration and attendance. The Council is thus able to address poor service performance resulting in better outcomes for users.
- 72** The Council with its partners has shown the capacity to learn from its experiences and apply those lessons to improve outcomes for residents. Attempts to influence the housing market in Claremont have not been successful, leading the Council to put greater emphasis on 'place-making' in tackling poor quality rental accommodation. The success of the Brunswick 'reassurance' project in driving down both crime and the fear of crime, has led the Council and its partners to extend the project to another deprived neighbourhood (Revoe), through the application of mainstream funding.

What has been achieved?

- 73 Overall performance in this area is good.
- 74 The shared priorities are being delivered through each of the Council's three corporate goals. The Council has prioritised economic regeneration as the key to securing the longer-term sustainability of the town and the life chances of its residents. It has a well-developed focus on public health and community safety with particular emphasis on the wellbeing of children and vulnerable people. It has strengthened capacity in these areas especially through increasingly effective partnership working.
- 75 The Council and its partners have adapted the national priorities to reflect local circumstances. They have done this by targeting effort, external funding and mainstream resources towards those issues and localities where they can have most impact. Innovative programmes, landmark schemes and good cross-agency working are beginning to produce tangible results. This is particularly so in the most deprived areas, where measures to arrest community decline and improve reassurance are making a clear difference for local people.
- 76 Although the delivery and performance management frameworks for the Council's ambitions are not complete, a pragmatic approach is enabling the Council to work very effectively with partners to deliver improvements for local communities. Underlying conditions are still very poor, but using successful and imaginative approaches the Council is delivering its major programmes of physical regeneration. Crime levels are relatively high but with its partners the Council has achieved some notable successes in tackling crime and disorder and the harm resulting from drug misuse. It is working well with partners to improve the health of people living in the town and to secure greater independence for more vulnerable older people, but it is not taking a wider approach to services for older people.. Work amongst vulnerable groups such as substance misusers or children at risk of exploitation, is proving to be effective. The Council's wider contribution to achieving outcomes for children and young people is good.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 77 The Council has taken significant steps towards the achievement of its ambition for a 'New Blackpool', including setting up the Urban Regeneration Company (URC), adopting the Master Plan and securing funding for regeneration projects. The core concept of the Council's approach is to reverse the town's long decline through reinvigoration of its main industry, tourism, to take advantage of a burgeoning leisure market. Although plans for the future regeneration of Blackpool rest to a significant extent on the Master Plan and the Casino bid, the Council is working well with partners to attract external funding and to implement regeneration initiatives which are already having an impact.

- 78 The first results of the £400 million initial phase are beginning to appear, with strengthened sea defences incorporating walkways, improved street lighting and gateway improvements to the town. The Master Plan for the town will inject significant capital investment to build a mix of facilities including hotels, a conference centre and casino as well as refurbishment to Hounds Hill shopping centre and a new civic complex.
- 79 The Council does not have an explicit overarching strategy for physical, economic and social regeneration and its plans are not linked into an overall approach to social and economic renewal. However, consideration of social impact is built into the Casino plans with the aim of maximising benefits to local communities, including the most disadvantaged, while mitigating the potential harmful effects of gambling. Statistical analysis of the borough's present economic situation is sound and includes assessment of the jobs that will be created and the skills that local people will need to gain access to these.
- 80 Imaginative and relevant programmes such as the Hoteliers into Training project show that the Council is beginning to put this knowledge to good use. It has been working actively with partners to enable residents to fill the 26,000 jobs that the Masterplan is expected to create or safeguard, and it has collaborated with Blackpool and Fylde College on training programmes for the casino industry. This approach is producing some results, with qualification scores at post-16 level strongly improving and now above the national average.
- 81 The Council is working to make local communities more sustainable. The Integrated Neighbourhood Initiative (INI) has achieved success with co-ordinated multi-agency inputs into neighbourhoods such as Talbot & Brunswick and the Grange Park estate, tackling health, housing, employment and community safety; the initiative is now being extended to three further areas. The Council is currently refurbishing the former town centre Lido into an enterprise centre that will provide low-cost managed workspace for business start-ups. Two new business parks have provided 3,000 jobs.
- 82 The Council is collaborating with local residents to create more green space (including a new park) and play space, both of which are at a premium in this densely urban borough. Residents have participated in some of the design schemes and are already noticing improvements to their immediate local environment. The environmental services that contribute to a sustainable community are generally meeting standards but the cleanliness of the borough is below average, which is a concern for a borough dependent on visitors for prosperity. Recycling rates have improved significantly and exceed government targets.
- 83 The borough suffers from problems of housing market failure, linked to the current oversupply of holiday accommodation. The Council is working well with housing associations to deal with some of the consequences and has achieved notable success in some priority neighbourhoods. It has worked with government agencies to gain recognition of the specific characteristics of housing problems in Blackpool. It does not, however, have a coherent strategy for addressing problems of an unbalanced housing supply, an old housing stock, a large private rented sector of poor quality, and a high number of houses in multiple occupation.

These lead to distortions in the local market and increase problems associated with transience and unstable households.

- 84 Progress towards creating alternatives to car traffic has been hampered by the withdrawal of direct intercity rail services and the lack of success, so far, of the crucial project to upgrade the tramway. The new draft local transport plan recognises these issues; it has clear aims related to the town's Masterplan and to the national transport strategy. Practical measures to tackle the significant planned increase in car-borne visitors await further studies. Over the period of the outgoing local transport plan, the Council has achieved some success in maintaining access to work by bus and increasing bus use. With an initial subsidy it has started up bus routes linking housing estates in the centre to peripheral employment sites and, more recently, it has increased its commitment to cycling, promoting cycle training and expanding its route network, though from a low base.

Safer and stronger communities

- 85 Crime levels are relatively high but there have been some significant reductions in burglary, theft from vehicles, common assault, criminal damage and in crimes committed by drug users.
- 86 There is a clear combined crime and drugs strategy for addressing the community plan theme of safer communities. It consists of a prioritised plan, widely supported, with good links to the national agenda and other plans. Community safety ambitions are clear and challenging. They are based on robust data and have been widely consulted across relevant sectors. This has allowed the Council together with partners to refine its priorities, to gain clear focus on priority neighbourhoods and to target prolific offenders.
- 87 The Council engages well with deprived communities to understand the patterns of crime and nuisance, and to develop joint responses. Using an intelligence led approach it has empowered those communities by enabling them to engage meaningfully with statutory agencies, resulting in solutions that are more sustainable. The Council with its partners also works well with excluded or marginalised groups to reduce fear of crime and build confidence, for example with hearing impaired people and with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender groups. Partners have learnt from these experiences and are in the process of extending the benefits to other neighbourhoods (Reassurance Plus) using mainstream resources targeted at residents' immediate concerns. The draft local area agreement also makes provision to support the continued roll-out. Fear of crime and levels of crime in the target areas have reduced at a faster rate than elsewhere in the borough.
- 88 The Crime, Disorder and Drugs Partnership has a coherent system for managing, monitoring and learning from performance, which includes specific targets and analysis for those neighbourhoods at greatest risk from the effects of crime and anti-social behaviour. The approach builds on earlier monitoring systems and, being at an early stage of development, is still to be fully integrated into the way the partnership is managed.

- 89 The Council has a sustained, corporate approach to addressing the problems of anti-social behaviour, criminal damage and violent crime. It has made adjustments in its planning and funding strategies to reflect these crime and disorder priorities. It has well co-ordinated arrangements for responding to anti-social behaviour. A multi-agency team with wide representation operates to ensure consistency, avoid duplication, and co-ordinate enforcement.
- 90 The Council with its partners is having significant success in tackling harm resulting from substance abuse. Partnership working is good with strong voluntary sector involvement (AdAction; ADS; Drugline). Arrangements are well integrated in terms of treatment and provision. An innovative scheme for those with a drug dependency has dramatically reduced the death rate for participants. The partnership has consistently met targets for those in treatment and retained in treatment, providing opportunity for individuals to make the transition to more stable living. The programme has been commended by the National Treatment Agency as the best performing in the region.
- 91 The Council and its partners have had notable successes in reducing drug and alcohol related crime. An innovative multi-agency project (Tower) has enabled partners to reduce the impact of acquisitive crime by a core group of prolific offenders who are also drug users. Independent evaluation has confirmed significant reductions (30 per cent) in crime levels, accompanied by improving health and reducing homelessness amongst the target group. The project has been cited by the Home Office as good practice. Another ground-breaking initiative (Nightsafe) has been effective in reducing that element of violent crime which is alcohol related and has been identified as a national exemplar of good practice. The Council and its partners are incorporating a strategic approach to alcohol harm reduction, with baselines, outcome targets and resourced plans, into the new Local Area Agreement.
- 92 The Council has improved its arrangements for emergency planning. It has introduced training and defined roles and responsibilities. It has demonstrated that it can respond to emergencies by testing its plans and running likely scenarios. It has applied the learning from these exercises to further refine its arrangements. The Council has participated with other resorts and local agencies in the Lancashire Resilience Forum to identify relevant risks and to create a community risk register. However business continuity arrangements are less well advanced and have not yet been fully implemented. Although the Council has demonstrated its capability in responding to the loss of a school and a Sure Start facility through fire, the Council cannot be confident about its overall ability to deliver critical services in an emergency.
- 93 The Council encourages active citizenship but its current approaches are not part of a coherent overall strategy for community engagement. Young people have been fully involved in the preparation of the CYP strategy. A thriving tenants' liaison forum, supported by the council, enables tenants to make a difference to the quality of life on their estates. Area forums give opportunity for the Council and other stakeholders to understand the views, needs and preferences of local people and have a small budget to be used for local projects.

An experiment with postal voting increased turnout from 27 per cent in 1999 to 51 per cent in the 2003 election. The Council has signed a new but untested Compact with the community and voluntary sector. These opportunities give some people a strong sense of participation. However, lack of a coherent approach poses the risk of overlooking some key groups, wasting effort and giving unclear signals about how people might be involved.

- 94 The Council is further ahead than most other similar authorities in addressing the needs of its large transient population. It has established good networking arrangements through schools to ensure that more vulnerable pupils are not disadvantaged. Problems of community cohesion and individual vulnerability are being addressed through creative projects such as Reassurance and Springboard. It recognises the need for a strategic approach and is collecting data to better understand the nature and complexity of the problem, prior to the preparation of a formal strategy.

Healthier communities

- 95 The Council and its partners have had some success in achieving their ambitions for healthier communities. The health of Blackpool's residents, as measured by life expectancy, is improving, but the gap between Blackpool and the national average has more than doubled in the last decade. The life expectancy gap for men reduced from 4.2 years in 2000-2002 to 3.3 years in 2002-2004, deaths from injuries and poisoning, road accidents and suicide have reduced; road accident casualties are now below the national average and no children were killed on the roads last year. Teenage pregnancy rates have fallen by 11 per cent. The success rate of smoking cessation in Blackpool exceeds the national average. Partners are currently focusing on accidents and falls in the home, especially for older people.
- 96 Arrangements for tackling the health agenda in Blackpool are good. The Council has very good relations with the (coterminous) PCT, and informal networks are strong. The post of Director of Public Health is a joint one, and the Council is in the process of recruiting a health policy officer within its corporate policy unit. Each directorate has a lead person for health, and major departments such as environment and housing can articulate the contribution they are making to improving health. The Council is therefore well positioned to play its part in attacking health inequalities in the borough.
- 97 The Council has rightly taken a strategic view of health inequality. It recognises that high levels of deprivation and unstable lifestyles, associated with poverty and transience, are major determinants of poor health. It has been innovative and proactive in developing its own policy approach to the health agenda, focussing on physical and economic regeneration as the lever to raise people's levels of health.

- 98 Supported by the PCT, the Council has had a draft health plan prepared; the first phase concentrates on lifestyle factors, and the second phase will include actions to improve housing conditions and increase walking and cycling. Some of these are already in place; so for example the Council focuses its housing improvement programme on installing or upgrading heating and insulation and improving energy efficiency.
- 99 The Council works well with partners to analyse and respond to the most serious health-related issues. Half the life expectancy gap for men, and most of it for women, is calculated to come from alcohol-related cirrhosis; in response to the high proportion of alcohol-related deaths, the PCT has overhauled rehabilitation and treatment, whilst the Council has worked with the police and the licensed trade to control consumption. These measures are beginning to have an impact on alcohol-related deaths in Blackpool.

Older people

- 100 The Council does not have a broad-based and coherent approach to addressing the wider needs and aspirations of older people in Blackpool. The relatively new 'Senior Voice' forum, which is led by Age Concern, is being developed to engage with older people on a wider range of issues; the first annual older people's conference was held in 2005. Current levels of engagement, however, are limited and the Council's focus has been in line with its priority of protecting vulnerable adults.
- 101 The Council is working well with partners in the health service to secure greater independence for more vulnerable older people, in line with the priorities stated in the corporate plan and the community plan. Through the Older People's Partnership Board the Council works with other providers who specialise in care services. Following consultation with service users, it has made changes in care planning, adaptations, and the development of local library services, making services more appropriate and relevant to people's needs.
- 102 Through joint investment programmes the Council and its health partners are providing better care services for elderly people with long term chronic disease, helping them to remain in their own home and retain independence. Agencies co-operate on projects to support older people, for instance in accident prevention, especially in targeted areas, where the Council has also facilitated inter-generational work to foster community pride and bridge the gap between young and old. It is piloting approaches with the PCT for using assistive technology to reduce the impact of falls in the home. Fewer people are being admitted to residential or nursing care. Equipment and adaptations delivered within 7 days is improving and is in line with the national average. The numbers of older people helped to live at home has improved in the current year by 4.5 per cent but only from a base position which had deteriorated in 2004/05.

'Just Ask' is an early example of the Council working well with partners from the voluntary sector to improve outcomes for older people in the form of increased benefit take-up, thus improving their means and potentially their quality of life. By adopting special procedures the Council together with partners has enabled older people who have a physical disability to claim their entitlement. Take up of benefits for those aged over 60 increased by 4.3 per cent over the period since 2004/05, cash gains amounting to £400,000 of additional benefit obtained.

- 103** Information to older people, especially more isolated groups, is fragmented and lacks co-ordination; there is an Older People's Readers Panel but this is focused on health and social care services rather than the wider agenda for older people. The Council has done some early work to ensure older people's social services reflect ethnic diversity, social inclusion and compliance with Race Relations (Amendment) Act but the approach is not comprehensive or systematic.

Children and young people

- 104** Support for children, young people and their families is a key priority for the council and its partners. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, acting as a Children's Trust, has clear and ambitious priorities for improving outcomes for children and young people in the borough. There is a history of effective joint working within the area and this has led to a number of well-targeted services to the most vulnerable young people.
- 105** Management of the council's services for children is good. Financial and resource management is generally good. The track record on service planning is mixed and some plans and strategies are not yet not fully developed to demonstrate how priorities will be achieved. Interagency work is a strong feature of the area and the capacity to achieve priorities is good. The Council's contribution to achieving outcomes for children and young people is good. Some areas remain a challenge and these include reducing the numbers of children looked after and the rate of child protection registrations.
- 106** The Director of Children's Services and Lead Member have been in place for over eighteen months but there have been no significant moves towards an integrated structure or pooled budgets. The council and its partners have taken a measured approach to implementing the new structures for delivering the Every Child Matters agenda. This is the best way forward as it enables a change in culture which is sustainable and which gives a firm foundation on which to integrate services and structures successfully. Arrangements are in place at senior management level to lead on the implementation of the Every Child Matters programme but not all staff have a clear picture of the route to achieving this.
- 107** The council works well with its partners and has secured good health outcomes for the majority of children in Blackpool. There are a range of programmes, which are impacting on healthy lifestyles, but some areas remain a challenge for the partners despite specific initiatives. These include the high incidence of asthma, smoking in pregnancy, low birth weight babies and lower than average breast-feeding rates.

Access to treatment services at CAMHS Tier 3 is problematic and children are experiencing long delays in accessing the service. However specific investment is being targeted to reduce waiting times. The level of teenage pregnancies remains high but recent figures show a significant reduction on the 2004 figures. There is well-targeted health and education support to young mothers.

- 108** On the evidence gathered by the Joint Area Review arrangements to safeguard children are adequate and children and young people appear safe. Child protection work is effectively managed and agencies work well to support children. There is some very good work to support children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and to prevent them from putting themselves at risk. Initial response arrangements are well managed but too many children enter the looked after and child protection system. Arrangements for the allocation of looked after children do not meet national recommendations as not all looked after children are allocated to a qualified worker. However, they are supported well under present arrangements. Children are placed for adoption within good timescales. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported by a specialist team but there is fragmentation of services across agencies. While there are a number of effective family support services further work needs to be done to bring these together under a preventative strategy to ensure there is more focus on early support to families in need before a crisis occurs.
- 109** Education achievement is adequate but the impact of services in a number of areas is good. Most children and young people attend school and enjoy their education. Children generally enter education with well below average level of skills but the educational standards achieved in primary school are broadly in line with comparator councils and the rates of improvement are above the national average. Some of the best value added scores are achieved in some primary and secondary schools in the most deprived areas of Blackpool. Attendance is below the national average and levels of permanent exclusions have fallen in primary school but remain high in the secondary sector. The quality of provision for children excluded needs addressing and more needs to be done to reintegrate them back into mainstream education. Looked after children and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported to achieve well.
- 110** The council places a high priority on involving young people in decision-making. The Children and Young People's Plan reflects children's views and many services have taken young people's views into account in shaping service delivery. Young people are aware of the Masterplan but some feel they have not been adequately consulted and have concerns about what benefit regeneration will offer them. Strategies are in place to address bullying and some schools have taken innovative steps to deal with the problem. However, young people remain seriously concerned about bullying because they experience a lack of consistency in the way some teachers are not responding to the problem. A range of activities is available to redirect young people away from anti-social behaviour including access to leisure and volunteering. Looked after young people have access to advocacy and complaints processes. However they do not have a forum in which to bring them together to make their views known to the council as a corporate parent.

- 111 Local services are making a good contribution to the economic well-being of young people. Most children are prepared well for working life and have access to advice about the different routes available to them. They have good access to work placements. There is good support to young people looked after and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to help them access provision. The number of young people not in education, training and employment has reduced significantly and is just above national benchmarks. Success rates in further education are in line with national averages. There has been slow progress in developing a comprehensive 14–19 curriculum to maximise the use of resources and to overcome duplication or gaps in provision. Supplies of adequate housing are limited and the length of stays in hostels is higher than the national average. However regeneration initiatives have been targeted at the some of the most deprived areas to redevelop housing stock.

Appendix 1 - Framework for corporate assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Blackpool Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 10-19 January 2006.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.