

Service Inspection Report

June 2006



Environment Inspection

Redditch Borough 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 (KLOE) 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.

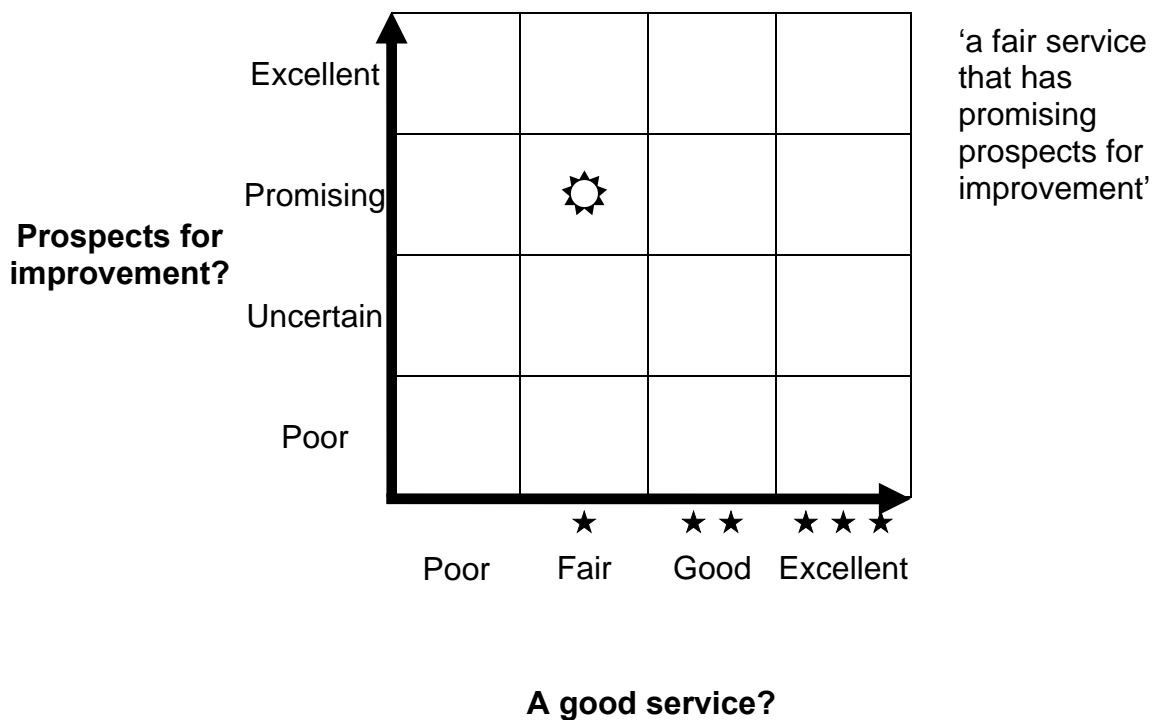
Summary

- 1 Redditch Borough is a relatively compact area (5,435 hectares) in North Worcestershire with a population of 79,000. Development of Redditch as a new town has resulted in distinct communities focused around district centres, a large country park running through the town, and large amounts of other open space with several million trees on council land. The road system segregates footways and includes 94 underpasses. The borough has unusually high levels of children and young people and only 7.3 per cent of the population from black ethnic minority communities.
- 2 Environment and planning services have a key part to play in delivering the Council's priorities of improving community safety, protecting and improving the environment and transport, promoting best standards in housing and health; providing a wide range of opportunities for leisure and tourism; and being a well managed organisation.
- 3 The purpose of the inspection was to establish how effectively environment and planning services contribute to the protection and enhancement of Redditch's environment. We also focused on the way the Council communicates its environmental messages and how people access the services. The service areas included waste collection and recycling, planning policy and development control; building control, environmental health, street cleansing, enforcement, landscaping/open space and countryside. These are some of the Council's most important public-facing services employing around 230 people (28 per cent of the Council workforce), and with a net revenue budget in 2005/06 of £4.9 million (35 per cent of the Council's budget).
- 4 Overall, the Council's environment and planning services are 'fair'. The local environment is improving. It is clean, well maintained and safer as a result of recent investment, and there are good outcomes from the planning process. However, overall performance, particularly in waste/recycling is below the median for English councils; the Council does not have a systematic approach to minimising its impact on the environment, and some aspects of customer access are variable in quality and services overall, do not provide particularly good value for money. External communication, particularly with the media, is of limited effectiveness.
- 5 There are promising prospects for the improvement of the services. Improvement plans and new policies address most service weaknesses and have the potential to deliver efficiency savings. The Council has adequate resources to deliver the improvement and there is a successful track record of improvement in services like planning, landscaping and litter enforcement. However, the Council has a track record of being slow to deliver improvements in some areas like recycling and has a challenging agenda for change which will stretch capacity in the short to medium-term.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Redditch Borough Council as providing a 'fair', one-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.

7 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- the Council is successfully using environmental and planning services to contribute to improved community safety;
- the borough is clean and well maintained as a result of investment in landscaping and street cleaning services;
- there are good outcomes from the planning process including a good level of affordable housing and environmental benefits; and
- the Council puts the needs of citizens and users at the heart of designing services and improvements.

8 However:

- overall comparative performance in these services below the median for English councils; satisfaction with services is mixed;
- the waste/recycling service is not value for money;
- access to services is complex and of a variable standard across services, and there are few customer standards in place;
- the Council does not currently have a systematic approach to reducing its own use of resources or impact on the environment; and
- external communication is of limited effectiveness.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- resourced plans are in place to deliver service improvements, some of which have the potential to deliver efficiency savings;
- service capacity is good, with the effective use of the private sector in planning to maintain performance levels;
- services can demonstrate a successful track record of improvement: there has been a significant turnaround in planning performance and environmental improvements have been delivered that are visible to local people; and
- value for money is improving in some areas.

10 However:

- performance in key indicators has lagged behind that of other councils;
- progress with improving the performance in areas such as waste/recycling, customer access and e-enabled service has been slow; and
- the Council's ambitious plans will continue to stretch corporate capacity in the short – medium-term.

Recommendations

- 11 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 value for money in environment and planning services by:

- identifying and delivering robust service improvements and/or efficiencies from recent/future investments in services;*
- reducing customer access points to take advantage of corporate systems and capacity at the same time re-engineer back office processes to improve efficiency;*
- using improved information on unit costs/benchmarking data and encouraging greater challenge of VFM service data through the relevant scrutiny group; and*
- exploring alternative methods of service delivery for appropriate areas such as the Arrow Valley Country Park, including further outsourcing, partnerships, trusts etc.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient services and reduced service costs;
- improved challenge and more rapid deployment of new methods and technology to improve services; and
- a sharper focus for the Council, and delivery of the Council's aim to facilitate more and deliver less in the future.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium to high costs. This should be implemented by September 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 Improve the impact of external communication within these services by:

- *building ongoing and proactive, relationships with the local media by senior officers and lead members;*
- *including a stakeholder communication plan for all new service projects and initiatives;*
- *developing a single point of contact for the local media;*
- *developing relevant member and staff media skills through training and personal development;*
- *consider the use of external input (for example, from other authorities and or the private sector) to check the impact of strategically important communications;*
- *setting clear, consistent, standards for external service publications, including the website, leaflets posters etc; and*
- *benchmark external communications to identify and deploy good practice.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more effective communication of the Council's aims and successes;
- more effective management of the public fall-out from mistakes;
- improving perception of the Council by residents and other stakeholders;
- more buy-in and understanding of the Council's implementation of change; and
- more targeted and effective use of resources.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 12 Redditch Borough is a relatively compact area (5,435 hectares) in North Worcestershire. Developed as a new town between 1964 and 1985, Redditch attracted significant numbers of new residents and businesses due to its close proximity to the Birmingham conurbation and good transport links. Most of the 79,000 population live in the town of Redditch, which covers around half of the geographic area of the borough. The rural area includes the more traditional settlements of Astwood Bank and Feckenham, and much of this is green belt.
- 13 Redditch has an unusual population profile, having a comparatively high proportion of children and young people; 20.6 per cent compared with 19.5 per cent nationally, and a lower percentage of people over the age of 65; 12.7 per cent compared with 16 per cent nationally. Only 7.3 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities compared with 13.9 per cent regionally and 13 per cent nationally. Redditch is ranked as 146th most of deprived of 354 English districts. However, there is wide variation across the district and 23 per cent of the population live in the most deprived 20 per cent nationally. Levels of unemployment are below both regional and national averages, as are average earnings.
- 14 Development of Redditch as a new town was based upon segregated land uses. This has resulted in distinct communities focused around district centres, a large country park running through the town, and large amounts of other open space with several million trees on council land. The road system segregates footways and includes 94 underpasses. There is a large purpose built indoor shopping centre which dominates the town centre and is very successful, but local shops and facilities in the district centres can struggle to be financially viable.
- 15 There are good road links around the town with free flowing traffic and little congestion. This encourages a dependence on the car and two-car ownership is higher than the national average. Car parking is an issue on estates because of their design. The road, footpath and underpass system contributes to the fear of crime and highlights litter and maintenance issues.
- 16 The Council has an above average number of council houses with 19.3 per cent of the population living in council owned housing. Whilst average house prices are lower than the regional and national averages, affordable housing is a recognised need as the Council has over 1,700 people on its housing waiting list.

The Council

- 17 The Council returned to a Labour Party-led administration in June 2004 after two years of 'no overall' control. Of the 29 members, there are 16 Labour, 10 Conservative and 3 Liberal Democrat. In 2002, the Council adopted a leader and cabinet political structure, with six portfolio holders, with the other members sitting on the overview and scrutiny and regulatory committees. The majority of decisions are made by the Council at its meeting rather than by the executive.
- 18 The Council became debt free in 2002. However, reserves have been used in the past to balance the budget. Over £1 million in revenue savings have been delivered since 2002/03 and a further £356,000 agreed for the 2006/07 revenue budget. The 2005/06 net revenue budget is £11.2 million with a capital programme budget of £27 million.
- 19 The corporate management team (CMT) comprises the Borough Director plus four directors responsible for environment and planning, community services, housing and asset management, and leisure, customer and business support. The borough directorate covers legal, finance, democratic services, audit and policy teams. The Council employs over 1,200 people (657 full-time equivalents).
- 20 The Council has a wide range of facilities and services, most of which are delivered in-house. These include: a theatre, a museum, an archaeological site, 12 community centres, 5 sports centres (3 being dual use), 2 swimming pools plus other leisure facilities. For example, a golf course, a water sports centre, a countryside centre (built in 1999), and a council-run adult learning and training centre.

The scope of the inspection

- 21 The purpose of the inspection was to establish how effectively environment and planning services contribute to the protection and enhancement of Redditch's environment. We also focused on the way the Council communicates its environmental messages and how people access environmental services.
- 22 The service areas covered by the inspection, at a strategic level included waste collection and recycling, planning policy and development control, building control; environmental health, street cleansing, enforcement, landscaping/open space and countryside. These are some of the Council's most important public facing services and cover some of the areas of weakness identified in the 2004 comprehensive performance assessment (CPA), which rated the Council overall as 'fair'.
- 23 The Council's agreed improvement plan includes the following three priorities:
 - to tackle the worst performing services to secure sustained improvement;
 - to improve communication/engagement, particularly external communication, public satisfaction and complaint handling; and
 - to integrate plans and link them to an effective performance management framework.

- 24 The Council is no longer a planning standards authority but was identified as one in 2004/05 and had been working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to improve the time taken to process planning applications. Therefore detailed inspection of the development control process was limited to avoid duplication.
- 25 Environment and planning services employs about 230 people, (28 per cent of the Council workforce), with a revenue budget in 2005/06 of £4.9 million, (35 per cent of the Council's budget). The Council's communications team of three people sit in the Borough Directorate.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26** The Council and its partners share an overall vision, broad aims and priorities for the district. This is for Redditch to *'be successful and vibrant, with sustainable communities built on partnership and shared responsibility and for people to be proud that they live or work in Redditch by the year 2020'*. The community strategy is based around seven broad aims including 'better environment, safer communities and healthy communities. These clearly reflect local people's concerns.
- 27** Environmental issues and the quality of life for local residents are reflected in the Council's five stated priorities in the corporate plan. Environment and planning services contribute to either directly or indirectly to all of these:
- improving the reality and perception of community safety;
 - protecting and improving the environment and transport;
 - promoting best standards in housing and health;
 - providing a wide range of opportunities for leisure and tourism; and
 - being a well managed organisation.
- 28** The Council has a well established understanding of the legacy of the new town and its resulting pressures on managing the natural and built environment, local communities and the quality of life. However, this contextual information is not always explicitly expressed in its strategic plans.
- 29** The corporate plan 2005/08 states that *'In three years time, the Council will deliver less and facilitate more...'* It is actively engaged in several partnerships to deliver its ambitious change agenda including the following.
- The Redditch Partnership, the LSP to deliver on cross-agency projects/ improvements identified in the community strategy.
 - The Herefordshire and Worcestershire Joint Municipal Waste Forum (JMWF) to address the national waste agenda. In the short-term, this includes the delivery of a stretched recycling target of 24 per cent in 2005/06, and participation in waste minimisation and recycling initiatives. Longer-term plans include the provision of infrastructure to divert waste and recycled materials from landfill.
 - The Worcestershire Hub e-government partnership, to deliver improved access to services through effective use of ICT in one-stop shops, a contact centre and exploration of shared services.

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- The Crime Reduction Partnership to target resources into reducing crime and the fear of crime.
 - The Worcestershire Liveability Partnership to deliver green space regeneration schemes.
 - The Bus Quality partnership to improve public transport.
- 30 Development in the district is guided and controlled by the development plan - the Redditch Local Plan2 (LP2). The Council has responded to changes in the planning system which replaces local plans and the regional structure plan with a local development framework (LDF) and regional spatial strategies. A local development scheme (LDS) has been agreed with the Government Office of the West Midlands and a draft statement of community involvement is currently being consulted on.
- 31 The Council's LP2 for the area was adopted in 1996 and covered the period up to 2001. Therefore, it does not reflect more recent local or regional needs or national priorities. However, the Worcestershire Structure plan was adopted in 2001 and the Regional spatial strategy was adopted in 2004, which inform the local plan for Redditch. A replacement local plan, the LP3 is in the final stages of preparation and is planned to be adopted in June 2006. Due to the implementation of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act in 2004 the LP3 will be 'saved' to June 2009. The core strategy and associated policies will continue to relate to the period up to 2011, subject to revisions as a result of the LDF consultation process outlined above.
- 32 The Council's LP3 draft is linked to the community strategy and corporate plan and has policies to support these and the regional spatial strategy. The core strategy has new policies including; to encourage the prudent use of natural resources, encourage high quality design and local distinctiveness, promote integrated transport and land use, deliver economic development objectives and protect and enhance biodiversity It also identifies the Abbey Stadium site for a major sports/leisure facility which will be of sub-regional significance. This ambition is currently being pursued via a partnership PFI with the private sector.

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

- 33 The Council puts the needs of citizens and users at the heart of designing services and improvements. It is developing its approach to meeting diverse needs but has not systematically assessed services to ensure this is happening. The way that local people and service users gain access to the services is complex and of a variable standard across services, external communication has limited effectiveness and the Council has few customer standards in place. The quality of the local environment is improving; it is clean and safer as a result of investment in landscaping and street cleaning services and there are good outcomes from the planning process. However, the Council does not currently have a systematic approach to reducing its own use of resources or impact on the environment performance indicators overall are below the median, waste and recycling performance is comparatively poor, and public satisfaction is mixed.

Access, customer care and user and/or community focus

- 34** The Council has good arrangements in place for consulting with the public and service users. A range of techniques are used, for example targeted and general survey, focus groups, publicity stands and road shows. The approach used is targeted to reach specific groups of customers. The environment and planning service plan 2005/08 shows a planned, proactive approach is taken by identifying what consultation is taking place, who is being consulted, when it is happening and how. This enables consultation to be better co-ordinated, avoids 'consultation fatigue' and enables effective deployment of resources.
- 35** The needs of citizens and users are accounted for in designing services and improvements. The Council can demonstrate many ways in which it has used information from consultation and complaints to improve services. For example, in November 2003, the citizens' panel was asked to explore the low level of satisfaction with street cleansing. The main issues identified by the panel were the cleanliness of underpasses and a lack of enforcement. As a result, the Council in partnership with Worcestershire County Council (which has statutory responsibility for underpass maintenance) embarked on a programme of underpass enhancement and maintenance and two full-time waste enforcement officers have been employed. Resources and effort has therefore been targeted at areas that are important to local people.
- 36** Internal communications are effective and staff are generally helpful and knowledgeable. The Council uses a range of internal communication methods including team briefing, newsletters and the Council's intranet, and also encourages feedback and input. As a result, front line staff have a good understanding of what's going on inside and outside their service area and are able to deal with customer queries within their level of authority or know where to pass the query on to.
- 37** Customer access to environment and planning services is complex, and as a result, customers do not receive a consistent level of service. The Council has a number of ways for people to access these services including:
- for face-to-face queries: four one-stop shops and a separate planning and building control reception; and
 - for telephone queries: a customer contact centre, various 'hot lines' , a main switchboard and a large number of direct dial facilities.
- 38** These access channels are deployed depending on the particular query, so for example, the one-stop shops and the customer contact centre can only deal with fairly simple waste queries such as bulky collections. Access to advice or requests for other services such as abandoned vehicles and landscape maintenance is via 'hot lines' managed within individual services. As a result of these different points of access to the services, the quality of service that customers receive varies. For example, whereas access to planning advice is good, with a good range of published planning policy guidance to help, customers with other service queries experience regular long queues in the town hall one-stop shop, no standard opening times and variable response times.

39 External communication by the services is variable and overall is limited in its effectiveness. For example:

- the Council's website is poor and unreliable. Many of the linkages to information and documents for these services do not consistently work, the structure and layout makes navigation difficult, and the content is of variable quality. In particular, the use of council terminology rather than plain English makes using the site difficult for users. The poor reliability, layout and navigation also means that the benefits from the Council's investment of putting planning services online is not maximised;
- service communication with the media is not effective. Press releases are of variable quality but in general lack context to effectively set the scene for the reader. Media stories are not always proactive or effectively co-ordinated. In general, the Council lacks a close working relationship with the local press and radio. This means that the Council is not making the most of the media to get messages across in a positive and constructive manner to very wide audiences;
- council-produced leaflets and publicity campaign material are of variable quality. There is no corporate or consistent service style or standards set and departments are able to develop their own materials. As a result, the use of branding, Plain English and colour is inconsistent. As the majority of materials are not 'road tested' by users first the Council cannot be sure that they will be effective. For example, the use of colour and font on anti-litter campaign posters makes them difficult to read for people with moderate sight problems;
- the Council is not using signage effectively to promote service facilities and provide clear information for service users. For example, there is inadequate signage to the Arrow Valley Country Park from the town's road network and the entrance signage is not prominent or clear about what is on offer. A proliferation of signs at the Council's town hall one-stop shop is confusing, particularly as the automated queuing system must be used in order to see a customer advisor;
- the Council does not ensure that it effectively communicates the outcomes from consultation. Where the Council has acted upon input from consultees, it sometimes misses the opportunity to let them know what has been done. In the case of some neighbourhood groups, the lack of feedback from queries raised or results of consultation with the Council on environment matters such as landscaping and litter had led to a reduction in attendance at liaison meetings; and
- formal complaint handling is well managed, responsive and information gained is used to improve service delivery and identify staff training needs. However, the Council does not apply the same standards to informal complaints and is slow to respond to ombudsman complaints. In 2004/05 the performance for responding to ombudsman complaints was in the worst 25 per cent nationally at just over 36 days, although this has improved to 22.5 days on average in 2005/06.

- 40 The lack of effective external communication can have a negative impact on the public's perception of these services and the Council overall. In 2003/04 less than 50 per cent of residents thought the Council kept them fairly or well informed.
- 41 There are few customer standards in place for environment and planning services and performance is not published where they do exist. Although the Council has a set of generic customer service standards for responding to letters and answering the telephone, specific standards are not in place for the majority of environment and planning services. This means that customers do not know what the Council's response times are for example to landscaping or litter complaints. The Council is also missing the opportunity to get recognition where performance is good and services are responsive.

Diversity

- 42 Environment and planning services are responsive to diversity issues and human rights and there are some good examples where this has shaped service delivery. For example:
- the environmental health service has tailored its delivery of food hygiene training to meet the needs of the local Urdu community, by using visual and oral training aids rather than written material;
 - the waste service provides a pull-out service for people who require help to position their waste containers at the kerbside for collection;
 - in building control, cultural differences are generally understood and taken account of when officers visit users in their own homes; and
 - the planning process is inclusive in relation to minority needs such as the Redditch Mosque, by using appropriate languages in all key documents.
- 43 The Council has achieved level one equalities but has not completed equality impact assessments across all environment and planning services although it plans to so. Therefore the Council does not know to what extent it does embrace and meet diverse needs and where gaps in provision remain.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 44 The quality of the local environment is improving through the Council's efforts of targeting areas that were previously hotspots for crime and littering. A programme for capital landscape improvements was established in 2001 to reduce ongoing maintenance of open space and improve community safety and the local environment. The work is focused around what local people have identified as their issues and has successfully transformed previously overgrown and unsafe areas, removing over 8,000 trees and thousands of square metres of shrubs so far. At the same time, the borough's 94 underpasses have been enhanced to remove graffiti and improve lighting. Resources are now in place to ensure that standards are maintained. Estate enhancement programmes in deprived wards such as Batchley is also contributing to improvements in community safety and community wellbeing.

- 45 The Council has achieved mixed success in meeting local regional and national objectives to protect and enhance the natural and built environment, create sustainable communities and minimise environmental impacts through policies including transport and waste. The published performance indicators (PIs) also show that comparative performance is poor, with 12 indicators below the median and only four above the median for 2004/05.
- The Council is behind others in embracing the national agenda to reduce, re-use and recycle more waste. The Council is recycling/composting a comparatively low percentage of the waste it collects. At 16 per cent in 2004/05, this is in the lowest 25 per cent of all councils. More has been recycled this year, but this has only risen to around 17 per cent. In accordance with the JMWS, the Council only collects dry recyclable materials but not all households have access to a kerbside recycling scheme. Only 66 per cent of households were served by a kerbside recycling scheme, in the lowest 25 per cent of councils, in 2004/05 although this increased to 83 per cent in 2005/06.
 - The Council is not effective in minimising the amount of waste it collects in order to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. The Council collected 417 kg per head of population in 2004/05, above the median for all councils and this has remained largely static during 2005/06 with 415 kg per head of population being collected. Residents are provided with a 240 litre wheeled bin as standard and operates a weekly collection. Although there are policies in place for not collecting side waste or from overfilled bins, the Council has no agreed policy for the provision of second bins. Historically, these have been provided with little qualifying or consistent criteria. Although this is changing, the Council currently does not have accurate figures for the number of second bins in the borough, but thinks it is significant. The lack of clear policies on waste minimisation counteracts the impact of education schemes such as 'mission impossible' to encourage residents to reduce and recycle waste from their homes.
 - The Council achieves good outcomes from its planning process. The Council has supplementary planning guidance to promote quality in areas such as listed buildings, domestic extensions, replacement windows and business expansion. This results in mostly high quality residential developments and successful integration of industry. In general, development has been sensitive to the predominantly green and wooded nature of the borough. The Council has also used the planning process to deliver best quartile performance in the provision of affordable housing (around 70 of the 350 new homes per year are affordable) and using money from planning gain (known as S106) to fund the improvements to the borough's underpasses as outlined above.

- However, the Council has only recently recovered from comparatively poor performance in the planning service. Overall performance in planning in 2004/05 was below the median. All three performance indicators measuring the speed of processing planning applications improved over the previous two years but one, for 'other', mainly householder applications was in the worst 25 per cent nationally at 77 per cent. In addition, performance on the number of applications granted on appeal was also in the worst quartile nationally at 41 per cent. Performance has continued to improve across the service during 2005/06; the Council exceeded all government targets for the speed of processing; performance in the percentage of new homes built on previously developed land was good at 95 per cent and the percentage of applications granted on appeal reduced to 15 per cent.
 - The Council uses the facilities at the Arrow Valley Countryside Centre and Country Park to make a contribution to cross-cutting agendas such as health and well being, leisure and environmental education. This is achieved through a varied programme of walks, cycle routes, sporting activities, craft and nature conservation activities.
 - Streets and footpaths in the borough are clean and improving. Performance in 2004/05 was in the best 25 per cent of all councils at 9 per cent of land littered to a heavy or significant extent, down from 14 per cent in 2003/04. Fly-tips and graffiti are removed generally within one day. The Council has adopted powers to remove abandoned vehicles and is doing this quickly.
- 46** The Council has developed some good individual approaches to addressing wider environmental issues including the management in its own operations, For example:
- investing in council stock to improve heating and insulation in target areas such as Batchley. The SAP rating of the Council's stock has improved over the past three years and is currently 69, in the best 25 per cent of all councils;
 - implementing a policy to include on-site composting facilities in new developments of 15 dwellings or more; and
 - purchasing green energy.
- 47** However, these examples are not part of a systematic process or overarching strategy; an officer/member environment advisory group was formed in 2005 to establish the Council's approach to these issues. Therefore, although the Council has achieved some good outcomes, it is not currently able to assess its environmental impacts or prioritise where resources should be targeted in the future.

- 48 The Council can demonstrate some success in delivering what it sets out to do.
- By meeting internal targets for carrying out scheduled environmental health food inspections during 2005/06. In 2004/05 only 67 per cent of scheduled high risk inspections were carried out.
 - By taking enforcement action to act as a deterrent to litter and fly tipping; a total of 300 enforcement actions including over 35 fixed penalty notices were issued in 2005.
 - By delivering a responsive and effective building control service; meeting all internal and statutory targets for plan checks, visits and enquiries and exceeding the income target for 2004/05 by over £12,000.
- 49 Public satisfaction with environment and planning services is mixed. The performance indicator survey data compiled in 2003/04 revealed:
- satisfaction with parks, open spaces and recycling to be above the median of all English councils and improving over the 2000/01 position;
 - improving satisfaction with the cleanliness of the borough (up from 51 per cent in 2000/01 to 57 per cent in 2003/04); but
 - there is declining satisfaction with waste collection and planning. In the case of planning, a satisfaction rating of only 65 per cent in 2003/04 is in the worst 25 per cent of all English councils.
- 50 At corporate level, public satisfaction is low. Overall satisfaction with the Council dropped dramatically from 65 per cent in 2000/01 to 48 per cent in 2003/04 (figures adjusted to account for deprivation), a fall from above median performance to the worst 25 per cent nationally. Satisfaction with the way the Council handles complaints also fell from 33 per cent to only 25 per cent. The Council is conducting some research into why these levels are so low, but until this is clear, it is more difficult for the Council to effectively engage with local communities.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 51 Overall services are either not particularly cost effective or the Council cannot demonstrate value for money; although this varies between individual services. There has been limited exploration of alternative methods of service delivery in the large spending areas which are delivered in-house. However, the Council has started to use the private sector in smaller services and where this is in place this is providing value for money.

- 52** There is a limited focus on value for money within environment and planning services, the Council's main driver for change has been to improve performance and service quality. For example, investments to increase recycling rates through kerbside schemes has added around £500,000 to revenue spend in this area. There is limited use of comparative costs, whole life costing or unit costs in individual services, and charges that generate income are generally low. For example, the Arrow Valley Countryside Centre financial plan shows the gross operating cost for 2005/06 to be £260,500, income excluding grants at £70,000 and with a five-year capital investment programme of just over £300,000. However, the Council does not have a full picture about visitor numbers so does not know who the facility is benefiting and if it delivers value for money.
- 53** The Council is starting to use modern procurement methods to improve value for money. Most services are delivered in-house. However, there are recent examples where this is changing, for example, trade waste has been outsourced as the in-house service was making a loss, the collection of abandoned vehicles is delivered externally with good outcomes and the landscaping capital project is delivered through contracts subject to competitive tendering. The costs of the removal of graffiti is borne jointly with the county council with only £4,400 of the £34,400 spend coming from Redditch Borough Council. In planning, a contract to outsource some planning applications to the private sector is contributing to improved performance and has received national attention.
- 54** There has been limited exploration of alternative methods of procuring services in the larger spending areas. For example, the Arrow Valley County Park, waste collection and recycling, street cleansing and landscaping.
- 55** Whereas net service costs per head of population are comparatively low for street cleansing, environmental health, planning and waste they are high for parks/open spaces and other environmental services. The use of net costs can also mask areas of high spending and does not account for capital spend which is comparatively high in Redditch. Between 2004 and 2006, the capital programme for these services was £5.8 million. Gross costs for services like waste collection show that the service is relatively high cost and this is borne out by the PI which for 2004/05 was well above the median for all councils at £45.50 per household. External factors, such as the amount of landscaped areas contribute to increased overall costs in services such as landscaping and street cleansing, but the compact geographical nature of the borough has the opposite impact on waste collection costs. Unit costs for some landscaping operations such as grass cutting are in line with industry norms and have allowed the Council to successfully bid for external business in open competition with other providers. However, the Council does not have sufficient data to demonstrate a similar situation with street cleansing.

- 56 There is limited evidence of the use of business process re-engineering or the use of new technology to deliver improved value for money. Environment and planning services have not transferred all contact handling to the Council's contact centre or one-stop shops and where this is in place, the levels of delegation are low. The service's use of separate customer access arrangements is not making efficient use of resources. In services that are field-based, such as landscaping and waste, there is limited use of mobile technology to streamline data transfer and reduce support and administration costs.
- 57 There is a mixed picture of value for money provision within the services. For example:
- the waste collection and recycling service is above median cost but there is less pressure on transport costs than in geographically larger districts. Performance is comparatively poor and satisfaction mixed. Therefore this is not a value for money service;
 - the 2004/05 costs for planning services are £9.54 gross (£6.88 net) per head of population which is relatively low compared to other councils. However, the Council receives fewer planning applications than similar councils at just over 8 per 1,000 population (the 2003/04 national average was 13.7). Overall, current performance and costs are therefore commensurate with adequate value for money; and
 - performance on street cleansing is good and public satisfaction is improving. Overall costs for 2004/05 are £13.36 gross, £7.12 net per head of population. The Council does not have good unit costs information on the services so is not able to target efficiencies effectively. Overall, this may be commensurate with adequate value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 58** Environmental and planning services are developing a good track record in delivering improvement. There has been a significant turnaround in planning performance and improvements delivered to improve the local environment. Some efficiencies have also been delivered to improve value for money. Whilst performance in key indicators has lagged behind that of other councils' progress is being made, but the Council has been slow to embrace the waste agenda and deliver improvements that will improve customer access.
- 59** The Council has implemented changes which have significantly improved the planning service. These include the effective use of private sector planning consultants to process some applications and increase capacity, improved delegation levels and improved member training. Performance has dramatically improved and the Council has exceeded all three government targets set for the time to process applications for 2005/06. As a consequence, the ODPM has recently announced disengagement with the Council as a planning standards authority. Applicants can therefore be more confident that their planning application will be determined in a reasonable timeframe.
- 60** The Council can demonstrate significant improvements have been made to the local environment and quality of life for residents over the past three years. This is particularly evident in the outcomes from the landscaping and street cleansing services. Local areas are improving and better maintained which is contributing to cross-cutting benefits particularly in terms of reducing crime and the fear of crime. More open, cleaner footways are also encouraging walking rather than car use.
- 61** Services can demonstrate where some changes have improved efficiency and value for money. For example:
- expanding the provision of the kerbside recycling service to an additional 5000 properties though reducing the collection teams from three to two person gangs;
 - outsourcing the trade waste service has stemmed previous losses and is now making a modest return for the Council;
 - funding an additional landscaping team through a better management of overtime; and
 - delivery of the Council's capital landscape programme is resulting in a reduced number of complaints/requests for service. Down by almost a half from 4,121 in 2001/02 to 2,202 in 2004/05.

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- 62 Performance is improving but comparative performance is poor. The direction of travel of key environment performance indicators (PIs) over the past three years is generally one of improvement. Only one PI of nine where comparison is possible did not improve between 2002/03 and 2004/05, although there was a mixed picture with four PIs relating to satisfaction between 2000/01 and 2003/04. Two of these relate to public satisfaction with waste collection and planning services, and the third is the percentage of homes built on previously developed land. The published PIs also show that comparative performance is poor, with 12 indicators below the median and only four above the median for 2004/05. This means that services overall are getting better but still behind those in other councils.
- 63 Unaudited performance data for 2005/06 has continued to show improvement in previously weak areas. For example:
- performance on the percentage of appeals allowed against a decision to refuse permission was in the worst 25 per cent of all councils at 40 per cent in 2004/05. There has been a significant improvement during 2005/06 with only three of twenty appeals allowed in 2005/06; and
 - 249 of the 262 new homes built in 2005/06 were on previously developed or 'brownfield land'. This equates to 95 per cent, a significant increase on the 60 per cent achieved for 2004/05.
- 64 The Council is meeting the timescales for the development of its LDF and is expecting to adopt the LP3 in June 2006. The LP3 will comprehensively reflect national, regional and local needs. For example, ensuring effective community safety in new developments.
- 65 The Council has been slow to respond to the national waste agenda and deliver improvements in waste collection and recycling, and has not been effective in minimising the amount of waste it collects. New kerbside recycling schemes have been introduced, but the Council did not meet its JMWS target for 2005 of 92 per cent coverage. The Council only recycled/composted 16 per cent of its waste in 2004/05 and is predicting to just miss its 2005/06 statutory target of eighteen per cent and the 2006 LPSA target of 24 per cent. The introduction of more stringent policies on not collecting side waste or waste from overfilled wheeled bins in 2003/04 coincided in a reduction of waste collected for that year. However, the new kerbside recycling service has essentially added capacity by providing two additional recycling containers for householders whilst continuing to collect waste from a 240 litre wheeled bin on a weekly basis. As a consequence, the amount of waste the Council collected in 2004/05 is above the median and rose by 12 kg/head population to 417kg. By adding capacity for recycling, the Council has made it more challenging to introduce restrictions in bin size or frequency of collection as a way of addressing waste minimisation in the future.

- 66 The Council has been slow to deliver improvements to access to buildings for people with disabilities and the range of services that are capable of electronic service delivery. In 2004/05 only 52 per cent of council buildings were fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, although this improved during 2005/06 the Council has missed the target date in the legislation by over a year. Only 50 per cent of services were e-enabled in 2004/05, in the worst 25 per cent of all councils. Whereas the Council has made progress during 2005/06, residents have had to wait longer for improved access to services in the meantime.
- 67 The Council has also made slow progress in other areas which can influence the public perception of environment services and improve efficiency including:
- improvements to website particularly to address issues around the reliability of linkages and quality of information; identified in website assessments by external organisations such as SOCITM;
 - delivery of improved external communications; particularly those with the local media identified in the 2003 CPA assessment; and
 - the rationalisation of customer access points for environment contacts; identified as an issue in the 2001 best value inspection of waste.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 68 The Council has plans for improvement that cover most current service weaknesses. Performance management is developing with scrutiny providing effective challenge on service quality, and the Council is effectively learning from mistakes. However, a focus on value for money is under-developed, and the evaluation of investments is not always evident.
- 69 The Council's aims are simple and clear. However, they are broad and not all underpinned by specific and measurable objectives. The Council's five corporate priorities are supported by a set of around 70 improvement actions but these cover the majority of council functions and they are not all measurable or outcome-focused. For example, *'we will reduce the amount of household waste through extension of household collection of recycling materials'* and *'we will take action to promote sustainability in the town including embedding sustainability in organisation'*. As a result, it is not clear how the Council will know when they have delivered these priorities. The environment and planning service contributes to over half of the 70 improvement actions so that it is also difficult to see which of these are really important and priorities for the services.
- 70 Service and strategic planning is improving. There is a good level of integration between plans and strategies, for example it is clear how the new LP3, open space and biodiversity strategies contribute to the community strategy and service improvement. Service plans cover a three-year time frame, have clear links to corporate aims and objectives, include key improvement actions, identify risks, and planned stakeholder consultation. However, they still lack financial information such as resources, budget, income and targets for unit costs which would enable an increased focus on efficiency and value for money issues.

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- 71 The Council has a clear route and vision for short-term improvements to its recycling and waste minimisation performance. The Council has signed up to the principle in the Joint Municipal Waste Strategy of alternate weekly waste and recycling collections to promote recycling and waste minimisation with a planned 100 per cent coverage of kerbside recycling by the end of 2006, and there is strong councillor support for this. A project team is currently developing the Council's approaches which include a set of supporting policies, standards, and implementation and communication plan. The project team is on track to start the changes during the latter part of 2006/07 subject to final approval of members expected in the summer.
- 72 New policies and guidance will enable the Council to make further service improvements and achieve better outcomes. For example:
- more affordable housing through lower trigger levels in a new affordable housing and S106 policies; and
 - using the Council's open space assessment to inform planning policy and landscaping priorities.
- 73 Other planned or improvements already underway address most current service weaknesses. These include; developing a comprehensive range of standards of service; conducting an assessment of all council activities in order to develop an appropriate action plan to deliver the sustainability agenda; standardising database and software packages; compliance with the requirements of the DDA by 31 March 2006, a new council website and website management arrangements by 31 March 2006 and re-introducing a council newspaper for residents.
- 74 However, there are some gaps in corporate improvement plans that have an impact on environment and planning services. The Council's communications and consultation strategy is not yet been underpinned by a time-bound, resourced action plan. Therefore the Council does not yet have a mechanism for ensuring that the strategy is delivered corporately and embraced at a service level. Similarly the Council's customer access strategy is not robust. The strategy was produced in November 2003 but it has not been updated and is not supported by a SMART action plan, demonstrating direction of travel against the plan and achievement to date.
- 75 The Herefordshire and Worcestershire Waste Forum has plans well underway to build a new materials recycling facility at Droitwich which will enable a wider range of materials to be recycled within the next two years. However, plans for dealing with organic waste streams are not environmentally sustainable. The JMWS principle of promoting/subsidising the use of domestic waste disposal units as a means of disposing of organic kitchen waste is not supported by the water industry as it is a potential source of pollution.

- 76 Effective leadership is evident in most areas but not all. There is a strong commitment from officers and members to environmental issues, for example by signing up to the Nottingham declaration on climate change. There is visible and effective community leadership for example in the way that the Council works with partners to deliver environment and community safety improvements. However, there hasn't been sufficient organisational leadership to ensure the successful delivery of the customer access strategy. For example, staff are resistant to more environment contacts transferring to the corporate contact centre and the timetable for achieving this is unclear. The Council has not been able to deliver improved customer access or efficiencies as a result.
- 77 Performance management is improving but the Council does not have a robust performance management culture. A performance framework is in place and monitoring takes place at all levels. Recent improvements in reporting to members have been introduced which enable the Council to monitor key indicators. Some services such as environmental health have used performance management to drive improvements, but management of value for money and efficiencies remains under-developed in most services.
- 78 The Council has used scrutiny to challenge performance which has led to service improvement. For example, the introduction of a vehicle amnesty to provide a solution to abandoned vehicles and a new complaints procedure was as a direct result of scrutiny intervention. However, there is little evidence of effective challenge relating to value for money.
- 79 The evaluation of the impact of investment is inconsistent. The Council has adopted good practice in demonstrating the benefits of capital landscaping projects. This includes customer surveys and measuring the impact on the number of enquiries and complaints. However, the impact of investment in the e-enabled planning services has not been evaluated. The Council therefore does not know if it is maximising the benefits from the investment.
- 80 The Council can demonstrate it learns from mistakes. For example, the project team developing the next phase of the waste strategy (mentioned above) is using learning from the implementation of the side waste policy in 2004 to build its communication plan for householders. This will help to get the Council's message across more effectively.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 81 The Council has adequate capacity to ensure that services improve. Funding is in place to deliver service improvements, some of which have the potential to deliver efficiency savings. Service capacity is good, with the effective use of the private sector in planning to maintain performance. However, the Council's ambitious plans will continue to stretch corporate capacity in the short to medium-term.

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- 82 The Council has adequate financial resources. It is debt free, but has required revenue savings to balance the budget in 2005/06. Reserves are relatively stable at around £2.2/£2.3 million over the last three years. As it is able to use prudential borrowing, the Council has the means to fund future investments. Funding is in place to continue with the capital landscaping projects and other planned service improvements for 2006/07.
- 83 The Council has a good track record of attracting external funding. For example £650,000 of DEFRA and £500,000 county grant has been used to support recycling. A £500,000 liveability grant secured for open space development and external funding has been used for improvements to the Batchley area in relation to community safety, estate enhancement and housing stock improvements.
- 84 The Council has recognised that the re-configuration of its waste collection and recycling service has the potential to release operational efficiency savings of approximately £350,000 pa. The Council is also planning to invest in an assessment of potential efficiencies from process re-engineering which will be completed by September 2006.
- 85 The Council is developing a positive approach to modern procurement. It is building upon positive experiences with planning, trade waste and landscaping to outsource the pest control service from 1 April 2006. This is expected to deliver an improved service with efficiency savings of £20,000 p.a.
- 86 The Council has a comprehensive training and induction programme for staff and members. This includes compulsory training for all members on the planning committee and training and 'talent' plans for staff. The investment in training and development ensures that the Council has the right skills in place for the future.
- 87 Staff capacity is generally good. Overall sickness levels for 2005/06 are predicted at nine to ten days per employee. However, the waste collection service is the exception at around 20 days per employee. This is covered by the use of temporary staff to maintain service levels, but is clearly a strain on resources. Staff relations and motivation is good. The Council's budget decisions for 2006/07 included potential staff redundancies. This was handled sensitively and has not unduly affected morale. Staff are highly motivated and proud of their service areas.
- 88 Corporate capacity is stretched. Capacity has been reduced over the last year with the loss of a director post and this has resulted in directors having a wide range of responsibilities. The Council has a substantial portfolio of facilities and services to manage and ambitious plans. For example the plans for the Abbey Stadium involve a £50 million plus Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract. This is an identified risk which will be challenging for the planning service and impact on member and senior officer capacity. The Council's ambitions to deliver less and facilitate more are being considered as part of a corporate programme of examining options for service delivery. Whilst this will assist in capacity building for the future, it will put pressures on corporate, and service, capacity in the short to medium-term.