

Planning Inspection

South Somerset District Council

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site 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 South Somerset District Council's planning service is a **poor** service with **uncertain** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council's planning service has suffered a serious decline in the past three years. Key performance indicators for development control (DC) show performance in the worst 25 per cent for 2004/05. Overall service costs are high and the quality of service delivered in DC is poor. The planning service does not have a clear understanding of the quality of service its delivers against its service costs.
- 3 Good advice and help to users, especially developers, is not always reliable and the quality of development is not consistently high. The Council's performance at winning planning appeals is lower than the national average. The local plan has taken more than ten years to complete.
- 4 Service performance has declined since 2002, reasons include weak management within the service, tensions between four independent area based planning teams, lack of experienced planning staff in DC, uncertainty in corporate management arrangements and poor implementation of new technology and systems.
- 5 Despite these weak results other aspects of the service are more positive. Customer satisfaction with the planning service remains in the best 25 per cent. Community engagement with decision-making is generally good and meetings take place close to the communities directly affected by proposed development. Results for local people such as easier access to jobs in Yeovil and housing in local villages are improved as a result of the planning system. Good progress in developing Area Action Plans for Yeovil, Chard and Crewkerne supports the Council's corporate objectives for example local prosperity.
- 6 The Council has for the first time a clear corporate vision and this places the planning service at the heart of its ambitions. A clear corporate commitment exists to improve the planning service and additional resources and capacity have been created to facilitate improvement.
- 7 Councillors and senior managers are clear about the improvement required although some councillors are less clear about the steps needed to achieve this. The Council has a new service planning framework but the planning service does not have a service plan in place to drive through the necessary improvements. The planning service does not have a clear medium term improvement plan to secure the improvement expected. Staff within the service do not understand their role in delivering improvement and are still struggling to deliver a basic service.
- 8 The planning service is at a turning point. Investment in the service is in place, staff and managers have been recruited, there are up to date planning policies to guide high quality and speedy decision-making. However, crucial medium term plans to deliver improvement are missing, low morale and scepticism within the service creates significant uncertainty.

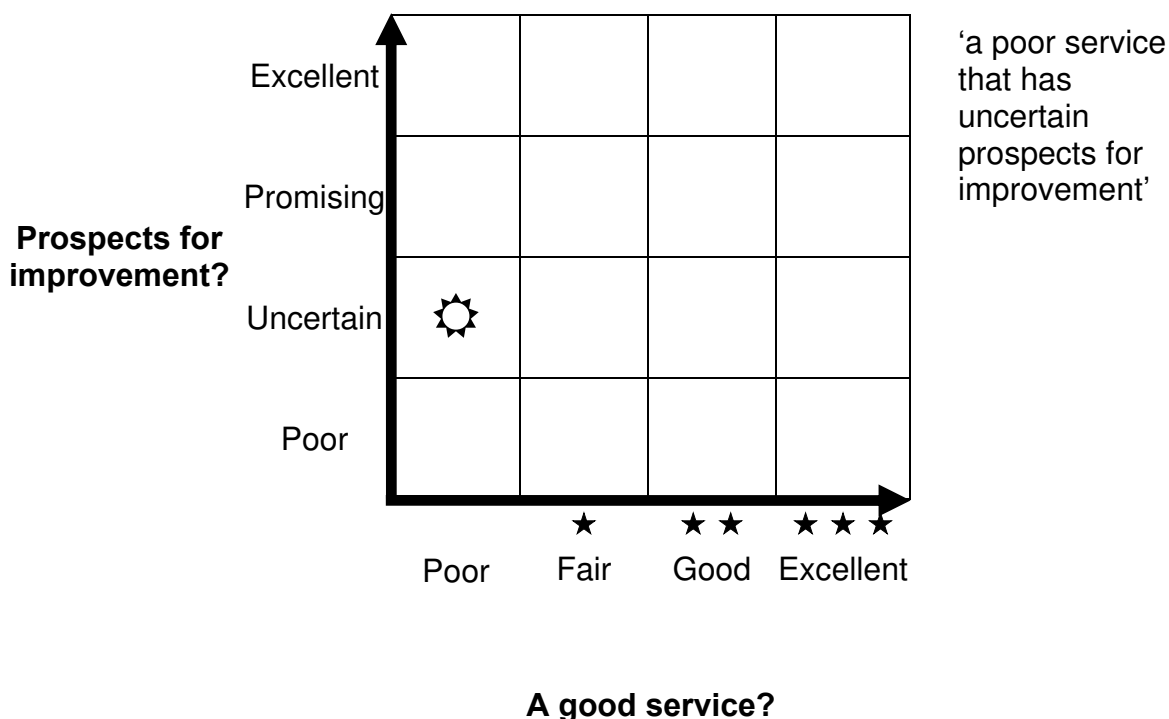
6 Planning Inspection | Summary

- 9 Since the inspection the Council has made good progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in this report. Many of the actions required in recommendation 1 have been implemented. Performance in the speed of deciding applications has begun to improve and based on current performance and targets the service is on course to meet government targets by the end of 2006/07.

Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed South Somerset District Council as providing a ‘poor’, no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 11 The service is a poor, no-star service because:
- DC performance is in the worst quartile for the speed of deciding major, minor and other planning applications;
 - appeal performance is in the worst quartile;
 - the cost of the service is high;
 - lack of effective service management and leadership; and
 - the customer's experience of the service is poor, advice is unreliable, access to staff is difficult, decision-making is unclear and the web site is slow.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

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However:

- community engagement is generally strong with access to local decision-making and good examples of some positive advocacy for disadvantaged groups;
- good progress has been made in developing Area Action Plans for Yeovil, Chard and Crewkerne in line with the Local Development Scheme; and
- innovative approach to the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) currently out for community consultation linking with community planning arrangements.

12 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is no track record of sustained improvement in the past three years;
- the council does not have a service plan nor a clear medium term improvement plan to drive improvement in the planning service; and
- staff are unclear about their role in the drive to improve the service and are still struggling to deliver a basic level of service.

However:

- there is a clear corporate commitment for the planning service and clear support for the improvement needed;
- the service has improved capacity and access to the resources needed to deliver improvement;
- leadership and management within the service is improving; and
- the task and finish plan has delivered a better environment for the service to support sustained improvement in the future.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Improve the quality of and access to the service by:

- *effective management of access to the service to meet customer demands and deliver a good quality effective planning service;*
- *effective use of customer first team;*
- *improved guidance to staff and customers to increase consistency and respect;*
- *improve and sustain the speed of deciding planning applications in accordance with government targets;*
- *improve quality assurance processes; and*
- *improve committee processes to ensure clarity of decision-making.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- maximising the service capacity to deliver a good planning service;
- improve the service delivered to customers;
- match customer expectation with the service received;
- improve the reliability, credibility and assurance of the service;
- improve the quality of the service and the built environment; and
- improve community engagement with the whole community including harder to reach groups.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve change management by:

- *improving communication with staff, stakeholders and service users;*
- *identify, plan and deliver medium term plan including smart targets, milestones, success measures, clear outcomes, resources, and clear allocation of responsibilities;*
- *increase understanding of service costs;*
- *identify efficiencies linked to service improvements; and*
- *involve stakeholders and users in the development and improvement of the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduced resistance to change within the service and from stakeholders;
- increased staff morale and commitment;
- improved performance within the service; and
- improved quality of outcomes delivered by the service and the Council corporately.

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

Recommendation

R3 Manage performance effectively within the planning service by:

- *introduce service planning including milestones, smart targets, performance measures and accurate reporting;*
- *plan, monitor and manage a medium to long term improvement plan for DC with clear identification of inputs, outputs and measurable outcomes that deliver improvements for service users and stakeholders;*
- *introduce personal performance plans and targets;*
- *regularly appraise staff performance against targets;*
- *use appraisals to identify training and development needs and implement programme of training and development; and*
- *monitor effectiveness of training and development.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved service performance and public accountability;
- improved value for money;
- clarity of direction in terms of improvements and vision;
- increased ownership of the service and personal accountability by staff and councillors;

- improved quality of staff, experience and effectiveness; and
- reduced risk of staff turnover.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 South Somerset is the largest of five districts within the county of Somerset, comprising nearly a third of the county with a population of around 155,000 and covering an area of 959 square kilometres. Taking both population and area together, South Somerset is one of the largest district councils in England. It consists of a mixture of both rural areas and a network of market towns. A third of the population lives in the principal town of Yeovil and over 40 per cent live in settlements of fewer than 2,500 people. Besides Yeovil there are a further nine rural market towns serving the dispersed population, with larger centres including Chard, Crewkerne, Ilminster, Somerton and Wincanton.
- 15 The population of the district has grown by 1 per cent each year over the last ten years and this is set to continue. The proportion of elderly people is rising steadily with 25 per cent of the population over the age of 60. This demographic profile has an impact on factors such as health and mobility. With a dispersed and largely rural population, transport is a key issue.
- 16 The resident ethnic minority population was 2.7 per cent based on the 2001 census. There is a strong and rising trend towards the district hosting of migrant workers from Portugal, Poland and other Eastern European countries.
- 17 The Index of Multiple Deprivation for 2004 shows that only a few wards are in the most deprived 20 per cent of UK wards, these being in Yeovil and Chard. Certain wards however, in the more remote rural areas, have higher scores on the Index of Multiple Deprivation because of access to services deprivation.
- 18 Despite consistently low unemployment - 2.3 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent for the south-west and 5.0 per cent for the United Kingdom - housing affordability is a significant issue across the district with low average household earnings and high house prices. This reflects the combination of high demand for homes, coupled with the local dominance of manufacturing jobs, agricultural decline and a workforce with lower than average educational qualifications. Average earnings are below both the South West and England average for men and women.

The Council

- 19 The Council has a cabinet with leader model and its decision-making bodies include the Council, district executive and the area committees. The district executive consists of 10 members including 4 area chairmen. The Council's political composition of 60 councillors comprises: 37 Liberal Democrat, 16 Conservative and 7 Independent councillors. The Council has in place four general purpose area committees (areas north, south, east and west). These are a key mechanism for community engagement.

The planning service uses these committees in policy development through discussion and consultation, to decide planning applications. There is also a central strategic planning committee which decides contentious planning applications or those of strategic district wide importance. The Council has a network of area and community offices to provide residents with local access to Council services.

- 20 In September 2004, the Council received a judgement of 'fair' following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment. A new corporate plan and priorities were introduced in 2005. In April 2006 the Council revised its management team and this consists of the chief executive, the assistant chief executive and three strategic directors, each with a portfolio of services. The Council employs 575 full-time equivalent staff.
- 21 The average 2005/06 council tax for a band D property within South Somerset is £1255.79, of which £128.05 is the tax set by the district council. The average overall council tax bill for the district increased by 3.4 per cent over the previous year, below the national average. The medium term financial plan sets out the Council's commitment to keeping any increases in council tax at a minimum level.
- 22 The Council's financial position is sound. The overall revenue budget for 2005/06 is £16.4 million, with a capital programme of £7.3 million. The Council has revenue balances and reserves of £4 million (estimated, end 2005/06). It also has substantial capital reserves, in particular useable capital receipts of £46 million.

The Council's planning service

- 23 The Council is a Local Planning Authority, with District level functions within a two tier system of Local Government. The Planning Service carries out the following planning functions in conjunction with other council services.
 - Preparing Development Plans (except the Regional Spatial Strategy) and associated documents.
 - Development Control and Enforcement (except minerals, waste and County Council applications).
- 24 The Council decides around 3,039 planning applications each year with a high proportion of listed building and conservation area applications. In 2005/06 the service has a net cost of £551,400 and it employs 68 FTEs plus some temporary staff. Poor performance in deciding planning applications led to the Council being a 'standards authority'³ (PSA) from 2005/06 and is proposed to remain a PSA in 2006/07.

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

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 South Somerset District Council has recently developed and adopted a corporate vision and this is supported by a corporate plan (South Somerset District Council Corporate Plan 2005-2012). The Council's vision is *'an organisation consistently delivering an improving quality of life for all'*. This is supported by a corporate mission statement - *'South Somerset District Council's strength is its flexible approach to creating a district in which people want to live, to work, to visit. The Enable-Partner-Deliver concept is a bold statement of how we will work with communities and partners to seize opportunities, realise ambitions and secure improvement'*.
- 26 There are five corporate aims supported by 19 objectives:
- *'Deliver well managed, cost effective services valued by our customers;*
 - *Increase economic vitality and prosperity;*
 - *Improve the health and well-being of citizens;*
 - *Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities; and*
 - *Promote a balanced natural and built environment.'*
- 27 An important objective for this service is Objective 4:
'Be a top 25 per cent performer in the national indicators appropriate to South Somerset by 2010'.
- 28 The Council is reviewing its Community plan which is five years old. It is guiding this review with its partners in the local strategic partnership and using the corporate plan to guide the Council's role. The development of the community plan and the local development framework is progressing together with cross service working reducing duplication of effort and improving the alignment of policies.
- 29 The planning service within the Council is now recognised as having a central role to place in the delivery of the Council's vision and it is recognised that this service must perform well to deliver effectively the ambition set out in the corporate plan.
- 30 The Council has finally brought its district wide local plan to adoption (subject to formal legal challenge) after more than ten years development. The Council has reviewed its planning policies and maintained an up to date plan. It adopted the principles of planning policy guidance note 3⁴ and awaited the confirmation of the structure plan housing figures prior to completing the formal consultation stages of the local plan process. This prolonged the plan making process but also increased the clarity of planning policy to guide and control development.

⁴ Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 - gives national guidance on housing, including increased housing densities and affordable housing provision.

The local plan clearly sets out the Council's aims for the control of development across the district. The aims are:

- *'to achieve sustainable development, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs;*
- *to maintain and enhance the social and economic well being of the area;*
- *to locate new development appropriately by maximising the use of the existing transport network and by minimising the need for additional infrastructure and avoidable travel;*
- *to make efficient use of existing resources, particularly land, and achieve the maximum benefits from the use of the land;*
- *to conserve and enhance the distinctive character and quality of the urban and rural landscape and townscape;*
- *to conserve and enhance the architectural and historic heritage of the area; and*
- *to protect and manage sites and features of nature conservation value in both towns and villages and in the countryside.'*

- 31** The Council has agreed with the government office a local development scheme (LDS) under the new planning legislation. This document sets out how the Council intends to progress towards creating a local development framework (LDF) to replace the local plan. The agreed LDS is over ambitious and no longer reflects the current situation; therefore the Council is seeking to revise the LDS to ensure that it is effective in delivering the LDF and remains challenging but relevant to the Council.
- 32** The Council has in the meantime made steady progress in developing the supporting documents to allow for the swift development of local Area Action Plans in the new LDF process. For example, the urban development framework produced to guide the delivery of the Yeovil Vision. This links to community planning ambitions for Yeovil to the spatial planning framework and policy development for Yeovil. The document takes account of the sub regional importance of Yeovil as a centre for economic growth and community development.
- 33** The Council is developing a vision for sustainable development in all its market towns and this work is informing the creation of Area Action Plans for Crewkerne and Chard which will form part of the LDF for South Somerset and the review of the Council's community plan. Again this links the spatial planning policy development to the work of the Local Strategic Partnership.
- 34** The Council has a clear corporate commitment to customer access and community engagement. These principles are strongly applied across all council services and a clear commitment from councillors exists to continue to improve the Council's engagement with the whole community. This approach is reflected in the Council's beacon status for community engagement.

- 35 The Council has a new service planning framework in place and services are developing service plans in the light of the new corporate plan. The planning service does not therefore have a long to medium term plan for service improvement.

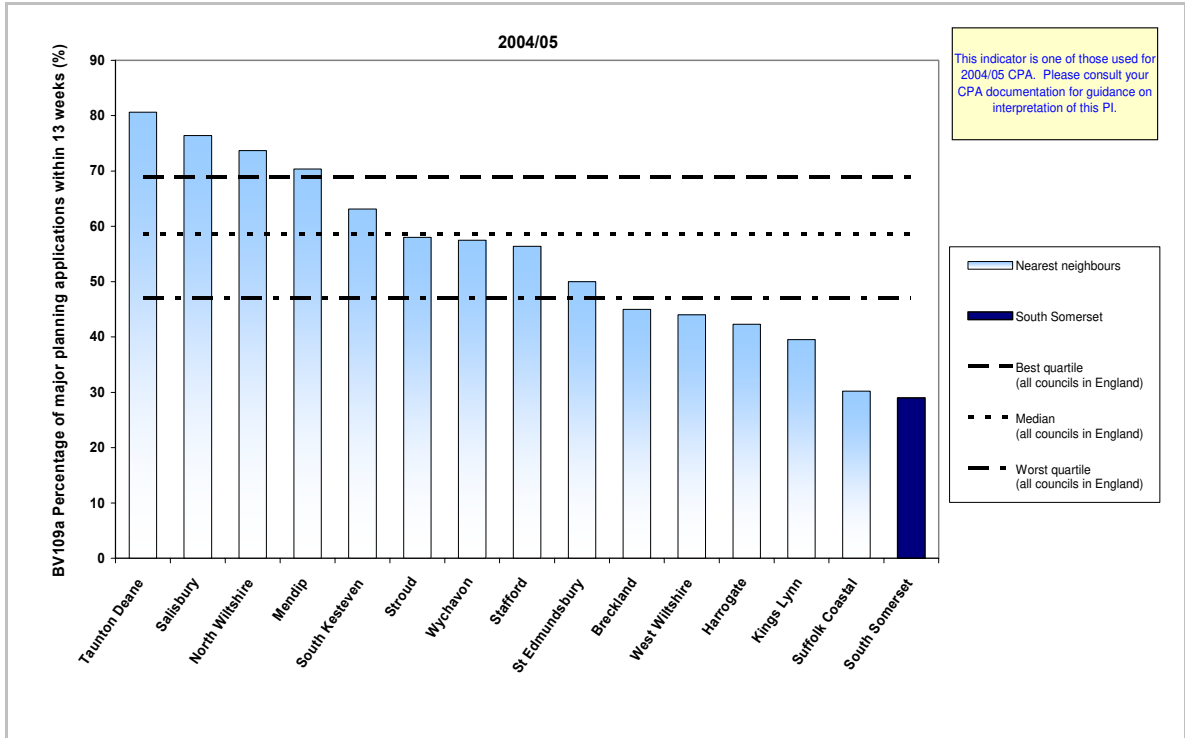
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 36 The planning service has struggled to perform in the past three years, in part due to a loss of experienced staff, a lack of corporate focus on the service and weak management within the service. The operation of four separate area based teams, fragmented the service, separated DC staff from the policy formulation processes and isolated DC staff. This made communication between specialist support such as historic building or ecology advice and DC extremely difficult and so reduced the potential to add value to the planning process and deliver high quality outcomes.
- 37 The planning policy service has remained focused on the completion of the local plan adoption process which has been driven mainly by a need to meet external deadline pressures. This has ensured that this service has been able to manage the corporate changes without significant impact on the operation of the service. The Council has been successful in delivering affordable housing for local people although the recent decline in DC performance has reduced the effectiveness of the planning service to maintain delivery of affordable homes. Historically the provision of affordable housing through the Council's planning and housing services has been good. In 2001/02 the delivery of new or acquired affordable homes was within the best 25 per cent when compared to other districts across England. Many of these were delivered as rural exception schemes to meet specific demand. More recently the supply of affordable housing has declined and in 2003/04 the Council's performance had fallen to below average compared to other districts. The Council has responded by reviewing its approach to affordable housing, by up dating its planning policies in the local plan and by improving its working arrangements with the main social housing landlord in the area. This new approach has raised the profile of affordable housing in the district and reduced uncertainty in the planning process.
- 38 Planning policy and the area development teams are working more closely to engage with the business community. This work is contributing to the development of Area Action Plans in the LDF and supports the objectives in the community plan.
- 39 However, development control (DC) has suffered significantly and performance is poor. The service does not function effectively. The speed of deciding planning applications is in the bottom 25 per cent, for major applications, minor applications and other applications, (see figures overleaf) when compared to all other English councils. The quality of its decision-making is also poor with 41 per cent of all decisions challenged at appeal being lost.

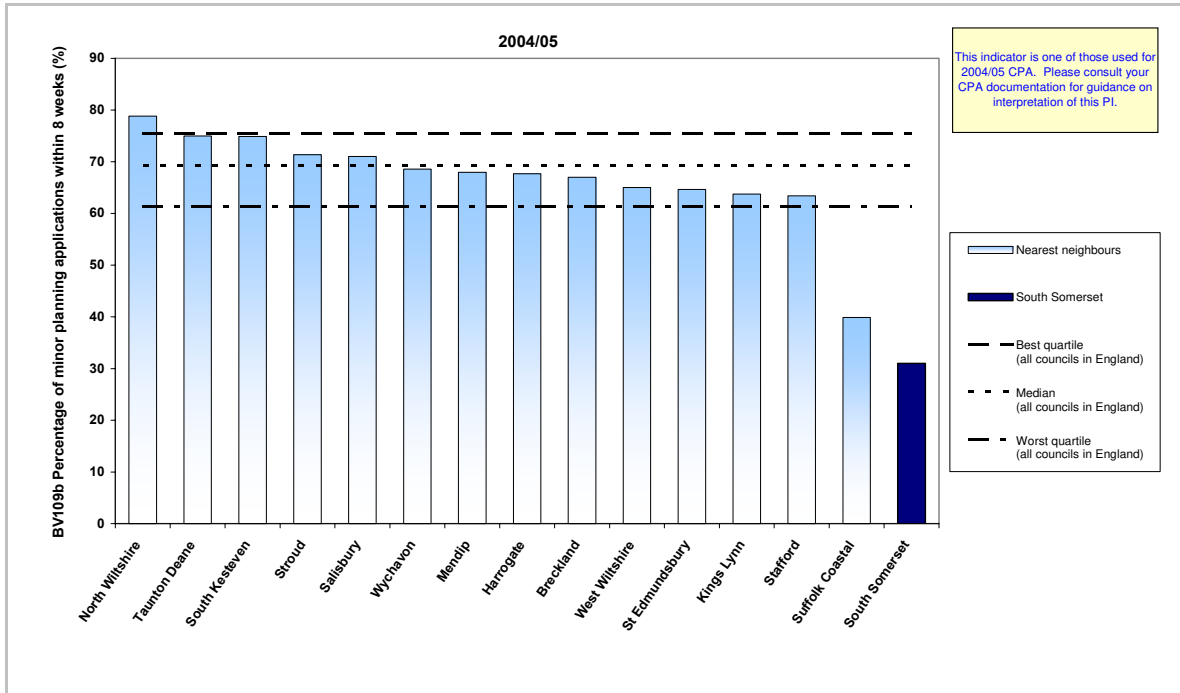
The Council has also seen a rise in complaints to the ombudsman and has on one occasion in 2004/05 been found guilty of maladministration.

Figure 1 Major planning application performance



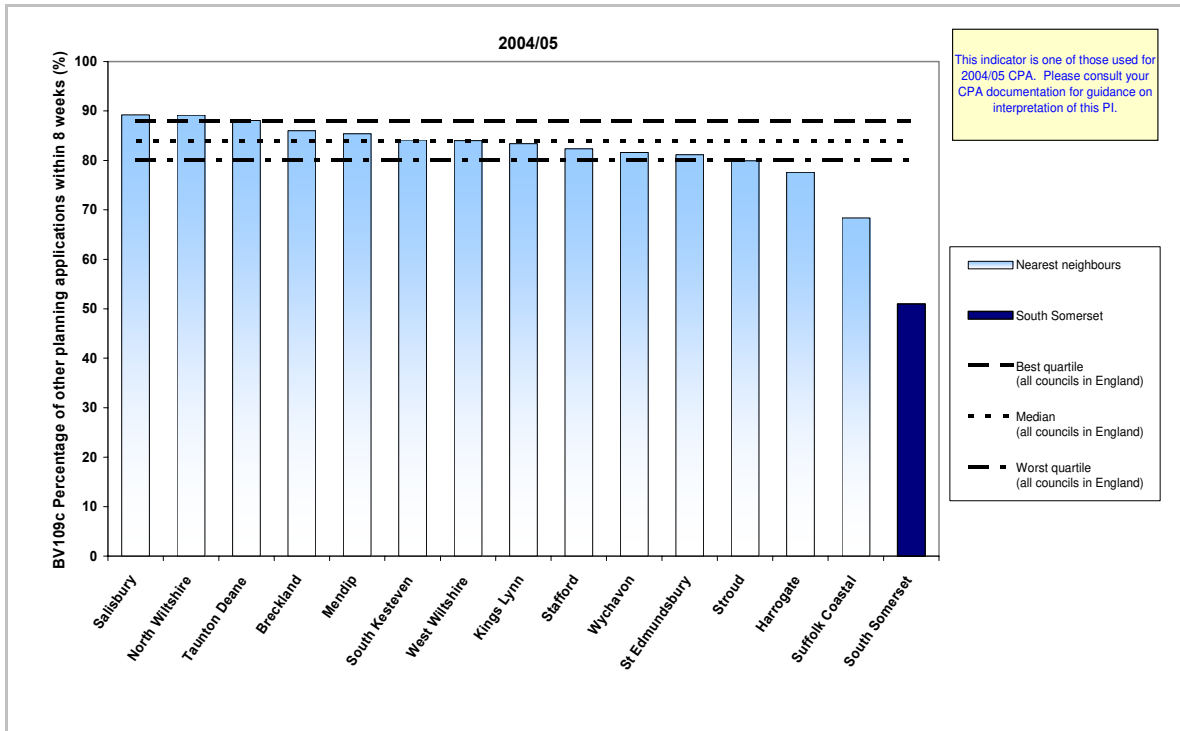
Source: Audit Commission Performance Indicators 2004/05

Figure 2 Minor planning application performance



Source: Audit Commission Performance Indicators 2004/05

Figure 3 Other planning application performance



Source: Audit Commission Performance Indicators 2004/05

- 40 The service lacks sufficient experienced staff and is unable to deliver a good quality or speedy planning service. In the past 12 months the service has had a high rate of staff turnover and has struggled to recruit replacement staff. Recently recruited staff are inexperienced and many are now training to become qualified planning officers. In the short term, staff are over stretched, lack training and experience and are not delivering a good quality reliable and consistent service. For example, reports are not checked for consistency, new planning staff are exposed to complex cases and are not being effectively supported. The service is at risk of further cases of maladministration through ineffective processes and systems.
- 41 The DC service offers inconsistent advice and decision-making. It offers pre applications advice and negotiates with applicants to secure a high quality of development. This approach should add value to the planning process; however, the lack of officer experience has resulted in poor advice being given on occasions and in at least some cases a poor quality of development results. For example, a social housing scheme in the district is located adjoining a petrol filling station with the tank access for petrol deliveries within a couple of meters of the front door to one of the houses. The Council can no longer excuse its poor speed of decision-making on the basis of high quality outcomes as these are no longer being consistently delivered.
- 42 The Council has adopted a proactive approach to the enforcement of its planning decisions. DC and building control staff are working collaboratively to ensure that new development is monitored throughout construction to ensure that development proceeds in accordance with the approved plans and that planning conditions are observed correctly. This enables the service to utilise its resources effectively and maximise the impact of the service on the quality of the final buildings.

Access, customer care and user focus

- 43 The Council has a strategic approach to customer access and care. It has developed an approach to service delivery over a considerable period of time, which supports the expectations and needs of the district. This commitment to customer access is explicitly stated as one of the council corporate objectives, supported by a clear commitment from councillors and staff to improving customer care and a strategic approach to improving customer access. In the Audit Commission inspection report for customer care published in 2005 the Council's overall customer care was rated a good service.
- 44 The Council has clear ambitions to engage with its local rural community. It has beacon status relating to how it engages with its rural communities. This corporate ambition is mainstreamed across all services. There are therefore high expectations on the planning service as a frontline service. The Planning service has produced an innovative Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) as part of the development of the LDF which sets out how the Council will engage with local people, communities and stakeholders in the development of new planning policy and in the consideration of planning applications.

The SCI is easy to read and informative, the Council is consulting local people about the statement. This will set high expectations for the service to meet in the future.

- 45 Customers and stakeholders take an active part in the consideration of planning applications. There are four multi purpose area committees, each covering a geographical area of the district, north, south, east and west. These meetings have a wide agenda including the consideration of planning applications. The public are easily aware of the change to the more formal planning meeting because the planning element of the meeting is separated from the rest of the agenda by a break in the proceedings. The public are invited to address the committee after the planning officer has introduced each planning application. This enables local people, applicants and agents to address the committee before planning decisions are made.
- 46 There is a basic level of access to the service for customers. Customers and stakeholders can access the planning service through a wide variety of options, including e-mail, telephone, fax service and the Council's web site. The service operates a planning surgery at two of its area offices for two days a week, and there is a duty officer available at the remaining offices every weekday.
- 47 Access to a wide range of planning information through the Council's web site is possible although the site is not easy to use. Customers can view the local plan on the web site, look at planning applications including the plans and supporting documents. The Council's web site has been recently up graded and the variety of functions has been increased. The web site was judged to meet all the 21 Pendleton criteria.
- 48 Customers can access information relating to planning matters at a wide range of locations. The Council operates local information points in all council buildings across the district including leisure centres; there is public access to council information through web based technology. It is therefore possible for all customers to view the local plan or planning applications in their own homes or at any council information point.
- 49 However, the planning service fails to meet the Council's own corporate standards. For example, the web site fails to deliver an accessible service because it is slow, documents are loaded as separate pages and have to be down loaded a page at a time, the local plan is only accessible through the Planning Portal rather than directly from the Council's planning home page. Therefore accessing information is complex and time consuming.
- 50 Accessing the planning service directly by telephone is difficult. The experience of stakeholders and customers varied widely. Many found that they could not contact planning officers when needed and that telephone calls were not returned. There are good facilities for customers to use to access all council services, however in planning the service is more difficult to access because it is not making effective use of the Council's customer contact service (Customer First). Some long-term customers bypass the Council's customer management systems when told that staff were not available, and managed to speak to the officer directly and therefore gained a better service.

There were examples, of staff not engaging with some customers but being accessible to other more familiar customers. This leads to a two tier service to customers and adds to customer frustrations.

- 51 Planning decisions made at area committees lack clarity. The Council has invested in area committee meetings to ensure that the Council is more engaged locally. However, the quality of officers' reports and presentations at the area committees linked to the failure of the chairman to clarify the decisions made, resulted in people being unclear about the decisions these meeting made. In addition, the role of the Yeovil Town Council meeting in the planning process is not clear or transparent and gives customers and stakeholders the impression that this forum will decide planning applications in addition to the area committee. The levels of confusion undermine the potential benefits of local decision-making.

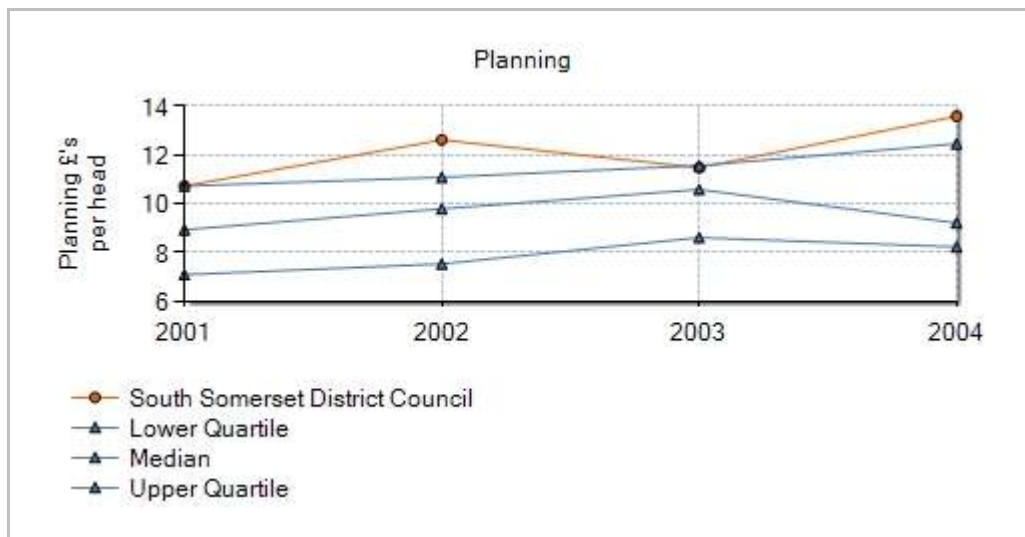
Diversity

- 52 Community focus, including recognising that service delivery needs to take account of the area's diverse communities is a strength of the Council. For example, it has developed an advocacy role in managing relationships with the gypsy and traveller communities, the housing strategy deals with specific issues relating to alternative dwellings such as caravans. This approach is generally strong across all services.
- 53 The majority of the Council's buildings are accessible to people with a disability and the re-location of the planning service to Brympton Way will ensure that all the planning service is provided in DDA compliant buildings. The Council carefully selects the locations of its area committee meetings to ensure that locations are easily accessible to local people and that meetings take place close to the communities directly affected by the decisions made at these meetings.
- 54 Customer satisfaction with the planning service is high compared to other councils. In 2003/04, 83 per cent of customers were satisfied with the planning service, this was down from 89 per cent in 2000/01 but still within the top 25 per cent of councils.
- 55 However, DC has not been effectively engaging with all community groups and some hard to reach groups feel excluded from the planning process, for example, local disability groups. In particular, groups that were once actively encouraged to be involved in the process are no longer approached for advice. Expectations are high within the local community and a failure to meet this is very damaging to the reputation of the service and the Council as a whole.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 56 Comparative costs for the planning service are significantly higher than the family average.

Figure 4 Comparative costs of the planning service



Source: Audit Commission VFM Profile 2005

The planning service is a high cost service and is currently not delivering a good quality, timely service. The Council has previously felt that it has a ‘value added’ approach to dealing with planning applications. It provides considerable pre-application advice and dedicated planning support is given across the entire district. This approach has increased costs but unfortunately the quality of service delivery has dropped as a consequence of staff turnover, inconsistent decision-making and a slow planning policy process.

- 57 Planning services are not meeting national standards of performance or the Council’s own targets. Performance on dealing with major, minor and other planning applications fell between 2003/04 and 2004/05 and as a result the Council became a planning standards authority in 2005/06. The Service’s performance at appeal is worse than the national average performance (66 per cent) in that the Council only successfully defends 59 per cent of appeals. Although the service is poor in comparison with its family group the level of customer satisfaction with the planning service in 2003/04 was high.
- 58 The cost of providing area committees has not been established. In the planning service it is not clear how this structure impacts on the overall costs of the service. It is clear that providing staff support for the four areas is time consuming and adds to the pressures experienced by the service. The service is currently being restructured and the new structures will provide some synergy by bringing the four teams together.

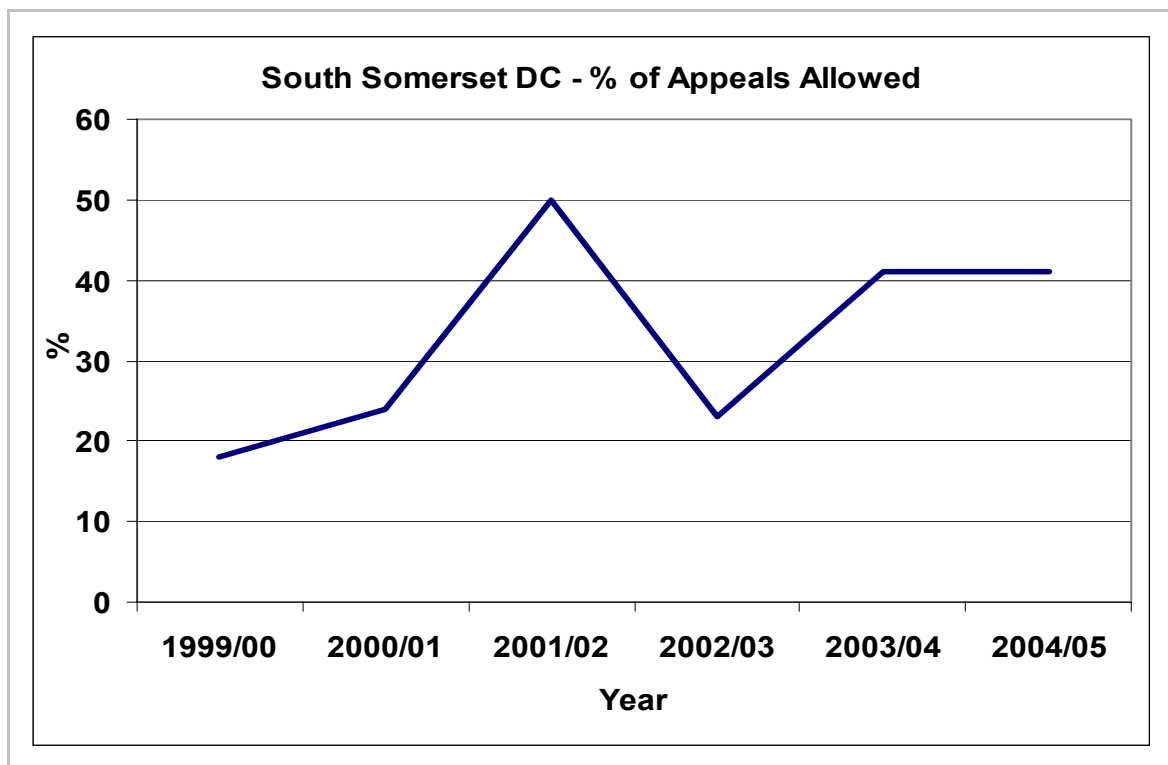
- 59 Baseline costs are not known and consequently the service is unable to demonstrate how it achieves value for money. Recently the Council has set efficiency targets for 2006/07; the baseline position has been set as the 2005/06 budget. Consequently the service does not have a clear understanding of the baseline cost for the service and they remain unchallenged.
- 60 The service cannot demonstrate that it is delivering quality services. There is no analysis of decisions made or of the recommendations for planning applications. Consequently staff felt uncertain if their contribution to the decision process added value.
- 61 The Council will not receive planning delivery grant for DC and has yet to spend its entire total planning delivery grant already received. The service has planned to spend the money in supporting service improvements.
- 62 The Council has been successful in negotiating financial contributions through Section 106 Agreements under the terms of the Town and Country Planning Act from developers. As at 31 March 2005 the Council held £448,174. It negotiated a further £95,000 in 2005/06 mainly for play areas. However, the lack of a corporate plan or specific policy to guide the negotiation of Section 106 agreements inhibits the Council's ability to maximise the benefits of development more strategically, this coupled to low levels of development in recent years has reduced opportunities for additional benefits from development.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 63 The track record in delivering improvements in DC is poor. Performance in terms of all the key performance indicators shows a decline in performance in the past three years. The Council is a Planning Standards Authority which means that it has reduced targets for performance and receives additional support to improve its performance. Poor performance is largely due to weak management within the service and the fragmentation of the service across four separate area offices resulting in the creation of four service units delivering the DC service. The Council is bringing the DC service together as a single service under a single manager to reduce the duplication of effort, strengthen leadership and increase capacity. It is too early to judge the full impact of these changes.
- 64 Appeal performance is worsening. Historically the Council has made robust planning decisions, in the period between 1999 and 2001 the Council lost between 18 and 24 per cent of its appeals. However, between 2003 and 2005 the Council has lost 41 per cent of its appeals. As shown in the figure below. Improvements introduced in 2002/03 were not sustainable and performance has continued to decline.

Figure 5 Appeal performance over time



Source: Audit Commission 2006

- 65 The Council has not effectively managed the workload of planning applications. The backlog of undecided planning applications has increased over the past three years. The Council recognised that in order to deliver sustained improvement in performance against speed of deciding planning applications these 'old' applications will have to be decided and this will impact on the service's overall performance figures.
- 66 Unaudited performance data shows a slight improvement in the speed of deciding planning applications in the last 12 months. The speed of deciding major applications within 13 weeks has improved from 30 per cent to 40 per cent against a target of 60 per cent. Minor applications decided within eight weeks have improved from 30 per cent to 48 per cent against a target of 65 per cent and others have improved from 51 per cent to 67 per cent against a target of 80 per cent in eight weeks. While this improvement is encouraging all three categories of application fall well below the national targets and the reduced targets set by the government.
- 67 The Council is keen to learn from other councils and has under taken a series of visits to top performing councils and councils that have shown greatest improvement. The planning service is now logging complaints and analysing them to help identify areas for improvement. The Council has recently reviewed its delegation procedure to increase the range of delegated decision making, so speeding up the planning process and introducing more efficient processes. The introduction of new managers with experience from other organisations is adding to the potential for improvement.
- 68 The service lacks a clear medium to long term improvement plan to ensure that the Council's aspiration for the service is translated into planned improvement. For example, recent changes have not delivered expected outcomes, such as the reintroduction of the duty officer system which resulted in an increase in telephone message taking within the administration section, this in turn reduced their capacity to validate new planning applications and index scanned documents on to the EDM system. This resulted in delays and an increased risk of deciding planning applications without the full consideration of consultation responses.
- 69 The service has been reluctant to take advantage of corporate systems. For example, the Council's customer first service is a contact centre approach to dealing with customer enquiries. Simple enquiries, such as, 'is my property a listed building?' or 'can I have a set of planning application forms?', could easily be dealt with by the customer first service. However, the planning service has not made use of this capacity and the quality of customer service has suffered.
- 70 Planning policy can demonstrate a recent track record of improvement. The local plan has taken a very long time to reach adoption (in excess of 10 years) but is now adopted as an up to date planning policy document subject to legal challenge. The service has also developed a LDS and made good progress in producing a SCI and much of the preparation work for the Yeovil Area Action plan, the Chard Area Action plan and the Crewkerne Area Action plan. The Council is also working across Somerset to develop an affordable housing supplementary planning document.

The planning policy team is also beginning to engage with the business community through closer working with the Area Development teams.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 71 There is a clear corporate commitment and an aspirational vision for the planning service in South Somerset. This is supported by the corporate plan priorities and the recognition that the planning service is the prime delivery mechanism for the Council in the delivery of its corporate agenda. For example, the economic development of Yeovil will be mainly delivered through the LDF process and through the delivery of planning permission for individual projects.
- 72 The adoption of a Corporate Plan 2005-2012 is a significant step forward for the Council. This is the first time the Council has had a clear corporate vision supported by service standards and objectives. This will enable the Council to clearly communicate its priorities to stakeholders, partners and staff and the community will be able to monitor the Council's progress.
- 73 The Council is aiming to be one of the best 25 per cent in the country and the planning service is a key service in achieving this ambition. The Council also recognises, within the corporate plan that this ambition is a top priority and if not achieved it carries significant risks for the Council.
- 74 The Council has recently demonstrated more focussed leadership in driving the improvement of the planning service, in particular through recent investment in the service, putting the right building blocks in place to support sustained improvement and through taking difficult decisions. The focus of the Chief Executive and cabinet is to monitor and manage improvement in DC in particular. The Council has reviewed and improved its scheme of delegation recently and this is a clear example of the new leadership within the Council driving through difficult decisions to deliver improvements. The delivery of the task and finish improvement plan is monitored by an improvement board involving both officers and councillors working together. The new arrangements for scrutiny also support the delivery of improvement in planning and the portfolio holder is clearly held to account for performance in planning.
- 75 The Council has made a firm commitment to address the problems in DC. The service is nearly fully staffed, resources are available for the development of the service, there is a task and finish plan in place to improve the systems and processes within the service. There is a new management structure in place and a new head of service has in the last month taken up his post. The four area based teams are being amalgamated into a single team based in Yeovil in order to create capacity and improve the consistency of the service.
- 76 Leadership within the service is improving. The appointment of a single manager to lead DC and a separate manager to oversee planning policy development has clarified the management roles in planning and generated significant capacity to drive improvement in the service. For example, the capacity within DC can now be managed across the whole district rather than within isolated area offices, therefore deploying officers to cover the district can be more flexible and efficient.

- 77 However, the lack of service plans and medium term improvement plans for the service is a significant weakness. The service has been focused on crisis management in the past 12 months and this has resulted in an inward focus on process improvements and has excluded users and stakeholders in the design of improvements. The result is unsustainable improvements, short-term fixes and disenfranchised customers. Some stakeholders reported service improvements that had made things more difficult for them and a lack of notice about the relocation and amalgamation of the DC service was not effectively communicated to all users.
- 78 There is a clear aspiration for the planning service to become one of the best in the country; however, there is no clear articulation or communication of this within the service. Staff are so focused on the treadmill of deciding planning applications that they are unaware or unclear about the future direction of the service. They are unable to see how the service will progress towards the ambition of being one of the top 25 per cent performing planning services. The lack of service plans and individual staff appraisals adds to the lack of clarity about what is expected of the staff and how the improvement of the service will impact on individuals. Staff morale is therefore low and the service is struggling to cope with more change.
- 79 Relationships between staff, councillors and regular users of the service are weak. The high staff turnover within the planning department has resulted in a breakdown in relationships. The councillors are better informed of planning policy and practice than some officers. Some regular users do not trust the staff to give accurate and robust advice and many stakeholders do not know who to approach in order to work with the service. This means that the service cannot effectively engage with users, is not working effectively with councillors or sharing experience to support new staff in the planning service.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 80 The Council has undergone a significant restructuring at a senior management level, with a focus on creating corporate capacity. This restructuring is complete and now the Council is developing its service planning framework. The additional capacity is beginning to deliver benefits across the council in terms of leadership and proactive management.
- 81 Recent recruitment has increased staff capacity in the planning service. The recruitment of new staff and managers in DC means that the majority of posts are filled. Caseload levels in DC are below average and are sustainable, and staff are beginning to be trained and developed. The Council is addressing retention issues and the relocation of the planning team to a single location with planning policy and DC located in the same building will further help the planning service to improve. The service recognises the opportunities to share learning and experience informally as well as through more structured training to further increase the capacity of the planning service.

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- 82 The new scheme of delegation further reduces duplication of effort and aids improved performance. The introduction of an expanded scheme of delegation reduces the number of applications decided by the four area committees and so reduces the burden on the planning service to support these meetings. The continuous workflow rather than working to committee agenda deadlines will further aid the services ability to manage the DC process more effectively.
- 83 The new planning policy framework has potential to increase the Council's capacity to deliver a more effective planning service. The Council is maximising the opportunity to 'save' the adopted local plan as a core policy document which allows the service to focus on the development of planning policy documents such as the area action plans and supplementary planning documents which will ensure that the Council is able to be more proactive in planning for the future than before. Planning policy is now facing a challenging future and the new management structure takes account of long term resource and capacity issues to ensure that the service is able to cope with the new planning framework. The Council has a two-year window to develop these plans before it will have to update its core policies.
- 84 The planning service has been actively developing links with other Somerset districts to reduce the amount of duplication involved in developing new planning policies. For example, working across Somerset to develop a consistent approach to affordable housing. The county council in partnership with the districts is collecting some of the baseline data to inform their planning policy work.
- 85 There is clear corporate commitment to the service's improvement. Additional funds are available as well as additional management resources. There is good leadership and support offered by senior councillors and managers. This ensures that the service develops and improve within the Council's structures rather than, as in the past, in isolation from the Council. This is a significant cultural change.
- 86 Performance management is not embedded within the service. There is still some staff resistance to a new performance management culture and this is taking up significant management capacity. There is a risk that new managers will become absorbed into the day-to-day running of the service and not remain focused on the strategic management needed to drive sustained improvement. The lack of a service plan increases this risk.
- 87 The Council's corporate energy and aspirations are not translated, communicated or owned within the service; staff are unsure if, this time, things will really improve. Therefore the service may not deliver the expected improvements. There is a history of change within the Council that fails to deliver the improvements expected. For example, the restructuring of the senior management in 2003/04 and the implementation of the service improvements in planning during 2004/05.

- 88 Administrative support for the service does not currently have the capacity to support improved service delivery. For example, the new centralised planning administration has a backlog of work but the administration staff in some of the area offices are under utilised. Because they are now managed separately this resource is not being made available to the planning service. This undermines the corporate leadership and commitment to the service.
- 89 The service does not have a systematic and holistic approach to training and development. It has begun to identify a range of seminars for staff training. However, this is in response to particular concerns and is not yet a systematic assessment of training and development needs. This scheme does not include councillors or regular customers and stakeholders. The impact of this initiative is therefore not maximised and the ability to use stakeholders to participate and develop training events is missed.