

Planning Inspection

Malvern Hills 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 Malvern Hills District Council is located in Worcestershire, to the west of the City of Worcester. It is predominantly rural with most of the 74,400 population located in the towns of Malvern, Upton-on-Severn and Tenbury Wells. The District has 21 conservation areas and numerous listed buildings. It is a relatively affluent area with a particularly high proportion of people of retirement age. The black and minority ethnic population is approximately 3.3 per cent which is well below the regional figure of 13.8 per cent.
- 2 Community priorities are identified in the community strategy and the Council's corporate plan and include a number which the Council's planning service can contribute to, such as protecting the local environment and delivery of affordable housing.
- 3 The comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) carried out in 2004 identified areas of poor performance including the speed of dealing with planning applications. The Council will be made a planning standards authority (PSA) in 2006/07 because of its performance on major applications.
- 4 The Council carried out a Best Value Review of its planning service in 2004/05 resulting in an improvement plan which the Council has been progressing since July 2005 to address identified weaknesses in the service.
- 5 The scope of the inspection was the delivery of the following services, Strategic Planning, Development Control and Enforcement and Building Control and how they contribute to the strategic aims for the planning of the environment.
- 6 We concluded that overall, planning services at Malvern Hills District Council are 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 7 The Council uses a variety of methods to engage with the public in preparation of its planning policy and the extent of community support for the Local Plan 1996-2011 was the highest in Worcestershire. Access to services and information by the public, via telephone, e-mail, on-line or in person is generally good. Whilst the adopted local plans are out-of-date, the 'new' local plan, which will be adopted this year, clearly contains policies that reflect national planning priorities and has regard for the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy. The Council is successfully protecting the local environment through the development and application of planning policies on sustainability, design and conservation and it is also securing a variety of developer contributions for local benefit. The service has recently clarified and publicised the level of service customers can expect.
- 8 However, there has been limited systematic ongoing engagement with users of the planning service and it is not engaging or consulting effectively with some hard-to-reach groups to ensure their needs are being met.
- 9 The Council has failed to meet its targets for affordable housing. Whilst it is successfully using the Planning service to apply the SPG on affordable housing through negotiations with developers and this has already delivered some affordable homes, the council has yet to meet its affordable housing targets.

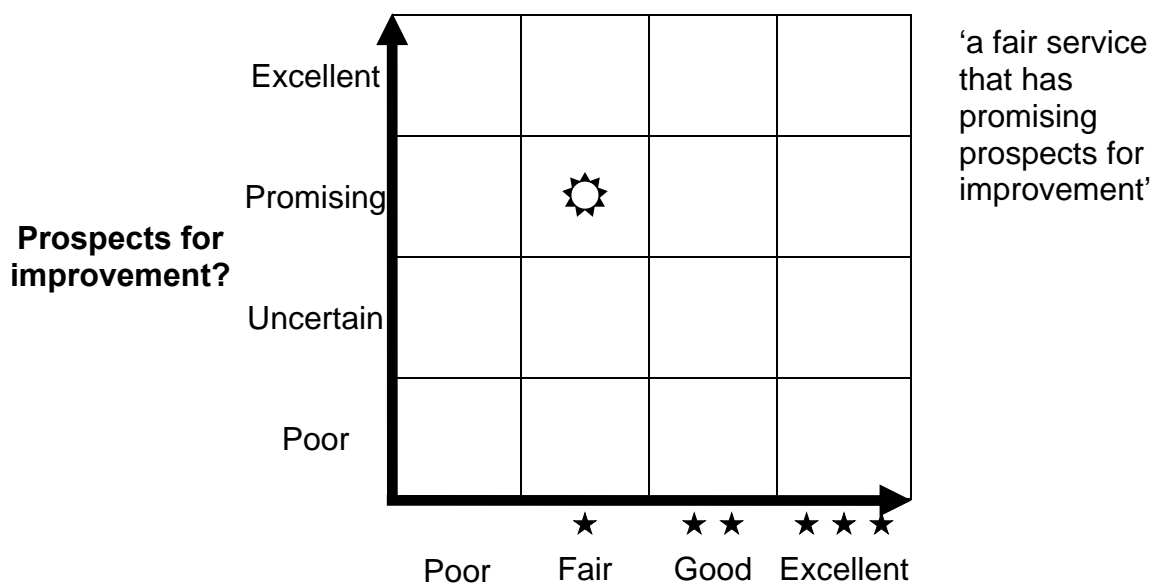
- 10 The Council is not demonstrating value for money in its planning services, whilst building control compares well to the private sector, over the last three years, planning services are relatively high cost, with performance below national targets, poor customer focus and satisfaction. In addition, current planning committee arrangements are not helping support efficient use of resources.
- 11 Investment in the service has resulted in improved planning performance over the past year¹, mainly related to application turnaround and enforcement activity. Whilst this has been from a low base when compared to other councils, it is significant for Malvern as it is now achieving government standards for speed of determining planning decisions which is a national priority.
- 12 The Council has an improvement plan in place to address weaknesses in the planning service and this has already begun to deliver improvements. Performance management is supporting the delivery of the plan and improvements in key planning performance indicators. The planning service is taking action to aid the Council in meeting its affordable housing. The Council currently has the people and skills within its planning service to deliver and improve the service.
- 13 However, the Council has not identified how it will sustain the improved capacity and the service remains at risk of having problems again in the future. Performance information does not allow the contribution of the service to corporate priorities or value for money to be fully assessed and a number of initiatives are new, not yet embedded in the service and their effectiveness has yet to be established. In addition, ongoing councillor training is not mandatory and the impact is not systematically evaluated.

¹ Improved performance is indicated in unaudited data provided by the Council for the year 2005/06

Scoring the service

- 14 We have assessed Malvern Hills District 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.

Table 1 Scoring chart²



A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 15 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the Council uses a variety of methods to engage with the public in preparation of its planning policy;
 - there is good access to the service via telephone, e-mail, on-line or in person through a duty officer system;
 - the Council is successfully protecting the local environment. It is ensuring that housing density is in line with national guidance, re-using previously developed land well and successfully delivering housing and employment land requirements to help protect the local green space; and
 - the Council is securing a variety of developer contributions for local benefit.

² 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.

8 Planning Inspection | Scoring the service

However:

- the Council has only recently clarified and publicised what level of service customers can expect in the form of customer charters and monitoring and publication of performance against these has yet to be made;
- the Council has failed to meet its targets for affordable housing, however contribution from the Planning service is being maximised through application of the SPG on affordable housing and negotiations with developers;
- there is limited systematic ongoing engagement with users of the planning service to inform future service delivery or ensure that the standard of service and delivery meets their needs. It is not engaging or consulting effectively with hard-to-reach groups;
- the Council is unable to demonstrate value for money in the delivery of its planning service. Service costs alone do not compare well nationally and speed of dealing with applications and satisfaction levels have been below average over the period; and
- despite recent improved speed of dealing with applications, over the last three years, the Council has failed to consistently meet some national targets.

16 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- investment in the service has resulted in improved performance over the past year. This improvement has been from a low base when compared to other councils but is significant for the Council as it is now achieving government standards for speed of determining planning decisions which is a national priority;
- the service is taking action to aid the Council in meeting its affordable housing targets;
- the Council has plans in place to address weaknesses in the planning service and has already begun to deliver improvements. Performance management is supporting the delivery of the plans and improvements in key planning performance indicators. The service is becoming more user focussed; and
- the Council currently has the people and skills within its planning service to deliver and improve the service. Investment in the service has improved staffing levels.

However:

- the Council has not identified how it will sustain the improved capacity to ensure continuous improvement and present committee arrangements for the determination of planning applications is not utilising resources efficiently or supporting consistency in decision-making;
- a number of initiatives are new, not yet embedded in the service and their effectiveness has yet to be established; and
- ongoing councillor training is not mandatory and the impact is not systematically evaluated.

Recommendations

- 17 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 costs³ 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 Ensure capacity in the service is sustained to deliver, manage and develop the planning service by:

- *taking a systematic and forward planning approach to the issue of capacity; and*
- *exploring alternative and strategic approaches to service delivery that should build capacity and increase value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduction of the risk of capacity issues affecting the delivery, performance and improvement of the service in the future; and
- improved council ability to procure planning services more strategically.

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

Recommendation

R2 Develop and implement systems to support the monitoring, review and improvement in value for money of the service. To include:

- *benchmarking of service cost and performance and establishing a baseline assessment of value for money;*
- *exploring options for improving value for money through targeting areas of high costs and poor performance; and*
- *ensuring managers and Councillors consider cost information alongside performance information as part of the performance management of the service.*

³ 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.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better use of resources;
- clarity around comparative cost of service; and
- the ability to demonstrate value for money of the service to the public.

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

Recommendation

R3 Ensure the service undertakes comprehensive and regular engagement with all sections of the community and uses this to assess the impact of improvements and inform service delivery. To include:

- *engagement with hard-to-reach; and*
- *analysis of current consultation being carried out.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the needs of hard-to-reach groups can be identified to inform service delivery;
- establishment of the outcomes and effectiveness of improvement actions;
- systematic and comprehensive ongoing service user engagement; and
- clear basis for future improvement actions.

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

Recommendation

R4 Review the efficiency and effectiveness of the current committee arrangements. To include:

- *ongoing mandatory planning training for all Councillors;*
- *assessment of uptake and impact of planning training for all Councillors involved in planning decisions;*
- *consideration of mechanisms to ensure the consistency of decision-making;*
- *level and implications of number of appeals upheld; and*
- *impact on officer support time.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved consistency of decisions made;
- reduction in the number of appeals upheld;
- minimisation of officer support time; and
- targeted and effective planning training.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 18 Malvern Hills District Council is located in Worcestershire, to the west of the City of Worcester. It covers some 57,710 hectares and is predominantly rural. The District has a population of 74,400 located in 68 parishes or Town Council areas centred around the towns of Malvern, Upton-on-Severn and Tenbury Wells which account for 56 per cent of the population. The rest of the District is sparsely populated and made up of rural settlements, small villages and hamlets. The District contains 1,800 listed buildings, 61 ancient monuments, 21 conservation areas, 6 historic parks and 47 sites of special interest. The population grew by 7.6 per cent between 1992 and 2002 and is now predicted to increase by 13 per cent over the next 20 years. The District has a particularly high proportion of people of retirement age and a relatively low proportion of children and adults under 30. The black and minority ethnic population is approximately 3.3 per cent which is well below the regional figure of 13.8 per cent.
- 19 The national deprivation index ranks Malvern Hills as 241 out of 354 in the country, where 1 signifies the most deprived council. The District contains a few pockets of high deprivation especially relating to barriers to housing and services. 53.5 per cent of properties are in the council tax bands A to C compared to 76.4 per cent regionally. The average house sales price in 2005 was £230,051 compared to £165,424 regionally. Affordable housing is a significant issue within the District.
- 20 Unemployment, at 1 per cent is nearly half the regional average of 1.9 per cent. However, the average gross weekly pay is £330, compared to £335 regionally and £357 nationally.

The Council

- 21 The Council comprises 38 councillors representing 22 wards and is led by a Liberal Democrat/Green administration. There are 20 Liberal Democrat, 12 Conservative, 6 Independent/Other councillors. The Council operates under an alternative form of political structure with a politically balanced executive committee, overview and scrutiny commission, standards committee, planning committee and licensing and appeals committee.
- 22 The Council employs 257 full time equivalent staff. It has a net budget for 2005/06 of £7.3 million.

The Council's planning service

- 23** The comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) carried out in 2004 identified areas of poor performance including the speed of dealing with planning applications. The Council will be made a planning standards authority (PSA) in 2006/07 because of its performance on major applications.
- 24** The Council has carried out a review of its Planning service in 2004/05 which resulted in an improvement plan being approved by Council in May 2005. The improvement plan contained a number of recommendations and associated actions which included the following key areas:
- establishing closer linkage between planning policy and community planning;
 - improvement of service and information to the public such as, service standards, enforcement information, user advice and guidance including pre-application advice, website improvements 106 process and agreements;
 - improve regular customer consultation;
 - creation of a single Development Control committee; and
 - alignment of staffing levels to process requirements.
- The Council has been progressing this plan since July 2005.
- 25** The purpose of the inspection was to assess how effectively and efficiently the service is contributing towards the protection and enhancement of the District's physical and natural and built environment. This included the delivery of the following services:
- strategic planning;
 - development control and enforcement; and
 - building control.
- 26** The inspection was undertaken primarily at a strategic level and therefore consideration of the detailed operational aspects of these services was limited to the degree to which they contribute to the Council's strategic aims for the planning of the environment.
- 27** The service inspected has a net budget of £1,219,000 and employs 39 staff, comprising 8 in planning policy, 22 in development control and enforcement and 7.5 in building control.
- 28** In addition, the Council received a planning delivery grant of £75,000 in 2003/04; £157,317 in 2004/05 and a further £130,248 in 2005/06.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29 Community needs and priorities are identified in the community strategy 2003-2006 and the Council's corporate plan both of which have been informed by public consultation such as group meetings, a postal questionnaire, community meetings, school visits and on-street interviews.
- 30 The community strategy identifies ten long term priorities where the local strategic partnership (LSP), the *'Vision 21 Malvern Hills Partnership'* intend to give focus and a series of short term plans and actions it intends to take to address them. The ten priorities are:
- an effective transport system that offers choice;
 - a safe community with no crime;
 - secure and fulfilling jobs;
 - protection of the environment, countryside and the character of towns and villages, and cleanliness and quietness where it matters to you;
 - housing to suit everyone's needs;
 - easy access to good health and support services;
 - a good range of shops and services where they're wanted;
 - a sense of belonging to a supportive community;
 - the chance to play sport, enjoy culture and relax; and
 - opportunities for lifelong learning and personal development.
- 31 The Council's vision as identified in its corporate plan *'The Council Plan 2005'* is 'A district which has first class services and facilities, is clean, safe healthy and prosperous, and has vibrant and active communities'. The Council has used the community strategy's ten priority areas as its starting point in developing its priorities and they have been developed with the aim of helping the Council achieve its long term vision. The six priorities in the council plan are as follows.
- Clean and green:
 - to promote and support a strategy of waste minimisation through the development of recycling services and the reduction and reuse of materials currently going to landfill.
 - Affordable housing:
 - within a balanced housing market to increase the availability of affordable housing in the district.
 - Community Health and well-being:
 - to provide sports and recreational facilities, promote healthy lifestyles and support local high quality health care provision in the district.

- Town centre enhancement:
 - to strengthen Great Malvern as the first choice for local people, and build its reputation as a desirable place to visit by nurturing its niche shopping and ambience and exploiting its unique history and location for the benefit of the Malvern people, businesses and its visitors.
 - Street scene/cleanliness:
 - to improve the cleanliness of our streets, parks and public amenities.
 - Local transport:
 - to promote accessibility to and the improvement of local transport.
- 32** Malvern Hills District Council currently has two local plans adopted in 1998, the Malvern Hills District Local Plan and Tenbury Local Plan. These Plans are now out-of-date and do not fully reflect more recent local, regional or national priorities.
- 33** The Local Plan 1996-2011 will replace the existing Local Plans and it is currently expected to be adopted in July 2006. It has been structured around the themes identified through the Local Plan key issues consultation and is centred on the needs of the community with the Community Strategy as its main driver. Whilst eventually the County Structure Plan for Worcestershire will not form part of the new Development Plan Framework, due to legislative changes, the Plan has been prepared in the light of its adopted strategy and is intended to be regarded alongside its policies. The plan has also had regard to the Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands and more recent national planning policy such as that set out in PPG3.
- 34** The Local Plan which will be adopted this year clearly contains policies that reflect national planning priorities relating to sustainability, such as transport minimisation, water supply protection, flooding and biodiversity. The plan for example contains sections and policies on the following.
- A clear requirement for all development proposals to reflect the principles of sustainability such as; re-use of land and buildings; minimisation of the need to travel between home, work and other activities and providing opportunities for journeys other than by car; protection and enhancement of the quality of the natural and built environment.
 - Proposals for new development will only be permitted if the design incorporates energy and water conservation features where appropriate.
 - Development will only be permitted where there is adequate capacity within the existing mains supply to serve the development and existing supplies will not be compromised or provision made for a new supply.
 - Development proposals will be required to retain natural habitat and features of ecological and nature conservation value where possible and strict limits placed on proposals which would have an adverse impact on the integrity of habitats, species and features.

- Developments in all areas at risk of flooding have a strict requirement of an appropriate flood risk assessment and criteria established to ensure that potential flooding problems are minimised.

The 'new' Local Plan 1996-2011 has yet to be adopted, but given the advanced stage of its preparation and the fact that its policies better reflect current national priorities, it has become increasingly important in influencing decisions on current planning applications.

- 35 The Council has up to date guidance to direct development in the district. All of the Council's adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) is less than three years old and relates to current adopted development plan policies. These were subject to public consultation and are available in paper, electronic or downloadable formats. To ensure understanding and use of the SPGs member workshops have been held on specific key SPG. The Council has established a clear timetable for future Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) which replaces SPG, which has budgetary approval for 2006/07.
- 36 Planning services aims and objectives are contained within the Management Plan 2006-2010. In addition to its statutory responsibilities and the Council's priorities and objectives, the service aims to guide, control and encourage high quality and sustainable development throughout the district, with the guiding principal of providing an efficient, cost effective, high quality service that is responsive to customer needs. Within the Management Plan each sub-service; Development Control; Building Control and Development Plans and Conservation has its own set of service priorities, annual plans actions and measures of success, which are linked to the council priorities or review improvement plan actions.
- 37 The Council has responded well to changes in the planning process which replaces local plans with a local development framework (LDF). A local development scheme (LDS) has been agreed with the Government Office of the West Midlands and the Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) was formally submitted to the Secretary of State in December 2005 and adopted on 26 April 2006. In line with statutory requirements under the LDF the Council produced its first Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) also in December 2005 covering the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005.

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

Access, customer care and user and/or community focus

- 38 The Council is committed to involving users and citizens in its corporate direction. The Community Plan 2003-2006 has been developed following community consultation carried out in various forms which included, group meetings, postal questionnaires, a series of community meetings, school visits and on street interviews. The Council's own Corporate Vision and objectives which use the Community Plan as its driver have been revised following consultation with councillors, employees and partners. The Council has a citizens' panel in place and has used this for consultation on its corporate plans and also for user satisfaction surveys to establish trends in satisfaction levels.

- 39 The Council utilises a variety of methods to engage with the public and stakeholders in preparation of its planning policy. The Local Plan 1996-2011 has been prepared following a range of consultation with the community and users and the extent of community support for the Plan, 51 per cent of submissions, was the highest in Worcestershire. In addition, in preparation for finalisation of the Council's Statement of Community Involvement, a wide variety of organisations and individuals were consulted and all local parish councils were supplied a copy to comment on. The draft document was available on-line and in various formats. At the end of the consultation period in response to the comments, the Council has made a number of amendments to the scheme that was formally submitted to the Secretary of State in December 2005.
- 40 There is limited systematic ongoing engagement with users of the planning service. The service does not routinely and systematically engage with users of the service to inform future service delivery or to ensure that the standard of service and delivery meets their needs. Although Development Control undertakes follow up calls with individual applicants, there is no regular planning forum to inform service delivery. The planning service is currently undertaking a range of customer surveys such as with users of Tenbury Surgery, visitors to the Customer Contact Centre, applicant and agents survey, Building Control applicants and agents, and a mystery shopper exercise conducted in March 2006 by Planning Aid. It is too early yet for the results of these to be fully analysed to inform the future direction of planning services.
- 41 The Council has provided clear guidance and advice to improve public participation. It has issued a leaflet on public speaking at planning application stage giving guidance on the rules and limits for public speaking at planning committee and also provides Council contact details if further information is required. A public speaking policy has been in place since 2002 which provides for objector and supporter speaking within agreed protocols. The Council has recently introduced a speaking slot for parish and town councils following District wide consultation.
- 42 The Council is making participation at application committee meetings physically accessible to the public. As part of the Best Value review the Council surveyed users of the Development Control Area Committees such as applicants, objectors and the general public and all respondents confirmed that the meetings were held in a convenient location, which was easy to enter and use. To increase access further, where planning applications are significant or contentious, Planning Committees are held locally in the community such as those for the North Site applications.
- 43 The Council responds to consultation and feedback related to specific applications and negotiates changes to the proposals where possible and appropriate. Consultation regarding plans at the North Site development has resulted in a number of changes being made in response to public feedback and concerns. An example of this is where a commuted sum of £60,000 has been negotiated for the removal of a service road if short cutting becomes a problem for local residents. A further example is where the initial plans included a proposal where part of the site at Whippets Brook was to be lined with concrete.

Objections were received from the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust on biodiversity grounds, as the local habitat of a protected species would be harmed. Successful negotiations have resulted in a much smaller scale, low-key scheme of works involving the removal of approximately three trees that are causing an obstruction within the brook channel.

- 44 Access to planning staff is generally good. Members of the public, agents and representatives of the Parish Councils generally regard the operation of the planning service to be good and better than other neighbouring councils in the area. Planning staff are regarded as professional, helpful, accessible and responsive to users needs. Specific individual officers were cited as very knowledgeable and willing to provide a quick service and no significant problems were highlighted regarding the quality of pre-application advice, it being consistent and informative. A duty planning officer system is in place at the contact centre with planning staff being available Monday to Friday between 10am until 4pm to deal with 'drop in' enquiries or booked interviews. To help address customer queries quickly and efficiently, the duty planner has access to online planning files and data. The Contact Centre staff are also trained to be able to address most general planning enquiries at the first contact therefore limiting the need for telephone customers to be transferred on. Personal callers to the Contact centre can find a range of planning information leaflets both internally produced and externally provided by the ODPM. Hard copy information is subject to plain English assessment and available in different languages and different formats. Access to the service outside of the contact centre is provided at the Tenbury surgery however this is limited. In addition there is no evening or weekend opening provided by the service.
- 45 Communication access to the service is now generally good. This can be achieved by telephone, mail, on-line or in person and is well regarded by users. Over the last three years e-access to the Council and the planning system has been poor but has recently improved. From 2003/04 to 2004/05 the Council has increased the number of e-enabled services from 52 to 65 per cent, but this still remains below average performance nationally. The current figure is expected to be 95 per cent.⁴ The national Pendleton survey of planning websites scores council websites using 21 criteria, with the higher the score the better the website in terms of planning services. This survey indicated that the Council scored 10 out of 21 in May 2005 which at that time was in the bottom 21 per cent nationally. This has however recently increased significantly to a figure of 20 out of 21 with a 100 per cent functionality being prevented through a deliberate decision not to provide a fully interactive on-line version of the Local Plan until the new plan is adopted. The Council's website now has a number of online planning facilities available 24 hours a day, for example; planning application search, access to planning lists, online submission of applications via the planning portal; land searches received and dispatched electronically, on-line tracking of planning applications plus a range of planning information and documents available to view or download.

⁴ Unaudited figure for 2005/06

- 46 The service has not had clear, published customer service charters setting out the level of service customers can expect. Until January 2006 there were no service charters. The new charters compiled for each service include clear targets in relation to how long an individual can expect to wait for a response to various enquiries and to help publicise these they have been added to the website and are available at the customer contact centre. Monitoring and publication of performance against these has yet to be carried out as some of the charters have only been prepared this current year.

Diversity

- 47 The Council is committed to addressing diversity issues but recognises that it remains an area for improvement. The Council has corporately adopted an Equalities Policy in August 2004 which gives a framework for the development of diversity in the Council. The Council also has a Diversity Working Group set up and a member champion in place to help raise awareness of diversity issues. In 2004/05 the Council achieved level 1 for the local government equalities standard and had a below average score on the checklist on promoting race equality of 11 per cent. This has increased to 47 per cent in the current year.⁵
- 48 Consultation with some hard-to-reach sections of the community is underdeveloped. In recent planning consultation the Council has undertaken a range of work in rural communities. However, in developing the Statement of Community Involvement the Council has identified certain groups such as young people, the elderly and the less physically mobile where its engagement is limited.
- 49 The Councils planning information is available in various formats and languages. The recently compiled service charters all have an explanatory section of what the service does and contact details, postal address; telephone number; email address and all are available in Urdu; Bengali; Portuguese; Polish and Chinese. The range of advice available on the website is subject to plain English assessment and has alternative language and visual impairment options. Hard copy information available at the contact centre is subject to plain English assessment to ensure it is easy to read and is available in a range of languages.
- 50 The Council has addressed a number of sensitive planning applications in a balanced way. For example, following an initial planning refusal and subsequent amended re-application on more suitable premises, the Council allowed a planning application for a needle exchange in Malvern. This was against strong local opposition and concerns from residents. The subsequent application met little resistance. A planning application was submitted which sought to use a building in the Great Malvern conservation area for a residential assessment centre for children with special educational needs and residential accommodation for their families. This and the subsequent application for an extension were both met with strong opposition from neighbours and local residents. These applications were allowed following comprehensive debate and opportunities for objectors and supporters to voice their views.

⁵ Unaudited data

- 51 The new local plan includes a range of policies aimed at addressing issues associated with diversity and inclusion. Examples include the recognised need for dependant relative's accommodation (Policy CN10) and the provision of disabled parking (Policy ST3). Equalities and Human Rights implications are considered on all applications and reports to Planning Committee and the potential issues and impacts identified and scheduled with the application or report. Legal Services has the corporate lead in considering the legal and case law implications of the Human Rights and Equalities legislation on behalf of the Council and advises the Council on the implications of changes in the law in both areas. It systematically monitors law reports, drawing any specific issues to the attention of Planning Services and has run both training and briefings on specific aspects of the law when needed.
- 52 The Council ensures Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance of developments via the Building Control section. Responsibility for compliance of plans with DDA Act 1995 rests with Building Control. An 'aide memoir' internal practice note on dealing with DDA issues has also been prepared for Development Control planning staff handling applications. Corporate diversity and equality training has been provided to planning staff and a specific DDA training workshop was delivered by the Council's building control service for all similar services in Herefordshire and Worcestershire when the regulations were last amended. In 2004/05 however, only 57 per cent of the Council's own buildings had full disability access according to published PI data and the Council has missed the 2004 deadline for compliance of all its public buildings.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 53 Service outcomes have been reported under the community strategy or the Council plan 2005 priorities where these are applicable.

Protection of the environment, countryside and the character of towns and villages/Clean and green

- 54 The Council is successfully protecting the local environment. The Council is committed to protecting local green space, conservation areas, historic parks and sites of special scientific interest which are located across the district. On the North Site development for example the Council is ensuring that whilst it is attempting to maximise housing density overall, in line with government policy, the density is at its lowest where the site borders onto local green space to lessen the visual impact. The new local plan has identified sufficient housing land to meet the allocation of the Worcestershire County Structure plan up until 2011 thereby minimising the need to develop within local green space.
- 55 The Council has established policies to protect the environment and guide future development. The new plan has clearly been developed to address national planning priorities and contains policies relating to sustainability, design and conservation.

In addition to the general development requirement policy statement, the Council is applying a specific policy in respect of the North Site development to provide a mixed use development, including a new local centre with a community centre and local shopping facilities to lessen the transport need. The Council has in place policy restrictions on car parking provision based on maximum figures as opposed to minimum standards. It has been especially successful in applying these limits to urban developments which have close proximity to local amenities and facilities.

- 56** Planning enforcement is developing from being a reactive to a proactive service. The Council's planning enforcement has had staffing recruitment problems over the past few years which had resulted in a backlog of work and resulted in its work being reactive. The Council's Best Value Review noted this situation and parish and town councils identified that a lack of enforcement was a prime concern at the time. Consultation with past applicants also noted that a lack of enforcement action was an issue. The Council has an updated Planning Enforcement Policy in place, recently adopted which includes a risk based approach to compliance in order to target resources against high risk and priority areas. The Council now employs two investigating officers and an enforcement officer who has helped reduce the backlog of cases from a figure of around 300 to 140 in December 2005. The service has now become proactive in its approach to enforcement which will better enable it to help enforce the council's policies and priorities.
- 57** Housing development density is being delivered in line with national guidance. The Council's Annual Monitoring Report in December 2005 indicates that 42 per cent of its new dwellings were built at more than 50 dwellings per hectare; 19 per cent were at 30 to 50 dwellings per hectare and the remaining 39 per cent were built at less than 30 dwellings per hectare. National guidance on development densities in the ODPM's *Planning Policy Guideline 3 - Housing* sets a target of between 30 and 50 dwellings per hectare. The Worcestershire County Structure Plan Policy D9 (Density of Housing Development) states that authorities are expected to discourage low density housing development of less than 30 dwellings per hectare unless there are local circumstances which indicate otherwise. Sixty-one per cent of development in Malvern Hills has been completed at a density of 30 dwellings and over which reflects the focus and high demand for development in the urban area of Malvern. The new plan policy statement CN6 states that residential development will be permitted where density between 30 to 50 dwellings per hectare is achieved and allows development of less than this, only in exceptional circumstances, where development at a higher rate would adversely affect the character and quality of the surrounding area.
- 58** The Council is re-using previously developed land well. The Annual monitoring report and audited data indicates that in 2004/05 completions on brownfield land are at 80 per cent. This exceeds the target of 70 per cent set out in the Worcestershire County Structure Plan and the new Malvern Hills District local plan. All of the housing allocations listed in the new local plan Policy DS5 (Housing Sites within the Malvern Urban Area) are on previously developed sites.

The Council has tested the ability of these sites to accommodate development through the Council's Urban Capacity Study and it does not foresee any problems in maintaining its target for the remainder of the Plan period. This work again helps the Council to protect green space within the district.

- 59 The Council is securing a variety of developer contributions for local benefit. The Councils adopted planning policies and SPD/SPGs require the provision of the following aspects on appropriate development sites to be secured by negotiation; affordable housing; provision and maintenance of public open space; improvement of education facilities and sustainable transport improvements. Some SPD/SPG such as 'planning obligations education facilities' and 'affordable housing' do give developers clear guidance and examples of levels of contributions they can expect. Whilst the local plan is clear on what developer contributions will be expected for the council is progressing its work on the SPG for 'developer contributions and planning obligations' to provide detailed guidance on its planning obligations policy. Some specific examples have been at the Science Park where a contribution of £135,000 was negotiated towards the development of a cycle network, £150,000 towards local highway improvements, £10,000 towards traffic calming and £30,000 towards accommodating school buses. The negotiations on the North Site development should give community gain in excess of £10 million towards items such as, affordable housing, education and open space provision, off-site highway improvements, community link officer, free off street parking and a coach bay facility at the local school. The use of section 106 contributions is clearly benefiting the local community.
- 60 The service works well with other internal departments and external partners such as the County Council. For example planning and legal have close contact on planning contribution work and are currently working together to produce section 106 standard templates. The County Council hold their working with the Councils planning service in good regard and the working relationship compares well relative to other neighbouring district councils.
- 61 The Council is helping minimising flooding through the local plan policy process. Policy DS16 in the new plan restricts development in all areas of the District unless an appropriate flood risk assessment has been carried out. The new local plan also provides clear instruction on the actions needed dependant on the flood risk assessment made. The Environment Agency has provided flood zone maps for the district and these are included with the local plan. The agency is a statutory consultee on planning applications and there is an agreed protocol in place for consultation.
- 62 The Council is not performing well in relation to the number of conservation areas in the district with an up to date character appraisal. The district has 21 conservation areas. Its own Best Value review identified that very few of these had an up to date character appraisal and of the plans to undertake four internally and two externally over the next four to five years only one has yet been completed. As a consequence the Council is unlikely to perform well against the new BVPI to be introduced in 2005/06 which measures the proportion of conservation area sites that have an up to date character assessment.

A safe community with no crime

- 63 The Council is successfully working with the local Community Safety Officer to help plan out crime in new developments. The Community Safety Officer is notified of all planning applications and is directly involved when there are considered to be community safety issues. For example, the development of eight affordable housing units on an urban brownfield site in an area which had a number of problems of crime and disorder and anti-social behaviour. Technical input and advice was sought from the community safety officer and West Mercia Constabulary when considering the application which was allowed following changes in the design to avoid a covered walkway, closure of a footway through the site and a special surface treatment of a car park to prevent skateboarding. A planning application from Lidl for a discount food store in Malvern Link was amended due to the experience of 'joy riding' in a nearby store. The design requirement was made to incorporate rising bollards to prevent vehicular entry after hours. The new local plan includes requirements for developments to show how crime is minimised and community safety is promoted.

Affordable housing

- 64 The Council has failed to meet its targets for delivery of Affordable Housing. Affordable housing is a recognised local need and priority, however, the Council has not succeeded in meeting its targets in recent years. In 2004/05 it had set itself a target of 35 units and delivered 19. However, the Council is using the planning service to successfully negotiate with developers on implementation of the SPG on affordable housing and as a result recent developments are helping secure affordable housing. For example in addition to the 43 per cent it has managed to secure on the North Site development which accounts for around 200 units, other developments such as the S&T Buildings at the Qinetiq site and Pensmill at Eardiston have both secured 50 per cent affordable housing. This is in addition to a number of smaller rural exception sites consisting of 100 per cent affordable housing.
- 65 The Council works well with the local parish councils to identify local housing need. Despite the Council not delivering overall against its affordable housing targets it does have good relations with local parish councils to help it identify local housing need and potential sites where this can be delivered. As a result new development has been focussed on urban areas and sustainable rural settlements.

Town centre enhancement

- 66 The planning service is using development briefs to contribute to town centre enhancement. The plans for Malvern Town Centre are scheduled in the 'Great Malvern Town Centre Action Plan'. The Council has taken the decision for the its regeneration service to lead on its Town Centre Enhancement priority and the thrust has therefore been primarily on bringing in new business into the town. Following actions identified in its management plan linked to this priority, the planning service prepared development briefs two main sites in the town centre. The development brief for the Post Office site has identified its planned use as a retail site providing a focal point for visitors to Malvern.

The development brief for Edith Walk has identified the desire for it to become a 'Festival Square' and become a town centre focal point for commercial development with access to other parts of the town. A draft concept statement has also been prepared for the Malvern Community Hospital Site to direct the development to residential use. Whilst design statements for major aspects of the town centre are prepared supplementary planning guidance for smaller developments such as shop frontages, and advertisements are not in place.

- 67 The planning service is using developer contributions to help town centre enhancement. The service has successfully negotiated a financial contribution towards town centre enhancement and promotion through a section 106 agreement associated with the proposed redevelopment of Upton Marina designed to compliment the town and bring in more visitors.

Regional and national priorities

- 68 Over the last three-year period, the service has failed to consistently meet some national targets. The service's performance in relation to meeting planning application turn around times has been mixed. This has resulted in it being designated a planning standards authority (PSA) in 2006/07 relative to major applications. The Council has taken corrective action to improve its performance on application turn around and meet statutory targets of the determination of 60 per cent of major applications in 13 weeks; 65 per cent of minor applications in eight weeks and 80 per cent of other applications in eight weeks. Audited data for 2004/05 indicates that performance was 45 per cent, 53 per cent and 72 per cent respectively. More recent unaudited data indicates that this situation has improved to 60 per cent, 66 per cent and 82 per cent. In light of these recent improvements, in March 2006, the ODPM has notified the Council that it does not intend to take any further action with the Council if the improvements are maintained. To help the speed of application turnaround the level of planning decisions delegated to officers has been maintained at 85 per cent. The proportion of planning appeals that are upheld (ie council decision is overturned) in 2004/05 at 37 per cent was below average, just above the worst quartile nationally.
- 69 In 2004/05 the Council's quality of service checklist for planning at 39 per cent was in the worst quartile nationally. Recent unaudited data indicates that this has raised to 88 per cent in the current year.
- 70 The Council is successfully delivering on the local provision of employment land. The Worcestershire County Structure Plan requires the Council to provide about 55 hectares to 2011. The Annual Monitoring Report identifies completions up to 2005 are 32.82 hectares and together with future commitments total employment land supply from 1996 to 2011 will be 61.58 hectares a surplus of 6.58 hectares.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 71 The Council is unable to demonstrate value for money in the delivery of its planning service. Value for money is the efficient and economic uses of resources to deliver effective services that deliver outcomes that address local and national priorities. It is relatively high cost service, giving variable levels of performance, and poor customer focus and satisfaction.
- 72 There is no systematic approach to the monitoring and review of value for money. Whilst some comparisons were made as part of the Council's review of planning, there is a lack of detailed information on cost comparisons and ongoing benchmarking of costs with other councils is not systematically undertaken.
- 73 The Council is not demonstrating value for money in its planning services. Planning services costs alone do not compare well in relation to other councils nationally. The Council's spend per head on planning is in the highest cost quartile nationally. In addition, BVPI performance over the last three years related to the speed of dealing with planning applications and public satisfaction with the service has been below average. This situation however is improving since the Council has managed to increase its planning performance.
- 74 The Council has not taken a robust approach to demonstrate value for money as part of its Best Value Review. The review concluded that the cost of planning in 2003/04 was just below the average when compared against the Council's nearest neighbour family group. Productivity was also defined as the number of applications received per planning officer which, it was stated, was slightly above the average in 2003/04 when compared to the same group of councils. The Council's review and assessment of value for money did not include issues of service quality such as access to and quality of pre-application advice or the provision of planning information in general. The BVPIs relating to speed of decision-making show that, in 2003/04, the council's performance was in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally in relation to minor and other applications although performance was above average for major applications. In addition the Council was below average for the proportion of users satisfied with the service. In not taking a robust approach to compare performance in terms of quality as well as effectiveness the council did not use the BVR process to adequately determine whether its planning service offered value for money.
- 75 Building control compares well in terms of profitability and fee generation. Due to the nature of the Building Control service, in the Best Value review, it was judged in terms of profitability and fee generation in relation per employee. When compared to the independent private sector the review concluded that the Building Control service compared favourably to this comparator group.
- 76 There is a lack of corporate requirement for service-led value for money targets. The Council does not have a strong track record of explicitly targeting efficiency gains/savings but it does attempt to make savings when these have been forced upon them through lack of funding. Corporately the Council has made efficiency savings and is on target to meet the first year Gershon efficiency savings. There are no efficiency or economy targets identified at service level.

The work on restructuring the planning service following the service review has reduced spending on contract staff whilst a limited cost increase of £40,000 is aimed at improving capacity to achieve greater performance improvements.

- 77 The planning service is not taking full opportunity to improve value for money. The relative poor performance of the planning service against the speed with which it determines planning applications resulted in lower than average awards from the government in the form of planning delivery grant to invest in improving services. In 2004/05, the planning service received £157,317 against a council average of £320,000. In addition, only just over half of this was invested into the planning service as £75,000 was used for corporate purposes. The planning delivery grant received in 2005/06 was improved to a figure of £130,248 but again £75,000 was used corporately. The Council has made the decision to invest all of the PDG received in 2006/07 into the service with no corporate 'top slicing' being applied. However, diverting these funds away over recent years may have hindered the rate of progress of improvement.
- 78 Committee arrangements for the determination of planning applications is not utilising resources efficiently or helping ensure consistency of decision-making. The Council operates two development control committees plus a planning committee. This number of committees means that a significant amount of officer time is spent supporting them and planning related training has to be available to all Councillors. The Best Value Review recommended that a single, smaller planning committee should be created primarily to ensure greater consistency of decision-making. This was accepted in principle by Full Council, however, following an intense debate on the issue Councillors decided to maintain the current arrangements. A major factor in the decision being the strong opposition of Parish Councils to a single committee. The level of appeals upheld against decisions in 2004/05 at 37 per cent was in the worst quartile nationally and has increased in 2005/06 to 41 per cent. The Council's own data indicates that approximately 80 per cent of the 2005/06 appeals allowed were where decisions were made against officer recommendations.
- 79 There is a limited systematic and strategic corporate approach to partnership working. The Council recognises that procurement is not fully developed and is an area that it needs to improve. It has a corporate framework in place to support procurement which includes a policy, strategy and corresponding rules and to help its implementation there is also an officer with a procurement role who provides advice and support. At a service level some specialist tasks are outsourced through procurement contracts or partnering such as agricultural, hedgerow and archaeological appraisals; conservation and economic viability studies, urban design and retail impact assessments. In addition outsourcing of work is also used where appropriate to address peaks in workload.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 80** Investment in the planning service has resulted in improved performance over the past year particularly in relation to application turnaround year⁶ and enforcement activity. This improvement has been from a low base when compared to other councils but is significant for the Council as it is now achieving government standards for speed of determining planning decisions which is a national priority.
- 81** The Council undertook a Best Value Review of the service, completed in April 2005, which identified weaknesses in the planning service. These weaknesses are being addressed through the delivery of a two-year action plan running from July 2005. The plan has already delivered improvements that should be noticed by users. For example, enhanced and additional planning guidance, improved pre-application advice and better co-ordination between the customer contact centre and planning officers. In addition, new posts have been established which are helping reduce application turnaround times and improving service delivery.
- 82** There have been recent significant improvements in planning performance indicators. The Council's unaudited data for 2005/06 indicates that it is now achieving government targets on speed of determination of all types of application. The speed in determining 'minor' and 'other' planning applications has demonstrated a trend of improvement since 2003/04 though this has been from a low base when compared with other councils. Performance on determining major planning applications has improved reversing the negative trend of previous years. Whilst the ODPM has designated the Council as a 'planning standards authority' for 2006/07 related to the slow determination of major planning applications in 2004/05, they have since acknowledged recent improvements in applications performance. Overall, the service is demonstrating that it is improving its performance related to the speed of processing planning applications which is a national priority.
- 83** The speed of application determination is improving with no evidence to suggest that the quality of advice to service users is deteriorating. Improved performance has been achieved by, employing additional staff, better monitoring and taking a more proactive approach at the pre-application stage to improve the quality of proposals before they are submitted. Caseloads for officers have reduced to be closer to the recommended figure of 150 cases per officer.
- 84** Other performance measures indicate an improvement in the last year. The Council has improved its performance against the Quality of Planning Services Checklist from 39 per cent in 2004/05 to 88 per cent in 2005/06 and it's Pendleton score for on-line planning services has risen from 10 in 2005 to 20 out of a possible 21 points in 2006.

⁶ Improved performance is indicated in un-audited data provided by the Council for the year 2005/06

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- 85 The planning service is taking action to aid the Council in meeting its targets for the delivery of affordable housing. The service has recently put in place an affordable housing SPG which now encourages up to 50 per cent of housing on developments to be affordable. This is a challenging proportion to seek to deliver. It has applied this guidance in negotiations on the North Site and has increased the proportion of affordable housing to be delivered on this development from an initial 10 to 43 per cent. In addition, the Council is adding to its range of section 106 obligation templates related to the different types of affordable housing. This is intended to clarify the process and increase the speed and efficiency of delivery of affordable housing. These improvements should help the planning service to further support the delivery of affordable homes which is a priority need for local people.
- 86 Satisfaction of applicants with the service has been below average. In 2003/04 customer satisfaction was below average when compared with other councils and had fallen slightly since 2000/01. The Council does not have more recent satisfaction information to show whether satisfaction with the service has improved as a result of service improvements made.
- 87 Performance on appeals against planning decisions is worsening. The Council has identified a significant number of applications where decisions are made against officer recommendations. Planning decisions made against officer recommendations are now referred to the main planning committee for review and training related to recurrent issues is to be provided for councillors. Therefore action is being taken with the aim of improving the quality and consistency of planning decisions.
- 88 The Council is unable to demonstrate improving value for money in the planning service. The Council has been successful in reducing the level of expenditure on temporary agency staff needed to deliver the core service while increasing the number of establishment posts. This represents improved economy in staff resourcing. A business process review is planned (supported by additional funding of £60,000 by ODPM) which will identify ways to further improve efficiency across all Council services. The planning service has been prioritised in this review. The service does not systematically and regularly review how costs relate to the quality and performance being delivered across all elements of the service and therefore it is not able to evidence improvements in value for money over a sustained period.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 89 The Council has an improvement plan in place to address weaknesses in the planning service. Performance management is supporting the delivery of the plan and improvements in key planning performance indicators. The service is becoming more user focussed. However, reported performance information does not allow the contribution of the service to corporate priorities to be fully assessed and a number of initiatives are new, not yet embedded in the service and their effectiveness has yet to be established.

- 90 The planning services improvement plan is resourced and is being project managed. The plan is being resourced via the Planning Delivery Grant (PDG). A project officer was appointed in July 2005 to drive its delivery. Performance against the plan is being regularly monitored by the planning management team, the planning committee and by Scrutiny. In April 2006 the plan was 77 per cent on track and action is being taken to progress areas that are behind schedule such as ICT developments. In this way focus on improvement is being maintained.
- 91 Performance management is also supporting improvement in some key planning performance indicators. Performance information is regularly collected and trend analysis undertaken of speed of dealing with planning applications. Performance is monitored by senior management team, the planning committee and scrutiny. Performance is on the agenda of each planning committee ensuring all councillors have access to up to date performance information. Staff and councillors demonstrate an awareness of current performance which is maintaining a focus on planning performance across the Council.
- 92 Remedial action is taken to correct weaker performance. For example, a specific action plan has been developed to tackle major planning applications and additional posts have reduced the caseloads of planning officers. This should ensure the current level of performance is improved upon.
- 93 Assessing the impact of the service on the quality of the wider environment and the Council's corporate aims is developing but information is limited. Actions in individual service plans are linked to the delivery of corporate priorities and progress against these is monitored at a service level. An annual 'quality tour' takes place on which officers, councillors and representatives from Parish Councils review developments and identify learning points. However, the local performance indicators within planning services which are reported to councillors focus on speed of delivering processes rather than being linked to the delivery of Council priorities. Therefore, as yet reported performance information does not allow the contribution of the service to corporate priorities to be fully assessed.
- 94 The Council recognises the need to further evaluate the strategic impact of the service. It intends to form a stronger linkage between community and land planning and tie the imminent review of its Community Strategy to the LDF to establish the overarching community aspirations for the District and then feed this work into the Regional Spatial Strategy. Planning services have already presented a paper to LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) representatives on the spatial issues likely to be influencing land use in the District over the next 20 years. In this way the service is informing strategic debate and future service objectives.
- 95 The service is responsive to customer feedback and complaints. There are a number of examples of developments that have resulted from customer feedback such as the introduction of a neighbour consultation guide and improved site inspection records for building control.

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- 96 The planning service is developing a more user focussed approach but this is not yet fully embedded in the delivery of the service. Customer standards have been implemented, there have been improvements in provision and accessibility of customer information and surveys and mystery shopping exercises have been undertaken across the service. However, these initiatives are recent and have not yet been fully evaluated to inform service delivery and design.
- 97 The Council is developing its policies and raising awareness in support of diversity issues. However, in the service there is a recognition that further work is required to ensure that the needs of the diverse community are fully assessed and met.
- 98 There is limited evidence of learning from the best performers in the country. Consultation with users, comparing with other similar Councils such as with building control function and using the Planning Excellence model helped to identify service weaknesses and solutions in the BVR. The Best Value Review did not robustly examine alternative ways to deliver or build capacity in the service learning from national best practice. Though the service shares information through a number of locally and regionally based professional networks it has not routinely sought out top performers.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 99 The Council now has the people and skills within its planning service to deliver and improve the service. Investment in the service has improved staffing levels and this has resulted in performance improvements and is allowing developments to take place. However, the Council has not identified how it will sustain the improved capacity and the service remains at risk of having capacity issues again in the future. In addition, ongoing member training is not mandatory and the impact is not systematically evaluated.
- 100 Staff capacity in the service has recently improved. The service is currently successfully recruiting staff and is close to full complement. The main problem for the service in the past has been recruitment and retention of staff. At the time of the BVR there had been vacancy levels of up to a 35 per cent. The current position is that 17 staff have been in post for less than two years. A number of additional posts have been added funded by the PDG such as a senior planning officer and planning technician on permanent contracts and a planning officer on a fixed term contract. Increased staffing levels have resulted in improved performance in a number of areas across the service. These include improvements that the public will notice such as speed of dealing with planning applications and enforcement of planning conditions.
- 101 Resources are in place to deliver the improvements. This year, for the first time, all the resources secured for planning through the PDG have been added to the services base budget in order to ensure that planned improvements are delivered. The difference between base salary budgets and the additional posts is about £30,000 and this will be met through the PDG. When PDG ceases the Corporate Operational Management team and Councillors have indicated that this sum will be met through review of the medium term budget strategy.

However, there is no documented exit strategy that explores the implications of cessation of PDG and identifies the actions to be taken when this happens.

- 102 The Council has successfully built capacity in enforcement addressing a major weakness in the planning service. Until recently the Council did not have the capacity to enforce its planning decisions. It had difficulty recruiting qualified officers and the service was poor. The Council took a different approach and recruited one qualified enforcement officer and two experienced 'investigators' from non planning backgrounds to train 'on the job'. This initiative is seen across the Council as a notable success. The backlog of enforcement cases has reduced markedly. There is now a structured approach to joint working between services such as enforcement, building control and environmental health to ensure planning conditions are applied and public confidence is restored.

- 103 The Council is developing skills 'on the job' in other areas of the service. The Council has trained Customer Service Staff to give initial customer advice to service users and deal with basic planning enquiries. This is freeing up the time of professional officers. In July 2006 the Council is funding (through PDG) an assistant arboricultural post on a two-year fixed term contract. The assistant is likely to be recruited from agricultural college. Their role will further progress Tree Preservation Order work while allowing the landscape officer to be more strategic in promoting the biodiversity and sustainable environment agenda.

- 104 The Council supplements its capacity with external expertise. It brings in consultancy support to provide specialist knowledge. For example, on affordable housing on the North site and to deliver larger conservation appraisals. It has brought together a panel of local architects to provide voluntary advice on design matters at a pre-application, application or appeals stage to inform decision-making and enhance design outcomes. The first monthly meeting is in April 2006. This is a cost effective way of bringing specialist skills into the service and providing challenge to current practice.

- 105 The Council is investing in training and performance review and training needs are generally met. Training and development is viewed positively by staff who feel that the opportunities for personal and professional development are well supported by the Council. A management development programme is in place and the service currently has the managerial skills and capability to develop the service and to manage it effectively. Staff have regular appraisals that address performance as well as identifying training needs. The Council is ensuring that staff currently in post have the skills to deliver the planning service.

- 106 The Council has an established training programme for Councillors which covers a range of planning matters. An annual programme has been in place since 2003 of about six training events each year raising awareness of both development control and planning policy issues. As all Councillors sit on planning committees a planning induction programme is mandatory for new Councillors whilst all other training is voluntary. In addition, workshops have been held to address specific issues such as local plan objections, the development of SPGs and enforcement. The Council has delivered training events for Parish and Town Councils on web developments, availability of planning information and effective consultation.

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The Council does not, however, monitor attendance or evaluate the impact of training systematically.

- 107 Officers and councillors are clear about their roles and responsibilities and there is a mutual respect between them. The Portfolio Holder for the service is particularly knowledgeable and is providing strong leadership.
- 108 There has been no forward planning approach to the issue of capacity. The initiatives taken to build and retain capacity have been reactive and limited in their scope. The full range of possibilities for building capacity and retaining staff in the long term have not been fully explored such as joint working with other councils or with the private sector. In the absence of a forward planning approach there remains a potential risk of the service having capacity issues again in the future.
- 109 The Council is progressing alternative service delivery options but as yet there are no significant examples of modern procurement practices being used to deliver value for money or build capacity in the planning service. The Council currently has joint delivery arrangements with other Worcestershire councils for 'The HUB'⁷ and is progressing procurement of joint Revenues and Benefits (business case to be approved in June 2006) and Waste Disposal services. However, as yet, the Council has not looked strategically at procurement within the planning service. There is some limited partnership working taking place mainly related to shared training events.
- 110 Capacity problems in some other areas of the Council are impacting on progress in planning services. ICT support for the service has improved recently, however, there continues to be problems progressing the development and use of the GIS and UniForm systems. An example of the impact on users of the service is that the Tenbury surgery does not yet have sufficient IT in place to support an effective outreach service. Capacity issues in Legal Services are again being addressed but there has been a delay in progressing the improvements in the approach to Section 106 obligations. Therefore, capacity issues in other areas of the Council are delaying some actions in the planning services improvement plan.

⁷ The Hub is an internet portal set up by six Worcestershire district councils and the county council to provide on line access to all their individual sites and services from one point.