

Service Inspection Report

July 2006



# Environment Inspection

**Fenland 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 Service'* (July 2003).

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

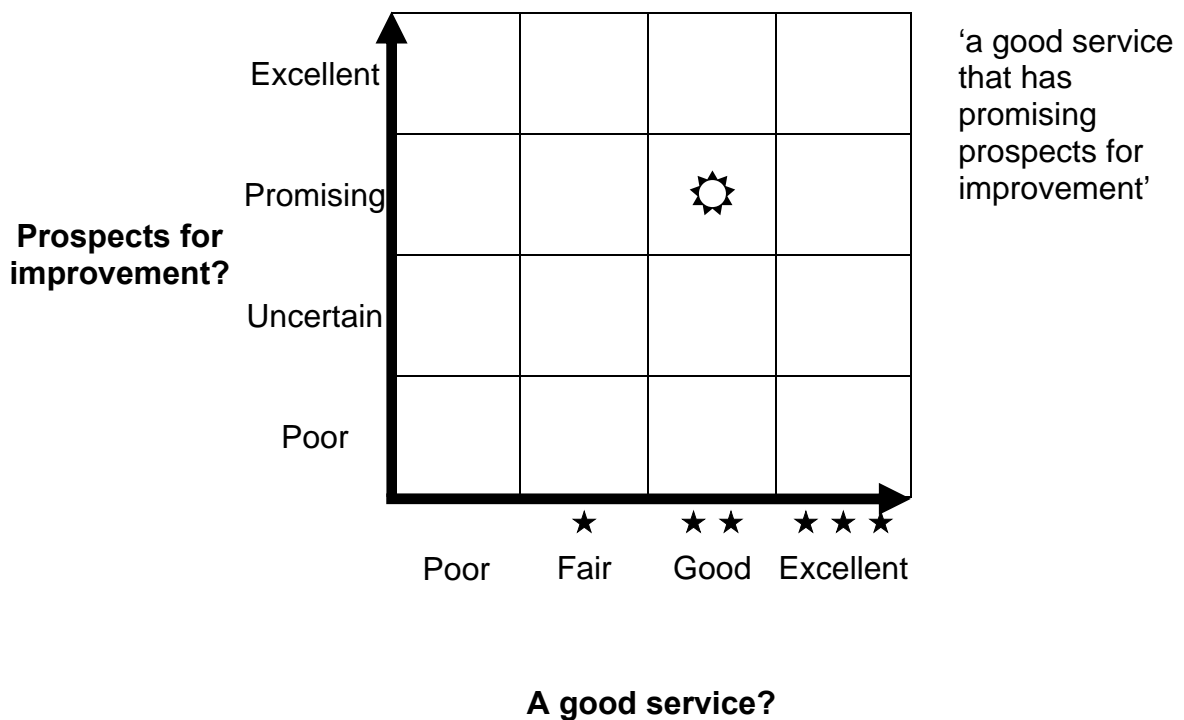
## Summary

- 1 Fenland District Council is delivering good street scene services with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council covers a predominantly rural location of almost 500 square kilometres in the north east of Cambridgeshire. It has a population of approximately 83,000 people living in 35,000 dwellings. The Conservatives have overall control of the Council, which has a net budget of over £14 million and employs 744 staff.
- 3 The Council, in direct response to public consultation, has made street scene issues and environmental management a clear priority - 'Streets Ahead' is a medium-term corporate priority. Investment decisions have followed this priority and have led to noticeable improvements in service delivery and overall environmental quality. Access to services has also seen significant improvement through investment in the 'Customer First' priority. There are now one-stop shops in each of the market towns and a single telephone number for all enquiries handled by a new telephone contact centre.
- 4 Through the introduction of new waste and refuse collection services across the district, recycling rates have increased considerably from 21 per cent in 2004/05 to approximately 35 per cent in 2005/06. Waste being disposed of to landfill is falling considerably. The Council is well placed to achieve its own challenging recycling target of 46 per cent 2007/08 and is easily surpassing its statutory standard set by the Government.
- 5 More effective maintenance of the parks and open spaces and street cleaning are also delivering noticeable improvements. This has resulted from additional investment such as introducing the highly visible rapid response teams. Investment has also been secured to deliver a number of quality environmental enhancement schemes, both in the natural and built environment.
- 6 A robust approach to sustainability is embedded. The need to address climate change is actively pursued including through encouraging wind turbine development. The Council estimates that enough energy is produced in this way to meet the domestic needs of all four market towns in the district.
- 7 The service has strong corporate and political support. Investment in resources and management has improved the service's capacity and there are good calibre staff now in place who are committed to driving further service improvements. Performance management arrangements are now clear and enabling service improvements to be delivered. This, together with the major schemes either planned or under development, to further enhance the district, gives promising prospects for further improvement.
- 8 The current approach to identifying satisfaction with services is not robust preventing the Council demonstrating the effectiveness of the significant investment in services. A strategic approach to enforcement has yet to be developed. Finally, there is a lack of robustness in the approach to ensuring value for money, including through procurement processes.

## Scoring the service

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

**Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

<sup>1</sup> 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.

10 The service is a good, two-star service because:

- overall, significant investment has resulted in clear improvements to the quality of the local environment;
- services are targeted to address the expectations of the community, including hard-to-reach communities, and communities are engaged in the design and delivery of services;
- the successful introduction of a three bin recycling and waste scheme district-wide has resulted in significant improvements in the rate of recycling from a poor performing service to a level that challenges some of the best performing councils in the country;
- the amount of waste disposed of to landfill is falling consistently;
- streets have got cleaner and grounds maintenance improvements are resulting in noticeable improvements in parks and open spaces;
- quality development and environmental enhancements are being delivered through clear policies and an effective approach to securing investment;
- a robust approach to sustainability and climate change is resulting in clear environmental benefits such as enough renewable energy generation to meet the domestic demand of all four market towns;
- customer access to the service has been enhanced through the investment in the telephone contact centre and one-stop shops; and
- services are more accessible to the public through the investment in meeting the Customer First priority that has seen the introduction of a telephone contact centre and one-stop shops in each of the market towns.

11 However:

- satisfaction levels, when last comprehensively surveyed, were comparatively low across a range of street scene services;
- the approach to enforcement, although improving, is not corporate and joined up across services;
- although the introduction of the one stop shops and the telephone contact centre has improved the overall delivery of services this has yet to enable enquiries on bulky waste collections and reported missed collections to be resolved at the initial point of contact; and
- although a profitable trade waste service is offered the Council has yet to extend its role of education and awareness raising to encourage waste minimisation and recycling in the business community.

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- 'Streets Ahead' is a clear medium-term corporate priority;
- strong political and managerial leadership of the service is evident;
- there is a recent track record of improvement, especially in recycling performance and standards of environmental improvement;
- a clear approach to performance management is now assisting with driving a continuous approach to improvement across the organisation; and
- significant improvements are under development such as the Nene Regeneration Project.

13 However:

- clear plans to comprehensively and routinely monitor satisfaction levels are recent and not yet fully embedded; and
- a robust and corporate approach to procurement, assessment of value for money and risk management, although acknowledged as weaknesses, have yet to be addressed and embedded.

## Recommendations

- 14 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 costs<sup>2</sup> 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 Review and challenge value for money across all environment services and set targets to improve efficiency by:*

- *continuing to develop the clear understanding of service outcomes against the cost of delivery in all service areas; and*
- *developing a clear and consistent corporate approach to value for money including through the procurement of goods and services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater focus on the impact of money invested in the service on outcomes for residents;
- increased efficiency of services; and
- increased ability of the Council to demonstrate value for money to local taxpayers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with medium costs. This should be implemented in the next six months.

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

**Recommendation**

*R2 Develop a clear approach to enforcement that supports both the education and awareness programmes already in place through:*

- *developing a consistent approach to enforcement across the organisation and, where possible, with partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a clear focus and approach to enforcement actions; and
- improved value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with medium costs. This should be implemented in the next six months.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Improve awareness of services to residents, through:*

- *embedding a comprehensive and corporate approach to monitoring the levels of satisfaction and informing residents of service standards and achievements against them;*
- *a robust approach to publicising service standards both in the Council's own literature and through the media together with achievements against these standards and corporate priorities;*
- *developing a clear and consistent corporate brand; and*
- *target all residents such as new householders with clear information/welcome packs on services provided by the Council.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater public awareness of what services the Council offers and the standards that can be expected; and
- improved public satisfaction rates with the Council as a whole and with individual services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented in the next six months.

**Recommendation**

*R4 Complete process mapping to ensure that IT and systems of data capture are improved to enhance service at the first point of customer contact.*

*Ensure systems are in place to reliably capture service information:*

- *link front and back office functions to enable all service requests to be more effectively handled at the first point of contact at either the one-stop shops or through the telephone contact centre;*
- *develop the complaints compliments and comments system to enable the capture of information through frontline staff; and*
- *improve the level of information on the website to enable residents to know easily what services they can expect to receive and when in their local area.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient and effective delivery of services at the first point of contact; and
- a clear understanding of residents views on services so that delivery can meet expectations.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented in the next six months.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 15 Fenland District Council covers an area of almost 500 square kilometres in the north east of Cambridgeshire between the larger and contrasting centres of Cambridge, Peterborough, King's Lynn and Huntingdon. It includes the market towns of March, Chatteris, Whittlesey and Wisbech as well as numerous fenland villages. There are over 35,000 dwellings. The total population is 83,519 (2001 Census), and is expected to grow to 91,500 by 2011. The population density is low with 154 people per square kilometre. Much of the district is put to agricultural use. Fenland has a small population of residents from minority ethnic communities with a non-white population of just 1.38 per cent and a white British population of 96.88 per cent when last recorded in April 2001.
- 16 In 2004, Fenland ranked 142 out of 354 local authorities in England (1 is the most deprived), and 13 out of 48 most deprived districts in the east of England (based on DETR Index of multiple deprivation). Wisbech (North), Parson Drove and Wisbech St Mary wards are within the 20 per cent of the most deprived wards in the country. The 2001 census showed that 24.5 per cent of the local population are aged over 60 years and 23.8 per cent aged below 19 years.

### The Council

- 17 Fenland District Council is controlled by the Conservative party with 36 of the 40 seats. There are 27 wards in the district, of which 18 are single member, 5 are two-member and 4 are three-member wards. The Council's net revenue budget in 2006/07 is £14,311,220. It has 744 employees.
- 18 The Council has a 20-year vision that has been developed and shared with the Fenland Strategic Partnership (FSP). Protecting and improving the environment is one of the seven strategic themes underpinning the vision. The corporate plan, which links the Fenland Community Strategy and best value performance plan (BVPP), sets out the overall vision and mission of the Council for the period 2006/09. The Council's own vision is to be *'an efficient, progressive and well governed organisation which has the capacity to deliver current and future local and national priorities'*. The supporting mission *'to improve the quality of life for people living in the Fenland district'* is further broken down into long-term objectives, one of which is 'Streets Ahead', an objective to improve the local environment.

- 19 In May 2002, the Council embarked upon an ambitious improvement programme. Prior to this programme being developed, a number of independent external assessments including IDeA peer reviews and best value inspections were undertaken. These assessments highlighted many areas of the Council as 'poorly performing' with pockets of low morale. It was also recognised that resources were often not appropriately aligned to the delivery of priorities for the community.
- 20 The Council was rated as 'fair' in its 2003 Comprehensive Performance Assessment. A subsequent Direction of Travel Statement in 2005 recognised the pace and scale of the improvement programme.

### The Council's street scene services

- 21 We inspected how the Council is achieving its 'Streets Ahead' objective. In particular, we assessed how this is being achieved through the Council's management of the natural environment, open green spaces and local environmental quality and by its waste management and strategic planning services. References in this report to the 'service' reflect how the Council is achieving this ambition collectively through these services.
- 22 Street cleaning, refuse and recycling collections are delivered directly by the Council. A contractor undertakes grounds maintenance. This includes grass cutting across the district as well as maintenance of the parks and cemeteries. Most shrub and tree maintenance and specialist functions such as maintaining bowling greens are also undertaken by the contractor. Together with the contractor the Council is responsible for the maintenance of 134 hectares of parks (1.2 million square metres of grass), 4 football pitches, 48 play areas, 7 cemeteries, and 11 closed church yards.
- 23 The key services and associated budgets for the last three years are shown below.

**Table 1**

<b>Service area</b>	<b>Actual 2003/04</b>	<b>Actual 2004/05</b>	<b>Actual 2005/06</b>
Refuse and recycling collection	1,706,737	1,908,382	2,328,155
Parks and open spaces	586,680	627,085	603,978
Street cleaning	386,119	482,968	605,761
Public conveniences	169,534	133,777	150,193
Cemeteries	57,340	103,186	114,368
Trade refuse collection	(35,805)	(661)	(27,856)

## National context

- 24 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to reduce the amount of waste that is collected and to encourage more recycling. Fenland District Council's statutory standard for 2006/07 is to recycle 20 per cent of household waste. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.
- 25 Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) gives a local authority power to deal with litter-based problems affecting its area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach and specific levels of cleanliness for various environments. Under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act, a council has the power to issue a notice to a private landowner to clean up their land and to undertake the cleansing itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2003 strengthens a council's legislative powers for keeping the area clean.
- 26 The Government has promoted the '*Cleaner, Safer, Greener*' agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.
- 27 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, '*Securing the Future*' 2005. Indeed, many local authorities are at the forefront of efforts to achieve greater social, economic and environmental sustainability. District councils, such as Fenland, are expected to use their powers as planning, housing and waste collection authorities, as well as their general wellbeing powers and community leadership, to achieve sustainable development. This includes working with others to promote energy conservation and efficiency, protect wildlife habits and promote biodiversity, reduce and mitigate climate change and promote more sustainable patterns of development.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28 The Council's corporate plan has five medium-term priorities for the period 2006/09 to focus resources and management attention. These are Community First, Streets Ahead, Open for Business, Quality Organisation, and Decent and Affordable Housing. The plan is updated each year to reflect what has been achieved and changing local needs and views.
- 29 The priorities have been appropriately determined by the views of local people, the demographic needs of the Fenland communities, the Fenland Community Strategy and national and regional policies and priorities. In December 2001 a quality of life survey was undertaken. Along with other public opinion surveys and complaints, this highlighted dissatisfaction over inadequate street and toilet cleansing, lack of co-ordination of environmental services, un-emptied litter bins, poor grounds maintenance and dog fouling.
- 30 The 'Streets Ahead' priority directly contributes to three of the key themes of the Fenland Community Strategy, developed by the Fenland Strategic Partnership:
- improving the Community's Safety, Health and Environment;
  - building Vibrant Towns and Village Communities that are good to live in; and
  - developing 'Countryside Pride'.
- 31 Clear visions have been developed for each of the Council's five medium-term priorities. The services inspected support the delivery of two of the Council's medium-term priorities. Their visions are:
- **Streets Ahead** - *'to create a district that is an attractive place for the community with a streetscape that is neat, tidy, well maintained, safe and fit for purpose'; and*
  - **Customer First** - *'to provide excellent customer service, community access and maximise customer satisfaction in all services'.*
- These priorities are supported with clear targets in service plans.
- 32 The September 2004 Citizens' Panel survey invited the public to indicate their preferred options for future service developments in the 'Streets Ahead' priority area. Efficient refuse/recycling and general environmental maintenance were considered highly important. Service objectives are in place to address these environmental issues.
- 33 Improving the environment is a shared priority between central and local government and is a regional priority in Cambridgeshire. Objectives to increase recycling and composting reflect the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Waste Management Strategy, produced in partnership with all Cambridgeshire councils.

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

- 34 We assessed how the service is meeting the needs of the local community and users, as defined by corporate priorities, against three key lines of enquiry:
- access, customer care and user and/or community focus;
  - diversity; and
  - service outcomes for users and the community.

### **Access, customer care and user focus**

- 35 The needs and views of citizens and users are central to the design and delivery of the service. The Council's core values include 'listen and talk' and 'understand, learn and improve'. Consultation is now a robust process with the views of all communities sought and used to inform service delivery. For example, results from community consultation helped inform the design of recycling services and the Customer First project, a project aimed at increasing accessibility to services. This has been designed on clear needs-based priorities for local people and has translated the Council's commitment to actual processes that benefit the community.
- 36 Access to services has improved significantly. In response to community feedback one-stop customer advice centres have been opened, one in each of the four market towns. Customer relationship management has been introduced through a telephone customer service centre. This provides, through a single contact number, information and access to all services, minimising the need to transfer customers to individual departments, from 8.00am to 8.00pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to noon on Saturday. However, this has disjointed back and front office systems reducing the effectiveness of dealing with missed refuse collections and arranging bulky household waste collections. The Council is aware of this and has employed consultants to examine work flow so that such issues are addressed.
- 37 Information is clear and is made available through a variety of sources. Services are promoted through the local press, a free paper delivered to all homes, in which the Council has a weekly article on services. A quarterly magazine, Fenland Eye, is produced by the Council and informs residents of achievements and services available. This is well laid out, easy to read and informative. The website has also been improved and more information is now available although it does not provide full service details such as when refuse collections are made on a street by street basis and when street cleaning is undertaken.

- 38 Service standards are generally clear and comprehensive though not widely publicised. A suite of pledges is in place for all services. For example, there is a service pledge to respond to abandoned vehicle enquiries within 24 hours. However, standards for some services are not stated, including the response to alleged missed refuse/recycling collection. It is also not made clear to the public what services the Council does not provide, such as highway maintenance. Information about all services, including alternate weekly collection of domestic waste, is not collated and routinely sent to new residents. Although the standards are publicised on the website and available in leaflets from the one-stop shops they are not routinely promoted in other literature such as in the Council newspaper and local press. Lack of comprehensive and consistently promoted standards means that customers cannot be exactly clear what level of service they can expect to receive.
- 39 There is a clear understanding of residents' needs derived from extensive consultation and good opportunities for the public and other stakeholders to contribute to policy and service development. For example, resident's views were sought on the proposals for improving the rate of recycling. Consultations included focus groups held in November 2002 as part of the environmental services best value review and the 2004 Citizens' Panel survey. The focus groups (one in each of the district's four market towns) confirmed general support for increased recycling and their preferred collection method was subsequently employed.
- 40 Services are tailored to meet the needs of all users. Assisted collections are offered to those unable to put out the wheeled bins for collection. The travelling community is provided with a responsive refuse collection service minimising potentially costly clean up costs on council land. A trade waste collection service is also offered. By delivering a range of services to meet different needs the Council is putting into practice its commitment to 'customer first'.
- 41 Front line staff demonstrate a clear understanding of service issues. Refuse and recycling staff are knowledgeable and able to resolve customer enquiries, for example regarding the alternate weekly collection of recyclables and waste. For those queries that cannot be resolved cards with contact information are given to residents so that problems can be resolved promptly. Contracted staff carrying out grounds maintenance are also knowledgeable and keen to resolve issues as they arise. However, the Council has yet to ensure that issues dealt with by frontline staff are routinely captured on the corporate 'comments, compliments and complaints' system.
- 42 Electronic access to Council services has improved. In 2004/05 only 54 per cent of services capable of being delivered electronically were possible. This placed the Council in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. Unaudited data for 2005/06 indicates that this has improved to 99.85 per cent. The Council is improving the website to support the delivery of the Customer First priority.

## Diversity

- 43 The Council understands the contribution that diverse groups can make to the quality of life and well being of the community. Particular emphasis has been placed on communication and consultation with hard-to-reach groups such as young people, old people, black and minority ethnic communities and travellers. The latter are an important part of the Fenland community. Initiatives to improve engagement include establishing a traveller's forum and the production and distribution of a compact disc to aid communication with this group. Language Line is used for translation purposes. Leaflets are produced in different languages and in pictorial form to aid understanding of the recycling roll-out. This focus on the importance of diverse communities has been recognised as good practice locally and regionally with the Council running courses for the Eastern Region Assembly on traveller site management. These initiatives help ensure diverse communities are able to contribute to consultation and understand what the Council is trying to achieve.
- 44 The Council has a robust approach to diversity and equality. For example, the corporate equality action plan is SMART<sup>3</sup> and on target and reviewed regularly by the quality reference group. Diversity Champions have been appointed to all major service areas and a diversity forum made up of external stakeholders is in place to ensure a co-ordinated approach to diversity across Fenland. Equality Impact Assessments for all major service areas have been completed ensuring services are tailored to local need. This has resulted in clear outcomes for the community, such as a £45,000 accessibility project in Lattersey Nature Reserve, which is making public open spaces accessible to all.
- 45 The Council and service embraces diversity, equality and human rights to ensure that all users have fair and equal access. For example, the Council has a Racial Equality Common Standard for Council Contracts to ensure all staff who work on behalf of the Council exhibit the same behaviour as that expected of council staff. If contractors breach this standard, the contract is automatically terminated.
- 46 The Council is adopting an overly cautious approach to achieving the Equality Standard. For example, it is currently working towards level 3 even though there is evidence that this is being achieved, such as by setting equality objectives and targets through service improvement plans.

## Services outcomes for users and the community

- 47 Service outcomes were assessed against waste management, street cleaning, grounds maintenance and general environmental issues. These are the key service areas that contribute to 'Streets Ahead', one of the five medium-term priorities for the period 2006/09.

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<sup>3</sup> SMART - specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timebound.

## Waste management - recycling and refuse collection

- 48 A highly successful phased roll-out of a three bin system has recently been completed. The approach was developed following extensive public consultation, including focus groups in the market towns. To inform residents a comprehensive marketing and communication strategy was implemented including advance publicity leaflets, customer service packs, road shows, talks and presentations to town and parish councillors, and press releases. A clear project managed process under the '*Getting it Sorted*' brand has resulted in few complaints and all residents, including those in flats, are now offered kerbside collection of recyclables. This represents a significant improvement since 2004/05 when only 78 per cent of the population were served by a kerbside collection scheme. Domestic waste is now collected on alternate weeks to dry recyclables and compostable material (garden and kitchen waste). The service is effectively delivering against the 'Streets Ahead' priority.
- 49 Considerable progress has been made in increasing the percentage of domestic waste that is recycled/composted. In 2004/05 21 per cent of household waste was recycled/composted, representing a median performance when compared to other councils. Unaudited data for 2005/06 indicates that this has increased to 35 per cent. In April 2006, the first full month with the whole district on the new service, 45 per cent (unaudited) was achieved. This means that the Council is already exceeding the Government standard of 20 per cent in 2007/08 and is making good progress to achieving its own challenging target of 46 per cent.
- 50 The amount of waste per household going to landfill has fallen significantly. Although the overall weight of waste collected is comparatively high, with an above median performance reported in 2004/05, much of this is of recyclable and compostable material and hence is not going to landfill. In 2001/02 931kg per household of waste was landfilled each year, this has fallen consistently to 589kg per household in 2005/06.
- 51 The Council is proactive in its approach to further reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. The Council estimates that 17 per cent of all domestic waste is biodegradable food waste. Due to the method of treatment adopted by Council, food waste can be composted along with green garden waste. To make it easier for residents to remove food waste from the residual waste, 2,500 subsidised kitchen caddies have been made available. This actively supports the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) which aims to reduce the impact on the environment by reducing the amount of biodegradable waste sent to landfill.
- 52 The refuse collection and recycling services are clearly promoted and are reliable. Easy to understand information is provided to all households, including through the distribution of an annual calendar of collections. The percentage of missed refuse collections over the past two years is 0.075 per cent. Collections that are missed are rectified quickly.

- 53 The Council is a key partner in the Recycle Cambridge and Peterborough (ReCaP) partnership. Beacon status was awarded to the partnership in March 2006 acknowledging the significant county-wide progress in the waste minimisation and recycling agenda. This effective partnership is allowing resources to be pooled and learning to be shared in order to increase recycling rates further.
- 54 Kerbside collections are complemented by a high number of appropriately positioned bring sites across the district. Although usage is dropping for some recyclates as a result of the roll-out of kerbside recycling, bring sites are currently the only method by which glass and textiles are collected. Emptying frequency is not sufficient at some sites at peak times. This leads to some bring banks overflowing and therefore additional time spent cleaning the area. This is acknowledged by the Council and there are plans to review emptying frequencies and the usage of bring sites as a result of the new kerbside scheme.
- 55 A range of additional waste services is offered. A pre-paid, by appointment, service is provided for the collection of bulky items of household waste. This service is taken up by between 250 and 300 households per month. As a result of an overview and scrutiny review of the service, concessions for those on low incomes were removed in April 2006 and standard service charges introduced. A profitable trade waste service is also offered. The Council is, however, not effectively encouraging waste minimisation and recycling in the business community, although at present it cannot be demonstrated that offering recycling collection services to the trade is economically viable.
- 56 The Council has a clear approach to education and raising awareness. A programme of education is in place which builds upon the focused education delivered in conjunction with the roll-out of the three bin scheme. A dedicated education vehicle that targets hard-to-reach communities has been introduced with £20,000 of funding from Defra.<sup>4</sup> Schools education is embedded with themed programmes of activity aimed at primary/junior/secondary and sixth form levels. Competitions are used to raise awareness. School children designed logos for the bring recycling sites and the kitchen caddy scheme. In addition, the Council is active in countywide Recap campaigns. This effective approach to awareness raising is contributing to the success in increasing recycling rates. Through the success of individual schemes, however, the Council has developed a number of high profile brands for projects that are not always directly associated with the Council as a whole. In addition some opportunities to increase awareness have not been taken such as providing home owners new to the district with welcome packs with details of services such as information on refuse/recycling collections.
- 57 The recent significant improvements in the service have yet to be reflected in improved satisfaction rates. In 2003/04, before the new service was rolled out, satisfaction rates were low. Only 84 per cent were satisfied with waste collection placing the Council just outside the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. Satisfaction with recycling facilities was also below median with only 77 per cent satisfied. Although the roll-out of the new scheme has only recently been completed surveys are identifying improved levels of customer satisfaction.

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<sup>4</sup> Defra - Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

## Street cleaning

- 58** Significant improvements in the standards of street cleaning have been achieved. The number of employees dedicated to street cleaning has increased from 6 to 21 in the last four years. In addition, new equipment has been supplied to enable more effective cleaning. A regular litter picking schedule is now in place for villages and revised shift patterns ensure an appropriate level of street sweeping at weekends including early morning sweeps in town centres. Services are therefore being designed to meet community need.
- 59** The best value performance indicator for street cleaning (BVPI 199) has shown three successive years of improvement and in 2005/06 the locally agreed stretch target of 18 per cent was achieved. This is significantly better than the Government target for councils to have less than 30 per cent of streets classed as being littered. The improved standards of street cleanliness have been confirmed independently by EnCams (formerly the Tidy Britain Group). Fly-posting and graffiti are not significant problems in the district and where they do occur are dealt with promptly. The Council is therefore clearly delivering against its Streets Ahead priority.
- 60** Two highly visible Rapid Response teams have been put in place to focus on street cleaning in rural areas and to clean up fly-tips. Removal of fly-tips has reduced from ten days to one day as a result of introducing this new service. During the period January to November 2005 the team responded to 2,068 calls and responded to 2,010 of them within 24 hours. Putting in place appropriate systems and resources to respond to environmental issues is supporting corporate priorities.
- 61** Investment is targeted to respond to issues raised by the public both through complaints and surveys. For example, the Council has responded to identified need in the provision of over 70 new litter bins as well as dedicated dog waste bins. The provision of adequate bins enables the public to dispose of waste appropriately.
- 62** Front line staff are involved in planning and designing the delivery of services. Staff are involved in the choice of equipment such as mechanical street sweepers and refuse vehicles. Regular meetings take place with employees, and with contracted staff, to discuss service delivery issues. This has resulted in changes to the way services are delivered so that they are more effective, such as closer integration of some grounds maintenance and street cleaning functions. By involving its staff the Council is identifying and addressing issues before public complaints arise.
- 63** Public toilets and changing rooms are well maintained. Cleaning is undertaken twice a day by the cleansing section. Monitoring of cleanliness of these facilities is checked in parks by the grounds maintenance contractor staff.

- 64 The significant improvements that have been delivered in the standards of street cleanliness have yet to be reflected in improving public satisfaction. In 2003/04 63 per cent expressed satisfaction with the standards of cleanliness, placing the Council in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally. As with waste services, more recent surveys show an improvement in public satisfaction with street cleaning.
- 65 Although additional resources are resulting in increased enforcement activity it has yet to be fully effective. A dog warden is now in post and fixed penalty notices have been issued. However, dog fouling does remain an issue in particular areas. Fixed penalty notices are also issued for littering offences. The lack of a corporate approach to enforcement has been recognised by the Council. A new enforcement section is being put in place linking enforcement activity across the Council and with partners such as the police community support officers. A councillor with portfolio responsibility for enforcement is now focusing political and managerial attention on this important issue.

### **Maintaining open spaces**

- 66 Overall, the Council is effective in maintaining parks and open spaces. In line with corporate priorities significant investment has been put into care of the local environment. This additional investment has resulted in a significant improvement in some areas such as the improved standards now achieved in the cemeteries and the new and improved flower planting schemes. This has resulted in the success in the Anglia in Bloom awards. For example, Wisbech has achieved awards for best floral displays, most improved entry, best schools project and overall third in group with a silver award. Wisbech Park itself has received over £45,000 worth of investment. Improved working arrangements supported with investment in line with corporate priorities is resulting in an improved environment.
- 67 The Council has been successful in establishing 'Friends of' groups to involve the community in the improvement and maintenance of open spaces. This includes establishing community groups for parks and to support the successful 'in bloom' competitions. These groups are involved in the development of management plans; the choice of furniture and in some cases assist in the maintenance of specific areas, such as the bowling green and watering of baskets in the in bloom areas.

- 68 The Council has a clear vision to engage with the wider community. 'Street Pride' is a new initiative aimed at encouraging community involvement in the care and maintenance of their local environment. Constituted groups are to be established on an area basis so that external funding can be sought. A pilot scheme involving volunteers of both staff and councillors has proved effective, securing £13,000 of funding. The groups are supported by the police and the fire service. To date this pilot has delivered six successful events including weekend litter picking in parks. Funding is now in place to roll-out the street pride initiatives across the community. Community involvement is recognised by the Council as central to continuous improvement and to meet cross-cutting priorities such as community safety.
- 69 Grounds maintenance contractors now work closely with the Council. The contract has been renegotiated resolving many of the problems previously experienced that were impacting on overall quality. Service standards have improved and there is a good working relationship with clear agreed work schedules in place. Regular meetings take place between the Council and contractor, although this is currently at frontline level. This has resulted in minor but important difficulties being resolved promptly as well as bringing frontline staff together. Contractor staff are also engaged in the 'Friends of' groups and are therefore part of decisions taken to improve services. Rectification and default notices are now rarely used due to more effective performance management and recent investment to provide new supervisor posts. Integrated and close working practices support the delivery of services to achieve environmental improvement ambitions.
- 70 The Council is working effectively with other groups to improve the environment. The Fenland Environmental Enhancement Team (FEET) is a partnership between the Council, police, and the probation service. Building on successful projects elsewhere in the county, this partnership, using information gathered in environmental audits, deploys youth offenders on environmental enhancement projects. The grounds maintenance contractors are also supporting the project through the loan of equipment. A clear programme of work is in place for the FEET project. A number of successful initiatives have been completed, such as graffiti removal, and the partnership is important to the delivery of 'Streets Ahead' priority.
- 71 Services are joined up to ensure that the environment is well managed. This includes a pragmatic approach to dealing with land outside the control of the Council. Systems are in place for the referral of issues that street scene staff cannot directly deal with such as litter and fly-tipped waste on private land. Close links between building control, planning and environmental services ensure that this land is dealt with appropriately. A pragmatic approach is also taken between resolving the issues directly and the use of enforcement powers. A clear approach to ensuring the environment as a whole is maintained is important in the delivery of 'Streets Ahead'.

- 72 The Council now deals with abandoned vehicles promptly. In response to satisfaction information that indicated approximately 61 per cent of residents considered abandoned and burnt out vehicles to be a problem, placing the Council in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally, new procedures have been put in place. In 2005/06 95 per cent of vehicles reported as being abandoned were investigated within 24 hours and 100 per cent of those that are confirmed are removed, subject to legal entitlement, within 24 hours. The Council is therefore delivering services to address public concerns.
- 73 As with waste management and street cleaning, public satisfaction has yet to fully reflect recent improvements achieved. A survey in 2003/04 resulted in low levels of satisfaction with only 56 per cent of respondents expressing satisfaction with parks and open spaces. More recent surveys do indicate improving levels of satisfaction which does reflect the improvements put in place in maintenance arrangements.

### **General environment issues**

- 74 The Council is successful in facilitating the delivery of quality development. There has been significant investment and success in securing external investment, such as Market towns Initiative funding, that has resulted in quality development and environmental enhancement schemes. For example, March market place has undergone a major, but sympathetic, enhancement scheme that has provided more space for pedestrians. Gateways into the market towns have been improved including the £1.3 million investment in Chatteris town centre. Through increased use of the Council's own resources, in line with priorities, together with success in securing external funding significant environmental improvements have been achieved.
- 75 Clear and comprehensive policies and design guides are in place to ensure quality development contributing to the protection and enhancement of the environment. Policies and specific guidance notes, including those on sustainability and provision of open spaces are in place and are resulting in clear outcomes. The local community and interest groups, including youth groups, are actively consulted in the design of environmental enhancement schemes. This has included the use of local artists and focus groups and exhibitions to encourage ideas for improvement themes. There is a clear policy to focus development on previously used sites to avoid encroaching on the green belt. Over the last six years, 41 per cent of all new development has been on brown field sites, exceeding the structure plan target of 35 per cent resulting in the Council having the highest proportion of development on previously used sites of all district councils in Cambridgeshire.
- 76 Development control powers are effectively used. Additional public open space is being delivered through a clear approach to planning gain. This includes an eight-hectare extension to West End Park which is currently under development. Where appropriate planning enforcement powers are used to ensure buildings at risk are brought back to their former standard for example in the renovation of Chatteris House. Historic building grants have been used to renovate properties in disrepair under private ownership.

- 77 The Council has a clear approach to sustainability which is embedded in the local development framework process. Climate change is an important issue due to the geographical nature of the fens. A comprehensive approach to reducing impact on the environment is reflected in the success at encouraging wind turbines in the district - there are currently 15 in place and planning consent granted for a further 12. This is sufficient to generate electricity to meet the domestic demands of all four Fenland towns. Planning gain secured from turbine applications has included contributions enabling the development of a climate change strategy. A climate change manager is in place reflecting the importance with which this is considered. A clear approach to sustainability supports a number of the corporate priority areas including 'Streets Ahead' and 'Open for Business'.
- 78 The Council ensures that it delivers its own services to reduce impact on the environment. Energy use is closely monitored and Council buildings are energy efficient, representing a performance amongst the best performing councils nationally (BVPI 63). The vehicle fleet, including refuse freighters, are run on bio diesel which, in 2004/05, resulted in a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions of 16.4 tonnes when compared to the use of standard fuels. Together with the grounds maintenance contractor, the Council has stopped the use of all chemicals (pesticide and herbicides) in some parks. New lighting, such as in St Peter's Gardens, is energy efficient and reduces light pollution. The Council is therefore setting a clear example on environmentally sustainable practices.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 79 The costs of delivering the waste management service are complex but reflect policy decisions and corporate priorities. The significant increase in the level of service offered to residents is reflected in the overall cost. In addition, the roll-out of the three bin scheme has coincided with other corporate service improvements that have impacted on cost. Although the service is high cost the level of service to residents has improved significantly.
- 80 The cost of waste management per household as measured by BVPI 86 has increased from £31.08 in 2002/04 to £49.59 in 2004/05 representing an increase from just below median cost to a level in line with the most expensive councils nationally. Unaudited costs for 2005/06 indicate a further increase to £59.81 with a forecast of reaching £64.25 in 2006/07. This reflects an increase in net expenditure from £1.1 million in 2001/02 to an estimated £2.6 million in 2006/07 following the roll-out of the three bin scheme.

- 81 In addition to direct service costs, including the provision of a relatively new vehicle fleet, there are other cost considerations impacting on this cost indicator. There has been a significant impact resulting from recharge costs from the 'Community First' corporate objective. The telephone contact centre and one-stop shops handled many enquiries during the roll-out of the new refuse and recycling schemes which, the Council estimates, resulted in an additional cost of approximately £6 to £7 household. As this recharge is based upon usage it is likely to reduce in subsequent years as the scheme becomes established. In addition, there are accounting costs associated with the new wheeled bins. Although grant funded from Defra, accounting practice requires this cost to be notionally charged to the service which adds approximately £3 per household.
- 82 The Council has a clear understanding of the breakdown of costs. A comprehensive approach to cost benchmarking has been undertaken in an attempt to compare like-for-like service provision. This has been undertaken with councils that offer similar collection methods and have comparable recycling rates. The Council estimates that the true cost of delivering waste and recycling services, when compared to similar service providers is average at approximately £52 per household.
- 83 The Council has been successful in attracting external funding for its recycling improvements. The Council was able to access Defra funding of £1.4 million towards 'Getting it Sorted', which included the purchase costs for two new vehicles and 62,000 wheeled bins. This considerably improved the value for money rating of the project from the viewpoint of local council tax payers. Additional external funding of £63,000 has also been obtained from the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) for publicity supporting the new scheme.
- 84 Value for money is clearly achieved from the trade waste collection service. This discretionary service, in 2005/06 resulted in a profit of £27,856. This money is invested back into Council services.
- 85 The Council has achieved value for money in the procurement and operation of the vehicle fleet. Purchase arrangements for new vehicles, including using leasing partnerships and partnership purchasing are realising savings over traditional lease arrangements and outright purchase. For example, the procurement of two refuse vehicles realised savings of over £17,000 compared to outright purchase arrangements. In addition, buying 'nearly new' vehicles is both securing value for money and providing vehicles that are fit for purpose. A tyre purchase agreement has resulted in real savings of approximately £5,000 per year. Bulk purchase and storage of fuel also results in savings of between 5p to 10p per litre compared to commercial pump prices. With a consumption of approximately 400,000 litres per year this results in a significant saving. The Council is therefore managing its operations effectively to secure value for money.

- 86 The Council is responsive to external forces in delivering value for money. A positive approach to the sudden withdrawal of the operators of the materials recycling facility, where dry recyclables were processed, was adopted. The opportunity to work in partnership with another council was taken for the removal and treatment of dry recyclables. A competitive joint tender realised savings from the combined tonnage. The new contract achieved savings of £6 per tonne (yielding a full year saving of £60,000). Additionally, new tipping locations have saved on crew time and fuel costs. Value for money is also being secured through the joint glass contract led by the County Council. This has delivered a profit on the sale of glass of approximately £10,000 per year in addition to recycling credits.
- 87 However, the Council lacks a corporate approach to value for money and procurement. There are examples where different parts of the Council have achieved value through procurement to gain efficiency savings. For example, using e-auction to achieve £17,000 per annum on 1,100 litre bins. However, this information is not co-ordinated centrally to ensure a consistent approach corporately. The Council is aware of this and has recently appointed a procurement officer to ensure a more corporate approach.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 88 The Council is developing a track record in delivering improvement. The direction of travel statement and the annual audit and inspection letter indicate that the Council is moving in the right direction. Systems have been put in place which are now leading to service improvements that residents would notice in waste management, environmental health, corporate capacity, people and some areas of community housing. There were performance weaknesses in some aspects of community housing, planning, benefits processing, cleanliness and a range of council-wide indicators. However, unaudited data suggests that performance in some of these areas is improving. For example, benefits and planning, has since improved due to internal reprioritisation. Investments in almost all key areas of Council activity, coupled with internal restructuring, capacity-building and cultural change, have created a platform for continued improvement.
- 89 The Council responds positively to external inspection. In February 2006, the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate concluded that the performance in the first two quarters of 2005/06 registers a 60 per cent improvement against 2004/05, thereby raising PIs from the bottom quartile to the top.
- 90 The Council can evidence a record of effectively implementing changes that have led to improvements in service delivery. Between 2002/03 and 2004/05, 61 per cent of corporate key performance indicators have improved with 45 per cent of performance indicators now above the median, itself a significant improvement. Specific indicators in the services inspected, such as the recycling rate show noticeable improvement. The recent focus on the 'Streets Ahead' agenda is therefore now resulting in improved services to the community.
- 91 Public satisfaction at the point of service, either at the one-stop shops or through the telephone service centre, is high. There have also been recent improvements to street scene public satisfaction rates which have previously compared unfavourably:
- Street Scene - 53 per cent in 2003 to 61 per cent in 2005;
  - Recycling - 68 per cent in 2003 to 70 per cent in 2005; and
  - Parks and Open Spaces - 56 per cent in 2003 to 60 per cent in 2005.
- 92 However, more generally, public satisfaction with the Council has not reflected the improvements made in the performance in many service areas. The Council believes public perception of it is influenced by the negative articles that appear on a regular basis in the local newspaper. To address this, the Council intends to take a more strategic approach to communication.

- 93** Robust processes for routinely assessing the level of satisfaction with services, and with the Council as a whole, have recently been put in place. This is particularly important to allow the Council to demonstrate the impact on the public of the significant investment made in services such as those inspected.
- 94** The improvements and changes that the service has set out to achieve are being met. For example, Supplementary Planning Guidance has been brought forward to support Council priorities enabling the Council to deliver major market town initiatives, and the development of the £50 million Nene Regeneration Project that will bring significant benefits to Fenland. These developments have addressed community needs such as public open space, affordable housing and delivering sustainable energy through successfully bringing forward and approving wind turbine applications with public support.
- 95** The service has fully embraced the need to consider value for money. However, there is not a consistent corporate approach. The Council has addressed a strategic commitment to efficiency saving in the medium-term but now needs to assess how the realisation of benefits from key projects is contributing to the overall value for money from its major service changes.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 96** The Council has aims and priorities for the future that are clear, challenging and robust supported by realistic targets and measurable outcomes. The Council has a clear service planning framework which ensures all service plans are now completed in a standard format integrating Council priorities with national performance targets and complemented by local performance indicators. The plans are outward-focused to assess performance and progress and are comprehensive about user-focused achievements in the longer-term.
- 97** Service improvement plans contain the necessary actions and targets to achieve top quartile performance. These plans which cover all aspects of environment services are regularly reviewed by officers and councillors. Where performance falls behind milestone targets, remedial action is promptly taken and then monitored appropriately. A robust approach to service planning places the Council well to meet corporate priorities.
- 98** Aims and future plans are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. A three-year corporate plan supported by a comprehensive action plan is used to monitor progress against the community strategy, Council priorities and service improvement plans. As part of the recent Council restructure, portfolio councillors are now aligned to corporate priorities to ensure continued focus on performance management and effective decision-making. Performance information is reported monthly to the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and a portfolio briefing pack is prepared for councillors which allows progress to be tracked against key priorities and other plans. Weak service areas are monitored to ascertain reasons for poor performance and remedial action is taken to ensure that they improve. This has included providing increased investment in some services, particularly in recycling which has resulted in significant improvement in overall performance.

## 30 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 99** Leadership of the service is effective. The service has active, visible and effective senior managers and councillors. Leadership within the Council sets a culture of openness and transparency as illustrated by Chief Executive Briefings and walkabouts, and staff are supported to perform to the best of their abilities. Councillor support for the environment service is strong. Councillors are very supportive and have a clear vision of the recycling agenda and the need to meet statutory standards. The successful implementation of the three bin system has enabled the Council to achieve 35 per cent recycling rate (unaudited) in 2005/06 from a low base of 8 per cent in 2002/03.
- 100** Councillors and managers regularly communicate Council priorities to staff and partners to ensure they have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities in service delivery and are also clear about the culture and values of the organisation to ensure service improvements take place. Staff at all levels are well informed of service direction and development through weekly team and departmental meetings and one-to-one discussions. Staff performance in delivering services is formally assessed through annual Learning, Evaluation and Performance (LEAP) discussions with line managers.
- 101** There are effective performance management arrangements in place to drive and monitor progress and review impact. Following the formation of the Performance Improvement Unit and appointment of Performance Champions, performance information is now simple to access and understand enabling both councillors and staff to know how well the service is performing against local and national performance indicators. Reporting of performance indicators to CMT and councillors utilises a traffic light system and includes an indication of the long-term trend of the direction of travel of the indicator. It explains the reasons for variations in performance and is presented in a format that demonstrates achievement against corporate priorities. Users are informed about service achievements through 'Fenland Eye', the local newspaper but performance against service standards is not routinely included. This is a missed opportunity for the Council as users will not recognise the scale of service improvements achieved if they do not have service standards to compare performance with.
- 102** Performance management arrangements are still developing to drive and deliver improved value for money. Councillors remain challenged when deciding what services or service elements the Council should no longer provide although the Council's annual efficiency statement has helped focus attention on these pressures. Whilst councillors and managers identify and pursue opportunities to reduce costs, for example £521,000 savings in 2005/06 from corporate services, financial management, procurement, HR strategy, enhancing technology and asset management, a value for money culture is still developing and is not embedded in corporate processes.
- 103** There is a clear project management approach to service delivery. 'Fenland Way' methodology is used on larger projects, such as 'Getting it Sorted'. This is a tailored version of Prince 2 and appropriate staff have received training in its use. Through effective delivery of projects such as the roll-out of the three bin scheme, risk of service failure is minimised.

- 104** A corporate risk management culture remains underdeveloped. The risk management strategy is being implemented in service planning and in compiling risk registers but risk management has only recently been introduced into the operational arrangements of the Council.
- 105** The service is learning from high performing and other providers, user feedback and its own experience. The Council is using learning both from other councils and from its own experience to improve the performance of the 'Getting it Sorted' roll-out and was able to incorporate the lessons learnt into the process for the second roll-out in May 2005. As a result, there were significantly fewer calls to Customer First from residents affected by the second roll-out than was experienced from residents covered in the first phase. Customer feedback from rolling out the three bin scheme resulted in multi-lingual leaflets and pictorial representation being produced to enable all residents to use these services correctly.
- 106** The Council has a well publicised, user-friendly and supportive correspondence, compliment and complaint (3C) process for service-users, staff and others to submit suggestions and grievances. The Council uses a recorded correspondence system to respond to these enquiries in a positive and timely manner and the results are used to help improve services. For example, the Council is now using consultants to ensure all procedures are linked and enable information to be available at the first point of contact. It has yet, however, to ensure routine capture of all service complaints (and compliments) especially those handled by frontline staff.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 107** The Council has been consistently recognised by the Audit Commission for the pace and scale of its improvement programme. This has included significant investment in high priority areas which has enabled the Council to acquire appropriate skills, finance and tools to improve further. This is demonstrated in both the Council's 2004 comprehensive performance assessment report and 2006 direction of travel statement.
- 108** The Council has the capacity to deliver service improvements. Reorganisation has resulted in high calibre senior managers now being in place. Councillors and staff are clear about their strategic and operational roles as well as their responsibilities and accountabilities. Staff have a clear understanding of council priorities and how they personally contribute to service delivery. This is formally reviewed through the LEAP system where personal targets are set linked to service improvement plans and corporate priorities. Training and development needs are also assessed and training takes place in a timely manner. For example, all frontline administration staff have completed customer excellence training levels 1 to 3. Staff also confirmed they have the necessary tools to do their job well. There has also been significant investment in equipment to allow services to continually improve. Investment in environment services is demonstrated by improving the vehicle fleet, new mechanical street sweepers and purchasing new protective clothing and equipment for staff.

## 32 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 109** The Council is ensuring it has the necessary skills to deliver further improvements. For example, where there have been identified gaps in capacity, ie planning, procurement and enforcement, the Council has either secured the necessary funding or is in the process of recruiting these staff. Planning professionals have now been recruited to deliver Local Development Framework (LDF) and additional resource has been agreed to improve the corporate approach to ensuring value for money through a new post that will focus on challenging the current delivery of services. In addition, resources have been redirected to enable a focus on priorities. This includes using savings to fund the establishment of a corporate enforcement team. The enforcement team will bring together staff across services, including street scene staff such as an antisocial behaviour co-ordinator funded by the local crime and disorder reduction partnership.
- 110** The Council has access to the necessary tools to deliver service improvements. It has established its own project management guidance based on best practice principles to ensure service change is managed and delivered in a controlled and co-ordinated environment utilising skills and building capacity where necessary. For example, some managers have been trained in the PRINCE2 method of project management and these individuals have been used to manage projects and coach/mentor other managers. Such skills were used effectively in the 'Getting it Sorted' project. In addition, improved ICT is now enabling more efficient delivery of services. For example, more accurate data collection (service complaints etc) is now in place enabling more timely and accurate assessment of performance and corrective action which residents will notice as evidenced by the Council's recorded correspondence system.
- 111** A clear approach to consultation and communication is now in place giving the Council an effective understanding of community need to enable it to deliver future service improvement. A clear consultation process now underpins the corporate policy-making process, with the addition of consultation workshops on priority services and a postal survey of 3,000 residents on local priorities to develop and inform the draft corporate plan for 2006/09. The roll-out of new policies, such as on waste management, have been accompanied by a targeted public communication strategy. Public consultation exhibitions have been arranged at the Council's four one-stop shops, and others have specifically targeted older people and local minority ethnic communities.
- 112** The Council has robust human resource planning. The Council has effective workforce development and corporate learning initiatives, eg the Council is Investor in People accredited, has an effective leadership development and member development programme as well as an effective appraisal (LEAP) system. These plans ensure that the Council has the necessary capacity to deliver service improvements.

- 113** The Council has improved the management of sickness following the introduction of a more robust sickness monitoring policy which now includes 'back to work' interviews in November 2004 and ensures the Council has accurate records. Sickness levels in Environment Services have decreased from 12.6 days per employee in 2004/05 to 10.5 days in 2005/06. Whilst this is a good improvement in the last year, absences increase the cost of services such as refuse collection, which is above the Council average.
- 114** The Council has effective financial planning. There is a robust medium-term financial strategy in place. The 2006/07 budgetary process has been further improved to enable councillors to make the necessary decisions to ensure resources are allocated to Council priorities. This has included moving resources from non-priority areas such as from tourism to enforcement. This process ensures the Council has the necessary financial capacity to deliver service improvements in line with agreed priorities.
- 115** The Council's approach to procurement remains underdeveloped. There is now a published procurement strategy based on national guidelines and there are isolated examples of good practice to achieve improved value for money across the Council. For example, environment services has achieved £20,500 savings per annum by purchasing second hand refurbished refuse freighters against the price for new. However, the Council's current approach to procurement is in need of greater corporate co-ordination. The Council acknowledges this and has recently agreed funding for a procurement officer to ensure a corporate approach to achieving value for money.
- 116** The Council has a track record of working with partners to deliver service improvements in priority areas, this includes partnerships with:
- other Cambridgeshire councils in producing a joint municipal waste management strategy for which the achievements and future plans have been recognised in the award of Beacon status;
  - police to reduce crime through the establishment of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme;
  - the Primary Care Trust to improve the environment and wellbeing though joining up services;
  - the Probation Service through the FEET project to improve the wider local streetscene; and
  - town and parish councils to deliver local improvements, eg Street Pride.

The Council is also currently undergoing a partnership review to ensure that it is only involved in partnerships that have clear and deliverable outcomes that residents would notice.

### 34 Environment Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 117 The Council is successful in attracting external funding to deliver improvements. This includes the funding from Defra and Wrap to support the significant improvements in waste and recycling services. Major regeneration projects are also leveraging in external funding including those to deliver the £50 million Nene Waterfront project. This considerably improved the value for money rating of these projects from the viewpoint of local council tax payers.
- 118 The investment phase of the Council's prioritisation of customer service is now complete. The sustained high usage rates at the four Council one-stop shops and the telephone call centre demonstrate that the Council was right to identify a demand for these services and this progress was recognised in the Audit Commission inspection *'Managing Service Change to Meet Customer Needs and Deliver Value for Money'* in September 2005. The new website, the resources diverted into meeting the Government's IEG targets and the introduction of Customer Relationship Management systems have all increased the responsiveness of the Council to consumer demand. The new compliments, complaints and comments procedures and customer service excellence training were introduced to add quality to the increased access to services now being received by residents. However, the Council has not yet carried out a value for money review of its customer contact and advice centres and is therefore unable to fully measure value for money from the £1.8 million investment in Customer First in its first year (2005/06).