

Service Inspection Report

August 2006



Planning Service

Plymouth City 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 (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

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

Summary

- 1 Plymouth City Council's Planning Service has a clear ambitious vision for the development of the city. This is based on good intelligence about the local area, the needs of the local community within the city and the economic development required to sustain a modern city.
- 2 The planning service is actively working with other services to develop policies and plans for improved service delivery. This is also leading to outcomes that are helping to address inequalities in some communities. For example, by working with housing and education to address issues in Devonport and with the waste service to address short-term and longer-term service improvements.
- 3 There is effective engagement with the development industry to attract high quality sustainable development across the city in accordance with the Mackay Vision and the Council's own planning policies. Many development partners are adding to the planning service's capacity as they bring expertise and experience to the process.
- 4 The planning service demonstrates effective leadership through its partnership working. It has good working relationships at a regional and sub-regional level with key stakeholders. Consultation with the local community ensures that there is currently support for the overall ambition for the city. Where development activity is high local people are more actively engaged.
- 5 The Council has improved the speed of deciding planning applications. It has reached the best 25 per cent of performance for deciding 'other' and 'minor' planning applications. It is reducing its backlog of 'major' complex applications and has implemented initiatives to address, but has yet to improve, the overall speed in deciding this group of applications which remains in the worst 25 per cent.
- 6 Customers can easily access the planning service and in most cases their questions are answered at the first point of contact. The planning staff meet regularly with major developers prior to the submission of their applications in order to maximise the quality of the development, ensure proposals align to the vision for the city and secure additional community benefits through a legal agreement.
- 7 The service has a strong track record of improvement and is developing the capacity to secure the delivery of the vision for the city. There has been investment in the planning service in the past two years and there are high levels of morale and commitment from staff, councillors and partners which has led to significant service improvement. The scale and pace of change within the planning service, means that the full impact of some these improvements are not yet realised.

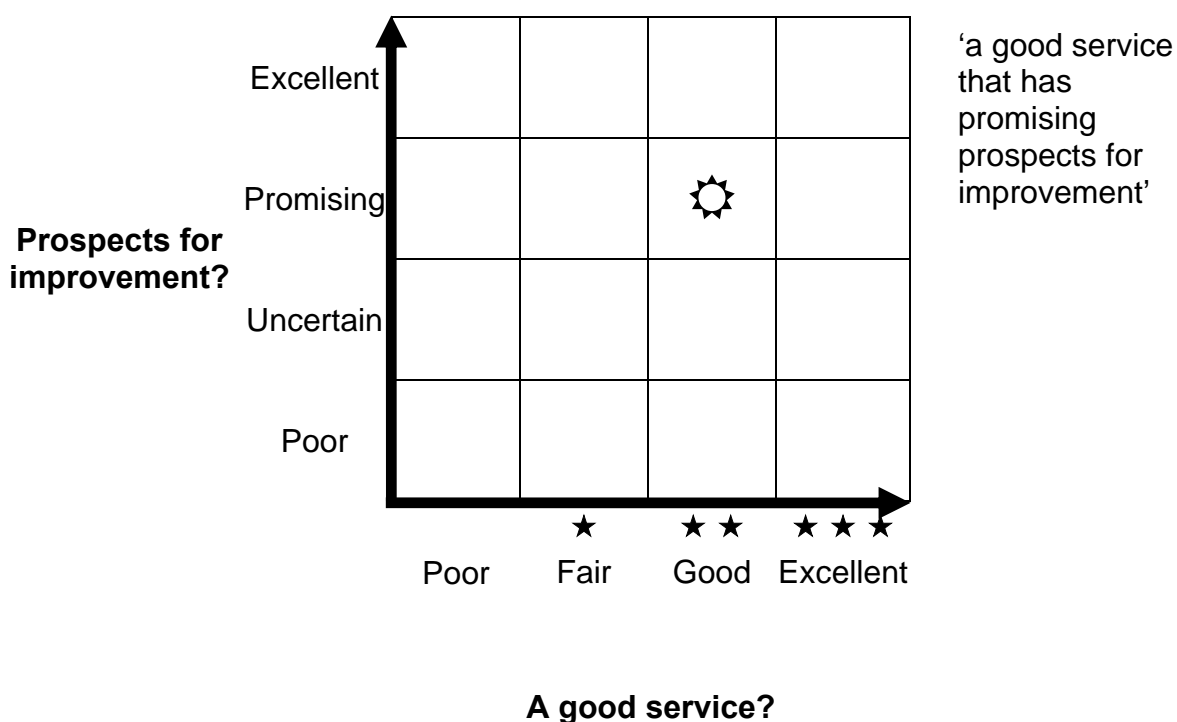
6 Planning Service | Summary

- 8 However, in specific areas capacity is limited and this impacts on the ability of some support services to deliver the expected levels of service, for example, the backlog of section 106 agreements and the development of a more strategic approach to securing community benefits. The service has yet to fully address the diversity of its users and to identify and understand the needs of some non-users.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed **Plymouth City 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 chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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

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

- the service has a clear vision for the city;
- the service benefits from effective leadership;
- it makes a significant contribution to the Council's corporate objectives;
- the Local Development Framework is progressing well and is of a high standard;
- councillors and officers work well with partners;
- regeneration of the city is underway; and
- the service is in the best 25 per cent of councils for speed of deciding 'other' and 'minor' planning applications.

11 However:

- the service does not fully address the diversity of its customers and non-users; and
- the speed of deciding major applications compares with the worst 25 per cent of councils, due to weak support from the legal service and problems completing section 106 agreements.

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- recent investment in the service is leading to service improvements that local people recognise and internal and external stakeholders support these;
- high levels of enthusiasm are felt by staff, councillors, stakeholders, partners and customers;
- planning policy documents are clear and link with corporate plans and ambitions;
- ambitions for the city are accepted by those involved in the delivery of the planned regeneration;
- strong leadership to drive improvement is evident both corporately and within the planning service;
- effective working with partners is used to supplement capacity to enhance the enabling role of the Council; and
- the Council has recently become more effective in implementing change.

13 However:

- limited corporate financial capacity is increasing pressure on all services;
- many recent changes have yet to deliver identifiable improvements; and
- a strategic approach to securing additional benefits, through section 106 agreements, is not in place.

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 costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the Council's strategic approach to securing additional community benefits from the regeneration development taking place by:

- *exploring and adopting the tariff approach to city-wide benefits;*
- *creating a more strategic role for the management of the section 106 process; and*
- *increasing staff awareness of the commercial implications of negotiations for development benefits.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased clarity of section 106 negotiations;
- less uncertainty for partners in developing land;
- improved budget arrangements for recipients of benefits; and
- improved quality and speed of determining complex major applications.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the service provided to local people by:

- *developing its services further to encompass equality and diversity issues; and*
- *regularly testing the service's value for money and the relationship between costs and performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better service provision and value for money for users and local people; and,
- better fit between the needs of local people and the service provided.

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

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Plymouth is the second largest city in the south west of England, with a population of 244,400. It is located within a stunning landscape, with Dartmoor to the north and Plymouth Sound harbour to the south with the rivers Plym and Tamar to the east and west.
- 16 The city has a rich cultural history. The city's origins relate to its coastal location with naval and maritime activity at the heart of the city's development. The city centre was extensively damaged in the Second World War and was redeveloped following a plan created by Abercrombie.
- 17 The city failed to realise its full potential as a dynamic city and the decline of much of the military activity in the city added to the economic pressure and decline. Plymouth has some of the country's most deprived wards and is ranked 76 out of 354 (where 354 has the least deprivation). It has a diverse population with 3.5 per cent non-white British.
- 18 The city has good transport links to the rest of England and Europe. It has its own airport and international ferry service. It has a main line station and access to the motorway network via the Devon Expressway.
- 19 The city is home to Plymouth University, a teaching hospital at Derriford and a dentistry school. The National Aquarium opened in 2002 on the quay at Sutton Harbour marking the city a tourist destination in its own right.

The Council

- 20 The Council has a Labour party administration, with 28 councillors; the Conservative group has 25 councillors with the Liberal Democrat group having 3 councillors. The Council has adopted the Cabinet and Scrutiny model of governance. The Council has a cabinet of 10 councillors, a range of subject-based scrutiny committees and separate regulatory committees for licensing and planning.
- 21 The Council is a unitary council and employs 11,000 people across all its services. It has a net revenue budget of £281 million. The average Band D council tax is £1,176.34.

The Council's planning service

- 22** This inspection has looked at how the Council is using its planning function to deliver the ambition for the city. This includes planning strategy, development consents and, investment and sector support, with elements of other council services such as transport, housing and legal service which have an impact on the planning service. The planning service is part of the Council's Planning and Regeneration Service.
- 23** The service is responsible for:
- the production of the Local Development Framework (LDF);
 - the production of the Local Development Scheme (LDS) to monitor and manage the delivery of the LDF documents;
 - the Statement of Community Involvement;
 - the annual monitoring report to monitor the impact of planning policies;
 - the deciding of planning applications;
 - the enforcement of planning control;
 - the giving of planning advice to the public;
 - the negotiation of planning gain to the benefit of the whole community;
 - delivering nature conservation and tree-related functions;
 - co-ordinating coastal planning functions for the Tamar Estuary;
 - undertaking economic development initiatives; and
 - managing the Tourist Information Centres, tourism and marketing initiatives including events and festivals.
- 24** The Planning and Regeneration Service is divided into three units: the Strategy Unit which deals with amongst other things planning policy; the Development Consents Unit which deals with planning applications, enforcement and trees; and the Investment and Sector Support Unit which deals with all economic development and tourism matters. The planning service employs 77 FTEs with a total expenditure of £4,783,661. However, there is income totalling £2,310,851 leaving a net budget of £2,472,810.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 Plymouth City Council has a clear vision for the regeneration and development of the city. This is based on the work of David Mackay, who at the request of the local strategic partnership was commissioned to develop a master plan for the city. The work involved significant levels of engagement with many groups, organisations and local people. The vision has been adopted by the City Council and the local strategic partnership and now guides the development of all strategic plans.
- 26 The key principles of the vision are that Plymouth has yet to fulfil its full potential, that there is capacity for growth within the city limits, that the city is fragmented and that the dominant road networks limit the ability for people to move informally around the city without using the private car. The vision is focused on the city centre and the waterfront in particular and aims to: *'make the city one of Europe's finest, most vibrant waterfront cities where an outstanding quality of life is enjoyed by everyone and where all can be healthy, wealthy, safe and wise'* (Plymouth 2020).
- 27 The Council has developed its corporate plan in line with this vision and the key objectives in the corporate plan are the same as the key objectives in the emerging revised community plan. The Council and the local strategic partnership are working together to develop their strategic plans and this is the foundation for the development of the Local Development Framework (LDF).
- 28 The strength of the vision for the city and the support it has received has enabled the city to ensure that regional and sub-regional plans adopt the vision as the basis for spatial planning in the area. The principles of the vision have guided the development of the core strategy element of the LDF.
- 29 Work to produce the Area Action Plans (AAP) and Local Development Documents³ (LDD) is in parallel with the area-based work for the community plan. Much of the baseline research is carried out jointly with partners and used to inform both strategic plans.
- 30 Within the City Council, there is a clear link between the corporate plan objectives, the objectives of the LDF and the service plans for the planning service. Service plans are cascaded through the Council from a corporate level, a directorate level down to individual service teams. The objectives in service plans are also translated into personal work plans at an individual member of staff level.

³ These are area specific detail plans that form part of the LDF.

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

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 31 The planning service is making good progress in developing the LDF. The Statement of Community Involvement has been subject to public consultation and submitted to Government Office for approval. The preferred options stage for the core strategy is complete and the core strategy is due for submission in July 2006.
- 32 The preparation of these plans is based on up-to-date local intelligence and effective engagement with stakeholders, partners and local people. This work began in 2000 as part of the local plan review but has been rolled forward into the LDF process. The Council is running the LDF process for Plymouth in tandem with South Hams District Council in recognition of the close relationship between the aspirations of the two councils. The two councils have jointly commissioned a housing needs survey to inform their respective housing strategies and the LDF process.
- 33 The Council is working jointly across service areas to inform the planning policy framework for the city. For example, close working with education to understand the changing education needs across the city and to profile the numbers and location of school-aged children has enabled the creation of a comprehensive plan for the closure, redevelopment, expansion or construction of a new school. This has already enabled the Council to secure additional funding and to work with developers and partners to identify and secure new sites for community-based education campuses. This has had a particularly significant impact in one of Plymouth's most deprived areas - in Devonport a new education campus is proposed, linked to a new community hub with health, sport and shopping.
- 34 The Council can demonstrate effective leadership supported by the clarity of the vision for the city. This has enabled the Council and its partners to make effective representations at a regional and national level. This has resulted in the adoption of the principles of the Plymouth vision in the regional and sub-regional spatial strategies and these principles are supported by regional partners. Not only does this give the Council's policy credibility but it also gives development partners more security and has enabled funding to be secured through the development industry. Throughout the city, development is underway and large construction cranes dominate the skyline.
- 35 The development work for the LDF is of a high quality. The Royal Town Planning Institute has recognised the groundwork for the LDF, the level of engagement with partners, the quality of the baseline data for the formulation of the policies and the speed that the Council has progressed through the award of the Silver Jubilee Cup in 2005. This external recognition for the Council's plans adds credibility and increases the momentum for the successful regeneration of the city. In addition, staff morale is high as a result of the award.

- 36** The first annual monitoring report (AMR) on the Council's implementation of planning policy provides a clear assessment of the baseline position across the city. This AMR submitted to the Government Office includes a comprehensive assessment of the city. This forms an effective baseline for the management of the delivery of the proposed accelerated growth and to manage the impact of the plan. This helps the Council to ensure that the LDF delivers the intended outcomes and allows a flexible approach to planning policy development based on up-to-date evidence.
- 37** Good design is effectively encouraged in all developments. The Council uses design principles to develop the area-based detailed planning policies. This links the community planning processes with realistic development proposals. The Council's development partners are also engaged at this local level. In addition, all significant development proposals are subjected to external design scrutiny through a design panel chaired by David Mackay. This ensures that the design principles of the Plymouth vision are adopted in each development proposed, for example, the restoration of part of the historic naval dockyard area to produce the high quality of the Royal William Yard development. This is recognised as good practice by CABE⁴ and secured high quality development in the city.
- 38** The Council is conserving the heritage within the city's existing buildings. For example, it is working with English Heritage to develop a local list of important buildings to supplement the national listed building designations. This recognises buildings for their local importance and secures their protection and incorporation into any redevelopment. This proactive approach reduces uncertainty for the development industry and gives reassurance for local amenity groups seeking to protect these locally important buildings.
- 39** Councillors and officers work effectively together and there is clarity about the different roles and responsibilities each has. For example, the portfolio holder for planning is not a member of the planning committee. This secures a clear separation between the executive function of the portfolio holder and the regulatory activity of planning committee. All councillors involved in planning receive compulsory training relating to how the planning system operates and key technical guidance and policy issues. There is a clear code of conduct and practice for everyone taking part in the planning process, for councillors, officers and for members of the public. This ensures that matters of probity are observed and that planning committee meetings are conducted effectively.
- 40** The relative profile of other environmental issues is low, such as biodiversity, climate change, and sustainable energy use and water conservation. The Council does address these issues within the LDF core strategy, and through its partnership working with the Local Strategic Partnership. However, local developers and partners are not focused on these important issues. This could make it harder to secure measures in future developments to reduce use of water and energy, to adopted sustainable construction principles and to have a positive impact on climate change, compared to accelerated growth and economic prosperity.

⁴ Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

- 41 The Council is slow in developing a comprehensive citywide policy for section 106 agreements to secure additional benefits from development. The Local Development Scheme (LDS), which sets out the timescale for the production of each part of the LDF, identifies that the supplementary planning document dealing with section 106 agreements is due to be published early 2007. In the meantime there is a momentum for developing in the city, and developers would welcome a clear policy, with a fair and transparent approach to these legal agreements would speed up the planning process, ensure that development continues to proceed and ensure that citywide infrastructure and benefits are secured.
- 42 As well as the focus on the production of the LDF, the Council has also secured significant improvement in the performance of deciding planning applications. In 2004/05 the Council's performance for deciding 'minor' and 'other' planning applications was exceeding government targets and within the best quartile when compared nationally. The Council is successfully defending its decisions at appeal. In 2003/04, 37 per cent of appeals were allowed against the Council's decision - below the 40 per cent government target.
- 43 However, major applications are still within the worst quartile and performance continues to be poor - this is reflected in the Council remaining a planning standards authority for this class of planning application. Continued poor performance in deciding major applications is in part due to the Council's focus on reducing the backlog of planning applications. Some older applications are still awaiting the completion of a legal agreement securing additional benefits, such as highway improvements or contributions towards education provision although the backlog is being reduced.
- 44 The legal service has not provided the required level of support in determining major applications in the past and limited capacity within this service has added to delays. The service is using external legal consultants to provide this service on current legal agreements and this has helped to improve the speed of deciding some recent applications. Reducing the backlog of applications will continue to have an adverse impact on overall performance; however, the Council is actively managing this process in order to build sustained improvement in the future.

Access, customer care and user focus

- 45 Community engagement is effective in developing the LDF. The Council has worked well with public and private sector partners to develop the Plymouth vision into a spatial planning policy framework; partners include the private sector such as the Sutton Partnership and the public sector such as the New Deal for Communities partnership working in Devonport. Both these areas of the city have experienced recent regeneration that has impacted positively on the quality of life for local residents.

- 46 The Council meets regularly with some key customers to develop the planning service further. The Plymouth Regeneration Forum attended by local developers, architects and agents meets regularly to discuss how the planning service can develop and to exchange ideas about the future development of the city. The Council uses effective feedback mechanisms to show that it is using this opportunity to make real differences in service delivery. For example, the Plymouth Regeneration Forum was involved in the creation of the service standards for planning.
- 47 Regular customers of the service, partners and stakeholders are very satisfied with the planning service they receive. Officers are effectively engaged in pre-application discussions and regularly meet with key partners to ensure progress is maintained. This relationship enables both parties to identify problems and issues early and seek joint solutions. However, the service has not maintained effective mechanisms to engage with its less regular customers. Strategic public consultation events have been well attended in the past but there has been some loss of momentum, recent public consultation exercises were less well attended. Initially the community embraced the Mackay vision for Plymouth but more recently traditional consultation methods adopted by the Council to progress the LDF are less well received. This may in part be that the community is still supportive or it may be a sign of local apathy and disengagement. The Council recognises the need for a more innovative approach in order to maintain the level of community engagement, so that local people remain clear about how the current level of development fits with the overall vision. This will be tested further when the LDF core strategy is examined in public and when individual planning applications are considered.
- 48 The Council does not effectively participate with its less regular planning service customers. It does not engage regularly with customers making smaller 'householder' planning applications to discuss wider service improvements. These customers account for well over 50 per cent of the planning applications decided by the planning service although the impact of each is smaller. The Council meets regularly with these customers on a daily basis through the Duty Officer system. Comments made during such meetings are fed into the corporate comments system; however, no feedback is given to those customers. Therefore the service is not aware of the level of satisfaction with the planning service on a wider scale from the majority of its customers.
- 49 The Council does not currently know what its less frequent customers think of the service that they receive. When last measured by the Council, customer satisfaction with the planning service was poor. Only 64 per cent of customers were satisfied with the planning service in 2003/04. This coincides with the poor levels of performance in dealing with planning applications. The service has not completed a more recent customer satisfaction survey following the recent improved performance although it has very recently introduced some customer feedback processes, at the time of our inspection only two customers had responded.

- 50** The planning service is easily accessible for many users of the service. The service makes effective use of technology such as email and telephone systems to communicate with its customers. There is a duty officer available for customers and a clear appointment system is used. The planning service has its own dedicated planning reception where staff are polite and helpful to customers. The majority of customers' questions are answered fully at the first point of contact, telephones are answered promptly and case officers are generally easy to contact. Pre-application advice is available to all planning applicants and this service is highly valued by customers.
- 51** Good use is made of e-planning; the service has an accessible website containing information about planning policy, the LDF, and development control. Some customers use the website to submit planning applications directly to the service. The website was awarded the maximum score against the national Pendleton criteria in 2005.
- 52** The planning service has recently published clear customer standards and these are actively monitored by the service. They link the quality of the service provided to the vision outlined in the corporate plan for the whole Council. The Plymouth Regeneration Forum was involved in their development and participants are clear about the charter. However, these service standards are not widely publicised, and other customers are largely unaware of them. Therefore some customers are not able to judge effectively the level of service they receive and the service cannot manage customer expectations. The planning service, also, identifies any complaints and uses these to improve the service or to identify areas for staff development and learning.
- 53** Public access and transparency at planning committee has improved. Planning committee is held in the late afternoon in the civic centre. This location is easily accessible and well serviced by public transport. The layout of the room helps the public to follow the meeting; councillors are clearly identified and can be clearly heard. Active management of the agenda reduces the production of late items; this ensures that everyone attending the meeting is clear about the issues for discussion. The timing of the meeting is difficult for customers who are working in and around the city, reducing the potential for local people to attend.
- 54** The Council is not making full and effective use of modern technology to aid councillors' decision-making. Some plans are pinned to the wall behind the councillors and the introduction of computerised projection is used primarily to display only the location of the site. This impacts on the quality of the discussions on applications and is difficult for councillors to be clear about development proposals. This takes up committee time and adds little to the quality of the planning process. Some details of planning conditions and section 106 agreements were also unclear and led to requests for clarification rather than a clear discussion of the merits of the proposals, for example, discussion about hours of working during construction to be included in a condition. For the Council to be able to deal effectively with the future large-scale developments proposed in the city, clarity of information presented to planning committee will become more important.

- 55 Most of the Council's planning guidance for the public are written in plain English and include information on how to access the information in other formats and languages. However, some of the forms and standard letters used by the planning service are not clearly written and explanatory information is not clear.
- 56 There is still a fragmented approach to the delivery of some elements of the planning service. For example, the Council has a wide range of enforcement powers across a number of its services and there was some evidence that the service had participated in campaigns with other departments. But, the service delivers planning enforcement in isolation of other council regulatory powers. This means that the Council does not benefit from the use of effective joint enforcement powers and does not always secure effective enforcement.
- 57 The Council has not joined up the development process; building control manages the construction of buildings separately from the planning service. Time spent designing buildings as part of the planning process may be duplicated when construction plans are developed. For example, building in energy efficiency and water saving design at an early stage using the expertise of building control would add to the overall quality and sustainability of development. The current focus within the planning service on architectural design excludes building control and their expertise and opportunities to maximise sustainable construction techniques. Although there are examples of joint working, with the access officers for instance a more joined up service would add to the development process and reduce customers' delays and costs.

Diversity

- 58 The Council is not fully effective in meeting the diverse needs of the local community. It has only reached level 1 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. Although there is a corporate focus on this issue, it has still to be embedded within the planning service. For example, the service's equality impact assessments are focused on the limited customer base for each service; that is people who were already engaging with the service, rather than leading to a clear understanding of the diversity of the communities that the service impacts on. Understanding the diversity of people already using the service is necessary but the regeneration of the city will impact on all citizens and their diversity must be understood and embraced by the service to ensure that the city develops to meet the whole community's needs. The Council is putting together a framework for engagement and consultation to help the service undertake this in a more effective manner and with a co-ordinated approach across all council services.
- 59 The Council has a low level of buildings that are open to the public in which all public areas are accessible to people with disabilities. Although the civic centre - where the planning service is delivered - is accessible, only 15 per cent of the Council's buildings across the city are fully accessible for people with disabilities. However, 53 per cent of buildings are generally accessible to people with disabilities, and of these, the vast majority offer accessibility for planning functions. Overall, this is a low level of provision and may exclude some people from participating in the service.

- 60 The planning service shows some awareness of the diversity of its users. The development control service offers a home visit service for customers who cannot access the civic centre due to illness, disability or inability to travel. There is access to language line and translation services are available although two to three days notice is required.
- 61 There is a raft of planning policies aimed at addressing inequalities experienced by some minority groups. For example, the Council is working to develop more opportunities for local travellers to establish permanent sites in locations that are sustainable for the whole community. Policies to secure improved access to new buildings for disabled people are embedded in the LDF core strategy policies.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 62 The planning service has begun to develop a more robust understanding of its costs. It has used a core function analysis to identify the time resources needed for specific service activities and created a cost-based benchmarking group to compare service costs. However, the information used for comparison is out-of-date referring to April 2004 in current 2006 comparison exercises. Therefore the full benefit from benchmarking is lost. The development of clearer criteria for benchmarking activity is essential if the service is to maximise the benefit of clearly understanding how its service costs, staffing levels and effectiveness of the service delivery accurately compares to its benchmarking partners.
- 63 Analysis shows that the service is more expensive and these costs are increasing compared to the average for the councils in the selected benchmarking group.

Table 1 Service expenditure (outturn prices), planning policy, building and development control (£'head)

	2006/07 £'head	2005/06 £'head	2004/05 £'head	2003/04 £'head	2002/03 £'head
Plymouth	12.01	11.56	11.33	9.67	7.73
Selected group average	9.48	9.62	9.20	7.92	6.30
Selected group data					
Upper quartile	12.57	11.56	11.86	9.90	7.73
Median	10.70	10.02	9.42	9.39	6.68
Lower quartile	7.48	7.53	7.18	6.32	5.69
Rank	5 out of 14	4 out of 14	5 out of 14	5 out of 14	4 out of 14

Source: Finance and General Statistics (2002/03 to 2006/07)
CIPFA Statistical Information Service © 2006

- 64 The Council has identified the planning service as a corporate priority and in particular the development of planning policy. This is reflected in the number of staff involved in the development of planning policy which will be 13.5 FTE when the current restructuring process is fully implemented. For development control, staffing levels are below the average and rank the Council 7th out of the ten councils that have submitted this information.
- 65 Limited corporate financial capacity is increasing pressure on all services, however, there is a strategy to support financial recovery in the next three years that requires services to adopt a stand still budget. In the case of the planning service the budget is restricted but identifies limited growth to ensure that the production to adoption of key elements of the LDF is not compromised. This is a clear, deliberate decision and indicates the priority the Council gives its planning service.
- 66 The planning service has maximised external funding through improved performance attracting Planning Delivery Grant. This is ring-fenced to the planning service. The service is also working with partners to secure additional contributions which supports the development of the LDF. For example, private and public sector partners contributed up to 84.65 per cent of the core LDF budget in 2004/05 and 36.22 per cent in 2005/06 core LDF budget.
- 67 The use of partnerships has also enabled the service to share the cost of highly valued non-statutory activity. For example, the additional costs of the design panel chaired by David Mackay, is shared with the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce. This is a sign of the commitment to the vision for Plymouth and the acceptance of the need to secure high quality design.
- 68 The Council's arrangements for the delivery of services that support the planning process are not maximising their value for money. The Council's legal service is unable to deliver the level of service needed for an effective planning service and relies on external contractors to supplement the internal services to planning particularly for section 106 work. The transport service has significant recruitment difficulties and relies on external consultants to support the development of strategic policy. These solutions, while adding capacity in a timely manner, are not currently enhancing the skills and competency of the Council's own services nor are they reducing the financial burden on the planning service as the in house providers remain a cost to the service. This situation in the light of significant financial constraint is not sustainable; any reduction in the service provided would impact on the performance of the planning service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 69 The planning and regeneration service has a record of effectively implementing change over the last two years. Prior to this, the service had a poor track record of delivery, with little investment in the service. Since the development of the Mackay Vision in 2004, along with significant corporate and service staff changes, process changes, and an increased focus on the role of planning, the service has started to put the building blocks in place in order to improve delivery. Some of these investments have yet to lead to service improvements, but certain areas can demonstrate outcomes for the community.
- 70 Clear corporate commitment to the service over the past couple of years has led to increased resources being made available to it. Despite standstill budgets, redundancies, savings efficiencies and service reductions across the Council, the planning service has received increased financial investment and staffing. For example, a new S106 co-ordinator and support assistant were appointed in September 2005 and have just begun to monitor and address delays in deciding major planning applications. The transport department has also recently approved an extra seven members of staff in order to complete planning-related projects. This has helped deliver improvements to the service.
- 71 Planning policies have greatly improved. The service has worked hard to develop its LDF; many within the planning profession such as the RTPI⁵ view this as a best practice approach. This has allowed it to create a firm foundation on which to build a raft of supporting policy documents such as area action plans, a core strategy, S106 templates, customer service standards and a Statement of Community Involvement. Although it has yet to approve its draft economic strategy, these policies now provide a clear framework for the service.
- 72 Recent external challenges to the service have been addressed. These include recommendations from the CPA⁶ and planning inspections in 2004 as well as recent PAS⁷ and IDeA⁸ reports. For instance, this has led to the production of a major applications and enforcement improvement plans, addressing S106 backlogs, tackling enforcement issues more proactively and introducing an 'added value' system for case officers. Aside from this, the service can also demonstrate how it learns from others by visits to local councils, for example, to see how others addressed public speaking at committee meetings. Others are also learning from the service in return, for example, by the promotion of Plymouth's LDF at a national level.

⁵ Royal Town Planning Institute

⁶ Comprehensive performance assessment

⁷ Planning Advisory Service

⁸ Improvement and Development Agency

- 73 Performance indicators have improved in many areas. The most impressive improvement has been the increase in the speed of decision for minor and other applications (BVPI 109b and c) from 44 and 57 per cent (both worst quartile) respectively in 2003/04, up to 80 and 89 per cent (both in best quartile) in 2005/06. Recent unaudited figures show a steady performance at 81 and 88 per cent. Other improvements to PIs include the percentage of homes built on previously developed land (BVPI106) which fell from 89 to 84 per cent in 2004/05 but remains well above the government target, and the quality of service checklist (BVPI205) which rose from 83 to 94 per cent (unaudited) in 2005/06.
- 74 However, there remains a poor performance with speed of decision-making for major applications (BVPI109a). Despite a recovery plan, performance was 32 per cent in 2003/04 and rose only to 34 per cent in 2004/05, against a council average of 58 per cent. Unaudited figures for 2005/06 show a fall to 31 per cent. Overall, the service can demonstrate an improving track record in most areas apart from major applications.
- 75 Many of the service's recent changes have led to direct improvements for customers. For example, a pre-application service has been introduced, which has been well-received by users such as developers and architects. This has enabled a faster turn around in decision-making, as well as providing customers with a more effective and responsive service, as they are able to make any necessary amendments early on in the application process. The planning committee has made changes in order to make the process more efficient and transparent. Public speaking methods have been simplified, last-minute amendments have been disallowed and changes such as layout of seating and visual presentation of cases have been introduced in the last few months.
- 76 The regeneration of Devonport is one example of a key outcome that citizens have begun to experience over the past few years. The planning service has played a key role in helping recreate an improved neighbourhood with increased housing mix as well as better education, employment, health and recreation facilities. Crime levels have fallen by half and the perception of crime has also dropped. The local community has also been active in refurbishing a park in the area based on their needs.
- 77 Until two years ago the service struggled to perform effectively and there was a lack of investment. For example, the Audit Commission planning report from 2004 showed that the service compared unfavourably to others, it had increased applications which it failed to proactively manage and a significant backlog, high sickness and had neglected enforcement and written enquiries. Since 2004, the service has made significant progress but the Council cannot yet demonstrate a sustained track record in improvement over the longer term. The backlog of major applications has almost been removed, sickness rates are below council averages and enforcement and correspondence processes are in place. Some new improvements have not had time to bed down, and some have yet to see real outcomes on the ground. For example, the new customer charter has only recently been published. Partners believe that the service needs to continue to deliver the results from all its recent investments.

- 78 Improvements have yet to be realised in the following areas of speed of deciding major applications, clarity on section 106 agreements and delayed approach to equalities. The Council was a planning standards authority for all classes of application in 2003/04 due to the poor speed of deciding all planning applications. The Council is still a Planning Standards Authority for its continued poor performance on major applications. Customer satisfaction with the service (BVPI111) fell from 75 per cent in 2000/01 to 65 per cent in 2003/04, and although this figure is now two years old, the service does not have any later information on gauging satisfaction. A lack of clarity on S106 agreements results in delays, with developers often having to get involved in lengthy renegotiations. Finally, the Council's somewhat delayed approach to improving equalities – still at level 1 of the CRE – is reflected in the planning service, with few outcomes evidenced in this area.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 79 The Council and the service have a clear vision for what it wants to achieve over the long term. The Mackay vision up to 2020 has been developed closely alongside partners and has been translated into aims and objectives for the future of the service, making it clear what the improvements will be to the community. This vision has been based on a sound knowledge of the challenges and opportunities that the area faces, and takes into account the views and needs of the community.
- 80 There is a golden thread linking the vision to service delivery. Closely supporting the vision are a raft of inter-linked plans such as the corporate plan, LDF and service plans with a 'golden thread' which can be tracked through to individual work plans. For example, the planning and regeneration service plan has its own mission statement with five service objectives which underpin the five Council objectives. These are supported by clear integrated service measures which each member of staff works towards. The service's priorities are ranked in order so that there is clarity about what is a priority, for example planning applications, and what is not a priority, for example tourism development.
- 81 Performance management is robust, with staff knowing what is expected of them and how their work contributes to the overall aims and vision for the area. The Council as a whole has improved in this area over the past few years, and the planning service is no exception. Staff have a fuller understanding of performance management, and this culture is now evident. This is supported by the recent introduction of the electronic 'e-perform' system, which has helped to embed the vision down to individual objectives. This is also supported by individual performance assessments, reviewed every six months, which provide each member of staff with a clear understanding of what they are doing and why. Although not all service plans have yet been developed using the new electronic system, staff are clearly able to see what is expected of them and how their work contributes to overall aims.

- 82 Financial plans are not yet integrated to service delivery plans and so it is unclear exactly what resources are needed to deliver each objective. For example, budgetary information has not yet been input into the new electronic system, and is reported separately from – although alongside - performance issues. However, the service has calculated exactly what percentage of resources has been used to deliver these objectives in the past, and so is in a good position to use this information to plan robustly for the future.
- 83 The setting of clear and challenging targets is inconsistent across the service. Service planning aims to bring the service into the best quartile for example, some service plans identify stretching targets for service improvement but other action plans do not have a clear allocation of resources, milestones or measurable outcomes. For example, the new development consents unit plan for 2006/07 contains an aim to promote inclusive communities that has an 'ongoing' deadline and no indicator of success. Therefore the service's ability to effectively monitor and manage this element of the service is at risk of being reduced.
- 84 Leadership is effective. The service enjoys active, visible and effective management, and this is recognised by staff and partners. Both senior managers and councillors create a climate of commitment, openness and mutual respect. Leaders have communicated the vision and the priorities of the service well, and have demonstrated an ability to take tough decisions, such as a major restructuring of the service, reducing the landscape design team and transferring the running of the design administration panel to the Chamber of Commerce. Despite this upheaval and the service efficiencies that have been made, staff feel empowered in their work, supported by a clear strategic direction.
- 85 The service has now started to use a number of mechanisms in order to help it focus on priority areas. It has introduced a separate Major Applications Improvement Plan which is beginning to see results, dealing not only with speed of decision-making but also the quality of the process and outcome driven. Many business processes have been examined, and this has led to a restructuring of teams with a new majors team and case officers responsible for the enforcement of their own cases. New enforcement guidelines and a customer service charter based on user feedback is also helping the service to manage its performance.
- 86 However, some of these are extremely recent, for example there have only been two responses to the new user feedback surveys, and non-users are not included, and the new complaint monitoring system has yet to identify specific service improvements that can be clearly identified. Also, the majors improvement plan was only produced in April 2006, despite poor performance for many years leading up to it. Overall, these mechanisms are now beginning to focus on improving the most relevant outcomes for service users.
- 87 Communications within the service are good. There is evidence of close working with other departments within the service itself and other services such as housing. Externally, the service has worked hard to communicate the vision, the LDF and the promotion of area action plans such as in the proposed developments at Plymstock. This ensures that stakeholders have an appreciation of what the service is trying to achieve.

- 88** Risk assessments have been completed for the Strategy Unit within the service. These show that the highest risks concern the recruitment or retention of high-calibre staff in order to deliver the LDF. However, it is unclear what the risks facing the other parts of the planning service are, or how these will be managed.
- 89** Councillors can demonstrate they manage the performance of the system, but there is room for development. Clear monthly performance and budget reports are available for the portfolio holders and senior management, while cabinet and scrutiny panel get quarterly reports with historic trends and targets. The Audit Commission's overview and scrutiny review in July 2005 reported that although the committee had matured, it still needed to link more with performance management in order to provide a more robust challenge. The impact of scrutiny on the service is inconsistent, although training is now available. Scrutiny clearly aided the improvement of the development control service but the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel cannot demonstrate significant challenge for some key elements of the LDF process.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 90** The service has the people and skills it needs to deliver its service priorities. Corporately, it is supported by mechanisms such as the new electronic performance management system and the 'experienced manager development scheme' which several planning managers have attended. At service level, it has produced a skills audit and draft workforce plan. This has helped highlight skills gaps that the service is now addressing with equality and project management training. Staff believe they are valued and able to learn and develop their skills. Despite previous reports of low morale, staff are now highly motivated, and there is clear evidence of a 'can-do' culture. This is supported by low turnover rates, and sickness absences for the service are at around eight days each, just below the corporate average.
- 91** There is a need to develop the commercial awareness of some staff. Some do not have the necessary skills in order to negotiate effectively with developers, for example, over finalising S106 agreements. One of the reasons for this is the need to fully appreciate the impact that delays over major applications may cause on the bigger picture for the city. This, coupled with the projected increased workload, means there is a danger that this may not be managed sustainably. The Development Consents Unit utilises the skills of the Asset Management Service to analyse open book assessments of development projects when they are submitted for planning approval. The aim is to maximise the quality of decision-making whilst ensuring that unreasonable requests are not placed upon development proposals that may delay them or prevent them coming forward. The appointment of a new section 106 co-ordinator below management level reduces the potential to successfully address this key issue for the success of the regeneration of Plymouth. Although some unfilled vacancies have caused slippage to plans, such as in the strategy department, these are not as severe as in other councils' planning services, and so overall the service has the capacity it needs to deliver improvement.

- 92 Councillors and officers are clear about their strategic and operation roles. These are clearly set out in protocols and there is evidence of productive working between them. Role changes and restructuring have taken place recently both for staff and councillors, for example, with the changes made to planning committee meetings following on from concerns about the transparency of the meetings. Although these roles are new and settling down, this is helping strengthen the service and the quality of service it is providing to its customers.
- 93 IT is used effectively to deliver service objectives. The e-planning service has been rated as 'excellent' under Pendleton criteria, with planning applications now starting to be submitted online. Other web developments mean that customers can now find out a wide range of planning and regeneration information online, as well as being able to track applications. In-house, the service has developed tracking tools to monitor progress of applications and S106 agreements. There have been delays to the installation of an electronic document management system (DMS), and so there is a current reliance on paper-based filing systems. However, time has been spent in the intervening period scanning historic files ready to be input into the new DMS to ensure that the service can move forward quickly as the DMS system comes on line. Overall, these tools have helped to achieve efficiencies as well as improving access to the service.
- 94 Councillors and officers work well with partners to help deliver the service. For example, it has worked closely with South Hams District Council to develop plans for the Sherford area. It also maximises the use of consultants to help deliver expertise where the Council does not have internal capacity, for example, in urban design and transport projects. Partners such as those in the regeneration forum speak very highly of the service and what it has achieved in the last two years, for example, in urban design and the pre-application process. This confidence in relationships, as well as the firm policy foundations, has encouraged other developers to invest in the area, notably the Devonport and Sutton Harbour areas. Cross-working across the Council, for example with the housing service, has helped improve private housing stock in the East End area. Partners do have some concerns over the service's ability to deliver improvements, particularly due to delays and staff shortages in the legal and transport departments of the Council which have been holding back major applications. Although the Council is overcoming these concerns, there is a need to allay these fears in order to further encourage inward investment.
- 95 There is limited corporate financial capacity increasing pressure on all services. The MTFP has made progress towards increased financial stability. Although most services have stand-still budgets for the next three years, the planning service has increased budgets, as the Council recognises the importance in delivering the LDF. For example, the service has received an extra £111,000 for its LDF work for 2006/07 and a further £628,000 for the next two years, for the funding of the LDF independent examinations.
- 96 Corporate procurement is developing strongly; however, it is not fully embedded within the service. For example, the use of consultants in a wide variety of activities is not closely controlled or managed through a clear procurement framework.

- 97 The service has also been a key player in setting up one of the most successful Business Improvement Districts in the country which has led to both strategic and operational improvements to the city centre such as CCTV, cleaner streets, and co-ordination of the new Drake Circus shopping centre. A new Local Enterprise Growth Initiative bid is likely to bring over £10 million into the area and GOSW⁹ and RDA¹⁰ are confident that the Council is likely to attract other funding, although these have not been guaranteed. Overall, the service has used its scarce resources effectively on becoming an enabler rather than a deliverer of its improvement agenda, although corporate financial constraints are still a concern.

⁹ Government Office for the South West

¹⁰ Regional Development Agency