

Corporate Assessment Report

August 2006



Corporate Assessment

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

- sustainable communities and transport;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities;
- older people; and
- children and young people.

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Sandwell Council is performing adequately and faces major challenges ahead. There are high levels of deprivation in the borough with many residents experiencing poor quality of life. Together with its partners, the Council shares an ambitious long term strategic vision that aims to tackle the scale of deprivation, the extent of health inequalities and low skill levels. The Council works well with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and is contributing to effective community leadership through the sub partnerships that are working on specific strategies and actions. There is a longstanding ambition focused on regeneration that is now being delivered as a result of the Council's success in attracting external funding.
- 6 The Council shows a good understanding of communities' needs based on research and meaningful engagement. The Council works well with voluntary and community organisations but communications are not always effective. As a result of establishing six Town Teams, consultation has strengthened, is varied and targeted at disadvantaged groups.
- 7 The Council's priorities are appropriately aligned with the LSP. There is also an adequate focus on most national, regional and sub-regional priorities, reflected in the Council's new corporate business plan. Partnerships are making positive contributions to delivering priorities and building capacity. Most external partnerships work successfully together on shared priorities, However there have been some problems with building a cultural centre, and the Housing Renewal Pathfinder has been slow to deliver key targets. Therefore, although some partnerships have been slow to deliver, most partnership working is effective.
- 8 Political leadership is adequate and developing well. Decision-making is coherent and transparent with a clear focus on priorities. Difficult decisions are taken by political leaders. Cabinet arrangements are resulting in effective decision-making and scrutiny is contributing positively. However, the pace of decision-making and management is not always as timely as pressures demand.
- 9 Corporate management is adequate and has been strengthened through recent appointments to the Executive Management Team (EMT). Management capacity including corporate support is not consistently strong. Recent changes such as a new Chief Executive and the Development Director of Children's Services provide a sound base on which capacity can improve.
- 10 There is an adequate focus on priorities. A framework for strategic planning is in place, this is facilitated by appropriately aligned management structures and well established performance management systems. Some improvements are made as a result but allocating resources to priorities has not always resulted in improvement.

- 11 Approaches to securing value for money are not sufficiently advanced. The Council has used Best Value Reviews (BVRs) to identify service inefficiencies and improvements have been made as a result. There are recently established links to service planning, performance and resource allocation but there is no consistent or systematic review of costs or benchmarking to ensure value for money. Therefore, local people are not always benefiting from best use of resources.
- 12 The Council's approach to diversity and equalities is adequate overall. The Council is taking action to ensure that equality is mainstreamed into services and has achieved Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. There is a clear internal focus on equalities, including the establishment of roles for councillors who champion race, gender and disabilities issues. Equality impact assessments are made on key services. As a result services are culturally sensitive to local need.
- 13 User focus is good. In the community, local people are consulted systematically at neighbourhood level and the Council ensures that specific disadvantaged groups are involved in planning service delivery. As a result, there is a range of targeted initiatives for black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and vulnerable people. The Council has invested recently in better customer access through its One Stop Shop and call centre. At point of access, the needs of local people are being met.
- 14 Relationships with community leaders are positive. Because of multi-agency neighbourhood surveillance, working intelligence is good and teams know about and address disturbances as they occur. Social cohesion is occasionally marked by tension but these incidents are managed well and there is good support in the community.
- 15 Service performance is mixed. Progress against 62 key Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) shows that 60 per cent improved over the last three years. Most of those that are poorly performing relate to children's services and the Council has failed to improve children's social care services. Improvements are slow in re-cycling, homelessness and in the condition of the borough's roads. Children in Sandwell are not being served well but there are better outcomes for adults, people in receipt of benefits, those with chronic illnesses and people living in social housing.
- 16 Achievements in shared priority areas are also mixed. Partnership working is delivering significant achievements in important areas like crime and disorder. Anti-social behaviour is receiving appropriate attention through a multi-agency approach with positive outcomes. Sustainable communities are being developed, with West Bromwich now defined as a regional centre. Crime rates have reduced significantly but there has been slow progress in tackling worklessness and building new skills. The older people strategy is new and although the Council and its partners have a clear understanding of health inequalities progress has been mixed.

There are clear signs of substantial regeneration, environmental improvements and significant transport schemes have been delivered to help local people with access, health inequalities are narrowing, older people are accessing targeted initiatives but local people still do not have proper chances for employment.

Areas for improvement

- 17 To address current shortcomings, the Council should accelerate service improvements in children's services and other services that are underperforming such as re-cycling. This should be done through a sustained focus on performance management, rigorous scrutiny and a strategic approach to value for money.
- 18 The Council with its partners should drive important shared priorities more rigorously so that local people are provided with the qualifications and skills they need for employment and that wider health inequalities are narrowed. This should be done with partners through better strategies and plans to drive performance in partnership with the LSP and the new PCT.
- 19 So that its anticipated organisational change programme is successfully managed, the Council should ensure that management capacity is sustainable and that organisational development support is robust by developing and monitoring a comprehensive project plan.
- 20 The Council should develop a comprehensive Social Cohesion Strategy following the research currently being carried out to ensure that positive community relations are further developed and tensions are lessened and managed well in partnership with others.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	2
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
Overall corporate assessment score**		2
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 21 Sandwell is situated in the Black Country to the north west of Birmingham and forms part of a major urban area. It is densely populated with 282,800 residents of which 20 per cent are from BME groups. There is a slightly higher proportion of pensioners and young people in the borough compared to national averages. For an urban environment, it has a large percentage of open spaces with Sandwell Valley the largest of these; in total the borough comprises 8,600 hectares.
- 22 Sandwell metropolitan borough faces major challenges. It is ranked as the 16th most deprived area in the country with 53 per cent of the population living in very deprived wards. There are significant levels of poor housing and a large number of high rise flats that the Council is clearing to make way for better quality mixed housing provision. Because of these conditions, there has been a history of high morbidity rates, high levels of infant mortality and long term illnesses, mental health problems and chronic conditions. The rate of teenage pregnancy is also high, although reducing, due to action taken by the Council with partners.
- 23 Until relatively recently, the borough was suffering from a loss of population due to a decline in its manufacturing base. Manufacturing companies that have moved away have left behind numerous derelict brown field sites, some of which are on contaminated land. However, as a result of action taken by the Council and its partners, the population of Sandwell is now stabilising.
- 24 Until relatively recently crime rates were high in comparison to other areas in the West Midlands; they have now been brought into line with the regional average and crime reduction rates are good compared with other regional crime reduction partnerships. Nevertheless, drug offences and levels of anti-social behaviour are high but being dealt with as a result of joint responsive strategies.
- 25 Low levels of skills and high levels of worklessness are key local issues. The percentage of residents with no qualifications is higher than regional and national averages and educational attainment is low. Gross weekly pay is below regional and national averages at £320. Unemployment is relatively high at 4.2 per cent compared to a national average of 2.4 per cent.
- 26 Because of high levels of deprivation, the Council has been able to attract significant amounts of external money and has been successful in securing £1 billion for the next ten years. This is a challenge for the Council as the scale of work is extensive, but there is now in place an Urban Regeneration Company (Regenco) and an arms length management organisation (ALMO) to support regeneration activity and enhance capacity. Sandwell is also designated a Housing Market Renewal Area together with Birmingham City Council with a potential for further significant external funding. An Urban Living partnership has also been established. Sandwell is re-building its schools using PFI monies and has its first Academy opening in September 2006.

The Council

- 27 The Council is Labour controlled, there are 72 ward councillors made up of 50 from the Labour group, 11 from the Conservative group, 5 Liberal Democrats, 2 Independents and 4 BNP councillors. It has a Leader with two Deputy Leaders and seven cabinet councillors with portfolio responsibility and delegated authority to make decisions in consultation with cabinet advisors. Portfolios cover service and cross-cutting areas appropriately. The Council has nine Scrutiny Panels, three Select Committees for older people, social cohesion and electoral participation, and an overarching Scrutiny Management Board.
- 28 The Council management structure is organised around five themes: Neighbourhood & Community Services; Children's Services; Adult Services & Health; Urban Regeneration and Policy & Corporate Governance. Executive Management Team (EMT) comprises the Council's own Executive Directors as well as directors from other key bodies such as Sandwell Homes and Public Health.
- 29 The Council's main partnership is with the local strategic partnership (LSP) and this has been established since 1997. It is a mature partnership chaired by a representative from the private sector. The Council is actively working at a regional and sub-regional level, including with a consortium of Black Country councils and with Birmingham City Council.
- 30 There are six local Town partnerships: in West Bromwich (designated as one of four regional centres) Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton and Wednesbury. These are improving the 31 neighbourhoods set up with Town Committees and supported by Town Teams, which look at specific local neighbourhood issues and are responsive to incidents and environmental problems. Neighbourhood Renewal Funding underpins the viability of these teams and community initiatives.
- 31 Key service partnerships include the Sandwell Leisure Trust, the Liberata Benefits Partnership and Sandwell Homes (the Council's ALMO). Plans are well advanced to set up a new strategic partnership to transform corporate services with plans to let the contract in early 2007. There is a well established partnership approach to mental health through the Care Trust and there are jointly funded posts to provide strategic leadership in health.
- 32 Regenco, the borough's urban regeneration company, was set up in 2004 to address the significant scale of work required and manage the projects and major external investment. The Council has a strategic development unit that supports the interface between the Council and Regenco.
- 33 The Council employs around 16,470 staff and has a current revenue budget of £239.7 million excluding the schools' grant of £178.2 million. The capital budget is £101.2 million. Its Band D council tax level is currently at £1,082 per year. It has general reserves of £11.8 million.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 34 The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements. There are clear ambitions for the area and its communities that are based on a clear understanding of local needs. Overall, community leadership is good.
- 35 The Council is showing good community leadership. It is supporting the LSP well. The Sandwell Partnership is mature and the Council is demonstrating close collaboration and is sharing information well. The Council has worked together with its partners to develop the LSP Sandwell Plan. The Plan is good and offers a long term and strategic vision for the borough with aligned priorities. This vision states: 'The Sandwell of 2020 will be a thriving, sustainable, optimistic and forward looking community. Sandwell residents will live in a transformed borough. They will enjoy excellent health, a safe environment, have access to rewarding employment, leisure and cultural opportunities and have a positive view of life in Sandwell in a truly revitalised West Midlands. It will continue to be a diverse, but harmonious, mix of industrial/commercial activity and attractive neighbourhoods, where the principles of sustainable development have been applied.' This close collaboration between the Council and the LSP, and the focus on the Plan is resulting in some good outcomes for local people.
- 36 The vision is underpinned by meaningful ambitions for the borough. The Sandwell Plan's priorities are appropriate for the challenges it faces. Priorities articulate the need to stem migration, transform the environment, diversify local economy, focus investment in West Bromwich and build strength in the borough's six towns. These priorities have received sufficient focus, although the pace of improvement has been slow in some priority areas such as worklessness, education and health. But, through sustained focus on regeneration schemes, including economic diversification and community safety, local people have stopped moving out of the area, the economy is becoming diversified and crime has reduced.
- 37 Adequate arrangements are in place to deliver the Sandwell Plan and it is resourced. The Partnership has received its full allocation of external NRF funding to deliver its plan but it is unclear how this funding will be mainstreamed in the longer term. It has also recently evaluated the way it works and has re-emphasised key issues for 2006 and set out how it intends to improve further. Town Teams that were set up to deliver plans locally are showing good outcomes.

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- 38** The Council's own plans to deliver Partnership ambitions are adequate. The Council is focussing on regional, sub-regional and national themes in its new Corporate Business Plan for the next three years. This Plan sets out how the Council's strategic objectives and priorities contribute towards delivering the Sandwell Plan and how other shared priorities link. Although not articulated yet in the corporate plan, the new priority relating to older people has its own strategy. The Council's delivery of outcomes meets needs in partnership with others.
- 39** At a local level the Council also delivers effective community leadership. For example it has taken its neighbourhood strategy and engaged locally with partners to identify 'natural neighbourhoods' and has clustered these around six Town Committees supported by Town Teams. There is a greater focus on commissioning in targeted areas such as health and unemployment that is ensuring that resources are targeted at the greatest need. Local people are seeing the outcomes resulting from a cross-cutting approach to solving neighbourhood problems and issues.
- 40** Political leadership has improved and is sound. Decision-making is coherent, transparent and focused on ambition but can be slow. Difficult decisions have been taken by councillors. For example the Council decided to shift its focus on fully developing all six towns to making West Bromwich its main centre for commerce and tourism. Local people can already see results of major projects in West Bromwich and environmental improvements in the other five towns.
- 41** Ambition is underpinned by a good understanding of communities' needs. Local engagement is strong and has been established over a long period. Disadvantaged groups are involved in the development of strategies and approaches and a range of consultation techniques are used. Engagement with the community and voluntary sector is effective overall but joint working opportunities are not always maximised. A Community empowerment network has been in place for some time that brings together people from local communities and gives them an opportunity to engage with the Council and there are Older People's champions in three of the six towns. As a result, the Council takes account of relevant needs of disadvantaged groups and the community as a whole in the design and delivery of its services.
- 42** Strength of ambition has led to major investment plans for the borough. The Council has secured £1 billion over the next ten years to transform Wednesbury, West Bromwich and Smethwick. Part of the borough has been designated a Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder (HMRA) managed through Urban Living with the potential to attract significant external investment; however delivery arrangements have been judged weak so far in a separate report recently published. There is a capital programme in place to replace all secondary schools with £300 million of investment. Clear signs of this transformation can already be seen with good facilities for residents.

- 43 The Council also works well with wider regional partners to ensure that the needs of Sandwell are known, understood and considered in wider strategic plans. For example, it has been working with the Black Country Consortium and has agreed that West Bromwich will be one of four key centres in the region following the Black Country study and this focus has helped secure funding. The Birmingham & Sandwell Collaboration Board has recently been established to consider issues affecting both councils including the Urban Living agenda and the 2010 health agenda. Because of these wider partnerships, the borough has benefited from further partnership funding opportunities and is delivering better investment plans for the future.

Prioritisation

- 44 The Council's performance is adequate in this area. There are clear priorities for the borough but action taken to deliver priorities is variable. Some of the long standing priorities have been slow to improve.
- 45 Priorities are shared between the Council and its external partners. The Council has taken action to integrate front line services to support cross-cutting priorities. For example there is a multi-agency approach at neighbourhood level that brings together key services across agencies to quickly deal with identified problems. If there is intelligence coming from the police of drugs abuse, the team can not only deal with the crime but also related environmental problems and safety issues, and can arrange for health intervention for the offenders. This type of approach is efficient and builds confidence at a neighbourhood level.
- 46 The Council is also working well with partners to deliver shared priorities for improving health and social care provision through to 2010. Priorities for regenerating the borough are shared effectively with Regenco, the borough's urban regeneration company. Local environmental and health inequalities are being effectively tackled and the borough is slowly being regenerated.
- 47 Management structures support the delivery of priorities. At a corporate level, the Council has developed management structures to align priorities in themes. Plans and strategies address priorities based on an analysis of local need but not all are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound). This means that improvement cannot be quantified in all cases.
- 48 Councillors and staff recognise and understand priorities well. Portfolio responsibilities are aligned with priorities and assigned to cabinet members. There are three improvement priorities that have been reconfirmed this year: education attainment; safer, cleaner, stronger communities; and strengthening the protection and support for vulnerable children. The Council's own priorities generally reflect the ambitions articulated in the Sandwell Plan. In linking priorities in the two plans, the Council and its partners ensure a consistent focus.

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- 49** Corporate processes to align resources to priorities are adequate overall. The Council has introduced medium term financial planning to consider priorities over a three-year period and difficult decisions are taken as a result of decision conferencing and a balanced scorecard approach. Budgets now follow priorities. There are some clear examples of improvement in priority areas because of resource allocation such as in environmental services, benefits and crime and disorder. Overall, the Council's education service contributes to improving outcomes. In some areas such as children's social care services, focus on priorities has not been sufficient in the past. But, because councillors have prioritised this area, there are now clear and realistic priorities in the Children and Young People's Partnership Plan and the Council's Plan for Education and Children's Services. However, although resources are re-aligned in a greater number of services, costs are not always known in all service areas so the process is not yet fully effective. So the Council cannot be confident that services are adequately resourced.
- 50** The needs of BME groups and vulnerable people help shape priorities. The Council ensures that equalities are mainstreamed into each service. One of the Deputy Leaders has responsibility for performance and equalities and this has sharpened the Council's focus. As part of its journey to achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, the Council carried out prioritised equality impact assessments, which helped identify the needs of vulnerable groups. For example impact assessments were carried out for choice based lettings in housing so that people from BME communities could access housing suitable for their families. These measures when taken together ensure that diverse communities can access services that are culturally sensitive.
- 51** Priorities are informed by BVRs (best value reviews) and the Council has taken decisions to deliver its services in different ways. The Council focuses on areas that need attention and uses information gained through reviews to shift priorities. Recognising that there was a need to improve access to services, the Council conducted a review and agreed an improvement plan to deliver services differently. This shifted priorities and a major initiative was agreed to deliver access through a Call Centre and One Stop Shop approach. The Council intends to further redefine front office delivery and improve efficiency through business process re-engineering. As a result of progress to date, the council has achieved better customer focus for people accessing services.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 52 The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council's decision-making arrangements are sound overall, although decision-making does not always lead to good service outcomes as service performance is mixed. Some of the Council's key internal processes are not effectively supporting improvement, but partnership capacity is good.
- 53 To help it address widespread regeneration, the Council is making good use of partnerships and arms-length arrangements to build capacity and draw in external funding. Regenco, has brought in significant additional capacity to help deliver priorities on regeneration. Sandwell Homes has been successfully established and is enabling the Council to draw on significant government funding to improve its housing stock. The Sandwell Mental Health and Social Care Trust is contributing effectively to mental health services. There are effective arrangements for joining up services at a local level, including with partners, through the Town Teams. The Council has not used partnership arrangements in children's services effectively. Most partnering arrangements are, therefore, strong and improvements are being delivered in major service areas such as housing provision, adult social care and regeneration.
- 54 The Council's financial position is relatively strong. Asset management is good. Financial management, including management of the capital programme, is adequate. The Council is bringing under control overspending in Ground-care, its grounds maintenance service. In children's services, which have a weak track record of controlling significant overspending, there is now a better understanding of areas for development. Overall, therefore the capacity to improve is adequate and most service outcomes have improved.
- 55 Customer focus and access is good. The one-stop shop in Oldbury is effectively serving customers and there are adequate language and translation services for local people to help them access services and there are variable extended hours. The Council has a well developed corporate approach to complaints and comments that has a positive impact on service performance, for example in waste collection where action is taken to correct faults in service delivery.

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- 56** Project management is effective. The Council used sound project management arrangements to develop its ALMO, Sandwell Homes, which is performing well. Other successful projects include the delivery of the first Academy in the borough which is opening as planned in September, and improvements to fire safety in schools resulting in a reduction in insurance premium. This means that local people can see that council commitments and investments translate into real facilities for their use.
- 57** Risk management is developing well but is not consistently embedded across all council activities. The Council is managing the introduction of risk registers in each thematic by supporting staff with a risk management toolkit. A Deputy Leader monitors risk management, demonstrating the importance attached to the activity. The remit of the recently-formed Audit Committee includes ensuring risk management arrangements are robust. The Council's Strategic Investment Unit supports the risk management of externally funded projects. However, there have been some external projects where risk has not been effectively managed, in particular THEpUBLIC and the Click! project (aimed at providing adults with facilities to help them learn how to use information technology). The Council has learnt from these experiences and has taken steps to strengthen governance arrangements.
- 58** Decision-making arrangements are transparent and reasonably efficient, but their effectiveness in delivering priorities is mixed. The decision to enter a partnering arrangement for the benefits service has resulted in consistent and sustained improvement in this service. However, the Council has been slow to improve in some key areas such as children's services and waste management. Councillor and officer relationships are constructive with clear roles and responsibilities. The councillors' ethical framework is operating effectively. Scrutiny is contributing positively with effective overview work and there is some evidence of challenge. Overall, therefore, local people are experiencing mixed outcomes from the Council's decision-making.
- 59** Leadership capacity is adequate overall. Councillor leadership has improved and is now also adequate. The Council has used external capacity-building funds to invest in councillor and manager development. Cabinet and Executive Management Team portfolios support cross-cutting work. Management capacity is mixed because of inconsistencies in the quality of middle managers. The Executive Management Team has been strengthened following new appointments and the quality of senior managers is good, but their ability to provide sustained leadership is untested and some are temporary appointments. Leadership skills are being used more effectively and members of staff are more positive about leadership than they were in 2005.

- 60 Human Resources (HR) policies are not consistently supporting investment and improvement. The Council has undertaken workforce planning and has an effective Workforce Plan. It invests effectively in staff development and staff are actively encouraged to be innovative. The Council is above average for the proportion of top earners who are women or from BME communities. There are some effective approaches to improving workforce diversity, for example training and flexible working practices to support women to take up professional posts in areas such as engineering and traffic management, and placements in the planning service for BME graduates. However, the workforce as a whole does not fully reflect the diversity of the local population. Sickness absence remains a challenge, recruitment can be slow and appraisals are not based on competency. Organisational development capacity is limited. This means that the Council is not making most effective use of its workforce to deliver its ambitions.
- 61 The Council does not manage value for money (VFM) effectively. There has not been a clear and sustained focus on value for money and VFM outcomes in some areas are weak. The Council recognises this weakness and work is underway to improve the management of VFM but this is at an early stage. Procurement is not strongly developed. The Council is reducing transactional costs through electronically-based purchasing systems; however most service-based procurement has not been reviewed or co-ordinated corporately. Local people cannot be assured that the Council is providing best value for public money.
- 62 The information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure is not consistently supporting improvement. There has been some investment in ICT and there are some improvements, for example the Council's website is now rated C+ by the Society of Communications and Information Technology Managers (the second highest rating), and the planning portal on the website provides on-line access to planning services. However, the infrastructure does not support modernised and flexible working across all services. The Council recognises these weaknesses and is well on the way towards implementing a strategic partnering arrangement for some of its core corporate services, with the intention of both improving efficiencies and investing in ICT and business support.

Performance management

- 63 Performance management is adequate. There is a consistent and well established approach to performance management, but this is not being used effectively to improve performance in all partnerships.

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- 64** Councillors are effectively involved in performance management and its importance has been successfully emphasised by creating a Deputy Leader post responsible for focusing on performance. Interventions have resulted in, for example, a reduction in the time taken to provide statements of special educational need for children by negotiating with the health authority, and improvements in waste management by changing contractor. The Deputy Leader holds portfolio holders to account and there is good opportunity to challenge performance in the cabinet. The visible commitment of councillors to performance management provides a strong message throughout the authority that it is at the core of the management function.
- 65** However, despite developing a robust approach to the management of performance, education performance, a key priority for the Council has not improved. This is because the ability to stay focused is variable. The majority of the 36 per cent of indicators that have remained in the bottom 25 per cent over the past three years relate to education. This means that the Council is not effectively managing performance in key areas such as enhancing the overall skills and qualification profile for young people leaving schools or helping them into employment.
- 66** Managers and staff increasingly focus on performance and respond to the messages of performance monitoring. This is supported by the Performance Business Managers in the Corporate Performance Review Unit, driving improvement by providing advice, support and challenge to services. The Unit reports to the Leader and Chief Executive, drawing attention to key areas of underperformance. One such service was waste management which improved from ten per cent of recycling of domestic waste to sixteen per cent in 2005/06 (although performance is still poor). Across the Council, sixty per cent of performance indicators have improved since 2002/03. In priority areas these include crime and disorder indicators that have improved overall by 21 per cent; education indicators (although many of these are still in the worst performing category); homes built on previously developed land; non-decent homes made decent (although this is still in the worst performing category); and the cleanliness of the area, which dipped in performance during the relevant period but the Council expects to report this year that cleanliness is now in the highest performing category.
- 67** A culture of performance management is being established. In the last two years the Council has moved from monitoring performance to managing it. In most thematic areas, there is a clear link reaching from the Sandwell Plan to the performance and development plans of individual employees. Performance is monitored regularly. Although this is not yet consistent across the Council, in children's care services progress has been made in the last 12 months to realign performance processes with the corporate approach. Progress against key priorities and performance indicators is monitored and performance information informs the quarterly reporting sessions involving EMT and the lead councillors.

- 68 Performance management and resource management are not yet fully integrated. Thematic management teams have been allocating resources against the key activities for the last three years. In thematic plans for the period 2006 to 2009, this is being done systematically. But, it is too early to be clear about outcomes for this forthcoming period.
- 69 The Council with its partners has developed a number of tried and tested means for capturing the needs of diverse groups. For example, adult services include user engagement in responding to health issues of minority ethnic communities. Adult services and health services work together to identify barriers to access for black and minority ethnic communities. A day care survey found that services were not specific enough for particular communities and so there has been targeted investment in older black and minority ethnic people in the form of the Mary Seacole Day Care Centre and the Afro-Caribbean meals service.
- 70 The Council and its partners are working together productively to review performance in order to improve services. For example, the Safer Sandwell Partnership has taken action to reduce crime, such as domestic burglary, which fell by 21 per cent during the year ending December 2005 which was recognised by GOWM as '...the most significant (reduction in crime) in the region.'. Adult services partners with the voluntary and community sector and the West Midland Care Association (an association of private care homes in the region) reviewed the performance of a number of high value contracts resulting in better value for money. In partnership with the independent sector a quality framework has been introduced in which user views on the quality of homes are monitored. In partnership with the ALMO and as part of the Supporting People Strategy, services have been decommissioned or re-designed as a result of performance review and services are now provided that are delivered more efficiently.
- 71 The Council uses performance management in partnership working with mixed outcomes. Performance indicators measure how effectively the Council's Adult services work with health partners. For example, performance management has led to improvements in delayed discharges and the data for this is monitored each two weeks. Performance management between the Council and the PCT has contributed to a reduction in teenage pregnancy. However, there have been cases when a lack of knowledge about performance in some key projects has caused difficulties, for example the CLICK! project and THEpUBLIC, where there was an absence of management information from partners.
- 72 Performance management arrangements for the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) are sound and developing well but outcomes are mixed. A performance manager post was established three years ago, reporting directly on performance to the LSP Board and Executive. The culture of partnership performance management is developing and, for example, the new Sandwell Plan is more focused on short and medium term measurable objectives such as establishing street warden initiatives as part of neighbourhood development. As a result, performance is being driven in some important priority areas such as crime and disorder but less effectively in worklessness and skills.

22 Corporate Assessment | What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 73** The Council uses complaints and compliments to inform performance and to learn about service delivery. The Town Teams are crucial in providing the voice of users and the Sandwell Herald is used to provide performance information to residents but also to seek their views on performance via questionnaires. Examples of users helping to improve performance include the Safer Sandwell Partnership's response to BME communities who were victims of crime, as a result of which strategies were put in place to ensure measurement of increased security. However, the contribution of the voluntary and community sectors, service users and other stakeholders to performance review is not yet systematic or fully developed.
- 74** Performance management does not include value for money information although a new initiative to review value for money started recently. Work with partners and other providers to compare and evaluate processes, costs and outcomes is at an early stage. Comparison and benchmarking across partners are not routinely used to drive performance and efficiency. The Council cannot be fully sure that services provided can demonstrate a good use of resources for local people.

What has been achieved?

- 75** Partnership working is building capacity and delivering improvements. However, the Council delivers mixed performance in its services and in one of its key priority areas, children's services, performance is inadequate. It is working on all of the shared priorities, although some of these are less developed like services for older people.
- 76** The Sandwell Partnership has strengthened its community leadership. The establishment of key partnerships like the ALMO and Regenco is helping to deliver ambitious plans for regeneration. West Bromwich is already seeing outcomes on regeneration. New housing schemes are beginning to provide mixed housing although renewal of housing markets remains a risk. But in other services there is a mixed picture of achievement, for example non-decency levels in housing are high and the pace of delivery for reduction in worklessness is relatively slow given the known skills profile within the borough.
- 77** Partnerships are working effectively to improve the local environment and public transport usage is high. Fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles are removed quickly and the transport network is good. But some services, such as re-cycling, waste management and homelessness, are under-performing; and the condition of the borough's roads is well below average.
- 78** Outcomes are generally good in public safety. Anti-social behaviour has been tackled well. Serious road accidents have reduced. The services provided by the Council with its partners are achieving some impact on drug and alcohol misuse. Although a lot has been achieved, crime levels are still high and fear of crime remains a concern for local people, but these levels are largely in line with those in other West Midlands authorities, and the percentage of people feeling safe has improved. Preparedness for emergencies is sound although business continuity is not yet assured. Although there is no formal strategy to deal with social cohesion, relationships in the community are positive and disturbances managed effectively.
- 79** There are some outcomes to close the health inequalities gap but significant health problems remain including high levels of infant mortality. In partnership with others, the Council has an understanding of health inequalities and health is a priority for the LSP. But, current capacity problems in the health economy are holding back progress. Nevertheless, as a result of sustained focus, levels of morbidity, heart disease & strokes and teenage pregnancy show improvement.
- 80** Outcomes for older people are adequate. There is a new strategy for older people and the Council has taken a cross-cutting approach to this area. It has set up a Select Committee to focus on delivery but older people as an explicit priority is not included in plans for either the LSP or the Council. Nevertheless, the Council has a good track record of providing services to older people through social care and health. Older people are given a focus in the design of some services such as housing.

- 81 Some outcomes for children and young people are inadequate. Children and young people are not adequately safeguarded. The Council works satisfactorily with parents and partner organisations to improve the quality of education and quality of life. There are a range of initiatives to adequately support social and emotional development. Although capacity to improve is adequate, service management is inadequate, focus on priorities is variable, and resource management is not robust.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 82 The Council has a coherent, strategic approach to the regeneration of the borough with regional and sub-regional bodies. There are some significant schemes that have been delivered so far with many more planned including improvements in transport. However, outcomes on skills, worklessness and wealth, a priority for the borough, are weak.
- 83 There have been some good outcomes and investments in the West Bromwich area. The Lyng Estate has a mixed range of good quality housing, some of it including energy efficient technologies. There are new bus and metro stations in West Bromwich. The Sandwell Academy and THEpUBLIC are nearing completion. Some major employers, such as the AA, have been attracted to the town following the construction of new office facilities. Regeneration work is effectively supported by planning services, including supplementary planning guidance, land assembly, and successful compulsory purchase orders. Local people can readily see improvements to their local environments.
- 84 For the borough overall, outcomes on skills, worklessness and wealth have been weak. The proportion of the working population in employment and the levels of formal qualifications have remained broadly static, at well below national and regional averages, since at least 2001. However, the Council has made some progress on worklessness. Nearly 2,000 people living in disadvantaged areas have been helped into employment by the Council over the last three years, facilitated by schemes such as Joblink, Carelink and Think Local Construction. There are some effective small-scale schemes for improving skills, such as the Council's two Neighbourhood Learning Centres. Overall, though, not enough people are being provided with the skills they need for employment.
- 85 The Council has worked well to stop population loss. It has contributed to this by providing mixed housing to replace many high rise units. In 2004/05 there was a net completion of 600 new homes in the borough, and the Council plans to grow housing by 900 per year through to 2020. Steady progress is being made in reducing the proportion of non-decent council housing and targets are being achieved. However, there is a long way to go and the levels of non-decency still place performance in the worst 25 per cent of councils. Performance on the use of temporary accommodation for homeless families is good. However, there are weaknesses in the homelessness service, and the Council is taking steps to improve this via a review of access to housing services. Housing conditions have improved for local people and the population is stabilising.

- 86 Progress on tackling housing market renewal is slow. There is an effective New Deal for Communities in Greet Green that is supporting initiatives. However, there have been some significant weaknesses in the arrangements for delivering housing market renewal, and the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder (HMRP) is at risk of not delivering the transformational change it is aiming for. The Council and its partners are working hard to resolve these problems, for example the Pathfinder's board has been refocused and a senior level Collaborative Board across both Sandwell and Birmingham has been established. This slow start means that local people are not yet seeing any benefits from the initiative.
- 87 Outcomes in environmental priorities are mixed. Partnerships work effectively at a local level with initiatives to reduce anti-social behaviour. Fly tipping and abandoned vehicles are tackled effectively. The well-being power is used to bring stakeholders together to tackle alley-dumping. Council performance on standards of cleanliness is above average and expects to report further improvement for 2005/06. However, the Council is failing to meet its own ambitious targets on recycling. It has reviewed its waste management strategy and invested additional resources. Overall the Council's integrated approach has had a big impact on providing safer, cleaner localities and public satisfaction is high in some areas.
- 88 The Council works very effectively in with partners to improve transport in the borough and regionally. The focus is on public transport because of low levels of car ownership and low average wages. The Council has worked well with the Passenger Transport Executive on schemes such as the new bus station in Wednesbury. Public transport usage in the borough is well above the regional average, and public satisfaction with bus services is high. With an improved transport infrastructure, local people are able to travel outside of the borough to reach schools or employment.

Safer and stronger communities

- 89 Performance is adequate and the Council is contributing well to improvements in public safety. It works well with partners to deliver successful outcomes. Overall, crime has reduced by over 21 per cent (2004/05) as a direct result of partnership working with the police.
- 90 Tackling neighbourhood problems using multi-agency teams is very successful. The Council plays a strong role in the Safer Sandwell Partnership through contributing at a neighbourhood level. For example, it has introduced a borough wide 'designated public places order' which gives the police powers to control drinking in public. As a result, performance for all categories of anti-social behaviour puts Sandwell in the best 25 per cent of councils.
- 91 Working with Sandwell Homes, the Council is addressing crimes on housing estates. Communities are supported to provide diversionary activities for young people and to address environmental concerns like graffiti, litter and fly-tipping. Through neighbourhood renewal funding (NRF) there are currently 16 schemes operating in the six neighbourhood clusters. Dedicated telephone lines have been introduced to report anti-social behaviour and drugs misuse. As a result, there has been a reduction in criminal damage, including arson.

- 92 Action taken in partnership is having good results in reducing deaths and serious injuries on roads. This is as a direct result of introducing safety cameras and improved street lighting. Sandwell's Road Safety Unit has introduced preventative strategies like training pedestrians, campaigns that have reduced accidents involving young drivers aged 17 to 25 years, and cycling training for children. Local people are safer on the borough's roads.
- 93 The Council and its partners are achieving some impact on drug misuse, although action against alcohol abuse is more limited. There is joint provision for users to access drugs related care, advice and support. Some specific interventions are being made to reduce the harm from alcohol. The Power Theatre Project targets year 11 children, addressing the dangers of under-age drinking, and 'Proof of Age' cards have been introduced backed by Trading Standards interventions, advising local retailers regarding sale of alcohol and solvents. Drug and alcohol users are receiving care, support and advice.
- 94 There are positive relationships in the community and with community leaders. Although there is no formal strategy relating to social cohesion, the Council can show that it is working with and building diverse communities. Projects in partnership with community groups support cohesion and there is a well established and integrated compact between the Council, its communities and voluntary groups. But, recent tensions, exacerbated by local elections, competition for new housing and increasing segregation in schools are causing some concern for the Council. Overall, however people do see prompt response to disturbances in their neighbourhood.
- 95 Crime is still regarded as a concern for local people although surveys undertaken by the West Midlands police do show improvement. Although reductions in crime rates have been significant, the borough is still in a poor position in most crime categories in comparison with other councils. So, despite good partnership working, local people do not always feel safe and crime still remains as one of the top four social problems identified by local people.
- 96 Current arrangements to safeguard and protect the most vulnerable children and young people in Sandwell are insufficiently robust, unreliable and inadequate. This has been the case for some time and is evidence of the unsatisfactory governance by the Area Child Protection Committee and the council as the lead agency. In some cases there are significant delays in investigating child protection concerns and there is no system for checking the quality, progress and outcomes of investigations. Partnership working to keep children and young people safe is inadequate.
- 97 Responses to internal and external emergencies are adequate. The Council together with the Local Resilience Forum has a shared approach to emergency planning with an overarching plan and local plans linked into support rescue, transport and communications. Local risks have been assessed and three emergencies have been tested successfully over the last year. As a result the Council has learned some valuable lessons about accommodation for displaced people. Local people are protected by the Council's plans; however, emergency planning relating to business continuity is still at an early stage, so risks remain.

Healthier communities

- 98** Performance is adequate and outcomes improving overall. Main health inequalities have been identified with the help of BME groups. However, although improving, health inequalities indicators remain poor overall.
- 99** Some voluntary and community BME groups are engaged in helping the Council to understand their specific health inequalities through a Health Network and the Council has set up an innovative 'Punjabi Expert Patient' programme. So, specific health initiatives can be accessed by communities.
- 100** Health outcomes are improving overall and the Partnership is implementing evidence based intervention to tackle areas of concern. But most indicators are still worse than other West Midlands authorities and are poor overall with some indicators such as infant mortality and premature deaths from cancers showing higher levels. Teenage pregnancy rates and smoking cessation rates have exceeded their targets but because all of these indicators started from a very low base, there is still some way to go to catch up. However, the health inequalities gap is narrowing in most cases.
- 101** There is a long productive history of joint working. Healthier communities are a priority within the Sandwell Plan with clear targets for improvement and the Health Inequalities Plan closely links across to the Council's Plan. The Partnership has been strengthened by the inclusion of the Town Team Co-ordinators and patient representation. This has facilitated effective cross cutting approaches. As a result, health objectives have been built into other plans such as regeneration, housing and crime. For example, there is a proposed capital programme to re-provide Oldbury Leisure Centre as a dedicated resource for disabled people incorporating treatment facilities and a GP surgery.
- 102** There are some successful initiatives that are helping to address health inequalities. For example, action plans are specific to neighbourhoods. Communities are assisted in the management of their chronic illnesses. Young asthma sufferers receive free central heating installation and Sandwell Homes works with health partners to carry out 'Repairs on Prescription' and non-decent homes receive heating through the 'Warm Zone' initiative. Because services are targeted at disadvantaged groups, people's health is improving slowly overall.
- 103** There is good support for adults with mental health illness. There is a track record of pooling budgets and a clear strategy to re-provide services into the community. Most adults with mental health issues are being served well.
- 104** Some actions are currently not being delivered. This is because partnerships with PCTs and the health economy are currently being redefined. In the meantime, the Council has an overarching strategy for healthier communities and there is a preventative programme that it is working on. In the wider health economy, there is a proposed 'Towards 2010' programme (that seeks to invest £750 million in hospital and community facilities) as part of a proposed strategy going forwards. So, even though partnership working is causing some delays, local people are receiving health benefits as a result of the Council's preventative actions.

- 105 The Sandwell Health Partnership has an improvement plan with seven improvement priorities. It has a performance group that has been established for some time that is overseeing and co-ordinating the production of quarterly performance monitoring reports for the LSP. This brings together performance information on Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets, health floor targets, national targets and local priorities. It has close links with the Town Teams and also makes the analysis in a cross-cutting manner ensuring that broader health inequalities such as poverty are considered alongside mainstream health targets and indicators. Interventions delivered as part of this have led to some improvement but more remains to be achieved.

Older people

- 106 The Council is developing a strategic approach to services for older people that goes beyond health and social care but this is new and untested. Overall, services in adult social care have improved as assessed by CSCI in 2005. Resources to support the strategy are built into the 2007/08 budget strategy.
- 107 The Council does have a specific focus on older people but, although there is an Older People's Strategy Board the Council is not yet working in partnership with the LSP on explicit strategies for older people. Instead the focus at LSP level has been integrated with health and there is no specific priority for older people identified in the Sandwell Plan and no clear remit for partners to contribute to the strategy through the LSP other than through the health theme already established. At the moment the Council is concentrating on its own strategy and what it can achieve in partnership with Agewell. Also, it has developed a cross-cutting approach as led by the Older People's Select Committee. So despite the lack of specific focus at LSP level, older people are benefiting from a range of targeted initiatives delivered by the Council together with Agewell.
- 108 There is limited evidence that the needs of older people in the design and improvement of existing services and in the 'planning for the future' exercises are being taken into account. This is not yet systematic across all services. There is a range of services that support the wider needs of older people such as: the 'Telecare' scheme to help older people to remain living independently at home; targeting of older people by the welfare rights team and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP); energy efficiency schemes; silver surfing activities in libraries and community centres; 'Young At Heart' programmes targeted at older Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Irish communities; and GP referral schemes for gentle exercising and cycle and walking activities. The majority of the effort so far has been led by the Council but there is a specific housing strategy for older people developed by the ALMO and the Active Sandwell project in partnership with Sandwell Leisure Trust. Because there is a lack of a systematic approach to building in needs, older people can access services wider than health and social care but these are limited.

- 109** The Council has had some success with its partners in varied housing provision or supported living schemes. It has reduced the number of delayed discharges and increased numbers of older people helped to live at home; equipment to support independence is supplied rapidly. Housing schemes such as the Neptune shared equity scheme are specifically designed for older people. For those people who cannot live at home, extra care is provided as a result of opening the William Mitchell Living Centre in partnership with Focus Housing Association that has provision for 16 beds for elderly and mentally infirm people, and with its partners has established two Independent Living Centres for people with disabilities. This means that there are more housing options available to vulnerable older people in the borough.
- 110** The Council engages with older people adequately but more could be done. The older people's champion initiative is well regarded but it is only in three of the six towns and it is unclear what will happen when the NRF runs out. There are some examples of good engagement such as through the long standing relationship with Agewell, the annual Agewell conference and the operation of older people's champions in Wednesbury, Greet Green and West Bromwich. However the Council could be clearer with its consultees about what has happened as a result of consultation. This lack of comprehensive engagement with older people means that the Council is missing opportunities to identify the needs of this group, involve them in decision-making, and communicate with them about the outcomes of their consultation.

Children and young people

- 111** Social, educational, health and economic outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell are inadequate as the majority are below the national averages. Overall, the Council's education service contributes adequately to improving outcomes but the social care service contribution is inadequate. This is unsatisfactory for those children most vulnerable to poor outcomes and, therefore, the combined contribution of council services to improving outcomes is judged to be inadequate. The capacity of the Council to improve the management and quality of services is adequate.
- 112** The management of the Council services for children and young people is inadequate and weaker than most other council services. Although there are clear and realistic priorities in the Education and Children's Services plan, the ability of the Council to stay focused on its priorities for children is variable. The consistency and effectiveness of the management of resources is not sufficiently robust and does not assist the focus on priorities. The Council's current capacity to deliver its services for children and young people is inadequate and has led to poor services that have failed to contribute consistently to improving outcomes. The Council has not sufficiently maximised the capacity available through partnerships despite being a Children's Trust pathfinder.

- 113 The capacity to improve is adequate. In recent months there have been changes in key personnel at senior corporate levels, as well as investment of additional corporate capacity. Notwithstanding the temporary nature of some of these key appointments, there is now better understanding of the areas for development and the factors that have led to poor services. The Council is at the beginning of a drive to improve service management. There is, however, no clear and sustained focus on value for money. The performance management of service delivery is adequate and councillors are satisfactorily engaged in scrutiny and challenge.
- 114 The contribution of council services in partnership with the commissioners and providers of health care to improve the health of children and young people is adequate. There is a satisfactory range of relatively new health service initiatives. The impact of these services on reducing health inequalities is emerging but limited. The work of the Council in keeping children and young people safe is inadequate. The arrangements for governance, accountability and partnership through the Council as the lead agent for safeguarding children are inadequate and do not comply with the duties in the 2004 Children Act to co-operate and safeguard. The work of the Council in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is adequate. The Council works satisfactorily with parents, partner organisations and schools to improve the quality of education and encourage children and young people to make progress and enjoy life. There are, however, insufficient leisure and recreational opportunities for children and young people. The work of the Council in helping children and young people to contribute to society is adequate. There is adequate support to help them develop socially and emotionally. The vision and plans to further increase citizenship, participation and inter-agency working are well conceived and clearly expressed but most of the initiatives are at an early stage of development and insufficiently co-ordinated to provide wide reaching participation. The Council's contribution to helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is inadequate. The Council has identified that whilst improvements are being made, outcomes are currently unsatisfactory. The quality of social housing for young people is improving from a low base, and most young people live in affordable housing. There is good, targeted support for families through regeneration initiatives.

Appendix 1 – Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 8-19 May.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.