

Corporate Assessment Report

July 2006



Corporate Assessment

Northamptonshire County Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	4
Executive summary	6
Areas for improvement	8
Summary of assessment scores	9
Context	10
The locality	10
The Council	11
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	13
Ambition	13
Prioritisation	16
Capacity	19
Performance management	22
What has been achieved?	25
Sustainable communities and transport	26
Safer and stronger communities	27
Healthier communities	29
Older people	30
Children and young people	31
Appendix 1 – Framework for corporate assessment	34

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 The Council is performing adequately after a period of significant organisational and cultural change. Clear progress is being made in making the Council fit for purpose and it is making good progress in meeting the needs of the communities it serves more effectively. The Council's community leadership is good. It has developed a clear set of ambitions based on the priorities identified by local people and its partners. The Council has responded comprehensively and at an early stage to proposals for significant population growth whilst remaining focussed on delivering its priorities.
- 6 Underpinning these achievements is the significant improvement made in the effectiveness of the Council's partnerships with the statutory, business and (to a more variable extent) the voluntary sectors. This is exemplified by the clear managerial leadership provided in taking forward the Local Area Agreement (LAA), which has had a galvanising effect on local partnerships. The Council's reputation with local people and other key stakeholders is improving. All of the Council's key strategic partners understand the overall strategic direction of the Council and recognise that services are getting better. For instance, education services are helping to raise standards and motivate young people well. In primary schools, standards of education are above average and the economic performance of the area is improving.
- 7 The Council has a good understanding of overall community need and its awareness of the needs of potentially disadvantaged groups is improving. Knowledge is being shared and analysed with key strategic partners to develop challenging high level ambitions for Northamptonshire. This is helping the Council to focus on delivering outcomes for local people.
- 8 The Council has clear priorities and through its robust approach to medium term planning is focussing consistently on issues that take forward its high level aims. It balances its responsibilities to deliver national priorities whilst being sensitive to local need. Some difficult decisions have been made which are now delivering better outcomes, in educational achievement for instance, after moving from a three tier to two tier structure in Northampton. There is evidence that resources are being allocated to priority areas and that corporate and financial planning processes are more explicitly aligned, but there remains scope for further improvement, in strengthening budget management for instance.
- 9 Managerial leadership at the council is good and senior management capacity has been strengthened to enable a coherent corporate identity to be established and better services delivered. The Council now has the staffing and financial resources it needs to deliver its own priorities but some areas of weakness remain. Poor ICT infrastructure is a significant barrier to service improvement. The performance management framework is good but it is not yet consistently embedded across the council or in key partnerships. The approach to value for money is underdeveloped and the council is currently only meeting minimum requirements.

There is, however, commitment from the top of the organisation to improving this and to securing efficiency savings. There are a number of areas where corporate processes are delivering better outcomes, in particular in the strong approach to corporate procurement.

- 10 Political leadership is clear and effective. The new administration elected in 2005, has quickly and successfully articulated its ambitions. The capability of senior councillors is generally good but not consistently so. Scrutiny has shown its value in supporting policy development but it is not yet sufficiently challenging or robust. The Council is not systematically identifying the development needs of councillors.
- 11 The Council needs to do more to develop its approach to user focus in line with its improved approach to diversity. The Council's work on the Local Government Equality Standard is helping to improve consultation with diverse communities and to better understand impact. It recognises the need to gain greater ownership of this agenda across all parts of the organisation. More people are being employed at the Council from black and minority ethnic groups and work is underway to encourage more applications. Customer focus in service departments is improving and access to services is becoming easier. The Council's own analysis indicates that satisfaction is improving. The Council however, recognises that its overall approach to centring service delivery on the needs of the user needs to be formalised at a corporate level.
- 12 The Council is performing well on some shared priorities. The Council is making an effective contribution to enhancing the overall economic performance of the area. It works well with its partners, through the two Urban Development Corporations and the seven local strategic partnerships in the county, to deliver its plans for neighbourhood renewal in the areas identified as most disadvantaged and to address the needs of rural neighbourhoods. Positive engagement in the Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) growth agenda is helping the Council to plan for future population growth in a co-ordinated way.
- 13 The Council is performing adequately on other shared priorities. Community safety remains an area of concern for local people. There are examples of innovative projects and partnership working that is building capacity and some areas of performance have improved. For example, the fire service is responding well to the need for change. Crime is falling, but local people continue to experience high crime levels and further effort is needed to reduce youth offending and drugs and alcohol abuse. There have been recent improvements in performance in waste management and transport but major challenges remain. The condition of the county's unclassified roads is improving with further investment planned in major roads under the contract with the Council's partner. Work on developing more strategic approaches to improving the health of communities and narrowing inequalities is at too early a stage to have had demonstrable impact. Vulnerable older people are receiving better and more co-ordinated care but the Council is at an early stage in developing a more strategic approach to meeting the needs of all older people in Northamptonshire. Performance in safeguarding vulnerable children is variable but overall, it is adequate.

Areas for improvement

- 14 Improve the capacity of the Council to deliver service improvement. In particular deliver improvements in:
 - ICT infrastructure, to make it fit for purpose in supporting services in delivering improvement;
 - scrutiny, allowing it to hold the Executive more visibly to account and to challenge poor performance; and
 - securing value for money, by integrating it more fully within performance management.
- 15 Develop the Council's member capacity by developing the skills and training of executive and scrutiny councillors, making the competencies for cabinet members more explicit and developing a framework for evaluating performance.
- 16 Take forward the approach to user focus and diversity by:
 - developing a corporate approach to user focus; and
 - ensuring a better shared ownership of the equalities and diversity agenda across the whole council.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
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

- 17 Northamptonshire lies in the heart of England. It is part of the East Midlands region but in some ways relates as much to its more prosperous neighbours in the south east. It has a population of 646,700, covers an area of 236,900 hectares and contains a diverse mix of urban and rural areas. This includes Northampton Borough which is by a large margin the largest urban centre with 30 per cent of the total population. There are seven borough and district councils in the county: Northampton, Corby, Daventry, Kettering, Wellingborough, South Northamptonshire and East Northamptonshire.
- 18 Northamptonshire's population has expanded significantly over recent decades and this trend is set to continue and accelerate. Between 1991 and 2001 the population grew by eight per cent and is projected to grow by a further 27 per cent by 2021. The county is a key part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area and it is planned that this will result in building 99,500 new homes in the area and a target of 81,000 new jobs.
- 19 In 2001, 92 per cent of the population was white with the remaining eight per cent from a number of different ethnic minority communities. Higher proportions of ethnic minority communities live in the urban centres of Northampton and Wellingborough, with most other areas being predominantly white. The county population is relatively young with an above average number of children and young people.
- 20 The local economy is relatively buoyant with local unemployment below the national average at 1.8 per cent. Average weekly earnings are however, below the national average as are qualification levels in the workforce. At a county level deprivation is relatively low, but this masks large differences between districts. Nationally out of 354 districts Corby is the 74th most deprived and South Northamptonshire one of the most affluent with a ranking of 344th.
- 21 Crime and disorder are key concerns for local people. From a low starting position there have been some improvements in the level of crime overall. Nevertheless, in 2004/05 almost all types of recorded crime were in the worst performing quartile.

The Council

- 22 The Council has been Conservative controlled since May 2005 (after 12 years of Labour control). There are 73 councillors comprising of 45 Conservative, 20 Labour and eight Liberal Democrat. Political management takes place under a leader and cabinet model where individual cabinet members exercise some delegated powers in their individual areas of responsibility. There is an overview committee and six scrutiny committees. Responsibility for chairing scrutiny committees is shared between the majority group and opposition councillors.
- 23 The Council has a board in place designed to enable alignment between political and managerial leadership. The Board is chaired by the Chief Executive and is responsible for overall delivery of the Council's strategic goals and priorities. It comprises three Executive Directors, the Director of HR, the Leader, Deputy Leader and one other cabinet member, the Chief Executive of Northampton Borough, and a senior representative from the Council's management consultant partner. Four service directors are responsible for the delivery of council services for children and young people community services, sustainability and public protection (which includes the fire and rescue service). The directors (executive and service) meet together at least monthly to plan and co-ordinate the delivery of council services.
- 24 The Council has a total of 19,000 employees (including schools). In 2005/06 it has a net revenue budget of £627.5 million and a capital budget of £125 million. Net expenditure per head is above average at £976, but council tax levels are below average with the Council's share of a band D property at £856.98 (compared to the national county average of £921.85).
- 25 The Council has a policy of limiting council tax increases and, at 2.8 per cent, agreed one of the lowest increases in the country for the 2005/06 year. In the medium term, it is one of the Council's stated priorities that the level of council tax should increase by no more than the rate of inflation, provided that the amount of funding provided by the Government allows this.
- 26 There is a Northamptonshire Community Strategy although the Council decided not to establish an overarching county wide strategic partnership to deliver it. To date, community planning has been delivered through seven district based local strategic partnerships (LSPs). This is now changing with the development of a Northamptonshire LAA as a way of taking forward partnership working. The LAA sets a framework for jointly agreed goals, priorities and performance targets between the Council and its key strategic partners. This will bring together a range of investment programmes and governance arrangements from April 2006.
- 27 In 2002 we undertook a corporate assessment of the council and gave it a score of two out of a possible four, and the Council was categorised under CPA as 'weak'. At that time, the Council was in the early stages of organisational and cultural change and recognised the need to deliver significant improvements in prioritisation, focus and performance management. In 2004, due to improved service performance, the Council's CPA category improved to 'fair'.

12 Corporate Assessment | Context

Under the new CPA 'harder test' in 2005 it was categorised as two (out of a possible four) stars. In 2005 we also undertook a CPA of the Council's fire service and assessed it to be 'weak' overall.

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

Ambition

- 28 The Council is performing well in this area and is consistently above minimum requirements.
- 29 The Council has a clear set of ambitions for the county. The overarching vision to make Northamptonshire 'an excellent place to live and work' is articulated through seven strategic goals (ambitions) that achieve a good balance between national priorities whilst accurately reflecting the needs of the area. The seven strategic goals are:
- a healthier, more active and independent life for adults;
 - a safer, freer and more prosperous county;
 - a cleaner and greener county;
 - a secure and independent future for children;
 - a smaller and more enabling council;
 - maximising the council's influence and resources; and
 - sustaining an excellent organisation.
- 30 The Council's vision helps it to set a clear agenda and provide leadership to local people.
- 31 There is a good understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing the area in the light of population growth. All key strategies (and major procurements) take into account the needs of new and expanding communities. The plans for population growth are integrated with clear strategic approaches to developing the local economy and physical infrastructure. This includes the Community Strategy which also focuses on ensuring better community safety in the context of high crime levels. At a high level these ambitions are challenging, for example to make Northamptonshire one of the safest counties in England. This is challenging because current levels of crime and fear of crime are high. The ambition is nonetheless supported by clear action plans and milestones, and some innovative projects are improving the lives of people in some of the most deprived areas of the county. For instance, in tackling anti-social behaviour and reducing domestic violence.
- 32 The Council has developed its ambitions based on a sound understanding of data about local need. The Council has worked extensively with its partners to develop the Northamptonshire Observatory as a means of analysing data about the locality and better understanding community needs. This has been used effectively in understanding the social and economic issues facing neighbourhoods and to target its neighbourhood renewal work.

14 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

For instance, the Economic Development strategy contains realistic ambitions for the Northamptonshire economy to tackle the level of skills, low pay, and employment opportunities in deprived neighbourhoods. The strategy closely follows the regional strategy for the period to 2015 and expects key strategic partners to be involved in delivery. The impact has been to more closely match strategy to need and so improve outcomes.

- 33 The community strategy identifies promoting cultural diversity and inclusion as a key part of enhancing the quality of life. The Council has made significant progress in engaging and consulting with black and minority ethnic (BME) organisations and community groups, and has set itself an ambitious goal of reaching level four of the Local Government Equality Standard by 2006/07. The BME Partnership Board is gaining a higher profile through its work and is being used to build more capacity to plan for future improvement. In addition there is recognition of the need to reflect the diversity of the mixed rural and urban nature of the county. There has been a range of user focussed planning in service departments with customer contact centres being established in the highways department, community services and for trading standards services.
- 34 The Council has been successful in communicating its ambitions. Council staff and local people understand what the Council is trying to achieve for the area. This has been done by active use of internal and external communications. The Council's high level aims are distributed and displayed throughout council workplaces. All staff receive a copy of 'My Guide to Excellence' which outlines council aims and how the work of staff contributes to delivering them. Significant effort has been directed to using the local media and the Council's own free magazine, to communicate council aims and positive news stories with local people. Surveys taken in 2005, while not directly comparable with those taken in 2002/03, are similar in scope; and show an improvement in residents' level of overall satisfaction with the Council from 37 per cent to 56 per cent.
- 35 Ambitions are underpinned by realistic and specific plans and targets but some are not sufficiently outcome focussed. High level ambitions have detailed strategies and plans with targets and milestones. But there are exceptions, for example the high level ambition contained in the community strategy for Northamptonshire to be 'progressive and exciting' is not expressed in outcomes local people would recognise. This makes it harder for the Council to work with its partners to evaluate impact in this area.
- 36 The Council consulted widely with its partners and local people in reviewing its priorities for 2005-06 and 2006-07. This has helped shape its ambitions for the area in a way that local people recognise and can relate to. The Council ensured that consultation was reported in an open and transparent way. For 2005-06 using external consultants to report findings from focus groups, targeting specific groups such as the disabled and the voluntary sector and distributing questionnaires in public places (there were 318 responses from this source). The Council's website also placed the questionnaire in a prominent position and a further 57 responses were received from that source. Consultations for 2006-07 were enhanced by a more structured use of the citizen's panel to ensure responses were more representative of the wider community.

- 37 There is a shared focus between the Council's key strategic partners about what they are trying to achieve jointly and a shared commitment to delivery. Over the last two years, senior managers have invested significant time and energy in improving relationships and capacity in key strategic partnerships. Key partners across public, private and voluntary sectors report that relationships have improved and that there is a better shared understanding of the overall strategic direction. There have been specific benefits from this improved partnership working, for example, senior management from the Council worked with the West Northamptonshire Urban Development Corporation (UDC) to establish a delivery vehicle for investment in regeneration projects amounting to £25 million for that area. The Council showed leadership in involving the borough and district councils in its work where relationships had previously been problematic. Other strategic commercial partnerships have been particularly successful including the high level input provided to the Council's board and the investment being made with the highways contractor to improve the county's roads (a priority area suggested in consultation with local people).
- 38 The Council has a COMPACT with the voluntary sector and this has been used to develop a shared vision. The majority of voluntary organisations feel that partnership arrangements with the Council have improved and their work is more closely linked to the Council's vision and priorities. The Council has worked with the voluntary sector to develop the approach to business planning which enables it to monitor performance against the outcomes agreed with these important partners. Resources are allocated to the voluntary sector only after a business plan is submitted and approved. This has been a difficult process to complete and as a consequence, a small number of voluntary organisations feel less engaged and there is some dissatisfaction with the Council's strategic direction. While the Council recognises the situation, it has not become distracted by it and is continuing to work well with its key strategic partners in developing its strategic vision.
- 39 The Council has shown good community leadership. It has responded positively to the proposals for the MKSM growth area and has agreed a common agenda with its strategic partners. The Council's senior management has engaged effectively with central government departments throughout and ensured that Northamptonshire secured additional resources to prepare for growth. Despite having a range of views across the majority group about the impact of the MKSM growth proposals, through its political leadership, the Council has maintained a consistent focus, taking a realistic view of the costs and benefits of the growth. The Council has also used the development of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) to provide clear direction to the local community and more widely amongst partners. The Council has a challenging agenda in developing the LAA within a two tier local government setting and where partnership working has historically been poor. It has used the development of the LAA to create common improvement agendas with partners.
- 40 Community planning arrangements have delivered benefits in locality planning but have been less effective in producing a joined up countywide strategic approach. The Council has a community strategy with community plans being delivered through the seven district-based local strategic partnerships (LSPs).

16 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

This arrangement was effective in securing the engagement of local partners but is less effective in delivering planned outcomes for Northamptonshire in a joined up way. The Council recognises the need to have a more co-ordinated approach within the LAA and its proposed governance arrangements provide a sound base to achieve this more effectively.

Prioritisation

- 41 The Council is performing well in this area and is consistently above minimum requirements.
- 42 The Council's framework for corporate priority setting is based on a medium term plan (MTP). The MTP is reviewed and annual priorities set as part of the annual planning cycle. Priorities for the 2005/06 year were determined by the former administration, but were reviewed and amended by the new administration following the May 2005 elections. There were 23 priority areas for improvement including seven top priorities. The seven top priorities in 2005/06 were:
 - anti-social behaviour and fear of crime is reduced by more visible policing;
 - roads and footpaths are better maintained and a modernised strategic road network is developed;
 - the built, natural and public environment is better maintained;
 - more children and young people get wider opportunities for development through extra curricular activities run by the statutory and voluntary sector;
 - more children live in stable and supported families;
 - more adults are supported in living at home safely; and
 - the County's visibility and reputation with communities, visitors and businesses is improved.
- 43 At the time of our fieldwork, the Council was in the midst of its planning cycle for 2006/07 but it had agreed a draft revised approach to prioritisation for 2006/10. There are eight priorities, seven of which are broadly the same as the top priorities in 2005/06, with the addition of a priority 'the council lives within its means, providing services at a cost to the local taxpayer that increases by no more than the rate of inflation provided that changes in central government funding do not prevent this'. There are no lower level priorities but a larger number of 'other outcomes' (many shared with partners within the LAA) broadly similar to the existing 23 priorities.
- 44 The rationale for selecting the top seven priorities is clear and they reflect the issues identified in community consultation. The full set of 23 priorities provides coverage of the high level ambitions and address key issues in its assessment of community need. The top priorities are areas where maximum corporate focus is needed to change performance in the issues most important to local people.

At the detailed level, there are specific priorities on preventing domestic violence and meeting the needs of travellers which are designed to meet the needs of these harder to reach groups. The Council's consultation on its priorities also sought the views of some hard-to-reach groups.

- 45 The Council's priorities reflect its ambitions and are derived from its assessment of the needs of local communities. There is a general priority to address fairness and disadvantage, and equality and diversity is evident in the approach to other priorities. For example reporting and responding to racist incidents and other hate crimes are given a high profile in tackling anti-social behaviour. The approach to the priority for supporting children in more stable families has a strong focus on reducing out of county placements for disabled children. The Council has conducted equalities impact assessments across all its services, and developed action plans to improve effectiveness. The external assessment of meeting the Equality Standard for Local Government concluded good progress was being made. All service plans for 2006/07 address the issues arising from equality impact assessments and the LAA includes a number of specific diversity targets. The Council recognises that its overall approach to centring service delivery on the needs of the user needs to be formalised at a corporate level. The significant investment needed in corporate IT systems is adversely affecting the pace of development required to improve the situation. The MTP however, has sharpened the Council's focus on service users and highlights the investment planned in its systems and processes to meet customer needs.
- 46 The Council's priorities have been set in the light of national and local policy frameworks. For instance, Council priorities for waste management reflect expectations from the government to minimise the volume of waste collected and to increase the level of recycling. The Council has also agreed local priorities that recognise and balance the needs of different district areas. Priorities in relation to neighbourhood renewal reflect the national frameworks in targeting the most deprived areas of Corby and Northampton but also recognise the need to balance this with the local needs of rural areas in the south and east of the county. This means that local people should receive more targeted services and that the Council is able to work more effectively with central government.
- 47 There is consistent ownership of priorities and they are used to ensure focus. Councillors, staff and other stakeholders know what the Council's priorities are, and understand the implications for their work. Councillors and senior managers actively use the MTP when reviewing and making policy decisions to ensure actions are focussed on delivering priorities. For example the MTP is used to set the framework in a review considering the mainstreaming of funding of community safety projects. There is a very high level of awareness throughout the Council about the priorities outlined in the MTP, and charts displaying the 23 priorities and seven top priorities are displayed widely. Awareness and ownership extends to more junior staff where individual and team contributions to corporate priorities are discussed regularly with managers. This makes it more likely that priorities will be used to inform decisions about front line service delivery.

18 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 48** The Chief Executive worked with all political groups early in 2005 to ensure that any change in administration was dealt with as efficiently as possible. This work, and the briefings provided by the senior management team to prospective councillors, allowed the Council to remain focussed on achieving its ambitions at a time of considerable change and uncertainty. Priorities are reviewed regularly and lead responsibility for delivery is clear. Responsibility for delivering the top priorities is allocated to a cabinet councillor and a senior manager. The new administration published a detailed plan for the remainder of the 2005/06 year, highlighting the resource implications of delivering its strategic goals and priorities. This has enabled the new administration to remain focussed on implementing its plans.
- 49** The Council's medium term financial plan (MTFP) and its annual budget setting process are effective and ensure that resources are allocated in accordance with the priority areas. The MTFP clearly identifies how resources are allocated to all 23 priority areas and the seven top priority areas, whilst continuing to limit council tax rises. In 2004/05, £0.3 million was shifted from waste management to invest in the priority of improving 'the state of repair of roads and footpaths'. Efficiency savings generated through improved procurement have been invested in improving ICT and are continuing to provide resources to support the Council's major investment plans for improving this area. The Council proposes to invest £0.5 million in community policing initiatives in 2006/07 and to invest an additional £25 million over five year in highways maintenance by using its prudential borrowing powers. The short term plan published by the new administration in 2005 increased investment in the priority areas of supporting adults to live at home (£2 million), enabling more children to live at home in stable families (£0.5 million), and improving the strategic road network (£5 million in year 1 of the five-year investment programme highlighted above).
- 50** The Council is willing to take difficult decisions when focussing on priorities. For example undertaking a major reorganisation of schools from three to two tiers in Northampton to address underperformance at key stage three. Despite significant short term disruption this investment is now achieving improved outcomes. The Council has also used a voluntary sector COMPACT to change the pattern of funding for the voluntary sector to move from providing ongoing grants to commissioning services based on delivery of priorities. This change was opposed by sections of the voluntary sector but resulted in better focussed provision in some service areas. For example in 2005/06 funding was increased to a project supporting muslim women and children to improve attainment at key stage two and reduced to a less targeted project for parents and toddlers.
- 51** The Council's delivery framework has action plans attached to its 23 priority areas for improvement. Each of these plans sets out lead responsibilities, the actions required, the resource required for delivery, desired outputs and key milestones for delivery. Many action plans have clearly defined outcomes but some do not. For instance, clear actions are highlighted to improve service delivery to meet the council's ambitions for a safer, freer and more prosperous community and there have been successful outcomes in reducing domestic violence, reducing the number of fires in the county and tackling domestic abuse.

The priority to ‘improve the quality of life in the most disadvantaged areas...’ is supported by SMART performance targets and outcomes that can be understood by local people. The priorities taken forward with partners in the LAA have clear and challenging targets and outcome measures. This makes it easier for the Council and its partners to understand the impact of its plans.

- 52 Some other actions are not so outcome focussed, particularly where cross-cutting services are being delivered and where strategic priorities are less clearly articulated. For example the priority for ‘the built, natural and public environment to be better developed and maintained’ is supported by an action to clean up localities that expects the involvement of the business sector, voluntary groups, district and borough councils and parish councils. This action does not have specified measurable outcomes, nor is it clear what would represent success. This decreases the likelihood of successful outcomes for local people.
- 53 There is a shared understanding of priorities with partner organisations. The Police service and the Council have agreed clear priorities for reducing crime and the fear of crime by increasing the level of visible policing in communities. The partners within the proposed LAA have quickly developed a shared view on relative priorities and there is clear evidence of improved partnership relationships. Voluntary organisations funded by the Council are required to submit a business plan to demonstrate that they focus on the delivery of agreed priorities. NHS and district council partners have shared priorities for older people and are now supporting increased numbers of older people to live independently. Between 2002/03 and 2004/05 these increased from 85 to 98 per 1,000 of the population aged over 65 years.
- 54 In 2005 we undertook a CPA of the Council's fire service and found that it had not set itself clear priorities. Since we reported the Council has made good progress with its improvement planning and now has a clear and robust set of priorities. This is helping to deliver more effective modernisation of the fire service.

Capacity

- 55 The Council is performing adequately in this area and is at minimum requirements.
- 56 The roles and responsibilities of senior officers and councillors are clear and the managerial leadership necessary to deliver the Council's priorities is being provided. The Board, which includes all three executive directors, the relevant portfolio holders as well as external representatives, has enabled the Council to maintain its focus. Executive Members are clear about their responsibilities and are not distracted by minor operational matters. Whilst the work of scrutiny committees is contributing to policy development, it is not providing the challenge necessary to hold the Executive to account or to challenge poor performance.

- 57 The Council has good senior managerial capacity and this is providing leadership from the top of the organisation. Senior managers are visible and accessible and provide clear direction. Political leadership is clear and effective and this has enabled the administration to clearly articulate its high level requirements of the Council in a way that is understood by staff and stakeholders alike. But the capability of senior councillors is variable and the training needs of members are not systematically identified which could adversely affect the capacity of the Council to deliver its ambitions.
- 58 The Council has adequate staff capacity to deliver its priorities. The proportion of employees from ethnic minorities is increasing and in 2004/05 amounted to 3.55 per cent of the total workforce (a top quartile performance). This performance compares well to the amount of working age people from ethnic minorities living in Northamptonshire, which was 2.89 per cent in that year. In 2004/05, 2.32 per cent of the top five per cent of earners were from ethnic minorities which, whilst less than the previous year, was still top quartile performance. The Council has set targets to increase the proportion of its people employed from ethnic minorities over the next three years and is working with the BME community to encourage more applications to work at the Council. The percentage of the top 5 per cent earners that are women was ahead of target in 2004/05 at 43.45 per cent (the target was 42 per cent) and the Council has set a target to be in the top quartile in 2005/06.
- 59 The staff and managerial capacity is generally good but in children's services is not consistently so. Most staff across different departments feel positive about working for the Council. Training and development needs are identified through the individual appraisal process and the Council is reviewing its delivery of training. Some staff feel they have the freedom to innovate in their day to day jobs but many feel that management does not encourage them to offer suggestions on alternative ways of delivering services.
- 60 The strategic approach to human resources is underdeveloped. There is not yet an effective corporate workforce plan, although there has been some positive work in service departments. Trade Unions feel that its linkages with the top of the organisation are poor and that communication channels are ineffective. The Council feels that it is engaging at an appropriate level and that pre-planned meetings are attended appropriately by senior council officers. This gap in perception is a potential barrier to engaging staff in the difficult process of organisational change that lies ahead.
- 61 The Council has begun to use partnerships to build capacity and is planning to invest in areas where the need for more capacity is greatest. It has committed significant resources and energy to turn around some partnerships that were not working well and partners recognise the clear leadership that has been shown in some problematic areas. For instance, the Council has provided clear and sustained leadership to develop the LAA and has put in place governance arrangements designed to support the decision-making processes in an open and transparent way. The Council has also taken responsibility for managing partnerships that were not performing well, for example it has re-energised the work of the Local Resilience Forum.

- 62 Partners recognise the additional resources committed by the Council to support the seven local strategic partnerships. Partners also feel that the Council is now engaging with them in a more corporate and coherent way and have commented to us on the quality of officers participating from the Council.
- 63 A robust medium term planning process is in place and the Council has aligned its financial plans and its priority areas for improvement over the next three years. The Council has clearly identified its priority areas for investment and proposes a switch of resources away from non-priority areas of £31 million in 2005/06, £40 million in 2006/07 and £48 million in 2007/08. The general reserve has been restored to the level recommended by the Chief Financial Officer and a comprehensive risk assessment process is in place to support the allocation of resources to priority areas. The short term plan prepared following the election of the new administration provides strong evidence that the Council is able to respond quickly when refining its priorities and to direct resources effectively.
- 64 The Council has the financial capacity to deliver its priorities. It has assessed financial and service risks and these have informed its decision-making. But it also recognises that budget management is weak in some areas of the organisation, resulting in projected overspends in some departments in 2005/06. The achievement of financial plans is reliant on the application of strong project management techniques. However, the approach to project management, whilst developing, remains variable across the Council.
- 65 The Council has invested significantly in its procurement team and has delivered more than the anticipated efficiencies over the past 18 months. In 2004/05 cashable savings of £2.8 million were secured and contributed to the achievement of the Council's targets under the Gershon regime. There are examples of innovation, with the establishment of the 'virtual procurement team', and the regional centre of excellence has commended the Council for its work in two areas over the past 12 months (for improvements in processing invoices and in the way agency resources are purchased to support priorities). The Council works with its strategic partners to improve procurement across the county. It chairs the local procurement forum and has enabled the district councils to work collaboratively on procurement projects.
- 66 The Council's external auditor has assessed arrangements for securing value for money at minimum requirements and the Council prepared a strategy in December 2005 in response to this and to improve the corporate approach.
- 67 The Council's ICT resources are insufficient and this is affecting its ability to deliver service improvements. The Council recognises this serious weakness and in February 2005 agreed a corporate ICT strategy. This strategy plans to invest around £60 million in ICT projects over the next ten years. In the short to medium term however, the lack of capacity is a significant barrier to progress.

22 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 68** The Council has some well established partnerships with the private sector which assist in building capacity and improving outcomes. For instance, the involvement of private consultants in the work of the Board ensures that the Council is in a position to seek the views of its partner at a very early stage in policy development. The highways maintenance contract is delivering improvements in the local infrastructure and the contractor regards the Council as a good partner to work with. Since the contract was agreed, the percentage of non-principal roads (unclassified) in need of repair has improved from 34 per cent (2002/03) to 20 per cent in 2004/05. The public is also able to report concerns directly to the contractor about the state of the county's roads through the 'Street Doctor' initiative.
- 69** The Council has secured external funding to finance its expenditure plans. A private finance initiative to improve 41 schools was finalised in 2005. The Council has also secured funding amounting to £141 million in direct grant from the government to improve infrastructure in the light of plans for population growth.

Performance management

- 70** The Council is performing adequately in this area.
- 71** The framework for performance management is good and it is delivering some significant benefits. Whilst some good practice is evident, it is not consistently embedded across the council and its partnerships, and its impact in some areas is limited.
- 72** The level of involvement of executive councillors and senior officers in performance management is consistent with their roles, but scrutiny is not sufficiently challenging or rigorous. The role of the cabinet in performance management is clear and developing appropriately. The cabinet sign-off of the performance standards in September 2005, has given members a structure for their discussions with managers and the Board and Cabinet have made clear their ownership of the 'golden thread' across priorities and objectives. Top level commitment by councillors and senior officers is evident and the chief executive and the leader have overall responsibility and accountability for council-wide performance. Scrutiny in its role in performance management however, remains underdeveloped. Scrutiny meetings are not sufficiently focused or challenging and the call in process is seen as unreasonably restrictive by many scrutiny members. Indeed the majority group on the overview committee has an effective veto on call ins and the last seven attempted call ins have not been allowed.
- 73** Review cycles, as exemplified by the Quarterly Performance Review (QPR) are effective. QPRs are timely, provide opportunities to take corrective action and then to monitor progress. The QPR is generally robust, during which there is a culture of open debate where targets for improvement are routinely challenged and under-performance is identified. The review process assesses whether services are achieving their stated performance targets; if these are not being delivered there is agreement on what remedial action is needed. QPR has made an impact on outcomes.

For example improving arrangements for direct payments in Community Services. However, the reviews are not yet used to spread good practice more routinely across the Council.

- 74 The focus on performance and the use of performance management is variable. There is effective performance monitoring and analysis across much of the council. In some services, such as Sustainability, it is consistently good and in Community Services it was established before the corporate initiative was launched. This standard is not, however, consistent across the Council and there is unacceptable variation in children's services. To support performance management, performance champions have been identified in each service to promote and sustain the performance momentum.
- 75 Resource management and value for money are not well integrated with performance management. For example, the resourcing of a pupil referral unit in services for children and young people illustrates a ratio of staffing to low pupil numbers which the Council acknowledge is clearly not cost effective. However, a recently established 'Costs, Activities and Performance' (CAP) project, is a positive cross-council investment to develop greater understanding of, and linkage between, performance and value for money. CAP will try to achieve closer linkage between financial strategies and the delivery of services.
- 76 Some services of the council work with other providers to compare and evaluate performance. For example, the joint performance framework is an example of partnership working between Community Services and Health. In addition, the Council has worked with its private contractor for Highways Maintenance to use its own performance management systems to manage the contract.
- 77 In Community Services there is effective influencing and reorientation of services in home care as a result of consultation and there are people's panels in each district who contribute to the consultation process. The 'hard-to-reach' project has led to increased take up of support for carers from the BME community. The service has also promoted a publicity campaign to minority groups to explain how to access direct payments. More generally, across the Council, there has been inconsistent reference to BME groups, disability, groups at risk of disadvantage and geographic areas as part of needs analysis and service planning.
- 78 There is variable practice in the way some services involve service users and other stakeholders in contributing to target setting. For example, seven Local Transport Plan (LTP) objectives have been developed in consultation with local stakeholders. However, the contribution by service users and other stakeholders, such as the voluntary sector, to target setting and performance review is only just underway and the good practice in some services is not routinely shared.
- 79 The Council's systems are providing more knowledge about performance to drive improvement. There is effective target setting for improvement in line with priorities. User complaints and grievances have informed development in some service areas but there is no overall approach to ensure user views inform the corporate performance framework of the Council. In transport services, customer feedback is invited after road works take place.

24 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

One survey showed an 80 per cent satisfaction rate with the works out with more than half of those surveyed having responded.

- 80** Data collection and analysis is developing across the Council and, in Community Services, staff development includes the use of performance information to improve services and how to make better use of data and information. Overall, across the Council, there is variable use of data collection and analysis of the needs of BME groups and other groups at risk of disadvantage. Equality impact assessments have been completed across the Council but the quality of these is variable. Performance guidance makes provision for user complaints and staff complaints to be used to inform service development and there is advice on how to use suggestions and compliments. But there is limited consideration of how feedback from diverse communities can be used to influence services.
- 81** The management of performance within partnerships is underdeveloped. Some work is underway with the Council's highways contractor to address this but this work is at an early stage and is an isolated example. The Council regards the LAA as the mechanism for introducing a more systematic approach and has, with its partners, developed a protocol for this in preparing for the LAA. The Council's current performance framework does not yet provide guidance to help staff understand and be able to demonstrate the impact of partnership working and ensure it provides value for money.

What has been achieved?

- 82 The Council is performing adequately in achieving national and shared priorities and is overall at minimum requirements.
- 83 The national and shared priorities are reflected in the Northamptonshire community strategy, the MTP and across all priorities. The Council's corporate, financial and service planning frameworks ensure that council activity is directed at the delivery of priorities. In most services there is a clear link between priorities and service outputs, and this is directed by a clear and robust performance management framework. The Council has achieved a good balance of national priorities whilst remaining sensitive to local needs. This is exemplified in the positive approach to setting targets with partners in the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) 2 and the emerging LAA.
- 84 Capacity to deliver the shared priorities is being enhanced by developing crosscutting approaches within the Council and within key partnerships. Some are delivering better outcomes now, for example in neighbourhood renewal, but others are at an earlier stage and local people are not yet experiencing significant improvement across all services. Poor ICT capacity remains a significant barrier to service improvement.
- 85 Public satisfaction with the Council and its services has been poor but there are signs it has recently improved. In 2003/04, overall satisfaction with the Council at 37 per cent was amongst the lowest in the country. In addition public satisfaction with council services was poor, with most in the worst performing quartile. In 2005, the Council's own survey showed a much improved rating for overall satisfaction of 56 per cent. While these surveys were not directly comparable they were similar in scope.
- 86 The Council is performing well on some of the shared priorities. In primary schools, standards of education are above average. The Council is making an effective contribution to enhancing the overall economic performance of the area.
- 87 With regard to the other shared priorities the Council has met the minimum requirements and in some areas performance is improving. There are examples of innovative projects and partnership working that is building capacity. For example the fire service is responding well to the need for change and crime overall has reduced by nine per cent in 2004/05 compared to 2002/03 levels. Nevertheless, community safety remains an area of concern for local people, who continue to experience high crime levels and further effort is needed to reduce youth offending and drugs and alcohol abuse. There have been recent improvements in performance in waste management and transport but major challenges remain. Work on developing a more strategic approach to improving the health of communities and narrowing inequalities is at an early stage. Vulnerable older people are receiving better and more co-ordinated care but the Council is at an early stage in developing a more strategic approach to meeting the needs of all older people in Northamptonshire. Performance in safeguarding vulnerable children is variable but overall, it is adequate.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 88 The Council's priorities and strategies for sustainable communities and transport directly support its ambition for a safer, freer and more prosperous county and the ambition for a cleaner and greener county. Three of the top seven priority areas are designed to support this shared priority, demonstrating a sustained focus on achievement in this area.
- 89 The Council has played a significant role in taking forward the sub-regional economic development strategy and the economic performance of the area is above average. The Council has worked closely with the regional development agency and the government office to develop a coherent strategy grounded in a sound understanding of local need. This strategy is however, at an early stage and it is yet to have significant impact. There are strong formal and informal links with local businesses. Most indicators of economic well being are positive, for example overall levels of deprivation, the percentage of the population economically active, and the numbers of new VAT registrations are all better than the national average, but workforce skills are lower than average. The changes over time in these indicators are in line with national trends.
- 90 There is an effective approach to neighbourhood renewal. The Council has a clear overall strategy and works in an increasingly effective way with local partners in delivering programmes. Positive examples of partnerships in the most deprived districts include promoting skills and training.
- 91 The Council has worked with partners from an early stage to ensure the MKSM growth agenda supports the achievement of its economic and environmental priorities and strategies. Future procurement of larger contracts takes account of the implications of the MKSM growth projections. Detailed planning work has been undertaken with partners to determine the implications of population growth and additional housing on relevant council strategies. This work, and the council's positive engagement with central government, has ensured that Northamptonshire has already been allocated £141 million to fund additional infrastructure.
- 92 The Council is working with partners to influence the housing market, particularly in relation to the growth agenda. It provided leadership in developing the Regional Housing Strategy and the Strategy for Housing Investment in the East Midlands area, bringing together key partners and leading the submission of funding applications to central government. As a result of this partnership working, the southern sub-region received £70 million (40 per cent of the funding available for affordable housing across the East Midlands) and 1,542 affordable homes are due to be built in line with the Council's ambitions for the regeneration of the area.
- 93 The Council is working successfully with partners to increase recycling and is also working to develop solutions for more sustainable waste management practices. The Council has taken a leading role in working with district councils to take forward the waste management strategy.

The statutory recycling target in 2003/04 was met and in 2004/05 recycling of household waste increased to 29 per cent. The tonnage of waste collected has remained stable at a position that is better than average.

- 94 The Council has good awareness about the challenges it faces in improving its transport infrastructure and is starting to achieve more impact. Its LTP is rated as fair by the government office. It has worked closely with partners to develop a coherent sub-regional approach to transport strategy and has succeeded in attracting additional infrastructure funding to meet local transport objectives. This is helping to prepare for the MKSM growth proposals but key challenges remain unresolved, for example extending the rail link to Corby. Although improvement in unclassified roads is evident, the condition of Northamptonshire's major roads is worse than average and the Council is planning additional investment to address the situation in partnership with its highways contractor.
- 95 There has been progress in improving public transport from a low base. Historically, Northamptonshire has had low usage of bus services and low levels of public satisfaction. The Council recognises this as a problem and it has developed a partnership with bus operators which has attracted additional government funding and improved some key services. In 2004/05 bus usage increased by 8.5 per cent.

Safer and stronger communities

- 96 Being a safer county is one of the Council's key strategic goals and strengthening and sustaining safer and stronger communities is a key part of the LAA. There is a comprehensive community safety strategy based on a good analysis of issues facing local communities. The strategy has clear links to the Community Strategy, the LAA, the seven Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership Strategies and the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy for the area. The strategy reflects the main outcomes from the seven Crime and Disorder Partnership (CDRP) audits completed in December 2004. The Council is making an effective contribution to each CDRP and partners value the level and quality of Council input. The Council works well (through the CDRPs) with its partners in the Police service and resources, such as data analysts are jointly funded. The clear leadership provided by the Council is allowing resources to be targeted where they are needed most.
- 97 From a poor base, performance in reducing crime is improving. Data provided by the Council for the period April to September 2005 confirms this improvement and crime overall has reduced by nine per cent since 2002/03. However, almost all performance indicators are in the worst quartile with one indicator (sexual offences) being in the second worst quartile in 2004/05. The fear of crime amongst local people is also in the worst quartile. The Council is working with its partners to change the situation and within the council itself, awareness of the requirements of section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act has been promoted amongst councillors.

- 98 The Council is making an important contribution to creating stronger communities through its own innovative projects and in partnership. Some council-funded projects, such as the 'Sunflower' project to reduce repeat offences of domestic violence, are having a positive impact. In Corby and Kettering the percentage of repeat incidences of domestic violence has halved. After a full evaluation and analysis of need, the work of this project is being extended across the county.
- 99 The Council is effectively engaging with a wide range of partners. A multi-agency Safer & Stronger Communities Board, chaired by the Chief Executive of the Council works to ensure co-ordination. The Police service has strongly endorsed this development. The CASPAR programme supports the overall approach to crime reduction by prioritising the needs of disadvantaged communities.
- 100 The Council is working strategically with the seven district councils to tackle anti-social behaviour. A project known as 'U-Turn' is reporting successful outcomes from early intervention with the families of young people where the risk of anti-social behaviour is greatest. Since the policy was introduced in November 2002, and to April 2005, support has been provided to 192 young people and the level of re-offending reduced. The success of the project has been recognised by the Government Office for the East Midlands and the Home Office, with further funding being made available from the government for two additional posts to extend the preventative model to those identified as at risk.
- 101 The effectiveness of programmes reducing the harm caused to adults by drugs and alcohol is limited. The Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) has historically performed poorly, but the Council has shown leadership since 2004 in taking it forward. Until that time, partners felt the DAAT was underperforming and were uncertain over how to address the situation. Clearer policies are in place to assist in reducing drug and alcohol abuse and there are early signs of successes. There has been investment through the CDRPs in specific projects designed to reduce substance dependency. The 'Poppy' project in Corby has improved access to treatment. However, the Council recognises that further action is needed to co-ordinate such care across the county. The Council is funding counselling and advice services but the benefits of this are not yet being fully realised.
- 102 The Council has a good track record for road safety improvements. There have been significant reductions in road accidents compared to previous years. Road accidents involving children are also falling (33 per cent reduction by 2004/05 compared to the baseline set in 1998) reflecting the sustained focus of the Casualty Reduction Partnership. The Council has targeted at risk groups such as motorcyclists for education and has introduced traffic calming measures. The Council has been short listed for beacon council status as a result of its sustained good performance in reducing road accidents.
- 103 The Fire Service is successfully reducing the number of fires. The Arson Reduction Strategy is reducing malicious fires and an intervention strategy for young people (the 'Firesetters Programme') is also reporting successful outcomes. Working with its partners in the Police service and the Fire service, an initiative known as 'ELVIS' is resulting in fewer vehicle arson incidents.

- 104** The Council has established detailed arrangements for dealing with emergency situations. It has demonstrated strong leadership in the Local Resilience Forum. A county-wide emergency plan has been drawn up based on an assessment of risk (identified by its key partners). The emergency plan has been tested for resilience in three major incidents in the past 12 months and a programme of resilience testing is in place. The Council has an internal business continuity plan and impact assessments have been completed. The Council actively engages the private sector, encouraging local businesses to attend the Local Resilience Forum. Advice is available on the Council's website for local businesses about business continuity arrangements.
- 105** The Council has invested in its capacity to deal with emergency incidents. Resources have been pooled with all seven district councils to build capacity. The Council uses this capacity to provide training for employees within the Council and at its key strategic partners.
- 106** The Council prepared a framework for community cohesion in October 2005 and is working through the seven LSPs to engage with local people. The Safer and Stronger Communities Board oversees the development of a county-wide strategy for community cohesion. In response to public demand, the Council has introduced a number of celebratory services, such as naming ceremonies and reaffirmation services. Over 1,000 citizenship ceremonies have been conducted since April 2004, which compares favourably with the Home Office estimate for the area of 350.
- 107** A Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Partnership Board is in place and 15 different faith groups are represented. The Council has had positive feedback from the various faith forums about the work of the partnership board.

Healthier communities

- 108** The Council is making some positive contributions to the health of local people.
- 109** The picture in relation to the health of the population in Northamptonshire is mixed with some improvements being made in line with national trends. The overall strategic approach is at an early stage of development.
- 110** Despite having lower than average levels of deprivation, both male and female life expectancies are slightly worse than the national average, but the percentage of households containing a person with a long term illness is lower than average. Infant mortality rates are better than average but the percentage of babies born with low birth weight is worse than average. Most indicators of health show an improving trend for example between 1991/93 and 2001/03 male life expectancy increased from 73.9 to 76.5 years and female life expectancy increased from 79.1 to 80.9 years. This rate of increase is in line with the national trend.
- 111** The Council has worked with its partners, including the Northamptonshire Observatory, to develop a better understanding of the health needs of local people, pooling data on the health of residents in different localities. This has given a better understanding of health needs in the more deprived areas and informed work on neighbourhood renewal.

- 112 The Council understands its strategic role in relation to promoting health and well being but its work is at an early stage. The community strategy gives clear priority to improving the health of the population and outlines the key areas where the Council can make a difference. The Council has worked with partners to develop a draft health and well being strategy. This draft strategy takes a cross cutting (i.e. moving on from the traditional focus on NHS and social care services) and long term view of the Council's contribution to improving the health of local people. It sets clear overall aims but these are not yet supported by measurable outcomes or action plans for delivery. Arrangements to manage performance with partners in this relatively complex environment for service delivery have not yet been developed.
- 113 The community strategy has a clear priority of 'working towards reducing health inequalities' but there is limited evidence of co-ordinated actions designed to achieve this.
- 114 The Council is working hard with its partners to deliver more integrated services. There are formal liaison and policy development arrangements with primary care trusts (PCTs), and the majority report that they have positive relationships with the Council. The health scrutiny partnership committee has taken a proactive and constructive role and is working with the district councils and the PCT to provide a local voice for residents. Council and NHS mental health services are increasingly becoming integrated and links with primary care teams are being strengthened. Access to child mental health services is overall satisfactory but there are significant differences between the north and south of the county. An adult social care squad has recently been established to provide a single point of access to social care services, but access to council and NHS services is not yet being provided in an integrated way.
- 115 Approaches to addressing the needs of potentially vulnerable groups are making progress but are not yet part of an overall strategy. There is a joint teenage pregnancy partnership which provides support and education and the numbers of teenage conceptions have fallen overall but in some areas rates remain high. There are also a number of small scale projects supporting vulnerable groups. These include Dosityo (a voluntary sector project supporting Asian girls and young women) and DASH (a project in Daventry providing health and home safety advice to older and other vulnerable residents).

Older people

- 116 The Council's approach to care services for older people is well developed and integrated although a council wide strategy for older people is at an early stage of development. The draft strategy goes beyond traditional care services and outlines overall aims for achieving a council wide approach to addressing the needs and aspirations of all older people. In addition, the Council in 2003 changed its organisational structure to ensure that a range of community services for older people were integrated within a single department to maximise opportunities for joined up approaches.

The draft strategy has not yet been subject to formal consultation with partners but there has been a range of informal contacts in its development. The Council now proposes to undertake formal partner consultation and wider consultation with older people and the general community.

- 117** The Council is at a more advanced stage in planning an integrated approach in housing related services through the supporting people programme. Partners and other stakeholders are positive about the Council's approach. In 2003, the Supporting People Board (representing the Council, the district councils, the PCTs, and the probation service) jointly commissioned consultants to develop a strategy. A draft strategy was produced in 2004 outlining a more integrated approach to housing, health and social care services with action plans for the county as a whole and within individual districts. These proposals have now been taken forward within the five-year supporting people strategy. There are now some examples of housing related service that are more geared to promoting independence, and some more traditional services have been decommissioned. The supporting people strategy is at a relatively early stage in delivery and significantly more change is planned in the future.
- 118** The Council has made some progress in developing its approach to consultation with older people but it recognises that more development is required. There is a county wide consultative older people's forum which links to locality based groups. This group has been used to consult on a range of issues including the transport needs of older people.
- 119** There has been good progress in providing co-ordinated and comprehensive services. In 2005 the Commission for Social Care Inspection assessed that services for adults are serving most people well and that there are excellent prospects for improvement. In particular it highlighted that there had been good development of services that promote independence and that partnership working was better established. In 2004, the Council opened four specialist care centres using PFI funding to provide rehabilitative and preventative services for older people. These centres have input from NHS staff and play a key part in avoiding inappropriate hospital and residential care admissions. There are also a range of other community services that promote independence and improve quality of life. The Council and the PCTs also have an integrated community equipment service which ensures older people receive equipment more quickly. Libraries provide 'silver surfer' sessions for older people and 250 energy efficiency surveys and 40 home fire safety checks have been undertaken for older people.

Children and young people

- 120** The council is performing adequately in this area. Outcomes for children and young people in Northamptonshire are adequate. Targeted work is showing some positive results, but provision, especially for more vulnerable young people, is not consistent across the county. The Council's youth service is inadequate. The youth offending service is performing adequately.

- 121 There are clear and relevant ambitions for children and young people expressed in the community strategy, the Council's improvement plan and the Children and Young People's service plan. There is strong commitment by all partner agencies to delivering integrated services through the Children and Young People Partnership Board. However delivering on the outcomes is at an early stage. The Children and Young People's interim plan show clear and robust priorities.
- 122 Achieving value for money is adequate although this is not yet consistent across the service. Risk assessment is not used consistently in the approach to financial management. There is no process in place to ensure that all projects, which support children and families, are well targeted, and consistent with priorities. Performance management is adequate. It is very robust in some services. However there are areas in which performance is poor and this is not being identified and addressed.
- 123 The work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is adequate. Children and young people are generally healthy. Multi-agency support for parents and carers to keep themselves and their children healthy is effective and well co-ordinated. Teenage parents are well supported but there are still high rates of teenage pregnancy in some areas. A programme of universal health screening is in place but the take-up rate is variable. The extent of breastfeeding varies and there is no overall strategy in place to address this. Immunisation rates are high and oral health is good. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services have long waiting lists and offer limited services to some vulnerable groups.
- 124 The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is adequate. Most children and young people appear safe. There is good information available for parents and young people to raise their understanding of safety issues. The investment in family support services is having a positive impact. While outcomes for most children are satisfactory there are concerns about the quality and consistency of some casework practice and lack of consistent management oversight. Most parents of children with disabilities value the services provided although there are insufficient respite places for young people with learning disabilities who have seriously challenging behaviour.
- 125 The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good. The strategy for childcare and early years is good. Pupils' attendance is in line with the national average and is improving. The level of exclusions is too high. Provision in the referral units and complementary centres is good and young people achieve well. Not all the young people who are excluded from school, however, receive the required 20 hours a week of education. In primary schools standards are above average. Standards in key stages 3 and 4 in secondary schools are below the national average but overall are improving. The attendance and attainment of looked after children is slightly above average and improving. Support for black minority ethnic pupils is good. Provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is effective. Good opportunities are provided for children and young people to take part in sport and music.

- 126** The work of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is adequate with some strengths. There are good opportunities for many young people to contribute to the way their schools are run and to local issues that matter to them. However young people do not feel that they are consulted sufficiently about developments that affect them and that their contributions have limited impact. Looked after young people make good use of the independent advocacy service. Children and young people's social and emotional development is well supported. However, bullying and harassment remain a concern to many young people. Effective programmes have been introduced to help reduce anti-social behaviour. Work with victims of youth crime is inadequate. Too few accessible and affordable leisure activities are available to young people. The numbers of young people who offend who are not in employment, education or training is well above the national average which is not satisfactory.
- 127** The work of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well being is adequate. A clear and appropriate strategic direction for 14-19 education and training development has been set by key partners. However it has not yet achieved a significant improvement in outcomes for all young people. There is insufficient inclusion of employers and work-based learning providers at all levels. Many young people aged 14 to 16 are beginning to benefit from a broader curriculum. The provision of post-16 education and training is generally satisfactory. The proportion of young people continuing in education or training after the age of 16 is above the national average although it declines significantly at age 17. There are improving trends in most achievement rates for learners aged 16 to 19 in schools, colleges and work-based learning. There are insufficient levels of suitable housing to meet the needs of all young people. Young people who are looked after participate well in employment, education and training. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is adequate for those with low level needs, but limited for those with complex or profound needs with seriously challenging behaviour.

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 Northamptonshire County Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 9 - 20 January 2006.
- 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.