

Environmental Services and Sustainability

Harlow District Council

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from 'The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services' (July 2003).

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Harlow Council delivers a 'fair', one-star environment service; prospects for improvement are excellent.
- 2 Over the past three years, the standard of the Council's environment services has been variable and costs high. However, significant improvements have been made and the Council has developed plans and invested in capacity. These will deliver further improvements to services and value for money.
- 3 The Council's top corporate priority is 'A clean, safe, sustainable environment', and the Council has made a range of recent service improvements in support of this aim. Streets and open spaces are now well maintained and generally kept free from litter, graffiti and fly-tipping. The Council has successfully promoted biodiversity and established three new nature reserves.
- 4 Access to Council services is good, and services are delivered in a way that meets the needs of most users. For example, although there is a kerbside waste collection service, a doorstep service operates for local people who are infirm or have restricted mobility. A kerbside recycling service is now provided to 100 per cent of households.
- 5 The Council has successfully promoted waste minimisation by providing home composters, textile and furniture reuse schemes, and other measures. The amount of waste collected from households has been consistently low.
- 6 Despite significant improvements over the past three years, the percentage recycled or composted was only 16 per cent in 2004/05, which was in the worst 25 per cent of councils.
- 7 The Council has taken action to promote a more responsible approach to the environment through a sustained and thoughtful campaign under the 'Together We Can' banner. Working with local residents and traders, intensive clean-ups have been carried out in 22 neighbourhoods. In addition, there is a proactive enforcement team working to deter 'enviro-crime' such as littering and dog fouling.
- 8 Value for money has not been consistently achieved. There are high unit costs and public satisfaction is below average. The existing contract for waste collection is not providing value for money. The Council does not have unit cost data for its services except for the national best value indicator for waste collection. The Council makes limited use of comparative information for costs of services provided.
- 9 Satisfaction with services has been low for street cleaning and waste collection but high for recycling. Many of the service improvements are too recent to have an impact on published satisfaction rates but there has been positive recent feedback from local people, particularly regarding the neighbourhood clean-ups.

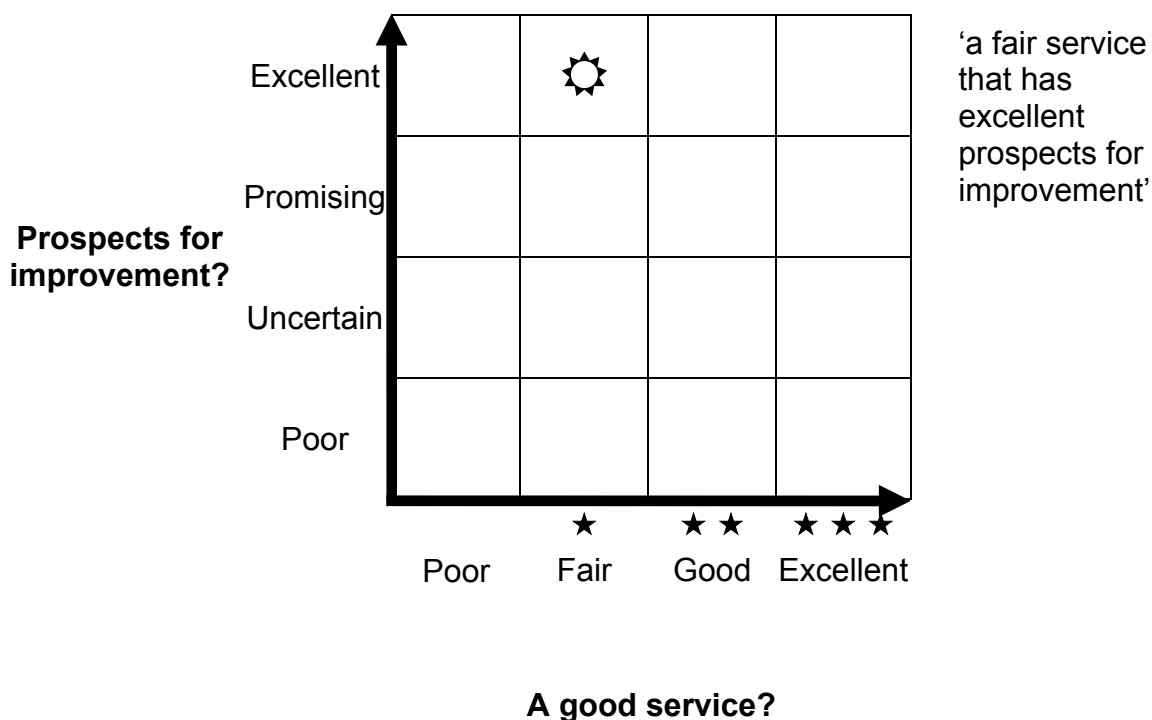
- 10 The service has excellent prospects for improvement. It has demonstrated a track record of local environmental improvement and has invested in plans and capacity for the future. Recent service improvements, such as the introduction of night-time sweeping, have resulted in cleaner streets and better value for money. Corporate improvements, such as the new Civic Centre and Contact Harlow, have improved access to the service. The Council is more actively managing performance of the service, for example, by using complaints and customer comments to target street cleaning services in identified hotspot areas. Consequently, service outcomes are improving.
- 11 There is strong leadership and support for the Council's priorities for environment improvement. Councillors and senior officers are open and accessible to staff and seek to continually improve services.
- 12 The Council is addressing key value for money issues. It is forming a joint venture company (JVCo) which will provide a range of services, including street cleaning. The contract includes good practice requirements, such as outcome specifications and continuous improvement requirements, as well as requiring bidders to set out proposals to improve cost-effectiveness. The company is planned to be established by the end of 2006 and offers prospects for significant improvement in service outcomes and value for money. The Council has recently re-negotiated a two-year extension of the waste collection contract from 2007. A range of value-for-money improvements have been agreed, including a recycling target of 25 per cent by 2008/09 and benefits amounting to approximately 3.5 per cent of the annual contract value.
- 13 The Council is undertaking work to improve its understanding of value for money as well as improve value for money. For example, the JVCo requires efficiency targets as well as performance improvement targets in key outcomes. Recent work has also been undertaken to investigate a more cost-effective solution for waste collection.
- 14 The Council has recently improved its performance management arrangements. This includes improved performance monitoring and review mechanisms as well as an improved approach to target setting, with more recent realistic targets set. Service planning arrangements have improved and the Council has begun to learn from other organisations. For example, composting of leaf sweepings was introduced following a visit to another council.
- 15 The Council is achieving the aims it set for 2005/06. The direction of travel of key (unaudited) environment performance indicators in 2005/06 is positive. Recycling and composting of waste has increased from 10 per cent in 2002/03 to a projected 19 per cent for 2005/06 and the Council has exceeded its statutory recycling standard. The amount of household waste collected per head of population has recently decreased and, in 2004/05, performance was in the best 25 per cent when compared to other councils. The number of missed refuse collections is good with a current average of approximately 15 per month. The Council has considerably stepped-up its efforts to reduce environmental crime and has recently issued over 100 fixed penalty notices, mainly for littering and dog fouling offences.

- 16 The Council has improved its capacity to deliver service improvements. Funding has been identified to deliver service improvements relevant to the Council's top priority. This includes additional funding of £150,000 for street cleaning and £80,000 for recycling expansion, as well as £60,000 capital for a new street sweeping vehicle.
- 17 Historically, there has been limited investment and development of the workforce. However, over the past two years, new service managers have been recruited and changes are apparent. The Council is currently undertaking actions to improve sickness-absence levels amongst operations staff. The joint venture company will also be required to commit to the development of staff.
- 18 The Council works well in partnership with others to improve its capacity. For example, the Council has secured £1 million funding for a range of green spaces projects in partnership with the Countryside Agency and the Groundwork Trust, and a further £2 million grant to continue these projects.
- 19 There is a range of complementary action planning mechanisms in place to improve services. For example, a cross-service litter group exists, and has resulted in improved communication between community services and operations service staff.

Scoring the service

- 20 We have assessed Harlow District Council as providing a 'fair', service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



- 21 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- streets and open spaces are generally well maintained and kept free from litter, graffiti and fly-tipping;
 - access to services and service delivery meet the needs of most users;
 - waste recycling rates have improved and waste minimisation policies are been effective;
 - a high-profile 'Together We Can' campaign is helping to improve the street scene; and
 - street cleaning costs are low.

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

22 However:

- there is inconsistent understanding of the meaning of sustainable environment in terms of the Council's priority;
- waste collection costs are high;
- comparative performance for recycling and composting (2004/05) is in the worst 25 per cent of councils;
- resident satisfaction in a number of services has been low; and
- there is inadequate understanding of value for money;

23 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- a number of recent service improvements are in place and delivering clear outcomes:
- the new management structure is providing good leadership;
- there are clear short-term plans and medium-term priorities for improvement;
- performance management arrangements have improved;
- the Joint Venture Company offers opportunities for further service and value for money improvements;
- capacity to deliver priorities has been enhanced; and
- good partnership working is evident.

24 However:

- The approach to obtain the step change improvement required to reach the upper quartile recycling target is yet to be fully appraised and planned.

Recommendations

- 25 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that Harlow District Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Develop a robust options appraisal and business case for the waste management contract for 2009 to inform future procurement decisions and to include consideration of:

- *integration of waste and street cleaning;*
- *value for money;*
- *integrated waste management strategy;*
- *recycling and waste minimisation targets; and*
- *future growth of Harlow.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater integration of waste collection with other street scene services;
- enhanced communication for all street scene services;
- continuous improvements in value for money; and
- improved partnership working with the private sector.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 December 2007.

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

Recommendation

R2 Develop a full understanding of the value for money provided by services to include:

- *comparative unit costs data;*
- *comparative performance data;*
- *comparative quality information; and*
- *cost to quality analysis.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- full understanding of the value for money provided by services; and
- improved targeting of actions to improve value for money to areas most in need of this improvement action; and
- improved value for money of services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 December 2006.

Report

Context

The locality

- 26 Harlow is a small, compact town in West Essex. Built in the 1950s onwards as one of the post-war new towns, it is a planned town based on a series of principles including the co-location of employment and residential developments; green 'wedges' that run along the lower-lying areas into the heart of the town; and a hierarchy of local amenities, such as shopping and leisure, linked to the neighbourhoods.
- 27 Harlow's population is around 78,000, with 21 per cent under 16 and 15 per cent aged 65 or over. The proportion of over 75s in Harlow is expected to grow by a third over the next ten years. Eight per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities. The area has a diverse local economy with several major companies located in the town with a strong research and development focus.
- 28 The town experiences relatively high levels of deprivation; the fifth highest in the East of England region and the second highest in Essex. The level of unemployment in Harlow is 2.2 per cent and there are low levels of educational achievement with 28 per cent of the population having basic skills needs in literacy and 31 per cent in numeracy.
- 29 Harlow's housing stock was mainly constructed between 1950 and 1980. It includes high density dwellings and often experimentally-designed housing. The Council is the largest property owner and as a percentage of all the housing in the town, Harlow has the second highest proportion of council housing in England. The main form of occupancy in Harlow is owner-occupation, which makes up approximately 60 per cent of all housing. Council housing makes up just over 30 per cent, and Housing Association and private rented sector make up the remainder. Harlow is now over 50 years old and faces the challenge of other new towns. It has an infrastructure all built around the same time, and which is starting to deteriorate. This presents significant challenges for regeneration and environmental quality.
- 30 Harlow is identified for major future growth. The draft East of England development plan sets out a vision for the major regeneration of Harlow as a sub regional centre in the Stansted and M11 area. This includes the construction of 20,000 new homes by 2021, though not all within the Harlow boundary. A new employment area to the north of the town is to proposed, with a total of 40,000 jobs being created across the whole region.

The Council

- 31 Following boundary changes in 2001, the number of councillors was reduced from 42 to 33. A third of the Council's seats are up for election in three years out of four. There is no overall political control, with a joint administration formed between Labour (11 seats) and Liberal Democrats (10 seats). The Conservatives (12 seats) form the opposition. The Council operates a 'Fourth Option' committee-based political management structure.
- 32 There are three policy committees: Housing, Environment and Community, and Policy and Resources. The Preview and Best Value committee covers the overview and scrutiny function. There are regulatory committees for Standards, Planning and Licensing.
- 33 The organisational structure consists of the Chief Executive, three Strategic Directors, two with responsibilities for areas of Customer Services, Housing, Human Resources and Regulation, Community Services, Finance, Legal and Democratic Services and Regeneration. A third, Interim Director leads development of the Council's Joint Venture Company. Heads of Service have been streamlined reducing from 22 to 10. A dedicated CPA Change Manager has been appointed using Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) capacity funding. The Council employs an average of 806 FTE staff.
- 34 During the financial year 2005/06 the Council will spend around £26.4 million (gross) on housing and £54 million (gross) on all other services. The Capital budget for 2005/06 is £16.4 million. The average band D property in Harlow draws Council Tax of £1,304.01 for 2005/06, with Harlow's proportion being £224.37.

The Council's environmental services

- 35 The environmental services are mostly provided by in-house staff in the Operations, Regulatory and Community services departments.
- 36 The waste and recycling collection service is provided by Veolia (formerly Onyx) under a contract won in open competitive tender in 2002. Waste is collected weekly, in black sacks. Glass, cans, plastic, paper, and cardboard are collected from the kerbside, mixed, every fortnight.
- 37 The operations and waste contract staff are located at the Riverside depot, near the County Council's civic amenity site. Other staff are located at the Civic Centre.

National context

- 38 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, 'Securing the Future' 2005. Indeed, many local authorities are at the forefront of efforts to achieve greater social, economic and environmental sustainability. District councils are expected to use their powers as planning, housing and waste collection authorities, as well as their general wellbeing powers and community leadership, to achieve sustainable development. This includes working with others to promote energy conservation and efficiency, protect wildlife habits and promote biodiversity, reduce and mitigate climate change, and promote more sustainable patterns of development.
- 39 The Government has promoted the 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.
- 40 Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) gives a local authority power to deal with litter-based problems affecting its area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach and specific levels of cleanliness for various environments. Under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act, an authority has the power to issue a notice to a private landowner to clean up their land and to undertake the cleaning itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 has strengthened councils' legal powers for keeping the area clean.
- 41 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to reduce the amount of waste that is collected and to encourage more recycling. The Government is currently consulting on setting councils a recycling standard of up to 30 per cent by 2007/08. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.
- 42 The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduces a number of changes to the development system including the replacement of structure and local plans with a local development framework, and requires a local development scheme which sets out a work programme for the local development framework to be adopted by 2010.
- 43 Promoting biodiversity is an objective of the UK sustainable development strategy. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are of particular importance. Section 28G of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) states that public bodies must 'take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, to further the conservation and enhancement of SSSI'. The Government's Public Service Agreement target is for 95 per cent of SSSI land to be in 'favourable' or 'recovering' condition by 2010.

- 44 Reducing energy consumption and promoting use of energy from renewable sources is important for reducing fuel poverty and climate change. There are specific legal and policy commitments for national and local governments, including:
- Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 – this requires local housing authorities to promote energy efficiency in the local housing stock (public and private), with a target of 30 per cent improvement by 2010;
 - Kyoto Protocol – The UK is committed to a 12.5 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2008 to 2012;
 - UK-wide targets – the UK government has itself set a target of reducing carbon emissions by 20 per cent from 1990 levels by 2010 with the ultimate goal of achieving a 60 per cent reduction by 2050 (Energy White Paper and UK Climate Change Programme); and
 - UK Renewables Obligation – a target has been set for 10 per cent of all electricity generated in the UK to be from renewable sources by 2010.

Inspection scope

- 45 The scope for this inspection includes the following services:
- waste management, including refuse collection, waste minimisation and recycling;
 - Street Scene - street cleaning, fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti, grass verge maintenance and street furniture,
 - Planning Outcomes and Building Control (environment aspects only);
 - Natural Environment; and
 - environmental sustainability.
- 46 The relevant period of assessment is the past three years, March 2003 to March 2006. In reaching its judgments, the inspection team has placed emphasis on recent priorities, the current quality of service and the current direction of travel.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 47 Over recent years the Council has consistently stated the high priority that it places on the environment and the need to improve its environmental services.
- 48 The Council's Statement of Intent (2003) had eight corporate aims, including the aim 'to make the environment clean, safe and sustainable'. The aims were supported by objectives, including to:
- maintain and improve the quality of our environment and the sustainability of our lifestyles; and
 - improve the appearance of the street scene and enforce legislation in respect of litter and dumped rubbish, dog fouling and abandoned vehicles.
- 49 This Statement of Intent was replaced by the Corporate Plans of 2005 and 2006. These stated that the Council's top priority is 'A clean, safe, sustainable environment'. Some additional details are provided in the Street Scene Action Plan, appended to the Corporate Plan.
- 50 The Council's top priority (A clean, safe and sustainable environment) is widely publicised and known by staff. Councillors, managers and other staff show a commitment and enthusiasm for the priority. However, there are widespread differences amongst officers and councillors in the interpretation of a 'sustainable environment'.
- 51 The main activities to deliver these priorities are:
- improving street cleaning;
 - tackling anti-social behaviour;
 - improving recycling;
 - to increase the biodiversity of the town's natural landscape; and
 - to reduce the cost of collection of refuse relative to similar authorities.
- 52 These are underpinned by the following targets:
- 55 per cent of the public very or fairly satisfied with cleanliness of the local environment by the end of 2005/06 (and no more than 3 per cent of Council land to have unacceptable levels of litter and detritus by 2007/08);
 - 100 per cent of the intermediate level of the local authority's contribution to the local biodiversity action plan process (no date);
 - 18 per cent of waste recycled from domestic waste collection by 2005/06 (and 20 per cent by 2007/08); and
 - to reduce the cost of refuse collection to below the median level for district councils (no date).

- 53 The Government set the Council a statutory recycling and composting performance standard of 10 per cent for 2003/04 and 18 per cent for 2005/06.
- 54 In the Council's Best Value Performance Plan for 2004/05, the Council set itself targets for all environment BVPIs for that year, including:
- recycling and composting - 14 per cent and 1 per cent respectively;
 - quantity of waste collected per head of population - 333 kgs;
 - cost of waste collection per household - £42.24;
 - population served by a kerbside collection of recyclables - 100 per cent;
 - land having unacceptable levels of litter or detritus - 0 per cent
 - homes built on previously developed land - 45 per cent;
 - environmental health checklist - 90 per cent;
 - energy efficiency (SAP rating) of council housing - 69 (on scale of 1 to 120).
- 55 The Council has deposited a second draft local plan. This sets out ten aims which include sustainable development, and sub aims such as the best use of resources, and reduction of greenhouse gasses. Other aims include the natural environment, with sub aims of protecting and enhancing natural resources and sustaining the character of the green belt and green wedges. A further aim for the built environment includes a high quality environment and ensuring new development is of a high standard.

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

- 56 Given the priority that the Council has placed on the environment in successive corporate policy documents over the past few years, it has been slow to achieve success and it still compares unfavourably with other councils in some important respects. The quality of the Council's environmental services has changed considerably over the past year or so with notable improvement in some areas, in line with the Council's top priority. Environment service standards have risen and services have become more responsive to the needs and views of local people. However, this has not yet been sufficient to raise levels of satisfaction throughout the local community and service users.

Access, customer care and diversity

- 57 Access to the Council's environmental services is good but with some exceptions. The Civic Centre and Contact Harlow (the Council's customer contact centre) is open 8.30-5.30 Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings. A single telephone number is advertised for Contact Harlow which handles all customer contacts, a high percentage of which are about environmental services, such as refuse and recycling. The performance of Contact Harlow is closely monitored and managed and adjusted to meet public demands. Monitoring demonstrates high levels of public satisfaction with the way in which calls are handled. Leaflets on environmental services are available in the reception area of the Civic Centre.

18 Environmental Services and Sustainability | How good is the service?

- 58 Access to Council services at the Civic Centre is excellent but restricted at many other Council buildings. Overall, only 9 per cent of Council buildings are accessible to people with disabilities. Most members of the public who contact the Council in person do so at the Civic Centre. This is a modern building with good access for people with disabilities and staff are trained in a range of customer care techniques, including basic signing. It is located in the town centre, with good access by car and bus. However, access for people with disabilities elsewhere is poor and the Council has not met its own targets to improve access.
- 59 The Council provides adequate access to core environment services. There are two green recycling sites at Latton Bush and Harlow pool car park, and, until very recently, there was a restricted green waste collection service for vulnerable residents. This has recently changed to include all residents. There are recycling sites within 11 wards of the area. In addition, there is a 'heavy squad' who collect bulky household items.
- 60 The coverage of environmental services on the Council's website is inconsistent with some areas inadequately covered. The website has been recently redesigned but has yet to be adequately populated with environmental services information. For example, there is good information about local nature reserves but there is no information about waste collection. Information about air quality is not specific to Harlow and the Environmental Health page simply provides some contact addresses.
- 61 The Council has put the public at the heart of its priority setting process. Over the past two years the Council has undertaken a series of major public consultation exercises on its corporate priorities. The 'clean, safe and sustainable environment' top priority resulted from this process. In addition, focus groups have been held prior to the 'Together We Can' clean up campaign and afterwards to obtain feedback to improve services in line with community comments. As a result, the Council can be confident that it is addressing issues that are of the highest priority to the majority of local people.
- 62 The Council recently agreed service standards for most environmental services. Agreed service standards did not exist for important areas, and those that do are not easily accessible to the public. By way of contrast, the Council does publish standards for its housing repairs service and leaflets are available in the Civic Centre. There are service standards for aspects of planning, building control and environmental health and the response times for some services are available to Contact Harlow staff. The recent Customer Service and Access Strategy sets out a range of corporate service standards. The result of the historical lack of service standards is that the public is unclear about the level of service it can expect to receive.
- 63 The Council is engaging with local people to develop aspects of the service. It has undertaken effective consultation to develop street cleaning service and the maintenance of trees is now undertaken in consultation with local residents. User feedback is now used to improve service outcomes. For example, a responsive sweeping service has been put in place to clear glass from cycle-paths when reported by local cyclists.

- 64 The approach to diversity is not sufficiently systematic or developed. The Council has recently developed a draft Race Equality Scheme and Corporate Equality Policy. It has achieved only Level 1 on the Equalities Standard and environmental services are not at the forefront. The planning service has undertaken an initial equalities assessment, required for the local development framework; other environment service areas have yet to make a start. There are examples of positive actions, such as recent meetings with members of the Chinese and Indian restaurant trade, which were well attended. The environmental health service has risk-assessed enforcement activity against the requirements of the Human Rights Act. And young people have been involved in local environmental issues through the Harlow Youth Council. There is also some recognition of diverse needs in the waste service. People who are unable to place their refuse at the edge of their property can apply for an assisted waste collection service. Overall, however, the service has yet to address diversity needs thoroughly.
- 65 There is good working on environmental services across departments. For example, Rainbow (a charitable organisation part-funded by Community Services) collects reusable furniture and redistributes it to those on low incomes. Rainbow also provides employment in its workshops for ex-offenders, through the Essex Probation Service. These arrangements benefit both the environment and vulnerable local people.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 66 The outcomes for users and the community are reported below, using the three elements of the Council's environment priority (clean, safe and sustainable) as sub-headings. Over the past two years the Council has focused effort and resources on street cleaning, and although areas of serious littering remain, the Council has achieved a good standard of cleanliness. Flytipping is removed quickly and a media campaign to improve resident awareness of actions to improve cleanliness is in place. Enforcement against enviro-crime has improved, although it is not yet comprehensive. Community safety services target town centre activities to improve standards of safety and cleanliness. The Council has also undertaken considerable work to meet its sustainable environment aim with a kerbside recycling system in place, improved levels of recycling and waste collected is comparatively low. The Council has supported higher quality building development with new housing built to higher environmental standards, and the energy efficiency of the local housing stock has improved. Focused work has been undertaken to improve the appearance of local shopping facilities. The Council has also successfully promoted biodiversity and created three new local nature reserves. However, the local site of specific scientific interest is not adequately protected. Despite a number of service improvements, residents remain concerned about the levels of litter and enviro-crime. Latest available comparative data (2003/04) shows satisfaction with street cleansing and refuse collection services in the worst 25 per cent of Councils.

A clean environment

- 67 The Council has focused attention and resources on street cleaning to good effect over the past two years. The Council has set very demanding targets. Although it has not met the numerical targets, it has improved the cleanliness of the streets and public areas and the standard of cleanliness is generally good, but at a considerable ongoing effort. (The actual standard cannot be ascertained because although monitoring was carried out, there were flaws in the Council's method and the results were qualified.) High priority has been given to the cleaning the town centre. More recently, intensive clean-ups have been carried out involving support from local people and other agencies in 19 of the neighbourhood hatches. Feedback from local residents is very positive and complimentary. Despite more regular sweeping and the local clean ups, there remain areas where litter, refuse and fly-tipping is a serious and recurring problem.
- 68 Fly-tipping on highways and public land is cleared quickly, on average within one working day. The Council reduced the average time taken to clear fly-tipping from 0.9 days in 2003/04 to 0.6 days in 2004/05. However, the benefit and cost effectiveness of improving performance from an already high level of service is unclear in this particular case. It is noted that in 2005/06 performance has since decreased to an approximate average of 0.9 days.
- 69 The Council has taken action, in partnership with local people and other agencies, to reduce littering and encourage a more responsible approach to the environment. It has used various media, including the local newspaper and bus advertising, to present a sustained and thoughtful campaign, under the 'Together we can' strap line.
- 70 Enforcement against littering is in place and improving but is not yet comprehensive. There is considerable frustration amongst the public and staff at the way in which areas that have been cleaned can soon become littered again. There is demand for more effective enforcement action. The Council has started to take enforcement action against littering and dog fouling. In 2004/05 it issued 19 litter and two dog fouling Fixed Penalty Notices. None were issued for fly-posting or graffiti and none in previous years. The Council has taken enforcement action against noise nuisance using different powers: in 2004/05 it obtained 13 convictions for breach of abatement notice in cases of noise nuisance. The Council has now increased enforcement activity and issued an approximate further 80 Fixed Penalty Notices in 2005/06. In view of the serious litter problems this is positive but until recently has not been enough.
- 71 The refuse collection service is not sufficiently integrated with other street scene services, giving rise to some practical problems. The rate of missed collections appears to be low, at an approximate average of only 15 per month. However, the method of collection (black sacks and open containers for recyclables) often results in litter being left on the street. There are tensions at operational level between the refuse contractor and the Council which manages the contract and is responsible for street cleaning.

- 72 Despite the recent improvements in street cleaning, overall satisfaction by residents with standards of cleanliness and refuse collection are low - both were worst 25 per cent in 2003/04 and worse than in 2000/01. A survey in 2005 found a small improvement in satisfaction with litter. (The 2005 survey did not ask about refuse collection.) There has been dissatisfaction as a result of the change in 2002 from doorstep refuse collection to edge of property collection arrangements. Despite this being almost four years ago, there are still some problems with the new arrangements. For example, some residents refuse to put their waste at the kerbside and there is a lack of clarity over the eligibility criteria for doorstep collection.

A safe environment

- 73 This inspection addresses safety issues in terms of their impact on the environment. It is not an inspection of the full scope of the Council's community safety services.
- 74 Community safety services are contributing effectively towards making Harlow's street scene cleaner as well as safer. Tackling 'enviro-crime' (street scene issues, such as graffiti and fly-tipping) is addressed by the Anti-Social Behaviour and Fear of Crime groups within the Harlow Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. Community safety activities, particularly in the town centre, are seen as crucial to improving standards of safety and cleanliness. For example, the Council has put resources into managing late-night taxi-customer queues to reduce litter, vandalism and other undesirable behaviour that would impact on the street scene.
- 75 The environment and community safety services work closely and effectively. Some functions, such as enforcement of litter offences, are dealt with by the Community Services instead of Regulation, as would be more typical. This has encouraged good inter-departmental working, strengthened by the Council's inter-departmental Litter Group.
- 76 Residents are concerned about levels of litter, graffiti, vandalism and abandoned vehicles. The national Quality of Life surveys in 2003/04 found that Harlow residents were in the highest 25 per cent of districts, in terms of their concerns about these issues. However, a number of recent service improvements have been made.
- 77 The Council is also tackling other safety issues of importance to the public. For example, it has worked with the restaurant trade to improve standards of food hygiene. Its environmental health service scores highly (100 per cent - best 25 per cent) against a checklist of good practice.

A sustainable environment

- 78 The rate of recycling has improved significantly over the past few years and the Council has met its 2003/04 statutory target. However, standards have risen across the country and the percentage recycled or composted was only 16 per cent in 2004/05 so it remains in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils.

- 79** The Council has focused on minimising waste collected, with success, and the amount of waste collected per head is low, in the best 25 per cent. The Council has promoted home composting and promoted textile and furniture reuse schemes. It has been reluctant to introduce a comprehensive green waste collection service, in order to minimise waste collected and to keep garden waste out of the waste stream. A comprehensive analysis of the composition of waste in west Essex shows that garden waste is lower than average in Harlow. However, other types of putrescible (organic) waste, such as vegetable peeling and cooked food waste, are high - over 30 per cent of residual collected household waste. These could be composted, given the correct facilities. The Council does not have a suitable set of indicators to show how its particular mix of recycling and waste minimisation will achieve its objectives and meet the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) requirements.
- 80** Kerbside recycling facilities are now reported to be provided to 100 per cent of residents and residents' satisfaction with recycling facilities is high. However, participation in recycling is around only 55 per cent.
- 81** The Council's planning and building control services have provided effective support for the new housing to be built to higher environmental standards. The New Hall housing development, currently under construction, has been supported by the Council's regulatory services. The Council has demonstrated a high level of corporate commitment to New Hall. The innovative designs which incorporate high standards of environmental sustainability (Eco-homes Excellent) have been encouraged by the Council's masterplan and the building control officers who have also provided a flexible and professional approval service. The Council's planning service scores well (89 per cent - best 25 per cent) against checklists of good practice.
- 82** The Council has enabled high quality development in the area known as 'Town Centre South'. This £60 million redevelopment was completed in 2004 and includes a new retail area known as the water gardens with a large water enclosure. It also includes the site of the new civic centre, where the Council is now based in a modern building. Further developments include a new bus station and market stalls space.
- 83** Recent environmental improvement work has been undertaken to improve 19 neighbourhood shopping centres and hatches.³ This includes implementing regular sweeping and graffiti removal; a one-off pavement scrub in front of shops; repairs to pavements, bins and seats and chewing gum removal, along with winter bedding in some existing planters. This work is helping to promote local shops, minimise travel for local residents and help those with limited mobility.

³ Harlow's smaller neighbourhood centres are called hatches.

- 84 The Council has successfully promoted biodiversity. It adopted a biodiversity strategy in early 2003 and has implemented a number of projects which have protected and increased the local flora and fauna. It has also helped to foster greater ownership and involvement on the part of local people. These include an innovative approach to meadow management, significantly increasing the acreage of long grass. This was recognised in Green Apple award. It recently established three new local nature reserves. This has increased the protection for wildlife in these sites and is delivering biodiversity gains. Also 100 per cent of river length is assessed as good biological and chemical quality.
- 85 Despite this generally good approach to biodiversity, it remains the case that, until recently, the Council has failed to provide adequate protection or management of the local site of special scientific interest (SSSI). SSSI are designated in order to give them the highest level of protection. English Nature classified 100 per cent of acreage of the SSSI in Harlow (Harlow Woods) as being in unfavourable condition in March 2005. Harlow Woods SSSI includes Parndon Wood, Hospital and Ridsen Woods, all owned by the Council. It has been damaged by illegal vehicle use (motorcycles and quad-bikes) and deer grazing. The Council has now eliminated the vehicle problem but has yet to complete deer protection. The outcome is that biodiversity is reduced as regeneration of trees, such as Hornbeams, is endangered and will take some years to recover.
- 86 Good progress has been made with improving the energy efficiency of the local housing stock: a 3.27 per cent improvement in the year 2004/05 and 19 per cent since 1996. The energy efficiency of council housing is in the top 25 per cent. This has been achieved by significant investment (£2.6 million in 2004/05) in new central heating boilers, double glazing and loft insulation and promotion of energy efficiency. The Council works with Essex EEAC and has drawn on ECC and Warmfront funds to tackle energy efficiency and fuel poverty. This improves the comfort of homes for local people, reduces fuel bills and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.
- 87 The Council is delivering its top priority of a sustainable environment with respect to its property management. The new Civic Centre is naturally ventilated and designed to be highly energy and water efficient; it is actively managed to achieve this. All Council properties are fitted with low energy bulbs and the CO² emissions are calculated for each building.
- 88 The Council has promoted sustainable travel for staff in the Civic Centre. It has encouraged car sharing and cycling, drawing on the support of staff groups, such as the bicycle user group. However, it has not set clear objectives or monitored outcomes and does not have an active travel plan.

- 89 The following table illustrates current and previous performance for environmental services from a range of best value indicators, and demonstrates performance achieved in these to be variable. Performance has improved for recycling, and there is high satisfaction with recycling facilities, and all residents are now considered to have access to kerbside recycling service. Nevertheless recycling and composting performance when compared to other councils is in the worst 25 per cent. The amount of waste collected is increasing, but still compares well to other authorities. However, the cost of waste collection is high, and resident satisfaction is in the worst 25 per cent when compared to other councils. The indicator for the cleanliness of streets has been qualified for two successive years, and resident satisfaction is in the worst 25 per cent when compared to other councils. The working practices for environmental health and planning services demonstrates good performance and in the best 25 per cent. However, the percentage of new homes built on previously developed land is in the worst 25 per cent.

Indicator	Result 2002/03 and quartile position	Result 2003/04 and quartile position	Result 2004/05 and quartile position	Projected result 2005/06
BVPI 82a&b Percentage of household waste recycled or composted	10% **	14% *	16% *	19%
BVPI 91 Percentage of population served by a kerbside collection of recyclables	88% **	95% ***	98% ***	100%
BVPI 90b Resident satisfaction with recycling facilities (adjusted for deprivation)	78% (2000/1 data) ***	84% ****	Not collected	Not collected
BVPI 84 Kg of waste collected per head	350 ****	361 ****	379 ****	371
BVPI 86 Cost of waste collection per household	£41.42 *	£46.42 *	£47.48 **	£55.02
BVPI 90a Resident satisfaction with waste collection	81% (2000/1 data) *	75% *	Not collected	Not collected
BVPI 199 Percentage of land significantly littered	Not collected	3% (qualified)	8% (qualified)	11%
BVPI 89 Resident satisfaction with standards of cleanliness	53% (2000/1 data) *	52% *		53% (Council NOP survey)
BVPI 119 Resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces	77% (2000/1 data) ****	74% ***		69% (Council NOP survey)
BVPI 166a Score against a checklist of environmental health best practice	75% **	100% ****	100% ****	100%
BVPI 63 Energy efficiency of council housing (SAP rating)	67 ****	68 ****	63 ***	64
BVPI 205 Quality of service checklist for planning			89% ****	100%
BVPI 106 Percentage of new homes built on previously developed land	23% *	12% *	13% *	84%
Percentage of derelict brownfield land			8% (2004) **	??

Note comparison is with all relevant councils in England. Key to quartile (25 per cent positions) is as follows:
 * = worst 25 per cent; ** = third 25 per cent; *** = second 25 per cent; **** = best 25 per cent.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 90** The overall value for money provided by environmental services is unclear. Procurement gains to date are weak, with the waste collection contract not providing value for money. The Council works well in partnership, including the voluntary sector, to improve value for money. There is good evidence of the consideration of priorities and resourcing to target key service improvements. The Council generally lacks accurate comparative unit cost information and has not benchmarked unit costs related to performance. It does not have or report cost-to-performance information. It, therefore, does not understand the value for money provided by its environmental services.
- 91** Waste management is not providing value for money. Waste collection costs in 2004/05 were £47.48, in the second highest 25 per cent when compared to single tier and district councils. Performance is comparatively weak with actual recycling rates in the worst 25 per cent, and low resident satisfaction with waste collection, although satisfaction with recycling facilities is higher and in the best 25 per cent.
- 92** There are some operational issues with the management of the waste collection contract which demonstrate that value for money is not being obtained. Some of these are to do with the collection systems selected by the Council and others are to do with contract management and co-ordination. For example, we observed a recycling collection round where shredded paper was blown by the wind and the operative could not reasonably be expected to clear up all the paper. It is also noted that 10 per cent of litter complaints follow a recycling round. There are also problems regarding interpretation of the collection arrangements and lines of authority. The Council is currently investigating this issue, and until resolved will not be able to secure value for money and this issue consequently impacts on the street cleaning service.
- 93** The Council does not fully consider value for money when considering charges. For example, the Council has, until recently, provided a restricted but free green waste collection service for residents on low income or those with disabilities. There has been a subsequent decision to provide collection of green waste to all residents free of charge. However, the costs of undertaking this, and the possible revenue that can be obtained from introducing charging for this service, has not been assessed. Consequently, the Council has not fully considered the value for money it could obtain from introducing charges for this service, which is a missed opportunity.
- 94** The Council's approach to procurement is mixed. The Council is demonstrating a number of good practice principles in the establishment of a Joint Venture Company (JVCo) which includes the use of outcome specifications and continuous improvement. This will impact on key environmental services such as street cleaning when the JVCo is established around the end of 2006. A recent procurement strategy has also been developed. However, many of the actions in place have not been achieved to target. For example, there is no corporate guidance for the inclusion of continuous improvement incentives in contracts.

- 95 There are some innovative examples of partnership work with voluntary sector organisations which provide good value for money. The Council has worked with local partners such as a local environment co-operative known as the Environmental Conservation Co-operative (ECCO) to ensure a cost-effective re-use scheme for bulky items. This includes quarterly kerbside collection of textiles and bulky items.
- 96 The Council considers the impact of its policies and priorities for funding. Last year the Council revised its spending plans based on the 'Simalto' exercise. This included public consultation on funding options for a range of services. As a result, priority savings of £1.24 million were identified, and a number of services were cut or ceased, such as a swimming pool. However, priority growth items included an additional £25,000 for street cleaning and a further £80,000 was made available for recycling expansion. The Council has ensured adequate funding for its key priorities.
- 97 The Council is improving its awareness of value for money issues and has recently implemented a range of actions to improve. Examples cited include cost-quality reviews and business process re-engineering undertaken in a range of specific service areas. However, this work has had little impact on Environmental services. Whilst business process re-engineering is cited to have been undertaken for planning services it is also stated that the review found that little or no improvements can be made. Until the Council has a comprehensive knowledge of cost, quality and performance issues, it will be unable to clearly target effective action to improve.
- 98 The Council is an effective partner and has worked with partners to develop capacity and so secure improved value for money. In partnership with EEDA and English Partnerships £100,000 was obtained to deliver a strategy for town centre north to balance the regeneration initiative that has taken place to the south. Through the ODPM, growth area funding of £1.5 million was secured for research projects in the Harlow area on a landscape and environmental study, master planning principles and sustainable criteria, Transportation Study and Regeneration Strategy. These studies were produced through a technical team, with a range of partners. In addition, £1 million was secured from the Green Space funds for environmental projects and Green Infrastructure Study, Chaired by Countryside Agency and hosted by Harlow Council. The Gateway regeneration partnership scheme has also attracted £11 million ODPM funding.
- 99 There has historically been limited investment and development of the workforce. The Council acknowledges that it has an ageing skilled workforce and the Council recruited experienced people rather than offer development and training opportunities for staff. Some staff state that there is little training offered to develop skills in areas such as HGV and road sweeper vehicle driving. Furthermore, some gaps have been identified for middle management skill needs which are yet to be addressed, such as strategic management skills for operations middle managers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 100 Over the last year the Council has focused on implementing service changes to improve outcomes for the people of Harlow. The direction of travel of key environment performance indicators is positive and feedback from the public has been complimentary.. The Council has undertaken innovative community engagement work with a citizenship project to reduce environmental crime, and has introduced service improvements, such as night-time sweeping, which have helped to improve street cleanliness. There is focused activity to improve the cleanliness of litter hotspot areas such, as local shopping areas, and actions to reduce graffiti. Furthermore, value for money for aspects of the street scene is improving with more efficient working practices. Waste recycling is increasing and the Council has exceeded its statutory recycling targets. There is an improving focus on obtaining greater value for money benefits through the recent re-negotiation of the waste collection contract. Feedback from residents on clean-ups and other initiatives has been complimentary although the service improvements are too recent to have a full impact on resident perception. Overall, outcomes for service users are improving.
- 101 Effective service changes are demonstrating improving environment outcomes. Following the agreement of the Council's top priority, 'A clean, safe and sustainable environment', in 2005 street scene activities gained a higher profile and a number of service changes have been made. This includes the 'Together We Can' initiative with targeted action improve the cleanliness of local shopping areas ('hatches'), including graffiti and gum removal, as well as improvements in the cleaning of subways, cycleways and major cleaning of 20 estates. The Council introduced a kerbside recycling collection service in 2004 and the fabric of the town centre has been improved through planning outcomes. A number of recent service improvements include composting of leaf-fall and the introduction of night-time sweeping. These changes have resulted in improved cleanliness and increased levels of recycling.
- 102 The Council has considerably improved access to the service for the public. The new Civic Centre building and Contact Harlow have made services more accessible to a wider range of local people. The Civic Centre is centrally located and has good access for people with disabilities. The Saturday-morning opening is an improvement, making it possible for people to contact the service outside 'normal' working hours. Challenging service standards are being met and satisfaction is high.

- 103** The Council has made tangible improvements to the environment of Harlow. User experience demonstrates recent improvements. For example, residents noted improvements to the cleanliness of the hatches. Partners report that the Council acts to improve the built and natural environment and has created three new nature reserves over the last three years. The Council won a Green Apple award for conservation in November 2004 for innovation in promoting biodiversity in Harlow. Residents thought that the town park and recycling service was good and there was less graffiti.
- 104** The direction of travel of some key (unaudited) environment performance indicators in 2005/06 is positive. Recycling and composting of waste has increased from 13 per cent in 2003/04 to a projected 19 per cent for 2005/06 and the Council has exceeded its statutory recycling targets. The number of kilograms of household waste collected per head of population has consistently been in the lowest (best) 25 per cent of councils and decreased in 2005/06. The total number of missed bins is good with a current average of approximately 15 per month. The Council is also working to reduce environmental crime. For example, to date over 100 fixed penalty notices have been issued mainly for littering, and 9 dog owners received notices for dog fouling offences.
- 105** The Council has undertaken innovative community engagement work with young people to reduce environmental crime. This includes the citizenship project where a small group of six children who were starting to exhibit anti-social behaviour attended a 12-week course with objectives that included recognising the impact of anti-social behaviour on the environment. Activities included removing graffiti. After the programme it is reported that four of the six children's behaviour at school improved. The linking of street scene and community safety activities, such as managing late-night taxi-queues, is also having a positive impact on cleanliness.
- 106** The Council is achieving the aims it set for 2005/06. Most of the performance indicator targets it has set for 2005/06 for its top priority are being met or exceeded (as demonstrated by unaudited performance information). This is in contrast to achievement of earlier priorities, where a significant proportion of performance targets were not met.
- 107** The value for money provided by some key service elements is improving through analysis of activities and performance. Action to improve efficiency includes the composting of leaf-fall, and the replacing with grass of unsightly shrub beds that trap litter. Night-time sweeping was introduced in 2005 and has enabled more rapid cleaning of main roads due to reduced traffic. The Council has also provided refuse vehicles in fixed points around the town to enable residents to dispose of bulky items.

30 Environmental Services and Sustainability | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 108 The Council is addressing key service costs. It has renegotiated the waste collection contract, reduced the escalation element and obtained service improvements. Since 2002 the Council has contracted its waste collection service, and the cost of waste collection per household increased from £41.42 in 2002/03 to £47.48 in 2004/05. This is above average cost when compared to single tier and district councils. It is linked to the Baxter index. However, this represents a 14.6 per cent increase over that period compared to an average increase of approximately 22.5 per cent for most district councils. The recycling rate increased by 6 per cent over the same period compared to an average increase of 8 per cent for councils in the lowest or median 25 per cent. Costs are currently projected to increase to £55.02 for 2005/06. The contract was due to expire in 2007 and the Council recently re-negotiated a two-year contract extension. This includes a new cost escalation methodology with the estimated rate of cost escalation decreasing from a 12 per cent increase in the last year of the current contract to 5 per cent annual increase in the contract extension. This is a positive development and will provide improved value for money.
- 109 The Council's track record on improving recycling and waste minimisation is effective. The amount of waste collected per head of population has consistently been in the lowest (best) 25 per cent of councils and decreased in 2005/06. In 2005/6, unaudited figures demonstrate that recycling increased by nearly 3 per cent, whilst the actual amount of waste collected decreased by 2.1 per cent. This demonstrates the recent impact of service improvements. Waste collected was increasing faster than waste recycled until 2004/05. Recycling of green waste has been low at about 1 per cent in 2004/05, and reflects the Council's decision to have a green waste collection service only for those residents unable to use the civic amenity and to encourage home composting. A recent decision to extend the green waste collection service to all resident should result in improved composting rates but may also increase the overall tonnage of waste collected. This aspect of the waste strategy is unclear.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 110 Effective performance management arrangements are emerging as a result of recent improvement work. Leadership on environmental services is strong. The Council has improved the prioritisation of what environmental services is seeking to deliver. The approach to medium-term planning has developed through the impending implementation of the joint venture company. There are examples of recent active performance management. Target setting and the approach to service planning is improving with clear actions. The Council continues to improve its performance management arrangements and new systems are currently being implemented. The Council is developing its approach to community engagement. The approach to learning has improved with a clear internal process and examples of external learning applied to improve services. The JVCo is on track to be in place by the end of the year and has targets for future service and value for money improvements. There are a number of improvements currently being actioned. This includes the implementation of team planning, and ongoing work to improve the organisation's understanding of, and actions to improve, value for money. The Council's target for waste recycling

indicates its intention to achieve a step change in performance, although the contract requirements and collection methodology are yet to be finalised.

- 111** There is effective senior officer and councillor leadership on environmental services. Heads of Service (most appointed within the last year) as well as corporate directors and councillors demonstrated an understanding of and support for the Council's priorities for environment improvements. There is strong senior management capacity and cross-cutting mechanisms in place to ensure this capacity is effectively utilised. For example, the recovery planning process has a number of improvement programmes in place led by heads of service and there are regular heads of service meetings with the corporate management team. There is staff commitment to service improvement. Staff stated that communication has improved through regular newsletters and team briefings. Staff morale is good and the Council is regarded as a 'more positive place' to work. Senior managers are regarded as open and accessible by staff. There are regular newsletters in place to inform affected staff of developments in the JVCo implementation. Consequently, the Council has reduced the concerns that staff have and is effectively implementing key service changes.
- 112** The Council's top corporate priority of a clean, safe and sustainable environment is reflected in service plans and the phase 2 recovery plan has an action plan to improve the street scene. Service planning objectives such as 'improve the public's satisfaction with street cleaning in the town' and improve on the statutory target for recycling clearly match the ambitious and customer-facing outcome targets set out in the corporate plan for the medium-term. These targets for 2009/10 include to be in the best 25 per cent nationally for public satisfaction with the cleanliness of the local environment as well as to be in the best 25 per cent for domestic recycling. The Services have clear aims aligned to corporate priorities. This provides the focus required for future service improvement. Quarterly performance reporting provides a summary of progress against corporate plan targets. It also contains a summary of service plan actions. However, the reporting of service plan actions is not explicitly referenced to priorities. Until this is in place it will not be fully clear how more detailed service actions are progressing priorities.
- 113** Recent actions to improve the environment demonstrate the use of proactive performance management. For example, the Council has analysed feedback from complaints, litter requests and BV199 analysis to re-profile the service and introduce a night-time road-sweeping service. The effectiveness of this introduction has been evaluated. This analysis demonstrated that, before the introduction of night sweeping, 42 areas had unacceptable levels of litter or detritus (below grade b). After introduction of the night sweeper this was reduced to eight areas. In addition, the wider street cleaning service is currently being re-profiled to have more intensive sweeping in areas that have poor survey results and higher complaints. Consequently, active performance management is resulting in improved service delivery.

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- 114 Service and recovery plans for the street scene demonstrate a range of actions that will improve outcomes to the community. For example there are actions in place to reduce landfill by the composting of street sweepings, and the re-provision of recycling facilities for flats to increase recycling, reduce theft of recycling bins and contamination of waste. In addition, there is a £1 million capital programme in place to rationalise and improve playground provision in open spaces. A maintenance regime is also planned to be implemented to increase the percentage of land to hay meadow. A programme for future estate cleaning based on the recent pilot exercise has been agreed. The service planning process has improved and the emerging service plans for 2006/07 demonstrate a range of good practice considerations with a SWOT and PESTLE analysis (tools to examine the strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats to the services as well as the political, economic, social technological, legal and environmental factors) to help inform the position of the service. There are also action plans with resourcing considerations, as well as a risk assessment log.
- 115 Plans focus on the key areas required for improvement. For example, the Council has developed a customer satisfaction action plan which has a range of actions, including promotional activities and communication developments, such as the distribution of an information pack for the 'together we can clean up our town' initiative. In addition, the Council has recently agreed a range of service standards for environmental operations. This and the further planned actions will help to address the historically low customer satisfaction results for some environment services.
- 116 The Council is improving its focus on diversity and has established several key plans. It has adopted a corporate race equality scheme, a corporate equality policy and an action plan. This will be applied to environmental services. The Council has undertaken work to further improve the achievement of the equality standard for local government and expects to demonstrate achievement of Equalities Standard level 2 for 2005/06.
- 117 Performance management arrangements are improving. In 2004/05 the Council introduced a quarterly corporate performance monitoring process that includes all key indicators and has a traffic light system to indicate whether performance is on target. The corporate process also requires action planning when particular performance indicators are not on target. The quarterly reports are reviewed by both the corporate management board and a councillor budget and performance working group established in 2004. The use of the balanced scorecard for performance monitoring and review is being introduced at a corporate level and the operations service is also piloting the balanced scorecard as a mechanism to monitor performance and develop action planning. Consequently, the corporate approach to performance monitoring and review is now more effective.

- 118** Key performance management requirements at a service level are in place. Action to ensure data accuracy of BV199 (the indicator that measures street cleanliness) has been recently implemented with ENCAMS training for staff. There are monthly officer meetings within service areas where performance information is discussed and progress on action planning. For example, all regulatory services staff discuss individual work plans, and operational services undertook a review of street cleaning issues in order to identify actions to improve. In addition, there are processes in place to monitor the performance of the waste collection contract including monthly officer meetings and quarterly board meetings. The board minutes demonstrate consideration of performance issues and actions to investigate, such as littering complaints that follow the recycling crew in the area. There is detailed monthly reporting of national and local performance measures by operations services which measure the impact of improvement work such as the average time taken to remove graffiti using clear graphs. Customer contact standards are carefully monitored, against challenging service levels. In addition, a detailed recent 'mystery shopping' exercise has been undertaken to independently assess and improve the experience of people with Contact Harlow.
- 119** The Council has recently improved its approach to target setting. There have been past weaknesses in target setting, with targets not fully considering the impact of actions in place. For example, the target to remove abandoned vehicles was 10 per cent within 24 hours compared to a projected performance of over 88 per cent for 2005/06. In addition, the target for no planning decisions to be overturned by appeal was not achievable. However, target setting has recently improved with training undertaken and targets set out in the recent service plans demonstrate consideration of actions and resourcing in place, and consequently the target for BV199 has been recently adjusted. Minutes from an operations management team meeting demonstrated discussion and consideration of service planning and target setting.
- 120** The Council has an internal learning process, and has begun to learn from external organisations. The Council's project management processes for recovery planning include a 'lesson learned' summary on closedown of key projects which is distributed to the recovery working group. The Council has also recently contacted a major supplier of wheeled bins to seek advice on how to develop recycling in flat blocks. Examples of learning at a service level include leaf-fall composting and the introduction of static beats following a visit to the London Borough of Barnet. Council officers are receptive to learning and will be monitoring the progress of Epping Forest District Council's implementation of alternative weekly collections, which is seen as a possible future step to be undertaken by the Council to improve recycling rates. This learning will help ensure future service improvements are effectively implemented.

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- 121 The Council's approach to managing key risks for the JVCo is effective. The implementation of the JVCo has significant risks, and these are being effectively considered by the Council through its project management arrangements. This includes a log of risks and mitigating actions. Outstanding issues are considered and addressed through monthly highlight reporting. Risks are also reduced through the use of external expertise (for example the use of external consultants in the development of the contract conditions and for the legal considerations). Consequently, the JVCo is on track to be in place by the end of the year and is planned to deliver significant performance benefits.
- 122 The Council has negotiated a number of improvements to the refuse collection contract. This includes recycling projects for blocks of flats, and a vehicle maintenance agreement which splits the costs between the contractor and the Council. Other improvements include work to understand customer satisfaction and reduce complaints as well as developing the performance management arrangements. These improvements should contribute to improving value for money, with direct costed benefits worth 3.5 per cent of the total annual contract value.
- 123 The Council has recently implemented a service level agreement process for grant aided organisations which is designed to improve the value for money obtained. There is now a five-stage process with key objectives and targets developed for every substantial service level agreement using the balanced scorecard methodology. Funding of service level agreements is paid in two six-monthly instalments. A monitoring and evaluation process includes six monthly reports and the second funding payment is not made unless satisfactory performance is obtained.
- 124 The Council has only recently articulated its new approach to community engagement and this is yet to be fully implemented. However, a clear corporate communications and consultation strategy has been developed. The Council is in the process of implementing the strategy which has a more focused approach and includes neighbourhood forums to discuss key issues. Although the use of consultation in service development is not clearly set out in service plans, there are examples of recent action being undertaken. This includes the re-design of the street cleaning service which is partly based on feedback received. The citizen project is also planned to be undertaken again, and a pilot street scene champion programme is in planned where children aged 11 to 13 are encouraged to report incidents of environmental crime such as graffiti in exchange for credits which can be exchanged for gift tokens. The Council plans to have an 'Environment week' for the town in June as well as begin publishing its own newsletter for residents. In addition, the 'together we can clean up our town initiative' is publicised in the local newspaper, and has received a range of positive feedback from service users. Consequently, improvements in community engagement are beginning to demonstrate user support for key Council initiatives.

- 125** A medium-term focus has developed. The Council also engages positively in the development of the joint municipal waste management strategy for Essex, which provides a longer-term improvement focus for waste management. Priority activities in the corporate plan are at a very high level (eg 'Improve Street Cleaning'). The JVCo is planned to deliver continuous improvement to achieve short and medium-term targets in key outcomes and efficiencies for the street scene. The extension of the refuse contract with the current contractor also provides includes improvement targets until 2009.
- 126** Team planning is in development. There has historically been a lack of team planning in services such as community, customer and operations services, although there is generally work in place to develop team planning in the near future. Furthermore the staff personal performance plan (PPP) process, whilst in place for some time, has only recently been systematically implemented. For example street cleaning staff reported receiving their first group staff appraisal last year. Nevertheless, staff are positive about the PPP process as a mechanism for agreeing some targets and for development needs. Most environment staff have a PPP in place. The Council plans to undertake further improvements to the PPP process over the coming year to more explicitly focus on performance management.
- 127** Work is in place to improve those aspects of the service where performance management arrangements are not yet fully developed.. The community safety unit is currently recruiting a technical officer whose role will include developing a performance management system, as this is acknowledged as an area for development. Similarly there are plans to improve self-awareness of street cleaning performance and operative accountability, for example by requiring some staff to complete monitoring sheets. Furthermore, scarab mechanical cleaners have been recently fitted with tracking devices to provide management information including productivity data. The Council is also implementing a new corporate performance management system which will help embed performance management arrangements in the future.
- 128** The Council has improved its understanding of, and actions to improve, value for money. This includes establishing and comparing unit costs for the operations services, and a number of ideas such as the greater use of pool vehicles to reduce transport fleet costs. In addition, the Council is participating in a business modelling scheme (KAT) the purpose of which is to evaluate options in relation to waste collection specifications and methodologies in order to deliver the most cost effective system for Harlow. The JVCo is seen as a key vehicle to deliver future improvements in value for money. In this respect it is clear from the ITN that the specification for the contract includes outcome specifications to improve performance and a performance payment mechanism which includes consideration of efficiency proposals. This is good practice.

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- 129 The current arrangements for refuse collection limit the recycling performance that can be achieved. The Council believes the most it can expect in recycling performance from the current collection system is approximately 25 per cent by 2008/09. Its strategy is to increase participation levels so that the majority of residents will be receptive to more ambitious systems in 2009. New collection arrangements are likely to be introduced in 2009 to mesh with the county waste strategy to enable a step change in performance. The Operations service plan includes some positive and innovative short-term proposals for diverting waste but medium to long-term plans for targeted promotion, putrescible waste and waste minimisation are dependent on the outcomes of the county waste strategy.
- 130 Information systems for human resource (HR) management are currently not supplying sufficient detail of key staffing capacity issues. For example, vacancy rates for services are not known corporately and neither are figures for temporary agency staff. HR staff are working to develop the systems in place.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 131 The Council has improved its capacity to deliver service improvements. Funding for its top priority has been identified to achieve key targets. The Council works with partners to enhance its capacity to deliver outcomes for service users with £1 million ODPM grant obtained for green spaces projects. It works with voluntary sector organisations to enhance its capacity to deliver services. A recent procurement strategy and action plan has been developed and the Council is entering into a strategic procurement partnership with a joint venture company to improve street scene services. There is a range of complementary action planning mechanisms and the recovery planning process has resulted in a number of improved building blocks. There are a number of staffing issues to resolve. There has historically been limited development and investment in the workforce. Sickness absence levels for operations service are comparatively high, and there is a high number of temporary staff in some service areas. In this respect, the Council has engaged in partnership arrangement with Essex County Council in order to strengthen its human resource capacity and management.
- 132 The Council has identified funding for its top priority. The medium-term financial strategy sets out a commitment to resource priorities, and this is being implemented. For example, in 2005/06 the Council identified £80,000 for recycling expansion, £30,000 for environmental health and £25,000 for street cleaning. An additional £150,000 has been identified for continuing street cleaning improvements in 2006/07 such as extra cleaning of housing estates and shopping hatches. In addition, funding of £30,000 for an additional community safety officer in 2006/07 is in place. Capital investments for 2006/07 include £60,000 capital provided for a new mechanical sweeper, £15,000 for a recycling publicity trailer, and £15,000 for new dog waste bins. This demonstrates that the Council is committed to ensuring progress in achieving its top priority.

- 133** The Council is securing funding improvements to achieve its targets. For example, the street cleaning services has invested in a new vehicle to implement the planned improvements to the street scene. The Council has also obtained agreement of the waste collection contractor to share the costs of the purchase of new vehicles.
- 134** A number of detailed studies have been carried out that enhance the Council's capacity to cope with the substantial housing growth that is planned. These include the green space study, transport landscape and environmental study, master planning principles and sustainable criteria, and the transportation and regeneration study.
- 135** The Council is working in partnership to deliver enhanced outcomes for service users. For example, partnerships are in place with the Countryside agency and Groundwork trust to deliver £1 million of green spaces projects after a successful bid for funding from the ODPM. The Council is an active partner and is also working with English Partnerships and the EEDA to deliver a Town Centre North strategy. CAFE Space is providing additional capacity to deliver the Green strategy. (Harlow is seen as one of CAFE's top national priorities, with substantial potential.) Partners are generally positive about the contribution made by the Council to progressing shared priorities although some would like a clearer involvement and commitment at senior officer or councillor level. This partnership working has enhanced the council's capacity to deliver improvements and the planned housing and employment growth.
- 136** The Council works well with voluntary sector organisations to improve the services available to users and the general environment. This includes the Harlow Biodiversity partnership, which has resulted in the creation of three new nature reserves. ECCO, which provides a waste minimisation and environmental education service, including the text-BAC project, a quarterly kerbside collection service for textiles and bric-a-brac in Harlow. Another voluntary organisation, Rainbow, repair and renovate donated furniture as well as building a range of items of garden furniture and equipment using recycled materials, such as reclaimed wood. The organisation also facilitates the re-use of donated items of furniture, clothing and household linens to families and individuals living on a low income. The Council part-funds these organisations, who also receive funding from other sources such as the big lottery fund. This provides a cost-effective way of delivering additional environmental services.
- 137** The Council has invested £1 million to improve playground facilities. This is a rationalisation process to provide fewer but better play facilities, with a programme to decommission and renovate playground provision and is currently 50 per cent completed.
- 138** There are some examples of innovative management to improve services. The allotment service enables self-management and autonomy of 18 of the 35 allotment sites in partnership with the Harlow Allotment association. The Council also uses Suffolk Punch shire horses to mow meadows as part of its management approach and promotion of biodiversity.

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- 139 The Council utilised external expertise to develop the Town Park. Harvard students produced a series of landscape proposals. These ideas have formed the basis of the proposals, which are currently being taken forward by landscape architects. They are producing Town Park Master Plan to provide framework for improvements in the park to be enabled by future developments.
- 140 The Council is demonstrating the strategic use of procurement to further improve its capacity for continuous improvement. The Council is currently undertaking a JVCo to enhance its capacity to improve key services. This is an ambitious project the scope of which includes a large range of environmental services and others such as housing repairs, although not waste collection. The vision is to have a long-term partnership with a private sector supplier to improve service provision and outcomes. This is a complex procurement and consequently the Council has utilised advice from external consultants in the development of the contract conditions and to consider legal issues. If managed well, this procurement offers considerable potential to improve outcomes and to provide additional capacity for the enlargement of Harlow.
- 141 The Council is now identifying and meeting the training needs of most staff and the needs of the organisation. Most staff report that training needs are met via the PPP process. Furthermore, staff morale is high and staff want to improve service performance. ENCAMS training has been undertaken to improve the robustness of the data collected for indicator BV199. There is a general perception by staff that communication and management arrangements have improved. Consequently, staff are motivated and positive about working for the Council and demonstrate commitment to service improvement.
- 142 Core ICT systems are in place to support environmental services, although these are not fully integrated. IT systems in the operations service basic but reliable. However, there is planned development work and an initiative to allow picture messaging and reporting of issues such as graffiti and abandoned vehicles has been recently implemented. A new content management system and refreshed internet site was launched at the end of January, and there are plans to launch an interactive website by the end of 2006. The Council has a customer contact centre known as 'Contact Harlow'. This is delivering a high standard of customer access and information, as demonstrated by customer satisfaction data. However, it is not automatically linked to other customer systems, such as those for waste management. The customer relationship management (CRM) system was procured in 2001 and the Council intends to procure a more flexible CRM system in 2007/08.

- 143** There is a range of complementary action planning mechanisms to improve corporate and service capacity. The Council's recovery planning process has resulted in the development of seven improvement strategies and associated action planning such as project and programme management, community engagement and communication, customer service and access. Some PRINCE2 principles have been effectively used to achieve the outcomes. This work has resulted in strategies and action plans the progress of which is to be reported to the service performance and improvement team. Progress has been achieved in all areas, for example, the development of a procurement strategy and associated action plan as well as a community engagement and communication strategy. A cross-departmental litter group exists to enhance service improvement and cross-departmental working, and for example, communication between community safety and street cleaning has improved as a result with feedback passed to operatives.
- 144** The use of wider procurement to meet environment objectives is not clear, although there is some planned work to progress this issue. A recent procurement strategy and associated action planning is in place. Whilst this includes Gershon efficiency targets, other performance indicators and targets are yet to be developed. There has been a considerable delay in meeting some of the targets of the procurement action plan. For example, the Council's approach and success in reviewing environmental purchasing principles and setting appropriate targets (originally targeted for July 2005) is not yet completed, although there is a revised target to do so by August 2006. Other actions envisaged include future consideration of whole life costing and sustainability issues. The use of 'green' procurement (for example from electricity contract) is not apparent.
- 145** The Council is acting to improve staff capacity. This includes developing the operational team leading skills of operations staff, with a number achieving a level two certificate in team leading (which is accredited to the institute for leadership and development). Furthermore training for staff has been undertaken in some key areas such as sickness management, handling difficult situations, motivation and performance management. The Council is seeking to secure the future development of staff through the JVCo, as it requires interested parties to set out proposals on how training needs will be met.
- 146** High sickness absence rates reduce the capacity of environmental services. The Council has recently engaged in a partnership arrangement with Essex County Council, for the delivery of human resource management. This has improved the Council's capacity to implement the JVCo. However, sickness absence rates for operations services is high when compared to the rest of the Council at 13.1 days in the 2005 calendar year, compared to an average of about 9.6 days for all Council services. The sickness absence policy is considered to be an area for development and review by key HR staff, and recent work to improve sickness absence rates at the Mead Park depot has been undertaken with the appointment of a temporary HR consultant to focus on reducing sickness absence rates at the depot.

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- 147** The high number of temporary staffing in some services may not deliver full value for money. There is a high number of temporary staff reported in some areas such as planning and environmental health. This is in part due to recruitment difficulties, and whilst the services have the capacity to progress priorities, it is unclear whether full value for money is being obtained from this approach. There is no use of market supplements to attract and retain staff.