

Service Inspection Report

August 2006



Environment

Watford Borough Council

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

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

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

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

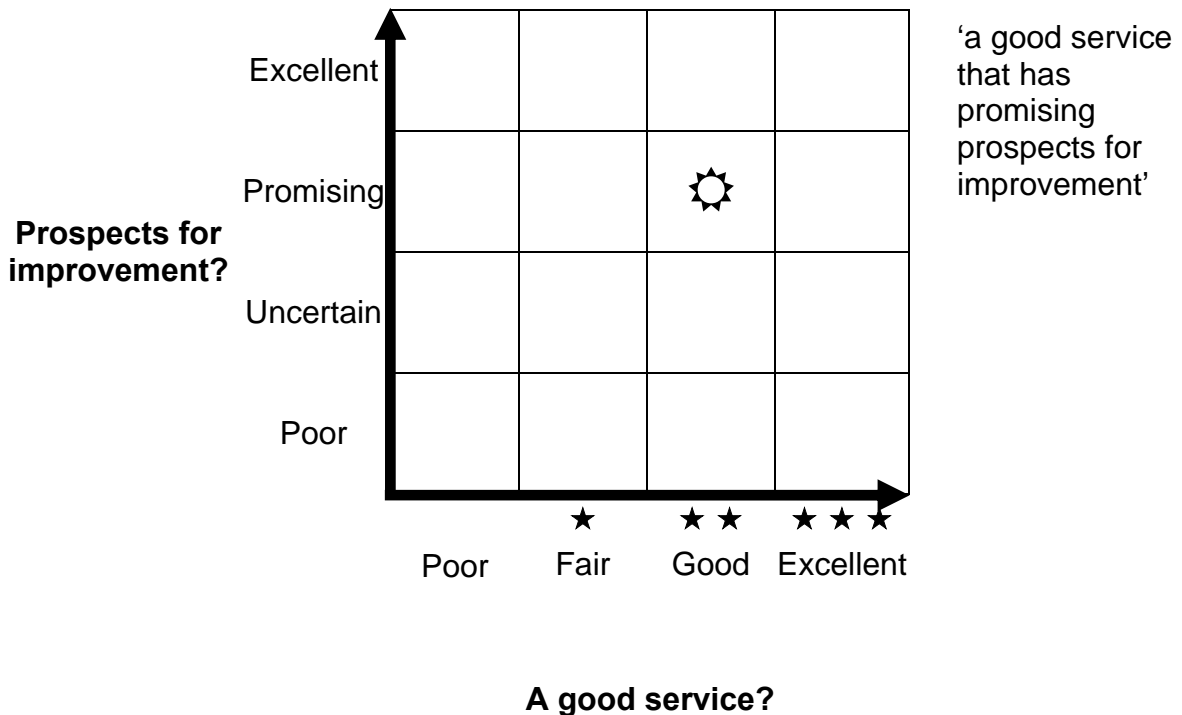
Summary

- 1 Watford's Environment Service is good, with promising prospects for improvement. The inspection in June 2006 covered street cleansing, refuse collections and recycling, and included licensing and community safety issues where these related to the street scene.
- 2 The Council is keeping the streets clean and successfully tackling the problems of graffiti and fly-posting. A recent combined operation with the police resulted in 41 of the most high profile graffiti taggers being caught and the levels of graffiti and fly-posting reducing by 75 per cent. It has introduced a comprehensive and flexible recycling scheme which offers kerbside collections of paper, glass, cans and plastic bottles for recycling, as well as taking garden waste, kitchen waste and cardboard for composting. This has resulted in an increase in recycling and composting, to 37 per cent of the total domestic waste collected, and a reduction of 14.5 per cent in the amount of household waste sent to landfill. Public satisfaction with the service is improving.
- 3 In national comparisons for 2004/05 Watford was above the median for the cleanliness of its streets, and has improved its performance in 2005/06. It collected less waste per head of population than the average, although the amount collected rose in 2005/06.
- 4 However, service costs are high. The Council has given priority to investing in service improvement and recognises that in the short-term the consequence is high service cost. However, it is committed to reducing the cost of this service over the coming years. It now has the information and systems it needs to analyse and tackle these high costs and is seeking comparative data to fully understand why their costs are higher than other councils.
- 5 The Council has a 'can do' culture and has plans in place to continue its impressive improvements in this service. The Environmental Service has built up a strong track record of delivering improvement in all areas of service delivery. It has done this by making the service a priority, supported from the top of the organisation. They have learnt from other councils and refined what they have learnt. In several cases, notably licensing and tackling anti-social behaviour, council staff are now recognised as regional and national leaders. The Council works well with its statutory partners and has engaged the public in the clean, green and safe agenda.
- 6 The Council is now starting to refine its approach and tackle its known weaknesses. It has not been systematic in its collection, analysis and use of data to develop the service. Also, actions and targets have not always been clearly prioritised.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Watford Borough Council as providing a 'good', two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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

8 This is a good, two-star service because:

- the Council works effectively against anti-social behaviour in partnership with the police;
- the streets are predominantly free from litter and detritus;
- graffiti is no longer a major problem in the town;
- the Council uses its enforcement powers to enhance the street scene;
- there is a comprehensive and flexible recycling scheme in place;
- the Council has exceeded its government set target of 30 per cent for recycling; and
- it has significantly reduced the amount of waste going to landfill.

9 However:

- service costs are high;
- some customers are not getting the message about what they can and can't recycle; and
- the Council has not been systematically monitoring the success of its initiatives such as its support for the real nappy campaign and assisted bin collections.

10 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a strong track record of delivering improvement in this service area;
- there is capacity within the current recycling scheme for significant expansion;
- the successful approach taken on graffiti and fly-posting is now going to be focused on the problem of litter, with a team of street enforcement officers; and
- there is targeted investment in the service, both from within and outside the Council.

11 However:

- the Council needs to make hard choices to guarantee future reductions in costs of waste collection and recycling;
- the Council still has work to do to help engender a greater sense of civic pride about the appearance of the borough; and
- the Council is still not consistently living its own message on recycling.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Further improve the service through a better understanding of value for money by:

- *negotiating a new performance-based collective agreement for waste and recycling staff;*
- *benchmarking costs with neighbouring authorities;*
- *undertaking a cost benefit analysis of further improvements to the service, including a review of the trade waste service; and*
- *working with service users to set service standards and contribute to the monitoring of performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved focus on the cost/benefit of services; and
- an overall improvement in the value for money of the services provided.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented incrementally, and completed by June 2007.

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

Recommendation

R2 Enhance community involvement to deliver a cleaner, greener, safer Watford by:

- *developing a more joined up approach to consultation, communication and customer service, to promote waste minimisation, encourage involvement and feedback and demonstrate that problems which residents see as important are being addressed;*
- *re-launching clean, green safe funding for community-based projects;*
- *creating a more positive public understanding of enforcement, by the creation and public dissemination of a new Council-wide approach; and*
- *using expertise in other services to help target hard-to-reach groups to ensure all of Watford's communities have equal access to the service and to specialised schemes, such as assisted collections.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- enhanced civic pride across the borough, with a greater sense of community involvement in policy-making and delivery;
- a greater understanding of what enforcement action will be taken and why and when; and
- improved customer satisfaction, with specific actions having being targeted at specific local resident priorities.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Watford is a densely populated borough covering an area of 21 square kilometres with a population of 79,300. It lies to the north of London, inside the M25, in the county of Hertfordshire. The availability of road and rail links and its geographical position has led to high levels of commuting. Unemployment levels are higher than the average for Hertfordshire, 2 per cent compared with 1.4 per cent, but lower than the national average of 2.3 per cent.
- 14 Eighty per cent of the jobs in the borough are in the service sector, although many of these jobs are done by people from outside the borough. Over 28,000 people who work in Watford live outside the borough. Of the 41,000 Watford residents in employment, more than half work outside borough. The town is also a regional centre for shopping and nightlife. As a result, many of the people who use the facilities of Watford are non-residents. The lively night time economy of the town centre presents the Council with challenges not faced by many other similar sized towns.
- 15 There is a significant ethnic minority community in Watford, with nearly 21 per cent of the population classifying themselves as being other than white and British and 14 per cent as black and minority ethnic. This compares to a national average of 13 per cent and 7.9 per cent. The largest ethnic minority group is Pakistani (4.7 per cent in the 2001 Census).
- 16 Levels of educational attainment among the residents of Watford are consistently above regional and national averages. Three-quarters of residents of working age have qualifications at NVQ1 and above. Although 12 per cent of residents have no qualifications at all this is lower than the East of England average and the average for England and Wales as a whole (27.9 and 29.1 per cent respectively).
- 17 Deprivation levels are generally low, although there are pockets of deprivation, with five of the ten most deprived smaller areas in Hertfordshire being within Watford. When broken down into different types of deprivation, two areas in Watford are within the 10 per cent most deprived in the country for high levels of crime within the crime domain.
- 18 There are around 34,695 homes in Watford, with 80 per cent in private ownership. The town's expansion in the nineteenth century with the development of the railways has left a legacy of traditional terraced streets. There are 5,000 council houses, and the Council will shortly be balloting its tenants about future arrangements.

The Council

- 19 The Council has had a Liberal Democrat administration since 2002. Prior to this the Council was in Labour control. There are 28 Liberal Democrat councillors, three Conservatives, one Labour, one Independent and three from the Green Party. The directly elected Mayor, also a Liberal Democrat, won her second term in office in May 2006. The Council has a Cabinet system of government. The Cabinet is made up of the Mayor, four portfolio holders and one member without portfolio.
- 20 The Council is managed by the Corporate Management Board, made up of the Managing Director, two Corporate Directors, the Director of Finance and the Council's Monitoring Officer (the Head of Legal and Democratic Services). They are supported by a management team made up of a further nine heads of service, including the Head of Environmental Services.
- 21 In May 2004, the Audit Commission published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of Watford Borough Council. This assessment categorised the Council as 'weak'. A CPA progress assessment by the Audit Commission in 2005 reported that the Council was progressing well in priority areas and taking effective action to deliver future improvement.
- 22 The Council's net revenue base budget for 2006/07 is £15.27 million, the Housing Revenue Account expenditure is budgeted at £18.4 million and programmed capital expenditure for the next three years is £37.6 million.

The Council's environmental services

- 23 The Council's environmental services department has six elements; street cleansing, waste and recycling, community safety, licensing, environmental health and depot and fleet services. These services were brought together in January 2006 in recognition of the close correlation between the successful delivery of a cleaner environment with the enforcement and community safety agenda, making the link between crime and grime. It also united the services in the 'cleaner, safer, greener' block of the Local Authority Agreement (LAA) recently concluded between Hertfordshire and the Government Office for the region. These services are primarily provided by directly employed council staff.
- 24 The Council chairs the regional Streetcare sub-group and plays a leading role in the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership. A published waste strategy is in place for the whole of Hertfordshire. This strategy is being reviewed in the light of national and local changes to the waste environment.
- 25 This inspection has looked the streetscene services of street cleansing, waste and recycling, community safety and licensing.

National context

- 26 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to reduce the amount of waste that is collected and to encourage more recycling. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.

- 27** 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 cleansing itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2003 has strengthened councils' legislative powers for keeping the area clean.
- 28** The Licensing Act of 2003 has given local councils the responsibility for alcohol licensing, previously dealt with by the magistrates' court. The Act has four objectives which councils must promote when carrying out its' licensing functions. These are the prevention of crime and disorder, public safety, the prevention of public nuisance and the protection of children from harm.
- 29** The Government has promoted the Cleaner, Safer, Greener agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 30** Environmental services are a long-term priority of the Council's. 'Cleaner and brighter streets and public spaces' was a pledge in the mayors manifesto from 2002. The Council's vision, shared with One Watford, the local strategic partnership, is 'a town to be proud of, where people will always choose to live, work and visit'. Within its medium-term plan the Council has prioritised 'cleaner, greener streets, public spaces and environment' for 2006 to 2008 to support its longer term objective of 'a town with a high-quality environment.
- 31** The views of local residents are at the heart of policymaking. Consultation has demonstrated that cleaner streets are a high priority. A MORI survey in 2004 found that clean streets were seen as important to the local quality of life by 58 per cent of respondents, second only to low crime. The same survey showed that 50 per cent of people thought that street cleanliness needed improving locally and 45 per cent thought the level of crime needed local improvement. A safer town is also one of the Council's seven long-term objectives.
- 32** The medium-term plan for 2006 to 2011 makes clear that the five functional work areas of the service directly respond to customer needs as encapsulated in the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Plan and in corporate priorities. The service unit plans for 2006/07 directly cascade from the corporate plan, making a clear link between the service objectives and the Council's corporate vision and objectives. Each of the 31 medium-term objectives are categorised according to both the Community Plan and the Council's corporate priorities, and are cross-referenced to other regional strategies as appropriate, such as the Hertfordshire Waste Strategy.
- 33** A county-wide waste strategy is in place. The strategy, which covers the whole of Hertfordshire and all its district councils, is currently under review in the light of national and local changes to the way waste needs to be dealt with in the future. Almost all of the goals set by the original strategy relating to waste collection, recycling and education have now been met by most of the Hertfordshire councils.
- 34** The service has specific aims to contribute to the achievement of the Council's vision. These include extending and promoting recycling services, addressing waste minimisation, further Environment Action Zones, delivering a carbon management strategy and implementing the Community Safety Strategy. Specific targets set for 2005/06 were to increase the percentage of household waste recycled from 25 per cent to 31 per cent, reduce the amount of waste collected by 2.46 per cent, to undertake a door knocking campaign across the borough to encourage recycling, and to improve the proportion of land and highways with unacceptable levels of litter and detritus from 15 per cent to 13 per cent.

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

Access, customer care and user focus

- 35** The Council has established a clear and responsive link between residents' views and needs and the policy-making process. The corporate consultation strategy is both ambitious and comprehensive. Environmental Services have embedded a thorough process of consultation with residents for the introduction of all new schemes and policies. The recycling scheme was introduced after wide consultation. Area committees were used to shape the revision to street cleansing. The identification, through consultation, of public concern about abandoned vehicles has led to more action to tackle the problem.
- 36** The Council is successfully engaging residents in environmental issues. There are some good arrangements for engaging residents, both corporately and for this service. Corporately there is the 'About Watford' quarterly newspaper, supplemented by documents such as the Forward Plan, the Council's website, and quarterly area newsletters which highlight neighbourhood news. The Council's Communication department is working well with Environmental Services to get media messages out. Service information is available on the Council's website, and there is a clear and easily understood recycling leaflet plus other specific advice and guidance. The Council's support for the Watford Recycling Arts Project (WRAP) is taking the message to a wider audience.
- 37** The Council recognises that it still has some issues around consultation and engagement. Feeding back to consultees and the general public about the impact of consultation on council policies is less effective than the initial consultation. Some Local Area Committees are not as effective as others and some residents feel that outcomes are decided before the consultation is undertaken. Engagement with non-statutory bodies, such as community groups and the voluntary sector, has not been as systematic as the way the Council works with its statutory partners. And although communications with people about Environmental Services issues generally work well, there is a wider corporate issue as to how the link between consultation and communication is utilised, with specific reference to enhancing civic pride. As a result, the Council is planning to improve the links between consultation and communication.

- 38 The Council is successfully focusing on service users while balancing local needs with national drivers. The Council is delivering a service which encourages waste reduction and recycling without excluding those with different needs. Kerbside recycling is available to all residents, and includes paper, card, garden and kitchen waste, cans and glass and plastic bottles. The Council has chosen to use 140 litre wheeled bins for general waste, instead of the more common 240 litres, because these are less visually obtrusive given the large number of terraced houses in the town. This was a well thought through decision taken in the knowledge that it would cost more than a larger bin with fortnightly collection. Where wheeled bins are totally unsuitable it provides plastic sacks. It does offer a number of options to residents whose circumstances could mean they produce extra waste. For example, families of five or more can have a larger bin, families with babies can buy special plastic sacks in which the Council will collect used disposable nappies, and any resident can purchase additional sacks to cater for those occasions where excess waste might be generated. In addition, the Council is offering subsidised compost bins to residents who want to compost in their garden and help to reduce the volume of waste collected; 165 were sold last year. The Council has recently reviewed its bring bank services in the light of continuously dropping tonnages and has reduced them from 14 to 12 and has prompted a review of materials on offer, to see if additional demand can be stimulated. Details of the location and the different materials that can be recycled at each site are on the Council's website and in the recycling leaflet delivered to all homes. There are also differential charging schemes for bulky waste and non-rodent pest control for residents on low incomes.
- 39 The Council has a good customer service centre (CSC) which it is developing into a single point of access for all services. Last year environmental health enquiries, such as licensing, were transferred across to the CSC, and the rest of the service is in the process of transferring across. There have been some teething problems with software integration, especially on licensing. But with the CSC taking a proactive approach to mastering the issues, with an environmental 'champion' job swapping with back office staff on a regular basis, much of the burden of answering routine enquiries has been taken away from back office staff. The CSC is achieving high customer satisfaction levels, above 90 per cent. However, recent MORI (2004 and 2006) and Citizen's Panel surveys have revealed a deepening dissatisfaction with complaint handling at a corporate level. The CSC is spearheading a renewed effort to turn this around. It has already been at the heart of new training programmes. It has also been monitoring progress on complaint handling over a six-month control period. Amendments to the service have resulted, including the introduction of a new switchboard system which allows customer service advisors to be deployed more flexibly to meet surges in demand and which reduces call waiting times and accelerates call-back. New corporate guidelines on complaint handling have been drawn up and are being implemented.
- 40 The Council is improving access to council buildings for people with disabilities. In 2004/05, 65 per cent of the Council's buildings which are open to the public had all public areas suitable for and accessible to disabled people. In 2005/06 this rose to 90 per cent.

- 41 However, there are areas in which the Council needs to improve. There has been no organised monitoring of the success of these access policies. The systematic approach to profiling problem areas used successfully for anti-social behaviour and licensing has not been extended to address waste and litter. There is not currently a comprehensive set of service standards, so service users are not always clear about what they can expect. Although there is an internal 'grot spot' list for service teams, this is not publicised to engender public and media support to tackle these areas. The information on the website could be more joined up; for example the website advises residents that they can look at their refuse/recycling calendar to check their collection day, but this isn't available online, and the page giving advice on buying sacks for disposable nappies does not promote real nappies and the Council's cashback scheme. There are also continuing problems with the roll-out of kerbside recycling to multi-storey flats where some residents find it difficult to access the scheme.

Diversity

- 42 The Council is clearly committed to equality, diversity and human rights. The Council's leadership has championed a proactive approach to diversity across the organisation. There is also a renewed emphasis in putting the customer first across the Council. New guidelines on the provision of accessible services for all have gone out to all staff with intensive follow-up training. The procurement strategy gives prominence to issues of diversity, with a common thread running through all processes. The Council achieved level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in 2004/05 and is working to achieve level 3 by setting equality objectives and targets. Initial equality impact assessments have been carried out. Corporate performance indicators demonstrate a good track record on gender, ethnicity and disability. However, there is an under representation of women and ethnic minorities in the frontline delivery of environmental services.
- 43 The Council has effective engagement mechanisms to understand the views, needs, desires and preferences of its users and non-service users, including those from vulnerable, minority and otherwise marginalised or hard-to-reach groups. Over many years the Council has developed close working relationships with a wide range of minority and disability groups and has detailed information about local diversity. Environmental Services made use of these groups in the development and implementation of the West Watford Environment Action Zone, with high rates of participation by businesses from within minority ethnic communities. Work previously done by Leisure and Community Services is now being carried forward by the work of the Equalities officer and the Mayor, who has personally championed the equality agenda. There is a Scrutiny Diversity Panel, made up of members of the public who represent different minority groups, which is a concerted effort to involve hard-to-reach groups and minorities in policy-making.

- 44 This service has specific approaches to meet the needs of service users. Printed documents and the Council website offer options for translation. A pictorial guide to recycling has been developed for those people with literacy issues. Assisted bin collection is available where a household does not have anyone capable of moving bins and boxes to the front boundary of the property. This is well publicised on the Council's website with a list of FAQs and has been promoted in recycling consultation and through the CSC and standard correspondence.
- 45 However, the link between service delivery and actual outcomes is not being sufficiently analysed. For example, there have been no requests for document translation but the reasons for this have not been explored. The use of minority and disability network groups to drive service improvement is not systematic. Although the Council collects data on the ethnicity of people who make complaints there has been no structured use of this data to improve environmental services. There has also been no systematic monitoring of take up for assisted bin collection.

Service outcomes for users and the community

Street cleansing

- 46 The Council maintains the streets to a good standard. The streets are predominantly free of litter and detritus. The percentage of land littered to a significant or heavy extent has improved from 18 per cent in 2003/04 to 15 per cent in 2004/05, which was above the national median. This has further improved to 13.6 per cent in 2005/06. The service has four area-based street cleaning rounds which are supplemented by two 'hot spot' teams. Although the streets are predominantly free of litter and detritus, the town centre has an underlying level of small litter, particularly cigarette butts, which is exacerbated by the poor condition of areas of block paving. At the time of our inspection there were some small isolated areas which had not been recently swept, but these were cleared after the head of service had been informed. The Council's efforts to improve street cleansing have resulted in increased public satisfaction, as evidenced in Table 1 later in this report.
- 47 The Council is working well in partnership with residents and local businesses to target problem areas, including the after effects of the thriving night time economy. There is a good working relationship with fast food retailers in the town centre, who send out their own litter pickers to clear litter outside their premises. Environment Action Zones have been set up to promote and deliver improvement in identified problem areas. Two action zones have been run so far, one in the St. Albans Road area and one in West Watford. Both have run over six month periods and made a difference to environment and attitudes. Baseline studies, the use of areas within zones as controls plus six-month monitoring of complaint levels enabled measurement of impact. There has been a sustained improvement overall, although the level of improvement in littering in West Watford has been better than in the St Albans Road area.

18 Environment | How good is the service?

- 48 The Council is involving local communities in improving and maintaining the streetscene. Community Cleanup programmes are co-ordinated by the Council's Housing department. The most recent this year on the Sherwood Estate used clean-up kits provided by Environmental Services, which include long arm litter pickers, graffiti removal wipes, bags, gloves and fluorescent safety tabards. These clean-up kits are now available to any neighbourhood group and are being publicised on the Council's website and through a letter to all community groups. The Council has also arranged to have additional litter bins installed where requested by residents and has involved local school children in a competition to design litter bins to be sited close to schools. A seven-day litter bin emptying rota is in place, and we found no examples of overflowing bins.
- 49 The Council has successfully worked with owners of private land near Sandown Road to address litter and detritus problems. This involved negotiations with the owners of an unadopted road where significant litter and detritus was accumulating. The owners now pay the Council to clean this road as part of the standard cleaning round.
- 50 Street cleansing staff are committed to the Council's vision of a town to be proud of. There is a clear focus on the overall streetscene even where this falls outside their normal job. There is no trade waste collection on Sundays, but some shopkeepers will leave their rubbish out on a Saturday night. Street cleansing staff will remove this, when spotted, to avoid the risk of bags being kicked down the streets by rowdy members of the public. Another example is the reporting of hazards, and temporary restoration, if spotted during cleaning rounds. And the street care timesheets have a sheet for reporting problems other than those for which they are directly responsible. Street cleansing staff are also trained in safe collection of needles and identification of drug paraphernalia and work closely with the police and drug action team.
- 51 Past decisions on town centre design, street furniture and signage have created problems for street cleansing. Some of the elements in the high street take insufficient account of cleaning requirements. For example, stone balls which serve to separate pedestrian only areas from vehicle routes are difficult to clean underneath, and the shelter with a 'V' shaped roof in the high street is commonly referred to as 'the leaf catcher' for obvious reasons. Also, the deep cleaning process has disturbed block paving in town centre, creating numerous small litter traps. The service is addressing these problems, for example through the purchase of cleaning machines with extendable arms, and there is improved communication between the planning and environmental staff to minimise future problems.
- 52 However, there are matters in which the service needs to improve. The list of known problem areas used by the street cleansing team is not being shared with partners, press and the public as a 'grot spot' list to focus attention on these areas. Also, the Council is not systematically working with owners of private land to tackle the small number of visible, small scale areas of litter and detritus on private land around the town. As a consequence there are isolated problem patches which detract from the generally clean environment.

Waste hierarchy – refuse, recycling and composting

- 53** Council actions are having a significant impact on the amount of waste going to landfill. Although the overall amount of domestic waste collected per head of population increased by 1.1 per cent in 2005/06 compared with 2004/05, the amount sent to landfill reduced by 14.5 per cent. This is because of significant increases in the amounts recycled and composted. In 2005/06, 19 per cent of waste collected was recycled, compared with 11.8 per cent the previous year. The level of composting also increased from 13.4 to 17.7 per cent. The combined total, 38 per cent, significantly exceeds the Council's target, set by Defra, of 30 per cent.
- 54** The Council's recycling scheme is flexible and effective. By using a single type of recycling box residents can adapt the scheme to suit their habits. Additional boxes are available on request. The Council has also improved the recycling options available to its citizens by enabling kitchen waste and cardboard to be included in waste collected for composting. Public satisfaction in the service has improved, as evidenced in Table 1 later in this report.
- 55** The Council is taking action on a number of fronts to promote waste minimisation. The recycling doorsteppers spoke to over 8,500 residents addressing issues arising from the recycling service and offering advice on waste minimisation. The Council supports the nationwide real nappy campaign by offering £40 cashback to parents who buy real nappies. The Council also offers subsidised compost bins. Overall, the Council collects less domestic waste than the national average, and is among the lowest in Hertfordshire.
- 56** There is further scope for the Council to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. The Council's actions to minimise waste are all not having a significant impact. The take-up of the cashback scheme to promote real nappies has been disappointing, with only 65 claims in the last two years. There are around 2,000 infants of nappy wearing age in the borough and disposable nappies are a significant contributor to landfill, so the Council's impact in this area has been small. Also, the Council has issued 2,592 of the larger 240 litre bins to homes with five or more occupants. There are 2,650 homes in the borough shown as having five or more residents in the 2001 Census. This appears to be a high percentage (98 per cent) of larger households to have needed this extra capacity given the range of recycling options available. As a result, more waste is going to landfill than may be necessary.
- 57** There is a high level of contamination in the plastics collected for recycling. The Council's recycling partner can only process certain types of plastic, primarily plastic bottles. However, the rules on plastic recycling are not sinking in and residents persist in putting other types of plastic into the recycling boxes. In 2005/06 there was a 17 per cent contamination rate, which has cost the Council £10,000. Over 100 tonnes of plastics, most of which could have been recycled, have been sent to landfill as a result.

Environmental sustainability

- 58 The Council is taking action to reduce its impact and the impact of its citizens on the environment. There is a specific officer within the environmental service whose primary role is to address sustainability issues. The Council's fleet uses ultra low sulphur diesel fuel. The ongoing fleet review incorporates a number of energy efficiency and emission-related bid evaluation criteria. The water consumption in council buildings has been reduced and it uses energy from renewable sources. In addition, it has implemented a printer strategy to reduce the number of printers constantly on line and to cut down the amount of paper generated by staff. The Council has declared six air quality management areas within the borough. It is also promoting the re-use of unwanted household items through a charity furniture scheme, with details on its website and its recycling leaflets.
- 59 For the future, a Green Travel Plan is being developed, a major part of which is a car sharing scheme to cut down the number of staff bringing cars to work each day. The scheme already includes eight partner organisations from across the town. The Council is also planning to review its own recycling as part of the forthcoming trade waste review. It currently only recycles paper, which is not sending the right message to its residents.

Enforcement and community safety

- 60 The Council is taking a robust approach to enforcement against individuals who are spoiling the street scene. Enforcement policies have clear escalatory ladder. All fixed penalty notices are followed through to payment or prosecution. Since 2004 the Council has issued 31 fixed penalty notices for dumped rubbish and has had five successful prosecutions for waste offences. A wide range of sanctions for anti-social behaviour are being actively enforced, with a good success rate. Re-offending is down from 12.5 per cent to 9 per cent. In particular, a recent operation between the Council and the police, Operation Rianna, an ambitious multi-agency approach to a range of street scene problems, caught 41 of the most high profile graffiti taggers. Most signed acceptable behaviour contracts and undertook reparation work to avoid criminal proceedings. As a result, the problems of graffiti and fly-posting in the borough have reduced by 75 per cent and re-offending rates have dropped from 12.5 per cent in 2005 to 0.75 per cent in 2006.
- 61 The Council is working well with its partners to make the streets safer and cleaner. Eleven Clean and Safe days have been undertaken, where the Council works with a range of partners, including the police, the DVLA and the fire service, to identify and take action against abandoned or untaxed vehicles, dumped rubbish, graffiti and arson risks. The latest exercise found 11 instances of illegally dumped household waste and eight premises with an arson risk due to poor waste storage. There has also been a successful multi-agency intervention on the Sherwoods estate, linking CCTV, curfews and landscaping changes to reduce anti-social behaviour. The Council has recently been working closely with the police to combat a spate of purse snatching; measures include giving police bin keys to immediately retrieve dumped bags and purses.

- 62 Other examples of partnership working are found in the anti-social behaviour action group (ASBAG) and the proactive response to the busy night-time economy. Pubwatch and ServeWise schemes are in place, and the Council and the police have developed a risk matrix of the top five licensed premises of concern, to co-ordinate and guide their actions and to provide a robust line of evidence for any court action. One recent example of co-operation involved pubs in the town agreeing to close for one-hour following the first England World Cup match. This followed a joint approach by Council and police to make a natural break between day time and night time drinking, and reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour. As a result of these successes, the Council's community safety effort has become nationally and regionally recognised, and Watford is getting safer, with violent and vehicle crime, robbery and burglary all down.
- 63 The Council is also involved in designing out crime, to ensure that the built environment does not facilitate or encourage criminal or anti-social behaviour. The police crime reduction officer is involved in the review of planning applications and the Council works with the fire service on Action against Arson days.
- 64 However, the positive stance taken by this service on enforcement is not part of a corporate approach to enforcement. There is no council-wide strategy for the use of enforcement to deliver corporate priorities. Although there is an enforcement officers group, this is underused. This leads to variations in the application of enforcement policies. For example, there are no obvious correlations between levels of fly-tipping and the enforcement actions taken. As a result, there is a perception among residents that enforcement, particularly for fly-tipping and dog fouling is not being robustly pursued.

Public satisfaction

- 65 Public satisfaction is generally improving. The Council engaged MORI to undertake a satisfaction survey on its behalf earlier this year. The results of the poll, which have not been audited, showed positive movement in most customer satisfaction ratings compared to the Council's position in the national survey undertaken in 2003/04. The results are shown in Table 1, which also shows that the Council were in the worst 25 per cent of Council's for these services in 2003/04. The results of a separate and not directly comparable citizen's panel survey undertaken in 2005 are also shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Public satisfaction

Public satisfaction is low but increasing

Satisfaction measures. Percentage of residents satisfied with:	2003/04 MORI	2003/04 Quartile	2005 Citizens Panel	2006 MORI
Standards of street cleanliness	50%	Worst	62%	64%
Recycling facilities	55%	Worst	69%	73%
Recycling collection	71%	N/A	75%	77%
Waste collection	77%	Worst	82%	79%

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 66** Corporately, the Council has adequate arrangements for delivering value for money. The recent Audit Commission review of the Council's use of resources found that the Council's arrangements for achieving, managing and improving value for money are adequate. The Council's spending on this service is in line with its priorities. The Council exceeded its targets on efficiency savings in 2005/06 while improving performance, as measured by best value performance indicators. In 2006/07 the Council had the lowest percentage council tax rise in Hertfordshire for the fourth year running. However, the Council's scrutiny function has not been driving value for money. The call-in and performance scrutiny committee has been dominated by performance indicators without in depth analysis and challenge.
- 67** The Council has been improving its procurement procedures. It has a procurement strategy which is geared to the securing of VFM and outcomes that meet user and community needs. It is in line with basic national strategy and objectives and establishes detailed procedural and cultural arrangements to embed an ethos of continuous improvement, for example, through the operations of the Procurements and Contracts Board (PCB). The implementation of the procurement strategy has already resulted in around £145,000 of annualised efficiency savings corporately, as well as reductions in workloads and increased partnering. For example, the Council procured recycling boxes through the Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation saving the cost of tendering.

- 68 The Council now has the capacity to disaggregate its procurement spend and is using this data to improve the value for money performance. To date there has, however, been no attempt to calculate a baseline 'green spend' based on either application of environmental criteria or on the profile of the supplier. This could be used to monitor and promote greater local spend, enhanced partnership with the 'third sector' and the use of companies committed to environmentally sound policies where appropriate. There are, however, recent examples of environmental criteria being applied to procurement; for example energy from renewable sources and the programme of replacement doors. The Council does have a draft sustainable procurement strategy, which is in the process of being finalised. This will address environmental costs and considerations more explicitly than existing procurement strategy documents, and embed these into council procedures and processes. This draft strategy identifies some of the key elements for the application of best practice on environmental costs, partnering and the promotion of local and alternative sourcing, in pursuit of enhanced VFM.
- 69 These are high cost services. The cost per resident of both waste collection and street cleansing is amongst the highest in the country, and has been for a number of years. The current administration has been committed to improving environmental services and has consciously given a high priority to improving the services while recognising that this might further increase already high relative costs. For example, the Council introduced a wheeled bin waste collection scheme using smaller bins and weekly collections. Although it would have been cheaper to have moved to fortnightly collections with larger bins, the adopted scheme was the one which in the Council's view best reconciled the conflicting pressures generated by national targets and local context. Although the cost of waste collection has almost doubled in the last two years, from £48.30 per household in 2003/04 to £86.08 in 2005/06, the percentage of waste either recycled or composted has increased from 21 per cent to 37 per cent over the same period. Another significant factor in high service costs is the relatively high corporate support service 'on costs', currently 16 per cent of total service costs. Cost comparison has not been embedded in the service culture, and disaggregated data for service costs has not been available in previous years. However, disaggregated financial data is now available and the Council is now making a concerted effort to get service cost comparators from other councils within Hertfordshire to better understand where further savings could be made. There are already a number of plans in place to reduce costs while maintaining the current levels of service. These include sharing a depot with Three Rivers District Council, which would include a bulking facility to reduce the time currently spent driving to the recycling facility in St Albans.
- 70 The Council is improving its performance in service delivery. Unaudited performance indicators for 2005/06 show continued improvement in most service areas. In addition to the aforementioned increases in composting and recycling, the Council has also reduced the percentage of land littered to a significant or heavy extent from 18 to 13.6 per cent over the last two years. The cost of dealing with abandoned cars has been cut from £78,300 to £9,500 per annum, without a significant change in policy delivery, through the Hertfordshire Abandoned Vehicle Consortium. The cost of disposal is now being met by the county council.

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- 71 Service management has also improved. Internal Audit reports show that the service is now generally well managed and controlled. New contracts are in place for glass and paper recycling which have maximised the income for the Council and are reported as working well. Past problems in claiming recycling credits have been overcome and this is now up-to-date. A time and motion study undertaken last year by external consultants demonstrated that four household waste collection rounds instead of the current five would be feasible. The Council has not yet pursued this option but it is working with the union and staff to negotiate a new collective agreement for waste and recycling operatives based on performance, for implementation in April 2007.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 72 The Council has made changes that have improved the service. A previous audit commission inspection found the streetcare element of this service to be fair, but identified a number of weaknesses. These have generally been addressed, with the exception of the high costs. An ambitious recycling scheme has been introduced, which has significantly reduced the amount of waste going to landfill. New street cleansing rounds have been introduced and the cleanliness of the borough streets has improved. Joining up the Council's community safety, licensing, legal and planning services with the police and youth offending services in Operation Rianna resulted in a 75 per cent reduction in graffiti and fly-posting. The trend of improvement has now been recognised by local residents, with increased customer satisfaction evidenced in the recent MORI poll (April 2006).
- 73 The Council has delivered this significant change by means of sharply-focused investment and effort. A renewed emphasis has been placed on the needs of local residents, exemplified by the successful launch of the Council's new Customer Service Centre (CSC). Routine enquiries for most environment issues are now handled by the CSC and feedback from residents has been generally positive. The CSC is now driving new efforts to raise customer care standards in back offices across the Council.
- 74 There is a joined up approach to the delivery of improvement. The service works closely with the Council's Housing department on initiatives such as 'Clean Up Days' on local estates. The ambitious plans for local road reorganisation and town centre development have been developed by departments across the Council, with this service and the planning service to the fore. The merger of Technical Services, Community Safety and Environmental Health into a single Environmental Service earlier this year made financial sense, and has increased effectiveness. For example, street cleansing staff have helped the community safety team to trace graffiti taggers back to their home streets. This means the Council is now more effective and efficient in improving the environment for residents and visitors.

- 75 The development of a new Community Plan ('One Watford') has given fresh impetus to external partnerships by tying other groups more closely to the aims of the environmental service. So too has the relaunch of the Town Centre Partnership, thanks to a £55,000 investment from the Council. The Anti-Social Behaviour Action Group (ASBAG) has been the focus for a number of community safety programmes that have won national recognition. The monthly tasking and co-ordinating group has drawn the licensing service more closely into this broad ranging and effective partnership. Service Level Agreements with the Probation Service and the Youth Offenders Unit, which see graffiti taggers cleaning up walls across the District, have contributed to reduced re-offending rates. Joint working with statutory bodies has also resulted in other initiatives that have made a difference locally. 'Clean and Safe Days' have successfully targeted vehicle crime as well as street cleanliness. 'Action Against Arson' days have also made an impact. As a result of this success in tackling anti-social behaviour, the Home Office awarded the partnership Together Action Area status in 2004.
- 76 The most obvious example of improved service delivery is in recycling. In 2004/05 the Council's overall recycling and composting rate of 25 per cent was better than the median figure for English district councils, which was 21 per cent. However, a quarter of district councils were recycling and composting 27 per cent or more of their household waste in 2004/05. The roll-out of the new kerbside collection and the education effort underpinning this have seen recycling rates jump from 25 per cent to 37.69 per cent in the past year. The percentage of household waste recycled has jumped from 12 per cent to over 19 per cent while the percentage composted has risen from 13.4 per cent to around 18 per cent. Door stepping campaigns and other face-to-face contacts with residents across the borough have resulted in a service which has sufficient flexibility to take account of most local needs. Smaller waste bins, no limits on numbers of recycling boxes, the continuing use of bags at a limited number of locations are examples of this. Until recently contamination rates have been low. In 2004/05 the Council collected 392kg of household waste per head. This compared favourably with the national median figure (411kg), although it was not good enough to put the Council with the best 25 per cent, which were only collecting 380kg or less. These improvements have been recognised by residents, with improved satisfaction ratings in the May 2006 poll for both recycling and facilities as well as waste collection.

- 77 The street scene is also much improved. Problems with fly-tipping, abandoned cars, fly-posting, dog fouling and graffiti have all been reduced in recent years, with the proportion of land graded as having unacceptable levels of litter and detritus falling again in 2005/06 from 13.6 per cent to 12 per cent. There has also been a sustained improvement in the cleanliness of the streets. This positive trend has been produced by a wide range of overlapping initiatives with partners, such as the notably successful Operation Rianna. The ambitious targets the Council sets itself for the regular local cleanliness audits have also had a positive impact. The improvement also reflects the Council's willingness to take a firm stand on offenders, especially on anti-social behaviour, but also on Fixed Penalty Notices, which are usually enforced. As a result of the Council's efforts areas of heavy usage such as the St Albans Road and the town centre are noticeably cleaner and more attractive. These improvements in cleanliness are reflected in the continuous improvements in resident satisfaction, which rose from 50 per cent in 2003/04 to 64 per cent in the May 2006 MORI poll.
- 78 The Council has taken a strong lead in energy efficiency. The Council has played an active role in the Hertfordshire Environmental Forum, and has worked with other Councils and with its own Landlords' Forum on schemes such as bulk discount house insulation. CO2 levels in the borough, already among the lowest in the county, continue to fall, and the Council has developed a carbon management strategy to sustain this progress. The 2006 Scrutiny Panel study on bus services, which is now under discussion with the County Council, was specifically intended to address emission control as well as traffic congestion. The Council's fleet uses ultra low sulphur diesel fuel. And the ongoing Fleet review incorporates a number of energy efficiency and emission-related bid evaluation criteria.
- 79 The Council has made progress with its own internal recycling and resource management effort. Working in partnership with Watermark, the Council has reduced the volume of water used in its buildings by four per cent. A printer policy has reduced the use of both printers and paper, and paper is recycled through office recycling bins. A pilot programme for a more ambitious internal recycling policy is being developed and the Council is proposing to do this in partnership with local businesses.
- 80 The service has also begun to address value for money, with some limited improvements. The merger of two environment-related services into one at the beginning of 2006 produced the deletion of a managerial post. The partnership with Watermark not only generated savings in water bills but also £140,000 of grant funding, which has gone into the local cavity wall and loft insulation schemes. Joining the Hertfordshire Abandoned Vehicle consortium has reduced recovery costs from £78,300 in 2003/04 to £9,500 at a time of sustained improvement. Recycling boxes were procured through the Yorkshire Procurement Organisation resulting in OJEU and other overhead savings.

- 81 The one area of significant weakness in the service track record is its cost. The cost of the waste collection service is among the highest 10 per cent in the country. Budget overruns in waste and recycling in each of the last two years have resulted in the Environmental Services budget being overspent by £150,000 in 2004/05 and £285,000 in 2005/06, which has generated pressures on the rest of the service and on the Council's General Fund. And with the Council having only recently begun to disaggregate its budgets, the service has not fully come to grips with the underlying causes of these high costs.

How well does the service manage performance?

Plans

- 82 The Council has an effective planning system for delivery of its environmental objectives. The environment is a high priority, with at least four of its seven key corporate objectives directly related to it. The Mayor's call for a 'cleaner, greener, safer' Watford runs consistently throughout the corporate planning process. From the LSP vision for the next 20 years through the Council's annual and medium-term performance plans right down to the unit plans for the service, the inter-relationships between environmental aims, outcomes and impacts are clear and precise.
- 83 A set of inter-locking plans has been developed to deliver these priority improvements. At the strategic level, the 'One Watford' forum of the LSP has now established a number of environmental targets for the Council to pursue jointly with its partners. The Council's corporate medium-term plan (2006 to 2011) is underpinned by a concurrent Environmental Service plan. This in turn is delivered by means of two separate unit plans which set out in detail what each part of the service will do in the coming year. These will be supplemented by new strategies for communications, community safety, licensing, gambling, open spaces and carbon management which will be finalised and implemented in that time frame. More immediately, additional plans are produced in response to problems that arise in mid-year. A good example is the MORI 2006 survey which revealed that residents concerns over recycling were largely about bin placement before and after collection. As a result, the Council has now produced a guide to the collection process for residents, which uses photographs as a means of resolving these and other misunderstandings.

- 84** The detailed service plans are themselves derived from a range of wider strategies and policies. At the County level, the soon-to-be-revised Hertfordshire Waste Strategy established the framework for accessing external funding, improving local service delivery and raising awareness about waste minimisation and recycling. For example, the service has used the waste aware sub-group of the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership to integrate the recycling and waste minimisation messages into the local primary school curriculum. In licensing, the work with the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Licensing group and with local licensed premises has successfully identified and addressed persistent problems, and the service has led the way in developing an innovative matrix-based methodology to help achieve this. On community safety, the monthly Tasking and Co-ordinating Group on community safety is yet another good example of a planned approach to improvements in service.
- 85** The service is also closely integrated into the ambitious plans for local redevelopment. These include the planned refurbishment of one of the shopping centres in the town centre, the establishment of the new Health Campus, and the proposals for major changes to the central ring road. All of these, together with the joint work with the County Council on an integrated transport strategy are feeding into the ongoing work on the Local Development Framework (LDF) and the Local Area Agreement (LAA) environment block.
- 86** Internally, the service plans also draw upon planned improvements at the corporate level. The introduction of the new Customer Service Centre (CSC) is central to the long-term aim of putting customers first, and early returns on CSC handling of environmental enquiries have been positive. The new Customer Relationship Manager system (CRM), which will deliver detailed and timely data on resident concerns, should also help tackle gaps and weaknesses in service. And persistent resident dissatisfaction with complaint handling, again evident in the latest MORI poll, is giving impetus to the production of a comprehensive set of service standards and to new training in customer handling, which has been heavily subscribed to by environmental service staff.
- 87** The service is also itself planning for the medium-term on a number of fronts. The Fleet Review, the Green Spaces Strategy, the Depot Share and Bulking Facility Study, the Trade Waste Strategy and a review of licensing policy are all due to be finalised within the next nine months. The carbon management strategy and a sustainable procurement strategy will follow in the coming year.

- 88 Existing plans are generally of good quality. The links between the various policy-making levels be they county, corporate or local, are clearly established. So too are the links between most of the policies themselves. But there are still some aspects of environmental policy that are not fully joined up. Enforcement is one example, with a more consistent corporate approach to an issue that spans community safety, environmental health, licensing, street scene and planning. The links between communication, consultation and customer service is another, with the need to make better sense of the overall picture at a strategic level before developing separate delivery plans. And the inter-relationships between the array of medium-term service plans is not set out in a single document, which means opportunities such as to inform workforce development planning are not maximised.
- 89 There are also some gaps in corporate planning. The most obvious example is the need for a corporate approach to securing improved value for money across the Council, and for a service plan that follows this lead. There are signs that the Council and the service are getting to grips with these issues. But the absence of a consistent approach to these issues in the raft of plans that exist within, or are relevant to, the service are a serious weakness.

Performance management

- 90 The service has developed a generally good record in performance management. Clear and focused messages from the very top of the Council cascade down to the frontline through the effective use of monitoring and management techniques. Such weaknesses as exist largely relate to the need for improved prioritisation and for more consistent use of data analysis to evaluate, and plan for, success.
- 91 Performance management in partnership is mixed. The service works closely with statutory partners in a range of partnerships that have clear and measurable targets, and some of these, in community safety, have been commended by the Home Office. With non-statutory partners, the record is less strong. But in the Environment Action Zones, the service has shown itself capable of developing shared procedures that can be monitored and managed effectively.

- 92 Internally, the corporate performance management processes have been strengthened. The recommendations of the 2005 Audit Commission review of performance management processes are now being implemented. There is now more systematic scrutiny of performance data by the Central Management Board (CMB) and by the Call In and Performance Scrutiny Committee. CSC data on customer complaints is being used to drive customer service training of back office staff. The staff appraisal system has been reviewed and overhauled. Training needs are largely being met and the latest staff survey shows staff feeling more valued by the Council. A modified version of the PRINCE2 project management toolkit has been rolled out to all senior staff. Areas of corporate weakness, however, remain. The scrutiny committees, whose work is now the subject of a dedicated manager, are still not making as much impact on policy-making as they might, and have been reviewed in conjunction with the IDeA to identify actions to improve their effectiveness. The Council has not had a sustained approach to tackling underperformance in BVPIs and only now is addressing this, with the 'cause for concern' list. Local PIs are few in number and limited in scope. Disaggregated data on 'green' procurement by the Council can now be produced, but has not yet been analysed or used. And the template for unit plans does not compel services to either compare costs and performance, even locally, or to rank them according to importance.
- 93 Within the service, the trend is upward. Challenge processes are improving. For example the Community Safety Strategy is subject to a rolling review, rather than the Government mandated three yearly review. There are signs of an improved approach to risk management, thanks to rising insurance costs. Short-term sickness problems are being tackled, with improvements in absence rates in the past year. The unit plans for 2006/07 are an improvement on their predecessor, and staff are happier using them.
- 94 But some of the weaknesses in the corporate template are reflected in the service unit plans. Cost comparisons are absent. Priorities are not ranked in any way, and this lack of prioritisation carries over to individual aspects of policy. For example the 'grot spot' list of the twenty or so grubbiest areas of the borough is not ranked, as it would need to be, to be an effective basis for a wider partnership. Long-term sickness problems in the service have not been addressed. And across the service, the collection, analysis and use of data is not systematic. This leads to missed opportunities. The useful time and motion study on waste collection cycles was not followed up by a cost benefit analysis of the options revealed.

Learning

- 95 The service is learning from others. The close working relationship on environmental issues with Three Rivers DC is mutually beneficial from this standpoint. Three Rivers are learning from the piloting work Watford is doing on trade waste with, among others, Watford FC. Watford are learning from the Three Rivers pilot work on recycling tetrapaks and the impending decisions on the joint depot and bulking facility can only enhance this process. More specifically, the roll-out of the kerbside recycling followed learning from a number of councils inside and outside of the county. The successful use of 'cancelled' stickers to combat fly-posting was brought in from Camden. The composition of the street cleaning budget is being reviewed following discussions with Luton Council. And the Anti-Social Behaviour strategy drew on experience from across the country; and it is now seen as best practice itself, with Watford leading the Home Office-sponsored 'Together Academy Respect Workshops'.
- 96 There is, however, more that can be done to further improve learning from others. A more strategic approach to joining up communications, consultation and customer service is an obvious issue. But most importantly, the Council needs to learn more from others on the various cost components of comparative performers in waste collection and recycling.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 97 The service has good access to the necessary skills, infrastructure and partnerships to deliver future improvement. Earlier this year the Council reorganised its services to bring community safety, refuse collection, street cleaning and recycling under the same head of service as environment health and licensing. Officers and frontline staff are skilled and motivated. The recent improvements have been delivered by a respected workforce that shares the 'can do' approach of its leadership. Training needs are largely being met and the latest staff survey shows staff feeling more valued by the Council. The future challenges for the borough, the Council and the service have been articulated clearly in the Community Plan and in corporate documents, and are being kept in sharp focus.
- 98 Other necessary tools for improvement are now in place. The recent pattern of enhanced partnerships with County Council, with neighbours, within the LSP and with other statutory bodies is a strong base for further progress. The new Hertfordshire Waste strategy should combine with the planned facility sharing with Three Rivers to continue to develop solutions to the coming challenges of local bulking, transport costs and deepening reductions of waste going to landfill. And the enhanced infrastructure that has delivered the recent significant improvements in recycling has the potential to handle increasing recycling rates even without further refinements.

- 99 The Council is now in a better position to use data on customer satisfaction and needs to plan service delivery. New customer relationship management software will allow the service to analyse the data being collected by the CSC to provide detailed information to better target gaps and weaknesses in delivery. Waste advisors have returned to their core duties of education following the roll-out of the kerbside service, and are now planning new initiatives and training programmes. The results of the MORI 2006 survey, which revealed continuing concern at the way household wheelie bins are returned after emptying has prompted the production of a pictorial guide to proper bin placement. Persistent dissatisfaction with corporate complaint handling is giving impetus to the production of a comprehensive set of service standards and to new training in customer handling, which has been heavily subscribed to by service staff.
- 100 The service is and will continue to be a high priority for the Council and adequate resources are being made available. The Council has improved its financial management. The accounts are no longer being qualified. And the underlying financial position of the Council, in terms of its asset base, is strong. The Council will have to find around £2 million in efficiency savings in each of the next few years if it is not to draw down on those assets. Therefore difficult decisions are being made corporately to reduce costs. But no significant cut backs in environmental services are in prospect. An additional £60,000 has been put into the core budget for two new street enforcement officers, who will spearhead a more integrated approach to enforcement across the service. However, the service is already taking a more rigorous approach to capping costs and improving value for money. Monthly cost monitoring and minimisation is now in place to avoid the cost over runs of the past two years.
- 101 The Council and the service are dealing more effectively with short-term sickness. Although corporate sickness levels have fallen from 14.79 days in 2004/05 to 11.61 days in 2005/06, the levels of absence are still among the worst in the country. Sickness levels in the service are among the highest in the Council, largely because there are persistent problems of long-term sickness, with two members of staff being off work for more than three years. However, these staff are no longer being paid by the Council.
- 102 There are some strong examples of partnership working. The monthly Tasking and Co-ordinating group is an essential focal point for partnership working on anti-social behaviour and, increasingly, licensing. Also, the planning for Clean and Safe days draws together a number of statutory partners to look at a wide range of problems. An action group to focus on the litter problem in a similar way is now being formed. Partnership with neighbouring Councils, especially Three Rivers DC, has resulted in plans for depot sharing and joint approaches to trade waste. This requires an initial investment of around £1 million per council, with significant, but as yet un-costed proposed savings in overheads and transport costs. The Council will be working with the union and staff to negotiate a new collective agreement for waste and recycling staff based on performance, for implementation in April 2007.

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- 103** However, there is scope for the Council to extend the way it works in partnership. There is not a systematic engagement with non-statutory bodies, such as community groups and the voluntary sector that mirrors the way the Council works with its statutory partners. There have been individual successes such as the community cleanups, but these are one offs. As a consequence, there are available resources to help the Council achieve its clean, green and safe agenda which are not being fully exploited.
- 104** The service is successful at attracting external funding for environmental improvements. For example, the Council has recently been granted money for recycling projects (over £230,000 in 2006/07), waste education officers (two slots worth £50,000 in 2006/07) and waste contamination studies (£48,000).