

Environment - Waste, Street-scene and Natural Environment

North Shropshire 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 (KLOE) 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.

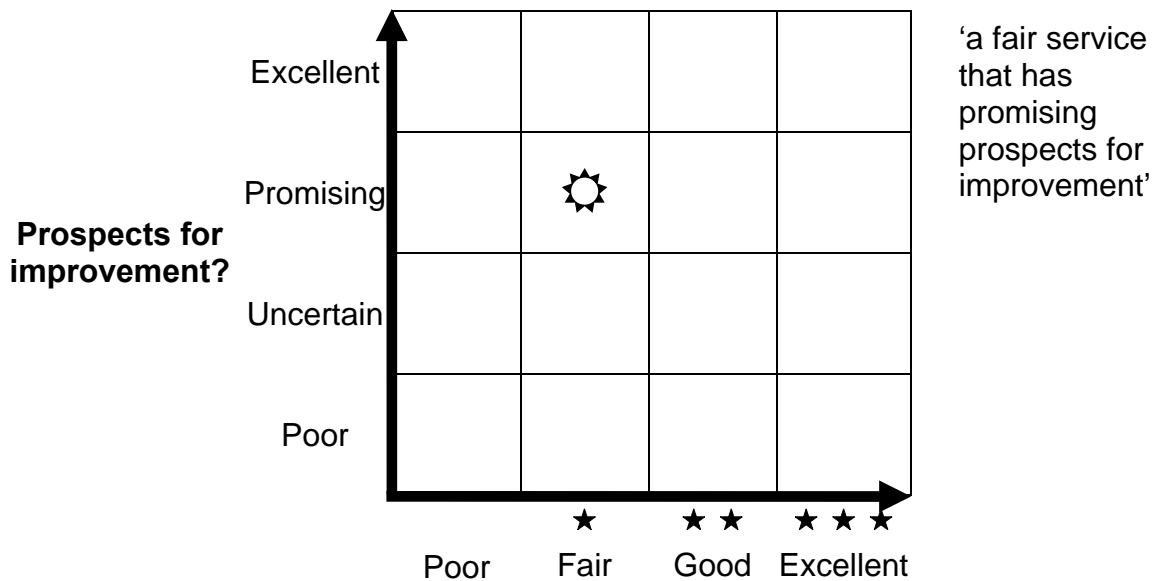
Summary

- 1 North Shropshire District Council has made significant improvements in a range of environmental services. Overall the current service is fair with promising prospects of providing a good service very soon.
- 2 Recycling has been a priority for the Council. It has steadfastly improved its recycling performance and is now in the best performing 25 per cent of English district councils. There is a clear commitment to continue to work with other councils in order to improve recycling further and to reduce the current high cost of the service.
- 3 The Council has been slower to recognise the need to improve the street-scene and satisfaction with the cleanliness of the district has been low. Attention to detail remains an issue leading to inconsistencies in standards but robust monitoring and reorganisation of how cleaning is managed has started to change this. It has become a priority, and with the new resources and expanded cleaning teams these issues should be resolved soon leading to a higher and consistent level of cleanliness across the district.
- 4 The Council has recently adopted a new corporate plan, in which the core value of 'protecting and enhancing the environment' has been given greater prominence. It has done some good work towards this value, especially around recycling and energy use, but there is no clear overarching plan and there remains much that needs to be done in order to deliver on this value.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed North Shropshire District Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 6 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the Council exceeded its statutory minimum recycling standard (of 18 per cent) by recycling 29 per cent in 2004/05 and 38.5 per cent (unaudited) for 2005/06;
 - the amounts of household waste disposed of to landfill has declined, with the equivalent of 293 kg per person being landfilled in 2005/06, although the total amount of household waste collected is high at 477 kg per person (for 2005/06, unaudited);
 - the district is generally clean although there are unacceptable inconsistencies and poor attention to detail, such as weeds detracting from otherwise attractive planting schemes;

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.

- there are some good initiatives helping reduce the Council's overall impact on the environment but these are delivered in isolation and there is no overall plan or vision for achieving the Council vision of 'protecting and enhancing the environment'; and
- costs are high and the services are not yet delivering value for money.

7 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- where the Council has maintained its focus it has delivered good improvement, such as in waste and recycling;
- partnership working is beginning to deliver improvement. The Council has a clear commitment to partnership working which will enable continued improvements in waste and recycling and facilitate improvements in the street-scene; and
- although performance management is still developing, the Council is fully aware of what is needed to embed performance management, and has put in place arrangements including performance clinics together with clear short term plans to significantly improve the value for money it obtains from its service.

However, it remains unclear how the Council will manage services against its core values and whether it will sufficiently engage users and other stakeholders to ensure it will continue to improve services for the future.

Recommendations

- 8 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.

Recommendation

R1 The Council should assess actions against intended outcomes for current and future services. Particular attention should be paid to services undergoing large amounts of change, including:

- street-scene, as it is re-organised to deliver improved efficiency and outcomes. There should be a clear understanding by the Council and its partners of the links between street-scene, anti-social behaviour, planning, grounds maintenance and overall satisfaction with the local area;*
- waste and recycling collections, to ensure that the benefits of the Shropshire Waste Partnership continue to be enjoyed by the local people who live and work in North Shropshire, including; and*
- assessing the costs, benefits and outcomes of the current arrangements for charging for bulky waste collections.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased capacity and a cleaner district; and
- ensuring that changes following the new waste contract continue to be beneficial to local people and the outcomes contribute towards the priorities and value of the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should start implementing this immediately and ensure that systems are developed to embed this approach in future.

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 The Council must ensure that users and stakeholders are actively involved in setting standards and identifying and resolving problems. The Council should:

- learn from where it has been successful, and apply this to other areas within the Council;*
- ensure that staff are aware of the needs of local people when delivering services or planning changes;*
- ensure that outcomes are focussed on users and are what users expect whilst linking to priorities and values of the Council; and*
- make sure that users and stakeholders are aware of what the Council has achieved and the plans to improve, and how they can be involved in this.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater ownership from users and stakeholders of solutions, and recognition of the work the Council has started to do to improve further;
- improved capacity as the Council gains benefits both strategically and operational from working in partnership with others; and
- improved satisfaction from users and local people.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented during the next planning cycle for service plans, and review of the corporate plan and community strategy.

Recommendation

R3 The Council should articulate its values and develop targets to measure progress towards delivering them. In particular, these targets and values should cascade across all the Council does and be apparent in:

- service plans - so that individual services can demonstrate how they contribute to values as well as priorities;*
- individual appraisals - so that everybody who works for the Council knows how they work towards the values; and*
- reported within the council plan.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to demonstrate how the Council is working towards its core values;
- deliver improved value for money (which is a core value of the Council); and
- enable staff, services and the Council as a whole to be clearer on what its core values mean and identify what changes are needed to meet their values.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 9 North Shropshire is a sparsely populated rural district, in the West Midlands of England. The district covers an area of 679 square kilometres and is predominantly rural in nature, including 18 nature reserves and almost 600 hectares of land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Fifty-eight thousand, seven hundred people live in the district, half in the four small market towns of Wem, Ellesmere, Market Drayton and Whitchurch, and the rest of the population living in villages and rural areas. There are a total of 116 identifiable settlements across the district.
- 10 Traditional industries and agriculture are in decline and poor transport links (in some parts of the district), rural isolation and a low skills base in the resident population are all acknowledged issues. The average wage in the district is below the national average, although unemployment overall is low. There are average levels of deprivation across the district, with 1 per cent of the population living amongst the most deprived wards of the country. 1.1 per cent of the population is identified as from non-white communities.

The Council

- 11 The Council has 40 councillors, with 17 in an independent group, 17 Conservatives, 4 Labour and two not affiliated to a group. The Council has recently adopted a Leader and Cabinet governance structure, supported by Scrutiny Board, Finance and Audit Board and Performance Management Board.
- 12 In 2005/06 the Council's net revenue budget was £8.5 million and the capital budget was £6 million. Spend per head of population is £143, higher than the regional and national average, and Band D council tax (including town and parish council precepts) is now in the most expensive 25 per cent of English councils at £187.13.
- 13 The Council has a relatively new management team structured around the Chief Executive, who has been in post since June 2005. Overall the Council employs 357 people (although these are not all full-time).

The scope of the inspection

- 14 The scope for this inspection includes:
 - waste management, including waste collection, waste minimisation and recycling;
 - street-scene, including street cleaning, fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti and grass verge maintenance;

- natural environment, including biodiversity, parks and open spaces; and
- environmental sustainability, including use of natural resources, energy efficiency, climate change and air quality.

The Council's waste management and street-scene service

- 15 The majority of the services are provided directly by the Council. The waste and recycling collection has recently been changed. In September 2005 the Council switched to an alternate week collection system whereby households generally receive three collections a fortnight, one for garden and kitchen waste, one for recycling paper, glass bottle and jars and metals tins and cans, and a final collection for the remaining element of household waste that can not be recycled or composted. The Council also provides complementary services such as a bulky waste collection and the collection of trade waste from a small customer base.
- 16 Recyclable material and the non-recyclable waste is delivered to sites controlled by Shropshire County Council. Kitchen and garden waste is delivered to a local farm which has the appropriate licence to compost this waste. The county council also provide household waste sites where householders can take their own waste for disposal and recycling.
- 17 The Council also provides street cleaning services, the dog warden, removal of abandoned vehicles and clearance of graffiti, fly-tipping and fly-posting. There are 1,650 km of highways in the district, 43 per cent of which is swept on average every five weeks. Grass cutting is provided under a contract arranged for the Council by the county council.
- 18 A total of 80 staff are employed, by the Council, to provide these services, at a total cost of £2.97 million (2006/07).

National context

- 19 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to encourage more recycling. For North Shropshire district council these standards were set at 10 per cent for 2003/04 and 18 per cent for 2005/06. In May 2006 the Government announced a minimum recycling standard of 20 per cent for all councils by 2007/08. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill. In waste management, North Shropshire district council has a statutory duty to collect household waste and Shropshire County Council has a statutory duty to arrange for the disposal of household waste, and to provide a place for local people to dispose of their own household waste.

- 20 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 the legal powers available to councils to keep their area clean and to tackle other nuisances, such as abandoned vehicles.
- 21 The Government's Liveability agenda draws clear links between the quality of the local environment, health issues and crime and disorder. Legislation has been strengthened to help local councils improve the local environment such as increasing the amount for fixed penalty notices for people dropping litter, reducing times taken to remove abandoned vehicles and additional powers to tackle graffiti. In response to the Kyoto protocol, the Government set targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent, from the 1990 baseline, by 2010.
- 22 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, *Securing the Future*, 2005. Councils such as North Shropshire are expected to use their powers in planning, housing and waste collection, 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.
- 23 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.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 Historically the Council has not had clear aims or ambitions in many areas. The Council's previous corporate plan was internally focused and lacked clear measurable targets. Recent plans are clearer and contain better targets but obviously these plans are for improvement in the future.
- 25 Whilst corporate plans and policies have been weak, the Council has been clearer with its ambitions towards waste and recycling. As part of the Shropshire Waste Partnership it has adopted explicit and challenging targets for recycling and waste generation. There are clear expectations within the partnership of capping costs through partnership working, and an intention to deliver services that offer the best practical environmental option at the lowest overall cost.
- 26 The Council has adopted the targets within the waste partnership and translated these into targets for North Shropshire district council which are reflected in the new corporate plan and service plans.
- 27 Intentions for street-scene have been uncertain until recently. Although the Council had ambitions to be in the top 25 per cent of English districts by 2007 there were no plans of how they would achieve this and no monitoring of cleanliness standards.
- 28 However, recent plans are more focussed. The current corporate plan contains clearer themes and priorities within those themes. For this inspection the themes of Sustainable Communities and Safer and Stronger are relevant. Target setting is improved and includes the following targets:
 - 42 per cent recycling by 2007/08;
 - reduce total waste to 450 kg/head by 2007/08;
 - only 5 per cent of relevant land not meeting acceptable standards by 2008/09 (measured by BV199a); and
 - 80 per cent satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness across the district by 2009.
- 29 Service plans now generally contain clearer action plans and cascade targets from the corporate plan. This means it is much easier to see what the Council intends to do and what the expected outcomes are. However, some targets are less well defined, especially around value for money which are not quantified.
- 30 The corporate plan also lists the Council's values, although it does not expand on these. The listed values are:
 - providing value for money services;
 - being accountable;
 - caring for and protecting the environment;
 - being open and honest;

- making available the best quality services that our resources allow;
- working in partnership with others;
- being fair and showing that we care; and
- providing equality of access and opportunity.

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

- 31** The Council takes a sensible and pragmatic approach to meeting the needs of the community, and balancing community needs with national priorities, when delivering services such as waste management and keeping the district clean. Most people are able to access and use the services, but the approach is not consistent across all services or across the district. There are examples of good working, such as the flexible approach taken to ensure that rural areas are able to take part in the recycling service, but the Council does not always communicate effectively to all communities within the district about the options available. For example, although leaflets and information are available in different formats, such as large text or in audio, it rarely lets people know that alternative formats are available. This limits the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- 32** The Council has recently achieved good outcomes from its waste management services. It has exceeded minimum performance standards in terms of the amount of waste recycled and composted, provides a reliable and responsive collection service that is appreciated by users and reduced the total amount of waste disposed of at landfill sites, although the total amount of waste collected is high.
- 33** The district is generally clean across towns and rural areas but there are unacceptable inconsistencies, including lower standards of cleanliness, which impact adversely on some communities. Lack of attention to detail in some areas means that minor issues detract from an otherwise clean and attractive area, although work is currently underway to tackle this.
- 34** The Council has undertaken a range of activities and actions that contribute towards improving the environment. With the exception of energy use, these are isolated and do not form part of an overall or consistent series of actions to improve the environment, and the Council has no clear plan linking to its core value of protecting and enhancing the environment.
- 35** The Council is yet to deliver value for money across its environmental services. Although the waste and recycling collection is good it is expensive and does not yet represent value for money. There are clear plans to improve the value for money of this service. The Council cannot demonstrate value for money from its street-scene service because it has not been monitoring performance and satisfaction. Grass cutting is cost effective and delivers value for money, although it is a small service in North Shropshire.

Access and diversity

- 36 The Council has taken a reasonable and flexible approach to how it delivers its services so that they meet the varying needs of local people. The Council has ensured that the waste and recycling collection is available as widely as possible by considering the needs of a diverse rural population.
- All households within the district are offered the same opportunity to recycle, including separate collections for waste which can be composted. The Council uses three different sized vehicles to achieve this across the district.
 - Where the normal arrangements, which are two wheeled bins and two boxes, are impractical, other arrangements are put in place, including bags for very rural areas, clear bags for people living above shops, and encouraging neighbours to share bins where space is at a premium.

This has helped ensure that local people can use the recycling collection which in turn has helped increase the amounts of household waste collected for recycling.

- 37 Service standards are clear and accessible. Although there has been little direct involvement of service users in drawing up these service standards, the services are based upon consultation of what the public want. The Council involved local parish and town councils when considering the changes to the waste collection arrangements. Service standards are published on the Council's website and in service plans. Information on the level of service provided is included in a wide range of literature which is well distributed across the district. This helps inform the public of what they can expect from the Council.
- 38 The Council has demonstrated that it can be responsive to the local community although this is not applied consistently or rigorously across all services. Recognising that contacting the Council was not straightforward, the Council developed a customer contact centre which can deal with queries either over the 'phone or for visitors to the council offices. This service is responsive. Local people already recognise that this has improved. However, it has yet to be fully effective as callers may be given other telephone numbers to call, transferred to other people within the Council or asked to leave a message on an answer machine. Local people still report difficulties in getting a response to messages left on answer machines. This shows that the Council can identify issues but has not been fully effective in implementing wide scale change to improve customer service. The Council is currently exploring further initiatives to improve this area.

- 39 The Council is developing its approach to equality and access. There are some good examples of initiatives pursued to enable equal access to Council services but these are not always logically followed through or clearly linked to other core values of the Council.
- The Council offers an assisted collection to 7.5 per cent of households as part of its commitment to ensure that the waste and recycling collection is available to everybody. Smaller waste bins are available for people living on their own or in small family units. However, only one sized recycling box is available and this is a source of frustration for some members of the community, especially those with restricted mobility. The Council has not actively considered whether an alternative, such as providing different sized recycling containers, may provide a more effective solution in such circumstances.
 - Leaflets and publicity material are available in large print, other languages and can even be made available in audio format if required. The Council has been proactive in providing appropriate leaflets to particular communities, but fails to promote the fact that these alternative formats are available in general leaflets. Publicity material about the recycling collection contains no information about the availability of different formats.
 - Although the Council adopted an '0845' telephone number for waste and recycling enquires, and is attempting to reduce the number of different telephone numbers promoted for contacting the Council, a range of different telephone numbers are still published and sometimes it is unclear which number the public should call. In reality, though, most calls are handled by the same customer contact centre.
 - The Council offers a bulky waste collection service, which is charged for based on the total weight of waste to be collected. In recognition that this has the potential to discriminate against certain groups within the community, especially those who can not or do not drive (and so can not use the public disposal sites), or for whom the charge levied is prohibitive, the Council supplements the bulky waste collection with a Saturday skip scheme, which is promoted locally. However, the Council has not assessed whether this is a successful alternative or whether there may be more cost effective schemes which provide a better outcome.

This is consistent with a Council which is currently at Level 2 of the Equality Standard for local government.

Waste management - reduce, reuse and recycle

- 40 Recycling is effective. The Council provides a comprehensive and effective recycling and composting scheme across the whole district. Households can recycle a variety of materials which the Council collects on alternate weeks to the non-recyclable waste. The Council collects paper, cans, tins and glass bottles and jars for recycling and garden and kitchen waste for composting. All householders are able to participate in the scheme and satisfaction with the scheme is reasonably high. In the national 2003/04 surveys, 70 per cent were satisfied with the recycling service, which was higher than average. Since then the service has been re-launched although the Council's own surveys, which are not directly comparable to the national survey, shows that satisfaction has remained at 70 per cent.
- 41 The Council has exceeded its statutory recycling standards for 2005/06. Recycling has historically been low in North Shropshire but the Council has focussed on improving this service and in 2004/05 the Council recycled 29 per cent of the household waste it collected. This was amongst the top 25 per cent of English district councils. Although un-audited, the Council has reported that it recycled 38.5 per cent of the household waste it collected in 2005/06, considerably in excess of the Council's minimum statutory standard of 18 per cent. Data for the first three months of 2006/07 indicates that recycling and composting rates have continued to increase and approximately 45 per cent of household waste was recycled during the period April to June 2006. This shows that the Council is taking its responsibility over waste management seriously.
- 42 By working in partnership with others the Council is helping improve services and encouraging the reduction and reuse of household waste. The Council has:
- supported the local furniture reuse scheme. This reduces waste, promotes reuse and supports people on a low income;
 - worked with the county council over a variety of initiatives which, amongst others, has led to the county council significantly upgrading the local waste disposal sites for the public to use; and
 - worked with all the districts in the county to promote home composting and more recently to start promoting real nappies, both of which help reduce the total amount of waste.

However, it has yet to assess the effectiveness of these schemes in terms of minimising waste, or how effectively different scheme work together, such as the relationship between the county council provided recycling site and the Council's garden waste collection.

- 43 The waste and recycling collection is reliable. The Council now accurately records the number of missed bins and has steadily improved its performance over the last few years. The council now records 92.7 missed bins per 100,000 emptied. When a bin is not collected it is recorded together with the reason - such as overweight, or contaminated, and this information is passed to the Council offices. This enables the Council to follow up issues to ensure that people know how recycle, and to minimise the risk of material being rejected due to contamination.
- 44 Education and promotion for recycling and composting has been effective. The Council embarked on a well planned campaign which has managed to divert a large proportion of waste away from landfill. The quality of most material collected for recycling and composting is acceptable. Following a recent period when quality fell the Council took appropriate action, involving the local press, increased monitoring of bins before they are emptied, and follow up visits to households which were putting out the wrong types of materials. This has helped improve the quality of the material collected.
- 45 The Council has successfully reduced the amount of waste disposed of in landfill. Despite a significant increase in the total amount of waste collected, brought about by the introduction of garden waste collections and the switch to wheeled bins, the total amount of waste disposed of at landfill sites has decreased. In 2002/03 the Council collected and landfilled the equivalent of 355 kg of waste per person but this reduced to 293 kg for waste per person in 2005/06. Overall waste levels, however, are much higher with a total of 477 kg of waste being collected per person in 2005/06 which is likely to be amongst the poorest performing district councils in England.
- 46 The Council is yet to analyse and assess how effective the recycling collection is in different parts of the district. Although overall diversion from landfill is effective, there has been no robust analysis of diversion rates across the district. This means that Council does not yet know where there is scope for improved efficiencies or where it should encourage people to either start recycling or to become more effective at reducing the total amount of waste they produce. However, the Council is aware of this and has started collecting the data to enable it to undertake this work.
- 47 Whilst the Council has shown a clear lead over the recycling of household waste, this leadership has not been demonstrated with other waste. The Council's trade waste service offers no recycling support to its customers, and there is no real support to encourage local businesses to start recycling their own waste. Although the Council has a recycling scheme within the Council offices this scheme is of a low profile compared to the profile of the Council's promotion of household waste recycling. Consequently, the Council is unable to demonstrate a consistent commitment to its core value of protecting and enhancing the local environment.

Street-scene

- 48 The Council is not ensuring that the whole district consistently meets an acceptable standard of cleanliness. Although there are adequate cleaning schedules, which should ensure that the whole district is cleaned to an acceptable standard, certain issues remain. These include the following.
- A build up of detritus in some town centres. Although the town centres are frequently cleaned, parked cars and a lack of robust supervision has allowed detritus to build up in some car parking bays and pull-ins. This detracts from the cleanliness of the area and causes other problems. In Ellesmere, for example, detritus build up has blocked drainage channels and water is unable to drain away.
 - Poor attention to detail and lack of joint working with others detracts from an otherwise clean and attractive area. Weeds on pavements detract from attractive floral displays in Ellesmere. A noticeably lower standard of cleanliness in some areas, such as paths linking residential areas, detracts from cleaner rural areas.

This lack of attention to detail is a source of frustration to local people who, whilst recognising that overall there had been an improvement in cleanliness, are annoyed that particular areas or problems had not been addressed. Satisfaction with the cleanliness of the district has been declining. In 2003/04, 63 per cent were satisfied with the cleanliness of the district and the Council's own survey in 2005 showed that this had declined to 60 per cent.

- 49 The Council is starting to work with others to maintain the district, but this is still developing and there remain inconsistencies in the overall approach. Co-operative working has led to improvements in some areas. For example:
- the Council worked with the county council to arrange for litter to be cleared when it was too wet to cut grass;
 - co-operation with the county council means that litter is picked before the grass is cut; and
 - the Council assists five parish councils to collect litter within their villages.

However, in other areas there remain clear divisions of responsibility. In some places the county council, district council and local town council maintain land adjacent to each other but to different standards, or clean them at different times. This means that sometimes it looks like the area has not been cleaned effectively, and sometimes litter on adjacent land becomes the source of litter on recently cleaned areas.

- 50 The use of enforcement to reduce litter and fly-tipped waste is still developing. The Council clears fly-tipped waste quickly and efficiently, generally within 24 hours of it being reported. But attempts to prosecute offenders have not been pursued. Monitoring equipment has not been effective. However, the Council does have plans to address this with the purchasing of new covert surveillance equipment.

- 51** Comparison and improvement has been hampered by a lack of capacity within street-scene. Lack of capacity resulted:
- no robust monitoring of the cleanliness being carried out. This means that the Council did not know which areas were not clean and could not compare its performance against those of other Councils. The Council is now collecting this data, but will not be able to make full comparisons for another 12 months; and
 - streets not being cleaned as staff were redirected to ensure that the waste and recycling collections were carried out. A re-organisation within the services has stopped this happening but it is too early to determine the impact this will have on the cleanliness of the district.

Sustainability and protecting the environment

- 52** The Council has a good approach to energy use.
- It has conducted a baseline study of energy use through the Council's buildings and in 2004 set targets to reduce energy use in the main offices by 25 per cent and within the swimming pools by 10 per cent.
 - Following this the Council adopted improvements such as improved insulation and better housekeeping actions.
 - 'Green' electricity is purchased for swimming pools and the main council building. Market Drayton swimming pool operates a combined heat and power unit which, although gas fired, generates electricity supplying surplus energy back to the national grid.
 - The SAP rating (a measure of the energy rating) for council houses has improved dramatically. In 2002/03 the SAP rating of council houses in North Shropshire were among some the lowest nationally at 51 (out of a possible 120). Improved insulation, more efficient boilers and double glazed windows have improved the rating to 75 for 2005/06 (un-audited).

These all help reduce the impact on the environment of providing services, running buildings and helping people keep warm in their own homes.

- 53 With the exception of energy, there is no clear overarching plan on how the Council intends to deliver its core value of 'protecting and enhancing the environment'. There are some very good initiatives but these are delivered in isolation and the Council has no clear plan of how it will ensure that it achieves its core value of protecting and enhancing the environment, and there are key issues which still need to be addressed within the district. These include the following.
- Only 21 per cent of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are in a favourable condition. There is a national target of 95 per cent of SSSI land being in a 'favourable' or 'recovering' condition by 2010, and it is incumbent on councils to 'take reasonable steps to ...enhance and conserve SSSI'. Twenty-six per cent of SSSI land in the district remains unfavourable and not improving. There are 50 hectares of SSSI land at serious risk and this accounts for two-thirds of all such land in Shropshire. However, there has been some recent success in the district, such as Prees Heath, home to a rare butterfly, which has been secured by the charity Butterfly Conservation who have already taken action to reduce illicit vehicles which was identified by English Nature as the most pressing reason for its adverse condition.
 - Some high profile sites in attractive town centres are derelict and overall 2 per cent of developed land in the district is classed as derelict. However, the Council has used its powers to help improve some areas - such as Walford House in Hodnet which after a period of neglect was the subject of a compulsory purchase order and subsequently marketed by the Council. It has now been renovated and contributes to the attractive conservation area.
 - The Council has worked well with others to improve the natural environment. Housing Renewal Area funding was used to purchase a former gas works site in Whitchurch. After decontamination part of the land was leased to the town council to expand the park whilst the remaining land was used as car park for visitors.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 54 The waste and recycling collection is expensive and does not currently represent value for money. The service provided is generally good and has evolved quickly to move, in terms of recycling, from one of the poorest performers to one of the best. The Council has achieved this by investing significantly in the service and in 2004/05 the cost was equivalent to £83.15 per household. This was the most expensive district council in England. Although costs for 2005/06 have reduced to £75.57 per household (un-audited) these are still high and the Council has focussed on improving recycling at the expense of value for money. Some elements which should make a positive contribution to improving value for money do not, such as the trade waste collection which has reported a financial loss for both 2004/05 and 2005/06.

- 55** There is a clear rationale and plan to deliver value for money within the waste and recycling collection. As part of its work within the Shropshire Waste Partnership, the most cost effective way of delivering the overall aims was identified as high levels of recycling sooner rather than later which the Council has delivered. The Council is currently reviewing efficiencies in its waste and recycling collection and anticipates making changes later this year. However, it still remains that the current arrangements are not yet delivering value for money for council tax payers in the district.
- 56** The Council cannot demonstrate value for money over the street scene service. Although the Council has started looking at benchmarking, it has not been monitoring outcomes in terms of cleanliness of the district or satisfaction. Therefore, although it has been able to compare staffing levels and costs, it has not been able to account for how effective the arrangements are, and therefore does not know whether the service is achieving value for money.
- 57** There are areas where the Council has been able to demonstrate and improve value for money. These include:
- changes made to heating and lighting which are reducing energy use in swimming pools and the main Council buildings; and
 - entering into a partnership contract with the county council for grass cutting. North Shropshire District Council does not have large responsibilities for grass cutting in the district - most parks being owned by the town and parish councils. By working with the county council, the Council has been able to benefit from economies of scale and achieves good value for money on grass cutting.

However, these examples are isolated and are yet to be applied consistently across the Council.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 58 The service has begun to demonstrate the capacity to identify key areas for development and the ability to turn plans into improvements that the public will notice. Where the Council has maintained focus it has delivered significant improvements, such as in waste and recycling but the pace of improvement has not been consistent across key service areas and the public do not yet recognise the extent to which some services that they receive have got better. However, the Council is developing the capacity to sustain and broaden the pace of improvement in its work on the environment.
- 59 The Council has a solid track record in improving its waste collection services. Improving its waste and recycling performance is a corporate priority. There has been a planned approach to the development of the waste and recycling collection service with the gradual introduction between 2002/03 and 2005/06 of kerbside green waste collection, wheeled bins for garden and non-recyclable waste and the switch to alternate weekly collections for non-recyclable waste and fortnightly collections of dry recyclables. These changes formed part of the overall commitment to move towards a standard level of waste and recycling collection across the whole of Shropshire and has resulted in a dramatic improvement in recycling performance. On this indicator the Council has moved from the bottom quartile in 2002/03 to top quartile 2004/05 (7 per cent to 29 per cent) at a time when most other councils were also improving recycling. There has also been a reduction on the amount of waste landfilled. The Council has taken the decision to continue to drive up recycling performance and this has led to a provisional out-turn of 38.55 per cent for 2005/06. Local targets on fly-tipping and bulky waste collection have been exceeded.
- 60 However the improvement in waste and recycling performance has come at a price.
- The amount of household waste collected has risen sharply. The Council moved from the top performing to the poorest quartile for this indicator over three years from 2002/03 to 488 kg per head in 2004/05, although there was a slight decrease to 477 kg in 2005/06.
 - Most significantly, refuse collection costs rose from £46.24 in 2002/03 to £83.15 per household in 2004/05 - the most expensive refuse collection service in the country compared with English district councils. The Council is prioritising a reduction in service costs and initial figures show a slight drop for 2005/06 although these are not audited.

- 61** The Council has made slower progress in improving its Street Scene service. Public satisfaction with the cleanliness of streets fell from 72 per cent in 2000 to 60 per cent in 2005 (Council's own data). The service is beginning to implement changes designed to improve service delivery and the standard of cleanliness of town centres has begun to improve. Over 2005 a range of internal reviews and consultations were carried out, including a comprehensive Scrutiny review of the service and these have resulted in a series of planned service improvements. Some of these, such as the merging of teams and increased street cleaning and litter picking frequencies, have begun to have an impact on outcomes for users. Other recommendations are incorporated into the service plan for 2006/07 and as yet their full impact has not been felt.
- 62** The Council is developing its approach to identifying and securing value for money (vfm) and is putting corporate processes in place to achieve this, including a revised procurement strategy. Within environment services there is a developing approach to ensuring value for money. This is better established for the waste services than for other areas.
- The decision to invest additional resources to achieve higher than the statutory recycling target was taken following a consultant's report which indicated that long term costs would be lower if the Council, and its partners, adopted higher targets and invested in these earlier on.
 - More recently the Council has embarked on a review of its waste and recycling collection rounds. Costs for 2005/06 were lower than for 2004/05, and efficiency reviews have already saved the equivalent of 170 operator days. (This review is continuing.)
 - Following the scrutiny review, the street-scene service has been exploring methods to improve vfm including revision of street sweeping routes, and exploration of the potential of partnering arrangements to improve vfm.

Consequently, although the services can not demonstrate value for money at the moment, the approach is developing and has started to deliver improvements.

- 63** Although there is increasing recognition of the importance of securing value for money across the full range of the Council's activities, progress has been inconsistent. Investments in dual fuel refuse vehicles and alternative energy sources at Market Drayton swimming pool demonstrate an awareness of building value for money principles into service planning and delivery. However, there has been no sustained approach to making a reality of Council's core value of protecting and enhancing the environment. For example the use of recycling bins within the Council offices has not been prioritised. The Council has not taken the opportunity to take simple steps to enable it to live out its core values in practice.

How well does the service manage performance?

64 Performance management arrangements are still being embedded. The development of the new community strategy and corporate plan are helping to enable service and corporate priorities to be linked, and there are clear plans for improvement in waste, recycling and street-scene. However, there is less clarity on how performance towards the Council's core values is measured.

65 There is a clear corporate commitment to improving the environment, expressed in the corporate plan through the setting of the following priority outcomes.

- Sustainable communities: as a result of our actions the amount of household waste recycled as a percentage of local household waste collected will be increased and the total amount of household waste will be reduced.

This is supported by clear targets on recycling and the amounts of waste collected, and through local targets such as missed bins.

- Safer and stronger communities: as a result of our actions the cleanliness of land, streets, pavements, footpaths, verges and highways will be improved.

The street scene service has begun to develop a co-ordinated service plan with targets and actions linked to corporate priorities but this is at an early stage of development. Targets are set for cleanliness, and on local issues such as the time taken to clear fly-tipped waste, and further work is planned to develop appropriate performance indicators (PIs) and collect more information on local needs. Therefore the service cannot yet be sure that its targets are all appropriate.

66 There are no targets or actions linked to the Council's core value of 'caring for and protecting the environment.' As a result councillors and officers are not able to gauge if the full range of the Council's services are contributing effectively to this value and services are not encouraged to think about how the work that they do links to it.

67 The collection and use of performance information to manage and improve service performance is improving, but from a low base:

- BV199 was not monitored until the second and third periods of 2005/06; and
- there was a problem with data loss for local PI on missed refuse collections in 2003/04.

The service has acknowledged that targets have not always been sufficiently challenging. Arrangements for challenging targets and outcomes have been introduced in the past 12 months and this is helping services to develop more realistic and stretching targets.

- 68 There are clear plans and timescales to improve value for money. The service acknowledges that it has had insufficient data on value for money and service plans include commitments and time-scales to work on vfm reviews, including:
- reviewing efficiencies and rounds on waste and recycling collections with the intent to reduce costs by the equivalent of £10 per household. Work is progressing on this with clear time scales and responsibilities. Cabinet have taken overall responsibility, and changes are to be implemented in September this year; and
 - following the scrutiny review, street-scene has been exploring methods to improve value for money including revision of street cleaning routes and possible partnering arrangements.

Therefore although the Council can not demonstrate value for money across its environment services, it is taking effective action to make measurable improvements.

- 69 Service planning is becoming focused on the delivery of outcomes that are important to the public. A revised framework for service planning has resulted in services developing a vision of what they want to achieve based on analyses of strengths, weaknesses and past performance. Targets and actions are being linked to corporate priorities but this is at an early stage of development and in some cases work is still needed to collect information to provide a baseline against which targets can be set. It is becoming clearer how services link and contribute towards the Council's priorities.
- 70 Senior officers and councillors have responded positively to the messages set out in the Council's CPA report and have provided active and visible leadership to the process of change that the Council is engaged in. Improving internal and external communication has been a priority and as a result of improved briefing systems and staff newsletters, staff are aware of how their work links to broader corporate objectives. Plans are developing to improve the interface with the public, and have already delivered a new customer contact centre, and there are intentions to develop a Customer First approach to delivery. However, at the moment input from users and stakeholders is under developed and inconsistent within service plans and until this work is complete services will not be able to be sure that their targets reflect the views of service users, stakeholders and partners.
- 71 The use of comparative information to drive performance improvement has been under developed at the Council and work to improve this is still being carried out. The street scene service has recently developed a good understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses but it recognises the need to continue to collect and use knowledge of practice elsewhere to inform service development. The scrutiny review took into account some limited information on practice in other councils and the service is undertaking more benchmarking and collecting the comparative information to inform future service development. Currently service planning is not consistently informed by the use of comparative information.

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72 Arrangements for reporting on and challenging performance have improved and a culture in which the questioning of progress towards targets and outcomes is viewed as a positive way to improve services is being created.

- Monthly performance clinics have been introduced to enable corporate management team to challenge heads of service on achievement of priorities areas of under performance although at present councillor involvement is limited as elected members are only able to participate as observers.
- Scrutiny Boards receive quarterly monitoring statements and Heads of Service attend to report on performance against key PIs.
- Team meetings regularly discuss PI and service improvement targets.

The mechanisms to enable performance to be effectively managed are being developed but there is some way to go until they are embedded.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

73 The Council has invested money in the service to improve performance. Recycling performance has moved from the lowest to the upper quartile over four years as a result of targeted investment. Following the scrutiny review, additional funding has been directed at the street-scene service to deliver improvements in service performance and customer satisfaction. The Council is working well with partners to develop capacity and is committed to develop this further. Additional resources have been committed to enable more staff and equipment to be provided to respond to inadequacies in the service. The Council has demonstrated that it can deliver improved outcomes for the public when it targets resources at under performing areas.

74 The Council has a strong record of partnership working which has helped it to increase internal capacity to initiate and maintain improvements to environment services.

- The Council has, from its early stages, played a leading and supportive role in the development of the Shropshire Waste partnership. This has led to a strengthening of the Council's technical and strategic capacity, and enabled the Council to benefit from expertise in areas such as procurement and options appraisal.
- Through its membership of the partnership the Council secured additional funds from DEFRA, enabling it to meet the partnership service specification ahead of the contract start date.
- The Council has demonstrated that it is willing to give up direct control of the service in return for the achievement of improved vfm and outcomes.
- The Partnership is in the process of securing a new waste and recycling contractor, as part of the overall Shropshire Waste Partnership contract, for the Council.

- 75 The Council is also using partnership working to improve its capacity to deliver shorter term improvements to services although there are some inconsistencies in approach. It has worked with the county council to co-ordinate litter picking to occur before the grass on highway verges is cut. At the Hodnett Bypass the Council works with the landscape maintenance contractor - who also picks litter - to ensure that litter is picked frequently. However, this is not consistent and there are areas where partnerships are not fully developed and capacity is not maximised. This has led to variable outcomes in street-scene across the district.
- 76 There is a developing approach to corporate procurement but its impact has not yet been fully felt. The procurement strategy sets out a framework in line with modern procurement methods and partnerships. The strategy has been implemented over the last 18 months, with processes being put in place over that period. The service is using the corporate guidance to inform a more strategic approach to the procurement and provision of services. It is discussing the possibility of undertaking some rural recycling collections for a neighbouring council as a way of reducing its operating costs and providing improved value for money for both and is investigating partnership working with neighbouring councils for street cleansing and dog warden services. The Council has recently approved the use of external consultants to help develop its approach to shared services further. This will help ensure these intentions are fully developed and explored so that the Council can maximise its impact using the available capacity.
- 77 There has been recent improvement in the strategic management of budgets. This year the council has a known under-spend of £70,000 compared to £600,000 last year as a result of investment in new accounting systems, changing working practices. This provides the framework on which the council can build more effective medium term financial planning.
- 78 Human resource planning has been poor in the past but is improving. Local targets on per cent of food premises inspected were missed in 2005/06 due to the food team being understaffed during the year and information for BV199 was not collected due to lack of dedicated staff resources, despite this being a priority. Service managers have led a focus on improvement and have provided staff with the support and tools to facilitate this. Additional resources have been directed to support improvement including the provision of extra staff to deal with phone queries arising from the introduction of new services. In response to the need to improve the street scene service identified in the scrutiny review, the team's structure and remit were amended to enable the creation of a rapid response team and improve litter picking. Therefore amendments to human resource planning are beginning to result in improved outcomes for the general public.
- 79 The service has learnt from previous problems in its Human Resources practices and has worked with the corporate centre to implement improvements. In the past, performance has been adversely affected by staff sickness and staffing resources being redirected towards introducing new services. The service is attempting to rectify these problems by implementing a revised sickness absence policy with the HR section and creating more posts to deliver in priority areas. This is beginning to help the Council deliver a more consistent service.