

Service Inspection Report

September 2006



Environment - Planning Services

Northampton Borough 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 web site 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

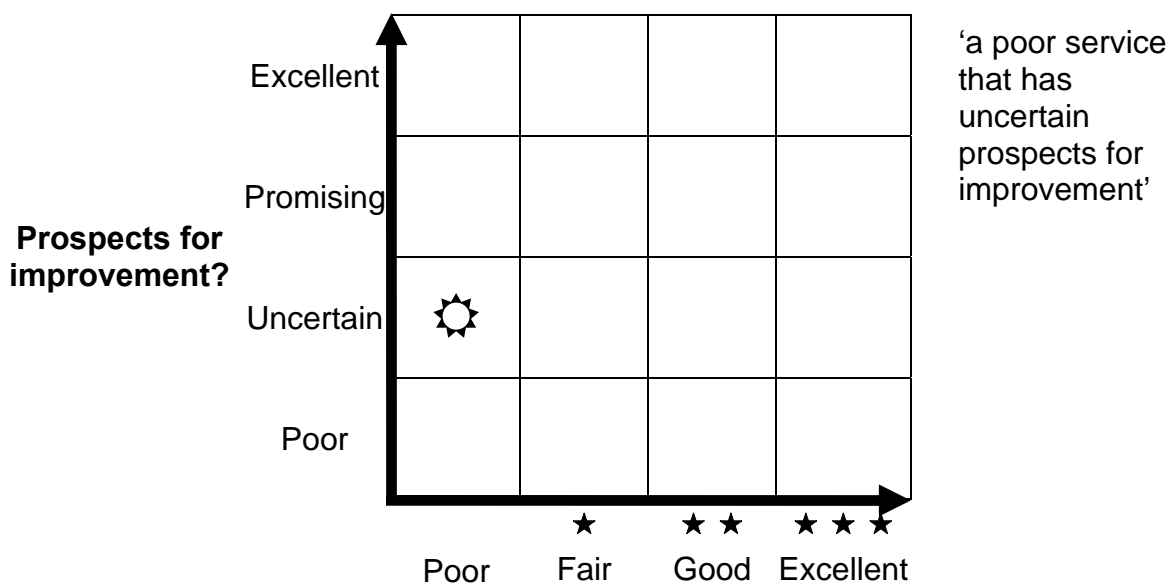
- 1 The Council's planning service is poor. The quality of the individual services that make up the Council's planning services is variable with some services being better than others. The quality of the planning outcomes the service delivers in relation to local and national priorities is mixed. The service does not provide good value for money.
- 2 The service does not focus on the needs of customers and their experience of the service is generally poor. Customer feedback does not influence how services are provided, and the availability of advice to the public is limited. The accessibility of the service is reasonable for those with different mobility needs, but is weaker for those with different communication needs.
- 3 The service has a poor track record in engaging with the public although recently the service's approach to engaging hard-to-reach groups has improved. The service has made limited progress in understanding the diversity of the local community.
- 4 Building control and development control services, the two planning services where customers have the most contact with the Council, both provide a poor quality service to customers since officers are stretched to provide even a basic service. The planning committee is not fully effective.
- 5 The planning policy team provides effective guidance by preparing some good site and policy specific plans. However, the existing local plan is out-of-date and the team has not made enough progress in revising the overall planning policy framework. The conservation function has not had sufficient capacity to both offer advice and develop policy. The planning enforcement team provides a fair service which is effective although it works in an isolated way.
- 6 The service's delivery of national priorities is variable. The service's contribution to environmental sustainability is mixed as is performance in relation to national performance indicators (BVPs). In relation to local priorities, the service has made a little progress in improving customer satisfaction, building partnerships and developing town centre plans. The track record in delivering sustainable communities and housing according to pre-existing growth projections is reasonable, but progress has been poor in developing plans to deliver the higher levels of growth in housing, jobs and infrastructure now required.
- 7 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement. The service does not have a strong track record of improvement. Where improvement has taken place this is generally in response to external influences or has happened only very recently, as is the case with the development of town centre plans and improved telephony within planning services. Improvement in the planning policy and major projects aspects of the service is stronger.

- 8 Political and managerial leadership is weak. Councillors and senior officers provide little vision, or sense of direction for the service or for the development of the borough. Officers and councillors have been distracted by difficult decisions such as deciding how to take forward plans that will deliver the required level of growth, or how to work with partners such as West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC). Councillors and officers have reacted to the growth agenda as a threat rather than an opportunity. Management attention is focused on the day to day operations within the service with little thought given to improvement planning. There are few service or improvement plans.
- 9 Key areas of the service such as development control and building control lack technical and professional capacity and, crucially, service leadership. Both are at risk of service failure if there are further losses of experienced staff. This critical position has now been recognised by the Council and there is a strong commitment to providing the necessary technical and professional leadership through the recruitment of appropriate senior staff and through improving the service's approach to recruitment and retention.
- 10 There is significant recent investment in the service to build capacity in line with the priority now given to town centre development and addressing the growth agenda. This also includes capital resources from external sources. There is a growing commitment to improving value for money from these extra resources, but this is not yet resulting in greater efficiency or better outcomes.

Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed Northampton Borough Council as providing a poor, zero-star service that has uncertain 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

- 12 The service is a poor, zero-star service because:
- the quality of services that make up planning services is variable. Some parts are fair, such as enforcement, while others are poor such as building control and development control;
 - the service does not focus on the needs of service users. There is little opportunity for customers to influence how services are provided and the availability of advice to the public is limited;
 - the planning committee is not fully effective. It is inefficient and lacks transparency;
 - the Council has a dated local plan and has made limited progress replacing it;

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 Environment - Planning Services | Scoring the service

- planning decisions are made quickly but speed is at the expense of a quality service to customers;
- the service is delivering some important outcomes that meet national priorities such as housing and infrastructure, but it has made limited progress in delivering local priorities such as improving customer satisfaction, and planning for further growth within the borough; and
- the service does not provide good value for money.

13 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is no consistent track record of improvements instigated by the service;
- where improvements have taken place these have been in response to external influences rather than as the result of the Council's own improvement planning;
- political and strategic leadership for the service continues to be weak; and
- management of the service is reactive and too operationally focused, and there are gaps at management level of sufficiently experienced staff to provide the required level of professional and technical leadership.

14 However:

- recent developments show some early tangible signs of improvement for the public, such as better response to telephone enquiries and signs of town centre regeneration;
- increased resources have been invested in the service;
- the Council has made a commitment to providing the necessary professional and technical leadership in the service as a matter of urgency and some areas of the service such as planning policy have begun building capacity; and
- the Council has begun to take important steps to improve customer focus and these should positively impact on planning services.

Recommendations

- 15 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 Improve political and community leadership by councillors by:

- *putting in place arrangements that ensure councillors comply with accepted best practice relating to the standards of member conduct and training in planning matters;*
- *urgently developing, with partners, a coherent vision for the borough and west Northamptonshire; and*
- *identifying the opportunities arising from the vision and promoting these to stakeholders and the wider community.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- ensure there is probity in the planning decision-making process;
- improve efficiency, value for money, transparency and the perception of fairness in the way planning business is conducted; and
- provide long term leadership through the development of an enduring vision for the borough.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by November 2006 to coincide with the debate over key tasks in the planning framework (ie the core strategy and growth options study).

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

Recommendation

R2 Establish the strategic direction for the service. Urgently make key decisions about:

- *the improvement agenda for planning services;*
- *the strategic direction of building control; and*
- *the delivery of the service level agreement with WNDC.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- provide a clear framework for improvement in planning services for local people; and
- improve the efficiency and effectiveness (value for money) of the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by November 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the professional and managerial capacity of the service through:

- *developing and delivering an effective workforce plan for the service to address any skills base and capacity issues of professional and managerial service staff appropriately; and*
- *examining innovative ways to recruit and retain staff to make the most of opportunities the Borough presents; terms and conditions of service and through exploring opportunities for collaboration with external service providers and joint working.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- provide a more efficient, flexible and resilient workforce;
- provide the potential for greater stability and capacity building for the future;
- provide a better strategic direction; and
- secure greater confidence in the delivery of the planning function by the public.

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

Recommendation

R4 Develop the service's customer focus by:

- *overcoming cultural resistance in some service areas and by supporting staff so that they recognise the benefits of a strong customer focus;*
- *ensuring clarity at service level for the roll out of corporate customer service initiatives;*
- *promoting interdisciplinary co-operation (between functions and teams) and learning;*
- *improving the range and accessibility of general advice;*
- *developing service specific mechanisms for listening to customers, and the community, and acting on findings, for example reviewing service standards;*
- *publicising service standards and managing services to deliver those standards; and*
- *implementing quick wins such as tackling the uninviting planning services reception area at Cliftonville House.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- meet users' needs and provide a more efficient and effective service;
- clarify the level of service users can expect; and
- make the service more customer driven and provide higher levels of satisfaction with the service.

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

Report

The locality

- 16 Northampton Borough Council is the largest district council in Northamptonshire with a population of about 194,500, living in 85,000 households. It is predominantly urban, but also comprises seven parishes. Minority ethnic communities form 12.3 per cent of the population. The town saw rapid growth from the 1960s when it was developed as a new town. The new town's urban development corporation was wound up in 1985.
- 17 The town is now part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) area identified for economic and population growth as part of the government's sustainable communities plan. The newly formed West Northamptonshire Development Corporation is planned to deliver economic, social and housing growth in west Northamptonshire including Northampton. The population grew by 20 per cent between 1982 and 2002 and it is expected to grow to around 300,000 by 2031.
- 18 The Council is ranked 168th out of 354 local authorities in the indices of deprivation. No wards are in the worst 10 per cent for deprivation but 33 per cent of Northampton's wards are in the 25 per cent of most deprived wards in England. House prices are just below the East Midlands regional average. About 81 per cent of housing is in private ownership. The town was previously a centre for shoe manufacturing and now includes some large employers such as Barclaycard. Unemployment is lower than the national average with lower than average take-up of benefits by working age people.
- 19 When compared with the rest of the East Midlands and England, Northampton has a higher than average percentage of under 15s and 16-24 year olds, whereas the percentage of over 65s is lower than regional and national averages, showing that the area has a young population. Educational attainment is below the regional and national average.
- 20 The town itself has more than 500 listed buildings and structures because of their heritage value. There are 18 conservation areas, many archaeological monuments and areas of archaeological value, 159 historic parks and gardens and five nature reserves.

The Council

- 21** The Council comprises 47 councillors elected every four years. There is no overall political control of the Council with 20 conservative, 17 liberal democrat and 10 labour councillors. The Council has a leader and executive system to govern the business of the Council. This consists of a leader, deputy leader and four other executive councillors all from the Conservative Party. Each has an individual portfolio. These cover:
- community participation and financial strategy;
 - business intelligence, people and e-government;
 - community engagement and democratic services;
 - economy and infrastructure;
 - local environment; and
 - residential operations.
- 22** The Council was assessed by the Audit Commission under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) as 'poor' in March 2004. A cross party improvement board was established in 2005 to oversee the delivery of the recovery plan as a basis for taking the Council forward and delivering improvement. This improvement board has recently been adjourned. There is one overview and scrutiny committee chaired by either labour or liberal democrat councillors.
- 23** The Council employs approximately 1,350 full and part-time employees. The new chief executive took up her post in November 2004. The three new corporate directors were all in post by May 2005, and eight of the ten corporate managers were in post by the end of September 2005. The service head and team leader restructure below this was completed by December 2005 across the Council, although not all posts are yet filled.
- 24** The Council's overall budget for the year 2005/06 is £27.6 million and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is £38 million with a working balance of £2.8 million. In 2005 the Council made the decision to retain its own stock and to achieve the decent homes standard for its stock itself.

The Council's planning service

- 25** The service under review consists of:
- development control;
 - planning enforcement;
 - planning policy;
 - conservation;

- customer services; and
 - building control.
- 26** The inspection did not include specific examination of:
- regeneration and economic development;
 - land searches; or
 - strategic housing.
- 27** The Council was designated by the government as a Planning Standards Authority in 2005/06 for its poor performance in dealing with 'major' planning applications. The service had sufficiently improved by January 2006 for the government to lift the designation.
- 28** The budget for the service in 2005/06 was £1.2 million for development control and enforcement, and £0.8 million for planning policy and conservation. This was an increase of 24 per cent from the previous year. The Council was awarded £528,000 from the government's planning delivery grant (PDG) in the 2005/06. Building control undertook around £766,000 of fee and non fee based activity in 2005/06.
- 29** The service employs around 60 full time equivalent (FTE) staff including a share of support and administration staff within the customer services team, with around 11 professional officers in development control, three in enforcement, five in conservation, 13 in planning policy and nine in building control. Some posts are vacant, or are filled with agency staff. There is a widely recognised shortage of town planners nationally and many councils have been experiencing staff recruitment and retention difficulties.
- 30** The recently formed West Northamptonshire Development Corporation has been created to deliver economic, social and housing growth in west Northamptonshire with Northampton being central to the success of the growth agenda. WNDC has planning powers to determine planning applications classified as 'significant and strategic' for the area of the borough defined as the Northampton urban development area. WNDC also determines town centre applications for all new development and changes of use.
- 31** Along with South Northamptonshire District Council and Daventry District Council, Northampton Borough Council signed up to a six-month service level agreement (SLA) with WNDC in March 2006 to provide development control services for those applications that fall under WNDC's authority. WNDC has no plan-making responsibilities. Plan making remains a responsibility with the Council.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 32** The Council has adopted six priorities within its 2006/07 corporate plan:
- improve Northampton's housing by focusing on and improving its weakest services ie revenues and benefits, void properties, decent homes standard and homelessness;
 - make Northampton a cleaner, safer and greener place to live;
 - invest in the regeneration of the town, providing economic development and growth;
 - listen to local people and provide the services they need;
 - manage the Council's finances effectively; and
 - improve its performance to be fit for all its purposes.
- 33** The more detailed 2005/06 corporate plan also outlines the values that guide the way the Council operates, and sets out targets for each priority that provide the focus for driving and measuring improvement. These include working together in partnership and improving satisfaction.
- 34** The community strategy for the borough was adopted in 2002 and a review of progress conducted in 2004. The community strategy has not been updated, and so it reflects partners' and the local community's aspirations of four years ago. The local plan review 'issues' report at the time was used to inform the community strategy, which includes the following planning related aims:
- conserving built and natural heritage;
 - protecting and enhancing recreational facilities;
 - promoting well designed buildings;
 - supporting sustainable living (including reuse of previously developed land, transport, energy efficiency, flood risk management, biodiversity);
 - encouraging a prosperous, safe, attractive town centre; and
 - promoting suitable locations to attract inward investment and high quality employment opportunities.
- 35** The Council recognises the importance of contributing to the county wide local area agreement which it signed up to in April 2006. In relation to planning (principally the fourth block of the agreement) this means:
- to increase skill levels in the labour market to ensure that labour supply is inclusive and meets the needs of the county's employers both now and in the future;

- to promote growth in the number of enterprises in Northamptonshire, with a specific focus on knowledge economy employers, and to maximise the benefits of their growth all, but particularly for excluded communities;
- to increase the affordability, supply, quality and condition of housing in Northamptonshire; and
- to increase the accessibility of communities to meet their needs and maximise their opportunities.

36 There are no directorate plans; service plans are out-of-date and do not state clearly the key priorities for planning services. Inspectors have therefore drawn the following six subheadings from the above three strategic plans. These headings are based on the priorities, values and targets within these plans which have a bearing on the way planning services are delivered, or are based on the priorities in plans for which planning services is a primary enabler:

- improving satisfaction levels with the Council;
- building strong partnerships, for example playing a strong and influential role in the renewal agenda;
- ensuring growth is of quality and is sustainable;
- striving to eliminate deprivation, for example through access to affordable housing;
- engaging the community and reflecting local aspiration in renewal and growth plans; and
- prioritising town centre regeneration.

37 The Council is also obliged to respond to national planning and other environmental priorities. It is a government priority that planning authorities ensure all growth and regeneration contributes to social, economic and environmental sustainability. In addition to securing a high level of reuse of brownfield land and higher housing densities, this means the planning process should have a positive impact on community safety, energy efficiency and biodiversity. National priorities are also reflected in best value performance indicators and agreed standards of performance for some of these (for example for reuse of brownfield land, percentage of planning appeals upheld). A key indicator (BVPI 109)³, subject to government targets, measures how quickly planning applications are determined.

³ The government's PSA6 target is that 60 per cent of major applications will be determined in 13 weeks, 65 per cent of minor applications will be determined in 8 weeks and 80 per cent of other applications will be determined in 8 weeks by 2006/07. BVPI 109 is the performance indicator used to report performance.

- 38 Plan-making is a key statutory function of the planning service. The Council's adopted local plan is nine years old (1997). The planning policy team began working on a revised local plan in 2000, but by 2002 work was stopped as it was becoming increasingly clear that the government's proposals for reform of the planning system would make further work inappropriate. The Council has since adopted some additional guidance such as guidance on delivering more affordable housing and more sustainable parking, and guidance on planning out crime, which better reflects current government thinking.
- 39 The planning service has to adhere to regional and other guidance. The Regional Spatial Strategy and the Milton Keynes South Midlands Sub Regional Spatial Strategy (both adopted March 2005) currently form part of the statutory planning framework for the borough, as does the county structure plan (adopted 2001).
- 40 In response to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 the Council is required to produce local development documents to replace the local plan. Under these new arrangements, the Council is the plan making authority for both the borough and for a major part of west Northamptonshire where housing and economic growth is to take place (known as the Northampton implementation area or NIA). This means it needs to work closely with the neighbouring planning authorities of Daventry and South Northamptonshire as well as the county council. This principle of joint working is spelt out in the sub regional strategy. It adds a further layer of complexity to plan making, and places an additional responsibility on all partners to collaborate, for example, on the development of a core strategy across the NIA.
- 41 The Council's plans for preparing new local development documents are set out in its local development scheme (LDS), submitted to government office by the March 2005 deadline. The scheme includes two core strategies (one for Northampton and one for the NIA), and four area action plans. The central area action plan (which includes Northampton town centre) is scheduled to be prepared first along with the core strategies.
- 42 The Council signed the SLA with WNDC in April 2006. The SLA spells out the performance targets for each stage of the development control process. The Council is committed to delivering this level of performance for both WNDC and all other applications that fall outside the designated area.

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

Customer care and user focus

- 43 The service's customer focus is poor. This is because customers are not at the heart of service delivery. For example the service does not have any regular arrangements, such as user forums, focus groups or surveys, to find out from service users what their experience is of the service they receive. In addition, the service is not learning from complaints. As a consequence changes to service delivery are not systematically informed by the experience of service users.
- 44 There is limited use of customer service standards within planning services. Few standards have been set, and where there are standards, information on the level of performance against standards is not reliably collected, used or made publicly available. This means it is not made clear to the public what level of service to expect or what level of service is being achieved. Also it means that the Council is unable to ensure improvement takes place.
- 45 The service is not using information technology well in order to help the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning service to the public. For example, there is limited use of IT systems for the storage and retrieval of information to assist case handling and the provision of advice to customers, particularly in development control. Electronic systems do not link up with each other in order to provide improved information for front line support staff and customers or for managers to anticipate bottlenecks or to troubleshoot problems. The result is that applications handling is inefficient. It is over-dependant on professional officers, and provides only limited assurance to managers and the public that applications processing targets will be achieved.
- 46 Performance standards as set out in the WNDC service level agreement are not being met for WNDC applications or for other applications across the borough. Although effort is going into improving systems and procedures, progress has been slow due to the lack of technical capacity and technical leadership in the service. Improvement resources have been diverted from corporate projects such as business process re-engineering, in order to address shortcomings in basic management information within development control.
- 47 Customers receive a fair service in relation to the time taken to determine planning applications and check building regulations submissions. Performance figures from the Council for 2004/05 indicate service levels were already above the government's 2006/07 national targets for planning applications handling and therefore the members of the public are getting faster decisions. Statutory deadlines were reported to have been met for 96 per cent of plan checks in 2004/05 by building control.

- 48 The quality of the service to development control customers has deteriorated in the past three years. For example, the refusal rate for planning decisions has increased, and the rates for withdrawn applications and resubmissions have increased at the same time as opportunity for pre-application advice reduced. Officers and agents refer to a lower priority being given to applications once they are past the eight or thirteen week target date, and to there being less flexibility available to negotiate minor amendments. The service recognises that the deterioration in the quality of the development control service is a direct consequence of concentrating on improving the speed of handling applications.
- 49 The planning committee is not fully effective. For example, the quality of planning committee debate is variable. Some members of the public have expressed a low level of confidence in the impartiality of committee debate. Not all committee members have received training and where training has been given, some members are reluctant to follow the guidance given, for example on how to respond to lobbying, or avoiding getting involved in the detail of individual planning applications. This results in a poor impression to the public of the probity, fairness and transparency of the decision-making process.

Accessibility

- 50 The accessibility of planning services by the public is variable. There are a number of barriers, for example:
- the Council's main planning reception at Cliftonville House is uninviting and offers no facility for self service such as through advisory leaflets or on-line planning services;
 - there are gaps in the availability of advice to the public such as a clear policy on enforcement priorities and how enforcement is undertaken, or how and where planning decisions are made, and what service standards to expect. Gaps in the availability of advice leaflets has led to a greater reliance on the telephone or face to face contact with development control officers;
 - duty officers for building control and development control offer a restricted hours service (no more than five hours a day) for face-to-face advice to members of the public who visit the main planning reception;
 - members of the public experience significant delays in seeing designated development control case officers and in accessing pre-application and specialist advice;
 - it is difficult for the public to navigate planning service web pages without planning knowledge; and
 - planning committee business is difficult to follow due to the use of poor visual aids and poor acoustics in the committee room.
- 51 However the planning services pages of the Council's website are improving, and do provide a range of on-line functions such as submissions, payments and weekly lists of applications lodged. Increasingly applicants are finding emails and web-based services effective in dealing with the Council's planners.

- 52 The Council ensures that applicants and objectors are able to address the planning committee directly through public speaking. Planning reports are written in plain English, and planning committee members ensure reasons are given for decisions. This in line with recognised good practice elsewhere.

Engaging with the community and valuing diversity

- 53 The service's planning policy and conservation teams do not have a good track record of engaging specific hard-to-reach groups, that is, groups whose voices might otherwise not be heard. The recently adopted statement of community involvement sets out a more robust framework for building community involvement in planning matters, and was prepared in response to the government planning guidance requirements.
- 54 The service has a limited understanding of the diverse communities it serves. Officers and councillors are slow to acknowledge that the growing black and minority ethnic communities in the borough, the above average proportion of younger people, or the lower than average education attainment levels of adults in the borough present different challenges to making the service accessible. Little progress has been made within the service in conducting impact assessments on its policies and functions in accordance with the Council's race equalities scheme. There therefore remains a risk that some parts of the community are unknowingly discriminated against in the way services are delivered.
- 55 The service to those who have different communication needs is variable. Receptionists have access to staff that are able to use sign language. Translation services are available for speakers of other languages. However correspondence and printed advice do not habitually make recipients aware of this facility, and no monitoring of the use of languages other than English takes place in order to understand the likely communication needs of service users.
- 56 The service is now improving public engagement in some areas, as can be seen from the approach taken in engaging with specific town centre user groups through the Town Centre Commission. The service successfully utilised expertise from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to build a wide variety of user group forums to feed into and reflect on proposals for town centre development.
- 57 The service offers a reasonable level of facilities for service users who have different mobility needs. For example, the Cliftonville House and Guildhall receptions are wheelchair friendly, private interview room facilities are available and both receptions are well served by public transport and car parking for disabled people. Plans can be sent to customers who are unable to visit either reception or visit the planning website.

- 58 There is a reasonable understanding of the implications of statutory legislation relating to human rights and disability discrimination. For example, the enforcement team is well informed in relation to the impact of human rights legislation on enforcement matters. There is effective use of the well-being team leader by planners in seeking advice over accessibility matters, and by a disabled persons housing group. The local plan requires ten per cent of all new housing to cater for people with disabilities and this is being achieved, for example at St Crispin's.

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

National priorities

- 59 The Council's progress in ensuring planning fully contributes towards environmental sustainability is variable. There are good examples of where the planning service has enabled environmental outcomes such as supporting the development of ecohomes⁴ at Upton, the use of S106⁵ monies to extend CCTV coverage and putting in place management plans for nature reserves and wildlife sites. Although the Council has long a history in contributing to environmental stewardship, there has been little continuity. Delivery against plans has not been followed up, or has proved too difficult. For example progress in meeting the community strategy's aim of improving home energy efficiency is not clear due to a lack of baseline information.
- 60 The service is addressing some national planning priorities as defined by best value performance indicators. For example, development control was already making planning decisions (BVPI 109) in accordance with the government's targets during 2004/05. Over the past five years, development of housing on previously developed land has achieved consistently good rates, in excess of 70 per cent (BVPI 106), which is well above the national target of 60 per cent. The service was performing at the level of the best councils for the best value planning quality checklist (BVPI 205) in 2004/05 and for development control user satisfaction (BVPI 111) in 2003/04.
- 61 There are however weaknesses in significant areas. The service's appeals record has deteriorated. In 2005/06, 55 per cent (un-audited) of appeals against the Council's planning decisions were upheld by planning inspectors. This means there are issues relating to the quality of the Council's planning decisions.

⁴ EcoHomes is the Building Research Establishment's environmental assessment framework. It balances environmental performance with the need for a high quality of life and a safe and healthy internal environment. The issues assessed are grouped into seven categories: energy; water; pollution; materials; transport; ecology and land use; and health and well-being.

⁵ Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows a local planning authority (LPA) to enter into a legally-binding agreement or planning obligation, with a land developer over a related issue. S106 agreements can act as a main instrument for placing restrictions on the developers, often requiring them to minimise the impact on the local community and to carry out tasks, which will provide community benefits.

- 62 The Council has a dated local plan. The plan was adopted in 1997, but over 80 per cent of councils nationally had a local plan of less than five years old or a replacement plan on deposit (as at March 2005). The datedness of the local plan means that planning policies may not reflect more modern planning priorities and national policy. A dated plan also impacts on the quality and timeliness of planning decisions and the ease with which planning applications can be made.
- 63 The timescale for preparing development plans in accordance with the LDS has slipped. The planning policy team successfully submitted the LDS by March 2005 (BVPI 200a), but limited progress has been made in achieving key milestones towards the production of local development documents (BVPI 200b) such as the core strategy. Only one of the 18 conservation areas in the borough has an up to date appraisal or management plan. The target for 2005/06 (BVPI 219) is 25 per cent.
- 64 There are no national priorities relating to building control or enforcement.

Local priorities

- 65 The service does not have a clear understanding of the priorities it is aiming to deliver. This in part is due to the lack of up to date service plans. Inspectors have therefore drawn the following six subheadings from the corporate plan for 2005/06, the community plan and the local area agreement. These headings are based on the priorities, values and targets within these plans which have a bearing on the way planning services are delivered, or are based on the priorities in plans for which planning services is a primary enabler:
- improving satisfaction levels with the Council;
 - building strong partnerships, for example playing a strong and influential role in the renewal agenda;
 - ensuring growth is of quality and is sustainable;
 - striving to eliminate deprivation, for example through access to affordable housing;
 - engaging the community and reflecting local aspiration in renewal and growth plans; and
 - prioritising town centre regeneration.

Improving satisfaction levels

- 66 The service does not have a clear understanding of the level of customer satisfaction with key parts of the service. However, the Council is investing much effort in improving the satisfaction of service users, primarily through improving the corporate approach to customer services. Planning services are participating in this, although commitment to this is not universally strong. For example, some officers still feel their service would be stronger and more effective given a return to dedicated support teams.

- 67 Anecdotally there are early signs that satisfaction is improving. For example, improvement to the website is leading to greater use of the website and email contact with the planners. Customers during the first two weeks of the new automated call distribution system (June 2006) have given very positive feedback compared with previous telephone contact with the Council which relied on answerphones.
- 68 Customers' perceptions of staff are variable. While some service users recognise, through their dealings with planning services, that officers are unhelpful, others refer to knowledgeable and committed staff who will bend over backwards to help.

Building strong partnerships

- 69 The service has not been effective in the past at collaborative working with other services within the Council or with external partners. For example, there has been very little joint commissioning of planning policy tasks or exploration of alternative delivery arrangements to boost the capacity and flexibility within development control and building control.
- 70 Where partnership working by the service has taken place it has been in reaction to opportunities identified by external partners, rather than being led by the Council. For example this was the case with English Partnerships' brownfield initiative, and the Environment Agency's flood plain masterplanning.
- 71 The service is now making some progress in building partnerships to improve strategic planning for the area, as required in response to the growth agenda set out in the Milton Keynes South Midlands sub regional strategy. Over the past twelve months, the Council has been instrumental in establishing working arrangements between the four local planning authorities within the NIA but there is little progress for the community to see at this stage, for example in terms of agreement over what level of housing growth will be accommodated within the borough.
- 72 Some recent progress has been made in building partnerships for improving delivery. There has been an increase in the number of partnering agreements secured by building control, and the three NIA local planning authorities recently agreed to jointly procure all the sustainability appraisals for their draft development plan documents. The policy team has recently built a strong partnership of stakeholders with Building Design Partnership (BDP) to begin assembling proposals for town centre development as part of the central area action plan.

- 73 Internal collaboration remains weak. Services within the Council provide advice and support to development control officers on an informal basis. There are limited arrangements between planning and building control to ensure guidance given by planning complies with the requirements of the DDA⁶ and other regulations such as those relating to means of escape, and energy conservation. Collaboration between development control, building control and enforcement officers is variable, for example in the monitoring of conditions, or in taking a proactive approach to building control or enforcement. Collaboration that does take place is not part of any formal arrangement. A project management approach is currently in place for major applications to enable effective case management to take place, but this is inconsistently applied. This means key opportunities are being lost that would enhance service effectiveness and efficiency as well as customers' experience of the service.

Ensuring growth is of quality and is sustainable

- 74 Over the past five years the planning service has consistently enabled housing completions year-on-year over and above the 1,050 dwellings per year strategic allocation. Recent developments, such as at the St Crispin's hospital site, provide a wide range of dwelling types and styles, including affordable and special needs housing and incorporate the redevelopment of the old hospital building which is listed and so helping to retain a nationally important building. The site is serviced by new bus routes, and car parking is limited in accordance with the adopted policy in order to encourage use of other modes of transport.
- 75 The service has been successful in bringing underutilised land into more productive use supporting government sustainability principles. For example, remediation works at the old landfill site at Harvey Reeves Road have been used to create a development corridor through to Sixfields. Flood prevention works achieved through the development process have increased the land available for development while also contributing to local biodiversity through the creation of reserves with management plans, such as at Storeton's pits.
- 76 The planning service has built up experience of negotiating financial contributions from developers to put in place strategic infrastructure, such as the country park beyond Upton, as well as smaller sums for environmental enhancements. Over 120 S106 agreements with a total of over £6 million are currently in place and are being used to secure a range of community benefits such as improving public transport infrastructure (eg real time bus information and additional bus services), improving community safety (through extending the already extensive CCTV coverage in the town).

⁶ The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995) aims to end the discrimination that many disabled people face. From 1 October 2004, Part 3 of the DDA 1995 has required businesses and other organisations to take reasonable steps to tackle physical features that act as a barrier to disabled people who want to access their services.

- 77 The service is improving the quality of development in line with the principles of sustainable communities, and the government's emphasis on high quality development. Developers at Upton have provided innovative housing guided by the use of design codes promoted by the Council's planning services. The development includes ecohomes and local flooding alleviation features integrated within the overall site, and with strategic flood protection beyond the site. A high standard of urban design is sought through the design strategy outlined in the December 2005 masterplan for the Ransome Road site close to the town centre. The Council's planners encourage high quality development and take pride in the quality of the subsequent development that takes place. For example, the quality of the waterfront masterplan was recently recognised with a national award, and Northampton's planners regularly gain recognition at the East Midlands branch of the Royal Town Planning Institute awards.

Access to affordable housing

- 78 The service is improving its contribution to the delivery of affordable housing but there is a long way to go to meet local housing need which the Council estimates to be 730 affordable housing units per year. A total of 537 affordable homes were built between 2001 and 2005. A significant proportion was built as a result of planning policy requirements on developers to make provision for affordable housing. More demanding policy requirements have since been introduced, (Interim guidance on affordable housing).
- 79 Planners are ensuring that affordable housing is of good quality and fully integrated into housing estates in line with national guidance. For example, affordable housing is being provided in an integrated manner within developments of mixed tenures and housing types. It is hard to identify affordable housing in new developments such as at St. Crispin's and Upton as units have been 'pepper potted' around the sites. This ensures new developments cater for the widest possible range of accommodation needs.

Reflecting local aspiration in renewal and growth plans

- 80 Progress has been poor in reflecting the local community's aspirations in a clear vision that could then be reflected in renewal and growth plans. This is because progress has been poor in relation to achieving the Council's own target for the review of the community strategy, targets for the completion of key tasks within the LDS and developing a borough 'brand' that will assist in creating and sustaining an attractive economic environment for inward investment and regeneration.
- 81 Progress has been poor in relation to the expectation set out within the MKSM sub-regional plan that the three west Northamptonshire local authorities would work towards a common core strategy. The Council has been active in engaging its NIA partners but the completion of this key planning policy task has slipped significantly, delaying other aspects of the local development framework. Fifteen months later (June 2006), timescales have slipped and milestones have been missed, and although political consensus between NIA partners over growth options is closer, it is not fully resolved. A draft joint core strategy is proposed for November 2006 to coincide with completion of the growth options study.

If this is achieved in this timescale, this will amount to an eight-month delay during which time further speculative development proposals may come forward without the benefit of a firm policy framework.

- 82 There has been variable progress in drafting secondary planning policy documents. The planning policy team is effective in identifying community needs through its technical studies which are then used to inform policy development. For example the policy team has ensured that the urban capacity study, recreational space and retail studies and housing needs assessments have been used to update interim policies ahead of the formal review of the local plan. However vacancies have led to a lack of capacity which has meant conservation appraisals have not been progressed at the rate anticipated. Very few conservation statements have been updated since their original designation up to 30 years ago and work on the local list of historic buildings has been delayed.

Prioritising town centre regeneration

- 83 The service is starting to make progress in tackling the challenge of town centre regeneration. However town centre regeneration has been neglected for a long time, and this has been reflected in the very small scale regeneration function in the Council historically. The service is therefore starting from a low base, but its capacity is growing in line with the high priority now given to town centre regeneration.
- 84 Large scale improvements are yet to be realised. To date town centre users recognise environmental improvements such as the new paving in front of All Saints Church, and the ongoing work redeveloping the Derngate theatre. However, there are few other signs of regeneration on the ground, and many signs of underutilised and ageing infrastructure such as the bus station and office space above it. This is borne out by the 2004 retail study.
- 85 The Council is investing in regeneration and growth, and since mid 2005 the planning service has made steady progress in forging partnerships and preparing plans for the revitalisation of the town centre. First and foremost is the work the service has undertaken with BDP in developing the vision for the town centre and with the help of CABE and BDP, in engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. Planners are also working to achieve comprehensive development across sites with multiple landowners that will unlock wider benefits such as improving access and movement into and within the town centre.

Is the service delivering value for money

- 86** The planning service as a whole does not provide good value for money. This is because overall the cost of providing the service is high in relation to the quality and range of the services provided and taking into account the demands the service faces and the outcomes it delivers. There is a growing emphasis on delivering a programme of change leading to greater corporate efficiency but there is no focus within the service on improving value for money.
- 87** The Council is now spending an average amount on its planning services. Planning services' gross expenditure, excluding building control, has increased by 14, 8 and 24 per cent respectively in the three years to 2005/06, to £1.98 million. Nationally, planning spending has been increasing at around 10 per cent per year, reflecting in part increasing fees and the investment of planning reward monies. Planning costs on a per head basis at Northampton have historically been well below average but have been moving towards the average year on year reflecting greater levels of investment in planning in the borough. In 2005/06, based on CIPFA⁷ estimates for similar councils, development control and planning policy total expenditure at Northampton was £10.16 per head of population compared to an average £15.04 for similar authorities. However local demand also needs to be taken into account. The borough is within the MKSM growth area and so faces additional demands. It should also be noted that Northampton is the largest district council in England based on population. This should enable the Council to achieve some economies of scale. Also there are relatively few planning applications submitted per head compared to other districts which should lower per capita costs.
- 88** The quality of the service provided is poor. The service's track record on customer focus is weak. There is an absence of any quality frameworks in which services operate. For example building control does not work within a recognised quality framework such as Chartermark, the International Standards Organisation or the District Surveyors' Association, and there is little transparency as to the level of service aimed at or provided.
- 89** The range of services is limited in that access to individual services is variable, and there is little added value through services working collaboratively. Teams are often too stretched to offer advice to other teams or the public while delivering their own key tasks. This is the case in the conservation and planning policy teams.
- 90** However, the enforcement team is more effective. It offers a good number of routes to reach a satisfactory enforcement outcome such as regularisation, enforcement notices, Section 215 notices, pre-emptive injunctions and prosecutions. The enforcement service has seen the number of enforcement matters grow from 375 in 2002 to 680 (pro rata) in 2006, which is a reasonable caseload for a team of three officers.

⁷ CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting) compiles planning statistics on expenditure annually. Councils participate on a voluntary basis. Around 60% of district councils participate.

- 91 In development control, demands are increasing, with a growing caseload of increasingly complex planning applications each year, and higher service levels demanded by the SLA. However, the 10.5 (FTE) development control planners currently handle 1,600 applications a year, and so do not have excessive workloads compared to the government's guideline figure of 150 cases per professional officer.
- 92 The planning committee and the development control decision-making process are inefficient, and this contributes to poor value for money. There remains a relatively low level of planning decision delegation to officers (BVPI 188; 85 per cent in 2005/06, un-audited). Higher levels of delegation would lead to greater efficiency. For example, over 240 applications are taken to committee every year (2004/05 and 2005/06) and these require considerable officer time in preparing and presenting applications for committee. Furthermore the delegation scheme allows applications to be called into committee in the absence of firm planning reasons, and so too many applications are considered at committee with little value being derived. Around 15 per cent of officer recommendations to the committee are overturned by the committee, and there is a high number of successfully upheld appeals (BVPI 204; 55 per cent in 2005/06, un-audited).
- 93 Councillors too readily engage in detailed planning matters on individual planning applications. This leads to inefficiency since officers' professional objectivity is challenged, and officers are distracted from more pressing matters. Councillors still seek direct access to officers, bypassing the councillor contact centre, expressly set up to improve efficiency and effectiveness of officers' advice to councillors.
- 94 The building control service is losing market share as local approved inspectors win business in a competitive environment. Building control's total fee income from its paying customers has fallen 13 per cent per year since 2003/04. The proportion of fee funded activity relative to all the building control activity of the service has fallen from 72, to 61, to 52 per cent over the last three years. Over the same period the number of professional building surveyors currently in post in the service has fallen from ten to six. Yet it is unclear what value the Council places on this growing volume of non-fee work.
- 95 It is too early to gauge the extent to which the new corporate arrangements for providing customer services are delivering value for money. However, there are early signs that pockets of resistance within some planning service teams could prevent the initiative from being fully effective.
- 96 It is a corporate strength that the Council has been able to deliver cost savings through the root and branch review and that realignment of resources has taken place through a review of budgets over the past 12 months. These reviews have led to major savings across the Council. However resources have been reinvested in the planning service to reflect the corporate priority placed on delivering the growth agenda.

- 97 Despite this many parts of the planning service are stretched and are struggling to maintain service levels and meet changing demands. This is due to inefficient and ineffective working. Business process re-engineering in development control is underway but is taking longer than anticipated. A corporate programme of reviews includes planning services in year 3 (2008/09) but in the meantime there is little enthusiasm to benchmark service costs as they are not considered out of line with services elsewhere. The Council does not utilise or contribute to CIPFA planning and development statistics. There is poor availability and use of management information and this hinders the service's prospects of improving value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 98 Improvements in the planning service have generally been in response to external influences. Some corporate initiatives as a result of the Council's poor CPA rating have led to improvements in the service but these have only happened recently.
- 99 The Council has recently delivered a corporate restructure through all tiers of management including a 'root and branch' review of senior management. This resulted in a reduction in management posts, the creation of three cross-cutting directorates and a new corporate manager tier. There is now a wider corporate understanding by senior managers who have shared responsibilities in relation to planning and an increased awareness of cross-cutting issues. However, understanding and awareness have not been translated into working practice and there are, as yet, few visible outcomes for the public.
- 100 The track record in improving the services as measured by national performance indicators is mixed.
- Development control applicants' satisfaction with the service increased from below the national average in 2000/01 to be among the best nationally in 2003/04.
 - The planning services' Pendleton score, which measures the content and usefulness of the service's web sites, rose from 11 to 15 out of 21 between 2003 and 2005.
 - The delegation of planning decisions to officers has improved from 76 per cent in 2002/03 to 85 per cent in 2005/06 and further still to 90 per cent in the first two months of 2006/07 according to the Council's own figures.
- 101 The service has significantly improved the speed of handling planning applications over the two years to 2004/05. All three categories of application now exceed the government's targets. The proportion of 'major' applications dealt with within target times has increased from 25 per cent to 65 per cent over two years while 'minor' and 'other' applications have increased from 56 per cent to 71 per cent and from 70 per cent to 81 per cent respectively. This has been rewarded by the borough's designation as a planning standards authority being lifted. The Council's own figures for 2005/06 indicate these standards are being maintained. However, this improvement in speed has been at the expense of the quality of service that customers experience.

- 102 There are some areas of deteriorating performance. For example applicants' appeals upheld by the Planning Inspectorate have increased from 27 per cent in 2003/04 to 55 per cent (un-audited) in 2005/06. The government's guideline acceptable level is that no more than 40 per cent of appeals should be upheld.
- 103 The Council is improving the quality of developments in line with the principles of sustainable development but outcomes for the public in other areas are limited. There have been no major step by step improvements in the town centre over recent years that could be identified by members of the public and there has been an absence of strategic plans to deliver town centre improvements. Any improvements that have taken place have been small scale in comparison to the task ahead.
- 104 The Council's very recent track record on town centre development is better. For example, the Derngate theatre site redevelopment is now under way, and a Town Centre Commission has been established and BDP is currently assembling proposals for town centre development as part of the central area action plan. Councillors and officers now agree that the town centre development is the most pressing part of planning for the future of the borough.
- 105 Customer focus within the service has been poor but recent changes made are designed to improve the experience of customers in contacting the service and are now having some effect. For example, answerphones have been removed from planners' desks and an automated call handling system put in place. There are clear signs of immediate improvements in customer service. Until recently information on the nature of customers' dealings with the Council's planning services was not known. This meant that the Council could not use customer information to improve performance. This has now changed.
- 106 The Council can demonstrate a reasonable track record in securing additional resources to enable development to take place. For example over £6 million has been secured through S106 agreements to be used in the borough. Further S106 monies have been secured for education, healthcare and transport infrastructure. Additionally £17 million has been secured through English Partnerships as part of the brownfield initiative and £2 million through the regional development agency to assist in the redevelopment of key sites in the town centre.
- 107 There are increasing levels of investment in the service but there are not, as yet, commensurate improvements in the levels of service. This means there is no demonstrable track record of improving value for money by the planning service. The service has not benchmarked its performance against others, nor has it undertaken any baseline analysis for future performance comparisons.
- 108 The Council has a growing track record in improving the diversity of its workforce. For example the number of staff with disabilities and the number of staff from minority ethnic communities has increased relative to the community the Council serves. However, the Council's performance in promoting race equality and its achievement in relation to the equality standard for local government is poor.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 109 The service is not being managed well, is lacking vision, strategic leadership and a focus on improvement planning. Management of the service is reactive in style, focusing on the day to day and allowing individuals and teams to operate in an isolated way. This means that opportunities to meet corporate goals are being missed or are being resisted in some areas, for example improving customer focus and increasing cross service working. Performance management mechanisms have been ineffective. The corporate performance management framework is in place and is intended to address this but it is not yet embedded in the planning service. As a result it is not effective as a tool to improve performance.
- 110 Political leadership is weak. There is no track record in evolving a vision that sets out what the town will be like to live, work and shop in 10, 15 or 20 years from now. Neither has there been a sense of urgency to create such a vision. Similarly the Council has been slow in setting out a wider economic development vision for the borough. It has been recently agreed that the local university will help to develop it.
- 111 The political consensus of the last two years has not been used to develop a shared vision that could endure through successive council administrations. In a council with no overall political control and elections due next year that may not lead to a single political group in control, co-operation and agreement on some common objectives for the good of the area and its current and future residents are vital. Councillors have been distracted by the difficulty of deciding where growth in the borough should be and have reacted to the growth agenda as a threat rather than an opportunity. However there is now an emerging political reality that councillors need to influence the growth agenda from within and to work actively with partners.
- 112 The service lacks clear direction. This led to the service not engaging with WNDC effectively at a critical period in the development of the SLA. There is continued ambivalence over providing the development control function to WNDC at all. Provision of the SLA is a significant proportion of the Council's development control function, and this uncertainty over the future of the SLA is hampering development of the service's improvement focus.
- 113 Improvement planning within the service overall is weak since the wider strategic framework within which the service operates is weak. Although the Council has been focusing on the improvement agenda, key plans for the future are non-existent or delayed. The community strategy which should set out the aims and priorities of the whole community is out-of-date (2002) and its planned revision has not taken place. The Council's own corporate plan for 2006/07 was agreed three months into the year, is limited to one year only, and has not been influential in shaping service delivery plans which are now also out-of-date.

- 114** The service does not have a vision of what it wants to achieve. Service plans for composite parts of the planning service are incomplete. As these should flow from the corporate plan this is not surprising but it does leave managers and staff with no basis to set goals or personal plans against which their performance can be measured. Where plans have existed, for example the building control plan for 2005/06, this is narrowly focused and lacks a sense of direction. The planning policy service plan was not updated ahead of the start of the 2006/07 year. There is no service or improvement plan for development control and no service plan coverage of enforcement. There is no improvement focus on matters of key importance such as improving customer service, delivery of the SLA, or retaining and developing professional staff.
- 115** The management team within the service lacks technical and professional capacity and leadership. For example the building control service has lacked direction and has seen its fee paying work fall, and its experienced staff leave and not be replaced. This is despite critical weaknesses being identified in the 2002 best value review. Corporate improvement resources have been diverted into development control to fix basic technical functions. Poor management information is sapping management capacity. There is limited capacity within the service's management team to identify priorities, and to overcome some officers' tendency to work autonomously. Senior planners are stretched with caseload work and supervision leaving little available time to progress management tasks.
- 116** The Council has now recognised the urgent need to fill this crucial gap in technical and professional expertise. It has sought professional guidance from the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA's) planning advisory service and from specialist recruitment consultants to identify and implement the most effective solution.
- 117** Performance management information is not being used effectively within the service. The Council introduced a new performance management framework in 2005 which includes monthly reporting at four levels of performance information. While this emphasises a focus on performance, its usefulness in managing the planning service is limited as the performance indicators used (BVPIs) do not cover the whole service and local indicators are not included.
- 118** The service conducts some performance monitoring, for example, of the progress of planning policy tasks. But there is no monitoring across the whole service area and it is not integrated to give a full service picture or establish its relationship to corporate goals and the improvement agenda. Performance monitoring that does take place is process focused rather than focused on outcomes for users.
- 119** Key areas of performance monitoring are not currently effective. The SLA with WNDC prompted establishing service standards in development control. The service has committed to applying these standards in its non WNDC work too. However it has not been measuring its own performance in either, leaving WNDC to provide information on the Council's performance. The service is in the process of developing a system for collecting this information.

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- 120** The Council has developed a three-year programme of service reviews to cover all services but these have not yet started. A planning services review is scheduled for year 3 and so this will not provide the direction needed now.
- 121** The Council corporately is taking steps to improve value for money. Budgets have been delegated from the centre to local managers providing incentives to improve efficiency. The high costs of contract and agency staff have been recognised and a single agency contract with other councils in Northamptonshire is being developed.
- 122** The service is learning from experience but this is not systematic. For example the review of the planning committee by the Overview and Scrutiny planning task and finish group compared practice with other councils and made recommendations to improve the service for users. However it did not look at the broader issues of levels of delegation and member conduct. It is too early to judge the impact of the recommended changes. Learning from the excellent Town Centre Commission engagement process has not been systematic or widespread although the housing strategy consultation has used a similar approach. A corporate process for learning from complaints is being rolled out. However other opportunities to add value are missed, for example repeated requests from inexperienced development control officers to planning policy are dealt with in an ad hoc manner rather than more efficiently in service training or planned coaching.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 123** The capacity of the service to improve has been seriously impaired by the lack of sufficient staff with the necessary skills and expertise. This is being addressed in some areas, such as planning policy where existing resources have been refocused and new team leader and management posts established, and where recruitment is now underway. But the urgent need to improve the position in development control and building control has only very recently been recognised.
- 124** Recent changes to customer services are resulting in improvements to planning service users and the Council is investing significant funds in the service as a whole.
- 125** Key areas of planning services have suffered from staff shortages while there has been a focus on building corporate management capacity. Shortages have been accompanied by high staff turnover and use of temporary agency staff. Experienced staff have left and many current staff are inexperienced. The skills loss over recent years has placed additional pressures on managers in developing and supporting less experienced staff. In some cases staff unsupported by managers, are placed in positions beyond their level of expertise and seniority.

- 126** The service lacks resilience. There is over reliance on a few key members of staff which makes the service vulnerable should key staff leave. Both development control and building control are at risk of service failure, if, for example, one more senior professional officer should leave, even with the current level of work demand. The pressures will increase with the impact of the growth agenda and as the demands of WNDC rise with the increase in large development applications.
- 127** In the past there has been a lost opportunity to recruit and retain good quality planners. The growth agenda offers planners a unique opportunity to work on major, challenging projects in partnership with others. Apart from some recent isolated examples in planning policy and regeneration, the Council has not championed these opportunities to its advantage.
- 128** The human resources (HR) strategy is not effective in supporting the planning service. There has been no coherent approach to the recruitment and retention of planners despite the high risk the continued shortage represents. Although the Council has committed two per cent of its budget to training, this has been targeted mainly on corporate management training. Staff and managers report difficulties in accessing required continuing professional training. There are no workforce development plans or succession planning in the service. Personal development plans and appraisals have been introduced but they are necessarily based on out-of-date service plans and have not been utilised by all staff and managers. Probationary interviews are monitored by HR but some staff and managers report that there is insufficient capacity to complete them fully or on time. Exit interviews are undertaken by HR but there is not yet any data analysis and they have not informed practice. Some training needs analyses of councillors have taken place but personal development plans are not yet in place.
- 129** Councillors are not leading by example. Planning committee members are sitting without the benefit of training running the risk of ineffective decision-making and giving a poor impression to the public. Planning committee meetings are long and inefficient. Planning training is available for all councillors, particularly planning committee members but it is not being attended by some and not applied in practice by others.
- 130** There is now a strong commitment within the service to addressing the shortfall in professional and technical management capacity within the planning service. The service recognises the need to attract experienced planners and to retain and develop its existing officer resources. It is working hard to develop an appropriate set of roles and responsibilities within the service management team, and to make these attractive to would be recruits.
- 131** The customer services team is improving strongly in its work within planning services. There is a strong sense of direction and leadership with enthusiastic staff who are able to point to improvements for users, even though it is very early days. The planning policy, growth and regeneration teams are also making progress following their reorganisation and the subsequent loss of staff over the past 12 months. Further officer resources have been added and there is now a clearer sense of direction and vision within these parts of the service.

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- 132** Increased financial resources have been invested in the service. The service budget has grown over 50 per cent since 2002/03. The review of budgets last year did not lead to service budget cuts but resulted in benefits to the service through a redistribution of resources and this has led to additional front line posts. The Council has used PDG funds in a sustainable manner as two planning officers funded currently by the PDG have been mainstreamed. This exit strategy reduces the impact on the service if the PDG should end. Increases in resources reflect the corporate priority of delivering on the growth agenda.
- 133** There is a growing recognition by councillors and officers of the added value that partnerships bring. For example the Council contributed strongly to the development of the Northamptonshire LAA. There is a growing track record of delivery through partnership. The brownfields initiative with English Partnerships has attracted significant external funding and the Town Centre Commission with CABE demonstrated excellent user involvement.