

Planning Services

North Dorset District Council

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission's Inspectorate under powers 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 coordination 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 and its subsequent amendments.

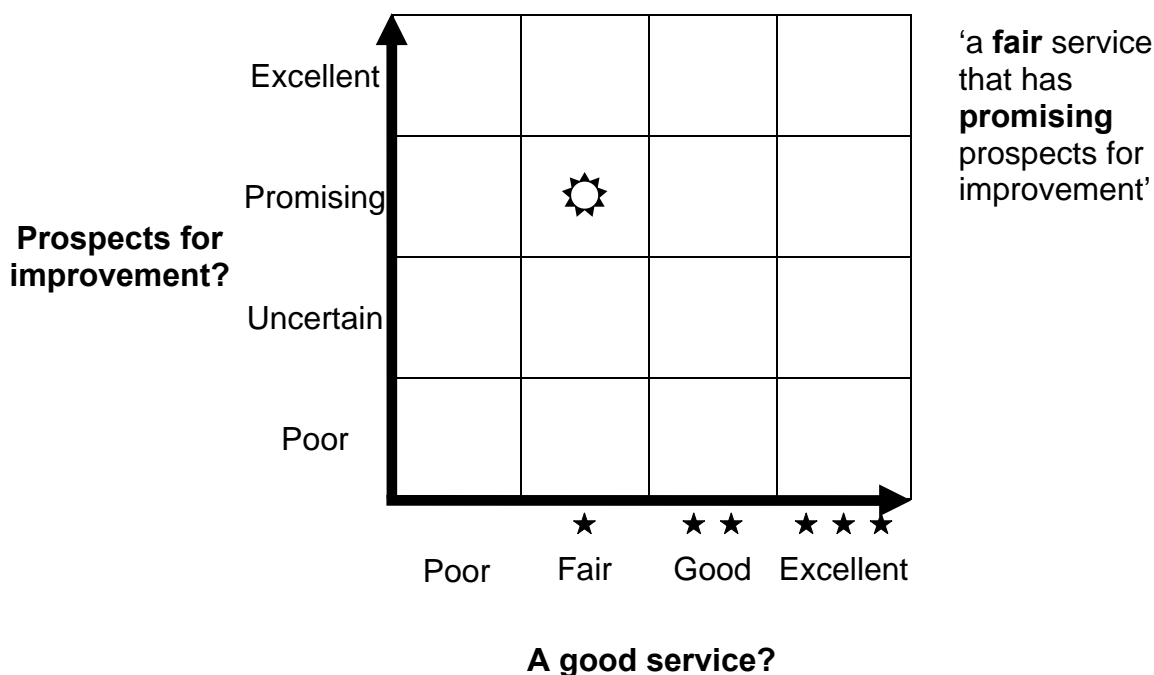
Summary

- 1 North Dorset District Council provides a **fair** planning service which has **promising** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council provides a **fair** planning service because of the Council's previously relaxed approach to residential development which has led to housing oversupply and undermined the sustainability policies in the local plan. Planning policy has not controlled the number, location and type of new housing. The Council has also not consistently met all its targets for affordable housing. In addition, there have been delays in the production of a key element of the local development framework. Customer access to planning services is mixed. The planning service has not yet identified how it will ensure consistent and effective services for all parts of the community. The service's costs are relatively high although they do reflect the Council's objectives in giving a high priority to improving the planning service. However, a clear understanding of these costs is incomplete.
- 3 In the last two years the Council has secured significant improvements to its planning service, in particular from the development control service. As a consequence the Council is no longer a Planning Standards Authority.
- 4 The service meets all national targets for dealing with planning applications. Development is of high quality and this has been recognised by users and residents who rate the local environment highly. The service provides comprehensive and consistent pre-application advice through its development team approach and this is clearly improving the quality of recent development. Planning policy is having a positive effect on the supply of employment land, protection of the environment and the accessibility of new development. The Council is now making more robust decisions which is reflected in a good track record of defending its decisions at appeal.
- 5 Prospects for improvement are **promising** because the Council is developing a positive track record in delivering improvement. Residents and partners are increasingly satisfied with the way in which the Council is protecting and enhancing the local environment. There are effective performance management arrangements in place to drive and monitor progress, and good quality plans in place to support continuous improvement in the planning service. The Council demonstrates effective leadership in driving the improvement in the planning service and is making good progress with its improvement plans. The planning service has the capacity to deliver its plans for improvement. Financial planning is improving and the Council has made proactive use of external funding and partnership working to improve the quality of life in the area. The service has access to the appropriate skills and finances to deliver improvement.
- 6 However, the Council still has poor performance in developing housing on brown field sites, not all plans for service efficiency have been realised, and there are some instances where performance management arrangements have not been fully effective or are incomplete.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed North Dorset 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.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is a **fair**, one star service because:
- there is a legacy of over supply of housing and delays in the release of further affordable housing in the district;
 - the Council has not consistently met all its targets for affordable housing;
 - production of an important element of the Local Development Framework (LDF) has been delayed;
 - customer access to planning services is variable;
 - the planning service has not identified how it will ensure consistent and effective services to all parts of the community; and
 - the service's costs are relatively high and there is a lack of comparative information which is not helping the Council understand its costs.

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.

- 9 However, strengths include:
- effective decision-making which is resulting in high quality developments that have been recognised by the public and by national design awards;
 - significant improvements to service delivery and better outcomes for users and the community;
 - all national targets for dealing with planning applications are being met;
 - comprehensive and consistent pre-application advice through its development team approach which is clearly improving the quality of recent development;
 - an up-to-date local plan and more recently the Council has made good progress towards producing the local development framework (LDF);
 - effective planning policies on the supply of employment land, protection of the environment and the accessibility of new development; and
 - robust decision-making supported by a good track record of defending planning decisions at appeal.
- 10 The service has **promising** prospects for improvement because:
- it is developing a positive track record in delivering improvement;
 - residents and partners are increasingly satisfied with the way in which the planning service is protecting and enhancing the local environment;
 - there are effective performance management arrangements in place to drive and monitor progress, and to support continuous improvement in the planning service;
 - the Council demonstrates effective leadership in driving improvement in the planning service;
 - the Council has robust plans for service improvement which address service weaknesses such as customer access, service efficiency and ICT;
 - the service has the support, skills and capacity to deliver its plans for improvement, and the service is making good progress in implementing its improvement plans;
 - partnership working is used effectively to increase capacity; and
 - financial planning is improving and the Council has made proactive use of external funding to improve the quality of life in the area.
- 11 However, the Council still has poor performance in developing housing on brown field sites, not all plans for service efficiency have been realised, and there are some instances where performance management arrangements have not been fully effective or are incomplete.

Recommendations

- 12 Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for local people and the Council. We identify the approximate costs², the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these. In this context we recommend that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Provide clearer and more timely planning policies and guidance for the benefit of users and the community by:

- *ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing by developing appropriate and consistent housing policies;*
- *engaging with key partners such as the Government Office to discuss any changes in timetable to produce the LDF core strategy; and*
- *producing more appropriate design guidance that clearly set out the Council's expectations for development now and in the future.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- improve the quality and sustainability of development in the district;
- provide users and the community with good quality and robust policies that can stand up to challenge and appeal;
- keep key partners engaged in the planning policy process; and
- improve the quality of life for people in need of more affordable housing.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the Council's approach to understanding and then delivering better value for money by:

- *engaging with other councils with high performance and low costs, to help understand costs and how to manage them better;*
- *exploring charging for development team advice; and*
- *ensuring that IT systems are fully maximised by improving the accessibility of electronic information, and fully utilising mobile technology.*

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.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- improve the understanding and delivery of value for money (VFM) by establishing a clear baseline of costs to judge any future improvement in VFM; and
- maximise IT systems to make services more efficient and effective.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 North Dorset is a predominantly rural area which includes the towns of Blandford Forum, Shaftesbury, Gillingham and Sturminster Newton. North Dorset continues to experience a high rate of population growth, high house prices, low wages and an ageing population. Average earnings within the district are £342 per week, below the national average of £402 per week. House prices are high at an average of £195,075 compared to an average of £163,693 for England and Wales. North Dorset has one of the highest ratios of house price to earnings in the country.
- 14 Affordable housing and a limited transportation network are major problems for the District's sparse and mainly rural population. Most roads are single carriageways and narrow lanes making travelling difficult across the district. Rail links are limited. The majority of the workforce is employed in the service sector and unemployment is low at 0.7 per cent. The population of the district is currently 65,700. The proportion of people from ethnic groups other than 'white British' is 3.4 per cent which is below the national and regional average.
- 15 The district has a high environmental quality. It contains two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), 45 conservation areas, 2,500 listed buildings, 155 scheduled ancient monuments, 13 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (one of which is a National Nature Reserve), and numerous important sites of nature conservation.

The Council

- 16 The Council has a Conservative administration. There are 15 Conservative, 12 Liberal Democrat and 6 Independent councillors. The last full election was in May 2003.
- 17 The Council employs 257 full-time equivalent staff and its net revenue expenditure in 2005/06 was £5.9 million. The band D rate of council tax is amongst the ten lowest in England, and until recently the Council's strategy had been to increase tax towards the national average for districts in order to fund service improvement. However, in July 2005, the Government announced its decision to cap the council tax levied by the Council. This led the Council to cut its budget in 2005/06 by £350,000 and to initiate a review of future spending plans aimed at reducing net expenditure by approximately £2.5 million over the next five years.

- 18 The Council was scored as **weak** in the CPA inspection in 2004. It then agreed an improvement plan which sets out its programme for improvement for 2005 to 2008 under the Council's six priority themes, with 31 supporting project plans. Delivery of this is monitored by a programme board, which includes councillors and representatives of partner agencies. To complement this, the Council has successfully secured capacity building funding from the government to increase its capacity to manage change and improve services. The Council has adjusted the allocation of responsibilities between the three general managers with a new general manager for Development and Resources.
- 19 In December 2005 the Council was judged as progressing well in addressing the issues raised in the 2004 CPA report. The progress assessment found a number of positive improvements including a more participative culture and better sharing of learning. The assessment also found that the Council continues to give effective community leadership and has invested in improved ways of working. However, the assessment found shortcomings in articulating the Council's ambitions and weak links between service plans and corporate priorities.
- 20 The Council is engaged in a pilot Local Area Agreement and is leading on the affordable housing element of the pilot across the county. The Council has also led the delivery of the county-wide target for affordable housing across Dorset.

The Council's planning services

- 21 The Council is a Local Planning Authority, with district level functions within a two tier system of local government. The planning service carries out the following functions.
- Preparing the district's Local Development Framework (LDF) and delivering the Local Development Scheme (LDS) which comprises development plans, associated documents and guidance.
 - Development control and enforcement.
 - Historic conservation and design.
 - Building control.
- 22 The Council decides approximately 1,400 planning applications each year with a high number of applications for listed building and conservation areas. In 2005/06 the Service had a net cost of £963,100 and it employed 42 FTEs. Poor performance in deciding planning applications led to the Council being a 'planning standards authority' from 2003/04. A programme of support to guide progress was provided by the government and improvements in performance removed this designation in 2005.
- 23 The services which comprise the Council's planning service were given a high priority by the Council and have not been subject to budget savings. Reductions in the environment service (which includes conservation and design services) have been limited to those areas which do not have a direct bearing on planning.

- 24 This inspection of the Council's planning services considered the effectiveness of the above service activity and approaches in meeting local needs, achieving value for money, delivering improvement, managing performance and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to improve services. The building control service has also been considered in terms of how it supports the planning function.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25** The Council has adopted the county-wide community strategy as its own because it believes the problems facing Dorset are best tackled more strategically and in partnership with other councils and organisations. The Community Strategy for Dorset is based on regular analysis and consultation. Four specific community strategies are in place for each of the four market towns and surrounding areas in North Dorset. The Council's vision for the people of North Dorset is 'where thriving and balanced communities in our market towns and surrounding villages build economic prosperity while safeguarding our unique and diverse environment'. The vision is supported by six strategic themes in the corporate plan which are: access to services; building corporate capacity; community planning and leadership; community facilities; economy; and the environment.
- 26** The first three themes are the Council's improvement priorities and were identified in its CPA improvement plan following wide consultation. This plan has been adopted as the Council's corporate plan and contains 31 improvement projects. Those particularly relevant to the planning service include:
- improving the Council's approach to developer contributions;
 - deliver the development control improvement plan;
 - produce the Local Development Framework (LDF);
 - deliver further town centre enhancements; and
 - provide sufficient affordable housing.
- 27** The Council has annual service plans to guide service delivery. Objectives are the same for the Development Control, Planning Policy, Building Control and Environment services. These objectives are:
- to foster sustainable and safe development;
 - to ensure efficient and effective service delivery including balancing the speed and quality of decision-making; and
 - to promote high standards of customer care.
- 28** Service plans are well integrated with other key plans. They reflect the Council's Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) strategy, the Customer Access Strategy, the Diversity and Race Equality Scheme, the Crime Reduction and Disorder Reduction Strategy, and the Medium Term Financial Plan.

- 29 The Council's planning policy objectives are set out in the district-wide Local Plan adopted in January 2003. The Local Plan seeks to concentrate development in market towns and encourage sustainable communities in line with the Council's vision and approach to community planning. The Local Plan also seeks to protect the environment, address key issues identified in the Community Strategy for Dorset such as affordable housing, and reflect national priorities, such as renewable energy.

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

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 30 The Council's previously relaxed approach to residential development has led to housing oversupply and undermined the sustainability policies in the local plan. Planning policy has failed to control the number, location and type of new housing. The Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole Structure Plan requires North Dorset to accommodate 347 additional homes each year between 1996 and 2011. The annual monitoring report shows that up to March 2005, 443 additional homes have been built each year greatly exceeding the structure plan requirement. There is housing over-provision in all of the district's towns, with the exception of Shaftesbury, although the greatest over provision has occurred in the rural areas. The Council planned to accommodate 1,260 homes in rural settlements between 1996 and 2011. By March 2005, 1,399 had already been built, significantly exceeding the annual requirement. The overprovision of housing in the rural areas stems from the Council's failure to restrict local plan settlement boundaries around rural villages. Until 2004 it continued granting planning permission in village locations contrary to the local plan. This has undermined the local plan's intention to focus new housing development on the four market towns.
- 31 Inconsistent decision-making in the past has failed to control the supply of housing. For example, the local plan contains an allocation for 680 new homes on land to the east of Shaftesbury. The planning application has been 'called in' and the government is now deciding the future of the site because of concerns that there is an over supply of housing in the district and services in Shaftesbury may not be able to support large scale housing growth. This is creating uncertainty in relation to the delivery of community infrastructure linked to the development, most notably the 35 per cent of the new homes that would be affordable.

- 32 The service has not consistently met all its targets for the delivery of affordable housing. The local plan established a target for the Council to deliver 90 new affordable homes each year between 1994 and 2011. While the Council met this target in three separate years since 1994 it failed to achieve it in the three years up to 2004/05. The majority of housing sites that have come forward have been too small and have not met the Council's thresholds for affordable housing. For example, between January 2004 and April 2006 none of the 47 planning permissions for residential schemes granted in Blandford Forum exceeded the threshold for affordable housing. The district wide supply of affordable housing sites has also been restricted by the delays in bringing forward a major allocation at Shaftesbury. However, the Council did deliver 123 affordable homes in 2005/06 and it does have a good track record of providing rural affordable homes through exception site policy with nine completed in 2003/04 and 19 in 2004/05.
- 33 There are instances in the past where the Council has made questionable planning decisions. For example, during the late 1990s the Council granted planning permission for a number of agricultural workers dwellings. One application was for a substantial dwelling in open countryside, the size of which we believe could not be justified on the grounds of the needs of an agricultural worker. The Council recognises that this type of development is inappropriate and uses this example for training purposes as an example of poor quality decision-making. This type of decision is unlikely to happen again but because the house is still under construction it is a visible legacy of poor decision-making.
- 34 The production of a key element of the LDF has been delayed. In July 2005 the service held five stakeholder focus groups each dealing with the key themes of the core strategy covering: the environment; travelling; living; the economy; and housing. From these groups the service identified a broad range of issues and stakeholder priorities, which it then linked to the Council's community planning work. Formal stakeholder feedback from the sessions demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction. In parallel with the consultation work, the service is updating key policy areas such as: housing need; review of employment land; and urban capacity. However, loss of staff and uncertainty relating to the timing of the regional spatial strategy mean that the timetable for the adoption of the core strategy has slipped by three months. Revisions to timetables at this early stage have implications for future key tasks which in turn could delay the planned adoption of the core strategy by September 2008.
- 35 General design guidance is limited. They are not supported by clear illustrations of good design. The service has not produced formal guidance setting out its preferred approach to areas such as house design, conservation and advertisements. This has resulted in some users complaining of inconsistencies in conservation advice. More guidance is planned as part of the local development scheme (LDS) but the Council's current expectations for high quality design are not well communicated to the community, to users or to developers.

- 36 However, more recently the Council has made good progress towards producing the local development framework (LDF). It has produced a LDS setting out the contents of the LDF and associated key target dates for its production. Research has been carried out on the provision and quality of open space, housing needs, employment land, and urban capacity. In addition, it has produced a statement of community involvement (SCI) that forms the basis for community engagement in the planning making process. The service has agreed the LDS with the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) and the SCI was assessed by the Planning Inspectorate during May 2006. Partners are positive about this progress and the service does not anticipate major changes to the SCI.
- 37 The Council's local plan has been effective in a number of instances. It was adopted in 2003 and provides a policy framework for the Council's planning decisions up to 2011. The local plan focuses development on the district's four market towns. This aims to make development more sustainable and links well with the Council's approach to using the four towns as centres for community planning. A large supermarket was recently built in Gillingham after much negotiation and in accordance with policies on restricting out-of-town retail development. Renewable energy is actively promoted through energy efficiency, use of recycled materials, and green travel plans. A number of low energy use housing sites have been developed, and the Council promotes and insists on national sustainability criteria and accreditation schemes. Community safety criteria are also mainstreamed in the local plan and a number of housing schemes have benefited from the Council's expertise in this area. Fear of crime in the district is consistently low and relevant design criteria are well used.
- 38 Planning policy is having a positive impact on many aspects of development in the district. The annual monitoring report produced in December 2005 identifies that:
- the number of agricultural buildings lost to other uses has fallen from 37 to 4 between 2002/03 and 2004/05;
 - no planning permissions were granted in the flood plain or in areas of special protection in 2004/05;
 - there is a good range of employment sites and the development of employment land - at 2.9 Ha each year - is ahead of the local plan target of 2.35 Ha; and
 - new development is located in sustainable locations, with more than 80 per cent of development within 30 minutes of key community facilities by public transport.

Planning policy is promoting development in appropriate locations and supporting employment while protecting important environments.

- 39 The Council has clear guidance for securing planning contributions from developers. Since 1999 the Council has adopted and refined guidance that clearly sets out the level of developer contributions towards local infrastructure. Developer contributions include education; transport; community building; sports provision and play areas. The guidance sets out the expected contribution for each new home adjusted according to the town in which it is to be built. This increases the clarity and transparency of the planning process.
- 40 The Council is now adopting a more structured approach to collecting and spending developer contributions. It has established a developer contribution improvement project with key tasks to collect outstanding contributions, establish a common data base for contributions and a clear protocol for spending the money. The Council is now collecting, recording and spending developer contributions that are expected to exceed £6.5 million by 2011.
- 41 The service deals with planning applications quickly and efficiently. In 2004/05 the service only met one of the three national targets for dealing with planning applications. However, unaudited figures for 2005/06 show that it has met and exceeded the targets in each of the categories. In addition, the service's performance over the last three quarters shows a steady, sustained improvement. To support its improved performance, the service has increased the rates of delegation; currently in excess of 90 per cent of planning applications are decided by planning officers rather than by planning committee. It has introduced three weekly formal pre-application meetings with developers and holds regular meetings with case officers to identify issues early and applications that might exceed the target of eight or 13 weeks. Dealing with planning applications in a timely fashion is a key feature of a quality planning service as well as being a high national priority.
- 42 Robust decision-making is resulting in good quality developments. The reduction in the time taken to deal with planning applications has not affected the quality of planning decisions. The service can demonstrate numerous schemes where its influence has improved the quality of the development. For example:
- the quality secured through negotiation on the Brynston Hills residential scheme in Blandford Forum which subsequently won a national design award; and
 - the improvements to the design of the residential scheme on the former community hall site in Sturminster Newton. The hall has been relocated into a new mixed use scheme in the town centre.

- 43 The Council encourages good design. There is a clear improvement in the quality of recent development. This has been recognised by users in council wide and county council community surveys. Village design statements are encouraged. A number of contemporary developments have been built, many receiving national design awards. The Council gives its own design awards and the North Dorset People and Places Award Scheme covers a broad range of initiatives spanning voluntary work and achievements of local businesses. It also includes categories for new housing, building and conservation and environmental contributions. The inclusion of design and conservation in broader awards emphasises the links between planning and the wider community.
- 44 The service has a structured and effective approach to enforcement. It has produced a risk based approach to breaches of planning that allows officers to prioritise case work and decide whether formal enforcement action is justified. In 2005/06 the service met its standard in responding to complaints within 15 days in 71 per cent of cases. The service also closes cases where no further action is justified and informs interested parties. This prevents a backlog of unresolved cases from building up. In 2005/06 the service closed 313 cases, more than the 282 new ones. Councillors receive a regular report detailing the type of enforcement action taken and its progress. The building control service also monitors new development and works well with the enforcement section. This arrangement is governed by formal procedures. The approach to enforcement ensures that action is proportionate, risk based and maximises impact.
- 45 The reasons for the Council's planning decisions are clear. Planning applications that are reported to planning committee are supported by comprehensive committee reports that set out the planning arguments. In addition, officers support delegated decisions with short reports. The decision notices include clear reasons for approval or refusal, as appropriate, and where councillors disagree with officers' recommendations at committee the reasons for their decision are recorded. The high quality of the decision-making is supported by the Council's record on making robust decisions, as evidenced by its performance on defending decisions on appeal. Between March 2004 and February 2006 the Council successfully defended 85 per cent of its decisions. Over the same period it successfully defended 59 per cent of the appeals resulting from councillors refusing planning permission contrary to officers' recommendation. This success rate is not due to the Council's reluctance to refuse planning permission as refusal rates over the period were 22 per cent, compared to the national average of 16 per cent. The Council's decisions are therefore robust.

- 46 The Council's current approach to probity in planning decisions is sound. The Council has put in place a clear and effective protocol for councillor and officer relations and a specific code of conduct for members of the development control committee. All councillors must be trained prior to making planning decisions. Where concerns are expressed over councillors' behaviour, there are clear procedures to ensure that their actions comply with the agreed standards. The Local Ombudsman found no cases of maladministration in the 28 planning related complaints received between 2004 and 2006. However, there have been cases where councillors' actions have failed to meet expectations. The Standards Board decided in March 2005 to disqualify one councillor for four years based partly on his treatment of Council staff and reprimanded another councillor for failing to declare an interest in relation to a planning application. The Council has arranged further training for councillors on acceptable conduct between staff and councillors and when to declare an interest in relation to planning applications.

Access, customer care and user focus

- 47 The Council's planning service has a good understanding of the needs of the majority of the local population. The service has carried out widespread consultation as part of its open space audit in 2005, with its statement of community involvement, and uses the results of county-wide consultation such as on the community strategy and from a Liveability survey in 2005. The development control improvement plan was also shaped by consultation with partners. Results of consultation have resulted in more focused action plans, and clearer policies on open space with fewer play areas but of higher quality. The service consulted 300 stakeholders on its customer charter in March 2005 and this produced a broad range of comments that the service used to amend the charter. Consultation resulted in a more comprehensive development control service charter which clearly sets out how the service will interact with its users.
- 48 There are customer service standards covering all parts of the service. Customer charters and business plans contain links to these. For example, the Planning Policy Business Plan 2005/06 contains a customer promise that commits the service to the council wide service standards and sets out further specific standards. These are to develop planning policy in consultation with the community and to help people to understand planning policy. The promise also commits the service to working within the statement of community involvement. These standards place users and the community at the centre of the policy function and have resulted in a number of well managed community road shows.

- 49 Users have good access to planning advice. In 2005 the service introduced a development team approach that meets every three weeks. The development team includes representatives from all planning services and experts who can provide advice on flooding, contamination, highways and trees. Developers can present their schemes at the meeting in order to obtain the Council's initial response. Staff and users find the approach very useful. However, the Council does not have clear criteria identifying those schemes that should be presented to the development team, and discussions at meetings are not recorded in a systematic way. Overall, the development team approach allows the Council early and comprehensive input at an early stage and encourages better quality design. The service is currently developing the approach and piloting the use of pre-application agreements on behalf of the national Planning Advisory Service.
- 50 Customer access to the planning service is steadily improving. All council receptions have an induction loop and reception staff are welcoming and helpful. Staff are given regular training on customer service. When members of the public request planning files they are given the whole application file apart from any privileged information, typically legal advice. This helps users to understand the basis for the Council's decisions. Meetings of the development control committee are accessible. The Council holds these meetings in the Council Chamber which has direct, outside, level access with parking for people with disabilities immediately adjacent to the main entrance. Members of the public are allowed to address the meetings in accordance with clear criteria and good use is made of electronic audio visual equipment to display plans and supporting information such as photographs. The meetings are well chaired and agendas are freely available. The conduct of the meetings allows the public and councillors to understand what is being proposed. Planning meetings have also taken place in more rural locations if there are particularly contentious local issues on the agenda. As a result, public attendance at these meetings has been high. The Council has also carried out surveys of the public at council meetings, finding the public to be generally satisfied with the quality of meetings.
- 51 The planning service website provides an acceptable level of planning information. The site provides access to planning guidance, the local plan and draft local development framework documents. In addition, users can view weekly lists of applications submitted to the Council, development control committee agendas and minutes, and submit electronic planning applications. When the government carried out its national survey of Council planning websites in May 2005, North Dorset scored 16 out of a possible 21 points placing the Council 75th out of a total of the 354 councils surveyed.

- 52 However, customer access is limited in some important areas. Development control committee meetings start at 10.00 am. This reduces the ability of people who work to attend. In addition, the Council recognises that day-time committee meetings may prevent some people from standing as councillors. The website does not allow users to search for new or older planning applications or to view plans submitted with planning applications. This means that once notified of a planning application, it is necessary to visit the Council or parish council offices to view the detailed drawings, rather than being able to view those details on line. This is particularly significant in North Dorset given the rural nature of the district and the difficulty some people may have in reaching parish or Council offices.
- 53 The planning service's current reception facilities are poor. The reception area does not provide a good environment for users to hold discussions with planning staff. This reception is separate from the main reception, located on the first floor. Although it is served by a lift, it is located some distance from the building's main entrances and allocated parking for people with disabilities. Reaching the reception can therefore present a number of accessibility challenges. In addition, the reception lacks lowered counter space and public computer access, and has an insufficient number of private meeting rooms. However, the Council recognises this and has clear plans to address these issues by integrating the reception into the corporate customer contact centre.

Diversity

- 54 The Council is raising awareness of diversity at a corporate level and is integrating policies into service planning. It has adopted a diversity and race equality scheme that establishes a broad definition of diversity. Despite a slow start, the Council has achieved level two of the race equality scheme and is making good progress towards level three. There are good links between the scheme and service business plans, demonstrating a consistent commitment to diversity throughout the organisation.
- 55 The planning service's understanding of diversity issues in the district is improving. It has produced an equality impact statement relating to the production of the local development framework. The statement of community involvement (SCI) sets out a clear commitment to systematically integrate equality into policy development, identifying rural isolation as a particular issue. This statement is also linked with the Council's youth strategy. The service is also accessing minority and hard to reach groups through community planning. The Council's community workers, supporting the four community partnerships, have the specific task of identifying and working with hard to reach groups. This work identified a specific need for information on business start up and planning advice from one particular ethnic group and the Council responded by organising a breakfast seminar. Close links with the Council's community planning exercises is resulting in more focused consultation and a better understanding of local need.

- 56** The service has taken steps to increase its accessibility to diverse groups. The service's leaflets are available in large print and braille and can be translated into different languages on request. Translation is also provided for key policy documents such as the SCI. The Council subscribes to Language Line and is working with disability groups in order to improve general access across all Council services. Accessibility issues are well considered by the building control service and development control consults with them on a regular basis. The Council has taken steps to meet the needs of the gypsy and traveller community and granted planning permission - despite local opposition - for a temporary travellers' site to coincide with the annual Great Dorset Steam Fair. This has resulted in better facilities for an increased number of travellers and reduced the risk of any conflict with local communities. In 2005 the Council received a 'diversity in action' award from Dorset Police in recognition of this work.
- 57** However, there is a lack of clarity on how the statement of community involvement will be delivered. Consultation and engagement with the four community workers is identified but it is not clear how their views will be consistently acted upon. The statement sets out an intention to contact hard to reach groups but does not clearly identify how and when this will be achieved. There is a risk that the views of some parts of the community will be missed.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 58** The service is unable to demonstrate a detailed understanding of its costs in comparison with other councils. Benchmarking data has not identified areas where cost savings can be made. This is despite taking a lead in securing cost information from other comparable councils. So far, the Council has found that other high-spending councils are recording their costs in different ways which is making direct comparison difficult. As a consequence, baseline costs are not known and the service is unable to demonstrate cost efficiency.
- 59** The planning service's costs are high. In 2004/05 the planning service cost £18.02 per head of population. By this measure the Council has the 18th highest planning cost of 237 district councils and is second to West Dorset in the county. The Council does receive higher than average numbers of planning applications per head of population and if cost is considered in relation to workload the Council drops to 76th highest cost. However, in relation to its nearest neighbour group, this still makes the Council the most expensive. The high cost of the planning service was one reason why the Council scored a two out of four for its first Use of Resources assessment on value for money.

- 60 However, the planning service is a high council priority and therefore its relatively high cost reflects the Council's intentions to improve the service. From 2003/04 to 2006/07, the Council increased its investment in the planning service. This has resulted in a marked improvement in service delivery, particularly in development control. Investment has focused on the right areas and in improving services to users and the quality of decision-making. Investment has also resulted in a more effective approach to developer contributions. The recently-appointed compliance officer has recovered £2.3 million in infrastructure contributions owed by developers under legal agreements and only £20,200 is outstanding. The service is therefore now more effective and efficient.
- 61 Senior management and councillors are challenging value for money. Business plans for 2006/07 now contain efficiency savings of 5, 10 and 15 per cent. Investment in the planning service has taken place during a time of tight financial constraint in the Council. As a result, all service budgets are challenged in detail on an annual basis. In addition, when posts become vacant, service managers have to submit a business case for re-appointment. Councillors also demonstrate an awareness of costs and the need to ensure that the benefit of spending is maximised.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 62 The Council's planning service has a positive track record in delivering improvement. Since 2002/03, the government has set minimum standards for councils that fail to meet national targets for the time taken to deal with planning applications. North Dorset was a standards authority between 2002/03 and 2005/06. However, the service has responded positively and worked with the government's consultants and GOSW to significantly improve planning performance. As a result performance in many key performance indicators has consistently improved from 2004/05 to 2005/06. In 2005/06 the speed of processing applications exceeded both local and national targets. As a consequence, the Council is no longer a standards authority and will receive less intensive monitoring from GOSW from 2006/07 onwards.
- 63 The table below indicates sustained improvements in key performance indicators. In addition, the Council has been making robust planning decisions and has won a high percentage of appeals. In the period between 2003/04 to 2004/05 the Council lost only 15 per cent of appeals compared to a national target of 40 per cent and the national average of 33 per cent. The Council benefits from an approved Local Plan, and councillors and officers make clear references to this when determining planning applications.

Table 1 Key performance indicators

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs)	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2004/05 comparisons
BV109a - percentage of major applications determined in 13 weeks	31%	42%	69%	National target 60 per cent Best 63 per cent
BV109b - percentage of minor applications determined in eight weeks	37%	55%	80%	National target 65 per cent Best 70 per cent
BV109c - percentage of other applications determined in eight weeks	66%	79%	93%	National target 80 per cent Best 85 per cent
BV 188 percentage of planning decisions delegated to officers	81%	85%	93%	National target 90 per cent Best 91 per cent Median 88 per cent

- 64 Residents and partners are increasingly satisfied with the way in which the planning service is protecting and enhancing the local environment. This is despite low satisfaction with the planning service, and with open spaces, in 2003/04 (this survey has not yet been updated). The county-wide liveability survey indicated high levels of satisfaction with the environment at 93 per cent, with North Dorset residents the most satisfied in Dorset. Many partners have praised improvements in the development control process. The number and type of complaints are reducing. Residents and partners express high levels of satisfaction with the way in which the Council engaged with them on producing the LDS. Despite hostility from some agents, most recognise the efforts the Council is making to improve its planning service. In 2005 the Council carried out an audit to identify the condition of leisure and open space provision in the district, and local views on this provision. Consultation included a representative sample of the community including older and younger people, disabled and ethnic minority groups, and people from the travelling community. Most respondents rated the differing types of open space and indoor community facilities as being good. Much of this space was secured through the planning process. This shows that the Council's efforts are being increasingly recognised by users.
- 65 At a corporate level the Council is making good progress in delivering its improvement plan, drawn up in response to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004. The Council's progress assessment in October 2005 indicated that the Council was 'progressing well' since CPA, in particular in continuing to give effective community leadership, and focusing on its priorities. Since then the Council has strengthened corporate management arrangements further, for example by taking a more consistent and corporate approach to risk management, service planning, procurement, personnel issues, diversity, and youth issues. Councillors are well engaged in this process. By strengthening these areas the Council provides a more firm base from which further service improvements can be delivered.
- 66 The Council is improving its approach to securing better value for money. Investment in information technology (IT) and the development of skills have improved the way the Council works. Plans are in place to improve access by integrating reception areas and using technology to enable administrative staff to deal with more telephone and email queries. The proportion of interactions with the public capable of electronic delivery was only 11 per cent in 2003/04, which increased to 56 per cent in 2004/05. The Council has now (subject to audit) met the Government's target of 100 per cent by March 2006. Business plans highlight options for further efficiency savings of 5, 10 and 15 per cent, and the Council's new procurement strategy provides a clearer framework to secure better value for money in the future. Conservation costs have been benchmarked and this information was used to justify employing an additional member of staff. The Council is now using benchmarking to look at the numbers, cost and role of staff involved in elements of the planning process. However, these processes have yet to make the planning service more cost effective.

- 67 North Dorset is making some progress with its new process of plan preparation known as the Local Development Framework (LDF) but the core strategy has been delayed. The Local Development Scheme (LDS) was published in April 2005 and this sets out a timetable for the production of the different elements of the LDF. Two key elements of the LDF have been completed - the Statement of Community Involvement and the LDS. The Council effectively engaged its partners and the community in the early stages of the production of the Core Strategy but its production has slipped by three months as a result of loss of the policy manager and delay in the regional spatial strategy. Delays at this stage could have serious implications later in the plan production process.
- 68 The Council has poor performance in developing housing on brown field sites despite clearer policies in the local plan to address this issue. In 2003/04 the service achieved 33 per cent and was in the worst 25 per cent of councils. In 2005/06 this figure had only increased to 38 per cent. This is the worst performance in Dorset.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 69 There are effective performance management arrangements in place to drive and monitor progress with the planning service. The Council has a track record of sound financial management and can demonstrate that resources are used flexibly in line with priorities. Performance and financial management processes are more integrated, in particular in linking service planning to the Council's medium-term financial plan. The service produces regular, robust and balanced information using a wide range of performance monitoring mechanisms covering most relevant aspects of performance. This has helped to ensure that decision-making arrangements are more effective.
- 70 There are effective arrangements in place to support continuous improvement. There is a clear corporate commitment to improve planning services in North Dorset, as evidenced by the CPA improvement plan which identifies planning as a priority service. Service plans for development control, planning policy, environment (which includes conservation), and building control are much improved and provide a clear framework for managing performance. Service plans contain both service specific and cross cutting themes such as diversity, sustainability, access, and community safety. The development control improvement plan is linked with service plans, financial plans and the CPA improvement plan.

- 71 The Local Development Framework is addressing the right issues and effectively engaging the community in the process. The service is responding positively to the over-supply of housing. The Council has negotiated with the applicant on a major housing site near Shaftesbury to increase the level of affordable housing from 25 per cent to 30 per cent. In addition, the Council is considering a housing policy that would prevent any further unallocated sites coming forward in rural settlements prior to 2011. Planning permission on unallocated sites in market towns will only be approved if developers provide a significant contribution to sustainable or corporate objectives, for example, by providing a significant contribution to affordable housing. The Council is now controlling the supply of housing and according to the Councils data it only approved 19 dwellings in April 2006, 12 in May and 4 in June. Through this approach the service is aiming to reduce future housing supply and increase the number of affordable units.
- 72 The development control improvement plan addresses the right things that matter most to users and communities. It is a realistic plan that contains clear aims up to 2008, priorities for the future that are challenging and robust, and addresses service weaknesses. For example, there are actions to improve benchmarking and understand value for money, to produce clearer and more specific planning guidance for users, to implement new IT systems including a more interactive website, re-tender some contracts such as legal services to secure greater value for money, and to consult more regularly and with diverse groups. Further consultation is planned for 2006/07. The Council engaged with key partners on development control improvement plans and consulted with parish councils on service plans. Plans for planning services are well integrated.
- 73 The Council has strengthened its approach to performance monitoring. Service standards are in place and are well monitored. Service performance is reported regularly, and areas of poor performance receive more detailed investigation. This process involves asking managers to explain any underperformance to councillors in an open meeting. This ensures clear accountability and enables councillors to challenge underperformance. In addition, both scrutiny committees are well engaged in monitoring and challenging performance. Financial reporting has improved with new financial systems which allow councillors and managers to have better access to information about expenditure. Councillors have a much clearer picture of performance and have helped drive improvement in planning services.
- 74 North Dorset is making good progress with its improvement plans. The Council has completed 12 of its 31 projects in its CPA improvement plan including leadership and management development, councillor training and mentoring, integrating the development control improvement plan into service delivery, finalising a young people strategy, improving complaint management, and embedding risk management processes. Progress is being made in implementing the development control improvement plan including improving the speed of administrative processes, introducing a new scheme of delegation, and delivering effective pre-application advice for planning applications. These improvements have been well received by agents and partners.

- 75 The Council demonstrates effective leadership in driving the improvement of the planning service. Senior managers and councillors support service managers in changing the culture of the service. Leadership within the service is strong and improving. The service has active, visible and effective management and leadership, recognised by staff and partners. The leadership from senior managers and councillors sets the tone of the organisation by creating a climate of openness, transparency and mutual respect. Councillors are willing to tackle difficult problems and to take and stick to tough decisions to resolve these. For example, councillors have prioritised services and moved finances away from lesser priorities such as tourism and leisure to support services such as planning. In addition, councillors have supported an increased delegation of planning decisions to officers, and have taken a much more robust approach to probity issues. The Council recognises that this has been a difficult journey but effective leadership and robust plans for the future are sustaining improvement.
- 76 The Council has a positive approach to learning from experience and from other organisations. It uses learning from beacon councils on issues such as affordable housing, scrutiny, and assessing the quality of housing development to inform what it plans to do. The approach to managing complaints has improved so that complaints now influence service improvement and are directed to and owned by the right person. The Council has made a substantial investment in training and development and this is now evaluated for impact. Additional training has been provided in response to this feedback. Staff appraisals are better structured and internal learning has improved. For instance, the planning service is learning from the revenue and benefits service, which is introducing the next phase of a corporate customer contact centre. The Council is open to external challenge and has responded well to inspection and audit activity. The Council is open, transparent and self aware.
- 77 However, the way the service manages its performance is not fully effective. There are some instances where performance management arrangements have not been fully effective or are incomplete. Most significantly the number of housing completions was under-reported in 2005 and the consequence of this includes the urgent need to manage housing supply more effectively. Some targets in service plans are not very stretching, for example in developing brownfield sites, and in the planning quality checklist indicator. Targets for internal consultation on planning applications are not effectively monitored, and some targets for conservation and planning policy are too internally focused. The priorities in the environmental service plan also lack clarity.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 78** The planning service has capacity to improve further and deliver its plans for improvement. The Council has increased capacity within the planning service by increasing resources, securing external funding and developing the skills of existing staff and councillors. Expenditure on planning services increased significantly from £636,000 in 2003/04 to £981,000 in 2004/05 and to £1.10 million in 2005/06. It is planned to increase to £1.17 million in 2006/07. One new senior planning officer, a new enforcement officer and two new administration officers have been employed since 2003/04. Investment in the environment section increased by £9,675 in 2003/04 and by a further £21,600 in 2005/06. This funded an arboriculture officer and a conservation and design officer to ensure a speedier response to development control enquiries. A new planning policy manager is now in place and there are clear plans to deliver the core strategy. This places the Council in a better position to speed up the LDF process.
- 79** Financial planning is improving. Because of its past poor performance, the Council did not initially secure high levels of planning delivery grant. However, it did secure a grant of £252,000 for 2005/06. This has been integrated into future budgets and the medium term financial plan to ensure that future budgets are sustainable. A corporate procurement strategy is now in place.
- 80** There is evidence of effective human resource planning. Effective human resource policies have helped to reduce sickness absence in planning services and the latest unaudited figure for 2005/06 shows 8.2 days lost per employee. The Council figure is 8.78 which is a reduction from 11 days in 2004/05 and from 9.8 days in 2003/04. The service can demonstrate consideration of equalities and human rights issues in its policies and employment practices. The Council has maintained its Investors in People accreditation by ensuring that appraisals are used as a means of identifying training needs in line with Council objectives, as well as monitoring performance. Training needs are then integrated into a service training plan and delivered over the year. Planning staff are generally positive about training and opportunities for development. In addition, there is an ongoing councillor training programme which has covered specific issues such as probity, diversity and any changes in legislation. By delivering effective training the Council ensures that it provides staff with the tools to do their job more effectively.

- 81 The service has access to the appropriate skills, tools and finances to deliver improvement. The development control improvement plan is funded and investment in services is secured up to 2007/08. More effective use of ICT and plans for the customer contact centre are expected to drive efficiencies in accordance with those identified in current service plans. Specific business transformation plans for the planning service are now in place. Staff and councillors are enthusiastic and committed to service improvement. They are knowledgeable about their subjects and a mentoring scheme has helped councillors to develop their roles. They have the skills to deliver further service improvement. In 2006, the Council secured £137,250 in government funding for project management, IT projects, and further workforce development. This further extends the Council's ability to deliver effective planning services.
- 82 The Council has made proactive use of external funding to improve the quality of life in the area. For example, it has worked with community organisations to design and deliver improvement to public spaces, using £3.7 million of Liveability funding and £3.94 million of developer contributions. Over 60 community projects have benefited from Liveability funding including new community facilities, parks, grants to community organisations and the creation of two new nature reserves. The Council is improving its collection of developer contributions and only £20,200 remains to be collected. External funding has been better co-ordinated and supports community objectives by ensuring that development is more sustainable in the long term. Better management of external funding has ensured that funding is well targeted and effort is not duplicated.
- 83 Partnership working is used effectively to increase capacity. External help is used appropriately, for example in using specialist advice on appeals and for elements of the LDF such as employment surveys, and urban capacity. The Council also contributed to a county-wide housing needs survey, and works in partnership with two other Dorset councils to procure legal services. Further plans are in place for more councils to join the legal services partnership and this will help ensure the consistency of legal advice and cost effectiveness.