

Corporate Assessment Report

October 2006



Corporate Assessment

Devon County Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is the means by which the Audit Commission fulfils its statutory duty under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003 to make an assessment, and report on the performance, of local authorities. Corporate assessment is one element in the overall assessment that leads to a CPA score and category.
- 2 The purpose of the corporate assessment is to assess how well the Council engages with and leads its communities, delivers community priorities in partnership with others, and ensures continuous improvement across the range of Council activities. It seeks to answer three headline questions which are underpinned by five specific themes.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

- sustainable communities and transport;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities;
- older people; and
- children and young people.

- 3 Corporate assessments are normally aligned with a joint area review of services for children and young people (JAR). In practice this means that the Council's achievements in relation to children and young people are assessed using the evidence provided from the JAR. In addition, examples of outcomes and activity, which are relevant to the other themes and which are identified through the JAR, are considered within the corporate assessment.

- 4 The JAR covers all services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes. The separate JAR report covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report.

Executive summary

- 5 Devon County Council meets well the challenges it is facing. It is recognised by its partners as providing strong corporate and community leadership, with an outward looking and visible approach to fulfilling its shared vision for the community. The vision for the county is clear and ambitious and is shared with statutory and voluntary sector partners and residents. It reflects national agendas and local needs and is supported by staff.
- 6 The new Chief Executive and the drive of the current political leadership are appreciated by partners and staff as producing a collaborative approach to the complexities of a county that has 28 distinct communities plus the city of Exeter. The issue of subsidiarity is a key consideration to partners and the Council is responding to this by setting up county committees in each area, with funding available to councillors to spend on key local schemes.
- 7 The Council has given direction to the Devon Strategic Partnership, to clarify and align its vision, resources and priorities. The community strategy has been produced through extensive community consultation, setting out clear priorities to be addressed and the actions required of partners. The community strategy, the Local Area Agreement (LAA) delivery plans and the Council's strategic plan are now fully aligned and the Council has moved resources from lower priorities to boost the corporate and community strategy priorities.
- 8 Internal systems support the delivery of the Council's ambitions. User focus is enhanced through a strong consultation framework, a new customer service centre, attention to rural transport and the innovative whole community consultation process - 'Our town', piloted in Barnstaple. Performance monitoring resulting in corrective intervention is becoming evident. Councillors are generally well informed and are supported by able and knowledgeable officers. Scrutiny is developing well and is supporting policy making. Value for money is strong, coupled with high user satisfaction. There is a range of appropriate corporate HR policies including, staff recruitment, retention, sickness absence and training and development. Strategic workforce planning is evident and property and ICT management is improving.
- 9 The Council is facing up to difficult decisions to improve services. These include a major appraisal of the future role of the libraries service and small rural schools as well as the outsourcing of residential homes. It is realigning the Council's staffing structures and cutting managerial posts. The rapid change over the last year has however shown in higher stress levels and a feeling of initiative overload, as detailed in the recent staff survey. The Council is rightly mindful of bringing its staff and managers with it as it makes changes to its policies and budgets.

- 10 The Council produces generally high quality services for residents. It is aiming to make Devon England's greenest county. It has achieved national recognition for transport and waste services and is taking action to reduce the Council's own environmental impact through restricting parking for its own staff and encouraging car sharing, as well as improving bus services. Activities to strengthen the economy in disadvantaged areas include a broadband initiative, a 'Ring and Ride' service for rural areas and it has diverted two years' of Council tax from second homes to districts to help with affordable housing. The Council's approach to older people is highly effective, built on thorough consultation. Partnership working with health and the voluntary sector has brought success in reducing delayed discharges, and an innovative mentoring pilot with the Department for Work and Pensions has increased the take-up of benefits. Work is also done in schools and communities on building co-operation between the younger and older generations as a way of strengthening community cohesion.
- 11 The Council and partners focus well on crime and safety hotspots. Devon is a low crime area comparatively and the Council and partners are targeting where intervention will do most good. Work on domestic violence has reduced repeat offending by 15 per cent and joint work by trading standards and police is tackling under-age alcohol sales. Road safety initiatives are reducing accidents and work with district Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) has reduced domestic burglaries.
- 12 The Council works well with partners on healthier communities. Health scrutiny recommendations have contributed to plans to develop a dentists' school to ensure more dentists in the area. Initiatives to improve health include healthy school dinners, walking/cycling to school, realigned services for supported housing and multi-professional teamworking, such as at the Clock-tower Surgery.
- 13 However, the Council does not achieve high performance in all its services and systems. It achieves only average performance in education with some child safeguarding procedures needing urgent improvement. While it now targets resources to priority areas better through the upgraded performance management system, it is too new to see its benefits at all levels of the organisation.
- 14 The Council's approach to diversity is generally strong. The Council appreciates the diversity of Devon and engages Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) citizens and most hard to reach groups appropriately. Work with BME older people in Exeter has resulted in the opening of a multi-faith centre which is being used by Chinese and Muslim older people. On the other hand, the Council has not made sufficient progress on finding sites for travellers. Disadvantaged groups influence budget-setting through, for example, the Equality Reference Group. The Council listens and acts on representations from disadvantaged groups, phasing in charges for some services for older people rather than increasing them in one step.

Areas for improvement

- 15 The Council needs to ensure that the new corporate performance management system results in best practice in every department and enables councillors and managers to be comfortable with measuring and interpreting data and taking the necessary action.
- 16 The Council's new Medium Term Financial Strategy is matching resources to priorities to deliver services that residents want. This is happening at a time of restructuring and stress levels are increasing. The Council must pay particular attention to delivering restructuring whilst at the same time ensuring that staff are supported through the changes.
- 17 Driving up school achievement from its average performance is necessary to match the performance of most other services. The Council knows this and is devoting more resources and attention to this but should look to a whole organisation approach to maximise the impact.
- 18 The Council needs to improve the protection of children at the greatest risk of abuse by reviewing the thresholds which govern access to services, together with ensuring a more consistent application of eligibility criteria.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	2
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	2
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		3
*Key to scores		
1 – below minimum requirements – inadequate performance		
2 – at only minimum requirements – adequate performance		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – performing well		
4 – well above minimum requirements – performing strongly		

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

Scores on 5 themes	Overall corporate assessment score
Two or more themes with a score of 4 None less than score of 3	4
Three or more themes with a score of 3 or more None less than score of 2	3
Three or more themes with a score of 2 or more	2
Any other combination	1

Context

The locality

- 19** Devon is the only English county with two separate coastlines and over a third of the landscape is subject to special protection including the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site in East Devon, Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks. Covering an area of 656,413 hectares, Devon is the third largest county in the country but it is also one of the most sparsely populated. Nearly 16 per cent of the population of 724,700 live in the city of Exeter with the remaining population dispersed across the 28 Devon towns and over 400 parishes. Devon attracts nearly eight million visitors per year and the resident population is growing at over twice the national average with an increase of around 5,000 each year. Devon is also becoming more diverse – the black and minority ethnic population doubled between 1991 and 2001 but still accounted for only 1.13 per cent of the total population. The county is a popular retirement destination and 42 per cent of the population are aged 50+ compared with the national average of 34 per cent.
- 20** There are differences in economic performance and capacity between areas of the county. Employment levels are high throughout the county but many jobs are low paid, part-time and seasonal with average full time earnings roughly 14 per cent below the national average. The most recent productivity figure for the county is only 78 per cent of the national average, although Exeter performs much better at 121 per cent of the national average. Tourism, agriculture, food and drink, marine and environmental technologies and the creative industries make an important contribution to the Devon economy. Academic performance and skills levels among the working population are equal to or surpass the national average but there is wide variation across the county. For example, nearly 29 per cent of the population of Exeter are qualified to NVQ4 level or above compared with only 17.5 per cent of the population of Torridge and the percentage of adults lacking basic skills in Torridge is significantly higher than the national average.
- 21** Devon's popularity as a place to live has contributed to a very sharp increase in house prices in recent years – there was a 131 per cent increase in average prices between 1999 and 2004 compared to 84 per cent for England as a whole. Shortage of affordable housing is a significant issue with average house prices nearly ten times average earnings in Devon. Whilst the population of Devon as a whole has been increasing, the number of young people aged 20 to 24 has reduced over the last 20 years and there is a declining birth rate.

The Council

- 22** After four years with no party in overall control and power-sharing arrangements in place, a Liberal Democrat majority was elected in May 2005 and there are now 33 Liberal Democrat, 23 Conservative, 4 Labour, and 2 Independent Councillors. A single-party Executive of 7 Liberal Democrat Councillors, supported by 6 Executive Support Councillors, has been established and there are four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, all chaired by Conservative councillors. Eight County Committees have recently been established to strengthen councillors' local community leadership role and allocate funding to help ensure that the Council's countywide plans are translated into action. In the county there are also eight district councils, two unitary authorities (Plymouth and Torbay) and 364 town and parish councils.
- 23** The Council has a workforce of over 23,000 staff (16,631 full time equivalents). A restructuring of the organisation has recently been undertaken to align directorate responsibilities and functions with its Strategic Plan priorities. There are three service directorates - Children and Young People's Services; Adult and Community Services; and Environment, Economy and Culture - supported by three directorates providing a range of corporate strategic and support services. The Council is considering the feasibility of externalising or sharing some of its support services with partner organisations as part of a drive for greater efficiency.
- 24** The gross revenue budget for 2006/07 is £982 million. In terms of efficiency savings, the Council met its target of £9.8 million in 2005/6. The Council has also gained external funding amounting to £55 million for a wide range of projects, plus £42 million under the Department for Transport's Single Major Scheme arrangements for the Barnstaple Western Bypass and a Private Finance Initiative of £120 million for the Exeter schools reorganisation programme to improve educational performance in the city. The Band D Council tax rate is £977.49 for 2006/07, which represents an increase of 4.9 per cent from the previous year.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 25 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council and partners have a good understanding of the needs of the Devon communities and clear, overarching and challenging shared ambitions. There are close links between the community strategy, Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the refreshed Council Strategic Plan. Partners state that councillors and staff give strong community leadership underpinned by innovative and extensive community engagement mechanisms.
- 26 The vision for the area is aligned with that of partners. The new administration has refocused the strategic plan, which was agreed in December 2005. It runs to 2011 and builds upon the previous strategy, which had helped deliver a four star rating from the Audit Commission. These targets are aligned with the ambitions within the LAA and community strategy. Indeed, there is a strong resonance between the LAA, community strategy and strategic plan, all agreed by partners. This strengthens the partnership's focus on a shared set of stretching targets.
- 27 Council objectives are based on consultation with local people and reflect the national and local government shared priorities. They complement the vision set out in the Strategic Plan:

'A county with safe, healthy and inclusive communities, a strong and diverse economy and a cherished environment'.

The new Strategic Plan has five objectives underpinned by actions and targets:

- giving the best start in life to Devon's children and young people;
- strengthening Devon's economy;
- celebrating Devon's culture;
- improving Devon's environment;
- promoting independence and choice in Devon

and these are all related to the overarching aim of 'Making Devon Greener'.

- 28 The political leadership has set challenging targets to deliver the 'green' agenda, and this thread can be seen at a strategic, but also at a personal level. All of the targets relating to the five strategic objectives in the strategic plan show how they will deliver that aim and include matters like reducing the carbon footprint, making it easier to use alternative forms of transport than the car, and ensuring the best environmental practice in the design or housing and care facilities. Individual staff action plans contain clear and deliverable 'green' targets. Examples include the chief executive cycling to work on two days a week; a person committing to composting at home; and individuals setting targets to reduce paper consumption. Effective action is underway to deliver the overarching aim.

- 29** Ambitions reflect a shared understanding of demographic trends. The Council, district councils and health colleagues work well together in the Devon Intelligence Network. This network has used data to understand the subsidiarity of the 28 community areas plus the city of Exeter and this data has driven the content of the county and district level strategic plans. For example, to address the need to boost rural jobs and skills, the council and partners have connected small businesses to broadband, are encouraging innovation and collaboration between small businesses, universities and business organisations, and targeted public sector investment in underperforming geographical areas. These actions have already resulted in the creation of 849 new jobs. To deal with the priority of promoting independence and choice, the Council has included Care Direct as a part of the services in the Customer Service Centre, with specialist call-handlers, linked to a joint home visiting service. This has resulted in an additional £2.5 million claimed by older people and the Council has set a target for a doubling of the number of adults and older people receiving direct payments and a 10 per cent increase in the number of older people helped to claim additional benefits, both by 2008. These are tangible interventions already making a real and measurable improvement to people's lives.
- 30** Ambitions are realistic as they are underpinned by a range of comprehensive strategies and delivery plans. The new three-year financial strategy allocates resources, identifies areas for investment, disinvestment and plans efficiency savings, setting a Council budget within the context of the community strategy ambitions. This is further supported by strong HR strategies, project and risk management and capacity. These strategies and plans support wider ambitions to improve the quality of life for local people through for example, improving life chances for children and protecting the environment. Plans are supported by stretching targets. For example, it has set an environmental target of increasing the amount of waste recycled by 19 per cent, by 2008, on a current rate that is already a high performing service at 40 per cent. Another example is a targeted 40 per cent reduction in older people moving into residential accommodation also by 2008.
- 31** The Council emphasises the concept of wholeness in its consultation and provides citizens and communities with resources, confidence and capacity to enable participation. The 'Our Town' project in Barnstaple was based on a four week consultation with local people in which a fifth of the population participated, resulting in a community plan for Barnstaple with strong local ownership. This approach is being extended throughout the county. The Council also works well with BME representatives and supports and funds the Equality Reference Group as an independent challenge group. Ambitions are therefore well grounded and a good basis on which to plan and allocate resources.

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- 32** Citizens, partners and staff are clear about the vision and aim and support them. The Council has created a wide range of successful consultation mechanisms, using newsletters, focus groups, citizens' panels, e-mail and the internet. Whether from focus groups of citizens, interviews with partners and staff, there was enthusiastic agreement on the vision and aim that resulted from consultation and that the Council had consulted thoroughly. There is particular agreement about maintaining the environment arising from the understanding of climate change being experienced in Devon. The Council has engaged well and can rely on support for its plans.
- 33** The Council provides clear and inclusive leadership to champion Devon's needs. In the early stages of setting up the county Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), it helped partners to find an agreed solution rather than putting proposals to partners for agreement. The Council encouraged the appointment of an independent chair for the LSP - the Bishop of Exeter - to develop leadership within key partners and to highlight open decision-making. It funds community support officers to enable the eight district LSPs to function efficiently and to ensure that there is capacity to keep district community strategies up-to-date. When partners identified affordable housing as a particular need, the Council agreed to two years' subsidy for affordable housing from the second homes council tax income, even though the Council is not a direct housing authority. It used its powers to promote community development and there was all-party agreement within the Council to this action. To tackle the need to improve education standards in Exeter it worked with the city council, education partners and parents to carry out a schools reorganisation at the same time as a PFI project. This involved 34 schools being reorganised, with the transfer age changed, eight schools merged into four and providing five new schools each of which includes 14-19 accommodation and strong links with the local Further Education sector. This major project was well led and managed. The Council is able to collaborate and lead to deliver services that the county needs.
- 34** The new administration is facing up to difficult choices to improve services. It is pressing ahead with restructuring library provision and outsourcing residential homes and is consulting and explaining the issues that it knows are controversial. Partners and residents therefore understand the issues, if not agree with the potential outcomes. It has learnt from its reactive approach to the LAA pilot, on the need for full and early engagement of partners. It is bolstering partnership working through the creation of eight county committees; eight such committees, based on district council boundaries, provide a forum for councillors to discuss local policy needs and allocate funding. This is to help ensure that the Council's countywide plans are translated into local action, addressing the priority needs of Devon's diverse communities. The Council is displaying a determination to make changes that are intended to improve services.

Prioritisation

- 35** The Council is performing adequately in this area. The Council has used its understanding of local demographic trends and national priorities to set local priorities. It is clear what needs to happen to deliver the overall vision and aims set out in the new Strategic Plan and it is taking steps to ensure that target-setting is fully embedded to help deliver the priorities.
- 36** The Council understands from its widespread consultation processes what matters to the people of Devon. The Council has made a particular effort to listen to the needs of hard to reach groups and its BME Communities through a range of means like the Citizen's Panel, the Equality Reference Group, consultation with older people's group - Agile - and with the hearing impaired community. As a result of the consultation, the regeneration programme now identifies priority communities for action. The new Strategic Plan and the subsequent top five priorities which were agreed following the election of a new single party administration in December 2005 are therefore based on thorough consultation and gives a sound basis on which to plan.
- 37** The five top priorities to deliver the ambitions are:
- improving health and educational outcomes for underachieving children and young people;
 - unlocking the economic potential of disadvantaged communities;
 - minimising waste, increasing recycling and composting and reducing the landfilling of waste;
 - tackling traffic congestion and air pollution and improving public transport; and
 - enabling more elderly and disabled people to stay safe and healthy in their own home.
- 38** Councillors and staff recognise and support these priorities and objectives and act to deliver them. The Council's spending profile is now matched to priorities to show how resources are being deployed to deliver them. A new three-year medium term financial strategy targets resources to priorities better. The Council has used it to review all initiatives and priorities, reducing the number from 300 to 30 and ensuring a much closer fit with the new strategic priorities. Managers and staff have recently ceased work on lower priorities. The Council scrutiny committees use the Corporate Assessment Key Lines Of Enquiry to help them to challenge potential work items to help prioritise their work. The Council is undertaking a major schools reorganisation policy framework, which is intended to meet the priority of addressing under-achievement, address falling school rolls and improve school standards. It is also undertaking a review of school transport to seek a more cost-effective and integrated solution. The Council is taking action to deliver agreed priorities.

- 39 Translating ambitions into SMART targets is not yet consistent. Whilst the majority of key plans do have clear targets this is not the case for all plans. For example, for the priority of celebrating Devon's culture, targets are in place and work is underway to make them fully measurable and outcome based. Also, priorities have been translated well into strategies and action plans for other plans such as in the Children and Young People's Plan and Climate Change. On the other hand, the commitment to becoming the greenest county is relatively new and a framework to measure success using a balanced scorecard approach is not in place although it is currently being developed. The council is aware of the need to embed target-setting throughout the organisation and is reviewing and updating all plans, including building in robust project and risk management. This means that although the council is ambitious it is not yet in a position to fully measure its success.
- 40 The Council is also taking steps to reallocate resources available to partners to address priorities. For example, money collected from council tax from second homes initially used for the county-wide priority to support affordable housing has now been shifted to focus spend on provision of extra care housing in line with the new strategic priority of independence and choice for older people. Disadvantaged groups influence budget-setting through, for example, the Equality Reference Group, and charges for some services for the elderly were altered following this work. The Council is redirecting resources through the Supporting People programme, based on an evaluation of impact on clients. The Council has opened a Customer Service Centre with a front and back office split designed to improve services and make efficiency savings to redirect to priorities. Some of the anticipated efficiency savings are clearly identified, such as in social care but they are less clear in other departments like libraries. The Council has therefore been able to redirect resources to its priorities.
- 41 The Council is increasingly able to maintain its focus to deliver its strategy. It is reducing its asset base to release resources for investment in priority areas and it is now selling Exeter International Airport to secure significant private sector investment in the expansion of the airport, thereby creating jobs and wealth in line with priorities. It has also achieved its target of £9.8 million efficiency savings in 2005/06, to enable further investment in priorities and avoid excessive council tax increases. It has attracted external funding of £55 million for a wide range of projects plus funding under the Department for Transport's Single Major Scheme arrangements for the £42 million Barnstaple Western Bypass. Furthermore, the Council's increasing focus on its priorities means that it is now tackling long-standing issues and making tough decisions, for example, considering the best option for the provision of residential homes. As a result, the Council is ensuring that sufficient resources are available to deliver its strategies.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

Capacity

- 42 The Council is performing well on developing capacity, with its partners, to deliver against its ambitions. The Council is well led, the management team is effective, councillors and staff work well together and corporate drive to improve is constant and strong. The Council has developed its internal challenge processes over the past year to instil a culture of healthy political challenge. The council works effectively to build capacity through partnerships. There is clear accountability and transparent decision-making to support service delivery and improvement. The overall quality, effectiveness and commitment of councillors and staff is good. Officers and councillors are clear about their roles and responsibilities and operate within an appropriate ethical framework.
- 43 Staff capacity is strong and appreciated by partners. Officer capacity to deliver priorities has improved through the Council's recent restructuring, particularly in its transition to a new Children and Young People's Directorate. A new top level structure is now embedded across the Council's three service directorates. The Council has allocated resources to complete its restructuring, which will include significant efficiency savings through a voluntary redundancy scheme aimed primarily at middle managers. The restructuring is being managed sensitively and is clearly focused on improving the Council's capacity to deliver its priorities. Financial resources have been made available to complete the Council's job evaluation programme to modernise staff structures and pay.
- 44 The council is well led. Councillor capacity is improving, challenge is increasingly effective and capacity is built through appropriate councillor training. The Executive is effective, well organised and focused on delivering the Council's priorities. Executive councillors' capacity is also increased by support councillors and cross-cutting theme champions. A joint Executive and Management Board meeting successfully builds relationships between senior councillors and officers and is used appropriately to increase collective capacity. Some councillors indicate that they have not been well supported in their role. One of the ways the Council is addressing this is through the development of local performance information and community profiles to help them gain a better understanding of issues affecting their division. Scrutiny is organised and supported appropriately and its impact has improved during the past year. It is now effectively chaired by opposition councillors and it is beginning to challenge executive decisions and contribute effectively to service improvement. For example, scrutiny has successfully challenged the process by which decisions about the future of an adult care home; and intervened to improve NHS dentistry access and to stop the reduction in opening hours at a minor injuries unit. As a result, the roles of officers and councillors are boosting capacity to deliver strategic priorities.

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- 45** The Council's financial planning is robust. A revised medium term financial plan has been approved and this now clearly links spending to the Council's priorities. The Council has built significant reserves over recent years and this and its medium term financial plan is releasing funds to deliver in its priority areas, for example two new libraries, improving waste management, transport, delivering its school improvement programme and pursuing its environmental agenda. The Council provides good value for money. It is a relatively low spending council with generally above average performance. Difficult decisions are taken to address value for money such as changes to school transport; and in its contracting arrangements for the Barnstaple bypass which resulted in a £4 million efficiency saving. The Council has set efficiency targets of £21.8 million in 2006/07 and a further £32.8 million for 2007/08 to challenge services to prioritise and deliver services more efficiently. This is part of a planned three year improvement and efficiency programme to modernise services in line with its priorities, which will mean less posts and ceasing work on lower priorities but increased focus in priority areas. The Council's procurement and contracting arrangements are well managed and address value for money through appropriate use of incentives and penalties, and through the purchase of 'green' electricity. This enables resources to be available to deliver Council priorities.
- 46** Staff capacity to achieve change and deliver priorities is good. The Council's HR and related policies are robust and HR is a key strand of its strategic plan. The Council uses workforce planning effectively to maintain its capacity, restructure in key areas and to address the older than average age profile of its staff. Recruitment and retention are successful and appropriate staff management policies are in place, including managing stress at work and sickness absence. The level of sickness absence has decreased to below the national average although the restructuring over the last year has shown in higher stress levels and a feeling of initiative overload, as detailed in the recent staff survey. The Council is aware of these issues and working with unions and staff to clarify what is to happen. This is assisted through internal communications being effective. Staff have access to a good range of training and development opportunities, including leadership development for senior managers, equality training and a programme of customer services training for front-line staff. Staff capacity is generally enhancing the Council's organisational capacity to deliver improved services.
- 47** The Council has good focus on access and diversity which are mainstream considerations in the Council and with partners. A new Customer Service Centre (CSC) has been successfully launched, physical access to council buildings meets the requirements of disabled people, and a mobile information and ICT centre, run in partnership with the BBC, tours the county. The Council provides information to local people through a variety of means including an accessible web-site and an effective council newspaper. Council meetings are web-cast and more than 1,000 people access this service each month. The Council is making satisfactory progress toward Level 3 of the Equality Standard for local government and takes appropriate actions to ensure its partners address equality through its contracting and procurement arrangements.

- 48 The Council is improving its project and risk management. The Council's Risk Management Strategy sets out clear roles, responsibilities and reporting mechanisms. Departments have risk registers and there is a Risk Management Group to oversee this. High value projects have an allocated procurement officer and are managed appropriately through Prince 2 methodology.
- 49 Capacity is effectively improved through close engagement and good partnership working. The Council is successfully engaged with many partners. The Devon Improvement Programme (DIP) for example, which received £1.13 million government funding and has delivered improvements to service access such as the Devon Learning Portal. Capacity is improved through effective partnership working to deliver improvements in mental health services, in environmental areas through the Devon Rural Network and by the efficient co-ordination of voluntary services through active Council's for Voluntary Service groups. The Council is also making good use of business partners' skills in the proposed sale of the airport. The Devon Procurement Partnership includes all district councils and other public sector services who effectively share procurement processes. A current construction procurement project is projecting savings in excess of £100 million across the region.
- 50 Two key strategies underpinning the work of the council are not yet in place. The Council's ICT strategy is not up-to-date and the Council has a large number of ICT systems which are well managed and supported, but not yet linked to other key strategies, such as access, flexible working and communications. However the Council is addressing this and is making good progress. There is no clear council wide property strategy in place, pulling together its asset management plans. As such, capacity is not currently enhanced by these systems.

Performance management

- 51 The Council's is performing adequately in this area. It is taking steps to improve its systems, practices and information to enable the Council and partners to set targets, measure them and take remedial action when necessary.
- 52 The Council has invested appropriately to improve its corporate performance management strategy. Key building blocks are in place, with links evident from the council's and community objectives, through to the activities of staff. There is a clear hierarchy of plans in place, use of performance indicators, and regular reporting on performance information and individual targets. The Council has introduced a new software performance management system to drive corporate performance management, which has improved the quality and consistency of the quarterly reporting, supported by widespread training in its use. The Council is doing this as it recognises that it does not always use data to best effect corporately. Committee reports include a number of elements of good practice such as the traffic light system, local targets as well as BVPIs but national comparative data is not always included and reports do not always link back to the targets in the Strategic Plan. It is unclear how some work in task groups, such as the investigation into renewable energy, will contribute to policy making or performance management.

20 Corporate Assessment | What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

- 53** The Council is taking steps to improve the councillors' role in performance management. Regular reports on performance are given to Executive councillors, and scrutiny chairs get this information at the same time. Scrutiny committees now receive performance information from the new software system and regular performance meetings take place between portfolio holders and the relevant director. Updated training for councillors is being rolled out on interpreting performance data, starting with scrutiny councillors. This is building the potential for councillors to manage continuous improvement.
- 54** Departmental performance management is improving though not yet fully embedded. The Rapid Improvement Process was developed in social services directorate as part of its overall Quality Strategy in response to an unfavourable inspection and a drop in star rating for the Council. By focusing on improvement in key performance areas and enabling frontline staff to be engaged in the process and ownership of improvement, it has led to a range of demonstrable benefits and improved outcomes. For example, the process has led to improved performance in service user waiting times for assessments and packages of care, with performance in Acceptable Waiting Time for Assessment (BVPI 195) having improved by 14 per cent from 2003/04 to 2005/06. In 2005 the Council regained its two star social services rating assisted by this process. The ICT service is also strong in performance management. Programme and risk management are growing strengths. The corporate approach to programme management is based on best practice within the former social services directorate and a corporate training programme is enabling this best practice to be shared across the whole Council. Performance management in children's and young people's services though is not consistent, rigorous or adequately quality assured. Improvement in performance management is not uniform.
- 55** The Council is tackling the need to improve individual performance management. It has recognised the inconsistent pattern of frequency of appraisals and is addressing it. However because of major restructuring in health and adult social care, it will take two more years for coverage to rise from 75 per cent to 95 per cent. Staff who are appraised are clear about how their work contributes to the Council's priorities, are set objectives to meet these, given training and development opportunities to meet their objectives and appraised against them. As a consequence individual performance management is improving.

- 56 The Council is improving performance management with its key partners. For example, the community strategy sets out the key performance indicators by which progress towards each goal will be measured. Responsibility for monitoring progress against these indicators rests with the thematic partnerships set up to address each of the goals and many of the key indicators have now been incorporated in LAA delivery plans that are monitored by the Government Office for the South West on a six monthly basis. The Council understands and shares information with partners, such as the work on health and wellbeing for the DSP. The Council is investing in appropriate systems to help partners use performance data to co-ordinate service delivery. For example, the Amethyst Community Safety Data Hub is being used to gain a better understanding of crime and disorder issues in order to target resources where they will have most impact. The work is a multi-agency initiative led by the Council. The system enables geographical crime 'hotspots' to be identified, and is allowing partners to understand the causes of crime and target resources accordingly. The Council is using the development of the eight County Committees to better understand its performance at a neighbourhood level through the development of neighbourhood profiles. These moves are enabling performance management benefits to be delivered with partners.
- 57 The Council uses feedback from users and partners well. It takes complaints seriously, deals with them promptly and uses the process to share learning. For example, feedback from a carer's user group led to changes in the training for carers and the involvement of a recent care leaver in delivering the training. The Local Government Ombudsman recently commended the Council on the promptness and thoroughness in dealing with formal complaints. The Council also shares feedback with partners, for example, on health and wellbeing for the DSP, and on children's services. The Council is therefore better able to improve services as it listens to feedback.

What has been achieved?

- 58 Overall, the Council is performing well in this area. The Council is resourcing these priorities robustly and working well with partners to achieve community objectives. Cross-cutting objectives are well managed, and the Council has targeted those at risk of disadvantage well. The council is also mindful of subsidiarity in delivering its services and has adapted its approach to the diverse needs of Devon's communities.
- 59 The Council produces generally high quality services for residents. It is aiming to make Devon England's greenest county. It has achieved national recognition for transport and waste services and is taking action to reduce the Council's own environmental impact through restricting parking for its own staff and encouraging car sharing, as well as improving bus services. Activities to strengthen the economy in disadvantaged areas include a broadband initiative, a 'Ring and Ride' service for rural areas and it has diverted two years' of Council tax from second homes to districts to help with affordable housing. The Council's approach to older people is highly effective, built on thorough consultation. Partnership working with health and the voluntary sector has brought success in reducing delayed discharges, and an innovative mentoring pilot with the Department for Work and Pensions has increased the take-up of benefits. Work is also done in schools and communities on building co-operation between the younger and older generations as a way of strengthening community cohesion.
- 60 The Council and partners focus well on crime and safety hotspots. Devon is a low crime area comparatively and the Council and partners are targeting where intervention will do most good. Work on domestic violence has reduced repeat offending by 15 per cent and joint work by trading standards and police is tackling under-age alcohol sales. Road safety initiatives are reducing accidents and work with district Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) has reduced domestic burglaries.
- 61 The Council works well with partners on healthier communities. Health scrutiny recommendations have contributed to plans to develop a dentists' school to ensure more dentists in the area. Initiatives to improve health include healthy school dinners, walking/cycling to school, realigned services for supported housing and multi-professional teamworking, such as at the Clock-tower Surgery.
- 62 However, the Council does not achieve high performance in all its services and systems. It achieves only average performance in education with some child safeguarding procedures needing urgent improvement. While it now targets resources to priority areas better through the upgraded performance management system, it is too new to see its benefits at all levels of the organisation.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 63** The Council is delivering well the ambition for Devon to be the greenest county in the country. New schools are being built to high environmental standards and a significant proportion of schools now operate green travel plans to encourage more walking and cycling to school. The Council uses the planning system to secure high quality sustainable design in the two new communities planned for Devon. For example, in Cranbrook, the Council with partners has secured developer agreement to a higher eco-home design standard than was initially proposed and the community will also be well served by public transport, minimising the impact on the environment.
- 64** The Council takes positive action to reduce its own environmental impact. It applies a sustainability test to all high value procurement, and now procures its electricity from a green supplier, reducing the Council's carbon footprint by 10 per cent and saving £127,000 in climate change levies. Staff have personal environmental targets and staff car travel has been significantly reduced by restricting access to car parks at the Exeter headquarters. Recycling facilities for office waste are being rolled out across the Council's buildings and recycled glass is used for road resurfacing where possible. In this way the Council is exhibiting leadership in promoting environmentally sustainable ways of working that will encourage others to do the same.
- 65** The Council is providing residents with high quality waste management services. For example, through initiatives such as the 'Don't Let Devon Go to Waste' campaign, and re-focussed household waste recycling centres, there are high levels of customer satisfaction, reducing amounts of household waste and increasing levels of recycling and composting - at over 40 per cent in 2005/06.
- 66** The Council's transport service is successfully promoting alternatives to the car. It is a Transport Centre of Excellence for its work in promoting public transport and has received national recognition for its work to promote cycling. Council work with major employers has led to a seven per cent increase in the number of bus users and a 26 per cent increase in users of its Park and Ride service. The Council also supports a range of alternatives to traditional bus services in rural areas such as Wheels to Work and Fare Car schemes. This means that even in rural areas there are alternative means of transport to the car.

- 67 The Council is effectively supporting the local economy, particularly in disadvantaged areas. It has been a lead player in the Broadband4Devon project designed to increase the accessibility of rural businesses, many of whom are in isolated areas, to new customers and helping nearly 5,000 Devon businesses become more competitive through ICT adoption. This has resulted in £12.48 million of increased sales and the creation of 849 new jobs. Business partners commend the Council as engaging that sector well, providing high quality advice and information to businesses. A Devon-wide economic partnership has recently been formed and fully influenced the LAA. This is being used to help align action and target funding. For example the Council has worked with communities and partners to tackle gaps in basic skills, and encourage inward investment through improving infrastructure and town centres such as the 'Our Town' initiative in Barnstaple.
- 68 The Council has shown leadership in tackling the shortage of affordable housing in Devon. Even though it is a district council responsibility, for the past two years the Council has directed all of the extra income (£8.85 million) from the council tax on second homes to fund affordable housing projects, such as on the site of the former Okehampton Hospital. However, accommodation for some vulnerable communities, such as gypsies and travellers is limited. It is currently working with district council partners to fully identify accommodation needs and encourage the development of suitable sites.

Safer and stronger communities

- 69 The Council has a strong approach to working with partners to build safer and stronger communities with a range of successful results. The Council has agreed pooled budgets within the Safer Devon Partnership to target actions and allow a focus on local decision-making.
- 70 The Council has a clear understanding of the importance of dealing with crime and the fear of crime. Creating a county with safe, healthy and inclusive communities is a key priority for Devon's Strategic Partnership (DSP) of which the council is a leading partner. The DSP is well linked through to the county wide Safer Devon Partnership and district level Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships. Clear messages about the importance of community safety help focus the County Council on what matters most to local people.

- 71 The Council effectively uses data to identify priorities for improving community safety. This includes the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to pinpoint crime hotspots and focus action. The Council and partners have as a result identified as priorities violent behaviour (including domestic abuse), anti-social behaviour, alcohol, substance abuse and drug dealing. There is also high concern amongst the public about road safety, particularly about speeding, especially in rural areas. There is a high level of fear of crime, including by young people, although recorded crime levels are very low. The Council and its partners have responded effectively and have reduced crime in several hotspots in the county. This includes reducing domestic burglaries by 17.4 per cent and vehicle crime by an average of 19.8 per cent over the last three years. Additionally, the Council, as lead partner in the Against Domestic Violence and Abuse Partnership achieved its LPSA 1 target of increasing the reporting of incidents of domestic violence to the police by 10 per cent and reducing the number of reported repeat victims by 15 per cent. The Council deals appropriately with a key crime and disorder concerns.
- 72 On anti-social behaviour, the Council and partners have a clear understanding of the local causes and have plans to combat it. Thirty four thousand, five hundred and forty five reported incidents of anti-social behaviour occurred in 2005/06 and these have been analysed and partners are confident that they can achieve a 10 per cent reduction in reported incidents by 2008. This is being tackled through a range of strategies like Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) being imposed. In the last year the Police have also developed improved computer systems to identify reports of anti-social behaviour and the Partnership is now better able to establish both the nature and extent of the problem and provide a more co-ordinated response to dealing with it. Good partnership based strategies are reducing anti-social behaviour, through community safety partnerships and early intervention programmes. Despite low levels of youth crime, the Youth Offending Service has been very successful in reducing anti-social offending by children and young people, consistently ranking as one of the top 10 per cent nationally.
- 73 The Council deal effectively with substance abuse. It leads the multi-agency Drug and Alcohol Action Team which has been recognised by the National Treatment Agency as one of the better performing teams in the region. Drug treatment targets are being met and NHS targets are being exceeded on numbers entering and retained in drug treatment. The Council is aware that alcohol misuse is associated with a range of crimes such as anti-social behaviour and joint work by trading standards and police is tackling under-age alcohol sales. Also, a Council-run training programme for drink drive offenders has reduced re-offending by 30 per cent.
- 74 The council works well with partners to reduce accidents. In 2004 Devon had the lowest rate of road deaths and serious injuries in the country and the Council has just been awarded Beacon Status for road safety. Road safety initiatives, such as Driving Speeds Down and the Devon Driver's Centre, are reducing accidents.

- 75 The Council and partners have strong arrangements for responding to any potential emergency situations. It has a strong resilience plan, agreed with partners, and led by the Chief Executive.
- 76 The Council has a sound approach to building stronger communities. It has a strong approach on working with BME communities and works well with the voluntary sector in the county and through the Devon compact. This includes codes of good practice to determine the basis for continued partnership working between the two sectors. The Council also supports and fund approaches to increasing the level of volunteering in the county, raising awareness on teenage pregnancy, and supporting groups of young parents and people with mental health problems. The Council therefore supports the building of sustainable communities.

Healthier communities

- 77 Health is generally good in Devon. Life expectancy for both men and women is higher than the national average and premature death rates from heart disease and strokes are lower and falling. Teenage pregnancy rates are generally below the national average and falling (although not falling as fast as the rest of England) and the number of road injuries and deaths are also lower than the England average.
- 78 The Council's engagement with partners on developing healthier communities is variable. The Council, and its partners, have clear objectives to improve health particularly of older people and young people. The LAA focuses on encouraging healthier lifestyles through, for example increasing physical activity and reducing alcohol misuse, but the Council did not adequately engage partners in developing the Healthier Communities LAA. As a result the council is not maximising the opportunity for more joined up and co-ordinated working in this area. However, the Council works well with health partners to jointly deliver some effective health services such as the Joint Agency Teams at a school for children with special needs and at a GP surgery with a high number of vulnerable patients such as homeless people and asylum seekers. In this way the Council and partners are helping to improve the health of vulnerable people.
- 79 Health is improving as a result of the activities of the Council and its partners. The Council is delivering a range of activities to improve health. Road safety activities are contributing to fewer fatalities and serious injuries on the road. A Fresh Start programme has introduced healthier meals in schools, and an increasing number of children now walk or cycle to school as a result of a high proportion of schools having travel plans. Drug and alcohol services for young people are good. Schools are on track to meet the local targets set as part of the National Healthy Schools Programme. The council is committed to improving the health of its employees and has implemented, with partners, new initiatives such as health needs assessments, and health promotion campaigns. Outcomes from these new initiatives have yet to be evaluated, but anecdotal examples of staff changing their health behaviours exist. Staff sickness absence rates are falling.

- 80 The Council, with partners, is improving access to services for those most at risk of disadvantage. It has effectively reconfigured services to improve quality and access. For example, supported housing services for young people are being integrated to allow more tailored housing assistance that matches individual need. In addition, direct payments have been developed for people with learning difficulties resulting in a more tailored service choice which is recognised and appreciated by service users.
- 81 The Council is demonstrating leadership in improving health services. The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee intervened successfully to persuade health colleagues to maintain the opening hours of a Minor Injuries Unit. Also, a scrutiny review of NHS dentistry, undertaken in partnership with neighbouring councils, resulted in action by health colleagues to improve availability. The Council has highlighted areas of concern and taken action to improve health services to the community.

Older people

- 82 The approach to older people is strong. The Council is responding appropriately to the increasingly ageing population by stating older people as a priority in the Strategic Plan and the LAA delivery plan priorities. A comprehensive strategy for older people is in place that encompasses wellbeing as well as care. The Council has a nominated Executive Councillor plus an older people's champion. This gives an organisational focus on what needs to be improved.
- 83 The Council works effectively with partners to engage older people well. A MORI survey highlighted not just a wish by older people to stay in their own homes but also on a need to deal with housing, income, social activities, transport, and keeping healthy. The Council has made these wishes a central part of their strategy for older people. The county councillor champion for older people has helped to set up a number of older people's groups like Agile and Exeter Senior Voice resulting in more user-focused communications. Following a recommendation by the older people's champion, an older person's LSP was created in 2003 to give direct access to Councillors for consultation, resulting for example in improvements to housing for older people. Council engagement with Muslim elders in Exeter has led to opening the Hikmat Centre, providing a gateway to health and social care services which caters for the specific needs of Muslim and subsequently Chinese elders. Although relationships with an older persons pressure group are adversarial, the Council otherwise has a positive track record on engagement with older people. Older people are consulted well and the Council listens to, and acts on the consultation.

- 84 The council and partners provide a wide range of high quality services to older people. This includes Care Direct, a service that provides older people with direct access to information and advice on a wide range of services; and a visiting service that has helped older people claim an estimated £2.5 million of additional benefits each year. The Council also works with a GP led initiative, UPSTREAM, that uses community mentors to identify isolated and vulnerable older people and engage them in creative and sociable activities. The Council sponsors Ring and Ride, where an older person can book a taxi at subsidised rates. Work with Health has resulted in an integrated single assessment process, reducing delayed hospital discharges by over 30 per cent in the last year. The Council has exceeded its LPSA1 targets to reduce the number of older people being admitted to residential care from 98 to 92 per 10,000. Older people are therefore well served by the Council and partners.

Children and young people

- 85 Outcomes for children and young people are adequate. The council is performing adequately in the provision of services for children and young people and its capacity to improve is also adequate. Good progress had been made in agreeing a Children and Young People's Plan, in creating a directorate for children and young people's services and in establishing a Children's Trust. However, there are significant weaknesses in social care services for children.
- 86 The council's challenging ambitions for children and young people have been agreed with key partners and are set out clearly in its strategic plans. However, insufficient priority has been given to looked after and vulnerable children and to improving education outcomes for more able pupils. Performance management is inadequate and target setting is generally weak. There is a lack of robust data to inform management decision-making in some key service areas. There are positive examples of good and improving performance, for example in the youth service, fostering and adoption, and parts of education. Work is underway to develop a comprehensive performance management framework which will be overseen by the Children's Trust.
- 87 The council works well with partners in promoting children's and young people's health. However, patterns of improvement and access to services vary across the county. The proportion of looked after children receiving regular health checks has improved and is now good. There is a strong focus on developing healthy lifestyles, for example in schools and youth work settings.
- 88 The work of the children's social care service is inadequate. Where there is a clear case of abuse and neglect, adequate provision is made. However, the high thresholds which govern access to services, together with the inconsistent application of eligibility criteria, mean that not all children at the greatest risk of abuse and neglect get the protection they need. There are also insufficient preventive family support services. Children and young people generally feel safe in the community and in school. Most looked after children are in stable foster care placements, but a low proportion is allocated to a qualified social worker.

- 89** Educational attainment is generally in line with the national average at all key stages and in line with the average of children in similar authorities. It has mirrored the improving national trend since 1999, however, attainment in disadvantaged areas is still not good enough. The attainment of looked after children is improving but remains low and too many are absent from school. Most children enjoy their education and make at least satisfactory progress in relation to their prior attainment. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well in special schools and at least satisfactorily in mainstream provision. Attendance is generally in line with the national picture and the number of permanent exclusions is reducing. The council provides good support to schools.
- 90** There are good opportunities for children and young people to make a positive contribution and to participate in decision-making. Good efforts are made to ensure vulnerable groups are included. Care leavers influence the services they receive, but opportunities for children still in care are more limited. Effective partnership work is tackling anti-social behaviour and reducing the number of first-time offenders.
- 91** The council's work in helping children and young people achieve economic wellbeing is adequate. Post-16 success rates are in line with the national average. A high proportion of young people is in education, training or employment, although a significant minority is in work without training. There is insufficient affordable housing to meet the needs of young people. Those with complex needs face particular difficulty finding a suitable place to live.

Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Devon County Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 23 May to 23 June 2006.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.