

Corporate Assessment Report

October 2006



# Corporate Assessment

Swindon Borough 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 Swindon Borough Council is performing adequately. It is a council that has undergone a radical transformation. The pace of change and the progress made have been impressive. Given the building blocks that have, or are being put in place, the Council is well placed to deliver further improvements.
- 6 In 2004 the Cabinet in Swindon instigated a large programme of change and improvement. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) had been engaged with the Council since 2002 due to the Council's poor CPA rating. The 2004 Corporate Governance Inspection acknowledged improvement but criticised pace and vision. The Council appointed an interim chief executive and this alongside new political leadership has increased the momentum of the programme of change. It has invested in a new officer structure and recruited a new top team of officers. Its improvements over the last two years have come in priority areas and can be related back to the three step path to recovery it set out in its Full Recovery Plan.
- 7 The Council's first priority in recovery focused on service improvement. The result has been that significant and continuous improvement in performance has taken place both in service areas and corporate performance from a low base. The Council's CPA rating has improved from 'poor' to 'two stars' overall with improving services impacting on the quality of life of people in Swindon. External assessments show that improvements are being achieved. For instance, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) 2005 performance assessment judged adult and children's social care as now 'serving some people well'. The track record of the Council and its partners on achieving their priorities is improving and is shown, for example, in specific areas such as services for children and young people: improvement in educational attainment at key stage 2; increase in preventative services and the proportion of children looked after who have had health assessments. However, while there has been improvement in some areas, not all action has resulted in the anticipated improvement within identified timeframes, including for example the Youth Service.

- 8 The second area of focus has been improving community leadership to tackle the opportunities and problems the borough faces and the Council recognises that it is still at a relatively early stage in addressing this. For Swindon, community leadership meant planning the longer term future of the Borough, improving the town centre and delivering the Local Area Agreement which was signed in April 2006. The Council now has much clearer political leadership, with greater clarity about the long term vision for Swindon as a growth area. Political and managerial leaders are working with regional agencies to both absorb regional demand for new homes and to limit the environmental impacts of car traffic. Stakeholders increasingly understand the vision and are working constructively with the Council to deliver it. Swindon has strengthened its managerial leadership and increased capacity at senior levels. Improved political and community leadership places the Council and its partners in a better position to deliver on its ambitions into the future. It is now seen as a credible community leader with clear support from partners.
- 9 The Council is now beginning to address its third area of focus, the increasingly important priority of building neighbourhood capacity. Substantial Council investment and officer time has been required to bring failing services up to an adequate standard and the Council is still putting in place the building blocks for sustained improvement. There is a culture of partnership working among the local strategic partners with a range of partnerships in place which include the voluntary and community sector. However, there are areas where this is weaker at a delivery level, for instance the Community Safety Partnership (CSP). There are many recent plans and strategies that have been developed with a clearer focus and, along with the new LAA, have provided a good stimulus to more effective partnership working. At present, however, it is too early to see outcomes in some key areas. Swindon and its partners have taken positive steps to tackle disadvantage through neighbourhood renewal, however, this is not yet supported by clear, linked strategies and plans for delivery.
- 10 Value for money is improving from a low base and efficiency savings have been delivered. Value for money and progress with efficiency reviews are now incorporated into quarterly performance reviews and the service planning round each year. The Council is taking steps via its medium term resourcing plan (MTRP) to ensure that priorities, resource allocation and budget changes are linked. Procurement is a strength and within a new strategic framework the Council is now focussed on driving increased value for money, particularly in areas such as transportation and integrated care.

- 11 User focus and diversity are at the core of the ambitions and are now becoming clearer in delivery but need to be more consistent at the neighbourhood level. Many of the Council's priorities are focused on improving opportunities and quality of life in neighbourhood renewal areas and therefore focusing on groups at risk of disadvantage. There is a need to reduce health inequalities, improve access to services and employment for disadvantaged groups. Currently, action plans at a neighbourhood level do not show how these improvements will be delivered. Successful individual initiatives are evident, including work with black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, for example the Asian women's mental health project. Overall the Council workforce does not broadly reflect the ethnic background of its highly diverse communities.

## Areas for improvement

- 12 The Council needs to improve in four areas.
  - The clarity of its prioritisation in terms of ensuring plans and strategies adequately and robustly support the overall vision as encompassed by the LAA.
  - Action plans at a neighbourhood level need to show how improvements for disadvantaged groups will be delivered and inequalities in health, access and employment eroded.
  - Improving via its current plans access for customers through ICT and improved accommodation.
  - More consistent application of its strategic human resources (HR) processes.
- 13 Although it has derived a set of priorities from its overall vision and ambitions, scope exists for clarifying further the links between the Council's strategic thinking and its delivery plans by completing and clearly linking its emerging strategies around economic development, older people, waste and leisure services. In particular the links between anti-social behaviour and the town centre, housing and regeneration; and skills and regeneration are not well co-ordinated or consistent.
- 14 There is a need to show through action plans at a neighbourhood level how the council and its partners will reduce health inequalities, improve access to services and employment for disadvantaged groups. This should involve consistently taking account of the needs of all sections of community to ensure that they inform priorities in the design and delivery of services.
- 15 The Council needs to build on the investment it is making through initiatives such as the ASPIRE project to continue to enhance capacity through maximising the effective use of ICT and accommodation to transform services for all people in Swindon.
- 16 The Council needs to further improve the corporate management of human resources by fully implementing what is a sound strategic approach to HR. This means implementing its HR strategy and improving workforce planning including:
  - adopting a more consistent approach to training and development;
  - ensuring it acts by example to promote equalities and opportunities and thereby being more representative of the communities it serves; and
  - ensuring lower level managers have the skills to enable them to deliver the new agenda.

## 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	2
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	2
<b>Overall corporate assessment score**</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>*Key to scores</b>		
1 – below minimum requirements – <b>inadequate performance</b>		
2 – at only minimum requirements – <b>adequate performance</b>		
3 – consistently above minimum requirements – <b>performing well</b>		
4 – well above minimum requirements – <b>performing strongly</b>		

### \*\*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

- 17 Swindon Borough is a unitary Council located near the M4 between Bristol and London. It has a population of 181,000 and is growing at one of the fastest rates in England with the population projected to reach 208,000 by 2011. The majority (87 per cent) live in the town of Swindon, which occupies one quarter of the borough's area, and the remainder live in the surrounding rural areas. The proportion of people from groups other than white British was nine per cent in 2001, below the national average of 13 per cent. Significant communities include people from Poland, Italy and Ireland and more recent arrivals from the Balkans and the Middle East.
- 18 In terms of deprivation, overall Swindon ranks 161st of the 354 areas of England (one being the most deprived), a change from the 2001/02 level of 125 showing the improving status of residents. However this masks the fact that two wards rank 18th and 29th nationally in the most recently published Index of Multiple Deprivation. There are some areas below ward-level of multiple deprivation with chronic unemployment, a benefits culture and deep-rooted problems of health, safety, crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Some communities have traditionally lacked aspiration and although educational attainment and post-16 participation are improving, they are still low. Unemployment is generally below the national average but slightly above regional average levels.
- 19 Historically a railway town, Swindon has successfully reinvented itself over the last 20 years as an ICT and logistics base with a buoyant economy. It is a strategic business location for major companies and some Government agencies. The pace of growth has slowed with job losses in manufacturing. Nearly 80 per cent of local employment is in the service sector. Transport access is good because of the M4 and main line rail services.
- 20 Swindon has a disappointing town centre and a limited variety of housing stock, which undermines confidence and is a key reason why so many who work in Swindon commute daily, looking to the surrounding counties to live, shop, play and invest their wealth. The Council has recognised that it needs major investment in the scale and quality of the built environment, retail outlets, art, culture and leisure facilities. This is fundamental to the future of the borough and a key focus for the Council's plans and investment. The Council has reacted positively to the significant planned housing expansion. Last year, 1,730 houses were completed and this level of build is set to continue, with land identified for 16,000 houses over the next ten years and proposals for a further 16,000 between 2016 and 2026 in a new development area. This will bring the population to over 250,000, potentially making Swindon a regional centre.

## The Council

- 21 The Council comprises 59 Councillors. Following the June 2004 election there was a change from being a hung Council to one which is Conservative led. Conservatives hold 40 of 59 seats; Labour has 14 seats and the Liberal Democrats 3 with 2 Independents. The Council is governed under the Leader and Cabinet model. The Cabinet of nine has a Leader who is also portfolio holder for Regeneration, Sustainable Development and Transport Planning and a Deputy Leader who is also portfolio holder for Corporate Affairs. The seven other portfolios are: Children's Services; Leisure, Culture and Recreation; Resources; Health, Housing and Social Care; Highways, Transport and Strategic Planning; Local Environment and Community and Neighbourhoods. There was a planned change of leadership following the 2006 local elections with the previous Deputy Leader becoming the Leader.
- 22 The Council has a Scrutiny Committee and five Overview Committees that match the Group Director structure: Children's Services, Housing and Social Care, Environment and Leisure, Resources, and Policy and Partnership. Two sub-committees cover Audit, and Health and External scrutiny. Overview and Scrutiny committees are politically balanced and some are opposition-led.
- 23 The Council's vision is 'Swindon - the UK's Best Business Location' and its role in delivering it is set out in the Corporate Plan. The Leader chairs the LAA Partnership Board, and the Council are closely involved in its four subsidiary boards for Economic Development and Enterprise, Children and Young People, Safer and Stronger Communities and Healthy Communities and Older People. Underpinning these priorities are four key values which consultation with residents confirmed they want to see explicitly within the LAA. These are: citizenship, pride and identity; sustainable development; equality, inclusion and cohesion; and partnership working.
- 24 The Council is currently negotiating with a private sector partner to take over its back office functions starting in November 2006. It is intended that this will include HR, finance, revenues and benefits, ICT, general administration, a first-stop-shop and customer contact centre and property services.
- 25 In 2004 the Cabinet instigated a large programme of change and improvement. The ODPM had been engaged with the Council since 2002 due to its poor CPA rating. The 2004 Corporate Governance Inspection had acknowledged improvement but criticised pace and vision. The Council appointed an interim chief executive and has invested in a totally new structure, building capacity through the recruitment of a largely new top team of officers.
- 26 The net revenue budget for 2006/07 is £112.7 million excluding schools (£197.0 million including schools). This equates to a net spend per head of population of £618. Council Tax is below average at £1,170 compared to the Audit Commission family average of £1,181 and the Unitary average of £1,198. The Council's general reserves are 5 per cent of its net revenue spend. The 2006-2010 capital programme totals £240 million including provision of a new central library, new civic centre, seven new schools and the replacement of all unsuitable temporary classrooms.

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

### Ambition

- 27 The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements. It has developed an ambitious, overarching, strategic vision which focuses on the need to regenerate the area under the banner 'Swindon - the UK's best business location'. This is very stretching and the Council and its partners see this as more than a simple business transformation, having a big impact on local people, reducing disadvantage and regenerating the town centre.
- 28 The ambitious agenda has been developed after consultation and discussion with partners. Its overriding vision is well informed by existing consultation and is long term, challenging and realistic. Drawing on the outcomes from existing consultation Swindon produced a clear set of promises in 2005 and a corporate plan in 2006, both of which have been endorsed by partners and other stakeholders. Ambitions have been publicised to all stakeholders through initiatives such as the highly visible 'Swindon 2010' 50 Promises document offering clear and specific commitments to citizens about things that really matter to them. Swindon 2010 forms part of the corporate plan and includes medium term targets such as establishing contact centres by 2010 and improving secondary school results by 2006. Stakeholders and staff understand these ambitions. The clarity of the vision has enabled the Council to make some difficult decisions, for instance, recognising in the face of some localised public resistance, the positive impact on the culture and prospects for the place of having a university campus sited in the Borough.
- 29 The Council has taken a strong community leadership role in developing the area's LAA. This has involved developing and clarifying a single embracing vision for Swindon. The starting point was the 2004 Community Strategy and the consultation that fed that exercise. The LAA focuses more strongly and ambitiously on Swindon's vision, 'Swindon - the UK's Best Business Location'. There is good consistency between the 2004 Community Strategy, Swindon 2010, the Corporate Plan and the recent LAA. A clear and consistent vision underpins the Council's own plans creating a unity of purpose and a shared sense of ownership among partners, stakeholders and staff.
- 30 The Council is increasingly taking steps to provide robust and effective leadership to the community. It has taken some bold decisions for the benefit of the area including positively taking on a large programme of growth and sticking determinedly to the decision regarding the site of the university campus. The Leader of the Council chairs the LAA Partnership Board, and the Council is closely involved in its four subsidiary boards. Stakeholders, particularly public sector partners, have growing confidence in the Council's ability to meet the area's challenges.

## 14 Corporate Assessment | What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

- 31 There are some good individual strategies backing up the overall vision. The Housing Strategy sets out clear priorities and has a determined approach towards its top priority, the provision of affordable housing. This has added impetus to an area where the Council is performing well and exceeding its targets.
- 32 The Council has a good understanding of the local context for the borough. The Swindon 2010 20 Promises document offers clear, specific commitments to citizens on social, environmental and economic issues. The Council has carefully managed the publication of Swindon 2010 and the new corporate plan so that the incoming leader could sign and be seen to own the messages in it. This has maintained a clear sense of direction and eased the transition from one leadership to another.
- 33 The Council has improved its ongoing engagement with disadvantaged groups using its five 'equalities coalitions' for race, women, older people, disability and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender issues. Most stakeholders believe the Council has a good understanding of all its local communities, the locality, and the issues and challenges facing it. The coalitions have contributed to strategy development and target setting for the LAA, the transport strategy, the ASPIRE project and one-stop shop developments and the external funding strategy. At a service level there has been positive engagement with Swindon Tenants Voice, a representative tenants group, over improvement planning, contractor engagement and the LAA. There has also been thorough consultation with a range of stakeholders on the Council's budget, which led to changes in funding, for instance, additional investment in services for looked after children and savings made by discontinuing the supply of free refuse sacks.
- 34 The Council is aware of cross-cutting issues between priority areas but is not consistently maximising opportunities to link ambitions across the Council through prioritisation and capacity building. For example, there are unresolved tensions which lead to some contradictions amongst the priorities between 'promoting travel choice' and 'managing the impact of transport on the built environment'. For instance the regeneration of the town centre is not linked to improving the training and employment agenda for 14 to 19 year olds and so opportunities to raise the aspirations of this group could be missed.

## Prioritisation

- 35 The Council's performance in this area is adequate. It has prioritised well in recent years, focussing its attention on improving front line services, and deriving a set of priorities from its overall vision and ambitions. There are number of key emerging strategies and it is not yet clear how these and its partners' plans integrate and support the LAA. Action plans at a neighbourhood level do not yet show how improvements for disadvantaged groups will be delivered and inequalities in health, access and employment eroded.

- 36 The Council has successfully focused on what matters to local people and has not been distracted. The Council set out three stages in its recovery plan and the first theme of recovery was service improvement. It successfully prioritised this and has delivered good service improvements shown by its improved overall CPA rating and in services, such as sustained improvements in social care services for children. This involved investment in a new management structure and then robustly following a challenging programme of change and improvement.
- 37 There is strong political and officer consensus on the overall vision and top priorities such as improving the town centre and the wider regeneration agenda. The key documents, the LAA, the corporate plan, Swindon 2010 and the ongoing commitments from the recovery plan are consistent in content and in the priority areas expressed. Priorities are informed by consideration of both national and local issues. These priorities and those key plans already in place are well linked, for example, the focus on regeneration.
- 38 There are however a lot of priorities across a very broad agenda and there is no clearly expressed hierarchy of priorities. This is an important issue because the Council has not yet adequately prioritised to show it has sufficient capacity to deliver on all its existing priorities as well as its stretching ambitions for neighbourhood renewal. An example of the impact of this is that despite being a public priority, the scale of the problems and the level of resourcing regarding community safety have not been well matched and there have been capacity issues within the CSP. This has led to underperformance in this area, particularly in terms of combating drugs misuse.
- 39 There are clear priorities in Swindon 2010 and in the corporate plan around reducing disadvantage such as around low cost housing. This recognises the need to reduce health inequalities, improve access to services and increase employment for disadvantaged groups. Beyond this however, the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (NRS) itself is not well developed in order to deliver reduced disadvantage at neighbourhood level. While there are several successful local initiatives between the Council and its partners these are not supported by comprehensive, linked, up-to-date plans and strategies. Consequently action plans at a neighbourhood level do not currently show how these important improvements will be delivered.
- 40 The links between the strategic thinking that is guiding what the Council does and its delivery plans are unclear. Although there is a clear performance management framework and an up-to-date set of service plans in place which link well to the overall ambitions, some key strategies and plans, including neighbourhood action plans are not in place, such as those for economic development, older people, waste and leisure services. These are all in development and their delay was a conscious decision to prioritise service improvement as its first step in its recovery. The Council has successfully strengthened its focus to date but it is at risk of failing to maximise the potential of its current position and to encourage better joint working. An opportunity to improve this is the new draft leisure strategy in relation to closer working to reduce health inequalities.

- 41 The Council has a good medium term financial strategy to ensure resources will be available. The Council is taking steps via its four year medium term resourcing plan to ensure that priorities, resource allocation and budget changes are linked. The last two years has seen effective resource reallocation to priority areas. The most high profile example of this is in adult and children's social care where significant reallocation aligned with the Kent County Council partnership has turned the service around. From the former low base of 'no stars' in 2003, the CSCI 2005 performance assessment rated adult social care as 'serving some people well' with 'promising' capacity to improve.
- 42 There has been some good alignment of budgets with health both in children's and older people's services linked to shared priorities. However, the Council's resources are not yet fully aligned with those of its partners and it has yet to take steps to review and reallocate the resources available to partner organisations to address the priorities within the LAA. Through the new LAA the Council plans to review and reallocate the resources available to partner organisations, but this is at an early stage. Adopting this timetable was a conscious decision and the Council's commitment is to have a detailed breakdown of funding aligned with the outcomes ready for the first year's refresh in April 2007. As a consequence, it is currently unclear how some of the LAA outcomes will be delivered, in particular, how the Council and its partners will prioritise, then shape service and resource delivery to tackle deprivation.
- 43 There is mixed understanding of the priorities amongst stakeholders. Strategic partners have a good understanding of the priorities while other stakeholders are less familiar with them. This is despite the fact that the Council has widely publicised its promises to people and is continually keeping them up-to-date. A range of consultation methods have been used to identify key themes which have been fed back to cabinet to inform the decision-making process around priorities and important issues such as the potential council tax rise.
- 44 The Council is not consistently taking account of the needs of all sections of community in prioritising the design and delivery of its services. User focus and diversity are prioritised at the ambition level, but it is a mixed picture in terms of prioritisation and delivery. The Council has improved its ongoing engagement with disadvantaged groups via the five equalities coalitions. It has also prioritised community development for people from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds and increased the take up of adult education in some of the BME community. However, action plans at a neighbourhood level to deliver improvements for disadvantaged groups are not in place. Although services such as housing monitor take up and customer satisfaction by ethnicity or other equalities data and then use this to inform service improvements, this does not happen consistently. Similarly, while children's services priorities are based upon an analysis of needs, including key community-based data such as health inequalities, recorded criminal activity and educational attainment at Super Output Areas, this is still a developing area for other services.

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

### Capacity

- 45 The Council's performance in this area is adequate. Officers and councillors are clear about responsibilities and decision-making is open and transparent. Management capacity and leadership and political leadership have been strengthened. Financial capacity and management are good and some of the key building blocks are now in place to deliver further improvement. However, a strategic approach to HR has yet to be implemented consistently and the ICT infrastructure and accommodation are generally not sufficient to meet the Council's challenging improvement programme.
- 46 Appropriate mechanisms are in place and are effective in ensuring good, ethical standards are maintained. Codes of conduct and protocols are in place, action has been taken in instances of improper conduct. The Council has a Scrutiny Committee and five Overview Committees that match the Group Director structure. Two sub-committees cover Audit and Health and External scrutiny; the Audit Sub Committee was last year promoted to full standing committee status reporting direct to Council. Overview and Scrutiny committees are politically balanced and some are opposition-led.
- 47 Councillors and senior officers maintain their focus and are not distracted by minor matters. Difficult decisions have been taken where necessary, such as radical re-structuring; and focus is sustained on improving front line service delivery as the first stage of recovery. Scrutiny is well run and challenging and political party considerations are not paramount. Scrutiny contributes to service improvement via a clear role in performance management, an example being the review of HR which led to the new centralised approach. Senior officers contribute appropriately to, and executive members take responsibility for, strategic and policy decisions.
- 48 Swindon has strong and increasingly very well regarded leadership exercised by the cabinet, chief executive and corporate management. The capacity and calibre of senior management in the Council has been strengthened and is proving sufficient to provide consistent leadership, challenge and support across the Council. The Council has managed to successfully boost capacity, despite removing some layers of management and maintained generally low spending levels without impacting negatively on service delivery. This is illustrated by the overall improvement in its CPA rating.

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

- 49** There is a comprehensive training and development programme for staff and a programme for councillors which needs to be developed beyond the immediate period. The member development programme includes a module on partnership and community leadership. Although there are sound strategic HR documents in place the Council has been inconsistent in its application of these strategies and there has been little impact as yet. The recent centralisation of the human resources function has the potential to improve overall HR capacity to support improvement and is starting to do so in some areas. However, the deployment of HR capacity is inconsistent and workforce planning as a whole is underdeveloped. Although there is a draft joint workforce strategy with health and children services, there remain staffing capacity issues in some areas, such as adult social care and community safety, as well as gaps in provision such as no identified Children's Rights Service.
- 50** Progress on some important issues such as Single Status has been slow and there are key Council projects critical to the Council's agenda that will test the relationship with the trades unions over the next year or so, including, the ASPIRE project and Green Travel. Relationships which have been mixed are now improving and the Council has recently reached agreement to work in a different way with unions towards joint objectives.
- 51** The Council's approach to procurement is strong. Through its new Gateway system it has achieved efficiency savings of £830,000 to date and identified a further £2.8 million for the next two years. A comprehensive procurement strategy is in place and is supported with a toolkit and training. Alongside this, the Council has improved its project management processes for appraisal, approval monitoring and review, and applies these consistently. The Council is engaging in strategic partnering for improved ICT and back office functions, and has developed some joint commissioning, including a joint commissioning strategy with health covering the planning and delivery of services.
- 52** Swindon Borough Council has effectively built financial and other capacity through the strategic use of partnerships. A number of strong and successful partnerships are in place. The range of partnerships boosting capacity include the Kent County Council partnership which adds considerable management capacity and the partnership with the PCT where there are clearly aligned budgets and plans in place covering a range of service provision. There are some areas however where weaker partnership working has impacted on outcomes, for instance in community safety where the ASB unit lacks the capacity to respond to its backlog of casework.
- 53** The financial capacity and financial management of the Council are good. It is asset rich with a high level of land ownership, particularly in the town centre, which is a significant positive given the intended level of development in the town centre. There is a robust medium term financial strategy which links resources to service strategies. Although this minimises the risk to the delivery of priorities, financial projections are finely tuned being dependant upon other factors such as rising land values.

- 54 The Council's approach to the use of resources and its focus on value for money are both adequate and improving. Swindon is generally low spending in revenue terms with a below average Council Tax which is the lowest in Wiltshire. It has maintained this position while delivering its recent service improvements. A number of service areas have used invest to save to deliver improvement. For instance, the learning campus aimed at reducing out of borough placements for children and young people requiring multi-agency provision for care and education, and a newly tendered fostering service providing increased qualitative placements. Corporately procurement is strong, with a new strategic framework and the Council is now focussed on driving increased VFM in areas such as integrated care for older people. Specific and challenging efficiency targets have been set, for instance £9.1 million in 2006/07, for bridging the gap between resources and planned spending.
- 55 The Council has increased its capacity to deliver by getting a dispensation from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to finance some one-off transformation costs from capital receipts through to 2008. The Council now has a £240 million capital programme for the period 2006-2010 including provision of a new central library, a new civic centre, seven new schools and the replacement of all unsuitable temporary classrooms. The programme is fully funded without significant borrowing with nearly 80 per cent being met from capital receipts, section 106 deposits and grants.
- 56 Swindon's ICT infrastructure and accommodation are generally not fit for purpose or sufficient to meet the Council's challenging improvement programme. The Council is now well-advanced in negotiating with a private sector partner to take over its back office functions starting in November 2006 (ASPIRE). It intends to use private sector expertise to re-engineer business processes. The Council is making good progress on e-government, and at 89 per cent it is in the best quartile in the percentage of its interactions with the public which are capable of electronic service delivery. However, further work needs to be done to ensure that those in disadvantaged areas can access these and that services support those with additional language or communication needs.
- 57 The capacity of the voluntary and community sector within Swindon is underdeveloped. The Council acknowledges it needs to and is seeking to build capacity in the voluntary and community sector with a Compact in place following extensive consultation. The inclusion of Voluntary Action Swindon on the Local Public Sector Board Partnership Board is a positive step to improve the strategic engagement with this sector, increasing the ability of the local sector to obtain external funding and to support the Council in achieving its priorities.

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

**58** Overall the Council workforce does not broadly reflect the ethnic background of its highly diverse communities. The Council has now prioritised equalities corporately and within services and is committed to working with its coalitions and partner organisations to improve the diversity of the workforce. Level 2 of the Equality Standard was achieved in March 2005 and it aims to reach level 3 by the end of the calendar year and action plans are in place to achieve this. However, there has been limited advertising of Council vacancies within the neighbourhood renewal areas and the Council has not demonstrated its leadership role in promoting apprenticeships, nor has it linked vacancies through the value chain to contractors.

## Performance management

- 59** The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements. It has made very good progress towards being a performance driven organisation. Over the last two years it has shown a sustained commitment to developing a stronger, more inclusive approach to owning, managing and monitoring performance at all levels. These changes have resulted in tangible improvements to a number of services.
- 60** The Council has effectively managed performance in recent years. Performance management is led strongly from the top of the organisation. The Chief Executive takes a keen interest in the monitoring of ongoing performance. The Corporate Board supports the Council in systematic monitoring and focus. For example it monitors key risks using Corporate Performance Action Reviews (CPARs). It has delegated discussion on joint and integrated operational issues to each Group Director's team. There is an improving emphasis across departments on setting challenging performance targets and more consistently tackling under performance which is yielding general improvement in the levels of performance, an example being in the housing benefits service. The Council, in conjunction with its contractor, has been focusing on improving this previously poor performing service. Processing times are much improved and the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate's report resulted in a score of 3, that is, good performance.
- 61** The Council has a clear performance management framework system. It has an annual cycle for the integration of performance and resource planning and management that is applied in practice and is bedding in across the Council. Each Promise and LAA Outcome has an action plan with milestones. There is a new on line corporate COMPASS system in place across the Council and all plans, including service plans are cross-referenced and have a golden thread down to individual work plans. This is a good, easy to use software tool which shows progress of the Council at a high level and is well linked to LAA promises and corporate plan targets. There are plans in place to add partners to this software system.

- 62 Councillors are closely involved in performance management through executive, scrutiny or Council meetings. Performance Management is included within the Member Development Programme. Overview and Scrutiny has a clear view of its role in holding the Executive to account for its performance. Performance improvement, particularly through the ongoing delivery of the 50 Promises has had a high profile over the last two years. This has helped to ensure councillors have a role in driving up levels of performance which has been critical in the recent recovery, such as in housing benefits.
- 63 Arrangements for performance management in partnership working continue to develop. Some performance management of partnerships has been in place through the LSP, with accountability for future actions clearly defined. The performance management framework used within the Council involves partners and is monitored at several levels for instance the Children and Young People's partnership board, the Group Directorate and the LAA. There has been open sharing of performance management information across the various partnership boards and groups. For example targets have been set in consultation with stakeholders including the Youth Forum and the equalities coalition, though the LAA is recent and untested.
- 64 Swindon has introduced robust budget management processes and in year budget monitoring with clear responsibilities and accountabilities placed with departmental managers. Although financial and performance reporting is aligned and performance information is very timely, the management of resources is not fully integrated with the management of performance. There are steps in place to overcome this and as yet, this has not inhibited the ability of the Council to deliver its ambitious programme of improvement for the area and it continues to deliver to budget.
- 65 The appraisal system is at present inconsistently applied across the Council. A recent Council survey identified 70 per cent coverage in terms of completed appraisals in the last year. There are also mixed views on the strengths of the system, with some managers feeling it is too bureaucratic.
- 66 Risk management has improved and is informing key corporate and strategic planning at a high level. The appointment of a lead Corporate Director and Lead Member for Risk Management has increased its profile. For example, risk assessments are in place for all business plans and are regularly updated. Examples include the contract with Kent Social Services. However risk management lower down the Council, though improving is less consistent and robust.
- 67 The Council has clear corporate priorities for disadvantaged groups and through its mechanisms for consulting is able to assess the needs of disadvantaged groups and take steps to meet them. The Council has a programme of service based satisfaction surveys and established stakeholder groups and user forums which obtain data in relation to the locality and ethnicity. For instance, there is a corporate priority to help the most vulnerable achieve more qualifications. In adult learning following significant investment and the production of neighbourhood learning plans for pilot areas, the Council was able to show increased take up of learning opportunities over four years among BME and disabled groups.

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

- 68** Despite this and other localised good examples, the Council lacks systematic processes for monitoring take up and satisfaction rates for service users. The Council is therefore unable to consistently assess the impact of performance on its BME communities and other groups, particularly in the neighbourhood renewal area. An exception is in housing where the BME housing needs survey is being repeated due to earlier weaknesses. The impact of this is that the Council is only now starting to comprehensively develop its community cohesion agenda.
- 69** The Council has a good learning culture and makes use of complaints and feedback information. Council is prepared to learn from things that didn't work well and to transfer this into other settings. For example, communications at the start of the ASPIRE project did not take sufficient account of staff concerns. The learning regarding change and communication is to be shared with 130 managers at a learning day to support the broader transformation programme.

## What has been achieved?

- 70** The Council's performance in this area is adequate. It has achieved significant improvements in its priority services in areas that are important to the public. Results for education, adult social care, benefits and planning are now much improved, as a result of the Council focusing on aspects that have been performing poorly in the past. These can be related back to the three step path to recovery it set itself in its Full Recovery Plan where service improvement was a clear first priority. Further improvements are necessary in some key areas for instance in the community safety partnership especially around drugs.
- 71** There have been important and sustained improvements in education and social care services for children. Outcomes for most children and young people in Swindon are generally adequate with some positive and emerging strengths. Children and young people appear safe. There is however significant inequality both in access to services and outcomes achieved for children and young people. In general young people are healthy and life expectancy compares well to the national average. Smoking and substance misuse is a significant impediment to physical health particularly in the more economically disadvantaged areas of the borough. Educational achievement in primary schools has recently reached national averages but remains lower in secondary schools. This overall picture reflects particular underachievement in the more disadvantaged areas such as Park North. Overall children appear safe although some live in communities where they feel concerned about their safety. Children from black and minority ethnic communities performed above the borough average at GCSE but were over represented as a proportion of children looked after or involved with the Youth Offending Team (YOT).
- 72** Despite seeing improvements in its priority services, the Council is still putting in place the building blocks for sustained improvement and it is too early to see the outcomes from some significant investment and plans. The LAA has provided a stimulus to increase partnership working; however, at present, it is too early to see outcomes in key areas. There are some strong plans and strategies in place to deliver improved quality of life but weaknesses exist due to the lack of up-to-date strategies for economic development, waste management and older people. New communities are being created at North Swindon and major extensions are planned to the South and the East of the borough. The Council and its partners are investing heavily in the use of the planning system to ensure the development of sustainable communities. For example, through the use of design codes to make places attractive and easy to access by public transport. However, while the southern area is shortly to receive major investment there is no clear funding strategy for the older disadvantaged areas and therefore inequalities in health, access and employment are not being addressed.

- 73 ICT and accommodation are not fit for purpose and access to services is only adequate with telephone callers receiving a poor service. In 2004/05 only 21 per cent of council buildings were accessible to disabled people. The Council is implementing plans and beginning to deliver improvements in access to services - an area it acknowledges it needs to improve. The ASPIRE project is an example of how the Council is using partnership working to boost capacity and improve services. The Council is now well-advanced in negotiating with a private sector partner to take over its back office functions starting in November 2006. It intends to use private sector expertise to re-engineer business processes.
- 74 Community engagement is improving through direct consultation and the use of Swindon's five coalitions. There are some good examples of work with BME and disadvantaged groups. These include a cross authority partnership approach to working with gypsies and travellers and improving the participation rates of minority groups in key services such as adult education.

## Sustainable communities and transport

- 75 Swindon has successfully promoted business growth and is a major regional centre for large companies. It has acknowledged the need for expansion and it is beginning to improve the town centre, an early example being the library project. The LAA is very ambitious in this area and aligns to the corporate plan. It identifies the need to balance the economic growth with a new town centre and improving the quality of life particularly of those in deprived areas. Along with its partners the Council is looking beyond medium term planning horizons to manage growth and accessibility up to 2026. However, substantial inequalities in the quality of life exist between deprived wards and more affluent areas. Recent major housing developments such as the northern development area have also not maximised opportunities to create more integrated and cohesive communities.
- 76 The move by Swindon and its partners to tackle neighbourhood renewal is a positive step as it is not required to have a neighbourhood renewal strategy, nor is it in receipt of Government funding as a priority area. Local politicians and partners have therefore signalled a clear intent to tackle disadvantage. Nevertheless, this is not supported by clear, linked strategies and plans for delivery. For example, Neighbourhood Action Plans are not yet in place. The risk is that the prosperity of the borough will be improved but those residents in the pockets of deprivation will not benefit and this will impact negatively on the sustainability of the whole borough. The links between its plans, in particular the links between ASB and the town centre, housing and regeneration; and skills and regeneration are not sufficiently well co-ordinated and consistent. While there is no clear funding strategy for the older disadvantaged areas, inequalities in health, access and employment are not being addressed.

- 77 Benefit claimant levels in disadvantaged neighbourhoods remain high when compared to all Swindon and regional averages. For example a resident living in the central ward is two and a half times more likely to be a claimant than the Swindon average. Low skills and aspirations in disadvantaged areas remain stubbornly low. The improving collaboration between schools, training providers and colleges across the partnership is increasing opportunities for young people and encouraging them to consider further education or training options. However an example of the current lack of integrated thinking is the missed opportunity to link the schools' PFI with local labour markets in West Swindon. Problems not currently being addressed include an inadequate bus route and a lack of apprenticeships.
- 78 The Council has made a clear commitment to improve accessibility through promoting alternatives to motor car use. Its Local Transport Plan is appropriate for the local context for the next five years, and the Council is investing in a strategic transportation vision to 2026 to show how it will cope with the implications of its plans, particularly population growth. This has the potential to enable the Council and its partners to be clearer as to how it can increase accessibility through the use of public transport and managed car use, particularly between the housing growth areas and the town centre.
- 79 The Council in co-operation with its arms length bus company has managed a marked increase in public transport use and in walking and cycling. Bus use has increased by over 4 per cent against a backdrop of a national decline. It has improved its delivery on infrastructure and the condition of roads is good and improving. An important local example of improved accessibility through the use of integrated working is the promotion of a bus service that links the town centre to the out of town Great Western Hospital.
- 80 The Council has a good record on the delivery of affordable housing and good outcomes in terms of decent homes. It is delivering an average of 300 affordable homes per year and is above target. It is also improving its housing stock quickly and 86 per cent of its housing stock meets the Government's decent homes standard. On current plans the Council will have improved all its houses to Government standards by 2008, two years earlier than the existing deadline.
- 81 Appropriate housing is provided for most vulnerable young people including care leavers and more comprehensive support is now in place for those with complex needs. It has a good homelessness service with rough sleeping virtually eliminated. The use of bed and breakfast and temporary accommodation has reduced. Care leavers and other vulnerable young people therefore have access to appropriate accommodation and support.
- 82 The Council has a commitment to green issues but overall Swindon's performance on environmental issues is mixed. It has no up-to-date waste strategy and has missed statutory recycling targets. Waste recycling has improved between 2002/03 and 2004/05 from a low base; the Council achieved 13.5 per cent per cent recycling in 2004/05 and 19.88 per cent in 2005/06.

- 83 The Council is implementing plans to improve the attractiveness and safety of public spaces. There are some examples of improvements to the physical fabric of the borough, including streets, and the cleanliness and maintenance of public places is adequate. Most stakeholders believe the Council works effectively to promote the quality of the local economy and environment. The Streets for Living project and quicker graffiti removal are ensuring that the cleanliness and appearance of local areas are improving. Air quality is good as evidenced by effective monitoring and the area has no air quality management areas.
- 84 The Council is successfully working with partners to improve opportunities for more sustainable construction. However it is missing opportunities to make large gains in sustainable construction. For example it is not promoting the highest environmental quality rating for its school building PFI programme with its partners.

## Safer and stronger communities

- 85 This Council is failing to deliver significant improved outcomes for local people in this key priority area. Partnership working has been underdeveloped with serious weaknesses in the youth service and limited capacity in commissioning and co-ordination of drugs services. Due to the links between drugs and crime this is notable, particularly given that fear of crime and the issue of anti social behaviour are citizen's and Council priorities. Only a third of stakeholders believe the Council works effectively to make the community safer.
- 86 The Council has not met targets to reduce crime, though levels overall have fallen. Overall, the crime rate for the area is close to the national median and is falling at about the national rate. But fear of crime remains a concern for many local people. By the end of April 2006 Swindon was expected to have recorded a reduction of 6.7 per cent against the 2003/04 baseline, whereas the recorded reduction was 3.5 per cent which amounts to an additional 335 offences. In 2004/05 the percentage of residents surveyed who said that they feel fairly safe or very safe outside after dark was 77.5 per cent which was an improvement on the previous survey. However an above average number of people thought that graffiti and vandalism was a big problem. The Council has responded to this by investing in improved graffiti removal. Through better working with utility companies it is removing racist and obscene graffiti within 24 hours.
- 87 The Council has successfully encouraged local people to report crimes and other incidents. Although this has produced an increase in some types of reported crime there are indications of increased confidence that reports will be followed up. An initiative which has had an impact is the introduction of a pilot neighbourhood warden scheme. Results of the evaluation suggest that most surveyed want the service to continue, feel safer in their homes and safer walking in their neighbourhood and believe the area to be tidier and cleaner. An additional positive outcome from this is that over 150 young people signed up as junior wardens.

- 88 The Council actively supports victims and witnesses of anti social behaviour (ASB) through the work of the ASB Unit. The ASB Unit runs an 'it's your call' report line for public reporting of ASB through a single phone number. In contrast with other aspects of community safety, it has stronger internal partnership working on ASB and more effective external partnerships with the Police. Against a background of rising drink related crime and an increase in public order offences, some progress has been made. A dispersal order has been granted in Swindon following significant and persistent problems of anti-social behaviour. The ASB Unit has made considerable progress and, since 2003, has issued 60 acceptable behaviour contracts as early intervention voluntary contracts, setting out conditions tailored to the perpetrator. Since 2002, 21 ASBOs have been granted where interventions failed. Areas such as Linden have been effectively targeted and have seen a reduction in ASB as a result.
- 89 The Council is not participating effectively in combating drug and alcohol problems. The Council and its partners have failed to achieve key targets relating to drug treatment. The Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) is not meeting required standards in a number of areas including needs assessment, workforce capacity, user and carer involvement, harm reduction, blood borne virus control and treatment tailored to need. Effective drug and alcohol programmes are critical to improving health and reducing inequalities and although Swindon has plans in place to deliver the DAAT strategy, it is not clear if it has sufficient staff capacity in place.
- 90 The Council undertakes thorough community consultation, including BME groups and those most at risk, to inform priorities and the allocation of resources. It also engages well with tenants through its newspaper, Swindon Voice. For example, the Council is improving the built environment in the Cavendish Square area through physical redevelopment of the area after three years of consultation.
- 91 The Council has not maximised opportunities to create more integrated and cohesive communities and acknowledges the need to improve community capacity including reviewing service delivery and partnership funding. This was implicit in the second and third steps of its recovery plan. It has a draft Community Cohesion Action Plan which is in the process of being agreed. It has already undertaken good work with travellers and gypsies. However, it has yet to integrate or join up its services or initiatives to deliver under LAA or neighbourhood renewal strategy (NRS) themes.
- 92 The Council uses partnership arrangements to reduce accidental injuries and death. It has successfully reduced the incidence of injuries among the population. It has reduced road casualties to below government targets for 2003/05 and is committed to further improvement through one of its 50 Promises. These improvements are leading to both a healthier population and a reduced burden on local care services.

- 93 Business Continuity Plans are in place but do not reach minimum standards at present for instance there is a lack of resilience around the IT network and systems. Business continuity processes need to be better developed and embedded, particularly for ICT, the ASPIRE project is intended to assist this. The council has agreement and funding to recruit a Business Continuity Officer. There are processes in place through the Local Resilience Forum covering emergency services, the PCTs, Wiltshire County Council, the Environment Agency, the army, the Health Protection Agency and the Council. Arrangements are regularly tested including a cross-Wiltshire exercise last year. There is regular training for key staff and the community risk register is in place with Swindon-specific risks identified.

## Healthier communities

- 94 The health of some communities the Council serves is improving as a result of the activities of the Council and its partners. The health improvements are largely within children and young people, mothers and other vulnerable groups. The Council with the PCT has made significant improvements to the health assessments of looked after children (LAC). In addition there are good rates of immunisation for all children.
- 95 The integrated planning and delivery of health services for families, mothers and children is improving. The PCT Chief Executive is also the Strategic Director for Housing, Health and Older People within the Council and there is also a joint Director of Public Health. This has led to a shared agenda and some joint plans as well as alignment of budgets in key health and social care areas. The clear and effective partnership working with the PCT includes good information sharing. The Council Promises and LAA have been agreed with the PCT and there are several promises and LAA targets which relate to the health of children, adults and older people. The joint appointments have been promoting the health agenda through the NRA partnership boards.
- 96 The Council and the PCT, through the Director of Public Health, have undertaken some good health inequalities studies which are focused at Super Output Area level. The LAA has a clear target to do an in depth survey at below neighbourhood levels to identify barriers and levers to good health, what it is that people really do and what can be put in place to promote change in respect of healthy living. This analysis has not yet been done however it is intended that this will provide the base line for the future reassessment of impact.

- 97 The Council has not linked the health agenda to wider Council ambitions, for instance, there is an opportunity to do this further in the draft leisure strategy. Although there are more cycle paths, this has not been in the existing, most vulnerable areas but has been focused in the new build housing areas. The wider role the Council can have on health is not being maximised for instance in the lack of play activities on housing estates. However, the learning campus is a good example of a new build that incorporates special needs schools, a high support school, which incorporates care and behavioural support; mainstream provision and comprehensive health and social care input all aimed at maximising integration of services for children to prevent placements out of borough or in residential care.
- 98 The Council works with its partners to provide significant activities to address health inequalities and there are good examples of contributions to promoting healthier communities. For instance, the health assessments of children looked after and people with learning difficulties and disabilities are good. Assessments for looked after children rose from 47 per cent to 96 per cent in one year following intervention and the appointment of a co-ordinator. The Healthy Schools programme is strong and recognised as having the highest participation level in the region. Through the schools and Children's Centres there is encouragement to eat healthy foods and participate in sports and active leisure pursuits. Smoking reduction initiatives include smoke free communal areas on sheltered housing schemes. The Council has undertaken smoking cessation activities within the Council for staff but there are currently limited activities with the business community.
- 99 There are good working relationships with Connexions, Sure Start, Sure Start Plus and sexual health services. There is good local provision for teenage parents, including a unit for housing teenage mums who have to leave their parental home, which has good quality support and access to education. Rates of breast-feeding and non smoking in pregnancy are improving as are immunisation coverage and oral health. There is a mixed picture regarding teenage pregnancies which have shown a slight rise in the figures this year although they have generally reduced over the last three years.
- 100 There have been some improvements in the mental health of children, families and adults. Prevention and treatment services provided by the CAMHS (Child and adolescent mental health service) have been working well and services to children and young people have improved and are good in terms of access and waiting times for assessment to services. Effective work has been undertaken with BME groups through for instance the effective Asian women's mental health project and further work to understand and address the specific needs of BME groups is being planned.

- 101 The Council and its partners are having a good impact in other areas that improve health such as the reduction in accidents, especially among children in disadvantaged groups and areas. Additionally the Council is on schedule to ensure that all of its housing will meet the decent homes standard by 2008 and the enhanced Swindon Standard by 2016. There has been an increase in awareness of energy efficiency measures and a reduction in the number of the 'fuel poor'. The Council has supported increased take up of welfare benefits. However there is limited monitoring of those accessing such services to ensure they are targeted at the most vulnerable.

## Older people

- 102 The Council delivers improving social care services and other activities from which older people benefit but as yet there is no specific co-ordinated coherent range of services with a focus on addressing the independence and well being of older people across the Borough.
- 103 The Council's social care services are provided through a newly established Housing and Social Care Directorate, whose Strategic Director is the Chief Executive of the PCT. This shared role has enabled joint planning as well as alignment of budgets, although some of these are in the early stages of development and it is too soon to show an impact. Within these integrated services the Council is developing partnerships for older people to provide a more systematic approach which reflects the seven dimensions of independence. However, it has not yet fully embedded its approach to the national agenda. The draft strategy which will be approved by full Council in September 2006 limits its focus to those that are 65 years and over which does not reflect the national agenda of promoting independence and well being from 50 years plus.
- 104 In Swindon 2010, the Council has highlighted both the specific needs of older people and the importance of other issues to older people such as community safety, decent homes and affordable warmth. The Council and its partners have also agreed a number of LAA targets which reflect the needs of older people, such as improving the health of people as they become older including those for obesity and smoking cessation.
- 105 The Council has undertaken research on the likely impact of the ageing population. For example, creating a profile of its current and future population, where they live and where the services are to enable a focus on repositioning services. In addition it has reviewed future demands on care services. However the impact on the ageing population has not been considered across the wider agendas of leisure and transport.
- 106 Improvements have been made in adults and older people's social care provision over the last year. There are a range of services being delivered to older people and there is a clear improvement in co-ordination through the resource centres. The good joint working relationship with health bodies supports the older people's agenda well. This model will be enhanced by the two resource centres that will have a specific focus on the needs of older people from BME groups which are in the planning stage.

- 107** There are good working relationships across key areas within the Council and with the PCT. Effective working with the acute hospital has helped to limit delayed transfers of care and there is good work on falls prevention and the management of long term conditions.
- 108** The Council has a good record on providing appropriate housing for older people. This can be seen through its work on meeting the decent homes standard and addressing fuel poverty. In addition, two extra care homes have been delivered to promote independence by helping people stay in their community and avoid full residential care. To further promote independence, there is a SMART house for demonstration purposes to enable people to see how new technology can help them live more comfortably at home. Community safety is important to older people, and although fear of crime remains an issue, the initiatives to combat ASB through wardens and the improved ASB unit have led to an increase in confidence.
- 109** The Council is increasing the range of activities available to older people and encouraging them to be active such as through reduced fares and fitness programmes. However there are few examples the type of intergenerational activity which can promote community cohesion.
- 110** The Council has worked to increase older people's income with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Staff that have contact with older people have been trained in welfare benefits and liaise with the DWP. However there is limited information on welfare benefit take up and the level of income maximisation and how people who are not already service users get this information.
- 111** The Council is improving its engagement with older people. There is an older people's coalition and there has been wider engagement with specific groups through a BME worker and two resource centres which encourage users from BME communities to use services. One councillor has been designated as an older peoples champion with responsibility for engaging with older people.

## Children and young people

- 112** The ambition of the council and the partnership for children and young people is good. The council has set itself a challenging agenda for change and improvement. This agenda has been developed and then shared with and endorsed by partners.
- 113** The ambition has been developed into a vision, with priorities based upon an analysis of needs, which have been the focus for changes and investment. For example, the analysis highlighted areas of inequalities such as educational attainment, which has led to improved support to schools and improved quality of provision. However, opportunities to link ambitions across the council have not always been maximised. For example, the regeneration agenda of the town centre is not linked to improving the training and employment agenda for young people.

- 114 The leadership and management of services for children and young people is adequate. The integration of children's services, which joined education, children's social care and the youth service starting in October 2005, has been well managed. It has increased capacity to support the new service, with additional staff recruited to senior posts. The Group Director Children, the designated Director of Children's Services and Lead Member have been in post for a year. Senior leadership of the integrated children's services is good. The council provides good political and managerial leadership to the Executive Management Group, the Children and Young Peoples partnership Board and the Children's Trust Performance Group that underpin the emerging Children's Trust. There is inconsistency in management of staff at lower levels, with varying experiences of supervision and performance monitoring focused on achieving good outcomes for children and young people.
- 115 Use of resources and value for money is adequate. Some areas are improving, for example where there has been investment and changes, as in the newly tendered independent fostering service and the children's centres. This has led to increasing local provision. There is good alignment of budgets across the council and with partners, especially with the PCT. The council's medium-term financial plan and budget show that resources are being moved to support areas of greatest need, reinforced by its partners, and that medium-term plans are resourced. High out of area placements are subject of a joint strategy with health and social care focused on reducing these over a period of time building on the plans aimed at preventing out of area placements. Joint commissioning strategies are being further developed and there are effective examples of joint and aligned budgets such as Sure Start, Sure Start Plus and the Children's Centres. Historically, national and local funding for education and children's social care has been below national comparators. Education outcomes are adequate and improving, although from a low, and in some schools a very low, base. There are examples of services that do not demonstrate good value for money, such as the youth service.
- 116 Outcomes for most children and young people in Swindon are generally adequate with some positive and emerging strengths. Children and young people appear safe. There are, however, inequalities both in access to services and outcomes achieved for children and young people.
- 117 Smoking in pregnancy, which was above national rates, has decreased but remains high in the more disadvantaged areas. Breastfeeding rates are increasing. There are, however, areas in Swindon that at present do not have adequate access to facilities that promote good health and healthy lifestyles. Immunisation coverage and oral health are good. The Healthy Schools programme is a major vehicle for co-ordinating health promotion programmes to children and young people and schools value the input of school nursing and health promotion staff. Positive mental health promotion is a priority and there is an impressive range of initiatives to promote emotional well being and self esteem. Clinical provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good.

- 118** Although children and young people are healthy and life expectancy compares well to the national average, there is considerable inequality across the borough. Initiatives such as the multi-agency children's centres are aimed at supporting areas of greater need with a view to reduce these inequalities.
- 119** Overall, children appear safe. For some children bullying was a concern. Children assessed as most at risk of harm or abuse and who are the subject of formal plans of protection are protected by multi-agency work and committed professionals. Front-line social care services have shown consistent improvement. The referral and assessment service is now working effectively to ensure children are safeguarded. Slow progress on reducing the overall numbers of children being looked after was limiting opportunity for reinvesting in providing further family support services.
- 120** Educational achievement in primary schools has recently reached national averages but remains lower in secondary schools. This overall picture reflects particular underachievement in more disadvantaged areas, although improvements are being made. Good support to schools causing concern has reduced the number of schools in special measures. The attainment of primary school children is now in line with similar authorities, but there is still significant underachievement in some secondary schools. These weaknesses are being addressed through well targeted strategies, which are beginning to make a difference and are improving attainment at GCSE. Support for improving behaviour is effective in reducing permanent exclusions, although fixed exclusions remain above the average in secondary schools. There is good support for improving attendance.
- 121** Many young people are contributing well to their school and community, although significant groups remain disengaged. In spite of some good initiatives being developed, some core services including youth services require significant improvement. Improvements to failing services such as youth provision were still to be achieved. Children from black and minority ethnic communities performed above the borough average at GCSE but were over-represented as a proportion of children looked after or involved with the YOT.

- 122 There is improving collaboration between schools, training providers and colleges across the partnership to increase economic well-being for young people and to encourage them to consider further education or training options. Achievements of qualifications equivalent to level 2 at ages 16 and 19, however, remain poor. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is steadily declining from 8.1 per cent in 2004 to 4.6 per cent in 2006. Local employers offer satisfactory support to schools for work experience and other activities but are not sufficiently involved in post-16 education and training. The council does not offer apprenticeships or take advantage of supported employment schemes. Opportunities for young people to join apprenticeship programmes are limited, with many training providers preferring to work with young people already in employment. Existing strategies are not significantly increasing the number of young people progressing on to higher education. Appropriate housing is found for most vulnerable young people, including care leavers, and more comprehensive support is now in place for those with complex needs. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have satisfactory progression opportunities into further education and training.

## 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 Swindon Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 12-23 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.