

Service Inspection Report

November 2006



# Environment

**Wyre Forest District Council**

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## Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

## Summary

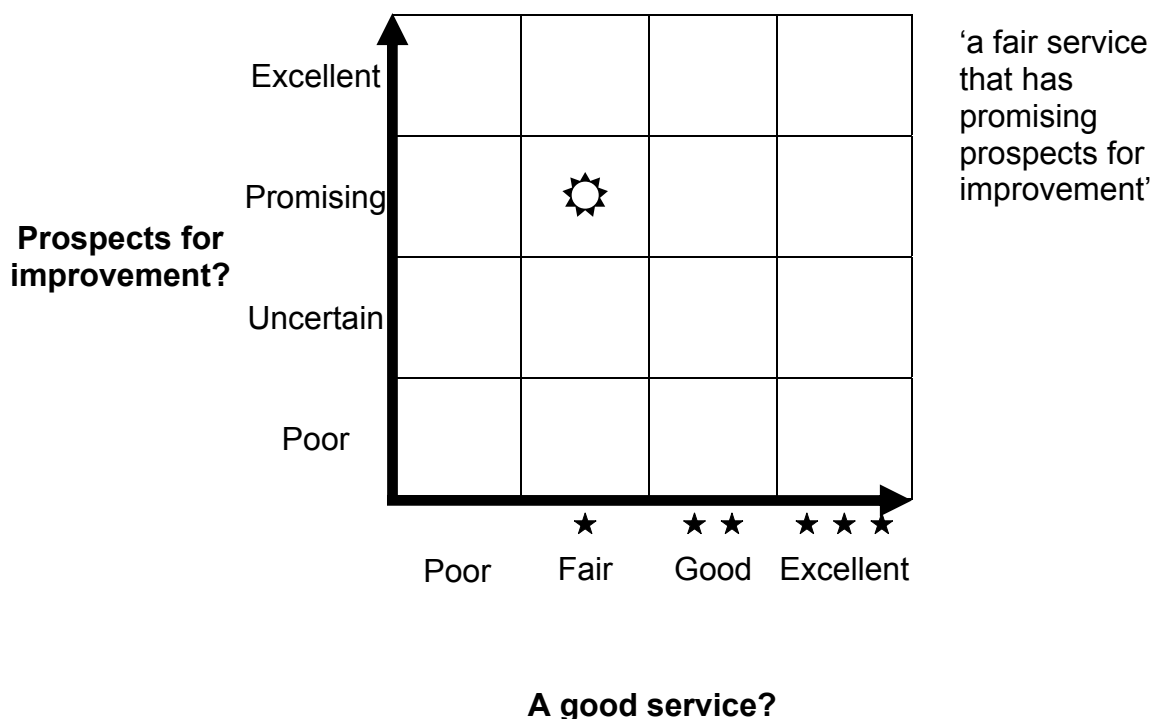
- 1 Wyre Forest District Council is situated in north Worcestershire. It has a population of 98,100. The majority of the population (over 85,000) live in the towns of Kidderminster, Bewdley and Stourport on Severn, with the remainder living in the rural areas. A higher than average number of older people live in the district, and only 3.7 per cent of the population are from black ethnic minority communities.
- 2 Improving the environment is a key priority for the Council and this is reflected in the Community Plan which the Council shares with its partners. The purpose of this inspection was to establish how well the environment service, including aspects of the planning service, contributes to the enhancement and protection of Wyre Forest's environment. A focus of the inspection was on the effectiveness of the Council's communication of environmental messages.
- 3 The inspection was carried out in May 2006 and covered street scene services which consist of; refuse collection, waste minimisation and recycling, street cleaning, clearing of fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti, and the maintenance of street nameplates and bus shelters. It included parks, open spaces and maintenance of grass verges, public conveniences, car parks, on-street parking enforcement and some aspects of the planning service, including development within the district, major applications, and environmental sustainability. The inspection also reviewed aspects of internal and external communication, and the Council's customer care and access arrangements.
- 4 Wyre Forest District Council is delivering a fair environment service. External communications are well planned and used effectively to deliver important messages. Service staff focus on their customers and use feedback effectively. The services have been particularly successful in collecting a high rate of dry recycling, in reducing the amount of waste collected per head of population and in keeping the costs of refuse collection and recycling comparably low. It promotes home composting and has carried out an evaluation. The streets are clean and parks and nature reserves are well managed. The Council works well with partners, and delivers planning outcomes which benefit local communities. Planning performance on major applications is now meeting government targets. However, the Council has not embedded environmental sustainability and is in the process of implementing a sustainability action plan. It does not have a comprehensive approach to diversity or a consistent approach to analysing need. Value for money of the service is mixed. Public toilets are of mixed quality and cleanliness.

- 5 There are promising prospects for the improvement of the services. The Council can demonstrate a successful track record of improvement within the service and where improvements are still needed, plans are in place to deliver these. Consultation is used to help shape future service provision. Value for money is improving and plans show how it will improve further. The Council has the capacity to improve the service and uses partnership effectively to enhance service provision. However, it has taken some time for the Council's improvements to the planning process to have an impact on its performance on major applications and its performance management framework is not fully embedded.

## Scoring the service

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

**Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



*Source: Audit Commission*

- 7 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the Council has a comparably high rate of dry recycling which represents top performance on progress to DEFRA standard, and has been successful in consistently reducing kilograms of waste per head;
  - home composting has been evaluated by the Council in conjunction with the County Council;
  - there are clean streets and graffiti and fly-tips are removed promptly;
  - the Council is effective in enforcing laws to keep streets clean, publicising its action, and working well with partners and private landowners on preventative measures;

<sup>1</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

## 8 Environment | Scoring the service

- it plans and uses external communications effectively and works well with the media on environmental messages such as recycling and enforcement of the Clean Streets and Neighbourhoods Act;
- service staff are customer focused and customer comments, compliments and complaints whether formal or informal are dealt with well and are used by the Council to improve services;
- the Council manages and maintains nature reserves well and promotes biodiversity. It is also working with the private sector on environmentally sustainable initiatives;
- customers are satisfied with the planning service; and
- the service focuses on the quality of planning outcomes and the Council works well with developers to secure benefits to the community through section 106 agreements.

### 8 However:

- the Council has not fully embedded environmental sustainability and cannot yet show energy efficiency outcomes;
- the Council's approach to diversity is not embedded and access arrangements are not fully developed, for example recycling banks lack signage;
- value for money in these services is currently a mixed picture; and
- public toilets are of variable quality and cleanliness.

### 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council can demonstrate a successful track record of improvement within the service: there has been a significant achievement on waste minimisation, and environmental improvements have been delivered that are visible to local people;
- there is good use of consultation to help shape service delivery;
- service improvement plans are in place to deliver improvements particularly to extend kerbside recycling, improve participation and street cleansing, and implement improved customer services and some of these plans have the potential to deliver efficiency savings;
- partnership working is effectively used to enhance capacity and service provision; and
- value for money is improving in some areas and the Council has developed a framework to address value for money.

10 However:

- the Council has not developed a cohesive approach to diversity until recently;
- although there is an increased focus on performance management it is not yet embedded; and
- there are above average levels of sickness absence both corporately and within the environmental services.

## Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 Develop a systematic and corporate approach to mapping the needs of all of the community in the Wyre Forest district, based on existing information, including an approach to hard-to-reach groups.*

- *Continue to raise the profile of diversity and ensure that it is appropriately championed by councillors and managers.*
- *Use the information to plan delivery of services and link to other council systems, for example GIS.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a more focused approach to ensuring that all sections of the community receive good service.

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

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Improve medium to long term planning to ensure comprehensive coverage for all aspects of the service.*

- *Align communications activity to corporate priorities and develop a more proactive approach to joint planning with the media.*
- *Develop a clear action plan for climate change based on consultancy feedback.*
- *Establish a clear vision for consultation on street scene action including cleansing.*

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

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- greater efficiency due to better co-ordination and focus on strategic objectives.

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

### ***Recommendation***

*R3 Ensure that environmental sustainability becomes embedded in the Council's planning and performance management systems.*

- *Develop an action plan to maximise the take up and success of home composting, based on findings from the current evaluation carried out with County partners.*
- *Ensure that environmental sustainability is effectively championed and monitored by managers and councillors.*
- *Implement sustainability appraisal in all major decisions, for example moving to a single site.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- better integration of sustainability into service planning and policy making points.

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

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 12 Wyre Forest is situated in north Worcestershire and takes its name from the Forest of Wyre, a medieval hunting forest and now a popular tourist attraction. There are a large number of rural villages as well as the towns of Kidderminster, Bewdley and Stourport on Severn. Covering an area of 195 square kilometres, the district is made up of a mix of urban, rural and market town communities. Wyre Forest has a population of 98,100 residents (Office of National Statistics 2004) with 18 per cent of the population are under 15 years of age and 17.5 per cent are of pensionable age. In the district, 84.7 per cent of the total numbers of dwellings are privately owned and 15.2 per cent are RSL (Registered Social Landlord) rented, another 0.1 per cent of dwellings is supplied through the public sector.
- 13 Wyre Forest is a generally mixed picture of pockets of economic prosperity and some pockets of serious deprivation in Kidderminster for example, within Oldington and Foley Park. The index of multiple deprivation ranked Wyre Forest at 162 out of a total of 354 English council areas.
- 14 Based on the 2001 census information, Wyre Forest has a black and ethnic minority population of 3.7 per cent which is below the regional and national average.
- 15 In terms of employment, Wyre Forest is home to a range of industrial and commercial concerns and also has a history of being world leader in the carpet industry. With 1.7 per cent of eligible residents claiming job seekers allowance in March 2005, unemployment is just below the national average of 2 per cent. The key employment sectors are manufacturing and distribution. Historically, the area has been subject to flood risk and the Environment Agency has installed preventative barriers at Bewdley, with support from the Council.

### The Council

- 16 The Council has a Conservative administration, with 18 out of the 42 elected members. There are also nine Independent Health Concern, seven Liberal (Focus Save our Hospital), four Labour, two Liberal Democrat and two Independent councillors. The Council has a Cabinet and Scrutiny system.
- 17 The frontline services inspected are provided by two operational divisions - Cultural, Leisure and Commercial services which delivers the waste collection, recycling and street cleansing services and Planning, Health and Environmental Services. These are supported by the Strategy and Performance unit, Financial Services, Human Resources and Legal and Democratic services. There are just under 500 employees.

- 18 Net revenue expenditure for the Council in 2005/06 was £13.2m. The Council has recently set a net revenue budget of just under £13.5m for 2006/07, with an increase of 2.5 per cent in council tax. The revised capital programme expenditure for 2005/06 is £8.7m, with an estimate of £7m for 2006/07.

### **The Council's environment services and communication**

- 19 The inspection looked at the Council's environmental services with a specific focus on internal and external communication, to deliver environmental messages. The environmental services included within the scope for this inspection were as follows.
- Street scene services, that is:
    - waste management, including refuse collection, waste minimisation and recycling;
    - street cleaning, fly-tips, abandoned vehicles and graffiti;
    - parks and open space; grass verge maintenance;
    - car parks and on-street parking enforcement;
    - public conveniences;
    - street furniture, including bus shelters and street nameplates; and
    - partnership working on integrated services and enforcement.
  - Development within the district and major applications.
  - Environmental sustainability.
- 20 In Wyre Forest, these responsibilities include refuse collection and recycling, street cleaning, clearing fly-tips, dealing with abandoned vehicles and graffiti, and maintaining street name plates. The Council exercises its discretionary powers to provide a trade waste service, car parks and public conveniences, and to maintain grass verges, topping up the level of County Council cuts. With the exception of trade waste, the services are all delivered in-house. The combined budgets for the services in 2005/06 totalled £4.2m. Worcestershire County Council is the waste disposal authority, the highway authority and the transport authority.
- 21 The Council was identified as a planning standards authority in 2006/07 for major applications and is working with other agencies to improve the time taken to process planning applications. Therefore the inspection did not include a detailed analysis of the development control process but instead concentrated on major applications performance and regeneration to avoid duplication. Wyre Forest was awarded £433,350 of Planning Delivery Grant in 2005/06 and £116,025 in 2006/07.
- 22 The district has a depot in Kidderminster and the County Council's Civic Amenity sites are located on Stourport Road between Stourport and Kidderminster and at Hoobrook in Kidderminster. There are 21 recycling banks ('bring sites') 22 car parks and 12 public toilets. It also manages 12 parks, 10 nature reserves and 3 Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

## National context

- 23 The Government has set statutory performance standards for local authorities to reduce the amount of waste that is collected and to encourage more recycling. The Government has set a recycling standard of 20 per cent for all councils by 2007/08. In addition, the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme provides a powerful financial incentive for local authorities to minimise waste sent to landfill.
- 24 Councils have a duty to keep their land clear of litter. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) gives a local authority power to deal with litter based problems affecting its area, including issuing fixed penalty tickets to people who commit an offence by dropping litter. A Code of Practice, issued under the Act, recommends a 'clean as necessary' approach and specific levels of cleanliness for various environments. Under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act an authority has the power to issue a notice to a private landowner to clean up their land and to undertake the cleansing itself if the landowner fails to act. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2003 has strengthened councils' legislative powers for keeping the area clean.
- 25 The Government has promoted the Cleaner, Safer, Greener agenda and many local authorities have adopted similar aims.
- 26 Councils are expected to support the UK sustainable development strategy, Securing the Future, 2005. Indeed, many local authorities are at the forefront of efforts to achieve greater social, economic and environmental sustainability. District councils, such as Wyre Forest, are expected to use their powers as planning, housing and waste collection authorities, as well as their general wellbeing powers and community leadership, to achieve sustainable development. This includes working with others to promote energy conservation and efficiency, protect wildlife habits and promote biodiversity, reduce and mitigate climate change, and promote more sustainable patterns of development.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 27 Improving the environment, particularly increasing recycling activity has been a high priority for the Council for the last two to three years. The 2003-2008 Corporate Plan lists 'Managing the local environment' as a local priority and this reflects the Community Strategy theme of 'A better environment'. For the current year, the Council has stated its priorities as service, efficiency and prosperity and environment and local regeneration are highlighted within the service theme. The street scene has become a more recent high priority as a result of consultation feedback and councillor scrutiny.
- 28 The Council is a partner in a recently established Worcestershire wide Local Area Agreement, which has the theme 'A better environment for today and tomorrow'. Local activity so far has focused on determining and resourcing priorities for action in the Foley Park and Greenhill/Broadwaters/Horsefair neighbourhoods of Kidderminster, where there have already been partnership improvement initiatives.
- 29 Wyre Forest is a partner in the Worcestershire Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy. Under this agreement, Worcestershire County Council has agreed to pay a grant of £294,000 for an enhanced recycling rate which is 2.34 per cent over the statutory performance standard over the next seven years. The statutory performance standard for recycling in Wyre Forest was 10 per cent in 2003/04, 14 per cent in 2004/05 and 18 per cent in 2005/06. In 2005/06 the County Council provided additional funding and agreed an enhanced target of 28.03 per cent with Wyre Forest District Council but provisional figures suggest it has achieved short of this at 25 per cent at the end of 2005/06 (unaudited).
- 30 Other targets relating to best value performance indicators are set out in the Best Value Performance Plan. In 2004/05, for the services inspected these were:
- extend doorstep recycling collection to 99 per cent of District domestic properties;
  - 370kg of household waste collected per head;
  - 60 per cent of major planning applications to be determined in 13 weeks;
  - no more than 30 per cent of land and highways assessed as having combined deposits of litter and detritus across four categories of cleanliness; and
  - 38 per cent of Local Natural Reserve habitat in the District meeting the Bio-Diversity Action Plan criteria.

There was no target for reducing energy consumption as the Council had not produced the base data.

- 31 In 2004/05 the Council also supported their local priority to improve communication and community engagement by producing a consultation strategy, opening the one-stop shop Hub in Kidderminster town centre in the summer of 2006 (originally in the Library now the Town Hall) and launching a community information database on its website. The government had also set a national target to have 100 per cent of services available on line, and have 100 per cent of council buildings accessible to the public by the end of 2005.

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

#### **Community focus and communications**

- 32 The Council uses a range of consultation techniques and takes action as a result of consultation findings. It plans its communications proactively in line with specific environmental objectives, has good relations with the local media and has carried out successful campaigns on recycling. The Council is also effective at encouraging good environmental behaviour in the community. However, the Council has not demographically analysed the community it services and does not strategically plan external communications based on corporate priorities or routinely test communication methods.
- 33 The Council has a robust approach to communications and consultation, using a range of consultation techniques which are deployed in environmental services, such as surveys, roadshows to promote recycling and focus groups to explore street scene improvements. It has a comprehensive consultation strategy which is supported by a database. This means it can co-ordinate consultation across the Council and deploy different approaches as appropriate.
- 34 The environmental services take action in response to the consultation they carry out. The street scene services are developing this by establishing regular consultation with a public focus group. Consultation with users is used to inform service delivery for example, the environmental services developed an action plan in response to their recent survey. This includes supplying more information on plastics recycling to clarify which plastics can be recycled and further limit contamination.
- 35 The Council is taking communication seriously as one of its improvement themes. It has carried out a communications audit to evaluate effectiveness and has designed the communications strategy around this. The strategy covers the broad range of communication disciplines and segments target audiences including a section on communicating with socially excluded groups. It evaluates specific campaigns, for example, the Mission Impossible Target 75 campaign which led to 85 per cent participation in recycling. It has good relations with the local media and a media protocol is in place, and also monitors relevant media output on a monthly basis, so that it can assess the effectiveness of external communications.

- 36 The Council plans its communications in line with specific objectives. In the services inspected, this was demonstrated through a specific communications campaign to highlight enforcement work on litter and fly-tipping, and a joint campaign with the County Council to promote recycling - 'Mission Impossible Target 75 per cent'. It also has a draft communications plan for promoting the new customer service arrangements of the Hub, which should help to inform the public and ensure a smooth transition. These campaigns are central to the implementation of new initiatives and are often monitored at service level. For example, Mission Impossible Target 75 per cent led to a substantial increase in recycling participation, so staff within the service were clear about the impact.
- 37 Information provision in the Council anticipates user requirements. Customer service staff are provided with information to respond to frequently asked questions, and Newswyre, the Council's newspaper, with its broad distribution, gives the public useful information before initiatives like recycling or street scene enforcement are launched. This helps new initiatives to roll out smoothly, for example in the case of the phased roll out of recycling.
- 38 The Council uses a broad range of external and internal mechanisms to communicate policies, for example the recent work on environmental enforcement and policies on fixed penalty notices, which was communicated through a variety of different media. The Council has a clear enforcement policy, has a protocol on fly-tipping agreed with the Environment Agency to clarify areas of responsibility, has publicised enforcement standards on the website and has worked with the Police on joint publicity campaigns. Residents we met also told us that Council communication is mostly effective.
- 39 The Council has also encouraged good environmental behaviour in the community. For example, it has worked with Kidderminster Further Education College to reduce dropped litter and cigarette ends and helped to provide some disposal points. This has been reinforced by information provision and some enforcement. It has led to cleaner areas around the College and sent out positive signals to the community.
- 40 However, the Council has not used census or demographic information to map out the community profile or their potential needs. Without this information the Council risks missing opportunities to tailor design of its services to customer need; for example, different age groups may prefer different types of access to council services, for example, young people may be more in favour of texting and older people may prefer telephone or face to face contact.
- 41 There is scope for the Council to be more proactive in planning its external communications. Campaigns in the media are not necessarily corporately driven and often originate from service requests. The Council has not planned campaigns jointly with the local media, which would improve focus, internal capacity and local impact.

- 42 The Council does not test out all aspects of its external communications provision. Some aspects of the website are not user friendly, for example it is difficult to navigate to 'recycling' from 'environment', and although the Council works with the County Council on monitoring air quality at two sites in the district, and publishes the air composition data on the website, this is not in a easy format for local people to gauge whether the air quality is getting better or worse.
- 43 Use of branding is not fully developed. The Council uses a consistent house style in its publications and is aware of the importance of recognition. The Cleansing team also wear clearly identifiable clothing and use distinctive vehicles, for example. However, there is scope to do more to help the public have a positive memory of the Council and its aims. The Council is drafting a branding strategy in response to this but it is not yet in place.

#### **Access, customer care, and diversity**

- 44 Frontline staff are knowledgeable about the services and they monitor and learn from customer contact. The Council produces a range of information for environmental services including service standards, and there is good online access. Customer complaint handling is good and the level of environmental complaints is very low. However, the Council's approach to diversity is not embedded and there is scope to improve physical access to some service facilities. Face to face and telephone access is limited to standard hours on weekdays and the Council has not reported its performance against its service standards.
- 45 Staff are knowledgeable about the services and are responsive to customers. Customers can access service face to face at Stourport, Bewdley and Kidderminster, by telephone and by email. February 2006 figures for customer services show that 94 per cent of telephone calls are answered within 15 seconds with 65 per cent resolution at first point of contact. At the time of the inspection, 80 per cent of calls were resolved at first point of contact. The Council also has a litter hotline to encourage the public to report litter and fly-tips, and this is also used by housing neighbourhood wardens to report any problems. The Council monitors how quickly the service responds to these notifications, and in 2003/04, 71 per cent were cleaned up within 24 hours, showing that the hotline is used actively to improve service.
- 46 The Council provides a range of informative leaflets about services, and the public have online access to forms for reporting fly-tips, abandoned cars and litter. The environmental services have a range of service standards which are user friendly and publicised on the website and in 'Newsyrye' the Council's own quarterly newspaper for residents. There is now online access to Planning, and the Council has a high Pendleton rating for its electronic service delivery of 20 out of 21. It also provides a duty officer for face to face contact, and the Council is starting to consult parish councils online about planning applications, to speed up and facilitate consultation with rural communities on planning matters.

- 47 Customer complaint handling is good and the Council is responsive to public feedback. The call centre logs informal and formal comments, complaints and compliments and transfers them to the service concerned. Recently the number of environmental complaints has been very low and the service has received more compliments than complaints, for example on litter enforcement work and the bulky waste collection scheme. The call centre tracks when action was taken. Councillors review the nature of these customer contacts once a month to establish whether any further action needs to be taken, which enables the Council to learn from any trends.
- 48 However, physical access to some service facilities could be improved. Recycling banks lack signage and the website does not have a map showing their location. Residents also commented that traffic flow through Stourport Road Household Waste Site was a problem. Although this site is managed by the County Council, Wyre Forest District Council is in a position to work with the County to solve the problem, and this has not happened yet. Although the Council makes ad hoc requests for dropped kerbs through the quarterly highways forum, the Council lacks a proactive approach to accessibility of the street scene, and risks losing opportunities to make the street scene better for the whole community.
- 49 The Council's action on diversity is not comprehensive. Whilst the Council has improved access arrangements for customers to 83 per cent under the Disability Discrimination Act, much of this work took place after the statutory deadline for 100 per cent. The Council is at CRE Equality standard level 1 and has not yet carried out equality impact assessments in its services, although it now has an Equalities and Diversity working group which has established a framework for implementing diversity and an action plan. However, some examples of good practice exist such as learning sign language in the Hub, balancing human rights with other considerations when determining planning applications and pull-out assistance on refuse collection, but these are not yet a product of a corporately embedded approach.
- 50 Current customer services provision is not fully designed around customer need, for example:
- opening hours are currently limited to standard opening hours and the Council has not engaged the local population in a debate about what the opening hours should be. It plans to do this after the Hub has officially opened in August 2006;
  - environment service standards are currently publicised through the website and Newsywe. However there is currently no mechanism for reporting the Council's performance against them to the public; and
  - time taken to resolve a call can be inconsistent as not all aspects of the service have access to, or use, the customer relationship management system, for example the planning service.

### **Service outcomes for users and the community**

- 51 We have grouped the service outcomes under the five headings below.

#### **Waste hierarchy – refuse, recycling and composting**

- 52 Wyre Forest has a reliable refuse collection service and complaints about missed bins are low. It collects a range of recyclables and promotes home composting. The Council's progress to DEFRA statutory recycling standard is amongst the best 25 per cent nationally. There is a high level of public participation in recycling and the Council has a robust approach to environmental education. Waste minimisation performance is good. However, the Council missed a stretch target which was additional to its original commitment to the County Council.
- 53 The Council provides a reliable refuse collection service, using a wheelie bin for residual waste and two boxes for recycling waste. Complaint levels about missed refuse collections are low. Staff know the routes well and are customer focused. However, public satisfaction in with waste collection recorded by the 2003/04 best value satisfaction survey was in the worst quartile. The timing of this survey coincided with the introduction of recycling, and the Council had insufficiently resourced customer care arrangements to deal with enquiries. The Council has learnt from this experience. Since then it has conducted a small survey of residents which indicates that satisfaction has improved, reflecting the investment that the Council has put into enhancing communication and refuse collection service.
- 54 The Council provides a good recycling service, with participation rates of around 85 per cent. It encourages the public to recycle by collecting recyclables every week. It collects a range of materials, including glass, paper and card, light plastic, textiles, cans but not green waste. Instead it has promoted home composters in conjunction with its County Council partners and in line with the Worcestershire Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy (JMWMS) guidance. Consequently, the Council has concentrated on removing green waste from the waste stream which had reduced waste tonnages to landfill.
- 55 The Council's performance on recycling and progress towards the DEFRA statutory recycling standard is in the top 25 per cent of councils nationally. This standard is 18 per cent by 2005/06. The Council has doubled its recycling rate from 12.9 per cent in 2003/04 to over 25 per cent at the end of 2005/06. In April 2006 the Council's current recycling rate had risen to 27 per cent (unaudited figure). (see table in appendix)
- 56 Kerbside collection is not comprehensive but is improving. In 2004/05 this covered 81 per cent of the district, which was in the worst 25 per cent nationally, but has now increased to 90.6 per cent of dwellings in the borough (2005/06 unaudited). Coverage has now increased to 97 per cent counting microsites at supermarkets, sheltered housing, pubs and rural locations, just short of the original target of 99 per cent coverage of the district. The Council has recently extended its recycling service to some rural and hard to reach properties by operating a small freighter, which shows its willingness to find solutions for different sections of the community.

- 57 Waste minimisation performance is good. The amounts of waste collected per head were in the best 25 per cent nationally in 2004/05 and have gone up only very slightly since. The Council promotes recycling, home composting, waste reduction and reuse campaigns in partnership with Worcestershire County Council, and has an effective relationship with the local media. It collects residual waste every alternate week and operates a closed lid policy and does not take side waste. The Council collects bulky waste which is £12 for three items free to those on council benefits. It encourages reuse via local electrical goods and furniture outlets through the joint campaigning with the County 'Mission Impossible' scheme. Also in partnership with the County Council, Wyre Forest is evaluating the effectiveness of its home composting and expects to have the results by the end of September 2006. Additionally, although some green waste is disposed of at the County Council's civic amenity sites, County Council tonnages are also decreasing overall, which indicates that the diversionary effect is minimal.
- 58 The Council has a robust approach to environmental education. A number of schemes are carried out with children, particularly of primary school age including visiting schools, being involved in walk to school routes and proactive adventure and learning days involving planting 100 trees, for example 'Save Habberley Valley'. The Council also runs 'nappacino' mornings to encourage the use of real nappies and encourages other ways of being environmentally friendly through its website information, but it does not quantify the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- 59 Although it achieved much more recycling than its original target of 18 per cent, the Council did not achieve a further stretch target in 2005/06. Worcestershire County Council provided additional funding and agreed an enhanced target of 28.03 per cent with Wyre Forest District Council for 2005/06. Provisional figures suggest the Council has achieved short of this at 25 per cent at the end of the year, despite commencing extra rounds and putting microsites in place. This means that the County will seek to 'claw back' some of its grant, but this is unlikely to have any significant effect on service outcomes.

### **Keeping the district clean**

- 60 Streets in the district are generally clean and fly-tips and abandoned cars are removed promptly. Reality checks showed very little graffiti, dog fouling and fly-posting.

- 61 The Council maintains the streets to a good standard in its towns and villages, and takes particular care over areas frequented by tourists. It has organised weekend cleaning to deal with the litter left behind by weekend visitors. However, this generally good appearance is not reflected in performance indicator results. Some 21 per cent of streets had unacceptable levels of litter or detritus in 2004/05 and the council's unaudited figures indicate this to be 17 per cent in 2005/06, which is around average performance. Public satisfaction with cleanliness was low in 2003/04 and in lowest 25 per cent of councils (see appendix). In 2005, the Council introduced a new cleansing regime, with a more focused approach and seven day cleansing, and this combined with the clear priority for this service has led to cleanliness standards improving noticeably. During our inspection members of the public we spoke to indicated that street cleansing was generally satisfactory, but that they had noticed one or two hotspots outside supermarkets and in the town centre, and trolleys in the river in Kidderminster, indicating some scope for joint working with the organisations concerned.
- 62 The Council has an effective partnership approach to the removal of fly-tips. These occur mainly on nature reserves and open spaces and the Council has developed a new protocol with the Environment Agency and Wyre Forest Community Housing. A variety of frontline staff, Police Community Support Officers, councillors and the public take responsibility for reporting fly-tipping, in addition to the street scene officers. This means there is a team approach to keeping the district clean and as a result over 90 per cent of fly-tips are removed within 24 hours.
- 63 The Council's performance in removing abandoned cars is good and it investigates all reported vehicles within 24 hours. It removes graffiti promptly and has a partnership approach to graffiti and criminal damage with the police in some of the more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Reality checks showed very little litter, graffiti, dog fouling or fly-posting at the time of the inspection.

### **Maintaining and managing the street scene**

- 64 The Council is effective at maintaining and managing the street scene. Parks are pleasant and well maintained. The Council works well with other agencies in managing the street scene and has effective enforcement arrangements. However, public toilets and verge maintenance are of variable quality.
- 65 The Council is effective in maintaining and managing the street scene. The Council in partnership with Opportunity Bewdley has recently invested in new street furniture in Bewdley and new bins for the district. Red dog waste bins are provided on dog walking routes and in public spaces, to encourage dog owners to use them. The provision of bins and street furniture is adequate, bins are emptied regularly and streets are generally clean. Parks are pleasant and well maintained. The street scene is proactively managed and there are planned maintenance plans in place for car parks and a rolling programme of street furniture renewal, which ensures that car parks and street furniture are presentable.

- 66 Enforcement is effective. The Council has issued 31 fixed penalty notices for street scene offences. Planning enforcement has dealt with 370 complaints in 2005/06 and has served seven enforcement and other notices and undertaken one prosecution. The Council publicises fines for fly-tipping on the sides of its vehicles and the services communicate well and work effectively with each other on enforcement issues. The Council works with retail outlets such as fast food premises and with private landowners to improve the appearance of the environment, for example, businesses on Comberton Hill and the gating of private land at Sion Hill which has effectively prevented fly-tipping.
- 67 The Council works well with the Police and other agencies involved in managing the street scene. It had a joint publicity campaign featuring the Police to launch its enforcement activities and has sited needle bins as a result of the crime and disorder reduction partnership, which has featured an ongoing joint project on criminal damage and graffiti. It also worked jointly with police on a project to stop and check up on licences of waste carriers and consults on designing out crime in car parks. The Council works well with the County Council on mitigating air quality in two action zones in the district, through the County's Local Transport Plan, which will address air quality issues in Bewdley. There are quarterly joint Highways forums attended by councillors from both authorities, which ensure continuity of joint working on street scene issues between the County and Wyre Forest District Council to ensure that the area is cleaner and safer.
- 68 However, the Council's provision and maintenance of toilets are of variable quality across the district, in terms of building condition and cleanliness. Residents we spoke to thought that they were inadequate provision for days when Bewdley or Stourport are busy in the summer. The Council recognises this and has initiated a scrutiny review to look at the buildings and locations and has increased the level of cleaning.
- 69 Verge maintenance is variable. We observed mixed outcomes such as long grass on some urban verges leading out of Stourport, which are the district council's responsibility. As a result, outlying areas of the town can appear unkept at certain times of year.

### **Development in the District**

- 70 The Council's performance in terms of the time taken to determine major applications is recovering from a dip in performance. The Council has mixed planning outcomes but has put supplementary planning documents in place to ensure the future quality of development. The planning service has good customer service arrangements and the Council works effectively with developers to secure good section 106 outcomes.

- 71 The Council's performance on processing major applications is recovering from a low level. It was in the worst 25 per cent of councils in 2004/05 and was also poor at the end of 2005/06 (37 per cent against a target of 60 per cent within the 13 week timescale). Fifteen of the Council's 112 applications in 2005 were major applications. The Council recognised the reasons for the dip in performance at the end of 2004 and put in place measures aimed at improving performance such as dealing with section 106 agreements at the start of the process, and reducing the size of the Development Control committee. A legacy of older applications in the system meant that the impact of these improvements was not immediate, but in May 2006, the Council had improved performance to 52 per cent and this rose to 69 per cent in August 2006.
- 72 The Council provides an efficient service for the determination of 'minor' and 'other' planning applications and applicant satisfaction with the service is good. Minor and other applications have met the Government target of 80 per cent of applications being determined within an eight week deadline. In 2004/05, the last audited year, the Council was in the best 25 per cent for percentage of planning applicants satisfied with the service received, which shows that the service has a good all round approach to customer care.
- 73 The Council has worked effectively with developers to gain outcomes for local people. It has encouraged the use of section 106 monies (contributions by developers) in ways to benefit the local community and the street scene. For example, these contributions are having a positive impact and have been used to secure: highways improvements; cycling infrastructure; sustainable transport initiatives; new, and improved, open spaces and play areas.
- 74 Planning outcomes have been mixed. The Council has facilitated town centre shopping developments such as Weaver's Wharf which has improved the environment but local people feel that it has drawn custom away from smaller town centre outlets. The Council can also show positive outcomes from larger housing developments, some of it affordable, such as Park Street in Kidderminster, but residents we spoke to said that housing infill developments were less attractive. The Council tracks the value that it adds to a major proposal. The Council now aims to ensure good outcomes and has Supplementary Planning Documents in place which, take into account community views, and guide consistency in the quality of new development, although it is too early yet for the impact of these to be realised.

### **Environmental sustainability**

- 75 The Council works well with other agencies on biodiversity and is starting to work with the private sector on sustainability. It has a sustainability working group and an action plan and has taken some action. However, it has not yet embedded sustainability into everything it does.

- 76 The Council has made some progress with improving environmental sustainability. It has a sustainability strategy owned by a cross divisional sustainability working group. This has led to the Duke House Travel to Work plan and to baseline measurement for water conservation. It has started to work on a climate change action plan and to procure energy from renewable sources. It has secured funding from the Envirowise BREW fund to support resource efficiency clubs in businesses in Wyre Forest, a project which was recently launched and gives companies environmental management training, and has received baseline data from 5 companies. This shows that the Council is engaging with the wider community on promoting environmental sustainability.
- 77 The Council in accordance with its Local Plan 2004-2011 makes efforts to site developments in environmental sustainable locations. Its performance on the percentage of new homes built on previously developed land in 2004/05 was above average at 83.4 per cent. The Council applies a precautionary principle to flood risk and development in flood plains is not normally permitted, in line with government guidance.
- 78 Effective working is in place on biodiversity. For example, between the Council and English Nature on biodiversity and nature reserves. This has included jointly purchasing, and maintenance of, the Hurcott nature reserve and prompt clearance of fly-tips and abandoned cars by the Council from the ten nature reserves. The Council has also promoted a local grazing animals project as some wildlife sites need to be grazed. It also actively supported the setting up of the Biological Record Centre and the Worcestershire Habitat directory in conjunction with partners, which provides an information resource for to extend work on biodiversity in the future. The Council also seeks advice from Worcestershire Wildlife Trust on biodiversity in planning applications and the manager of the Council's ranger service also advises development control officers on the subject. This means that biodiversity is taken into account in all planning applications.
- 79 Sustainability is not fully embedded in all of the Council's activities. For example, the Council has just signed up to the Worcestershire Climate Change pledge but work on the climate change strategy has not yet led to any clear outcomes. The Council has not adopted an environmental management system for its own operation. It recycles in-house, but the performance monitoring of this is in the early stages.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 80 Value for money across these services is mixed but improving. The Council has put in place a value for money policy and reviews opportunities to improve quality and efficiency. The Council compares costs with other councils, however, some of this is in the early stages. It manages its assets proactively and is starting to use modern procurement methods. However, budget monitoring in the environmental services is not robust and the Council's action on shared services has not included environmental services so far.

- 81 The Council has a mixed picture on the value for money of these services. Expenditure on waste and recycling is below average and the service is a top performer on dry recycling and waste minimisation. For street cleansing, costs are above average and the service performance has improved to better than average levels with effective enforcement. Expenditure on planning is comparably low with mixed performance: at the end of 2005/06 performance on major applications was poor but performance on minor and other applications was above the Government target. The Use of Resources judgement in 2006 concluded that Wyre Forest District Council was at level 2 and that its costs are consistent with similar councils after taking into account mitigating factors.
- 82 Public satisfaction with these services is also mixed. At the time of the last MORI survey in 2003/04, public satisfaction was low for waste collection and recycling. Since that time, the Council has carried out its own mini survey and satisfaction levels have improved with 89 per cent of respondents satisfied with recycling. In 2003/04 public satisfaction for street cleansing was also low, but since then the Council has re-organised services on a zoned basis with seven day cleansing to solve weekend cleansing issues. Although planning performance on major applications is poor, the percentage of applicants satisfied with the service received is at the level of the best performers.
- 83 Budget monitoring within waste services is not robust. Cost data was not prepared in accordance within the budget monitoring cycle for four months in the last financial year. There are also no specific targets in the environmental services for value for money. This means that the Council cannot be certain of the relationship between costs and the range and quality of the service provided and policy decisions may be misinformed.
- 84 Environmental services have not benefited yet from the Council's work on shared services. It has a positive approach to developing shared services throughout the county. With the development of the recycling site at Hartlebury, there will be increased opportunities to share services more efficiently and deliver improved outcomes for service users.
- 85 The Council now has a framework to deliver value for money. It has a value for money policy which involves putting key principles into action, linking allocation of resources to priorities and monitoring costs. At the same time it has striven to improve quality and efficiency. For example, it has designed the environmental services to be efficient, and the main drivers for change have been to improve performance, the quality of service and to keep council tax increases to a minimum. It has reviewed waste collection rounds to make the most efficient use of freighters and crews, and planned street cleansing services according to priority zoning and the benefits to the customer. It has also integrated street scene activities such as litter picking and grass cutting, to avoid shredding litter for example. It has also implemented effective street scene enforcement before many councils, and this acts as a deterrent to littering.

- 86 The Council has made recent investments in communication with the public. It has invested in training for customer service staff and in customer relationship technology. This is already yielding benefits in terms of seamless and quick service and aims to deal with 80 per cent of calls at first point of resolution for those services dealt with in the contact centre are being met. More cost effective methods of payment, for example direct debit are provided for example for bulky waste collection and take up is being monitored although the impact of this has not yet been fully evaluated.
- 87 The environmental services monitor costs and compare themselves with other councils. Customer services have joined a national benchmarking group, but work on cost comparison is in very early stages. There is an improving knowledge of different costs for methods of access, for example phone calls, through the website and face to face and certain transactional services, but base data for comparison purposes will not be available until the service is fully functional.
- 88 The Council manages its assets proactively. There is a planned maintenance programme for council buildings, management plans for parks and open spaces and a phased programme of investment in street furniture and car parks. For example, open spaces such as heathlands and woods are often managed jointly with other agencies, such as English Nature and farmers, which increases a sense of community ownership and reduces demands on council capacity.
- 89 The Council has a robust procurement strategy which encourages decisions based on a combination of cost and quality, and is developing its whole life approach to both the costs and benefits. For example, the Council procures renewable energy for many of its buildings and is building sustainability into the business case for its new site. It is also starting to use modern procurement methods to improve value for money. Most services are delivered in-house though the council does market test services and for example, is now working with Wychavon District Council so that Wychavon can implement a service to deliver fixed penalty notices on their behalf. Joint procurement with partners is encouraged, for example in relation to the waste strategy and also in the provision of parks and open spaces.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 90 Wyre Forest District Council has a positive track record of improving recycling performance at the same time as minimising waste. It has also improved the appearance of the street scene, environmental enforcement and arrangements for customer service, and major planning applications are now meeting the government target. However, the Council does not have a strong track record in delivering diversity and environmental sustainability related outcomes.
- 91 The Council has responded positively to the national waste agenda and implemented previous inspection report recommendations and has clarified its priorities regarding recycling and waste minimisation. Its track record on recycling is positive. A weekly kerbside recycling scheme with dry recyclables only was introduced in 2003 alongside fortnightly collections of residual waste. Since then the Council has consistently achieved more recycling than its statutory standard. (see appendix). In 2002/03 the Council achieved an 8 per cent recycling rate, this increased to 13.07 per cent against a standard of 10 per cent in 2003/04, to 24.3 per cent in 2004/05 against a standard of 14 per cent and 25 per cent (over a standard of 18 per cent) in 2005/06 (unaudited).
- 92 The Council has a good track record of minimising waste. Waste tonnages are reducing (see appendix). The Council collected 416kg per head in 2002/03, reducing to 381.29kg per head in 2003/04 and then to 360.7kg in 2004/05, representing a 10 per cent reduction in two years. This has reduced again in 2005/06 to 356.1kg per head (unaudited figure). It has achieved this by promoting recycling to the public, through communication and encouraging recycling through weekly collections, reducing the number of collections of residual waste and enforcing a no side waste policy. These measures have helped consistently reduce the amount of waste.
- 93 The Council has improved the appearance of the street scene. Its track record for BV199 has improved from 21 per cent in 2003/04 to 17 per cent in 2005/06 (unaudited, see appendix). It has done this by re-prioritising the service around zones, implementing seven day working with later hours to deal with the evening economy, incorporating a number of litter pickers into the horticultural team to ensure picking before mowing. It has also promptly implemented effective street scene enforcement in response to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act and has issued 31 fixed penalty notices.
- 94 Arrangements for customer service have improved. Customer relationship management technology and customer service training have enhanced customer service in advance of the formal launch of the Hub. The Council has refreshed the reception area at Stourport to improve the customer experience. It now has formal performance indicators for the Call Centre at Kidderminster and is resolving 80 per cent of calls at first point of contact, when previously customers would have been transferred, saving customers time.

- 95 The Council can demonstrate where some changes have improved efficiency and value for money. For example, it is actively managing the costs of the waste and recycling service, and whilst costs increased from £38.64 in 2004/05 to £41.34 in 2005/06 (unaudited, see appendix). In 2002/03 the Council was in the worst 25 per cent of councils but by 2004/05, its performance on cost improved to above average, showing a positive trend.
- 96 Performance on processing major planning applications within 13 weeks fell significantly from 78.8 per cent in 2003/04 to 36.4 per cent in 2004/05, but is now getting better. An evaluation has been carried out and the Council implemented a robust action plan which included a range of actions, including ensuring that section 106 agreements are dealt with early on in the process. This has had a positive impact on performance and in early 2006/07 there was clear evidence of improvement in processing speeds of all types of applications, and notably in processing major applications.
- 97 The Council has not yet developed a consistent track record on environmental sustainability. A cross divisional working group is now progressing sustainability with an action plan following a scrutiny review. There have been some early wins such as procuring renewable energy, and the Council is developing baselines in order to measure future outcomes. The Council has recently had consultancy advice on a fleet health check and from the Carbon Trust on how to save energy in its own buildings, but at the time of the inspection the Council had not had time to implement the findings and so they had not led to any clear energy savings.
- 98 The Council has also made slow progress in other areas which are important to an inclusive and effective approach to customer services and delivering environmental services, including:
- delivery of improvements to the website and e-service; and
  - track record on equalities and diversity, which has not been historically strong but is improving. For example, progress towards achieving DDA compliance, which was 33.3 per cent for 2003/04 and now stands at 83 per cent in 2005/06 (unaudited).

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 99 Action plans are in place to address most service weaknesses and the Council's strategic plans set out clear aims to improve the environment. There is strong commitment from councillors and officers to improving the services, and the Council also has a robust approach to learning. However, the Councils' approach to performance management is not embedded and project management needs to be strengthened.

100 The Council has a range of action plans in place which address most areas of current service weakness. These plans are resourced and include:

- a customer services strategy including launch of a customer services charter including service standards is timed to support the Hub and the new approach to services provision. There is also a communications plan for the official launch of the Hub. The Council also has a draft branding strategy to support its communications work;
- draft schemes to address diversity which include awareness training, impact assessments in services, and action to meet recent legislation on ageism and disability;
- street scene improvements, including a planned programme of public toilet refurbishment originated by a Scrutiny review, funded with £127,000 of capital; and a rolling programme of car park improvement with £80,430 in the budget for this financial year, and £2m in the capital programme for replacement/additional car parking in Kidderminster. Management plans are also in place for the parks and the Council is aiming to win green flag awards for its key parks such as Brinton Park;
- the Countywide Joint Waste Strategy Implementation Plan 2005-2006 includes actions to increase kerbside coverage to reach 100 per cent, and to increase participation. These include targeted timebound campaigns to harder to reach people and on-going crew education. Longer term plans for waste management include moving to a twin wheeled bin alternate week collection service with a broader range of recyclables when the County Council has clarified plans for a wet materials recycling facility to be in place in 2009. These proposals have strong support from senior managers and councillors and the Council is working jointly with its County partners on establishing timescales for these developments;
- an action plan on climate change which resulted from a scrutiny exercise; and
- a draft business plan has been developed to achieve the Council's goal to have single site accommodation. This plan takes account of sustainability, for example to action energy advice and optimises the balance between the use of energy and maximising the use of renewable energy sources.

101 The Council's strategic plans clearly set out aims to improve the environment and a commitment to the Worcestershire Hub, and these are reflected in the community strategy which also links through to the Worcestershire partnership strategy. The community strategy aims are derived from consultation with partners and the public and recognise a number of key environmental issues for example, reuse and recycling, sustaining biodiversity and encouraging green procurement. The Council's five corporate priorities are supported by improvement actions which reinforce the environmental aims, are measurable and outcome based. Very recently the corporate priorities were reduced to three with emphasis on the environment theme as the most important service priority, reinforcing the focus on this area.

- 102** There is strong leadership within the Council at a corporate level. There is a robust commitment from officers and members to the environment, economic regeneration and developing customer services through the Worcestershire Hub. The Council's willingness to take difficult decisions is demonstrated, for example by the introduction of fortnightly collections of residual household waste in 2003 with weekly recycling collections.
- 103** Service and strategic planning to support improvement plans is improving with coherent links to the corporate plan and community strategy. There is a good level of integration between action plans, service plans and strategies, for example the aims within the Cultural, Leisure and Commercial Services business plan link to the waste strategy. The annual business plans have clear links to corporate aims and objectives, include key improvement actions, and identify service costs, resources and budget information. The Council has a process to review linkages between plans, which ensures that they are comprehensive and avoids duplication and omission.
- 104** A robust consultation strategy is in place identifying campaigns and specific users, stakeholders and partners to be consulted. It links into the corporate plan and through to the community strategy and sets an objective to encourage cross divisional consultation exercises and joint working. The strategy is concise, with a time bound action plan which is measurable and targeted. The strategy is also used to ensure that survey or consultation fatigue is avoided. In addition, the Planning Inspectorate has passed the Statement of Community Involvement which outlines the Council's intentions to engage with a number of stakeholders and community groups and specific segments of customers.
- 105** The Council's draft communication strategy clearly sets out what it wants to achieve and what the drivers are. It is supported by a communications audit which identifies gaps within the strategy, for example that the Council needs to develop a branding strategy which looks not only at how the Council is branded but at how customers experience its services.
- 106** The Council has a strong approach to learning.
- In developing their approach to waste collection and recycling the Council visited other authorities and best practice from Lichfield was used to shape the service.
  - Complaints, including pre-complaint stage and compliments are recorded and tracked and reported to Corporate Management Team and to Cabinet regularly. Lessons learnt are identified. For example, the team developing the next phase of the customer service strategy is using learning from the implementation of the weekly recycling and fortnightly residual waste collection in 2003 to improve its communication plan for householders. This will help to get the Council's message across more effectively.

## 32 Environment | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- Internal communications are good. Staff feel valued and that they are listened to and there is an effective flow of information through the core brief and team briefs. Most staff have regular appraisals and know their objectives and how these link into business plans and the corporate plan.
- Cross divisional working groups have been set up to review a number of themes for example, sustainability, procurement and performance management.

- 107 However, there are some gaps in corporate improvement plans that have an impact on environment and planning services. There is no medium to long term plan for some services for example street scene, particularly street cleansing, though there are individual action plans to address some of the improvements needed within street scene eg toilet provision and car parking, and website development. Therefore it is difficult to know how the council will achieve the targets set for improvement in these areas.
- 108 Performance management is improving but the Council does not have an embedded performance management culture, for example some service targets are not sufficiently ambitious and there is work to do on sharpening up indicators, frequency of monitoring and ownership. However, a performance framework is in place and monitoring takes place at all levels. Performance reporting is centred on the council's priorities and recently the scrutiny committees have been realigned to directly reflect responsibility for the performance around those priorities. However, risk management and contingency planning are under developed. Some services such as the contact centre have used performance management to drive improvements, but the impact of performance management is inconsistent across the Council.
- 109 The Council does not have a strategic approach to project management though this is being developed. A discussion paper has been put together for the corporate management team which uses recent work with IDEA and learning from other councils. This recommends a suitable structure and resources to finance a programme officer post over the next two years. The Council is currently project managing the Hub development. Having a full time programme officer in place, the implementation of a common methodology and structured, resourced approach will mean that all projects are more likely to be delivered on time, to plan and to budget providing better outcomes for users and partners.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 110 The Council has adequate capacity to ensure that services improve. Service capacity is good, with the effective use of the agency staff in planning to maintain performance. Funding is in place to deliver service improvements, some of which have the potential to deliver efficiency savings.

- 111** The Council is in a strong financial position and has successfully attracted external funding through partnerships. It aims to minimise the increase in council tax which means that resourcing for improvements/action plans and new projects must come from efficiencies in other areas and from working in partnership. Funding is in place to improve the toilet provision in the district and to continue the improvements to car parking and other planned service improvements for 2006/07.
- 112** The Council has a successful track record of attracting external funding. DEFRA funding has been obtained to extend the kerbside collection of recycling, and WRAP funding to increase participation and education in recycling. The Council has also obtained funding from English Nature to buy Hurcott Woods as a joint venture, with the Council providing the management of the woods.
- 113** Partners think highly of the Council. The relationship with the County Council is strong with good outcomes for local people. For example, the Council have influenced the County's Local Transport Plan to benefit air quality in Horsefair, Kidderminster and Welch Gate, Bewdley. The Council has adopted a partnerships governance framework, recruited a partnerships manager and regularly reviews partnerships to manage the achievement of outcomes and what value has been added, in order to make best use of member and staff capacity and ensure that council priorities are being delivered through these arrangements.
- 114** The Council works closely with parish councils and community groups to maximise capacity and access to services for customers. For example, members of the Women's Institute recently carried out a clean up of a local nature reserve. The Council is piloting a scheme with two parishes to develop electronic consultation for planning using planning development grant funds to buy laptops and projectors. This is supported by training from the council and the development of guidance and has been held up as an example of best practice by the county association of local councils (CALC). The Council has offered to enhance the parish lengthsman scheme and this has been taken up by three parishes. This shows the Council's willingness to work with the community.
- 115** The Council uses cross divisional working to increase capacity. For example 32 members of staff are trained in enforcement procedures and the council is now working with the police to train and develop procedures so these staff can also enforce on alcohol and minor incidents. Cross agency working is also building capacity eg a protocol has been developed with the Environment Agency to provide the expertise in dealing with asbestos and other hazardous substances and ensure a comprehensive service to the public.

### 34 Environment | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 116** Capacity is being increased through the Worcestershire Hub developments, the expanding use of the customer relationship management system across all services and through online services. The satellite one stop shop is operational at Stourport, and the main one stop provision at Kidderminster (due to open in August 2006) and second satellite at Bewdley will enhance the service's capacity. The Council's main one stop shop at Kidderminster has been subject to a rigorous options appraisal in terms of value for money and better outcomes for the public. Once the one stop shop opens, all receptions will close and a full range of services will be provided by the customer service advisors. This combined with the promotion and improvement of e-services such as online planning will create greater efficiency in services. It is anticipated that £100,000 savings will be generated each year. The Council recognises the need to build capacity with the recruitment of a customer services manager and the staffing requirements for customer service advisors built around aptitude and ability.
- 117** The Council's scrutiny group has been effective in reviewing, and improving, service provision. For example, scrutiny review groups have reported on recycling which led to the purchase of new freighters suitable for kerbside recycling and obtaining grant funding and funding from the county and a review of public toilets, where the Council has committed resources to improvements in response to public concern. As a result, the Council is addressing major public concerns through the scrutiny process.
- 118** A comprehensive training and induction programme is in place for staff and members. This includes compulsory training for all members on the planning committee and training plans for staff. The Council has a competency based approach to training and assessment for managers and is extending this to the rest of the workforce. The investment in training and development ensures that the Council has the right skills in place for the future.
- 119** Staff capacity is generally good. Staff feel that there are good relations and they are highly motivated and proud of the work they do. However, sickness levels for 2004/05 are higher than average and above the Council's own target level and there are further issues with sickness in environmental services. The Council has implemented an absence management procedure to resolve the problem but it is too early to assess the impact from this initiative.
- 120** The Council is taking an active part in investigating the potential to share services across the county. These are at an early stage of development and currently a revenues and benefits shared service is being investigated and a business case developed. Waste services have been discussed with a view to providing a countywide shared service, but no further plans have been made. Sharing services has the potential to release resources and increase capacity throughout the Council both in customer contact and back office services and currently this opportunity is not being exploited in environmental services.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Figure 2 Wyre Forest performance indicators, comparative position and trends**

Wyre Forest Environment Performance Indicators								
Indicator	Best to be...	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05		Unaudited result
		Result	Quartile	Result	Quartile	Result	Quartile	
BVPI 82a & b Percentage of household waste recycled or composted	High	8%	Lowest	13%	Lowest	24%	3rd	25%
BVPI 91 Percentage of population served by a kerbside collection of recyclables	High	28%	Worst	84%	3rd	81%	Worst	95%
BVPI 90b Resident satisfaction with recycling facilities	High	63% (2000/01)	Lowest	62%	Lowest	Next survey 2006/07		
BVPI 84 Kg of waste collected per head	Low	416	2nd	391	2nd	361	Best	356
BVPI 86 Cost of waste collection per household	Low	£23.64	Lowest	£37.40	3rd	£38.64	2nd	£41.34
BVPI 90a Resident satisfaction with waste collection	High	87% (2000/01)	3rd	79%	Worst	Next survey 2006/07		
BVPI 199 Percentage of land significantly littered	Low	New 2003/04		28%	3rd	21%	Not Comp	17%
BVPI 89 Resident satisfaction with standards of cleanliness	High	52% (2000/01)	Lowest	56%	2nd	Next survey 2006/07		
BVPI 119e Resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces	High	65% (2000/01)	2nd	71%	3rd	Next survey 2006/07		
BVPI 106 New homes built on previously developed land	High	69%	2nd	91%	2nd	86%	2nd	77%
BVPI 109a Major applications determined in 13 weeks	High	52%	2nd	79%	Best	36%	Worst	38.04%
BVPI 109b Minor applications determined in 8 weeks	High	68%	Best	70%	Best	71%	2nd	71%
BVPI 109c Other applications	High	81%	Best	80%	2nd	83%	3rd	86.2
BVPI 179 Percentage of standard searches done in 10 working days	High	99%	2nd	100%	Best	100%	Best	100%
BVPI 204 % of appeals allowed against the authority's decision to refuse planning applications.	Low	New 2004/05				27%	2nd	49%
BVPI 205 Quality of service checklist for planning	High	New 2004/05				72%	3rd	94%
BVPI 111 Percentage of applicants satisfied with the service received	High	89% (2000/01)	Best	86% (2003/04)	Best	Next survey 2006/07		

NB: BVPI 90b and BVPI 89 not adjusted for deprivation