

Environment Inspection - Planning Services

Castle Point Borough Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Service Inspection | 4 |
| Summary | 5 |
| Scoring the service | 7 |
| Recommendations | 10 |
| Report | 13 |
| Context | 13 |
| The locality | 13 |
| The Council | 14 |
| The Council's Planning service | 14 |
| How good is the service? | 15 |
| What has the service aimed to achieve? | 15 |
| Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users? | 16 |
| Is the service delivering value for money? | 23 |
| What are the prospects for improvement to the service? | 26 |
| What is the service track record in delivering improvement? | 26 |
| How well does the service manage performance? | 29 |
| Does the service have the capacity to improve? | 32 |
| Appendix 1 – PIs/Performance | 36 |

Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Planning services at Castle Point Borough Council are 'fair' with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The service demonstrates some positive outcomes to benefit local people. For example on protecting the natural environment and the green belt from inappropriate development. It is also meeting the needs of the elderly population through the provision of nursing home and sheltered housing accommodation.
- 3 However, the service has been less successful in other areas. For example, it has been slow to provide affordable housing to meet the needs of young people and those on low incomes. Service contribution to community safety, a key council priority has also been limited. It is also not yet effective at dealing with people who breach planning regulations.
- 4 The service performance is above average in determining most planning applications and performance has improved over time. However, performance on major applications has been below average.
- 5 The service does not maximise its learning from customers and response to customer needs is mainly reactive. There is a lack of service analysis to ensure that the needs of hard to reach groups are being met and learning from customer complaints and comments has been reactive not systematic.
- 6 The roles and responsibilities of officers and councillors are not clearly defined and made clear to the public. For example officer and councillor protocols are not in place for all stages of the planning process. The public may not know what to expect when they engage in the planning process.
- 7 Services are providing value for money and although this is not currently managed systematically, there is a plan to manage value for money more effectively. Development control is currently one of the cheapest services in the country. However, the planning service is not routinely comparing its service delivery against the best performing councils and targets to improve value for money are not developed.
- 8 The service improvement plans recognise current weaknesses and are aimed at resolving them. For example, the planning service has recruited new managers and staff with the skills that it needs to implement these plans.
- 9 Senior officers and councillors demonstrate their commitment to planning through the approval of a 23 per cent service budget increase to ensure that service priorities will be achieved.
- 10 However, plans are in varying stages of development and it is difficult to gauge the impact on planning service quality. For example, the service is currently consulting on options to improve public open space and is in the early stages of preparation of planning guidance to improve its affordable housing record.

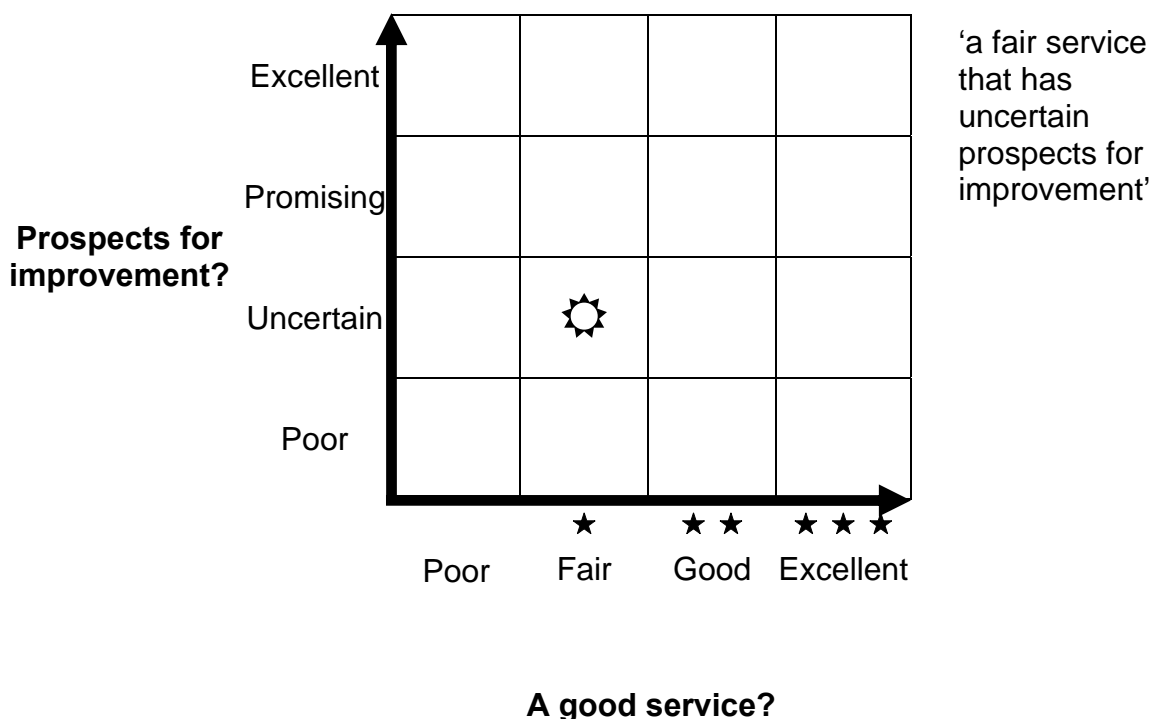
6 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | Summary

- 11 Performance management arrangements at Council level are improving but impact is still developing in the planning service. For example, project management in the planning service and the development of local performance indicators to help the planning service better reflect corporate priorities and management of value for money are still developing.
- 12 The Council has not carried out any process analysis within the service and cannot prove that processes are sufficiently streamlined or that staffing is at the right level to meet service demand in the future.
- 13 The inspection covered planning policy; conservation and environment enhancement; development control; enforcement; searches; building control and regeneration functions.

Scoring the service

- 14 We have assessed Castle Point Borough Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 15 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- performance in determining most planning applications is above average;
 - the service performance is doing well against most government planning performance priorities, such as the level of delegated decision making;
 - customer satisfaction is high across services with the exception of development control;
 - the service demonstrates some positive outcomes, for example on protecting the natural environment and the green belt from inappropriate development and the creation of Canvey Heights Country Park;

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

8 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | Scoring the service

- the service has achieved some community strategy objectives such as securing the redevelopment of the Paddocks Green Community Centre to provide a new comprehensive health centre on Canvey Island;
- relevant specialist information has been developed with partners to provide a joined up approach for customers such as technical advice relating to contaminated land; and
- planning services are providing value for money.

However:

- the service does not maximise its learning from customers and response to customer needs is mainly reactive;
- service contribution to affordable housing, a key priority has been low;
- management of value for money is still embedding;
- there are weaknesses in the way the service communicates with the public such as promotion of service standards and transparency in officer and councillor roles;
- councillors have had limited training on planning matters; and
- the planning enforcement function is under-developed.

16 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- track record on local priorities is mixed, for example, the Council cannot demonstrate a correlation between CCTV cameras and track record on community safety;
- the service does not have a strong base of skills such as project management;
- the Council has not carried out any process analysis within the service and cannot prove that processes are sufficiently streamlined or that staffing is at the right level;
- local performance indicators which reflect corporate priorities in development control and planning policy are currently under-developed; and
- the Council does not systematically use benchmarking information to raise standards of performance in planning. Exploring alternative methods of service delivery is not routine.

However:

- the Council's improvement plans aim to resolve current weaknesses and it has recruited new managers and staff with the right skills to support these plans although it is too early to gauge the impact;
- the Council has achieved some positive outcomes to benefit local people. For example on protecting the natural environment and the green belt from inappropriate development;

- performance against national performance indicators is generally above average or performing at the levels of the best councils and is improving over time;
- the planning service looks at best practice when implementing major new system;
- senior officers and councillors have maintained commitment to the service. The budget for the service has increased by 23 per cent to ensure service priorities will be achieved;
- the service has a good track record of attracting external funding and using this well. For example, it is not dependent on planning delivery grant, but it has used this to improve the research base for new policy and ensure that planning policy is developed to time; and
- performance management arrangements support the Council's plans and enable them to be monitored effectively.

Recommendations

- 17 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Review communication arrangements with the public and key stakeholders through:

- *service analysis to ensure the needs of hard to reach groups, the public, service users and key stakeholders are being met in service delivery;*
- *reviewing support documentation available in hard and electronic copy to ensure information available meets the needs of customers;*
- *developing a more systematic approach to learning from comments and complaints;*
- *improving the relations with the media to promote service standards, priorities and achievements to the public;*
- *reviewing the operation of Planning Committee to ensure equitable access to the public; and*
- *defining measures to monitor progress and implementing actions to deliver identified weaknesses.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- equitable service delivery to all members of the community and better customer focus;
- service information and delivery arrangements that help the public and key stakeholders engage more effectively with the service;
- improved demonstrable learning both within the service and across services; and
- better promotion of priorities and service standards to the public.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 30 June 2007.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve service efficiency and effectiveness by:

- *developing, implementing and monitoring service indicators to measure service efficiency and value for money;*
- *reviewing service processes against established good practice;*
- *introducing effective workforce planning to meet the future needs of the service; and*
- *undertaking a business process re-engineering of the planning service and using findings to:*
 - *ensure that work processes are efficient;*
 - *assess the future information technology needs and to further improve the electronic delivery of the service; and*
 - *reviewing the service improvement plan for 2006-2010 and resources to ensure implementation of the actions arising from all the recommendations above.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved service management of value for money;
- improved efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to the public; and
- better preparedness for the future demands of the Thames Gateway on planning related services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 30 June 2007.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the effectiveness and transparency of the planning process to the public by:

- *reviewing and publishing Section 106 procedures, requirements and their justification to ensure that the approach is transparent and consistent;*
- *project planning including committee decision making processes to speed up major application decision making; and*
- *ensuring appropriate monitoring procedures are in place to track progress on planning application processing.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better strategic management of the planning process;
- improved efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of service delivery to the public; and
- quicker decision making for major applications, currently a service weakness.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2007.

Recommendation

R4 Clarify the roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers in the planning process to the public by:

- *updating councillor and officer protocols for all stages of the development control process including pre-application discussions and ensuring these are available to the public;*
- *ensure clarity and focus of decision making through improved councillor engagement;*
- *implementing mandatory training for planning committee councillors and ensuring attendance; and*
- *monitoring compliance with the above points.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clearer public understanding of officer and councillor roles in the planning process;
- increased transparency of the planning process to the public; and
- improved councillor skills to make planning decisions.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2007.

Report

Context

The locality

- 18 Castle Point Borough Council is situated in south east Essex and covers 17 square miles (4,488 hectares) bordering the northern side of the Thames Estuary. There are four main settlements: South Benfleet; Thundersley; Hadleigh; and Canvey Island. Outside these settlements the Metropolitan Green Belt, which covers 87 per cent of the borough, protects the area from most forms of development.
- 19 The Borough is 20 minutes drive from the M25 and has the benefits of frequent train services to London, however there is only one railway station in the borough. The Council is the largest employer. Sixty per cent of the population work outside the borough. There are also high out-commuting rates for leisure activities such as entertainment.
- 20 There is a population of approximately 87,000 living in 35,700 dwellings. The population is relatively stable but the over 55 age group is growing. At 24.3 per cent, the proportion of the population of pensionable age is higher than the national average of 20.8 per cent. Twenty per cent of the population are young people. Residents from an ethnic minority background make up 3.35 per cent of the population. This is below the national average of 13 per cent, but has increased from 1.2 per cent since 1991. Over 7,000 households in the Borough contain a member with a disability.
- 21 Average house prices in the area are close to the national average and below that for the East of England. The borough's housing stock was largely constructed after 1945. About 94 per cent of dwellings are owner occupied with 4.5 per cent in the Council's ownership and 1.5 per cent in registered social landlord (RSL) ownership.
- 22 The Borough is part of the Thames Gateway South Essex area that is the government priority for regeneration. The borough is not identified as a primary focus for growth. However, it is surrounded by the unitary councils of Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea and the districts of Rochford and Basildon and will be affected. The Castle Point Regeneration Steering Group comprising of partners within the Gateway has been set up to address regeneration issues in the borough.
- 23 The educational attainment of the Borough's population is lower than the regional averages, particularly in relation to higher educational attainment and professional qualifications.

- 24 Outside of the green belt, there are few sites with special designation affecting planning. There are only two conservation areas, 47 listed buildings and six ancient monuments. However, there are six sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) together with five local nature reserves. The north of the borough contains a number of ancient woodlands. The agricultural land quality is generally poor.

The Council

- 25 There has been a Conservative administration since May 2003, consisting of 29 out of 41 councillors. There are 11 Canvey Island Independent councillors and one Labour councillor.
- 26 The Council has a committee system with four policy committees and a recovery committee. There is also a planning committee dealing with planning policy and applications and three other regulatory committees. There are five neighbourhood meetings, mirroring the revised county electoral divisions.
- 27 There is a Chief Executive and four directors. The Council employs 307.5 full-time equivalent staff. The Council's revenue budget for 2006/07 is £12.1 million - an increase of 8.5 per cent on revenue expenditure in 2005/06.

The Council's Planning service

- 28 Planning service inspected services include the following.
- Planning Policy – responsible for preparation of the local development framework (LDF) to replace the local plan.
 - Conservation and environment enhancement – responsible for conservation areas, trees, woodlands. Conservation advice is provided by Essex County Council through a service level agreement.
 - Development Control – responsible for planning applications and other applications.
 - Regeneration - responsible for developing regeneration initiatives for the Borough.
 - Enforcement – enforcement of planning control.
 - Searches – maintaining the land charges register and responding to enquiries.
 - Building Control – enforcement of the building regulations.
- 29 The inspection also examined how the services work with other services such as housing and external partnerships such as the Thames Gateway to deliver corporate and other priorities.
- 30 Net service costs in 2005/06 were £710,500 and there are 23.5 FTE staff in planning services and 2 FTE staff in land searches.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

Local objectives

- 31 The Community Strategy overall vision adopted for the Borough for 2006-2020 is: 'A community where everyone can prosper be safe and live in a high quality environment'. To achieve this vision eight key themes have been identified and the following are linked to the Planning services: learning for all; making our environment greener and cleaner; regenerating our local economy; becoming healthier; feeling safer; having fun; getting around; and serving you better.
- 32 The 2006-2010 Corporate Plan links to the objectives of the Community Strategy. The planning service supports the four priorities of corporate plan in its 2006-2010 service plan which are:
 - environment – civic pride;
 - community safety;
 - regeneration and homes; and
 - improving the Council.
- 33 The Community Strategy and Corporate Plan link through to the planning service priorities which in turn reflect national sustainable development objectives.
- 34 The local plan for the borough was adopted in 1998. The adopted local plan policies reflect government planning aims and outline what the planning service is seeking to achieve overall. Although dated, they do address some key areas which the service is seeking to achieve. For example:
 - strong environmental protection policies;
 - affordable housing (though thresholds are lower than current government thinking);
 - shopping policy to encourage the protection of the vitality and viability of existing centres;
 - design advice with an emphasis on energy efficiency and the use of high density development and the promotion of a good mix of housing types;
 - meeting the needs of disabled people through development; and
 - encouraging public transport and alternative transport to the car when considering new development.
- 35 Local Development Framework (LDF) policies and proposals which will replace the local plan appropriately link to the Community Strategy, national regional and local objectives. For example, the Council's core strategy and generic development plan document (DPD) includes action on social inclusion, meeting skills gaps, planning health care services and regeneration objectives.

- 36 Regeneration is a key issue for the borough. Canvey Island is a priority for the South Essex Thames Gateway and the Council. Canvey Island has significant problems of deprivation skills levels, lack of employment opportunities reflected in the bringing forward of the Canvey Island DPD in the LDF.
- 37 The Housing Needs Survey Update 2004 shows that the total affordable housing need annually is now 513 units - the planning service should be helping to meet this need.
- 38 Planning services should also contribute to improving the public open space in the borough, an issue identified recently in the Open Space Appraisal 2006.
- 39 The building control, legal and land charges and planning service plans set out how the services operate to meet corporate objectives in the context of national and regional issues and set targets to 2009/10 to correlate with the borough's corporate plan timeframe.

National and regional planning objectives

- 40 The planning service also has to adhere to regional and other planning guidance.
 - The East of England Plan envisages sustainability and prosperity and requires the provision of 4,000 new additional dwellings in Castle Point and 2,000 new jobs between 2001 and 2021.
 - At the sub-regional level, Castle Point is located within Thames Gateway which has been identified as the national priority for regeneration. The borough is represented on the Board of the Thames Gateway Partnership which is the organisation which provides the overall vision for the future of Thames Gateway. The vision for Thames Gateway South Essex (TGSE) is 'to improve opportunities and quality of life for local people through establishing the area as a focal point for economic regeneration and investment, provision of new infrastructure and improved environments.'
- 41 Building control and enforcement play a role in ensuring that development meets government regulations and sustainable principles.

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

Accessibility, customer care and community/user focus

- 42 The service is not systematically identifying local needs to inform service provision. Although it informs the public of decisions on planning applications where they have written in and reports outcomes to complainants on enforcement issues, it does not ask for feedback from customers to help improve the service. In addition, although the service is responsive to complaints it is recognised that the service is not yet systematically learning from complaints. Customer satisfaction surveys at reception are undertaken but plans to address issues arising are not yet in place.

- 43 Customer information is inconsistent. Planning and building control staff are polite and helpful but service expectations are not always clear to customers and knowledge is variable. Service users reported staff have good customer care skills. There are varying degrees of knowledge among planning staff and a lack of clarity on new legislative changes such as the expected standard of submission of design and access statements. There is a lack of published guidance to help householders understand planning requirements. Service standards have not been promoted to customers. Service users are unsure what they can expect from the service.
- 44 Initiatives in place to help the service understand user need are not fully effective. There is an established developers forum which meets twice a year, and this has had a limited impact on the planning service.
- 45 There is limited guidance on S106³ (planning gain) obligations. Apart from affordable housing there is no detailed guidance or justification of other contributions that may be required. This is recognised by the Council and is prioritised for work in the LDF. The provision of such guidance helps ensure developers are treated consistently, that the Council does not miss opportunities and that the use of S106 is seen by the public and developers to be transparent, fair and consistent.
- 46 Officer and councillor roles and responsibilities in the planning process are not clear or transparent. For example, existing protocols for councillors and officers do not cover responsibilities in pre-application discussions. Existing protocols are not readily available or publicised to the public. The public are not aware of what is expected by councillors and officers in terms of decision making and operational responsibilities.
- 47 There are areas of weakness in supporting how planning decisions are made. For example, there has been limited councillor training on planning matters. The decision to make councillor training mandatory for planning committee members was only taken in July 2006 and has not yet been implemented. Attendance at training events has been mixed. Training boosts councillor skills and gives them greater knowledge of legislation, policy and material considerations in order to deliver appropriate decisions and inform policy making. In addition it is difficult for the public to identify officers and councillors at planning committee because there are no name cards and roles are not adequately explained.
- 48 Service satisfaction is generally good. Building control and searches have high levels of satisfaction. However, development control has not undertaken its own research to see if public satisfaction has improved since the last best value performance indicator survey in 2003 which showed satisfaction rates at a level of the worst performing councils in the country.

³ A legal agreement under Section 106 of the 1990 Town & Country Planning Act. Section 106 agreements are legal agreements between a planning authority and a developer, or undertakings offered unilaterally by a developer, that ensure that certain extra works related to a development are undertaken such as providing community benefits on site such as play areas to serve the development or to mitigate the effects of the development on the local community infrastructure and services such as financial contributions to schools.

- 49 Good specialist information is available to inform developers of local pertinent issues to inform applications for major development. The Council has prepared technical advice on contaminated land for developers in conjunction with its partners. In addition, it has worked hard with partners on flood alleviation and has prepared a strategic flood risk assessment to guide development.
- 50 The service is improving its engagement with the public and is able to demonstrate some changes in delivery arising from public need. For example, it has introduced public speaking at planning committee and a duty officer system as a result of the service best value review in 2004/05. Building control has altered contact arrangements in direct response to public comment. Website information is good and well received by regular service users. A special planning committee meeting was held on Canvey Island to deal with the Calor Gas application which was well attended by the public.

Diversity

- 51 Access requirements are in place to meet most of the physical needs of customers with the exception of the council chamber. The new environment services reception area is wheelchair friendly; the service has access to a language line and documents are available in a variety of formats. Home visits are also available.
- 52 The impact of new development on the needs of disabled people is effectively built into planning processes. Building control routinely screen all planning applications to ensure that they are suitable for disabled people; the Council has had an access group in place for 13 years, currently chaired by the head of building control and ground floor accommodation of all new flat development is required to be accessible for disabled people. This is important given that the borough has a high proportion of disabled residents.
- 53 Adopted local plan policies support and are delivering development to meet the diverse needs of the population with its partners. For example, the Council has been successful in delivering nursing home and high numbers of sheltered accommodation and flats for young people in sustainable locations. It is also taking a strategic approach to meeting the needs of gypsies and the travelling community with Essex County Council and using the Council's hard to reach group forum to inform the LDF.
- 54 The Council is making good progress in relation to the equality and diversity agenda although the impact on service delivery is still embedding. The Council has achieved Level 2 of the Equality Standard and is on target to achieve Level 3 by March 2007. Diversity impact statements are in place across all services, all staff have received appropriate training and a Council hard to reach group forum was established in 2005/06. Work is ongoing as part of preparation for Level 3 to ensure that working practice in planning reflects equality and diverse needs of the community.

- 55 Recently, access to the planning service electronically has allowed service users 24 hour access to the service but users consider this is not yet meeting the needs of the whole community. Service users report positive improvements from a low base over the last 18 months to the planning website. These include being able to submit, pay for and track building control and planning applications electronically; however they consider more needs to be done to help those not so computer literate or do not have easy access to a computer.
- 56 The planning service is not able to demonstrate the effect of human rights legislation on service delivery. Staff have received appropriate training and account is taken in planning committee reports but the service was not able to show how human rights affect day to day business in the planning service.
- 57 The council chamber is not fully equipped to meet the needs of the public. Hearing the debate at planning committee is difficult due to the lack of microphones; and space for wheelchair users is limited.

Service outcomes for users and the community

Local priorities

- 58 Service contribution to local priorities over the last few years has been mixed. For example, contributions through Section 106 agreements have been limited, in part due to the small scale and number of planning applications received and the age of the local plan. However, the service is positively contributing to biodiversity, meeting the special needs housing requirements of local residents and regeneration objectives.

Environment - civic pride

- 59 Service partnership work to improve the natural environment and biodiversity, a key objective for this Council priority, is having positive results. For example:
- North Benfleet Hall Wood and West Wood have been placed under the management of Castle Point Wildlife Trust. Damage caused to these ancient woodlands by users has been mitigated. As a result populations of non-priority species such as slow worms, nesting sparrow hawks and black caps have been seen to increase;
 - proactive work by the planning service with the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) and English Nature at Northwick has resulted in a new Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and has been cited by English Nature as an exemplar of how development and biodiversity needs should be reconciled; and
 - the creation of Canvey Heights Country Park at a cost of £250,000 to regenerate a former tip site and supported by EEDA.
- 60 Frameworks are in place to guide development in the Council's two Conservation areas and the quality of new development is improving within them. For example, Ashwell Mews in South Benfleet Conservation Area.

- 61 There is a shortage of public open space in the borough and the planning service impact on improving this has been limited. The externally facilitated Council Open Space Appraisal 2006 identified a shortage of public open space and that only 37 per cent of the 118 sites audited were above average quality. For example, £52,000 has been received and spent on improving Hart Road and Thundersley Common playgrounds through Section 106 money. Other Section 106 money has been secured to improve other recreational facilities in the borough such as a new pavilion and bowling green at Woodside Park and improvements to the John Burrows Tennis Courts.
- 62 The service does not assess how it contributes to corporate priorities and service contribution to the quality of design in the borough. For example, development outcomes are not monitored for quality through for instance an annual tour or to judge how well development is meeting key objectives for the Council. The Council cannot robustly demonstrate the contribution of planning services to what it is seeking to achieve.

Community safety

- 63 The contribution and impact of the planning service in improving community safety has been limited - a key council priority. Keeping the community safe and secure was the top priority for residents in the 2005 council survey. The Council has been successful in extending CCTV in the borough through Section 106 agreements but this has not translated to reduced crime levels yet or faster levels of detection. It is not clear if the Council has measured the impact of this initiative on reducing the fear of crime. In addition no developments in the borough have received 'Secured by Design' status. The scale of planning applications within the borough is predominantly small and has resulted in the police architectural liaison officer no longer commenting on planning applications routinely.
- 64 Open space facilities for young people are limited. For example, the 2006 Open Space Appraisal identified a lack of recreational facilities for young people and 66 per cent of play equipment was rated as poor or very poor in the borough. This limits the diversionary activity available to young people.

Regeneration and homes

- 65 A suitable delivery vehicle is in place to ensure a co-ordinated approach to regeneration initiatives on the ground although this is relatively new. As part of its Thames Gateway responsibilities, the Castle Point Regeneration Steering Group has been set up. This involves all agencies involved in delivering regeneration including the government office, Thames Gateway representatives and the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). Stakeholders report the group is working well. The group has managed the preparation of the Sustainable Regeneration Framework for Canvey Island prepared by Urban Initiatives. The Council is taking a holistic partnership approach to the delivery of regeneration aims and objectives.

- 66 Planning services are on target to deliver the overall housing numbers and jobs required by regional planning policy and the South Essex Thames Gateway. Annual housing completion rates are above target and annual job creation rates are currently in line to meet expectations. However, the Council cannot point to achievement in creating knowledge based jobs.
- 67 The Council does not have a strong record of affordable housing provision, however, its special needs housing record is good. For example, only 29 affordable housing units have been provided over the last three years. However, the Council has been successful in providing housing to meet the needs of elderly and disabled people - one in five households in Castle Point have a disabled resident. Two hundred and seven special needs housing units have been achieved in the last three years.
- 68 The Council is successful in delivering many of the government's sustainable development objectives. For example the Council has achieved high density development for some years. In 2004/05 nearly one third of new housing was achieved at densities of over 50 units per hectare and all new housing has been developed on previously used land. Only 1 per cent of previously used land remains derelict which is one of the best performances in the country. By having high density development using previously developed land, the Council is reducing the development pressure on the green belt.
- 69 The service is achieving some key regeneration objectives through Section 106 agreements and negotiation with key partners to meet identified local needs. For example it has secured a new link road for Charfleets Industrial estate on Canvey Island which will improve access to the island, a £50 million new business park has been approved on Canvey Island and it has also secured the re-siting of the fire station to Stadium Way, Hadleigh as a first step to the planned regeneration of the town centre.
- 70 The service is actively working with the local primary care trust to find sites to meet local deficiencies and future needs in health care in line with community strategy objectives. For example, it has secured the redevelopment of the Paddocks Green Community Centre to provide a new comprehensive health centre on Canvey Island.
- 71 New development is located in sustainable locations to reduce the dependence on the car and is starting to meet the shortfall in one and two bedroomed properties in the borough. This is in line with national objectives on sustainability and local planning policy. For example, sheltered housing at Hart Road, Thundersley and the increase in flatted development such as that approved at 403-504 London Road/Oak Road, Hadleigh.

Improving the Council

- 72 Performance is above average with the exception of time taken to determine major applications and development control public satisfaction rates. For example, performance on time taken to determine minor and other applications (these cover most of the planning applications received) has improved to 87 per cent and 93 per cent respectively, exceeding the Council's targets. In addition the Council's performance in 2005/06 on the planning quality checklist improved to 94 per cent, exceeding the Council's own target. A table of relevant performance is included in Appendix 1 of this report.
- 73 The Council is achieving high levels of delegated planning decision making in line with Government expectations. Over the last three years the Council has maintained delegated decision making to officers at levels above 90 per cent. This helps to speed up decision making on planning applications for customers.
- 74 The Council has a dated local plan but this is not reflected in the quality of planning decision making. The local plan was adopted in 1998. However, the numbers of successful challenges to the Council's planning decisions at appeal are relatively low. For example, in 2004/05 the Council's appeal record was one of the best in the country. In addition there have been no findings of maladministration against the Council concerning planning matters.
- 75 The service has acted promptly in respect of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the development of a new planning framework is on target to meet all the milestones set. Some development plan document work is progressing ahead of schedule such as the Canvey Island Plan. This reflects its regeneration priority for the Council and the Thames Gateway. The Core Strategy and Generic Development Control Policies are currently out to consultation in recognition of the need to replace the dated local plan. The Council is moving forward appropriately to provide an up to date planning policy framework for the borough.
- 76 Performance against corporate and service standards is mixed. For example, the development control service has not been able to meet the Council's customer service 'promise' of responding to 95 per cent of enquiries within ten working days. However, building control has set challenging targets for approving full plans over and above the statutory requirement which it is achieving.
- 77 Council performance as a community leader in relation to broader environmental sustainability objectives is mixed. For example, the Council is one of the best performing authorities in the country in terms of energy efficiency of the Council housing stock and improved energy efficiency in the general housing stock by 15 per cent under the Home Energy Efficiency Act provisions. However, the Council has no green travel plan in place. In addition, it does not operate any environmental management systems.

78 The planning enforcement function is reactive in its approach and is under-developed. This means that the service is not proactive in dealing with people who breach planning law. Although conditions monitoring to ensure applicants have complied with conditions attached to planning consents is in place using building control, there are service issues still to address. For example:

- enforcement priorities for the service are not well understood by or publicised to the public, as they are hard to find forming part of the service enforcement policy publication;
- action the service can do and the legal constraints within which the enforcement function works are not well publicised to the public;
- the planning service enforcement policy is new and is not impacting on service practice;
- formal enforcement action against offenders has been limited;
- enforcement is seen as mainly reactive by stakeholders and ineffective;
- the impact of the new corporate approach to enforcement has not yet impacted on the planning service; and
- service capacity has resulted in a current lack of dedicated enforcement resource in the planning service, although the Council has plans to address this.

Is the service delivering value for money?

79 Value for money is the efficient and economic use of resources to deliver effective services that deliver outcomes that address local and national priorities.

80 Services are providing sound value for money.

- The searches function is competitively priced - the cheapest service in Essex and costs decreasing over time for example by just under 50 per cent between 2003/04 and 2005/06. It has also been performing at the level of the best councils for the last five years.
- Building control operates at below average cost, has high rates of customer satisfaction and has achieved at least 97 per cent of market share over the last three years.
- Conservation advice has been outsourced through a service level agreement to Essex County Council in recognition of the very low numbers of listed building and conservation area applications received resulting in reduced costs.

24 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | How good is the service?

- Planning policy costs have reduced by 7 per cent between 2003/04 and 2005/06 whilst maintaining LDF progress.
- Development control costs are the lowest in the family group at £5.25 per head of population, performance against most indicators is above average or at the level of the best councils (with the exception of the speed in which major applications are determined). However, satisfaction rates are low (although data is reliant on the 2003 BVPI survey).

- 81** The planning service has had some success in leveraging in external money to help improve the service. For example £1 million from the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to regenerate and improve the relationship between the seafront and the rest of Canvey Island - a key priority for the council. In addition the Council is a participant in the partner authority scheme for building control which provides additional income and opportunity for building control officers to improve their skills base on projects they would not normally come into contact with.
- 82** There are examples of effective budget control of external monies. For example, Thames Gateway growth funds for the preparation of strategic flood risk assessment which had a maximum allowance of £100,000 and £91,382 were spent within the proposed timescale. This is an example of effective financial management.
- 83** Budget control mechanisms are robust. For example, budget holders have to produce signed monthly assurance statements; each budget holder has an assigned service accountant who gives ongoing training and assists with budget control; budgets are updated daily using an on-line system which is updated daily and budget holders are held to account at quarterly Scrutiny meetings. In addition building control and development control fees are monitored corporately as high risk volatile items. The service is able to track budgets and manage major areas of risk effectively.
- 84** The planning delivery grant (PDG), a government grant given to councils dependent on performance, is being used effectively, ensuring that the service doesn't depend on it. The Council has received £759,588 in PDG between 2003/04 and 2006/07. For example, none of the planning delivery grant is being used to provide staff. Rather it is being used to extend capacity through updating the research base for planning policy development and other corporate initiatives. Such as the 2006 Open Space Appraisal and the Council's Strategic Flood Risk Assessment work. The Council is extending capacity using PDG in an effective manner.
- 85** The planning service is extending its capacity in some areas through partnership working. For example, it is extending capacity using the resources of the Essex Wildlife Trust to improve the management of ancient woodland in the borough and has outsourced conservation and listed building advice.

- 86 The Council is using alternative forms of delivery to achieve better value for money but this is less developed in the planning service. For example, there is a five year information technology partnering scheme in place from 2005 to deliver all Council's ICT services. Although the planning service has outsourced conservation advice to Essex County Council, it does not routinely consider alternative ways of service delivery.
- 87 However, management of value for money at service level is not yet fully effective. Service led value for money targets are not in place. Efficiency or economy targets identified at service level are under-developed and are not fully costed across service elements in service plans. For example, referring to 'time saved' in some cases. In addition cost benefit analysis is not used routinely in consideration of investment decisions across the service.
- 88 The service has not implemented any measures to ensure the effectiveness of service delivery to the public. The planning service has not undertaken a business process re-engineering or other process to ensure that service elements are operating effectively and efficiently. For example, some staff are qualifying as planning officers and attending college courses one day a week which impacts on capacity.
- 89 The planning service is not routinely benchmarking against top performing authorities. Routine benchmarking is mostly limited to an Essex context, outside of the best value review conducted in 2004/05. The service is not yet managing value for money effectively.
- 90 The use of information technology to improve efficiency of service delivery for the public has not yet been maximised. A limited number of agents are submitting planning applications on-line and the full benefit of information technology systems such as the geographical information system are still being embedded. The full benefit of the service investment in improving the website and information technology for customers has not yet materialised.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 91 Planning service track record on delivering national and regional planning priorities is relatively strong. However, service contribution to the delivery of local priorities is inconsistent and the Council contribution to overall environmental sustainability is not well developed.

National and regional priorities

- 92 The service is on target to deliver the East of England targets. To achieve the 4,000 housing requirement to 2021, the Council requires an average of 200 dwellings per year to be completed. Completions between 2002/03 and 2004/05 were above this, averaging 209 dwellings per year. In 2004/05 there were 255 completions. The Council is on target to provide the number of dwellings it needs to meet projected overall need.
- 93 Track record on achieving the core government priority of sustainable development is strong. For example, the Council's record on re-using previously used sites for development - since 2003/04 at least 96 per cent of new homes have been built on previously developed land. This performance is among the best for similar councils. High densities of housing development have been consistently achieved. Housing is sustainably located in the town centres. The Council is achieving government expectations and reducing development pressure on the green belt.
- 94 The service has a track record of improving performance in relation to national performance indicators across most areas. These are outlined in Appendix 1. For example:
- standard searches have performed at the level of the best councils for the last five years. All search requests have been processed within government target timescales for the last three years;
 - the percentage of new homes built on previously developed land has increased from 67 per cent in 2002/03 to 100 per cent in 2004/05. Performance has matched that of the best performing councils over the past two years and remains at 100 per cent (unaudited) in 2005/06;

- performance on minor and other applications has recovered from a dip caused by planning staff leaving and the introduction of new information technology in 2003/04. Since then, the Council has boosted the service's staffing by two posts. In 2002/03, 63 per cent of minor applications were determined within eight weeks. This has improved to 74 per cent in 2004/05, and 87 per cent (unaudited) in 2005/06. Likewise, in 2002/03, 81 per cent of other applications were determined within eight weeks and this has improved to 84 per cent in 2004/05 and 95 per cent (unaudited) in 2005/06; and
 - performance against the quality of service checklist for planning (a new indicator in 2004/05) has improved from 72 per cent in 2004/05 to 94 per cent in 2005/06 (unaudited).
- 95** The service has been making good progress in relation to LDF milestones. For example, early submission and approval of the local development scheme and early priority of development plan documents which will assist regeneration objectives for the Thames Gateway. Work is underway on the Section 106 development plan document and Canvey Island Regeneration Plan and the core strategy and development control policies are out to consultation.
- 96** The service record on appeals has been good. Performance on appeals declined from 6 per cent of appeals allowed against the authority's decision to refuse planning applications in 2004/05 to 22.7 per cent in 2005/06. However, this still met the Council's target of 30 per cent or less (which matches the government expected standard).
- 97** Planning services and land charges are providing value for money. Net costs are low across all inspected services over the last few years. For example, the building control service is performing well against local indicators and has a good track record of securing market share. This is currently at 97 per cent, the highest performance in the county. Searches have been low cost and high performing over the last five years. Development control is one of the cheapest services in the country and relatively high performing with the exception of major applications which have failed to improve until recently.
- 98** However, the track record on customer satisfaction although good for building control and land searches is less positive for development control. The last national best value planning satisfaction survey in 2003/04 found that only 68 per cent of applicants were satisfied with the planning service, which was amongst the worst performers. The survey was carried out when the service was experiencing staff capacity and IT problems and this is reflected in the customer's views. The Council has not carried out an interim survey on development control but informal customer questionnaires placed on planning reception show that 96.5 per cent of visitors found staff to be polite and helpful and 93 per cent found staff to have treated them fairly and with respect.
- 99** The Council's track record on overall environmental sustainability is mixed. For example, council housing stock energy efficiency has improved and matches the performance of the best councils. Local estimates of carbon dioxide emissions put the Council as one of the best performing. However, there is no green travel plan in place and green procurement practices are not well developed.

28 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 100** Performance on major applications is declining despite action to improve performance. Performance has declined from 67 per cent of applications being determined within 13 weeks in 2002/03 to 54 per cent in 2004/05. 2005/06 unaudited figures indicate that this has further fallen to 44.4 per cent in 2005/06. This fails to meet the Council's own target of 65 per cent. However, this below average performance was caused by the introduction of new IT, the Council measuring the performance indicator incorrectly and a lack of staff capacity. Although initial problems have been put right, service actions are not yet improving the speed in which major applications are determined.

Local priorities

- 101** The service record on meeting the special needs of residents in housing provision is mixed. The Council has provided high levels of nursing home and sheltered accommodation to meet the growing needs of the elderly in the borough. Over the last three years these housing types represent a third of new housing approved. All flat development has to have ground floor accommodation adapted to be able to accommodate disabled people. However, progress on affordable housing has been slow. The Council has only created 29 affordable homes between 2001 and 2006 and none in 2004/05. The Council is addressing the needs of its elderly and disabled residents but is not yet meeting the needs of young people or people on lower incomes.
- 102** The Council's track record on quality of recreational facilities for children and young people is not strong but is being addressed. In a recent open space appraisal 25 per cent of sites were rated as below average, 66 per cent of play equipment was rated as poor or very poor and there was a lack of facilities for teenagers and young people. It also has a limited track record of planning contribution to community safety, for example in 'secure by design' and by taking the advice of the police in aspects of safety. The service has recognised the problem and is now starting to work to improve youth facilities in the borough with its partners. For example, it has provided the 'Legacy XS' indoor skateboard facility at Richmond Hall, Richmond Park and a skateboard park at Waterside Farm working closely with the community and the Council's youth forum. As a result, the services is involving young people in recreational provision and improving community cohesion.
- 103** There is a strong track record on biodiversity and raising awareness of nature. For example, condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest has improved from only 10 per cent in a favourable condition to 50 per cent while 25 per cent are recovering – Natural England 2006 survey. In addition, North Benfleet Hall Wood and West Wood have been placed under the management of Castle Point Wildlife Trust. As a result, damage caused to these ancient woodlands by users has been mitigated and populations of non-priority species such as slow worms have increased.

- 104** The Council has a recent track record of investing in customer service improvements. For example, there is now a corporate customer care charter known as the customer promise. E-enabled service delivery in the planning service has improved to top Pendleton score⁴ from a very low base, and can be accessed from the planning counter. There are also new counter facilities for the planning service in the council offices, which allow wheelchair access.
- 105** The planning service has learnt from its best value review. It has implemented most of the actions including setting a clear strategic direction for the service, developed an affordable housing policy, improved access due to extensive scanning of plans and use of a geographical information system.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 106** The service is self aware of its weaknesses and service improvement plans address what it needs to do to improve. However, plans are in varying stages of development and some improvements are needed to service performance management arrangements.
- 107** The service has a clear vision for its improvement planning although some plans are in varying stages of development. The themes for improvement are contained in the LDF core strategy and include transport infrastructure - which is fundamental to economic development; deprivation and inequity; flood risk; skills gaps and town centre regeneration. The planning service has developed action to better meet corporate priorities and to improve outcomes for users. These plans also address recognised weaknesses such as playground provision, regeneration of Canvey, affordable housing and the lack of town centre focus. Plans include:
- action to improve the Thames seafront aimed at attracting day visitors and to establish better medical facilities on Canvey Island, which will bring medical care closer to Canvey residents; and to improve town centres starting with Canvey and Hadleigh. Plans for Canvey are also aimed at making it a model of environmental sustainability, and attracting green businesses;
 - providing more one and two bed homes in line with identified housing need; affordable housing supplementary planning guidance to provide a framework to improve affordable housing levels in the borough; the Canvey Masterplan and Hadleigh town centre plan including the redevelopment of the fire station area which is underway. There is also a rolling programme of updating and refocusing older industrial estates such as Northwick, Manor Trading Estate and Charfleets;
 - Community Safety - Castle Point is a low crime area but fear of crime is a significant issue. The Playground strategy includes refocusing play facilities on need and improving them, including facilities for young people up to the age of 18, such as community shelters, aimed at diverting teenagers from street corners. The recent development of the LDF also provides for greater clarity of focus on community safety outcomes;

⁴ A government sponsored survey of planning websites where a score is given based on user friendly criteria

30 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- a corporate working group is currently developing the Council's new approach to S106 agreements and the associated development plan document but work is in early stages and it is too early to see the impact;
- the Council has approved a plan to improve the speed in which major applications are determined, however, government returns show that performance in September 2006 although improved from 2005/06 results still remains at below government expected levels of 60 per cent. Latest published performance tables show service performance of only 50 per cent in 13 weeks;
- the Council's operational management group is developing corporate enforcement activities in line with the enforcement concordat and is planned to link with the new enforcement officer in planning but has yet to make an impact; and
- IT development including customer relationship management software will be introduced in planning to improve customer service in May 2007. In advance of this, the Council is carrying out business process reengineering in planning in March 2007 with the Planning Advisory Service.

- 108** The Council has a clear framework in place for strategic development for the Thames Gateway. However, the Thames Gateway South Essex Group did not have a clear structure or mechanisms for delivery until recently. Partners consider that the Council has responded very well and has developed a long term vision on the basis of public engagement, with funding in place for many of the schemes. The Council's leader is a director on the board of the Thames Gateway, and so there is strong leadership on this initiative within the Council. This creates more certainty on delivering Thames Gateway objectives, such as establishing an environmentally sustainable employment site on Canvey.
- 109** The Council is working effectively with partners to deliver its plans and put infrastructure in place. For example, planning contributions have secured a new link road for Charfleets Industrial estate on Canvey Island which will improve access to the island. The Canvey Island Steering Group has supported the work of the Transport Board and welcomes the infrastructure proposals for better public transport through the South Essex Rapid Transit (SERT) and improved access to the island by a third access from Manor Way. This means better access to jobs and better links with the rest of Essex and Thames Gateway areas.
- 110** The Council is basing its plans on what the public want and their priorities. There is a consistent vision for regeneration which is based on public engagement. For example, the consultants who developed the vision for Canvey funded by EEDA based this and are basing the sustainable regeneration strategy for Canvey on a series of workshops held with representatives of the public, churches and businesses on the Island - the 'Island Team' approach. The Council is also engaging with the public on implementing the playground strategy. This is more likely to lead to a result which is appropriate for the area and which suits local people.

- 111** Corporate support is in place to ensure that improvement plans stay on track and this resource is starting to influence the planning service. The Council has recruited an improvement manager whose work plan will help the planning service, and who has recently piloted an approach to value for money (VFM) within the service. His work programme includes extending the approach to VFM to other services; setting up a process to review VFM and monitor Gershon savings; developing procurement and partnerships and improving performance management; including developing local performance indicators and reviewing performance reporting including the role of overview and scrutiny.
- 112** The Council actively seeks to learn from the best practitioners on some new projects and learning is shared and transferred within the Council. The planning service looked at what was working well in councils such as Great Yarmouth and Rother, before choosing a workflow system, and now it is working with the Planning Advisory Service and Colchester Borough Council to improve benefits from S106 agreements. The Council has a cross service group, the 'operational management group' which spearheads developmental work within the Council, for example on risk management, enforcement and customer care. This has enabled the Council and the planning service to establish a consistent approach to risk management quickly.
- 113** Mechanisms exist to allow staff to input effectively into planning improvements. For example, in planning, the service implemented flexible working as a result of a staff suggestion. Corporately, as a result of briefing sessions by the chief executive and staff surveys, the Council has formulated an action plan which includes introducing a programme of mandatory management training for all middle managers and holding peer reviews in areas known to have dissatisfaction issues, in order to understand the reasons and act on findings.
- 114** Performance management arrangements in the planning services support the Council's plans and enable them to be monitored. For example, the Council has a clear performance management framework which cascades aims and objectives from the community strategy using the same themes as the Local Area Agreement, to service plans and individual appraisals. It has also improved performance monitoring with 'Covalent' a computerised performance recording system. It has recently delivered appropriate training on this, along with training on target setting as part of the launch of the performance management framework - 'Cutting the Mustard'. The recovery committee, planning committee and executive management team now all receive quarterly reports on key BVPIs and key departmental improvement actions. This results in action plans to address shortfalls in the services inspected such as on the planning quality checklist.

32 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 115 However, performance management corporately is still embedding. Some practices are improving such as risk management and long term focus to service planning but there are still some weaknesses to be addressed. For example, at service level:
- the planning service is not measuring equity of service delivery across the community;
 - the planning service does not routinely benchmark their costs and other performance indicators with other councils, although this is done in building control;
 - monitoring service achievement against Council priorities through local performance indicators and service standards across the service is underdeveloped; and
 - monitoring, handling and learning from service comments and complaints is underdeveloped - this is recognised by the service.
- 116 Improvement actions are incorporated into the corporate plan and service plans but only relatively recently. Medium and long term aims and targets have only been included from the 2006-2010 round of service plans. The Council has improved its risk management and aims to reflect this in the next round of service planning. Appraisal arrangements have been reviewed and the system has been relaunched, with clearer objective setting and identification of training needs. The appraisal system is working well in planning. This ensures that staff skills are enhanced, and that corporate planning objectives are cascaded down to individual tasks.
- 117 Not all plans are fully detailed and project planned as they are in different stages of development, and they are not held together by a programme management approach. For example, plans for the Thames Gateway are moving forward. However, some of the plans for development of industrial estates and various projects on Canvey are in the early stages, although outline plans and funding are in place.
- 118 Councillor leadership of the planning service is not fully effective as some national priority considerations are not adequately regarded. For example, some councillors felt that the percentage of planning decisions delegated to officers was too high, and wanted to be more involved in the detail of decision making. Some councillors felt it appropriate to voice publicly their concerns criticising officers for this approach. The Council is at risk of allowing its focus to be diluted until the acceptance of national priorities is clearly demonstrated and communicated by the councillors leading the planning service.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 119 The Council has recently improved capacity at the strategic and operational levels, but it is too early for these measures to have had an impact. It has not analysed processes or carried out workforce planning for its future skills requirements with other South Essex Gateway authorities.

- 120** The planning service does not currently have a strong base of management of change skills. For example, project management and process analysis skills are underdeveloped although this is being addressed corporately. The Council has not carried out business process re-engineering in development control and because of this it cannot demonstrate that the processes are efficient and streamlined or that capacity is right for the workload or future workloads.
- 121** The capacity of the administration function in planning is not always used effectively. Work done by administration is not managed or prioritised and there are problems of cover in cases of absence. This means administrative staff can be deflected from key tasks such as registering planning and building control applications to do other things.
- 122** Some capacity issues have yet to be addressed or are not far enough advanced to gauge the benefits. Planning training for members has not been mandatory up till now. The Council made planning training mandatory for planning committee members in July 2006 but it remains to be implemented later this year and so the impact of this initiative on effectiveness is not known.
- 123** However, the Council has recruited appropriate new managers and staff to address weaknesses in the service and improve capacity to improve.
- It has boosted strategic capacity by successfully recruiting a planning and open space manager who also has housing experience and will promote the affordable housing agenda.
 - It has recruited an experienced economic development officer, and is recruiting two further policy officers to support action on employment and regeneration.
 - It is investing in enforcement. It previously had a dedicated officer in development control but this post fell vacant. It has now re-introduced the post. As a result, the service is able to formalise its approach to enforcement, enforce more actively and embed the corporate policy.
- 124** The Council has also increased operational capacity.
- Staffing has increased compared with two years ago, and this is reflected in better performance for example in improving the speed in which 'minor' and 'other' applications are determined.
 - The service has also reorganised to provide a full complement of planning policy staff which was previously a risk for the LDF preparation.
 - The Council has adopted a 'grow your own' policy due to a national shortage of planners. Staff are from a variety of environmentally related backgrounds and disciplines which adds to the skills base, for example in development of databases, urban design and environmental sustainability.
 - The Council has a system of awarding increments for successful Royal Town Planning Institute examination success at different stages of qualification which has proved successful in retaining staff. The Council has also introduced flexible working. Consequently staff now have incentives to stay at Castle Point.

34 Environment Inspection - Planning Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 125** Senior officers and councillors have demonstrated that they think the planning service is important through maintaining investment in the service. There is no additional draw on the PDG which remains ring fenced and the service received an increase in budget to provide additional staff resources to ensure service priorities will be achieved. The budget for the service in 2006/07 increased by 23.4 per cent to £939,700 from 2005/06 levels.
- 126** Clear guidance exists on partnerships and on procurement which it has developed with external input from its auditors and is implemented by the service which is being appropriately applied in procurement decisions by the service. For example, the service applies the Council's procurement strategy to competition for consultants conducting research and feasibility studies in the areas of economic, regeneration and planning.
- 127** Partners we spoke to thought Castle Point a good partner and keen to improve. The Council's approach to regeneration was well valued by stakeholders and considered innovative for example, in its approach to Canvey Island which is seen as an exemplar.
- 128** Workforce planning is in the early stages of developing strategically across the South Essex Thames Gateway. The plan is in draft and delivery mechanisms are not yet fully in place. The balance of type of work in the service may change in the medium to long term, with a higher requirement for experience in dealing with more complicated planning applications. This helps ensure that the Council has appropriate skills and capacity to deliver wider objectives.
- 129** The Council listens to staff and acts on what they say. For example, in Planning, the service implemented flexible working as a result of a staff suggestion. Corporately, as a result of briefing sessions by the chief executive and staff surveys, the Council has formulated an action plan which includes introducing a programme of mandatory management training for all middle managers and holding peer reviews in areas known to have dissatisfaction issues, in order to understand the reasons and act on findings.
- 130** External resources are being used effectively to extend capacity.
- The Council has recognised weaknesses in councillor training and is now a joint member development programme with IDeA, and Basildon and Rochford District Councils. This has included ethical training and work on scrutiny and challenge, and won an award on the East of England Regional Assembly Innovations Day.
 - Capacity building funding is scheduled to develop work on procurement, action learning for councillors and mentoring for the leader and chief executive.
 - The Council also shares the costs of an audit manager with Southend Council.
 - The Planning Advisory Service is being engaged to help the service monitor and operate S106 agreements.

- Using consultants to extend capacity, for example, on the study of Open Space.
 - The service has been successful in gaining external funding to deliver its regeneration and economic regeneration work, for example, £1 million from the Thames Gateway/ East of England Development Agency for improvements to Canvey seafront - a key local priority.
- 131** The Council's own investment in the planning service has led to improved areas of service delivery. For example, IT investment has significantly improved the electronic capability of the planning service. The service has a medium term service level agreement to deliver expert conservation advice with Essex County Council which has resulted in the publication of the Council's conservation area appraisals to provide a framework to focus improvement and access to appropriate professional advice. The service has used planning delivery grant constructively without depending on it for the future, using it as development funding for research and policy rather than to fund full time staff. This lessens the financial impact on the service in 2008 when planning delivery grant is no longer awarded.
- 132** The planning services have a low sickness record over time. Currently, the planning service, building control and land searches have sickness absence levels well below the council average at just over three days per employee per year. The Council has a managing absence procedure and managers have had support and training in applying this. Staff now inform the Council about their sickness absence through a private medical contact centre, which gives them the opportunity of speaking directly to a nurse to gain advice about their illness. Sickness absence levels corporately have fallen from 13.5 days per employee at the end of 2005/06 to just over nine days corporately in September 2006.

Appendix 1 – PIs/Performance

- 1 The following table provides an overview of BVPI performance in the area of planning.

| Indicator | Result 2002/03 | Quartile 2002/03 | Result 2003/04 | Quartile 2003/04 | Result 2004/05 | Quartile 2004/05 | Result 2005/06** |
|---|-------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|
| BV 109a percentage of major applications determined within 13 weeks | 67% | Best | 36% | Worst | 54% | 3rd | 44% |
| BV 109b percentage of minor applications determined within eight weeks | 63% | Best | 48% | Worst | 74% | 2nd | 87% |
| BV 109c percentage of other applications determined within eight weeks | 81% | Best | 57% | Worst | 84% | 2nd | 93% |
| BV 111 percentage of applicants satisfied with the service received | 81%* (2000/01) | Not Comp | 68% | Worst | next survey 2006/07 | | |
| BV 179 percentage of standard searches done in ten working days | 100% | Best | 100% | Best | 100% | Best | 100% |
| BV 106 percentage of new homes built on previously developed land | 67% | 3rd | 97% | Best | 100% | Best | 100% |
| BV 204 percentage of appeals allowed against the authority's decision to refuse planning applications | new indicator | | | | 6% | Best | 23% |
| BV 205 Quality of service checklist for planning | new indicator | | | | 72% | 3rd | 94% |
| Percentage of Brownfield land that is derelict (NLUD) | n/a | | | | 1 (2004) | Best | 1 |

* *Qualified*

***Source for 2005/06 data is the 2006/10 Corporate Plan and maybe subject to change*