

Corporate Assessment Report

November 2006



Corporate Assessment

Buckinghamshire County Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

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

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

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

Executive summary

- 5 Overall the Council is performing strongly, well above minimum requirements. Buckinghamshire County Council, with its partners, has a clear and challenging long term vision to create sustainable communities. Key challenges facing Buckinghamshire in achieving this vision are developing community cohesion, responding to the planned housing growth in the north of the county and the impact of climatic and demographic changes. This vision is based on a good understanding of the national and regional context and is informed by extensive and ongoing engagement with local people.
- 6 Rising to this challenge - while operating within strict financial constraints - the Council has invested heavily in organisational development to improve its capacity to deliver its ambitions as well as other national and regional agendas. It has significantly improved its performance management arrangements, political and managerial capacity and is investing strongly in partnerships to support shared delivery of its ambitions for the area. Success is demonstrated by strong performance against national performance indicators, relatively high (and improving) levels of residents' satisfaction with the Council, significant improvement in social care and overall improvement from 'good' to 'excellent' ranking by the Audit Commission in 2005.
- 7 The Council provides strong leadership in both shaping the vision through the Buckinghamshire Strategic Partnership (BSP) and delivery through the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The Corporate Plan translates this vision into clear priorities and ambitious targets. Partners are involved in setting targets within the LAA, ensuring they are both challenging and realistic. At the same time the Council is focusing service delivery more closely on community needs in an area based approach through the Getting Closer to Communities (GC2C) initiative. Overall, this sets an ambitious framework for action to balance the social, economic and environmental needs of the area in a structured and pragmatic way.
- 8 The Council effectively engages with most local people and partners to ensure that it is meeting the diverse needs of the whole community. A key strength is that this engagement is ongoing which contributes to a good shared understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve. Despite this, the Council has been slow to implement a strategic approach to diversity, which is limiting its effectiveness in some areas. However, the Council is already aware of this and is investing corporately to ensure its approach to diversity is consistent and integrated.
- 9 The Council is clear and explicit about the challenges it faces in delivering its ambitions for the area. Priorities are robust and consistent with the overall vision. The Council is able and willing to make difficult decisions to achieve a balance between the need to meet community needs, resource constraints and the commitment to provide effective and efficient services. Effective leadership - both internally and throughout the county - means that partners understand and generally support what the Council is trying to achieve and priorities are clearly understood by councillors, managers and staff.

- 10 The Council delivers services that provide value for money. While delivering high quality services, it has kept council tax rises at or below the regional average and worked within tighter budget settlements by focusing resources on priorities and identifying efficiency savings. A corporate approach to achieving value for money is supported by strong medium term financial planning. Close monitoring allows early intervention and action to be taken on predicted budgetary pressures. Financial standing and management are good. A strategic approach to commissioning services and procurement is being developed - to enhance the Council's ability to make efficiency savings and provide value for money - but is not yet embedded.
- 11 There is sufficient capacity to deliver priorities and the Council is developing a robust approach to organisational development and workforce planning which is improving the recruitment and retention of staff. This is enhanced by good strategic staff management, supported by employee development and training to ensure that staff are focused and committed to providing customer focused services. Corporate governance is sound and there is strong political leadership and councillor development. Political decision-making is transparent. The political structure is effective in engaging councillors and ensuring that there is strong challenge through scrutiny.
- 12 Strong and highly effective partnership working in most areas is increasing capacity and providing services that are focused on user needs. Significant outcomes have been achieved with effective strategic and operational partnership working across most sectors. A strategic approach to managing partnerships is in place, supported by a partnership strategy which is allowing the Council to focus its resources in this area. However, there are uncertainties associated with partnerships in some areas including those with health organisations and with building capacity with some voluntary sector partners, which is limiting effectiveness in these areas.
- 13 There is a strong performance culture. Building on this, the Council is creating a joint approach with partners which is most developed in the monitoring and performance management arrangements for the LAA. The Council is also consistently strong at managing individual and team performance which is acknowledged as being effective by councillors, managers and staff. These arrangements support improvement and enable the Council to maintain high standards of service delivery.
- 14 The Council, with its partners, can demonstrate consistent and significant achievement across shared priorities. Together they have made good progress against social, economic and environmental agendas - though progress against some aspects of the health agenda has been slow. There is a coherent corporate approach to achieving sustainable communities and improving community cohesion that responds to the planned growth agenda and the diverse nature of the population. These achievements demonstrate a proactive approach and a willingness to work in partnership to achieve real community outcomes.

Areas for improvement

- 15 The Council needs to improve in three areas:
 - its strategic approach to diversity;
 - develop a more consistent and effective approach to partnership working, in particular with health organisations and the voluntary sector; and
 - embed a strategic approach to procurement.
- 16 The Council's approach to diversity is effective but a strategic approach needs to be embedded. The Council recognises that its ability to work consistently across the organisation and in partnership would be improved if it had a corporate resource to focus its activities. Recent issues relating to Aylesbury and High Wycombe have focused attention on community cohesion and the Council has incorporated its approach to diversity within the Community Cohesion and Equalities Strategy. Internally, there is an equalities steering group and investment has been made to add capacity through recruitment to new equalities posts. However, these initiatives are at an early stage. The Council should continue to develop a corporate approach to ensure all its activities are consistent and integrated.
- 17 While partnership working with the NHS is effective in some areas, initial progress has been slow on some targets contained in the LAA and there are uncertainties and budget pressures affecting the provision of social and nursing care. Many of the factors affecting partnership working in this area are externally driven through NHS budgetary pressures and reorganisation. However, the Council's strategic approach is less developed than those within other shared priority areas. A new joint director of public health post is being recruited, but the Council should build on this and ensure a more strategic approach to developing healthier communities.
- 18 The Council is aware that it needs to help build capacity within the voluntary sector to ensure enhanced delivery of services to minority and vulnerable sectors of the community. The Council needs to build on strong relationships and jointly plan with the voluntary sector on better use of resources.
- 19 The Council is effective in ensuring value for money. However, it recognises that further efficiency savings are possible through better commissioning of services and procurement. A revised strategy is being developed and has yet to be implemented. As a result the Council is missing opportunities to make further savings; it needs to ensure this new approach is consistently applied across the organisation.

Summary of assessment scores

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

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

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

Context

The locality

- 20 Buckinghamshire is located in the south east of England, stretching northwards from the Thames Valley across the Chilterns to Northamptonshire. It is a county of contrasts; the north is predominantly rural, with small market towns, while the south is more urban. More than a quarter of the county is within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a further third is protected as Green Belt. Within rural areas, agriculture is the predominant land use. Population density is comparatively low - below both the national and regional averages.
- 21 Buckinghamshire has a population of 479,000 people, the majority of whom live in the three main towns of High Wycombe, Aylesbury and Buckingham. The population is ethnically diverse, with 12 per cent of the population coming from ethnic communities other than white British, with particular concentrations in Aylesbury and High Wycombe. Non-British white residents account for more than three per cent of the population and Asian/Asian British and Pakistani make up 4 per cent.
- 22 The age structure of the county is similar to the national and regional averages; 21 per cent of residents are under 16 years, 64 per cent are of working age and 15.2 per cent are over 65 years. However, the proportion of people aged over 50 is projected to increase to 38 per cent by 2011 and 41 per cent by 2016. Life expectancy is above the national average, placing the county in top quartiles nationally for both male and females.
- 23 Buckinghamshire is a relatively affluent county. Average household incomes are 34 per cent higher than the UK average. The county ranks 144th out of 150 in terms of the government indices of deprivation (where 1 is the most and 150 the least deprived). It has a generally thriving economy, with low unemployment and high levels of car ownership. Its workforce is highly skilled (with a quarter of employees educated to degree level), and an above average proportion of managerial posts. Educationally the county excels, with significantly higher than average pass rates at GCSE level. Residents benefit from a higher level of community safety, but recorded crime in some areas is above the national average. However there are small pockets of severe deprivation. One per cent of people live in areas that are among the most disadvantaged in the country, creating stark contrasts within some communities.
- 24 The county has good transport links, particularly to London. The M4, M40 and M25 motorways pass through the county, as do main rail lines. Both Heathrow and Luton airports are close to the county boundaries and the London Underground system extends into the south of the county.

- 25 Part of the county is included within the Milton Keynes and South Midlands sub-regional growth area. This is expected to result in housing growth of over 3,500 dwellings each year until 2026. Much of this growth will be concentrated around Aylesbury, almost doubling the size of the town. To oversee and manage this growth, key partners (including the county council) have formed a delivery vehicle - Aylesbury Vale Advantage. Delivering growth and providing appropriate infrastructure while protecting the environment and sustaining a high quality of life are key challenges facing the Council.

The Council

- 26 The Council has a long standing Conservative administration, which currently holds 44 of the 57 seats. There are 11 Liberal Democrats and two Labour councillors. Political direction is provided by a Cabinet of nine councillors. The Leader, Deputy Leader and seven Portfolio holders share responsibility for the Council's work. There are four Overview and Scrutiny Committees covering adult services, children's services, community and environment services and public health. There is also a range of non-executive and regulatory committees, for example covering development control, standards, rights of way and appeals and complaints.
- 27 The Council employs 14,000 staff, making it the largest employer in the county. Staff leadership is provided by the Chief Executive, supported by seven Corporate/Strategic Directors while responsibility for service delivery is delegated to Heads of Service.
- 28 The Council plans to spend (gross) £647 million on services in 2006/07, with a capital programme of £45.6 million and anticipates efficiency savings of £5.6 million.
- 29 The Council was first assessed under the Audit Commission's corporate performance assessment process in 2002 when it was rated as 'good'. It subsequently improved its performance to meet the top performing 'four-star' (excellent) rating in December 2005.

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

Ambition

- 30 The Council is performing strongly in this area, well above minimum requirements. The Council is ambitious for the area and demonstrates strong leadership in realising this through a well developed planning and delivery framework. With partners, it has developed a clear and challenging strategic vision for the future, based on strong and ongoing engagement with local communities, including many 'hard to reach' groups and those at risk of being disadvantaged. As a result the Council has a clear understanding of the underlying needs of the area and its role in meeting them.
- 31 The Community Strategy sets out a challenging agenda for partners to work together to achieve sustainable communities in Buckinghamshire. Its ten year vision states that *'in 2015, Buckinghamshire will have maintained its economic success and its position as one of the most prosperous counties in England. At the same time it has enhanced its environment and improved the well-being and quality of life of all its residents'*. The strategy is structured around a number of themes and priorities for action that reflect the views and needs of local communities, set in the context of the future planned growth of the county and region and national agendas. This sets a clear framework for action to meet the social, economic and environmental needs of the county within a regional, national and wider context.
- 32 The achievement of this vision is supported by highly effective partnership working and a pragmatic approach to delivery. An information sharing protocol with districts and other partners reduces duplication and helps to align local strategies. Following the success of its first Local Public Sector Agreement (LPSA 1) in delivering the 2001 community strategy, the Council is providing strong leadership to a second Local Area Agreement (LAA) and LPSA2. Responsibilities for delivering the 61 targets in the four key blocks - children and young people, economic development and enterprise, healthier communities and older people and safer and stronger communities - are clearly defined and effective monitoring arrangements are in place. This agreement has the potential to secure government funding of up to £12 million by 2008. This provides a good basis for developing a shared understanding, pooling resources and a collective focus on meeting local needs.

- 33** The Council has translated the ten year strategy for Buckinghamshire into its own plans and strategies. The Corporate Plan establishes a five-year vision that also reflects national shared priorities. This sets out what the Council intends to do, the resources needed for delivery and how success will be measured. Key strategies such as the Local Transport Plan and Young People Plan are aligned with the corporate and community strategies, and identify cross cutting actions for example in how they contribute to sustainable development and community cohesion. This supports effective delivery.
- 34** Extensive consultation and engagement with most local people means that ambitions are based on local need. In addition to a questionnaire survey of all households, more targeted consultation included roadshows and workshops for older and young people, rural communities and targeted approaches to vulnerable and black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. This consultation is ongoing through various forums with the community and partners. This level of engagement and the clarity of presentation of the Corporate Plan contribute to good shared understanding among partners and stakeholders of what the Council is trying to achieve and their role in delivery. This is a key strength of the Council's approach.
- 35** The Council is ambitious for itself as well as the local community it serves. It aims to be an excellent council, supported by innovative business practices, and cost-effective delivery. All of its stated aims require effective cross-cutting action, both across the Council and with partners. There are challenging aims to tackle disadvantage, achieve social cohesion, and promote sustainable communities in the context of the planned growth of the county. Aims have to be delivered within the budgetary constraints imposed by the corporate drive to secure annual efficiency savings and set council tax increases lower than the regional average. This is a key challenge for the Council and its partners but does ensure that its ambitions are challenging, but realistic.
- 36** The Council is providing wider community leadership in its response to the planned growth that could result in doubling the size of Aylesbury over the next 20 years and further expansion of Milton Keynes. Despite local opposition and concerns over the environmental impact of such growth, the Council has successfully championed the interests of Buckinghamshire to ensure that the county benefits from the planned regional growth in the South East and is able to influence key decisions about its future. The Council is actively shaping the future of the area.

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- 37 At the local level, the Council's ambition is expressed in the Getting Closer to Communities (GC2C) initiative. This is transforming the way the Council aligns and delivers local services in partnership with other agencies. Following a successful pilot in five community areas, the Council is now rolling out the remaining 19 areas ahead of schedule, mapping needs and developing local profiles, with input from partners, voluntary agencies and all tiers of local government. However, further work is required to fully engage some district councils at an operational level. GC2C is creating new community networks, aligning services with neighbourhood policing and health partners, and creating an enhanced community leadership role for councillors. This is supporting a more joined-up and sustainable approach to local involvement and enabling a more tailored approach to voluntary sector engagement - an area which requires further development to ensure consultation is more targeted and help utilise limited capacity more effectively.

Prioritisation

- 38 The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements. It has established priorities that reflect local needs, support the Council's ambitions and respond to regional and national agendas. A robust delivery framework is in place to ensure that resources are allocated to priority areas. As a result the Council knows what matters most to local people and concentrates its efforts accordingly.
- 39 The Council's Corporate Plan (2005-2009) sets out seven clear aims, supported by prioritised objectives and outcome-based measurements. These priorities were established through effective community engagement and a good understanding of regional and national agendas and shared priorities. Priorities are annually reviewed to reflect changing community needs. The priorities outlined in the current Corporate Plan are:
- 'involve, represent and serve all who live or work in Buckinghamshire;
 - provide efficient and effective services;
 - give children and young people the best possible life chances;
 - improve the quality of life for adults;
 - provide support to help families cope with their responsibilities;
 - build with you safer, stronger and healthier communities; and
 - maintain a vibrant economy whilst protecting the environment.'

This sets a clear agenda for action.

- 40 The Council is engaging effectively with most sectors of the community to ensure that it meets the diverse needs of the different communities in Buckinghamshire. Examples include targeted engagement with the Asian community in High Wycombe and Aylesbury on the provision of adult social care and with rural communities on the provision of better access to services to support and maintain sustainable communities. A strong example is the Castlefield library in High Wycombe where services have successfully focused on meeting the needs of the local Asian community. Through the Buckinghamshire Strategic Partnership (BSP) the Council has led a series of conferences on a variety of topics including affordable housing, community cohesion and supporting independent living for older people. It is clear how consultation has informed key plans and strategies, such as the Local Transport Plan or contributed to more challenging targets in areas such as recycling. The Council is good at providing feedback on consultation to inform stakeholders about what has changed as a result of canvassing their views. As a result the Council is able to take account of the needs of all sectors of the community in the design and delivery of services.
- 41 A relative weakness is that a strategic approach to diversity is not in place. As stated above, a number of initiatives are supporting effective partnership working and the delivery of services to diverse sections of the community. However, the Council recognises that it needs to build a more integrated approach to share learning and understanding of diversity issues across the Council. Some strategies do not specifically address diversity issues, for example the high proportion of young people from ethnic minorities are not targeted in the Young People's Plan. To improve its practice in this area, the Council has recently developed a Community Cohesion and Equalities Strategy and invested £150,000 to recruit a corporate community cohesion and equalities officer and a project manager. A more integrated approach to diversity across the Council will help it tailor services more closely to individual needs.
- 42 Partners and other stakeholders are actively engaged in setting realistic but challenging targets. Partners were consulted and actively contributed to target setting for both the LAA and LPSA2. Stakeholders have also contributed to other strategies and plans to develop realistic, outcome based targets, for example to reduce health inequalities, improve recycling and public transport to rural communities. Staff are also engaged in target setting at a team and service level, ensuring realistic targets are set based on the knowledge and experience of those delivering services. This contributes to a shared ownership of what the Council is trying to achieve. However more needs to be done to develop an effective strategic approach to health partnerships which is currently limiting effectiveness in this area.

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- 43** Priorities are clearly understood within the Council and by its partners. Councillors, senior management and staff have a clear understanding of Corporate Plan priorities and their role in delivery. Priorities clearly reflect national agendas and the local context and are based on a good understanding of needs, for example, improving the quality of life and independence for adults in response to the increasing proportion of older people locally. This is supported by a series of initiatives to ensure properties are maintained, older people are safe and well supported and there is integration into the community. Priorities are also clearly placed within the growth agenda and overall aim of achieving sustainable communities, for example by ensuring that sustainable transport and other infrastructure is in place to support the local economy and social cohesion. A strong focus on efficiency has helped the Council to identify non-priority areas, such as libraries and the need to change the focus of some services in line with community needs; for example, re-focusing the public protection service to one of community safety. As a consequence priorities clearly influence and are supported by the actions of the Council and its partners.
- 44** The Council is using its financial, planning and performance management frameworks to maintain a strong focus on delivery of its priorities. The key priority of 'providing effective and efficient services' sets the context for delivery and is supporting strong performance. Nearly half of all best value performance indicators (BVPIs) are in the top performing quartile compared with other councils. At the same time, the Council has kept increases in council tax at or below the average for the region and is working within tight budgetary constraints. It has achieved this through the medium term financial plan (MTFP) which identifies priority and non-priority areas, a sound planning framework that links corporate priorities to service targets and a highly effective performance management culture. Key strategies such as the Local Transport Plan show explicit links to cross-cutting and wider agendas, such as social inclusion, safer, stronger and healthier communities, ensuring a joined up and integrated approach to delivering outcomes that meet the aspirations of the community. The Council is able to direct its actions effectively to support priorities.
- 45** Council resources are targeted - together with those of partners - at priority areas, for example using council tax revenue from second homes to fund Police Community Support Officers. Where necessary, the Council takes difficult decisions to ensure that priorities are delivered. An example is within Adult Social Care where there is a targeted approach to the provision of older people's services to those most in need. As a result the Council has been able to allocate scarce resources to areas of greatest need where they will have greatest effect.

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

Capacity

- 46 The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements. There is strong corporate governance, effective financial management and staff and councillor capacity is good, enhanced by a strategic approach to organisational development. Risk management and ICT are supporting the delivery of customer focused services. Partnership working is generally strong, although reorganisation within the health sector is currently limiting service delivery in some areas. The Council has yet to embed a strategic approach to procurement.
- 47 Councillors and officers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. This is enhanced by good and effective working relationships. Portfolio holders provide strong leadership on cross-cutting areas, including diversity. This enables councillors to take responsibility for strategic and policy decisions, allowing officers to manage operational issues.
- 48 The Council has transparent and effective decision-making processes. Lead (Cabinet) councillors are accountable for the delivery of service and cross-cutting targets. Overview and scrutiny committees are used to challenge performance through regular monitoring, including effective use of call-ins on several cabinet decisions. They also use scrutiny to improve understanding and develop policy, for example by commissioning a report into the low level of complaints from the Asian community and reviewing the impact of local health organisations. Policy Advisory Groups (PAGs) also allow backbenchers to get involved in policy making decisions. There are sound arrangements for ethical governance with an active standards committee. Awareness is raised through quarterly newsletters and an effective twice annual quiz for councillors on standards issues. Councillor skills are developed through induction, specific targeted training and the implementation of personal development plans. This is building on the already strong capacity of councillors to play an active part in the decision making process.
- 49 The Council has a very strong focus on financial management and its financial control is good. Councillors, managers and staff give high priority to balancing budgets and achieving value for money. The Council is aware of its relative costs and performance. The value for money strategy and activity-based budgeting focuses managers' attention on delivering VFM in their services. Costs are low, complemented by good performance in Education, Environmental Services and Transportation. In Social Services costs are commensurate with improving performance. The Council ensures that its resources are used cost effectively.

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- 50** The Council's financial strategy is robust and underpinned by effective management and control, both strategically and by service managers. The medium-term financial planning process ensures resources are linked to priorities and that the Council is aware of future funding shortfalls. Effective monitoring ensures that resources are shifted to priorities and areas of underperformance. The Council has increased funding to schools social services and waste to meet future challenges. No significant departmental overspends have occurred in recent years and the Council has delivered its planned efficiency savings. The Council is managing its risk through a strategic approach and through service risk registers which identify key operational and generic risks. Risks associated with the need for future savings are identified in a corporate risk register. This helps the Council stay on track and within budget.
- 51** Management capacity is well developed. Delegation of operational issues to heads of services allows directors to focus on strategic decision making, policy development and cross-cutting agendas. Innovative business practices, such as the 'top 100 managers' meetings allow key managers to actively contribute to policy decisions and the strategic development of the organisation. There is good two-way communication with staff via newsletters and regular staff briefings, which are evaluated to ensure they are effective. Recent staff surveys indicate significantly improved staff confidence in the leadership and management capacity of the Council. This enhances the Council's capacity to deliver what it wants for local people.
- 52** Organisational and staff capacity are supported by effective workforce planning and an innovative approach to recruitment and retention. Targeted advertising, promotes the Council as an employer of choice and recruitment from abroad is filling staff capacity gaps. Flexible working policies, localised pay scales and low sickness levels contribute to low rates of staff turnover in most services. Employee relations are harmonious and the Council has appointed employee representatives to improve staff consultation. There is more to be done to ensure that the workforce matches the profile of the diverse local population and that the Council improves its performance against the local government Equality Standard from its current Level 1. But overall, the committed, able and motivated workforce is achieving high levels of service delivery.
- 53** The Council makes good use of IT, particularly to improve customer access to services. This is guided by a strategic approach, delivered through the ICT strategy. Key elements are the customer contact centre and interactive websites, for example, 'Highways on Call' which allows more than 80 per cent of customer queries to be dealt with at first point of contact. IT systems are used effectively to support performance management information and have contributed to significant improvement in this area. Access to IT is improving for all sectors of the community, including older people, supported by specific IT courses. This helps users access services remotely, without the need to travel.

- 54 Strong and well developed partnership working adds to capacity and is central to delivery of the Council's aims across all sectors. Of the many examples, one notable achievement is the recent partnership working with a number of local agencies to defuse potential racial tensions in Aylesbury and High Wycombe, in relation to terrorist issues. The Council is developing a strategic approach to partnerships through the introduction of a partnership strategy to better focus its resources in this area. This demonstrates commitment to build stronger and more effective arrangements that are responsive to local needs.
- 55 However, capacity limitations are affecting performance in some areas. While partnership working with the NHS is effective in some areas, progress has been initially slow on some targets in the LAA and uncertainties and budget pressures are affecting the provision of social and nursing care. The Council is aware that relations with some district councils needs to be improved - particularly following the introduction of GC2C, the area-based approach to service delivery. The tight funding climate means that some services are understaffed and are not able to deliver as effectively as they would like. For example high turnover of social work staff leads to a lack of continuity for some children and families. This is preventing a pro-active approach to tackling weaknesses in these areas.
- 56 A strategic approach to corporate commissioning and procurement is not yet embedded across the Council and project management is not used consistently to drive improvement. These relative weaknesses have contributed to a perception that the pace of change is slow in some areas. However, the Council is aware of these issues and is taking steps to address them.

Performance management

- 57 The Council is performing strongly in this area, well above minimum requirements. A strong performance culture is in place, supported by a comprehensive and effective performance management framework. Monitoring is systematic, regular and appropriately focused with the effective involvement of portfolio holders in managing service performance and managers in managing team performance. Performance is improving in a high proportion of priority areas.
- 58 The Council has a strong performance culture. Performance management has a high profile within the Council, with the Leader and Deputy Leader acting as performance management champions. A sustained focus on performance against priorities is maintained through linked service and financial planning and quarterly reporting to Cabinet. The 'achieving top performance' initiative provides a focus on, and a celebration of, achievement which is valued by staff. Good awareness of levels of customer satisfaction influences decisions about improvement priorities, for example, investment in improvements to roads and pavements. This supports effective delivery.

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- 59** Following recommendations in the previous corporate assessment, the Council has focused resources on ensuring that the performance framework is understood and used consistently by staff and councillors. The 'golden thread' that translates high level priorities to service and business plans and the targets of individuals is clear. Teams are involved in agreeing targets and staff know how they contribute to priorities through regular appraisals and line management meetings. The Council is further developing elements of the new performance review process by introducing an annual self-assessment by services. Overall, staff and councillors are clear about their contribution to delivery.
- 60** The Council uses knowledge and feedback to improve service performance. Good use is made of benchmarking, external evaluation and consultancy to drive improvement. The Chief Executive is working with a national task force to compare performance more effectively against other county authorities. A three year programme of risk-based service performance reviews is challenging performance and identifying the scope for efficiencies. Knowledge about complaints is collected and used to improve services and efforts are made to make this process accessible to the full range of users. Improvements include access to services and information via the Councils website and refocusing the trading standards function to that of community safety based on comments from stakeholders and the public. Performance information is used effectively to identify cross-cutting issues and target the needs of minority groups. For example, the transportation service worked closely with adult learning to improve spoken English among ethnic minority groups to boost recruitment of bus drivers. The Council identifies and rewards staff groups or individuals where they have performed highly. This helps the Council to challenge performance and support a clear focus on improvement.
- 61** Performance management is used to address areas of underperformance and drive improvement by maintaining focus on the actions necessary to drive change. Over three quarters of key performance indicators improved between 2002/03 and 2004/05 and almost half place Buckinghamshire among the best performing councils nationally. The Council met most of its improvement targets last year. With partners, it has met Community Plan targets, including reductions in the numbers of burglaries and robberies and improvements in smoking cessation and bus transport. The Council achieved improvements in all 13 of the LPSA1 target areas and earned performance reward grant in 9. In response to a critical Social Services inspection in 2003, the Council has delivered significant improvement, achieving a subsequent inspection rating of two stars.

- 62 The Council's partners are actively involved in managing performance in areas of joint responsibility. LSP and LAA partners have signed up to an overarching information-sharing protocol. Effective arrangements are in place to monitor and manage the performance of key strategic partnerships such as the LAA and the Children's Trust. Shared priorities are led by the appropriate partners, who include agreed targets within their own plans and strategies. The Council supports voluntary sector providers of social care by hosting a joint performance management system. Sound arrangements for information sharing and managing performance are developed with partners across all sectors, including the Bucks Waste Partnership, the Bucks combined Fire Authority and the provision of services jointly with the National Childminding Association. This has resulted in positive outcomes including increasing the amount of waste recycled, increased strategic and operational effectiveness of emergency services and a clearer understanding, support and integration of childminding services for young children.
- 63 Performance monitoring and reporting arrangements are robust, with accurate performance indicator data held on a central IT system. Quarterly reporting to Cabinet summarises performance against the seven corporate aims using traffic-lights to highlight progress and identify corrective action where a service is not on track to meet its targets. Full and exception-only versions give a clear overall picture of performance. Portfolio holders are accountable for performance of their areas and monitor performance monthly with service managers. Overview and scrutiny effectively supports this process by selectively focusing on particular performance issues. Further challenge is provided by the Chief Executive who leads a series of monthly manager star chambers (Comstat) on the performance of all services, that includes a strong focus on customer care. This is modelled on good practice in the transportation service that has led to improved outcomes. Staff and councillors are clear about how services are performing and their shared responsibilities for delivery.
- 64 Robust systems are in place and a good range of performance information is used to support delivery. The quality and accuracy of BVPIs has improved and is now good. The performance software holds corporate and service plans, the full range of national and local indicators and all targets set. Information on services and portfolios is readily accessible to managers and councillors. The system generates a good range of summary reports, tailored to their audience, including performance reports for the LAA. It also allows partners to access and update performance information directly and plans are in place to further improve this.

What has been achieved?

- 65 The Council is performing well in this area, consistently above minimum requirements and can show significant achievement across the shared priority areas. This achievement of a coherent corporate approach to sustainable communities and improving community cohesion set against a context of a large growth agenda and the diverse nature of the population is particularly significant. Achievements show a regional approach in areas such as transportation but also reflect local need, as with the introduction of Police Community Support Officers.
- 66 The Council is improving the quality of life of local people. Key achievements include improving educational attainment for young people from ethnic minorities, reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancies, improving recycling rates, reducing fly tipping and road accidents and increasing the use of public transport. However the Council has not achieved what it wants in some areas, for example, reducing some health inequalities and although public satisfaction with public transport is improving, it remains among the worst performance nationally.
- 67 The Council works effectively to achieve national standards in educational attainment, improved transportation and access to services. Crime is generally reducing and the Council has worked in partnership to improve community cohesion. While achievement in developing healthier communities is more variable there are good examples of partnership working and successful outcomes. The delivery of services to older people has improved with innovative approaches, in partnership, to supporting independent living and improving the quality of life. Overall, the Council is performing well to meet the needs of children and young people and the capacity of the council to improve is good.
- 68 The Council's strong approach to working in partnership has meant that many of the achievements are jointly owned. The Council has strong links to the voluntary sector and is using its expertise and experience to further promote capacity-building and target consultation. Joint performance monitoring and the introduction of some pooled budget arrangements are delivering more efficient and effective joint service delivery. The achievements outlined below testify both to the Council's effective work in partnership and to its own achievements. This is enhanced by a collaborative approach to working with district Local Strategic Partnerships and a pragmatic approach to delivering shared priority targets within the LAA - which are stretching but realistic.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 69 A coherent corporate approach to sustainable communities and transport is in place. The achievement of sustainable communities is a core aim of the Community Strategy and the Council has a very clear understanding of what this means within the context of the growth agenda and how different services can effectively contribute. This sets a clear framework that is shaping the Council's response to the growth agenda and is defining its approach to delivery through cross-cutting actions in transport, health and community safety.

- 70 The Council has redefined its strategic planning role in response to the anticipated housing growth in the county. It is taking a strong lead in the regional and sub-regional planning process to ensure that the county receives realistic and sustainable levels of housing and employment growth, and secures the necessary infrastructure. It is supporting districts in meeting affordable housing targets and has commissioned a countywide assessment of the housing needs of vulnerable people. Through its highly acclaimed LTP, the Council is developing more sustainable forms of transport and actions that also support cross-cutting agendas such as social cohesion and the promotion of health. This joined up approach ensures that individual actions contribute to the Council's strategic vision of sustainable communities.
- 71 Strong and effective partnership working supports a wide range of activities that contribute to sustainable communities. These include the development of a long term infrastructure framework for the county in conjunction with other service providers, contributing to Aylesbury Vale Advantage - the delivery vehicle for the growth of the town - and joint preparation of a long term growth strategy for Milton Keynes. This is helping to ensure that local priorities are balanced against regional growth pressures to secure sustainable patterns of development.
- 72 In the face of major challenges, the Council is providing opportunities for improved access to services, promoting healthier lifestyles and more sustainable forms of transport. A web-based car sharing scheme, green travel plans for schools and the promotion of cycling, walking and other forms of transport are helping to reduce traffic growth, achieving a reduction in car journeys of 11 per cent between 2003 and 2005. Investment in major road improvements such as the A418 strategic route from Aylesbury to Milton Keynes includes a new express bus service between the towns and improved bus services to connecting villages. A new £15 million public transport hub is currently under construction in Aylesbury and a 'park and ride' facility has been provided at High Wycombe. In partnership with bus operators, the Council has improved key bus routes in Aylesbury, resulting in a 25 per cent increase in bus passengers over the past two years. However, although overall levels of user satisfaction are increasing, bus usage across the county remains low and is not meeting targets set.
- 73 The Joint Waste Partnership is supporting effective action on waste and recycling. Cross county collaborative working and the pooling of resources have significantly reduced fly tipping - by 20 per cent. The Council is increasing recycling by promoting home composting, public awareness campaigns and education programmes within schools. Overall, the county is exceeding its national recycling target of 35 per cent, and ambitious targets are in place to increase this to over 50 per cent by 2011. This is helping to reduce the amount of landfill.

- 74 The Council contributes to local economic prosperity through activities that complement the work of the districts, for example by addressing skills gaps and developing a joint business and property database. The proportion of the working age population in employment has increased to 82 per cent - among the highest percentage nationally. Major planning applications are decided speedily, amounting to top performance nationally. The Council is supporting the business community through the Bucks Economic Partnership, for example by holding a procurement event, rural conferences and events to promote locally sourced food. It is building on the growth agenda and the forthcoming Olympics and Paralympics by marketing and promoting Buckinghamshire as a place to invest in and visit. This has contributed to a growth in the rate of business formation in line with the regional average. SEEDA and other external funding agencies are supporting the regeneration of market towns, including initiatives to promote tourism and walking and the e-Bucks Broadband initiative. This is supporting the local economy through targeted action.
- 75 The Council has earned considerable external accreditation for innovation and for the quality of its environmental work. The Audit Commission assessed the quality of its environment services as 'good, with promising prospects for improvement' in October 2005. The Council is recognised by government as a 'centre for excellence in transport delivery'. Its transport service has won a national award for partnership working as well as an international award for its innovative approach to school travel plans. The quality of its services and high profile means that the Council is able to exert a national influence to benefit local people.
- 76 The Council has been slow to provide leadership on sustainability through its own practice. It has only recently developed a protocol for disposal of its land assets to provide affordable and key worker housing. It is not consistently demonstrating by example how it is increasing recycling or incorporating sustainability assessments into its policies. However, the council is aware of these weaknesses and is taking steps to address them.

Safer and stronger communities

- 77 The Council and its partners have a strategic approach to addressing crime. The residents' survey identified 'feeling safe' as a local priority. 'Safer and stronger communities' is an explicit theme within the Community Strategy that is delivered through the LAA and supported by targets in the Corporate Plan. A Safer and Stronger Communities Plan supports the Community Strategy and feeds into the four district Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs). This provides a coherent framework for delivery.

- 78 The Council is contributing to crime reduction. Although levels of domestic burglary remain high, the Council exceeded its targets last year to reduce this, as well as robbery and vehicle crime. The level of violent crimes and sexual offences remains low. However, the fear of crime is rising in some areas. To reduce the fear of crime the Council is using tax income from second homes to fund 80 per cent of the costs of the 42 Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs). Strategic directors attend the CDRPs in each district to ensure an integrated yet localised approach. This illustrates the impact that the Council and its partners are having in reducing criminal activity.
- 79 The Council works effectively to deliver initiatives to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB) through partnership working with CDRPs and is using PCSOs and its own public protection team to tackle crime. Examples include working with neighbourhood watch groups to prevent doorstep selling and reduce distraction burglaries and campaigns to reduce fly tipping and abandoned vehicles. A multi-agency initiative in Aylesbury aimed at removing graffiti and an arson publicity campaign was launched earlier this year. Working with young people on the 'Skidz' car maintenance programme is helping to reduce car crime. A countywide ASB strategy is close to completion, supported by an ASB group. The Council also funds a full-time post with responsibility for co-ordinating actions and ensuring an integrated approach to reducing ASB.
- 80 The Council is reducing the impact of drug and alcohol abuse through several initiatives. Targets for reducing drug dependency and alcohol abuse are included within the LAA and Community Safety Partnerships. The Council is the lead body for the Drugs and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) and has established links with young people and schools through a drug prevention education and awareness project. Three year plans are in place for both adults and young people with pooled budgets for treatment and targeted approaches. The Council's public protection team has been successful in meeting targets to reduce under-age sales of alcohol and tobacco. This contributes to building safer and healthier communities.
- 81 The Council contributes to reducing injuries. Targeted initiatives to help vulnerable people avoid accidents in the home include health check assessments for older people and training for care workers. Other campaigns are aimed at reducing the level of accidents caused by younger car-drivers and motor cyclists. The Council has run a campaign to raise awareness of the effects of drink/drug driving and has targeted road improvements to reduce accidents. Performance indicators for reducing traffic accidents on non-motorways are improving. These improvements support healthier communities and reduce the burden on local care services.
- 82 Up to date and well resourced emergency arrangements are in place, and were recently tested in a real situation. The Council has good relationships with key partners at a regional level and is an active member of the Local Resilience Forum for the Thames Valley. Business continuity management is in place across the Council, ensuring it has contingency plans to deal with most emergencies. As a result the Council is well prepared to deal with external emergencies.

- 83 The Council is making strong progress in improving community cohesion. The Community Cohesion and Equalities Strategy provides focus for this area of work. It is having real impact in reducing racial tensions in Aylesbury and High Wycombe with the role of the Council commended from all sections of the community, including the local police. The Council specifically targeted work with schools and youth groups, for example, holding a celebration of different faiths. The Youth Service worked closely with the Asian community on a number of levels, including informal engagement 'on the streets'. This is helping to break down barriers and improve understanding between different communities.
- 84 Effective forums for BME and other minority groups, including older people and those affected by rural isolation are helping to reduce inequalities and social isolation. The Council has negotiated a compact with the voluntary sector which is broadly seen as effective. However, the Council is aware of the need to better support the voluntary sector by targeting consultation, building capacity and negotiating longer term funding and it is currently working with partners to address these issues.

Healthier communities

- 85 The Council is improving the health of local people. It is working to build strong partnerships and is undertaking many initiatives to promote healthier lifestyles and reduce inequalities in health. However, a strategic approach to co-ordinate and direct its actions is not yet in place and this is currently limiting effectiveness.
- 86 The Council is actively working to promote healthy communities, but its effectiveness is currently limited by the lack of a coherent strategic approach to planning and delivery. There is currently no clear political or managerial leadership within the Council with overall responsibility for health planning and co-ordinating actions between different agencies. A number of targets in the LAA are identified as at risk of not being met and other data sources show that some health inequalities are widening. The creation of the new jointly funded post of Public Health Director is an important step in ensuring that health issues not only benefit from a strategic focus, but are also considered as part of the day to day management of PCT and Council functions.
- 87 Linked to the above, targeted initiatives towards specific communities are not consistently developed or supported by tailored targets. To date, the emphasis has been on general improvement, for example to reduce coronary heart disease, cancer and accidents and the promotion of mental health. There is little evidence of action against the growing problems of obesity among the wider population or reducing mortality rates within the Asian community. However, it is starting to address alcohol dependency through work being co-ordinated by the DAAT. The GC2C programme is helping to develop a better understanding of local health issues and identify locally based actions, but it is unclear how far health partners have been involved in shaping this. A more targeted approach would help the Council and its partners shape delivery more appropriately to areas of greatest need.

- 88 However, the Council is committed to achieving healthier communities and has established a delivery framework for this. The Community Strategy and the LAA set out how the Council will work together with partners to promote health, for example by promoting active lifestyles, smoking cessation and reducing harmful emissions from motor vehicles. The Council has raised the profile of health issues and the need for cross-cutting action by establishing a separate health scrutiny committee to oversee its own work and that of partners. This commits the Council and its partners to a shared agenda to tackling problems in a co-ordinated way.
- 89 Effective partnership working - at an operational level - is securing a broadly based, multi-agency approach to improving health; for example, working with the police on drugs misuse and with trading standards on nutrition, particularly targeted at schools. Health is being promoted through physical activity, encouraging walking, healthy eating, smoking cessation and through other cross-cutting agendas, such as transport. The Thirst for Life campaign is tackling dehydration among older people and has significantly reduced hospital re-admissions in this age group. These initiatives are improving the health of those most at risk of disadvantage.
- 90 Key partnerships are in place. The Choosing Health partnership is developing its role of co-ordinating the delivery of health and well-being targets. To support this, it has audited all public health functions across health and local authorities and made a good start on needs-mapping. Inter-agency Partnership Boards are supporting delivery of the National Strategic Framework targets, co-ordinating action and forging stronger links between agencies. For example, housing and leisure services jointly seek to meet the needs of people with special needs. Changes in the health economy are currently causing some uncertainties between key partners but this has not prevented the Council from moving forward on integrated working arrangements and delivering agreed actions. This demonstrates a strong commitment to support the health agenda.
- 91 A wide range of initiatives are targeting different groups and supporting action across many fronts. There are many examples of innovative work and pockets of good practice that support cross-cutting agendas. For example, through promoting cycling, investing in road improvements and awareness campaigns, the Council has achieved a 25 per cent increase in cycling across the county this year alone. The Council is actively engaged in the Healthy Schools programme, tackling under-age drinking and smoking and promoting sexual health among teenagers. Targeted initiatives are successfully reducing the number of teenage pregnancies and improving access to advice on a range of health matters. The Healthy Living Centre in Aylesbury is providing access to a range of health and well-being services for those at risk of being disadvantaged. However, future funding streams to sustain this facility are yet to be confirmed, and no equivalent provision is made in other parts of the county.

Older people

- 92** Improving the quality of life for older people is a clear aim of both the Community Strategy and Corporate Plan, reflecting the growing proportion of older people in the population. The Council has made significant progress in recent years in the achievement of its ambitions for older people. The provision of adult social care has improved and was a contributory factor in increasing the Council's rating to 'two stars' in an assessment undertaken by CSCI in 2005. A joint inspection of older people's services indicated that the Council was serving most people well and had promising prospects for improvement. Further improvements have been implemented in adult learning, providing a range of well-attended courses aimed specifically at older people.
- 93** The Council and its partners have a strategic approach to the provision of services to older people. Improving the quality of life for older people is a key theme within the BSP; responsibility for progressing this joint approach is through the Partnership board for Older People's Services. There is a joint approach to target setting and a strategy which incorporates a charter with seven clear aims. Within the Council there is strategic responsibility at cabinet level, and through senior management via the Strategic Director of Adult Services and a Head of Older People's Services. This framework is enabling the Council in partnership to maintain a focused and strategic approach to service delivery.
- 94** The Council is successfully engaging with older people and their representatives through a variety of sources including surveys, an older people's conference, Age Concern workshops and an Age Well study of South Buckinghamshire. The Older People's Strategy action plan was created by the Older Peoples Action Group which has champions from other organisations and advocates representing the older people's community. Engagement is also targeted at diverse groups including the BME community, learning disabilities and other adult social care groups.
- 95** Services are delivered effectively in partnership. Community needs are met by commissioning services and managing contracts in a way that promotes a healthy mixed economy in service provision. This includes care homes and extra-care housing that is provided in partnership with the private sector. The Council is undertaking assessments on safety in the home and is working well with the police and other agencies to improve community safety. The Council works closely with its NHS partners to commission and deliver a co-ordinated range of services that avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and promote independence. However, uncertainties about responsibility for the provision of nursing and social care remain both now and in the future. The Council is aware of these issues and is working with the NHS to try to resolve them.

- 96 The Council is improving the independence of older people. There is a clear ambition to increase the number of older people living independent lives. While performance indicators reflect low numbers of older people supported, this reflects to a certain extent the affluence of the area with many individuals paying for private care. The Council, in partnership, has introduced a number of schemes and initiatives to support this ambition. These include volunteers to undertake gardening, advice and support on benefits, home safety and heating consumption, together with social activities and phone contact to provide social interaction for older people living alone. Access to public transport, leisure activities and adult learning particularly in IT and pre retirement courses are helping to improve the lives of older people. Customer satisfaction with Council services from older people has significantly increased in recent years illustrating the impact these initiatives are having on their lives.
- 97 Cross-cutting initiatives support a co-ordinated approach to delivering shared priorities. Examples include working with younger people on intergenerational projects, promoting better understanding of younger and older people's needs, helping older people more effectively claim benefits and the distribution of information on services through libraries and GP's surgeries. This is helping to promote community cohesion.

Children and young people

- 98 Overall, the Council is performing well to meet the needs of children and young people, supported by clear ambitions that are shared by partners and robust plans and strategies, including the LAA and the Children and Young People's Plan. Priorities for improvement are clear and based on consultation. Well established partnership working and effective performance management are supporting good performance in the Youth Service and adequate performance in social care. However, costs are comparatively high in some areas and there is insufficient focus on prevention and equality and diversity issues. Overall, the capacity of the council to improve is good. However, the reorganisation of the health economy is creating uncertainties about future funding that could impact on some areas, including some preventative services.
- 99 Strategic planning among health partners is sound, and the health of children and young people is good. Outcomes overall are in line or better than national averages. Mental health services for children are good, but there are some delays in receiving treatment. Provision for looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good. Staff and families have expressed concerns at the additional travel time resulting from the decision to transfer acute children's services from Wycombe to Stoke Mandeville Hospital. The financial difficulties facing the merging primary care trusts are having an increasing impact on services.

- 100** Children appear safe. The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides an effective lead. Action is taken to protect those most at risk of abuse, but the threshold to access social care services is high, with delays in responding to some less urgent cases. There is good but inconsistent multi-agency collaboration to support children and families. There are insufficient preventive services. Shortages of foster carers and social workers are being addressed. There is some good integrated work for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities but the strategic integration of services is at an early stage.
- 101** The contribution of local services to helping children and young people achieve well and to enjoy their education and recreation is good, and standards of attainment are very good at most educational stages. Admissions to schools are managed effectively within the selective system in the county and attendance is good. Not all children and young people excluded from school receive full-time alternative education. The attainment and attendance of looked after children is improving. Lengthy consultation to review the role of special schools is only now being converted into action.
- 102** The combined work of services in helping children and young people to play a positive role and contribute to society is good. There is good support to help children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, deal with many routine changes and major challenges in their lives. Partnerships work effectively to reduce anti-social behaviour, and there is a low incidence of offending by young people. Young people are consulted about some of the services they receive but an overall participation strategy is at an early stage.
- 103** The overall contribution of services to helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is good. Rates of participation by 16-18 year olds in education, employment, and training are particularly high. Partners plan provision for pupils and young people aged 14-19. Standards are high in sixth forms and at least satisfactory elsewhere. An effective strategy to meet the needs of black and minority ethnic learners aged 16-19 has yet to be developed. Community regeneration is appropriately focused. Action to reduce homelessness has still to address the needs of families with children in temporary accommodation. Careleavers are generally well supported. Learning provision for young people aged 16-18 with learning difficulties and disabilities is good. Planning of provision for those aged 19 and over is poorly co-ordinated.

Appendix 1 - Framework for Corporate Assessment

- 1 This corporate assessment was carried out under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, under which the Audit Commission has power to inspect local authorities' arrangements for securing continuous improvement. The results of the corporate assessment contribute to the determination of the overall CPA category for an authority, which the Audit Commission is required to assess and report on under Section 99 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 2 The Council's self assessment provided a key resource in focusing the assessment activity which included consideration of:
 - key documentation, including the Council's improvement plan;
 - updated performance indicators and performance data; and
 - interviews and meetings attended.
- 3 The assessment for Buckinghamshire County Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 10 July to 15 September 2006.
- 4 This report has been discussed with the Council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the Council.