

Environment - Planning Services

Hinckley and Bosworth 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 2007

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	14
Context	14
The locality	14
The Council	14
The Council's planning service	15
How good is the service?	17
What has the service aimed to achieve?	17
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	19
Customer care and customer focus	19
Accessibility	20
Engaging with the community and valuing diversity	21
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	21
Local priorities	21
Meeting national priorities	26
Is the service delivering value for money?	26
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	29
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	29
How well does the service manage performance?	31
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	34
Appendix 1 – Planning best value performance indicators (BVPs)	38

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 (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website 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 The Council provides a fair, 'one-star' planning service. Some parts of the service are improving, but overall it has uncertain prospects for delivering the consistent and sustained improvement required to ensure it becomes a good service.
- 2 The Council provides a fair range of planning services in accordance with local priorities, but service quality is variable. The service includes a good conservation function and a rapidly improving enforcement team. Development control and planning policy teams are almost fully staffed and have enthusiastic officers. There is a clear emphasis on handling planning applications quickly, but this combined with changes in staff is leading to a variable quality of service to the public, for example, in development control. However, the constituent parts of the service provided are generally at or above minimum standard.
- 3 The service's customer focus is underdeveloped. Service users are not central to the design and improvement of the Council's planning services particularly in development control. While arrangements for communicating with some key stakeholders have improved, the use of service standards remains underdeveloped. Customers' ability to access services is variable, for example through electronic access to services via the internet. The service generally caters well for members of the community that have different communication or physical needs in order to use the service. Planning committees provide a confusing experience to those members of public who attend due to unclear decision-making, and on occasions, due to unhelpful member behaviour during discussion.
- 4 The service is making variable progress in delivering outcomes that address local and national priorities, but progress overall is fair. For example, the speed of determining planning applications is now good, although it has not been consistently so in the last three years. The Council has an up-to-date local plan, which is enabling an adequate supply of land for housing and mixed development, with some notable contributions being made to the government's sustainable communities agenda. The service is making steady progress towards the local plan's replacement. The Council is a weaker performer in relation to environmental sustainability.
- 5 The service has made limited progress is achieving its goal of excellence and in delivering a 'one team' planning service. However, overall the planning service provides an effective service in preserving and enhancing the built and natural heritage of the borough, and comprehensive town centre plans are beginning to take shape.
- 6 The planning service does not provide good value for money given the cost of the service to the local community, the priority the Council places on the service, the range and quality of services available, and the performance of key aspects of the service. This is due to limitations in achieving a customer focus, the limited availability of a 'one team' service and lack of evidence of customer satisfaction.

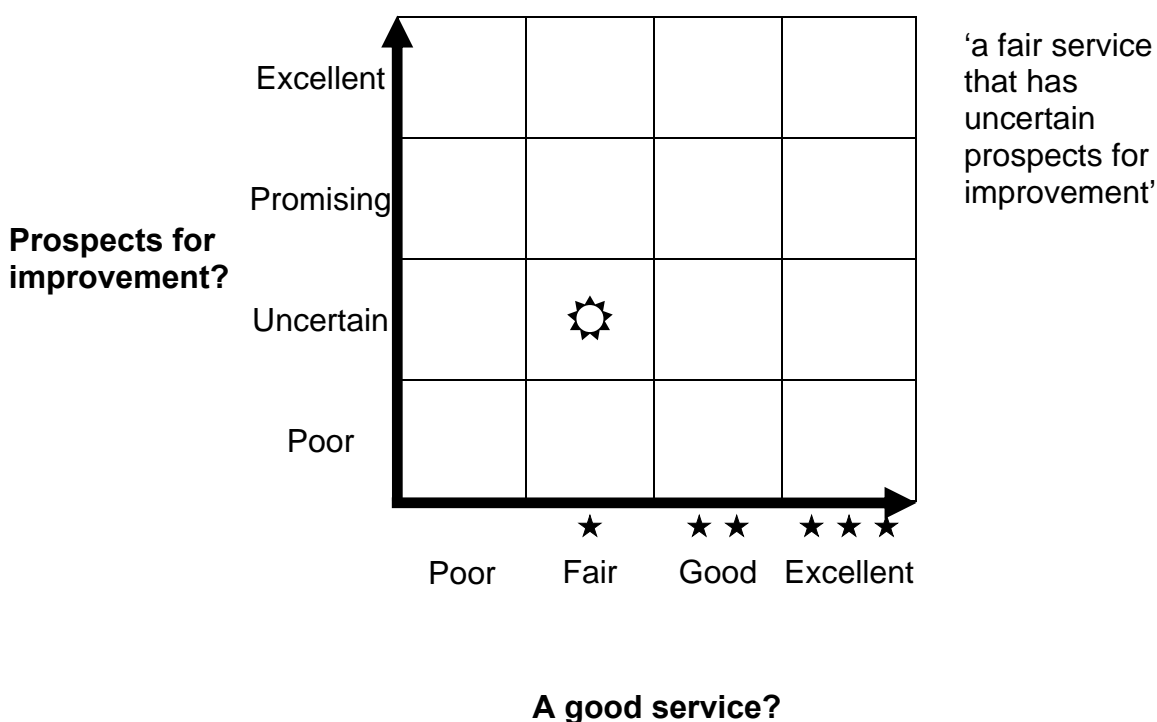
6 Environment - Planning Services | Summary

- 7 There have been recent improvements in the service, some of which are key to the delivery of corporate aims. However, the track record of delivering customer-focused improvement has been inconsistent and the outcome of some improvement effort is difficult to demonstrate. The Council does not know whether customer satisfaction is improving.
- 8 Improvement planning in the service is not sufficiently wide-ranging, robust or informed in order to drive customer-focused improvement in the medium to long-term. The vision and aims for the service are developing but are incomplete. Although professional leadership is good, councillor leadership is not consistent. The service's improvement focus has been narrow. Improved performance management has contributed to significant improvement in processing planning applications quickly, but is less effective in improving other aspects of the service such as customer service. The service does not focus on improving value for money.
- 9 The service has good financial capacity as a result of its prioritisation. It has successfully secured internal and some external resources. Restructuring of the service has improved both the alignment of services, and staffing capacity in both planning policy and development control. Staff changes and the loss of experience in the service present a risk, but in the context of weak corporate workforce planning the service is working hard to develop resilience and harness the enthusiasm of its staff. There is ongoing investment in the development of officer and councillor capacity, but the impact of councillor training has been variable. The service does not routinely explore opportunities to increase capacity through collaboration and partnership.

Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Hinckley and Bosworth 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

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.

11 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- the Council provides a reasonable range of planning services in accordance with local priorities, including a good conservation function and a rapidly improving enforcement team;
- the planning service provides an effective service in preserving and enhancing the built and natural heritage of the borough, and comprehensive town centre plans are beginning to take shape;
- the speed of determining planning applications is now above the average for district planning authorities nationally in two of the three categories nationally, although it has not been consistently so in the last three years. This focus on the speed of determining planning applications reflects a local and national priority;
- the Council has an up-to-date local plan, which is enabling an adequate supply of land for housing and mixed development, with some notable contributions being made to the government's sustainable communities agenda. The service is making steady progress towards the local plan's replacement; and
- communication with some key stakeholders has improved, particularly in specific plan making tasks, and the service generally caters well for members of the community that have different communication or physical needs in order to access the service.

12 However:

- the quality of services within the planning service is not consistently good. For example, the development control team provides a variable level of service in terms of the quality and consistency of advice to the public and customers' ability to access services is variable, for example through electronic access to services via the internet;
- the service's customer focus is underdeveloped and the use of service standards remains underdeveloped;
- planning committees provide a confusing experience to those members of public who attend due to unclear decision-making, and on occasions, due to unhelpful member behaviour during discussion;
- the Council is a weaker performer in relation to environmental sustainability;
- the service has made limited progress in achieving its goal of excellence and in delivering a one team planning service; and
- the planning service does not provide good value for money.

13 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is not a strong track record over the last three years of delivering customer-focused improvement. The focus of improvement effort has been narrow. Improvement that has taken place has been inconsistent, and the outcome of some improvement effort is difficult to demonstrate;
- action planning to ensure improvement takes place is underdeveloped. Plans are not sufficiently wide-ranging, robust or informed in order to drive customer-focused improvement in the medium to long-term. The vision and aims for the service are developing but are incomplete;
- councillor leadership of the planning service is not consistent;
- the Council does not know whether customer satisfaction is improving;
- the service does not focus on improving value for money; and
- the service does not routinely explore opportunities to increase capacity through collaboration and partnership.

14 However:

- there are signs that improvement is gathering pace in some areas. There have been recent improvements in the service, for example relating to town centre planning. Improved performance management has contributed to significant improvement in processing planning applications quickly;
- professional leadership is good. The planning service is working hard to develop resilience and harness the enthusiasm of its staff;
- the service has good financial capacity as a result of its prioritisation. It has successfully secured internal and some external resources. Restructuring of the service has improved both the alignment of services, and staffing capacity in both planning policy and development control; and
- there is ongoing investment in the development of officer and councillor capacity.

Recommendations

- 15 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 Improve the customer focus of the planning service by:

- ongoing engagement with service users to help inform and define excellence in customer services, the service standards and targets;*
- ensuring customers' satisfaction with the service is gauged, and that the service responds to feedback, such as complaints and comments; and*
- involving customers in improving key aspects of the service such as the transparency of committee meetings, and explaining planned improvements so that they are understood by customers.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to agree with stakeholders, including councillors, what a strong commonly held understanding of customer focus looks like;
- to ensure service standards and targets reflect customer needs and expectations;
- to ensure a balance is struck between making fast planning decisions and other aspects of a good planning service from a customer's perspective; and
- to improve the experience of all customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 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 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the accessibility of planning services by:

- *promoting and supporting the use of different means of accessing the service (eg email, web services, telephone advice) and tracking the uptake of these alternative access channels;*
- *ensuring all services are accessible to both the one-off service user and the frequent applicant. Stating what services are available and how they can be accessed, eg development team, pre-application advice, and advice relating to conservation, design and trees;*
- *agreeing and implementing clear plans for the 'one team' approach in planning; and*
- *ensuring all elements of planning services that are available electronically (internet or intranet) are kept up-to-date, and are clearly signposted and supported.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure equality of access to services;
- to provide more ways to access services in order to meet customers' needs and expectations; and
- to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

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

Recommendation

R3 Develop the capacity and resilience of the planning service by:

- *exploring all options for procuring planning-related services in partnership with other organisations;*
- *maximising officers' learning from experienced planners, eg from freelancers, consultees and partner organisations and from team leaders and supervisory roles;*
- *preparing and implementing plans for closer integration of building control and development control, and of planning services with the customer contact centre; and*
- *developing the service's ability in the medium-term to contribute to Council's efficiency agenda and to provide resources to reinvest in the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure the service has the capacity for improvement and this is sustainable;
- to improve value for money from the investment in the service;
- to secure services that would otherwise not be available to the Council; and
- to ensure an equal quality of service is available to customers.

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

Recommendation

R4 Ensure action plans for improvement are robust by:

- *developing implementation plans for the service vision, ensuring goals are customer and outcome focused, and that they relate to the medium-term;*
- *ensuring team and individual plans are robust and regularly reviewed;*
- *applying equal rigor to setting and pursuing local performance indicator targets as has been applied to key national PIs; and*
- *developing a broad-based improvement agenda for the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure the Council's stated ambitions are implemented; and
- to improve accountability and efficiency.

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

Recommendation

R5 Maximise the contribution of councillors in delivering a fair, efficient and effective service by:

- *delivering the planned mandatory training for councillors on the planning committee, including their substitutes. Offer additional planning training and ensure it is available to those councillors who want to access it;*
- *agreeing and abiding by protocols on contributions from all councillors who participate in planning committee debate. Applying mutually agreed standards of conduct in committee;*
- *ensuring the committee decision-making process is clear to the lay person, eg making and revising recommendations, the casting of votes and the final decision;*
- *maximising councillors' learning from scrutiny, from appeals and from the evaluation of the use of policies and reasons for decisions. Set aside time outside planning committee meetings to explore policy; and*
- *clarifying what improvement in outcomes for citizens will arise from specific investment in planning services, eg enforcement, customer service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure customers perceive the service as fair, consistent and transparent;
- to protect the reputation of the Council and provide the public with confidence in the service; and
- to ensure investment leads to improvement in services that the public will recognise.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 16 The borough of Hinckley and Bosworth is situated in southwest Leicestershire. It sits broadly within a rectangle formed by the A5/M69/M1/M42 and A42, with the M69 providing the east-west link to the M6. Therefore, it has good links to many of the principal population centres of both the East and West Midlands. However, the feeder road network and the A5 face congestion problems. It has a population of 102,200, with an urban core of 60,000 at its southerly point. The rest of the borough is predominantly rural and characterised by traditional villages with many historical features. The population is now growing at a faster rate than the regional average. There is a smaller proportion of the population in the under-15 category but otherwise the age structure is similar to the rest of the East Midlands.
- 17 The borough is affluent, ranking 278 out of 354 on the national index of deprivation scale. Unemployment in the borough continues to fall and was 1.2 per cent in October 2005. The buoyancy of the local economy is demonstrated by increases in hi-tech manufacturing which is compensating for the continued decline in employment in the hosiery/textile sector. One noticeable feature of the local economy is that the proportion of the population employed in manufacturing (34.2 per cent) is over twice the national average.
- 18 However, the area's relative affluence conceals examples of multiple deprivation in parts of Earl Shilton, Hinckley, Barwell and the ex-coalfield area as well as accessibility issues in certain rural wards. 3.5 per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to the Leicestershire average of 7.3 per cent and the East Midland's average of 8.7 per cent (2001 census).
- 19 There are 23 parish and town councils. It has 26 conservation areas, 125 hectares of sites of special scientific interest (SSSI), 320 listed buildings as well as many scheduled ancient monuments and of course, historic battlefields.

The Council

- 20 Following the 2003 election Conservatives hold 19 seats, the Liberal Democrats 9 and Labour 6. In 2002 the Council adopted a leader and cabinet model, and in 2005 this was restructured into seven portfolios.
- 21 The Council employs the equivalent of 360 FTE employees. It is historically low spending with an average band D council tax for 2005/06 of £95.76. A 1 per cent increase in average band D council tax adds approximately only £34,200 to the Council's net budget. Therefore it is in the difficult position of retaining a low level of Council Tax, and maintaining prudent levels of balances, whilst facing increased costs and pressures of new and improving services.

- 22 Key partnerships are the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and Community Safety Partnership. County-wide partnerships include the Leicestershire Waste Management Partnership and the Leicester and Rutland Improvement Partnership (LRIP). Links with local businesses have been improved through the Town Centre Partnership and with Leicestershire Promotions which is used to promote tourism.
- 23 The chief executive, deputy chief executive and the four heads of service form the Council's Strategic Leadership Board (SLB). The Council's political and management structures are closely aligned with one additional portfolio holder on cabinet dedicated to rural issues. The five service groupings are finance and IT; strategic planning, housing and partnerships; health and environment; culture and development and corporate services.

The Council's planning service

- 24 The service under review consists of:
- development control;
 - planning enforcement;
 - conservation; and
 - planning policy.
- 25 The inspection did not include specific examination of:
- building control;
 - community planning;
 - regeneration; and
 - strategic housing.
- 26 However, the inspection considered how the planning service works alongside these services, and with other services such as leisure and recreation, and customer services, as the planning service either enables these services or is supported by them.
- 27 The Council was designated by the government as a planning standards authority in 2003/04 and 2006/07 for its variable performance in dealing with major planning applications.
- 28 The gross budget (estimate) for the service in 2006/07 is £1.69 million, an increase of 5.5 per cent on actual spend in 2005/06. The Council has received a total of £640,000 in planning delivery grant (PDG)³ over the first four years of the regime.

³ Planning Delivery Grant was introduced by the government in 2003 as a means of providing councils' planning services with extra resources, and hence a further incentive, to improve the performance of key aspects of the service such as applications handling speed. This is a national priority for planning.

- 29 The service employs 25 staff including 3 enforcement officers, 1 conservation officer, 5 planning policy officers and 5 development control officers, with administrative and technical support. Nearly all posts are currently filled, and there are two officers who work on a free-lance basis.
- 30 The service was restructured in 2005 so that building control and enforcement teams work alongside the development control team under one manager and planning policy, housing, community planning and regeneration work together under one manager.
- 31 In March 2006 the planning service volunteered to undergo a review by IDeA's⁴ planning advisory service in order to help develop the service's improvement focus. The process involved a review of the service by peers from other councils. The IDeA finalised its report for the Council in July, and the service drew up an improvement plan in September 2006.
- 32 The Council received around 1,200 planning applications and 400 enforcement cases during 2005/06. The Council's planning committee comprises 17 councillors. Each committee member has a substitute who can sit on the planning committee if the member is unable to attend. This means all councillors can sit on the planning committee. The committee meets monthly in the Council chamber and makes decisions on around 10 per cent of applications.

⁴ IDeA is the improvement and development agency for local government. It is owned by the local government association. It uses the talents and experience of councillors and senior officers – known as peers – who support and challenge councils to improve themselves.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 33** The Council has a corporate performance plan that outlines priorities and aims over the medium-term (2006/11). There are 12 strategic objectives, many of which are related to planning.
- Enforce high standards of professional conduct.
 - Strengthen two way engagement:
 - 80 per cent of phone enquiries at first call; and
 - put customers first.
 - Ensure staff have knowledge, skills and tools to improve performance.
 - Further regenerate the borough and improve the local economy:
 - sustain best quartile performance for handling planning applications to 2011;
 - complete the core strategy by December 2006; and
 - revitalise the Hinckley town centre by 2011.
 - Secure a safe and attractive environment:
 - enhance links between building control and development control and between development control and other services to provide a single service;
 - more efficient and effective enforcement;
 - improve e-planning and planning appeals performance;
 - implement environmental stewardship; and
 - crime reduction audit across all functions.
 - Secure affordable housing across the borough.
- 34** In addition, five council services are stated as being service priorities for the Council. Planning is one of these five.
- 35** The borough's community plan is in the process of being revised alongside the preparation of elements of the local development framework. The local strategic partnership is aiming to adopt a new community plan from 2007 onwards. The county-wide community strategy promotes three themes related to the above objectives:
- production of climate change action plans across all councils by end of March 2009;
 - increase vitality and viability of town and rural centres; and
 - improve provision of quality employment land and premises.

- 36 Service aims are restated to some extent within the recent round of service plans, called business delivery plans, and within improvement plans. The service's revised vision following the peer review is to *'to achieve attractive, high quality, safe and distinctive places in the borough through high standards of service, excellent customer care and investment in our staff'*.
- 37 From these strategic plans, the following five themes have been identified in the this report in order to express the key local planning priorities:
- excellence - best quartile performance;
 - customer service - one team;
 - town centre regeneration and ensuring village vitality;
 - creating distinctive places; and
 - securing affordable housing across the borough.
- 38 The Council is also obliged to respond to national planning priorities. These include aspects of the service that address best value indicators (eg the reuse of brownfield land, percentage of appeals upheld). A key indicator also subject to a specific public service agreement target (PSA6) measures how quickly planning applications are determined. There are national targets for the handling of major, minor and other applications that the service needs to reach during 2006/07.
- 39 The planning service has an up-to-date local plan. The plan was adopted in 2001. As at April 2005, over 80 per cent of councils nationally had a local plan of less than five years old or a replacement plan on deposit. An up-to-date local plan means that planning policies are more likely to reflect current local planning priorities and national policy. In the Council's case, the local plan, for example, contains extensive policies covering conservation in the build environment and the natural environment reflecting the importance of these preserving and enhancing these assets. An up-to-date plan also assists in the quality and timeliness of planning decisions and the ease with which planning applications can be made.

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

Customer care and customer focus

- 40 The service's customer focus is underdeveloped. Service users are not central to the design and improvement of the Council's planning services particularly in development control. Little attention has been paid to ensuring the experience of service users shapes service development or to ensuring customers' experience of the service improves over time. For example, there is no routine mechanism for reliably gauging feedback from all service users, such as through applicant questionnaires, through members of the public who attend the planning committee, or through comments and complaints. The Council has useful service user forums, for example, for parish councillors or agents and developers. However, they are not used in an effective way to inform and improve service delivery. Forum attendees often feel they are there to receive information rather than contribute to improvement, or they are unclear about the impact of their contribution due to a lack of feedback. As a result, the level of customer service received is not 'negotiated' with service users but is imposed.
- 41 The use of service standards is underdeveloped. The planning services charter spells out only a narrow range of services and does little to encourage alternatives to face-to-face contact with planning officers. Targets are set but do not relate to the level of service actually delivered. There are no targets for the handling of straightforward, non-contentious applications. An enforcement charter provides customer service targets and refers to the principle of prioritisation, but enforcement priorities are not set out in the charter. This means that the public is unable to gauge the urgency with which the Council will seek to resolve different types of alleged breaches. Without clear service standards the Council is unable to clarify for users what their expectations of the service should be.
- 42 Planning committees provide a variable experience to those members of public who attend. The Council has reintroduced public speaking at the monthly planning committees, and many committees are well attended by members of the public interested in specific planning applications. Officers and councillors report that good progress has been made in making the committee experience more informative through improved visual aids, and in making the decision-making process more efficient and effective through councillor training. While the sound system is good, improvement in visual aids has been primarily for the benefit of committee members and not for the public. Reports are available to the public in attendance but update reports are not. The chairman fails to make the decision-making process easily understood to the public in attendance since the language used in decision-making is confusing to a lay audience, as is the casting of votes on recommendations. The planning committee process does not pay sufficient attention to the needs of the public in attendance, and gives attendees a poor impression of the service.

- 43 Low level but persistent unhelpful councillor conduct at planning committee meetings remains a problem. Officers and councillors report this as an area where there has been significant improvement in the past two years. Planning committee debate much of the time is well ordered and councillors are courteous to each other and to officers. However, isolated outbursts from one or two members indicate a lack of respect between some councillors. Some non-committee members seek an undue influence in decision-making through exploiting their roles as ward or executive portfolio holders during debate. Some councillors come inadequately prepared, while others stray away from matters that are material to the planning application being discussed or enter into debate over policy formulation. These incidents make the decision-making process less efficient, and also run the risk of giving attendees a poor impression of the service.

Accessibility

- 44 Customer access to the service is variable. Some aspects are improving. Reception staff are able to provide some basic information on the progress of planning applications. Printed guidance is available, such as for householder extensions, or on how to complete a design statement. However, the service does not provide easy access to customer advice for many of its services. Service users report inconsistencies in verbal advice given and advice of varying quality. Some services are only accessible through planning officers, such as for design, conservation, archaeology, highways and community safety advice. Accessing planning officers can be difficult for new customers yet frequent service users are able to receive a higher level of service due to their familiarity with who to speak to and how to contact them. This is preventing access for all service users on a fair and equitable basis.
- 45 The availability of planning services via the Council's website is below average according to the latest government sponsored Pendleton⁵ rating of the service's electronic capability. The service is working hard to improve the planning information available, such as making lists of planning agreements and open space sums available on the Council's website. Currently, around 8 per cent of planning applications are being submitted electronically. However, comments on applications by email or online are not yet routine. Poor organisation of information remains a barrier to ease of access and the service has only very recently begun to explore how service users can be encouraged and supported to use information and communications technology. The service is not yet using internet technology to provide a significant advantage to the majority of service users.

⁵ Pendleton Associates have undertaken on behalf of the government three ratings of planning services on council websites since 2003. Each rating is scored out of 21. In December 2005, the last rating over half (214/354) received a score of either 20 or 21.

Engaging with the community and valuing diversity

- 46 Communication channels between the service and the community are now effective when undertaking major plan-making tasks. For example, the service has ensured particular groups in the community that are hard to reach have had the opportunity to be involved in formulating future planning policies. Specific consultation activities have been targeted at the low waged, at those with a low level of educational attainment, at the young and at members of the black and minority ethnic (BME) community. For example, BME consultation highlighted strong support for improving informal recreational facilities. The service has broadened its range of tactics to generate public interest, such as using performing arts in the town centre, engaging widely recognisable public figures such as Fergal Sharkey as a keynote speaker, and through youth council debate. This has resulted in wide public interest in the future of the borough. Key stakeholders such as parish and borough councillors are also well briefed on the process.
- 47 The service generally caters well for members of the community that have different communication or physical needs in order to access the service. Physical access to the public gallery of the Council chamber after hours is difficult, but otherwise physical access, for example for a person in a wheelchair, to the services available at the Council's main reception is good. Many documents are written clearly for particular audiences, where the language is carefully used to make the message clear to non-specialists, for example in committee reports and letters regarding enforcement matters. There is a hearing loop and an effective PA system in the Council chamber for meetings and reception has access to a range of translation services to a large print facility, and to a sign language specialist. Physical access to the Council building and parking for mobility impaired customers is adequate. The service is taking reasonable steps to ensure fair and equal access to services for those with different mobility or communication needs.
- 48 The service gives careful consideration to balancing the needs of the individual and communities. The service routinely considers the implications of human rights in pursuing enforcement action through a clear statement on human rights within the 2002 enforcement policy, and through legal support from in-house advisors. The borough is a proactive partner with other district councils within the county in seeking to assess needs and provide solutions in accommodating gypsies and the travelling community within the borough.

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

Local priorities

- 49 The following five local priorities have been drawn from council and community plans for the purposes of reporting recent performance and outcomes the public will recognise.

Excellence - best quartile performance

- 50 The planning service performed above average but below the best quartile standard (using government figures) for two of the three key planning speed indicators (BV109) in 2005/06. The Council has set itself best performing quartile targets and the service achieved its own interim targets for planning speed that year. However, as many other councils are improving at a similar rate, the ambition of achieving best quartile performance is constantly moving ahead of actual performance, although the gap is narrowing.
- 51 While the speed of applications' handling is gradually moving towards the Council's goal of excellence, some aspects of the service that customers experience are not improving at the same rate. Some customers report problems in customer service, such as inconsistencies in advice received, an inability to get hold of case officers, failure to return phone calls or respond to letters in the agreed timeframe. In addition, the service has not clearly communicated to service users changes in the way the service is delivered, and this is also being perceived as providing a variable level of customer service by some.
- 52 The service uses limited performance information in order to define what excellence means other than excellence in the speed of handling planning applications. Other nationally determined performance indicators, where quartile comparisons can be made show a mixed picture of performance. For example, planning service users' satisfaction (BV111) was a worst quartile performer in 2000/01 (no audited data has been available since). The percentage of upheld appeals (BV204) was just above average in 2005/06 while the quality of service checklist (BV205) was in the best quartile in 2005/06.

Customer service - one team

- 53 There has been steady progress in moving towards the Council's aspiration of a 'one team' approach, but a comprehensive one-team approach is still some way off. Customers still receive services that are accessed through a general reception or switchboard facility. But there is now some basic information that staff at the Council's Argents Mead reception can access electronically in order for example, to provide an update on the progress of a specific application or to identify the relevant planning case officer. Customers, however, need to be referred on to specialists in many instances, which means the service is not seamless as it is dependent on the availability of specialist staff.
- 54 Advisory functions are generally reactive. A development team approach is available, although not actively promoted, for applicants for major developments. Planning staff and other Council staff who are in a position to advise on applications meet fortnightly in a 'majors forum' to resolve potential difficulties. However, the approach does not involve outside input, for example from highways, archaeology or community safety advisors and is primarily aimed at supporting the needs of the case officer and not the applicant. The service's planning charter is very narrowly-focused on first time applicants. The availability of pre-application advice is referred to in the charter but is not actively promoted or supported. Up until very recently the Council itself referred to significant limitations in providing access to pre-application advice.

- 55 The reorganisation of the service in 2005 has not led to clear benefits that customers would recognise in all areas of the service. There is improved integration of planning policy, regeneration and community planning activities, and the enforcement team is beginning integrate the monitoring of conditions and delivery of planning obligations into its work. The co-location of development control and building control has provided better informal contact between officers, but this has not yet been turned to the advantage of the customer in terms of improvement in customer service.

Town centre regeneration and ensuring village vitality

- 56 The service has been effective in enabling a number of town centre developments in the past three years in Hinckley, while progressing plans for comprehensive development. Environmental improvements will be familiar to town centre users. The pedestrianisation of Regent Street took place in 2003 following extensive work by the planning service, and improvements to the open space environment are currently taking place at Argents Mead with the help of developer contributions from development in the vicinity.
- 57 The service has also encouraged development that will increase the vitality of Hinckley through increasing the resident population of the town centre in accordance with government guidance. Under-used upper floors over existing shops have been converted to provide 'living over the shop' accommodation, and development of a prominent site on Wood Street provides both residential and retail uses.
- 58 There has, however, been limited progress securing development as part of a comprehensive approach to town centre regeneration. A site-by-site approach was finally superseded by a masterplanning process in 2004, leading to the adoption of the town centre masterplan in December 2005. The Council made rapid progress in developing and adopting the plan although this plan has been brought forward ahead of agreeing the core spatial strategy for the district. The town centre masterplan follows the success of the Druid's quarter masterplan on the north-east side of the town centre.
- 59 The Druid's quarter masterplan adopted in 2002 has enabled a number of key buildings important to the industrial heritage of the borough to be retained in employment use. Parts of the area were designated a conservation area, and together with the use of regeneration grants, the service has made an important contribution to preserving the identity and enhancing the vitality of the area.
- 60 The employment study of land in current use or allocated for employment use 2004 has increased the Council's ability to make planning decisions based on an up-to-date assessment of the employment potential. The study is now providing significant weight in decision-making and this has recently been successfully tested at appeal with regard to applications for change of use of town centre employment sites. The study is weakened by the lack of an economic development or regeneration strategy for the borough, but this work is currently in hand.

- 61 The service has ensured larger settlements away from Hinckley, which is in the south-east corner of the borough, have also benefited from the development of under-utilised sites, such as at Market Bosworth. Ex-coalfield communities in the north of the borough such as at Bagworth have benefited from large scale housing redevelopment and sustained regeneration effort. However, there is little evidence of the contribution by the planning service to the vitality and viability of smaller settlements. This remains a key task to be addressed in the future local development framework.

Creating distinctive places

- 62 Overall the planning service is effective in preserving and enhancing the built and natural heritage of the borough. The service aims to create distinctive places and it achieves this through an effective conservation service. Advice is provided to case officers and to the public, for example, over changes to single dwellings in sensitive sites and in relation to retention of buildings which are part of the industrial heritage of the borough. The service also manages a longstanding environmental improvement programme, which supports improvements to the public realm such as to boundaries, steps and paving. The programme helps foster local community interest and stewardship of local heritage.
- 63 The service has had mixed success in providing up-to-date policies on heritage matters that are important to local communities. The service been very proactive in preparing a borough-wide landscape character assessment, which is well regarded by planners within the county. A stone wall guide was developed in response to local interest. The borough's planners have recently facilitated the development of a village design statement for Burbage through the final stages, including an in-house sustainability appraisal, to its adoption. However, only 2 of the borough's 26 conservation area appraisals are up-to-date, and production of a public arts planning policy has had to be shelved due to a lack of resources. These shortcomings inhibit the Council's ability to create distinctive places.
- 64 The contribution the enforcement function has made to maintaining a distinctive borough has been limited in the past, according to the perceptions of parish and borough councillors. However, the function is rapidly improving. The service is providing good case handling with nearly all complaints (94 per cent) receiving an acknowledgement within three days and a response outlining the Council's proposed action within 15 working days during 2005/06. Figures for the use of enforcement powers show that the function is prepared to use a wide range of measures available to it. The service seeks to resolve difficulties first in most instances. But it also uses measures such as enforcement notices, temporary stop notices, breach of conditions notices and planning contravention notices more frequently compared to all other planning authorities. The service is not yet good at evaluating its effectiveness, but there are plans to develop this.

- 65 The service has a clear focus on improving design as part of its remit in controlling and enabling development. The service is able to offer advice from planners with architectural and urban design training, and councillors are developing their specialist interests through the appointment of design and environmental stewardship champions. Design statements have been a requirement to accompany applications for new dwellings for several years. These measures are resulting in a greater emphasis, in accordance with government guidance, on high quality design in the borough.
- 66 The use of developer contributions to create distinctive places has been variable. The Council has secured a reasonable range of community benefits, including local transport and affordable housing. Arrangements from managing developers' contributions are good, but the rationale for the benefits sought by the Council has not been consistently strong. Much of the total contribution towards open space, (in excess of £1 million) was secured prior to the adoption in 2004 of the Council's green space strategy. Parish councils, which receive around half of these open space contributions, have not been influential in identifying the community benefits that these sums should support and they now seek a greater say. Government guidance indicates that local communities should have a wider say in the use of developer contributions and this will ensure the planning service makes a stronger contribution towards creating distinctive places.

Delivering affordable housing

- 67 Planning policy is making a small, but significant contribution towards meeting the need for affordable housing in the borough. In the three years to 2004 planning permissions were granted for, an average, 85 affordable housing units per year. In 2004/05, 57 units were built towards the borough-wide overall target (Housing strategy 2005/8) of 254 affordable housing units per year, out of a total 340 houses per year structure plan requirement. In addition, the rural exceptions policy has been used twice in recent years to provide affordable housing in two villages where such housing would have been unlikely to be provided otherwise. The Council recognises the need to increase its delivery of affordable housing, and it is looking to set appropriate policies in place in the local development framework.
- 68 The planning service is contributing towards sustainable communities in accordance with government guidance. The Crest development of 400 houses at Coventry Road in Hinckley achieves medium (30 to 40 dwellings per hectare) housing densities, although the majority of houses built in 2004/05 across the borough were built at a lower density. The Crest development provides a mix of dwelling types including affordable housing with different tenures, quality in design, and transport infrastructure to contribute to a sustainable community. The Persimmon development of 80 live-work dwellings at Market Bosworth built between 2003 and 2006 encourages fewer car journeys. By enabling such developments, the service is making a significant contribution to longer-term environmental sustainability and cohesive communities.

Meeting national priorities

- 69 Although its track record is variable, the service is now performing well in determining planning applications according to national targets. This is a key national priority for planning services. Performance information for 2005/06 indicates that the Council is performing above the standard set for all three categories of application to be achieved by all councils by 2006/07. The Council has, however, been designated a planning standards authority twice in the past four years for poor or variable performance in handling major applications.
- 70 The planning service has an up-to-date local plan and the service is making steady progress towards the local plan's replacement. Since April 2005, some key milestones in the new plan-making process have been achieved although progress has slipped or been halted on others. It is a national priority to have key elements of the new local development framework in place by the time the current local plan becomes out-of-date in 2007. Due to a delay of more than one year in the progress of the core strategy there have been delays to other key planning documents which will make this difficult. However, Government Office for the East Midlands has commended the service for the way it has aligned its spatial planning and community planning processes, for its effective consultation and for developing distinctiveness within plans.
- 71 The Council is not making a strong contribution to limit its impact on the environment. The planning service has secured green travel plans for key developments, but the Council's own green travel plan has been hampered since 2000 by uncertainty over the future location of the main Council offices. The Council has invested in plans to improve energy efficiency and biodiversity but progress in implementing plans has suffered from a lack of sustained focus. The Council's lack of community leadership on broader environmental issues risks undermining the contribution of others.
- 72 The Council is not performing well in ensuring a high level of reuse of previously developed land (ie 'brownfield' land) for building new houses. The Council consistently performs below national expectations (60 per cent) although it just exceeded regional expectations (50 per cent) in 2005/06. In addition, the service has not been able to secure community benefits through the planning process that would prevent the deterioration of around half of the borough's 125 hectares of sites of specialist scientific interest (SSSIs).

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 73 The planning service does not provide good value for money given the cost of the service to the local community, the priority the Council places on the service, the range and quality of services available, and the performance of key aspects of the service. This is due to limitations in achieving a customer focus, the limited availability of a 'one team' approach and lack of clear evidence of customer satisfaction.

- 74 The costs per head for the service have been consistently above the average for the near neighbour group for the past three years. The borough has an above average population and below average number of planning applications per year in comparison with near neighbour planning authorities. Both factors should contribute to better than average value for money being achieved.
- 75 Priority has been given to the planning service. There has been an increase in resources year-on-year for the last three years, an increase in management attention and an increase in expectations for the performance of some aspects of the service. The relatively high level of resources the service now receives in relation to other near neighbour councils and in relation to the overall share of borough's revenue budget reflects this priority. However, the high priority given to the service is not matched to a comprehensive improvement agenda for the service.
- 76 The Council provides a reasonable range of planning services given the size of the district, but service quality is variable. The service includes a good conservation function and a rapidly improving enforcement team. However, several experienced staff have left the service in the past two years, and there has been significant staff turnover in development control and planning policy. There is some concern voiced by stakeholders, such as statutory consultees and applicants, about the lack of continuity of planning staff and that this is leading to variable service levels. While there is no evidence to indicate this is having an adverse impact on the quality of planning decisions, it is having an impact on the perceptions of the quality of customer service, as is the lack of a 'one team' approach.
- 77 Case-loads for both development control and enforcement are broadly within the government guideline figures in order to strike a reasonable balance between efficiency and effectiveness. The planning policy team of five officers and the workload of the team are broadly similar to those of near neighbour authorities. The planning service is beginning to develop a more flexible way of working, for example through home working and the use of planning technicians to handle some of the more straightforward matters.
- 78 The service has a variable track record in relation to the speed of handling all planning applications, but it is now performing well in relation to government expectations. It provides variable performance in other areas where there are national performance indicators. It has delivered good planning outcomes in relation to building sustainable communities and creating distinctive places. There has been mixed success in keeping plans up-to-date. Information on customer satisfaction is limited.

- 79 The Council has received only a limited share of planning delivery grant. Of 16 near neighbour authorities, the Council has received the second lowest share of PDG⁶ over the four years to date. But the Council has been quite successful in obtaining external funding. In addition to developer contributions, the Council has secured discretionary funding from EMDA⁷ for environmental improvements and specific planning studies.
- 80 The decision-making process generally leads to effective decisions. There are relatively few overturns, appeals, successful appeals or instances of the awarding of costs against the Council. Decision-making is also reasonably efficient since relatively high levels of delegation are achieved and applications are not called into the planning committee unnecessarily. Planning applications receive an adequate level of internal challenge, and arrangements ensure resources are not wasted on defending unsound decisions.

⁶ The Council has received £640,000 in the four years to date. The Council's allocation is second lowest on a per capita basis too.

⁷ EMDA is the East Midlands' regional development agency.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 81 There have been recent improvements in the service, some of which are key to delivering corporate aims. However, the track record of delivering customer-focused improvement has been inconsistent and the outcome of some improvement effort is difficult to demonstrate. The Council does not know whether customer satisfaction is improving.
- 82 The service has significantly improved its performance in processing planning applications quickly during the last 15 months, although this has been at the expense of improvement in other aspects of service quality. The Council has been designated a Planning Standards Authority by the government for its poor performance in processing major applications within government timescales twice within the last four years. In response, the service put in place an improvement plan (September 2004) and the Council increased investment in, and focus on, the service. As a result, performance for all three types of application measured by BV109 improved during 2005/06 and all exceeded government standards. The Council's own monitoring information shows that in-year performance for 2006/07 has continued to improve. The longer-term track record is inconsistent.
- 83 The service has improved in other areas measured by national PIs. Between 2003/04 and 2005/06 it has consistently reduced the level of appeals allowed from 40 per cent to 29 per cent. It has increased its score against the best value quality checklist for planning (BV205) from 78 per cent in 2004/05 to 94.5 per cent in 2005/06. The proportion of decisions delegated to officers has increased consistently during the last three years from 84 per cent in 2003/04 to 89 per cent in 2005/06, contributing to a more efficient service. It has recently improved its e-planning as measured by the Pendleton criteria to 18 out of 21, but from a low base. There has been some improvement in sustainable development during the last three years shown by increasing the proportion of housing development using brownfield land from 31 per cent in 2003/04 to 51 per cent in 2005/06, a level just above regional expectations.
- 84 Planning enforcement has improved. Helped by recent increased investment, doubling the size of the team, many longstanding cases have been resolved, although work to address the backlog means that new complaints are not being handled more quickly yet. Councillors are now better informed about case progress. However, the service has not yet developed robust success measures for some aspects. For example, the fact that the service has been reactive is a key stakeholder concern, but the service has not set targets for monitoring planning conditions to ensure a more proactive approach. Improvements need some time to be recognised by stakeholders such as parish councils.

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

- 85 There has been a limited focus on service improvement as measured by local performance indicators. The service has adopted measures, such as a 15-day response target for enforcement complaints, or a 3-day target for validating planning applications. However, performance against such targets has not been consistently measured so there is no track record of improvement against these measures.
- 86 The service does not know how satisfied its customers are. The most recent nationally comparable data from the triennial Best Value survey shows the Council's customers to be among the least satisfied nationally, with satisfaction with the service in the bottom quartile (41 per cent). This dates from 2000/01, but there is limited evidence of improvement since. The Council did not supply data for the survey in 2003/04 and the service has not given attention to gathering its own information about satisfaction levels, meaning it is unable to update this picture. A very recent citizen's panel survey is yielding some more positive messages, but the analysis is incomplete.
- 87 The development control service does not have a strong track record of improving customer service. It has made recent changes designed to improve service users' experience but these are often partial or incomplete and there has not been a sustained focus on identifying opportunities. For example:
- it has recently changed its previous 'duty officer' approach to a rota system which means that planning case officers are more accessible, although case officers have 'on-site days' when they are not available. Frequent applicants and councillors are unaware of the change in approach;
 - the service has made improvements to electronic access such as an online planning application service. It is making progress in scanning documents such as planning conditions and enforcement notices to make them more accessible to the public. However, parts of the website providing advice or explaining the standards of service have broken links or out-of-date information; and
 - there have been improvements to planning committee such as better use of visuals for committee members, the reinstatement of public speaking and improved reports, but there are still limitations. For example, the decision-making process remains unclear to those who observe the planning committee. This is an area of ongoing focus, with, for example, agreement for new screens in the gallery to enable the public to see the information that members are using when reaching their decisions.
- 88 The prospects for regenerating Hinckley town have improved following the adoption of the Town Centre Masterplan. It is a more ambitious and comprehensive programme than the Council's previously limited approach, and has secured cross-party commitment. It is underpinned by important building blocks such as an employment land study, a spatial strategy and a task group working on transport, car parking and traffic. Some improvements in the town centre have already been made, such as redevelopment in the Druid's Quarter, the Atkins building and Queen Street.

- 89** The green space strategy is now enabling better use of developers' contributions to make environmental improvements, improving the provision of open space in local communities. Resources are being used more strategically in accordance with the green space strategy, for example, for play space at Boston Way in Barwell and the Argents Mead enhancement project in Hinckley. The green space action plan sets out spending of £3.5 million over three years for similar projects and enhancements.
- 90** Consultation as part of the process of developing the borough's planning framework has significantly improved, and the Council's strategic planning is beginning to benefit from more co-ordinated community engagement. The community and corporate plans build on the same body of knowledge which has informed the local development framework, helping to ensure a more consistent focus on local priorities in the Council's main strategic plans.
- 91** The service is not able to evaluate improvement in value for money achieved either through efficiency savings or through recent investments. It has received significant investment and some aspects of performance have improved. However, the service's understanding of value for money has not improved and it lacks the means to demonstrate whether overall improvement is commensurate with the level of resources received.
- 92** The Council and the service have made slow progress with diversity and equalities. The Council has not yet achieved the first level of the Equalities Standard for Local Government, and has not fully implemented its three-year Race Equality Scheme action plan adopted in 2002. There is now increased corporate focus on the issue, and consultants have been engaged to help the Council move forward. In the meantime, although customer services' staff at reception are responsive to the individual needs of customers, the corporate and service framework remains weak.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 93** The service's improvement planning is not sufficiently wide-ranging, robust or informed to drive customer-focused improvement in the medium to long-term. The vision and aims for the service are developing but are incomplete. Although professional leadership is good, councillor leadership is not consistent, and the improvement focus of the service has been narrow. Improved performance management has contributed to significant improvement in processing planning applications quickly, but is less effective in improving other aspects of the service. The service does not focus on improving value for money.
- 94** The Council is ensuring good links between community and corporate aims and priorities and planning policy. A more integrated approach to consultation and policy development is leading to improvement in the alignment of strategic, community and corporate plans, although some plans have not yet been adopted.

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

- 95 The Council is at an early stage of developing a clear planning vision for the borough. While there are clear aims and priorities for town centre renaissance, the planning vision for the borough as a whole is not yet clear or corporately owned, and is inconsistently expressed by councillor leadership. For example, there is no borough-wide regeneration or economic development strategy yet, and the profile given to the focus on attracting cultural industries to the Hinckley town centre varies. There is inconsistent appreciation of the role that planning can play in delivering local priorities.
- 96 The vision for service is emerging, but it is not shared with stakeholders and is not central to the service's improvement planning. The vision 'to achieve attractive, high quality, safe and distinctive places in the borough through high standards of service, excellent customer care and investment in our staff' was developed at an event in July 2006 with wide involvement across the service, but without input from service users and other stakeholders. It identifies a range of relevant areas for improvement focus, but these have not yet had time to influence improvement plans.
- 97 Councillor leadership is variable. Leading councillors are clear about the priority given to the service, aspire to excellence and are committed to the planning function overall. However, they express an inconsistent and sometimes narrow vision for the service, and some other councillors show a lack of support for the function. This inconsistent corporate approach is not helping the service achieve the excellence that councillors aspire to.
- 98 Professional and operational leadership is good. Managers lead by example and represent the function well in terms of technical knowledge, including in committee. Staff are motivated by the leadership style in the day-to-day management of the service.
- 99 Improvement plans are not yet wide-ranging and sufficiently comprehensive to drive improvement in the medium-term. For example, the current service plan for development control has a narrow focus, and is not well informed by a robust understanding of what is important to service users. The action plan from the peer review has a wider scope but is still not well-focused on improvements to the service that people will recognise, or on tackling some of the issues facing the service in the medium to long-term. For example, there is no clear plan to improve customer focus, or to tackle the clear need to develop human resource capacity in a way that is sustainable in the longer-term. As part of the corporately agreed business development planning cycle, the service is in the process of developing its next service plan to reflect the new service vision and integrate the action plan from the peer review. However, at the time of the inspection, there is no overall framework to bring together the range of improvement actions, identify their relative priority and provide a clear focus for the service's improvement efforts.

- 100** Improvement plans do not set out a robust, deliverable framework for delivering improvements that customers will notice. The improvement plan arising from the IDeA peer review lacks firm action to develop the service's customer focus. The current service plan for development control is linked to the relevant corporate objectives, but apart from in relation to national PIs (best value performance indicators) it is not outcome-focused and identifies only short-term actions. It is not supported by more detailed service area or team plans. The key means of managing its delivery is through individual performance and development appraisals (PDAs). They are generally linked to priorities, but are not all specific about outcomes and targets, and the system is not consistently used.
- 101** There is no specific plan to better integrate a customer focus into how the service is delivered. There is consensus on the importance of the customer, from political leadership to frontline staff and frontline staff, in particular are keen to provide a good quality experience to people using the development control service. However, current improvement plans do not include any actions aimed at systematically identifying customer concerns and aspirations, so that they can shape the way the service is delivered. There are corporate plans to transfer significant parts of the service that people receive at the first point of contact to the customer contact centre over the next year, but these plans and their impact do not clearly feature in the service's future plans.
- 102** Corporate performance management has improved. Greater ownership, better information and more robust monitoring has enabled effective focus on improving planning speed (BV109) and, together with a willingness to take action this has led to significant improvements. Effective project management of major applications is supporting sustained improvement in this formerly poorly performing area. However, the framework is less effective in driving performance elsewhere in the service. For example, there is no track record of effective focus and improvement in local PIs, and monitoring of delivery of service plans is undermined by the lack of specific actions and success measures.
- 103** Target setting is not always robust. There is little evidence that the service understands the likely impact of its ambitious future targets for BV109 on performance in other areas important to users. Targets for local PIs are routinely set at 100 per cent, with no analysis of their achievability within the resources available, or of any adverse impact on other aspects of service quality.

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

- 104 The service does not focus on improving value for money. There has been initial analysis of the cost of processing a planning application but this has not been used by the service to understand, compare or improve unit costs. A continuous improvement group within the service identifies process improvements, some of which require investment or the use of agency staff, but there is no cost/benefit analysis. The improved outcomes from the investment the enforcement service has received cannot be quantified. There is little analysis of possible value for money improvements to be gained from the planned transfer of some advice and guidance to the customer contact centre, or of the impact on service capacity. Opportunities for joint working to improve efficiency are not often explored. This weak focus on value for money means the Council cannot be sure that it will secure improvement commensurate with the level of investment it is making in the service.
- 105 The Council is open to learning from others, particularly from external challenge, although it misses some opportunities both to learn and to apply the learning in practice. The Council is open to external scrutiny, and during the last year has invited both a pilot CPA and a peer review from the IDeA's Planning Advisory Service. It has responded to the main issues from the peer review with an action plan, which it is implementing. However, important opportunities are missed to learn from, for example, customer feedback and complaints. Service standards have not been developed with users, are incomplete and are not consistently monitored. Information from complaints is not used to shape the way the service plans to improve. Further opportunities to apply learning from parish councils, site visits to completed developments and appeals have not been taken.
- 106 Internal challenge is weaker and the impact of scrutiny has been mixed. Planning topics have been reviewed by the Council's scrutiny function, such as planning obligations and developer agreements, and the performance of minor planning applications. Members of the scrutiny commission report making a valuable contribution to the local development framework process. However, scrutiny has not been ambitious in extending its remit to look at the performance of the development control service beyond planning speed, such as the quality of the service or the delivery of the peer review improvement plan.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 107 The service has good financial capacity as a result of its prioritisation and some success in securing external resources. Its recent restructuring has improved both the alignment of services, and staffing capacity in both planning policy and development control. Staff changes and the loss of experience present a risk, but in the context of weak corporate workforce planning the service is working hard to develop resilience and harness the enthusiasm of its staff. There is ongoing investment in the development of officer and councillor capacity, but the impact of councillors training has been variable. The service does not routinely explore opportunities to increase capacity through collaboration and partnership.

- 108** The service's financial capacity to improve is good. Because it is a corporate priority, the service has seen a year-on-year increase in investment over the past three years. It has benefited from the Council's improvement reserve, planning delivery grant which has been used in a sustainable way, and is currently exempt from making a contribution through the Council's efficiency savings programme. It now accounts for around 21 per cent of the Council's revenue resources, and the medium-term financial strategy sets out commitment to this level of funding plus inflation for the medium-term. All of these factors provide capacity for the service to improve.
- 109** The restructure has improved alignment of services in some areas. The incorporation of planning policy into a new 'performance, strategy and housing' service has afforded opportunities for greater collaboration, enhancing the quality of corporate and community planning, the cohesiveness of consultation and the integration of performance information. It has increased the capacity of the planning service to enable improvement in areas such as affordable housing and securing better use of green space.
- 110** In other areas the restructure has not yet resulted in tangible benefits. Development services now bring together building control, development control enforcement and administration, but it is too early to see any impact of the restructure that service users would recognise. New ways of working have not yet been established and there remains scope to share learning and resources. Staff and managers in both development control and planning policy are working hard to ensure that communication and joint working do not suffer and lead to deteriorating service quality as a result of the structural changes.
- 111** Staff capacity has improved across the service. A new senior enforcement officer is bringing many longstanding cases to resolution, and reducing the backlog of complaints. A second has been appointed to increase capacity further, with the aim of enabling the service to be more proactive, although the degree of improvement targeted is not clear. As part of the restructure, the planning policy team and the development control team have both been enhanced by an extra post.
- 112** The corporate approach to workforce planning has been weak. The Council has made slow progress in addressing people issues, has a limited approach to diversity and equality, and until recently lacked some key policies to support good human resource management such as an absence management policy. Although these are now in place, a more strategic approach to planning and developing human resources capacity has not yet been developed. This is important because the planning service, in common with many councils nationally, faces significant challenges in recruiting and training qualified and experienced staff.

- 113** Within this framework, the service is working hard to maximise its human resource capacity. It needed to recover from a significant loss of experience two years ago. The staffing establishment has been increased and the service is now almost fully staffed. It has invested in its ability to recruit and retain officers in a range of ways, such as a 'grow your own' graduate officer development scheme, the encouragement and support of developing specialisms such as urban design, sustainability and landscaping, and a number of means of harnessing enthusiasm. Training and development opportunities are offered to meet both the needs of the service and the aspirations of staff, increasing their motivation and the service's chances of retaining them. This is helping build a team of enthusiastic staff with varied experience, a willingness to take on new challenges and work in new ways, and a commitment to the Council as an employer.
- 114** However, the lack of continuity in planning experience presents a risk to future improvement. In development control, it is impacting on the service experienced by stakeholders and perception of the service, both internal and external. For example, stakeholders cite inconsistency in the advice received and the interpretation of guidelines and policy. In planning policy, there is limited depth of experience and knowledge of the borough, given the challenges ahead. The service managed for the past nine months without a principal planner responsible for the local development framework. Where the Council has retained experienced staff, it does not always maximise use of them, and is limiting its ability to attract experienced officers by responding reactively to market pressures rather than collaborating with partners such as other local authorities in more creative approaches.
- 115** The service has increased capacity in support services that will enable planning to improve. Legal support has been significantly increased and this is already helping the enforcement service tackle difficult cases and deal more quickly with complaints. It will also support the drafting of planning obligations and increase capacity to advise the committee on probity issues. Information and communications technology capacity to support more efficient processes and better access for customers has also increased. The new technical team in planning has increased planning officer capacity by undertaking some of their more straightforward tasks.
- 116** The Council is increasing capacity by securing additional resources from a range of sources to make improvements to the local environment. For example, it has committed £35,000 for three years to improve the Druid Quarter, and has attracted, from English Heritage and Leicestershire Economic Partnership, an extra £100,000 for each of the years. Its improved strategic basis for securing developer contributions means it is securing more from developers for priority open space projects. The service has secured heritage resources through the government's HERS⁸ programme, and from EMDA for work such as the Atkins Building feasibility study and the employment land study. However, the Council has had mixed success in securing PDG over the past four years, although it has used this funding in a sustainable way.

⁸ Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme programme resources are available through the Government.

- 117** The Council is making steady progress in anticipating and building the capacity it needs to deliver the Hinckley town centre masterplan. Its current capacity and experience is limited. The Town Centre Partnership is not long established, and there is not a strong body of experience or a dedicated resource in the Council to achieve town centre regeneration. However, a programme management approach is being adopted supported by a team drawn from across all service areas to lead on each of the eight key sites. The Council has used consultants effectively to identify appropriate partnership options for delivering key elements of the town centre development. A significant consultancy budget has been secured for the first year, and a portion of reserve fund earmarked for beyond. Following an EMDA master-planning workshop in March 2006, the Council is championing the concept of a virtual urban development company with other district councils.
- 118** However, the service does not have a good track record of securing extra capacity through joint working with partners. For example, the service has been slow to seize opportunities to commission joint studies, or jointly recruit with other neighbouring councils. It has not sought to increase its capacity to deliver the local development framework through working jointly with other councils.
- 119** There has been variable impact on councillors from the range of capacity-building measures that have been put in place over the last 18 months. Councillors have benefited from one-to-ones to identify individual needs, and there has been significant investment in training and development through LRIP. Some specific issues identified by the Peer Review as having an impact on transparency and probity have been acted upon recently, such as a revised protocol for site visits, a revised code of conduct and the ending of political group meetings before planning committee. Some training is to be made mandatory to ensure that all planning committee members are properly equipped to participate. However, it remains to be seen what impact these measures will have.

Appendix 1 – Planning best value performance indicators (BVPIs)

- 1 Table 1 below details planning specific performance indicators used in the report.

Table 1

BVPI	2003/04	Quartile	2004/05	Quartile	2005/06	Quartile (DCLG)	2005/06 target	2006/07 target
BVPI 109a of major applications determined within 13 weeks	36%	Worst	63%	2nd	64%	3rd	55%	70%
BVPI 109b of major applications determined within 8 weeks	62%	2nd	59%	Worst	79%	2nd	65%	80%
BVPI 109c of major applications determined within 8 weeks	84%	2nd	81%	3rd	88%	2nd	88%	90%
BVPI 106 Percentage of new homes built on previously developed land	31%	Worst	46%	Worst	51%	4th	45%	47%
BVPI 200a&b Plan making – plan has been adopted in the past five years	N/A	N/A	Yes	As per 80% of LAs				
BVPI 204 percentage of appeals allowed against the authorities decision to refuse permission	N/A	N/A	38%	3rd	29%	2nd	33%	24%
BVPI 205 Quality of service checklist	N/A	N/A	78%	3rd	94%	1st	81%	100%
BVPI 111 Percentage of applicants satisfied with service provided	2000/01 41%	Worst	2003/04 no data					

Source: Nationally collected and reported BVPIs

- 2 Table 2 details other planning specific performance indicators used in the report, in addition to those prescribed (or no longer prescribed) nationally.

Table 2

Other PIs collected and reported locally	2003/04	Quartile	2004/05	Quartile	2005/06	Quartile	2005/06 target	2006/07 target
(BVPI 204) Percentage of appeals allowed against the authorities decision to refuse permission	40%		38%	3rd	29%	2nd	33%	24%
Number of appeals determined (comparison is with near neighbours)	20	32 Ave	28	31 Ave	29	54 Ave		
Cost of planning (net, services included in inspection) per capita (CIPFA)	£6.77	£6.20 Ave	£7.82	£6.78 Ave	£8.47 Est	£7.24 Ave		£10.58
Pendleton score e-planning	1/21	Worst	6/21	Worst	18/21	3rd		
(BVPI 188) Decisions delegated to officers as a percentage of all decisions	84%	3rd	86%		89%			
No of planning applications decided			1,182		1,179			1,400

Source: Nationally or locally collected and reported PIs, not all subject to external audit