

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Newark and Sherwood District 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 and Improvement

Executive summary

- 3 Newark and Sherwood District Council has improved since the last corporate assessment in 2003 when it was rated 'fair'. It is now a 'good' council.
- 4 The Council's ambitions meet the needs of the area. Ambitions are based on good consultation, sound data and are well aligned with county wide partners. The Council is using its understanding of the district effectively to shape its aims and objectives and bring about noticeable improvement. It recognises that radical measures are required for future sustainability and the cornerstone of its ambitions is a Growth Point proposal for Newark, which involves considerable housing growth and significant improvements to the local infrastructure to meet identified needs. Ambitions are challenging and realistic and the Council has shown it is willing to take difficult decisions in support of them. However ambitions are not supported by clear outcome based targets and this is limiting the clarity of understanding among staff and the local community.
- 5 The Council's priorities are based on a sound understanding of local needs and maintain an appropriate balance with national and regional agendas. However, priorities at the corporate level are not clear enough. The Council's strategic planning framework lacks an overarching corporate plan that translates its key aims into specific priorities over a period of time and supports them with clear outcome focused targets. In contrast the Council takes a rigorous approach to identifying its specific service priorities and shifts resources to focus on key objectives. Specific priorities are not well understood outside of the Council and the precise contribution to some LAA targets is unclear.
- 6 The Council has good capacity for improvement, with no areas of significant weakness. Working relationships are good and high standards of conduct are maintained. Finances are well managed and risk management is an integral part of the planning process. Corporate procurement arrangements have secured good savings. Partnering and shared services, in a variety of forms, are enhancing overall capacity. Managerial leadership is strong and becoming increasingly inclusive. Political leadership under the new administration continues to develop positively. Overview and scrutiny arrangements are adequate and improving. Decisions are generally reached in a timely way though ineffective communication sometimes leads to perceptions of inaction. Councillor development lacks a structured approach and progress on aspects of the workforce development plan has been slow, both of which are inhibiting improvement of the capacity of staff and councillors.
- 7 Performance management is adequate. The Council regularly monitors information on projects and performance in a variety of forums. The focus on performance is stronger in some service areas than others. Target-setting, based upon outcomes of relevance to the public, is not embedded into the planning process; the Council frequently sees the completion of an action as success instead of focusing upon the public benefit it is intended to deliver. Good use is made of external accreditation schemes but the response to recommendations from regulatory bodies is inconsistent.

- 8 The Council is achieving good outcomes for local people and it has delivered improvements in all priority areas. It provides a range of good services, such as benefits, housing and cultural services, recognised in performance indicators and by favourable external assessment. It protects and improves the environment: streets are clean, town centres have improved, and parks are attractive and well maintained. It works effectively with partners to develop a more prosperous economy and provide better leisure and health opportunities. It is making a substantial contribution to maintaining safer communities but recent crime trends suggest that some improvements may not be sustainable. Progress towards housing aims is mixed. Residents' overall satisfaction with the Council has increased by 10 per cent in the last three years and is above average. Satisfaction with specific services is mixed.

Areas for improvement

- 9 The Council should improve its strategic planning framework by issuing an overarching corporate plan that translates its key aims into specific priorities over a period of time. This would strengthen the links to service and financial plans and would promote a better understanding of the Council's ambitions among its many stakeholders.
- 10 The Council should invest in developing clear outcome-based measures and targets for each of its priorities, ensuring that they are SMART¹. The focus should be on measuring the community benefits achieved rather than monitoring progress against actions. This should help to improve performance management as it will provide the Council with more focused information to measure performance against.
- 11 The Council should take steps to improve communication of its ambitions, plans and progress both internally and to the public and key stakeholders in order to raise awareness and stimulate constructive dialogue.
- 12 The Council should improve the effectiveness of its approach to assessing the development needs of councillors and delivering appropriate training so that they have the necessary leadership and organisational skills to drive the future challenging agenda of the district.

¹ SMART Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time bound

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*	Weighted score
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	6
	Prioritisation	2	4
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3	6
	Performance management	2	4
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
weighted score			41
CPA category			Good

*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**

**Banding thresholds for determining CPA category

Category	Required score
Excellent	45-60
Good	36-44
Fair	28-35
Weak	21-27
Poor	20 or less

Context

The locality

- 13 Newark and Sherwood District lies on the eastern side of Nottinghamshire. Covering 65,000 hectares, it is the largest district by area in the county. The main town is Newark, in the south-east of the district, which is at a major junction of transport routes, with good rail links to London and Nottingham. To the west and north-west lies part of the former Nottinghamshire coalfield, with a number of former coal-mining communities, the largest of which is Ollerton. The rest of the district is predominantly rural, with scattered villages. The minster town of Southwell lies in this area.
- 14 The population in mid-2006 was estimated to be 111,700. The proportion of children and young people (0-15 years) is 19 per cent – a similar figure to the rest of England. However, the district has a higher proportion of elderly people and a lower proportion of people of working age than the rest of the country. The 2001 census identified that 3 per cent of the population was from a group other than ‘White British’, which is low compared to 8.7 per cent in the East Midlands and 13 per cent nationally. There are high representations of gypsy and traveller families and the long-established African Caribbean, Chinese and Polish communities are integrated well within Newark. More recently an increasing number of new migrants from Eastern European nations have come to the area. Racial incidents are low and there is little evidence of community tensions.
- 15 Newark and Sherwood’s economy shares many characteristics with that of the wider sub-region which has undergone significant changes from its industrial past, reducing its dependence on agriculture, coal mining and manufacturing. Just under half of the workforce is employed in distribution and public administration.
- 16 When measured on the national deprivation index, Newark and Sherwood ranks 143 out of 354 authorities (1 being most deprived). The two most deprived wards in the district are in the top 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. Unemployment is 4.7 per cent (December 2006) which is below both the regional and national figures (5.2 and 5.3 per cent). A large number of people work in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. Education and skill levels are low, reflecting the area’s economic legacy. Annual income levels are below the regional and national averages - £21,148 compared to £22,178 and £23,379 respectively.
- 17 Life expectancy in the area is slightly above the national average and 67.3 per cent of the population are able to record ‘good’ general health. However, the area has high smoking and adult obesity rates, high mortality rates from illnesses and high levels of disability.

- 18 Owner occupation levels are slightly below the regional average and house prices vary significantly, with the south-west area being strongly linked to the Nottingham property market. The ratio of house price to earnings means that affordability is an issue for many people.
- 19 Crime levels are significantly lower than the Nottinghamshire average but just above the average of comparator areas elsewhere.

The Council

- 20 The Council is elected every four years. No single party had overall control until the elections in May 2007 when the Conservative group gained a majority. There are 26 Conservative councillors, 6 Labour, 10 independent and 4 Liberal Democrat. The Council has a Leader and Cabinet model in place and a single party executive of seven Conservative councillors with portfolio responsibilities covering: strategic and corporate policy; sustainable development and regeneration; environment; leisure and culture; housing and amenities; finance, procurement and e-government; and democratic involvement and community relations. Three overview and scrutiny committees are in place to cover external relations and partnerships, policy, and services, each chaired by a Conservative councillor.
- 21 The Council employs 800 people (525 full time and 275 part time) led by a management team made up of the Chief Executive and three Strategic Directors. The current Chief Executive is relatively new to the Council having been appointed in 2007. The Council's overall net revenue budget for 2007/08 is approximately £15.7 million. The average Band D council tax in 2007, including county, police, fire and rescue and parish council contributions is £1,540. The District Council element of this is £157.49, an increase of 1.99 per cent over the previous year.
- 22 The Council has set up an arm's length management organisation (ALMO), Newark and Sherwood Homes, to manage its 5,500 housing stock.
- 23 The Council works with public, private and voluntary sector organisations in a range of different partnerships. The Newark and Sherwood Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was formed in 2002 and published its second community strategy in 2006 covering the period to 2012. The main decision making body of the LSP is the partnership board which is chaired by the Leader of the Council. The board coordinates the efforts of separate issues groups that cover the key themes of the community plan. The Council is also working closely with Nottinghamshire County Council and other district councils. In 2006 the Council entered into a formal partnership arrangement with Nottinghamshire County Council and signed up to a countywide local area agreement (LAA) which includes shared targets.
- 24 The Council was assessed as 'fair' in its last CPA report which was published in December 2003.

25 In 2005 the Council adopted a new strategic planning framework with the aim 'to be an excellent performing council'. This included five priorities:

- to encourage economic prosperity for all;
- to provide leisure and health opportunities for all;
- to protect and improve the environment;
- to ensure affordable homes built to modern standards are available for all; and
- to maintain safer communities.

These were supported by six 'delivering excellence' objectives, which were to:

- improve service delivery to the community;
- improve community satisfaction;
- improve operational efficiency;
- improve organisational performance;
- improve employee morale; and
- improve relations with key partners.

26 Following the elections in May 2007 the Council reviewed its aims and priorities and on 11 September 2007, while the inspection team were on site, it adopted a new vision:

'We want Newark and Sherwood's urban and rural communities to take pride in being vibrant, sustainable and having a high quality of life. To achieve this we want to deliver excellent, appropriate services and value for money.'

Five new core priorities, with broad similarities to the old ones, were adopted, to be:

- clean and green;
- safe and strong communities;
- economically vibrant;
- good health and homes; and
- culturally active.

Three supporting priorities were also adopted:

- value for money;
- raising aspirations; and
- accessible and responsive.

These new priorities will be taken into account in service plans for 2008.

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

Ambition

- 27 The Council is performing well in this area. Ambitions are based on good consultation and sound data, and are well aligned with county wide partners. The Council is using its understanding of the district effectively to shape its aims and objectives and bring about noticeable improvement. It recognises that radical measures are required for future sustainability and the cornerstone of its ambitions is a Growth Point proposal for Newark, which involves considerable housing growth and significant improvements to the local infrastructure to meet identified needs. Ambitions are challenging and realistic and the Council has shown it is willing to take difficult decisions in support of them. However ambitions are not supported by clear outcome based targets and this is limiting the clarity of understanding among staff and the local community.
- 28 The Council's ambitions are challenging, realistic and have led to noticeable improvement in the district. As a relatively small district it has been faced with some challenging issues, such as economic regeneration after the demise of coal mining. Its plans have led to vibrancy in the district, for example the riverside development of Newark. Leisure plans have improved services in the face of ageing facilities. Housing supply is struggling to meet demand despite an average of around 600 new houses a year. Mostly these have been in small developments where it is more difficult to attract significant contributions to affordable housing and local infrastructure needs.
- 29 The Council has recognised that more radical measures are needed for the future and is successfully pursuing a Growth Point proposal for Newark, which is pivotal to its plans. The government's 'New Growth Points' initiative is designed to provide support to local communities who wish to pursue large scale and sustainable growth. Local authorities were invited to submit strategic growth proposals which were sustainable, acceptable environmentally and realistic in terms of infrastructure. The Council's proposal was assessed by the government against published criteria and was one of 29 successful bids across the UK. The proposal would help to deliver significant infrastructure improvements that the Council has identified as necessary for the sustainability of the district. The proposal consists of:
- up to 5,000 new homes, 30 per cent of which will be affordable;
 - a new link road between the A1 and A46;
 - up to 100 hectares of employment land;
 - a 40 hectare country park;
 - a multi-sports hub; and
 - community facilities including four new local centres.

The government is allocating around £65,000 in 2007/08 from the first year's funding pot, to help the Council progress its plans through the local planning process. Delivery of ambitions such as this will have a significant impact on the sustainability of the district.

- 30** Ambitions are well aligned with those of countywide partners. Improving relations with key partners is one of the Council's 'delivering excellence' objectives. The Council's ambitions share a great deal of common ground with the aims of the LAA and LSP and the Council's recent review of its vision has strengthened the links. Actions taken by the Council demonstrate close alignment and strong support for the aims of its partners. Examples include the decision to provide a site for a new police station at a low cost, and actions by leisure services aimed at reducing health inequalities. Supporting partner aims helps to ensure that the Council is able to make an effective contribution to wider community needs.
- 31** The Council's ambitions address the needs of the area and community. The Council engaged well with the public and stakeholders in helping the LSP to develop its second community plan, which covers 2006-2012. It held a wide range of consultation events and used a range of methods to engage with a wide cross section of people over a 12-month period. Ongoing consultation with local groups such as the citizen's panel and the young people's panel helps to keep the Council's knowledge of public opinion up to date. This open and proactive consultation process reflects all sectors of the community and ensures that the Council has a good awareness of local needs.
- 32** The Council has good access to reliable data, which it shares effectively with its partners. For example it has developed a 'state of the district' report that provides a wide range of information such as crime data from the Police, accessibility data from the highway authority and health data from the Primary Care Trust (PCT), all broken down into individual wards. This information is easily accessible to councillors, officers and importantly, the public via the Council's website. Good availability of demographic and performance data helps to ensure that the Council has a good understanding of the needs of the district.
- 33** The Council is using this understanding effectively to shape its aims and objectives. For example its knowledge of rural accessibility issues has led to the development of outreach services for culture. Its awareness of low education and skill levels has led it to focus on developing a larger knowledge sector in the local economy. Good use of intelligence means that the Council is able to tackle issues that will make the most difference to local people.

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- 34 The Council provides effective community leadership in partnership with others. It is a committed and prominent member of the LSP which the Leader of the Council chairs. It is taking the lead in a number of areas. For example it has played a leading role in Nottinghamshire in carrying out a gypsy and traveller accommodation needs assessment and a sub-regional housing market assessment. It is also the lead district for emergency planning in the county and acts for the other Nottinghamshire districts under a service level agreement. The activity of senior officers has been instrumental in delivering significant achievements such as attracting major investment to the district through the Mastercare development; a 100 acre site for a national distribution centre that supports around 1,000 local jobs. Such effective leadership is needed if ambitions are to be delivered.
- 35 The Council is willing to make difficult decisions in support of its ambitions. While ambitions have been traditionally officer-led councillors are growing in their leadership role under the modernised arrangements and have made a number of decisions in the face of strong opposition from different groups and interests. The Growth Point bid is a significant example but there are others such as the introduction of twin bin alternate week recycling, new management arrangements for the Market Place in Newark, and the closure of museums and refocusing of cultural service provision to support the disparate rural communities. Ambitions are less likely to be achieved if there is a lack of willingness to make unpopular decisions.
- 36 Ambitions are not supported by clear outcome-based targets set within an overarching corporate plan. Most of the aims in the key strategies followed by the Council are written in descriptive terms that focus on actions rather than expected outcomes. There are insufficient targets to show the benefits to the community and provide better clarification of the Council's aims. Some strategies require review and realignment such as the economic regeneration strategy 2003-2012. Without clear targets the Council will not know when it has achieved its objectives.
- 37 Stakeholders and the local community do not have a clear understanding of the Council's ambitions. A wide range of communication initiatives have been tried but these are not getting through to all of the stakeholders. The Council is aware of this issue and has created a new post, Head of Communications and Customer Services that has recently been filled. Without a good understanding of key objectives stakeholders such as the public and partners are less able to provide support to the Council in achieving them.

Prioritisation

- 38 The Council is performing adequately in this area. Priorities are based on a sound understanding of local needs and maintain an appropriate balance with national and regional agendas. However, priorities at the corporate level are not clear enough. The Council's strategic planning framework lacks an overarching corporate plan that translates its key aims into specific priorities over a period of time and supports them with clear outcome focused targets. In contrast the Council takes a rigorous approach to identifying its specific service priorities and shifts resources to focus on key objectives. Specific priorities are not well understood outside of the Council and the precise contribution to some LAA targets is unclear.
- 39 The Council's approach to prioritisation is based on a sound understanding of local needs. They reflect the community needs established in the community plan, which were based on good engagement with stakeholders. A systematic approach is taken to ongoing consultation such as a programme of citizen's panel surveys. This includes consultation to gauge public opinion on budget priorities. The Council takes specific measures to include minority groups and has established good relations with the two largest groups - gypsies and travellers and Polish communities. A good understanding of local needs helps to ensure that the most appropriate issues are addressed.
- 40 Priorities at the corporate level are not clear enough. The Council has identified a set of priorities in support of its aims but there is considerable scope for clarification of these. The stated priorities, both old and new, are all-embracing and written in general terms that make it difficult for staff and other stakeholders to understand what the specific priorities are, and what non-priorities are. The Council's strategic planning framework lacks an overarching corporate plan that translates its key aims into specific priorities over a period of time. Current priorities do not fully identify the contribution that actions will make to longer term aims of the Council and its partners. Service priorities are identified in service delivery plans which translate the key priorities into specific actions. These are predominantly annual priorities, though they are intended to be 'indicative' of the priorities for the following two years. Aims are generally not translated into specific medium and longer term priorities and are not supported by clear outcome-focused targets. Clearer long-term priorities and supporting targets are important to ensure that progress is identifiable and is to be sustained beyond a single year.
- 41 In contrast, the Council takes a rigorous approach to identifying its specific service priorities. It has a systematic way of prioritising individual schemes and projects. It has adopted a comprehensive methodology with a wide range of scored criteria and clear descriptions to assess against. The service planning template is comprehensive. It requires services to show linkages, internal and external and take a wide range of issues into account such as resource needs, risk and procurement. It also takes a systematic approach to learning from experience and identifying consultation plans. This approach helps to ensure that the right actions are tackled with regard to importance, relevance and deliverability.

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- 42 The Council shifts resources effectively to deliver its priorities. Feedback from consultation on budget options has helped to identify areas that are important to the public such as cleanliness and community safety. This has led to changes such as the creation of 'litter hit squads' and an anti-social behaviour team. Poorly attended museums have been closed and money diverted to create outreach services that increase accessibility for people in rural areas. The budget opinion survey also identified areas that the public did not consider to be important and this led to cuts in areas such as catering and chairman's costs. The willingness to shift spending from low to high priority areas reflects public opinion and means that the public receives better value for money.
- 43 Priorities maintain an appropriate balance with national and regional agendas but the precise contribution to some LAA targets is unclear. The Council has reviewed its priorities to ensure that they are aligned with the LAA and community plan 2006-2016. Its priorities show a good contribution to national agendas such as reducing health inequalities through leisure services activity. However the Council is unable to prioritise its actions towards some of the shared LAA targets as it has not established with its partners in the Nottinghamshire LSP what the expected contributions of individual districts are to be. Alignment with partner aims is important to ensure that the Council contributes to wider community issues.
- 44 The Council is ineffective in communicating its specific priorities to staff and stakeholders. The main vehicles for identifying specific priorities are the service delivery plans. There are 15 of these and this large number does not help to convey the overall priorities of the Council. The service plans are primarily internal documents that are not readily available to the public and stakeholders. In 2005/06 and 2006/07 the Council published annual 'key issues and priorities' leaflets to keep the public informed about actions planned for the financial year. These have not been prepared in 2007/08 and a consequence is that the Council's website currently has no details of the year's specific priorities and actions. Good communication of priorities is important to increase understanding and maximise the support of the public and other stakeholders.

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

Capacity

- 45 The Council is performing well in this area. Current capacity is strong in some areas and there are no aspects where there are significant weaknesses. Working relationships are good and high standards of conduct are maintained. Finances are well managed and risk management is an integral part of the planning process. Corporate procurement arrangements have secured good savings. Partnering and shared services, in a variety of forms, are enhancing overall capacity. Managerial leadership is strong and becoming increasingly inclusive. Political leadership under the new administration continues to develop. Overview and scrutiny arrangements are adequate and improving. Decisions are generally reached in a timely way though ineffective communication sometimes leads to perceptions of inaction. Councillor development lacks a structured approach and progress on aspects of the workforce development plan has been slow; these are inhibiting improvement of the capacity of staff and councillors.
- 46 Working relationships within the Council are good and decisions are taken in a collaborative, open and constructive way. The Council's constitution clearly sets out the structural framework for decision making and defines the roles and responsibilities to be adopted by councillors and officers. Information is readily exchanged and issues frequently discussed by portfolio holders and senior managers. The Council conducts business in accordance with the constitution and in a collaborative way. Decisions are openly reported and published on the Council's intranet and web site. Good working relationships, a well defined structural framework and transparent reporting increase the likelihood of quality decision making.
- 47 The Council maintains sound ethical standards. The constitution defines the framework for ethical behaviour by councillors and officers and is supported by an adopted code of conduct. In September 2007 the Council declined early adoption of a new model code of conduct prepared by the Department for Communities and Local Government which will come into force in October 2007. Instead, it remains governed by its existing code until the replacement code comes into force. Complaints of inappropriate behaviour are few, are properly investigated, and, when found to be substantiated, the Council's response has been proportionate and correct.

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- 48** Managerial leadership is strong, and political leadership is strengthening. In spring 2007 the Council appointed a new Chief Executive who is supported by a long established senior management team. Traditionally, many of the Council's initiatives have been officer-led, with councillor endorsement and support to maintain strategic direction. Since the last election the balance is changing and the political role is strengthening. Leadership is becoming increasingly inclusive between councillors and senior officers, as illustrated by workshops to devise new priorities. Service heads provide good support to Cabinet members whose portfolios are cross cutting rather than service based. Strong officer support for councillors coupled with clear leadership by councillors is essential for the Council to be effective.
- 49** The Council's commitment to partnering and shared services significantly enhances its capacity. There are numerous examples where the Council operates in partnership or jointly with other agencies to provide its services cost effectively. It shares services with other councils such as building control, legal services and concessionary fares. Other instances include combining its crime and disorder partnership with neighbouring Bassetlaw, and adopting a lead role for emergency planning on behalf of all district councils in Nottinghamshire. Relationships with the voluntary sector are good and the Council's production of training and support materials for parish councils demonstrates its commitment to the community sector. Joint operations provide opportunities to reduce costs and increase effectiveness.
- 50** Financial management is effective, financial standing is sound and the Council demonstrates a sustained commitment to value for money. The Council actively manages its budgets and asset base. Areas of higher spending are justified by alignment to priorities and remedial action is promptly taken to address potential overspend. There are good examples of income generation and efficiency saving targets have been consistently met. The medium term financial plan reflects the Council's stated ambitions but will need to be reviewed in light of the new priorities and developments with the Growth Point project.
- 51** Corporate procurement arrangements are strong and effective. The Council has a comprehensive procurement strategy and, particularly by combining its activities with neighbouring authorities, has achieved significant savings for example in purchasing replacement refuse vehicles and securing ICT disaster recovery capability. Work continues to ensure full departmental compliance with the strategy but overall the arrangements are good. Effective use is made of consultants to fill skill gaps where appropriate, such as to progress the Growth Point proposals. Procurement practices are contributing to effective service delivery while saving both effort and money.

- 52 Risk management is an embedded and integral part of the Council's planning. A risk management strategy has been devised and is supported by a comprehensive corporate risk register. Service plans also contain risk analyses and identify management strategies for those events where the risk is above an acceptable level. Risk registers and plans are regularly updated to reflect changing circumstances. The Council's investment in this activity helped to mobilise a response to the flooding experienced by the district in summer 2007, minimised the impact and aided efforts to return to normality. Effective risk management reduces the likelihood and impact of identified but unpredictable events.
- 53 Investments in ICT and e-government are leading to improved access to services and information. Progress on e-procurement and electronic access to services (now at 100 per cent) has been strong. The Council has embarked upon a £900,000 project to refresh its ICT infrastructure, increase resilience, improve energy efficiency and provide a reliable platform for future development. The web site is regularly assessed against external performance and accessibility criteria and further enhancements are planned. Improvements in electronic services deliver efficiency benefits to councils and give the public better access to information.
- 54 Overview and scrutiny (O and S) arrangements are adequate and improving. The Council's three O and S committees are supported by a range of task and finish groups with an agreed forward work-plan. The creation of an audit and accounts committee has further strengthened risk management. Extracting maximum benefit from the O and S function is proving a challenge to the Council, which it acknowledges. The recent appointment of governing party chairs to all O and S committees under the new administration has affected the balance of scrutiny and is not yet improving the degree of challenge. A call-in system exists but is seldom used as councillors find the procedure cumbersome. Nonetheless, there have been instances when O and S has proved to be particularly effective, for example the review of communications and reviewing projects to ensure maximum social dividend is secured. Ensuring consistent and effective use of the O and S process enhances a council's capacity.
- 55 Communication with the public and partners is not wholly effective. The Council generally reaches decisions in a timely way but ineffective communication sometimes leads to perceptions of inaction. The Council is engaged in a number of complex and interdependent negotiations surrounding future developments in the district. Negotiations of this nature take time which has been misinterpreted by some members of the public and Council partners as unnecessary delay and inactivity. A degree of confidentiality has to surround these arrangements but the Council's communications efforts have not conveyed reality and have resulted in some unfounded concerns.

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

- 56 The Council is taking a structured approach to developing the leadership and organisational skills of councillors but so far this is having limited impact. It has devised a comprehensive induction and training programme to support new and existing councillors to enhance their knowledge and skills. This consists of 24 sessions, from May to October 2007. Immediately following the elections in May this year these sessions were well attended but this has now declined to disappointing levels. The Council has aspirations to achieve East Midlands Regional Councillor Development Charter Standards but is not yet meeting all of the requirements. In particular it is not consistently assessing the individual needs of all councillors and developing leadership skills to drive the future agenda. The limited effectiveness of the Council's approach means that it is not maximising the competence, leadership and capacity of councillors.
- 57 The Council has not achieved consistent progress with its workforce development plan. This was adopted in 2006 to address key personnel related issues. Some of these have been progressed and represent significant developments for example the job evaluation and moderation programme and the annual appraisal scheme. However, limited capacity has inhibited progress on other issues and timescales are slipping. For example, despite recent improvements, sickness levels remain well above the target specified in the plan and related data quality issues are undermining the effectiveness of management practices. Also progress on improving the proportion of minority communities in the workforce has been poor. The lack of progress on some aspects of the workforce development plan is inhibiting improvement of staff capacity.

Performance management

- 58 The Council is performing adequately in this area. It regularly monitors information on projects and performance in a variety of forums. The focus on performance is stronger in some service areas than others. Target-setting, based upon outcomes of relevance to the public, is not embedded into the planning process; the Council frequently sees the completion of an action as success instead of focusing upon the public benefit it is intended to deliver. Good use is made of external accreditation schemes but the response to recommendations from regulatory bodies is inconsistent.
- 59 Reporting structures to support performance management are in place and are being strengthened. The Council captures information from a variety of sources to support community, demographic and performance analysis, for example the 'state of the district' review. This information is used to support partners, including the LSP, and internally. Cabinet and the corporate management team (CMT) currently monitor performance quarterly but CMT now plans to increase the frequency to monthly reviews. Existing data quality and analysis is satisfactory and uses internally developed spreadsheets to aid presentation. The Council has a three year action plan to enhance these arrangements including the use of commercial performance management software from April 2008. Reliable information, analysed in a meaningful and accessible way, aids effective performance management.

- 60 In strategic and service planning the Council is not sufficiently focused on targeted outcomes of value to the public. Whilst there are clear exceptions, strategic and service plans rely too heavily on action-based activities with insufficient reference to target-driven improvements that will be of obvious benefit to local communities. Actions and projects are being monitored against timescales, spending and milestones but success has to be measured in terms of community benefit rather than Council effort.
- 61 The Council's corporate reporting arrangements are not sufficiently focused on its priorities. Cabinet and the CMT regularly consider performance against a basket of indicators. Detailed reports present information on corporate health and other indicators but do not focus upon the Council's priorities and the significance they have for the public. Managing progress against the Council's declared priorities is therefore more difficult.
- 62 Annual appraisals are in place and contribute to delivering the Council's overall objectives. All employees are the subject of an annual appraisal process which includes the identification of personal objectives for the coming year. Objectives favour action-based planning rather than targeted improvement but are clearly related, and contribute to service level activities.
- 63 The Council is not maximising its use of customer-related information to assist it in planning improvements. While some services are using customer-related information others are not. Membership information is captured and analysed by the leisure and cultural service through its 'Activo' system. The data has been used to support and manage improvements in providing all aspects of the service including increasing opportunities for people with disabilities as part of the Inclusive Fitness Initiative. Other sections of the Council, for example environmental services, also capture user information but currently there is no mechanism for collating this information at a corporate level. The benefits to be derived from corporately collating and analysing Council wide customer and user based information cannot yet be obtained.
- 64 Staff and user complaints procedures are well established and used constructively. All complaints from members of the public are examined by the Chief Executive and catalogued before referral to the relevant head of service. Complaints are few and diminishing but trends are analysed by the policy and performance unit who initiate remedial action as necessary. In 2006 residents' satisfaction with complaints handling was in the best quartile, at 46 per cent. Staff complaints and grievance procedures are in place though, reflecting the generally open and collaborative approach which pervades the Council, issues tend to be resolved informally and the procedures are rarely used.

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

- 65 The Council makes good use of external assessment and accreditation schemes to help it to achieve high standards of service delivery. It has used ISO, Green Flag and Charter Mark standards as well as QUEST, Park Mark and other external accreditation schemes to maintain and improve the quality of both its organisational arrangements and the services and facilities it provides for its communities. Benchmarking is extensively used, as is participation in national networks, for example the Association for Public Service Excellence, to identify sources of learning and share good practice. Organisational arrangements and service quality have been improved through the constructive use of comparative standards and information.
- 66 The Council has not consistently responded to recommendations from external regulators. In recent years a number of service and corporate inspections have been completed by the Audit Commission and other regulators. In most cases, the Council has responded well to the recommendations contained in the subsequent reports, such as waste management, but this is not always the case. For example, in 2003, the Council underwent its first CPA assessment. The resulting report identified concerns around prioritisation and performance management. Progress on these matters has clearly been limited. Failure to act upon recommendations can limit progress on service improvements.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and Improvement

- 67** The Council is performing well in this area; all priority services are improving. It delivers a range of good services, such as benefits, housing and cultural services - recognised in performance indicators and by favourable external assessment. It protects and improves the environment: streets are clean, town centres have been improved, and parks are attractive and well maintained. It has worked effectively with partners to develop a more prosperous economy and provide better leisure and health opportunities. It is making a substantial contribution to maintaining safer communities but recent crime trends suggest that some improvements may not be sustainable. Progress towards housing aims is mixed. Residents' overall satisfaction with the Council has increased by 10 per cent in the last three years and is above average. Satisfaction with specific services is mixed.
- 68** Based on national performance indicators for 2005/06 the Council performs well and is improving. Residents' overall satisfaction has increased, against a downward national trend, by 10 per cent, from 45 per cent in 2003 (worst quartile) to 55 per cent in 2006, which is above average. Satisfaction with specific services is mixed, with high satisfaction in some areas, such as benefits and housing but low satisfaction in others such as planning. Forty per cent of all best value performance indicators (BVPIs) are in the best quartile, compared to a national average of 32 per cent. Compared to the time of the last corporate assessment in 2003, 82 per cent of BVPIs have improved.
- 69** The Council's achievements are assessed against the five priorities and the 'delivering excellence' objectives set out in paragraph 24 above, which has been the basis of the Council's work since 2005.
- 70** The Council, with its partners, works effectively to develop a more prosperous economy. It has been active in the development of some key sites aimed at job creation. The Newark Beacon business innovation centre was completed in July 2007 at a cost of £3.9 million. It provides working space to help new businesses, supports around 120 jobs and is helping to develop a knowledge economy. The Council has facilitated the development of the award winning Sherwood Energy Village, at Ollerton. This is a social enterprise venture that provides around 800 jobs, about the same number lost through pit closures. The Council has also attracted major investment to the district through the Mastercare development that supports around 1000 local jobs that meet local needs. The Council's efforts are helping to ensure that the local unemployment rate is below the national average.

- 71 The Council is making good progress in its aim to provide leisure and health opportunities for all. It works well with the PCT, with jointly funded posts to promote healthy lifestyles and eating habits. It provides a range of activity programmes and concessions for targeted audiences, such as a successful course to reduce childhood obesity. It supports a well-used GP exercise referral scheme and promotes the Inclusive Fitness Initiative, designed to help disabled people make use of exercise and gym facilities. Satisfaction with leisure facilities has increased by 9 per cent, from 45 per cent in 2003 to 54 per cent in 2006. Usage has increased by 11 per cent in the last two years and a higher proportion of new users, 18 per cent, have a disability. In 2006, the Council became one of five authorities to take part in a national pilot project, 'Gallery 37+'. This provides creative learning, targeted at individual young people with the least opportunity, and to date 37 young people have achieved arts awards. Access to cultural services has been improved by the introduction of more outreach services such as a rural touring cinema that was started in January 2007. By targeting its provision of leisure services the Council is better able to make a contribution to significant cross cutting issues.
- 72 The Council is effective in protecting and improving the environment. It has attractive and well-maintained parks, three of which have achieved Green Flag awards. Streets are in the best quartile nationally for cleanliness and having a low amount of graffiti. Recycling rates have improved significantly after the introduction of a twin bin system, from 11 per cent in 2004/05 to 26 per cent in 2005/06, which is in the best quartile nationally. Composting rates are low as the Council does not provide a green waste collection service, though one is planned. The environment of town centres has been improved with refurbishment schemes in Southwell and Newark that have been well received by the public. Most improvements have been recognised by residents. Between 2003 and 2006 public satisfaction with cleanliness increased by 16 per cent to 70 per cent and recycling by 7 per cent to 66 per cent, though satisfaction with waste collection fell by 8 per cent to 80 per cent.
- 73 The Council has had mixed success in meeting its aim: 'to ensure affordable homes built to modern standards are available for all'. It has set up an ALMO, Newark and Sherwood Homes that has been assessed as providing a 'good', two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. This is providing management services to tenants that are resulting in best quartile satisfaction ratings. The percentage of homes that did not meet the decent homes standard (DHS) in 2005/06 was high, at 47 per cent. However a grant of £49.5 million has been secured and overall funding of £90 million is in place to enable 100 per cent of homes to meet the DHS by 2010. Performance against other BVPIs in 2005/06 is mixed. The use of bed and breakfast for homeless families has been eliminated but the average stay in hostels is in the worst quartile. Unaudited figures show that homelessness applications have reduced but the number of people sleeping rough is high. Average re-let times and the energy efficiency of the housing stock are both best quartile. In the last three years 237 affordable homes have been delivered against a target of 200. While progress has been made there remains much to do to address fully the housing needs of the area.

- 74 The Council is making a substantial contribution to maintaining safer communities but recent crime trends suggest that some improvements may not be sustainable. The Council has made a significant investment in operating an extensive 24-hour CCTV network. In 2005 it won a national CCTV team of the year award having captured and reported 6,000 incidents a year to the police, resulting in over 1,500 arrests in four years. It has improved car parks to give reassurance to users and four of them have been awarded 'secure car park' status under the Police Park Mark scheme. The activities of an antisocial behaviour unit has had a positive impact reducing surveyed residents' perceptions about unacceptable levels of antisocial behaviour from 46 per cent in 2003/04 to 18 per cent in 2006. Crime levels in the district are comparatively low but rising trends in a number of crime categories (including damage, assault and pedal cycle theft) are a cause for concern and are likely to have an impact upon the fear of crime. In partnership with the County Council, Newark and Sherwood achieved beacon status for emergency planning and delivered a highly effective response to the widespread flooding that affected the district in 2007.
- 75 The Council is making good progress in most areas towards its aim to 'deliver excellence', reflected in the significant rise in overall residents' satisfaction. It delivers a number of services that have been favourably assessed in external accreditation. As well as its housing ALMO, its use of resources, cultural services and benefits service have all been rated as 'good'. Waste management was assessed as 'fair' in 2005. The Council has significantly improved the speed of dealing with planning applications. It is in the best quartile in all three categories and was rewarded with a planning delivery grant of £541,915 in 2006/07, among the top 10 per cent of awards nationally. All four leisure centres have achieved Quest accreditation, as has the sports development service which was 'highly commended'. However the Council's achievements in some of these areas are not reflected in high public satisfaction. The satisfaction with the planning service in 2006 remains in the worst quartile and while satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities has improved, it remains at a relatively low level. Some corporate health indicators are not performing well. Sickness absence increased in 2006/07 and there is under-representation of women, staff with a disability and staff from an ethnic minority within the top-paid 5 per cent of the workforce.

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 Newark and Sherwood District Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 10 to 14 September 2007.
- 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.