

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Fenland 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 Fenland District Council has made significant progress since its corporate assessment in 2004 when it was rated 'fair'. The Council is now rated as 'excellent'.
- 4 The District faces significant social and economic problems arising from the decline of agriculture and agricultural related services. Its location between a number of larger and better known cities and towns, such as Cambridge, Peterborough, Huntingdon and Kings Lynn has meant that historically the District has lacked identity and struggled to attract the level of attention and funding other districts have gained. Since 2004 the Council has strengthened the systems necessary to deliver improvements, such as performance management and increased its capacity. This is resulting in improved services and outcomes that address priorities and community needs.
- 5 The Council and its partners have a clear, realistic and shared vision for the area. This is based on a sound understanding of the nature and scale of issues facing the area and has been informed by consultation. The Council's mission is 'To improve quality of life for people living in the Fenland district' and includes improving the supply of jobs, housing, reducing crime and enhancing the environment. This mission is supported by plans to secure delivery but there is a lack of an easily accessible and straightforward explanation of what outcomes people could expect and associate with. The local community have been involved in setting the ambitions for the area. The strengthened political and managerial leadership has raised the Council's profile resulting in additional resources being directed to the District to enable community needs to be met.
- 6 The five key priorities identified by the Council address the issues that matter most to the local community. The priorities are: Community First - ensure improved health and social wellbeing for the whole community; Streets Ahead - to create an attractive and sustainable environment for the community to enjoy, with a streetscape that is clean, green, safe and well maintained; Open For Business - to promote the growth of local businesses and develop the Fenland economy; Decent and Affordable Homes – to provide decent and affordable homes for local residents and; Quality Organisation - to provide effective access to services, and to improve the skills and capacity of the organisation to meet local priorities and deliver excellent services. A robust framework of plans is in place which is delivering the priorities although a few targets are not expressed as outcomes that the community would recognise. Resources are directed at priorities and this enables achievements to be delivered.

- 7 There is strong leadership both politically and managerially. An organisational restructure and culture change have led to greater outward focus and embedded cross-departmental working that focuses on priorities. The higher external profile of the Council is leading to increased external investment in the District. The Council has worked well to improve capacity and continues to do so, particularly through training and development activities. Financial capacity is sound and the Council has been successful in attracting external funding to deliver projects for the benefit of local people. There is a good awareness of diversity issues and the impact made on service delivery. Procurement practices and an adequate approach to value for money are delivering savings but reporting and management of performance and quality against costs needs further development.
- 8 There is a strong and effective focus on performance management at all levels of the organisation which enables corrective action to be taken. Overview & Scrutiny is making an impact and the performance management of partnerships is effective and improving. The Council learns from user feedback and uses this to improve service delivery. A strong appraisal scheme helps to ensure that staff play a full part in managing performance. Local and national performance indicators are used to measure delivery but the Council tends to over rely on the performance of BVPIs and external awards to measure success.
- 9 Since 2004 the Council performance has significantly improved. Over the last three years the pace of improvement has been faster than most other councils and unaudited data for 2006/07 shows 75 per cent of BVPI have improved and 41 per cent of performance indicators are now amongst the best 25 per cent in the country. Previously poorly performing services are now much improved and the Council has delivered improvements in all of its priorities although not all satisfaction rates reflect this yet.
- 10 Working with its partners, the Council has improved the health of the community. Improved access to sports and leisure facilities and schemes such as a GP referral programme for older people have helped to raise the life expectancy of the District's population. Initiatives and service improvements have improved the quality of life - especially those for most disadvantaged or located in deprived areas. The local environment has improved. Street cleaning has helped to reduce littering and graffiti. Waste recycling has increased significantly with the successful introduction of a three bin system. Crime remains a concern to local people but initiatives have successfully dealt with local problems. The Council is supportive of the national priorities to tackle climate change and create sustainable communities - the 34 wind turbines located in the District provide the equivalent amount of electricity to supply the whole of the District's housing.

- 11 Decent and affordable housing is being provided. Actions have been taken to improve the public and private housing stock through improvement work and provision of grants. The needs of the older people and those with disabilities are being met. Revision of existing planning policies is intended to secure even greater numbers of affordable homes in the future. Jobs are being created or retained within the District. Work with partners is helping to expand the skill base of the area and raise educational achievement. The provision of infrastructure and facilities is assisting the growth of the local economy. Changes within the Council have led to improved services for the public. The raised profile of Fenland means additional resources are being directed at the District.

Areas for improvement

- 12 The Council and its partners need to strengthen their approach to target setting. Targets should identify outcomes that the local community would recognise and associate with. These should be communicated more effectively to the community so that they know what the Council and its partners are trying to achieve. This will provide a greater focus on outcomes that the community would recognise and improve confidence that they will be delivered.
- 13 The Council should strengthen the arrangements for improving value for money. For example, the Council should develop reporting of performance and quality against costs. This would provide a good understanding about the value for money of the outcomes its resources are delivering. It will also enable the Council to be sure that it is using its resources where they can make the most positive impact.

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	3	6
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	3	6
What has been achieved?	Achievement and Improvement	3	21
weighted score			45
CPA category			Excellent

*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

- 14 Fenland District Council is located in the north-east of Cambridgeshire between the larger centres of Cambridge, Peterborough, Huntingdon and Kings Lynn. It is one of five districts within the county of Cambridgeshire. There are four principal market towns - Wisbech, March, Whittlesey and Chatteris in which approximately 76 per cent of the population live together with 16 parishes covering 21 villages. The District has no major dual carriageway and poor access to the rail network.
- 15 The District covers an area of 546 square kilometres and has a dispersed population of 89,900 (mid 2006 estimate). The population is growing faster than the county, regional or national average with a 7.4 per cent increase between 2001 and 2006. The population is aging with an older age profile than the national average, and a lower share of younger people, especially those aged between 16 and 19 years. These trends are expected to continue. Black and ethnic minority groups comprise an estimated 0.2 per cent of the population with gypsies and travellers accounting for approximately 3.3 per cent (2,850 people in 2005 census) of the population. The number of migrants settling in the District is increasing but it is difficult to determine precise numbers. National Insurance data for 2005/06 indicated 1,570 migrants with Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Portuguese and Estonian nationalities forming the largest groups.
- 16 The District is influenced by the decline of agricultural and associated food processing industries and services employment. There are high levels of deprivation with the District ranked 142 out of 354 local authorities in England (1 is the most deprived), and 13 out of 48 most deprived districts in the east of England (based on DETR Index of multiple deprivation). Wisbech (North), Parson Drove and Wisbech St Mary wards are within the 20 per cent of the most deprived wards in the country. These wards are included in one of only two rural Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder schemes approved by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in December 2003.
- 17 Male life expectancy is below the county, regional and national average. Educational achievements are low with very low attainment in secondary education. Overall crime rates are low but there are pockets of high crime levels in Wisbech.
- 18 The district lies within the London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough Growth Area. The East of England Plan 2001-2021 is expected to increase the housing allocation for Fenland resulting in the number of new homes required each year rising from 476 to 550.

- 19 The percentage of the working population in employment is 68.1 per cent (December 2006) which is below the national average. There is low job density - the ratio of jobs per to working age population with about 71 jobs per 100 people of working age compared to a national average of 84. This results in high outward commuting with nearly 40 per cent travelling out of the district for work. Average gross weekly pay is £345.60 which is below the county and national average. The amount of housing in public ownership (13.5 per cent) is lower than the regional and national average and the need for affordable housing is high.

The Council

- 20 Fenland District Council is controlled by the Conservative party which holds 39 of the 40 seats. The Council has adopted a Leader and Cabinet structure, with an Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and a Corporate Governance Committee. There are 9 portfolio holders, each responsible for one or part of each of the Council's priorities.
- 21 Following the 2002 local elections the Council underwent an organisational restructure. The current Chief Executive was appointed in 2002 and a new management team appointed in 2003. The number of senior management posts was reduced from 23 to 9. At the same time the Council started a five year improvement plan to improve performance and change the organisational culture with departments being abolished and adopt a 'One Team' approach.
- 22 The Council has a net revenue expenditure of £14.3 million in 2006/07 rising to £15.2 million in 2007/08. It had a capital expenditure of £10.0 million in 2006/07 and a budget of £6.2 million in 2007/08. The Band D council tax for 2007/08 is £1,370 which is above the average for the Councils comparator group and the national average. The Council has 744 employees.
- 23 In December 2006 Council tenants voted for the transfer of the Council's housing stock to a housing association. The transfer is to take place in November 2007 and will generate approximately £22 million for the Council - part of which is being reinvested to improve leisure facilities, provide affordable homes and provide serviced land for new employers.
- 24 The Audit Commission assessed the Council as 'fair' in 2004 (out of a five point scale of poor, weak, fair, good and excellent). Since then the annual direction of travel assessments by the Commission have recorded good, and sometimes significant progress from a relatively low base. Internal restructuring, capacity-building and cultural change created a platform for continued improvement with performance data showing improvement in all priority areas.

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

Ambition

- 25 The Council is performing well in this area.
- 26 The Council and its partners have a clear, realistic and shared vision for the area. This is based on a sound understanding of the nature and scale of the issues the area faces and has been informed by consultation. The corporate plan, community strategy and local area agreement are clearly linked and supported by a robust framework of plans to ensure delivery. The strengthened political and managerial leadership is raising the Council's profile resulting in additional resources being directed to the District to enable community needs to be met.
- 27 The Council and its partners have a clear and shared vision for the District which is well understood by councillors, staff and other stakeholders. The first community strategy adopted by the Fenland Strategic Partnership (FSP) in 2004 sets out a clear 20-year vision with seven strategic aims. The strategy was revised in 2007 and the overarching vision is 'Fenland is a district where there is a high quality of life for all, now and in the future and that Fenland is known as a great place to live, work, learn and visit'. The vision is underpinned by six priority themes:
- Fenland's future generations;
 - helping people live healthy, independent lives;
 - making communities safer and stronger; building a sustainable environment;
 - building communities with decent homes;
 - a sense of place and purpose; and
 - helping people into work and encouraging innovation and enterprise.
- 28 The strategy is endorsed by a range of public, community and voluntary organisations. A wide range of stakeholders were consulted about the strategy including organisations such as Norfolk & Fenland Muslims/Minority Matters, Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and Cambridgeshire Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Joint preparation and adoption by the Council and other key partners ensures ownership of the ambition and co-ordination of resources.

- 29** The Council is very clear about what it wants to achieve for Fenland. The corporate plan 2007-2010 sets out the Council's mission which is 'To improve quality of life for people living in the Fenland district'. The Council's vision is to be 'An efficient, progressive and well governed organisation which has the capacity to deliver current and future local and national priorities.' The corporate plan identifies specific and challenging targets that support the mission and these are underpinned by plans that set out what will be delivered and how. However, although the mission is clear it is difficult for individual members of the public to understand what it means for them. The corporate plan is reviewed annually to ensure it aligns with the community plan and reflects community needs and aspirations. The organisation is clearly focussed on this and is delivering. This means there is a strong sense of direction for the Council and its partners.
- 30** The Council and its partners clearly understand the nature and scale of the issues facing the area. A range of social, economic and environmental data was used to identify key issues facing the district such as deprivation, crime, health and education. This included information from Quality of Life Survey 2006, Cambridgeshire sub-regional travellers' needs assessment, the Cambridgeshire Observatory and the Cambridgeshire Rural Forum. The Council and its partners are aware that community and corporate ambitions can only be delivered by partnership working. As a consequence, the Council is working successfully with partners such as the College of West Anglia to improve educational attainment. Using a wide range of local information means the Council is accurately identifying needs in the area.
- 31** Effective consultation has informed the ambition. The Council's consultation strategy provides a framework for community engagement and there is an annual consultation calendar. The Council is also a member of the Cambridgeshire Consultation Partnership which agrees consultation approaches and shares all consultation information between all the local district councils, Action is taken to address issues raised by consultation. For example, concerns raised in the Quality of Life survey led to revised key objectives in the community strategy. The Council has engaged effectively with black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. For example, information from traveller forums and fairs led to the inclusion of specific targets within plans to address concerns raised. This means that local people have a voice in setting ambitions for the area and understand how priorities are set.

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- 32** There are clear links between the community strategy, corporate plan and Local Area Agreement (LAA). The LAA 2006/09 is informed by the Fenland community strategy and identifies specific issues facing the District such as poor levels of education. For each action a county baseline is identified together with specific actions and targets. For example, within Fenland partners have a district baseline and targets set for increasing the percentage of the district's 16-18 year olds in education, employment or training from 51 to 70 per cent by 2008/09 and to increase the educational attainment of travellers by raising the percentage attuning level 4 or above in key stage 2 in English from 31 to 65 per cent. Each of the LAA themes is linked to the strategic themes of the community strategy and Council's corporate objectives. National priorities included in the LAA, such as crime reduction are included in the corporate plan and it's supporting plans as well as those of partners. This ensures the ambitions are shared. The comprehensive and coordinated strategic policy framework means the Council and its partners are well placed to deliver the community's ambition.
- 33** Strengthened leadership has led to an outward focus and an improved external profile for the Council. In the past the Council had been inwardly focussed but this has changed with partners noticing a much greater outward focus and engagement. Councillors have been more effective at county and sub regional level. For example councillors sit on bodies such as Cambridge Horizons which has led to the District's inclusion in the housing growth area opening up access to additional funding and support. The raised profile of the Council has resulted in a greater recognition of needs in Fenland and additional resources being directed to the District. For example, £95 million for education. Officers are working with partners to improve impact and outcomes. For example the diversity focus group, which includes partners, is chaired by a council officer. The group proposed changes in the hate crime reporting scheme in schools leading to improved reporting and action to resolve incidents. Improved leadership means that the Council is now recognised as an important player in the sub-region and is better placed to maximise opportunities and benefits for local communities.

Prioritisation

- 34** The Council is performing well in this area.
- 35** The overarching priorities for the area are clear, well understood by the Council and its partners and reflect the social and economic challenges facing the area. Responsibilities and duties of partners are clear. A robust framework of plans is in place which supports the priorities and there are clear links between national and local priorities. Resources are directed at priorities enabling achievements to be delivered.

- 36 The overarching priorities of the Council are clear and closely link to the social and economic issues facing the district. Many of these issues, such as improving health and education are not ones that can be resolved quickly but there is a strong sense of direction for the Council and its partners. The community strategy identifies priorities for each theme within the strategy some of which specifically address the needs of such groups as older persons and travellers. The Council has moved resources to support delivery of priorities - for example £220,000 per year fund the Council's contact centre and four One Stop shops which have improved community access to the Council's and its partners services. The corporate plan is updated annually to ensure it aligns with the community plan and reflects community needs and aspirations. Five long term objectives are identified the following.
- Community First - To deliver services and work with partners to ensure improved health and social wellbeing for the whole community.
 - Streets Ahead - To use a prevention, intervention and enforcement approach to create an attractive and sustainable environment for the community to enjoy, with a streetscape that is clean, green, safe and well maintained.
 - Open For Business - To work in partnership to promote the growth of local businesses and develop the Fenland economy.
 - Decent and Affordable Homes – To contribute towards the provision of decent and affordable homes for local residents.
 - Quality Organisation - To provide effective access to services, and to improve the skills and capacity of the organisation to meet local priorities and deliver excellent services.
- 37 The overarching priorities are clearly understood by stakeholders, councillors and staff. Each portfolio holder is responsible for elements of the priorities and accountability is clear both internally and externally. Many councillors also chair or sit on external bodies directly linked to their respective priority areas. For example, the portfolio holder for economic and business development is a member of the joint transport group which has enabled the Council to secure S106 contributions for transport improvements in March and Wisbech. The 'Fenland Eye' is circulated to all households and the internal staff newsletter refers to the priorities, although articles are not grouped so that the public can easily see what is being achieved in each priority area. There is specific reference within the corporate plan to BME or people at risk of disadvantage - for example migrants, travellers, older and young people to ensure their needs are met. Clarity about priorities enables the Council and its partners to focus on their delivery.

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- 38** Relative priorities are clear. Internally, officers and councillors are very clear about what is and is not a priority. Councillors set the priorities each year as part of the corporate planning cycle. The Council itself is very clear that anything that is not clearly linked to a priority is by default not a priority, but this is not explicitly stated. Resources have been moved away from lower priority areas. For example, from environmental health to waste and recycling which has resulted in improved performance. Resources in the corporate centre have been moved to frontline services such as planning. Service plans and strategies underpin the corporate plan and clearly link to priorities although the relative priorities of some individual actions within them are not so clearly stated. Partners are clear what the Council's priorities are although a few are less clear about the relative priorities of actions within some supporting plans - for example in the economic development strategy. Clarity about what is and is not a priority means the Council and its partners are directing resources at key areas of importance.
- 39** The Council's priorities are based on a sound understanding of local need. They are informed by a wide range of data and consultation with the community. This led to ranking priorities and Council data indicates 94 per cent of respondents to those surveys supported the priorities. The Audit Commission's stakeholders' survey indicated 79 per cent of respondents thought the Council had clear priorities which focus on things that matter to the local community. Community engagement and effective use of data means the Council's priorities reflect community needs.
- 40** Partner organisations clearly understand the duties and responsibilities of other partners. The stakeholder survey indicated 71 per cent of respondents thought the roles and responsibilities between the Council and its partners were clear. For example, each of the six community strategy themes is underpinned by an action plan which identifies the lead partner for each action. The Council led a review of partnership working leading to a Cambridgeshire compact agreement setting out the principles for joint working within the county. This clarity of roles and responsibilities helps partners align their priorities and resources.
- 41** There is a robust framework of strategies and plans to deliver the priorities. Each community strategy theme states what achievements are required and the mechanisms to deliver these. For example, the Safer Fenland Strategy identifies six priority areas and is supported by an action plan which sets clear targets for the next three years to improve community safety. Each corporate objective is supported by detailed service plans which in turn link to individual staff targets. Targets and local performance indicators are being used although a few indicators are not expressed in terms that the public would recognise - for example maintaining QUEST accreditation for the leisure centres. The robust policy framework is enabling the Council deliver against its priorities.

- 42 The Council effectively allocates resources to priorities and delivering outcomes. A medium term financial strategy (MTFS) is in place for the period 2007/08 to 2009/10, which is reviewed annually. A scored priority matrix is used to assess and evaluate capital and service developments to ensure resources are redirected to priority areas. For example the restructuring of the corporate management team saves £205,000 per year which has been redirected to fund a migrant worker advisor, £100,000 to planning, and £130,000 for rapid response teams. Additional funding of £200,000 per year has enabled the three bin waste collection scheme to be introduced across the District. All of these examples resulted in improved performance of services. Each priority has a policy development team made up of councillors who advise the portfolio holders. The Council also uses its own assets to aid delivery of priorities. The asset management plan identifies how it will use its property and land to assist in economic development of the area such as provision of serviced land. The Council has disposed of surplus assets - in 2006/07 it raised £2.2 million which has been used to improve community facilities through grants, enhance leisure and fitness facilities and support delivery of affordable housing. Effective use of resources is addressing priorities and improving services.

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

Capacity

- 43 The Council is performing well in this area.
- 44 Political and managerial leadership is strong. The Council has worked well to improve capacity and continues to do so, particularly through training and development activities. Financial capacity is sound and the Council has been successful in attracting external funding to deliver projects for the benefit of local people. There is a good awareness of diversity issues and the impact made on service delivery.
- 45 The Council has strong political and managerial leadership. A strong culture of 'One Team' is promoted which provides a cohesive approach not only between officers and councillors, but also between services. This has enabled better cross service working with a much greater focus on service delivery and priorities. Although each of the corporate priorities has one or more portfolio holders responsible for delivering it, their roles are clearly stated and there is separation of responsibilities for particular topic areas. Councillors are therefore clear about their roles.
- 46 There are effective arrangements in place to govern the conduct of councillors. A new code of conduct for councillors has been adopted and a clear ethical framework is in place. The Standards Committee functions effectively and is developing key areas of corporate governance such as whistle blowing arrangements and codes of conduct. As a result, the Council maintains a good standard of probity and integrity.
- 47 Council decision making processes are sound. Committees, such as planning, are well run with constructive debate and clear decision making. However there are currently no opportunities for public speaking or questions at Council meetings (apart from the Planning and Licensing committees). This was piloted but there was little demand from the public. Meetings are also held during the day and whilst attendance at some meetings such as planning is high this has not been reviewed recently to ensure it meets community preferences. Decision making is transparent but opportunities for greater public participation have not been maximised.

- 48 The financial capacity is sound. The Council has strong balances and there is a track record of attracting external funding to resource local priorities. For example, the Council has invested £1.2 million of its own money in the Nene Waterfront project with another £9.3 million provided from other public sector sources. This project has the potential to lever in another £37 million from private sector partners. The Council has also assisted partners in securing external funding to support projects. As a result, this has helped to ensure that sufficient resources are in place to deliver plans.
- 49 The Council's approach to value for money is satisfactory. It has performed well against the Annual Efficiency Statement and achieved £1.6 million efficiency savings in the last two years. This is in excess of the targeted level of £1 million. Whilst the Council reports performance and budget information, reporting of performance and quality against cost is underdeveloped. The Council is now starting to review all major service areas to improve efficiency and value for money. Operations and Parks & Open Spaces are the first two reviews scheduled for autumn 2007. These areas are seen as priorities due to opportunities to improve customer focus and service delivery. The Council has recently enhanced capacity in this area by using previous efficiency savings to appoint a Business Efficiency Team to conduct the reviews. Although the team has yet to show impact, the Council is now better placed to improve efficiency and value for money.
- 50 Project management is effective. The Council has mechanisms in place to manage large projects and to ensure that these are delivered to schedule. This has been successfully used to deliver large projects such as the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) and the Nene Waterfront on schedule. The benefits to the community of these large projects are clear, but the Council does not always evaluate outcomes from some smaller, but nevertheless, important projects. Effective project management helps the Council to deliver projects on time and within budget.
- 51 ICT is used to improve access to services. Electronic service delivery has improved significantly with 100 per cent of interactions with the public capable of electronic delivery. For example, over 728 planning applications have been submitted via the Planning Portal since its inception in 2005. It is now possible to report environmental nuisances and make bookings for sports and leisure facilities on-line. Older people now have a greater awareness of benefits they can obtain through the use of a dedicated software package. This has increased the uptake of benefits amongst this group of residents by over £160,000 per year. The Council's effective use of ICT has demonstrably increased the accessibility of local residents to services, particularly those living in rural areas.

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- 52** Procurement arrangements are delivering some savings and efficiencies delivered. The procurement strategy has only recently been approved and is still being implemented but savings and efficiencies have been delivered. For example the purchase of IT equipment for the one stop shops, telephony for the call centre and refuse freighters have helped to deliver performance at a lower cost. Effective procurement processes have helped the Council to save £114,000 during the last two years. As part of the procurement strategy the Council monitors supplier compliance with diversity and environmental standards. This helps ensure that the Council is maintaining its role as a community leader as well as delivering effective procurement.
- 53** There is an effective approach to risk management. This is built into corporate and service planning and decision making processes. For example, the Council considered the implications of a possible snap general election on electoral services and the potential risks arising from the forthcoming LSVT. The Council has completed a governance review of partnerships' risk but recognises that further work is required. As a consequence of the work carried out so far, there are a reduced number of partnerships reporting to FSP board and partnerships are more confident.
- 54** The culture of the Council has significantly improved. The Council has removed silo based working by introducing the 'One Team' approach, improved internal communications and placed an emphasis on training and development. All staff have learning plans and individual learning plans for councillors are now being introduced. Councillors also have a programme to develop skills through briefing sessions and induction. As a consequence, Councillors and staff now better equipped to undertake their roles. There are high levels of staff morale and satisfaction. For example, the 2006 staff survey showed 83 per cent of staff are proud to work for the Council. However sickness absence still remains high, only showing a marginal improvement from 11.51 days in 2005/06 down to 10.85 days in 2006/07. The Council has introduced career grades and modern apprenticeships to address staff shortages in key services such as legal and planning services. As a consequence of the investment in culture, service performance has improved.
- 55** There is good awareness of diversity issues and the impact these make on service delivery. For example, the Council has appointed two part time advisors to work with the migrant community to improve engagement and access to services. The two advisors have seen 237 individuals in the first two months of the service which started in July 2007 resulting in improved access to services and facilities such as housing and health. The Council has completed equality impact assessments and action plans for all services. These have led to some tangible service improvements. For example, information on waste and recycling services is now available in a wide range of foreign languages and access to leisure services is being actively promoted to diverse communities. This has helped to integrate diversity into service delivery and enable better service access by specific sections of the community.

- 56 The Council is increasing capacity through jointly funded appointments with partners. It has funded a development officer at a secondary school site for sports facilities funded by lottery grants. In addition the Council has given good support to the appointment of Police Community Support Officers. As a consequence, the levels of reported anti social behaviour have declined.

Performance management

- 57 The Council is performing well in this area.
- 58 There is a sustained focus on performance management at all levels of the organisation which enables corrective action to be taken. Overview & Scrutiny is making an impact and the performance management of partnerships is effective and improving. The Council learns from user feedback and uses this to improve service delivery. A strong appraisal scheme helps to ensure that staff play a full part in managing performance.
- 59 The Council has a strong focus on managing performance. There is a robust performance management framework in place which reports progress against Council priorities. Appropriate action is taken to improve performance. For example, poor performance in housing benefits was improved by changing work processes and introducing new IT systems. The council was identified by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as a Planning Standards Authority for the poor performance in dealing with major planning applications in 2005/06 major applications. Additional resources have resulted in improved timeliness of determining all types of application with national targets now being met. Financial reporting is embedded in the performance management framework. However, the Council places too much emphasis on best value performance indicators and awards to judge success. Whilst these may have a positive impact on staff morale they often do not measure things the public would recognise. The Council secured a number of external awards and commendations for organisational effectiveness, but it tends to overemphasise these as measures of success rather than outcomes that local people would notice. Overall, the focus on performance management has led to improved performance, especially in priority areas.
- 60 Scrutiny is effective. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee produces an annual work programme linked to Council priorities and all meetings concentrate on a specific theme. The Committee has completed reviews of services which have led to improved service delivery. For example, the tourism review resulted in additional information centres being set up across the district which are disability compliant and have better directional signage. The review of the marine services led to improved to increased usage and income for the port of Wisbech in line with Council priorities. As a result, Overview & Scrutiny is helping to drive service improvements.

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

- 61 The performance management of partnerships is effective. For example, the Fenland Strategic Partnership (FSP) now focuses on performance management and concentrates more on achievements rather than just discussing issues. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee receives quarterly reports on the performance of the FSP and also calls in partners to explain progress on strategic priorities. For example, Councillors were recently able to question a representative from the College of West Anglia on the progress of this project. Councillors sit on the FSP Board and its subgroups and use this to strengthen the democratic accountability and performance of partnerships. The Council is also active in supplying performance data for FSP subgroups notably the Safer Fenland Partnership and the Health & Social Wellbeing Group. This helps the Council and its partners to focus on strategic priorities and assess progress.
- 62 The Council uses feedback and learning to improve services. For example, feedback from the public raised concerns about a lack of accessibility to services in rural areas. As a consequence, the Council purchased portable sports equipment to take out into the community which enabled residents of rural areas being able to participate in health and leisure activities. The Council completed a review of the One Stop Shop opening times in line with the views of users. As a result, the One Stop Shops now open on Saturdays which enables individuals to access Council information and advice services that they may have found difficult to do during the week. The learning from one phase of the introduction of the three bin recycling system was used to inform the next phase. As a result, the number of customer complaints fell each time. The Council has learned from the expertise of others and performance information has been used to inform service standards. It is open to external challenge and used Audit Commission inspection and performance reports to challenge performance and improve. User feedback has led to better access to services and improved performance.
- 63 The Council has detailed processes in place to monitor the impact of service delivery on diverse communities. It has introduced detailed guidance on gauging the impact diversity makes on service delivery and identifying improvements for the future. Initial findings show that diverse groups are well satisfied with the Council and its services and also indicate ways in which engagement with these groups can be improved in future. All services have plans to improve service delivery to diverse communities. There is a clear performance management framework in place and overall progress is regularly reported to CMT. For example, the 2007 Equality Monitoring Report identifies those steps that the Council needs to take to improve from CRE Level 3 to Level 4 by 2009. This helps to ensure a clear focus is maintained in improving diversity throughout the Council.
- 64 The staff performance appraisal system is effective. There are clear links and a streamlined approach between the corporate objectives, service delivery plans and organisational and individual development plans. For example, the strategic objective providing a high performing telephone contact centre can be traced through to individual development plans of staff working in the service. The system is well used and accepted by staff. This helps staff to be clear about their roles and the contribution they are making towards achieving the Council's corporate priorities.

What has been achieved?

Achievement and improvement

- 65 The Council is performing well in this area.
- 66 Performance has improved significantly with previously poorly performing services now much improved. The Council has delivered improvements in all of its priorities but not all satisfaction rates reflect this. The Council has won external recognition for a number of services.
- 67 Over the past three years there has been a significant and sustained focus on improving performance indicators (PIs) with the pace of improvement increasing. Audited data for 2005/06 showed 24 per cent of PIs were in the best 25 per cent in the country whilst un-audited data for 2006/07 shows this has now risen to 41 per cent which is above the district average of 33 per cent. The pace of improvement is faster than other district councils - unaudited 2006/07 PI data indicates 83 per cent of the Council's PIs improved over the last three years compared to national average of 65-67 per cent. Between 2005/06 and 2006/07 the Council was the fastest improving council nationally with 75 per cent of PIs improving compared to an average of 50-52 per cent. Unaudited data for 2007/08 shows continued improvement.
- 68 Satisfaction levels are mixed. Whilst improving overall, some areas remain below the average for other councils. Overall satisfaction with the Council remains above average. Satisfaction rates for services linked to Council priorities have risen between 2003/04 and 2006/07 - for example recycling (up from 73 to 81 per cent), cleanliness (up from 61 to 75 per cent), However satisfaction for arts activities and venues dropped from 27 to 24 per cent. More recent data for un-audited 2007/08 indicates further improvement in satisfaction since 2003/04. For example, the number of residents who believe burglary is an issue has dropped from 51 to 22 per cent and a decline in antisocial behaviour has lead to an increased feeling of safety. Satisfaction in the benefits service has improved from 78 to 88 per cent since 2003/04.

Community First

- 69 The Council is working effectively with partners to improve the health and wellbeing of its community.
- 70 The health of the local community is being improved by providing better access to sports and leisure facilities. Through the Adopt a School programme over 1,250 young people have visited leisure centres and received advice on nutrition, healthy eating and preventing childhood obesity. For older people, there is an active GP referral programme. By targeting elderly and disabled residents, there has been an increased use of leisure centres and facilities among these groups. As a result of these initiatives, between 2001 and 2005 life expectancy in Fenland for males rose from 74.6 to 76.4 years and for females rose from 80.1 to 80.7 years.

- 71 Services to some of the most deprived residents of Fenland have improved. The Council has increased the speed of benefits processing and improved access to the service in rural areas by introducing a network of visiting officers who process applications in claimants' homes. As a result, the average time for processing new claims fell from 73 days in 2004/05 to 30 days in 2006/07 (un-audited data) and the average time for processing changes in circumstances fell from 38 days in 2004/05 to 17 days in 2006/07 (un-audited data). User satisfaction with the service has improved as a consequence. This means that vulnerable residents are now able to receive their entitlements quicker.
- 72 Partnership working has delivered tangible improvements to the quality of life in deprived areas. For example, the Council in conjunction with the Safer Fenland Partnership and Neighbourhood Links has targeted the Waterlees area of Wisbech. The Council undertook a range of activities to reduce littering, fly-tipping and provide sports activities for young people. The level of crime in the neighbourhood fell from 7 per cent in 2004 to 4 per cent in 2007. In addition, the percentage of local residents who felt tackling the appearance of the area was a priority fell from 11 per cent in 2004 to 7 per cent in 2007.
- 73 The Council has improved access to services for travellers, migrant workers and older residents. The Golden Age Fair and Golden Age website have improved access to services and information for Fenland's older residents. Over 400 people attended a recent fair with many being assisted to access unclaimed benefits, information, advice and health checks. Over £326,000 of unclaimed benefits have been claimed since the Fairs started in 2003. The Council has produced 'Welcome' packs for migrant workers in ten different languages which are freely available through Council offices and information centres. The packs provide advice not only on Council services, but also NHS information provided by the Primary Care Trust. The Travellers' Forum and the Diversity Forum also meet on a regular basis with the Council and this has led to better co-operation and engagement. The success of these initiatives is shown by high levels of satisfaction for the services provided by the Council by both the migrant worker and traveller communities.
- 74 The Council has delivered improvements for young people. It has actively promoted a Youth District Council which allocates grants to support facilities for young people across the district. The Council has also provided sports and a range of other initiatives to engage young people and provide diversionary activities. For example, work in Whittlesey to provide diversionary activities has led to a decline in the percentage of local people who consider nuisance relating from alcohol and vandalism to be a concern, down from 59 per cent in 2003/04 to 53 per cent in 2006/07.

Streets ahead

- 75 The Council is working effectively to create an attractive and sustainable environment with clean, green and safe streets.

- 76 The Council exceeded Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) targets for recycling or composting household waste achieving 31 per cent against a target of 18 per cent for 2005/06. The 'Get it Sorted' three bin scheme now covers all households in the district. Unaudited data for 2006/07 indicates the amount recycled or composted has increased to 47 per cent. Thirty one schools have joined a recycling scheme and the percentage of material that can not be recycled has dropped from 10 to 6.8 per cent. Satisfaction has remained high with relatively little opposition expressed by residents due to the scheme allowing food waste to be disposed of weekly. The amount of waste collected is high but is now starting to decrease. The waste and recycling service achieved Beacon Status in 2006/07.
- 77 Street cleanliness has improved significantly. The percentage of land with significant deposits of waste has dropped from 20 per cent (2004/05) to 7 per cent according to recent unaudited data for 2006/07. Litter hotspots have been targeted - for example in the Waterlees area unaudited data shows unacceptable littering has reduced from 52 per cent to 10 per cent between 2005/06 to 2006/07. A 'Food on the Go' campaign in Whittlesey reduced litter in five targeted hotspots by 67 per cent. The introduction of a rapid response service reduced the amount of graffiti and fly-tipping - the time to remove fly-tipping has reduced from 10 days to 24 hours. The cleanliness and quality of parks and public open spaces has improved. The 'Street Pride' scheme is building community pride and playing a key role in cleaning up local parks and public spaces. In 2006 the Audit Commission judged the Council's Environmental Services to be 'good' (out of a range of poor, fair, good and excellent) with 'promising' (out of a range of poor, uncertain, promising and excellent) prospects for improvement.
- 78 The Council, with its partners has reduced crime and enhanced the effectiveness of the Safer Fenland Partnership. The British Crime Survey indicates overall crime has fallen in the District by 13 per cent although many crime indicators remain above average (ie poorer), due in part to significant areas of deprivation. In partnership with the police and the County Council specific problems are being targeted - for example underage drinking and associated antisocial behaviour. In the Wisbech area two dispersal orders has led to a reduction of 35 per cent in antisocial behaviour and alcohol related violence and crime around the town. The Fenland Environmental Enhancement Team (FEET) which includes the police, the Probation and Youth Offending Service and Neighbourhood Watch groups has delivered 65 environmental improvements. Many of these have been completed by offenders and reduced environmental crime and increased the perception of safety. The Council is contributing to enhanced use of CCTV, including automatic number plate recognition, which has increased incident detection and arrests. Data supplied by the Council indicates 79 per cent of residents think the Council is working to make the District a safer place to live.

- 79 The quality of life for local residents has improved. A prevention, intervention and enforcement (PIE) approach has been adopted - for example a dog behavioural advice day led to a decrease in the number of complaints relating to dog barking. A scheme of fixed penalty notices has reduced litter and dog fouling offences. Multi agency work including changes to letting policy, improved gardens and intensive housing management has reduced crime in Weston Miller Drive from 48 incidents per year to 4 between 2003/04 and 2006/07.
- 80 A variety of initiatives are enhancing sustainability and the environment. The Council has permitted 34 wind turbines to be built which provide the equivalent amount of electricity to supply the whole of the districts housing. A number of villages and town centres, such as Elm and Chatteris have been enhanced with the Council providing additional funding to improve material specification such as using York stone rather than tarmac. The Council is part of a 'Smartlife' pilot project to promote and delivery modern and sustainable forms of housing construction - 106 houses are being built in the District to meet local housing need.

Open For Business

- 81 The Council is supporting and assisting in the development of the local economy.
- 82 The Council has built relationships with local businesses resulting in jobs being created or retained for the benefit of the local economy. The Council is actively working to regenerate the area and create additional jobs. Since 2004 approximately 550 new jobs in total have been created. A notable example is the success of the South Fens Business Centre which has led to 163 jobs being created in new technology and knowledge based industries. The Council has worked with business partners to attract new jobs to the district, and in one case, to retain a major employer. This latter initiative prevented nearly 1,000 jobs from being lost in Wisbech.
- 83 The Council is working with partners to expand the skills base in the area. They have facilitated a range of Investing in Communities Projects. For example, Vocational Skills Centres have helped reduce the percentage of school leavers not in education, training or employment from 9.5 per cent in 2003/04 to 7.8 per cent in 2006/07. The Travellers Learn and Earn Project has helped to assist 26 members of the travelling community into full time employment during the first quarter of 2007/08.

- 84 The Council is developing the infrastructure of the area to support expansion of the local economy. For example, the Council has successfully transformed the Port of Wisbech. It now has a yacht marina which provides a useful community resource and education facilities. As part of this project, the Nene Waterfront Development project continues to progress well and work is now underway on the 'Boathouse' community resource building. The Council is supporting small businesses through its mini-factories which now enjoy 100 per cent occupancy. Since 2003, the sale of over 12 acres of serviced land has resulted in 120 additional jobs being attracted to the area. Partnership working with Network Rail has opened up 60 acres of brownfield land for industrial development. This has not only helped to create 40 new jobs, but has also provided enhanced environmental facilities for the enjoyment of local people.

Decent and affordable homes

- 85 The Council is improving the housing stock and delivering housing that meets local needs. It has taken specific action to address the needs of the elderly and the gypsy and traveller community. Unaudited PI data for 2006/07 indicates that housing PIs have improved - for example the number of vacant dwellings returned to use and the time taken to complete urgent repairs. The exception is the time to carry out non urgent repairs which has increased.
- 86 The quality of the housing stock has improved. The existing stock has been improved and all council owned homes have new doors, central heating and double glazing. One hundred and fifty new bathrooms have been fitted and 250 aids and adaptations have been installed each year following occupational health referrals. The SAP (energy efficiency) rating is amongst the highest nationally with unaudited data for 2006/07 indicating a rating of 82 compared to a national average of 67. In December 2006 the Council secured a vote to transfer its housing stock to Roddons Housing Association. Tenants were heavily involved in the process which will enhance services for tenants - for example a free handyman and gardening service for vulnerable residents, a £1 million community fund and improved parking and security fencing for all tenants. Part of the funding generated by the stock transfer will be used to deliver the 'Fenland Standard' of housing which is higher than the national decent homes standard. The stock is to be transferred in November 2007.
- 87 Advice and assistance is improving the private sector housing stock. The Council is working with partners to target assistance at those sectors of the community most in need. In 2007/08 a tax credit scheme funded by Centrica has enabled 224 homes to receive grants to improve energy efficiency and 295 homes to receive Warmfront grants to provide affordable warmth. Customer satisfaction with the services is high.

- 88 The housing needs of the elderly and vulnerable are being met. Two hundred and thirty four households have received disabled facility grants enabling the residents to remain in their own home. Schemes such as the Sanctuary and Wimbington Community Support have enabled victims of domestic violence and older persons to remain at home. Existing sheltered housing such as Boyden and Onyx Court has been refurbished to provide private facilities for all residents and improved communal facilities. Future housing needs are identified with a new housing strategy approved in March 2007 with developments such as Doddington Extra Care scheme being implemented. The needs of gypsies and travellers are being met - 64 pitches have been improved and 34 pitches have had facilities provided to meet the needs of the disabled. Gypsy and traveller satisfaction rates are very high.
- 89 The Council has worked with the Fire and Rescue Service and improved the safety of houses that are in multiple occupation or which are hazardous. This has led to identifying 30 properties which were either unregistered or sub standard. Following remedial work some are now licensed thereby ensuring the residents have safe living accommodation.
- 90 The Council is making good progress in preparation its local development framework to replace the local plan. It was one of the first to submit a Core Strategy in 2004 but, as a result of the findings of other public inquiries, further work was required and it is expected to be resubmitted in late 2007. The core strategy aligns with the community strategy and contains revised housing policies, including lower thresholds for affordable housing, and exception sites to meet local housing needs as well as expected growth. The current local plan, although out of date, is securing affordable and local needs housing with 247 affordable and 108 local need units built in the last three years. The overall delivery of new homes has increased to reflect the sub regional housing growth - 639 in 2004/05 and 755 in 2006/07. The 2006 Quality of Life survey showed Fenland residents had higher scores for satisfaction with affordability of housing and housing availability compared to other Cambridgeshire councils.

Quality organisation

- 91 The Council has made significant changes to the organisation to improve services, the organisational culture and capacity. The Council has won a number of external awards including IIP reaccreditation and Municipal Journal awards.
- 92 Action has been taken to improve customer service and access. The middle managers programme and customer service training has led to improved services and satisfaction. The introduction of the four Fenland@Your Service shops, together with a new reception and telephone contact centre means 94 per cent of customers are now dealt with at the first point of contact. Customer access complaints have fallen and there is a low rate (1.7 per cent) of abandoned calls.

- 93** Communication and awareness of services has improved. Migrants settling in the area are provided with detailed welcome packs. Older people have greater awareness of benefits they can obtain through the 'Golden Age Fairs' and use of a software package. Electronic service delivery has improved significantly with 100 per cent of interactions with the public capable of electronic delivery. The website contains a variety of information and links to other councils enabling those unable to visit a council office to obtain information about services.

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 Fenland 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.