

Corporate Assessment Report

December 2007



Corporate Assessment

West Berkshire Council

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Introduction

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

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

- Ambition
- Prioritisation

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

- Capacity
- Performance management

What has been achieved?

- Achievement

Considered against the shared priorities of:

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

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

- 4 The JAR covers specific services for children and young people that are directly managed or commissioned by the Council, as well as relevant health and youth justice services provided by other bodies. It focuses on the contributions made by services to improving outcomes especially concerning safeguarding, services for looked after children, and services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The separate JAR report also covers the leadership and management of services for children and young people and, in particular, the way that such services work together to improve outcomes. The description and judgement in respect of children and young people in this report is summarised from the JAR report and the most recently published Annual Performance Assessment from Ofsted which covers all of the Council's children services.

Executive summary

- 5 Overall, the Council is performing well. West Berkshire Council, with its partners, has a clear and challenging vision to improve the quality of life for those living, working and visiting the area. Key challenges facing West Berkshire in achieving this vision are meeting the needs of the whole community and in particular sustaining communities affected by rural isolation. Other key challenges include responding to planned housing growth, bridging the skills gap, providing enough affordable housing to ensure economic prosperity, maintaining high levels of education and reducing level of criminal activity which has risen recently. In partnership the Council has now developed a draft longer term vision which will provide a strategic approach for the challenges outlined and also incorporates the impact of climatic and demographic changes. This vision is based on a good understanding of the national and regional context and is being informed by extensive and ongoing engagement with local people.
- 6 Rising to this challenge the Council has invested in organisational development to improve its capacity to deliver its ambitions as well as other national and regional agendas. It is improving its performance management arrangements and political governance. It has streamlined and focused managerial capacity and is investing strongly in partnerships to support shared delivery of its ambitions for the area. Success is demonstrated by good performance against national performance indicators in many areas, high and improving levels of residents' satisfaction with the Council, and maintaining high standards in education and social care. In 2006 the Council improved its Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) score from 'two-star' to 'three-star' as ranked by the Audit Commission.
- 7 The Council provides good and improving leadership in both shaping the vision of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and delivery through the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The Council Plan translates this vision into clear priorities and ambitious targets. Partners are involved in setting targets within the LAA, ensuring they are both challenging and realistic. For example further reducing low levels of traffic congestion or within a healthy community targeting poorer performing areas for improvement. At the same time the Council is focusing service delivery more closely on community needs through the Newbury town centre strategy, vibrant village scheme and good use of community intelligence. However, it has yet to implement some strategic agendas including climate change and the over 50's. Overall, this sets an ambitious framework for action to balance the social, economic and environmental needs of the area paying particular attention to the diverse needs of the various communities.
- 8 The Council effectively engages with most local people and partners to ensure that it is meeting the diverse needs of the whole community. A key strength is that this engagement is ongoing and regularly consults and seeks people's views through effective working with parishes which contributes to a good shared understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve. Despite this, it has an inconsistent approach to diversity and some hard to reach groups are not involved in informing the Council's plans. The Council is aware of this and it is a targeted area for improvement within its plans and strategies.

- 9 The Council is clear and explicit about the challenges it faces in delivering its ambitions for the area. Priorities are robust and consistent with the overall vision. The Council is able and willing to make difficult decisions to achieve a balance between meeting community need and protecting the environment for example, in setting targets around new housing which support both these issues. Effective leadership - both internally and in the community - means that partners understand and generally support what the Council is trying to do although there are some areas, including traffic congestion, where some elements of the business sector are not clear on the Council's priorities.
- 10 The Council delivers services that provide value for money. While delivering high quality services it has kept council tax rises at or below the regional average, although council tax levels remain high. It has also worked within budget settlements by focusing resources on priorities and identifying efficiency savings. A corporate approach to achieving value for money is supported by good medium term financial planning and a strategic approach to procurement. Close monitoring allows early intervention and action to be taken on predicted budgetary pressures. Financial standing and management are good. The Council's ability to make efficiency savings and provide value for money is highly effective.
- 11 There is sufficient capacity to deliver priorities through good strategic staff management, supported by employee development and training to ensure that staff are focused and committed to providing customer focused services. Corporate governance is sound and there is good political leadership and councillor development. Political decision-making is transparent. The political structure is effective but challenge through scrutiny remains inconsistent.
- 12 Strong and highly effective partnership working in most areas is increasing capacity and providing services that are focused on user needs. Significant outcomes have been achieved with effective strategic and operational partnership working across most sectors. A strategic approach to managing partnerships is in place which is allowing the Council to focus its resources in this area and a notable success is joint working with the health sector.
- 13 The Council has created a robust approach to performance management with partners which is most developed in the monitoring and performance management arrangements for the LSP and LAA. The Council is effective at managing individual and team performance. The Council's approach to performance management is based on a 'plan-do-review-revise' cycle with agreed timeframes for remedial activity to tackle underperformance. These arrangements support improvement and enable the Council to maintain high standards of service delivery.

- 14 The Council, with its partners, can demonstrate consistent and significant achievement against its own priorities. Together they have made good progress against social, economic and environmental agendas - though progress against some targets has been slow in waste and some areas of criminal activity have increased. There is a coherent corporate approach to achieving a better quality of life that responds to the planned growth agenda and the diverse and dispersed nature of the population. These achievements demonstrate a proactive approach and a willingness to work in partnership to achieve real community outcomes.

Areas for improvement

- 15 The Council needs to improve in several areas.
- 16 While many key Council strategies are in place there are a number of gaps in key areas and include the over 50's, climate change and gypsies and travellers. These strategies are being developed but as yet are not implemented to ensure a coordinated approach across a range of services.
- 17 The Council recognises that it needs to improve its strategic approach to diversity and has significantly improved in recent years. However, further work is required to ensure a consistent and integrated approach for all the activities of the Council and how it engages with all areas of the community. This includes effectively targeting all diverse groups to facilitate better engagement. The Council also needs to monitor the impact of its services with diverse groups to ensure these services meet the needs of the whole community.
- 18 While scrutiny has improved with the introduction of policy development committees, effective challenge to the Council through overview and scrutiny remains inconsistent. Further development is required to facilitate effective monitoring of executive decisions to ensure implementation.

Summary of assessment scores

Headline questions	Theme	Score*
What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?	Ambition	3
	Prioritisation	3
What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?	Capacity	3
	Performance management	3
What has been achieved?	Achievement	3
Overall corporate assessment score**		3

*Key to scores

- 1 – below minimum requirements – **inadequate performance**
- 2 – at only minimum requirements – **adequate performance**
- 3 – consistently above minimum requirements – **performing well**
- 4 – well above minimum requirements – **performing strongly**

**Rules for determining the overall corporate assessment score

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

Context

The locality

- 19 West Berkshire is located in central southern England and geographically makes up half of the old administrative county of Berkshire. The district comprises three distinct areas. The Kennet valley to the north where the main towns of Hungerford, Newbury, Thatcham and Theale are located. The suburban areas to the east close to Reading and the more rural chalk downlands which are areas of outstanding natural beauty and cover around three quarters of the district. In these more rural areas population density is low (the lowest in the South East) and delivering accessible services in a rural environment is a major challenge to the Council and its partners.
- 20 West Berkshire has a population of 148,300 people, the majority of whom live in the four main towns located in the Kennet valley or within the suburbs adjoining Reading. The population has steadily grown over the past decade and there is an increasing elderly population which is projected to further increase over the next 20 years. In response the Council has developed an over 65's strategy but this will still place further challenges for the delivery of services to support independent living and provide social and nursing care. Ethnic diversity is relatively low for the region at just under three per cent which is predominantly located in the suburban areas close to Reading. Although increases are projected for this sector of the community there are more marked increases in migrant workers predominantly from Eastern Europe which is starting to impact on the community.
- 21 The area is predominantly affluent and the district ranks 125th out of 150 in terms of the government indices of deprivation (where 1 is the most and 150 the least deprived). There are small relative areas of deprivation in Newbury, Thatcham, Lambourn and Calcot. It has a generally thriving economy, with low unemployment and high levels of car ownership. The area has benefited from its location in the Thames valley and many high profile businesses have located to the area bringing with them demands for skilled employees from the local labour market. The thriving economy has brought challenges in provision of affordable housing with house prices higher than the national average requiring many workers to live outside the area and commute. The demand for skilled labour is also presenting challenges in trying to bridge the skills gap and support local businesses in the knowledge based service economy.

- 22 Education levels are high with 65 per cent of pupils achieving five or more grade A-C at GCSE level in 2006 while 80 per cent of primary school children achieved KS2. The health of the district is predominantly good with comparatively few people reporting that they are not in good health. However, there are challenges for the Council and partners including comparatively high mortality rates from cancer and circulatory diseases. There are also relatively high rates of teenage pregnancies and problems with drugs and alcohol in some localities. While criminal activity remains low and overall West Berkshire is a safe place to live, recent rises in some areas of crime have promoted an increased fear of crime from residents.
- 23 The area's proximity to the M4, A34 and Heathrow airport ensures that the area has good transport links. However, the demand for housing and the growth area of Reading is impacting on increased pressure to build new housing (expected housing growth 18,000 by 2025). Delivering growth and providing appropriate infrastructure while protecting the environment and sustaining a high quality of life are key challenges facing the Council.

The Council

- 24 West Berkshire Council was created in 1998 as one of the six unitary authorities in Berkshire. A new Conservative administration took control in 2005 which currently holds 36 of the 52 seats. There are 16 Liberal Democrat councillors. Political direction is provided by an Executive of 10 councillors. The Leader, Deputy Leader and 10 Portfolio holders share responsibility for the Council's work. There is an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and three Policy Development Commissions that support both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive enabling a broader range of councillors to get involved in policy making decisions. There is also a range of non-executive and regulatory committees, for example, covering development control, standards and appeals and complaints.
- 25 The Council employs 5,542 staff, making it one of the largest employers in the area. Staff leadership is provided by the Chief Executive, supported by three Corporate/Strategic Directors while responsibility for service delivery is delegated to Heads of Service.
- 26 The Council plans to spend (gross) £278.4 million, including Dedicated Schools Grant, on services in 2007/08, with a capital programme of £21.7 million, including external funding, and anticipates efficiency savings of £1.8 million.
- 27 The Council was first assessed under the Audit Commission's corporate performance assessment process in 2002 when it was rated as 'fair'. It subsequently improved its performance and achieved 'three-star' (good) rating in December 2006.

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

Ambition

- 28 The Council is performing well in this area. The Council is ambitious for the area and demonstrates good leadership in meeting local challenges through a well developed planning and delivery framework. With partners, it has developed a clear and challenging strategic medium term vision for the future, based on strong and ongoing engagement with local communities, supported by effective parish planning. Building on this vision the LSP is implementing a long term vision and overarching strategy which is currently out for community consultation. Overall the Council has a clear understanding of the underlying needs of the area and its role in meeting them.
- 29 The community strategy sets out a clear agenda for partners to work together to improve the quality of life in West Berkshire. To meet challenges of a thriving economy through reducing the skills gap, maintain high levels of education and the provision of new and affordable housing the LSP had developed a community strategy. These areas are particularly challenging given that performance is already at a high level. Its five year vision states that in 2008, 'there will be improved quality of life and equal access to services with a safe and healthy environment and prosperity delivered through a range of meaningful job opportunities'. The strategy is structured around five key themes and priorities for action that reflect the views and needs of local communities, set in the context of the future planned growth, demographic changes and regional and national agendas. These priorities are annually reviewed and set a clear framework for action to meet the social, economic and environmental needs of the area within a regional, national and wider context.
- 30 The achievement of this vision is supported by highly effective partnership working and a pragmatic approach to delivery. There has been significant improvement in strategically sharing data with partners which is helping reduce duplication, focus attention on areas for improvement and align local strategies. Following the success of its first Local Public Sector Agreement (LPSA 1), where the partnership achieved notable success and was awarded a large delivery grant, the Council is providing strong leadership to a second Local Area Agreement (LAA). Responsibility for delivering the many targets across the Government's shared priority areas are clearly defined and effective monitoring arrangements are in place. This provides a good basis for developing a shared understanding, pooling resources and a collective focus on meeting local needs.

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- 31 The Council has translated the five year strategy for West Berkshire into its own plans and strategies. The new corporate plan establishes a five year vision to 2011 that directly supports the vision within the community strategy through five high level objectives which are reviewed annually. This sets out what the Council intends to do each year with specific targets identifying how success will be measured. Key strategies including the children's plan, supporting people and the regeneration of Newbury town centre are also aligned with the corporate plan and community strategy and have a longer term vision enabling the Council and its partners to develop a longer term agenda for delivery in these areas. However some strategies to support the Council's ambition are not in place. Examples include the over 50's, culture and gypsy and travellers. This has affected the Council in implementing a more strategic and planned approach to these key community areas.
- 32 Extensive consultation and engagement with most local people means that ambitions are based on local need. Effective use of different methods of consultation is supported by good use of community intelligence which is delivered through an analytical framework 'the West Berkshire Profile', and an annual residents' survey. Consultation is ongoing with rural areas through parish planning, and targeted approaches to some vulnerable and black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, older and young people. There are some more minor areas where understanding of priorities is less clear for example with the business community on traffic and housing issues. However, this level of engagement and the clarity of presentation of the Council Plan contribute to good shared understanding among most partners and stakeholders of what the Council is trying to achieve and their role in delivery.
- 33 The Council is ambitious for itself as well as the local community it serves. It aims to be a more efficient and effective Council which is supported by effective business practices and processes. All its stated high level objectives require effective cross-cutting action both across the Council and with its partners, although not all councillors and staff are clear about cross-cutting issues. There are challenging aims to maintain economic prosperity, promote sustainable communities, support independent and healthy living while supporting young people and their families to lead better lives set in the context of planned growth and the issues around rural accessibility. These aims meet the needs of the community both now and in the future. Aims have to be delivered within the budgetary constraints imposed by the corporate drive to secure annual efficiency savings, set council tax increases lower than the regional average and the relatively small size of the Council. This is a key challenge for the Council and its partners but does ensure that its ambitions are challenging, but realistic.

- 34 The Council has demonstrated good community leadership in its response to planned growth of both Reading and Oxford and the need for large numbers of new housing. Despite local opposition it has managed to balance the needs of all sectors of the community and champion the interests of West Berkshire making a decision to set a lower target for housing than originally required by the LSP. However weaker external communications has contributed to an underdeveloped regional profile for example where the Councils and partners role in effectively dealing with recent flooding was not widely recognised. Overall the Council is effectively helping to shape the future of the area while ensuring it has the infrastructure to support planned growth.
- 35 However, a long term overarching vision and strategy is currently not implemented. The Council acknowledged the need to develop a longer term strategy for the area, to build on the clear medium term vision and with the LSP has drafted a vision and strategy until 2025. This strategy 'a breath of fresh air' incorporates much of the longer term visioning contained in the Council's strategies and develops new strategies including the impact of climate change. This strategy is currently out for community consultation. The longer term strategies already developed by the Council helps it plan and take a longer term approach but this is not currently contained in one overarching strategy covering all key issues facing the community.

Prioritisation

- 36 The Council is performing well in this area. It has established priorities that reflect local needs, support the Council's ambitions and respond to regional and national agendas. A robust delivery framework is in place to ensure that resources are allocated to priority areas. A consistent approach to targeting diversity is not in place and some key plans and strategies are not developed. However, overall the Council knows what matters most to local people and concentrates its efforts accordingly.
- 37 The priorities of the Council clearly reflect the main needs and context of the area. These priorities are outlined within the corporate plan (2007-2011) and were established through effective community engagement and a good understanding of regional, national agendas and shared priorities. Priorities are annually reviewed to reflect changing community needs. The Council's localised approach through good use of community intelligence is a notable strength and local issues raised by communities are mapped against the Council's priority outcomes. This allows the Council to remain focused on issues such as regional housing growth and more local issues including sustaining small village communities. As a result the Council knows what matters most to local people and concentrates its efforts accordingly.

- 38 Clear priorities set an agenda for action. There are 16 well publicised priority outcomes reflecting key community and internal areas including value for money. Each priority outcome has a series of measurable targets which are regularly monitored. The Council has also responded to community engagement and has prioritised three of the 16 outcomes over the next three years for particular focus and additional resources. These are safer and stronger communities, cleaner and greener reflecting the community's desire to maintain the rural environment while better schools supports the desire to maintain high levels of education and bridge the skills gap. Lesser priorities are also clearly set out and are understood by the majority of stakeholders and include cultural services and public protection. This allows the council and its partners to further refine its focus to areas of particular concern or importance.
- 39 The Council is engaging effectively with most sectors of the community to ensure that it meets the diverse needs of the different communities in West Berkshire. For example, there has been effective dialogue with business, environmental and local communities on affordable housing to balance the needs of economic prosperity and protect natural environments. Significantly, in the context of the rural and sparsely populated nature of the area, positive use is made of the views of people who live in small villages through parish plans to support development and improve access to services. This is a particular strength and has resulted in good action planning, stronger networks and improved results such as making it easier for older people to get into Newbury and Thatcham. However, despite the development of an equalities strategy the Council lacks a strategic approach to diversity in how it responds to community need. It recognises that it needs to build a more integrated approach to targeting diverse groups and individuals and involving them in shaping its services. For example the Council does not consistently monitor the take up and satisfaction of services by ethnicity or other equality strands. The lack of a more integrated approach to diversity impacts on how well services more closely reflect individual needs.
- 40 Priorities are clearly understood in most areas within the Council and by its partners. Councillors, senior management and staff have a clear understanding of Council Plan priorities and their role in delivery.
- 41 Partners and stakeholders are actively engaged in setting priorities and realistic but challenging targets. Through the Local Area Agreement (LAA), good and sustained focus is placed on tackling both local and national issues and partners work together to drive solutions through setting targeted outcomes. For instance, supporting people with low skills into work resulting in large numbers of people being re-skilled at Level 2 NVQ through Newbury College. Through the LPSA2 shared targets have been developed while stakeholders have also contributed to other strategies and plans to develop realistic, outcome based targets, for example, to reduce health inequalities. Staff are also involved in target setting at a team and service level, ensuring realistic targets are set based on the knowledge and experience of those delivering services. This contributes to a shared ownership of what the Council is trying to achieve.

- 42 The Council is using its financial, planning and performance management frameworks to maintain a strong focus on delivery of its priorities. For example, in 2006/07 an additional £3 million in adult social care allowed a higher number of vulnerable people to be supported while significant increases in transport budgets promotes easier access and road safety. At the same time, the Council has kept increases in council tax at or below the average for the region, although council tax levels remain high and is working within tight budgetary constraints. It has achieved this through the medium term financial strategy (MTFS) which identifies priority and non-priority areas, a sound planning framework that links corporate priorities to service targets and an improving performance management framework. The Council is able to direct its resources effectively to support priorities.
- 43 Partner support and resources are aligned to area needs. Through good joint working with the police, health and voluntary sectors, more resources are targeted at areas of deprivation such as Greenham. Here additional neighbourhood resources to improve anti social behaviour are supported by multi agency work to improve learning, skills and health. As a result the Council and its partners have been able to allocate scarce resources to areas of greatest need where they will have greatest effect.

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

Capacity

- 44 The Council is performing well in this area. There is strong corporate governance, effective financial management and staff and councillor capacity is good, enhanced by a strategic approach to project management and procurement. Risk management and ICT are supporting the delivery of customer focused services. Partnership working is generally strong. There are a number of relative weaknesses including the lack of consistent challenge through overview and scrutiny and the lack of a developed corporate approach to workforce planning. Overall the Council uses its limited resources very effectively but these relatively minor weaknesses are preventing the Council from further improving its capacity.
- 45 Councillors and officers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. This is enhanced by good and effective working relationships. Portfolio holders provide strong leadership in their areas of responsibility and champion some cross-cutting areas, including diversity. This enables effective engagement of councillors in making strategic and policy decisions, allowing officers to focus more on operational issues.
- 46 The Council has transparent and effective decision-making processes. Lead (Executive) councillors are accountable for the delivery of service and cross-cutting targets. Overview and scrutiny is delivering more effective challenge into the organisation, for example, in challenging affordable housing targets or reviewing the Council and its partners' response to the recent flooding. Scrutiny is further enhanced by using policy development committees which allow a broader range of councillors to get involved in policy making decisions. However, there is currently no consistent monitoring of executive policy decisions to ensure effective implementation. There are sound arrangements for ethical governance with an active standards committee. Councillor skills are developed through induction, specific targeted training, mandatory training in areas including diversity and the piloting of personal development plans for the Executive. This is building on the already strong capacity of councillors to play an active part in the decision making process.

- 47 There is a very strong focus on financial management and financial control is good. Councillors, managers and staff give high priority to balancing budgets and achieving value for money. The Council is aware of its relative costs and performance. There is a value for money (VFM) strategy and this is one of the Council's 16 priority areas. Activity-based budgeting focuses managers' attention on delivering VFM in their services. Costs are low for some services, complemented by good performance in Education, Environmental Services and Social Care. Where the Council has increased costs this is commensurate with improving services. The Council ensures that its resources are used cost effectively.
- 48 The Council's financial strategy is robust and underpinned by effective management and control. The medium-term financial planning process ensures resources are linked to priorities and that the Council is aware of potential future funding shortfalls. The Council has yet to develop longer term financial planning to support the developing longer term strategy. However, effective monitoring ensures that resources are shifted to priorities and areas of underperformance, for example, reducing criminal activity or maintaining good educational performance. No significant departmental overspends have occurred in recent years and the Council has delivered its planned efficiency savings and been very successful in leveraging external funding. The Council is managing its risk through a strategic approach and through service risk registers which identify key operational and generic risks and a corporate approach to project management and procurement is further enabling the Council to make best use of its capacity. This helps the Council focus its resources on areas of greatest need.
- 49 Staff capacity is supported by a strategic approach to human resource (HR) management. The Council has recently revamped its people strategy to ensure a more strategic and consistent approach to personnel policy. There are departmental workforce plans but the Council has yet to implement a corporate approach to workforce planning across the organisation. The Council has achieved investors in people (IIP) demonstrating a strong commitment to developing its staff supported by effective internal communications. Management capacity is being increased through a more structured approach to management based competency training. A recent staff survey indicates high levels of staff satisfaction with the organisation when benchmarked to other councils. Capacity is further supported through flexible working policies, low sickness absence rates and generally effective recruitment and retention in a competitive labour market which enhances the Council's capacity to deliver what it wants for local people.

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- 50** The Council makes good use of IT, particularly to improve customer access to services. This is guided by a strategic approach and a considerable investment improving the functionality of internal systems. Key elements are the customer contact centre and interactive websites although progress against some targets for the contact centre have been delayed due to capacity issues. IT systems are used effectively to support performance management information, especially through web based collection and sharing with partners, and have contributed to improvements in this area. Access to IT is improving for all sectors of the community and is resulting in greater take up of services via the website. This helps users access services remotely without the need to travel, which is particularly relevant in the more rural parts of the area.
- 51** Strong and well developed partnership working adds to capacity and is central to delivery of the Council's aims across all sectors. Of the many examples, one notable achievement is the Government Office's commendation of the LSP and the delivery of the first community strategy. Other notable areas are the Council's partnership working with parishes which has been awarded beacon status and the joint posts and integrated working with health which is supporting a generally healthy community and reducing inequalities. The Council has developed a strategic approach to partnership working through use of service level agreements (SLA's) and a corporate register. This demonstrates commitment to build stronger and more effective arrangements that are responsive to local needs.

Performance management

- 52** The Council is performing well in this area. A performance culture is in place with councillors and at management level which is understood by frontline staff. This is supported by a comprehensive and effective performance management framework that is clearly linked to the staff appraisal system. Monitoring is systematic, regular and appropriately focused with the effective involvement of portfolio holders in managing service performance and managers in managing team performance. Performance management at a strategic level with partners is strong. There is a lack of local PIs in some areas but performance is improving in the majority of priority areas.

- 53** There is a consistent, rigorous and corporate approach to performance management. The Council has had a cross council officer group, the Performance Management Group (PMG) in place for several years which has provided a challenge and corporate focus on performance. The PMG has built on the existing system and strengthened the links between corporate priorities and delivery plans and focused on continuous improvement. Now these systems are robust it is working on quality assurance and ensuring all action plans have SMART targets. The reporting framework provides a clear tool for managing performance. Councillors are managing performance through portfolio, service areas and through the LSP. Arrangements for tracking and reporting the performance of the LAA and the LSP are web based with the majority of partners able to input and review data. However some partners such as the voluntary sector are not consistently involved in this process. Having a web based reporting system enables the Council and its partners to use information effectively, challenge performance and support improvement.
- 54** Performance monitoring and reporting arrangements are robust. The approach to performance management is based on a 'plan-do-review-revise' cycle with agreed timeframes for remedial activity to tackle underperformance. Reports focus on areas of poor performance or exceptions. As a consequence, performance is reviewed at the appropriate stages within a clear framework. This has helped give focus to areas of underperformance for example crime. As a result actions were put in place with the LSP including regular reporting to ensure targets and improvements are reached and these areas of underperformance are now improving within this area.
- 55** Councillors are effectively engaged in performance management. Performance reports are considered by the Executive and appropriate Scrutiny or Policy Development committees. For example scrutiny reviews within children and young people services contribute positively to improvement including the review of the impact of the piloted Life Chances Team. This resulted in the development of the service into one which is valued by many children and young people. Remedial actions are required to be reported where performance is below target and are followed up. For example, the first quarterly monitoring report presented to the Executive or Overview and Scrutiny Commission contained a number of areas where performance had been below target and what actions had been taken, for example direct payment within adult social care. The subsequent actions had recovered the performance level in the majority of cases. There is regular informal performance review between portfolio holders and directors and where appropriate heads of service. Councillors have received training in both performance management and scrutiny which has enabled them to challenge performance more effectively.

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

- 56 Performance management is used to address areas of underperformance and drive improvement. For example poor planning performance has improved to be among the top ten performing authorities in the country. Performance management is contributing to the delivery of priorities. For example the improvement in Key Stage 2 results for children is a priority and the outcomes show demonstrable improvement, especially for those children with learning difficulties and disabilities. This indicates that the Council has the ability to use performance information to drive improvement. However there is inadequate focus on performance in relation to black and minority ethnic groups or other diverse groups. There is a lack of locally developed PIs that can be used to assess impact and evaluate localised initiatives for example, access to services by those people living in the more rural areas of West Berkshire.
- 57 There is a clear performance management culture across the organisation with a clear understanding of the roles played by staff in driving improvement. The Corporate Management Team and Executive have driven performance management improvements over the last three years. The PMG has been the driver for change and challenge across the Council. Senior managers have clear targets and these are regularly reviewed to ensure progress and delivery but this is not yet consistently in place throughout the organisation to front line staff. There are strong links between the corporate priorities and service delivery plans which creates a 'golden thread'. The 'golden thread' translates high level priorities to service and business plans and to targets of individuals. Teams are involved in agreeing targets and staff know how they contribute to priorities through regular appraisals and line management meetings which is supported by recent staff survey results. Some elements of the performance review process, such as monitoring the quality of reviews, are not yet fully in place, but overall, staff are clear about their contribution to delivery.
- 58 The Council uses knowledge and feedback to improve service performance. Good use is made of benchmarking, external evaluation and consultancy to drive improvement. There is good data sharing with most partners and monitoring of service level agreements is robust. Complaints and user feedback are analysed to help improve performance at a service level although there is a lack of a corporate approach to using complaints information. Trend information and response times are reported to Corporate Board who monitor the remedial actions which result. Knowledge regarding satisfaction levels of diverse communities is not routinely captured and shared to inform improvement priorities and drive. This limits the ability to 'review-revise' provision to meet diverse needs. Reporting to the public is done through varied formats including a free newsletter, and comprehensive reports and survey information on the Council website. This helps to challenge performance and support a clear focus on improvement.

What has been achieved?

- 59 The Council is performing well in this area. It can show significant achievement across the shared priority areas. This achievement of a coherent corporate approach improving the quality of life set against a changing context of a large growth agenda and the diverse and dispersed nature of the population is particularly significant. Achievements show a regional focus in some areas but also reflect local need, as with the achievement of beacon status for its work with parish councils.
- 60 The Council is improving the quality of life of local people. Key achievements include sustaining vibrant village communities, exceeding affordable housing targets, maintaining high levels of health and targeting areas of concern including reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancies in some areas. Other achievements include supporting independent living for the elderly with high standards of social care, reducing fly tipping and road accidents and increasing the use of public transport. However the Council has not achieved what it wants in some areas, for example, there has been increased criminal activity in some areas, although this is now reducing after significant investment, an increase in residents' fear of crime, and recycling rates remain low.
- 61 The Council works effectively to achieve national standards in educational attainment, improved transportation to rural areas and access to services. Partnership working to improve community cohesion is successful with improved local election turnout rates and the customer contact centres and accessible website is improving access to services for all areas of the community. There have been notable developments in healthier communities where there are good examples of partnership working and successful outcomes. The delivery of services to older people has improved with innovative approaches in partnership, improving the quality of life for the over 65's but the Council has yet to articulate its strategy of supporting the over 50's. Overall, the Council is performing well to meet the needs of children and young people and the capacity of the Council to improve based on its track record is good.
- 62 A strong approach to working in partnership has meant that many of the achievements are jointly owned. There are strong links to the voluntary sector and it is using its expertise and experience to further promote capacity-building and target consultation to diverse communities. This has resulted in greater accessibility, countryside management and facilities in rural villages. The LSP is particularly strong and achieving real outcomes for the community supported by improved joint performance management and data sharing. Joint working and the introduction of some integrated budget arrangements are delivering more efficient joint service delivery. The achievements outlined below testify both to the Council's effective work in partnership and to its own achievements supported by a pragmatic approach to delivering within the LAA - which are stretching but realistic.

Sustainable communities and transport

- 63 The Council has a clear and co-ordinated approach to sustainable communities and transport. Its growing assurance as a community leader is reflected in its increasing confidence in setting stronger ambitions and targets for improved quality of life for its citizens, businesses and visitors. For example through its integrated work with partners on improving life in villages and deprived parts of the district in areas like Greenham. This supports the LSP and council plan aims of creating more sustainable communities including reducing inequalities in skills and increasing opportunities for people to access housing. Importantly the new council plan places a greater focus on planning, recognising its role in promoting economic and environmental wellbeing.
- 64 The Council and its partners are taking positive steps to support local people with disabilities into employment through the Council funded 'Pathways 2 Employment' project. This service has currently helped over 142 people access work and training and also supports other marginalised groups including older people and women returners. Actions such as these provide effective support for local people who may otherwise be disadvantaged.
- 65 Levels of economic activity at 86 per cent are far in excess of regional averages. While West Berkshire is admittedly an attractive location, the Council works very effectively with businesses, further education colleges and regional agencies to support continued growth and reduce skills gaps. Examples include excellent progress against LAA targets to increase the number of people with Level 2 NVQ skills in areas such as IT and healthcare – where businesses are reporting local shortages. Such actions support continued economic growth while at the same time increasing opportunities for more people to enjoy and achieve through a paid working environment.
- 66 Effective joint working with partners is helping to better balance local housing markets. Guided by a 'fit for purpose' housing strategy and relevant local plan policies the Council has increased its focus on enabling more affordable housing. Between 2002/03 and 2006/07, 737 affordable units were built and the Council has consistently exceeded its annual target of 150 affordable houses per year. In 2006/07 - in line with its focus on vibrant villages a significant number of recently built affordable houses are in rural areas – 43 (27 per cent of all housing completions in 2005/06) and 121 (40 per cent) in 2006/07. In 2006/07 planning gain contributions from development activity increased from £3.5 million in 2004/05 to approximately £8.5 million. This has resulted in affordable homes being built with no public subsidy.
- 67 Provision of housing for vulnerable people is good. For example, performance on preventing homelessness, non use of temporary accommodation and allocation of homes for people with a drug or alcohol dependency is strong. The Council has also increased the numbers of people supported in their homes to prevent admission to residential or nursing care. The Council has an excellent record in the use of supplementary planning guidance to ensure infrastructure improvements, securing of planning gain and increasingly the integration of housing, transportation and environmental sustainability.

- 68 The Council has worked well with partners to join up its planning, transportation, and economic prosperity ambitions to deliver good results on the ground. Examples include the Vodafone HQ and Greenham Business Park which have supported easier access to work by public transport, walking and cycling and car sharing. The Council has taken a bold decision to minimise the long term impacts of development in West Berkshire by being the first Council to adopt the 'excellent' standard for the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method BREEAM in its planning approvals.
- 69 The Council is realistic about what contribution it can make to changing behaviours in terms of its plans and targets for controlling car use. Given the context and geography of the district it seeks to limit single car occupancy and increase reliance on walking, cycling and public transport. Customers report higher satisfaction and performance with transport and accessibility. Use of buses has increased to 2,200,000 journeys per year – against the national downward trend. Rural access for some groups is improving. For example two new rural bus services carry 5,700 passengers a year. Cycling is successfully promoted and investment in walking, cycling and improved pedestrian crossings has increased significantly in line with the priority of improved accessibility.
- 70 However, in 2006 the Council recognised the need to improve its overall performance and branding in terms of environmental quality. Under a 'cleaner and greener' banner the Council and partners have prioritised areas of concern to residents such as a reinvigorated recycling campaign and targeting a reduction in fuel poverty. The Council is on the verge of entering a 25-year partnership with the private sector to deliver better waste management and has successfully gained substantial PFI funding to support its long term ambitions.
- 71 Satisfaction with services is mixed. Residents' surveys show improvement in the quality of their local urban environment and public space is kept very clean. More local playgrounds exist and satisfaction with parks and open spaces is high. However, despite recent improvements in recycling and waste – performance is poor compared to the majority of other areas. And while individual actions on reducing climate change exist – no overall strategy or action plan is in place.
- 72 While improving, the Council is not delivering to the level of the best performing councils in private sector renewal and housing. Examples include re-use of empty homes, key worker housing and sustained joint working with private landlords. The Council is not focussed on joining up its plans for youth activities with its transport provision and although plans are in place these have yet to be implemented.

Safer and stronger communities

- 73 While overall crime levels remain low when compared nationally, recent increases in some areas of criminal activity have required targeted action. The overall performance of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership for West Berkshire, for all reported crime, is worse than all its most similar CDRPs. In particular domestic burglaries and criminal damage have increased to a rate of just over 100 crimes per 1,000 people. Nearly half of all residents feel that crime levels have got worse in the last three years and 30 per cent of residents are afraid to go out after dark.
- 74 The Council has responded by prioritising the theme of 'safer and stronger' and it contributes effectively to the Safer Communities Partnership. Support from the Home Office is assisting in building capacity to address clear weaknesses in the Partnership through the Partnership Support Improvement Plan. Additional focus and resources in the form of new staff, better data sharing and targeted action on offenders is starting to bear fruit and recent un-audited evidence shows a reduction in recorded crime. Through improving performance management at a partnership level, results are improving and the LSP has set clear and challenging targets and ambition is good.
- 75 The Council works effectively to deliver initiatives to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB). Residents report a 10 per cent reduction in ASB in the last three years. Part of this success comes from the Council acting more corporately and increasing its resources at hot spot areas. For example, neighbourhood wardens, action groups, PCOs combine well with various services in the Council in areas such as Newbury, Calcot and Tilehurst. The Council provides parental support in managing the behaviour of children through its work with schools and young people. Abandoned cars and graffiti are removed quickly. Effective and proportionate use is made of actions to reduce ASB such as dispersal orders. The Council has introduced ten alcohol designation orders which are supported by the police and local people. However the Council is not consistently able to measure the success of some of its actions due to a lack of effective local performance measures in this area.
- 76 The Council is reducing the impact of drug and alcohol abuse through several initiatives. Commissioning is based on a good understanding of local need and partners in the Drug and Alcohol Team work well to co-ordinate activity in line with clear LSP and other targets. In 2006/07, 280 people were in drug treatment which exceeded the partnership targets and 80 per cent were retained for 12 weeks. Good multi agency work ensures that the substance misuse agenda links well to well being strategies such as welfare support, housing and health improvement.

- 77 The Council and partners have produced good results in reducing accidents. The number of fatalities and serious injuries has declined by 51 per cent in the last five years – ahead of the 2010 national target of 40 per cent. Fire safety work is targeted at high risk groups including the elderly, lone parents and people in rented accommodation. Children are kept safe while in the care of the Council and while at school. The Council has a very strong track record in responding to emergencies. In July 2007 it reacted decisively to support vulnerable people in the flash flooding that swept the area. Joint working and excellent use of local data and knowledge meant that people with special needs were prioritised and were kept safe. It has very good risk management arrangements and works well with other Berkshire councils.
- 78 The Council's contribution to building stronger communities is improving. The supporting people programme is successful in helping people with particular needs remain in local communities. Older people are helped to live at home longer which provides more continuity and stability for local areas. Parish plans with their inclusive approach ensure that the majority of residents feel they have a stake in the future of their towns and villages. The Council recognises the need for further improvement in understanding the needs of all its communities and in particular, new communities from the EU, travellers and gypsies and some BME groups.

Healthier communities

- 79 The Council and its partners provide good services that improve the health of local residents. The health of the majority of West Berkshire residents is good and above the national average. A review of the strategic needs analysis is currently being undertaken to inform the joint commissioning strategy between the Council and the newly formed Berkshire West Primary Care Trust (BWPCT). Ambitions are focused on tackling health inequalities and are reflected in the LAA. Specific vulnerable groups have been identified, such as those with physical and sensory disabilities and older people, as well as those in more isolated groups. This ensures good levels of health for the whole community.
- 80 Partnership working with the local health community is good and rebuilding after a period of rapid change within the NHS. The BWPCT covers the Unitary Authorities of Wokingham, Reading and West Berkshire. Prior to the health reorganisation the three Unitary Authorities and the previous PCTs worked together for 18 months as a 'virtual' group. This ensured that there was agreement on shared priorities, to prevent disruption to service delivery, maximise joint working and minimise duplication. The planning and financial cycles with the Council and the PCT have been brought together to promote alignment of budgets and services. There is good data sharing and these initiatives are improving the health of those most at risk of disadvantage.

- 81 Targeted activities promote good health and wellbeing for vulnerable groups. Vulnerable children and young people including looked after children have access to sport and other leisure activities. Family learning projects are working with travellers to build confidence in accessing health services. The 'All U Need 2 Know' initiative uses the 'Clive Bus' to provide a wide range of information to all rural areas which is well used and provides a valuable means of accessing health information and there is an active village voluntary sector helping residents access health care. Currently the Council's and the PCT's resources and improvements are targeted at those areas in greatest need. For example, in partnership, to establish a shared facility for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to improve service delivery and improve value for money.
- 82 Approaches to reducing drug and alcohol misuse are good and effective. The DAT provides specifically targeted programmes for some groups, for example, young offenders. Targeted work with Trading Standards has impacted on reduced underage alcohol and tobacco sales. This has been supported by direct work with schools through a joint funded post which has increased the number of teenagers giving up smoking. Services for people with mental health and learning disabilities have been re-provisioned to maximise community services wherever possible. Working in partnership with service users in planning service delivery has led to the redevelopment of a staged independent living scheme for young people with learning needs to help maximise their independence. This demonstrates a commitment to reducing the influence of drugs and alcohol on the health of the community as well as helping people to remain in the community rather than move into differing forms of care.
- 83 Partnership continues to improve. There are a number of co-located teams and joint posts at a strategic level in adult and children's services to support joint working and policy development. There is an agreed joint approach to funding continuing care which ensures that services are delivered in a timely fashion after assessment. There are a range of services provided in partnership, for example, to reduce teenage pregnancy which has seen good results. This demonstrates a commitment by the Council and its partners to a shared agenda to tackling problems in a co-ordinated way. However there is no longer term joint workforce plan in place to further support joint working and joint commissioning is currently underdeveloped although partners have developed a pragmatic approach. Some joint budgets do exist, for example, in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), the joint equipment store and a small respite care budget. While there is a commitment to use these, all partners are clear that further joint funding will only be used if it can demonstrate how it will benefit service users.

Older people

- 84 The Council and its partners have delivered against its ambitions to promote and support the independence and well being of those people who are over 50 years. While there is good needs and trend information the Council and its partners do not have a comprehensive strategic approach to people over 50 years which goes beyond health and social care. There is an older people's champion on the Executive and part of this role is to ensure that older people's needs are addressed across all service priorities.
- 85 Action is undertaken to support independent living although this is service led rather than a corporate response. These include the development of Silver Surfers, intergenerational programmes such as adopt a grandparent, and leisure activities such as walking for health. In addition some of the response is sensitive to the varied needs of the distinct communities across West Berkshire – this supports sustainable communities and reflects the Vibrant Village and parish planning agenda. However the Council and its partners do not have a formalised response to the seven dimensions of maximising independence for older people. A more targeted approach would help the Council and its partners shape delivery more and coordinate its activities to areas of greatest need.
- 86 The Council with its partners are improving adult social care services for older people meeting current and future needs. The Health and Well Being Partnership, established in 2005, provides community leadership in creating a framework for health and social care. This has good outcomes for example an increase of 150 older people supported to live in their own home. Working with the Department of Work and Pensions has enabled 300 people to gain increased pension credit or attendance allowances. This framework is enabling the Council in partnership to maintain a focused and strategic approach to service delivery.
- 87 The Council has a good adult social care service that is well regarded by CSCI, improving its star ratings assessment from two stars in 2003 to three stars, serving most adults and excellent capacity to improve services in 2006. In addition through close working with the PCT delayed transfers of care have remained low and a jointly funded 60-bed unit for dementia has been built, providing a local service that also provides good value for money.
- 88 The Council does not have a consistent approach to engaging with older people. There is some limited consultation targeted at older people, an Older People's Forum and there is a citizens' panel being developed which will have older people's representation on it. However, it is not clear how the outcomes from these consultations are used and reflected in service plans and policy decisions, for example, the eligibility criteria. As a result the Council and its partners cannot be confident that the needs and aspirations of those older people are being met.

Children and young people

- 89 Outcomes for children and young people in West Berkshire are good. The majority of pupils in schools, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress through the various key stages. Attainment in the Foundation Stage is mostly good and, by the age of 16, the percentage of pupils gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C at GCSE is above the national average and in line with those in similar local authorities. Post-16 attainment in secondary schools, for students taking Level 3 courses, has improved with average point scores per student showing a year-on-year increase taking the local authority's performance further above the national average. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), has fallen but is still above the target of 3.5 per cent.
- 90 Service management in West Berkshire is good. Services are characterised by high levels of staff commitment, clarity of purpose and exceptionally high levels of co-ordination and collaboration. Partnerships with schools, other agencies, parents and young people, are strong. This has led to a range of sustainable initiatives making a demonstrable impact across a broad range of areas to deliver high quality services. Performance is kept under review very well and actions for improvement are regularly evaluated for their impact. There is optimum use of joint commissioning, for example, helping young people with disabilities to remain in the community. The local authority makes good use of funding to meet and improve the needs of children and young people.
- 91 The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good. The Children and Young People's Plan includes a preventative strategy with a good emphasis on early intervention. The Youth Offending Team (YOT) provides effective sexual health advice services and assists young people through sign posting to other health services. Virtually all schools have a drugs policy and the local authority's smoking cessation programme has helped many young people to give up this habit. Physical health is promoted and an increasing percentage of school children spend time on high quality physical activity. The percentage of looked after children who receive medical and dental checks is good.
- 92 Children and young people appear safe and arrangements to ensure this are good. Children and young people are provided with a safe environment. The child protection policy is fully developed and implemented. All children on the Child Protection Register have a qualified social worker. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board has developed well. Stability of placements for looked after children is excellent in the short-term and good in the long-term. Good systems are in place across health, education and social care for identifying, reporting and assessing private fostering placements. The number of adoptions of looked after children is in line with similar authorities. Following difficulties identified by the Council during 2006, not all initial core assessments are being completed in a timely way. However, good progress is being made in tackling this. Early intervention and a multi-agency approach have resulted in better targeting of services. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families are well supported.

- 93 The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and to achieve well is good. The local authority is working effectively with weaker schools to remove shortcomings and continues to develop its support and challenge to all schools in order to raise standards. The work of the Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) is particularly effective in helping pupils to gain qualifications or return to mainstream education. However, a few excluded pupils are not receiving their full entitlement to full-time learning and responsibilities for the whereabouts of these young people for the entire week are not sufficiently clear.
- 94 The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society and achieve economic well-being is good. Consultation with young people is good and they have many opportunities to express their views on the quality of services. Looked after children are helped to make a positive contribution to their reviews. A good proportion of looked after children engage in education, employment or training on leaving school. This is also the case for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The Connexions Service supports young people with disabilities through transition well, but those with learning difficulties without a statement are not as well supported. The extent to which learners develop workplace and other skills is predominantly good, but access to work-based learning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is not made easy. The range of qualifications offered to sixth form students, has been limited, but has broadened over the last year. The prevention of re-offending is good.
- 95 Capacity to improve further is good. The 2006 APA found the Council's capacity to improve to be excellent, whereas the Joint Area Review found long-term workforce plans within the Council and joint workforce planning with partners to be underdeveloped. The capacity of the voluntary and community sector to support further service improvements is also uncertain. However, senior managers have a good record of service improvement and purposeful leadership has laid a good foundation for developing integrated, locality based provision. The Council provides good value for money.

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 West Berkshire Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 3 to 15 September.
- 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.